

A vintage-style illustration of a woman with dark hair, wearing a white dress, leaning over a large wooden tub filled with water. She is washing clothes, and a white cloth is draped over the side of the tub. The background is a solid blue color.

**MEET
ME**

**AT
GIANT
WASH**

**POEMS
BY
MIKE FINLEY**

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The Newmans of Westport¹

It is said that on a stormy night
when a traveler is most in need
of a helping hand they are out there
in their Ferrari, idling, extra gas
and jumper cables at the ready.

Few are the motorists who drive
the length of the Connecticut Turnpike
without receiving road assistance
from Paul and Joanne.

She waits in your car with you,
chatting of the weather,
blushing at your compliments,
coupons for popcorn and salad oil
spilling from the glove compartment.

He is immediately under your hood,
blue eyes blinking away the damp,
righting the wrong connections.

Joanne has a plate of fresh brownies,
Paul a wool sweater to warm you up.

To be of use, that is the thing,
atonement in the grease and gravel
and lesser people's luck.
This simplicity saves them from fame,
your distributor outweighs
every glory they have known.

And when the emergency subsides,
you wave goodbye and they smile
through clutched raincoats and return

¹ Namedroppings (1982)

to wait for the next living soul.

Revolving Door²

Seeing the old man
Step tentatively
Into the glass cylinder,
The girl slowed down,

The two tiptoed around
One another, palms high.
He smiled at his partner,
And she, who had never before

Danced the minuet, stepping
Out with the old, stepping
In with the new, did
likewise.

² Water Hills (1985)

The Business of Bees ³

When prices are normal
And weather cold, bees clump
In a knot, suck sugar
And hum to stay warm.

But when sugar is high
It's cheaper to dump them
Out of their drawers and buy
A new queen come the spring.

This year the bees are
Tumbling, hear: sugar
Is dear, the snow lies
Buzzing on the ground.

³ Water Hills (1985)

A Drive in the Country⁴

Summer was dry but the
Farmers forget and plow
The dead stalks under.
Today the wind is lifting
The first loose dirt away.
The elms in the Mahnomen
Park are striped for
Felling, and sugar beets
Litter the roads at sharp
Curves. Tree trunks lay
Scattered where they
Landed after the tornado
Of 1958. Outside
Crookston a yellow dog
Just made it to the ditch
To die, and farther
Ahead, a mile from the
Border, old shoes line the
Shoulders. Canadians are
Home now, wearing new
Ones.

⁴ The Beagles of Arkansas (1978)

The Wild Man ⁵

The hairy man on the concrete slab
sticks wet straw in his nose.
Once acrobat of a green bright place, once
black of eye and virginal of demeanor,
Mona Lisa ingenue,
flame hair spiking a hundred points,
everything interesting, alive
to delight and every possibility,
lingonberries bursting from within.
Betrayed by kidnappers, jailkeepers,
dieticians who take the fun out of food,
piling it in a trough beside the springdoor,
and now by time that makes
shredded unrolling tractor tires of us all.
Now denizen of the hard gray country,
he makes no unnecessary moves,
wrinkled brown banana fingers stiff with callus,
the body so attenuated once, airborne miles
from fingertip to toe, now collapsed
into rubber, a puddle of meat and hair, his body an eraser
grading the striated cement,
the look on his face a mirror of grief and disgust
the life is so boring and death is so slow.
And the sniff of the straw in the nose is as rich
and as dank as a distant dream
of roosting spots in trees,
of orchid and lemon, where the wild people
bite blossoms from their stems,
blink languidly at the tumult below,
in Papua, chewing, a long time ago.

⁵ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1982

Witnesses⁶

Three women at Perkins sit in front of me,
a mother and her daughters. The youngest,
in glasses, wears fuchsia lipstick and matching
fuchsia suit, with four silver buttons
on each sleeve. The sister has a sleepy, dragged out beauty
and unbrushed hairdo. You can make out the lines
of her brown arms through the sleeves.
The mother sits with her black pocketbook in her lap,
the strap looped around one wrist.
They appear to have rules about conversation,
taking respectful turns.
Though their eyes light up, and slight smiles glide on their faces,
not one word is audible twelve feet away, and no one laughs
or touches. I wonder if they are discussing the people
they met at the doors they knocked,
which ones seemed interested in the message they carried,
and which did not extend the courtesy of respect.
Then the food arrives, hamburgers, cokes and fries,
and the women in their Sunday clothes bow heads and pray

⁶ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1982

Crossing Nobles County on a Clear Day⁷

It was not a tornado because it was not attached to anything.
It was a dust devil, a creature of air pressure,
a swirl of turbulence on a warm afternoon
Not giant and dark, but tawny and tan,
the color of dirt being milled into sunlight,
like a thousand-foot feather tickling
the tummy of the earth

⁷ The Upset Sea (2010)

Hitler In The Vestibule ^{8*}

The bald old man sat at table spooling his eggs
With a spoon. I don't get it, Thomas,
I told him, you could have been
A famous musician, and
Fiddled in concert halls around the world.
At age eight you were tutored by Sarasate.
And here you are running a southside diner.
Why?

He grinned sheepishly, changed subjects. Did I
Tell you about my confrontation with Hitler?
During the Anschluss of 1939 I was eight, I was
Visiting Vienna for the second time that year.
Meister Drucker had booked us into the Kaiserhof,
And one morning I had nothing to do, so I boarded
The elevator and pushed all the buttons.
Whenever the lift arrived at a floor, I would
Push the button again. The car was an agony of
Slowness.

It was the same hotel where the president had
Agreed to meet Hitler that day, and downstairs
A mob of journalists were queuing in the lobby
With Hitler as he rocked from boot to boot,
Waiting for the elevator to come down.
Diplomats on hand swallowed hard, worrying that
Hitler would perceive the elevator's operation
As an incident of national mischief. When I
Finally landed on the first floor, and the gate
Swung open and I looked up at the black leather
Coat of Herr Hitler, arms folded and a look of
Considerable severity on his quaking features,
I began to cry.

⁸ Namedroppings (1982)

^{*} My interview was with a performance artist named Alan Brookins-Brown, who used to perform the midnight shows at Dudley Riggs Etc. in Minneapolis. I sat with him and Barry Casselman one evening on the West Bank and he told me this remarkable story of the Fuehrer and the elevator in Vienna.

Poor Hitler. He craved, I think, to crush me
Like a roach, it was what he need, what he lived
For, but with the photographers on hand and a
Country to overrun, he was obliged to be on his
Best behavior. So instead he smiled and I thought
He looked much more like Oliver Hardy than
Chaplin with that diagonal smirk, he scooped me
Up in his arms, kissed the tears from my cheeks
And called me German baby names. I remember
How smooth were his cheeks, how high-pitched his
Speech, and the implacable look my first instructor
Wore also.

The rotogravure ran under the headline of
AUSTRIA SURRENDERS across the world. I
Continued to study and to play.
But gradually I came to miss my own childhood,
which had gotten lost in my abilities and my schedule.
I wanted to sit in a sandbox and smash wet
Castles with my planes, wanted plebiscites
And pogroms laying waste to my room. Because
Hitler and I came to see the same thing.
Retreat one time, you never see action
Again.

Bernal Diaz at Prayer
Before the Battle of Otumba, 1520⁹

We sleep in armor again tonight,
Like tipped over beetles.
We roll,
We roll,
And the roaches rattle through our limbs
And joints and iron breastplates.

Holy Spirit I lift lead arms,
My broadsword dangles at the cuff.
Even the dew adds weight to me
And the smoke and ashes
Curl propitiation
To strange gods in volcanoes.

To the true God your select ones pray
To discern the difference between
What is rust,
What blood.

When the hour to clamber upward comes,
Grant safe passage to some good place
To look down on what is ours

⁹ Meccico (1978)

Sergeant Gallegos Abolishes Higher Rank, 1913¹⁰

The walls I made them run toward
Were the ones they themselves built
To keep me out and my mixed kind.
I swear I could watch these
Lieutenants and colonels drill
Like foot-soldiers forever – but
Lacking time and owing to their
Numbers, dispatch must be efficient.
Those who maintained the ancient order
must benefit first from the new.
The new justice is, they run, I
Shoot them dead, them barefoot through
The cactus spines, me resplendent
In my brocade sedan-chair!
The only peace I will know tonight
Is the balm of the butter
From the old masters' icebox
On my tragically blistered
Trigger finger.

¹⁰ Meccico (1978)

The vocational counselor in Delhi
Apologized for giving bad advice:
'Not every young Brahmin with money
Is wise.' Many years later,
Pandit's swami, glancing about his
Townhouse in St. Anthony Falls,
Shook his head. 'Pandit-ji, ' he
Said, 'your instincts are bad
Enough, but your lifestyle has got
To go.' Every guru starts
Somewhere, and for Pandit the
Crossing occurred one evening in
1973. He had chanted a special
Intention for two nights and a day,
And now his skin began to evanesce
And a glow like radium suffused his
Features and the bones of his hands
And feet shone in the rice-paper
Silhouette like moonlit twigs.
Suddenly Swami barges in, unplugs
The lava-lamp and shakes Pandit by
The shoulders. 'Wake up, Balbir,
You disgrace to your caste. When
Will you quit all this fidgeting? '
Four years of doctrine and
Contemplation and Swami Mukhtaranda
Throws up his hands. 'Tell me, have
You considered a career in
Dentistry? People get toothaches,
You could be useful. We have been
Discussing your case at Himalayan
Central in the Loop. Pandit-ji,
It's not working out.' Pandit
Breaks down on the other end. 'But
What of my chapel, with the acoustic

¹¹ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

* I studied yoga meditation one spring in 1977. My teacher was a lovely man named Usharbudh Arya.

Paneling and foam carpet pads –
What of the rent, the three skinny
Daughters, Irish setter, Triumph
Roadster? Give me another chance,
Business will boom.' Swami relents:
'Just thank God you're in
Minneapolis where you can't hurt
Anyone.' Pandit attends continuing
Education courses in business
Management at the university
Convention center, learns the seven
Words to seal a sale, prints
Meditation coupons in the back pages
Of the Sunday TV section. Hatha
Enrollments begin to swell, a course
In breathing for data processors
Draws overflow crowds, registered
Nurses from around the city salute
The sun from every angle. Suburban
Gardeners no longer worry about
Scaly-worm and red-ear mites. Swami
Writes: 'I am man enough to admit I
Was wrong. You're some kind of
Pandit. Christmas is out, we're
Booked at Vail six months in
Advance.' Pandit spawns a yogi
Tummy, bolstered by his taste for
Hostess Snowballs. The wisdom of
The East is born again, Midwestern.
'Shift gears with your one mind,
Retain the other for the clutch.'
He hires so many assistant pandits
He doesn't know which one smokes
Luckies and lectures on the holy
Wind within. His checkbook is
Bulging, his checks in the popular
Scenic Wilderness design, the
Rockies, Mojave, Maine lighthouse
And drive-thru Sequoia. But Sunday
Mornings while the Christians pray,
Pandit snaps on snorkel and weighted

Boots, and drifts the tangled floor
Of Lake Calhoun. 'On surface, ' he
Tells his class on scuba yoga, 'we
Encounter the brunt of life's
Agitations, those waves and splashes
Which torment the honest heart. But
When we go below we feel this
Unlikely thing, the tranquil wet
Embrace.' He pads through the mud,
Brushes long ropes of alga aside. I
Am I, he inhales, Thou art Thou, he
Exhales, and here in this constant
Kiss of life is the successful
Career of one soldier of Shiva in
These United States.

The Lost Colony^{12 *}

All we wanted was to set up shop, sell what we found,
then have our sons and daughters take our places
later on.

After the first year we piled everything up on the beach
and waited for the ships, but the ships didn't come.

We had to eat our own food.

We didn't make a cent.

The next year was the same, and the year after that.

The piles got smaller, though, and after a time only the
young went on about sailboats
and flags.

We trade among ourselves but it isn't the same.

We can't all get rich off each other.

We knew something went wrong but we didn't know what.

Some new kind of war where everyone died
or a new kind of storm that put out every fire.

We thought of barricades, epidemics, even the possibility
that no one remembered.

How did we get so alone in the world?

The torches we lit with the remaining oil

laughed through the night and went out.

We started to keep to ourselves in the fields.

The work week grew shorter.

We didn't talk as much over meals.

One by one, a few of us stopped showing up
at the market, for meetings, to eat.

On the night of the last meeting we cast our final ballots.

Breaking camp, we buried the pitchforks and rifles.

¹² The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* Based on the true history of the Roanoke Island settlement – second English colony in Virginia, after Jamestown. One day everyone just left, without explanation. It could have been famine, starvation, hostile indigenes. I like to think this is just what America does – it swallows us up with its ability to lose us.

We burned our houses and put out the fires.
This occurred in the spring of the last year we kept
track of.

We tore up the book of debts and allowances, one page
at a time.

Dividing into groups of two and three, we headed inland,
leaving not so much behind as a single naked
footprint in the sand.

Cycling¹³

Biking down Laurel Avenue at ten o'clock,
I see a big man sitting in the dark under a porch roof
propped up by three two-by-fours.
At the dance studio on Snelling, with the big glass windows,
it is late, and the woman instructor stands
under a light bulb, weight on one leg.
At the store I open a door and a young girl
explodes into me, laughing.
The air is still, if you listen you can hear
the murmurs of people out walking.
Someone's been cutting the grass in the yard
of the old man across the street, who has died.

¹³ The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

Auden in Minnesota ¹⁴

On the worst winter evening of 1972, W. H. Auden,
who had never traveled west of New York City,
read from his work on the campus of St. John's University,
60 miles north of Minneapolis.

At this point in his life Auden, 76, was so grand a figure
that many thought him dead already and enshrined
in Westminster Abbey.

He was the poet's poet, the cigar store Indian
with his roadmapped face
And perpetual cigarette, the man who could do
anything with a line.

A surrealist friend and I drove up on bald tires, cars veering out
of the hypnotic white at us, narrow shoulders
shrugging us to right and to left.

Two hours later we stomped up the snowy chapel steps
and took our places in the back of the hall as the legend
lurched to the podium.

He looked venerable as snow and wrinkled as an armadillo,
and drunk as the situation permitted.

Toothless he slurred through the "Musée des Beaux Arts,"
through the homages to Yeats and Freud,
and all the companions of his youth, of war and hell
and golden bough and burning bird.

And no one understood a word,
except once, between coughs, when he very clearly
pronounced the words "old fag."

Afterward we elbowed the undergraduates for an autograph
on a Modern Library edition of his Selected Poems
and as I twisted out a hand clasped mine.

It was the hand of a professor friend, named Ted,
who had written his one and only published monograph
on Auden and his work, and he was too devoted
to the master to stay at home that awful January night,

¹⁴ Namedroppings (1982)

but too shy, too proud, to venture into the push and shove.

I will never forget the look in Ted's eyes as he gazed at the scrawl
on my frontispiece – actual writing of the actual writer –

“Warmest regards, Wystan.”

And being a sap, I gave it to him.

This spider studied real estate.
He built a web at the corner station
over the sign flashing Quaker State –
location, location, location.



Meet Me at Giant Wash¹⁶

In the Bear's Den Bar on Franklin Avenue
a black mother bear looks down from the countertop
like a spirit through a rotten cloud of smoke,
a room of pickled faces, Ojibwe and Irish,
nearly as preserved as the beast.
I live just a block away, in a building with the porch falling off.
Summer nights friends and I tiptoe onto the sagging boards,
drink wine and watch the passing trade.
Next to Bear's Den is a laundromat that has burned to the ground,
with a mural on the side of a big white woman
in red pumps and dress, her hair in a kerchief, her lips
as red as brick, pinning up bedsheets to dry
and she is so happy, she is saying Meet Me At Giant Wash.
But she never finishes folding that bedspread
on the side of the building, they haul her rubble
away in trucks, still smoldering, because a tenant upstairs
lit up and dozed off, and that's how it goes,
one building at a time the neighborhood gets carted away,
and the big black bear, paralyzed, each hair erect
with nicotine dew, rubber lips pulled back to make her look more
ferocious than she is, teeth bared against the wrecking ball,
comes next.

¹⁶ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Tracks

I grew up a road and a pond from the B&O line.
Every night the train would come rumbling through.
Not close enough enough to shake the house, but enough to make
you notice,
and maybe cock an eye to see if it was early or late.

As kids we set pennies on the tracks to flatten them like pie tins
but we could never find the pennies after.
The train carried coal and car parts and refrigerant.
I would be lying in bed, staring at my hand in the dark,
certain I was dying of some disease that started in the palm
then spread to every cell of the body,
and the whine of the train would comfort me.

A couple of kids said they lay under the tracks when a train
barreled through,
but I didn't believe them, it raised so much dust
you would die of asphyxiation
even if the wheels did not segment you like sausage.

Sometimes you saw some fellow shambling along the cinder
rocks
that slipped underfoot like they were quarried on the moon
and you wondered what wrenching loss he had suffered,
if a woman had betrayed him, had he embezzled an employer,
did a man die in a bar on a Saturday night,
and now he walked the sidings like a murdered man,
or was he just a guy whose plan fell through and didn't have a
backup.

A friend and I found a dead she-goat lying by the tracks,
poor thing must have wandered and been caught in the oncoming
light.

It had been dead for a week, and we saw it was a mother from her bloated bag.

We imagined the inside was full of insects or yogurt and thought it instructive to stab the pouch with a pointy stick then run away so the glue inside would not splash us.

But stab as we might we could not break the bag because we were kids, and we didn't understand.

'The Minstrel & The Ladie' ¹⁷.....

The singer's message: I am only a boy
And my songs and my fiddle
My only true friends.

But the woman banging her glass
On the formica bartop is receiving
Transmissions of life in the wild,

She envisions geese lifting
From a fern-bog in the peninsula
Of a state she has never visited.

Between numbers she buys him a beer
And for a moment there is no Ramada Inn:
Young man, I want to kiss you everywhere.

But he clings to character, stammers
His Thank you Ma'am but home's a distance,
And the roads up Moorhead way are slick.

To no avail. She's deaf. Changing.
Already she's a brute brown bear
In the northerly wood,

Already enjoying the scratch
She knows comes next on her rump
On the broken spruce branches.

¹⁷ Water Hills, 1985

At the Circus ¹⁸

ambulance lights
at the auditorium gate
and a lump on
a stretcher
and on top of that
the embroidered
red fez

¹⁸ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Cleveland, 1959 ¹⁹

Tranquility of a town
even though we're a big city.
Pedestrians leave home early,
take ten extra minutes
to stroll to the office.
The street seems cleaner than usual,
some critical flotsam is missing.
The bus leaves the curb
with a thrill of exhaust.
The birds sit
on the courthouse pediment,
and they are coy about some secret
or other.
The Press and Plain Dealer
have been on strike
for over a month.

¹⁹ The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1992)

The Dogs of Madison Square²⁰

The leaves blow across the old park,
the hickory and ginkgo,
linden and oak, next to the monument
of eternal light, for the fallen soldiers
of the first world war, and beside that,
a sign on a tree saying, caution,
a rat poison called Makl
has been placed in this area;
its antidote, if you are resourceful
about these things, is Vitamin K-1,
you probably have some in your house,
if you can get there in time.
But the dogs roaming the sixteenth
of an acre of fenced-in grass
by the Flatiron Building can't read.
A big-chested pointer, a doberman
and an old teat-dragging Labrador,
plus a Scottie, cocker spaniel,
and some kind of greyhound all gather about
as she defecates, and it is entirely
fascinating to these dogs about town.
She bows, cowed by their attention
as she squeezes it out
and they are delighted with the whole business
and beat their tails against themselves, no,
their eyes never really seem to lock
onto one another, because their joy
is somehow outside what they are,
it is in the rich aromas in the air,
the unleashed freedom they feel
behind their heads, and their
damp maws open wide
like smiles.

²⁰ The New Yorker (1996)

Minnesotan in New York ²¹

When I landed at LaGuardia
it was seventy degrees,
all I needed was a thin jacket.
For three days I walked the streets
leery of beggars who seemed
to know something, and shadowy
figures lurking in doorways.
But when the temperature began
to fall and the canyon gusts blew
plastic sacks like ghostly luggage,
I came into my own.
I am more used to winter than them,
it is my element, walking into wind
swinging my computer case at my side.
All along Sixth Avenue phalanxes of muggers
and murderers part, melted
from their purpose by sled dog eyes,
urgent and cheerful on a cold,
cold night.

²¹ The New Yorker (1996)



It is two in the morning, and the sound
of air hammers and chainsaws
from a night construction crew
fetches me from bed.
The view from my hotel window
doesn't quite include Lincoln Center,
kitty corner, though the hotel
celebrates its tradition of putting up musicians
and singers and actors overnight.
What I do see is a triangular patch of grass,
and a statue of Dante,
his laurels blending with the dead leaves of November.
He gazes out on 63rd Street and Broadway, humorlessly,
like a man who knows his way around infernoes.
Besides the immortal poet is a bus stand advertising
Eternity by Calvin Klein.
It is late, and the traffic has begun
to die down. Down the sidewalk
comes a man who is drunk.
Each step is an essay and not all
are successes. He is like a mime climbing
an imaginary rope, a phantom walking through
new falling snow, that melts on
the shoulders of statues of poets,
and I, too excited to sleep in my hotel bed,
know exactly how he feels.

²² The New Yorker (1996)

The New Yorker ²³

The woman crouched in a blanket in the slush
on 46th street is taking deep breaths
during rush hour.

She is wet and cold, she has no place to go,
and winter is only beginning.

Citizens with destinations stride by her
in pressed clothing
and their faces tell their feelings.

The broker's displeasure with the city's
condition, and the daily pained reminders of
suboptimalization.

The pretty account exec's cheerful denial
that a bad fate might await her one day.

The tourist who, seeing another person losing
a handhold on life, is afraid for himself.

You want to stand the woman up,
slap the sleet from her hair and send her
on an invisible errand,

giving phone sex or counting traffic or
handing out bills to busy pedestrians,
but God has made her incompetent
and us indifferent, except for one woman
in a strawberry hat, who walks past, stops,
fiddles with her pocketbook, and places
a five in the paper cup.

²³ The New Yorker (1996)

The Addict ²⁴

In the clinic waiting room.
A guy enters on his mother's arm.
She is the sick one, but he looks bad –
hollow-eyed, hostile, multiple tattoos –
you can see the bullets under his skin.
While he stares emptily at the furniture
she keeps nudging him and making funny remarks.
At one point she says, "I've got a good idea,"
leans over and whispers something in his ear.
The man blushes and smiles,
and turns to look at his mother
with unimaginable softness.

²⁴ The New Yorker (1996)

Passengers hug their luggage close
and check their watches as they wait
by the message board
for news of the delayed train.
There is anxiety in people's faces.
One women clasps her red gloves and keys in one hand.
A student looks up at the board with open mouth.
Then the letters start flipping and
the speakers announce that the train
to Princeton Junction is cleared for boarding
and everyone breaks for the steps down to Track One,
clambering down like a centipede in suit.
Once situated in our seats, we look up, out, and away
as the conductor announces that a bridge in Newark
is causing problems,
and there will be an "indefinite delay."
A groan goes through the car like an infantry taking fire.
"Jesus Christ," mutters a man in a long coat,
who looks like he is about to cry, and who obviously
has someplace important he has to get to.
He and a dozen others bolt to their feet,
grab their bags and rush back up the stairs
to find a ride on another line. No sooner
are they gone than the address system announces
that the problems in Newark have been resolved,
and the car begins to slide forward in the station.
I ask the conductor if we couldn't call
the people back, and end their suffering.
The man just punches my ticket, smiles and says,
"You're going to be just fine."

²⁵ The New Yorker (1996)

Every day it gets more real, real blood,
Real punches, that's a real big brassiere
On the woman from Klamath Falls.

But the effect is like some circus
Where the sweat and pee of the show-ponies
Is bled into a plastic cup.

Instead of feeling connected you feel
A million years removed,
Detached from the remarkable people

Bellywhumping their loved ones,
Remote from your neighbors down the street,
From the people you are supposed to love.

The cord connecting set to wall
That unplugs you from yourself,
And some sharp pitchfork poking holes,

Ignorance is snapping up residential real estate,
A volcano is growing in the cornfield.

Nine Caregiver Tales*

from interviews with personal attendants

1

'The couple on Columbus Avenue sat down to eat ...
All they had on their plates was mac and cheese ...
So I stopped off at the Farmer's Market
And loaded up on greens and okra,
A chicken for frying, and some catfish too ...
You should have seen the looks on their faces
when they came to the door ...'

2

'Dora's stroke took away her speech ...
From that day on, not a word escaped her ...
But of all the friends I visited I felt calmest with her ...
I would talk and she communicated with her eyes ...
There was no embarrassment, and no misunderstanding her ...
You could tell she was entirely there, right there ...
From the light of thanks that shone from her.'

3

'Jake and Dora went for a walk around the block ...
And when they got back, their car was gone ...
The repo man had been watching them ...
It's funny, Jake said, we could have declared bankruptcy and kept
it all ...
But the catch is, bankruptcy costs \$1500 in Texas...
Hey, if we had \$1500, we wouldn't have had to declare
bankruptcy!'

4

'This trailer was falling apart ...

* This series was written as part of my participation in a workshop by Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theater of Minneapolis. It was not commissioned – just stories I assembled from other caregivers' experiences. It was an issue of concern to me because I had cared, at different levels and in different times, for my sister Kathleen, my mother, and my daughter Daniele.

There was a hole over the stove and animals were coming in...
The formica walls were peeling away ...
Their two young kids needed space to run, and not so many sharp
corners ...
I found them a new place ...
With a yard, and fence, and a place to plant flowers ...
Not always, but sometimes, well, every now and then ...
everything falls into place ...'

5

'Sometimes you hit a wall ...
Money is a wall ...
A few thousand dollars and all this misery would go away ...
But there's no way to get it, and the looks in people's faces ...
As if somehow, some way, there's a way to get through this ...
You would write them a check yourself, if you had it ...
But there's so many people in trouble ...
The pain goes on and on ...
That's when I break down and cry ...'

6

'Some people go into a funk when they can't walk any more...
Not Eliza...
She gunned that chair down the hall, bumping into people on
purpose...
Challenging them, blocking their progress ...
Wearing a bright red dress because she wasn't hiding from
anyone...
One day I pushed her around the room, like a waltz ...
And she said, 'This was what it was like. There was space ...
God, I loved to dance.'

7

'Abe played saxophone all his life...
Slinky and smooth, it was the only thing he loved ...
The stroke took away one hand, and this proud artist ...
Could now just fumble with the keys ...
But one time he played for me...
a simple version of 'Summertime, and the livin' is easy ...'
With closed eyes, tears running down his pursed lips.'

8

'The hardest part is when I have to move on ...
You become part of people's lives, part of their hopes...
Then the system says, Go help these other folks ...
Or you just burn out and have to start over ...
And the looks on their faces when you explain ...
And you know it is the last time you will see them ...
Because it's the dying time of year ...
And the feeling that rises up in you ...
That is part love and part shame ...
The hardest thing is saying goodbye.'

9

'It was the most peaceful death I ever saw...
One moment I was reading to Helen about the life to come ...
Then this elegant independent woman slipped away ...
Her sister called me later to say Helen had one last request ...
She asked me to dance, on her grave ...'

The Lazarus Cheese²⁷

Written on a 2008 trip to France.

“We milk the sheep
And stir the milk
And when it hardens
Place it in the cave.

“The fungi are drawn
To dark moisture, and swarm
over the great white wheels, and cover
Them with a leathery skin.

“But the cheese is so warm
It radiates its sunshine
Deep in the darkness
And the fungi seep into the light.

“Then the spiders descend
And they are hungry for the fruit.
They lay their eggs around the wheel
Like a drapery to protect it.

“After five years we remember
There is cheese down there
Deep within the cave
And we fetch it wrapped in cloth.

“It is like a monster made of monsters
And we cut it open and it breathes
From the depths it gasps
And exudes its bouquet.”

“But it is so sweet,” I say,

²⁷ Cartes Postales (2008)

“So delicious!”

“Yes, but for five black years

It was death!”

Last Night in Paris ²⁸

You couldn't sleep and the cats in the courtyard
could tell you were a tourist
and poured a cinema of deprivation
into every plaintive yowl.

Did you know what it was to be homeless,
without a dish to call one's own
without a calf to lean into and vibrate?

And this clamor continues for hours,
until you understand existentialism
because everywhere you go people

in this city restore themselves by morning
while you lie awake fretting
about the mobs of the faceless
and the general strike,

animals who should not even be
if the country had a spaying program
or a wheelchair ramp
or an elevator to the loading platform

the unintended offspring of the night
lean into the crutches and mewl
and this is the way that Paris is

a city of battered beautifuls
the gorgeous and the gaunt
and never more mighty at the base

than the heft of a kitten's paw





Pain Was My Bread

I must have been French

Cartes Postales ²⁹

This is just to say
I bought the most beautiful cards
On my trip with Rachel
Pictures of the Roman theater
And the lighthouse in the proud harbor

But I was only gone three weeks
And the first week I was too confused
And the second week I never saw the Poste
And the third week I thought, hell
I'll beat the postcards home

One day I saw in the rearview mirror
The ancient city of Carcassone
Squatting on a hilltop like a soft turban
My eyes beheld the glory
Thinking of you

²⁹ Cartes Postales (2008)

Les Sangliers ³⁰

The wild boars of the hilltops
Venture down at night
Attracted to the perfume
Of cantaloupe and squash
Stealthy of snout and grunting opinion
They scour the sand for fallen grapes
And when they gaze bloody-eyed
At the moon
They bristle in their beauty

(on parting at morning)

The darkness parts reluctantly
A dog in the black barks once,
And bats flit silently beside the house
At a boar come by to gnaw on the apricots
or a deer dipping for the sweet chew of romaine

The crow of the coq seems premature
The church bells sound seven
But nothing happens, the village
Is fumbling for the snooze button
Then the first hint of lifting
Suffuses the horizon

The lights of cars along the Dordogne
appear and disappear as they round curves
Cats, cold and complaining from the chill
Sound sour, then the clatter of a beer truck
Rattling its bottles on a bump in the road

A church bell bangs for a whole half minute
And the fathers stumble out of bed
You can hear the ignition click and groan,
the ohs and ahs of changing gears.

And Madame Fleury walks in her night coat,
Rolling pin tucked under one arm,
and the dark holds a candle to the world

³¹ Cartes Postales (2008)

Somewhere on the journey I picked up the habit
Of answering Rachel absently
Mm-HMM,
With a hard accent on the second syllable,
Like, Say WHAT? Or 'Scuse ME?
So that what sounds like it should be agreement,
Oh my yes indeedy!
Comes across instead as judgmental reproach,
You want it WHEN?
You really believe THAT?
Rachel looks at me like I am Rex Harrison
Correcting her on matters of everything
From architecture to history to French vocabulary
And I sound like the world's consummate ass
But I have no idea I'm doing it
until I say it and look at her horror-stricken
And evidently, deep down,
in the pit of the soul where the dark things skitter
That ass must be the man I am
The guy who waits for other people to make mistakes
So he can shimmy down from his goalpost
And administer correction with a bonk.
Oh DEAR, pas MOI, ma CHERE.
Better to have one's tongue yanked
from its housing than to be this
fruity fish
But even keeping mouth shut is no guarantee
because it is a hum, it is not even words,
you can speak evil without articulating sounds
O God I must guard against this tendency
with all that is in me, Oh NO!
There it goes AGAIN, once you start

you can't STOP, I have always been
a know-it-all but until now I knew to
keep that information to myself.
They told me if went to Europe it would
change my outlook
But I look in the mirror and all I see
is Transylvania







The woman was hanged onstage
and the lifting sprained her back
and since the opera things
have been difficult.

When she is in spasm,
I knead out
The knots and tangles
from her spine.

When I massage her I work
from her neck to her soles.
She whimpers like a doe,
if does whimper – I don't know.

She is the general
directing the attack
indicating with a nod
what happens next and how.

She is the wounded lioness
clambering up a hill
And despite the pain
She will make it to the top

We have a deal
That when we say farewell
and she beams at me as now,
on the railway landing

She will be the femme
My lion-woman
And I am her man
for the duration.

L'abbaye de Les Abeilles ³⁴

(Abbey of the bees)

In Caunes-Minervois the Cathares were put to the torch,
Twelfth-century hippies whose simplicity offended
The powers that were.

This afternoon I read in the Abbey of St. Adelbert,
A hotel now, with motion sensors
For late-night stair climbing.

Between a crack in the courtyard wall
Honeybees exit to forage for flowers,
mute apart from a casual hum.

Narcissus, chrysanthemum, hydrangea and rose,
A friend to those who cannot
find the Latin words to pray.

The Albigensians have resumed their positions,
High in the ramparts they toil,
Stings sheathed.

They go about their business in the beauty
They spite both government and the church,
Their only objective is sweetness.

No earthly power can tear them from their hive
And only light substantiates
Their song.

Manitou Cemetery³⁵

Suicide Minnie went mad because
a favored child coughed up blood

She died in the snow beside his stone,
mouth and nails black from eating clay.

Only fifteen live in town today,
but two hundred lie in the soil.

Being sensible and land being land
the graveyard was dug in the marshland.

In '59, when Jack's Creek rose
it lifted the boxes and bones of a dozen

and scattered them among
the cattails and the ratweed.

Farmboys were beaten into militia,
fewer and fewer, war to war.

Two to Manila, two in the Solomons,
one in Panmunjon, none left for Vietnam.

The inscription says *Relinquunt*,
meaning they gave their all.

All outnumber the citizenry now,
a massacre called everybody gone.

³⁵ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Christmas ³⁶

The road is a memory
lost in the blizzard
the snow is falling
sideways

The cattle's eyes are
too frozen to blink
They won't be there
in the morning

³⁶ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Clarinet Is a Difficult Instrument ³⁷

I was eating minestrone
when I heard something fall
outside my apartment window.
Too dark to see much
but a pair of hairy arms slam shut
a window on the third floor
of the building opposite mine.

In the morning all I found
was a bent clarinet on cement,
dented horn and pawn shop sticker
saying nine dollars.

It reminded me of the French explorer
Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac.
He too had dreams, set sail
up the St. Lawrence, looking for China,
and wound up settling in Detroit instead.

³⁷ Home Trees (1978)

Gise Pedersen Sets Me Straight on a Matter of Natural History³⁸

'No, you've got this part all wrong, '
Says Gise, swatting a poem about birds
With the back of one hand.

'You have whippoorwills sobbing in the limbs
Of poplars, but whippoorwills don't perch
In poplars, whippoorwills don't perch anywhere,

Because their legs are just tiny twigs,
They are gone into atrophy, no muscle left,
So all they can do is plop themselves

Flat on the ground and make the best of it
There on their haunches. And furthermore,
What is this sobbing business? It's poetic

But hardly accurate. Their cry is more
Like a cheer, it is a call my son Peter,
Before he died, liked to imitate

On his walks home from school.
Many times, late summer nights in our cabin,
Hendrik and I would be feeling morose,

Only to hear out there in the darkness
The cry of a creature pressed close
And shouting from the cold of this earth

To all who might hear him:
VIP-poor-VEE! '

³⁸ Water Hills (1985)

Biker Bob Cannizzarro's Living Room Decor ³⁹ *

Ignore the Iron Crosses
And posters of Nuremburg
And leather-breasted
Blondes on naked Harleys,

But drink in the tapestry
Tacked up behind empties
That might be a tribute to
Baked potatoes, clad in

Aluminum foil but isn't –
It's night-time on an arid
Beach, and the two
Astronaut buddies walk

Hand in hand in the
White light from earth –
Brushed on black velvet
And hung by the platters

Of Bobby and JFK.

³⁹ Water Hills (1985)

* Bob Cannizzaro was a biker neighbor of mine in the 1970s. He could be very rough. Sadistic even. But he had this one soft aspect.

Little Jo ⁴⁰

Is it irony to be old
Yet small, 86 but 4 foot 9?
Putting breakfast
Together, Jo pushes a
Stepladder from cupboard
To cupboard. My friends
Are dead and so's their
Kids. TV's no good
Since they took off
Bonanza. She stops me
In the hall one night.
You know what I'd like,
She says, before the
Rent went up and put
Her in a high-rise and
Me in a duplex, Some-
Times I'd like to go out
Like I used to and just
Run around for a while.

Down the twisty corridors
The animals dance by torchlight
The bison and the bison,
Wild bull and wild bull,
The reindeer curtsies to his partner
Which licks him on the brow
The wet muzzles of ancient cows
Exhale snow in the crowded hall.
The walls grow closer
And the calcite drips longer
And the jaws of the father
Grind down on the son.
The mountain of ice
And the museum of fire,
the colors of oxide and manganese mingle
Concavities bloom and convexities swell
And the mountain museum devours
A hillful of christs
Poking out of the ground

There is Vincent shot through the lung
And Henri drowned in the ink in his well
Verlaine shoots Rimbaud
And Rimbaud shoots Verlaine
And there is Picasso
Bowing before the rhino
And there is Duchamps
On his stuttering staircase
The knot of mares of Marc Chagall
Float upside down on the flickering wall
And ice and stalactite take their toll
of the rust and charcoal and oil
the bear and the elk and
the ox and the bull
the cave grinds against the bones of all
and sunshine collapses
to a tiny black ball

⁴¹ Cartes Postales (2008)

(Our holiday concludes)

How can one think of going home
To the gristle of living
The pummel of performance
The ordinariness that mugs you
And shakes you down
Till change fountains from pockets
Puffed out like fleurs-de-lis?

One may live like the Baron of Beynac
Resolute and armored
More trilobite than man
Brooding from his granite rampart
A danger to all who glance up
And get blinded by surmise.

Or one may return as tourist-as-clown
Patting his wallet for reassurance
The joker in the deck whose
Hat-horns dangle, unerect to the last,

Not “I know” which is a wall of stone
To crouch behind,
But “I think” or “perhaps” or
“Unless I’m mistaken,” all hedged
And botanical and bearing red berries
A little translucent once held
To the light.

And one would be slow in all that one does,
Slower than a tree-sloth to minimize
All sense of ownership because who
Is an author, we are really all actors
All playing our part,
And “Introducing, as the sloth, the sloth.”

But be thorough because

⁴² Cartes Postales (2008)

Time has been set aside to do so
Not the flash of lighting that singes
Every sage eyebrow but the thick ooze
That lubricates the belly of the slug.

And one will be worshipful
For there is grandeur back there
In Minnesota, one recalls,
And as following in the footsteps
Of the painters did not make one paint,
So the guy with the guidebook
was not not a fool.

LeTrain Envers⁴³

(The wrong train)

You watch the board with the flipping
numbers
And suddenly it is your train and
you race
To the gate, dragging your suitcase
behind you
And you find the last car and you climb
up the steps
And collapse in your seat as the train
pulls out.
For an hour all is well, the countryside
Clicking by you.
Then you are in Poitiers and the train
starts to slow
And you are seized with fear because you are
on express to Paris,
There should be no stops – the horror
hits you.
You have boarded the
wrong train.
You glance about at the other
passengers.
How lucky they seem, to be going where
they are going,
And not having to call Jean-Paul in the night
and say
Come get me, dear cousin, I'm in Brussels,
I think.

⁴³ Cartes Postales (2008)

Desert Contractors

They rise early at the Motel 6
in Twenty Nine Palms
and the parking lot empties
in minutes

They lug giant insulated lunchboxes
down to their trucks and utility vans.

First light is peeking over Mount Ryan
and I see one of them
standing on the bed of his pickup.

He is wearing an orange safety vest
and he seems almost to be saluting the sun
chugging a quart of whole milk.

Les Cryptoportiques ⁴⁴

(a subterranean market in Arles, built during Roman times)

These are the stations of the scourge
the pillar where the spirit spurts

The cathedral embedded in the mine
has been silent now for some time

The cobblestones are always damp
From the place where stalagmites stand

There the cockroach Orson Welles
scrambles over a hill of shells

There the bazaar of shiny foil
lamps sputtering their last drops of oil

Dank as the dungeon and damp as a cave
No swinging ball of lead can raze

There the architect led on a leash
Drawn into darkness like a beast

There the hippodrome's flaking hoar
and sawdust and horse piss and hair

There is your empire, sunken and gone
It ripples like a pebble in your palm

⁴⁴ Cartes Postales (2008)

Old Stone Enters Into Heaven ⁴⁵

THE MASTER CALLS HIM TO HIS REWARD *

OLD STONE was a mean man, whole
Town of Kinbrae knew that for
Entertainment he used to take pot
Shots at his dog, a good old girl
Deserving better. One day Stone was
Said to have got bad news from
Montevideo, folks saw him stride
Past the post master's kicking dust,
Spitting on the side walk and
Cussing out the Goose Town Savings &
Loan. Mr. Miller said he purchased
A package of Illinois whiskey and
That was what they found later on, a
Broken bottle by the pump house well
That'd just gone dry. Must have
Hauled his rifle down where it hung
By the stove and stomped out to the
Yard with a box of fresh shells,
Loaded and reloaded, pumped lead
Into the milk shed wall and cackled
And gnashed his nasty teeth. His
Yellow tears skittered down his dry
Cheeks as the dark deed formed in
His mind, the notion occurring to
Complete the thing for once and for
All, and he whistled Betty to heel
At his feet. And she sidled,

⁴⁵ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

* I wrote this story in 1977, when I was living in Kinbrae, Minnesota. The actual story took place in Hector, Minnesota, but Kinbrae had stories too. The legwork was done by, I believe, the poet-ag activist Joe Paddock, or a history-gathering team he was part of in Renville County. My task was to make it fun. It was like stealing a pie from a window sill.

Shivering, up and imploringly searched
For the better nature behind his red
Eyes as he pulled two sticks of
Dynamite from a tool bin and tied
Them to the poor bitch's tail, lit
The long fuse, smacked her hind end
And sat down on the hole and watched
Through the open out house door as
The dog took off yelping straight
Through the kitchen doorway and dove
Under the master's brass post bed
With the eider down comforter pulled
Down in after her. No no no no,
Cried Stone, and he screamed with
All his saw toothed might with the
Indignation of a man so wronged by
Creation perverted by willful beasts
Like a dog so dumb she couldn't even
Get blown up right, and he screeched
Her name and called her forth and
Condemned her disloyalty as the
Least best friend a most cursed man
Might have, a churlish cur who
Fought his dominion from the day she
Was whelped, who missed regular naps
Thinking up ways to undo him, him,
Him who now wailed like a ghost to
Get out, get out, get out, get out
Of my pine board, tar paper, china
Platter house God damn your four
Legged soul. And Betty, hearing his
Break down with out and imagining
Herself the object of some grand
Reprieve at the hands of this
Passionate and lovable if you really
Undertook to know him but until then

Deeply misunderstood failure of a
Man and imagining moreover her life
Long ordeal at those knotted hands
To be miraculously over and herself
Forgiven of the loathsome crime of
Having been his, dashed happily down
The rock porch steps and full tilt
And with her master's heartfelt
Cries of No no no no no echoing
Across the wooded glade leapt gladly
Into his awe crossed arms and the
Two best friends saw eye to eye,
Each bade goodbye, and left Kinbrae
Forever.

eye died feet road
real take open enough really
car everything open St darkness war
now back wet looks faces pray
ones man
goes saw thing away get Pandit line
steps year day run another part Every Avenue life
find even house gone like old see must
good hotel place Stone thought world call
side wild morning people falling dance
called One around time big got
smiles friend building red Like ground well
wall never Hitler light three warm
lifting dead night whole room black
kind Swami hear set two next
bad found woman oil friends
city way might comes behind God
week young hair mother look make wrong go
arms home come much just know Les
saying cave think Auden put hand snow
last new took work
cold

Kraken Press

1841 Dayton Avenue
Saint Paul MN 55104
651-644-4540

mfinley@mfinley.com

Visit us at mfinley.com/kraken

