



POEMS of MIGHT

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by Mike Finley

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Poet's Preface

Every two or six months, for forty years, I have written and self-published a little book. It is debatable why I do this. I post the booklets, but no one reads 'em, mostly. I guess it is just what I do.

I like to write when I travel. I also write when I don't travel, but travel has the effect of imposing themes on the material. I wrote half of the poems in this collection at Bear Head State Park in Tower, Minnesota. Rachel and I hiked and kayaked, and read around the fire. It is the same place we camped following our daughter Daniele's death in 2009.

The theme of this short collection is might, and it chronicles the beginning of a return to form after nearly two years of difficulties and depression. It is also an expression of my crabbiness. I have starting going to poetry readings again, to have something to do—and I am dismayed by how little most poets have to say. Come on, people.

I like that the booklet has an emphatic flavor, and is, to my mind at least, kind of funny.

M.F.

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House of Demons

A priest returned to his home after a long journey
and found it inhabited by demons.

They climbed his walls, hung from his ceiling,
emptied his cupboard with their endless hunger.
They shit everywhere, and sickened the priest
with their gruesome habits.

The priest tried beating them with a broom,
but they would not budge.
He chased them around his garden with a rake.
He poked them with burning embers,
which only seemed to please them more.

Finally he filled his home with lotus and jasmine,
until all but one packed up and left.
The one who stayed was the ugliest of them all,
picking his teeth with a femur bone,
wiping his snot on the walls.

“I am a priest of Lord Buddha,”
the man proclaimed,
but the demon heard him not.

Finally the demon whispered in his ear,
“I feed on your humiliation, priest.”

And the priest, finally understanding,
knelt before the demon and begged him to stay.

At which point the demon transformed into Lord Buddha,
splendid in his saffron raiment
“You see how easy it is,” he told the priest,
“when you stop caring about yourself so much?”

Son of a Birch

The birch tree is a flasher
bolting out of the clearing.
See how white my pale ribs are,
how flammable my skin,
I tell you I'm a firestarter!
I always want to peel it off
till I'm bare! bare! Bare!
I'll blind you if you peek!

The Thing About Dreams

is, as soon as you awaken and sit up and wonder,
the story starts to fly away.

You think to yourself, Why did I take so seriously
an argument with an alligatorman?

Not with those lengthy teeth,
not with those wheat-brown slits of eyes,
it embarrasses me that I could be so gullible,
therefore it could not have happened,
I must have dreamed of something else,
but what, what, what?

Forgetfulness arises out of shame,
shame that you feared the teeth, the eyes,
because it is not allowed to fear foolish things
in the waking world, it is not allowed
to do a dance with that which cannot be,
it is not permitted to long for unspeakable beauty,
which is only you, your simple heart
and hungry mouth, so we build a bridge,
then blow it up, and forget that it led to
our deepest desire.

How It Goes

Those who are going present themselves,
frantically asking for your help,
and you ease them onto the still-warm bed.
Their eyes are crazy, looking every which-way,
and you lay them on their side
and they pant like a broken bellows,
tearing itself apart, teeth bared,
tongue swollen like a foot in the mouth.
You stroke them so they know you are with them
in case the brain can no longer see,
and you do not leave them,
not even to fetch water from the tap.
They look at you with gratitude
because you are doing something
and that is all they wanted,
though they never said the words,
to be with you, to feel the reassurance
of your hand, the hand they loved,
till darkness comes and
the heartbeat stops.

Godzilla

We glimpsed it clearing the top of the ridge,
a tree as big as God.
It rose like a mountain from the valley below,
a thousand foot high,
vaulting over other trees
that scurried at its feet like moles,
its root like a clenched star on the plain,
its treetops lost in cumulus.
Along the trunk were dead eagles and cattle
trapped in its leakages,
and the side of a barn,
deposited by a storm,
that crashed into the trunk and expired,
that still read Mail Pouch.

There Is a Kingdom

of people who don't like who they are,
though the birds sing there
with every kind of flower.

No one knows how they got this way.
Some say they live under a witch's curse.
Some say they drank from a poisoned well.
Some say the people are sinners from another life,
and this life is their punishment.

Some even say these people are the scapegoats
from every other kingdom
where the people don't care
who suffers for them,
and the music and dancing
in those lands go on.

At the Parents of Suicides Group

I visited a place online called Parents of Suicides. It is a Yahoo Group. I have been wanting to make more of a connection to other adults who have lost sons or daughters this way, hoping to find a strong voice, of someone who really understood this, who could help me to go forward.

So far that hasn't happened. What the hell, I was only there an hour. Maybe some heroic soul will speak to me still.

But what I did see there was noteworthy. I saw several moms in complete hysteria, tearing their hair (figuratively) over the fate that has befallen them. Moms whose sons and daughters shot themselves, or gassed themselves, or drugged themselves to death.

It is not something I want to spend much more time doing. The pain was so intense, expressed often in ALL CAPS. The message I heard, over and over, was tantamount to:

My god, my god, why have you forsaken me?

I think there is a level of misery a mom can feel that a dad can't match, and has no wish to. And it just makes sense ... the bond being inexpressibly tighter, and woven into the protein of life. Dads by comparison are just buddies.

In fact, what I felt almost immediately at PoS, after reading a few of these wretches posts, was a measure of calm. I have been searching for answers, and feeling so unlucky, and I suddenly felt just a little bit lucky.

I need to put into words what I felt in that place.

When I think of Daniele, and how badly she felt almost every day,

I still weep at the horror of her life. To always be afraid, angry, on the edge. How lonely she must have felt, taking the pills with her dog in her lap, and washing them down with vodka.

How she must have wept for herself, and for all of us, and for the way things worked out.

And when I cry at these times, I am very sad -- for her.

But to be honest, that is not the way I usually grieve. Most often I just feel irritable and nastily angry -- going through the supermarket, and seeing all the other people loading their carts. Their lives going on smoothly, seems like, but mine wobbling like it's missing a wheel and skidding in the dirt.

Maybe I am a bad person for it, but I grieve more this way, for myself, and what happened to my life, than I do for Daniele.

I feel like I am in touch with Daniele. Not much, but a bit. In these moments she has moved on from me. She's sorry for the pain she caused, but she is relieved from her own pain. I see her sometimes in birds flying close by. Not that she's a bird now but because she is free now, I feel, and is continuing, with a fresh start. She's no longer crazy, no longer afraid, no longer on the edge of the next crisis, in need of bailing out.

If she can go forward, I should be able to, too ... somehow.

I'm not "there," mind you. I'm a mess. But each day is a tiny bit different from the one before. Tiny chunks of perspective kick in.

Everyone dies, I tell myself. Only in recent years has it been unusual for parents to survive their children. My father had two siblings die before he was even born.

And suicide, while it is properly horrifying to us, is really just

another way to leave the room. And if this place we're in right now tells us anything, it's that many young people do it. It's a leading cause of death of people under 30. This is the world we have made, one that our children are rejecting.

Finally, I have lost all faith in God-as-Superman, rescuing us as we fall. I had a dream in which I was Huckleberry Finn, and God was the other guy going down the river with me on the raft. Afraid as I was. As unable to control the current, or the weather. And completely unable to turn the raft around and head back upriver. This river only goes one way, toward death.

And that's the deal we have cut. No rescue, but the possibility of companionship, in the dark, in the cold, in the damp.

I wanted to tell the women in PoS that it's important to me that I not make Daniele's death into a kind of altar to lay myself on. She wouldn't have wanted that. She was a party girl all the way. She would have said, "Whatever," and shrugged. And then laughed.

My love for Daniele was the beauty of my life. She was the beauty of my life. My Darwinian imperative -- my designated replacement.

But things didn't work out, and now she knows more than I do. I am the child, she's the one who knows what death is.

I will still weep, nearly every day.

But I will keep breathing, too. and trying to understand the weird gift of life.

I know this:

I wanted to feel that Daniele was OK, and I do feel that. She's free.

I wanted an explanation of why she had to die, and I came up with that, one night in a tent at Fenske Lake. Daniele died because she was too much for this life. She was my Zombie Girl, wild at heart, "half in love with easeful death."

The thing that eludes me is how I am supposed to go on myself, what I am living for. That part is still murk to me. Nothing seems to be happening on that count.

But that's still a lot, and I'm grateful for it. Some days it slips away from me, but eventually I find my way back to it.

Meanwhile there seems to me time for things to happen.

And I am still looking to have that heroic conversation.

The White Pine Is the Best Tree

Because it has the most personality.
While other conifers stand in a line
symmetrically like dancing Irish girls,
the white pine is all over the place,
asymmetrical, striking a pose,
hailing a cab, saying hey, hi, how do you do.

Their upper part is Oscar Wilde,
arms at an angle, nose in the air,
weight on one leg.

But the leg,
the leg is all Marquis of Queensbury,
ramrod straight and thudded to the ground
as if to say here am I,
a forest to myself,
a city complete in my bones.

Call it pride or call it wood,
but build your roads straight
through the ice and cold,
when I come through
there will be no bends
in my boards..

Mighty Poem

There is a paradox in English, that some words mean the opposite of themselves.

Thus *sanction* can mean either permission or impermission.

Now, one of our commonest words, *might*,

can mean raw power, almost beyond measure,

the might of the hydroelectric dam,

the might of God,

the might of Mighty Mouse,

and on the other hand it is the subjunctive form of the verb *may*, meaning it's possible, conceivable, it could go either way.

Looks like it *might* rain.

I *might* go to the dance with you,

a locomotive *might* be a speeding hound, or it *might* not.

You can feel the power leak out of that form.

The subjunctive *maybe* – it doesn't get less mighty than that.

And most poets take refuge in the maybe--

I might change my life.

There might be a God,

A man might dream,

who knows.

*

Poets are pussies, it's a well-known fact.

We languish daytimes on our sofas in our gherkins

and blue silk stockings,

chewing our hangnails,

play Mother Might I and order out.

We are like oil paintings of sad clowns

with bleared greasepaint

that normal people can't look at long

because it causes confused feelings.

And when we fight we are like women slapping
because we are afraid to land a punch.
We think about flowers and our dead grandmothers
and maybe we suck on our thumbs,

*

When are we going to fight like men?
When will we challenge ourselves not to be more sensitive
or to bear greater pain or to honor the past
but to advance a proposition
and make it stick?
Why are we so miserable and insecure and envious?
Who cares what fucking Frank got from the Carnegie Mellon
Fund?
Why aren't we being obvious, and sentimental, and funny?
Why aren't we getting drunk and falling down the stairs?
Why are so few poems about ballgames and tits
when those are what we love?
Why aren't love poems gushing out of us like springwater from a
stone?
Why aren't we thanking our mothers and fathers?
We should be endorsing candidates and christening bridges
and honoring the dead.
We shouldn't be going over anyone's head
including our own.
We should be clear as champagne
and twice as fun.

*

A mighty poem is not a maybe poem.
It flows like rushing water to the sea.
A mighty poem is for everyone.
It tolls for you as well as tolls for me.
A mighty poem burns calories and works on you

until you have to stop and breathe.
A mighty poem is willing to pay the cost.
It says to you, get furious, or lost.

Shit Happens

Our happiness misleads us,
we think it is the norm,
when it has to be earned,
with tears, by the cupful.

What did you think,
the banquet of life
would not succumb
to putrefaction?

Death by Gopher

He's cute by the campsite
bounding from crumb to crumb,
cupping your leavings in tiny twig hands
and rotating it as he gnaws.

A trail of shredded wheat
leads to your fire
till he dashes up your pantleg
and you commence to hop around

Slapping your cuffs and
calves and thighs and
imagining those tiny twigs
are sinking into flesh

You picture it diving
into the hole it made
in your muscle and rooting
around in your meat.

You are in a fine state now
pointing your pistol down
your pants and squeezing
off a round and lying down

Staring up, the Milky Way
all creamy and a shooting star
too quick to draw,
the snap of a log in the fire

Close those eyes,
brave chevalier,
and know that nature
was never your friend

Using the Recorder

No one likes their actual voice
because they believe they know it already
from the sounds that rumble through
the jaw and mastoid to your ear.
Alas, that sonorous voice is not yours.

Our real voice, a recording shows,
is tinny by comparison.
It lacks the dulcet filter of our skulls.
We sound like Mickey Mouse, insecure
and undermining our own credibility.

This voice is one reason we write instead of speak.
But writing is aloof, it is like
yelling underwater,
no face, no music, no eyes.
But there is hope via biofeedback.

Radio announcers wear earphones
when they talk to overcome the bone-noise.
This way, you sculpt your sound as you hear it.
Radio people sometimes go too far,
and they make their voices sound LIKE THIS.

But you can use the feedback
to filter out your falseness.
Listen to the fear you hear when you talk.
The contradictions, the undermining
of your own strengths.

Eventually you will learn to use your voice
the way it was meant to be, brave,
honest, assured of its merit..
You stop playing against yourself

and you are a monster of truth.

Yer Ya-Yas

It was always about getting, for them.
Satisfaction, what you want,
shelter from the threatenin' storm,
to get offa my cloud with my fair share of abuse.

And all us kids felt better
because if Mick and the boys were havin' problems
we could be expected to have some too
cuz problems were a normal thing to have.

Later, he discovered his feminine side
and alternated rooster strut with shake your skinny ass.
Move that thing, we told the boys,
you get the silver, we get the gold,
we got live if you want it
cuz what can a poor boy do,
down around a moonlight mile.

Skedaddle

You were the poet, not me.
I was just trying to hold onto my own,
to maintain, you were the one
willing to slit the rope
and sail out into someplace new.

I thought if I made you famous
you would go on living,
and if no one forgot you
then you never went away.

I failed because the world
can't bear the truth
that every daughter ever born
is already gone.

Forgive me my girl.

You gave me a look that said
I was no longer your parent
that said none of it matters,
the thing that is so important.

There is no saving, there
is no rescue to be made.
if you save me you are only saving me
from the journey I must be on.

I say this with a smile,
the most loving one I know,
come away with me now,

Come dance in the mountain
where the stones shiver

and the monsters slam the bar

and the old songs
drift like smoke
in the crackling air

The Claw

I invented bits of business with my kids.
One was a character I would turn into
while they sat on my lap.
One moment I was their loving fond father
and the next thing you knew
I was The Claw
and I would utter the name like that,
hyperdramatically,
as if something were caught in my throat.
The hand would go up,
it would cast a shadow
on their wide-eyed faces.
They knew something incredible
was about to happen,
and it did, The Claw descended,
found their soft child bellies,
and commenced to tickle.
What agony it was, writhing under
my stiff-fingered wiggling.
I could feel their wonderful
abdominal muscles clench,
and then The Claw would evanesce,
and they would be in my arms again,
and I would blink
as if I remembered nothing
of the terrible transformation.
Where did he come from?
A dark radio-drama world
where monsters in trenchcoats
blew fart-noises into the tummies
of small children.
The lesson was that
the world could be naughty,
and even loving fathers had a secret side

but it was OK,
The Claw was never around
for very long, and we laughed
and laughed and laughed.

Pop

Robert Bly at Plymouth Congregational Church, May 9, 2011

"A man requires many fathers in life.
They do not always know who they are."

It was billed as possibly the great man's final reading in the Twin Cities, and we were urged to arrive early because seating was at a premium.

I had not heard Bly read in 33 years. In the 1970s I revered him, and was one of scores of young writers who wanted to tear off a chunk of him and graft it to ourselves. Bly was a breakaway figure for the generation -- exciting, funny, subversive, literary but also extra-literary, pointing a pathway away from poetry's academic confines and into the high country of dreams, fables, Jungian psychology and eastern wisdom. He was the Nazz.

In his 40s when I met him, he was already a prophet, assailing presidents and urging a teardown of the false categories of western thinking. As he got older, he evolved into the American poet of higher consciousness, a guru of understanding the mysterious life we share, crafting a shelf-ful of poetical devices that were entertaining, illuminating, and funny.

What I liked best about him was his aversion to beautiful language. It was unlike him to milk the lyricism from a line. He liked words that grunted, hrmphed, and even sneered. I remember him paraphrasing the book of Matthew, "Behold the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin..." Bly's version came out something like, "Look at the flowers, they don't have to work for a living, but don't they look great?" [I will try to find the exact quote.] I almost upchucked at the beauty of Bly's line, because he focused on the attitude, not the gossamer. I will always love him

for that.

And I think we thought he belonged to us somehow, because we lived nearby.

It was a windfall for the young poets of the state, like myself, to have a single poet at the ready who was like a hundred-headed multipurpose elephant: guru, comedian, trickster, warrior, teacher, poet and scold.

If you followed all those footsteps, you would be going every direction at once. There was too much to be.

And tonight many of those young poets were on hand to hear the old master. Only the master, supposedly getting on in years, looked strong and irascible. And the disciples, sitting in three reserved pews at the front of the old church, looked old, hairless, baggy-eyed and droopy. Possibly some projection there.

His latest book, *Talking Into the Ear of a Donkey*, felt like his summa of wisdom and self-deprecation, full of chastising asides to himself ("Robert") about the vanities and presumptions of his life. Every time he came to these places in his reading, the audience smiled, cuz Bly was taking a gentle hack at himself.

It sounded suspiciously like humility ... except we knew him so well.

It was a healthy night for me, as I got to say goodbye in my heart to this fierce old con-man, whom I had put so much stock in. He never knew this, and he barely knew me, but when I was 25 I did everything he said, hoping to be a good disciple. Standing on a blustery street corner on Cedar Avenue in Minneapolis, he told me (as near as I can reconstruct the remark):

"Stop publishing, Irish. Get away from people whose good

opinions you desire. Live high in a tree. Repent!"

He was joking, and I think I may have added the 'repent' bit, but I spent a lot of time in that tree. I agreed with him, and I stopped showing my poems to people, stopped sending them out. I kept writing, but I kept it to myself. I did it not just because this man told me to, but because I was learning there was danger, obsession, contamination in the striving and doing.

So I went away, and for years only showed people my prose. And now, suddenly, we both were in the same room again. He made me feel old.

I know why -- because he kept going, and the rest of us spluttered out. He was naturally mythic, we were naturally not.

As we were filing out of the nave, the line he was standing in merged with my line, and I stood side by side with him. I decided to say nothing. He never knew me, really, and I was a different man at 60 than at 20. I looked levelly at him, and he regarded me right back, and we went our respective ways.

I said it had been 33 years since I saw him. There was one exception to that. Ten years earlier, during the buildup for the invasion of Iraq, I attended a rally at Weyerhaeuser Chapel at Macalester. And we participated in another memorable but pointless showdown.

I gave a little talk that day about the "Mighty Wurlitzer" effect of propaganda, and Robert was on hand to stir us up with some Rumi, the great poet of the Tigris. I skipped his reading.

Afterward, I was in the lower level gallery, and the great man made his way toward me amid the mobiles and art. He was wearing his poncho and everything. I looked into his eyes and he looked into mine. Here we go, I said to myself, as he drew near --

two old monks meeting on the windswept road, or a scene from a spaghetti western.

"Is that the can down there?" he asked.

"Uh huh," I replied.

And that was our moment of healing.

What to Read

Not the old things,
not matter how good
you remember them being.
They are not coming back.

But not the stuff you
whipped off yesterday,
that you're still in the grasp of,
but maybe aren't ready.

Do the ones from
about three weeks ago,
that you wrestled with,
that still amaze you

with the stink of truth.

Dog Prayer

In the morning and the night
You are my life's delight
Till I fail and lose my sight
I know it will be all right

I just want to be with you
I just want to be with you
I just want to walk with you
I just want to be with you

How We Experience It

I haven't had many deathbed experiences.

You find out about death on the phone, or from the newspaper, or a letter sent to your address.

My mom, we got a call from the hospital in Kentucky. I was out shopping. When Rachel met me at the door with the news, I dropped a 12 pack of Coke, and the cans spun around on the floor, fizzling.

My sister, when she was 15, went into a coma and died in three days. I was 11. I never got to see her.

My daughter died alone, at home. Her face turned black, and her clothes were soaked in tears. But they had zipped her in a bag and taken her away by the time I got there.

I have always kind of envied people with terminal illnesses. For a long time everyone knows they are dying, and there is opportunity to sit with them. And even if you never summon the words you want to say ... they know. They see you sitting right there, so they know.

That has to be some sort of comfort.

In this case, I am sitting with my dog, and he knows. He knows better than words can say. Even in his condition, when he wakes up, and I'm out of the room, he comes staggering over to be by me.

I don't think he knows what's happening to him. But he knows he loves me, and that has been his compass, his entire life.

Dog on the Lawn

Beau staggered out of the house this morning and stood on the lawn, huffing and puffing.

He is in heart failure, I guess. Rachel used her stethoscope on him -- 125 beats per minute, about 30 more than normal.

One of the curious things about dogs is that they make nearly the same face when they are in trouble as when they are really happy. Panting heavily, tongue out, teeth peeled bare and grinning.

Great joy and heat stroke look about the same.

I coaxed him to step toward me but he couldn't. His legs wobbled beneath him. His chest heaved.

After half an hour I lifted him up, like a lamb, and carried him in and laid him down.

I just sat with him for a while, running my fingers through his coat, patting him on the hollow spots around his ribs.

I was snuffling, but it wasn't too bad. I was reminded of the first day we brought him home, 15 years ago, and we did the same thing, he and I -- lay our heads together on a beanbag chair, the one with the leopardskin spots, and closed our eyes and slept.

And when we awoke, we belonged to one another.

White Squirrel

First glance, you say, wow,
an albino squirrel.

But he's not exactly pretty.
He looks like he's been stung by bees,

there are chunks of him missing,
he is harried and weak.

Of course -- he has no camouflage,
every animal can see him

in the grass, on a branch,
anywhere except snow

which he doesn't frequent
because he's asleep.

He is like a celebrity, every time
he steps out into the world

every eye of every bird
of prey zeroes in on him,

he feels like he's been
tap-dancing in the spotlight

every minute of his life

Dog Park Squirrel

What kind of creature makes its home
surrounded by enemies?

This one taunts the dogs below,
pretending to ignore them.

You think I can't stay up here all day?

You think I'm going to let a few barking morons
spoil my day?

He lifts his tail for them to see,
he mocks them leaping
from branch to branch.

The neighborhood howls
from morning to night.

Will he lose his grip, and be torn to bits
by those assembled and calling out below?

Or is he the angriest squirrel in the world
having the time of his life.

Sometimes They Catch Them

It was the spring of 1971.
I was bicycling with my dog across campus.
She was a good girl,
but when she saw little animals
she went crazy.

I remember that the sun was sparkling
through the great oak trees
like broken glass
on the new-mown grass
on the mall.

The bell rang
to end the third period,
and the west doors
of the Humanities Building
opened wide,

and students pouring out
of their Thoreau classes
on peace and nonviolence
clutched their books
to their bosoms
and beheld the sight

of my hound,
standing square
on the endless lawn
pulling the head off
of a bushy-tailed squirrel.

Angela Peckenpaugh

It makes me sad that Angela Peckenpaugh gave so much of her life to writing and to art, and so little appears about her on her Amazon page.

I knew Angela, but only a bit. I lived in an apartment building beside her apartment building on Bradford Avenue in Milwaukee, from 1982-85.

She was a familiar figure in Milwaukee literary circles. She was attractive, and fun-loving, and had an eye for beauty. When I knew her she was exploiting the new color Xerox technologies, creating "still-lives" on the photocopier glass using feathers, ribbons, berries, skeleton keys, and other things she found in antique shops.

She was smart, and I wanted to be known by her. I wanted her to like me, or to see that I was worth knowing. But we never quite became friends. I remember one night we played pool in a bar, and to make a shot she spread herself across the billiard table, aware of the effect she was having on those of us around her.

I searched the Internet for a picture of her, and could find only one, a group shot of her with writer friends.

Angela was a teacher, a poet, an artist, and a character. She was canny -- yet seemed to live in her own world. She was a woman in love with beauty, and I mourn her passing, in 1997, though I just learned of it today -- by suicide.

The Poem Room

It is a place of shame,
the only room with a lock
on the door.

To make it come out
you loosen your garments
and drop them to the floor.

There is paper there
for you to use,
one sheet after another.

But when you are done
how proud you are
of what you have authored.

You want to call people in
to show them what
you've made

and they smile
because they don't want
you to feel dismayed,

but in the end it is
the one thing you do
that is expressly you

Bridge Going Upriver

The sand at Hidden Falls is frozen
but it softens when you sit
because here pumps the first barge of spring
coming round the bend.

It's not the Delta Queen cascading
in triple-decked grandeur up the waterway
but it is pleasant to watch the barges
shudder and smack the next ripple
pushed on by an engine a fraction their size
and out of sight around the willow sandbar

The barges coming into view,
they are not coming empty for gravel or grain
but are laden down with construction gear,
steel black I-bars, the span of the new bridge
they are building by the falls, the bridge that fell down
and sent cars tumbling last August.

It's a smart idea as these bars are huge,
they can't be shuttled about on city streets,
no helicopter can sustain them,
and on the next barge are compressors
and a crewhouse and gigantic black tires,
maybe to buffer the boats from the pylons
and an entire steel staircase in one welded piece
you could drop into place and start climbing.

It all chugs by, a remarkable thing,
one bridge heading upriver to take another's place,
until it falls too, because bridges fall,
it is one of two things they do,
thermodynamics being what they are,
and that tiny tug coming into view,
a fiftieth the size of the barges it's pushing
it's a riverboat tug with whistles whooshing,

pushing against current for all it's worth,
and on its prow the name *Minneapolis*.

Meaning

A man needs a place to keep himself,
a patch of floor,
a sleeping bag,
a hole in the world the size of him.

A man needs to know what he's for,
an assignment, a job,
a thing to do
to fill his time of breathing.

A man needs to know he is known,
that someone saw him,
someone knew
he lived and tried his best.

In the end it goes away,
and time runs out of words.
It will make no difference then
that he needed to be heard.

Bride and Groom

He is bashful, with a grin of self-deprecation,
like who am I to have his own day.
All his friends came, and the joke is that George
found someone to marry him.
She is satisfied, it is her biggest day
and she has escaped her crazy mother
and crazy family
to start a new one herself.
The world sucks, he is unemployed,
and she is stuck on a third-shift crew.
But when it's time for the newlyweds to dance,
they stagger through a waltz,
one foot seeking to avoid the other,
and they look into one another's eyes,
and he begins to weep.

First Love

Her name was Karen.
She was five, and I was six.
She was wearing a little girl's swimsuit,
with a ruffled bottom.
She knelt beside me by her inflated pool
and I studied her honey-tanned legs,
her little butt resting on her heels,
the pretty pore-lines on her knees,
so different from my skin,
which was Irish.

And she smiled at me
and her baby teeth were beautiful,
bright daggers of pearl.
I thought to myself,
no wonder boys want to
affiliate with girls,
want to own them,
want to keep them from the others,
it is because of their honey-tanned legs,
and the pearly daggers
of their teeth.

Ghost in the House

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
Every night I give you my kiss.
I cover your sleeping face with my hands.
I look into your eyes with tenderness.

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
The floorboards creak where I stand.
I stand at the window, drapes flowing.
I talk to the moon like a friend.

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
People come and people go.
The secret I cannot convey,
That I lived and loved and knew.

Led Zeppelin

Why do we demand to be taken seriously
when serious pays the dividends it does?
Why do we strain for subtle effects
when the only people who appreciate those
are wheeled on the verandas
of nursing homes or dead?
Keep it moving, don't let up,
the old crowd has dried and blown away.
You can think but can you dance?
What you need's an audience.
Kick out the jams and the iambs too.
Barefoot girls clap hands by the moon.
Human voices wake us and we drown.

The Plaque at Meeker Island

There is a plaque at the old Ford Dam, beside a 15-ton turbine
that spun in the rushing Mississippi for 70 years,
stealing power from the comb of water that falls thirty eight feet
like an unrolling carpet at the slaggy foot of Meeker Island.

The turbine is rusted now, and you can see the places
where the water wore the metal down,
like bite-marks sunk by Mississippi teeth in cold Mesabi steel.
The plaque says the turbine in its working lifetime
produced 1.3 billion kilowatt hours of electricity
for the families of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Think of the turbine squatting in the roar,
taking everything the river gave,
melting snow from high up in the swamplands,
gargling the impossibly pounding water,
molecules exploding in the crashing white,
hydrogen, oxygen ripping apart
negative ions flooding the atmosphere,
these whirling blades converting this ceaseless falling
into work.

Think of the prosperity it means for the cities,
the jobs and the money and the confidence it creates.
Think of the lights that dazzle every room,
of the families pulling out chairs
and sitting down to dinner,
think of the hot meals that we prepare,
and the clashing noise of happy knives and forks.

Think of the conversations that happen,
and the jokes that we tell, and the love that we feel
for one another, alive and living alongside this river.

On the Other Side of the Door

Six months, and only two
Knocks on the door.

I must be talking to God;
And yet, we're not speaking.

