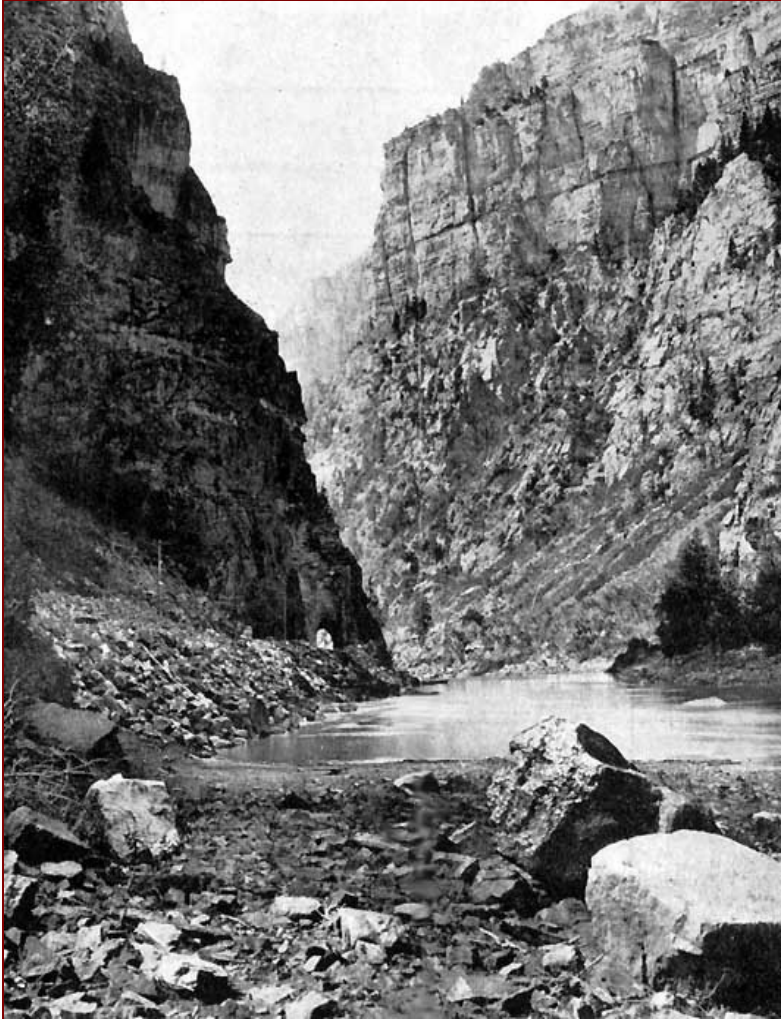


М о а б



Poems by Mike Finley

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MOAB

On Sunday when the family was camping
Three miles up the Colorado from town,
The little boy wandered too close to the water.
His sister screamed as he was carried away
And she said she saw him wave goodbye
Although he might have been reaching for help.
A man who lived three doors down in Salt Lake
Was camping in a lot marked No Camping Allowed.
He had agreed to keep watch on the river.
The methane in the decomposing body
causes it to float, he said, and we get the boy back.
and what could I tell him but good luck.

I think of the moment the father experienced,
The moment every parent sits up in bed
Because you have let down your guard
And the treasure is gone, you will never get it back
And your punishment is for that instant
To freeze over forever like unmeltable ice.
And you say, If only I had done this or that
Or if only my last words had not been so sharp.
Doggone it Elmer can't you see daddy's busy?
Can't you play by your sister where you're not in the
way?
It was your number one job to keep an eye on him.
God will forgive you but that's about it.

A TREE'S CAREER

There is a large silver maple in our front yard, perhaps
50 feet tall ...

Rachel does not like it, it is not a perfect tree ...

It does not turn bright red like a sugar maple ...

Nor does it have the giant hand-shaped leaves of the
scarlet maple ...

In fact it seems suburban with its silver skin and
delicate blue undersides ...

It grows so fast its trunk is split with stretchmarks ...

It is so thirsty the rest of the lawn goes dry ...

In the fall it drops its undistinguished yellow leaves by
the ton ...

Neither do I love it, for this reason ...

But it is a patient presence, steadfast and sure ...

It cools the front of the house ...

It shields us from the summer glare ...

Cardinals and blue jays convene their weekday business
there ...

And it never, ever, ever, ever leaves ...

THE ART OF SADNESS

I remember when I was five
And she drove our blue Plymouth
to get her drivers license;
four times she had to take the test.

I gave the eulogy at her funeral.
I planned to make it sweet,
The memories a boy has of his mother
Across an unspeakable lifetime.

About her struggle as oldest of six
Raised poor on a Michigan farm,
Her determination to make it out of there,
To grow wings and fly out of that place.

But she married a selfish man
And gave birth to a sick little girl
Who lived to be sixteen years old
Who, after her teeth were pulled, died.

There was no escaping after that.
And no discussing the loss with her.
She continued to have get-togethers
In the big back yard, and the pictures

Show she smiled, but not really.
Only me and my brothers knew

How broken she was inside,
And how angry she was at the switch.

She liked to chat but she did not laugh.
She liked to read but she did not learn.
I believe she loved her sons like icons
But one by one she drove all three away.

For thirty five years she had diabetes.
Injections, blurred vision, black feet.
A husband died. A flood swept through.
Her heart attacks took away her home.

She spent her last year in my house,
Not very happily. But I came to
Understand her attachment to the past,
And her odd way of loving us.

So when the end to her suffering came
in a hospital room in Kentucky
And the doctors tried to yank her back
Calling out the all clear

I see her old 49 Plymouth again
Splintering the guardrail by the gorge
Pedal to the metal, car over the cliff
I see her rolling her eyes one last time

From the electricity ripping through

her shredded circuitry, oh what
can you do to me, I hear her saying,
that you have not already done?

LITTLE CACTUS

smaller than a thumb
poking up from the roadside

tiny one what are your hopes
to produce a perfect plum

a prickle of such sweetness
to offer your master the sun

so as to contradict
the lowliness of your station

a lifetime in a ditch, a coat
of dust from every passing car

or is it your grandiose notion
to stab out like a miracle

and ransom the air
imprisoned in my tire?

ALIEN ABDUCTION

You were innocent, you shared
The prejudices that connected us
Like prayer, and the world held firm
Behind its insipid certainties.

Now you have nothing to cling to,
You stopped making sense to people
And the ones who lifted you up
left you there without explanation.

How is a man to live like that
Except muttering and on his knees
Hanging one's head in the shivering corn
And living with an unreasonable truth.

GOVINDA AND THE PARK POLICEMAN

The enlightened one and a disciple walked down a
mountain road
to sit at the foot of the cascading waters
that were famous in that province.
And it was here at this waterfall that he understood
For the first time the poured-outness of God
Into the world of nature, how divinity infuses itself
In the commonest things, the splash of a trout
Or an insect's buzz in the hollow of one's ear.
And when his meditation was complete.
The two climbed back up the mountainside,
Where a park ranger was issuing them a citation.
What is the matter, officer? he asked.
You park registration is good for sixty minutes
But you have been here for almost an hour and a half.
I see, said the compassionate Buddha. But you know,
We were praying by the waterfall and lost all sense of
time.
That may very well be, the ranger said, but it's not
honest
To pay for sixty minutes, then try to get away with
ninety.
I assure you, officer, I had no intention of deceiving.
But as you can see, I am but an old monk,
And these legs are not so fast at climbing steep hills
As my young companion's.

Then you should have paid for three hours, said the
ranger.
Perhaps you should put a meter on the waterfall,
So people can deposit their money directly, said the
disciple,
Who was red-faced with irritation.
Peace, my son, said Govinda. Indulging in sarcasm
Solves no problem, and creates many.
Besides, this good man is merely doing his job.
Write him a check then for the full amount,
But mark on the memo line:
"A tax on illumination."

ON FIRST UNCAPPING STUTRUD'S BREW

Apologies to John Keats

Much have I travell'd in the realms of ale,
And many handsome hops and bitters quaffed;
And many oaken kegs have I been fore and aft,
Which oracles bound to Ceres do foretell;
To the western wind have I hoisted seven sail,
Where mighty Dionysus shook and laughed;
And begged a token of hearty Falstaff,
Like a free card for getting out of jail.
How comes it that this beverage so clear
Obtains the sacred ripeness that is all,
An effervescence pyrotechnic to the ear --
I drink it down and hear the holy call.

For I have supped with the gods of beer
Silent, on a Summit in Saint Paul.

LUCKY PENNY

I was walking by the tracks
on the first muddy day of spring
and saw a small circular object underfoot.
I almost walked by, because often
these things turn out to be
bottlecaps or boltheads or slugs
but this one caught my eye
like it might be a dime, I'll go down
for a dime because a dime is ten cents,
but when I brushed off the mud
It was a plain old penny,
rusted with railroad gravel and salt
and some kind of violence caved in one side,
indented, like some mighty heel came
down on it, and I thought
of my youth, and how me and the boys
placed pennies on tracks
a thousand miles from here
because the story went that a train
running over a penny would flatten it out
like copper foil, or alternately,
it would cause a mile-long train
to buckle and slide off its runway,
jackknifing, buckling, doubling up,
the crew members wide eyed and screaming
as they slid down the embankment,

all those chemical tanks cracking open like eggs
and spewing their pent-up poison
from Lorain to Toledo
and I know you're wondering what kind
of person would squander a penny
on such an inglorious outcome
and I say hey, admit it,
you would not look the other way.

IN ELY

Along Highway 169 leading into town
Banners strung across storefronts proclaim
Welcome fishermen.

As if fishermen just pulling in
Would presume the opposite,
That businesses in a resort town would turn up their
noses
At a steady stream of customers,
But there is a stigma attached like a hook to a lip,
That anglers wear the mark of Cain.

Or they are like Rosa Parks with her purse clenched
tight
And until this time, until this town,
No fisherman stood up for himself
And said, Shopkeeper you will take my money,
Because while I perform unspeakable torture
On creatures lower down than me on the phyla chart,

I personally am fashioned in God's image
And deserving of dignity thereof.

Perhaps it's the sour smell of death in the cleaning
sheds
Emanating in squiggles like heat from the highway
Or the danger of store employees getting snagged
On those hats they wear with the hooks and flies,
Neon colored like candy or crayons
But inextricable without needle-nosed pliers
And the grim countenance of the fisher king
Who has drawn one closer to his limit.

WITNESSES

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 their heads
and pray.

DAY'S END

When the sun sets on the edge of the sky
Even crumbs of grit arrayed on the sidewalk
cast a shadow an inch and a half long.
I get down on my hands and knees to observe them,
Like a man condemned to push a peanut with his nose
butt poised poetically in the air,
and this is for all of eternity, mind,
as if someone has tossed a handful of shirt pins
into the air and when they alighted
they arranged themselves magnetically,
every head facing west.
They are like a platoon of infantrymen
leaning on their rifles
attentive to their sergeant's instructions.
They are like a forest blown down by a single puff of
wind.
They are like a civilization of sand,
and this was their sacred center,
and everyone has gathered here in the late light
wearing little hats of tribute to some celestial event.
The least of things stand tall and straight,
grateful that a spinning world still glows.

THE PROOF OF GOD

Is in the breath so simple.
Breathe in, breathe out,
Then tell where one begins
And the other ends.
Or tell me it was you
Who gave instructions to the lungs,
"I have inhaled enough, old friend,
Now it's time to let it go."
The truth is, it happens
And it happens again,
Over and over, every minute
We are alive, a moebius loop
Of oxygen and carbon
That is just exactly
What we require,
Not an advanced degree
in gas hydraulics, a bird
On a branch is as competent as that.
Mechanics call this device
A governor, and it governs us
Without our being aware,
And it is everywhere,
In every cell and every blink
And every balanced process
That there is.
And you can say
That's no old man with a beard
But I say well it's something
And it keeps us going day to day,
A will to order that provides us

Opportunities,
But you need not believe to draw air,
It is given, and there is no moment
When we are free from this
Casual miracle,
This tap on the shoulder
That says here, friend,
See what you can do.

PRIESTS

Even on the most sweltering days
when cement workers and waitresses
were tottering in the pews,
the priests suited up in all the layers --
alb, cincture, chasuble, stole.
The acolytes looked on with open mouths
as the priests dressed, muttering.
They appeared powdered, as if with corn starch,
their pale parts blanching in the gymnasium light.
Their hands fluttered through the blonde cabinetry
alighting on oils and incense, linen and gold,
muscatel, ribbons, and thin coins of bread,
the looks on their unlined faces all duty,
half lonely men, half swans.

PEACE POEM

It's like you're driving the interstate
And you hit a pothole and blow out a strut
And you stand by the roadside
Kicking the chrome and cursing
The road maintenance crew
For being too late with a shovel of patch
Saying son of a bitch what a crummy system
And you don't seem to notice
The headless horse in the crook of a tree,
Or that there is no road, just stink and smoke,
And the days that used to make you
Call on God for better times
Are never coming back.

NIGHTTIME AT THE CHRISTIAN RETREAT

The men who have been praying all day
Lay down their souls like cufflinks to the Lord.
And in a while the snoring starts, first in one cot,
Then in another, and soon each man
Is making his offering of oxygen.
There are thirty men under this roof
And not one is a drinker any more but maybe
We were all dropped on our faces as babies
Or maybe we have a greater than average population
Of former boxers, noses broken by a left jab,
Gladiators laid out on the Coliseum floor
gasping through a spatter of blood.
And the sum is like a song played on a rank of snouts
Like a choir of hogs assembled in crates,
Grunting and rooting and squealing for God.
Where the intake is a truck wheezing up a steep hill
And low gear holds the runaway in check
For if they leave the road they have set out on
They will backslide and their exertions will have failed.
Up a hill, down a hill, the night is an oscilloscope
Of panting crescendos and snorting diminuendos
On a Wurlitzer organ pneumatically powered.
The roof heaves up, the roof subsides,
Like the ribs of a whale with thirty men inside
Detoured from their journey to Nineveh.
And the night is the irreplaceable pearl
That we beat the shrubs by our houses to find

That we turn out every cushion, flip over every rug,
That we pry up the hardwood of our hearts to locate
But it is not there until we surrender,
Like the flushed faces of boys on their pillows
From the exertion of long days of play,
Like the din of a great brass gong, hung from a rope,
Fashioned by the hammering
Of a thousand earnest craftsmen,
Or the groan of a lamasery, chanting like smoke
High up on a dream Himalaya.

HARD FROST

Late in October, and leaves have been falling for weeks.
My dog and I are walking by the river, by a backwater
wearing a new skin of ice, with white vapor seeping
from the wounds.

As the sun creeps over the ridge, its rays hit the tops
of elms and beech trees, and it is like a chain reaction,
the warmth causes leaf after leaf to loosen and fall.

I imagine what it is like in the leaf to be so cold all
night

and all the softness of the sugar factory is killed,
so the sun is like a raygun that blasts you from your
perch,

and you fall, all at once, as the sun finds more and more
of you,

falling all at once like wax soldiers in a failed offensive,
falling like soap flakes in an old-time flicker from the
Yukon.

And they lay in a heap on the green moist ground like
panting dogs

who have been out among trees, chasing all day, and
can only grin now

like the agitated dead. Because the trees are closing
shop for the season,

they are going away from the green and away from the
birds, the trees

are departing for a different place. They are not dead,
they are only gone, and these branches they leave

as remembrances.

MAN & BUTTERFLY

I stand in my back yard, by the prairie garden my wife
has put in, with monarchs fluttering all around ...

It enters my head to poke out a finger, as a possible
perch for one of the creatures ...

And sure enough, as I do, a couple fly close enough to
indicate they at least considered the possibility ...

And you wonder what this could lead to ...

It could be a breakthrough in butterfly/human relations
...

So long we have shared this planet but never really
shared our point
of view ...

We wanted to make contact long before this, they will
say, but there was that matter of you pinning us to
corkboards as objects of art...

It would be difficult at first, because we would have to
magnify their faces to make proper eye contact, and
once we see their fuzzy protuberances up close it could
be pretty gross ...

We could hold peace conferences at which we will
praise them for their diaphanous kitelike beauty and
they could cry out in alarm about riding lawn mowers
...

They could teach us about the dazzle of sunlight, about
the long silence in the chrysalis, about the
transformation from gluttonous worm to ravishing
angel ...

And maybe I could read them some poetry ...
I would be a modern-day Uncle Remus, a secular Saint
Francis, and won't my family be surprised to see me ...
There I am, communing with the fauna, and there they
still are, distracted and fatigued ...
Distraction from the curiosity of a family member on
speaking terms with creatures of nature ...
Fatigue at nothing like that ever happening to them ...
Other people will want to stand with me at the fulcrum
of this amazing contact ...
And I will tell them, stick out a finger and try your luck
...
The pure of heart are sometimes rewarded ...

GEESE

How beautiful and virtuous they seem this morning
idling in the pond in the little park off Dale,
pointing in every direction, leaderless for the moment,
empty from the hard work of migration.

They are the most recent of dozens of groups to pass
this way

and descend into the city to rest up,
judging from the goose crap strewn everywhere
like green toothpaste in the grass.

And their virtue is their quiet courage
in attempting this thousand-plus mile flight every fall
all the way down to Padre Island in the Gulf
across every kind of hilltop and berm,
and not one of them is a drama queen
honking the long history of their efforts
and the birds who fall to the hunters' guns
or get sick en route and can't flap another flap,
they shut their yaps and keep flying.

FISHFLIES

They probably have some other name where you are,
These clouds of angels ululating in the heat.
Harmless as flying shrimp, they neither bite nor itch
Yet they fill the heated sky with their bent translucent
twigs,
Ecstatic to be together for a day before they die,
The endless day that extracts everything from them,
As if life were only about them and their rollicking hour
in the sun.
They mass at your screen door like a theatre on fire
Turned back by a locked emergency exit, they perish in
your car grill
Bodies packed so deep that the fan blade
Scarcely cranks against the clog, and
Robustly constructed spider webs collapse from the
weight
Of so much happiness. They are an army of Egyptians
Spun down in chariots to the sea floor,
They are the Superbowl crowd with the bomb in the
stadium ticking,
They are the communion of saints strewing palms
In the path of the new king proclaimed.
They are put in play not for any reason that benefits
them
But because God made a covenant with the pickerel and
gar

Saying the sign to my chosen will be the feast I visit
upon you
In the first week of August, last days of July,
Eat this candy that I scatter on the waters
Till your gills no longer pulse and your stomach wants
to split.
And so it will go, fish eating fly and man broiling fish
In a coating of garlic and crumb, each species
imagining itself special
Like a chain of being leading straightway to heaven.

SNEEZE

We are fluff that has been blown on,
And we part company with one another
And float away into
The aloneness of the world.
And we wander so long
Borne aloft by a breeze
And we ache to see one another again
Yearning to feel the ancient connections
And we float that way outward all our lives
Until we come to rest one day
And realize we carried the secret
Inside us all along, that we arise
From the soul of a golden flower
And the day of brilliant blooming
Has been gathering inside us
All the while

THE POEM

The most beautiful poem there could be
Alit on you and lit you up.
To hear it was to laugh and cry
Both feelings at the same time
It was wise and absurd and remarkable
And true, you wanted to dash up and down
Your street yanking everyone off their porch
Telling what you heard and they would get it too
You would be pounding each other
With joy because it represented
An irrevocable change in everything that was
And the annihilation of bad beginnings
And all the poems that started well
But meandered off in self-destructive ways.
A poem to make you wake up grinning,
A poem to build stout friendships around,
A poem to turn to when everything else
Went gray, and the light came on again.
But by the time you located a pencil
And pressed it to paper, the angel
Had departed, the stone had rolled back
Into place and the moment was gone.
You could not remember the first thing
About it, something about – no –
And you stood there pointing stupidly
With your finger, so close to glory,
So human in your shoes.



Kraken Press
1841 Dayton Avenue
Saint Paul MN 55104

651-644-4540

<http://mfinley.com/kraken>

mfinley@mfinley.com

