



# Don't Be Like the Moon

Mike Finley

Recollected Poems



# Don't Be Like the Moon

Recollected Poems 2009-2012

Mike Finley

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## ***Sparrow in the Hangar ... August 2011***

## Escape

Don't do it for yourself  
only do it for others.  
Belong to them,  
be the only one they have,  
distribute shares  
so they know that it's real.

Ignore the others like yourself  
let them find their own burrows  
far away from you and dig.

Distrust the flattery  
of your peers,  
whatever they offer  
is what they want back.

You are on your own.  
Forget the great teachers,  
they were mostly bums  
except for here and there.

Say this to yourself  
I don't give a flying fuck  
what anybody thinks,  
a hundred times or so,  
then say, no, really, I don't.

Abandon the plowed field,  
press on into wilderness,  
bury your coins



by a tall pine tree

but remember the glory,  
carry it in your heart,  
be interesting to yourself  
and honor every mystery

## Pit Toilets of the South Camp

The reason why the most visited state park has pit toilets is  
it sits on a rocky bluff beside a river and it is not possible  
to drill a tunnel through rock to pipe fresh water through,  
and take waste water out, nor is it desirable,  
black PVC that shivers when used  
and so we have these unflushable buildings  
that seem a throwback to another time  
and you enter only because you have to  
your hand forced by your own plumbing issues,  
your reluctance as great as all outdoors.  
Do not breathe deeply, do not even breathe by mouth,  
do not stare lingeringly by the hole  
just do your business and be on your way.  
Be careful, at the critical moment  
when you lower your pants down your legs  
not to let your keys or a wallet pop out of a pocket  
and into the soup because as necessary  
as those things are, as indispensable to your life  
as you have made them,  
they are gone.

## Inheritance

An upstairs room is full of scraps,  
thousands of yellow pages and post-its,  
and on each I have jotted a few words,  
a reminder of some thought I once had  
that I don't remember and can't even guess  
why I thought it might be important.

The idea was to do something in my life  
with my hands to make this world more  
comprehensible, and the pain of living in it  
more bearable but the thing is  
I can't even read them now,  
my eyes alight and then they veer away.

My own thoughts have become opaque to me  
with no possibility of meaning,  
just what they will seem one day  
when my loved ones tiptoe up the stairs  
and look at the tangle and think how  
excited I was for just one moment  
and wonder what I was up to.

## Adverb

You start with an ordinary verb, like utter  
and then you add the ly ending  
then the word takes on a different feeling  
not just the that but now with the how  
in what way against what sort of resistance  
now you are doing something utterly  
not just spoken but blurted out  
not just said but yanked from the tonsils  
these are not words typed onto a page  
they are blood-flecked foam from wobbly gums  
this is what you have been trying to say  
are you listening to what I am saying  
are you listening

## Freedom to Choose

Filling out my Conscientious Objector form  
in 1968, a form I eventually  
decided not to finish,  
I came to this question:  
Do you advocate the overthrow  
of the United States Government  
by force or violence?  
And after some deliberation  
wrote down,  
force.

## Competition

I told my bride when she returned to me  
I had been heaping clean laundry  
on her side of the bed,  
and before i went to sleep each night  
would pat it on the hip  
and murmur into its ear, sweet, sweet laundry.  
I figured it was only fair  
to let her know there was this  
competition.

## Wonderful

You could be walking the road  
when the feeling overtakes you  
and you start skipping  
faster than you can run  
and it seems downhill because  
you can't slow down  
and it's night and every star  
is fixed on you.

It is like a store finally stocks  
the thing you've been wanting  
and you sweep every item  
off the shelf and you ask the clerk  
if there are any more in the back.

You meet the person you have  
been waiting for for ever  
and not only are you excited  
but you see the excitement in them,  
in the color of their cheeks  
and the way you weave  
your anxious fingers  
together

## Sparrow in the Hangar

The bird in the hangar is trying to escape  
by the opening at the top  
but there is a screen preventing it.

The bugs clotted in the mesh regard the bird.  
Ordinarily they would not feel collegial  
but there is a sense they are all in the same soup now.

We're very close to being out,  
the bugs say over their shoulders.  
They cling to their anodized squares and feel the air,  
the fresh clean air of freedom  
licking their chitinous faces.

The bird knows they are idiots  
but she is having trouble, too.  
There must be a way, but where is it?

We watch this drama for an hour,  
the bird scanning the length of the roof,  
looking for a way out.  
After the longest time it swoops down to where we are  
and escapes via the enormous open door  
that is big enough to let an airplane in.

Otherwise, correct me,  
but hangars would all be full of dead birds,  
airplanes would be buried up to their wings  
in the husks of those who perished in despair,  
the sparrows, the swallows, the beetles, the bats,



every creature who wandered in  
then couldn't find its way out.

Except somehow we do get out,  
at least for a time,  
and we fly far away.

# Limp

As children playing we learned that we could all  
look crippled by dragging a foot.

So when we encountered a real cripple,  
with a serious disease or injury or malformation,

we wondered why they kept dragging their feet.  
Because we knew it was an act of will.

Why don't spastic people stop stretching their faces  
Don't they see it accentuates the problem?

Meditate, relax, dear disassembled friends,  
allow the peace of the God who made you this way

to overtake you and make you cool again  
Who needs those pop-bottle glasses

and that awful, sticky drooling --  
when you know it's just a case of nerves

and we made these recommendations  
in our heads as children and even later on

and a part of us thought we were being kind  
and we doing a duty, we had the souls of poets

advising the halt and the slow, and calling it  
pity, or compassion, an accomplishment of the heart

Because this is what a poet does, no one cares  
about the stupid pain of our own little lives

But look what we can do, we borrow the sorrows  
of those who really suffer, of those who drag their feet

We know we have plumbed the depths of pain,  
because of the woeful frowns on our face

We try their limping on for size, like a beard on a wire  
that fits over the ears, and we pass from face to face,

styling, collecting tears in a straw hat

## She Takes Me Places

My belief as a young man without much in the bank  
was that one could experience everything at home.

I quoted the Tao to defend this idea.

"One need not travel far to know the way."

I counted this as a prescription for imagination.

One need not climb an Alp to see the sun.

One need not skin a skunk to learn its secret.

I would have gladly been a sloth hanging from a bough,  
my metabolism at one with the tree that I hung from.

But then she came and took me with her.

We went to Bozeman, to the Great Lakes,

to Death Valley and Paris,

climbed Mt. Atitlan and Maine's Mt. Kitahden,

we walked the knife's edge and we banged our canoe

And I learned the lesson of my life,

that when the body says I don't want to, I'm tired,

just leave me alone, just leave me alone,

that is when you must go, do.

# People

are funny, when they  
are down and out

everything is sad  
but when things start

going better for them  
they feel upbeat,

even when everyone else  
is still suffering

## Lipstick & Sunglasses

What do you do, start a museum  
to put such things.

I found them in the glove  
compartment, I don't know

what they  
were doing there.

They were instruments of allure,  
attractants, and she knew how

they worked and she left  
them to me.

I toss them in a trash bin  
in front of a convenience store.

Goodbye the lips of cherry red,  
Goodbye the eyes I adored.

## Lucky You for Real

It was my first book and I wanted to make a splash  
like a meteor zipping across the sky,  
having traversed the lengths of the universe  
then drowning itself in a ditch.

So I had my hair permed and I leaned against a wall  
and I hugged myself for all I was worth  
and reaching for an effect,  
named a book that was really a protracted, selfish scream  
Lucky You, for the sheer brattiness of it,  
the mean gift of saying go ahead,  
enjoy life if you can,  
it's a trip and a half but don't fall

Now comes the penitent, 50 years later  
and must make amends for every last sin  
or drag this attitude into eternity.  
He now knows it is wrong to spit blood on your sandwich  
it is a crime to bust out bawling on a sunshiny day,  
with the swing-sets groaning  
and the toes pointing upward to heaven  
it is an unspeakable crime to call attention to suffering  
or to traffic in brokenness and label it art.

Dear friends we really are so lucky  
to have these opportunities to reflect  
and it is not right to say a gift that is taken back  
was never a gift at all.  
It was yours for the having,  
to hold in your hands, and only your two,

only these two in all the whole world,  
it was the price of admission, admit it  
We live in the shit but explain to me then  
these glorious blue delphinia



## Mall of America

The Mall of America  
is the mall of them all  
shining like a zircon  
in the sun

But the real mall  
of America is  
America itself, stuff to buy  
from sea to sea

Nothing you would want  
exactly but amazing  
nonetheless.

# I Was Born on Knickerbocker Street

on the Fourth of July  
a few ticks past midnight

in the middle of the century of terror  
at the equator of darkest Michigan

in a duplex at the edge of Flint, Michigan  
the birthplace also of General Motors

and cars you never heard of like  
the Dort, the Mason, the Little, and the Flint

and Michael Moore made the city  
ridiculous in its wretchedness

\* \* \*

The original Knickerbockers were the Dutch  
the ones that Washington Irving sketched,

the patroons of old Amsterdam soon  
to be New Yorkers like that fellow

with the pince-nez on the magazine cover  
with his nose in the air because he's in New York

which is also home to the New York Knicks  
and the whole sweep of history,

from Natty Bumppo and N-man Jim

to Patrick Ewing and Spike Lee

I wished a little of their magic dust  
had somehow rubbed off on me

At six months of age they bundled me up  
and rushed me off to Cleveland,

which was not so bad as Flint, yet,  
and my dad made Cadillacs there and drank

\* \* \*

I return a lifetime later and Flint is flooding  
the sudden rains are choking the gutters

and kids are out splashing barefoot  
in the lake that is Knickerbocker Street

on the outskirts of Flint, where the grass  
grows high as cane on every lawn

and burned out cars stand along the curbs  
and the lightning flashes through the hole

in the roof of the house I was born in

in the sea that swirls and suck things down  
along the Buick-Chevrolet Freeway

## Heat Wave

Everyone gets in the car  
and sets the AC to max

and drives all day  
with the cold in the face

and wonders why  
it's got so hot

Valiant

was the name  
of that crummy old car

It always melted  
in the rain

Still it strove  
despite shoddy bloodlines

to take us where  
we went

Beauty Is Not Wise

it doesn't have to be

## The Old Place

We moved up the street  
just six blocks away  
seventeen years ago  
and never looked back.

But there is the house  
and the gate that I built,  
some things are different  
and yet so familiar.

The sleeping porch  
we stood on in the dark,  
the cool air brushing  
all those leaves

The great maple tree  
we swung the kids under  
is still great, we thought  
the wind would knock it down

but look at it, holding  
the October sunshine,  
greater than ever and  
beaming in its place

## Busy

You have to stay busy,  
I'm not sure why.

Doing things shuts out the noise.  
Silence makes us stupid

and then there's just doing  
like sweeping or folding

and we are our  
happiest then



## Good Thing

we forget the names of things  
or else they get common

that thing there it's a --  
what do you call a thing like that?

I know don't tell me  
It's on the tip of my tongue

no it isn't, it's  
light years from my tongue

but the more we forget the more  
we become poets

each moment new to us  
this impossible now

like just waking up  
and stretching in sunlight

everything strange  
and unknown

## Seeing

Sometimes I wish  
I had brought a camera

Sometimes I bring one and  
I'm glad for the pictures

Still the mind finds fault --  
That was not the rock I stood on

The green in the trees  
was shouting the word light

Even in stillness  
We tremble at the motion

and the world is not small  
like this, doesn't fit in the hand

between finger and thumb  
it was as big as everything

and there were no corners –  
the frame was your bones

and the eyes looking out

## In Passing

You pass people  
on sidewalks and in hallways

They walk toward you,  
you walk toward them

There is a chance neither  
of you will say anything

but just as likely you will make  
some friendly tic

a woman will smile prettily  
but be scared to death

There's a rule against waving happily  
when they are still a block away

And sometimes you wait too long  
and your feeble hey is lost

There is a part of you  
lodged in the hypothalamus

that believes it is a moment  
of possible danger

that this oncoming stranger  
may thrust a bread knife

into the soft part of your forehead  
and the last thing you said

was hello

## Naked

I am finishing my sip of Naked Mighty Mango  
when I see a bee climb inside the plastic cup.  
He is a yellowjacket, and his abdomen  
is twitching spasmodically as if to sting the cup,  
like a beating heart or a really bad boner,  
that is just the way they do.  
He climbs out of the cup and sees me move  
the Naked away from him. He sees  
the entirety of me now, this smirking foothill  
looming over the table, toying with him  
and his serious mission, so I stop.  
I am trying to do better by bees.

He is waddling now along a closed copy  
of Tim Nolan's poems, still humping the cover  
with his swollen thing. He disappears  
for a moment under the cover and reappears  
on the art, a photo of a crosscut trunk,  
concentric whorls like a giant thumbprint.  
I was enjoying the book but the bee  
seems unimpressed and humps along  
with his pulsating body part.

I wonder if it was the Naked Mighty Mango  
made him drunk, and the bee is on a bender  
like a funny drunk on my table.  
Or – maybe it was Tim's poems –  
to which he had such a momentary introduction,  
that had this theatrical tumescent effect.

Now I notice there is something wrong with him.

He is walking with a kind of limp, dragging  
leg number five.

Then, dummy me, I see his left wing is not all there,  
he is a disabled bee, an insect with an identifying characteristic,  
for which there is undoubtedly an interesting story,  
an injury sustained -- something selfless and heroic,  
but it would be disrespectful to make one up,  
and this isn't that kind of a story.

# In Response to a Tattoo of My Name and Jack Kerouac's Having Been Inscribed on the Forearm of a Friend

It is hard to know the right response to a thing.  
Someone offers up their body for you  
and what do you say, Thanks pal?

Gratitude is impossible to the cool  
so you must make the awful choice,  
whether to speak the effable truth

or to bury it with the pat of a shovel  
in the yard of a friend who lives  
just down the street.

You could rent an airplane of course  
and squirt out a reply in brilliant vapor  
but in a minute or two it melts away,

formless as a train of elbow macaroni.  
You could hand out matchbooks  
that say Your Patronage Is Appreciated

so every sour sniff of phosphorus  
is also the scent of thankfulness  
that burns and leaves a divot in the skin,

which lasts forever I am told  
till the last white worm pats its tummy  
in the grave and slowly slides away

## Fragment

No one know the exact moment  
the black bear pushed open the spring-door  
to the outhouse and had it close behind him.  
Forensic investigators sugg



## Dumb Thing

A few will understand it  
and they will rejoice for you  
that some predictable  
thing connected you,  
a little dog yapping on its porch,  
a blossom of strawberry  
jam on your shirtfront,  
a yellow ticket slid  
under the wiper blade,  
a picnic without forks  
under a dripping willow.  
Let others break into pieces  
because the arrows of life  
have penetrated the skin.  
You blast them out again  
with a trumpet of air  
you call laughter

## Keys

are such peculiar things  
sticks of metal that get you in

and keep others out  
and if you lose one

or it breaks off in a door  
and you stare there

at the jagged kerf  
in your mittened hand

then the wrong person  
is out and you wonder

how you can possibly  
get back in

## Shave

What does it mean when you have a dream  
that you have grown a luxurious beard?  
I dreamed I had one and everywhere I went  
women ran their fingers through it  
and onlooking men just bit their lips and cursed.  
I can't say I was gracious about it in the dream.  
My attitude was along the lines of  
suck dust, my brothers and colleagues,  
because I have mine and the world  
loves a man with a brush like a backlit saint's  
but when I awoke and stepped into the shower  
and shook the can of Barbasol  
all I got was the cold spluttery stuff  
at the bottom of the can.  
And I ask you, beloved bathroom chorus,  
which was the real dream,  
the bright flowing promise of primary masculinity  
or the creamy splat in the palm of your hand,  
either way I stand naked in in the warmth  
of the water, both hands pressed  
against my face.

## Blatnik and Bong

Kids laugh at the names of things in the harbor.

the Blatnik Bridge and the Bong Airport.

John Blatnik and Dick Bong.

The one sounds like something a whoopie cushion  
would say,

the other a really tough name to take through junior high.

But John A. Blatnik, a Slovenian-American,

and thus the funny-sounding name,

fought with Tito in the underground in Yugoslavia during the war.

He was elected 13 times to Congress.

Though a DFLer, he was the first Democrat to vote against  
the 1964 Voting Rights Act, not the greatest thing  
to be distinguished for.

Richard Bong was an authentic war hero, shooting down  
40 Japanese planes

and winning the Congressional Medal of Honor

before crashing on a test flight and dying

in the Hollywood hills,

when something went wrong and his parachute didn't open,

it was nearly the last day of the war, and newspapers

led with two headlines that morning,

Atomic Bomb Hits Japan and Jet Plane Explosion Kills Maj. Bong.

Bong was just a Swedish surname, and Richard was

an honorable name, it is my own son's middle name,

after his grandfather, a medic in Korea

who was also a good man.

And what do you have now, an airport in Superior

named after Bong, where a few flights take off everyday,

but mainly it's two bridges, the Blatnik bridge

that rises to 125 feet over the bay and swoops

and swerves like a living thing, 7,925 feet long,  
spanning Superior, as grand as its surroundings,  
the beautiful escarpment leading down from Hermantown  
and overlooking the deep black lake.

And the Bong bridge, a shorter, flatter bridge that crosses  
the St. Louis, but it is longer nearly 12,000 feet,  
with 8,000 of that over water, named after ocks  
the ace of aces who was said to be  
such a bad shot, he had to fly up real close  
to what he was shooting in order to hit it, and  
sometimes flying right through the thing he shot,  
like in the movies, flying through fire, a man named Bong  
who did all that for us, and so we drive these bridges  
that feel like living things, groaning with the wind  
and leaning with the tides, and the steel and concrete  
humming underneath, it's not so  
funny anymore.

# Morgendämmerung

The unemployed sleep in,  
It is the only benefit they get.

The motorists on Ayd Mill Road  
bear down, it is road construction

and the lanes are narrowing even  
as a thunderstorm advances

to meet the oncoming sunrise.  
The sky is red with melodrama.

Tires sound, wipers thud, a rainbow  
Appears in the sky to the west

Against the purple cumulus.  
Everyone's grip on the steering wheel

Tightens, we mustn't  
be late for work.

***A Thousand Days ... January 2012***

## The Soul Could Cut a Better Deal

You could be running up the steps of heaven  
curled on a rug at the feet of the Lord

Everything would be perfect then  
And you would want for nothing

Still it is not so bad for you,  
a little grit mixed in with the meat.

The floor is warm but you had to warm it,  
the insects believe heaven is within you.

The soul could bound through heaven unleashed  
yet you choose to be attached to me



## 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.

## Cosmetic Dentistry

First the bad news.

The teeth you now run your tongue over  
will all be leaving your head,  
like that woman with the four-million-year-old skull  
whose canines were scattered like dice  
near the jaw in the red dirt of Africa's Afar Rift,  
because bite the dust is what teeth do.

My neighbor is a cosmetic dentist,  
you can tell from the way he keeps his lawn  
he is a proficient, too.  
He knows teeth are designed to last a lifetime  
provided your lifetime is short and brutish,  
but his job is to extend the warranty,  
painlessly, with amazing glue and diamond drills,  
through the lengthy and lovely lives  
so many enjoy today.

Jung says that an archetypal dream  
is that we are standing over a sink  
and our teeth fall out of our mouths  
and clatter down the drain and we try

to catch them but they are gone.

Turns out it's a dream about mortality.

The good news is, it doesn't bother your dog  
that he's going to lose everything,  
including his canines, which you don't brush  
though you know you should,  
though you love your dog a lot  
but it's kind of a bother to brush your dog's teeth  
and why shouldn't his ivories  
last the full fifteen years,  
when all he eats is toasted soybeans.

And the dog never dreams that dream  
of standing in the bathroom mirror  
watching his mortality clank against porcelain  
because he's a dog and they are spared that,  
unlike you and maybe unlike the Ardipithecus lady  
if people were already starting to dream about teeth  
four million years ago in Ethiopia.

Why are we the ones haunted  
the way my poor neighbor the dentist is,  
everything has to be just the right way,

on his knees in the grass on Saturday mornings in June,  
exhaust seething from the chainsaw in his hands,  
grinding away at the imperfect stump.

## Old Man Mountain Climbing\*

The old man begged not to begin the ascent,  
but we looped a rope around his head and dragged him up, gasping.

Oh, don't be so negative we called back to him, staggering  
And admit it, you need exercise, use it or lose it!

Halfway up he collapsed on the rocks, his eyes rolling  
bloodshot red at. Come on, old feller, we tugged at the rope,

I must admit he did his level best, on those shaky pins wobbling  
His breath wheezing out like an asthmatic accordion

And when we dropped him off at his place, we winked to each other  
You know he's going to have a good long sleep now!

\* Clue: The old man was my dog Beauregard, age 13.

## The Failures of God

what if God is really trying  
really doing his very best  
but he keeps fucking up  
showing up late after the levees have broken  
snapping his fingers  
and saying damn me

what if his heart is in the right place  
but he's just an idiot  
he can't help it  
he keeps losing his car keys  
and forgetting his umbrella

what if we've been covering for him  
out of kindness for all this while  
when what he really needs is  
accountability  
his holy feet held over the fire

and every time he pulls a boner  
and someone is dragged off  
to God knows where  
by accident

## 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.



## ***Poems Of Might ... April 2011***

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.

## 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.

## Gozira

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.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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.  
Their charm has passed,  
and they're not coming back.

But not the stuff you  
whipped off yesterday, either,  
the words you're still in the grasp of,  
but may not be thought through yet.

Do the ones from  
about three weeks ago,  
that you wrestled with,  
that still amaze you  
with the stink of truth.

## 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 Heading 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.

## 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.

## ***Dog Poems***

## 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 sleep by 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.

## Prospect Park

The couple on the bench are out of sorts.

You can see in their faces they are on the brink with one another.

Uninvited my old dog saunters up to them,

assuming he will be welcome,

a soft grin on his dazed features.

The couple reach out to him, lay hands

on his scruzzled skull.



## 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.

## You Taught Me How to Die

The dog was in a coma when we arrived at the hospital.  
I lifted him, limp, from the car-seat  
and placed him on the cart.  
They took him inside to examine him,  
then wheeled him back out to me, ready for the injection.  
My son and I knelt around him for a few minutes,  
thanking him with words and touches  
for being a good dog, and for being our dog  
his entire life.

And then, just before it was time, he opened his eyes,  
which were so blind now, and so tired from his ordeal.  
Then he licked the knuckles on our hands,  
so solemnly, then drifted back to sleep.

When I die I hope I am not in such pain  
that I can't look eyes on you, and thank you,  
the way he did, grateful in the last hour  
for the life that was given to him,  
and the travels he took, and the joy he had.

Forget everything else, my dear ones.  
Forget what a fool I sometimes was,  
how selfish I could be at times,  
how unsatisfactory some moments with me were.

But know that I loved you every day of my life,  
the life that we shared together,  
the travels we took and the joy we had,  
the children we made and held in our hearts,

and know it was you who gave all this to me.

It was you, and don't think  
I don't know this.

## The Dog in the Picture

He always stands out,  
even though the thing that delight him most  
is that he is in.

Even when no one in the group  
is talking to anyone else,  
everyone talks to him,  
even though he can't talk,

or perhaps that's why.  
He neither toils nor spins,  
he spends his lifetime humbly,  
on the floor,

living without irony or muttering,  
leaving his own family  
to be with yours, to go along

without regrets of any kind,  
see, he is grinning, tongue  
hanging out to here, he knows  
this picture is forever

***Cmon Get Happy! ... December 2011***



## Late March Snowstorm, a Hopeful Sound

It falls wet and heavy on the house.  
I open the drapes and see it come down,  
watching the yard,  
where the snow had melted,  
fill again with white.

Then I hear it, from all sides.  
The robins and cardinals,  
returned from the south,  
finding shelter in the hollows of the firs,  
they are singing madly,  
they are glad to be home.

## Of Course It Was a Dream

I awoke late and lay there for several minutes,  
before pulling myself up and sat on the edge of the bed.  
Outside it was still late winter, the cars were where  
they had been the day before.

Of course it was a dream.

I was in some strange city that was half fairgrounds  
and half MIT, when my cell rang  
and it was her.

Hello?

My knees buckled. I didn't want to believe.  
"Is that you, son?"

"Daddy," she said, "I'm waiting here.  
I want to see you so bad."

I should have known from the difficulty I had  
finding clothes to wear.  
Nothing stayed on me, nothing fit,  
so I wrapped a bath towel around me  
and ran.

I ran through the fairgrounds, but I couldn't get out.  
I smashed through the hedges  
and found myself on a campus  
with an endless series of stairs.  
I ran from auditorium to auditorium,  
clutching my towel.

I passed a vendor selling work clothes in the quad,  
heavy denim, with copper rivets,  
and thought to myself, that's odd.

A man asked if he could be of assistance.  
I need to get home, I said, but I don't know how.  
Oh, you need a map to get around, he said.  
I asked where, he pointed far back the way I had come.  
And I ran.

I backtracked perhaps a mile, running through buildings  
and hedges and midday rides.  
I ran until my heart was heaving  
when I came to a booth that sold maps,  
and a man in a long apron handed me a phonebook.

I punched the keys, and a voice came on  
and said "The number you have dialed is not in service.  
Recheck the number and dial again."

I sat on the edge of a disheveled bed  
and stared at the street outside.  
Ice dripped from the eaves above.  
A pair of cardinals hopped from a branch.  
But it was the same tree, the same cars,  
the same hard snow as before.

## How I Think About My Father

I know he felt shame for quitting his family.  
But I also think he felt he was a good guy  
who never got credit for meaning well.

It wasn't his fault his daughter was born sick.  
He wasn't the reason his wife was the way  
she was, at least he didn't think so.

Later in life he undertook to make amends.  
helping tenants who were in sorry straits,  
even testifying against other bad fathers.

He lent out money and forgave the rent,  
He came to be considered a man to turn to  
once his second wife had bled the evil out.

He gave up drinking and smoking and steak,  
He golfed in the desert early each morning,  
and eventually stopped chasing the waitresses

who had tempted him all of his life,  
with their snug rayon uniforms, their lipstick,  
the arousing way they slipped him the check.

So when a tumor sprouted around his lungs  
the size of a pie-plate, he felt gypped once again  
and cursed his luck, and in his wretchedness

he ratted out everyone he ever thought he loved,  
especially me, for remembering everything

and always reminding him of his failures

But out of this I have saved one good memory,  
of the Fourth of July at Cascade Park in Elyria,  
after the great finale had filled the sky with smoke

He bundled up my sister who had fallen asleep  
and wrapped her in the red blanket we had sat on  
and carried her tenderly in his arms to the car

And I stumbled after, because I was small  
and I was tired, too, but knowing this was  
the one moment I would love him

## Falling Out of a Moving Automobile

My mother didn't get her driver's license till she was 27. I know, because it is an early memory, driving with her from Columbia Station to the testing center in Berea, every six weeks or so.

She would buy me off with one of those long pretzel rods from Nickles Bakery, the kind they kept in a see-through canister by the cash register at the tiny market in Olmsted Falls, always standing upright, commanding the attention of every child buying groceries with his mother. Pretzel rods were better then than they are now.

My parents formed a strange covenant, that I found out about as I got older. My dad would have primary responsibility for my older brother Pat, while my mom took me.

This seems like a bad idea in retrospect, but that is what they did. I think Pat would say this was a logical course of action. He loved our dad, who taught his chess, and baseball, and games.

And my mom and I were spitting images of one another.

I remember I wooed her, and promised her a better life as soon as I came online. We would get a new car, not the old humpback Plymouth she learned to drive in. I would take her away from all the cares of life. She would waitress at Stouffer's no more in my regime.

My mom got her license on the sixth try. I was too young to know what she was doing wrong. But I remember no one had seat belts in those days, and I regularly rolled around in the back seat, and bumped against the door. I suppose she was not slowing down enough for turns. I remember the tires screeching a lot.

In those days people went "for a drive" for fun. Proud of being mobile, our mom drove us all over the Greater Cleveland area, as far east as Ashtabula, as far west as Avon. We saw the lake. We saw the oversized Easter Baskets in the park, with the tulip and daffodil bulbs flowers embedded in them. We drove downtown, across the mighty screaming bridges of Cleveland, with giant semis right alongside us, and the figure of the Terminal Tower looming high overhead like a colossus. I felt like I was at the very center of amazingness, driving with our mother through the industrial city.

But she was not a good driver. One day we drove through the Metropolitan Gorge, a lengthy ravine going through Cuyahoga County, with steep sides, and roads that actually went across the river -- not bridges, but fords. So the car splashed right through the river, which was more of a brook at this point.

One day all three kids were in the car. We all cried "Whee!" as we splashed through the fords, water flying away from us to the right and to the left.

We began climbing a steep hill in the Plymouth, which had a standard transmission that caused my mom all sorts of trouble. She didn't know how to set the emergency brake, if there was one. As we neared the top of the hill, leading steeply to the rocks and river below, the Plymouth stalled.

Our mom freaked. She kept pushing the car's ignition button -- it would have been a very easy car to steal. But instead of forging forward, the car began to roll backwards. Our mom, in full panic, felt the car sliding diagonally back until the bumper pressed against the cable guard -- the thin protection against tumbling down into the

gorge. The steel cable felt as taut as a rubber band.

"Everyone out!" she cried. Then she made us tiny kids -- tiny and deoxygenated in Kathy's case -- stand behind a 2-ton automobile about to go over a cliff, and to prevent that from happening with our little bunny arms and muscles.

She kept pushing the button, and the car would wheeze, ease forward, and stall out, forcing us kids closer to the brink.

It was hopeless, and not a little irresponsible.

And we would all have been pushed backward to certain mushy and possibly flaming death, had a man not come upon us, like an angel of the Lord. He set his own emergency brake, cleared us kids away, started up our car, quickly eased into first gear, and pulled the Plymouth away from the steel cable railing.

We drove home in silence.

But the laws of the universe did not change much. One day in the late summer of 1955 -- I am guesstimating here -- we were out on an errand, in the heart of Olmsted Falls, my brother and sister and me. I remember staring up and out of the back window, behind the seat, up at the telephone polls looping overhead. I was about to fall into a nap state.

But I didn't, because our mother took a fast turn and I rolled over toward the rear passenger door. The centrifugal force of my mom's hard left turn, combined with the weight of my small body smacking into the door handle, was enough to cause the door to open. And out of the car I tumbled.



We were going maybe 25 miles per hour.

I remember every microsecond of the spill. I tumbled headlong, with my hands in front of me-- kids are skilled at falling, you know. I fell at such an angle, missing the rear wheel entirely, that I flew over the gravel alongside the road, and into the tall grass of the shoulder sloping away from us.

I remember hitting the grass, and feeling its softness in my hands, and against my face. And still I rotated, somersault after somersault, like a slinky, down the grade of the grassy hill.

I struck no rocks, no beer bottles -- which people just threw out their car windows in those days -- no obstacles of any kind.

I was aware that this was happening only a block from St. Mary's Catholic Church, the place I spent so many Sunday mornings at pewside, casting about for something interesting.

But this tumult in the grass was interesting. I rolled, by my estimate, about 50 feet, and then came to a soft stop, still a couple of yards from the beautiful, rippling Cuyahoga, that pours over the ledge in that town in a wonderful seamless cascade, that reminded me of my mother's tortoise-shell comb.

My mother raced down the slope to engulf me. Say one thing for her, she was not above self-reproach, and she castigated herself for several seconds before obtaining a promise from us kids that our dad never needed to find out about this.

And we piled back into the car and drove the four miles home. The

sun was low in the afternoon sky, and the leaves on the poplar trees shimmered like dimes in the late light.

And I began having thoughts that I would never die, that there was no danger in the world, and those thoughts have persisted, wrongly, to this very day.

## Down with Emotion

It is accepted that emotions are good things ... that denying them leads to inexpressivity, addictive alternatives, and possibly constipation.

To be anti-emotion pretty much marks you as a psychological Puritan, or the coach who tells you to suck it up, slap the wound with tobacco juice, and get back out there and play.

Being unemotional is American. We're movie people, soap opera people, flag-flying people. The Puritans would dismiss the fifth freedom -- the freedom to cry.

Leslie Gore's "It's my party and I'll cry if I want to" stands as a bookend to Barbara Fritzsche's "Shoot if you must this old gray head ..."

We're entitled to it. It heals our wounds. It's who we are.

And yet ...

I learned late in life that I am hyperemotional. This just means that on the scale of emotionality, I am way over there. It may be part of being (gently) bipolar. And I'm here to tell you, that this supersensitivity really doesn't get you anyplace.

I am the guy howling with laughter at the cineplex, because I want to be amused, like a sponge wants to be wet.

The guy at the party who tells jokes, dances, and wants that extra drink, anything to keep the fun going.

The guy who at all times wants to flag people down and have a terrific conversation -- about anything, even the Twins -- but everyone always has somewhere to go.

At the end of all these efforts to maximize experience, is yes, another feeling, frustration. And sometimes anger, that no one wants to play.  
=(

More and more I think the stick-in-the-mud crowd has it right. Just be cool. Want not. Detach. If you feel a storm coming on, accept it, but let it pass. Don't try to climb up into the thundercloud. Definitely don't hurling shafts of lightning at innocent bystanders.

My wife says, change. Easy for a half-sphinx, half-chameleon to say. She is only comfortable outside her comfort zone. I call her child bride, though she will be 60 in April. I suspect she will live to be 130. When we go out, people assume I'm her father. We're like ten months apart, but they are really apart.

Emotion did this to me.

\* \* \*

I think a lot of people are like this. Some are famous. Most are just messed up.

The problem in part is that I reward myself for being this way. Being a writer means you align yourself with intense feeling and perception. There are always a few people who think it's the bees' knees. Enough to encourage you to think it's a good thing, you're on the right track.

Rachel has been studying about brains the past year. It's all about

brains, friends. Some of us have great, cool brains -- sagacious, dispassionate, able to separate themselves and their needs and dizzying desires from the matter at hand.

Others of us are strictly Abby Normal.

I sometimes think I would have been a big hit in a more backward time, like the Dark Ages. A jester, a soothsayer, a stirrer of pots. It was a more tolerant time.

My mother did an unusual thing in 1971 -- came down with juvenile diabetes at age 45. Medically speaking, this is weird, as the name of the disease properly suggests.

But there was a reason. She sent her daughter, 15, to the dentist to get her baby teeth pulled. My sister was a blue-baby -- congenitally messed-up heart ailment that no longer exists. Her blood supply was so deoxygenated that her baby teeth never pushed out, and so became mossy and diseased.

The dentist had my mother sign a waiver. Good thing because during the procedure, undertaken because Kathy's teeth looked dingy, she went into a coma, and died two days later.

My mother knew that her feelings about Kathy's teeth led directly to her death.

And so, being a hyperemotional woman, she willed herself to come down with a child's disease, one which led directly to her own death -- 40 sorrowful years later.

Ah, and it's the Irish that flows inside us, that holds us to its heart. A

surge of emotion that takes its toll of the body, blood sugar rising and falling like the sea.

And what good does this sensitivity do a person? It octuples their poetry output.

\* \* \*

God gives each one of us a unique hand of cards to play, and play it we must, for we have no real alternative.

My daughter, a rebel to her fiery core, was hyperemotional as well. She lost her crappy pizza parlor job -- please don't eat at Pizza Luce -- so she took her life.

There were other issues as well, some of them so awful that you start to see her point.

But my point is that her emotion -- the thing that distinguished her from all others -- her brilliant spirits, her wonderful, rippling-brook sense of humor -- was what did her in.

What amazes me, and it's a mathematical issue, is that the deck of cards God deals from has such crappy hands, so many of them, so laughably unplayable.

It is like making sense of a shredded newspaper.

I totally understand turning your cards over. Love you, girl.

But I wish there were instead a dial somewhere, so people like my mother, my daughter, and me could turn down the intensity. Leverage

against the fire.

We don't need to be playing all the time.

It's plain that other people's need or desire to engage is a fraction of what ours are.

Rachel says, meditate. But I'm willing to guess that hyperemotional people probably rank among the world's worst meditators. Or we do it, but even our meditation is a party. Not that I know how to measure and compare normal emotion to hyperemotion -- probably involving brainwaves and electrodes -- but it would be hard to get normal people to slow down and take the test.

Maybe begin by accepting that this is just the way it is, and there is no fix for it.

God made me this way, and whatever he finds amusing, that should be OK with me.

## Out Driving

In the dusk, in the snow,  
it looked like a bookshelf  
propped against the bus sign.

Rectangular, with wooden slats,  
A bookcase by the bus-stop,  
what an odd combination.

But it wasn't a bookshelf,  
it was a box-spring someone  
left by the highway.

It was a box-spring  
leaning on the bus-stop post,  
not a bookshelf after all.



## The Young People

We were like jewels glinting off  
one another's light,  
sapphires, rubies, garnets, pearls ...  
our teeth were so beautiful  
and so was our skin,  
nothing old could hold us in,  
our poor parents were at a loss to contain  
this savage perfection,  
the Buick roaring from gravel  
onto highway,  
laughter and beauty and limitlessness,  
six-packs of Rolling Rock,  
sexy cruel sneers,  
and our poor dear mother  
in her babooshka and apron  
carting Kleenex out of our rooms,  
and father with his yellow sponge  
daubing at the car seats.  
What religions would we not topple?  
What ancient wisdom would be next to fall?

## Don't Be Like the Moon

Don't be like the moon, your face all scars,  
dismayed by your bombardment.

If you choose to be like the moon,  
you will be relegated to night,  
a lantern in the darkness.

The world must carry the moon on its shoulder  
like a stillborn child to the grave.

Do not be bewildered like the moon  
Do not gaze open-mouthed into space  
Do not dwell in memories gone bad

Be like the earth you were plucked out of,  
The one that lives, that farts and sighs

Deny your losses, shed your skin,  
Pack away the dead so they cannot be seen

Make roses grow between the rows  
Be like the blooming earth and forget

## 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 an old 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.

## The Sign in the Store Window

When you say you can't imagine  
I know exactly what you mean --  
you mean it hurts to imagine,  
and who needs that unnecessary pain  
when there is enough of the real stuff  
to go around.

The truth is we imagine all the time  
of course  
and as bad as this is  
we imagine worse.

If you couldn't imagine  
you wouldn't be afraid.

The truth is we are losers,  
we will lose everything we know,  
each lovely face will crumple in the flame  
and if we don't see it  
it's only because our face  
caught fire first,  
but someone saw  
and someone's heart  
must break.

We knew what the deal was  
when we signed on.

Everything must go,  
as the sign in the store window says.

The shelves will be stripped  
and the roof set ablaze,  
and every thing  
be swallowed in the roar.

It's no good to walk the chalk line,  
bereft, mumbling, tearing at our hair  
and clothes, no one can live  
for a week like that.

But it's not a bad thing to pack it away  
in the back of our mind, closeout,  
clearance, make us an offer

The other creatures, rooted in the earth  
or yawning in the grass,  
don't have to deal with this.

Next time life seems pointless,  
next time you want to watch it  
shoot out of the can,  
remember that fact.

Why would this excruciation occur,  
why are you able to imagine this  
and so much more,  
until every tear sizzles to nothing,  
if you meant nothing?

If your heart doesn't break ...  
you're not here.

## Dishwasher

It's by far the best job in a restaurant  
The cooks by contrast are up to their elbows  
in anguish, racing to meet their requirements

The waitresses are all scribbling salad orders,  
trying to keep everyone's dressing straight.  
The barkeep pretends to listen to stories  
but really he's keeping an eye out for trouble.  
And the coat check girl with the big brown eyes  
stares from her stool in the darkened box

Whereas the dishwasher warms his blood at the wrists  
And the hot and soapy water goes to his heart  
like wonderful liquor.  
Everyone yelling but he doesn't hear.  
He is writing a song about love in America.  
And all he has to do are the dishes.

(1982)

## Pluses and Minuses of the Suicide of a Child

The first thing is, you realize  
you never have to worry about that one again.  
The play is finished, the suspense  
has passed, and the horrors  
that lay likely ahead --  
the crimes, disappointments, the late-night calls,  
the tears, the setbacks,  
a phonebook of pain and destruction --  
can close now.

Then you realize that people are not going to be bringing  
you their small problems and heartaches  
ever again, and asking for your sympathy,  
and for a time that seems an advantage,  
until you find out  
how much you miss it.

Eventually you learn  
you are still attached to that person  
and that you can't help continuing  
the conversation that you had started,  
and then got interrupted.  
You go to them for consultation,  
because they know everything,  
and have nothing better to do  
than to go on being part of you.

But it's no good really.  
Those you still love must look into your eyes every day  
and be silent about the cavity

that has opened up among you,  
the face that cars and buildings  
and trunks of trees are sliding into the ravenous,  
groaning, foothold-killing thing.

And because you love them  
you give them your best,  
and reassure them the way you did  
from the beginning, from the earliest, happiest days.  
"Darling ones, it's going to be all right."



# The Bard and the Elbow of the Whale

I am feeling philosophical, and the topic that floats to mind is bardism.

The idea of the bard is an old one. Long ago bards and priests were probably one class of shamanic person, the one in charge of teaching in a community.

But as roles specialized, priests followed magic and bardic figures followed words, and the art of persuasion. The bard became the person who kept the community alive by speaking memorable truths.

The bard was an orator, a rhymmer, a joke-teller, a story-teller, a teacher who knew how to say vital things in such a way that they stuck in the heads of community members.

Homer, if there was a Homer, was a bard. I like to think there was an actual author of that work, but if there were it came at the very end of the bardic era.

The bard may have been a maniac, but he served the community, reminding them when to plant, how to go to war, the right way to live and die.

You can argue with part of this, but the thing I want you to hold onto is the notion that the bard, the poet, had a vital function in the community. He was a kind of godfather, the guy who could make things happen, by the power of language and memory.

At the high water mark, bards were considered the MVPs of their communities. When two warring lords sat at supper, a bard was

placed between them, because it would be suicidal for the community to involve a bard in a fight or assassination -- how would people survive the winter without their walking, talking almanac? It would be killing the medicine man -- no more medicine.

Bardism had a natural life cycle, and it became obsolete. As literacy spread, and people could commit memory to paper, the need to have a person speaking the words into our ears decreased. Bards were among the first people to be disintermediated by language technology. They were replaced by librarians.

When the job of bard disappeared, people with the power of the bard to speak memorably were shunted aside, like samurais in medieval Japan, to find their own way in the world.

(One movie begins with a crafty samurai asking if he can hang himself from a nobleman's apple tree -- knowing that the noble would then be honor-bound to invite the down-on-his-luck warrior in and feed him.)

It has been downhill ever since! Poets -- bards without portfolio -- have tried to catch on as courtiers, jesters, entertainers, and old hermits high up the mountain.

The lucky ones won patronage, saying what pleased the nobility. Everyone sought public approval by saying what pleased people generally, like street musicians.

Many starved or took their lives, because a rift had opened up between them and their natural calling -- to be of authentic service to the larger group.

There have been efforts by poets, especially in their youth, to recreate the idea of the community bard. Some of these were hoaxes like Chatterton. Some were entertainments, like Shakespeare and Walter Scott. Some were hoary fictions, like early Yeats. Some were shape-shifting wisdom writers like Robert Bly, who pretended or perhaps actually thought they were bards. Whether they were actually of use is debatable. They certainly feel they are, warning us against evil wars and enemies of sound culture.

The thing is, everything about the way we live has combined to make the posterity of the bards -- poets -- disconnected and un-reconnectable from people.

We have books in the libraries telling us when to plant. We have no great need for visionary individuals to tell us how to vote or think -- you can practically get that from vending machines now.

The role of poets has been so reduced that we do not even think of them as being decent jesters or entertainers any more.

Hop-hop artists may be the exception to that. Their poetry is unignorable, political, and vivid in the extreme. But by and large, poets today are mere vestiges of what the mighty bard once was -- the voice of survival. We are linked to survival. We are luxuries that no one needs, and no one wants to feed.

Literacy and technology have made even the ancestors of the bards -- poets and storytellers -- largely irrelevant.

So what is to be done?

Evolution would say, keep evolving, until we become so vestigial we

are like whales' elbows, once mighty arms, now fins for piercing the briny deep. Poets can whore themselves out to ad agencies, web designers, purveyors of skywriting. Soon they will no longer be classed as poets. They will be wordsmiths, doing manipulative work for hire, overcoming people's sales resistance -- the diametric opposite of survival knowledge -- with the tiniest possible amount of panache.

Me, as a poet and a would-be bard -- I am humbled and horrified by this challenge.

I am a bard, or possibly a kind of prophet, in that I know what the secrets of survival are. I have learned these in the bitterest possible way, by experience.

The wisdom? That life is pain. And living is suffering. And after it, you die. In this sense there is no survival for individuals. There is only the possibility of survival for the community -- and even that is a finite concept. Groups die eventually, just as people do. In between is the warrior's way -- of struggling, of self-control, of working for others, and of acceptance.

But people flee from this truth. They want no part of this kind of bard. As if they ever wanted any part of any kind.

I think what few of us would-be bards care to accept is that the bards worked for the people, and that the people were a small group. Both these things are huge. The first says that the poet's job is no longer about the poet. "Confessionalism" has no place. "Personality" is only useful when it is useful. "Self-pity," whether comical or melancholic, is counter-productive. "Irony," if some people get it, and other don't get it, should probably be taken behind the barn and put down.

All these ground rules are harrowing thoughts for a person like me, who has gotten by all his life on precisely these elements.

It would be an enormous sacrifice to play by these ancient rules. For one thing you would be unpublishable -- no big loss if you are not publishing much anyway, but a big loss in the sense of its finality. It means you will be too uncool forever, and working for peanuts.

The other thing that will have to go is "squeamishness around sentiment." Most poets abhor sentimentality, and the usual symbols that stir the common heart -- love of country, canine loyalty, us vs them -- all the obvious emotional fields that people are drawn to. A proper bard will, I believe, praise motherhood, not put it on the psychoanalytic couch. You will have to make peace with the idea of institutions -- anathema for many artists.

Serving the community means shaving off a lot of rough corners. Most contemporary poets would rather drink ink than suffer this loss of self. It constitutes a rejection of modernism, and a diminution of identity.

Finally, the community has to want you, and there is no way to command this to happen. What if they want a different bard, or no bard? The new bard will have to woo his or her friends, and bother them at every opportunity, and tell them that they have to accept him. For their part, they have to accept him or drive him out of the circle.

Why? Because the bard must be part of their funny family. Perhaps they will pioneer in having this role develop and grow within their circle. Perhaps these individuals, linked with this peculiar common figure, will find ways to deepen connections and friendships -- so the bard doesn't feel alone.

And the born-again bard will be unable to charge for his services. Like the rabbis in the diaspora, they will have to learn a trade. Being a bard will be a hobby.

Perhaps the new union will make us all a little squarer again ... more cohesive and together ... sharing core values more consciously ... more serious about the bonds holding community together.

The loser in all this is probably the way we think about poetry -- as aesthetic, as odd, as clownish, as melodramatic. But there was little left of it anyway, in the ways most people think. People don't like poetry. It fails in every possible way – the wrong news coming to the wrong people in the wrong format.

It was the whale's elbow, and now it is time to swim.

## How to Have Good Things Happen

If something bad happens  
act like you don't quite get it.

Wear that what-the expression  
on your face.

That way you never give it the satisfaction  
of knowing you hurt.

Walk with a distinct rhythm,  
bouncing slightly as you go along,  
even if it causes pain or you  
are a little bit crippled.  
Pretty soon, by definition,  
you are dancing.

Love, but be discreet.  
Everyone twists an open valve.  
See what the other hands are betting  
then open it up, so the strong of heart  
can stand and follow.

## For the Love of God

I go through my list of friends' and acquaintances' blogs, but not often enough. I just came across one from last year. A woman I knew adopted a child who had been in a terrible fire, in China, and whose family abandoned him.

It was understood that the boy was disfigured, blind, unable to speak or understand.

Her family took him in, but from the start things went badly.

I didn't know until I read this just how badly.

What makes this story special, beside the fact that I know these people a bit, were the fervent hopes of the woman that the love of God would see them all through.

I have known situations where people come through this kind of hellstorm and their faith actually increases.

Not mine. I have my own little bag of woe to tote around with me. But this story humbles me.



## Burn, Baby, Burn

Rachel told me something interesting before she went north again this time.

"When we were young," she said, "part of our myth about ourselves was that we were different from other people, that we were more intense, had more going on.

"As I get older," she said, "I realize that that isn't true. Yes, some people are low-key. But in their hearts and minds, their concerns burn as brightly as anything you or I ever felt."

She was talking about our friends, her patients, the people we run into every day and don't think very much about.

Every car paused in traffic. Every worker punching in.

Their loves. Their needs. Their disappointments and struggles.

Every house, on every block, is a house on fire.

It's like my favorite quote, that Paul Gruchow gave me, that might come from Philo of Alexandria:

"Be kind to people you meet. For everyone is fighting a great battle."

It is the heart of her Buddhist principles because it is the bedrock of compassion -- seeing that other people are as real as we are, and gasping at their own share of life challenges.

I wonder what else she's right about.

## Paul Finleys

It is hard in these times to accept the death of a child but it used to be a common thing. It was one reason families have lots of children -- to absorb the losses due to disease, hunger, violence.

My own father was a replacement child. Two years before he was born his parents -- my grandparents -- had another son, who died of pleurisy.

He too was named Paul Finley.

Life just used to be spookier, as death was an abiding presence in every family. What seems normal to us, almost an entitlement -- our children will surely outlive us -- was not assumed then.

On another note, you wonder about how child-rearing changes when you get a second chance as my grandparents did. By all accounts my dad was raised as a kind of blessing incarnate, as a kind of prince. His older sister and younger brother were not given the same free pass.

It may be that this was why my dad grew up self-involved and not very responsible or ethical. He got into numerous scrapes that, by the standards of the day, were quite shocking. The worst is that he forced himself at age 15 on a young girl, an orphan visiting his family's farm, who then had his baby. That's right, I may have a half-sister out there in the world, whom I have never met.

And it may be because my father had a brother before him, who bore the same name, and who died.

And though he was raised as a blessing, as a kind of miracle child --

his own father cursed him for his transgressions. He told me this story several times, with drunken tears in his eyes.

And then his child died -- my sister Kathleen, one of the last of the "blue-babies," at age 15. (I was 11.)

And then his child's child -- my Daniele, at 24 -- died, by her own hand, one year ago.

Maybe these still are the olden days. And they ain't over yet.

Such unsimple and unnoticed mysteries.

## The Penultimate Review

I came across an item in a box yesterday. It was a yellowed underground magazine from the year 1978, The North Country Anvil.

In the magazine, on page 37, was a one-paragraph review of a book of my poems. It was not especially favorable. the words "derivative" and "solipcistic" both appear in it. (Not to worry, I can annihilate them with my mind.)

But what I realized was that it was the last time I got reviewed in print. Not nonfiction, just poetry. That's 33 years without having anyone say anything about me in print -- the lifespan of a messiah.

Not sure what to say about this. A sudden spate of fresh "derivatives" and "solipcistics" isn't going to make my day, or decade. I think one reason is that that was during the "offset revolution," when paper plates (think Insty Prints) made it affordable for anyone with shoes to publish a poetry magazine. So a kind of market flourished for a while, until prices rose again.

Now everything is online, just about. And I have had friends write sweet mash-notes to me on the Facebook pages, etc. Blessings be to all who qualify.

I thought it was interesting that this past August I published my collected/selected works, Yukon Gold: Poemes de terre, (<http://mfinley.com/pdf/poemes.pdf>) an event of immense artistic significance. I'm not going to do it again any time soon, at any rate.

The book has not gone completely unnoticed. Friends have come up to me and said, in so many words, "Why is it so long? (The book is

558 pages long, and barely loads into memory.) Only a thoughtful few have thanked me for the 558 pages I took out.

But it has gone almost completely unnoticed. 33 years. Gosh, that's a long time. Obviously, a conspiracy of unthinkable dimensions has been launched against me and the power my work must represent to the literary elites. I picture them cowering in a fancy room somewhere, sitting under a crystal chandelier, wearing monocles and poking my book with golden barbecue forks.

My inclination is to wait another 33 years, and not fly off the handle. But if things haven't turned around by then, I'm gonna have something to say.

# Nighttime in Heaven

was the nicest surprise because  
you expect it to always be day

but after dark is when the fun starts  
and all the praise is packed away

there is music far across the lake  
and occasional applause and whistles

for long stretches everything  
is impossibly funny, and you

keep saying of course, of course  
except your cheeks don't ache

and there is time for tender walks  
under a moon that is bigger than a house

and if you want you can rest on the stoop  
hand in hand with your life's best friend

everyone sleeps in a heaving pile  
and has the most wonderful dreams

people of every ethnicity smacking their lips  
and don't try to do the math on this

but they all hold on to god's pajamas

## Noncompliant

Sometimes you want to let it all go,  
stop taking the medicine  
and let your cells be.

The whole world is popping pills,  
and someone's getting rich  
from them.

Better to strike out  
for further lands,  
until your socks are soaking wet,

Take in the air for the air  
that it is and not something  
new and improved.

See where it takes you,  
how long we last, maybe  
make a man of us.

Feel like you're dying  
all the time  
cuz that's what living is.

## Consideration

It is considered unkind  
to let someone sit there and fill up  
with their fluids.

They could drown on them  
or just come to a halt,  
like a balloon  
blown full of cement.

So we hand them the box  
without saying a word  
and they blow out their gunk,  
the gunk of sorrow  
by the fistful  
until something that was light  
like a feather  
is weighted down and wadded up  
with tears and snot,  
a salty treat  
the dog will want to consider



## Apotheosis

Given lengthening life expectancies,  
it is logical that a man  
will some day enter the ladies room by mistake,  
and then it is incumbent upon everyone there  
to keep it together,  
for the women to be cool,  
because this is not the way maniacs act,  
this does not lead to blood,  
except the blood that goes  
to the face  
because the man was thinking  
about something or other  
and pushed the wrong door,  
it could happen to you  
if you let your guard down  
in that sense it is an index of virtue,  
because for one second in your life  
you were too afraid to be afraid  
and you look goggle-eyed into one another's faces,  
astonished, befuddled,  
perhaps even kindness played on the edges  
of that horrorstruck look,  
in the way that embarrassment,  
nakedness, the fact of our bodies  
must bring us together.  
even if we then veer off in opposite directions  
and never speak of this to anyone,  
for a second we were together,  
holding everything precious we own  
in damp and trembling hands,

and you wonder, if I can do this  
and live,  
what other limits are there?

## Papa's Pizza on Thomas Avenue

They serve house wine in jam jars,  
and a combo is playing,  
and the owner proclaims them  
the return of Francis Albert.

A woman is shown a table,  
and when she undoes her hood  
she is slender, with a high forehead  
and tiny teeth a bit apart.

At another table a girl  
who is at most eighteen  
and knows she is dynamite  
squints and laughs.

I recall that my father  
fought another man  
in the nursing home  
over a woman with a facelift.

The singer loses his way,  
reads lyrics from his cellphone.  
Though the wine was refrigerated  
I understand everything.

## Poet Wasting

The main reason we hunted them down  
was because there  
was so dang many of them.

We're not a cruel people,  
it would have been crueler  
to let them live.

Put a bounty on their heads  
and set them loose  
at the onset of winter,

run them down before too long  
and if you sent the liver  
to the DNA

for testing and it  
came back OK  
you got to keep the whole thing.

It was hard at first, looking into  
those plaintive eyes  
then jacking the trigger

It wasn't their fault  
they were so numerous,  
all they ever really wanted

was to say a thing  
so it lived a while

in the heart

but even that  
got old  
after a while

# Expectancy

(found poem)

The Lifetime of a lightbulb  
is the number of hours it lasts  
before going out.

Charlene buys a lightbulb

with a lifetime of 932 hours.

How many weeks can Charlene  
expect this lightbulb to last  
if she uses it exactly

seven hours and 40 minutes

every single day?

# Atheist Heaven

He is especially tender with these ones  
because they lived their lives without comfort  
there were no opt-outs from reason  
they lived in the crush of what could be seen  
and never asked for favors  
and they never lied to themselves  
and they never were kissed  
by the soul's endless night

they were saints of a sort,  
of a bleary, chap-mouthed sort  
and when it was over  
they lurched into dirt  
and issued not a complaint

they say he loves them most of all  
and gives them the tools  
to live without him  
the willingness to suffer chief among them  
and instead of one guardian angel  
they get two  
because they have more trouble  
to get out of

and now they sit in this room forever  
elbow to elbow  
legs crossed  
smoking pipes and  
thumbing the pages of books

without words

they never know  
and nobody tells them  
how loved they are,  
or where



## What We Should Do

Maybe we should all weep more  
It dissolves the salts that collect in the corners  
It flushes the rings and uncakes the pistons,  
It lubricates the entire mechanism

Maybe we should all set aside time  
To throw ourselves on the bed and soak it in tears  
Like a sponge taking on water  
Like a sub going down

Sobbing and sobbing  
until we scrape bottom  
Maybe we should unratchet  
The nut on the hydrants

And hose down the city  
With a sloshing of tears  
It feels so good coming out  
Though it stings, it corrects

The idea that your eyes  
Are for seeing only  
Maybe if we got it all out  
For once and for all

And took a Q-tip to each cranny  
And the tanks sound hollow  
When banged with a pipe  
And the sound echoes through you

Saying empty, I am empty  
And we have had a good cry  
Maybe it would finally be time  
Maybe we could muster the hope

To be happy

(Happy Thought)

People who  
worry they

might be  
narcissists

probably  
are not

## The Favor

If people looked to poems  
the way they look to music,  
that wonderful expectant feeling  
when the saxophonist is about to explode,  
or the singer shakes her head  
and her sweat pelts the front row,  
or the wink of the offbeat  
that has everyone laughing,  
and the drummer playing on  
as if nothing had happened.

Music we can listen to for hours on end,  
the delight just grows in us,  
the love envelops us,  
but poetry, well, forty minutes  
is a long time to think,  
and when the event is over  
and the skronk of chairs tells you  
it's time to go home,  
it's no mystery who did whom  
the big favor.

## My History as a Man

When I was young and handsome  
girls brightened like pennies  
when I drew near.  
Wonderful, ignorant girls.

Later, smarter, they pulled back from me.  
Even though I meant no harm.  
Well, I didn't mean much harm.  
Not too much, anyway.

Now, they don't even know that I'm there.  
I'm like an old pair of pants  
flapping on a pole.  
Oh ladies, I miss when you feared me.

## The Wagon

I was six when we moved to Vermilion-on-the-Lake,  
six doors on Niagara Road from the lapping Lake Erie

I spent all my time walking the bluffs and beaches  
staring out at the choppy gray water

one day i took it into my head  
to fill my Radio Flyer with dead fish

and roll it back to my mother's house  
I don't know what i was thinking

that she had a recipe for 30 pounds  
of eyeless, sand-pounded carp

I had to bury them in the field behind us  
my mom was very clear on that

and I stood over the grave with a shovel  
and I vowed as God was my witness

to keep an eye on my judgment in the future  
but I have to say, all these decades later

the problem continues

## My Father Didn't Like Me

I didn't know this until I was 56 years old.

My brother, driving me out to Dad's house in Hesperia to clean up, informed me.

"He wanted to live in the life he made for himself here," Pat said.

"He felt you were always trying to drag him back to the other life, the one he felt he had failed at."

It was like a slug in the stomach,  
because no boy ever wanted  
to be loved more.

But my brother was right.

My dad had lost a child.

He then divorced his wife.

He was blacklisted by General Motors nationwide for irregularities.

Then he abandoned his children and moved far away,  
to a place where cars were not manufactured,  
California.

He was 38 years old, young enough to start again.

Naturally his second life was more faithful,  
more successful, less riddled with horror.

And there I was, through my phone calls and visits,  
the son who could not let go,  
a constant reminder  
of everything that was left behind.

I understood Dad better now,

that his second life was meant to erase the first,

to make up for it,  
and I was supposed to admire his sudden sales abilities,  
his entrepreneurial demeanor,  
his ability to set money aside,  
prosperity blooming in the desert like a smile,  
the desert where he lived and golfed.

But I was always there, perhaps maliciously,  
to hurt him, perhaps because  
it was the only childhood I could remember,  
and all I had to do was whisper in his ear,  
the word Cleveland.



## Stepping Into Underpants

Gets harder every year.

The knees get stiffer, the hips  
do not want to make the number four,  
the one foot hopping on the floor  
leads the body into the bedstead,  
the doorknob, the chair.

And the seat of the underpants  
is not new cloth,  
the fabric has grown tired  
from so many washings,  
and sittings, and scratchings,  
the elastic has been through the dryer  
too often, it stretches  
but it no longer snaps back.  
it is more like a veil than a rampart,  
and the stabbing foot could so easily miss  
its target and plunge through  
the rear panel entirely.

And it will only get worse,  
until the old man has to sit on the bed,  
and pull them on the way George Washington did,  
with a stable boy to assist you,  
and an aide-de-camp standing by.

And so you sit,  
a polished rag in your trembling hand,  
pondering the glories  
that are behind you.

## When the Moon Sees Us

it sees the sea, it  
remembers the rolling

and the heaving  
and the wanting to leave

and though it rests now  
like a pearl in the night

it rose then into light  
dripping and shining

and held up to see

2 a.m.

I awakened  
to your sobbing

Don't cry I said  
though I knew what it was

and I knew don't cry  
is useless advice

I patted you  
and thumped your back

like a drum  
in the covers

as if the sounds  
from the heel of my hand

passed through  
in waves

I wanted the vibrations  
to set up a hum

and pass through us  
like a shout through water

and take it  
outside us forever

## Apache Dance

My parents fought. I did not understand the dynamics at the time, but my dad yearned to party, and my mom wanted him to stay home and be nice.

There was a wild destructive foolishness in his position, and a sick joylessness in hers. They hated each other as if there were no higher calling in the world.

I remember we three children sitting on a braid rug in what was our dining room. For some reason the dining room table was missing. It was late for us, dark -- perhaps past nine. I rubbed my eyes because I did not want to miss the drama.

We crouched together on the rug, which had a circular pattern, like a target. My brother and sister, both older than me, seemed to have a better idea what was going on. Kathy glared at our father, Patrick glanced about in fright. It was all news to me.

Our mother knelt behind us, hiding, either to block the blows from our father, or perhaps just to shame him, to expose him to us. See what your father is like. See.

Paul W. seemed like he might bust loose any moment, break a glass or swing at a lightbulb. He was foul, and made gestures as if to strike us, and then laugh because we were afraid. I think, looking back, he was in despair in some way. I think, looking back, our mother was, too. Their lives had galloped away from them. They had nothing now, except one another.

But what could children know about the knots grown-ups could tie

themselves into.

I always, secretly, knew they were mad. Unable to enjoy the most obvious things -- running in the grass, putting arms around the dog, jumping from the porch. Life was full of little delights, but you would never know that from grown-ups. Their idea of fun was cigarettes. They were full of passion and devoid of laughter. What had become of the children in them.

I think, looking back, that I was the luckiest person in the room.

## Floaters

It is one of my earliest memories, and it tells you something about the weird boy I was.

I am resting on an elbow lying on my bed on the second floor of my family's duplex in Columbia Station, Ohio.

I am four, and I am looking at the floaters drifting across the surface of my right eye.

They were like one-celled creatures -- though I did not know what those were then. But they were like them -- ghostly shapes with penciled peripheries, like euglenae or paramecia.

If you rotate your eyeball, the floaters shift with you, and are suddenly on another arc of the eye.

I don't know what I am looking at, but I know it is something tiny, that only I can see.

The thought I have at that moment, and that I still remember, is key to the kind of person I was.

"No one else sees these, or cares."

So many times I was on the lookout for secret things.

The looping of telephone lines as the car sped along Nichols Road.

The waving of tall grass in the autumn wind.

The whorls on my thumbs and fingers. The way light shimmered on a puddle in the driveway.

The contortions of nightcrawlers plucked from the slag pile after a rain.

The white doughnut-holes of dog poop that lay in the grass.

The sticky pine sap that slung to my trousers when I climbed.

The golden garden spiders, with their sharp arms and mandibles, that dwelt by the gutterspout alongside the garage.

The red beam of a flashlight showing through the web of my hand.

I was not a scientist, but I loved to observe.

And complement myself that only I was seeing.

And these floaters were like microbial angels that lived on my eyes. They could not be summoned at will. I could only see them sometimes.

# On Having My First Hearing Aid Implanted

I hear ...

my breath like an athlete  
drawing strength for the next heat ...

the murmur of the exhaust fan  
reaching out to me from a duct ...

the thud of the windshield blades  
dragged across ice...

a new sound from an old CD,  
a liquid throb of accordion ...

the grind on the snow-pack  
as I step toward the door ...

the gasp of the apple  
surrendering to the knife

1/7/2010



## The Burning Car

This actually happened, the first morning of my new contract, driving north.

Alongside the on-ramp at Highway 280,  
in the dark, just before dawn,  
a Mazda Miata sits in its own fire.  
Flames rise from an open hood,  
smoke billows out doors.

You ease by slowly,  
because the ramp is narrow,  
but you are afraid of the oily smoke,  
aware of the fuel tank boiling with gas.  
You hold your breath from the stink.

Internal combustion has broken out.  
You think, this is an omen.  
You think, I hope they got out.  
You think, Christ save us  
from ourselves.

## The Boards

Be joyful as you climb the steps  
put spring in your toes and the treetops

You are measured out for these sleeves  
and boxed in by these exigencies

God gave you bells so give them a shake  
let them tinkle to the striking clock

Say oh what a beautiful day  
as if you were Gordon McCrea

## Rolling on the River

As you may have noticed, I have been struggling since Daniele's death over a year ago, often quite bitterly, at the inadequacy, or perhaps I should say the overadequacy, of the religious tradition I was part of the past decade.

It was a source of acute pain to me that I belonged to a group that taught that God would rescue us from every danger – it's all in Psalm 91 – and that all things, no matter how seemingly foul, turned to good in the mind of God.

Because: how could that be? How could Daniele's life and death be interpreted as a blessing? Where was the blessing to her? To her family? Was the mind of God so convoluted that we were doing good for others, but taking it in the ass ourselves? And if so, what good was that?

So I have railed against the childishness of the rescuer mode. The recurring example is that mankind is Lois Lane, always falling from the upper stories of the Daily Planet Building, but always rescued by Superman before she arrived at the intersection below.

No matter what part of the world Superman was in, or what point in time he had dashed off to, he showed up.

The overadequacy of that God is that Lois need never learn the lessons life has to teach us about staying away from ledges. She continues with her triumphal notion of the divinity, which has distressing reverbs: a God that excellent is worth invading other countries for, worth limiting the civil rights of citizens for, etc.

He's so good, he's such a perfect package, that bad becomes good. His goodness makes it so.

Two weeks ago, I was at a party -- the Algonquin Hotdish, a local social for freelancers like myself -- and I met a woman author. We had had some of the same publishers -- no miracle there. But she told me she was involved in something called "forgiveness counseling."

Both red and green lights began flashing in me simultaneously. I respected the idea of forgiveness but I was leery of the idea of new age counseling. Candles, harp music, airbrushed angels.

But I told her -- Mary Hayes Grieco was her name -- that I might have a deep need to forgive God. I laid out my story for her, and stressed that I knew my bitterness was not a good attitude to sustain indefinitely.

"Then let's try to fire God," she said, prettily. Meaning, the Superman God idea. "Clear him out of your head. Come up with a notion that makes more sense to you."

So I signed up to do that very thing, and last night I did it.

For two weeks I fretted, because it did not seem like a good idea, when you squinted at it, to "fire" the All-In-All, with his hand on the trapdoor lever. My old pastor had railed at "cafeteria religion" in which the practitioner picks and chooses what attributes he likes, an ala carte faith. I like Luke, but I hate Paul. Like Mother Teresa, not so big on the Inquisition.

And I was doing that here, wasn't I?

But I went forward anyway, to see what was there.

Last night I met with another counselor, not Mary, but a colleague named Theresa. We chatted for an hour about the nature of my problem, and the particulars of my life. Then she led me through a hypnotic lesson.

It is the basic forgiveness lesson that they teach at this “company.” In it, the plaintiff ticks off a list of grievances against the person to be forgiven, with the culprit imaginarily occupying a chair. It is like a debate in which one of the opponents has not shown up. Only, since God is likely invisible, he may have been sitting in the docket.

My job was not necessarily to make perfect logical or legal sense, but to list my complaints, Declaration of Independence style. I did, focusing on Daniele's life, how painful it was for her to live her entire life plagued with acute anxiety problems, OCD, panic attacks, deep depression, deep hostility to her own growth and development, deep antagonism to anyone unlucky enough to try to lead her, a messed up personality, and, according to her at least, attention issues (I never observed them). She was alcoholic, a punk, and ultimately a suicide.

I had other criticisms, but I focused on these. I laid it all at Superman's scented feet. And told him how he had contradicted his own advertised features. How this was supposed to work for the good, how Daniele was unbelievably loved, how prayers were answered, how nothing happens to us so bad that that we cannot handle it. All these suppositions were patently wrong. So I was forced to let him go – let that concept of God the Rescuer dry up and blow away.

I did this with an element of fear in my heart. Firing the Great and Mighty Oz could be catastrophic karma.

Then I was directed to face another chair set up in the room. This was the mystery guest chair, where the new God was sitting. He was not fleshed in with features. He was a cipher – not there at all if I chose that route.

My job was to commence a relationship with this “new” being, to talk with him and tell him what I needed in a god.

I told him (I didn't really mean “him,” it's just an old habit) I did not want to be lied to. I wanted to be told the truth, or nothing at all. I wanted some basic sense of a relationship – an entity I could go to when meditating or praying, that could pick me out of a crowd, that I did not have to fill in every time we spoke. I told him I wanted a connection not just to one religion or one tradition but to the religious spirit of all people. I told him I wanted companionship as I journeyed through loss toward death, not abandonment. I told him I wanted community in the broadest possible sense – with all humanity, with nature, with myself – and not in the narrowest sense, a church of sixty-odd friendly souls.

I told him a bunch of things.

Then, after perhaps fifteen minutes of this, I was directed to rise from my chair, and go sit where “God” had been sitting, and to sit with that spirit, and become one with him. And from that wooden chair look back at where I had been sitting, as if I were merged with the new god, and regard my own figure, sitting on the couch.

It was the eeriest feeling I could describe to you, a god's eye view of myself. I saw how unhappy I had been, how restless and irritable. I saw how good my intentions were, no matter how screwed up the

outcome often was. I saw my own effort to live a good life, to be a good husband and father and witness to others, and I found sympathy welling up in me for myself.

And then I spoke to myself, and I astonished myself by echoing the words of Jesus. They were sentences I had copied into a novel I had written back in the 1970s. They came out of me as if they were being blown out of an old grave. I have much to tell you. But you cannot bear it all yet ... For a while I am with you. Then I am not with you ... Fear not ... Behold, I have overcome the world...

They were NT chestnuts, but they were poems, too, koans. I was reminded of the role language had always played for me, how I loved the music in the old Episcopal church I attended in New Haven, the swells of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Then things became even weirder. I was channeling Jesus, but this Jesus was an innocent compared to the Jesus of Scripture. My Jesus felt more gullible. He was full of ignorance, unletteredness, skepticism, and humor. My Jesus had morphed into a character I carry close to my heart – Huckleberry Finn!

My Jesus was a companion not to resolve the issue of slavery and avert a terrible war, but a Jesus to accompany me on a raft journey, down the mighty river of life.

It was so odd, I knew I would have trouble describing it intelligently to Theresa. And when the spell passed, and it was time to talk, I blabbed everything to her. She was evidently used to weird stories. Whatever I experienced was my vision, and mine alone.

I think the nexus of it was that it was OK to be me. And I would

probably stick with a strange personal amalgam of Jesus and Huckleberry Finn as my totem – just as I had written to myself in 1979, and never published.

Here's that story, if anyone is still reading:

<http://mfinley.com/pdf/jesus-huck-finn.pdf>

Theresa and I hugged and I went out into the cool night.

I felt a tingle along both my arms, and my face was warm to the touch. More importantly, I felt as if every wrinkle of my face, every tired crease, every scowl line, had relaxed. I started the car. Springsteen singing "Radio Nowhere."

I was still an old man, I found, as I checked the car mirror. But I was relaxed, at peace. And I had not felt that way in years.



## The Woman in Seat 20C

Sometimes in the  
periphery of the eye  
you see one.

Someone who knows  
the way that  
things are.

You know them by  
the rings around  
their eyes --

paranoid,  
hostile,  
broken-hearted,

they are the experts  
on the way  
things are.

You want to cup  
her cheek in  
your palm

and say I know,  
I know, isn't  
it awful.

# Hertz Doughnut

Another major "find" this morning, by the radiator.  
This one seems unusually misanthropic.  
I carbon-date it to 1988.

Foolish woman!  
Imagining we will  
become friends!

You snort and smile  
and cover  
your face.

You all think we  
are such nice guys  
when we

are aching  
to pump you  
full of tears.

Girls under-  
estimate the  
fusion at hand.

They suppose they  
are in charge  
and that they dance

because it's  
their idea, but  
it isn't.

## Flight 2238

We took off in a winter storm  
after an hour de-icing.

The window seat is nice  
but the plastic frame

is broken and there is  
no shade to draw.

The plane has a line  
of overhead TVs

but the plane drowns out  
the sitcom dialogue.

There are peanuts at my feet  
but the space is too tight to reach.

My ass hurts but  
I can't get up and walk.

Now the door juts upward:  
West Palm Beach!

## Return of the Prairie Falcon

When a bird flaps and flies  
no one cries.

Why demand that anything stay  
when we are all going away?

And when we return  
the hurting heart may burn  
because something gone now  
shows its face,  
and that blesses this place.

***Feces, Plus Other Concerns of Youth, Plus a  
Number of Additional Concerns ...  
February 2011***

## Feces

Freud was right on,  
They are a key to every little life,  
they are the threshold of not-OK.  
They are a guarantor of calamity,  
A ruiner of days,  
They are the thing you want at all costs to avoid,  
The thing to keep behind you always,  
that trips you up and peels you  
from the throne of respectability,  
and tells you,  
you must go.

And yet they come out of you,  
they are you,  
they are homunculi of who you are,  
they are your little tar babies,  
they have your eyes,  
they are the part of you you want to get far away from,  
and that is a major paradox for the 2-year-old.

To be found out, to fail, there is no disgrace  
completer.

Logically everything relating to them  
is awful, unlovable, stinky, and to be shunned.  
No amount of washing,  
no slathering of soap makes them right,  
you aren't even really supposed to poke around  
even though it is you  
and your solemn responsibility

and yet ...  
and yet ...  
and yet they remain riveting in their own  
strange feckless way  
incorrigible,  
they bear the mark and are your mark..

It is as if,  
when the two of them in the garden,  
you know the famous two I mean,  
they who had never before known waste,  
having had a bad, bad, bad, bad day,  
Had it read back to them then,  
the riot act I mean to say,  
and the perfect world was shuttered,  
all was forfeit, all was lost,  
and the one thing they knew,  
as they picked their way through the fallen world,  
was they had to go.

## Beach and Skyscraper

I was three, and remember only a few images of our trip down through the Smokies, in my dad's new Cadillac, staying in Daytona Beach for a couple of days, then returning via New York City. My dad worked as a design engineer at Cadillac Tank Plant in Cleveland, and always had the latest model.

A local paper photographed Pat and me playing in the sand, and did a full-page photo feature of us. Why us, of all the families on the beach, when that is really all there was to do in Daytona then, bake in the sun, I don't know.

But I remember the brightness and the heat that radiated in my skin, even as we drove back north, past Cape Hatteras, the lighthouse striped like a Christmas candy cane.

Days later we cruised up Fifth Avenue, and Pat and I craned our heads out the Cadillac window up to see the Empire State Building rising above us like a mighty pyramid

At the time I believed we stood on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, but I now believe it was Rockefeller Center. It's just logical because you can see the Empire State Building from the Rockefeller Center.

I remember thinking I was seeing the most important thing in the world, this dizzying, beautiful, grownup city.

My dad picked me up and help me by my ankles over the rail, as a joke. Who he thought he was amusing is the great question. Certainly not the people standing around us, horrified, hands over their mouths. This is the same dad who tried to teach me to swim that year by throwing me off a boat.

I didn't learn to swim.

But I remember it happening, the dangling over 500 stories, and seizing up and grabbing my father's cuffs to hold on to.

My mom rebuked him, but that never did much good. He couldn't



help doing bad things.

We drove home through the tunnels on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I rode in the back seat, unbelted in those days, and slept on my sister's soft shoulder.

I remember our parents still spoke to each other. That memory would seal up soon.

I was the baby of the family then, cheerful and fat. But I remembered having a thought:

This is good, I thought, going places. You don't have to understand it, just see it.

## Goat Song

When I was young I thought I might be special,  
that I was favored by God.

I spent a lot of time looking in the mirror  
and wondering what I could do.

I remember thinking I might be a tap-dancer  
and tap-dancing in the mirror  
for about thirteen seconds  
and getting winded and stumbling,  
and falling off-rhythm,  
So tap-dancing wasn't it,  
but something surely was.

I remember being in church and playing with my fingers,  
complicated intertwinings that left  
the ordinary people praying in the lurch.  
I thought God was examining all the hands in the pews,  
bored with the usual clasping and meshing  
and then he would come to me, and to my hands,  
and I was all Dali-esque with my digital interlocutions  
and he would stop and think,  
in that giant vibrating voice of his,  
now this is something I can work with.

Sexual

I remember being sexual even when I was a child. I can remember  
being three and bathing with my mother, soaking the the bathtub in  
Ivory Snow. I was aware of her curly hairs, and her long, wet self  
stretched out along my little tub of a body.

Years later, seeing Botticelli's Venus rising out of the clamshell,  
something clicked. I knew I had seen this thing before.

I remember her roughing me up afterward with the terry cloth towel, and counseling me about keeping my special parts clean. I found out decades later that our father had given her a case of gonorrhea after the war, and it was another setback to the relationship. Even today that would be uncool.

I loved my mother the way a boy loves his mother. She was crisp, and feminine, and she radiated light when she looked at me like I was her special man.

I sought union with her, that's all. We had once been one, why could we not be together again?

It is sad, the things that occur over the years that dim this sun-bright light.

I told her, flat out, I wanted to marry her, and buy her a two-tone car, red-orange on the bottom and cream-colored on the top, and she could drive me to work every day.

I know she thought about it because the next car she bought was a Chevy Bel Air in those same classic colors.

1952

I was in a small tornado as a child.

I was almost 3 years old, it was late in the morning  
early in May, in the greenhouse community  
of Columbia Station, Ohio.

I was in diapers and pins,  
and upset about that,  
because it hung on me because my mother  
was in a hurry to dress,  
and because our house was a duplex,  
and we shared the basement  
with the Heinzes next door.

So when the two mothers and their two children  
tripped down the outside cellar steps,  
already branches were sailing through the air  
and the storm groaned all around us  
I stared defiantly at my mother  
for dressing me like that  
in front of the neighbors, a woman in hairpins  
and her 8-year-old daughter,  
hiding her face in her mom's hip.

While I stormed about the diaper  
the wind whipped all around us,  
knocking down our carport,  
and blowing my dad's fiberglass awning supplies,  
the ones he never made a dime off,  
away into the adjoining field.

Afterward we tiptoed through

the broken window frames.

A deer, bewildered, bounded across the yard into the Scotch pines,  
and we spotted the unlikeliest thing,  
a '49 Plymouth parked askew among the potatoes,  
a two-by-four with 7 five-inch nails jutting out of it,  
piercing the passenger window,

and fluttering just above that  
an emancipated kite  
still spiraling through the sky,  
its paper heart torn,  
its tattered tail still spinning it down  
in circles to the ditch.

## The Diving Board

My son has already jumped into the YMCA pool,  
6 years old, tumbling like a spider  
and then skittering away to the lip.  
But I stand atop the wobbling board, paralyzed.

I did not know this about myself, that I was afraid of things,  
and I could not tell you what it was I feared.  
Obviously people jump off boards and do not die in large numbers,  
but I could not step forward, I was like a statue  
on the fiberglass, and eventually had to beg my way backwards  
down the ladder, passing chloriny children with baffled expressions.

A minute later I climbed back up again,  
and in my shame I pretended to be brave,  
and plunged headlong, it was as if  
my fear had weighed me down, because I  
sank to the bottom and only slowly began to rise again  
like a dislodged log.

Between my excitement and my fright,  
I had little air in me, and my lungs were close to bursting  
when I finally found light, and drew air in again.  
I don't think anyone but me knew  
how awful I felt approaching the twilight,  
with the sounds of kids  
splashing and screaming with joy  
attending my demise.

But in that moment I saw forward  
to the terrible tenuousness of life,

not just my own but the lives of those I loved,  
and how helpless I was to save them.

And to just dive into this mystery, as if it were a joke,  
as if no one ever got hurt,  
as if everyone wakes up every morning  
with light in their eyes and the sun  
on their faces, is a lie.

# I Know Who You Are

Day after day  
Like a lover with a wound  
I keep after you

What have I wanted to give you all this time  
That I keep making offerings  
And promises of love

Why do I run to you every chance I get  
And tell you again of my ardor

As if I had the answers  
As if I had the cure  
For all of the sickness  
That walks through the world

It makes sense to me  
That I peel away the mask  
And see the damp light of your seeing

O my loving loved one  
My huckleberry friend  
Cast with me up the waters,  
We float, hands close  
But never touching

How many times I have longed  
To hold you in my arms  
And give you kisses deep  
My silent, good companion



You the mind inside my mind  
You the breathing presence  
And though you have never spoken  
I have wooed you all this time

My other, my angel, my flower  
I write and you read  
without words

## The Favor

If people looked to poems  
the way they look to music,  
that wonderful expectant feeling  
when the saxophonist is about to explode,  
or the singer shakes her head  
and her sweat pelts the front row,  
or the wink of the offbeat  
that has everyone laughing,  
and the drummer slamming on  
in his own mad world

Music we can listen to for hours on end,  
the delight just grows in us,  
the love envelops us,  
but poetry, well, forty minutes  
is a long time to think,  
and when the event is over  
and the skronk of chairs tells you  
it's time to go home,  
it's obvious who did whom  
the favor.

# Permutations

*Permutations of  $n$  things taken  $r$  at a Time*

We learn this phrase in algebra.

It asks how do we arrange a list of possibilities –  
if 10 horses run a race.

what are the chances for win, place, and show?

And so it goes.

Every crossroad contains  $x$  possibilities.

What happens if we turn left or proceed forward,  
or veer off the gravel and into the corn?

There is a formula to help us get a handle on this,  
but it raises as many questions  
as it answers.

But what if, as happens,

$P$  is an elastic variable?

The mare with the the white flame on her face  
could come up lame on the second turn,  
pulling at her straps.

The rider in green could think to himself,  
What I have really always wanted to do  
is paint.

Or the moon could turn out  
after lengthy investigation  
to be a sourball hanging  
in the August sky.

## Friend

Why do I twist your arms into  
coming to my poetry readings

and make you sit through all  
that excruciating bother

as if you needed to be tested  
to prove you deserved me

when what I should have done  
is plunk your hand in mine

and thank you for your love –  
despite, and not because, of this –

what a gift that you indulge me  
and let me play this through

what a generous pretense  
that these stick-figure stories

matter and our laughter does not,  
that there are others in the world

when we both know, as a matter  
of fact, there are not

## Two Adjoining Towns ...

elected the same man mayor.  
One town he served well, and fed,  
and provided every comfort to,  
and every useful service.

The other town he set fire to,  
and strangled every child.  
How did the two towns communicate  
from that point forward?

That is the issue of the life we live –  
identical inputs, differing results.

And how do we turn to one another with love  
and say This  
is what I believe?

## Moon River

Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker,  
wherever you're going I'm going your way.

(Johnny Mercer, 1961)

I think this is the soundtrack to my new religion ...

adrift down the river

with a friend who cannot save us,

cannot stop the war,

cannot set us free.

All we have is one another

heads in our hands

staring up at the stars.

# Hand

Sometimes it is just a gesture  
that changes things,  
the opening and the outward sweep of the hand,  
which seems grandiose in one sense,  
“See all I am inviting you to,”  
and humble in another,  
the stepped-on paw of a creature like yourself.  
Such a simple thing, wordless,  
humble, human.  
And if the hand should be a well-used one,  
one that has been frozen, shaken,  
knitted, soiled, refused, all the better.  
It opens, like an usher showing the way,  
and you follow.

## Without Darkness

Without darkness  
there is no light.

Without blindness,  
no sight.

Without words  
no poem.

Without you,  
no home.



## Communique

I am talking to you as if  
beauty were still beautiful  
and would continue to be so  
forever

I am talking to you  
as if the world did not end  
and things keep on being  
the way that they are

I am talking to you  
with your face in my hands  
our love was the sweetest  
thing that I knew

Dear daughter  
I am talking to you

## What Else Could You Be Doing?

Instead of listening to this poem,  
You could be jumping out the window,

You could be engaging someone  
In a conversation that matters

You could be spilling all your secrets  
You could be kissing the person you love

But have not kissed enough,  
You could be eating a sandwich for the ages

You could be thinking of a song  
That used to mean everything

And thinking what it means again  
You could count your blessings, literally

On an abacus if need be

Instead of hearing me talk  
You could be hearing your own heart

And doing what it tells you to do

## ***Big Ass Angels ... September 2011***

## Life and Death

Death can be wretched,  
and you strangle for days,  
or you obtain mercy,  
blown out with a puff

It isn't fair but then what is,  
every one of us afraid the same,  
but leaving by a different door,  
this funny life.

## Pedaling

I like being able to climb a hill  
I didn't think I could

and the look on the motorist's face  
when I come to a stop and I stop

Hang in there say the telephone poles  
the shiny storefronts have your back

death may toot its grim ocarina  
but see the light move  
through the sycamore

## What Need Have We of Paris?

Oh it is undoubtedly great,  
what with its tin rooftops  
and horse-chestnut trees,

but how can it compare  
to St. Paul's seven hills  
wherever they all are  
and its multiple mini-malls

or the birds singing sweetly in spring  
or the steeple of St. Agnes  
standing guard like a nun over all?

## Take the Worst Thing

that ever happened to you  
and instead of being destroyed by it  
make it your cornerstone,  
build on its power.

Find a way to think of it as a wonderful gift,  
the thing that defines you and sets you apart.  
Say, if I can survive this and learn from it,  
I will wake up every day singing.

## What If

What if we had lived a different life,  
in the houses we visited and walked through the rooms,  
and looked out the windows and smelled the wood.

Would we have made different friends, and stayed up late  
on summer nights, laughing and drinking with them?  
Would different moments have defined our fate,  
chance occurrences on other street corners,

Would we have grown into different people?  
Would we have experienced greater success?  
Would they have brought us closer together  
or pulled us farther apart?

When I bicycle down these streets,  
the ones we almost moved onto,  
and I see those bushes and the steps leading up,  
I remember the smells, and I think about our life,  
and I wonder.



## Hooray for Dying

Without it we'd be lazy things,  
unafraid of what the next day brings.  
We would put things off today  
because what's the hurry anyway?

Our love would mean little,  
and the world would fill up  
with us faster than it does.

Dying is the redeeming fire.  
It is the pearl of great price.  
Dying tells us who we are.  
It turns out we are just us.

It is the source of poignancy.  
When our adored says no,  
death rejoices because now  
it gets all of you.

It is the cleaner-upper.  
Scrubbing away the toughest stain.  
It guarantees relief  
for every living man.

We might never look at one another  
with tears in our eyes and thus  
never quite see who we are.

It is the stone that sharpens,  
the flint that makes spark,

the buzzer that brings the game to an end.

It is the promise of the dark.

## If You Go Down

If you go down, if  
your face actually  
touches the ground

something happens,  
people loosen your collar  
and get on the horn for help.

Soon a vast and wonderful system  
is engaged on your behalf  
because you went down.

But your face has to touch  
the ground and if it doesn't  
no calls are placed.

It's all about the touch,  
it's all about the feel  
of face against street,  
that part is intolerable,  
and our beautiful idea  
springs into action

with no effort spared  
which is why I say to you  
when you fall, really fall,

be horizontal, even unconscious  
and a thousand doctors  
will reinflate you

to the maximum PSI,  
just don't keep stumbling  
like so many people do,

to your left and to your right,  
too afraid to go down  
and admit that it's over.

## Expletives

I didn't use to swear so much  
in the days before Daniele died.

I considered it beneath me,  
ill-considered, crude, a resort resorted to

unnecessarily, what with me being a poet  
and having that great vocabulary.

But since then I have felt a kind of peace  
with ugliness, and the terrible words

are always there for me to fling,  
like rotten fruit lying on the ground

so that now, when I scoop them up  
they are comfortable as new socks

or like old friends who meet up again  
and promise this time to keep in touch

because in a dumb world in which  
we are only allowed to say so much

these words have power, like the poker  
that stirs a dying fire back to life

and when I give them the OK sign  
I release them back into the noxious air,

the air that they so perfectly,  
so satisfactorily describe

## Consider a Woman

If you would have someone to look at  
dreamily all day  
a woman is the way to go.

Women are so pretty, everything  
about them is better than a man.

They have emotional depth  
and are capable of wondrous  
paradox and contradiction

They are intelligent, thoughtful,  
compassionate, and slow to violence.

In addition to this they are  
natural multitaskers  
because we make them do everything.

## A Man with a Hole

There was a man with a hole in him  
that he thought nothing of.

When he showed it to people,  
they said to him,  
That doesn't look right at all.

But don't all men have holes,  
the man asked.  
Yes, they said, but you should really  
have that looked at.



## Big Ass Angels

Beauty has always distracted us from the truth.  
Adam in Eden was misled deceived by Eve's eyes

Was she good or did she just look that way --  
a man never certainly knows.

Artists likewise get taken in.  
Given a choice between naked beauties  
to base the saints on,  
and lumpy people from around the town  
you know which way they're going to go.

Women of the world, take heart!  
From knowledge the masters were blind to,  
that no one is prettier than anyone else.

Did you think that after wading through this life  
with all the misery caking its sides,  
that heaven would taunt us with nubile starlets  
with halos taped to their heads?

The eyes tell lies, what we call beauty  
is just temptation,  
is just a lie.

Help is coming, dearest friends.  
A bell will sound and all will know  
what we hoped was true,  
but could quite believe.

We are beautiful, beautiful, so beautiful  
And then we are beautiful  
beyond even that.

Unpluck the eyes of the peevish heart  
and all swims into view

## The Interview

“So nice of you to come in,”  
said the man with the white kerchief.  
“I just have a few questions  
about your background.”

The interview goes well,  
until the applicant is stood up  
against a plaster wall and shot.  
The bullets penetrate his chest and face.

He goes to heaven and there he is again,  
the man with the kerchief and clipboard.

“I know, I know,” he said,  
confidentially – “Isn't it weird?”

## When It's Not OK to Curse

Obtain a conceal/carry permit  
and when circumstance dictates  
squeeze off a few rounds

It rattles some nerves  
but is soothing to others

Tell them you're honoring  
the second amendment  
or do they hate America?

Remind them that people don't  
kill people, it's not even

the gun's fault for that matter,  
blame the world for being aggravating,  
and also, blame the bullets

## Hey Girl

My girl is red hot  
Your girl ain't doodly squat

I know what it is to be loved  
beyond your worth

I know what it is to laugh  
until you bawl  
O – I bathed in beauty  
then I saw the glory pall

Hey girl standing  
in the doorway crying

You did your best,  
I know

## Charley

I wanted my son Jon, a smallish kid  
heading off to school, to feel strong.  
So I invented a persona for him, Charley,  
a guy with an attitude, not especially sensitive,  
the kind that doesn't sweat the small stuff,  
the kind that acknowledges you by raising his chin,  
as in Good Time Charlie.  
When he climbs up the giant steps  
of the school bus, I'd say to him,  
“Hey, have a good day, Charley.”  
It was something just for him, a cool cat.  
But the driver heard it, and so did the kids.  
So I learned, twenty years later,  
that half of his classmates  
thought his name was Charley, and called him that  
throughout his elementary years,  
and being circumspect  
he never corrected them.

## When It's Not OK to Curse

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the gun's fault for that matter,  
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and also, blame the bullets

## The Rescued Man

I am like the piano you play  
that always falters up ahead

a man but also a dog needing  
something to be brave for

i praise the day you gutted this fish,  
and zipped away the offending spine

pull me to bed with you tonight  
let me sleep this curiosity off

the way the lion feels for his mate  
when she brings him red meat

it's the love of the dog sleeping  
curled at the monastery gate



## We Have a Deal

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  
staggering up a rock  
And despite the pain  
She will make it to the top

So that when we say farewell  
and she beams at me as now,  
on the railway landing,  
heading off to war,

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

And despite the pain  
She will make it to the top

That when we say farewell  
and she beams at me as now,  
on the railway landing,  
heading off to war.

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

## A Flag

is what we should be like  
in a stiff cold wind  
every fiber stretched taut,  
buffeted until  
we come apart,  
every moment  
ripping at our seams.

# Undeterred

en route to our rendezvous  
i am handed a lit stick of dynamite  
and being polite  
I do not refuse  
with blackened face and smoldering collar  
i proceed, failing to notice  
the two-ton Mosler safe  
plummeting from a fifth story window  
though badly accordioned  
i make my way to you

despite stepping on countless rakes  
that that boink me in the face,

despite steam rollers  
making asphalt road of me  
making crunching and popping  
sounds of my bones

electrical sparks from fallen electrical lines  
touching me and turning me into  
leaping swastikas in the air

so many efforts made  
to keep me from you

the locomotive rushing  
from the hastily painted tunnel

me poised for what seems like eons

above the manhole hole  
before falling  
the wet cement awaiting me below  
is hardening

but do not doubt  
I will be with you shortly

# She

She moved through the world  
like a jaguar giantess,  
serene and purposeful.  
No one messed with her,  
or if they did,  
we never knew about it.  
No wonder we loped after her,  
longing for her safety,  
aching for the teat and  
the lick of approval,  
promising to marry her  
so she could never slip away.  
Now she's gone, and there  
are others, also beautiful.  
But one look into their eyes and you see  
they are broken, and fearful  
they cannot protect you, they are  
in greatest danger themselves.  
Still we cannot turn away,  
we chase after these frightened creatures,  
as if they had the power  
to make us whole.  
We overtake and stand panting  
over their trembling selves.

## My Girl Is Red Hot

Your girl ain't doodly squat

I know what it is to be loved  
beyond your worth

I know what it is to laugh  
until you bawl  
O – I bathed in beauty  
then I saw the glory pall

Hey girl standing  
in the doorway crying

You did your best,  
I know



## Birds

They evolved wonderfully from reptiles,  
hollowing their bones, sprouting feathers,  
being bipeds with a thousand kinds of beaks.

But then they seemed to run out of steam,  
they couldn't go the extra mile,  
they couldn't take charge of the world.

I think the reason is their silly walk,  
hopping forward two legs at a time.  
It gets them around, standing on the ground

but no one takes them seriously,  
who would fear us if we walked like  
we were in a sack race, and losing.

## The New St. Francis

I greeted them in the spirit  
of greatest lovingkindness.

They were supposed to perch  
on my finger and sing to me of God.

Instead they took wing at my approach.  
Perhaps it was the cigarette.

## Boomers

My generation was supposed to fix  
this crummy no-good world.

No more war, no more racism,  
we would all use computers,  
everything would be measured and good,  
true democracy sprouting everywhere,  
a global economy and continuous improvement,  
and people would prosper on the basis of merit.

Today the generation before us hates us  
for being jerks, and so does  
the generation that followed after.

Everything we tried to do failed.  
The world is boiling,  
nobody's working,  
we're living on the street,  
computers made us slaves  
and corporations run the earth.

Now we are being herded into small groups  
and driven off the edges of cliffs.  
You can hear the sound we make when we hit --  
boom, boom.  
And this is how we make  
the world a better place.

## Let's Twist Again

Like we dead last somewhere  
When granite were  
we taken for  
and hankies were entwined.

Shout it aloud  
That the seamless shroud  
Relinquishes the word  
into the starry aria.

So boogie down to funky town  
where the pylons give out  
and citizens dance about  
and the still seas gulp.

Flappiness is for the birds  
who caterwheel above  
and drunkard is the dove  
that eye am thinking of.

## My Old Man

My Rachel was driving through California in 1978, and stopped by my father's hacienda to introduce herself. He invited her in, and fed her, and was reasonably hospitable.

But with my dad nothing was ever simple. He looked at her and said, "You remind me of that movie star ... what's the name though .. the one with the red hair ...?"

Feeling complimented, Rachel ran through her list of ravishing Hollywood redheads.

Rita Hayworth? No too shabby ...

Katherine Hepburn? That would be ecstasy ...

But no to either of those.

Uh, she said, losing confidence ... Lucille Ball?

No, not that one.

The answer, of course, was Woody Allen.

I was not there but I can just imagine the look on the lovely Rachel's face.

My father had told the woman I would marry, the love of my life, the mother of his grandchildren, that she looked like Woody Allen.

It was a remark as mean and passive-aggressive as it was obtuse.

My father.

## Good Stuff

You hear a crunching sound under the kitchen floor,  
you imagine it's a mouse that came in from the cold  
and is having its way with your circuitry and beams.

You look at the limestone foundation of your home  
and see numerous holes in the porous rock  
a creature could use as a way to get in.

So you go to Menard's and find a product in the paint section.  
Good Stuff is what it says on the can,  
it's an aerosol foam sealant,  
you attach a kind of straw to the can  
to direct the flow, hold the can upside down,  
squeeze the trigger on the can,  
then release the foam into the cracks between things  
and it expands to form a yellowish dam  
that swells and hardens to keep things in or out.

You expect the foam to be like shaving cream,  
light and inoffensive, but as soon  
as you pull the trigger the foam oozes out,  
and it is nasty, it does not go where you want it to go,  
it tumbles end over end down the limestone wall  
like bloated snakes.

You want it to squirt exactly into the chink  
you see in the wall, and stay there  
but the snake says fuck that, I'll go where I want to go.

That's when you see that Good Stuff comes from Dow,

the folks who brought you napalm.

You think, well, I'm still in charge here,  
I'll use my fingers to sculpt the contours,  
it will be like drawing a bead with window putty,  
but the moment you come in contact with the foam  
you regret it, it is astonishingly sticky,  
in a sickening, greasy sort of way,  
your fingers cry out that this was not such a hot idea,  
and you hold up your hands in horror,  
trying to scrape the gunk from one hand with the nails of the other,  
and you know in an instant this substance is going  
to be on you all week.

In the end you arrive at a truce with the foam.  
It fills the holes, then goes where it will,  
swelling, blobbing, tumbling down the wall,  
so that when it dries it looks like your house  
has a cold and these hideous boogers are weeping  
through the cracks, and you stand there,  
your hands blackened by the greasy glue,  
you cannot touch anything for days, or eat,  
but the holes are filled, the mouse will beat  
on the dam you have made with its tiny fists.

I sought refuge from the wild in this house of infinite food,  
he will say, and now it is my fate to starve  
behind this hopeless, sealed-up wall.

And you can accept that, gothic as it is,  
because you have filled the holes that let things in  
to the place where your family sleeps in their beds

with their risings and fallings, alive and unprotected,  
and unaware of all the things you do.



## Little Thing

My hearing aid is a tiny thing,  
a little gray pebble  
that fits over the ear,  
and a little wire sticking out.

It was foolish to take it camping  
to Bear Head Lake,  
where we parked our trailer  
on a pad of gray pebbles.

In the morning I looked  
where it should have been  
on a little ledge  
above the trailer sink.

I took the trailer apart, piece  
by piece, disassembled  
the entire structure,  
searching for that tiny pebble.

And when I pulled the trailer  
off the pad, I got on my knees  
and asked each little stone  
if it could help me hear.

Twenty-five hundred dollars  
it cost us, and it was not covered  
by health insurance,  
and me being out of work.

We drove home in a blanket  
of silence, in part because  
I couldn't hear, in part  
because of the shame I felt.

A week later, I come across  
a trash bag in the garage,  
its plastic yellow handles  
tied in a careful bow.

I pull out the paper towels,  
the eggshells, potato peels,  
orange juice bottle  
and damp coffee filters.

And there I see my pebble.  
I place it in my ear,  
I hear the scratchy sound,  
and say Yes, yes, yes!

***The Bavarian Oratorio Playbill ... November 2011***

## The Bavarian Oratorio (Excerpts)

Furlong: [aside to audience] Two Angels, Furlong and Vladimir, clipboards in hand, meet at a roadside near Nuremburg.

Vladimir: And as the holidays were approaching, they swapped angelic news.

Furlong: (examining picture) This is an old picture of us ... of Vladimir here, and this is me .. but you can see the resemblance .... The thing to remember is, we're still just 2 years old, emotionally ... Vladimir and I have had a special assignment for the past 5,772 years ... our job was the study of mankind ... to look for signs of grace and worthiness ... which if we didn't find, the Big Man was gonna send asteroids ... remember his promise, he wouldn't destroy us FLOOD ... and that should be a caution to you ... when you read the bible, be on the lookout for loopholes ... So how has it been going for you, old friend?

Vladimir: Remarkable! It is a special time of year. I was just in Sodom, you know. Sodom ... I can honestly say that, as an angel traveling in disguise, I have never experienced such hospitality. People rushing out of their houses, wishing to know us better. Great, great people, the Sodomites.

But I meant to ask you, ancient one: You are familiar with my pretzel bread -- the manna of the ages?

Furlong: Indeed, I know it to be a gnarly loaf.

Vladimir: Then you will appreciate this backgrounder story on the

origin of pretzel bread.

## Black Forest Fudge Cake with Schicksallshlage

So moist it collapses on itself,  
You have to hold it to the serving knife  
With the tip of one clean finger

And even then it loses its shape,  
It is caught like quicksand in its own firm pudding  
And the whipped cream, and the brilliant cherries

Not long ago we raised glasses in triumph  
Atop the eagle's roost and dove into this treat  
As we dove into the adjoining lands

It was the dessert of triumph,  
And the champagne evanesced, and the beer  
Barrels emptied and the tubas blew

And the ruddy people linked arms  
Like joyful sausages dangling  
And they danced like October's bright light

The same ones would be awakened in the night  
And be trucked to the outskirts of town  
To clamber through the lime and fumes

And acknowledge what they had done  
Now they are crying, the cake in the earth  
that was once so delicious, the cherries

So plump and so red, we did not know,  
we could not know,

who could ever have known such a thing

I saw that look of shame on my friend Jurgen's face,  
Jurgen who was born after the war,  
Jurgen who must live with this association,

But still keeps those pictures atop his piano,  
Of Aunt Ursula and Uncle Leo having a laugh,  
It is Christmas and all are enjoying

This chocolate cake impaled upon the fork,  
A cake so moist it can't have been baked,  
This is the cake our ancestors ate

So perfect with honeyed hot coffee

Furlong: I only regret that angels don't have stomachs, so that we might taste the pretzel bread ourselves. And gall bladders. Little known fact -- We are not like people, I understand the wings, harps and halos. But I was still surprised by sthe webbed feet.

Now I wish to share with an observation from the High Holy Temple of King Solomon, from the time of the Maccabees. I call it .



## In the High Holy Temple

It was the feast of Hannukah, the celebration of Israel's rebellion against the Greeks.

I tiptoe into the Great Temple of Solomon and hide behind the veil.  
And this is what I see:

The High Priest turns to face the men in the congregation, and prostrates himself on the temple floor, in his raiment of woven silks. Baruch Atah Adonai! He cries, I am not worthy even to address you! I am less than a speck, less than a crumb, less than a mote, less than an iota. Whatever you can think of that is tiny, I make that look like a looming mountain. That's how modest I am. Before you, greatest of gods, I am nothing! When you are talking about nothing, chances are very good that you're talking about me. I have applied for trademark protection. That's how insignificant I am.

Then a prince, a descendant of David and Solomon, in a gown of magnificent pearls and golden thread, steps up and pounds on his breast. "Lord of lords, I stand before you in vast humility, a humility before which all other humility must bow. If you took all the magnifying lenses of all the scientists in the world were lined up to see me, they could not see me. Because I am less than than. Zero, zilch, infinito! Truly, the point I am endeavoring to make here, is that before you, I am nothing! Just so we are perfectly clear on that point!" Just then a humble goatherd, moved by what he has heard, pushed through the crowd of the faithful and advanced toward the sacrificial altar in rags and tattered sandals, and takes the hem of the High Priest and Prince of Israel.

"Dearest creator," the goatherd says, "I bow before you, and thank

you for the you give me. I -- I -- I am nothing too!”

At which the High Priest nudges the Prince and says,:

“So look who's nothing?”

FURLONG -- Thank you for that revelation, old friend.

The other morning, in downtown Minneapolis, by Target Center, I met a man who I thought must once have been an angel, but something happened. He was homeless now, and he was standing in the sleet and snow, waving his arms and shouting a speech he had memorized. He was kind of a cross between Nicholas Cage and Dr. Suess. He was draped in a sleeping bag that he used as a coat. The sleeping bag had a name -- Mooshwar, which is French for handkerchief. He used the blanket to wipe his nose on, which was always dripping, because of the cold.

For this reason, the other bums called him Greensleeve.

I wrote down the speech that Greensleeve was calling out to passing cars and pedestrians. His rhymes were abominable. I asked him why he rhymed that way.

"I messed up," he said. "I should never have started with the word future -- nothing really rhymes with future, except suture."

So why didn't you change it? I asked.

"Because," he said, "I'm trying to tell the truth here."

I have asked my old friend Vladimir to flag some of these rhymes and warn you when a really bad one is on the way.

[While Furlong reads, Vladimir flips cards telling people to GROAN, CRY OUT, MUTTER, GNASH TEETH at the bad rhymes.]

## The Song of Greensleeve

I rap every tinted car window saying "Hey you sir,  
Haven't you heard about the child of the future?"  
But these cars they don't stop, they don't even toot their  
Horns, they're just a bunch of rush-hour commuters,  
No one's got time for the child of the future.  
To them I'm just some filthy rag-pusher,  
Windshield viper, sidewalk ambusher.  
Greensleeve they call me, and Mickey the Moocher,  
But I'm not no red-hot hootchy-kootcher.  
My nights I sleep on a stoop by the sewer,  
I spend my days dodging motor scooters.  
I don't want your dollar to buy me some hooch, sir, (GROAN)  
But promise you'll think about the child of the future!  
In the park I awaken every park-bench rooster.  
One sits up and says to me, "The point is moot, sir. (MUTTER)  
because there ain't no freaken child of the future!"

But I would bear up under excruciating torture  
Before I would rat on the child of the future.  
Herod mopping his meat in worcestershire (CRY OUT)  
Could not make me turn on the child of the future.  
You could be Adolf Hitler, a beerhall putscher.  
And I would still not forsake the child of the future.  
I'd turn down a contract with Simon & Schuster,  
I would spurn all their offers of literary lucre  
To surrender on paper the child of the future.

Fact is, it would take something thermonuclear (GNASH TEETH)  
Hoisted on the shoulder of a Titan booster  
To blast into shrapnel my hopes for the future.

And even then you couldn't be too sure.

I want to bring to the table the fire-escape feuders,  
I want to cry peace to the burners and looters,  
Go home to your wives all you salesmen at Hooters,  
Drive all the rich from the haunts of haute couture,

Go home to the tailors, go home to the butchers,  
The teachers and tutors and surgeons with sutures, (see, he got sutures  
in)

Ambulance chasers and blue civil-suiters,  
Go home you plumbers and your stinky roto-rooters,  
You priests, rise up, from your ass-polished pew chairs!  
Call quitting time for the hackers and hewers,  
Unshackle every secretary cuffed to a computer,  
Go home all you winners, go home all you losers,  
It's like you're all clicking through the wrong viewer  
And missing the slide of the child of the future.

I'm not no wise man, not no shepherd or drummer,  
But I can tell when there's a miracle somewhere.  
Because the child of the future is newer than you are,  
And he's old, oh, he's old, he's older than Sumer.  
A child is coming who will seem like a soldier,  
With eyes so blue that they could not be colder,  
Eyes as blue as the sky in the sky, only bluer,  
And his words will be just like the truth, only truer.

And if he should suddenly sneeze or kerchooer  
I'll offer the sleeve of my greatcoat Mooshwar  
To wipe off the snot of the child who blew there,  
And hold in these old arms the child of the future.

VLADIMIR:

Thank you, Furlong, thank you for the tale of Greensleeve, the fallen angel of Minneapolis. I knew him well.

And now I will give you a heavenly farewell, by singing a passage from the beloved Bavarian Oratorio, composed right here in Nuremburg, that is most relevant to this passage of the child of the future ...

Furlong, will you speak the sacred scriptures while I prepare my voice to sing?

FURLONG: (standing)

“For lo, a bank of angels appeared in the sky over the women tending their flocks, huddled in the Bethlehem pre-dawn.

One by one the women rubbed and rubbed their eyes ...

so that when they glanced up they beheld the gleaming wings and countenances of angels from every rank and file, filling the sky for as far as they could see ...

rank upon rank, choir upon choir ...

and in one mighty chorus they began to intone ...

## I Don't Know Why

Furlong: Ah! --

[Vladimir]:

I love the colorful clothes she wears

And the way the sunlight plays upon her hair

Furlong: Ah!

[Vladimir]:

I hear the sound of a gentle word

On the wind that lifts her perfume through the air

FURLONG: Ah!

V: Close my eyes; she's somehow closer now

Softly smile, I know she must be kind

When I look into her eyes

She leads me down into her blossom world

F: I don't know why, but she sends me there ...

V: I don't know how, but she sends me there ...

F: I don't know where, but she sends me there ...

V: I don't know where, but she sends me there

F: I dunno, I dunno, I dunno, I dunno, I ---.

---

Toutes ensembles:

Ohhhhhh!!

Pause ... then Furlong restarts, plaintively: Ah!

[Vladimir]: (with Furlong interrupting in red)

I love the colorful clothes she wears

And the way the sunlight plays upon her hair

[Furlong]: Ah!

[Vladimir]: (with Furlong uttering the red phrases)

I hear the sound of a gentle word

On the wind that lifts her perfume through the air

...

V and F say the next four lines stumbling over each other, so the phrase overlays

through the air ...

through the air ...

through the air ...

through the air ...

through the air ...

through the air ...

through the air ...

through the air ...

through the air ...

FURLONG ... and so they divided into groups of two and three ...

hand in hand, and wing to wing ... and they walked together under

the cascading stars, fanning out to visit every tiny hamlet, to bring the

good news of greatest love and greatest peace to every human

household ...

and the one message they imparted in every doorway ... the old ways



are done, you can stick a fork in 'em, and a new day is dawning ...  
on this ... this most beautiful of mornings ...

VLADIMIR: (with Furlough quietly sighing ..

And before they disappeared, a loaf of pretzel bread tucked under  
each arm, the last angel turned and began as if to sneeze ... It was  
Greensleeve ... the angel of the city ... the angel of so much sorrow  
and pain ... and he had but one sound to make:

FURLONG:

Ex -- ex --- excitations!

## The Artist's Development ... Match 2012

Buzzy the Bear woke up up in the forest. The world was beautiful. The sun was shining. Buzzy liked to run and play. He also liked eating honey.

\*

Buzzy the Bear woke up in the forest. "Whata great day!" he said. I'm going to run and play all day! And find some honey to eat!"

\*

Buzzy the Bear woke up in the forest, and yawned the biggest yawn ever. He had dreamed of eating a big bowl of honey. "Honey is so wonderful," he thought to himself.

\*

Buzzy the Bear woke up hungry and decided to go looking for honey. "I know," he said, "I'll get help from Blinky the Squirrel. Squirrels are clever at finding things!"

\*

Buzzy the Bear woke up Blinkey the Squirrel. "Wake up sleepyhead! It's a beautiful day in the forest!"

\*

Blinkey opened his eyes to see a huge bear poking his head in the hollow of his tree. "Eeeeehh!" he screamed.

\*

Blinkey the Bear had hibernated all winter long. He had lost a lot of weight, and needed nourishment. He staggered over to an adjacent tree, where a squirrel lived in a low hollow. Brutally, Buzzy swiped into the hollow and fetched out the body of the unconscious creature.

\*

"I'm going to eat you!" the bear roared. "I'm going to eat you all up!" To which the squirrel replied in a flat voice. "Do what you have to do," it said. "This is the way of nature."

\*

The bear was starving. Without nourishment he would die. Casting aside his reservations he thrust his paw into the center of the hive. Immediately he was engulfed in angry Africanized bees, who knew just how to slide between his greasy black hairs, find the vulnerable skin, and push their pulsating abdomens downward with a hundred throbbing, frantic, life-ending injections of venom.

\*

I know just what to do. I'll take what I want. I'll eat what I want. No one can harm me. I'm a bear for fuck sake.

\*

The other bears steered clear of him when they encountered one another in the forest. He was known to be a rogue, an outlaw. The males feared him for his violent disposition. The female bears regarded him with interest, because of his size, which was stupendous, but more for his sneering indifference. Something told them he had been terribly hurt, and the pain had caused this transformation that they could only regard as magnetic. This animal was a loner, his expression seemed to say. He will only lash out and hurt.

\*

Buzzy the Bear woke up in the habitat that had been created for him. He did not know or understand his captors, who were like bears but like gods as well, purposeful but forever mysterious. Because of them, his anxieties were over. They brought him food, and swinging tires to strip with his powerful claws. Life lacked relationship, and meaning, and the cry he made in the back of his throat, all those years in the forest. He had gained a hundred pounds, and he knew this winter there would be no sleeping. Just please the crowd and eat the fruit they piled by his dish.

But at night, in the zoological gardens, when he dreamed, it was always the same dream -- of endless swarms of bees, of tearing, carnivorous teeth, and always the prospect of dripping honey and the

pain he underwent to obtain it.

And as he sat on his pad by the cast iron latch, he looked back at the people who stared at him and chattered like forest creatures.

And the thought that he thought: “How sweet is this beautiful world.”

## ***Godiva Goes Riding ... February 2012***

## Beauty and Wisdom

there is a well in the iris  
and everything tumbles in

and no man is immune  
from this characteristic error

beauty looks like wisdom  
because the eyes amaze us

something that wonderful  
must see something

## Lord Godiva Sleeping

I shall join them in watching the parade  
behind the blinds,  
hidden in the curtains,  
peeking between two fingers.

I never possessed you,  
it was quite the reverse –  
you laid out in satin  
like god's own beauty  
me soaking the pillow with tears

***Help4U ... March 2012***



## Get Into Heaven Without Having to be Good

Knock on the gates of paradise.

God, carrying a clipboard, will squint to make out who you are.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“Let me in,” you say.

“I don’t think so,” says God, glancing at the clipboard.

“Hey, God,” you say, tapping your sternum,

“this is me you’re talking to.”

## Be a Better Poet

Stop using ink.

Stop talking and listen.

Then listen to that.

## Make Love to a Woman

Remember if  
you fail to say  
Mother may I?  
You may not.

Know Truth  
When It Bites  
You on the Ass

Be wary of words that mount the pedestal. Be on  
on the lookout for humiliation, or better still  
stand guard and prick up your ears.

A deeper peace will take  
a thousand  
years.

# Understand Spirit

if you have  
a better idea  
let us  
hear it

## Be Happy As a Frog

Suspended animation is a trip.

The grin extends from ear to lip.

The gullet swells and lets one rip.

The legs extend from toe to hip

And into pea soup, smiling, slip.

## How to Pray

Something in the air

Wants to pull you away.

Go into the world.

Look everywhere.

## Fix Global Warming

Issue solar-powered  
ice-making machines  
to everybody.



# How to Distinguish Beauty from Goodness

You can't.

# How to Be Famous

Get a dog

## Win Your Children's Attention

When they are thirteen sign them up  
for the Mars mission.

Then call them every three weeks on the radio.

They will be so glad to hear from you.

Be the Life of the Party

Keep breathing.

## How to Be Good

Instead of giving to a regular charity  
identify a family you want to help  
and call on them at all hours  
to see if they are OK.

## Win Your Friends' Attention

Half the time be utterly sincere,  
grateful and caring.

The other half say the exact opposite  
of what you mean.

Everything you say will be  
important now.

## Live Forever

Glue a BB pellet  
to the insole of your shoe.  
You may not actually  
live forever but it  
will seem like it.

## Think Clearly

Why hold your intuitions

In such high regard?

When they are what got you

The way that you are.



## How to Accept the Innate Unfairness of Being

Some days you dine,  
some days you are dinner.

## Write Originally

Cut a dictionary up  
with scissors,  
one word at a time.  
Use each one once.

## How to Think About Elections

Relax, it's just  
the wind blowing  
up the street.

# How to Grow in Wisdom

Stop trying.

## Keep Dementia at Bay

Raise the standard  
by making  
everyone you know  
crazy.

## How to Negotiate

We start life  
as egomaniacs,  
fists full of demands  
then begin to make  
concessions.  
To get what you want,  
go back.

## Escape from the Wheel of Samsara

We have to let go in order to fall  
And the steady tumble that carries us down  
Surrender all order, unclench every hand  
Until we are sleeping, and begin  
again

# Why Did the Buddha Sit Under the Tree?

To get to  
the other side.



## ***Defending the Cake ... February 2012***

## An Experience

It was the winter of 1980. I took a late night train from New Haven to New York City. I did this every two or three months while we lived in Connecticut, because I knew New York was not going to be part of my life for long.

I arrived in the city around 5 am, and wandered over to Central Park. It was a crisp morning, with frost on the sidewalks and grass. A cool breeze was blowing through the park.

I sat on a stone bench next to a stone wall, took out my notebook, and began scribbling some thought I had on the train.

I remember sensing loose newspaper pages stirring around my feet.

Suddenly a giant pneumatic tube  
uncoiled in front of me and blasted  
me with warm, stinky gas.

It was the trunk of an elephant, kept  
just inside the stone wall. I had  
chosen a bench at the Central Park  
Zoo, and some giant creature, inches  
away from me, had unreeled its trunk  
and blasted me.

It all happened in a second. My  
impressions were:

The visible thing was alive and tipped  
with bristly spikes.

Though the exterior was dry, the  
interior was steamy and drippy.

The gas did not smell like peanuts or a  
hayloft. It smelled like elephant lung  
-- something less charming than the

other possibilities.

Afterwards, I would need several paper towels to rub the goo off my face.

Was it a good experience? Not in the sense that I enjoyed having a cup of warm snot painted onto my face.

But in the sense of being greeted, in the cold and dark, by a curious creature I would never wholly see, a creature who in her own way was being nothing but polite, nothing but social, putting herself out there, just for me ...

Well, then, yes!

## Building a Poem

A mighty gate swings open  
with the very first line,  
it is your declaration that something great is underway,  
and the reader must pull over  
and idle his engine.

This opening has a curse upon it –  
it must be very good but it mustn't swamp the boat.  
You have to something to follow it up.

And isn't that the problem with everything, the middle?  
Being born is amazing, and going out again at the end  
is inevitably dramatic,  
but in between is where where the good ideas get stifled  
like sneezes into fancy handkerchiefs,  
the kind you used to tuck proudly in your pocket  
but now strike you as a little disgusting,  
in between is where we sow sunflowers and salt  
to keep people guessing.

And now the suspense builds, as the first plates  
spun on sticks start to waver,

and the perform furrows his brown and looks up  
at the source of clear danger,  
all this while perched on a steel cable stretched taut  
with one end in the tenements,  
the other on Park Avenue.

(This is a good time for the neighborhood clown  
to reveal his broken heart,  
with a digression about childhood disappointment.)

And then, not with a clap but something like a hush  
as the crowd parts and the donkey  
shambles into the courtyard riderless,  
but dragging a rope of clanking cans behind it,  
and in between its clapboard teeth  
a pink begonia as big as the world..

## Dealey Plaza

The onlookers couldn't look on any more.

When his brain flew out of him,  
in the same way their eyes leaped out of them  
and they plopped into the rough  
and now the people feel about on  
their knees with spread fingers  
in the thistles and weeds

Torn burlap where their eyes had been,  
stuffing leaking from the seams.  
The people felt about in the dark, in the sun  
for a part of themselves  
that would never come back,

Oh, America you lost it that day,  
it was your last chance but how could  
you know that then,  
groping for courage, blind  
on the grassy knoll.

# Be Careful What You Say

for Ari Flesicher

In the days of the Romanovs  
it was considered a capital crime  
for a citizen to utter the name  
of the Babylonian emperor  
who put Daniel in the den  
and saw the writing on the wall.

To say that name in Moscow  
or St. Petersburg invited arrest  
and deportation or worse,  
to be lined up against a wall  
and to slump in the dirt,  
all because the name in Russian  
Ne boch ad ne tsar  
constituted a revolutionary slogan:  
There is no God  
and there is no czar.



## Uncalled For

Who ordered this?

You ask as if everything heretofore  
had been requisitioned in triplicate

and suddenly THIS shows up  
like a turd in the pew  
and everyone is out of joint

## Hard Day's Night

John Lennon was full of shit,  
that song about coming home from work  
for the evening humjob  
was marriage from the point of view  
of a horny high schooler.

If that were true we would never have heard  
of Yoko Ono and John and Cyn  
would still be together  
but that never happens, women are too proud,  
even the demoralized ones, to go for that  
more than one or twice a year  
and never when you just get off from work.

Which is just as well, coming home  
from work should not be a leading  
cause of divorce, but it's the not knowing  
that causes tension,  
going through the mail,  
inches from the flesh  
you are dying to be one with.

Only it's not the flesh, it's the idea  
of the flesh, it is having someone  
to come home to even if it's boring,  
so when you're stuck in traffic  
the idea of the door opening  
and you being there loving you  
is like a mighty chord blanged  
on a Rickenbacker 360 12 string machine  
with a bass chord underneath  
humming.

## Zzyzx

Night time in the high Mojave,  
the ramping sound of passing cars.

Broken bottles, clear and brown  
glisten in the headlamps.

People came to Soda Springs  
to take the waters which were  
supposed

to be some hydrological cure, but  
the waters of Zzyzx, California

are neither hydrated nor logical,  
just a smear of chalk

in the starless dark  
on a windblown slope

off I-15.

## How Do We Know

If joy is a gift of god  
that grief is not one also?

Dearest, sweetest, lovely child  
Have I got something for you.

## Childhood Boners

When you were nine or ten  
they started coming,  
like wooden pencils.  
with sensitive erasers,  
like baby carrots rubbing  
against cloth,  
you could feel the fabric weave  
as if by Braille

Oh, you could adjust them  
and obtain a kind of relief,  
but they still pronged out  
like a form of salute,  
like a space man out  
on a tether, feeling  
around in the dark.

## Needing To Be Away

I didn't want to be there  
but I knew I couldn't leave

so I came up with the idea  
of painting eyes on my eyelids

You would be gone, you would  
be off somewhere else

But people would be reassured  
by the clamshell sclera

and the tea-leaf iris  
and your attentive expression.

The only problem  
was painting them on.

## Tiny

The tiny house  
sits on 44th Street,  
like a wedge of cheese.

It's small enough to  
cradle in my hands.

It's the kind of house  
they live in in Monopoly.

There would no room  
for our stuff.

The fire of our belongings  
would light and warm  
the neighborhood.

We'd live so small,  
one plate, one spoon.

You and I would always  
be touching.



# She

She moved through the forest  
like a jaguar at night,  
serene and full of purpose.

No one messed with her,  
or if they did,  
we never knew about it.

No wonder we loped after her,  
longing for her safety,  
aching for the teat and  
the lick of approval,  
promising to marry her  
so she could never slip away.

There are others now,  
also beautiful.

But one look into their eyes and you  
see they are broken and fearful.

They cannot protect you,  
they are in great danger themselves.

Still we cannot turn away,  
we chase these anxious creatures,  
as if they had the power  
to make us whole.

We overtake and stand panting  
over their trembling selves.

## Loose Ellipses

I use ellipses because they are  
lengthier pauses than mere periods  
convey ...

They signify that breath may be drawn ...  
that there is time for a slight  
inhalation ...

before the next oncoming volley of  
words ...

This is the microsecond when  
thought enters in ...

and after a moment  
slips away  
again ...

## Fariña

Richard Fariña called to us saying,  
If somehow you could pack up your  
sorrows  
and send them all to me,  
you would lose them, I know how  
to use them ...  
and so on.

And my callback, forty years  
since he flipped over  
the handlebars, breaking his neck  
is what a lovely offer that was.

We will lose them.  
He knows how to lose them!

But what did that mean?  
How did he plan to use our sorrows?  
It's so difficult to picture.

We might imagine stiff canopies of sorrows  
stitched together to make

hoods for BBQ grills.

That would make them useful,  
keeping leaves and sleet and squirrels away.

Or, our sorrows will be reprocessed  
as a foodstuff, boiled in vats until they no longer  
cause pain, and squeezed like a thickened soup  
into MREs and deployed  
overseas.

Or our sorrows are monetized,  
pulped and perhaps reprinted as  
brand-new Confederate dollars  
that leap into air as if Dixie had just been struck up  
by the band, the South has risen again,  
coming to rest  
a weary day or so later on the faces of puddles  
and shivering ponds.

And as for these dollars lying Jefferson Davis side up  
in the shivering puddles and ponds,  
the birds see them floating from  
over and above,

and the bluegills and sunnies see them floating  
from below,

and what do they think,  
these fishes and warblers,  
with their tiny but astute little minds,  
of our sorrows floating by the magic of surface tension --  
they have surely seen it all by now,  
they once saw mountains  
climb down from other mountains,  
they saw seas part,  
they saw giants stalk the wasted plains  
in search of corn.

But here our sorrows, refitted as value,  
if only imaginarily,  
as a tribute to the fallen,  
a salute to all we held near or dear,  
these birds and fishes think  
this takes the cake.

# Defending the Cake

*for Carol Connolly*

We consider ourselves virtuous when we hold up our hands  
as the Christ held up his hand to the Devil  
and we say No Devil, No

If we break the rules and begin eating cake,  
we know it will be our undoing,  
flesh will swell like the waves of the ocean,  
and wash over all our hopes,  
we will be true cake-eaters then,  
lotos-eaters, Ambrosians, the hoity-toity,  
the people of the islands standing out on the strand

Cake is a danger to us, clogs the cell walls  
and sweetens up the blood and become cake  
ourselves, diabetic and crumbling..  
Calvin was against it, it did not suitably mortify,  
because it did not bless the darkness  
it was in fact sin – we even call it sinful  
because we remember the story of the garden  
and the serpent, and the devil's meal.

We don't even know how to make cake any more --  
it's a confection in a tin we place on the potluck table  
and quickly step away, because it came from the grocery store  
or it came from a mix --  
if it looks like cake that's all that matters, we think --  
still the feeling of shame that we didn't care enough to  
make a true cake.

This storebought is lighter than air,  
it satisfies the requirements without satisfying the mouth  
that gloms onto it,  
this fake cake just dust occupying the form of a cake  
It is chemistry by proxy  
it is an imposter, a fraud,  
it is the embodiment of our falsity.

And yet,  
through history it was an idea that had heft,  
it was a gift of first fruits,  
it was the best that was in us,  
the angel's food of our better natures  
Because you do not bake a cake on a Tuesday, you wait



until something momentous comes round  
and you put into it all that is good that we have,  
all the impossible things that we did not have  
when we dwelt in the cave,  
shivering, battled-bled, cakeless and cold.

See what we put in it ...  
cinnamon, coconut, lemon zest, nuts,  
the frosting, the pudding, the squeak  
of the fork on the china like a bow upon a rosined string.

Cake is our vision of the life we don't see  
yet flows around us in swirling mystery,  
like a starry night of dark chocolate.

It is an expression of our love for one another,  
if I knew you were coming you know what I would have baked ...  
It is less the joy than the symbol of joy  
It is so good on the tongue  
as I look into your eyes one more time

So let us eat cake  
as the act of love it is

## Forsoothing

Sooth yourself, it's what we do  
as babies, gumming a knuckle  
to hold back distress  
from the tooth sawing through.

But soft, it could be anything,  
God's wounds from the lashings  
he withstood for us,  
egad, it is hard to believe  
all that bleeding, God's blood..

Verily, we roll along,  
beneath the lethal stream,  
merrily, forgetfully we fall  
in deed until we dream.

## Good Guy

He worried that the flesh eating bacteria  
were not getting enough.

## Reassuring an Artist Friend

Everyone else went to work at Wendy's  
and you joined up with the Marines.

Everyone else got a job at the mall,  
you kneel on a stone floor and pray.

## Needing To Be Away

I didn't want to be there  
but I knew I couldn't leave

so I came up with the idea  
of painting eyes on my eyelids

You would be gone, you would  
be off somewhere else

But people would be reassured  
by the clamshell sclera

and the tea-leaf iris  
and your attentive expression.

The only problem  
was painting them on.

## Jesus Heading Up the Hill

There are times when you have no  
more blessings of your own  
and you have to beg from the people  
you see,

You who used to be everything,  
look at you  
sobbing like a girl

Collect their sympathy  
as if it were golden coins  
because that is all the money you carry

Until the next assignment  
down the road

## We Think Heroically

The people we happen upon in our lives  
are the best people anywhere.

They are scholars and saints,  
artists and poets belonging  
to the ages.

It's a kind of chauvinism  
but an innocent kind,  
where everyone you know  
is the best there could be,

it makes the little world  
we live in astounding,  
like what are the odds  
we would find one another

like rooting for the home team  
or feeling patriotic  
because this flag  
they're marching down  
the street. is ours.

# Mental Illness

is catching  
you can get it  
from anyone

all it takes is  
one apple  
at the bottom  
of a barrel

the walls break  
down, the sugar  
spreads

because something  
you once loved  
is dead



## Advice to a Colleague

She is standing in a busy hallway  
talking to a colleague.

She is paying close attention  
to what the other is saying.

And the closeness of the attention  
is remarkable, it is the kind of attention  
everyone is dying for.

She is a girl without power  
and yet she is hanging in there,  
she is giving everything she has  
in this moment to her friend.

You would roll down the mountain  
for this moment of being heard.

Up close you find fault with her.

What can a young woman know,  
her beauty is a product of her innocence,  
her very not knowing.

Now it seems fake what she offers,  
this accident of beauty, the fact  
that nothing has dragged her down yet,

nothing has dulled the light in her  
eyes.

So you grudgingly marry her  
and the business of chopping her down  
like a tree begins because that is what  
most men do, they can't help themselves.

Except there is just a possibility  
that what you are seeing is steel,  
her love is a form of fearlessness  
and she will light your way

and be a blessing to you  
every moment you look in her eyes  
till you draw your last breath.





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