

THE NEW YORKER

poems by Michael Finley

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Penn Station

Passengers hug their luggage close,
their faces diagonal with dismay,
and check their watches as they wait
by the message board
for news of the delayed train.

One woman clasps her red gloves and keys in one hand.

A professional man folds his arms and frowns.

A student gazes up at the board with open mouth.

Then the letters start flipping and
the speakers announce that the train
to Princeton Junction is cleared for boarding
and everyone breaks
for the steps down to Track One,
clambering down like a centipede
in a suit.

Once situated in our seats, we look up, out, and away
as the conductor announces that a bridge in Newark
is causing problems
and there will be an indefinite delay.

A groan goes through the car like an infantry taking fire.

Jesus Christ, mutters the professional man, who looks
like he is about to cry, and who obviously
has someplace important to get to.

He and the woman in red gloves
and half a dozen others bolt
to their feet, grab their bags and rush back up the stairs

to catch a ride on another line. No sooner
are they gone
than the address system announces
that the problems in Newark have been resolved, and the car begins to slide forward in the station.
I ask the conductor if we couldn't call
the people back, and end their suffering.
The man just punches my ticket,
smiles and says,
"You're going to be just fine."

Witnesses

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

The Life of Glass

The bits of clear and amber glass
and metal collar in the street
say something jarring happened here.

If you live in the city long enough
you see the life of broken glass,
beginning as a puddle
on an abandoned parking space
where a pipe caved in a driver's window.
And each car driving over the puddle
spreads it apart like crackling dough
until only a few bright nuggets
catch the glint of streetlamp light.

In an empty parking lot on Sunday morning
you can see where the latest window
was smashed, and here, and there,
the fading remains of those broken earlier,
like crystal snow on unmarked graves.

And when you pull up to an intersection after
the players in an accident have headed
for the wings, you see the glass and think
of the jolt that lingers in the air,
the black tires grumble forward,
holding their breath.

The New Yorker

The breath of the woman crouched

in a blanket in the gray slush

flutes about her like a dying fire.

She is wet and cold, with no place to go,

and it is only early December.

Citizens stride by her, and their faces

pronounce their opinions.

The broker is displeased with the state

of the city, the young account exec cheerfully looks

every way but at the fallen woman,

and the red hot vendor sidesteps

around her, doing brisk business.

You want to stand the woman up,

slap the sleet from her hair

and send her on an invisible errand,

set her to work on a phone bank

or streetcorner, passing out bills,

earning a few dollars, anything

but this public suffering, so deadly

and so close to Christmas.

But God has made her incompetent

and us indifferent, except for one woman

in a camel hair hat, who passes, stops,

fiddles with her pocketbook,

tiptoes back and places

a five in the paper cup.

Browsers

He flipped through the magazines
in the periodical room.

The Cadillac, he thought to
himself, is definitely the
Rolls-Royce of automobiles.

She sauntered through the stacks,
fingers dusting the tops of rows.
The things I don't know,
she pondered, could fill a book.

They stood in line at the
check-out desk,
shifting their weight
like two ships passing in broad
daylight.

Priests

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

The Dogs Of Madison Square

The leaves blow across the old park,
the hickory and ginkgo,
linden and oak, next to the monument
of eternal light, for the fallen soldiers
of the first world war, and beside that,
a sign on a tree saying, caution,
a rat poison called Mak1
has been placed in this area;
its antidote, if you are resourceful
about these things, is Vitamin K-1,
you probably have some in your house,
if you can get there in time.
But the dogs roaming the sixteenth
of an acre of fenced-in grass
by the Flatiron Building can't read.
A big-chested pointer, a Doberman
and an old teat-dragging Labrador,
plus a Scottie, cocker spaniel,
and some kind of greyhound all gather about
as she defecates, and it is entirely
fascinating to these dogs about town.
She bows, cowed by their attention as she squeezes it out
and they are delighted with the whole business
and beat their tails

against themselves, no,
their eyes never really seem to lock
onto one another, because their joy
is somehow outside what they are,
it is in the rich aromas in the air,
the unleashed freedom they feel
behind their heads, and their
damp maws open wide
like smiles.

Columbus Circle

It is two in the morning, and the sound of air hammers and chainsaws
from a night construction crew
brings me out of bed.

The view from my hotel window
doesn't quite include Lincoln Center,
kitty corner, though the hotel
celebrates its tradition of putting up musicians
and singers and actors overnight. What I do see
is a triangular patch of grass,
and a statute of Dante,
his laurels blending with the dead leaves of November.

He gazes out on 63rd Street and Broadway,
humorlessly, like a man who knows his way
around infernoes.

Besides the immortal poet is a bus stand advertising
Eternity by Calvin Klein.

It is late, and the traffic has begun
to die down. Down the sidewalk
comes a man who is drunk.

Each step is an essay and not all
are successes. He is like a mime climbing
an imaginary rope, a phantom walking through
new falling snow, that melts on the shoulders
of statues of poets,
and I, too excited to sleep in my hotel bed,
know exactly how he feels.

A Minnesotan in New York

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

Poems I Meant to Write

I meant for the longest time to write
about the little tasks, about tying the shoes,
and fitting the hands into gloves,
I saw my big hands negotiating the laces and trying
sleeve after sleeve over finger and thumb.
I could have had fun with the sand I dumped out
of each sneaker, enough for a beach, enough
for a castle and moat.

I could have written about the look on their faces
sometimes, that they saw us not as the oafs
who yelled and sighed and lived stupidly above eye level,
but shining gods, shining, omnipotent and perfect.
How when they cried in your arms
they were praying to you
to make it better, to lift the pain from their lives,
and you could.

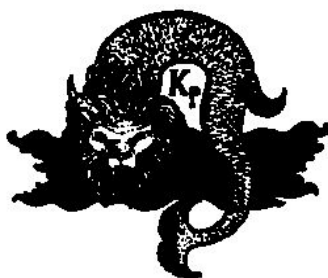
I could have written about the tiredness of the house,
the exhaustion of the tabletops, crusted with crud,
sponged pointlessly after meals, the flakes and globs
spattered on the floor that fill the cracks in the hardwood.
Or the handles on the stroller that were not long enough,
so you walked in a crouch, and the white plastic wheels
that turned sideways on a whim
or a pebble and skidded to a halt.

I could have remembered their bodies between us in bed
when they were just babies, the smell of them there,
the cramped caution of the dark, the wet exhalation
from their noses. The kick of them against blanket,
that wakes you and
momentarily annoys you, then draws you even closer.

Why did they finally leave our bed, our big pink comforter
and the warmth of the family, for beds of their own?
There was space for us all, and another night
would have cost them nothing, but they went.

I could have described the last night they woke up
frightened and sauntered in barefoot
and climbed in between us.
They slept again immediately, and we tried, too.
But I know you were thinking, off on your side,
that this is the moment, and this was our life,
and the white skin of our children dove and fell
again beside us, in the bright sun setting, out to sea.

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in friendship,
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