

# *The Rapture*



*poems by Mike Finley*

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Annotated poems by Mike Finley

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These poems are odds and ends composed or completed after August 2009. I had not intended to include poems relating to my daughter Daniele's death, but then I did – to give the collection ballast, I think.

It is an annotated collection, because I like explanations for things as much as the next person. My great fear is that my writings are giving away some awful truth about myself – that I am just a narcissist who doesn't really give a crap what people think. I hope it's not true, but the evidence is in your hands. Perhaps the annotations will make these silly efforts less obtuse.

A few very recent, unfinished poems are blanked out, toward the back of the book. I will include them when I am happier with them. But now, I feel like “putting something out there.” Because this is what I do.

Regards, Mike

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## THE RAPTURE

Walking with Rachel,  
We detect a fragrance  
So sweet and so intense

Like honey, lilac and swirled violets  
We look at one another  
With a look of joyous anticipation

Until we step into a clearing  
And see the turquoise  
plastic Port O Potty.



## OLD MAN CLIMBING

*One nickname I use for my dog Beau is 'Old Man.' He is arthritic, and our upland ventures are taking their toll of him. This is one explanation I would have preferred to withhold, because I enjoyed the idea of doing this to an actual old man.*

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. 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, heaving,  
We winked to each other. He's going to have a good sleep now!

## THE EYED ECLAIR

*This is pure jabberwocky. But I like the rhyming, and the oddball sense of rune and mystery.*

Occam's razor  
is shaving us thin  
deep down  
below the skin.

The rule is it has  
To make some sense  
Yet everything is gone  
into bliss.

I propose logic  
that leaps and bounds  
considerations  
taken out of account.

Because a thing is  
is why it can't be.  
It restores the imp  
to possibility.

God and the devil  
share a carpool,  
Jesus and Hitler  
paddle canoe.

Mirror man  
is up to the task.  
The eyed eclair  
asks do not ask.

## CLOTH NAPKIN

*This is really old – 1978? – dating from our courtship, when I was showing Rachel the beautiful things of my life. This year I dusted it off and returned it to the rotation.*

Rachel says my  
gosh this is  
a fancy place

the snails  
so warm  
and buttery

also ironic  
how fleeting  
is their taste

## WRITERS

Writers start out all right  
they pay attention to things and deliver reports  
on the way things are, it is a useful function  
they perform

but then something happens

someone will say, you know, this is interesting,  
and you can see it go bad  
like a banana going brown  
they enjoy the attention and want more  
and tell themselves I could create lots of these reports,  
they're not that hard to do  
now that I know how to do it

and then they want readers  
and they they want comments  
and then they want praise  
and then they want praise  
coming out of the faucet  
night and day like an endless drip.

until they are no longer reporters  
but debutants on a featherbed  
chins in their hands and their feet  
wagging behind them

tell me more about myself  
tell me more  
and they're not working  
for you any more

you say everyone needs encouragement  
it's not true

encouraging only encourages them

## THE OUTLAW

*It helps to understand that the name Jesse is, like Joshua and Yeshua, a variant of Jesus.*

Jesse was a suicide  
the way he egged on the law.  
After a while they had no choice  
but to string him from the bough.

Jesse's father beat on him  
until the neighbors howled.  
But Jesse loved that old man  
and did as he was told.

Jesse was a poet who  
invaded women's soul.  
He looked them in the eye  
and called them Pearl.

Jesse had a gang of friends  
but he could count on none.  
Not one of them stood below  
the rope that he made taut.

Jesse was a dead man when  
they set him in the crate.  
When spirits came to fetch him  
they were too late.

The outlaw disappeared  
Beyond the Wasatch Range  
Jesse was a bastard  
and no one took his name

## STOOPING TO PICK UP A PILL

that rolled onto the floor  
and under the kitchen table

I bend at the back, no good  
I get down on my bony knees

but my shoulder is in the way  
and my neck starts to strain

I get all the way down  
and duck my head under

till I hear myself wheeze  
and the heart begins to thump

and the big vein pulses  
and the follicles weep

then there is the pink pearl  
bearded with bunny dust

I hold this statin eyelet  
between two fingers like a host

and think this would be  
a silly way to die

## PATTY CANNEY

*Patty is an artist I spent an afternoon with, as she generously hosted a signing for my art book "The Orchard," designed and published by Richard Stephens. During the signing and chats, I looked at her paintings on her studio walls. They were wonderful.*

Her paintings are light  
and colorful, only a woman  
could or would portray these  
languid hesitations --

a visitor in a gallery leaning into  
an oil,  
a male dancer during break, chest out,  
unable not to strike a pose,  
a dress dummy in a window,  
headless yet still pretty.

In each case there is something beautiful and timeless,  
and at the same instant diminutive,  
a sigh of human exasperation.

Children dripping ice cream  
into dappled hands,  
a man slouched in a chair in an atrium  
biding more time than he wishes.  
A garment hanging on a nail,  
awaiting the impartation of flesh.

It is an everyday world of grace and  
impatience,  
One we bustle through every day,  
hands in pockets and eyeballs rolling,  
forgetting we are art.



## BUTTS

get thrown from moving cars,  
flicked from cricket fingers,  
dumped out of ashtrays  
ground under shoe tips

rains wash them into gulleys  
then into the storm sewer  
then headlong like the dear  
departed out into the river.

beneath the Lake Street Bridge  
is a sandbar of cigarette butts  
millions jammed together like lumber  
a beaver dam of paper and micronite

this leg of not quite land grows  
like a stockpile of spent shells  
each one own etched  
with its owner's initials

a cigarette is a valentine  
you send yourself that says die  
you worthless fuck

it is all that you deserve

it is target practice for the soul

each squeeze of the trigger

steadies the hand and

locates the crosshairs

a way to flip God the bird

and tell others not to hate you

because that would be redundant

you will save them all the trouble

## DIME

One day I learned I was wrong all my life  
Offended by lightness and wary of cheer  
And the only music my ear respected,  
The groan of the soon-to-be-dead.

Then did I see how far down-mountain  
I was and what hard climb lay ahead.  
But does one undertake such journey  
With high purpose and fanfare

Or better, plant foot as if nothing  
Much matters, as if birds migrating  
Have nowhere to get to, and matters  
Of life and excruciating death

Are resolved by the flip of a coin.

## **BUICK CENTURY**

It was the Dynaflow model  
green body white top  
three-speed automatic  
bullet holes shot out the side

we drove 105 mph on the  
Marblehead Causeway  
at two on a Saturday morning  
and the officer let me drive away

I picked up girls as sweet as candy  
and winked at their mothers  
as I opened the passenger doors

and guys I never thought I'd know  
ate fifteen cent hamburgers  
by the bag in the back seat

and we drank beer and drove  
till the white lines swerved  
and the white stones spanked

the underbody  
late at night  
in 1966

## CORRECTIONS

*I originally wrote these sentiments as “Fourth Step” declarations – sentences where we list the grievances of our lives. The list of grievances becomes a lamp that illumines the misgivings we all feel -- and an antidote to each complaint.*

We resented the lucky who were born to success  
Who thought this was all there ever was

(But we don't know if they were lucky or not  
Or they were just simple and that was their loss)

We hated those who enjoyed causing hurt  
The clever for making us feel so ashamed

Those who would not tell us what they knew  
Who pointed at our tears with grubby fingers

(But if they were empty that was their punishment  
Perhaps the clever feel hollow too)

And it is human to slow down and stare  
At the splash of blood on the bottom stair

We resented our brothers for casting us down  
(Yet our brothers would die for us, we know)

Our mothers because they could not know us  
(But we know they wanted us to grow and live long)

Our fathers did not think us worth staying with  
(But those fathers spend eternity in hell)

We wept because our children were no better than us  
(But they were bled from our own confused blood)

We turned on God because he turned on us  
(Or so we thought because we felt alone)

We prayed the light would dwindle to a dot  
(But awoke to find ourselves home)

## THE LITTER

*Another dog poem.*

Why do you sniff at the hedge, the hedge?  
Because I am looking for my brothers, you said.

Why do you check out all the other dogs?  
I am checking to see if they know my brothers.

What do you do with the information you collect?  
I making a map in my nose of all that I know.

Why do you poke your head out the window?  
Because you never know, they might have come this way.

Why do you leave messages wherever you go?  
So my brothers know I will find them.

## OVERHEARD

*This is needlessly obscure. I had a silly vision, that hell was run along the lines of a telemarketing phone bank. I fantasized I was a business writer interviewing the manager. This is what came of that.*

“People have this idea that we have unlimited resources  
The boss is saying to me, stubbing out his cigarette in his private office  
But we experience the same constraints as everyone else  
Look at these lights, they cost money  
We don't even own the building  
But we do what we can, this facility works three shifts seven days  
That's over eight hundred callers per day working on a commission basis.  
We don't expect everyone to like us or to do business with us  
But we know the odds, that two of every hundred are eager for our call.  
I have confidence in our training and in our plan.  
What I have no leverage over is the business cycle  
It hits us the same as it hits everybody and all we can do  
Is tighten our belts and wait it out, just like you.  
But people think they are in some unique bargaining position  
Like we will kill ourselves to make them our customers  
The truth is this is like agriculture and right now  
We have a bumper crop, and that's not good for prices.  
So it puts us in the uncomfortable position of saying to people  
This is our final offer, take it or leave it  
And what they don't understand is, we run an honest shop here  
There's no bait and switch, all our callers are of legal age  
With us, what you see is what you really get  
But times are changing and so naturally there are always  
A few customers think they should get custom treatment  
And like we should draw up exclusive contracts  
Just for them and I have to tell them that's not how it works.



And the callers come to me and say, So and so is on the line  
And they are unhappy about this or that,  
I tell them the same thing, you hear them out,  
You tell them you understand what they must be feeling  
That's why we have a policy: no refunds.”

## PRAYER FOR POETS

Let a thing be what we say it is.  
If a donkey is eating corn  
let the donkey not be an allegory  
nor the corn a corn byproduct.

Let us not despise readers  
for not getting us  
when we did nothing to let them in,  
and everything to keep them out.

Let every offering be a gift,  
first from you and then from us.  
Let 'Let this serve you well'  
be both credo and manifesto.

Do not let us fall down  
the well of our awareness.  
Neither let us feel special  
Just because we hear music.

Lead us not into obscurity,  
and deliver us from brilliance.  
For thine is the poem  
forever amen.

## DAILY GLOBE

*An eulogy for Jim Vance, who hired me for the best job I ever had,  
editing the Worthington, Minnesota Daily Globe*

daily globe is precious thing  
sunshine on a field of beans  
piggies grunt and cattle moo  
all your friends say i love you

when daily globe is said and done  
bright light in the afternoon  
all the hard working people swore to  
do their best by minnesota

moon down to the cuticle  
deer walk through the corn  
daily globe is beautiful  
stillness in the early morn

okabena burning bright  
on the prairie of delight  
like a diamond in the sky  
motorboat goes roaring by

editor of burning truth  
second section reading proof  
publishing his daily biz  
enthusiast of all that is

daily globe is precious thing  
sunshine on a field of beans  
piggies grunt and cattle moo  
all your friends say i love you

## BIRDS

They descended from dinosaurs,  
they could of ruled the earth,

and then it would be us skittering every  
which-way when we saw them coming

but something happened and now  
they never give us a chance

post-traumatic stress disorder taught them  
we will do what we did to the chickens

who once were a noble feathered breed  
but now abide in a protein matrix

I want to say hey little birdies,  
make the distinction between people

who stuff your feathers in the grill  
and those of the Francis of Assisi stripe

Take a chance on mankind or on men  
We just want to be your friend

## MY DAD

*A journal entry. My dad died in 2007.*

I didn't see a lot of my dad when I was a boy,  
but when I connected with him later in life,  
he shared this thought over coffee,  
which struck me like an arrow:

"All I ever wanted to do was make women laugh."

I don't think he qualified it with "beautiful."  
Just making any woman smile was it for him,  
a means to fulfillment.

I lifted my cup to him, from one foolish man to another.

"I know exactly what you mean," I told him.

## **PRAYER**

Something in the air,  
That drew me away.  
Where were you today?  
I looked everywhere.

## OLD GIRLFRIENDS

I know I'm not supposed to but I think of them,  
and not the way they are now, wise and complicated,  
but the daffy way it was joyful to please me  
when we were young and things were possible.

What a blessing their kindness was loving me.  
The future stretching like airplane glue.  
Me and them in a big house together,  
Thrilled for all time by one another's beauty.

I want to pick each one up in turn and spin her  
And look into her eyes and say thank you  
For thinking I was someone worth contemplating,  
That gift of confiding, which will never be ash.

This one thought she saw something in the man.  
This one said he could be some kind of friend,  
This one, we knew and were known, and it was OK.  
You gleam at me like a merit badge in my heart.

## IN DEFIANCE OF GRIEF

How can you kill what cannot be killed?  
Why weep for those who have been taken?

Why furnish ammunition to the enemy  
Who hammers jewels from your tears?

Who am I to say, 'This is the end! '  
When I am the world's ignoramus.

I can't outsmart the market  
But I second-guess God?

I made a list of every known sadness  
And set it ablaze on a paper plate.

Let others twist their hankies at night.  
I am free of all that forever.



## FOOLS UNLIMITED

God is the reason we all go crazy  
begging scraps at every doorbell

Why we wear diapers cut from the funnies  
duct-taped and leaking at the advertisements

And sandals cut from gallon milk jugs  
So there is no sneaking about

We embrace those who betray us  
and bless their bratty descents

The taste of vomit is always in the mouth  
And it is not even always our own

Confess to crimes we didn't commit  
Love Limbaugh and Gingrich and Jones

Abandon critical thought forthwith  
Your intellect was never your friend

A woman with arms crossed demands to know  
where have we been and where is our pay

and the answer is always yes we did  
the voices made us do it again

## LA FROMAGE LAZARE

*Written on our 2008 trip to France. It's a true story.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But it is so sweet,” I say,  
So delicious!”

“Yes, but for five black years  
It was death!”

## MM-HMM

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

a know-it-all but until now I knew to  
keep that information to myself.  
They told me if went to Europe it would  
change my outlook  
But I look in the mirror and all I see  
is Transylvania

## HOUND AND TURKEY

*A conversation between a dog and a bird that I overheard  
by the St. Croix one summer night.*

The dog asserts itself with utmost authority  
the cry clear and abrupt from her throat  
and later this evening she will find humor,  
slit-eyed, in the tale of the hunt  
and the squawking sound of the ridiculous bird.

Haddle haddle haddle *loop* --  
as if he deserved to be torn apart  
because, really, that funny voice  
could not be taken seriously  
a tragedy for the creature in question

who had been a hero up until that hour  
beautiful in his strut and in his demeanor  
and keen of eye like nobody's business  
and the hens will swear he did not come  
into this world to depart from it as a clown

# THE TIDE

complains

*ish*

*ish*

*ish*

## THE FLY

Walking forlorn along the Mississippi,  
I felt a deerfly land on my cheek.

Instead of me slapping it, it slapped me!  
The tiniest hand you could imagine reared back  
and let me have it.  
At most I felt a tiny itch.

And then a sound.  
I could barely hear.  
Perhaps, "britzel ... britzel ..."?

But I got the sense, loud and clear, that it was  
warning me about something,  
urging me to shape up.

"Listen," it was saying, "I'm going say this once.  
Life is pain. Accept it! Accept it,  
you stupid, stupid man."

And then it buzzed off.

Now I am downgrading the alert.  
It couldn't have meant much. Otherwise,  
every insect that annoys you is some kind of angel,  
sent to deliver a message.  
About what is expected.  
About how we must live.

I'm sorry, there are too many insects  
for that to be true.



## A SENATOR CONCEDES

*Written in 1975, but resuscitated by Al Franken's exhaustive victory over Norm Coleman*

Every day a man rises and sets off to undo it,  
some failure he barely remembers,  
a phantom moment hiding in time.

These are the years he is in his prime,  
his wisdom and courage fixed in the grin  
he landscapes his life with:

the disappointment he feels in the world  
he holds at arm's length, the odd fascination  
for his mother's first name.

Somehow we never quite let it sink in  
that the contests that mattered  
have long since been over.

Today I want to walk home, stumbling,  
my fists at my eyes,  
sobbing all the way.

## PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG DOG

As a gangly pup he sensed the need  
Of things to be better than they were.

And so he went about his rounds,  
Pruning boulevard trees with his teeth

Because nubs sticking out annoyed him,  
Asking for much yet not yielding leaves

It was an aesthetic vision that drove him  
To leave objets glistening like jewels in the dew

To water every flower with his graceful salute  
And holes for planting roses in next spring

His earth palette caused many a stir  
In the salons of Dayton Avenue

And his adorning the upper mulberry branches  
With an assortment of clinging cats

## FRANKENSTEIN IN THE CEMETERY

*The only poem of mine my daughter ever told me she liked. And she liked it a lot.*

Here is where I ought to be.  
And here. And here.  
And here. And here. And here.

1974

## DEATH AS SNACK CAKE

*I don't have a clue what this means. Or why I wrote it.*

the grave's a fine  
and spongey place  
a coffin like a twinkie

and we who dreamed  
so many bright things  
surprise, we are the filling

## THE NEWMANS OF CONNECTICUT

*I began writing this in the 1980s when Rachel and I lived in New Haven. We had two stories by friends, about late-night help, both times in foul weather, from the remarkable Newmans. I finished it on the occasion of Paul's death.*

It is said that on a stormy night  
when a traveler is most in need  
of a helping hand they are out there  
in their Ferrari, idling, extra gas  
and jumper cables at the ready.  
Few are the motorists who drive the length  
of the Connecticut Turnpike without  
receiving some kind of road assistance  
from Paul and Joanne. She waits in your car  
with you, chatting of the weather,  
blushing at your compliments,  
the coupons in your glove compartment  
for popcorn and salad oil,  
he is immediately under your hood,  
blue eyes blinking away the damp,  
righting the wrong connections.  
They have an air of sad obligation  
about them, the need to be simple  
and useful and sympathetic, that  
your problem with your distributor  
outweighs every glory, every golden  
delight they have known. Joanne has  
a basket of fresh-baked brownies,  
Paul has a dry wool sweater to lend you.  
And when the emergency subsides,  
you wave goodbye, they smile through  
clutched raincoats and return to their car,  
and wait for the next living soul.  
To be of use, that is the thing,

that is the atonement they require,  
salvation in the rain and grease  
and gravel and lesser people's luck.

## ICKY

*A Daniele poem*

was the name of her fish,  
a tetra I bought her  
when she was three.

we spoke to him  
we touched him  
and one day he died

you know my darling  
I began to explain that life  
is how we share our love

and it's OK to be sad  
when we lose  
a dear sort of a friend

she finally spoke  
'You know, daddy ' she said  
'he was only a fish'

## THE HORROR OF HIDDEN FALLS

*I wrote this five years ago, but I just wanted to include it because it's fun.*

I love the fall. I love the crisp air and falling temperatures. What a great time to be out with a good dog, driving the late-model, fire engine red Taurus your mom bequeathed you when she went to winter with family in Kentucky the day before.

So I'm down at Hidden Falls with old Beauregard. He is looking sheepishly up at me, which is my signal that he needs to take a dump. So I stop walking, take out my plastic bag, and wait for him to execute his ablutions.

Poodles are, how do you say, fastidious about these matters. Beau's typical dump means finding the right spot, often after investigating three or four other spots. Or, maybe he's just waiting for the feeling back there to be just right.

Then, he squats in a very primitive shape -- Kodak moment -- and, as he does his thang, he rotates to the right, or counter clockwise. I don't know why he rotates this way -- again, maybe to keep on eye on what he's doing, and on any predators that might swoop down on him while bent to this task (poodle-snatching owls?), and make off with his curly blue bod.

In any event, all these things come to be, just as they have happened 2000 times before. But there's a disgusting hitch in the action, as Beau can't quite seem to shake completely free of the thing he's getting rid of.

*[Pause to explain to readers The Poodle Problem]*

You see, poodles are unlike most dogs in that their hair never stops growing. This is OK on their coats, because you can shave them.



They catch more burrs when their coats are long, and that's a drag. I have spent many an afternoon picking elephant-ear burrs out of his \$600 coat.

But the deal is, poodle hair grows everywhere. Coat, ears, and yes, your hairy hindquarters. And today is the day his hair back there has grown to just the right length to obstruct the free flow of his poop.

So, hunched over like a hissing black cat, Beau looks back at his butt, at the offending poop, and then back again at me, eyes imploring me to intervene.

Then things go from bad to worse, as, still turning, he stumbles into a copse of burr bushes. As he turns, they spool onto his curly coat. Wherever they touch, they stick, like nature's Velcro. Within seconds he has seventy burrs stuck to every part of him including his ears, face, eyebrows, and paws.

"Oh, Beau!" I cry out in dismay. I am looking at two horrible jobs in need of simultaneous emergency action.

"You stupid, stupid, dog!"

*[Warning to the squeamish: things get worse ahead.]*

It is not that he or I enjoy intervening. He is shamed by it, and I naturally am repulsed. But it's a job that can't be done without using some sort of buddy system. And the way things are, I'm it.

Usually I have something like toilet paper handy with which to perform the procedure. Sometimes I have to improvise. I have used a decaying newspaper found in the woods, an empty McDonalds coffee cup, even a set of three check deposit slips with my name and address in the upper left-hand corner, fanned out to maximize their surface: deposit here.

I used a handful of fresh-fallen snow once. Beau crossed his eyes over that one.

But today, all I have is the plastic bag. I use it for a few seconds, then for some reason I don't want to keep using it, and the problem is still not solved, and all I got left is two twenties, which I don't feel like breaking.

Exasperated, I uproot a fistful of grass, and use that to midwife the birth in progress. It is a mess, but at least we succeed in getting the main elements out of the dog and into the world at large.

Beau is about to express gratitude to me. He is a vain creature generally, but he can be very touching when he is thankful about something.

So we're limping back to the car, him on the leash, his butt still rather badly blotched. I am damned if I am going to lead him through the woods in this ridiculous condition.

But then I remember: I'm driving my mother's new car. I see it ahead of me, gleaming brick red in the first rays of October sun, like in a commercial. What a beauty!

And I don't know everything about this cockamamie thing we call life, but this much I do know: My mom won't like it if I smear dog shit all over her upholstery.

So I open the trunk, take out a blanket I was saving for deep-winter survival, tuck it around the back seat. There isn't enough to cover the backrest part, just the seat cushion. So I leverage the dog, very slowly, onto the blanket and sit him down.

"Now you stay there!" I tell him sharply, climb into the front, start the car, and head up the 150-foot high hill leading back to the river

road.

Almost immediately Beau stands up. I glance at the upholstery, at his butt, at him.

"Lie down!" I command in the rear view mirror.

He stares at me.

"Beau, you lie down right now!"

More stares.

"Goddamnit Beau, you get your ass on that blanket and lie down right now!"

He is paralyzed with uncertainty. Oh, we have only practiced the "lie down" command all of 10,000 times. But now he's frozen in the high beams of my fury, and he can't recall what it means. "Lie down ...?" Is that the one involving chicken? Where's the chicken?

"Lie down!"

Nothing.

I stop the car, put it in park, open the front door, get out of the car, open the back door, grab the dog by his neck and hindquarters and force him to his knees (and elbows).

"Now you LIE DOWN."

He lies down. And he stays that way, like a shitty-assed sphinx, all the way home. Whereupon I lead him inside, take him down in the basement, fill the laundry tub with warm water and soap and load the curly blue animal in, and spray, and sponge, and scrape, and brush, and then finally, both of us exhausted, I let him out.

He dashes up the stairs, shaking the water from his legs and butt, and makes a beeline for the studio couch. And I let him go.

I mean, I really do love the fall. I love the sense of the seasons gathering, and the crunch you feel when you step on dead leaves.

But I hate those elephant-ear burr plants. And I hate when the hair on a poodle's ass begins to cling.

## REFLECTION: THE WORLD OF JOB

*A journal entry*

I learned today of something that is just sickening -- the accidental death of a 1 year old child to a couple that just lost another child, the same age, a couple years ago, also to a fluke event.

It has been with me all day. This couple is as good-hearted a couple as I know, and I know that grieving over their first child was a mountain to climb, and they were just starting to see daylight again, due partly to the new baby.

I think i know what it is like. I had a sister die when I was 11, and that event darkened the face of my family forever after. Basically, no one recovered, though I probably did best of us. But even me -- I made up my mind in the wake of my sister's death that I was going to live for the two of us. And that, on reflection, seems like a lot for a kid to take on.

This was the sin of my family: We thought we were showing respect for the horror of our loss by hurting ourselves as deeply as we could, for as long as we could. It's the story of a brooding life -- grief compounding, until it becomes an altar to itself. No one in my family could ever bring themselves to talk about it, not even with alcohol, though goodness knows we gave it a shot.

In my grandparents' time, it was not exceptional to lose two children -- it's one reason people had lots. It seems so much more unacceptable today -- but this is still the world of Job.

In church today we broke into small groups and prayed for this family. I was paired with a family that never says much to me. They have their own private sadness that I have not been allowed to penetrate. I prayed for a minute, out loud, asking God for some glimpse of hope, in this sorrowful time, something to remind us

that we don't really have a clue what any of this means. We are just bursting into fountains of tears because we don't know what else to do.

The best I could come up with was that our kids don't belong to us, we just think and feel that they do.

The four-year-old boy in this family, a little blonde fellow about the size of a stuffed animal, piped up.

"Heavenly father," he said in his little voice, which has clearly prayed out loud before, maybe more than I have in my many years. "We just want to hold this baby up to you, and pray that you make him well, and that he gets good food, and is warm and safe, and is loved."

It made no sense, but it was as good as anything anyone said today.

## ALL THE YOUNG POETS, FOR PHEBE

*For Phebe Hanson, a poet I knew in the olden times. I wanted to tickle her by reminding her of the characters we used to hang around with at readings in the 1970s. No one else is going to get this – but the tumult shines through.*

I remember going to readings at the Unitarian Society  
and vying with the others for reading time  
I sat with the surrealists like Richard Waara and Jeff Beddoe  
always the danger of a recalcitrant ice tray  
always a guy from the colleges talking about Indians  
and a girl about a night that got out of hand  
University professors looked long in the tooth  
in their denim sportcoats and gleaming goatees  
the guy who had a chapbook out and read the whole thing  
until even people without watches  
were glancing at their wrists  
the nervous girl who rattled her papers  
the boy who couldn't believe how bad he was  
until he opened his mouth  
Penelope Seiss disgusted with the men  
Mary Ellen Shaw peering over her spectacles  
Jonathan Sisson, intelligent and afraid  
Englishman John Daniel's classy roundelay  
Crazy Robin Raygor's blunt impossibility  
John Rezmerski, the funniest guy of all  
and Gregory Bitz with his mad persona  
and the bullet hole through his arm from Viet Nam  
and grinning Michael Tjepckes, rocking Byronic on his cane  
Jim Naiden pulling his pants up by the belt  
and Michael Kincaid as grave as the grave as the grave  
and Caroline Marshall chaste as a feather  
Keith Gundersen popped in for an appearance  
Mary Kilpatrick with her Kenneth Patchen stories  
and Wendy Knox antsy for something to happen

and Garrison Keillor's tales from the pea patch  
and Phebe Hanson's tales of the Sacred Heart  
and Jenne Andrews, who'd seen too many troubles  
and Tom McGrath, kinder than he needed to be  
Robert Bly presiding like a glad prince  
Frank Brainerd holding up his trembling cup  
and afterwards the bars and the cold cars  
everyone throwing a bag over everyone  
talking something home in the trunk  
an image, a hiccup, a gesture, a disease  
they were the years of clapping on  
one another's armor and galloping off to war  
it seemed at the time they could do it forever  
and a few of them did, but not all



## DISAPPOINTMENT

*A journal entry*

Today is the one month anniversary of Daniele's death. Every single night, until about a week ago, I bolted up in my sleep and asked why this happened.

I had raging, angry, imaginary arguments with people from my church about what God wanted from my family. In truth, no one has called to engage me on this topic. I guess they are all confused by it as I am.

But it makes you wonder, what good is religion when it can't even approach a topic like this? And why do we have children draw Jesus with crayons, when this is the actual truth of God's love?

I don't know who I am more disappointed with -- God, who I feel sorry for these days, or my friends, who swear by him, but hide behind their doors.

We are all such cowards, deep down. I would like to lead a delegation to give God a piece of our mind. But I fear I am all alone.

When I do go to him, we sit on a log, and sit with our chins in our hands. He hasn't any better a clue what's going on than I do. But the whole world is looking to him for relief. Poor bastard.

## **THE STINK**

Does not understand  
it is the problem

Brothers, sisters  
where are you going?

## **STABBING GOD'S EYES WITH BBQ FORKS**

We had had it and called a meeting.

"He sees what we've been doing, and comes down like a thunderbolt!" said a man named Porphyry.

"The punishment is disproportionate to the crime," cried a woman with neurofibromatosis and Tourette's.

"Still, maybe he's within his rights," said an old man known for his thoughtfulness, who was holding a bird's nest on his lap.

"Sidney, why don't you shut the fuck up!" we cried in unison.

So we chose a champion, named Leavitt, and handed him two silver long-handled BBQ forks. The plan was to plunge them into God's eyes while he was surveying what he had wrought.

Leavitt lay in wait while God adjusted his instrumentation. Then, stepping from the drapes, he struck, embedded the BBQ forks deep in God's sockets.

"My word!" said the Lord God, wrenching the utensils out with his fists and weeping bloody tears.

"Things will never be the same," he said, his eyes wrapped in a checkered sash.

"I did a lot of good stuff, too," he said in his defense. "You ought to give me credit for that. Poems and babies and such."

Leavitt was unmoved. "Let's move on," he said coolly. "But I will say, seeing you like this, that we perhaps didn't appreciate your

totality."

"Don't blame yourself," God murmured. "You had just cause."

But Leavitt was transforming. "My friends made me do this," he said, beating his breast. "What jerks they all are!"

"I know," God said, staring off into space. "I know."

## HOPSCOTCH

I knew in an instant  
she was there, and there, and there

The being small, under radar  
where love clambers in the umber

We take turns like Merlin  
inside every creature

No membranes, no padlocks  
to hinder the leaping

The mole makes castles underfoot  
Crane sharpens bill on a log

A duck cannot fly without flapping  
Mosquitoes explode like kisses in the air

And suddenly everything  
waves its hands and says hi

## WHEN THEY DIE

The mother makes you weep  
because all mothers are Greek  
and they do not know  
but they suffer so

The father makes you sigh  
because of all that never was  
Fathers are foolishness given a voice  
that then has nothing to say

A son would be like being smitten  
by a smith, a hit on the head  
like nothing could be, pray God  
could never be

But a daughter is the end  
it was the man turned inside out  
his soul become a flower  
and his only shot at beauty

## RENUNCIATION

I break with St. Paul  
and the one-way  
Irish streets

And join with Patrick  
and the Christ whose blood  
veins every leaf

## LATE AUGUST

River dispatches spirit as steam  
evaporating  
in the morning light

The fawns of spring  
dance across  
dew-lipped grass

Bee doesn't know he  
is unaerodynamic  
and so he  
bumbles along



## ADVICE

Thoughts are like tenpenny nails.  
They have a point, they have a heel,  
and you can drive them deep into muscle,  
and then extract them with a claw.

If you insist.

We trust our instincts.  
But our instincts are the reason we suffer.  
We say, "Obviously, this,"  
but it is far from obvious,  
in fact it is wrong  
the way chomping on a fishhook  
is wrong.

You need to find a new way to live,  
in which you take it easy on yourself.  
You are the only you you have.  
Conserve, preserve, pull back on the reins.

Somewhere you got the idea that  
hurting yourself was your job,  
and that was bad,  
but then you became a workaholic.

Stop it.

God gave you two brains,  
and you never use one of them.  
Unwrap it now, and set it in its place,  
and take it for a spin.

Instead of empty space

put a bird there and let it chirp.  
An annoying little bird.  
And let it chirp until you wish it would shut up  
while it drowns out your stupidity.

Someone got what they wanted  
so what makes you restless?

Do you want to spend the rest of your life  
like a knucklehead, never getting anything?

Stand up.  
Get out of the street.  
Walk, and see where that gets you.

## THE WEATHER

The day of the death it began to drizzle  
and people arrived at the door stamping their feet  
to be rid of the wet.

It had hardly rained all summer.

An hour before the funeral the sun came out  
and a soft breeze arose from the west.  
People took off their jackets  
and hung them on the backs of chairs.

In the middle of the night on Tuesday  
the heaving thunder woke us up.  
We ran through the house  
lowering windows.

Then stood on the porch  
as the rain came down,  
rain by the oceanful,  
pounding the boulevard,  
blasting the neighborhood,  
choking the gutters,  
running and rushing  
to rejoin the river.

# THINGS

*Poems written the morning of Daniele's funeral*

## THE GLUTTON

The caterpillar had eaten all the leaves on the bough.  
You pig, said the sparrow, you are killing the tree.  
How am I supposed to know, the caterpillar cried,  
can't you see I don't have eyes.

## THE CABLE

Stretched taut between two buildings  
it crackles like a force about to snap  
it is the almost bursting sound  
of a brush dragged along a drum skin.  
an awful expectation  
like a world about to crack

## THE CIGARETTE BUTT

I have ambitious aspirations  
the cigarette butt announced.

The toadstool said to him,  
I don't think that's very practical

## THE FOUNTAIN

Families come from all over  
and spread their blankets on the grass

The fountain is predictable

every forty minutes it goes off  
and sprays its water like a carousel  
of rinestones

Mommy look, a little boy says,  
the murmurs ripple through the group.  
Mommy, I tasted it, it's salty --  
and greasy, he says with a grimace.

Mother kleenexes a smudge  
from his cheek,  
Don't you know it's  
a fountain of tears?

### **THE CAST-IRON SKILLETS**

God says, I need you to do something for me  
and hands you two-red hot frying pans.  
Twenty years later you run into him again.  
He says, are you still holding those things?  
Hey, you can set one of them down.

### **THE MAN WITH NO ARMS AND NO LEGS**

A man with no arms and no legs  
is grinning ear to ear.

What have you got to be cheerful about  
he is asked.

I like how the light is playing on my face  
I have a feeling it's my lucky day

## **THE FUNERAL**

mourners descend like crows  
gliding in sad circles

## **THE MIRACLE**

The man in bad straits had prayed for a miracle  
and a jumbo jet landed on his house









## **DRUNKEN SAUDI**

Rakhan weaves his promise with a finger  
I want to learn English the best Mister Mike

I want to studying every day  
All the people being speaking the best

All my families believe in my success  
Because that is my name, the cornerstone

I am not supposed to alcohol I know  
But America, well, America no problem

And the woman in the bank is not prostitute  
She is only painted to be that way

One day I tell my family everybody  
Mister Mike is most excellent teacher

# "TO HIS MISSUS RETURNED FROM THE SEA"

BY ANDREW MARVELUS

First night she sleeps her back to me  
like a semaphore signal

This vessel at anchor at last

I say missus, and that  
stands for mistress,

and all that was lost in the elision

It is like master except thoroughly admiral:  
"The mastress set sail on a plunging mattress"

Upright, midnight, recondite

Seamen hang listless in the rigging  
Whitebacks stroke in the dinghy

Heaving their spume upon the sea

Lesser men wince because the captain is voluble:  
How can you get a word in?

When edgewise is the most delicious way

Resting her harpoon against the wall  
she slips inside the stiffened sheets:

Regina! my Queequeg! my queen!

## 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

## SHROOMS GONE WILD

the wilderness is underfoot  
the mussels on the hulls

sunny caps are glad pagodas  
winking in the sun

vaudevillians spin  
silver plates on sticks

upturned cup deformed  
like a beggar's hand

flash of tiger fishes  
changing their direction

the phantom glides  
from stump to stump

silver butterflies  
like flying menus

tiny acorns tip their hats  
to no nutritional value



## TO RACHEL, ABOUT DANIELE

diff between you and daniele  
you always see connections that make things seem possible  
seems polyannish to some people

Daniele felt she knew the world better than you did  
you know the length breadth and depth of the world  
but her attitude was that things could not be done  
she generalized her fatalism to “nothing can be done”  
when she clapped on armor of punk  
she made herself feel safe in a world in which nothing was possible

kings and peasants by themselves can never filthify the world  
kings can drop oil an fell trees  
peasants can squat in their misery and shit  
but the middle class with their notions of fairness and immunization  
and universal literacy and environmental care  
a million small engines sputtering

# RESET

Starting now  
everyone  
has my permission  
to enjoy life.







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