



RIMES  
FOR  
HARD  
TIMES

MIKE  
FINLEY



# Rimes for Hard Times

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## **Explanation**

Ever since I started writing, in detention hall in high school, I liked the fact that modern free verse was incredibly easy to put on the page. You just go – that's really all there is to it. So I was surprised to discover that not only did I have a book's worth of formal rhyming poems but that they followed a specific theme, of loss, though written over a 20 year period. They are not intended to be rhyming poems a la Wordsworth; rather, they use rhyme to express a manic emotion, to help me get at my topic. So I lumped them together and here they are.

If you are not my friend and don't know my story – well, it astounds me that you are here – but here is the story. I had a daughter named Daniele, whom I loved very much. But she had many problems, and in August 2009 she took her life. I have written a lot about Daniele, most of it not this sorrowful. I know that, if she were asked about me writing all this about her, she would roll her eyes at the waste of it. But, here it is, wasted and everything. It begins with an evocation, “Spirit” ...

## **Spirit**

if you have  
a better idea  
I'd like  
[to hear it](#)

## **Clints and Grykes**

Clints be the islands that float apart.

Grykes be the fathoms that must be paved.

Schist be the rock that guards your heart.

Karst be the stones that cap your grave.

## Nine \*

I think it must be exceptionally fine  
To discover oneself at the ripe age of nine.

Nine is so swift on the hoof and so fleet,  
Nine is so hard on the growing of feet.

Nine is so elegant, ermine and silk.  
Nine is so everyday, chocolate milk.

Nine is so ancient, the product of eons.  
Nine is so modern, an apex to be on.

Nine is so stalwart, so bold and so brave.  
Nine is timid, crouched in a cave.

Nine is exemplary, a regular role model.  
Nine is tight jeans that make you waddle.

Nine is the age to explore many areas.  
Nine is the age to think life is hilarious.

Awkward and clumsy and falling downstairs,  
Graceful and delicate, walking on air.

Halfway to womanhood, working, and college,  
Think of the expertise, think of the knowledge!

Think of your doddering, slobbering father  
Who always thought you could walk on water.

Nevertheless, here you are, here am I.  
Who could be prouder, who makes me cry?

I would do anything you ask me to,  
Quack like an elephant, shout like the dew,

---

\* A birthday card, 1993



Save you from earthquake and mudslide and viper,  
Save you from having to launder a diaper.

Save you from heartache and meanness and strife  
All of the days of the years of your life.

I'll save you from all these things while you're nine.  
Because I will always want you to be mine.

I've done a couple of things pretty well,  
But my masterpiece goes by the name of Daniele.

## **In the Night**

My little girl awoke in the night  
quaking with fright,  
and I held her and explained  
that the monsters were gone,  
they were never there at all,  
and the look she gave me was, I recall,  
almost one of pity, as if  
I were the doomed one, mine the swift  
tumble coming soon.  
I rocked her to sleep in her room  
and thought of every plane  
I wanted to see go down,  
every siren shearing the dark  
were heading toward my part  
of town, my god, and all I  
have is a child to protect me.

## **Bottlework**

Pick up one and tilt it in  
Let it drizzle down the chin

Feel the acid in your mind  
And the shiver up your spine

Feel the essence hit the stream  
Feel the numbness in the brain

You are squeezed out of your skin  
And issued new instructions

Like a cosmonaut out on a tether  
You are becoming untogether

The heart trying in every way  
To break free from the ribs of its cage

You can almost take it in your hands  
And hold it against you like a lamb

Don't construct a coherent answer  
That sentence must be said aslur.

Lie on the bed and watch the ceiling  
Spin like a sky that is all possibility.

## **Excruciated**

Jesus was a suicide  
He blamed it on the cops  
Do what you have to do,  
he said  
And died upon the cross

## **Intuitions**

Why do we hold them  
In such high regard  
When they are what got us  
The way that we are?

## **At Fifty-Eight**

It is something to celebrate,  
the day one turns fifty eight.

It is the midpoint of life's domain  
the fun half spent, the rest remains,

one slowly cranks up the first high bend  
then roars like thunder to the end,

I drag the bag of bent clubs that are mine  
and commence the back nine.

## **Applause for Crow**

I believe you are the blackest bird I ever saw,  
blacker than blackbird or raven, grackle or daw.  
Your wingspread blacker than onyx without flaw,  
Lacquered jacket black as a chaw  
of tar or ink or the mountain blueberries in your crow.  
Your eye so keen there ought to be a law,  
Diving down and snatching every stray gewgaw  
Clutch of diamond, gum wrapper or straw,  
snatched quicker than a talon or a monkey's hairy paw,  
spurs remorseless as a mongoose claw.  
Mightier in legend than the donkey's jaw,  
from the ice of January to April's dreary thaw,  
from summer's roasted pastures to autumn's hem and haw.  
Your disdain for the usual forest foofraw,  
your pitilessness for feathered things carried off in a wet dog's  
maw,  
and tendency to repeat yourself are transwoodland topics of awe.  
Over and over every morning, the first breath I draw  
that voice like tearing paper, only still more raw,  
the hard spank of morning cries caw

## **My Darling Serpentine**

I thought it was so tragic  
And nothing could be badder  
I peeked inside the basket  
and beheld the speckled adder

I predicted mass destruction  
The rope could only tighten  
But no noose is a good noose  
It was a cat-eyed python

I thought I had shed blood for you  
There was none such as this  
'The poet of the universe'  
And then I heard the hiss



## **Four Jewels**

*for Rachel*

Christmas time and you and I  
And our two kids in tow,  
Tobogganing down Highland Hill,  
Diamonds hiding in the snow.

I remember you in spring,  
I would do anything to hear you laugh.  
Seeds explode and send up shoots,  
Emeralds peeking from the grass.

Dismal rain at Lake Itasca,  
Summertime and you and I  
Curse the bugs and zip the tent,  
Sapphires shining in the sky.

Our children are beautiful,  
We did the best we could,  
When they are gone, I still love you,  
Rubies moving with our blood.

## **Why Seek You Him Here?**

Why look for him in prayer?  
God is not there.

You cannot place a local call  
to the All-In-All.

Not responding to anyone,  
why, that's half the fun.

He has gone into his father's house.  
He's got no time for the likes of us,

Too busy creating fresh wounds  
to manage old accounts.

Best look for him in jail  
picking his teeth with a nail

Better, look where no one looks  
and not in books

## **We Irish**

It is said we hate the body  
and it's true.

It is said we punish  
with silence  
and we do.

Slow to anger, slow to judge,  
good thing we never hold a grudge.

It is said we sing the sweetest songs  
since Rosie fingered Dawn  
but then we have our  
downsides, too.

## **Dukkha**

*in Buddhism, the inevitability of suffering*

Some folks have to live in shit  
Others live next door to it

No escape and if there is  
The 'suffering of no suffering' is his

The pain of unfeeling, not being at all  
A cavity that swallows the soul

So do not envy the next guy's grass  
Everyone gets it up the ass

## **Step Up Some Other God**

Step up some other God  
Get in the running  
Don't be like the first guy  
Be gracious and cunning

Don't be one of  
The original troupe  
We need fresh flavor  
to enliven the soup

New visions, new faces  
W need a new deck  
with a set of  
new aces

I want a God who  
Allows me to to think  
A God who allows me  
To buy Him a drink

A God who doesn't  
Run out of gas  
A God who's not  
A pain in the ass

Let's get a God  
Indifferent to fashion  
And send the other guy  
Packing

## **My Chrestomathy**

This is what I commend  
to you, make good use  
of the brick-in-hand

Useful learning  
weighted by wood pulp,  
is what's its meaning

A poem wants to be a joke  
like Midas' spud –  
like I'm one to talk

But here is evidence of a crime,  
my darling DNA,  
I pray someone finds

Who stole the baloney  
that hung curled  
in the balcony.

I miss that dear bird  
it was my only chance  
to be similarly cured.

## **Pelagius**

Little is known of this man  
except he refuted original sin.

Some suggest he was Irish  
With a vision nightmarish:

Adam set 'a bad example'  
When he bit into the apple.

And Jesus did not die for us.  
Augustine railed at Ephesus

His heresy had sufficed.  
To gut the crucified Christ.

## **Ride**

Fifty five miles is fine for us  
but angels take the local bus

You stare and watch the city wheeze past  
The next corner as good as the last

Young women talk to one another  
Years before either is a mother

Young guys sets his bike on the rack  
It will be dark before he gets back

My seat mate wishes I weren't there  
I don't care

The driver beats me to it at the door  
No, you have a nice day, sir



## **The Search Goes On**

I'm looking for something  
in the eyes of people I meet nightly.  
if I turn and walk away  
it's because you didn't have anything to say  
or held onto it too tightly.

## **Death as Snack Cake**

The grave's a fine  
and spongy place  
a twinkie of an eye

and we who dreamed  
so many things  
are the filling surprise.

## Les Cryptoportiques

*(a subterranean market in Arles, built during Roman times)*

These are the stations of the scourge  
the pillar where the spirit spurts

The cathedral embedded in the mine  
has been silent now for some time

The cobblestones are always damp  
From the place where stalagmites stand

There the cockroach Orson Welles  
scrambles over a hill of shells

There the bazaar of shiny foil  
lamps sputtering their last drops of oil

Dank as the dungeon and damp as a cave  
No swinging ball of lead can raze

There the architect led on a leash  
Drawn into darkness like a beast

There the hippodrome's flaking hoar  
and sawdust and horse piss and hair

There is your empire, sunken and gone  
It ripples like a pebble in your palm

## University Avenue 1

I was working at M&L Motor Supply  
on University Avenue across from Wards,  
making \$108 a week as an order filler guy  
while attending college part time. It was 1969.

My job was to take phoned in orders,  
push a cart through the warehouse,  
locate the parts that were in stock, box them  
for shipment, and backorder the rest.

This particular day I was standing on a step stool  
poking at the box-end of a Mopar combo  
tailpipe and muffler for a '64 Plymouth Fury  
when the pipe began sliding down toward me.

The box was eight foot long, contained 46 lbs.  
of hardened steel. It was falling now, falling  
from the stacks, sailing down to me like a bride,  
and it struck me on the left side of my forehead.

The blow alone would have knocked me out,  
a baseball bat could not have hit harder  
but first it sent the ladder teetering, back, back  
until I fell backward and crashed to the floor.

When I came to I was changed. I struggled to stand.  
My fingers tingled. I felt an egg, a protruding bud  
from my brow. I looked in the mirror in the dirty  
warehouse toilet and washed away the blood.

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock

in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building  
at the University. I had completely forgot.  
The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said 1:25.

Snow was falling and wind was blowing,  
I staggered out to the street in T-shirt, tie-dyed  
but I did not feel cold. A 16-A bus was just approaching  
from Hamline Avenue, and I boarded, wild-eyed.

Where's your money? The driver asked. Eighty five cents!  
I looked at him like Long John Silver under the egg  
and said You have to get me to the University!  
and took a seat halfway to the back.

The passengers were coming home from morning shift.  
One man wore a hat that said Gopher Gears,  
And the same word on his jacket and thermos.  
The phrase has stuck with me over the years.

I sat quiet but in my mind I was standing and telling them  
Do not be afraid my brothers and sisters,  
I will make the journey from St. Paul to Minneapolis,  
I will do business there with TAs and professors,

I will be valorous in my actions and acquit myself  
in a way you will be proud of. The assembly  
and forklift people will not be ashamed this day  
of one of their own climbing the heights of classical poetry.

I stepped off the bus at the University quad,  
made my way to Ford Hall Room 108, burst  
through the door, and every eye looked up  
at the egghead from the Midway in the torn T shirt.

I grabbed a blue book from the stack and read the question:  
Analyze Houseman's "Eight O'Clock" and explain  
how poetic form helps further the poet's message.  
Ordinarily I might have struggled in vain

with this assignment but I had been struck  
by a muffler from the gods, and I had insights  
I had never had before, when the pipe hit me full  
it poured into me a galaxy of lights.

I knew this poem by heart somehow. I had knelt  
on its floor and drunk its dark waters.  
I scanned the poem in fifteen seconds and  
began to write in the book, in big black letters.

"Each sprinkle of the clock tower bell  
brings the condemned man closer to his time.  
Each stanza of the poem is his knell,  
each line a stair to, trembling, climb."

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk,  
the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall  
and the graduate students on scholarship  
whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul.

I would get an A, of course, but that was not  
the point, I was transformed, beyond dreams.  
I stood on the walkover bridge and gazed out over  
the brilliant white cloud of toilet paper plant steam.

Gods and goddesses choose us mortals not  
by our bloodlines or superior mothering  
but because a magnet pulls metal down from the sky  
that tempers and makes us fit vessels for suffering.

University Avenue begins at the Capitol  
and peters out only God knows where, in Blaine.  
But I am with you to the fullness of time,  
and in my bones and skull I map your pain.

## **Mobile Greek Chorus**

Radio dispatched, they can be on hand  
to minister to every moment of panic

They know somehow what is in your heart  
and what must be weighed against what

Sympathetic to you, but also mindful  
of the needs of the larger community

Should you act out of rage or selfish desire,  
that might be it for Denmark

They explain what the hero cannot  
Because they have the common touch

Still the megaphones seem a bit much



## **The Wreck of the Hesperus**

On a foggy morning in '76  
I idled my VW at the intersection  
of Cedar and 28th Streets,  
awaiting the traffic light's decision.

Stealing through the mist nearby  
a two-axle truck headed for the landfill  
manned by Steve and his uncle Guy,  
would soon have a screaming handful.

The garbage truck in overdrive  
gathered speed in lightly falling rain.  
My fevered brain could not surmise  
the convergence of the twain.

I heard a poem in my ear.  
The light was red, but turning green.  
I slipped the Superbeetle into first gear  
and throttled the machine.

The truck's enormous left front tire  
rolled up onto my hood,  
and the truck ramped into the air,  
all white and beautiful and good.

My car stopped instantly, crushed.  
I watched the truck fly o'er  
the intersection, and the great nose pushed  
itself into the asphalt floor.

The axles snapped and spun away.  
Two wheels in tandem headed east.  
The great container heaved and swayed  
and tipped and dumped its feast.

Coffee grounds, eggshells, cereal  
boxes scattered wide and far.

The screeching metal carrier  
scraped street and gave off sparks.

Banana peels, venetian blinds,  
and Sunday comics sections.  
Burned out light bulbs and orange rinds  
with jotted down directions.

I saw a flattened beach ball skin  
flapping in the truck's rubble.  
I saw Guy and Steve stagger from within  
and feared there might be trouble.

The men seemed drunk and at a loss.  
Their feet met no resistance.  
People on the sidewalks paused  
to offer their assistance.

Me, I crawled from the front seat,  
cassette deck in one hand.  
I had a small bump on my head  
but was otherwise able to stand.

An ancient man from a nursing home  
stepped forward with accusing eye.  
He gestured with his finger bone  
that I was to draw nigh.

"Young man," he asked in squeaky falsetto,  
"What church do you go to?"  
I asked why the old man wanted to know.  
"Because I want to go to that church, too."

## **Entrepreneur**

This spider studied real estate.  
He built a web at the corner station  
over the sign flashing Quaker State –  
location, location, location.

## **Skibbereen**

Step to, step to fair Skibbereen,  
don't let them know you are dreaming.<sup>2</sup>

Let my hounds come lick my face  
For why should friends be afeared.<sup>3</sup>

Let the insects play tag-the-old-man  
amid the confines of my beard

And bid the local beauties sigh,  
whom long I longed to be beside.

Sheila Murphy, you knew my vow  
I gave all my eyes for you.<sup>4</sup>

Peggy McCarthy kick over the hearth  
and prod me by that cheerful fire.<sup>5</sup>

Fetch the English major general  
who taught me how to lie still.<sup>6</sup>

Here's to patting my round torso,

---

2 Poem began with the 'sound coincidence' of Skibbereen and Jerry Garcia's song "Sugaree" – a song about quarantine.

3 Tales abound of families unable to prevent feral dogs from devouring their dead parents, or children. Their own dogs and other animals had long since been killed and eaten.

4 Eyes, potatoes. Murphy remains the most common name in Skibbereen. My deliberately obscure allusion here is to Shulamite, the love object of Song of Songs – and referenced in Paul Celan's haunting Holocaust poem, 'Death Fugue.'

5 Many families were buried simply by knocking down the cabin they lived in and setting it ablaze.

6 A pun on English major and major general, and a reference to Gen. James Thornberry, who counseled against confiscating landlord's crops to keep the Irish populace alive.

Full to here with mangel-wurzel.<sup>7</sup>

Now just a pint to please the host  
and tap it from the neckermost.<sup>8</sup>

Don't dip your finger in the soup  
or have it handed back to you.

Oh Mary Kilkenny with the lucky penny –  
Oh my comely girl Kathleen!

I shall live and I shall die  
in the happy Land of Ire

It's fine to be plying a ploughman's  
*dream in Skibbereen*

---

7 A rhubarb-like root that was prevalent in the area, hard to digest, but yielding some nutrition.

8 A common way to stave off starvation, so long as livestock were still alive, was to bleed them and make a kind of blood-biscuit with oatmeal.

## **What She Would Say**

Each time I see you sad  
I feel worse inside

I wish you could see  
I just had a bad day

I'm sorry it hurt you  
But I was hurting too.

Time to kick out the chocks  
*And let me roll free*

## **The Rain Will Come**

When the stain sets and sinks into the cloth  
on a rag on a post on a gravelly hill  
where the ants march steady in the crimson clay  
The rain will come and wash it away

When there is too much to bear  
and you have worn out prayer  
And there is some thing that needs to be gone  
the rain will come and wear it down

Though no one you know will understand  
something hard to comprehend  
though faith is dead and odd is even  
the rain will come and rinse it clean

When the gouge is deep and the hole erodes  
and scoured hollow by a stone  
and the universe is empty as a sin  
the rain will come again and fill it in

When you have given up for good  
And you tried everything you could  
And you made arrangements with the pain  
And the worm has burrowed lengthwise through the brain

The rain will come and start to fall again

## **Relationship**

God mops  
the last breath  
away  
with a cloth



## **Mystery Girl**

She could be so sweet and brave  
but yet so afraid,

wonderfully vulgar  
but not much of a divulger

alive with laughter  
and then thoughtful after

But when she went black  
there was no going back

Baby, how did you do this thing  
And what was God thinking

## **Druthers**

I wish I was a better man  
I wish I was more honest than I am

I am somewhat honest but prefer  
to shade things in my favor

I am fairly kind, but with exceptions  
as with the bombs in the basement.

My wife is right, I'm an angry guy,  
and negativity scares people away.

I wish I could do a job just right,  
just once, and have it be perfect, complete.

"That guy knew what he was doing,"  
people would say. "That's the kind of man to be."

I wish I was the sort who radiates calm  
and pleasantness and never flips the alarm.

But in fact I have this anxiety problem  
so wishing is what I spend a lot of time on.

I don't know why I play the fool –  
Perhaps to avoid being useful.

## **Scrum**

Mulligan, Mulligan  
when will you learn?  
Your boy's in the bottle,  
your girl's in the urn

Mulligan, Mulligan  
Where is your brain?  
The missus has cheated  
you time and again

Mulligan, Mulligan  
when will you quit?  
Your work has been canceled.  
The house smells of shit.

Mulligan, Mulligan  
Time for a rest  
The ball's in the chamber  
the hammer is pressed.

Mulligan, Mulligan  
run away down.  
The lord is demanding  
his rights from now on.

