

Sugar Trap



the nature poetry
of mike finley

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Springtime¹

When the floodwater rises
it drapes the twigs and stems
with the leaves and gunk stirred up.

Then when it recedes the muck
clings to the branches
in the shape of the water's drift.

The bushes seem populated with
puppets and dolls
with papier-maché blouses

and bunched up clothes.
And when the breeze comes through
it lifts up their skirts and they dance.

¹ The Rapture (2009)

Beauty and Wisdom

there is a well in the iris
and everything falls in

and no man is immune
from this characteristic error

beauty looks like wisdom
because the eyes are amazing

something that wonderful
must see something

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

The Monster

arises at 6 am daily,
commences abominations

everywhere he goes
he shits on beauty

and not just a little, it is
remarkable how it disperses

an oscillating propeller fans
the shit till it is everywhere

and if you ask him
what he thinks he is doing

he will say, I honor it
with my attention and my stink

he is drawn to beauty
but then must soil it

he wants to be close to it
to climb into its body

it is the very intimacy
that is so unnerving

and after a while things
are not so beautiful

then the monster moves on,
and he takes the family with him

and all of them glad
to lie down among flowers

Uncheated

There is a single day in Minnesota in April
when everything happens at once
the grass, the flowers, the leaves, the sky
and if you are not out that day
or if you are not paying attention
to what is happening around you
you will feel cheated by the world
you will feel that winter made the handoff
to spring and you were somewhere else
and you will wonder what was the good
of all that longing and how did
the air turn kind and sweet again
when you were about your business

Fishflies ²

They probably have some other name where you are,
These clouds of angels ululating in the heat.
Harmless as flying shrimp, they neither bite nor itch
Yet they fill the heated sky with their bent translucent twigs,
Ecstatic to be together for a day before they die,
The endless day that extracts everything from them,
As if life were only about them and their rollicking hour in the
sun.
They mass at your screen door like a theater on fire
Turned back by a locked emergency exit, they perish in your car
grill
Bodies packed so deep that the fan blade
Scarcely cranks against the clog, and
Robustly constructed spider webs collapse from the weight
Of so much happiness. They are an army of Egyptians
Spun down in chariots to the sea floor,
They are the Superbowl crowd with the bomb in the stadium
ticking,
They are the communion of saints strewing palms
In the path of the new king proclaimed.
They are put in play not for any reason that benefits them
But because God made a covenant with the pickerel and gar
Saying the sign to my chosen will be the feast I visit upon you
In the first week of August, last days of July,
Eat this candy that I scatter on the waters
Till your gills no longer pulse and your stomach wants to split.
And so it will go, fish eating fly and man broiling fish
In a coating of garlic and crumb, each species imagining itself
special
Like a chain of being leading straightway to heaven.

² Moab (2005)

The Jeffers Petroglyphs

Here the tomahawk made
Red scratches on granite

It could almost have been
The glacier signing its name.

The drawings need no footnoting
They are adequate for the ages

Every artist thinks
His doings are important.

But here a hunter hung
His belt among the stars

Slugs³

You can pluck them from their surfaces
and hear the sucking sound of their slime releasing.
Sprinkle salt on them, it is said,
and you break their chemical seal,
and it burns, and they twist from the pain.
In the rain forest they are everywhere
on leaf and stem and stone.
But on the islands where it has not rained in months,
they drag themselves on meager dew
from pebble to twig like dead men left out in the open
futile horns extending slowly
like a remark you are anxious to hurry along.
They hunch forward gradually, and the weight slides
forward like tiny beached whales
trying to make themselves comfortable.
Yellow, brown, black, red,
they make their way to some lookout place
and lift blind heads and smell salt sea.

³ Sunset Lake (1989)

The Wolf House⁴

Needing a roof on a windy night
we came upon a shack above the logging zone.
We tiptoed in the twilight,
afraid someone was inside,
and if so, what they might be.
No one was there so we made our beds
and slept. In the morning
we saw the claw marks in the wood,
and the hair in handfuls,
suddenly free, and drifting
out the door.

⁴ Sunset Lake (1989)

In Ely⁵

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

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

Or they are Rosa Parks with purse in lap
And until this time, until this town,
No fisherman had stood up for himself
And said, 'Shopkeeper, you will take my money,
Because while I perform unspeakable torture
On creatures lower down on the phyla chart
I myself am fashioned in God's image
And deserving of dignity thereof.'

Perhaps it's the smell of death in the cleaning sheds
Emanating in squiggles like heat from the highway
Or the danger of store employees getting snagged
On those hats they wear with the Martian flies,
Neon colored like candy or crayons
But inextricable without needle-nosed pliers

And the grim countenance of the fisher
Who has drawn one closer to his limit.

⁵ Sunset Lake (1989)

Where Birds Fare Well ^{6*}

Swallow on telephone lines,
Doves in the underbrush,
Hawks in ruins and cathedral rafters,
Crows on the shoulders of fallen soldiers,
Peacocks on staircases,

Canaries in the offices of motel managers,
Parrots in rich women's kitchens,
Whip poor wills sobbing
in the branches of trees
on long summer nights.

Sparrows on rooftops, in hedges and haylofts,
Eagles ensconced atop immaculate mountains,
Hérons in marshes,
Swans in canals and
floating in fountains,

Skylarks sing into the sun,
Owls in cemeteries,
And cuckoos in the heads
of young
men.

⁶ Home Trees (1978)

^{*} This is the poem referred to in a later poem, 'Remainders.' It is a loose translation of a poem I found in 1975 in an anthology of Italian Futurist writers. So in a sense this is stolen – a schoolboy's lift. And it is no longer interesting to me to share credit with some worthy writer from a different era that I barely understood. But doggone it, this is *my* poem. And I'm (at this writing) *alive*. Coincidentally, I became a futurist at this point in my life, lower case *f*. I produced a TV show called *Future Shoes*, which went on to become an important slogan for me.

Parking Lot^{7*}

The attendant at the parking lot
Was angry this morning.
His shovel was missing,
And in a crack in the blacktop
Near the corner of Eighth & LaSalle,
Five weeds were sticking their heads up,
Looking for trouble.

⁷ The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* Humor became a primary feature of my writing, and it was apparent from the beginning. But with this 1975 poem, I was finally getting the rhythm of it. I.e., the humor was starting to be a little bit *funny*.

Geese⁸

How virtuous they seem this morning
squabbling on Marydale Pond,
pointing in every direction, leaderless,
humming from hard migration.

They are just the most recent group
to descend into St. Paul to rest up,
judging from the goose crap everywhere
like green toothpaste in the grass.

Their virtue is their honking courage
attempting this 1400 mile flight
all the way down to Padre Island in the Gulf
across every kind of junkyard and garage.

Not one of them's a drama queen,
drawing attention to the epicness underway
or the brothers who fell to the hunters' guns
or got sick and couldn't flap another flap,

They shut their beaks and kept flying.

⁸ Moab (2005)

The Sugar Trap^{9*}

To keep yellowjackets from our tentsite
I filled a pop bottle half-full
with sugar water and strawberry jelly.
As the day grew warmer the bees would alight on the rim
and one after another descend
to sample the pink nectar.
By day's end there were over forty bees in the bottle,
most of them drowned
with a few still clambering over
their fellows to climb out.
But the walls are too steep
and their wings too wet
and the water is too sweet
to avoid very long.
First they fly down, and spin inside the bottle,
delighted with their find,
enough sugar to feed their community for a month.
The sight of their comrades floating face-down
does not seem to be a major minus to them.
It is only when they set that first foot
in the water that they suspect,
and the struggle to rise up somehow is on.
It is impossible, they fall back
into the sticky syrup, their wings now covered.
Furious, they start twitching their abdomens.
This must be someone else's fault,
they seem to be saying,
I never sought sugar for my own personal use,
it was always for the hive.
But community mindedness has fled

⁹ Sunset Lake (1989)

* This poem was picked by editor Michael Heffernan as one of the top 50 poems ever to appear in *Midwest Quarterly*.

and in their wretchedness
they sting their comrades the dead and the dying,
spasmodic, undulating, thrusting in their pool
and this can go on for hours, and more.
I did not see any bee trying to warn off any other bee
either by gesture or sound,
even though the arrival of the newcomer
spells sting after sting.
It is as if in their misery they call out to come join them.
It is good to share this meal my brothers
it is good to drink the common cup,
so cold, so sweet,
this wine.

The Fly¹⁰

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.

¹⁰ The Rapture (2009)

Unmitigated Gall

The oak tree has a gall around its trunk,
the exception to its perfect upright lines
that makes the tree look pregnant
and suggests a shortened life.

But what does a tree know.
Water is drawn, sugar is distributed,
leaves splay themselves in the sun
like stewardesses on layoff.

Photosynthesis wants no more
and the effect of a cancer
at the waistline, a tumor of wood
throwing everything off, is nil.

The game goes on, the process proceeds
despite deformity, despite
circuitousness
through cambium, xylem, and phloem.

Sprinkler¹¹

Underfoot the worms awake.
The sudden flood intolerable,
and they rotate to the surface
pink and brown and nearly straight
like little socks hung out to dry
and exposed to the idiot sun
and if I had the right kind of ears
I would hear them gasp.

¹¹ Desalinization (2010)

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

When You Encounter A Bear

Appraise the situation. Might it be friendly? Do you see cubs in the vicinity? Is there a tree nearby, or a cave?

Do not run. You can't outrun a bear. Don't try.

People say to run downhill from a grizzly. **Don't.**

Try **backing away**. They let you do that sometimes.

Climb that tree. Climb at least 33 feet off the ground so it can't get to you and hurl you down.

If successful with the tree, be sure you brought **food** with you, but not food with a delicious aroma. We suggest Skittles.

Try **pepper spray**. But know that pepper can act as an attractant.

Fight the bear. It will be difficult, but it will **respect you** more.

Keep your backpack on. Wear it in front, across your beating heart.

Do not **play dead** until you almost are.

Once mauled, **be patient**. Wait until the bear has finished to crawl away.

Imperfect Tree

There is a large silver maple in our front yard ...
It is not a perfect tree ...
It does not burn bright like a sugar maple in September ...
Nor the radiant leaves of the scarlet maple ...
It seems suburban with its silver skin and delicate leaves ...
It grows so fast its trunk has split with stretchmarks ...
So thirsty the rest of the lawn is dry ...
In the fall it drops its undistinguished yellow leaves by the ton
...
It is not a perfect tree ...
But it is a patient presence, and it cools the house ...
It shields us from the glare of the sun ...
Cardinals and blue jays convene there for their business ...
And it never, ever, ever, ever leaves ...

Our neighbor is cutting down his smaller maple ...
It blocked sunlight from his home, which is much driven past,
for its luminous openness ...
Which is admittedly not so apparent when a tree is blocking the
view ...
But he's tired of the tree's mediocrity ...
So out comes the chainsaw, and down goes the tree, and into the
house it goes, one armload at a time ...
I wonder if it feels like an honor ...
After all those years in the cold and the rain ...
Those thankless, dripping, freezing years of service ...
To be invited in by the fire?

Cholla

White thumb poking up
from the desert roadbed,
tell me what your high hopes are:

'To produce a prickly-plum
of such perfect sweetness
to offer my master the sun,

so as to contradict my status
a lifetime in a ditch
dust-coated by passing cars.

Or is it to reach as far
as thin fingers can go
like intercessory hands

and to serve as arrows
of deflation in the hard
black meat of your tires?'

Hamsters ¹²

Several times I have opened an eye at night
certain someone was moving in the house,
but it was only the chrome wheel turning

Or we would be making love and hear the sound
of metal on metal from the children's room –
the ball in the drip bottle pushed and released.

The crunch of seed between pointed pearls,
the scurry and blink of prisoners.
In the cane, in the damp, in the moldy dark, they spin.

¹² Moab (2005)

Late August 2009¹³

River dispatches spirit as steam
evaporating
in the morning light

The fawns of spring
step into view
on dew-lipped grass

Bee doesn't know he
is unaerodynamic
and so he

bumbles along

¹³ Horses Work Hard (2000)

Cottonwood ¹⁴

In May the fluff begins to float.
It is the feather of the cottonwood
Mightiest tree rising up from the Mississipp
And shooting into the atmosphere.
How can an airborne thing become
So mammoth a being?
Because it is still light in its wood.
This ribbed pillar is mostly air,
With skies of space between every particle
So even when it thumps its giant heart
It is already beginning to fall.

¹⁴ Great Blue (1990)

Truck Stop ¹⁵

The older man in the leather vest
Walks with the gait of a gunfighter
Toward the men's room, a gallon bottle
Of pink windshield wash
In one hand and a bag full of cigarettes
And Hostess Snow-Balls in the other.
He is compact and erect, and his mustache
Is trim despite hours on the road.
His white-haired woman, taking smaller steps,
Follows close behind, eyebrows penciled
in an 'I will follow you anywhere' arc,
Her frame a little dumpy from the miles
She has kept his company, but you can see
There was a time when she was wonderful.
Is he a good man? I can't tell. But I admire
The seriousness he girds himself in.
Like the last sworn knight in a useless world
Ambling past the Sega Strike Fighter
And the 'For Your Safety' condom dispensary,
Past the claw-fetching crane game and the
Lip-biting girl eying the Tickle Me Elmo
embedded in the heap.

¹⁵ The Rapture (2009)

How virtuous they seem
squabbling on Marydale Pond,
pointing in every direction, leaderless,
recuperating from the hard day's flight.

They are the most recent crew
to drop into St. Paul to rest up,
judging from the goose crap squirted
like chatreuse toothpaste on the path.

Their virtue is their honking courage
attempting a 1400-mile flight
from Winnipeg to Padre Island
across every junkyard, strip mine and mall.

Not one of them's a drama queen,
calling attention to the epicness underway
or the sisters who fell to hunters' guns
or the brothers took sick and veered out of formation,

Not for them to crab about nothing,
They shut their beaks and kept flapping.

¹⁶ Midnight at the Mounds (2004)

Anteater

He's a tough negotiator.
He doesn't just eat you,
he eats your wife
and he eats your children
and he eats your mother
and he eats your cousins
and he eats your insurance agent
he eats everyone you know.
He eats your whole city
then tucks the last ant in the side of his maw
and says
I'm sorry,
I can't help it
I was made this way,

I require large numbers of ants to survive.

Hard Frost ¹⁷

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

As the sun creeps over the ridge, its rays hit the tops
of elms and beech trees, and it is like a chain reaction,
the warmth causes leaf after leaf to loosen and fall.
I imagine what it is like in the leaf to be so cold all night
and all the softness of the sugar factory is killed,
so the sun is like a raygun that blasts you from your perch,
and you fall, all at once, as the sun finds more and more of you,
falling all at once like wax soldiers in a failed offensive,
falling like soap flakes in an old-time flicker from the Yukon.
And they lay in a heap on the green moist ground
like panting dogs
who have been out among trees, chasing all day, and can only
grin now like the agitated dead.
Because the trees are closing shop for the season,
they are going away from the green and away from the birds,
the trees are departing for a different place.
They are not dead,
they are only gone, and these branches they leave
as remembrances.

¹⁷ Sunset Lake (1989)

Horses Work Hard ¹⁸

they clamp their bits in the riding ring
kicking the sawdust behind them
all day the children mount and pace
and when the animals rest
steam rises from their bodies like prayer
and they turn their heads and snort
when the last class is over
and the girls ride home in silence
in their vans
the horses are let out
to find solace in the grass

¹⁸ Horses Work Hard (2000)

Signs ¹⁹

Every hundred yards in the Wisconsin woods
there are signs posted saying
No Hunting and No Trespassing.
People leave their cabins when the weather gets cold,
and they do not want to return to a shot-through window
or knocked over pumphouse.
A good sign, suggesting violators will be prosecuted
seems to keep most people away, except for
a few hunters who need everything spelled out.
You can tell a salesman made his rounds some time ago
because the dayglo veneer has peeled away from every sign
leaving three dry leaves of plywood sheeting.
So that every hundred yards is a tree
with a perfectly blank sign on it.
The gray of the bark crisscrosses the knots
and whorls of the plywood,
gray from the rain and north woods wind,
an advertisement to wilderness,
a message the animals read as well as you
saying this is this and here is here
and deeper into the pines there is more.

¹⁹ Sunset Lake (1989)

The wooden barns are coming down,
Whether they are the giant-breasted kind
Collapsing from the weight of too much hay
or the countless sheds and coops
that have started to lean in on themselves,
They have had it, it is finished.

The center beam of this great red beast
off the turnpike near Defiance
was good for a hundred years
And caused many to at least
Consider chewing Mail Pouch.
But a century of wind, all that lightning, that rain
And all that standing exposed
In the hot Ohio sun take their toll.

The people who live on the acreage
are cannibalizing the wood for fuel,
every day pulling a board away for burning.
All that will remain will be the limestone foundation
An open ruin with neither roof nor walls,
A reminder of the Germans and Swiss
Who put up these planks.

What will replace them
Are corrugated sheds, more efficient in every way,
With sliding doors and guttered tops,
No need to store hay any more, so one story
Is as good as two, and cheaper,
But the feeling's not the same,
Of these burly brothers who stood a hundred years,
Sad and red and full to bursting.

²⁰ Sunset Lake (1989)

Uncheated

There is a single day in Minnesota in April
when everything happens at once
the grass, the flowers, the leaves, the sky
and if you are not out that day
or if you are not paying attention
to what is happening around you
you will feel cheated by the world
you will feel that winter made the handoff
to spring and you were somewhere else
and you will wonder what was the good
of all that longing and how did
the air turn kind and sweet again
when you were about your business

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