



**A Thousand Days   Mike Finley**



# **A Thousand Days**

by Mike Finley

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*I am publishing this booklet on approximately the third anniversary of the death of my daughter Daniele in August 2009. Her death was the most painful experience of my life. I lost my daughter, my faith, many friends. Even my wonderful marriage was rocked to the core.*

*While I have always had doubts about the therapeutic value of poetry – more poets seem to be needing therapy than benefiting from it – I used pen and paper to lift myself out of the torpor that followed.*

*These are some of the poems from this period. They are not all about Daniele – in fact only a few are – but they describe a gradual lifting of misery.*

*I don't know that anything I say here will help another individual suffering in a similar way. But I hope that it may. I came to realize that, in the history of the species, no human has ever kept another human alive for even a second, not even an emergency room doctor.*

*Life, which is in us for a time, is ultimately beyond us, and greater than our thoughts.*

*Nevertheless, I offer mine here, because they are all that I have.*

## **Beauty Is Not Wise**

it doesn't have to be

## **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.



## **What If**

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

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

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

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

## **Don't Be Like the Moon**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Atheist Heaven**

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

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

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

and now they sit in this room forever  
elbow to elbow  
legs crossed  
smoking pipes and  
thumbing the pages of books  
without words

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

or where

## **What We Should Do**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To be happy

**2 a.m.**

I awakened  
to your sobbing

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

and I knew don't cry  
is useless advice

I patted you  
and thumped your back

like a drum  
in the covers

as if the sounds  
from the heel of my hand

passed through  
in waves

I wanted the vibrations  
to set up a hum

and pass through us  
like a shout through water

and take it  
outside us forever

## **Election**

Don't take it personally.  
The wind comes,  
the leaves blow  
down the street.



## **The Boards**

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

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

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

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

## **The Woman in Seat 20C**

Sometimes in the  
periphery of the eye  
you see one.

Someone who knows  
the way that  
things are.

You know them by  
the rings around  
their eyes --

paranoid,  
hostile,  
broken-hearted,

they are the experts  
on the way  
things are.

You want to cup  
her cheek in  
your palm

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

## **Desalinization**

As water became more scarce  
we turned to our tears as a source

Suction cups hooked up to the eyes  
Captured the precious liquid

Hand-held pumps converted them  
to tapwater, ready to go

And the salt and the glycerine residue  
were stored in underground casks

Nonstop grieving was encouraged  
as an alternative to military service

High accidents skyrocketed  
because it was so hard to see

But even that was not enough  
to irrigate farm fields and

Planners looked for another source  
And conducted tests on the ocean

And all agreed by the disagreeable taste  
People have been weeping a long time

## A Great One

I never constructed a great one with my hands,  
one that swept cities away like a runaway reservoir,  
and people did not resist the surge  
because the flood felt like it was their flood,

Because a great one feels like it knows you already,  
has taken up your cause without you being awares.  
A great one is compassionate yet ignorant,  
It pays no union dues, it knows nobody's name,

It is courageous because it really doesn't give a shit  
if it's corny and it doesn't care if it passes through  
the baleen of some cleaner whose job it is to filter  
nutrients through the narrowest possible slit

A great one is like a hammer-blow to the head  
And the best of us feel we have been pummeled to mush,  
Our heads like boiled bowling balls, pulpy  
And we don't care, it's a plus in the overall profile.

A great one lays down its life for you with a laugh  
Because it knows it can never die, its gestures  
Cost it nothing, it is in a movie of its own life  
And it is playing the part of itself.

It is always flush with cash because it is of a piece with riches,  
It picks up every check and leaves twenty dollar tips.  
A great one is generous in its heart because that is its pedigree  
Like the people who have the good things of the world.

A great one summers on the cape and winters in the mountains  
Because the air is better and the company convivial  
And the pinchball on the atomizer is never out of reach

So that the voice is ever liquid and the timbre ever strong.

It is ushered into the waiting limousine  
And speeds away to the next great moment,  
The testimonial banquet, the honorary degree,  
The reception line loops back on itself like an homage to infinity.

The great one acknowledges no competitors,  
As it dips its bread in the back seat bowl and mops up the wine,  
Yet we stand in its wake as it shrinks to a dot, teary-eyed, choking  
on the blue fumes of its burning.

## **After the Rain**

Sometimes when it stops  
you can scan the faces  
and understand them a bit

That man with his wife's umbrella,  
people put up with him  
and that's about all he gets

The girl in the rainboots  
wishes she weren't pretty,  
at least not all the time

There is a fellow, hands in pockets  
who does not know what  
to do with himself

And that other guy, bug-eyed  
in the reflection, disturbing people  
oh, wait, that's me

## **Intuitions**

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

## Cottonwood

In May the fluff begins to float.  
It is the feather of the cottonwood  
Mightiest tree rising up from the Mississippi  
And shooting into the atmosphere.  
How can an airborne thing grow  
Into 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.



## Opportunity

Logically the caterpillar  
would chew the leaf forever

But then the tumbler clicks inside  
and worm begins spinning its tomb

How afraid we would be  
to seal ourselves in like that

Until all light is gone  
And there is no leaf to eat

And all movement ceases  
And we tremble in the dark

## I Know Who You Are

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

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

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

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

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

O my loving loved one  
My huckleberry friend  
Cast with me up the waters,  
We float, hands close

But never touching  
How many times I have longed  
To hold you in my arms  
And give you kisses deep  
My silent, good companion

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

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

## **What Else Could You Be Doing?**

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

You could be engaging someone  
In a conversation that matters

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

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

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

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

On an abacus if need be

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

And doing what it tells you to do

## **Springtime**

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.

## **If You Like Poetry**

There probably something wrong with you.  
You have an appetite for grandiosity,  
or inability to deal with everyday reality  
your sense of self has been splintered  
so you dwell in solipsistic space.  
Perhaps you are afraid of confrontation  
and so you seek retribution on the page.  
Or your anger at injustice  
has taken you to a place where  
you need to smolder by yourself,  
Or your attention span is not what it might be –  
isn't that a spider on your sweater?

## **The Soul Could Cut a Better Deal**

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

Everything would be perfect then  
And you would want for nothing

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

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

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

## **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.



## **Knock on Wood**

So a tree becomes a stump  
and the microbes burrow in  
until it is all lacework  
a filigree of matter.

The world that seems solid  
is full of holes,  
holes between pores  
and holes between cells,  
holes between the molecules,  
atoms and particles.

There are oceans of space within and between.  
You could say we live in space.

I'm not really here,

I'm just saying I am.

## **Prayer**

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

I looked everywhere.

## La Fromage Lazare

“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!”

## **Icky**

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'

## **Critique**

I slapped the man's manuscript in my hand.

“The truth is, your work is almost entirely masturbatory.”

He clasped me by the shoulders and gazed into my eyes.

“Finally, someone understands!”

## **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 Porphyre.

"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."

## **Nighttime in Heaven**

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

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

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

for long stretches everything  
is impossibly funny, and you

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

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

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

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

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

but they all hold on to god's pajamas



## **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

## **Everything Dies But Nothing Goes Away**

In Kotzebue there is no recycling program.  
No one wants what this small city far away to the north  
throws away.  
It's too expensive to go after their shit for the small savings of  
reprocessing it.  
A crusher would cost a million plus  
and everything would still have to be sorted  
and separated.  
You think of the melting glaciers  
and you think of the energy hat went into everything  
that is visible everywhere.  
And it's not just the pop cans, it's everything.  
No one pays the gas to have it sent to a landfill,  
put on a barge to be chopped up and reused.  
And so the front yards fill up, with everything  
people have used --  
the cars that no longer run,  
the freezers that stopped freezing,  
the broken toilets, the ravaged boats,  
old air conditioners, rusted grills ,  
the splintered plywood ramps  
used by skateboarders to get lift  
from the pull of the tundra.  
bicycles, snow-gos, barrows, storage containers,  
chainsawed doghouses,  
shipping containers as big as a house,  
cement mixers that ground to a halt.  
I saw industrial equipment  
I can never identify,  
great hulking iron things with fans and flanges  
and levers that once did something powerful  
but now can only sit  
In front of a log cabin I saw a broken treadmill  
labeled "Endurance."

I saw four school lockers, leaning side by side  
against a wall, their yellow paint flaking  
in the subzero cold.  
And up on the tar-paper roofs of these caved-in houses,  
the racks of moose and caribou,  
skulls still connected, vegetarian teeth bared  
to the cold, the trophies of long-ago hunts.  
And sits on their lawns forever,  
I don't mean lawns, because there is no grass,  
it sits on their property,  
it gives away their secrets,  
it's a 3D photo album, shot to scale,  
it's the story of their lives  
standing around doing nothing.

A part of me says how wasteful.  
A part of me says what a mess.  
But it teaches us a lesson.  
it teaches you that everything we make  
takes up space.  
We who ship everything off to the dump  
have convinced ourselves we are tidy people  
when somewhere a half dozen zip codes away  
a landfill is groaning from our excesses.  
And we look at these people of the north  
and wring our noses  
like they are the slobs and we are the civilized ones  
while our shit is packed off to trouble some people  
in China, in Mexico, or under some mountain  
in Nevada,  
Or it leeches into our own water substrate  
and we wonder why our SAT scores are dropping.  
It's a filthy-ass world however you shave it  
so why not keep the bones above ground, to see?

And that's what they do, in Kotzebue –  
the permafrost prevents deep graves,  
as if the earth is saying. oh no you don't,

you can't hide that slop in me,  
so you lay them atop of it instead,  
you heap stones and gravel  
over the suck-mouth ancestors  
and the beautiful girls in beaded fur parkas,  
you strew plastic flowers on the sea-washed stones  
flowers that fade from the cold and the blinding sun,  
and say this was our life,  
we cannot tell a lie,  
and even if we could,  
the earth would not allow it.

## 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 as 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

## **How It Goes**

Those who are going present themselves,  
frantically asking for your help,  
and you ease them onto the still-warm bed.  
Their eyes are crazy, looking every which-way,  
and you lay them on their side  
and they pant like a broken bellows,  
tearing itself apart, teeth bared,  
tongue swollen like a foot in the mouth.  
You stroke them so they know you are with them  
in case the brain can no longer see,  
and you do not leave them,  
not even to fetch water from the tap.  
They look at you with gratitude  
because you are doing something  
and that is all they wanted,  
though they never said the words,  
to be with you, to feel the reassurance  
of your hand, the hand they loved,  
till darkness comes and  
the heartbeat stops.

## **There Is a Kingdom**

of people who don't like who they are,  
though the birds sing there  
with every kind of flower.

No one knows how they got this way.  
Some say they live under a witch's curse.  
Some say they drank from a poisoned well.  
Some say the people are sinners from another life,  
and this life is their punishment.

Some even say these people are the scapegoats  
from every other kingdom  
where the people don't care  
who suffers for them,  
and the music and dancing  
in those lands go on.

## **Skedaddle**

You were the poet, not me.  
I was just trying to hold onto my own,  
to maintain, you were the one  
willing to slit the rope  
and sail out into someplace new.

I thought if I made you famous  
you would go on living,  
and if no one forgot you  
then you never went away.

I failed because the world  
can't bear the truth  
that every daughter ever born  
is already gone.

Forgive me my girl.

You gave me a look that said  
I was no longer your parent  
that said none of it matters,  
the thing that is so important.

There is no saving, there  
is no rescue to be made.  
if you save me you are only saving me  
from the journey I must be on.

I say this with a smile,  
the most loving one I know,  
come away with me now,

Come dance in the mountain  
where the stones shiver  
and the monsters slam the bar



and the old songs  
drift like smoke  
in the crackling air

## The Claw

I invented bits of business with my kids.  
One was a character I would turn into  
while they sat on my lap.  
One moment I was their loving fond father  
and the next thing you knew  
I was The Claw  
and I would utter the name like that,  
hyperdramatically,  
as if something were caught in my throat.  
The hand would go up,  
it would cast a shadow  
on their wide-eyed faces.  
They knew something incredible  
was about to happen,  
and it did, The Claw descended,  
found their soft child bellies,  
and commenced to tickle.  
What agony it was, writhing under  
my stiff-fingered wiggling.  
I could feel their wonderful  
abdominal muscles clench,  
and then The Claw would evanesce,  
and they would be in my arms again,  
and I would blink  
as if I remembered nothing  
of the terrible transformation.  
Where did he come from?  
A dark radio-drama world  
where monsters in trenchcoats  
blew fart-noises into the tummies  
of small children.  
The lesson was that  
the world could be naughty,  
and even loving fathers had a secret side  
but it was OK,

The Claw was never around  
for very long, and we laughed  
and laughed and laughed.

## **Dog on the Lawn**

Beau staggered out of the house this morning  
and stood on the lawn, huffing and puffing.

He is in heart failure.  
Rachel uses her stethoscope on him --  
125 beats per minute, about 30 more than normal.

One of the curious things about dogs  
is that they make nearly the same face  
when they are in trouble as when they are really happy.

Panting heavily, tongue out, teeth peeled bare and grinning --  
Great joy and heat stroke look about the same.  
I coax him to step toward me but he can't.

His legs wobble beneath him. His chest heaves.  
After half an hour I lift him up, like a lamb,  
and carry him in and lay him down.

I sit with him for a while, running my fingers  
through his coat, patting him on the hollow spots around his ribs.  
I am snuffling, but it isn't too bad.

I am reminded of the first day we brought him home,  
15 endless years ago,  
and we did the same thing, he and I, that day.

We laid our heads together on a beanbag chair,  
the one with the leopardskin spots,  
and closed our eyes and slept.  
And when we awoke, we belonged to one another.

## **Tsunami**

Just as the man stepped  
onto the stepstool  
and into the noose

a wall of water  
eighteen feet at the crest  
swept into the room

the voice of God says  
You can't quit,  
you're fired

## **The Idea of a Boat**

Whoever came up with the idea of a boat  
was rowing against intuition.

The water, which seeks to envelope us  
and fill our lungs with itself  
and drag us down to its embrace,  
could be contradicted  
with a thin membrane,  
a leaf, a log, a raft, a door  
and we bound out on the breast of death  
like anybody's business.

## Escape

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

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

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

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

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

Abandon the plowed field,

press on into wilderness,  
bury your coins  
by a tall pine tree

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



## **Valiant**

was the name  
of that crummy old car

It always melted  
in the rain

Still it strove  
despite shoddy bloodlines

to take us where  
we went

## **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 then 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  
**Good Thing**

we forget the names of things  
or else they get common

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

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

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

but the more we forget the more  
we become poets

each moment new to us  
this impossible now

like just waking up  
and stretching in sunlight

everything strange  
and unknown

## **My Daughter Tells Me**

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.

That is what  
Daniele would say

Kick out the chocks  
And let me roll away

## **The Sugar House**

the sugar house is shutting down  
you can hear the babies cry  
red cheeks rumpling in the sun  
hush little children goodbye

time to lock the summer house  
and bed the waterlines with straw  
winter wants its solitude  
and double-bolted doors

## **Is There NASCAR in Heaven?**

There surely must be  
because of the glory  
But obviously not the advertisements  
They will not be selling Winston and  
Kool 100s there  
The afterlife is noncommercial  
though the cigarettes are free

And instead of cars  
which depend on resistance  
we will have something looser,  
I am thinking of songcars  
You just sing and off you go  
There's no burning rubber in heaven  
no needle teetering on the red

And the guy at the loudspeaker  
Is also the guy with the checkered flag  
He's also the clown  
with the multicolored wig  
And up in the stands throwing down  
Crackerjack that's him,  
and slapping the mustard stain  
on his thigh,  
him too

And we will not race in a loop anymore  
and not against one another

But with one another like colts at play  
and everywhere and in every way  
Its going to be terrific, you'll see

And instead of celebrity drivers  
like Richard and A.J.  
we will all be sitting at the wheel.  
like movie stars in our astronaut suits  
and the bugs on our teeth don't even die  
they brush themselves off  
and fly away

## **Dream of Whitman**

I dreamed I played basketball  
with the bard of America,  
he spun the globe on his finger  
and said, young fellow,  
you must not dwell inside yourself,  
step out, step up to the world  
where everything is revealed.  
I stood in the rain on the bridge with him  
and he shouted into the din,  
There is no modesty now,  
no inhibition,  
no deflected blows.  
He clasped me around the shoulders:

My son, it all just goes!



## The Upset Sea

Weather reports said it would get heavy  
but it still came on fast.  
By noon the sea was rolling,  
10 foot swells that pitched the boat repeatedly  
into the next wall of water,  
forcing people to huddle in the cabin  
and glance about with worried expressions.  
The newlywed couple in front of us were sick  
she lovely in the face and eyes,  
he a little drunk and full  
from two too many cinnamon rolls.  
So when he hove all over her,  
the pitch of the boat was such that  
it dripped down off her and onto the floor,  
including my backpack beside her,  
until it was swimming in chowder,  
Meanwhile the boat was rocking and rolling  
and I was torn mentally between  
thoughts of the craft's capsizing  
and thoughts that that might rinse the backpack clean.

A small young woman from the excursion company  
stepped forward, miraculously able to right herself,  
and began to press the woman with paper napkins,'  
the brown nonabsorbent kind you find in lavatories.  
Still she knelt like Magdalene in the typhoon  
to daub the shaken woman's sweater and jeans,  
then led the two back to the bow  
where the pitching was minimal.  
She staggered back to see if I wanted to empty  
the pack and she would hose it down.  
Ashamed by her graciousness, I nodded.  
She offered me gloves but I said no,  
I was once a dad and waded through worse than this.

The boat continued to pitch and yaw  
and the newlywed woman returned, boyfriendless,

to stare sullenly out the window.  
But when we ducked back into the inlet,  
away from the raging sea, she rose and rejoined him  
at the gangplank, where they kissed and smiled,  
but remained stationed for a quick getaway,  
wanting to face people no more.

"I want to thank you for your positive attitude,"  
said the brave young boatswain,  
whom I wanted as a daughter.  
"And you for your courtesy," I replied,  
sorry I would never see her again.

And as Rachel and I walked safely ashore,  
I lifted the backpack to smell.  
It was all there, my computer, my wallet,  
my cellphone, my journal, my books,  
and mixed in with it all, the sea itself,  
plus raging stomach juices, plus the faintest hint  
of cinnamon.

## **Poet Wasting**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

was to say a thing  
so it lived a while  
in the heart

but even that  
got old  
after a while

## **Mighty Poem**

There is a paradox in English, that some words mean the opposite of themselves.

Thus *sanction* can mean either permission or impermission.

Now, one of our commonest words, *might*,  
can mean raw power, almost beyond measure,  
the might of the hydroelectric dam,  
the might of God,  
the might of Mighty Mouse,  
and on the other hand it is the subjunctive form of the verb *may*,  
meaning it's possible, conceivable, it could go either way.  
Looks like it *might* rain.

I *might* go to the dance with you,  
a locomotive *might* be a speeding hound, or it *might* not.  
You can feel the power leak out of that form.  
The subjunctive *maybe* – it doesn't get less mighty than that.  
And most poets take refuge in the maybe--  
I might change my life.  
There might be a God,  
A man might dream,  
who knows.

\*

Poets are pussies, it's a well-known fact.  
We languish daytimes on our sofas in our gherkins  
and blue silk stockings,  
chewing our hangnails,  
play Mother Might I and order out.

We are like oil paintings of sad clowns  
with bleared greasepaint  
that normal people can't look at long  
because it causes confused feelings.

And when we fight we are like women slapping  
because we are afraid to land a punch.  
We think about flowers and our dead grandmothers

and maybe we suck on our thumbs,

\*

When are we going to fight like men?  
When will we challenge ourselves not to be more sensitive  
or to bear greater pain or to honor the past  
but to advance a proposition  
and make it stick?  
Why are we so miserable and insecure and envious?  
Who cares what fucking Frank got from the Carnegie Mellon  
Fund?  
Why aren't we being obvious, and sentimental, and funny?  
Why aren't we getting drunk and falling down the stairs?  
Why are so few poems about ballgames and tits  
when those are what we love?  
Why aren't love poems gushing out of us like springwater from a  
stone?  
Why aren't we thanking our mothers and fathers?  
We should be endorsing candidates and christening bridges  
and honoring the dead.  
We shouldn't be going over anyone's head  
including our own.  
We should be clear as champagne  
and twice as fun.

\*

A mighty poem is not a maybe poem.  
It flows like rushing water to the sea.  
A mighty poem is for everyone.  
It tolls for you as well as tolls for me.  
A mighty poem burns calories and works on you  
until you have to stop and breathe.  
A mighty poem is willing to pay the cost.  
It says to you, get furious, or lost.

## The Poem Room

It is a place of shame,  
the only room with a lock  
on the door.

To make it come out  
you loosen your garments  
and drop them to the floor.

There is paper there  
for you to use,  
one sheet after another.

But when you are done  
how proud you are  
of what you have authored.

You want to call people in  
to show them what  
you've made

and they smile  
because they don't want  
you to feel dismayed,

but in the end it is  
the one thing you do  
that is expressly you

## You Taught Me How to Die

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

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

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

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

But know that I loved you every day of my life,  
the life that we shared together,  
the travels we took and the joy we had,  
the children we made and held in our hearts,  
and know it was you who gave all this to me.

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

## **Cosmetic Dentistry**

First the bad news.

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

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

Jung says that an archetypal dream  
is that we are standing over a sink  
and our teeth fall out of our mouths  
and clatter down the drain and we try  
to catch them but they are gone.  
Turns out it's a dream about mortality.

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

And the dog never dreams that dream  
of standing in the bathroom mirror



watching his mortality clank against porcelain  
because he's a dog and they are spared that,  
unlike you and maybe unlike the Ardipithecus lady  
if people were already starting to dream about teeth  
four million years ago in Ethiopia.  
Why are we the ones haunted  
the way my poor neighbor the dentist is,  
everything has to be just the right way,  
on his knees in the grass on Saturday mornings in June,  
exhaust seething from the chainsaw in his hands,  
grinding away at the imperfect stump.

## **Old Man Mountain Climbing**

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

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

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

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

And when we dropped him off at his place, we winked to each  
other

You know he's going to have a good long sleep now!

## **On Having My First Hearing Aid Implanted**

I hear ...

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

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

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

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

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

the gasp of the apple  
surrendering to the knife

## **Good Stuff**

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

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

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

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

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

That's when you see that Good Stuff comes from Dow,  
the folks who brought you napalm.

You think, well, I'm still in charge here,  
I'll use my fingers to sculpt the contours,  
it will be like drawing a bead with window putty,

but the moment you come in contact with the foam  
you regret it, it is astonishingly sticky,  
in a sickening, greasy sort of way,  
your fingers cry out that this was not such a hot idea,  
and you hold up your hands in horror,  
trying to scrape the gunk from one hand with the nails of the  
other,  
and you know in an instant this substance is going  
to be on you all week.

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

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

And you can accept that, gothic as it is,  
because you have filled the holes that let things in  
to the place where your family sleeps in their beds  
with their risings and fallings, alive and unprotected,  
and unaware of all the things you do.

## **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

## **House of Demons**

A priest returned to his home after a long journey  
and found it inhabited by demons.  
They climbed his walls, hung from his ceiling,  
emptied his cupboard with their endless hunger.  
They shit everywhere, and sickened the priest  
with their gruesome habits.

The priest tried beating them with a broom,  
but they would not budge.  
He chased them around his garden with a rake.  
He poked them with burning embers,  
which only seemed to please them more.

Finally he filled his home with lotus and jasmine,  
until all but one packed up and left.  
The one who stayed was the ugliest of them all,  
picking his teeth with a femur bone,  
wiping his snot on the walls.

“I am a priest of Lord Buddha,”  
the man proclaimed,  
but the demon heard him not.

Finally the demon whispered in his ear,  
“I feed on your humiliation, priest.”

And the priest, finally understanding,  
knelt before the demon and begged him to stay.

At which point the demon transformed into Lord Buddha,  
splendid in his saffron raiment  
“You see how easy it is,” he told the priest,  
“when you stop caring about yourself so much?”

## **Govinda and the Park Policeman**

The enlightened one and a disciple walked down a mountain road  
to sit at the foot of the cascading waters  
that were famous in that province.

And it was here at this waterfall that he understood  
For the first time the poured-outness of God  
Into the world of nature, how divinity infuses itself  
In the commonest things, the splash of a trout  
Or an insect's buzz in the hollow of one's ear.  
And when his meditation was complete.

The two climbed back up the mountainside,  
Where a park ranger was issuing them a citation.  
What is the matter, officer? he asked.

You park registration is good for sixty minutes  
But you have been here for almost an hour and a half.  
I see, said the compassionate Buddha. But you know,  
We were praying by the waterfall and lost all sense of time.  
That may very well be, the ranger said, but it's not honest  
To pay for sixty minutes, then try to get away with ninety.  
I assure you, officer, I had no intention of deceiving.  
But as you can see, I am but an old monk,  
And these legs are not so fast at climbing steep hills  
As my young companion's.

Then you should have paid for three hours, said the ranger.  
Perhaps you should put a meter on the waterfall,  
So people can deposit their money directly, said the disciple,  
Who was red-faced with irritation.  
Peace, my son, said Govinda. Indulging in sarcasm  
Solves no problem, and creates many.  
Besides, this good man is merely doing his job.  
Write him a check then for the full amount,  
But mark on the memo line:  
"A tax on illumination."

## **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.

## **The Plaque at Meeker Island**

There is a plaque at the old Ford Dam, beside a 15-ton turbine  
that spun in the rushing Mississippi for 70 years,  
stealing power from the comb of water that falls thirty eight feet  
like an unrolling carpet at the slaggy foot of Meeker Island.

The turbine is rusted now, and you can see the places  
where the water wore the metal down,  
like bite-marks sunk by Mississippi teeth in cold Mesabi steel.  
The plaque says the turbine in its working lifetime  
produced 1.3 billion kilowatt hours of electricity  
for the families of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Think of the turbine squatting in the roar,  
taking everything the river gave,  
melting snow from high up in the swamplands,  
gargling the impossibly pounding water,  
molecules exploding in the crashing white,  
hydrogen, oxygen ripping apart  
negative ions flooding the atmosphere,  
these whirling blades converting this ceaseless falling  
into work.

Think of the prosperity it means for the cities,  
the jobs and the money and the confidence it creates.  
Think of the lights that dazzle every room,  
of the families pulling out chairs  
and sitting down to dinner,  
think of the hot meals that we prepare,  
and the clashing noise of happy knives and forks.

Think of the conversations that happen,  
and the jokes that we tell, and the love that we feel  
for one another, alive and living alongside this river.

## **Moon River**

*We're after the same rainbow's end --  
waiting 'round the bend,  
my huckleberry friend – Johnny Mercer*

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

adrift down the river  
with a friend who cannot save us,

cannot stop the war,  
cannot set us free.

All we have is one another  
heads in our hands

staring up at the stars.

## **Pluses and Minuses of the Suicide of a Child**

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

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

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

But it's no good really.  
Those you still love must look into your eyes every day  
and be silent about the cavity  
that has opened up among you,  
the face that cars and buildings  
and trunks of trees are sliding into the ravenous,

groaning, foothold-killing thing.

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

## **Molly in the Door**

I went to the door and there was my daughter.  
The sun was shining behind her  
so I could barely make out her face  
but I could see she was healthy  
and strong and happy.  
Hi Pops, she slugged me,  
the way she always did,  
and she gave me the biggest hug.  
She held me in my arms and spun me slowly around,  
spun her old man around,  
rocking me on my feet.  
I was astonished at her musculature  
and the bright look in her eye,  
it was joyous, and fearless  
like she had been paddling a canoe in the sun  
with good friends for a year.  
I held on and began to cry ...

I woke up.

At first I was sad because it wasn't true,  
my daughter wasn't really alive,  
I would never hold her and swing her like that, again.  
But then I thought this  
is how she might be now,  
easy and forgiving and strong as a horse,  
and I began to laugh  
the same way she used to laugh,  
eyes closed, top teeth showing,  
like a semi-moon on a starless night,  
letting it out in one exhalation,  
holding nothing back.

## **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 deepest longing

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

