



VICTORY THROUGH SONG

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Victory Through Song

Writings 2011 to 2014

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Saints Be

The Irish invoke the holies' names

Until their identity is blurred.

Sweet Jaysus,

Dear mother,

Be calling me home.

But at the gate it all comes back.

The doorman smacks me

with the back of his hand,

a friendly touch that says I know you.

So I commit to smacking you back

For Pete's sake,

for the love of Mike.

My Kids Outgrew Me

They that adored me as tots
as I seized them by their soft little heels
and upended them,
dashing their faces into piled bedding.
How they laughed
like overflowing fountains.
I was god almighty to them then.
Years later my daughter came to see me as weak,
and I could never get to her after that.
You cannot grab them by the heels any more,
once they are grown and not standing
on a bed.
They're too big,
and you could hurt them,
not to mention yourself.

My Lover, My Bed

Slip between the sheets that are cool and good even in winter.

Bunch the blankets into your form and place one hand upon the hip.

Mumble night-night to the dog on the carpet, who will stand sentry all night over our love.

And then the tumbling and twisting, on the back, on the side, belly down against the covers, the stories flip by like an old animation,

and this ecstasy sweeps over me night after night all the nights of my life, undoing me, revealing things, fulfilling wishes I did not know I had, my lover, my bedsheets, my dream.

McCartney at 100

They wheel him out to the balcony to blow out a single candle on the coconut cake. His grandchildren and great-grandchildren sing to him and applaud.

They open his present for him: an old black Beatle wig from the days, still in its shrinkwrap. He nods as the nurse positions it on his bald, mottled head. With his drooping eyes, the wig and custard face, he could pass for a chimpanzee child.

The old man looks out at the orchard surrounding the estate. The offspring grin. They are glad he doesn't live in a home. Here he has full time care around the clock.

All the beautiful ones are gone. Van and Joni and Mick and Neil. Ringo. He got a card from Iggy today. He's the only other one.

Ten year old Maeve pushes a ukulele into his hands. Trembling he finds the frets and manages a pair of words. Missing. Kissing.

He looks up at them all, so prosperous and glad. Sure, he lost a lot, but was there ever a more fortunate man?

But he was the one who worried about the future. We can't keep doing this. Let's change our name. Let's go up on the roof. Let's travel through Scotland. Something bad would happen unless measures were adopted and carried out.

And then the words are there, the fingers find the strings. I'll pretend that I'm kissing the lips I am missing. And I'll send all my loving to you.

Opportunity Costs

In business it means,
if you do one thing,
what does that prevent you from doing instead?
And after you decide this thing,
any investment you make is sunk.
You can never get it back,
Any more than you can leap backward
from the pool to the diving board.
And that is the essence of the lives we live,
opportunities selected
and efforts, once taken,
that are unrecoverable,
which gives every breath
we take
new meaning.

Field Corn

you strip to the ear
gold and beautiful
silk tumbling
plucked from the furrow
we lie stiff in the crib for you,
hardening with love

(1977)

For Julie Miller (1948-2013)

It was the winter of 1964. I was 14, and visiting our neighbors the Platos. Joyce Plato was in a school play, and the actors were having a party in the living room.

I thought they were all way out of my league older and more hip about the world. One girl seemed especially advanced, a girl with pale skin sitting on the piano bench, banging out a version of "Bringing in the Sheaves" that was simultaneously ironic and faithful to the song's spirit.

This was Julie Miller.

I stood in the back of the room and said nothing to her. But I stared at her for an hour or more, trying to get a handle on who she was and how she could show so many emotions -- joy, laughter, drama, a sense of the holy, a sense of the ridiculous.

I wondered if I would ever be lucky enough to know her. To my amazement, I did get to know her, and we became friends, and then close friends, and then passionate and young and wonderful together.

She was one of the most amazing people I ever knew – and most amazing of all, she figured out who I was, and loved me right back. She lifted me to a whole other level.

I will never forget, and I will always love, Julie Miller.

Why Poetry

Other kinds of writing, people
are always in a hurry to get it done.
Make the deadline, ring the bell.
Poetry, that never happens.
Zero demand, less reward,
This thing was invented
for the likes of me.

Peace Competition

The call went out that the magazine had received a \$5,000 grant to sponsor a poem competition, to see who could write the best peace poem reflecting the saying by Thích Nhất Hạnh:

"Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet."

Poets rejoiced at an award so handsome, and began ransacking their notebooks and manila folders for their best peace poem.

Others, noting that the deadline was still 60 days away, bent to the task of writing a new peace poem so transcendent they would be showered with a significant financial blessing.

Coffeehouses filled with the sound of caffeinated scribbling. Paeans to peace proliferated at each table.

"I've got it!" one poet said, and stood impulsively to read his work, a 45-line narrative about water trickling down the crystalline slopes of the holy mountain Tài Shān.

"It is luminous," one poet conceded, frowning.

"But might it not be too specific?" another asked, prodding the poem for vulnerabilities.

Everyone sensed it would be a long climb to reach the top of Tài Shān. Many poets essayed the ascent, and all of them tumbled to the side.

Propitiations were offered, and were handed back to them: no thanks.

In the spring of 2013, forty-six poets made the attempt. All fell into quarreling and despair.

Only one poet made it to the summit, a mother of two from the city of Redwood Falls. Her poem was simply a repetition of the

saying of Thích Nhất Hạnh: "Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet."

To which she added the single word: "Really."

Room Under the Rock

Seeking refuge from the world I lifted a rock,
a slab of sidewalk that had been shunted aside.
Immediately I became aware of a community of beings
that had just had their sky ripped away from them,
and now the sun screamed at them, and something like
Polyphemus held their world in his paws.
Oh! Oh! They sought to shelter their eyes with two hands,
four hands, some of them many more hands.

I got to know them all in time.
A doodlebug rolling into and out of a ball.
Red millipedes zipping this way and that.
A lascivious nightcrawler, coiling and uncoiling its wet body.
An earwig caught in the camera's click.
A spider nest like a cotton ball, twirled open by the stone.
And everywhere eggs of some unknown creature,
flecking the pockmarked mud.
A slender earthworm, an inch long at most,
Delicately packing its casings in the dirt.

To my sweet new friends of the dark and damp, I said,
I am grown tired of the ways of the world!

So they invite me in, and I kneel beside them --
and the rock slides comfortably back into place.

Man With Bag of Hammers

I saw a man standing on a pier
pulling hammers from a sack,
and tossing them, one by one,
into the murky Atlantic.

What are you doing?
I stopped him and said.

"I no longer want leverage
between me and nails,"
he exclaimed, weeping.
"From now on I will pound
them in with my fist!"

Blind Spot

There is always that one place you cannot see reliably.

Things sneak up on you there.

You know that when the end comes,

it will probably appear in that space behind your shoulder
that you cannot comfortably swivel to.

So that is what you focus on,

year after year,

with a dismal, forlorn feeling,

because what can you say despite all this vigilance --

"I didn't see it coming."

Aerosol Tears

for today's sad person
on the go

It Came From the Landfill

Clambering up through the layers of waste,
it was everything that was despised,
plastic, organic, toxic and foul.

It's head was a gallon-orange juice bottle.
Its frame was a broken Big Wheel.
One arm was made of tangled Christmas lights,
and a leg of rotting dog.

It stopped to regard itself in a smashed mirror,
the Tinkertoy eyes, banana peel mouth.
It saw that it meant well,
even if its bloodlines were not the very best,
and set off on its journey.

Polar Vortex

Outside the wind feels
like a cheese grater against my cheeks.
I am so hunched from the cold
my spine begins to hurt
but look at Lucy in the snow,
rising time and again
like a sea monster surging
through the drifts

Alienation of Affection

Daniele paper-trained the puppy in her room.

She who was so squeamish
put up with his poop and his pee.

She guided him through it,
he was quick to learn
and proud to do it right.

One night she came to me crying.
Oh daddy, she said, I love him so much.

As the dog grew he began sleeping in my room.
I worked at home, I drove the car,
I was the obvious alpha so he switched allegiances.

Now she is gone, and he is gone
and I stumble on without them.
Last night I dreamed they were together
in her room again, the one
with the burnmark on the floor,
him at her feet, him panting with love,
her sure of the things that were hers.

'Your Dog Is Beautiful'

Sometimes at the dog park, I say to an owner, preferably of an everyday sort of dog, "Your dog is beautiful."

And the owner will look to make sure I am talking about his dog and not someone else's.

And in that moment he will see his dog the way someone else might see him, and sure enough, the dog is beautiful – if not in bearing or contour, then in the joyful way the dog is bounding across the yard.

It may have been a while since anyone said, "Your dog is beautiful," and this was a valuable reminder of what he has – a special dog, a cut above. That dog that loves you so much is worthy of loving you – because he's beautiful.

It is also a recognition that not everything is always great, having a dog. Every dog has some monumental flaw, designed to inflict embarrassment or disappointment on the owner, over and over again.

But this – "Your dog is beautiful"-- is like a button that resets the relationship.

The owner looks at the dog and is reassured that all this tension is worth it. That he was wise to adopt this dog, and that he has been blessed for his wisdom in doing so.

Sometimes it is the dog that needs praise. People are busy and it's not always possible to give the dog the time and the open space to be happy. The owner feels sheepish about this, and subtly blames the dog for having these needs to sniff and chase. It's sad, but it's what we do.

That is a discouraged dog, and I will kneel before him, on both

knees, and massage his neck and throat – never patting down on the head, which dogs find irritating. Of course they cannot understand your words, but they get a hint from words like “good” and “dog.”

You massage them for a moment, maybe removing some gook from an eye, because the dog knows you are OK and will grant you this access. A thumb gently rubbing inside the ear is usually welcome. Scratch them just above the tail -- everyone likes that, even you.

The dog's life is neurotic, standby equipment for a creature not designed to stand by, one who craves joy in the moment, not down the road. Every time you walk out the door is crushing to him.

And you say, “You are such a good dog, such a good dog.”

Giant Eyeball

I don't know what to do with it, the giant eyeball in the garage. Every time I clean up back there, I come across it, still in the manufacturer's box.

It is actually a bowling ball – a novelty bowling ball I bought online for Daniele in 2007. She had taken up bowling at the Bryant Bowl and Memory Lanes. It's a great way to pal around and drink beer with your friends, and pretend you are getting exercise.

So I thought, she would like this eyeball bowling ball. It's trippy, a conversation starter. And it would help her game – no more searching the racks for a ball light enough, that also fits your fingers.

So I gave it to her for Christmas. She didn't come to the house so I delivered it to her apartment steps, still in the box, wrapped in a red bow.

I called her later and she seemed delighted. “Amazing,” was how she described it. And brought it back to me: “How many dads buy their kids giant eyeball bowling balls?”

“I didn't have the fingerholes drilled.” I said, “because I didn't know your finger size, or how far apart your fingers are. But I checked around and most alleys have a ball shop that will do that for you.”

So for months after that, when we got together, I might refer to it, casually. “Been bowling lately?”

“Yes I have,” she would say, smiling broadly at me and poking a thumb in the air. She was happy to give me that satisfaction.

But when she died, and I cleaned out her apartment, I found the

ball still in its box. It was inviolate: it had never been rolled, never hit a pin, never had the fingerholes drilled.

I don't know. Maybe going bowling was just a joke she told me, a dodge I was too dumb to see through. Or maybe it was an item of such reverence, or such value as a knickknack on her coffee table, that she spared it from actual use. Bowling bowls do take a beating.

When I come across it now, I don't know what to do. It's weird enough, and funny enough, that it would look interesting on the piano, or fireplace.

But something about the eye is unnerving. It never blinks. It doesn't miss a trick.

So five years later, I have never brought it in from the garage.

Rapid Decomposition

Some people want to be mummified and have their bodies last millennia. Others want to be buried deep in the ground, sealed away from the worms by silk and steel.

This proposal is for the rest of you, who want to go out with a flash, and give the world an amazing experience. Instead of keeping the spiders and microbes and bugs away, you hold a party and invite them all.

This is what you do. You have to bathe your body in accelerating agents just before you die. Nitrogen and carbon are the best for this. We suggests creating a slurry of sheep's manure and tapwater in an outside cauldron. You want it thick, but still a little soupy.

You lie down in a sunny spot in the garden, with aerated soil, and you ladle about six gallons of the stuff all over you. You want a good coating, top and bottom.

Then you die.

Dying itself is amazing. One moment your cells are firing on target, performing trillions of molecular transfers and metamorphoses that keep you cooking in unison. Next moment, all the lights go out, cell after cell. It's like you didn't pay the electric. Breathing and heart rate stop. Blood begins to pool in the lowest part of you, the ones close to the ground.

For a few minutes not much happens. But the slurry shoots out methane and the methane is like reveille to the local biosphere. Insects look up from what they are doing. Microbes are drawn to you like filings to a magnet.

The gas goes out of you and you may wonder: Is this creeping cloud what is left of my thoughts and memories? Could this be

my soul taking leave of the body?

No! It's just stinky gas. That other stuff is long gone. But consider what it's doing. While other people are still in the freezer at the funeral home, people blowing their noses in grief, you are going to town. Bacteria accelerate the breakdown of your cells to lightning speed.

You discover something remarkable. Inhalation is out of the question, but you are exhaling like never before. You are sending one fugue after another into the atmosphere, like that snippet in Close Encounters of the Third Kind. You are instantly the talk of the biological neighborhood. They ride in your direction like the Oklahoma land rush, everyone scheming for a piece of the pie.

It's the Fourth of July and everyone is waving their flags and shouting Oh! as you rip a great one, and then rip another. People can't see it, but there is a grand finale going on that fills the daytime sky. Everyone and everything wants a piece of you.

Everyone makes off with what they can carry – a cell, a fleck of skin, a drop of blood, a pimple. There goes the neighbor's dog with your right index finger. "I saw that Buddy! I saw what you did!"

It's a jubilee day, with streamers and noisemakers, picnic blankets spread upon the lawn. A brass band is celebrating your gift to the world. Speech, speech, the gathering exclaims!

And you are moving. The biting and sucking and ripping of membranes causes you to hum. Your face makes faces, your tissues flinch. Every part of every part of you is causing you to dance, like a puppet connected to a billion strings, like Bonnie, like Clyde, like that old gospel testimony.

I hosted the feast, you seem to be saying, I partied till dawn, everyone left with the first rays of sun, carrying a tinfoil package in the shape of a swan.

Halloo, hallay – what a wonderful day!

Now isn't that better than taking it slow?

Gosh, Bob Dylan

I was making a left turn against traffic on Concord Avenue in South Saint Paul when I was struck broadside by a FedEx truck.

Next thing I knew, I am being ushered into a cell in hell. The place smelled like rotten eggs, but not overwhelmingly so. You could get used to this, I think.

But the surprising thing to me is, my cellmate in hell, sitting at a picnic table, his crossed legs showing a fine pair of rattlesnake skin boots, is American music legend Bob Dylan. He looks up warily as I hold out my hand in introduction.

"Gosh, Bob Dylan!" I say, trying to absorb this extraordinary turn of events. "I mean, if you have to die and go to hell, this is a nice dividend!"

Dylan stops filing his nails.

"I'm a major fan," I say. "I have most of your albums in my collection." Then, catching myself, "Had most, I mean to say."

I tell him about my favorite records and songs. "And, 'Ballad of a thin Man,' I mean -- what can I say. Classic, classic song. Kinda spooky though, too. Maybe you can tell me who Mister Jones really was."

I examine the room more carefully. No bookcases, no TV, no stereo. No pen or paper. Really just a sink, the picnic table, and the two of us facing one another in a fixed position.

"I know this is hell," I say to Bob, "but I'm genuinely looking forward to conversing with you. You have no way of knowing this, but I'm actually a writer, too. I mean, not like you, but I've taken the muse out for a spin, if you get what I'm saying. Some of it," I say, chuckling, "is pretty darn good. In my own not-so-humble

opinion!"

Dylan cocks an eye at me. "Ever think that maybe you're my hell?"

"No," I say. "The thing is, I'm not a hundred percent sure why I'm here. I get you being here, big rock star et cetera, but I was a pretty OK guy. I did read that play by Sartre. Well, read about it anyway. We can talk about that. We've got time."

How Can I Miss You

If you don't go away?

The Nice Thing

About going to heaven
is you probably never have
to pray again.

Eclogue

Half a Monopoly board
blown into a thistle bush
in the Colorado chaparral –
the game ended here.

Little Tiny Hands

I am so touched by your tiny hands.

They are like an invitation to me to take care of you,
to protect you from harm,
to kiss your sweet small knuckles
with multiple kisses,
which is strange because the rest of you
is quite large.

Two Distinguished Poets at the Dog Park

Two associate professors from rival community colleges are walking their dogs.

Daemon wears the shepherd's cap from the back pages of The New Yorker, \$79.95 plus shipping.

Albion is topped by a Syrian burnoose from the Fall Global Conflagration catalog.

Their dogs walk ahead of them, snuffling the bushes.

"I was flipping through the late poems of Lermontov last night," Albion is saying. "I feel they have been underestimated."

One of the two dogs, an Italian bulldog, is squashing a tennis jaw in his mandibles.

"Cannes," the poet calls out in dismay, "don't you remember what the last tennis ball did? Oh my lord, \$700 to cut it out of you before it blocked your intestine and killed you. Give me the ball, Cannes."

The poet makes gimme gesticulations with his fingers. The dog looks briefly in the master's direction but continues to mash the ball.

"Cannes, I must insist you surrender the ball. Very well, we'll do this the hard way." The poet slips his fingers in the dog's mouth and wraps them around the slimy ball. The dog refuses to surrender it.

"Cannes, this is your last chance. Release the ball!"

The dog blinks languidly but maintains its fearsome grip on the

toy.

“God damn it, Cannes, do you want me to get the shock collar out? Is that what you want?”

Bypassers are starting to slow as they witnessed the battle of minds underway by the pond.

“Here, let me try,” says Albion as he approaches the two, kneeling sympathetically in front of the dog and taking his head in his two hands.

“I know how it is for you, Cannes. The ball releases a lot of tension, doesn’t it. Tension that builds up in a dog and that seeks resolution. You know, old friend, this ball seems like your friend right now, but after they slit you down the middle to remove it, it won’t seem like your friend, will it?”

The dog pants gently, but will not surrender his prize.

Albion turns to Daemon, solemnly. “I’ve done all I can.” He looks toward his own dog, Sasha, a Bouvier des Flandres, chasing butterflies and bounding about like a spring lamb.

“Oh look at her,” he exclaims. “She’s like an angel from another realm!”

Albion’s smile disappears as he watches Sasha initiate a series of dives into something on the meadow floor. He looks at Daemon and they say, simultaneously: “Rotted fish!”

Sasha is like a professional wrestler, dropping violently again and again into the sepulchral ordure, absorbing its foetid excesses into her forehead and shoulders. Already the filth was stiffening her coat, causing it to corruscate in the afternoon sunlight.

“Sasha, do you have any idea how repulsive that is! I forbid it! Sasha! Sasha!”

The last loud call echoes across the glade, bounced against the walls of the city ravine, causing whole flocks of birds to exit their

roosts in the fir trees, tout ensemble.

At the parking lot, Cannes disgorges his tennis ball, licks it once, and vaults into the back seat of the Prius.

Albion kneels with Sasha at the water fountain, rubbing the filth from her coat with his Drakes London field bandana.

They drive back into the city with the sun just setting, painting vermilion the rocks and rills alongside the highway.

“I have been enjoying the recent issues of *Magisterium*,” Albion says. “They are achieving something remarkable with language.”

“I have some submissions with them right now,” Daemon replies, freeing his ponytail from his collar. “I have a good feeling about it.”

And in the back seat, the windows down, the two dogs grin indiscriminately, eyeing the roadside for movement.

At the Wake

Three days Tim Hoolihan waited to fart.
Then it came, endlessly bubbling out of him,
like a machine gun issuing into honey.
His widow smiled thinly.

1978

They Thought

They could tyrannize us
with their luxuries and entertainments,
their plentiful food and freedom of movement,
the "benefits" of literacy,
the "order" created by laws,
their "life extending" vitamins and antibiotics,
their social safety net and robust economic system.
I guess we showed them.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Man is driving home through the woods.

Has to take a leak so pulls over.

He opens the driver door with one hand while pulling the key out of the ignition with the other.

But the key slips out of his fingers.

Man feels around the car mat, cannot locate the key.

He steps out of the car and looks. No key.

He pushes the front seat back in order to view the entire area. No key.

He takes a flashlight from the glove compartment and shines it, even checking behind the pedals. No luck.

I've got it, he thinks – when he opened the car door the key somehow jumped out the door. It seems unlikely, let's pursue the possibility.

Man gets down on his knees and looks for a slot in the snow the key might have slipped into.

He rakes the snow in a six-foot area to remove the snow and slush from the shoulder, then shines the light on the raked area, in case the light catches a glint of metal in the snow.

A car approaches. It is a county sheriff's deputy.

The man gets to his feet, his knees soaked through with slush, and wet snow hanging on his hands and elbows.

"Whatcha got there?" asks the law enforcement officer.

"Funniest thing, the man says, "I dropped my keys."

Cop shines a light in the man's face.

"You been drinking?"

"No," the man says. "No wait, I had a drink after work."

"Which is it?"

"I had one drink over an hour ago, at Jimmy's."

"Do me a favor, the cop says. Stand right where you are and walk toward me."

"But it's snowy," the man says, "you won't be able to see if I waver."

"Humor me," says the cop.

"Jesus Christ," says the man, walking, despite a little kink from kneeling in the snow.

"I've seen better," the cop says, switching off his light.

"I'm 61," the man says.

"Well, I'm going to let it slide this time, sir," says the cop. "Good luck with your key." Cop slides back into his car and drives off.

Man watches squad car climb a hill and disappear.

In frustration the man kicks the car door. When he does he, he hears a muffled clink in the area of his ankle.

He looks down and realizes he is wearing cuffed trousers. Reaches into the cuff, and pulls out the key to his Mercury Grand Marquis.

“Well, I’ll be a son of a bitch,” the man says aloud.

Gets back into the car, starts the ignition, and eases back onto the highway.

Man, he says to himself, I really have to pee.

Paul Gruchow

Of all the things I have written, my favorite was a full-length article honoring author and naturalist Paul Gruchow that appeared in Minnesota Monthly in the fall of 2004. Paul, the managing editor of the Worthington Daily Globe while I worked there in the 1970s, had taken his life that year after a terrible struggle with depression. The piece was part journalism, part memoir, part psychoanalysis, part prayer. I loved it for that very reason, that it combined ordinary elements to become something grand.

http://issuu.com/mike_finley/docs/gruchow

What I did not put into that article, which could easily have been mistaken for hero worship, was that in actual life, Paul and I did not get along. And I'm not quite sure why that was.

It began with Paul calling me one day at my University office and offering me a job: news editor of the Daily Globe. It wasn't an invitation to an interview. It was an actual outright offer, to move out to the prairie and run the newspaper's daily operations.

Get this: I wasn't a journalist. I wrote public affairs pieces for the University – a public relations hack. But he saw an article I wrote about the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald, and said, "This is the man I want!"

So I went out, made his acquaintance, and heard him lay out his worries about the newspaper's current direction. Unhappy staff, run-amok writers, reluctant advertisers, dissatisfied readers. I knew nothing of these problems – I worked for the ultimate ivory tower, the university – but I said to him, amazingly even to me:

“All those issues can be dealt with.”, capable

So he invested in me, never mind that I was a mere lad of 28. I believe he saw me as the bold, capable knight who would slay organizational dragons and make his editorial dreams of a beloved prairie institution come true. He did not know I was a surrealist poet on the side, and I did not share that information.

Almost immediately, things went wrong. If there is a book, *The Elements of Newspaper Page Layout*, I had not read it. Everyone hated the way I put things in boxes and made silly things as important as serious things. And when I wrote for the paper, people were offended.

I come from the Cleveland area, still Midwestern, but much crazier and more desperate than southwest Minnesota. A wire story came in about some kids in Parma, where I once lived, who paid the neighborhood bully \$50 to kill their father, because he would not let them watch TV after 9 pm. Typical Parma, I thought. So I published the story under this very urban headline:

Don't Like Your Dad? Do What These Kids Did

The phones exploded with rural readers who were already living in fear of patricide, before our story ever appeared. Another time I wrote about the tradition of incest among remote farm families – “prairie wives,” the daughters were called. Again with the phones and denunciations.

Several more of these tone-deaf stories by me, including one about a witches' coven starting up in Luverne, and Paul told me my services as writer were no longer required, and I should stick to assembling each day's paper.

A chill set in. I was asked to read at the local library, and since Paul was a board member, he was asked to introduce me. It was

a big deal for me, a bit nervous to be reading to my daily readers. But I was unprepared for Paul's introduction, stunning in its brevity:

“What can I say, here's Mike Finley.”

And so it went. Paul was very moody, disappearing for days at a time, and holing up in a cloud of tobacco smoke in his corner office. I realize now he was depressed, but at the time I thought he was disappointed in me, the paper, and everything.

And so I served out a two-year term in Worthington. I was not a bad news editor. Our paper won a trunkful of awards from the Associated Press and Medill School of Journalism, and some of them could be traced back to me. The paper was famous for having a "magazine attitude" toward the daily news. I considered that I had done a good job, and moved to Connecticut where my wife Rachel was in grad school.

That fall, a magazine in Red Wing, Minnesota, featured me as their star writer. They published several pieces of prose and poetry, and a bio. I had told them before I left Worthington I was the Daily Globe's news editor. Not knowing what a news editor was, they dropped the word and referred to me as the paper's editor. Which I wasn't – that was Ray Crippen, a gentleman who held the title but mainly wrote editorials and wonderful front page essays about life around Lake Okabena.

So the bio said I was editor, not news editor. I get a postcard from Paul, with this sentence scrawled on the back:

“Saw your work in Great River Review. Congratulations on your promotion!”

And that was it. I didn't speak again to Paul for almost 15 years, after he attempted suicide. I called him in Duluth and asked if I

could do anything for him. He was friendly, but fatalistic.
"Nothing you can do, Mike. The train has left the station."

A month later, he was dead. And that's when I approached Minnesota Monthly about doing a portrait of The Great Gruchow and all he had done – running a great paper, writing books about canoeing, birds and the prairie, a teacher and a scholar. It turned out to be a labor of love, from me to Paul but also to the life we lived, and the place we lived it, down where the herons nest.

But I will tell you this. When he wanted to be one, no one on God's green earth could be a bigger jerk than Paul Gruchow.

Some Days Don't Seem Like Stardust

When the rent is due
and the dog bowl's bare
and depression blinds you
to the glory stitched tight under
the surface

When the memory of being fashioned
in the fieriest furnace
isn't there for us

When we are yanked from our perch
by disappointment and shame

We walk through the fog we know as now
unable to glimpse the brilliant atoms
we are swapping every day
like flying fish

We should love ourselves knowing
we are the kiss of the universe

everything pitching in to make us
and us giving back at the end
which is really no end at all
even on a dank, dull day

Death Does the Watusi

These masses that once were treasure
we now hastily bury with dirt

The taste of the concrete curb
against front teeth

The smoke of the city
inhaling us

The once-loquacious object
now buzzing in tall grass

* * *

We've been going about this the wrong way,
erecting barricades against death

And shutting it out when we
Should be inviting it in

Seat him at the end of the table,

toast him and his marvelous deeds

It is as natural as the night

That follows a decent day

A tune to have us stand and dance,
a ragtime melody

On a Train Rolling Out of Berea

I take a seat in the middle of the car, and open my copy of *Swann's Way*. Within moments I hear an elderly voice behind me.

"I see you sitting there," the voice says, cracking. "Do you think I don't see you?"

I freeze, reluctant to see who my accuser is.

"Oh, you think you're so lovable."

I try to read my Proust, but I can't. Probably a lunatic back there - some kind of crazy seer who cuts to the heart of people on public transportation. I don't dare look.

"A whole world of God's beautiful creatures, but you're special, aren't you?"

I have to admit, a part of me does feel that way at times. I do want the whole world to love me. And sometimes I egg them on, being pleasant, hoping they will like me back. Asking for it.

"Yes, you're just God's little treasure, aren't you?" she asks now in a odd, childlike voice.

Then I think, No, that's not fair! I'm just a guy like anyone else. Sure, I read a fancy book on the RTA, but it's just because it settles me on trips. O visionary -- I'm just struggling to make my way through life, hoping it doesn't hurt too much. Why can't you cut me some slack?

I turn in my seat to rebut her, but all I see is an old woman with a birdcage in her lap, holding a wrinkled knuckle out to a pretty green parakeet.

Freelance Writher

Be Nice to the Devil

We could save ourselves a lot of trouble if,
instead of trying to be better people,
we focused on bringing the devil to God.
Those two love each other deep down,
you can tell, though sometimes
you have to read between the lines,
and perhaps our whole reason for being
is to urge them into reconciliation,
because after we lose those two characters
we can do anything we like.

A Weed Is An Unwanted Flower

The English name the dandelion
for its diuretic capabilities – “pissybed”

We used to know more about their power
Every dock and bramble a doctor

Flowing like velvet among violets and celandines,
panicles of amethysts and cerulean blue

The downy cranesbill nuzzles its stars
like pearling hearts in a nest of sea kale

Why must we be so inhospitable?
What makes us think we are wise?

Fuzzy Black Riding Helmet

For six years, between her ninth and fifteenth birthdays, I drove Daniele Saturday mornings to a series of riding academies along the St. Croix River. She always rode English style. We bought her a felt riding helmet with a fuzzy top surface, a smart black jacket, and some riding pants and boots. I came upon the helmet today, high on a shelf in her bedroom closet.

Daniele liked riding. And she loved the horses themselves, though she drew back from the basic skill of jumping. Plagued all her life with a variety of phobias, she would get right up to the rail and come to a stop, every time. Some of the instructors were understanding. Others held it against her, and we would have to find another stable to take lessons. She never received the coveted certificate of completion, though the academies took thousands from us.

When she was 15, she tried Zoloft, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor or SSRI. She had been seeing psychologists and psychiatrists since she was nine, for mood disorders, phobias, and panic attacks. But she had never taken an antidepressant.

The drug worked for a time, but then its effects wore off. She could take more and more, but not get the desired effect, relief from the constant feelings of fear, which she once described to me as “always drowning.”

She had been taking the drug for over a week, with no indication of anything happening. But now, watching her cantering in circles on the sawdust, I saw her change. Instead of riding loosely, the reins slack, her shoulders hunched, she leaned forward, hugged the horse between her knees, and advanced toward the rail.

The horse leaped up, Daniele bore down, the jump was a success. She paused to encouragingly slap the horse on the neck, then circled for another jump. She jumped perhaps 20 times that Saturday morning, and we rode back to St. Paul together quietly, a fierce look of pride on her face.

I told her mother what I saw, and how marvelous it was to see our daughter take control of the young mare and will it up over the rail, completely balanced.

And then the effect went away, and Daniele slipped back into her realm. We were almost near the end, anyway. Not many girls keep up with riding as they reach puberty and are distracted by other things. She was creating a new self for herself even then, a young woman armoring against her fear with tools of her own devising – brave clothes, brave hair, brave make-up and puncturings.

The armor worked better and lasted longer than the Zoloft did. I came to see that she had remade herself into someone who was never afraid – because she had to, to stay alive.

And I wonder, was the girl I saw doing that the real girl? Or was it just momentary courage from a dissolving pill? Who was the girl I saw hold the holding the horse close to her, reins held tight, the sound of leather stretching, the two of them leaving the ground and sailing over the bamboo rod?

Why Can't It Just Be a Hobby?

I know some who insist it is holy. Muses must be summoned. A golden ribbon must mark its place.

What's so bad about losing oneself in something you love?

What's so bad about tying a fly? Or biting a thread?

No one ever committed a crime while engrossed alone. I don't think.

The time goes by. You get better at what you do. You are not annoying or irritating anyone during that time. That comes later.

Two Poems Whose Titles Come After the Poems

I met an old beggar, sitting in a hedge of thistles,
by a coffee can heavy with centavos.
His distinguishing feature was a crippled arm,
broken at the wrist at birth,
his shriveled thumb and fingers forever gripping his elbow.
Coming from a family of beggars,
the infirmity was seen as a sign of favor
that there was no height he could not attain.

Hedge Fund Manager

The sucking sound
at the end
of the milkshake

Death

Q/A: Worthington's Paul Gruchow on The Overbreeding of the Broad Breasted White, with an Aside About Nelson Rockefeller

Is it true what they say about turkeys drowning in rain?

I have seen the birds look up when it starts to rain, he says. It is like they are uncertain what rain is.

If it is a heavy rain, you may find a few dead in the morning.

If it is a gully-washer, it will look like a massacre took place.

That's in the summer. I saw worse in winter.

The farmer puts light bulbs in the coops, to keep the birds from freezing. The birds crowd around for warmth. One or two will be actually touching the hot glass, and will burn and die. The remaining birds then climb under the dead ones to get closer to the heat. Then they suffocate or burn.

On a really cold night, as many as a hundred desperate birds will force their way under the dead to take their place against the bulb.

In the morning, the farmer finds his work of a year frozen in a heap.

Paul told me he had the worst job any man ever had – turkey

desemenation, at a farm near Montevideo.

Does that mean --?

Yes, Paul says. You sit them in your lap, and you jack them off.

Using a machine?

We didn't have one.

Just your fingers?

Just my fingers.

They let you do that?

They look forward to it, Mike, like a soldier in a whorehouse.

Did you wear gloves?

Yes.

What did they do?

Stared off into space mostly. A few looked at me – thankfully I guess.

Tell me about Nelson Rockefeller.

It was 1970. Governor Rockefeller was invited to be grand marshal of the Turkey Day Parade down Main Street.

Everyone told him not to, but he insisted on wearing a long hounds-tooth overcoat as he rode through in his limo. He had it in his head that Minnesota was a cold place, even though this was early September.

One guy, standing on the curb in front of the courthouse, took one look at the overdressed governor and said, "I'm glad I didn't vote for that turkey."

FACE TO FACE WITH A BEAR

First thing you must do is appraise the situation. Might the bear be a friendly one? Does the circus happen to be in town? Is the bear sitting up and begging for a treat?

Better hope you have a treat.

Did you notice if there are cubs nearby? Did you bring enough treats for everyone?

Having made these determinations, you should consider turning and running, even though bears are famously fast. If this bear is unusually slow to follow, running should buy you a good two or three minutes, plenty of time to get your affairs in order. Some people say to run downhill from a grizzly.

Not surprisingly, it turns out that bears are just as good at running downhill as you are likely to be.

Instead of running, step carefully. Try backing away deferentially. Maybe the bear is just feeling territorial and you can get away by with a show of respect, bowing and nodding as you edge away from it.

Quite possibly the bear is miles from its home and doesn't really care that you are there. It is just looking for the right path to take. Do not whip out a map to show it.

Pepper spray – you are welcome to try it. But understand that pepper can act as an attractant.

Do you have Cracker Jack or other food on you? If so, get it off you. Bears love Cracker Jack, with the popcorn and caramel and peanuts. Distribute it as widely as you can. The objective here is to distract the bear with easy pickings, and perhaps buy another two minutes, because once treated to Cracker Jack, the bear will

likely want more.

Note: Most bears, seeing food distributed on the ground, will understand that the dispersed food is now “in the bank.” They can return and enjoy it any time they like. Whereas you are on the move, and trying to get away from them. Bears are not idiots.

Is there a tree nearby? Go ahead, climb it. If the tree is not tall you can stay away from the bear for about five minutes.

Eventually the bear will simply bend the tree over until you are low-hanging fruit.

If it is a tall tree, you should climb at least 30 feet off the ground, ideally till the trunk is too small to support the bear. But if it can only get close, it will still have the option of whipping the trunk from side to side until you let go. This is work but most bears are willing to put in the effort.

If the bear gets to you in the tree, even high up, the bear will hurl you down, break your legs and crack your skull, then follow down after you. This only takes seconds.

If you are successful with the tree, hope that you did not throw your food away as suggested earlier. You may be up in the tree for several days, until you faint or fall, or the bear gets bored waiting and leaves. This does not happen often. Most bears find the situation of you being up in a tree weeping entertaining, even if they are very hungry.

A final option is to fight the bear. If you fight a bear, keep your backpack on. In fact, wear it in front of you, across your beating heart. Lie face down. You want the bear to get at your heart last of all. Like the king in a game of chess, you must at all costs protect the heart!

Fighting the bear will be the challenge of a lifetime – literally – and in the end you will be broken and slashed open in several places, but the bear, who up until this moment has shown a

certain disdain for your abilities, will respect you now. You will respect yourself as well – you engaged a huge carnivore in physical battle. You will have the satisfaction of knowing you tried everything, if you can still feel satisfaction.

Do not play dead until you almost are. Admittedly, it is harder to be persuasive then.

Once you have been mauled, and the bear has finished doing things to you, stay where you are. Wait until the bear departs to begin the long crawl to safety.

The People Who Are Made To Feel Ashamed

Are not the ones who should feel ashamed.

The people who should be ashamed
are the ones unable to feel ashamed
yet they heap shame day after day
on the troubled, the poor and despised.

Poor Lanny

Poor Lanny heard his dad was dying in Ohio and packed his duffle and strapped it to his cycle.

On the way to the airport he got blindsided by a Chevy Nova, and he veered off the highway on his Kawasaki and drove into a ditch, which he bounced out of and smacked into a tree, where he hung from a low branch for a minute before falling back to the ground.

The Chevy never stopped. He figured later it was a family of illegals, and they probably didn't have insurance and there really wasn't much point in hanging around to identify a body they didn't even know.

An ambulance came. Turns out Lanny was hurt pretty bad, breaking both his arms and both his legs in a couple of places each, and fracturing his skull on top of that.

They put him in a body cast and he stayed in the hospital for three weeks until he could move one arm again. They sent him home in a kind of pullied contraption that allowed him to walk, but only like a drunken spider.

He couldn't bathe or cook. He couldn't lie down. He watched TV all day long, until the batteries on the remote went dead.

In two months he never heard from anyone so he was restless and decided to go for a walk. He hobbled down the back stairs and made his way to the street and into a nearbu billiard parlor. He angled himself in the door and ordered a beer, and asked a woman on the next stool over to tip the glass and help him drink it.

The woman watched as he drank the entire pint, one thirsty gulp at a time.

Then Lanny staggered over to the cue rack and tried to take a shot at the cue ball, tripping over his plaster and aluminum crutches.

The woman stepped forward and set down her hand, to settle the cue. Lanny shot the 8-ball into the corner pocket.

He and the woman looked at each other a long time. Seems she was an heiress to a broadcasting fortune and was looking that night for something just as pathetic as him, and took him home.

Six weeks later Lanny shows up at his dad's funeral in Ohio. Down to a pair of aluminum braces now, he made his way, halting, down the center aisle of the funeral home to see the old man laid out.

Before he could get there his mother stepped in front of him. She beheld her broken son, who had moved heaven and earth to be at his father's funeral, but was still late.

She put her hands on her hips and said:

"Lanny, how *could* you?"

Never

Never call another human being hypersensitive.

It's EXTREMELY hurtful.

Ann McManomon

She was a lawyer and married to a lawyer.

They owned a split-level home
backed up against a steep ravine.

My mother valued her as much
as she valued any friend, and wisely
because she went on to become a judge
and her husband Joe became a judge, too.

But one day Ann McManomon
looked at me, age three,
and started to laugh.

Look at those legs! she said,
with her hand over her mouth.

Will you look at those amazing legs?

And my mother, frown lines forming over her eyes,
did not talk to Ann McManomon
for the next year.

Excruciated

Jesus was a suicide

He forced it on the cops

Do what you have to do,

he said,

And climbed upon the cross

The Werewolf Phase

When I was ten I went through a phase where I made lots of strange noises. I could talk real guttural, the way I thought a werewolf would talk, way down in the back of my throat. I would say things like:

"Hey, how ya doin'?"

"I'm comin' to gitcha!"

"Pass me some of that lemon pie!"

It didn't hurt or make me cough or anything. So I used that voice all the time, at the breakfast table, on the playground, with friends. I don't recall anyone ever saying to me, "Why are you doing that?" because we were all ten or eleven, and it was OK to make no sense whatsoever. It was a cool time.

But my mother was working three jobs -- two waiting on tables, and a third not selling Mutual of Omaha to the worst list of leads this side of the Platte.

And to her credit, she put up with my voices for probably more than a year before one night, setting down her purse full of change, she turned on me and demanded:

"Why do you want to sound like a jackass?"

Werewolf wasn't the only voice I did. I could also do Donald Duck, but only when he was cursing. I couldn't make understandable sentences like Ducky Nash.

Anyway that's when I stopped doing voices.

A Word that Should Mean Something Else

That is one well-beheaded young man,
and he will go places

Her beauty was beheaded with
a diadem of roses

Or wait up for me,
I'll beheaded home soon

'I Think It's Your Entire Consciousness I Object To'

I can accept that not everyone is going to love me,
but this poet's remark seemed to cross a line.

Should I therefore stop being conscious?

Should I lie down on your lawn and hold my breath
and try not to think about anything?

Would that seem like an improvement to you?

Would you like me better dead or in a coma?

Or would you rather I just went away

and was conscious on someone else's lawn?

The Bag from Cub Foods

My dog is curious but cautious,
she wants to know why the plastic bag
is drifting across the grass,
like a creature of legless spirit,
but not enough to pounce on it.
She knows this thing is out of the ordinary,
and could turn on her with fierce
unconscionable magic, and nothing either
in her history or the history of her kind
has prepared her for the battle
about to begin.
Where does a dog come off being cocky
in a world of plumbing and appliances,
where betrayal is never more
than a sudden yelp away?

Pinky and the Bear

A snowshoe bunny named Pinky hopped across the forest floor. He was a happy bunny who enjoyed his life and enjoyed mingling with other creatures.

If he had one regret, it was that he never felt that bunnies enjoyed the same respect as larger creatures, especially the noble predators that lived in the woods. He felt he had a point of view as distinctive as theirs, and he pined for a certain level of recognition.

Pinky hunched down to go to the bathroom, popping out a few little beads. Suddenly he became aware of a large presence near him. He turned to see old Bruin, the lordly grizzly bear who roamed the valley. The bear waddled close to him, snuffling his giant black nose. Pinky froze in his tracks.

"Hey, how you doing?" Old Bruin said to the smaller creature, curling his lip. The bear, too, needed to defecate, and stooped right next to Pinky.

Pinky was thrilled. In all his days he never expected to be addressed by a dignitary of the bear's stature. That meant a lot to the bunny, who wriggled his nose and smiled appealingly up at the giant animal.

"I'm doing most especially well," Pinky said, then wondered if that came across a little over the top.

"Say," the bear said, "I have a question for you." He grimaced as he described the problem he was having. "Does -- uh -- poop stick to your fur?"

There was no end to the bunny's delight. To be consulted on a point of hygiene like this, by a creature so regal and respected, this was a major triumph for him socially. He nodded vigorously,

grateful for the moment the bear had bestowed upon him.

"Oh, it most assuredly does!" the bunny said.

"Good," the bear said, grabbing the bunny and wiping his ass with it.

To A Stranger

We never refer to it,
but it's always there,
the thing unsaid,
this restless hunger
to be known.

Why does no one
seem to see the truth in you --
the effort you've been making,
the earnestness of your love.

You sit there giving
as you so often do.

Maybe this will be the hour
it all cracks open,
the moment of contact
when you can't keep it up
a single second longer,
and everything spills out of you
like feathers from a gun.

People see the goodness in you,
they see the courage
you show every day
just getting up and going about,

the things you don't talk about
but are never out of reach.
Your tender heart
that has already been broken
multiple times,
that you keep patching together
and sending back out,
that sense of duty
to those you belong to,
even when they seem unaware.
I see you in your beauty,
the hope that has no hope,
it's just you making
a trip to the well
that you have visited
so many times before.
I know. Because I see you.

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

A Hand Is Like a Flower

A hand is like a flower,
perched upon a stem.

A surgeon, rinsing and
holding them aloft,
sees beauty in their form.

A fist is like a bulb,
packed full of potential.

They turn on their joints in sunshine
like tulips in a breeze.

And when you have departed,
visitors hold them up and blow,

and the ashen seeds set off
on a journey, in search

of something to hold.

'I'm Fine'

In the cartoons, we are so confident. An enemy fires a shotgun at us, and we mock them to their faces. "Ah, ya missed me," we say.

Then we drink a glass of water, wipe our mouth on our sleeve, and the water squirts out of a dozen holes in the body.

Because that is what we do. In order to go forward we pretend we are intact. We feel we have to. That trauma, that abuse, that insult to ourselves did not draw blood. Admitting we are damaged would be giving into it, would make it true. No one wants to be broken. It will only embolden our competitors.

And so we stumble on, and this persistent wound is like the air we breathe, without odor or taste, we accept it as normal; indeed, we do not detect it. Denial becomes a point of character. We rubbed dirt on it, or chewing tobacco, and got back in the game.

But our loved ones frown sympathetically as they see us struggle and stammer, knowing we have these unhealed wounds that are untreatable because we don't admit they are there. They suffer because we do not feel our feelings. Our wound becomes the great wound of their lives.

At night we dream fitful dreams, making weird animal noises, while our loved ones knot their handkerchiefs, awake beside us, and the unending stream of blood and water seeps into our mattresses.

Snowshoe

Chimpanzees are actually no hairier than we are.

Their hair is just coarser.

Years ago we looked like they did,
flashing a fine dark coat.

Then when the ice came,
and all the world adapted or died,
those of us living above the glacial line
turned white as snow from head to toe
and stayed that way year-round,
pinkless except for our lips and butts.

When I Come Out of the Mountains

When I come out of the mountains I will come looking for you.

When I return to the mountains wearing a cloak of fine linen.

When I come out of the mountains the demons will part for me.

When I come out of the mountains I will bring every kind of strong medicine.

When I come out of the mountains the sun will be blazing.

When I come out of the mountains the jays will loop from tree to tree.

When I come out of the mountains I will come striding up your path.

When I come out of the mountains I will rap on your door.

When I come out of the mountains I will take you in my arms

And carry you back to the mountains forever.

Angel Still Guarding The Gate

It's a used car lot now
on the outskirts of Karbala.
Mostly American cars, some Nissans,
and a '97 Land Rover over by the wall.
I have been standing in one place
for 6,000 years without relief,
no one gets that this
is Paradise.

The Day

I woke up and there were mountains

where there were no mountains before.

The people on the street had somewhere to get to,
but they had time to say hello.

In every tree and bush I heard cheeping,
and a variety of dogs hollered from their yards.

I went to the door where you should have been
and rapped it with my knuckles.

I sheltered my eyes with my hand from the sun.

A hawk nuzzled itself on the phone line
and a child in blue ran by with a kite.

Cinder Block Into Fish Pond

It is all about leverage.

You lift the stone,

You give it a heave,

Everyone stands back.

The goldfish scramble

To escape the turbulence.

Because you did this,

You can't be friends

With the cattails or the fish.

You are the other now,

Unaccountable, made

A target by your tools.

Pillow Full of Bees

Give a squeeze to the pillow of bees

Ask how do you sleep

With dreams like these

Canter

Approaching the gallop,
three hoof-claps are heard
da-da-DAH, da-da-DAH, da-da-DAH
Three hoof-claps
for a creature with four legs.
Some day, maybe in heaven,
I will ask one how he did that.

The Victory of Song

From now on I will enter every room singing.

Just like in a Broadway musical

Singing morning noon and night now

I will be singing to my breakfast

I will sing to my poodle dog who will tilt her head in confusion

But I will laugh and kiss her on her head

And everything will change now

You will smile when you see me

You will say there is a man who's not paying attention

Because he always greets us singing

He is restoring the people he loves with color and laughter

And other people will start singing

They'll lock hands across the city

Traffic will come to a stop

As people roll down their windows and start singing

And money will stop being everything

One beautiful song after another

And children will thank their parents for every act of love

And wives and husbands will sing to one another

Singing Oh, oh, oh, we are singing

And the government will get suspicious

As the economy starts to tank

And even the hedge managers step out on their balconies

And they sing Oh, oh, oh we can't help singing

And plans will be drawn up

And as I stand in the courtyard

Arms outstretched and beaming with love

A shot will ring out and down I will go

And my heart will stop beating but only for a moment

And I will lie on my back gazing up at the clouds

And remarkably and inexplicably I will still be singing

And I will sing to my assassins

How sad it must make you

To do this violent deed but to have so little effect

"Oh, big deal, how proud you must be,

How powerful you must be

To have to shoot a man for singing"



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