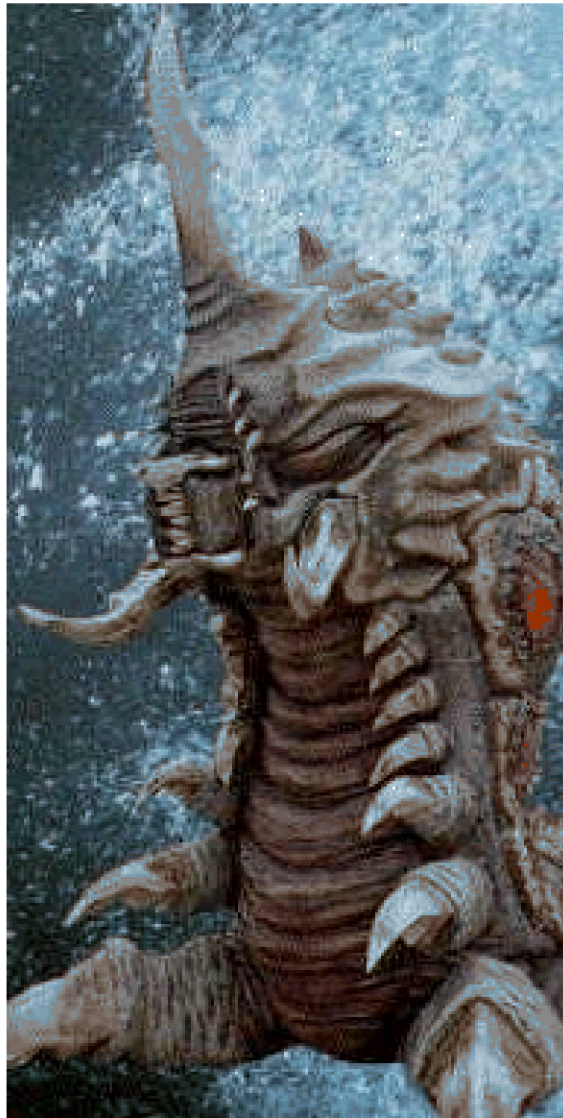


THE THING THAT HAD ITS WAY WITH DULUTH

II

By Mike Finley



The Brood

I don't want to share anything with you,
I want to be alone late at night,
I want to drink until I'm dry,
I want to make secret journeys down the dank streets
where married men don't venture,
I want rooms of clinking crystal
and appreciative smiles,
jokes tumbling from my lips
like silvery grunions
slapping in moonlight.
I don't want to help carry groceries in from the car,
groceries I will never eat,
go for endless walks that take us nowhere,
rub your back when mine is killing me,
I want sleep forever under sparkling snows
and dream of ballgames and girlfriends
and the years of goodtimes before
this dagger snaked its way into my breast,
I am afraid of waters and doctors
and the look on your face
when you are in trouble.
I want to undo everything, erase my assent,
irradiate my sperm, run off
to a nation that is beaches only,
that welcomes heels and celebrates
desertion and whose official flower
is the beget-me-not.
And yet,
to be father
of this melon thing in you
with all its sweet red stuff, and seeds and rind,
is a grand endeavor, and I see plainly in your eyes
that this is your wish and because I am your slave by heart
I accept the full penalty, let them come, let them swarm on me
like ticks, I will bounce them and change them
and wipe them clean as if they were my own
and all the while knowing where once there was life
is now only children, and the windblown fluff
that was once my hide is all that remains
of a boy who loved
to play.

In the Night

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

OLD SAW

Out walking with Red, we came upon
an ancient cottonwood tree, standing like
a giant fork in the forest.
Into that fork another tree had fallen,
so that the original cottonwood stood straight
while the dead fallen tree leaned into its crux,
and every breeze made the live tree groan
as the dead trunk rubbed against it,
it was the sound of a balloon roughly handled,
or metal failing underwater,
like a natural cello's lowest string
rubbed raw of its rosin.

Eventually the dead tree had worked a groove
in the crotch of the live one,
and with the passage of time was wearing its way
downward, splitting it down the middle.
One main arm of the live tree had died,
and owls and birds and other things
had made their apartments in the soft dry flesh.

Rachel and I stared up at this natural saw
and we took one another's hands instinctively
as if to assure ourselves
that the rubbing of one life against another life
was a warming thing always.

But love can come into our lives and life move one.
What is left when love remains
sawing gently on our limbs?

UNIVERSITY AVENUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock
in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building
at the University. I had completely forgot.
The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said 1:25.

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

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

and took a seat halfway to the back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk,
the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall
and the graduate students on scholarship

whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul.

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

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

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

HAIRCUT

When my stepdad was dying of a brain tumor,
we hired a barber named Dave to come round every week.
Dick didn't have a hair on his head,
after chemo, not one -- but he liked talking to Dave,
who also sold insurance and awnings.
Dave would pretend to cut hair
for half an hour or more, chatting about
the kids today, or an open lot
where a supermarket might go.
And Dick would nod, or grunt --
he had no words left in him -- with half open eyes.
I think he was pleased to be served,
to be the man, that ghost hair was still coming
out of him, unstoppable, wild.
When Dave was done he carefully brushed the excess off,
shook the cloth off on the porch,
let nothing ride away on air.

THE CLARINET IS
A DIFFICULT INSTRUMENT

I was eating minestrone
when I heard something fall
outside my apartment window.
Too dark to see much
but a pair of hairy arms slam shut
a window on the third floor
of the building opposite mine.

In the morning all I found
was a bent clarinet on cement,
dented horn and pawn shop sticker
saying nine dollars.

It reminded me of the French explorer
Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac.
He too had dreams, set sail
up the St. Lawrence, looking for China,
and wound up settling in Detroit instead.

The Dance of the Dog

The knees bend like spurs
Spun round from the
Rattling steps, shake off
The wood-stove fever
Stored from the
Floorboards through the
Night, race past the pump
To the edge of the
Cleanshorn field where
Only the day before an
Army of corn held sway.
Now on tiptoe, now
Trotting gingerly row to
Row, the pink tongue
Flagging, the keen eye
Swerves to the suggestion
Of movement, surveys the
Swath of harvest slack-
Jawed. The creatures of
The plain are dazed in a
Changed world, but he who
Sleeps on a burlap sack
Where the cinders spit is
Proud to the tooth: I am
I, he thinks, dog, and
This is my country, and
This the might of my
Accomplices.

Hamsters

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

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

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

A MINNESOTAN
IN NEW YORK

When I landed at LaGuardia
it was seventy degrees,
all I needed was a thin jacket.
For three days I walked the streets
leery of beggars who seemed
to know something, and shadowy
figures lurking in doorways.
But when the temperature began
to fall and the canyon gusts blew
plastic sacks like ghostly luggage,
I came into my own.
I am more used to winter than them,
it is my natural element, walking into
the city wind, swinging
my computer case at my side.
All along Sixth Avenue the muggers
and murderers part, melted
from their purpose by sled dog eyes,
urgent and cheerful on a cold,
cold night.

Letter From Como

Taking course to ospreys and antlions and the mauve noodle
stacked like rosaries in the outer office
Tonight it is quiet it is too quiet tonight
Taking course from the trail of rags and broken webbing
and the natives trembling under the giant banah leaves
And taking course dead reckoning from the moon
directly chuckling like the Old Bombardier
Take my course to the sailor awash and aflat
on the tarot deck
Take it to Queens and Pawtuxet and the all-nite laundromat
It steams like desire in the sleeping pile of woolens
And the natives pressed themselves thin as knives
pressed against the quivering chandelier
take it to Mom and Pop and the aging cheerleader
who ten years later still presses the torn photograph
against her ribs
It is too quiet it is sinister
It is number than any number
And what do I do oh what please say
is a pawpaw and a bobtail nag all the doodah day
Take it to America America in the springtime springtime in America
because this is the garden of animal delight
the clean scrape of the dish on cement
Taking course to red jackals and jaydaws and the red noodle
Nailed to the waiting room like old magazines
It is better than that it is steadier than that
How do you do and welcome to Fabricburg
You can't tell the fours from the threes
You can't tell the flowers from the screams
No wonder they say we were made out of mud
Come out of your trees and your rivers and
Come to America come to Minnesota
Come to the click of cleats and the children
straddling the giant tortoise they have come
They have come for miles around
Come to the land of long letters of love the land of love
his is the land of the crackling barn
and the land of the infernal flower
and the land of big shovels
This is the home town this the sublime
This is the black underside of a million raw tabletops

Love scarred like burnt pleasure and bubblegum
These are its children and those are its heights
These are the fingers meshed and twined like cotton candy
Peanut shucks and gosh the divine criminentlies
Come to the straw and the cane and urine flowing like soda
Come to the land of poultry and the love of the condom
Come to the rinsed kidneys of the lost tribes
And the land of small children and dogs
They teem in the refuse like ambassadors for change
Come to the Como when the hibiscus are in bloom
and the drunks are in bloom and the tree sloths
Parasites bloom green in the skin
Come to the green swarming pond this year
we dredge there our memories
of kindness and jewels and breadloaves
and cannonshot rakes and quicksilver
Come when the tuna are jumping
and the children are jumping at cornbread and promises and time
and the secrets of time This spring
the tiger is muttering remonstrances of love
And the banker noodle sits like a patient in the vestibule
Come to the 24-hour urgent care centers cursing
the revolving doors and the No Parking Zones
and the decisive victory in the field
Come to the spreading joy of a thousand elm trees
Two years from blight and the skinny roots of love
And the thousand children jumping in the night
Taken in dreams to a place beyond mountains
and the thousand mattresses no one turns over any more
Come to Como Brother John and Alphaea
Take to the hard streets and the harder walls
And take course to the parklights bathing the lost kids
And take course down the trillion rows of lilies and rot
take course to Como at a certain time of year
now here now gone forever now at the tip
of every tongue take course
by hunted animals strung by ropes
their bodies opened to the wind and to love
Flies singing seafaring stories in the breeze
Open and battered to the slim
curve of love

Old Stone Enters into Heaven

Old Stone was a mean man, whole
Town of Kinbrae knew that for
Entertainment he used to take pot
Shots at his dog, a good old girl
Deserving better. One day Stone was
Said to have got bad news from
Montevideo, folks saw him stride
Past the post master's kicking dust,
Spitting on the side walk and
Cussing out the Goose Town Savings &
Loan. Mr. Miller said he purchased
A package of Illinois whiskey and
That was what they found later on, a
Broken bottle by the pump house well
That'd just gone dry. Must have
Hauled his rifle down where it hung
By the stove and stomped out to the
Yard with a box of fresh shells,
Loaded and reloaded, pumped lead
Into the milk shed wall and cackled
And gnashed his nasty teeth. His
Yellow tears skittered down his dry
Cheeks as the dark deed formed in
His mind, the notion occurring to
Complete the thing for once and for
All, and he whistled Betty to heel
At his feet. And she sidled,
Shivering, up and imploringly searched
For the better nature behind his red
Eyes as he pulled two sticks of
Dynamite from a tool bin and tied
Them to the poor bitch's tail, lit
The long fuse, smacked her hind end
And sat down on the hole and watched
Through the open out house door as
The dog took off yelping straight
Through the kitchen doorway and dove
Under the master's brass post bed
With the eider down comforter pulled
Down in after her. No no no no,
Cried Stone, and he screamed with
All his saw toothed might with the

Indignation of a man so wronged by
Creation perverted by willful beasts
Like a dog so dumb she couldn't even
Get blown up right, and he screeched
Her name and called her forth and
Condemned her disloyalty as the
Least best friend a most cursed man
Might have, a churlish cur who
Fought his dominion from the day she
Was whelped, who missed regular naps
Thinking up ways to undo him, him,
Him who now wailed like a ghost to
Get out, get out, get out, get out
Of my pine board, tar paper, china
Platter house God damn your four
Legged soul. And Betty, hearing his
Break down with out and imagining
Herself the object of some grand
Reprieve at the hands of this
Passionate and lovable if you really
Undertook to know him but until then
Deeply misunderstood failure of a
Man and imagining moreover her life
Long ordeal at those knotted hands
To be miraculously over and herself
Forgiven of the loathsome crime of
Having been his, dashed happily down
The rock porch steps and full tilt
And with her master's heartfelt
Cries of No no no no no echoing
Across the wooded glade leapt gladly
Into his awe crossed arms and the
Two best friends saw eye to eye,
Each bade goodbye, and left Kinbrae
Forever.

The Fifth Beatle

When I was a teenager I often dreamed they invited me
to join them and though I played no instrument
and sang only a little, and my hair wasn't right,
they sensed I was one of them and let me belong.
They seemed to enjoy being in Ohio, and walked
my front porch in their Cuban heels, and
I did my best to fit in. There was never
misgivings or resentment that I was still in high school,
or American, or stood about stiffly, with hands stuffed in pockets.
Because they were special, they were kind enough to let me be, too.
Last night I dreamt I was in LA, and a mutual friend
notified me George was anxious to see me.
We drove along the beach till we came
to his wife's fashion salon, and I was led in.
A busy, happy woman with cropped curls
gestured behind her and laughed. This was where
all the money went, she said. I shook hands with the retinue.
Some of the members of the old band were still there,
including the saxophonist with the scars on his nose,
whose name I could never remember.
I met George's son, whom I had never met before,
he was almost grown, and resembled his mother,
handsome and quiet and composed. I was taken aback by him,
and couldn't think of anything to say.
They wheeled out an exquisite cake that said
"Welcome back, Mike," with a picture of us five lads,
one without an instrument, with buttercream dahlias
and frosting cherries, created by some impressive celebrity baker.
And when George arrived everyone crowded around him,
but after touching his son's face he went straight to me
and hugged me and we rocked happily
for a moment, reunited, and I remembered the good times on tour,
and how they always dropped me off again afterward
at the gray house on the hill, and I would sneak inside to bed.
I could see the lines in George's eyes, and his hair had thinned
but his grin was still stupendous, and he peppered
me with questions about my family and my life
and rebuked me for not bringing a photo with me.
During the meals, seeing the love they all had,
I felt tears come to my eyes, and I burst out and told
them I didn't deserve them as friends, they were all so
genuine and kind, and I was sorry I had not stayed
in touch, and I was so sorry about John, and I was sorry

I had gotten old and fat and become a business writer
and lost the music, and someone patted my back while I sobbed.
And in his thick scouse George quietly said
none of that mattered, I had gotten away
but we were together again, and we would always be mates,
and this day was for us to remember and to share.
And they all lifted their glasses of soda water and lime.
When the alarm sounded I went to my daughter's room
and kissed her several times on her smooth forehead.
She emerged from her sleeping bag like a rose in bloom
and told me my hands were cold, and smiled her lovely smile.
We could hear the diesel idle of the garbage truck in the alley
and the birds in the maple tree sang.

Witnesses

Three women at Perkins sit in front of me,
a mother and her daughters. The youngest,
in glasses, wears fuchsia lipstick and matching
fuchsia suit, with four silver buttons
on each sleeve. The sister has a sleepy, dragged out beauty,
and unbrushed hairdo. You can make out the lines
of her brown arms through the sleeves.
The mother sits with her black pocketbook in her lap,
the strap looped around one wrist.
They appear to have rules about conversation,
taking respectful turns.
Though their eyes light up, and slight smiles glide on their faces,
not one word is audible twelve feet away, and no one laughs
or touches. I wonder if they are discussing the people
they met at the doors they knocked,
who seemed interested in the message they brought with them,
and who did not extend them the courtesy of respect.
Then the food arrives, hamburgers, cokes and fries,
and the women in their Sunday clothes bow their heads and pray.

The Sugar Trap

To keep yellowjackets from our tentsite
I filled a pop bottle half-full
with sugar water and strawberry jelly.
As the day grew warmer the bees would alight on the rim
and one after another descend
to sample the pink nectar.
By day's end there were over forty bees in the bottle,
most of them drowned
with a few still clambering over
their fellows to climb out.
But the walls are too steep
and their wings too wet
and the water is too sweet
to avoid very long.
First they fly down, and spin inside the bottle,
delighted with their find,
enough sugar to feed their community for a month.
The sight of their comrades floating face-down
does not seem to be a major minus to them.
It is only when they set that first foot
in the water that they suspect,
and the struggle to rise up somehow is on.
It is impossible, they fall back
into the sticky syrup, their wings now covered.
Furious, they start twitching their abdomens.
This must be someone else's fault,
they seem to be saying,
I never sought sugar for my own personal use,
it was always for the hive.
But community mindedness has fled
and in their wretchedness
they sting their comrades the dead and the dying,
spasmodic, undulating, thrusting in their pool
and this can go on for hours, and more.
I did not see any bee trying to warn off any other bee
either by gesture or sound,
even though the arrival of the newcomer
spells sting after sting.
It is as if in their misery they call out to come join them.
It is good to share this meal my brothers
it is good to drink the common cup,
so cold, so sweet,
this wine.

Sleeping on My Hands

I sleep on my hands every night.
As I pull the covers around me
and prepare to let go,
first on my right side,
then on my left,
I bunch both hands under the pillows,
holding my head up through the night.

My head must need to be held up so,
but I cannot do otherwise, they go there
on their own.
And in the morning when I awake
the stems of my wrists are sore and hollow
and my fingers numb and cold
and I feel I have been flat on a cot
donating blood all night.

Possibly my hands were intertwined so
in the drift and brine of my mother's womb,
the twist of zero gravity
for wet weeks on end.

Or my head is made so heavy
by the ordeal of ordinary living
that only my hands can prevent its sinking
forever in mattress like a black hole of gristle,
bone against wrist against skull against mind,

as if I am taken down from the cross nightly,
and set on my side in the darkness to rest
and dream of the wounds in my palms and my heart
bearing the sins of the world in my bones,
diving sideways into time.