

# Remainders

by Michael Finley

*for Peter Meister,  
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*A Penny for the Poet?*

Poets are born to suffer, of course, but here's a rare opportunity to pat one on the head. Your donation to Kraken Press will help keep this site up and running.

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## CYCLING

Biking down Laurel Avenue at ten o'clock,  
I see a big man sitting in the dark under a porch roof  
propped up by three two-by-fours.  
At the dance studio on Snelling, with the big glass windows,  
it is late, and the woman instructor stands  
under a light bulb, weight on one leg.  
At the store I open a door and a young girl  
explodes into me, laughing.  
The air is still, if you listen you can hear  
the murmurs of people out walking.  
Someone's been cutting the grass in the yard  
of the old man across the street, who has died.

## **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.

## 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.

## **JONATHAN UNDER THE HACKBERRY TREE**

Backyard radio baseball game  
My son on my lap looking up  
Through springtime treetops  
As we sway in our canvass swing.

Our father who art in hammock  
Hollow be thy chest.  
One man on, Puckett steps up  
And lines a shot to right,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy heartbeat drum  
Now and at the hour of death amen.

I thought I would have more poems  
Welling up in me about my little son,  
Telling images of flesh and skin  
A single drop of an ancestor's blood  
Roaring down the tunnel of time  
Through this bleating baby heart.

The side is retired, two men on, game over.  
I want to tell you not to worry,  
It's still only April, there are months to play.

But it is as if you don't even care,  
You are somewhere else, you are not yet here.  
The things you see you do not know,  
You only know me as a warm spot in time.  
Your brain stirs invisibly like the worm  
In its bag, that one day will step out  
And have limbs and wings and everything,  
Will talk and have opinions.

Too late for me, though, a spectator  
Who misplaced his program, open-mouthed  
And blinking, but as good as dead,  
And never knew what hit me.

Look at you, Jonathan, little nag,  
Three weeks old and still not found  
Anything you like in this world  
Except lying on your back on my lap  
On the swing under tree that spreads  
Above you like a firework of green

And the light breaking through  
In diamond peeks. Your eyes jerk  
From rim to rim like a drunk on a train,  
Your legs heavy and useless  
Like bread soaked with dew.

Children because they are so alive  
Spell death to every thing.

Mysterious man, mess-making machine,  
Render of night and enemy of art,  
Nothing comes. You cry, we rock,  
The wet of your diaper like tears.

The weeks I spend attending to you are like  
An old woman pouring liquid from the jar  
Of her life into your plastic cup.

How I wish you would smile at me,  
Though it be only a muscular accident,  
I would write you a check from a secret account

That would wipe me out. I would pay to be  
Your baby mind, set high in the tree by that evil  
Mother in the lullabye song,

We would follow the motion  
Of branch against twig against spinning sky  
Where all is revealed in the rockabye  
White blind beam  
Of love.

## **REVOLVING DOOR**

Seeing the pensioner  
Step tentatively  
Into the glass cylinder,  
The girl slowed down,

The two tiptoed around  
One another, palms high.  
He smiled at his partner,  
And she, who had never before

Danced the minuet, dancing  
Out with the old, dancing  
In with the new, did  
likewise.

## **BIKER BOB MANISKALKO'S LIVING ROOM DECOR**

Ignore the Iron Crosses  
And posters of Nuremburg  
And leather-breasted  
Blondes on naked Harleys,

But drink in the tapestry  
Tacked up behind empties  
That might be a tribute to  
Baked potatoes, clad in

Aluminum foil but isn't --  
It's night-time on an arid  
Beach, and the two  
Astronaut buddies walk

Hand in hand in the  
White light from earth --  
Brushed on black velvet  
And hung by the platters

Of Bobby and JFK.

## "The MINSTREL & The LADIE"

The singer's message: I am only a boy  
And my songs and my fiddle  
My only true friends.

But the woman banging her glass  
On the formica bartop is receiving  
Transmissions of life in the wild,

She envisions geese lifting  
From a fern-bog in the peninsula  
Of a state she has never visited.

Between numbers she buys him a beer  
And for a moment there is no Ramada Inn:  
Young man, I want to kiss you everywhere.

But he clings to character, stammers  
His Thank you Ma'am but home's a distance,  
And the roads up Moorhead way are slick.

To no avail. She's deaf. Changing.  
Already she's a brute brown bear  
In the northerly wood,

Already enjoying the scratch  
She knows comes next on her rump  
On the broken spruce branches.

## LAST YEAR'S XMAS DANCE

Norwegian farmers in hospitals, islands  
Of plastic tubes and fluttering eyelids  
Struggle to do what they will not do,  
Arise and return to their fields.

Ivor Thorsen of Glendive, Montana,  
Disintegrating nerves flown in, is awed  
But his speechlessness, motionlessness,  
Dreams he is laughing in Glendive, Montana.

But the strings inside are all undone,  
Incomprehensible to a scarecrow who  
Has walked ten thousand furrowed  
Crumbled lopsided miles.

Mary, Anna, is it really Christmas Day?  
And is it really clumsy me slipping here  
With farmer feet on the Legion floor?  
Oh look at me Mother I'm dancing.

## THE DANCE OF THE DOG

The knees bend like spurs  
Spun round from the  
Rattling steps, shake off  
The woodstove 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, survey 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.

**GISE PEDERSEN sets me  
STRAIGHT on a MATTER  
of NATURAL HISTORY**

"No, you've got this part all wrong,"  
Says Gise, swatting a poem about birds  
With the back of one hand.

"You have whippoorwills sobbing in the limbs  
Of poplars, but whippoorwills don't perch  
In poplars, whippoorwills don't perch anywhere,

Because their legs are just tiny twigs,  
They are gone into atrophy, no muscle left,  
So all they can do is plop themselves

Flat on the ground and make the best of it  
There on their haunches. And furthermore,  
What is this sobbing business? It's poetic

But hardly accurate. Their cry is more  
Like a cheer, it is a call my son Peter,  
Before he died, liked to imitate

On his walks home from school.  
Many times, late summer nights in our cabin,  
Hendrik and I would be feeling morose,

Only to hear out there in the darkness  
The cry of a creature pressed close  
And shouting from the cold of this earth

To all who might hear him:  
VIP-poor-VEE!"

## Star

Star climbed out, stuttering, bawling, breech, unruly child with a tomboy forelock. July 17, 1939, and war was in the barnyard air, and mud, and straw.

As a baby herself she doted on mother's milk, always stooping, always sucking. She grows, she swells, she rounds like the corners of a Holstein balloon.

An idea forms in an oblong head. What a thing, to make food in the body, to take food from the body, and what a thing to feel oneself growing, living, the wet Wisconsin grass all around!

Star grew broad in the shoulder and staunch in the rump. Her walk never faltered, it was the lolling sway of the maid of the pasture. Pink lips mulling grass, methane scenting the meadows of spring.

When she was mounted for the first time ever she returned the bull's push with her own affirmation, her parts a soft suitcase for the seed of the thousands. A factory whistle deep inside her stomachs sounded loud and low and warm. The career of an artist began.

The milk flowed, tons of it, it gushed from her bag, by the canister, by the crate, by the tankerload, by the refrigerator car. It streamed from her aching teats like an army of paint, it poured across the Wisconsin watershed.

One-year-olds in Chicago sucked, and whole families in Michigan. Old men breakfasting alone in apartments soaked their toasted bread in milk. Convents of bustling women emptied steel milk cans to the last white drop. Plastic jugs on Escanaba tables. Young women pricking the cardboard stop and spooning the greasy white around the lip into coffee cups.

These are the figures: 325,000 pounds of milk, 100,000 gallons, a half million quarts shimmering and condensing in milkmen's carriers, a million pints of milk from one feminine engine. Twelve years the blue ribbon winner at the Wisconsin State Fair in Wauwatosa. Photographed, garlanded, hailed above all other cattle.

Years passed, tourists from as far as Mitchell, South Dakota came to see the gracious, dignified, bountiful beast. Thirty calves, each with the tomboy forelock, were her offspring.

At the age of 38 years, the equivalent of 230 human years, the oldest cow in

history, she labored yet, surrendering daily 15 pounds of high-butterfat milk.

Just this week, on January 16, 1979, in the same weathered barn she was born in, Star's heaving flanks came to a stop. No life, no milk, no chinking bottles, no titan of production, no heroine of health, no raiser of children, no fortifier of America. Star had shambled into memory.

"It seems so empty now," said the woman in overalls who led her to pasture all the years. "She was a good creature, a hard worker. She was a friend."

## 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.

## FLYING DUMBOS

I come across a picture of my daughter and me  
at Disneyland. Frozen inside the plastic elephant,  
our faces a riot of stupid joy, we float high above the pavement  
between two other elephants. She is almost three,  
and has seen the movie seventy or eighty reverent times.  
Each time the tension built inside her soft body,  
until her eyes opened wider than the baby elephant's  
and she cried out to the TV, *mummo fie, mummo fie*,  
and looked pleadingly at me that I too  
might affirm the miracle of flesh borne aloft  
with no net and no magical feather,  
and I would take her hands and clap them for her,  
as I am holding them tight in this snapshot,  
so that she will always know that I saw it, too,  
impossible as anything.

## THE BUSINESS OF BEES

When prices are normal  
And weather cold, bees clump  
In a knot, suck sugar  
And hum to stay warm.

But when sugar is high  
It's cheaper to dump them  
Out of their drawers and buy  
A new queen come the spring.

This year the bees are  
Tumbling, hear: sugar  
Is dear, the snow lies  
Buzzing on the ground.

## REMAINDERS

Copies of my poems went on sale at Odegard Books,  
The precise word is remaindered,  
Marked down from three ninety five to just the ninety five,  
And it hit me that this gambit by the bookstore  
Was just what people had been waiting for.

Sure, you expect people to hold back,  
Especially at today's prices. Three ninety five is  
A piece of change, no doubt about it,  
And there must be people who thumb the book  
And pat it with one hand as if weighing the  
Poems against the expense, the expense against  
The poems, take one step toward the cashier  
And then fail in their purpose, put the book back  
In the rack, and pick up a copy of American Poetry Review,  
Beautiful things wonderfully said,  
For under three dollars, a wonderful buy, instead.

But who could balk at ninety five cents,  
Why, that's less than a dollar with a nickel left over,  
You could buy the poems and have enough to  
Handle the sales tax, nineteen for the poet and  
One for the State of Minnesota and its beautiful  
Forests and waterfowl.

[Actually, all nineteen don't go to the poet. I was  
Promised a ten percent royalty, which meant forty cents  
On the full price, and the fine print here says  
When a book goes remainder there isn't really  
Any royalty at all, but I don't care, I didn't  
Write them for the forty cents, you see,  
I wrote them for this feeling I'm having right now  
Of breaking through, of getting out,  
Of seeing the birds I'd stored in the box  
Fly out of it, white wings fair  
clapping the morning air.]

Ninety five cents for thirty five poems,

That's less than three pennies apiece. Here's one  
About some weeds growing in sidewalk cracks,  
So what, it's only six lines long but at three cents  
Who's going to complain? Here's another,  
A beautiful lyric, a love poem connecting  
To the Italian futurist movement of the nineteen-teens,  
It was published in a number of respected magazines,  
For less than three cents you won't need a vacation tour  
This year, just read the words and feel their awful power.

Or the final poem, I call it "The Light," which was all  
My life in sonnet length, how there were things  
I thought I always wanted, but when I got them they were  
Different, or I was unable to recognize them -- such pathos  
As would melt the stony heart, and I lay it all down  
For you, vulnerable, small, the shattered clown,

The paper trembles with the grief of truth,  
Because here it is, softcover renaissance,  
And all it costs is three lousy cents.  
My ear to the ground I can detect the build  
Of momentum, people swearing off bad habits forever,  
People afraid to look one another in the eye  
Now looking and seeing the pain and love that had been there  
All along, now reaching out, fingertips touching,  
The sting of tears collecting in the corners  
Of millions and thousands, the soft collapse  
Of a hundred brittle barriers of reason and attitude  
Finally available, the incandescent word  
At prices the masses can afford.

Let us go now, you and I, to Odegards.  
For life has many sales but few true bargains.  
Let us take the silver coins and hand them to the person  
And remember to ask for the receipt, if you're a poet  
Your whole life is deductible.  
Oh daughters of Homer gather round his knees  
And hear him sing his saltstrong songs.  
There are myriad of you there,  
A speckled galaxy of brave little lights,

Fresh washed garments tucked under your knees,  
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning,  
He cannot see you but he hears you breathing.

## WHEN WE ARE GONE

When we are gone and the plates of the earth  
have shrugged,  
and the cupboards rattle and the rafters sift,  
and the groaning household teeters on the brink  
and the song of consciousness decays,  
what calendar will cordone off its days?

When we are gone and the rub of reaching fills the world,  
and root and branch and tongue and paw  
    all strain as one for what is just beyond,  
    sugar, sunshine, water, meat,  
and the hummingbird suspended in the air,  
what mind, what glance encapsulates it there?

When we are gone and the dust of our doing has flown  
and there are no longer angels and no men,  
And our home and our skin and our story of love  
give way to hozannas of flies,  
what spectators swarm the empty choir,  
sockets twitching with surmise?

When we are gone and meaning loses meaning  
though your molecules and my molecules  
are plucked apart and strewn  
across this raw unwitnessable scene  
they are better for that blink of time,  
forgotten in the giddy sprawl of green.

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