



SUNSET LAKE

POEMS BY MICHAEL FINLEY

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for Barry Brent.

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Billboard

Mounted above a TV repair shop along Dale Street in Saint Paul
is a billboard with the immense face of a man on it,
thirty feet tall, as tall as a movie screen.

His tie is askew, his collar is wild, like a man who has been
running in his suit.

His coloring is all wrong, orange and blotchy red,
as if he spent hours in a tanning booth,
then guzzled down a fifth of cheap gin.

The man is perhaps 30, and he is holding a phone to his ear and
smiling,

but the receiver does not appear to be connected.

“I’m Steve Larson of Sunset Realty,” the sign says, “and I buy
homes for cash!”

He seems both innocent and crude, as if having the belief
that just seeing his huge face, faking a phone call,
grinning from high above the traffic,

will make us want to hand over our houses and give him the keys.

I imagine his pals clap him on the back for pulling off this stunt

but that even he knows, when he drives this way late at night,

When the traffic dies down, that he could not be nakeder
to the world,

promising cash in hand if people will only turn over
their lives to him,

than if that giant face were festooned on the moon,

agog at what is possible below.

In Ely

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

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

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

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

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

Dead Cat for Ray

I entered a barn on an abandoned farm
in the town of Kinbrae where I lived.
In a manger on a bed of old straw I found a cat,
very dead, very thin, no fur, its leather skin stretched taut around
it.

Its back was arched in a defensive posture,
its face pulled wide in a final hiss,
and in its mummified condition you could distinguish
each vertebra and tooth.

I believe it had a heart attack and died defending itself,
perhaps against a German shepherd or raccoon.
The attacker slunk away, leaving the cat a mummy of life and
death.

When my friend Ray came to visit the farm
I took him for a tour of things I had seen --
the grave of Suicide Minnie,
the sandpaper leaf of the lamb's-ear plant,
finally to the manger in the Sveringen barn,
and we stared at the cat like reverent bad boys
then walked home.

That night we lay down in the township road
and watched the aurora shift and split in the northern sky.

Ray was from Cambridge, a city guy, gay, into *est*,
a sculptor, painter, performance artist.
He flew back home the following day,
and I did not hear from him for two years,
when he invited me to read a poem at an exhibit of his.
The art was stupendous, torsos in charcoal, roughcut wood,
hairy ropes, chains.
Ray couldn't draw his way out of a bag,
but he had something else, a ferocious vigor that moved me.
At the heart of the installation he had suspended
on an invisible line
the dead cat from Sveringen's barn, and it turned slowly

in the warm air of the gallery,
whiskers stiff, eyes black, teeth bared to the ear.

It was like, the height of bad taste to exhibit a dead creature
as art, and yet everyone who saw was overwhelmed
at the brave agony of the cat.
In a gallery that had seen plenty of bad ideas and wrongheaded
impulses
here was life and death hanging in a haze,
it was more than noteworthy, it was serious.

A part of me resented that Ray had stolen back in the night
and taken my holy treasure from me,
the other part gratified he thought it so powerful
that he packed the dead animal in his dufflebag and drove
from Minnesota to Massachusetts with it in the back seat.
And astonished to see it now, in its current setting,
twisting in the light.

Afterward I lost track of Ray. We had been friends since college,
him always private, a dog-eared copy
of *The Drunken Boat* by his bed.
His scoliosis was so bad he spent a summer
walking through Europe with a backpack full of rocks
to straighten himself up.
Once I went to his room to listen to Highway 61 Revisited
and came upon his diary and read a few pages,
and I felt so ashamed of myself I started a diary of my own,
in which I talked about looking at his diary.

In January I quit college and itched to Boston and spent a month
in an apartment 20 inches from the El tunnel.
Every 20 minutes the train passed near,
but my friends and I were so high stoned we thought it was
charming
when the milk vibrated spilled in the refrigerator.
I took him to the Tea Party and the Velvet Underground was
playing
and we lay on our backs in a psilocybin haze

and watched the ballroom dissolve.

Back at college Ray began joking that he was Jesus,
and then as time passed, it wasn't so much of a joke anymore.
Without a smile he turned in a 36-page religion paper
titled simply "Jesus," and every page was blank.
The professor had him sent home to get better.

Ray, I didn't know you were gay, and I wasn't your type,
and it never mattered.
You worked for three years teaching painting at Walpole
Penitentiary,
to murderers and rapists and killers.
On the last day you told them that you were gay
because you wanted them to know you, and that a person could
be OK
and still be a faggot, but you didn't want them
to feel obliged to kill you in the process.

I didn't worry about the inmates so much as AIDS.
When people started to die you assured me you didn't do
the things that put a body at risk, but I worried anyway.
You visited twice after the cat exhibit,
and Rachel and I had had two kids, and our lives
took a sharp turn away from one another.
For a while you were in Cleveland, teaching at the museum.
Then Thailand, doing I don't know what -- and that was where I
lost you.

I called your parents, I called your friends,
no one would tell me where you were or what became of you.
I needed to understand because we were friends.
You once gave me a wonderful compliment, you called me a
human being
and that was so meaningful coming from you,
for whom human meant noble and feeling and alive and crazy
was not so bad, it was a sign you were paying attention to things.
I admired you so, and if I had the great spotlight of the world to
direct

you would be turning in it now
like that dead cat in the gallery, abused in life and abused beyond
it,
ugly and craggy and ridiculous and raw
but fully engaged, all muscle and mind alert
to life and life's unlikely opportunities
and the aurora borealis would shift and slide
and light up our faces like 1977,
and the light show on the Velvets in 1968,
and that trip to Rockport in '73 when we lay in the back
of the pickup truck watching the phone lines loop overhead,
when we were young and not yet treed or backed into
impossible corners, and the world what I saw, Ray,
the beautiful courage in the crowclaws of your grin
and the manic dazzle of your eyes,
radiant artist and friend of my youth,
I would have them know.

In a Tent

I would like the night to be over.
I would like my mattress to reinflate.
I would like my sleeping bag to stay where I put it
and not slide toward the lowest corner of the tent.
I would like the morning to suddenly be here.
I would like the pain in my kidneys to ease.
I would like to be able to get up, find the zipper
and pee in the bushes without walking into
fresh spiderweb and imagining its builder
tightening its hairy noose around my penis.
I would like to close my eyes and dream
of happy times and happy places,
not children tied to chairs and forced
by cruel kidnappers to eat cold chop suey
with pimentos, the canned kind.
I would ask that whatever is making
that chug and response sound down
by the lake edge finish its business and shut up.
I would like my teeth to not taste like someone else's.
I would like to take a long shower
and wash my butt, and shampoo
the pine sap out of my hair.
I would like, when morning finally does come,
that I could stand and walk the way I used to,
not this rickety post-stroke hitch
last night left me with.
I would like for a day so sunny and so dry
that it would drive the damp like Rommel's camels
from my sodden bag and towels.
I would like for zippers to zip, stakes not to bend double,
socks not to electrostatically
attract pine needle, foxtail and burr.
I would like my wife, who is sleeping so beautiful beside me,
her cheekbones catching the half-moon light,
to awaken and hold me and offer me
succor for my pains.

When You Are Pope

When you are pope you can not be like other men.
You cannot be seen disappearing into limos
outside casinos or polishing off a beer at a corner tavern,
the old men snorting at your caftan and cap.
You cannot affect a commanding air,
pulling at your cincture and laughing like a man,
you must be humble all the day,
you must be unworthy to loosen the bootstraps of the world,
even if you are not feeling humble, or humble has become
tiresome as a singsong prayer.
Everyone is your boss because everyone knows you
and expects certain behavior.
No spitting, no grumpiness, no annoyance with fools
for if you show any signs of being human
they will not let you be pope any more
and you will wind up on a bridge somewhere
selling windup toys or grilled kebabs and people will come up to
you squinting
saying I know you.
You must always be for life and always be for peace
and never concede the fact that everybody dies and the world is
ripe with people
who could benefit richly from a ferocious beating
and everyone knows it but you are not allowed to say it.
People go one and on about this saint and that saint
and you can say nothing though you know all the evidence in all
their files,
who was too fond of the muscatel, who wrote letters of an unholy
nature,
who masturbated with the lilies of the field, and who,
when the dog the body was disinterred and the coffin cracked
the look on their face was a maniac grin, frozen that way
for eternity.
It is hard to keep up with friends.
It is just not the same once you are pope.
They are so fond of you now, fonder than they ever were before
and nothing you say gets through to them,

they won't let you be honest any more.
There are times you want to burst out crying and tell them
everything
what a crock the Vatican is and what assholes the cardinals all are
and what you would give just to sit and play cards and sip gin
like you used to years ago before people stopped listening.
When you are pope you understand your career
has probably peaked,
there will probably not be many achievements after this,
it will be unusual even to catch a fish
on a Saturday in an aluminum boat, the little waves banging
against
the prow, and haul it flipping
into your net. You will look over your shoulder and the lake will
be full
of other boats, and film crews and helicopters, and people will
say it's not a fish,
it's an allegory, you have to think about this on a very complex
level,
nothing is simple any more.
When you are pope it is sadder than you imagined.
The devout and the suffering look to you as if you had the
answers
for their madness, for the cough that has been getting worse,
for the world in arms, and the torture of the faithful over slow
flames,
and you would do anything to take away the pain
but what can you do, you are only a pope.
Your faith that never let you down before
is suspect, you haven't heard from God in years,
he is like some clever zephyr that blows into town and blows out
again,
now you see him, then for thousands of years you don't,
and if gets to be too much and you start to doubt it's your fault,
where's your faith you sad son of a bitch, I was just waiting
for this moment, I knew you would disappoint me.
And now the light pours in at Castle Gandolfo, and you awaken
late
and your kidneys ache and you wonder how long you can carry

the cross
for the rest of the world, and you think of a girl
you knew in school, and you wonder what became of her,
if she got old and fat and lost that look that lifted you up off your
feet
all those years ago or she is still who she was, only better,
a lifetime later, and all this time she could have been your friend,
and you turn in the bedsheets, holding your side,
you feel as if a spear that fetched water from you,
and it is seeping away like raindrops from the body,
shiny as silver, as famous as dust.

The Wolf House

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

My Girl, 1987

At a video store with Daniele, three years old.

She runs up to me with a movie box:

"Look daddy, it's Mommie!"

The movie is *10*, with Bo Derek in cornbraids and nylon swimsuit,

running toward you on the cover.

Oh, baby, you are the one.

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.

Slugs

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

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?

Entrepreneur

This spider studied real estate.
He built a web at the corner station
over the sign flashing Quaker State –
location, location, location.

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.

From the Roof of My Apartment Building in Downtown Minneapolis

the moon is down to the cuticle now
the stars nod in and out

the night is as dark
and as deep as the hole

in the shed of the potato farm
in Michigan that my grandfather

had, and
then lost

I Saw a Deer, Now I Must Write a Poem

I saw a buck bolt onto Highway 5, down by the airport,
where workers are fixing the bridge.

Suddenly it was there, standing by the shoulder,
its side all rough as if scraped against stone,
then bolting into traffic, dodging cars,
leaping over the lane divider,
skidding away from a trailer truck, then vaulting
onto a bank of unaccustomed slag, and dancing, whitetail
bounding, back into the trees.

The wrong place at the wrong time, rush hour,
it was lucky it didn't get run over.
Motorists were shocked, workers stared open-mouthed.
The frantic look in the deer's eyes spelled
terror, confusion, the suggestion of reproach.

Deer and construction sites don't mesh,
the deer so fragile sprinting between bulldozers.
The overarching sense that road construction is wrong
and cars should pull over and give the natural order
the right of way and any poet seeing a deer
in the wild must file a complete report,
express solidarity with the animal,
remorse for the thud of mankind,
acknowledge complicity in the hazing
of innocent blood.

I was thinking that if deer
had short legs and made grunting noises
there would be fewer poems about them.

Full Up

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

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

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

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

After We Got the Dog

Daniele paper trained him in her room.
She who was so squeamish
put up with his poop and his pee.

And 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.

Signs

Every hundred yards in the Wisconsin woods
there are signs posted saying

No Hunting and No Trespassing.

People leave their cabins when the weather gets cold,
and they do not want to return to a shot-through window
or knocked over pumphouse.

A good sign, suggesting violators will be prosecuted
seems to keep most people away, except for
a few hunters who need everything spelled out.

You can tell a salesman made his rounds some time ago
because the dayglo veneer has peeled away from every sign
leaving three dry leaves of plywood sheeting.

So that every hundred yards is a tree
with a perfectly blank sign on it.

The gray of the bark crisscrosses the knots
and whorls of the plywood,
gray from the rain and north woods wind,
an advertisement to wilderness,
a message the animals read as well as you
saying this is this and here is here
and deeper into the pines there is more.

Priests

Even on the most sweltering days
when cement workers and waitresses
were tottering in the pews,
the priests suited up in all the layers –
alb, cincture, chasuble, stole.
The acolytes looked on with open mouths
as the priests dressed, muttering.
They appeared powdered, as if with corn starch,
their pale parts blanching in the gymnasium light.
Their hands fluttered through the blonde cabinetry
alighting on oils and incense, linen and gold,
muscatel, ribbons, and thin coins of bread,
the looks on their unlined faces all duty,
half lonely men, half swans.

Hard Frost

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

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

Applause for Crow

I believe you are the blackest bird I ever saw,
blacker than blackbird or raven, grackle or daw.
Your wingspread blacker than onyx without flaw,
Lacquered jacket black as a chew
of tar or ink or the mountain blueberries in your crow.
Your eye so keen there ought to be a law,
Diving down and snatching every stray gewgaw
Clutch of diamond, gum wrapper or straw,
snatched quicker than a talon or a monkey's hairy paw,
spurs remorseless as a mongoose claw.
Mightier in legend than the donkey's jaw,
from the ice of January to April's dreary thaw,
from summer's roasted pastures to autumn's hem and haw.
Your disdain for the usual forest foofraw,
your pitilessness for feathered things carried off in a wet dog's
maw,
and tendency to repeat yourself are transwoodland topics of awe.
Over and over every morning, the first breath I draw
that voice like tearing paper, only still more raw,
the hard spank of morning cries caw

To a Woodpecker

I too have been banging my head
like a jackhammer of bone
on the trunk of a tree
till my thoughts rattle round
like Odysseus for home.

Will I pry apart cambium with my nose
and find grubs in the soft meat
or will I spend a lifetime
skullstruck up a pole
reiterating the error of my life?

Minivan

We could not afford a good one but this
was good enough for us,
brown high-rider, automatic, slant six.
When we bought it we were in awe,
it smelled like road angel,
and though it had already rolled
ninety thousand uphill miles
with strangers in its seats
we felt it had been waiting all along
for us. I washed it, and stickered it,
and drove it to the store.
We were partners, it and I.
So when I left it for an hour at the park
and some guy smashed the passenger
window with a tire iron and stole
several hundred dollars of audio tapes
I got at the library for our trip out west,
I blamed myself, I should never
have left my treasure alone.
And when we sailed west through badlands
and buttes, and we filled our thermos
at Wall Drug, and bought doughnuts for the kids
it was with a new covenant between us,
a promise to take care of her.
We parked it near the motel door every night,
we locked it up and took the cameras inside.
And when I left our wallet and cash
on a trash receptacle at a convenience store
high in the Montana Rockies,
and we realized it was gone
and had a look in our eyes that had elements
of hope and elements of despair
and we sped back twenty miles up the mountain
our minds hard from wishing,
and there it was, people walking by,
good decent wallet-ignoring Montañards,

and we drove on, toward the Idaho border
and beyond that, to the brightening sea,
tearful with happiness and love
for you, Grand Voyager, for you.

Microwave

I hit the 30-second button,
and being busy, step to my office,
hit a key on my PC, and walk back
to the kitchen. Bing, coffee's warm.
But where did the 30 seconds go.
Like a card pulled from a deck
that gets smaller and smaller,
like the tiny waves hurled round the machine,
banging on the glass of time.

Roads

Macadam, asphalt, blacktop, tar.

Roads will take you anywhere,
speeding through the countryside, every bend a mystery,
every unevenness a jolt into something not known.

Roads on islands are conflicted
because they do not get you anywhere really,
they are circular and apologetic about that.

Mountain roads turn cars into eagles,
breasting the current then streaking down,
every eyelid opened wide.

Shore roads and causeways
lick the water while the water licks them.

Frontage roads like zoo animals prowling
their perimeters, pining to be free.

The dead end road is indeed a death,
irreversible and to be avoided
until the time you wish not to return.

Expressways and beltways that traffic courses through
like blood through muscle, cars by the thousand,
every destination of economic significance.

City boulevards throw each car in the spotlight
announcing a major breakthrough, you.

Alleyways where cats trip by on tiptoes,
and the modest lane that guides us to the garage,
the squeaky brake that tells you you are home.

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,
which ones seemed interested in the message they carried,
and which did not extend the courtesy of respect.
Then the food arrives, hamburgers, cokes and fries,
and the women in their Sunday clothes bow heads and pray

Plan

I know what I will do. I will drive a long way
north, to the wilderness, and pitch
my tent, and wait.

And when a tree nearby has had enough and
is ready to fall to the forest floor,
I will be on hand to see what sound it
makes, and report to you.

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