



Forgiving God

poems by mike finley

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Alien Abduction^{1*}

You were innocent, you shared
The prejudices that connected us
Like prayer, and the world held firm
Behind its insipid certainties.

Now you have nothing to cling to,
You stopped making sense to people
And the ones who lifted you up
left you there without explanation.

How is a man to live like that
Except muttering and on his knees
Hanging one's head in the shivering corn
And living with an unreasonable truth.

¹ Moab (2005)

* Again, I am guilty of using one metaphor – abduction by space aliens – to show what it is like to become convicted on an idea that is not popular with other people. You don't want to believe it – but your faith requires it.

Blow²

We are fluff that has been blown on,
We part company with one another
And float into the aloneness.
We wander so long
Borne aloft by breath, aching
To see one another again
Yearning to be stitched together at the foot
And it is like that until one day we come to rest
And realize that we carried the secret
Inside us all along, that we arise
From the core of a golden sun
And the day of blooming
Has been gathering inside
The whole while

² You (2002)

Meditation ³

thirty seconds short of a miracle
reminds the world
to keep me on my toes

forget it's a poem it's
life everlasting and what would
you give for life everlasting

I am a cracker breaking into
the crumbs of what I am, fit for a journey
through a thousand carnivorous years

remember me the way you first glimpsed me
through the wrong end of the telescope
that's me in the distance, my hand in yours

shut the door the thing out there
that was us will go away
and let us remember what

a privilege it was to bless this
space that was our duty
to keep busy with being

³ The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

Ski⁴

The snow is like cream
flowing down the ridge
along the cracking river.

A flock of geese
against dusted firs
alter their direction

like a human hand
moving through water.

⁴ Horses Work Hard (2000)

Why Did the Buddha Sit Under the Tree?

To get to
the other side.

Tsunami⁵

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

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

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

⁵ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

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.

God & Hippopotamus⁶

In the beginning God said to Hippopotamus:
Kiboko, I want this bank kept clean.
Your job is to keep the grass in line.

Kiboko answered the Lord saying:
Your will is my will, but please, Lord,
May I loll my sun-hours in the stream?

God thought deeply upon the matter; finally
He said Oh, all right,
Just don't eat all the fish.

Now every night Kiboko mashes clay
Between her hooves. When she goes
She shits and pisses both at once,

Her tail a propeller scattering the mess
Up and down the twilit bank
Distributing it for God to examine.

See? she says, her billiard-ball eyes
Rolling up to the moon –
No scales.

⁶ Water Hills (1985)

Water Hills ⁷

The water hills are
High today. Water
Hills meaning us, how
We break up the
Surface of things,
And make the lake we
Rise from more
Interesting.
Something burning and
Electric with
Insistence is in us,
Scratching, tapping
In our skulls. Some
Unnegotiable body of
Water rocks us in its
Arms, and in the
Distance collected
Like blue waves
Between us the man
Kisses deeply and
Longingly wife, and
The lightning
Sticking in our heads
Makes fire, each
Inhalation fills the
Sail, borne aloft by
A hand so strong the
Boat and sea obey.

⁷ Water Hills (1985)

The Dog of God

The dog of God has no free will.
He lives by the Master's convenience.
Left alone for long periods to fend for himself,
Nothing to drink, not a scrap in the bowl.
Parasites, ear mites, worms in the flesh.
The rapier teeth of a hundred invaders have left their marks,
And the old whiskered maw is white with the years.
A cataract clouds the left brown eye,
The malformed right perpetually weeps.
His loping gait is long since gone, he limps
And hobbles from gate to gate.
But when the Master returns from business
The hound of heaven staggers down the path to meet him,
Manged tail clapping with joy.

When You Are Pope⁸

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 on 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.

⁸ Sunset Lake (1989)

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 what you would do 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 has fetched water from you,
and it is seeping away like raindrops from the body,
shiny as silver, as famous as dust.

Triangles Prisms Cones ^{9*}

From a distance all we were were
big blue wheels;
we called them 'our reasonableness, '
we called them 'true circles, '
living in the world
and spinning with love.
It was our only course,
like the rudderless boat's,
to see land,
any land.

I was bound in copper coil,
you were a fire of slippery jewels.
From a distance we
were static electricity,
living in love with the stock-still world.

Crying under our floorboards
was our silver pyramid,
penned inside our walls were
ancient bulls
in bas relief.

Our flags were sins on lascivious oceans,
our word for regret was
'a whirlpool of blood, turning in space.'

It sped on.
The dot
which was so small at first
became what it had to become,
a collapse into feeling.
Item broke down into item of light,
each one new and unknown.
It was 'our home,'

⁹ The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I took the title from the same Italian Futurist anthology I took "Where Birds fare Well." After the first line, I believe all the words are mine.

a wave of slow motion,
which was all our lives forever.

We Asked for a Sign ^{10*}

Three days he waited to fart.
Then it came, endlessly bubbling,
like a machine gun in honey.
His widow smiled thinly.

¹⁰ Lucky You (1976)

* I always thought this was funny, but I have never had anyone confirm this for me. A corpse in a coffin, farting. The widow blanching. Come on, people. Sigh.

Truth Never Frightens

Based on a poem by Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). I realized some years after I made this that it is plagiarized from a shorter poem by Daniel Ladinsky. Apologies and honor to him, but I still like the extended version.

I remember once walking out in the winter
to greet our father as he returned from work.
He was a little late that night
and I waited by the corner near our house

The cold can enliven thanks, you know.
Thus my wool coat became a sacred robe ...
How happy I felt to be alive that night.

I waited there in a world of all the things I loved,
the smell of good food,
the quiet gleam of the street lamps,
smoke curling from every chimney,
the candles burning so hopefully in our windows
as if all were waiting for some important arrival.
And the snow,
the holy and immaculate snow.

It fills my heart with thankfulness.
It makes me think that angels feasted as I did that night
on the truth of our existence,
that God keeps saying to us, like the most loving father:
"Have more of what I made for you.
Have more. Have more!"

I saw him coming, our father
I saw him coming with arms outstretched.
We ran to meet each other
and he lifted me as he so often had –
twirled me through the air,
his hands beneath my arms,
holding me aloft.

And you know this is the nature of truth.
This is how truth behaves

Truth never frightens, it seeks only to love us
It lifts us high and lets us fly
Like birds in formation on the starriest night
It lifts us up and lets us know
How loved we are by God.

Nighttime at the Christian Retreat¹¹

The men who have been praying all day
Lay down their souls like cufflinks to the Lord.
And in a while the snoring starts, first in one cot,
Then in another, and soon each man
Is making his offering of oxygen.
There are thirty men under this roof
And not one is a drinker any more but maybe
We were all dropped on our faces as babies
Or maybe we have a greater than average population
Of former boxers, noses broken by a left jab,
Gladiators laid out on the Coliseum floor
gasping through a spatter of blood.
And the sum is like a song played on a rank of snouts
Like a choir of hogs assembled in crates,
Grunting and rooting and squealing for God.
Where the intake is a truck wheezing up a steep hill
And low gear holds the runaway in check
For if they leave the road they have set out on
They will backslide and their exertions will have failed.
Up a hill, down a hill, the night is an oscilloscope
Of panting crescendos and snorting diminuendos
On a pneumatic organ inflated by breath.
The roof draws in, the roof expands,
The roof heaves up, the roof subsides,
Like the ribs of a whale with thirty men inside
Detoured from their journey to Nineveh.
And the night is the irreplaceable pearl
That we beat the shrubs by our houses to find
That we turn out every cushion, flip over every rug,
That we pry up the hardwood of our hearts to locate
But it is not there until we surrender,
Like the flushed faces of boys on their pillows

¹¹ Moab (2005)

From the exertion of long days of play,
Like the din of a great brass gong, hung from a rope,
Fashioned by the hammering
Of a thousand earnest craftsmen,
Or the groan of a lamasery, chanting like smoke
High up on a dream Himalaya.

Govinda and the Park Policeman ¹²

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

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

And when his meditation was complete.
The two climbed back up the mountainside,
Where a park ranger was issuing them a citation.

What is the matter, officer? he asked.

You park registration is good for sixty minutes
But you have been here for almost an hour and a half.
I see, said the compassionate Buddha. But you know,
We were praying by the waterfall and lost all sense of time.
That may very well be, the ranger said, but it's not honest
To pay for sixty minutes, then try to get away with ninety.

I assure you, officer, I had no intention of deceiving.
But as you can see, I am but an old monk,
And these legs are not so fast at climbing steep hills
As my young companion's.

Then you should have paid for three hours, said the ranger.
Perhaps you should put a meter on the waterfall,
So people can deposit their money directly, said the disciple,
Who was red-faced with irritation.

Peace, my son, said Govinda. Indulging in sarcasm
Solves no problem, and creates many.

Besides, this good man is merely doing his job.
Write him a check then for the full amount,
But mark on the memo line:

"A tax on illumination."

¹² Moab (2005)

Pond ¹³

I see trees on the far shore mirrored in a pool
And below the trees the shimmer of cloud.
Below the cloud the reeds bow heads.
Behind, the shadows lengthening.

The skin on the water ripples with breeze
Like puff of breath on cup of tea.
Now cloud now electricity now stillness.
Now water-beetle steadfastly rows.
The shifting shape of trout.

It is like thinking about thinking
And then thinking about that.
It is leaf and water and heron craning.
It is shining and subtle and lovely and wet
And impossibly intelligent.

Prayer for Refuge ¹⁴

God save me from salesmen
and preachers in denim.

From long conversations
with etherized patients.

From boredom in the afternoon
And the smell of cheap perfume.

Shield me from the words
and consequences I deserve.

Maintain a sense of possibility
Put turbined slippers on my feet.

So at a moment's notice I can flee
From lolling tongues to thee.

¹⁴ You (2002)

Bad Neighbor ¹⁵

He moved in after dark
and I never saw his face.
Now I hear him moving
furniture around.

At night when I lay awake
He's banging out 'Honolulu Baby'
On his ukulele,
I swear it's the only song he knows

And he hasn't got a pretty voice
And every ten minutes I hear him
Crack open a beer, and ten minutes later
Roll the empty across the floor.

I don't know what the hell he's cooking –
Cabbage and licorice casserole? –
But the smell suspends for days and days,
Like he's hanging it up there on a line,

He is always at the door,
A cup of sugar, I don't know,
Maybe he's lonely and wants to talk,
Still I hide behind the drapes

Until the knocking stops
And his footfalls dwindle in the hall.
I wish he would pack up and move
And take that face I dare not see

But I've gotten to the point
I don't think I can live
Without him any more.

¹⁵ You (2002)

Cathedral Bathroom Graffiti

In the basement,
under the great gray dome,
people squat and write
on the toilet wall.

'I was here,' L.M. scratched in 1995.
Someone transposed an H and an I,
which I think means Jesus,
and he wrote it several times.
Someone just wrote the initials I.D.O.
which meant something to him
but not to me.

Bob '57 wrote: 'Let the sunshine in, '
a quote from a nude musical.
And someone in that dank room
with the too-thin paper wrote
'Miracles do happen'
with his Sharpie.

Dime¹⁶

One day I learned I was wrong all my life
Offended by lightness and wary of cheer
And the only music my ear respected,
The groan of the soon-to-be-dead.

Then did I see how far down-mountain
I was and what hard climb lay ahead.
But does one undertake such journey
With high purpose and fanfare

Or better, plant foot as if nothing
Much matters, as if birds migrating
Have nowhere to get to, and matters
Of life and excruciating death

Are resolved by the flip of a coin.

Fools Unlimited ¹⁷

God is the reason we all go crazy
begging scraps at every doorbell

Why we wear diapers cut from the funnies
duct-taped and leaking at the fold

We embrace the people who betray us
and we bless their bratty descents

The taste of vomit is always in the mouth
And it is not even always our own

Confess to crimes we didn't commit
Love Limbaugh and Gingrich and Jones

Abandon critical thought forthwith
Your intellect was never your friend

A woman with crossed arms demands to know
what happens now and who is to blame

And the answer is always yes, of course
the voices made us do it, again

¹⁷ The Rapture (2009)

Opportunity

Logically the caterpillar
would chew the leaf forever

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

How afraid we would be
to seal ourselves in like that

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

And all movement ceases
And we tremble in the dark

God Told Me to Tell You To Cut Your Hair ¹⁸

(for a friend afflicted with sexual compulsivity)

God told me to tell you to get a haircut.
Here's how he explained it:

Long hair is a sign of defiance.
Long hair is a sign of androgyny.
Long hair is a sign of childhood.

Samson had long hair,
but he was proud and he lost it
and had to go from pillar to post to reclaim it.

Jesus had long hair.
And you're not him.

Your sign is the sign of the Leatherneck.
Get a Marine cut, down to the nub.

Signal subtly to everyone who meets you
that you are a different guy.
No longer windblown and endlessly complex
but simple as the stubble on your scalp.

Then, be that guy. In three and a half weeks,
go get another haircut.
Don't let it grow back ever again.

If people ask you about the new look,
sneer and say, 'I'm on a mission from God.'
Every time you look in the mirror, think:

"I am a Marine. I do the dirty work.
I do what I'm told. I don't have a brain.
I have give everything away,
and I don't take anything back."

¹⁸ Midnight at the Mounds (2004)

Shame is for sissies and you
Are a natural killer

Pelagius

Little is known of this man
except he refuted original sin.

Some suggest he was Irish
With a vision nightmarish:

Adam set 'a bad example'
When he bit into the apple.

And Jesus did not die for us.
Augustine railed at Ephesus

His heresy had sufficed.
To gut the crucified Christ.

Doing the Non-Ado

Coulda

Shoulda

Woulda

Buddha

Prayer for Money ¹⁹

To the extent that it is educational to suffer,
And there are lessons you wanted to teach,
God, we get it.

If we have sneered from our own security
that others aren't trying hard enough,
forgive us.

We are reduced in our fear
to being grateful that they are hurting
and not us.

You are lord and commander of tides.
Wash something in our direction,
we pray.

Build tolerance in us for one another
And confidence to write a check
and start things.

Build patience in us awaiting opportunity,
That we not step on our neighbor's face
for a penny.

Call an end to this lusterless season.
Send rain by the ocean and wash away
our fears.

¹⁹ You (2002)

Why Seek You Him Here? ²⁰

Why look for him in prayer
God is not there

you can't place a local call
to the All-In-All

Not responding to anyone,
why, that's half the fun

He has gone into his father's house
He's got no time for the likes of us

Too busy creating fresh wounds
to manage old accounts

Best look for him in jail
picking his teeth with a nail

Better, look where no one looks
and not in books

²⁰ The Upset Sea (2010)

The Search Goes On

I'm looking for something
in the eyes of people I meet nightly.
if I turn and walk away
it's because you didn't have anything to say
or held onto it too tightly.

A Monk at the Door ²¹

One summer morning the doorbell woke me.
When I opened the door, there was a man in a Tibetan robe,
wearing Buddy Holly frames.
He was a chaplain from the Minneapolis Police Department.
He read from a piece of paper in his hand.
He told me that my daughter had been found dead in her room.
Then I had to tell my wife.
Rachel, a man downstairs ...
says Daniele ...
has died.

This really happened.
It was August 18, 2009.

Within moments of hearing my daughter was dead,
God died, too.
I had put all my trust in his faithfulness.
I knew we were on a journey, a journey I could not understand.
But I trusted God to see us through.
I prayed every day for protection for Daniele,
from the dangers that surrounded her life.
And so God began to shrink, to collapse to a dot.
I could see him disappearing into air.
I could hear his tiny voice calling out: goodbye.

The day of the funeral, a beautiful hawk perched
on our backyard lines.
A dozen people looked up as it surveyed us, shrugged,
and flew away over the garage.

Sometimes in the fall, down by the river bluffs, I see eagles.
And herons. And ducks.
Always, a curious sensation that they are not just birds,
they are messengers somehow.
Here I am, they are saying. I am here.
I am everywhere.

²¹ Desalinization (2010)

Winter was hard. Rachel went away.
Friends stopped calling.
They were sick of my stories.
I sat and watched the satellite and I drank.

Sometimes I was so angry I would argue all day,
with the people who no longer called.
Behind their backs I told them the truth to their faces.

Spring came, the trees leafed out and blossomed.
One day I heard a tapping in the dining room.
A robin had returned and flown in the back door,
and now was leaping over and over again
into the same sealed window.
The bird was frantic, afraid and exhausted.
I fetched a plastic Walmart bag from the pantry
and slipped it over the frightened bird.
As gently as I could I placed the bag
on an open planter in the back yard.
The bird sat paralyzed, unblinking, one wing cocked awry.
I left the bag and bird alone, and when I returned minutes later,
the bag was empty ...
the bird was gone.

And for the first time I found myself wondering
about something ...
If God was truly gone ...
if nothing mattered and the universe wasn't just
a snide joke at the expense of the conscious ...
then why was that man on the porch,
with the stubbly scalp and the stubbly chin
and the stammering affect ...
and why was he wearing saffron robes?

And why has that color ...
the color of the embalmed body,
but also the sign of surprise
been everywhere I look?

The Rain Will Come²²

When the stain sets and sinks into the cloth
on a rag on a post on a gravelly hill
where the ants march steady in the crimson clay
The rain will come and wash it away

When there is too much to bear
and you have worn out prayer
And there is some thing that needs to be gone
the rain will come and wear it down

Though no one you know will understand
something hard to comprehend
though faith is dead and odd is even
the rain will come and rinse it clean

When the gouge is deep and the hole erodes
and scoured hollow by a stone
and the universe is empty as a sin
the rain will come again and fill it in

When you have given up for good
And you tried everything you could
And you made arrangements with the pain
And the worm has burrowed lengthwise through the brain

The rain will come and start to fall again

²² The Upset Sea, 2010

Relationship ²³

God mops
the last breath
away
with a cloth

²³ You (2002)

God Must Love Crazy People²⁴

He made so many of us
When we shout to ourselves
on a busy mile and not
into a cellphone
he must smile

When we fabricate arguments out of air
and become paranoid
with ridiculous fears,
a sensible person starts bleeding from the ears
and He daubs his eyes with joy

When we miss the rent because
all our money is spent
on a Crazy Kat clock with ping pong eyes
it constitutes
divine surprise

as if this was what
the world He made
out of mud is really for –
the looks on our pusses
are priceless

When we weep ourselves to sleep
because we can't seem to change
and we drive the people we love
onto barstools, saying

it matters, it is fulfilling,
it is the indivisible element,
it is the purpose of
the entire experiment

God must love the crazy people
or why would He make us
such as these,

²⁴ Desalinization (2010)

impossible to put up with
unhealable as disease

He loves us because
we remind him of Him,
before the before, in-
comprehensible
to His core

The Outlaw²⁵

(Original verse began: Jesus was a suicide)

Jesse was a suicide
the way he egged on the law.
After a while they had no choice
but to string him from the bough.

Jesse's father beat on him
until the neighbors howled.
But Jesse loved that old man
and did as he was told.

Jesse was a poet who
invaded women's soul.
He looked them in the eye
and called them Pearl.

Jesse had a gang of friends
but he could count on none.
Not one of them stood below
the rope that he made taut.

Jesse was a dead man when
they set him in the crate.
When spirits came to fetch him
they were too late.

The outlaw disappeared
Beyond the Wasatch Range
Jesse was a bastard
and no one took his name

²⁵ The Rapture (2009)

Moab²⁶

On Sunday when the family was camping
Three miles up the Colorado from town,
The little boy wandered too close to the water.
His sister screamed as he was carried away
And she said she saw him wave goodbye
Although he might have been reaching for help.
A man who lived three doors down in Salt Lake
Was camping in a lot marked No Camping Allowed.
He had agreed to keep watch on the river.
The methane in the decomposing body
causes it to float, he said, and we get the boy back.
and what could I tell him but good luck.

I think of the moment the father experienced,
The moment every parent sits up in bed
Because you have let down your guard
And the treasure is gone, you will never get it back
And your punishment is for that instant
To freeze over forever like unmeltable ice.
And you say, If only I had done this or that
Or if only my last words had not been so sharp.
Doggone it Elmer can't you see daddy's busy?
Can't you play by your sister where you're not in the way?
It was your number one job to keep an eye on him.
God will forgive you but that's about it.

Proof of God ²⁷

Is in the breath so simple.
Breathe in, breathe out,
Then tell where one begins
And the other ends.
Or tell me it was you
Who gave instructions to the lungs,
"I have inhaled enough, old friend,
Now it's time to let it go."
The truth is, it happens
And it happens again,
Over and over, every minute
We are alive, a moebius loop
Of oxygen and carbon
That is just exactly
What we require,
Not an advanced degree
in gas hydraulics, a bird
On a branch is as competent as that.
Mechanics call this device
A governor, and it governs us
Without our being aware,
And it is everywhere,
In every cell and every blink
And every balanced process
That there is.
And you can say
That's no old man with a beard
But I say well it's something
And it keeps us going day to day,
A will to order that provides us
Opportunities,
But you need not believe to draw air,

²⁷ You (2002)

It is given, and there is no moment
When we are free from this
Casual miracle,
This tap on the shoulder
That says here, friend,
See what you can do.

Spirit^{28*}

if you have
a better idea
I'd like
to hear it

²⁸ DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

* I stopped praying when Daniele died. Just couldn't do it any more. That is what this poem-let is about.

Dream of God Driving a Bulldozer ^{29*}

*He seemed very purposeful, and happy ...
damned if I can figure out why*

It's what he uses to get around ...
It isn't very fast ...
And the mileage is pathetic ...
But he has a ton of gas ...

He sits high in the seat,
bouncing with every lurch,
blue fumes pouring out around him ...
as he leans into the dirt

He wears hard hat and safety glasses
and a corncob pipe,
which he clenches with his smile
and a rag he uses to wipe

Everywhere his tread digs in ...
it stutters in the clay ...
then a wall of shit issues forth
at the nudging of his blade ...

²⁹ The Rapture (2009)

* I wrote a dozen 'shake fist at God' poems in the wake of Daniele's death, So far, nothing terrible has (additionally) happened.

God's Body³⁰

The campaign raged into its eighth decade, hopeless from the get-go.

All God had to do was think of his enemies and they ceased to exist. You would be talking to a guy, and suddenly he was no longer there.

God would wait until they got within a spear-throw to blink, and then he laughed that awful empty laugh. What an asshole he was.

And that was why, despite the danger, there was never a shortage of volunteers.

They signed up by the thousands, eager to end the tyranny, the caprice, and that gruesome laugh.

And the soldiers fought all their lives, until God thought of them, or they died.

The Lord God mowed them down by the million, and he laughed his giant belly-laugh.

One day God slipped up, he became intoxicated with his own self-regard and lapsed into a kind of holy coma.

A group of commandos came upon him as he lay open-mouthed on the sand, and they lanced him in the neck and armpit and groin.

Divine blood rushed from his wounds, till the seashore stank for miles.

It was a mighty and an unexpected victory.

Without asking, they stripped his body with long knives, and peeled away his fat in lengthy strips.

³⁰ The Rapture (2009)

They rendered the fat, which screamed in the cauldron, and filtered it through cheesecloth.

Altogether they saved thirty-two barrels of oil from God's body.

The oil was distributed to the people of the world, who burned it in lamps.

The lamps stayed lit for the lifetimes of the people. They read, and talked, and danced, and it was their turn to laugh, to the light of God's pure oil.

And though they were nervous about the darkness that was coming, they had no regrets.

Six Theological Options ³¹ *

When your heart is broken
you have six theological options.

You can say this proves there is no God
and do whatever you like.

You can bury yourself deeper than ever in God
and pray for acceptance or elucidation.

You can cut a deal with God,
though chances are it's too late for that.

You can be disappointed with God
and spend your days asking why, why.

You can decide that you were God all along
and it was on you all the while.

Or you can declare war on Him
and live life like a soldier.

³¹ Desalinization (2010)

* I have had people tell me there are more than six options. But they won't tell me what the others are. I think they want a nice one to be there.

The Soul Dwells Outside Time³²

clinically signifying
that its temporal lobe
is minuscule
a teardrop in a drum

which is why it is as excited
to see you returning from
the store
as from a dozen years
in jail

to the world this proves it
is an imbecile
and yes, the soul is an imbecile,
and yet!

in the larger realm
it means love does
not parse out its grace
with a dropper

but by the mainspring
straining
inside the machine
that is always
shuddering

for your touch

³² DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

God's Failures ³³

What if this is the best he can do
he's like an airline that keeps losing luggage
or the Army Corps showing up late
after the levees have broken
snapping his fingers
I've fucked up again

What if his heart is in the right place
but he's just an idiot
he can't help it
he keeps losing his car keys
and poking his eye with his umbrella

What if we've been covering for him
out of kindness all this while
when what he really needs is
accountability
his holy feet held over the fire

³³ The Rapture (2009)

Prayer in Defiance of Grief ³⁴*

How can you kill what cannot be killed?
Why weep for those who have been taken?

Why furnish ammunition to the enemy
Who hammers jewels from your tears?

Who am I to say, 'This is the end!'
When I am the world's ignoramus.

I can't outsmart the equity markets
But I second-guess my molecules?

I have made a list of every known sadness
And set it ablaze on a paper plate.

Let others twist their hankies at night.
I am free of all that forever.

³⁴ You (2002)

* 'You' is a book about pursuing the spirit – hymns of joy, mostly. If you hate theistic things, you will want to skip these.

Prayer for Resilience ³⁵

As the mountain hungers to be made flat
So I burn for your salvation.

Help me to forgive the airplanes
strafing me on the skyscraper.

The centipedes in the pillowcase
know not what they do.

Spread open my chest with a spring-clamp
And let my heartbeat keep my time.

These trembling hands want work.
These clapping lips want song.

To you I lift a styrofoam cup.
Pile on dear God, pile on!

Prayer for Foolishness ³⁶

God make me an idiot
Oblivious to sense.

I don't want to care
About things that don't matter.

Gibberish is speech enough
From now on poetry is touch.

Burn all books in an act of faith
Gag all speculative breath

Steer my learned friends away
Let me be with you this day.

³⁶ You (2002)

Prayer for the Reordering of History ³⁷

If we went by the papers
The world'd be burned to a crisp.
Then where did all the beauty come from?
And whence that pitchfork, hanging in the air?

It's so easy to get sidetracked
Over pogroms and massacres.
Did you order all that blood for yourself
Or did our own certainty require it?

The clang of armies was our idea.
All you ever offered was love.
And now it is our charming defiance
That throws that in your face.

Help us to identify and ignore
All propaganda.
Better to be blind as a mole than to see
Disingenuously.

³⁷ You (2002)

Prayer at Planting Time ³⁸

The hardest lesson of the sinner
Is that all is in you, and nothing in him.
Why are we given these garrulous minds
If the end-challenge is only to submit?

God take away my anguish
By taking away everything.
I cannot save my life,
I cannot save the things I love.

Plant this wisdom into me,
Drill deep and release the bulb
That will bubble out of the ground like iris
After every dry season.

Renunciation ³⁹

I break with St. Paul
and the one-way
Irish streets

And join with Patrick
and the Christ whose blood
veins every leaf

³⁹ The Rapture (2009)

Hand

Sometimes it is just a gesture
that changes things,
the opening and the sweep of the hand,
which seems grandiose in one sense,
“See all that I am inviting you to,”
and humble in another,
“This is the paw of a creature like yourself.”
And if the hand should be a well-used one,
one that has been frozen, shaken,
knitted, soiled, refused, all the better.
It opens, it invites,
and you follow.

Forgiving God

It is the hardest thing to do
because when he fails he really fails
and of everyone who really lets you down
he lets you down the hardest
and of everyone who let you down
he should have known better
and how destructive the failure would be –
no one who trusted before
will trust again so much.
His failures twist souls,
kill churches, feed the bitterness
that bitterness craves,
so that there is more failure,
more failure, more.

He is sorry, God knows
he is sorry and what can he say,
that he'll make it up to you,
like a missed call on an outside pitch,
it can be swapped with another pitch later?
No, people die, faith dies, love dies
when God fucks up
and he wears the memory like a wooden plate
tied round his neck with string.
So many plates, so many strings
you can hear him far off, coming.

So how do you go forward when you
have all power and he has none?
First appreciate the irony.
Then do the thing he would have done
in a more competent age,
and set him a task that has nothing
to do with you or his most recent error –
bring word from a long lost friend,
let you witness love without being involved.
Let you see kindness with your own eyes,

kindness of the kind that smashes rocks
and contradicts credulity.

And as always, look for the sign
of his handiwork, a surprise
you could not have included
in the instructions, some happy extra
thrown on to the task.

Then you know he is on the job
and stimulated.

Extract no promises, God has no compass
to keep him aright, it is
one step at a time for him, the same
as me and you.

And start saving, now, for the next big
fuck-up, because
God is let loose on the unaware world
and anything can happen.

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