

**POETS
RUIN**

**EVERY
THING**

MIKE

FINLEY

Poets Ruin Everything¹

A roomful is like a guild meeting of the gods
And they are petty, jealous ones.

If they are friendly they are unctuous and you wonder
What they want from you, perhaps the sense
that they are not really very good
But with a little politicking with you they might be
admitted to the inner ring
And thus avoid the death of being bad,
and the embarrassment of having thought otherwise.
In any event they seem nice but you dare not believe them
For they are peddling wax fruit from the back of a truck.

If they are unfriendly it is because they are intimidated
by everyone
Except the people they are able to intimidate,
and they are always trying
To decrease the first group by increasing the second one.
They are bullies plain and simple but they do it
with attitude
instead of muscle.
The work no longer matters to them,
just who is in and who is out, and what explanation
they can concoct for being out themselves.
A good excuse is better than a poem;
in fact that is the kind of poem they write, and
some are pretty good.

The worst are those who turn you into a member
of the unfriendly group
because they write a brand of inoffensive and sincere verse
that ordinary people sitting in the front rows get,
and these simple thoughts vault them to the head of the pack,

¹ Desalinization (2010)

and their poems appear in the more coveted magazines,
and then you are the jealous one and obliged to loathe yourself,
but at least you did not sneer at them at parties or call them names
or if you did they were merely passive expressions.

"I couldn't wait to hear more of your work."

"When I read your poems I want to close the book and just be."

And then there are the others, you can't describe them
because you never see them.

You don't know how much they drink or if they know
their kids' names or if they worship Pan in a laurel grove
because they keep their heads down, and when you
read a poem by them

you feel your intestines knot because it is the real thing
and you want to break into their houses at night
and rifle their cupboards and bag up their secrets
and then you would be as clean as them,
but it's no good, because they're too good,
they aren't even aware that there's a competition,
they seem plugged into some whole other thing
and anyway you don't know where they live.

High in the Foothills^{2*}

a man pulls a fish
from a stream

² Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

* This was my definition of a poem in 1977

The Lord God Addresses the Convocation of Poets

You who puff yourselves up with words,
hear me now.

All you who achieve with the arch of an eyebrow
what you would not do with honest toil.

You who are persuaded that living sordidly
lifts you above these other my creatures,
who imagine that I harbor special grace and store

for the masturbators and malingerers
of this my world. (Yes!)

You who imagine that being unable to speak simply
and without design
are signs of my special favor.

Blow trumpets, howl winds, swirl gyres of ocean and cyclone and
rage.

I break with the poets of the field and the air,

I deny the poets of the heather and hearth,

I forswear the poets of water and land

who get it wrong more consistently

than idiots quaking in the square

or misbegotten monsters who live but an hour

goggle-eyed in their mothers' maws.

Break thunder, break cataracts, break trees at the knees,

break promises not to destroy you again

in a boat, in a fire, in a meteor blast.

While you amuse yourselves that I send muses
to each of you

to draw out the milk of your beauty,

as if legions of angels had nothing better to do

than attend to the daydreams of lazy vanity,

pet preference of the I-Am.

O, do not play footsie with the whirlwind,

do not make nice with death-in-life,

Crush granite, strike planet, crush heaven with one swipe,
curse me as a jealous god that I am harried by these gnats,
will no one relieve me of their pretense?

I've grown tired of the customary acts of faith,
widow women turning on spits,
infidels lighting the streets into town –
I want a special cut of meat from my subjects,
the hearts of their poets pierced en brochette,
the best minds of their generations sauteed.

Down with the poets, commence the crusade.
Line them up and start shooting, mow them down in my name.
Begin with the successful ones in the same towns as you,
the men and women in salons who know
that if they were in any real place
and not some jerkwater parish far from Rome
they would be nobody at all.
The people who get endlessly recycled in anthologies,
panels, talk shows, the works,

they who have started to take it for granted
that they are the spokesmen for nature's art,
the voice of the flowers, the agent of the wood,
and talk and mince like boneless politicians.
Have them get ready to bathe.
Then get the street poets who might have amounted to something
because at least they had energy
if only they'd set aside being mad at people who've done them no
harm
but that would mean losing the attitude

that is their weapon of choice
in an unworthy world so forget that.
My apocalyptic friends, you would not know an apocalypse
if one bit you on the ass.
The pagan poets – find them, tell them
the Lord God Jehovah says –
BOOGA BOOGA!

The surrealists – find them! Tell them who would make madness
an artform that I won't let them be crazy.

Hobble their imaginations, hamstring their minds,
let them be prisoners of syllogistic logic,
unable to free-associate or make the jettes of thought
that make them feel superior.

The solipsists – let every reality be real except theirs,
let their mirrors explode and the shards eviscerate them,
In the hall of death let them be hamburger.
I want files of dadaists turned into actuaries,
hauling their crossbeams up the ancient hill.

The suicide poets – dig them up,
and reshape their mouths into smiles,
hang lobster bibs around their necks,
put them to work doing community service,
for the people they shucked off and the examples they set.
The myth poets who walk in the shadows of shadows,
drive them out into the light,
invite them as guests to our poem pogrom.
And the introspects who do not get out of bed

until every dream is written down, rouse them and tell them
I have something nonmetaphorical to share with them,
Real spikes and real nails, and broken teeth and broken bones.
Call in the botanical poets and the bird poets from the fields –
naming things and reporting on their noises and smells,
and in all matters particularizing,
imagining this is what I do with you –
find them, mulch them, restore them to their world,
the rich good manure of poets.

The social poets who don't write much
but never miss a party,
tell them they won't miss my party,
I've got them on my list.
With a bullet.
The alcoholic poets with the hair-trigger responses

and faltering follow-up,
who sought refuge in the weak stuff, spirits of grain,
their flame will be smokeless, clean and blue.

Tell the writers of confessional poems their penance
shall be infinite fire throughout infinite time.
Tell the poets of rhymed verse my favorite poet is Whitman,
because of the resemblance.
Tell the feminists about my long white beard.
Tell the writers of love poems I hate them.
Tell the poets obsessed with rhyme and meter
that a clock is ticking
in their asses, and their moment of glory is nearly come round.

Light ovens, start fires, pitch boil till blackness
fills my nostrils like perfume.
The smoke of a thousand poets in residence,
who communicate in surreptitious form
the lack of respect extended them in departmental meetings
because they don't know anything anyone with a brain
lodged inside a skull would pay \$100 an hour to learn.
Feed to the reaper the country poets who drive into town
to depict the horrors of the street in verse.

Feed to the incinerator the city poets who take the highway out
to bless the headwaters and mouth the names of dead medicine
men,
whom I personally know,
and who if they saw you standing there, spiral notebooks at the
ready,
would split you down the middle
with an adze, or an atlatl,
they were good honest people don't you know.
Torch their jackets with the patches on the elbows,
string up and debowel their pedigreed dogs,

bring me the beating heart of the ceremonial poet
assigned the dedications of new gymnasiums
and alumni center parking ramps,

flay the chancered workshop poets who labor with laser
and page the world with simultaneous submissions
of the same thick verse a hundred times over,
a backbreak of postmen, a slaughter of spruce
and for what, some pointless exercise in imitability
that gives pleasure to neither reader nor world,

slack stillborn refraction of art,
a bag of vomit from an unclean mouth,
vanity everywhere, top and bottom,
fetch matches, fetch torches, fetch fire.
Rage, quake, pestle, shout,
all the pretty ones blotted out,
Women poets ploughed with lime and the men enriched with
manure,
Invite every glad spirit who puts down the words,
the terribly timid, who confide the only truths they know

to incomprehensible lines that no one will read,
O, their fragile courage moves me so,
how do I attend to the business of keeping the bodies in motion
and the atoms charged
knowing they are having a bad day in a dormitory in
Pennsylvania,
heap them high like hosannas of unexercised flesh.
Death to the clay-faced outdoorsman who writes in a cabin
deep in the woods by the light of a candle and trust fund.
Death to the radical poets who assailed the princes

that I myself had installed,
making their jobs even more impossible and unpleasant
than I had made them to begin with
O you who make life difficult but sleep in till ten,
draw tenure, clink glasses late into the night,
You're highly regarded, you're very well read.
I grind your bones to make my bread.
My prophecy is plain, my prophecy is pain,
my prediction mass graves and smoking soil,

nutritious to the earth beyond all reckoning,
they that held such store in words
instead bequeath calcium, nitrogen, zinc as their gifts,
their limbs interwoven in a tapestry
that puts the lie to their individuality,
O, that one there, row four hundred, two hundred sixty-fifth from
the right,
did you know he was a genius, a genius, a genius, a genius!
My geniuses are cloth.
Come to my supper and sit at my table,

hens and chickens stewing in your broth.
I turn all your whining water to sangria,
all your crumbs to angel food.
You are fit and right and meat to me.
Climb inside the warm abode I have prepared for you
for a trillion churning years.
As you are creators
and as I am creator
let us now be as one,

alive
in the
LAVA
of language.

Dream of Whitman

I dreamed I played basketball
with the bard of America,
he spun the globe on his finger
and said, young fellow,
you must not dwell inside yourself,
step out, step up to the world
where everything is revealed.
I stood in the rain on the bridge with him
and he shouted into the din,
There is no modesty now,
no inhibition,
no deflected blows.
He clasped me around the shoulders:
My son, it all just goes!

In Minnesota

A friend showed me a poem he had written
and I was appalled.
Why did you type these words, I asked.
It's so sad, you could have been brushing carrots instead,
or changing the gravel in your fish tank,
something useful.

What you wrote is so poetic
and such a lot of work
and so hard to understand,
it's a wonder that you did it.

Have you ever considered that your muse
is out to get you,
to embarrass you so badly with her inspiration
that you dare not leave your house?

Consider the possibility.

It's funny because life is full of adventures
and coincidences
and funny stories,
but this is what we always write about
O my soul the Stygian darkness ...

You know what we should be doing?
We should be laughing our asses off
at our ridiculous lives
and the bumpy journeys we've all been sent on.
We should be passing the jug
and blowing wine out our noses
at the incessant meddling of God,
not hid indifference to our plights.

A poem should be like sticking your fingers
in a lamp base

to see what it feels like,
it should make us clap like toddlers
or tin monkeys with cymbals,
we should be rolling our eyes
and sneezing underwater.

Instead of writing what you've written
you should appear on stage
and flip a lightswitch
a hundred times until everyone
sees green and magenta circles
blipping in front of their eyes,
now that would be a poem.

But evidently I'm in Minnesota
and we have taken a vow,
and we'll say no more of this for now.

Critique

I slapped the man's manuscript in my hand.

“The truth is, your work is almost entirely masturbatory.”

He clasped me by the shoulders and gazed into my eyes.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!”

'Abandon'

As a noun it can be
a wonderful thing
a severing of restrictions
a tossing off,
'She gave herself to total abandon.'

As a verb it is to be avoided
a father driving west
away from his kids,
a baby making fists in a basket
'When she most needed you
was when you abandoned her.'

Only occasionally
it cuts a fresh groove.
'We abandoned that way of thinking
as destructive.'
'She abandoned all claims
and went forward.'

A Great One *

I never constructed a great one with my hands,
one that, once released, swept cities away like a runaway
reservoir,
and people did not resist its surge
because they knew the flood was for them,

Because a great one feels like it knows who you are,
has taken up your cause without you being aware.
A great one is compassionate yet ignorant,
It knows you better than you know yourself,

It is courageous because it doesn't give a shit
if it's corny and it doesn't care if you try to pass it
through the baleen of your ideology
to filter its truth until it becomes acceptable

A great one is like a hammer-blow to the head
And the best of us feel we have been pummeled to mush,
Our heads are like boiled bowling balls, empty and malleable
and marked by a preternatural swirl.

A great one lays down its life for you with a laugh
Because it knows it can never die, its gestures
Cost it nothing, at the end of this movie another one begins,
and so the penalties we dread facing are a joke to it.

It is always flush with cash because it is of a piece with riches,
It picks up every check and leaves hundred dollar tips.
A great one is generous because money is infinite
but you cannot know this until you spend it.

A great one summers on the cape and winters in the mountains
Because the air is better and the company convivial

* This began as an essay about what makes a poem great. But then I thought, who cares about that? What makes anything great? What does great mean exactly? What is a great one? By "vaguely up" the topic, it seemed to work better.

And the pinchball on the atomizer is never out of reach
So that the voice is ever liquid and the timbre ever strong.

It is ushered into the waiting limousine
And speeds away to the next great moment,
The testimonial banquet, the honorary degree,
The reception line that loops back on itself like an homage to
infinity.

The great one acknowledges no competitors,
dips its bread in the bowl and mops up all the wine,
we stand in its wake as it shrinks to a dot, teary-eyed, choking
on the blue fumes of its burning.

Fountain Pen Poem

When I folded it,
A shadow copy appeared,

the message of mystery
you always want to write

that could mean anything or nothing
and slanted in the wrong direction

like a sentence that doesn't know fear.

Mobile Greek Chorus

Radio dispatched, they can be on hand
to minister to every moment of panic

They know somehow what is in your heart
and what must be weighed against what

Sympathetic to you, but also mindful
of the needs of the larger community

Should you act out of rage or selfish desire,
that might be it for Denmark

They explain what the hero cannot
Because they have the common touch

Still the megaphones seem a bit much

The College of Poets

We were cut off from one another for so long,
And now we are assembled
Yearning to connect and tell one another
We understand, we understand, we understand.

All the envy has been hosed away.
If we criticize it is in the name of collegiality
And solely with the objective
Of making a good thing better.

Garlands of asphodel deck our brows
Figures of speech hover in the air:
'Amputees twitching their phantom limbs'
'Neutered dogs attending to their nutsacks'

Poet Struck By Train

for Denis Joe of Liverpool, who had a bad day

I hear the chime in the poem's voice
and in the notes you write
you hunger for truth and you tell it too
you understand pain is the face of injustice
in an otherwise lopsided world

I know what it is like to fall forever
and wonder how there could be
anything additional below
no whiskered root to grab hold of

why rage against a world
that can't help being busted?

fire is proof that fire exists
and can't be extinguished ever
not by a train a thousand miles long
smashing into cheek and bone

the human heart is infinite
survives these raggedy envelopes, us,
keeps beating after red-faced suns
have hissed and had their say

My Darling Serpentine³

I thought it was so tragic
And nothing could be badder
I peeked inside the basket
and beheld the speckled adder

I predicted mass destruction
The rope could only tighten
But no noose is a good noose
It was a cat-eyed python

I thought I had shed blood for you
There was none such as this
'The poet of the universe'
And then I heard the hiss

³ Desalinization (2010)

Beheaded

The word has been undermined
so you think of mattocks
and stained chopping blocks, it

should be a term of approval, as in
that is one well-beheaded young man,
and he will go places, or

her beauty was beheaded with
a diadem of roses that pulsed
with fragrance in the dying light, or

for use in a vow
when it must be especially clear
what we intend, as I'll
beheaded home soon

What Is a Painting

First it is a meditation
on the thing that is in it,
a boat, a man playing cards,
and the way the man
looks at the others around him.

A house shivers under a cold sun
its shingles blown aslant,
the paint is bleared and blued
by hot and dripping rain.

Then it's a dance with light,
because no one paints
in the dark. Seeing is what
it's all about.

Then the shadows play
on the faces, the light reveals
what burns inside –
tiredness, suffering, boundless joy.

Finally it is action,
there are strokes involved,
strokes! each one a mighty blow
to untruth, an assault

so one is having an adventure
on one's feet, a duel to the death
or to life, or however,
but it is just exciting, you see.

We get into trouble,
then work our way out again..
And while I am no painter,
I think of this undertaking

with an unaccustomed
reverence –
it may be the closest
I ever come to God.

Peace Poem⁴

It's like you're driving the interstate
And you hit a pothole and blow out a strut
And you stand by the roadside
Kicking the chrome
And cursing the road maintenance crew
For being too late with a shovel of patch
Saying son of a bitch what a crummy system
And you don't seem to notice
The headless horse in the crook of a tree,
Or that there is no road, just stink and smoke,
And the days that used to make you
Call on God for better times
Are never coming back.

⁴ Moab (2005)

The Secret

knowing there is one
makes everything awkward

we're all supposed to know it
but no one's allowed to say

what it is, still there's
all this nodding

Disavowal

Be wary of poems that mount the pedestal
Brandishing bright words, or better still
stand guard and prick up your ears.
A deeper peace will take a thousand years.

Writers

Writers start out all right
they pay attention to things and deliver reports
on the way things are, it is a useful function
they perform

but then something happens

someone will say, you know, this is interesting,
and you can see it go bad
like a banana going brown
they enjoy the attention and want more
and tell themselves I could create lots of these reports,
they're not that hard to do
now that I know how to do it

and then they want readers
and they they want comments
and then they want praise
and then they want praise
bulging out of the faucet
night and day like an endless drip.

until they are no longer reporters
but debutants on a featherbed
chins in their hands and their feet
wagging behind them

tell me more about myself
tell me more
and they're not working
for you any more

you say everyone needs encouragement
it's not true
encouraging only encourages them

Prayer for Poets⁵

Let a thing be what we say it is.
If a donkey is eating corn
let the donkey not be an allegory
nor the corn a corn byproduct.

Let us not despise readers
for not getting us
when we did nothing to let them in,
and everything to keep them out.

Let every offering be a gift,
first from you and then from us.
Let 'Let this serve you well'
be both credo and manifesto.

Do not let us fall down
the well of our awareness.
Neither let us feel special
Just because we hear music.

Lead us not into obscurity,
and deliver us from brilliance.
For thine is the poem
forever amen.

⁵ You (2002)

Patty Canney⁶

Her paintings are light
and colorful, only a woman
could or would portray these
languid hesitations –

a visitor in a gallery leaning into
an oil,
a male dancer during break, chest out,
unable not to strike a pose,
a dress dummy in a window,
headless yet still pretty.

In each case there is something beautiful and timeless,
and at the same instant diminutive,
a sigh of human exasperation.

Children dripping ice cream
into dappled hands,
a man slouched in a chair in an atrium
biding more time than he wishes.
A garment hanging on a nail,
awaiting the impartation of flesh.

It is an everyday world of grace and
impatience,
One we bustle through every day,
hands in pockets and eyeballs rolling,
forgetting we are art.

⁶ The Rapture (2009)

To the Young Poet Who Wished
To Know How to Do Better⁷

Your haiku
are too long.

⁷ Horses Work Hard (2000)

Remainders ⁸

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

⁸ Remainders (1990)

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.

Kerouac's Will

"Nobody Owns Jack Kerouac" – Jack Shea

They are fighting over the poet's estate,
who gets the royalties, who owns the rights.

To manuscripts, diaries, thousands of letters
One will after another is thrown out in court

The family scrambles to sell off his stuff.
Johnny Depp paid \$15,000 for a trenchcoat.

Surprise of surprises, the bum on the road
is worth about \$20 million,

a man with \$91 in his checking account
at the moment of his death

Why a Poem and Not Prose?

I acknowledge from the outset
you lose 99% of readers
because they hate it this way

We live in prose, we toil in prose,
we wish we could spend every minute in prose
because it's manageable and workmanlike

and reasonable,
you can measure yourself against it
hell you can even write it,

Whereas poetry raises so many doubts,
it is a temptation to lay it on thick
and getting vacuumed up your own butthole

Sometimes a shark is taking bites of you
your chum is bleeding into the ocean around you
a poem allows it, and paragraphs don't

Or we awaken from a terror dream
and there is God by the maple bureau
and he's clicking his mandibles

And sometimes you just need
to stuff a hummingbird
into a milkweed pod

and for that a milkweed pod is ideal

Bad Poem

There is the sickening moment
when you realize he isn't going
to pull out of this
and the black smoke pours
from the manifold,
and the pilot heads into
the horizon
and it would be sad except
he had it coming
and this is how nature
scrubs itself.

If You Like Poetry

There probably something wrong with you.
You have an appetite for grandiosity,
or inability to deal with everyday reality
your sense of self has been splintered
so you dwell in solipsistic space.
Perhaps you are afraid of confrontation
and so you seek retribution on the page.
Or your anger at injustice
has taken you to a place where
you need to smolder by yourself,
Or your attention span is not what it might be –
isn't that a spider on your sweater?

Dot's Cafe⁹

A cup of coffee is a joke
the night tells
awake in the dark
in the unsponged booth

Vapor fogs the phone
booth door
my quarter falls forever
down a well

Bugs pack against the screen
surrounding
and disarming
in the hi-beam

Headlights scatter
sudden rain
small faces
on the windowpane

A cup of coffee is a kind of kiss
lip to warm lip
then leave a napkin poem
as a tip

⁹ Horses Work Hard (2000)

I Saw a Deer, Now I Must Write a Poem¹⁰

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.

¹⁰ Sunset Lake (1989)

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