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poems by Michael Finley

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THE TIDE

keeps complaining
ish ish ish

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

rain rinses the terraces stacked
by years of careful climb
losing balance, there a lamb
somersaults downhill

the spring's first cherries
rotting in the damp
cedar waxwings totter drunk
on phone lines

cattle crowd along the strand
outside the drive-in movie
subtitles, subtleties they disdain
mulling the green mint that grows there

A DRIVE IN THE COUNTRY

Summer was dry but the
Farmers forget and plow
The dead stalks under.
Today the wind is lifting
The first loose dirt away.
The elms in the Mahnomen
Park are striped for
Felling, and sugar beets
Litter the roads at sharp
Curves. Tree trunks lay
Scattered where they
Landed after the tornado
Of 1958. Outside
Crookston a yellow dog
Just made it to the ditch
To die, and farther
Ahead, a mile from the
Border, old shoes line the
Shoulders. Canadians are
Home now, wearing new
Ones.

CLEVELAND 1959

Tranquility of a town
even though we're a big city.
Pedestrians leave home early,
take ten extra minutes
to stroll to the office.
The street seems cleaner than usual,
some critical flotsam is missing.
The bus leaves the curb
with a thrill of exhaust.
The birds sit
on the courthouse pediment,
and they are coy about some secret
or other.
The Press and Plain Dealer
have been on strike
for over a month.

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 goes as dark and as deep
as the hole in the shed

of the potato farm in michigan
that grandfather bill

had, and
lost

THE ILIAD

A cavern blasted amid high-standing corn
like the swath of a broadsword
in the prayer-chamber of the house of virgins --
trampled stalks and the crushed green ear,
braid-bearded against the ground, listening
long after the final blow is hurled.

Phantom forces have met on the night-cloaked
food-strewn fields and in their fierce combat
shed blood and laid vegetables to waste.
Their waters turned clay vermilion, their dew
that skidded and sprayed through the night
now glitters in the rosy-fingered dawn.

What German shepherd made watchman by war
and named Ajax after a foaming cleanser
now perks his ears at the scent of raccoon
on potato patrol in his quadrant of corn
and unassisted pads the township road
and accosts the raiding masked intruder?

The din of crash and gnashing fills the plain,
the tears of Ceres and countless nymphs of grain
spatter the sides and gnawed limbs of warriors,

even the light in gin-soaked Yeoman Magruder's
bedroom down by Turtle Lake flicks on
as neighbors near and far attend the clash.

By sun-up only the star-shaped wake remains,
and the trail of scarlet collecting in furrows,
leading through the dazed and shivering maize
to the banks of Jacks Creek's moaning curl,
where face-down in mud and open-bellied
the slack-jaw bandit sips his fill of death.

Back on Farmer Fagan's wooden porch
stout-hearted Ajax hints and whines,
split-cheeked and eyeless, ruffed collar
drips red and the faithful shepherd bleats
and nudges the screen, honored to share
good news in what moments of glory remain.

LITTLE JO

Is it irony to be old
Yet small, 86 but 4 foot 9?
Putting breakfast

Together, Jo pushes a
Stepladder from cupboard
To cupboard. My friends

Are dead and so's their
Kids. TV's no good
Since they took off

Bonanza. She stops me
In the hall one night.
You know what I'd like,

She says, before the
Rent went up and put
Her in a high-rise and

Me in a duplex, Some-
Times I'd like to go out
Like I used to and just
Run around for a while.

OLD STONE ENTERS INTO HEAVEN

THE MASTER CALLS HIM TO HIS REWARD

Old Stone was a mean man, whole
Town of Kinbrae knew that for
Entertainment he used to take pot
Shots at his dog, a good old girl
Deserving better. One day Stone was
Said to have got bad news from
Montevideo, folks saw him stride
Past the post master's kicking dust,
Spitting on the side walk and
Cussing out the Goose Town Savings &
Loan. Mr. Miller said he purchased
A package of Illinois whiskey and
That was what they found later on, a
Broken bottle by the pump house well
That'd just gone dry. Must have
Hauled his rifle down where it hung
By the stove and stomped out to the
Yard with a box of fresh shells,
Loaded and reloaded, pumped lead
Into the milk shed wall and cackled
And gnashed his nasty teeth. His

Yellow tears skittered down his dry
Cheeks as the dark deed formed in
His mind, the notion occurring to
Complete the thing for once and for
All, and he whistled Betty to heel
At his feet. And she sidled,
Shivering, up and imploringly searched
For the better nature behind his red
Eyes as he pulled two sticks of
Dynamite from a tool bin and tied
Them to the poor bitch's tail, lit
The long fuse, smacked her hind end
And sat down on the hole and watched
Through the open out house door as
The dog took off yelping straight
Through the kitchen doorway and dove
Under the master's brass post bed
With the eider down comforter pulled
Down in after her. No no no no,
Cried Stone, and he screamed with
All his saw toothed might with the
Indignation of a man so wronged by
Creation perverted by willful beasts
Like a dog so dumb she couldn't even
Get blown up right, and he screeched
Her name and called her forth and

Condemned her disloyalty as the
Least best friend a most cursed man
Might have, a churlish cur who
Fought his dominion from the day she
Was whelped, who missed regular naps
Thinking up ways to undo him, him,
Him who now wailed like a ghost to
Get out, get out, get out, get out
Of my pine board, tar paper, china
Platter house God damn your four
Legged soul. And Betty, hearing his
Break down with out and imagining
Herself the object of some grand
Reprieve at the hands of this
Passionate and lovable if you really
Undertook to know him but until then
Deeply misunderstood failure of a
Man and imagining moreover her life
Long ordeal at those knotted hands
To be miraculously over and herself
Forgiven of the loathsome crime of
Having been his, dashed happily down
The rock porch steps and full tilt
And with her master's heartfelt
Cries of No no no no no echoing
Across the wooded glade leapt gladly

Into his awe crossed arms and the
Two best friends saw eye to eye,
Each bade goodbye, and left Kinbrae
Forever.

BROWSERS

He flipped through the magazines
in the periodical room.

The Cadillac, he thought to
himself, is definitely the
Rolls-Royce of automobiles.

She sauntered through the stacks,
fingers dusting the tops of rows.
The things I don't know,
she pondered, could fill a book.

They stood in line at the
check-out desk,
shifting their weight
like two ships passing in broad
daylight.

STAR

War was in the barnyard air on July 17, 1939, when Star climbed out, stuttering, breech, unruly child with a tomboy forelock. And she bawled and squalled, a calf demanding an accounting. Knock-kneed, bony, loose in the joints.

But baby loved her mother's milk, and often stooped to the task. She grew, she rounded, like the corners of a Holstein balloon, slowly filling with the breath of life.

Star could not know that her suckling would be our suckling. This business of food, and milk, and wet Wisconsin grass!

She grew broad in the shoulder and staunch in the rump, added pounds by the hundred. Her walk was no longer a faltering stumble, or a youngster's half skip. It was the lolling sway of the maid of the pasture. Pink lips mulling the grass of the day, methane scenting the meadows of spring.

And the day came and she was mounted for the first time ever, her parts a soft suitcase for the seed of the thousands. She returned each push with her own affirmation. A factory whistle deep inside her stomachs sounded loud and low and warm.

Star went to work. The milk flowed, tons of it, milk, it gushed from her bag, her aching teats dispensed it by the tanker car, streaming across the Wisconsin watershed. Infants in Chicago sucked. Schoolkids in Joliet drank from cartons. Milkmen clattering down the alleys of Minneapolis. Jugs on family tables in Escanaba.

These are the figures of a champion's life: 325,000 pounds of milk, over 160 tons, 20 tanker cars, 100,000 gallons. Twelve years the blue ribbon winner at the Wisconsin State Fair. Photographed, garlanded, most famous among all living cattle.

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

At the age of 38 years, the equivalent of 230 human years, the oldest cow in history, she still put in a working day, surrendering daily 15 pounds of high-butterfat milk.

On January 16, 1979, in the same weathered barn she was born in, Star died. Lying on her side in straw, her great heaving flanks coming to a stop.

"It seems so empty now," said the woman who led her to pasture through all the years, since she was a girl of seven.

"She was a good creature, a friend."

CHAUSSEE

The birches lining the channel road
And separating lake from pond
Mingle in the evening air like the
Women in line at 5 o'clock at the
Temporary help service -- bored
With stale gossip and pinching the
Lips of their pocketbooks shut.
And when one undresses at the
Vanity at night and brushes the
Last of the day from her hair, her
Arms go slack, the spine uncoils,
Goes gracefully green, fibrous and
Frail as wood between two
Glistening bodies of water.

THE REBUKE OF THE KINE

The farmer spatters the grass with gas,
shambles forward with match lit,
stoops and unrolls a carpet of flame
and smoke as black as rubber.

He says you burn the weeds the snow
would hang on, drift from, smother
the road, keep pheasant and jack-
rabbit away from the wheels.

Animals knew fire before they knew men.
The cattle's groan rolls over the plain,
suspicious now as ten thousand years ago
of foreigners and foreign food.

Man scrawls his signature in fire:
Defy me O charges and see what you get.
But the beasts have heard it all before:
Good sir do not leave us tethered again
as meat in your impetuous path.

CHRISTMAS

the road is a memory
lost in the blizzard
the snow is falling
sideways

the cattle's eyes are
too frozen to blink
they will be dead in
the morning

NEW CRICKETS OF NORTH AMERICA

- i -

The new crickets of North America
Are singing tonight,
Imagining they are bobolinks
And those ugly wings of theirs can fly.

- ii -

There is no cricket on my hearth,
There isn't even a hearth there.
But I've got crickets living in my drywall,
They think it is August in March there.

- iii -

When the cricket sings to us
In the drywall,
His song is eternal,
Going on and on and on.

- iv -

They are not cockroaches,
Not quite.
Cockroaches don't keep you
Up all night.

-v-

All night the cricket croons
I was beside myself.
Two crickets by the bed
And only one shoe to throw.

-vi-

They should lock them all up in haiku,
So poets in Maine can tell their wives
Crickets make music just like you,
This frictive rubbing of the thighs.

-vii-

Jiminy Cricket was the worst.
Who needs an insect who knows all?
If I were Pinocchio I'd have made him
sing to the garbage disposal.

-viii-

Chirrup! Chirrup,
You sleepyhead!
VREEEEEENglug

-ix-

In Britain it's a kind of game,
performed with bat and wicket.
I'd tell them it's a stupid sport

but they'd say that's not baseball.

-x-

Count the chirps
per fifteen seconds
Add 40 to your sum;
This dandy "cricket-thermometer"
Would be a hit under your tongue.

-xi-

All night the cricket cries and cries
His love to gypsum and paper.
All day I will moan and swoon
And yawn and blink at the office.

-xii-

The entire world
is resting now.
And end to the workday battle.
The cricket keeps me company
while I lie awake
and prattle.

-xiii-

Deep down I guess I'd like to be one,
And tell this world to stick it,
Go join the birdies in the wall --
Anymore everybody's a cricket.

DOG IN THE MANGER

Hard years after I first hear
the expression
I understand its meaning:
The dog is in the manger,
Napping in the hay.
When cow comes near to eat,

Sharp teeth warn her away.
But you know dogs, sooner
Or later they always repent.
Watch one as he trots out
To pasture, drops a shank-
Bone at your hooves.

ELEVATORS

walking through
the financial district
i smell hay

ON THE BUS

The giant man
With tiny eyes
Standing on the
Crowded bus
Rocks in the
Aisle bumping
The shoulder of
The worried girl
In the Mr. Bill
Teeshirt.
She wishes he
Were not so
Huge, and not
So very close.
But he is
Far away,
He is thinking
About the
Record pinned be-
Tween his knoblike
Fingers, about
The vastness of
Sky inside in
His head when

The earphones
Are on, and the
Magic of
Mangione dwindles
Him to beauty.

THE PITTSFIELD TORNADO

easter twister
scrapes through
town, a hoe

of steel
in the grip
of god

away with winter's
hangers-
on

and break
fresh ground
for planting

GOOD

fish in the fishtank

bread in the bag

me waking up on the studio couch

the system is working

HOMEOPENER

Beer bare skin hot sun
And this, perched on a
Tub rim, prying skin,
Laying open the white
Underneath.

This is what snakes do
Every year, spiraling
Outward into time; or
Trees, whittling
Bracelets backwards.
Compulsion hunger
Strange delight in
Lifting away these
Sunburnt sheets, funny
Feeling called getting
Closer.

I HEAR WATER

Inside the aquarium the fish stand still and
bubbles roll to the surface. I am standing by
the sill
watching the rain come down.

AT THE KOIN-O-KLEEN

I wonder how many others beside me
enjoy running hands through
soiled clothes in public.

A discreet pleasure, no one may wink --
we pretend we're on an elevator,
intent on something directly ahead.

That man on the sorting table gives
us away, sipping Mr. Pibb through a straw,
400 pounds of him, naked to the waist,

tattooed on his right tit is the lone
word SWEET, and on his full
left breast the word SOUR.

LAST YEAR'S XMAS DANCE

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

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

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

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

MY HOUSE

has grown tired of storms
and winter, she braces herself
from the wind

her flecks of paint chip
off and drop
like seeds to the ground

this is my home
i live here
she is intolerant of do it yourself

she knows she is beautiful naturally
two stories her life
inside and outside wooden and white

she yearns in her slumber for
a hiding place out of the sun
and the rain

some camouflage to the eyes
of men
on a dark afternoon no one

will notice her foundation shift
like the edge of a lake
as brick by brick

and stick by stick
she steps back into
the wood

LANDLORD

Please Mr Hoveland -- no more stories
of driving the snowblind
expressways in the dead of night
to buy fuses -- you're so brave,
so industrious, so intelligent --
our luck to live in your house.
But tenants need peace from continual
caretaking -- the calm of Sunday morning,
Vaughan Williams on the box.
But soft -- that RASPing sound -- is the
"Symphony Antarctic" cassette
melting in the parlor?
Relax, says the wife, it's just
Mr Hoveland, shoveling
an eighth-inch of snow from the walk.

THE BUSINESS OF BEES

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

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

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

LIGHTNING

A neighbor interrupts
Our burritos. It was
Lightning he says
Which hit your tree
Which fell over our
Our fence and
Shattered my wife's
Famous green mirror-
Ball. Lightning he
Says that came this
Close to my camper.
Oh it's a beauty too
Sleeps five and
Drinks ten why I've
Got a cabin going up
By Wahkan and we aim
To camp in this baby
Till it's built.
Oh and it'll be
Something the plates
And silver'll match
By God not some
Pathetic hodgepodge
Like Ma had to deal

With how she did it
I'll never know.
It was lightning he
Says while we pick up
The sticks from his
Blacktop drive.
Lightning he says as
We stack the wood
Gingerly wary of
Termites that ran
Through the holes.

PANDIT

The vocational counselor in Delhi
Apologized for giving bad advice:
"Not every young Brahmin with money
Is wise." Many years later,
Pandit's swami, glancing about his
Townhouse in St. Anthony Falls,
Shook his head. "Pandit-ji," he
Said, "your instincts are bad
Enough, but your lifestyle has got
To go." Every guru starts
Somewhere, and for Pandit the
Crossing occurred one evening in
1973. He had chanted a special
Intention for two nights and a day,
And now his skin began to evanesce
And a glow like radium suffused his
Features and the bones of his hands
And feet shone in the rice-paper
Silhouette like moonlit twigs.
Suddenly Swami barges in, unplugs
The lava-lamp and shakes Pandit by
The shoulders. "Wake up, Balbir,
You disgrace to your caste. When
Will you quit all this fidgeting?"

Four years of doctrine and
Contemplation and Swami Mukhtaranda
Throws up his hands. "Tell me, have
You considered a career in
Dentistry? People get toothaches,
You could be useful. We have been
Discussing your case at Himalayan
Central in the Loop. Pandit-ji,
It's not working out." Pandit
Breaks down on the other end. "But
What of my chapel, with the acoustic
Paneling and foam carpet pads --
What of the rent, the three skinny
Daughters, Irish setter, Triumph
Roadster? Give me another chance,
Business will boom." Swami relents:
"Just thank God you're in
Minneapolis where you can't hurt
Anyone." Pandit attends continuing
Education courses in business
Management at the university
Convention center, learns the seven
Words to seal a sale, prints
Meditation coupons in the back pages
Of the Sunday TV section. Hatha
Enrollments begin to swell, a course

In breathing for data processors
Draws overflow crowds, registered
Nurses from around the city salute
The sun from every angle. Suburban
Gardeners no longer worry about
Scaly-worm and red-ear mites. Swami
Writes: "I am man enough to admit I
Was wrong. You're some kind of
Pandit. Christmas is out, we're
Booked at Vail six months in
Advance." Pandit spawns a yogi
Tummy, bolstered by his taste for
Hostess Snowballs. The wisdom of
The East is born again, Midwestern.
"Shift gears with your one mind,
Retain the other for the clutch."
He hires so many assistant pandits
He doesn't know which one smokes
Luckies and lectures on the holy
Wind within. His checkbook is
Bulging, his checks in the popular
Scenic Wilderness design, the
Rockies, Mojave, Maine lighthouse
And drive-thru Sequoia. But Sunday
Mornings while the Christians pray,
Pandit snaps on snorkel and weighted

Boots, and drifts the tangled floor
Of Lake Calhoun. "On surface," he
Tells his class on scuba yoga, "we
Encounter the brunt of life's
Agitations, those waves and splashes
Which torment the honest heart. But
When we go below we feel this
Unlikely thing, the tranquil wet
Embrace." He pads through the mud,
Brushes long ropes of alga aside. I
Am I, he inhales, Thou art Thou, he
Exhales, and here in this constant
Kiss of life is the successful
Career of one soldier of Shiva in
These United States.

