

UNIVERSITY AVENUE

By Michael Finley



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A Penny for the Poet?

Poets are born to suffer, of course, but here's a rare opportunity to pat one on the head.
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University Avenue

I was working at M&L Motor Supply
on University Avenue across from Wards,
making \$108 a week as an order filler guy
while attending college part time. It was 1969.

My job was to take phoned in orders,
push a cart through the warehouse,
locate the parts that were in stock, box them
for shipment, and backorder the rest.

This particular day I was standing on a step stool
poking at the box-end of a Mopar combo
tailpipe and muffler for a '64 Plymouth Fury
when the pipe began sliding down toward me.

The box was eight foot long, contained 46 lbs.
of hardened steel. It was falling now, falling
from the stacks, sailing down to me like a bride,
and it struck me on the left side of my forehead.

The blow alone would have knocked me out,
a baseball bat could not have hit harder
but first it sent the ladder teetering, back, back
until I fell backward and crashed to the floor.

When I came to I was changed. I struggled to stand.
My fingers tingled. I felt an egg, a protruding bud
from my brow. I looked in the mirror in the dirty
warehouse toilet and washed away the blood.

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock
in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building
at the University. I had completely forgot.
The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said 1:25.

Snow was falling and wind was blowing,
I staggered out to the street in T-shirt, tie-dyed
but I did not feel cold. A 16-A bus was just approaching
from Hamline Avenue, and I boarded, wild-eyed.

Where's your money? The driver asked. Eighty five cents!
I looked at him like Long John Silver under the egg
and said You have to get me to the University!
and took a seat halfway to the back.

The passengers were coming home from morning shift.
One man wore a hat that said Gopher Gears,
And the same word on his jacket and thermos.
The phrase has stuck with me over the years.

I sat quiet but in my mind I was standing and telling them
Do not be afraid my brothers and sisters,
I will make the journey from St. Paul to Minneapolis,
I will do business there with TAs and professors,

I will be valorous in my actions and acquit myself
in a way you will be proud of. The assembly
and forklift people will not be ashamed this day
of one of their own climbing the heights of classical poetry.

I stepped off the bus at the University quad,
made my way to Ford Hall Room 108, burst
through the door, and every eye looked up
at the egghead from the Midway in the torn T shirt.

I grabbed a blue book from the stack and read the question:
Analyze Houseman's "Eight O'Clock" and explain
how poetic form helps further the poet's message.
Ordinarily I might have struggled in vain

with this assignment but I had been struck
by a muffler from the gods, and I had insights
I had never had before, when the pipe hit me full
it poured into me a galaxy of lights.

I knew this poem by heart somehow. I had knelt
on its floor and drunk its dark waters.
I scanned the poem in fifteen seconds and
began to write in the book, in big black letters.

"Each sprinkle of the clock tower bell
brings the condemned man closer to his time.
Each stanza of the poem is his knell,
each line a stair to, trembling, climb."

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk,
the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall
and the graduate students on scholarship
whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul.

I would get an A, of course, but that was not

the point, I was transformed, beyond dreams.
I stood on the walkover bridge and gazed out over
the brilliant white cloud of toilet paper plant steam.

Gods and goddesses choose us mortals not
by our bloodlines or superior mothering
but because a magnet pulls metal down from the sky
that tempers and makes us fit vessels for suffering.

University Avenue begins at the Capitol
and peters out only God knows where, in Blaine.
But I am with you to the fullness of all time,
and in my bones and skull I map your pain.

HAIRCUT

When my stepdad was dying of a brain tumor,
we hired a barber named Dave to come round every week.
Dick didn't have a hair on his head,
after chemo, not one -- but he liked talking to Dave,
who also sold insurance and awnings.
Dave would pretend to cut hair
for half an hour or more, chatting about
the kids today, or an open lot
where a supermarket might go.
And Dick would nod, or grunt --
he had no words left in him -- with half open eyes.
I think he was pleased to be served,
to be the man, that ghost hair was still coming
out of him, unstoppable, wild.
When Dave was done he carefully brushed the excess off,
shook the cloth off on the porch,
let nothing ride away on air.

Hamsters

Several times I have opened an eye at night
certain someone was moving in the house,
but it was only the chrome wheel turning

Or we would be making love and hear the sound
of metal on metal from the children's room --
the ball in the drip bottle pushed and released.

The crunch of seed between pointed pearls,
the scurry and blink of prisoners.
In the cane, in the damp, in the moldy dark, they spin.

Children

When we are little it is hard
to believe we will turn into our parents.
Grown ups are so ugly and so tired
with orange pads on the bottoms of their feet,
the pores of their faces cry out surrender,
and the hair, the hair is everywhere,

But once we are grown we have only
to look at a child to glimpse what they will become.
The face fills out, the limbs acquire bulk.
The boy enters a door and exits his father
like a breed of ordinary dog.
Or the boy roars into his fruition
the malification of his mother,
her beauty beaten into him like bronze
and ramping out again
like laughter to the world.

Flying Dumbos

Taking down my office before the move,
I come across a picture of my daughter and me
at Disneyland, when she was little.
Frozen in the plastic elephant, our faces a riot
of stupid joy, we float high above the pavement
between two other elephants. She is almost three,
and a veteran of seventy or eighty screenings of the movie.
Each time she sat reverently through it ,
the tension building inside her soft body,
until her eyes open wider than the baby elephant's
and she cries out to the TV, *mummo fie, mummo fie*,
and looks at me pleadingly so that I too can
affirm the miracle of flesh borne aloft
with no net and no magical feather,
and I would take her hands and clap them for her,
as I am holding them tight in this snapshot,
so that she will always know that I saw it, too,
and the unlikeliest thing there ever could be
really happened.

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

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.

Girls of the Intercoastal Highway

The girls are nearly naked,
one has no suit on her behind
and to make matters worse her friend is
slathering sunscreen on it.

The girls are laughing
and it is a happy, decent laugh.
It is me that is at fault
crouching behind my sunglasses.

The girls in Minnesota are white
or maybe these girls are Minnesotan,
from a part I don't know well
like the Arrowhead region.

The girls are wriggling under the oil
and laughing at the lotioned fingers.
When I return from the hotel
with my little boy's squirt gun

The girls are gone, doubtless shamed
by my shame, gone home
to cover their bodies. When I return
to my prairie state I shall miss

the girls and their honeyed skin,
where the snow flies sideways
and behinds sit in swivel chairs,
lotionless and waiting for the spring.

The Curtis Hotel

I flew into town and I didn't feel well
when I left home in southern Cal
on a summery day but I touched down
in Minnesota in November.
My stepmom and I had had a fight
and I ran out the door with a shirt
and my checkbook from delivering Fuller
Brush for my dad and hitchhiked to the airport,
and flew the red-eye from LA to St. Paul
And the limo driver heard my tale
and dropped me off at the Curtis Hotel
where I shivered in a short-sleeved shirt
by the revolving door and waited by the ashtray
for a friend to come get me,
while the first snow fell.

He finally came and took me home,
and told me I was on my own.
I got a job in a parts warehouse
and went to night school and excelled
and I got a good job, with a desk
and met Rachel after a while.
I used to take her Sunday mornings
to the brunches at the old hotel,
and feast on omelet and melon balls,
bouquets of roses and asphodel,
and the waiter kept our glasses full
of Asti Spumante, and I would peel
a twenty from a roll of bills,
which I never begrudged at the Curtis Hotel.

We lost that job, but married anyhow.
We pledged our troth in a city park
and danced all day in a friend's front room,
but when it was time for the honeymoon,
we checked into the Curtis Hotel,
the only room we could afford,
a single window overlooking the mall,
but we slept in, switched off the bell,
our only night in the Curtis Hotel.

Years later, my dad, no longer selling
door to door, had some interesting news to tell:
"Your mom and I were not doing so well,

we thought a trip together might be swell.
That's something we have been meaning
to tell you, you were conceived in the Curtis Hotel."

I remembered a scene when I was a child.
I stood with my grandfather on the opposite shore
of the Mississippi in LaCrosse, and he pointed and said
Minnesota is just over there, and I repeated the word
as if it had mysterious power, and made a vow
to cross that river one day. So when the plane landed
in 1969 and I stood in the door at the Curtis Hotel
I felt this was the place I would dwell.

When I saw it demolished on TV,
the cameras caught at the final moment
a window on the fourteenth floor slide up,
then shatter, as the building buckled
with the weight of the beds and bathtubs
all those years, its bricks all shrugged
and its shoulders collapsed and went to hell.

And the people building the convention center
on that site explained on the TV
that no one was in Room 1410,
the crew had checked out every floor,
no homeless man could hide in a closet, sure
today was not the final day, today is never
the final day, it has no meaning,
it is no ancient honeymooner hollering no,
it was just an effect that a building can feel

the hum of death vibrating every sill,
so it throws up a window to let out a howl
and shout out the secrets of the Curtis Hotel,
and all the souls who found shelter there,
who slept, and wept, and shivered, and sighed,
and laughed, and loaded up their plates,
crawled into bed, and rose, and ate,
and tipped the doorman at the gate,
and drove away with no thought of farewell
to the spirits that lived in the Curtis Hotel.

At the YMCA

I scaled a Matterhorn on the Stairmaster machine,
ran a mini-Marathon on the indoor track, then
changed into my trunks and swam the length
of the pool a half dozen times.

I showered high as a kite. The endorphins were going off
inside me like little fireworks of drugs, good feelings
about myself and about the world.
Back at my locker I sat on a bench,

opened the door and grabbed my briefs,
slipping my feet through and pulling them up my legs.
They felt so snug, so sexy, so new. Exercise
does wonderful things to your head.

That was when I noticed none of the clothes
in the locker looked familiar. Come to think of it,
weren't my underpants blue with a white waistband?
I blinked at the locker, twice, saw it was somebody else's.

I rubbernecked to right and left, to see what men were near,
naked, hairy, territorial of the cloth they drape their loins in.
No one saw. I stripped the briefs off with one sweep
and hurled them back in the locker, slamming the door,

and opened my locker, and grabbed my old stretched-out, faded,
thin-in-the-seat underwear. To me they were very paradise.
I dressed hurriedly, grabbed my gym bag and ran to the exit.
I made good my escape, no one thinking the worse of me.

But late nights I lie awake, and contemplate the sensation
of those briefs, and know I am changed.
I will never judge another man before I have stood
a minute or two in his underpants. Maybe not then.

Overdraft Notice

The blue wind that blows through the soul
blows cold, it scatters leaves and opens envelopes
with your name hovering in the cellulose window.
You know in an instant the news will be painful.
You cry my god and fall to your knees.
Sometimes you go long weeks without opening them,
sometimes you hide them under phonebooks
because if no one else sees them they maybe never came.

Other people's lives seem unhaunted, they write
the amount of each check and subtract it from the balance,
it is a wholly unsatisfactory way. And yet
they don't get these things all the time,
whereas you don't go six months without one, and if
you get one on a Monday chances are good
you will get another Tuesday, and even if
you go to them and thrust fistfuls of loose cash
in their hands and pockets and say please, please
take my money, and they look at you
the way people look at an unclean child,
You will get another notice Thursday.

Each one costs \$20 but you don't mind, you are glad
the bank is getting something for its trouble
and for putting up with you, you who were never meant
to carry money around or write checks
when something wonderful catches your eye.
These thin slips of paper with the blue circles
that identify your sin and decide your punishment
are your judges in this life. You bow to their power
and file them away in the secret shrine of pain,
and scurry away to places of pleasure,
bouncing end over end.