

House of Murk



by Mike 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. Your donation to Kraken Press will help keep this site up and running.

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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 basting it with oil.

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

The girls in Minnesota are whiter.
Or maybe these girls are Minnesotans,
but from a part I don't know well
like the Arrowhead region.

The girls wriggle on towels
and laugh at the lotioned fingers.
When I return later from the hotel
with my little boy's squirt gun

The girls are gone, doubtless shamed

by my shame, slunk away
to cover themselves. When I go home
to my prairie state I shall miss

the girls and their golden skin,
back where the snow flies laterally
and behinds sit in wooden chairs,
lotionless, waiting for spring.

Poems I Meant to Write

I meant for the longest time to write
about the little tasks, about tying the shoes,
and fitting the stubby hands into gloves,
I saw my big mitts negotiating the laces
and slipping sleeve after sleeve over finger and thumb.
I should have saved the sand I dumped out
of each sneaker, enough for a beach, enough
for a castle and a moat.

I could have written about the look
on their faces sometimes, that they saw us
not as bristle sprouting oafs
who yelled and grumped and reigned stupidly
above eye level,

but shining gods, omnipotent and perfect,
strong heroes sent by a faraway star.

How when they cried in your arms
they were praying to you to make it better,
to lift the pain from their lives,
and you could.

I could have written about the tiredness
of the house, the exhaustion of the smeared tabletops,

crusted with crud, sponged pointlessly after meals,
the flakes and globs spattered on the floor
that fill the cracks in the hardwood.

Or the handles on the stroller
that were not long enough, so you walked
in a crouch, and the white plastic wheels
that turned sideways on a whim
or a pebble and skidded to a halt.

I could have remembered their bodies between us
in bed when they were babies,
the smell of them there, the cramped caution
of the dark, the wet exhalation from their noses.
I could have tallied every kick against the covers
that woke you and annoyed you,
then drew you even closer.

Why did they finally leave our bed,
our big pink comforter and the warmth
of the body familial, for starched white beds
of their own?

There was space for us all, and another night
would have cost them nothing, but they went.

I could have described the last night they woke up
frightened and sauntered in barefoot

and climbed in between us.
They slept again immediately, and we tried, too.
But I knew you were thinking, off on your side,
that this was the curious moment,
and this was our life, and these little fish
cascaded from our sides,
and the skinny white flanks of our children
dove and fell beside us,
in the soft light sliding out to sea.

What We Want

We want meat, but more than meat.

We want to know there will be meat
next time we need meat.

We want beauty and allowance for not being beautiful.

We want to be naked, unashamed, beautiful, kind.

We want sun on our faces, and surprise,
and the glint of recognition when we see
and know the child in one another,
and shamble out to play.

We want company and laughter
and the drunken feeling of feeling,
closing our eyes and feeling.

We want instructive journeys into our own hearts.

We want another chance to tell people
what we meant.

We want to join hands with all those we have hurt
and say we're sorry.

We want to stop being afraid of the dark,
and afraid of the light.

We want to welcome the alien
and celebrate the other.

We want to tell the secrets
that have been choking us for years.
We want explanations, show us with arrows
and diagrams why things happened,
and how it is better.
We would like to be gods but will settle for angels,
would settle for people better than us.
We want the feeling of winning just once
but completely, the victory that heals
the scars of a hundred beatings.
We want forgiveness for rude and
forgetful crimes,
the bullets we pump into each other,
as if they were only words, the things
we saw coming but couldn't bring ourselves to stop.
We want to die and be born and live, and die and be
born again, moment to moment, feeling, flashing,
rolling in sun.
We want to stop being bastards and bitches
and locate the lost children locked away.
We want to sit at the knees of those we treasure
and hear their stories into the night,
applauding the best parts for all we are worth.

We want to see and taste and hear and
feel and touch.

We want warmth, the calm of the sleeping body
banked against us.

We want to kiss and kiss and kiss.

We want to say thank you
a thousand thousand times.

More than meat we want light, to be known
by the stars, by name, by face, by the secret token implanted in a
hollow bone at birth, we want
more, more, more, more --

We want to remember back before
we could remember, have it all be there for us, recallable and clear.

We want to forget, sleep the sleep
of the newborn rebuilding its energy
in a swirl of slumber, empty eyes closed like peace,
heated blood coursing like love.

Cannon Falls

The sidewalk is beautiful,
one of those dry crystalline snows
that sparkle in the moonlight
like white sparking wires.

Too many rolls at supper club.
Then back to the bed and breakfast.
The bubble lights on the Xmas tree
are boiling merrily.

Rachel reads on the sofa.
I sit in the library and pull book
after book from the shelves.
Baseball, history, politics, poetry.

In one is a poem by Jon Silkin
about the death of his child.
It is so heartbreaking I read it twice,
and the sorrow saws right through me.

Suddenly I don't hate poetry.
It is not false or vain or unimportant,
It is the best way to talk and think
about things that matter most

because in a hundred words or so
I felt the stab of the boy's passing
the crumpling of the parents,
the sweetness and horror on one page,

and I want more, I pulled a dozen books
down from the shelves
and careened crazily through them,
greedy for more minds, more lives.

Every paragraph seemed to sing,
every poem a shiver, people's pictures
snapped in the moment of a lifetime,
and I felt no envy only joy.

My chest hurt, I stepped outside
and walked toward town.

The Zumbro River was frozen over,
but I heard water by the bridge.

The falls are tumbling brown
from the limestone table,
like a greasy comb of water
in winter. It is starting

to snow again, and Rachel
is there, and takes my arm,
and we return like married people,
coughing frost in the quiet air.

Tarantula and Wasp

You do not know the struggle,
you cannot know the cost
until you have been tangled
with tarantula and wasp.

Tarantula is power,
a fearsome hairy ghost.
It meets its wily match
in the black bottomed wasp.

The spider fights for its life.
The insect wants its corpse
as a furry incubator
for a hundred eggs of wasp.

Live now or live later,
a choice as old as Faust,
enlivened by the anxious dance
of tarantula and wasp.

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 that 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 a year 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 still get another pair 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 on them
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 shrine you have made for your pain.

They caught you again, they know who you are,
they know what you've been doing.

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