

The Whole While



Early Poems (1966-1976)

by MICHAEL FINLEY

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Poet's Note

There is a series of stages you go through with old poems. The poems you write in your teens are a horror to you in your twenties. The poems you write in your twenties are contemptible to you in your thirties. The poems you write in your thirties are admirable to you in your forties, but duller than the earlier ones, which seem so full of zing and passion.

The poems collected here are not award winners, and they will never appear in college anthologies. Reading them, I understand criticisms other writers have of me then -- and who knows, now. I had all the words but not a lot to say. That seemed harsh, because I knew there was feeling here. But when I catalogue the feelings, they come up as self-involvement, toxification, alienation, paranoia and lust.

Apologia clenched firmly in mind, I commend these birds to the ovens of your mind.

CALIFORNIA

it is sad not being loved
in arizona

the stars shine on the tops
of mobile homes

the ring around the moon
means something

the compassionate buddha
wobbling on a fart

switch off the radio, stop
and listen

a diesel whine a mile away
on highway one

SALESMEN

Have surrounded your home,
They sleep in shifts, handcuffed
To black satchels.
They demand one of your party hostage,
But you are alone.
You send them a message, "No Deals."
Tonight your attempted escape
Was anticipated.
As they gather around the car,
You turn up the volume,
Wheels spinning tirelessly.

THE DRUNKEN CHRIST

blotto in bethany
laid out on the table
this is my body
do what you will

i never liked the poor
i said that to be nice
i hate turning the cheek
you always get clubbed

i was never much of a
carpenter, my father and i,
we don't talk any more
take me, eat me, what do i care

i wish sometimes i was all
that they think, i would
take their houses up in fist
and shake them empty
into the streets, scour their temples

at least the sinners
know how to party, i yearn for
their company after
a long day of truth

i want to walk out under the stars
i'm in the right mood for trouble
and i think i know
just how to find it

A SHORT SONG TO THE STARS

on a night of anger and angry streets
knotted like a stone
pressed to the wound

the children are spinning
their houses in hoops
to the sea

the streets are full with
children they cling
to the spine

like a precious jewel like
a breadcrumb caked
to the trembling chin

knotted like a short song of children
or jewels spinning above like
a song to the moon

IN AMERICA

In the beginning we expected a land smothered with buffaloes,
A continent of verdant floes
Of grass and Indians strumming banjos
And singing in their teepees of hunters with haloes
And other kinds of heroes
And the usual aboriginal bravadoes.
What he has to do, I guess a man does.
And in America, where tornadoes
And volcanoes
And all the other throes
Of nature hold sway, we cling to our mottoes.
One of which says that when we experience fiascoes
We forget them, we forget all the peccadilloes
Involving frayed manifestoes
And Tippecanoes
And hurled tomatoes
And tea-party cargoes
And weary men leaning on hoes
In frescoes
And anxious women on tiptoes
And millions and millions of disappointed negroes
And thousands and thousands of confused mulattoes
And everyone society has handed out zeroes,
To all the hoboes slapping at mosquitoes
And the other small potatoes
Hunkered in their ghettos
Hoping to be excluded from the next day's vetoes.
You're lucky you're white and never had to wear their shoes,
You probably couldn't even get your toes
To fit, but that's the way it goes
In America.

YOUR EYES

the murmuring turbine blades of your eyes
blue windmills turning
sunlight into bread
the gills of the goldfish
in a Japanese tub
languid petals of unplugged fan
spiraling in the breeze
quick wink oh guillotine
flared skirt of magic mushroom
lightswitch squirting darkness
through the room
venus flytrap closing on
some hungry living thing

THE LATE SHOW

that's the news, and now for the weather
says jiminy cricket a minute from sign-off
lock up when you leave the last cricket says
and grabs his coat from the station rack
and steps out into the cathode snow

the camera could not sleep a wink
and tosses and turns uneventfully
sleep sleep chant the fans in the stands
placards surging to spell the team name
the horizontal will not hold

the TV dreams of horses lining up
of a single horse cantering between mirrors
a thousand thoroughbreds a moebius carousel
lift coronet pastern fetlock heel
a thousand stallions break from the gate

visiting hours were supposed to be over
something steps from the hydrostatic haze
maybe the scramble of the escaping soul
of the television set, frightened face pressed
black and white against green glass

the iris dwindles to a star, goes out
inside a laser sprays particles of light
against foil, a cascade of protons
a dream about dust entering at the ear
dust that God will charge with himself

the TV dreams, an army trudges across Ukraine
flotillas of white herons elect to arise
and boys and girls and grown adults
who watch too much are sentenced to hang
suspended in oscilloscopic bliss

FRANKENSTEIN IN THE CEMETERY

Here is where I ought to be. And here. And here. And here. And here. And here.

DEAD OUT

the funeral was a success
people came from

all across town
said their goodbyes

poured water
scuffed heels

dumped dirt on top of
what used to be fire

THIEF

she looked for the stallion
with liver patch and bad reputation

who took the children from their
nightbeds one by one

she looked down all the alleys
she looked for his name

arrested in the tape-scarred
windows of schools

eyes like twitching water, wet
intestines curling in the snow

she puffed her sleeves with straw
painted blood on her knees

and scraped through town
with face in hands

morning she was ready to meet him
in blue meadows crackling with dew

after the fights she picked her way
through the stalls

eyeing the taut picador faces
and glimpsed him once

breath rolled down his flanks
like smoke

she wanted to warn you,
if she gets to you first

you will know her by the tongue of jam
oozing from her sides

DREAM

i wake around noon in the crook of a tree
my mouth is full of cocoons

crickets sing as i amble through
the milkweed field

passing my hands
through sticky stems

all around the sunflowers frown
heads bowed like periscopes

hummingbirds zip from blossom
to blossom, later

i climb back up to sleep
each cattail vigilantly mans his post

the trees throw out their birds
and breathe

JELLYFISH

all night i dreamed a jellyfish
its head was blown and plastic
as a bell

and he was my lover
and his thousands of bodies
loved me

and he had stings
that paralyzed
by touch

i was so excited i fell
unconscious eggshell white
and curled

he made his bubbles and slid away
i have him to thank
this swollen dutiful boy

and he is married to himself
a thousand times
and we are lovers

THE LOUSE

now i am a louse and this is the world
prepared for me

new friends inquire about me with shifting
sticks, i puff out my thorax and
tilt my beady head

oh, there are little animals even on me

life in a radiant forest where moisture glistens
from the trunk of every tree
and our plaintive chopping fills the air

and i am desperate for your scratch, see
i hover in your fur

STUCK IN SANTA FE

good question doc
can anybody die
in california

because i never
felt like
this before

the sun is
a pill that won't
go down

LETTER HOME

each night i think of your big fat calves and little eyes
i treasure this photo, little deborah leans over your lap
and you smooth her dress over her very big buttocks
she has your eyes
and mickey i can tell is quite the sailor now
i'm sure he itches all over like a sandbox
how moist his palms must be

but what is that cigarette smoldering on the lawn?
and why is that serpent regarding you that way from the branch?
love, love i know it is all right
because the peonies are bouncing like popcorn balls in june
and the air is sweet and i think of you

oh and please give my kisses to the big red dog
her thin wet nose glowing in the dim dark light
i'll bet she overeats and sags on skinny stalks
and she must miss me too

more later, love there are horses
our work here is succeeding beyond our wildest dreams

CARTOON

en route to your party
i am handed a lit stick of dynamite
and being polite
do not refuse

blackface and smoking collar
i proceed, failing to notice
the two-ton safe
descending from a fifth story window

no matter, though wrinkled
i make my way to you despite doors
opened in my face
flattening it considerably

too many incidents to recount them all
the locomotive charging from the doorway
me poised for several moments
over the manhole before falling

the wet cement awaiting me
soon hardened but
do not despair love
i am coming

1974

riding shotgun and the wiper slap
i saw this movie once before
bad print, bad sound, bad saxophone
in the rainy days of black and white

driver tell me where we are heading
tell me this is not a dream
meet my eyes in the rearview mirror
say it will turn out well

i woke in the back beside my brother
and wondered why he was there
remembered killing a man in a dream
let go his hand and watched him fall

driver tell me you are not him
tell me all will turn out well
take me to my destination
a house i have visited many times

i roll down the window and look for a number
i have never seen this house before
yet someone inside it is calling my name

TYPEWRITER

military cemetery
anodized raindrops
pileated woodpecker
on a black tree branch

CRAPS

each constellation
kept coming up
seven seven seven

and i stopped
rolling and the lodestar
pulled me

magnetically
from bed
hey what the

i said and the door
slammed shut
the whistling stopped

jigsaw pieces
everywhere
scattered in the grass

A COMPACT

what came down came down
on golden rungs
strapped to the air
with golden thongs

i saw and still see golden men
so taken in this quiver
so balanced in the air

what goes goes to
the end of my heart
the place i keep swept
and warm for you
will always be yours

i apologize for apologies
what missed the mark
i confess

who knows the root and the anxious word
the fluttering feet and the severed chord
whatever rises does

ROADS

all roads have breakfast in the desert
they pick their way into mountains going through
their belongings
all roads trudge through cities, then perk up again
and stretch their limbs up and down hills
and blink when they come to the ocean

SOMETHING NOT HEARD UNTIL SPOKEN

the world is being worn away by wheels
speeding past tomcats
bitter as usual about the poor
choice of scraps

the street is gone, the road is gone
every little path is gone
as its lines are reconciled

leave this place with unmeasurable step
and shooshingly
great understanding is the uncle
of silence

that syllable lives forever in your ear

LOVE SONG

golder than the simple capitol of sweetness
and sweeter than the bridges of love
our directionless desires
and the one life, life
are these the orchards of your hair
and the hands i love so plenty
with hills and the happy swell
of your blue like the untroubled
window your weather

look upon these undiluted eyes
your satin beams of rain
your sight and scope
your clear suburban stare

your roads into wilderness
wetland thighs so cattailed with you
the west and east of the brushed in dance
now glistening oil

you set the table that sings
in the cottage of flesh
and i roam your countryside making wrong turns
unto hamlets and county seats and acres
and acres of love

paint me the dye of you
close to your current
drawn like and flapping this
happiest flag

LEGERDEMAIN

only to pass you back into life
the brittle thread made green again
only a motion of greatest authority
to settle this ringing night to sleep

a ringing night sinks into the knees
snapshots whirl like driven leaves
true words turn flesh when a cold cold wind
takes hold pulling its sail

domination of the switch of life
domination of the preserver of life
the hand is quicker than the eye
the trick turns domination

not possible return from black and white
the prints not fuse to blood and bone
what sleight of hand can repair
a portrait a family portrait

NEW FRIEND

in midmay the springtime
stops holding its breath
the trees light up like
fireworks of green
the screen doors slam like
the first time ever

winter was hard, the car
got crashed, my bike got
stolen, my dog run over,
my credit trashed

but i love my new friend Rachel
she is pretty and sweet to me
she makes me happy
like water flushed with
melting snow

everyone tells me it's true
but i believe it anyway

