

Nightwalk

it's own and solitary way
- Dickens

Following trails at night, the moonlit
broken blades of grass telling
where someone recently passed,

giving wide berth to shrubs and litter
for fear of getting snagged on a thorn
or bitten by a rattlesnake

or breaking the delicate spell of silence
by scaring up a bird or rabbit
who thought she had settled in for the night,

I think of my neighbor saying last time
we talked — which we didn't often,
even before the last election —

we weren't here for the company,
so one good thing about here is
you don't run into people much.

Bio

Michael Gregory is the the author of several books and chapbooks, including *The Valley Floor* (1975) and *Hunger Weather 1959-1975* (2 vols, 1979, 1982), both from Mother Duck Press; *re: Play* (Pudding House 2008); and *Mr American Drives His Car* (Post-Soviet Depression Press 2013). His poetry has appeared widely in periodicals, anthologies and on the Internet and has won a variety of awards. For the past several years he has been engaged in writing a boo-length poem, *Pound Laundry* (forthcoming from Post-Soviet Depression Press) based on the life and work of Ezra Pound.

Since 1971, he has lived off-grid in the Sulphur Springs Valley ten miles from the US-Mexico border.

Empire State

Qui gurgis aut quae flumina lugubris ignara belli

Horace

Given more time and a sinecure from friends
in high places, replete with subsistence farm
not far from Rome (yet far enough) and slaves
to keep it up and a live stream fed
year round by a sacred spring (is there another
kind?), even I might yet turn out
a book or two of odes and epodes extolling
with intricate syntax and virtuoso metrics
such virtues as are to be found in the commonplace,
gently chiding my urbane friends for vices
they ought to know better than to indulge yet biting
my tongue when it gets too sharp, keeping in mind
how we're all prone to folly, especially when
we're young and still in the throes of passion, mad
for the arms of both Venus and Mars, easily led
down dead-end paths by smooth-cheeked lovers and smoothtalking
snakes who have no good in mind.

But things being as they are, I don't have to worry
about that. Friends in high places
are about as likely as Santa Claus.
So be it. I've got this piece of desert
more or less paid for, some peace of mind
sometimes, a friend or two and a faithful lover
to share the quiet with, the virtues of working
the soil with my own hands, watering it
with water brought up through pumps and pipes
when (as usual) it doesn't rain,
the pleasures of watching stems and branches grow
under my care, flowers open, fruit
ripen and words come as naturally as these,
unforced, in uninverted order, no
hothouse specimens twisted out of their habit
but sweet and delicious, food fit for the gods,
put to the test not by argument
but fate and fortune, gifts of providence
in what little time we have to ourselves,
free as anyone stuck with making a living
to rail against the fools and privateers
who would sell their mothers for a quick buck,

lead our country into endless war,
trade freedom for a little security.

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Praxis

Our dreams must be pragmatic
- Aristotle

He had no badge except a gun
looking for the men and women
who stopped by my stand to ask for food
in a language I thought I understood.

They knew the Queen Anne's Lace, the spring
medicine plants, the evil-headed
creature curling out of the cabbage.
They walked among flowering herbs.

I gave them milk in cardboard bottles
(more than I knew I had left over
from feeding the cats) and some bread,
cheese and apples. A little girl

was there, her eyes large and bright
with hunger, fear and unhappiness.
She said she didn't want to go on
like this, never knowing when

the man with gun would reappear,
that all she wanted was to go home
where everything was as it was and would be.
She said that was what she wanted

no matter how often her parents explained
(and I, I admit, tried to help)
that place she thought she remembered was gone,
had never been, except in dreams,

for even there what wasn't known
was everything and everything
might change overnight as she knew
it had, you never know what might happen

which was why they had to keep going
now, to reach that dream place she
could come back to time after time
despite the change in everything.

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Dust

After they came down
the dust was everywhere

eyes ears and mouths
inside and outside

pulverized matter
through every opening

afflicting exposed tissue
—sometimes mechanically:

blocking smaller paths
irritating the flesh

—sometimes chemically:
inducing anomalies

in cells, chromosomes,
genes and their functions

biological changes
subacute to chronic

often unpleasant
in the extreme

—sometimes, in otherwise healthy
adults, terminal

—sometimes, in the young
and unborn, developmental

or transgenerational
to show up later

dangers Washington knew
and lied to us about

the EPA on orders
issued through channels

from the White House
by way of the CEQ

telling us it's OK
it's just dust after all

not enough in the air
to cause significant harm

(and as you can see we
aren't wearing gasmasks)

the risk is minimal
(though of course if you have

pre-existing conditions
you'll want to take precautions)

so please let's get back to work
get this mess cleaned up

business back to normal
the exchange going

let's show them over there
who did this to us

who they're up against
with our women and men

in uniform after them
in their own lairs

never letting up
until their oil is ours.

for Heidi Dehncke-Fisher

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**Eating Brown Rice and Tamari by Light of an Ill-adjusted Aladdin Lamp in Just Deserts,
Arizona**

*Let's do something exciting tonight.
Let's waste something or ruin something
or make some acid rain or something.*

1

Walking through the acid wastes of Bisbee improper
picking up on all the semi-precious stones--
St. Elmo preserve us, these tailings are hot, the air's on fire--
drop your eyes in the Lavender Pit to fall and fall like spit
from that Turista Kid hanging on the hurricane fence
behind the Chamber of Commerce viewpoint

*Once there was a Queen who sold her soul
until all she had left was a big hole.
What did she do then? She sold the hole.*

2

Walking through the hemispherical fountains of mesquite,
glimmering spectra of setting suns reveal themselves
as exposed brains of sensitive creatures embedded
past their eyes in glowing red sand: all night
their ganglia transmit nervous messages of sultry
wind, moonlit sky, crystalline depths of clay.

*Men and women died here, some spreadeagled
to the sun, some split from bottom to top.*

3

One they found on the wrong side of the line
between Douglas and Paul Spur, August, 1980,
stripped him and tied him, branded him, then
kicked him back across the border. And one
they picked up on I-10 three months
later, drove to a house on West Blvd.,
Bisbee, fed him acid, raped him, then cut
up his tongue and left him hogtied in a wash.

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Pins and Needles

recessions were induced
- William Greider

Who will tell the people
the secrets of the temple?

madness in high places
high crimes *contra natura*

obscene wealth created
ex nihilo

financial instruments
as weapons of mass destruction

the coin of the realm minted
in nomine populi

then taken away as taxes
from those who have least

given as *droit du seigneur*
to private interests

returns on savings so low
everyone buys on time instead

mortgages on homes foreclosed
homeless and jobless in the streets

then borrowed back in a lender's market
ungodly profits on treasury notes

the major banks bailed out
while farms go broke and factories close

the dealers in arms and currency
never at a loss in a pinch

compounding the national debt
with personal bankruptcies

borrowing at interest

the practical fiction of legal tender

the sins of the fathers and so forth
genius vilified or ignored

to pay for all the common wealth
squandered on kindred insanities—

war corruption pollution disease—
forked tongue on forked tail

the high priest of the state religion
the chief talking head of the bank of issue

intoning monetary dogma
blessing the puppet in the oval office

whose fiscal policy belies the myth
of representative democracy

determining between them how flat
the little guy will get squeezed

in the interest of high interest
how fat the bubbles will be inflated

how thick the cloud of speculation will be
spread by those who buy and sell debt

how high the unemployment will rise
before the point of the pin trade is factored in

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Poli Sci

Yesterday I broke my favorite cup
—cobalt blue with gold letters—a gift
from visiting Antioch scholars-in-the-making,
intelligent young gentlemen and ladies
dressed in the latest undress mode, come
to hear, for college credit, about the border.

In a different time and place I
was a lot like them, at home in my native state
with credentials that didn't have to be seen
to be believed, where reputation didn't
so much go before as draw people there
looking for answers to one it or another

as I but for circumstance would have been drawn
to learn the latest math and physical science,
enrolled in a work-study curriculum
leading to degrees in astrophysics
I'd been trying to get myself ready for
since before puberty and Sputnik

reading up on relativity
light bending around dense bodies
saddle-shaped universes of negative space
endless possibilities of time
defined by mathematical constructions
limited only by imagination:

lines on a blackboard, say, or on a page
describing how things work in the real world
where institutional endowments employ
celestial mechanics to figure out the angles
of attack and repose objects assume
under hypothetical conditions

of so many Gs with such and such a payload
a list, say, of known properties
in relation to one another, fixing
with pure science what if it ain't broke now
is, according to certain theses
having currency in some circles,

if not given serious attention,

bound to become a problem of hemispheric proportions where imaginary lines can't be crossed without showing people holding guns a card encoded in symbols known at checkpoints everywhere

as a reduction of planetary motion to laws expressed through physical constants in a field perturbed by x-forces applied in series to points Y through Z in order to see how long what some call surplus energy can be shunted off

to isolated storage banks before (given total diversity of the species in question, adjacent possibles multiplying themselves exponentially, a phase transition of autocatalytic sets) explosive reactions occur in real time.

In the hour or so we had we spoke in relatively concrete terms of pressures economic and atmospheric, wastes human and industrial, fair versus free in the universal abstract that treats labor as a commodity.

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Remembering

Speaking truth to power
Fighting fire with fire
Keeping alive to fight again
the battle if not the war

There are many ways to resist

witnessing
testifying
putting money where your mouth is
body on the line
a monkey wrench in the works

Many ways to prepare

remembering
the body bags
the mustard gas
the Kamikazes
Ghost Dancers
suicide bombers

remembering
Buchenwald
Hiroshima
Rwanda

remembering who paid
for surgical strikes
smart bombs
strategic rapes
tactical bombers
death squads
mass graves

There are many ways to resist

lying down on the job
lying in
lying in wait
instead of just lying

remembering

Pearl Harbor
the Gulf of Tonkin
the Bay of Pigs
the Pueblo, the Maine
Abu Ghraib
Guantánamo

the broomstick in Brooklyn
Rodney King in L.A.

the ace of clubs the king of diamonds
the pentagon the tower
connecting the dots
the poppy fields to the oil fields
the cotton fields to the coke plantations

boardrooms to party platforms
bank accounts to body counts

world banks
world trade organization
world trade center
world market
stock market
slave market
new world order

self-interest to vested interest
interest rates to tax breaks

sweat shops to laundered money
to keeping up with the Joneses

civil rights to human rights
birth rights to last rites

remembering
what wasn't on TV
what isn't on the history channel

Operation Chaos
Project Phoenix
Operation Mindbend

debt debit deficit doubt

Project Artichoke
Project Naomi
Project Monarch

the High Arctic Auroral Research Project
the haarp angels don't play

remembering who you are
remembering who you aren't

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A Walk on Wet Ground

The memory of my country spoils my walk.
Thoreau

A wet morning. Gray. A little too warm
for frost. Grackle and raven having their say.
Some time yet before the blackbirds
clack and flutter toward the apparent sun.
I had forgotten, given my own children,
that the harvest and new year's rites each fall
are first of all a response to certain death.

No place to sit: puddles in low spots,
the swelling high ground spongy underfoot.
The wettest fall in white memory.
As the light rises, the air quickens,
adding new chill to the damp: standing
still too long, the skin wants to shiver,
the hand and finger knuckles to be held;
walking, only the toes seem to feel the cold.

Daylight burnishes the orchard leaves
still clinging to last year's new growth.
The mesquite are finally dropping their fronds,
getting as much sun to the trunk as they can.
Underneath, the beds of leaves and grasses
migrantes have made glisten with damp light.

The border patriots have a point of course:
though some birds return to the nest each spring,
others do not. Names borne in a land
they came to call home, wherever their bodies may go
they themselves disappear into their songs.

*For Joel Climenhaga, born in Rhodesia,
who died en la frontera on All Souls' Day*