

meta meta
make-
belief
poems

Marc McKee



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To Camellia & Harry

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------|----|
| <i>How Meta is This?: An Essay</i> | I |
| <i>meta</i> | |
| This is the Part of the Poem Where You Help Me Out | 7 |
| Just a Bunch of Received Ideas About Mazes | 10 |
| Semipro Air Traffic Controller | 12 |
| The Answer is Not More Reality | 14 |
| A 74-Year-Old Man with Memory Loss and Neuropathy | |
| Who Enjoys Alcoholic Beverages | 15 |
| The Electric is Excellent in the City | 17 |
| Diary of a Busy Doctor | 18 |
| Staggered Zebra | 20 |
| Available State Compensation Remedies #1: Museum | 22 |
| Geriatric Anesthesiology | 24 |
| Public Health Response to a Rabid Kitten— | |
| Four States, 2007 | 25 |
| Knit Your Own Sweater, Boss Lady | 26 |
| Lester Bangs Talks Scottie | 28 |
| Bereavement Company Picnic | 30 |
| Bereavement Company Christmas Party | 32 |
| Bereavement Company (o): At the Grief Recovery | |
| Academy | 34 |
| <i>meta</i> | |
| Gizmo Idolatry | 39 |
| Concept | 41 |
| Voice-Over | 43 |
| Bomb Shelter | 46 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| This Song's About a Superhero Named Tony, It's Called 'Tony's Theme' | 48 |
| After the Film Adaptation of Bobby Gaugin's <i>Tricycle! Waterfall!</i> , w/ Off-Brand Orange Juice | 49 |
| Fan Mail | 51 |
| Fan Mail 2: Nanny Time Approacheth | 55 |
| Tracking Shot | 58 |
| Gust Avrakotos Pulls Lancaster Dodd's File in the CIA Archive, 1989 | 60 |
| Some Little Movie | 63 |
| <i>make-belief</i> | |
| Kite Shepherd (O) | 67 |
| Kite Shepherd (I) | 68 |
| Kite Shepherd (2) | 69 |
| What Isn't Rubble | 70 |
| Marching Band Adjudication Services | 72 |
| Veteran Kid | 74 |
| Calming Measures Ahead | 76 |
| Good Party | 78 |
| At the comestible wedding | 80 |
| There are 21 dogs on the <i>To Be Destroyed</i> list | 82 |
| The Devil is in the Details, God is in the Details, the Devil is God | 84 |
| This Will All End In Tarantulas, I Know It | 85 |
| Abridg'd Epic | 87 |
| & Now | 90 |
| & What Shoulder, & What Art | 92 |
| Make-Belief | 94 |
| Phil Parma Speaks Over the Body of Philip Seymour Hoffman | 97 |
| * | |
| <i>Notes</i> | 101 |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | 103 |

How Meta is This?: An Essay

Impossible to determine a singular *this*
that *how meta* “is.” That 90s show about nothing
has a show within a show that starts to be
about nothing but has to be about something
and is terrible, making the show without
the within show victorious
and in the midst of that arc my father loses
his job, all our lives change, but that’s real,
not *about* the real except there is no real
that isn’t also *about* being real, cf. so many emcees,
hiya hip hop, personae personae personae
like to flip Ezra Pound’s bones, so very
vampire slayer, the first episode of *BtVS* I see,
for example, pivotal season 4 finale,
a kind of vision/conspiracy board
that retroactively laces up what’s come before
and prophesies what’s to come only what’s come
before are prophecies that didn’t pan out,
failures in determinism that stay warnings
even now, *even now* one of the only things I like
about prophecies. There was that one song
by NOFX, remember NOFX? remember that song,
it was its own kind of essay, anything can be
an essay if you take the time to call it an essay
and did it ever get played on the radio?
Are there not like 1000 desperate, sloppy
9/11 metaphors masquerading
as hour-long serial melodramas
but then maybe 2 come correct, right, are
right, right? Write your guess on two postcards
and send one postcard to someone

you are sure will disagree with you
and one to one you are sure will not.
There's the scene in *Safety School*, not its
real name, where the fallen, above-it dick
with a terrified heart names a pencil, breaks it,
and the woman whose involuntary, audible reaction
is audible in a precisely performed way.
Two characters from that show have 30 seconds
at the end of most of the first three seasons
to pitch a diamond at us that chases
the pleasing fossil fuels of the other 21:30. So TV,
so all day, Tom Stoppard, but Shakespeare all day
every day, the part where the fool I am
mistakes the fool I am with Lear's, with Hamlet,
with Will his hack self hooting, cutting eyes, cutting
eyes to the penny rabble, one minute
he's romancing the break with the pretense
of the kingly body, then a snark follows hard upon
that rolls out like a carpet
down the whole mercy-forsaken plank we walk
then a dick joke / balls joke / vagina terror
joke but let's be clear: it is Philip Seymour Hoffman
in that one movie that I love just enough more
than all other fellow meta instants:
Can you see him there? Hospice nurse,
paging through soul-scurvying porno mag
classifieds. How on the phone he is.
How barely patient. How *for* his patient, so
This is a movie he says, not in so many words,
and in movies even when the sky rains
amphibious catharsis, even
when all the characters sing the same song
where some of my best friends just know
there should be an intermission instead
or a fire of napalm and petrol

that dials this movie back to “never happened”
even then, the most artficing
of an artificial thing lays out things true,
it is like the field dressing game of true things
happening. *This is a movie* he doesn't quite
say, but the movie says hey,
how about this movie, being a movie,
and Philip Seymour Hoffman never does anything
less than make you believe. Please pretend
you know this is a movie and act like it
because if that means to you anything like
what it means to me, you will help me
like I believe I would try to help you. Who
is even saying this. He wants you to believe
even art at its most absurd can lead you, propel you
into intervention, like “the lady blackmailer”
in another movie I love that you've almost certainly
never seen. Do we have all night, all we have
is night. Sometimes all we have is all the night
we have. Right. Allusion, Michael. Fake it till
etcetera. I have loved so many cartoons
reminding me they are cartoons, how they take
my hand. I once thought any move to meta
was a cheat. Just one bobble and meta
is meat. How meet. My son, 3 ½, says
we can read this book just skip the dragon.
I say I won't skip the dragon, but
it's make believe, you don't have to be afraid,
I'm right here, and make believe
can't hurt you. He knows better already
and I have to keep remembering to know
better. The dragon comes, I narrate triple-time,
slow down and draw out the victory
of those menaced, who come through
mortal risk that in the moment can only ever be real

and in the end, no casualties. How rare.
Big smiles, relief, still he put his head
under the pillow while the danger reared up,
real. Okay, but also making believe can save you,
your friends, your cosmologies, making better
belief has to be the beginning of beginning
to save you I will tell him one day, should we
get so lucky the sun rises on that day. Oh,
all along I have forgotten to say welcome.
How meat this meta cute becomes.
Welcome to these poems which are all
this, all the time, often differently, welcome
to these poems which expect you to be
in this movie with them, welcome
to this poem that knows you're a movie,
welcome, welcome to being on my sleeve,
welcome to being my heart, look
it's got a megaphone in the least
of its ventricles, another ventricle entirely
stuffed with masks and the other two,
what am I, a doctor? I miss you already,
welcome, welcome, welcome
to the belief I make, no need to stay awake,
I don't think it was your cinnamon roll
I ate, but so sorry am I nonetheless
and when I say that I trust you know
my stick figures even as they go on
bend over backwards
to say *thankyou*.

meta

This is the Part of the Poem Where You Help Me Out

This is the part where I describe
the edges of the lake
but not the lake

so it will be your lake I tiptoe around
with my scalpels
and my markers,

with my masking tape and my staples
and my ideas
about all things

insisting their way into frame. This
is the part
where mountains rise

because pop-up book, because eagle-struggling-
to-be-born-from-a-heart
song, because bittersweet-battery

movie. In this part the parts depart and what remains
is the echo
of what's been played.

All the stage is a world. Staging the world
is our awl,
punching breathing holes

into the suffocations. This is the part
where the hero barks
his forehead

coming to too fast on the bottom bunk
of the bed
fronting The Brother Cave

floor display at Prepubescent Males 'R Us.
This is the part
where he limps

toward the exits, feeling
whatever you think
feeling wronged by inanimate

objects feels like: The smallest lightning.
Seventh grade shame
in the face.

I leave it to you
to determine
how the hero came to be

here, what is indicated
by *he*, the color
of the unquestionably clean

shirt he wears. This is that scene. What you see
tells you something
about yourself, about

your relationship to a world that finds you
in it. A door in you
now and again swings open

and from the sea behind it
something swims
toward you.

The next part is the part where
the camera of the I
pulls back

and up: you can see that the bunk beds
are shaking
or they are trembling

or they are falling slowly apart, they are
popsicle sticks or pillars
on the verge of coming down

into a music
it takes your bent / ear
to make.

Just a Bunch of Received Ideas About Mazes

I'm nothing if not an excessive reaction
to an imaginary problem.
In other words I really am
something, I think, therefore I am,
I think, intermittently intimate
with the infinite. I drink
therefore—you know how that goes.
The second Big Bang will be
noted Renaissance dilettante Frames Janco
exploding into a new universe
yes we are tired
and a literally split second previous
my mouth will be full of buttons
before the Dancin' School School of Dance,
in my back pocket a flask full
of something to tenderize the buttons.
It is not always easy. When friends
told you they thought less of you
than you thought they thought
for example. How terribly the world
rakes the felt in the glitterbang and halflight
and doubleword of this casino.
Will we ever find our way
of course we will find our way
and lose it again and again and again
walking past a bus stop. It is morning
and we must decide which game
can lay claim to having the most
of our skin in it. Or maybe just sink,
through with deciding, through with maybe.
Sometimes, though, I enjoy thinking

of all the shoes I might fill
and the sun roars once more.
Before, I told you it rained inside
our umbrellas and that wasn't made up.
On the far side of the Eastgate Foods parking lot,
an older and older man sits on the curb
facing away from the highway.
Once upon a time, there was a phone booth
there. You pushed silver into it
and a voice came out.

Semipro Air Traffic Controller

Even when I say something like
I couldn't catch your driftwood
with Satan's butterfly net, skifflekind,

I'm worried it's a worn flight path,
exhausting bother. You're right, right,
a flight path still a flight path, yeah,

try not to be an exhausting bother
but think of all the calendar Xs
we might put to better beds, sung

to superior rest. I can see you from here,
like me, barking at a mountain, telling it
to wait for the piano, waving in sunflowers

with the faces of clocks. It never stops.
As poplars go, I'm more gum
than shun. What gods we have

we are giving away. It is not wrong
to take our dance cue from the beat
of a human heart, but it is wrong

to miss the other beats reddening
the lens, cracking the window. Quickly,
so very quickly, some shape alights,

to lay a hand upon what can't be
stopped, what can scarcely be slowed.
Wheels on the ground, dawns

per second, it goes so fast
there's a bow in our throats
and not just one. There's nothing

can grease Time's palm. We will not take
even this glass of water with us.
We choose when we can choose

even as we are distracted
by fetching, nearly designed filth
on the windowsill

how empty we leave it.

The Answer is Not More Reality

There is no answering for the past, it is / already
beneath the water
and sinking
until, like anything else—a conversation
at a party, a tusk, granola—disaster's decorations
bubble and froth at our feet. Look
at all the stuff:
Tinsel. Crushed cans. Viscera
of unknown provenance.
No way I'm picking that up.
There is no already beneath the water,
the party tusk is sinking
into the conversation with anything else,
we up make have to stuff
only with tongues silverer.
After the party, you rinse the bottles.
After you rinse the bottles, you set them in rows.
After they are in rows, you name them
and to all the names
you try to tell the right story. The past
can't help it, it pushes you down
on a sidewalk split by long-vanished ice.
There is enough reality here
to catapult a rhinoceros,
to cover you from head to toe,
to soak the brief paper towel you are
but tell me something that goes
bounding beyond bounds,
there has to be something unreal
to make, to mend
these broken pieces into.
This means you.