

**Max Wickert**

# NO CARTOONS

*(Short Version)*



Dan Houdermarski, *Mac in the Gulag* (1989), oil.  
Collection of Katka Hammond

These poems have accumulated over several decades. Their form is strictly syllabic (five-six-five), but they otherwise follow no preconceived scheme or theme. Their arrangement should probably be random, but a printed version necessarily fixes them in place. I have here made as brief a selection as I dared. A longer “Fortune Cookie Version” of this sequence will be published by Outriders Poetry Project in 2011.

*Introduction*

Dear audience, our  
author is not prepared  
to read this evening.

Atop the table near  
the microphone you  
will find a bowl filled with

fortune cookies. When the  
spirit moves you, walk  
up to the table, take

and break a cookie, read  
the text on the slip  
into the mike, then eat

the cookie, take the slip  
along, and make room  
for another reader.

When everybody is  
done, some or all may  
wish to stick around to

discuss the optimum  
order into which  
your texts might be arranged.

*The Beginning*

My life has a purpose.  
The middle. My life  
has a purpose. The end.

My tale is distinguished  
by a singular  
dullness--its mark of truth.

Something keeps knocking down  
my narcissism  
and nothing takes its place.

To start with, I know what  
everybody knows:  
all that it takes to end.

It's not the way I think.  
It's the way I speak  
about the way I think.

I thought I might become  
a saint. Instead I  
became a sybarite.

I'm the kind that won't hear  
the kind that don't feel  
for the kind that can't speak.

I think. I hope it tells.  
I hate being told  
"Ideate, punk! or else!"

It seems I just don't have  
the capacity  
to seem just as I am.

Am I the only one  
to whom this occurs?  
My life has no meaning.

*Happy Days*

Merited pain makes me pine  
for the pleasure  
of sentencing myself.

When I was seventeen  
I could hurt myself  
until I felt complete.

"Endangered" was the word.  
It seemed to apply  
to me, not the species.

I forgot I was drunk  
when I admitted  
that drunk was what I was.

Am I forced to rehearse  
all the failures of  
the world? Still, still far wide!

Free parking? Modern art?  
Gosh. Perhaps I am  
a handicapped patron.

*American Tao*

I like my buns bigger  
than the beef between.  
What law says I can't?

Unannounced, that's how I  
will make my debut.  
If unnoticed, tough luck.

Yes, a leech. My big hole  
taps into meaning  
and not issues from it.

I am your life. If you  
belong to yourself,  
your life belongs to me.

Not a friend in the world  
can I have. My truth  
makes me want to blow yours.

*Terra firma* at last.  
*Aria fresca.*  
So why can't I breathe?

*Vissi d'Arte*

So I told my chauffeur:  
"Feel free, help yourself  
just make sure we get there."

Even so, I'm sometimes  
tickled by a thought  
and must scratch where I itch.

I'll be only too glad  
not to be too grand  
when nobody else is.

Nobody plays my game  
for pleasure. They all  
want to compete for joy.

*That is the Question*

What have I been getting  
into all my life?  
I'm dying to find out.

Since there is no time, I'm  
being punished now  
for all I later do.

Here's my swill. But I try  
to swim out of it.  
Your swill thrusts me back in.

Once I made fun of you.  
Now I have to pay  
for siding with the sure.

*IOU*

I did not miss you. I  
noticed you, but I  
did not remember you.

You're the kind that can't hear  
the kind that don't feel  
for the kind that won't speak.

You're free. You have boots to  
kick me with and fly.  
I'm not free. I have roots.

You are my life. If I  
belong to myself,  
my life belongs to you.

*The Blame 1*

"Too lazy to think" you  
called me, too lazy  
to think I've become.

*The Blame 2*

Since you kept telling me  
it wasn't all bad,  
I came to wish it were.

*The Blame 3*

Your telling me I was  
honest made me feel  
the most hopeless liar.

*The Blame 4*

Not content to love me,  
you made me into  
your kind of pedestrian.

By nature lazy, I  
pay out the respect  
I owe you like a tax.

You didn't make it, still  
you can have it, since  
you made me think of it.

You may be the better  
interpreter, but  
I'm the better liar.

That I make you my goal  
doesn't have to mean  
that I make you my thing.

My point is one you won't  
accept, though I hope  
you'll read between my lines.

Beat brass pots with rawhide  
whips until the leaves  
rustle. Listen and learn.

Learn to hate yourself. Fuck  
self esteem. It can't  
make you. You can't make you.

The more you comprehend,  
the less you will sense  
what it feels like not to.

If you won't do it, God  
won't do it. If God  
won't do it, nothing will.

I ask: Are you petty?  
self-serving? like me?  
But no. You have to be.

Nature will revert to  
whatever level  
works to be rid of you.

If you should demand it,  
let me have the grace  
of not begrudging it.

Nothing I like makes sense,  
all mere preference.  
Make me happy. Rate me.

This sense of merited  
discomfort seems to  
make me comfortable.

I'll be honest with you:  
I'm really just as  
chickenshit as I sound.

Give me a break! You've been  
at me from the day  
you tried to be in me.

You hit me because I  
was hurting you. I  
hit you because I hurt.

Not the threat of your blows,  
not your blows falling,  
but my sores make me smart.

No matter how slowly  
you add my fuel,  
I spin out of control.

*Brindisi*

If you call that liquor  
you don't like the cup  
of love, drink it yourself.

My sex lights on yours like  
a fritillary  
on a fritillary.

Thank you for pushing me  
into something you  
knew only by repute.

Talk about the body  
is talk about the  
talk about the body.

You struggle to achieve  
a stupidity  
equal to your envy.

What a time we've had. Stay!  
You know how I hate  
having to make new friends.

If I said I really  
cared, how would you start  
testing my commitment?

Might as well say it now  
that you're still reading:  
This too will pass. Good-bye.

*Nirvana*

One me plus one you plus  
one of all others  
minus everybody.

*The Sparrows*

You twerp love me twerp and  
you're no twerp to me  
while twerp me loves twerp you.

Your vivibrations  
make me behave  
rididiculous.

You'll notice me all right  
unless you feel forced  
to think you made me up.

I can't keep up with you  
indefinitely  
like this. Let's fall in love.

*Sein Händedruck  
und (agh!) sein Kuss*

Never mind like reason.  
Never mind like way.  
My season's like today.

The fire that keeps you  
from me burns brighter  
than light seekers foresee.

Dinner was delicious.  
Our talk was clever.  
You disappointed me.

Since you will not let me  
call you my angel,  
at least taste my cheesecake.

*Joy of Sex*

I take it you've had one,  
a feminine one.  
You have not? You're a fraud.

Heehee! if you were not  
a feminist, we  
(heehee!) would married be.

For Christ's sake, boy (if you  
are a Christian) touch  
your moist lips to my dry!

Not with my words, you don't.  
Even if you did,  
you'd be none the wiser.

*To the Torture Victims*

I die. The devil says,  
"Smile, you're in heaven."  
But I know you see me.

All very well and good,  
you might say, but I  
can't do both good and well.

*Dumdiddy Dumdum Ta-tá*

Whose knock is this? I think  
I know. His pad is in  
the Village. Used to be.

She's a nectarine so  
Luscious, you have to  
eat her over a sink.

*Venus*

Her green light is a fuse--  
cancer cells crying:  
“There is no wealth but life.”

I feel clean and she feels  
clean to me, but she  
tells me she feels dirty.

If she knew me for what  
I am, she would make  
her child wage war on me.

Terrible illusion:  
I can't help looking  
in the mirror, gorgeous.

Blue eye of Avernus,  
stop watching me die.  
The weather is turning.

My maker forever  
opts to make my world  
a world utterly strange.

*The Toad*

Me me me me me me.  
It too dislikes me.  
It it it it it it.

*No Cartoons 1*

Jokes as strictly tested  
as cures for cancer.  
Funny? Don't make me laugh!

Show me to your head man.  
I'll take the stars. Please,  
may I keep my walkman?

Everyone whom I call  
winds up in my hell,  
each with a new sibyl.

The champions of the big  
tease tease me because  
I like my teases mild.

All who believe I'm nice  
start by assuming  
I can't help being so.

All of them make a lot  
of allowances  
and I, of course, do not.

Assume the position  
of highest wisdom.  
You are apprehended.

Never boast of your skill,  
or your strength, or your  
beauty. Boast of your luck.

Sense is everywhere you  
look for it. As for  
coherence, make your own.

*Singing in the Rain*

Keep yourself to yourself.  
All your attributes  
inevitably leak.

To make hay faster, play  
the numbers, don't try  
to decipher the code.

If you outgrow your need  
to shine, you can be  
a star. Are you tempted?

Bounce them off each other  
over and over  
till they give off meaning.

*So What Color is Your Suit?*

Your eyes are gray, your  
hair is gray, your skin is  
gray and your soul is gray.

You can wear that head-dress  
or not. However,  
you've got to check your balls.

Only connect! Keep things  
moving! Speak from clouds!  
Make another cartoon!

Careful, friend, lest you let  
heart's desire get  
ahead of your head set.

If you're a torturer,  
you will always find  
who wants to be tortured.

Never mind the reason.  
Never mind the way.  
The season ends today.

That there should be water,  
that there should be you:  
equally amazing.

Remember the bells? No?  
Sirens, then? No? Well,  
remember the sunsets?

Ask a rhetorical  
question and get an  
ironical answer.

*Blue Pleasures*

Flies land on your pudding.  
Smoke gets in your highs.  
There's a thong at your heart.

Don't you hear the guitar?  
You will never come  
to know how sad you are.

Keep on sifting through stuff  
and you'll find either  
mystery or more stuff.

If you cannot accept  
what your soul tells you,  
your life will convince you.

If you can't feel pleasure  
as greater than sex,  
you're a sissy, sissy.

*El Norte*

If you won't think of sex  
as more than pleasure,  
you're a bully, bully.

You think "Wow! I'm done for  
now!" ready to bet  
that it's not over yet.

Someone grasping what you  
just said doesn't mean  
he's shot you in the head.

If you have evidence  
that you meant it all,  
destroy the evidence.

She's charged with politics.  
Deactivate her  
before she blasts your world.

The cardinal explains  
how green must look black  
to his doxy mate.

Convinced of love, he was  
convicted of rape.  
He was not convincing.

Supercharged, works  
hard, connected with  
the top: perfect victim.

*The Marvelous Boy*

Nice dead kid who needed  
to be special and  
had his chance to succeed.

That others would suffer  
pained him deeply, but  
why should his mother die?

The bad Germans found it.  
God, the good German,  
allowed it to be found.

*Lange Pingua*

Said the fool in his heart,  
"There's no God." It's hard  
to stop eating shortbread.

God's death only occurs  
in the religious  
bits of the universe.

That prick has an ego  
almost as tight as  
the cunts he dreams about.

*Modernism*

That devil decides to  
forever disdain  
the merely delightful.

"Now he feels the heat, now  
he's in hot water!"  
"So how come he still breathes?"

The distinguished rain drop  
spends his whole short life  
acknowledging applause.

If we ask a question,  
our hero replies:  
"Language is for cowards."

Is cowardice dumb? Not  
necessarily.  
But neither is courage.

Just as she was winding  
the alarm, he asked:  
"Did we make it tonight?"

*God's Trollop*

God's trollop is blushing.  
She'd do anything.  
He knows it. So she won't.

*Mystery*

will not announce herself,  
waits to be announced  
by the angel Reason.

More and more she finds her  
distaste for cartoons  
shading into hatred.

Moral pain she pays for  
is pain she prefers to  
penal pain she pays with.

All too well she saw it  
coming in hulking  
and coming out sulking.

*The Witch*

After we straightened her out  
she acted more bent  
out of shape than before.

Finally she resists  
and begins to swim  
in our sea of malice.

Sea cracked in a million  
sparks, blue table cloth  
athwart red, aping waves.

*The Wenches and the Trenches*

We have the discussions  
and you've got the nuts.  
We're here to make you shells.

*Do I Make Myself Perfectly Clear?*

Boring, boring, boring.  
Boring. Yes, boring.  
Yes, boring. Yes, boring!

*Drowning in a Teaspoon of Water*

No—one—mind—can—hold—things  
not—only—not all  
but—no—part—of one—thing.

Each living authorship  
depends on dying  
faster than its subjects.

It cries for whatever  
pure chance can provide  
even in politics.

Either there's a common  
language or there's not.  
Long live the difference.

Rumors of poetry  
rumors of rumors  
poetry of rumors

The hitch in meaning? Not  
"Does it exist?" but  
"Is it worth the effort?"

Apart from somebody  
better doing it,  
is it the best thing to do?

*An Audience of Geniuses*

The dance of the clumsy  
makes itself perfect  
as a matter of course.

*So It Happened*

and directly led to  
(as how could it not?)  
a further perception.

Xerox it all, quickly,  
before the writing  
begins to reappear.

It takes all kinds at once  
so naturally  
nothing's unique in it.

Better get hit than not  
get hit and yet get  
heart-hurt but not know it.

It isn't the fuck, it's  
the fucking meaning  
of the fuck that matters.

And of course it matters,  
it's got to matter  
to me, if you insist.

*Lust*

Wrong for it to mean more  
than friendship but right  
for it to mean friendship.

Desire it could be  
anytime, but now  
it's mainly a pleasure.

The title complicates  
at least as badly  
as it can explicate.

One tittle complicates  
more madly than ten  
big thumbs can simplify.

*The Mainstream*

Yes, it has a certain  
simplicity. It's  
comic strip Romanesque.

The torch knows it believes  
it all, therefore feels  
forced to speak in fire.

*Loud Noise*

The moth believes it knows  
it all, therefore feels  
forced to fly at fire.

Why would anybody  
not forced to bother  
be bothered to attend?

So a body meets a  
body. Something will  
die. Need a body cry?

Categorical goals,  
fucking distractions,  
a bad finish. That's life.

Giftwrapped? How insipid!  
Once the wrapper is ripped,  
can wishing unrip it?

Unveiling the Savior  
and then pinning him  
up is no comic strip.

The rude sun bids the rude  
stars vanish. We come  
closer to him than them.

The number of the beast? It's  
in the book and all  
of us know what it is

We're the kind that don't feel  
the kind that won't speak  
for the kind that can't hear.

What's this? A conviction  
of sin, and no hell  
to burn in? Let's make one.

Are we mad if our world  
consistently looks  
madder than our nightmares?

Yes, we're mature enough  
never to coddle  
anyone's illusion.

Work will not work, nor will  
refusal to work,  
therefore we work to rule.

The world pardons our dirt  
by making all of us  
more sterile year by year.

We seek to find no joy  
in joy which entails  
visible excitement.

*Villa of the Mysteries*

We depict the victims  
we won't save on walls  
we beautify but can't.

*Baghdad Bunkers*

Good grief! what have we here?  
A diaspora  
of Germans? God forbid!

Let's never be mature  
enough to coddle  
anyone's illusion.

Damnation! we have reached  
the origin and  
have to go back again.

Once we've all become slobs,  
we'll study how to  
become endearing slobs.

Cheap shots and more cheap shots.  
Bad hangovers. Would  
we could toss down some good.

Enough of wisdom now.  
Let's have a woman.  
Not that one. She looks wise.

Of what can't develop  
we hear in echoes  
ample development.

Maybe none will listen.  
Maybe all forget.  
But we didn't not speak.

*Complaining about the Help*

Okay for us to say:  
"Try then buy." But they  
would rather shop non-stop.

We've got to pay them to  
beat the kids. We don't  
have the heart to do it.

Let's fight what they seem to  
be doing till we  
find ourselves doing it.

What keeps us joined is not  
our sign, not even  
our song, merely our pride.

That strain again and then  
our song is over.  
Yes. Over and over.

A specter is haunting  
the world. Never mind.  
Communism is dead.

Divorce. Or better yet,  
a suicide pact.  
Give the children a chance.

Dear suicide: How can  
anyone desert  
a world with me in it?

Those weird inflations of  
riper years: you love  
nothing less than the world.

Your brains ring in your ears:  
clouds of unknowing,  
sing-along of the spheres.

Money brings peace within  
the range of profit.  
Outside it children starve.

Makum feel smart. Druggum.  
Wakum. To impose  
is . . . umh . . . to discover.

*El Fuente de Hijuelos*

*¡Mujeres, mujeres!  
¿No es el seno  
á prueba de bomba?*

*Kiss Me Ars Poetica*

Editorials can pass  
for song if you keep  
the tone ingratiating.

*Promised Land*

You know it in a flash:  
its people do not  
want to know their future.

*Lament of the Parents*

So you know nobody  
whom you want silenced?  
Praise the Lord! Are you deaf?

You give them all you've got  
but they want beauty  
too. Expensive tastes.

Women, stay as you are.  
Clean young men, grow up  
into dirty old men.

When they want to show truth  
they have it spoken  
by idiots and monsters.

indepth. . . interactive. . .  
multimedia. . .  
assisted suicide. . .

How solemn their caution  
ends making them feel--  
not to seem too solemn.

Lone heroes so need to show  
brave, they can't even  
get afraid together.

*Liberals*

Their contempt for villains  
was tantamount to  
contempt for their victims.

*Altar of the Dead*

They so badly want to  
tell their news, though they  
don't know yet what it is.

Their good side, no doubt, is  
not to engage. And  
their bad side? Not to care.

Fortunately the world  
disappoints all those  
who watch it for results.

*Short Pants*

Some say, "Hey, let's do it  
now!" Others say, "Well . . .  
okay." Armageddon.

Ugly Americans.  
Theme parks. Rap. Car phones.  
New world order? No sweat.

*Verdict*

If some were chewing gum,  
the bench will assume  
that all were standing tall.

Strange mothers! When the house  
seemed low on fuel,  
they sent their sons to burn.

They have no eyes, no  
veins, no crotches, no  
feet--nothing but signs.

*Fantasy Island*

They arrive from the States  
where there's no failure.  
They need their lives heightened.

Champions of privacy  
will get their names pulled  
out of circulation.

Little drops of water.  
Little grains of sand.  
Ooh! how they do cohere!

The Grand Hotel Abyss--  
you open the blinds  
and find you're looking in.

Open another door  
or close all windows:  
you will be overwhelmed.

Leaving one's great matters  
unmentioned is how  
one makes them understood.

BOOM! boom, boom, boom! There's  
hope  
yet. Three more booms  
than one thought possible  
One had something to say,  
But once one said it  
one had nothing to add.

*Endless*

No cartoons. No cartoons.  
No cartoons. And so:  
The sky, the sky, the sky . . .

*Moor Swan*

Baroque clouds belly out  
big bulging sails of  
transparent convention.

Near death, a setting sun  
unifies the land  
by means of shadows.

*Do Me No Harm, Good Man!*

Cricket chaps keep up leg  
friction, that's why they  
croak so quickquick. Whoops! whoops!

Saturn. Ceres. Pluto.  
And all the rest. Best  
experienced from afar.

Jumbo electric bug  
zapper louder than  
picnic rock-n-roll band.

It's "Hoyotoho!" from  
upstairs. On the street  
sparrows peck rotten fruit.

Amazon hamburgers.  
Japanese flashlights.  
Florida communists.

Language is just like grass.  
One whiff can lead straight  
to the crack of poems.

The languages of Hell  
sound strange even in  
American accents.

Some day merely to look  
at a reflection  
will make an awful splash.

The dance of the perfect  
makes itself clumsy  
by choice by choice by choice.

*When Wants Were Worn Weak*

coincidentally  
opportunities  
deteriorated.

Ah, metaphysicians!  
Wheel out Big Berthas!  
The sparrows are flying.

Bad faith universe. Bad  
hope motel. Bad love  
seminal vesicle.

Simultaneously  
infantile giggles  
and shrieks of distemper.

*Allegory of the Poets*

Garbage is dressing Time  
watching Kitsch scratching  
Obscenity offstage.

*Withalittlebitofluck*

Red wine and chocolate. Time  
and tide. Subjective,  
objective. Wet matches.

*Urban Renewal*

Vaaanity. Eeemptiness.  
Blaaank walls. Rain. A dooor  
repeatedly bannnggging.

Early to bed to waste  
time, early to rise  
to be wasted by it.

*The Great Refusal*

No, no, no cartoons. No.  
No, no cartoons. No,  
no, no cartoons. No, no.

*No Cartoons (again)*

Nonimmachinations?  
All news newspaper?  
Superfresco fresco?

*Day Womster Spika*

Day womster spika de troof.  
Day gits id spoken  
bei iddiotes unt momsters.

What hot black nights! As though  
each speck of living  
daylight had turned racist!

The good words are of the kind  
that come in a flash  
and then go out, period.

All real secrets are  
(so far as they are  
real) open secrets.

*The Two Masters*

A has more to say about  
the ifs and the buts,  
but B has all the nuts.

"Is there more than a chance  
that taking a chance  
will improve my chances?"

All good reasons for  
getting in make good  
reasons for staying out.

*Acta Est Fabula*

Incomprehensible  
without theory  
no trace of which appears.

The one revolution  
against all margins  
eats up revolutions.

*Thank Heaven*

Bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!  
Bangbangbangbangbangbang!  
Bangbangbang! Bang! (Bad shots.)

Very honorably  
Western discussion.  
Nothing mystical here.

Rape is not the worst crime  
which even rapists  
may try to imagine.

"What, trained? educated?  
learned? scholarly?  
magisterial?" "Yes. Trained."

Depend on soul music  
to keep the best folks  
in the worst neighborhoods.

*No Cartoons (again again)*

The God whose words form in  
a cloud is a God  
who exists in cartoons.

Stop! No more sentences!  
(Intergalactic  
Unenforced Amnesty)

Truth. One does not invent  
truth. Why do all who  
do make it hard to find?

*Headline*

Zone of Finality  
Declared by Inmate,  
Censorship Held Hostage.

Slicks of oil on boiling  
water trace proofs  
of Manichaeic truths.

*Not in Cameroon*

"Do you know cartoons?" "Know  
Khartoum? Why, I am  
the Mahdi!" "No, cartoons!"

*Ecossaise*

Till a' the seas gang dry?  
Sounds like a threat,  
for a' that and a' that.

Late to bed not to waste  
time, late to rise to  
not be wasted by it.

First cruelty so much  
the worst cruelty,  
how can the numbers count?

*Rodin* Shakespeare and Dante shat  
a-squat at road sides.  
A fact. Think about it.

*Civil War* Pop pop pop pop pop pop.  
Mum mum mum mum mum.  
Pump pump pump. Mop mop mop.

Never in history  
does America  
do wrong without just cause.

*Prime Time* Blood sports? Bedlam? Public  
executions? Nah,  
just fantastic war news.

The wine cup. The wine. The  
vine. The vinegar.  
God is dead? God is dead.

*Blessed Be the Pieceworkers* who perish in attempts  
to negotiate peace  
with pushy production.

Jehosaphat here! There  
appears to have been  
a major malfunction.

All true blue conquering  
pale Galileans  
die as Americans.

All whom they can't coerce  
they buy and whom they  
can't buy they liquidate.

Common activity,  
creativity.  
They want to be alone.

Modern women are bad.  
They make you think  
you have a chance with them.

If they all turned fully  
political, none  
could be oppressed by me.

*Tell Them What to Do*

Only if and to the  
extent that you do  
something for them you can

*Six Pronouns in Search of the Title*

He said, "We need cartoons  
to fix your context."  
She watched them watching it.

God's in his heaven. Yes,  
cancer patients are  
writing theodicies.

Always the best way to  
keep on going is  
to stop along the road.

Rapt in the infinite  
Itself, the epic  
shrivels to a caption.

*The Epic*

go home come home go home  
come home go home come  
home go home come home go

If cartoons. And cartoons.  
But cartoons. And so:  
a tune, the tune, this tune.

*Privatio Boni*

Good by good by good by  
good by good by good?  
Good buy, by God! Goodbye.

*The End: My Life*

had no purpose. My life  
had no purpose. The  
middle? It was a start.

blank slate blank slate blank slate  
blank slate blank slate blank  
slate blank slate blank slate blank