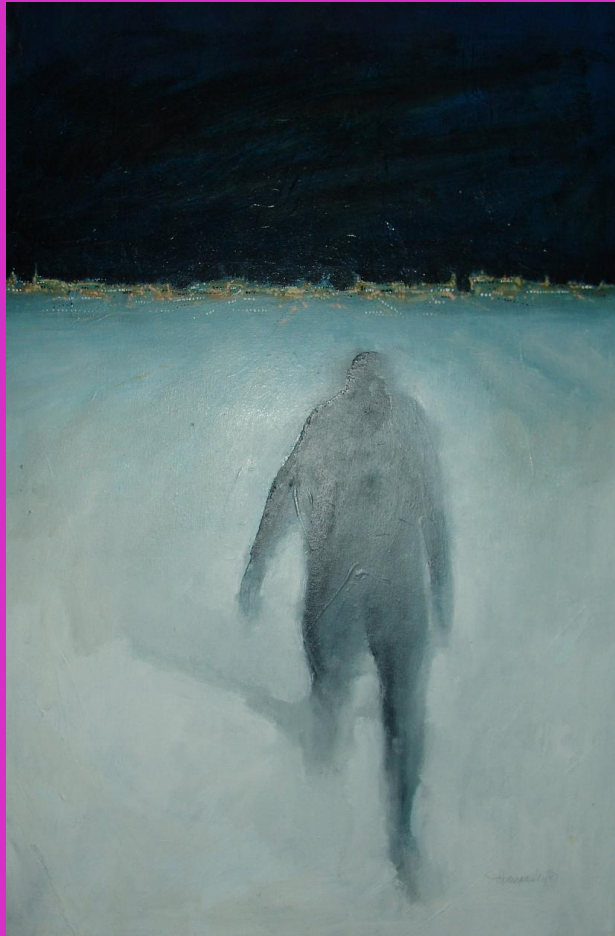


Max Wickert

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 is 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