



**FISHING
IN THE
KNIFE DRAWER**

Mark J. Mitchell

FISHING IN THE KNIFE DRAWER
A Chapbook on a Day
Mark J. Mitchell



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“Any idiot can handle a crisis; it's day-to-day living that wears you out.”

--Anton Chekov

A.M. TANKA

Tea steams my glasses.
I'm blinded by fragrance,
deaf to morning.
My neighbor wields his rake.
Leaves obey.
This cup is empty.

AUBADE

Like water writing on skin, drawing shapes
With no meaning, she shakes, she starts to rise.
It will be some time before she's awake.

The morning, quietly, begins to break.
Bold sun, bright through shutters, crosses her eyes
Like water. Writhing, her skin draws its shape

Across sheets. She unfolds, yawns. She drapes
Her hair across the bed, across her thighs
For some time, testing light before she wakes.

It's worthy. She stirs, almost purrs. She makes
Her tiny motions, distilling small lies
She'll write with water on skin. She draws shapes

In dust on her bedside table. She takes
Her morning pills. She rocks back, she tries
For some time to persuade herself to wake.

You rest beside her, quiet for her sake,
Waiting for the poem her open eyes
Will write on your skin. Like water, she shapes
The sum of time. You're patient. She will wake.

SHAVING GRACE

"Besides, who would ever shave themselves in such a state?"

--Lord Byron

It's a showy hazard, a silly trick
To shave focused intently on your eyes.
Blood tends to blossom and you often nick
Your chin. Practicing this art, I'm surprised.
Today it's easy. I think it's relief:
The season's ending, duty's almost done.
This discipline is more charm than belief,
Something I do in honor of a nun,
Not God. At least, I think that now, as I scrape
The soap off my face (looking straight ahead).
I'm kidding myself, there is no escape
From your own soul, not even for the dead.
I've finished shaving and my face is clean.
My eyes are clear, unmoved by what they've seen.

SINISTER KITCHEN

It is a stainless steel
Conspiracy. A plot.
A revolution!

This morning
The cheese grater tilted
Onto a slotted spoon.

I have no idea
If alloys were exchanged or
Plans were hatched.

I only know that after work
Neither one could be found.

This is not a coincidence.

CONSTRUCTION ZONE

It is constant, this play of noise
Across these streets. Someday it will
Be over. Until then, lanky boys
Are constantly toying with noise,
Choosing the perfect tool to employ
For breaking up our sleep. It spills
Constantly, our own game of noise
Played on our street, against our will.

HOUSECLEANING

It is futile
To keep dusting
The mirror:

Dust never sleeps
And the mirror can't lie.

It's best
To leave the whole thing
Alone.

WRITER'S DAY OFF

His skull is loud and crowded
With under drawn characters
Giving him a headache because
They all speak at the same time.

He trips on the carpet, dropping
A bagel, cheese side down.
He is easily distracted by pale
Suicide mountains that might develop.

Just before noon, he finds himself
Whispering accented names, tenderly
To the almost-empty coffee pot
While the telephone rings and rings and rings.

FINANCIAL DISTRICT

The money in this room
Is as abstract
As an all-white painting.

Somewhere a woman
Is singing Mozart's *Angus Dei*
As if God were listening.

And maybe a violin
Calls out to someone by name
And they turn off their route.

The sun is shining bright and cold.
In the desert, it's Spring:
Bats, balls and straining muscles dance.

We sit here
Talking about money.

OFFICE RONDEAU

She sighs, like water under wind,
softly (you'd think she'd never sinned)
then bites her sorrow back, smiling
(always bravest when she's filing).
Still, she's a stranger in her skin.

She brushes her hair, unpinned,
falling loose and undisciplined
(someone *please* find this beguiling).
She sighs

again, closes her drawer, spins
slowly on a heel, fixing her grin
like make-up—she calls it styling.
Still, there's some tough guy boss spoiling
her life. The workday always wins:
She sighs.

PADRES VS. GIANTS, THIRD INNING

Radio game. Road game. First place in April
doesn't mean a thing but it still feels good.
That junk ball pitcher's fooling our wood.
We've got a journeyman kid on the hill
keeping the bases clear so far. Our boys
are the class of the division this year.
Still, it's a slow enough game. I could use a beer.
The announcer's just keeping up the noise
and it's not enough to hold me tonight.
Her plane will land in the morning. I'll be
at work, of course. It's been a long road trip
for her, too, she'll be tired. I hope her flight's
calm and on time. We've only been married
twenty years—I wait, starving for her kiss.

A LAUNDROMAT IN THE RAIN

Cars hissing past only see
windows as steamy as a shaving mirror after a shower
or a parked sedan loaded with entwined teenagers.

Inside, it smells like swimming pools.
Perfumed detergents kiss the moist air,
motors hum and thrash, doing the ancient
work of beating clothes against stones.

On a pink table, a girl in red sweats
reads a novel in French. A young man
drags a dryer open. Heat exhales.
He keeps his body between
his ragged shorts and the girl's eyes.

On a bench in the corner
by the change machine, a half-shaven
man with mended glasses watches.
He has no laundry of his own. He's making
a personal survey, counting all
the subversive t-shirts, and taking names.

AFTERNOON CALL

I came. I came to see your flowers bloom:
Red burst. Violet surprises. All white
Rainbows arranged on green stalks, all too bright
For these aging eyes. I do not presume

To knowledge. Botany is beyond me.
I'm not sure I see the colors you do.
But I came to see those colors, the new
Shoots, churned soil, bound tendrils. I came to see

Or to learn to see. This is no excuse
To see you. Really. I came for your plants,
Your garden. You invited me. No use

Pretending you didn't. Those poppies slant
Nicely away from that tree. That's blue spruce,
Isn't it? I'd visit, but I just can't.

STILL LIFE:

WHITE WINE IN WINTER

Last year's blossoms
ghost from the glass.

High windows throw memories
of buttery sun across the table.

The room is cool
as caves cut into rock.

An urgent telephone pulses,
left alone, off the hook.

OLD RECORD

Ella sang it: Spring can really hang you
Up the most. Days move to a quirky beat.
Sun behind haze, light smog, early dew
Quickly sucked back to air, this must defeat
Ambition. Errands remain unrun, chores
Ignored. You dig out scratchy jazz records
And bop around your kitchen. Stop to pour
Some coffee, slap an air bass, pose a chord,
Then sigh heavily and sag at the shoulder.
Slump out to a porch, a chair, remember
Other days, women not your wife. Older,
Right. Wiser, right. She's not real, just some her.
Your eyes spot a dust mote. You watch, engrossed.
Yes, spring can really hang you up the most.

MUSICAL CHAIRS

I constantly move
the violin
risking music and dust.

The house wants
attention:
the toilet sings,
floors applaud.
I pace and smoke.

CLEANING A GARLIC PRESS

A blind and legless insect
glints dull gray
under the flow of water.

A green toothbrush
breaks its bristles
against heavy mesh
pushing bits
of pulp into the sink.

This small monster
dries and drains against
my wine glass.
I sniff my fingers:
They stink
of a good meal
and soap.

KITCHEN LESSON

Fishing in a knife drawer
A finger slips.

The thin line, invisible
At first, broadens

To a red seam and spreads
Down the palm

Completely obliterating
Your life line.

DOMESTIC BALLADE

Stew cooks on the stove, bubbles smile
across brown gravy. Household chores
busy hands, spices tempt you while
you sort clean socks. You rise, stir, before
something sticks (an excuse for more
aromatic steam). It's all right,
you think, this light, afternoon light
slanting down on clean counters, sun
pointing up something not quite white.
there's always more, you're never done.

While wiping up you move the news,
wondering just where this headline
happened. You should know and you used
to, you're almost sure. At age nine
you wrote a report, got a fine
grade. Somehow it slipped from your head,
gone with all your teacher said.
Today you'd like to have it, one
tiny fact you know you've read.
There's always more, you're never done.

Well, you just sigh and stir the pot,
breathing deep, add some basil, salt.
There are things you haven't forgot
(true, those unread books aren't your fault.
No, you were too tired to assault
them). Some things you won't know, big deal,
physics and kings, other unreal
facts. It was more duty than fun
that made you choose, excess zeal.
There's always more, you're never done.

Windows steamed, you mutter a prayer,
recall who you're cooking for, where
she likes to be kissed, how her hair
frames her face, how her smile can stun
you still from across a room. There
are rewards, you've more than your share.
There's always more, you're never done.

HOME ALONE

Cooking for one
has a purity. Like science
tested in an after hours lab:
If the experiment works
there's time to tell the world;
if it fails,
no one needs to know.

Cooking for one
is an exercise in logistics,
keeping the dishes
to a minimum,
re-using each spoon and pan.

Cooking for one
is the practice of optimism,
a ritual meant to chase
loneliness away.
It's a game we play
while waiting
for someone to come home.

RETAIL SCENE: EARLY EVENING

Out of the sunset
Work-weary women,
Heavy with bread and appointments,
Struggle in to buy their wine.

A little later, younger girls
Smelling like macaroons
Walk out of the purple sky,
Purchasing pre-date cigarettes
To secure their smokescreens.

MUNDANE MIRACLE

Coins drop like years on a palm,
Fall dead into drawers
Before they speak their history.

Bills blacken fingertips
As change is counted back.

Just another evening when money,
Like water, is turned into wine.

TASTING NOTES

Whites

a) Pale tease on the tongue
a certain terse sweetness
body to die for
no nose

b) Coarse and golden
like a blonde I know
but not
as funny

c) Dry, bone-white not
ashen. A hint of earth
in the nose something
is struggling
for my attention

Reds

a) If there were light in this room
it could not get through
this glass
all hard angles and wood
the wine knocks

b) Generous friendly
my tongue hugs it my nose
thinks of farms
it wants to be but
is not quite
a work of art

c) A sanguine mystery
it calls my name
instructs me
to look at the moon
in a puddle.

NIGHT MUSIC

My sleepless neighbor
Paces while I count his steps.

Sky is washed by mist.
A siren sets off a dog.

Brakes scream, horns bleat. I'm waiting
For damp notes from a foghorn.

HERB TEA

Listening for the kettle
I cough. My lungs rattle
Hard, like trapped steam. The cold
Will pass, the cure is time.
Still, I can't say I'm fine
Trapped in this midnight, feeling old.

Mark J. Mitchell studied writing at UC Santa Cruz under Raymond Carver, George Hitchcock and Barbara Hull. His work has appeared in various periodicals over the last thirty- five years, as well as the anthologies Good Poems, American Places, Hunger Enough, and Line Drives. His chapbook, Three Visitors will be published by Negative Capability Press later this year and his novels, The Magic War and Knight Prisoner will be published in the coming months. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, the documentarian and filmmaker Joan Juster. Currently he's seeking gainful employment since poets are born and not paid.

