Poems Along the Path

Michael Thaler
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Michael Thaler
For all those, both gone and still here, who inspired this work
Preface

On January 15, 2008, Michael Thaler died of a rare cancer at the age of 45. Michael’s creativity blossomed over the last two years of his life and stayed with him until his final days. His unique vision could turn a photograph of a washing machine into a work of art and a subject for poetry. Wherever he happened to be – in Japan, suburban New Jersey, or New York’s East Village – he paid attention to things most people would pass by and showed they were worthy of notice. Above all, he was in search of the authentic – in the world and in himself. In photographing people, Michael captured their essence. He approached his subjects humbly, without artifice, and they responded by revealing their inner natures. In his blog, One Foot in Front of the Other (ohenrosan.blogspot.com), Michael revealed himself in the same way and touched readers all over the world. Michael had to stop taking pictures when his cameras became too heavy for him, but he continued writing until the night before he moved to a hospice. His last blog entry was the moving poem “Fatigue” in which he said “I see the steady progress of death…But, blessing of blessings I can still feel the life spark.” This small book gathers together the poems that were scattered throughout Michael’s blog. And we can still feel his life spark.

Valerie Thaler
Contents

Gleanings from Buddha Fields ........................................ 1
On the Path ........................................................................ 9
Remembering Japan ......................................................... 25
Gone But Still Here .......................................................... 41
Hermitage ........................................................................ 55
Facing Death ....................................................................... 67
Gleanings from Buddha Fields
In heaven

Chaung-yen Monastery, Carmel, N.Y

In heaven
there’s a lake
where cares are washed away
Getting clean

Washing machine
baptizes my clothes
in a fresh start
Dreams of Buddha fields

Great Buddha Hall, Chuang-yen Monastery, Carmel, N.Y

And I awoke
surrounded by ten thousand Buddha’s
and I was whole again
Four untitled poems

Time to sit zazen:
Fart around, now it’s too late
OK, tomorrow

The Buddhist precepts:
Very easy to follow
till I leave my house

A thought arises
I try to chase it away
but like it too much

Don’t let anger rise:
One more precept I can’t keep
the list grows longer
Three untitled poems

Alone with my thoughts
haunted by the bitter things
I shouldn’t have said

Gray hairs on my head
each one a mocking witness
to empty worries

And just who am I?
Particles of shit and spit
exactly like you
It’s funny how we’re amazed
by the simple victories
of the very young
and the very old:
“The baby took his first steps today”
“Grandma walked by herself today”
Circles
in constant motion
opening, closing
closing, opening
On the Path
The Brooklyn Bridge

is a coy child
peering from behind a wall wrought
by immigrant hands
Visiting an old friend

It was early May when I last walked across the George Washington Bridge, gateway to so many of my adventures on foot in Manhattan and beyond.
With cooler weather approaching, I want to dust off my walking shoes and get back on the path.
On the path, I lose myself and find myself at the same time.
On the path, necessities and luxuries rarely vie.
On the path, my senses sharpen.
On the path, I feel content as my life unfolds at three miles per hour.
I’m just about ready to heed the call once again.
Walking, again

Today
Manhattan was mine
seven leagues
20 miles
a trail of footfalls
from North Jersey
nearly the length of the island

Crossing the George Washington Bridge
haven’t felt a hammering headwind like this
in a long time
it’s a cunning sparring partner
threatens to sweep my feet from under me

Walking down Hudson River path
wind roaring in my ears
my eyes water
can’t hear myself think
gray clouds part
like a fleece jacket unzipped
on the gusts
a hint of spring

I leave the riverside
to escape the wind
walk east down 83rd Street
to Central Park
Choose a serpentine path
blasted through bedrock
deserted
runoff from yesterday’s rain
drips from an overpass
cars and taxis zip by

Cross Fifth Avenue
    Madison
    Park
    Lexington
    Third
    Second
    First
Downtown-bound

Reach Gramercy Park
memories of my grandmother
summers spent as a kid
not far from the little bar
where O. Henry wrote
“Gift of the Magi”
and Babe Ruth bragged
over beer and cigars

Cut back west to Third Avenue
head down to Canal Street
    Chinatown
hucksters hawking
fake designer bags
and wind-up toys
and God knows what
Sun setting
streets emptying
People rushing home
to see
the Super Bowl kickoff

Streets turn quiet
purposeful Chinese ladies
head home from shopping
men shut their stores
and I head to the Manhattan Bridge

A dark, mysterious span
over the East River
not a soul on the footpath
wind blows dust into my eyes
subway trains clatter by
deafening screech of metal on metal
sparks cast a greenish light

To my right
the Brooklyn Bridge
twinkling like tinsel
strands of angel hair

On a whim
I don’t double back
across the Manhattan Bridge
I’ll head into Brooklyn
city of churches
instead
and take the Brooklyn Bridge
that lacework fortress
back over the East River

Back in lower Manhattan
the financial center
Wall Street
all dark and quiet
no deals going down
all the tourists gone
a few drops of rain
I see the ghost
of Bartleby the Scrivener
(he still prefers not to)

Head up Allen Street
which becomes First Avenue
after Houston
past crowded bars
sports banter wafts outside
men out front smoking
excitedly talking
the world’s biggest football fans
some just for this day

I stop at my friend’s sushi bar
the place is a crypt
kid reading a book
at a corner table
leaves as I arrive
just me
and the waitress
and the cook
and the radio
I quietly sip my beer

Return from the toilet
to find someone sitting next to me
some college girl
young enough to be my daughter
I try to make small talk
amid cavernous silence
rebuffed, ignored
she turns away without a word
“You just happened to be there”
(I feel like saying)
but I finish my beer
pay the tab
tell her
“Enjoy your dinner
and keep in mind

(hungry ghosts weeping)
life isn’t nearly as serious
as you make it out to be --
but you’ll find out”
and back out into the night

9:30
trudge uptown
losing steam
ankles sore
carefree stride well behind me
walk past the carriage horses
along Central Park South
no business at this hour
drivers talk among themselves
in conspiratorial whispers

I reach Columbus Circle
nearly fall asleep on the A train back to the GWB
  I get off the train
the station quiet as a catacomb
  up the stairs
onto the street
  into the darkness

Half-moon perched
atop one of the GWB towers
wind still howling
even stronger than this morning
  not another soul
walking back to New Jersey
Cotton Club

At the Cotton Club
is that Duke Ellington’s ghost
in the pinstriped suit?
Underneath the bridge
a world of broken spirits
tucked away, unseen
Just passing through

Walk walk walk
Think think think
Angels and demons vying for my thoughts
I’m just passing through
A master at work

Diving, surfacing, diving again
A lone cormorant
probing the Hudson’s secrets
A senryu*

“How is your dessert?”
“Fine,” she says, fully sated
Now, awkward silence

*Haiku are poems about nature. Senryu are poems about human nature. In Japanese, they both follow the same 5-7-5 syllable pattern.
Light and shadow

New York shopkeeper
smoothes his trousers, combs his hair
poses for a shot
Remembering Japan
Doors

House entrance, Sawara City, Chiba Prefecture

I remember a time
and a place
of adventures
around every corner
behind every door
Storm dream

Distant thunder in the dead of night
    stirs my sleep
    floats me to a level
    just below consciousness

    Through half-shut eyes
    I can see
    a bamboo grove
    smell its musty dampness
    feel its moist soil underfoot
    then I awaken
    and realize
    I’m still in New Jersey
Lately

Abandoned truck swallowed by kudzu, Chiba Prefecture

These days
I feel so old
weary
stiff
joints ache
focus wavers
past is more clear
than the present
climbing a mountain
summit hidden by fog
straining to move
this bag of bones
how nice it would be to sleep
for 10,000 years
If

Matsuri (festival), Sawara City, Chiba Prefecture

Coming back
to beginner’s mind,
casting off
these jaded views,
seeing anew
with the eyes of a child,
All
just a footstep away
If
I hop off this treadmill
Hermit’s lament

Bored monkey, bored trainer, Miyajima island, Hiroshima Prefecture

‘Tis a sad world indeed
that would rob you even of the simple pleasure
of bathing in your own blues
The threat

Country road at dawn, Chiba Prefecture

Watch: One of these days
I’m gonna leave this old house
and just keep walking
Death is but a dream

Pilgrim (o-henro-san) on the Shikoku 88-temple path

Death is but a dream
a long walk through countryside
strangely familiar
Atomic Bomb Dome

Genbaku domu (Atomic Bomb Dome), Hiroshima

Atomic Bomb Dome

twisted beams, cries of anguish

searing heat, silence
Crazy Zen abbot

Adashino Nembutsu-ji temple, Kyoto

Crazy Zen abbot
serves tea, tries to out-bow me
at Daisen temple
Farm woman

Yokaichiba City, Chiba Prefecture

Farm woman blushes as I point my camera, adjusts her bonnet.
Gentle Koyoshi, 
scorned, cast out by family, 
“You’re no husband, you’re no father,” they yell 
forcing upon him a life of solitude; 
days of wandering, 
finally takes refuge in a garden shack between two trees, 
too proud to accept charity, 
owner lets him stay in exchange for chores, 
breakfast is part of the deal; 
Koyoshi, ever in his own world, 
joins us at table, 
ever talks much to his surrogate kin, 
quietly sips his tea, 
now and then lifts his head to smile, eyes twinkling, 
gets up from the table without a word, 
gently exhales 
shuffles back to his shack 
a man of quiet earth tones, a golden light within.
Greetings from Kyoto

Maiko-san (apprentice geisha), Gion district, Kyoto

Painted smile conceals
a heart brimming with sadness,
beneath the veneer a spirit
rarely allowed to shine through,
sick of this life
the rude customers
gawking tourists
staccato click of camera shutters
a routine set in stone,
had to leave school after ninth grade
to learn arts that stink of the old
here in the ancient capital,
hates the goddamned shamisen
makeup sometimes makes her break out
dreams of reinventing herself in Tokyo
time for her next appointment
Farmer

A life spent stooped
over a vegetable field
pulling weeds
planting
harvesting
forever bound to the land
childless
alone
years since her husband died
backbone twisted into a question mark
cranes her neck just to look straight ahead
54 but looks decades older
farming can’t pay the bills
shack falling apart around her
TV set, kotatsu*, kerosene heater, toaster oven, ancient clock
her only luxuries
finds comfort in tea and cigarettes
and the cats that prowl outside

* A kotatsu is a small, low table. Underneath the table are heat coils. In winter, you stick your legs under the kotatsu, and a blanket keeps the heat in.
Every day, I’m visited by voices and visions from my years in Japan. The memories remain alive and vibrant within me. The sense of aesthetics that took root in me colors the way I view life itself.

Hints of incense remind me of lazy summer afternoons with a dear friend in Kyoto, watching Arashiyama -- Storm Mountain -- turn blue then purple then green in the changing light.

The tinkle of wind chimes carries me back to my apartment balcony overlooking a sea of rice paddies shimmering emerald green in the brilliant sun.

Certain poetry rekindles the joyous solitude I felt inside bamboo groves.

A cicada’s stridulations or a bird’s call transport me back to forests of giant cryptomeria trees where the sunlight never fully pierces the canopy.

Physically, I’m half a world away now. Spiritually, I never left.
Gone But Still Here
Song of the Taconic Parkway

Old two-lane Taghkanic highway of brittle macadam slices through the hunting grounds of the Algonquins
sunlight
filters through clouds
plays tricks on the mountains
gives them wrinkles
tints them purple
tickles the heather on their slopes
and makes it shimmer
tires thump on black rubber joints
between pale roadway slabs
in perfect time to the Bukka White blues on the radio
the ghosts of the Dutch
still haunt the geography
of this place
where creeks
are called kills
and rolling thunder
is but the mirth of giants playing tenpins
Damn kids went off too proudly and too eagerly
to fight in a war they thought
would be fought and done in a month
  Full of piss and vinegar
  itching to get in the fray
poor bastards probably died
  of measles or dysentery
long before they could fire a shot
  in anger or fear
Sure, put up a monument
  write odes to their bravery and courage
and the nobility of their cause
but how do you capture in bronze and stone
  a dying boy scared shitless
  crying for his mother
Dream house

Stones shaped by sturdy Dutch hands
before a free America was even an idea
Its only neighbor a willow sapling
grown staid and massive
Its walls a witness to pioneers and scoundrels
Redcoats and patriots
dreams and realities
Exuding an inner warmth
that makes it a home
Spots on a tin ceiling

Trendy SoHo art gallery
entertains the well-heeled and the hip
paintings hang like jewels on the wall
magnets for comments
small talk
like the three kinds of wine that fuels it
flows freely
few look up to notice the ages-old pressed-tin ceiling
with a diamond pattern in relief
its fresh coat of white paint
can’t cover the vignettes
of generations of tenants long gone
immigrant families crammed ten to a room
mothers nursing newborn babies
elderly relatives breathing their last
strong men with calloused hands
speaking languages strange even in this Babel of Manhattan
all their ghosts mingle
unseen
but felt
in the art gallery
Slavery in New York

Caesar, a slave. Daguerreotype, ca. 1850
from Collection of The New-York Historical Society, ID 46594

Slave burial ground
yields beads cowries bits of bone
echoes of anguish
I could’ve eased my dad’s final months
   could’ve soothed
       his fears
arising from awareness
    of ebbing lucidity
his mind the victim
of a capricious child
stealing a cookie here and there
   from the jar

I could’ve bridged decades of enmity
    that had settled
into an uneasy truce
   could’ve answered
that frantic long-distance call
one afternoon
   a cry for help
asking me
where he was
why he was alone
why I wasn’t there
“Can you HELP me?”
   he pleads
into the answering machine
through which I screened the call

In his last days
his mind nearly gone
wife unable to care
for his needs
or defend herself
against his blind rages
he is put in a nursing home
the same one where his mother died
I remember visiting her there
as a boy of 4
“Why is Grandma playing with a doll?”
I ask my mother
in a scene that haunts me
to this day

And now my dad
perched on the edge
of that same fine and fragile line
and at that same way station
in a moment of clarity
says
“I’m going to die here, aren’t I?”

I want to visit him
“He wouldn’t even recognize you”
my mother says
I take her word for it
and stay away

The phone call came a week later
he died just past midnight
on his 48th wedding anniversary

I don’t recall shedding many tears
at his funeral
but afterward
I pulled out the box of old home movies
safely tucked away
and forgotten
in my mother’s basement
carefully threading the brittle film
through the projector

and there he is
vibrant
smiling
in his element
forever young
in far happier days
before realities put hopes to flight
and opening this portal
I let loose torrents of emotion
such as I’ve never felt

It’s been 14 springs
since he’s been gone
but the talks we have now
by his graveside
are among the best
we ever had
Gone but still here

My dad’s childhood home, Sixth Street between First Avenue and Avenue A, East Village, Manhattan

I sip
rum and cokes
and blur
the here and now
at an East Village bar
steps from the tenement
where a midwife delivered my father
99 years ago

I rise
on stuttering feet
and walk
around the corner
past the old public baths
on 11th Street
between Avenues A and B
an abode now for well-heeled tenants
but through a rip in time
I see the place where my father
watched his father
get clean
after days of manual labor

I pass
the public school
where my father’s mind was nurtured
its classrooms now luxury apartments
with big closets

I hear
idle chatter
about
stock portfolios
and
reality TV
and
real estate prices
but it can’t drown out
echoes
of ancient immigrant sounds
whose meanings can be inferred
but not quite understood

I walk
these streets
arm-in-arm
with ghosts
My old man’s ink

Another spring
since he has been gone
my old man’s ink
still not dry
his stamp
on my personality
Hermitage
Roots

Well dug circa 1763 in yard of carriage house where I live. The main house, a Dutch colonial, was built in 1763 and was occupied by the British during Washington’s retreat from Fort Lee. The well is no longer used, but the quality of the water is said to be nearly pristine.

My roots
on my father’s side
are in the polyglot streets
of the East Village
and on my mother’s side
in the wise-guy streets
of the Bronx
and Brooklyn
and Harlem
With such a noble pedigree
how the hell
did I wind up
in Joisey?
I rail against the cramped confines
of my timeworn garage apartment
so hot in summer
so cold in winter
and then tonight
I see the golden gibbous moon
flickering through the pines
that tower over the roof
and I give silent thanks
This old house

My drafty old house
Frigid gusts find every crack
in these thin, tired walls
**Winter sky**

Outside my hermitage
on a chill night
I watch Orion
prowl through the trees

**Welcome to January**

A chilly morning
Puddles show scudding gray clouds
Bones creak as I walk
Storm
Air still as a tomb
Thunderclaps move like footfalls
toward my shaking house

Whispers outside my window
A mourning dove coos
from a treetop perch unseen
breeze rustles the pines
Two cats
couch-mates for years
yet in the morning
strangers
Plotting mischief
  two cats sit
  by the water bowl
Untitled

I have a cat
unlike all other types
he’s in love with the sound
of the Scottish bagpipes

When the skirling begins
his ears perk up straight
“That’s not music,” he thinks
“That’s a possible mate”
Untitled

Cat sleeps in my lap
too old to do much but purr
just wants to stay warm
In a patch of preserved marshland down the road from my house, these wildflowers are flaunting their colors for the last time before they wither and die, yielding to the coming autumn.
Facing Death
Winter is here
a trudging old man
who finally has arrived

*Jisei is the Japanese word meaning “death poem.” The tradition of composing a poem as a farewell to life goes back hundreds of years in Japan and is rooted in the Buddhist view of life and death.
Reminder to myself

Living life to its fullest isn’t about checking off thrills from a list; It’s about being fearless in following my dreams, courageous in accepting that some will go unfulfilled (but the joy is in the pursuit) and taking the time to savor something as simple as a cup of tea
Dropping away of body

In the early stages of my illness, when the cancer was just beginning to bloom inside me, my karate found full, if awkward, expression in the relatively pain-free movement of my ankles, knees, hips, wrists, elbows and shoulders.

As my ankles began to betray me and as my knees and my hips followed suit, I thought, “Well, I still have my arms.”

As my wrists begin to betray me and as my elbows and shoulders follow suit, I have come to realize that all I’ll soon have left is my spirit.

The cancer can’t have that.
Thoughts on a Friday night in the ER

In a burst of fury
hotter than the sun
my right fist engages
    in a brief
    but vicious
    bout
with the bathroom door
and the door wins
    like Tyson
    over Spinks
only much quicker

The exquisite pain
flushes the anger
    from my mind
    like a burning
    bubbling
    stream
    of peroxide
flushes out infection
    and I realize
in a rush of clarity
what a long
    long
journey
    this
    is
Calcium Dreams

Pick a dream
from the catalog
and wrap yourself
in it
then fade
to black
Thoughts on a Wednesday afternoon

Embers cool quickly
as the last bundle of sticks
is burned ... 
my thoughts are
distant
clouded
wrapped in gauze
my body weighs
as much as the universe
I just want to sleep
and sleep
That’s progress

I was immortal
when I was younger
fooling time, fate
and myself
with a parlor trick
long since forgotten
Lying on the exam table

Lying on the exam table
as the IV medication
drips ...
drips...
drips ...
I know how I got here
but where am I going?

In the X-ray lab

In the X-ray lab
they peek
at the inner man
while my spirit finds
a hiding place
amid all those bones
Journey of a lifetime

I’ve been expecting you
but not eagerly
Won’t you have some tea?
Two thoughts from the zendo

Sitting in the zendo
I am just a shadow
on the wall

***

Going on a journey
leaving behind everything
even myself
Voices from the subconscious

A poem?
A poem? At a time like this?
Are you crazy?
Frightened beyond words
by that final anxious moment;
Hoping beyond words
for a journey to the stars
Kindness

Worried friend stops by
with a hearty meal
“Enjoy these blessings while you can,”
says I to me
I'm curled up on a bed in an ER exam room. An elderly woman lying on a gurney rolls by my door.

The gurney stops for a moment. She turns to me and her tired, sad gray eyes meet my tired, sad blue ones. Whisper acknowledges whisper.

Then she slowly turns away as the gurney moves on.
Facing death
recalling the “virtues” of my life
(why am I keeping score?)
letting the foibles haunt me
Who am I trying to please?
What am I measuring up to?
Untitled

I’ve trapped myself
into sniffing out death
around every corner
and when panic attacks
reveal a minuscule glimpse
of what I most fear
I recoil in terror
and scream “Oh Shit!”

Am I the pursued
or the pursuer?

I’m learning
that if you go fishing
you catch fish.
Untitled

In younger days
I created
a rite of passage --
a silver-dollar-size tattoo
on my left bicep
of the Chinese ideogram
for “double happiness”

Done in reds and greens
it now looks like a rheumy eye

How silly it appears
on my toothpick arm
Fatigue
Thursday, January 3, 2008

Looking in my bathroom mirror
I see the steady progress of death
as he moves like an eclipse
across my face

My skin grows more taut
my beard is shot through with gray
my eyes are increasingly bloodshot
I can’t recognize this person staring back at me --
in fact
this stranger is scaring me

My physical weakness astounds me
my arms don’t listen anymore
my sense of balance has forsaken me

But, blessing of blessings
I can still feel the life spark
I can still feel the life spark