



MYSTERY GIRL

BY MIKE FINLEY

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Baby Danger¹

The night the baby was born,
And the midwife left,
And our friends finished off the champagne,
We wrapped it twitching in a white cloth
And set it between our bodies in the bed.

Sleeping rigid as steel bars,
Terrified we'd roll upon the being
And smother the life,
And dreamed of it sliding to its death
Under dark waters,
Dreamed it fell from countertops,
Chairs, cracked like eggs on the baked varnish
Of the world.

We dreamed of leaving it exposed
And found it blue and chapped upon snow,
Or turning one moment and looking back
To the crib rocking emptily, emptily,
All of our reasons
Suddenly missing.

There was a decade of our lives or more
When we could lie down upon cold tracks
And drink and nod off
And not worry about morning.

Now everything is heat,
And distant thunder.

¹ The Brood (1992)

The moon puts its shoulder to the shade,
Peering in like the dumbstruck
Passenger on
Two frightened adults
And a small sleeping girl.

Mystery²

for Daniele (1984-2009)

A scene familiar from late night,
the husband in the cellar,
struggling to rinse blood from cloth.

Now is the time for the washday miracle,
what did the paper say about removing blood,
hot water sets its rusty paws as evidence

and the world will know what was done.
See how the gelatin beads along the mesh,
the plasm of life splashed the length of it, dyed.

Taste – like coins in the pocket too long,
of things suspect, gone wrong,
of what should ever be in edging out.

Blood, blood, and the wretched Lady
wrung hands and wailed for the
perfumes of Arabia, and a gallant

man and the blade subsumed.
Blood, blood, and the last survivor
plunges the mass back into the cold.

The press said something snapped in him,
a stain that spread, a marinade of bed.
And the bodies lying in the room overhead

² The Brood (1992)

are still now, the seeping at low ebb,
and the red-eyed husband mounts the stairs
and stands beside the sleeping wife

and newborn child.

Nine*

I think it must be exceptionally fine
To discover oneself at the ripe age of nine.

Nine is so swift on the hoof and so fleet,
Nine is so hard on the growing of feet.

Nine is so elegant, ermine and silk.
Nine is so everyday, chocolate milk.

Nine is so ancient, the product of eons.
Nine is so modern, an apex to be on.

Nine is so stalwart, so bold and so brave.
Nine is timid, crouched in a cave.

Nine is exemplary, a regular role model.
Nine is tight jeans that make you waddle.

Nine is the age to explore many areas.
Nine is the age to think life is hilarious.

Awkward and clumsy and falling downstairs,
Graceful and delicate, walking on air.

Halfway to womanhood, working, and college,
Think of the expertise, think of the knowledge!

Think of your doddering, slobbering father
Who always thought you could walk on water.

Nevertheless, here you are, here am I.
Who could be prouder, who makes me cry?

I would do anything you ask me to,
Quack like an elephant, shout like the dew,

* A birthday card, 1993

Save you from earthquake and mudslide and viper,
Save you from having to launder a diaper.

Save you from heartache and meanness and strife
All of the days of the years of your life.

I'll save you from all these things while you're nine.
Because I will always want you to be mine.

I've done a couple of things pretty well,
But my masterpiece goes by the name of Daniele.

Fever^{3*}

Infant daughter in my arms
plucks absently at my nipple.
A smile forms.

She gets the joke,
how useless I am,
and it seems to do her good.

³ The Brood (1992)

* I found this poem of mine published in a website of mediocre father-daughter poems. That was OK. But they rewrote the last line to “Thank goodness she got better!”

Since She Died

I am in a restaurant
unwrapping a napkin
when for no reason the people
stop sipping coffee,
become monster babies
from a monograph of freaks
cyclops baby, girl with no brain,
hour-old faces that didn't quite
make it, dry eyes crossed
with expectation of death.

I wish I could salve this feeling
like I butter a roll,
but bitterness is not a face you make
its roots punch through you
and tangle the heart.

Families are joined together
like paper dolls,
then pulled apart at the arms,
and the rest of the village,
well-issued and well-nourished
with all the right parts
in all the right places
peruse their menus
like passengers on a train,
their eyes on the scenery
ride innocently over
the rust-red tracks.

Mystery Girl

She could be so sweet and brave
but yet so afraid,

wonderfully vulgar
but not much of a divulger

alive with laughter
and then thoughtful after

But when she went black
there was no going back

Baby, how did you do this thing
And what was God thinking

Bloop⁴

Lips pursed,
the fish in the bowl
stares goggle-eyed out
of its tank.

It forms one perfect bubble,
inside which is nested a single syllable,
which asks one simple question –

Why?
Why?
What did I do?

⁴ The Upset Sea (2010)

Glue-Girl⁵

First glimpse of the child sent to replace me
Is of glassine bone and milky skull.
Two hearts quicken, ages in ages yawn.

Doctors chat and diddle buttons,
Knead the image squirming on their monitors –
A handful of centimeters from ulna to shoulder,

The gauge of the brain-pan,
The auspicious twelfth rib.
There the heart, like a tulip sprouting from the chest,

The kiss-blowing machine, the plunge
Of its pumping, the determined sucking
Already underway.

The astronaut, wound round its cord,
The slack-eyed hero, the virtueless saint
Is selfing itself into light.

I gasp, from fear.
Little glue-boy, little glue-girl,
What will you come to?

No peace, no peace.
Your home all storm, a tempest of blood,
And in all that ocean one swimmer is stroking,

Stroking and stroking,

⁵ The Brood (1992)

Keen to the sound
Of thunder underwater.

When They Die⁶

The mother makes you weep
because all mothers are Greek
and they do not know
but they suffer so

The father makes you sigh
because of all that never was
Fathers are foolishness given a voice
that then has nothing to say

A son would be like being smitten
by a smith, hit on the head
like nothing could be, pray God
could never be

But a daughter is the end
it is the man turned inside out
his soul become a flower
his only shot at beauty

⁶ Things (2009)

My Girl, 1987⁷

At a video store with Daniele, three years old.

She runs up to me with a movie box:

"Look daddy, it's Mommie!"

The movie is *10*, with Bo Derek in cornbraids and nylon swimsuit,

running toward you on the cover.

Oh, baby, you are the one.

⁷ The Brood (1992)

Flying Dumbos⁸

Taking down my office before the move,
I come across a picture of my daughter and me
at Disneyland, when she was little.
Frozen in the plastic elephant, our faces a riot
of stupid joy, we float high above the pavement
between two other elephants. She is almost three,
and a veteran of seventy or eighty screenings of the movie.
Each time she sat reverently through it,
the tension building inside her soft body,
until her eyes open wider than the baby elephant's
and she cries out to the TV, mummo fie, mummo fie,
and looks at me pleadingly so that I too can
affirm the miracle of flesh borne aloft
with neither net nor magic feather,
and I take her hands in mine and clap them for her.

⁸ The Brood (1992)

Icky⁹

was the name of her fish,
a tetra I bought her
when she was three.

we spoke to him
we touched him
and one day he died

you know my darling
I began to explain that life
is how we share our love

and it's OK to be sad
when we lose
a dear sort of friend

she finally spoke
'You know, daddy' she said
'he was only a fish'

⁹ The Brood (1992)

A Prophecy¹⁰

FOR MY DAUGHTER, FOR SOMEDAY

When I was eleven my sister Kathy died,
she was five years older, born sick, a leaky heart valve
that tapped her strength and turned her blue,
and my role as brother was to fetch for her, and
I ran up and down the stairs with colored pencils,
teacups, Scrabble tiles, wires, beads, I never minded,
she was a kind girl, she thought I was funny,
she loved to draw horses, and before she died she won
one of those matchbook art contests,
with a charcoal of a black Arabian, and a year later
the art company sued us for back tuition, and won,
and that was our luck in those days, I remember
disgracing us three times the day of the funeral,
first I insisted on wearing a straw hat with a blue feather
my Uncle Jack bought at a turnpike plaza,
and making a scene when they wouldn't let me,
second I broke into a horrible grin when I saw my friends
in the pews at mass, and finally, I was caught
throwing eggs at the parked cruiser of the police escort
at the reception afterward, and watched the dripping yolk
reach down the car window and door like raked fingers,
and while people downstairs ate ham I fell on my bed
and argued with God it was all a joke, and fantasized
how scary it was to be you, carted off in a litter
from the house, blue hand clutching the sheets,
asking mommy am I going to die, and all because
you never lost your baby teeth and they were rotting

¹⁰ The Brood (1992)

in your head and a dentist did his best and made us
sign a release but something broke, some vessel
inside you that led to your brain, and you lived
three more days in a hospital in our little town,
and what was your life but a box of notebooks
of horses and letters to Elvis and the play you wrote
and put on in the garage with the boy down the street
who grew up to be gay, and the taunts
of your classmates for being that way,
and did you awaken in the night in your bed
and wonder like me if the presence spooling in the dark
would collect your life from you like a subscription fee,
for I saw your death as a sign, a palmprint
on a piece of paper that says everyone dies
and rather than become afraid I became hard
and lived my whole youth that way, and
I suffered because I wanted so to replace you
but it was the last thing I could communicate,
and when God decided to answer my prayer
in the goodness of time and I married your mom
and became father of you children, and you blessed my life
with your beauty, it began again, the dreams,
and I cry more than ever sometimes at the thought
of a sick child hurt and dying and confused, and the hole
it blasts in the mother and the father, in my mother
who cannot talk about these things thirty years later,
she became an amateur genealogist, I think because
the dead do not disappoint, or my father,
who left for California to slam his grief and failures
behind him, there are craters of flesh opened in all of us,
kids, there is war behind every painted fence,
and I have learned no wisdom that can make this not hurt,
we are unfortunately stuck with it like we are stuck

with one another, all our lives and beyond our lives,
crybabies like sand hollering at the water to stop,
so let us have our cry and wipe our noses and
forgive me my sadness and mixing you up in my mind,
but you once had an aunt, a blue young girl
who looked like you, who won a ribbon for riding
in Pioneer Week, six months before she died, and posed
in the glory of jeweled paste, black harnesses
bearing the name Jaye, her rayon cowgirl blouse shining blue
in the lens like aluminum foil and the glass teeth bared,
a photo of weakness but how strong she was
to survive this life, and live on in my heart, that is how strong
we will have to be, courageous as children are
carried away, and have to trust the carrier,
because those hands are all they have, that a life sometimes
takes many lifetimes, to learn and laugh and know,
perhaps some mighty victory is growing in you now.

The Balloons ¹¹

On my daughter's four-month anniversary,
I buy a dozen helium balloons
at a toy shop,
red
yellow
green
blue,
and stuff them in the back seat
of the VW.
But the day is warm, and I
forgetfully
open the passenger window
to let in air,
and as I accelerate up a hill,
I can't prevent them from bobbling out,
one after another,
crowding one another
like terrified tourists.
Pulling over by the side of the street
I watch them fight their way up
over the treetops and wires,
red
yellow
green
blue,
out of reach
before I can catch them,
gone into sky like the years
of a young girl's life.

¹¹ The Brood (1992)

Hopscotch ¹²

This is an experience I had the week of Daniele's funeral. Like many other important moments that week, this one occurred at Hidden Falls in St. Paul. I was in an ultimate crisis of meaning that morning, when suddenly everything I saw seemed to fit together ecstatically. All the creatures I saw seemed to be saying something to me, something about humility that permitted them to be courageous. It was a moment of astonishing, outrageous friendship.

I knew in an instant
she was there and there and there¹³

The being small, under radar
where love clambers in the umber¹⁴

We take turns like merlins¹⁵
putting on other creatures

No membranes, no padlocks
to hinder the leaping

The mole makes castles underfoot
Crane sharpens bill on a log

A duck cannot fly without flapping
Mosquito kisses explode in the air

And suddenly everything
waves hands and says hi

¹² Desalinization (2010)

¹³ She: Daniele's spirit, where she had disappeared to. I knew she was not a duck, but she was speaking to me as one.

¹⁴ Being a jerk here. Love clambering in the umber is like, spirit moving through shadow. I just liked the “-mber” sound, like the end of the month.

¹⁵ A merlin is an owl, but this also applies to T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, in which the wizard Merlin schools Arthur in the ways of wild creatures.

Glory¹⁶

Losers
is what we are
because there is nothing
that will not depart
Every tooth will come out
every hair will blow away
every drop of blood
scab up
and flake away
Every thought
you ever had
Every child
you ever held
Every smile
will fade
in the end
And the hardest thing
is being grateful
for every loss
and every death
because what
you do not lose
you did not
have
and what you did
not have
you never
knew.

¹⁶ You (2002)

Lines Written the Morning of the Funeral ¹⁷

THE GLUTTON

The caterpillar had eaten all the leaves on the bough.
You pig, said the sparrow, you are killing the tree.
How am I supposed to know, the caterpillar cried,
can't you see I don't have eyes.

THE CIGARETTE BUTT

I have ambitious aspirations
the cigarette butt announced.

The toadstool said to him,
I don't think that's very practical

THE FOUNTAIN

Families come from all over
and spread their blankets on the grass

The fountain is predictable
every forty minutes it goes off
and sprays like a carousel
of rinestones

Mommy look, a boy says,
I tasted it, it's salty –
and kind of greasy.

Mother kleenexes a smudge
from his cheek,
Don't you know it's
a fountain of tears?

¹⁷ Things (2009)

THE CAST-IRON SKILLETS

God says, I need you to do something for me
and hands you two-red hot frying pans.
Twenty years later you run into him again.
He says, are you still holding those things?
Hey, you can set one of them down.

THE MAN WITH NO ARMS AND NO LEGS

A man with no arms and no legs
is grinning ear to ear.

What have you got to be cheerful about
he is asked.

I like how the light is playing on my face
I have a feeling it's my lucky day

THE MIRACLE

The man in bad straits had prayed for a miracle
and a jumbo jet landed on his house

THE MAN MADE OUT OF GLASS WHO KEEPS BREAKING

Every motion he makes
some new part breaks off

first a finger
then a hand

He wonders whose blood that is
forming on the edge

He keeps breaking and breaking

without losing mass

The spit bubbles
between his lips

Why doesn't someone say
stop stumbling about like a dope

All this pointless breathing
and acting surprised

He is an item of scientific interest
Making rainbows out of prisms

Don't love me he says
it's unsafe when I shatter

THE CHORD

See how lifting one finger
changes everything

A door opens, something
new and unidentified is there

Do you hear it?
Do you hear?

The Weather ¹⁸

The day of the death it began to drizzle
and people arrived at the door stamping their feet
to be rid of the wet.

It had hardly rained all summer.

An hour before the funeral the sun came out
and a soft breeze arose from the west.
People took off their jackets
and hung them on the backs of chairs.

In the middle of the night on Tuesday
the heaving thunder woke us up.
We ran through the house
lowering windows.

Then stood on the porch
as the rain came down,
rain by the oceanful,
pounding the boulevard,

blasting the neighborhood,
choking the gutters,
running and rushing
to rejoin the river.

¹⁸ Desalinization (2010)

Zeppo*

At 6: 30 a.m. Daniele releases you
From her bedroom
And you traipse upstairs to me.
I am writing, but
You don't care.
You plead with your midget's grimace:
My canines are floating!

I stand from a now-unfinishable poem
And descend two flights, and
swing open the back door,
You lift your leg against the barbecue
And are framed by the early light
And the first green blades of spring
And steam rises from your pee
Like a prayer released straightway to God.

* Zeppo was Daniele's dog – an odd, unreliable, but loving Rhodesian ridgeback dachshund mix. He chased cats up trees then followed up. Daniele got him after her first attempt, and their bond was so strong I imagined he would keep her alive until we found an answer. It still stuns me that she left him. Him, of all people.

What She Would Say

Each time I see you sad
I feel worse inside

I wish you could see
I just had a bad day

I'm sorry it hurt you
But I was hurting too.

Time to kick out the chocks
And let me roll free

Clints and Grykes*

Clints be the islands that float apart.

Grykes be the fathoms that must be paved.

Schist be the rock that guards your heart.

Karst be the stones that cap your grave.



* Geological terms. On Ireland's Burren, a cap of limestone pushed up from the Atlantic, called the karst. The karst is sometimes broken into two looks – the stone outcroppings and the spaces separating them. The overall effect is extreme inhospitability.

Unruined

I envy them
they can hear sad music

for the vicarious
pleasure of it

it takes them down
but not all the way

their tears a vacation
from not feeling

,

their floret of anguish
a change of socks

Ophelia¹⁹

I feel you,
and I feel you feel me too

I want to ask how
one floats laded down

with so much information?
Every thing

that doesn't kill us
makes us sadder

Like a mermaid
tangled in a net

you have given up
gasping for good.

¹⁹ The Rapture (2009)

Tattoos ^{20*}

Side of her right leg: skull with flowers and a snake

Side of her left leg: minotaur skull, with green tentacles

Lower back, centered: a spider, a flower, and red flames

Upper left back: skull with devil motif

Upper right back: skull with angel motif

Left shoulder and arm: against a maze-like background

a skeleton with bovine skull and hooves

lifting a bottle in salute

²⁰ Things (2009)

* Found poem; the text of the medical examiner's list of Daniele Finley's actual body marks and tattoos

Advice for the Funeral ²¹

Thoughts are like tenpenny nails.
They have a point, they have a heel,
and you can drive them deep into muscle,
and then extract them with a claw.

If you insist.

We trust our instincts.
But our instincts are the reason we suffer.
We say, "Obviously, this,"
but it is far from obvious,
in fact it is wrong
the way chomping on a fishhook
is wrong.

You need to find a new way to live,
in which you take it easy on yourself.
You are the only you you have.
Conserve, preserve, pull back on the reins.

Somewhere you got the idea that
hurting yourself was your job,
and that was bad,
but then you became a workaholic.

Stop it.

God gave you two brains,
and you never use one of them.
Unwrap it now, and set it in its place,
and take it for a spin.

Instead of empty space
put a bird there and let it chirp.
An annoying little bird.

²¹ Things (2009)

And let it chirp until you wish it would shut up
while it drowns out your stupidity.

Someone got what they wanted
so what makes you restless?

Do you want to spend the rest of your life
like a knucklehead, never getting anything?

Stand up.
Get out of the street.
Walk, and see where that gets you.

After We Got the Dog ²²

Daniele paper-trained him in her room.
She who was so squeamish
put up with his poop and his pee.

And she guided him through it,
he was quick to learn
and proud to do it right.

One night she came to me crying.
Oh daddy, she said,
I love him so much.

²² Sunset Lake (1989)

Children ²³

When we are little it is hard
to believe we will turn into our parents.
Grown-ups are so ugly and so tired
with orange pads on the bottoms of their feet,
the pores of their faces cry out surrender,
and the hair, the hair is everywhere,

But once we are grown we have only
to look at a child to glimpse what they will become.
The face fills out, the limbs acquire bulk.
The boy enters a door and exits his father
like a breed of ordinary dog.

Or the boy roars into his fruition
the malification of his mother,
her beauty beaten into him like bronze
and ramping out again
like laughter to the world.

²³ The Brood (1992)

In the Night ²⁴

My little girl awoke in the night
quaking with fright,
and I held her and explained
that the monsters were gone,
they were never there at all,
and the look she gave me was, I recall,
almost one of pity, as if
I were the doomed one, mine the swift
tumble coming soon.
I rocked her to sleep in her room
and thought of every plane
I wanted to see go down,
every siren shearing the dark
were heading toward my part
of town, my god, and all I
have is a child to protect me.

²⁴ The Brood (1992)

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