



feces

plus other
concerns of youth

Feces

Plus Other Concerns of Youth

Plus a Number of Additional Concerns

By Mike Finley

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Part 1

Feces

Feces

Freud was right on,
They are a key to every little life,
they are the threshold of not-OK.
They are a guarantor of calamity,
A ruiner of days,
They are the thing you want at all costs to avoid,
The thing to keep behind you always,
that trips you up and peels you
from the throne of respectability,
and tells you,
you must go.

And yet they come out of *you*,
they *are* you,
they are homunculi of who you are,
they are your little tar babies,
they have your eyes,
they are the part of you you want to get far *away* from,
and that is a major paradox for the 2-year-old.

To be found out, to fail, there is no disgrace
completer.

Logically everything relating to them

is awful, unlovable, stinky, and to be shunned.
No amount of washing,
no slathering of soap makes them right,
you aren't even really supposed to poke around
even though it is you
and your solemn responsibility
and yet ...
and yet ...
and yet they remain riveting in their own
strange feckless way
incorrigible,
they bear the mark and are your mark..

It is as if,
when the two of them in the garden,
you know the famous two I mean,
they who had never before known waste,
having had a bad, bad, bad, bad day,
Had it read back to them then,
the riot act I mean to say,
and the perfect world was shuttered,
all was forfeit, all was lost,
and the one thing they knew,
as they picked their way through the fallen world,
was they had to go.

Part III
Plus Other Concerns of Youth

The Wagon

I was six when we moved to Vermilion-on-the-Lake,
six doors down Niagara Road from the lapping Lake Erie

Mornings and afternoons I walked the bluffs and beaches
gazing out at the choppy gray water

One day I took it into my head
to fill my Radio Flyer with dead fish

and roll it back to my mother's house
I don't know what I was thinking

that she had a recipe for 30 pounds
of eyeless, sand-pounded carp

I had to bury them in the field behind us
my mom was very clear on that

and I stood over the grave with a shovel
and I vowed as God was my witness

to keep an eye on my judgment in the future
but I have to say, all these decades later

the problem persists

My Father Didn't Like Me

I didn't know this until I was 56 years old.

My brother, driving me out to Dad's house in Hesperia to clean up,
informed me.

"He wanted to live in the life he made for himself here," Pat said.

"He felt you were always trying to drag him back to the other life,
the one he felt he had failed at."

It was a slug to the stomach,
because no boy ever wanted
to be loved more.

But my brother was right.

My dad had lost a child.

He then divorced his wife.

He was blacklisted by General Motors nationwide for cash irregularities.

Then he abandoned his children and moved far away,
to a place where cars were not manufactured,
California.

He was 38, young enough to start again.

Naturally his second life was more faithful,

more successful, less riddled with horror.

And there I was, through my phone calls and visits,
the son who could not let go,
a constant reminder
of everything he had fled from.

I understood Dad better now,
that his second life was meant to erase the first,
to make up for it,
and I was supposed to admire his onset of sales ability,
his entrepreneurial cast of mind,
his sudden ability to set money aside,
and say no to Smirnoff,
prosperity blooming in the desert
like the grinning skull of a steer along the way,
the desert where he lived and loved and golfed.

But I was always there, I see now, maliciously,
to hurt him, perhaps because
it was the only childhood I could remember,
and all I had to do was bend in his direction
and whisper in his ear
the word Cleveland.

Beach and Skyscraper

I was three, and remember only a few images of our trip down through the Smokies, in my dad's new Cadillac, staying in Daytona Beach for a couple of days, then returning via New York City.

My dad worked as a design engineer at Cadillac Tank Plant in Cleveland, and always had the latest model.

A local paper photographed Pat and me playing in the sand, and did a full-page photo feature of us. Why us, of all the families on the beach, when that is really all there was to do in Daytona then, bake in the sun, I don't know.

But I remember the brightness and the heat that radiated in my skin, even as we drove back north, past Cape Hatteras, the lighthouse striped like a Christmas candy cane.

Days later we cruised up Fifth Avenue, and Pat and I craned our heads out the Cadillac window up to see the Empire State Building rising above us like a mighty pyramid

At the time I believed we stood on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, but I now believe it was Rockefeller Center. It's just logical because you can see the Empire State Building from the Rockefeller Center.

I remember thinking I was seeing the most important thing in the world, this dizzying, beautiful, grownup city.

My dad picked me up and help me by my ankles over the rail, as a joke. Who he thought he was amusing is the great question. Certainly not the people standing around us, horrified, hands over their mouths.

This is the same dad who tried to teach me to swim that year by throwing me off a boat.

I didn't learn to swim.

But I remember it happening, the dangling over 500 stories, and seizing up and grabbing my father's cuffs to hold on to.

My mom rebuked him, but that never did much good. He couldn't help doing bad things.

We drove home through the tunnels on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I rode in the back seat, unbelted in those days, and slept on my sister's soft shoulder.

I remember our parents still spoke to each other. That memory would seal up soon.

I was the baby of the family then, cheerful and fat. But I remembered having a thought:

This is good, I thought, going places. You don't have to understand it, just see it.

Floaters

It is one of my earliest memories, and it tells you what a weird boy I was.

I am resting on an elbow lying on my bed on the second floor of my family's duplex in Columbia Station, Ohio.

I am four, and I am looking at the floaters drifting across the surface of my right eye.

They were like one-celled creatures – though I did not know what those were then. But they were like them – ghostly shapes with penciled peripheries, like euglenae or paramecia.

If you rotate your eyeball, the floaters shift with you, and are suddenly on another arc of the eye.

I don't know what I am looking at, but I know it is something tiny, that only I can see.

The thought I have at that moment, and that I still remember, is key to the kind of person I was.

"No one else sees these, or cares."

So many times I was on the lookout for secret things.

The looping of telephone lines above the back window as the car sped along Nichols Road.

The waving of tall barley in the autumn wind.

The whorls on my thumbs and fingers. The way light shimmered on a puddle in the driveway.

The contortions of nightcrawlers plucked from the driveway slag after it rained, so clean, so blind.

The white doughnut-holes of dog poop that lay in the grass.

The sticky sap that slung to my trousers when I climbed the

clump of Scotch pines nearby.

The golden garden spiders, with their sharp arms and mandibles,
that gathered by the gutterspout alongside the carport.

The red beam of a flashlight at night, under covers, showing
through the web of my small hand.

I was not a scientist, but I did my share of observing.

And complimented myself that only I was seeing.

And these floaters were like microbial angels that lived on my
eyes. They could not be summoned at will. I could only see them
sometimes.

It was magic I could summon, not every time I wanted. The light
had to be so, and it was best to do it alone.

You only saw them when they wanted you to.

Goat Song

When I was young I thought I might be special,
that I was favored by God.
I spent a lot of time looking in the mirror
and wondering what I could do.

I remember thinking I might be a tap-dancer
and tap-dancing in the mirror
for about thirteen seconds
and getting winded and stumbling,
and falling off-rhythm,
So tap-dancing wasn't it,
but something surely was.

I remember being in church and playing with my fingers,
complicated intertwinings that left
the ordinary people praying in the lurch.
I thought God was examining all the hands in the pews,
bored with the usual clasping and meshing
and then he would come to me, and to my hands,
and I was all Dali-esque with my digital interlocutions
and he would stop and think,
in that giant vibrating voice of his,
now this is something I can work with.

Sexual

I remember being sexual even when I was a child. I can remember being three and bathing with my mother, soaking the the bathtub in Ivory Snow. I was aware of her curly hairs, and her long, wet self stretched out along my little tub of a body.

Years later, seeing Botticelli's Venus rising out of the clamshell, something clicked. I knew I had seen this thing before.

I remember her roughing me up afterward with the terry cloth towel, and counseling me about keeping my special parts clean. I found out decades later that our father had given her a case of gonorrhea after the war, and it was another setback to the relationship. Even today that would be uncool.

I loved my mother the way a boy loves his mother. She was crisp, and feminine, and she radiated light when she looked at me like I was her special man.

I sought union with her, that's all. We had once been one, why could we not be together again?

It is sad, the things that occur over the years that dim this sun-bright light.

I told her, flat out, I wanted to marry her, and buy her a two-tone car, red-orange on the bottom and cream-colored on the top, and she could drive me to work every day.

I know she thought about it because the next car she bought was a Chevy Bel Air in those same classic colors.

1952

I was in a small tornado as a child.

I was almost 3 years old, it was late in the morning
early in May, in the greenhouse community
of Columbia Station, Ohio.

I was in diapers and pins,
and upset about that,
because it hung on me because my mother
was in a hurry to dress,
and because our house was a duplex,
and we shared the basement
with the Heinzes next door.

So when the two mothers and their two children
tripped down the outside cellar steps,
already branches were sailing through the air
and the storm groaned all around us
I stared defiantly at my mother
for dressing me like that
in front of the neighbors, a woman in hairpins
and her 8-year-old daughter,
hiding her face in her mom's hip.

While I stormed about the diaper
the wind whipped all around us,

knocking down our carport,
and blowing my dad's fiberglass awning supplies,
the ones he never made a dime off,
away into the adjoining field.

Afterwards we tiptoed through
the broken window frames.

A deer, bewildered, bounded across the yard into the Scotch
pines,
and we spotted the unlikeliest thing,
a '49 Plymouth parked askew among the potatoes,
a two-by-four with 7 five-inch nails jutting out of it,
piercing the passenger window,

and fluttering just above that
an emancipated kite
still spiraling through the sky,
its paper heart torn,
its tattered tail still spinning it down
in circles to the ditch.

Apache Dance

My parents fought. I did not understand the dynamics at the time, but my dad yearned to party, and my mom wanted him to stay put and be nice.

There was a wild destructive foolishness in his position, and a sick joylessness in hers. They hated each other like there was no higher calling in the world.

We three children sat on a red braid rug in what was our dining room. For some reason the dining room table itself was missing. It was late for us, dark – perhaps past nine. I rubbed my eyes because I did not want to miss the drama.

We crouched together on the rug, which had a circular pattern, like a target. My brother and sister, both older than me, had a better idea what was going on. Kathy glared at our father, Patrick glanced about with concern. To me it was not far from entertainment.

Our mother knelt behind us, hiding, either to block the blows from our father, or perhaps just to shame him, to expose him to us. See what your father is really like, she kept saying. See.

Paul W. seemed like he might bust loose any moment, break a glass or swing at a lightbulb. He was foul, and made gestures as if to strike us, and then laugh because we were afraid. I think, looking back, he was in despair in some way. I think, looking back, our mother was, too. Their lives had galloped away from them. They had nothing now, except having one another to hate.

But what could children know about the knots grown-ups could tie themselves into.

I always, secretly, knew they were mad. Unable to enjoy the most obvious things – running in the grass, putting arms around the dog, jumping from the porch and shouting “Whee!” Life was full of little delights, but you would never know that from grown-ups. Their idea of fun was whiskey and cigarettes. They were full of

passion but devoid of laughter. What had become of the children in them.

My day would live the rest of his life in shame and evasion, my mom in anger. My sister Kathy would only live to 15. My brother Pat wouldn't even remember this, but would live his life in considerable worry, as if there was something he should have done.

I was the luckiest person in the room. The youngest usually have it best.

Falling Out of a Moving Automobile

My mother didn't get her driver's license till she was 27. I know, because it is an early memory, driving with her from Columbia Station to the testing center in Berea, every six weeks or so.

She would buy me off with one of those long pretzel rods from Nickles Bakery, the kind they kept in a see-through canister by the cash register at the tiny market in Olmsted Falls, always standing upright, commanding the attention of every child buying groceries with his mother. Pretzel rods were better then than they are now.

I remember, they had just started making Trix.

I was four years old, and in love, love, love with my mom.

I loved my Mom

My parents formed a strange covenant, that I found out about as I got older. My dad would have primary responsibility for my older brother Pat, while my mom took me.

This seems like a bad idea in retrospect, but that is what they did. I think Pat would say this was a logical course of action. He loved our dad, who taught his chess, and baseball, and games.

And my mom and I were spitting images of one another.

I remember I wooed her, and promised her a better life as soon as I came online. We would get a new car, not the old humpback Plymouth she learned to drive in. I would take her away from all the cares of life. She would waitress at Stouffer's no more in my regime.

My mom got her license on the sixth try. I was too young to know what she was doing wrong. But I remember no one had seat belts

in those days, and I regularly rolled around in the back seat, and bumped against the door. I suppose she was not slowing down enough for turns. I remember the tires screeching a lot.

In those days people went "for a drive" for fun. Proud of being mobile, our mom drove us all over the Greater Cleveland area, as far east as Ashtabula, as far west as Avon. We saw the lake. We saw the oversized Easter Baskets in the park, with the flowers planted in them. We drove downtown, across the mighty screaming bridges of Cleveland, with giant semis right alongside us, and the figure of the Terminal Tower looming high overhead like a colossus. I felt like I was at the very center of amazingness, driving with our mother through the industrial city.

But she was not a good driver. One day we drove through the Metropolitan Gorge, a lengthy ravine going through Cuyahoga County, with steep sides, and roads that actually went across the river -- not bridges, but fords. So the car splashed right through the river, which was more of a brook at this point.

One day all three kids were in the car. We all cried "Wheel!" as we splashed through the fords, water flying away from us to the right and to the left.

There was me, 4, Pat, 6, and our sick sister Kathy, 9.

We began climbing a steep hill in the Plymouth, which had a standard transmission that caused my mom all sorts of trouble. She didn't know how to set the emergency brake, if there was one. As we neared the top of the hill, leading steeply to the rocks and river below, the Plymouth stalled.

Our mom freaked. She kept pushing the car's ignition button -- it would have been a very easy car to steal. But instead of forging forward, the car began to roll backwards. Our mom, in full panic, felt the car sliding diagonally back until the bumper pressed against the cable guard -- the thin protection against tumbling down into the gorge. The steel cable felt as taut as a rubber band.

"Everyone out!" she cried. Then she made us tiny kids -- tiny and deoxygenated in Kathy's case -- stand behind a 2-ton automobile about to go over a cliff, and to prevent that from happening with our little bunny arms and muscles.

She kept pushing the button, and the car would wheeze, ease forward, and stall out, forcing us kids closer to the brink.

It was hopeless, and not a little irresponsible.

And we would all have been pushed backward to certain mushy and possibly flaming death, had a man not come upon us, like an angel of the Lord. He set his own emergency brake, cleared us kids away, started up our car, quickly eased into first gear, and pulled the Plymouth away from the steel cable railing.

We drove home in silence.

But the laws of the universe did not change much. One day in the late summer of 1955 -- I am guesstimating here -- we were out on an errand, in the heart of Olmsted Falls, my brother and sister and me. I remember staring up and out of the back window, behind the seat, up at the telephone polls looping overhead. I was about to fall into a nap state.

But I didn't, because our mother took a fast turn and I rolled over toward the rear passenger door. The centrifugal force of my mom's hard left turn, combined with the weight of my small body smacking into the door handle, was enough to cause the door to open. And out of the car I tumbled.

We were going maybe 25 miles per hour.

I remember every microsecond of the spill. I tumbled headlong, with my hands in front of me-- kids are skilled at falling, you know. I fell at such an angle, missing the rear wheel entirely, that I flew over the gravel alongside the road, and into the tall grass of the shoulder sloping away from us.

I remember hitting the grass, and feeling its softness in my

hands, and against my face. And still I rotated, somersault after somersault, like a slinky, down the grade of the grassy hill.

I struck no rocks, no beer bottles -- which people just threw out their car windows in those days -- no obstacles of any kind.

I was aware that this was happening only a block from St. Mary's Catholic Church, the place I spent so many Sunday mornings at pewside, casting about for something interesting.

But this tumult in the grass was interesting. I rolled, by my estimate, about 50 feet, and then came to a soft stop, still a couple of yards from the beautiful, rippling Cuyahoga, that pours over the ledge in that town in a wonderful seamless cascade, that reminded me of my mother's tortoise-shell comb.

My mother raced down the slope to engulf me. Say one thing for her, she was not above self-reproach, and she castigated herself for several seconds before obtaining a promise from us kids that our dad never needed to find out about this.

And we piled back into the car and drove the four miles home. The sun was low in the afternoon sky, and the leaves on the poplar trees shimmered like dimes in the late light.

And I began having thoughts that I would never die, that there was no danger in the world, and those thoughts have persisted, wrongly, to this very day.

Part III

A Number of Additional Concerns

Election

Don't take it personally.

The wind comes,
the leaves blow
down the street.

Stepping Into Underpants

gets harder every year.

The knees get stiffer, the hips
do not want to make the number four,
the one foot hopping on the floor
leads the body into the bedstead,
the doorknob, the chair.

And the seat of the underpants
is not new cloth,
the fabric has grown tired
from so many washings,
and sittings, and scratchings,
the elastic has been through the dryer
too often, it stretches
but it no longer snaps back.
it is more like a veil than a rampart,
and the stabbing foot could so easily miss
its target and plunge through
the rear panel entirely.

And it will only get worse,
until the old man has to sit on the bed,
and pull them on the way George Washington did,
with a stable boy to assist you,

and an aide-de-camp standing by,
proud nostrils flaring.

Atheist Heaven

He is especially tender with these ones
because they lived their lives without comfort
there were no opt-outs from reason
they lived in the crush of what could be seen
and never asked for favors
and they never lied to themselves
and they never were kissed
by the soul's endless night

They were saints of a sort,
of a bleary-eyed, chap-mouthed sort
and when it was over
they lurched into dirt
and issued not a complaint

They say he loves them most of all
and gives them the tools
to live without him
the willingness to suffer being chief among them
and instead of one guardian angel
they get two
because they have more trouble
to get out of

and now they sit in this room forever
elbow to elbow
legs crossed
smoking pipes and
thumbing the pages of books
without words

they never know
and nobody tells them
how loved they are,
or where

The Diving Board

My son has already jumped into the YMCA pool,
6 years old, tumbling like a spider
and then skittering away to the lip.
But I stand atop the wobbling board, paralyzed.

I did not know this about myself, that I was afraid of things,
and I could not tell you what it was I feared.
Obviously people jump off boards and do not die in large
numbers,
but I could not step forward, I was like a statue
on the fiberglass, and eventually had to beg my way backwards
down the ladder, passing chloriny children with baffled
expressions.

A minute later I climbed back up again,
and in my shame I pretended to be brave,
and plunged headlong, it was as if
my fear had weighed me down, because I
sank to the bottom and only slowly began to rise again
like a dislodged log.

Between my excitement and my fright,
I had little air in me, and my lungs were close to bursting
when I finally found light, and drew air in again.

I don't think anyone but me knew
how awful I felt approaching the twilight,
with the sounds of kids
splashing and screaming with joy
attending my demise.

But in that moment I saw forward
to the terrible tenuousness of life,
not just my own but the lives of those I loved,
and how helpless I was to save them.

And to just dive into this mystery, as if it were a joke,
as if no one ever got hurt,
as if everyone wakes up every morning
with light in their eyes and the sun
on their faces, is a lie.

What We Should Do

Maybe we should all weep more
It dissolves the salts that collect in the corners
It flushes the rings and uncakes the pistons,
It lubricates the entire mechanism

Maybe we should all set aside time
To throw ourselves on the bed and soak it in tears
Like a sponge taking on water
Like a sub going down

Sobbing and sobbing
until we scrape bottom
Maybe we should unratchet
The nut on the hydrants

And hose down the city
With a sloshing of tears
It feels so good coming out
Though it stings, it corrects

The idea that your eyes
Are for seeing only
Maybe if we got it all out
For once and for all

And took a Q-tip to each cranny
And the tanks sound hollow
When banged with a pipe
And the sound echoes through you

Saying empty, I am empty
And we have had a good cry
Maybe it would finally be time
Maybe we could muster the hope

To be happy

I Know Who You Are

Day after day
Like a lover with a wound
I keep after you

What have I wanted to give you all this time
That I keep making offerings
And promises of love

Why do I run to you every chance I get
And tell you again of my ardor

As if I had the answers
As if I had the cure
For all of the sickness
That walks through the world

It makes sense to me
That I peel away the mask
And see the damp light of your seeing

O my loving loved one
My huckleberry friend
Cast with me up the waters,

We float, hands close
But never touching

How many times I have longed
To hold you in my arms
And give you kisses deep
My silent, good companion

You the mind inside my mind
You the breathing presence
And though you have never spoken
I have wooed you all this time

My other, my angel, my flower
I write and you read
without words

Happy Thought

People who
worry they

might be
narcissists

probably
are not

The Favor

If people looked to poems
the way they look to music,
that wonderful expectant feeling
when the saxophonist is about to explode,
or the singer shakes her head
and her sweat pelts the front row,
or the wink of the offbeat
that has everyone laughing,
and the drummer slamming on
in his own mad world

Music we can listen to for hours on end,
the delight just grows in us,
the love envelops us,
but poetry, well, forty minutes
is a long time to think,
and when the event is over
and the skronk of chairs tells you
it's time to go home,
it's obvious who did whom
the favor.

When the Moon Sees Us

it sees the sea, it
remembers the rolling

of its earliest hours
and the heaving

and the wanting to leave
and though it rests now

like a pearl in the crux
of the dark of the night

it rose then into light
all dripping and shining

and held up to see
and we looked and we saw

2 a.m.

I awakened
to your sobbing

Don't cry I said
though I knew what it was

and I knew don't cry
was useless advice

I patted you
and thumped your back

like a hollow drum
in the warm of the covers

as if the sounds from the heel
of my pounding hand

passed through your body
in waves of shock

I wanted the vibrations
to set up a hum

and pass through us both
like a shout through water

and take it
outside us forever

Permutations

Permutations of n things taken r at a Time

We learn this phrase in algebra.

It asks how do we arrange a list of possibilities –
if 10 horses run a race.

what are the chances for win, place, and show?

And so it goes.

Every crossroad contains x possibilities.

What happens if we turn left or proceed forward,
or veer off the gravel and into the corn?

There is a formula to help us get a handle on this,
but it raises as many questions
as it answers.

$${}_n P_r = \frac{n!}{(n-r)!}$$

But what if, as happens,

P is an elastic variable?

The mare with the the white flame on her face
could come up lame on the second turn,
pulling at her straps.

The rider in green could think to himself,
What I have really always wanted to do
is paint.

Or the moon could turn out
after lengthy investigation
to be a sourball hanging
in the August sky.

My History As a Man

When I was young and handsome
girls brightened like pennies
when I drew near.
Wonderful, ignorant girls...

Later, smarter, they pulled back from me.
Even though I meant no harm.
Well, I didn't mean much harm.
Not too much, anyway...

Now, they don't even know that I'm there.
I'm like an old pair of pants
flapping on a pole.
Ladies, I miss when you feared me!

Friend

Why do I twist your arms into
coming to my poetry readings

and make you sit through all
that excruciating bother

as if you needed to be tested
to prove you deserved me

when what I should have done
is plunk your hand in mine

and thank you for your love –
despite, and not because, of this –

what a gift that you indulge me
and let me play this through

what a generous pretense
that these stick-figure stories

matter and our laughter does not,
that there are others in the world

when we both know, as a matter
of fact, there are not

Two Adjoining Towns ...

elected the same man mayor.

One town he served well, and fed,
and provided every comfort to,
and every useful service.

The other town he set fire to,
and strangled every child.

How did the two towns communicate
from that point forward?

That is the issue of the life we live –
identical inputs, differing results.

And how do we turn to one another with love
and say This
is what I believe?

On Being Fitted for My First Hearing Aid

1/7/2010

I hear ...

my breath like an athlete
drawing strength for the next heat ...

the murmur of the exhaust fan
reaching out to me from a duct ...

the thud of the windshield blades
dragged across ice...

a new sound from an old CD,
a liquid throb of accordion ...

the grind on the snow-pack
as I step toward the door ...

the gasp of the apple
surrendering to the knife

Moon River

*Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker,
wherever you're going I'm going your way.
(Johnny Mercer, 1961)*

I think this is the soundtrack to my new religion ...
adrift down the river
with a friend who cannot save us,
cannot stop the war,
cannot set us free.
All we have is one another
heads in our hands
staring up at the stars.

Burning Car

*This actually happened, the first morning of my new contract job,
while driving north.*

Alongside the on-ramp at Highway 280,
in the dark, just before dawn,
a Mazda Miata sits in its own fire.
Flames rise from an open hood,
smoke billows out doors.

You ease by slowly,
because the ramp is narrow,
but you are afraid of the oily smoke,
aware of the fuel tank boiling with gas.
You hold your breath from the stink.

Internal combustion has broken out.
You think, this is an omen.
You think, I hope they got out.
You think, Christ save us
from ourselves.

Prospect Park

The couple on the bench are out of sorts.

You can see in their faces they are on the brink
with one another, about to come apart.

Uninvited my old dog saunters up to them, off-leash,
assuming he will be welcome,
a soft grin on his dazed features.

The couple reach out to him, lay hands upon him
and then notice each other
in a different way, patting
his scrozzled skull.

Rolling on the River

As you may have noticed, I have been struggling since Daniele's death over a year ago, often quite bitterly, at the inadequacy, or perhaps I should say the overadequacy, of the religious tradition I was part of the past decade.

It was a source of acute pain to me that I belonged to a group that taught that God would rescue us from every danger – it's all in Psalm 91 – and that all things, no matter how seemingly foul, turned to good in the mind of God.

Because: how could that be? How could Daniele's life and death be interpreted as a blessing? Where was the blessing to her? To her family? Was the mind of God so convoluted that we were doing good for others, but taking it in the ass ourselves? And if so, what good was that?

So I have railed against the childishness of the rescuer mode. The recurring example is that mankind is Lois Lane, always falling from the upper stories of the Daily Planet Building, but always rescued by Superman before she arrived at the intersection below.

No matter what part of the world Superman was in, or what point in time he had dashed off to, he showed up.

The overadequacy of that God is that Lois need never learn the lessons life has to teach us about staying away from ledges. She continues with her triumphal notion of the divinity, which has distressing reverbs: a God that excellent is worth invading other countries for, worth limiting the civil rights of citizens for, etc.

He's so good, he's such a perfect package, that bad becomes good. His goodness makes it so.

Two weeks ago, I was at a party – the Algonquin Hotdish, a local social for freelancers like myself – and I met a woman author. We had had some of the same publishers – no miracle there. But she told me she was involved in something called "forgiveness counseling."

Both red and green lights began flashing in me simultaneously. I respected the idea of forgiveness but I was leery of the idea of new age counseling. Candles, harp music, airbrushed angels.

But I told her – Mary Hayes Grieco is her name – that I might have a deep need to forgive God. I laid out my story for her, and stressed that I knew my bitterness was not a good attitude to sustain indefinitely.

"Then let's try to fire God," she said, prettily. Meaning, the Superman God idea. "Clear him out of your head. Come up with a notion that makes more sense to you."

So I signed up to do that very thing, and last night I did it.

For two weeks I fretted, because it did not seem like a good idea, when you squinted at it, to "fire" the All-In-All, with his hand on the trapdoor lever. My old pastor had railed at "cafeteria religion" in which the practitioner picks and chooses what attributes he likes, an ala carte faith. I like Luke, but I hate Paul. Like Mother Teresa, not so big on the Inquisition.

And I was doing that here, wasn't I?

But I went forward anyway, to see what was there.

Last night I met with another counselor, not Mary, but a colleague named Theresa. We chatted for an hour about the nature of my problem, and the particulars of my life. Then she led me through a hypnotic lesson.

It is the basic forgiveness lesson that they teach at this "company." In it, the plaintiff ticks off a list of grievances against the person to be forgiven, with the culprit imaginarily occupying a chair. It is like a debate in which one of the opponents has not shown up. Only, since God is likely invisible, he may have been sitting in the docket.

My job was not necessarily to make perfect logical or legal sense, but to list my complaints, Declaration of Independence style. I did, focusing on Daniele's life, how painful it was for her to live

her entire life plagued with acute anxiety problems, OCD, panic attacks, deep depression, deep hostility to her own growth and development, deep antagonism to anyone unlucky enough to try to lead her, a messed up personality, and, according to her at least, attention issues (I never observed them). She was alcoholic, a punk, and ultimately a suicide.

I had other criticisms, but I focused on these. I laid it all at Superman's scented feet. And told him how he had contradicted his own advertised features. How this was supposed to work for the good, how Daniele was unbelievably loved, how prayers were answered, how nothing happens to us so bad that that we cannot handle it. All these suppositions were patently wrong. So I was forced to let him go – let that concept of God the Rescuer dry up and blow away.

I did this with an element of fear in my heart. Firing the Great and Mighty Oz could be catastrophic karma.

Then I was directed to face another chair set up in the room. This was the mystery guest chair, where the new God was sitting. He was not fleshed in with features. He was a cipher – not there at all if I chose that route.

My job was to commence a relationship with this “new” being, to talk with him and tell him what I needed in a god.

I told him (I didn't really mean “him,” it's just an old habit) I did not want to be lied to. I wanted to be told the truth, or nothing at all. I wanted some basic sense of a relationship – an entity I could go to when meditating or praying, that could pick me out of a crowd, that I did not have to fill in every time we spoke. I told him I wanted a connection not just to one religion or one tradition but to the religious spirit of all people. I told him I wanted companionship as I journeyed through loss toward death, not abandonment. I told him I wanted community in the broadest possible sense – with all humanity, with nature, with myself – and not in the narrowest sense, a church of sixty-odd friendly souls.

I told him a bunch of things.

Then, after perhaps fifteen minutes of this, I was directed to rise from my chair, and go sit where “God” had been sitting, and to sit with that spirit, and become one with him. And from that wooden chair look back at where I had been sitting, as if I were merged with the new god, and regard my own figure, sitting on the couch.

It was the eeriest feeling I could describe to you, a god's eye view of myself. I saw how unhappy I had been, how restless and irritable. I saw how good my intentions were, no matter how screwed up the outcome often was. I saw my own effort to live a good life, to be a good husband and father and witness to others, and I found sympathy welling up in me for myself.

And then I spoke to myself, and I astonished myself by echoing the words of Jesus. They were sentences I had copied into a novel I had written back in the 1970s. They came out of me as if they were being blown out of an old grave. I have much to tell you. But you cannot bear it all yet ... For a while I am with you. Then I am not with you ... Fear not ... Behold, I have overcome the world...

They were NT chestnuts, but they were poems, too, koans. I was reminded of the role language had always played for me, how I loved the music in the old Episcopalian church I attended in New Haven, the swells of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Then things became even weirder. I was channeling Jesus, but this Jesus was an innocent compared to the Jesus of Scripture. My Jesus felt more gullible. He was full of ignorance, unletteredness, skepticism, and humor. My Jesus had morphed into a character I carry close to my heart – Huckleberry Finn!

My Jesus was a companion not to resolve the issue of slavery and avert a terrible war, but a Jesus to accompany me on a raft journey, down the mighty river of life.

It was so odd, I knew I would have trouble describing it intelligently to Theresa. And when the spell passed, and it was

time to talk, I blabbed everything to her. She was evidently used to weird stories. Whatever I experienced was my vision, and mine alone.

I think the nexus of it was that it was OK to be me. And I would probably stick with a strange personal amalgam of Jesus and Huckleberry Finn as my totem – just as I had written to myself in 1979, and never published.

Here's that story, if anyone is still reading:

<http://mfinley.com/pdf/jesus-huck-finn.pdf>

Theresa and I hugged and I went out into the cool night.

I felt a tingle along both my arms, and my face was warm to the touch. More importantly, I felt as if every wrinkle of my face, every tired crease, every scowl line, had relaxed. I started the car. Springsteen singing "Radio Nowhere."

I was still an old man, I found, as I checked the car mirror. But I was relaxed, at peace. And I had not felt that way in years.

Hand

I wrote this one two weeks ago, and I consider it part of the healing journey I have recently embarked on.

Sometimes it is just a gesture
that changes things,
the opening and the outward sweep of the hand,
which seems grandiose in one sense,
“See all I am inviting you to,”
and humble in another,
the stepped-on paw of a creature like yourself.
Such a simple thing, wordless,
humble, human.
And if the hand should be a well-used one,
one that has been frozen, shaken,
knitted, soiled, refused, all the better.
It opens, like an usher showing the way,
and you follow.

The Boards

Be joyful as you climb the steps
put spring in your toes and the treetops

You are measured out for these sleeves
and boxed in by these exigencies

God gave you bells so give them a shake
let them tinkle to the striking clock

Say oh what a beautiful day
as if you were Gordon Fucking McCrea

Flight 511

We took off in a winter storm
after an hour de-icing.

The window seat is nice
but the plastic frame

is broken and there is
no shade to draw.

The plane has a line
of overhead TVs

but the plane drowns out
the sitcom dialogue.

There are peanuts at my feet
in a space too tight to reach.

My ass hurts but
I can't get up and walk.

Now the door juts upward:
West Palm Beach!

Hertz Doughnut

*Another major "find" this morning, by the radiator.
This one seems unusually misanthropic.
I carbon-date it to 1988.*

Foolish woman!
Imagining we will
be friends!

You snort and smile
and cover
your face.

You all think we
are such nice guys
when we

are aching
to pump you
full of tears.

Girls under-
estimate the
fusion at hand.

They suppose they
are in charge

and that they dance

because it's
their idea, but
it's not.

The Woman in Seat 20C

Sometimes in the
periphery of the eye
you see one.

Someone who knows
the way that
things are.

You know them by
the rings around
their eyes --

paranoid,
hostile,
broken-hearted,

they are the experts
on the way
things are.

You want to cup
her cheek in
your palm

and say I know,
I know, isn't
it awful.

Return of the Prairie Falcon

When a bird flaps and flies
no one cries.

Why demand that anything stay
when we are all going away?

And when we return
the hurting heart may burn
because something gone now
shows its face,
and that blesses this place.

Without Darkness

Without darkness
there is no light.

Without blindness,
no sight.

Without words
no poem.

Without you,
no home.

Communique

I am talking to you as if
beauty were still beautiful
and would continue to be so
forever

I am talking to you
as if the world did not end
and things keep on being
the way that they are

I am talking to you
with your face in my hands
our love was the sweetest
thing that I knew

Dear daughter
I am talking to you

What Else Could You Be Doing?

Instead of listening to this poem,
You could be jumping out the window,

You could be engaging someone
In a conversation that matters

You could be spilling all your secrets
You could be kissing the person you love

But have not kissed enough,
You could be eating a sandwich for the ages

You could be thinking of a song
That used to mean everything

And thinking what it means again
You could count your blessings, literally

On an abacus if need be

Instead of hearing me talk
You could be hearing your own heart

And doing what it tells you to do



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