



A Solution For America
by Mike Finley

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Outside My Window

from: *Songs of Disappointment*

Every morning I part the drape with one finger, hoping yet again
to see

professors of literature discussing with one another how deep
beyond deep I am,

a head start, really, on the post-postmodern era.

There should be earnest young men lining up to receive my
blessing.

By now there should be shy girls in pigtails, hoping for the touch
of my hand against a cheek,

and rapturous women in red dresses, their hearts in full swoon.

There should be the publisher's representative, bringing the day's
valise of cash.

But when I look out the window I see grackles stealing the
sunflower seed

and behind them, the garbage truck backing up,
saying beep ... beep ...

Nature

There are people in the world who are so remarkable of face
that traffic stops for them,
that others, beholding them, go to a distant place
inside their heads,
and imagine endless days of worship in a golden light.
Because of the look that streams from their eyes,
because of features that seem sculpted by God,
the cheek, the throat, the color of the skin,
you know they will be objects every day of their lives.
Their lives may not be complete,
and they will never be certain they are loved because they are
good
or just because of their cheekbones.
They will never have to work,
whereas you, my beautiful one, will toil
every day till you die.

In Defense Of Self Pity

It is never in favor to feel sorry for oneself,
but I offer this meek refutation.
I was driving on Cedar Lake Road in 1977.
Life was good, I had a pretty girlfriend and a job.
I was a published writer with a dog.
But then I felt the building of tears inside me,
they erupted and stumbled down my shirt.
It was the realization that, lucky as I was,
I wasn't ever going to be great.
Not untalented but lots of gaps in character and resources.
My work was lazy and slipshod at times,
I lacked the follow-through to make that perfect draft,
I had a disturbing propensity for the dark and obscure,
a guy without pedigree, sprung from ordinary places,
already too damaged in life to make it big,
I would just go on being this guy in the mirror
with the premature crows-feet by his eyes.
I pulled the car over and wiped my face
and felt in that moment a kind of affection for myself
I don't recall feeling ever again, admiration for going forward,
acceptance of the blessings that came my way,
even if I never lit up the sky, maybe I could still be
a decent man, or a dad.

The Man Who Didn't Get It

There was a man who was tormented by angels,
who caused his body to revolt against him.
They made his hair fall out, and he laughed.
“Look, my head is round, like the earth I live on,” he said.
They made his eyesight weak. and he laughed again.
“There are so many games you can play blind!”
They caused the cells in his body to go mad.
“Connect the bumps, and you make constellations!” he shouted.
“I believe I am on a pathway to remarkable growth!”
The doctor informed me that I’m positive!”
Which was very frustrating to the tormenting angels.
“We’re just not getting through to this guy,” they said.

The Words We Chose

We didn't care about the people outside.
The called things by the names that made most sense.
A hot beef sandwich, with canned corn and mashed potatoes,
went by the name "roast beef commercial."
No one knew why. After a time, we didn't know why.
And the manager at the auto parts warehouse
I worked at answered the phone, "City desk."
The phone was on a desk, and the desk was in a city,
but mainly it was just the phrase we knew,
and it made us all feel significant.
And tromping through the woods, you might come across
No Trespassing signs, only a single word loomed larger
than every other, and that was "POSTED."
It was a point of law, you had to post a warning to strangers,
who would see that word written large from a distance,
and know to go someplace else to shoot.

A Solution For America

America is troubled by two demographics --
the number of people who have given up on life
and those who are yearning for someone to kill.
We are proposing the creation of a Strategic Despair Reserve,
a list of people who would rather die than live --
the depressed, the defeated, the terminally ill, the afraid --
coupled with a list of people who feel compelled to kill people --
the deranged, the furious, the disturbed.
Each side in the SDR solves the other side's problem.
Second Amendment types need no longer open fire on
schoolchildren
as there are adults happy to take their place --
no need to commit suicide afterwards,
as they are given a free pass by the law.
And those who have lost all hope in this country
can make their exit walking down the street,
lowering the shades on the Great Experiment.

Do You Know What A Buck Does To Does?

Promise you won't desert me in the desert.

Because I am too close to the canyon to close it.

Shot at, the dove dove into the bushes.

The bloody bandage was wound around my wound.

After a number of injections the member got number.

How I would lead if I just got the lead out.

It being spring, I will teach my sow to sow.

When I Am Gone

I always tell the dog I'm coming back.
But why do I leave a roast chicken on the counter?
The dog knows it is for dinner.
She knows she'll even get a piece of breast.
But dogs' brains have tiny temporal lobes
so a bit of time can seem a lot to them.
The first hour she was good, saying no
to the chickeny smell, the delicious bones and gravy.
But in the second hour she is overcome,
she is salivating but also forlorn because
I am gone so long, I am obviously dead,
and mustn't she keep up her strength?

Chichicastenango

On Sundays in Chichi the vendors set up early,
loading booths and tables with weavings, flowers, pottery,
candles, and medicinal plants.

Already the censer girl is swinging the can on the cathedral
portico,
perfumed smoke filling the square.

An American lady rose early to snap the proceedings.

The vendors wave her away, unless she wants to tip them.

She comes to a lean-to where an old woman is fastening masks
to a woven background.

The masks are the faces of Mayan gods, some of them demons,
there is even one of Porfirio Diaz.

The tourist lady lifts her camera and presses the shutter.

The old woman turns and screams in Quiche, scolding the lady.

It seems that in Chichicastenango it is extremely poor form to
photograph

any artisanal works, because they took so long to make,
and because the time spend making them puts spirit into them --
and now, in an eighteenth of a second, the click of a Nikon,
all the spirits from an entire year of work flee from the masks.

They are empty now, they are merely representations.

The old woman glares with hatred in her eyes.

The greedy American has stolen everything, and not paid a single
centavo.

The Suffering Neighbor

The stresses of everyday life were more stressful for her.
She was an ardent believer, and wanted you to believe, too,
so that you could be happy, never mind that she
was seldom happy.

The world wanted in, and she wanted to keep it out,
so that she peered through the drapes
at the teenagers walking by,
the ones with the crazy hair and safety pins, and cautioned her
children
against the wrong kind of company.

In her distress she made terrible mistakes,
as the time she invited
the couple next door to a free screening at the college,
hoping to be best friends with them, and have them
join her church.

But the movie turned out to be full of naked people
and she slumped in her folding chair,
another opportunity to serve others destroyed.
Her teenaged son smoked pot, so she had him remanded
to a tough-love logging ranch in western Montana,
she turned in her own son to the cops,
and he never came home.

She showed up at our doorway five years ago,
tears running down her cheeks, somehow she did not
learn of our daughter's death until eleven months after the fact,
and she poured through the doorway,
sobbing and shaking, apologizing for not knowing,
but even then not calculating that such a visit only stirred
sad thoughts in us.

But we took her in and made her tea, sometimes
that's how it works.

So when we learned a week late that they found her dead in bed

at the age of 56, we grieved for her, who suffered so much
and wrung her hands, and praised God
and knotted her hanky.

Thank you, Mabel, for doing your best, even when your best was
not so good.

Big Leg Girl

Waiting at the intersection, Max noticed a girl, perhaps 16, stumbling across the street.

"You know," he said, "I have never understood why people with obvious weight problems don't simply exercise and eat less."

"Maybe she's got mental problems," Perry said. "Maybe she is depressed. Maybe she has a circulatory disorder.

"Maybe she's lived her whole life in foster homes. Maybe she was a victim of sexual abuse, or was bullied in school."

Max turned to Perry.

"Oh, you're so compassionate."

Jesus Has a Lot To Answer For

In the Bible he says Ask and it shall be given to you,
Knock, and it shall be opened to you.

And so people have been knocking and asking
for a very long time.

Please save my child from addiction, from disease,
From kidnapping and dying, Lord we pray.

Of course, only a small fraction experience divine intervention,
I would say maybe twenty percent at the most,
and what is He to do if the tornado is bearing down on a
playground,

hip-check and ricochet it to another town?

So the eighty percent are right to say, Dear Savior,
it says here, Ask and it shall be given to you.

It doesn't say, Ask and I'll get back to you with my decision,
This is a promise of delivery, an explicit warranty
with zero wiggle room.

So what do You have to say about that?

And Jesus will say, Well, we were perhaps a little casual
with the language.

which I still maintain is true in a technical sense,
but you may perhaps need to hear the explanation
from a trained theologian,

they are good at unpacking concepts that appear to be obvious.

Think of the whole asking process as a kind a lottery.

So the parents whose children died in their arms,
whose reasons for living melted away like snow,
the parents of these lifeless children look to Jesus and they say,
Why, you mother effing liar.

Two Old Men

When I go these days I really have to go.

I was driving the River Road where Highland ends.

I parked the car and danced behind a wall to find relief,
just as an older man from the high-rise crossed the street
to take his evening walk.

As I stepped out from behind the wall we nearly collided.

"Good Christ," he shouted, grabbing his chest.

"I thought you were about to attack me."

"No, no," I said. "I was just taking a leak."

"I had heart surgery just a few weeks ago," the old man said.

"I wasn't going to kill you," I said. "I just had to go."

Most Dogs Are Good Dogs

It's an odd one that lies around thinking of ways to undo you.
They want a good relationship, they want to get along,
they want to master, to the degree they can figure them out,
the things you expect them to do.

There are vicious dogs, but they are usually doing what they are
trained to do -

i.e., they are being good, after a fashion.

And there are mad dogs, made that way by inconceivable
torment,

and God knows they cannot help being that way.

When they trash the couch, pulling all the fluff out
and onto the carpet, they are not intending to trash your dreams,
it was just an odd thought that stole over them,
and even when they have a clear grievance,
and are reminded then of their carnivore origins,
they can be dissuaded with a pat to the head
or a reassuring word.

The Not Very Good Best Poem

His language wasn't great and he read his rhyme
in a singsong way,
but what worked was that the poem was important to him.
It was about a colleague at work named Kerrie
that he had a crush on.
He saw her every day, and over the months her kindness
and her smile and her pretty face were like steak knives
planted deep in his chest.
He was so in love, he was in that place where she was the one,
and every time she spoke to him she hollowed him out,
scraped empty by her goodness and abashed by her beauty.
But Kerrie was married and seemed happy being that way.
What could he offer but his ugly face and stupid future?
He read his poem and sat down, and it was clear
the poem only deepened his despair.
How could he go forward, his seed would not find purchase
in the only woman he loved, it was like dying, it was dying,
his hopes were Osterized, his future disappeared,
he envisioned a walk-up apartment and pee-stained underpants,
and he still had to work with her every single day,
yet I was more moved
by the poem he read than any other reader's.

The Weeping Man

I came upon a weeping man and I knelt to offer assistance.

What is it, I asked him, that has brought you to this point?

I am the lowest of men, he sobbed.

No forgiveness, no restitution. I have failed at everything.

Come on, friend, I said, it can't be all that bad.

Why, look at me, I have my faults and failures but see how I soldier on?

The man pulled away from my grasp.

I may be down on my luck, he said, but there's no reason to be insulting.

My Vision

It must have been on my mind subconsciously
because my dream lasted for hours,
with the lava flows, houses splintering,
horned reptiles roaming the streets,
snatching up nonbelievers and disposing of them.

But death itself was not so bad.
It reminded me of getting beamed up
by the transporter in Star Trek --
you start to darken, like a banana going bad,
and then, without pain, you are
ushered into the other side.

It was not vouchsafed to me to behold
the entire vision, and what lay on the other side,
but who cares -- it didn't hurt.
And I had run the good race, at a sustainable pace
and now I was one with the elect.

I could not help thinking of the people who knew me in life.
the ones who reliably picked up their dog's poop
and wrote generous checks to 501(3)c organizations,
to see me getting the free pass like this
and thinking, You've got to be kidding.

Dream

In retrospect it made no sense
but at the time it was quite gripping.

My Baboon Bride

The summer I turned 16, the summer of Sgt. Pepper, I took a job as zoo guide at Jungle Larry's Safari Island in Cedar Point, a big Ohio amusement park.

My job was to be a groundskeeper, and eventually a caretaker of every kind of animal.

My jungle identity was B'wana Mike.

I was the luckiest young guy in the world – sun-drenched 18-year-old girls, Lake Erie sands, a jungle outfit, a dorm room, the Velvet Underground, a 1967 Buick Special. I read books by Alan Watts, dressed in a Japanese bathrobe, and burned sandalwood incense from my window.

All the girls were older because I lied about my age to get in.

My challenge was to love them credibly, the way a sophisticated 18-year-old boy would.

It was a summer of lies. I calculate that I did not tell the truth for 100 days.

The opening weekend was Memorial Day.

The loudspeakers played "Born Free" over and over morning to night.

In my mind I always answered "and now they're in cages."

It was exciting because the animals had finally arrived from winter compound.

An animal that interested me was the wild olive baboon from Sudan.

They have huge teeth and a reputation for viciousness.

And vivid asses that no one wants to look at.

In the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1932, a busload of Italian soldiers was attacked by a tribe of geladas, who tore the truck to bits and killed and carried off several soldiers. Baboons are fierce, we told ourselves.

We had a big male, Mombasa, and a smaller but equally noble female, named Loma.

They were incredibly strong and insane-looking.
And Loma was in estrus.
The first day we got a report that a group
of Seventh Day Adventists
was aghast because the two baboons were having sex
in front of their group.
We arrived in time to stake the two animals apart,
so only
their fingers could touch.
This was at Jungle Larry's instruction.
Then the terrible thing happened.
Mombasa strained all the next night and day to reach Loma.
Around 5 AM the next day he leaped up,
and the chain yanked him so hard his neck broke,
and he died in a heap of sawdust.
Everyone was upset.
We put Loma in a traveling cage and pulled blankets over the
sides,
like a widow's compartment.
We tried to carry on, as if nothing had happened.
My job included raking out the enclosure she and Mombasa
had been staked out in.
Everyone said, Don't let the baboon get the drop on you.
They can tear the eyes out of your head in two seconds.
On the third night, after the show shut down,
I was raking, and I felt a hand grab my pants pocket.
It was Loma, reaching through
the bars of the cage.
I nearly let our urine.
I put my hand on her hand, and she quickly grabbed it
and pulled me down, till I was kneeling and facing her.
I could barely make out her golden eyes
in the shadow of the cage.
I pulled back the blanket to see her clearly.

Intensely, she turned my hand over and over and examined the pores of my skin with her eyes, picking microscopic particles from the back of my hand.

She was grooming me.

Grooming is a major social activity among primates.

It is one way a tribe of creatures living together can bond and reinforce social structures, family links and strengthen relationships.

It brings peace to even violent families.

I looked at Loma and realized, for the first time, how beautiful she was.

And she looked at me as fervently.

She was grooming me because she needed someone, and I was it.

In the days and weeks left to us, we communicated entirely by touch and by seeing

Summer wore on.

Every day I worked, and chased girls when I got out.

At night, however, I would sneak onto Safari Island and spent fifteen minutes with Loma.

One Saturday I drove to Hammond, Indiana to see a girl who left Cedar Point because I got too fresh.

When I found her apartment, and knocked on the door, a linebacker from Purdue opened it.

Get lost, was all he said.

I raced back to Ohio, to Sandusky, I knew Loma would be wondering where I had gone.

When I got back, there was a commotion.

The baboon has escaped, one of the guys said.

People gathered under a sycamore tree she had climbed up into.

I saw her staring out over Lake Erie.

I could see her realizing she was nowhere near home.

There was no easy escape route for her to take.

I called to her. Loma ... Loma ...

She spotted me, hesitated a moment, then began climbing down from her high perch.

I was so glad she was safe.

I was even able to see her vivid ass coming down the last branches of the sycamore.

She backed into my arms and held onto me.

It was the only time I ever held her.

Four days later I was scheduled to leave, to start college.

I couldn't say goodbye, so I slunk away, and drove across Ohio.

And I put her out of my mind, and lived my life.

Twelve years later I was visiting Ohio with my wife.

I wanted to show her the zoo where I had worked.

I was impressed that the animal areas were more natural now, and more hospitable.

We came to a primates area.

She was behind see-through nylon cables, not bars.

There were eight baboons in with her –

all babies and other females.

Loma was white in the face now, but she sat like a queen on a log made of concrete,

A great grandchild in her arms.

Loma did not blink but she fixed on me.

Life had moved on but she had survived and done well.

She had made a career for herself in the jungles of Ohio.

That was my picture of our summer romance,

and the beautiful creature who made a man of me,

The Child Who Slipped in the Bucket

The mother's back was turned for just a second. The three boys needed attention, too. But it was enough time for little Barbara, 14 months, to tumble in.

It was a five-gallon bucket, the kind Barbara's father used as a backhoe operator, without about eight inches of water in the bottom. Too deep for a baby to push out of. Too deep to hear a child cry.

The paramedics took 20 minutes to arrive. They were able to start her heart again, but they could not undo the damage to her.

Everyone brought food, and hugs, and promises of prayers, but it was too much for the family having a vegetable girl.

They moved away, because it was too hard to be around friends, who remembered Barbara shouting out sounds, and stumbling about. Everyone said she was the sweetest girl. Now she can't close her eyes by herself, or use the toilet, or eat.

Years pass. I stop thinking about them. But today I saw another child, at a nearby park, being pushed in a swing. She reminded me of Barbara, the happiness and liveliness in her expression.

I thought of that little girl, and her mother and father, and her two older brothers, and had to pull over.

Walking the Wood Veranda in the Early Morning at St. Mary's, 1963

When I was 13 years old, I attended a Catholic junior seminary in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. I was supposed to become a priest.

The boys slide from their bunks and tiptoe to the trough to brush their teeth and spit.

Now dressed, they pound down two too-tall flights of stairs and exit into the still-dark morning.

Down at the pond the ducks are remarking, the footfalls of 60 boys echo on the planks.

They enter the rectory and press through an underground corridor to climb three steps to the chapel entrance.

From darkness everything becomes light. The choir is intoning, the censer is swinging, and Jesus has been busy, all the while the boys were sleeping, suffering on the cross for them.

To Rachel in Alaska

After it has put to death every living thing it can,
winter offers feeble compensations.
It paints the panes with frosted flowers,
and shapes the dunes against the door.

I never weatherstripped this year
and in come the piping gusts now,
inflaming my gas bill.

As lonely as I am sometimes
and as cold as the air in our bedroom gets,
I think of you in the dark all day in Kotzebue,
and the northern lights your main compensation,
both of us missing the warmth of two bodies.

Advantages of Turning Sixty-Four

Pretty girls start smiling at you again. Your years of being a danger to them are winding down.

The perception of harmlessness has been sneaking up on you for some time, and now it's plastered all over you.

And it's true unless you start stashing them into burlap bags and filling your car trunk with them.

But even if you did that, where would it lead? You lack the vigor for sustained engagement.

The other good thing is you're not really old yet, and so the girls don't pity you.

The bad diseases are still years away, and look at you, you are getting around fine, keeping your bodily fluids in where they belong.

Good times, with your kidnapping years well behind you, and a pleasant remission till the sucking sounds begin.

Talking About My Mom

I talk about my mom to friends. Sometimes appreciatively, sometimes complaining about her ways. She was a willful and emotional woman, who did not suffer mistreatment well. It was she who taught me how to clean and cook and behave. She would not like me writing this now.

I was in love with her as a boy, for the longest time. Then I found reason to be afraid of her, too. But I have no way to describe her. She might have been a really good mom, or she might have been really bad.

It was not until I posted a picture of her on my Facebook page that I was able to show my friends her penetrating gaze, the powerful determination behind her gentle smile.

People said to me: "I understand you better now."

'It's Not a Boy, But It's Better Than Nothing' -- A Rotten Thing to Say

It is an earthquake in the heart of a man who fathers a daughter. Overnight there is a creature of wonder in the world, a baby woman that issued out of your own hairy loins.

There is a year-long period where she cannot talk but keeps talking anyway , with no shortage of certainty, in a voice to commend armies and choirs, issuing orders to all within range, letting them know who is in charge of this house.

And when she is taken from you, because the world is useless and doesn't know how to love, even after the moon has crashed into your house, and you look about at the splintered sticks, even after such a loss you want to say to every man listening, the nonsense she imparted to you:

Bar bar ar ar bar bar bar bar ...

Have a daughter, love that little girl. She will make you into a man.

The Creature in the Tree

The creature in the tree sits licking its wrist; every 37 seconds it blinks.

It regards the farmer and his two sons, the lantern, the shotgun and the dogs.

Why is this world so fraught with commotion, it wonders.

And waits for its ride to arrive.

To Understand A Woman

Watch her sleep.
All the sharp words and glances are gone.
Her face is relaxed,
with an element of sadness still about it,
because she can not be doing now,
she can only drink in the peace and power of sleep.
She has let down all her defenses,
and is snoring like a rabbit would snore.

A Poem in the *Rolling Stone*

I was never famous or even popular as a writer, but here and there I had my moments. I enjoy telling people I have published in the trifecta of unlikely publications: *Guideposts* (published by Billy Graham), *Paris Review* (published by George Plimpton, somewhere in the middle), and *Rolling Stone* (published by The Devil). Each has its own story, but here is the story on *Rolling Stone*, edited at that time, 1977, by Charles Perry.

Rolling Stone was not especially literary, but it did use little poetic bits in its back pages, in the review sections, to make the columns balance. In newspapers these are called filler items, but I have generally tried to avoid that phrase.

I knew that *Rolling Stone* readers were probably high, so I sent them short little items, such as I still write today. The one that got accepted was called "Eating & Flying," and it was about a stoned observation while flying in an airplane. I was not stoned, but the observation was. The simple gist of it was that the clouds outside the airplane reminded me of the steamed cauliflower served on the tray-table. (This was back when airlines served hot meals.)

I was delighted to see a poem of mine in *Rolling Stone*, especially under a review of Linda Ronstadt, thought at that time to be the world's most lubricious woman.

I told all my friends. I told myself that I was on the fast-track now, that Charles Perry's judgment would vault me to the front line of American rock and roll poets. The more I thought of it, the more impressed I knew Perry was with my amazing little snippet. Then the subsequent issue of the magazine came out. Thumbing through (to suss out the competition), I found my poem all over again, this time nestled under a bounteous photograph of Dolly Parton, and a review of her latest album.

What was I to think? Either Charles Perry really liked the poem, or he was in the early stages of dementia and had forgotten he used the very same poem in the previous issue or it was just filler to him, and did not matter all that much.

Here is the masterpiece in question:

Eating & Flying

The one reminds me of the other:
a silver sleigh traversing piles of cloud,

and the tinfoil peeled from
a steaming lunch. The cauliflower
seems especially familiar.

Talking Fly

A fly lands on my resting thigh and commences wringing its hands over my skin.

I say, Fly, do I look like a steaming pile of shit to you?

Fly says, Well, I did land on you.

At a North Dakota Border Crossing

Crossing into Canada behind a pickup truck, I watch the Mountie circle the truck once, twice, making marks on a clipboard, and putting his fingers into the exhaust pipe. I step out of my car to use the bathroom. When I emerge, the Mountie is still talking to the man at the wheel, a Dakota grandfather. I arch my eyebrows at him, to say, What's up? He shrugs, sighs and turns his face straight ahead.



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