

My Son Fishes Coins Out of the Fountain at the Mall

My eight year-old son can't believe his luck.  
That there are just  
"all of these coins left in this fountain."  
He easily fishes them out.  
He's recently become curious about money  
and where it comes from.  
I'm afraid this is sending him  
the wrong message.  
I'm also worried about all those wishes.  
Will they still come true?  
I feel silly for even thinking that.  
I would feel really silly  
saying that to my son,  
who might think, as it now stands,  
that one obtains money from fountains.

I am desperate for one of those signs  
that are on some fountains that say  
these coins are collected for charity.  
Then I could tell my son to leave the coins  
for the kids with multiple sclerosis or something.

My son is really raking it in at this point.  
His wet little hands filled with lucre.  
People are starting to look.  
Other kids are getting curious.  
There might be a run forming on this fountain.  
All I can think of to tell my son  
is that we have to be somewhere.  
This is of course a lie.

Later at home we count the money--  
"Count de Monet!"  
He's too young for Mel Brooks jokes.  
Three dollars in change.  
Not bad my little capitalist.  
He is now asking for a water feature  
in front of our house.  
I didn't expect that.  
I try to explain that nobody  
would make wishes in our fountain.

He wants to know why the mall fountain  
is better for wishing  
than a fountain in our yard, to which  
I have nothing to say.  
More questions I can't answer.  
It is really hard to make sense of wishes/wishing.

Driving the Wrong Way Down a One Way Street

You entered the do not enter  
and there is no way out but through.  
You will learn that the usually effective  
embarrassed/apologetic wave has its limits.  
Even the church-going mother  
in the hatchback  
taking her children to school  
can be seen muttering  
a few non-biblical epithets  
under her breath.  
Her stare is enough to wish for the end times.  
You have screwed this up for everyone  
and will have to keep screwing  
because backing up is worse than continuing.  
You can only manage your level of wrong here.  
Driving the wrong way down a one way street is like  
putting a roasted potato in your mouth  
at a dinner party that is way too hot  
but you can't spit it out.  
So take the honking,  
take the shrugs,  
take the fingers.  
This is an exercise in humility.  
It is spiritually cleansing.  
Remember Elliot's words  
*Nothing dies harder than  
the desire to think well of self*  
and know that today,  
if just for a little while,  
you killed it.

Your Six Year-Old Daughter Asks You How the Penis Gets into the Vagina

What do you say? Do you tell her?

I told her.

But why? Who knows?

And now your wife wants to know.

So does your therapist.

Maybe it's because you remember

the day you figured it out

in fifth grade,

a full three years before

it was revealed

in junior high health class

by a football coach

that said puberty

poo-ber-dee.

You were riding your bike

home after school,

puzzling it out.

You knew that somehow

the penis had to

get into the vagina

for babies to get made.

But it just didn't seem possible

that the penis,

a squishy little piece of flesh,

could be pushed against a vagina,

and do anything but crumple.

If only it could be made firmer,

if only it had another state.

Wait a minute,

I stopped the bike for this.

I remembered that the penis

almost has the desired properties

when you wake up in the morning.

What your mom sometimes calls a *flagpole*.

Yes, that might just work,

a flagpole penis.

Oh my God, a flagpole penis!

If you don't take into account my age

at that moment,

you might be unimpressed,  
but remember this was pre-poo-ber-dee.  
An erection was in no way connected  
to desire in my mind.  
I was like a man who'd never seen water,  
trying to figure out how a fish swims.  
I was an anatomical engineer  
that deduced the solution from first principles.  
It was my on-the-road-to-Damascus moment.  
Okay, not everybody gets to be Paul.  
But when the great engineer in the sky  
has called your name,  
you go out and you preach the word.  
And *that* is why I told my daughter.

Reading Nietzsche Before Watching *It's a Wonderful Life*

These spirits do not mix.  
All it took was a 30 minute dose of Nietzsche  
on the herd mentality, mobbing,  
and the perversion of the ubermensch's spirit,  
to make George Bailey's wonderful life a Greek tragedy.

Prior to this encounter, I had seen the movie  
over 15 times, usually during holidays,  
and never failed to be touched.  
But this was the first time I saw  
George's family, friends, and townspeople  
ply that combination  
of guilt, shame, and sex  
(not to mention some angel dust pyrotechnics)  
to level George Bailey, man of talent.  
And on this viewing, surprise of surprises,  
Mr. Potter turns out to be the only man  
trying to save poor George,  
even if it is  
    only out of self interest.

And all those gut-wrenching moments  
coming so close to escaping:  
the board meeting,  
the bank run,  
the train station with Harry,  
the call from Sam Wainwright,  
(if that idiot can make it anyone can).  
If only Ernie the cabbie  
would just chloroform Georgie-boy.  
Just so he could get out of his own way  
for a half an hour.

The real dagger in the soul though is the end  
when he's wet, disheveled  
with tinsel matted on his head,  
looking out as an imbecile on all proceedings,  
as he is made  
    to feel grateful for it all.

Hearing Your Own Pettiness in the Words of Your Son

As you drive them to practice,  
your son tells his friend  
that their tennis coach is  
*not the sharpest pencil in the box.*  
He says this with the same smirking condescension  
(and cadence!) that you said it with,  
just two days before.  
Moreover, feeling his point might have been  
too subtle he says it again.  
At which point you interrupt  
to correct your son in front of his friend.  
By which your son understands  
you are not correcting his meanness  
but his lack of guile.  
And you did this all to seem  
nicer than you really are.

In the silent five minutes left  
before you reach the tennis court,  
you realize your legacy will be total.  
Your son inherits not just your sense of humor  
or your fluid single-handed backhand  
but your vanity, pettiness, and spite.  
He doesn't just see you as you present yourself,  
or as you conceive of yourself  
but as you are.  
And all those not so comic foibles  
will become part of him too.

His words, your words, echo in your thoughts  
for five long minutes and then a lifetime more  
as you gaze vacantly through the windshield  
at all that is before you in time  
looking into the future,  
the harshest kind of mirror.