

MIKE

He would romp with his grandchildren in the living room
Throwing them in the air, catching them on the way down.
That was Mike: Catching the people he loved, not letting them fall.
The specifics of him - white, male, Catholic –
Were subsumed by his Mikeness: one of a kind, irreplaceable.
He was at home in his own skin.
He'd pat his big belly to make us laugh, then laugh himself.
He didn't care how he looked.

His father had died a couple of years earlier.
"We thought we'd have him with us a while longer," Mike said,
"But it didn't work out that way."
We thought we'd have Mike with us a while longer, too.

We – the extended family –
Didn't know about Mike's illness until it was too late.
One day we heard he wasn't feeling well;
The next, it seemed, that he was mortally ill.
Not enough time.
There wasn't enough time to say goodbye.

He started treatment as soon as he found out.
He and my sister, his wife, did everything they could.
It didn't help.
And week by week he got worse,
As they both prayed for a miracle.
For the last several months he lay in bed
Looking, with his tall frame and suddenly grayer hair,
Much like Stephen King.
He was on IV glucose,
Unable to eat because it made him sick.
("How awful!" I exclaimed when he told me.
"You're telling me?" he replied. Mike liked to eat.
In happier days he would fix us Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners
Then eat with great appetite, cracking jokes throughout the meal.)
He dozed a lot,

But when awake he never complained.
Christ, he didn't even swear.
Imagine it: Dying in pain, in his fifties,
Leaving behind the wife, son, grandchildren, and dog he loved,
He still didn't curse.
His priest brought him Communion every week
After he could no longer attend services.

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Mike in the hospital, kissing his grandchildren goodbye.
Relatives came for their last visit.
I came, and cried through the whole hour.
I couldn't stop it, couldn't stand it.
His son Josh slept there nights to be near him.
(*"Where's Josh?" was one of the first things he'd say upon awakening.*)

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Mike home from the hospital: home, where he wanted to be.
His dog, Mary, licked his cheek in greeting
And curled up at the foot of his bed.
His wife and stepdaughter were there with him,
His wife holding his hand.
Mike died the same day.

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Then the funeral: grieving family,
The elderly knowing their time was approaching,
The young uncomprehending, years away from death.
The priests eulogizing Mike:
How he laughed when telling them he was ill.
How he never missed services until he got sick.
And the soloist, who'd known Mike for years,
Choking up at the end of her song,
The beautiful notes muffled by tears.

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Then, with dreamlike inevitability, the interment:
Tall fir trees, green grass, gray clouds mirroring our distress.
"In the midst of life, we are in death."
Di being strong, Josh being strong,
Friends and relatives weeping.

Mike in a small container,
Which seemed incredible to me.
How could someone so big –
Big in body, big in soul and soft heart –
Fit into that container?
The officiators placed the container into the hole
Then told us – twice – that the ceremony was over.
No one moved;
We sat silently, knowing we couldn't leave yet.
So they let us stay, while they shoveled dirt into the hole
And sprinkled red roses on top.
Red roses: Not eternal, not like Mike.

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The longer I live, the less I understand death.
Mike was so present, so seemingly indestructible,
And now he's gone.
He was safety, reassurance, warmth.
It was impossible to dislike him; the very idea was absurd.
This next is not original, but sometimes the old sayings are the only good ones:
A light has gone out of the world with his passing.
I can see it drifting up to heaven, getting smaller, smaller,
Then winking out.
No, I take that back: Don't talk to me about heaven.
We're still here on earth, and we need him.

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It shakes the concept of justice
When a good man dies young.
(American justice, anyway; other countries are used to it.)
How could this churchgoing man
Who never gossiped, never bitched,
Who made you believe in humanity by his very existence –
How could he go like this?
How does life make sense if this is his reward?

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No one can take Mike's place, but then no one should.
We know he's just gone, not really dead,
And that we'll see him again.
How else could we stand it?

JAMES BROWN ON THE BOX

On a summer's day in 1968,
I took a walk with two other girls.
We ran into three black guys from our school,
And all of us walked together.
The guys were handsome and clean-cut.
I remember feeling, not shy -
That word is so overused it should be banned -
But aware I was doing something for the first time;
I'd never walked with black guys before.
They were fine - I mean their behavior was fine.
So was ours, for that matter.
There were no romantic vibes; we just walked,
And talked haltingly, gropingly,
Reaching across the black-white divide, or trying to.
I remember the sun was shining;
It was a beautiful day.

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One of the guys carried a huge cassette player -
They weren't called boomboxes then -
On his shoulder.
It was blaring James Brown, and only James Brown,
Songs quite loudly the whole time we walked.
The guys didn't mention the songs or James,
But what I intuited from them was pride.
Pride in James Brown, in what he was,
The trail he blazed, the dance he danced,
The success he achieved against tremendous odds.
Also love for him, and an earned possessiveness.
"This sound is ours," they seemed to say without words.
"It is ours and nothing - not racism,
Not cultural appropriation, not the Ku Klux Klan -
Can take it away from us.
Nothing can take away what he did for us,
What he does for us, simply by existing."
All this was conveyed without a word being said.
It was too big for words.
It was almost as though James Brown's music
Gave them the right to walk tall and proud.
In a perfect world, they would have had that right anyway.

In a perfect world, they would have had that right anyway.
But in this world, James Brown gave it to them.

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There would have been a Michael Jackson without Brown,
But he wouldn't have been the same - not less, just different.
His dancing, for example - would it have had the same flair,
The same impassioned fluidity,
Without Brown's kill 'em and leave* example? I doubt it.
And James Brown, in turn, was said to be influenced by Jackie Wilson,
Though accounts differ on this. So it goes.

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A brief rundown of some of his hits:
Could anything be funkier than *"Cold Sweat?"*
"I Feel Good" made us feel better than good.
"Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" was an instant endorphin rush,
Before we knew what the word meant.
It was that best of all highs, a drugless one.
(When I heard Brown's music back then,
What I felt could have been expressed as:
"Damn, that sounds good! What is it? How does he do it?
Aw, who gives a shit - let's dance!"
And I can't dance, believe me.)
"Please Please Please" showed him at his raw, beseeching best.
Above all, there is *"I'm Black And I'm Proud"*,
His anthem to his people.
James Brown was a shot of adrenalin straight to the soul.
He gave different things to different races.
To blacks, I think, he symbolized pride, validation;
Payback, like his song says.
To whites he was a reminder that there was rhythm in the world,
And emotion, and that it was all right - more than all right -
To display both.

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James Brown grabbed his moment while he was young and hungry,
When he had the energy to achieve it,
And at the perfect psychohistorical moment.
(*Ten years earlier, or later,*
He might not have clicked, or not as resoundingly.)
Some people have a talent for doing that
While others, just as gifted, fritter their chances away,

Sidelined by fright, by am-I-good-enough-ism, by second-guessing.
James Brown went for it, got it, and inspired millions in the process.
From the heart of Africa to Fifth Avenue, we all know who he is.

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Brown's sad last years don't detract from his achievement.
The wonder was his success, not the human frailty we all share.
Not to mention that stardom comes hand in hand
With a huge Jungian shadow, which most people only dimly comprehend -
The compulsion to balance scaling the heights
By descending to the depths.

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In my mind, the young men are still walking with their -
Oh hell, I'm going to call it a boombox -
Still straight and proud, fading into the sunset
Until they become black silhouettes.
As I watch, they multiply into tens, hundreds, thousands,
Dancing to James Brown's music, the music he gave them,
The music they drew out of him,
Happy and proud and defiant.
And now they are silhouetted against a baobab tree -
Thick-trunked, with spreading horizontal branches -
And an orange sun-setting sky.
Then they shrink back again, to the original three.
Maybe they're walking into their future,
The future James Brown made more possible.
The tree is gone now – but the brilliant light remains.

*Taken from James McBride's biography of Brown, of the same name.

STRONG WOMEN

They're shoved in our faces in an endless parade -
Weak Women.

Phyllis Hyman, Judy Garland,
Marilyn Monroe, Whitney Houston,
And all their latter-day counterparts -
Their complexity winnowed away in screaming headlines,
Reduced to only one of their many facets.
They're *just* alcoholics, we're told
Just drug addicts, *just* masochists,
Just naturally weak.

Never mind that they had to be Teflon-coated
To get to the top in the first place.
Never mind their humor, their warmth,
Their talent, heart, tenacity.
Just focus on that Achilles heel
And forget everything else.
The message to women?
*"Don't aspire to greatness,
Don't reach for the stars,
Don't rise above your station.
You'll only fall, like they did."*

Well, I haven't noticed Oprah Winfrey falling;
She's survived abuse and losing a child.
Loretta Lynn didn't fall,
Though they stuck a breakdown scene into "*Coal Miner's Daughter*"
To imply that she did.
Beverly Sills didn't fall
Though she birthed an autistic son and a deaf daughter.
And Jennifer Hudson didn't fall
After mother, brother and nephew were killed.
She even forgave the killer.

One can't help but think
That the power structure (or *PS*),
Wants small women, stressed women,
Women intimidated into malleability.
When women are strong, the *PS* ignores them,
Hoping no one will notice.
When famous women mess up,
The *PS* trumpets it from the rooftops, with raucous glee.
"Look," they might as well shout, *"Another one down!"*

What did we tell you?"
How tacky, really.

Then there's *Guess-Which-Magazine Syndrome*:
(Name of Famous Actress): *"How Cancer Is Slowly Killing Me!"*
Negative only, positive need not apply.
What's that you say?
The articles focus on their strength and stamina,
As they pull out all the stops to survive?
That's the supertext. The subtext says:
*"Be afraid. Be very afraid."**
And a lot of people are.

Ayn Rand said it best (*no, I don't agree with her politics.*
You can be brilliant and wrongheaded, both):
"I want to see, real, living, and in the hours of my own days,
That glory I create as an illusion."
Everyone wants to see that.
Everyone needs to see that.
But try finding it in most magazines.
Especially the ones near the checkout counter,
That everyone will see on their way out.

When faced with a truly strong woman,
The power structure can be harsh.
Joan of Arc they burned -
She was just too much for them.
(*"Kill the bitch," I imagine them saying in their drafty halls.*
"My head is exploding just being around her.")
Eve they scapegoated, natch.
Wouldn't you know they'd blame the first woman
For the downfall of humanity?
Let's start out on the right foot, ladies;
It's not like you're equal or anything.

This is why I celebrate women's strength,
To remind us all that it exists.
Yes, we're flawed, but in the main we're sound.
It's like our strength is the soup, our flaws the salt.
You can't have soup without salt -
But salt is not soup.

*A line from the movie *The First Wives Club*.

MAYBE

Maybe God is a court jester
Wearing a peaked purple hat hung with silver bells,
Making us laugh at the truth.
Maybe God is a three-toed sloth inching along a branch
Or a really fast cheetah pursuing its prey.
Maybe God is intersex
With heavy breasts and take-your-pick genitals.
Maybe God is the green grass, the leafy hedges,
The branching trees reaching to heaven.
Maybe God is the planet: The seas, the valleys,
The curvature of the earth.
Maybe God is the space-time continuum,
Giving us space to make our mistakes
And time to learn from them.
*Maybe God is us when we help others
Forgetting ourselves in that cosmic moment;
Maybe that is God.*

LIFE AND WORK

(Or "Note To Self")

Only do what you can do,
For the years of life are few.
But make it strong, the tale you tell
And may your soul you never sell.

Do what means the most to you,
For a million or for few.
Work your passion every day;
Ignore the ones who say you nay.

For talent comes from God above,
(Or God below? Let's call it love);
And if you throw away His gift,
'Tween you and He there'll grow a rift.

Through creation will you rise;
It is your quintessential prize.
Your solace for the pain of life,
Your pleasure in the midst of strife.

Make your work your very own,
As a dog will hug a bone.
Illumine it with all you are,
As earth is silvered by a star;

So that when people see your art
The product of your fervent heart:
"Why, yes," they'll say
"That's her work, see,
For no one else's could it be."

Work your magic day and night,
And always have it show the right.
For many people - most, in fact -
Have not the strength to make this pact.

And so the creators have their say
To show that there's another way;
Till what was once an airy dream
Which has the power but to seem,
Takes on substance, takes on form,
Becomes the real, the true, the norm.

