


1993

Age of Reason

Richard Flynn

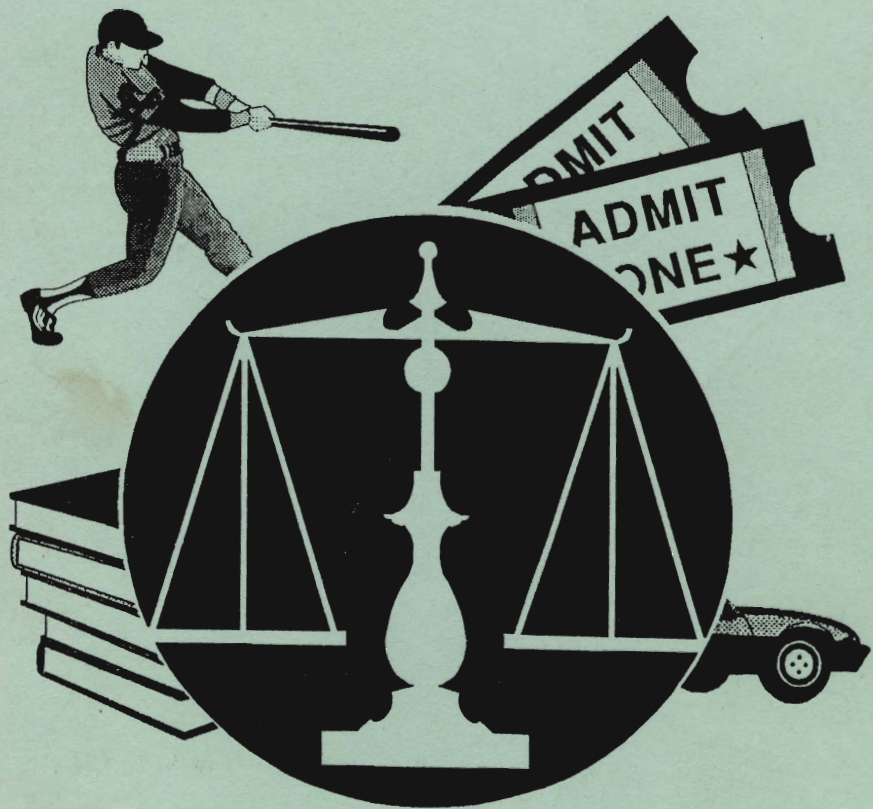
Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/engl-facpubs>

 Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Flynn, Richard. 1993. "Age of Reason." *Literature and Philosophy Faculty Publications*, Paper 1.
<http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/engl-facpubs/1>

This other is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Literature and Philosophy at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literature and Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.



THE AGE OF
REASON

POEMS BY

RICHARD FLYNN

THE AGE OF REASON



poems by
Richard Flynn



Hawkhead Press
Terre Haute, Indiana
1993

©Richard Flynn 1993
All rights reserved.

Flynn, Richard, 1955-
The Age of Reason.

ISBN: 0-9635631-2-2

Thanks to the magazines in which the following poems first appeared, often in earlier versions:

Aerial: "After I Left You in Virginia Beach"; *Arts Indiana Literary Supplement* 1989: "Tempting Fate"; *Crop Dust*: "Peafowl"; *Gargoyle*: "The Age of Reason, I-II" (audiotape issue); "Defining Gravity"; *G.W. Review*: "Before Morning"; *Indiannual* 5: "Raccoons"; *The Laurel Review*: "The Renters"; *The New Laurel Review*: "Harmony"; *The Quadra Project*: "Empty Picture Frame With Clown and Balloons"; *The Reaper*: "First Freeze" and "Night Baseball With Rain"; *The Salmon*: (Galway, Ireland): "Apology on Roosevelt Island," "Looking at the North Ward" and "Without Family"; *Washington Review*: "The Age of Reason, I & V," "Disney Family Album," "Eviction," "Half-Wits," "The Last Resort," "Stage Fright" and "Stewed Tomatoes."

A substantial excerpt from "The Age of Reason" appears in somewhat different form in the anthology *Men in Our Time: Male Poetry in Contemporary America*, edited by Fred Moramarco and Al Zolynas, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1992.

The author wishes to thank the D.C. Commission on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts for a 1988 D.C. Commission on the Arts Fellowship in Literature, which enabled him to complete many of these poems.

For Patricia Pace
and, as always, for
Richard Nicholas Flynn

Contents

I

- Half-Wits . . . 1
- Summer of Love . . . 2
- Stewed Tomatoes . . . 3
- Stage Fright . . . 4
- Looking at the North Ward . . . 5
- Before Morning . . . 6
- Eviction . . . 7
- Raccoons . . . 8
- Without Family . . . 9
- The Last Resort . . . 10

II

- Disney Family Album . . . 13
- The Renters . . . 14
- Tempting Fate . . . 15
- Night Baseball With Rain . . . 17
- Defining Gravity . . . 19
- Lullaby . . . 21
- In Bunk Beds . . . 22
- Empty Picture Frame With Clown and Balloons . . . 23

III

- Peafowl . . . 27
- First Freeze . . . 28
- After I Left You in Virginia Beach . . . 29
- Apology on Roosevelt Island . . . 30
- Harmony . . . 31
- Back Home Again . . . 32
- The Past . . . 34

IV

- The Age of Reason . . . 37

l.

Half-Wits

I look, incredulous, as my father
Watches his five-inch television
In the big house that's mostly empty.
His wife gave him the set
For his birthday, thinking he could
Use it at the office. My sister says
He might put it in the bathroom.
I say, "No, that's where he does
All his reading. They have too many
TV's already." I shouldn't talk.
I have three sets. It's not that
I object to television.
Everyone needs a friend, but not
In the bathroom.
Anyway, they deliver the pizza.
Dad and I dig in, both of us squinting
At Pat Boone, two inches tall
On the Sony. His wife and mine
Sit on the couch, watch it in color.

Summer of Love

In nineteen-sixty-seven, junior-high
A month away, I fall in love with rock.
Twelve years old, sweating DC's heat, I try
My father's patience. Half a child, I walk
To the bus stop on Connecticut to wait
For DC Transit to ride to Soul Shack
At 12th and G, knowing my dad will hate
The Jimi Hendrix album I bring back,
Knowing he'll yell at me and complicate
My life and generally give me flak.
School starts, and on the evening news, in shock,
Dad watches flower children demonstrate,
As Allen Ginsberg out in Arlington
Attempts to levitate the Pentagon.

Stewed Tomatoes

At lunch they rang the bell,
Everyone shut up, listened to the priest,
Soon to be retired, tell us
That today was the first day
Of the rest of our lives.

You took a heaping tablespoon of train wreck
And flung it at me. The seeds
Ran down my Oxford button-down.
We were both excused from the refectory.

We got twelve demerits apiece,
And had to come in Saturday. Our parents thought
We didn't give a shit. We didn't.

That evening we drank on the bridge,
One eye out for the rent-a-cops.

Stage Fright

. . . all his happiest memories of Shakespeare seem to have come from a high school production of *As You Like It* . . . he has by some obscure process of free association, combined James Russell, Amy, and Robert Lowell into one majestic whole . . ."

-Randall Jarrell
"The Obscurity of the Poet"

The doctor removed the cast,
And I knew I'd never play again—
There was still no feeling in my thumb.
During production week, I had to fake it.

I was a lousy actor, but got the part
Of Amiens, the minstrel, because I could sing
And play a mean guitar. It occurred to everyone
But me that I had, subconsciously, stuck my hand

In the blender on purpose. Because I couldn't
Memorize my lines. Because the high notes
Made my face red. Throughout dress rehearsal,
I didn't dare strum, knowing the risk of humiliation.

Often I wonder what possessed me that I showed up
Opening night. Jaques stalled when I missed my cue.
I recount this episode to my friends when we've had a few.

Looking at the North Ward

The symmetry of each grey building blurs
In crooked memory. I recall my
Last view from the inside, as rain obscures
The view I memorized through screens, when I
Was locked up in the North Ward. And from that
Angle, at that time, nothing moved as real
Things do. People moved absurdly. Pale, flat
And badly animated phantoms still
Pursue me. I have dreamed the cars afloat
Before me. I awake as the cars take
Off, crash in a Seclusion Room. Remote,
I watch new wet screens, hoping they break, break
The ugly scenes I once imagined in
The Ward. And then I go to sleep again.

Before Morning

*I woke from human sleep to find
My windows frosted.*

Who am I kidding?
You'd been taking a shower
And I was basking
In the half-awake haze
I often mistake
For poetry.

After considering the prospect
Of rising and showering
As you had, I rolled over.
You came back to bed with a towel
Around you, eating an apple.
You cut the bruised parts off
With a steak knife.
You looked at our reflection in the mirror
And swore you could see through it.

I didn't know you were joking
Until you cracked the towel in the air
Like Zorro. I knew then you had
Consigned the morning to laughter.
I grabbed the towel,
Brought you down inside it.

Eviction

When we moved, no one wanted to help.
It took a dozen trips in the station
Wagon. We only moved from one dump to
Another. We had to get rid of the dog

Who'd gotten us kicked out. We blamed
The thin walls and Arthur downstairs,
Who should have been hard of hearing,
But wasn't. Complained when we walked

Too loudly. We had carpet, just like
The lease said. The spare bedroom was
The dog's. He didn't respect our pri-
Vacy, but preferred exile to attempts

At discipline. Arthur thought carpet
Wasn't enough, wouldn't be happy till
We were on the street. He didn't care
That we couldn't afford to move away.

Of course we did, but we neglected to
Pay the gas bill—a small revenge. We
Miss the dog. Sometimes, we even miss
Arthur if our neighbors get too loud.

Raccoons

We wake to a sound we assume is outdoors.
You roll over and you're eye to eye with a raccoon
Who got in through the bare plumbing in the apartment.
Frightened, we put on boots and bathrobes,
Chase him into the bathroom. He crouches
Behind the toilet, just a baby.

Months after he's caught with peanut
Butter bait in the landlord's cage, after,
To our knowledge, he's been set free,
Our son arrives.
Relatives bring him bears, lambs, rabbits.
He gets a raccoon which he likes
As much as us or his pacifier.

And I see the real raccoon's prescience,
Though he was only seeking a wet place,
A mother. It's inconceivable he knew
The moment

When our son's presence
Was unknown, nearly, to us,
A knot in our heart.

Without Family

So I've shut myself in my spacious room
In the large house where we live
Beyond our means. Our son comes in
Wearing the Superman cape I've made
From his best-loved blanket.
He gives me a picture—
His self-portrait—
Except,
He's added a thin beard to it
And called it "Daddy."

When I attend to him—
When I really attend—
He laughs at me, scolds me, "Make nonsense!"

Then he laughs again,
A demonic laugh.

In an instant I see, in the picture,
That the hair looks like mine
On Saturday morning
After I've drunk too late,
Too much,
Without family,
Without him.

The Last Resort

Every summer booze fueled the kitchen fires
So hot we all wanted out. But of course
There were the endless lessons—swimming,
Diving, tennis—and trips to the pediatrician

Who voted for Goldwater. We were booked
Far in advance for disaster, from the last
Day of school to our disastrous vacation.
Our parents dragged us to the Poconos

In the Chevy Biscayne, trying to jump-start
Their marriage. When that didn't work,
They tried Puerto Rico, leaving us
With our hopeless grandparents.

Why did they bother? I ask myself here,
In Columbus, Ohio, where my wife,
My son, and I wait for repairs on the Chevette.
Why, in the middle of the worst heat wave in years,

After three years apart, are we taking this
Vacation of Errors? On the country station
T. Graham Brown sings "The Last Resort."
Even four hundred dollars later it seems

We're still sucking air. And why do I
Believe there's hope for us in some
Indiana subdivision, when all I want now
Is to drink alone in the TV's soothing flicker?

II.

Disney Family Album

for Beth Joselow

On television, an ancient Disney
Animator, the man responsible
For Cinderella's stepmother, regales
My family with memories of Walt.

Watching, over leftovers, the love scene
From *Lady and the Tramp*, I start to feel
A little guilty—about the extravagance of living

With three movie channels and VCR.
My son spills milk on his tuna sandwich,
On his pants, on the floor, on me. I'm pissed—
But grab a paper towel, try in vain

To save the sandwich. There's no use crying,
I tell my son, feeling idiotic,
A grown-up. Things settle down. We're watching
Goofy try to cross the street while Goofy

(A second Goofy) runs him down, records
Another victim with a rubber stamp
On his car door. Later, after Snow White
Kisses Grumpy, after Thumper tries to

Teach Bambi how to skate, we see the man,
The animator again. My son says,
"Daddy, I think he's gonna be dead soon.
See, look at his hands—he's got those big veins."

The Renters

How exciting the fire hydrants,
The parking meters! How strikingly,
How soon we forget we're stuck.
We are stuck. Behind the playground
Is the artificial garden where what
We know of imagination disappears.
We live uneasily in the middle house.
The neighbors descend on us, check our mail,
Steal it because we are vague, vagrant—
The renters. We own nothing on this
Earth but buzzing, waking, and sleeping. Nor train
Nor car carries us to the workless world.
We are deceived into being lost
By the traffic. Our children inform us:
We've had you always.
How could you not know? We can't know
Whether something goes on, or is out there
Keeping us in this town, this stolen home.
Though risk is what we come for,
We hold in our old hands emptiness.

Tempting Fate

Usually, I've had too much
Of something. The moderation that comes
With age doesn't come to me.

It's cold and I'm given
To false starts, though I'm unsure
Of the connection.

Already, I find myself nodding off
On the couch, snow and static
On the television, a half-finished

Beer going stale. As I sink deeper
Into twilight sleep, I begin
To dream myself

In the same place, thirty years
Hence, with the child grown and you
Long gone from the next room.

That shakes me, and I go
To our room to make sure
You're still there.

Startled from pregnancy's
Thick sleep, you touch me
As I crawl into bed.

I wake late beside you.
After I finish my morning hacking
And the coffee that both

Settles and charges me, I laugh
At how pitiful that dream was,
Undermining any real remorse.

Night Baseball With Rain

Most of us fold. Fool that I am,
I stay in with nothing. The giddy evening
Goes stale like the beer. Someone fondles
Someone else's wife. Her husband's
Passed out; even the cards are drunk.
And my wife reminds us
We have to get up early,
Couldn't you be more quiet? The child is . . .

Asleep, he dreams of Eddie Murray
And the replica Series ring
That's turned his finger green.
Wearing the stiff glove he can't use yet,
He waits in the left field bleachers
For batting practice flies. Nothing even
Comes close. His face is sticky with tears
And cotton candy. Then a chewed-up ball
Drops out of the upper deck
Into his lap, God's gift to parents.

But downstairs, nothing drops out
Of the skies for me. Blurry-eyed,
Fading, down to my last white chip,
I wish I could be carried home.

I am at home: restless, bored with my friends,
And looking to change my luck.

Tomorrow, I'll go play first base coach.
At his game, I'll watch him take
His short but confident cuts,
And listen to the thunder, see
The swiftly darkening skies.

Defining Gravity

"Perhaps they were right in putting love into books,' he thought quietly. 'Perhaps it could not live anywhere else.'"

—William Faulkner
Light in August

What thoughts I am able to have in the short breaths
Between the pulses of the neighbor's bass, I must steal,
As if they were born from a distorted sense of fear.
Though I'm alone, finally, I'm unable to lift
Sense from the abstractions, unable to face
The hard and imminent fact of the child that will come

Too soon and not soon enough, who will become
Something apart from us who made it, with its first breath.
Still, we will see ourselves, indelible, in its face.
Even the agony of decision will be erased when we steal
The first glance. It will both lift
Us and bring us down to earth with the helplessness of fear.

Yet, even now, we ask ourselves what there is to fear.
We both knew that someday the time would come
When we'd want to have children, when we'd lift
Ourselves from the uncertain world in a breath.
We knew that, eventually, we would try to steal
That joy for ourselves, looking past the volatile face

Of things we ought to know better than to face.
Still, perhaps foolishly, we continue as if our fear

Were inconsequential, as if we could steal
Away and find a place where nothing would come
That wasn't wanted, though we'd know that in a breath
It could end. We know we could never lift

Ourselves completely from that possibility, or lift
The child from it either, though we'd rather not face
The inevitability that, just as we give it breath,
The child will inherit twice our fear.
Even as the end must silently and surely come,
We will try to hold those moments we can steal.

Perhaps we can't make sense of it, or steal
Enough moments even to begin to lift
Ourselves from the despair we forget, but always come
Back to. And we say it's worth it, although the face
Of worthlessness is always there so that we fear
It's almost useless to bother with the next breath.
What freedom we steal now, savored in the face
Of that uplifting responsibility we fear
And also welcome, is as furtive as that breath.

Lullaby

for Richard Nicholas Flynn

We lower you into
The crib. Now in-
Animate animals
Watch us

Straighten the blankets
As you turn. You're restless
Early in twilight's
Ease, though shadows trace

The room halfway to blaze.
In the last parade of our sad
Nostalgic look we doubt
The true large part we had

In making you. We stop, step
Unsurely when we leave
Your room with no wise notion
Of how dreams behave, stumbling

When we whisper, "Goodnight.
Don't worry." We know too well
This extreme parental wish, this
Hopeless, holy imagination.

In Bunk Beds

for Bill Flynn

The stories themselves didn't matter,
But your telling of them, and my almost
Infant gratification.

When I began to fall asleep,
You'd awake in me
Staccato amazement. You knew,
As a child does, how magic fools
And captivates and keeps us from sleep.
Your best trick was a witch who lived
In your pocket. She'd fly us,
On short notice, anywhere.

You took her out most often
On nights like these—cool, autumn—
Nights I now fill with smoke. Though you were
The ideal child everyone thought you were,
Only I knew the near-inhuman means
By which you moved us away from, but almost
Through sleep, to impossible places.

Empty Picture Frame with Clown and Balloons

It waits for a child's picture,
Not another of my real son,
But the child I wish for selfishly,

Because I think I have
So much to give, the child
I conceive of only now,

Who saves marriages—
A victim who redeems
The guilty, the adult—

The imaginary child,
The newborn who,
For an instant, turns

Men into mothers.

III.

Peafowl

In Tennessee, you used to have peacocks
And ponies. You lived on the outskirts
Of Knoxville, not a farm really,
But the menagerie of your father's imagination.

Apparently, he liked animals more
Than people, but you never give me the details.
He was a doctor: you lost contact.
When you were thirteen,

You moved up here to the no-man's
Land between south and north
To live in a high-rise with your mother
Who wanted the comfort of humans.

Remarkably, nothing split in you
As it did in me—eight years old, fresh
From the flat midwest. You were immune
To the movements of politicians and diplomats.

Perhaps memory kept you whole:
The bull who kept breaking down the fence,
The peahen who laid an egg
While you were taking her to the zoo.

First Freeze

for Herbert S. Guggenheim

You get up enough strength to leave your apartment,
And meet us on Wisconsin Avenue. Standing idly
On the street corner in your dingy parka, you look
Like a lost child. You raise your hand in recognition.
We are your parents, ashamed to have left you in the cold.

Inside the bar, you expect us to pay for you. The parents
Metaphor wears thin. Finally we squeeze a dollar
And a quarter out of you. When I pocket that small change,
You look at me as if you expect thanks.

Then I remember sitting in the kitchen where we were
House-sitting; you paid us a visit. I'd just read your
Long poem out loud so that you could hear it. I listened
To your self-congratulations, and my eyes glazed over
From the bourbon and the fatigue.

I looked at your
Eyes behind the thick glasses. For a moment, perhaps
Because of something you said, I thought I saw
The images sharpen behind the blizzard.

After I Left You in Virginia Beach

Your mother drove me to Norfolk.
I was burned out when I boarded Trailways.
The shacks distracted me as I tried
To write my Shakespeare paper.
The ride didn't help my penmanship.

On my knees, trying to retrieve
My copy of *King Lear*, I remembered you,
Crouched on the beach,
Pointing out the scene
Of your father's infidelity.

Apology on Roosevelt Island

We walk past the science-fiction
Statue of Teddy. I point out
The stone homilies behind him.

The brochure tells us more
Than we care to know, "an 88-acre
Wilderness preserve

Where people may escape
The stresses of urban life
And renew their spirits."

A woman sits and copies "MANHOOD"
On the back of her brochure,
Though it's printed inside.

On the swamp trail I apologize
Because we have to walk through
The ooze left by recent rain.

As we find our way
To the rock facing the city side
Of the Potomac, the bass

Of low-flying planes
Shakes the entire island.
Again, I say I'm sorry.

Harmony

for Philip Bingham

We rented a car in San Francisco,
Drove the coastal highway to Santa Cruz.
It was the first time I'd been west.
When I saw the Pacific, it was just an ocean.
I found him as I'd expected,
In a beach house, acting Californian.

After we embraced, he shrugged,
Acknowledged you as if you were an alien,
And left. Later that night we sat in a bar,
Nursed sixty-cent beers, and watched him perform.
He sang about a dizzy blonde
With new wave hair. You cringed.

He sang about nature. I cringed.
Five years before, I wouldn't have.
He noticed our discomfort,
Tried to ease it by taking us to Karla's
In the mountains. We couldn't accept
Whatever transcendence he'd planned,

So he stripped and went swimming.
You suggested he was enacting his nature hymn.
The evening chill reminded me of hearing it.

That night we drove back to the city
And ate Japanese. When we reached the hotel,
We were singing.

Back Home Again

We're here. Where they speak
Plain American (Marianne Moore).
Where helmetless teens court

On motorcycles down disastrous roads.
Out back, there's a basketball hoop,
And hundreds of unidentified

Red bugs. There are 38 basic
Cable channels and two bookstores:
"Christian Connection" and "Adult World."

We hear tell of Klan meetings and tent
Revivals in the country. The new mall
Beckons souls from all over.

It's a great place to raise children.
But I still can't sleep. Even thunder
Sounds different out here, more

Resoundingly hollow. And I pray now.
Every night. "Give me back my life,"
I say. "Let my limbs and voice

Sing in unison. Forgive me
My notions of home." This morning,
The car and I need a jump-start.

As the air gets chillier,
I realize I've come here with too much
Freight. Thinking America's

Crossroads is my own, I listen
To the all-night trains, wishing to be
Transported, wishing to be sound.

The Past

Be careful what you look for, looking back.
In a nostalgic moment, a friend calls.
You haven't heard from him in fifteen years.
Years you haven't gotten over. He mentions
Your first lover, and you ask what she's up to.
He promises to find out. After you've begun
A new life, after your divorce, after two new
Hometowns in as many years, when you finally feel
Home free, he tracks you down. "You wouldn't want
To know her," he writes. "She repeats herself,
Has grown large, talks obsessively about her
Son's toilet-training, her husband's Ph.D.
You're lucky you were spared such a reunion."

You are lucky. Never to face the longing
Of long-gone adolescence. Lucky to be living
This imperfect life that can't be changed
By all those years.

IV.

The Age of Reason

I.

To know you own the grown-ups,
That they depend on you,
Is power, pure and simple, over
This unnatural world where teenagers,
Lined up outside the Hung Jury Pub,
Wait, dull-eyed and spike-haired,
For the matinee performance
Of Sarcastic Orgasm. Just turned seven,
You walk with me, your Dad,
Past the fresh punks and say,
"They look to me as if they've just
Discovered drugs." Incredulous,
I remember watching, as a child,
Art Linkletter, during the long days
At home in breathless
Confinement. I feel the adrenalin
The pediatrician gave so freely
Make my heart rage
Against my sweaty surroundings,
Where no blankets were ever fresh,
Where, in enforced hypochondria,
I lived in the black and white
Of TV or exhausted the children's
Room of the public library.
Recalling the countless science-fiction
Tales I devoured, I hear you tell me,

"This kid at school got
Blue potato chips for Easter."
A thoroughly modern first
Communion, I thought.
A meal fit for an alien.
Cut off from you except for
Weekends like this one,
When we go to a "Boring
Old poetry reading" (where you
Behave exceptionally well, because
You've reached the Age of Reason
And can sit still for more than five
Minutes), I think of the explosiveness
Of the nuclear family, whose short
Half-life, perhaps, is well-deserved.
The after-images of failure
Conceal a barely perceptible radiance.
This short-sleeved day
Is already threatened by rain.
But it's an idle threat,
Like the empty plastic cup
You've perched on the bookstore's
Balcony. That cup captivates
The audience more than the stiff
Verses of the poet, who's doing her best;
And I see that even reason
Has reasonable limits, that children
Will be grown-ups only for so long.
It seems the cup stays perched
For so long, and the reading lasts

So long, till "So long!"
And the cup falls. The poet
Retrieves it mid-verse, smiling weakly,
As once again you steal the show,
Delighting the bigger grown-ups
Who sit on the floor like children.

II.

We leave the bookstore. The thunderstorm
Starts as if on cue. Dodging the lightning,
You say, "It's like an Atari game,"
Reminding me of some perverse
Pollyanna. (Hayley Mills was my favorite
Child actor when I was a child. She could charm
The pants off Adolphe Menjou.)
You are fascinated by the uptown bus.
You look through its wet
Video-screen windows at the city
You love unconditionally.
To you the city is an escape
From the immaculate suburbs,
Where every lawn but yours is perfect,
Where every house but yours is owned.
Like Hayley, you master our affections,
Command our attention. You look at this city
As your own, thinking it exists
For you alone. You can leave it any time,
And it will always be there for you.
At school, forced to keep a journal,
You write, "I like the weekends because

I get to go to my Dad's house in the city.
He lets me stay up late and play poker,
And I always go to 7-11 too."

III.

"I told my Dad if I could have my wish
I'd ask for \$50,000, and he said I
Probably wouldn't get it, and I
Don't think so too." You are such
A reasonable child. You've even learned
Forgiveness; writing about Micah and James,
Who are moving, you say, "I wish
They'd leave soon because
They're mean to me and say bad things.
But sometimes I miss them cause
I like them a lot." If only we
Could deal with absence as little children.
But we grownups move in worlds
We've demolished out of our own
Limitations. We can't pretend
That "Micah called me Retard," or conceive
Of ways to live in a world where
Everyone moves away but we love them
In spite of it. Those shadowy creatures—
Relatives, our former best friends—we rank
In descending order. We're adult enough
Not to think of every passage, every
Affair, as a birthday, pretend not
To stand on ceremony. And yet, a child's
Toy, a rubber alien, given by a friend

For good luck, seemed to me an emblem
Of modern childhood, and it calmed you
My modern child, during the long
Questioning of my final examination.
And again you were reasonable, well-behaved,
Even afterwards, in the bar, as you
Panhandled quarters for Pac-Man
While we adults drank
To celebrate and forget.

IV.

Despite my obsession with baseball,
High summer wears thin after two weeks
In the high nineties. This morning we
Trek to the 7-11 for my *Sunday*
New York Times and your lime Slurpee.
On the way you say, "God is infinite.
That means he doesn't have to die.
God is lucky. I wish I were infinite—
I'd get to live longer." Later we board
The downtown bus to Granddaddy's
Office to take a charter from this hot
City bereft of baseball
To Baltimore where Charlie Leibrandt
Ends the O's winning streak. He's perfect
Through five and a third, when he allows a walk.
Oblivious to the double play that follows,
You bum a buck and a half from Granddaddy
For a Coke. When you make your way
Back to the hot stands, you give him a quarter

Change, and begin to beg me, incessantly,
For a batting glove. I tell you to wait till
The game is over, and, on a weak single to right,
There goes the no-hitter. After the game,
I spend my last three dollars on the glove.
But the law firm is taking us out
For unlimited crabs and beer, and, after all,
They took us out to the ballgame.
And on the bus back, having made a flirtatious
Friendship with Jessica, who's seven too,
You're a little less antsy. Having had
Your fill of chocolate sundaes, you're
Content almost. The bus drops us off,
And Granddaddy drops me at my
Rented rowhouse in my "transitional"
Neighborhood. Then you ride back
To the suburbs in the climate-controlled
Cadillac with vanity plates that read
FLYNN. You take my scorecard and the team
Photos for kids 14 and under to show your mom,
Who calls to say you're exhausted but happy-
Happy, that is, till you remember you've left
The batting glove in Granddaddy's car.
Perplexed, you say, "Mommy, Granddaddy's rich,
Isn't he? You should see his car!"
Before you go to bed your mother asks you
Whether you like your life.
"Not very much," you say. "I never
Get to do what I want."

V.

When I was your age, we moved
From Wilmette, Illinois to this
Your beloved city. I'd been shuttled
Back and forth on Pullmans while
Your Granddaddy, an up & coming lawyer,
Worked for the railroad, winning
The "Risk" case. For months he visited
On weekends—it seemed as if my parents
Were already divorced—but then we lived
In Georgetown for a while and your
Uncle Jim was born. This was 1960,
When our cocker spaniel, Rin Tin Flynn,
Saw rats and bit Aunt Kathy, and had
To be put to sleep. We did move back,
But I got sick a lot;
I stayed home, watching the Cubs daily
On TV, and reading the entire Oz series
Until I got to Ruth Plumly Thompson,
Baum's inferior imitator. But that's almost
Beside the point. I wanted to tell you
What you're still too young to know:
Sometimes we have to accept substitutes—
Or weekends. Sometimes we have
To move away against our will. Sometimes,
We try to justify the unforgivable.
But you're not too young;
You know this already.

VI.

Searching the aisles of bright toys
In the bright toy supermarket, we hunt
For Mattel's rubber aliens, MUSCLEs,
Which you tell me stands for "Millions
Of Unusual Small Creatures Lurking
Everywhere." Everywhere I look, other
Weekend fathers indulge their small
Creatures, as I indulge you.

The movies are full of children
Adopted by aliens when their parents
Aren't looking, children liberated
For a couple of hours from marriages,
Governments, and leisurely suburban days.
And you frighten me, because I'd
Forgotten childhood's pain, the nightmares
About the first grade, because you forgive me
Even my worst moments, because I don't
Know how to make up for my absence. Here,
In Toys 'R' Us, plastic trinkets
(For children who dream of worlds where
Parents are parents) seem appealing to us
Adults who refuse adulthood
Even as we dream of it. And you
Children, seeing the necessity of our fantasy,
Captivate us with your childishness
Till we almost believe that happiness
Can be manufactured the way
Your Little League team manufactures
Runs, till we almost believe that

There are special rules for us
Who can't quite master the real
Rules, the rules for grown-ups.

VII.

"Everyone has a mission in life," you tell me
As we drive around Greensboro aimlessly.
"Yours is getting us lost." I am trying
To get us back to Chapel Hill,
To Aunt Kathy ("whose mission in life
Is forgetting things") and Uncle Rick's
("Whose mission in life is to play with me").
I ask you what your "mission in life" is,
And you tell me, "It's to be obnoxious
And beg for money all the time." Despite
Our having had a good day visiting *my*
Friends and you being on best behavior, I laugh
At the truth in what you're saying. You amuse
Yourself so much, you continue,
"Mommy's mission in life is to pick up
After me." This pisses me off, I tell you.
But, though I'm angry, it seems a wonder
How *adaptable* you are, facing constant
Disruption with equanimity. And here,
In the last vacation of a whirlwind summer,
After four camps, and days in our offices
Between camps, with the extended days
Of school imminent, you and I are both
Afraid of the cooling off into winter.
There's a renewed sadness over everything,

As in school you begin a new journal:
"I don't get to see my Dad that much
On the weekdays, so I have to imagine him.
I hope he doesn't have to move far away,
'Cause I like his cats and the city too."
When I read this I know for sure
It isn't just my heart breaking.
As I pack to leave our city I'm afraid.
Afraid that we'll grow distant,
Afraid that you will hate me. I want
To tell you to take care, as I move
Carelessly through my mission in life.
Let us try to live out our alien
Existences hopefully. Let us pray
That wishing will make us better.

Better, if not transformed.

Richard Flynn is the author of *Randall Jarrell and the Lost World of Childhood* (University of Georgia Press, 1990), which was named a 1992 Outstanding Academic Book by *Choice* magazine. He teaches contemporary poetry and children's literature at Georgia Southern University. Previously, he taught at Indiana State University and George Washington University, where he received the Ph.D. in American Literature in 1987. In 1988 he was awarded an individual artist's fellowship in poetry writing from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and the Humanities.

The Age of Reason is a moving, complex book of poems about that most complicated subject--the family. What I like most about the poems is how truly they capture the conflicting aspects and contradictory emotions that make for "the explosiveness/ Of the nuclear family." In these poems there is a remarkable balance of humor and pain; of surface actions and buried feelings; of geographic locations and emotional dislocations; of childlike perceptions and adult realities; of despair and hope. Though the subject is complex and difficult, the poems are accessible and gracefully crafted, deftly balancing form and content.

--Eric Nelson

author of *The Interpretation of Waking Life*

Wry, alert, Richard Flynn brings a compassion to these poems which is neither corny nor self-serving. The mystery of childhood, its grown-up ways, again and again crosses the moment to surprise us. Real loss is here, and inevitable. But so is wonder, odd and life-saving.

--Marianne Boruch

author of *Descendant* and *View from the Gazebo*



\$8.00

Hawkhead Press
Terre Haute, Indiana