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# Age of Reason

Richard Flynn

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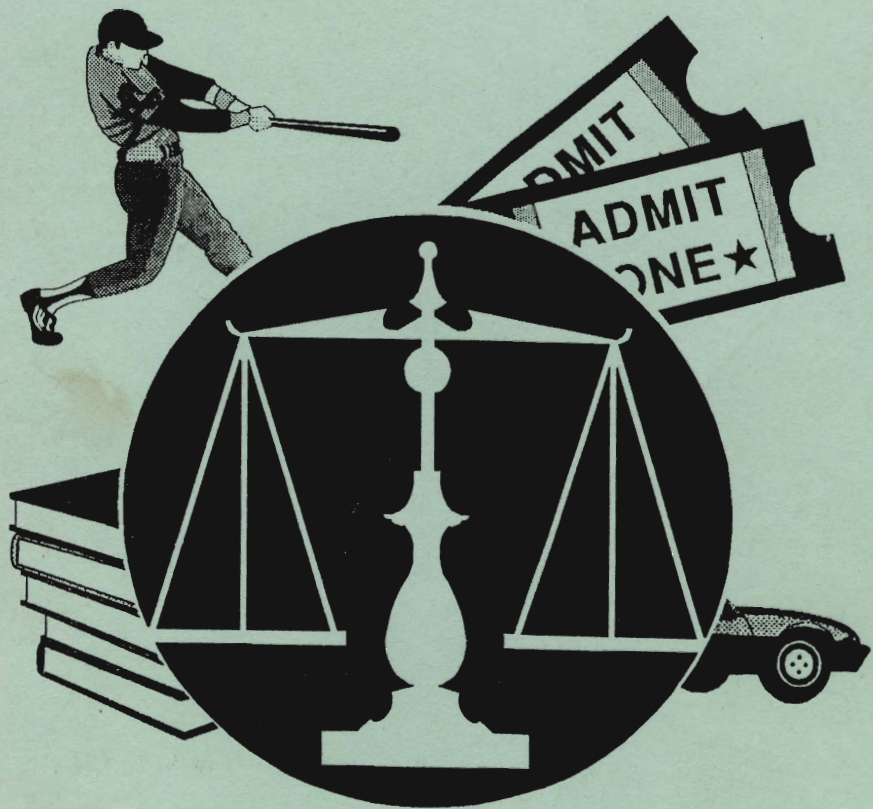
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THE AGE OF  
REASON

POEMS BY

RICHARD FLYNN

# THE AGE OF REASON



poems by  
**Richard Flynn**



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

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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*



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