

GEORGE DAVID MILLER
Award-Winning Poems

Deprived and Depraved

Just before the housing bubble burst Mom and Dad foisted the old place on a nice nurse,

Who shelled out an arm and a leg for the elderly edifice

My parents got for a song in 1962.

When I go back east,

I usually take a pilgrimage by the old homestead

and stealthily drive by in a

pine-scented rent-a-car. The changing neighborhood

and meretricious shanty (eyeliner purple shutters)

are my mathematical proof of a miserable

childhood I spent years lamenting about

to a baker's dozen of therapists

blessed to hear about the vicissitudes

of my existence.

Police cars pulse down the streets. There are no

rims on the basketball backboards; therefore, everybody who shoots

misses. The cement pavements are cracked and bulge

like the discs of the few old neighbors who

remain shakily at their stations. I never see people

walking their dogs anymore; no wiffle

ball games on the side of the house; trees

are storefronts for shady people digging into

their jackets to make illicit business

transactions. Plywood has replaced dozens
of windows. At night, music—loud, leering,
livid—and desolate cries under stars
that have lost their twinkle and are dim and
distant. Damn the dreariness.

But my so-called proof is refuted by the algorithm of my memories. I remember:

The neighbors, crabby, not creepy; my parents: neurotic but nurturing; the neighborhood,
conventionally claustrophobic but as safe and clean as white linen cotton. I breathed clean air
and dreamed of gratuitous greatness.

What was the worst that ever happened to me there?

Cleaning up the basement floor after the toilet gurgled and overflowed?

Striking out in the ninth inning with the bases loaded?

Lacking the social skills to lure sleazy girls to my bedroom?

As I drove through the neighborhood for the umpteenth time, I realized that I was one of those
people who was deprived of nothing and depraved by everything.

Much as Bell had invented the telephone, I had invented my childhood. I imagined my childhood
into ruins: they had not been halcyon days but nor had they been the stuff of Post Traumatic
Stress Disorder either.

The rent-a-car had to be back in 45 minutes.

Or I would be charged for an extra day.

I've Lived a Life

OK

I regret some things

On the other hand

I regret absolutely nothing

I've lived a life

When I couldn't see the forest for the trees

I just burned down the forest

Now I see everything

Perfectly

I've lived a life

I've been a Shaker

Quaker

Fakir

A puritanical procrastinator

I've lived a life

I've done people right

I've done people wrong

I've forgotten the words

To my wife's

Favorite song

I've lived a life

I've made life

Saved life

Taken life

Taken life for granted

Cursed life for good

I've lived a life

I once loved a woman like a tropical storm

With wind speeds ranging anywhere from 38 to 73 miles per hour

And she yawned at me like a tortoise

I've lived a life

I've done the cha cha

The rumba

I've even done the zumba

I've lived a life

I've given the shirt off my back to the poor

And then 10 minutes later

Stole Hot Tamales from the bins in the back of the store

I've lived a life

When I had an endoscopy and colonoscopy

At the same time

They high-fived in the vicinity

Of my small intestine

I've lived a life

I gave Monopoly money to volunteers

In the middle of the road soliciting

For the latest popular

Terrible disease

Only so I could get the Tootsie Rolls

They were handing out

I've lived a life

After taking an extra heaping teaspoon

Of Tylenol PM

I was actually able to pronounce

Me-so-the-li-o-ma

I've lived a life

I've eaten crow with Hume's fork

Had a bloody bad shave with Ockham's dull Razor

Tuned my piano with Nietzsche's hammer

I've lived a life

When I saw my brother kneeling at the bed of his dead son

I saw life as a cruel joke and God as a punch line

I've lived a life

What is the purpose

Do I have a right

Where are the stencils

Do you have a knife

Spun around spurned viciously spackled

Unhinged like the door to your favorite adult book store

Prostrate on the palace steps

When night nebulously gnaws at the hindquarters of the only

Steed fast enough to gallop around the gradual greed

And residual sorrow

What is today if it doesn't lead to

Tomorrow

O God Jesus Zeus Yaweh Allah Athena Aphrodite Brahma Visnu Ra Hathor and of course Osiris

Do any of you how I can contact

Miley Cyrus

I've lived a life

The Counter

I

I made all of Anna's lunches

K-12

on the same white countertop

an island in the middle

of a cosmetic and

convoluted kitchen.

In the beginning it was chips, peanut

butter and jelly,

and Starburst.

By the end, it was protein bars, carrots,

and grapes.

Throughout it was the same formica

countertop

my wife religiously reminded me

was not granite, marble, quartz, or in not any sense

a gilded monument.

I navigated around the

rectangular counter

to baptize and lacerate lettuce,

peel and parcel out
potatoes, coronate carrots, whip
eggs, watch
colanders leak like
oil rigs, mis-measure
cooking
oil, and seal-coal Brownberry
Bread with smooth peanut
butter and lumpy jelly.

II

I had been repeatedly warned that after Anna
graduated the monument would be razed:

As I dismantled it
I remembered
a salmonella breakout
at America's favorite sub shop
and toweling town the counter
four times a day
with an eco-friendly solution of
white vinegar, rubbing alcohol,
and dish detergent

my arm moving along
the gritty white surface
like a solitary windshield wiper.

And we still got sick to our stomachs for a week.

III

Open space
now the dictum of the day
the island
and its ersatz crown
in my wife's estimate
could not remain
and
"After all, it's just us now
Anyway."

I still stop by the spot
where the island used to be
my hands at counter level
where I made my daughter's
peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
I lean forward and almost fall.

This is where I learned
to mix oil and water
where I burned my fingertips rescuing
waffles from the toaster
the aircraft carrier from which
Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter dinners
took off before landing at their
final destination.

I prepared many meals there
for family
for neighbors
for one or two local celebrities
but mostly I made school lunches
for my daughter.

IV

I don't make her lunches anymore
but at least once a day
I almost drop a plate
where the counter would have
been to support it.

How often
we do things
the very same way
when what we love most
has been taken away.

What My Father Didn't Say

good Jewish boys remember what their
fathers tell them at weddings, bar mitzvahs,
funerals

pearls of wisdom big as bowling balls
guideposts for life's journey

it is what my father did not say

I remember most

the night I almost didn't come home

so unusual for me not to be where I was
supposed to be at my post

I was creature of habit and this creature's
habit at 19 was a movie and home before
midnight but on this particular occasion it was
about 4:30 when I came traipsing into a house
pitch black except for a solitary light in the
kitchen

in white BVD underwear and undershirt my
father sat there his feet stretched across a
chair reading *The Wall Street Journal*

as soon as I crossed the threshold he folded
his paper, nodded, and went up to bed
unlike the Supreme Court he did not judge

unlike talk radio he did not condemn
unlike commercials he did not make a pitch in
60 seconds or less
he simply let me be and at 19 I needed him to
let me be
He may have been worrying to death and put
on me on an all-expenses-paid guilt trip
he did not inquire but not out of apathy
I was home safe
that is all that mattered
a father was glad his son was home safe
what better sentiment for a father
I thought that then
I think that now
I think
I do owe my father an explanation of where I
was when he waited up for me; but I am not
about to do it in front of you people and I am
also not sure about the statute of limitations
either and besides that has nothing to do with
what really happened on that night

Just Barely Is Enough

I hate cheap homeruns, when they barely make it over the fence. I prefer the spectacular smashes hit so far and high that they chip off a piece of the moon before they return to earth. My mother, who explained to me that the owl of Minerva appears at twilight and then flies off before you can ever get a good look at her, told me once when we were watching a game on TV that they both count the same: the homerun that goes far, the one that just makes it. She knows a thing or two about baseball. When she was in boarding school, she used to leave notes on Ted Williams' windshield criticizing him for over-swinging. During a commercial break between innings, she turned down the sound with the remote. When she did this, I knew there was a pronouncement coming: When your sister died, your father and I were paralyzed. If only we had gotten her to the hospital earlier. The doctors said if we had gotten there just five minutes earlier she could have been saved—just barely. But your sister went from crib to coffin in a matter of hours. And then your father and I pretty much gave up. We had you, we loved you. But the life had been drained out of us. I heard the clock click from second to second and I envied it for ineluctably moving forward. For me, the gap between each click felt like an eternity. I'd just let you sit there the whole day in a dirty diaper. People would come over and I could see them turn up their noses up and look at you and then at me and then make excuses and leave. I barely had the energy to change you, much less feed you and tuck you in at night. I read you that damn book *Go, Dogs, Go* like a million times because the book only had three words in it besides "go, dogs, go." My vocabulary was reduced to hi, bye, nice dress, nice try. Dinner somehow got on the table, who knows how or why. I made tuna noodle casserole every night for a month and we even had the leftovers for breakfast. I barely got enough sleep and walked around each day slit-eyed and tongue-tied. Dust danced everywhere when the wind snuck in through the front door. One time when I confused dusting with changing your diaper, I sprayed you with Pledge. You had the shiniest butt in the world that day. Your father told half-assed jokes he half-learned and I smiled at them half-heartedly. He never changed light bulbs and we didn't care if we sat in the dark. After six months of living in dust and dark, your grandmother screamed at us to "get up and get over it"—I just barely stopped myself from strangling her. For the longest time, we barely got by. People who love the spectacular, the fireworks, the long homeruns, usually miss the real plot. Take it from me, all of us are here today because of a bunch of just barely's. Those Greeks talk about *arête*, psychologists about peak experiences, and yogis about *sāmadhi*. Sometimes just barely is the only path from present to future. If only your sister had barely made it. It wouldn't matter whether we just barely got her to the hospital on time—she could be here today and all of us could be together. Then my mother clicked on the sound again. Watch your game. On the window sill a bird was perched. It was an awful big bird. It was an owl. I didn't think there were any owls out here where primeval forests had long ago been ceded to gated communities. My mother grabbed the remote, turned up the sound up to 83, and scared the crap out of the owl.

Why did she chase it away? She already said what it was going to say.

#8, Poem of Social Conscience, “Bless Me, Rabbi”

This strange woman approached me at my Aunt Freda’s 85th birthday party and blabbed: Bless me, rabbi.

I am not a rabbi, lady. In fact, I flunked out of Hebrew School on five separate occasions. Here’s what I wrote on my final exam circa 1970.

First question: what is a Jewish star? My answer: Barbara Streisand. Question number two: what did Moses part? I say: his hair. Last question: what does the Angel of Death do for a living? My answer: how the hell would I know—am I his accountant?

Look, lady, I’m not a rabbi. I don’t know nothing about nothing. I can’t bless you.

Then she says: I have been raped and I have no reason for living. I need you to bless me.

How could I turn her down? I’m not heartless. So right there at my Aunt Freda’s 85th birthday party, I riffed a blessing like you wouldn’t believe. . . .

The only shame involved in what happened to you—is that this society does want to say the word (rape), to say it happens (rape), to say it happens like smog happens over Los Angeles (rape), to say it is an epidemic and plague (rape).

Blame tight pants; blame halter tops; blame Sue Johansen; blame women for having hips and breasts.

For those who say it doesn’t happen in nice families, I say look your own family: at that grandmother who was institutionalized; at the cousin everybody affectionately refers to as DA SLUT; at that aunt on your mother’s—or maybe it’s your father’s—side of the family everybody talks about in hushed tones because she hung herself in 1987.

Honey, you got to keep you head up and dance—be as light as feather in a summer breeze—and dance. Never let your feet touch the ground and dance!

You are as pure as the heavens and earth when God created them.
You are as a whole as a circle, 360 degrees not one degree less.
You are as beautiful as a mountain peak in dazzling sunlight.

You ask for a blessing.
You don’t need a blessing.
You are the blessing
You bless us all
Because you rose above the fall.
You are an exemplar
Of the divine law:
Purity of spirit above all!
You are an inspiration
Because you are a survivor. . . .

When I finished my blessing, she had gathered over her girlfriends and said: Girls, girls, come over here and get blessed.

I am not a rabbi. I am not a rabbi. Jesus H. Christ, I am not a rabbi.

I know you’re not a rabbi. You’re a Hebrew School dropout. But I really didn’t need a rabbi. All I needed was a blessing. And a pure heart is enough for that.

I'm Not a Ghost Anymore

I was born directly in the path of my father's nervous breakdown.

A seagull in an oil slick. The first ten years of my life he was a zombie.

A deer's head mounted on a pogo stick; eyes deep and dead in their sockets; a snowman's coal cavities. He sat in the same slumped way (every day) in his black chaise. He spoke only once or twice a year like an automated teller in roid rage: "If I ever see him again I'll run him down with my car and then back over him to make sure he's dead." Then he turned back into a zombie again. And looked right past me. You don't really have a father when all he does is look right past you. When I said I had a pain in my stomach, he looked right past me. When I bled all over the bed he looked right past me. When I went to the hospital to have my ovary removed, he looked right past me. All I wanted was a father who'd tell me to clean up my room and do my homework. All I wanted was a father who'd sit on the couch and watch reruns of *Full House* with me. All I wanted was a father who'd tell me I was the most beautiful little girl in the world.

And all he did was look right past me.

Then just yesterday the strange man I never knew looked right at me and said: "Make your bed; wash your clothes; unload the dishwasher; finish your homework; wipe the dogs' paws; and come over here and give me a hug—and don't look so sad. I'm not a ghost anymore. I'm your Dad."

Weeds

I. We clean your toilets; raise your kids; cultivate your crops; stand behind your brooms and mops; send our kids to die in Iraq. And you fence us out and treat us— like weeds. . . . We exist on the borders of the bountiful cornfield. The farmer allows us to exist so long as we don't mingle with his precious corn. You see weeds aren't allowed in fine fertile soil.

II. We receive so little nutrients; We barely survive; While Crops Devour; Caviar caliber dung; We subsist on rocky ground; The health care we receive pales in comparison with what the corn gets; They get Blue Cross and Blue Shield; We get "Hey, hombres you go die in the fields."; As you can gather our; Self-esteem is not high; Whose would when all they do is curse at us and rip us from the turf

III. Without warning we're attacked: run over by lawnmowers, castrated by clippers, smothered by chemical warfare. We have no means for redress since we don't belong to the fertile center. The farmer hates us—because he can't sell us.

IV. We've sent reps to Fight for our rights none returned; We're only weeds; We'll never be corn; We'll turn yellow and brown & perish; We'll still live on the edges; As our ancestors once sang in; Old weary broken voices; We'll never make it to the promised land or even a good neighborhood. Finis.

Our 9/11 Couch

My wife finally gave me permission to get rid of the big green sectional couch. Not the whole couch; only 1/3 of it; the part with the sleeper we never used. Nobody actually made it through the night on the sleeper, even a family friend—who washed down an Ambien with a shot of whiskey that submerged her into a quasi-coma—complained she could feel the springs nibbling on her intestines. Every other month it seemed we tried to return this section of the couch because anybody who sat on the cushions slowly sank into children until their knees were at eye level. Couch specialists from the furniture equivalent of the Sorbonne with little flashlights and Master's Degrees in circumlocution repeatedly came out to diagnose the problem, but they never admitted a deeper structural problem and only recommended replacing the cushions. New cushions; same sinking feeling. At one point, I threatened to load the couch on Ryder truck and drop into one of their showrooms, proclaiming: "This couch is a piece of crap—don't buy their pieces of crap." I considered this a veiled threat—they considered it empty. My wife said to wait until someone helped me to move it, but I refused to wait. I had my chance and she—a packrat who ran the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of our household—would soon become nostalgic and want to hold on to just like she held on to everything. As I turned the green leather monstrosity on its side to fit in through the door, I remember the day we got the couch: 9/11/2001. On the day we got the couch, my one daughter sat above the sleeper and told us she had been raped. Whenever people got sick, they lay on the soft sinking side of the sectional. When my older daughter had her wisdom teeth out; the younger her tonsils; me when I had my vasectomy. The dogs slept there and never bitched about the sinking feeling. "You can't get that out the door," my wife told me. "Wait for Jim to come home—he'll help you." She didn't know that I had excommunicated Jim from my church because he voted for Bush twice. This part of the couch had served its purpose and having served its purpose could now kicked to the curb with the rest of the Friday trash. I couldn't wait to see that the green sectional being hoisted, tilted, and plopped into the bin and hear the grinding of the gears and the crushing of the wood and metal. I knew exactly where the remains would go too. It would go Trash Mountain, the highest and only peak in our flat Illinois town. The garbage truck squeaked down the street and I decided to follow it for a while. It picked up chairs, tables, bookcases, carpets, a dining room table—pieces that had become disabled in some way and thus expendable. When do things really become expendable? Some of the stuff looked pretty good—why were they getting rid of good stuff? Maybe we had gotten rid of the couch too soon. The dogs still liked it and it was a good place for people to convalesce. It was such a piece of crap we didn't care whether anybody spilled anything on it. Grape juice—fine. Mustard—fine. Nail polish remover—fine. Now I was practically tailgating the truck and the mustached driver was looking out his rearview mirror at me, but I continued to follow it to Trash Mountain, from whose peak unlike the Sears Tower you could not see four states on a clear day but if got to just the right spot could see the town hall and three McDonald's golden arches. "Au revoir," I said as the truck bee-lined toward the top. My wife interrupted my poignant moment with a siren ring on the cell: "Where the hell are you?" "Watching the sun set." "It's noon." "It's a metaphor." "That's life." "It's death." "It's time for you to come home."

Your Grip

Anymore, No More

With the arthritis becoming
Worse and worse

She can't
Close her hands anymore

Make a fist anymore

Hold a paintbrush anymore

Twist off a bottle cap anymore

Or even
Give me the finger anymore

And she thinks because
She's losing her grip
On the world
She's going
To lose me too

But I tell her

I'll be your hands
When your hands are no more

I'll be your feet
When you're feet are no more

I'll be your eyes
When your eyes are no more

I'll be your feet
When your feet are no more

I'll be the light
When the light is no more

And I will not be
When you are no more

George David Miller

You Brought This on Yourself

This poem is dedicated to everyone in the LGBTQ community, especially those who have been brutalized, like my daughter, who was hospitalized after being brutalized at Abu Ghraib High School in America's most livable city, Naperville, Illinois.

They found her
They found her at the bottom of the stairs
And she had blood on her face and tears on cheeks
And three football players
Anointed, appointed, and baptized by the Church of Latter-Day Hate
Pushed her down a flight of stairs because she was gay.

The teachers in their glass closets counted their pay and looked and looked and looked—
The other way.

The old principal told my daughter: "We can't be of any help: you brought this on yourself."

So, my daughter came home later that evening and slit her wrist with a plastic knife,
Ran out into the middle of the street looking for oncoming headlights so that she could
throw herself into darkness forever.
I didn't know what to do.

I'm a meek man, I'm a mild man, I have problems asking my server at Bob Evans for
extra cream in my coffee.

But I was engaged, I was enraged, I was paged by my conscience and I told my daughter:
"You push me in front of the next car because I would rather die than see you suffer."

And she cried and we hugged, and she knew that I was by her side, on her side, and she
did not have to commit suicide.

And I became obsessed, an angel, a demon, as obnoxious as Tony Little selling his
exercise equipment or Matthew Lesko his books on government grants, because it's wrong,
it's wrong for the weight of the world to be on the shoulders of a fifteen-year-old girl.

I mean she ain't Atlas: she can't shrug the world off her shoulders.
But I can help push—push—the world off her shoulders because I'm her father.

I mean, sir, if she were your daughter, what would you do?
And, sir, if she were your daughter, what would you do?
And Dick Cheney and Alan Keyes, if she were your daughter, what would you do—
Well, we know what you do, and that would be the wrong thing.

So, the next day I went to the principal's office, and I was armed:
Armed with ideals of justice, goodness, and decency.
And I had fire in my eyes—and they looked at me pleadingly.
But the only thing I could tell them was this:

"I can't be any help: you brought this on yourself."

—George David Miller

George David Miller is a slam poet who tours high schools and colleges. For the past seven years, he has performed to approximately 35,000 people at about 200 venues. "You Brought This on Yourself" is part of his repertoire as are poems on eating disorders, sexual assault, child abuse, and other social issues.