

The Failures

*Half of us have always failed
And we have failed among.*

By

Francis Raven
Washington, DC
USA

Chippens Press
Bloomington, Illinois
Number 3
February 2009

Contents:

They Call it <i>Wolfing</i>	1
The First in a Series of Gulf Wars	2
Stain	3
Next Time, I'll be the Bank	4
Workshop	5
Many Rounds Raise Expectations to the Stars	6
Ashes	7
Bush League	8
Sometimes You're the Wrong Thing	9
Mom, (Sheepishly) I Didn't	10
No Smoking Area	11
Identity Politics	12
Striking a Match	13
Mimetic	14
The Lottery	15

They Call it Wolfing

In the end I just knew there was no way
I could have eaten all those hotdogs.
It wasn't my first competition, but what was I thinking?
I invited everyone, my mom, her husband
(Who I absolutely refuse to call my stepdad), my sisters
And their short-term boyfriends. The thing was
It was hot. Have you ever tried to eat a lot
When it's really hot; it's not that easy.
It's sort of like the sweat restricts your throat
Or sort of pokes your uvula so you gag.
I puked. It was embarrassing, but it was puke or die
And in that situation you'd probably have chosen
Much like me: I didn't die: I failed.
I thought they'd support me
But they really didn't.
They all sort of made fun of me and made me
Watch them eat lunch at the after-party.
That's why I don't really have much contact
With my family
Anymore.

The First in a Series of Gulf Wars

We tried to take over another country and failed.
We are sad. I guess our intelligence was sexed up.
It was our 169,234 sq. mi. versus their 6,880 sq. mi.
But then there was world opinion, that capricious bitch.
Pointing, we said, "slant drilling." Of course, immediate sanctions
Forced our hand or at least the hand of my double.
I have heard that up to 100,000 of my citizens were killed.
That's just the price, the price we pay.
What do we pay it for? We thought this was a green light:
"We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts,
Like your border disagreement with Kuwait," but apparently
Green lights, like celebrities, must be vetted by CNN.
You can't do anything. You have no power.
We may have failed, but we are not pathetic.
We are not dogs. Check out the
Weapons of mass destruction we still have.
You'll sex that up later!

Stain

I don't know if you can help me.
I cannot for the life of me get this stain up.
It's like a little gray pencil mark on my tub.
I've tried to remove it with Comet and a sponge.
I am left here sweating and swearing.
I've tried a pencil eraser and I've tried sandpaper.
I tried the toothpaste solution when my wife's golf clubs
Seemed to mar everything and IT DIDN'T WORK!
I rubbed the damn thing for a half hour, but nothing.
Give me something else. I am crying out to the universe.
But there is nothing else.
I guess I just have to adjust to my imperfect tub.
I hate looking at it. When I go to the bathroom
I have to force myself to stare straight ahead
So that I won't see it. I guess my strategy has changed
From alleviation to adaptation. I will avert my eyes.
I will not use that bathroom. I will move.

Next Time, I'll be the Bank

Look, someone has to lose.
But I always win. It's sort of a defining trait for me.
It doesn't matter what you land on
You need to buy it and then you need to repeat
And then after you have a couple of key clutches
You need to convince the weakest link to make a deal:
Look into their eyes and you'll
Say a yellow for their red; because once you have
A first monopoly the spiraling advantage sucks you forward
And besides, you should know that Illinois Avenue
Is the square most landed upon (besides jail).
But this time I didn't win.
I really think that someone was cheating,
I really do. I just have this winning proclivity
So when I don't hit it I know that something's really wrong.
Consequently, I'm going to the board with this one.
I'll make you blush, of that I'm sure.

Workshop

And then I read her work and know that
I have done nothing, absolutely nothing, worthwhile.
My deepest face is not yet turned to the world enough.
You can see it in that poem about the hedgerows
Where the garden becomes both her garden and America
Which is totally right, we're in this together or else,
But how did she see that a garden could
Stand in for a country? That's what I'm saying,
I've never seen that sort of thing. To me America is America
And this garden, however difficult to deal with, is just my garden.
So I'm throwing it all away;
Maybe burning it and starting over. At least it's romantic.
Starting over is so. But that's sort of an afterthought:
First it's pathetic: I've written nothing worthwhile
And I've spent so much time writing it.

Many Rounds Raise Expectations to the Stars

Submitted on a whim because I had a résumé
And the cover letter, well, I'm good at writing cover letters.
If I didn't know others found it so boring, self-punishing,
I'd do it on my free time, but I'm wary of what others think.
That's why I didn't tell anyone that I was applying.
But then you have to dress up to go to an interview
And I don't usually dress up. I had to have things dry-cleaned;
I had to iron other things; I even had to buy a couple of items
(Not that they were overly expensive
And I probably should own them in the long run
But I still had to buy them).
Therefore, I had to spend time at the store.
I had to tell people where I was going.
It just wasn't very easy keeping it a secret,
Which is why they were ecstatic
When I came home from the first interview.
It had gone so well and I hadn't even thought myself qualified:
Into the top tiers of an organization that usually only hires from within,
Which is why I was shocked, nay crushed, when the call came
To inform me that I wouldn't be Director of Operations,
That I would still find time at home, so much time.

Ashes

We were there in time.
It wasn't that they didn't call
But even suited up
Men can only do so much.
In Yellowstone at least
We knew what we were up against:
Nature, succession, real time.
You dig a ditch, you hem it in, you spray it down,
You let it burn, protecting high-profile targets,
But the flames of this beast were fed with
Something we knew much less well
Than nature. To say *if you make it you know it*
Is false. If you make it, it can get out of hand
Just as easily, even easier, since you trust it
And that's sort of like Frankenstein, a bad story
Only in a campus of warehouses
With thousands of people's lives at stake;
Popping bricks through wet toxic smolder,
The seemingly endless light; perhaps it was from within.
Yes, perhaps we made something whose light came from within.
Well, I couldn't fight that, could I?
You couldn't begrudge me for that, could you?

Bush League

But just like gravel in the shoe
I kept bending over
About to unlace
When, unsure if it was worth it,
I stumbled on
Past the point where I could confess.
These weren't sins, merely deviations.
I never threw a game
Nevertheless was kicked out,
Barred from the hall of fame
Despite my vigorous denials.
I had my supporters, of course,
And it's for them I feel worse.
I duped them, successfully,
But at the cost of my career.
Thus, success at the cost of failure
And the gnawing blister begging to pop clean.

Sometimes You're the Wrong Thing

And so I pushed, I kept pushing.
Everything I asked for
I asked for more.
I knew I was pushing, but I couldn't stop.

One night, he was coming back from Tokyo
and he asked me to pick him up. I hadn't picked him up
in a very long time. I knew something was wrong.
His therapist had given him permission.
That's the kind of person he was: weak.

My so-called friends had confronted me not so long before this
saying that my drinking was becoming a problem
that it was so-called self-medication for my "borderline
personality disorder." There would be a divorce;
I would be the divorced wife,
but we would go through some sham counseling first
much as women have always undergone sham trials
for their freedom and power.

What I saw was his own insecurity, his own vanity,
his inability to admit to his own failures, so he shoved them on me,
but pushing was also propping up: I'll admit to not feeling
all that awful when I found out that his younger hot wife
had been cheating on him for the duration of their entire marriage.
A failure unaddressed multiples all your days long.

Mom, (Sheepishly) I Didn't

He said that yes I was reading the same words
That he was staring at on the page, but that my emotions
Were nowhere near his vision. It was supposed to be sad
And he said that I was reading it
As if I was making fun of myself. Self-hatred, he said,
Wasn't the character's problem. Well, maybe not hers...
That is,
He pictured another actress in my place
And he would pay her to be there instead of me.
He was the director. This was his right.
I'm okay not getting parts, really I am.
I'm still quite young
And have plenty of time to make my mark.
But, what makes me sick with hot nausea
Is that I told everyone, and I mean everyone,
My friends, my family, everyone I saw,
About the audition. I have no idea why.
I think I was drunk. I might have wanted
To show everyone else up
And now I have to tell everyone
That I didn't get the part. I'll start with my mom.
It's not that she'll be supportive, but she's a gossip
And will tell everyone else.

No Smoking Area

This damn lighter:
The scratching doesn't even offer
Spin to a flame. And just as spark answers
A security guard fingers his negative response
You're not allowed to...
Even in this open air. And the insides available
Are not my insides.
There will be nothing to inhale today.
Unfortunately the filter has already been fingered
To death
Puckered between lips
Marred by my lipstick. That is,
It will never be new again.
I might as well throw it away, quit smoking.
But does quitting mean I'm a total bust?
Or are certain things we fail at the beginning of success?

Identity Politics

It's not only historic that I ran
It's also historic that I lost. Just so you know
I was the best candidate and that's why it's so historic.
It's the first time that the best did not win.
It's a happy day for my gender, in a way, in that
I got as far as any woman ever did
But it's a sad day for excellence
And I am an exceptional woman.
I know the party doesn't deserve me
And that my lack of a need to be abused
Puts me at a disadvantage from others
But I've worked for this party ever since
Our kitchen table leaked a dual strategy for greatness.
In the end, it was my heritage that undermined my case:
I am of mixed race: excellence and femininity
And the mixed race among us
Have never fared well. I just hope that one day
America is prepared to bow before the difference in one,
Not in each one, mind you
But in particular ones who lonely arise in times of tumult.

Striking a Match

First, I sort of propped them over the charred log of last night,
But the newspaper was wet
Or so I surmised
After nothing, and I mean not even one twig, would burn
Or else perhaps it was the greenness of the kindling.
Of course, once an attempt has been made
The second is just that much messier
With its ashes drawing on the sleeves;
Its sweat from bending over and in. That is,
The hearth is not a natural place to live and my hand entered
Not with dwelling in mind but with mere frustration.
It was one of those activities like driving somewhere
Where all men have an opinion concerning the directions:
Teepee or cylinder?
I've always thought that the ultimate bachelor party
Would be a contest of sorts,
To see who could light the house on fire the fastest.
It would not have been me. As tent's apex crushed spark
We decided that marshmallows were fine in the microwave.

Mimetic

I know it's supposed to look like that desiccating flower,
Chain of beads, statuette, iPod, catalogue, and bouquet of condoms;
I know it's supposed to be a contemporary still-life. But
I just can't seem to make a bunch of lines jump to the next level.
It's like I don't have the language to say
The world
Yet. The world has its own way of saying itself
And it's not letting me in. But I'm close
Or sometimes it seems like I'm close.
This is my 15th try at this little arrangement.
But fuck it, maybe the world is wrong;
Maybe my pile is wrong, has no language itself even;
Maybe it's just that because
You can lay actual things with other actual things
It seems like you can draw them
When in actuality I should have been more discerning;
Maybe not everything can be a picture; yes, that's it.
It's the world and not my hand that's wrong, dead wrong:
Talent is overrated. A thousand dots connected amoebically
Would be more suited to the world as it is: I'll draw that.

The Lottery

By God I've scratched; bought and scratched;
The minor wins merely pique the urge to scratch: I scratch.
I know it's not in my best interest but
I don't scratch for a minor boost
I scratch for a qualitative difference.
I scratch for a new car, and not just any new car
But a car I can't afford now.
I don't even know what car that is, but I scratch for
That which could scratch me up a notch
If only scratching could stop the itch
But it just brings my needs to a froth.
If only I hadn't seen how the other half lives,
But it's not just the other half any more;
It's everyone appears to live the same,
Though they can't possibly. Thus we're all scratching
Futilely as the swisher under the bullet proof glass spins money
Towards a disgruntled employee who knows I haven't won
Before I do. It's in his eyes. It's always in his eyes
Sort of like dust rigged against me.



Francis Raven is a graduate student in philosophy at Temple University. His books include *5-Haifun: Of Being Divisible* (Blue Lion Books, 2008), *Shifting the Question More Complicated* (Otoliths, 2007), *Taste: Gastronomic Poems* (Blazevox 2005) and the novel, *Inverted Curvatures* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2005). Francis lives in Washington, DC.

Chippens Press
Bloomington, Illinois

www.chippens.com