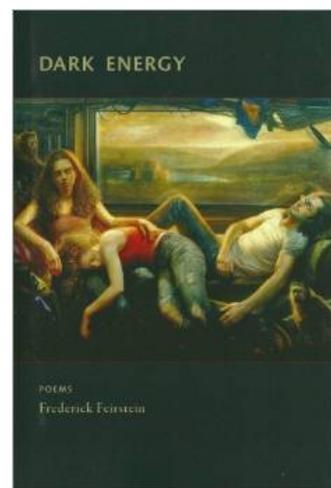


# Dark Energy

## Poems by Frederick Feirstein

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The Expansive movement began decades ago to counter a depressing reality in published verse: most poems were lame efforts at self-mythification -- poor imitations of the first Confessionals. It felt as though a tsunami of oatmeal had dimmed poetry's most attractive facets, including prosody, strong diction, storytelling, and the use of reference and language clear enough to bridge the divide between individuals.

Stopping in at the now-extinct Gotham Bookstore to survey what was new, this writer too often spent more time looking at photos on the walls of what used to be than at current journals and new books. Hoping to find someone as engaging as, say, a Beat from the 1950s, or Eliot, Stevens or Millay from the 1930s, he found very little with real energy. Most poems and lyrics communicated mirror images of people this writer neither knew nor cared to meet, and in a style best described as the prevalence of sincerity over craft.

Then, at a bridge of lost hope, something emerged both old and new. Growing out of regional magazines like the *Kenyon Review*, this new poetry wave featured writers who knew how to use classical means to develop modern material. One of them, made visible by little presses called Countryman and Seagull, was Frederick Feirstein, a noted psychoanalyst in Manhattan who'd once written for theater and television. What made his work jump off the page? The poems were alive; they told stories about someone else, and in a recognizable voice:

The siren's screaming in my head again,  
This time it's Grandpa waiting to go down,  
With his last preserves hooked up to his vein,  
The sick king crumbling in his common gown.

Among the pots bubbling with grapes and plums  
In his huge kitchen, we blow on tablespoons  
Of juice, while Grandpa seals the vacuums  
In the finished jars....

from "Grandpa Borea", *The Survivors*, 1974

The poet is not standing off at third person distance. This Grandfather is his; and, the wonder, shock, and horror at realizations about his Grandfather's life (including his survival of the Holocaust), belong to the poet, as they should. Strong, symbolic figures are created that way, by who sees them, and how. When found in a mirror, they're usually transmitted by the damaged and the deluded.

It's now forty years after that first, exciting book. Feirstein's shelf has grown long, and is one this reviewer often refers to. Some favorites include *Manhattan Carnival*, about to be re-released by Grolier; *City Life*, which includes the delicious comedy "Psychiatrist at the Cocktail Party,"; *Fathering*; *Ending the 20th*

*Century, New and Selected*; and *Fallout*. His newest, though hardly his last, as another book works toward publication, is *Dark Energy*, brought out by the Grolier Established Poet Series in Cambridge. The title is strongly related to a theoretical assumption of the same name in physics. A little quote about "dark energy" from the NASA Web site:

*More is unknown than is known. We know how much dark energy there is because we know how it affects the Universe's expansion. Other than that, it is a complete mystery. But it is an important mystery. It turns out that roughly 68% of the Universe is dark energy. Dark matter makes up about 27%. **The rest - everything on Earth, everything ever observed with all of our instruments, all normal matter - adds up to less than 5% of the Universe.**[Ed.'s bold] Come to think of it, maybe it shouldn't be called "normal" matter at all, since it is such a small fraction of the Universe.*

-- "What Is Dark Energy?", NASA Science: Astrophysics:

<http://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy/>

Feirstein's a poet and psychoanalyst, not a physicist, but you can hardly miss the analogy. What we think of as our manifestation in the world, our behavior, acts, conversation, deeds, etc., is an incomplete picture. If we're able to negotiate growing up, career, family, and relationships with uninterrupted progress, we may never see what's missing. However, when something disturbs us without apparent cause, or makes a major part of our life narrative break up, we may go to someone like Frederick Feirstein. But most of the time, it's not that serious. We solve the problem by manufacturing a story or myth to satisfy our questions. That new piece of our narrative may not be real or complete, yet still reveal just enough to allow us to move on, assured that we know where we are on life's through line. Story and myth, insubstantial though they may seem, are arguably the dark energy of the human psyche. They drive us; they shape us; we can fall apart when they don't ring true. And that, in part, is the foundation on which Feirstein's *Dark Energy* is built.

We all tell stories that rationalize things otherwise not quite explainable. So do families, community groups, tribes, even whole nations. Here's an example of the latter. The tale of the Founding Fathers, for American Constitutionalists, is the story that justifies a concept of universal law that may otherwise be fairly regarded, as it was by Hannah Arendt, as a fiction. But, so long as the story holds, exemplary evidence attached, it has unmistakable power to change the way we think and act. Feminist stories about the Seneca Falls Convention, and its role in political emancipation of women, are just that; the facts can be interpreted differently. For instance, women were politically and economically emancipated first in the Wyoming territory (written about with some astonishment by European observers in the 1890s). One myth doesn't fit everyone. However, it seems clear that Seneca Falls is as strong a founding myth for some as Wyoming is for others.

We tell stories to comfort us in the night, to give solace during in the day. Stories translate shattering grief into manageable mourning. At a wake, or sitting *shiva*, we tell stories about the dead, proving not only that they once lived, but that we knew them and can speak about them. But we also have power to change the story, or tell a revelatory anecdote that nobody has ever heard before. Other stories create order in a world far too complicated and dangerous to face without a strategy. Stories and myths can help. We often depend upon them to do so:

Wheeling down Main Street in technicolor light  
Are Disney's heroes, our mythology,  
A comfort in the middle of the night.

Mickey Mouse, Minnie, Uncle Donald help.

The children of America are sick  
Of war, cultural suicide, and greed.  
Snow White, Bambi, Lady and the Tramp,  
It's midnight now, help us in our hour of need.

"Gravity of the Black Hole, Prologue"

It's good to start an exploration like this with humor. While it may seem silly to ask cartoon characters for help, could they offer any? They're amusing fictions, fun to watch (as art and story), but -- and this is telling, they're also predictable. That makes them comforting. If you're really distressed when you start to watch one of these and end up laughing and feeling better, it looks like Mickey, *et al*, did something besides flit about on a screen. And there's more to it. Myths are prefigured stories. We know how each episode will turn out, whether it's set on Mt. Olympus or on a movie screen. We accept those conventions and, by doing that, we know how the complications will resolve. These restrictions on fictions also tell the stories' authors how to behave, so that we'll feel right about a retelling. And we can be nasty when someone violates that agreement. Look at the response to Ralph Bakshi's *Fritz, the Cat* (1968), regarded by many as pornography parading as a cartoon. Another critics described it as a wickedly funny variation on an old standby. We can't ignore the importance of this.

Myth creation, and storytelling, are vital to individual psychic health, and to whole societies. Colin Turnbull, in a controversial book, *The Mountain People* (1972), posited the theory that the Ik tribe of Uganda suffered complete social disintegration after a government-forced move from a rich valley to a near-desert. The change, according to Turnbull's account, undercut almost every social and cultural tradition the Ik observed, leaving a desolated people behind. Similar theories have been posited about the effect of the Bureau of Irish Affairs (or the American Bureau of Indian Affairs) by deliberate suppression of standard cultural stories, or myths, as well as local language. A large part of the Irish revival in the 20th century arose from poets reconstructing the great cultural myths of Eire. Much the same happened with the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Cultural myths can take on a variety of forms, as this one from Vienna.

Freud found his myth in self-analysis  
Where Orpheus, ne Oedipus he led  
Us lost boys, naked, to our soul's abyss  
-- To see in flashbacks what we missed in bed.

So ask yourselves, what myth became your Fate,  
What traumas drew you in to play what part,  
What self-deceptions, and what hypnoid states  
Determined what exactly broke your heart.

"Gravity of the Black Hole, Myths"

(A note: don't expect extremely formal abstractions, academic obfuscation, or rarefied references from this poet. Thankfully he's not that kind of maker. The movement he co-founded all those years ago was strongly opposed to such tactics, describing them as means of avoiding, not delivering, meaning and story).

The sequence travels with Freud to the end of Part I, from the comforting, pre-war illusions of Vienna ("Daydreaming"), to the shock of the Nazis -- horrible confirmations of vital segments of Freud's perceptions and understandings, his story breaking toward scientific knowledge:

The mystic quest for light inside the dark  
Witch's wood always is doomed to fail.

Heroic in our search for mother's milk,  
We find poison in the Holy Grail

So we must cherish every nanosecond  
And not turn Paradise into a hell --  
Public in war, private in neurosis --  
But live in every nonmalignant cell.

"Gravity of the Black Hole"

A remarkable figure like Freud developed his stories toward a greater purpose, pushing toward a science of understanding variations of the human psyche. But the rest of us do the same thing, for similar (if more personal) purposes, as children do with fairytales.

In almost every fairytale we've ever heard  
We children can't be seen, can't say a word,  
And know our Fate must always be absurd.

For instance, when the father suffers grief  
He sends us children to our stepmom's double  
Who puts us on a cross or *bas relief*.

Our task, then, is to be resurrected  
By challenging the unexpected,  
To re-appear the fractally perfected.

Hansel and Gretel, Snow White are the best  
To learn from. learn never to trust or rest  
--The poorest of us and the wealthiest.  
When we toast Life, remember we're Death's guest.

"Gravity of the Black Hole, Fairytales"

This is an important book, not only for the excellent poetic sequences, but for reminding us of a truth we can't safely ignore. Stories and myths stem as much from observation as from imagination. A good example is the apocryphal story about the best scientist making a difficult area of research suddenly visible. It sounds impossible; it's hard to prove, and can be misleading (failing to credit Rosalind Franklin is a very good counterargument about that story's plausibility). Still, we're surrounded by examples that are hard to ignore. Insoluble problems beset us and then, one day, thanks to Newton or Einstein or Freud or Feigenbaum, we go "Eöoh, that was easy." And so we keep the myth in our repertoire of tools for understanding our world and our place in it. Feirstein offers something related, telling us what we should know about human storytelling and mythmaking.

We've always known that we make things up about people and the world. When we tell little fibs to cover up a mistake, most of us know what we're doing. We're papering a potential hurt with a (hopefully) harmless tale. But we don't talk about the process very much, or very honestly. And that's bad, because, with myth and exemplary story, when we forget what they can do, we turn them into sentimental mush. Then, the adults start texting while the movie's running and the kids wonder why they're being lied to. It happens a lot; it's a big part of commercial translation of popular culture.

To protect *the children* from the scariness of *Little Red Riding Hood*, right-thinkers turn the wolf into a nice creature who'd be a sweet doggie if he were fed more often. In the original, the message of the wolf

was transparent: things are not what they seem. If you succumb to lies, even from someone who looks like your grandmother, you will be eaten alive by a world without tolerance for the ignorant. Scary -- but kids need those messages, not the squishy-soft versions written by committees looking to avoid liability. The stories and myths are not just warnings, but jumping off points from the illusory comforts of childhood. Feirstein does this especially well with wonderful variations on old stories, such as an aging Snow White (surely meaningful in American life):

Her face is now a zero of despair  
Over aging, money, the fatality  
Of menopause, sexual schemers...  
She lifts a wisp of gray hair  
And tries to grin, "Bring me no more dreamers."

"Snow White", from part 2., Gravity of the Black Hole

Or the Prince with his hope:

So here's Snow White, apparently not living.  
Behind her glass, she doesn't look too well.  
Yet the Prince has the innocence to hope

He can resuscitate her with this kiss he's giving.  
Warmed by the fire in her inner hell,  
He doesn't hear her cackle, "Your breath's smoke,"

Or see the Mother Witch inside her unforgiving,  
Or the Victim shouting in the mirror, "I can't cope!  
This Prince here thinks I'm actually living?"

"He doesn't know I'm happiest with dopes,  
My seven ex's with their dwarfish living....

"The Prince", from part 2. Gravity of the Black Hole,

Ralph Bakshi never did better! And there's more to this. Common reference points make changing the story possible. The Prince and Snow White, older now, experienced, and in different circumstances, are still recognizable characters. The new stories build on the original, without which there would be nothing to work with. These variations, based on what students of chaotic systems call "recursion", or "re-entry," allow us to travel a familiar path, in the process of repetition gaining a different perspective, and sometimes a dramatically different outcome. Storytelling and mythmaking are how human beings build civilized perceptions of themselves and of their relationships to others. Some animals can talk. Some use tools. Some remember each other. And some can even predict the future a little. Human animals, through a luxury of intelligence, can construct enormous stories from anecdotes, original myths, carefully filtered experience. These stories are the framework on which we hang the canvas of our lives, whether as individuals or civilizations.

Feirstein develops this at some length in the opening sequence, "Gravity of the Black Hole", and its three parts are worth going back to again and again, for their wit, wisdom, and often dark humor. You'll never see Three Blind Mice in quite the same way again, or Cinderella:

The Prince with Cinderella was persistent.  
Twice he lost her, twice he freed her from  
Her own masochistic disasters,  
And married her and lived forever after.

The Prince went twice to her crazy house,  
Smoking cigars, riding on Fantasy,  
Trusting himself, his courage; he knew he could  
Rescue Love, rescue himself with Reason.  
He knew he was the damned but favored son.  
He married what's unconscious, what we shun.

Adults have different versions....

We've discussed the content but only implied the craft in *Dark Energy*. Reading these poems, with their delightful structure, intricate rhymes and supple flow, it should be no surprise that Feirstein has written lyrics for several full-length musicals. These poems, in their dramatic pitch, reveal Feirstein the playwright as well. The excerpts cited indicate that Feirstein has a terrific ear, with the sense to leave space for a reader (or listener) to fill in the blanks. That's a requirement in verse as much as in lyrics for a song. Versification got a bad name under the Modernists, hardly better under post-Modern critics. But, if you enjoy good songs, lyrics and poems, their success most often requires their author knowing what to do with prosody and how to fit the music. Feirstein figured that out a long time ago. *Dark Energy* is the latest example.

Reviews are not intended as survey courses for sophomores, but as teases to tempt readers to the bookstore, online or off. The rest of the book should be a surprise. You will be, not only by the reworked fairy tales and observations about them, but by Part II, the second sequence, "The Two Sides of the Moon."

*Dark Energy* is a remarkable book and is highly recommended. And special thanks to Ifeanyi Menkiti, who has not only started a fine new press but has also saved Grolier's of Cambridge, one of America's great bookstores.

To buy the book at Grolier's Bookstore in Cambridge, select the following: <http://www.grolierpoetrybookshop.org/~shop/dark-energy/250089>

It's also at Amazon and other outlets.

Arthur Mortensen  
Expansive Poetry and Music Online

Arthur Mortensen is a playwright and a poet. His latest collection is *Why Hamlet Waited So Long*, from St. Sebastian Press. He has been the Webmaster for a very long time.