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A Parallel Press Chapbook

Facts of Life

Poems by
Jim Ferris



A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

Facts of Life

Poems by
Jim Ferris



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Poet of Cripples

Let me be a poet of cripples,
of hollow men and boys groping
to be whole, of girls limping toward
womanhood and women reaching back,
all slipping and falling toward the cavern
we carry within, our hidden void,
a place for each to become full, whole,
room of our own, space to grow in ways
unimaginable to the straight
and the narrow, the small and similar,
the poor, normal ones who do not know
their poverty. Look with care, look deep.
Know that you are a cripple too.
I sing for cripples; I sing for you.

I. DECONSTRUCTION AND THE BODY

High Concept

I was just planning to be in LA
for a couple days—make a few calls, see
an old friend, sit on the beach for an hour.
Nothing special. Calling up
the Screen Actors Guild was just a whim.
A joke. I never dreamed that anything
would come of it. You know how the guild has a rule
that no two actors can use the same name.
I just called to see if they had anyone
using mine. That's all. Just a moment,
I'll check, the person says. She's back in
two minutes. Did you say Jim Ferris? Yes.
Of course you're registered, Mister Ferris.
One moment, please. What does she mean of course,
I'm thinking, when suddenly this poodle voice
yaps: Where have you *been* I've been
trying to get hold of you for a month
OK a week but you gotta talk
to me, check in once in a while. Excuse
me, but who *is* this? Oh, this is just great—
a week in the country and it's amnesia.
Hello—I'm your agent. You'd be nothing
without me. I'm quoting you here. Where are
you? I'm not thinking, I tell him the name
of the hotel. Nobody stays there,
he says. Ten minutes. And hangs up before
I can say I'm nobody, really.
But I'm curious too, so I go down
to the lobby to see what this agent
looks like—if he shows. He does—and in five
minutes. He doesn't go up to the desk,
he comes right over to me and sits down.
Why don't you call me I've been worried sick.

I'm about to say Because I don't know
you, but he's already on this great deal
he's cooked up for me—for this other guy.
I'm not an actor, I tell him. That's why
they want you, he says. I'm not the right guy,
I say. I don't know this business, I don't
know you or anybody in this town.
Nobody really knows anybody else, do they.
Nothing I say makes the slightest dent in this guy.
Before I know it we're having lunch
and all these people are acting like they know
me. A couple I'd seen in movies—that's it.
Nobody believes that I'm not
who they think I am. I show them my brace—
no movie star wears a brace like this,
or walks like I do, unless they're trying
to win an Oscar. Cut it out, Jim, my agent says. You can't
keep pulling this stunt. What the hell, I think,
maybe it will be fun, until they figure it out.
But here's the thing: they never do. I take
the part my agent lined up for that other
Jim. I stand where they tell me, look
where they tell me, say my lines. Beats
working, I tell myself. I take more parts,
do some deals, and before you know it, I'm
a player, a commodity, Mister
Green Light, as full of shit as anybody.
What's become of the other Jim Ferris?
Maybe he's back home, paying better attention
than I ever did to real life, my life.

The Doctor

English is not his native language.
He says he is a doctor, and they let him practice
on us. He is not like the others with his starched
white coat buttoned all the way up, his trimmed mustache,
his dainty feet. He is gentle in his foreign way.
He speaks softly, and I give him my leg to break.
It hurts, of course, but it's for my own good—
in Europe they do this all the time. When he cuts
a cast off he runs the saw up and down his arm first—
See? It vibrates; it will not hurt you. He breaks
my other leg. It hurts, of course, but you should see
him with a mask on and a scalpel in one hand—
quel magnifique. Bones are, after all, only bones.
I balk at the second arm, but he is the doctor,
and of course he knows best. I am encased in plaster
by the time they take him away. I'm glad
he was so gracious.

Pater Noster

I am an orphan. Yes, Jesus loves me,
yes, my parents love me, and I live in the thin space
between two worlds. I am not their son—
I am the son of Vulcan, the crippled god,
and down in his never-broken bones Jesus knows.
He is so sad, he knows I am lost.
My father makes a brace for me—he is good
with his hands—and I move through this world
like Jesus, reproach and inspiration to all.
For I am sent from on high—what do you worship?
Look upon me, then look within and know thy god.

A Communion of Bones

In 1994 a hurricane turned inland and parked over Georgia. Days of heavy rains led to widespread flooding, severe enough to float long-buried coffins out of their graves.

Jesus never broke his bones—
 so the legend holds.
Together till the end, his bones,
 those holy, holy bones.
Jesus walked away from death
 on weight-bearing bones—
The weight of the world upon his head,
 on holy, heavy bones.

I'll have a bushel of bones today,
 I'll have a bonemeal meal.
Doctors and preachers and old treaty rights,
 bones float away in a flood
In the night—they flee their earth-freed
 coffins and rejoin the waters,
Back in the flow, out in the world,
 bones once again on the move.

For Crippled Things

Once I turned from thee and hid.

Gerald Manley Hopkins

Glory be to God for crippled things—

For minds as sharp as cracked concrete;

For flab that sags, for joints and thoughts that will not come unstuck;
Forgotten lessons, wisdom . . . what? Nothing.

Growths that thrive and work left incomplete;

All legs grow tired, all clocks their hands grow stuck.

All things imperfect, asymmetric, strange;

Whatever is transient, moaning, full aware that they're meat;

Lost pieces of walk talk see hear laugh run good luck;

He must love the lame—he made us in so wide a range;

we are his joy, his music all we sing;

Our praise is in our flux.

Poems with Disabilities

I'm sorry—this space is reserved
for poems with disabilities. I know
it's one of the best spaces in the book,
but the Poems with Disabilities Act
requires us to make all reasonable
accommodations for poems that aren't
normal. There is a nice space just
a few pages over—in fact (don't
tell anyone) I think it's better
than this one, I myself prefer it.
Actually I don't see any of those
poems right now myself, but you never know
when one might show up, so we have to keep
this space open. You can't always tell
just from looking at them, either. Sometimes
they'll look just like a regular poem
when they roll in—you're reading along
and suddenly everything
changes, the world tilts
a little, angle of vision
jumps, focus
shifts. You remember
your aunt died of cancer at just your age
and maybe yesterday's twinge means
something after all. Your sloppy,
fragile heart beats
a little faster
and then you know.
You just know.
And the poem
is right
where it
belongs.

Deconstruction and the Body

One thing that happened in medical school started me thinking: I was working the ER late one night, when this guy came in, mighty messed up from a gunshot wound to the head. Blood everywhere, of course. Some of his skull had been blasted away, and we could see right down to his brain. But he was calm and lucid—in fact, he made more sense than some of my professors. While everybody else rushed around, he and I talked about Heidegger and the later Foucault. As we talked I kept trying to peek inside his skull, to see if anything changed color or moved while he thought. I couldn't tell much. We were in the midst of a discussion about the Nazis when they took him up to OR, so I went along. The neurosurgeon said I was better than anesthetic anyway.

They couldn't save the brain. They left the brain stem and some of the cerebellum, but took almost everything else. By now we were talking about Hegel and deconstruction. I've always had trouble with deconstruction, so I scarcely noticed that I was talking to a man with no brain to speak of. They packed his skull with styrofoam so what was left wouldn't rattle around. Then they closed him up. They wouldn't let me into the recovery room with him. "How can you expect to learn anything about medicine if you spend all your time talking to a patient with no brain?" the attending asked me. After I got off that morning I hunted up my professor and asked him how I could have a deep discussion about Derrida with a guy with no brain. The professor, universally considered brilliant, told me I must have gone into a peculiar kind of low-grade shock upon

seeing all the blood, and imagined the whole incident.
It was all in my head. The patient had
checked out by that evening when I came back
on duty, but he had left a short list of books
for me to read. It got me wondering about just
what's really up there—what if Jesus was right
and our brains *are* pucks, radically decentered each
face-off—what then? We can be excused, can't we, if we
confuse gravity with entropy, words
with language, heart with mind, with soul.

Pray

as if there is a special Jesus
for heathens, a demigod
for the semiwhole, a song of redemption
with one note for one ear, an inside
without an out. O special Jesus,
beacon of weak light to weaker eyes,
dashboard icon for the parking elite,
one-sided coin—call it: tails, tails, tails,
tails—pray for us. Pray
like tomorrow is already here,
pray that the shallows will stay
calm and clear. Pray we don't die
in our sleep. Pray, special Jesus,
our insides stay wild, dark, and deep.

Dear God

My mom says she noticed something wrong
with my leg right after I was born—
she still holds a grudge against that doctor who
said she was imagining it. First operation
at one; the one tomorrow is what, number ten?
I used to think you had something in mind
for me. I think I've been kidding myself.
How much difference can it make to any
body how I walk? Cast, no cast. Limp, no limp.
Brace, no brace. It just matters to me.
A universe of one. Where does this come from?
Did I screw up somehow? I must have
done something, because a real God would not do
this for no reason. Not the one I was taught.
Just put an X on my forehead, proclaim my shame
from a billboard, put a Kick Me sign
on my back. I can put up with the looks,
the remarks, the smaller and larger
humiliations, wanting what is always out
of my reach. I can swallow it all—
how heavy my brace is, the way people look
at me and then look away, the way they talk
like I can't hear can't see can't think,
not being able to ride a bike when all
my friends ride bikes, always being slow
and fat and ugly, magnet for faith healers
and those who tell me God Has a Plan. Do
you? It would be nice to know. Because
tomorrow, more yet to swallow. I can handle
the pain, I can handle the shame,
I've been practicing all my life. What I can't
handle is the fire that flames my gut—
anything might touch me off. All I've swallowed
has poisoned me. Don't you know this? Do something
for me—fix me. No. Fix the world. We've all

learned our lesson, haven't we? At least take away
this bucket of bile I've gulped down. Mix me
an antidote. But if you won't do that, if
you can't, I can take it. Just leave me alone.

Very truly yours in Christ,
A lamb and sinner

Fear at 13

On your back on the narrow table, one leg shaved
to the hip, gown folded up to your ribs, nurse fishing
for a vein to start the IV, huge dome of light
close overhead, gas mask nearby, instruments
clanking, green masks showing only bandit eyes,
blue-eyed nurse washing up your leg with Betadine,
hatchet men waiting to cut you, and what you fear most
in all the world is that you'll pop a boner
and die embarrassed on this green yet sterile field.

Post-Op

Waking up in a bin of cotton—
you just want to clear this stuff from your eyes,
your ears, most of all your mouth. The room
jumps like it touched something hot, spins away,
and you puke into this curved steel basin
by your mouth. Bitter, but you feel better
as you spit the taste out. Mrs. Spoerl
comes over, and her perfume makes
you want to puke again, but you don't.
She wipes your mouth—how are you feeling?—
takes the basin away. You think
maybe that's not a good idea,
but she's back with a fresh one before you
can puke again. Her hand on your forehead,
it feels so cool, so good and normal that
you don't want to have to puke again but
oh God it's another bucketful—
it feels like a gallon but you never
fill that emesis basin, thank God.
She takes your temp, checks your blood pressure,
gives you a shot for pain. And then you're gone.
This heavy ocean throws you up
on shore from time to time. You puke, suck
on ice chips, and loll there like a dinghy
in the trough of a wave. The afternoon
waltzes, when awake you notice the cast—
it feels hot—the pain, your mouth, your gut,
your head. This is not fun. The puke pan
feels good against your skin. You cling to it,
a straw against this pitching sea. You felt
fine this morning; now you can't quite recall
your name, but you remember Mrs. Spoerl,
Mrs. Spoerl, Mrs. Spoerl. Recovery room.

Late afternoon they take you back
to the ward, wheel your bed along the halls,
the lights overhead flashing as you pass
underneath. Nothing feels good. The guys
and nurses are solicitous on your
return, but the ward is bright, busy,
jarring, and you just want to be alone,
unconscious, something. Off and on you are
unconscious, and, whoever is with you,
you are alone. And it hurts. No one
can share this, and you know it in your marrow
when you wake up at midnight, you're wide awake
for the first time since morning and now you know
how much it hurts, how badly your bones
mistreated, how alone you can be
in a room with fifteen others. Night nurse
out of sight, and you don't want to call out
like you've heard hundreds of quavering voices
do before, you throw your head side to side
because it takes your mind off how much
your leg hurts and then you hear it anyway,
God damn it! That's your voice quaking *Nurse?*
And then it happens again *Nurse?* and you
just can't help it out it comes *Nurse!* And now
your humiliation is complete.
Everyone crumbles after surgery.
The nurse comes, she brings ice chips, a shot
for the pain, and you breathe again, relax
your neck as you're released to tomorrow.

Biological Determinism

Jockeying for position at the starting line
in our casts and hormones, bad haircuts, wheelchairs,
crutches, banana carts, awaiting word from heaven,
the Girls Ward, we're tense and ready or already
giving up when our nurse fires her starter pistol.
We race up the hallway, bumping and thrashing
toward our biological destiny.
Only one can win whatever it is out there
at the other end of the dark hall, only one,
and we push and jostle and trick each other
to be the only one, to get there first, to claim our rightful prize:
to park next to the bed of the prettiest crippled girl
in the hospital. *You boys were horrible*
to those girls, swarming around that one like flies
and crushing all the others. Like we ourselves were crushed,
crippled prizes, chipped loving cups, slightly cracked goblets,
chairs with three pretty good legs. Lisa was our holy grail—
forgive me, Darlene, forgive me, Wanda—she was the light
we yearned to buzz around, the screen we smacked our heads against.
One night I got off free and clear, strong in shoulder and arm,
I left them all behind and sailed into the Girls Ward alone,
the only one. But I was too soon, my prize lying down,
I couldn't find her, didn't recognize her until
she was surrounded by those who finally caught up.
My crippled love was lost, is lost still, and all I have
to give is slightly salty on the skin, the musk that comes
and goes, my twisted leanings, my violent falls,
and getting up, again, again, again.

II. *FACTS OF LIFE*

Facts of Life

Where's the glory in it? I am not
a survivor. Whatever the state
of my legs, whatever happened
there, know this: I walk down the street
whole, whether I limp or stumble,
cane or crutches, roll in a chair.
This is my body. Look if you like.
This is my meat, substance
but not my substance, sum of all
its particles back to the big one but particular
to no single interpretation
in a universe of possibilities
that we all try to limit with all
our soft might but which accepts
only the most temporary
instructions—you, sir, explain
that birthmark, and you, how about
that nose? We are not signs,
we do not live in spite of
or because of our facts,
we live with them, around them, among,
like we live around rivers, my cane,
your warts, like we live among animals,
your heart, my brace, like we live
with each other.

Not Killing Oneself

Her life had become meaningless.

Geoffrey Fieger, attorney for Dr. Jack Kevorkian, speaking of a Kevorkian victim.

I was walking through a parking lot
when a guy told me he admired me
for not killing myself. I had stopped
and bent over to adjust my brace—
damned thing was rubbing me the wrong way.
I just looked at him. His friend had killed
himself over the weekend, his friend
who had his arms and legs and so much
to look forward to and yet he killed
himself while I wore a brace and did not
kill myself. So he admired me.

What do you say to that? I have vanity,
a hunger for respect, for some proof
I'm OK. But I would like to be
admired for something more positive
than not killing myself. I said thanks,
or something like that. Only a year
earlier my then-wife tried to kill
herself a few months after we split.
She swallowed her whole cache, including
a bottle of phenobarbital.

She might be dead now, the cops said when
they called me long distance. Touch and go,
the hospital said. She lived that time.

I have some ideas what this world
is like. And though we've all been there,
and not that long ago, I still cannot
remember what it's like to not be
alive. I try to hold judgment;
soon enough, I know. Soon enough.

Apologia

This poem
does not need
to march
across
the page.

This poem
is free
to lean
and limp
and lurch
and tap the
ground.

This poem will just be
here,
as it claims
a place
on this
page, in this
space, in this rolling,
stumbling,
stuttering,
blinking,
fresh and stinking
world of great
pain
and promise:
this poem
does not explain
its shape,
its struggles,
its joys.
Explain yourself,
if you like,
and that

is yours.
This poem is home
with every poem
and with all
sparks
seeking a place
to light.

The Way of the Cross

In more myths than I can count the hero
back from the underworld returns lame,
scarred, crippled. Marked. Maybe this is why
they fear us so: in their bones they know
we know things, we have wrestled with the dark
and the light, we have come limping back.
Never again one of the crowd, we stand,
sit, lie apart, distinguished by where
we have been, by what we have come through.
This is why they fear us so—
it's what they fear we know.

The Effect of Gravity on the Mind

When I walk down the stairs

I think about falling
and chipping a tooth.

When I walk cross the kitchen floor

I think about falling
and breaking my leg.

When I walk on the winter ice

I think about falling
and crushing my head.

When I walk across the bridge

I think about jumping.

What Rises in the Spaces Between the Cells

Start where you are. If you cannot
love the body that feels the pain,
love the body that forgets pain,
love the pleasure that tickles up
in the absence of pain, love
the body that carries the not-
pain. Start where you are. If you can't
love the body that bears the pain,
love the not-pain that surrounds all
pain. Bear the feel of nothing but
pain. Then love the body that holds
your pain, for the pain surrounds all
not-pain, as breath surrounds breathing.
Start where you are. If you cannot
love the body that minds the pain,
just breathe. Start. For pain is the path
to no pain, as pain is the path
to pain. I am told of painkillers,
I am told of the power
of prayer. I am told that pain is
my friend—just try having none.
Ask a paralyzed vet. Ask
a quad. Ask that burn on your stump.
Ask forty days and forty nights,
ask the quiet face of night hell,
ask all futile molecules,
ask the merchants of dismal joy,
ask what rises in the spaces
between the cells. Ask. Then breathe.
Start where you are. If you cannot,
breathe. And start where you are.

What It Tastes Like

The first time I did it I was somewhere
else, watching, waiting for the moment—
so that's what it tastes like—the hard, moist, soft
moment when—the first time I had her take
my brace off, strap by leather strap, the beast
comes off, and then she went one further—rubbed
my leg, massaged my shameful condition, and I came
as close as I had ever been to living
outside my hardened little self.
How can you blame me for marrying her?
I didn't know what I was doing down there,
but eager beaver learner. Wish I'd thought to rub
my leg—wish she had too. Made that part up.
Made up the leg too. Made up the marriage,
her death, my life. The taste was real.
The hardest thing is the hardest thing was
the fucking brace.

Patron Saint

Send me Saint Sebastian,
stick-with-it Sebastian,
stuck through with all those arrows,
speared, spitted, skewered. Saint Bull's-eye.
This guy could take it. No bullet to bite,
no blindfold, no whining. Oh patron saint
of pincushions and porcupines,
oh saintly sieve, oh holiest of men,
oh stickler for God's truth, you who healed
and headed back for more, pray for us.

Mea Culpa

Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children—for charity cases.
I was just another crippled child—a leg among legs, arms,
backs—bones gone awry. We just want to help you, poor cripple.
This is for your own good, little cripple. The Shriners wear

funny hats. I wear my shame, wear it outside
my pants, for all to see—and look away. I look away,
and we change the subject, and people call me brave
behind my back. Oh brave new world, that has such people

in it. I never think of you as crippled. I never think of *you*
without knowing my shame, that festering deformed secret
hidden deep in my soul yet there for all the world to see:
I am worthless, a mistake, a trick of genetics or fate. *Mea culpa.*

I don't belong here with all these cripples—seldom
do I see their shame—but I belong nowhere else,
not in the normal world—I wear my shame on the outside.
Mea culpa. I make them uncomfortable. *Mea culpa.* I make us

all uncomfortable. *Mea maxima culpa.* But there is no one
to forgive me—God doesn't care, and leaves me bait
for faith healers and the cult of silent suffering. This: God
has singled you out—it's not an accident—God picked you,

you must be strong to carry this cross. Offer it up for the greater honor
and glory of God. And this: if you really believe, you'll be healed.
It is only up to you—just have enough faith. When the healing fails
it is my fault for not having enough faith—*mea culpa.* It is my fault

for being a chump—*mea culpa.* It is always my fault—*mea maxima culpa.*
Surgery after surgery, my leg is no longer. Healing is no longer:
no longer hating full-length mirrors and glass buildings, no longer
needing small minds to accept me, forgive me, redeem me. God,

wherever you are, your shift is over. Take a break. I must
do this myself. I absolve me; go forth, and limp no more.
That's not it. Heal my understanding, fulfill my crippled soul.
I want to know that divinity is in my leg, in my shame, that God lives

in misshapen things, in the shriveled secret shame that is my core.
I need to know that. I need to know. And then, maybe, I can learn
to forgive—forgive the healers, the normals, God—perhaps even
forgive the crippled child who has carried my burden so long.

Enough

Instead of putting cotton in my ears
to pretend I was deaf,
instead of closing my eyes and wearing sunglasses
to pretend I was blind,
I'd pretend I could walk
like everybody else, like my brother,
my neighbors, kids at school.

I'd pretend for days, for years,
that I walked like everybody else.
Someone would always correct me—
can he hobble over here and try this on?—
but I was persistent, insisting on
seeing myself as a regular kid,
standing out for my wit, my charm,

my intelligence, not my walk.
I still pretend—I think of my walking
as *walking*, not something
beautiful or unique.
Like a poem, it is enough
like all the rest to be recognized,
but different enough to move me

through the world.



JIM FERRIS is a poet and communication scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, with a particular interest in humanities-based disability studies. With experience as playwright, performance artist, director, and actor, he has performed widely in the U.S. and Canada, and his writing has appeared in dozens of publications including the *Georgia Review* and the *Michigan Quarterly Review*. At the UW–Madison, Ferris led the successful effort to establish a disability studies cluster as part of the university's interdisciplinary hiring initiative, which will result in the hiring of three scholars in disability studies over the next few years.

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