



On Earth As It Is

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2010

## Ecclesiastes II: Son of the Philosopher

Bryan Furuness

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# on earth as it is

*prayer as story, story as prayer*

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ABOUT

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*photo by matthew simmons*

## *Ecclesiastes II: Son of the Philosopher*

*Bryan Furuness*

*Exodus 4:24-26: At a camping place on the way to Egypt, the Lord met Moses and tried to kill him. Then Zipporah, his wife, took a sharp stone, cut off the foreskin of her son, and touched Moses' feet with it. . . And so the LORD spared Moses' life.*

### **Life is Failure**

Some days I think the clouds are your eyes. Some days I think the birds are your voice. You laugh, chide, scatter thistle all over my lawn and screw up my grass as some kind of lesson I'll never understand because I don't speak bird.

Whatever you are trying to tell me, I have failed to get for the last five decades, just as I have failed at marriage, child-rearing, multiple careers, and keeping house-plants alive. Why the bird-speak, Lord? In olden times, you came down and made yourself plain. You walked around the garden, yelled at Cain, bossed Jonah around. You spoke to Moses, then tried to kill him. *Tried?* Why? And how were you foiled by a foreskin?

### **I Fail, Therefore I am**

Maybe failure is proof of existence—mine and yours. The universe is full of blank planets. Were those failures in your early attempts to create life, or will you claim as Edison did when he said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.?"

Maybe our failure to communicate is evidence that we both exist and are trying—but it is failure nonetheless. Take angels, for example. You say that angels will come in the form of someone needing help. But the angels we imagine show up to give us help. If only we could get all of them together, then our angels could help your angels, and it would be a nice, satisfying, closed loop. But that's not the way life works. Life is

a series of half-loops, broken, radiating need.

I have measured out my life with failed jokes. Like the one I used to tell about your attempt at murder, because I always joke about things that trouble me. *That story tells me two things, I would say. One: never go camping. Two: always pack a spare foreskin.*

That joke never got anything more than nervous laughter. There are two kinds of people in the world, it seems: those who like the Bible, and those who like jokes. Why did you make me the only one who likes Bible jokes?

### **Other People Fail, Too**

People get everything backwards. They celebrate birth, and mourn death. They should do the opposite! The day you die is better than the day you are born. At a baby shower, we should file past the mother with eyes down, murmuring, "My condolences." At a funeral we should drink and shout, rejoicing that someone has gotten off the hamster wheel of life.

People work hard when they are young and retire when they are old. They should do the opposite! Children, enjoy yourself. Love each other while you can do so without weariness and boredom. Fill your bookcases with wine instead of books. The more you know, the more it hurts.

When you are old, then go to work. What does it matter at that point? You're going to be miserable regardless, so you might as well be of some use to somebody.

Hard labor at an advanced age may hasten death. It's worth a try, anyway.

How I envy the stillborn, who never experience a single day of pain. How much more do I envy the extinct species—the passenger pigeon, the mysterious starling—for they have laid down their baton, the one that gets heavier with every generation.

I can't help but notice that Moses was saved by his wife. Did he move to save himself? Or did he look at you with relief, like *Thank God it's over?* At the beginning of Exodus, he was pretty clear that he did not want to do what you wanted him to do. And you—did you hesitate? It takes a while to snip away at a foreskin. What passed between you and Moses?

Some days I wish that I was not a body, but a cloud of thoughts. Or a regular cloud, without any thoughts. I would be, without a doubt, the kind that broods, but only for a while, before it is mercifully atomized against the mountains.

### **Our Replacement for Communication is Condescension**

Was it the Tower of Babel? Was that when we stopped understanding you? Was that when we humans stopped understanding each other, even those of us who supposedly shared a language?

Did you go too far back then, burning out all the lines of communication? Afterwards, did you think, *Oops, I should have pulled back, right at the end?*

The socket you have burned out, we have filled with condescension. For example: your people condescend to non-believers, and the non-believers condescend right back. Is there anything worse than the comments section that follows an internet article about religion? God, it's like a mental sewer. That was a condescending remark, I know, but also true.

You walked around the pages of the Old Testament; you became Christ. That's what makes those stories great: you didn't condescend; you chose to descend.

But even in those stories, you weren't truly anthropomorphic. Only when you tried to kill Moses, I see now, only when you failed—only then.

Because you failed, you were human. Because you know failure, you know me.

Bryan Furness has stories in *Ninth Letter*, *Sycamore Review*, *Southeast Review*, and the forthcoming *New Stories from the Midwest* and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. He teaches at Butler University, where he serves as the associate editor for *Booth*.

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