

GIFTS IN DISGUISE

Poems by
Robert H. Deluty



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To
Barbara

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Gifts in Disguise

*Blessings sometimes show up
in unrecognizable disguises.*

Janette Oke

*Someone I loved once gave me a box
full of darkness. It took me years to
understand that this, too, was a gift.*

Mary Oliver



Nineteen Years Later

At the supermarket,
 The retired college counselor
 Runs into a former student
 Named Bethany who came to see him
 Only once -- when she threatened suicide
 Believing she had failed her Econ I final.
 Bethany thanks him profusely, noting
 That his kindness, wisdom, and perspective
 Might well have saved her life that day.
 After accepting her gratitude and
 Exchanging pleasantries, the counselor inquires
 About the grade she received on the exam.
I was afraid you'd ask, she replies. I got an A.

masquerade party . . .
the mixed-martial artist dressed
as *Thumbelina*

kicking her boyfriend
in the shin for refusing
to share his feelings

kneeing her husband
in the groin for refusing
to watch a romcom

Chinese Mom calling
her 10-pound-overweight teen
The elephant

Jewish Mom calling
her 10-pound-overweight teen
Skin-and-bones

watching the judge
kicking the candy machine
for his *Almond Joy*

young ex-Marine
with three prostheses stating
I've no regrets

ill for a week,
their child tries trick-or-treating
on November 6th

Bev and Ira Lyne,
moving company sales clerks,
naming their son, Van

Ed and Vi Bottoms,
former hippies, christening
their daughter, Belle

Grandpa refusing
to open an umbrella
unless it's flooding

first grade Halloween . . .
triplets dressed as Supergirl,
Bo Peep, a walrus

teenaged boys staring
at cheerleaders, hoping for
wardrobe malfunctions

his two year-old,
pointing at the bathroom scale,
calling it a clock

young trick-or-treaters
cursing the kind, old lady
who gave them raisins

Charles Smith presenting
his five grandsons Chip, Chuck,
Chad, Chas, and Chazz

Milton Pisman
begging his daughter, the bride,
not to change her name

Spanish bullfight . . .
learning the famed matador
was born in Vermont

choleric elder
telling the wheezing child
to knock it off

Your most loved dessert? . . .
Great-Uncle Floyd responding
Biscuits and gravy

breaking her ankle
attempting to pick up
a four-leaf clover

mass murderer
asserting all is good now:
I found Jesus

two shrinks discussing
the mental health benefits
of *Charleston Chews*

his Greek in-laws
showing contempt for the man
drinking decaf

mid-eulogy . . .
his battered widow hiding
her revulsion

on chemo,
a cancer patient dreaming
of sheared sheep

hearing the lyric
Bad moon on the rise as
Bathroom on the right

MVA melee . . .
young atheist attempting
to buy *NO GOD* plates

her spouse noting
the shrink's diagnosis
erased his guilt

his wife asserting
the shrink's diagnosis
destroyed her life

two spiders creeping
out of the jack-o'-lantern
beside the scarecrow

the coach avowing
he profoundly regrets
biting his fullback

mid-tornado . . .
watching a man and his cow
taking flight

breast-feeding mother
pinching the neighbor who asked
Can't your child self-soothe?

breast-feeding mother
punching the stranger who asked
Why don't you just pump?

Pearl, a newlywed,
 opting to take the last name
 of Charles Nicklaus

the deceased's daughter
 claiming those who knew him best
 hated his guts

bleaching mishap. . .
 his Red Sox T-shirt turning
 Chicago-ish

remedial math . . .
 the instructor starting off
Listen up, losers

Quaker teenager
 daydreaming of entering
 the O.K. Corral

pregnant, dreaming
her belly is transparent:
a womb with a view

in the audience . . .
the Nobel winner's mother
beaming, but clueless

tasting his first ham,
Jacob Goldstein preparing
for a heart attack

Halloween . . . coming
to work in a three-piece suit,
Hulk head and hands

a Eurasian boy,
a Kenyan girl holding hands,
eliciting hope

the prof informing
a math grad student it's **not**
pronounced *Des-kar-tez*

the dean informing
a young physics prof it's **not**
pronounced *noo-kyu-lur*

telling the shrink
analysis has strengthened
her narcissism

Great-Grandpa Sid
deciding one morning
to learn to waltz

Great-Grandma Rae
deciding one afternoon
to stop being nice

morbidly obese,
thanking the man who called her
curvaceous

morbidly obese,
kissing the man who called her
Rubenesque

first day of grad school . . .
her assigned advisor states
I do not give praise

watching in awe
as Granddad removes ear wax
with tweezers

sleazy shoe salesman
stroking her heel while saying
You're a model, right?

What are Saturn's rings? . . .

an eighth grader responding

Gifts from God

before the blind date,

deciding which foreign accent

to adopt

phlebotomist's sons

sporting sweatshirts proclaiming

Give Blood, Play Rugby

describing her teen

as half chemistry genius,

half social moron

wish list for Santa . . .

a six year-old writing first

New wheelchair for Ma

retiring prof
offering her last lecture
in cap, gown, tube top

How's Grandpa? . . .
Grandma replying *Feeble*,
but in a good way

a Jew explaining
why she eats bacon and crabs
but not ham and shrimp

Friday the 13th . . .
Mom and Pop sitting down
for their tax audit

Yale perfectionist
slashing her right wrist
over a C+

a man's shopping cart
filled with sixteen jars of mayo,
one box of *Trix*

Uncle Willard
paying his huge bar tab
with \$2 bills

a mall cop asking
the screaming toddler's mother
to control her child

her fifth grader
spelling *Mississippi*
with six *s's*

in Miami
spotting a sports car
with Alaska tags

vegan pacifists
wishing their daughter were not
wedding Frank Slaughter

career soldiers
wishing their daughter were not
wedding Toby Dove

on Father's Day
receiving a mug stating
World's Okayest Dad

Yom Kippur morning . . .
Li Peng wishing Max Levine
a fun day off

Easter morning . . .
Sol Katz wishing Irv Goldman
a good yontif

Lillian L. Lloyd
 expressing her distaste
 for the name Noelle

a Maine two year-old
 applying *Cherry ChapStick*
 to her doll's lips

his parents' crèche . . .
 neon exclamation points
 above Jesus

a boy named Seymour
 feeling he's destined to be
 an optometrist

a boy named Percy
 feeling he's destined to be
 miserable

ESL student
asking if it's all right
to say *I amn't*

ESL student
inquiring which is better:
You is or *You's*

old neighborhood . . .
their favorite bookstore
now *Lola's Quick Tan*

in church, a mother
wondering how saints behaved
as two year-olds

in church, a teen
wondering if any saints
were parents

hearing their waiter
describe the wine as *earthy*,
his date starts giggling

with a Bangkok Mom
and a County Galway Dad,
noting he's *Thairish*

two tourists asking
their Tel Aviv cab driver
where pork is sold

regretting
using his Christmas-gift stilts
to take down the lights

asked to name the shape.
a child writes under the square
Timmy

pondering
if, in heaven, Great-Granddad
will still be senile

buying
their first grader finger paints
and a black beret

smiling as he learns
his Lubbock-born cousin Clem
is a Princeton dean

a girl
with Bell's palsy praying
for a pretty smile

a man
with Bell's palsy longing
for symmetry

finding irony
in her Great-Uncle Curt
being so verbose

finding irony
in his Aunts Bella and Grace
being total crones

the prof explaining
why polka dots, plaids, and stripes
do go together

pre sixth birthday . . .
their granddaughter requesting
a wishing well

pre eighth birthday . . .
their grandson requesting
a dagger tattoo

young parents finding
their toddler's fearlessness
terrifying

weeping as she hears
their son calling his girlfriend
the love of my life

two crack addicts,
sitting on a park bench,
comparing damage

dinner compromise . . .
a Dad offering his child
one penny per pea

turning eighty-five,
proudly noting he's never
shined a shoe

their Alaskan friend
 signing her Christmas card
Brrrrrenda

their Jamaican friend
 signing his Christmas card
Micaaaaah

New Year's Eve . . .
 a college grad resolving
 not to look for work

a third grader
 calling her newborn brother
Six-weeks immature

Belgrade billionaire
 confessing that, for two years,
 he sold *Yugos*

on the beach . . . asking
her boyfriend's Granddad to stop
staring at her toes

ten-year-old athlete
explaining her success:
Turn pressure to joy

their first session . . .
his patient noting she loves
the taste of paint

a Sioux Falls teen
calling her Fargo cousins
the hicks

April Fool's Day . . .
getting mauled by a poodle
named Luscious

informing her spouse
retirement should **not** mean *work*
as hard, without pay

Mom claiming
 she'd be great on a balance beam
 if it were yards wide

half-Finn/half-Lao girl
 demanding a *Barbie* doll
 who looks just like her

four star restaurant . . .
 a diner takes from his pocket
 mint dental floss

Jan and Gus March
 introducing their daughters
 June, May, and April

*There are souls in this world who have the
gift of finding joy everywhere, and leaving
it behind them when they go.*

Frederick William Faber

*As to me, I know of nothing else
but miracles.*

Walt Whitman



Human Zoloft

The two-year-old child
 Of depressed parents –
 Mistaking the petals
 For vanilla frosting –
 Screams with delight
 Upon seeing the bouquet
 Of short-stemmed white roses,
Ooooh . . . cupcakes!

New Orleans tourist
asking if the gator sausage
is kosher

the old prof telling
his grad student with the flu
Go home. Watch soaps.

feeling uneasy
with how much his new in-laws
enjoy misfortune

a Chinese girl
named Wing informing bullies
her name means *glory*

a Chinese teen
named Fang telling tormentors
her name means *fragrant*

gorgeous girlfriend
 asking for all his passwords
 on their fourth date

told to duck,
 her three-year-old son saying
Quack, quack

gently suggesting
 his dieting spouse pass
 on the hot fudge

NBA coach
 characterizing his team
 as *quite tall*

a young pilot
 skywriting the message
How Do I Land?

a second grader
praying that the school shooter
runs out of ammo

seven survivors
of Pol Pot comparing
their nightmares

Queens diner . . . a man
requests a slice of peach pie,
a can of whipped cream

a toddler
sucking the right thumb
of her newborn sib

the eighty year-old
asserting he's going through
a midlife crisis

the ex-Met claiming
more renown for his mullet
than his pitching

heading to Iraq,
young Marines overhearing
Enjoy hell!

old man offering
a six-pack and cigarettes
for his lost cat

on his deathbed
the admiral whispering
I yam what I yam

on his deathbed
the general whispering
That's the fact, Jack

alone on Christmas,
the old scholar surrounded
by papers he wrote

a fourth grader
declaring that *willn't* sounds
better than *won't*

a sixth grader
warning his younger brother
grammar is evil

a ninth grader
believing accuracy
is over-rated

a tenth grader
wondering if shepherds need
high school diplomas

their grandchild noting
his pants fell off the couch
with his legs in them

spreading butter
on the floor as her boyfriend
takes a shower

two Rice profs welling
with tears as they discuss

Charlotte's Web

two Yale profs roaring
with laughter as they discuss
Foghorn Leghorn

drunken law student
giving out the phone number
of her estranged Mom

Pitt roommates bragging
they ran out of toilet tissue
five days ago

learning her fiancé
has twelve dollars and eight cents
in savings

in the ER
a two year-old chews the gum
she picked off the floor

ninth grade dropout
longing to have a college
named after himself

obese man singing
while waiting to be dislodged
from the turnstile

pregnant teen asking
web users to cast votes for
her unborn son's name

tourists eschewing
the low-fat Icelandic beer
featuring whale meat

unemployed man
dreaming of adopting
very rich children

while she's out, going
in her hated housemate's room
and farting

Great-Grandma pointing
to her age lines with pride, boasts
I earned 'em all

A&M freshman
assuming the thesaurus
is now extinct

English professor
frowning at the preschooler
who said *liberry*

English professor
scowling at the young teen
who said *athelete*

English professor
glaring at the undergrad
who said *dialate*

English professor
screaming at the colleague
who said *expresso*

the shrink not knowing
 his patient could hear him when
 he whispered *Pinhead*

bulimic teen
 seeking employment
 in a donut shop

their realtor
 describing the stately house
 as *a tad haunted*

Grandma staring
 at her set of false teeth
 in the toilet

their son explaining
 why the name of his rock band,
Meat Rain, is way-cool

the dying scholar
uttering his final words:
Thoughts aren't facts

in Germany
finding a vending machine
dispensing fresh eggs

in China
spotting a vending machine
providing live crabs

for Christmas
the prof handing his TAs
bagged goldfish

the linguist,
asked *What's the prettiest word?*,
replying *Free*

after the sale,
christening his boat
The Aqua-holic

after the crash,
re-christening his boat
No Luck Atoll

dreaming his wife
and two exes become
a firing squad

dreaming her husband
and three exes board a ship
bound for Neptune

responding
to his grandchild's tenth *Why?*
with *Because shut up*

job interviewee
noting he's *early to bed,*
late to rise

the Smiths consider
giving their newborn a name
with no vowels

Are your folks retired? . . .
her blind date answering
Kinda – they're in jail

Are your folks alive? . . .
his blind date replying
It's hard to say

her new patient
admitting to a deep fear
of elbows

Ivan Marcus Fein,
a narcissist, preferring
to use I.M.

a girl describing
her cruel, brutish father
as *cranky*

the dying man
hoping to raise hell
in heaven

asked what she'll be
when she grows up, his child
replies *A grown-up*

asked what he'll be
when he grows up, his teen
responds *Not you*

estranged for decades,
not recognizing her Dad
sitting at the bar

quadriplegic man
fighting back tears watching
Riverdance

back of the squad car . . .
handcuffed teen envisioning
her parents' faces

Grandma referring
to her two grown sons as
Blondie and *Baldy*

a Baptist child
asking her uncle whether
he's done with Satan

Mom's birthday card . . .
 her seven year-old writing
I love you sometimes

out on bail,
 the teen idol showing off
 his winsome mug shot

Psych prof proclaiming
 the *Bic for Her* purple pens
Pointlessly gendered

Grandpa screaming
 at the tantruming toddler
 to grow up

their Chihuahua,
 inside the dishwasher,
 licking a saucer

informing her son
the term is *beauty salon*,
not *saloon*

mid-nightmare,
smashing her husband's jaw
with her casted wrist

Super Bowl Sunday . . .
between two big screen TVs,
getting married

Super Bowl Sunday . . .
under three small screen TVs,
having a wake

at Dulles, eying
the TSA inspector
pat down a nun

misunderstanding
the old Italian waiter
who said *Basta!*

telling bored students
if they want entertainment,
visit Vegas

telling barred students
they're too late for today's class,
too soon for next week's

a Russian elder
wondering if God permits
angels to smoke

a dry cleaner
blowing *Dorito* dust off
the *Ralph Lauren* tux

At Children's Hospital

Listening

To the radio pitchman

Asserting *There's nothing*

Worse than a computer

That's slow and unreliable,

The ten-year-old boy

Battling a brain tumor

And his nurse turn

To each other and

Utter in unison

Imbecile

drinking fountain . . .
 a toddler trying to turn
 the knob for her dog

New York cabbie
 from Cote d'Ivoire confusing
strip mall and *strip club*

Detroit mid-winter . . .
 a poor Mom choosing between
 heat and eat

congratulating
 her child on faking so well
 sincerity

the cynic
 admitting he has a high
 contemperature

locker room . . . watching
the man with the furry back
comb his unibrow

locker room . . . watching
the tattooed, multi-pierced teen
shaving her head

during the snowstorm
their three year-old searching for
her beach pail, shovel

on leap day
Jonathan Fluke getting
struck by lightning

dying Latin prof
requesting to be buried
atop his *Harley*

Brave catcher
 offering the umpire
 a breath mint

palsied man
 laughing aloud as he dreams . . .
 dunking on LeBron

centenarian
 beaming with joy as she dreams . . .
 punching out Limbaugh

their Grandma
 claiming Grandpa has devolved
 from geezer to coot

telling his child
 she's like a daughter
 to him

*The hardest arithmetic to master is that
which enables us to count our blessings.*

Eric Hoffer

*I believe a leaf of grass is no less
than the journey-work of the stars.*

Walt Whitman

pre-interview . . .
 the TA asking his profs
 to pray for him

her father inching
 the hefty restaurant bill
 toward her boyfriend

returning home . . .
 informing their two year-old
 the newborn's staying

at the bar
 offering the pick-up line
You'd be a great Mom

Harvard professor
 reading a student's e-mail
 beginning *Yo!*

their hosts
preferring *authentic*
to *hospitable*

English prof hating
that *teachers* and *cheaters*
are anagrams

hypochondriac
learning he's been fired
by his physician

begging her son
to drop his new girlfriend,
the skydiver

an eight year-old
asking the vet whether snakes
ever feel guilt

telling her grandkids
they've a choice: be positive
or stone silent

ninety wedding guests
learning the groom's a pervert
from the best man's toast

rookie cornerback
renaming his coaches
the *tackulty*

drywall apprentice
renaming his mentors
the *spackulty*

first-year law student
renaming her professors
the *wackulty*

asking his teacher
are thumbs the only things
that should be twiddled

old Minnesotan
cursing his young neighbors
using snow-blowers

an OCD teen
explaining why her carrots
and peas mustn't touch

Jets' long-snapper
dreaming of being named
the league's MVP

a four-year-old boy,
outside at midnight, holding
Mom's suicide note

100th birthday . . .
Great-Great-Grams placing
her first horserace bet

100th birthday . . .
Great-Great Gramps getting
his left ear pierced

pre-wedding . . . the bride
praying that her Mom and Dad
don't get plastered

at forty, hoping
his new beard comes in fuller
than last year's

Aunt Claudia
informing her French poodle
barking is gauche

Valentine's Day . . .
young couple in the clinic
with first-degree burns

half-asleep prof
intending *FYI*, but
typing *DUI*

mid-recession . . .
taxidermists complaining
business is dead

his blind date
wearing shorts stating
Your Massage Here

her blind date
sporting a tee proclaiming
Better Than I Look

informing Grandma
it's far better to receive
than to give

losing gymnast's Mom
slugging the reporter for
asking *How's it feel?*

double amputee
claiming his favorite song
is ZZ Top's *Legs*

pre first exam . . .
asking the prof how obscure
are her questions

Swindell the lawyer
pleading to have it pronounced
swin-DELL

Seattle youngsters
naming their little league team
the *Wets*

Duluth youngsters
naming their little league team
the *Thermal Sox*

batter's box . . .
the all-star crossing himself,
irking atheists

his date noting
she responds to rejection
with piercing shrieks

her date noting
he responds to stress
by getting naked

Gramps averring
he can't watch *Full House* due
to diabetes

Nana explaining
she can't watch *2 Broke Girls* due
to good taste

mid nursery rhyme . . .
a terrified four year-old
screaming *Stop!*

no sick days left . . .
the feverish cook chopping
between hacking coughs

a Charleston mother
bemoaning her debutante
joining the Marines

a young prof reading
the review, *You're super cute*
but not very bright

an old prof reading
the review, *You're not awful*
like everyone says

Olympic sprinter,
finishing in fourth place,
jeered by his wife

driving stoned . . .
spotting a cop, slowing down
to ninety-two

his father-in-law
despising the concept
of *I'm sorry*

thumbing through
Aunt Bev's old scrapbook, finding
umbilical stumps

thumbing through
Aunt Maude's old scrapbook, finding
Uncle Ed's mug shots

oral defense . . .
telling her Master's student
he's dumb, but not lazy

their son
responding to *I love you*
with *So?*

informing Granddad
old, balding men's ponytails
are pitiful

referring
to his kids as *the lawyer*,
the nurse and *the bum*

referring
to her exes as *the schmuck*,
the schlub and *the putz*

Oscar night ~ two men
in the bar brawling over
red carpet couture

the student writing
across the exam's last page
iluvu

the prof writing
across his student's report
WTF?

asking his girlfriend
to stop calling her Mom
Mother

begging her boyfriend
to cease calling his father
Daddy

first graders playing
checkers with ginger snaps
and snickerdoodles

Grandma Louise
vastly preferring *most feared*
to *best loved*

tense, hopeless teen
describing herself as a
panic-depressive

Abilene pastor
calling his church's altar
the hitching post

dumping
her boyfriend for applying
lip balm in public

dumping
his girlfriend for calling him
Cuddles in public

a Sherpa guide,
atop Mount Everest,
collecting trash

surgeons removing
an infant's brain tumor
containing teeth

asked to name
a source of heat, her grandson
replying *Hell*

their fifteen year-old
categorizing himself as
gender fluid

their sixteen year-old
categorizing herself as
transromantic

first of April . . .
a bowler knocking down pins
in the wrong alley

Boston man teaching
his three-year-old twins why
they should hate Yankees

a Sikh presuming
O'Dell, O'Toole, and Ozick
are all Irish

a Thai presuming
MacDuff, MacLeod, and Mac Weiss
are all Scottish

the prof explaining
to his RA from Gabon
a knock-knock joke

Muslim girl writing
she does not have the right
to bare arms

telling the doctor
she fears her toddler's laugh
is demonic

a boy answering

Who signed the Magna Carta?

with *Why do you care?*

a girl answering

Name two novels by Tolstoy

with *War and Peace*

her brother-in-law

slicing, eating the meatloaf

with a pocketknife

irking his teens

with the bumper sticker

Obummer!

the sailor claiming

his most favorite Seas are

Med, Red, and Dead

a seventh grader
stating crabs, shrimp, and lobsters
are *Crushed Asians*

old vet questioning
the psychotic man how long
his centaur's been ill

old vet requesting
the psychotic woman ride
her unicorn home

Ed and Linda Green
naming their newborn triplets
Fern, Olive, Hunter

in a deep sleep . . .
dreaming she is suffering
from insomnia

telling a colleague
her diamond engagement ring
is *Kitschy, but cute*

the general,
meaning to write *Warm regards,*
omitting the *m*

a sports cap vendor
hoping his grandson enrolls
at Stetson

a *Hostess* baker
hoping her grandson does not
enroll at Drake

an addict trying
to calm his screaming toddler
with methadone

contemplating
the ad of her Dad, the plumber:
Drains are my life

his great-nephew
believing Moses Malone
is Jewish

his great-niece
believing Yogi Berra
is Buddhist

two Nobelists
discussing their favorite
Jerry Lewis films

freshman Hugh Cox
informing his new classmates
it's not pronounced *Huge*

handing in her test
 while telling the professor
Please don't judge me

on his birthday
 a forty year-old pitching
 a perfect game

on her birthday
 an eighty year-old bowling
 a perfect game

the weatherman
 named Marat calling the storm
 the *Rain of Terror*

his new girlfriend
 noting that she finds cuddling
 much too intense

Saved

In the midst
of a loud, petty,
bitterly contentious
faculty meeting,
the elderly professor
gets a cell phone call
from his three-year-old
granddaughter imploring
Sing, Pop-Pop, Sing!

linguists creating
exquisite collective nouns
for lorikeets

linguists creating
accurate collective nouns
for congressmen

Ava and Otto,
lovers of palindromes,
buying a *Civic*

DC school window . . .
filling the bullet hole
with a sunflower

Dachau survivor
dining with his twelve grandkids . . .
triumphant



Author's Note

Dr. Robert H. Deluty is the Associate Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He has been a psychology professor at UMBC since 1980, and was named Presidential Teaching Professor in 2002. He and his wife, Barbara (a clinical psychologist), live in Ellicott City, Maryland and have two children, Laura and David, and two granddaughters, Ava and Claire. Dr. Deluty's poems and essays have been published in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Pegasus Review*, *Modern Haiku*, *Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy*, *Psychiatric Times*, *Jewish Currents*, the *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, *Welcome Home*, *Muse of Fire*, *Maryland Family Magazine*, *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, *The Faculty Voice*, and many other newspapers, journals, and anthologies. *Gifts in Disguise* is his forty-fifth book.

