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Fatherhood

Poems about Fathers

Selected and edited by

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Extract

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Unlike the subject of motherhood, which has inspired some of the most sentimental poems ever written, fatherhood as literary fodder seems always to have provoked more ambivalence. (You can trace bereft sons all the way back to Homer.) According to a despairing John Berryman, in a poem from *Dream Songs* (#241), "father" is "the loneliest word in the one language."

In this anthology, memories of poignant moments abound, such as Yeats's "Cradle Song," whose last lines are adapted from a Gaelic song: "I kiss you and kiss you, / With arms round my own, / Ah, how shall I miss you, / When, dear, you have grown." "Man's breathing Miniature!" writes Coleridge, awestruck and humbled by his newborn child in the tender "To an Infant." The birth of a child yields moments of humor, too, as in the Chinese poet Su Tung-P'o's witty "On the Birth of His Son": "I, through intelligence, / Having wrecked my whole life, / Only hope the baby will prove / Ignorant and stupid. / Then he will crown a tranquil life / By becoming a Cabinet Minister."

A number of poems in this collection, especially those describing fathers and sons, convey a vulnerability rarely written about. In "Dust as We Are," Ted Hughes remembers caring for his ailing father, and Howard Nemerov offers a father's bittersweet perspective on

dropping off his son at his classroom in "September, the First Day of School."

The bond between fathers and daughters can be especially strong. In Louise Glück's "Snow," the speaker recalls her father carrying her on his shoulders to see the circus: "My father liked / to stand like this, to hold me / so he couldn't see me." Katha Pollitt's "A Chinese Bowl" offers a quotidian scene of family life: a girl sits curled up on the floor writing a play called "Bean Soup and Rice," as her father sits at his desk immersed in his work: "I think, This is happiness," she writes.

Grandfathers make appearances as well, whether as a surrogate father (Robert Lowell's "Dunbarton") or as an influence from beyond the grave, as in Charles Reznikoff's brief poem "My Grandfather, Dead Long Before I was Born." Elizabeth Bishop's intimate, child-like "For Grandfather" is a wistful missive: "How far north are you by now?" she asks. "Where is your seal-skin cap with ear-lugs? / That old fur coat with the black frogs? / You'll catch your death again."

The section entitled "Sorrow, Fury, Regret" captures most pointedly the dramatic variability of the father–child relationship. Perhaps no poem is as explicit and powerful as Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," which describes an idealized yet oppressive father, one whom the speaker rejects with a resounding, forceful brutality. It is Plath's

defining poetic utterance, and surely among the most searing poems ever written.

The book's final section explores loss – in some cases that of a father, and in others, perhaps the most painful loss of all, that of a child. In "On My First Son," Ben Jonson mourns his seven-year-old: "Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy; / My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy.... Oh, could I lose all father, now!"

Writing as daughters and sons, and as fathers themselves, these poets convey the profound (and profoundly complicated) nature of the father–child bond. In some instances it is more fraught than loving; yet, as the poems here amply demonstrate, it can also provide lessons in forgiveness, reconciliation, gratitude, and love.

Carmela Ciuraru

BECOMING: ON BIRTH AND INFANCY

"GOLDEN SLUMBERS KISS YOUR EYES"

Golden slumbers kiss your eyes,
Smiles awake you when you rise.
Sleep, pretty wantons, do not cry,
And I will sing a lullaby:
Rock them, rock them, lullaby.

Care is heavy, therefore sleep you;
You are care, and care must keep you.
Sleep, pretty wantons, do not cry,
And I will sing a lullaby:
Rock them, rock them, lullaby.

ÉTUDE RÉALISTE

I

A baby's feet, like sea-shells pink,
  Might tempt, should Heaven see meet,
An angel's lips to kiss, we think,
    A baby's feet.

Like rose-hued sea-flowers toward the heat
  They stretch and spread and wink
Their ten soft buds that part and meet.

No flower-bells that expand and shrink
  Gleam half so heavenly sweet
As shine on life's untrodden brink
    A baby's feet.

II

A baby's hands, like rosebuds furled,
  Whence yet no leaf expands,
Ope if you touch, though close upcurled,
    A baby's hands.

Then, even as warriors grip their brands
  When battle's bolt is hurled,
They close, clenched hard like tightening bands.

No rosebuds yet by dawn impearled
Match, even in loveliest lands,
The sweetest flowers in all the world –
A baby's hands.

III

A baby's eyes, ere speech begin,
Ere lips learn words or sighs,
Bless all things bright enough to win
A baby's eyes.

Love, while the sweet thing laughs and lies,
And sleep flows out and in,
Lies perfect in them Paradise.

Their glance might cast out pain and sin,
Their speech make dumb the wise.
By mute glad godhead felt within
A baby's eyes.