

Fatherhood at Fifty

a selection of poems
by Joseph Lisowski

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Biography & Acknowledgements



From 1986 to 1996, Joseph Lisowski was Professor of English at the University of the Virgin Islands. St. Thomas serves as the setting for Looking for Lisa, his recently published novel now available from Fiction Works (www.fictionworks.com). Dr. Lisowski is now teaching at Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina.

His web page may be seen at:

<http://www.netpoetry.org/judges/jlisowski.htm>.

Recent chapbooks include *Letters to Wang Wei*, poems and two essays, (*Words on a Wire*); *After Death's Silence* (2River View); and *Grief Work* (Kota Press), *JB*, a dialogue in poem form between John the Baptist and King Herod (PoetryRepairShop), and *Stashu Kapinski Strikes Out* (Rank Stranger Press).

An earlier version of some of the FATHERHOOD poems appeared briefly (from June through September, 2000) on *A Writer's Choice*, a web site by Leslie Blanchard.

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Delivery

"Honey, I think you need
to run the red lights."
I tramp the pedal to the floor.
Thank God, it's early Sunday morning.

I rush into the emergency entrance.
My wife moaning, waddles behind.
"Labor! Labor!" I shout.
A nurse points to the elevator.
"Second floor," she says, returning to her magazine.
There are chicken bones on the floor.
Chicken bones! Both my wife and I laugh.
It's St. Thomas, all right.
Then the ripping pain.

The doctor is called, a mid wife comes.
The baby is coming, is coming!
The delivery table is broken flat.
I lie behind my wife's back,
tilt upward to brace her bearing down.
She elbows me in the side
when she wants to relax.
I flatten out, she leans back
gasping for breath.
This is not how we practiced,
not what the classes and books said.
Up again, sharp elbows, down again.

Then he comes, swift, sleek, strong.
The doctor catches him, breaks him free,
swinging the baby's head toward me.
I turn, sweat dripping from my brow.
The boy opens his eyes not five inches
from mine, and by God, I swear he smiles
before loosing that first long wail.

Rapture

At five weeks, Jozef smiles, cranes his neck.
Eyes, cobalt blue, scan the rafters.
I look at the thick pine,
cannot fathom what he sees.
He's intent. Something must be there.
I look again, trace the timbers
to joices, spy a few cobwebs
wafting in the intermittent breeze.
His focus holds.
Angels, I think.
He must be seeing angels.

I break his plane of sight
touching my nose to his.
He stretches more.
Beyond my eyes.
Beyond my looming head.
Beyond my need for attention.

Ballroom Dancers

He still scans the rafters--
Angels or maybe low slung stars,
I don't know. I'm at a loss.
We dance
to an old Simon and Garfunkle tune.
The boy arches back
arms akimbo, head tilted.
There's rhapsody in our dip.

In the reflection of the patio glass
I look decades younger
and he, only a blur in my quick turns.
I think of my daughter,
our reckless dancing years ago.

The music stops
at the same spot it always had.
He resists me pulling him close,
eyes still fixed above.
I feel it's best not to interfere.
It is not just us two.
I can see in his eyes
he's still dancing
somewhere up there
with the sister
he'll never touch to know.

A Mild Case

He cries the afternoon.
Evening follows with more tears.
A sour stomach, a rash,
constipation perhaps,
anything but loneliness.
My wife and I take turns walking him.
He stills then starts again.
"Hush little baby, don't say a word"

We've become too dependent on language,
as if saying the malady
provides half the cure.

A baby cries. His parents
hold him, walk or rock.
A baby cries. A new version
of an ageless tune.

Evening Song

I cradle him in my arms.
He sings a new song--
B sharp followed by hard Gs.
His thin blond hair
waves in the breeze
like leaves of a young palm,
head bobs against my chest.
Then he arches way back,
lets loose a high C,
and stares at me
with eyes blue as the Caribbean.

A banana quit alights on our deck railing,
hops to the sugar bowl filled for early dinner.
My son continues his song, scaring
the bird to a nearby hibiscus.
Others perch on its branches.
I whistle like an asthmatic thrush.
They twitter in the bush.

A Regular Church Goer

Little Jozef is reverent, attentive,
until the sermon starts.

Then he arches his back,
studies the cathedral ceiling.

Up there, I'm convinced
are angels, maybe saints
who also find the homily boring.

He speaks to them
with strong, certain tones.

What a grand time he has,
laughing and rocking,
arms flailing. What's this
new song unto the Lord?

The priest stops, glances our way.

The congregation clears its throat.

The lector pages through the hymnal
trying to find the right note.

The organ sounds again,
and my son keeps to his own key.

Dinner Time

My baby boy blows bubbles of saliva.
I blow air in his face and break them.
He smiles, starts to laugh.
I warn him what I'll do
if he blows them again.
He does and I do.
We both laugh.

I pause to eat a shrimp, a forkful
of baked potato, some lima beans.
He bubbles again.
I blow them out.
He gives me one of those looks
some would interpret as gas.
"Manners," I instruct him,
waving a shrimp tail
in front of his face.
His eyes follow it greedily.
"Here, son," I move it to mouth.
"Don't you dare," my wife scolds.
"Hey, I'm only giving him a whiff.
I promise, I won't give him any," I reply.
"Not until maybe next week."

Day Care

I doze amid his struggle for sleep.
Hand patting his back, I try
to ease dyspepsia, summer tropic heat.
He grunts, growls, rubs his face
into the sheet, kicks and stretches.
He misses his mother, I'm sure.
She'll be back but not for a while.
She's at work full time now,
three month maternity leave at an end.

Our mornings sway an easy routine--
feeding, prayers, followed by reading
his book of sounds and play with
Mr. Bear with Bunny Feet,
Mrs. Rabbit Green Ears. Bath time
is next and he squeals with glee,
splashing and kicking, soaking
kitchen counter and floor.
A quick song of "Bye Baby Bunting"
as I swaddle him dry.

"My turn next," I say
and put him in his infant seat.
He watches me shower, reaches
for the thick lather of my shampooed head,
finds surprise in how the bubbles disappear.

The morning is complete with greeting
of birds and lizards, filling sugar bowls
so they can eat. He plays with a mobile
I attach to his chair--yellow butterfly,
blue clown, triangles of red, yellow, and blue
on a green ring. Another bottle
and a thirty minute nap before
we begin a long, ponderous afternoon.

He knows his mother's absence,
bravely faces the loss. His restless waiting
punctuates our play, our pacing and rocking.

Flamboyant Season

Bougainvillea blossom bright orange
and purple in drought.
Rain is late in coming
like promised government funds
like universal health care
like remedies for the poor and homeless
like an end to violence.
Crops have failed.
A few thin cattle
are rushed to market.
Even my neighbor's goat's bleat is weak.

In spite of it all, my son grows strong in laughter,
and the flamboyant trees continue to bloom.

Hope

Jozef smiles in his sleep.
I watch the fluttering behind his closed eyes.
Happy dreams are an anomaly to me.
He coos too. I lie alongside him,
on guard for mosquitoes.

He was born into my late life,
sowing a joy I never imagined,
a harvest cornucopia I can't contain.
I listen to his breathing,
stroke his fine hair.
He smiles again.
Could I have once been like this?
It's more than I can believe,
a secret that I can barely glimpse.

Soon he will wake.
A few stretches, a yawn,
a baby tiger growl and then a smile.
I'll talk to him, asking
about his dream, calling
him sweet names.
With him in my arms, I'll walk
through every room, introduce
him again to whatever we pass.
He'll bob his head, and when I whistle
at the banana quits feeding on our deck,
he'll gurgle a dictionary of sounds.

This is how the morning officially begins.

"Blessed Are...."

At last, a long nap,
an afternoon of easy tropical breezes.
He hardly stirs. No sound
but the wind fluttering blinds,
occasional chirps of birds.

After days of drooling,
gnawing his fingers, my thumb,
he's done it.
Pushing that first tooth through
is hard work.
I, too, can rest, catch up on chores,
read, relax, write this.
But I must confess
that after two hours,
I lie down alongside his crib,
and listen to the lullaby
of his regular rhythmic breath.
Who can say I am not blessed?

An Even Exchange

Months slip by, and I fear
years will too. His teeth,
all four of them, clamp
my knuckle as he shakes his head
like a dog worrying a rag,
threatening to break skin.

Letting go, he sings an aubade,
somewhere between a warble and a growl.
I fit him in the Snugli,
and we hike the neighborhood.
He never tires of trees, flower gardens,
the kids shouting as we pass.
I never tire of him,
his twenty-five pounds, strong heartbeat
pressed against my chest.

First Seizure

How long does a seizure last?

Months? Years?

I was a young man
when his face first flushed,
belly full of heat.

Twitching followed shortly after,
and then the cries--
weak gasps, moans.

Light and dark folded alike,
the baby shaking in my arms,
unable to lie still or alone.

Snow fell, jammed the window sill,
turned to ice, melted somewhere
in our rocking. Night sweats, day sweats.
Tylenol cooled him enough to half open
eyes that searched for succor,
finding only our inadequate love.

I dream awake
of our far away island life,
the healthy sun, soothing wind.
He knew no illness then.
I pass a mirror, see my hair
grow thin, skin sag and crack.

Century Clock

His mother is working late.
The weather's inclement,
and he fights sleep again.
I sing tired lullabies,
read familiar stories.
"Where's Spot?" and "Pat the Bunny"
are his favorites.
He loves turning pages.

I think of the Dick and Jane books
that I read as a kid,
their dog Spot, my dog Shep.
A millennium is about to turn.
The century clock ticks.
What new age will my son sift
from the memories of these books?
What will he be thinking of
when he reads a new age
to his sleepy son when his wife is away?

Games

He tinkers with a xylophone
not quite getting a grip.
Then to blocks perfect for pitching.
Little wooden children from the school bus
sail through the air next.
He has a great arm for everything
but the miniature green basketball
I throw again and again in his lap,
which he doesn't catch but pushes aside.

Postscript

Some days I don't know
where I end, where my son
begins. He is attached
to my sight, my vision, my soul.

Like a hand or an ear or a foot,
we go everywhere together.