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Fathers and other gifts | poems and translations

Michele M. Taipale
The University of Montana

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FATHERS AND OTHER GIFTS:
POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS

by

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B.A., University of Washington, 1980
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1982

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[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

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Fathers and Other Gifts

I used to think all fathers lived among clouds, swirled down from the sky, once a month, bearing gifts from Hong Kong, Guadeloupe, Beirut -- places whose names tripped the tongue and rang through the house while the fathers were gone. And in the absence of all fathers, I grew. Up and up.

I strained and stretched to grow, but never up enough to reach the fathers. So I learned the names of clouds -- cumulous, nimbus, stratus, ciro-stratus -- and the absence became a presence, a gift from the clouds. A gift culled from their vapours and the dust of your leaving.

The house was crammed full of that gift. It almost took your place.

But tell me, Father, do you have a place? Is nimbus your place? Is Guadeloupe? How far up must a father go? The questions echoed through the house and rattled windows. But answers never fell from the clouds. I still have the doll from Fairbanks and other gifts to make a presence of your inevitable absence.

That rhinoceros from Helsinki, he's the most absent of all. His thin grin and stone stare remind me of no place and maybe that's the secret. Maybe that's the most valuable gift.

But what to make of it? Twenty years, Father, I've stared up and, today, the skyline is endless. There are no clouds,
nothing to cast your shadow over my house.

And here, wrapped in blue sky and the dubious walls of my house,
I lock and unlock doors, refining the art of absence.
Someone is always leaving, disappearing like a cloud over some final horizon. And I am always out of place,
waving good-bye from a doorstep, shielding my eyes and looking up
to gauge the weather or find an answer -- some small parting gift.

But I leave as often as anyone, Is that the trick? the gift?
leaving first? I've almost mastered it. I'll leave this house
and others. But how far, Father, how far up can a daughter go? Every absence rings clearly now and, wherever I go, I'm no place -- staring up at sullen skies and impenetrable clouds

of my own making, my gift to myself, the absence I inhabit like a house. It's no sort of place, Father -- not far enough up, nowhere close to the clouds.
Low Tide

I wait like a starfish stranded
belly up on the beach,
stomach squeezed out through my mouth
swallowing the sun.

Come, beware of nothing.
With two firm fingers, lift me,
place me in your left palm.
The eyes I do not have
will never judge you.

Take me home. I will live
in a fishbowl
on your kitchen table.
Mornings, I will reflect your
moods through the rising sun.

Give me still water,
inflexible walls.
You will notice me
when you want to.
I hardly breathe.
Acrostic #43

Least of all I suspected you
Of plot or theme. Until
Over our locked limbs and scumbled
Kisses, you pitched your tent --
Immovable. We hadn't planned on that.
Networks of sure footing and straight thought
Gave way beneath your sudden weight.

Already we have lost sight of separate endings,
Taken each other's imperfections for our own.

Tasting the rareness of such days, we
Harvest each one the way sun harvests ocean
Employing it later in the bruise and

Muted drift of lakes. Between your
Obsessive course and ours: only the slender length
Of the needle tipping the compass
North to the center of uncertain things.
Acrostic #46

Palms of my hands sunk in dirt --
Love, my friends, may be just this:
Alter the course of weeds and watch
New growth, like weeds, spring from the soil.
To till the soil, become a bit like soil.
In every earthworm lurks another worm.
Never doubt the severed worm's struggle,
grim and undetermined, to reunite.

To till the soil, become the worm.
How little one knows of the earth,
Everything matters now.

Gather the chill of the soil
Around you. This is home now. Make do.
Remember your life
Depends on this digging down:
Escaping the sun is essential.
Now, you and the earth are one.

In the ground; you defecate
Nothing but earth as you go.

(stanza break)
Maybe this is essential:
After the madness of weeds and soil in Spring
Remember the little we learn
Curing the ground of the little we know
Hands dirt deep in March.
Defining the Problem

1
Somewhere in Texas
a woman say, "the problem is
everybody wants more
than there is."

2
Pieces of a man
are strewn along the sidewalk.
A wife sobs. She says, "the problem
is no one is in control anymore."

3
An expert says,
"reality has become unpleasant
and I think that is the problem."

4
A high school survey concludes,
"the problem is serious."

5
"As a starving child shrivels," someone has noticed, "his eyes become larger." The person says, "the problem is not that there is not enough food."

(stanza break)
A writer wins a Nobel prize and says, "the problem is that love has become an abstraction. We must re-invent love."

* all quotations from NEWSWEEK magazine
Gynecologist
to Dr. Lamey

With your plastic-wrapped fingers
poking and probing the irregular walls,
with your cold metal tube, your imaginative
mind, your KY jelly, and piercing
blue eyes, what do you find?

I admit, I've tried the same thing.
I've poked and I've probed, looked in the mirror
for some sign of what you hide
but I haven't your mind or years of devotion --
have only seen that it really does
resemble somewhat,

and I do not like, oysters
or clams. It's that wrap-around
paper gown, the great white sheet
that covers my thighs like mysterious
hills, that intrigue me so. Could you give me

a hint or is your training too strict?
"Hmmm" you say, or "AhhhHaaa" --
everything functions
as it should, but even I know that.
Give me a glimmer of hope, tell me
it's the best you've seen all day --
lie if you must.

Please, doctor, please give me
an imaginative prescription for imaginary pain.
The history inscribed on my vulva, in the strength of vaginal muscles, must tell you something about my imaginary pains -- they stem from a conviction that what you see is just about all you get.
Of Worms and Madness

We were sitting in the sandbox
cutting up worms
when you wiped the blade on your lederhosen
and remarked that any fragment of a worm
can make a hole, burrow so deep
it can't be found. Then you asked me
to marry you. I said no.

But that was twenty years ago
and it would be odd of me
to think of it now
if I hadn't just heard about you and worms.

It began like this:
Accidentally,
you found out
you were adopted
and, ten years after you'd swung an axe
at his head for killing the rabbit,
your adopted father died
and your adopted brother was popular,
always did well at school,
and your adopted mother worried
about appearances and some girl
didn't love you.

You imagined
no one had ever loved you
and you went mad --
killed cats and picked
their brains, set fire
to your clothes and plunked
wildly at the piano
you once controlled
exquisitely.

They put you away,
made you wear a white coat
and put square blocks into square
holes, circular blocks
into circular holes,
and the holes grew bigger
darker and lovelier
and you thought you could enter,
put a razor in your wrist
that you might drown in a hole.
But they pulled you out

and now you're home again
which is a different sort of hole
and you are still on fire,
still wetting the bed,
cramming the pillow with dreams
and tears and still, so I've heard,
sitting in the sandbox
watching the fragments
burrow into the dirt so deep
they can't be found.
Defrosting

I am watching ice
drop in precise chunks
from the freezer walls,
the coldest water dripping
into a pale blue bucket.

With a sponge the breadth
of my wide thighs, I've sopped up
every trace of milk spilled
and blood dripped from carelessly
wrapped hunks of meat.

I've thrown out, finally,
the berry jam I'd made and saved
until it was eaten by blue-green
mould. For months, I watched
that mould flourish.

Now, I will watch this ice until the last
drop of water falls, until warmth
has replaced this empty space
and the clean white walls
envelop everything.
Repossessing the Night

Friends, you have plagued my nights long enough with your insatiable skeletons. This is your last chance. This is the last time I will tolerate your bones in my dreams. A heap of memories bound by love will prop those bones, and I will make you dance all night because, in the morning, you will have to leave, all of you, forever. You Kathy, fifty feet under the sea you removed the mouthpiece -- as if you thought water were enough to sustain you. Look, it wasn't my fault and my nights are not your rightful resting place. I had no chance to save you, everyone agrees, and nothing like love will bring you back now. So go away with your bitter bones.

And Caroline, your almost perfect body was bone-white when they found it in the roadside rubble. You had pressed the pedal down stupidly because you loved the way the world blurred, because there was never enough motion, because you were drunk, because taking the chance seemed like fun -- as it had been all those other nights.

And you, Diana, are another statistic proving that night is not a good time for women, or anyone, whose bones are likely to shatter if, by chance, some man chooses to pick up an axe, to strike you precisely on the head and then, as if that weren't enough, to confess and tell the world he did it for love.

(stanza break)
I tell you, I have begun to wonder a great deal about love. Was it love, Lola, that made you kill yourself that night? Or was it a lack of love? or had you simply had enough? Did you watch the razor slice through flesh and stop at bone? you should have left a note explaining it all. Because of you I got drunk and had to sleep with strangers for months. The chance

that, if left alone, I'd see the world the way you did, was a chance I didn't want to take. I am not brave and I love life even at its worst. Friends, there is nothing I can do for you anymore. I am repossessing my inadequate nights. You will no longer inhabit my dreams and fill them with bones, bones and young blood because I really have had enough.

I am giving you this last chance, this last night, because I did love you and did keep your bones alive for years and you should understand that I have had enough.
Acrostic #1

When all else fails,
Invent a man. Make him perfect.
Six days is all it takes, on the seventh
His heart is yours. Hold that heart
Firmly against your breast
Until its beat becomes the one
Lucid rhythm you breathe by.

This is a man you can trust --
His tongue erases pain, his hands
Instinctively gather your tears into a
Necklace of bloodstones. Wear it,
Keep it pressed against your skin.
In one week, you will be happy.
Nothing can go wrong. Shut your eyes,
Give him a name, keep it secret even from yourself.
Acrostic #2

What is it you want?
He asks. And I want to tell him
About a woman who sits alone at night in the mountains
Trying to seduce the wind.

I want to ask him:

Would you love a woman who
Imagines herself the sole reason for rain, whose dreams
Settle like snow over the scant distance between your
life and hers,
Her distances distorted by dreams that settle like snow?

I want to tell him:

Her eyes startle the sun
As she glances skyward
Dispersing clouds.

Tonight, she will sleep with thunder and dream
Of lightning's jealousy. Tonight, as you caress your
Lovely wife, think of this woman who
Drifts through fog dreaming she has married the weather.

He asks: What is it you want?
I want to tell him:
My hands tremble, prepare for the storm.
Acrostic #3

Never turn your back
On her. She dabbles in magic,
Turns men to trout.

Amazing how easy it is.

Wearing nothing but moonlight, she begins
Incantations. Worms crawl from her fingertips,
Spiders drop from the walls. Watch
Her long hair fly.

Beautiful as she is, beware.
Unlike other women, she will feel at home
Tumbling through your rickety dreams.

Maybe, as she runs her fingers down your
Aching spine, it will seem a remedy. You might respond
To her tightening grip by tightening yours. And then,
Tasting the bitter heat of her magic, you might try
Escape. Too late. You enter her like quicksand,
Ricochet through veins and race upstream to her heart.

Oh yes, she does have a heart. You will find it crammed
Full of steelhead and sea-run cutthroat,
Full of lust and dreams of falling in air,
Apologies. No, she is not
Cruel by nature: it is only that
This is what a woman must sometimes do.
Rooster Meat

I don't care that a chicken's brain
is only the size of a thumbnail, I cling
to Grandmother's long skirts. The skin
on my arms puckers like a plucked bird's.

The farmer says: a bargain,
two roosters for the price of a hen.
Chickens flutter at our feet
and peck at our boots as we pass.

I have heard that a rooster's body,
after the axe has fallen, will run about
headless. But these, that Grandmother
chose, only twitch and quiver.

Sunday, rooster meat is piled
on a platter at Grandmother's side.
Pieces are passed the length of the table
and on my plate rests a thigh thick as my arm.

This is the ancient recipe
grandmother keeps, but it is not enough
to hide the barnyard pulse
still throbbing in this meat.
In All Our Games,

Brother, you made me die.  
I played the Indian, the Commie  
the Spy -- and you  
and your friends always tied me up,  
shot me down.  

I must have died  
a thousand times for you  
and would have died as many more  
because I admired, wanted  
to be like you. Bad,  

brilliantly bad, like you  
who sent our mother screaming  
from the house as often  
as I brought her back. For years,  
I got along well with her  

only because you didn't.  
And, because you didn't, she sent  
you away -- boarding school.  
I was eight then,  
and began to dream you.  

Words you'd long outgrown  
spilled from my mouth  
like sludge, if your hair  
had been unreasonably  
long, mine would be unreasonably short.  
(stanza break)
When I was fourteen,
I was sent away too. Now,
you come in the mail three times a year.
Your card says: Happy Birthday, Christmas or Valentine's.
I've been so busy.

But Brother, I am still
dreaming -- not of you
but of a man like you. Every night
through sleep
he trails me

until my feet turn to slugs
and I stick in my own slime,
until his hard words
become harsh bricks, until the bricks
have been lain all around me and cemented
with love.
That Time of Year

Of course, it's in the air.
Bare legs and arms, white
as the winter left behind,

appear everywhere. Under trees
laden with blossoms, pink, yellow,
and vibrant with bees,

dogs couple. A man walks by
and a woman wonders
where his shirt tail is tucked.

The sunsets have been perfectly
primitive: cerise melting
into magenta over mountaintops.

Talk between strangers
is sensational. Sparks fly
from their tongues and every

nerve ending catches fire.
This is when the old grow young
and the young begin worrying

about growing old. Damp grass
careses bare feet and, like worms,
the toes dig into the earth.
Everything is on the verge
of ripeness and women's breasts
are rounder and lovelier

than ever. No one will admit
to not being in love. We cherish
the stars and inevitable moon

so conscious of our own
imperfections and longing to touch
those of others.

Press a hand to your lips
and call it love. In memory's
cauldron, the present

has already altered. It's all instinct
and good weather. Everyone is lusting
after anyone.
Chateau d'Yquem

A bee lands in the glass,
circles my last drop
of Chateau d'Yquem and,
like an ancient priestess, dips
into the wine, intent on some forgotten
ritual. Still burning with the sun
of distant French summers, this wine
weaves the history of a Sauterne vineyard
into the substance of her cells.

The thick sweet taste
of Chateau d'Yquem is the product
of "pourriture noble". Noble rot,
the mold that attacks grapes until they shrivel
like raisins on the vine
and raise a mist of spores. In 1859
the Duke of Russia paid 5,000 gold francs
for a single barrel of Chateau d'Yquem
and, last year, a bottle, vintage 1806,
sold for 28,000 dollars. Mine was '63, a gift.

The bee flies from my glass,
circles once above my head and disappears.
I like to think she does not return
to the hive today, but takes off, instead,
above rooftops and hilltops and dies mid-air --
the magic of Chateau d'Yquem, of kings
and queens, a certain patch
of land and the bright Bordeaux sun,
still pulsing in her wings.
Taking the Taxi Home, 17th Birthday

The driver laughs
when you tell him
he has taken the wrong
turn, laughs
little girl, I'm gonna show you
what a real man can do.

But it isn't until
he stops the cab and you feel
cold steel like ice
against your cheek
that you understand
just how real.

Show you, yes
I'm gonna show you and he does.
With his fingers
firmly on your throat
he presses your voice
out through the window like smoke.

This power he has,
it's almost magic.
He arranges your limbs
and they stay put
just where he wants them,
just like dolls'.

As your ankle cracks
against the steering wheel,
his final groan
melts your face like fire --
so real. He will not
kill you.

With the blade
resting gently
against your thigh, he says
you're not gonna tell, huh?
Not gonna tell no one.
And no, of course you're not.

You'll tell your folks
you're limping because stupidly
you tripped down stairs, he laughs
because he knows you will.
He tells you the fare and laughs
but you don't need to pay.

True, this is a dream
you've had
but always before,
you would wake.
Every Year

Every fall
I fatten
like a well-fed
piglet. I grow,
almost rudely, out of proportion,
ripen like a peach bursting
with the need to be eaten.
Winter, there's so much of me
even I can't love it all.
"The ovum split unequally. What would have been your twin was absorbed by your embryo during the first weeks of gestation in your mother's womb. As you grew up, it grew inside you. That is the teratoma." Dr. Strand to my mother.

* 

The size of a lumberjack's fist
that lump of flesh -- monster
grey, with three teeth, yellow hair --
for thirty-five years
she clung to your bladder wall
amazed at being
no one.

But when they found her, what a surprise!
They put her picture in a medical book --
an honor even you, Mother,
who've mothered marvelous ailments,
never have received.

And I remember how they sent you home --
er in a jar of formaldehyde, you
in stitches and pain. Six years
you kept her on the kitchen shelf
between dried parseley and sage.
When no one was home, I shook the jar
imagining she was you, your teeth
smacking the glass.

(stanza break)
When we moved, you left her behind.
Left her behind because, you said,
the formaldehyde had grown cloudy.
Because she got more attention than you.

*

Your father
didn't like complications,
left you
before you were born.

Your mother
died when you were three
and thirty years later
you gave me her name

so I'd never forget.
Never forget the orphanage
or the way they tied
your arms to a 2 by 4
to keep you from sucking your thumb,
the way they shaved your head
for running away
with your thumb
and the way the stubbled scalp itched
reminding you
you'd had no place to go.

No place, Mother, because the one
time you were adopted,
to replace a daughter who'd died,
they sent you back a year later
and that year you discovered
a new kind of pain.

The visible kind. The physical
visible pain that opens doors
to pity and love. And you
grew to love white hospital hands, white
hospital gowns, white hospitals.
You made pain your pet,
your specialty. And there is nothing
you wouldn't do for pain.

*

I tried breaking things.

In '72, for the third time, my leg --
the tibia cracked twice across
and split clear down the middle.
I thought I'd really done it that time.

Six months, I watched a spider
spin, re-spin, her sticky web
above my bed. But
there was always some flaw.

When they removed the cast,
my leg -- useless reptile, thin,
covered with thick dead skin -- wouldn't
function properly. And you
couldn't bear my limping.
(stanza break)
So in '73, I smashed my face.
Teeth sliced right through the upper lip,
an incisor dangled stupidly,
and blood mapped the landscape between us
on the fresh, crisp, snow.

My six year streak of accidents, Mother,
and not one of them
good enough.

*

I sent myself to boarding school.
You sent letters about migraines,
the pain of my absence.

For years, I wore
gray skirts and ate nothing
but bread and potatoes.

From my math class window
I watched the Alps cringe
and grow immense, I watched
fields of wheat turn into
wonderful loaves of oven fresh
bread. Rattling my pens,
I dreamt constantly
of dying. The huge eye
of a cow slipped, in Biology,
from under my blade, rolled
to the floor and danced
like a marble. I'd had enough.
(stanza break)
But you, Mother,
had discovered how much easier
it was to love me
when I wasn't there.

*

I'm not there now, Mother.
Six years ago, I came to America.
You got migraines, sold the chalet and moved --
have been moving for six years.

Mother, you move leaving pieces behind
wherever you go and still
there's enough of you left
to slip through my window at night,
slash my dreams with the surgeon's scalpel,
the smell of blood, of pain, of your mother's/my name.

Now, Mother, this is my
flesh split beneath the blade, my
tongue dry and swollen, stuck
to the roof of my mouth and, Mother,
my own warm blood spattered on the sick
white sheets. Mine because
in this dream, Mother, in this dream
they are cutting you out of my heart.
Fog Land

In winter my lover
is an animal of the woods.
That I must return before morning
the vixen knows, and she laughs.
How the clouds tremble! And
on my coatcollar falls
a brittle layer of ice.

In winter my lover
is a tree of the forest and summons
the forsaken crows
to her beautiful boughs. She knows
when dusk arrives the wind
will raise her stiff frost-trimmed
gown and chase me home.

In winter my lover
is a fish among fish and mute.
Slave to the waters that stir
at the stroke of her fins,
I stand at the shore and watch
her dive and soar
till ice floes drive me away.

And again, struck by the bird's
hunt cry as she reaches her wings
above my head, I fall
on the open field: she plucks
chickens and throws me a white
wishbone. I hang it round my neck
and go forth through the bitter down.

(stanza break)
My lover is faithless,
I know she sometimes glides
down to the city on high-heeled shoes,
in bars, with her straw she kisses
the glasses deep on the mouth
and for everyone she finds words.
Still, this language, I do not understand.

I have seen fog land.
I have eaten fog heart.
The respite

Harder times are coming.
Revocation of the respite
grows visible on the horizon.
Soon you must tie your shoe
and chase the dogs back to marshland farms.
For the entrails of fish
have grown cold in the wind.
The light of the lupines burns poorly.
Your gaze wavers in fog:
revocation of the respite
grows visible on the horizon.

Over there, your lover sinks from you into the sand,
it rises to her billowing hair,
it smothers her speech,
it commands her silence,
it finds her mortal
and willing to part
after every embrace.

Do not look back.
Tie your shoe.
Chase back the dogs.
Throw the fish to sea.
Extinguish the lupines!

Harder times are coming.
Twilight

Once again, we lay our hands in the fire,
you for the wine of the long fermented night,
I for the fountain of dawn, stranger to the winepress.
The bellows of the master we trust, they are waiting.

As sorrow warms him, the glass-blower approaches.
He leaves before daybreak, he comes before you call,
he is old
as the twilinght on our thinking brows.

Once again, he cooks lead in the cauldron of tears,
a glass for you -- to celebrate all you've missed --
that smoke-filled fragment for me -- it will be emptied
over the fire.
And thus I fall toward you making the shadows ring.

We know who hesitates now,
know who forgot the promise.
You can and will not know,
you drink from the edge where it's cool
and, as always, you drink and stay sober,
your brows still grow, you still call attention to yourself!

But I am already, at this moment,
in love, for me the fragment falls
into the fire, for me it turns to lead
as it was before. And behind that bullet
I stand, one-eyed, well-aimed, small,
and send it against the morning.
TRANSLATIONS OF POEMS BY PAUL CELAN
Tenebrae

We are close, Lord, close and within reach.

Already reached, Lord, and clawing at one another as if each of our bodies were your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord, pray to us, we are close.

Warped and weathered, we went there, we went there to bow over the trenches and anoxic waters.

We went to the watering place, Lord.

It was blood, it was what you had shed, Lord.

It shone.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord. Eyes and mouth are standing so open and empty, Lord.

(stanza break)
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are close.
Count the Almonds

Count the almonds,
count what was bitter and kept you awake,
count me along with it:

I watched for your eye as you glanced up and no one saw you,
I spun that secret thread
on which the dew that you thought
flowed down to the jugs
guarded by a decree that reached no one's heart.

It was there that, for the first time, you stepped fully
into the name that is yours,
that, sure-footed, you stepped into yourself,
that the hammers swung free in the belfry of your silence,
that the listening joined you,
that even the dead put its arm around you
and you walked, the three of you, through the evening.

Make me bitter.
Count me along with the almonds.
Webs Between Words

their time-halo --
a puddle,

grayfishboned behind
the phosphorescent crown
Meaning.

Litter of Possessions, Edging on Dust

Evening after evening,
extracted from thought,
the messages drift in,
kinglyharsh, nightharsh,
in the hands of grievance-bearers:

out of the breach
of their life-lines
comes the soundless answer:
the one perpetual
drop
of gold.