

# MORE LIGHT

FATHER & DAUGHTER POEMS

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN SELECTION



EDITED BY JASON SHINDER

A HARVEST ORIGINAL

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## Father & Daughter Poems

A Twentieth-Century American Selection

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## *I n t r o d u c t i o n*

I often recall my father's affection for his young daughter, Nina, my sister. He would frequently come home tired, emerging from the depths of an extremely long day of working at the restaurants he owned in Brooklyn. His face, voice, manner, and figure seemed sad when he and I would say hello. Yet his reaction was always a surprise to me when my sister would appear. It seemed as if my father suddenly let go of the tiredness, bitterness, and sorrow that was eating up his life and the lives of those around him. The sight of his daughter, often running toward him, liberated him. I imagined, in fact, that these encounters helped liberate, in some mysterious, unexplainable way, his love for me.

When he greeted her, he had a habit of saying "Hi princess," with a pleased, satisfied expression on his face. It was very friendly, and it was also faintly, mockingly conspiratorial—as if they were partners in league against the world. He became an ally to her, a witness, a friend, and, alas!, a kind of lover. His voice would become lighter, sweet, with a melody in it. His body seemed to become more firm than soft, more tall than short, and his grin more boyish even than in pictures from his childhood.

My sister was puffed up with pleasure because her father so adored her. She seemed determined to dedicate all her energies to making him adore her even more. She would sit beside him at the dinner table long after dinner was over, anxious for him to remain awake, interested in her. She would talk excitedly about one thing, then another, staying one step ahead as his eyes threatened to close from lack of sleep.

I am sure my father realized how hard his daughter was trying to please him. Her efforts seemed to make him feel

recognized, as if for the first time, for his own efforts, as father, as provider. He'd quickly agree to buy the six or seven things my sister said she so desperately needed.

My sister and father sometimes seemed so different in temperament and ambition that I wondered how they got along so well. Yet one thing clearly holding them together was the dynamic they created, of the strong, affectionate father and the adoring daughter. I always imagined that this dynamic would change as my sister grew older and began to address the arguments and pleasures of the self.

Yet we never had the opportunity to witness such a change, as my father died suddenly when my sister was still a teenager. His death left her to wonder and to be scared, in a new way, about her life. She would have to explore her feelings for her father in a different way, not while sitting beside him at the dinner table. She would have to discover what was between them in a way she never imagined: apart, without any hope of dialogue or contact.

I've often wished I could help her in her struggle to hold two seemingly opposite ideas in her heart and mind—a struggle that I, too, am confronting. The first idea is acceptance of our father's life as it was, with its sudden ending. The second idea, of equal power, is to accept the part of him that is his spirit and has no ending.

I have worked on this anthology, in part, with the hope that my sister and I will feel linked with other daughters and fathers in their efforts to speak honestly to each other. I hope my sister finds revealed among these poems the affection between herself and her father, and I hope the poems become her allies, as they are for me, whenever she is searching for him.

*More Light* is the first book to present poetry exclusively by American poets on the father-daughter relationship. The

poets are arranged chronologically so the reader may trace the development of the father-daughter theme in twentieth-century American poetry. I also hope the chronological order will illuminate the subtle and dramatic changes in form and content—as well as the constants of passion and honesty—that distinguish this rich and dynamic century of American poetry.

The birth of a daughter; the death of a daughter; the death of a father; the absence of a living daughter or father; a father's advice to his daughter on eternal or practical matters; a father's disappointment or disinterest in his daughter; a daughter's memories of her loving father; a daughter's memories of her sexually abusive, drunken, or workaholic father are but a few of the catalysts for the poems.

Interestingly, I discovered a number of very moving poems about the father-daughter dynamic written by poets observing the relationship from outside its bonds, as neither daughter nor father. Poets outside the relationship, without the entanglements that surface from being a participant in it, were often able to explore the roles of fathers and daughters in a surprisingly refreshing and revealing light.

As a result, the collection includes several poems written from the standpoint of a male teacher or friend whose bond with a woman is like that of a father; or a man imagining the pros and cons of fathering a daughter; or a woman or man acting as a kind of social observer, a chronicler of the fathers and daughters around them.

I have tried to select poems that speak most directly of the inexorable bond between fathers and daughters, while representing as many cultures, perspectives, and poetic styles as possible. I was drawn to poems that remained interesting and engaging after countless readings, and, at the same time, treated a particular aspect of the relationship with originality, courage, and honesty. Finally, I wanted poems that were, for

lack of a better word, moving—poems that went beyond the subject of the father-daughter relationship and produced an enlarged and resonant awareness of the self and of being alive.

The poems I have selected represent only a small part of a much larger, wonderful body of work. Because of space constraints, I have limited the collection to shorter father-daughter poems and to sections, where appropriate, of longer poems on the subject. I hope this volume will encourage readers to seek out the entire poems from which sections were taken as well as other poetry by the anthologized poets.

I am very grateful to the many people who provided new insights into the poems I was considering for this collection, and to the many poets, editors, teachers, and friends who brought father-daughter poems to my attention. Special thanks to Sophie Cabot Black, Samuel Kashner, Steven Bauer, Marie Howe, Laurel Blossom, Alice Quinn, Lawrence Joseph, Stanley Kunitz, Philip Levine, Naomi Long Madgett, Joseph Bruchac, Sheila Murphy, Cornelius Eady, David Unger, Allen Ginsberg, and Adrienne Rich for their support and help, and to Jonathan Cott for his collection of writings from fathers to daughters, *The Roses Race around Her Name* (Stonehill Press, 1974), in which I discovered several poems I might not have otherwise.

My thanks to Julie Braun, permissions editor of this collection, and to Nancy Graham and Kate Lunsford for their help in securing the permissions as well. My thanks also to the book's editor at Harcourt Brace & Company, Ruth Greenstein, for her invaluable support and for her suggestions regarding all aspects of the collection; to Heather Schroder at International Creative Management for helping shepherd the project; and to Martie Bolsinger, Anne Bergeron, and Micki

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Thanks, finally, to the many poets, or the people who, on their behalf, granted permission to reprint the poems in this collection. To the many poets and publishers who granted permission for a reduced fee with the understanding that a portion of any royalties from the sale of the anthology would be donated to PEN's Fund for Writers and Editors with AIDS, a very special thank you.



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*T. S. Eliot*

**M A R I N A**

*Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?*

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands  
What water lapping the bow  
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog  
What images return  
O my daughter.

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning  
Death  
Those who glitter with the glory of the humming-bird, meaning  
Death  
Those who sit in the stye of contentment, meaning  
Death  
Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning  
Death

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,  
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog  
By this grace dissolved in place

What is this face, less clear and clearer  
The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger—  
Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet  
Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.  
I made this, I have forgotten  
And remember

The rigging weak and the canvas rotten  
Between one June and another September.  
Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own.  
The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.

This form, this face, this life  
Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me  
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,  
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.

What seas what shores what granite islands towards my  
timbers  
And woodthrush calling through the fog  
My daughter.

**BELLS FOR JOHN  
WHITESIDE'S DAUGHTER**

There was such speed in her little body,  
And such lightness in her footfall,  
It is no wonder her brown study  
Astonishes us all.

Her wars were bruited in our high window.  
We looked among orchard trees and beyond  
Where she took arms against her shadow,  
Or harried unto the pond.

The lazy geese, like a snow cloud  
Dripping their snow on the green grass,  
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,  
Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little  
Lady with rod that made them rise  
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle  
Goose-fashion under the skies!

But now go the bells, and we are ready,  
In one house we are sternly stopped  
To say we are vexed at her brown study,  
Lying so primly propped.



THE LULLABY

Every poor fellow reminds me of my father.  
With worse luck than that  
He reminds me of my father  
With worse luck than he had.  
Which means me  
Who have better luck than my father had  
Because it is worse than bad.

Every fine fellow reminds me of me.  
Good luck is hard come by.  
It is not that innocency  
Of how luck befalls.  
It is a bad luck weary,  
A worse luck turned into destiny,  
A knowledge of bad luck  
And with bad luck seamy.

*A poor fellow knows a poor fellow.*  
*A fine fellow knows a poor fellow and a fine fellow,*  
*A poor fellow and a poor fellow.*  
*Every poor fellow reminds me of me.*  
*Every fine fellow reminds me of my father.*

And it is not to be forgotten:  
All luck is luck,  
My father's or mine.  
He was a poor fellow.  
His bad luck was perhaps no luck.  
I am a fine fellow.  
My good luck is perhaps no luck.  
All luck is perhaps no luck.  
All luck is luck or perhaps no luck.