



REFLECTIONS

A FATHER'S GIFTS

Three scenes visit me like Wise Men bearing gifts to Bethlehem. These gifts are beyond all price, and I lay them before me now and hold one to the light; the second scene, the gift of letting go:

A minister calls from the altar, *Who will give this woman in marriage to this man?* Outside December mimics April in a week that is both the first week of winter and the week of Christmas. A wedding guest coughs as if to cue my single line.

On my arm a woman's hand is as light as a petal. A woman clothed in winter white, a woman bearing spring flowers, a woman still my daughter. We walk in step, in time, together down the aisle of the chapel. Beneath our feet the old floorboards creak to mark our passage. We walk together as did shy hardy girls and their sober bewhiskered fathers here a century ago. My own beard is gray, and the last time I walked from an altar before friends and family I greedily took with me another man's daughter.

I feel I have rehearsed unaware this part, for we have walked like this before, my daughter and I, an evening or an afternoon, her small light hand in mine; we walked out into the neighborhood to view the gardens, or just beyond the houses to the bluff where we could look out over the Willamette River. She was a favorite of the old folks who indulged her with flowers.

But today's flowers are not of my house, nor is, any longer, the young woman who waits for me to play my part and speak my line, as a proper father should. But how can I give what I do not own? Have never owned. Her mother bore her. And I was but a witness with no prescribed lines then, in the April of her birth; again a mock April, a winter most mild.

I stand still, playing a small role again, but this time with one short line. I am a man without property here who blesses again with his witness as you, my daughter, release yourself from my arm to glide the

short distance to your husband, leaving me in the wake of your white gown.

To myself I say, *Daughter, you and your world, you alone own.*

To the minister's question finally I answer, *I will.*

*

I hold to the light the first scene, the first gift, the gift of hope:

I am much farther back in time. I am in a small hospital that overlooks the Willamette River. It is April and dark night. Across the river the fishermen have formed their line of boats, the hog line, and their lanterns form a bridge of lights doubled by reflection. Beneath them the salmon make their spring run to breed and die above the falls. They are not quite exhausted as they pause before the falls among the baited hooks. I wait like the fishermen in the dark who pull out of the black river the flashing salmon. I wait for my wife and the baby she is delivering after a difficult pregnancy and now a hard birth. I wait as the night reaches toward day, and I pray for two lives, knowing that death's hook dangles in the current of birth. I fall into the simple prayers of my childhood and swim through my fears with hope:

And my daughter slips, wet and shiny, into our time, her mother's creation, truth be told, and I but a man blessed only in witness, an audience of one, an actor with a small part in this drama and no lines. In joy and relief I see my holy family. My

daughters' life is all before her.

*

I hold to the light the third scene, the third gift, the gift of life:

Again it is the week of Christmas and the week of my daughter's wedding anniversary. It is my turn to wait by the phone, alone and anxious. My son-in-law calls to announce the birth of my first grandchild, a boy of eight pounds and twenty inches. Four time zones away, he calls to say that the baby is fine but my daughter is in surgery.

There will be more calls from him and from my wife who is by our daughter's side. My daughter is thousands of miles away; she is a woman surviving a difficult birth. I think of the baby she was and that young man I was looking out over the Willamette. And I hope again for her life. It is the 26th of December, the feast of the holy family. A tsunami takes its toll on the other side of the world. So much death, incalculable numbers; yet how many babies are born? The hooks of death are always in the currents of life.

Yet those hooks do not touch my family this holy day. I am a grandfather, my daughter recovers, we live on; and my grandson's life is all before him. □

Louis Masson is a professor of literature on The Bluff. His second collection of essays, The Play of Light, will be published this year by Cowley Publications of Cambridge.

Proper Use & Care of Your Hair Shirt

Congratulations on your purchase.
Knowing how to use your hair shirt safely
Will ensure its efficacy in reminding you
Of your body's slothful & evil nature.

Your hair shirt should be like a second skin,
Worn as an undergarment,
Abrading and chafing like a scourge.
Custom modifications can increase mortification:

If your hair shirt is an extra-abrasive wire model,
Consider strategic sharpening.
Should you desire to launder your shirt,
Hand wash in cold water.

You are well on your way
To a full realization of your spirituality.
For a complete reminder, gird up your loins
With our patented Hair Shorts™

-- Patrick Madden