

GRAMPA, JESSICA, AND EMMA



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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On May 19, 2015 Jessica Marshall, our daughter, called us and told us she was pregnant. Every grandparent on this planet recalls such an announcement. A dream not deferred!

This collection of poems are simply reflections of various times and my moods celebrating Jessica's and Emma's arrival and lives. As a fitting prelude, I opted to add those I composed about Jessica, 11-19-82.

Thanks to Christine who made all of this possible. As of this writing, we are the co-owners of the Venable Day Care Corporation—with one receiptant: Emma.

JESSICA

11-19-82

From the bottomless shaft of sleep
“My water broke.” In red glow: 12:30 PM

My drive to Cape Fear Valley Hospital took seconds
but the night moved a glacier’s inch.

The fetal heart monitor slushed noisy beats
from my love’s ocean bubble. My cassette
stole your little heart forever.

10 centimeters.
Chris climbs into the saddle,
arches her back 180° as her screams
shook florescent ceiling lights
and rattled instrument trays.

Delivery room cheerleaders chanted
“Push! Push! Push.” Squeezing tears,
My teeth grind to the gums. I clamp her hand.

A mushroom cap sprouted from black roots
as your chalk-white head emerged—
oblong head and tubular body squirted
into alien space, blinding suns.

Babbling and jabbering, I sleepwalk
in orbit around my love, cupping you
in my hands. “Here she is! Here she is!”

Your pink fingers
corkscrewed wound my pinkie
with primate strength.

Where's the Sponge?

In Bassinet Alley the little drunk
wheezes and drools, puckering
on an empty bottle.

She's intoxicated on Enfamil—
caught again Wiggling Under the Influence.
Her fuzzy head bobs, jerks from hiccups,
and fluttering lids seal her into babyland.

What now, House Husband?
Time card punched out?
The carpet is tweezers-picked clean.
Pictures perfectly perpendicular.
Count ceiling fan rotations?
Scan bookshelves for paper flights?
Brainwash with a good soap?

Baby's stirring—time for a change.
Her fresh diaper—a giant white butterfly—
enfolds pink buns. Then she burps

a milky fluid stripe on
the blue bedspread.

The Fall

She sits on the king bed,
fingers a diaper snap,
sucks a big toe.

He darts from the bedroom,
snatches her bottle of juice
off a table in the hall
and dashes back through the door way

to – see – her – fall – from – the – bed
faster than thought. She flips
bounces on the back of her head and
her diapered bottom splats on the rug.

Fear coils around his Adam's apple.

Grabbing her he cries
Pleasegodpleasegodpleasegodpleasegod—
Her screams pierce through joints and marrow
and stabs his heart like an ice pick.

Quadriplegic? Brain damaged?
Is she cursed with two insatiable jewels,
terribly aware?

Or left with a pair of dulled bulbs
staring in vacant space?

She flails her arms and kicks!
She's a natural gymnast who
performed a perfect somersault
watched by her idiot coach

who learned the distant between
mind or meat—motion or palsy—
and how life is thinner than a neuron
and grace follows after the fall.

1,000 Nipples

The 1,000th nipple is washed,
racked with a legion of others
lined on the pantry shelf
tiny bowling pins in a row.

She crawls, rolls over and over,
her skipping voice box plays
“ba ba, ba ba, ba ba”

as she reaches

for the summit

of her playpen.

Her Grief

She sobs. Mean daddy drags her crib
across the bedroom. Dolls gasp;
bears and tigers snarl from their shelves.

Wedged in the doorway, daddy grunts,
wrenches it through, gouges the frame.
Its legs plow through thick carpet leaving furrows.
He heaves it on the porch.

In her room, she sucks a thumb, stares at
the empty rectangular outline, phantom bars,
invisible Busy Box.

Stunned by the space
in her life, shapes of images
fade before tearing eyes.

then she goes to the kitchen
and drinks her juice.

Triskaidekaphobia

Daddy is simply dad. Long gazes
into her deep hazel eyes are outlawed;
I peek with peripheral vision
at her being moving through time—
while feigning to look anywhere else.

Her framed pictures on the hallway
are grade school displays shed long ago.

At 13 her body mimics the arches and curvature
nature patiently sculpts—so damn quickly.

From the living room, her party
is bordered within the kitchen doorframe.
She slices her green-iced 13 and with 6 girlfriends,
devours it. Frosting smeared on lips, fingers
and denim overalls. Soon they stampede
down the stairway chute into the den

and all that remains is an empty frame
filled by Daddy's memory.

Her Ashes

From the basement couch, this early morning
Her smoker's cough spews up the stairs.
Her teenage girlfriend snores, dreams on.

She hacks again and again and again

A throat singed, match-dead dry, desert-rock bare.

A horned-toads back germinates on her windpipe.

Dark cargo piles in her pulmonary bays.

. . .

Years later, she returned to oxygen.

EMMA

Antepartum 1-26-16

18 hours in the waiting room—
minutes are hours.
Miraculously the TV remains off.
Its black eye reflects neon light.

IT'S THE LAW!
ES LA LEY!
IF YOU HAVE A MEDICAL EMERGENCY
OR ARE IN LABOR

Framed newborn faces with knitted caps array the wall.
Swollen moms sway in, families carrying bags and bundles.
Jess is prepped in her inn. Daniel rubs and messages.
Jamie coaches and cheerleads. Grandpa contracts his leaking tear ducts, vainly.
Grandma feels her labor years ago, embedded as splinters in muscles.

From hundreds of choir and congregational voices,
Agnus Dei chants in upper lofts of my mind:

O Lamb of God, that
takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us...

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO RECEIVE
WITHIN THE CAPABILITIES OF THIS HOSPITAL'S STAFF

We visit her inn—Emma's heart monitor beats
in crescendo and decrescendo with each contraction
and we must soon exit

so grandpa paces... pees... ponders... prays... paces... Emma descending so slowly...

O Lamb of God, that
takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us...

Abba: you were there epochs ago

as teenage Mary contracted and contracted in waves
amid sheep and goats on a straw bed and wadded cloth pillow...
—Spirit became flesh—and Joseph ushered wet Jesus
into Rome’s iron world.

*Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. **

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO RECEIVE
NECESSARY STABILIZING TREATMENT
(INCLUDING TREATMENT FOR AN UNBORN CHILD)

“God, deliver Emma, as you did Lord Jesus.”

My daughter: you shall survive—our God shall deliver
with your midwife’s skilled hands, as your mother birthed you
33 years ago, our DNA spiraling inside each cell.

Jesus too stood near, as Mary birthed
His younger brothers and sisters

until his testament began in the Jordan River.

O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, grant us Thy peace.

Postpartum

Daniel bursts into the waiting room,
everyone applauding! We soar into the inn
at 11:50 PM, where 6.3 lb. Emma rests on Jess’s chest,
eyes peeking into worldly light

as did baby Jesus
when Spirit became flesh

so flesh can become Spirit
and Emma one day can rise.

*Ps 22:9-10

A Day in the Life

Emma's nine-week old kitten hair tickles
grandpa's nose as I bottle feed
her in the cradle of my arm... that baby smell!
Her fist clamps my pinkie—
toes wiggle a universe away.

Bluish eyes glazing, she gulps, drools and
miniature eyelashes flutter shut as

she and I flow in oxytocin current

when sucking ceases—she releases the nipple
and swoons into delta flight

and dreams?

The mirror reflecting her astonished eyes?

The bullfrog with black eyes and red mouth
descending and poking her tummy?

The giant's face touching her nose to nose?

Grandma articulating “Em... mah”?

Liver-spotted hands supporting her
steps on the kitchen table?

Does “Jesus loves me, this I know”

serenade her dream world?

You Were My God

You were my God when I was still in my mother's womb

—Ps. 22:10

On the S-shaped, metal patio rocking chair,
a slight nod on this oversized spring nudges
grandpa and Emma up and down up and down,
buoy-bobbing on green seas. First spring.

Her eyelashes flutter still as
she swoons into a baby dream
on my chest, milk
curdling on her lower lip.

As Wisteria fragrance crests through porch screens,

during each bob I silently whisper

“Abba Abba Abba”

Let the Little Children

*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them,
for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*

—Mark 10:14

I watch her shallow, buoyant breaths. Woozy from milk, she nods, sleeps.
Stroking her fuzzy, downy hair and orchid feel of baby cheeks,
How fragile is her tiny heart, pumping in metrical sounds—
And gazing on Creator's life, each passing second, astounds.

To dangle the furry monkey, her eyes light up from her crib;
She lifts her arms to reach and grope, drooling all over her bib,
Then, squeals in high-pitched, awe-struck glee, to finally grasp her toe.
I thank you Lord, wash the bottle—and prepare for tomorrow.

Dr. Seuss: Vamoose!

Dear Dr. Seuss: Green Eggs and Ham
 Emma finds a wee bit abstruse.
 Over and over “Sam I am...”
 Emma, “Pa Pa” must call a truce!

I shut the cover with a slam!
 Your tears cry out “child Abuse!”
 So, “Mary had a little lamb”
 As gramps resists substance abuse.

Ω

Grandpa’s Lament

We gaze at Nick’s current cartoons:
 “SpongeBob Square Pants” and “Paw Patrol...”
 Call these cartoons? Give us Looney Tunes:
 Bugs shoves Elmer down a man hole.
 But who compared to Donald Duck?
 Always mad and always quacked-up.
 Popeye was “strong to the finish.”
 Emma sprays out Gerber spinach.

Ω

Neuro Lockdown

“The Itsy Bitsy Spider”, umpteenth time.
 Emma begins to squirm and writhe and fuss.

“The Itsy Bitsy Spider”, umpteenth time.
 Grandpa’s brain succumbs to rigor mortis.

Recess

Old diaper off, he wipes,
 and she squirts a stream near and far—
 Wiping off his glasses,
 gramps drives to the nearest sports bar.

Ω

DEFCON 2

You'd think she is skewered
 in her motorized cradle—
 back arched in gymnast landing curve,
 legs kicking like pistons,
 arms flailing, and fists balled,
 eyes squinting and tears squirting in arcs,
 mouth wide as 1950's Saturday noon air raid horns,
 drowning out *Twinkle twinkle*,
 face jalapeño red

at naptime.

Ω

Not Getting with the Program

Emma blasted a gelatinous poop
 And grandpa was knocked for a loop.
 He fumbled for a sterile wiper,
 Then tried to affix a new diaper
 But he positioned it upside down,
 And almost had a nervous breakdown
 As another spurt filled like pea soup—
 He joined the club of nincompoops.

The Longest Day 1

Emma, Emma, making such a fuss,
Squirring, whining, writhing, scowling, burping...
Gramps bites his tongue, so he dares not cuss,
Wiggling, groaning, struggling, glowering, pharting...
Gramps fights the urge to dive under a bus.

The Longest Day 2

Emma, Emma, is so happy
When she's fed by her grand pappy.
But when he's ready for her nappy,
She groans and grunts another crappy.

Ω

Serenity

While carrying Emma by White Honeysuckle,
She gazed at the arching shrub, trumpeting flowers,
and suckled Gramp's thumb knuckle.

Ω

The Real Nursery Rhyme

She's not sleeping.
She's not sleeping.
"Not today. Time to play:

"Grandpa, I'm not joking.
Quit your silly moping.
Time us play. Play all day."

Family Circus

Savoring
cabernet
by the glass—

Italian
cuisine by
sunset beach—

Emma grabs
and sucks on
her big toe.

Ω

Not Nice Rhymes to Teach about Grandma

In grandma's room, take her shampoo,
Grab tight the cap, and then unscrew—
Pour it all out into her sink,
Then to your playpen we will slink.

Let's have more fun! Let's play some more!
Let's sneak insider her closet door
And look what's hanging! There's her hose!
We'll stuff them in her winter clothes!

One more prank should be so much fun—
More merriment for everyone!
We'll hide a rattle in one of her socks,
and then pretend to play with wooden blocks.

Playroom Buffet

She waddles across the wooden floor,
bare feet flopping like webbed feet,
flailing her arms, testing flight,
while aiming toward anything

plants or fragile or forbidden.
My bladder swells to a yellow dirigible. I hurdle
the latticed baby fence snug between a doorway,
dart to the commode to pee
a laser stream, and imagine
on the return hurdle all is well but
as she sits on the rug leaning over,

too quiet. Much too quiet. Is she masticating?

I swoop, clutch her into my lap, and she grins,
two bottom teeth covered by white gunk,
gumming something—cheeks hamster sized—
“What the hell?”

My finger scoops her cheek, teeth,
and out comes a tissue spitball
big as a golf ball but she gums more
still grinning

so, from the other cheek,
I finger out a black soggy mass,
a former dust bunny—
and from tranquil to tantrum

she protests it is time for lunch.

Incubator

She's three-inches less a yardstick, a laser
 sword flaming in window light. Her Fisher-Price

kitchen—purple sink, red cupboard, yellow
 fridge chills an old remote. Plastic tea set—

from a lavender teapot, she pours air tea
 in lime and pink cups. A Zoo Jamz piano—

its rainbow-colored key board is grubby with
 gummy-finger prints. Petri dishes, growing.

Furry animals - Little Tikes stroller - Disney castle (plastic flags) -
 Three music boxes - Cutie doll - Noisy Farm book - yearning for her,

with Mama today. Low-grade fever. Pink eye. Ear infection.
 Nostrils are nozzles, running and crusting yuk. Broken spigot

squirting out the other end. Past midnight, gramps stares
 at a bedroom ceiling fan. Dread is spectral,

whispers “How many toddlers tonight die on this planet? What
 makes her different from thousands of other precious ones, God?”

I shudder. Almost arrhythmic. “Must put trust in Him.”
 Sighing. Breathing deeply. “Hard to trust. No guarantees.”

How many toddlers tonight... STOP! Stop...
 “I shall trust You. Help my unbelief.”

She slept soundly with a clogged nose, Cheerios orbiting,
 dosed with Mama's milk, amoxicillin, Pedialyte.

Next day, *Staphylococcus aureus* dying,
 Emma bounces on the queen bed, clamping a chip,

babbling, squealing. Did she
 or God raise her up?

Emma – Cage Fighting Workouts

After several month's hiatus,
Pa Pa is ripe for more verse.
There is a time, he's prone to cuss—
Call 911 or a hearse.

The terrible-tvos have arrived.
At diaper change, the fun starts.
Whatever reward he contrives,
Her kicking is off the charts.

She flails, squirms, and twists in dissent
(He prays that he won't melt-down.)
The diaper smells of floral scent—
But he placed it upside-down.

Round two is the showdown.

Battle of the Bib

Emma was wearing a new autumn dress.
Papa snapped on her bib, to prevent a mess—
oatmeal was planned at her special request

But a tranquil breakfast was not to be.
She waved her teaspoon like a machete
And yanked at the bib to unsnap it free . . .

Screaming, crying, she blustered a Bronx cheer
As tears, mucus and spit sprayed Papa dear;
His glasses were filmed with fluid veneer

Then she balled the bib in a plastic wad.
Papa looked up: Is this the wrath of God?
He lost any pretense of poised façade:

“WEAR YOUR BIB” as he snatched her oatmeal.
(By now it was cold, lumpy, and congealed).
“Ok, Papa” concluded this ordeal.

The dress was pristine of an oatmeal mess
And Emma consented to his caress

But when he reached for a clip-on hair bow,
The scuffle began: Battle of the Bow.

Midnight Serenade

abcdefg
hijklmnop
qrstuv
w-x-y and z

abcdefg
hijklmnop
qrstuv
w-x-y and z

“What?”

Grandma climbs out of bed to the crib,
 Sees Emma dreaming, arched over something . . .

abcdefg . . .

gropes under her, seizes something soft
 and in streetlight, bulging ping-pong eyes,
 red-furry face, ABC shirt—

qrstuv
w-x-y and z

“She rolled on Elmo.”

Elmo flew into the hall

Elmo loves singing the alphabet

abcdefg . . .