

Mixtapes

POETRY
in VOICE
les VOIX de
la POÉSIE

FATHERS



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KIRSTEEN'S LINER NOTES

In this mixtape you'll encounter a multiplicity of fathers, from the noble and beloved to the troubled, damaged and downright dangerous—and their sons and daughters, who wrote the poems.

I find it curious that in everyday life, we don't often speak openly and intimately about the father. He tends to be a stereotype, or undefined, like a quick, featureless pencil sketch.

Fortunately, in poetry, an intimate medium, we find fathers in their full, flawed humanity—kind, lost, dead, comical, cruel, and oftentimes, ricocheting between extremes.

I'm always trying to understand my own complicated relationship with my tormented and tormenting father, and writing poems about it. I suspect that fathers, viewed through the haze of years, can't be clearly seen, can only be guessed at by their children.

The poems in this mixtape show how complex bonds with our fathers, whether positive or negative, have the power to shape, and even haunt us. The poems are intense. Many vibrate with an uncommon violence of feeling. Others hold a charge, feel volatile, as though something under pressure might explode from the page. I'm struck, too, by how often the poets' fathers appear as near-mythical figures.

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Why this powder-keg, heightened vibe? I laughed in recognition when, reading *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft* by poet Tony Hoagland, I came to the chapter called “Obsession: ‘Are You Still Writing About Your Father?’” “A real diehard, indestructible, irresolvable obsession in a poet is nothing less than a blessing,” Hoagland writes. “Passion is the greatest gift a poet can have,” he adds, “and nobody is mildly obsessed.”

Fathers are a fixation. Stanley Kunitz was 64 when he wrote “The Portrait”: “My mother never forgave my father/for killing himself,/especially at such an awkward time”—weeks before the poet’s birth. In Susan Musgrave’s “You Didn’t Fit,” grief collides with comedy as a daughter recognizes herself in her father: “You wouldn’t fit in your coffin/but to me it was no surprise.” In Donika Kelly’s harrowing “From the Catalogue of Cruelty,” a violent, sexually abusive father figuratively devours his own children: “He tried to take us/into his body, which was the house/the police entered.”

In “Forgiving My Father,” by Lucille Clifton, there’s empathy, but also rage, a reckoning: “today is payday, payday old man/my mother’s hand opens in her early grave.” In Tina Cane’s “Imaginary Dad,” the abandoned child-speaker eats Twizzlers, watches *Apocalypse Now*, and whenever a solider appears on the screen, thinks, “Now, there’s a dad/if I ever saw one.” Lynn Crosbie, in “Modestine,” artfully threads a story that’s being read aloud to a dying father with the speaker’s feelings for him, and reminds us how, looking back, everyday things may seem special—“my father’s good breathing/The kinds of sounds that strike like hammers, later on in life.”

Poetry, which insists on truth and refuses to oversimplify, provides us with reality that’s clarified and magnified. Taken together the poems in this mixtape aim to create a truer, sharper portrait of fathers, and of our complex relationships with these pivotal figures in our lives—beloved, despised, absent, and usually, far from perfect.



THE POEMS

MODESTINE

by Lynn Crosbie

A GOOD DAY

by Nancy Jo Cullen

PAN DULCE

by Jose Hernandez Diaz

BILINGUAL/BILINGÜE

by Rhina Espaillat

IMAGINARY DAD

by Tina Cane

FROM THE CATALOGUE OF CRUELTY

by Donika Kelly

TOP

by Kevin Spens

DETO(NATION)

by Ocean Vuong

MY PAPA’S WALTZ

by Theodore Roethke

YOU DIDN’T FIT

by Susan Musgrave