

Little Boy Crying

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Your mouth contorting in brief spite and hurt,

Analysis: The poem opens mid-scene, addressing the boy directly with the second person pronoun "your," pulling the reader into the moment and creating intimacy. "Contorting" is carefully chosen diction: the mouth twists not only in pain but in spite, showing the boy's simultaneous hurt and desire to provoke a reaction from his father.

your laughter metamorphosed into howls,

Analysis: The contrast between "laughter" and "howls" is sharpened by the word "metamorphosed", marking a complete and total transformation, not just a shift in mood. The boy's happiness has been entirely replaced by anguish. Both words also carry an animal imagery thread that runs quietly through the poem: "metamorphosed" suggests a creature-like transformation, while "howls" is the sound of an animal in distress, not a child.

your frame so recently relaxed now tight

with three year old frustration, your bright eyes

swimming tears, splashing your bare feet,

Analysis: The contrast between "relaxed" and "tight" captures the physical immediacy of the child's distress. "Three year old frustration" carries a deliberate ambiguity: it reads both as the frustration of a three-year-old and as frustration that is three years old, meaning the frustration has existed for his entire life, since the moment he was born. The hyperbole "swimming tears, splashing your bare feet" exaggerates the volume of crying, and also begins a water imagery thread that will carry through the poem to the final line's "rain." The boy is already drowning in water even before the punishment for playing in it.

you stand there angling for a moment's hint

of guilt or sorrow for the quick slap struck.

Analysis: "Angling" is a precise and layered choice: the boy is fishing for guilt, casting out his tears as bait to catch a reaction. The word builds on the water imagery established in the previous stanza: swimming tears, splashing feet, and now angling. The sibilance of "stand... sorrow... slap, struck" threads through the stanza with a soft hissing sound that mirrors the tense, restrained atmosphere. The alliteration of "quick slap struck" uses monosyllabic words to mimic the sudden, sharp speed of the slap itself.

The ogre towers above you, that grim giant,

empty of feeling, a colossal cruel,

Analysis: The second stanza shifts into the child's imagination. The metaphor "ogre towers above you" transforms the father into a fairy tale monster, reflecting the child's exaggerated, emotionally-driven perception. The alliteration "grim giant" reinforces the monstrous image. "A colossal cruel" is a striking noun phrase: cruelty itself becomes a physical entity.

soon victim of the tale's conclusion, dead
at last. You hate him, you imagine
chopping clean the tree he's scrambling down
or plotting deeper pits to trap him in.

Analysis: The allusion to Jack and the Beanstalk is explicit here: the boy maps his father onto the giant who is ultimately destroyed. His desire to chop down the tree and trap him in pits reflects the depth of his momentary rage, expressed through the only framework of evil he understands: fairy tales. This is not real hatred, but the heightened emotional reality of a hurt child.

You cannot understand, not yet,
the hurt your easy tears can scald him with,

Analysis: The third stanza introduces the father's hidden perspective. The phrase "not yet" acknowledges the boy's innocence while hinting at future understanding. "Easy tears" suggests how effortlessly the child cries, while "scald", a word associated with burning, shows just how deeply those tears wound the father. The contrast between the child's easy, unrestrained weeping and the father's invisible suffering is the emotional core of the poem.

nor guess the wavering hidden behind that mask.

Analysis: The metaphor "that mask" reveals that the father's stern expression is a performance, concealing his true emotional conflict. He wavers internally but cannot show it.

This fierce man longs to lift you, curb your sadness
with piggy-back or bull fight, anything,

Analysis: The juxtaposition of "fierce man" with his longing to give "piggy-back or bull fight" is the poem's most tender moment. The listing of childish, playful gestures, and the word "anything", conveys a father desperate to comfort his son but held back by duty. The word "fierce" is ironic: his fierceness is a mask over vulnerability.

but dare not ruin the lessons you should learn.

Analysis: This line captures the central dilemma of the poem: the tension between love and discipline. The father's restraint is not coldness but sacrifice. He chooses the boy's long-term growth over his own immediate desire to comfort him.

You must not make a plaything of the rain.

Analysis: The final line, isolated as its own stanza, is a deliberate volta. It reveals, simply and plainly, the reason for the punishment. The boy had been playing in the rain. The understatement of this closing line contrasts sharply with the emotional intensity of everything before it, suggesting that the lesson, though small, was worth the pain on both sides.

About the poem

Author: Mervyn Morris (b. 1937)

Context: Jamaican poet; the poem reflects on a commonplace moment of Caribbean domestic life, exploring the emotional complexity beneath parental discipline

Core idea: A father's act of discipline is misread by his young son as cruelty, but the poem reveals that beneath the stern exterior lies deep love, guilt, and the painful responsibility of parenthood.

• Main themes

- Parenting and discipline
- Childhood innocence and perception
- Love and vulnerability
- Appearance vs. reality
- The conflict between emotion and duty
- **Mood:** Tense and emotionally charged, softening to tender and reflective
- **Tone:** Compassionate, observational, and gently ironic

Remember

- The poem moves from **the child's pain** 'the child's imagination' **the father's hidden reality** 'the lesson'
- The **second person "you"** puts the reader in the child's position: we experience the moment from within
- **Animal imagery** runs through the poem: "metamorphosed" (creature-like transformation), "howls" (animal in pain); the child is reduced to something instinctive and raw
- **"Three year old frustration"** is deliberately ambiguous: frustration of a 3-year-old AND frustration that is 3 years old (his entire life from birth)
- **Water imagery** builds throughout: swimming tears 'splashing bare feet' 'angling' 'rain'. The boy drowns in emotion over the very thing he was punished for playing in
- **Sibilance** in "stand... sorrow... slap, struck" creates a soft, tense sound that mirrors the restrained atmosphere
- The **fairy tale allusion** (Jack and the Beanstalk) shows how children process cruelty through the only lens they have
- The father and the ogre are the **same person seen two ways**: through the child's eyes, and through the truth
- "Scald" is a key word: the father suffers silently while the child cries openly
- The **final line is deliberately anticlimactic**: the lesson was small, but love made it feel enormous