

Dressing My Daughters

By Mark Jarman

One girl a full head taller
Than the other—into their Sunday dresses.
First, the slip, hardly a piece of fabric,
Softly stitched and printed with a bud.
I'm not their mother, and tangle, then untangle
The whole cloth—on backwards, have to grab it
Round their necks. But they know how to pull
Arms in, a reflex of being dressed,
And also, a child's faith. The mass of stuff
That makes the Sunday frocks collapses
In my hands and finds its shape, only because
They understand the drape of it—
These skinny keys to intricate locks.
The buttons are a problem
For a surgeon. How would she connect
These bony valves and stubborn eyelets?
The filmy dress revolves in my blind fingers.
The slots work one by one.
And when they're put together,
Not like puppets or those doll-saints
That bring tears to true believers,
But living children, somebody's real daughters,
They do become more real.
They say, "Stop it!" and "Give it back!"
And "I don't want to!" They'll kiss
A doll's hard features, whispering,
"I'm sorry." I know just why my mother
Used to worry. Your clothes don't keep
You close—it's nakedness.
Clad in my boots and holster,
I would roam with my six-gun buddies.
We dealt fake death to one another,
Fell and rolled in filth and rose,
Grimy with wounds, then headed home.
But Sunday ... what was that tired explanation
Given for wearing clothes that
Scratched and shone and weighed like a slow hour?
That we should shine—in gratitude.
So, I give that explanation, undressing them,
And wait for the result.
After a day like Sunday, such a long one,
When they lie down, half-dead,
To be undone, they won't help me.
They cry, "It's not my fault."



Mark Jarman's childhood—spent in Southern California with a father who was a minister—greatly influenced his poetry. Much of Jarman's earlier work depicts surfer culture while his later work struggles with religious faith. Believing that narrative poetry welcomes a general audience, Jarman co-founded the Reaper, a magazine which advocates a return to traditional form and narrative verse.

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