
SESSION 3.1: GUIDE: WHAT IS COMMEMORATION?

Commemorative Art With Poetry

When President Lincoln delivered one of his most famous speeches, the Gettysburg Address, he was honoring the soldiers who fought and died in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. He was also commemorating what all of the Civil War soldiers stood for – our freedom. He wrote a speech to commemorate them. When we create works of art about Abraham Lincoln in front of and around our capitol we are commemorating or honoring him and his civic impact.

Poems can commemorate a person you love. Here, you will read two poems written by a father and his daughter. Both poems are written to memorialize a father's life and death. Twentieth century poet, William Carlos Williams wrote that there are "No ideas but in things." Shannon Vesely and her father both use things—a shotgun, a field of milo, a fence and thicket, quail and leaves; a milkweed pod, the brown and burnished bronze of fall grass and trees, the white filaments of milkweed floss—to show readers those tangible things that ground their memories of their fathers.

The ideas in both poems, modern free verse poems (Robert Frost writes "begin in delight and end in wisdom"), occur in the final stanzas.

Shannon says, "When my dad writes that he and his father "clot in time," he suggests that the memories of his father will remain with him forever, that the passing of time will not diminish or destroy the essence of all his father was or his love for him.

Likewise, when I write that "the filaments of love are whiter, stronger cords of life than stem or stalk," I suggest the same. Even though the milkweed pod may die, the filaments it has released, like the essence of those we love, remain with us forever. In both poems, the love for our fathers transcends the grief of death and lives on to memorialize this love and these men."

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From Dead Horse Table

LINES FOR MY FATHER

I love you, old man, in our time.
The shotgun cradled in your arm,
the marbled wood,
the varnished sky.

The milo's cut.
The fence holds leaves.
The thicket has its quail and
the final green.

We walk.
We clot in time.
The fence sings birdless
in the wind.

Don Welch

What do you know about Don Welch's father when you finish reading this poem? Do you think he liked to hunt? Do you know what time of year milo is cut? Perhaps that is a clue of the time of year he died. The fence holds leaves so if you don't know when milo is cut perhaps you know that it must be fall from the fallen leaves or the final green. Or might this mean that he died in the fall of his life? He comes right out and tells you he loves his father and calls him a special name. Can you tell he misses him when he writes, "the fence sings birdless in the wind?"

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THE MILKWEED POD

for my father

The milkweed pod,
having spent itself through summer months,
explodes.
Its summer soul has burst.
The cocoon of its husk
looses fine, white floss into the air,
autumn's lace,
its sheerest veil.

The bridegroom awaits.
He mourns not the passing colors:
the green and goldenrod,
the fields of burnished bronze.
He will not mistake his bride
in the brittle brown of this earthy shell,
will not kneel in the presence
of this absence.

For the filaments of love are whiter,
stronger cords of life than stem or stalk.
They dance where others sleep,
they sing such songs of wind and light
the world has never known.
There will be such songs in late October
when the milkweed pod opens,
giving its last breath to love,
wedding its soul to sky.

Shannon Vesely
daughter of Don Welch

The writer's dad loved words and poetry and instilled a love in her, as well. She chooses images from nature. Do you think her father loved nature? Is the milkweed pod opening a way of sharing him with all in this commemorative poem? Do you think writing poetry is a good way to commemorate a person? Why or why not?