

POET'S CHOICE | *By Robert Pinsky*

Parents — I suppose I mean a certain kind of parent— perform free-style rapping with their infants and toddlers all day long: rhyming on the child's name ("A shirt for Curt, the little flirt, will you play in the dirt?") or babbling about whatever is going on ("Here's some lunch that you could munch if you had a tooth, forsooth, but here is some for you to gum").

It's a little cultural habit that may function to help introduce the child to language. Or it may function to keep the parent from going crazy with the repetitious, endless duties of child care, or it may have no function at all. Presumably, it is related to the genesis of nursery rhymes, which are not required to make much sense: Kids enjoy "Rock-a-Bye Baby" with no worries about its political allegory, and my own children seemed to like hearing "Sing, sing, what shall we sing?/ The cat's run away with the pudding-string" with no need to know what a "pudding-string" might be.

Language always has at least a little meaning and always has at least a little element of static or nonsense. Joshua Weiner in his new book finds a telling, evocative place on that range, with several poems that exploit the mode of nursery-rhyme or parental gabble. Here is "Hanging Mobile," clearly inspired by a crib toy:

The parrot's eye
speaks to the sun,
my son coos back
on his back, on the run.

Mosquito in the shade,
the night crows green.
Who rings the bell
where you've never been?

Baby Gus, Asparagus,
tips make a fist
to knock back the sun.

The parrot's eye
grows with the moon,
my son sings a bubble
in the bubble of his room.

Rubies in the griddle,
the cake falls down,
the knife runs for president,
the parrot runs the sun.

Baby Gus, Asparagus,
who rings the bell
when you ring the bell?

Smoke across the bridge
plunders the eyes,
the wind speaks back
what you recognize.

Jimmies rain down
the frozen zone,
the drops drop green,
who dropped the sun?

The dawning, quickly expanding consciousness of the baby who gurgles at the shapes overhead, kicking with excitement ("on his back, on the run"), finds an expression in verse. But not only an expression. While the poem succeeds in feeling as if it is from little Gus's viewpoint, it also suggests an adult's protective awareness of the world's defects: the dropped sun, the child's own fist aimed at it, the question of identity in "who rings the bell?" Even the existence of presidents, knives and smoke implies the complicated world to come. Including that world in cadences both reassuring and exciting, comical and soothing, may be another function of the verses we chant to our children.

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(Joshua Weiner's poem "Hanging Mobile" is from his book "From the Book of Giants." Univ. of Chicago. Copyright 2006 by the University of Chicago.)