

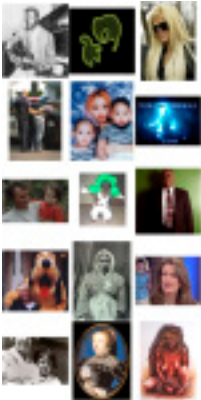
# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

May 24, 2007

## Friday Poem

Filed under: [poetry](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:14 pm

"More Photography, Less Poetry," [someone wrote](#) after last week's Friday Poem. So, dear John, this post is for you. Here are fifteen images that I found when I searched [Google Images](#) for the term 'Motherless.'



Now for the Friday Poem. Don't worry, it is a short one:

### One-Word Poem

by [David R. Slavitt](#)

Motherless.

Discussion questions.

1. Is this a joke? And, if so, is it a joke of the poet in which the editor of the magazine (or, later, the book publisher or the textbook writers) has conspired? Or is it a joke on the editors and publishers? Is the reader the audience of the poem?
2. It is regrettable not to have a mother. Is the purpose of the poem to convey an emotion to the reader? Does the poet suppose that this is the saddest word in the language? Do you agree or disagree? Can you suggest a sadder word?
3. The Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary gives an alternate meaning from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australian slang as an intensifier, as in "stone motherless broke." Can you assume that the poet knew this? Does this make for an ambiguity in the poem? Does this information change your emotional response?
4. If the assertion of the single word as a work of art is not a joke, then what could it mean? Is it a Dada-ist gesture, amusing and cheeky perhaps but with an underlying seriousness that the poet either invites or defies the reader to understand?

5. Even if the poet was merely fooling around, does that necessarily diminish the possible seriousness of the poem?
6. If we acknowledge that this is a work of art, can the author assert ownership? Is it possible to copyright a one-word poem?
7. In writing a one-word poem, the crucial decision must be which word to choose and to posit as a work of art. Do you think the poet spent a great deal of time picking this word? Or did he simply open a dictionary and let his fingers do the walking? Does that diminish the poem's value? Or is it a kind of bibliomancy?
8. Should the word have been in quotes? Or is it quotes even without being in quotes? There is a period at the end of the poem. Would it change the meaning of the poem if there were an exclamation point? Or no punctuation at all? Would that be a different poem? Better or worse? Or would you like it more or less? (Are these different questions?)
9. You can almost certainly write—or "write"—a one-word poem. But it would be difficult for you to get it published—almost certainly more difficult now that this one has been published and staked its claim. Is the publication of a poem a part of the creative act? Had the poet written his poem and put it away in his desk drawer as Emily Dickinson used to do, would this make it a different poem?
10. Some poems we read and some that we particularly like, we memorize. You have already memorized this one. Do you like it better now? Or are the questions part of the poem, so that you have not yet memorized it? Will you, anyway? Do you need to memorize the questions verbatim, or is the idea enough?

## 25 Comments

1. Blind Willie Johnson! In my humble opinion the best of all the delta blues musicians. Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning!

*Comment by [Olle](#) — May 24, 2007 @ [10:59 pm](#)*

2. Oh, yeah, that is the only known photograph of him too (B.W.J.)! The single surviving visual reference of a person. They put one of his songs on that Voyager satellite along with Mozart and all those recorded greetings too.

*Comment by [Olle](#) — May 24, 2007 @ [11:03 pm](#)*

3. More Pornography, Less Photography, ... just kidding

*Comment by [Philip](#) — May 25, 2007 @ [2:02 am](#)*

4. Well, first off, motherless is a really beautiful, haunting word. The kind usually said in hushed tones. But to frame it as a poem is a little ridiculous in the same way a lot of found art is because of the tenuous claims to authorship.

I might be able to appreciate this poem if it was part of a narrative in a larger book of poetry. For me, it shouldn't exist independently.

It reminds me of Hemingway's six word short story (For sale: baby shoes, never worn) or Faulkner's shortest chapter (My mother is a fish.) There's an inherent humor in the form, but all three speak of profound loss.

*Comment by [raabia](#) — May 25, 2007 @ [2:21 am](#)*

5. Motherless? Alternate title for Hemingway's [shortest story](#), reproduced below

"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

*Comment by [rob](#) — May 25, 2007 @ [6:12 am](#)*

6. One words poems? Kinda like one picture photo books. Just make sure you limit the number of signed first edition copies to 100 or so, and it will sell out in no time.

*Comment by [Mark](#) — May 25, 2007 @ [8:05 am](#)*

7. Your queries remind me of Socrates. Perhaps the Question, not the answer is where we learn the most. Ah, introspection...

*Comment by [Bill](#) — May 25, 2007 @ [9:12 am](#)*

8. Please don't stop blogging.

*Comment by [Jennifer](#) — May 25, 2007 @ [10:51 am](#)*

9. "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence."  
Audre Lorde, rest in peace.  
I really believe that too, at the risk of sounding more unhip than I ever have.

Also, Alec, I really dig your selections. There have been several poems I didn't know at all and was thrilled to be introduced to, today's poem included.

*Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — May 25, 2007 @ [3:46 pm](#)*

10. Wrote this, when I was 24. In my native languages I probably couldn't have taken the naive pathos in those lines. But it's a memory, a snapshot out of an amateur album.

Death comes through the chimney  
mother  
broken window  
emptiness

death comes through the chimney  
mother  
blind window  
loneliness

dark ashes, smoke taken by the wind  
pain  
what's left  
mother

1984, February

*Comment by [Zoltán Jókay](#) — May 26, 2007 @ [8:30 am](#)*

11. Hi, I've seen an article about your in a magazine. They are wonderful!

*Comment by [Sandy&Cat](#) — May 26, 2007 @ [9:28 am](#)*

12. Funny that I read this today... yesterday was my mum's birthday, and today is the day she died, 19 years ago when I was 8.

This kind of coincidence, that you would post "motherless" on the weekend of the year I always feel most motherless, and that I would happen to read it, reminds me of those seeming-coincidences when you break up with a love and you see and hear their name everywhere. Is it just the matter of being more sensitized to the word, the name...? or is it something else?

*Comment by [Evil Olive](#) — May 26, 2007 @ [1:05 pm](#)*

13. Alec,

This is just great. I'm going to invite the neighbors over and discuss.

*Comment by [Robin Dreyer](#) — May 26, 2007 @ [1:41 pm](#)*

14. If the word "motherless" is a poem, then it's a readymade, like the urinal by Duchamp. So the context is important.  
But Duchamp, as I know, was the first one, who made this kind of transfer. So he invented the idea of readymades: that's a part of the beauty of the urinal, which I once saw at a museum. In fact I was amazed by the actual beauty of the urinal, the reproductions I saw before never worked on me.  
Still I have some misgivings with the word motherless as a poem: because the poet is not using an ordinary word, but a word filled with memories and emotion per se.  
Sun, moon, love, child.  
Fatherland, nation, pride for example would be other words filled with some excitement, easily used for propaganda.  
A German president was asked if he loves his fatherland. He answered: I love my wife.

*Comment by [Zoltán Jókay](#) — May 26, 2007 @ [9:30 pm](#)*

15. In Germany, maybe following one word poem would have a big impact:

Jew.

*Comment by Zoltán Jókay — May 26, 2007 @ [9:42 pm](#)*

16. A SHORT HISTORY OF MEMORY

In one ear

*Comment by [Media Mike](#) — May 27, 2007 @ [5:17 am](#)*

17. maybe he could right a sequel "Fatherless" ?

*Comment by [mark page](#) — May 27, 2007 @ [1:14 pm](#)*

18. sorry I meant write, right

*Comment by [mark page](#) — May 27, 2007 @ [2:55 pm](#)*

19. It's got to be a lonely feeling, no matter what.

Freedom  
Words by Richie Havens

Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
A long way from my home

Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom  
Freedom

Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone  
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone  
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone  
A long, long, long, way, way from my home...

*Comment by [Jim Casper](#) — May 27, 2007 @ [4:51 pm](#)*

20. rant/

Photography teachers need to stop teaching that photographs should read like poetry. This is

becoming a rule and stagnates photography as contemporary art. It's fine that its an accepted way of thinking about photographs when it benefits the art (How Alec works for example?) but photography should broaden it's horizons.

/rant

*Comment by [dan](#) — May 28, 2007 @ [5:23 pm](#)*

21. Please keep on with the Friday Poem. Excellent stuff.

*Comment by [micheal](#) — May 28, 2007 @ [5:58 pm](#)*

22. it's funny: i was going to write: "sometimes i feel like a motherless child: a long way from home," but mr. casper beat me to it! odd how we would both immediately conjure up richie haven's version of that song after being prompted by the word 'motherless.' it is such a wonderfully pretty song though.

also, i, for one, don't mind the poetry at all, even if i really hate a poem here or there because that's the point, isn't it? you can only find a diamond by looking through a lot of coal.

*Comment by [Meica.](#) — May 28, 2007 @ [10:18 pm](#)*

23. Gertrude Stein wrote a poem called Five Words in a Line (1930). Can you guess how it goes?

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [1:28 am](#)*

24. words words words words words ?

*Comment by [mark page](#) — May 31, 2007 @ [11:30 am](#)*

25. motherless child was originally a old spiritual sung in the south by slaves.

*Comment by [Song Chong](#) — June 1, 2007 @ [4:00 pm](#)*