

Parents

A child's face is a drowned face:
Her parents stare down at her asleep
Estranged from her by a sea:
She is under the sea
And they are above the sea:
If she looked up she would see them
As if locked out of their own home,
Their mouths open,
Their foreheads furrowed –
Pursed-up orifices of fearful fish –
Their big ears are fins behind glass,
And in her sleep she is calling out to them
 Father, Father
 Mother, Mother
But they cannot hear her:
She is inside the sea
And they are outside the sea.
Through the night, stranded, they stare
At the drowned, drowned face of their child.





Summary and analysis:

The title, 'Parents', implies connection not only between a father and mother but between them and their child. It is unsettling, therefore, to begin the poem with 'A child's face is a drowned face'. The child is not named: it could be any child. She is physically close to her parents in that they are standing at the bedside, watching the sleeping child, but there is a separation here too in that the child is far away in the realms of sleep. She might as well be under the sea and the parents above it, peering down through the water.

The parents 'stare down' at the child with the intense fascination and love parents have for their children. However, they are 'Estranged' from the child by the sea of dreams. This idea of closeness and distance can be extended to take in the uniqueness of the child: although she is the product of her parents' union she is also her own person and has her own inner world and life to lead.

The poet's language is straightforward and the repetition of fact: 'She is under the sea / And they are above the sea', is both calm and is also appropriate for a poem centred on a young child. It is almost like a child's tale but the simple narrative here belies the complexity of the poem.

The poet imagines that if the child were to look up she would see her parents looking faintly ridiculous as they peer down. The sea imagery is continued as they are compared to 'fearful fish' with 'Pursed-up orifices' and 'fins'.

The parents are fearful presumably because they worry about their ability to adequately care for the child and protect her from all harm. Their helplessness is highlighted by their being in a different world from their child and unable to



do anything but watch her.

Now the child calls to the parents in her sleep, but she cannot reach them. The language in this final section of the poem is negative and reflects the difficulties of family relationships as well as the helplessness that 'stranded' parents feel when standing over their child. They love her but she must live her own life and ultimately all they can do is watch. The repetition of 'drowned, drowned' in the final line of the poem emphasises the sadness of the complicated relationships and difficulties with communication that exist between parents and children.

En Famille, 1979

Bring me back to the dark school – to the dark school of childhood:
To where tiny is tiny, and massive is massive.

Summary and analysis:

The title of the poem suggests unity and comfort such as might be expected of childhood in a happy family. This poem was written when Durcan was thirty five. He asks to be taken back to childhood, where things are simple and intense. The 'tiny is tiny' and the 'massive is massive'. Life is never so straightforward and uncomplicated again. Childhood is a 'dark school' where we learn as we grow, but it is not unequivocally positive and joyful, as is seen by the use of the word 'dark'. However, Durcan still longs to go back, which suggests that his life now is less than perfect.

