

A Poetry Book that Saw the Future
by Susan Meissner

For my eighth Christmas, my grandparents gave me a book of poetry that I've kept for more than four decades. I've taken it with me on every move, even the international ones. The dust jacket went the way of tatters sometime in the late eighties, but the aquamarine hardback still has a place on my shelves. It's titled *Favorite Poems of the Children's Hour*, copyright 1967 and compiled by Josephine Bouton. I think I loved the audacious title most — oh, the bravery of editors who fearlessly chose these as the favorite poems of not just some, but all children. Children, mind you, who would sit and listen for sixty minutes to a kind soul reading them. Thanks to these editors, you may look for poems the youngsters will like better than these, but you won't find any because these are the favorite.

Or maybe what I loved about the gift most is that my grandparents liked my own meager and oft pitiful attempts at poetry and they wanted to encourage me, affirm me, and embolden me to keep at it. It's rather amazing really that they didn't give me a children's poetry book with thick, oversized pages filled with verses that anyone with a rhyming dictionary could come up with. They gave me, ahem, the *favorites* that a child would listen to. It was almost as if they could see me in my future life, not writing poetry exactly, but writing. Always writing and striving for prose that makes the soul ache with its beauty. They've both passed away now but it seems that with that gift, so long ago, that they could almost predict the future and see me where I am now—with a shelf of novels with my name on them.

Or maybe it was the uncluttered inside pages that I loved; ink and paper and few illustrations. Snippets from the greats like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Sir Walter Scott, people whose names I didn't know then but I surely do now.

Actually, what I loved – and love still – is the poem my grandfather wrote to me on the inside page, in the all-caps script that was distinctly his.

To Susie

*This book was given to Susie at Christmas time
In the year nineteen-hundred-and-sixty-nine
The idea for a book of poems came from Grandpa
The picking and buying was done by Grandma
We hope your own poems you continue to write
Then you will have less time with your sisters to fight!
Many years from now, when you look on the year to pass
Will you remember the games we played when you were a young, young lass?
Will you look on the problems of Johnny and Billy
And think of your Grandpa as being quite silly?*

(You need to know Johnny and Billy were the names I gave his puppet hands. His high voice when he made them talk drove everyone crazy, but I loved them.)

I can tell you, many years later, with the book in my lap as I write this, that I remember it all. Silliness is not what I think of when I remember those lovely uncomplicated days. When the adults in my life could see my future even before I did and then gave me the wings to fly there...

That is what I love best.