

Notes on O my pa-pa by Bob Hicok:

Like Maurice Manning (Banjo52, Nov. 15), Bob Hicok is a relatively young poet who takes chances that would fail in lesser hands. There's a bit of wisecrack in his language and content--a tone that keeps many irony-loving poets too detached to trust. Brain castrates heart. I suspect that these poets are apparently so worried about sentimentality that they overcompensate and eviscerate their poems. Overly academic poets can do the same thing, yet I wouldn't be surprised if those two schools of poetry feel contempt for each other.

But Bob Hicok is not an excessively self-defended irony-robot. He keeps on being human and soulful, even as he relies on wit and irony in everything from subject matter to word choice to decisions about line breaks. Of the Hicok poems I've read, "O my pa-pa" is his greatest achievement, and it is simply a fine poem in any context.

You may have heard about writers' conferences or the writing workshop scene. The teacher, who is usually a writer-dignitary (with real or imagined celebrity), guides less experienced writers as they sit in a circle and critique each other's work.

Naturally, the bad mom and the bad dad are frequent subjects. And why not? There is no shortage of bad moms and bad dads. However, beginning writers don't seem to realize that they need to bring something new to the table--a new kind of bad mom or bad dad, or at least a fresh perspective and invigorated language on a well-worn subject.

And now there's Hicok's strategy: why not turn the tables entirely? What if there were a workshop of dads writing about bad sons, or just disappointing sons, indifferent sons, self-centered sons, sons who broke their fathers' hearts, sons who maybe deserve to have critical poems written about them, even if the poems are bad. Bad dad, bad son, bad poem. Dumb males, distant males, longing males . . . Writing Workshop, anyone?