

# Twelve River RIPPLES

## Favourite Poem



### **Infant Sorrow**

by William Blake

My mother groaned! My father wept.  
Into the dangerous world I leapt:  
Helpless, naked, piping loud:  
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands:  
Striving against my swaddling bands:  
Bound and weary I thought best  
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

This short poem sounds like a cheerful nursery rhyme with its tight rhythm and rhyming scheme. But there is nothing cheerful about it. The father watches helplessly as his wife endures labour; he is filled with anxiety as the child struggles in his hands; it may be his first child and he's unsure how to wrap him up; he strives against the swaddling and screams, *like a fiend in a cloud*. Has he arrived out of the sky?

But then he gives up the fight, and *sulks on his mother's breast*. No saccharine, oh isn't it lovely, a mother breastfeeding her sweet new baby – no, this is painfully real. The poem leaves a lot of questions unanswered: was this child intended, and even welcome? Or does this birth mean yet another mouth to feed when food is scarce? Or is it their first child, and the new parents are unsure if they feel ready for this responsibility? They may have had to get married because of him.

This is not the sort of message we're used to: "It's a boy! It's a girl! Mother and Baby doing well." No, we're looking at anxiety, even foreboding. This child has indeed leaped into a tough world, not very child friendly. William Blake, being a visionary, railed at the cruelty in the world about him. Birds in cages, horses whipped and overworked, children sent to work in cotton mills, down coal mines, up chimneys. Because of extreme poverty or the consolation of alcohol, parents were sometimes forced to give up their children into prostitution or some other form of exploitation.

Even the children of the wealthy classes were often raised by servants and sent at an early age to Spartan boarding schools. So Blake was simply voicing his anxiety at the future of this new born baby. Will his mother survive? (Women often died a few days after giving birth.) Will the child survive its first year? Faced with so many uncertainties, why would the new father be joyful?

Anne Boileau