

SNAPSHOTS of the heart

JAKE SLOMINSKI'S ILLNESS BROUGHT A SENSE OF URGENCY TO HIS FATHER'S LIFE THAT HELPED HIM RECAPTURE HIS 'LOVE AFFAIR WITH WORDS'

By CHERYL CLOCK
Standard Staff

There was a time in his life when Jim Slominski had lost poetry. A time before his son, Jake, was born when his love of prose had quite simply evaporated into the blur

of life. It was rather odd, when he thinks about it now, since his love affair with words dates back to high school when he'd read poetry with a buddy during jam sessions with his electric guitar. He wrote poems through university while he studied English literature at Concordia University in Montreal. And when he moved to Niagara-on-the-Lake with wife Mary and worked on the family's peach farm, his poetry continued.

But by the time Jake was born, he had lost it completely.

It was 1996 when he found it again.

That was the year his five-year-old son Jake was diagnosed with



Jake Slominski sits with his mother, Mary, father, Jim and sister, Maya, around him. Jim has a second book of poetry published called Forever the Last Time.
STAFF PHOTO BY

That was the year his five-year-old son Jake was diagnosed with Duchenne-muscular dystrophy, a particularly brutal and ruthless disease that has no cure.

Jim and his wife, Mary, were heartbroken. They had a daughter, Maya, by then. And thought they had the perfect life.

And then, Jake's teacher noticed something peculiar. Jake couldn't run like the other kids; he always seemed to lag behind. And when he climbed stairs, he always seemed to need a wall for support.

Doctors told them Jake's muscles will gradually weaken over time to the point where he won't be able to walk. Then, even his heart and the muscles used for breathing will become too weak to sustain life.

Jim and Mary chose not to hide from the devastating news, but face it head on. They called friends and relatives, trying to explain to them what they were only just beginning to understand themselves.

Jim called an old university professor, someone who had cultivated his

love of poetry back in his days at Concordia University.

"Jim," the professor told his friend near the end of their conversation, "you know what you have to do."

Poetry would come back into his life.

He began using his flair for words like a camera, recording moments in time, before they slipped away forever.

A collection of those poems are found in his book, *Forever the Last Time* (Wolsak and Wynn, \$15). He writes from a father's perspective of his family's sorrows and triumphs.

He calls them poetic snapshots of his heart.

"It's odd when you're given this kind of news," says Slominski, 42.

"Up until then, life is this large thing, where we're in the middle somewhere and whenever we get to the end, that's fine."

Jake's diagnosis brought a sense of urgency to his life. An almost frantic need to capture memories, to give them an immortality of sorts on paper, before they were gone forever.

"Poetry

is my equivalent to photos, to getting the video camera out," he says.

"Things slip by us. We think we're going to have them forever, that we'll enjoy the moment again and again."

But sometimes, moments disappear. Too soon. Never to be enjoyed again.

And so, he wrote. Early in the morning, at 4 a.m., into leather-bound journals in the semi-darkness, sitting on a thick rectangular pillow called a gomden, as words flowed in a torrent of emotions from his ball-point pen.

He combined poetry writing with his devotion to tai chi, yoga and meditation. At first he wrote for himself. Then, for his family. And then he realized his words just might mean something to someone else too.

So, he published his first book, *The Wind is a Tall Man Striding* and was shortlisted by the CBC Literary Awards for the section on Jake. A series of poems that are now in *Forever the Last Time* won him second place in 2002.

Since then, he's continued to write with an honesty he hopes will touch people on many levels.

In *School Yard*, he writes about the time Jake had been playing with friends at the far end of the school yard, searching for insects. They had found a praying mantis there the day before.

*Then the bell rings and everyone runs
and he can't keep up
and his friends get smaller
and no one waits
and he tries
to run fast
falling farther
and further behind.
Alone. Crying.
A rag doll
tumbles through his chest, an
awareness
crushes him
like the body of a praying
mantis
under a friend's shoe.*

Slominski will never feel his son's pain, he says. But he tries. He tries to imagine how it must feel for his son to be left behind by a world that often forgets to wait for him.

In *The Light Load*, Slominski returns to a time in his life when Jake was just a baby and muscular

dystrophy was something that happened to some other kid.

He writes how he used to carry Jake, wrapped warmly in blankets, between the bare pear trees to the raspberry canes, singing to him until he fell asleep.

*Through the days, months, years
he grows thicker with each sleep.
This simple vow:
You will never be too heavy for me
to carry.*

"The love I had for him at that time became so deep and rich," he says.

"I thought I couldn't love a child more than I did. But when you have a tragic situation, you find there's ways of loving a child more than you could have possibly imagined."

In *ToysToysToys*, he describes a moment when he's yelling at his kids for not tidying up their toys. And then, a realization.

*I imagine
years from now
the sounds of laughter and fighting
and dialogue for action figures im-
provised on the spot
gone
and me
opening boxes
weeping trying desperately
to shake
the life back into them*

Slominski says he writes with a certain clarity. A simple straightforwardness and honesty that doesn't get clouded by obscure prose. He wants people to relate his words to their own lives.

He describes his poetry as a quartet.

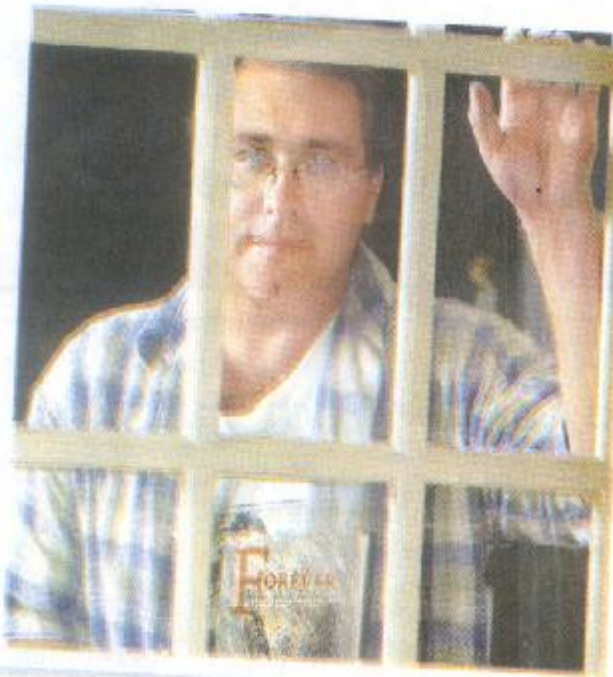
"I see it as classical music, a quartet. It's not a symphony, it's quiet pieces that have different moods.

"But ultimately, they're quiet, very minimalist pieces."

Two words have become his guiding principals.

"I want poetry of beauty and strength," he says.

■ Jim Slominski's second book of poetry, *Forever the Last Time*, is available in Chapters, as well as Chapters and Amazon on-line and at north-westpassages.com. He is organizing a book launch and poetry reading. Call 905-685-9130 for details.



Jim Slominski's second book of poetry is titled *Forever the Last Time*. The book features over 50 pieces inspired by Jim's family and what he observes on his journey through life.

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