

That Awkward Age

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Extract

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To Meccano

Like me you were born in Liverpool,
and after the war, as soon as you reappeared in the shops,
Dad was first in the queue for my birthday present.
The introductory box for beginners contained
perforated strips of red metal, nuts, bolts, spanner,
screwdriver, an axle and a pair of wheels. Magic.
I couldn't wait to turn you into small feats of engineering,
a miniature Golden Gate Bridge, a scale model
of the *Titanic*, a two-wheeled double-decker bus.

But there was less to you than met the eye,
and although my father would sit beside me,
boyish and enthusiastic about cobbling together
a pair of ladders, a crucifix or a luggage trolley,
little Isambard Brunel would wander off to rummage
in mother's sewing box. Sorry, Meccano.
My best times were spent as a fireman during the Blitz,
rushing fearlessly into burning buildings to rescue zips,
buckles and bra-fasteners trapped in tangled heaps of red metal.

To My Violin

I loved the very shape and feel of you.
The curved lightness of a body
lovingly carved from an Alpine spruce
in a sun-filled garden in Cremona
by Geppetto, the blind violin-maker.

I never tired of snapping open the case
and unclipping the bow, your Sancho Panza,
tightening the horse-hair and applying the rosin.
The silkiness of your neck as I slipped you under my chin.
God's in his heaven, let the music begin.

I'm sorry, violin, but it never did.
It was the lines and funny dots that kept me out.
I thought that if I concentrated really hard
and imagined the tune, then you would overhear
and amplify it, weaving melodies out of thin air.

You, after all, cost hard-earned money my parents
could ill afford. Plus the lessons after school.
But as a ragged claw scuttled across the floor
of the fingerboard, and Sancho see-sawed
sea shells on the C sharp, you lost interest.

Eventually I realised that what came between us
was music, and so we went our separate ways.
Me, to doing this, and you, laid out in a dusty cellar,
to dream of being kissed awake by a handsome prodigy.
Remembering, not a garden in Lombardy, but a factory in Taiwan.

To Poetry Please

What a daunting pleasure it has been over the years
to sit in a studio and present you to the nation @bbc.co.uk.
To celebrate poetry. Seven buxom women abreast,
staggering and sliding on the ice-bound road.
The red wheelbarrow. A boy falling from the sky.
Dappled things, borogroves and runcible spoons.
The secret ministry of frost, full moons and little Frieda.
Rainbows and the liquefaction of Julia's clothes.

To celebrate the joy of socks. Love in the back of vans,
sing the body reclining and the warming of her pearls.
The way we were and the way we will be. Growing old,
wearing purple, a joy to behold. And let us not forget
the vacuum cleaner and the Ford Cortina BS8 2LR.
More feel-good than Gielgud. Rhyme. I like that stuff.
Let us sleep now. To Poetry Please, a little momento,
some of your favourite lines stitched into a cento.

To Bedtime Stories

'How we envy the infant McGoughs tucked up in bed.

Night after night of magical word-juggling at the hands of a consummate craftsman.

How lucky they were, how grateful they must feel.'

The Signal Award

Sadly, you weren't around when I was a child.

In wartime, with blackouts and nightly bombings,
the printed word was rationed, and there was little time
for ill-fitting glass slippers and transvestite wolves.

Sadly, my own books weren't around either.

How proud Mother would have felt reading
my stories to me, as I joined in the exciting bits
and quickly learned the poems off by heart.

Because I write for children and often perform
with apparent enthusiasm in front of young audiences,
people assume I enjoyed reading to my own kids,
the bedroom aglow with lilting reassurance.

Alas, bedtime stories, I let you down. Grimm's the word.

I yawned my way through the classics. Boring swiftly
of fables and fairy tales I would leave out great chunks.

'Once upon a time they lived happily ever after. The end.'

I blame the war and the clash of opening times and bedtimes.

One eye on the smiling Thomas the Tank Engine clock,

'Gosh, is that the quality time? Goodnight, sleep tight.'

Kiss, kiss, and Daddy is down the stairs and off to the pub.

So inept was I, so famously bad, that when the kids
were still making a noise long after lights out
my wife would shout upstairs, 'Now go to sleep
or your father will come up and read some of his poems.'

We could hear the groaning as they burrowed
beneath the duvets. 'Oh no, not another night
of magical word-juggling at the hands
of a consummate craftsman.' Then silence.

To Contact Lenses

We were never really suited, were we?
A relationship that was bound to fail.
I lacked the willpower.
'Persevere, persevere,' was the opticians' mantra
Over the years, five in all.
(Four wearing glasses I seem to recall.)
Putting you in was always a problem.
Being short-sighted I could seldom hit the target
and you would slide over the cornea,
and disappear from the screen like a lost email,
unread and irretrievable.

Getting you out was even worse.
Last thing at night, I would jab an eyeball
impatiently like a doorbell, sending you into orbit
around the cosmos, before landing, I imagined,
on the dark side of the brain.
Or perhaps sliding down a nasal passage
into the trachea to end up lodged in a lung.
Remember the time I found you on the floor
of the bathroom, and thought I'd coughed you up?

The pity is we didn't meet sooner.
Who knows what heights I might have achieved
on the tennis court or the rugby field?
But by the time you appeared on the scene
the scene was an accustomed blur.
Eventually my aim improved and lenses
softened, but by then I'd given up on you.

Now my sporting days are over
and girls make fun not passes,
and though tempted by the occasional fling,
I face the fact, I'm stuck with glasses.