

# Poems in a Time of Coronavirus - Issue No. 12



This anthology contains poems and prose chosen by a group of friends from St Paul's Church Grove Park Chiswick on the theme of 'Childhood', shared with each other via Zoom on 18 June 2020.

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## ***School Bag* by Owen O'Neill**

It was the first leather thing I can remember all big buckles and resilient hard newness with brass rivets and stitching and everything fitting into itself with nothing left to spare shiny on the outside and dull on the inside like a brown horse's ear.

My schoolbag was too big for me, knocking at my shins, the two of us full of emptiness on our first day, but coming home proud at three o'clock with Janet and John and a jotter. I was soon to grow into it, learn to love it. It would become my protector, weighed down

with the hard spines of Joyce and Hardy and Steinbeck whirling through the air at my enemies a windmill of lethal knowledge that would bust your head wide open. It was a goalpost when a spontaneous game of football would last into the dark days of an echoey winter

and all we were really left kicking was a piece of freedom away from home and work, even in that country blackness I knew it was mine, picking it out immediately from all the others like a blind man feeling a face. I learned to wear it well, broke it down like a bucking bronco until it buckled more

easily and lay gently on my side. Forty years on and the smell of leather, no matter what it is, is always my schoolbag, sour hawthorn black ink woody pencil shavings, rubbers tired of rubbing and the crumbs of stale bread and education. It was all the real learning I ever had, inside that bag.

They are vanishing now, leather schoolbags. Cyberspace and screens are the future, easily carried and soon forgotten. I saw one the other day in a junk shop, circa 1960. I bought it, clutched it to my heart, and some day when I'm very old and disappeared, they will find me, wandering in my pyjamas, on the hard shoulder, swinging my schoolbag, ready for a fight.

**Chosen and read by Shelagh Allsop**

## ***Forgiven by A. A. Milne***

I found a little beetle; so that Beetle was his name,  
And I called him Alexander and he answered just the same.  
I put him in a match-box, and I kept him all the day ...  
And Nanny let my beetle out -  
Yes, Nanny let my beetle out -  
She went and let my beetle out -  
And Beetle ran away.

She said she didn't mean it, and I never said she did,  
She said she wanted matches and she just took off the lid,  
She said that she was sorry, but it's difficult to catch  
An excited sort of beetle you've mistaken for a match.

She said that she was sorry, and I really mustn't mind,  
As there's lots and lots of beetles which she's certain we could find,  
If we looked about the garden for the holes where beetles hid -  
And we'd get another match-box and write BEETLE on the lid.

We went to all the places which a beetle might be near,  
And we made the sort of noises which a beetle likes to hear,  
And I saw a kind of something, and I gave a sort of shout:  
"A beetle-house and Alexander Beetle coming out!"

It was Alexander Beetle I'm as certain as can be,  
And he had a sort of look as if he thought it must be Me,  
And he had a sort of look as if he thought he ought to say:  
"I'm very very sorry that I tried to run away."

And Nanny's very sorry too for you-know-what-she-did,  
And she's writing ALEXANDER very blackly on the lid,  
So Nan and Me are friends, because it's difficult to catch  
An excited Alexander you've mistaken for a match.

**Chosen and read by Victoria Lynch**

## ***Fern Hill* by Dylan Thomas**

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
    The night above the dingle starry,  
    Time let me hail and climb  
    Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
    Trail with daisies and barley  
    Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,  
    In the sun that is young once only,  
    Time let me play and be  
    Golden in the mercy of his means,  
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,  
    And the sabbath rang slowly  
    In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay  
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air  
    And playing, lovely and watery  
    And fire green as grass.  
    And nightly under the simple stars  
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,  
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars  
    Flying with the ricks, and the horses  
    Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white  
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all  
    Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
    The sky gathered again  
    And the sun grew round that very day.  
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm  
    Out of the whinnying green stable  
    On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house  
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
In the sun born over and over,  
I ran my heedless ways,  
My wishes raced through the house high hay  
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows  
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
Before the children green and golden  
Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me  
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,  
In the moon that is always rising,  
Nor that riding to sleep  
I should hear him fly with the high fields  
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.  
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

**Chosen and read by Catherine Jessop**

### ***1 Corinthians Ch 13* from St Paul's letters to the Corinthians**

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, love; and the greatest of these is love.

**Chosen and read by Sam Hearn**





## ***The Little Black Boy* by William Blake**

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;  
White as an angel is the English child:  
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree  
And sitting down before the heat of day,  
She took me on her lap and kissed me,  
And pointing to the east began to say.

Look on the rising sun: there God does live  
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.  
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.

And we are put on earth a little space,  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,  
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face  
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear  
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.  
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care,  
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Thus did my mother say and kissed me,  
And thus I say to little English boy.  
When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear,  
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him and he will then love me.



Chosen and read by Katharine Makower

## ***Reminiscences of Childhood - an excerpt by Dylan Thomas***

I like very much people telling me about their childhood, but they'll have to be quick or else I'll be telling them about mine.

I was born in a large Welsh town at the beginning of the Great War - an ugly, lovely town (or so it was and is to me), crawling, sprawling by a long and splendid curving shore where truant boys and sandfield boys and old men from nowhere, beachcombed, idled and paddled, watched the dock-bound ships or the ships steaming away into wonder and India, magic and China, countries bright with oranges and loud with lions; threw stones into the sea for the barking outcast dogs; made castles and forts and harbours and race tracks in the sand; and on Saturday summer afternoons listened to the brass band, watched the Punch and Judy, or hung about on the fringes of the crowd to hear the fierce religious speakers who shouted at the sea, as though it were wicked and wrong to roll in and out like that, white-horsed and full of fishes.

One man, I remember, used to take off his hat and set fire to his hair every now and then, but I do not remember what it proved, if it proved anything at all, except that he was a very interesting man.

This sea-town was my world: outside a strange Wales, coal-pitted, mountained, river-run, full, so far as I knew, of choirs and football teams and sheep and storybook tall black hats and red flannel petticoats, moved about its business which was none of mine.

Beyond that unknown Wales with its wild names like peals of bells in the darkness, and its mountain men clothed in the skins of animals perhaps and always singing, lay England which was London and the country called the Front, from which many of our neighbours never came back. It was a country to which only young men travelled.

At the beginning, the only "front" I knew was the little lobby before our front door. I could not understand how so many people never returned from there, but later I grew to know more, though still without understanding, and carried a wooden rifle in the park and shot down the invisible unknown enemy like a flock of wild birds. And the park itself was a world within the world of the sea-town. Quite near where I lived, so near that on summer evenings I could listen in my bed to the voices of older children playing ball on the sloping paper-littered bank, the park was full of terrors and treasures. Though it was only a little park, it held within its borders of old tall trees, notched with our names and shabby from our climbing, as many secret places, caverns and forests, prairies and deserts, as a country somewhere at the end of the sea.

And though we would explore it one day, armed and desperate, from end to end, from the robbers' den to the pirates' cabin, the highwayman's inn to the cattle ranch, or the hidden room in the undergrowth, where we held beetle races, and lit the wood fires and roasted potatoes and talked about Africa, and the makes of motor cars, yet still the next day, it remained as unexplored as the Poles - a country just born and always changing.

Youtube clip: [Reminiscences of Childhood](#)

**Chosen and played by Peter Capell**



## ***Horace by Monty Python***

Much to his Mum and Dad's dismay,  
Horace ate himself one day.  
He didn't stop to say his grace,  
He just sat down and ate his face.  
"We can't have this!" His Dad declared,  
"If that lad's ate, he should be shared."  
But even as they spoke they saw,  
Horace eating more and more:  
First his legs and then his thighs,  
His arms, his nose, his hair, his eyes...  
"Stop him someone!" Mother cried,  
"Those eyeballs would be better fried!"  
But all too late, for they were gone,  
And he had started on his dong...  
"Oh! foolish child!" the father mourns,  
"You could have deep fried that with prawns,  
Some parsely and some tarter sauce..."

But H. was on his second course:  
His liver and his lights and lung,  
His ears, his neck, his chin, his tongue;  
"To think I raised him from the cot,  
And now he's going to scoff the lot!"  
His Mother cried: "What shall we do?  
What's left won't even make a stew..."  
And as she wept her son was seen,  
To eat his head, his heart, his spleen.  
And there he lay, a boy no more,  
Just a stomache, on the floor...  
None the less, since it was his,  
They ate it - that's what haggis is.

**Chosen and read by Hillie MacLaren**

## ***The Mill on the Floss - an excerpt by George Eliot***

We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it, if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass, the same hips and haws on the autumn hedgerows, the same redbreasts that we used to call 'God's birds' because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known and loved because it is known?

## ***My Heart Leaps Up by William Wordsworth***

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

**Both chosen and read by Mary Barnard**

## ***Warning to Children* by Robert Graves**

Children, if you dare to think  
Of the greatness, rareness, muchness  
Fewness of this precious only  
Endless world in which you say  
You live, you think of things like this:  
Blocks of slate enclosing dappled  
Red and green, enclosing tawny  
Yellow nets, enclosing white  
And black acres of dominoes,  
Where a neat brown paper parcel  
Tempts you to untie the string.  
In the parcel a small island,  
On the island a large tree,  
On the tree a husky fruit.  
Strip the husk and pare the rind off:  
In the kernel you will see  
Blocks of slate enclosed by dappled  
Red and green, enclosed by tawny  
Yellow nets, enclosed by white  
And black acres of dominoes,  
Where the same brown paper parcel -  
Children, leave the string alone!  
For who dares undo the parcel  
Finds himself at once inside it,  
On the island, in the fruit,  
Blocks of slate about his head,  
Finds himself enclosed by dappled  
Green and red, enclosed by yellow  
Tawny nets, enclosed by black  
And white acres of dominoes,  
With the same brown paper parcel  
Still untied upon his knee.  
And, if he then should dare to think  
Of the fewness, muchness, rareness,  
Greatness of this endless only  
Precious world in which he says  
he lives - he then unties the string.

**Chosen and read by Jackie Rayer**

### ***Music from Childhood* by John Yau**

You grow up hearing two languages. Neither fits your fits  
Your mother informs you “moon” means “window to another world.”  
You begin to hear words mourn the sounds buried inside their mouths  
A row of yellow windows and a painting of them  
Your mother informs you “moon” means “window to another world.”  
You decide it is better to step back and sit in the shadows  
A row of yellow windows and a painting of them  
Someone said you can see a blue pagoda or a red rocket ship  
You decide it is better to step back and sit in the shadows  
Is it because you saw a black asteroid fly past your window  
Someone said you can see a blue pagoda or a red rocket ship  
I tried to follow in your footsteps, but they turned to water  
Is it because I saw a black asteroid fly past my window  
The air hums—a circus performer riding a bicycle towards the ceiling  
I tried to follow in your footsteps, but they turned to water  
The town has started sinking back into its commercial  
The air hums—a circus performer riding a bicycle towards the ceiling  
You grow up hearing two languages. Neither fits your fits  
The town has started sinking back into its commercial  
You begin to hear words mourn the sounds buried inside their mouths

### ***Foreign Lands* by Robert Louis Stevenson**

Up into the cherry tree  
Who should climb but little me?  
I held the trunk with both my hands  
And looked abroad in foreign lands.

I saw the next door garden lie,  
Adorned with flowers, before my eye,  
And many pleasant places more  
That I had never seen before.

I saw the dimpling river pass  
And be the sky's blue looking-glass;  
The dusty roads go up and down  
With people tramping in to town.

If I could find a higher tree  
Farther and farther I should see,  
To where the grown-up river slips  
Into the sea among the ships,

To where the road on either hand  
Lead onward into fairy land,  
Where all the children dine at five,  
And all the playthings come alive.

**Both chosen and read by Carolyn Ashford-Russell**

### ***In Mrs Tilscher's Class* by Carol Ann Duffy**

You could travel up the Blue Nile  
with your finger, tracing the route  
while Mrs Tilscher chanted the scenery.  
Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân.  
That for an hour, then a skittle of milk  
and the chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust.  
A window opened with a long pole.  
The laugh of a bell swung by a running child.

This was better than home. Enthralling books.  
The classroom glowed like a sweet shop.  
Sugar paper. Coloured shapes. Brady and Hindley  
faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake.  
Mrs Tilscher loved you. Some mornings, you found  
she'd left a good gold star by your name.  
The scent of a pencil slowly, carefully, shaved.  
A xylophone's nonsense heard from another form.

Over the Easter term, the inky tadpoles changed  
from commas into exclamation marks. Three frogs  
hopped in the playground, freed by a dunce,  
followed by a line of kids, jumping and croaking  
away from the lunch queue. A rough boy  
told you how you were born. You kicked him, but stared  
at your parents, appalled, when you got back home.

That feverish July, the air tasted of electricity.  
A tangible alarm made you always untidy, hot,  
fractious under the heavy, sexy sky. You asked her  
how you were born and Mrs Tilscher smiled,  
then turned away. Reports were handed out.  
You ran through the gates, impatient to be grown,  
as the sky split open into a thunderstorm.

**Chosen and read by Sue Hearn**

## ***Ethel* by Joyce Grenfell**

I don't understand Ethel.  
I don't, I don't really.  
She's one of my very best friends,  
Just about the best, nearly.  
She's an awfully nice girl, Ethel is,  
Dainty and refined,  
I mean she'd never do or say  
Anything unkind.  
But get her inside a stadium  
And she seems to go out of her mind.

'KILL HIM!' she yells, 'KNOCK HIS BLOCK  
OFF!'  
At ice hockey or football or what.  
'KILL 'EM!' she yells, turning purple,  
'KILL THE PERISHING LOT!'  
'SH-SH!' I say, 'ETHEL!'  
'SH-SH!' and I die of shame.  
'KILL HIM AND BASH HIS TEETH IN HIS FACE!'  
She says,  
And calls him a dirty name.

I don't understand Ethel,  
I don't, I don't truly.  
She is always gentle and sweet,  
Never a bit unruly.  
She's an awfully shy girl, Ethel is,  
Wouldn't say boo to a goose.  
You wouldn't think she ever could  
Suddenly break loose.  
But get her inside a stadium  
And her face turns a terrible puce.

'THROW HIM OUT OF THE WINDER!' she yells,  
And her eyes go a terrible red.  
'SWIPE 'EM!' she says, looking cheerful,  
'SWIPE 'EM UNTIL THEY'RE DEAD!'  
'SH-SH!' I say, 'ETHEL!'  
'SH-SH!' and I nearly die,  
'SWIPE HIM AND GRIND HIS FACE IN THE  
MUD!'  
She says,  
'AND PUT YOUR THUMB IN HIS EYE!'

I don't understand Ethel,  
I don't, I don't, really.  
She's one of my very best friends,  
Just about the best, nearly.  
She's and awfully quiet girl, Ethel is,  
That's why I never see  
What makes her carry on like that,  
Noisy as can be.  
Then last Saturday down at the stadium  
Well... it suddenly happened to me.

'BREAK HIS SILLY NECK!' I yells, 'IRON HIM  
OUT!'  
Well, Ethel was startled at that.  
'IRON HIM!' I says, feeling lovely,  
'IRON HIM UNTIL HE'S FLAT!'  
'OOH', I says, 'ETHEL!'  
'OOH', and I did feel queer.  
Then she grinned, and we both of us gave a yell  
'BITE A BIT OUT OF HIS EAR!'

**Chosen and read by Simon Surtees**

