THE ALPINE FELLOWSHIP
2018

CHILDHOOD

Edited by Alan Lawson

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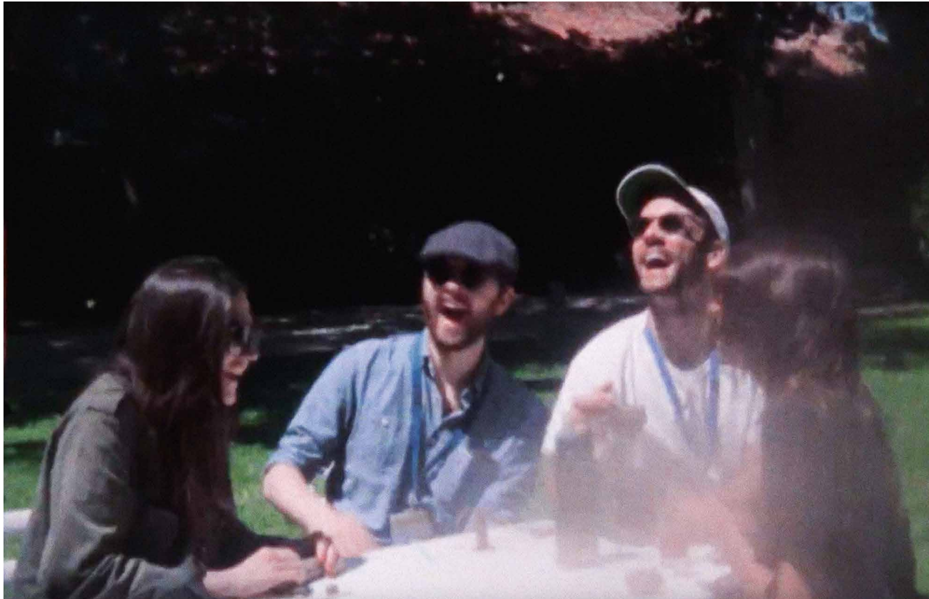

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Preface

'I'd like to say that we could be friends
but the truth is we have nothing in common'

Creating a symposium for adults to talk about childhood is an exercise most beautifully captured in this poem 'To my nine year old self' by Helen Dunmore. To talk of who 'I' was, is to own that person as me whilst burying them as gone, at least parts of them. That 'I' is elusive, and neither first nor third person narrative quite expresses the oddness of talking about who we were, and in some ways still are, a lingering presence, discarnate, but with a voice nevertheless.

Some people suggest that childhood is a preparation for entering into the adult world, with puberty, as one of the various instars. Unlike butterflies we don't literally digest our childhood selves, though what we become is something nevertheless quite distinct. Pieces of us remain like imaginal discs and can metamorphise into courageous, kind, corrupt, or avaricious adults.

Childhood is not simply a preparation for adulthood, neither is education, I don't believe they are simply a means to an end, they are in their own ways ends in themselves. There is something distinct about childhood. It holds a special place in adult consciousness, where it can become a sort of arcadia. The Greek arcadia is wrapped up in pastoralism and harmony with nature, and the childhood version carries many of those distinguishing features. Not surprisingly, it is after all the time when we play in nature without needing to extract any economic value from the land. The child climbing a tree shares a transcendental moment with the arcadian shepherd playing a flute. Both are idylls, idealised and perhaps even invented memories, or at least highly selective, but we long for them, for a time and place beyond/before the machinations of society and culture, and for time, more time. Death is not denied entry to arcadia or childhood but it appears further away, the sense of finitude is less discernible. Perhaps this is why we sentimentalise childhood, perhaps the cult of youth is simply death denial.

But that may be too simplistic. The obsession with youthfulness and the extent to which society can both sanctify and fetishise over everything that was, of our former selves that were young, innocent, just, and 'beautiful', may not simply be sentimentality but sadness. Sadness that the world of the 'ought' or the 'could be', never matched up with the 'is' of reality. Perhaps then we are creatures caught between sadness or sentimentality. Sad for our failure to make the world as we imagined and idealised, or sentimental because it's nice to think there was a time when all was well with the world.

And yet, there is something more about the state of childhood, and the recollection of it, that is profoundly important to culture. The painter Picasso delights and infuriates in equal measure with his alleged statement that 'it took him four years to paint like Raphael but a lifetime to paint like a child.' Putting aside the misplaced arrogance there is something beguiling about the notion of refinding that childhood voice, or that childhood way of seeing. Of remastering something that gets lost in the rational methodology of adulthood. Of going back in time as if there were important ways of seeing that have been obscured. Proust devotes six volumes to time and the resonance of childhood. He finds something of this sonority, when he writes, 'when on a

summer evening, the melodious sky growls like a tawny lion, and everyone is complaining of the storm, it is the memory of the Meseglise way that makes me stand alone in ecstasy, inhaling, through the noise of the falling rain, the lingering scent of invisible lilacs… Thus would I often lie until morning, dreaming of the old days at Combray'.

The Meseglise way, and the Guermantes way are attempts to puncture the veil that separates adulthood from childhood, through analysis of memory Proust demonstrates the profound effect that nature through childhood has had on the adult psyche. Because it's not just nature, and not just being a child, but it is the confluence of the two that seem to allow for the creation of what we might refer to as a genre of childhood. The fragments of childhood memory and their potency are what lead Proust to realise that the ephemeral 'dog daisy and water bubble on a river bank' are preserved, are 'elected to survive' through adult consciousness, and all of adult life is a yearning for a place as beautiful as it was seen as a child, or indeed for a good night kiss from a mother as intelligent and beautiful as our own. That childhood may be fictionalised, distorted, invented. We have a tendency to ignore the nasty bits. But recollection and imagination are essential parts of the adult world, it is after all adults that plant rose gardens not children, or design cathedrals, or take their children to river banks to look for dog daisies and water bubbles. Perhaps the cult of childhood is just another search for the transcendental, and all our attempts to find it are also notable by what is not said, not written, designed, or planted.

Two obvious features of being a child, as far as I can recollect, were wonder and boredom. It's a cliché of course but I vividly remember sitting through

some tedious school lesson, bored beyond measure, whilst outside someone was mowing a lawn, and a wasp knocked against the window, and I knew suddenly and essentially that everything that was important was not in that room, but in that wasp and the smell of cut grass. Growing up for some reason entails an unease with that early epiphany. And the official line is to call children day dreamers and to insist upon a dogma that the complex problem of living is somehow soluble. Solved by hard work and system, and that imagination is a form of laziness, something to leave behind. But perhaps it was the transcendental that knocked upon the window that day, Pan calling from the woods. Perhaps the gods are not dead, just moved on, only visible to bored children.

Yet we've created a paradigm for childhood education based solely around economic thinking. Because, as we all know, when living gets complicated we turn to money and things. Schopenhauer thought art would fill the God shaped hole in the universe, but he was of course wrong. …money and things filled it. Visit any school website and you will see phrases such 'preparing children for the global market', the educational lexicon has become filled with words like impacting, facilitating, actionable… and benchmarks, feedback, and line managers… words that come from business and industry. The design of childhood looks like a poorly thought out second guess of the job market. The guess is how to put one's offspring higher up the food chain. Perhaps it was always a bit like that. And maybe we're just containing children until they reach the legal age to start drinking away the angst, or spending away the existential hole in their lives. Indeed schools talk about 'safe coping mechanisms', which is vernacular for 'go for a run, don't take

drugs'. As if they've already admitted like some continental philosopher that life is meaningless, and there's nothing to do but cope, and childhood is preparation for coping, rather than predication for living.

Only, the child that I was *knew* that life is tremendous. Within the recollection of dog daisy and water bubble, lawnmower, or seagull, or chip shop, there is something profound. Proust's tisane and madeleines are not simply warm memories but the incarnation of the imagined or recollected. Their colour and metaphysical texture, are entirely important in themselves, as are all that is not said in those recollections, and it is failure to entertain them, to hold them in all their complexity, and allow them to exist, that ruins us as adults, as grown up children.

By Alan Lawson

Writing Prize

First Place

CHILDHOOD: A TRIPTYCH

By Mo Ogrodnik

I: MINT

The night wind carried the peppermint inside and made a surf in the mango grove—fruit, leaves, and limbs rustled and swept, crescendoed and faded like distant waves in the land locked village of Baduan, an untouchable place between Nepal and Pakistan. The damp breeze, smelling of mango and mint, wrapped around the two teenaged girls as they relieved themselves in the open field, urine seeping into the dirt and droplets spraying their ankles. As children they had held hands side by side, watched liquid pour from their bodies, form rivers beneath them, but tonight the sky was black and they were silhouettes in the peppermint field.

They did not have time to pull up their purple or green Sari pants.

His pot bellied stomach slammed against her behind. The other's bony elbows and bare feet pinned the green clothed girl to the ground. Her voluptuous and strong body writhed in the defecated dirt and her hands grabbed into the mint roots trying to get leverage to expel the sickness from her back. Mouthfuls of dirt silenced their screams. The men climaxed.

The four of them panted in the open field as the dark eyes of the girls, fourteen and sixteen, found each other.

Two sets of cousins.
The girls, Untouchables. The men, Yadav, tended cattle.

The girls were alive when they were hung like ripening mangoes from the limbs of the old tree. The leaves vibrated around their bodies and the wind swept them up into the undertow. They gasped for air, the scent of mint filling their nostrils and lungs until they were glutted with mint, packing more and more into their bodies, pressed into an oil that seeped out of their pores and suffocated them.

The fathers refused to remove their daughters from the boughs. The village gathered beneath the bare feet of the girls swaying above them and demanded justice. On the third day, the bodies were cut down and cremated, their ashes feeding the roots of the peppermint field.

II: BISCUITS

Madhu counted the speckled dots on the dirty linoleum floor. She was supposed to be in school, but instead she was sitting in the corner of her mother's bedroom trying to decide what to do. She was doing math in her head: 51 spots—27 (her mother's age) = …24. There were twenty-four more spots than her mother. The white light of morning was gone and the room was dim. Madhu begged her father for curtains and in a drunken fit, he stripped the maroon sheet from her mother's bed and hammered all four corners into place, creating a cave.

A cavern for her mother to sleep.
And sleep.

But now the food that her Auntie made for her mother to sell on the streets was covered in flies. Her mother abandoned the hoppers, roti, and spicy crisps at the door and went back to bed. She listened to her mother's breath, counting the length of the exhales. So much of Madhu's life was about counting—counting steps, breaths, stitches in her school uniform. Her mother slept through the Sri Lankan summer days. She was shy and sad and her Auntie had tried to help but now the food lay in the basket on the table. The food would go to waste and they would owe her Auntie money. Her father would rage. Her mother would cry.

And then sleep.
And sleep.

It was almost lunchtime when Madhu stopped counting and remembered the whistle. Between the beats of her mother's breath, she slipped out of her school uniform and hunted for one of her mother's crumpled dresses.

*

The whistle rested between her lips as she balanced the basket of food on her head and made her way towards the old port where the fishing boats docked and the fish markets lived. Nearby there was an Iranian souk where piles of pots and pans, plastic bowls, and plungers were sold. She could not go to the Pettah market near the Old Fort where many of her mother's friends hammered and sold meat. The smell of warm blood and flies was something she had known since she was a baby and she would surely be spotted.

When should she start blowing? The men saw her approaching and it would be awkward to whistle when she was close. Her breath filled the metal chamber, the ball vibrated between her pursed lips, and a high pitch went out over the waters. She was a sight to behold by all the young men hanging out beneath the ragged awnings of their fishing boats. She knew they were watching her and she had to be careful. She blew her whistle again and the men laughed easily and called her over. She smelled the burning of tobacco in the salt winds, the scaling of fish under midday sun. And she kind of knew—no she definitely knew—that she was a vision of beauty in their day and that she would be able to sell every hopper, roti, and spicy crisp for more, much more, than her mother or Auntie.

She took the extra money she made and went to the tailor. Stood on the chair in her school uniform, her arms spreads wide, and explained to the man that the pockets must be bigger, much bigger. More than twice the size. They must be invisible and look exactly same. He was skeptical. She explained how she needed to carry a notepad and pencils with her at all times, how she loved numbers and maths, and could he do it right away? She would help. She wanted to learn how to sew. In an hour the pockets were done and in these pockets was her plan.

In the morning, she stopped at the market and bought as many sweet biscuits her pockets could hold. She wished they were even bigger. In the corner of the school yard, she set up her sweet biscuit store and by the end of recess her pockets were filled with money and during math, instead of doing equations, she added up her earnings, rolled her fingers between the crumbs

lining her pockets. She does not know what makes her so resourceful. So naturally gifted at work. At making money.

*

Now she wears a yellow uniform and a black hairnet. She lives in Kuwait, in a house with a woman who keeps her passport in a locked drawer, a woman who does not speak her language. She's part of a remittance world—SMS messages, money wires, packages home, and roti on the weekend.

III: TOMATOES FROM SYRIA

Zeinah hugged the damp box of plates she found in the trash to her chest. The streets were empty, blown-out windows and abandoned apartments reminding her of neighbors killed or departed. The sand kept blowing, disguising bloody streets and burying the evidence of people's lives. She passed refrigerators, rusting bedsprings, and mangled electrical cords in the dust, taking the long way around to avoid the playground that had become an ISIS stage for cautionary tales. Orange jumpsuits filled with dead men hung from the swing sets. Swing sets whose chains used to jump as girls pumped towards the sky.

Their house was at the end of the street. She turned the key, the stench of cold mildew greeting her at the bottom of the stairs. Stone steps that had kept Zeinah and her older brother, Yasser, cool during the heat of summer as they traded sports cards and sent a pink ball bouncing through the shadows. Five of them used to live in this house—Zeinah, her brother, her parents, and her maternal grandmother, Tita. Zeinah struggled up the steep stairs

with the box and she was suddenly reminded of tomatoes. Boxes of tomatoes, still covered in dirt, their green stems covered in prickly fur, the smell filling her nostrils with the strong bitter Syrian sun as she hauled them up to the kitchen. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Tita used a blunt bread knife to sever the fruit into thick slices she served on blue and white plates. Yasser would disappear from the table, leaving a red-stained napkin on his seat, where it would remain after the meal was finished and the long shadows had moved across the room.

Everyone back then used to have boxes of tomatoes in their kitchen. Now they were a delicacy. So many greenhouses destroyed. She had seen pictures of plastic walls and ceilings departing into the wind. Farmers were killed or abandoned their crops, leaving the tomatoes to rot, mildew, and suffocate beneath the dismantled plastic tarps.

Suffocation. Plastic. Yasser. Yasser who painted black graffiti on a green wall. Yasser who disappeared seven years ago. Maybe on his way home from work. Her father believed he located the site of the crime, the place where the family car was abandoned, the place where mangy dogs ate from the curb. He returned with a black umbrella from the back seat. For two weeks there was silence and then a phone call. A voice demanding two hundred thousand dollars. They put Yasser on the phone. He begged them to pay the money. And they did. They went to everyone they knew, sold jewelry and furniture, borrowed money from the bank against their home. They did as they were told. Left the money exactly how, when, and where. They had gone over the details hundreds of times. Followed every instruction perfectly.

That was seven years ago.
Seven years of silence.

For weeks, Zeinah went out with the umbrella, rain or shine, hiding her slender frame beneath the black nylon tent and broken metal spine, walking through the streets, putting out a signal, a sign, for her brother to find his way home.

Her mother refused to leave the house. She needed to be there when he returned.

But Zeinah knew. Everyone knew.
There would be no return of the son, father, or friend.
Her brother was dead.
She reached the top step out of breath and called out to her parents as she opened the door, “I'm home.”

Writing Prize
Second Place

YOUR SISTER'S IN THE DARK

By Francesco Lo Basso

I was five when my sister split my head open.

It was a summer day, sticky and hot. We were still living in Hoboken then, the whole family layered into a blocky red brick apartment building like drawers in a filing cabinet: us on the top floor, my dad's parents below, and my aunt and uncle in the basement. There were plenty of signs that it was north Jersey in the late-eighties—Blondie and Bon Jovi filtering from car speakers and boomboxes, neon spandex shorts, Nike high tops, backwards Mets caps, Walkmans, rollerblades, big glasses, bigger hair—but you could also walk the whole square mile of the city and hear nothing but Spanish or Italian spoken. Old World customs sat right alongside modern ones: knock on wood three times to ward off evil spirits, touch metal when passing a funeral procession, throw spilled salt with your right hand over your left shoulder. Your Sister's in the Dark | Lo Basso 2 Knocking over a glass of wine brought good luck; shivering involuntarily meant someone was walking on your grave.

On Saturdays, while my mom and sister were at Shoprite getting the basics—as well as the treats: Temp Tee cream cheese, Lucky Charms, Ball Park hot dogs, Doritos—I went with my father to Carlo's bakery for fresh bread and focaccia, then Fortunato's deli for the week's cold cuts: thin slices of prosciut-to, mortadella, soppressata. When we got home, Alana and I would watch

cartoons—Muppet Babies, Darkwing Duck, The Real Ghostbusters—while my mom started the arduous task of making the gravy. She'd set a giant cast iron pot on the stove, and slowly feed it tomatoes, sliced onions, chunks of fresh garlic and basil until the whole apartment smelled of it.

Sunday pasta was a clamorous affair with any number of relatives or family friends joining in the night-time meal. There were the Morettis across the street—Eleanora and Franco and their two boys—and Giovanna and Isa, unmarried sisters who lived alone in the rowhouse next to the Morettis. Fernando and Rufina and their four kids lived on the other side of the railroad tracks, and Eugenio and his mother and sister across town. My father, Fernando, and Eugenio had grown up together, in the Old Country as they called it, and though not explicitly called Zio, Fernando and Eugenio were given the same deference as my other uncles. Only when I was eleven, after my family had moved to Pennsylvania, when I handed Rachel Grossman an invitation to my sister's party and she asked, "What's Confirmation?" did I realize people could be things other than Italian and Catholic.

However, the old and new were not harmoniously intertwined, but sat, begrudgingly, beside each other. My mother was the only American in the entire extended network of my father's family, and though she worked hard to participate in the traditions she had suddenly found herself expected to uphold, some of them exasperated her. Like the Scarponis.

For somewhat obscure reasons (which likely had to do with one of the Moretti boys and her daughter), Mrs Scarponi hated Mrs Moretti. She deemed

Mrs Moretti evil—a witch—and left burnt matches and salt on Eleanora's stoop. Walking past the Moretti house, she gave it the devil's horn—index and pinky fingers extended, middle fingers held down with the thumb—to ward off the malocchio, the curse of the evil eye.

I didn't understand. Eleanora was nice. She sometimes watched Alana and me when my parents were working. She gave us Oreos and didn't make us leave the living room if one of her sons put on MTV. Mrs Scarponi was the one who looked like the witch from Snow White, hunched and grey-haired with filmy white eyes. She was nearly blind and walked stoopedshouldered, waving her hand in front of her the whole time as if performing a curse.

As a child, I thought the wide berth we gave them was because of Mrs Scarponi, but years later my mother told me she never trusted Filomena. She was a teenager, but she dated men who were much older—guys who would pick her up in big, loud cars and buy her real gold jewellery and designer purses. I don't remember seeing her go to school or work, she just hung out the window in low cut tops and big hoop earrings. Something was always wrong with the Scarponis' apartment—leaky faucets, broken shelves, heavy packages, dented window screens—and Filomena would appear on our stoop, twirling a lock of hair around her finger, and ask my dad or his brothers to come over and have a look.

The Scarponis represented disorder, and my mother liked rules: make your bed, clean your room, set the table, try hard in school, obey your parents, do what grown-ups tell you to do, don't talk back, don't sit like that when you're

wearing a dress. Both my parents worked full-time, and my mother took care of all the household duties on top of it, but it felt like she was always there while my father wasn't. Yet my dad's dictums sat on top of all the other rules, and they coincided with the two speeches he delivered ceaselessly: family and authority above all else.

Everything had a rank. Disobeying your father was bad, but disobeying him in front of Nonno (my dad's father) was worse. Listen to your teachers, but only if they don't contradict your parents. Adults should be respected first, but if there were no adults around, Alana—who is two years older than me—was in charge. Age came with authority, and while Alana's fiefdom only consisted of me, she still had one, and I had none.

Alana was adamant about the lines between hers and mine—nothing was ours. My mother wouldn't buy us anything unless she could afford two of it, and so almost every doll, every dress, every My Little Pony and Polly Pocket had its mirror. I began to think of Alana and I as a unit, a single entity, but this lack of differentiation infuriated her, and she rallied against it at every opportunity. Once, at the bank with our mother—dressed in identical green and pink striped rompers, even our hair arranged in matching side ponytails—a woman stopped us and said, "Oh, how cute. Are you twins?" I was thrilled by the assumption, somehow feeling more special rather than less at the idea of being the same as Alana in every way, but my sister was outraged.

The first real distinction to come between us was when Alana started school and learned to do something miraculous: she could read. My mother went

to the store and brought back two books: one for me, which had only pictures, and one for Alana, which had only words. That book, the first one in the Sweet Valley Kids series—a slim volume of probably not more than fifty pages, bound in a cheap purple cardboard that grew more and more creased with every reading—sat like a talisman on my and Alana's bookcase. I stared at it for what felt like hours, memorizing every detail of the picture on the front cover.

I wasn't even four, but I begged my mother to teach me to read. For weeks, after we took Alana to school, my mother would set a small blackboard and a piece of white chalk on the kitchen table and I would sit beside her, painstakingly tracing shaky letters onto a piece of notebook paper. I was relentless and one day, astonishingly, those graphite squiggles—which for so long had seemed as abstract and impenetrable as the sky or the air—took form and significance. They became sounds which combined into words which, when united, created phrases and sentences and whole entire stories. Overnight I had discovered the key to unlocking those mystical black marks on those crisp cream pages in Alana's special book, and rather than this discovery diminishing their power, it increased it. Suddenly, the most mundane of objects—my father's newspaper, my mother's magazine, the back of the toothpaste tube, the side of a cereal box—became energized, mutable.

When Alana got home from school I was eager to show her my newfound skill, and read aloud from a Dr Seuss book. But Alana did not approve of this change. She rolled her eyes and told me Go Dog Go was a book for babies—that she read chapter books.

Her reaction confused me. All I had wanted was to keep pace with her, to blur the lines of separation between us, but Alana wanted the opposite. She seemed to solidify before my eyes, drawing lines and boundaries that reminded me of my position in the hierarchy of our family: she was the older sister and I was the younger sister and this distinction mattered.

Our mother bought us more of the Sweet Valley Kids books, and though they stood in numerical order on our bookcase, I was only allowed to touch the ones mom explicitly bought for me. There must have been over a hundred books in the series, but we knew the lineage of each and every one. Sometimes, if Alana grew bored with a particular storyline, she would grant me ownership of that book, and I duly transferred the title in my head from the "hers" column to "mine". But then Alana would see me reading it and snatch it out of my hands, claiming she had never given it to me in the first place. If I had been smarter, I would have asked for some kind of written proof of these exchanges, but the thought never occurred to me. Rather, we tied ourselves into tedious, endless loops, our arguments only ending because while I grew wearier as the conversation folded in on itself, Alana grew angrier. I always conceded—and she always took my capitulation as admission of guilt rather than the exhaustion it was.

When I was four, my mom took me to meet with Sister Una—St Francis Academy's stern-faced, grey-haired principle. I was terrified. I had to bite my lip to stop myself from crying. According to their school policy, I was a year too young to start kindergarten, but my mother was insistent.

"I know this is what's best for her. Please give her a test or something if you don't think she's ready."

The sisters in Sweet Valley Kids were in second grade, and so I knew what a test was. Thus, this exchange was profound. My mother was restrained—she never raised her voice— and though she wasn't being loud, her tone was adamant, almost demanding. I stared at her in wonder as she gripped my hand.

When Sister Una didn't respond right away, my mother added, "She can already read and write."

I was overcome with conflicting emotions. Half of me felt bolstered, proud. Alana knew how to read and write and that meant it must be a valuable skill—a good thing—but my sister was also angry that I could do so. Maybe it was bad.

The hierarchy saved me.

My mom told me school was important and her judgment outranked my sister's. The only part of the test I remember is explaining the different colours to Sister Una, and doing so slowly and carefully because I was mildly appalled an adult didn't seem to know red from blue. I started school that September.

On the day she split my head open, Alana and I were in our room playing a game we'd invented called Cinnamon Land. Alana had recently read The

Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and determined the way to Cinnamon Land, a magical place where our stuffed animals came to life, was through our closet.

Our closet was narrow, with a sliding wooden door on a metal track set into the wall above it. We crouched on top of the tangle of shoes and fallen pieces of clothing, but couldn't squeeze enough of ourselves inside to close the door all the way. This exasperated my sister, who felt we weren't playing the game right if we couldn't close the door and open it onto Cinnamon Land.

Even at five I was desperate to please, and tried to mollify her by asking if she wanted to be King Bunny—a leading role she would naturally have assumed, but which had begrudgingly fallen to me because it was my pink and white bunny who transformed into the king in Cinnamon Land.

We had clambered out of the closet and were standing in front of our dresser, a bulky five-foot tall monolith of solid wood. I held my bunny out to her, but she slapped it away and shoved me. I fell back into the dresser, my head colliding with the corner seam.

The pain of impact registered second. My first reaction was of shock. My sister had always had a quick temper, but she had never hit me before and this explosion of violence left me stunned. She had no immediate response, just an expression of self-contentment. Only when I started crying, when I put my hand to my head and it came away red, did her expression turn to one of horror.

The rest of that afternoon comes to me in snapshots: my mother in the doorway, her face drained to white. Alana staring at the blood on my sweatshirt and vomiting. My mother dragging me out of my room. Sitting in the back of my aunt's car. A towel over Alana's head. A bright white hospital room. A nurse holding my hand. But the most distinct memory, the neural pattern etched as though by acid into my brain, is the spray of Alana's chestnut hair as it rose and fell against her neck as she tilted her head back and banged it against the wall. She knocked her own head into every surface we passed on our way out the front door: table, kitchen counter, doorframe. The thumps were muffled but dissonant.

In the end, my injury wasn't serious. The way I'd hit the dresser, directly on the seam, had sliced open the top of my scalp. The position of the cut meant it bled freely, but caused no lasting damage. I got six stitches and was sent home.

My sister was silent the whole way. She said nothing in the car, nothing over dinner, nothing when my mom helped me into my pyjamas and put us to bed. It was only once we were in the near dark, the room lit by the streetlight filtering through the open window and our Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle nightlight, that she sat up and twisted around.

It might have been the gloom, but she was squinting at me. It felt like she was measuring something.

"I banged my head more times than you hit yours," she said, and turned towards the wall. She fell asleep shortly after.

Writing Prize

Third Place

THE DARK AND THE BRIGHT

By Krystal Song

"What's for dinner tonight, Ama?" I asked, running in from the rice fields. I lifted my skirts to jump the dirt threshold but didn't notice the slender cat kneeling in its shadow. Both Cat and I yelped as my feet landed mere centimeters from his tail.

"Sorry, Xiao Mao," I said, scooping him up. He smelled clean, though I don't know how he did it. All of us were made of dirt back then. It was the first thing we inhaled on those countryside mornings, the last thing we ate as our bodies succumbed to starvation. World wars were hard, but a country at war with itself—even harder. The year was 1975, and the Cultural Revolution was in its full, savage swing.

And yet, amidst it all, Cat was somehow thriving. His black coat was shining and sleek, and though his body was slender, it was a powerful body—all sinew and muscle. His razor-sharp paws were licked clean, his whiskers newly washed. He growled at me, his tail lashing like a whip, and I cringed. It was hard to tell who was the pet, and who was the master.

"You need to get rid of that cat," Ama said from the kitchen, as she pounded out zhongzi and wrapped the sticky rice in lotus leaves. The kitchen was really just a corner of the bedroom, which was just a fraction of the living room. We all lived side by side in those days, stepping on each other's toes and tails. I hated sharing a bed with Ama at the time, but in a few years I would long for her warm body at night, her familiar Ama smell in my sheets. In a few years, she would be sentenced to a labor camp, and I would sleep alone.

I peered over Ama's shoulder. "So what's for dinner?"

She shrugged, wiping her nose with the back of her hand, leaving a streak of white across her suntanned face. Once, she'd prided herself on her pale complexion–the mark of a landowner's daughter. Now, Ama told us we owned no land, and we'd better not fool ourselves into thinking otherwise.

My skin matched hers–brown, viciously freckled. I didn't mind. Unlike Ama, I could barely remember the *before*—the big house in Shanghai, the extravagant parties, the foreign chocolates. Those were just stories, as much a reality as the monster fables Brother told me at night to make sure I didn't sneak out. All I knew back then were the green, green rice fields, the pervasive leeches, the hot summers. All I remember is the sweat that ran down your temples and into your eyes until you couldn't see.

All I remember is the hunger.

You see, we were always hungry in those days. There was never enough to eat, and when there was, people flocked to your door. If you were a good Comrade, you'd be forced to share. If you were a bad one, you wouldn't live to dinnertime to enjoy your food.

“We don’t have much today, Ziyi.” She dusted her hands on her apron, then faced me. Her almond eyes were dull, adorned with blue-purple bags. “Da Ge hasn’t found much work recently. And we haven’t heard word from Aba…”

“When will he come home?” I whined. I missed my father. Ama was always strict; she was the one who handed me chores, checked my homework. Aba only had treats for me–candy in his pockets, smiles on his face. But late one night, after pounding on the door and muffled voices in the hall, he’d gone. He hadn’t returned since.

“Soon, Ziyi, soon.” My mother’s eyes shut, her sparse lashes fluttering. I knew I wasn’t supposed to crave affection, but I was eleven, and I did anyway, in the same way a cat cannot help but crave milk. I wrapped my arms around her, rubbing my face against the flour in her apron, and to my surprise, she relented, leaning forward to tuck me in closer. In that moment, I had never loved her more. In that moment, despite the eternal hunger, despite the unremitting worry, I had never felt safer. Humans are unquenchable creatures, you see. We rejoice over scraps; we take what we can get.

“Xiao Mao?” My mother gasped in surprise, and I turned around. Cat trotted in through the threshold once more. But this time, between his teeth: a fat, fresh carp, its tail still limply flopping.

I screamed with delight. Ama opened her mouth to rebuke me, but her attention turned to the front gate as Brother returned home. We both hurried outside.

The sun had only just fallen, and early evening carried the lingering aroma of yulanhua, grown wild but no less fragrant. It was late spring, and the magnolia blossoms were just starting to ripen, full of promises they could actually keep.

“Da Ge!” I called. “Xiao Mao caught us fresh fish for dinner! We’ll have zhayu tonight!”

Brother picked me up and swung me around, just like Aba used to do. Da Ge was ten years older than me, and the pride of our little family. He was big and strong and good at finishing chores quickly, which made me very jealous. All the girls in town liked him, though he was a former landowner’s son. He knew just what to say to make Ama smile even when she was tired, and he always listened to my stories and laughed at the right places. When Brother was home, no one argued, even though we had less food to eat. It was too bad Brother had to work far away most of the time, so he wasn’t home often. But when he was, it was always a party.

Cat meowed from below, displeased with being ignored. Brother laughed at the spoiled little master, bending to pet him on the head.

“Where did you go today, Da Ge?” I asked. His stories were riveting to me, revealing the secrets of faraway places I would never get the chance to see. My days were routine: school, fields, home, and back. The same well-trodden path each day. I couldn’t wait to be like Brother, leaving home for

new adventures all the time. But by the time I reached his age, I understand that what awaited was a far cry from adventure.

"To Comrade Lu's house. He needed help with his new barn. And he was so pleased with your Da Ge's work that he gave me these." He fished out two plump tangerines from his pocket, sparkling bright as jewels. I whooped with glee.

"*Aiya!* Be quiet, Ziyi," my mother snapped. "The neighbors will come to check on us. A lady always keeps her mouth shut."

Brother let go of Cat, striding forward to greet Ama. "She's still just a child, Ama," he told her quietly, thinking I wouldn't pay attention. But I was growing up quickly, and beginning to learn that the words said quietly, between the lines, were the most important of all.

Ama nodded, letting herself lean on him for a brief respite. I was always relieved with Brother around, knowing that he could take some of the burden off Ama. Back then, I didn't know how to help her. By the time I learned, she was gone.

I'll always remember that night. It was a feast in my eyes, in my memory. No dinner today, no matter how extravagant, compares to that little meal of fried fish and rice, complete with rare tangerines for dessert. We didn't have much, but we did have our little family, and who could forget Cat, sitting like a king at the head of our table? We weren't full, not by far, but we were satisfied.

Now, I remember that fleeting happiness as a strange thing, for how could you be happy in the face of constant oppression, incessant misery? Somehow, we managed it. Somehow, we found the little moments, the seconds of sheer joy that we made last through the hard times. For the moments were few and far between, and you needed them to last a long way, to prepare you for the worst of times.

For they would come when you least expected it.

Only hours later, as Brother was teaching me English covertly under candlelight, and Ama was sweeping the floors, we heard knocks at the door. In those days, you dreaded those knocks more than anything. We had few friends. Many enemies.

It was Comrade Dai and his wife Jing, peering into our gloomy house with undisguised anger. "Where is that thief of yours?"

Brother rose quickly from his bed, moving over to stand beside Ama in the doorway. Dai looked startled to see Brother at home with the rest of us, and I felt a surge of satisfaction to know he had not expected the added threat. I couldn't wait until the day I grew up to become like Brother, able to defend the home and Ama. For now, I only snuggled closer to Cat, hiding between covers in the dark.

"We know of no thief," Brother said slowly, in his solemn manner. I shivered; he sounded exactly like Aba when things were getting serious. For a foolish moment, I was glad it wasn't me under his gaze.

But Dai sounded unmoved. "Your cat. That little beast stole one of our prize fish."

Jing interrupted. "I bet you trained him to do it too."

Cat froze beside me, as if he was listening. I peeked out from beneath the covers. Brother's eyes were flashing. "We did no such thing."

But Ama, in her foolish, gracious way, put her hand on Brother's arm. They shared a look which I could not begin to understand, and then she turned to our neighbors. "Our cat did catch a fish. We did not know it belonged to you and we sincerely apologize. The last thing we want is to take what is not our own."

I felt an invisible fist squeeze my heart, but there was no stopping Ama when she made up her mind. "We've unfortunately already finished half the fish, but we'd gladly give you the remnants and repay you in whatever means we can."

Our neighbors came from proletarian roots, and the Cultural Revolution had been their stroke of luck. I had seen their gardens–bountiful with squash and bokchoy, and heard about their storerooms–bursting with sacks of millet and rice. It was so unfair, I wanted to scream. But I knew by now that no one would listen to a child.

Dai cast his prying eyes around the inside of our house, then turned up his nose. "We'll take the fish now. You can pay us back in rice when your rations come in."

"Ama, no!" I cried, unable to hold back any longer. I ran up to them in the doorway, but Brother put his arms around me, silencing any further protests. "Listen to Ama," he said quietly.

Ama nodded, ignoring my outburst. Her jaw was set, resolute, but I could see the pain in her eyes. She hurried into the kitchen, then returned with the leftovers, carefully bundled and tied in lotus leaves. That precious meat was everything to us, nothing to them. But by the law, it was theirs.

"One more thing," Dai added, and his words were like a knife. He looked back at his wife, who nodded. He twisted the blade: "We want the cat killed."

"What?" I shouted. Ama paled, and even Brother looked troubled. He put out a conciliatory hand. "Comrade Dai, we are sorry for the trouble we have caused you, but there must be another way we can settle this between neighbors–"

"Either we get this over with now, or we bring this to the Standing Council," he said gruffly. Tears were coursing down my cheeks now. My cries only strengthened as I felt a familiar ball of fluff wrap around my ankles, settling on my feet. I knew he was doing this to comfort me, but right then, it was the farthest thing from comfort. "Go," I tried to say through my tears. "Run!"

But Cat, for all his wisdom, simply sat there, gazing up at our family with deep, mournful eyes. In his last moments, he stared at me, and I remember

that he told me even the darkest moments would not diminish the bright ones.

Jing grabbed Cat before he could flee. Brother pushed me back, shoving me into the house. I tried to fight him, but he was stronger. I had never felt so helpless.

"Ziyi," he said urgently. "Go to sleep."
"Please," I cried. "He didn't know he was stealing!"
Dai looked at me coldly "*Yu yi fan sun.*" *Good intentions still lead to disaster.*

Ama hugged me, and it was only then I saw her over bright eyes, glassy with suppressed tears. I knew then that she cared, that she cared more than I had ever known. "Go back to bed, Ziyi," she whispered.

I was crying as only a child can–with nothing held back. But blindly, with tears blurring my vision, I obeyed. I went to my bed. I got under my blankets. And I did not sleep.

They didn't return until hours later, but I stayed up all the same. As the door creaked open, I saw looming shadows silhouetted against the midnight sky. "Ama?" I whispered, suddenly afraid of Cat's vengeful ghost.

"I'm here," she answered, hurrying to me. And just like that, my fears subsided.

That night, Ama snuggled against me on one side, Brother on the other. Their bodies were cold at first, but we pooled our blankets together. Together, we were warm.

"I'm sorry, Ziyi," Brother said softly. "I know Xiao Mao meant a lot to you."

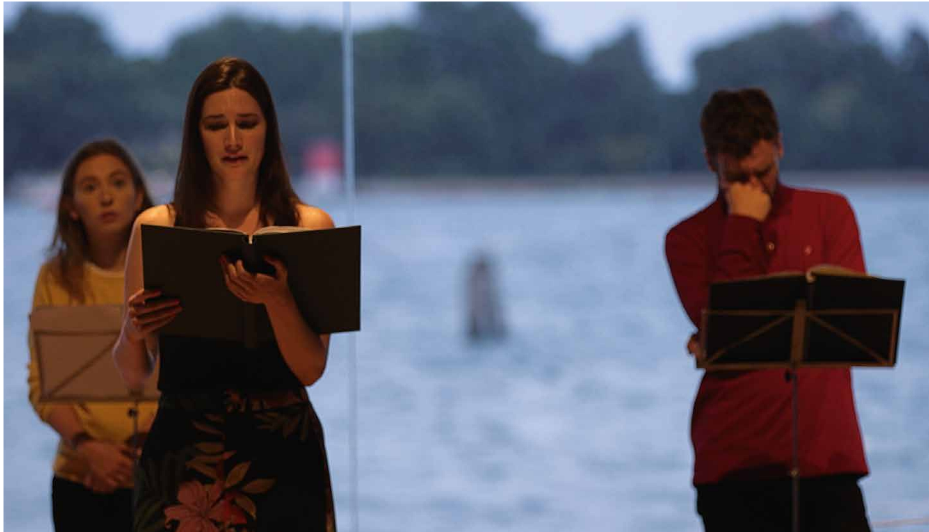
"You'll see him in heaven," Ama reminded me. And then, so quiet I almost thought I imagined it. "I love you."

I stilled beneath the blankets, but my pounding heart gave me away. You see, Ama rarely showed us affection. This moment was rare, so special I treasured it in my memory, preserving it like a fossil caught in amber. I treasured this warmth, this safety, nestled between two big, strong bodies. Their arms were around me, their hearts beating beside me, and right then, that was all that mattered.

There weren't many good memories back then, and there were a lot of hard ones, but we kept going because we knew the bad did not diminish the good. Later on, Ama would botch a Communist notice and be sent to a labor camp as punishment, and Brother would reach the age to be forced into a reeducation program. Later on, I would learn to survive on my own, but I would always remember these moments, and they would keep me going.

"I love you too," I whispered.

For now, we had each other. For now, we were not alone.



Drama Prize

First Place

Excerpt from

The Perfectly Timed Death of an Imaginary Friend

By Kieran Lynn

Three actors are onstage, along with one invisible friend, who is called Ernie.

Sara: This is a play about imaginary friends. In this play, I play Sara. Except I'm not really Sara, I'm an actor, so we all just have to imagine that I am Sara.

Alex: I'm also an actor, but you have to imagine that I'm Alex, Sara's husband and Lee's dad. But in real life, this isn't my daughter or my wife

Lee: And you have to imagine that I'm really Lee, Sara and Alex's twelve-year-old daughter. You also have to imagine that I'm twelve. I'm not twelve.

Sara: This is the first scene.

Alex: Imagine that we're all in a big family kitchen.

Lee: Actually, we're not all there. I'm upstairs in my room. I'm twelve, so I try to spend as little time with my parents as is humanly possible.

Sara: There is a dining table in the middle of the room and there's a fruit bowl on the dining table that's full of fruit. Because it's a fruit bowl.

Alex: There is a window back here, it looks out onto a garden. It's summer so the garden is green and full of flowers.

Sara: We've just had dinner and I'm loading the dishes into the dishwasher.

Alex: And I'm eating chocolate ice cream.

Sara: We're talking about the only thing parents ever talk about, their kids.

Alex: I'm not saying you're wrong, Sara, I'm just wondering what more we can do. I mean, we've followed every piece of advice we've ever got.

Sara: I know, but Lee starts high school in three weeks.

Alex: So?

Sara: So, high school is a child's first dunk in the cold water of life. You go from a world of playing tag, singing your times tables and doing finger painting to a world of smoking on the bus, makeup and heavy metal.

Alex: Heavy metal? Is that still a thing?

Sara: Starting high school is the first day of the rest of her life. The life she will have in the future, will come down to how well she does there. And how well she does in high school could come down to how well she *starts* high school.

Alex: Do you really think so? I can't remember anything about my first year at school. I'm pretty sure I didn't lift a finger until a few weeks before my final exams.

Sara: That was fine for us, but things have changed. Do you have any idea how competitive the world is now? If we want Lee to succeed, then we need to prepare her for the reality of the world.

Alex: I think she's a bit young for that. I mean, isn't part of childhood about being ignorant to the realities of the world?

Sara: But she isn't a child, she's twelve. If she wants to get a good job, then she's going to need a good postgraduate education. To get on the best postgraduate program, she's going to need an undergraduate degree from a top university. To get into the best universities, she's going to need good exam results, to get those she's going to have to hit the ground running.

Alex: …Wow. Now, even I'm feeling afraid.

Sara: For all of that to happen, we need to confront the problem head on.

Alex: Okay. And what is the problem?

Sara: The problem is Ernie.

Alex: Ernie is her best friend.

Sara: I know, but he is also a distraction and I think it's time we did something about it.

Alex: What?

Sara: I don't know. But whatever it is, it has to be big.

Alex: …That's the end of the first scene. You're probably wondering what's the deal with Ernie. Well, the problem with Ernie isn't that he is poorly behaved or that he's a bad influence, the problem with Ernie, is that Ernie is imaginary.

Resin on marble,
95 x 50 x 45 cm, 2016

Visual Arts Prize

First Place

My Shelter

By Alexandra Slava

"My Shelter" is an autobiographical work that includes my own portrait as well as my mother's. By engaging first with the emotional intimacy of our relationship and my own personal experiences, I am trying to express a more universal idea of the strong bond between a mother and her daughter. When childhood ends, there always comes a hard moment of letting go. This piece is my attempt to convey the everlasting love between a parent and child and the subtle shades of human emotions.

Commentary by Julian Spalding

Alexandra Slava's sculpture 'My Shelter' is surprising for three reasons. The first: it's bewilderingly accomplished for one so young; it was created when the artist was only 20. Next, and most remarkably: it's an extraordinarily precise expression in purely visual terms of profound and elusive feelings: a mother and daughter's relationship, the loving bond between them sustained across and within their differing thoughts and perspectives. This is achieved by Slava's sensitivity to surface, the membrane between internal and external space where human meeting occurs. Slava emphasises this physical contact by lowering but not closing her subject's eyes. Both are aware that they are touching and so are we. Slava achieves this alertness by modelling space as well as form. The lifted manicured finger is placed tensely in the air below the older, more strained mouth of the mother and above the softer lips of her daughter. All the details in this sculpture are beautifully and fluidly realistic

and at the same time emotionally orchestrated. The last surprise is almost as remarkable: this sculpture is of our times but looks as though it has sprung, without a break, from the work of Rodin and Camille Claudel, leaping over Modern Art, with all its wonderful triumphs and grotesque, superficial trickery, as if this whole movement hadn't happened. This is the confidence of a new generation. I don't think, for a moment, that Slava's art is the only way forward, but she has, overnight, reclaimed realistic expression in art.

Photo Collage, 2017

Visual Arts Prize

Second Place

Here I am

By Nieves Mingueva

Nieves Mingueza is a photo-collage artist and special educational needs professional in primary schools who, with the series ‘Here I Am’ shows a sensitive, low-key portrait of childhood autism. The images in ‘Here I Am’ are inspired by her experience in a special school in South London, as a way to connect with the universes of autistic children. With the help of minimal poetry, the artist links images with a wide range of deep emotions, feelings and thoughts.

Here I Am

Automatic language. Poet’s heart.
Growing up on a swing. Flying like a bird.
Playground. Sound. Song.
Loving the smell of books.
Drawing. Puzzling out emotions.
Well done. I got it.
Switch off the light.
The proper distance with the group. Unique. One.

School. She said that I am a little fish. Swimming.
Giving. Giving.
Tears are in her eyes.
I put my tiny hands on her eyes.
White fog and deep sea and dark rocks.

Home. When I sleep I become a plant.
Love you, mummy.
X364 X364 X364 Off the cuff.
Granny is waiting for me with a bird on her shoulder.

This means that over 695.000 people in the UK may be autistic.
If you include their families, autism is a part of daily life for 2.8 million people.

It's a gold day. I wrote a poem with just three words:

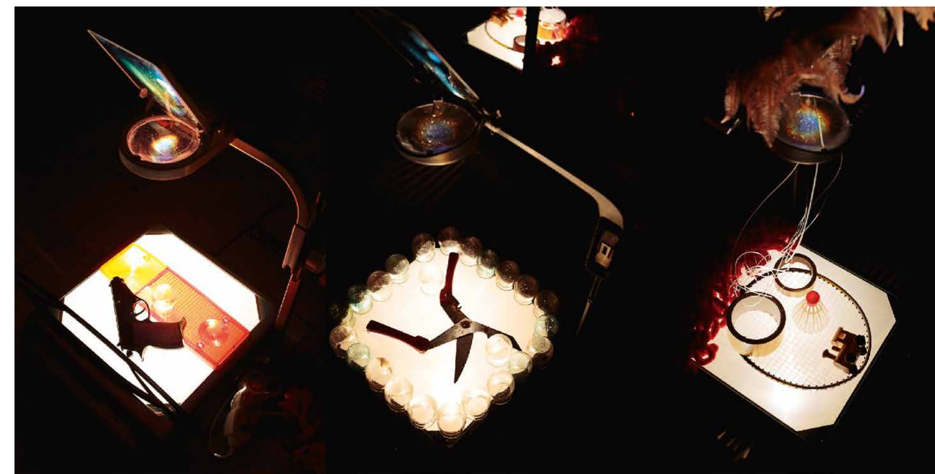
Here I Am.

Visual Arts Prize

Third Place

Enfant Terrible

By Rua Golba



The Bat Poet: Children and Animals in the Poetry of Randall Jarrell

By John Burnside

> And, I've found, there's no children's book so bad that I
> mind your having liked it: about the tastes of dead children
> there is no disputing
>
> *Randall Jarrell*

I don't remember 'having a childhood'. I remember public events, formal and colourless, like the italicised dates in a Farmer's Almanac: Easter weekend, the summer holidays, the last day of school before Christmas and, of course, Christmas itself. In principle, I remember various birthdays, two weddings, a handful of bereavements, but there are no details in my mind, or none that I trust as more than anecdotal. I am still haunted by a week-on-week sense of hymn tunes and folding chairs, and I specifically recall Valentina Tereshkova, or rather, I recall the *thought* of her, a Yaroslavl woman with hair the same colour and style as my Aunt Margaret's, guiding her *Vostok 6* forty-eight time around the earth during the summer of 1963—and I remember wondering if she had gone to the hairdresser's the day before the launch, as my mother or any of my aunts would certainly have done, to make sure she looked presentable for the cameras. This was important to the people I grew up with: to be *presentable*. Not beautiful, or elegant, and certainly not stylish, (which might have betrayed aspirations beyond their means), but presentable, which is to say, *tidy*—another key concept of my early years. There were many ways to make things presentable: you could *tidy*, (a more or less constant process of

low level maintenance that was done as one went along) or you could *tidy up*, (a serious and systematic exercise, for when visitors came) or, when time was of the essence and a general impression would suffice, you could *tidy round*. Certain purchases were frowned upon as potential sources of *clutter*, which, by definition, could not be kept tidy. Pets were bad, for the same reason. Any accumulation, of pretty much anything, not only looked untidy, it might also *attract vermin*, a prospect that filled the women in my family with a profound horror.

I have no sense, now, of what my mother and aunts thought of Valentina Tereshkova, or whether they took any notice of her at all, but I, for one, could only imagine her house as supremely tidy and, through an effort of will, vermin-free, (and I knew this would have taken considerable effort, because my Uncle John had told me once that, in atheist, non-Catholic Russia, they had rats the size of Jack Russell terriers; how he knew this, I have no idea). Valentina Tereshkova's house would be spick and span, however: not one salt cellar or Soviet knick-knack out of place, the dishes wiped and put away, the books she had accumulated during her ten years of night classes lined up on their shelves in alphabetical order—and when she returned from her triumphant space voyage, I knew that she would remember every single thing she had seen, before, during and after that flight. For the one thing I understood back then, intuitively and, so, without a doubt, was that, if I could only achieve an orderly life—not tidiness, not presentability, but true *order*—I would be gifted with a perfect, near-cinematic memory, an ability to slow time, or even to stop it long enough to hold one magical moment up to the light and *know* it—not through a glass, darkly, but even as I was known.

I don't remember moving away from our first home—a pit town in the West of Fife—but I remember going back. We had been living in Birmingham for several months, though I couldn't say how long exactly; my father, a casual labourer, was looking for steady work, but when he couldn't find anything better than he was used to, we returned whence we had come, to a prefab in the same Fife pit town. There was no steady work in Cowdenbeath, we knew that, but it was *home*, and we had family nearby. Still, I seem to recall being uneasy in our new lodgings; in fact, I think the whole family did, and it took a whole week of rain to bed us in, by which I mean the green, edge-of-town rain that seeped into the prefab through the window frames, a wash of moss and what looked like fish-spawn accruing on the larder walls, every crack in the fabric of the place stopped with a clutch of green fleece, a nameless organic mass that smelled of sump and cistern, leaf-rot and the distilled bitters of pure *viriditas*. I seem to recall thinking that this Triffid-like greenery was intelligent in some inexplicable way, but I was smart enough never to talk about that, or about the idea that came to me every Sunday, as we were walking home from Mass, that we were strangers in an ancient and grudging place that belonged, not to us, but to the animals in the undergrowth and the crusts of lichen spotting the branches of the winter trees.

Later, when we moved again, I knew why I had felt uneasy at the prefabs. It was because our return to Fife had shown me that home was not the fact that I thought it had been. Our next move—to the steel mills of Corby, in the English East Midlands—brought us for the first time to a real house, with hot water and windows that did not admit the rain, but I knew it wasn't really ours. We didn't have a home because, to be at home, you have to

imagine a place of your own out of something more than tidiness and having enough to pay this week's rent. Still, though I am still painfully aware of it as an idea, I do not recall those years of homelessness in any detail. I remember a holiday at Clacton, a fight I had in the square outside our house, two more weddings, another bereavement—but I do not remember these things as events, or as film loops running at the back of my head; it's more like the recollection of writing things down in a diary. At some point, it seems, I stopped taking very much notice of the given world and confined myself to the world I was constructing as the best alternative to the given that I could manage. The world I invented, not just from special moments but also from books, films, songs, pictures and whatever I could find in the chambers of my own imagery.

Soon, I was living in two realms, though my presence in the outer world was becoming more and more nominal. And I was under no illusions: I not only knew exactly what belonged to which world, I also had a very sure sense of which was real and which was mere fabrication. For example, as Christmas approached, I knew that the outward business of the day belonged to my parents: the morning to my mother, for whom we all traipsed off to Mass, the afternoon to my father, if he was present and in the mood for playing paterfamilias. The rest, however, was mine. Or rather, it belonged to the inner realm, to the secret, essentially pagan world of light and fire and, on those Yuletides when we were graced with it, to the snow. Bing Crosby could croon away about a White Christmas all he liked, but the actual weather out in the Kingswood, just a short walk from our house, belonged to a long-ago, pre-Christian state that I could taste and smell and hear through all the

distraction of the self-designated 'real world'. Outside, in that real world, like the grown-ups in Dylan Thomas' stories of childhood, my elders trudged back and forth in the snow, the men in lumpen winter coats, the women in churchgoing shoes, coming home from Church or Kirk, sometimes kindly, too often ugly in their puritanism, always black and grey and, more often than not, frighteningly serious. They seemed to me distant and unknowable, like bodies sheathed in those full-body plaster casts that used to be applied to some tuberculosis patients, familiar in their delineation, but oddly uncertain in the details.

*

The seeming unknowability of others is, of course, a familiar cliché. A critical point in the child's development might come when the inability to understand other people turns back on itself and is then expressed as the old chestnut: "Nobody understands me," which is then formalised into a vague, existential generality. Yet, as much of a commonplace as it is—and as often it is subjected to satire and kindly mockery—the growing child's sense that we can never know the inner life of another creature remains oddly poignant. I once worked in a garden centre where an African Grey parrot lived, suspended in a fine cage at the centre of the main glasshouse, and I have never seen such a picture of loneliness and boredom. Whenever a new customer came into view, the bird would call out and a few moments of fuss and mock conversation would follow, until the human became self-conscious and moved on. Usually, the parrot would try to extend the encounter but, when it became clear that he was alone again, he would fall silent, looking for all the world like the child I remembered being, alone on my first day of

school, a child who didn't speak the language the other children spoke (or so I thought) and so was unable to 'connect'. For whatever reason (upbringing, natural predilection) I felt no kinship with these specific others, though this didn't mean that I believed kinship was impossible. It was just that a search would be necessary to find my place in the world and others who were 'of my kind'. The caged parrot never experiences this revelation, however. It speaks to everyone it encounters, and most of us reply—but all we do is echo back and forth, endlessly. We do not converse. That African Grey, alone in its pretty cage, was doomed never to learn that real conversation was possible, and could have been achieved with others of its own kind. For me, a first-stage resolution of this dilemma came from finding a book which was partly a short story for children, but mostly a generous and inclusive parable about how poems are made, a book that turned up, rather miraculously, in my local library, far from its point of origin (the prelims said that it had been first published by Aladdin Books, of New York, in 1963). How it got there, I do not know, but I was grateful to the vagaries of contingency that it did. That book was Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet*, with illustrations by Maurice Sendak. Before moving on to that most treasured volume of my early years, however, I want to take a brief detour into the work of—arguably—the world's most underrated psychiatrist.

*

Ian D. Suttie, a doctor's son from Glasgow, only produced one major (and unjustly neglected) work, a critique of orthodox Freudian analysis entitled *The Origins of Love and Hate*; published by Kegan Paul in 1935, it came out the day after he died, at the age of forty-six. It is a powerful work, incisive

and far-reaching in its scrutiny of the Freudians' insistence on "nastiness for its own sake", positing, in its place, a dismantling of what its author calls "the taboo on tenderness". From the outset, Suttie's main difference with the Freudians arises over their insistence on the part played in early development by the sex drive, almost to the exclusion of other concerns; against this he posits the concept of 'shared interest' which leads, not to neurotic and jealous possessiveness of the mother, but to an increased tenderness towards her and *a growing sense of connection and attentiveness to their shared world*, manifest, as the child grows, in a desire to make and share a culture and to enter into egalitarian love-friendships:

> We have now to consider whether this attachment-to-mother is merely the sum of the infantile bodily needs and satisfactions which refer to her, or whether the need for a mother is primarily presented to the child's mind as a need for company and as a discomfort in isolation. I can see no way of settling this question conclusively, but the fact is indisputable that a need for company, moral encouragement, attention, protectiveness, leadership, etc., remains after all the sensory gratifications connected with the mother's body have become superfluous and have been surrendered. In my view this is a direct development of the primal attachment-to-mother, and, further, I think that play, cooperation, competition, and culture-interests generally are substitutes for the mutually caressing relationship of child and mother. By these substitutes we put the whole social environment in the place once occupied by mother—maintaining with it a mental or cultural rapport in lieu of the bodily relationship of caresses, etc., formerly enjoyed with the mother. A *joint interest in things* has replaced the reciprocal interest in persons; friendship has developed out of love. True, the personal love and sympathy is preserved in friendship; but this differs from love in so far as it comes about by the direction of attention upon the same things (rather than upon each other), or by the pursuit of the same activities even if these are not intrinsically useful and gratifying, as is the case with much ritual, dance, etc. The interest is intensified even if it is not entirely created (artificial) by being shared; while *the fact of sharing interest deepens the appreciation of the other person's presence* even while it deprives it of sensual (or better of sensorial) qualities. [my italics]

This, then, is Suttie's view of "the process of sublimation" and it differs from the Freudians' analysis in two important ways: first, it dispenses with the need to "define all pleasure or satisfaction as sexual" and, second, it brings to the fore the power of shared interest, leading to creative and appreciative play and, so, to culture. In this analysis "necessity [or need] is not the mother of invention; play is", and pathological attachment to the other, or the "dread of loneliness" predicated on the unpredictability and wilfulness of that other, is transformed into a companionable state that allows both for the preservation of self's, and respect for the other's, integrity. "Originally," Suttie says:

> the Baby-Mother bond is vaguely and intuitively appreciated by the former as mutual absorption. By degrees the baby's expanding

> activities and sense-impressions change the character of this bond. A service rendered to the baby's body and a caress are originally indistinguishable by it, but the baby's perceptions of and interest in its own body and its immediate surroundings grow rapidly under the influence of the mother's ministrations. In this way it develops Interest-in-Itself, the process Freud misconceives as Narcissism. It is of course arbitrary to say at what point the companionship of love becomes the companionship of interest, but there is no doubt that the feeling-relationship of the companions does change as attention ceases to be absorbed wholly and reciprocally each in the other and becomes directed convergently to the same things. Co-operative activities, identical or complementary attitudes to outside happenings, build up a world of common meanings which marks a differentiation from simple love wherein 'the world' of each is the other person. The simple direct bond has become a triangular relationship wherein external objects form the medium of play.

What Suttie is describing here, I think, is how culture originates, in a (potentially) elegant game that allows each individual to enter a communal space governed, not by conventions and institutions, but by shared values and playful invention. Just as the child goes out from the secure, home-ground of proximity to the mother, in order to explore further afield, so we, as adults, (individually, or *en commun*) move out from the security of a home place to recognize space much as the child does—as openness, freedom, threat and as complementarity, (since space and place "require each other for definition"). In the context of poetry, we see this in Seamus Heaney's various writings about his home-place in Mossbawn, voiced in one short prose memoir as the child's repetition of the Greek word for centre or home stone, the *omphalos*:

> I would begin with the Greek word, *omphalos*, meaning the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music became the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door

but it is poetically realised most fully in the poem 'Sunlight', (dedicated to the poet's mother) in which that sense of a centre obtains an extraordinary gravity:

> There was a sunlit absence.
> The helmeted pump in the yard
> heated its iron,
> water honeyed
>
> in the slung bucket
> and the sun stood
> like a griddle cooling
> against the wall
>
> of each long afternoon.

From this gravitational centre, *place*, I want to argue, (following Suttie) that the child ventures out into a kind of weightless and conditional agora—*space*—

and, once there, is able to participate in a range of adventures, which I would roughly define, on the one hand, as acquisition (or appropriation, or colonisation) and, on the other, as exploration (appreciation, understanding). Sadly, the two are not mutually exclusive, though it seems to me quite obvious that the one is as ignoble as the other is commendable—and it would be a fine education system that, alongside a furthering of the child's gifts for exploration and play, helped him or her to see that. Such a system might be summed up in Dion Fortune's maxim: "the adept owns nothing but has the use of everything." It seems to me that, if poetry has any influence in the moral formation of the child, it is in suggesting (and I am all too aware that poetry is not a pedagogic practice, any more than it is a form of legislation) that there is something ignoble in acquisition, that the colonist with his flag is a lesser mortal than a true explorer, say, or that the self-validation of the big-game hunter is less interesting than the curiosity of the naturalist going unarmed into the same territory.

For the lucky child whose *omphalos* is, as it were, sufficient in its gravity, exploration can be a noble pleasure—and, importantly, what such a child-adventurer brings back from 'abroad' helps to strengthen the home place. That being so, threat—and terror—are naturally part and parcel of this cycle of being and becoming, elements of the overall experience that, as we confront them, help to define us in finer detail, and so help us grow. In order to go on moving out, in order to maintain the play of home place and given space, of self-as-subject and other-as-subject, we have to be able to play. The more we play, the better players we become—and it is this play, this moving back and forth between the known and the unknown, between a home ground and the out-thereness of the still-to-be-experienced that gives rise to a live culture. Culture is the set of games we play in order to hold the world as one; at times, however, this play will run the risk, out in the as-yet un-navigated space that is not home, of falling into the sweet foundering in immensity of which Leopardi and Montale write so eloquently, a privileged confusion where all that is familiar—thought, self, home ground—is momentarily, and sometimes beautifully, lost.

*

Today, more than thirty years after his death, Randall Jarrell remains underappreciated as a poet, overshadowed, not only by contemporaries whose reputations he helped to create, but also by his own genius as the finest critic of his age. He is infamous for his barbs, witty summations of lesser poets' pretensions that come close to drawing blood, but he was also hugely perceptive, not only about the work of other writers, but about politics, the academic world and that tendency in mid-century America towards a very commercial form of societal degradation highlighted in such works as Henry Miller's *Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and the ideas of social critics like Vance Packard and William H. Whyte. Jarrell's writing on childhood, and on relations between children and adults is often provocative:

> One of the most obvious facts about grown-ups, to a child, is that they have forgotten what it is like to be a child. The child has not yet had the chance to know what it is like to be a grown-ups; he believes, even, that being a grown-ups is a mistake he will never make—when he grows up he will keep on being a child, a big

> child with power. So the child and grown-ups live in mutual love, misunderstanding, and distaste. Children shout and play and cry and want candy; grown-ups say Ssh! and work and scold and want steak. There is no disputing tastes as contradictory as these. It is not just Mowgli who was raised by a couple of wolves; any child is raised by a couple of grown-ups. Father and Mother may be nearer and dearer than anyone will ever be again—still, they are members of a different species. God is, I suppose, what our parents were; certainly the ogre of the stories is so huge, so powerful, and so stupid because that is the way a grown-ups looks to a child…Grown-ups forget or cannot believe that they seem even more unreasonable to children than children seem to them.

What Jarrell saw was an almost systematic squandering of the child's basic resources, in pursuit of the conformist paradigm that Whyte famously labelled 'Groupthink'. No surprise, then, that he would be drawn to writing "for" children. What he does, in that field, however, is quite distinct from most of the rather kindly, self-aware and often conformist offerings of other poets, whether they write for children all the time, or only occasionally. But then, what Jarrell saw, in adults, was how the persistence of the child was not a sign of immaturity, or narcissism, but of good luck and the preservation of something essential. As Leo Zanderer notes in reference to Karl Shapiro's essay, 'The Death of Randall Jarrell':

> Reflecting on the "literary commonplace that American literature is essentially a child literature," Karl Shapiro observed that, "Our poetry studies behavior and leads us back to the child. With Jarrell, too, the child becomes the critic and center of value." He was, "the poet of the *Kinder* and the earliest games of the mind and heart. All those wounded soldiers and shot-down men turn back again into children, for a wounded man is again a child." Shapiro is specifically thinking of Jarrell's war-poems here, but *he rightfully suggests that all his poetry shows an overriding concern not only with the experiences of childhood but with a general theme of childhood as a human experience continuing well into maturity*. [my italics]

This is a key point: historically, most 'developed' societies (even those, like Victorian England, that romanticized childhood) have been intolerant of any continuation of 'childhood' beyond a certain age. In 1867, for example, just two years after the appearance of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Karl Marx was writing, in the first volume of *Capital*:

> In so far as machinery dispenses with muscular power, it becomes a means of employing labourers of slight muscular strength, and those whose bodily development is incomplete, but whose limbs are all the more supple. The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and labourers was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage-labourers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family, without distinction of age or sex. Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's

> play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family.

At this time, children as young as three might be employed as chimney-sweeps, though as Marx points out, "there exist plenty of machines to replace them"; occasionally, they would become trapped in the chimneys, where many died of exposure, smoke inhalation or, of course, fire. It seems strange, now, to think that, in an age that not only idealized the child, but is considered by many the era in which 'childhood' was invented, the sheer misery of most children was so carefully ignored. As historian Paula S. Fass has pointed out:

> the 'modern' perspective on children as sexually innocent, economically dependent, and emotionally fragile whose lives are supposed to be dominated by play, school and family nurture, provides a very limited view of children's lives in the modern western past. While some children did experience this kind of childhood, for the vast majority, it is quite literally only in the twentieth century that these have been enforced as both preferred and dominant.

This being the case, Suttie's child-centered psychology, with play at its core, comes to seem even more radical—and in their own quiet way, Randall Jarrell's poems, both about, and for, children, may be seen as equally game-changing in their approach. When, in an early poem, 'Children Selecting Books in a Library', he says:

> if we find Swann's
> Way better than our own, and trudge on at the back
> Of the north wind to—to—somewhere east
> Of the sun, west of the moon, it is because we live
>
> By trading another's sorrow for our own; another's
> Impossibilities, still unbelieved in, for our own…

he is remembering, as Shapiro noted, that "a wounded man is again a child", but he is also showing us that the hurt child, like the wounded man, seeks more than mere entertainment, or diversion, in books—that, on the contrary, to read is a quest in which

> The world's selves cure that short disease, myself,
> And we see bending to us, dewy-eyed, the great
> change, dear to all things not to themselves endeared.

However, this writing *about* childhood—as it is recognized societally, and as it extends into adult life—is paralleled, in the work *for* children, by an exploration of life's wonders and an enquiry into how they may be discovered, even in a societally controlled world in which, as Jarrell notes in yet another poem about a young person in a library, "the ways we miss our life are life." Need it be so? This is the question Jarrell's children's writing asks, though he is also aware that the attempt to live more freely has its own, very particular costs, chief of which is a solitary's longing for something that, while not altogether definable, is perhaps best expressed in the poem

‘Windows’, in which Jarrell’s speaker, encountering the “lights of others’ houses”, becomes poignantly aware of “the impossibility / That haunts me like happiness!”

*

At first glance, Jarrell’s finest work for children, *The Bat Poet*, comes over as a standard, if charming and well-made ‘once upon a time’ animal story. Its protagonist is “a little light brown bat, the color of coffee with cream in it” who, for his own reasons, becomes separated from his home colony and, having achieved what could be seen as a form of Transcendentalist isolation from ‘society’, begins to stay awake in the daytime, in the process discovering a very different environment than the night-time world to which he is accustomed. This daytime realm is a source of great wonder—sunlight, other animals, birds—so much so that the bat wants to describe it all to his former companions. The question is, how to convey it in all its strangeness and beauty? He quickly learns that plain description fails to impress:

The bat told the other bats about all the things you could see in the daytime. ‘You’d love them,’ he said. The next time you wake up in the daytime, just keep your eyes open for a while and don’t go back to sleep.

The other bats were sure they wouldn’t like that. ‘We wish we didn’t wake up at all,’ they said.

At this stage, the little bat could be seen as just another Romantic outsider, one of those for whom the doors of perception have been miraculously cleansed, so that every thing appears to him as it is, lit by the sun, all “green-and-gold-and-blue.” While the other bats insist on closing themselves up, seeing all things through the narrow chinks of their cavern, (or, in this case, barn), the little bat enjoys privileged glimpses of the Infinite. However, there is a cost here: first, his individual vision of the world sets him outside his community and, second, he has no way to articulate for others, and so to validate, what he has seen. Unlike the conventional nonconformist, he cannot pretend to be altogether happy in his isolation—and so, in order to share his solitary visions he turns to poetry, composing three short pieces in which he describes an owl, his new friend, the chipmunk, a skeptical mockingbird and, finally, having refined his craft to a level at which he can use poetry as a means to self-exploration and discovery, he writes about his own life. In the process, he comes upon a kind of vision of the essence of bat-ness. It is an elegant, trusting narrative in which the author does not trade on cleverness or guile, and the reader is prompted to ask questions about what can and cannot be known, and of that, what can and cannot be articulated. What does language do in relation to experience? How do we convey the wonder of what we have witnessed to those who live in an entirely different world from ours? And what is it, in all this wealth of sense impressions, that comes together to make a ‘self’? Throughout the narrative, the poems illumine these questions, culminating in a Suttie-like model of how each creature both finds and makes the world it inhabits. Describing the mother bat’s flight through the air—with her baby hanging on to her body through all the “doubling and looping, soaring, somersaulting”—Jarrell elegantly illustrates this process of seeking and finding:

All night, in happiness, she hunts and flies.
Her high sharp cries
Like shining needlepoints of sound
Go out into the night and, echoing back,
Tell her what they have touched.

This is beautifully done. It may look like no more than a description of echolocation in a creature that "lives by hearing", what it is really doing, however, is reminding us that what we know of the world is a moment by moment quest in which the quality of the moment depends upon the steady play of perception and imagination in which, like the bat, we find a provisional home amidst the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that this game is *shared*: the mother plays it to find her place in the world, and the child is nourished, not only directly, by the "milk she makes him / In moonlight or starlight, in mid-air", but also by all that she sees and does.

*

There is an old saying, attributed more often than not to some anonymous Chinese thinker, that 'he who remembers, forgets.' As a child, I used to puzzle over what it meant; now I believe that it may be a timely warning not to become too attached to the idea of memory. If the ways in which we miss our life are life, one of those distractions may well be the irritable, obsessive, supposedly Proustian search for specific moments in the past, key images, or occasions, or triggering stimuli that, likely as not, never actually happened—or not in the way we choose to think. Is it not conceivable that the specific data—the relatable memories, the mental images and album leaves, those "madeleine" moments—for which we constantly, and often fruitlessly, search are not so important to growth as the marks and traces and flow systems that experience lays down in the body as a whole? Becoming—unfolding in time, realizing a selfhood—is not a matter of querying some kind of inner database, or picture library, where we are unlikely to find anything more than a repository of anecdotal evidence; it is a way of seeing and doing, a way of being, that we summarise, for convention's sake, under the rubric of character. We do not—cannot—live in the past. The childhood each of us has is not a matter of long ago and far away but, like history, like memory, is happening here and now. Childhood continues; perhaps it never ends. As Jarrell reminds us, in one of his finest short lyrics, we live, sometimes painfully, in the present, all the while longing for "well water / Pumped from an old well at the bottom of the world." We feel incomplete without this sense of an origin, a source, and we locate it, wilfully, in the past, or in some ideal history. All this while, however, we have the means to drink, if only we could abandon such illusions:

The pump you pump the water from is rusty
And hard to move and absurd, a squirrel-wheel
A sick squirrel turns slowly, through the sunny
Inexorable hours. And yet sometimes
The wheel turns of its own weight, the rusty
Pump pumps over your sweating face the clear
Water, cold, so cold! you cup your hands
And gulp from them the dailiness of life.

By Jenifer Wakelin

I'd like to contribute to our discussions about childhood some observations from my work in a mental health service for children in care. My training as a psychoanalytic child psychotherapist is grounded in the close observation of infants and young children and the study of child development. The theory and clinical practice of Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein—the pioneer of psychoanalysis with children—and the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion provide a framework for understanding unconscious processes that can shape a child's world. These processes may also affect the functioning of professional groups that aim to provide some substitute for parenting when families have not been able to keep children safe.

The life instinct

Freud's observations of his 18 month-old grandson playing led to the elaboration of a fundamental dichotomy in his theory between the life instinct and the death instinct. He described the life instinct as a binding force that aims towards forming living substance into ever greater unities, so that life may be prolonged and brought to higher development. (1920, 1923)

Melanie Klein returned to this idea in her thinking about states of mind that fluctuate between being more or less integrated:
When the life instinct is in the ascendant, integration and synthesis can successfully progress. (1958)

This idea of an instinct that promotes integration and more complex organisation may seem quite abstract; and yet it is one that I find useful in everyday clinical practice. I will explore the relevance of this idea to the potential for growth and development with two examples—the first from the work of a professional group, the second from individual therapeutic work with a child.

Aaila

For every child who comes into care there has been a family tragedy or a series of repeated tragedies. Their development may be compromised by a range of adversities such as foetal exposure to drugs or alcohol, violence, conflict, and parental mental health difficulty. Once in care, the aim is to provide children with as much continuity as possible, but a stable placement with the same foster carer is not always possible to achieve. Further disruptions may compound the early adversities.

The baby I'm going to call Aaila was taken into care at birth. She had been exposed in the womb to high levels of heroin. Severe substance abuse and mental health difficulties meant that neither parent was able to look after her. She was cared for by a group of nurses in hospital while being withdrawn from heroin until she was taken to her first foster placement, when she was three weeks old. One of the effects of foetal exposure to drugs and the subsequent withdrawal can be prolonged crying that has a very piercing quality. The babies are difficult to comfort and may need to be held, carried and soothed for hours on end.

Aaila's first foster carer, who was also looking after two young children, found Aaila's inconsolable distress more than she could manage. When she was ten

weeks old, Aaila was moved to a more experienced foster carer who, with no other children in her care and the support of her adult daughter, was able to provide Aaila with her undivided attention for much of the day.

Concerns, both about Aaila's developmental needs and about the early disruptions in her relationships, galvanised a group of workers to support the new foster carer and a referral to my service was made. Legal proceedings were also underway to determine Aaila's future care. One of my colleagues visited Aaila and her new foster carer for an hour-long observation every few weeks and convened professionals meetings that were regularly attended.

When Aaila was five months old, we received the shocking news that her mother had died by suicide. A month later, her father too died, in circumstances that remained unclear. The cohesion of the professional group came under strain under the impact of this double shock. The foster carer, and my colleague who was visiting her, felt isolated as their phone calls and emails now went unanswered. A containing and supportive framework that had linked the different professionals had been shattered. It took repeated and continued efforts by my colleague to gradually bring the group back together.

What seemed to help in this endeavour was knowledge from experience of the fragmenting impact of 'secondary trauma' on professionals working in the zone of severe dysfunction and distress where ordinary parental functioning has been overwhelmed. Freud describes the death instinct as aiming "to undo connections" (1940). He also links the death instinct with the compulsion to repeat: the isolating impact of trauma is repeated when professional groups fragment

and cannot communicate. Particular effort and persistence is often required to bring a group back together with a focus on the needs and development of the child. The power of pressures within organisations to 'undo connections' cannot be underestimated; failures of communication, and failures to make links, are highlighted in every Serious Case Review and child death enquiry.

Another factor that seemed to help to get the meetings started again and to act as a focus for communication was that my colleague was able to describe developments in Aaila from her observations in the foster home. It was as if a kernel of living growth and development provided a nucleus around which more hopeful and living relationships could reform. My colleague went on to work with Aaila and her foster carer for another year, until she was adopted by her paternal grandparents. They came to stay near the foster home for several weeks so that relationships could be formed before Aaila moved to her new home, and remained in contact with the foster carer and my colleague.

I think of this reparative process as an instance of the life instinct generating connections between those close to Aaila, as previously in the professional group. In my next example, I want to further explore the working of a life instinct that combines and organises, and a death instinct that fragments, in the communications of a particularly eloquent child, who was six when his therapy began.

Serhan

Psychoanalytic child psychotherapists see children at regular times each week, in the same room with the same box of toys. Therapy is combined with sessions for parents and school meetings; treatments usually last at least

a year. This consistent setting allows close observation of the developing relationship between child and therapist and helps us to understand ways of managing anxiety that may impair or block development. Over time, feelings can be noticed and named, defences can become loosened, and areas of the mind may be freed up for new learning and relationships.

The child I'm calling 'Serhan' was from a Turkish family living in north London. He was a child who teachers were worried about as soon as he started at school, when he was five. Serhan seemed to inhabit a world of his own, but his withdrawn states alternated unpredictably with violent rages. He loved drawing and could sometimes listen to a story, but he was completely unable to comply with directions from adults. In the school setting there were often times when he had to be physically restrained.

Serhan was diagnosed at different times with oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit disorder, autistic spectrum difficulty and Tourette's syndrome. Because of the severity and complexity of his needs, it was agreed that I would see him four times a week in a therapy that went on to last for over three years. I was supported in this work by weekly supervision with a consultant child psychotherapist with many years' experience.

Background

Serhan's mother Mrs L. left her village in Turkey when she was fourteen to marry her cousin, who lived with his extended family in London. She was eighteen when Serhan, her second son, was born. In meetings in the clinic, we heard that Serhan's paternal grandfather dominated the household, hitting the children and verbally bullying the adults. When Serhan was two, Mrs L. took the decision to leave, taking her sons with her to a women's refuge.

Mrs L. recalled that even as a two-year-old, Serhan had tried to defy his grandfather. She spoke of there being 'two Serhans', one who was angry and controlling, and another, completely different, who was gentle and affectionate. Mrs L. herself came across at times as bright, lively and insightful, while at other time she seemed frail, despairing, close to collapse.

Before therapy began with Serhan, I observed him in school. Here is an excerpt from my notes. Serhan was in the classroom.

Pale and dark-haired, with a large nose and protruding ears, Serhan is concentrating intently on cutting paper into strips. Then he draws and cuts out a figure. Suddenly, he jabs the scissors into the middle of the figure.

When I involuntarily lean forward to see better, he reacts immediately, turning to look at me for the first time. His dark eyes are now large and blank, as if a shutter has come down.

He returns to the paper strips and meticulously assembles them to make two adjoining squares, and then adds two more squares below.

He sticks the cut out figure onto the four squares, and excitedly shows it to the classroom assistant, telling him *it's a person in a window*. Now I see the figure has one arm raised as if waving.

I felt, as I watched, that the waving figure expressed a kind of greeting that was touching and hopeful. Serhan's fragility became more apparent at lunch-time after the assistant left him in the crowded hall. He leaned against a wall, grimacing and pawing at a poster of teddy bears, until he was rescued by a dinner lady who helped him to join the queue for lunch.

Like the school observation, the first therapy sessions with Serhan were unforgettable.

Serhan looks in the toy box which contains toy animals and fences, building blocks, plasticine, drawing materials, sellotape, string, a family of wooden dolls, and some small plastic vehicles. Straight away he finds a helicopter which has a blade missing, and tells me it's broken. I feel I have failed him horribly, and I say it feels sad to find this broken thing. He builds an enclosure with the plastic fences and looks at the animals while I tell him my name and talk to him about his sessions, which are going to be four times a week. He shows me the crocodile's teeth and asks what the metal pieces in its jaw are for: are they ears? no, they don't have ears… it's to keep the mouth together.

Then he divides the animals into three groups: the scary ones, the broken ones, and the too small ones; the three groups immediately get mixed up. Then he folds a piece of paper in half and cuts a series of patterns, and holds up two pieces with sharp zigzags and roars. I say he sounds like a wild animal; he tells me: I made that noise because this pattern looks like sharp teeth. He cuts out some circles and now he looks at the inside, cut-out shapes, folds

them in half and makes a quacking noise; then he looks at me through the holes in the paper and squeaks. He tells me this noise is a ball, bouncing…

In this first session, I had a powerful impression of a thoughtful, communicative child who was looking for meaning. There was a very intense, kaleidoscopic, dream-like quality in his play. I felt there was a logic to his thoughts, but one that I could not follow. Sorting the animals into groups seemed to be a way of looking for order, but the categories he found were like members of an unstable family, perhaps representing a scary daddy or grandfather, a broken mummy, and a too-small child. So quickly finding the one broken toy suggested that the broken mummy may have been uppermost in his mind.

There were four sessions a week, with no session on Wednesdays. In the first week of the therapy, I did not prepare him enough for this gap. In the Thursday session, I saw a storm of feeling that brought more of the behaviour that was so difficult to manage in school.

Serhan cuts out a paper bow and arrow and a triangular castle. He says *the sharp bit of the arrow hits the castle*, because there's a baddy inside and the castle is broken… He tells me about a TV programme in which the shark eats up all the fish. He moves the scissors making loud gnashing sounds. I say I think he is telling me something about yesterday, when he didn't have a time here and this is how he feels about it when he comes back. He bashes the scissors against the toy animals, shrieks, and seems not to hear me. He begins to spin around the room, excited and unreachable.

It was hard for me to feel heard by Serhan or to find anything to say that made sense. I was left feeling bad about myself as well as confused and apprehensive. Some of these feelings were undoubtedly my own, but some may have been projections from him of unbearable feelings that were extreme and difficult to sort out because he had been living with them for so long. My experience of not being able to get through to him may have been a communication of his experience of having been unable to get through to a young and isolated mother, who at times was incapacitated by depression.

A second unprepared separation came seven weeks later. Usually very reliable in bringing him to the clinic, Mrs L. told me at the end of a Friday session that she could not bring Serhan the next Monday. This is an excerpt from the day after the missed session.

Serhan runs into the room, screams, and turns the box upside down. I say he is angry I didn't give him a safe place yesterday, why didn't he see me? He jumps on the box, it splinters loudly. I say there are too many bad feelings for Serhan, I am to have the scared feelings now.

… he screams into the toy phone, then bangs the tap and mutters *rain everywhere*, then goes to the toilet, brandishing the toy crocodile. When he comes back, he fills the sink and tells me with a kind of excited venom it's water, milk and wee *all mixed*.

Here I seemed to be seeing what the paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott described 'an active production of chaos in defence against … unthinkable … anxiety' (1965). It seemed that something that Serhan had begun to feel was good and reliable—the regular routine of his sessions—had suddenly become the source of painful experiences, leaving him feeling that good and bad were hopelessly muddled, like water, milk and wee all mixed.

The first prepared separation came with the Easter holiday break. Five weeks before the end of the term, I gave him a calendar with squares drawn around the days of the sessions, so that he could see when we were going to stop and when the sessions would resume. Seeing this calendar had a huge impact, and also brought development.

Serhan blocks the door with his chair and bombards me with toys. I tell him to find another way to show me what he's feeling and he writes a sign: 'no mis w. no no no no no…'; then he tells me 'no' is just 'nnnn' and 'oooo' sounds. He laughs emptily. There is a feeling of great bleakness.

I say, 'when it feels like there's no Serhan and no Ms W. coming together, Serhan feels he must fall apart like this word, and then there's no words and no talking between us'.

He puts another sign, 'duk' by the light switch and switches the light off saying I don't need light.

After a while I say I think he does want to find a light and he wants to see if I can help him find it. Then he makes a card with a drawing of himself

on one side and a house on the other. He tells me he has ten windows at home, but some people have twelve, or a hundred; he's just going to draw four.

I say how horrible it is when he feels other people have more than he does. He draws another figure and then tells me that this is his 'ID card'. I feel very moved when he shows me the two figures, one large and smiling, one small and sad. He says, they are both me.

Serhan's insight about himself and about his divided identity felt extraordinarily poignant. In the rages that took him over when anxieties became too much for him, he had seemed to completely disappear into an identification with an angry, bullying grandfather; but now both he and I could hold both sides of him in mind.

Becoming a child

Over the next few months, Serhan became more able to let me know about painful experiences in a way that felt less muddled, and more like a younger child.

They're all laughing at you and your face is dark red and you're crying and you've got zero and you go home and tell your mum… and you and your mum are crying…

You will have a dream of being in a tornado and spinning and don't know where you are and very cold and falling in the hole.

I was now with a little boy who could tolerate feelings of dependence, who could tell me about painful experiences and frightening nightmares. There was a clearer sense of 'who is who', in contrast to the pervasive confusions of the first months. Serhan was able to persevere for several sessions in writing and illustrating the story of the three little pigs. He drew the last pig looking with satisfaction at his strongly built house, saying: 'that was hard work'. Grasping the idea of 'work' seemed so important in contrast to wishful fantasies of being omnipotent that he could get lost in.

Serhan was beginning to come across as a more ordinary boy, but the glimpses we got of life at home were still worrying: he was seen by the clinic's escort wandering across busy roads on his own, collecting pieces of metal in an old supermarket trolley. He was now seven years old. We heard that he went to bed after midnight, suffered night terrors and often slept in his mother's bed. A grim period then followed in the therapy when much of his play felt driven and joyless. He seemed unreachable for many months and there were many episodes of desperate panic that were difficult to manage in the clinic. When he piled up all the toys and trampled on them shouting, *'The great big muddle heap'*, he seemed to be under the sway of a drive towards disconnection and disintegration. But in a rare quieter moment he told me a story about a mother 'who is frozen in ice'. I was then more able to understand how becoming 'the scary one' might seem the only way out.

Gradually Serhan seemed to come alive again, helped in part, it seemed, by a growing curiosity about the world around him. When he wrote a list of the months and the seasons, he asked me: … what are months for? And then,

What happens in winter? What are roots? I felt he was telling me about a hope that something had stayed alive, underground. He also asked me questions about the nature of reality: Where is infinity? Who comes first—God, Father Christmas, or fairies?—and about time: *Did* I do it like this when I was little?; Why does time go so fast?

Mrs L. meanwhile had not been able to learn English, as she had hoped to do, remained isolated and found it difficult to recognise the extent of her son's needs. She did indeed seem to be frozen. A referral to social services, made with her agreement, had not resulted in support for the family. A plan was then made for a planned ending of the therapy, to be followed by an extended assessment in a residential child psychiatric unit.

During the last phase of the therapy, a new interest and way of being together emerged: snakes and ladders. Serhan chose to draw his own snakes and ladders board and this seemed to provide a structured space— the symmetrical grid of the board and the known rules of the game—in which anxieties about going 'to the new place', and the ending of his therapy could be explored. Wishes to control the game alternated with curiosity to see what happened next. Serhan used an animal as a counter and was now able to observe his feelings as displaced into the animal. The tortoise was often his chosen counter, with its hard shell and mobile home. He clearly described what I think his own experience used to be: when he loses he thinks the room is going to explode.

Sometimes Serhan wanted to speed up the game by throwing several dice at once. Thinking about large numbers seemed to catapult him into a world of millions, infinities, where he could get lost, but he became more able to come back to the single dice and an idea of moving more steadily, so that we could see and think together about what was happening at each step.

As Serhan became more able to play, there was a new sense of space in the sessions. Ladders and snakes did not get muddled up with each other. He did not try to cheat. Knowing about the structures of time and space makes things more predictable and gave him more agency: he now had the capacity to anticipate and to prepare himself for change. This seemed to mean there was a less desperate need to take refuge in omnipotence by identifying with a scary grandfather.

In one of our last sessions, during a game in which we both seemed to go round and round, never quite reaching the last square, Serhan asked me what is progress? As I was considering how to respond, he asked: what is gravity for? He then answered his question by telling me that, if there was not gravity, people would fall off the earth.

Concluding reflections

Child psychotherapists working in the NHS often do not know what becomes of our child patients. I heard that, after a period in the residential unit, Serhan moved to a local school for children with special needs where he became more settled and his needs were better understood. His mother also received support from the new school and became more integrated in the local community.

Serhan's increasing curiosity about his own internal states and about the world around him are aspects of the mental growth that the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion describes as depending on truth 'as the living organism depends on food' (1965). His internal resources—'roots'—had allowed him to move from an internal world made up of scary ones, broken ones, and too small ones—that quickly collapsed into *the great big muddle heap*—towards a more integrated, organised and creative world in which he could be nourished by the love for knowledge; a world in which the death instinct is mediated by the life instinct.

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The Child as the New Archetypal Object of Love

By Simon May

Of all that I've done in my life, I'm most proud to be your dad.
Barack Obama to his daughters in his farewell speech to the nation as President of the United States

Out of everything I've accomplished, my proudest moment hands down was when I gave birth to my daughter Blue.
Beyoncé

An extraordinary, possibly revolutionary, change is underway in much of the Western world, and it is happening in plain sight: parental love is gradually taking over from romantic love as the *archetypal* love: namely the love without which one's life cannot be deemed to be complete or truly flourishing, whatever its other achievements—or indeed its other loves. By the same token, the child is displacing the romantic lover as our most sacred object, as the romantic lover once displaced God in that position; and the parent-child bond is becoming the most sacred relationship. And so to violate the child—or the parent-child bond—is now the ultimate sacrilege, today's equivalent of desecrating the divine.

Since ancient times there has of course been intense debate about what is the most worthy object of love: in other words what sort of object of love, what kind of loved one, is taken to offer the purest possibilities for loving. There

has been much more variety than we might think. For Diotima, a probably mythical priestess whose words are recounted by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, one of his dialogues on love, the supreme object of love was absolute and eternal beauty—or, differently put, creation of, and in, beauty. For Aristotle, and a long tradition that stretches from him through Cicero, Montaigne, Nietzsche and Emerson, it was the virtuous friend: somebody with whom we share similar virtues and to that extent a deep oneness of mind; somebody whom we come to experience as a second self and to whose wellbeing we are committed, perhaps for life. For Plotinus it was the "One", the mysterious source of everything. For many centuries of Christian dominance it was, of course, God; and this is clearly grounded in the Bible, beginning with Deuteronomy's commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might", which, along with love for neighbor, is named by Jesus in answer to a question from a passer-by, as the supreme good. For the troubadours of medieval Europe the highest object of love was the (usually unattainable) Lady, repository of virtue. For Spinoza, in the 17th century, it was nature considered as a whole. From the late 18th century it became the romantic-erotic partner—or, more rarely, nature or art. For psychoanalytic thinking it is the parent, or rather an internal representation of the parent. But now, in a historic change, it is, I suggest, coming to be the child.

Now in proposing that the child is becoming the supreme object of love I am in no way suggesting that there aren't parents who are neglectful, resentful, violent, or otherwise abusive towards their children. Clearly some are. Ideals inevitably draw attention to the degree to which they are betrayed—just as, in the centuries

when God was unquestionably taken to be the supreme object of love, believers surely took the divine name in vain again and again. Still less am I implying that parents in previous ages didn't love or protect their children, indeed fiercely so, or accord them intrinsic rather than merely instrumental value. Many parents of course did; and evidence for this is to be found all the way back to biblical and classical sources. So in *Genesis*, for example, we read of Abraham's love for his son Isaac; and of Jacob's for Joseph—whom he loves above all his other children. The Prodigal Son is evidently doted on by his forgiving father. The images of Mary holding the infant Jesus, which we find in so much European painting, often depict her loving intimacy (rather than only her pious care).

Moreover, the prestige of children—and stigmas against childlessness—have been reflected in the fertility cults of many societies, as well as in prayers to overcome barrenness, such as Hannah's appeal to God for a child in the Old Testament, or Elizabeth and Zacharias's in the New. And parents have, at most times, taken joy in producing heirs as well as pride in preserving their family, clan or community.

Nonetheless, until as recently as the late nineteenth century the child isn't close to being the archetypal object of love in the West—the only part of the world on which I am at all competent to speak. And nor, until then, was childhood seen in any way as the primary locus of the sacred, and so as incompatible with valuing children as economic assets.

On the contrary, for much of the nineteenth century children continued to be widely regarded as economic assets, and had few rights in law. Incredible

though it might now seem, child labor was abolished in the United States only in the early twentieth century, until when, according to a major historical study, “ten year old boys were commonly found in the blinding dust of coal breakers, picking slate with torn and bleeding fingers”, while “thousands of children sweltered all night for a pittance in the glare of the white-hot furnaces of the glasshouses.”. In the nineteenth century, orphanages in the United States routinely supplied child laborers by way of so-called orphan trains. At the same time in London, dead infants, according to a report of the time, “littered parks and roadsides”. Again incredibly to our contemporary ears, in England a full 63% of homicides recorded by the Registrar General between 1863 and 1887, “concerned the murder of a child under 1 year of age”. In other words, according to such statistics, children were more likely to be murdered than any other age group. And none of this is to begin to touch on the question of child slavery, which was rife as recently as the late eighteenth century.

In all these periods offspring were, of course, often desired, anticipated, welcomed, protected, boasted of, and indeed loved. Yet such valuing of children was consistent with, and perhaps in part even motivated by, their role as healthy specimens, able to contribute to the family’s economy, to its social prestige, to looking after parents in their old age, and, at least in the case of the nobility, to the continuation of lineage. To love children and to value them for their economic or social utility were not, for the great part of Western history, regarded as incompatible, as they clearly are today. In short, we don’t need to go back as far as Socrates, for whom it was a mark of the *inferior* soul that he or she “sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies”, to see that a conception of the child as the supreme repository of the sacred, and of love for the child as the supreme expression of love, is the radical exception in Western history, and possibly in world history.

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So what might account for this epochal change, which dawns, with remarkable suddenness, between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when as the sociologist Viviana Zelizer has shown, children under fourteen went, in the space of this very brief period of time, from being valued for their economic contributions to the family to being “economically ‘worthless’ but emotionally ‘priceless’”? And why has this transformation gathered such momentum since then that today the child is becoming the touchstone of the sacred?

We should eliminate from the start four tempting, because obvious-seeming, explanations: first, that in celebrating childhood we are seeking a sanctuary of innocence from a venal world; second, that the near elimination of child mortality in much of the West has made it “safe” to risk profound attachments of love to one’s children; third, that we are in the grip of a new fertility cult; and, fourth, that, with the so-called “death of God”, we now hope for immortality in our offspring rather than in a life to come.

I don’t have anything like the space here to go into all the reasons why I am rejecting these explanations, which I have set out more fully elsewhere; but suffice it to say that if the child became the supreme object of love merely because declining infant mortality rates made loving attachments less risky

for parents, we should expect to have seen a leveling off of the sacralization of the child ever since infant survival could be more or less assured. But this doesn't appear to have happened. On the contrary, the sacralization of the child, and of love for the child, has continued apace, and arguably with greater vigor than ever.

So, too, if a fertility cult were at work parents would strive to have the maximum number of children—or at least of healthy children. More prestige would attach to having five than to producing just one. Whereas in much of the Western world, and especially in much of Europe, exactly the opposite is happening: the ever-greater moral significance of parental love is coinciding with a demographic crisis. People are refusing to have large families at the same time as they are turning the child into the repository of the sacred.

In fact, the gathering moral weight of parenthood might be contributing to *declining* birthrates in some countries and social groups, if only by compelling parents to "get it right" with each child. Which means that their devotion, time, and money are better concentrated on few children than spread thinly between many. It might even be inhibiting people from having children at all, or at least causing them to wait until they are certain of doing so for the "right" reasons, or until age forces their hand. And this is particularly so for women, still very much regarded as emotionally the more crucial parent, and therefore more subject to society's unforgiving strictures should they be deemed to fail, despite the fact that men are increasingly participating in child rearing.

Seeking immortality through our children?

Finally, the cult of the child as the archetypal object of love is not fundamentally about seeking immortality through one's children in an age when there is no longer wide belief in traditional promises of immortality—for example, in an afterlife guaranteed by a loving God, or through heroic deeds that will survive the hero's death, or in a romantic union that can be perfected only beyond this world.

Indeed, if today's cult of the child were centrally about a desire for immortality one might expect this, too, to be reflected in an urge to have more children, while stigmatizing adoption, stepchildren, and infertility, which do nothing for a parent's immortality, at least in a biological sense. But that is not the case either.

Instead, in today's secular times, people tend to seek immortality in their reputation, and especially in the memory of others who are likely to survive them—including but by no means limited to their children. To paraphrase W. H. Auden's elegy to Yeats, we become our admirers: in other words, the dead live on as a memory trace in those who survive them. And the trace we want to leave is not so much one of courage, as in archaic societies such as those of pre-Christian Rome and Greece, as one of love. Our indestructible legacy is to be our loving and our being loved—a reality to which many a funeral oration attests.

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Far from being aimed at immortality, I am therefore suggesting that love of the child in the contemporary West is fundamentally about locating

the sacred *in the finite life of the individual*, instead of its transcendence. It is about finding the purest love in an exclusively worldly, individualized, setting that contains none of those other-worldly overtones—such as the desire of lovers to "merge"—with which romantic love is inextricably associated.

Indeed, unlike romantic love in its heyday, parental love is to be as down-to-earth as it is possible for love to be, entirely unconcerned with dualisms such as body/soul, sexual/spiritual, earthly/heavenly, and temporal/eternal, or with ambitions to transfigure the first of each of these pairs into the second, or the second into the first: dualisms that so energize romantic love from Dante to Wagner and beyond, but that no longer speak as urgently to our world. Specifically, parental love pursues, for the sake of both child *and* parent, today's thoroughly secular way of conceiving the ideal of an autonomous, egalitarian individual—an ideal, originating in the eighteenth century, to which the idiom of romantic love has become far less well suited.

In addition to this urge to locate the sacred in the everyday world and the suitability of parental love to modernity's ethos of autonomy, the ascendancy of the child as our archetypal object of love is also fueled, I suggest, by two other major developments of our age: first, the war on risk: the tremendous urge to make the whole of life a safe space. And second, the unprecedented degree to which childhood has come to be seen as *the* key to a flourishing life—in other words the way in which the child is now seen as parent of the adult.

Let me close with a few words on each of these two points. First the war on risk. This has become a moral objective of the first order and is closely linked to the death of God and to the emergence of what Nietzsche presciently called "the religion of comfortableness", which is single-mindedly devoted to conquering suffering and the causes of suffering. Not in some distant utopia or in another world altogether, such as heaven, but right here and now, in a life of "happiness" achieved through the security of family, career, health, equality, and convenience. And so the child—as the paragon of human vulnerability, for whom any suffering is undeserved—is increasingly the battlefield on which the West's war on risk is being fought. The most *morally* urgent love is therefore necessarily directed at the child. As the totemic object of our new religion of safety, he or she must at all costs be protected from suffering and trauma. Society can be judged safe only to the degree that the child is safe (so that the State, which follows like a sniffer dog wherever the values of the age lead, now makes the safety of the child one of its paramount concerns). And parental love is deemed to be successful, even genuine, only to the degree that it strives—and manages—to make the child invulnerable.

This much is perhaps obvious. Less obvious is that love of the child serves the safety of the parent too. For in no other type of love is the lover's devotion extended from such an overwhelming position of superiority—at least until the child reaches the threshold of adulthood.

So, for example, in love for God we are the absolutely inferior party, at the mercy of an all-powerful, all-knowing power, who might, moreover, disappear in our hour of need.

In romantic-erotic love, the lover is vulnerable to rejection, indifference, betrayal, rivals, and a panoply of destructive possibilities at the hands of the loved one.

In love for nature, whether she is seen as Mother Earth, or as the sublimely terrifying force, indifferent to human concerns, depicted by Kant and Burke and many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets and painters, the lover is, again, the fundamentally weaker party. (Indeed, human puniness—the finite in the face of the infinite—is integral to the "romance" of mighty nature, as in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich.)

And even in ideal friendship, as paradigmatically depicted by Aristotle, there is, by definition, parity between the two parties in terms of those qualities that ground their love for one another. And so (as Aristotle himself notes) this kind of reciprocal love is out of the question if one party is significantly inferior to the other and, indeed, is to a degree a part of the other, as, Aristotle says, a child is to its parent.

Moreover, parental love, as it is conceived today, is manifestly devoted to maintaining "borders" between lover and loved one. And so it avoids the dangerous but thrilling erosion of individuality, the porous selfhood, that is the signature and even the goal of the other great forms of love. No matter how intense its devotion, it eschews any yearning to "merge" with the loved one, as we find in romantic love. Nor does it see the loved one as a "second", possibly indistinguishable, self in the manner of friendship-love, as described by such writers as Aristotle and Montaigne. Nor does it involve the kind of passionate, awe-filled submission that we find in love for God—not to mention the craving to fuse with God expressed by so many mystics. On the contrary, such impulses would be repudiated as perversions or betrayals of love for one's children. Respectful distance and clear boundaries are to be maintained. Indeed, such respect is seen not as a restriction on love but as a sign of love.

Not least, in parental love the risk of being repudiated or betrayed by the loved one is less than in any other form of love. Until the child has reached early adulthood its need for mother and father is so great that it cannot emotionally abandon them—even if its love, let alone gratitude, can't be counted on after that; and arguably the parent is the only lover who can never be truly abandoned. For in one internalized form or another, a child remains loyal to its parents for its whole life, even when it thinks it is rejecting them, often speaking and dreaming of them on the day of its own death.

For all these reasons, parental love today is talismanic of the war on risk. And however much parents, for their part, claim to be, and are, slaves of their children, and terrible though rejection by them is—"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/To have a thankless child" rages King Lear—the reality is that their love is very much less vulnerable to destructiveness, wrath, or betrayal than is any other form of love. Today's safety-obsessed, hyper-vigilant "helicopter parents" are as far from the death-devoted hearts of Tristan and Isolde as it is possible to get.

Finally, a few words on the other major reason that I want to mention for the gathering primacy of childhood in the contemporary West. This is the con-

viction, which is again deeply rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought, that an emotionally healthy childhood is the key to a flourishing life and love the key to a flourishing childhood; that from the child's experiences, and in particular from the quality of its early emotional attachments, emerge the templates for how, as adults, we will live and love and value and relate to others, as well as our possibilities of becoming authentic, self-creating, self-respecting, autonomous individuals—in other words, of achieving the dominant modern conception of what it is to flourish.

On this view, therefore, the adult as constituted by the history of her childhood, which is in turn central to any narrative that can structure her life and explain or redeem its difficulties. To that extent the child is parent to the adult; and like every parent remains over in the life to which it gives rise.

In its bare elements, this view goes back to Aristotle, who conceives of childhood as the potential to give rise to an adult manifesting, in their mature forms, traits and functions that characterize flourishing human nature. But our modern emphasis on fostering the individual autonomy of the child, on the development and health of its inner emotional life, and on its need for the right sort of loving intimacy is first gestured at by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his 1762 pedagogical treatise *Emile*, with its insistence that only through meticulously mentored self-discovery will the child give rise to an authentic adult: a human being who, with single-minded integrity, is sovereign in his or her values and tastes, rather than one who, as he puts it in the *Second Discourse*, lives in and through the opinion of others, and whose sense of existing is nourished exclusively by their judgments.

It is expressed by Wordsworth's famous line "The Child is Father of the Man". It is reflected in Alyosha Karamazov's rapturous injunction to the group of boys at the end of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "You must know that there is nothing higher, or stronger, or sounder, or more useful afterwards in life, than some … beautiful, sacred memory, preserved from childhood. … If a man stores up many such memories to take into life, then he is saved for his whole life.". It is turned into an engineering manual of baby and child care by Dr. Spock; and richly developed (though without Wordsworth's or Dostoevsky's sense for the joys of childhood) by Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, John Bowlby and other psychoanalysts, as well as by the hugely influential ideas of Piaget and his followers, which see human development as marked by clear stages, each of which takes place between certain ages and each of which is as vital to the formation of an adult as it is irreversible.

In thinkers such as these we find the seeds of today's conviction that love's natural focus must be the child.

And so for the kinds of reasons that I have just sketched—among them the role of parental love in relocating the sacred to this finite, everyday life; in fulfilling our contemporary ideals of autonomy and equality; in waging war on suffering and risk; and in shaping those early stages of life that have come to be seen as the key to human flourishing—for such reasons the child is, I suggest, the first truly *modern* object of love, the first archetypal object of love not dependent on traditional religious or otherwise dualistic categories. Differently put, love for the child, in its contemporary form, is the first

archetypal love genuinely to reflect the death of God; the first not to be marked even by shadows of the divine.

Credit line:
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The Art of Wonder

Transcript from lecture

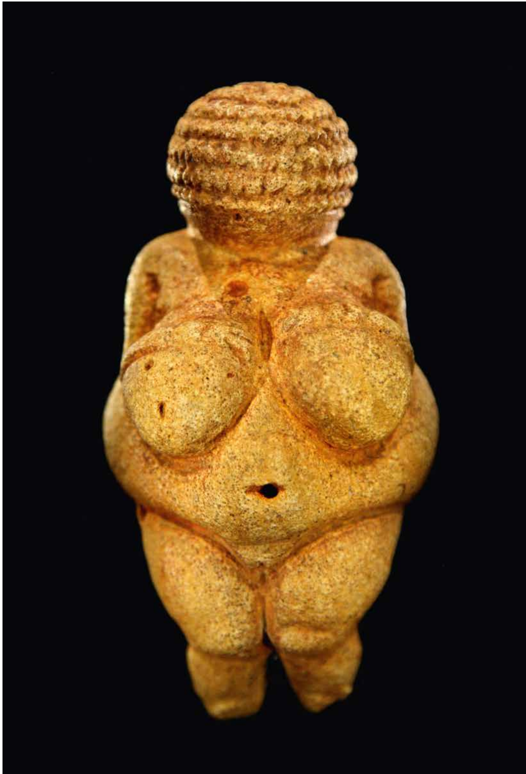
By Julian Spalding

Children's art begins with scribbles, then, slowly bodies take shape. We realise we've first a face, then a head, arms and legs. Next we begin to draw what we see around us—a strip of blue at the top for the sky, a strip of green at the bottom for the grass. Then we draw a house sitting on the ground—our home. Then a sun floating in the gap between the earth and sky. Up until this point children's art is essentially the same all over the world—proving—if proof were still needed—that we're all one people. Only later do cultural differences creep in, when children begin to imitate grown ups.

These first two stages of image making—a body followed by a layered world—are remarkably close to the first images we formed of our universe. I don't wish to imply that early mankind was childlike—not at all—but the pictures of our world that we formed in childhood were carried forward into adult life seamlessly, in ways that would be impossible today. We lost our direct contact with childhood during the Enlightenment. I want in this talk to explain why, and touch on some of the effects this has had. What I want to propose is that the great works of art of the past—pyramids, temples and cathedrals—which required massive workforces of highly skilled craftsmen—were built with the irrepressible joyous wonder that can be seen on a child's face.

Recent excavations of workers' accommodation in Egypt show that the pyramids were not built by slaves, as Enlightenment historians thought they

must have been, but by thousands of men who willingly gave their labour (albeit in lieu of paying taxes), and who were well accommodated and well fed. And contemporary accounts describe the same communal enthusiasm building the great cathedrals of Europe.



Venus of willendorf

At the same time that we begin to form images in paint, we begin to ask the question why? Why is the sky blue? Why does rain fall? Why do we die? And we go on doing it till our elders run out of answers and patience and we lose interest because we discover that the answers don't make any difference to us anyway. It's then that we begin to form a 'world picture' of who and where we are—a common sense view that is shared by everyone around us. The first image we make as children is of a body—and I think we first thought of the world as a body. The earliest sculpture to have come down to us is the so-called Venus of Willendorf, now dated to about 30,000 years ago. It's small and fits easily into the palm of your hand. It's been variously interpreted as some sort of fertility goddess, but I think it's actually a world picture, possibly handed round at an initiation ceremony, when all one's childhood 'whys' were finally answered.

The earth was a body because it had soil and rocks just as we had flesh and bones. It was covered in grass like we were covered in small hairs. It had hills like breasts and caves like wombs. And it was floating in the sea. Most early myths around the world talk of the water under the earth. There had to be water down there because when you poured water onto the ground it soaked down and it had to go somewhere. But there was a problem. We knew that water always fell. Water couldn't rise of its own volition. Why then did the tide come up? This was a great mystery.

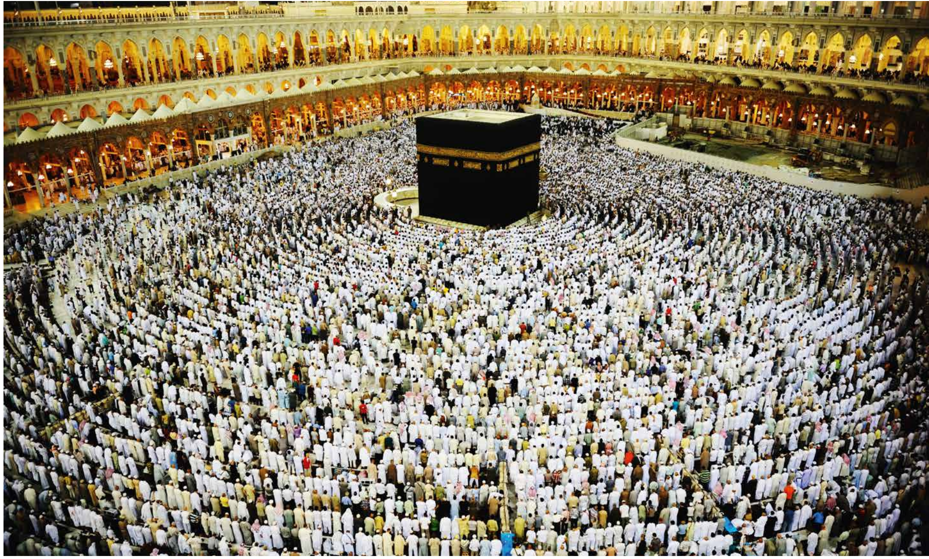
There's a growing consensus that we first lived, not on high savannas, but along estuaries where the food was plentiful and so rich it might have stimulated our brain's development. All the evidence of our earliest habitation

would have been lost when sea level rose by a massive 100 meters after the last ice age a mere 12,000 years ago.

You only had to float on your back in water and breath in and out, to get the answer. The sea wasn't rising—it couldn't—it was the earth that was rising and falling, slowly—twice a day. The earth was breathing! She is alive! We still call her Mother Earth. If the earth was alive, that meant she could give birth. We thought caves were wombs, and some of us ventured bravely down into them to paint images on what we still call the living rock perhaps to help the Earth give birth to beasts that were especially important to us—tribal ancestors perhaps, or animals that we'd had to kill to prove we were a man and had to pay a ritual penance for doing so. We drew one image over another, because a womb can give birth many times.

There are no paintings of fish in these early caves—but then fish have no legs, so can't be born on land. And there were no images of birds either—you only had to look in their nests to see where birds came from—little skies. And there were no images of people in these early caves—pictures of men came much, much later in rock shelters. The explanation for this is that even in early history it's probable that we didn't think we were born of the earth, but came from the stars.

If the Earth was a body, what was her head? It's been variously interpreted as a bonnet, or coils of plaits, or scarification marks, but I think it's an image of heaven above the earth, the circling stars. It's still amazing to go out on a clear night, and see the stars going round the North Pole. In a time-lapse photo of this phenomenon you see Orion behind a tree—then half an hour later he's riding high in the clear sky. This stellar movement round a central point in heaven dominated our ancestors' thinking—the vast majority of us, by the way, lived in the Northern Hemisphere. Heaven wasn't something we had to invent. It appeared nightly to us above our heads. This circular movement was the culmination of many religious practices but most famously in Islam. Here pilgrims pray around the Kaaba, which contains a sacred rock, a meteorite fallen from heaven.



Our next image was of a layered world. Apart from a handful of isolated and soon forgotten Greeks, everyone the world over believed the world was flat, until 500 years ago. A flat earth made sense because if it wasn't you'd fall off. And the sea was flat—that was obvious. Water always stays flat, whichever way you tilt the cup. The Great Pyramid of Gizah was originally faced in shining white marble—most of these stones were later stripped off to build the early mosques in Cairo. This pyramid originally was a gleaming white triangle sailing on the desert sands—more light than substance in the brilliant Egyptian sun. But its massive weight within was, I think, what it was all about.

Why do things always drop when you let them fall? Why do flames always rise? Heaviness and lightness was a great mystery. Gravity was the invisible force that dragged us down to our grave, opposing the spirit of life and

growth that raised us up, and made us walk tall. People in the past used to have very straight backs—in today's round world we slouch.

The pyramid points up to heaven. There was a centre there revealed to us by the circling stars. So, logically, we thought, there must be a centre of the earth. This made sense because we believed the earth was a flat square. It had to be because it had four sides facing North, South, East and West. This gives the pyramid—all pyramids around the world—their familiar, peculiar shape. We built them, I think, because we believed that if we could focus the forces of up and down in the centre of the earth we could hold our universe together and stop it being rocked by troubles. We always had troubles. The bigger and heavier and more light-reflecting, more flame-like we made the pyramid the better it would do its job. The word pyramid comes from the Greek—meaning fire in the middle. The Egyptians themselves called pyramids 'horizons'.

The pyramids of Egypt, Mexico and China were the same shape not because people learnt to build them from each other—as Enlightenment historians thought, believing in the modern idea of intellectual advancement—but because the people who built them didn't know any other people existed. They all thought, as young children do, that they stood at the centre of their world. Pyramid building stopped when we realised we didn't. We were growing in numbers, travelling and trading more widely. There was obviously a centre in heaven—we could see it every night—but where was the centre in the world below? We couldn't see it. There were other mountains, pyramids and ompholoi, as well as the ones we'd thought were at the centre of our world.

Why does the sun rise in the east and set in the west? This was a great mystery. The answer was that everything above the sun is fixed and eternal—the circling stars—but everything below the sun changes. Life became a journey from birth to death.

Queen Hatshepsut's Temple in Egypt—built 3,500 years ago—takes your breath away when you first see it. Something new has entered the history of humanity. The three, tiered terraces run North to South and are crossed by a rising ramp running due East to West. This is aligned precisely so that the sun's rays rising at dawn on the Winter Solstice strike the inner chamber of the tomb deep in the cliff so that the Queen will be reborn as the sun is reborn each year.

The Forbidden City in China is built on exactly the same principle but shifted on its axis. It was an answer to the question 'Why is the north cold and the south warm?—this was a great mystery for anyone living on a flat earth in the Northern hemisphere. 2,000 years ago the Chinese discovered polar magnetism, a wonderful invisible force, like gravity, that they believed held everything in the world together. The journey from the North to South was the journey from winter to summer and from death to life. The Chinese Emperor's job was to perform sacred rituals along this 'dragon path' from North to South to maintain balance and harmony across his troubled world—and there were always troubles.

We seem to have come a long way from Children's art to some of the most elaborate creations of mankind, but actually I don't think there's a division, at this stage in human history, between the child's vision and the adult's one. Any child

could understand that the Parthenon was a temple between earth and heaven where a God could find a home. Despite its incredible sophistication, I think the Parthenon was probably built, collectively, with the same excited wonder we saw on that boy's face. And the evidence suggests that a child led the great procession up to this temple every four years. 500 years after the Parthenon was built, Jesus said 'Suffer little children to come unto me ... for such is the kingdom of heaven.' What did he really mean by this? Perhaps we've misunderstood the role that a child's perception of reality has played in history.

The great new missionary religions—Buddhism, Christianity and Islam—adopted a simplified world picture that any child could grasp. They taught that we all stood on the flat earth together, on a level, under the great dome of heaven. The first great Buddhist temple is in Sanchi in India, built just over 2,000 years ago. One of the first great Christian Churches—the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, built 1,500 years ago. It was seamlessly converted into a mosque 1,000 years later for Christians and Muslims shared the same world picture—a great dome above a flat earth. But if the earth is flat and square and heaven is a circular dome above it, how do they fit together? You only had to look at the light along the horizon for the answer—the mist that veils the truth from our eyes. The Taj Mahal, an Islamic tomb, is a condensation in white marble of this veil of mystery, which surrounds us. This in part explains its breathtaking beauty.

This white haze along the horizon is also the Veil of Maya, the veil of unknowing that Buddha's mother kindly threw around us to prevent us remembering the pain of our birth or foreseeing the agony our death. Veiling was

widespread in most societies, across the Far East, India, the Middle East and Europe—though it is only now sustained in Hinduism, up to a point, and in Islam. We're so used to seeing images of the Madonna that we forget she's veiled. People seeing this in the past would immediately think of this.

The sun veils the moon when he rises. The assumed dominance of men over women throughout history has not just been because of the generally, greater strength of men, and their arrogance, but because our sun and moon appear almost the same size from earth and yet are so different in nature—the sun is strong, fierce and unchanging and rules the day, while the moon is pale becomes pregnant every month and rules the night. The role of men and women throughout history has been hugely influenced by this cosmic fluke.

Islam and Buddhism taught that we're surrounded by mystery. We must pay attention to the eternal world of heaven not the mortal world around us. Everything changes below the moon, whose image still rides over the domes of Islam. Roman Christianity was the exception. It taught that God had created man in His own image and the world as we see it. The idea took hold that the closer we studied God's creation, the more clearly we would see God. Van Eyck painted each blade of grass on earth, but still saw heaven as being much bigger in the sky above.

Searching God's creation led Christians to explore the ends of it. Columbus discovered the world was round in 1492. Seventy years earlier, the Chinese had sent flotillas of ships to the four corners of the world—but the evidence suggests that they thought they'd only been to corners. The Vatican declared

that God had revealed the truth that the world was round only to Christians. The sun went round it, lighting the way for Christian missionaries. In 1505 Pope Julius 11 decided to pull down the old rectilinear St Peter's and build a new one in which everything curved. Its arms reached out to embrace the round world.

The word baroque means a misshapen pearl—the world was a huge pearl fixed in the centre of the universe, but it was misshapen because it had to accommodate heaven on top. The Pope commissioned Michelangelo to paint his ceiling to show that heaven was still up there. It seems odd to discuss the Mona Lisa in a talk about a child's vision. But I think essentially this is what Leonardo's vision was. Behind his imposing brow, was a little boy endlessly asking why? This painting, I think, is his attempt to show how everything fits together—it's a painting of Mother Nature sitting in a round world (note the different sea levels behind her). Everything in this picture is bathed in mystery for he realised that nothing is distinct, every flows into everything else. What's extraordinary about Leonardo, despite his intense examination of all he could see, was that it never occurred to him to invent the telescope or microscope. It never occurred to him—or anyone else—that there was anything to see beyond what we could see. There would always be mystery on our horizon.

When we invented the telescope by accident—a century later, Galileo turned it on the moon and discovered it wasn't the Virgin Mary but a lump of barren rock. The truth of the world was no longer the truth we could see. Newton worked out why an apple fell down but the moon stayed up. He

discovered the mechanism of the rainbow. It wasn't a sign of God's love but could be created by anyone anywhere. The Enlightenment severed our direct link with childhood. Wordsworth feared the loss of this connection. His famous poem reads:

> My heart leaps up when I behold
>   A rainbow in the sky.
> So it was when my life began
> So it is now I am a man
> So be it when I shall go old
>   Or let me die.
> The child is father of the man.

And then Darwin worked out that God hadn't created the world as it appeared—but everything had changed over time. Our noses and penises, mouths and vaginas could well be in different places. Modern Art was a response to these discoveries, not a revolution in itself. It's exactly what a child of five couldn't paint. But this is perhaps the key to Picasso's genius—you have to become a child again to create. But creating a complete world picture was becoming increasingly difficult. But we still had hankerings after images that would sum up where we were. Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House did just that, I think, because it's a sphere, the new shape of our world, cut up into segments to make sails—a dynamic version of a pyramid—a ship journeying across space. This image gave us hope that we were going somewhere. Then Bill Anders took his famous photograph in 1968—Earthrise on the moon. We could at last see ourselves as others saw

us. But we realised at once how fragile our atmosphere was, and unique, in the vast, sterile emptiness of space.

Regretfully, I think, we haven't had time to develop a spherical world view—a sphere is a beautiful image for us—for everyone who stands on one is on top of it, but no one is more important than anyone else—a sphere allows us to all be different—which everyone is—yet equal at the same time. And spheres are excellent images for our minds. We each have spheres of interest and influence, but these fade at their perimeters, they don't need to end in barricades. Spheres allow us to live together with different views. And isn't a sphere a good image for the universe itself? Wherever we peer into the microcosm and the macrocosm mysteries recede before us. It's possible that we're fated to be bathed in mystery, as many great minds in the past have said, which means that science and religion needn't be at loggerheads, because aren't we all in the same boat? But our sphere has turned into a fragile bubble before our eyes, which we're busy puncturing at this very moment. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao caught the world's imagination in 1997 because, I think, it's very like an image of a bubble bursting.

To bring us back to earth, or rather to sea level, where this story began—the base line of our existence, which we naively—this is real childish thinking—assume to be a fixture. Venice is quite possibly an efflorescence of continuous human habitation since the last rise in sea level. Global warming will make sea levels rise again. Venice is in the front line and could so easily disappear. Human values tell us that we can't put the preservation of historic artefacts

on a par with people's lives, but can we separate them out so easily? As every sufferer from the onset of dementia knows, what is left of human life when memory goes? A world without Venice—perhaps the most beautiful city mankind has ever created—would be a frightening impoverishment of our planet. Is that the gift we want to leave children growing up today? We have to stop this happening, if we can.

The Sobs That Never Cease: Proust and Childhood

By Christopher Prendergast

In an oft-quoted sentence from *La Prisonniere*, Proust's narrator speaks of a place in the mind where children and the dead get together as returning souls, the ghosts of a long gone past: 'When we have passed a certain age, the soul of the child we were and the souls of the dead from whom we have sprung come to lavish on us their riches and their spells'. This is vintage Proust, and the sort of thing that explains why we often think of him as one of the great literary artists of childhood. His immense novel begins in childhood, or more exactly with the work of memory in returning to childhood, and dwells there for the better part of 400 odd pages. Several thousand pages later, in the closing moments of the last volume where the narrator embraces a future as the writer of the book we have just read, it goes back to his boyhood one last time, specifically to the sound of the garden gate bell would announce the regular evening visits of their Combray neighbor, Charles Swann. This concluding evocation marks the importantly circular shape of Proust's work, a circle in which the past of childhood and the present discovery of the artistic vocation are indissolubly joined.

Amongst many other things, we find here an echo of an idea that takes root at the beginnings of European romanticism, the idea that through Art we can remake contact with the childlike state modern man has been separated from, principally by the processes that compel compliance with the modern regimes of instrumental rationality. These were, for example, some of

the arguments of the great German cultural philosopher, Friedrich Schiller, who, long before Marx, in his great work, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* diagnosed an impoverishment of spirit arising from the specializing of function and faculty under the dominion of instrumental reason. Schiller here was close to Rousseau, who in *Emile*, his major work on childhood and the disciplining regimes of socialization, wrote of our relation to childhood prior to the influence of those regimes: 'Who has not sometimes regretted that age when laughter was ever on the lips, and when the heart was ever at peace?'. Schiller's dream, shared with many of his contemporaries, was of a recovery of those lost human resources of alleged natural being and unreflecting spontaneity: 'they [children], wrote Schiller, are what we once were, and what we ought to become again. In the sphere of literary art he assigned the task of representing this longed-for state to the genre of the Idyll, versions and cognates of which are of course to be found everywhere in the literature of European Romanticism

The question that, for the purposes of our colloquium, I want to bring into the foreground is whether Proust can in fact plausibly be seen as a continuation and extension of this legacy of Romanticism. It may perhaps not surprise if I say the answer is both yes and no, but may surprise if I immediately add that it is altogether more 'no' than 'yes'. That of course is one way of stating an aim, if not actually to upset, then at least to rearrange, a familiar version of the Proustian applecart. One reason for this has to do with the plain fact that the cart does not stop in Combray. Entrancing though it is, it not the whole *Recherche*, although it is often what and only what many readers know. It is very common for readers of Proust not to get further than vol 1, thus encumbered with a misleading view of Proust as principally preoccupied with childhood. However, while one of the structural shapes of the novel describes a circle, along with that circular shape and its loops of recollection across the arc of time, there is also a linear novel consistent with the form of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, unfurling a trajectory that runs from early years of childhood into adolescence, various stages of adulthood and ending somewhere indeterminate in later middle age.

And as we head out of Combray into the succeeding six volumes, not only, narratively speaking, is childhood left behind. We also find ourselves moving deeper into a world that is essentially childless. For all its vastness, including its vast cast of characters, there are hardly any children in it. Alongside two 19c novelists who also went in for vastness and whom he greatly admired (Dickens and Tolstoy), Proust's fictional world is not notably child-friendly. The boy Narrator appears to have no siblings and his only playmate—also the only other child in the novel who is given any narrative substance—is Gilberte in the first volume, a friendship which however unfolds on the cusp of puberty, at the edge of the adolescent sexual curiosity that will inform the sojourns at Balbec in the succeeding volume and the encounters with the enthralling band of young girls in flower. Beyond this point, apart from fleeting mentions and one troubling though minor appearance, children are conspicuous by their absence. There are several reasons for this. It is partly a reflection of a profound sense of sterility at the heart of the historical and social world Proust describes, a wasteland in turn related to Proust's view of adult sexuality as rapacious and cruel, straight out of the Augustinian tradition. In Proust the sexual relation is rarely life-giving or life-sustaining, and

expresses more the relation of hunter and hunted in a game of capture and evasion that will come to head in the Narrator-Albertine relationship.

But what if we choose to remain, as so many do remain, in the Combray of the first volume, with its riches and its spells, the core elements of its reenchantment of the world (the expression that, via the social theory of Max Weber, came to characterize the Romantic project)? This is the dimension of Combray above all lived and recalled in the most famous episode of the novel, the episode no-one can bypass (though I sometimes wish we could), the moment when, as if by magic, worlds of sensation and impression are conjured from the taste of a pastry dipped in a cup of lime blossom tea, to provide a foundation stone for the entire architecture of the novel. The particular feature of this episode that I myself would want to highlight here is the cup as cornucopia, brimming with sensorial memory that is lodged deep in the bodily unconscious where the boundaries between one kind of sensory experience are porous and interactive. The technical name for this, in both psychology and aesthetics, is synaesthesia (the power of one order of sensation to suggest or provoke another). This was also a major preoccupation of the Romantics and their immediate successors, in France crucially Baudelaire, who is never far away when it is a matter of discussing the Proustian aesthetic. It was also to become a central theme of developmental psychology and some versions of psychoanalysis, its fluidities seen as what characterizes the infant state, what we are born with, and which then departs us as part of the developmental process of specialization of function and faculty; and before the body becomes what late in the novel Proust describes as our 'mortal enemy', though in certain persons, above all artists, it endures for longer, and

for a privileged few, forever. One of the most privileged ever was of course Proust, for whom the transport of synaesthetic experience and the incomparable ability to represent it by another means of transport (the elaborate weave of metaphor, the shrine at which Proust the artist worships, and which derives from Greek *metaphora* which you will still see on the public transport system of present-day Athens).

This rhapsodic overflowing of the compartmentalizing adult mind by the primitive life of physical sensation and bodily memory is for many the quintessential Proust, tantamount indeed to hallowed ground, what the Narrator himself describes as 'sol mental' (the mental soul) of his life and of the book we are reading. Others, however, including myself, have maintained that it is soil that risks exhaustion from over-cultivation with the wrong fertilizer, namely, a form of sentimentality of the kind favoured by a certain class of Proustians in desperate need of the sugar rush of swooning epiphanies. In any case, whatever one's view of the power of madeleines, this is not by any means the whole of Combray. Along with the rhapsodic, there is also the traumatic (a term I use, not in the trivializing sense of much contemporary usage, but in its original associations with intermittence—a hugely important Proustian experience—designating the delayed effect of something surging back into consciousness after having been repressed and banished from memory. In this context, we have not the surges of joyful spontaneous recollection, and rather those of a wounding of the child psyche, so deeply inflicted as to be incurable. Here I refer to the other central episode of the Combray volume: the drama of neediness, fear and threatened loss that accompanies the episode

of the mother's goodnight kiss, initially refused, hysterically entreated, and finally though reluctantly given. It is the source of the sobbing alluded to in my title, the sobs that, as everything else leaves and dies, never leave, and that are unforgettably summarized in a passage from the first volume also concerned with bells (though not the happily tinkling bells of the garden gate of childhood):

> The sobs had never really stopped; and it is only because life is now becoming quieter around me that I can hear them again, like those covenant bells covered so well by the clamour of the town during the day that one would think they had ceased altogether but which begin sounding again in the silence of the evening (37).

Maman, as the narrator refers to her and as I shall refer to her (its English translation as 'Mama' giving snotty-nosed hostages to fortune too numerous to mention), is absolutely dead centre of the world of childhood in Proust, in both the fiction and his own life. A questionnaire of the time inquired of several well-known persons what would most make them unhappy. One response was vintage belle-epoque (being 'separated from cigars'). Proust's was, I quote, 'being separated from Maman'. When the definitive separation came, in 1905, he wrote to his very close friend, Anna de Noailles 'she takes away my life with her' and, more elaborately, to the writer, Maurice Barres: 'Our entire life together was only a period of training for the day when she would leave me, and this has been going on since my childhood when she would refuse 10 times to come back to say goodnight before going out for the evening'.

I repeat here the caveat regarding reductionist swaps of fiction and autobiography, but the parallels here are unmistakable, though with a peculiar twist performed inside a kind of narrative back hole. In that connection, I shall now fast forward, to—where else of course?—Venice. Fantasized as a dream destination from early on, the narrator finally gets to Venice late in the penultimate volume, *La Fugitive*, in the company of Maman, still grieving for the loss of her own mother. For Proust, Venice also a place of magic, in particular associated with the French term *éblouissement*, the dazzle of light and colour of the Piazza San Marco, as well as the muted tones of the interior of the Basilica. It is here that the Narrator makes notes while reading Ruskin. But it is also here that he perceives his mother as grown old, grief-stricken, worn and stamped with mortality. This is the occasion of what, at least for me, is the most moving sentence Proust ever wrote, long, sinuous and touchingly intimate:

> The time has now come for me when, on remembering the baptistery, …I cannot remain indifferent to the fact that there was by my side in this cool twilight a woman clothed in mourning, [whose respectful but enthusiastic fervor matched that of the elderly woman who can be seen in Venice in Carpaccio's *St Ursula*, and that nothing can ever again remove this red-cheeked, sad-eyed woman, in her black veils, from the softly-lit sanctuary of St Mark's where I am certain to find her, because I have reserved a place there in perpetuity, alongside the mosaics, *for* her, my mother.

Here we find not only the narrator's mother 'clothed in mourning', but also an anticipation of a mourning ineluctably to come, the narrator's own

for her death. This however brings me to the fictional black hole at the heart of the last volume. The last we see of Maman in the narrative is on the train from Venice back to Paris at the end of *La Fugitive*. In the final volume, *Le Temps retrouvé*, she effectively disappears. I'm not myself a great fan of word counts masquerading as methodology under the fancy name of 'quantitative analysis' because now accessible in digital form. It may nevertheless be worth mentioning that there are 210 instances of the term 'Maman' in the *Recherche*, 71 in first volume and a mere 8 in the last, 7 of which refer to the Narrator's mother, and all as an object of childhood recollection. The last appearance or rather mention of her as a living presence is when the Narrator announces that he is off to the grand social gathering at the Guermantes, while she has a tea appointment elsewhere with Mme Sazerat. It is a sort of parting of the ways in a minor key. But it also speaks sotto voce of another parting, one altogether more definitive. From this point on narratively speaking, she simply ceases to exist. This has to be one of the strangest evacuations or silences in the entire novel, or indeed in the history of modern fiction. It is why I call it a fictional black hole, out of which unanswerable questions pour. Has she died? And, if so, is this the one death of which the Narrator simply cannot speak? Or is it, as one of Proust's biographers suggests, a placing of her in a kind of timeless zone out of reach where death cannot reach her; in other words a fairy tale. Interpretations abound, and I could list several more if there were time. One thing is for sure: the passing reference to the tea appointment with Mme Sazerat, followed by absence and silence, mark the moment of an exit, her exit from the story that begins with her. And it is with this stress on exit that I want to wrap up.

Maman's unrepresented and perhaps unrepresentable disappearance from Proust's novel is one of his ways of marking the inevitable and definitive exit from the fairy tale of the Garden of Combray, the place where one cannot stay and which is in any case intrinsically and incorrigibly flawed. In this it resembles that other garden, the paradisal garden of Eden, versions of which, biblical and non-biblical, haunted the Romantic imagination, but of which Proust observed in one of his most famous maxims: 'the only true paradise is a paradise we have lost'. I said earlier one of my purposes was to disturb a received view by rearranging the Proustian applecart. So let me end with a few remarks about Apples. A contest for the best Proustian description is a mug's game, but I would certainly consider placing a bet on the stunning description of apple trees in *Le Côté de Guermantes* as 'guardians of the memories of the golden age' that accompany the earlier description of apple trees along with the hawthorn trees of the Méséglise Way in Combray. Apple blossom, however, was what for Proust became a mortal enemy; being anywhere near it would induce an attack of the psychosomatic illness that could lay him low for weeks. Though, philologically, there are no apples in the original Biblical Eden, the Apple as poisoned fruit serves the allegory of expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the equivalent of which in Proust is the place where the sobs that never leave you are born, and where we also find a farewell to a literary tradition post-Milton, the apples and apple orchards of Wordsworth, through Rilke to Robert Frost.

Three voices on The Potential of Childhood
Transcript from panel presentation

The Potential of Childhood

By Jane Feaver

Society pushes at us with the idea that childhood is a condition we will grow out of: we are urged to grow up, to behave like adults, to put away childish things. As if it is a one-way street. But you don't have to look far among writers—particularly poets—to find a counter-imperative. I want to start by reading you part of a letter Ted Hughes (who was as wonderful a writer for children as he was for adults) wrote to his son Nicholas (1986), who'd expressed some anxiety—as an adult—about feeling 'childish'.

'Nicholas, don't you know about people this first and most crucial fact: every single one is, and is painfully every moment aware of it, still a child. […]Everybody develops a whole armour of secondary self, the artificially constructed being that deals with the outer world, and the crush of circumstances.'

Hughes characterises this inner child as a 'little creature…sitting there, behind the armour, peering through the slits.' And goes on to say: 'in fact, that child is the only real thing in them', warning his son that when the child gets 'buried away under their… protective shells—he becomes one of the walking dead, a monster.'

We have talked here about the importance of evoking childhood in a spirit of playfulness, but here Hughes doesn't preclude the dark and the deep and the real necessity and urgency of making contact with that child.

What or who is it exactly we are seeking to make contact with?

A creature whose outlook is untrammelled by schooling, by institutions, the 'grooming' of education, of work, our social, political, emotional conformity, which allows us, he suggests, to 'sleep-walk' through our lives.

I found a lovely poem which echoes this belief. It's by the early twentieth-century Finnish poet, Edith Sodergran, 'My Childhood Trees'. In the poem, the poet is addressed as an adult by the trees she knew as a child. They're shaking their heads at her and asking, 'What has become of you?'

> …why are you fettered by your illness?
> You have become a human, alien and hateful.
> As a child, you talked with us for hours,
> Your eyes were wise
> Now we would like to tell you the secret of your life:
> The key to all secrets lies in the grass by the raspberry patch.
>
> We want to shake you up, you sleeper,
> We want to wake you, dead one, from your sleep.
> [trans. By Stina Katchadourian]

Poets know the importance of being allowed 'to stand and stare'. They respect a non-hierarchical view of what is important and what is not. In this poem, all there is to know of life and death might be contained in that image

of the grass by the raspberry patch. Poets understand and value the sensibility of childhood—the child as father to the man.

Coleridge makes the distinction in his *Biographia Literaria* between a writer of genius and a writer of talent. He says the difference has something to do with an ability to carry 'the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood, to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day, for perhaps forty years, has rendered familiar…'

Prose writers can appear to be more entrammelled, to be less willing to shoulder off the burden or privileges of being an adult, less willing to play the game.

Sylvia Townsend Warner is a writer of poetry and prose whom I particularly admire. She was an intellect and scholar, largely home-schooled and self-educated. She lived what appeared to be a secluded life in rural Dorset, yet her outlook was international. She ran off to support the Spanish Civil War, was a translator of Proust's essays and a regular contributor of stories to the *New Yorker*. In 1959 she was asked to give a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts entitled, 'Women as Writers' in which she talks archly about what she insists are the historic *advantages* of being a woman. She feels sorry, she says, for the circumstance that grants 'man… his heavier equipment of learning and self-consciousness'. Women find themselves in a humbler situation she says, and this has required them to develop very particular skills: they can write at the kitchen table; they can do two things at once; they have a facility with language, particularly the demotic. She imagines a great literary party in a palace, full of the sound of men

popping champagne corks. Women are excluded; they are able to access this party only by breaking in—like children might—'through the pantry window'. They've 'entered literature, she says, 'breathless, unequipped, and with nothing but their wits to trust to... no one has groomed them for a literary career.'

Sometimes we need reminding of or bringing back to our wits.

How do we get access to that child? How do we get under the carapace?

I teach students who are mostly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. Ironically, perhaps, thought they are in age closest to childhood, I've found they're the most resistant to re-inhabiting it. There's an uneasiness around play. They are defensive about their learning, busy proving themselves, anxious and fearful, keen to distance themselves by presenting children as a concoction of sentiment and lobotomy.

I see my first task as trying to get them back to a pre-educated state. Not necessarily to think of themselves as children, but to think of themselves as animals. What is it is to be an animal in the world? I get them to enumerate the senses, switch them on, one by one, like switches on an electrical circuit: Sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and—if they like—intuition. These are broad strokes, rudimentary categories, but even so it is surprising how difficult it is to keep them all in mind at once.

I encourage them then to see themselves as part of the materiality of the world, and not separate or distinct, above or below; to begin to think about

the materiality of the world of language, its sound, its weight, its music. (They might, for instance, like Heaney, find new life and heft in a word like *omphalos*.)

For the sake of their education I could talk in terms of a technique popularised by the Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovsky. In 'Art as Technique', 1917, I tell them, Shklovsky describes the concept of 'defamiliarization' or 'estrangement', which is exactly what Coleridge was talking about when he praised the 'child's sense of wonder and novelty'—a way of approaching the world experientially, as if with no prior knowledge.

Shklovsky describes the way in which 'perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic'. We are lazy creatures; we quickly learn the easy, smooth-tongued ways, speaking in clichés. 'Art exsists' Shklovsky says 'that one may *recover* the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.'

It is an artist's duty to make the world anew, to re-invent it every time.

It is no surprise to me that in later life Sylvia Townsend Warner described herself as an anarchist. Writers need to cultivate a child-like anarchy; they need to develop a nose for disruption—anything that shakes us from our sleep!

I want to leave you with a poem, one that came out of a period of disruption, and which I hope might illustrate what I see to be the vital connection between childhood and play, anarchy and creativity.

It arose in part from my experience of strike action. Uncharacteristically last term lecturers in many British universities, particularly in the humanities, came out on strike. The strikes were ostensibly about pensions, but became about far more: they lifted the lid on the parlous state of the universities, the increasing commodification of education, the imposition of business models of management and finance. What intrigued and excited me most was the picket line, which grew and grew until it had become an extraordinary liminal space, a place of carnival, of singing, dancing, cooking, knitting, crying, laughing, banner-making—none of which would be associated with the institution of a university, but all of which committed by those people who daily make up the university, and perform the true business of the university.

Why was it so important?

It jolted us out of accustomed ways of being—atomized, anxious. We began to share ideas. We began, in fact, to behave like humans, aware that from the outside we were behaving, perhaps, more like children than the buttoned-up service-providers we sometimes felt institutionally-bound to be. The relief! The comradeship!

And it was a double strike: because what happened when we were due to go back to work: it snowed, and so heavily the campuses were closed. This was disruption of an entirely different kind, but with exactly the same effect: people in my village began coming out of their houses, talking to each other, a child-like wonder at the transformation of the landscape, at seeing the world made new again.

Strike!

Twice in a row, the night before the day we're due to return to work,
it snows,

takes us, blinking from our doorsteps, by surprise—
the aftermath of a blitz.

Can it be coincidence?
The glare of white is not so much familiar as

reminiscent—the stuff of childhood bundled up,
when every year, it seemed to us, it snowed. The lanes

are thick with it again, cars like igloos. School is shut.
Straggles of children trudge with plastic sledges

to the steepest field. They shriek and dive. What luck
to not be doing the thing we'd all be doing had it not snowed

(learning as outcome, teaching for gold, etc.).
An end to stultifying jargon!

I'm trying to tell you how it was: that picket,
it was like the snow,

a chance to stop, to breathe,
which we embraced like Samurais

who've been unlaced, unbolted from their armour after years
and lifted out—we hardly recognize ourselves

but rush to fill our boots up while we can—
joy daring weightlessness abandon

Three voices on The Potential of Childhood
Transcript from panel presentation

The Potential of Childhood

By Polly Stenham

When I was researching this title I came across a word I hadn't heard before.

NEOTENY

Which means the retention of immature qualities into adulthood.

Wonderful word right?

And human beings, are, apparently, of all creatures, the most neotenous. The most connected to our immaturity, our childlike selves.

In that way, the potential of the child, the child we were, is always with us.

When I think about being a child I think about play.

I think about how, despite the creativity and privilege of my job as a play-wright,

It's something I seem to have lost from my life.

That to make a play and to play, share the word, piqued my interest more. The word 'play' is so much in my life. What is it? When it's not theatre.

If the definition of play is a pleasurable activity undertaken for no apparent purpose. Making plays is certainly not that.

Although I get the game of creating alternate realities—characters—it is a serious business—in its way—the fantasy of it all. Tickets must be sold—shows reviewed—the purpose is there. Very much.

No apparent purpose. No apparent purpose. When was the last time many of us did something for no apparent purpose?

When did we stop actively playing? When did it all get so serious. If we are truly such neotenous creatures is it good for us, for our health, that it's got so serious? I look at my mental health, my peers mental health, I lost a friend to depression this year, and I think, I wonder, are the consequences of losing this side of ourselves, the potential for play we had as children, are the consequences of this loss cognitively socially and creatively and emotionally, in fact deeply serious?

I think we shame play out of ourselves as a species, popular culture riddles the gamer, the comic collector, the trainspotter, but is the joke on us? Everything must have a goal or purpose or it's 'trivial' but have we misunderstood the importance of the trivial? Is to not have a purpose purposeful in its self? Is the silly in fact important?

There's a phrase I kept coming upon as I researched this.

The opposite of play isn't work—It's depression

Is this current lack of play in our lives, no doubt driven by our Neo liberalist consumer orientated post industrial capitalist culture, whats led many to feel tired serious and afraid. Joyless. The NHS prescribed a record level of antidepressants last year, and suicide is now the leading cause of death in the 20 to 34 age group.

In denying the irrational—the pleasure seeking—the social and hedonistic—almost physchotic (in a good way) side of human nature, a side that can be safely expressed through play—in denying this in our adult selves—is leading to a mental health epidemic?

A state of play is an altered state. Are these altered states important—crucial even—a safety valve for our minds—a way to release something—suppression in play as a child has proven links to mental health problems later in life.

I stumbled across an experiment that seemed to prove this point.

RAT CAT PLAY EXPERIMENT

Two groups of adolescent rats—play suppressed in one group not another.

Both groups given a cat saturated collar—both groups hide (this is meant to happen)

The non play rats never come out—they die in hiding—they haven't learned to overcome fear.

We have the same neuro transmitters and similar cortical architecture to rats. Therefore the experiment proves that play is important to our survival.

Some of the greatest thinkers in human history are the biggest advocates of play.

Einstein—Play is the highest form of research.

Speilberg—I dream for a living.

JK I write what amuses me—It's totally for myself.

PLATO—LIFE MUST BE LIVED AS PLAY.

We used to play more as adults—if you look at a 15th Century picture of a courtyard you'll see all kinds of play—all ages playing—we've lost something since then in our culture. Perhaps, as we moved from the feudal to the capitalist, the landed to the industrial, pleasure for pleasures sake changed it's currency?

And what currency does play have? Surely one of them, is creativity.

Because play is a brief respite from the tyranny of apparent purpose.
Perhaps even

RELIEF FROM THE TYRANNY OF SURVIVAL.

And it is in that space surely, that relief from the hunt, whether the supermarket or the woods, where creativity flourishes.

The importance of child like solo play should never be underestimated. I remember finding my younger sister alone. Talking to books. For hours.

It is the way we explore the boundaries of our inner and outer worlds.
And it's that playful curiosity that drives us to explore drives us to interact and there the unexpected connections we form are the hotbed for creativity.

As our world becomes increasingly challenging, we as a race need to develop more resources of creativity and cooperation. Could more play in our lives be the key to these capacities? Play is not frivolous—it is essential—And the times when it seems least appropriate to play might well be the times it's most urgent. Creativity, fellowship, wonder—the things play fosters. How could we not want more of this in our lives?

Three voices on The Potential of Childhood
Transcript from panel presentation

The Potential of Childhood

By Jessica Swale

It is a bit magical isn't it, on this island, the first time I came here I thought I wonder if it's a little bit like that Agatha Christie book where everyone turns up on the island and one by one they disappear; that's my play brain. My name is Jess Swale, I'm a screenwriter and a playwright and a drama mongrel. Basically, I make stuff up for a living, which is a great pleasure because I get to play all the time. Peter Brooke said that 'a play is play'; it's what we've been talking about and it's what we do in the act of making theatre. It's make-believe and it's an absolute fostering of the imagination on everybody's part. Partly the actors, obviously they are pretending to be somebody else, but there's something really exciting I think in the fact that we're asking an audience of quite often serious people to sit in a room and just accept that the people in front of them aren't the people in front of them, they're entirely different people in entirely different scenarios. There's something about the sort of communal act of childlike abandon that theatre fosters in an audience as well as in the participants, which is one of the reasons I love doing it. But as a dramatist we get to go even deeper into that because we spend our whole lives pretending: playing someone else, pretending to be someone else, shaking off critically the confines of the real, the everyday, to go somewhere that, frankly, we find more interesting. I don't want to write about my personal experience, I would rather pretend to be somebody else and then explore that; it's that sort of curiosity that I think you have from when you're very young, but in order to do that, in order to bridge that and find that childlike

creativity, not only do we have to act like a child in terms of trusting curiosity and our imagination and taking risks, going to war on risk, but we also have to be able to access what we had when we were child and our experience. Madeleine L'Engle said that

> I am still every age that I have been. Because I was once a child, I am always a child. Because I was once a searching adolescent, given to moods and ecstasies, these are still part of me, and always will be... This does not mean that I ought to be trapped or enclosed in any of these ages...the delayed adolescent, the childish adult, but that they are in me to be drawn on; to forget is a form of suicide...

So maybe that's what we're doing as creative people, we're putting off an early death and Tom Stoppard said "if you carry your childhood with you, you never become older," I think it's rather lovely. You do have to go fight against this feeling of rigidity in terms of what's expected of you, Stanislavski the great Russian art maker said, and I'm sorry for the philosophers and academics amongst us he was quite critical of that sort of particular way of thinking, he said "intellectual analysis, if undertaken by itself for its own right, for its own sake, is harmful because it's mathematical dry qualities tend to chill an impulsive artistic élan and creative enthusiasm. If the results of scholarly analysis are thought, the results of artistic analysis are feeling." That is what we trade in—feeling. I've had to learn as an adult making this sort of work to trust my feelings, because you can only be original if you really forget the rules and tap into the wildness and the rebel and the risk. What I love more than anything else is the 'what if?'

When I was at primary school I used to have two different fantasies (well I used to have lots of different fantasies but just to share these two with you). One was that during a maths class, which was by far my worst subject, a man would come through the window on a flying horse, sweep down, and pick me up from my table and out of the window I would go with him and I would be the coolest kid in the class because I've gone out the window on the magical horse. I loved that fantasy because it was a chance for me to find something imaginatively better than the reality, but of course you also have the fantasy world which is the worst reality and it's something that we haven't really talked about yet. We've talked about the greatness of play and the innocence of it, but actually children also have dark imaginations, the 'what if' where things are horrible, and that's a really critical part of both what we do as dramatists and what children do. I read a quote this morning saying that childhood is about people not accepting death and not engaging with death. I don't think that's right, I think children are obsessed with death and obsessed with darkness and trying to work it out and work out what it can possibly mean.

The other fantasy I used to have is that I was standing in front of a group of people, doing something very serious, and wearing totally inappropriate clothes. I found it really scary the idea of being asked to be taken seriously but instead of wearing normal trousers I would be wearing something mad like, for example, something truly embarrassing like the worst shorts you've ever seen—lycra 1980s cycling shorts. Somehow, I would expect still to be taken seriously by everybody despite the fact that I had ridiculous clothes on. That's the risk you take as a writer, is saying "here is something within me

that is a bit scary but hell, I'm going to say it anyway because who cares?" Children don't ask all the time to get affirmation from other people, sometimes it's just about being true to yourself.

A few years ago I was offered a rather unusual chance—a commission to write a film which, for the first time in my life, instead of being based on either an idea that I had pitched or a studio had proposed, I was asked to do something where they said you can do what you want, you can start from scratch, but you cannot come to us with something you've already got, you have to start with a totally blank page. So I had to ask myself, really for the first time, what I really wanted to write about if I could just start from nothing. What really fascinated me, and what I came up with, was childhood and imagination: what it means to be an underdog, what it means to be small, and what magic is, because those are the things that are the reasons why I'm a writer. It's a film about a woman who, for reasons that she doesn't know at the beginning, has tried to squash the childhood and the imagination and the love out of her life. She's a folklore historian but her job is to work out what the reality is behind folklore stories and crush the magic with science. In a slightly anarchic act, rather than talking seriously about my theories of play, I thought I would just read you a little bit of the script to demonstrate this. The reason why I have really enjoyed writing this is because not only do I get to write the voice of a child and the voice of an adult who has lost her childhood, but how those two things manifest in both characters. The innocent child often is the wiser of the two because they don't try and plan and think too much. Part of childhood is the freedom of being honest and truthful without all of the baggage that adults teach you to try and understand.

So there's a scene in the film where Frank is wiser than anybody amongst the community and, likewise, Alice the adult has moments where she's more like a child than a conventional adult, and that's what I really enjoyed as a writer. We sort of assume 'this is how you write a child' or 'this is how you write an adult' but it's when you mess up those things that you get something interesting.

The film is set in the 1940s and Alice lives on a house on the beach on her own. She's thirty-something and she's cantankerous and she has an evacuee delivered to her that she doesn't want because she's far too busy working and she doesn't like kids. Alice is looking through photographs, she picks up a photograph of an Italian town and compares it to another picture nearly identical but in this picture a town hangs ghost-like in the air above the first town. She pins them to a map on the wall, pan out to reveal a crime-lab style wall: a collection of images, notes, strings linking pictures and places. The door bangs. "Shoes off!" Frank pokes his head round the door, his eyes widening. "Don't even think about disturbing me. No." He watches the door, she pins the second image to the map.

"Where's that?"
"Reggio in Calabria, Italy. What?"
"It's floating."
"No it isn't, it just looks like it is."
"But it is."
"I thought I told you to leave me alone."
"How do you know it isn't?"

"Because they are buildings made of stone, they can't just hang in the air. Have you heard of physics? It's not real."
"But it's a photograph."
"Yes, but there's a perfectly rational explanation and perhaps I would work it out if you'd only leave me alone. Go on, out!"
He leaves. She looks back at the photograph. He returns. "Magic?"
She kicks the door closed, shutting him out, and returns to her work, but something niggles. She picks up the photograph again. Later on, they're having dinner and he's seen a spooky mask on the wall and he asks what it is. She tells him "Chiabatty, an Indian Marsh spirit. You find them round the salt flats in Gujarat."
"They're not real though?"
"Oh they are," she says "haven't you ever seen a marsh spirit? Balls of light hovering around at night?" Because the longer she gets to know him the more she starts to engage with the play, even though she doesn't accept magic at all. She starts to enjoy playing with him and what he believes and what he doesn't. "You should look out for them," she says "they're all over the place, Minmins in Australia, Bruhyas in Mexico, you know what the Colombians call them?"
"What?"
"Candelija, evil grandmothers doomed to wander the Earth, tortured souls. See what I mean about women living on their own with cats?"
"They're not in England though, are they?"
"Oh yeah, more than anywhere. Wait until it's dark then go to a church and keep your eyes on the gravestones. They'll come, but when they do, don't get too close because it will flit away. Then when you follow it will get quicker

and quicker until you're in the bog drowned and that's the end of you." Frank pales. She smiles to herself. "Will o' the wisps, Frank. It's just marsh gas, that's all. Iridescence from chemicals that make heat. It's why you find them around graveyards—gas from decomposing bodies."
"But you said they lead you away."
"Imagine there's a pool with a leaf floating on it then you jump in, what happens?"
"I get told off?"
"To the water."
"It gets wavy."
"And the leaf? If you swim towards it?"
"It floats away."
"Exactly, move towards a gas and it disperses and reforms further off. It's science, will o' the wisps…."
Frank eyes the mask warily and rapidly finishes his dinner. "Can I get down now?"

She flicks her head to the door in consent and he heads out shutting the door behind him. Something falls. Alice looks up. It's the mask, fallen from the wall. She freezes. Of course there's no such thing as magic, is there?
As the story progresses we see that her experience of the world comes from being very hurt by what happened to her ten years earlier when she was left by her lover. She's climbing the hill with Frank, he's tried to make a plane and it broke so she's made him make another one, and he says as they're walking up the hill "what if it breaks?" And the thing about Alice is that, even though she's an adult, she's unconventional and part of that is about defying the conventions of what we imagine to be good parenting or good motherhood.

She isn't good at talking to children because she doesn't really understand what the expectations are. So he asks her "what if it breaks?"

She says "let me tell you something. Life's not kind, anguish is inevitable, your heart will break, your friends will die, you may even think about killing yourself. Planes will crash Frank, what matters is how you deal with it. What if it crashes?"

"I build another one."
"Well then, what are you waiting for?" She walks away then turns to see Frank hurtling towards the edge, he loses his footing. "Frank!" She tackles him to the ground just in time. They watch the plane arc up elegantly over the sky and then smash onto the sand below. "Worth it?"
"Yeah."
She takes out a flask and pours them tea.
"Why don't you have a husband?"
"Why don't you have a wife? Do you think I need a husband?"
"Did you ever have one?"
"There was someone, once."
"Who?"
"It's in the past now."
"Did you get married?"
"No."
"Why not?"
"What is this, twenty questions?" He blows on his tea and then she looks to the beach, shards of a memory rise up.

I wanted to write something where we really saw how wise a young child can be and how perceptive. It's later on, twilight, and the moon casts a silver glow on the wooden slats of the house. Frank lays places at a makeshift outdoor table and Alice brings out a stew. Frank hovers, looking at something inside.
"Can I put some music on?"
"That old thing hasn't worked for years." Frank appears with a record. Alice stiffens, "put it back."
"What is it?"
"Put it back!" Frank, shocked, does as he is told and then sits down quietly.
"Hand me your plate Frank. Sorry it's just… it was a gift, that's all."
"From who?"
"A lady. A friend. It's a good tune."
"Is she the one you loved?"
Alice stops serving and looks up at him. "Why do you say that, Frank? Would you think it was strange if a woman loved another woman?" Suddenly immensely vulnerable, she looks at him.
He thinks. "No."
Unexpectedly, momentously, the tide of emotion breaks. The weight of secrecy, judgement, agony, loss, all for a moment redeemed by the compassion and innocence of a small boy. Tears flood. "I'm sorry, it's just…" Alice sobs. Frank is bewildered. "It's not… you didn't… it's just people, most people think it's wicked."
"Why?"
"I don't know, they think it's a sin to love someone, that we should burn in hell."
"It's not as bad as marrying someone you don't like."

She smiles at the wise and surprising boy. “Do they argue at home?”
“Sometimes, sometimes they just go quiet. Did you kiss her?”
“How would you feel if I said yes?”
“Don’t know.”
“Then yes. How is that?”
“Alright. Was it on the lips?”
“Mostly. Eat up, your stew is getting cold.”

*

Just to finish, extremely briefly, with a quote from Dr Seuss who is one of my heroes, he said “adults are just obsolete children, and the hell with them.”

Mahler, Britten and Childhood

By David Matthews

I’m going to discuss the childhood of two composers, Gustav Mahler and Benjamin Britten, and its effect on their music. All artists of course are affected by their experience of childhood, but with both Mahler and Britten, the experience was particularly important, as their music shows in different ways. I’ll begin with Mahler.

He was born in 1860, the second child of Bernhard and Marie Mahler, a German-speaking Jewish family living in a small village, Kalischt, on the border of Bohemia and Moravia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Bernhard ran the village pub and had a distillery there. Though not well-educated, he was a voracious reader and ambitious both for himself and his children. His wife, ten years younger than him, frail, slightly lame, came from a more prosperous merchant family. When Mahler was two, the family moved to the nearby town of Iglau (now Jihlava) in Moravia. Their first child Isidor had died in an accident at the age of one, and Gustav then became and remained his mother’s favourite child. Meanwhile she had twelve more children, of whom six, all boys, died in infancy and another, Mahler’s favourite brother Ernst, a year younger than him, who died at the age of thirteen. So death was a constant presence in the family.

Mahler’s father is usually portrayed as a strict disciplinarian with a harsh temper, who beat his children and sometimes brutalised his wife. This may

well be true, though Alma Mahler, the chief source of these stories, is not always to be trusted. Mahler rarely spoke of his father, but he did tell his close friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner that his mother did not love her husband: she 'hardly knew him before the wedding', Mahler said, 'and would rather have married someone else whom she preferred. But her parents and my father were able to break her to his will. They belonged together like fire and water. He was all stubbornness, she gentleness itself.' It does seem, however, that Mahler respected his father, and certainly Bernhard was determined to do as much as he could for his son when he had recognised his exceptional musical talent. So Mahler was sent to Vienna at the age of fifteen and had the best possible musical education. The fact that after his father died Mahler kept his chair in his flat and often proudly pointed it out to friends shows that he didn't *hate* his father, though his feelings were certainly nothing like the deep love he felt for his mother. Altogether I don't think he can have seriously damaged by his childhood experience, as his music shows.

There is, however, an important element of Mahler's music that seems to be related to a painful childhood incident, as related in a famous story he told Freud during his visit to him in 1910 to consult him about the crisis in his marriage. We have Freud's own account, as given much later to his friend Marie Bonaparte. 'People have often reproached me', Mahler apparently said to Freud, 'because my music has sudden changes from the most noble to an ordinary banal melody', and Freud continues: 'he told me the following story … One day, as he was sitting in the house, he heard the father in the next room having a violent quarrel with the mother. He listened, eavesdropped through the door, and then couldn't stand it any more and ran out into the street. And there was a barrel organ playing a very hackneyed tune: Ach, du lieber Augustin … an old Viennese song. He heard this, and this contrast after the dramatic scene of the father with the mother he reproduced all through his life in his music.' Marie Bonaparte regarded this as evidence that Mahler was not a great composer, and other critics used to say the same; but I think that Mahler, who had become very used to such criticism, was unduly sensitive about using supposedly banal musical ideas. Deryck Cooke rightly drew attention to an essay by Aldous Huxley where Huxley distinguishes 'Tragedy' from 'The Whole Truth', tragedy being 'chemically pure', a distillation of truth, while 'The Whole Truth' is the chemically impure amalgam of everything in human life. Huxley concludes that both approaches are equally valid in art. Mahler's music, whose appeal has much to do with his use of the vernacular, is in fact a supreme example of what Huxley meant by 'The Whole Truth'.

At the age of six, Mahler composed a piece called 'Polka with introductory Funeral March', which accords very well with the story he told Freud. Sadly that piece and everything else he wrote in childhood is lost: the first piece that survives is part of a piano quartet he wrote when he was sixteen. I want to describe the opening of the first of Mahler's ten symphonies, completed when he was 27, and the culmination of everything he'd written up until then and everything he'd experienced: a young man's comprehensive statement about life. It traces the passage from childhood to adolescence, through falling in love and being rejected, through painful encounters with death; finally to full, mature confidence in life.

The introduction to the first movement is a vivid evocation of a particular childhood experience: it refers to an episode when Mahler's father left him in the forest near Iglau for several hours as he forgot to go back and fetch him, but when he did so he found the boy quite happily sitting listening to the sounds around him. The *pianissimo* six-octave A on the strings that opens the piece is all on harmonics except the lowest basses. It magically captures the deep stillness, the shimmer of light, and the soft rustle of the wind that Mahler must have experienced. I heard it myself when walking in the pinewoods near Jihlava: there was a sudden breath of wind, and I seemed to hear the opening of the Symphony. The series of descending fourths that are heard next are marked 'Wie ein Naturlaut'—'like a sound of nature'; but the fact that they also recall the introduction of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony which is very similar but uses falling thirds instead of fourths, reminds us that the young Mahler was not just trying to paint nature, but was also aware of the symphonic tradition to which he naturally belonged—something not noticed by many of his critics, to whom this work sounded like a strange aberration. Clarinet and distant trumpet fanfares recall sounds overheard from the Iglau barracks: Iglau was a garrison town, and military sounds abound in Mahler's music; a number of his songs are about soldiers marching off to their deaths. A cuckoo calls (Mahler marks it in the score), though with the pervasive interval of a fourth, not the correct third—the fourth is motivically correct, if not ornithologically. Soft horn calls remind us that this is the world of German Romanticism, familiar from Weber and Wagner. When the movement proper beings, the main theme, starting, as you'll hear, with the now familiar falling fourth, is the tune from the second song of Mahler's first song-cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, to his own poems. It describes a

walk in the countryside on a bright spring morning, the young man thinking joyfully of his beloved as he hears the birds singing. We've now left childhood for adolescence, where much of the remainder of the Symphony is set. The triumphant conclusion of the finale, where Mahler asks if possible for extra horns to the seven already in the orchestra and asks them all to stand up, uninhibitedly celebrates young adulthood.

Two of Mahler's later works deal specifically with childhood in different ways from the First Symphony. In the last movement of the Fourth Symphony, Mahler sets a poem from the German folk anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, about a child's vision of heaven. He was always able to identify with the simple feelings expressed in these folk poems. His setting of *Das himmlische Leben*,'Heavenly Life', is a re-creation of innocence from an adult perspective, not necessarily true to his own experience, but certainly to his imagination, and a gentle parallel to the passionate religious affirmations that had ended the Second and Third Symphonies.

The other work, from a few years later, is *Kindertotenlieder*, settings of five of the 428 poems that the Romantic poet Friedrich Rueckert wrote after two of his children had died. Remembering his own death-haunted childhood, and having almost died himself from a haemorrhoidal abscess just before he started writing it, Mahler composed a song cycle of exceptional poignancy. After interrupting it for several years, he finished *Kindertotenlieder* in 1904 just before his own second daughter was born. Alma Mahler wrote in her memoirs of her concern that he was tempting fate, and indeed three years later their first daughter died of scarlet fever. Mahler wrote to his friend Guido

Adler: 'I placed myself in the situation that a child of mine had died. When I really lost my daughter, I could not have written these songs any more.' But they don't end tragically: the storm evoked in the last song dies away into an exceptionally beautiful lullaby where the child is imagined safe in the hands of God. In all his works except the Sixth Symphony, Mahler was always able to work through to a consoling ending. And as with the ending of the Fourth Symphony there is a feeling of recaptured innocence in this music, but from an adult point of view. And here he's quite different from Britten.

Mahler was one of the chief influences on the music of Britten, at a time when few people in England had heard Mahler's works or knew much about him. Britten's childhood was much happier than Mahler's, almost to excess. Like Mahler, he had a devoted mother—a little too devoted, one might suggest. His father, Robert, who was a dentist in the Suffolk coastal town of Lowestoft, where Britten was born in 1913 and stayed close to almost all his life, seems to have played a minor role in Britten's upbringing. But his mother Edith, a competent pianist who also had a fine mezzo-soprano voice (which according to several of Britten's friends sounded very like Peter Pears, his partner later in life), was determined that her son would become a great musician. She would tell friends that Ben would be 'The Fourth B' after Bach, Beethoven and Brahms—and perhaps she was right. Because Britten was the centre of her attention, the object of her most fervent love, he soon came to believe that he was special, someone around whom the world should revolve. On Sunday afternoons mother and son would play piano duets together, in particular Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, which was re-enacted as a love-duet between them. It hardly needs to be said that Edith Britten was

powerfully influencing the course of her son's emotional development and almost certainly his sexuality, although the consequences would not become apparent until much later.

Britten played the piano, as he himself said, as soon as he could walk, and at the same time started to compose. He wrote hundreds of pieces during his childhood and adolescence, none of which he destroyed, but very few of which he tried to get performed in later life. Quite a few of them have now been published and the evidence of young genius they show is comparable with Mozart and Mendelssohn. Under the guidance of Frank Bridge, who became his composition teacher when he was fourteen, Britten's teenage music became more and more radical, culminating in near atonality; but he then drew back, rediscovering a new freshness in tonality which he continued to explore throughout his life.

There's a very telling remark that Britten made in 1953 to Imogen Holst, when they were having dinner together and she expressed her delight in a particular passage from the opera *Gloriana*, which he was writing at the time. She wrote in the journal she was then keeping: 'I . . . told him how I enjoyed the quaver rest at the end of each line in the boys song in Act III sc II, & how, having taught 13yr olds, I could appreciate its realism, and he said "it's because I'm still 13".'

Thirteen was the age when Britten seems to have been happiest. He was head boy at his preparatory school and *Victor Ludorum*—he always excelled at games. He had just met Frank Bridge, who was to supplant his mother as the most important influence on his life. It was because in some ways he

never grew up that Britten throughout his life was able to evoke states of innocence in his music so convincingly. But there was a dark side too. In some of his most important works, innocence is drastically threatened, or corrupted. The prime example of innocence corrupted is in *The Turn of the Screw*, where the two child protagonists, Miles and Flora, are in the seductive power of the ghosts Peter Quint and Miss Jessel and, to quote the line in the libretto that Britten's collaborator Myfanwy Piper took from Yeats: 'The ceremony of innocence is drowned'.

It's possible that the theme of innocence corrupted may be linked to an experience at Britten's preparatory school. He told his friend Eric Crozier, with whom he collaborated on three of his operas, that he had been sexually abused by the headmaster. Whether he was exaggerating we just don't know. The young adult Britten was intensely puritanical, and we know from what he said that some aspects of sex seem to have horrified him. As a homosexual, he was always uneasy and could not adopt the carefree attitude that his friend Auden held and encouraged him to adopt too. One aspect of Britten's homosexuality involved serial infatuations with boys, who were often at the magic age of thirteen. His obsession accords with Freud's account of boys whose intense fixation on their mother leads to an identification with her, and thus to narcissistic love of 'a young man who resembles themselves and whom they may love as their mother loved them'.

We are so concerned with paedophilia nowadays that we need to understand the very special kind of love that Britten pursued. In his book *Britten's Children*, John Bridcut defines this very well. He writes: 'Britten assumed

an openness and transparency in his dealings with boys that prevented any secret desire devouring him through repression and denial. It was a sublimation which enabled him to control his weakness—perhaps even to transform it into something wholesome and good, as it emerged in his friendships and in his music.' The boys were muse figures. That he still felt guilt about these friendships, however, is shown very clearly in his last opera *Death in Venice*, where Aschenbach is condemned to death because he has deserted the purity of Apollo for the sensuality of Dionysus.

Britten's love of children and children's voices led to him to write almost thirty works involving children, the majority for boys' voices alone. They include the choral works *A Boy was Born* and *A Ceremony of Carols*, the operas *The Turn of the Screw* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the *Missa Brevis* and the *War Requiem*. Boys' voices are of course a part of the English choral tradition, but Britten was the first composer to make extensive use of children's voices by themselves, for which there are few precedents: the outstanding ones are Berlioz in *The Damnation of Faust* and the *Te Deum*, and Mahler, in his Third and Eighth Symphonies. Mahler's boys' voices imitating bells in the fifth movement of his Third Symphony are particularly Brittenesque.

The most ambitious and I think the finest of all Britten's works for children is *Noye's Fludde*, the setting of the Chester miracle play that he wrote for the 1958 Aldeburgh Festival. As well as three professional singers and nine professional instrumentalists, the opera involves twelve child soloists, a large children's choir and a children's orchestra of strings, recorders, bugles, handbells, and other percussion, notably Britten's invention of cups or mugs of

various sizes slung on a string by the handle and hit with a wooden spoon. In Scene 5, the animals process into the ark. The opening is for the professionals: first, the imperious voice of God commanding Noah to fill the ark, and Noah's reply; then the children's voices take over. Noah's children and their wives announce the names of the animals as they march in, accompanied by bugle calls. The animals in chorus sing a repeated 'Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie eleison', a two-bar, two-note phrase, the epitome of Britten's extraordinary ability to create something memorable out of virtually nothing. The birds (sopranos) are the last to enter the ark. The scene dissolves on a beautiful plainsong *Kyrie*, sung by Shem, Ham and Jaffett.

The bugle calls make an interesting comparison with the distant trumpet fanfares in Mahler's First Symphony. Mahler is recalling military sounds, which in his later works will become symbols of tragedy and death. Britten, as a friend later recalled, is remembering the sounds of the Officer's Training Corps band playing at his public school while the two friends, who had both obtained exemption from the Corps, practiced cricket and tried to drive a ball between the marching cadets. Mahler the adult, Britten the eternal boy.

'I like the child approach to performance very much', Britten said. 'I think the main reason for my writing for children is because I believe in the artist being a part of society and I like the idea of being used by the young.' And his special ability to identify with young people was unique among great composers. *Noye's Fludde* wonderfully illustrates this: despite the authoritarian presence of the Voice of God, whose whims have caused all this mayhem, *Noye's Fludde* is a work refreshingly free from guilt, a vision of innocent delights.

Reflections on Childhood

Transcript from lecture

By Andrew Graham Dixon

I began thinking about childhood and our attachment to it and what our attachment might mean. An attachment to children on the part of adults and where that comes from and what are its sources in our culture. I began with a book which I remember reading a very long time ago by a historian called Lawrence Stone it's called 'The Family, Sex and Marriage,' and it's an archivally based historical account of the evolution of attachment to childhood in England from 1500 to 1800. If I can shamelessly simplify the argument, I think what he was attempting to show, sociologically, was that there was a great transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, he argued, people were very wary of getting too attached to their children, particularly up to the age of say five or seven, because childhood was such an age of vulnerability. Children died at such a high rate that you couldn't afford to invest too much emotion in them because you were constantly torn apart by their death. This changed as medicine improved and welfare conditions improved and that by the end of the 18th century people began to become much more attached to children and became more interested in the idea of child experience. His book of course is really about England but I wondered if this is this really true? It's sociologically interesting but is it really true that people didn't dare to think of children as deeply affecting human creatures.

I then returned to the place where I began the last time I spoke here on a very different subject and I was thinking about Francis of Assisi, one of the great

figures in Italy of the Middle Ages and, as I explored last time, Francis was a catalytic figure in Italian culture precisely because he attempted to make the Bible, I think, more humanly approachable and what he encouraged in people was a far more emotional approach to the church and its teachings. He encouraged the church in turn to be much more emotional, to be much more theatrical, to take advantage, so to speak, of the deeply human poignant aspects of the Christian story. In one of the texts that was extremely dear to Francis' heart, Matthew 19:14, Jesus said "suffer little children and forbid them not to come to me for such is the Kingdom of Heaven." How did Frances translate or interpret that and make it central to his way of bringing God to ordinary, often very poor, people in the Italian Middle Ages? Well one of the things he did was to establish the nativity as one of the central stories that would be brought to people, to make people think about the fact that God became a man and succumbed to the ills of mortality, that he entered the womb of a human woman and succumbed to the experience of being born. Moreover, he was born as a refugee, as a refugee who couldn't find a house in which to be born, he had to be born in a stable. Francis wanted people who themselves were living in places not much better than a stable, and often considerably worse than a stable, to feel that this religion was for the poor, for the vulnerable, was for them. It was by making childhood, the childhood of Jesus Christ, such a central feature of the imaginative experience of being a christian that was hugely effective as a method and its effects can still be seen very movingly in works of art.

This painting by Giotto is part of the great cycle of fresco paintings in Padua and it shows us the nativity, it shows us Christ's vulnerability. The nature of Christ's very early life as a refugee is emphasised through the stage set architecture. It's not a real landscape but it is the idea of a barren place in which a miracle is happening. Joseph sleeps and Mary is there and it's very, very touching. Francis didn't just encourage this in art; at Grecia in 1208, he instituted something which continues vividly in Italy today, namely the notion that at Christmas time the people of the village will make a nativity. The people who are often given the greatest responsibility for placing the figures within this Italian tradition are actually children, so in a sense what Francis invented with this idea of the nativity was a kind of doll's house in which you engage with the notion of Christ as a child. You engage with Christ's childhood within your own childhood absolutely viscerally in the sense that you're not only thinking about it as a little boy or a little girl but you're being invited to make your own version of it. You can decide where Joseph should be and you can arrange the animals in the stable and it's tremendously, tremendously powerful. All of that suggests to me that no matter how well researched and convincing Lawrence Stone's book is, and I don't want to sort of discredit him in any way, I think the truth is far more complicated. No matter how people may have attempted not to become attached to children and childhood and the idea of child's vulnerability, I doubt personally very much whether they ever truly managed the trick. Francis, who was a genius at knowing how people's emotions work and how to hook into their emotions to bring them into the church, he plainly realised that mediaeval people were extremely attached their children because if they hadn't been I don't think this celebration of both the idea and the image, both in painting and sculptural form, of the nativity could ever have taken root in the way that it did.

Michael Baxandall many years ago wrote a brilliant book called 'Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy.' One of the things that it looked at with great diligence was meditations and manuals for prayer, these texts in which priests told each other how to tell their congregations to pray. One of them says that if you're telling your congregation how to sympathise or to engage with some of the early scenes of Christ's life you might, for example, think about the Massacre of The Innocents, and when you think and pray about the story of the Massacre of The Innocents you might want to find somewhere among the faces of your village the man who might in your imagination play the part of Herod. So you are, as it were, being invited to people your imagination with a prayer based on the real faces and the real figures in the real forms of those around you, which one might say is almost another version of what Francis is suggesting that you do when you arrange a nativity.

The Nativity at night
by Geertgen tot Sint Jans

One of my favourite paintings in the National Gallery is by Geertgen tot Sint Jans and it's called 'The Nativity at night' and it's just such a wonderful image. It's a very rare thing in the sense that it's an early Renaissance 'nocturne', a painting set at night, which is very unusual and there are very few such images. It's not really until the end of the 16th century that we find one in the work of Caravaggio and artists such as Adam Elsheimer. Again, I think it's another way to emphasise the hostility of the world in which this child is born; it's using darkness to suggest the aloneness and vulnerability of this moment of birth.

When Rubens painted his version of 'Massacre of the Innocents' he had just come into contact with Caravaggio's work. In fact, Rubens had just made a box with his own hands for Carravagio's 'Death of the Virgin,' which he'd bought in his role of art dealer for the Duke of Mantua after it had been turned away from a Roman church, possibly because the madonna in it was depicting a prostitute. Rubens boxed this picture up and sent it off to Mantua and in his own 'Massacre of the Innocents' you can see he is thinking about Caravaggio and maybe wondering how Caravaggio might have painted the 'Massacre of The Innocents'. Rubens comes up with his own extremely dramatic and troubling image but again it's a picture that rather that gives the lie to anyone's idea that people didn't really think that children were touching, or poignant, or moving in the Europe of the 1600s. I suppose it's Rubens way and Rubens is a painter who is so much about life, and fertility, and fecundity that even when he paints about death he emphasises the 'livingness' of the forms that are going to die. It is troubling in a very different way—these are the children, of course, who died in the place of Christ, they are all killed in case one of them might be Christ. None of them are, but how alive they are, they're like plump fruit being smashed against roman stone. That is Rubens thinking about the vulnerability of the child.

One of the paintings that Rubens probably would have been looking at is 'The Conversion of Saint Paul' by Caravaggio painted for the funerary chapel of the papal treasurer. There are two paintings by Caravaggio in this chapel and there's a painting by Annibale Carracci as well, they were all commissioned and painted at the same time. Carracci's painting shows the soul of the Virgin Mary rising to heaven and it's very much a proto-baroque image in which Mary and the apostles are all dressed very much as if they are aristocratic; they wear astonishingly rich robes and the colours of the robes are very dramatic and bright. Caravaggio's painting is exactly the opposite of that, his are the colours of Earth and the colours of humility, the colours dullness, the colours of poverty. Caravaggio was flaunting the fact that he spent very little money on the paint whereas Carracci must have spent a fortune on his paint and Caravaggio is very conspicuously turning the arse of his horse so that it faces the virgin in Carracci's altarpiece, which is just a few feet away. What's this picture got to do with childhood? We see St Paul who is on his way to do bad things to Christians suddenly converted to be a Christian himself by a thunderbolt from God, he is struck from his horse and he lies on the ground. There's a depiction of the same subject by Michelangelo in the Pauline Chapel, which is next to the Sistine Chapel (which hardly anyone ever gets to see because it's the Pope's private devotional chapel), in which Michelangelo depicts this in much more 'Hollywood' style as the cast of hundreds people reel in astonishment as God comes down from the heavens to strike Paul with his thunderbolt. Caravaggio excises all of that to leave us contemplating only the horse, only the groom, and only the figure of Saint Paul lying on the ground. The church is Santa Maria del Popole and you'll still see, if you go to Rome today, that it stands by a great gate. The great gates made of stone once marked the outer boundary of Rome, beyond it now is just part of the endless urban sprawl of modern commercial Rome and a street with about 400 pizzerias in it, but back then it was just fields going north. So on a jubilee year when pilgrimage was made to Rome maybe 50,000 poor people would come to pray for their brother who's ill, or their son who's got leprosy, or their husband who has damaged his arm in an acci-

dent at the mill, this was the first church that they came to. What Caravaggio has done is that he has, very carefully, made those poor people feel at home in a way that I'm sure would have been greatly approved of by St Francis in whose spiritual footsteps Caravaggio always walks, and he's made this scene resemble a nativity. I think if you come into the church as a poor pilgrim in 1601 and you see this picture for the first time you are put in mind perhaps of those nativity scenes that you helped to arrange when you were a child.

I think there's another association here too, which is with where you live, because peasants in Northern Italy at this time lived with their animals because the animals were central heating. So you would have the animals in the house and you would live above the animals so that the heat rising from their bodies would warm you, and I think Caravaggio is very carefully creating a painting of a miracle that looks like your house. So this is your house, this church is for you, this place is for you; Caravaggio is triggering these associations that you might have with your childhood. Conversion in Caravaggio's depiction of it reminds me very much of that phrase that Francis cleaved to: "suffer the little children," because at the moment of Paul's conversion he becomes like a child. He is helpless like a child, his eyes are closed, he becomes blind for three days in the story so he cannot see anything except the light that is flooding him inside, so he is eliminated from within but he is as helpless as a child and what is he experiencing is a mystic understanding of the significance of Christ's vulnerable birth all the way through to Christ's equally vulnerable death. That sense of the proximity of death and life, "we are born astride the grave," as Beckett would write much later, is such a terrifying thought that as we get older we realise we do seem to be accelerating.

That proximity between birth and death is here given another charge because what Caravaggio has done is he has depicted Paul as the infant Christ and also as the adult Christ on the cross; he's experiencing the whole life of Christ from the alpha to the omega, from the child to the adult, dying on the cross all in one moment of conversion. It is brilliantly compressed into this image.

When Caravaggio himself was a child, when he was five, Milan where he was brought up was struck by plague and, because his family had contacts, he was given permission to escape the city of Milan, which no one else was allowed to do really but he and his family were allowed so they went back to his native village of Caravaggio. There in the archives you'll find a very sad series of testimonies to what happened next, testimonies that take the form of notices of death. Caravaggio's father dies, his uncle dies, his grandparents die, all the men in Caravaggio's life die within a period of about seven days because they've taken the plague with them. After Caravaggio committed the murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni, went on the run and escaped to Naples and then went on the run to Malta and assaulted a man in Malta and went on the run again and ended up in Sicily, he painted a very late depiction of a nativity as a sort of sister painting to a depiction of St Lucy. I can't help feeling that this is Caravaggio probably unconsciously very much in touch with himself, Caravaggio painting his own sense of himself as a refugee through this image of the nativity and the holy family as refugees. I find it's an almost unbearable painting to look at because Mary is the refugee mother, Christ is the refugee child, and the shepherds have arrived and they want to help—they really want to help, they want to take care of this child and this mother, these two refugees, but something stops them from being able to do it. It's as if there's

a force field that separates those men reaching out towards that woman and child. I think it's Caravaggio's way of saying there is no help for it, I will not be saved. I think it's him in an age before the cult of childhood reflection and reminiscence, he's painting his sense of himself as a child. Those shepherds are all men that died who can't help him and it's that poignancy that is the subject of the picture.

'The Cholmondeley Ladies' is an extremely convincing vision of why perhaps you might think the 16th century English people didn't have the most tremendously sentimental attitude towards their children. The Cholmondeley sisters, with their identical Elizabethan kit-form babies staring out impassively at us, makes one feel that perhaps there is something of English reserve. It's before Caravaggio so I am going back but the Renaissance is a difficult period to understand because there are different things going on at different times but there is a common tendency, I would argue, that crosses from Italy and France to England and one of the leitmotifs of Renaissance humanist discourse is the association of people who are very emotional with stupidity. Michelangelo, when he wants to say that somebody doesn't really know what they're talking about, he says that's the sort of thing that a priest would say, or a woman would say, or a child would say, because those people are led by the heart not the head. Michelangelo is not an artist without emotion but he's quite disdainful of it in many ways and in Caravaggio's art he is saying, in many ways, that he doesn't agree with Michelangelo and that he doesn't really like what he did. In some Caravaggio pictures, which are very much about the importance of having emotion and the importance of allowing yourself to have emotion, he includes little references to Michelangelo

paintings that definitely don't really have that kind of emotional charge and are much more intellectual.

The same kind of humanism that feeds Michelangelo's ideas about women and children and priests can be found in other areas of the Renaissance. For example, Sigismondo Malatesta who built the Temple Malatestiano in Rimini, which is the huge mad marble bas relief church interior full of tremendously arcane and strange classical symbols which were all created within a scheme that could be exonerated at the level of Christianity, but only after you've done twenty cryptic crossword puzzles would you understand that this image of Diana actually stands for the virgin. Anyway, what did he cover over with that? He covered over a whole series of frescoes by Giotto with this marble intellectual framework of the new art, the new humanism. He was a thug but he'd been educated and he wanted to prove to everybody that he was really educated and when one of his courtiers asked why he had made a church into an intellectual construct, into this pseudo-classical temple, the answer came back from one of the humanist advisors. It said that if we did it like they used to do it in the past, ordinary people might understand it.

I would argue that that way of thinking, which is also assigned to a certain degree to Giorgio Vasari and the way that he writes about art, is really the antecedent of modern conceptualism; the idea that art should only really be understood by some. I mean it would now be too politically incorrect to say that women, children, and priests are too stupid, but someone is stupid and we are intelligent. As it developed during the Renaissance, that idea of elitism very much militated against any involvement or any sympathy with this idea

of childhood and this idea of vulnerability, or this idea of being moved by the fact that God became a baby—not just a person, but a baby. You mustn't be moved by any of that because it's undignified and it's not intellectual. One of the things that it's responsible for is an awful lot of mistakes and what that humanism, I'm simplifying, but what that humanism turns to within the English intellectual tradition is the protestant reformation. I think one of the most telling stories told by Thomas More helps to explain why the British did what they did. It says that Thomas More was sitting next to two women on a coach and he heard them talking about which Virgin Mary they were going to visit on pilgrimage. Thomas More then concludes that these women are so stupid that they think that the sculpture is the Virgin Mary and so was begotten the English reformation which resulted in the destruction of 99.7% of all British art between 1530 and 1600. I would argue that it's very much an attack on emotion, it is an attack on engagement, and it's to do with the fear that if you become too emotionally engaged with a particular nativity or a particular image you'll actually mistake the figures in the painting for reality, they will become a totem rather than an aid to prayer. The composers of the meditations on prayer are saying that the Giotto just helps you, that you're not confusing the little baby in the Giotto painting with Jesus Christ, but the protestants feel that is exactly the danger of what you might do and so they throw the baby out, literally since we talking about childhood, with the bathwater. They destroy all the art and they leave you with the word and the sermon as the way of getting to God and you can see this reflected in the architecture. What happens with that development I think is very much a retreat from emotion and a retreat into a much more intellectualised approach. The reason I'm going on about religion and childhood is that, I probably

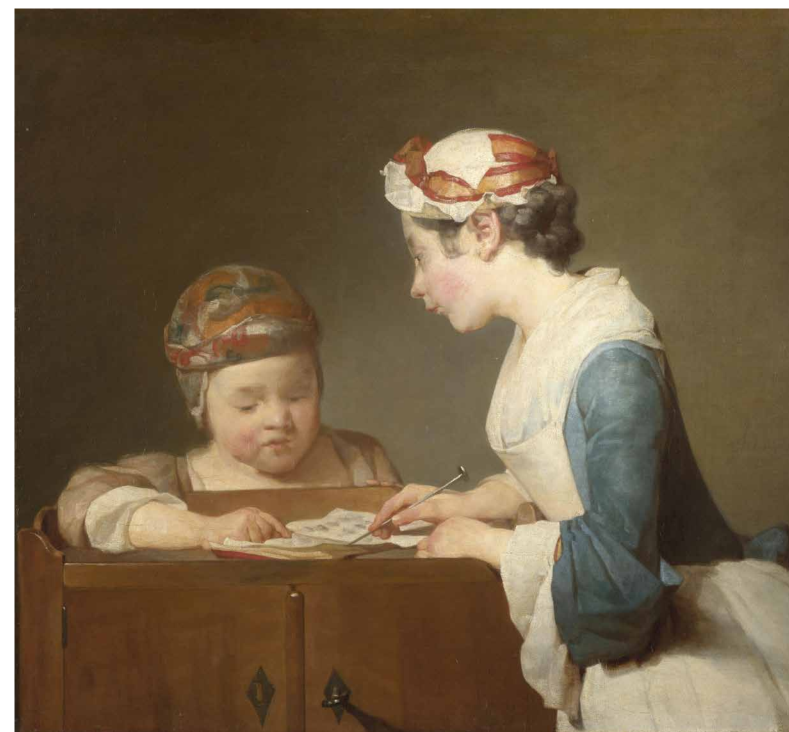
should have emphasised this earlier, for most people up to say 1650, the vast amount of the non-working experience is actually religious and much of the way in which they think about everything, in which they think about life, is religion. So in terms of works of art, when they relate to a child it will invariably be about Jesus.

Therefore, the transformations that are made to that limited set of experiences are absolutely enormous. On this subject, I often feel that Shakespeare is the artist that comes into this purged emotional void of British culture and understands very well that these people have had it all taken away, there is no spectacle, there is nothing to look at, there's nothing to emote with, there's nothing to relate to emotionally anymore because none of that allowed. That's what theatre can do, so the greatest writer of theatre ever emerges at exactly the moment when the largest wholesale destruction of the holy theatre has taken place and is it a coincidence? Is it a coincidence that Shakespeare, for example, writes very movingly about exactly these things that we are talking about—the vulnerability of the child? I suppose you could say that 'The Massacre of The Innocents' is in 'Titus Andronicus' where children actually get eaten, but there's much sympathetic writing about the nature of childhood and children in Shakespeare and I think it's perhaps the transference of energy from the church to secular literature that's taking place.

Thus, we move forward into one of the key moments in the development of modern attitudes to childhood. I would say that the key moment is not the Renaissance, it's not the Reformation, it's not the middle ages, it's the enlightenment. You can see it in a number of places that suddenly around the years 1750

to 1780, 1790, you see this development of tremendously sympathetic images of children. Children, as it were, suddenly come into focus at this moment.

In Chardin's 'House of Cards,' I suppose what he's doing is he is working within a sort of Dutch tradition of the 'vanities' and so a child is building a house of cards and the house of cards is of course a very fragile thing. You could say, if you wanted to be very Dutch and Calvinistic about it, that the child has no free will; God will decide when the house of cards falls. The child in the painting may live to be one-hundred or he may live to be six, he can't control it and we're all going to die and such is the nature of things. Yet that doesn't for me quite work with Chardin because you nonetheless see that within that scheme of a moral reflection he's actually very touched by the way that the child deliberates. I don't know if you've ever tried to make a house of cards but there is a moment when you really have to let go of the card and you want to let go in such a way that it falls the minimum height that it has to in order to take its place on the pyramid stack below and I think that's what he's depicting. He is depicting just the moment when the child is concentrating on very slowly lowering that card. I think Chardin is perhaps also reflecting on this type of motor control as he remembers it—he remembers trying to make a house of cards—and I wonder if he doesn't also think that it's connected to painting in that he has to be as careful as that when he puts paint on the canvas. What Chardin is actually painting secretly is his own history and painting a part of his own development; every painting he makes is a kind of house of cards. So what do you might think of at first sight as a sort of slightly superior, puritanical, adult view of childhood, uninfused with sentimentality, is perhaps rather different, is perhaps a declaration of fellow feeling between artist and child.



The Young School Mistress
by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin

Another example by Chardin is a picture of two sisters called 'The Young School Mistress' in which a young school mistress is teaching the younger child part of her lessons. I think again you could see it within certain historical context as a kind of moralising picture about the importance of education or the importance of virtuous comportment, which it no doubt is, but I think there's more to it than that. I think again we're talking about people beginning to be interested in the *state* of the child rather than the *idea* of the child or the idea of the vulnerability of the child as I was talking about more really with the case of early Renaissance or mediaeval depictions of

the infant Christ. We're not talking about vulnerability here, we're talking about a genuine interest in how a child turns into a grown up. It's almost as if Chardin is painting a kind of fruit at different stages of its growth; the little girl is a version of the older girl but she's sort of like a blob and she's a blob studying these blobs on the pages of the book in front of her but she's a blob who will become like the other girl and there's a kind of miracle and a mystery about that. Chardin is very touched by that and he expresses the notion of it, I think, in his own painterly language, which is to do with finish—that the girl the older girl is more highly finished.

Molly and the Captain
by Thomas Gainsborough

My favourite picture of this kind is a painting by Gainsborough of his two daughters, painted for himself and never finished; 'Molly and the Captain' he called it. One of them was four at the time of the picture and one of them is six and they're holding hands in a wood wearing a golden silk dress and a silver silk dress. Perhaps one of them is meant to represent the age of silver, the other the age of gold. There's two years that separate them and it's one of the most tremendously poignant images that I know of small children. I suppose in a way he is revisiting the territory of Chardin in the sense that you see two girls who are related to one another and what are almost, you can't help feeling, versions of one another. The younger girl Molly is depicted with a wonderful sensitivity to the slight clumsiness of the four-year-old, that her arms and legs are somehow less tense and organised than those of her sister. Her sister has more self-consciousness, she's more aware of herself, and she is perhaps slightly posing like she's aware that she's being painted whereas the little one clearly is not aware of anything except the butterfly that she is reaching towards, which of course as you will know symbolises the transience of the state of childhood and the transience of life.

One of the sadness's of bringing up children is the loss of each stage, so when a three-month-old becomes a four-month-old suddenly they're too big for their Moses basket and you'll have to take the Moses basket to the charity shop because it's no longer of use and that's when people start crying and they're crying because they've lost a three-month-old. At the point where you lose the three-year-old you notice it because the hugs that you get are no longer the mad impulsive hugs a three-year-old who is utterly abandoned to everything except the fact that you've come home and isn't it brilliant. No,

when they get to be a five-year-old they are also thinking about something else and when they get to be a 9-year-old maybe they didn't have a good day at school and you're lucky if you get a kiss and then, when they're a fourteen-year-old, they've got a boyfriend on the phone or whatever. Each phase, each time you look at your child you see the memory of the child who wasn't there and I think that's what this is a painting about, because Gainsborough can still see in 'Molly and The Captain' where one may go. This is a painting created for himself, it was not for any audience or market. It is probabel that in his own mind the justification for it was the fact that he was moving away from the very tight art of his early work and trying to develop a new, more 'Van Dyckian' style, and this was an essay in this new style which would make him rich and famous in England. This is pretty much the very first picture in that style. He was a very emotional man, he was very much a man for the age of feeling and he felt very strongly, and I'm sure this was a very personal picture. I'm also sure that the 'unfinished' quality of it—they occupy an unfinished world—is extremely significant.

Jean Jacques Rousseau probably did more than anyone else to place the child at the centre of discourse, as some people call it, in the 18th century. Rousseau was a revolutionary at the level of his attitude to the child and he said that children should not be educated in the way that we've educated them so far. He believed that they spent far too much of their time with their noses in books and that children shouldn't read until they're ten, they should just be physical. We should change the clothes that they wear, we shouldn't swaddle them up, we shouldn't put little boys in young versions of adult costumes, we should allow them to move their limbs freely. They should be able to play and swim and run and fish and do all these things. What Rosseau was bleeding for was a form of freedom and his ideas about freedom, and about being unchained from attitudes that were bound up with the past and attitudes that were bound up with political structures, aligned with an event called the French Revolution. Childhood was seen as an ideal state, childhood was the state to which we should return, a kind of heaven to which we should return in the secular reinterpretation of Christian structures of thought that took place in France and elsewhere during the late 18th century. Childhood became this blessed state and it was blessed because it knew no rules, and if knowing no rules is blessed, how can we transplant that into a political state? Ah, well we will have to kill all the fathers and the mothers, we will have to kill the King and the Queen and the apparatus of government, and so it came to pass that they did. If you go into the Pantheon, which is the great church that the revolutionaries deconsecrated and made the temple of their own achievement, what do you find in it but this wooden casket. One of the things that the revolutionaries did is they also, like the English, destroyed all the art in churches or as much of it as they could get their hands on and declared themselves to be an atheist state. But they needed the kind of mass 'drawing together' power of the old religious festivals and so they invented new festivals and instead of taking the bones of a saint through the streets and placing the bones of the saint on the altar on the Saint's Day, on the day of the liberation of the Bastille they dug up the bones of Rousseau, who was their prophet, the man who said that we should all become as children, and they placed his bones in the wooden casket. Two hundred thousand people accompanied this casket into the Pantheon and Rosseau's remains are still there in a chapel accompanied by a frieze depicting some old pagan festival of

fertility with lots of children involved. My favourite bit is a torch sticking out the back of the casket and this, this flame of a Rousseau, I think of as being his idea about childhood and about freedom from the structures of the past.

Another figure worth mentioning is Pernasi and his images of prisons, these great dark prisons, which are all created in the 18th century around the same time that Rousseau was writing. They are the image of it is that we want to escape and we escape by becoming as children, because to become as a child is to become re-made, to become new. You can see it in 'Madame Pierre Seriziat' by Jacques-Louis David, what you really don't want to do after the French Revolution is to wear posh expensive clothes because that's how you get your head cut off really quickly, so you'll suddenly see again that the women are no longer wearing these astonishing costumes that took nine hours to get into. They're suddenly wearing these loose white shifts that make them look a little bit like classical sculptures. The French Revolution very much placed classical art at the centre of this new cult of purity and freedom, and they're accompanied by their children because they are the prophets of a new natural order in which children will be welcomed.

I am interested in this idea of what the child can then become in romantic culture. In Philipp Otto Runge's painting called 'The Hülsenbeck Children', the children have this astonishing sort of primal energy and I think there's a great letter by Runge where he says his own baby is "so plump he seems almost bulletproof." In one of his paintings his own infant son is like a kind of human marrow, growing, growing, and growing. There's something very compelling about 'The Hülsenbeck Children' and their having been created at the same time as the Valhalla monument was being erected. The Germans, the poor beset-upon Germans who had never been a nation of any kind, just a tapestry of cultural fragments trodden over by other people in their Wars, the Germans dare to think of being a nation and I think that these images are the first images in which you can feel that this is what's growing, this is what's being dreamed of. This idea of the child is not a child, this is the German version of the French enlightenment child, but they know that the French Revolution has taken place. These are the revolutionaries of the future, I think, in Runge's imagination. It's very interesting that historically these images have always been identified with the German nationalist cause although they are only images of bourgeois artists and bourgeois artist's parent's children. The status of these children as the harbingers of German nationalism, as everything does in Germany from the 1850s to 1946, goes very bad. There is a Nazi dolls house in the German National History Museum in Berlin, it's one of the most chilling objects that you could possibly see but it's a very good example of how childhood, and the cult of childhood, and the association of childhood, which developed from Rousseau to Runge, with a sense of Enlightenment revolutionary potential, a sense of nationalism, a sense of national self-identification, was very quickly, as so many aspects of romantic culture were, twisted and turned in this very sinister way by the Nazis. In one of the rooms, I think the kitchen, there's a portrait of the 'Fuhrer' which hangs directly above a radio and in one of the rooms the wallpaper shows the Hitler youth walking in the Bavarian landscape so that they will become good soldiers. Everything in this house is sort of sick and twisted, it's a version of what childhood, having been co-opted by nationalism, can very quickly be turned into.

The 19th Century on the one hand establishes a kind of cult of the child, and on the other hand is a period of appalling treatment of children, which is a paradox that many people find difficult to square. So at the beginning of this period you have William Blake writing the poem about the chimney sweeps and the chimney sweeps dream of being liberated from their coffins of black and being able to leap and prance upon the green. Then you fast-forward to an 1862 image of 'Jacks in the Green', a wonderful document of a lost moment in the history of London. From about 1770 to the 1870s they had, on May Day in London, a procession and a festival called 'Jack in the Green'. Jack in the Green is an old pagan god linked to Ancient Rome who was preserved in English folklore and celebrated on May Day and he was personified by a walking hedge or a man completely covered in leaves. You can see him prancing about in the middle of Piccadilly in some images. What he stood for was the annual regeneration of nature, the idea that life comes from death. This tradition was kept alive in London but it took a twist towards the end of the 18th century when it became the procession for the chimney sweeps. On May Day all of the chimney sweeps of London were allowed, only once, out of the carcinogenic labyrinth of chimneys in which they spent their life, they were allowed out and they would become for one day the rulers of London and they could do whatever they wanted, they could take whatever sweets they wanted, they could pluck you by the nose and you couldn't do anything about it. This vivid strange pagan festival in which paradoxically, and the same paradox haunts Blake's poem, these children actually represent death. I asked a social historian why it was the chimney sweeps and the answer is that in old England you would always have a man completely covered in coal dust, a man made completely dark, and he would be replaced by the Jack

in the Green on this May Day festival, so because the chimney sweeps were naturally black, they were so black from soot that they couldn't become white, they took over this role. They were allowed out on this one day so it's a very peculiar guilty sort of celebration of life from death in which the youngest and the most put-upon children who would basically be sold to be chimney sweeps, they were effectively slaves living in 19th century London, they were allowed to be free for one day but it was it must have seemed like a short day and the next day must have been really bad.

I couldn't not include 'Alice in Wonderland' in discussion of children in the 19th Century. This idea, I think, which is partly responsible for the fact that children's lives have got a lot better is this idea of childhood as something that's precious, something that's very hard to squeeze into and very easy to grow out of, is encapsulated in the Alice stories. Modern artists become very interested in children again because I think there is an association between childhood and the avant-garde. If you want to reinvent everything, if you want to reinvent your own experience, the idea is that you can remake things by becoming a child because you can somehow forget convention. The ambition of Modern Art is to forget convention and invent everything again and again so it is always new, so it's a dream about becoming a child. Picasso said that he could draw like Raphael when he was fifteen but he'd spent his life trying to paint like a five-year-old. I think it's an interestingly flawed idea actually because the dream behind it is that you can forget what you've learnt and engage directly with your experience in the way that a five year old child engages directly with experience, without conditioning, without etiquette, without

worrying that you're staring at somebody in a way that you shouldn't stare at them. The problem with it, I think, is that it doesn't take sufficient account of the fact that being an adult is inevitable and personally, I think if Picasso had done what he said he dreamed of, wouldn't all his pictures look different because he'd become like a child each time that he painted a new picture? But I reckon I can always tell a Picasso from a mile off so I don't know whether you become fresh by doing it. I think it's part of the dream of being fresh but I'm not sure that it's actually the answer. I'm not sure it helped him out of the prison that every artist has to occupy, which is that of being themselves. It doesn't have to be a prison but it's certainly a determining framework.

I shall end on my favourite book of the 20th century, which is Winnie the Pooh. You know they'll always be somewhere on that stretch of Heath, there will always be a little boy playing with his bear. What this book captures so poignantly, more brilliantly than any other book that I know, is the way in which you cross a line when you leave being a child, but you don't know that you've crossed it. It is only afterwards that you realise "I wasn't a child after that, was I?" He captures that so brilliantly. I think what I also loved about those books is the fact that Piglet is, as you know, a very small animal and he is frightened of fierce animals, and whenever he is frightened in this way Pooh will always hold his hand, because it's all about love really.

A Glastonbury Childhood

By Nell Leyshon

My name is Nell Leshon. I'm a novelist and dramatist, I write for theatre and I am the first woman in history to write for the 'Globe'. I also write for a radio, I have had a huge, ongoing career writing for 'Radio 4' and 'Radio 3'. I've come here today to talk about my childhood and how my childhood has affected my writing voice and has infected my writing voice and has created my writing voice. When I talk to you I want to talk about the beginning of my work and I want to talk to you about my books and I want to give you a sense of starting at the beginning, but the problem is that the beginning of every book has another beginning and the beginning of every beginning has another beginning until they go right back…. Back, back into the black before we could write, before we could say who we were and reflect on who we were.

I am five years old, I'm sitting on a chair, but my feet don't touch the ground. I can feel the pressure of the seat, of the cushion beneath my thighs—it is velvet, worn. My feet don't touch the ground and there's air between my soles and the carpet. I reach out my hands and I touch wood—honest, bare, unvarnished oak. To my left there's a bookshelf—full—and there's a fireplace and ahead of me is a big, early Victorian sash window. I am five years old and I'm sitting in my chair and I'm looking out of the window at my world… my world… my world… my world… And there are people walking by and these people are dressed in cotton. They hold handmade banners, and some have bare feet.

There's a man with a rose of thorns around his head, a crown of thorns, and there's a man with red on his hands. I'm five years old and I want to know what this is that I see, I want to know what my world is. I go to find my mother. I find her painting in her studio, she has bare feet, she has unshaven legs, she has flowered trousers and the walls are covered in paintings of me, of my siblings, of my father. I ask her who these people are and then I go to find my father.

I know where he is. I step out into the street and around the corner. The windows are etched, and I cannot see through. Only I can see through because where it says 'Ye Olde Queen's Head' the curve of the queue is clear, and I *can* see the convex concave world inside, and my father at the bar drinking himself into a convex concave world, altering his mind. He's always there. I ask them about these stories. I sit on his lap, he smells. He doesn't wash, my father. He smokes and he rubs the cigarette ash into his trousers and into his turn ups. He doesn't believe in ashtrays. I rest my head on his chest and as he speaks I hear a grumbling. I hear an orchestra of breathing, of heartbeat, of lungs. I slip off his lap and I slip onto my mother's lap. She too smells, she's not a fan of washing.

I ask about the stories and they begin to tell me about my world and what they tell me is one day a man, a tin trader from Cornwall, came to my town. He came all the way with his nephew and he came across the flooded moors and he stopped his boat in Bridgwater because he thought that was Cornwall. They rode across the flooded moors all the way into Glastonbury and Joseph of Arimathea and his nephew Jesus came into my town and the people walking past the windows are coming to see him in my town. It's a story, only it's not a story, because I am five years old and this is my world. Later, after Jesus' death, his uncle came back to Glastonbury. Blake knew all of this and did those feet in ancient lands walk upon England's pastures green. He knew, and I knew, that this was true. He came back, the uncle, he came back with a chalice with blood in, and he came back with his walking stick and he walked up a hill called Wearyall Hill, which is a hill I know my five-year-old legs can climb. He was tired, he rested his stick in the ground and below the ground the eyes on the stick where the twigs were broken off begin to sprout and it grows. And this miracle tree, at midnight every Christmas, animals come to it. They kneel in front of it and for one hour they can speak to human beings. My five-year-old self, my legs climb the hill, and I sit and I wait for the robin so that we can have a conversation. After he planted his stick, Joseph of Arimathea took the chalice and he hid it inside the well in my town near my house. My five-year-old self and my five-year-old friend go to the chalice, we dip in our hands and we cup water and we bring it up to her mouth and we can taste Jesus's blood in the iron stained water. Blake knew it, I knew it.

I'm five years old, I'm sitting in a chair—velvet—my feet don't touch the ground and there is air beneath my soles. There is a bookshelf on my left and I reach over, and I take a book. I hold it in my hands, I turn it over. My sister, my big sister, has taught me to read early in front of the blackboard in our house, which is always there, which we have to write on because you see we are autodidacts in my house. There are sins in my house, a house full of atheists, the sin is to be boring. The sin is to get an education and join the system.

We need to fight, all of us. We are going to reinvent the wheel and going to do it daily, monthly, yearly, and we don't want to know what other people think because we are us—a house of artists. I have this book in my hands, I turn it over and I look at the spine. There are empty letters where the gold has fallen out and there's a little bus ticket marking my page. I open it, it's the '376' bus ticket, the one that takes me from Glastonbury to Street, from home to school to swimming pool, and it is the bus that passes over the river where King Arthur (who of course is buried in my town) threw his sword. It is all there, but they're not stories, they're real because I'm five and this is my world and this book is on my lap. I open it, I can read. I look down at the page and I begin to read, only I read aloud, and I hear my voice in the room and as I read the words become music. They've left my body and they have become music and my body has become an orchestra because I am playing my body. My voice, my ribs, my lungs, everything is a musical instrument. I don't know what it is that I feel but I know it is too much for me, and I have an idea that what I need to do is create a box inside me and place these things, these feelings inside and I'm going to close the lid and I'm never going to open it because this is my secret and I will never as long as I live tell anyone my secret.

I'm six years old. I'm standing up, I'm on the passenger seat and my father is driving and it's the two of us—a rare, rare thing in a family of many siblings, secret siblings who I will one day find out, secret marriages, secret families. We are driving over the Severn Bridge, we're going back to the land of my father. He drives, he smokes Players No.3. He taps them on the packet before he puts them in his mouth, loose threads of tobacco, the smell, the circle at the end, no filter, like a moon, and moon of tobacco that is going to kill him many years later. He's driving fast, and I say "faster, fast" and he drives faster. There are no seat belts; we don't believe in seatbelts like we don't believe in education, like we don't believe in received anything. We're reinventing the wheel and he's driving the wheels and we enter Swansea. We go straight to the market and it is prawns for me, prawns wrapped in newspaper, and for him laverbread. The women have come in from the coast in their national costume, every single one of them selling. It's very beautiful. I'm six and I know what I'm seeing, and I know it's going. We go to the bookshop 'Ralph The Books,' he saved me magazines, he saved me comics, and I listen to him, and I listen to my father talking about the old days—the coffee boys, Dylan Thomas, the life that they had in Swansea. Then we go to see my aunt in the small terraced house, which I think is a huge world and when I revisit it later I realise it is tiny. It is four streets but to me it is a huge, huge world. He's bored of me, my father. I'm his sixth child only I think I'm his fourth. He sends me out with money to the sweet shop and I buy a pear drops. I put them in my mouth and I feel the sugar, I feel the jagged edges where they're moulded which almost cuts my gum. They taste of nail polish remover; my mouth is strong with the taste. Then I walk back and there are women on steps, women talking in Welsh in lilting musical voices, and I stop and listen and I think it's is an amphitheatre overlooking Swansea and this is an opera. Only I'm six and I don't have those words, but I know that what I'm listening to is something beautiful and it can go in the box with the other things in the box and I never open it and I never tell anyone.

Now I'm seven years old. I'm with my sister, the sister who took me to read, the sister who I think is my second biggest sister who turns out not to be my second biggest sister. We're down on the Somerset levels; it is a world of flat

land, it is a world of summer headaches, it is beautiful. There is peat underneath the water and there are ruckles; the men who dig peat dig it into squares and they build it into towers where the air can pass through and dry them—ruckles. We stand in front of these ruckles and I look at them for I know some things by now and I know how peat is made, that peat is thousands of years old, that this is time that they're digging up, this isn't soil this is time. It contains bodies composed by the acid in the soil, it contains the history of the people who lived there. Only, I am seven and there is no history anymore because time has collapsed like the time in the peat has collapsed and I can see it all. There are flag irises as yellow as butter and there are bulrushes in every rean, every hand cut piece of water by the monks at Glastonbury Abbey, creating fields and creating fake lakes to keep their fish in. I gather cowslips with my sister, I can feel them as I put the flowers together, the heady weight of the yellow flowers here resting here on my hand and inside here is the fragile stems and here is the sap dripping on my wrist. I still feel it, I can feel the weight, it is real it is not a figment of my memory, it is real and as I stand here today I feel the weight of those flowers. We walk near the sweet track—one of the oldest roads in history where people lived above water on stilted houses. The summer people in Somerset, like me. My world, my town, my love.

Now I'm eleven. I'm eleven years old and we move and leave behind my town, my love, my stories, and we move to a village and though it is only six miles away it is a world away, it is a different life. We move into a house older than Chaucer with walls this thick and a thatched roof. We live there because it was my brother who thatched the house. It has beaten earth floors and underneath we find a silver dagger from the Battle of Sedgemoor, the last battle on

English soil. They locked up five-hundred men in Westonzoyland church, the cathedral of the Somerset levels, and they killed them all. At night they ride horses across the flat land through the mist and I can hear them, they're real, I hear the bridles, I hear the cries, I hear them calling out. My village is between two hills and my body begins to imitate the landscape; there are hills, there are dips, and then there is a stream of blood. There are fourteen farms and I'm young enough to adopt personas to move in amongst the people in the farms. There's an old man in his seventies who still wears a suit to farm in and there are no buttons and he does it up with string. He came from the orphanage when he was ten and he hasn't been paid one penny in his entire life and he's lived on the farm. He sleeps downstairs and he sleeps in his suit and he sleeps in a room full of apples—the storage space. There is an orchard there, a room of trees, and the names of the apples are beautiful and the names of the diseases of the apples are as rich as anything Shakespeare ever wrote. I'm the observer, I'm watching them and I'm listening to them, they eat sandwiches with thick white bread and cheddar that they have made in their own kitchens and pickled beetroot which stains the bread like blood.

I am twenty-five years old. I'm in Madrid and I've run away from my own success; the world of commercial work is not for me. I turn down money, I turn down offers. I'm sitting in Madrid at a table and it's a hot day, the green blinds are down so that the sun doesn't come in and in front of me there's a typewriter and it sits and waits. I take a piece of white paper and I put it in and I hear 'clunk clunk clunk,' as the paper gets taken up into the feed and the letters are waiting upside down in a semi-circle, back to front, reversed, waiting, waiting, mirror image… My fingers are waiting but I don't know

what it is that I'm going to write and it is then that I realised that reinventing the wheel is possibly one way of doing things and that perhaps I need another way, but there's something deep inside me stirring and I don't know if it's anything to do with this box inside me but something is stirring. Two weeks later I find out that what is stirring inside me is a baby.

I'm twenty-seven years old. I'm in the University Library, my baby is in the arms of a childminder. I'm pregnant when I come for my interview and they laugh and I said "but you don't know me, take me and I'll show you." I'm learning a different way of learning, they take my head apart and put it back together and there's a course called creative writing and it runs in both years and I think that if I do that now I'm going to be in trouble because I'll never be able to sit in a lecture again. I know you see, I know, so I wait and I do the second course. I'm in the library, they've asked me to do something but I've got a notebook with me and a pen and I begin to write but there's something about my handwriting on the page and there's something about self-consciousness. I recognise myself too much, I see myself, it is true self-consciousness and besides, the box is securely locked.

I'm thirty-two years old. I'm living by the sea where I live now, on my lap is my second son—the child who closes the womb, my last one. I have to do this and I have to begin now. There is a loneliness; I know no other writers. But I begin and I'm driven by something other than me, I'm driven by something inside me. I begin and it's hard and I think back to my family and I think back to my mother and the paintings and I think back to how she was at St. Martins painting and how she spent those years learning and learning. I think about

my father the goldsmith and I think about how long it really takes to make a perfect gold circle, it's not easy. I think about my brother who can thatch a roof so beautifully that I want to stroke it that as I drive through Somerset I know his thatching and I'm always right. There are always straw cockerels next to the chimney to stop the devil going down. I'm thirty-two years old. I'm going to do an apprenticeship because this isn't about anyone else this is about me. This is about the box inside, this is about my world, my inner life.

I'm forty years old. I'm sitting at my desk, it's not easy but the apprenticeship feels as though something has happened. There's a bonfire in my garden, I'm burning boxes, and I go into my study which is upstairs to escape my children to get some quiet. I pick up the three novels that I have written, that I have rejected, and I hold them in my arms and I carry them down to the garden and I place them on the fire and I burn them. There is no trace, there are no desks, there is nothing. I destroy everything. The next day the fire is still hot but the day after when it's cool I take the ashes and I dig them into my vegetable patch. I grow vegetables and I eat my own words. I'm writing a novel age forty, it's called 'Black Dirt' and it's about the layers of time and history in the peat and it's about the stories of Glastonbury. It tells the story of the uncle and the nephew who row across the flat land where the water is silver in the light and they hear a rhythmical beating and they look up and there are three swans in the air, heavy, impossible, their wings moving slowly, their necks outstretched, the three of them. They rest their oars always and all they can hear is the beating of the wings and the drip drip drip of the water from the ends of the oars into the flood. Beneath them grass and sand and fish wave and swim past.

I'm fifty years old. I'm working on a project at the Royal Shakespeare Company about the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. I spend three days in a room and we're read pieces of the bible by Shakespearean actors and we talk about making plays. I come up with the idea of what would happen if a young woman was taught to read with the King James Bible, how would that change how she reads and her use of language? Her name comes to me immediately—Mary. But the project is cancelled. I'm fifty years old and I'm walking along the beach by my home, I'm thinking that maybe there are ideas for plays that can be crossed over into novels and in that exact moment, in that hot fire of creativity, a lion comes into my head. It is the year 1813 and I am writing this by my own hand only it comes in the voice of my childhood village. I realise it is a maid, an illiterate maid in the village who goes to work for the vicar and there is the entire story only the problem is I'm down at the beach and I have no notebook. I have nothing to put any notes in but now I've done a long apprenticeship and I have got to the stage of trusting the deep river that runs below and I know that if I have an idea once I can have an idea again because I know I can reinvent the wheel whenever I want to. I go home, I begin, I become her, and I write in her voice and I write in an ecstatic fury. I write through cooking for guests, I write through people staying, through changing beds, through looking after my children. I'm writing while I cook, and my family complain that the food is not as good as normal. In this book the young woman goes to work at the vicarage, she goes into a room and there is a bookshelf full of books. When no one is looking she takes one down, she turns it over, and she sees the spine and she sees that the gold is missing from the letters and she opens it, there is no bus ticket but there are black marks and she doesn't understand what they are. She can't read and she can't write but she's as clever as me, she's smart as me,

and the vicar is going to teach her to learn to read and write and the very first words that she's going to learn are 'in the beginning was the word'.

Now I'm fifty-six years old and I'm standing here thinking yes I'm fifty-six years old but there's a very boring use of the notion of time. For I'm not fifty-six years old, I'm five years old, six years old, seven years old, I'm eleven years old, twenty-five, twenty-seven, thirty-two, forty, fifty. I'm every age. I am the person who built my house that I live in with the thick walls, I'm the original thatcher, the original maker of a cockerel who will stop the devil going down the chimney, who stuck nails in the heart of the pig and stuffed it up the chimney to be safe. I am the woman who lost her husband who had eight children who was going to farm on her own. I'm the man in Westonzoyland church with 499 others and I know I'm going to die tomorrow because time has entirely collapsed and that is my job—to reach across time, to reach across levels, to remember to remember the sharpness of the pear drop as I suck it, to remember that taste in my mouth, to remember how it feels like rough plaster in my cheek when I finally swallow the sweet. It is my job. I started by talking about beginnings and it feels here today as I'm standing here like another beginning, because that's the thing about reinventing the wheel and being fresh and bringing new ideas and passion and love. That is the thing now, I have finally opened the box and begun to tell people what it is that I put inside the box age six that I have nurtured and cared for. Now we are going to see what comes out of it.

Philippe Petit between the Twin Towers 1974

Katherine Rundell and Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

By Alan Lawson

It was a great pleasure to welcome the esteemed author Katherine Rundell back to the Alpine Fellowship. I was acquainted with her work through the various copies of her books my son has taken on holiday or that I've threatened to confiscate over the years. These are the tricksy manoeuvres that parents play to encourage their children's reading. My boy responds beautifully to being told he must go straight to sleep, *must not read* as he has a busy day of schooling ahead. It's sort of the opposite of a Pyrrhic victory. He putting his light back on and reading into the early hours, relishes the win for childhood rebellion, whilst we the smug middle class puppeteer parents sip wine and applaud our reverse psychology. The only catch to all this is the reading material has to be good enough to sustain the revolt. Children are not stupid, they are brilliant, and Katherine Rundell understands this.

Rundell spoke to us for about half an hour. She began by briefly tracing the history of children's literature and the relatively modern idea of children 'unmoored from the imperatives of the pulpit' or indeed of the 'adult world'. With sparkling wit Rundell tells us that mothers are the most endangered species in the modern children's novel, because 'the best way to enfranchise a child in children's fiction is to get rid of the imperatives of the adult world, and that means murder' or a car crash. But clearly it is not enough to simply free children from parents, books open up spaces that children populate with their imagination, and the worlds that emerge between the author and the

imagination of the child can be playful, instructive, cathartic, and perhaps most importantly they make us less lonely. Rundell's writing does this, and the particular success of her novels is perhaps down to her not having *grown up, if growing up* is to lose that sense of wonder that a child has for the world, and Katherine Rundell hasn't. She spoke of pink dolphins in the amazon, and swimming in flooded forests with 'your toes trailing over the tops of trees' and electric eels winding through the branches, because as she says 'the real world is a little bit fairy-tale'.

Literature, as I've alluded, can be a way of universalizing personal suffering, by reminding the reader that others feel sadness or loss. In the same way moments of camaraderie can nurture our sense of belonging. Rundell talked beautifully about food and how scenes with food are opportunities for characters to come together, 'often as the brief interlude in between peril' and often where 'human emotional adventure is played out in text'. But her clearest exhortation was for writers to write about their obsessions, and Rundell is remarkable for the breadth and depth of her obsessions which include flying planes, to teaching Shakespeare at Oxford University, to rock climbing on the roof of her college building, to wolves. All these obsessions have found their way into her novels, and it serves to show children as she says, 'that the world is remarkable'.

And obsession can be a good thing for children. Too often do I get a sense that modern childhood is a broad induction into the world of things without the space for obsession, and thereby depth to develop a proper understanding. Obviously a workforce of generally, albeit superficially, well trained young adults is a handy thing for an economy. But an obsession for the piano, or for frogs, at the expense of say trigonometry is what gives our culture the individuals with the depth of understanding to inspire us all. Obsession can also be a way of escaping the world, a meditation of sorts. Rundell walks tightropes to do this because she thinks, 'sometimes to make the world fall mute is a valuable thing.'

In an era of accelerating technology and attention deficit, how happy any parent will be to know that one so learned and inspired, and obsessed, as Katherine Rundell is writing for our children.

Childhood:
continuous becoming or the experience of becoming into being

Alessandra Cavalli

When the egg and the sperm meet, and the fertilised egg falls from the fallopian tubes into the uterus, according to the French child analyst Francoise Dolto (1) an unconscious desire to be born into life and a new drive towards consciousness is actualised. The human seed is hankering itself in the fertile "earth" of the mother. There everything needed for life can be found. From inside the uterus the foetus grows attached to the mother through a link of life (the umbilical cord), that guarantees survival. The seed grows and unfolds rapidly. At three months of gestation the foetus (2) is able of listening to everything outside: mother's and father's voice are recognised, noises are identified and heard. Soon the foetus begins to dance to the sounds he hears: he attunes himself to the sounds of mother's voice choosing different movements (3): he might move the right leg every time he hears a "a" sound, or the left leg every time he hears a "e" sound. This dance makes him feels connected to the mysteries of a world he does not know yet, but is preparing for.

The unborn baby has a great need for connected-ness. He is able of synchronising his heartbeat to mother's heart beat (4); in this way he begins to learn about his mother inside out: her peace of mind, her depressive states, her anxieties... through the different frequency of her heart beat, the foetus begins to gain an unconscious knowledge of her state of mind, of her thoughts. While he explores the world in which

he lives, he slowly begins to become aware of how much the world in which he lives is linked to the world outside; he begins to "know" that he might have to go and explore the world outside. Using his resources and his newly acquired knowledge based on his experience in the uterus, he might be imagining something about that other world outside… will they also dance in water like him? While inside the uterus it is very laud, (heartbeat, digestion, bowls movements), he knows that in that other world outside there are many rhythms, silences, sounds, movements full of intensity, softness… The foetus unconsciously knows that he is preparing for that journey, one day he will go there, to that world that he knows little about…

The journey the foetus has to undergo is difficult, he has to abandon his ordered world, let go of it, face the unknown, the Chaos of the unknown. It is a tremendous step into the void…. *there is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth allows us to believe* (5)… In the caesura of the act of birth lies the secret of development, at each caesura in life we grow, we transform ourselves, we become into being, we actualise our potential, we transcend the being we were to become a bit more what we are meant to become.

In the depth of the undeveloped mind of the foetus there is a *preconception, an archetypal predisposition*, a sort of grammar of the psyche that guides the new born baby into chaos, into the unknown: how to move, what to search for?

Smell, vision, taste will help the new born baby to detect and find the breast. It was first described in 1987 (6) at Karolinska Institute in Sweeden as the *"crawl to the breast"*: a new born baby, if left alone on mother's abdomen just after birth, will crawl to the breast, helped by his capacity to make a connection between the taste of the amniotic liquid still on his hand, and the smell of the colostrums on the nipple.

Caesuras:

If the birth is the first caesura in the life of the infant, I will now investigate three further caesuras that the infant has to overcome, three jumps into unknown and chaos that he needs to allow himself doing in the next years of his life. I will use three paintings for us to picture how the journey of the infant is developing. The scope of this talk is to show that *there is much more continuity between infancy and mature life than the impressive caesura of the end of infancy allows us to believe, to paraphrase Freud*.

The motif of St Anne, the Virgin Mary and the Child and how its depiction developed in history of art, seems to describe very well and in a powerful way the journey of childhood.

St Anne represents the support the family offers to a mother and her new born baby.

Picture 1: Masaccio (1424, Uffizi) the beginning of ordering chaos: from preverbal to verbal, from confusion to order, from unconscious to conscious.

Scenario 1: An hungry baby hallucinates (7) the breast. The attuned mother knows that her baby is hungry and she intuitively knows what her baby needs. As a result of her imaginative work, the baby experiences a realisation of its own hallucination. Everything arrives in just the right way. There is a sense of fit between the baby anticipation and realisation. This mother helps the baby to feel that chaos is tolerable.

Scenario 2: if the mother is less in tune with her baby, maybe she is less confident in herself, she cannot imagine what she could do, and her actions are less responsive… so she might be more mechanical, less attentive, less in tune with her baby… In this second scenario the breast presents itself to the baby as an alien object. While baby 1. is not afraid of the unknown, baby 2. might feel threatened by unknown, and finds it much more difficult to open up to it. This scenario might become so traumatic that baby 2 might close himself to chaos and decide to stay in his very little but known environment. In this case growth is crippled and the potential will never come to maturation.

In scenario 1. the baby feels he has created the breast. He might be thinking: "I have created the world, or the world is a responsive place, that I can transform into what I have imagined."

Clearly the baby does not think in this way, but events of this kind underpin creativity. Only when self-experience is reflected, does the baby feel fully alive. As he praises the world, he gives voice to his own feeling-self that he feels reflected in the forms of the world (beginning by his mother's face).

By doing so he transforms the world, while he is transformed. The mother's responses are like an echo.

Before birth the infant lives inside a mother's space. After birth a mother creates with her body (her arms, her breast, her warmth and attention) a near-uterine state for her infant. It could be called the marsupial space, a space of transition between the total dependence in the womb and the increasing independence of separate existence. For the first few months of extra-uterine life the infant's physical space is largely the same as the mother's physical space. As the baby grows and develops in terms of mobility and independence, he gradually emerges from the 'pouch' of mother's orbit, and his personal space becomes increasingly defined by his relationship with the general space of the wider world. As this happens the infant's internal space begins to be formed (a mind capable of thinking, observing, facing chaos), together with a sense of a 'core self', that we could also call the personality of the infant with his own sense of identity.

Picture 2: Leonardo da Vinci (1503, National Gallery): moving away from the known marsupial space, exploring the unknown in the space between mother and infant.

The physical and psychological separation between mother and infant creates a space between mother and infant in the infant's experience which is the rudimentary space for consciousness. The experience of separation as a painful absence is a necessary development in the growth of consciousness. The suffering of an actual space in which the mother is absent is the necessary condition for the development of representational symbols. The first thought is the thought of an absence: no mother. There thinking begins. Creativity begins where the absence has been acknowledged:

When the infant reaches the stage of recognising the loved mother as not created by the infant, but as a person in her own right, the question arises: How to survive without her? Here the problem of creativity becomes more important…

Lia, two years old:

> *Her mother calls Lia and asks her to help mother with a puzzle. Lia goes to mother and does the puzzle very quickly: there are five pieces, she succeeds in putting four pieces together but the fifth doesn't fit. Lia becomes very agitated, cries, stands up, falls, bangs her head, looks outside the window and seems lost. She then sees her ballerina outfit, puts it on with her father's help and starts dancing. Her father puts a record on and they both dance. Mother gets a Polaroid camera and takes a picture of Lia. As soon as the picture is developed Mother shows it to Lia who looks at herself, opens her mouth and tries to swallow the image of herself on the picture (the child literally tried to eat her image off the photo, not the whole photo).*
>
> *After that Lia has a look at the puzzle. She goes straight to the piece she couldn't place before, picks it up and is now able to put it in the right way.*

In this vignette Lia seems to be reconnecting in a primitive physical way to a good experience of herself. She 'eats' the Lia who was having a good experience and we see that after this, she has regained the self confidence that was briefly lost to her. We might speculate that she needs to take inside herself, to swallow, the 'Lia who is looked at with love (by mother, taking the photo). Lia seems to connect with a previous internalised experience of taking in something good. This previous experience must already be 'inside'. This concept of inside begins to be formed by the infant taking in mother's milk, her voice, her look. The experience of something going inside must be responsible for the beginning of differentiation between inside and outside. By eating the good image of herself, Lia seems able to identify with a good mother who is feeding her with something good. In the transition between feeling capable and losing that sense of a capable self, Lia searches for a confirmation that she can do alone. She still needs help to re-find this confirmation, but once she feels secure in herself, she can continue to solve problems, with a sense of agency! Lia seems to have achieved some capacity for symbolising: she is not eating food in order to make herself feel well, for example, but she eats in pretend a lovely image of herself. In this way Lia is strengthening her ego and her identity.

The capacity to relinquish the mother will foster the development of language: in the absence of mother I can call her, I can express my needs, I can think my own thoughts, I can grow, become independent.

This is a very difficult moment, between letting go of the marsupial space and acquiring the capacity to become separate: able to know one's own emotions, needs and desire, and learn how to express them.

The incapacity to manage this transition has terrible consequences for the developing child: he remains trapped in the fantasy of living in the womb, which is order, which is known. Chaos, unknown remains unmanageable, and with it creation, creativity, expansion and discovery. The child needs to go on creating what is unknown, what is chaos, the same way he did it after birth: Go on figuring out, finding ways of representing what is unknown and chaotic. This is the capacity of the artist, the infant that goes on discovering the world.

Picture 3: Caravaggio (1606, Villa Borghese): becoming a person in one's own right. The discovery the world around us and the role of the father.

In this phase the mother has to let go of her child, has to allow him to become separate, to develop his own potency. The child is going to go away from mother, give up the illusion that he possesses mother, that he has created her. Mother becomes part of the order that the child has created inside himself. She taught him everything she could. The child's task is now to continue his own journey of creation: to be "reborn" again, into new chaos, new unknown. And to represent it, order it, master it, in order to go on creating, representing, ordering, always at the limit between known and unknown. Maybe this is what Caravaggio was intending by putting the child's foot on his mother's foot while she squeezes the snake. As this child seems to show:

Rita came to a worm on the road in a paddle, and stopped what she was doing. All three children gathered around to look at the worm which was alive and moving.

Rita moved forward to stamp on the worm, but father stopped her. Rita bent down to try to pick the worm up but father took her hand and said No. There was a drain cover nearby, and the three children gathered around the drain cover to look down into the water. Rita suddenly stopped, pointing up at the sky saying bird, father looked up but couldn't see any bird. We looked carefully at the trees and the sky for some time, as Rita pointed at them, and we saw a bird in the tree right above our heads. Then Rita spotted a squirrel and pointed fascinated as she watched the squirrel swinging from one tree to the next. The other two children were moving on along the path, but Rita didn't seem to notice them much, and seemed in a separate space. Then they came over to her and one of them pushed Rita quite hard, so she almost fell over, but regaining her balance just in time, Rita looked bemused and didn't retaliate. The father of that child said something, so the little girl went over to Rita and hugged her, they kissed. The other child did not want to be left out, so she joined the two in a tripartite rather unstable hug. It was time to go home, so we walked slowly back with several distractions such as another worm, and a large muddy puddle which Rita splashed in, but then was dismayed by having muddy trainers and wet feet...

The role of the *Father* becomes very important here. He points out to the child the future, the unknown, the task: go and explore. Orang-utans do this

in a very clear cut way. Once their offspring are ready, and have learnt everything from their mothers, fathers send them away (8). It is now the task of the young orang-utans to go in search on their own. For humans the process is much more complex…

The work of the father is to push the child to move on, to go on exploring the world, to study, to find out whom he is, and leave the world of the mother behind. Go into the unknown, yet again.

From lived meaning to representational form:
The child has now to find ways of creating for himself objects or forms that help him containing experiences (playing with a doll, writing a poem, creating a hut in the trees). Eurydice has to be lost forever: then Orpheus begins to sing and creates a form in which he can contain his feelings of sadness. The infant needs to appropriate words now, words which are understood by everybody, but represent for him at best his own experience.

Lorenzo (four years old) has to start school the next day, and is afraid. He does not know how to do it. First he sits on the couch, jumping up and down maybe as a way of expressing his confusion, and anxieties, then he sits on it and transforms the couch into a car. He is now driving the car, and with his mouth makes the sound of a sport car, very fast, he is driving, on top of things.

I say: "Now that you can drive the car, it will be easy to go to school, tomorrow". He was showing me in pretend that he is a potent boy.

Creating a language:

Alfi (eight years old) who is black and was bullied at school asks me: "Do you think that colour blind people are not racists? They might not see the colour of the skin."

Finding a form:

Maria (11) who suffers from multiple traumas brings playdoogh to her session, and creates a sort of breast without a nipple. Instead of the nipple there is a hole. Together we understand how terrifying it is to live inside that hole, an empty hole without a mother.

These children were representing for me in a creative way a very charged emotional experience that seemed chaotic to them. By giving it a form we were able to give voice to it, so that the experience could become known, ordered and, hopefully, a way of handling it could emerge.

The journey of the hero

Every human being has to create their own life, by being, and becoming all the time. Moving into future, in the same way the foetus moved out of a known space, into chaos, into the unknown. Like the baby who creates his mother, the human creates his future by opening up to the unknown, finding a form for it, creating a language and giving it meaning.

Being and becoming means sacrifice: what you already are for whom you could become.

Like the foetus who has to move out into the unknown and is guided by an internal "knowledge" that pushes him to go in search for what is needed, like Lia who stops and reminds herself that she is capable, that she has already overcome obstacles, and has to try again and again, like Rita who openly explores the unknown, discovering the beauty of nature and its ugliness, including the other children's attacks, each of us, day by day have to repeat this pattern, the pattern of life.

The child, like the artist lives in a space which we could call "Chaos-order-chaos" similar to the space between womb and extra-uterine life. In order to go on developing we need to investigate that link, that caesura: to approach it by "knowing it before hand" is here of no use.

Unfortunately those who have lost a possible link to their ***internal*** *guide, are in danger of remaining trapped in horrible wombs which, by promising order, protect from pain, chaos and growth. The price to pay for this protection is life itself, as those wombs are deadly, like hell. Life is always outside, where future is. The artist has to find the courage to be born again and again.*

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The Alpine Fellowship takes an interest in phenomena whose depth is vast and rich and inexhaustible and whose true importance and complexity can sometimes be obscured in a narrow modern day conception of life.

Childhood is undoubtedly one such phenomenon. In his preface, Alan mentions that 'some people suggest that childhood is a preparation for entering into the adult world.' Perhaps those who hold this view also subscribe to the assumption that life is a linear affair: as we 'progress' through life's different stages—continually in the quest to develop and perfect ourselves—we leave earlier, lesser developed parts of ourselves behind. It is thus that the adult masters her former childhood self.

The trouble with such a view is that it's at best a partial truth of things. A large body of work from a range of different disciplines suggests that we spend most of our adult lives consciously or unconsciously making up for all that childhood left unanswered. The attempt to 'outgrow' our inner child is perhaps a way to fix what we don't want to be true—all the experiences and truths that were too hard to bear: being finite, imperfect, vulnerable.

If anything, then, the child remains the master of the adult, and the more we can befriend our childhood selves the more we stand a chance to actually become adults one day.

Conceiving the child/adult relationship thus moves us closer to a circular rather than a linear picture. In his coming of age novel *Siddhartha*, Herman Hesse reflects towards the end of the book: 'Everything unresolved comes again. Everything not fully suffered comes again.' Perhaps we never leave childhood behind, but rather always revisit different parts of it as we spend our lives circling ourselves.

My relationship to my own childhood is still somewhat mysterious to me. I'm amazed by Proustian characters who can give detailed accounts of what their childhood was like. I have no such accounts to offer. Characteristically, one of my favourite memories of childhood has come to me by way of someone who recalls spending time with me as a child.

At the beginning of 2018, an old family friend came up to me at a birthday party. She said that she hadn't seen me since I was 6, and was dying to know what had become of me. And she shared with me the memory of this last childhood encounter.

In the story we were on an island in the Mediterranean, on a beach close by the house that my family and I were staying at. My mother and grandmother were on their way back home while I stayed behind. My whole focus was on digging out, assembling and comparing sea shells. These shells I was collecting from all over the beach. I had laid them next to each other and was setting up a basic system of classification. I took all the time in the world to arrange the pieces according to their shape, size and colour. I seemed so intensely curious about what I was doing, and so deeply immersed in the reality of the physical world, that she simply couldn't get my attention to tell me that my group was wandering off. Seemingly lacking any concept of social obligation, I stayed on the beach until the sun went down.

I'm not sure I can call this a childhood memory, because the truth is I don't remember that moment of my childhood. I can access it only through hearing a story from an adult who does remember. This makes me a little nostalgic, because there is a large part of my childhood that seems somehow inaccessible to me.

So I've always felt close to Proust's longing to 'search for lost time', or to Celan's poetry of absence, as in his poem 'At night, when the pendulum of love swings between Always and Never', which continues with the lines:

> From out of a distant, dream-darkened
> grove, the trace of breath drifts to us,
> and what is missed persists, great, like the plans for the
> future.

Childhood echoes through its absence, its ungraspability. Perhaps it is this absence which makes it ever present. Lacking clarity as to its precise manifestations, we can project onto it what we wish: perhaps this was the time of the great oneness with things, a time where we did not yet distinguish between ourselves and experience, a time before the dualism of self and world.

Childhood as arcadia, childhood as preparation, childhood as the source of undigested trauma, childhood as a place of benevolent purposelessness, childhood as the forever elusive blind spot… with a phenomenon as particular and universal as childhood, what mattered was to listen to the different experiences so as to remind ourselves of the multiplicity of ways of seeing.

We suspect that something similar may hold true for our next symposium on 'identity'. In fact, identity emerged as the theme from out of the way that the meeting on childhood unfolded. We discovered that there is a real need to better understand and empathise with each other, particularly when the subject is something as intimate and vulnerable as one's experience of childhood. If we can only conceive of the other in light of our own experience, we run the risk of making each other feel unseen.

By Jacob Burda

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If a little dreaming is dangerous, the cure for it is not to dream less, but to dream more, to dream all the time.

Marcel Proust

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