

Childhood Innocence

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Childhood innocence is impossible
to define, and yet seems impossible
to deny. One look at little kids,
at their delighted, impish smiles
shows a likeable larrikinness
is all they'd be up to. They know
too little for evil or malice.

Who couldn't believe that innocence
is innate, and that ignorance
is innocence by another name

but I remember primary school days:
our class included Ronnie Fettle.
Ronnie Fettle, a boy of some mettle
that we never knew: Ronnie
whose brain stuttered over words,
ideas and numbers. We clumsily
aped him, lucky to have someone
more simple than we were. Teachers
implored us to be kind, but teachers
had to be ignored. Magpies will attack
a wounded bird, a bird
that must wonder why.
We were too ignorant to think beyond
our own immense, naïve, nervous selves
and our fragile normality.

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In early high school we put up with Peter
whose surname I no longer know.
“Peevish” we called him, having
discovered this word beyond our world,
as he was: Peter who loved
the English kings and queens, and could
rattle off their names in endless,
meaningless lists, time after time.
He would recite them to teachers too
– an unforgivable crime. His reward was colour:
day after day chalk stolen from class
was crushed – the more colour the better –
and Peevish was dusted off
in regal red and white and yellow and blue.
His mother’s implorings and teachers’ threats
didn’t stop the daily chalkpowder plot.

Can guilt be retrospective?
Is knowledge of care
seeded in us or wholly learnt?
What can I say in our defence?
We were too ignorant for empathy;
we had no sense of the nastiness
we perpetrated, a morality lost
in our tense childhood innocence.

Enough

Now that I am old enough
to be filled with memories
and clear-headed enough
to anticipate that time
-- not far off --
when memories
will grip my consciousness

more firmly than
the evanescent present,
I am caught at each year's end
by the names
I must delete
from the address book,
swipe from my smart phone,
friends to render
as invisible as air.
It's many years since
my children have gone
to the weddings and I
to the celebrate-a-life funerals.
Each year I cull
at least three or four,
make them mounds on
memorialising time's horizon;

but one is always there,
not an annual
stopping of the mind
but a daily, an hourly
mountain
that I can never climb.

I stroll along
cloud-stained Singapore streets
that push up memories
of our once walking them together
so many years ago.
We were young enough
not to think ourselves young

and our children
really were children, cheeky,
effervescent with curiosity.
How long before I've done enough
penance for your death,
for your dying
so much younger than me?
The pleasures of breathing,
of seeing, of being
weigh heavily on me
or, more truly, in me.

I'd like to think you here
with me "in spirit," as they say,
but even though I
almost feel you on my skin
it's thought as a walking stick,
a stalking, sentimental hoax:
the world goes on with
or without us
and time ticks us off
like tasks
it's rid of at last.

The Morning of Your Birthday

The morning of your birthday
clouds huddled in the sky
“thick as thieves” your mum would say
conniving against the light.
Sleepless, I staggered up in the early hours
with an intemperate cough
as though I had got you
caught in my throat.
In mid-morning the thieves burst apart
and rain hammered down,
the gutters choked, the roof rang,
downpipes trembled against the wall.

In the post an insurance invoice
for me and “the estate of R J Haskell, 67,”
an age you never reached. Why
does this upset me so much?
I stayed solitary all day, talked to no-one.
I drove into the Hills, to the French café you enjoyed;
it was closed, perhaps appropriately,
so I drove to the other, with
the toy Eiffel Tower: closed permanently.

By now the sky was the embodiment of winter,
a damaged quilt of night and day
and I was uneasy under the eucalypt trees.
I had never guessed how fine
the line dividing care
from self-pity. Three birthdays
now you have missed, but I
don't miss them, I mark them horribly,
aghast at the present, the future,
and pitifully reverence the past.