

Twelve River RIPPLES

A Writer's Life



A Childhood in Poetry

My mother's maiden name was Lovely – it really was. She taught elocution and drama in a big room upstairs in our house; the master bedroom converted to the mistress's workspace. She also founded our local 'am dram' society, producing and performing in plays, and created her own one-woman show; a sort of compilation of Joyce Grenfell-like monologues. Sometimes she took me along for the child performer 'ah' factor. Given a prod, I can still recite the whole of 'I'm sure that my neck don't want washing' in my best Cockney!

My earliest memories of poetry are of my Mum reading from A.A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*. Sometimes she would chuckle so much she could hardly finish the poem. I even learnt 'Forgiven' by heart, which began with *I found a little beetle, so that Beetle was his name / I called him Alexander and he answered just the same* – and she added it to my performance repertoire. (I tried instilling a love of Milne's poetry into my own children but the only two lines they learnt to recite, while stomping round the house, were: *Wherever I go there's always Pooh / There's always Pooh and me*. I wonder why! Where did I fail as a mother?)

Christmas and birthdays were a time for my Mum's poetic creativity, writing silly ditties and limericks for relevant family members – here's one for me in 1963:

*There's a girl who thinks acting's the rule
And acts all the time she's at school
She's quite set her heart
On playing the part
But why choose the part of the fool?*

Thanks, Mum!

As I grew older, she introduced me to a range of poets through poems such as John Masefield's 'Sea Fever', Alfred Noyes' 'The Highwayman' and those in T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. I learnt about the First World War from the likes of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, while Shakespeare's sonnets were always in there somewhere. For lighter entertainment, I had Ogden Nash and the wonderful *Archy and Mahitabel* poems by Don Marquis. Older still and it was Yeats, Auden, MacNeice, Dylan Thomas and more T. S. Eliot – the list seems endless. Interestingly – no female poets in this list! Her favourite poem was Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Pied Beauty' – the last poem she asked me to read to her in 1977, when she was dying.

As I write this, I wander off from time to time to pull out various poetry books from the raft I inherited from her – to reread the poems, find her pencilled comments and love the memories.

Again – thanks, Mum.

Fran Reader