

explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

Christopher Reid New poems

The Hero

Snapshots remember those far days for me:
days when the camera doted on me
and could not keep its eye off the little hero.

Behold the squirm of newness and fragility
in my mother's arms, as she stands on a lawn
I do not recognise, with a picket fence
and the hills of Hong Kong in a faint haze behind her.
Small, slender, spryly poised
in a pair of low-heeled, two-tone shoes,
she returns the gaze of the photographer,
while I, her first-born, her prize exhibit,
appear to be keeping my thoughts to myself
with a smile so cryptic you might call it smug.

Big-headed centre of attention!

In later shots, as crown prince
of a realm from which I am destined to be exiled,
I take my first steps, swagger in nappies,
fondle the muzzle of Butch, our bull terrier,
ride a four-wheeled wooden horse,
look scared of the sea, and throw a quoit
on the deck of a boat going heaven knows where –
none of which I could now recall
were it not for photography's eternal present.

A present with a future in it –
seventy years of future, and counting –
hidden from the questing infant hero
ever more deeply as my time goes by.

Kindergarten

Here's a piece of paper,
paints and a brush, a jar of water,
some little scissors, a pot of glue:
now, show us what you can do.

This room I've never been in before
is backs of other children's heads
and teacher moving from desk to desk.
Teacher is nice, giving advice.

Put a round shape of yellow there.
Not too much. That's right.
Well done, you've made a sun,
lovely and bright.

She leaves. What do I do next?
Blue for sky. But the sun
isn't dry and the colours run,
blurring to green, which doesn't belong.

Unless I can get a tree in there.
But that goes wrong when I add red flowers
that puddle and brown
as soon as I dab them down.

The paint water is tainted,
tainting the painting.
The paper, loaded wetter and wetter,
tears when I try if scissors can make things better.

That's how you find me now:
fumbling tatters of misbegotten art
with paint-stained, glue-clogged fingers,
but not yet – while hope lingers –

ready for a fresh start.

The Museum of Disappointing Toys

Toys you could tell were not for you
even as the wrapping fell to the floor.
Toys you played with once, but never more.
Toys you gladly outgrew.

Toys you accepted as a gift
and thanked for in a throttled voice,
because the obvious wrongness of choice
bespoke a deeper rift.

Toys you had asked for yourself,
but fell short of your bigger imagination
and so, in abnegation,
were stowed on a high shelf.

Toys you spurned, lost, threw away,
maltreated, neglected.
How odd, how unexpected
that all should end up on display:

each in its glass-fronted case,
poorly lit, so what you peer at is mostly
a mortified, ghostly
image of your own face.

Little Self

Little self,
I'd like to know you better,
only something shy about you,
something fey and furtive,
always aids your escape.
Were you ever truly a child?
The company of other children
never much took your fancy.
Go and play with So-and-so!
Why? You wanted a more compelling reason
than that they were five or six,
eight or nine –
whatever age you happened to be.
Rough boys and supercilious girls
shoving and snatching
ruled the domain of games;
playground slides and carousels
were fun to be alone on,
but chaotic and hazardous, shared.
Gravitating, instead, to the grown-ups,
how did you hope to charm them?
Did you really expect them to recognise
the grown-up inside you
and invite you into their circle
of elevated chatter
and puzzling laughter?
A dog or a cat would have stood
more of a chance.
Run along now! Go and play!
So off you went
and found your own diversions
in certain favoured places:
Punch cartoons and Lewis Carroll
gave you worlds you could wander in,
enraptured or bewildered;
dictionaries, opened at any page,
were welcoming too,
as spacious as daydreams.
Both snug and liberated,
you had taken the first steps
to becoming me –
the me of sixty-something
inconceivable years later.
That's what's hard to understand.
The elusive self,

the imp of oddness
that started the whole process
without knowing why,
the timid, stubborn, frivolous, contrary,
unprepossessing ego
I cannot disavow
and whom I'm questioning now –
how did you come about?
No answer. You can't hear me.
You're too busy
playing with your toys
of dictionary words and funny drawings.
The one adult
who would have been happy
to join you in conversation
is simply too far away.