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Opening extract from

iF: A Treasury of Poems for Almost Every Possibility

Edited by

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Introduction

'Child! Do not throw this book about; refrain from the unholy pleasure of cutting all the pictures out.'

Hilaire Belloc

An anthology means a gathering of flowers. Unlike the ones you pick from the garden, these won't wither, and will hopefully remain with you.

Poetry was originally oral; it was sung or chanted, passed from person to person, across borders and down the centuries. These days, nursery rhymes and playground chants are still an integral part of a small child's life, but thereafter poetry can all too easily be shunted into the realm of schoolwork or wheeled out like elderly literary relatives at a wedding or a funeral.

Sometimes the poem at a funeral or a wedding manages to 'move the people' (as the great Spanish playwright Lope de Vega said was the job of art). Both of us discovered as children the tingling feeling a poem can bestow. A war poem can have more power than a history book. A love poem has consoled better than a friend. If you want to try a poem as a sticking plaster to help you through a wobbly patch, have a look at our list of poems for possibilities you may be facing, on page 266. The poems in this book are all poems we loved as children, poems we love reading to our children, poems we think you may want to know too.

We launched Britain's first children's poetry app, hoping, in some small way, to introduce poems to a generation of children who were at home with technology and hoped that they would be encouraged to love, learn and even write poems. We made our iF Poems app, and gave them poems to read or hear being read by well-known actors. We hoped they would have fun with poetry in a way they might not have done before.

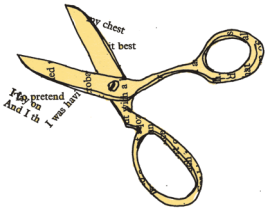
The response to the iF Poems app was overwhelming. We received emails from all over the world suggesting new poems we might consider. Every day brought a new and often delicious addition to our own library of poetry. We began to gain an increasingly accurate sense of what our fellow poetry enthusiasts believe to be the greatest verses in the English language. Some poems transcend all barriers. These are

the poems that everyone loves, the ones that consistently touch the soul. The result has been this book.

In each chapter, we've tried to start with the easier poems, and then move on to some more difficult ones. You may need a dictionary on occasion: some of the language is difficult, but we hope you will enjoy the detective work. We have poets ancient and modern, fusty and frisky, famous and forgotten. We hope we have included a poem for every possibility, almost: as G. K. Chesterton observed, 'Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese.'

Peruse, enjoy. It's your book. But don't cut *all* the pictures out . . .

Allie Esiri and Rachel Kelly
London, March 2012





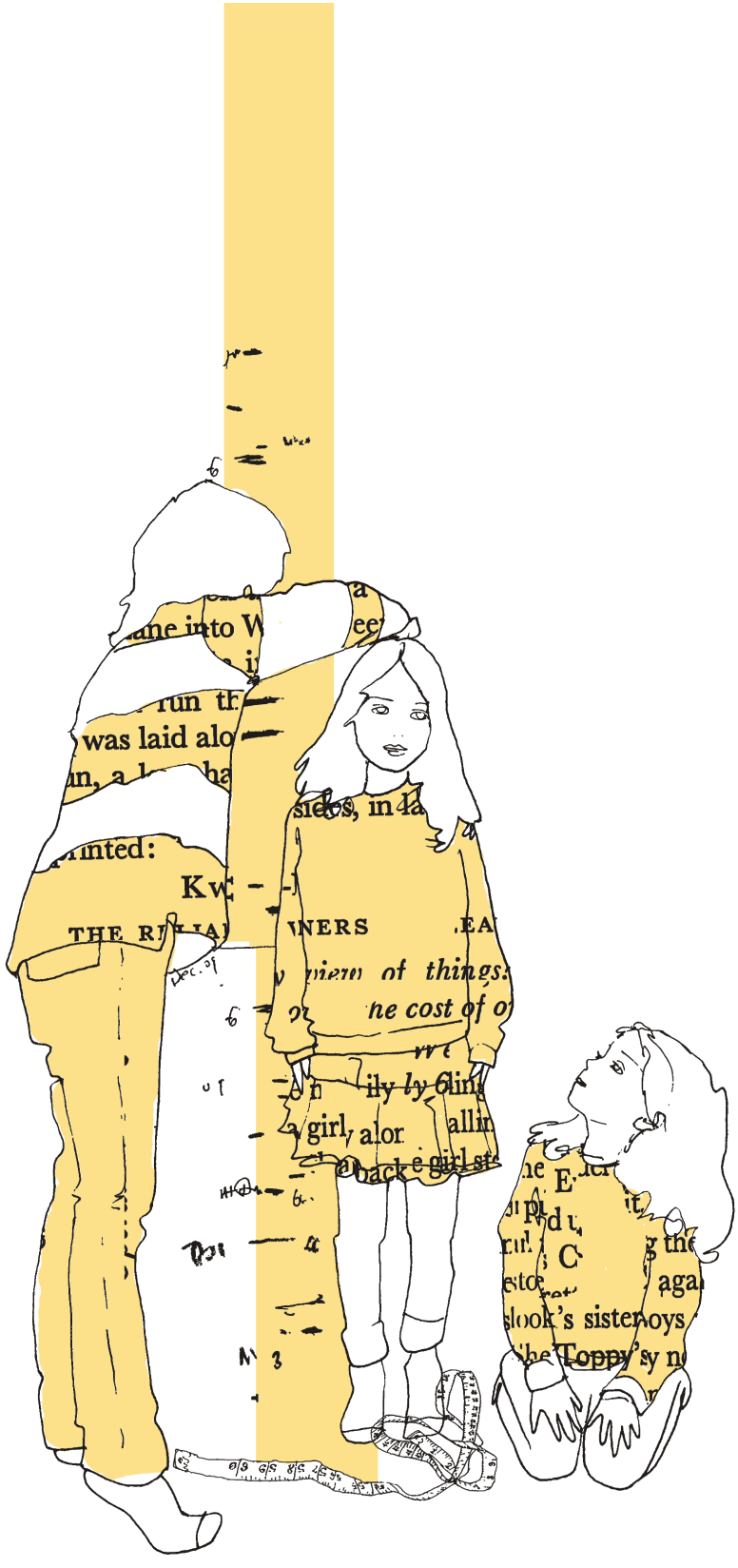


Growing Up









I Want to Know

JOHN DRINKWATER
1882–1937

This amusing poem describes how confusing life can be when you're growing up. Each quatrain, a verse of four lines, is composed of two rhyming couplets, two lines that rhyme. Each verse deals with a different subject and the rhyme is used for comic effect.

I want to know why when I'm late
For school, they get into a state,
But if invited out to tea
I mustn't ever early be.

Why, if I'm eating nice and slow,
It's 'Slow-coach, hurry up, you know!'
But if I'm eating nice and quick,
It's 'Gobble-gobble, you'll be sick!'

Why, when I'm walking in the street
My clothes must always be complete,
While at the seaside I can call
It right with nothing on at all.

Why I must always go to bed
When other people don't instead,
And why I have to say good night
Always before I'm ready, quite.

Why seeds grow up instead of down,
Why six pence isn't half a crown,
Why kittens are so quickly cats,
And why the angels have no hats.

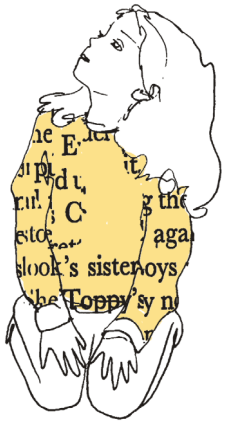
It seems, however hard they try,
That nobody can tell me why,
So I know really, I suppose,
As much as anybody knows.

There Was a Little Girl

H.W. LONGFELLOW

1807–82

There was a little girl,
Who had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her forehead.
When she was good,
She was very good indeed,
But when she was bad she was horrid.



Where Did You Come From, Baby Dear?

GEORGE MACDONALD
1824–1905

George MacDonald is considered to be one of the first writers who aimed to entertain rather than instruct children, and was a great influence on many other poets. As a clergyman, George MacDonald strongly believed in the power and beauty of God's work. This is reflected in this poem, which is in rhyming couplets.

Where did you come from, baby dear?
Out of the everywhere into here.

Where did you get your eyes so blue?
Out of the sky as I came through.

What makes the light in them sparkle and spin?
Some of the starry spikes left in.

Where did you get that little tear?
I found it waiting when I got here.

What makes your forehead so smooth and high?
A soft hand stroked it as I went by.

What makes your cheek like a warm white rose?
I saw something better than anyone knows.

Whence that three-cornered smile of bliss?
Three angels gave me at once a kiss.

Where did you get this pearly ear?
God spoke, and it came out to hear.

Where did you get those arms and hands?
Love made itself into hooks and bands.

Feet, whence did you come, you darling things?
From the same box as the cherubs' wings.

How did they all just come to be you?
God thought about me, and so I grew.

But how did you come to us, you dear?
God thought about you, and so I am here.

The Leader

ROGER MCGOUGH

1937–

I wanna be the leader
I wanna be the leader
Can I be the leader?
Can I? I can?
Promise? Promise?
Yippee, I'm the leader
I'm the leader

OK what shall we do?

My Shadow

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
1850–94

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.
He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;
And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.

The funniest thing about him is the way he likes to grow –
Not at all like proper children, which is always very slow;
For he sometimes shoots up taller like an India-rubber ball,
And he sometimes goes so little that there's none of him at all.

He hasn't got a notion of how children ought to play,
And can only make a fool of me in every sort of way.
He stays so close behind me, he's a coward you can see;
I'd think shame to stick to nursie as that shadow sticks to me!

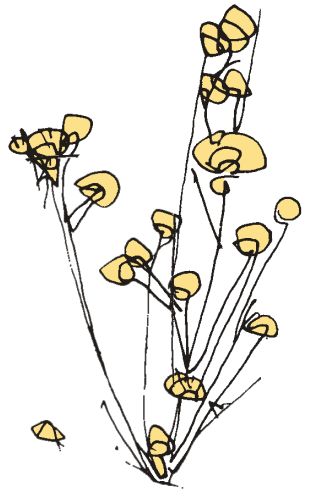
One morning, very early, before the sun was up,
I rose and found the shining dew on every buttercup;
But my lazy little shadow, like an arrant sleepy-head,
Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed.

The Lost Doll

CHARLES KINGSLEY
1819–75

I once had a sweet little doll, dears,
    The prettiest doll in the world;
Her cheeks were so red and so white, dears,
    And her hair was so charmingly curled.
But I lost my poor little doll, dears,
    As I played in the heath one day;
And I cried for her more than a week, dears,
    But I never could find where she lay.

I found my poor little doll, dears,
    As I played in the heath one day;
Folks say she is terribly changed, dears,
    For her paint is all washed away,
And her arms trodden off by the cows, dears,
    And her hair not the least bit curled;
Yet for old sakes' sake, she is still, dears,
    The prettiest doll in the world.



Infant Joy

WILLIAM BLAKE

1757–1827

This poem was published in William Blake's collection Songs of Innocence, *which explores the idea that childhood is a time of freedom and spontaneity. In some of his other poems, William Blake takes a different view, suggesting that the spirit of childhood can be ruined by the rigidity of society.*

'I have no name,
I am but two days old.'
What shall I call thee?
'I happy am,
Joy is my name.'
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy, but two days old.
Sweet Joy I call thee:
Thou dost smile,
I sing the while;
Sweet joy befall thee!

