

U. A. FANTHORPE

Half-past Two

*Once upon a schooldtime
He did Something Very Wrong
(I forget what it was).*

*And She said he'd done
Something Very Wrong, and must
Stay in the school-room till half-past two.*

*(Being cross, she'd forgotten
She hadn't taught him Time.
He was too scared at being wicked to remind her.)*

*He knew a lot of time: he knew
Gettinguptime, timeyouwereofftime,
Timetogohomenowtime, TVtime,
Timeformykisstime (that was Grantime).
All the important times he knew,
But not half-past two.*

U. A. FANTHORPE

*Half-past Two
(cont.)*

*He knew the clockface, the little eyes
And two long legs for walking,
But he couldn't click its language,*

*So he waited, beyond once upon a,
Out of reach of all the timefors,
And knew he'd escaped for ever*

*Into the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk,
Into the silent noise his hangnail made,
Into the air outside the window, into ever.*

*And then, My goodness, she said,
Scuttling in, I forgot all about you.
Run along or you'll be late.*

*So she slotted him back into schooltime,
And he got home in time for teatime,
Nexttime, notimeforthatnowtime,*

*But he never forgot how once by not knowing time,
He escaped into the clockless land for ever,
Where time hides tick-less waiting to be born.*

SEAMUS HEANEY

Personal Helicon

*As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.*

*One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.*

*A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
A white face hovered over the bottom.*

*Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.*

*Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.*

DON PATERSON

Why do you stay up so late?

*I'll tell you, if you really want to know:
remember that day you lost two years ago
at the rockpool where you sat and played the jeweler
with all those stones you'd stolen from the shore?*

*Most of them went dark and nothing more,
but sometimes one would blink the secret color
it had locked up somewhere in its stony sleep.*

This is how you knew the ones to keep.

*So I collect the dull things of the day
in which I see some possibility
but which are dead and which have the surprise
I don't know, and I've no pool to help me tell—
so I look at them and look at them until
one thing makes a mirror in my eyes
then I paint it with the tear to make it bright.*

This is why I sit up through the night.

MARGARET ATWOOD

Bored

*All those times I was bored
out of my mind. Holding the log
while he sawed it. Holding
the string while he measured, boards,
distances between things, or pounded
stakes into the ground for rows and rows
of lettuces and beets, which I then (bored)
weeded. Or sat in the back
of the car, or sat still in boats,
sat, sat, while at the prow, stern, wheel
he drove, steered, paddled. It
wasn't even boredom, it was looking,
looking hard and up close at the small
details. Myopia. The worn gunwales,
the intricate twill of the seat
cover. The acid crumbs of loam, the granular
pink rock, its igneous veins, the sea-fans
of dry moss, the blackish and then the graying
bristles on the back of his neck.
Sometimes he would whistle, sometimes*

MARGARET ATWOOD

Bored (cont.)

*I would. The boring rhythm of doing
things over and over, carrying
the wood, drying
the dishes. Such minutiae. It's what
the animals spend most of their time at,
ferrying the sand, grain by grain, from their tunnels,
shuffling the leaves in their burrows. He pointed
such things out, and I would look
at the whorled texture of his square finger, earth under
the nail. Why do I remember it as sunnier
all the time then, although it more often
rained, and more birdsong?
I could hardly wait to get
the hell out of there to
anywhere else. Perhaps though
boredom is happier. It is for dogs or
groundhogs. Now I wouldn't be bored.
Now I would know too much.
Now I would know.*

PHILIP LARKIN

A study of reading habits

*When getting my nose in a book
Cured most things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
To know I could still keep cool,
And deal out the old right hook
To dirty dogs twice my size.*

*Later, with inch-thick specs,
Evil was just my lark:
Me and my cloak and fangs
Had ripping times in the dark.
The women I clubbed with sex!
I broke them up like meringues.*

*Don't read much now: the dude
Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who's yellow and keeps the store
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
Books are a load of crap.*