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THE CHILDHOOD ISSUE

Illustration by Stephan Backes

One of the most interesting things about childhood, amongst many other things, is that we all had one. They come in different shapes, sizes and colours but if you're reading this, it's guaranteed that you had one or indeed, are still having one. Some of them helped form the finest memories and experiences of our lives whilst others would rather be forgotten as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Some of them lasted for years, others were cut brutally short. It is within childhood that we form our morals, our values and the strength or weakness of character that will either bless or jeopardise our brief flirt with life on this planet. They also have the overwhelming capacity to shape not just our own futures but also the futures of those that come after us. A precious few manage to rebel against their upbringings - sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but ultimately the experiences and lessons we learnt as children have a gigantic impact on how we view the world as adults.

Philip Larkin famously wrote "They fuck you up, your mum and dad, they may not mean to, but they do." He may not have been the jolliest of souls but the core sentiment of the impact that childhood holds over our mental well-being later on, rings true. It's precisely this impact that bore the following collection of poems which present the theme of childhood from varying angles. Whether it be from parenthood, childhood, personal experience, considered observation, pain, joy or suspense; there is a recurring feeling of intimacy in most of the poems this issue. From the childhood snapshots in 'Worm Eater' to the internal reflection in 'Emulsion' to the anticipation in 'Be Prepared to Bleed', the theme has been picked apart by 20 poetic minds, re-interpreted by 20 illustrative brains and hopefully, presents a pretty holistic vision of what childhood is. Presumably there will be gaps but that's the wonder of childhood - they come in all different shapes, sizes and colours.



POLARBEAR

-

He's one of the most honest, heartfelt and well respected wordsmiths on the spoken word circuit who was asked to perform at Glastonbury Festival after his first ever gig. Since then he's gathered quite a following and is showing no signs of slowing. We caught up with him to discuss his beginnings, his inspirations and how parenthood has affected his work.

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Name, age, hometown, years performing etc?

Polarbear to many, Steven Camden to a few. I'm 31 years old, was born in the summer of 1979 in the heart of the country, Birmingham, and have been performing since 2005.

No doubt this is a painfully common question, but why the name Polarbear?

It's fair enough really. I was obsessed with polar bears as a kid; wildlife in general and football were the most important things. One day I watched an Arctic special and Sir Attenborough told me that polar bears are the only animal on the planet with no natural predator except themselves. Humans can't eat polar bear meat because it's poisonous, so basically nothing can mess with a polar bear. That appealed to me. So later on when I started rhyming on beats and I needed a name, it just made sense to me. It was that simple in the beginning and like I find with a lot of correct choices, lots of other stuff becomes apparent that fits too. Probably not best to get me started on the rest of stuff.

How did you find your way into spoken word in the very first instance?

It was an accident really. I had no idea what it was or that it even existed. A friend of mine spotted a gig advertised in Birmingham called a 'slam'. I didn't know what it was but he told me it was basically rhyming with no music, and you can win stuff. I remember it was part of the literary festival sponsored by Orange. We went down, had a couple of drinks, everyone had to put their name in a hat and mine was pulled out first. I did my thing then watched as a string of people got up and did stuff like I'd never seen before. I reckon that if I hadn't been up first we would have left and I wouldn't be where I am today. Anyway there was a mobile phone up for grabs and we were both slightly merry and I got through and ended up winning the phone. Then the guy hosting the night asked me to do a gig for him and when I asked where he said 'Glastonbury'.

So your second ever performance was at Glastonbury Festival?

Yep. Second proper performance was Glastonbury Festival 2005 in the poetry and words arena. It was my first ever festival as well. Can honestly say it changed my life in lots of ways. In between the first one and Glastonbury I did some research as to what this 'spoken word' thing actually was and made some choices about what I would do with the freedom the form offers.

And what actually is this spoken word thing from where you're standing?

To me spoken word is a chance to say whatever you want to people, in the hope that you connect.

Is there a freedom in spoken word that you don't think exists in more traditional performance poetry or in rapping/rhyming?

Yes I think so. I think that if you get up at a spoken word gig and simply rhyme 16 or 32 bars that you wrote to a beat, you have wasted an opportunity. Without wanting to sound cheesy, to me that's like taking a blank canvas and tracing onto it. I think that the freedom of complete space can throw you if you don't look at it as an opportunity to play. I mean I'm far from experimental in my form but if something is written to speak out loud with just you and your voice in mind and you don't play with space - why bother?

So what were your early gigs like? Do you look back at them fondly or do they readily induce cringing?

I can honestly say I don't think I've ever had a really bad one. I've had ones where I've felt something near disdain for some of the people I can see while I'm speaking. I've had ones where I've been wheeled out as the token wordy bit to fill the space between bands, but I've not ever had one where I haven't felt some sort of connection to somebody listening. Some of the earlier ones were probably less assured, especially when I came down



DON'T SWALLOW THE PIPS

Poem by Sophie Clarke
Illustration by Zoe Regoczy

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White as knuckles, shoots grip down
in soft pink beds. They plait thinly
over moist, warm organs, until I can't tell
what is vein and what is root.

Twigs snap. Thick branches break
into the curvature of my ribs, my spine wizens
into trunk. A whole ecosystem heaves
under a canopy of lungs and leaves -

I fear I will be a laughing stock.
What use is a doctor with these ailments
I can't speak of? My tongue is gashed
black bark, I choke on clumps

of mulch. And each morning I wake
to fistfuls of flora at my ears,
the miniature disaster of my nose
sprouting birdsong.

-

'Don't Swallow the Pips' is a literal tribute to
the old wives tale that claims a swallowed
apple pip will grow in your stomach. It was
written to capture this strange mix of real terror
and absurd comedy.



EMULSION

Poem by Matthew Fieldhouse
Illustration by Tobias Hall

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This is the bow and arrowed child,
the supple, soft, bone marrowed child,
the sherbert sweet, marshmallowed child,
with a mouth that's full of maps,

and rosebud sap,
the kind that coarses through his limbs,
fills his head with playground planets, penny sweets and bruising shins,

that summer skin,
with grit packed scars on mud packed knees,
fills his eyes with cornfield continents, paper planes and clambered trees,

such jamboree,
but as the molten years flick by,
I've painted that marshmallow child in Dulux One Coat White,

now out of sight,
layer on layer of matt emulsion,
he's covered now, white smothered now, this act of adult expulsion,

a strange compulsion,
but on occasion comes a day,
where the paint gets chipped, emulsion splits and that child comes out to play.

-

'Emulsion' was written as an optimistic attempt to come to terms with the vast differences between oneself as a child, and oneself as an adult.



PEEPSHOW COLLECTIVE

They're one of illustration's longest standing and most successful collectives, with a jaw droppingly impressive client list that would make any mother proud. They're also home to some of the most influential illustrators that the UK has to offer. We snuck in a few questions about life as a collective, the collaborative process and what they would all be doing now if they weren't part of Peepshow.

Who are Peepshow and where do they come from?

Peepshow are a collective of illustrators, animators and designers based in London, Stockholm, Tokyo and the Gloucestershire countryside. Our numbers have fluctuated over the years but as it stands today, Peepshow is Luke Best, Jenny Bowers, Miles Donovan, Chrissie Macdonald, Pete Mellor, Marie O'Connor, Andrew Rae, Elliot Thoburn, Lucy Vigrass and Spencer Wilson. Marie studied Textiles but most of us come from an illustration background. Peepshow was founded in 2000 by seven graduates of the University of Brighton. As a collective and as individuals, we have worked extensively within the areas of illustration, advertising, art direction, moving image, set design, mixed media installation and fashion and textile design.

What made you decide to become a collective rather than operate as individuals?

Peepshow was set up as a way of facilitating self-promotion, collaboration, sharing clients, expenses and to make the experience of being an illustrator more fun. Power in numbers as they say. Although our key practice entails working on our own individual commissions, we come together to work on specific commissions, namely installation and animation projects.

What are some of the biggest benefits of working as a collective?

A shared studio, website & promotion, expenses, client list and library, as well as a group of trusted people to look to for advice. Also by collaborating we end up working on projects that challenge us and take us out of our comfort zone.

How does the collaborative process work? Do clients choose which members will work on a brief or is it decided by Peepshow?

It depends on the nature of the project. Some clients come to us with a particular illustrator or aesthetic in mind but on other occasions they are open to our interpretation of the brief. We'll come together to discuss ideas and see whose work is best suited to the brief as well as who's interested and available, leaving a smaller team to see the project through to the end.

Why the name Peepshow?

The original website was designed to show a 'peep' of our individual illustration work using a peephole device, so the name Peepshow seemed perfect and just stuck.

How often do people confuse you with the TV show of the same name and do you resent the namesake, baring in mind that you came first?

It's not really an issue as we're not in competition, besides we all like the show too much and it's not as if we own the word, it's been around since the 15th century. We did have a strange letter once from some fans of the TV show suggesting we make an all female version, they even sent plot & casting suggestions. Robert Webb wore a T-shirt in the last series with a design by Andrew on it that must have been bought as a bootleg from a market. It's not legal so don't buy it.

You all have very varied styles. Is this something that works in your favour or does it make the collaboration process more difficult?

Collaborating on a shared drawing rarely happens because everyone's work is so different. The most enjoyable part of collaborating is being able to leave what you know, move away from your established visual language and try something new. I don't think we'd all still be working together if our work all looked the same. We quickly realised that the most successful way to collaborate is if everyone contributes ideas and works in a way unassociated to their personal work. A great



WITCH HAZEL SONG

Poem by Adrienne Drobnies
Illustration by Rory Kurtz

-

Red Rover come over and show me the games
you learned as a child. How to use a pair of
scissors with a vengeance and how to spank
a cat. How to beat your brother's head against a
wooden bench. How to be invisible and how not to be.
How to throw a shoe that hits a face.
How a slap slaps. How to crank up the wind
inside you and how to wind it down.
How pencil lead turns to diamond.
How glass cuts skin. How ovens burn.
How burns heal slow. How scorpions hide under
blankets. How your insides get emptied by force.
How vomit gets cleaned. How soap feels
in your mouth and how a wooden floor
feels on your chin. How splinters get pulled.
How car doors slam. How scars
last on ring fingers. How ice burns as
much as fire and how I don't know how she got
those welts. Teach me the rules you learned as
a child and how a switch cut from a
witch hazel is a lesson in pain and power.

-

'Witch Hazel Song' looks at the incidents of physical abuse that
took place during the writer's childhood.

