

The Seven Stages of Love by Matt Nicholson

Introduction

William Shakespeare, in his play, *As You Like It*, puts his famous 'The Seven Ages of Man' speech into the mouth of a character called Jaques, a melancholy man who wants the job of Fool in the court of Duke Senior. The speech begins with those famous lines:

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
they have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His act being seven ages...

My story takes its lead from Jacques but brings it to the present day and follows – via seven poems – the stages of love that a man might experience throughout his life. And so we begin with stage one: (Introducing the main character, Tom, as a newborn baby, experiencing love in its most fundamental form).

Love in the act of naming...

They've called him *Tom*
and, despite his frantic arrival,
that bumpy, screaming landing in their lives,
all the world is blanket-soft to him now,
all the shapes in orbit around his recumbent kingdom,
merely players in a constant stream.

And, if he is lucky, he will feel love before he can count
its 4 letters amongst his friends and weapons.
And before he can spell it out, he will know it
in the upturned corners of his sleepless mother's mouth,
the satisfaction of food and safety, the warmth of skin,
and the fastness of her grip.

He will understand the welcoming laughter
that greets his loudest burp and his rasping farts,
because these are the first voices imprinted
on his snowfield mind, these are the lessons
learnt in playfulness, the oneness with the machine
that runs on these terms, just as the sky above
runs on stars.

Stage two: (sees Tom as a young schoolboy loving the world of knowledge and the mechanism of questions and answers as a means to find his place in the world)

For Shakespeare, the next age of man is 'the whining schoolboy with his satchel'. In our second stage, we ask the question:

Who would win in a fight between love and a Komodo dragon?

Tom comes when he's called,
not because he's a good little boy,
(*Yeah right*), but because he has questions
about dinosaur eggs and dwarf planets,
and a desire to know who would win
in a fight between: A pipistrel and a dormouse?
A lion and a velociraptor?
Titan, the largest moon of Saturn,
and Peter, the brand-new teaching assistant
in his Year 2 class at school?

He writes down the words
then lets his 5-coloured biro, set on the green ink,
draw an automatic shape on the open page
of his Transformers notebook,
then he goes to find the creature
that looks most the same.

By tea-time, he knows everything there is to know
about Komodo Dragons, how they mainly eat deer
and only sometimes humans. And his mother knows
that when he goes into this quiet, she had better
be ready to answer the questions when they start:

*Mum, mum...who would win a battle
between a venomous reptile and a grizzly bear?
Mum...and between a giant super lizard and Peter,
the brand-new teaching assistant,
in my year 2 class at school?*

*Mum, mum...who would win in a fight between
a Komodo Dragon and dad?
(even though he's in Scotland with *that woman* now).*

Stage three: (sees Tom falling completely in love for the first time, suddenly able to contemplate another person as being more important in his life than himself)

‘And then the lover, sighing like a furnace...’

In stage three, as adulthood beckons, we find Tom...

Falling in love at 19 years and 4 days old – The paradigm shift

In a warehouse stocked with darkness
at 3.47 am, Tom is standing silent,
working security, shadows for company on the night shift.
He’s counting 13 lucky minutes till his next patrol,
13 monumental moments that will change his life
as the world shifts on its heart strung axis,
when the walls, he is paid to guard, will crack,
the darkness, he inhabits, will be pierced
by her distant light, the flood within his chest
will buoy his heart up to his head, where it will
tell him that Kelly is the one, Kelly is the first soul
to exist above his own. He reaches for his phone
then remembers that it’s the hour when every soul
should sleep, and he must keep his heart to share
with her in a letter, to be read by her over breakfast,
with strong black coffee and toast.

Stage four: (Sees Tom and Kelly find life together too hard after a series of big life crises)

By Stage four, while Shakespeare is harping on about a 'soldier, Full of strange oaths', ours is...

A sonnet to a period of dysfunction

Beware the rules you agree at the start,
between your new love and your own weakness,
before you know the range of your nuptial hearts,
how they'll cope with the mundane, the bleakness.
Because amongst all the laughs and the love,
the universe can kick hard in the nuts.
And beyond all the big dreams that you have,
it will take more than just whiskey and guts.
These two souls promised they'd mean every word,
all the hard ones, however tough the time.
To the breaking point of being absurd,
pure as the church bells had been in their chime.
He'd meant those words when he told her *I do*,
when she'd said *goodbye* she'd meant that one too.

Stage five: (sees Tom all alone and marking the day that he and Kelly lost their baby girl).

Shakespeare couldn't have timed his next line better, when he talks about '...the justice in fair round belly...' cos our Tom knows nothing of justice – he knows as well as anyone...

Love can be for an absence

One day out of every year
he finds himself alone, in the pub,
between the dartboard and the quizzie.

He puts five pound in the juke box,
lines up three cold pints and imagines
long conversations, as a father might

with a daughter he never knew.
He starts by telling her about his mother,
then his school days, lost and found,

and about dinosaur eggs and dwarf planets,
how Komodo dragons mainly eat deer,
and only sometimes humans.

At the last swig of the third pint, he stands,
looks up to heaven in case he can see her,
and nods to the bar for 3 large Irish.

Then he tells her about the 80's,
the music that used to matter,
and about his Kelly and how she shone

like the space shuttle on re-entry, and how
amongst the pieces of his shattered heart,
some were meant for her.

Stage 6: (Tom is descending into drink and forgetfulness, not sure which memories of Kelly are real and which are not)

While Shakespeare's man '...shifts into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons...' in his sixth age, Tom is longing for...

A love he can't always remember

Is she with a man in Midlothian?
Or a woman in the Western Isles?

Did she wander away on a whim
one day, winding up in Wales?

Is she living with her mother
in a flat in Milton Keynes?

Is she parenting her parent now?
He knows the phrase but not what it means.

Is she dead from plague or scurvy?
Did she leap off Flamborough Head?

Will she ever come back and forgive him
for never ever making his bed?

He still feels warm inside when he thinks of her,
even in that North Sea wind,

just wished he knew what had become of her,
whether he was sinned against or sinned?

And did she send him that letter after all,
or was it a trick of the mind?

Stage seven: (In the end)

For both Shakespeare and our Tom, this is the 'Last scene of all / that ends this strange eventful history.' And this is the last kind of love...

Love in the guise of remembrance (a short soliloquy)

When I am old enough
to be a pope, or a permanent fixture
at the end of a long, polished bar,
I might find your words
on the torn corner of something
in the pocket of my heavy coat.

Reading your words:
through accumulated lint,
the wrappers from my chocolate limes,
tickets from essential bus journeys
on routes long since cancelled,
I will know again, know at last,
know for sure that I was loved.