

# **Let the Children Speak**

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# Let the Children Speak

*For the Cleveland Children*

I cannot know who's right; I only know  
That while they rage and argue back and fro,  
Of propitiatory lambs thrown by fate  
Upon dread fires of legal, long debate,  
The children suffer.

We were once as they:  
Frightened and alone, grey dawned each new day;  
Innocent, unsure, silence voiced our fears;  
Hidden from the world, no one saw our tears;  
The step upon the stair, that inner dread;  
The loneliness of waiting in our bed.

We, who were these children once, remember,  
And summer blooms wither to December.  
Memories return, forced back on the mind,  
And all the while the tabloid presses grind  
Their numbing call to revive past deeds done.  
The memories are pressed back one by one;  
Refusing each to fade as history,  
Fresh aches now return, etched in memory.

We too recall the day we knew – unchecked;  
The day we knew our parents imperfect.  
And then we knew – e'en then we knew – our lives  
Would dedicated be from prying eyes  
To keep their imperfections hid.

What pain

To live within the shadow of disdain,  
Knowing none would know our secret stowed;  
For those whose duty was to share the load  
Were they who laid upon us as the cause,  
And used our tiny bodies for the tawse  
Of ill, cruel-tutored fingers groping out:  
Too sick with fear to cry or run, or shout  
To mother waiting in the room below.  
(Our darling mother broke herself to know  
The saddened eyes of youth's first trust betrayed;  
Yet, weak herself through her own fears, she stayed.)  
Her silence hung about her as a shroud:  
We could not break it by a word out loud;  
And so we silent stayed, though screamed within,  
While squaring to the world with secret grin.

We saw the other children clear and free,  
And aped their moods with dull conformity,  
While through each party and each childish game  
We knew that we were different.

Not the same

As they who laughed with carefree happy eye  
And watched with sweet content their day flow by,  
While knowing well each day would swiftly close  
With fireside chat and stories read, till doze  
And peaceful slumber took their welcome place:  
And only calm content on father's face.

But in those weary, long, occluded years,  
Through tiresome dreary sadnesses and tears,  
We loved our parents too in diverse ways:  
They cared for us and tended bleeding graze;  
They clothed and fed us; brought us chocolate treat;  
Or chased across the park on legs still fleet.

We loved them both, and never sought to blame  
Or harm them by revealing inner shame.  
We could not let them suffer at our word:  
We only knew that if it once be heard,  
Then we would take the fullest share of guilt,  
Destroying lives of they who first us built.

We lived our lives 'twixt sealed and torn estate,  
Knowing veracious love would come too late.  
It is too late for us: what's done is done;  
Now I say, "For Christ's sake ask the children!"

*'Let the Children Speak' had its germination in the Cleveland child abuse cases in 1987. The whole community of Cleveland was torn in two by this scandal. As a GP, I met women who told for the first time of their own childhood abuse. As the Senior Police Surgeon for Middlesbrough, I saw abused children and the accused parents. Yet without doubt, many of the parents in the scandal were wrongly accused. It was the polarisation of these positions that drove the inquiry, and led to a dichotomy that is still unresolved.*

*I was heavily involved in the events, and knew both the paediatrician, Dr Marietta Higgs, and the Senior Police Surgeon, Dr Alistair Irvine, well. I was involved in examining some of the children, and dealing with their parents and social workers. In addition, a number of women who had themselves been abused as children told me their stories.*

*The certainty is that child abuse happens, and it blights the lives of those affected. The children want the abuse to stop, and can't understand why it is happening to them; but they do not want the guilt of smashing their family, and seeing their father sent to prison.*

*Undoubtedly there was child abuse in Cleveland, probably at a similar level to that in other towns and cities, and this needed to be dealt with. But equally, the method advocated by Dr Higgs for detecting abuse was shown to be flawed, and this meant that many innocent parents and children were subjected to the stigma of false accusation.*

*As Principal Police Surgeon for Middlesbrough, I was in the centre of the whirlwind. In some children I witnessed incontrovertible signs of abuse, yet was aware that many more families were being damaged by false accusations. The local paediatricians accused me of being nobbled by the police, and the police would not call me to testify before Lord Justice Butler-Sloss in case I weakened their argument. In the end, the sides became so polarised by adversarial arguments that I was not called as a witness by either.*

*'Let the Children Speak' is the heartfelt argument of an adult looking back to their childhood and questioning "why?" seeking neither retribution nor revenge, but wishing that intervention for others that they had been denied.*

*This poem is based on reports of abuse that were given to me in confidence during the events leading up to the inquiry.*

*"The interests of the child must be paramount:" Sir Stuart Bell MP, Cleveland Child Abuse Inquiry, November 1987, Middlesbrough.*