

Alan Jenkins
 The Sporting Life

for K-

Hunched by torchlight, late, in a tent of sheets and pillows
 I went from Mole and Ratty and *Wind in the Willows*
 To *Chuck of the Chindits*, from the *Boys' Book of Sport*
 To *Fishing with Mr Crabtree*... Our fishing weather
 Was high summer, almost everything we caught
 Was a 'tiddler', while – there it went, our bait-tin!
 Bobbing on the wash made by pleasure cruisers and –
 Us and them, the same as it had been for ever –
 The 'gin palaces' of advertising men. (He was unmanned...)

The moment when my float began to dip and dither –
 In all our 'trance-like idling' on the bank together
 Was that the best? Or when his oars dipped fluently
 And set the leaf-reflections rocking in the water
 As he made for his lunchtime pint? – Somehow he
 Had got clean away, and sat wordless in the boat
 (We left the keep-net filled with little roach or dace).
 It wasn't that he loved them less – his wife and daughter –
 But when a barmaid smiles at him, he wears a red face...

They are walking with me now, the towpath by the river,
 My mother and father, alive again for ever
 In and out of flickering leaf-light and shadow;
 I have grazed my palm as usual, my mother bends to kiss it
 Better, and my father stops beside the water-meadow
 To wipe the beads of perspiration from his brow
 And smooth his moustache with the back of his hand,
 Both sides, and he says, *We were always close like this, it*
Is just that being young you did not understand.



He wears the red face at breakfast on Sunday morning –
 My sister who came home at dawn sits pale and yawning
 While he ruffles his paper, smoothes his moustache –
 His way of keeping mum – and we are all silent.
Don't let's have a scene, my mother says. Tea and ash
 And burnt toast, and cigarette-smoke; from where I sat
 I could see the cups he'd won in rowing eights
 With stains like the dark rings that a night on Eel Pie Island
 Had left round my sister's eyes: trophies, dead-weights...

He'd been a swimming champ and an ace speed-skater.
 Unsteady on the ice, I was afraid of water
 From my first go when I'd gone right under, swallowed
 And choked on chlorine. I stood in water-wings
 And shivered while the others splashed and wallowed,
 I grew to hate the feel of hair that was still damp.
 Then one day: I was Mr Toad, lord of all I swam in! –
 Girls in their swimming costumes, wet stuff that clings,
 Their dripping, scrawny backs... The feast after the famine,

The drowsy, pungent air, the isle full of strange noises –
 Cries, crowd-chants, the raucous broken-hearted voices
 Of some who are strutting, strumming far below;
 Unmoored, I drift past them, past the bright flotillas
 Of bottles, records, and, silhouetted in the glow
 Of little fires, the burnt-out crews who stare
 Unblinking into dark, at stranded wrecks;
 Past the Edwardian boathouses and the villas,
 The shoals of drink and drugs and gropes in discothèques.



Afternoon heat in the limes and the flimsy curtains
 Pulled to against a sun that has never seemed more certain
 In a sky that has never been more blue; 'the day's play'
 At Wimbledon switched on, we watch Rod Laver's
 Miracle cross-court returns, Dan Maskell's *Oh, I say!*
 Plump-sounding in those starved-for-pleasure times –
 Starved in the midst of plenty... *The tennis club!*
On what your father earns? We'd sample all the flavours
 In a box of All Gold before he came back from the pub...

A long late-summer dusk, thickly-leafed South London:
 A last set, everything flows, I am not undone
 By backhand or forehand drive, drop-volley, serve;
 Your skirt flutters up and I glimpse the hidden entrance
 I want and fear, the secretive plump curve
 That gives off a whiff of washing-powder, musk
 And there is no end to them, the clean tennis-whites,
 The body that will do my bidding, unrepentance,
 The voices from the club-house bar on summer nights –

But you are swimming far away from me, for ever,
 From where I stand in stillness by the river,
 Long-shadowed stillness, with an hour to go before
 The lights come on, the rhododendron-scented
 Park is empty, the ferryman and rowers are ashore
 And the ebb-tide has carried me beyond the bar,
 The reef on which I'll graze my palm;
 You kiss it and we lie together, willow-tented,
 I am not adrift, or drunk, the night is blue and calm.