

I Grew up in Another Language

by Sheridan Maquire

I grew up in another language. Thinking back, that language wasn't about words or symbols but a semiotic rainbow, a world conversed through colour. My childhood was ablaze with light in the day and velvety with black at night. I'd awake to a sky so rich with blue that my eyes would hurt and my heart would sing; the sun so yellow that it shouted a warning '*better put on some suntan lotion today, young man*'.

Of course, I never did and my mother would set me loose on the beach in bathing trunks (as they were called then) and then forget that by evening my skin would be red raw. Then it was pink and soothing calamine lotion and eggs and chips for dinner.

In my small, safe crisp white bed, in my safe and small white room with the big brown mahogany wardrobe that mum could not afford to replace, there I lay tightly closed up, like I was being born again and I'd think of the language that the day had spoken to me. I talked alone with the colours before my closed eyes, like they were friends who would never harm me, never leave me, never betray my trust.

Now pink for the candyfloss, which the little girl next to me on the beach eats so carefully and that I am just a little jealous of. Now green for the pistachio ice cream that so weirdly has gained the approval of my juvenile taste buds and that mum laughs about out loud. Now yellow for the egg sandwiches on soggy white sliced bread that mum has lovingly made for our picnic and which - I know now - taste better than the finest caviar.

Now orange for my little blow-up dinghy afloat in a rockpool and in which I set sail for 10 minutes along the treacherous barbary coast, avoiding sea monsters and pirates until I get tired and go back to mum for a hug and a piece of chocolate. Such larks!

Then one cold day, grey for the bludgeoning sky that suddenly hangs over the cliffs, steel silver for the icy rain that stings and forces me upwards on the spikey shingle towards mum – but where is she? Ah yes, over there, talking to some woman – but in my heart, the betrayal burns. And in the corner of my eye, dark brown for the metal spade that in the distance two men use to cut a crab in half to look at its insides. Red for the mist of futile but searing anger as this callousness cuts through me as though I too had been cut in half.

In the silence of the night, like a prism in reverse, the colours of all my life revert to one single beam of white light. My epiphany makes me gasp as though I am drowning. I grew up polychrome young and I have become monochrome old.