

Fifty years on.

40 Years On was my school song, not as famous as the *Eton Boating Song* but perhaps more reflective and soulful – a little less ra-ra-ra and jolly boating weather, thank goodness. The words enjoin a teenager to imagine what it would be like to look back at the age of sixty on life as a schoolboy; perhaps a near impossibility. When you are young you feel immortal and, at seventeen, thirty seems impossibly ancient so to put yourself in the shoes of a sixty-year-old is unimaginable, almost insulting to the ethos of youth.

It is not hard at sixty to remember what life felt like at boarding school. I can still remember the aggression and the ever-present threat of physical violence or intimidating verbal assault. Commands were barked out and senior boys who seemed like men administered a brutal and arrogant discipline. The cold was ever-present in the winter term; frozen fingers and chapped legs red and aching with cold. We were forced to endure the hated football field where would-be men fought out a proxy war between opposing teams; a war in which I felt unengaged and to which I was hostile. My lack of enthusiasm and aptitude for team games enraged the hearties and further urged them to pick on me. The others spoke the universal male language of the locker room, a tongue as foreign to me as Sanskrit. School was a philistine place where no softness, good taste or art had permission to flourish; aesthetics were alien to a world where games were enshrined as a religion. My uncle came to visit me and said that he felt time had stood still and that he was transported back to his own schooldays in the same house forty years before. He felt that little had

changed; the anachronistic dress, the inedible food and the lack of culture were unaltered since the 20s. And yet, he remembered his time fondly as though such hardships could be edifying or enjoyable. I suspect what he remembered were the intense friendships of youth and the undercurrent of passion present in some of them. These I too experienced but with them the ache of the unattainable, at least as far as the object of my most heartfelt desire. For those of a romantic nature sex without love assuages only a momentary impulse.

I now realise that so much of what I felt and thought was an expression of the feminine as opposed to the masculine that I was expected to be. There were others like me although I did not know it until nearly the end of my schooldays – I thought I was the only one who felt as I did. Everyone hid these longings because they were unconscionable, shameful as well as criminal. There was casual sex of course and plenty of it but I knew of no one who harboured the same longing to be loved by a boy.

Now I am fifty *'years on when afar and asunder parted are those who are singing today.'* I now know the feeling of impending mortality that begins when you lose a parent. Once both are dead you stand next in line and your time will come soon enough. At seventy, I feel less vigorous and my drive to achieve has transmuted into a desire for a gentler life. I have lost the instinct to acquire possessions indeed we have sold much of what we had so carefully selected and collected. The tree of friendship too has been subject to a rigorous pruning just as we have been pruned in our turn from the trees of others. Sometimes old friends

inexplicably drop one and that can be hurtful and leave you wondering if it is something you either said or did but one can never discover the truth. It is also true that you can tire of friends as their ways and faults increasingly irritate. For me, I tire of people who are snobbish, self-absorbed or shallow. We become less tolerant as we age; this is a tendency to fight and resist. The need to socialise diminishes in parallel with sexual desire. Women continue until extreme old age to seek the society of others in order to gossip and discuss their progeny whereas men become more solitary and retiring. Watching sport and talking with other men about it and sometimes about politics animates straight men but bores most gay men. We trend to socialise more with women friends as we grow older.

The world becomes strange and unfamiliar as tastes change and youth becomes ever more distant. It is a truism that after sixty years of age one becomes increasingly invisible especially to the objects of our waning sexual impulse. For my generation the change that upsets us most is the dumbing-down of the news especially that from BBC. We were brought up to think that the BBC represented impartiality and factual reporting; now the news on TV is a collection of sound bites often with images that are unconnected, such reporting as there is has a barely disguised bias. The news concentrates on celebrity, sport and disaster with occasional human-interest stories to tug at the heartstrings. News has become pure entertainment at a debased level – what Orwell called '*prole feed*'. The newspapers are no better; even the Times has its share of non-news, gossip and trash although it does retain some fine columnists like Matthew Parris. It is better at my age to

read books and often books written before I was born; they contain wisdom and still possess the power of beautifully written English utilizing the full panoply of our extensive and expressive lexicon.

One should strive to have an income that is more than sufficient to supply your needs and wants; debt in older age is an unwelcome complication that induces stress. Thankfully, as income decreases after retirement, so do one's cash requirements. I find I appreciate a simpler life and a simpler diet. Boredom leads many people towards the bottle but thankfully I do not find great temptation there in fact my body has become intolerant to alcohol and even a small amount gives me a bad head in the morning.

I cherish the few close friends but Derek is my best friend and constant companion, we have lived together for forty years. He retired from his profession of interior design many years ago and has concentrated on art, photography and running our small charity, *Aids Ark*. He is a diligent and tireless person always with a project or two on the go but he is free from ambition and makes no attempt to share his work widely as either an artist or a photographer.

I increasingly live in the ivory tower of my laptop, sometimes writing, but also reading with not a little irritation of the folly and vainglory of politicians here and elsewhere. I fume at the rise of nationalism that is everywhere a pernicious evil spawning hatred and war. In the vanguard of the recent wave of nationalism have been the whinging Scots. Not content with enjoying a much greater spend per capita than neighbouring England, political over

representation as the result of smaller constituencies and most egregiously having a say in our affairs where we have no say in theirs, their nationalists carp and whine and make trouble. No one dares to point out the clearly racist undertones of their platform and complaints; its fine to be Scots and proud of it but to be an English nationalist is to be a bigot and a racist – such special pleading is unfair and makes those who suffer this discrimination angry. Maybe its because we don't have a national dress or a revolutionary hero like Robert the Bruce. They seem oblivious to an obvious consequence; their nationalism has given a licence to English nationalism and allowed it to find its voice in turn bringing about the very thing the Scots do not want – a vote to leave the EU. People south of the border have become sickened by their selfish antics and have decided to pay them back in kind by voting, 'leave' and forcing the Scots to leave as well – why would Europe want them? If this destroys the Union, I say hooray – we are well off without them. They can live as my mother used to say, 'Off the smell of an oil rag' and create their own socialist nirvana north of the border. Now I do sound like an angry old man. But has Europe learned nothing? To deny the natural affinity of people who speak the same language and share the same culture is a recipe for conflict. Politicians should stop trying to tell people how to think and what is decent to believe. Why force people to live in a political union they neither like nor want. If the Scots cannot live in a union with their neighbours how can they be expected to live in a union of 27 countries? Their reputation for meanness is well deserved; they have proved they are takers and not generous givers.

When I'm not sitting at my laptop fuming at unfolding political events, I am spending time in nature or on the sea.