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Nonsense Poems in the Big Woods of My Childhood

"The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea [in] a beautiful pea-green boat" (Lear). My grandmother's voice intones through the haze of one of my earliest childhood memories. I was four years old, lying on the earth-tone coverlet of my grandparent's bed in the loft bedroom of their asymmetrical 1970s hippy house. It was naptime. The sun streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows in the kitchen and made its way up the hallway. I was drifting off, but the familiar words penetrated the early stages of slumber. My grandmother has a beautiful voice, and every word of Edward Lear's nineteenth-century nonsense poem was spoken in just the right pitch and rhythm. "They took some honey, and plenty of money, [wrapped] up in a five-pound note," her voice continued soothingly. I was losing the battle with sleep, but I knew how the narrative ended. The next week on my day at Gram's house, the book was *Teddy Bear Picnic*, which she would sometimes sing, or *Leaves from a Child's Garden of Verses*. I was not particular; I loved them all. Many of the peaceful moments of my early childhood had the same features: my mom or my grandma, a book, and a warm, safe place. In the present, I return to books, not only for mental expansion, but also for the familiarity and stability of summer naptimes and homeschool afternoons.

"Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs" (Wilder). The voice in this memory is different, younger for one thing. My mother was only twenty-five, but she had two youngsters and a toddler around her on

the couch. I was five, and these were the early days of my education, which I spent at home with my two brothers. Every day after lunch, Mum read to us from a chapter book. A favorite of ours was the *Little House on the Prairie* series, and our copy of the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, sported a missing cover, cracked spine, and bent pages. I can recall with distinct clarity the motion of my mother turning down the page to mark our place in the familiar tale. My later school years do not have this idyllic quality. I have become an exacting perfectionist who agonizes over every word read and written, but the habits from my childhood of listening—focus, attention to detail, enthusiasm, and organization—continue to bring me peace.

"How do you spell *frog*," my seven-year-old self demanded of my mother, who was kneading a loaf of bread at the kitchen counter. For a child who loved books, I struggled to read independently, and it affected my early ability to write. Yet, I clearly wanted to write and followed my indefatigable mother around asking for her help.

"Sound it out," she encouraged. "F-raw-g." I looked at her skeptically, not feeling the sound-it-out game. I was more interested in my story about a boy and his pet frog. "Or look it up."



"I don't know how," I insisted impatiently.

"Then make your best guess."

Eventually, the book was finished and illustrated, despite a few unconventionally-spelled words. Within a year or two, I learned to read and jumped from a first-grade reading level to a high-school reading level in the course of a few months. Being conventional is overrated. At seven, I never suspected I was behind, and because my parents did not pressure me, I caught back up without ever knowing. Learning to read was another quiet, happy experience. Now,

other things do not come easily, and the outside environment is not as kind. I suffer more on these occasions, but in time, I catch up when I am ready.

"And hand in hand [on] the edge of the sand, [they] danced by the light of the moon, the moon, the moon. They danced by the light of the moon" (Lear). I was gone from the present as my grandmother closed the shiny hardcover copy of *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat* and placed it back on the low bookshelf beside the bed. The present is not always as sunny as that day in 1996, but my grandmother's voice and the words it repeated always keep me steady.



Works Cited

Lear, Edward. "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web.

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Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Little House in the Big Woods*. New York: Harper, 1953. Web.