



## Charles Darwin - the man and the scientist

*Darwin's childhood*

### Wonder and Loss

#### Ruth Padel:

*This first poem, "The Chapel School," uses words from an old school fellow of Darwin's, the very first memory of anybody outside his family. He was about seven, his first school.*

#### The chapel school

He brought a flower to school.  
He said his mother taught him to look inside the blossom and discover the name of the plant.  
I inquired how it could be done,  
But the lesson was not transmissible.  
A walk through the zebra maze to the Unitarian chapel on Claremont Hill.  
What do they say, these black stripes on white house walls?  
He's afraid of the dogs on Baker Street.  
When boys play he chews the inside of his mouth.  
He can never bite.

*The very first memoir of him that is not from his family was another naturalist called Leyton and he was at the same school, the Chapel School in Shrewsbury and he remembers Darwin bringing a flower to school and saying, "You can, my mother told me you can find the name of the flower in this." I thought that was so interesting and actually the first portrait of Darwin as a boy with his little sister, Catherine, is he's holding a flowerpot with a plant in it.*

#### Sheila Ochugboju:

There's a wonderful story about Darwin, about when he was in school as a child, he'd taken a flower and he'd gone to his school friend and he'd said that if you look deeply into the flower, the name of every flower is inside it, that it's at the core of every flower its name is written, and this was his idea, his understanding at that young age of what the Linnaean system of categorisations of flowers were. But I love that, I love that inherently everything in the way it is systematically designed by nature has a name. And of course, as a biological scientist or in any form of systematic recording, you do have a system which allows you to name it very fluidly. So he wasn't wrong but it's wonderful that he put it like that, and I wished we asked questions as scientists believing that the answer was already there just for us to unfold.

#### Ruth Padel:

#### The year my mother died.

*Darwin's mother died when he was eight and he remembered very little about her.*

I remember her sewing table, curiously constructed, her black velvet gown, nothing else except her deathbed and my father crying, no embrace.  
My older sisters in their great grief did not speak her name,  
her memory was silence, no memento of her face.

#### The Miser

*This poem uses some of the words about Darwin's early childhood which he wrote late on in his autobiography, and I've made a connection here between his passion for collecting which came upon him very, very young after his mother died. I have linked this to the psychological idea that a passion for collecting is a passion for order, to maintain some kind of order against*

*unbearable loss.*

The passion for collecting which leads a man to be a miser, a virtuoso or a systematic naturalist was very strong in me. It was clearly innate.

None of my sisters or brother had this taste.

Cross the Welsh bridge out of town, go up the hill on Frankwell Street and you'll see above the Severn brick pillars with the sanded bloom of an aging dog.

Around the back, father's surgery and waiting room,  
outside the stable yard, hay shoots, a piggery and tool shed.

Lower down, a bothy on the river bank where plates of jagged ice harvested in winter from the river lean one against the other.

A dairy, where these blocks are dragged to cool the milk and cream.

The quarry pool, which he fishes for newts and tadpoles.

Collecting, to assert control over what's unbearable, to gather and to list:

stones, coins, franks, insects, minerals and shells.

Collect yourself, just smother what you feel, record order,  
summon in one place, making like Orpheus a system against loss."

*From very early on he had a passion for collecting things and he says in his autobiography it was for stones from minerals, for newts, for anything.*

*Far later, when Alfred Russel Wallace, who also discovered the principle of natural selection, when he was asked "Why was it you and Darwin who saw this?" he said, "I think because we were both so interested in collecting and in the sort of taxonomy in giving the names of differences and variety. And that is actually one of the key things. Once you start collecting things then you rank them according to differences, and difference is variety and spotting the difference is the basis of everything."*