

Take this Token transcript

Episode 5: Tokens of Care

Kathleen Palmer: I'm Kathleen Palmer, Curator of Exhibitions and Displays at London's Foundling Museum. *Take this Token* is a podcast about tiny objects steeped in history and emotion: the Foundling tokens.

The Foundling Hospital was one of Britain's first children's homes established in London in 1739. In its early days, anyone giving a baby into its care would also leave a token. This might be a ring, a metal, a poem, a playing card, or even a hazelnut. Many of these precious, highly personal objects are on display today at the Foundling Museum in Bloomsbury. We've been talking to people with a connection to the Museum. In this podcast, they take one token and share what they know, what they feel and what they imagine.

Episode 5: Tokens of Care

Today, we hear from two creative people with close links to the Foundling Museum, folk musician Sam Lee, and writer Yomi Şode. Choosing and responding to a token, both Yomi and Sam imagined different acts of care in lives connected with the tokens.

Sam draws a connection between how his token was made and the devastating, selfless choice of a mother giving up her child in the hope it will have a better life.

Sam Lee: The token spoke to me because of the breakage within it. There's so many different shapes and sizes and qualities of what a token can be. I did choose a coin, not a broken coin but a punctured coin, one that has five holes pierced in it. I think what caught my attention is the puncturing, the brute strength that would've been needed. That sense of violence to the coin, to mark it, to destroy a bit of sovereign worth, struck within me this idea that in the act of the defamation of the coin there was a sense of self defamation. The brutality of what a mother has to go through to, give a child away. That sense of having part of you pierced and ripped out and torn away, the most precious thing a human can have, was echoed for me in those holes.

Maybe she did it herself. Maybe she was there with somebody who covertly did the work for her.

Every bang. You can feel that reverberating through her, knowing what that act was and the purpose behind it.

As a folk singer, the concept of a token is a theme that exists within many songs as this kind of idea of a contract of love, of connection, and separation as well, obviously.

So to see such a gathering of the real things, the articles themselves, is quite incredible because they're only concept form in folk songs.

So to see them, knowing that each one of these holds such a potent and generally tragic story of separation is extraordinary. They are works of art in that sense, communiqués to a time gone by.

The song is a token, the token is a song in many ways. A song is just another way of carrying a memory, a story, be that personal one or a societal one. And no doubt that all of the mothers who gave their children over would've known songs. There are lots of songs about that impact of having a child out of wedlock, and what that does to a mother, to a family.

And there's a Travellers' song called 'London Lights' – it's probably not that old either – that really tells that story of a mother being driven from home onto the streets in winter with just her baby, because of having a child with a man outside marriage.

[sings]

*See how those London lights are gleaming
Through the frost and falling snow
Sleep on, sleep on my blue-eyed treasure.
Your mother's got nowhere to go.*

*It was those two blue eyes enticed me,
'ticed me from my happy home.
And now he's gone away and left me
and on my brow is written shame.*

*See how my parents, they do slight me.
And my sisters do the same.*

*My father says he will not own me
and my mother hangs her head in shame.*

*See how those London lights are gleaming,
shining through the frost and snow.
Sleep on, sleep on my blue-eyed treasure.
Your mother's got nowhere to go.*

Kathleen: For Yomi, thinking about his token starts from a very personal place, but leads to imagining a network of caring relationships.

Yomi Sode: So the token it's almost like a coin shape. It's copper. There's a phoenix on top of a crown. The back of it's engraved. And the engraving says: 'Chid More, November 10th', and gives the time, which is half past twelve. But there's no year, so there's a bit of mystery there.

The reason I chose this token – there's a number of reasons actually. This is almost like the phoenix that rises from the ashes. There's a lot of belief in that. And when I think about my last two years, especially in light of the whole pandemic, there's been losses within the family. I think about that in relation to me and then I think about the person that handed his token in, and be like, you know, 'One day with the hopes that I'll be back. But when I do I'm going to be a different person.' And I think there's a great belief and strength in that, in saying, 'I'm going to do my utmost to rise above whatever it is I'm going through right now that's kind of put me in this situation.'

And I think that applies to a lot of where we might be in life. We would want to work to rise above whatever it is that is coming in our way. So for me, this token represents memory, resilience, great strength.

Kathleen: Most people who look at the tokens think about individual parents, mostly mothers, choosing an object to leave with their child. Yomi's focus is wider,

Yomi: I feel like there's a lot of conversation in relation to the mothers, to the children. I also think about where staff members at that time hold memory, where they hold empathy. As they file these tokens, what level of care is put in there? Do they hope for these mothers to return at some point? How do they manage their own boundaries?

Especially when I look at this token in particular, how do they relate to that? It's a huge weight. And the irony being that the token must have been one of the lightest things to hold, while it has such a *weight* to it.

It's calling for care. But there's a level of care that's required and that's being asked. We can't gauge that. But here is a mother that is saying, 'this is what I would like to be my remembrance, this is me to my child'.

The staff member's the last person to hold and to file that. And there's a lot in that one motion. Maybe this is the writer in me speaking, there's a lot in opening a file. There's a lot looking at a new space in it, next to the previous one, to documenting it and then closing it and then filing it back. There's a lot in that motion. It's how I process as a writer: I'm not writing these poems or these pieces of work for the sake of writing. I have to put myself into it. And sometimes I need a break because the weight of it is heavy.

Kathleen: Thinking about weight and responsibility and legacy, we asked Sam and Yomi about anything in their life that feels like a token, any little object with that kind of concentrated meaning. Both looked at their hands.

Sam: The *London Lights* song I song comes from the family of Scots Travellers that this ring is the keeper of the law ring that I inherited from my teacher, the Scots Traveller Stanley Robertson. With this ring comes the responsibility of many, many songs of a very unique repertoire from a very unique community who are the last carriers of oral tradition in Scotland. It's the most precious object in my life and holds me to account in my journey. The ring first and foremost is something that will continue beyond my lifetime without question, to whom I don't know yet.

But for me, in some ways, the songs are heirlooms that are most precious to me, because I've received them from somebody else and they don't hold any physical weight to them, but they hold an enormous cultural weight and each song will no doubt live beyond my lifetime - if I do the right things - and whoever receives them then gets to do what *they* like with them. So what goes with the song is the trust that somebody else will do good by them. And tend the flames, I would say.

Yomi: If I had to choose something to give to my kids - something like my rings. Something that stays with them as much as they want it to, they can physically just feel it.

So I think about the rings a lot. I think about the idea of if they they're annoyed, for example, and they can clench their fist, they can feel the pressing of the ring in between their fingers, then that might remind them of me to be like, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. We're getting a bit too hotheaded. Let's relax a little bit'. The feeling of it to be like - he wouldn't want me to react this way. Those things I think are really important to me. That's something that I would want them to hold into cherish.

You can see the tokens chosen by Yomi and Sam, along with many others, on display at the Foundling Museum, Brunswick Square in Bloomsbury, London.

The Museum is open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 till 5 and Sunday, 11 till 5. For more information, visit foundlingmuseum.org.uk, or find us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

in the next episode, we are thinking about the significance of jewellery as we talk with historian Jeanette Bright about a tiny ruby ring and a mysterious newspaper advert, and hear from jewellery maker and designer, Alex Monroe about a divided medal and a hoped-for reunion.

You've been listening to *Take this Token*, a Foundling Museum podcast with me, Kathleen Palmer, written and produced by Minnie Scott with Louis Mealing. Music by Ben Jacob.

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