

'Juniors'

Juniors

Jacqueline Burdett

We were in the same class
at primary school. Shared
the same birthday. One year
were told to stand up
so the room could sing
and toast the nothing we'd done.

Slight, she was, freckled:
tawny keeps coming to mind.
Already bringing on a bit of a stoop
to oblige the afterwards.

You'd glimpse her
slipping out to play,
edging the shadows
of the manager's son
and the town-clerk's daughter.

She answered each question perfectly
then retrieved her stillness,
putting the world away from her
till called upon again.

She rarely smiled,
perhaps never,
certainly not the day she and I
held an end apiece of coincidence,
like a pageant-flag
golden from a brush of sun
fluttered in a pocket of wind.

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John Mulligan

John Mulligan was first light,
always. He filled your eyes
with pan face, turret hair.

His voice was hornets
fighting in a pot,
a Sewanee whistle
when he was carpeted—

which happened as often
as footballs popped
or Tuesday's beef
was fat over flesh.

His dad would goof away
the Mulligan summer
on any stage going:
Pontins, Barafundle strand,
Palma once, an incredulous busload—

was our class's Santa Claus,
flushed and belt-looped,
speaking Laplandish
with a Skibbereen tic.

When we walked
through the morning gates,
it was a given that we be
demolished, cobbled up again
from bits and bobs of hygiene

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and attentiveness.

But John had Skibbereen
in his shoulders, which would quiver
before the next joke took—

hence the dig of teacher’s fingers
in his back, at which his dad
would decamp from shoulders to heart
and in that little fortress
call showtime,

and on the ceiling
of Holy Trinity Church next door,
the cherubim would get it,
let go their swags of radiance
and howl.

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Ian Sanders

A wraith,
Ian Sanders was.
When he spoke he'd tilt away
as if meaning to tiptoe
round the outside of harm.

At eight he looked
years older, perhaps
a husband with a thin smile
who provided but walked alone,
who frowned when asked
his children's ages. Sometimes
the corner of his mouth would drop
and the day would drop with it.

How to explain then
the twinkle that led him everywhere,
past over-piled coats locking arms
to break their fall,
paintings of home with all the windows
urged to the edges, pots of cress
bred to hang down its hair?

It was because he got adults,
had seen round the back of their world.
He was the boy
who hides in a theatre at night
and tours the magician's room,
noting how cabinets falsify,
how a hanky begets a dove.

So when teacher's glare
grew aim and ruler
or Father came puttering in
to remind us how our fingerprints
were all over the apple of Eden
or we were told we'd be getting a day off
because someone who'd never know us
was being important
in a church near the Palladium,
I'd see the twinkle brighten
on the oldest face in the room,
watch as it burned into all the feints,
the sleights, the doings.

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Susan Reilly

There was only the one world
and it was Susan Reilly's.
Fifty yards from her front door
to the school and each day
she made priceless work of it.
Hers was a nose for the good air high above,
a hand to summon in the shields and lions,
put a fan through its witching play.
She couldn't meet your gaze dead on—
her eyes would drift up to the blue lands
where Tony Curtis lived, where Diana Dors waited
to gift her a sample of Knight's Castile.
Royalty, Susan. Mum was the school's
chief cleaner, carpenter dad popped in to fettle
on his way to or from the big life.
To those of us who came out of the mists
a mile or more away, whose parents
worked on remote stars with vague orbits,
hers was a country of certain bounds
and charters. Once she turned up
in her slippers. When she realised,
she led our mirth, our handclaps to the brow,
let us into her Rubovia to play among its oaks.
You'd think that, for a few cloakroom minutes,
we'd tumbled a trunk of silks
in a place the colour of nothing.

A Rubovian Legend was a BBC children's television series which ran from the mid-50s to the early 60s, using marionettes for the characters.

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Peter Wilmore

When I think of him,
Peter Wilmore is in afternoons
of yellow and frost
when we're just out of the school gates.
About to go his way,
he turns to us the last of the smiles
he'd leave in every hour,
a touch serious from trusting too much
and thinking too well.

In his eyes
there might have been already
a life of outskirts hotels
with rooms that face the street,
fresheners plugged in
and the bath-to-shower buttons
not quite working. Of sending cards
to his children,
their postmarks two, three days behind the view.

Of steeling himself
to try and cut a meeting
so he could get back,
see at least one face
bear rosily down on the candles...
then being taken aside,
handed the keys to the newest car
in the fleet (full tank, mind),
assured with some heat that,
unless he got a shift on,
tomorrow's Edinburgh would be
a city without a deal.

Perhaps he now Skypes of an evening,
thanks to the set-up skills
of a son of a colleague of his wife
or someone from gym-zumba
she never mentions by name.
Sits like a stilled planet
while the screen fills with faces
no bigger than when he'd glimpse them
through his morning windscreen,
or at night from down in the hallway,
as they crested the last wooden hill.

It could be they joke
that he still can't pronounce
where they've long gone:
Växjö, Rennes, Coquitlam.

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Or that once a year
they push a candled cake his way
across the dark atmospheric,
so he can lean to the lens
with puffed cheeks,
and afterwards, out of shot,
touch his eyelids
and tighten his lips.

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Delia Inskip

Delia Inskip was love and sweat.
Her hand-me-downs
kept warm the strain of generations,
including older sisters
who didn't properly exist
till ample and pendulous were coined.

She would expand with the school day
into the spaces left behind
by new tee-bar shoes and worked hems,
stare like the lady in the moated grange
at the flecks and cuts
of her far side of the table.

She lived by The Blue Boar
at the end of a broke-back row
and her brother would haunt the pub yard of a dusk
with his bits and bobs of America –
deck shoes, ebony quiff,
windcheater bunched
for the full thumb-and-beltloop thing.
So how's tricks said the winks he'd scatter
at the landlord's bike, punished toilets,
nettles erasing a corner wall

till Delia arrived with the jug,
which he'd take in
and pass to her to hold steady
as they walked together home,
hoping that, for a spell of the night,
the beer would get dad out of Burma.

Nothing answered the brother's winks.
No-one closed on Delia in kiss-chase.
Still he warmed the pub's gatepost,
still she never didn't smile
never didn't move like a mother
waiting only for the years and some bloke
and a niece's outgrown, wonky-spoked pram
to rise up, meet all the promises
of her endless heart.

Holy Trinity RC Junior [Mixed] and Infants School, Bilston, South Staffordshire, 1958-1965.

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