

Ugly Bird

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I Want to Stand Naked in the School Hall

on the podium, mid assembly,
so my presence will be so overbearing no one can look away.
I want their eyes to burn into my skin, examine
its ripples and folds and the scar that digs it up
like a trench in Ypres.

I'd watch a few hundred jaws slowly unhinge,
drop down into a mass of O's, all directed
at my body, lopsided like the projector, its florescent beams
bouncing on my raw flesh so each goosebump
would have its own time in the spotlight.

I want to raise my arms, outstretch my fingertips,
so everyone can see my hairy armpits and wonky tits,
my nipples erect with the cold of a hundred stark looks,
so they'd know, so they'd see, I'm not perfect
and in no way do I want to be. Then,

when I've got their attention, I want to read them a poem
through the headteacher's microphone, full blast
so that each naked syllable in each naked word,
spat from my naked throat, would near burst their eardrums,
before they stood, frozen and agape, then filed out.

Cappuccinos

We don't talk about the night I howled
like someone had shoved a skewer through my earhole.
Or about how Mum, unable to escape my crying,
made me a mug of tea and threw it at the wall.
Or about us all staring at the smashed mug

and the tea running down the paint and dripping
onto the carpet. The tea on my pack of playing cards
branded with *35 reasons why I love you*,
and how 19 reasons turned into a sodden mess
of tea and ink and card. We don't talk

about the packets of paracetamols, about how my sister
slapped me and stuck her fingers down my throat.
How I buckled like a breaking wave, retching out
sticky foam. And how I couldn't eat, my body full
with black jelly. How for weeks I lived on yoghurt pots.

We don't talk about how I was never able
to tell you who I was – *who I am*. But love
was etched in my sore eyes and chapped lips,
in the shrieks and the silence. How it was there
through the blood tests, the interviews.

Instead, we sit at a table, all four of us
eating a banana loaf and sipping cappuccinos,
and my dad says *This is proper coffee*,
not that watery powdered coffee,
these are real beans, strong and dark.

Dunnock

While the Robin pouts and puffs out his chest,
bright plumage ripe for Instagram, and the Wren struts,
throws back her head, bursts into a rendition of ‘Halo’ –
the Dunnock tuts and takes a drag from his cig.

His flat cap bobbing up and down as he shuffle-hops the ground,
and squeaks out a few wobbly notes of corrugated iron:
Ey up Steve, fancy a pint int’ Red Lion? Then he hauls himself
into the air, brown parka flapping in the wind.

He’s the vanilla ice cream of birds, lowest in the pecking order.
A nice chap, but drab, spends his days in the scrub, minding his own,
shuffling about with that awkward gait. And he’s meant to be chuffed
when the priest says – *he’s a model proletariat, seen but not heard.*

What he means is a working-class bird. Out there in the bushes,
with four other dunnocks, all jumping like crickets, arses in the air,
tails proper waggling, doing it in true Rocky Horror fashion.
He winks, that Jack the Lad, chirps out a friendly *fuck you* –

I am the dunnock and I like to screw.

Note: Victorian priests referred to the Dunnock as a model for how the working class should conduct themselves because of its dull, quiet and conservative nature. It was later discovered that the Dunnock is polyamorous and often multiple pairs of males and females will mate together.

Mourning

Monday morning,
and a hand skirts the rim of a polystyrene cup
half empty of instant coffee, perched
haphazardly on a melamine desk.

Its occupant's eyes
scan through a myriad of email texts,
whilst fingers drum out a rhythm
across faded keys.

Tap-tap-tapping,
like the click of a rusty bike chain
hurtling down a hill,
pinned against the wind,

past a blur of trees,
slicing through puddles,
skimming the line of the hedgerow
on a summer's day, twenty-four years ago.

Ruben's Grin

We were playing cowboy shoot out,
and when the imaginary bullet hit his chest
he fell too fast and landed on his back.
His eyes widened and I saw cervices clench
across his cheeks as he strained against tears.

But he didn't cry. He just sat, cross-legged
on the carpet, observing, and after a minute
staggered back up to join in. Shy, when
the others grouped up on tasks,
he worked on his own, sat at the desk

in the corner, between the smart board
and the window, eyes wide like a rabbit
at the blank paper in front of him. I asked
if he needed help and he meekly commented
I'm not good at writing reviews.

He drew some slanted boxes, each bearing
a lopsided dog head, and wrote *Pick a dog
is good because you get to pick cute dogs.*
I suggested he could illustrate the magazine cover.
He asked if we could play the board game he made,

and pulled out a piece of paper and a dice
from his zip-lock plastic wallet. Shook it upside down
to let paper snippings fall out – our *items*,
and explained the rules, words tumbling out
so fast they all slurred together.

He rolled a six, and hiked across a volcano,
acquiring a key. With my wand, as instructed
I put lava on him to make him drop it.
And when I mimicked its hot sizzle – *psssst*,
Fire Boy's smile sparked a fire that lit the room.

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