

A Square of Sunlight

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Meg Cox

smith|doorstop

the poetry business

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For Deborah Alma
poet, generous mentor and loved friend

A Square of Sunlight

She dawdled home as usual through the town with school friends. One was left at the station another at the library. Three of them stopped at the bakers in the High Street for free stale cakes and after some window shopping by the time she reached the Butter Cross she was on her own. She turned into the Close and took the short cut through the Cathedral, in the front and out the back, touching the Jane Austen grave, then hurrying under St Swithuns church, into Kingsgate Street, through the garage to the front door at the back under the scent of ripening pears against the wall. The hall, shadowy dining room and its candle smell, through the breakfast room, by the walk-in larder, shedding satchel, blazer, boater and shoes as she went into the kitchen, back door open, and her dad in his cricket whites, prone and beating his fist on the quarry tiled floor in a square of sunlight.

The Law of Unintended Consequences

I blame my mother.
Aged four I ran home
from school to tell her
my new word 'fuck'.
I didn't say it twice.
She said she didn't
even like to think it,
let alone speak it
and it was a very,
very naughty word.

I said it a lot after that:
in my bedroom
under the bedclothes
savouring its sinful sound,
and aloud when alone
walking the dog
in the water meadows,
practising for my future.

Stan

Cricket Field Road in Horsham
was where I went once a week
for piano lessons with
the village organist, a family friend.

I can remember walking
along that road admiring my feet
in new Clarks sandals
but few other memories.

I do remember a metronome on the top
of the shiny black upright piano
and Stan's shiny black hair.

I would remember more
but luckily for me Stan liked to play
with little boys and not little girls.

'She was the kind of person who keeps a parrot'

Mark Twain

Welsh probably. She wore a hand-knitted grey cardigan,
and a Celtic knot brooch, most of the time.

Brought up by elderly Edwardian parents
in the thickly painted green and brown villa
(brother died in the second world war)
she saw them to their graves, slowly and willingly.
The Townswomen's Guild wouldn't have been
the same without her scones.

The elderly cat foisted on her after the funeral
by the local vicar didn't suit and didn't last.

But then she got Bertie for company.

He was a fabulously riotous, flapping, feathered,
blue, red and yellow fluster of beak and claw,
coarse voiced, free minded, friendly, crapping,
indiscriminate glory of a bird. *Take yer knickers off, darlin'*
the milkman heard the bird say. That's what I know about her.

Showing Promise

When my father was sixteen
he could throw an egg over the house,
run through the rooms
and catch the egg unbroken
in the back garden.
The doors would be open,
his mother in the kitchen
sighing *oh George* as he dashed
and his dad outside
nodding but keeping one eye
on his cabbages –
showing off

The Best Medicine

It must be genetic
that just lying on our backs
made me and my brother laugh.
When we had adjoining bedrooms
our mother would shout up the stairs
stop reading now and go to sleep.
Later she would shout again
stop laughing now.

Adult, I went to yoga classes
and at the end we had to lie
on our backs on our mats and relax
doing yogic breathing but before long
I was asked to leave before that part –
disruptive to meditation.

Come to think of it
lying on my back laughing
has caused me quite a bit of trouble
in the past.

Aldermaston March 1962

I was the dissenter.

I was the one who walked fifty miles
with thousands of others
slept on hard floors
carried a sleeping bag
and four pairs of spare knickers.

I was the one who hardly got to clean my teeth
and peed behind bushes.

I was Joan of Arc
fighting to 'Ban the Bomb'
for the good of the world.

And for Paul the college friend I fancied,
who pleaded with me to do the walk
with him but after the first day
when I opposed his plans
for how we'd sleep, he quickly
got into another girl's sleeping bag,
one which was next to mine
on a smelly village school floor.

1963

The house is in Chatou, a southwest suburb of Paris.
It has proper French tree lined streets and stag beetles
noisily hovering under a fretted iron street lamp.
The kitchen is three times the size of our kitchen,
and foreign, hung with paintings. There are three windows
all without mullions but they aren't doors.
It's dark outside and I'm alone in the house, sitting
on the scrubbed pine table with my bare feet up on the dresser
because I'm painting my toe nails and drinking real coffee.

My book *Bonjour Tristesse* (in French) is open beside me.
I've turned on the radio hoping to hear the Beatles' first LP.
There's some Bach. I fiddle with the dial.
After more solemn music an announcement
Le Président Kennedy est mort.
Above the radio is a sketch of a sparrow by Picasso on a red
mount.
I know now it wasn't an original.
I was kissed by a Frenchman the week before.
I am 19 and this is just the beginning of my life.

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