

Ritual (Those were The Days, My Friend)

Off the playground slewing grit ever onwards in toe-capped troughs, face burning from thirty minutes righteous singing to end a day of plasticine and plimsoll whacks, towards sanctuary in a hug. Then shoulder to waist and out the gate in palm-palm grip to cross the road where Leroy's brains once glistened under tyre. On tarmac there's no black or white, only shades of grey.

Up the hill and past the Custard House with its hobbit door which sometimes popped wide, its scary midget owners scurrying out - one beard, one skirt, but matching macs. Locking up and going on their wonky wheeled way, with tartan trolley- big enough to hide a third in if there was one - bumping off the kerb.

At The Corner, ever wary, Mrs Hobson never came from out behind her counter cage, in case us rats, we fag-end kids stole her out of house and home. So I chose without touching Sherbert Fountains, Curly Wurlies, then you pointed through the wire and the string pulled magic key rose tarnished from between her molten layers of nylonned flesh. Cola Cube scent and Peanut Brittle sweat cloyed to our hair as the door rang closed.

In weather without iced paths or downpours and that sudden hail that pinged off a Parka like bullets off a rock, we'd got to The Park and you'd take the weight off on the third bench read Woman's Own stories or watch the swans beak the weed for bread not thrown yet.

And I'd run as Champion the Wonder-Horse, this mighty cannon-ball of childhood, a mass of sugared up, Silver-Top, scabbed on flesh. All Life was in my swoop between the pines, down that slope to where all that separated me and water were your shouts, sometime rails and lucky heels.

When the light was failing or the Sunblest half floating in swollen pieces at the drain-off, *Time to Go* would come again and I'd be called to side. Before we walked, you'd shoulder bags, pocket papers, make me show you hands and just in case wash mine in the iron spring, take a sip like icy blood for the journey home.

Once I left my pants there in a bush, a knot of dirt, too-late, and Dock leaves, wondering as we stepped out - like mis-matched lovers or Jehovas - whether the mongrel Lassie from nearby flats would follow me home, with a wish to embarrass and my Y-fronts between its teeth. That night I asked for a bath though it wasn't Sunday, and you picked yourself off the floor long enough to run it and quiz me softly, softly whether I was alright, my paisley jim-jams seeming to scream from the radiator *Don't tell her - or there'll be no t.v.*

Most school nights, only home-work punched a hole in my sky. Early days, Peter and Jane butted their shiny faced way between me, sofa and tea. Or spellings, hand writing patterns learnt by the window, as out front the street played on, the number 2 stumping me for hours on end, cos although you said and I could see that it bent like a swan's neck, I just couldn't get it. And later, there were years and years of me digging trenches X foot wide, Y foot deep, of two trains colliding at 78 mph, or the mess of probability, of ox-bow lakes and Ag/silver, Pb/lead all punching a whacking dent in my right to draw castles and spacemen before bed.

Ziggy and Slade pulsed in the other room, TRexstatic guitars grinding through the woodchip, all tugging at sulking elbows on the un-laid table. The slurp-dong of wooden spoons stirring oxtail and flinty clunk of Dad's miss-aimed axe, splitting off-cuts into kindling on the back-step concrete. When it all turns to lard and my brain went, stumped, I'd flatten face to the cool kitchen lino between ideas, nose full of this years menu, lifetime's past knees and belly to Heinz Beans, Birds Eye, and Toast-Topper-vomit from under the grill, baccy strands, clay soles, scuff heels and Lifebuoy soap. I'd lie til a kick in the pants or the release of tea, Nationwide, teeth and bed - all much of a muchness, ritualistic and lovely.