Mossend Memoir

By Linda Arntzenius

Revisiting these childhood streets, I find
no trace of our old tenement—nothing
to jog the memory of a town erased

while the people, gone like flicked ash
from a cigarette tip, dead of drink or lack—
defy erasure—fragments of the past
looming in the forefront of my mind—

Polish Joe the watchmaker, alone and un-mourned,
his pungent breath and sausages, solitary love and kick-dog hurts.

Sheila Pride, dead at thirty of illegitimacy brought on by waist-length hair,
breath-taking as a Geisha's.

Daft Pat McPhee who scared me witless one foggy Halloween,
appearing with a pumpkin grin, silent out of the mist,
too many teeth for his mouth to close on,
bog-Irish and *glaikit*, harmless as a turnip.

Auld Jokey Weir who lived like a hermit in the woods,
mysterious and sufficient.

Geordie Banister in his dark shop,
a cool place for provisions,
butter cut from a half-barrel block
on the marble countertop next to the Scottish Cheddar
and Islay Dunlop.

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His older brother Jim
counting the coins from the folded paper
(my mother's message-list),
splatting butter between two wooden paddles
lifted dripping from a cold-water crock,
solemnly wrapping the patterned pat into a parcel with string,
the accoutrements of his trade and secret workings,
the quiet off-license in the back
where my mother would buy cider on a warm day,
while I skipped across the street to Fordyce's sweet shop
to negotiate for ice blocks or to Coya's marbled café
to ponder the cold smell of Italian wafers.

Sent to buy sausages from Forrest's Butchers,
I'd stand in line in front of the glass cabinet,
shuffling sawdust over the pig's blood
beneath the dripping carcasses.

Loitering in Bessie Smith's, I'd sit on the worn plank counter,
coveting the greengrocer's huge brass scales and weights,
moved to a longing I didn't understand by the earthy smell
of beets and sacks of potatoes.

Home early from school on a Wednesday
in gymslip and knee socks,
sent to the back door of the bakery
to ask Mr. Symington for burnt rolls
(*well-fired* my mother called them *don't ask for burnt),*
mesmerized by his lumpy face and hands, pallid and sticky
as the dough he laid out on the floury trays—

Comforting and troubling
they crowd the burning glow
my Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednego
who will not be consumed
in the ripening drag's fiery combustion
holy smoking resurrection.

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