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poems
by
doctors

The Not-Parents

Siân Hughes

taught me things I was not supposed to know. Until he threw
the television out the window
they taught me to watch old films late at night, and to notice
odd things in the background,
anomalies, plot-twists, the words to old musicals, how to be
alone in the woods after dark,
to be afraid of game-keepers, poisons, people at work, visits
from step-children, debt, divorce,
low cloud on the hill, the cliff-edge, a change in the weather
that stops the fire from burning.
They taught me things that I forgot, names of flowers, herbs,
all the different coloured drinks
they kept for decoration in cut glass decanters. How to make
good bread, keep a fire overnight.
How to watch. How to keep very still, downwind, and wait
for badgers under the trees.
That comfort smells of log fires, wet coats, good whisky, cigarettes,
that laughter is a trick
that cracks your voice open, then you spray it with a blue plastic
gun that lets you breathe.
When the stepson and his girlfriend were ‘messaging about’ upstairs
they taught me
this was sex, and funny, and no reason to be shy. They taught
me to make pickles, put things by,
to love your animals because when you’re waiting for the
ambulance at the end of the lane an
old cat is comfort, to marry someone who makes you laugh,
even if he throws the television
out of the window, then mixes so many pills with gin you have
to call the ambulance.
She taught me how easily we die. All you need is bronchitis,
asthma, hatred of hospitals
and half an hour alone. She taught me grief, all the time I knew
her, for the child she never had,
places she left, and felt she never could go back to. She did not
know how useful this would be
when she said ‘you’re a woman of the world, you know what
goes on’ and I didn’t know
what either of those things meant. She taught me love comes
in unexpected boxes,
left on the doorstep, fed with a bottle and returned to the wild.
It was love she taught me,
all the bad things she taught me, holding her old cat in the dark
under the trees,
waiting for the blue lights to flicker on the hedges and the pieces
of glass
where they fell among the nuts she left out for wild birds and
badger cubs, the night
the television went out of the window, and she waited under
the trees they taught me
everything they knew about love.

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