

The Kids are Alright?

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THE KIDS

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POETRY BOOK SOCIETY CHOICE





The Register

That first September, I climbed the blue stone steps,
past Shakespeare's doubtful face, an old mosaic
of Jamaica, and the ruby blot of lips
where last year's girls had kissed the schoolhouse brick.
Now this year's crop pushed past, all clattery-chat,
their first-day back – *Whassup? Salaam!* – the Fugees
blaring from someone's phone: *Ready or not...*
And with that old white dog still barking softly

in my head, I walked the sugar-papered hall
and pushed the classroom door to find a sprawl
of teenagers sat waiting, my 're-sitters',
all back to do what they'd already failed.
I took my seat, and called the register
Deniz, Tyrone, Alicia, Chantelle –

The Art of Teaching II

Boredom hangs like a low cloud in the classroom.
Each page we read is a step up a mountain
in gluey boots. Even the clock-face is pained
and yes, I'm sure now, ticking slower. If gloom
has a sound, it's the voice of Leroy reading
Frankenstein aloud. And if we break
to talk, I know my questions are feeble sparks
that won't ignite my students' barely beating

hearts. There is no volta here, no turn,
just more of the same: the cloud sinking ever lower,
the air damper, yet more rain. And the task
is unchanging, like spending years chasing a monster
you yourself created. Leroy asks
if he can stop reading. I say, for now, he can.

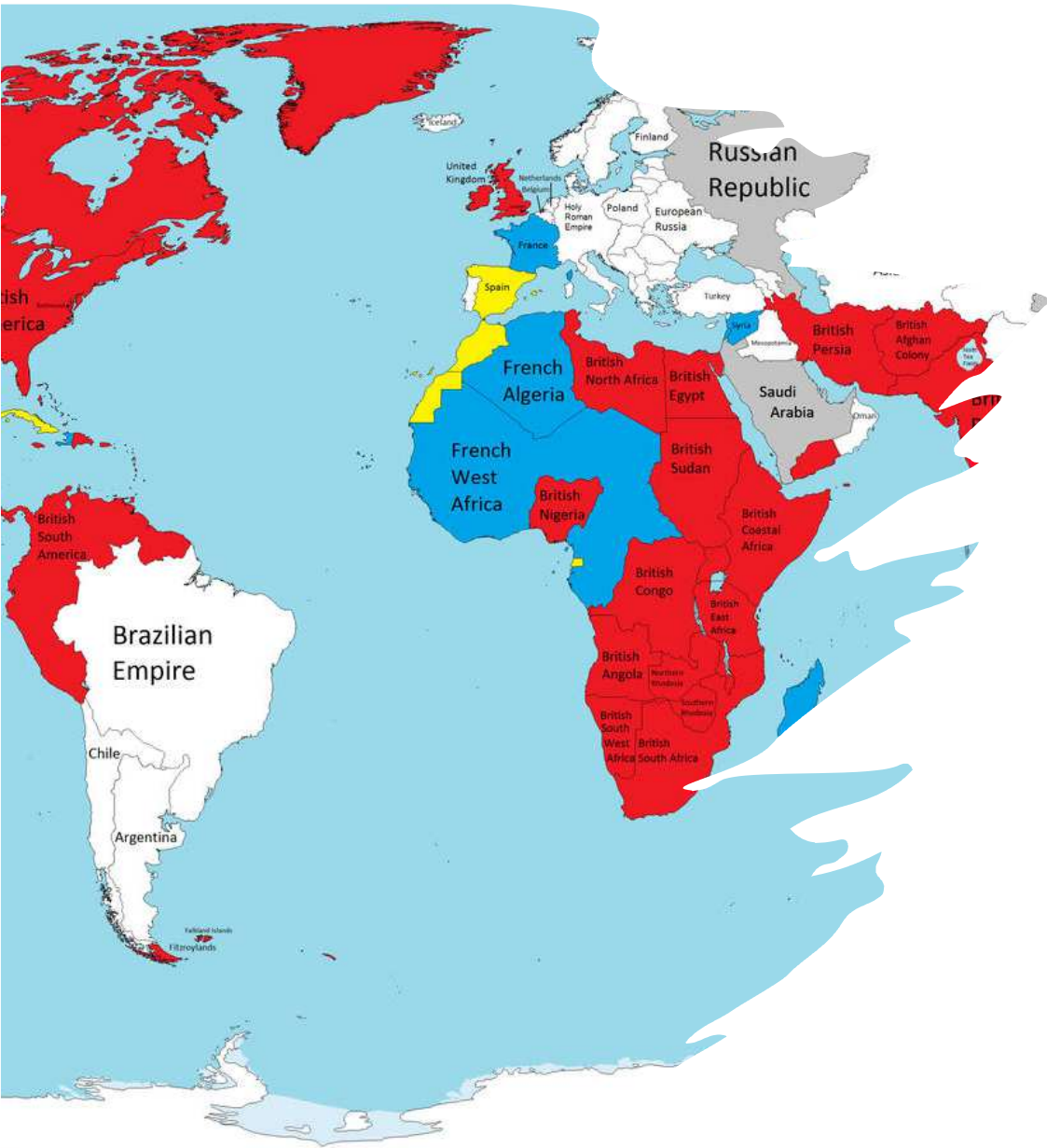
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The Only English Kid

When the debate got going on 'Englishness',
I'd pity the only English kid – poor Johnny
in his spotless Reeboks and blue Fred Perry.
He had a voice from history: *Dunno-miss,*
Yes-miss, No-miss – all treacly-cockney,
rag-and-bone – and while the others claimed Poland,
Ghana, Bulgaria, and shook off England
like the wrong team's shirt, John brewed his tea

exclusively on Holloway Road. So when Aasif
mourned the George Cross banner swinging freely
like a warning from his neighbour's roof,
the subway tunnel sprayed with MUSLIM SCUM,
poor John would sit there quietly, looking guilty
for all the awful things he hadn't done.



Technology

Suddenly computers,
screens, an electronic pen
so off the cuff,
I'd ping a poem up –

To Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love
or a drawing of the Pardoner,
an image of an ivory tusk
or a map –

one that showed
the 'heyday' of the British Empire,
the pale blue sea around
the places half those kids
had sort of come from once,
shaded rich and bloody red.

Janine

was a Monday-morning-queasy-feeling.
I was never ready for her choice of sting:
the late strut-in, teeth-kissing, rolling eyes,
my protests thwacked away like swatted flies.
Or else the bleat of questions questions questions,
her pinging hand, a jack-in-the-box, a gun
she kept on firing, asking over and over
why we couldn't study *Harry Potter*

or worse, the searing telescopic stare
I winced in as she coiled a lock of hair
around the middle finger that shone at me.
And this went on for months, until somebody
said the thing – and finally bought ease:
my dad was half Jamaican, half Chinese –

Janine I

My dad was half Jamaican, half Chinese?
Her question at my office door. Her face
gone softer, searching mine for vestiges
of blackness, as if she'd find a sign, a trace
the more she sought. And when I told her yes,
was some fire put out? It's hard to know
what heat, or presume a heat at all, or guess
the stakes when teachers rarely look like those

they teach. The whiteness of my skin has been
confusion, chaos, agency. Janine
was nicer, after – all *whatssup Miss?* and *hey!*
like neither me nor her remembered Monday's
knackering, spun-out war. She'd dropped her gun.
I'd somehow been excused. I'd been forgiven.



Pink Hummingbird

for John Toolan

The postcard he sent you in that long wet summer had, on one side, a pale pink hummingbird and overleaf, his notes on your essay on Faulkner in his usual turquoise ink; the words, you imagined, written in sunlight on the bed of his book-stuffed flat, each weighed with care like a love letter, though it was you who wanted him. All summer, you waited for September:

to be back in the tattered classroom,
the tables pushed together, and him at the top
like a doting father, or a bridegroom,
or like God, if God wore Doc Marten shoes
and a silver sleeper in one ear – not the God
you didn't believe in, but one who believed in you.

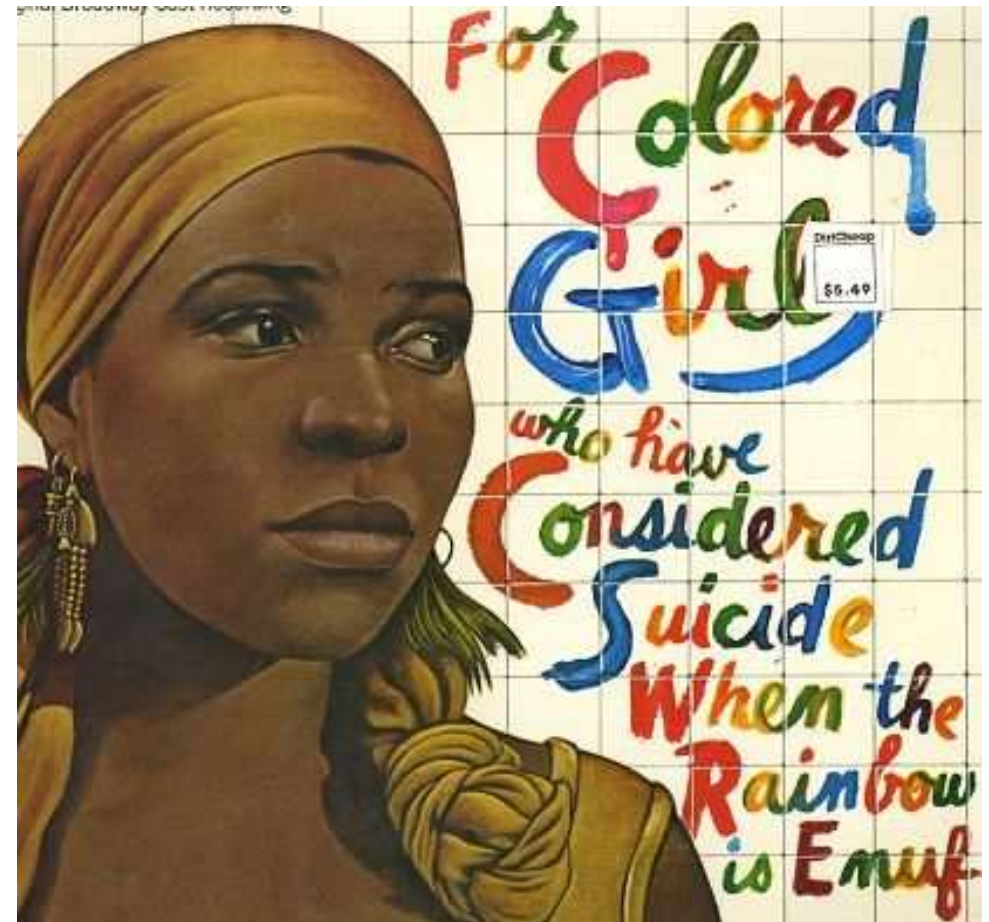
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For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf

Our vowels were flat as the dead fish that floated
in Dagenham Docks, but still John made us
recite these lines meant for black women who said
i have/ poems/ big thighs/ lil tits which made us blush
as our estuary tongues went tripping
over *cuz* and *enuf*, and the slashes the poet
scattered over her page, and the whole bloody thing
was set to dance and on another planet

compared to Essex and my pals – whose mums
served up school dinners, whose dads worked nights at Fords.
We could just make out the half-rubbed words
of last year's kids – like *patriarchy*, *nationhood* –
and soon I biro'ed in my own new terms:
hegemony, *resistance*, *sisterhood*.

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The Sixth-Form Theatre Trip

This is more like bloody dog-walking than teaching –

Anonymous

You've got more dogs than you can count. Big dogs
and small. One badass dog in headphones mooching
up the aisle. A dog who's smuggled in a hot dog.
Two loving dogs, back row, already smooching.
Some dogs are up on haunches, barking. A dog
or two already dozing, heads in paws,
dog-sighing and dreaming. The other theatre-dogs
look down their snouts – a pair of tutting Chow-Chows,

some sloany Poodles in the box. But when
the curtains lift, and your dogs are hypnotized –
their ears like little hoisted sails, the wag
of tails, their shining dog-hearts fling wide open.
They know these words, these lines, memorized
like buried bones. And don't you love your dogs?