
JAMES ARTHUR

School for Boys

I believe in the power of original sin,
in the wound
that keeps on wounding. The son
of the suicide
becomes a suicide. His own son
becomes a drunk. You're not meant
to be so unhappy,
you think, so it must be something
that you've done;
there must be a reason why you are
the way you are.

I've forgiven the teenage pedophile
who lived a few doors down
when I was seven.
The things he did to me
I'm sure were done to him at home.
Sunday afternoons, I'd be sent out
into the yard,
where I could do no harm, beyond
decapitating
my mother's tulips, or torturing
the roly-polys
in the rotted-out retaining wall
around the flower bed.

I and other boys would fight,
shoplift, or wreck each other's fortresses
of plywood boards
and brick. Or earn a nickel from the beer store

for every bottle that we found
in the no-man's-land of alleys that ran
both north and south.

The anger, the shame:
over time, these things just become
a piece of who you are.
You build around them, since you can't
burn them down.
One boy, by far the most precocious forager
in our tribe, stole a box
of 3-D movie glasses
from the loading dock behind the Cineplex
and brought it to my parents' house
with the idea
that we'd sell the glasses pair by pair
at school, but the box sat below the deck,
going nowhere. In time
its contents were scattered and destroyed.

In time, I was sent to a private school dedicated
to forming the whole boy:
his body, his conscience, his character,
his mind.
There, too, some men did prey on children
in darkness
of a different kind. My fellow students
gave me
lessons on strength and weakness
that I will not forget.

And yet, many of the faculty—masters,
they were called—
were among the most decent men I've known.
One giant of a physics teacher,

who sometimes
 would grab boys by the collar
 or roar into their faces while gripping them
 by the ear
 (the man roamed the corridors scowling,
 on a rolling cloud of fear),
 brought me into his office,

and, after making me swear I'd never tell
 another boy, opened a sketchpad
 of watercolor paintings. They were his own:
 the most fragile
 lilies, snapdragons, and other flowers,
 unfolding like translucent creatures
 from the ocean floor.

He let me sit there in silence
 turning pages for half an hour. *Life*
is not a boys' school,
 he told me. *Be one man for the world*
and another for yourself.
 Then he put his paintings away
 on a high shelf.

When I was seven, all of that
 lay far ahead. In my grade-two class
 there was a pale, elfin redhead
 (I won't say his name),
 whose mother always sent him to school
 in a tie and blazer.
 How many times we made that boy cry
 I just don't remember.
 He said he was an extraterrestrial
 in disguise, that his people
 would soon arrive and kill us, every one,

or take us off
to be vivisected. And his story didn't change
when we threw his books

into the trash. Or when we pinned him
to the ground
and made him eat the dirty snow.
I think I half believed him.
But his people never came.