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Back of the Class

Julia Bell

I'm 17. I'm wearing a pastel pink outfit picked especially from Dorothy Perkins in Carmarthen. It doesn't suit me, but I have no sense then of what might suit me outside the small world of Bible Stories and Church and school. I am wildly ambitious, but I don't know how to realise this. I think this interview might somehow show me the way.

I know that I'm smart enough to have won some writing competitions for my poetry and short stories, to have read my way through the Brontes and Austen and Orwell and be on good terms with Wordsworth and Keats and Shakespeare. For the entrance paper I wrote an essay on Truth and Beauty, sat in the school library invigilated by the kindly RS teacher who sat and read a book, while I filled several sides of A4 with my erratic handwriting and made an argument for the romantic imagination. My education so far has been knitted together from a shelf of old Encyclopaedia Britannicas, the Bible, Welsh poetry and 80s pop songs.

Jesus College, Oxford, 1988, much the same then as it is today, or 450 years ago for that matter. There is a sense of permanence here which has the reassuring thickness of museum air. Nothing has changed for centuries, and nothing will change. No one from my school has ever applied to Oxford before – a Comprehensive School with a catchment area of 30 miles. A good school – which I love, partly because it is a respite from home which is troublesome – and partly

because it *is* a good school, an example of how proper comprehensive education can work in a society that respects and values education as a common social good. All of us are thrown in together whatever our ability, and there are still Metalwork and Woodwork and Design Technology Labs, where there is a swimming pool and a sports hall and a kitchen for Home Economics and a big portacabin for Pottery and Art. And a huge school hall where we put on a yearly school production of Shakespeare and suffer the stuffy, and at times - bum-numbingly boring School Eisteddfod.

Eisteddfod – a peculiarly Welsh experience where you learn to recite Welsh poetry or sing Cerdd Dant – a difficult kind of singing with voice and a harp which requires perfect pitch and an ability to carry a different tune to the harp. Eisteddfod, an event which no one outside Wales seems to understand or care about. If you are good at School Eisteddfod, you might make it to the town Eisteddfod where the counties compete to send their best to the National Eisteddfod. This is where the real talent shows itself – future TV stars or opera singers or classical musicians – Gwawr Edwards, Bryn Terfel, Owain Llwyd, and the beloved Cerys Matthews are all Eisteddfod veterans. Eisteddfod is a celebration of Welsh culture, but it's also a talent contest. Every good school in Welsh-speaking Wales will have amongst its alumni winners or runners up at the National Eisteddfod. But because it happens in Wales – where it is perceived that the people are generally slow and backward and impoverished and were conquered many hundreds of years ago – the art is considered quaint and

nostalgic, not a relevant part of the national conversation, and we even have the worst Prince.

I already have a sense of these things, because although I have grown up in Wales, and can speak Welsh our family is still English. Our roots pulling us back to Devon every Summer holiday, I know from trying to explain to other children about Eisteddfod over the years not to bother to try. I won the school Eisteddfod poetry competition however, for which I have a trophy – a crown made by the metalwork teacher – and this is on my application form.

I am to stay overnight in a room at the college, because my interviews are early in the morning and I have two – one with the admissions tutor another with the Dean. They give me a room in the attic with a view of the spires. Crenulated, aspirational, classical. Here is history, pomp and circumstance, tradition, security.

I go and hang out in the common room, with its green seats and big red Chesterfield and bright lighting and watch the other candidates. I speak to a girl – woman – who seems much older than me. She has glossy hair and a sheeny purple dress that comes from the kinds of shops I have not yet seen or shopped in. There is an M&S in Carmarthen – about an hour away from home, which is where all posh clothes in our house come from. I think she's called Rosalind, or it could be Olivia, everyone appears to have names from Shakespeare. She tells me she's at Roedean. I've only ever heard of the place spoken about in hushed tones by my maternal grandmother, who herself was a bit of posh – she knew her way around the social circuit of Bristol and Bath in the 1920s and early 30s. Her

father ran the paper company Basildon Bond. And judging from the love letters she left me, knew how to have a bit of fun. But someone that had been to *Roedean* was a bit like someone who had been to *Eton*, essentially, posh, and better than us in some mysterious way that was never really explained.

Class, at this point in my life, is generally a bit of a mystery, although I know we are, supposedly middle class, but we are also in some way mongrel. We live in a shabby draughty vicarage, and we have no money. We qualify for free school dinners and wear homemade and second-hand clothes and trainers from Peacocks that smell of industrial glue. And my paternal grandmother is from the whole other side of the tracks. One of nine, brought up above a pub in Norwich, she hardly has any money to rub together. She reads the Daily Mail and has a curly Norfolk accent.

The church keeps us close to the state, but even in Wales the church is different. The Church *in* Wales not the Church of England. We are a province of the Anglican Communion the head of whom is the Archbishop of Canterbury, with all the historical weight that carries. And on top of that we are Evangelical, which means we look to America as much as Canterbury. These are the structures of the world as I understand it. I know instinctively that all the parade and brocade, chalice and ceremony, signify something very old. But the guitars and the tongues they are something else, something new.

But we are also taught in Welsh classes about how the English enforced the English language in school by the use of The Welsh Not. The Not was a slate hung around the neck, on which *Welsh Not* was written. It was given to the first

child heard to be speaking Welsh in the playground and typically, the last child to be wearing the token at the end of the day would get a punishment – usually the cane. Although it wasn't policy, it was widely practised, and not just in Wales but across the Empire, with other indigenous languages. O.M. Edwards writes movingly in his memoir about his school in Bala where the bullies – *y bechgyn drwg* – would taunt him until he replied, of course, instinctively, unconsciously, in Welsh. For this he would have to wear The Not and then get caned. The consequence of this was the rather mournful comment in his biography – *'blynyddoed chwerw oedd dyddiau ysgol I mi – bitter years were my schooldays to me.*

In the log book of the British School in Aberaeron – the precursor to my school – they recorded in 1889 *"Cannot get the children from the habit of talking in Welsh; the school as a whole is backward in English."*

There it is. *Backward.* Still, there are arguments about the continued teaching of Welsh in schools in Wales, claims that it limits attainment and that fewer pupils from Welsh speaking schools go on to top universities. But I don't know any of this yet. All I know is that Jesus College smells familiar, like wood polish and old churches, dusty, creaky buildings and ancient ways of doing things. I sit on the battered Chesterfield, ox-blood red, and wonder at my chances. This college apparently prides itself on being a Welsh college – many of its alumni have Welsh roots. But we chose it of course, not because of any particular association with Wales, but because it's named after Jesus, Our Lord and Saviour, with whom my parents have a very personal relationship.

Rosalind, or Olivia, tells me that she is going to study Politics. She does not seem anxious about her chances, she seems already adult in her department and confidence, like she belongs here.

'Good luck!' She breezes at me, before spotting someone that she knows and scooting off to join them. She is exactly the thing, whatever that thing is, that I have come here to attain. But the more I want it, the more impossible it is to pin down.

They take us on a tour of the building. The dates slide past me 1571, 1639, 1853. There are pictures of Lawrence of Arabia. The dining room is a hall with a high table, with panelling and oil paintings of men who are famous Deans of the college. Remembering it now, I'm expecting a sorting hat and an appearance by Dumbledore. Being a student here involves being treated as if you are special, and who doesn't want to feel special?

I make a phone call home with a ten pound green BT Phonecard. It seems like the future of technology. I watch Tomorrow's World and marvel at the new mobile phones and the ever more powerful computers, the objects that will go on to transform my future. I use about a pound telling the parents I'm OK, watching the pixelated numbers counting down in the liquid crystal display.

After I'm finished, a boy approaches me. He has high colouring like me, getting redder as he approaches. All my adolescence I will suffer with this, blushing fiercely with anxiety whenever someone talks to me. I am trained to be good and helpful but underneath I am self-conscious and brittle and eager to

please in a way which is pushing my personality out of shape, because I am hungry for the world beyond mine, for what is out there. But I dare not show it. We are a public family, made special by our mission to convert the world to Jesus. People are watching.

The red-faced boy has short hair and big shoulders. He's podgy and he stammers. He asks in an incredibly posh accent if he can borrow my Phonecard.

I'm reluctant to give it to him, but it seems like a small request. I suppose he'll pay me for the use of it. I've got enough credit for several long phone calls. I'm only going to be here for twenty-four hours, my father will be coming to pick me up tomorrow. Sharing is caring, right?

He takes it and puts it in his pocket and mumbles a thank you to his shoes. I feel sorry for him because his face is the colour of a cooked ham.

I signal to him that I'll be waiting in the common room, next to the phones, while he makes his call, but I'm not sure he's understood me. He can't even look at me. The whole encounter is so awkward and free of the usual conversational dignity, I wonder if he's ever spoken to a girl before.

I sit in the common room, reading Keats, the subject of my entrance paper. Specifically, Ode to A Grecian Urn. What do you think Keats meant by the line "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty*"? That is my question.

Here is Keats in the full flow of his youth, marvelling at some Greek pottery in the British Museum, awed by an artefact and the depth of history represented by it. A cold pastoral, full of happy, happy love and mad pursuit. His phrases echo through literature. I have not yet been to the British Museum, nor

to Greece although I am well versed in history and gorged on the Bible. But I have yet to actually see a Grecian urn, the women playing lyres, the tunics, the flat faces and the priapic scenes. To the Christians, the Greeks were idolatrous, St Paul standing on the steps to the Acropolis preaching to the Athenians about false Gods.

But what did Keats mean, actually? T.S. Eliot thought the question ruined the poem and it's not clear who speaks this line. I make an argument that it's the vase, transcending time, which says this. The poet implying that an artefact is more eloquent than any written history. Evidence speaking louder than language. And if I had known it then I would have quoted Susan Sontag: 'What do we have from the past? Art and thought. That's what lasts.' Keats is marvelling at this sudden revelation and finding it beautiful.

But there is another argument that is unwritten, which I don't know how to articulate yet. I have not yet read Foucault's observation that 'truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.' I have yet to consider how the truth is connected to power and knowledge and who gets to speak. Because the truth is often not beautiful. Maybe it is, in this, the romantic moment of Keats' new-born wonder. Mostly the truth is ugly, dirty and sad, and people will often go to any lengths to hide from it. The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off. And in our family, there is only the Truth and it is more likely to come with a leaflet which tells you about Jesus.

The boy with my phonecard does not come back. I get up and check in the corridor but there is no one there. He must have forgotten or something. It does not occur to me that borrowing might actually mean using and not returning.

I spend the night in an attic room with a small window that has a view over the rooftops. Matthew Arnold's dreaming spires. Chimney stacks and green lead rooves, crosses and statuary and all manner of architectural fol-de-rol.

I write in my notebook, haunted by Ted Hughes and his Thought Fox. So much poetry! I want some kind of sign, a mystical dream, that tells me I am chosen too, but nothing comes. I sleep in a strangers' bed listening to the creaks of old houses. The sound of footsteps and distant laughter outside. I want this more than anything I've ever wanted. I want to be taught. I am so ready.

*

I knock on the door. There is no reply. I check my watch and the names on the list beside the door. It's my name and my turn. I knock again. My chest flutters. I don't know what to do. I knock a third time and then, gritting my teeth, enter.

There are three people in the room; a woman is lying on a chaise lounge, which is by the door, in the corner is a man, who has a black moustache and curly hair, who I discover is the admissions tutor and later, when I read Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, I imagine that Howard Kirk, looks just like him. There is an empty chair in the room, which when I sit makes me higher than

everyone in the room, and behind this chair, slouched against a bookshelf, sits another man.

The room seems so impractical. Why are they not all sat behind a desk? The woman seems bored, not even looking at me, and being higher in the room makes me feel as if I'm at sea. The floor appears to move around me. I can sense there are rules here, but I don't understand what they are.

By now I am irradiated by nerves. My jaw feels loose, and my face is starting to colour. I am full of cortisol, the small vessels of my body on high alert. The animal part of my body is entering a primal mode of defence. Fight or flight or freeze. Perceiving high danger, the processes of my body act as if I am about to be attacked. My blood vessels contract to conserve blood, this, and my pounding heartbeat is having a ruinous effect on my mind.

I look at the woman who is lying on the chaise longue. I remember her as Pre-Raphaelite, red hair like Ophelia, more than anything, bored. She catches my eye and looks away out of the window.

A question is fired at me from Howard Kirk.

'You wrote about Keats. Why do you think he's important?'

My mouth is so dry it seems almost stuck together. My tongue like lead, I'm turning the reddest puce colour. The woman on the chaise, flicks a glance at me and seems to curl her lip into a smirk. Behind me, the man I can't see coughs.

I stutter out some lines about Keats' importance to the romantic movement. But I'm struggling to think. Everything I've ever known about anything has flown. I know I know the answer to this: a good answer, a confident

answer, but accessing it seems to involve trying to think with a brain that is thick as tar.

‘You said in your essay that for Keats the Grecian urn is beautiful because it is evidence. Evidence of what? What did you mean?’

This question comes from behind me. From someone I can’t see. Panic, now. I can’t remember. I can’t remember. And the question is phrased in such a way as to sound like an accusation. Am I wrong? I feel wrong.

I can’t remember what I said, another mumble, and then the woman, stretching herself, and looking at the ceiling as if she’d rather be anywhere but here, interviewing me, says

‘You said you work for hospital radio on your form.’

I nod. I do. Saturday mornings in the portacabin outside Bronglais Hospital. The lonely old ladies wanting to listen to Jim Reeves sing Amazing Grace.

‘Yes.’

‘Why do you think people listen to the radio?’

This at least is a question I know the answer to, although I’m still unsure. In this situation I feel as if anything I say could be written down and used in evidence.

‘Erm, because they’re lonely.’

She smirks. Naïve again, but what else should I say?

‘So do you think that the radio should be under the auspices of the Social Services then?’

I don't know what she means. I don't really know what Social Services do. I've done a GCSE in Politics, but the structures of government and citizenship are not really taught in school. You pick it up - or not - by osmosis. To me, Social Services are the people who are called in to take care of neglected children, like the girl at school who was taken away from her parents. I can't work out what they might have to do with lonely old ladies. Who does take care of the radio, anyway? The BBC? By now I'm aware I'm taking far too long to answer the question. And I still fighting through my hard, clenched body, which is pouring with sweat and shame.

'I don't know. Yes. I suppose.'

It's the stuff of nightmares, with the exception that I'm not naked. Obsessively, I keep wondering why the room is laid out this way, nothing makes sense. Does that woman despise me? What is the man behind me doing? Howard Kirk appears to be doodling on his notepad. They are laughing at me. They are laughing at me. The stuffed bookshelves behind them seem to go in and out of focus. The part of me, that is expansive, curious, shrivels inside.

Why was the room arranged in that way? This is the question I ask myself later down the years, when the shame of that day has faded to a bruise. Was it a trap or a test? If a test, what was it testing? If a trap, what was it trying to ensnare?

In that chair in spite of everything – *everything* – that I knew, I could remember nothing. My mind became like a blank sheet. I experienced it all at once as completely terrifying and utterly humiliating. In spite of all my learning I

was efficiently muted by my own fear. But of course, I didn't know that yet. What I experienced was a vivid sense of shame, of not being good enough, and of being an object of fun because of this perceived inadequacy.

A 2014 study from Bristol University found that there is a direct neural pathway between the front of the brain and the part of the brain responsible for the freeze response. In a life or death situation, playing dead can be just as effective against predation as running away.

Elite athletes who measure their bodies in micro, whose careers depend on the most miniscule of percentages, understand that getting control over panic and anxiety might mean the difference between winning and losing. Armies of sport psychologists are deployed to train thought control to help calm nerves and override primal instincts. But none of this is innate, it takes knowledge, practise, and control to overcome.

Now I can see how my particular neural pathways were set – my bespoke set of triggers – the biological processes which were the conditions of my childhood. A trained urge to please common to most women; the cultural expectation of an honest game which comes from the Welsh sense of *fair play, boyo, fair play*; the underpinning queerness which makes me a stranger in more normative environments. The primal parts of my body are groomed to read extreme danger into the scrutiny of these stratified social situations and to send me into a state of mind bordering on catatonic.

What was that room set up for? It was not to test what I knew. But to test my body against itself. To see how far I could hold my nerve. Handle an

unexpected arrangement of chairs. A small danger which my primitive self understood as catastrophic. Here is Foucault's Bio-Power and even Bio Politics in action. Bio-power means to literally have power over bodies – 'an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations.'

What Foucault means is that our biology is a site of state and social control. Some of this is overt – issues around abortion for example, or the right to die. But much of this is covert. The explosion in anxiety disorders amongst the young must in a way tell us something radical about the way in which politics is being played out on wider society, or what's left of it. The constant testing and ranking, which moves us far away from human-centred, holistic education, is producing a generation of clinically anxious children.

Social control works best if its unconscious, and so many of our ideas about how to live are located in the body – in hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares – that it becomes easy to manipulate a population. Propaganda wouldn't work, unless it worked on the body. Provoked primal responses in the population, made them afraid, or ashamed – because (Foucault again) 'power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of the population.'

And anyway, who does pass this kind of test? Who is this establishment? In that interview I was subject to the exertion of a biological power, not just a discursive one. It was a kind of sadistic hazing. To ensure that the powerful will not be the most noble or the most knowledgeable or the most intelligent, but

rather those most able to conquer their dislocation, their nerves, those who believe that they are worth it, that they already own it. The game did not, nor will it ever, belong to a vicar's daughter from Wales, who is a bit queer.

The other vicar's daughter, the one I might have been in a more Anglican, English, environment, toils at the top of politics, to keep the establishment in power. To defend the men of her class. These kind of dry, bullied, sadistic women, seem exactly a product of the perversity of church and class that is the English Establishment, right down to the church-fete dancing and naff fashion.

But the tragedy is there is so much talent wasted, so many silenced. The best minds of my generation are certainly not currently in power, but rather those who fit a narrow range of biological, as much as socio-economic criteria. For what is intelligence if not a product of the brain, and by extension the body, a mysterious set of nervous connections that scientists are still trying to chart?

What is preserving itself here is a system. Ensuring that a narrow group of people will go on to become the English elite, propped up by a set of conservative rules and world views. Who did get in to Oxford back then? I would point you now to Westminster. To Boris and Cameron and Gideon and the Bullingdon club boys and their influential fathers and their friends in finance. And those on the sketchy shuttle bus between Westminster and the media, and the Treasury and the City. To the mess we're in. And this small group, chosen for their psychopathic tendencies and their upholding of the old traditions of Englishness can no longer prepare a British Isles – made up of all its various

peoples – for the forces of modernity. For our real place in the world, for the consequences of Empire.

This is the shrinking Kingdom of the English, who subjugated Wales and Scotland and Ireland. They may be in power, but to what effect? What consequence? The country is far more brittle and divided than they can see. The biggest problem of elite cliques is myopia. They are the believers who still, somewhere, think that the map of the world is pink. But they forget their Classics lessons. What happens when an empire falls? With no one else to dominate, the establishment turns on own people. We become subjects, not of the British Empire, but of the last dregs of the English upper classes. Which makes the fact that Oxford is, by its own analysis, letting in even fewer ‘non-traditional’ students now that it was in 1987, a glaring piece of evidence about how the knot is being tightened even more firmly around the bag of family silver.

I wonder now about all the other kids like me, the ones at odd angles, the queer and working class and black, or even just Northern, or Welsh, or provincial. This is not a place for them, however loudly they might be knocking on the door. Not until the narrow world view expounded within the walls of this Harry Potter World for Grown Ups is revealed for what it is – the site of production of many of the misjudgements made by the ‘natural party of government’ over the past ten years. This is my generation of politicians. See how they shine.

After the interview I roam the quad, I know I have fucked up, something which is confirmed a few weeks later in a letter which tells me that my entrance paper was of high quality and in itself would have earned me a place, but my performance at interview was so poor they were not going to make an offer.

It takes a long time to undo some of the trauma of that day. For a long time afterwards, I have a neurotic sense of not being smart enough to speak. Of abject failure – of being laughable in my ambitions. Why would *you* think you belonged here?

Throughout my life I will meet people who have been to Jesus College, or rather versions of it. Many of them work in publishing and the media. Many of them live in London. At one excruciating publishing dinner I sat between two grandees reminiscing about their time at Cambridge, making jokes in Latin over my head.

I see the red-faced boy across the quad and I run to ask him about my phonecard. He mumbles something and fishes it out of his pocket, now bent and dogeared. When I try to use it later to make a phone call I discover that he's used all the credit. In this way, my Oxford interview taught me exactly everything I needed to know.