

Playtime

One class at a time they let us out –
Miss Reilly and Mr McCormack

whose hand we had seen her holding,
and Mr Murphy whose wife she became.

In the days when grown-ups
were still in charge they always knew

what we needed: fresh air
and a space to let it off as steam.

Drawing blood on a regular basis,
the flint in the walls was lethal,

salvaged from an abbey
whose ruins loomed above us.

To play the game of Chariots
you only needed a friend –

your arms locked behind you,
you'd skim the corners like Ben Hur.

The first shrill of the whistle
stopped us all in our tracks.

The second shuffled us into Years.
Any time we stepped out of line

was like a venial sin.
The mortal sins were dealt with later.

Goliath

The day I floored Mick Kavanagh
defending my granddad's interests,

we had crossed fields to reach the shambles
at the end of the big man's boreen –

a morning's adventure together,
if I helped fetch the sucking calf.

The deal sealed with spit and a snifter,
they were making the most of the visit,

when talk turned to boxing
and my half-hearted career.

I must have missed a wink
between them – when it seemed

the giant was set to renege –
just as he saw nothing coming ...

However the calf skittered
across the squelching fields home,

my grip on its halter was iron,
my gum booted stride transcendent.

Drink

He has a way with a pint that hints
at who he is. It starts as the ale is drawn,
his eyes moving from the barmaid's chest

to her grip on the polished wood
of the pump. Along the tilted side
of the glass, the liquid rises

as if spelling danger, or re-establishing
an equilibrium, while the over-lively froth
gushes forth like loose talk

before it drains into the slops;
and when the measure's attained,
with a small headspace left,

she sets it up on the counter
for him to assay. He pauses briefly,
holds it up, then gives it a quarter turn,

staring into it like a talisman,
or the dark mirror that shows him
what he needs to see.