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An introduction to three poems from “Sugar Mile”

by Glyn Maxwell

This man—me—walks into a pub on Broadway in the golden early September of 2001, opens his notebook on the bar, and starts trying to write a poem. My work is interrupted by an old man called Joey Stone, who laughs to see me crossing out words. He tells me he is there to mark a significant date. It is sixty-one years to the day since “Black Saturday,” the first mass daylight bombing of London, the onset of what became known as the Blitz. Joey had noticed I was British, and thought I’d know this stuff. But I don’t, and I say no more for the rest of *The Sugar Mile*. It is a book of other voices.

Joey settles into his chair by the window, and, as the beer and the sunny afternoon begin to send him towards sleep, memories come. Over the course of the weekend, as he wakes or dozes, as the barman Raul clears up around him, chatting about the English, or girls, or the glories of New York, and as this man—me—sits silently at the bar, Joey relives those terrible three days, which will culminate in the worst incident of civilian loss of life suffered by the British in the war. Joey was fifteen and delivered papers to a family called the Prays. Their father worked at Tate and Lyle, one of the great sugar factories clustered near the docklands. When their home is destroyed on Black Saturday, the family is evacuated to a school. Joey is fascinated by the sisters Sally and Julie (the latter struck dumb by what’s happened), friendly with the elder brother Harry, and barely tolerated by the younger brother Robby—who never lets Joey forget he is half-Italian and therefore “the enemy.” He follows them to their shelter in the school. There they wait for the three London buses that, they have been promised, will carry them to the safety of rural England.

Two days and nights go by, there’s no sign of the buses, the bombs rain down around them, and London burns. Huddled together with hundreds of others in a few classrooms, the Prays and Joey try to keep their spirits up, gossiping, telling stories, imagining the countryside—a place they have never seen—imagining a life after this, a future. Gradually, Joey’s memories reveal one beautiful secret in a wilderness of ruin.

Glyn Maxwell's most recent book of poems is *The Sugar Mile*, forthcoming in April from Houghton Mifflin.

Glyn Maxwell is the author of a new collection of poems, *Pluto* (Picador).

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