

ANNA AND MY AUNTS

After my father left when I was six years old, my childhood and adolescence was surrounded by women: my maternal grandmother Jane, my mother and her three sisters – Suzie, Nettie and Hannah – their half-sisters Alice and Harriet and their cousin Anna. They peopled my landscape, tall as standing stones. Playing with my brothers and cousins on the front-room carpet in my Nan's flat, women's voices lilted their continual accompaniment to our games, sharing jokes and stories with each other; another comment chucked into the criss-crossing mêlée of words; laughter suddenly blossoming over my head. Laughter I never fully understood, though I wanted to share it because it made me happy.

Aunt Anna had a great sense of style. When she had a new passport photo taken for our trip to old wartime friends in Holland she sounded delighted as she showed it to us: "It makes me look like a French tart!" She worked for the London Underground at Bethnal Green Tube station. I associate her with singing, especially at the crowded Boxing Day parties in our Whitechapel flat. I catch her singing down the years with my mother. They sway together with drinks in their hands, Aunt Anna balancing a fag between her fingers:

Call round any old time

Make yourself at home –

My poem came from a workshop led by Naomi Foyle, where she asked us to celebrate a relative. The words flowed easily, as if they'd always been on the brink of being written.

AUNT ANNA

We say her name. She high-heels through the room,
dripping with gold at her neck, lobes, wrists
and fingers, glittering the gloom.
Fishnets at fifty, she whistles a taxi, persists
in leopard spots, tiger stripes, black skirt slashed
to her thigh. That time some bastard
mugged her, she grabbed a cosh from her bag, bashed
his head till he scarpered. She'd get plastered
at our parties, sing *All I want is a table
and chair. I don't care, just a table and chair.*
She'd kick her leg high and never topple,
shimmying way past the midnight hour,
dabbing her ash, sloshing another swig,
cramming her minutes with life, making them big.

