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Somebody's Saints March In

Nathalie Anderson

Surprises at the 1995 Eagle Wing Music Festival, Groomsport, County Down

For Jim Doan and Tram Turner

Not your expected Irish music: no sainted mother
pleading with the Virgin for her boy Danny's safe return;
no four fields sprouting up together, uniformly green;
no celestial Gaeltacht voices winging on their grace notes
into heaven; no bodhrán, no uilleann pipes, no whiskey-
driven risings at the wake. No: this here is Ulster music,
ballads gearing up to blue-grass, a sound demonstration
of trans-Atlantic pollination, and three friends from the South
are listening intently, dubious but open to persuasion, eager

to be even-handed. Three friends from the South on a lark
in the North, June of the first cease-fire, dark Belfast over
their shoulders, sunlight scattering in wavery fractals
on the wind-crisped water, just like back home; the music tinny,
thinned by the breeze, muffled in thick talk, dulled by the children's
squealing, blaring and dimming as the amplifiers surge
and fail, just like back home; sails on the bay, hot fish pungent
with vinegar, and three friends at their ease, basking in the warmth,
the Northern hospitality, cooled by the brisk air—June,

before things heat up again. Three friends from the South, and this
is who they are: Charleston, Chattanooga, Chapel Hill—seeds
cast on the waters, scattered maybe from this very port,
sprouting out bog cotton, indigo, blue grass: trans-Atlantic
pollination. Who they are: two men, one not; one in love,
two not; two embraced by doting families, one (alas) not;
one devout, two not; two gay, but all three in their own way queer;
one Irish-speaking, two not; two Irish-dancing, one—oh,
rather not; two raised in the deep South, one not; one settled

in the Southland, two not. Among them, such lilting music—
Chieftains, Altan, Solas. Among them, such stirring marches,
sit-ins, demonstrations—Civil Rights, Equal Rights, Gay Pride,
Anti-War, Anti-Nuke, Right to Choose, Take Back the Night. Which
is why, of all the festive people gathered here—families
lounging on rough blankets; men standing stoic in shirt-sleeves, arms
hugged tight to pale bodies; codgers sipping dark pints; toddlers
sitting down abruptly; teens in their blond dreads and piercings;
mothers relaxing at last, feet up, indulgent—these three

are the only ones to blink and gape when out of the dazzling sun
a grey mist rises and solidifies—ten men, twenty
in grey uniforms, stars in their eyes and on the crossed blue
bars of their snapping red battle flags, the band whistling
Dixie, the crowd hooting and hollering for their Lost Cause
as the Ulster Re-Enactors of the War Between Our States
march out to strut their stuff. Old times there are not forgotten.
The sun clouds over, the wind picks up, the soldiers shout. Which
South will rise? Three friends look away, look away, look away.

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