

John Gilgun

First War Death

Why this memory?
Not of myself in this photograph,
in my knickers, knee socks and plaid parka,
frowning into the Kodak,
seven years old in 1942,
but of that young man, that sailor,
I don't remember his name, who died at sea,
it couldn't have been more than a few weeks
before this picture was taken.

There'd been a Sunday dinner,
my mother's brothers were there,
and perhaps the dinner was for them,
because they were leaving,
going overseas, both in the army,
one eighteen, one twenty,
and we were outside on the porch steps,
my mother was taking pictures,
and this sailor came up the street.

Perhaps this snapshot of me
was on the same roll of film?
Anyway, they knew the sailor,
he lived only a block away, and—
“C'mon! Get in the picture!”—because
he was going overseas too, like my uncles,
and we were losing the war, no one knew how badly,
the government kept it from us.

My sister was there, only three then,
cute in her snowsuit, and the sailor
in his winter uniform, his navy blues,
held her up in front of him,

and a few weeks later he was dead,
his ship blown up in the Coral Sea
or off New Caledonia or the Solomon Islands.

He was the first enlisted man to die in our town
and I remember the owner of the local paper
asking people for pictures of him
for the story they were doing on him.
And my mother said,
“We can’t give them this one.”
Because he was holding up my sister
and she completely blocked his face.

John Gilgun is the author of five books: *Everything That Has Been Shall Be Again*, *The Dooley Poems*, *Music I Never Dreamed Of*, *From The Inside Out*, and *Your Buddy Misses You*.