

Final Reflection
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Falling in Love

I hate school
I've always hated school
the only reason I get suckered into this shit
is because I feel sorry for people

I hate school
but I never hate learning

I love to think
I love to read
I love to have long and complicated conversations

but school is about punishments, grades, social climbing
memorizing
cruel misjudgments inhabit the halls
gentle people are passed over
competition rules

if I hate school so much, why am I still here?
why do I teach?

maybe I am powermad
a controlfreak
telling other people
what to do
how to be

it's clear
something keeps me here
perhaps an angel wants me to look her in the eye

tell her the story
I have locked in my heart
sigh

ok, angel
I'm fourteen
my bleeding heart sends me
to teach in Harlem
I feel sorry for black children
who, surviving crib-robbing rats, find themselves
facing dread arithmetic

my first time teaching for reals
I learn about learning
friendship, frustration
and small victories
I climb to the top of rickety wooden stairs
the sounds here are not like the silence
in my school
the silence of compliance eerily frames
the calculated pretense of private school suck ups
but
this room
is thrilling
alive with concentration
I can't help it that I fell in love

Then
there was a little girl...

was it a coincidence that she was black?
was it a coincidence that I was just enough Jewish
to be thought ugly and impertinent by my schoolmates
who weren't like me - on scholarship and
by my schoolmates who were?

what is ugly anyway?

...there was this little black girl, angel
about eleven years old and she just
needed to pass one test
one statewide test
a math test
then
she could go to the school of her choice

this test will determine the rest of her life
her parents know it
I know it
she knows it
worst of all the state knows it

I hate school
I hate the way school uses its power to ruin lives

this little girl could do everything
pass all the other state tests but she couldn't
face the math
she was terrified

once a week she came to my house
we worked at algebra and sometimes
she cried

I learned that it wasn't the ideas
inside the math
that were too difficult for her
it was memories
teachers who called her slow, stupid
hopeless
what is hopeless anyway?

this little girl and I
we studied math and the workings of fear
and we conquered them both
we conquered fear and math together
but she passed her test alone
I can't help it that I fell in love

Then
my first real job
taxes taken out, wages, the works
my friends were watching the lottery
not for millions but for birthdays
remember draftees, angel? they did a lot of praying

while my friends dreaded
going to war in a foreign jungle
I was teaching little boys
who lived in the city jungle we call ghetto

one day
a group of nine year old boys
try to kill the effeminate art teacher
with the wooden knives
they have been assigned to whittle
these boys crack me up running around
pretending to hunt the teacher
who unconsciously obliging
runs around the room screaming
soon
we are all screaming
each of us
in our own
brand of hysteria

after the screaming dies down
the teacher is furious

he wants to kick the offending boys
out of the program
we compromise
we split the class
into the good and the bad
I will teach the bad
he will teach the good
in those days I was the ugly
today, angel, I assert
that all categories are impossible to justify
when it comes to human beings

I hate my private school
I hate that no one asks me how I feel about
my gay and suicidal dad
people assume
that because our dads are all important
nothing could be wrong in our homes
conversations never touch on the terror
never raise the curtain on the sadism lurking
in the awkward rhythm of our lives

I hate that no one but me ever asks these kids
what they think about
what they care about
I hate that we can teach people but ignore persons

I hate that I was inarticulate
I hate that I felt ugly in spite of the fact that we were
doing our best
we did put a dent in the entrenched systems of inequality
in that ugliness that still permeates our bones
the ugliness that periodically clouds my days
gets in my eye and messes up my attitude
I hate that I can't shake that ugliness, angel

I can't help it that I fell in love

later I teach in a school
for the "slightly retarded" children who wish
to become acceptable to the main stream of education
who wish to earn the right to attend schools where they will be ridiculed
just like me these outsiders are pushed
further and further toward the perimeter
hanging on
the banks of the main stream
already overpopulated with the hordes of misfits trying
to learn how to swim

Then
my liberal heart told me to teach theater
at the University of the Streets because
I love the name because I think
a street school might not be a prison
but
a different kind of violence rules that roost
the blood and guts kind

I had my first and only
fist fight there
with a very beautiful
man
who said
because I won
that I wasn't really a woman
never mind
I felt beautiful to win
and
he would never know
how right he was
how unlike any traditional idea of a woman
I was

lost, despairing
how like the people
I love to work with, angel
he didn't know
how unlike any stereotype
any of us really is inside
I can't help it that I fell in love

and then there was the time they came and said
"The kids are dying. Killing themselves. Teen suicide is an epidemic."
what was I supposed to do *then*?

I thought I had escaped
I hadn't taught in years
I was a real artist then
I didn't need to teach
I did my art

my name was in the papers
I had escaped schools and their petty little problems
I had found my beauty
the kind I could speak about
in museums to people who thought I was really something

"Kids are dying"
they said and I knew that this was not a petty problem
but it wasn't until she said
"Please come and teach"
when she said
"We need you "
that day in the park
she was with her dog
a big black poodle-like-thing pulling
her and her eyes were filling with tears
and her hair was partway fallen out
she was battling cancer and

the school system and she said
“Please. Come. We need you.”
I went back and never left again
I can’t help it that I fell in love

Plato hates me
that’s ok, angel
I hate him too
Plato says that poets have no place in the Republic
that’s ok with me
this poet doesn’t want to live in a Republic
run by hereditary ineffectual partial-people
this poet is a democrat
this poet says that in a democracy
every person is a citizen
every citizen has a right to be here
every citizen has a right to participate
every citizen has the right to become responsible
even mutt-people like me
who worship beauty and truth
who will walk a mile for a museum
who aspire to authenticity
who believe in the transparency of every educational act

I came back to teach
artist-in-the-schools
that-was-me
by then art had been so eradicated from the curriculum
that schools were reduced to ordering out for their art

because most problems between people are communication problems
I can save a program shunned by teachers
who still split the world into good and bad
I take the bad off their hands
fix what they can’t fix
resuscitate programs strangled by administrators stealing funds

work the program with the people who still want to learn
even after the money is gone
we still want to learn
no matter how repressive the standards
bureaucracy will never succeed in killing learning
learning will beat the odds
go underground till it can rise again
because
learning is life reaching out to know herself
love is the power learning needs to reach
the mysterious theater which supports
this fabulous dance of love
and learning
is us

when a school cannot create
but invention is critical
an artist is hired but
only in desperation only
until the crisis is resolved
then
back to Plato's purgatory we go
back to the banishment necessary for the illusion
of the maintenance
of the status quo
I can't help it that I fell in love

like Chaucer's pilgrims artists are a regular parade of oddballs
searching we find other searchers
in conversation
truth and beauty are not solitary pursuits
art is not about isolation
art is about connection
forward and back
in time
and always between people

art is like the ocean or
the wind or
like sex
you can ride her
be in her
work with her
but
you cannot make her do your bidding without turning her into a dangerous
enemy who will one day destroy you for your impertinence

I read Plato carefully trying to decipher his terror of process
his obsession with order is a futile attempt to govern
the spontaneous creativity he finds anathema
to the Republic of his dreams
Plato's dehumanized utopia has been the stone from which we have carved
our educational models for far too long

angel, this poet knows
the only kind of discipline that can save lives is self discipline
self discipline is the prize we earn
when we love something so much
that we put our selves wholeheartedly to its service

labors of love humble us
lead us to face our shortcomings
I have gone mad with fear and insecurity trying to do my art
I have hit the wall of my limitations
trying to go deeper into the truth of my meanings
trying to get in touch with the beauty of my feelings

that damn wall, look at it
everything I can't do is on the other side of that wall

that wall is my failure, my limit, my blank page, my lost dream
my dark night of the soul

I walk through that valley
in the shadow of my fears
then if I allow art to move in me
if I allow beingness to move in me
if I allow myself to grow
if I just keep going
I can make something
I can create
participate in the mysterious theater of humanness-in-process

the school in its present form of handmaiden
to industry and nationalism
bows to art-the-product
denies art-the-process
school dooming itself to the limitations of commercialism and quid pro quo
condemns students to the sterile choice of
a) follow the rules
b) be of predetermined use
c) get out

if we are sincerely searching
in this curriculum debate
for fundamentals of democratic education
if we are wishing
for an education that can convey, illuminate and teach
freedom of speech alongside the responsibilities of communication
freedom of congress alongside the responsibilities of individuals
freedom of expression alongside the responsibilities of community
art is the ideal laboratory playground for the development of personhood
I can't help it that I fell in love

some days are weirder than others
this was a very weird day, angel
it began at 5:30 a.m. when an art teacher
I was substituting for while she attended a conference
called me

“Be careful.”
she said
“There will be a boy in your class today.
I forgot to tell you about him.
He’s dangerous.
He shouldn’t be there but somehow he keeps coming back.”
I didn’t believe her
I thought this was just another version of art teacher hysteria
dividing the world
into the good and the bad
I was over that
I no longer believed in those divisions
I ignored her
nicely
and hung up

this school was particularly rigid
substitutes were expected to follow the letter of the plan
which was
that very weird day
to carve
with exacto knives
the soft impressions necessary
for print making

suddenly there was blood
“An accident”
they say
the boy bleeding from a cut in his thigh
I send to the infirmary
“An accident.”
they say
the one bleeding
the other smiling
the one who had accidentally
stabbed his friend

accidents happen

the class continues

minutes pass in concentrated silence

enter the principal

and the police

they seem surprised that the class is proceeding normally

I have absolutely no idea how serious this is

until I see the rage on the face of the principal and the studied

calm on the faces of the police

they take away the boy who stabbed his friend

was it a coincidence that we were white?

no student speaks

I have nothing to say

minutes pass in stunned silence

enter a teacher saying she will take over

I am to go to the principal's office

now

I go

sit

try to make sense of the principal's litany

he says

"This is all your fault "

it never would have happened

"if you had worn a skirt."

he thinks he's good

he thinks the boy who stabbed his friend is bad

and he wants me to think I'm ugly

he doesn't know that I outgrew this game when I outgrew my husband hitting me

I don't fight with him

I only fight with men who can learn, angel

I've learned that lesson well

I let him have his fantasy

the good, the bad and the ugly
for all I know he gets off on it

the next day I ask the students to debrief
piece together the story which goes something like:

there once was a little boy
whose father beat him regularly
to a bloody cringing pulp
this poor boy runs away repeatedly
social services is unable or unwilling to remove
this boy permanently
from his vicious, vindictive father
slowly, say the students

the boy goes mad

“He broke.”

is what they say

“It’s not his fault.”

is what they say

“The system did this to him.”

they say

“The system killed him.”

they say

“He was a nice kid.”

they tell me

except for the principal who is trapped in categorical imperatives
no one is angry at the boy who stabbed his friend
because we know that just because
we don’t yet know
how to help each other
doesn’t mean that we won’t
one day
be able to genuinely
care and communicate

and the friends we lose while we look for a way to heal this process
are heroes in the war of hierarchies
I can't help it that I fell in love

sometimes I feel so alone, angel, I think I might as well die right now
I hate that woman in the park
I hate her for asking me to return to teaching
I want to work with artists
I want to get away from this school shit
but then, angel, I think
if not me
who? and if not now
when?
and if I don't have the courage
if I can't face this wall and keep climbing
if I can't make it through this valley
if I can't look you in the eye
what kind of artist does that make me?

and
if art
deserves a place in school
which it undoubtedly does
then won't art have to earn its place through the courage of its carriers?
how else does history happen except through the actions of individuals?

isn't the curriculum struggle teaching me something?
isn't the struggle of people to be represented in the curriculum
isn't that my struggle too?

if other people can muster the courage to struggle
I'd like to be brave too
I don't want to think that people hate me
I want to think that
no thanks to Plato
people aren't used to dealing with poets-in-schools

except as outsiders invited in for carefully bounded experiments
I don't want to think
that people are artless
I want to think that
I will sing art's praises, angel
I don't want to think I am losing my life to this struggle
I want to think that I am saving the lives of young artists
who get squelched
silenced
and sometimes die trying to cope
with a school system that cannot resonate
with their need to explore issues of process
relationship and personal purpose
I can't help it that I fell in love

I fell in love with little faces smiling at me as understanding breaks
through veils of incomprehension
I fell in love with young people throwing away the idea
that they are stupid and inconsequential
I fell in love with women whose stories of being lost and outside
were my stories too

I fell in love with philosophers and theoreticians who try to make sense
I fell in love with my teacher
when she looked so deeply inside herself
to question her process she taught me
this curriculum search can be
not only a scientist's search
for the harmony we call truth
but the artist's search
for the illumination we call beauty
I fell in love with myself, angel
for joining the ranks of those who care about what happens to us

I fell in love with learning
in a sunny library

a long time ago
when my children broke from my womb I fell in love
with the world which was there to embrace them
I fell in love with education
when my professor showed me
the art of education
can be
in the way we live it

I can't help it that I fell in love
my lovers are all worth the fall
maybe
one day, angel
I might find myself
falling in love
with school



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