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Kindergarten Poem

Every day, parked in front of the school waiting for my daughter, I see the same man pushing a wheelchair up the steep hill that leads to just about where I slouch in the bucket seat listening to Schubert. It’s a struggle, he’s not young, either the father or grandfather of the boy who wears thick glasses and has feathery black hair. His head droops forward, rolls to one side or the other. The man always stops to straighten it, then pats him on the shoulder. You can tell it’s love, even more than love, this extra devotion, this most bitter ministering. I don’t know what they’re doing out here; the child is a first-grader from what I hear and class is in session. Could be the man, let’s call him father… wants to take his stricken boy out for air or just extricate him for a while from the madness of walls and desks. Whatever, he is punctual and steady, equipped with Kleenex, inhalers, prescriptions. I admire him enormously but must refuse to think about him, or the boy. Word is, it’s terminal.

I wait for my robustly healthy daughter to spring from the door, rush down the steps and toss me her backpack. It’s her radiant smile that I need to expect, to remember always. The boy in the wheelchair never smiles. He seems mostly asleep in some dream world all his own; nor does his father smile, though he feasts on every fraction of a second with the child. How he endures day after day, that poise of absolute defeat transcending itself—as if to convey a kind of joy I hope I’ll never know. But I can’t dwell on it. I’m waiting for my daughter.
The bell has rung. She’ll come barging out the door any minute now. We parents congregate near the concrete steps and I imagine, in some sense, hold our breaths. When the children flutter forth in happy commotion there’s always a twinge of panic if we don’t see our own right away. The man pushes his boy on the sidewalk amid all of us. We nod, he nods, and then we clutch our children’s frail little fingers and lead them away to cars and head for home. Today my daughter says she’s had a bad day. She’s about to cry. Her toy watch fell off and some boy’s shoe crushed it into a pile of plastic splinters. I assure her I’ll get another.

Can’t mess around with time, I laugh, and watch the smile consume her face though I don’t think she gets the joke.

We drive home singing the new song she’s learned:

Button you must wander, wander, wander—

The sun blasts through our windows like sweet cream.

She’s buckled tightly in her car seat and I anchor an eye in the rear view mirror to make sure she doesn’t disappear.

I feel an ease akin to that of trees lining the road, their red, yellow and purple leaves ready to unhinge; yet, suddenly, at the stop sign, I want to scream. But, of course, I don’t.
Sick Visit

for Madeleine, not yet one

They isolate rosy, wide-eyed bloomers
in for check-ups and shots
from the febrile, listless lumps
collapsed in parental embrace
as if failures at infancy, childhood,
Being itself.
And she, so limp in my arms,
gazes with the hope and trust
I long to assure with mere touch
since she has not yet acquired
the pretense of language.

She howls when
a starched severe nurse
draws fever from her ear,
burrowing into my chest,
waiting as I wait, not in fear
but near its borders.
She rouses to peer at a clacking
industrial clock, the slack-lipped boy
across the hall whose eyes ooze,
a cheerful mural of elves and toadstools;
yet she always shifts her eyes to mine
to make sure this new place
has my sanction.
New doubt clamors
as the doctor probes her back
with his cold stethoscope;
clothes removed,
she lies on the paper sheet,
her existence no longer easy
as a glass of water.
Mayhem in the left ear
will require antibiotics:
candied pink liquid so bellicose
it needs refrigeration—
a tough good cop
not himself above suspicion.

When it’s over
she bounces on my knee
while I now probe the doctor
with stale, sensible questions.
He smiles, reaches in his drawer
for a fuzzy bunny sticker.
She is half won over
when evolution makes
its sudden leap:
sticker tightly clutched,
she cocks her perfect cartoon skull
toward the door, points, and squawks
something close to "Home?"
She has learned,
without quite knowing,
that we lurch like assassins
from the silence of innocence
into an infirmary of words
where fear is never pure.
Author Notes

Louis Gallo teaches at Radford University in Virginia. He was born and raised in New Orleans. His books include the poetry volumes Omens, The End of Hours, Halloween, The Fascination of Abomination, and The Truth Changes. His novel, Breakneck: A Katrina Fugue, and a poetic memoir of New Orleans, The Lord of Misrule, have been recently published.

About the Work

The two poems chosen for this issue of Segue are both autobiographical in the same sense that just about every work of art is autobiographical: the material must pass through the mind of the artist. Indeed, I do not believe in the empirical myth of objectivity. Nothing is objective as long as whatever we conceive and perceive must first filter through our individual brains. What the poet must do is fiddle with the materia prima and try to transform it into what may seem an objective piece in order that others may respond to it. In these two poems, both about my children, the initial inspiration was, call it what you may, paranoia over their welfare. These children came to me late in life and I have always been over-protective to an extreme degree.

In one case the initial inspiration came from seeing an afflicted boy at the school and immediately transferring the possibility to my own daughter; in the other, taking my very, very young child to the pediatrician. Both poems, however, try to say more, but I have no time to get into that here. Both attempt to transcend the specific and move into the more universal realm that every reader can appreciate. The passage from inspiration to execution is, for me, a matter of logistics and verbal pyrotechnics, that is, to lift the ordinary into a realm of, hopefully, beauty and eloquence. And this involves, simply, the right choice of words, metaphors, symbols, images. That’s the execution in a nutshell.

I believe that the poet’s job today is to help re-enchant a world that has become increasingly technological and “objective.” In the past, this problem did not exist and perhaps poetry had other functions, to teach and delight maybe. Teach and delight now involve the re-enchantment I mentioned. When I read poetry I want to reach a realm of magic and incantation and what I would call “holy” revelation. I want the poem to change reality or open up avenues in reality that we have collectively forgotten or have no time for anymore. To me all poems are spiritual and/or religious, for they seek something beyond what we are merely presented from day to day. And that beyond is the spiritual, however you define spiritual. So I hope my poems accomplish this either very simple or excruciatingly difficult feat.

Louis Gallo on the Web

www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/profile.php?id=31210696