

# "In Quest of Her Beauty"

An excerpt from *Being With Children*

PHILLIP LOPATE

**O**NE TORPID MORNING, when Group A had not the slightest interest in literature, and nothing I said could entice them into writing, and I was considering giving up the profession, I noticed Tommy, who seemed as lost as myself. He was biting his fingernails for lack of anything to do and frowning as the other boys chased each other around the room. I asked him if he wanted to try writing a poem. He said he didn't think he could. And then he looked around unconsciously for Clifford, whose large literary shadow seemed to inhibit him. It had the effect of saying to me: Aren't you asking the wrong one?

I took out a poem in French by Apollinaire and asked him to write down a translation. "I don't know French," he said with understandable perplexity. I said I figured he didn't, but he should look at the words closely and say them over and over in his mind until they suggested some meanings. This is a technique called mistranslation, by which someone perfectly ignorant in a foreign language can "translate" it by sound associations, visual similarities and wild guess-

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*Phillip Lopate untangles Dan, yet one botulism auctioned off the schizophrenic aardvark, although one progressive orifice kisses five quite purple poisons, and one progressive ticket ran away. Two very speedy sheep mostly noisily marries the schizophrenic aardvark, even though two obese televisions grew up. Five putrid lampstands gossips lamely. Extremely silly mats aucti*

es. In another situation, with more outgoing children, I would have probably used a direct experiential approach; but with a child like Tommy, who was studious, self-conscious, timid about revealing his feelings, it was better to use a text—an objective starting point outside himself for inspiration.

The poem went:

## **Photographie**

### **APOLLINAIRE**

Ton sourire m'attire comme  
Pourrait m'attirer une fleur  
Photographie tu es le champignon brun  
De la forêt  
Qu'est sa beauté  
Les blancs y sont  
Un clair de lune  
Dans un jardin pacifique  
Plein d'eaux vives et de jardiniers endiablés  
Photographie tu es la fumée de l'ardeur  
Qu'est sa beauté  
Et il y à en toi  
Photographie  
Des tons alanguison y entend  
Une mélopée  
Photographie tu es l'ombre  
Du soleil  
Qu'est sa beauté

Tommy stared at it a long time. I urged him to put down any old idea for the first line; it didn't matter if it was silly or made no sense. When he realized that I was not going to help him with the translation, except in general ways like telling him he could add more words or syllables to make it read better if he liked, Tommy wrote down a tentative beginning. "The town squire's mattress came back to town." I nodded non-committally. He was not a child given to irrationality of any kind, and I could see he was stretching himself. He kept stealing looks at my face with timorous excitement, not so much wanting suggestions as protection in this strange voyage through unknown waters. He seemed to know instinctively what to do, but he proceeded very slowly. "It's weird," Tommy said, "how you could take words in a foreign language and translate them without knowing the language!" I wanted to say *Sbbb*; I was afraid he would lose the spell; instead I nodded and murmured, "It's something like chemistry." Actually more like alchemy, I thought. The poem progressed; at each line he thought of and discarded several options; and after the first two lines (which unfortunately had little to do with the rest), he tried to make everything connect narratively. It was time to pick up Group B, but Tommy wasn't finished yet, and so I decided to let Group A stay in the Writing Room, though they were fooling around. I would have to rearrange my schedule to work with Group B in the afternoon. All these considerations were making me nervous, but I knew it was more important to sit with Tommy and be there for him until he finished his poem. As much for my own sake as for his. How often does one get a chance to be present at the birth of a poet? The whole process gave me shivers. Though the poem as a finished product would probably not convey to anybody else that shiver, I quote it as part of the record.

### Photograph

TOMMY

The town squire's mattress came back to town.

Poor mattress fell on the floor.

She photographed the champion broom.

She found herself in the forest,

In quest of her Beauty.

The blankets shone.

Her chair was held up by balloons.

She found people dancing in jars.

As they were dancing they were making some dough as flat as a plain.

She photographed some fumes from the dust that rose in quest of her beauty.

She photographed tons of languages.

They entered a melody.

She photographed two lumps of soil in quest of her beauty.

We went over Tommy's version from the beginning to see if he wanted anything improved. Did he like it? I asked.

"Well, it sounds like a real poem even though it doesn't exactly make sense."

I translated the original Apollinaire for him. Tommy listened with intense interest. Then he said modestly, "I think I like mine better."

"What about it do you like better?"

He thought for a while. "It's more like a story." ☹