

Thinking in Pictures

Take Two

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IN 1947, TEMPLE GRANDIN, now a famed animal scientist and easily the most renowned autistic person in the world, was born in Boston. At age two, she was labeled as brain damaged; at age four, the label was narrowed to autistic and her parents were told to institutionalize her. Suffering from severe Sensory Integration Disorder, at age 18 Grandin invented a squeeze-box, or hug-machine as many call it, that helped her self-soothe and thus cope with outside stimulus. (Imagine being bear-hugged by your mother for thirty uninterrupted minutes.) Grandin later used this same principle to promote more humane practices in the handling of cattle: the cattle, “hugged,” would be calmer as they went in for slaughter; this made the beef-eating public happy because calmer animals result in more tender meat.

Most mornings, before I make the forty minute drive to Staten Island to teach poetry to twenty autistic children between the ages of eleven and thirteen—work I’ve been doing every spring for the past ten years—I bury my nose in my daughter’s neck and get

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lost in her (apples, yogurt, lavender), and I kiss her and kiss her and worry (only slightly) that maybe you’re not supposed to kiss their necks and bellies, at least not with such tenderness and love, that maybe this will send them to therapy. “Mama,” I say and point to myself [*kiss, kiss, kiss*]; “Eva,” I say and point to her [*kiss, kiss, kiss*]. *Mama, Eva; Eva, Mama*: this is what the books tell me to do; at this age pronouns are incomprehensible.

In the Classroom

When I get to the school on Staten Island, Matthew shows me a picture of what looks to be a very happy clown. The room reeks of Clorox, and images of the accident that proceeded the need for so much bleach flash through my mind. I smile at Matthew’s picture. “Bozo the Deathivator,” Matthew yells. “Squeeze his nose and you die. Honk! Honk!” On the other side of the room, Kyrillos chews on a baby doll leg, and Rachel sits in a corner, rocking, with her hands over her ears. On seeing me, she says over and over, “I hate poetry.”

“Aw, Rach,” I say. “Sometimes I hate poetry too. Come on over anyway. Today we’re just going to talk about dreams.”

While I try to start the lesson, Courtney cries for her mother. I think of Eva, of the game I play with her in the moments before I leave, how I wave Goodbye

and go around the corner, then peak back around and say, “Hi sweetie. I’m back. Mama’s back! Mama always comes back!” Courtney yells more, and I want us all to pile up on the floor and just hug and scream and cry until we fall asleep, but I am the teacher, for now anyway, so I say, “Dreams by Langston Hughes,” and the clouds crawl across the windows, and the chairs scrape against the floor.

El Autobus

According to Grandin, autistic people think in pictures, and their thinking is associative rather than logical. Grandin says that when she hears the word happiness she gets a picture of French toast in her mind.

I think of my own mind, how it’s never seemed quite logical, how it trips and slips and turns a hug machine into a pump into the silver of the slide into the soft edge of the knife, into butter, cream, strange crooked dreams, and then there are notes, *Notes Toward Something*, I call them:

The hot sun.

The orange of Tandoori.

Ledge of window, ledge of light.

Raspberries.

Hearts without, without...

In the classroom, the poetry lesson is in full swing. “Life without dreams is like...” My plan is to teach the students about couplets and about holding onto dreams—many birds, a single stone. At first their answers are ordinary, answers any child might give. *Life without dreams is like peanut butter without jelly, a body without a belly. Life without dreams is like a city without a street*, but then when I am scrambling for a rhyme for street (and so intent am I on beat!). I keep asking about the heart. Life without dreams is like a heart without what? I say, and then I say it again, louder. A heart without? Without? *Wheels!* Courtney yells.

And they start turning in my mind—Courtney’s

wheels do— and just when the teacher in me wants to try to get a different answer from someone else, Courtney begins to jump up and down, yelling *wheels, wheels, wheels*. “A heart without wheels,” she screams. “Nothing could be more terrible than a heart without wheels!”

The Refrigerator Mother & Other Theories

Before Eva, when I worked from home I wandered to and from the refrigerator. My day looked a little like this: string cheese, fudgesicle, sentence, tortilla with melted cheese, sentence, chicken strip, carrot, delete sentence, chicken strip, frozen banana chunk, sentence, more string cheese, period, make that a semicolon, cracker, period. Having her changed all this. Now there are mashed plums and forgotten phrases, pureed sweet potatoes and drinkable yogurt, words that I don’t even remember to jot down and glass jars of strained peas; the fridge seems to be bursting from its seams. Since I can’t write I talk incessantly. *Microwave*, I say. *Pears, father, feathers, elbow*. Eva looks around as if trying to understand how each thing has been given a name and then tries to eat it.

Our shadows fall behind us as we stand (her in my arms) in the glow of the tiny fridge light. *Refrigerator*, I say, *Mother*. It is only April but already so hot, and the cold feels good. *But not A refrigerator mother*, I tell her, and we laugh, me because I think I’m funny, her because she thinks it’s funny when I laugh.

In his 1943 paper that first identified autism, Leo Kanner called attention to what he called a “noticeable lack of warmth” among parents of autistic children. In a 1960 interview he pushed the theory even further describing these parents as “defrosting just long enough to produce a child.” Thus was born the Refrigerator Mother Hypothesis. Kanner believed that because the children were rejected by their cold and distant mothers, they turned inward to “seek comfort in solitude” and thus became “autistic.”

There are other theories too: the vaccine theory trumpeted by funny-girl, ex-Playboy-bunny-cum-

mother Jenny McCarthy; the cord-clamped-too-early theory; the poisons-in-the-milk-of-meat-eating-breastfeeders theory. There is also the Mahler theory in which the child is unable to differentiate from the mother, and thus, as described by Silvano Arieti, the “you remains a you” and is never “transformed into an I.” It almost sounds like a poem, no? You a you, and I an I, and oh that lovely entanglement with mother.

Why Poetry?

On the bad days—the days when my I flaps about so haphazardly, the days when I can’t even manage eye contact with one of my students let alone get them to follow along with a Bishop poem, the days when I really just want to be in my office—alone—writing, or all I can think about is Eva and how *I* should be home with her instead of spending nearly every dime I’m earning (less tolls and gas and taxes) to pay a sitter to be there with her—on those days, I want to stuff all the money I *do* make into an envelope and hand it back to the school and say, please use this for something better than poetry. Use it for a cure or some horses. Heck, buy the school its very own hug machine.

One silly aardvark gossips partly cleverly, however the mostly irascible elephant tickled one angst-ridden cat, yet irascible subways gossips, even though five bourgeois sheep fights fountains.

Fortunately those days are few and far between.

On the very best days, I know in the deepest, reddest center of my bones why it’s so essential to have a poet in a room full of autistic children. The thing is *we* think in pictures too—in flashes of lavender and bleach and laughter. When I hear Temple Grandin say that happiness, for her, is a plate of french toast, I think, of course it is, how could it not be (!), and when Courtney talks of a heart without wheels, it is not the mother in me or the teacher in me or the dreamer in me that understands what she’s saying, it’s the poet, the poet who knows just as well as Courtney knows that standard English with its *a is for apple and blue is for sky* might fail us over and over, but—at least for now when it’s all we’ve got—it keeps the wheels turning, turning and turning and spinning out wildly in this wide desert heart, going somewhere it never could have gone otherwise. ☺