

EXCERPT

Being With Children

PHILLIP LOPATE

“In Quest of Her Beauty”

One 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 guesses. 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 a en toi
 Photographie
 Des tons alanguis
 on y entend
 Une mélodie
 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."

You make those choices: to hold the group's attention together, or go for a quiet moment with one student and let the group thing sag. Sometimes you're too tightly wound and defensive and supervisory even to detect the possibility of a quiet moment. Then something loosens you: a look or a stray remark is thrown at you like a clue, and you take it up.

A boy named Marvin was newly arrived from an all-black school in the South. He seemed stolid and more mature than the other children. One morning he came in late, near the end of a workshop, and sat in a chair with his coat on.

"Why don't you take your coat off?" I said.

He tossed his coat over mine, which happened to be lying on a desk. "Seems like my coat be in love with your coat," he said.

This remark made me turn around. Until he had said that I confess I had thought of him as a dull, "mulish" kid, but now it seemed there was more going on under his slow brown eyes than I had thought.

"Tell me more—how's your coat in love with mine?"

"I can't say, 'cause I don't know much about Coat Love," he said.

Now he really had me intrigued. I asked him if he thought objects, things, had actual feelings. He said he often talked to things that were lying in the street, tires and junk, carried on conversations with them.

And now his mother was worried about him—she worked in a hospital as a nurse, she wanted to take him to the "Psych."

I told him I talked to myself, that all writers did, and it wasn't as unusual as he might think. Marvin brushed aside this reassurance with a worried look: "No, she's gonna take me to the Psych. I know something's wrong."

He seemed to want to talk about it, and I wanted to listen. But I didn't feel easy about adopting a therapist's role in relation to him.

There had to be a way that he could talk, and that I could show him that his thoughts were not so bizarre or frightening (which I felt pretty certain that they weren't) *through* my ordinary role as writing teacher.

I took him to a far table and sat down with him and asked him to talk to himself as if he were in the street. I would write down everything he said. That way we could make what he said into a poem. "All right," he said skeptically. "Where should I start?" "Start the way you would if you were outside in the street, looking around, thinking to yourself." He began dictating to me. He seemed to be formulating it in his head, consciously editing out certain details and asking me to write down only those that would be good for the poem. At the end of his dictation I asked him what title he wanted to give it; and he said without hesitation, "The Sadness."

The Sadness

MARVIN

Helping my father wash the car
 He tells me to get the water
 Marvin turn on the hose pipe.
 Turn on the hose
 It's on.
 All right that's good. Bring it here.
 Now we splash the soap on
 Marvin run the water on the car
 All right that's good. Turn it off.
 Now let's dry the car off
 Gotta give me some money to go get a soda
 Marvin you don't have to help me no more
 Here's \$5.
 I go over to the wall.
 Then I start staring.
 I look down the street
 I look up the street
 What do I see?
 I see one man coming with a carriage carrying junk
 And a freight train running on its lane
 There's no kids my size
 Anyhow I'm outside
 So I guess I'll talk to myself
 Well I wish I had a horse
 I look down the street and here come a mule.
 They start clearing the junk house
 So the mule can come and dump his load
 I wish I had a darn horse.
 I always wanted a horse and Dad know it
 But I had to stop being afraid of horses first
 Someone said they'll kick you to death

Mom & Dad say when we go down South
We'll get a horse.
And Dad say he'll get him one and me one too
So what am I worrying about
I'll be glad when I go down South
It is so warm there.

"It's very good, Marvin," I said when it was done. We were both a little stunned. I took it to the second floor to show his teacher, Stanley Riegelhaupt, who happened to be in the teacher's lounge on his prep period.

"Marvin wrote that?" said Stanley. "That's terrific!"

"Well he told me what words to write and I wrote them down..."

For all my enthusiasm about the poem, I still felt there was something less "legitimate" about dictated work. Wouldn't it be more useful for him to struggle through a written piece on his own? How much of the final product was shaped by my arranging it into lines? After the second week's dictation from Marvin, I told him that next time he would have to write it himself. "But it doesn't come out so good as when you write it," he insisted. And it didn't. During the next few workshops, his eyes followed me with a hurt look as if I had betrayed his trust. He understood the trick—the same trick all the other teachers pulled. It was that universal *idée fixe* of adults: to get him to read and write. It wasn't enough apparently that a way had been opened for him to say what was on his mind.

So the weaning process took a step backward: I gave in and he dictated again. Was it the dictation itself that was so crucial to him, or the physical and mental closeness it brought between us? My hanging on to his every word? The next time, he gave in and wrote a page. For the rest of the year we were bound to each other by that first experience, glad when we met in the halls, embarrassed for no reason, as if looking to rediscover that same shock of intimacy.



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Phillip Lopate

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