The Lesson

Faun's Head

Among the dense leaves of the grove
green nook sprinkled with gold
in the uncertain forest that blossoms
with spectacular flowers where the kiss sleeps
wild and rushing through the splendid embroidery
a startled faun widens his two eyes
and bites the sanguine flowers with his white teeth

Stained and crimson like old wine
his mouth explodes in laughter beneath the branches
And when he has scampered - like a squirrel -
his laughter still trembles on every leaf
and you can see – awakened by a bullfinch –
the Golden Kiss of the Wood
pulling itself together again.

– Arthur Rimbaud

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"Hugo, I think it's time to read the poem."

Her long Polish name was much too hard to pronounce, so the children called her Miss T. She explained to them that people who live in hot places around the world—the Hawaiians, for instance—have lots of soothing vowels in their language, because a tropical sun warms their lips. "*Aloha nui loa e noho mai, e `ai a e, wala`au,*" she would say softly, shaping her mouth into exaggerated ovals and mock kisses, as the children listened, open-eyed and smiling. Whereas, in cold places like Poland, where she is from, the winters are sluggish and brutal, so the people who live there suffer purple lips and a cacophony of consonants. And here, Miss T, her teeth chattering uncontrollably, would cough up a succession of K's and Z's and B's and T's, trying to

construct her name from this sonic clatter, while the children howled in their glee.

Her conceptual art degree from the Warsaw Academy did not allow her to make a living in Los Angeles. But it did allow her to view the world through a precise lens and she now shared that expertise with her students. She taught them the art of seeing, but they taught her the art of feeling – drawing her into their feral emotion as they painted guns and bleeding hearts on the costly paper she brought from home.

She loved living in America, especially southern California, where the year round sunny days melted those bleak Polish winters from her memory. And she loved her husband—an amorous Mediterranean man who was always chasing after her. He never stopped touching every part of her body. He warmed the chill out of her bones. When they cooked dinner together, he would often stop what he was doing to slide his arms around her waist and kiss her neck, while she diced cabbage and chopped beets for the borscht. When they went for a walk he would take a gentle hold of her upper arms, simultaneously, in both his big hands. He always pleasured her first, before he ravaged her for himself; followed by long, luxurious nights of spooning.

Their combined incomes were not enough to live on. It's true he didn't work as hard as she did, but maybe he worked smarter. She embraced steady employment, he chased sporadic freelance; she was the industrious worker ant from Northern Europe and he was the pleasure-loving grasshopper from the Mediterranean. Somehow they scraped by. They did bump heads occasionally, like most couples, over idiosyncratic differences. She mobilized every pair of socks and marshaled every surface to reflect her face; he didn't mind a little mess – his socks never matched – and he preferred to smooch. But primarily, they lived in harmony. In fact, over time, he taught her a different kind of art—how to steal pleasure from every moment.

When acquiring a second language after the age of 12 or 13, it is next to impossible to lose your accent. Miss T had learned English in her native Poland as an adult. Although her accent was thick, her command of English syntax and grammar was excellent. But like most immigrants, she occasionally used a turn of phrase in such an amusing way the kids would be delighted for hours. Whenever she would say, "What a week. *Thanks* God it's Friday," they would take the phrase home and repeat it all weekend to squeals of laughter. At other times she would assure them with, "Don't worry about the quiz, it will be a *pieces* of cake." That one really tickled their funny bone. But for a foreign mind, it makes perfect sense to think in this way. After all, one cuts things into 'pieces'. And one gives 'thanks' to God. In particular, she often repeated two American colloquialisms—her favorites—perhaps because they were the first ones she learned when she was studying English. At every opportunity, and there were plenty with these unruly kids, she would say, "Who's minding the store?" or "What's up with that?"

Miss T's enthusiasm for America never waned. But over the years her disappointment with the American school system greatly disillusioned her hopes for the future of this great country. In Europe, teachers are highly praised, well respected, well paid, and well pensioned when they retire. After all, they are the caretakers who insure a healthy garden—the ones who plant the seeds, who nurture the sprouts that will become the fruit-bearing trees of the nation—the next generation of builders, thinkers, inventors and innovators. How is it possible that the most powerful country in the world, America, would throw its teachers to the *bottoms* of the barrel? "What's up with that?"

And especially in the wealthiest state in the union, California, with its vast, fertile farmlands (the breadbasket of the world); with its aerospace and computer industries (Silicon

Valley); and with its Lotto (which is supposed to provide huge revenue for schools); why does California have a broken education, and its children on the school grounds have no nurses, no paper, and no hope of higher learning? “Who’s minding the store?”

But she loved her job and she loved working with the kids. The only drawback (besides the unpaid extra hours, and the administrative bumbling) was that the children made her sick. They were little germ factories, coughing like smokestacks, and her health wasn’t what it used to be. This school year in particular, she was sick seven months out of ten. Six years earlier, she had caught whooping cough from one of her boys (poor fellow), who sneezed and vomited in her face while she was leaning in close to help him with a run-on sentence. Whooping cough is rare these days and vaccines have all but stamped it out, which meant her doctors didn’t diagnose it properly. For six months her hacking and wheezing was so severe, she got no rest and her husband had to sleep in the other room. But she would never take a day off. She had that Polish workhorse ethic.

Once a week each kid had to recite a poem, from memory, in front of the class. This was not an easy task for the students or the teacher. Untrained little minds meet new words with a wicked resistance. Kittens have more discipline. So the obligatory recital first required they handwrite the poem—daily. Through tedious repetition, the ink would eventually soak every word into their brains. By the end of the week this rote exercise gave them a gangly confidence. They could then stand before their fellow students and deliver, orally, the inspired verse. As every parent understands, no transaction between child and adult can proceed without a deal. In this case, the ‘deal’ was simple: once they had recited the mandatory poem, they would no longer need to scrawl a tedium of crooked letters—meaningless scratches on a page they couldn’t relate

to. After all, wouldn't a drawing of killer robots blowing each other up make more sense? And be more fun? Since the kids hated the act of writing and would avoid it at all cost, the sooner they got it over with, the better. This single motivation made it quick and painless for all—except one boy. Hugo

The school *threw chaos in her wakes* and left her with *a problems child*. Hugo was a selective mute. He blabbered endlessly, at home; but at school, not a squeak. He chatted with his best friend, but not with the other children. Before public education had run out of funding, Hugo had been assigned a counselor, a speech therapist, and a psychologist. Every teacher and resource person in the school had also tried to help the boy, unsuccessfully. No one knew what trauma had triggered his wordless retreat or how to break his voluntary silence. By the time Miss T arrived at the school, they had *thrown out their towels* and considered the boy to be *a waste of valuable resource*. "Leave him with me," she told them, resolutely. "I know what to do."

Miss T had a theory. She believed it was the whooping cough that had indirectly caused her cancer—by compromising her immune system and wearing her down. Her doctors didn't agree that whooping cough could possibly cause cancer, directly or indirectly, but she held her ground. Although she had been aware for a few weeks that something odd was happening on her lower abdomen, just above her pubis, it was her husband, through his affectionate touches, who had first discovered the lump.

Miss T noticed Hugo hunched over his desk. His head covered by his signature blue hood. She walked over and rested a concerned hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?" He slowly sat up and resumed playing with his keychain. Along with two keys, a little man hung from a

silver ring. Its hands and feet were shaped into wrenches. "Wow," Miss T said, enthusiastically. "That man is a hard worker. Look at all the wrenches. That means he knows how to turn things around. When something isn't working he knows how to tighten things up and make them better. And look at his smile. He wants you to be happy too. He wants you to pick up your pencil and work on your paragraph." She pointed to the writing assignment he was supposed to have finished. He had barely begun. "You can move these words around, freely, in this part here; and add a period there; and remove this phrase because you have already used it above." She took her red pen and showed Hugo all the magical possibilities—how elastic and playful writing can be.

Then, she darted across the room to resolve a conflict between two girls fighting over a wet paintbrush, gobs of green watercolor spattered onto their faces. Miss T took the paintbrush away from them. "You both know we're short on supplies, so you need to learn to share." The girls acquiesced, but continued to stare each other down like a couple of boxers geared up for the second round. "I have a suggestion. When one of you is using the brush, I want the other one to observe what she paints and how she paints it. You might just learn something." When the girls settled down and took turns sharing, Miss T looked over at Hugo, now happily immersed in a busy writing frenzy.

Her gynecologist was a tall, dark, and unconventionally handsome man, who always made her feel comfortable with his warm and earnest bedside manner. He gave her the bad news. She had a malignant tumor on her ovaries. He explained that ovarian cancer was a deadly, silent killer that targeted a demographic primarily of Northern European women who, like her, have never had children. African-American women, for instance, have almost zero incidences of ovarian cancer. But the good news was that they had discovered it in the early stages, so her

chances of survival were excellent.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But her husband knew what to do immediately. Weep. He navigated his ship of tears, south, through a Mediterranean storm. Nothing would console him. Understanding how profoundly important she was to him, she decided to tough it out in true Polish style, and accept her fate—dry eyed. She was more concerned about her husband. How would he handle it if she didn't survive? He loved her more than any man had ever loved her. She felt his joyful presence like a brush stroke through every moment of her day.

One morning, Hugo trotted over with a sad look on his face. She could tell he needed a good hug. But she wasn't allowed to touch any child. Sometimes the kids would spontaneously run over and throw their arms around her, happy to have her in their lives. She was comfortable with that. And pleased. But she couldn't do the same in return. Moving here from Europe, where people do not own guns but often give each other hugs, it was hard for Miss T to wrap her mind around the fact that in America, guns are legal but hugs are outlawed. "What's up with that?" A good hug would have established rapport and gained Hugo's trust sooner. But she was resourceful. She had other approaches, which might take longer, but were equally as effective.

This week's verse was *Faun's Head* by Arthur Rimbaud. The poem is about astonishment in a magical forest. Although it was unusually difficult for children this age, she specifically chose this one because the mythical creature, wild in the woods, reminded her of the children. "Among the leaves … a startled faun widens his two eyes and bites the sanguine flowers with his white teeth … his mouth explodes in laughter beneath the branches." This passage definitely reminded Miss T of the kids on their lunch break. And finally, when the faun has "scampered—like a squirrel—his laughter still trembles on every leaf, and you can see, awakened by a

bullfinch, the Golden Kiss of the Wood, pulling itself together again."

Every day Hugo would turn in his handwritten copy of the poem. She could tell by the softer, sweeter expression on his face that he was warming up to her, little by little, and beginning to trust her. But no matter how gently she spoke or how cheerful her questions, she couldn't muster a peep out of him.

Each week all the children had stood before the class and recited their poem. But Hugo still refused. A few times, when Miss T would sit after school preparing lessons, Hugo would hang out under her care waiting for his parents to pick him up. He knew he would have to keep writing out the poem until he was able to say it aloud before the class, but he remained silent. "I want you to do me a favor, Hugo," Miss T asked him. "I want you, today, before you go home, to say only the title of the poem, that's all. Then you won't have to copy the verses everyday. You don't even have to recite the entire poem before the class, only the title, right now, during this hour, for my ears alone. I will even turn around. I need to prepare the lessons for tomorrow, on the blackboard. So when you are ready, say the title so I can hear it and you can stop writing and go play." His best friend had decided to stay with Hugo to keep him company. "Now that is a great friend," Miss T said. "I would love to have a friend who cared about me that much." His friend sat close to Hugo, whispering in his ear. "Say the title, Hugo. It's only two words—Faun's Head. Say it. Come on—say it. Then we can go play. You won't have to write anymore. Just say it." His friend kept offering these suggestions relentlessly, single-mindedly, for an entire hour. "Look, Hugo," his friend persisted, "Miss T turned her back. She can't see you. Go on, say it." Finally, before the hour was up, in a low, squeaky, trembling tone, Hugo spoke. "Faun's Head, by Arthur Rimbaud." Miss T turned around with a huge smile on her face. "That was excellent, Hugo." His friend smiled too. "See, I told you it was easy."

By the time her limited insurance kicked in, three months had passed before they could schedule her surgery. No one knew exactly how the small tumor had leaked; maybe because so much time had lapsed since the diagnosis; maybe because the scalpel had accidentally sliced the tumor going in. Her oncology surgeon did a great job of cleaning everything up afterwards, making sure no cancer cells were left behind, but just to be sure he insisted she go through a double round of chemotherapy. The first round would be the standard twelve sessions. The second round would be a concentrated dose injected into the peritoneal cavity. But she wasn't going along with this plan passively. As usual, Miss T required other opinions before drawing a conclusion. She needed to cross-reference her options through exhaustive research. She performed her due diligence by making phone calls and scouring the Internet for all available information. Her handsome gynecologist corroborated her findings. The second round of chemo would be unnecessary. The percentage of improvement between those who received the treatment and those who didn't was so minuscule it wasn't worth suffering the extra horror and its aftermath.

Her husband was an angel through the entire nightmare. The post-surgery hospital stay would have been grueling had he not sat by her side holding her hand and reassuring her with smiles and kisses. He sweet-talked the nurses into letting him sleep over—a request they never allowed. They even provided a mat for him to rest on overnight. He brought in his freelance jobs and playfully designed on his laptop while she hallucinated on the morphine. All night long Miss T couldn't sleep because the opiate dripping into her arm kept whispering: America. America. America.

Miss T was a vegetarian. She tried to interest the children in eating more vegetables—the missing component in their sugar, starch, and animal diet. To their astonishment, she explained how she grew a variety of edible foods on her balcony and windowsill. She would bring soil and seeds and earthenware from home and teach them how to pot and water and nurture the plants. It did no good. They loved sprouting the seeds, but not eating the yield. The children groaned that they hated tomatoes. She spent a lengthy amount of time convincing them that tomatoes are not only nutritious and energizing but they are as sweet and delicious as candy.

At lunchtime, Hugo came running over excitedly to where Miss T was standing in the shadows (after chemo, the Southern California sun was too aggressive on her delicate skin). He grabbed her hand, opened it, and placed three cherry tomatoes in her palm, two yellow and one red. He could see she was delighted. But having second thoughts, before she could eat one, like a baby bird snagging a worm, his five small fingers pecked at her hand and snatched the red tomato right back out of her palm. He popped it swiftly into his mouth and chewed it up wholeheartedly right in front of her, the seeds and red pulp stuck between his teeth. This cracked her up. "I'll bet you've never eaten a cherry tomato before, have you Hugo? This is your first one?" He nodded in agreement and ran off toward the parallel bars, his blue hood flapping. "I just knew it," she said, smiling after him.

Her husband attended every chemo session. Painfully disheartened, he couldn't design, so he would sit, round-shouldered and vigilant, on the chair next to his wife as she suffered the ordeal while reading a vegetarian magazine. Observing her calm exterior with curiosity, he appeared to suffer more than she. For she seemed relaxed and unaffected by the poison draining from the ominous bag above her head down the tube into the portacath implant burrowed in her

chest. All previous attempts to mainline had badly bruised the fragile veins in her arms. On the way home, after her first experience with the slow dripping toxin, she bragged to him that it was *a pieces of cake*. What is the big deal? Why does everybody make such a *fussy* about it? But by the third session, it hit her that chemotherapy is progressive. The poison builds up, killing you by degrees, until it overwhelms your mental and physical resistance. Then, out of nowhere, the neuropathy would kick in. The pins and needles in her hands and feet drove her crazy. Suddenly, she would rub her hands furiously. Or she would stomp her feet and dance around in a circle on the kitchen's polished linoleum. Her husband would ask her, "Do you want a hat, honey?" She would look over at him puzzled. "You know," he added, playfully, "for your Mexican Hat Dance." She would burst out laughing and the laughter helped relieve the pain.

Once, she started sobbing. She rarely cried, so on this occasion, her husband was deeply concerned. "Are you in terrible pain, sweetie?" "No," she responded, in a state of hysterics, "It's just that if I stand too long in one place, a pile of hair appears at my feet. Look at this?" She bent down and picked up a wad of hair strewn around her Doc Martens. He tried to console her. "Well then, try not to stand too long in any *one* place." This time her laughter reverted to more tears. "Look at my head? My hair is so thin you can see my scalp." He addressed her tenderly, "It doesn't diminish your beauty in the least. It's always a pleasure to look at you. I'm surprised, I've never known you to be vain." She was quiet for a moment. "It isn't about vanity. Much of a woman's identity is tied up in her hair. I feel so ugly." She continued her sobbing. He threw his arms around her gently. "Ooh, you lovely thing, please don't feel that way, don't you understand? You're always beautiful to me. Always. It's just that now you happen to be my post-apocalyptic-punk-art babe." And he kissed her on the head. She recoiled squeamishly. "Don't do that, you'll cause more hair to fall out … I'm starting to look like the Golem in the Lord of the

Rings." She twisted her body into a ghoulish shape. So he kissed her once on the forehead and twice on each cheek. "Yes, my *precious*." She stopped crying and smiled, enlivened by her husband's devotion.

Hugo often waited for his parents under Miss T's supervision. His best friend couldn't always accompany him, so one time, when it was just Hugo and Miss T, she opened a large black bag she had brought from home, and flipping it upside down, dumped out an endless stream of art tools and supplies onto his desk – brushes, tubes of paint, colored pencils, pens, markers, and blank canvases. His eyes popped seeing this magical invocation before him as if he had rubbed a lamp and every one of his wishes had come true.

"Hugo, I know I said you were no longer obligated to write or recite the poem. But I was struck by a strange idea. What if I leave the room while you recite into my recorder? She activated the memo app on her phone. If you can recite the entire poem, you can have everything in this art bag." Hugo stared at her, astonished. "Would you like that? I know how much you love to paint. And you are so good at it. Do you think you could put these tools to good use?" Opening the empty black bag, she reclaimed her harvest and walked away with the booty. Hugo was suddenly dispirited. "Whenever you are ready to recite, just go ahead, I will be outside the door working on lessons. Or you can do it tomorrow; or the day after; or the day after that. But just remember. You won't receive your prize until you recite the entire poem."

The next day Miss T played the recording of Hugo reciting the verses. The class listened open-mouthed, surprised and impressed. When everyone looked over to acknowledge Hugo for his daring accomplishment, they noticed his seat was empty. Hugo was hiding under his desk.

However, the following morning, after recess, Hugo was the first to burst into the room

and run up to her, filled with enthusiasm and purpose. He proclaimed in a loud, but still wavering voice, “Miss T, Miss T, can I recite the Faun’s Head myself, in front of the class, not the recording, but just me?” At first she was shocked. To hear his voice for the first time after all these months just about made her cry with joy. But she held back the tears. Instead, the corners of her mouth slowly lifted into a satisfied smile.

Hugo stood confident at the front of the class. His blue hood usually covered most of his face. But now he pulled it back onto his shoulders. Outside, the weather had shifted over the last few days from the usual L.A. sunny skies. Clouds gathered and a few drops of chilly rain fell here and there on the playground as the wind shook the trees. Miss T tried to suppress a cough—this residual daily hack had begun months ago and seemed to persist, much to her annoyance and discomfort. Her doctors couldn’t find anything wrong and thought it might just be allergies.

Hugo recited the first line timidly, but soon pronounced every long and difficult word with accuracy and confidence: “Among the leaves of the grove, green nook sprinkled with gold, in the uncertain forest that blossoms with spectacular flowers … a startled faun opens his two eyes wide and bites the red flowers with his white teeth.” As Hugo continued, his shaky, squeaky voice found solid ground and deepened its resonance. When he reached the poem’s finale, Hugo slowed down and took a deep breath: “…his mouth explodes in laughter beneath the branches. And when he has scampered – like a squirrel – his laughter still trembles on every leaf, and one can see, awakened by a bullfinch, the Golden Kiss of the Wood, pulling itself together again.”

Hugo himself couldn’t stop trembling with laugher. Silence filled the room as Miss T and the class were left speechless. His own white teeth in contrast to his dark brown skin seemed to take a bite out of that moment and store it in everyone’s memory. From this day forward, no one could shut Hugo up.

That evening, she lay in bed thinking about her day. Outside her window, the leaves rustled as the wind ripped through the branches of the trees. A confident drizzle tapped at the glass letting her know she was vulnerable, yet safe. The long effort and determination she had taken with Hugo had paid off. She thought of the look on his face as he read out loud to the class for the first time the last line of the poem, pulling himself together again.

These reflections made her happy—her life in America, her school children, her marriage. Snuggled up and intimate, her husband held her contentedly while he purred in his sleep. Not wishing to wake him, she tried to suppress a cough. But in this instance, her effort and determination were futile. For all along her chest, over each of her ribs, she could feel a tickle roll upward, slowly, toward her mouth—where it exploded into a consonant. Maybe a K or maybe a T. Under the soft, even rain, the branches quivered and sighed, gradually lulling her to sleep. And as she drifted off, she could hear Hugo's laughter still tremble on every leaf.