

FLEDA BROWN

I Am Sick of School

I remember school as nothing but misery. Probably my memory isn't fair, but the way I generally operate is to keep myself moving by chasing the ideal, thus dooming myself to failure, loss, and suffering. And in the so-called tranquilized 50s, as poet Robert Lowell dubbed them, there were plenty of ideals available. I started first grade in 1950, so I am almost entirely a product of that decade. You might think it was easier then, before the world grew intricate as a computer chip. From where I sat, in my bolted-down, pen-scratched wooden desk with an honest-to-god in-service inkwell, all students were white, Protestant, and basically nice. This was the Midwest. By 1953, we had Eisenhower taking care of things in a mythical place called Washington. The big war was over, and the little one, too. The American ideal had triumphed. The planet would last forever.

It was a tough spot to be in. I would have to dredge up the means to suffer from within. There was no TV—not for me, anyway, until I was 13—so my education was mediated only through my own private drifting imagination, perhaps not as colorful or quick as the 21st century imagination fed by SpongeBob SquarePants and the Simpsons. A dull kind of imagination I had, made up of rearrangements and distortions of what I already knew. But still adequate to scare me to death. When I was five, my father dropped me off for story hour at the local library in Middlebury, Vermont, five or six blocks from our house. He was planning to pick me up after, but story hour had been cancelled: when I climbed the dark stairs, no one was there. I walked home, crossing busy intersections, not sure which was the right way, my mind crowded with imageless horrors. If I had had TV, maybe fear would have looked like Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*, or Scar, from the *Lion King*—a communal shape and color, recognizable by many. Whether this is good or bad isn't clear, but my internal demons have always outstripped the ones I see on the screen.

What begins as my own history, then, becomes my spiritual state, defined by absence. Whatever I can't have, can't reach, or can't touch accurately enough to explain—such as the details of my life, subject

to decay or change—becomes for me an almost palpable absence. Like a blind woman, I keep trying to feel its walls, discern its shape. First grade, Grant School, Columbia, Missouri. Miss Jones. There I am, a skinny, earnest, silly little girl, alert every minute for trouble. It's not how many circles, how many curved tails I place exactly on the line, it's the ones I slant, wiggle, or make too small that are the problem. At the optometrist's, even though I guess as carefully as I know how, I am given tiny, gold-rimmed glasses to fit between me and the rest of the world.

Second grade. Huge, waddling German Miss Longenbach. We've been rehearsing a play for weeks. Our parents are invited. My mother and my grandmother arrive at the classroom door, all dressed up in scarves and furs, an hour late. I've told them the wrong time. My face burns with shame, with sorrow. Also in the second grade, the furnace goes out in the building. We are wearing our snowsuits in class. I am standing up front in a row with the rest of my reading group, reading to the class. I desperately have to go the bathroom, but I am too embarrassed to break the formation. I wet my pants, thinking maybe my snowsuit will hide it. "What's that?" the girl next to me says loudly as urine dribbles to the tops of my shoes. The teacher sends everyone else to recess and puts my pants on the radiator to dry. I am numb, watching abstractedly as my pants slowly stiffen like a large, white, dried flower. *Everyone else gets things right. Try very, very hard to be everyone else.*

Third grade—who is my teacher? I remember nothing of that year except the funeral of my best friend—what was his name? Freckled, dark-haired, son of the people who rented my grandparents' farm, sent to town for a better education. Frank. Frank Corneilson. One day we were walking to my house for lunch, a week later he was dead from measles. There he is, lying in his coffin, his mother kissing him, wet and crooning with sorrow. I'm next behind her. From far off, where I'm floating, I notice how dark each freckle has grown against his white face. I am not learning what death is: I am learning how to stay back, to let absence work for me. I develop a real skill for it. I learn how to bundle up some portion of the details, to save in case I want to sift through them later like cues. Meanwhile, I wander around like the Fisher King through my own fog, rich as myth.

Fourth grade, fiery-haired Miss Jenkins, also my father's fourth grade teacher. She takes us on a field trip to the cemetery next to

the school and shows us her headstone under the trees, one date already filled in. I feel there's something I personally should do, that I should feel more than I do, that I should give her life more of my attention, before it's over. But I am standing in front of the immutable past, the terrible future, each headed a different direction. I am in the middle, small and helpless. That is the feeling I remember.

Though I should pause to say that in grade after grade, the teacher held up my paper to the class as an example of how to do it right. I remember that, but barely the feeling of it. What I remember instead are the random panicky feelings, the feelings of isolation, of loneliness, of confusion, that pierced me, drove me, changed me.

Sometimes love is adequate to bring on misery. When we moved to Arkansas, I was going into the fifth grade. Oh, my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Bonner, beautiful, Presbyterian, artsy. She read us *The Secret Garden* every day after lunch. I crouched under the garden's tangled vines with her, utterly in love. My friend Donna and I visited our teacher's airy, art-filled home, right behind Donna's house. I giggled with nervousness in the temple of the goddess. I wanted to be her, to own her life. My longing joined up with a more universal longing that year: we girls turned equine, galloping across the ruts of the playground whinnying and neighing in our sleek bodies that were filling with a new, animal energy we could only call *horse*. We read *Black Beauty*. We were stallions and mares, according to our talents. Then I moved to sixth grade, to stolid, elderly Mrs. Keesee, and to dreaded math story problems. Too late for horses. I longed for Mrs. Bonner like a rejected lover.

Is it the same now? Do girls fall in love with teachers and horses? In the sixth grade, we stepped out onto a precipice—an unsuspected edge, a new cruelty. I say “we,” and this is part of my myth. It is the comfort of the myth, that we were together in this, that the wild horses turned out to be indeed ourselves. Georgena put angel-hair down Jay McDonald's back, a flirtation, however awkward. The itching humiliated him for days. I mention Jay because I was in love with him, too—unrequited, I was sure. Imagination moved inward, downward, into our bodies. Someone's parents arranged a supervised “dance,” where we were to learn steps, which I couldn't get right. Nothing quite right. On a snowy day, we girls brought our Ginny dolls to school in shoeboxes made up like beds, extra clothes tucked in the corners. We played dolls at recess, but joking

and self-conscious, now, in our dialogues. What did we want? To be somebody's girlfriend? Or a mommy? Or the wild horse, still throwing its head back, whinnying for us across the vast ditches of the playground?

What did I want? Junior high terrified me. It left me without protectors—dolls or teacher-lovers or horses—alone with my body that more and more refused to be ignored. Sure, I had friends. But in those days one's body was basically a secret even from them, a secret relegated to the dark, not announced all over TV and in movies and magazines. I tell you, few of us understood sex. We didn't quite get how it worked. We girls had only the movie in gym class of our upside-down-vase-shaped interiors to go by. Who knows what the boys' movie looked like? I cannot possibly exaggerate the terrible, enticing, shimmering unknown that lay in wait for me, directly in my path. It took no form in my mind, exactly. It was as hollow as the movie diagram. It might save me. It might drown me. How did I ever learn anything, with this at me day and night?

By extra credit. By threats and misery. And by events too large to ignore, that bore me away from my narcissistic self for a while. In Fayetteville, Arkansas, in 1957, when I was in the seventh grade, Federal troops were sent to Little Rock to allow a few Black students to enter Central High. My friends and I were humiliated for Arkansas, for ourselves. Faubus was an idiot. The U.S. government was too quick to step in. In Civics class, we were learning the workings of the three branches of government. Ohmygod, here they were, converging on our state capital.

The advantage of each particular misery is that it brings its own struggle toward remedy. We had to wear skirts to school, not jeans. I had my one precious "tight skirt," hips clearly outlined, but the rest of the time I wore full skirts, sometimes "circle" skirts, a full 180 of starched and ironed cotton or bright felt, sometimes with designs—poodles, dancing teenagers, bric-brac—sewn on. I would dip my net-like petticoats in liquid starch and hang them, spread out, on the line to dry. When I was fully assembled, my lower half resembled an open umbrella. My legs froze. My body, invasion-proof from the sides, remained utterly vulnerable from underneath. Protected by a rigid social code, I was still exposed where it counted most. No wonder the sixties came next. It made more sense to loosen the social code, put on a pair of jeans and protect what's most apt

to need protection. Already, Tampax was beginning to be marketed big-time. Laboratories were perfecting the Pill. Maybe it would yet be possible to invent a life free of the burden of the body.

Here is what we did to each other in junior high: we passed around “slam books,” one person’s name at the top of each page. You were to write a comment about that person in the blank space below the name. When it came to you, you could read what had been written: “Cute,” “He’s stuck-up,” “I used to like her but now I think she’s gotten too wild,” “Pretty, but she needs to learn how to fix her hair.” You turned first to your own page, skewered by each “slam.” We were obsessed with everything “queer,” although we didn’t know what it meant. If you wore green and/or yellow on Thursdays, you were queer. You snickered your head off if a teacher said “This seems very queer.” Personally, I had no idea what any of this meant, but, like most, I pretended. *Everyone else gets things right. Try very, very hard to be everyone else.*

I have not said much about actual classes, since learning was, of course, only a necessary backdrop. No matter that some of us loved it, no matter that I went around speaking French under my breath, no matter that I loved the first attempts at essays, at talking about books and poems. Still, the social structure loomed as large as the Federal government; learning was only local politics. When I failed an algebra test, my humiliation wasn’t about numbers and lines, it was about my unworthiness in the face of my friends’ success. When it was easy to cheat on a French vocabulary test, I did. Someplace in my brain, I’m still sitting behind Karen whose paper I copied from, dull with misery, with the worry that others will know, with the surety that as the teacher looks over the class and says, “Some of you cheated on this test,” she is zeroing in on me. It is fierce, relentless, social pressure that both ruins us and makes us better.

The Test is both horrible and satisfying precisely because it attempts to neatly package life’s problems. What else in the world carries the pressure of the ideal in its very bones? Yet in General Science, each of the multiple choices sneakily contains a nugget of the truth. And, how finely should I dissect the question without losing sight of possibly revealing grosser points? In algebra, how much credit for getting the right equation, but not the answer? What if I remember the theorem, but can’t figure out how to fit it to the problem? What if, miraculously, I get the right answer, but

use the wrong equation? How important is the answer? If I can write dazzlingly well yet say nothing much, do I get the same grade as the student whose essay plods along, but makes a good point? Do the means win out, or the ends? Under our current president's administration, students are tested half to death in order that No Child is Left Behind. Not that anyone would willingly leave any child behind, but it's damn near impossible to know: (1) Where the front is, that we want them all to get to, (2) How we would define arrival at the front, if we did find it, (3) What we'll do if they can't, or won't, get there, (4) None of the above, (5) All of the above.

High School seemed to me a big multiple choice test. The teeming generalities of Junior High began to separate into more permanent choices. When I entered Fayetteville High School, my history of school pointedly began to diverge from *the* history of school. There were the rejections: I didn't get chosen for Sub Deb, the exclusive high school sorority. I didn't get chosen for Hi Si, the second-best one, until the second time around. I tried out for cheerleader and didn't make it. Probably I was too quiet, too vague, no matter how enthusiastic I tried to sound. I was chosen at last for Peppers, the large group of pom-pom-waving back-ups for the cheerleaders. I couldn't keep first downs straight, but followed the lead of those who knew. I could've cared less about the games, but there was a certain, almost animal, satisfaction in marching onto the field in letter sweater and purple pleated skirt, sitting on the bleachers in a row with the others, waving my pompoms at the right time, yelling "Push 'em back, push 'em back, waaaaaay back!"

I met Harry when I was fifteen, and here is where my story could just as well begin or end—with my clear separation from the group activity we call school, to the beginning of my singular, anguished, self-tutorial. Harry and I had both been in Mrs. Andrews' home room, only he was there four years before me. She was the Latin teacher; I liked Latin, a language with no practical use, all dreaming and invention. Harry didn't. He had been one of those who never joined anything, who sat in the parking lot at lunch time, collar turned up, smoking and telling dirty jokes. Now he was going to the university just down the hill, the first in his family, studying to be a civil engineer. My bleached-blond next door neighbor, Gail, invited me to come along on a "date" with Harry and his friend Blake. Here came Blake in his souped-up, stripped down Ford. I

climbed in. Harry and I “made out” in the back seat most of the evening. I can offer many and convincing reasons why the absences in my own particular life compelled me to grab hold of a man, early, to be kissed, to be held, why I chose a man who was too old to date high school students, who was tense, migraine-prone, smoked two packs a day, and who gradually became an alcoholic. Many of those reasons would be personal, but some would be about school, and about the 50s.

Try to imagine not yet imagining the sixties. Try to imagine us, almost hating our mothers for submitting to their pots and pans when the war was over, for returning from the factories to be good wives and mothers, again. Try to imagine us also wanting, partly, to be like them. If you could look down the locker-lined halls of Fayetteville High School about the time I started wearing Harry’s ring on a chain around my neck, you would see me in my starched white blouse, tiny colored scarf at my neck, wide black belt and circle skirt, hair fluffy from huge brush rollers I had slept in all night, leaving red pock-marks in my scalp. I would be Loretta Young, or Doris Day. I would flirt and giggle. What you wouldn’t see is the lone, dark stream of fear and resolve running through me, the one that tasted of iron, that knew not where it was going. The other self, that believed we should follow our mothers, sent me, like so many of my friends, into the arms of men—me earlier than most—and dammed up the dark stream, for a time. When our younger sisters were turning their backs on the old ways and lighting up a joint, we were already changing diapers, feeling cheated—yes we did, even still loving our kids, our families.

Finally, with the ring around my neck, I belonged to someone. The ring itself was my anchor in time and space, the ideal and the actual swirling around each other, closer than ever to merging. It’s hard to translate this into now. There were roles, then, and the roles were more important than the figures who filled them. We all knew that. What mattered first was that you were a wife, a mother, a father. Whether you did it well, or happily, was not so much the issue as that you did it. You *were* the role. Secondarily, you had a personality. By this means, the culture remained stable, children had parents, people knew who they were. Who’s to say if this was good or bad? What it meant is that from the time I put Harry’s high school ring on a chain around my neck, I did not have to be alone with my complicated self.

I could talk about dating a college man. Then, we were “pinned”—I wore his Acacia pin, with its tiny diamonds and tiny chain, fastened to the front of every dress, every day, like a war medal. There were steps to adhere to, and I was adhering, albeit early. I sat in study hall and wrote Mrs. Harry G. Gray, III, over and over.

I should back up, because there were junctures where things might have gone differently. I was in love with another boy, a good student, excellent in math, nice and good-looking, a quarterback on the football team. There was another, homely and quiet, unnervingly bright, who invited me as his date to the annual Latin club banquet. And briefly, I worked for the school counselor, who made me suspect I didn’t need to glue myself to some boy to be okay. If I could have been aware of each turn, if I could back up and play them through in slow motion to see how my route gradually shifted until the energy ended up roaring down one lane instead of the other, I might be able to come up with barriers, blockers, filters, to change things. If I could get back there. If the “there” I imagine has any connection to the actual one. This is another loss that goes into the soup-pot of the ideal—what I imagine as lost chances.

It wasn’t exactly as if I took a divergent track: I took both tracks at once. I split myself into That Girl (not Marlo Thomas) and This One. Let us take That One first, with her terrible acne, very good and athletic body, space-age winged glasses, and a longing for love nothing could fill up, every boy a potential remedy. When Harry started hanging around the halls during basketball games waiting for her, she went with him, a little ashamed, a lot excited. He was not a bad person, but it felt gritty and wrong. Most everything about him—she suspected in her soul—was wrong for her, except that he held her, he loved her, and there was little chance he would change his mind. What she learned: how to shoot BBs into beer cans, how to fill a Zippo lighter and change its wick without spilling lighter fluid, how to French kiss, how to teeter on the edge of sex-but-not-sex, building the tension to a religious fervor, how to raise her bowling average, how to keep her two lives utterly separate.

But That Girl could hardly get free of This One so easily. This One carried home huge, well-organized three-ring notebooks, elaborate assignment books. This One studied late into the night for an Algebra test, and occasionally, by sheer determination, made an A. This one got all A’s in English, greeted every essay assignment

with breathless pleasure while groaning “Oh no!” to her friends. This One giggled. What she learned: that while many friends were smarter, she could succeed by dogged hard work, that her internal compass, deeper even than the urge for love, was ever swinging, swinging, looking for true North. Maybe she knew what agony it would take to get there, if there were such a place, but didn’t mention it to herself, so as not to scare herself off.

Senior year arrived for This Girl and That Girl, equally. My father had lost his teaching job at the University of Arkansas, mostly because he refused to finish his dissertation. At the end of my junior year, we moved to Cape Girardeau, Missouri. By then, I was “pinned” to Harry. I was leaving my school, my town, my friends, my only love. I tormented my parents with sobs all the way to Missouri. I started school. It was a good school, better than my old one. I made friends quickly. I made good grades. But suffering with loneliness, I came down with such a bad case of flu—such high fever, I became delirious. I cursed at my parents. It was all their fault. I needed Harry. He came. We walked down Broadway and picked out wedding rings. We got engaged. Here are two interesting facts: next door was Eddy, a boy my age. In the fall, I walked over to his house a few times to work on a school project. Gradually, he came to populate my fantasies—just a little—it would be unclear which boy was which—but it didn’t matter, since I would transform them into my endless, passionate letters to Harry. The second interesting fact is that at Thanksgiving, I rode the bus to visit Harry. Next to me sat a young soldier on his way to Fort Dix. We started talking. We had our cigarettes and coffee together, stool by stool, at the rest stop. Back on the bus, I pretended to fall asleep against his arm. I imagined going on and on with him, wherever he was going. How can I explain what I felt? Excitement? Desire? Look at me! I was like a kitten burrowing almost by instinct into any warm fold of cloth. But there was Harry, waiting for me in his parents’ Buick station wagon, and we got married in January, and I went back to Fayetteville to finish high school.

This, understand, is the same 17-year-old who was initiated that fall into the high school sorority at Cape Girardeau by kneeling and being fed raw eggs and crackers spread with Vick’s VapoRub, and being pushed down Broadway in a grocery cart at two in the morning. This is the same 17-year-old who picked out a wheat-sheaf

dish pattern, who was taken to the doctor by her mother to be fitted for a diaphragm. Who walked down the aisle in her long white dress, pretty nearly still a virgin, a hopeless ideal of a bride. This was January, between semesters for Harry. This was 1962. When I returned to Fayetteville High School after the wedding, the principal, the father of one of my best friends, informed me that I was automatically suspended for two weeks, the penalty for marriage in high school. Two weeks later, I was still ahead in most classes, having already covered the material in Cape Girardeau. You can find me in my senior yearbook only at the end, a rag-tag group of us standing together under a caption that says "New Students."

We are out of the 50s in that photo, but you wouldn't know it. I took a home-ec class and, with a lot of help from my new mother-in-law, made a pale green checkered Donna Reed dress with tiny pleats at the waist. We lived with Harry's parents until I graduated. My grades were the best ever. School continued to offer its steel framework to keep me from collapsing inward upon myself. It didn't save me, but it kept me on the assembly line of its vast 1950s factory, ticking off grade after grade against chaos. If there was fear, there was also geometry, with its parallel lines that would never converge; if there was worthlessness, there was also English, with its glitter of words, its poems like cradles to rest in. If there was loss, there was also history, where nothing is ever lost, if you memorize the dates. If there was passion, there was also gym class, with its volleyball coming down hard in my court, demanding all my attention.

I've been a student, and now a teacher, almost all of my life. I'm sick of school. I have always been sick of school. It scares me. Yet, I get up every morning, turn on my computer, and submit to its discipline as if Miss Jones, Miss Longenbach, Miss Teacher Unknown, Miss Jenkins, Mrs. Bonner, Mrs. Keesee, and all the rest I can name, are leaning over me to check. I bend over the screen and let myself be pulled into a completely unknown future. The work feels awful and humiliating, I have to say. It is as awful as it's ever been. But there is the happiness that almost doesn't want to be mentioned, so dependent is it on the misery. They are the two sides of the moon, absence and presence. Or, put it this way: I am twelve years old. I drag my sled to the top of Jackson Drive, huffing and puffing vapor. My hands ache, half frozen, my nose is numb. Then I climb on. Not

once, all the way down, do I think about my nose or my hands. I am almost in heaven, flying. I don't know how it will end, exactly, but the short run down is so unspeakably wonderful that I am willing to drag my sled back up, even after dark, again and again. I begin to like the climb. Anticipation begins to feel as good as the trip down. Better, maybe. It gets hard to separate them.