

Hyperlexia Journal

poetry & prose about the autism spectrum

Feeds: [Posts](#) [Comments](#)

Debra M. Fox



http://hyperlexiajournal.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/debra_fox.jpg

Debra M. Fox has published poems in various haiku journals. She is a lawyer and the director of an adoption agency. She lives just outside Philadelphia with her family, including her son Matthew, who has a rare genetic disorder.

The Way Things Go

The building first noticed the woman and boy ten years before its demolition. It wished now that it could play back the first time it glimpsed them, get a fix on their faces and remember its first impressions. The second time they came, it had forgotten they were ever there, like one forgets a kite that enchants for a moment and then vanishes from view. Yet, seeing them again for a second time, the building recalled it was reassured, in an odd kind of way, in a way it could not readily explain. By the third day they walked its grounds, the building was already expecting them, looking forward

to their presence.

The boy and woman walked with a dog, a yellow lab, who was more attentive to the boy than most dogs are to humans. They would approach in the evening after the janitors stacked the metallic chairs on tables in the cafeteria and began cleaning the floors with large spaghetti mops and pails of soapy water. Watching the boy spring up was of particular delight to the building. They never missed a night, the boy and the woman, unless it was pouring rain. Even in the snow, they came. The boy continued to wheel a stroller as he grew bigger, and the building didn't understand why.

The building noted other differences about the boy as well. Such as the fact that he didn't talk, and that he used his hands to make symbols. Or that he ran his soft hands over its brick walls, seeming to take in some extra sensation that others didn't, or couldn't. Or that he would often try to open its doors, but the woman wouldn't let him go inside, much to the building's disappointment.

This was not a fancy building like the Sistine Chapel. It was ordinary, without pillars or columns or graceful windows, without beautiful materials. Its architects prized functionality above all other elements of design. When first built in 1931, it was clean, tidy, brightly lit, and dry. Little thought was given to notions of line, proportion, or harmony. Doors were selected to exclude air drafts, prevent the spread of fire, and act as barriers to noise. No molding adorned their jambs or sills. Seen another way, the building was a convergence, or better, an accumulation, of clay pressed bricks and mortar, flashing, slate, struts, molecules and chemicals, DNA from the students who went there, tufts of fur from the mice who ran its hallways at night, and finger-nail clippings from certain fastidious teachers, who couldn't wait for after-school hours to perform personal hygiene. Outside were ordinary concrete paths, with occasional mosaic-like wads of pastel-colored chewing gum. These paths ran right up to nondescript doors, the type that were heavy and red and made a metallic sound when they closed.

Recently the building sensed that it would soon die. Buildings don't have predictable life spans the way people do, but perceptive buildings know when their ends are near. And say what you will about the building's plain façade, this was no fool of a structure. It worried when it saw orange plastic fencing going up around the mature trees that were selected for protection. It saw the old gymnasium destroyed last fall and could only ponder what that meant, as buildings don't understand the intentions of people. It noticed the grounds' keepers weren't coming round to remove the fall leaves caught within the shrubs and neglected to trim back the boxwoods, as they did every other year at this time. But the one clue, the one defining action that sobered the building, was the introduction of a wrecking ball onto the pathway that led into the courtyard next to the theatre. Every day for a week that wrecking ball sat idle and heavy next to the boxwoods.

What's more, the normal rhythms of the building changed. No longer could the building feel the pulsing of feet up its stairs in bursts, at regular intervals. No longer could it enjoy the aroma of macaroni and cheese on Mondays, and hot turkey sandwiches on Thursdays. Where once it enjoyed the vibration of metallic lockers slamming at the beginning and end of the school day, the hallways were now largely silent. Soon the maintenance workers didn't bother to turn the lights on, and the building had to slumber in utter, complete darkness.

Because it was immobile, the building could do nothing, could make no plan, to derail its imminent demise. It could only stand frozen in space and face what was surely coming. At the same time, the

building was the sort of structure that wanted desperately to find meaning in its situation, to even find goodness in it, despite its utter lack of control. It wasn't willing to accept that there was no adjustment whatsoever it could make to come to terms with its future.

When the gymnasium was destroyed last fall, there was no ritual, no laying to rest, so to speak, to properly mark its end. Demolition didn't seem to justify that kind of convention, and that confused the building, even upset it.

The building began to sense that there were things it could learn from the woman, so it began paying more attention to her. She seemed to get lost in the ritual of the daily walk, seemed to take joy in putting one step in front of the other. In springtime, she would reach up and bend branches of some of the lilac trees lining the building to inhale their scent. On Tuesday nights, she would press her nose to the glass of the cafeteria windows to watch old people square dancing, her mouth twisted into a half smile. On certain clear nights, her eyes would follow the boy's uplifted finger to the moon, and she would acknowledge that yes, the moon was full.

The boy, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to the fact that the building would soon cease to exist. That is not to say he didn't notice changes, because he did. But for him, the changes were more of the moment, more immediate, such as the improbability of a bulldozer parked on a lawn normally occupied by students eating their lunches. Or that there were so many more dried leaves caught in the bushes than usual, and that it was so delightful to crunch them between his fingers. And although the building was envious at times of the boy, that he could exist without a sense of foreboding, it tried to imagine how he would cope with a loss of something he had come to know for ten years. Would he experience sadness? And how would he express it to the woman, since he appeared unable to talk?

One evening in February, when the moon was a low sliver in the sky, the building intuited this would be its last night. Nevertheless, the building carried out its evening ritual. It settled itself, and as usual, the wooden floor joists in the theatre creaked, and the one women's faculty bathroom door (the only louvred door in the building) wafted open like always. As the building hunkered down, its rafters sank imperceptibly, and the windows on the top floor dropped down lower into their panes. The building didn't sleep much that night, and when the first rays of sun poked through the transom window, as usual, in the science room a smashing of glass could be heard, followed by the tinkling of thousands of tiny pieces. And then the building felt a rush of cold air breach its walls. Oddly, the building felt exhilarated and free in a way it never had before. Finally, the waiting was over, and the uncertainty that went with it. And somehow, now that it was here, now that there was no turning back, the building could slowly begin to accept its own demise.

That evening, as the building took stock of what was left of itself, it noticed the woman, boy, and dog come out for their usual evening walk. The boy approached first, and the building could see the disappointment in his eyes as he tried to enter the usual paths but couldn't because of a metal fence. He watched as the mother gently guided the boy away, seeming to console him. He watched as the dog lifted his head to inhale the mixture of evening air and debris.

In its half demolished state, the building wondered if the woman could understand or explain to herself why she tirelessly walked its paths day after day and year upon year. Did she realize it had become a silent presence in her life, something that accepted her and her boy for who they were? Did

she notice that it didn't stare impolitely or require anything of them?

In those last days of the building's existence, most other humans had long ago retreated to their warm homes and did not venture out except to go to work or run errands. But as spring came, children and their parents reappeared. Some didn't realize the building had been demolished. For others, there was a resurgence of interest in the building now that the days were getting longer, and the dark footprint where the building once stood was more prominent.

On Sundays, teenagers in eyeglasses driving mini-vans and gripping the steering wheel with both hands were turned away from the parking lot. Their parents in the passenger seats, white faced and nervous, would point to a new sign which said, "Construction Site: No Trespassing."

Little boys with baseball mitts, their fathers carrying bats and balls, stuck their noses through the wire fencing and noticed the old baseball field was now a drainage ditch, where geese landed and preened.

On weekend nights, young lovers no longer had access to the places where the building cast its deepest, darkest shadows.

And the little boy, faithfully walking past the place where the building stood, every night at the very same time, would sign to his mother that the building was "all gone". He would not take another step until his mother acknowledged that yes, it was true the building was gone.

One warm spring day after the azaleas were in bloom, the little boy, his mother and the dog walked by along the main road, now that they could no longer get inside the fence. With them they brought a paper bag full of "wishing bugs". They didn't know the real name for these plants; that's what they called them. The mother told the boy he could open the bag and take some of the stems out, which he did, clumsily. He threw the weeds in a burst, up in the air, and they traveled over the fence, and the breeze carried them to the empty space, and the little boy signed, "thank you". As the mother took the little boy's hand in hers, commanded the dog to turn around, and they started for home, the white puffs spread out and hung in the air longer than they rightfully should have, against all common sense.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)

[The MistyLook Theme.](#)

Follow

Follow “Hyperlexia Journal”

Powered by WordPress.com