

# Struck Dumb

by Mary Nyquist

*Dans cette histoire, l'auteure rapporte comment les effets d'un traumatisme peuvent entraver l'apprentissage dans un environnement traditionnel en éducation.*

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***It won't be long before she won't be able to hear a thing. Already his voice sounds as if it's coming from far, far away.***

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ranged herself, as usual, to appear tidy, concentrated, and at ease. Once again, though, nothing's being registered. Those marks on the blackboard, what are they supposed to mean? How can anyone understand when there are so many words missing? The few that do get spoken refer to numbers already there, chalked up, formed blankly in relation to themselves, an abstract, invisibly disciplined brigade, moving in and out of formation only in order to reform. There are no commands, no one is barking orders or threatening punishment. But it's not hard to figure out they're expected to take his direction, to reproduce exactly the moves he makes, to do just what he does. The slightest deviation leads to trouble. Even when it seems to be working, an alternate route meets with disapproval. What counts, obviously, is making sure there's no messing up along the way.

Everyone else seems willing to go along with this or at least give it a try. So why can't she fall into line? For weeks it's been getting harder, and recently it's not even been an option. Maybe she's just too far behind from not having done any homework lately. Somehow, it doesn't seem only a question of catching up, though. It's more like her ability to grasp what's

being done is going. There are moves her mind would ordinarily be making, but can't. Understanding what's going on doesn't just elude her; it's actually made impossible, prevented. The figures appear, disappear, reform, reappear, without entering any zone of meaning. It's as if the blackboard, a huge video screen, is displaying a game with symbols in perpetual, ordered motion, while controls, mobile figures, and score signals are all mysteriously withheld. Not from everyone, though. This flotilla of figures really seems to mean something to other people here. Or at least to be of some use. What stops their thoughts from spiralling outwards, upwards she wonders? A special energy source to which she's lost access? Or an invisible store of counting beans, neatly compartmentalized? Perhaps they've a kind of internal abacus that keeps their mental hands occupied, busy manipulating tangible, workable things keeping all these airy numbers open to the touch of thought, even to silent speech.

For her, though, all that's happening is a dizzying sort of deafness. It won't be long before she won't be able to hear a thing. Already his voice sounds as if it's coming from far, far away. It has such a distance to travel that by the time it reaches her ears it's barely audible. He, too, is receding, though she can still see his mouth moving as he lip-synchs faint, unintelligible sounds. Ever so slowly the volume gets turned lower and lower, finally diminishing to a low-toned, buzzing hum. The buzz is so soft now that the sound of her own breathing is all that can be heard. Not that listening to it has a calming effect. The air is coming in more and more uneven intervals. There are irregular gaps between breaths, but also within each one, where tiny, jagged gasps lurch toward a sudden, desperate gulp in the wildly arrhythmic beat of a

ball bouncing down the stairs, with three quick, short taps on one step followed by a high twist up and down. Better not to think about it, though, for the more she does the more difficult it is to get enough air. Even when trying to breathe deeply she can't seem to get enough. But she keeps forgetting to make the effort. And now her heart is racing. It's pounding so hard that someone else will surely soon hear it. If she doesn't keep her mind away from all this strange, crazy fear things will get worse, as they did last week. Oh, why is it happening again so soon? What's wrong, why can't she stop it? It's already so bad that she's no longer even pretending to take things down. The paper has only a few, fragmentary formulae, and now her pen has stopped writing altogether. Her hand probably wouldn't move even if she wanted to scribble something. Besides, she can't really focus her vision any more, at least in this room. Everything's getting blurry except her hands, which lie there cold and lifeless on the desk, and her bag, which she'll have to pick up if she gets away. If she doesn't move soon even her breathing will

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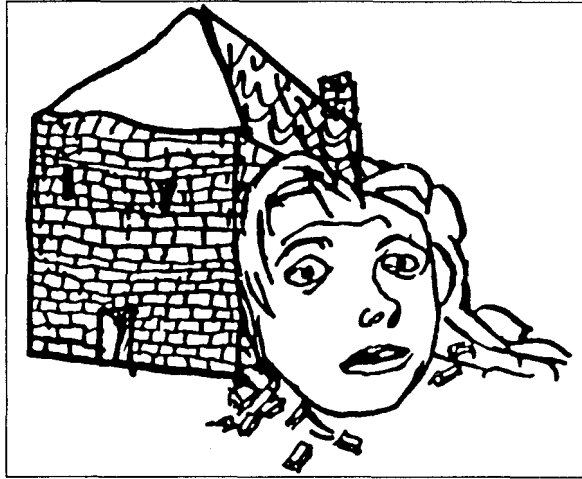
come to a halt. What if she passes out, suddenly, right now? What if she loses the power of moving altogether, and remains stationery, a seated statue, when everyone else gets up to leave?

That she appears to be here makes it feel even more that she's not. If only she could disappear completely. If her not being here were the simple, literal truth, this wouldn't be so hard

to bear. At least she wouldn't have to worry about what to say if someone were to notice she's not paying any attention. Or watched her slumping to the floor, which is what she's afraid will happen soon. It would be such a tremendous relief to feel no eyes could possibly reach out to touch her. Invisibility would cover her gently, like a shawl, protecting her from shame. But would it, really? There's nothing she wants more, nothing, and yet such a lot is already absent that it's hard to imagine how going all the way would ease the pain. Here she is, not really here, yet overwhelmingly present to herself, all the more horribly present because so much else is slipping away. Barely able to hear, see, or move, she's here in tiny particles of stress-specked pain, which pervade the space around and within, making it pulsate with a deadly, life-assaulting energy. The more lethal it becomes, the more it absorbs everything else into it, obliterating restless, outstretched legs, pencils, plaits, the scent of cologne mixed with the stench of pinkish eraser peelings. Could she disappear so completely that it would go, too? If her breathing stops, might not it all, at the same time, stop, too? If she stays absolutely still for long enough, maybe she'll be able to drop into a quieter, less chaotic space, where there won't be awareness of any kind.

To be able to leave it behind is what she wants. The movement away has already started, and it would be so easy just to let it go. But stop. Remember where you are, you idiot. This isn't either the time or the place for such foolishness. For all you know, you've already given yourself away. Is that what you want, to become a laughingstock? To be singled out as a basket case, looney, crackers? You can't expect to keep carrying on like this. And if you faint dead away again? Is that what you want? Imagine having to be carried out by who knows who, with all sorts of remarks being passed back and forth over your body,

and everyone hanging around while the calls get made. Never, ever knowing exactly what's happened. The longer you stay here, without doing anything, the more you're likely to bring all this on. And this time it's certain to be worse afterwards. There'll be more questions, more half-suppressed sniggers, more eyes avoiding you in the halls. If this is what you want, just keep it up. You're already doing a great job, so just keep it up. If



Gail Geltner, "Home Sweet Home?" 1982

you really don't want to create a scene, then you'd better get away, right now. This very moment. Either get out of here quietly, or shape up and get to work.

But can she? However much she wants to, she may not be able to get away. It might not be possible to break through this paralysis. Everything that could move seems immobilized. Let's see if she can lift her hand up a bit. No, not even her little finger will cooperate. What about shifting her left foot over a ways? No, not that, either. How this happens, she doesn't know. It's as if a transparent casing, moulded exactly to the shape of her body, encloses her tightly, holding her in place. Holding her so she can barely breathe. Or as if her movements are being directed by an unknown operator, who's decided that for the time being she will have no choice but to stay put. Paralysis by remote control. But there must be a way of wresting the control panel away, of taking it back. She can't

stupidly remain here, doing nothing, motionless. It's too humiliating. If she can't break out of this cycle soon, she'll have to hurl herself to the very bottom of the despair that has hollowed her out, hurl herself with so much force that there will be no chance of recovery. Stop this, then. Stop thinking, stop noticing. That would be a way of breaking free. You must leave, right now. This has gone on long enough. Just get a move on.

Get out, now. If you don't get up right now, this very second, it will be too late. Just get up. Remember your bag, and walk quickly, as if you know what you're doing. Now. Right now. Or it will be too late.

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It looks as if nobody's been in since the last time she was here. That old mop hasn't moved an inch and has the very same, mousy dustball sitting on it. No one's bothered to whisk away the cobwebs

that stretch over the sink, and across the window, too. That large one over there is sagging, maybe even tearing a bit. Perhaps the motes of dust that are always drifting about in here danced a little bit too long on its ladders. This room must not be used at all anymore. When were those cans of paint last opened, she wonders. That pale yellow, her favourite, could it actually ever have been used? Why is that hideous green everywhere instead? Including on every one of those brush handles, which even the strongest turpentine will never see clean. It's such a relief to find that nothing's changed. Everything is so much always the same it must mean they're using the other room all the time now. So this is still untouched, still unused, still hers. And no one knows it. If her luck would just continue to hold. If only people wouldn't get it into their heads to look for her here.

It's almost comfortable on the floor, now that these old boxes are getting less rigid and sharp edged. The ce-

ment is cold with the retentive, deep-held cold of those stones along the creek. But at least it's not damp the way the cellar at home is. No one will think of coming in here, she hopes. "She had to run off to the washroom again," is probably what they'll think. If she can get just a few moments of peace, with no one to listen to, no one expecting her to attend, no one looking at her to see how she is. If only she could stay here. If only this room could be her home. She would miss Pal, that's all. His warm and happy softness. Otherwise, she wouldn't mind a bit. Even going without food wouldn't bother her.

Those tears seem finally not to be stinging her eyes any more. Good thing it didn't start up because if it hadn't stopped someone might have been able to tell. No matter what she does, he always knows. There are only a few minutes before the next bell rings. If no one comes, there'll be enough time to become presentable, to knit this quiet into the frayed, unravelled threads of her everyday self. The next class probably won't be so bad. There's going to be a guest speaker, which means a lot of talking and commotion. And then there's choir, which everyone likes. The piece they're doing now, something baroque, she thinks, has so many different voices and so much movement there's no chance of drifting away. Tomorrow there's a special presentation of some sort. At least she didn't pass out today. Or get caught. If this doesn't come undone, there's maybe a good chance of making it through the rest of the week.

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## SHEREE-LEE OLSON

### Snow

Watching the snow I think of women  
in another cold country  
lining up before dawn  
in a bombed-out hospital  
to abort the babies  
they fear will only starve or freeze  
of the mothers waiting in basements  
with their extinguished children  
for word of food  
How they must long for time to speed up  
to take them to the end of their fathers' war  
while I want time to stop  
so I can keep you here under the eaves  
safe in your pale blue room

You catch me crying and I smile reassurance  
the way I never would with lovers  
and scoop you up and carry you to the window  
to show you the snow  
There are no shells landing in this city  
Explosions are quieter here  
a suicide in a locked room  
a newborn in a cardboard box  
I imagine her stubby body  
beneath the farewell note  
*I love you Precious*  
and her mother's teenage agony  
how she must have ached for time to turn back  
to erase the death from her body  
the tiny ghost from her womb

I push open the window  
and put some snow in your small warm hand  
You snatch it away  
searching my face for clues  
Your smile is like spring, like birdsong  
bright and sharp as a mirror  
turned to the sky  
I gather you against me, breathing you in  
and remember the woman  
whose love could not sway her only son  
from his courtship of oblivion  
and wonder how many times  
you will snatch yourself away  
before someone teaches you this:  
that life is always holy  
but sometimes death is a gift

*Sheree-Lee Olson is a feminist, a journalist, and the mother of two little boys. She currently works as an editor in the arts section of The Globe and Mail. This poem marks her return to poetry after many years of non-fiction writing.*