

## Autumn rolls in, bringing with it the terror of learning



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 7, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

I always like to quote John Keats' unforgettable "To Autumn" when fall arrives:

*Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-  
eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel  
shells*

*With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never  
cease,  
For summer has o'erbrimm'd their clammy  
cells...*

What I love about this poem is the way it dances between the abundance of the season, and the sweet sadness of something — summer — ending. It was 80 degrees yesterday in Portland, but this morning I caught that unmistakable scent in the air—a coolness, a hint of fermentation. Keats had the English countryside and "vines that round the thatch-eves run"; in North Portland, we have scrub jays helping to harvest the flood of cherry tomatoes taxing the branches in our garden, raccoons noisily knocking the apples out of our neighbor's clematis-infested tree all night, and the home brewer down the street's hop vines choking his trellises. We have back-to-school for Ramona the second grader, and me, the community college instructor. We have the ends of things, beginnings of things, closing down and starting again.

For Ramona, this means going from being a first grader in her classroom, which includes 1st through 3rd graders, to being one of the older kids who, ideally, helps the younger ones with lessons and exhibits leadership. We chose a public Montessori school for the public part — diverse student body — and for the Montessori part — commitment to grace, courtesy, and working toward world peace. It's safe to say that Ramona, bless her willful, id-driven little heart, is like all children, still kind of feral.

It's a lot of work to be patient — it doesn't come naturally.

Exhibit A: this summer in Michigan when she was feeding peanuts to the rapacious chipmunks on my mom's deck and her toddler cousin Madelyn couldn't stop whooping with joy and scared them off: "I do not like little kids who scare away nature!"

Exhibit B, this morning getting ready for school: "I don't care if it's Daddy's turn in the bathroom, I want to brush my teeth now and I only have to use grace and courtesy at school!"

Thus, the larger lessons that we learn in one context often take time to apply in other contexts.

When I say that Ramona is "feral," I mean it in the least charged, possible sense — that we're all born wild little animals and do our best to figure out what we have to do to abide with civilization, for want of a better word. I think that most adults are kind of feral as well. I know that I and my colleagues at the college are. For proof, sit in on any of the department meetings taking place on campus this week and listen to the purely animal-kingdom type fight-or-flight tones in which everyone is discussing the new online, class-management system that we all have to switch our classes over to by winter. "But I like the old system! Why do I have to rework my classes again?" (Note: I'm including myself here.) As I pick through the different ways of uploading a video lecture or laboriously building a quiz, I'm experiencing that whole Fear of the "new" that I experience every time I have to shift, learn another way — even though I got into this gig because I knew it was essentially taking out an insurance policy that I'd have to keep growing and upping my game for the rest of my professional life. In the very back of my lizard brain, I know that the new "new" thing will soon enough be the old new thing, then just the thing that I'll have to let go of when it comes time to change over again. Does everyone get reflective in September?

Keats goes on to say,

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where  
are they?*

*Think not of them, thou hast thy music  
too,—*

*While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying  
day,*

*And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats  
mourn*

*Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies...*

As excited as I was to spend the summer with Ramona last June; as full of promise as it was watching the tomato starts yawn and stretch tall and the raspberry canes spring skyward and pelt us with fruit while we had slow days filled with library visits, play dates, and weekend drives in the country. That shift in the light as the sun sinks sooner and sooner every evening is welcome. I can't say that I was sorry to consign Ramona back into the daytime tutelage of the mighty Mr. Kirk at her cheerful little school, where he and his colleagues speak 7-year-old a bit better than I do, and they know how to help her learn how to get along without giving up who she is. And I'm excited to face my own students in two weeks, many of whom are returning to college after a long gap, or starting for the first time. They can use my help in discovering how this whole higher education business works.

What neither Ramona nor my students know is that it takes just about everything I have to keep up with them, to learn, or relearn, what I'm expected to teach them — patience, mostly, in Ramona's case, and how to at least try to abandon the terror that comes with learning itself, in the case of my students. It's not an accident, I don't think, that the school year always begins in autumn when, as Keats finishes his poem,

*Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,  
And gathering swallows twitter in the  
skies.*

The sound of the birds gathering to take off for the season is the sound of departure, but it's also the sound of heading forth.



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