

# room for purple horses

BY LOCKIE HUNTER ★

I recently took a much needed sabbatical from a fifteen year career in publishing to pursue my master's degree in creative writing. I didn't want to wake up at 40 and realize that I hadn't written the great American novel. (As it so happens I'll wake up 40 years old this January and will not have written the novel, but I'll at least have a few chapters under my belt.) My memoir professor tells me to ask of myself: "What is the extraordinary reality that we live, that being conscious of it is enough to write a memoir of it?" My extraordinary reality includes a poet-in-residence—my three-year-old daughter, Pascale.

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Like most toddlers, Pascale is inquiring. She notices the veins decorating the leaves and the crow's feet stamping a pattern on my eyes. Her world is one of detection. Still, her language skills are not fully formed. I stalk Pascale with a pad and pencil, catching snatches of toddler verse. I'm tempted to submit some of her words as my own to one of my writing workshops. I'd get comments like, "original voice."

*Milk goes after milk. But sometimes milk comes before milk.*

This Ginsberg-esque poem was uttered one day when Pascale was helping her brother with his snack. It's perfect in its simplicity and its truth. If I can pattern my verse on such straightforward observations, I could make great movement towards a simpler style.

*Mommy: What if I have four apples and you have four apples?*

*Pascale: If I have four apples and you have four apples then we will be happy and we will love each other.*

Thank you, Walt Whitman junior.

*It makes my stomach crumbly and makes my stomach bumbly.* Shades of E.E. Cummings here. The word bumbly is gorgeous in its descriptive powers. It evokes grumpy old men and bad haircuts. Pascale was being blunt. She did not wish to eat something, as it made her bumbly. This same frankness is what leads the child to publicly comment on indelicate items.

*Mommy, that woman just picked her nose. You tell me not to*

*pick my nose. Is it okay for grown ups to pick their nose?*

These candid comments are worth every moment of the accompanying humiliation. As parents, we all have accounts of our children's first mispronunciations. The words "purkle" or "pupple" instead of purple seems to be an almost universal memory. A girlfriend recently told me that her son waves at the ocean waves. She beamed with pride. Are we making fun of our kids and their ignorance? No, but maybe we're feeling a mix of superiority and awe. I track my daughter and record her poems not because I wish to snicker at her mistakes, but because I know that one day her reality will be mediated, and as such she will utter the sayings that we all utter. Her words will become homogenized. "Have a nice day," she will say.

Last night, when I asked if she wanted a snack before dinner, she said, "No, thank you. I don't want to ruin my applepie."

My mother-in-law tells a story of my husband returning from school crying. He'd been given an assignment to paint a horse, and he painted it blue and purple. The teacher scolded him and told him that horses were brown. There was a painting of a carousel in my husband's house and the horses that traveled on it were shades of purple and blue. My husband was devastated at the reception his drawing received, and my mother-in-law stomped down to that school, demanding to know: "Is there no room in the world for purple horses?"

When playing in my off-limits room, my daughter almost overturned a framed painting that hadn't been secured to the wall yet. She came to tell me about it.

*Pascale: It almost fell over and hurt me.*

*Mommy: That wouldn't have been good, huh?*

*Pascale: No. Because we're not made for that.*

*Mommy: For what?*

*Pascale: For breaking.*

No. We are not made for breaking. Part of me delights in this poetry and part of me understands that my daughter will "learn to know better." Her grammar will improve; her word choices will deepen with understanding. Regardless of her future, I hope Pascale's "original voice" is one that will never be silenced. My writing has improved immensely since I met my daughter. She's taught me to look at the world at a slightly crooked angle, and to use my own words—grammatically exact or no—to tell the story of my world, my extraordinary reality. ★