

Primary colours

by Laura Horton (*Plymouth Laureate of Words 2020-2023*)

I'm trying to get into my old primary school, a 38-year-old standing anxiously outside the gates, searching for a buzzer or a break in the fence. Holding my notebook as purposefully as I can so I don't look suspicious.

In the playground, one child is pretending to be a monster, pulling her chewed blue jumper sleeves up over her head to create a long beak. Another watches this game longingly, considers joining in, then shyly scurries away.

She reminds me of...

"LAURA."

I jump, an elderly woman is standing on the other side of the fence.

"The buzzer is right there."

She points to a large intercom a metre from me, her long hands snaked with veins and peppered with liver spots.

"We've been watching you struggling from inside." She titters.

It's been 27 years since I've seen her, but I know exactly who this woman is, she's stalked my darker dreams for decades - Mrs Lyttle, my year 6, form teacher.

Pause.

The laugh of a bell rung by a child.

I step into the playground alive with little limbs, jumping and croaking and ribeting to the door.

As we walk I shrink under the gaze of Mrs Lyttle, the ghost of my socks flailing around my ankles, backpack scraping the floor.

"Stand up straight this instant."

I drawer myself up, as if a poker has been shoved up my – oh she's not talking to me.

"Ashley, don't run."

“Callum don’t you dare make those hand gestures – my office NOW.”

“So I hear you’re Plymouth Laureate then?”

I nod.

“I hope you don’t mind, I never got round to voting.”

I drop my notebook on the stairs.

“Ah still clumsy Laura.”

I notice children swerve past her warily as they crash pile up the steps.

She asks if I have children, when I tell her I don’t, she says being a mother is really the only worthwhile job. Though I’m sure she’d be disappointed in me even if I had a family the size of a netball team.

Up another set of steps, she ushers me through the sticky door and having not thought of it for decades, everything is suddenly so familiar. Metal coat hooks and dark wooden floors, the smell of sugar paper and crayons, the accident box, filled with spare pants, tiny blue plastic chairs and bean bags. Classrooms winding off the assembly hall, each named after a tree.

I’m shown into Birch.

“They’ll be about five minutes. I’m afraid I can’t stay – it’s a busy day. Good luck.”

I don’t realise I’m holding my breath until she shuts the door behind her. On the red wall at the back of the classroom is a board full of pictures of myths and monsters and a chart with children’s names and stars.

Mrs Lyttle’s lessons are the ones that have stuck with me, maybe because she was the last teacher I had in primary school, or maybe because her assessments of me mirrored my own fears that I was a lost cause.

I wasn’t allowed to join recorder club because it was a treat for the top tier of the class.

In a conversation about careers, Mrs Lyttle high fived Aaron when he said he wanted to be an astronaut, but patted my arm sadly and told me:

“I think you should set your sights a little lower.”

When I quietly explained I’d like to be a writer.

I was a daydreamer, and she would often ask me:

“Is there anything in that head of yours Laura?”

I took as many toilet breaks as I could during Mrs Lyttle’s lessons to shorten the days, so many that she asked my mum if I had worms. When she’d circle around to me, I’d stand up to sharpen my pencil, the primary school equivalent of a cigarette break.

I also desperately wanted her validation. I’d imagine that if I ever won an award or a Blue Peter badge, I’d thank Mrs Lyttle ironically.

I perch on a tiny chair and feel my palms sweating. I’m not sure I’ve got much to teach these children.

What I’m really terrified about, other than boring them to tears, is swearing. Knowing I absolutely cannot swear keeps it front and centre of my mind.

Maybe I should make an excuse, tell everyone they’ve made a mistake about me.

In the corner of the desk is a tiny fly caught in a web, the spider spins it around like a waltzer...

Then the door is flung open with a gust and the class blow in, settling like leaves on the floor around me.

Behind them is:

“Miss Keeble, can I sit on that ladies lap?”

I stand up quickly, Miss Keeble pulls me into a warm hug.

“I was younger than you are now, when we last saw each other, can you believe that.”

I didn’t realise I’d see you today, or Mrs Lyttle.

“We’re the last two teachers clinging on from the olden days.”

She has the same warm glow I remember, large safe hands that patched up bloodied elbows, putting ticks and crosses and smiley faces on exercise books.

I’ve written down things I want to say but my hands have started shaking.

I look at the children, identifying the shy looking ones instantly – the little girl from the playground staring down at her socks.

As I start to talk my mind goes blank. I’ve regressed, I’m a reluctant child with nothing in my head.

I need to ask them something.

“Has anyone been to the theatre?” My voice wobbling ever so slightly.

With one accord they yell yes although it turns out that most of the class have been to the cinema but not to the theatre with one or two having seen a pantomime.

A hand shoots up.

“Miss, how did you get that scar?”

He’s looking at my knuckle where a livid scar lives between my index and middle finger.

It’s from a glue gun accident.

“A lesson to be heeded here Jayden.”

Another question.

“Miss what’s your favourite pizza?”

“Erm four cheese.”

Miss Keeble stands up and asks if I mind if she tells a story about me.

“Do you remember your shaking leg Laura?”

I don’t, I admit.

She tells them that when I was their age, I was desperate to stand up and read in front of the class, but each time I tried my right leg would shake ferociously and I could never do it. I got so frustrated that one day:

“I held Laura’s leg under the table to stop it shaking when she spoke, and not only did she tell her story, she got a gold star.”

The feeling comes back, the safety of her belief in me.

“Look at Laura now.”

If only she knew.

A little girl calls out.

“Is your leg shaking now miss.”

Do I lie?

It is a bit, actually.

“But she got up anyway.”

It would be inappropriate to ask Miss Keeble to hold my leg now.

I want to tell a story about her but the only one I can think of, is when we had a discussion about sex education, Miss Keeble was always keen to be transparent with us, when she told us that “apparently” ejaculation is like an explosion - but a good one, her friend had told her. Although I’m sure she told us other things, this was the information that stuck and I traumatised my little brother when I sat him down to explain this matter of factly before dinner – he ran around holding his penis for days after, despite my mum’s reassurances.

“Did you like theatre in school miss?”

Hmm I was too self-conscious to have wanted to act, but I remember getting a little theatre for Christmas when I about eight, it had cardboard sets you could paint and magnets on the figures so you could move them about under the stage.

I made up plays with my brother Jack and charged family members 50p on the door. Jack would make fart noises and I’d stop performances to tell people off for laughing - I was an intense child.

I ask them about the wall of monsters and myths and the class comes alive.

I decide to discard my notes and set them a task to each write a monologue – a piece for one person, from the perspective of their monster. I know if we write a group play, some voices will get lost.

They get to work – and I move around the room answering questions and trying my best to give advice.

Some seem worried about getting it wrong.

“Will this be marked miss.”

No. This isn’t academic.

I notice the little girl from the playground raises her hand a few times, but swiftly retracts.

The hour flies by in a haze of monster imaginings.

What might your monster smell like Kayla?

“Gross miss.”

But might it smell like perfume to others?

“Yes! my dog loves to roll in fox shi...”

“KAYLA!”

They all hand in something.

“I don’t think mine’s very good Miss.”

I tell them I never like my own work.

I leave with 25 monologues and bear hugs.

Although I was only booked for one session I contact the school and ask if I can do something with the monologues. They find two more dates. One where I come in for a morning to type up all the pieces and edit any bits and bobs the children want changing, and the other to have them performed.

We’ve found a little pot of funding and find four actors from Plymouth Conservatoire. Christina, Todd, Lisa and Joe meet me at the gates, all colourful dungarees and nervous smiles. We’re performing in the hall today, Mrs Lyttle will be there.

The class are already sat in rows when we come in, I introduce them to the actors. I glance at Mrs Lyttle whose face is inscrutable. Miss Keeble is encouraging, trying to keep the excited chatter to a quiet hum.

I sit to the side of the hall and the actors begin.
Flying through the room, embodying:

An otter who lives in a flying dustbin
A seagull who eats toes and chest hair
A five-legged dragon
Flower fairies with lazars for eyes
Evil dinner ladies with poisoned ladles
A rotting turnip who rules the world
Homework warriors, giants and witches
Wizards and warlocks

Absurd and magical.
I keep half my eye on the audience.

The girl who doesn’t speak nudges her friend when her piece is up. She partially covers her eyes, I completely get it, I find it hard to watch my own plays.

“Did I really write that?”

Jayden looks tearful - in a good way.

There's something about the collaboration that makes art feel more possible.

One child is so excited he attempts to pick up another child and run around the room. I imagine the looks they'd get if adults tried to do the same at the Theatre Royal Plymouth during an Opera.

The room is fizzing, electric.

Kayla asks how the actors know what to do. Joe says it's instinctual, but a good script helps.

Little groups break out where more questions are asked:

"Is writing for actors a job?"

"How about lights?"

"What's the worst costume you've ever had to wear?"

"What's your favourite sandwich filling?"

Then the quiet girl tugs at my dress.

I look down.

"I wrote it to be funny, not sad. No one laughed."

She shrugs.

Not everyone will get you I say.

Mrs Lyttle insists on walking me out, I glance backwards at Miss Keeble whose smile buoys me up, as it always did.

We walk out through reception and as she ushers me through the door I spot a notice board. On the board is a photograph of me. Underneath it says: Former pupil Laura is now Plymouth Laureate of Words, proving that if you work hard enough and follow your dreams, anything can come true.

The children are filing out for break time, a riot of conversation and songs. Mrs Lyttle has started her laments to the children to quiet down as we walk.

"Is there anything in that head of yours?"

I know she isn't talking to me, but I answer anyway - YES.

The child she's talking to, the one daydreaming, looks emboldened and also says:

YES Miss!

I open the gate expertly now and thank Mrs Lyttle. As I wave at the children from the street, I know what voices I'll be leaving behind, and which I will be taking with me into my new role.