

# the difference between child-dread and grown-up- dread is the paycheck keeps the tears away

*by* M. F. Sullivan

the first day of preschool  
my mother walked me down the street  
to a tall building that cut  
like a knife made of bricks  
right into the street,  
an american flag  
sticking straight out  
just above the door.

the first second i was there  
i hated it  
and the other children  
with something deep inside me  
older than my four years  
like the disgust a man feels  
when he's lived longer than long enough  
and meets each morning tireder than the next.

that day, while forced to play  
with blocks and rice  
to nap on an auschwitz cot  
with strange rot-toothed children  
who were more enthralled than i  
with a picture-book about dalmatians,

i scowled my way on through.

a century later,  
my mother broke me out  
and at home my parents asked,  
so, how was it?

it was terrible,  
i said with a wave of my arms.  
we didn't learn anything  
we just napped  
and read books about dalmations  
and i thought you were supposed to learn in school.

it's only the first day, said my father.

but the next day, too,  
and the next,  
with no time longer than the naps  
you had to fake  
if you couldn't manage to doze off  
on a wafer-thin mattress  
and a pillow flatter still.

even the field trips were tainted  
like when the creepy little boy  
in the back of the bus with me  
told me, grinning,  
that he'd grow up to marry me  
despite my adamant protests.

each day was one of long despair  
except for the days when it wasn't raining  
in that depressive ohio way  
because then we could be in the overgrown playground

with the rusty merry-go-round  
and springing horses  
and creaking swings.

but the best part of that playground  
was the building behind it,  
made of brick and taller than the sky  
and covered in a wall of dark green ivy  
that spread further than i could crane my little neck.

the day we got to wear our halloween costumes in  
my father finally asked if i liked the preschool  
and if i felt i was learning anything  
and if i'd like to stop going.

of course i told him i wanted to quit  
and so back at home again i was  
until kindergarten started a year later,  
a formless year,  
the kind of year one feels when one  
has yet to be convinced of  
the sensation of time.

the weight of this inevitability was new  
because there was no escape  
and there were twelve more years of it  
and there went my mother  
and the playground was all shiny and new  
and there was no brick building  
to tower above me  
and keep me company while i played by myself  
amidst people i didn't really want to know in the first place  
since it always seemed that they didn't want to know me,  
and so i flopped on the strange red beanbag chair twice my size  
and wept without resistance

because it was natural to do so  
in the face of such a sentence.

