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Excerpted from the forthcoming book: *Beginner's Mind*

## Ex-Patriots

It is Glen Rooney's turn to lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance. With his right hand pressed to his chest, his short-sleeved, white cotton shirt hangs stiffly from his thin, alabaster arm. He has lifted the visor to his astronaut's helmet as if to commune with us. The helmet was a gift from Miss D after Glen announced to her one day his dream of orbiting the earth. On a typical day, he dons the helmet from morning arrival until afternoon dismissal -- retiring it to the top of his desk only for recess, but always wearing it for fire drills. During whole-class lessons, he peers through the helmet's plastic shield while he reads Miss D's lips as she guides us at the blackboard, or as she shuttles us through the sentences of the great Roman orators: Cicero's impassioned speeches parsed into columns of persuasive words like the concrete columns of the Roman Republic. During writing and reading hours, Glen sits at his desk hovering over word problems or over his science text as if he is hovering over the earth's arc -- his only air supply coming from his deco-style, laminated desk: his port, his dream base.

Today, however, Glen Rooney is leaving his port. He has turned away from us and toward the flag, and we can hardly hear him. Miss D stands beside him, and follows his lead. Like Glen, she pushes her own hunched shoulders back and stands with a new military posture; like Glen, she recites the Pledge in a staccato measure that keeps us all halting and trailing her in our own recitation.

### *I p-ledge a-LEE-gance*

We have become so accustomed to Glen wearing his helmet that we run to his defense when other children mock him. We tell them to leave him alone, and that some day he'll be a famous astronaut, and that dreamers are doers! We say this last part the way Miss D always says it, with theatrical pace and punctuation, and we let the idea work on them. *Dreamers are doers.*

In a town where dreams are whiskey-induced, and where our parents piously wait for their numbers to come up in the week's bookings, Miss D offers us a new religion. *Don't look back!* She calls to us if we falter during a poetry recitation, or if we shake our heads no when she calls upon us. *Don't look back, darling!* She calls to us, *Jump! Jump!* It is scripture from the Church of Nonconformists. Don't look back for a reason to fail, she might have said to us, *Jump. Before North Weymouth -- before your parents, before your culture, before your religion, before your worldview forbids it -- jump!*

The distance from Johnson Elementary School in North Weymouth to Harvard University in Cambridge is a direct route of about 15 miles, and less than 30 minutes by car. Forever standing between those two points, however -- as if to intercept certain ambitions -- are the colossal cranes of the Quincy Fore River Shipyard. Like cathedrals that generations of men from the surrounding towns have built, the shipyard's cranes pierce the sky and tower above behemoth ships below them. And like medieval cathedrals, the cranes and ships become points of destination in themselves.

In the early morning hours and then again in the late afternoons, in a changing of shifts that looks more like the rotation of pilgrims, our fathers and grandfathers make their tired trek over the bridge going to and from the shipyard. When the morning air is cold and clear enough, we hear the gigantic cranes flex, and swerve, and lean, and yaw as we dress for school or as we linger over our toast and tea. The histories of the Quincy Shipyard and of the Fore River Bridge that guard its entrance are our histories. Our surnames are inscribed into the shipyard's payroll book, and our initials are etched into the bridge's iron railings: *GB was here, or TM loves MG.* When the bridge hoists itself up to let a string of boats pass under it, we pour out of our stopped cars and fight for a spot to lean over the bridge's railings and watch the parade of barges, sailboats, and scows below. In the winter, when the bridge's steel and lattice floor ices up, our cars careen into the bridge's iron curb like seals on their

bellies. And, on hot afternoons after school, on a dare from their peers, our brothers jump from the bridge, risking their lives as they catapult into the murky quarry below. From the back seats of passing cars, we see them fly off the bridge's railing, and our hearts leap too with fear and horror -- and pride.

As if she has never heard of these hallowed places, Miss D presents us not with field trips to the shipyard or to local industries but with a map of the universe; not with creative lessons about the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts, but with instructions on how to plot stars from our bedroom windows at night. *When in doubt, look up*, she tells us. We take her advice to mean that for answers we should look toward the stars, or perhaps toward our various gods, and we notice that she does not say *look around*. Her lessons all but forbid us from looking around, all but prohibit us from relying upon the familiar references in our lives for answers.

During science lesson one day, Miss D tells us -- as if it is part of our study of the earth's atmosphere -- that dreams are not airy things. In fact, she announces, they are material things, they come from the earth's elements, and they come from what she calls the *here and now*. And, if dreams come from the here and now, Miss D tells us, then we should make our dreams *out of the here and now*. It makes sense to us, therefore, that Glen Rooney -- future astronaut -- should wear an astronaut's helmet; that Nicholas Kastinopoulos -- future Ambassador to Greece -- should proudly sport his Greek attire; and that for those among us with talents in painting or in writing (and our names are listed on the blackboard under "Who's Who in Art") -- there is an ample supply of paint, paper, and pencils.

This morning, Glen Rooney is all persona and Miss D makes it plain to us that she and the rest of us will be his understudies. We pledge allegiance in short staccato strides because of Glen's lead, but also because the pledge is parsed out in phrases all around our classroom. Although we have been reciting the pledge every morning since we were six years old, we cannot resist following the words in print -- parcels of a pledge, like Stations of the Cross, on poster boards lining our walls.

When John G. Ashe objects that we are 10 years old, and we certainly know the Pledge of Allegiance and we do not need it plastered on our walls, a few of the girls hush the rest of us quiet, and we wait for the terrible justice that comes to a boy who challenges an adult. But, Miss D only pauses to look at John G. Ashe's intense eyes. She nods her head slightly and tugs on the hem of her vest with one hand while she smooths her other palm over her hair. It is a gesture that we have seen many times, a gesture that she reserves for tipping our expectations. *Very good*, she says to John G. Ashe, *Very good*.

After recess, we notice that the poster boards with the Pledge of Allegiance are gone. Miss D asks us to consider what we should put on our walls instead, and she appoints John G. Ashe as *Marshal of Arts*. Within a week, he and a few of the other boys whom he has handpicked have peeled the walls of scotch tape and hung up their own drawings instead: pictures of ships and cubist-like boys throwing out lines of rope; pictures of boys jumping off of the Fore River Bridge, head first into the quarry below, their arms like broken wings. When it seems as though John G. Ashe and his friends have enjoyed this inaugural showing for long enough, others begin to tape their drawings to the wall as well. For the rest of the year, pictures and poems will cover our walls with a kind of seasonal cycle and a spirit of competition that we alone orchestrate: a row of Easter baskets, a chain of Christmas trees, a short sequence of Menorahs, a series of pumpkins.

Sabrina Kaslov decides that she should judge these seasonal art shows, and so now and then a First-Place Ribbon with a coveted gold medallion will hang from one of the drawings.

For a long time, hanging below our American flag is a display of our whole-class project: **American Ex-Patriots**. It is a misspelling of the word that we would not discover until much later in our lessons at Johnson Elementary. For now, it is a label that Miss D has crafted for us in thick, italicized letters -- an error on her part, or perhaps a happy and intentional blending of ancient word origins with our shipyard origins. *Patriot*, Miss D announces as she points to the placard peeking out from below our flag, *from the Latin for home*. And *Ex*, meaning *gone from home*. We cannot imagine ourselves gone from home. Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Man Ray, and images of Paris, *the City of Light*, crowd into the bulletin board that peeks out from under the flag. Miss D loves ex-patriots and we are encouraged to love them too -- not because they reject America, but because, as she says, *it takes a rebel to get*

*things roused.* The rebel rouses the believer to explain himself. The ex-patriot rouses the patriot to defend himself. They seem to need each other, the way Miss D explains it.

After a while, the difference between patriots and ex-patriots seems blurred to us too, since, according to Miss D, they are companions of a sort. From Hemingway to Robert Louis Stevenson, from Gertrude Stein to Copernicus, from Man Ray to Odysseus, the lesson is always the same: *in life, we must leave our homelands so that we can truly know our homelands.* We become ex-patriots in order to feel our patriotism. In art, we become dissidents in order to say our native allegiances more beautifully. When Nicholas K. objects that he will never leave North Weymouth because he will never leave his uncles and his mother, and he would be a quitter not to work in the shipyard too, Miss D hears that.

*he ex-patriot never leaves home,* Miss D says to Nicholas K. and to all of us, *because home is up here* – and she points to her head. Home, she will show us again and again, is the place where we do our best work, the place where we make our best art, the place where we think our clearest and boldest thoughts. In choosing Paris over Ohio, bullfights over rodeo, Hemingway chose his home, his subject – a subject that drew from him all that he had.

And, for Miss D, and ultimately, for all of us, choosing one's subject was the single most heroic task ahead of us – much more heroic than memorizing allegiances.

In his own adaptation of this idea, Bailey Arnold will routinely pack up his pencil and paper and leave his desk to resume his work somewhere else -- his favorite place, on the concrete floor in the hallway outside our classroom door. Each time he shuffles past us, John G. Ashe will look up from his work and in an exasperated tone, he will ask Bailey Arnold, *Where do you think you're going?*

*Home,* Bailey Arnold will smugly reply. Miss D and the rest of us will watch silently as Bailey Arnold sets himself down on the concrete floor in the cold and quiet hallway, and as he pulls his knees up to his chest for a makeshift desk -- and begins to write. *Home is up here.* Miss D's words seem to echo in the hallway where Bailey Arnold has planted himself. *Home is where we do our best work, where we think our clearest thoughts.* And we cannot help but notice that, until now, we have never seen Bailey Arnold bow his head to his paper like this; we have never seen Bailey Arnold follow his pencil across his page like this.

Over time, we come to understand Miss D's notion of being who we are because we *choose* to be that way, of living in a place because we *choose* to live there. *Self-fashioning and self-reliance.* Each time we recite our pledge, there is the sense that we are consciously *choosing* our allegiances, directing our own lives. We pity our peers, who have never felt this open choice, who have never been tourists in their own town – and who, after wandering from their roots, have never come back to feel the deep sense of loyalty toward home and country that we feel for North Weymouth, for the USA, as we do in Room 20. Conversely, with each daily pledge, there is always the chance that one of us might resist -- that one of us might *not* stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, that one of us might reject this pledge as easily as the rest of us embrace it.

When a few of the boys stay in their seats one morning, Miss D asks them later if they are going somewhere. *Leaving port, boys? Found a new home?* Miss D asks them. When the boys laugh and tell her that they just didn't feel like reciting, a few of the girls gasp, and Miss D looks at them as if they are speaking a foreign language. This is an idleness, a kind of dull inertia that she – and by now, the rest of us – detests. *Up or down, boys! Sword or crown!* she shouts above our heads as she paces back and forth in front of us, *but, know our reasons why!* It is a verse from a poem that we had written collectively during our study of the French revolution; a poem about kings and freedom fighters, about fighting or not fighting. It was a poem about choices.

*Sword or crown Ground or Sky But know our reasons why*

Always this year, there has been the choice between sword or crown; always, the very new and present idea that we can participate – or not. That we can someday leave this town – or stay. That we can reject our inherited attitudes – or defend them. Always there has been the choice between two

ways where there had previously been no choice at all. And, always, there has been the implication from Miss D, that no matter which course we choose, it will be open and navigable to us -- as long as we can explain ourselves:

*Sword or crown, ground or sky, but know our reasons why.*

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