

**LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND RELATIONS: *WE GAZE AS VISUAL-*
LITERACY AND ARTS-BASED INQUIRY IN TEACHING**

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Dedication

This is for Mark

who believes in my stories not yet written;

for Elise and Sacha

who inspire them;

and for Bryan and Linda

for whom there are no words.

Abstract

The project discusses and shares the creation of a social fiction, entitled *We Gaze*, which presents themes and images significant to curriculum and pedagogy surrounding and connecting literacies, identity, and relationship from the point of view of an observer of daily life, a teacher, and a participant in society. This arts-based inquiry is situated between narrative and relational knowing (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010; Knowles & Cole, 2008) researching from within the stories and phenomenon being studied. The multi-modal text interposes a non-verbal vocabulary (Rahn, 2007); addresses identity being tied to missed and mixed messages of words; and amplifies the individual stories and relationships of an ordinary life in the struggle to connect engrossing and separate *lifeworlds* (van Manen, 1990). Drawing from arts-based and multi-literacies research in education, phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy, literary and fine arts, some of the truths of being human are explored. These encompass disclosure, honesty, identity, privacy, relatedness, creativity, as well as the life of the text. Included throughout are pedagogical implications of observing and creating artfully. Attending thoughtfully to one's stories and the stories of others, as revealed in verbal and non-verbal literacies, is critical to fully becoming human. Found within the narratives, images, and poetry, as well as in the *intertextual* spaces (Sumara, 1995), the inquiry reveals how the vulnerability implicit in sharing text allows for authentic relation with the world.

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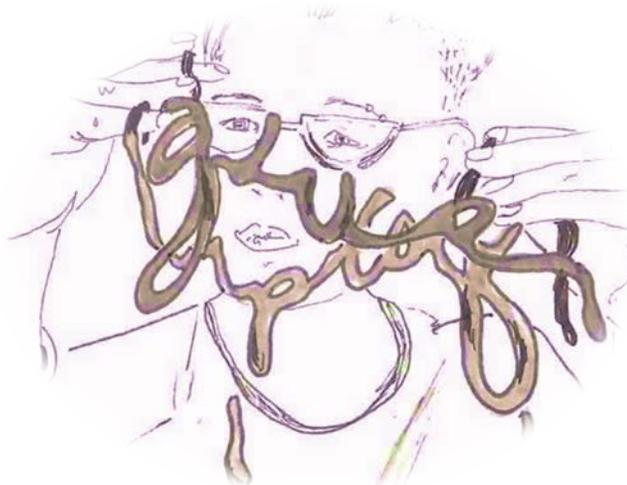
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Introduction

Before my very first graduate class in the Literacy in Globalized Canadian Classrooms cohort had ever convened, our instructors, Cynthia Chambers and Erika Hasebe-Ludt required that we write and submit a partial autobiography. Possibly overly committed to my insular identity (van Manen & Levering, 1996), a hesitation in giving voice to my memory made this an overwhelming task. This was compounded when, on the first day of meeting our cohort members, we were invited to read highlighted segments of our work in front of a class of then-strangers. Our passages were used as models to teach stylistic points in writing narrative, or perhaps that was just a guise for bringing our identities to a shared space. Community was built quickly out of the awe of our histories, the courage in the telling, and the gratitude for listening. As we continued our studies of diversity, literacy, and curriculum, this practice of sharing our stories continued via online dialogues and face-to-face meetings. Experientially, we came to know the value of life writing as a tool for “evicting us from our old selves” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 8), discovering identity and uncovering truths of being human—the good and the terrible qualities (Bly, 2001) that influence how we act in the world in relation to others.

In our cohort’s sessions together, our instructors warned that this kind of identity writing should not merely be “a form of belly-gazing” (C. Chambers, personal communication, July 8, 2012), a way of spending time thinking only of our individual selves. Post-structuralism theorizes that all “human identity and subjectivity has been socially constructed” (Kitching, as cited in Miodrag, 2013). Though we were writing to question the way we experience the world and to know our identities, we were also

reading, writing, and studying how our stories attached ourselves to the world and are of the world (van Manen, 1990). As researchers, the stories we live and tell are of value as phenomenological description; they are generated from lived experience and validate lived experience. Though from varied places, cultures, histories, and times; the words the members of our cohort offered through these *identity texts* (Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, . . .Sastri, 2005) spoke of commonalities of humanity. Through this work of telling stories, our cohort of graduate students along with our instructors linked our identities together and created community. I became purposefully aware of the power of spending time with the work of discovering identity along with communing in text. Collectively, our stories became artifacts to represent our habitus, the enduring patterns passed on between generations (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). This opening class to my graduate work inspired a readiness to share my own attempt at storying toward wisdom. Narrative as inquiry is not an attempt to problem solve, rather it is a snapshot of life from which insights may be gleaned, by reader and author.



Incited Inquiry Questions

The worlds to which I was and became attached, shape both the inquiry questions that developed and the methodology of this inquiry. I was raised to be a writer and a

reader by two English-major, teacher parents. Compounded by an introverted personality, I spent many hours in the privacy of my room writing poems, stories, and drawing. All the work I produced was shoved in corners of drawers, closets or garbage cans, lest anyone else catch the tiniest glimpse. I had no idea or wish that these creative interests might be integrated into my outward life, even as I studied French and English Literature and Drama in university. Those words, my words, that have now been lost or discarded speak a story I cannot retrieve. This melancholy realization instigated a yearning to convince myself of the value of my narrative. A year into my graduate studies, my story added a charming little character who carried with him much drama. Our son was born with health complications requiring us to live at hospital for a few months. During this time, I experimented on myself and the sharing of personal narrative, posting our nearly daily tribulations on an online blog. My words and experiences connected with hundreds of people, many of them strangers to me, as the blog was shared and shared again reaching three continents. Documenting my difficult reality provoked others to revisit their own memories. I wondered how it would be to revisit my own blog after (and if) the trauma had subsided. I marvelled at how a simple and honest telling of events could alter my understanding of the world and other people's experiences.

Candidness through text was becoming oddly more comfortable for me despite its permanence and the lack of control I had over how and with whom it was shared. Literacies beyond written language—communicating visually and verbally—is a daily maze to navigate in my work. As a teacher in a Catholic school division in Southern Alberta, I have taught students from Grade 3 to Grade 12. In my experience, faith-based schools can allow a freedom to have difficult and honest conversations; while the tacit

ritual and absolute canon of the Catholic Church also can inhibit openness. This dichotomy plays into my considerations of how language can mask truth. The majority of my 16 years in the division has been spent at an urban elementary school with a culturally diverse population. As an example, English is a second or third language to 11 of the 24 students in my multi-age classroom this year. I have observed immigrant families negotiate conversation and reconstruct lives, stirring my curiosity of the impact of literacy on identity. Working within the philosophy of inclusive education, our school has two specialized programs that attract students with extreme learning and/or behavioural challenges. A colleague once compared our environment to the Intensive Care Unit of a hospital; providing triage for a wide range of issues is concurrently desperate and life-giving for both sides. The intensity of school work, the demands and joys of family, as well as an innate desire to grow, learn, and create, urges me to spend time exploring how art-making can serve the work I do as a teacher and in my humanness.

- In what ways can arts-based inquiry through the genre of social fiction contribute to an individual's experience with language?
- How does writing narratively contribute to a better understanding of the self in relation to the world?
- How might an educator's experience with the process of creating a visual text in combination with creative writing transform pedagogy?

Arts-based Inquiry for Exploring Language, Identity and Relations

As Finley (2008) posits, "arts-based inquiry can explore multiple, new, and diverse ways of understanding and living in the world" (p. 71). As a research method, it utilizes creative arts to address social research questions; generating, analyzing, and representing data (Leavy, 2015, p. 4). This work can be done in any manner of literary, visual, or dramatic art. In the work done in our cohort exploring "Literacy in the

Globalized Canadian Classrooms”, we studied the intricacies and necessity of multiliteracies and multi-modal texts, as originally theorized by the New London Group (1996) through research and our own making of varied texts; poetry, narrative, photography, digital stories, and comics. Carrying tools and knowledge from the scholars that came before us, we made texts attempting to sift through our personal and professional histories and seeking understandings about life and teaching. This type of focused creating reveals patterns, themes, and truths (Cameron, 1992) shared safely and accepted benevolently with and within the form it takes. Beyond its value as research, arts-based work is engaging to its viewers, possibly making it more accessible than the 90% of academic journal articles that remain unread, besides by those involved in publishing them (Gordon, as cited in Leavy, 2015). Arts-based inquiry became the natural fit for our cohort—a group of educators coming from different backgrounds, studying how our mutual work can meet the needs of diverse learners and their literacies. More accurately, a/r/tographical work falls under the spectrum of arts-based research specific to education, in that it fuses artist/researcher/teacher, combining the self and the social in the experiencing, uncovering, and creation of knowing (Irwin, 2004).

As a teacher, my own questions about how literacy is defined and how it defines identity were best addressed with the close attention that a/r/tography forces. The questions about words—so much a part of my cellular make-up and every person’s day-to-day drone and drown—bid me to view literacy and language with fresh eyes. Language, verbal and non-verbal, is integral to our society’s function, to expression and interpretation; yet I would contend it is largely taken for granted, even at times ignored. Observing, inspecting, and analyzing how the exchange of words, looks, and gestures

influence identity and relations required that I set myself apart from these interactions while still being engrossed in them as an active member of the world. Gathering experiences to then translate into varied texts allows for this unique dynamic. By choosing an arts-based inquiry approach to research literacy, one aims to attend to the art(s) as a lived experience, choosing “a life that intentionally sets out to perceive things differently” (Irwin, 2004, p. 33). Attempting to work in artful ways, especially as a neophyte creator of texts, looking at literacy differently was unavoidable both in process and product. Coming to discover in a creative and open mood of inquiry is what I would hope for my students, and is how I wanted to approach my literacy research. In developing my methodology, I sought out exemplars of writing as research.

Narrative inquiry. The writing and telling of story is ancient and essential to our daily human existence. The power of story to make sense of being human is shared between the text creator and those who engage with it (Sumara, 1995).

Because we are composed in languages, because we constantly write ourselves, and rewrite ourselves, and write our relations to others, we need frequent opportunities to explore and experiment with rhetorical possibilities of texts, with the art and science of language use. (Leggo, 2009, p. 151)

Exploring language as it relates to identity and relations earnestly requests that writing becomes a significant part of the research. Writing narratively brings patterns and truths of social experience to light. Sincere exploration of experience offers engagement and resonance for researcher and reader. Autobiographical text becomes a “complicated conversation with self and others” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 2) offering readers to share in the “me-too moments” (Pelias, as cited in Leavy, 2015) that connect us to our

place and each other. Through life writing, a researcher seeks to locate herself in “a rapidly growing network of contexts” by “sending out resonances from one embodied and personal location to other embodied and public locations (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 4). The space and relationships that (be)come with the act of writing impact the sense of self. “Rather than identity being expressed *through* story, identity *is* story, and is thus comprised of narratives that people create for themselves and others.” (Sfard & Prusak, as cited in Danzak, 2011, p. 188). In this way, narrative writing holds a responsibility to consider the relationship and influence it bears. Readers may define themselves by what they are, and what they are not, based on the experiences they encounter in a text.

van Manen (2010) submits that the intimacy created through text may become a false experience based on conceived identities. Intimacy with the writer changes the understanding and reading of the text (Luce-Kapler, 2011). Therefore, the invitation into life writing holds with it a nagging caution to deliberate the self that is shared. A writer must make choices of what will be revealed and the form in which these truths develop so that authenticity of the phenomenon prevails. Writing from one’s own experience in an unknown direction is relevant in the search of truths about language, identity, and relations, as the subject is fluctuating and so intensely inseparable from the researcher. Entrenching myself in life writing and reflection of how language works in my different life worlds suits the nature of my inquiry questions which link personal, professional, and research interests. However, narrative can bring the writer to difficult places of memory and present where one is required to acknowledge connections and how they materialize in everyday life. Attending to these tension-filled spaces give way to learning and more reason for inquiry (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010).

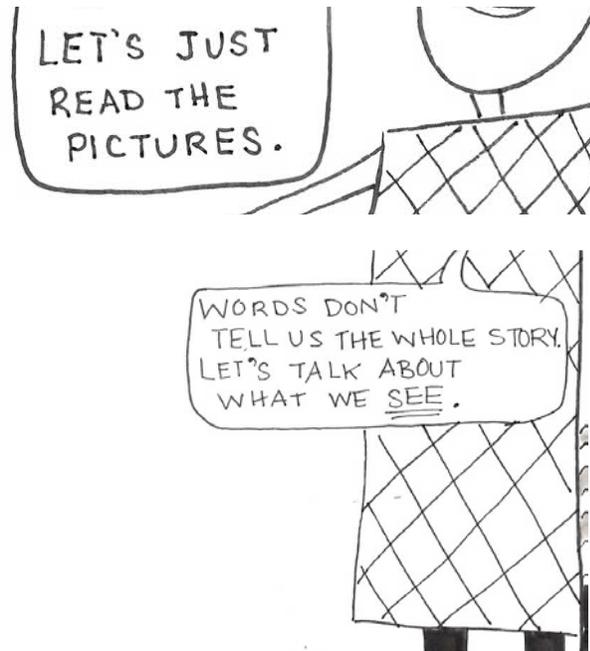


Fowler (2006) affirms the benefit of facing our tales and dwelling in difficulty as we narrate toward knowing ourselves, especially the self that teaches. She explains that to understand why we are who we are becoming gives teachers a peaceful locus from which to meet students and live well with others. “Becoming a teacher and maintaining a healthy teaching self requires as much self-knowledge as possible, but it also requires heeding and respecting the complex narratives of others” (Fowler, 2006, pp. 43-44). Reading the raw and honest narrative of Cynthia Chambers, lyrical memory work of Erika Hasebe-Ludt, and creative semi-fictional poetry of Carl Leggo in their literary métissage (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009), I recognized the variety of approaches toward life

writing. Leavy (2015) defines and describes such methods, including the possibilities and parameters of fictionalizing narrative inquiry. Fictionalizing can make “conceivable what would otherwise remain hidden” (Iser, as cited in Leavy, 2015, p. 58). This piqued my interest as a way to distance my relations and myself from my research, but still maintain a verisimilitude that could authentically explore the questions I pose. Combining data into a fictionalized text, with disclosure as such, allows the research to be humanized and relatable as truthfulness, rather than truth (Leavy, 2015). The fictionalized narrative form offers opportunity for readers to create their own understandings as they connect personal experiences to the written story (Sumara, 1995).

Visual arts-based research. Exploring the life writing of others, particularly in visual modalities such as digital stories (Lambert, 2013; Rahn, 2007) and graphic storytelling (Barry, 2014; McCloud, 1993), revealed for me a space for a more authentic relating to others. In these media, there were other literacies at work—ones that I had been familiar with because of my own propensities toward imagery and interpretation, yet foreign because of the peripheral mentality surrounding the visual in literature (Versaci, 2007). Lynda Barry pushes and plays with language and image, bringing a voice to her characters and drawing attention to how linguistic rules and meaning making can be challenged. This rebellion from convention likewise challenges my ideas about visual literacy or any literacy absent of language. It is these literacies that we first develop as children, though not always further developed and refined in a Eurocentric context, they hold potential for deep understanding. In the Inuit culture, art, inukshuks, tattoos, and facial expressions reveal literacies of animals and landforms, water and sky, dreams and gesture which are integral to understanding (Balanoff & Chambers, 2005, p.

20). There are messages in visuals that cannot be aptly translated to linguistic text, and an attempt to do so may, in fact, limit or reduce the original possibilities of meaning (Groensteen, as cited in Miodrag, 2013, p. 18).



Neither verbal nor visual should be determined more significant; however as a closeted “high-doodler” (Palmer, 2008) myself, the validation of purpose for graphic storying sparked new potential for creating, as well as literacy learning and teaching (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Delving into the literacies at work while exploring and creating visual texts has confirmed the intricacies and significance of reading an image; firstly, in the play and aesthetics that we can enjoy on the surface, and then in the importance of the visual’s role in a system of making and using signs for communication (Miodrag, 2013, p. 43).

Just like language, comics contain conventions and rules to be followed and then manipulated; including frames, speech bubbles, viewpoints, composition, and styles (McCloud, 1993; Miodrag, 2013). Of course, the specific combinations of visual images

work as a whole, as does the conscious and unconscious choices to include and exclude details. As a life-writing tool, this complex language of showing has a plain and relatable quality, perhaps because of our early encounters with the world being largely visual. Miodrag (2013) gives evidence of experiments that consistently show subjects recognizing simplified cartoons more quickly than photorealism. Cartoons help a reader decode the message by removing extraneous details. In an attempt to reveal with honesty and objectivity, the comic presents itself as a willing medium. Simultaneously, the stretch and give that the form suggests can also evoke mystery and contemplation. The multiple elements composing each panel act both independently and interdependently related to the whole. The multitude of variables and connecting points offer opportunities for subjective associations and diverse interpretations.

The image(s) and the intertextuality (Sumara, 1995) between word and image provide a dynamic outlet for memory work, truth telling, and disclosure. Yet in their ambiguity and vagueness, they also create a safe place for exploring and concealing those difficult or harsh truths that may be “hard to place” when beginning the memory work (Hubbard, 2012). Ware writes of Moriarty’s work, “cartooning becomes an act of seeking, of mental archeology” (as cited in Moriarty, 2009, “Introduction,” para. 4). Beyond this, visual representations are critical to my specific inquiry as the space between words is important to the telling of the stories, perhaps even more so than the written text. Much of the data I set out to collect specifically focused on thoughts unspoken, difficulty with language, and nonverbal communication. Simic writes, “our deepest experiences are wordless. There are no words to describe the gap between saying and seeing” (as cited in Luce-Kapler, 2009, p. 77). Letting moments speak for themselves

by depicting their sound, sight, and pause, creates space for phenomenological understanding. The image-reliant text opens up communication through its efficiency (speaking to many senses simultaneously) and room for interpretation through its objectivity (displaying the moment 'as-is'). Sameshima and Vandermause (2009) state that artful research is the act of focusing a metaphorical camera lens on a moment in time to make consciousness visible for the readers, from which they might create their own meaning. In this way, providing images and script documenting glimpses of experience as comics allow should leave space for a reader's own experience, judgment and interpretation to understand the phenomenon presented.

Poetic inquiry. Similar to the way images objectively speak in senses, the figurative nature of poetry offers the writer and reader scope for injecting interpretation as a co-constructor of meaning of the text and, accordingly, the social phenomenon being described. To write the moments that relate to research, a poet-researcher synthesizes events, analyzes themes, and often generates metaphor—distilling the events to the essence, engaging the senses. van Manen (1990) writes, “Poetizing is thinking on original experience and is thus speaking in a more primal sense” (p. 13). The use of poetry can bring data to a relatable and evocative space; it can bring weight and time to seemingly inconsequential moments that, when collected and examined, conveys an aspect of being human. It finds words and ways to direct readers to what can best be felt or experienced, rather than explained. A poem invites a reader to spend time in its spaces and ponder possibilities of meaning; it “has the resonance and integrity to bring us close” (Zwicky, as cited in Luce-Kapler, 2009, p. 77) as we share in a common cadence and vision.

Considering the life worlds of others through poetry brings awareness to one's one consciousness (Luce-Kapler, 2009).

In addition to describing events, strong poetry should move us and expand our social thinking, all while being attentive to aesthetics (Richardson, as cited in Leavy, 2015, p. 83). Leggo (2005, 2012) explores the life of an educator trying to live poetically through his autobiographical poetry, lit with humour, curiosity, and a search for wisdom. As James (2009) sifts through digital spam to creating found poetry, he explains how reconfiguring the words of others' writing can repurpose or revive the contributions to human knowledge in an "aesthetic recycling" (p. 59). Examples of poetic inquiry have pressed my knowing of the world and have presented another way to reveal truths of being human—clarified, yet open to the hazy ways of inquiry. Poetry generates tensions with(in) the imagery, the pauses, and the interpretations; thus allowing strings to remain untied (Sullivan, 2009). It is an appropriate genre for writing a place of discomfort and questioning, yet ease in the flowing, indefinite results that develop from hermeneutic, phenomenological inquiry.

I feel comfortable in this medium; I have spent time reading, studying and thinking in poetic texts. Steffler explains that "poetry is first of all a state of mind. Before it's a verbal structure, it's a way of perceiving and interacting with the world, including oneself, one's own life" (as cited by Leggo, 2005, p. 442). I believe living poetically to be a natural and original state in its play, experimentation, and rawness. Piirto (2009, p. 88) argues that those who attempt poetic inquiry should have acquired the proper amount of hours studying the discipline or 'points' as a legitimate author (gained from publishing or recognized by literary award) in order to have automaticity in the art as

well as maintain the integrity of the method. Though I am not certain that my undergraduate English courses with Professor Upton and my mini-library of poetry journaling qualifies me for this work, I am assured in the enjoyment I get from the “babble and doodle” (C. Leggo, personal communication, July 14, 2012) of sound and rhythm, and the understanding I glean from the images and openings which poetry gifts. I defer to Heidegger’s writing that “poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling” (as cited by Leggo, 2005, p. 441). Poetry well serves the inquiry into understanding language, identity, and relations—placing us deep into a sensory knowing to dig up the earthy truths, the things of dwelling in humanity.

Multi-modal research. Inquiry, particularly that involving language, when addressed multi-modally presents a broad view of the topic and offers more access points from which to enter the work. Any mode of inquiry requires writing to be a fundamental element; as Richardson and Eisner claim, working in varied modes offers more possibilities to discover new understandings and new ways of seeing (Richardson, 1994). Sameshima explains that understanding is incomplete without multiple perspectives offered in a “pedagogy of parallax” (Sameshima & Vandermause, 2009, p. 279). Together, the narrative, fictionalized narrative, poetic, and visual modes offer multiple viewpoints from one researcher. Writing in a variety of texts requires the researcher to attempt to reach the experiences with new eyes, and attend to the subject with different foci. Approaching the ideas from numerous angles advances more closely toward a holistic understanding for the writer. Meaning is made within each text, and in the

relationship between each. These multiple opportunities for connecting self to text, text to text, and reader to text, give multi-modal writing a fuller purpose and more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

Multi-modal work acknowledges and attends to the multiliteracies of its readers. Our diverse and changing world requires literacies that value cultural and experiential backgrounds, collaboration, innovation, and flexibility (New London Group, 1996). Researching language as it pertains to identity and relation not just in text but also in form intends to more than nod at multiliteracies, rather it accepts them with an open and lasting embrace. Inquiry of language, identity, and relations ignites in the value of experimenting with the boundaries of traditional and academic literature (Rahn, 2007) in constructing text multi-modally (New London Group, 1996). If human thinking influences the form that language takes, and language then shapes our brain (Kenneally, 2010, p. 33), it could transfer that the inquiry will dictate the form and the form will shape how the brain interprets language in the future.

Form encourages text creators to examine themselves in multi-modal ways. It may alter the way in which a story is told or remembered. It causes the maker of the text to carefully attend to the essence that is to be disclosed, what voice will best relate that message, what tone the form will create or allow, and how the audience will experience the text. The social-fiction modality of writing as process investigates social, political, cultural, political, and other “worldly” phenomena that we are confronted with and challenged by on professional and personal levels (Sinner, 2013). In merging the narrative, visual, and poetic inquiry with the social fiction, I hope for a marriage of objective and subjective experience with the research in the way a/r/tography offers. I

intend to uncover truths through both the content and the form in which the inquiry manifests.



Pedagogical Implications of Arts-Based Research

Educators are the designers of how society makes meaning (New London Group, 1996). The modes in which educators spend time and share messages with students are those that will be accepted as holding meaning and value. Attempting to communicate through the arts extends the literacies of teacher and students. When we limit language arts to wordsmithing, we restrict the scope of who may receive a message and, as educators, we exclude a range of students from expressing themselves (Zammit, 2011; López-Gopar, 2007). “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up” (Picasso, as cited in Cameron, 1992, p. 20). Recognizing the artist in the self as teacher, sharing this work, and encouraging it in students contributes to the landscape of literacies. The diverse world of which we are more aware and nurturing requires an expansion of literacies (New London Group, 1996).

Within the framework of multiliteracies pedagogy, broadly defined, educators expand the opportunities for children to express themselves—their intelligence, imagination, and linguistic and artistic talents. When this kind of expression is

enabled, children come to see themselves as intelligent imaginative, and talented.

(Cummins, 2009, pp. 243-244)

As a teacher, engaging in the creation of different types of texts gives me a purpose to become better versed in those genres and awakens my respect for the nuances in each.

Understandings gained from an arts exploration serve to inform educative practices surrounding the composing and sharing of creative work. Generating questions, observing, making, and unveiling what once lived within is an involved and transformative process. Fully knowing this process gives an educator another lens from which to approach guiding students in the same. Lived awareness of how text affects self-knowledge of writer and reader inspires focused motivations and approaches to teaching literacy. Choices of what and how art will be shared can be made with the connotation as artist, researcher, and teacher. *A/r/tography's* emphasis of process and dwelling in unsettled territories fosters an environment for critical thinking, knowledge building, and social growth (Irwin, 2013; Leggo, Sinner, Irwin, Pantaleo, Gouzouasis & Grauer, 2011). A pedagogy structured around space for creating is one that teaches students to contribute art, ideas, and self to the community. Texts, in their multi-modal forms, "carry traces of power relationships with them" as potential influences toward social change (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 132). Valuing art creation as being influential, and giving a place and time for stories to be honoured grows self-awareness and confidence (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). Everyone wants to be heard. Being heard builds relationship. Without relationship, learning can't breathe. The relationships between art and creator, text and reader, creator and reader grow from and in opportunities for sojourning in the vulnerabilities, queries,

and veracity upon which arts-based research insists. This is the substance of growth and learning.

Methodology

Form and process. Weighing the ways I came to this place of inquiry, the nature of the questions, and the intent of the research, form arrived first. The focus was on the process, allowing themes to present themselves through writing. Choosing to work multimodally forced me further away from knowing, subsequently approaching the questions with fresh eyes and a pleasant disquiet. My investigation is built around the creation of an exemplar of visual art in the modality of a graphic novel, incorporating life writing as part of social-fiction narrative theory (Leavy, 2013; Leggo, 2012; Sinner, 2013), arts-based research (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2015), and poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009).

Incorporating graphic and poetic inquiry specifically seeks to magnify life experiences where language and visual literacies contribute to disguising or illuminating identity. As Leavy (2015, p. 278) advises, I paid attention to the variety of modes from which I borrowed, soaking in exemplars and experimenting with style. I began journaling using various methods to enflame creativity (Cameron, 1996) and observe fully (Barry, 2014). Experientially, I ventured toward a closer understanding of literacy through my selection of words, images, connecting points, and the way in which they are gathered and separated. I was required to do a close reading of moments I lived and imagined. In my “close writing” (Luce-Kapler, 2011), I replayed events multiple times as I visualized, analyzed, compared, evaluated, and synthesized their essence. Interspersed throughout the project, I have inserted images pulled from my visual journal to connect or emphasize

written text. Because this inquiry speaks to multi-modal forms of research and expression, images have equal footing with text and are not treated as separate ‘figures’.

Most often, poetry provided the channel for processing and analyzing personal exploration of the research questions identified. I cultivated themes and refined inquiry findings using poetic-inquiry strategies outlined by Cahnmann-Taylor (2009): paying close attention to what topics pulled me to write; taking notice of where and why stops and punctuation were used to emphasize or slow down the reader; examining language and sounds; and recognizing repetition/omission. Informed by the work of poetic inquiry scholars (e.g., Leggo, 2009; Leavy, 2015), I endeavoured to edit the poems to more intensely divulge the flavour of the human truths the texts yielded; sometimes this meant increased precision, other times, added ambiguity. The events and images in the poems are, for the most part, entirely imagined and metaphorical, attempting to make sense of ideas surrounding language, identity, and relations. The personal narratives are memoir texts, of course, affected by the license that memory provides to such writing. The comics are fictional events, though largely based on actual observed interactions with students, colleagues, and relations. The speech used in the comics is usually from dialogue recorded from my observations; however, the characters and situations are created with the purpose of revealing the processes and discoveries of my inquiry.

I drew inspiration from Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) to then attempt to hermeneutically and intuitively sculpt a layered and cohesive text from the tangible and intangible material provided by a variety of daily experiences exploring language and identity. The multiple perspectives of the multiple modes contributed to the pedagogy of parallax (Sameshima, 2007) to create a more inclusive understanding.

Intention. The poetry and graphic work composed and curated during this process became a piece I entitled, *We Gaze*. The ‘we’ in the title is meant to be a call for writer and reader to be communal in this work, to take time together in this textual space to examine shared experience. In our examination, I wish to call attention to the visual aspect of communication in imagery and image, and give direction to a slowed and focused reading of the text, and the reader’s own experiences and memories. Thus, the invitation asks us to gaze, (likely from Old Norse *gasen, gazen*) which means *to stare, look steadily and intently* (“Gaze”, n.d. para. 2). Through the elements of story content, medium, and process, I explore the relationship between what is seen and what is said, what is revealed and what is hidden, what is intended and what is expressed.

Sumara (1995) suggests that literature does not just describe, but transcends events; literature can behave like an object, connecting the reader with its owner and the reader’s own perception of its use. In the work created with my cohort, collaborating toward a larger sense of wisdom allowed my sharing of art to become more liquid and forgiving because of the writing, reading, creating, showing, and listening I did with my colleagues. Now venturing on my own, I extend these experiences and expand on the issues that resound for me as I navigate my own identity and relations.

Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, and Sinner (2012) submit that writing the vulnerable and personal strands of our lives invites others into meaningful conversation, making the first move toward authentic relating. Similarly, Sinner (2013) claims that the stories of teachers expressed through social fiction as a creative-nonfiction literary form “stand as exemplars of arts research, and as an invitation to readers to consider multiple readings, understandings and writings of these narratives rather than closing stories to

static interpretations” (p. 1). This particular text requested me, as writer, to become aware of the presence of word and image in my personal and professional life, and the tensionality that lies between. In its paused glances into everyday life (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010; Bechdel, 2012) and the everyday life of teaching (Leggo, 2012; Porcellino, 2009), the voyeur/reader will be presented with a venue for connecting to familiar experiences.

The fiction created is decidedly mundane, intending to lift the quotidian significance of visual literacy in shaping our understanding of the world, our relationships, and our identity. Those that interact with this text in its creation and consumption may become further cognisant of the visual elements present in personal expressive contributions. It is my hope that this work will evoke a discomfort in the attempt to join what is read and what is seen, a disturbance in the thinking of those who spend time with it, and a calm with which to approach their next moment of relating.

We Gaze:
A Poetic Fiction

Hide

Flowing tails of colours, waves ballooning in the turns and dives, lunges and leaps. It is heavy but easy business; masquerading under and thick, dripping words, jumping event to event; sashaying judgment to next; gliding between transactions. We take them on slow—silk-thin layers slipping over us, smooth as our skin with which we were born. From when we are the smallest of humans we learn ‘mine’ and ‘yours.’ We take possession of our people, treasures, pride. We take possession of our thoughts. Thoughts claim words. Slipping them on slowly. Quiet spaces of child spaces we try on thoughts that try on words. And on we go. And on we find words protect thoughts. We try on words that veil thoughts. In quiet spaces of child spaces sleek and shiny cloaks coat the contemplations; conceal the real feeling to give freedom to breathe and be.¹ Under the swell and dance of language we can move freely, consenting to the rolling, elegant disguise. Selecting when to arrest the motion. Stop. Still. Wait for the lengths of sinuous strands to snake, untwist, float down and around to reveal the form beneath. Secure in our fine costume, prepared to begin the caper when ready: a step, skip, spin, and lost again under the shifting layers. We are almost in control of each flick and wave.

And why the dance? Why the crave to obscure the self? Is our truth wrong? “If all men were good, they could be candid, but as things are they cannot be.”² Skeins and skeins of fault-shrouding fabric, presents the best to our adoring and ignoring public, who, too, move quickly along; lest their capes end their flight, dangle and cling tightly to each curve, fold, and flaw. Language gives our secrets safe spaces, our weaknesses places

¹ Based on the book *Childhood Secrets* (van Manen & Levering, 1996) where the idea of privacy and private thoughts are discussed as important parts of forming identity.

² From Immanuel Kant’s (1997) *Lectures on Ethics*.

to become; protects us from a world that can harm the vulnerable. And that is fair. That is our right to hide. We call it “Privacy.”

And here is where the bends and folds of language tango, a passionate push and pull. Privacy is ours to own, *dedans, en*³. Graceful steps we take to make our music, preserve our rhythm. Secrecy, though. Secrecy fetches everyone just to tell them they aren’t invited. It is a keeping from. It is a keeping out. A brash and syncopated tap, a buffalo;⁴ step, shuffle, leap. We don’t allow others to partner us, carry us along, nor even match steps connecting in the cadence. Secrecy can encumber our relating to others. In the act of concealing our own faults, we give the false appearance that we are different from what we really are.⁵ We may lose ourselves in the grandiose efforts to posture for an audience. We may suppress the authentic, replacing it with a showy version of a dance we thought we created. When, at last, we look down at our weary feet. Pause to ponder why the quickstep, where the flow . . . Step on the floor with hesitation. Not so honestly that inhibits the movement. Claim space for reflecting on self—present and future. Steal kisses beneath pleats of fluid text(ile)s. Wrap up in the silken safety of syntax and silence. Floating fabrics sail and sink, at gauzy films of memories entwining, we gaze.

³ Dance term meaning “inward.” A circular movement of the gesture limb from the back to the front (as in *ronde de jambe*), or a turn done toward the stance limb. See *The Glossary of Dance Terminology* at orthopt.org

⁴ Buffalo is a tap dance step consisting of a step, shuffle, and leap; in Canadian vernacular, it also means to deceive.

⁵ In *Childhood Secrets*, van Manen & Levering (1996) discuss the difference between privacy and secrecy; the latter concealment being called dissimulation, which impedes relating.



On Daytime TV

On daytime TV
A lady says she feels
Like she has been trapped
Inside a body
Not her own

Decants tears
As she glances at the monitor behind
Flashing slides of an increasingly expanding woman
At family barbecues
In front of Safeway birthday cakes
Seated on a crushed-velvet couch
With children awkwardly reaching
To show affection
For the camera

Lowers her head into her pudgy hands
Shaking
An arm reaches out to comfort
Audience silently gawking
At her soaked and shaking cheeks
And chins
Wobbling arms resting high on her stomach

The host assures that after the break
There will be a makeover transformation
The audience applauds
Lady wipes her face
Offers a quivering smile

Lie Pile Pie

Lie pile pie

cooks sweet juicy dry

baked just once

fermented and shared

cooks

too good to eat

hard to digest

red feign stain

berry red betrayal

heart of the matter

cover with flaked

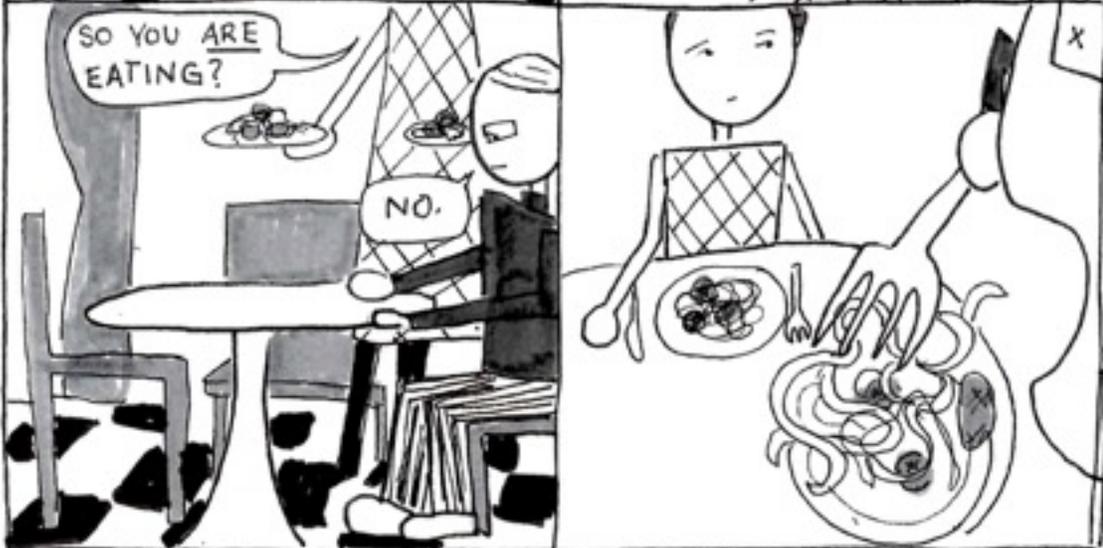
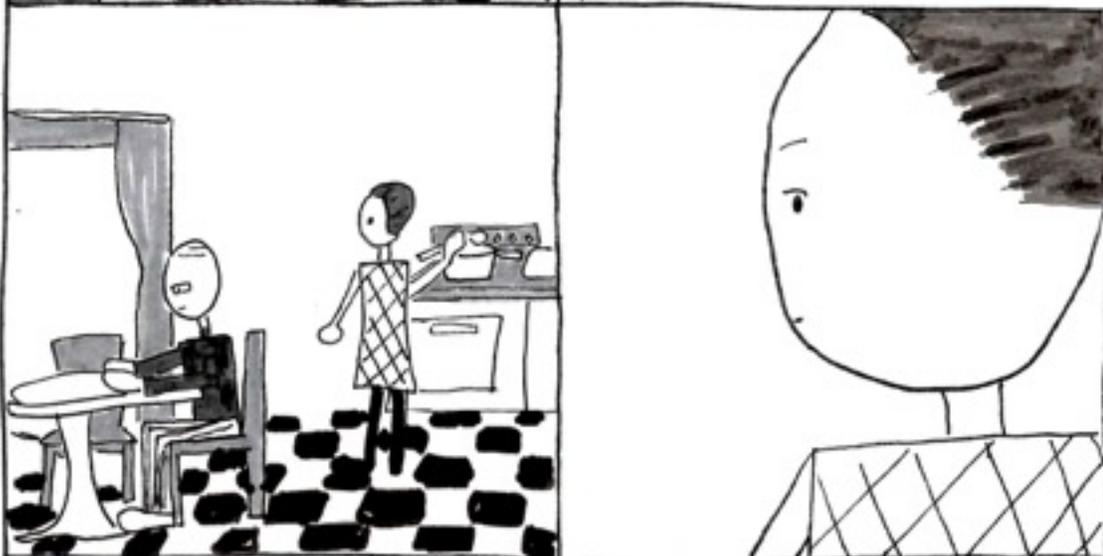
and flaky crust

serves a crowd

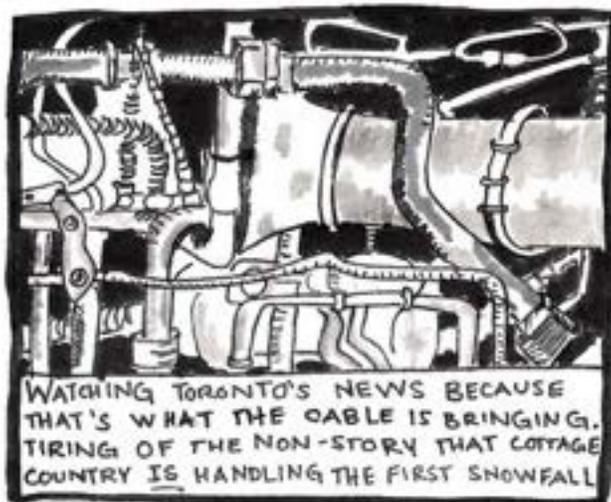
Beach Body

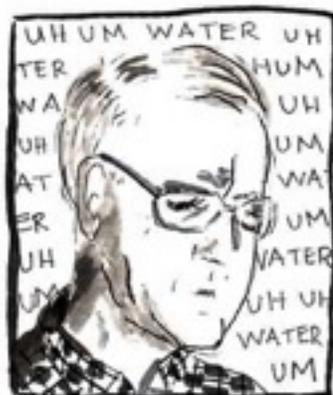
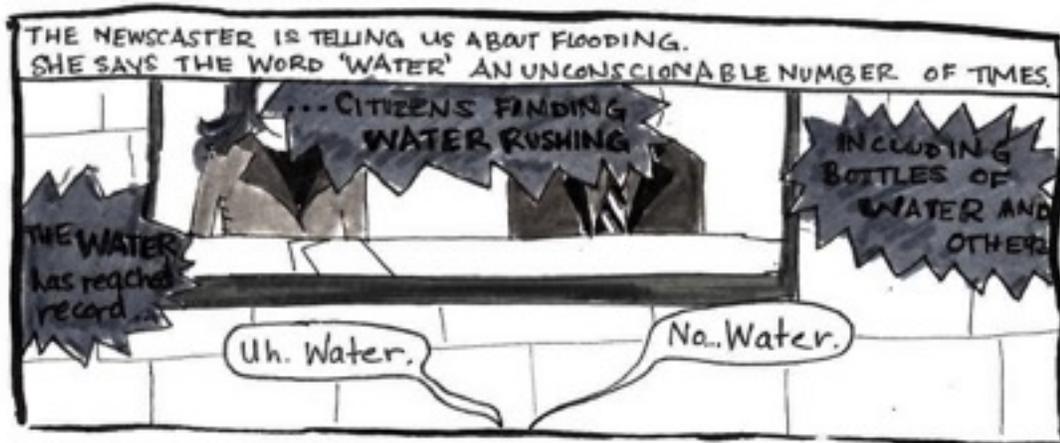


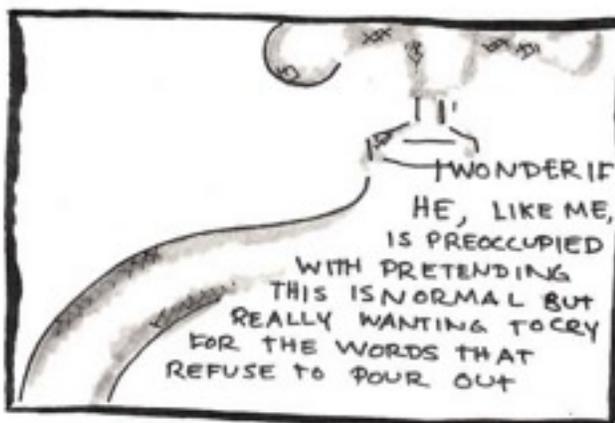




Water



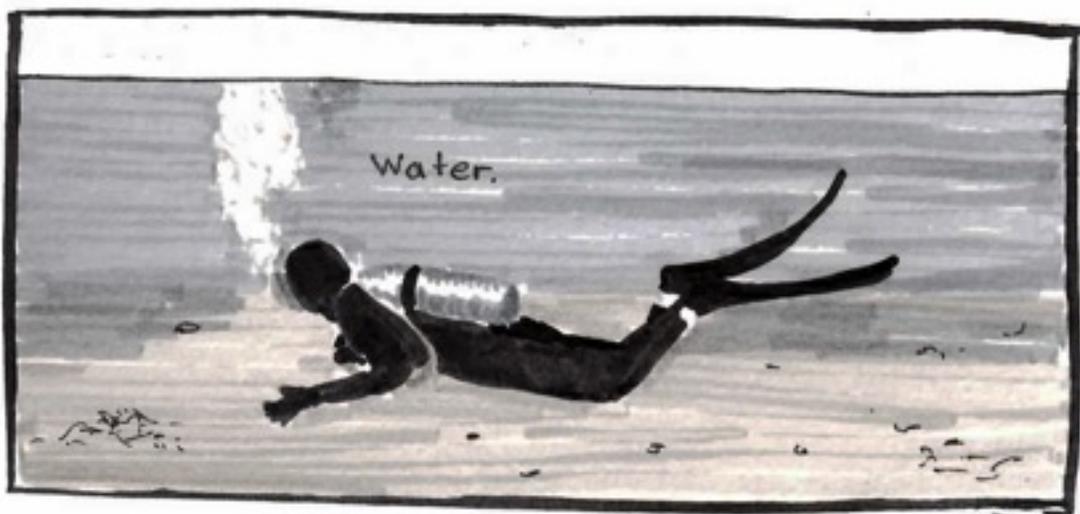




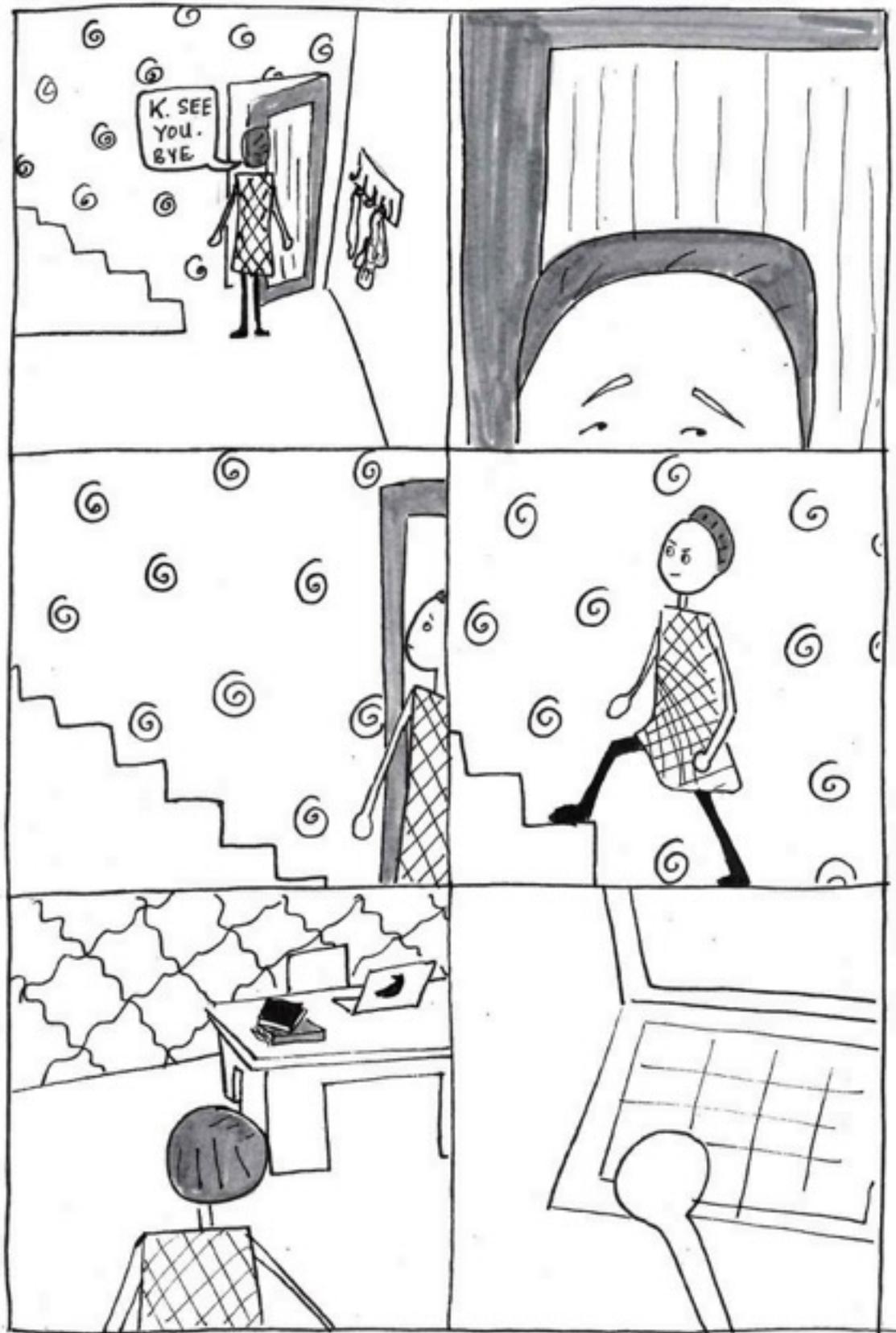
OR IS THERE JUST A BIT OF
TINKERING THAT WILL SET
LOOSE MEMORIES, QUESTIONS,
ANSWERS, ARGUMENTS



TO GUSH AND FLOW
AND RUN
WITH THE WAY IT WAS







Silent Rhythms

After mass on Sunday
Her family went 'to town' for brunch
Or went for a drive on the grid of country roads
Surrounding Picture Butte.
There were no movie players in cars,
No handheld devices.
Instead she watched the wheat fields blur past,
Smelled the pig farms come and go.

Usually the gravel maze led to her dad's hometown, Enchant
and his eldest sister, Shirley.
Visiting the family, baseball in the yard,
Checking calves, playing Atari, watching the adults play crib at the basement bar,
Resulted in a late night
A dark, eternal drive home,
As all drives are when you are six.

When they entered the town,
The glow of streetlights would rhythmically reveal
Glimpses of the beige interior of their Volvo station wagon,
Mom, Dad, Brother, Sister
Viewing the quiet of the neighbourhood
As they approached home.

Why will her mind hold fast to one uneventful event
Of this familiar and repeated scene from decades ago?
Just
One
Scene
Where the orange streetlights stirred her to wake,

Stare out the window like the others.

She remembers that when they turned at the Androns, past the Gergels, and into the drive,
She quickly slumped to the side and closed her eyes.

The humming car engine sighed, stopped,
As her brother looked over at her and announced indignantly,
“Dad, she’s faking it!”

Though angry with him for revealing her truth, she chose not to fight.
Feigning slumber with fluttering eyelids,
She waited expectantly for Dad to scoop her up and haul her to bed.

Doors slammed shut.

Murmurs of Brother’s plight for justice continued outside the car.

She nervously stayed in character, in darkness,
Hoping her efforts had not been ruined.

Oh! The certain relief when her car door opened and big arms gathered her up.
She collapsed into hero dad as he carried her to the house,
Pleased with all that was.

Of course Dad must have known she was not really asleep:

One of those secrets grown-ups keep for us so we can be their children for just –
a little bit longer:

A silent exchange of devotion granted,
Of peace in life rhythms and roles.

Now as she is a grown-up with a child of her own,

She clings to this memory that visits again,

As a knowing of the silent action that is love.

Tries to hold this close as she watches her dad losing his words.

Though mourns for ideas of the songs and games that may not belong to her son,

Her son will know his grandpa for calm, presence and patience.

He will know his grandpa from the joy in his eyes fixed directly on him,
And for his wide laugh,
Dappled in golden fillings and dotting wonder at his grandson.
These things have no words,
Need no words.

Her dad doesn't want to discuss the loss of his language.
And she doesn't bother him with it.

It's one of those secrets we keep so they can be our dads for just a little bit longer:
A silent exchange of devotion granted,
Of peace in life rhythms and roles.

Saturated

There's too much brown in everything
In everything too much wilt and brown
Too brown to quite know it
to quite hear it
the way they do when they grab her by the shoulders
turn her toward the camera and say
“Look, doll, I don't know how to say this
but let me set you straight”
sweet story never told
neglected rotten brown.

Too much pink in everything
In everything too much slick and sick
Too pink to quite see it
to quite feel it
The way they do when
They coat a stomach from the inside
pour down the viscous drip say,
“Look, doll, you won't feel a thing,
This'll set you straight.”
Sweet pain never understood
numbed pink.



Exhaust

Factory motions
 Insufficient products
 Dry dusty Detroit dusty
 Factory motions
 Hot no sweat

 Dry
 Exhaust
 Boxes metal hard
 Factory motions
 Taste tin

 Falter
 Fall
 Fail
 Shove this down
 Swallow hard

 Muted joy
 Muffled pain

 Swallowed
 distant memory
 of something
 that never was
 digested
 traces
 cycling quietly
 keep quiet.

The stories we are, aren't always our own.⁶

⁶ Words from Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009), inspired a reminder of the bittersweet nature of identity.



Narcissist

Inside these pin-drop thoughts

Cared soft thoughts

Left to grow silent

Feeding incestuous

Protected from critique

Ideas striding territories

Gathering borders

Treadmill collecting

Sphere spinning inside

Superior notions

Silently supported

A revelation

A ha

Make merry in this knowing

Hate only with humility

Ha ha

Consume the others

mostly less



Forgive Me, Teacher

*Forgive me,
 Teacher,
 for I have
 sinned,
 it's been five years since my last parent-teacher interview
 haven't set foot in a church since I married his dad
 it's been three years since I gave a fuck about what this kid does
 I am dealing
 with my own
 dysfunction
 at the moment.
 The litany
 his mom's fault,
 brother's fault,
 puberty's fault,
 system's fault;
 St. Clotilde,
 patron saint of
 disappointing
 children,
 pray for us.*

St. Augustine's School gym was purified of equipment, students and sweat; made holy in the 12 tables popping up like confessionals at the back of the nave. This being my fourth interview experience, I knew the ceremony of transfiguration, transforming a child into Jesus Christ through truth stretching; but this understanding was not enough to ease my nerves. Seeking reassurance from my colleagues, they chuckled with me (or at me) remembering when they first put on their grown-up clothes to act the part—before they

were pillars of the community, before they were teaching the kids of the kids they had taught. Their confidence and experience only diminished mine.

Paul advised me to do something to relax, to avoid building anxiety for the next hour. I strapped on the in-line skates waiting in my car trunk and ripped around the unfamiliar but typical town. A favourite activity and a chance to meet the streets, the excursion proved to leave me feeling more at home. I returned to school and rolled right into the gym to thank Paul. The old guard was settling into their ‘confessionals,’—laughing at the notion that I would irreverently roller-skate right into this sacred space. This vague encouragement and exercise endorphins inspired spirals and spins around the gym. More laughter confirmed that my youth and exuberance could be welcomed. I glided past an eye-roll from my principal, Mrs. Wells, and took my place with support of fans’ laughter, unmistakably *with me* this time.

Composed and subdued, we slipped into our roles as divine conduits to education, meeting with parents of our adolescent charges. Glancing away from our table to break the monotony of great-works, apply-herselves, and pleasure-to-teaches; parent and teacher faces alike bore witness to the rhythm of shamed contrition, solemn confession, and relieved absolution. I fell into the ritual, secure in the ceremony: a shared sacrament of reconciliation for mediocre attempts and empty promises.

As the crowd of parents was dissipating, I finally exhaled. I smiled at fellow teachers who were waiting for the rest to wrap up those last interviews. I noticed a couple leaving their jovial conversation with Mr. Kerber, our most seasoned veteran. They clearly had a good relationship with ‘Kerbie’; as you would in this small community

where people keep their enemies closer. The couple came toward my table. I stood as they introduced themselves as ‘Kayla’s Parents.’

“Pleasure to meet both of you! What a polite girl you are raising! She is a blessing to our classroom.” I smiled and wracked my brain to determine to *which* Kayla they belonged. Grade 6 Kayla or Grade 11 Kayla? They were both polite, and certainly blessings. That was safe. I awaited clues from the parents. . .

“Actually, we’re here because we’re upset about an incident Kayla told us about.” My stomach sunk. “Kayla told us you called her ‘dumb’ in the middle of class.”

“What? I assure you I would never say that.” My vascular face reddened as I searched my mind’s events for a potential misinterpretation.

Both the mother and father persisted, telling me that their daughter doesn’t lie and I shouldn’t speak to any student like that, especially one with reading disabilities. I tried to convince them there was a confusion, a mistake, maybe she heard a student say it?

The father’s face turned colour now, “You let other students call her ‘dumb’ in the middle of class??!”

Attempts at diplomacy and back-peddalling backfired; I rose to suggest I get my principal. The woman cracked and let herself smile. Bewildered, my eyes implored an explanation. She let me in on the joke; they were Mr. Kerber’s niece and nephew and *he* had set them up to it.

They stood up laughing, as did staff who had gathered around Kerbie, watching the whole show. The couple hugged me. I smiled, lightened, and then began to weep. I wept with relief. I wept with embarrassment and hurt that I had confessed my vulnerability to these mentors who exploited it. I wept at having witnessed the fear I carry

realized before my eyes: “You have no credibility. You are unfit to teach. You are a walking mistake. You are a joke.” I laughed through my tears, hoping my sporting attitude would be enough to serve as an ordination into this brotherhood.

The answer came when I was called to the office the next school day. Mrs. Wells instructed me on how my behaviour and general personality instigated the practical joke. I should reflect on my role as a professional.

“Should Kerbie have played the joke? Probably not. Am I surprised that he would think he could do that to you? Not at all. You know, it’s just how you are.”

In the moment when I had felt the most comfortable in my own skin, the most ‘me’ I had been, this authority figure had determined that I revealed a personality unbecoming to the profession. My fears were confirmed. As my authentic self, I had no credibility; I was a joke.

Transferred later that year, I was reminded of this advice and to use my time teaching Grade 5 to “develop into a young lady”. Freshly wounded, I met my new staff, careful to reveal the most lady-like qualities I possessed, attempting to exude the air that I knew what I was doing. Vulnerability and expression of my authentic self was tantamount to incompetence and immaturity. I let another rape me of my identity. Who is to blame?

Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa . . .
St. Clotilde,
patron saint of disappointing children,
pray for us.

A Part

Writing
separates
me
from the world;
Breathes space
to meet the two.

A part
Now close(d)
Weigh words well.

Reveal

In the shadows, lost and obscured, drumbeat patters across pavement. In the quiet, the sharp, tinny rattle echoes inside the walls of an aerosol can; promptly followed with Morse-Code ode sprays. Loooong, looooong, short. Short, short, looooooong. In the urgency emerging from suppressed proclivity; in the need heeded by oppressed creativity,⁷ the artist begins the piece.⁸ The paint on the wall is done in dark. The mark that is made is in the brass and the nerve, the slip and the slink, the fight and the verve. In an action of fighting against a quieted story—a peaceful aggression, the painter tags⁹ territory. The image immaterial until light breaks: for now it is the action that speaks for the self.¹⁰ In (c)overt expression, the underground freed in a four-finger spray.¹¹ It couldn't stay bottled, not those colours. Mad fervour takes over. Caution takes cover.

In dawn's truth-telling, the paint's revealed. Sickened regret pits last night's abandon. Garish or gorgeous, wack or dope;¹² there's no returning. This work is part of the world, part of the writer. The style unique—the pauses the flow, all distinct, unmistakably owned. Even the unintended betrays the artist, reveals an inner speak.¹³ The temptation looms heavy to critique, retreat. Dis this mistake in claiming this space, go over, cross out, pretend it doesn't matter—the lines, the signs, all just clutter. Get past

⁷ Rahn (1999) writes a brief history of graffiti culture, explaining its roots of oppressed peoples motivated to express themselves through 'anonymous' public art.

⁸ A graffiti painting, short for masterpiece.

⁹ A graffiti writer's signature.

¹⁰ Hubbard's (2012) narrative shows a transformation from labeling her identity through nouns, to verbs.

¹¹ "Four-finger spray" refers to a spray can nozzle that produces a wide line, about as wide as a hand.

¹² "Wack" is hip-hop slang for inferior work; dope means "cool."

¹³ Physiognomy refers to external, visible, physical signs that somehow betray inner feelings, thoughts, or character traits" (van Manen & Levering, 1996, p. 78).

the look, what isn't quite right. Props¹⁴ to the artist that came from inside the confines of a isolated mind. Let the colours breathe, subsist, thrive outside. They have to be named, claimed, given their time.



15



16

Now is when the story starts. People walk by, tilt heads, disregard, ask why, get angry; or stand and beam in the shades of honesty. However they feel it, they carry it on, connect it to the next—a beat in their song. To keep that internalized would deny our relations the maximum kaleidoscope, the hope in shared story. We're not here alone. The writings on the wall. We gaze.

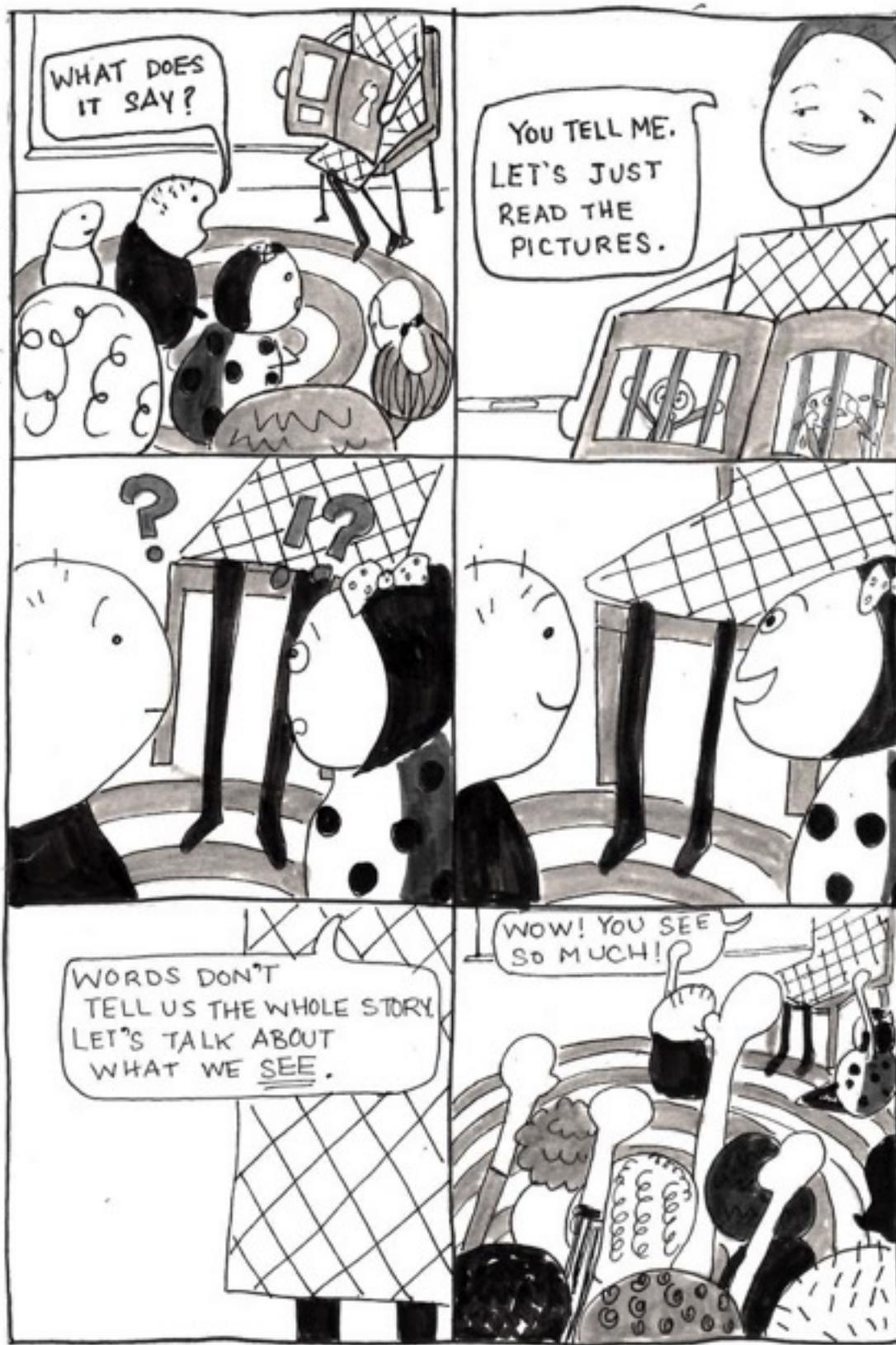
¹⁴ From Hip Hop vernacular, meaning 'proper respect'.

¹⁵ Based on a poetic piece by Christensen (2009).

¹⁶ Schaefer's words prompted this drawing calling for openness (as cited in Cameron, 1992, p. 1).







A Toast

I know not of
a purer teller of truths
in their stretch and give
angles and curves:
These brows speak
clearly
bravely.
Furrowed f(r)iends
betraying
agitation
frustration
(sigh)
resignation
and the combinations;
the complex and brave words
with no apt translation
(not even in German).
Collecting vocabulary
in each new way of joy
and in each new way of pain:
fully comprehensible,
comprehensive
subtle chatter
fluent
constant and quiet
offering only
on-my-face/ not in-yours.
Innocent space
and tension
between

think and speak,
you brows hold power
in your clever humility,
refined conviction.

To you, my fuzzy comrades:
May you continue to deny me
the secrecy for which I strive;
May you continuously contort
my words into expressions
of love, disdain,
hope, comfort sorrow
and all yet to be;
May you gift those who gaze upon you
with clarity,
glimpses of humanity.



What I Hold in My Hand

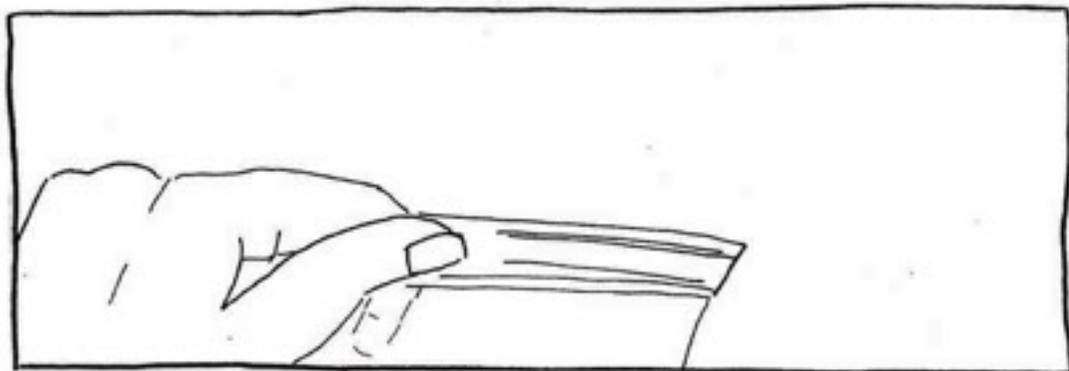
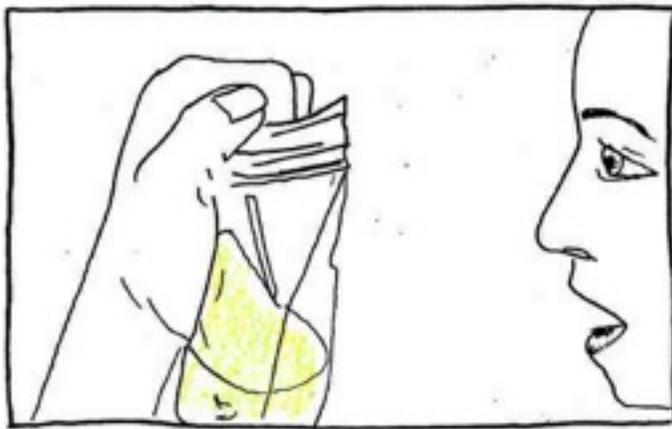
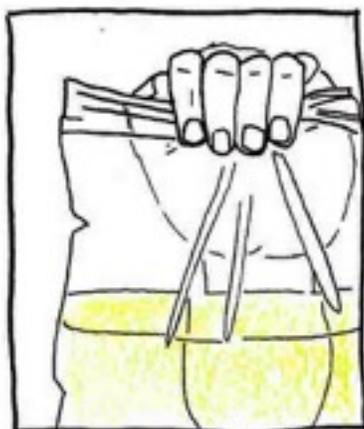
What I hold in my hand
Yellow obvious,
A message to the skeptics.
A whisper of existence,
An experiment of truth-telling.
Of me, through me, translucent.

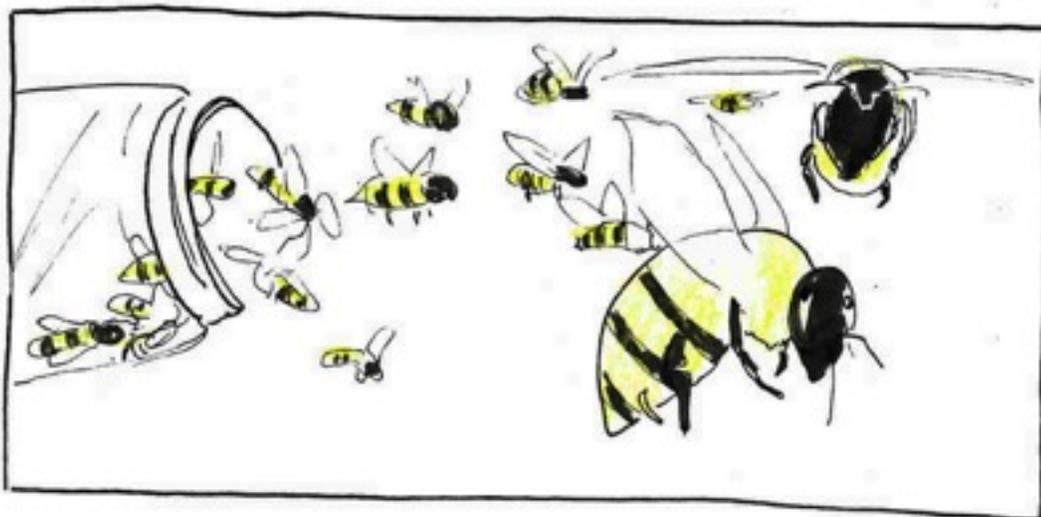
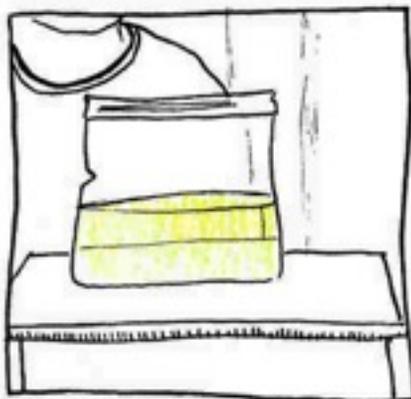
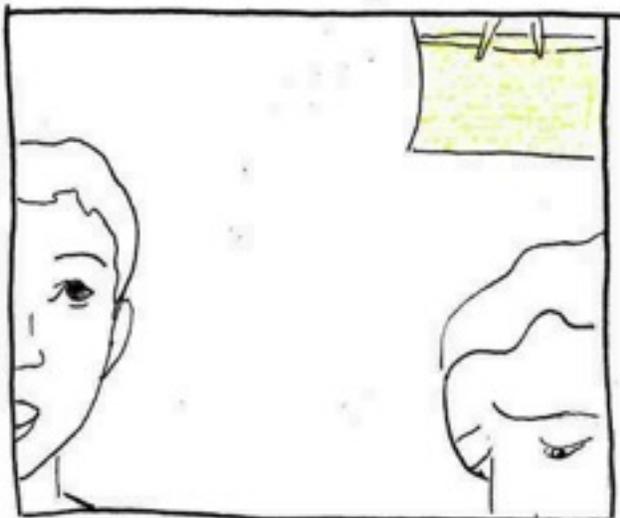
Behold my offering,
Like I do.
Peer at it from all angles;
Question its authenticity,
Its purpose.

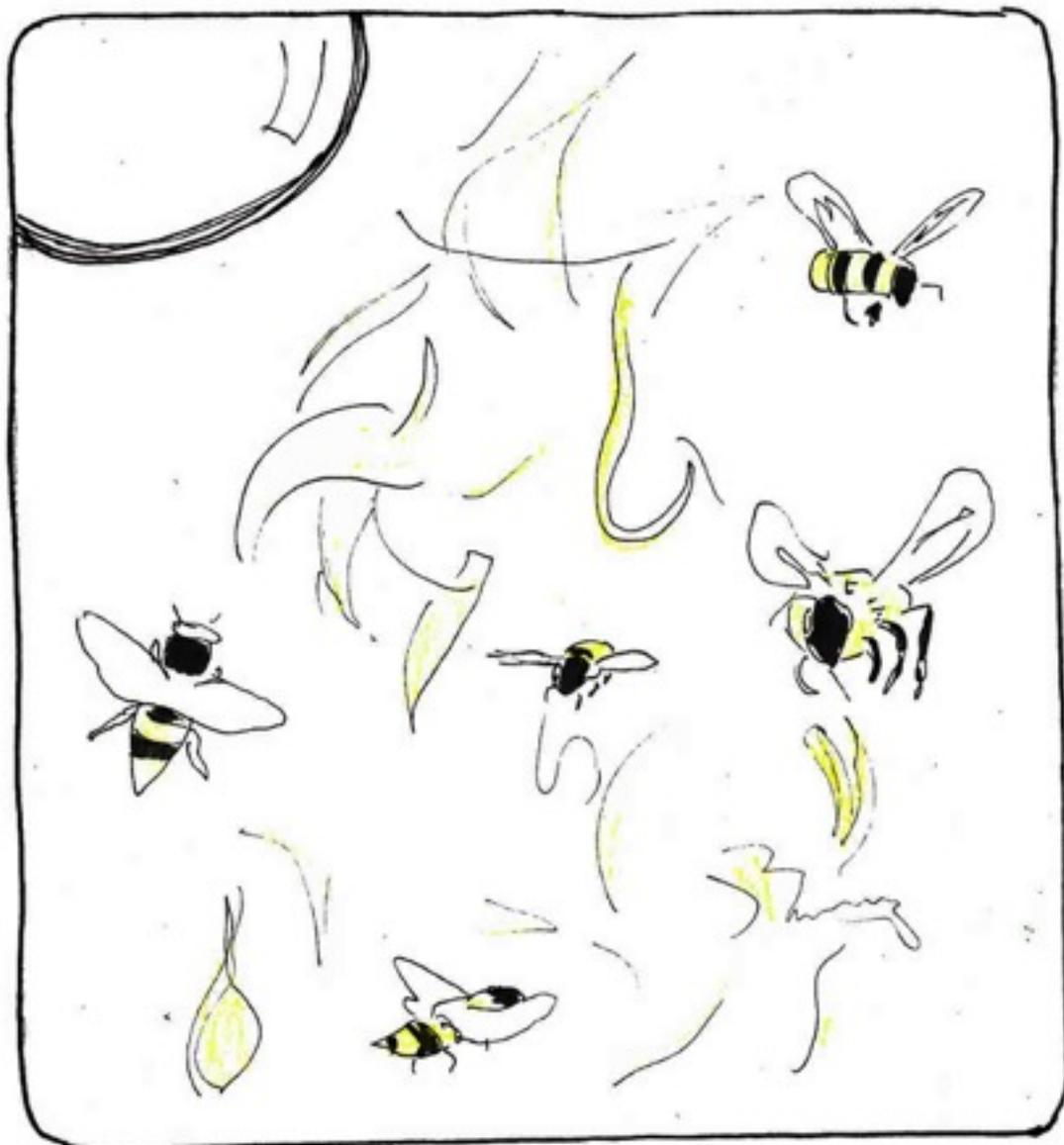
It cannot be put back.
It is here and now,
Hot and here.

I read that you can use this to start a fire –
Start a fire in a crisis;
Directing the sun's energy right through
the magnifying glass,
Igniting.

Blazingly, blaringly here now.
Irrevocably out now.
What was mine is ours.
For a minute before I toss it over the fence,
Chain linked,
Imagined distance,
Breachable frontier,
We gaze.









*circulus vitiosus*¹⁷

Façade false front plastered pink
 rosy wooden statue sits above the square
 a reminder of a lady that gave her money there
 Face finished painted
 Fake, *from Latin*
facies, ‘appearance and form and figure’ figure formed
 Figure Formed hung hanged high
Facies appearance forms shadows
 the falling faltering was-town now
 broken board buildings cow
 Feces below
 Factitious gears employed; grind,
 work to alter wooden expression elaborate machine
 a lady on bicycle efforts Rube Goldberg-style smile be seen
 scheduled strange puppet open smile
 Fictitious heroine
 Vicious laughter they watch tumble the
 Visage. Sweet Jesus.
 Vision a smashing crashing thundering wonder
 dust clears now with mask made level
Vis-à-vis face to face
 Vice concealed and
 peeled a tiny once-was revealed
 Vicarious they recognize
 solemn recover pieces place
 Surface sand down layers of paint
 Save Face
 Façade

¹⁷ A situation in which action and reaction intensify one another, vicious circle.

Polished

Wiping away

red toe nails

rubbing alcohol staining skin

You can't hide red,

pushy and present

you can't change scarlet

blush and obvious

Artfolio

It was the start of Grade 4. Mrs. C. gave us clean manila folders that would become our art portfolios. What a frightening and freeing opportunity; a blank slate to decorate, to make our mark, define ourselves. I jumped in with no caution, scrawling J-A-N-A in the middle of the rectangle, alternating colours and line technique. Part way through, I realized it was crooked. The name was lopsided, and I didn't particularly like the way the letters were so different from one another.

A pause. A frown. A look around. Across the aisle, Jenny had drawn a head-heavy figure skater etching an 8 at the bottom of her page. Hmm . . . I should have thought of that. I was a skater, too. I was skilled at drawing human figures and drew a well-proportioned figure skater jumping through the air, complete with the whooshing lines that indicate spinning.

“Hey, you copied Jenny! Hey, Jenny! Jana copied your skater!”

How humiliating. Quickly I blacked it out with a thick marker, forming an organic blob with geometric aspirations. I attempted to give the shape meaning by coloring star like blobs all over the place. Ugh. What now? This was felt marker I was dealing with!

I saw Christopher had been meticulously scrolling spirals, slowly spreading over half his folder. I was running out of time, though. And meticulous has never been part of my genetic make-up. At least no one suspected my random scratches and scribbles were a copy of Christopher's artful pattern. Orange, Green, Pink, Blue, all converging on top of one another, forming a sort of non-descript brown. The organic shapes were buried like meatballs in spaghetti. Sensing the end of class was near, I hastily darkened the letters of

my name, trying to save them from being swallowed by the snaking lines. With no time to alternate colours and line techniques, the letters became hairy monsters that only spelled a name if you squinted and tilted your head.

Class was over. The teacher began walking the rows, complimenting the artists, stacking up our folders in her arms. My portfolio was met with silence and a frown. I didn't even feel offended. She was right. It was the worst thing any kid had ever done to a manila folder. Ever.

I had no direction. I tried to do what was right for others. I buried mistakes. I hid the parts that made me proud. I continued doing the things that weren't working in hopes that they would. I rushed to be 'finished.'

I had to see that mess every art period for the entire fourth grade. Silly, but I can still see it now. What could I have said to the nine-year-old me as she stared at a blank manila folder in all its possibilities? What could I have said when she felt like she made her first mistake?

What can I say to me looking back at situations I happened into; I said 'yes' to everything without discerning what was right for me; I ignored my shameful moments; I continue(d) to employ less than optimal practices; I've approached the end of a project with finality rather than part of a journey. Whom might I have become had I been present and awake?¹⁸ Awake to what my spirit wants to be, awake to the possibilities I am in each moment and decision. How do we grace the others in our lives with opportunity to alter the mis/directions they began?

¹⁸ Fels (2012, 2014) discusses the value of being attentive to the present moment.

Given the Space to Say:

THIS IS WHO I AM,
plant a flag
stake a claim
you do not even know the importance of your truths.
Random shapes and scribbles disguise your magic
a mess of misdirection carry
attempts to plot trails not yet discovered.
Your map needn't be accurate;
your map needn't be complete.

Indecision isn't new(s).
You think everyone else has the route,
but there is no solid ground—
we are all continents shifting.
Chart this you now
revel in discovery of her
weep, whimper, wonder, laugh at the is and the isn't
Just leave some territory unnamed

always

return for it later.

Draw
in this
space





First Sound Since . . .

empty echo

rasping rough

sound hitting hungry walls

wrung and stretched

scraped to clay

hard soft clay

still raw rubbed raw

stinging exposed

crumbling wet edges

drying

so too slow

stone making

so too slow



Things Were Changing

Blake performed his first card trick at the front of the class, flipping and fumbling the deck, face red, blonde hair sticking to his sweaty forehead. He would try again and again and again: disappearing red rubber balls that rolled from under the cup and bounced conspicuously; amputating thumb illusion, the plastic pink not quite matching his pallid, pasty skin; rings of “fire” paper tissue threatening his juggling struggling.

Then one day, one trick: shoving a cell phone RIGHT THROUGH a pop bottle! From the crowd of ten year-old classmates, amazement, confusion, even anger at his deceit. Blake beamed through their jeers of disbelief. Success. Things were changing. Things were already changing.



Shared Spaces

Buzz and sparkle, a tizzy of tittering visitors clink glasses, powder noses, air-kiss cheeks, find seats. Honks, bleeps and scales sound from the orchestra pit. Spirited small talk attempts distraction from the heavy red drapery concealing the stage. From our neighbourhoods we have dressed carefully; put the children to bed; found parking; come here. In our own seats, anticipating together. Lights dim. Chatter softens. Hush. Conversations and cares are put in pockets and purses. Cue music. Hush, hush. Grand music swells and curtain rises. In silence, in darkness, spotlights snap on. Dusty light is cast on the scuffed, black platform below—this shared space and moment distinctly begins now.¹⁹ Strangers closed in intimate etiquette, agree to share in building this tale. The communal gasps, the united laughter, the glimpses of a gentleman in the front row wiping away tears; this is now the theatre.²⁰ We came here for this—to mutually know these feelings connect; to believe in the larger story of humankind; to lean into the strength of a crowd understanding our pasts and futures.²¹ Cross fade.²² Characters’ execute dialogue and drama, cloudy replicas of memories. Actors dig deeper, uncovering new emotion through the crowd. This is now the play. The intensity generates between

¹⁹ The relationship with place connects strongly to a sense of identity, and becomes particularly important for the marginalized living among a dominant culture (Chambers, 1999; Danzak, 2011; Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). The text can become the place for people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, languages, and identities, struggling with the tension of finding a place of belonging.

²⁰ Pahl & Rowsell (2011, p. 134) discuss how “sedimented identities” are built from layers of connecting to others’ stories.

²¹ Sumara (1995) speculates that “we don’t just read to add new experiences to our life, we read in order to find a location to re-interpret past experience and to better understand present and projected experiences” (p. 18).

²² Lighting term: fading one lantern (or group of lanterns) up while fading another down, as with transfer from story to story.

both stage and house²³ pressing forward, giving attention to the moment, surrendering wholly.

Or if we don't? The cast doesn't commit. A cellphone goes off. The lady near the back explains the joke to her hard-of-hearing husband. Like any relationship, the audience and company get out what they put in.²⁴ How do we decide that they'll effort to fall in love tonight? Despite our flaws? Is the timing right? A risk we took when we left our driveways, bought the tickets, surrendered disbelief. The chance the company took when they rented the venue, set the stage, blocked their scenes, rehearsed their lines. Or when the writer penned the lines, or when the director selected the songs. This community made a contract to meet in this theatre, give, receive, attend to this story—*our* story for now.²⁵ In this drama, words chosen, delivery, action, silences all speak humanity's start and now and yet to come.²⁶ Whether passively watching or enthusiastically creating, whether the production flops or triumphs; once strangers have fixed themselves more securely to the world.²⁷ At curtain close we will be brought to their feet, dutifully or compelled, they will know something new of this life. But now, scene two, enter stage right: the down-trodden protagonist, and we gaze.

²³ The part of the theatre in which the audience sits.

²⁴ "Of course the quality and intensity of the act of creation depends upon the structure and form of the text and the character of the reading subject. Some texts allow little space for the reader; some readers engage in minimal indeterminacy filling." (Iser, as cited in Sumara, 1995, p. 22).

²⁵ "We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience" (Ondaatje, as cited in Sumara, 1995, p. 26).

²⁶ We own each others' stories as they become part of the 'ethnosphere', the "sum total of all thoughts and intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought into being since the dawn of consciousness" (Davis, 2009, p. 2).

²⁷ Van Manen (1990) says theorizing about the world is attaching the self to the world.



Pippin



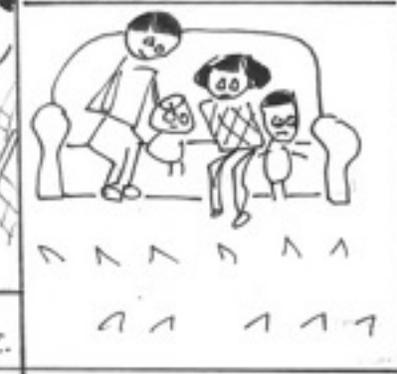


OR IF I JUST FELT BAD FOR BREAKING OUR BEST PRESENT



MY MOM MISHEARD ME. SHE COMFORTED ME.

I SOMEHOW REALIZED IT WAS MORE APPROPRIATE TO FEIGN CULPABILITY IN THIS TIME OF GRIEVING SO I DIDN'T CORRECT HER



Echoes

He likes to ride his bikes
There are four
Not ride them all at once
country time and
mostly mountain air
pedal and grind
a rhythm
conscious breath
close earth
colours more clearly
Earth is present to him
he is present to earth
rippled green shadow
hearing wind and bird
meeting spaces far away from what and who he knows
spaces his heart has not claimed yet

Of course

Of course
searching though
for signs signs that
there were others
not alone to thrill at a wooden bridge just ahead
satisfying rhythmic and hollow drummed crossing
trust in the journey
and melancholy
descent

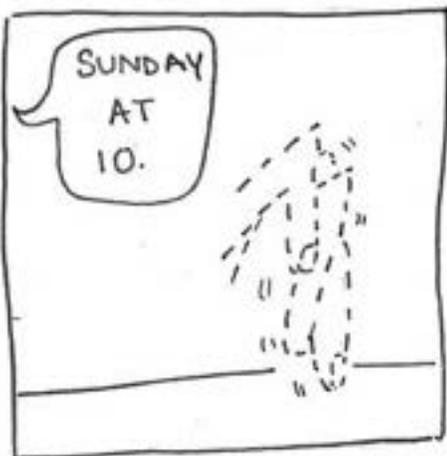
He doesn't look over his shoulder.

He prefers images of landscapes

With an awkwardly posed traveler
blocking the view
squinting
smiling at the photographer
reminding him of times or a time
at the symphony
grand and moving
lost in shine and boom
rise and fall
eyes darting instrument to shoes
studying the waits and readies
the blasts and croons
holding on energized
then fading slips to holding on
and a woman with hips
in a long and sparkled gown
floating to the centre of
everything

not alone
to excite in the melody
a reprieve from all crash
and moan
when meaningful claps
send her from the stage
he misses her humanity.

Visitors





YES.

NO.

SHE

WILL





Stand Still

stand

still

stay

silent

Olatunji²⁸

Down a level, concrete walls and dim replaces white sunlight. A labyrinth-like staircase of battleship-grey aggregate coils down yet another level. Is this the atmosphere Arthur Erickson envisioned in this original and functional design of a rectangular cave shoved into the side of a southern Alberta coulee? Is this what the University of Lethbridge motto authors had in mind? *Fiat Lux!* Dear God, let there be light! Proceeding on through the narrow hallway to Room W480, the ceiling drops and my stomach tightens. Other students, dancers mostly, are stretching, laughing, maybe pretending to ‘centre themselves’ on the floor like lotuses. I’ve come sober to the party of bodies wrapped in black, of movement and counterfeit expression. Inching around the edges of the oatmeal-bland walls, I remove my shoes. I remove my socks like the drAHma students do—have done since 1967 when they likely chanted and lurched to beating drums while the professor, draped in beads and linen urged them on with philosophy and rebellion. I am numb to those stirrings of our parents that these Generation X-ers are desperate to recreate, barefoot on chill floors coloured the same not-white-not-cream-not-yellow dinge as the walls. Brown rubber baseboards lap the room and trap me in this foreign void. I stare into the wall of mirrors reflecting me, this invisible stranger, and I know I cannot remain that way for long. The institutional and ticking clock taunts as it approaches nine a.m. when I will need to expose my self-doubt overtly and honestly to the flicker and buzz of fluorescent lights and the stares of judging, Lycra® statues. This aloof cavern of cold and bland both quells and hollows me. Reticently, I step into a space on the floor where I am screened from the mirror, blending in the middle of the class.

²⁸ Famous Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji. Olatunji signifies, “honour reawakens.”

This is my twice a week: stressing, then stretching, sitting in a circle, hearing about movement, history, Laban, dance, comedy of threes, Chaplin, fighting, the pause to refresh, trying it. Forcing becomes cajoling becomes compelling becomes wanting, and every class I step further outside myself—further inside myself. Our professor, Lisa Doolittle, fills that empty, bland room with her passion for this learning. She has us write a journal to remember our work and our journey. On one of these Tuesdays, one of these Thursdays, these words, these movements, these people collided/disappeared/manifested and became a new creation. We lined up in rows. We often did that. Lisa would have us experiment with movements—one at a time, usually. And like usual, I was searching my brain and the other faces for a clue of what *I* would do when all adjudicating eyes would be on me. Too late. Music started; drums and maracas. Lisa counted then jumped, waved, and leapt across the floor, beckoning the next row to join her, then the next, then the next. When a row was finished they would skip back to the start and fall in behind. Flailing, scooping, stooping, and rising, shaking, pulsing, stomping and floating; our bodies were feeling Ghana's heartbeat and ignoring our own. In communion with the music and each other, we moved. Without pretense or simulation, we moved. The voices of the drums and the people were reverberations of authentic gratitude for life and living. Their rhythms gifted us with freedom to ignore our insecurities and appearances and we accepted with sincerity. Over and over we moved across that space, for as long as the drums would sing to us. Smiles and sweat, blurs of swinging arms, whirls of pink faces, I couldn't pick out a one. I, too, blended in; this time not from fear but in unity. When the clock decided we were done, breath slowing, arms dangling, our joyfully fatigued legs pulled us to our socks, our shoes. I went home and bought the CD, *Olatunji: Drums of*

Passion. I listen to it often; though, on my own, my body and heart have never moved quite as when in that room of cold and bland, with those strangers who were friends, in the sounds and stories from a country and continent so far from our own.

Sweet Caroline²⁹

This is to be read as if it is a musical.

In this regard, you need to suspend your disbelief in such a way that you will allow
(mostly)
the music of Neil Diamond
to come rushing into your body
through your feet, the way it should.

That should be easy,
just ease in like you would a hot tub.
Take a dip.
Tap the toes.

Before you know it, you're all the way in,
your body relaxing into the rhythms of the jets,
face flushed,
arms stretched out to welcome every hydrogen,
every oxygen molecule before you.

Then you're sitting there asking your partner,
"Why don't we hot tub more often?"
You wonder that because in that moment you are more complete,
more peaceful, more wise.

²⁹ Title of song written and recorded by Neil Diamond (1969).

In that moment you can make connections
that answer the questions in your life that have plagued you
in the still sweat of night.

And the way you got there was so simple.

Just relax. Don't overthink it.

Go with the flow.

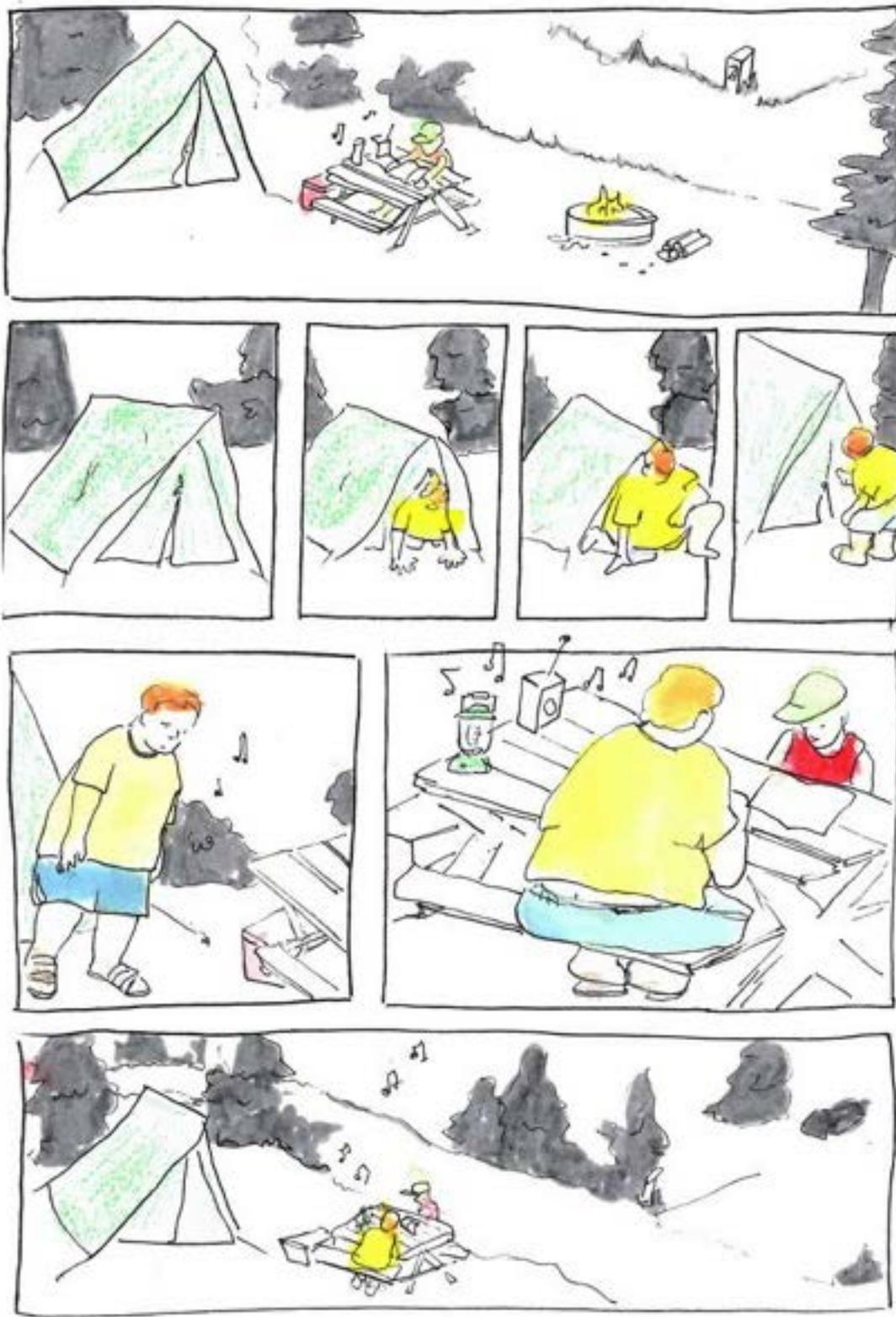
Of the jets.

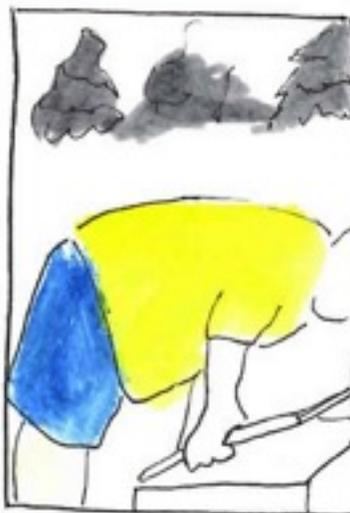
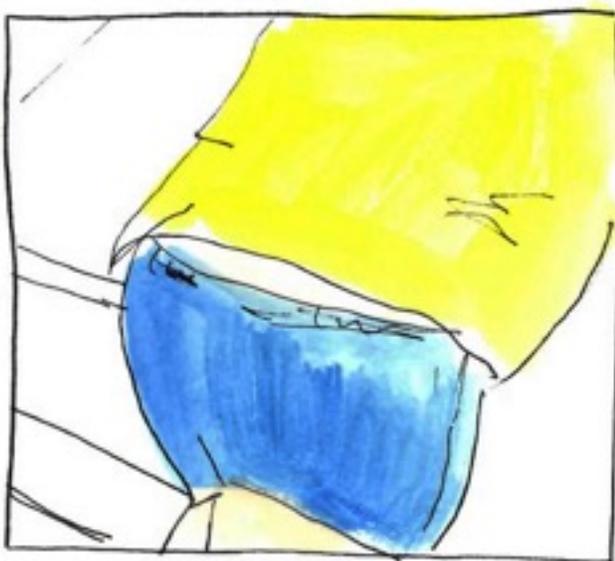
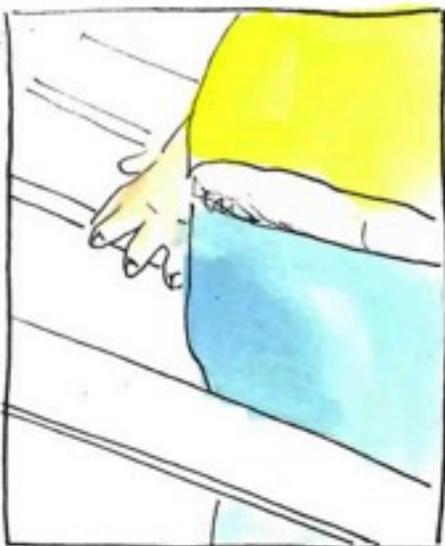
Of the words.

Of Crunchy Granola Suite³⁰

³⁰ Title of song written and recorded by Neil Diamond (1971).

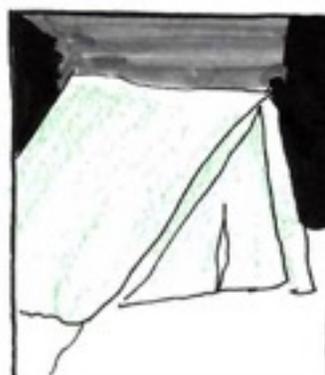
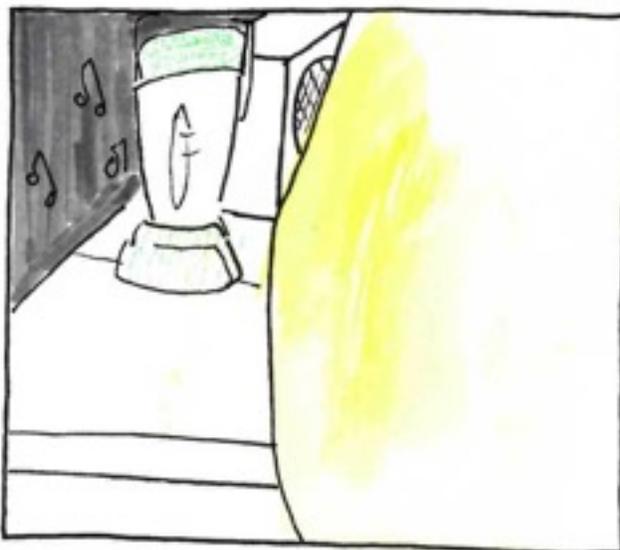
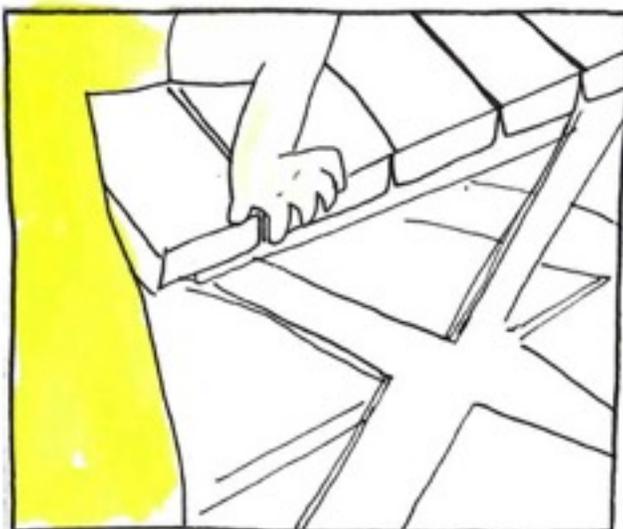
Shared Space











Chill

No bike today chill, baby, chill

coulee call

down

plodding plotting down

coulee call down

Scuff scrape scrawl

cool, baby, cool

coo lean calm

down

quite quiet down cling cold on

Hush breath

crumpled khaki hills

folds endless from here

wise oasis

waiting hold on

Air blast tears

blue, sun, blue

breath timed

wrong

timing hours long

breath step song

Pen ink

lock box strong

dwelling one eye out

scrolling whispers known

secret vision drawn

revel/ation

Sleep senses now

Creek sound rush

presence in words

vaporize reprise

presents in words

Space to lean

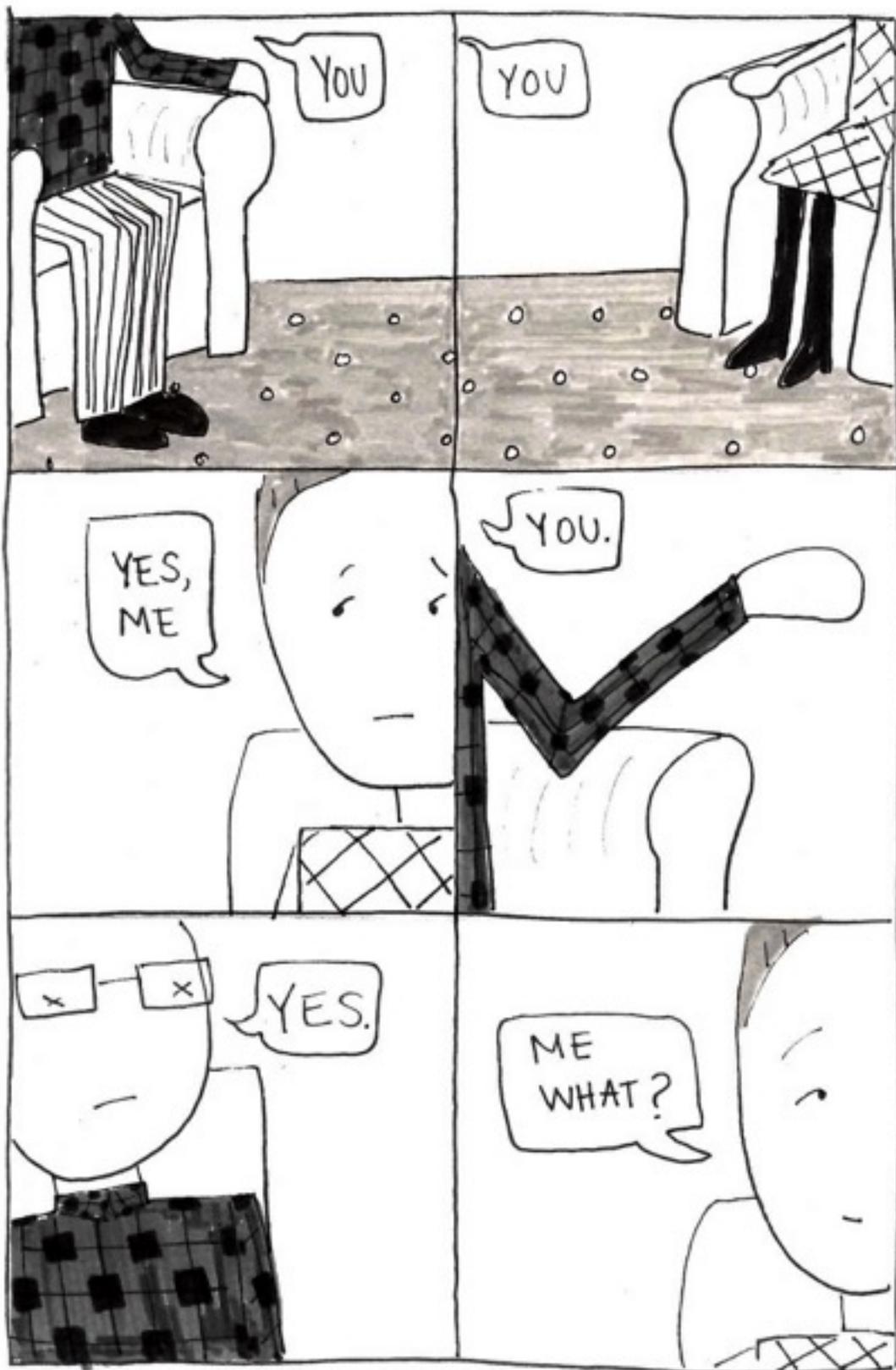
chill, baby, chill

reveal in

down

breath sweat sweet

revel in now



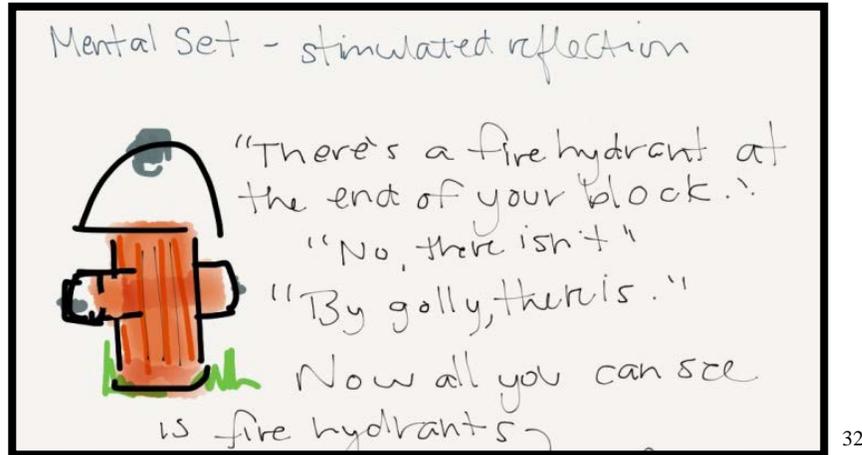


Narrating Toward Self



Merciless shears snip ruthlessly, shredding memories into soft piles multi-coloured fragments—powder blue flannel, grass-stained corduroy, rude pink satin. The more they cut, the more fabric surfaces, until exhaustion and awareness arrive together to review the mounds. Masses of once certain articles now dismantled, disrupted,³¹ useless threads overwhelm the floor, and the artist. Gingerly holding each piece again, seeing differently now, she arranges them anew. At first it seems random, a kind of rhythmic chaos; but standing back it is clear, a pattern is forming. Her method hastens. She has found sense in this jumble of unrelated events. Smiling she wonders why she never saw it before, now it's all there is.

³¹ Goto (2011) says, "Speculative fiction has the capacity to unsettle us, to make strange what we thought was familiar, and to have us re-examine our understanding of, and relationship with, 'normal.'" See therejectionist.com. I believe this to be true of all narrative. Isolating the story from the context gives an ordinary tale an extraordinary existence with new significance.



Stitching wounded textiles, easing them together when first they don't fit. The artist made these moments, prudently places, joins them; boldly asserts ownership of the work. Ownership of where she's been³³. The design reveals itself, sets the course for the next piece. The familiarity and direction comforts and sustains.³⁴ As weeks go on, the life the piece takes gives purpose to her hands.³⁵

³² Townsend, personal communication, July 10, 2013.

³³ Writing about our places gives credit and value to an important connection to ourselves and therefore to our own unique existence (Chambers, 1999). Luce-Kapler (2011) discusses how writing uncovers identity.

³⁴ Clandinin and Huber (2010) advise narrative inquirers to understand that "a person's lived and told stories are who they are and who they are becoming and that these stories sustain them" (p. 15).

³⁵ As Kenneally (2010) claims, we form our words and our words form us.



“Every man has a secret in him, many die without finding it.”³⁶ Hidden in the material of past, a new narrative forms; raw in its edges, maybe not expected or loved. Attaching the binding,³⁷ declaring this true, she irons, then folds, tucks it away. It’s yours if you find it. Rip out the stitches if you’d like, but the patches won’t subsist on their own. The quilt is the thing.³⁸ Enfold in its warmth, or cover your loved ones. Hang it on the wall. Texture, scent, and faded dyes invite nostalgia and pain, for a while. We gaze.

³⁶ Mallarmé implies that we do not fully know ourselves (as cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 55).

³⁷ A strip of fabric sewn over the edges of the quilt layers to finish the raw edges, add strength, and/or decorate the edge.

³⁸ “To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result. The poem is the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 13).

Found Poem from Lev #1³⁹

The questions would not wait,
 they had to be answered at once,
 and if I did not answer them
 it was impossible to live.

But there was no answer.

I felt
 that what I had been standing on
 had collapsed

and that I had
 no
 t
 h
 i
 n
 g

left
 under
 my
 feet.

What I had lived on

no longer existed,

and there was nothing left.

³⁹ Found from Tolstoy's *A Confession* (1921/2005).



THE DANGER THAT AN
INDIVIDUAL OF INSUFFICIENT
TALENTS & INADEQUATE
SCHOLARLY EXPERIENCE MAY
TRY TO HIDE HIS LACK OF
INSIGHT BEHIND AN
OBFUSCATING FLOWERY OR
SELF INDULGENT
DISCOURSE
(VAN MANEN,
1990,
P.17)

Infectious

Life-suck
isolator
Peace-sap
bully,
push down
until night
trap
yellow
heaving
at
the
door
smother

Embrace
veins
squeeze
tears
blood
sweat
souvenirs
of lifejoy
leaving lonely
parched by
dry hate
empty sick
dry heaves
no success
sterile
dark shell
no creation

found

go home

Delusions Are Grander

I.

I dreamt that I drew great hair

Surprised, I was

But

Pretended that it was my way

Casually

Examined

The shading

The line

As I continued the rest of the head.

II.

A door-closed teenager in my room

In the evenings until

Late at night I would draw

From a book gifted to me

By Mrs. Pittman, an artist.

Women and children with braids and an old black man

Stared at me from 1962

I would try to copy them but

Instead invented new feasible faces

One lady so sophisticated with

slender fingers touching her chin

The most glamorous person

That never lived

But sometimes in the mirror

I arch my brows and pose

My hand in such a way

That I believe I always

Was meant to be real.

III.

I housesat

Took care of this

Sided white house

Pillow cases creased

Even the fitted sheets

Folded flat like brand new bought

Every book stamped inside

Name, two initials, surname

A flow to it

Something like

Harry PT Lineman

Or

Joseph CR Holmes

Pesky LM Fielder

Poopsy Joe Johnson

Red Blue Whitesy

One day I hoped to fold laundry

Like that yet

Even in its moment

I hardly believe

The wish sincere

But sometimes practice

See potential



Concrete

My stories are not my own. They arrived from a universe of traditions—in text written, spoken, and unspoken. My vulnerability endears me to ancestors and those around me watching me struggle in my human weakness. Mine are humanity’s stories giving me shape and strength.

*raqia to stereoma to
firmamentum, did latin ask
greek ask hebrew can man
create a firmament in our
meekness vault of the sky and
expanse of earth is a cosmic
feat omnipresent become
solid within it strong in
humility
concrete*

Chiseling away at the etymology of firmament, reveals this word meaning ‘a strengthening’ (d)evolved from a word meaning ‘expanse’. Translation and interpretation changed and shaped firmament into being. Similarly, stories, pieces of the *expanse* of life lived, provide contour and form to *strengthen* values and identity. My memories transform my meaning, connecting me to the vastness of a mystical universe and what it is to be human.

when in *to the current*
the creek *vulnerable* *to feel*
aware not *not to* *free*
cross
of *destiny or* *to be in* *to feel chilled* *in flow*
destination *to hear babble* *present*
be

I remember backyard adventures, streams of neighbourhood kids, jokes through milk and spaghetti. Peaceful Saturdays of sun streaming in through the balcony window, I would watch Dad reading—perfect posture in his chair; play hushed word games and puzzles on green shag rug. Beethoven played in the background while Mom baked cinnamon buns, cookies, bread for us. Each day ended with Mom and Dad channelling Peter, Paul, and Mary: Dad on the guitar, the two crooning folk songs as we drifted away in homemade jammies, closing our eyes to the National Geographic-themed wallpaper. Hippie turned yuppie parents tip-toed across the yellow-brown linoleum. We loved every minute of it, flowing in rhythm with life's sounds and silences.

One morning, I became particularly enraptured with my work of cutting paper into bits at the kitchen table. All shapes and sizes, curves and lines, I concentrated on this process with my tongue reaching out the corner of my mouth, guppy jaw hinging with each squeeze of the scissors. There was no project, no product, simply the joy of hearing the scissors sing the rich duet with paper, ending each verse with a staccato reunion of blades, “Grrrunch-ski-chip, grrrunch-ski-chip”. Tool, hand, and paper worked together to realize a path unknown.

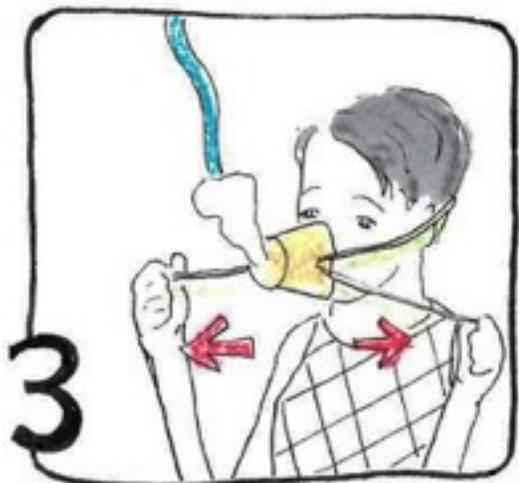
So engrossed in my practice, I didn't notice Dad enter; my I-spy-little eye focused only on the emerging incisions, slices, pieces of the paper somersaulting to the table. How long did he watch me, in awe of my calmness of mind and full absorption into a moment? Long enough for him to marvel at a child without expectation of a construct but the constructing itself. Long enough to find his camera and adjust the aperture for a portrait backed with a sunny-window. Long enough for him to snap a dozen-shot series of my becoming one with process. My attention was alerted to the camera audience, I

performed silly faces to relate to the new focus. The photographs capturing the trance remain, reminding me of freedom that comes in the vulnerability of childlike presence and strength of spirit that is born from exhaling into the direction life takes me.⁴⁰



⁴⁰ Photo credit, Bryan Ellefson, 1983

Safety Considerations



The Science of Breathing

There are two phases
to breathe
input / output
to breathe
to live
it's an equation
levels measured
controlled without thinking
inspire
contract
thoracic volume swells
inhale my place
dust / water molecules
floating here
in and out of every beast
every
one
inhale my place
rush in to why me
the pressure in here is not so high
so high as out there
in the atmosphere out there
nostrils throat larynx trachea
lingering in and out of alveoli
feed every questioning searching cell
blood trade
unload doubt / dark
take fresh wisdom direct to the heart
first
then through the body
to feet
to walk
to hands
to reach
to write
to breathe

Looks Familiar

These are my grandparents, my brother, me.

I know that look on my brother's face.

He is frustrated. Pissed off.

He looks like that when he doesn't get what he wants.

When people don't comply with his will.

This moment could be a hint at a lifetime of issues with authority.

I know that kid.

He is still here, still makes that face, just walks around looking like he's 40.

I know the look on my grandpa's face.

He is teasing. Menacing.

His face and posture look like one of my uncles, one of the ten of this man's children.

That uncle will bring that level of irritation to my brother's face many times over.

Sometimes until my brother's face turns red and he is punching and sweating and spitting rabid. Until there is swearing and yelling and dogs barking.

I don't know the man who is holding him.

He died within the year of this picture being taken.

I know the look on my grandma's face.

She is sick with worry. Silent.

She looks like she wants to tell her husband to cut it out, hug my brother, let him be. Yell at him like she will her sons and daughters when they move back in with her as adults, behave like selfish animals, fight and drink and use her place her money.

I don't know the lady holding me.

She is his wife and she keeps the peace.

The grandma I knew was irreverent. She had a big mouth, said whatever it wanted.

I know the look on my face.

I am numb. Impassive.

I am looking at my parents who are trying to take a picture and they are asking us to look for a moment. Waiting patiently for fretting to stop, for the threat to my family's harmony to cease. It appears I do my part to bring peace.

Worries and ideas keep me in my head. Quiet.

I know the girl sitting there.

She is still here, still makes that face. Now she writes stuff down.

Baptized

Uncle Garry was one of three boys in the Tanaka family; and he was one of over 4,000 Japanese who had either arrived in Southern Alberta to mine, harvest sugar beets, build the railway, or who had arrived via a no-choice ticket, compliments of World War II paranoia. By the time Garry was born, the war was over and his family had a new identity as Taber potato farmers, though echoes of discrimination followed this *nisei* (second generation). Garry didn't dwell on those stories, persevered and created his own stories of mischief with his brothers, mischief in school, and mischief all the way to Lethbridge College.

In 1974, when Garry married my mom's sister, MaryAnn, Grandpa Gus didn't go to the wedding. He didn't want his daughter marrying a "Jap." He didn't allow his eight younger kids to go, either; and he wouldn't allow Grandma Ann to be with her daughter on her special day—just as he wouldn't allow her to speak in her French or visit her Métis sisters, nieces, and nephews back in St. Lazare, Manitoba. My mom, having already escaped her father's home, was married and toting around my brother. She and my dad were set to travel north to Edmonton to attend the Tanaka-Russill wedding, until Baby Michael wound up in the hospital—the first of his many visits to the oxygen tent. With no cellphones, no e-mail, no texting, MaryAnn married Garry, believing this new family unit would be the only one she had. I imagine Grandma Ann in her tiny house in Blairmore, too scared to defy her husband, too scared to even phone an "I love you," but sick, sick, sick, fretting on the edge of her chair. Grandpa Gus died when I was only one year old, so I grew to know him only through stories, including this one Uncle Garry told me with a laugh in his eyes, hinting a pain he wouldn't allow himself to believe.

Within a year of the wedding, my mom was with her sister at the birth of their daughter, Toshiko Ann Tanaka. By the time baby me arrived, our families had already begun a tradition of taking turns visiting between Edmonton and Picture Butte, then Sidney and Picture Butte, then Prince George and Picture Butte, then Edmonton and Picture Butte. Our summer fun was given proof through Toshi's countless, awkwardly-contrived photos, a natural by-product of being Japanese and an only child.

As a teen, and young adult, Toshi and I maintained our kinship. I would spend a week each summer with her, Garry and MaryAnn. Garry was a story teller and handed out nicknames to anyone who would listen. He called me JB, short for Jana Banana. Toshi was MPR short for MunkPunkRailroad. Her boyfriends' names were never very complimentary, but never quite as cutting as the ones given to Garry by his father-in-law. Garry's wife and best friend was MK, MaryKid, or just Mary, and likely lists of other endearments that the brain cancer took from him when it wiped out the mischief in his eyes.

When I was with the Tanaka family, I pretended I was Japanese. Once, the WhiteSpot waitress asked if Toshiko and I were sisters and I still revel in that confusion—me with my pale skin and light eyes. For three visits in a row, I asked CG (Crazy Garry) to give me a Japanese name. When I moved into my own house, he bought me Japanese pottery tea cups and finally wrote my new name on the card: *Bananako*. Now “officially” Japanese, I fully embraced my new identity buying a two-foot-high dining room table with floor cushions, eating with chopsticks, learning to make sushi and reading books about *Feng Shui*, *Gautama Buddha*, and *Zen*.

Around the time I was planning my wedding, Garry had started dying: selling his motorbike, his boat; teaching MaryAnn how to use the barbecue; saying goodbye. On June 27, 2009, he couldn't come see Mieko, his granddaughter, my goddaughter, glowing in her ring-bearer dress. He was in the hospital; sickly, sallow, and bald, cancer hijacking his spine and organs, desperately trying to seize his strong spirit. He sent his MK with a special gift he picked out for me before the tumour had spread— a Japanese pottery wash basin and jug. It sits prominently in my home as the only outward evidence of my Japanese baptism, the only evidence of any heritage my mother's family could provide.

Holi-Days

I explained to my Grandma Anne that my other side of the family
Would be camping at Kananaskis
Like we did every year
Assuming she needed this clarification

Now I wonder if that stung
If she had wanted to take us on trips
I didn't think of it then because I didn't know
Grandparents took grandchildren to Disneyland

My Grandma sent us on trips to Ed's Dairybar
For salt and vinegar chips, grape pop and a green and white pack of Export A's
A thrill in itself without the expectation of being allowed to keep the change
But that usually happened, too.
And maybe a dollar or two from a stray uncle visiting

Maybe we would sleep over
Stay up late, laying on pillows and blankets on the floor
In the dark front room
Watching comedians on cable
Grandma on the couch

These holy days, weekend-vacations
Flicker in dimly and blue



Whispers Grip

Overwhelming promise
bundle from the ancients
so shiny real
it hurts the eye
a push
a pull
compelled to release
unsought doubt
unsought debt
whispers grip harder

Conclusion



“A creative disposition embraces the potentials of remote possibilities to go where one has not necessarily planned” (Kelly & Leggo, 2008, p. 82). I believe I began this writing and collecting of texts with an intent to bring concurrent peace and upset to an imagined reader; cause pause and inquiry in moments of connecting visual and text, text and life experience. I could not have imagined the transformation the readers would experience, as I could not have imagined the links and life experiences they would create within the spaces of the métissage (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009) of the writings of *We Gaze*. In this uncertainty, I trusted that my ‘creative disposition’ was strong and willing. My poetic fiction would meld with stories of others, leaving me with unrequited understanding of the possibilities of this text. I was satisfied that, as is the essence of phenomenology and hermeneutic life writing, questions would remain unanswered. Right to the finish, I supposed the word choices and arrangement needed to be mindful of the audience’s journey. How could I best lead them on a trip to transformation?

Reading or watching a character change is obvious, but objectively witnessing one’s own is more challenging. Reflecting on the product as a whole collection, I now am conscious that there needn’t be another audience; in fact, there was one all along. As

a/r/t/ographer, the relating I have done with the text and spaces between has been transformative to a self that hides and reveals, a self that relates, and a self that teaches. These ideas first percolated at the outset of my studies as a graduate student in the creation of a commonplace book: a collection of ideas, quotes, writings, understandings, and questions. My collection was built on Muth's (2002) *The Three Questions: Based on a Story by Leo Tolstoy* and centered around *zazen* teachings of being present and aware of the unfolding story that is you (Suzuki & Brown, 2002). Here I have returned to rediscovering the power in honouring my own stories and the way in which I remember them. It is in these (re)viewings that values are intensified and learning propogates.

We refine silk by washing it many times so that the threads are white and soft enough to weave . . . We temper iron by hitting it while it is hot—not to forge or to shape it, but to make it strong. (Suzuki & Brown, 2002, p. 89)

As Blomgren (2005, p. 2) relates, in Science, one discovers an unknown whereas in an odyssey, one is seeking an already familiar destination. Returning to what is already known after experiencing the trials, setbacks, and strange encounters of the epic journey, weaves the strands of our *lifeworlds* (van Manen, 2010) and experiences more tightly; it strengthens the fabric with which we clothe ourselves.

The Self in Hide and Reveal

Returning to my commonplace book I came across evidence of my first intentional *Artist's Date* (Cameron,1992). I had bicycled to the Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden in Lethbridge, Alberta, carrying a camera and a sketchbook. I walked the grounds as a tourist, carefully reading placards and brochure. Later, I pruned the brochure, cutting out words to contribute to a found poem, entitled "Hide and Reveal," inspired by the

Japanese gardening technique *miegakure*. Elements of the garden design are hidden at first glance, meant to be uncovered as the visitor journeys through—or even, on their way back. Zig-zagging within this arts-based inquiry has brought awareness to *miegakure* present in life-writing and phenomenological research. I have ventured out on a path of exploration, meeting struggles, more questions, some triumphs; only to return back to the beginning several times over to try it all again. I continue to puzzle and delight at the elements first hidden from my view that now reveal themselves; or more likely, as I become aware of what was there all along. Even returning to this found poem seems strange and familiar. It may have propagated this slow-budding inquiry I now use to view my places and relations, yet it holds different meaning to me from when it was first written for Cynthia Chambers and Erika Hasebe-Ludt’s Research and Methodologies course in July, 2012.

Hide and Reveal⁴¹

Write identity

artifacts, exist

time immemorial.

attend to space of the world.

Visit often,

senses absorb

hole can hold the structure together

surface silences

delicate balance

exploration seehearenjoy understanding

reveal the grace visible

⁴¹ Found poem from Nikka Yukko Japanese Garden brochure, written by Dr. Robert Hironaka, and Carl Leggo’s writing about holes (in Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 76).

soar in the absence

knowledge

made of space alone.

more questions

layers of space

transient-permanence

note the change

maintaining silences, distance

view, hear, smell, and feel

shape of space

*wabi-sabi*⁴²

nature evolving

In what ways will arts-based inquiry through the genre of social fiction contribute to an individual's experience with language?

In a similar manner of curiosity and quiet that one visits a Japanese garden, I have toured texts while developing my poetic fiction. Dwelling in words—mine and others, said and unsaid—has imparted respect for the glow, shadow, and variegated shades between that language creates. The act of attempting to capture communication in all its complexities and contexts forced me to take time to be more fully present to verbal and non-verbal interchanges. Grafting real moments together to create a social fiction required that I loop around, revisiting and taking mental photographs of my trip so I might artfully represent the intricacies of language.

⁴² “*wabi-sabi* connotes rustic simplicity, freshness or quietness, and can be applied to both natural and human-made objects, or understated elegance. It can also refer to quirks and anomalies arising from the process of construction, which add uniqueness and elegance to the object” See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabi-sabi>

When I first compiled the poem “Hide and Reveal” I had just begun recognizing a yearning for writing and possibilities for sharing. I had long kept my words close and writing completely sheltered. I was intrigued at how uncomfortable hiding behind small talk somehow brings more ease than honest exchange. I was exploring the ways many seemingly intimate relationships function on surface interactions, concealing sincerity to stay out of harm’s way. The value of vulnerability was sprouting up in personal identity reflection, in career, and in relationship with others as being vital for growth. The paradox of language disguising thought stirred my exploration through text.

In true *miegakure* fashion, elements of life’s design revealed themselves in unexpected ways deepening my connection to the inquiry. Walking right beside me as I began the writing of this project, important encounters with stories of language and literacy helped shape my thinking. I had the opportunity to learn from a wonderfully manipulative student who tried to avoid academic work using his identity as a non-verbal autistic boy. His potential for learning was masked by his inability to communicate with traditional literacies and his downright deceptive behaviours. His entrance into my story brought me new insights about the impact language has on identity. His peers were unable to communicate to him in conventional ways, yet caring relationships were formed. He could not demonstrate his knowledge and interests in speech or text, nor did he desire to. He refused to learn to type, utilize technological communication tools, or even point at images; however, we still knew he had a huge crush on Adele, loved swimming, could speed-read, but despised fiction. With my heightened observational skills because of my arts-based research, I was able to recognize other ways this student was attempting to express himself. Rather than being frustrated and annoyed with the

language skills he did not have, I could celebrate the moments when I comprehended the literacies he used.

Another student, fluent in three languages—written and verbal—decided to remain mute at school. Close friends could not convince her to whisper more than a “yes” or “no” once or twice a day. Her parents puzzled about how she talked non-stop at home. She loved to read and write in a variety of genres. She would only share her work with me. She wrote journals to me weekly to share details of her life, both general events and personal feelings. She spoke very clearly in eyebrow raises, smirks, and drawn-out hugs. Her identity within the classroom was largely based on her refusal to speak. She demonstrated how language can act as a currency. It is not an obligation but can be a gift to share under one’s own terms. I, too, have kept my words close, wary that I may be harmed in the sharing. With this awareness, I attempt to accept the gifts of language more graciously—from her and those who offer them freely. I do not push or press. A gift should not be rudely snatched away from the giver’s grip. Rather, I wait patiently for words to unfold in their own time.

And then, as quickly as my toddler eagerly earns words and expressions, an older relation of mine loses his. A disease called Primary Progressive Aphasia steals from the parts of his brain responsible for speech and language, leaving the rest of his brain functioning alone in silence. I witness strangers assume him to be mentally inept, unaware that he holds an enormous vocabulary, a graduate degree, feisty political arguments, and obscure lyrics to a soundtrack spanning decades. In his moments of frustration and confusion, I learn the fragility of our identities being so entwined in the

words we voice (Kenneally, 2010). In his moments of acceptance, I learn the expression of vulnerability—being secure in the disclosure of truth.



Being vulnerable to the process of arts-based inquiry accepts that the researcher will go in uncertain directions. Rather than exclusively exploring the writings of others, arts-based inquiry involves forming meaning with(in) the creation of art. In *We Gaze* I attempted to use comics to amalgamate the characters in my life who experiment or struggle with traditional literacies. As exciting and appealing as this creative work can be, it is overwhelming when a conception cannot be transmitted in the way it is imagined. Ohler (2008) speaks to the importance of having the technological skills to be able to articulate a message the way it is envisioned. A mostly tolerable fluency in multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) allowed me access to the ideas I wanted to express from a variety of paths. In this way, I gained a deeper, earthier feel for the rapport between different modes of expression. At first I was intimidated by the wish to create something profound and original. Through arts-based inquiry, I uncovered the realization that all art springs from another source (Rahn, 2007). I engaged with visual and written texts I admired, mimicked several styles, then attempted to create my own.



Inexperience and feelings of ineptness pushed me into Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* (Mills, 2010), making my learning active rather than simply a transmission of information (Cummins, 2009). Though the product may not match what I wish it could be, it is an expression of my engaged process. Some have argued that the authentic is aesthetic (Leavy, 2015, p. 279). Exploring language, identity, and relations through my own lived experiences and through text creation grew multiple layers of understanding. In the give and stretch of text, I played with language to relate the research to my own perceptions. In the honesty of art making, my experiences with language were pried open.

The Self That Relates

Now again, return on the same path, stroll back with me to the early morning of this inquiry, the commonplace book where naïve ideas collected as distinct dewdrops, sliding heavy, leaving a careful number to sit precariously on their tenuous platform. Muth's character, Nikolai, asks three questions: "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?" (Muth, 2002, p. 3). I gathered texts to soak in this examined engagement of the self in relation to the world. In the first light of this study I was recognizing an interest in being more fully in the world. At this time, I was writing about listening; reading, attending to stories of students,

colleagues, relations. Folded up and hidden behind flowered paper is a journal I penned, delighting in the writing I was taking the time to do, I added, “I didn’t want to say it out loud because I’m not sure I deserve this” (Boschee, personal journal, July 5, 2012). At this time, I didn’t acknowledge the value of my own contribution to discovering truths and “living well with others” (Fowler, personal communication, September 22, 2012). Yet, there was wisdom I didn’t understand reflecting just under the meniscus. Retrieving the found poem I wrote then, I see glimpses of knowing that in this work I would be obligated to go beyond visiting the stories around me, but attend to the stories within.

Found Poem from Lev #4⁴³

The life of the world endures by someone’s will
by the life of the whole world

and

by our lives
someone fulfills his purpose.

To hope
to understand
the meaning of that will
one must first perform it
by doing
what is wanted of us.

How does writing narratively contribute to a better understanding of the self in relation to the world?

⁴³ Found from words in Tolstoy (1921/2005).

As I reflected on what story to tell, I needed to decide how deeply the reader would be allowed to see. I needed to balance the editor who protects my inner identity with the curator who displays my outer identity. Privacy allows for the development of the identity; “privacy contributes to the kind of inner growth that is associated with independence, personal power, and positive autonomy” (van Manen & Levering, 1996, p. 74). I took care to protect the treasured recesses of my inner being where I alone can refute or encourage thoughts. I explored that idea in the first chapter of *We Gaze*, especially in the poem “Narcissist.” Reflecting on moments, writing them in a variety of forms, helped me purge feelings and collect themes that mattered. Though I could have gone on happily not asking questions about my history or identity through writing, Blomgren (2005, p. 3) warns that avoiding this practice could obliterate a sense of home, which is also our sense of hope. The time and attention given to selecting my words and images brought objectivity to my own stories, which allowed me to see patterns and connections otherwise hidden by emotion. Guided by Fowler’s (2006) *eight orbitals* of hermeneutic inquiry, I could plunge into memories, searching the relics for meaning, and sit with the events that resonate and even make me uncomfortable. This private work pooled together the isolated beads, forming a space to more deeply immerse in my identity. It brought me to difficult places of memory and the present where I required myself to acknowledge these connections and how they materialize in my work and life literacies. Some of the origins of my uneasiness with outward expression trickled to my consciousness.

During this graphic narrative inquiry, I discerned that truths more readily surface within the creation of art. My concern was that swimming in my own stories might

become self-indulgent and self-serving (van Manen, 1990, p. 17), that the insights I supposed to be clear were truly polluted. As I wrote and drew, my observations of people in relationship with their world distilled the blend of literacy and identity that emerged. I was given the opportunity to share some of the work I was doing at the Provoking Curriculum Studies conference held by the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies in February 2015. My writing had lived in my mind and my own desk, and occasionally in the safety of my literacy cohort who mutually shared and cared for our life's writings. Bringing it to an unknown audience was terrifying. The research I had done along with the experiences with my literacy cohort informed me that sharing narrative contributes to collective wisdom. I was writing these things and yet did not consider my story to hold the same significance. Still, with the trust in the research, I exposed pieces of my graphic work with candour, briefly apologizing for its crudeness, explaining away its faults; then delving into its reason for being. It resonated for the audience. Nurses, artists, and educators talked with me after, wrote me notes. The theory became real; I comprehended the power of my narrative, as simple as it may be, in connecting others to their own identities. Their experience of my story now shapes my next understanding of who I am, a dynamic and fluid existence constructed and co-constructed with the stories around me (Sfard & Prusak, as cited by Danzak, 2011, p.188). Sumara reminds us "the reading of fiction is a creative act" (1995, p. 22); the reader of the text will unwittingly form connections to their own experience, re-examine identity and further form pedagogical questions and answers. Moriarty (2009) speaks of his surprise that anyone would relate to his character, Jack of *Jack Survives*, because he did the writing for himself. He then postulates that "this could be explained by readers not being limited by my intent"

(Moriarty, 2009, “My Slow Understanding of Jack,” para. 11). By writing, I am offering opportunity for those who read it to drink in the text and sustain their own narrative.

In the film *About Time*, characters use time travel to relive events (Bevan, Fellner, Kentish Barnes, & Curtis, 2013). Not to change them, alter history, as is often imagined with going back in time; rather, they revisit moments to absorb them more fully. They return to the same, seemingly inconsequential times spent communing with relations. Perhaps knowing the self is only done in the spaces of connecting with others. The definitions and borders of our identity comes in a physical and visual sense, and in memory and experience (van Manen, 1996). In narrative, it seems fair and responsible to be sensitive to all the circumstances of divulging the self, the visual and the verbal (Galvin & Todres, 2009). Thus, in my writing, I attempted to tell and show the phenomenon of language, identity, and relations by creating imagery through poetics and pairing the narrative with visuals.

To reach an understanding with one’s partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one’s own point of view, but a transformation into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 341)

To become, we need to reveal both the visual and verbal facets, so they might reflect back to us in the rippled and choppy ways that our own language and that of others permit. We need to both voice and hear the stories that surround us to experience the evidence of what it means to be human and alive (Davis, 2009).

The Self That Teaches

One more time, let's circle back to the gates of the Japanese garden where I started. Evening songs whisper and hum tales from the journey in and out of where I have walked in this inquiry. It is time to leave, and leave changed. In the commonplace book I began over three years ago, simple hues of being present and engaged painted the self as teacher. As the heat of day melts and fades; twilight shadows slip over; colours are smeared, blended: a fresh palette appears. Mezirow defines transformative learning as “the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action” (as cited in Taylor, 1997, p. 48). Surveying the artifacts I placed in the first few pages of *The Three Questions* (Muth, 2002), a poem I had written colours what I now see as a purpose to my research—conviction of the innate wonder and potential of each individual I teach.

Puissance

You are prairie yellow—
 endless gold waiting for harvest,
 peeling of a moon
 suspended in hazy purple sunset
 waiting . . .
 peeling of a moon
 whose core has fallen
 slid
 and
 sunk,
 wobbles warbles, melts
 into the river where you were born
 of tadpole
 and genius.

How might an educator's experience with the process of creating a visual text in combination with creative writing transform pedagogy?



The awareness of identity's dependency on language and visual literacy informs my praxis and experiences and the experiences of students in my classroom. Though not every narrative is meant for polishing, there remains room for the *wabi* and authentically messy sharing of story. I encourage the value of process, of starts and restarts, of recognizing tints and shades through deeper seeking into what may seem monochromatic. Critical discussion and story circles (Ohler, 2008) help compose thoughtful portraits of histories. What started out as vague ideas in my mind became real and treasured text after being workshopped with my cohort and professors. Without the story-circle element, important revelations may be left crumpled in a writing-drafts folder. I am beholden to the stories and identities of my students that merit a place to be viewed and heard. I provide exemplars and instruction in multi-modal texts. We spend time analyzing image, video, dance, theatre, music, and various genres of language-based texts, to become aware of the limitations and liberties each allow. I have configured my literacy time to allow freedom and time to create. Understanding the balance of private and public tensions (van Manen, 1996) in identity formation, I also provide time for writing for the self. My students are given the first moments of each day to write in their *Morning Pages*

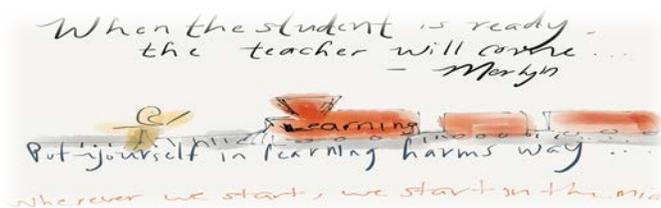
(Cameron, 1992), words that are never assessed or even viewed by their teacher unless invited by the author.



A pedagogy structured around space for creating is one that teaches students to contribute art, ideas, and self to the community. Opportunity to share the work they create devotes *gravitas* to their stories. I support their creativity by providing prompts inspired by their daily events, histories, artifacts, and families (Goldberg, 1986). I give them advice for altering form and refining artistry to bring interest to their expression. Time is set aside just for visiting, attending to the darks and brights of every day. Validating this curriculum is the deep and well-walked assertion that “education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction” (Dewey, 1897, “Article Five. The School and Social Progress,” para. 3). In future, I want to expand the audience for their truth telling. Exploring possibilities for a wider audience within the school community, as well as venues provided by social media, the “intimate public” (Jolly, 2011), may confirm the links and overlapping of shared experience. We cannot know what connections may come from our stories. Life writing provides “a means of reflecting with a view towards action” (Tompkins, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, Sinner, Leggo, Pletz, Simoongwe & Wilson, 2010) in one’s own and others’ communities. My teaching has focused on the importance of my students’ stories being part of a body of knowledge that describes humanity. A next direction will be to attempt to impart the understanding that rendering is the first step. As knowledge builders, students need to then set a course for change when needed (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006, pp. 97-98).

My own reflective writing has brought awareness to how precious time spent writing has been for me. My view of art living separate from my life at school requires a

vast alteration. The vitality inherent in art making needs to bleed into my daily praxis, breathing colours yet unseen in that space. I will challenge myself and willing listeners to mingle art, self-awareness, and sense of community to mingle with daily responsibilities. This is an ardent call to recognize that our studies are not just for academic and professional purposes. We can continue to bring our understandings to learn to live well with our relations in this place. Viewing my classroom through artistic lenses has let richer tones in identities and relationship emerge. Blomgren (2005) challenges us to journey alongside our students, not only providing the narrative, objective perspective, but also allowing ourselves to be discovered along the way. Hasebe-Ludt (2014) asserts that by writing artfully, we can develop a “rich and meaningful inner life and to help others, especially young people to do so” (p. 62). Narrative writing that honours the work I have done in my career has given full view of the seemingly random and uncharted paths, revealing the landscape in its full spectrum. I see the need for frequently and closely revisiting the turns and twists, to keep clear the details, and be mindful of the moments when clarity has become dull. Living in this state of inquiry and artful practice will be the lesson. “What is most difficult for any teacher—is to teach without teaching anything” (Suzuki & Brown, 2002, p. viii). In the presence of teachers that allow us to create our own knowing “we are profoundly on our own—and profoundly connected with everything” (Suzuki & Brown, 2002, p. viii). My purpose to relate to art and students will be to rouse them to fully become what they were grown to be.



The Self Transformed

I think I believed a dramatic butterfly-from-the-cocoon moment would occur through my inquiry; that my text would shatter earth and ring truths formerly unknown. Perhaps I could achieve what Hasebe-Ludt (2014) describes and bring a reader with me in a “*belonging together* in the Heideggerian sense of *Kehre*, signifying a turn toward thinking the unthought” (p. 61). This gestation, though, has been slow for me. There has not been a eureka moment of “I never thought that before!” but many of “Aaah. Yes. I think I’ve known that all along.” The journey has been about spending time listening and looking for wisdom with(in) being. Blomgren (2005) gave warning that even at the end of the journey, the idea of what one was expecting and what is actually there will not quite jive. There will also be an awkwardness between the person who has journeyed and the person/people hearing of the journey (Blomgren, 2005). I welcome the awkwardness. It means that the journey is still mine alone. I can be content in my private and insular identity. The work I have done has been a gift that cannot likely be fully known, possibly not even by a future me. The intentionality of exploring the secrets and intimate things about being has attached me more fully and profoundly to the world (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). The hiatus from my regular rhythm, this extended *Artist’s Date* has indeed transformed my thinking, yet returned me right back to the origin; just as the cleverly crafted walkway did on my visit to Nikka Yukko Japanese Garden. Holding close the hidden, the revealed, the nature and nurture of words and image, I carry questions for the next visit.

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