

**MULTIMODAL LIFE WRITING WITH MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS:  
A LITERACY OF EMPATHY WITH/IN ONE ANOTHER**

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## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to

my wife Kim,

who continues to encourage, understand, and

give of herself while I tend to this work.

Your way of being, the person you are, inspirits me

and continues to harken my heart

in a grounding of love, respect, and way of living.

## **Abstract**

Educators' and students' lives become validated and purposeful in the creation of, and attentive tending to, life stories. With/in the creative space opened through life-writing theory, students and teachers can come to develop a deeper sense of empathy towards the self and others in the classroom community. Utilizing arts-based research via narrative and poetic inquiry, life writing, and multimodality, I spent five months working with Grade 6 students in a Calgary middle school in the creation and sharing of life writing, and in subsequent group interviews. I collected data to be hermeneutically interpreted within my own poetic-inquiry texts. In these texts, I was able to tease out four thematic threads woven together in the fabric of my writing: Place, Other, Self, and Teacher. In the interpretation of data—student texts and my own—the rich empathic understanding of self and other became deeply apparent. If instituted as curriculum in classrooms, life writing can help in forging more empathic social futures for all members of a classroom community. This literacy of empathy, this wisdom of shared vulnerability, cultural respect, and political vitality, will result in a deeper understanding of what we need to live well together with/in these complicated cosmopolitan times.

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## Introduction

I came to life writing because I needed to. I needed to not in order to complete a project for my graduate program at the University of Lethbridge, but I came to it because my life craved it. I came to it because I could no longer live with the juxtapositions inherent in my life, in my way of being without attending to them deeply. In life writing, I am able to write my truths and questions, face them, linger with them, and gain the courage to go about the messy business of untangling and unfurling from that with which I can no longer live well with. Jones (2014) writes of an “academic world caught up in the very world (of planned obsolescence, disposability, and consumerism)” (p. 19). It is this f(rigid) model of industrial education, and the withdrawal of human connection that the theory, the choice of life writing, aims to combat through a re/newal of understanding the self and the other, and how we can come to *live aright* in this place, in this time (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005). Aoki asks what it means to live life well; what it is to live with/in “the zone between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experience [and] learning to dwell aright within it” (p. 163). As teachers, as humans, our goal is not to overcome the tension in our lives, but to learn to live well in accepting that tension, and to embrace the possibility of understanding that the tensionality holds. We must learn to live to accept the questions that arise, we must

try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. [We must not] now strive to uncover answers: they cannot be given...because [we] have not been able to live them. And what matters is to live everything. (Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 24)

We live with/in a society where human contact has been relegated to e-contact via instant messaging, button clicks, and *emojis*. We are witnessing and raising a generation of humans who do not have the opportunity to learn empathy and compassion through direct human relations, what Herriot (2014) describes as “the industrial economy [finding] ten thousand ways to prostitute the collective eros at the very core of community” (p. 110). Often, children and adults are spending hour after hour glued to personal devices, lacking real human interaction and social activity. The cruelest messages are sent at the push of a button, and the resulting reaction is often unseen. The sender has no idea of the impact of his or her communication, and the recipient is left alone to make sense of complex emotions. In order to live well, we must understand, we must bear witness to how we affect those with whom we live. Life writing opens anew opportunities of literacy—the literacy of the self, and the *literacy of the other*—perhaps even a literacy of empathy with/in one another and a *wisdom of vulnerability* in acts of writing and sharing (Morden, 2012).

A recurring theme in much of my writing involves the moments when I have become *shocked awake*—vibrantly present to the moment and opportunities that exist with/in each moment. Life writing is an open invitation to linger with these “moment(s) of risk, moment(s) of opportunity” where we become “startled to see ourselves anew. A stop is a moment of possible recognition, or reinvention, a reminder of what has been lost, an offering of what possibilities we might consider” (Fels, 2012, p. 334). When we seek a way of being that is different from that in which we currently dwell, we allow one’s self the space and time to become aware and recognize that these moments can be *astonishing* (from *tonare*, “to thunder” in Latin) (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2015).



Curriculum sojourner and scholar Erika Hasebe-Ludt draws on Heilbrun's (1999) description of these moments as being with/in "a state of liminality...to be poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another" (Heilbrun, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 99). The discord I feel upon the threshold of opportunity is re-imagined in terms of possibility. I find myself more aware of the opportunities that lie in hovering near the thresholds, between self/other, place, and way of being. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1933/2013) writes that "if you hold close to nature, to what is simple in it, to the small things people hardly see, all of a sudden [these] can become great and immeasurable...in your deepest consciousness, watchfulness and knowledge" (p. 24). In these spaces or *folds*, we find the rich and true meaning of our lives (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005).

In exploring my be/coming as a life writer, teacher, father, and husband, I present a number of liminal vignettes, which harken my calling to this way of being.

### **Limen One**

The class hushed as Matt<sup>1</sup> began to share his story. An engaged learner with literacy-learning issues, Matt had struggled in my Humanities class thus far. When it came to making meaning from writing in particular, this Grade 6 student would rush, be the first to slap his pencil down on his desk, and announce: "What do you do when you're done?" However, during the past week, we had been focusing on creating and sharing of life writing. This particular prompt was: "Who is someone, anyone, that you would give anything to be able to spend just five more minutes with and why?" Until this point, we had focused on 'external' indicators of who we were as people, such as personal heroes,

favourite foods, and favourite movies, but this was the first time we had delved into internal, historical personal narratives.

Matt raised his hand to share and paused, waiting for his classmates to quiet down. His narrative started with his dog, an old blue heeler that he had grown up with. As the story evolved, we learned about the importance of friendship between animals and humans, loyalty, and love. As he neared the end of his narrative, Matt paused and took a deep breath. As he attempted to continue, his voice cracked, and his head slumped down onto his desk. His tiny shoulders began to heave in sobs, and he released his emotions. This story had been sitting with/in Matt for two years. As it turned out, his dog had been attacked by coyotes and, as a result, had had to be put down. As Matt's shoulders heaved, there was a long silence in the classroom. His peers, silent and reflective, spoke without words regarding the power of Matt's narrative. Such long pauses can reflect a thoughtful mining of memory, a spark of connection, as Connie Blomgren echoed in a written comment after I had also shared a story of loss in a graduate class:

Thank you for your sharing today of your story. The long pause after you initially finished speaks to several things...including how powerful your story was/is...do not interpret the pause as anything more than processing time...one never knows what echoes your story may bring up. (C. Blomgren, personal communication, July 14, 2014)

A few moments passed after Matt had shared his writing, and another student, Eric, began to cry. Then he told his story about how his aunt had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer, and how he was scared of losing her. This prompted Mike, a recent immigrant from China, to put his head down. When prompted, he told us between sobs

that he was worried about his sister, whom the family had left back in China upon immigration.

In Matt's sharing, and our collective listening of the story, many others felt empowered to share and encouraged to become vulnerable in the safe place we had created with/in our community. Students had begun to discover the power of life writing as a method to better understanding the self and the other in the collective sharing and experiencing of loss, and the complexities of our life texts.

### **Limen Two**

We sat in Turcotte Hall of the University of Lethbridge, that first summer session of the Literacy in Globalized Canadian Classrooms graduate cohort, working with Dr. Cynthia Chambers and Dr. Erika Hasebe-Ludt. The class, a true snapshot of teachers in and around southern Alberta, held a nervous energy. We could feel and sense it. This course was NOT what we were thinking it was going to be. In spite of the front matter and literature dispersed in beige manila-tag envelopes and emails, we were ill-prepared for what was at the heart of this course: Learning to live well in this place, with these people. Assumptions had abounded that the course would revolve around ways to get students to be able to read and write in traditional confines of linear literacies: reading and writing. Perhaps there would be a smattering of new technologies thrown in because we all knew, as twenty-first-century 'with-it' teachers how important digital citizenship was, as well as the luxury and benefit of SMARTboards. So, our nervous energy was heightened when, on this day's syllabus, we could see that we were being asked to share selected texts from recently written autobiographies—a first assignment handed in early.

What was the purpose?

Do we have to?

Mine is going to suck.

This is embarrassing.

This is a smattering of the thoughts that were racing through my mind at this point. I saw that I was third to share, and I was dreading it. The two people before me shared some funny and interesting anecdotes, and as we discussed composition and purpose of the story, the meaning of the vignette, my anxiety grew. I was being asked to share about a moment from my late teen years that had changed my life, and I had debated whether or not to include it within my first draft because it was so hard to write about, let alone speak and share. The writing was about the moment I had heard that a friend of mine had died in a car crash after being ejected head first through a window when the car hit the ditch.

But, 13 years had passed, and writing it down had actually felt good, cathartically lightening my spirit. But now, to speak that moment for the first time in 13 years, in front of strangers, on this violently hot Lethbridge day, seemed overwhelming.

I began to tell the story of the phone ringing. Silence. Of my dad coming up the stairs 15 minutes later to tell me the news. Sweating, my voice cracking, I could barely get the story out. Several pauses and catching of sobs made it possible.

I sat there afterwards in silence, in the midst of pedagogy, intentionality, and curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005). Moist eyes met my own, and from their seat amongst us, Erika and Cynthia created the space for my story to settle with/in each of us.

Cynthia came over, and we talked about the power of speaking a story, of the shared collective power of story, and she thanked me for sharing.

The direct impact could not be planned. The outcome could not be sought or planned, for that would come off as disingenuous or leading. However, the wisdom in the creating of the open and safe space for us to share the shards of our beings, the ignored, hardened, and heart/full vignettes, was what stayed with me. The impact of that sharing, and feeling of safety, trust, empathy, and compassion was the foundation on which our cohort was built. It bonded us, taught us what literacy was, and why twenty-first-century literacies were not linear, but organic and living, and that our stories mattered, because, as Thomas King (2003) states, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). I have carried this lesson, this moment with/in me for three years. It has guided my practice, influenced my being, and helped me to face some difficult truths I live with in compassionate and empathetic ways. This moment has transformed my practice.

### **Limen Three**

This past Friday, one of the magnificent Chinook days of our Calgary winter this year, a solitary figure stood at the threshold of my classroom door. The figure stood strong like a pine amidst the torrents of spring flooding as the Grade 5 and 6 students flooded past. As the last student trickled out, the young woman stepped over the threshold and asked if I could talk for a minute.

~*Stop*~

Delivering my lesson via discussion of *The Giver* in Grade 6, I glanced over and saw Jenna whispering and looking at me. Her friend snickered, looked up, then quickly down at her book. This went on several more times, until the bell finally rang, dismissing

the group. Feeling somewhat vulnerable, and wondering what the two had been talking about, I approached them as they left the class.

“Nothing. It was nothing,” the friend iterated. “Jenna was just talking about the book.”

Instances like this occurred throughout the year, increasing in venom and resulting in my questioning why Jenna was so angry with me...why she had chosen me to single out. This sounds strange, feels difficult to type, because we are told not to let the wrath of students bother us, but truth be told, it did hurt, particularly because I had no idea what I had done, and I had to stand in front of Jenna and 60 other students each day and teach. I felt constantly ridiculed and mocked, even though it was clearly only one or two students.

Eventually, I called Jenna to the office and we talked with the vice-principal about appropriate social behavior and how we cannot all get along all the time, but we have to be respectful. We had several more meetings and discussions, all to no avail. It seemed that Jenna was not going to change her mind towards me, so I waited out the year, feeling insecure and completely exposed to the ire of an angry twelve-year-old.

*~Stop~*

A new year, a fresh start. The first week of school was exciting and vibrant, and I was relieved in the same way a bullied child is relieved when the bully moves away. Jenna was no longer in my class and I was free of her thick, negatively shrouded shadow. As I was talking with kids at lunch one day, a group of former students walked in, as they tend to, Jenna amongst them. Sullen and angry-looking as ever, she stayed at the back of the crowd while I chatted with the more talkative Grade 7s at the front. As the group

began to walk out, Jenna whispered something to the others, and they all began laughing at once. My neck turned red, and a pit dug in my stomach. It was not over.

Over the course of the next few weeks, we had a few run-ins in the hall, always with her looking upset and angry, mocking me. At one point, when a teacher came up and told me she had been saying awful things in class about me, I had had enough. I called her to the office, and asked her to sit down in our conference room.

“Jenna, what is wrong? What have I ever done to you?” I seethed.

“I don’t know. I was only joking,” she responded.

“Joking? This is not normal behaviour. People do not joke like this. It has gone on for more than a year now, and it is going to stop. You are making it difficult for me here, and you are being mean. There has to be a reason why,” I demanded, keeping my emotions in check.

“We’re just joking,” she cracked through tears, mouth pursed in an angry snarl.

“It has to stop. You do not have to like me. I do not have to like you. But this is stopping now, or I’m going to involve you, your parents, and the principal,” I threatened, starting to panic.

She agreed and left the conference room. I felt as though nothing was resolved, but I had treated her well, and I had set up my next move.

The rest of the year passed with her looking the other way when we crossed paths in the hall, and me glad she was doing so, although the tension never broke, was ever-present.

The year ended, and hearing that Jenna was going to the Calgary all-girls’ school made me sigh in relief.

~*Stop*~

The girl stepped forward and asked if I knew who she was. I looked at her face, now the face of a young woman, likely 15 or 16.

“Sorry, I have no idea,” I told her.

“It’s Jenna,” she responded, smiling shyly, and tucking her now-short hair behind her ears.

“Jenna? Hi! How are you?” I questioned, scared, throat thickening these four years later.

“I’m good. I had to come see you. I had to. I want to apologize for how I treated you. It wasn’t fair,” her voice quivered, but her face was gentle now, at peace—which was in direct contrast to the constant sneer and sallow eyes I knew her for. Her voice was confident, and though clearly this was Jenna, her entire aura was different, positive. She had changed.

“Wow! I’m completely speechless. What made you come back here?”

“Just this. I had to apologize. I’ve been meaning to, wanting to for a long time, but I didn’t know how. I was scared. I was so mean to you,” she confided.

Stunned, eyes stinging in this moment of courage, of transformation, I tried to tell her that it was old news, that it was forgotten, but the truth was she had hurt me. She had scarred me, and that relationship had been carried in my heart all of these years, a negative, deep stain that burdened me. She knew that. Jenna knew what she had done.

But now, here she was before me, truly changed, and completely vulnerable in her apology. We talked back and forth for a bit, her asking about my family, my asking about



girls' school and now high school. We laughed, and talked—free in the space of forgiveness, opportunity, and courage.

As the conversation drew to a close, she again tried to apologize, but this time, I cut her off.

“Jenna, you have apologized. You have made my week, my year. We’re all good now. No worries,” I told her.

We hugged as she left, the wounds healed, and my dark stain lighter, my memories in this place transformed, as was the present. In life writing, we open ourselves up, become vulnerable. Each moment, each pause, each stop an opportunity for realizing a different path, a new way of being. In pausing and lingering with Jenna, in her courage and my forgiveness, we were changed, released of past selves and past anchoring burdens, lighter in spirit for having bonded. These lingering moments at the thresholds, these limens, when noticed and attended to, act to change present, past, and futures in meaning/fully and heart/fully wise ways.

### **Methodology and Project Context**

As a Grade 5 and 6 Humanities teacher-researcher in Calgary, Alberta, I am interested in how people are connected, how we can come to understand our similarities and differences with/in our community, how we create a safe space for students and teachers to develop empathy for and with one/another, and how we can learn to live well together. I believe we must come to “live with ethos and empathy in relation to others in and outside classrooms; creating more collaborative and constructive learning and living communities” (Hasebe Ludt, Sinner, Leggo, Pletz, Simoongwe, & Wilson, 2010, p. 23). Life writing has been a key component of my curriculum for two years, and as such, the

implementation and delivery of the project was seamless. Students were already well versed in the artful practice of life writing and the sharing that entails. Each member of the Grade 6 class would complete a piece of writing in narrative, poetic, or drawn mode, and then we would spend time sharing our writing for those that were feeling the urge to share. During the writing and sharing, students were encouraged to be mindful and present in order to honour their own story and the stories of their peers. During sharing, I would often take notes of significant texts, wonderings, and wisps of thought that I felt were pertinent to the project. The data I gathered was then woven into my life writing within the framework of poetic inquiry. My final product reflects my interpretations of interviews, action-research data, student writing and sharing, and my own life writing in the context of the lived curriculum with my students.

The school population is drawn from middle-class suburban neighbourhoods in northwest Calgary. The student life writing was completed within the context of the classroom, as writing is a regular part of my Humanities curriculum in Grade 6. Interviews were conducted as part of the regular class, and the interpretation and analysis of collected data was completed in a spare room situated in our school. The project was completed over a five-month span, beginning in November 2014 and ending in March 2015.

At the outset of the project, a colleague explained the project and participant-selection process to the class. A colleague then drew 2 names at random from an envelope for each category (male, female, Alberta Education Special Coding, English Language Learners). Participants who returned permission forms to take part in the project delivered the forms to my colleague, who kept the names secured, private, and

unknown to me until the end of the project. I conducted small-group interviews with each student in the class as a part of the project. This is part of my regular curriculum with life writing and did not interfere with, or take away from, student learning in any way.

Rather, it enhanced student learning and understanding of each other and their writing.

Upon completion of the project, my colleague handed me the sealed envelope which, having been kept in a locked drawer, contained the names of the students who had granted me permission to use their data in the creation of my final research project. This alleviated any power that I had over students. Students were allowed to remain partially anonymous by each selecting a pseudonym that they would be referred to in their own texts and my poetic writing as part of my inquiry. Participants and parents and/or guardians were informed that for the duration of the project, I would be working closely with the students in group interviews, discussions, and interpretations of their multimodal life-writing projects. Students and parents were informed that I would be using narrative inquiry, which meant using stories to interpret lived experience and to collect data. Participants and parents were informed that the project's purpose is to determine the effect of life writing on the development of empathy and understanding towards the self and peers within our classroom community.

We typically spend two hours per week inside of the Humanities classroom creating and sharing life writing. This project took place over a five-month span, culminating in March. My conducted interviews took place once per week for 10 weeks, with each group, and lasted for 15-20 minutes per interview. During the interviews, I was able to take notes and reference students' texts that they were discussing in class.

Life-writing theory inherently involves writing about topics that are sometimes difficult for writers to uncover and explain. Writing, sharing, and listening to the stories can put participants, students, and the teacher in vulnerable positions. It was the intention of the study that through the writing and sharing of complex life stories, we would come to understand ourselves and our community in a more thoroughly empathetic manner and way of being. As such, I reminded potential participants that I would always be available for discussion and talk should they become anxious or fearful during the project. I made it clear that I would provide referrals to counseling services should the emotional toll appear to be too much for the potential participant. In the letter of consent, I ensured that potential participants and parents and/or guardians were aware that if they disclosed some issues in their texts, I would be bound to break confidentiality and might have to contact police and/or welfare agencies. I am bound by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) ethics and the Child Welfare Act, and thus I instructed potential participants and parents and/or guardians that texts produced throughout the course of this project, and this year, must be texts that potential participants were comfortable with sharing. I clearly indicated to parents and potential participants that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the project at any point without negatively impacting student grades.

Collected data and student texts have been woven into the heart of this final project, which is a collection of life-writing and poetic-inquiry texts, arranged thematically upon interpretation and analysis. The decisions about how the poems were woven together and arranged, both thematically and with respect to form and format, will be further discussed under the chapter heading "Harkening the Call of Poetic Wisdom."

### **Theoretical Framework: Arts-Based Research**

I have conducted this project purposefully within the overarching framework of arts-based research, within which life writing, multimodality, narrative inquiry, and poetic inquiry each have their grounding.

#### **Dwelling With Life Writing**

In our contemporary cosmopolitan Canadian classrooms, teachers and students are faced with evermore-complex contexts, curricular demands, and competitive pressures to succeed within the larger Canadian society. However, what we need in order to live mindful, whole lives is a literacy of engaging with/in ourselves and one another (Morden, 2012). In order to navigate our selves, our identities, and our lives, we must have the means by which to do so; we must be able to  *dwell*  with ourselves and others. Zaborowski (2005) describes  *dwelling*  as the fact that we can settle down in the world without either radically fleeing from the world or becoming wholly caught up in it, as that which “makes us first of all human, namely, the increasingly important human capacity ... the ability to reflect on reality in a questioning, abiding, and attentive way” (p. 516).

For Zaborowski and the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1971), to dwell means to be alive in the moment—to attend to, and to be mindful of, what is happening in the present moment. Studying, co-constructing, and drawing narrative meaning from the act and theory of life writing allows us to dwell with our selves and the others with whom we dwell.

Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner (2012) define life writing as a theorizing approach to educational inquiry and a method for it; a curricular and pedagogical practice; an artful and literary expression; a political and personal way of

being in the world; and a philosophical and spiritual attunement in relation to this world (p. xviv).

Chambers et al. (2012) remind us as well that “stories present possibilities for understanding the complex, mysterious, even ineffable experiences that comprise human living” (p. xx). Within my life-writing project, each participant, including myself, brings unique experiences, histories, and understandings that must be attended to if we are to mend and transform understandings of the self and the other in contemporary cosmopolitan classrooms. As life writers, “we seek to know our locations in connection with the past, the future, and others, as well as with our unfolding sense of self-identities” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 4).

Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) discuss the “potential risks and ethical obligations that arise when we open the doors to our own and others’ lives, and through this opening, seek and embrace transformation through education” (p. 1). This relates well to my own study on empathy through multimodal life writing and narrative inquiry. I must be ever-present and mindful of the precariousness and necessity of this work. The authors go on to question: “How are geography, autobiography, and memory connected? What is the curriculum of being human?” (p. 2). In my life-writing project, I wanted to study the effects of my attempts to transform the classroom empathetically, to see how we can all come to perceive ourselves differently, as transformed through empathetic relationships in a middle school in Calgary, Alberta. Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) write that “through relating to each other, we attend to our own education and to better understanding who and how we are in relation to others in the world” (p. 3). We need to understand

narrative, place, and temporality, in order to understand our selves and others more deeply.

Kadar (1993) submits that it is the act of the “disclosure of the self [that] defines the text” (p. xi). In my work, I am interested in what I call the *wisdom of vulnerability*, which will rely heavily on creating the community and context whereby writers, listeners, participants, and researchers feel comfortable enough to be put in precariously safe places in the acts of creating, sharing, listening to, and dwelling with life writing. Kadar goes on to relate that reading habits must change when we look at life writing. For Kadar, we must “read in a way that allows our own habits and prejudices to show through” (p. xii). It is this discovery of self and the other that guides my inquiry project. I am interested to see how my own practice, prejudices, and preconceived attitudes towards learners transform as I read, linger with, construct, and attend to, this project.

Heard (1995) has written extensively on the art of life writing and its importance in understanding our homes and our selves. For Heard, “home is what can be recalled without effort—so that sometimes we think, oh that can’t be important. Memories are the blueprints of home” (p. 2). In her experience, Heard maintains that writers must start from home—from what they know because “that’s where the real home is: inside” (p. 2). Heard further stipulates that when we are writing, how we are in the world, how we choose to dwell in the world, is important. These views and understandings matter and in writing, we are forced to speak even when we so desperately want to remain silent, because our voices matter. Heard implores writers to “fall in love at least three times a day” (p. 60). By falling in love each day, by loving more than immediate family members, we come to understand better our world and our place in the world. We

develop the empathy that we so deeply need to survive in our current social, cultural, political, and economic context.

Heard (1995) encourages writers to explore ideas, values, and notions such as synchronicity, injustice, ancestors, death, and the beauty in the everyday. Her topics of life writing encourage the writer to explore depths and crevices of their experience and discourse that will help them to understand who they are with/in this one life they have to live.

Christensen (2000, 2009) has written extensively regarding social-justice issues inside contemporary classrooms. In her writing she encourages the exploration of injustices. She also stresses the importance of community building and being able to listen to one another, to accept each community member for who he or she is, and to accept that there are diverse ways of exploring, understanding, and being in the world. In her work with students, Christensen (2009) discusses the need to “construct a classroom where students feel safe enough to be wild and risky in their work” (p. 1). It is in the sharing of our deep and important stories that their magic takes hold. It is this wisdom of vulnerability paired with a deep listening that will work to create empathy and understanding in and for all members of the classroom.

Christensen (2009) situates her life-writing practice within critical literacy theory, stating that when we begin from the premise that students need to be “fixed,” invariably we design curriculum that erases students’ home language and culture; we fail to find the strength and beauty in the experience and heritage that students bring with them to school (p. 2).



Like Cummins et al. (2005), Walsh (2008), and Danzak (2011), Christensen (2000, 2009) advocates for each and every unique learner and story that enters her classroom. Canadian classrooms need this pedagogy, this lived curriculum, in these current tenuous contexts. Rather than basing her life writing on deficits, Christensen sees gifts. Ultimately for Christensen, as a life-writing theorist, the act of writing is political. It thus helps to shape not only our understanding of our lives, histories, and contexts, but life writing can also help to shape a better future for each of us.

Christensen (2009) writes that “putting students’ lives at the center of the curriculum also tells them they matter—their lives matter, their ancestors’ lives are important” (p. 4). When teachers work collaboratively with students in creating multimodal life writing, we must remember that the heart of the story, what truly matters, is the personal narrative.

### **Dwelling With Multimodality**

Within this project’s scope, I deeply hope that through the implementation of a multimodal life-writing theory, I am able to avoid the alienating effect of traditional approaches to literacy in education, which have resulted in devastating and outdated pedagogies placed more in the realm of exclusionism, individualism, elitism, with overt ties to segregation and the Euro-centric belief that assimilation is the correct way to educate. I utilize multimodality, what Walsh (2008) defines as a “literacy of the meaning making that occurs at different levels through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimodal texts” (p. 106). I personally define multimodality as the complex, interwoven layers of meaning making negotiated, produced and interpreted through gesture, objects, viewing, speaking, listening, writing,

and various digital means of communication. Multimodal life writing opens doors of opportunity for students, rather than closing doors in despair. It allows and celebrates what Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) define as literacy engagement with words, stories, and poems: “[W]e hope that [meaning makers] can remember their own stories, gain the courage to tell them and to address the complicated issues of living ethically and with empathy among all our relations” (p. 12).

Many educators would agree with the ideas behind multimodal theory, but in practice, they continue with a traditional model because, as one of my colleagues put it, “If they can’t read and write [English], what good are they going to be? They’ll drop out of high school.” I would argue that pedagogy is indeed, as the New London Group claimed, “a teaching and learning relationship that creates potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation” (Cazden, et al., 1996, p. 60). If we are to engage our increasingly diverse Canadian classrooms in learning, it must be done with respect and honour, not through exclusionary, alienating traditional approaches that benefit no student in our classrooms. This project posits that it is through a multimodal approach to literacy, and indeed education, that our students “remake themselves. Students will reconstruct and renegotiate their identities” (Cazden, et al., 1996, p. 76) based on the layers of acceptance and learning that will take place in these classrooms. Diverse learners in complex, contemporary classrooms have much more to offer and provide in our classrooms than current linear notions of literacy pedagogy allow. We must value, respect, and share the diversities of these students in order to create a social and cultural fabric that will benefit classrooms now, and Canadian society in the future.

When our classrooms are closed off to a significant number of stories, each learner suffers. The opportunity for new immigrants, English Language Learners (ELL) born in Canada, and students with learning codes to share and make meaning of the world is completely lost. Multimodal texts such as digital stories, picture books, dual-language identity texts, etc., provide opportunities for all learners and teachers in our classrooms through critical literacy, which “addresses imbalances of power and, in particular, pays attention to the voices of those who are less frequently heard” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 129). It is in these multimodal texts “that students invest their identities and become the protagonists of their own stories” (Lopez-Gopar, 2007, p. 170). It is in this sharing and risk taking that we move our classrooms, and thus the world, forward towards an inclusive and respectful future that does not favour one form of literacy, one language, or one race of people.

It is the use of multimodal texts that provides the vehicle for engagement, design, and learning to take place between learners who may not speak a common language, and which allows all students to feel a part of the ‘common text’ of the classroom. The informed practice of a multimodal pedagogy will allow each learner to “generate meanings based on her or his previous experience, culture, and knowledge of social and image conventions” (Serafini, 2010, p. 93). The greater the number of perspectives and ideas shared between learners, the greater and more in-depth the understanding of a given topic or identity will be.

When ELL students see themselves as integral and valued members of the classroom community, as with all learners, it allows them to “construct an image of the [self] as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented” (Cummins, 2009, p. 244).

Barriers are brought down and the entire community gains access to invaluable insight, information, ideas, and perspectives that would not be possible without the implementation of a multimodal pedagogy. Language is seen as a valued diversity and as an asset, not a segregating disadvantage certain to relegate the ELL student to, at best, mute mediocrity in an unaccepting and uncaring society. In terms of power balance, with the use of multimodal texts, students “might transform the situation and provoke the possibility of new identities, relations of power, and narrative forms and functions” (Enciso, 2011, p. 22). Multimodality allows for equity in the classroom, and for a much-valued power balance between learners and between learners and the teacher, which a traditional view of literacy education does not allow.

At the core of multimodal life writing is the relationship between the teacher and the student. The expectations of students have shifted in the classroom in the twenty-first century. Prensky (2010) points out that today’s students “want to make decisions and share control. They want to be respected, to be trusted, and to have their opinions valued and count. They want to create using the tools of their time” (pp. 2-3). In short, today’s students want to have their identities respected in the classroom community. The change will be impossible without this respect, because “students will be reluctant to invest their identities in the learning process if they feel their teachers do not like them, respect them, and appreciate their experiences and talents” (Cummins, 2009, p. 236). Teachers must create an environment for risk-taking and identity investment in order to reap the true benefit of multimodal pedagogy. Without this empathy and compassion, all tools of multimodality will remain just that: tools. “ELL students will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in

learning” (Cummins, et al., 2005, p. 3). Teachers must be able to establish these opportunities in class through multimodal literacies. The extent to which teachers create an environment for identity investment, compassion and caring, is ultimately a reflection of that teacher’s curriculum and pedagogy: “As they open up identity options for students, teachers are also defining their own identities” (Cummins, et al., 2005, p. 12). Teachers must be honest with themselves and what they know to be right. They have the chance and ability to construct situations of power shift and critical literacy in their classrooms.

Heard (1995) touches on the importance of what she calls “visual archaeology” and the power of photographs to stir memories and bring them back from the recesses of our minds (p. 77). I would like to broaden this term and rename it “artifactual critical literacy,” as discussed in Pahl and Rowsell (2011). This form of literacy stems from students bringing in artifacts from home to “honour the home experience” of the child in order to gain the confidence and courage to discuss, write about, and interpret their lives, and rebalance the scales of power to allow equity and equality of all learners and participants in having their voices hear and honoured (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 130). For my purpose in this project, photographs provide important data and structure for my final written product.<sup>2</sup> Poetic inquiry theorist McCullis (2013) argues further that the “combination of photography and poetry...capture[s] the wholeness and complexity of the human experience and create[s] empathetic reactions in others” (p. 95).

### **Dwelling with Narrative Inquiry**

It is important to note that life-writing theorists Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) and Prendergast (2009) write of life writing as an artful approach to

research, and that there is a strict delineation between art and research. Prendergast writes that poetic inquiry is not poetry, but inquiry in the direct form of poems. McKerracher and Hasebe-Ludt (2014) submit that life writing and the hermeneutic interpretation of the stories are “opportunities to expand the domain of art education” (p. 118) to work towards a pedagogic approach and curriculum of empathy and care of the self and the other. Through this practice of artful narrative inquiry, we are gifted the possibility of deep reflection on the lived experience, developing a greater sense of equity, equality, and justice, main tenets of a democratic society. For William F. Pinar, the arts-based approach to research and writing “allows us to (re)connect with memory, to reach out from the self to others/the world/the cosmos through stories that are profoundly relational as well as self-reflective” (Pinar, as cited in McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014, p. 120). The multiplicity of modes and deep re/searching and mining of personal lived experience and interpretation of life, and the consequent artful creation and sharing, invite deep contemplation, understanding, and empathic living during complex times of rapid social, political, educational, and cultural transformation. We can develop a generative, more holistic approach to understanding who we are, how we are with others, and where our place is in Canadian society.

### **Dwelling With Poetic Inquiry**

Poetry  
Slows us down  
Calls us to play  
Invites us to listen,  
Opens ways of knowing,  
Provides a site for dwelling.  
(Carl Leggo, 2005a, p. 93)

### **An Artful Way of Being**

Poetic inquiry allows for the becoming  
 and an organic nature of classrooms,  
 students and learning.  
 It is inviting,  
 it is accepting,  
 and it is not rigidly elite and dis/cluding.  
 It is in/clusive and  
 replete with a sense of wonder  
 that is not final,  
 it is not perfect.  
 The poetry winds and extends,  
 not finding final answers,  
 but seeking to artfully unfurl  
 tufts of stories we encounter.  
 Never finished,  
 never final.

~~~~~

### **What is a Poem? (Unfinished)**

Dr. Leah Fowler once  
 Told me in correspondence  
 That she truly believes that it is  
 When we are lost and  
 Don't know where to turn,  
 When we're truly stuck,  
 That is where we find our selves,  
 Where our creative spirit kicks in.

A poem is being stuck,  
 Frustrated and coaxing words from  
 Nether regions of the mind,  
 Teasing tongue mercilessly.

A poem is in/spiration  
 On a sweaty and restless night,  
 A rush to put pen on paper  
 Before the moment is lost,  
 Lapped up in a barrage of  
 Anxious thoughts that seem to strike in the solace of  
 Midnight breezes weaving deftly  
 Through gentle lilac leaves,  
 Pushing a shroud of feathery clouds

Across the deep ink night.

A poem is the silence of empathic understanding  
The stillness and reverence of children,  
As a peer recounts a family tragedy,  
That wracks his soul and leaves him  
Barren.

A poem is the knowing that you carry with you  
In your being, with/in your practice,  
More wisdom and good, more empathic learning  
And wisdom,  
Than the small thinking of a provincially mandated  
Achievement Test  
Can deconstruct and damage.  
A poem is walking and talking with  
An intern teacher,  
Fresh and full of ideas and wonder,  
Willing to listen,  
And unscathed by the cynicism and sinister beings  
Some seasoned teachers can bring.

A poem is attending to students,  
Aokian walking with students and inviting  
Them to dwell, be, and listen  
To their own hearts,  
And the hearts of others,  
Learning to linger and striving to build  
Empathic and compassionate communities.

A poem is an email from a colleague:  
*“Had a chat with Jack yesterday about how much he misses your class because you made  
it feel like a family. He said he knew so much about his classmates and felt so close to  
them.”*<sup>3</sup>

A poem is having the patience  
To listen to a child screaming at you,  
And to know that the child,  
At this time,  
Needs to be able to scream,  
And that it is not personal,  
It just is.

A poem is silence and listening,  
Knowing now is not the time to share your story,  
But listen to that of others,



That others need to be heard,  
So that you can learn.

A poem is feeling comfort in solace and solitude,  
And allowing the beauty of the Byzantium night sky  
To stir, silence, and comfort,  
Under its vast cloak,  
Creating that careful realm between in/significant.

A poem is living to embrace  
The new,  
The different  
With/in a sense of wonder, of delight, and curiosity.  
A poem is forgiving and forgetting  
As much as it is seeking the new  
And never seen,  
For in forgiving and forgetting,  
We are able to see anew.

A poem is a conversation that lasts  
3 pots of steeped tea,  
Lingering over topics and themes  
We do not normally delve into,  
The only sign of the passage of time  
The mounting tea bags and water  
Rings on the table.

A poem is the wisdom that it is never complete,  
Never final,  
But continuing to wind and unfurl,  
Continuously becoming.

Poetic inquiry is a form of qualitative research that allows the researcher and volunteer participants to “synthesize experience in a direct and effective way” (Prendergast, 2009, p. 545). In this case, the experience is the e/affect of life-writing theory on a middle-school Grade 6 class in a middle-class Calgary classroom. I was able to conduct interviews and write my own poetry based on my classroom observations, interactions, and wonderings, as well as share numerous life-writing stories within our classroom for the duration of this research project. The data collection and analysis were

stripped down and artfully represented in poetic formats that detail the rich lived experience of a teacher and students over the course of six months.

The research data I was able to collect and synthesize into poems is powerful, deeply moving, and highly articulate. Of poetic inquiry, Prendergast (2009) writes that it “will carry within it the power to move its audience affectively as well as intellectually” (p. 546). The poetry that we wrote together as a class, and the life writing that we were able to create and share often moved us to laughter, tears, and moments of silent, deep listening in which our bonds were strengthened as the “yarn became more tangled in creating our stories and tying us together in a community” (Bob, interview, January, 2015).

In the practice of poetic inquiry, the researcher is invited to slow down, to bear witness to the wonderful “flashes in the familiar, holes opened up like portals to disclose vistas never visited” (Leggo, 2000, p. 11). In the carefully constructed time I have spent in writing, reflecting, sharing, and being with students and my self in this project, I have been able to bear witness to the extra-ordinary lives of each person I dwell with. I have come face to face with some of my own deep-rooted feelings and unsavoury characteristics that I seek to attend to, not fix, but find new possible ways of being. McCullis (2013) theorizes the approach of poetic inquiry as “a window into the heart of human experience” that allows for the possibility of a deeper ethnographic understanding (p. 83). Poetic inquiry has allowed me to question, to linger in the “whys” and “how comes?” I have been fortunate enough to be enriched with the stories of the students with whom I dwell in this empathic community. David Jardine writes that “children can bring about the transformation and renewal of the centre” (as cited in Wiebe, 2012, p. 198). In

slowing down, and listening, the class has become closer, enriched, and deeply intertwined. The empathy this particular group is able to show one another is astounding and is a noted characteristic of this group. The students in this group are patient, kind, and through my interviews and poetic meanderings, I have indeed come to the conclusion that poetic inquiry and life writing theory have each played interloping and interwoven roles in this gelling of community.

Poetic inquiry is not that shiny new method that all the teachers are implementing in their classrooms. It is not formulaic, but hermeneutic. It is not fixed, or linear, but transformative and intuitive—it is enchanting and teasing, inviting and enriching. As Wiebe (2012) writes regarding programmed teaching, “perhaps our striving for what is a best practice, what information is of most worth, or what is the best way to say this or that, is ‘thin’ like chicken noodle soup without the chicken, or the noodles” (p. 201). Poetic inquiry, and poetic ways of being, do not fit the mold of predictability and a one-size-fits-all education system. Poetic inquiry invites “imagination [that] will lead students [and educators] to the confidence to live outside of the structures which restrict them” (Wiebe, 2012, p. 202)—the very structures that we are enduring in the forced extension of provincial achievement tests, programmed curriculum, and professional development in our city and province. Poetic inquiry has encouraged me to more deeply believe that what we need is to work towards understanding the self and the other, what Wiebe (2012) calls a “translation of experience, particularly the inner, often unseen experience” (p. 202). I need this understanding, this sharing, in order to live well, to understand my being, my place, and my life in the presence of others in a diversity of places.

In poetic and interpretive inquiry, the writer/researcher is able to use the data collected during interviews, noticings, field notes, and journals, and then use that data to interpret the phenomena that has occurred; make sense of what is happening in his or her own words, in that time and in that place. The writing itself, if honest and honouring the writer's experience, "will carry within it the power to move its audience affectively as well as intellectually and will deal with the kinds of topics that lead into the affective experiential domain" (Prendergast, 2009, p. 546). As a researcher of my experience, and that of my student participants, my goal is to explain my personal interpretation of that qualitative data collected with/in myriad texts to help me directly explain and infer my experience to the audience. I hope to educate and connect with the audience through my vulnerability and articulate synthesis of data so that, when finished a reading of my work, the reader/writer can better empathize and understand the complexity, possibility, and wonder of life writing.

Within these complex, hyper-speed, and demanding times as a teacher in Calgary, Alberta, the practices of poetic inquiry and life writing have re/focused and rejuvenated my pedagogical being and knowing. In these practices, Leggo (2005b) intones that "by writing about our experiences, we can become more effective teachers, as well as teachers motivated by more joy and hope" (p. 441). Poetic inquiry, teaching, and living demand that the researcher/writer be attuned to moments, be reflective, be present, and be thought/fully more human. The practices help to humanize students once more, moving them to develop caring and courageous relationships and bonds more brimming with meaning and understanding than the most clearly articulated Learner Outcome from the Program of Studies. Quite often, those in the field of education who find themselves more

in tune with rank-and-file pedagogy and curriculum that adhere to fads, ‘experts’ doling out sit-and-git advice, and linear-based practice, admonish relationship building with students. They may come equipped with phrases such as “of course, we all do that” or “yeah, that’s the basics of education...let’s move past that.”

Underhill states that “the first snag to avoid is surely that of adopting a set scheme because we have read about it in a book, or because it suits someone else” (as cited in Leggo, 2005b, p. 446). In these times, we cannot allow the cold heart of linear practice to diminish or decimate the need to be human, to share and understand one another in deeper, more richly empathetic and complex ways. Poetic inquiry requires us to unclutter that which is not of utmost value from our lives and to “listen deeply...hear what is not being said...be empathetic, and aware, non-judgmental, and cautious” (Neilson, as cited in Prendergast, 2009, p. 550). Poetic inquiry and life writing constantly remind us to be questioning: What is of most worth? What is important to me in this time? What does this student, this human need most right now in this moment? Poetic inquiry asks us to dig into our hearts, past judgments, cynicism, brash and negative thinking, and into what is truly important in our lives and in our curriculum. Poetic inquiry requires that we give time and space to ensure that we do not “turn away from each others’ pain [and] refuse to honour their winding paths, the complex journeys they have made” (Neilson, as cited in Prendergast, 2009, p. 551). Poetic inquiry requires us to work towards a place of living well together in these complicated times.

In the method of poetic inquiry, as is the case in narrative inquiry, the writer/researcher is just as likely to discover truths about self as to reach understandings of the other. Prendergast (2009) reminds us that “creating poetic inquiry is a performative

act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research” (p. 547).

Leggo (2005b) suggests that this is precisely what educators need in order to balance our lives and make sense of our lived experience. We must “attend to the inner life. As educators we need to listen to our spirits, our hearts, our imaginations, our emotions, our bodies, our minds” (pp. 445-446). Poetic inquiry invites the researcher to attend to the self, to evoke one’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences and to write these ‘lines,’ expose these inner lives, in order to understand self and others more fully.

Gaylie (2012, p. 118) writes:

The place of poetry  
Belongs to silence,  
Trust, care, love,  
And it is at once  
Powerful and gentle.  
The place of poetry is also  
A place of vulnerability.  
For many people,  
A difficult place.

A methodology for poetic inquiry is to position it as an artistic practice carried out within a research framework that cannot and must not diminish the critical/aesthetic qualities of these kinds of poems as poetry.

(Monica Prendergast, 2009, p. 549)

### **A Found Poem From the Writings of Prendergast and Leggo**

*Poetic inquiry nurtures trustful living,  
A communion with its  
Connotations of deep connections  
And relationship—  
Heart resonating with the hearts  
Of others—*

*A transformational process of self-creation  
 And being attuned to the lived experience of others.  
 And to remember that as poet,  
 I too am the poem.  
 Poetic inquiry/living brings us closer  
 To the data,  
 To the lives and lines of*

*Our selves, of other.  
 Researcher, participants.  
 Masked, unmasked.  
 Costumed, bared.  
 Liars, truth tellers.  
 Actors, audience.*

*Allowing truth to show its face  
 In mysterious moments of coalescence.*

*Poetic inquiry invites us to listen deeply, interpretively,  
 Listen under words;  
 Hear what is not being said.  
 For how can we turn away from  
 Each other's pain  
 Refusing to honour winding paths  
 And complex journeys  
 Of the others,  
 Of our selves?  
 Poetic inquiry is a window into the  
 Heart of human experience,  
 The wholeness and complexity of  
 Human experience  
 Which creates empathetic reactions  
 In others,  
 Space to pursue fresh ways of seeing,  
 Of observing and examining experience—  
 A basic capacity for  
 Human dwelling.*

### **Harkening the Call of Poetic Wisdom**

This chapter of poetic inquiry represents a culmination of research for this project. Each of the sections begins with the word *harkening*, which etymologically can be traced back to the verb *to give ear, listen* in Old English (from *heorcnian*, “to hear” in Old English) (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2015). In the 1800s, the verb *hark* is linked back to hunting dogs who retraced their steps to find a lost scent. Each of these etymological foundations of the verb *hark* is meaningful in the creation, interpretation, and organization of my poetic inquiry project as I came to retrace the roots and routes of the course of my life in order to better understand my *place*, my *self*, my *relations with the other*, and my *self as teacher*. In the rendering of this life writing text, I have both listened to, and heard, my heart deeply, and I have come to understand my self in different and meaning/full ways. The life writing research has been rendered into four sections, each of which was formed hermeneutically upon the completion of my poetic inquiry. As a researcher, I closely read and reread my poems, and was able to extract common threads amongst them, entwining the writing with/in themes of *place, self, relationships, and teaching*. Of course, each of the poems could be housed within different sections, depending on the reading and interpretation of the poem. That being said, then, the writing, and the reading, are never truly done, but left open to change with the interpretation of the reader.

The sections of poetic inquiry begin with writing that reflects the importance of place in our lives, and from that grounding and understanding of place, how we come to know and understand ourselves and the world differently. Ideas of place, and the importance of place can change over time, as different aspects come to be interpreted



differently, such as my own poems about my house and town growing up. The following section is based on research of my own self, and new understandings of who I am at the time of writing. Even in readings of these poems weeks after writing, they have changed, I have transformed, yet they help me to better understand who I was and am now, though as Leggo often intones, the more I discover about myself, the less I know, and that is a lot to know. From poetic inquiry of self, the writing moves towards the theme of relations with the other, and how I, and others, have come to understand ourselves and those with whom we dwell in this world—how we come to know ourselves is often based on how we know our selves with the other. The final thread with/in the organization of these poems is based on my life as a teacher. This section is directly influenced by, and a part of, each of the previous sections—that is to say, harkening of the heart of teaching requires us to understand place, as well as relationships with self and the other in order to become a teacher who dwells well with/in these complex cosmopolitan times. Throughout the artful texts, I have used a variety of fonts, italicized texts, bold texts, and word arrangements in order to more creatively and articulately interpret data and make meaning for myself and my audience.

### **Harkening Heart of Place**

Teaching and working with Aksisstoyiitapiiya’kii [Dr. Chambers] has been a rewarding experience, one where I have learned more about place. This has helped me to understand that my autobiography is embedded in the land of my ancestors. (Narcisse Blood, 2009, p. xvi)

The hope that by describing the places I live I can learn to be both here and there with others, better. (Tasha Henry, 2012, p. 136)

It is not the grudge, but the grief that matters, and what we are going to do about it. It is where we are that matters. By learning to do what is appropriate in this place, and doing it together, perhaps we can find the common ground necessary to survive. (Cynthia Chambers, 2008, p. 125)

### **What the Towering Lodgepoles Tell Me**

Our car comes to a rest  
 on the banks of the  
 North Saskatchewan River  
 [which, more quickly than ever,  
 gnaws, erodes, devours the bank  
 next to our cabin]  
 and I disappear,  
     engulfed,  
     blended,  
     intertwined,  
     interlaced  
 with/in the  
 lodgepole and aspen groves  
 Indian Paintbrush and Juniper.

I crave this moment,  
 this re/kindling , re/spiriting,  
 this place.  
*"The further inside you the place moves,  
 the more your identity in intertwined with it."*<sup>4</sup>

I have come to know this place:  
 to know there is a survey stake  
 from 1919,  
 pounded by some wild adventurer  
 covered in mosquito welts,  
 lapping up life,  
 hammered in due left of the second curve  
 in the winding path.

To know that the beavers linger and whittle  
 and otherwise busy themselves across the marsh  
 on an island flanked by river's current,  
 some two hundred feet from the cabin.

To know there is an old GWG jacket,  
 faded water bottle

trapped on the inside pocket  
discarded amongst the brittle thicket  
of flood-killed willows  
behind the cabin,  
its lining mistaken for a kill site.

My wife asks where I went  
but never why.  
My father in law  
knows why I go without any questions,  
just stories about the land he  
has cultivated and uprooted;  
homesteaded at 19.

It took me years of this wandering,  
this losing of myself in place—  
in Barrio Norte of Buenos Aires,  
the hills of San Cristobal de las Casas  
medinas of Marrakech  
the folding spine of abandoned rail beds,  
still stretching across the  
wide back of the prairie  
near my home in eastern Alberta.

To understand the pull,  
to understand that the  
further inside the place I move,  
the more my  
identity becomes intertwined  
with/in that place;  
that they become more and more  
one and the same

In the solace sought in the solitude<sup>5</sup>  
and reflection in the respite  
of moose paths and deerways,  
next to the constant smoothing and erosion  
of the North Saskatchewan River,  
in coming to know the place,  
I am beginning to know my/self.



~~~~~

Canadian curriculum theorists must come to understand that the topos from which they write is the physical, imaginary, and sociopolitical landscape they share with the communities and children on behalf of whom they work and write. (Cynthia Chambers, 1999, p. 12)

### **206, 5th Avenue West Hanna**

Where I grew up,  
 an only child, insecure, sensitive  
 my world as I know it is tremoring  
 walk lightly, tread deftly, fade to nothing



The CNR is sending dad away  
 for a new job, a better position,  
 away from us  
 and in the heat of that time,  
 on that night before departure,  
 fault lines appear in angry outbursts  
 that I, his only son, am an embarrassment.  
 In that moment, I hate him;  
 but my mom's begging eyes lead me upstairs

to console him, his shoulders shaking,  
back to me, telling me that it's ok for guys to cry  
sometimes.

and I tell him it's ok, that I don't hate him,  
though it took me twenty years  
to let this go.

The elementary school  
Where I cut my teeth  
on the east side of Calgary  
and spend many nights  
running from teaching;  
running towards the students  
Where school board directives  
inhumanly directed us to show  
no emotion; invite no counter thoughts,  
to toe the school board line  
upon the closure of the school,  
the slow death of a community  
Where I unabashedly and openly  
wept with students of three years  
on our last  
day, moment, time,  
together.

Room 16, Language Arts  
Where I was called to the office—  
out of character in grade 8,  
to see my mom standing there,  
shak/ing, shake/n,  
shook.

There was an accident.  
Her brother, My uncle,  
Gordon  
Was dead.  
We had just seen him.  
His daughter wasn't aware,  
Didn't know—she has to know.  
We have to find her.

And so I re/enter  
the classroom,  
Changed.

In that moment.  
And murmur "I, we, have to go."

Laprida 1070, dept. 6A  
Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Where I have locked myself  
away Physically/emotionally

from anyone that ever mattered.  
Suspicion, mistrust, and misguided  
expectations  
d/evolve into  
pain, shouting, throwing  
ugliness  
that I can/not let go of  
not because I'm a masochist,  
but because I have a fear  
of  
this is the best I can do.  
J.C. Charyk Hanna School  
Where we started grade 10  
as a class of 52  
whittled down to 38  
graduates in 3 years;  
8 drop outs—  
the Heathens,  
Whose school lives were so utterly  
miserable  
that dropping out  
gave them hope  
that the world could get better.  
And we let it happen:  
the Haves, the teachers, the community,  
We went through each day,  
each violence,  
and passed it off, shrugged, laughed, mimicked,  
and let it happen.  
That shame is with me still.  
Nurse's Room, Simon Fraser School,  
Where I watched,  
a witness for my Assistant Principal,  
As Sherman Mark  
Emptied his pockets, removed his jacket,  
socks, and his tattered backpack  
of papers like leaves in a swirl,  
A hapless search  
for contraband that was never there,  
a lost 15 year old  
dignity shredded in front of two adults  
another wedge, another roadblock,  
back turned,  
trust ripped away,  
And he is still suspended

indefinitely.  
As if that is going to help.

~~~~~

### **When I Think of Poland...**

When I think of Poland,  
I think of my family

The countryside.  
My Irish accent throws people off.  
I'm actually Polish  
And I want people to know my history,  
Where I'm from...

Where my family is from,  
So they know me better.  
My grandma helped to make a special day  
Where we make perogies  
And dance.

Everyone in the area comes and  
It lasts all night... there's beer, sausage,  
Laughter.

People here don't know about that  
Side of me...  
What's important and who I am...  
Sharing this helps people understand me  
And why I might be someone  
More,  
Someone different than they think...  
I don't want to lose my culture,  
I want to share and protect it—  
It's a part of me.

~~~~~

With the certainty of death people will be less likely to take life, and one another, for granted. (Narcisse Blood, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 40).

### **Walking With Narcisse: Dwelling by the Pond**

On July 11, 2012, I had the opportunity to walk with, talk to, and learn from Narcisse Blood and Ryan Heavy Head. Our young graduate cohort in the M.Ed. program at the University of Lethbridge was learning about the literacy of the land and “what it means to live Blackfoot” (R. Heavy Head, personal communication, 2012). I look back at this experience tenderly, with gratitude and sadness, upon hearing of the tragic passing of Narcisse Blood. His writings, films, teachings, and life have rhizomatically touched each of us in this cohort, and past cohorts. Narcisse’s honesty, courage, and wisdom will continue to linger with us, even though he has passed to the other side. This poem is a collection of found phrases from that day spent dwelling around the ponds in the Elizabeth Hall Wetlands on the shoulder of the Oldman River, winding its sandy way through southern Alberta.

*Nitsiniyi'tak*

*Do you understand the land  
Enough to become a part of it?*

*Once you have a name for something,  
You will start to pay attention to it.*

*There is a literacy, an understanding,  
In birds nests and coulee depths.*

*There is a different time in Blackfoot:  
Be here. Know here. Be familiar.*

*We have to pay attention to anomalies—  
What is happening when the mallard nests are placed  
Up on the edges of the coulee, away from the water?  
Sights.  
Signs.  
Sounds of the wild; of animals, of people.*

*Elders are our living libraries,*



*With advice on how to live now,  
How we lived—Your books are a stand in  
For our elders.*

*We must pay attention to the gaps in our knowledge  
To remind us of the disconnects we have with nature.*

*What can the land teach us?  
Land is what feeds us all connections—  
Land is not a big thing.  
When we take more than we need,  
That affects everyone.*

*We need an education of attention, of attending  
To signs, to the rectangles in our lives  
That box us in.  
We are spiritual.  
We are not afraid of death.  
Hell was scared into me.*

*We need to have failure so we can learn.  
Is education about learning or is it about control?*

*Our goal is to become human—  
I don't have time for that some say...  
You do what you feel you need to do.*

*What is the difference between being Blackfoot and Becoming Blackfoot?  
What is it that you're living?  
If you can tell a story, you have lived it...  
Becoming Blackfoot has afforded me the opportunity to cope  
Instead of drinking to escape reality.*

*What do you lose when you lose a language?  
Richness.  
Texture.  
Our language is older than the Sphinx. The pyramids.  
Where are we and what do we need to live here?  
We can't be cavalier and collectively fail.  
We're all here together.*

~~~~~

The more rooted I am in my location, the more I extend myself to other places so as to become a citizen of the world. No one becomes local from a universal location. (Paulo Freire, as cited in Chambers, et al., 2012, p. 104)

### **In the Late Winter Slant of Gentle Light**

My daughter Holly and I  
Sojourned to Hanna, Alberta  
This past weekend  
To visit my parents—  
Papa and Gamma.

In my life,  
Too often I am too busy  
To travel the 214 kilometers  
The two hours to Hanna,  
And often rely on my parents  
Visiting us in Calgary instead.

So this trip was unique; special  
For Holly and her grandparents.  
It wasn't until we were packing to leave  
That I realized how deeply special the  
Intergenerational times spent connecting  
Are for me, too.

***“The further inside you the places moves,  
The more your identity is intertwined with it.”<sup>6</sup>***

206, 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue West, Hanna, Alberta,  
Has been my home  
Since I was Holly's age in  
1980.  
The home has been renovated  
On top of renovations,  
Altered,  
Housed different guests and a small  
Pack worth of dogs.

For many years,  
I yearned to be away from it...  
Cut-off, separated,  
Only to now find my self called back,  
Drawn in/to  
The familiarity of the desolate landscape

And shrinking town  
In east-central Alberta,  
Drawn to/wards the two-story stucco home  
Which has housed much of my life.

Was my act of escaping a passage?  
A right—a need to independence?  
Why am I called back now?  
    The prospect of middle age looming?  
    The prospect of senior citizenship hovering over my parents,  
    Harbouring the certainty of life's only certainty—death?

As we were packing,  
Holly decided it was time for a walk  
And she toddled off down the steps  
And sidewalk for half a block,  
My shadow traipsing along her unsteady steps.

We turned, headed back  
Towards Papa.  
The late winter slant of gentle light  
Silhouetted his figure,  
And with/in that pristine moment  
I was lost in time.  
The flurry of  
Past

                          becoming  
Present  
                          becoming  
Future

Blurred my eyes in tears.

I imagined the deep joy for my father,  
The fulfillment  
As his only son  
Guided his granddaughter  
Along the cinder block retaining wall,  
Retracing his own steps,  
34 years prior—  
a snapshot in time,  
Me in the place of my father,  
Holly in mine.

And in that slant of light  
Illuminating her joyous innocence,  
Holly beamed in the simple delight of running,

Winter wind whispering through her hair,  
And being with those she loves most.

We kept walking,  
The three of us  
Along sloped and cracked  
Sidewalks  
Partitions still familiar to me  
Every bump, signature, crack,  
Partially worn by my own sneakers and tires  
In youth.

In those tender moments of faint familiarity  
Of sharing and exploring,  
Of coming to know a place,  
Through the fresh eyes of a toddler,  
I felt at peace.  
I felt at home.  
I yearn to share,  
To kindle that place,  
Those echoes and familiarities  
With Holly.  
With my dad.  
Those echoes have shaped, rooted, and made me.  
They will,  
In turn,  
Deeply shape Holly.

~~~~~

To read the place means you are able to dwell within it, to inhabit it, to  
gather from it knowledge that makes life there possible, as well as  
intelligible and meaningful. (Cynthia Chambers, 2012, p. 187)

### **Renewing Relationships as Wayfinders Together**

Collective Experience,  
That phenomenon of drawing tighter;  
Entwining with other  
For having experienced an event together  
Is a magical, elusive  
Human emotion.

The Olympics in Vancouver;  
A musical concert;  
Terrorist attacks in Ottawa—

Comfort.  
 Reassurance.  
 Relationship.  
 We naturally seek that unifying collectivity.

When Chambers (2008) tells us  
 Of Narcisse Blood speaking  
 Stories of place;  
 Of being Kainai—

***“and through these stories,  
 he renews our relationship as a people  
 who have travelled to the places  
 together...  
 and with our students.  
 It is through these stories  
 We become friends and relations,”<sup>7</sup>***

They remind us of the importance  
 Of story in becoming human.

When Ellie tells in conversation  
 That ***“sharing makes [her] feel better  
 That people know what [she] has been through...  
 So they can comfort her”***  
***She renews our relationship as people  
 Who have travelled places together.***

When David relates that “[he] feels  
 Really happy to share his writing so  
 People know [he] gets really angry,  
 They can be calm with [him]”  
***He renews our relationship as people  
 Who have travelled places together.***

When Stacey confides that it is  
 “important to share sad stories  
 so people know more about you...  
 they understand your sadness better,”  
***She renews our relationship as people  
 Who have travelled places together.***

Bob intones that he notices,  
 That he “feels,  
 We are closer,  
 We’re open to accepting,

To opportunity of knowing our selves  
And each other”

***He renews our relationship as people  
Who have travelled places together.***

For we have traveled this year;  
As a community,  
Through and amongst hundreds of  
Stories,  
Shared as we wayfind in our classroom,  
Dwelling with/in  
The collective of each/other  
Using story to be/come  
Friends and relations,  
Entangled, knit, and knotted.

### **Harkening Heart of Self**

It is very difficult for us to comprehend and value our own lives. It is much easier for us to see things outside ourselves. In the process of claiming our own good writing, we are chipping away at the blind gap between our own true nature and our conscious ability to see it. (Natalie Goldberg, 2005, p. 166)

Though death is howling at our backs and life is roaring at our faces, we can just begin to write, simply begin to write what we have to say. (Natalie Goldberg, 2005, p. 178)

### **Self Realization**

We need to  
Pay attention to the  
Thresholds  
In which we  
LINGER  
—interconnection—  
Making the  
PAST, PRESENT ILLUMINATED.

*Geo Graphiein*—earth writing.  
Longing, (NOT)—belonging,  
On Thresholds poised to *poner*<sup>8</sup>  
One’s self in uncertain

Ground  
Country  
Condition  
Or a New  
Entering.

Remembering the moves that have passed  
Always paying attention to the  
Thresholds, knocks, and doorways  
Found between  
Destinies.  
And make meaning from  
<inter>CONNECTIONS.  
Because Barbara Kingsolver is  
Fecund with knowledge and  
Reminds us  
The greatest of all gifts is to know our  
PLACE  
In this unending journey  
SEEKING and SEARCHING  
To ATTEND to  
Where you  
ARE and IMAGINE  
Where we might  
GO.

~~~~~

**Found Poem From *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times* to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,**

From Dan Buchanan (*who has loved your book *The Little Prince* for many years and has recently bastardized it.*)

I first and foremost would like to say that  
I am not writing to you in order to beg forgiveness.  
I do not feel bad or responsible for  
making your book a shared piece—  
just between you and me and our readers.  
Your drawings were fine,  
and even as an adult, I  
could see the boa constrictor,  
and not the hat.

Before you get angry,  
I want you to know that I think the current version of the

text is  
superior to the original anyway—  
you know that it had been translated many times—  
and you know how translations between languages go—  
something gets lost.  
It's a common place—  
and in the métissage that I've taken the liberty of creating,  
our lives are forever interwoven.

Don't be scared—  
I've had a pretty good life.

You likely want to know  
what the hell I've done to the book.  
Well, just as the Little Prince had to travel  
and experience before he truly  
knew where he belonged and  
developed a sense of his identity,  
I too needed to travel  
and create stories  
and understandings from others  
for my life  
based on my place,  
past places, and  
places yet to be.

I don't know who I am yet,  
and maybe I'm more confused than ever,  
but I have stories to share,  
and a rudimentary understanding  
of what that means.

So—the changes.

I added several pieces of my own writing from class.  
Check them out.  
I think you would like a few of them.  
One is a poem to my dead grandfather.  
I thank him for the identity he has given me,  
and the importance of place he has instilled  
in my mother  
and now me—  
though it took 33 years.  
There are found poems,  
torn up bits of an autobiography,  
quotes,



text messages  
 and life writing that seemed to fit your message  
 at certain points in the book—  
 I think I have heightened the understanding of that message  
 for our adult readers.

Intertextuality plays a dominant role in our book—  
 you had drawings and written text—  
 I've taken the liberty of adding texts  
 from the land  
 such as plants and sand  
 (African sand at that),  
 turtle shells, musical representations,  
 written text, photographs,  
 graffiti, collage, *miksang* art,  
 and some painting.  
 It's the intertextuality that helps  
 with the hermeneutical approach  
 to/wards our book for others.  
 I've also taken the liberty of removing  
 some of your original written text from the book—  
 it no longer fit our message.  
 Sometimes I recycled it,  
 crossed it out,  
 painted over it,  
 or moved it to a more appropriate place in the book.  
 Don't worry,  
 it's all explained  
 and there is a method  
 to the 'madness.'  
 I think that the interpreted message of our book  
 is still relatively the same.

I changed the title.

And the cover.

Sorry.

I went with a head.  
 With lots of different languages on it—  
 you can appreciate language  
 and the worlds it opens  
 and closes—  
 you spoke a few.  
 The new title,

which I can't really say,  
 and you won't know,  
 means  
 Listen to me! (imperatively speaking)  
 in Blackfoot.  
*Sopoyaapistsiyiita.*  
 I know...a tongue twister.  
 But since we are sharing the book,  
 I thought it would be nice to have a blended book cover.  
 You got to keep the longer biography in the back,  
 and the whole back page  
 and spine are still yours.

I did change the perspective  
 that the book had on adults  
 —listen—  
 our pasts are always with us anyway—  
 so don't get pissed off.  
 If we share these stories,  
 the inner child will be happy.

So, there you have it,  
 Antoine.  
 It feels good to get this off my chest.  
 If you don't like this version of the book,  
 it will be changing in years to come anyway,  
 so don't sweat this version being forever—  
 it's quite ephemeral  
 when placed next to forever.

Truly yours,  
 Dan Buchanan, your co-author who is writing this from his cramped and sweaty  
 apartment in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.

~~~~~

### **The Difficult Work of Be/Coming What You Say**

“I wish I could read that book.  
 Your journal—but I haven't”  
 My wife states,  
 Eyes brimming, fine corners of mouth  
 Downturned—  
 My sign I have wounded her.  
 “At least in there, I know  
 You reflect, that you think and are

Vulnerable.  
I never see that.”

A true paradox in her world—  
A husband who swears by the power,  
The wisdom of vulnerability,  
Which opens doors of empathy and understanding  
Be/tween our Pinar-ian “complicated conversations.”

Is it pride?  
My own esteem-judgment of my own stories  
And emotions as worthless?  
Perhaps my role in society as strong, silent, man...

The truth is  
To openly display my emotions;  
To think before defensively  
Tongue lashing with blame,  
Is difficult.

It is difficult questioning, self-transforming work  
Replete with tension  
    With contradiction.

I slip on the guise of hypocrisy,  
I feel.  
The emperor’s new clothes in the classroom,  
But for my own complex relations;  
For my wife, for us  
I must face these difficult truths and  
Begin to  
See clearly what I want to be;  
    What I am now  
And embark on this complicated work  
Of becoming vulnerable.

~~~~~

Just be attentive towards what rises up inside you, and place it above  
everything that you notice round about. What goes on in your innermost  
being is worth all of your love. (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 36)

### **Bending Thoughts Back**

When I pause and take time to reflect,

To bend my thoughts back  
 I could almost snap  
 In fragility:  
 A winter worn limb  
 Of a prairie poplar  
 Clenched and tossed against its will,  
 By wicked northern winds,  
 Yet,  
 If rigid or frozen  
 It splinters into shards.  
 The truths from which I hide  
 Pop up in all aspects of my life.  
 Facing these barren truths is terrorizing  
 And liberating in process.

Truths are surfacing in  
     Arguments with my wife;  
     Anger in the classroom;  
     Moments of harsh judgment;  
     Truths of inadequacy and esteem;  
 Hidden, but present and leering—  
     *Why can't I let one argument go?*  
     *Why do I judge colleagues?*  
     *Why do I need control?*

It is in this act of bending  
 My thoughts back to face and trace  
 The rhizomes of my truths  
 That I be/come honest  
 And able to right my/self;  
 Face forward  
 With knowledge  
 And wisdom of my imperfections  
 And vulnerabilities;  
 A prairie poplar in the spring,  
 Awakening to potential—  
 Perhaps more malleable and more  
 Wont to bend with/in the slight  
 Chill of a breeze.

~~~~~

**Assumption. Cynicism. Judgment. Stereotype.**

Each have wedged their  
 Opaque lenses deep  
 With/in my thought—

Heavily clouding,  
                                 Enshrouding, poisoning  
 The reality;  
 And darkening bright opportunities and  
                                 Fresh beginnings.

The family I married into—  
 Small-town ranchers and farmers  
 My  
     Judgment imprisoning each  
 Action  
 Comment  
 Way

Until  
 In my mind they were  
 Villainous. Heinous. Un-worthy.

But

I have learned in  
                                 Reflection.  
                                 Retraction.  
                                 Thought/full questioning.

To control my inner cynic.

To counter argue  
     Counter view  
 What has become my nature—

This helps me witness and attend to  
 Beautiful acts of kindness, purity, and love  
 More bountiful than the few  
 Human blunders to which we are each entitled.

Ironic that someone cynical (*doglike* in Ancient Greece)  
 Must forgive humanness.

I am reminded of writing  
 Students were asked to generate  
 —to write two phrases—  
     1. the ugliest thing ever uttered to them.  
     2. the most beautiful thing ever uttered to them.

Amazingly we cling  
                                 Fresh sores  
 To the few awful slurs  
 Yet let the beautiful noticings  
 Wash like quicksilver over and through our minds.

I must,

If I am honest in  
 Needing change  
 Harness and ensnare  
 The plentiful flashes of human beauty  
 I am witness to  
 And release  
 The few shadows my cynical self is enslaved with...  
 In release  
 I am renewed.

~~~~~

### **Feel the Shroud of Stars Extended Infinitely Above**

Poet Mary Oliver (2003) implores: *“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”*<sup>9</sup>

Will fresh spirit, inquisitive questions &  
 Wonder  
 Become trodden, trampled by the multitudes  
 Of others,  
 Wayfaring on a well-worn passage?

*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”*

Will you spend it,  
 As many do,  
 Counting down days on a calendar,  
 Like collapsing dominoes,  
 Whiling away what should have been,  
 But never was;  
 What ceased to be?

*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”*

Will you cherish tender moments,  
 The sleepless nights with child  
 As precious time,  
 Or will you listen to ‘experts’  
 Who dare you to touch your child  
 For fear of developing dependency?  
 Do not linger at the door,  
 But have the courage to listen to your heart!

*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
 with your one wild and precious life?”*

Staring satiated at a screen,  
 Anxiously and absently crawling  
 Through minutes—  
 Neither loving nor hating,  
 But not feeling—  
 just numbed?

*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
 with your one wild and precious life?”*

Will you clasp claws onto grudges  
 And blacken your heart with resentment and  
 Pride?  
 Trudging through each day,  
 Each relationship and encounter  
 Sentient with moments of acrid festering?

*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
 with your one wild and precious life?”*

Will you take time for friends  
 And the welcoming heart(h) of love,  
 The tender moments spent with  
 A child, a wife,  
 That fade like the silver dew frosting  
 The beards of August aged wheat?

*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
 with your one wild and precious life?”*

Will you live in a moment of reflective solitude<sup>10</sup>  
 To be with yourself,



To know your truths and to  
 Feel the shroud of stars extended infinitely above,  
 With the same awe of a child,  
 Or the wonder of Mary Oliver's grasshopper,  
 Part of the daily humus;  
 The prosaic  
 That sustains us.<sup>11</sup>

*"Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
 with your one wild and precious life?"*

~~~~~

### **Lingering Longer With/in**

In this practice of life writing be/tween  
 My/self/students  
 I find myself.  
 Lingering longer  
 With/in—  
     Unbalanced atop a precipice,  
 What Leah Fowler describes as  
 "stumbling into fearful places  
 of the abyss."<sup>12</sup>  
 For this writing requires attending  
     To the core of who I am  
     To the frailties and realities  
 Of  
     How I came to be  
     In this city  
     In this time.



Calling into question  
Rooted beliefs, relationships, and recurring actions.

I question now,  
Rather than ignore.  
Pause rather than react.  
For this writing requires honesty; truths  
Which can be blunt.

Why am I so quick to anger  
With my wife,  
Whom I covet more than any other person?

Why is my first impulse overtly negative;  
Cynical—  
Almost on social impulse.

What has shaped that in me—to view people negatively first?  
Would I have recognized this shadow  
Without writing my/self in this project?  
Why do I block/control my wife's feelings;  
Deny her emotions?

In re/cognizing these qualities, these ways,  
I begin the difficult work of  
Mending my/self.  
Of mending my tangled relations with other(s).  
I am forced to climb from Fowler's  
Dark abyss,  
Seeking mending, seeking truths  
In attending to my self and the other;  
Learning to live well  
in this place,  
in this time,  
With/in others and self,  
For  
“a poem is a path in the frozen  
tundra of the heart.”<sup>13</sup>

~~~~~

### **And I Am Fragmented With/inThat Place.**

The moments,  
like etched copper,  
Be/come permanent in the splintering of my self—  
Remnants lingering (from remenoir—to remain)  
In those scenes,

Remembered and traced  
In shallow minings of the past—  
That shock me awake and  
Require a constant tending to.

I like to revisit these dark moments  
These fragments of self, strength, sadness and vulnerability  
To better understand who I am,  
How I came to be,  
And to witness the past as present.

They amount to a small handful,  
these splinterings,  
But they whole me again.

I revisit my Grade 8 class,  
Where I am called to the office,  
My mom there in tears  
Telling me her brother,  
My uncle Gordon,  
Is dead in a car accident,  
And I am fragmented with/in that place.

I revisit the moment  
I awaited my wife Kim  
Pacing outside her unit  
At the Peter Lougheed Centre,  
Seeing her bright and questioning  
Face through the mechanized doors,  
Delivering the news  
Of her cousin's death that morning—  
A post-operation  
Clot killing him instantly.  
And I am fragmented with/in that place,  
Tending to my wife  
Crumpled on the white tile floor.

I revisit the gentle spring day  
At our family cabin,  
Feeling whole and vibrant  
Alongside the North Saskatchewan River,  
Stretching and crackling awake from its long  
Winter slumber.  
Peace pierced permanently  
With a phone call  
And news of my cousin Kelsey's suicide

Hours before  
 Along the banks of Cowan Lake  
 In Big River, Saskatchewan,  
 And I am fragmented with/in that place.

A piece of my self left in the moment and space  
 Of these events,  
 To be revisited cautiously and mindfully,  
 Able to be vulnerable  
 Safely;  
 To seek the piece of my self,  
 That remnant remaining  
 Etched in time.

~~~~~

### **Cruel Words Are Slow Waters to Recede**

A page split in half  
 One side for the kindest words  
 ever shared with you

The other  
 For the cruelest.

Which would jar to life  
 First for you?  
 Which side dominates?  
 In a class of 11-year-olds,  
 The cruelest words  
 The most sinister of intentions  
 Cling to their souls  
 Like locusts on stalks of wheat.  
***“The mean one pops in first  
 because it scarred my heart”*** (Ellie).

In their thoughts,  
 Quickly surfacing:  
***“You’re fat.”***  
***“You’re ugly.”***  
***“Cut yourself and die.”***  
***“You should die, faggot.”***  
***“Useless Gaylord...”***  
***“You were a mistake for Mom and Dad.”***

Slow waters to recede,  
 Their brine corroding the soul,  
 Rusting,  
 Changing forever the target...  
 Do we  
 Choose to cling to the awful

And  
 Ignore or counter the kind  
 with doubt and cynicism?

Is there a reason my own father's  
 Acidic words:  
*"You're a goddam embarrassment...  
 why can't you be like the other kids?"*

Are ever-present  
 In spite of redemptive  
 Words and actions  
 Over the past 20 years?  
 Does it even matter if we choose to hold on to,  
 Or  
 If the words themselves linger...  
 Uninvited guests embedded in our identities?  
 What we must choose  
 Is our care with words  
 Which inflict and infect  
 Those we hold dearest in our lives:  
 "Don't throw words out into the world  
 Without caution."<sup>14</sup>

~~~~~

### **I Wonder at the Wisdom of Keeping Secrets**

I wonder at the wisdom,  
 The thought and intention  
 Of keeping secrets  
 From those we love.  
 The act of keeping—  
 Of silence itself—  
 A lie;  
 A dishonesty and eventual truth-slap  
 On the cheek—  
 A shock of glacial water  
 From which we emerge  
 Changed, different.

A student ponders why  
 Parents never told  
 Never explained that a  
 Brother was adopted.  
 Another torn up that family dogs,  
 Believed to be at grandparents' farm,

Were long dead from a .22 shot.  
 The truth untold—not lied to,  
 But deceived  
 And left alone,  
 Disregarded.

The jilt of secrets continues to linger  
 With me—  
 Explained in one-time-onlies  
 And never-to-be-mentioned-again-conversations.

**I have:**

a half brother,  
 6 years older,  
 a stranger and unknown  
 until his name, his being  
 was shared with me at age 22.

**I have:**

an uncle disappeared,  
 enwrapped in confines  
 of the boreal forests of northern Saskatchewan  
 afflicted with undiagnosed  
 schizophrenia—  
 Oliver's name is seldom mentioned.  
 His death a mystery of secrecy and  
 purposeful forgetting.

**I have:**

Grandpa Calvin Buchanan,  
 a foreign figure to me,  
 dead at age 66,  
 his life, his way of being  
 kept from me:  
 the bouts of alcoholism,  
 of leaving/abandoning family.  
 The dependency and brash life  
 cut short.

I wonder at the wisdom of  
 keeping secrets from/  
 of discluding  
 those whose hearts harken  
 the knowing, whose very being

would benefit from the knowing  
souls craving the sharing and community  
yet kept afar—distant by  
intentional silence.

~~~~~

### To Make Sense of Suicide

*“I tear up; I cry  
thinking of my coach...  
when I heard he committed suicide  
I was very sad, very depressed”*

Phil,  
The courage to share  
To become vulnerable and  
Teach us about your life.

I too have struggled,  
Continue to struggle...  
Pounded by questions, memories  
And despair—  
The finality of death—  
The inexplicable death by suicide.

My cousin Kelsey Dale Buchanan,  
A parallel life to my own  
In so many ways,  
But so different in just as many.

We were left reeling in June,  
The aftermath of his action,  
Unglued, changed.

Like myself, he was:

An only child.  
A teacher.  
A father.

Unlike myself, he was:

A lost lonely figure.  
A son grieving the death of father.  
Afflicted with alcoholism.  
A man living with depression.

And so,  
We didn't know.

Didn't know we should be helping,  
Rather than pitying and tongue clucking  
The family rumours  
Fuelled by his behavior in the months  
Leading up to his death.

Our final moments before his death  
Paralleled in juxtaposition.  
In parallel provinces.

My night spent with my wife  
And daughter,  
A crackling fire,  
A gurgling river—  
A meaningless bickering.

His night spent whirling  
In drunkenness,  
Retrieving a shotgun,  
Starkly alone in a trailer,  
A glimmering lake,  
The dichotomous tumult in his mind  
Playing out at its shores;  
And a sudden blast—  
Sick silence deepened  
By the leaving.  
His family left to  
Explain,  
Blame  
And wonder  
At what led to his final choice,  
Emboldened with alcohol  
Mind sick, untended.

The sudden leaving  
Presented by suicide  
Changes us,  
Leaves us barren.

But Phil's sharing;  
His courage to become vulnerable,  
Has helped me to write,  
To free my guilt and my own questions,  
To unburden in the heavy leaving  
Of my cousin,  
Of his hockey coach.

~~~~~

### Stumbling Steps in Naming

There are times spent reading  
 When I am so immersed,  
 So involved in the words  
 I could swear they were written  
 Like jigsaw pieces, cut deftly  
 To fit; to give structure and explanation  
 To my life;  
 So much so that when I startle awake,  
 I am not sure if I was transfixed or lucid;  
 I marvel; I pine; I fill  
 With wonder that another could put to words  
 The pristine emotion I have  
 Vied to represent for years.  
 The result can leave me  
 Euphoric in a collective sense of identity  
 Or in despair; a shell hollow  
 Of life—  
 Distraught that the writing confirms  
 What I have long suspected.  
 Is this not the wisdom  
 Of vulnerability I seek?  
 This sharing can shred you of ego  
 And illumine that emotion; that part  
 Which I long ago  
 Buried below layers of learning—  
 But continued to rhizomatically dwell, linger, and be/come  
 My identity.  
 Herriot realized, in his writing, that  
 “[He] saw all that was missing and [his friends]  
 saw all that was there.”<sup>15</sup>  
 A line that lay with/in me,  
 Burrowing deeply into my core;  
 My soul  
 Leaving me sleepless; exposed and  
 Fully naked in his writing, completely vulnerable,  
 For I, too,  
 Cannot see what I have,  
 But lament at what I do not have,  
 At what used to be  
 Rather than be amazed and astonished by what is  
 Available in the mundus of life,



The fecund plentitude in which we dwell.  
 The writing serves to  
 Slap me awake; to be thankful  
 For what I have and not  
 What is missing.  
 How did I lose that beautiful naivety?  
 How did negativity burrow itself  
 Unchecked, into my being?  
 Friends? Media? Nature? Nurture?  
 Perhaps it matters not,  
 But the realization does—the seeing,  
 The naming and realization.  
 It is a step towards the mending I do in  
 This writing,  
 However small and stumbling.

~~~~~

### **Truth to Self**

It's true,  
 This idea that if you  
 Practice the art of deceiving your  
 Self  
 Often enough with the same deception,  
 You come to know  
 That lie as truth;  
 And you'd swear you're being honest  
 At least  
 I do.

And I begin to wonder  
 Which of my  
 Truths  
 Began as they are now—  
 Real.  
 Or were they rehearsed and  
 Acted in/to truths  
 But born as lies?  
 I came headstrong into this  
 Thinking yesterday,  
 Writing with students.  
 Our topic: Telling unknown truths  
 About ourselves.

And in that moment,

I iterated an old lie:  
That I loved living in  
Buenos Aires.

***Truth to my self:***

I love the  
Idea  
Of living in exotic  
Capital Federal,  
The life of a *porteno*.

***Truth to my self:***

I hate to be thought a fool  
By friends, family, and my self.  
And so,  
The myth of my time in Argentina  
Was born....  
To save me from my shame.

Looking deeply back,  
Now I see I spent my time there  
Trying to fix a girl who could not be fixed,  
Who lived selfishly and  
Dangerously and self-fulfilled  
Many failed prophesies.

It was living as a *porteno extranjero*<sup>16</sup>  
In Barrio Norte del Capital  
That I learned true shame;  
How weak I was  
In chasing the dream of what  
Could have been—  
A traveling, traipsing, whimsical love...

Begun in Budapest;  
Built on disloyalty and deceit.  
And thus,  
My lie began.

***Truth to my self:***

I knew she would cheat on me,  
Just as our relationship  
Had begun.  
When you build on cracks,

The crevices can engulf you  
In tumbling pieces.

***Truth to my self:***

I am still angry with her for  
Hurting me,  
For diseasing me in mind and  
In body.

I learned there what depression was,  
The difference between solitude and  
Loneliness  
And how to live a lie.

***Truth to my self:***

I didn't love Buenos Aires.  
I loved the idea of  
*Before Sunrise* love.  
But in doing so,  
I have lived this lie;  
Coaxing it to become a truth.  
In this writing,  
In this vulnerability,  
I can begin to accept  
My truths,  
My self.

~~~~~

**A Difficulty in Listening**

My wife Kim tells me I seem  
So withdrawn;  
So afar  
When we meet in groups;  
And I am...  
But I am not apart.  
I feel more a part  
As I practice the call  
To listen,  
To give space,  
To share time,  
To linger in thought...  
Rather than listening just

As a means to tell my own story.  
 I listen to honour the stories of others,  
 I want to value  
 The lives with/in which I dwell  
 And in half listens  
 And guided conversations,  
 I cannot do this.  
 But in my listening,  
 It is obvious  
 I am not clearly communicating,  
 That I must speak even though  
 I most “desperately want to remain silent.”<sup>17</sup>

~~~~~

*“You are one of the happiest people  
 I have ever met.  
 Even now,  
 with the photos you post on Facebook,  
 you seem so happy.  
 I hope, inside, that you are as happy  
 as the person I see in those photos,  
 as the person I remember from University.”<sup>18</sup>*

### **One of the Happiest People I Have Ever Met**

This is not me.  
 This is not what I feel;  
 Who I am.

And the duplicity,  
 The dichotomous duality  
 The falsity, the fraudulent façade,  
 Un/nerves me and clingwraps to me...

Is there the possibility that if  
 This is what others see,  
 Then this is who I am?

Seldom do I let the kind words of others  
 Chink my mental armor  
 And settle with/in.  
 As is the case with many,  
 Negative self-talk roils in me;  
 Has saturated my existence,

So that I do not hear what is said,  
Let alone what is not said.

I do not hear:

***You have won the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence.***

**But rather:**

*You don't deserve that award, you fraud. There were many applicants.*

I do not hear:

***You are a Learning Lead at your School for a reason.***

**But Rather:**

*No one else wanted that job—it was left to you.*

I do not hear:

***Your friends admire and respect you.***

**But Rather:**

*They find you annoying and distant at best. It's too late to call them and catch up.*

I do not hear:

***I think you are so cute.***

**But Rather:**

*My wife has to think I'm cute—we're married. I'm old, scarred, and mostly grouchy.*

I do not hear:

***You are a good writer.***

**But rather:**

*I am a hack—anyone can 'make this stuff up.'*

I do not hear:

***That was tremendous leadership***

***At the staff meeting,***

**But rather:**

*You spoke up—as principal, I am obligated*

*To thank you.*

I need to hear.

I need to listen to what others say,

Who know me well,

Who tell me what I am,

Because far too often,

What they say

And what they don't say,

Is far more valuable,

More beautiful and meaningful,

Than the hateful words

Ringling out in my mind.

As Carl Leggo (2005b) poetically intones,  
*“In poetry,  
 I am seeking to listen to the rhythms  
 Of the heart,  
 And to hear the ways  
 That my heart  
 Resonates  
 With the hearts of others”* (p. 450).

~~~~~

People are changed, not by intellectual convictions or ethical urgings, but  
 by transformed imaginations. (Madonna Kolbenschlag, as cited in Leggo,  
 2006, p. 77)

### **The Seed of Cynicism**

*A shell,  
 Deep rooted, cloaked, and buried,  
 With/in,  
 of  
 Cynicism  
 Pride,  
 Complaint  
 Ridicule of hard-to-reach students and colleagues,*

*Hides with/in it  
 A naked vulnerability,  
 A deep a fearsome questioning  
 Of my abilities,  
 Of my lack and inadequacy,  
 A low esteem and negligible confidence  
 That masks itself in the sinister, cynical,  
 Shell I bear.  
 Through disclosure and openness,  
 Through the un/masking and honesty,  
 I attend to that sinister seed,  
 When it sprouts tendrils.  
 In this intentional act of attending,  
 I find the hope,  
 The possibility of transformation;  
 Of re/imagination the  
 “frozen tundra of [my] heart.”<sup>19</sup>*

~~~~~

## Harkening Heart of Relations

Through relating to each other, we attend to our own education and to better understanding who and how we are in relation to others in the world. (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 3)

Each one of us must go out into the world and engage with others (Bauman, 1993). Each of us has to be open to learn about others without prejudice and with trust in a mutual intent to do no harm. (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 69)

Most of us are afraid of love, afraid to love, afraid of the unpredictable and mysterious and invisible dynamics at work in love. Research is not possible without love, without the heart. (Carl Leggo, 2006, p. 77)

## Courage of Silence

Carl Leggo writes:  
*“It takes courage  
 to know when to be  
 silent”* (2005a, p. 99).

It is  
 The silence,  
 The pause,  
 Aokian in its metonymic lingering be/tween,  
 That jars us awake in its tensionality,  
 In its attending to the moment—  
 Not a vacuous void,  
 But a richly heavy space  
 In life’s fervent soil.

Know to be—  
*when your wife tells you you have once again hurt her heart—*  
 silent.

Know to be—  
*when a student shares that her amazing grandfather will die in January, a lost battle with*  
*cancer—*  
 silent.

Know to be—  
*when Ellie finishes telling of how she dies inside from the torment her lesbian sister lives in—*  
 silent.

Know to be—  
*when Phil shares, in sobs, the story his hockey coach's suicide—*  
 silent.

Know to be—  
*when a fresh intern wrestles with the overt challenges of teaching, of becoming a teacher in these complex times—*  
 silent.

Know to be—  
*when a colleague's absence is announced, and everything is not all right in her shattered, secret, separate world—*  
 silent.

Know to be—  
*when a colleague shares a beautiful story of her father's crippling struggle with ALS—*  
 silent.

In silence we honour,  
 We attend.  
 We make sense of.  
 Silence is the courageous gift  
 Of space we offer amidst  
 The chaotic cacophony of our lives.

~~~~~

Poetic inquiry serves as a valuable tool to give us the ability to view our data, writing, and conclusions from more empathetic and creative perspectives. (Debbie McCullis, 2013, p. 88)

The following is a found poem about the effect life writing practice has had on our Grade 6 classroom, taken from various interview notes over the course of the project.



### **This Class Has Changed What I Thought School Was**

I feel comfortable,  
Sharing stories—  
This year I trust the people in my  
Class.  
They have all shared stories  
That have affected them.

I want to share stories  
Deep inside of me—it's hard to keep them in  
I know when I share  
How people think of me and  
How they understand me.

I can express myself without  
Being embarrassed—  
It's about self-esteem  
And the heart—allowing others to  
See how I feel;  
Why I am the way I am.

I used to be way more scared.  
I was new to the country—  
Had an Irish accent, a Polish last name.  
I couldn't make sense  
Of how I felt.  
Now, they understand me.  
They know me  
And understand what I've been through—  
They can support me.

People in class,  
Don't just care about marks.  
They care about each other—  
They are more willing to  
Tell sad stories  
Because they feel safe—  
When my hockey coach died,  
They all know he committed suicide,  
And how that was hard for me.  
And there have been lots of connections  
Between people in the class  
That wouldn't have been there—  
They can help each other out,  
Or just knowing someone else has

Had something like that happen helps.

I remember most Lucy's story  
 About her grandpa.  
 Everyone was quiet when she shared  
 Because we were respecting  
 Her story; we were thinking of our own  
 Losses.  
 They saw a sad classmate,  
 And were sad for her,  
 Thinking about life in her shoes.

This year we are more united,  
 And there is less conflict—  
 No one picks on anyone  
 Because we know them better.  
 I haven't had anyone telling me  
 I'm annoying this year.  
 This class has changed what  
 I thought school was.

~~~~~

### **Enduring Life Curricula**

A famous quote greets visitors  
 To Room 34 in my school,  
 My homeroom.

***“Education is what remains  
 After one has forgotten  
 What one has learned  
 In school”<sup>20</sup>***

I placed it there,  
 Among other meaningful quotes,  
 Not because I believe  
 Schools do not serve a purpose,  
 But to honour the lives we have  
 Outside of these walls,  
 The learning that occurs  
 In the currere of life,  
 Which is much more vibrant  
 And meaningful  
 Than greyishness of prescribed  
 methodology, text-books, and  
 standardized learning.

My own heart,  
Upon careful in-dwelling,  
Reveals robust moments of curriculum  
None of which occurred in the confines  
Of a school classroom.

My father Cliff taught me  
What it means to sacrifice,  
Spending six years of his life commuting  
From Edmonton, Mirror, and Calgary,  
After the C.N.R. closed its doors in Hanna.  
Concerned with my fragility,  
My parents decided commuting weekly  
Was a better option than severing  
Roots and moving.

My uncle Brian,  
A solitary figure living in the  
Hinterland of the Canadian Shield,  
At Dore Lake in  
Northern Saskatchewan,  
Taught me a lingering lesson  
In respect for all things living,  
When we spent time  
Tracking the cacophony of  
Agonized calls from a raven,  
Entangled in fishing line  
And Jack-pine branch.  
Without word or direction,  
He held the bird tenderly,  
And instructed us on how to  
Untangle the razor line  
And free the corvus corax  
From certain death.

Kim's younger cousin,  
Full of vitality and life,  
Taught me  
That we need never stop caring,  
Even for a trapped porcupine,  
Fallen ten feet down  
An upright culvert.  
Their innate sense of life suffering  
Ensured my determination to  
Help raise and free the  
Imprisoned from a certain arduous  
Death.

My mother Grace,  
 Living up to her name,  
 Has taught me the definition of  
 Loyalty,  
 As she continues to stand  
 By her sister,  
 Afflicted for a lifetime by schizophrenia—  
 Highs and lows, paranoia, obsessiveness, living in altered reality,  
 Time and again hurting my mother's heart.  
 Yet, my mother remains loyal and true to her sister Gloria.

My brother-in-law and friend,  
 Jerome,  
 Who lives life simply and generously,  
 Constantly taking time to be present  
 To those he holds dear,  
 So thoroughly enjoying precious moments,  
 The air thickens with love,  
 With heartfulness.

My wife, Kim,  
 Who teaches me time and again,  
 That love,  
 The possibility of living with a generous heart  
 Is worth the pain and suffering  
 Endured in attending to the needs others  
 In our lives.

~~~~~

### **We Were Lied To**

Betrayal can sear,  
 especially when completed by someone  
 you feel you can trust, confide in...  
 but this time was different...this was bigger.  
 my friend, Seyi,  
 waiting in line to enter the restaurant,  
 but denied because he was wearing white shoes,  
 while others,  
 Caucasians, allowed to enter,  
 while my Nigerian friend was made to wait,  
 standing there  
 alone  
 embarrassed.  
 We asked

We pried... what was going on?  
 "Your friend has white shoes on"  
 was the reply....  
 and I pointed at my white converse,  
 his eyes, embarrassed, ignored me.  
 "How did I get in here then?" I implored.  
 "Listen, your friend has white shoes. He can't come in."  
 I looked at Seyi,  
 our eyes meeting,  
 and we knew in that moment,  
 we understood,  
 that in spite of what we are told,  
 what people say,  
 that racism is alive,  
 it is ugly,  
 and it dehumanizes  
 all involved.  
 We were lied to.

~~~~~

### **How Do You Attend to Your Fires Within?**

Do you find time to breathe?  
 Inhale and BE;  
 make whole  
 and recover from the  
 singes, frays, wounds,  
 with which life is accompanied?  
 How will you attend to your fires within?  
 Will you ignore, misguide, or replace  
 with a digitized hyper-version of reality  
 thereby feeding the fire  
 or seek a whole-ness in place;  
 solitude, solace.  
 How do you attend to your fires within, my child?  
 I was taught, was storied,  
 with tales of a grandfather I never met,  
 who traipsed the prairie,  
 a whimsical silhouette on the ocean of rolling soil,  
 relishing the dust and roots  
 of crops failed; and thick shoulder-high heads of wheat  
 knocking on overall pockets,  
 beards clinging to denim.  
 How do you attend to your fires within, my child?  
 With patience, I was taught to appreciate the  
 vastness, the depth, the stories,

of the prairie home of your grandmother—  
my mother.  
And in this attending,  
I came to know her.  
I came to know myself because of her  
sharing, vulnerability, wisdom.  
There is a wisdom indeed in stories  
of arrowheads for which we were  
hunting and mining together.  
Of rusted Russian threshers  
slowly decaying into the land,  
on which I'm certain her youthful outline dallied and leapt,  
when I gazed closely with closed eyes.  
She became re/youthed with me  
in such a way that we met again;  
we spanned decades  
to attend to each other and I listened.  
I listen more now  
to that time,  
than I did in the moment.  
As I sit here, attending to my own fires through word,  
through memory mining.  
How do you attend to your fires within, my child?  
Will you, as we round the corner of a long-forgotten mountain trail,  
that your mother and I once devoured in our youth,  
capture my visage, connect with my past  
and attend to your fires within  
carefully and peacefully embracing  
the space that  
was  
and  
is  
with/in myself, my story, your/self?  
How do you attend to your fires within?



~~~~~

**Letter from Dan (Your Grandson) in Lethbridge to John Mcleod From  
Colgate, Saskatchewan**

Dear Grandpa Mcleod (whose name doesn't spill off my tongue with ease),

Hi. I never knew you or smelled mints on your breath,  
Or saw the loving gaze that you gave your wife (my grandma that I also never met)  
Never had that modeled for me.

I never saw how you were with your grandchildren—

My cousins

Or how you reacted

To my mom

When she got pregnant and gave birth

To a child that she got rid of

With a man

Whose name she won't speak.

I never had you explain to me why you bought all

Of that Russian machinery that still

Rusts and decays in your yard.

You loved baseball, and football

And trips to Kamloops across windswept prairie

During the “dry years” in Saskatchewan

Climbing from earthen, dirt world of vast expanses

To rock and tree.

And then soon felt claustrophobic and you had

To cut your vacations short to return to the soil that you loved,

Even though during some of those times,

The roots of the grains could no more cling to the sandy earth

Than coil around your ankle like a serpent.

You loved walking the land

Watching, understanding, and listening

To the land—

Collecting arrowheads, and fossils, and pieces of grass stalk.

We still have your fragments and chips of stone centred and

Hung on a maroon canvas, encased in glass from your farm windows.

A piece of your barn was turned into a frame for

The spoons my mother (your daughter Grace) collects.

—I collect too. Too many things and it

Drives my wife crazy—

But I don't want to lose those stories.

My mom, your daughter,

Loves walking the land too.  
 Loves going to check out the East quarter or West quarter  
 (I should listen more deeply)  
 Or some remnant that remains, that she clings to.  
 She'll walk it continuously, enjoying the intermittent  
 Croaking of frogs, the silhouette of an owl perched in  
 Feral overgrowth of caraganas behind your house...  
 Or the wisp of a warm wind on a prairie night.  
 And pointing out where the apple trees, cherry trees,  
 And old ponds are that you used to watch the children play in.



And although it tore my mother apart on the inside,  
 She was the last of her siblings (your children)  
 To sell her section of land.  
 But you would like that Dave Jr. Mcleod  
 (your grandnephew)  
 Bought my mom's section of land and  
 Plans to raise his family there.  
 More and more, I'm seeing how important roots are.

You never got to see your house,  
 So filled with life and love,  
 Slumped into the earth, abandoned and hollow—  
 A death trap for birds and small, curious creatures,  
 It scared the shit out of me  
 When my mom would take me there.  
 And she never understood why I hated it.  
 Why I couldn't see what she saw  
 Wouldn't piece together the history from the  
 Ashes of your house that burnt down  
 When a prairie fire encircled it.

I never understood her either.  
 But now I do and I'm 33.



I wanted to thank you for what you have taught me  
And the values you have given me  
That your great-grandchildren will inherit.



**“You are So Loved...”<sup>21</sup> Thoughts Upon Ottawa Shooting**

In these,  
The darkest moments,  
**“You are so loved.”**

Young man,  
Fallen soldier with/in our nation’s heart,  
**“You are so loved.”**

A nation inhales  
And circles tighter  
**“You are so loved.”**

Little girl  
Shaken/ing at Grandpa’s cancerous diagnosis,  
**“You are so loved.”**

Ellie,  
Scared of jeers and taunts directed at a sister,  
**“You are so loved.”**

Kelsey,  
My tragic cousin, destiny in your hands,  
**“You are so loved.”**

My friend,  
Living in a women’s shelter, world suddenly terrifying,  
**“You are so loved.”**



### Wisdom of Wet Flies Cast

My dad's friend Vern Nunweiler,  
 Who recently passed away,  
 Told my dad  
 On a particular visit,  
 That he regretted  
 Not taking me fishing more often  
 At Helmer Dam for rainbow trout  
 In his aluminum boat.  
 And my first thought  
 Upon hearing of his death,  
 Was how grateful I was  
 For his time spent  
 Teaching me about  
 Wet flies, dry flies, casting, reeling,  
 And flooded outboard Evenrude motors.  
 So maybe much of the guilt and regret  
 We carry on our backs,  
 Is unfounded; imaginary.  
 Perhaps what we have done,  
 What we have given, shared, tended to  
 Is enough,  
 And we should focus on that  
 And not the overwhelming weight  
 That guilt and regret carry.

~~~~~

### Guilt of the In/Attentive

Dear Holly,

This is a letter poem  
 For you to enfold yourself with/in  
 In the future,  
 Written in my present,  
 From a dad who is not always present.

You are growing up  
 Being raised in  
 Complicated times;  
 Where distraction constantly envelopes  
 The attention of a people,  
 Including your parents  
 Who feel inadequate.

Who feel bored.  
 Who feel empty without technological validation.  
 To the point where  
 Your beautiful mother declared  
*“We have to be more mindful of using our phones  
 in front of Holly.”*

For we have fallen  
 For the allure of its call  
 Its instant confirmation  
 Its 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital gratification;  
 “to zone out, to numb our minds”  
 When truly in our courageous  
 Path together  
 We know that our minds yearn  
 Not for numbing,  
 But for attending to—  
 “Latin for stretching”  
 Those joyful moments  
 You so deeply and richly  
 Supply us with—  
 The way you cock your eyebrows  
 In spritely moods,  
 Your mimicking babbly and  
 Tickle, tickle, tickle.  
 Your soft pats of endearment  
 And your cries of frustration  
 All require—  
 Deserve— our attending,  
 For they are fleeting, will not last,  
 Will be transformed and  
 If we are not open  
 To dwelling wholly with you  
 With/out digitized distraction  
 Of friends three times removed from  
 Someone we used to know.  
 We are lesser, hollow, incomplete  
 And complicit in teaching you,  
 In cultivating you towards distraction  
 Away from your heart;  
 From our heart,  
 From attending to the other  
 Sharing with the other,  
 These quotidian moments,  
 The beautiful prosaic  
 That matters most.



### Lessons of the Amaryllis

Amaryllis lay dormant—  
 As bulbs,  
 Accumulating potential energy until,  
 In a mad rush,  
 Lush shoots burst forth,  
 Flowering in three weeks' time—  
 Wonderful gifts of patience and wonder.

...

A student recently reminded me of the patience  
 And time  
 Amaryllis require in be/coming,  
 And the stirring reward in the waiting.

Amidst the noise and frazzle of Friday farewells,  
 A figure stood, waiting at my doorway—  
 Rocking nervously foot to foot—  
 For an invitation across her/my state of liminality:  
 As we were "*poised upon uncertain ground...  
 Leaving one...self and entering upon another.*"<sup>22</sup>

Our eyes met in a flicker of fleeting  
 Re/cognition,  
 And she asked if we could speak,  
 If I had a minute,  
 Assuring it wouldn't take too long.

My mind, cluttered from the morning chaos,  
 Lurched back in time, trying to place a  
 Name to face?  
 Name to face.  
 Name to face!  
 Memory landing five years prior—  
 A second year at my current school,  
 Team teaching sixty-five students,  
 Unable to reach one.

Jenna, who now stood before me,  
 Had blossomed; had be/come,  
 A fading whisper of her former self.

Five years prior,  
 She had shaken my every confidence  
 As a teacher.  
 Snide comments made under breath in  
 Mid-lesson,  
 Stern stares of hatred,  
 Penetrating eyes,  
 Which had me questioning if I could reach her  
 Or any student.

We set up meetings,  
 We conferenced to no avail,  
 Tension fading when the year ended,  
 Though I carry/ied that dark relation with me,  
 Deeply embedded,  
 Still stinging upon reflection.

Now, in the present,  
 The student before me,  
 15, had blossomed,  
 Presen(t)ce exuding confidence and care.

*“I have to apologize,”*  
 She blurted.  
*“For how I treated you,*  
*for what I did and said that year.*  
*I’m so sorry.”*

Shocked present suddenly,  
 I looked away, transformed—  
 Emotional in the space of honesty, courage, and vulnerability  
 Carried forth by this former student.

The past was present was future  
 In the vulnerability she had shown.  
 She continued to explain,  
 Our conversation turning to me;  
 To our divergent lives briefly entwining again—  
 Sharing in our joys—  
 Fatherhood, *honours student*, grad student, *IB program*.

Drawing to that natural closure of conversation,  
 She broke into apology once more,  
 But I stopped her  
 A wave of my hand.

She had gifted me the  
Wisdom of apology; of vulnerability.

She had gifted me a witnessing of  
Be/coming in humans;  
That some require more time—  
More time  
Than a ten-month school year can provide  
In order to be/come.  
Jenna taught me the beauty in  
Patience and forgiveness,  
And with a hug,  
We went our separate ways,  
Shadows no longer lingering dormant,  
Hearts more full.  
Pasts, presents, futures,  
Becoming.

~~~~~

### **Gaining Wisdom Through Sharing**

Pain does not end or stop.  
It rests and rears its shadow  
Sometimes when we least expect,  
Shrouding our minds,  
Making life as we see it  
More opaque.

I thought of this today—  
A day of reflection, thought, and mindfulness  
For Canadians  
Following the tragedy on Parliament.  
A dark day for Canadians,  
But also a reflective time  
To be thank/full for our vast country  
And its diaspora.

It hit me again today during  
An assembly focused on story,  
Focused on suicide.  
Families telling their stories, sharing.

I dwelt on my cousin Kelsey,  
His final moments last June,  
By the lake in Big River,  
Hopeless and at his

End.

Finally making the decision that he  
Had had enough.  
And he had.

And so, while on the phone  
With his helpless mother,  
Stuck in Black Lake in the far northern hinterland,  
He took out his rifle,  
And ended his pain.

And in our sharing circle,  
After the assembly,  
I knew not to share that story,  
But to provide space and place  
For our community to share, to be.  
Vulnerable.  
And they were.

We never know what someone  
Copes with in silence,  
Enshrouded in darkness.  
So we shared and listened.

Phil opened up  
About his hockey coach  
Dead by suicide.  
Phil, a boy in a house of five other boys,  
Feeling completely alone, ignored.  
Lips shaking and  
Rivulets escaping eye corners.

A girl, bright and fresh as spring aspen,  
Opening up,  
Sharing that chemotherapy—a last resort,  
Has failed her grandpa—  
That Christmas may be different this year.  
We learn empathy through  
Sharing  
We gain wisdom and  
Heart/fullness  
Through sharing and  
The wisdom of vulnerability  
Forged in trust.

~~~~~

### An Interview Poem

*I feel safe when we share—  
Like we've warmed up to each other—Dawyne*

***We listen when we share—people stop  
Moving and listen and that makes  
Me more comfortable—Ellie***

These words  
Sprinkled with/in student interviews  
Reflect,  
Magnify the importance of this work  
This writing, listening, attending to/wards  
Other—  
That which we un/learn in our  
Attention-deficit society,  
But can be experienced, taught  
And can illuminate  
The magnificent in life,  
The beauty in empathic dwelling.

The community, I explained today,  
Is tighter,  
Closer  
Enfolded and layered in story—  
Story shared and story deeply heard.  
The very meaning of shared experience  
That glint of bond and trust,  
Lessens, un-damages, the effects  
Of oft cold, industry-driven  
Results!! Results!!!  
Chilling classrooms  
Preoccupied with testing, marketing, branding.  
We are discovering and learning each other.  
That is the meaning of this work.

~~~~~



### Achingly Tender and Precious Roots

Jamie,  
 A quiet and sullen boy,  
 A shadow,  
 Medicated for attention deficit.  
 It was only this year,  
 Our second together,  
 That we hear, we listened, gave time

To what Jamie's struggle was  
 A mother,  
 Now cancer free  
 Had battled the vicious disease  
 For years

Hitting Jamie with a harsh reality  
*"Squarely in the gut"*  
 and so he *"would complain of  
 stomach  
 ear  
 headaches  
 just to  
 hear his mom's voice  
 on the other end of the phone  
 because for a while  
 he didn't know  
 he couldn't know  
 if he'd ever hear it again."*

Life writing has freed him  
*"allowing him to tell stories  
 that no one else knows  
 that no one has heard  
 and that helps others  
 understand  
 why I'm droopy, distracted, sad."*—Jamie

The sharing was bitter;  
 Choked with emotion  
 And classmates  
 astonished in/to empathy,  
 Suddenly understanding Jamie  
 Suddenly understood that  
 The tendrils of our being  
 Those sacred,

Hidden,  
 And achingly tender and precious roots  
 Shape  
 En/courage  
 And deeply affect us.

Jaime's wisdom in sharing  
 Shocked us into understanding  
 And we thank him  
 In our silent acknowledgement  
 Of his pain;  
 Of his deepest fear.  
 We, too  
 Encircle, tighten,  
 And bind in the sharing.

~~~~~

The following lines were put together post-interview with Dwayne, Bob, and Leah. Their magical and in/spirited words stay enfolded with/in me...

#### **An Interview Found Poem**

*Because that's basically what  
 Life writing is...  
 Passing story yarn. —Bob*

#### **Dwayne's Fold**

**Sharing helped the class to understand  
 Who I am,  
 What makes me me.  
 I remember (a girl) sharing about  
 A grandpa who was dying  
 Of cancer...  
 And I could relate and  
 Understand her...  
 When I was 5 or 6  
 My grandpa had surgery  
 That was successful,  
 But the bacteria in hospital  
 Killed him slowly.  
 We waited...while he died.  
 That changed how I saw her...  
 I felt like I can relate to her**

**I understand since we've gone through the same  
Kind of thing.**

**Leah's Fold**

*We know people more  
And everyone likes to share—  
We get to know people better;  
We care for them...  
I remember Lucy's writing and sharing  
About her grandpa—  
It stuck in my head.  
Everyone was quiet when she shared  
To respect her story—  
They saw a sad classmate  
and were sad too,  
Because they know her and were sad  
Because of that.*

**Bob's Fold**

*Life writing is the top thing  
That has brought us together.  
Life writing connects us more;  
I know about Lucy's relationship  
With her grandpa,  
And that Catherine loves  
Ringette so much—I never knew that  
Before.  
We're open to opportunity.  
This year,  
It's comfortable to be with anyone  
In the class—  
We're just more kind to one/another.  
Last year, we would  
Get mad.  
Be mean.  
Call names.  
There was more conflict.  
This year, the sharing and writing  
Has helped.  
It makes me sad to think of next year  
That we won't do life writing.  
I'm scared my new class  
Won't understand...  
They won't pass the yarn,*

*Because that's basically what  
Life writing is...  
Passing story yarn.  
I haven't had someone tell  
Me I'm annoying...  
This class has changed what I thought school  
Was.  
I'm worried I won't be able to express  
Myself next year.*

~~~~~

I was overcome by an experience of stillness, of wanting to be completely and meditatively quiet, to simply allow the work to penetrate my endlessly distracted life and draw me into an understanding of Life that is deeper, truer, and indeed more hauntingly beautiful than anything my conceptually overburdened imagination could possibly imagine. (David G. Smith, 2012, p. xii)

#### **While I Absently Attend to the Screen in Front of Me...**

To be with those for whom you care deeply  
consists of more  
than a physical proximity.  
There is a closeness,  
a comforting connection  
in the act of listening,  
tuning out and decluttering  
the mind of distraction  
and being,  
lingering with  
the one(s) we care for.  
The gift of time, attending  
can be matched by nothing more intimate  
than listening to learn, to be;  
not listening merely to bide time  
to respond  
with one's own story.

Children, no matter the age  
are particularly sensitive,  
vulnerable to this connection...

A student complained in class,  
 creating a chorus of laments toward  
 Partial parenting...  
 of parents attending to hand-held screens and  
 a giving obligatory “uh huhs” in story pauses,  
 essentially shouting in spaces between  
 curt responses:  
**“I DON’T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT YOU.”**

Damage done. Message sent.  
 Device>Child.

I, myself, feel the sting of  
 this autopilot vacant parenting  
 when my daughter,  
 19 months of age,  
 rejoices, shouts, babbles  
 with/in my tuned-out presence,  
 her voice the fuzz of a between channel  
 on the AM radio dial.

Her actions unnoticed,  
 as I seek gratification from  
 strangers I’ll never meet,  
 who thumbpress ‘LIKE’ on a post  
 I made:  
 A photo of Holly,  
 while the real-life Holly  
 awaits my response:  
 a hug. A smile. Any acknowledgement...

She quickly grows impatient with/in  
 my blank, silent, and still  
 presence.  
 Knowing, now, my black phone holds more  
 importance in this cherished, fleeting time,  
 than does she—(battery life>life)

—Our only time at this time—

than she does.

Damage done.  
 The message is sent in silence,  
 and the opportunity lost.

I recall living moments in class,  
 exuberant learners lingering with me,  
 needing to share, connect, interact,  
 be with me,  
 only to be met with silence, rejection,  
 an angry stare directing them back  
 towards their seats in silence.

As I struggle to make anecdotal,  
 forced to record, evidence capture,  
 document what happens,  
 to appease our board, our higher-ups,  
 while students go ignored—  
 recording information presently  
 for the future which has never come,  
 but continues to loom—  
 “to not capture evidence is to  
 disservice students” they say,  
 but I feel to ignore present  
 students to record for the future  
 is an atrocity, a negligence.  
 I can not BE with my students  
 while documenting their actions  
 to death,  
 thus vilifying their vibrancy  
 as an obstruction.  
 My work is to care, to be, to listen, and attend to the needs,  
 of those held close in my context.  
 I can no longer absently attend  
 to the black rectangle clutched in my palm,  
 while the dear lives of those I love  
 play out for me to embrace  
 in each waking moment  
 of each day...  
 My numbness, our numbing oblivion,  
 can no longer be fed,  
 for it is written.  
 I have faced it.  
 I have written it,  
 “*Authentically...truth telling to  
 ...reimagine and remake [my]  
 world...*”<sup>23</sup>

~~~~~

If I could spend an extra few minutes with anyone in my life,  
it would be my grandpa,  
whom I never even met...  
which may seem strange,  
but I have heard many stories about him,  
about who he was as a person,  
and what he liked to do...  
He loved to spend time on the open prairies  
of his homestead,  
walking, exploring, and understanding the land.  
We have a set of arrowheads,  
mounted on canvas that help to tell  
the story of the land,  
before he tilled it,  
and dirtied his nails constantly  
in the toil of topsoil.  
I know 'of' him,  
through conversations,  
education from my mother,  
but that is not complete,  
that is not knowing,  
that is knowing one side,  
one person's thoughts on her father,  
not a grandfather.  
The knowing is partial,  
wisps of hints that swirl in my imagination.  
I know that he was honest, hard working, and resilient,  
having survived as a farmer through the great depression  
that ravaged southern Saskatchewan,  
scarred and poor,  
but still on his land.  
I won't ever know,  
except in my imaginings,  
what Christmas morning would have been like on their farm,  
What my mom was like as a teenager,  
How he greeted those he loved,  
And how he dealt with sadness,  
My youthful inquisitiveness and questions.  
I have, as a memory,  
his rusted Russian-built  
machinery,  
that still outlines  
the outskirts of the home quarter,  
and the apple orchard he tended  
with my grandma in the summer,  
that surrounded the now burned-out

homestead.  
 I still have, in our shed at home,  
 tools I scavenged from a rain-sunk  
 Quonset—  
 a saw, flathead, wood rasp, hand plane.  
 Each of which he held in a former life,  
 and I continue to cling to,  
 along with the wisps of imaginings  
 of who he was.  
 The never-meeting is not a sadness,  
 but an imaginative wondering,  
 more present now that my daughter Holly  
 is constantly in the loving company of her  
 grandparents.

~~~~~

### **Harkening Heart of the Teacher**

Through engaging in life writing and auto/biographical writing as research, teachers can meaningfully and powerfully articulate and reflect on the dynamics of change happening in these spaces and places.  
 (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 22)

As their writing teacher, my job is to try to help them speak again. To help them trust their own voices again. As a writer, my job is to keep walking out of the fire of silence myself, to keep telling the story of falling in and climbing out again, to let my voice sing. (Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 3)

I am convinced that by writing about our experiences, and ruminating on those experiences, and interpreting those experiences, we can become more effective teachers, as well as teachers motivated by more joy and hope.  
 (Carl Leggo, 2005b, p. 441)

*Note—here is an excerpt of an email I have drafted for our Minister of Education that I have not sent:*



## In the Wisdom of Poetic Teaching

*Hello Mr. Dirks.*

*On Wednesday, I went home as a teacher elated to have the freedom and choice as a professional to teach the way I believe teaching should happen—with student choice, voice, and genuine engaging inquiry. This was because the Calgary Board of Education had made the decision, based on beliefs and what is right for student learning and teachers, to cancel PATs for Grade 6 students.*

*Then the news came down today that you had reversed the board's decision. What is the rationale behind this? There is absolutely nothing you can show me, as a professional educator for 10 years, that students or teachers benefit from standardized tests. Standardized testing leads to standardized teaching and learning...nothing new, nothing exemplary—rote memorization of facts. Do you know or understand this, Mr. Dirks? Have you EVER stepped foot and taught in a classroom of students, trembling at having to write a PAT, full of anxiety when learning should be full of wonder and joy? Furthermore, applying a standardized test is an antiquated approach to teaching and learning. The "statistics" these tests provide matter little as they only indicate if students can read and discern the answer to generally poorly written questions.*

*We have spent years working towards an assessment structure that values feedback, engaging students to become active, democratic members of their communities. Then, you take away their feeling of having a voice by TRUMPING a board's decision much like a totalitarian dictator. How do we function as teachers within a supposed democracy when those in power do not follow democratic process by hearing the voice of the people?*

*You have made a mistake, Mr. Dirks.*

I could be angry, bitter and hopeless  
That our government, our own ministry,  
Does not understand education,  
Does not understand the concept of meaning/full  
Education.

But I choose not to be.

I choose to walk with my students with/in the curriculum  
We have created.  
Within the community that has rhizomatically  
Earthed itself in our school:

***“Had a chat with Jack yesterday about how much he misses your class because you made it feel like a family. He said he knew so much about his classmates and felt so close to them.”<sup>24</sup>***

I choose to honour students  
 For the unique stories and experiences  
 They bring to my class,  
 That they choose to share in our safe community.

I choose to allow students the freedom to write the stories  
 That speak to their hearts,  
 That connect their minds in empathic inquiry,  
 And are not formulaic credos an ‘expert’ has deemed  
 What a story is.

I choose be with children inside the classroom,  
 And learn together,  
 Not dictate rote facts and Specific Learner Outcomes  
 That minute thinkers would have you believe are vital.

I choose to allow free thinking and exploration,  
 Not standardized, formulaic thinking that  
 “*Robots can perform adequately*”—(Bob, class discussion, Feb. 6).

I choose to live by Jackie Seidel’s (2012) writing that  
 “everything that is alive only happens  
 one time ever” (p. 274).  
 And in understanding this, there is no room  
 To waste lives worrying or ruminating on  
 Step-by-step story creation,  
 Killing creativity  
 With SLOs and scripted teaching.

I choose to make space in our midst for  
 Compassion  
 Creativity.  
 Freedom.  
 Exploration.  
 Diversity.  
 Empathy.  
 Sharing.  
 Celebrating.

Not deficit and competition.  
 Not have vs. have not.  
 Not control and educational *rigor*—(Latin for “stiffness”).

I choose to accept that I do not know  
 All of the answers,  
 That many different answers exist,

And in knowing this,  
 We are more filled with wisdom  
 Than with barren, fact-filled minds.

I choose not to rush in order  
 To “cover the curriculum”  
 Delivering a boring, topsoil-deep curriculum,  
 But to allow opportunity to grow,  
 To learn, to receive feedback, and to celebrate.  
 Allowing each student to become a part of,  
 And not apart from.

I choose to build community,  
 Not anxiety, competition, and fear.

I choose to listen,  
 Because there is nothing more important than  
 Learning to listen and honour  
 The lives of those we are closest to.

I choose not to believe that education  
 Is a one size-fits-all institution,  
 But that education should  
 “include all children completely  
 with rich purpose and full human experience.”<sup>25</sup>  
 This is the wisdom of poetic teaching.

~~~~~

### **Sit and Settle With Writing**

I need to sit with this writing a little while longer,  
 I need to let it sit with/in me  
 and turn over, become.  
 Write about giving  
 the space to breathe,  
 to allow teachers to become  
 without punching holes in  
 filling bags of pedagogy....  
 Allow new teachers the time  
 to learn to listen,  
 to become,  
 because they are becoming,  
 to see the wisdom  
 in finding something positive in every situation,  
 in every scenario,

no matter how grim or dire.  
 To see that it was magical,  
 the advice and time, the literacy that was shared,  
 to make mistakes  
 and come to know these 'mistakes'  
 as learning, as becoming and process  
 never finished, never final.  
 I need the sense and wisdom  
 to find the confidence  
 in my own teaching self  
 to know that my modeling  
 is relevant and meaningful,  
 is rich and textured,  
 and that sometimes,  
 that is all that is needed,  
 and in not saying,  
 in not directing,  
 I am teaching in a more  
 thoughtful and meaningful way....  
 The teacher's way.  
 in this becoming,  
 it may appear to ignoring,  
 a passing over,  
 acquiescence,  
 but never have I been more aware,  
 more attuned to practice,  
 my own and that of the other.  
 This is what I must sit with.

~~~~~

### **In the Moments That Startle**

Some/times we hear  
 As though we are floating on our backs  
 In a wooded lake;  
 Ears half submerged,  
 As waves bounce and fill the canals—  
 Half hearing,  
 Not listening,  
 Not present in the haunting call of the loon,  
 Or the splash of a muskrat's tail,  
 Upon submersion.

Not attending to the  
 Subtle messages sent

By those with whom we choose to dwell.

Some/times students startle  
 Us into deep listening  
 With/in *“the sound of pedagogy in the silence of  
 the early morning calm.”*<sup>26</sup>

Inhale

“My aunt and uncle told me  
 I should never have been born!”  
 David blurted in frustration one day,  
 Eyes downcast, sobs caged within a  
 Body tensed in anxiety once more.

*“I remember to breathe deeply  
 in the moments that startle.”*<sup>27</sup>

I turn to David and listen deeply,  
 Giving of space and time  
 For him to be/come in the presence of  
 Self/other.

*“time to linger in conversation  
 about essential matters.”*<sup>28</sup>

Inhale

“I normally feel like no one  
 ever listens to me—  
 that my ideas don’t matter,”  
 Johnny explains,  
 Piercing blue eyes curved in worry;  
 In honesty and vulnerability,  
 Telling of a deeper  
 Rooted anxiety; of doubt.

*“I remember to breathe deeply  
 in the moments that startle.”*

Inhale

“My dog, Max—  
 he was really sick.  
 He died and we didn’t know  
 what was happening—

Now we have his chain;  
 his dog tag.  
 That's it."  
 The student touches our hearts,  
 Deeply—  
 Unaware in his courage and  
 Raw vulnerability,  
 In his telling,  
 That he would change us,  
 Would indeed linger with us,

Inviting us to

*“remember to breathe deeply  
 in the moments that startle.”*



~~~~~

That's true of writing: following a recipe never works. Words become brittle, won't pour into the mold we try so hard to fit them into. That's why writing from an outline usually produces something flat and formulaic.  
 (Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 43)

### **Moments of Pristine Calling**

In the midst of major theoretical shifts,  
 Top-down directives drowning  
 And burdening teachers  
 In assessment models  
 In anecdotal notes  
 In IRIS and  
 DOCUMENTATION,

“suggest(ions) that knowledge exists  
 beyond us,  
 away from us,  
 somewhere out there  
 that only a few have access to”<sup>29</sup>  
 The reason for being a teacher,  
 For heeding the call to teach,  
 Can become obscured  
 In the brackish shi(f)t,  
 Only to be/come  
 Crystal clear in coming  
 ‘round a corner  
 Startling a former student so quickly  
 Her reaction to hug me  
 Could only be natural—  
 A reminder in that moment  
 Of why we do not choose to teach  
 But we are called to it.  
 These startling pristine moments  
 Remind us of this call.

~~~~~

### **Dear David—Exposed, Raw**

I “examine my past, present, and future  
 Identity constructions”<sup>30</sup> ...  
 A day, a moment in this day, calls for it.

Dear David  
 Muscles tensed, neck strained  
 Wild temper unfurled,

Exposed. Raw.

A spectacle in front of all peers,  
 Shocked stares lining our path as we walk  
 My arm on his shoulder  
 His anxiety,  
 His host of complexities on display  
 (His behaviour too erratic for professional testing—  
 A sad irony)  
 Over a fear of missing his bus home—  
 Unable to cope with change—  
 New driver, New Teacher, New Year

Dear David

Exposed. Raw. Humiliated.

But for myself,  
 A chance for renewal  
 For neo-construction of my own identity text  
 Of my/self.  
 I mine back in mind  
 To similar circumstance where  
 My pride  
 My embarrassment  
 My need  
 to satiate control:  
 Escalated situations,  
 Damaged Students  
 Stained Relationship Irreparably.

Steven, removed for the audacity of  
 Wearing black knit gloves in class  
 For daring to refuse removal  
 At my demand—  
 Who threw a desk  
 Told me to “fuck off”  
 And who wrote me off  
 As I carried his rigid figure to the office.

Dylan, who I brought to tears  
 With a sarcastic joke  
 Sinister in its  
 Unintentional intentionality.

Marcy, whom I bullied  
 For bullying  
 For scrawling on  
 Bathroom walls  
 Words her dad scarred her with—  
 and she was 10.

Those moments Velcro-cling to me  
 They are me.

But...

Dear David,



Exposed. Raw. Vulnerable.

For David, I was calm.  
 Like a lone tree amongst crashing trunks,  
 Protected and sturdy from the storm.  
 When he yelled,  
 I knelt beside him.  
 When he cried,  
 I held his shoulder,  
 When he swore,  
 I gazed at him tenderly; with empathy brimming in my eyes.

There is marked beauty, renewal of self  
 When you pause  
 Proceed on unmarked hubris in teaching  
 And attend to the other;  
 To Dear David,  
 Exposed. Raw. Held.

~~~~~

### **Kill the Indian, Save the Man**

*“He’s feral, Dan,  
 He comes back from that reserve  
 Absolutely feral.  
 I can’t teach a feral Micah.”*

A passing, seething comment  
 From a colleague  
 Borne of frustration, anger,  
 But anchored to a colonial view  
 Of a First Nations youth,  
 Himself adrift  
 Be/tween  
 Two lives—  
 One on a reserve  
 East of Calgary,  
 The other in east Calgary,  
 East of Deerfoot.

I am stabbed again  
 With Richard Pratt’s words—  
 “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”<sup>31</sup>  
 Spoken well over a century ago,  
 Yet still,

Colonization exists,  
Breathes,  
Is tethered, fed, and tended to,  
In views of First Nations youth  
In schools.

And so, the question lingers,  
How will First Nations youth succeed?  
How will we work together  
In this educational system  
That continues  
Year after year,  
To honour linear literacy,  
Traditional industrial models of  
Product Product Product education.  
Economy-based education  
When some continue to refer  
To First Nations youth as  
Feral—as though they're  
Wild beasts to be tamed,  
Smoothed like Pokiak's stones,  
Rather than honoured  
As equal, contributing members  
Of our school; society,  
To be honoured.

~~~~~

### **Smoothed Like Stones**

Margaret Pokiak<sup>32</sup> honours us  
In the telling of her story,  
Of her time at 8 years of age  
Pining  
Longing  
To attend residential school  
Blinded by desire;  
By curiosity—  
As was Alice  
In her adventures in Wonderland.  
...but her father knew,  
He warned her of the dangers  
Of the outsiders—  
That they would smooth her  
Like a stone in the ebbs of water.  
I reflected on the students

I have smoothed;  
 Have worn down  
 Through threats of phone calls;  
 Shooting Steven a chilling glare  
 For being Steven.  
 Sarcastically degrading a sensitive boy  
 Named Oliver—  
 Bullying the bully...  
 Smoothing them  
 Like stones.  
 And Jas jolts me awake  
 In her telling;  
 In her reflecting on Pokiak's words—  
 Her distant life in  
 Sri Lanka.  
 The cacophony of noise;  
 Swirls of food lingering from vendors;  
 Saris and singing.  
 And she tells of her smoothing here;  
 Of her losing here.  
 Losing voice in the acquiring of language  
 And a new culture—  
 A necessary loss  
 She explains  
 For a better life.  
 But it's the  
 Silence  
 Between her words  
 That tells more—  
 The faltering of tongue on foreign ground;  
 The reticence of thought  
 Of remembering what was lost  
 What is being lost  
 That tells us of her smoothing—  
 We listen,  
 Enriched by the power of story  
 Made real, brought to life.  
 In our silence we honour  
 Their telling.

~~~~~

To be a teacher and a learner is to recognize that each needs the other for  
 its own sense of being. Life writing is the method—at the heart of  
 wisdom. (Janet Pletz, 2012, p. 212)

### Jamie's Wisdom

A quiet, sullen boy,  
 medicated for attention,  
 it was only this year  
 we heard, we listened,  
 we gave space

to what Jamie's struggle was:  
 a mother,  
 now cancer free  
 had fought the disease  
 for years

thus hitting Jamie with  
 reality  
 square in his gut,  
 and so he would complain in class of symptoms—  
 stomach/ear/head/

aches

Just for the chance  
 to hear his mom's voice  
 be comforted with the  
 knowledge she was alive  
 on the other end...  
 because for a child's eternity,  
 he didn't know,  
 he couldn't know  
 if he'd ever hear it again.

For Jamie,  
*life writing has freed him,  
 allowing him to tell stories  
 that no one else knows  
 that no one else has heard  
 and that helps others  
 that helps me  
 to understand  
 why I'm droopy, distracted, sad.  
 It makes us better.*

The sharp sharing of this story  
 was bitter,

choked with emotion and catching us  
 off balance.  
 Classmates, teacher,  
 astonished into empathy  
 suddenly understood Jamie  
 suddenly understood that  
 the tendrils of our being  
 those sacred, hidden  
 and aching tender and precious roots  
 shape  
 en/courage  
 and deeply affect us.

Jamie's wisdom in sharing  
 shocked us into understanding,  
 shifted, changed our community.  
 And we thank him  
 in our silent acknowledgement  
 of his pain;  
 of his deepest fear.  
 We encircle, tighten, and bind  
 in the sharing.

~~~~~

### **Lessons Learned From My Daughter, Holly**

I dwell often,  
 in memories of myself  
 as a teacher  
 before Holly was born,  
 and wonder what I would change—  
 what I would do over if I could  
 what I would  
 re/create  
 with/in  
 the classroom  
 with/in  
 myself, students,  
 After seeing the world  
 through the lens of a new parent.

On a recent trip to Hawaii,  
 I marveled at the delicate learning  
 taking place for Holly,  
 gingerly placing her feet

amidst the sand and briny Pacific water  
Experiencing innocently for the first time  
the cool, sucking, glomming texture  
of the sand,

entrusting her grandparents  
to keep her secure.

Or, her enthusiastic waves at  
the weary and tired passengers,  
squinting in the dark  
at the flickering screens  
dropped from the jet's ceiling,  
Holly waving exuberantly,  
whole/heartedly,  
pointing, smiling, babbling,  
each person an opportunity  
for connection.

I cringe,  
in a fleeting moment of sadness,  
at the thought,  
the realization,  
that she would one day lose this  
gleeful innocence.

And I was weighted,  
in/spirited  
with the immense responsibility we,  
as educators,  
as guides,  
curators,  
community builders,  
are entrusted with.

Not to be taken lightly,  
nor shrugged off,  
we must live this  
honouring of growth,  
of celebration.

we must reflect,  
and thus renew,  
honour children  
wholly.

Holy.

For their  
wonderings,  
musings  
understandings  
and learnings.

I consider and dwell  
amongst certain students  
whose lives call to me  
in this moment,  
in this tensionality.

And I reflect on Sarah,  
whom I scared in Grade 4  
with thought/less tales  
of the Holocaust  
shared, pondered, feared  
in class.  
Shaken, she left sobbing.  
A conversation gone to/o far  
for those too young  
not to be scared.  
I was scared.  
How could they not be?

I reflect on Fatima and Mina,  
Shaken to the core  
in Grade 6,  
age 11,  
by the unfiltered,  
unsupervised,  
sexual knowing,  
experience—  
a call for help  
from a peer.  
Who lost her childhood,  
Who never had growth-honouring.

How can we reconcile this  
'knowing'  
at such a young age? What did I do?  
Not enough.  
It could never be enough.  
I reflect on Sam,  
living in a crowded  
foster home.  
Her third.  
Abandoned by her mother,  
a drug addict (recently deceased),  
at birth.  
Relinquished by her uncle—  
her family,

at age 8.  
Living with  
Fetal Alcohol Syndrome  
and showing more resiliency  
every day,  
in every interaction,  
in every full-hearted attempt,  
than I could dream to muster.  
Period.  
Her identity,  
her self-worth,  
her value,  
hinging on the most  
beautiful, creative, and meaning/full  
artwork  
I have received from  
a student.  
These I value.  
These I treasure and  
celebrate with Sam.  
They are her hope.  
And so, Jana.  
We perform celebration-honouring,  
growth-honouring,  
in the same  
way we welcome  
each child into our classroom,  
each child into our lives.

We honour the whole child,

We celebrate their stories,  
We listen. We dwell. We wonder.  
We do not control, but we invite.  
We do not ridicule, but we encourage.  
We do not produce fear, but we explain.  
Deeply.

We use our wisdom  
gathered from reflection,  
to guide us.  
We understand each child,  
and value  
compassion, empathy, kindness  
as we mindfully dwell with our students.



“A ‘Curriculum for Miracles’ is not a deficit curriculum. It is broad and wide and deep, holding the whole of life generously without crowding. Only in such a possibility do the deepest sorrow and suffering have a place, to be experienced alongside the greatest joy and transcendent, radiant, peace.” (Jackie Seidel, 2012, p. 275)

With Holly,  
 we will celebrate and  
 be awe-stricken  
 by her curiosity  
 her exploration  
 her learning.  
 By Her.  
 And when growth-honouring  
 is needed,  
 I hope we respond as I have written:  
 with wisdom, compassion, and empathy.  
 Though, as Cohen & Bai (2012) wrote,  
 living up to your written  
 Word can prove to be  
 the utmost  
 challenge.  
 She,  
 They,  
 We  
 are worth that challenge.

~~~~~

### **Settlement in Education**

Arriving.  
 Finally.  
 After an arduous journey  
 From half a world away  
 To seek out and create a new life  
 The settler stands,  
 A silhouetted figure  
 Bold, back muscles taught and  
 Shoulders straight—  
 His etched black figure  
 A connection between the barren land  
 And the piercing blue sky  
 As he surveys what he has come to—  
 What is  
 His.

It would be easy for his mind  
 To be clouded with the pure  
 Vastness;  
 The insurmountable feeling  
 Of being swept up in the  
 Rolling prairie fescue  
 A boat adrift in a tempestuous storm  
 To see the flatness and sheer  
 Solitude  
 As a prison.  
 But as he stands and absorbs the land  
 He sees hope, not despair.  
 He sees challenges  
 That will need to be met and a  
 Life that will be cut into  
 And shared with  
 The land.  
 The dream of robust  
 Crops, swaying in the wind,  
 The fruits of his toil,  
 Mixes with his vision of the land.

Echoing this experience  
 A century later,  
 I am the settler and I have prospered  
 And come to love the land—  
 Become a part of the land  
 And the land a part of me.  
 The land is  
 Education—  
 The full crops are the understandings  
 Gained and shared between  
 Myself and my neighbours.

The beginnings were dire and difficult.  
 I had come to my land  
 With preconceived notions, expectations,  
 And ideas  
 But the earth quickly did away  
 With these  
 And almost as quickly  
 Tempted me to leave it...  
 To seek a life elsewhere.  
 Tried as I may, what had worked  
 Back home on the land  
 Did nothing but produce sparse  
 Clumps of stunted yields.

My neighbours,  
 Students, parents, peers,  
 Were reluctant to help me  
 In my early years—  
 Disinterested, tuned out  
 —By the harshness of the land—  
 And by other settlers who had  
 Destroyed their hope in it—  
 Who had told them the land wasn't for them  
 That they would never succeed—  
 The Land would win.  
 As if that were a win for anyone.

I knew so very little about the land.  
 But freshly arrived  
 I could not admit this  
 Ignorance.  
 I plied my basal skills  
 And forged through those first  
 Few long months on the land  
 Being kind to my neighbours,  
 Offering support,  
 Letting them know their  
 Homesteads and crops looked good,  
 Even though I could tell  
 They were worse off  
 Than my own,  
 Dust hewn faces  
 Grimacing into the horizon.  
 Banks of topsoil laying against any windstop  
 Unanchored to the ground  
 With the crop.

Funny how the land can  
 Blind you and divide you.

There were others...  
 Who had faced my  
 Hardships—  
 Hardened and set  
 Unwilling to risk helping me  
 Or my students in our endeavour.

The Land, the People on the land,  
 Were constantly changing,  
 But these first arrivals

Clung to their dangerous notions  
 Of what it meant to be a settler  
 And there was no negotiation—  
 What had worked in the past  
 Would serve us well now.  
 And they were content with their  
 Stunted crops, begotten in a  
 Lonely and prideful way,  
 Without contribution  
 from their neighbours.

But  
 They  
 Could not see  
 Or admit to seeing,  
 That we were all close to  
 Starvation  
 On that land—  
 Too focused on what  
 Had worked before.

But something, some hope  
 Held me to my place.

It was the hope  
 (later turned into knowing)  
 Of a shared connection  
 To the land, and each other,  
 A shared acceptance, respect  
 And understanding  
 That would allow us  
 To prosper in our  
 Place.  
 We began to listen to each other,  
 My neighbours and I.  
 We laughed, we cried, we were kind  
 And we worked the land with new tools  
 And knowledge  
 And changed it together  
 So that we understood it  
 And it was part of us as individuals—and  
 Of our community.  
 Crops stretched from the  
 Rich, cared-for soil,  
 New-found energy  
 Enabling growth seldom seen

In this place, in my place before.

As steward of my place  
 I have come to trust my judgment  
 Of the land.  
 I listen to neighbours  
 And share the experience of the land  
 Producing varying crops,  
 Each individual stalk differing  
 As each understanding differs  
 In our community partnership.  
 Remaining  
 Honest with myself  
 With what is truly important  
 What allows me to exist  
 In this place.  
 A shared understanding and  
 Deep-rooted respect for  
 the power of the land  
 And the partners that share it  
 To produce our flaxen harvest.

From time to time  
 We have setbacks and failures.  
 We must reassess our  
 Approaches—cultivate  
 And harrow the land  
 But we return  
 With new ideas, new methods  
 To rejuvenate the earth  
 And once again make it  
 Accessible to all.

Neighbours move,  
 And although it is sad to see them go  
 I am heartened with the knowledge  
 That we each have changed  
 For the better  
 Having affected one another  
 In our shared community  
 Amidst the vast, beautiful prairie.  
 A place not barren and empty,  
 But a place of hope, courage, empathy,  
 And understanding.

~~~~~

That's true of writing: following a recipe never works. Words become brittle, won't pour into the mold we try so hard to fit them into. That's why writing from an outline usually produces something flat and formulaic. (Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 43)

### **Dwelling Momentarily Amidst Curriculum-as-Plan**

I missed dwelling today,  
 In the space shared between  
 Curriculum-as-plan/curriculum-as-lived...  
 That beautifully tensioned zone,  
 “*an extraordinarily unique and precious place,  
 a hopeful place, a trustful place, a careful place—  
 essential  
 a  
 human  
 place.*”<sup>33</sup>

I sat in a place,  
 Devoid and barren of the richness of a  
 Classroom mosaic.  
 A workshop entitled:  
 “Designing Worthwhile Work”  
 Where we were withering,  
 Frost-laden tulips of early spring,  
 Together under ministerial orders,  
 Designed to  
*Enlighten,*  
*Aspire* towards  
*Transform* our teaching selves  
 And thus the lives of our students.

We were encouraged to explore;  
 To identify **TEN** orders,  
 Like Alberta's commandments:  
 Though Shalt:

1. ***Know how to learn***
2. ***Think critically***
3. ***Identify/solve complex problems***
4. ***Manage information***
5. ***Innovate***
6. ***Have entrepreneurial spirit???***
7. ***Use multiple literacies***

8. *Develop communication skills*
9. *Demonstrate global/cultural understanding*
10. *Apply career + life skills*

We talked, mulled, and planned.  
 We were facilitated  
 (with samples)  
 As though 10 commandments  
 Could guide, transform, revolutionize  
 Teaching careers and  
 Lives of students.

Barren of emotion  
 Akin to a yard machine's user's manual,  
 The experience chilled,  
 Reminded me to "*beware of the boxes*"  
 As Chambers (2012) would write...

Compassion?  
 Empathy?  
 Understanding what it means  
 To be human?

With these ten orders,  
 I am left to wonder and question:  
 Are we producing  
 Humans  
 or  
 Commodities,  
 Marked and measured to ensure  
 Economic futures,  
 With the commandments  
 Bereft of understanding,  
 Of the literacy of empathy,  
 Leaving followers  
 "*condemned to plan for faceless people...  
 defined in terms of performance roles.*"<sup>34</sup>

~~~~~

### **In Becoming Vulnerable**

In be/coming the teacher  
 I said/say I am,  
 (weary of wanting what I am not)  
 I have,

In thinking Aoki's 'unthought,'  
 Opened wondrous spaces,  
 Safe spaces,  
 Tensioned spaces,  
 Excruciating spaces—  
 For when we attend,  
 When we deeply care about living well with others—  
 Knowing that the most important curriculum,  
 Is with/in the creation of "sites of abundance  
 In which we must seek to live together with students."<sup>35</sup>

We open up to the Aokian slash—

Learning to live with/in  
 Joy/Sorrow,  
 Hatred/Acceptance  
 Past/Present/Future.  
 Vibrancy/Uncertainty  
 Stasis/Transformation

Stopping in at the office last night,  
 En route home,  
 I was jolted off balance  
 In a tensioned site,  
 Still learning to "accept  
 That the past is always present,  
 Always a part of living."<sup>36</sup>

Robert and I,  
 Constructed a complex relationship  
 In the two years we spent together:  
 Teacher/Taught.  
 Precarious, Dangerous, Tensioned...  
 But we learned to dwell together.

He, full of self-doubt blooming into self-hate,  
 Shaken and scared at the attempt to write,  
 For at least if he didn't,  
 If he chose not to,  
 He had that excuse,  
 That power.

We worked, though.  
 He typed. He voice recorded. He spoke.  
 His contempt be/came trust.



I scribed and he experienced expression.  
 He saw himself as a part *of*,  
     No longer apart *from*,  
 Prepositions can signify so much in their usage.

I was struck,  
 Deeply saddened suddenly,  
 Upon hearing from our assistant principal  
 That Robert has been struggling,  
 Immensely,  
 Now two years removed from my classroom,  
 From our site  
 To the point where depression and anxiety,  
 Geminis of mental health,  
 Are forcing his thoughts and inclinations  
 In an escalating fashion...  
     Towards suicide,  
     That it would be easier  
     Than hating himself,  
     Than being alone  
 In his anxiety, in his learning disability.

I wonder, shocked,  
 At what we can do?  
 Could I have done more?  
 My insecurities, my tensions,  
 Rising air pockets in water,  
 To burst.

So now I wait.  
 I have not seen him yet,  
 And I cannot bring up this private  
 Knowing with him;  
 Our relationship severed by age and  
 Architecture.

I wonder if he will talk to me about it...  
 Are our rhizomes still alive,  
 Spared the poisons of his self-hate?

Students/Teachers  
 So attached,  
 Yet as we all  
 Be/come—  
 Ever be/coming,  
 We are echoes through and over  
 Valleys, cliffs, and meandering pathways...

Carried on the wind,  
 Messages through shimmering aspen.  
 We call. We linger.  
 Faintly. Present.  
 Coming to “**moment(s) of recognition and be(ing)**  
**Startled awake.**”<sup>37</sup>

~~~~~

### **Nice Shirt, Faggot**

Anti-bullying day.  
 A chance to unite  
 To collectively stand  
 With afflicted victims:  
     The singled out.  
     The meek.  
     Those that dare wander  
     Along a lonelier path—  
 Gender, age, race:  
     Accepted, celebrated  
 Only to crash  
     Plummet  
     Destroy  
 In the moment of a comment  
 Walking up the stairs...  
 “Nice shirt, faggot. Couldn’t you at least  
 Get a man-cut shirt?”  
 Glancing at my colleague,  
 Unable to make sense of in/sensitivity,  
 I became shocked-aware of the deep roots  
     Evil rhizomes  
 Of apathy, of ignorance, of intolerance.  
 We have more difficult work to complete,  
 Than we can/want to know.

~~~~~

### **An Aspen Leaf in the Chinook Winds**

In conference/confidence  
 With an intern teacher,  
 New and young with wild ideas  
 And vibrancy,  
 We discussed her complex class,  
 Typical in its fabric  
 Of diversities.

***“How do you reach them all?”***

Leggo’s refrain drifted into my presen(t)ce:

***“This is the teacher’s way...”***

The lingering and being with;  
With self, with other. Attending in place and time...

***“Teachers can feel like an aspen leaf  
in the warm chinook winds,”*** I responded—

Shimmering, whirling in the midst of apparent  
Chaos.

But when we pause,

Slow down for tea and linger in the chaos,  
We can take time to be; to ***“dwell aright with/in it.”***<sup>38</sup>  
to reflect and attend—  
to notice what is of true import—The unique lives of students.

Small ideas like  
Grade rankings,  
Pending due dates,  
“Quick fix programs/scripted resources,”<sup>39</sup>  
PLANNING, PLANNING, PLANNING  
And neo-industrial models,  
Heap heavily and deflate to the side,  
As the joy of being, questioning, exploring  
***“the teacher’s way...”***

Take hold; keep you attached  
To the branch, able to see  
able to be/come

Your/self.

An aspen leaf in the warm Chinook breeze,  
Learning to dwell well amidst the  
Tensionality of a classroom.



**A Clearing Amidst the Brambles  
And Ro(u)ot(e)s of a Classroom**

My Uncle Oliver,  
Two years younger than his brother,  
My dad,  
Disappeared  
One stark winter night,  
31 years ago...  
After leaving a cabin  
In the deep, dark boreal forest of  
Northern Saskatchewan.



Suffering deeply of mental illness,  
Whisperings of schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder,  
His body was discovered,  
Or rather his clothing,  
By a group of hunters  
2 years later,  
Bringing to end a desperate  
Un/knowing.

I wrote this story,  
Be/came vulnerable in  
Front of our class,  
After a recent complicated conversation with  
My mother  
About Uncle Oliver—  
A spark in our normally mundane,  
Protected conversations.  
(we don't talk about such things in our family).

But I want to talk.  
 I need to share and create the protective enclave to share  
 To be/come *vulnerable*—(**Latin for “wounded”**)—  
 Thus knowing that we share wounds,  
 We do not have to accept pain alone.

Upon my telling  
 Of my family’s wound—my own complicated conversation,

Carly’s hand darted up, story already spilling out:  
 An aunt who has recently chosen,  
 Decided to run away, disappear  
 Leaving family lost and worried,  
 Confused and questioning,  
 Kids, husband, father, left to mend and pull together.

Tyler’s hand next:  
 Upon accidentally walking in  
 Mid-conversation be/tween mother and father,  
 Discussing lingering pain, still present,  
 Of her brother,  
 Drowned at age four—  
 A family’s grief, an uncle unknown.

The class,  
 Silent in honouring,  
 Knew they were gifted these stories.  
 In my vulnerability,  
 A clearing amidst the brambles and ro(u)t(e)s  
 Of a classroom was created,  
 For students to relate  
 To be/come empathetic, to understand  
 With/in that vibrant, confusing, tensioned space of  
 Wisdom.

~~~~~

### **Seeing Anew the Wonder of the Classroom**

In the intensity (**from Latin *intensus*, “stretched, strained, tight”**)  
 of a cosmopolitan classroom  
 in the mass chaos of my tangled thought patterns,  
 much in the ways of the class  
 the wonder of each student, the gifts and moments, are lost.

Through working with Amy, my intern,

however,  
 I am able to step back and observe  
 as the class be/comes;  
 continues  
 and I am warmed in my witnessing of gifts.

***Witness to...***

A strong and energetic new teacher  
 whose warmth and generosity of  
 self and spirit  
 is a gentle reminder of what is important, of why we enter the classroom.

***Witness to...***

Complex collaborations and consensus  
 while students construct and care  
 deeply in their work.

***Witness to...***

Kindness from a boy in explaining—  
 in taking time to talk to a vulnerable boy—  
 caring for him deeply upon his tearful return to class;  
 an unknown leader.

***Witness to...***

The whispers of bright ideas and understandings,  
 that, from afar, clatter like spilled pocket change,  
 yet are purpose/full and replete with wisdom.

***Witness to...***

A teacher learning, be/coming  
 a blessed mix of in/secure  
 kindly firm,  
 drawn naturally to those most in need.

***Witness to...***

My/self becoming, changing amidst observations,  
 and these deep reflections and meditations in  
 past/present  
 self/other  
 seeing anew the wonder of the classroom.

~~~~~

Perhaps we should then bear our sadnesses with greater assurance than our joys. For they are the moments when something new enters into us, something unknown to us; our feelings, shy and inhibited, fall silent, everything in us withdraws, a stillness settles. (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 51)

### **In a Sadness Carried**

All that is needed at times:  
 A gentle prompt,  
 A boot scuff on topsoil  
 To uncover the emotions  
 Restrained in depths—  
 To write/share  
 To comfort and encircle one another.

Ellie did a little inside  
 When they targeted her,  
 Made her life hell  
 For what her sister was—  
 This—a permanent mark  
 On a fragile girl who could crack  
 In the moment of  
 Thoughtless classroom banter.  
 We write, we share, we gather  
***“To learn and to understand—to feel safe  
 In trust,”***  
 Ellie says now...

How he, David, swept from  
***“Mr. B, I can’t,  
 It’s too painful”*** to  
 Openly sharing; giving to us his sadness—  
 A grandma’s sudden death.  
***“People can understand that I get angry...  
 that it comes from somewhere.  
 This year we know more about each other,  
 I express myself, and work with people better”***  
 David says now...

How she had the strength  
 To write a letter, a poem,  
 To grandpa,  
 Inflicted with cancer,

I cannot conceive,  
 But the sparks of recognition,  
 Of knowing that certain sorrow of  
 Anguished death was  
 Shared amongst three others—  
 All of whom had experienced the  
 Wrath of cancer.  
 A battle lost,  
 But they were tighter,  
 More understood and less alone  
 For having shared.  
*“We understand each other better when we write,  
 when we tell and share. You feel closer and it hurts because  
 you know them, but that’s ok,”*  
 Phil says now.

Tears welling, a voice shimmering in and out,  
 The painful sharing of a loved dog’s  
 Last moments—the needle  
 The whimper, the sobs...  
 And silence.;  
 Classmates giving the silence, the space,  
 So full with concern and empathy,  
 And a chord is struck—  
 Four more tell of a lost pet.  
 With a commonality and sharing,  
 The insecure is secured  
 With/in our group.  
 We write, we share, we gather.  
 To learn;  
 To understand  
 To feel safe in trust,  
 And the thriving rhizomatic connections—  
 Our strong, tender community.

~~~~~

I sense their hesitation to break the sanctity of the silence, preferring  
 instead to allow the story to linger where it seems truly to belong—in the  
 silent mystery that is teaching. (Ted T. Aoki, 1991/2005, p. 393)



### An Opening. A Wisdom.

Jamie, a quiet introvert  
 Today had the courage to share  
 And we all learned  
 We were all taught to see beyond preconceived notions  
 Of what or who someone is.  
 To see in/to  
 The story behind the person—  
 The layers and rhizomes  
 That make us who we are.  
 As he shared, the room grew  
 Silent—an intensely thick silence of attending—  
 Of truly being present with Jamie,  
 His voice cracking  
 As he explained his fears  
 And worries—  
 His mom's breast cancer;  
 Surviving,  
 And her courage—  
 How he adored her courage—  
 Saw her as a role model of strength.

An opening.  
 A wisdom.  
 For others to share their stories of cancer  
 Of battles.  
 And Jamie taught us  
 About compassion, respect  
 And not to overlook someone—  
 To with/hold judgment.

He'd never,  
 He later explained,  
 Shared this before—this feeling, this fear.  
 He still could not speak it, could not say it,  
 Because *“to say it  
 Makes the cancer, makes the death  
 Real.”*  
 Eyes down,  
 Voice quivering and finger fidgeting,  
 Jamie breathed a sigh.  
*“That felt good,”* he stammered.  
*“To share. To tell.”*  
 To awaken us to his story.

~~~~~

### **An Emergent Meeting**

“Emergent meeting at 3:05.

Please be there.”

The message crackled over the intercom.

???

How do you walk this

Fine line as a teacher

When, on days like today

The wind is vacuumed out of the room

And the silence amongst fifty adults

Is thick,

Eyes stinging.

On this day that

Some say we changed,

Our country changed

With shootings in Ottawa.

This is our job—to listen and

Attend to the questions, worries, and silent moments,

The pauses in between speaking,

More full of meaning than the questions themselves,

Which matter most...

On this day we learned,

A colleague, a friend

Was running, hiding

In a women’s shelter

To stay safe from a boyfriend,

Her child’s father,

Deemed a perilous danger to their very being.

So...

How can we pause and

Make sense of this work,

These events...

And still attend to Phil,

Whose hockey coach recently

Committed suicide,

Or Noah, whose anxiety

Is keeping him up all night.

This is our job; our life; our meaning.

To pause. To attend to. To listen wholly.



### A Tender Fine Balance

Teaching is a tender, fine balance.  
 Sometimes we are actors in a play  
 Both in, and on, a constant stage.  
 I tire of the power of the myth  
 That we teach democracy in  
 Undemocratic ways—  
 This grates on me, this juxtaposition,  
 Yet I'll falter and default to  
 Control when threatened  
 As naturally as I may smile  
 When uncomfortable.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance  
 Between hope and brutishness:  
 Knowing when to push certain students;  
 Knowing the same push  
 Will guide the next student over  
 The edge.  
 And yet,  
 One other will dig in, immovable,  
 Unreachable.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance  
 Between truths and which truths  
 To leave out—to protect  
 The children, the students,  
 When they ask “*does ISIS want to  
 Kill us?*”  
 Answering as best I can  
 Each of their questions;  
 Pleading ignorance and feeling  
 Abdul's eyes first on me;  
 Then glued to his barren desktop  
 When students ask about  
 Islam and Muslim students.  
 A fine balance to  
 Create a safe  
 Community of inquisitive questioners  
 And those willing to answer.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance  
 Between work life and a

Daughter who needs me—  
 A wife (secretively 6 weeks along)  
 Who needs me;  
 Between a breath of fresh air, an escape;  
 My mind clouded with corrupt thoughts  
 About our freedom; our safety  
 And that of my colleague,  
 My friend and her daughter  
 Seeking their own refuge,  
 From a war on their home front—  
 Familial refugees—  
 With/in a local women's shelter  
 Unable to leave, to work—  
 Prisoners of threats, plans, and what might.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance,  
 One fraught with constant inner framing—  
 Girls in tears,  
 Told to kill themselves by cutting,  
 By an ignorant and naïve peer,  
 Who wept and wailed in the hall  
 When I confronted him—  
 Unable to speak, explain,  
 Because, at the age of 10,  
 He didn't know, truly, the depth  
 Of what he had uttered.  
 And in that moment,  
 I could wreck our relationship—  
 I could threaten and yell,  
 But we talk, and he cries  
 Knowing he has done wrong...  
 And we are ok...

Teaching is a tender, fine balance  
 Of stern respect and compassion,  
 One I've ruined before  
 Toppling over the edge of stern  
 Into spite and anger  
 Thus losing students forever—  
 Because students do not forget the wounds of  
 How you were with them,  
 As easily as they shed knowledge of the  
 Grande Paix de Montreal and how that affects us today.

Teaching is a tender, fine balance in which I am constantly  
 Fumbling towards making aright.

~~~~~

Pedagogically I learned again and again that consciously creating a classroom that was a good and a right place for Marie, with enough space and time for a child like her to participate wholly and fully each day, all day, in everything we did together, was a classroom that was good for all children and also for their teacher. (Jackie Seidel, 2012, p. 279)

**“For a Boy Who’s Never Been to a Birthday Party”**

***“For a boy who’s never  
Been to a birthday party”***

And felt the kinship of a sleepover  
Or sharing presents with peers  
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

***“For a boy who’s never  
Been to a birthday party”***

Life is exhausting, spinning, dark  
With shoves, leers, and taunts  
Anxiety and exhaustion contorting face in pain  
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

***“For a boy who’s never  
Been to a birthday party”***

Every exchange, every glance is a threat;  
And tensioned shoulders set firm;  
Ready for reciprocation  
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

***“For a boy who’s never  
Been to a birthday party”***

Self harm and brutalized esteem  
Go hand through hand  
Ruggedly raw fingers clasping tightly together  
School is a difficult, isolating hell.

And so,

***“For a boy who’s never  
Been to a birthday party”***

A teacher requires an extra place of patience and compassion  
An arm extended, not a door slammed closed  
Because school is a difficult, isolating hell.

~~~~~

### **We Don't Have Time**

*“My mom and aunt think  
I'm the type to commit suicide, Mr. B.”*

David said, plain-faced, earnestly.

The statement stings still  
Two months later  
The wary face of an  
11-year-old boy  
    the speaker  
Still fresh; still presently lingering...

In the same mining of memory,  
A colleague's stinging comment that  
*“Grade 9s don't have time  
for personal narrative,  
wishy washy stories”*

The comment itself smacking someone  
Such as David hard in the gut.

*{don't have time...  
Type to commit suicide}*

I wonder how we don't have  
Time,  
How we don't have space  
To share, open, and explore  
Our complicated relations,  
    Our identities  
To learn and be with/in the literacy of empathy...

For while Grade 9s  
Practice  
Practice  
Practice

Writing business letters and  
Selected essays of varying topics,  
Their minds, their thoughts and questions  
Yearn for attending.

~~~~~

## Honesty in Mentoring

We welcomed wholly today  
 An intern teacher  
 A new teacher in/to  
 Our midst  
 Though I can't say wholly  
 With honesty.  
 I am excited;  
 And know it's a strong step for myself,  
 But questions and niggings haunt  
 And bubble to the surface  
 As does espresso  
 Steamed and gathering as liquid,  
 My self doubt  
 Bubbles to the surface  
 Pricking, stinging with/in.

*Are you strong enough to mentor a new teacher?*  
*Can you give up control—allow exploration?*  
*Allow space for panic and chaos?*  
*Will the students like her better???*

She's younger,  
         Bubblier.  
                 Fresh.  
 Wonder what happened to  
 The days I was the  
         Young-Fresh-Teacher...  
 In a pencil snap!  
         A binder click...  
 Those days are gone.

As Chambers (2004) writes

Though

*Courage comes from the French coeur and Latin cor for heart.*  
*To find and follow the path with heart*  
*requires courage and heart.*

The pricking sting  
 The telson  
 Of doubt and the question of self must play out  
 Must be sought and given time.  
 In the exploration,

In that daring game of inner solitude<sup>40</sup>

I come to know.

To my/self more profoundly,  
more lovingly.

And in that starting to know my self,  
I open to the possibility of the other.

~~~~~

### Hardened Students Harken Tenderness

Moments

Pauses

Re/sonate (Latin: *resonare*—re-sound)

Echo

With/in.

Some waves bouncing closer  
In similar circumstance  
Or in moments of solace,  
And solitude.

**“Be attentive to what rises up  
inside you,  
and place it above everything you  
notice round about.  
What goes on  
In your innermost being  
Is worth all of your love.”<sup>41</sup>**

Finally unencumbered  
With debris of the mind...

The broken blond  
10-year-old girl sat across  
From my principal  
Adjacent to me  
Trembling,  
Culpable,  
Having scrawled,

Smeared



A peer's name on washroom stalls,  
Appended by

***"BITCH" "SLUT" "WHORE"***—(paternal nicknames in her life)

Angry, young and seething,  
I turned to her and growled  
*"Why'd you do, Becky?! This is bullying!"*  
My words,  
Their brute force,  
Sinking her further  
Alienating her from another adult,  
Until Mark paused,  
Caught my eye with/in a flicker,  
And intoned that  
***"We don't want to bully bullies"***

Simple. Equal. Opposite.

***"An eye for an eye will make us all blind"***—Gandhi

That bud of wisdom shaping my understanding,  
Molding me towards knowing  
That the most difficult,  
Hardened  
Students  
Harken a more tender,  
More graceful approach.  
Hardened students harken this tenderness.

~~~~~

### **Curriculum Plan/Lived**

There are moments teaching  
That, in spite of careful planning  
When intended outcomes are not only  
                                          Not reached;  
                                                                                          They are necessarily abandoned  
As paths not taken  
Diminished in importance  
And fading in the swirl of dust in a rearview mirror—

Sudden stops and swerves  
Are constant in practice  
And to ignore these signs—these needs

Would be to purposefully constrain and structure a community;  
De-life a vibrancy.

A student stood,  
Her turn to respond in debate.  
Throat cleared,  
Notes checked  
And the class waited.

...  
Moments

...  
Passed

and in that looming stopgap  
my mind raced back  
connected to similar  
moments of fragility  
of vulnerability  
when students were damaged,  
shattered  
with snide remarks, sneers, giggles.

Perhaps

*“because we trust each other,  
we know each other and we’re trustworthy”* Jonah suggested.

But the class,  
This class waited while Lucy  
Rolled words on tongue,  
Articulation elusively escaping.

There,  
Standing alone  
Frozen—an immediate victim in years passed—  
A target.

Yet this year  
Whispers of encouragement  
From her team  
Opposing team  
Audience.

The words never came,  
But  
With/in their absence,  
We dwelt in compassion and support.

When ridicule would be easier; expected.

**“Our class is safer. More understanding”** (Bob in interview)

More likely to swerve to caring than  
Following rigidly planned routes.

When Lucy sat,  
She was more a part of  
Than a/part from  
And our community layers fastened tighter  
In acceptance.

~~~~~

### **Lingering in Lucy’s Wisdom**

Lucy,  
A lovely Grade 6 student  
Possesses that intelligence  
Overlooked  
Undervalued  
Underrealized  
Potential:

Emotional intelligence.

A literacy for understanding her peers’  
Facial expressions, posture, eyes...  
More attentive and attended to  
Than most people give time for...  
Indeed her **“literacy of the other”**  
As my dear friend Meghan Morden  
Would say,  
Is remarkably deft.  
So, then,  
When she states in class discussion  
That **“we must be kind  
Towards one /another,  
That we should listen because  
We don’t know the stories that people keep,”**  
Harbour,  
**“Of cancer, of anxiety, of abuse  
So we should be gentle.”**

We stopped.  
Attentive. Attending. Lingering. Listening.

To/wards Lucy's wisdom, deeply and thoughtfully.

How writing had opened doors for this wallflower,  
I later marveled,  
Now blossoming

Radiant and unfurling her  
Intuition; her intelligence.

\*\*\*\*\*

I thought of Lucy today  
Dozy on my way to work  
Eyes sunken and stinging in exhaustion  
Catching contacts more easily on heavy blinks,  
Skin blanched the white  
Of sleep deprivation that new parents understand,  
But don't speak of easily.  
Another long anxious night  
Of my daughter Holly's  
Fitful sleeps...  
Unable since we moved  
To settle herself—  
Not yet comfortable or 'home'  
And her mother, eight weeks pregnant,  
Unable to give  
As Holly is used to receiving.  
In stark contrast to previous years,  
I was not  
Dreading work in this state,  
My students care—for me, the other. For selves.  
I would share my night in a quip  
And they would understand.  
We have found that  
Less and less  
Do we need to hide,  
Protect  
Wall ourselves:

*“we're more open to everyone,  
this year it's comfortable  
to be with everyone in this group,  
we're more kind to each other”*

Dwayne

Our sharing,  
And blossoms of wisdom  
From Dwayne, Lucy, Noah,  
Linger and re/new  
My {teaching}self.

~~~~~

## Response to Our Digitallightningspeedrapidactionworld

*“Normally I feel like*

*no one  
ever  
listens to me”*

Dwayne explained...

How many of us  
Ever  
Feel  
Listened to?  
Ever,  
In our  
Digitallightningspeedrapidactionworld  
Do we make time to  
Honour the ideas,  
Thoughts,  
Stories of those with whom  
We dwell—  
Attending solely to one person—  
Without glancing at a phone or  
Fibre optically delivered program?

Our classrooms echo  
Our world.

We invite and encourage technology  
Yet become upset when students can't attend to listening...  
—and it's not  
that they do not want to listen  
or that they have nothing to  
say...  
We must,  
In teaching,  
Rehumanize and decolonize  
The dependence we have developed;  
Have grown accustomed to  
So that students like Dwayne  
Can find their voices  
Can be heard  
Amidst the turbidity  
Technology produces.

~~~~~

### His Father's Son

*“My glimpses into strangers’ lives expand  
my compassion for other people and  
deepen my understanding of  
the larger world” (Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 94).*

Slumped into the metal folding chair across from me  
the father’s agitation,  
his anxiety is palpable.  
**(from *Latin palpare***  
**“touch gently”—**  
though this is not a gentle feeling)  
and in that frosty moment  
his eyes averted;  
legs jiggling in unison  
he transports me back  
twenty-five years  
to his life—  
his experience in school.

No longer present,  
but present with/in his past.

How has school shaped this man? This father?  
How his experience

Continues to be with him...

Continues to shape him...

Continues to haunt him...

How many others like him have I  
helped to shape?

A sarcastic comment.

A comparison unwarranted and unfair?

A moment of false listening

to a story—

deceiving no one with my lack of presence

but myself.

These moments remind me  
if the lingering power,  
the lingering note  
we have in the lives of students,  
and they in our own.

To forget—to negate or refuse that  
influence in the confluence  
of our shared experience  
irrevocably damages.

**\*SNAP!\*** Attend!

Brought to present,  
the man's son,  
a member of my class,  
taps his knee  
and averts his eyes...  
his father's son.

I must work to keep his  
experience, his life at school  
from echoing,  
from becoming  
his father's.

~~~~~

### **Gift of Silent Reflection**

So much is communicated,  
So much is gifted,  
In that thought/full post-sharing pause  
Than any vocal reaction could create.  
Those precious, tender  
& vulnerable  
Moments  
Lingering as a class  
To honour the explicitly  
Clear and honest sharing—  
An elegy to a dying grandfather  
Afflicted with cancer.  
In our collective silence  
Lies a grasping,  
A coaxing of meaning,  
That is incredible.  
That is astonishingly loud.  
That is astonishingly heartfelt and tender  
In its solidarity and cohesion.

~~~~~

### To Walk Well With David

To see David tense and caged  
 pacing in the hall,  
 a second time having stormed out  
 mid-class;  
 a third time in two days,  
 could fracture your heart.  
 But,  
 in that moment,  
 that tension of time,  
 as I gave him space to consider  
 space to reflect,  
 talking in calm tones—

***“I thought I’d have the answers by now!!”***

I scream at myself.

***“I thought this got easier.”***

And

We

Linger.

I give him space,  
 his face contorted in anxiety;  
 in defeat.  
 Being bullied on the bus,  
 day after day of worry.  
 Being constantly reminded  
 that he is different.  
 In this agony,  
 this telling and confiding  
 with/in the space created,  
 I feel our bond deepen,  
 our eyes meet,  
 and he is vulnerable—raw.  
 Would he allow, I’d squeeze him tight;  
 let him know we care about him,  
 that he has infinite chances and opportunities,  
 because he matters.  
 In that moment,  
 I realize it has become easier.  
 I have not done the ‘easy’ thing:  
 David is not in the office,  
 another adult abandoning  
 this child who  
 needs to be pulled tighter,  
 not shunned away.  
 It is easier for I know



I can now look myself in the  
 the mirror;  
 I have not damaged another  
 fragile child,  
 as I have with past weaknesses  
 with my anger and impulse;  
 spite and pride.  
 In the act of creating that space  
 for David to share, be courageous in vulnerability,  
 I have chosen a new route/root,  
 a divergent path on which to  
 walk well with  
 David.

~~~~~

### **A Tallship in Irons**

***I am in irons.***

Sails luffing,  
 Flapping listlessly directly into the  
 Headwinds,  
 A tallship in irons  
 Floats—  
 Directionless,  
 At the mercy of the currents,  
 Of the headwinds,  
 Bobbing and liling.

I am, at times the tallship  
 In irons.

***I am in irons.***

There, I stated it.  
 I wrote it.  
 With the wisdom that in writing  
 Comes the ability to transfigure, transform.  
***“When I name myself or when I am named by others,  
 I am created (constructed or written) with identities.”***<sup>42</sup>

I am scared of being in irons,  
 Being that bored teacher,  
 That deflated teacher,  
 Who has given up, complacent.

Sails let out,  
Grasping for inspiration,  
To in/spirit my teaching,  
My practice.

But...  
7 years in one school.  
7 years teaching Grade 5,  
Grade 6.  
I am the Grade 5 and 6 teacher.

Too scared,  
Hesitant to try a new grade—  
Fear of failure,  
Fear of being unable to ‘*control,*’  
Of not being able to identify with  
Older kids,  
Keeps me in place,  
Static.

*I am in irons.*

On the distant horizon,  
There is opportunity,  
There is transformation,  
But for now,  
I am adrift,  
Grasping headstrong into the wind,  
At possibility with/in mandated curriculum,  
Threat of another year of archaic  
Provincial achievement tests,  
Having to prepare students to write  
Formulaic newspaper articles  
And artificial stories  
“beginning, middle, end”...  
As though stories have endings, and beginnings...  
We are always in the middle,  
In the midst.

*I am in irons.*



~~~~~

## Pervasive Power of Colleagues

As a teacher and leader at my school,  
 I like to believe I am seen  
 As a role model;  
 A practitioner.  
 So, I question deeply where my  
 Leadership was  
 During a recent staff meeting  
 Gone awry in  
 Anger, questions, volatility.

Summed up as stress-induced,  
 Yet the vicious language  
 Cut the air and smothered our voices  
 In malice.

The conversation articulated the story  
 Of a student—  
 Troubled and needing help,  
 Unknown to me—  
 Yet his teachers' wounding words,  
 Adjectives like “ass” and “dick”  
 Further cementing his fate as  
 Unreachable—even to those of us who  
 Did not know him.

And I was  
                               angry;  
   embarrassed;  
   ashamed.  
 Of my self. Of the broken promise I created.  
 Of the staff.

Yet, for that boy, did I have the courage,  
 The wisdom,  
 To stand up and do what is right?  
 To follow through on what I preach in the classroom.

### **Hypocrisy.**<sup>43</sup>

Students first?

It creates anxiety and discomfort with/in  
 That we can argue against  
 Bullying, persecution, stereotyping.

Yet we can brand the most sinister labels  
On students, as though they are product.  
Final. Always. All Ways.  
Rather than continually be/coming  
In the poetics of life.

But, the silent majority can sit and seethe,  
Blaming colleagues and selves,  
For not upholding what we promise—  
That each student will be treated with equity and dignity.  
How many times will this scene continue to play out  
In my career within staffrooms and parking lots,  
And snide conversations in the hall,  
Before I will take a stand to stop it.



*(Masks created by Jonah, Ellie, and Tyler during a large project in which the group decided to create a play representing a myth of the night sky in the Iroquois Confederacy)*



*(Below is a visual representation 'Greed Tank' by Bob, when he was asked to respond to what makes him worried or sad in the world).*



### Invitation to all Learners, to All Modes

I try drawing  
 To show my patience—  
 It's something I love  
 That forces me  
 To                    slow                    down  
 And show  
 What is exactly going on—  
 It adds detail and meaning.



I love 'greed tank'—  
 A metaphor of destruction—

An important representation  
 That I couldn't do in writing  
 For he encompasses more than words  
 Can tell.

To speak or draw my stories  
 Gives me the freedom  
 To do what I want—  
 I can express and tell more  
 But writing makes me feel stupid,  
 Like I can't do anything.



~~~~~

### Now Ten Years Old, Now in Grade Five

Writing and sharing life stories,  
 Researched and heart/full  
 Is not for the timid or the weak of heart—  
 The endeavor requires empathy, wisdom, honesty, and courage.  
 When, in writing club at lunch,  
 Dara shared with me,  
 On Google Drive,  
 A detailed confessional on why she wants to be with her mother,  
 I looked in/to my heart,  
 Deeply.  
 She had borne her soul,  
 Had shed some weight from her shoulders,  
 Bringing myself and my assistant principal to tears.

Now ten years old.  
 Now in Grade 5.  
 She thinks of suicide,  
 Of ending her hopeless and  
 Miserable life—  
 Living with a mother,  
 Who confides in Dara her own deepest  
 Fears of a failing marriage,  
 Of her own depression and suicide,  
 Too much. Too much. Too much.  
 For a girl  
 Now ten years old.  
 Now in Grade 5.

We now know  
 She wears long sleeves to hide bruises,  
 Wrought on her by an angry beast of a father,  
 Who lashes her cruelly on  
 Back, thighs, and arms  
 With a bamboo stick and coat hangers  
 When she is bad,  
 Permanently damaging  
 Her soul,  
 Marking her; scarring her,  
 As a reminder,  
 Of what she has done.

Now ten years old.  
 Now in Grade 5.

Trapped and damned,  
 Beaten if she tells,  
 She shakes,  
 And cries tiny rivulets down her  
 Cheeks.  
 “*She’s a sneaky bully,*”  
 Her former school told us  
 Matter-of-factly.  
 But Dara deserved more.  
 Deserved to have her story known,  
 Told.

Now ten years old.  
 Now in Grade 5.

### **Summoning the Courage to Teach With/in the Wisdom of Vulnerability**

The quieter, the more patient and open we are in our sadness, the deeper and more unerringly the new will penetrate into us, the better we shall acquire it. (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 52)

We need to actively create narratives ourselves, as teachers and learners, as part of these dialogues in schools and communities, narratives that document the lived curriculum in specific sites where a “cosmo-polis” (Sandercock, 2003) mixing of languages, cultures, races, and identities

occurs in evermore complex and innovative ways. (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 25)

The day's prompt was revealed on the screen at the front of our class, leading to that deep, reflective silence of solitude, as students mined their tangled relations, their pasts, their presents, for "someone for whom they would give anything and everything in order to be able to spend five more minutes with." Quickly, we were busy writing, filling page with meaning, unraveling and making sense of a life that has touched ours so deeply, it remains ever-present and has become woven into the fabric of our own lives.

While I was writing about my grandpa Macleod:

*If I could spend an extra few minutes with anyone in my life,  
that is most important to me,  
it would be my grandpa,  
whom I never met....  
which may seem strange,  
but I have heard many stories about him,  
about who he was as a person,  
and what he liked to do...  
he loved to spend time on the open prairies  
of his homestead,  
walking, exploring, and understanding the land.  
We have a set of arrowheads,  
mounted on canvas that help to tell  
the story of the land,  
before he tilled it,  
and dirtied his nails constantly  
in the toil of topsoil.  
I know 'of' him,  
through conversations,  
education from my mother,  
but that is not complete,  
that is not knowing,  
that is knowing one side,  
one person's thoughts on her father,  
not a grandfather.  
The knowing is partial,  
wisps of hints that swirl in my imagination.  
I know that he was honest, hard-working, and resilient,*



*having survived as a farmer through the great depression  
that ravaged southern Saskatchewan,  
scarred and poor,  
but still on his land.  
I won't ever know, except in my imaginings,  
what Christmas morning would have been like on their farm,  
What my mom was like as a child, a teenager...*

I looked up, suddenly conscious that Johnny was struggling; that he had unearthed a memory attached to deep pain. I came to him gently, knowing now that he was fragile and tender. I placed a hand on his shoulder, knelt beside him, and asked if he was OK. His deep sorrow was given permission for release, having been driven deep with/in his being. The family had recently had to put down their pet cat Digby, and his sorrow was deep and intense. We were able to talk as a class about the difficulty and guilt of being put in the position of putting down a beloved pet, and I was able to relate my own story, as my parents recently were forced to put down their beloved Bichon. The safety, security, and empathic reaction of the class strengthened Johnny, allowed him to witness that he was not suffering alone, and in that shared understanding of loss, there was comfort, connection, compassion, and wisdom.

Bravely and serenely, a young poet shared the text she had created, writing from the heart courageously, longing for time spent with her grandfather before cancer had spread its tendrils through his lungs and depositing him in a hospice. Stacy wrote about longing to have those tender moments of adventure back again, of being able to immerse herself in that time and fully love the moment, fully honour that man she knew when she was younger but has had to gently let go. Tear-filled, and voice choking, she bravely finished her writing, to a string of applause and sniffles, her classmates well-aware of the importance of this writing, of her, and her family's struggles, in understanding the

cruelties of cancer. In their honouring, in their present listening, they too, felt Stacy's pain and empathized with her impending loss, reconciliation of past, present, and future at the tender age of 11. Stacy wrote:

***When I was little***

*my Grandpa never stayed in the  
hospital for more than  
a week  
he was out and about  
exploring  
new places and experiencing new things*

***When I was little***

*my grandpa used to come up every weekend to ski  
but now his legs are too heavy to walk  
filled with liquid,  
a side effect of his chemotherapy  
let alone ski*

***When I was little***

*my grandpa loved food, breakfast lunch and dinner  
you should have seen him at an all you can  
eat buffet  
but now he can't eat as much as he used to  
and now the taste of Grandpa's famous  
juicy hamburgers is a  
distant memory*

***When I was little***

*my Grandpa used to go to all my sports games  
and cheer the loudest when I did anything  
it didn't particularly have to be special  
but now he can't go to my basketball or baseball games  
the only way he can see me is on a video tape  
Now that I'm older I've witnessed someone who has defied the odds  
who is brave, strong and gentle  
who has lived, loved and is loved*

***When I was little.***

A final member to share, Jonah, is typically a light-hearted, confident, and stoic participant in our Grade 6 community. Having written numerous times about his grandfather, a much-loved German immigrant whose bravery and cunning had helped him to elude the Gestapo during World War II, I assumed that Jonah would once again

write a touching piece on his grandfather. When he went to share, however, something was different. He took a deep breath and shared the most amazing and sad story, becoming vulnerable in front of us all. Jonah's text, eloquent and heart/full, was about wanting to meet an uncle he had never met: his mother's brother, who had been killed tragically in a plant explosion years before Jonah was born. He related how he would love to meet this man, because everyone in his family, including his mother, says they see the uncle in Jonah—that he reacts the same way, laughs the same way, and is touched tenderly by the same moments. Jonah, rivulets of tears staining his freckled cheeks, finished his sharing amidst the deep silence of his peers. We had not witnessed, not expected this from Jonah. We were honoured that he chose to so art/fully tell the painful story of his family's loss, and attend to his own understanding and connection to that loss in this poem:

*My name is Jonah Ryan.  
I am 12 and have freckles,  
I can play guitar,  
I am a unique person.  
If there was one person  
that I would give almost anything  
to spend time with,  
I would spend time with  
my uncle Ryan.  
My uncle Ryan died  
in a huge explosion  
at an oil plant he had been working at.  
My middle name is Ryan  
in celebration of his death.  
I wish that I could spend time with him  
because I have never got to meet him  
and whenever my mom, grandma, and aunt  
talk about him  
they always say that I  
have so much in common with him.  
He was funny,  
he was smart,*

*he had freckles,  
 he could play guitar,  
 he was athletic.  
 Since he was just like me  
 but older  
 he may have been able to guide me  
 through obstacles that he went through  
 and that I also may go through myself.*

These sharings, three examples plucked from amongst a community of texts, help to highlight the need to work towards “attending to the heart, to the emotional literacy that connects us with others, to what really matters in our life/work” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 25). In the ensuing “silence that honour[ed] the text,” the community was able to take time to reflect, to become empathetic co-learners in the intricately woven text of our classroom (Hasebe-Ludt, Bright, Chambers, Fowler, Pollard & Winsor, 2003, p. 111). I was reminded of what Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2003) theorized: “Writing hurts, sometimes later, it seems to heal, but the hurting is constant and the healing is very slow” (p. 106). As educators, we must work towards creating the space and the time to allow students to write and share what is truly present in their hearts, attend to what is truly on their minds and to artfully express what is clinging to their souls. They must be made aware that their life stories matter, because, as Kiinaksaapo’op (Narcisse Blood) so thoughtfully articulated, “ultimately, all we have are our life stories” (2009, p. xvi). When we do not create the space for learning about the self and the other, for honouring the stories that have come to make up our life fabric, we are merely continuing the conservative, status-quo, and elitist mapping of public education in Alberta. I am concerned that “the acts of teaching and the teaching profession have become sleek commodities of the capitalist and material world” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 23) and the message that this is sending to each member of our classroom, primarily that their lives do not matter, particularly those

students who currently are not a part of the powerful majority/hierarchy in society, the vulnerable learners in our complex classrooms. Through the political act of writing, sharing, and lingering in each others' stories, we able to live in a "hopeful act, one that [is] crucial for creating a new and different way of living and writing in the academy and in schools, a vibrant act that is vulnerable and unpredictable in its outcome but also necessary to create a new ethos of pedagogy" and new way of living well together (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2003, p. 107).

During the 2009 school year, I was privileged to receive two prestigious awards for teaching—one the Provincial Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the other the Prime Minister's Award for teaching excellence: one provincial-level award, and one federal-level award. At the time, I was excited and honoured, but something was missing. In my core, there was something errant and not quite right; the awards did not sit well with me. Perhaps it was a feeling of inadequacy, or guilt, but the more I linger within the practice of life writing, the more time I spend dwelling and truly knowing the students in our community, the more I realize that the awards were not real. They were not a true indication of my accomplishments—they were the pomp-and-glitz show for teachers that highlighted (necessarily) the diligent approach of those in the profession, but at no point were the lives and ways of being of students honoured. At no point were the awards framed in terms of how students were in a classroom with each other, with themselves. Douglas Aoki (2014) writes that "if you want to convince me you're a good teacher, don't tell me about yourself—tell me about your students" (p. 9). I keep this treasured quote with me, now, at all times, for it is my truth. I am a much stronger, a much more heart/full teacher, much more attentive and attuned, to the lives, needs, dreams, and

stories of my students since I have pillared my practice firmly within the framework of life-writing theory. For my personal pedagogy and curriculum, I am confident that what I am doing is right for our time in the classroom. Coming to know, understand, and learning to live well together is what we need in these complex times in the classroom, in the world.

When we write, we do not journal. We do not free write—though initially we are never concerned with limiting, alienating concrete structures imposed by syntax, spelling rules, and form. Our life writing is purposeful, mindful, and replete with possibility. We, as Hunter (2012) writes, “peer into the abyss because it often reveals dark and beautiful truths” (p. 59). When we have the courage to write, and thus share, our truths, our cores, we are learning to accept our selves; we are coming to learn to live well with, and understand, others.

Through the creation and consequent sharing of life-writing texts, teachers and students are inviting the possibility of what Aoki (1986/1991/2005) describes as the *curriculum-as-lived*, that magical and vibrant curriculum that cannot be planned, is organic, and constitutes the fabric of the complex lives woven within it. We need to honour more whole-heartedly, more soul/fully and attentively, the stories of the self and the other. Educational philosopher Maxine Greene (2007) iterates that educators must re/focus on artfully inviting “individuals to become—to create themselves among beings who are different, to choose themselves as thoughtful human beings, decent and engaged, wide-awake to the world” (p. 1). Through multimodal life-writing practice, we are inviting and celebrating the life stories of those closest to us, those with whom we dwell. Chambers (2012) implores that “what is needed is a kind of literacy and a body of

literature that helps adults and children find their way home, no matter how far they have run, no matter how long they have been running” (p. 188). We must be working towards this return home, a return to who we are and where we learn to live well together. The stories of my students—each and every one of them—echo this call. In honouring life writing as the centrepiece of our pedagogical approach, we learn to live well with the self and other. As McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt (2014) write,

language and literacy, in all their multiple, artful variations, are key to participating in this [human] commons, to create *curriculum in a new key* (Pinar & Irwin, 2005), as a mode of *in-dwelling* aesthetically and thoughtfully in the lived/living world of teachers and students (Aoki, 1986/2005, p. 159). (p. 128)

We are beginning to work “towards new understandings of what it means to become literate in places of teaching and learning that are profoundly affected by the complicated cosmopolitan and ‘worldly’ identity politics of this new millennium (Nava, 2007; Pinar, 2009)” (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2010, p. 22). Empathic inquiry invites the possibility of truth knowing, and interpreting the narrative of the other empathetically to imagine better, more equitable social futures. Feminist writer and theologian Madonna Kolbenschlag (1988) writes that after all, “people are changed, not by intellectual convictions or ethical urgings, but by transformed imaginations” (as cited in Leggo, 2006, p. 77). Teachers and students, in writing and sharing life writing, invite this distinct possibility for understanding and transformation, for an empathic world stemming from the *wisdom of vulnerability* so deeply needed in these complex and difficult times.

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- <sup>1</sup> All student names that appear in this project have been changed to protect anonymity. Excerpts from student work are used with Human Subject Research permissions from the University of Lethbridge and the Calgary Board of Education.
- <sup>2</sup> All photographs included within this text have been taken by myself and inserted with purpose into the text in order to add meaning. As such, captions have been left off of photos in poetic texts in order to make their viewing more aesthetic and fluid with the written text.
- <sup>3</sup> Spencer, personal communication, January 22, 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> Mayes, as cited in Shira, 2012, p. 147.
- <sup>5</sup> Writer and teacher Carol Bly (2001) writes that “human beings need solitude in order to take seriously their own ideas” (p. xx).
- <sup>6</sup> Mayes, as cited in Shira, 2012, p.147.
- <sup>7</sup> Chambers, 2008, p. 123.
- <sup>8</sup> Spanish verb for “to put or place.” Castellano Spanish is a treasure I continue to practice upon moving back from Buenos Aires to Canada.
- <sup>9</sup> Oliver, 2003, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 153.
- <sup>10</sup> Leggo (2006) writes that he is “reminded daily that [he] needs times of quiet contemplation, even aloneness, in order to participate in active life” (p. 85).
- <sup>11</sup> “I write about the quotidian experiences of backyards, always with a sense of the extraordinary at work in the ordinary, and seek wonder by attending the inexorable, inevitable experiences of the every day, always effing the ineffable” (Leggo, 2006, p. 84).
- <sup>12</sup> Fowler, 2014, p. 48.

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- <sup>13</sup> Leggo, 2005a, p. 109.
- <sup>14</sup> Chambers, personal communication, July 12, 2012.
- <sup>15</sup> Herriot, 2014, p. 33.
- <sup>16</sup> Castellano Spanish for “port-living oreigner.” Porteno is a nickname given to locals in Argentina who live in Buenos Aires, a port city on the Rio de la Plata.
- <sup>17</sup> Georgia Heard, 1995, p. 29.
- <sup>18</sup> Brad O’Donnell, personal communication, February 12, 2015.
- <sup>19</sup> Leggo, 2005b, p. 454.
- <sup>20</sup> Physicist Albert Einstein.
- <sup>21</sup> From an interview on CTV News with the lawyer Barbara Winters, who was a first responder to Nathan Cirillo, who had just been shot while standing guard at the National War Memorial in Ottawa. See Canadian Press (2014).
- <sup>22</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun, as cited in Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009, p. 99.
- <sup>23</sup> Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Donald, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008, as cited in McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014, p. 120.
- <sup>24</sup> Spencer, personal communication, January 22, 2015.
- <sup>25</sup> Seidel, 2012, p. 279.
- <sup>26</sup> Aoki, 1991/2005, p. 389.
- <sup>27</sup> Fels, 2014, p. 41.
- <sup>28</sup> Fowler, 2014, p. 47.
- <sup>29</sup> Wiebe, 2012, p. 204.
- <sup>30</sup> Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2010, p. 25.
- <sup>31</sup> Pratt, as cited in Thomas King, 2012, p. 107.
- <sup>32</sup> From Margaret Pokiak’s biographical account of her time spent in residential schools in Canada. Her book is entitled *Fatty Legs: A True Story*. (Jordan-Fenton, C., Pokiak-Fenton, M., & Amini-Holmes, L. (2010).
- <sup>33</sup> Aoki, 1986/1991/2005, p. 164.
- <sup>34</sup> Aoki, 1986/1991/2005, p. 160.
- <sup>35</sup> Jones, 2014, p. 18.
- <sup>36</sup> Leggo, 2005a, p. 109.
- <sup>37</sup> Fels, 2014, p. 41.
- <sup>38</sup> Aoki, 1986/1991/2005, p. 163.
- <sup>39</sup> Low, 2014, p. 109.
- <sup>40</sup> “There is only one solitude, and it is vast and not easy to bear and almost everyone has moments when they would happily exchange it for some form of company” (Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 35).
- <sup>41</sup> Rilke, 1933/2013, p. 36.
- <sup>42</sup> Leggo, 2000, p. 4.
- <sup>43</sup> Greek *hupokrisis*, meaning “acting of a theatrical part.”