

AMUSING THE MUSES:  
RUMINATIONS ON CREATIVE EDUCATION

by

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Can we afford to live imaginatively, contemplatively? Why have we submitted to a society that tries to make imagination a privilege when to each of us it comes as a birthright?

Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*

To be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew.

Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?: Essays*

If we are to survive as humans, it is crucial that we learn once again to sing.

Mary Evelyn Tucker, *What Does It Mean to Be Human?*

*A poet's confession*

I recently spent several days with five other Canadian writers in Whitehorse at the Yukon Writers' Festival. I read poetry in a number of public venues and worked with students. I was interviewed by the local CBC. As part of my agenda I was scheduled for a book signing at a local bookstore. The only person who spoke to me was a young employee of the bookstore who had been asked by a former student of mine to pick up a copy of my latest poetry book. I spent my time writing in my journal. As a poet in the world, I am almost always lonely; I am always seeking readers.

Lonely Poets Society

I sat in the circle of writers  
who meet weekly  
in the Minoru Seniors Centre

and I confessed,  
I am a poet  
and  
I am lonely  
because

I weave my world  
a tapestry of words  
I want to show you

the pictures afire  
in my head (no photos  
I can show guests  
on a Sunday afternoon):  
pictures of red brick  
walls, lines etched  
in black and white,  
purple-green trees  
rooted in the earth's  
molten heart, the sun  
faraway and faded  
as if buried in snow,  
the broken horizon torn  
from a larger canvas,  
the bare branches of alders  
like cracks in the air

and I asked,  
Who will look?  
Who can see?

and one man said,  
I like poems that rhyme

and one woman said,  
You punctuate wrong

and more said,  
What do you mean?  
and only Ken said  
nothing

and when I explained  
how I published my poems  
submission rejection  
submission sometimes  
acceptance poems sent  
like an SOS distress  
signal to the world

Ken said,  
You're lonely  
the way  
I was lonely;  
all my life  
I've been a salesman

knocking on doors;  
of course you're lonely,  
you're a salespoet

so, look for me, folks,  
I am everywhere  
I am a salespoet  
knocking on your doors  
and windows  
ringing your bells  
and telephones  
echoing in your chimneys  
and air vents  
with pitches and promises  
you can't ignore:  
don't believe me  
try my poems  
they're good  
satisfaction guaranteed  
or your money back

### *A poet's conviction*

I live in the world as a poet. I spend a part of most days in reading and writing poetry, in the practice of poetry, even in the experience of poetic living. I am constantly vigilant about seeing the world with a poet's senses and heart and imagination. I didn't write poetry in school. I didn't even like poetry very much. I was long out of school when I began to write poetry. I came to poetry only in my late twenties. During a time of personal crisis, I began to write in a journal, and I began to hear a vibrant voice in my writing that I had never heard before. Then I started to write poetry, and I discovered that I had much I wanted, even needed, to say about my daily life and world. Above all, I discovered that I love to revel in the possibilities of language. Now I write poetry as a way to make sense in the world. I write poetry in order to share questions and insights with others. I write poetry in order to learn to be still and attend to the circles of seasons, to feel rain and snow on my tongue, to see the sun scribe shadows in the mountains, to hear the raucous calls of crows and seagulls, to smell the sweet resilience of May flowers, to taste the ripeness of wild raspberries in late August. For the past two decades I have been writing poetry as a way to know the world, as a way to be and become in the world.

As a poet I live by the maxim that the world is words. As human beings, we are born into language, and as human beings we are borne up by language. We are awash in a sea of textuality. Like a whale that moves through the oceans with its environment pressing on its sides while it in turn presses its shape on its environment, we move through the ocean of language, universally pervasive, pressed and pressing. In our language use, we are constantly shaped and informed and defined, and we are constantly shaping and informing and defining. We are the words we speak and write and think and hear and read. As in the following poem, we speak and write and think and hear and read ourselves into existence.

Wor(l)d

in the beginning is  
    the word  
        without beginning

the spoken word written  
    the written word spoken

the word born in the world  
    the world born in the word

the word is worldly  
    the world is wordy

the word is in the world  
    the world is in the word

the word is the world  
    the world is the word

in the end is  
    the word  
        without end

*A poet's complaint*

The challenge for educators is to celebrate the ubiquity, the multiplicity, the plurality, the wildness of language full of wonder. We weave words and in weaving words we weave our worlds. My concern is that in schools we often get in the way of word-weaving. We try to tame the wildness of language. We try to categorize and box and control the messiness of language. We try to reduce language to basics and essentials and rules and conventions and patterns. Sometimes we try too hard to teach what cannot be taught. Like me with African violets. I water them too much. I tend them too much. I need to let them grow. I can facilitate their growth by helping provide the needed environment, but usually I water them till they wilt and fade. Our students are born in language. They are rooted in language. They have rich language resources. Our task is to guarantee that they are not obstructed and impaired.

In my teaching I meet many wounded writers. I tell them that I too am a wounded writer. I tell them about my grade eleven English teacher. One day she passed me back a writing assignment and said, "Carl, you will never be a writer." Then she added, "But you don't want to be a writer anyway." I respected that elderly woman with frosty hair like cotton candy. I wouldn't tell her that all my life I had harboured only two ambitions. I either wanted to be an astronomer or a writer. When I realized that I would have to study science and math in order to become an astronomer (I thought astronomers revelled in the wonder of stars without end), I knew that I wanted to be a writer. But I

couldn't tell my English teacher that I burned with fire to make words and play with words. Instead I believed her pronouncement that I would never be a writer, and for a whole decade I wrote nothing except academic essays for university credit.

Following my English teacher's judgement, I limped through years of university studies and years of school teaching, always convinced that I was not a writer, and that I could not be a writer. Only in my late twenties with my personal life exploding around me did I begin to write out of my emotions and fears and turmoil, and only then, after a decade of hearing the echo of my grade eleven English teacher's dictum, "You'll never be a writer," did I find that I had words, words filled with questions and fire and affection, words like stones that invited and enabled me to cross the river, always rushing swiftly, and only then, after a decade of silence, did I hear my voices, voices filled with hope and spirit and wonder, voices filled with desire for others, calling and recalling. I now tell other wounded writers that for the past two decades I have walked in the world as a poet who acknowledges his pain, but also insists on celebrating the joy of word-making, the joy of journeying.

### The Tower of Babble

what do I remember  
of my teachers' words

I recall they spoke  
many words

but I don't remember  
any

we spoke the same English  
we knew the same alphabet

did I understand  
their words

probably not  
so many words

tongue-worn texts  
in deaf ears

mostly mumbo-jumbo  
prattling gibberish

alien tongues  
without sense

echoes only

long lost

I did not belong  
in their classrooms

I found no places  
for dwelling in their words

we stacked the words  
a tower of babble

my teachers' words  
not mine

borrowed words  
that didn't fit

one day  
a tower of rubble

now I begin again  
at the end of the alphabet

where other letters  
can be written

### *A poet's creativity*

My experiences with writing as a student in elementary and secondary classrooms in the late 50s and 60s were like my experiences with any kind of creative activity in school, including art, music, and drama. For example, I remember vividly, as if it were only a few days ago, the pressing sense of fear I knew in music classes. In school I was required to listen to recorded music; the teacher stopped the music abruptly and randomly picked a student to identify the instrument just played. I lived in terror of being chosen, and always answered “piano.” Meanwhile, at home I carried my mother’s pots and pans and wooden spoons and ceramic bowls into the bathroom where I joyfully drummed my heart out—an early version of the contemporary percussion performances of *Stomp*. My school experiences did not nurture creativity or creative living.

In my early 30s when I was pursuing graduate studies, a drama education professor asked me what I remembered about school that had nurtured my creativity. I couldn’t remember any experience in the classroom that had encouraged or supported my engagement with creative expression. I confessed with much sadness that I was a late bloomer. I came to poetry only in my late 20s. During a time of personal crisis, I began to write in a journal, and I began to hear a vibrant voice in my writing that I had never heard before. Then I started to write poetry, and I discovered that I had much I wanted, even needed, to say about my daily life and world. Above all, I discovered that I love to revel in the possibilities of language. As a poet and educator, I seek to encourage my

students to write poetry as a way to know their worlds, and to learn their ways in the world. I am now middle-aged, and I know myself as a creative person committed to creative living, thinking, and becoming.

Susan Griffin notes wisely that “in the ecological view, instead of one creator there are a multitude of creators, and the many different kinds of creative consciousness that exist are all equally significant to the whole” (*The Eros of Everyday Life*, 1995, p. 40). The word “enthusiasm” means “inspired by a god.” We live in a world that is afraid of gods and goddesses, of wonder and mystery, of the heart and spirit. Music is derived from the word “Muse.” In the ancient world there were nine Muses with delightful names like Calliope, Erato, Melpomene, Thalia, Polyhymnia, and Urania. They were all Goddesses who inspired with enthusiasm the musicians, dancers, orators, storytellers, actors, and poets of their time. Our schools need the Muses. I invite my students to wander for wonder, to be open to the world around them, to hear with their hearts, to see with the eyes of their hearts. The world is miraculous and mysterious, and every day is an invitation to learn and become and savour wonder.

### The Alphabet

the alphabet we learned  
to write in school was spartan,

pressed between parallel lines,  
eschewing swirls curls whirls,

but we need to ask always, all ways,  
with tireless wonder,

what lies beyond the alphabet?  
for the alphabet, the creation

in letters, is a letter  
inviting the imagination

beyond the alphabet in lines  
that do not begin, do not end

### *A poet's composing*

As a writer in school I almost always felt inadequate, not quite sure where to put commas, concerned that I did not have anything worth saying, fearful that I was not as humorous or witty or bold or eloquent as my classmates, convinced that I was inferior because I wrote slowly, ashamed that my drafts were messy and chaotic and confusing, a litter of letters sprawling over scraps of paper. I was sure everybody else wrote as if transcribing dictation from speakers inside their heads or hearts or souls or stomachs. I heard voices, too, but they were always too quiet or too loud or too contradictory, voices that drowned one another out, voices that I could never master, confusing voices that silenced my voice. And so I wrote little, and found scholastic success in memorizing

facts and formulae and definitions and transcribing them faithfully in short-answer and fill-in-the-blank tests.

Only in my 30s did I begin to revel in the process of writing. I do not know what I want to write until I can read what I have written. Therefore, I like to fill blank pages with blue-ink squiggles in order to discover meaning, in order to discover what I want to say. As I write and write, and read and reread what I have written, the writing speaks to me and reveals meaning. And it is a wonderfully rich and adventurous experience. Writers do not begin with a clear understanding of what they will write. Instead they discover meaning during the frequently chaotic process of writing. The writing process is a journey in mystery, a meaning-making venture. Writers do not begin with a mentally constructed text that needs to be transcribed. Writers engage in an ongoing dialogue with their written words. Out of that dialogue meaning is produced and constructed and revealed.

In composing poetry, the writing process I practice includes the following dynamics: writing, reading, collecting, selecting, connecting, talking, thinking (convergently and divergently), doubting, guessing, reducing, paraphrasing, ordering, seeking, hypothesizing, wondering, deducing, inducing, constructing, deconstructing, reconstructing, reflecting, listening, viewing, representing, drawing (in, out, through), conjecturing, questioning, (day)dreaming, rehearsing in the sense of trying on and taking off, exploring, clarifying, revising, reviewing, drafting. The process is not linear; it is more like a spiral, a maze, a waterslide that twists, even the path of a balloon that is inflated and pinched but not tied, and when the balloon is released it shoots through the air. The path is not predictable.

### In the Beginning

As I shape language, alchemically language shapes me,  
my poems writing themselves in autobiographical urgency.

Beginnings and endings and all the countless moments between  
the beginnings and endings that are more beginnings and endings.

Compelling words cannot be commanded,  
will find their way when they wish, organic chorus.

Do different alphabets divide the world differently,  
full of desire for divining concealed secrets?

Emphatically, empathetically, energetically evoke  
experience in language like echolocation.

Fat, flat, flatulent words fill the air in this board room  
where I am bored with chewing words like myrrh from a fir tree.

Grammar slips through the stipulations of handbooks when  
nouns and verbs scramble to find their rhythms in gramarye.

How does poetry know? What does poetry know?  
How do I know poetry? What do I know?

Incarnate word, the Word in flesh, embodied presence,  
poems born in the imagined present.

Journeys begin somewhere, but navigating the landscape  
requires a map, compass, GPS, memory, heart.

Knowing even how my words often lie, slant lines with scant  
truth, I still seek words like dew in the desert to quench thirst.

Language—so much always remains unsaid. The holes allow us  
to recognize the world. Learn to lean on light in the darkness.

Moonshone stones like words rise up to the surface  
in a farmer's field, tugged by lunatic gravity, responding to the call.

Narrating my experience taxes the limits of language,  
leaves me in liminal spaces I will likely never traverse.

Order has an odour, even sometimes like ordure. The logic  
line is only one way. Try the ludic. For fun.

Phonse pronounced phonetic phrases with a parrot's panache  
and pissed poetic polyvalent possibilities outside the pot.

Question everything. What if? The world is transformed,  
even in the asking. What questions need to be asked?

Rhythmically, poems breathe, long heart's breaths full  
of the flowing, never ending geography, everywhere, always.

Sense runs both ways like the two strands of a reef knot,  
like shadows complement light in a counterpoint.

Today I saw a bumper sticker: Ban Leg Hold Traps, and I read:  
Ban Leggo Traps. My world sharply focused in my image alone.

Unlike undulating curves of oil in water, wind in snow banks,  
waves on a sandy beach, my handwriting does not flow and swirl.

Vases on window sills hold the poems I gathered for you  
in early autumn light.

Winnie the Pooh searches for the hole in order to find home.  
I search for the whole, too. Longing for the hole and home.

Xerographically language reproduces living, like chiaroscuro,  
in new conjunctions of light and dark.

Yarns yammer, yowl, yak, yelp, yawp, yell, full of yearning  
for you.

Zigzagging with the mark of Zorro, the poet begins with the end  
and ends in the beginning.

### *A poet's challenge*

I am critical of my school education, especially critical about the ways that, as a writer, I was constrained and even wounded by the kinds of experiences that comprised my senior language classes. What I remember most vividly are the repetitive exercises, and the focus on drills, and discrete activities and correctness. What I remember least are opportunities to write in innovative and creative ways, to take risks in writing, to experiment with diverse discourses. David Bohm, the esteemed physicist, does not mince words in his judgment that “generally speaking, what we learn as children, from parents, teachers, friends, and society in general, is to have a conformist, imitative, mechanical state of mind that does not present the disturbing danger of ‘upsetting the apple cart’” (*On Creativity*, 2004, p. 20).

Why do we fear creativity? My son Aaron loves to write. He knows himself as a writer. He writes daily—poetry, scripts, stories, ruminations. In grade 10, his English teacher told him to keep the creative stuff till he was finished with grade 12. As Julia Cameron observes in *The Artist's Way* (1992):

Remember, we live in a culture that is toxic to art. A remarkable number of toxic myths about artists flourish. In addition to our purportedly being broke, irresponsible, drug-riddled and crazy, artists are also deemed selfish, out of touch with reality, megalomaniacs, tyrants, depressives and, above all, people who 'want to be left alone.'” (p. 207)

When I was a senior secondary school student in the late 60s, the English teachers all used the textbook *Mastering Effective English*, by J. C. Tressler and C. E. Lewis. First published in 1937, my teachers used the third revised edition published in 1961. I still own a copy of the textbook, and recently returned to it. As an artifact of my adolescent experience, *Mastering Effective English* brings back many memories, mostly unsettling memories of frustration and busyness and constraint. I was, therefore, surprised when I recently read the “Preface to the Third Edition” of *Mastering Effective English*. I doubt that I read the preface when I was an adolescent. Tressler and Lewis explain their goals for the book:

It is the hope of the authors that the new arrangement of the instructional material will make the text easier to use and will leave the teacher and the students more time for creative expression. The text is replete with models and stimulating examples of good writing, but effective writing requires a reflective and unhurried address to the topic in hand. It is hoped that the teacher will help to provide an atmosphere of creativity and will encourage the student to try his wings in figurative flight. One soaring sentence will do more to make a writer out of a pencil-chewer than hours of laborious attention to grammatical usage. Help the student to get his feet off the ground, and, in the glow that follows, it will be easy to teach him how to plant them firmly on the ground again. (p. v)

The elaborate, even flowery, language of Tressler and Lewis sounds a little odd to contemporary ears, but I still hear many echoes of my current views about teaching writing. I applaud the emphasis on “creative expression.” As a writer, I know daily the wisdom of Tressler and Lewis' comment that “effective writing requires a reflective and unhurried address to the topic in hand.” In all my teaching, I seek “to provide an atmosphere of creativity” where students will take risks. Tressler and Lewis even support my conviction based on experience that we become writers by writing, not by “laborious attention to grammatical usage,” and that growing confident in our writing will lead to success in many skills and kinds of writing.

Tressler and Lewis had grand hopes for their textbook, but of course grand hopes are frequently not realized, and a quick overview of *Mastering Effective English* indicates that Tressler and Lewis' hopes will be undermined by the format of the book and the kinds of exercises that fill the book. *Mastering Effective English* begins with a brief and engaging history of the English language, but quickly turns to the structural pattern that characterizes the whole book. After a concise section of explanation (for example, “How Our Language Changes”), Tressler and Lewis provide “Practice 1. Studying Familiar Words with Less Familiar Meanings.” In this practice students are asked to define italicized words as they are used in ten sentences and to give other meanings for each word. This pattern of introducing and explaining a concept, followed by a practice exercise is repeated throughout the book. So, in spite of Tressler and Lewis' hope that “the teacher will help to provide an atmosphere of creativity and will encourage the student to try his wings in figurative flight,” the structure of their book encouraged teachers to clip the wings of their students by grounding them in exercises that were time-consuming, laborious, and repetitive. The first chapter continues with an exploration of the question, “What Is Good Use?” Slang, overworked words, clichés, euphemisms, gobbledygook, and jargon are all discussed with practice exercises designed to help the adolescent writer identify “what is good use.” Then this introductory chapter continues with twenty-two pages of “Words Often Misused,” such as “affect, effect,” “disinterested, uninterested,” “lie, lay,” “set, sit,” and “than, then.” The twenty-two pages of explanation of “Words Often Misused” are followed by six pages of practice exercises titled “Using Troublesome Words Correctly.” I remember as a secondary school student memorizing all the rules about troublesome words, and completing all the practice exercises. And I remember the frustration and boredom of working through rule after rule, practice after practice, class after class, and I remember my growing sense of conviction that words were a lot of trouble, and I remember my growing sense of loss of confidence that I could ever “master effective English.” I grew fearful of language. The slang and clichés and euphemisms and jargon I spoke with my friends and neighbours and family were apparently illegitimate, and the rules that spelled out apparently legitimate language use so convoluted and complex that I knew only I could never learn them.

So, Tressler and Lewis' hopes are undermined by the structure of their book. The pedagogic imperative set up in the first chapter is sustained throughout the rest of the book (even as I write the word "rest," I question whether or not the word should be "remainder"—the habits learned from Tressler and Lewis are still with me). My teachers led their students through the textbook as if it was an instruction manual that required diligent attention to a sequence of stages and steps. Tressler and Lewis' hope that the teacher would "help to provide an atmosphere of creativity" and would "encourage the student to try his wings in figurative flight" was an unrealized hope in my classes where the teachers assumed that students were like penguins with wings but unable to fly, marching in lines across the icy barrens. What I learned in my language classes was the fear of language, the incapacitating fear that I could never get "it" right, the fearful conviction that I could not fly.

### Writing the Unwritten Sentence

if I still believed  
the Blue Book  
of Tressler and Lewis  
masters of effective English  
my intrepid guides  
through senior secondary

I would believe  
as I once believed  
a long time believed  
a long time ago believed

I need to write/speak/be  
a unified sentence  
with one complete thought

a coherent sentence  
seamlessly stuck together  
correctclearcured

even though I know  
(have always known)  
I am a sentence fragment  
confused comma fused  
clumsy choppy  
a subordinate clause  
seeking the principal  
a dangling participle  
a subject with no predicate  
a predicate with no subject  
a rambling redundant  
cat and dog and dog and cat

but I no longer believe  
the Blue Book  
of Tressler and Lewis  
masters of effective English  
once my omniscient guides  
on a journey in the dark  
and light spaces lined  
by letters in words

where I wrote order out of chaos  
now I seek the way into chaos  
the way into the light  
spaces between the letters  
the way into the dark  
spaces filled by the letters  
where order is a sentence  
that has not been written

*A poet's commitment*

In *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (1996), D. G. Myers presents an engaging history of how creative writing was constructed as a curricular subject. Myers explains:

Creative writing was first taught under its own name in the 1920s. It began in a junior high school where it was originally conducted as an experiment to replace traditional English—grammar, spelling, penmanship, even literature classes—with something more appealing to young people. As such it was part of a broader movement to reform American education in the first half of the twentieth century. The cry was that subjects should not be taught, students should; the reform movement called itself progressive education. Creative writing was invented to transport progressive methods and materials into a junior-high-school English classroom. The man who invented it was a progressive educator—once well known, now largely forgotten—named Hughes Mearns. (p. 101)

Myers adds: “Creative writing was perhaps the most widely adopted of the curricular reforms instituted by progressive education; in many ways it was the model progressive subject” (p. 101). Creative writing emphasized students’ self-expression, the workshop method, and writing as a personal process of growth. Hughes Mearns proposed a “theory of permissings.” Because writing is “an outward expression of instinctive insight,” it “must be summoned from the vasty deep of our mysterious selves. Therefore, it cannot be taught; indeed, it cannot even be summoned; it can only be permitted” (cited in *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, p. 108). I find this history fascinating, especially because I am reminded that my views about teaching writing have been around a long time, and I need to know this history in order to know that I am not inventing the turning and returning curricular circle.

For many years, I have taught a course for Bachelor of Education students titled “Language Across the Curriculum.” In the course, I invite the students with many different curricular disciplinary backgrounds, including science, physical education, home economics, social studies, and technical education, to consider how creativity is the heart of everything they do as teachers. I invite them to pursue creative ways for researching and knowing and understanding. In the course, some of the students write poetry and narratives. Others paint and sing and dance. The students keep journals and explore drama as a way of knowing and communicating. Some produce posters and video presentations and web pages. Others explore creative arts as wide-ranging as autobiographies, bulletin boards, cartoons, designs, engravings, fiction, games, ikebana, jewelry, knitted crafts, lighting, music, needlework projects, origami, photographs, quilts, stained glass, transparencies, weavings, and woodwork. As the students explore language and creative arts with attention to their specific curricular disciplines, they develop an understanding of the fundamental importance of integrated, holistic, process-oriented, and collaborative approaches to learning and knowing. Each year at the beginning of the course, some students embrace my invitation to engage with the creative arts while others question what creativity has to do with teaching and learning. To those who question my approach, I ask them to trust me, to journey with me as we think about possible connections between their subject disciplines and teaching creatively. By the end of the course, almost everybody agrees that creative experiences are integral to teaching and learning.

I do not know how the world has been constructed so that creative arts and expression are perceived as peripheral to the core of schooling and the core of the larger world outside schools. The reservations of my students concerning creative arts in their subject disciplines are emblematic of the larger society's general disregard for creative expression. In a recent survey British Columbia employers rated the characteristics that they seek in employees. While I have no trouble accepting that employers are eager to hire people who have strong communication skills and analytical ability, people who set high performance standards and are honest, reliable, flexible, and adaptable, I was astonished to note that in a list of fifteen characteristics that British Columbia employers seek in employees, the fifteenth and least valued characteristic is “creative.” In “Language Across the Curriculum,” many of my students are motivated to reconsider their conventional perspectives, but when I present to my students the value of creativity in teaching, I always feel that I am trying to hold back a tidal wave of standard curriculum and traditional school practice. We teach as we have been taught, and we teach as we think we are expected to teach, and we teach as the textbooks and bureaucratic stipulations dictate. In “Language Across the Curriculum,” I seek to deconstruct some of the disciplinary boundaries that separate science and technical education and business education from language arts, from language and creativity, from opportunities to create and be created. I hope that my students who are preparing to be teachers will remember Sara Mills’ advice that “all individuals are potentially creative within the discursive constraints which enable ideas and texts to be produced. Most people have their creativity sapped at a very early age by society’s pressures on them to conform through the education system” (*Discourse*, 1997, p. 74). Inspired by Michel Foucault, Mills understands how all of us need to be committed to creative pursuits that push the boundaries of social expectations in imaginative and radical ways. Walter Brueggemann claims that “poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality” (*The Prophetic Imagination*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2001, p. 40). Creative education is committed to fostering a spirit of transforming, not conforming.

Grade Nine Geometry

in grade nine geometry  
I learned about points, lines,  
rays, planes, and a parade  
of polygons, spheres, pyramids,  
and cones that always left me  
hungry for ice cream

learned how to divide  
the white page with angles,  
precise and contained,  
admired the saucy  
isosceles angle, fell  
in love with the acute angle,  
was never sure about  
the obtuse angle, always  
wanted the right angle

learned axioms,  
self-evident truths,  
and theorems, less evident,  
but available to proof (and  
I loved the scent of approval  
from all that proving)

learned the world is the word  
of a cosmic comic mathematician  
who set all relations spinning  
like a tot with a Spirograph

learned to take the measure  
of the world with my compact  
smart K-Mart math set,  
compass protractor ruler,  
all the tools a geometer could  
need to drum earth's rhythms

only now in middle age  
have learned the world  
is more than geometric,  
now seek to embrace  
the chaotic and scribbled lines  
of light and love dazzled  
within wild imagination

must not forget when

I have lined my world in  
crayon congruent polygons  
and rest with a satisfied grin  
in the cube of my self-creation  
to ask, at least occasionally,  
about worlds outside  
my box, other worlds  
beyond the painted panels  
of my geometric control:  
no story is the whole story

### *A poet's commission*

As a poet and language educator, I invite and encourage writers to take risks in their writing, to engage innovatively with a wide range of genre, to push boundaries in order to explore creatively how language and discourse are never ossified, but always organic, how language use is integrally and inextricably connected to knowledge, identity, subjectivity, and being in the world. I invite writers, whether English is a first language or an additional language, to know themselves in poetry, to know themselves as poets. We live in a contemporary culture that mostly ignores poetry. This is very unfortunate because poetry invites alternative ways of knowing and being and becoming. I encourage all educators and students of language and literacy to write poetry because poetry is a capacious genre that opens up endless possibilities for expression and communication.

A while ago, a former Bachelor of Education student visited me. Mike was one of the most prolific and enthusiastic writers I have ever worked with. He explained that since completing the writing course with me, he had not written any more poetry. I felt disappointed. Then he added, "But though I haven't written any poetry for months, I am living poetically." And with Mike's gift of words I began to understand poetry in new ways. What does it mean to live poetically, to live with the spirit of creativity, to call the Muses into our daily experiences of living and learning? Bohm (2004) recommends that in order to learn anything new we need a mind that "is original and creative rather than mediocre and mechanical." (p. 25).

### Naming the Poet

as a poet I seek to be  
an anarchic author  
babbling barbaric  
cacophonous chorus  
divine daemonic  
ebullient eccentric  
fragrant fiction  
galvanic glossarist  
heretic hermeneut  
illegible iconoclast  
jovial juggler  
keening kazoo

ludic lunatic  
mad mystic  
narcissistic narrator  
ontological obscurant  
playful pedagogue  
querulous questioner  
rhetorical rudiment  
splitting subject  
textual tease  
ubiquitous utterance  
versatile verbalist  
whining warbler  
xenogenetic xylographer  
yapping yodeller  
zealous zany

*A poet's confidence*

In order to grow in confidence about our writing, we need to own our writing. Good writers must take responsibility for their writing. Otherwise, they will always be seeking to please the dictates of others—teachers, editors, professional writers. Therefore, an approach to teaching writing where a teacher identifies the writers' errors and demands correction will be counterproductive because the writers will not learn to identify errors on their own. They will not learn to take responsibility for their writing. They will not learn to own their writing, or to care about their writing. This view does not mean that there is no place for teachers in the writing process. In fact teachers are essential in the writing process, but this view does suggest that there will be many teachers. I like the notion of a group of writers as a group of students and teachers or, even more accurately student-teachers—everybody is both a student and a teacher, helping and guiding and responding to their own writing and to the writing of one another. I object to the common assumption that one person in a group is the teacher with a mantle of authority and expertise that makes the teacher a writer or evaluator or judge. All writers need to learn that each act of writing is a new challenge with unique questions and demands and problems. Hence writers need to enter each experience of writing with an interrogative spirit open to wonder and surprise, a bold, even reckless spirit open to uncertainty and change, a confident spirit open to the pleasure and power of word-making. But so often beginning writers or writers who lack confidence will throw up their hands in frustration or befuddlement because they do not know how to proceed in their writing and they have seldom if ever known the wonderful mystery of writing.

Ars Poetica

*A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit*

at sixteen I first read  
Archibald MacLeish's *Ars Poetica*  
but had no idea what he meant,

and there wasn't much chance my English teacher  
would reveal the mystery since she was preoccupied  
with comma splices, I still don't know what  
MacLeish meant, even though I am now fifty,  
and a poet who steadily seeks to know his art

and MacLeish's last lines continue to befuddle, too:

*A poem should not mean  
But be*

Perhaps  
A poem should not be mean  
But be a bee that pollinates  
Grasses leaning in the light  
Of the empty doorway  
Where grief and love  
Equal Maple Leaf bologna

how much weight can the alphabet bear?  
even the unbearable lightness of being?

\*

A poem is:

1. the frost on a winter window like a meadow of wildflowers or
2. a bucket of berries like a whisper in a crowded shopping mall or
3. the late sun in the winter valley like cranberry claret or
4. a tree afire in autumn's light or
5. a shard of moon in winter's night or
6. the sun awash in the sea in summer's dusk or
7. a crocus, purple and bold, in spring snow or
8. a stone that holds the April sun or
9. a sparrow in a bare alder tree like a silent response to prayer or
10. the scent of rosemary lemon balm oregano or
11. a thousand snow geese startled from the slough with raucous laughter or
12. a passage through the frozen tundra of the heart or
13. twelve grain bread brushed with olive oil or
14. dark wine crushed at the back of the throat or
15. the warm catch of sixteen-year-old Lagavulin or
16. four blackbirds in the snow on the backyard fence or
17. wind blowing leaves, rain-washed, leaning into winter or
18. snow falling in the street light outside my lover's window or

\*

and Harold Bloom is mortified  
because Stephen King has been awarded  
the 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

and Laura Bush cancelled a visit by poets to the White House  
when she learned some of them might criticize  
American involvement in the Iraqi War

and David Solway thinks Al Purdy is a mediocre poet,  
too popular, too accessible

and nobody reads poetry anymore,  
takes poets seriously anymore,  
especially not universities  
where poets are barely tolerated,  
and only because they have tenure

and I can't get anybody to publish my poem  
*Does Wayne Gretzky Deliver Pizza?*  
about the Great One's orgiastic consumerism,  
and I suspect the editors are scared  
of Wayne, or perhaps Wayne has bought  
all the literary journals, too

but at least some of my favourite  
Canadian contemporary poets  
are opening up new perspectives  
on *ars poetica*:

Michael Crummey writes about  
*bare buttocks like*  
*two sad loaves in a pan*

Lorna Crozier writes about  
Patrick Lane's arse  
in lines too erotically charged  
for my innocent poem

and if I were braver,  
I would tell  
the editors who don't publish my poems and  
the readers who don't read my poems and  
the reviewers who don't review my poems and  
the merchants who don't sell my poems and  
the poets who don't like my poems

how in the expansive spaces  
of my *ars poetica*,  
I will drive my poems  
like a mighty wind  
that puffs with  
an asthmatic's urgency  
across the empty page  
of wild lonely imagination  
with a bumper sticker:  
*if you're not reading this,  
you can kiss my poet's arse*

### *A poet's concern*

One of my primary concerns as a writer is supporting and nurturing others to know themselves as writers. My first book of poems titled *Growing Up Perpendicular on the Side of a Hill* deals with the ordinary experiences of growing up on Lynch's Lane in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. I wrote the first poem in the collection when I was thirty-four years old and the last poem when I was thirty-nine years old. For five years while I lived mostly in Edmonton and Vancouver I wrote poems about growing up in Newfoundland, poems about ordinary people in an ordinary place living lives that rang with the kind of ordinariness observed on *Coronation Street*. For five years I wrote poems about ordinary people and places and events, poems that I did not believe I could write when I was in school because I believed then that poetry was about grand themes of love and religion and war in faraway places, because I was convinced that poetry was written by dead people who lived in countries far distant from Newfoundland, because none of my teachers ever encouraged or even suggested that I could write about the ordinary experiences of my daily living. When I wrote stories in school I wrote out of the imagination as informed and influenced by television and Saturday matinees at the Majestic Theatre. I wrote about places and people and experiences and emotions that I knew almost nothing about. I croaked in somebody's version of a schoolwriting voice. I poured in the ingredients of character and plot and setting and suspense and description as if I were baking a cake with a detailed recipe, a kind of formulaic writing that gave me and others a limited pleasure only. Essentially I was writing skeletal synopses of television and film plots. I did not own the writing, and I did not have much desire for the writing. But for years I have been writing about the stories that have shaped me and continue to shape me.

### *In My Father's Arms*

*all my life I have wanted my father to hold me in his arms and tell me, I love you*

I went to a counsellor, empty but still full of fear, and she walked me through the tangled garden of five decades of living in the earth to a quiet meadow where my father and I stood all alone with the dandelions, both dazed and lost. I was once more a small boy. Faraway, I heard a soft voice, what do you want? I began to weep.

*all my life I have wanted my father to hold me in his arms and tell me, I love you*

We are each shaped by the first years of our lives; we learn how to live with one another from the stories we have been invited to live with others. Fathers and sons live in an alien world born in contest, often confused, where we seldom know how to name our desires. My father says, I'm a depression baby but I'm not depressed.

*all my life I have wanted my father to hold me in his arms and tell me, I love you*

In middle age I know my desires with an ache that pushes against the walls of my heart, and I know I will never lie in my father's arms, but I will still know my father in love, thankful for all stories, written, to be written, all fragments, only, subtending the whole and holy story that always exceeds the geometry of the heart's tangled lines.

*A poet's counsel*

My advice to young and older writers is simple:

Believe in your writing and yourself as a writer.

Commit yourself to writing every day.

Cultivate a keen sense of your voice.

Seek to know the world in writing.

Share your writing with others.

Always read lots of other writers.

Eat alphabet soup.

Alphabet Soup

a

All my life  
I have eaten  
words, sucked  
and nibbled words  
with a grub's  
dogged confidence  
that gastronomic gluttony,  
unending word-fest,

verbal pig-out  
would funnel me  
to the prize  
at the bottom  
of the box,  
but for ingestion  
and digestion  
my reward  
is indigestion

b

Leonard Cohen spent five years  
as a monk at Mount Baldy Zen Center,  
near L.A., 6,250 feet above sea level,  
exchanged robes for customary Armani,  
known as Jikan, Silent One,  
then left the mountain:

    nowadays, my only need  
    is to jot everything down,  
    I'm just the voice,  
    a living diary

c

If I put a beach stone in my mouth,  
I can taste the ocean,  
but the word stone in my mouth  
is a jaw breaker from Feaver's Store  
or the stored image of Frazer licking  
the mud off a rock just because  
we said he wouldn't  
or the numb tongue  
that would not say the words  
I rehearsed over and over  
till I was sure I was saying them,  
even in the silence

d

language is not the whole world

language lines the holes  
that let us see the world

to hold on to wholeness

as the world goes on and on and on

e

at fifteen  
Aaron ran down the stairs  
and shouted,  
I've done it,  
I've done it,  
I've finally  
written something  
I don't  
understand

f

Patrick and Angela's  
autumn orchard  
has dozens of trees  
with pears and apples  
that press heavy  
on the branches  
for names

g

shadows are everywhere  
a dark counterpoint  
in the light grass  
spaces of fire and earth

h

the word universe  
suggests a single verse  
a unified verse

i

a mad quest with no question  
a madder questioning with no quest

j

I am learning  
slowly like a crocus pushing

its way through spring ice  
to listen to silence  
the spaces between sounds

k

Aaron and I were playing pool  
and discussing the latest movie  
when he said, I only speak  
thirty-three per cent  
of what I say

l

the teacher said,  
your writing lacks rigor,  
I said, like rigor mortis,  
like a starched collar  
that cuts the throat,  
I want vigor,  
I want to bounce  
like Tigger

m

I do not have sufficient  
memory records insights  
to make sense of my life,  
so I write my life  
like a sensible pair of shoes  
for long meandering walks

n

rhythm is the flow of blood  
breath, breathing, breath-giving  
the measure of the heart  
knowing the living word  
to inspire hope, even  
in the midst of each day's chaos

o

the story always ends  
in etc.

p

I never write one story,  
always stories bumping  
one another,  
all true in some ways,  
all lies in some ways

q

writing is like trout fishing  
with Skipper  
at Big Beaver Pond  
casting out lines  
waiting in trust  
occasionally feeling a tug,  
this poem even

r

one Father's Day a while ago  
my son and I went to the carnival  
where he invited me to climb a rock wall,  
and strapped into harness and ropes,  
I fearfully approached the wall,  
several stories high,  
until I saw the finger and toe holds  
were letters of the alphabet  
when I zig-zagged into the June sky

s

Uncle Bud said,  
All their talk is fringe talk.  
First, I thought he said fridge talk,  
and assumed he meant talk about food,  
but he explained that all their talk is on the fringes,  
everything superficial.

t

orange has no rhyme,  
orangutans are some  
of my favourite animals

u

word-mongering is  
a balance between  
attending with the senses  
and  
attending in sensual language

v

how many languages do we have?

what is the language of fire earth air water?

who will listen?

w

why did Flannery O'Connor  
searching for God in a mad world  
confess herself a poor prayer?  
surely she had the words,  
constructed a world of stark fundamentals  
with the building blocks of words  
and she professed belief  
never far from God, even if  
they didn't chat often

x

I hide in the alphabet  
behind scribbled signs  
like this poem  
where emotion ceases  
at least seems deceased

y

I am a fisher  
casting my net  
wide in hope  
I will catch  
something  
perhaps a word or image  
or even a whole poem

z

I leaned in the coulee  
long enough to learn  
the coulee's flow in me,  
walked narrow trails,  
traces of other lines,  
written to and fro,  
when a coyote  
composed its own line  
across the coulee's wall  
turned at the ridge  
looked back to see  
if I was chasing her,  
knowing I was  
    and was not,  
slipped over the edge:  
    where does the coyote go?

*A poet's conclusion*

I conclude my hopefully creative ruminating on creativity with a poem I wrote recently following the death of our family pet, Charlotte, who taught me many lessons about living poetically and creatively in the everyday world. I think that all teachers and learners can be inspired by Charlotte's wisdom.

Charlotte

Even in our last walk to Dr. Grise's office, you sniffed  
constantly, filling your senses with the full world  
like a big text that you were always eager to read.

You loved Purdy's chocolate, had a discriminating taste,  
ignored the Zeller's chocolate one pound Allan's Easter bunny,  
ferreted out the Purdy's, well-hidden in closets and cupboards.

Aaron says you could levitate, the only explanation for  
how you ate the tops of flowers arranged in crystal vases  
on high shelves leaving in tact the stalks.

Each day you invited us out of the house to join you  
on a walk along a trail that never ceased to astonish,  
always the sense of wonder for the unfamiliar.

I wish I had scratched your belly more,  
perhaps even let you kiss me with your dog's breath

born out of places your nose enticed you.

When you ran fast, your ears waved like a heron's wings,  
and we thought you would defy gravity like a jumbo jet,  
always overweight with a belly that brushed the earth.

Thank you for the lessons:

*Smell everything.*

*Run fast enough so your ears stick out straight.*

*Always hunger.*

*Forget you're a dog among other dogs.*

*Always expect others to carry treats in their pockets.*

*Love children.*

*Take long naps.*

*Expect adoration.*

*Poop plenty.*

*Eat grass.*

*Bark, bay, howl with a heart's loud echo of each day's bounty.*

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The muses are not amused. "Thematization"™s aim is to conjure up something that cannot be present, either because it exists only in the past, in memory, or in literary "For some of us involved directly with working for the progress of architecture, the sudden outburst appeared strange, a few years ago, of fiction, or because, while contemporaneous, it exists in some exotic, far-off, or inaccessible place." And it is both amusing and disturbing to verify, briefly, about the creative process, and it is not surprising that "the ture itself." The muses are not amused. "We proceeded to see Blobs as representative of