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Perched: A Poet in The Academy

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PERCHED: ARTISTIC CONCEPT

This collaboration between a Vancouver poet and a Montreal-Boston visual artist is meant to introduce a poetic-artistic perspective to academic terrain.

The poems, written in spare diction, and the delicate nature of the forest, juxtapose the tensions between the industrialized academy and creativity. The goal of the work is to re-connect poet/artist with the world, in a newly re-imagined place, a creative, thriving, organic, collaborative place.

The work describes the places (dreams, parks, ponds) where academia and nature collide. Here, the academy meets the sudden, startling signals of nature (birds, owls, mountains). In the final poem, "Light," both poem and visual representation bend to the ground. The piece thus becomes a meditation on survival, brought by the grace and gentleness of the earth itself.

This artistic collaboration is ultimately meant to re-humanize and expand the narrow definitions of our workplace institutions through the interruption of poet/artist as forces of nature themselves.

The poet Billy Collins said:

By now, it should go without saying
that what the oven is to the baker
and the berry-stained blouse to the drycleaner
so the window is to the poet. (2005, p. 8).

Collins' interpretation of life as a poet speaks to me. As a poet in the academy, as an academic on the lookout for poetry, my role is partly concrete material witness. A window brings light and reminds me to find poetry in nature, in my students, and in myself.

During my first six years in academia, my office in the academy did not have a window that faced outside. Instead, the window faced inside, into the library, the shelves themselves; Canadian History. When I look outside my window, I saw: *The Riel War, Volumes 1-3*.

Mountain Diary

Near nightfall
sleeping on the edge
where the mountain
drops like a scream.

That Girl Guide knitting badge won't help now.
Should have done the survival test;
dropped from a canoe,
swim to a log boom.

Nearby, a rustle in the bushes,
a shadow on the move.

I whisper myself to sleep:
knit one, pearl two.



To me, my role as a poet in the academy is clear: My role is to write the poem. My role is to look out the window, see a bird, and make a note of it. In the words of Wilfred Owen (1918):

The poetry is in the pity.
All a poet can do today is warn.
That is why the true poet must be truthful. (p. ii).

When poets enter the academy, they become witness to the institution. Within a machine, they constantly see and feel a machine that does not see. In speaking with other poets and artists in academic life, I know we become the witnesses, and at times, the war reporters. All we can do is take our notes home, and report. Not long after I built a campus garden with a group of students, bulldozers appeared in the nearby pine forest. Displaced owls, deer and painted turtles more frequently appeared in our shrinking island of garden. I had this dream:



Sometimes I feel the academy would like to chase the poets from its hallways and tear down all the trees. As a poet in the academy, I know the difficulty of keeping my heart open, within dense terrains of language, strategies and ambitions that do not often speak to or from the heart. In such a terrain it can be hard to stay focused on poetry or to even know oneself as a poet.

When I teach, I am a poet. I teach many of my courses in much the same way: we go outside, we write poems. We run with ideas in the most interdisciplinary and transformational ways imaginable. We build gardens. We open hearts. As a poet, I realize I am not so much teaching poetry as I am trying to teach a way of being in the world and with one another.

Yet the honest struggle to poetry always leads outside: to gardens, to new ideas, to new artistic freedom, to the simple beauty of, every morning, being able to just look out the window, and see.

My experience in schools and universities as a poet, teacher, and researcher has taught me that communication is rooted in two things: experience of the world and the desire to express. A poet without experience, without a window, is gradually left with only a frustrated desire to speak.

(H)owl

First light,
things turned.
I prayed to the sky for a sign.

Morning rose pale yellow
above a blue mountain.

Walked a while
with friends in the forest,
sentenced to the science of schooling.

Out of nowhere, the sky,
a great horned owl flies.
So close, so quiet,

eyes twice
the size.

Sitting in the pine above the pond,
clear-cut
construction zone
heat wave
the arm of the crane, yellow,
sticks through the trees above the marsh reeds

eyes of owl
on the pond

now golden
daylight

arrives

swoops in silence
between the pines.



As an environmental educator I also learn and teach in a concrete world, one of hard facts, with the knowledge that our natural resources are limited and that this will dramatically change, is changing, how we work as teachers and scholars in the world. In a changing world, we rely more on details, intuition, communication, and trust. In such a world, all become poets.

a river is not dependent on water. We are talking about the flow.
(...and the growth that runs through the trees...and the land.)
- Andy Goldsworthy, Tides and Rivers.

Early in my academic career, I began to learn that land and language are inseparable, and that it is not so strange to become a poet-ecologist or an eco-poet. At the time, I began to have dreams that included more and more global warming scenarios. In one dream, I was swimming off the shores of Lighthouse Park in Southern British Columbia when a harbour seal appeared beside me. The seal remained for a long time; I felt honoured and amazed. Even in a dream, my first thought was: I must run home and write this down!

I now see these dreams as a catalyst for my deeper involvement in environmental education. Now I teach environmental education as a poet, as a transformative process, rooted in the world, and in ecological imagination.

Bohemian Waxwing

Bo
he
mian
wa
xwings

still
in red berry trees

on ontario
street so quiet
just a few
feet

above the ground now
at rest after being

2000
feet
high
(where they fly)

close to mountain moon
far from sea shore

(during courtship they pass a flower petal
back and forth what for?)



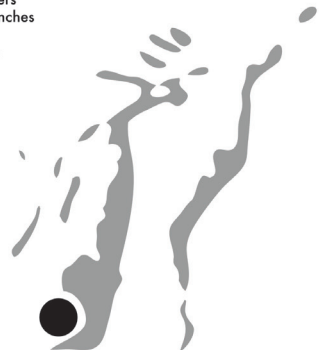
2 x
a year
bo
(he
mi
an)
wax wings

fly

across the country
god's teachers
on their branches

this morning

trust flowers
do not drop



Poets are those who need poetry to represent the world. Beyond academic language, we need to find and see and feel our own way, through poems. Ted Aoki (1996) urges academics to turn to the tension of narration, where "...we as humans are duty bound, ethically bound, to undergo the difficult – to try to occupy all the time the centerless space of narration" (p.9). Poetry promotes reconsideration of not only one's voice but one's rooted physical place in the world.

As a teacher, I constantly re-discover how poetry in the classroom has the power to engage, to connect, to transform, to provoke, to astonish, to illuminate. In some ways, poetry reaches students in the same ways as nature, bringing inspiration, beauty, honesty, and moments of total clarity. Poetry in the academy invites a return to the original lexicon of the word *radical*, derived from the Latin word *radix* or *radic*, meaning: *root*. Perhaps academics need to be a bit more like a radish, a bit more radical: live simply, seek light, grow.

To be a poet in the academy is not your usual job. Everyday, you risk bringing your soul to a sterile, professional academic setting, with few places to hide. It takes courage to teach, learn and to be an academic, to be a poet in the sunshine, within the walls of higher learning. I have also never known a poet in the academy who did not have courage, who did not push those walls right to the very edge in order to bring more light.

On mixing poetry and academia, the poet Federico Garcia Lorca (1951) said: "What would I say to you about poetry? What would I say about these clouds, about the sky? Look at them, look at them, look at them. And nothing more." The daily work of a poet means sitting alone at the window to consider the clouds, your own existence, then having the ability to capture all of that power and emotion and return with a few words that will reach people, and perhaps also allow them to witness the world with fresh eyes. As poets we are called to dwell in two worlds, with the hope that poetry itself will unite those worlds.

One classroom within a large educational institution is not always a particularly poetic or organic place. But when I teach in poetic flow with my students, we somehow spontaneously move beyond the classroom, the institution, and its processes, into a deep green forest filled with possibility. In doing so, students also engage with one of the main goals of environmental learning: connection – in, among and between organisms. Through poetry, we return to the forest.

As poets at our windows in the academy, taking note, we become bridges between exterior and interior, inside and outside, or, as Canadian poet b.p. nichol (1979) said, we engage in the challenge of poems as the “struggle to wed the inner and outer worlds” (cited in David, p.107).

As a poet in the academy when I write and read poems, at my window, I return to the truth of my dreams, my dreams return to earth, and somehow, being with nature restores well-being in a place between worlds.

Light

i want to be so
light
i
could
stand
on the end
a branch

of
lic
o
rice
mint

without bending it

(but if i did
it would fall
a simple arc
a brush stroke
that would take me gently
to the patio)

where i'd hop off

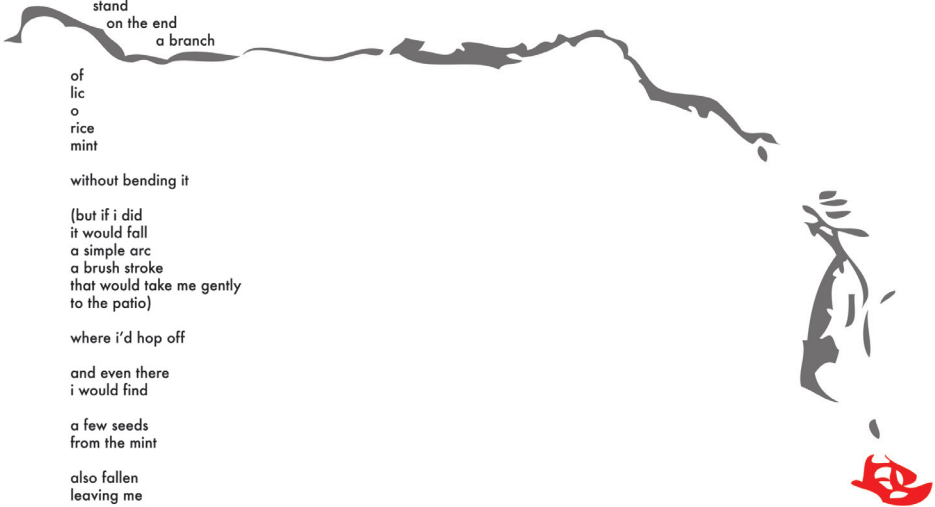
and even there
i would find

a few seeds
from the mint

also fallen
leaving me

just enough

to keep going.



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Note

Veronica and Catherine met at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) Conference in Vancouver, in 2008. They were introduced by colleagues and instantly bonded over their mutual interest in pursuing their artistic research in parallel to being in the academic education field. They kept in touch via email and developed the idea of a collaboration. Catherine had been doing some projects with poets from Massachusetts and New York and proposed to make the visuals for Veronica's poems. They started by making one broadside (using a letterpress and screen-printing images) and were so elated by the results that they decided to create more collaborative pieces. Veronica's prolific writing influenced Catherine's choice to move to a more technological approach, using graphic design software to produce the visual components. Throughout the process, Catherine was still very much influenced by her painting and screen-printing, which provided starting points for depicting the poems through visual images.

