George Elliott Clarke (2009) notes that “every life carries an expiration date” (p. 70), and Erín Moure (2009) writes that “it matters to be born. The rest, after this impossibility of birth, is sheer gift” (p. 251). I begin with a poem because a poem reminds us that life is a “sheer gift” with “an expiration date.” When I turned fifty, now long ago, I wrote a poem. I have been attending poetically to the curriculum of growing old(er) for a long time.

**Picnics**

*(November 14, 2003)*

like an expiration date on bacon or bread,
I have one more day in the decade of my forties,
and while I confess the fiction of chronology
composed by clocks and calendars, the imposition
of time as linear like a ladder, I can’t dispel
the relentless realization: in a day I will be old
at least much older than I am now, will wake up
on Saturday (for the first time I see weekend
as weakened) and notice how almost everyone
is young, younger than me, how, unless I am
a statistical anomaly, I will not live another
fifty years, perhaps another decade or two or three,
which today with the sun chasing shadows in early
winter light during a long run around the curve
of York Harbour will simply not be enough
I don’t know what eternity holds, what aftertaste
of earth will linger at the back of the heart, but I am
in no hurry to find out, since on this day I am teased
to distraction with the light I see everywhere,
need nothing more than eager licks of the earth
always greedy for more picnics, even as a teen,
I used the resources of high school mathematics to compute the irrefutable conclusion that eating up an annual average of fifty picnics, I would still devour only three and a half thousand in a typical biblical lifetime, and knew with unassailable certainty, even then, that wouldn’t be enough, not nearly enough like Emily Dickinson, I know for sure only, *Too few the mornings be, Too scant the nights*, and I wonder if Emily savoured many picnics, probably not, since I don’t think she went out much, or was that Emily Bronte? oh the waste of getting old! after a lifetime of rehearsing for *Jeopardy* (cramming my cheeks with facts like a neurotic squirrel), everything is now jumbled up like jambalaya, and all the facts are so much mouldy manna that will not sustain me in the long winter without picnics and writing this poem about growing old and longing for picnics (even though every sensible husband knows I should be helping Lana prepare for the birthday party tomorrow) is a sign I sing to ward off the murky monsters under my bed, including loss and lumbago, congestion and indigestion, headaches and heartaches, violet varicose veins like a map of violent places I have travelled, grateful and glad Anna sent me *Walter the Farting Dog* to remind me I am still loved

My main way of ruminating, investigating, and questioning is to write poetry. In the process of writing poetry I slow down and linger with memories, experiences, and emotions. In all my writing, I am seeking ways to live with wellness. We need poetry because poets engage with Ted Aoki’s (1993/2005) “playful singing in the midst of life” (p. 282). Poets are always attending to the alphabet, grammar, spelling, music, and imagery, as well as the keen intersections of the mind, heart, imagination, and memory. As Jane Hirshfield (1997) claims, poetry brings “new spiritual and emotional and ethical understandings, new ways of seeing, new tools of knowledge” (p. 79). In poetry, I seek new ways of knowing and being and becoming.

James Hillman (1999) asks, “What does aging serve? What is its point?” (p. xiv). The question is poignant, especially since I now live daily the keen experience of aging as well as the experience of witnessing many friends who do not have the privilege of living long. Hillman suggests that “the last years confirm and fulfill character” (p. xiii). He understands aging as “an art form” (p. xv). He recommends that “the aesthetic imagination is the primary mode of knowing the cosmos, and aesthetic language the most fitting way to formulate the world” (p. 184). As a poet, I share Hillman’s conviction. In my poetry, I engage in life writing and life review in order to seek patterns, themes, and interpretations that can hold the diaphanous, fluid, permeable understanding of life in a story or, more accurately, a sequence of stories: “Life review is really nothing other than rewriting—or writing for the first time—the story of your life, or writing your life into stories” (p. 91), explains Hillman. I am encouraged by Hillman’s hope that “character is refined in the laboratory of aging” (p. 163). I have made many regrettable decisions in my life, and I have hurt some generous people in egregious ways, and I have failed to accomplish many of my goals on the journey, but I have never lost faith that I can continue to learn. Hillman provides the
encouragement I need: “Each day brings another opportunity to strike the right mix, neither too malleable nor too rigid, neither too sweet nor too dry, giving the older character its power to bless with a tough-minded tenderness” (p. 163).

Now in my sixties, I read Carolyn G. Heilbrun’s (1997) evocative memoir *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty* with poignant recognition. She writes that “the greatest oddity of one’s sixties is that, if one dances for joy, one always supposes it is for the last time” (p. 55). She then adds: “Yet this supposition provides the rarest and most exquisite flavour to one’s later years. The piercing sense of ‘last time’ adds intensity, while the possibility of ‘again’ is never quite effaced” (p. 55). Heilbrun evokes the tension at the heart of my daily living experience. On November 18, 2008, my father died. A few months earlier he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. When he died, he was seventy-eight years old. My father had always been a robust, energetic man, and I anticipated he would live for a long time. I have written many poems in an effort to understand my stories with my father, especially the memories of joy and grief.

Remains

after the surgery
with only
a sickle of staples
to stitch your head
together,
the ambulance carried you
back home across the island
to autumn in palliative care,
the final quick slide down the church aisle,
the silent parade to Mt. Patricia Cemetery
near Wild Cove
(where we often spent summer Sundays
sitting in the sun, eating egg salad sandwiches,
glad for whatever the day might mean),
and the last slow slip
into the frost littered ground
like an elevator shaft
to somewhere we couldn’t go,
and now I stand in the mirror,
naked, wrapped only
in your memory,
and I see more and more
of you each time I glimpse
like a ghost is writing me
from somewhere faraway
I know I don’t
want to know

I am learning with James Hillman (1999) that my “father’s character . . . goes on unfolding” and I “go on learning about him, from him. He returns to mind in flashbacks and reveries” (p. 157). As I age, and “become more like him, he often feels nearer” (p. 157). I see him in the mirror often, and I catch echoes of his speech, especially in moments when I am humorous, critical, weary, glad, frustrated, and hopeful. My father is still teaching me; I am still learning from my father.
Brewed Awakening

Death is not about the dead. It's about the living.
(Brian Brett, 2009, p. 22)

1
Skipper shuffled
out of the hospital
in Wal-Mart slippers
like he never wore
for the first time ever
he held my arm
and we sidled
into his last October
my mother slipped
up a trail with KFC
and my father smiled
from lost places
when she sighed,
I got a haircut,
he whispered, nice,
like he always did

2
tomorrow is
my father's birthday
and he won't be
celebrating
with my mother
at Mary Brown's or
the Canton Chinese Restaurant
in Murphy Square

3
I don’t need
to make up stories
except now
in February
I do
wish only
I could
get it right
write it down
be done

4
I am learning
slowly like a crocus
pushing its way
through spring ice
to value silence
the ways words
invite spaces
between sounds
I am alive not dead
all the difference

According to Mary Oliver (1994), “poetry is one of the ancient arts, and it began, as did all the fine
arts, within the original wilderness of the earth” (p. 106). I write poetry because I need to know
I am connected to the earth. As Oliver understands, poetry “began through the process of seeing,
and feeling, and hearing, and smelling, and touching, and then remembering—I mean remembering
in words—what these perceptual experiences were like” (p. 106). The poet’s calling is “to describe
the endless invisible fears and desires of our inner lives” (p. 106). As a poet, I am always attending
to experiences and I am always seeking to translate and interpret the experiences in ways that help
me live with wellness in the world. Gregory Orr (2002) understands the “enormous transformative
power” of poetry and story-making (p. 6) because they help us “to live” (p. 21).

In Writing at the End of the World, Richard E. Miller (2005) asks: “Why go on teaching when
everything seems to be falling apart? Why read when the world is overrun with books? Why write
when there’s no hope of ever gaining an audience?” (p. x). He recommends that we need to ask
these kinds of tough questions in order to initiate an ongoing conversation about the value of read-
ing and writing. Miller encourages us to confirm our commitment to education that is personal,
transformative, and holistic. Miller notes that “schools currently provide extensive training in the
fact that worlds end; what is missing is training in how to bring better worlds into being” (p. x). In
all my research I focus on life writing. I write about the personal in order to understand how the per-
sonal is always connected to the public and universal. Miller asks, “Is it possible to produce writing
that generates a greater sense of connection to the world and its inhabitants?” (p. 25). I agree with
Miller that we begin with self-understanding, but our writing must move out from “the mundane,
personal tragedies that mark any individual life into the history, the culture, and the lives of the insti-
tutions that surround us all” (p. 25). Miller understands “writing as a place where the personal and
the academic, the private and the public, the individual and the institutional, are always inextricably
interwoven” (p. 31). When I write about my personal experiences of growing old(er), including the
death of my father, I am not writing about these experiences because I am eager for others to know
my particular stories. I write in order to invite conversation about what it means to be human on
the earth in the twenty-first century. I write with the hope that others will share their stories, too. I
write with the anticipation that we will discover together how to make difficult and critical decisions
for living, the kind of decisions that will sustain the ecology of our countless interconnections with
all the sentient and non-sentient creation. As a teacher, I have always been committed to holistic
education because we can only live well on the earth with one another if we are devoted to living
well in our own bodies, spirits, hearts, imaginations, and minds. I write poetry and essays as a way to
hold out my hands in both gratitude and invitation, always seeking to make connections.

Molasses

on a silver winter night
my brother threatened to pour molasses
on my homework (What kind of house
did Bunga the Pygmy live in?)
his grinning threat, my whining complaint
filling the kitchen air with purple
while my father in the living room
worked a crossword puzzle
(a five-letter word for regret,
unsolvable with sons, a four-letter word)
until he charged into the kitchen
and my brother shot out the door
speeding through the snow in his socks
with my father on the trail of hot footprints
like Bunga’s father hunting a wild hog
up Lynch’s Lane, over Mamie Jenkins’
picket fence through wind-swept drifts
riddled with tunnels and traps
after a weekend of boys’ busy burrowing
and I was still listing Bunga’s favourite foods
when my brother’s head poked around the door
blowing poison darts from cinnamon eyes
but I only grinned, and my father tracked
wet footprints across the kitchen floor
into my brother’s room while I waited
in the deep, still house, then leaving Bunga
digging yams, I sneaked toward my brother’s door,
I’m sorry I chased you, my father’s voice,
light blue, and the next day I couldn’t
read my Bunga homework because the pages
were dark and soggy with molasses

Jean Vanier (1998) asks, “Are not all our lives a movement from order to disorder, which in turn evolves into a new order?” (p. 12). I have lived a long life with much re-searching of my past stories. Only now in old age can I re-cognize how little I understood as a young person, and how little I will ever understand. “To be human,” Vanier advises, “is to create sufficient order so that we can move on into insecurity and seeming disorder. In this way, we discover the new” (p. 13). This is the heart of my understanding of curriculum. I will continue to journey in “seeming disorder” in order to know how everything is connected, how everything flows together, even if we cannot know the source or the destination. I have been a schoolteacher or university professor of education for more than 36 years. So much has changed in all these years. In the 1970s, when I began teaching, I heard little about holistic curriculum, or embodiment and education, or spirituality and social activism. Nevertheless, when I first read John P. Miller’s writing in the 1980s as a graduate student, I recog-nized that I had always been committed to holistic education. Miller’s explanation of transmission, transaction, and transformation as three approaches to curriculum and pedagogy impressed me as one of the most important conceptualizations of teaching I had ever read. For Miller (1996), “holistic education is an education of balance (for example, right relationship), inclusion, and connection” (p. 14). In all my teaching, I have sought to live holistically, always convinced that the whole crea-tion, and all sentient and non-sentient parts of the creation, co-exist ecologically and organically. Everybody and everything is connected. Like a poem, we need to find the rhythms that hold us inclusively in balance. As Jane Hirshfield (1997) notes, the “central energies” of poetry are “the concentrations of music, rhetoric, image, emotion, story, and voice” (p. 7). Etymologically derived from the Greek poiesis, to make, a poem is composed—deliberately, conscientiously, and creatively. In writing a poem, the poet seeks balance among the central energies that infuse and transfuse the art of poetry. I seek this balance in my poetry and in my living.
Return

the return disappoints
(Ernst Bloch, 2006, p. 62)

1

another sluggish run on the dike
that guards the Fraser River
you’ve seen only a couple times
a flurry of cherry blossoms spring
into a thousand snow geese
startled from the slough
while I remember you huddled
over bits of caribou hair and feathers
tying flies for trout, always waiting
leaning into the crocus bold
purple in the last snow amidst
morning light in the harbour

2

we went fishing in your secret
sun-splashed pond, a hard trek
in good health, now quickly used
up, and on a day you later called
the best of summer, we caught
our last trout, casting a line
into the far past, not knowing
the past was so soon all we
had left, our fishing done
even if the return disappoints
I will return, over and over,
perhaps I missed something

3

you knelt to pray, leaned into
the back of the pew, fell
into contemplation and a nap
while snow falls in the streetlight
a shard of moon etches lost images
on an icy window, indecipherable
seven crows on the backyard fence
sing a persistent song of death
amidst winter like a stone, though
I think I see a path in the snow
where you passed by, one foot
shuffling alongside another

Joan Givner (2009) suggests that “perhaps gaining a little wisdom from a grievous loss is the most any
of us can hope for” (p. 183). I am always seeking wisdom. A few days ago, my brother phoned to
tell me he was recently diagnosed with liver cancer. He has lived all his life in Newfoundland while I have spent half my life elsewhere, especially British Columbia. We have lived most of our adult lives on opposite coasts of Canada. While we were always very close as children, we have not sustained close contact in the past few decades. When my brother phoned, I knew the news was not good. He never calls. The occasional email reminds each of us that we are still here and there, still connected by a web of history, memory, and blood. Following the phone call, I received a text message from my brother. He had seen the oncologist, and my brother’s message was: “Not looking good.” Now my imagination is primarily occupied with memories of my brother.

The Diver

In the gray-blue sky my brother hung,  
long and lean, his body a line  
lined with taut muscles, and Macky’s  
mouth was a gaping hole in a scream  
or laugh because my brother was making  
the death-defying dive never dared  
from the concrete abutment at the end  
of the dam where the water was no more  
than a foot deep though it got deeper,  
out and out (if only you could fly  
and my brother loved to fly).

Earlier in the summer  
my brother climbed the arch  
of heavy timbers that hold  
the dam in place, and golden  
in the falling sun, high  
above our heads, he flew  
through the air and sliced  
the water, and was gone,  
and Frazer moaned, He’s dead,  
but my brother emerged  
slowly like a submarine,  
and though he was silent  
I saw the quick smile.

In the still air my brother hung,  
blonde and brown and blue, his head  
tucked between his arms, hands clenched,  
body a missile, toes pointed back  
like jet engines, and Cec shouted, He’s  
need to dive far out like shooting  
off a rocket launch pad, out and out,  
and since he knew he couldn’t move fast  
ought to reach orbit, knew he would come  
down, he had to skip over the water  
like a racing boat or run aground  
on the rocky bottom.

Earlier in the summer
my brother chased his shadow
across the grass and leaped
off the rock, flying, shooting
just under the surface
like a torpedo, and Macky
grinned, He dives so shallow,
he hardly breaks the water,
but my brother just looked
at us with no smile
though I saw the purple sky
reflected in his eyes.
The gray-blue sky and still air broke
and my brother dropped, but he
didn’t skip once, twice, three
times in quick smooth skips, and plunged
into the black water, and my eyes closed
but wouldn’t stay closed, and my brother
stood in the water up to his knees.
I can’t recall the dive
as a series of movements;
I remember only the still
moment when my brother hung
in the gray-blue sky
and that other moment
when he stood in the water
stained with his blood,
raw and bloody
like a skinned rabbit,
his eyes darting, searching,
as if he’d awaken
in a brightly lit room
he didn’t know.

My brother is a year younger than me. We are very different people. My brother has always been shy and quiet, reserved and conservative. He is full of humour and humility. His heart is keen, but he is not demonstrative, never outgoing. When I began kindergarten, my brother insisted that he dress in the same uniform of white collared shirt and wool pants that I was required to wear. My brother often followed in my footsteps as if I was navigating a way he could safely pursue. As boys we enjoyed many adventures together, and I considered my brother the perfect companion for wrestling, ribbing, and imagining. Like Patrick Lane (2004), my brother and I lived childhood as “a strange paradise” (p. 39).

Chips

the morning my brother danced
out of the house, his first summer job,
Got you a job, son, at George’s Diner,
work hard, job could last all summer,
might even chop potatoes for chips,
Carrie, Nan, my sister, and I
all stood in the backdoor and waved
as Skipper and my brother eased
down Lynch’s Lane under an opal sky,
Skipper’s broad smile gleaming
like the grill on his Chevy II,
and at day’s end we all stood
in the backdoor again to greet
George’s new employee, the apprentice chef,
we called him, when the Chevy II crawled
up Lynch’s Lane with Skipper’s head
jutted out the side window,
his face a pickled beet, barking,

Shit, up to his knees in shit,
echoes off the Blow-Me-Down Mountains,
my brother, his face shiny yellow-white
like a thin slice of potato, muttered,

I shovelled out George’s septic tank,
and long after midnight Skipper still sat
in the backyard, sipping Old Sam and Coke
while my brother soaked in Skin-So-Soft
for six or seven baths, sometimes shouting,

Shovelling shit was fun

At sixteen, I began dating Lana, whom I married at twenty. Lana became the center of my life, and my brother began finding his own way. I realized I no longer understood my brother, at least not well. We slowly became strangers to one another.

**Scribbled in Winter Light**

After a semester at Memorial, I returned home with Lana in December, eager to introduce her to my family. They knew Lana from my letters but this was their first opportunity to meet her. Lana and I almost needed snowshoes to tramp through the deep snow from Eddy’s Bus depot up Old Humber Road. When I introduced Lana to my brother, he just nodded and smiled. I knew my brother was shy but I expected a little more effort in his greeting . . . a story, a question, a little wit. Instead, my brother said nothing, just quickly slipped on his coat and left the house. My brother was a puzzle but Skipper compensated for him with an almost manic burst of stories, jokes, and opinions. When it was time for Lana to catch her bus back to Stephenville, we stepped outside to see my brother leaning on a snow shovel with a wide grin. Like Charlton Heston opening the Red Sea, he had shovelled a wide path through the deep snow in the yard. He still didn’t say anything, but Lana kissed his hot face as she passed.

In our twenties I slipped further and further away from my brother, eventually living in Toronto, Fredericton, Edmonton, and Richmond. Distance rewrote our stories, or effectively did not write any more stories. There are now many blank pages between us.

**Lottery Tickets**

Like a seagull scavenging the shore for scraps
I turned again to my mother’s house in search
of still more stories, though I long thought I’d written
all the stories of Lynch’s Lane, learned instead stories
always end in et cetera, like rain in Vancouver.
My brother flew five hundred miles
to spend five days, the first in five years,
came I assumed with a store of memories.
I was eager to listen, to receive gifts of stories.
I called my brother my research assistant.
We drove the autumn circle of the Bay of Islands.
What do you recall? I asked. He was silent.
Finally he said, Nothing. Perhaps I was asleep.
I told him about playing cowboys, about how
he and Cec argued about who shot who.
He said, I think it was you who argued.
I poked, Recall how you mimicked Chanel No. 5 ads,
whispered with weary French worldliness,
It’s not easy being Catherine Deneuve, left eyebrow
raised barely. I think I saw his eyebrow hover.
My brother sat in a corner of our mother’s sofa,
watched the movie channel, scratched lottery tickets
without end, counted wins and losses, always zero.
While I seek a fictional past, he seeks a fictional future.
He flew back home, and phoned the next night,
perhaps scared by the stories I might write out of
silence, perhaps eager to set the record straight,
said, It was fun, still held his stories sacred.
Like tuckamore I cling to the granite edge of memory,
while my brother lets the past pass like gallstones,
his stories stored in an iron urn buried in his backyard.
I am a poet pushed off shore in a punt with no oars.

“the shape of an integral life” and “teaching and learning for transformation” (p. ix). He is especially concerned that “we hide our true identities from each other” by “living with illusions” (p. 4).
According to Palmer, our culture “separates inner from outer, private from public, personal from professional” (p. 47), but Palmer claims that “we all live on the Möbius strip all the time” (p. 47) where “there is no ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” (p. 47). We must learn to open up to others, to be present
to others, to listen to the stories of others. Like Mary Oliver (1994), my poetry is “a confession of
faith” (p. 122), and “a life-cherishing force” (p. 122). Since, as Oliver knows, “language is a vibrant,
malleable, living material” (p. 91), I immerse myself in language as an artful way to understand my relationships with others, relationships that are not locked in chronology. I have learned many lessons from the stories I have lived with my father and my brother, especially how to live more joyfully in the new stories that are emerging in my life. I am attending to Linda Hogan’s example (1995):
“Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands” (p. 159).

I am now a grandfather to four granddaughters, Madeleine, Mirabelle, Gwenoviere, and
Alexandria. They are my best teachers. Recently, I considered buying a sporty convertible! I imagined driving down the highway in a Mazda Miata—tiny, compact, speedy! Then, one afternoon I was walking in the neighborhood with Mirabelle, who is 6. We saw a Mazda Miata with the convertible top down. Mirabelle looked at the car with its two seats, and asked, “Where do the children sit?” I knew in that moment I would never own a Mazda Miata. I need a Dodge Caravan!
Like Patrick Lane (2004), “it is the present I seek. Not to deny the past and not to ignore the future, but to have them live where they must, in memory and imagination” (p. 20). The stories I have lived with my father and my brother are integral parts of the texture of my living experiences. The stories are written in the heart’s ink as well as in the gaps and silences that no language can compose. Mystery abounds, but I will continue to write poetry as a way to map a little of the journey, partial and fragmentary, as I learn to lean into the story, whole and hopeful.

References


