



Lifewriting: A Poet's Cautionary Tale

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ABSTRACT

I am concerned about the hegemony of certain kinds of discourse in academic research. We need spaces for many kinds of research, including lifewriting research that focuses on narrative, autobiographical, fictional, and poetic knowing. Nevertheless, for all my enthusiasm for the value of lifewriting, I also recognize that lifewriting is fraught with dangers. There are many dangers in lifewriting, but there are also many dangers in avoiding lifewriting. Therefore, I promote poetry as a discursive practice that invites creative ways of writing a life in order to interrogate and understand lived and living experiences with more critical wisdom.

The text you write must prove to me that it desires me. (Barthes, 1975, p. 6)

Going into a narrative—into the narrative process—is a dark road. You can't see your way ahead. (Atwood, 2002, p. 176)

This is my story. But it is not my story only. (Miller, 2005, p. 176)

We are awash in stories. We live stories all the time. We attend to the stories of others. We linger in the stories of dreams, imagination, fantasy, and memory. We read stories in school and at home; we hear stories from friends and strangers; we view stories on television and the Internet and movie screens; we understand the past in terms of stories, just as we seek to understand the future in stories. And so, we need to acknowledge the stories in even the mundane events of our lives, to invest significance in our stories by attending artfully to how the stories are composed. We need to hold fast to Heaney's (1995) experience of "the thrill of story" (p. 10). As Naipaul (2000) understands, "the value of the experience lay in its particularity. I had to render it as faithfully as I could" (p. 50). Life is abundant, and

lifewriting is a way of focusing on some particulars of that abundance in order to recognize some of the possibilities of meaning that lie always in the seemingly tangled messiness of lived experiences. For stories to be creatively effective, they need to be shaped generatively and offered generously. This is the heart of lifewriting (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009) and this is the heart of poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009). Our stories need to be told in creative ways that hold our attention, that call out to us, that startle us, so we know our stories and the stories of others with renewed attentiveness. Lifewriting and poetic inquiry are ways of living in the world.

As a poet, fiction writer, teacher, and education researcher, I promote connections between lifewriting, poetic inquiry, and research in the social sciences. I support a poetics of research by investigating ways that creative writing (including poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, lifewriting) contributes to knowing and understanding. In my writing, I seek to live attentively in the moment, and to know the momentousness of each moment. I seek to enter lived experiences with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings. Above all, I seek to write and tell stories in an ongoing process of dialogue with myself and with others. Like Freire (1997), I am eager to “produce forms of knowledge that do not exist yet” (p. 31). I am concerned about the hegemony of certain kinds of discourse in academic research. We need spaces for many kinds of research, including lifewriting research that focuses on narrative, autobiographical, fictional, and poetic knowing.

Atwood (2002) suggests that “there’s one characteristic that sets writing apart from most of the other arts—its apparent democracy, by which I mean its availability to almost everyone as a medium of expression” (p. 25). The democracy of writing is increasingly experienced and expressed in a diverse and ever-expanding range of possibilities. As Amis (2000) reminds us, “we live in the age of mass loquacity” (p. 6). With the unprecedented proliferation of digital literacies and social networks, such as Facebook, blogging, and YouTube, many of us live in a time and place when more and more people (at least economically privileged people) are telling more and more stories about their experiences, clearly confident that their experiences deserve to be storied and shared with others, including family and friends, but also reaching out to strangers, potentially millions of unknown others. Amis is convinced that “nothing, for now, can compete with experience—so unanswerably authentic, and so liberally and democratically dispensed. Experience is the only thing we share equally, and everyone senses this” (p. 6). So, as I eagerly check out my daughter’s blog, ostensibly written by the family basset hound, Mr. Burns, but actually written by my daughter’s husband, I can participate in the almost daily visual record of my granddaughter

Madeleine whose life has already been stored in thousands of digital images (even at thirty months old). Of course, I can also walk down the road, minutes away, and visit my granddaughter and her parents, and indeed, like any grandfather mesmerized with love, I often do, but what I know daily is that I have an insatiable desire to share in the experiences of my family, and in the experiences of many other families, too. As Amis suggests, "we are surrounded by special cases, by special pleadings, in an atmosphere of universal celebrity" (p. 6). And as I attend to my granddaughter's blog in an age of ubiquitous celebrity, I can also watch myself reading poetry on YouTube. While I confess that I did not post the video to YouTube (I was taped during a poetry reading, and the organizers of the poetry reading posted the video), I also confess that I occasionally check myself out on YouTube, in much the same way that I might deliberately catch a glimpse of my image in a shop window.

So much research in the social sciences has been developed from the frameworks and presuppositions of science, and since science has been misrepresented for generations as a reliable, valid, and objective means of inquiry, other modes of inquiry have often been ignored or dismissed. Yet, as Baldwin (2005) reminds us, "science and story have always been partners. The impulse to understand our lives and the world through science is almost as ancient as the impulse to understand our lives and the world through story" (p. 58). I agree with Baldwin that we need both "the cognitive and the creative, the statement and the story" (p. 64).

As an education researcher, I am not attempting to spell out a clear, linear, coherent, logical, rational, scientific exposition of issues and dynamics involved in teaching and learning. I am not researching functions of the brain, or clinical supervision of teacher candidates in classrooms, or strategies for supporting second language learners in understanding idiomatic English. My narrative research is connected to understanding how stories present possibilities for understanding the complex, mysterious, even ineffable experiences that comprise human living. I am especially interested in understanding how stories can help us live with more creative, ethical, and political conviction. Atwood (2002) wisely suggests that "writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light" (p. xxiv).

Like Calvino (1995) I am seeking a "pedagogy of the imagination" (p. 92) by writing about lived and living experiences, and by ruminating on those experiences in questions, poetry, stories, and conversations with the words of others. Calvino muses:

Who are we, who is each of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a

library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable. (p. 124)

In this essay I present a combinatoria full of glimpses into a lifetime of teaching and reading and writing and becoming human. And in presenting this combinatoria, I am full of reservations, concerns, and fears about lifewriting. Hence, I present a cautionary tale.

Lifewriting is fraught with dangers, wrought with tensions, bought with tears and laughter, always caught up in mysteries beyond all telling. Lifewriting is much like living life. Of course, there are many dangers in lifewriting, but there are also many dangers in avoiding lifewriting. The subtitle “a cautionary tale” suggests a prophylactic or defensive or protective intention, but “cautionary” can also be understood as monitory and admonitory and exemplary. Lifewriting lives in the intricate interstices of all these adjectives; lifewriting is adjectivally adventurous. Even if I hold to a Derridean conviction about the undecidability of language, the impossibility of auto/biography, I am still always immersed in stories. In my stories I am dreamy, delusional, deceptive, and dangerous. I don’t trust my stories—sentimental, sinuous, serpentine, full of specious spells and simulated sense. Nevertheless, I live stories and tell stories and live each day with a zany zeal for walking the line like a tightrope that stretches from one unknown to another unknown.

In Adiga’s remarkable novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), the narrator Balam Halwai—servant, driver, philosopher, entrepreneur, murderer—tells his story to the Premier of China, Mr. Jiabao, who is going to visit Bangalore, India. Balam Halwai spends seven nights writing or narrating his story. At the beginning of his story, he promises: “... I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore. By telling you my life’s story” (p. 4). Like Balam Halwai, in my lifewriting I claim to tell the truth about growing up in Newfoundland, or living as a scholar near the edge of the Fraser River, or learning to be a teacher, or becoming a grandfather, by telling my life story. But what am I really doing?

Lifewriting Is Exculpatory: Whose Story Am I Telling?

In her novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels (1996) writes about how “the present, like a landscape, is only a small part of a mysterious narrative” (p. 48). She also writes about how

...the hindsight of biography is as elusive and deductive as long-range forecasting. Guesswork, a hunch. Monitoring probabilities. Assessing the influence of all the information we'll never have, that has never been recorded. The importance not of what's extant, but of what's disappeared. (p. 222)

I engage in lifewriting as a kind of research that provides stories for living by, not stories of fact, not historical stories, not hysterical stories. My stories are hopeful. When I tell a story, I know I am really telling my story, even when the story is significantly about somebody else.

So, as a part of my ongoing lifewriting, I offer a poem about my father, a poem that continues to cause me difficulty because it recounts a personal experience that casts a negative light on my father. I have written many poems about my father, but I have always cast those poems in a positive light. Even in this poem I am able to write it as a poem that has a happy ending. In fact, I almost always look for a happy ending. If I could not write this poem with a happy ending, I probably would not share it at all. I think this poem is truthful, an accurate accounting of events, at least as I remember them. I did not share this poem with my father, and now he is dead, so I never will. I think that the value of the poem for me is that I can use the poem to make sense of events in my relationship with my father. I don't actually need to share it with him because this is not a poem about my father as much as it is a poem about me in my own pedagogic experience of seeking to understand the views and values of others regarding diversity and sexual orientation—views that I regard as unjust and reprehensible, but must also recognize as entrenched and incomprehensible. The purpose of this poem is not exculpatory in the sense of clearing guilt or blame or shame; it is exculpatory in calling attention, in naming the shame, in declaiming from a place of shame.

Knots

one long summer ago
I returned to my father
who was tying knots
in the backyard,
hitches, loops, bends,
never know when
you might need to tie

a knot, he said, like
this fisherman's bend,
a simple, secure knot
for mooring a boat,
and at day's end
we drove to Curling
to see my uncle Jim,

and on the way passed
 the new Anglican rector,
 Ichabod Crane's twin,
 already suspect because
 he was tall, skinny, single,
 pale, pinched, and Skipper,
 with his face twisted
 like he had a toothache,
 muttered, another faggot,
 and I didn't know what
 to say, almost gasped
 with the cut of the blood
 knot on my bare back,
 the noose cutting my throat,
 I'd never heard my father
 speak with a hornet's fire,
 but also knew I hadn't heard
 him say much for years
 since I left home young
 and returned seldom,

mostly for meals and money,
 too busy with growing up
 to hear my father,
 and I wondered what
 he would say if I told him
 my best friend was gay
 or my son was gay
 or I was gay, but I said
 nothing, as usual,
 and a few months later,
 Skipper phoned, now
 the church warden
 for the new rector,
 chuckled, he's a good
 fellow, but needs me
 to look after him,
 and I remembered Skipper
 in the backyard tying
 a figure eight knot even
 Houdini could never escape

In his eloquent novel, *Jackytar*, Gosse (2005) writes about "paradoxes. Half-truths. Fictions we fabricated, then accepted as truth, and tried to pawn off to others. Fake and fragile, like so much of our knowledge" (p. 140). The narrator Alex Murphy composes "A Misandrous Queer List," a sad litany of the challenges gay people face. He writes: "When I die, no one will ever have truly known me" (p. 125). In all my lifewriting I am searching and researching the interstices of fiction and fact, possibility and impossibility, silence and revelation.

Lifewriting is Emancipatory: What Stories Am I Telling?

In *Writing at the End of the World*, Miller (2005) asks, "Why bother with reading and writing when the world is so obviously going to hell?" (p. 16). Miller responds to his own compelling question with the claim that writing is "a place where the personal and the academic, the private and the public, the individual and the institutional,

are always inextricably interwoven" (p. 31). Throughout his wonderfully wise book, Miller narrates the story of his father's depression, suicide attempts, and death. Miller's personal story weaves through his insightful analyses of the narratives of Chernobyl, Columbine, the Unabomber, 9/11, among others. Miller calls for institutional autobiography as "a brand of intellectual inquiry that is centrally concerned with ... 'the felt experience of the impersonal'" (p. 26). This is what I especially like about Miller. As a student of English literature in the 1970s, I was taught by professors who had imbibed the gospel of the New Critics. Texts were to be read with a single-minded attention to rhetoric or construction. There was no allowance for discussing how you responded to the text, how it made you feel, how it triggered memories and emotions. This kind of reading promoted the notion that the text held a secret message that just needed to be decoded. So, as a reader I was like a spy who sought to eviscerate texts with a skilful scalpel. In effect, I could not address my emotions, I could not investigate my heart. Instead, I pretended that the whole world was constructed in clear and logical and coherent ways. My feelings and experiences were always outlawed. Miller claims that the goal of institutional autobiography is "to locate one's evolving narrative within a specific range of institutional contexts, shifting attention from the self to the nexus where the self and institution meet" (p. 138). This is the goal of lifewriting.

Written on the Back of a Safeway Slip

I am a lonely poet
who seeks a reader
who will loiter with
me long enough
to hear my words.

We insist on clear
words, interpretable
(Apostle Paul's idea)
but I want to
play with words
like an alchemist
polishing the stone
that might transmute
dross into gold.

So my searching
always fails
(we are not
kind to failures).

Engineers all wear
a ring to remind
them that one
engineer once
failed.

I don't need a ring
to remind me

I fail all
the time.

By emancipation I mean that I liberate myself from illusions and delusions by recognizing I am deluded, enmeshed in the ludic places of amusement. There is no other emancipation. In Hamilton's (1988) harrowing novel, *The Book of Ruth*, the narrator is compelled to tell stories filled with violence and hate. Ruth notes that,

...we were the products of our limited vocabulary: we had no words for savory odors or the colors of the winter sky or the unexpected compulsion to sing. The language I had to speak to be understood is not the language of poetry or clear thinking. (p. 2)

Near the end of her horrendous narrative, Ruth still confesses:

I imagine ... that I'm ringing a bell, and someone will hear, but to tell the truth, I also know that it isn't very often that people change their ways. Still, I have to ring the bell, keep it sounding. (p. 284)

So, how do we learn to tell all the stories, to ring the bell, even if no one is listening, even if no one cares, even if no one responds?

Lifewriting is Exclamatory: When Do I Tell Stories?

In the mid-eighties when I resumed graduate studies after eight years of school teaching, I was introduced to poststructuralist critical theory by Dr. B. Cameron at the University of New Brunswick. An exemplary scholar and teacher, Cameron introduced his students to Althusser, Barthes, Cixous, Derrida, Eagleton, Foucault, Gramsci, Irigaray, Jameson, Lacan, and many more stretching to the end of the alphabet. I was enamoured with Derrida. Recently I read Mikics' (2009) *Who Was Jacques Derrida?* Mikics claims that Derrida sought to separate philosophy from psychology. According to Mikics' persuasive arguments, Derrida was opposed to exploring the inner life, the emotional life, the personal life, especially as expressed in lifewriting. I understand how Derrida's antipathy for biography and autobiography is supported by many traditions, conventions, and expectations in the academy, but after reading Mikics' intellectual biography of Derrida, I am reminded how much I have been shaped by the academy, by the scholars I have read, the teachers who have taught me, the colleagues who have guided and guarded my academic journey. Now I understand that if I hope to understand Derrida, I need to understand the life stories of Derrida, even while understanding that he would have regarded such an intention

and attention with derision. I now enthusiastically agree with Miller (2005) who argues

...for a return to 'personal' or 'non-academic writing' as a way to reclaim a form of expression that really matters—writing that reaches beyond the walls of our conferences, that eschews jargon to make a bigger tent, that dismantles the sense that the writer is the master of her past or of all that she surveys. (p. 30)

In 1995 Kofman and Dick made a documentary film about Derrida titled *Derrida*. Mikics (2009) comments on the film:

In Kofman and Dick's film, after a tantalizing, quickly dropped reference to his courtship of Marguerite, Derrida remarks, 'I can't tell a story ... I just don't know how to tell them.' This is a real moment of insight into Derrida's philosophy, which is supremely nonnarrative (or even antinarrative). Throughout his work, Derrida remains relatively uninterested in the stories people tell to explain themselves. He lacks Nietzsche's fine hand for the summary psychological portrait; as I have argued, he would like to reject psychology altogether. Instead, he thinks of his own history, and anyone's, in terms of little details, mostly linguistic. Such details are for him ways of hiding personal identity rather than revealing it (p. 242)

Mikics claims that "Derrida retained his hiddenness to the end. His readers were left to wonder, at the last, who he was" (p. 243). Perhaps we all retain our "hiddenness to the end." I think I am trying to avoid retaining my "hideousness" to the end. I want to be responsible. I want to respond and be responded to. But perhaps I just linger in the dark recesses of a cave, telling my story to an orator who is deaf and mute. Most days, that seems accurate, but even if that is the case, I will go on telling my story anyway because ultimately it is still more captivating than anything on TV. But I am not ignoring Miller's warning about "the profound sense of discomfort that can be produced when, in an academic setting, the request is made that one see or hear the actions, events, or details of another's life as warranting sustained attention" (pp. 40–41).

Voyeurism

In Big T's Rib Place in Calgary

I saw a woman who reminded me
of you without make-up, at least
a little. Odd how sometimes I still see

somebody who looks something
like you, a trace of memory, at least.

The last time I saw you, I was in Zeller's,
years ago. You wore a pink hoodie, laughed

with a man I knew was your new partner,
and I hid behind a shelf of DVD's, where
I rehearsed a few lines I might use
if you saw me, but you didn't, and I was

glad because I knew my lines weren't very good.

A long time ago, I saw you framed
in your bedroom window like a camera
knows a scene in the moment

of the shutter's precise smooth movement.

I saw you from the Tim Horton's across the road.
If you looked out your bedroom window
you would have seen me seeing you

mad with love and guilty with spying
or the other way around, but I knew
you'd never look, not alone.

I watch the world through dark glass

windows, mirrors, cameras, seeking to see while
not being seen, the poet's lonely obsession where
all the lovely stories are made up like Timbits
from frozen dough shipped from Toronto

In McCarthy's (2005) novel, *No Country for Old Men*, the Sheriff considers his
life with wisdom and candour:

People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they don't deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did. (p. 91)

And near the end of the novel, the Sheriff continues to think about his life in ways that are at the heart of lifewriting (at least my lifewriting):

I tried to put things in perspective but sometimes you're just too close to it. It's a life's work to see yourself for what you really are and even then you might be wrong. And that is something I don't want to be wrong about. (p. 295)

In my lifewriting I will continue to declaim, exclaim, and proclaim, not in order to blame and defame, not for fame and a well-cited name, but in order to claim that I have known, intimately and gratefully, the privilege of walking on the earth.

Lifewriting is Evocative: Where Are the Stories I Am Telling?

Miller (2005) claims that, "soon enough and sure enough, the educated person feels at home nowhere" (p. 185). A while ago, I visited Whitehorse in the Yukon. I told my friend B. McClelland, a psychologist, that Whitehorse reminded me of Newfoundland. Then, in a burst of memory, I told him that everywhere I go reminds me of Newfoundland. He said, "That's rather egocentric of you." I said, "I think it is geocentric." It is important to know our backyards. Google satellite images of the backyards where I live and have lived remind me how the whole beautiful earth is connected, and how we need to know the stories of others, not as the Other, but as human beings I am connected with in myriad ways. How does where we are help to make us who we are?

So, I invite my students to write about their homes, especially the myriad spaces that compose their domestic architecture, including their backyards, kitchen tables, closets, basements, and studies. As a location, home is always geographical and emotional. In *Belonging: Home Away from Home*, a moving memoir, Huggan (2003) ruminates on home and places as a Canadian who has lived in the south of France and Tasmania for many years. Huggan confesses that "it is becoming a bit of

an obsession, this quest to know what and where home is" (p. 89). But Huggan also understands that "actually, it is not that small white house I mean when I write the word home, but the subtle kinetic familiarity that comes from situating oneself in recognizable terrain, the feeling of *knowing who you are*" (p. 90). Regarding the different versions that she and her sister Ruthie have about family experiences, Huggan writes that "slowly, with age, I am learning a great truth about recollection; there is no truth, and inconsistencies only add to the richness of mutual memory" (p. 228). Huggan knows that her "stories are only partial truths—but insofar as they exist, they change life into language and keep it firm" (p. 25). In a similar way, Naipaul (2000) reflects on how writing each of his books took him "to deeper understanding and deeper feeling" and how "that led to a different way of writing. Every book was a stage in a process of finding out; it couldn't be repeated" (p. 27).

A few summers ago, I visited Labrador for the first time. The main goal of this family vacation and adventure was the isolated town of Battle Harbour which is now a Canadian national historic site. I stayed overnight in a refurbished house that once served as a stopping place for Dr. Wilfred Grenfell on his medical journeys up and down the coast of Labrador. Spending a couple days in Battle Harbour reminded me to ask many questions about the places where we live, especially about experiences of geographical intimacy.

Battle Harbour

After a few winding hours up the Viking Trail along the coast of the Great Northern Peninsula like a broken index finger pointing north, and a ferry ride from St. Barbe to Blanc Sablon, and hours more along the Labrador Coastal Drive, mostly on a gravel highway with boulders that could break Goliath's head or a windshield, to postcard perfect Mary's Harbour, and another hour on the *MV Iceberg Hunter*, we arrived in Battle Harbour, a restored remnant of the town that was once the unofficial capital of Labrador, the mercantile hub of a lucrative salt cod fishery.

Battle Harbour is a rock that can be walked,
end to end, in less than an episode

of *Law and Order* without commercial breaks,
a place without trees, and little sun where
the midnight blue ocean wraps its arms
around the island like a hug or choke-hold.

People once lived here all their lives, like Harold,
the tour guide, who grew up here till 1967
even when only three families remained, and
tells us his uncles always said about his father,
My son, he's some stun.

Because Battle Harbour had a Marconi station,
Commander Robert E. Peary stopped by often
on his Arctic expeditions, and in 1909 announced
he was the first person to reach the geographic North Pole
(even though it is likely a few generations of Inuit
probably hiked over it without making a fuss).
I have stood in the net loft where Peary stood, and
if he lied (as many think he did), there is no way
anyone could have known, will ever know.

And walking Battle Harbour on an intricate network
of boardwalks, old cart roads, and footpaths in the tundra,
visiting the restored churches and graveyards, picking
partridgeberries, remembering my home in Vancouver,
I think, Why not fall in love with a place the way we fall
in love with another—a romance with geography:

Be faithful to a place with all the lovely
and lonely moments of fifty or sixty years, decades
of recapitulated delights and steady savoury surprises.

In her novel, *Creation*, which narrates the adventures of John James Audubon in Newfoundland and Labrador, Govier (2002) presents an intriguing conversation between a character named Captain Bayfield and Audubon. Bayfield explains his understanding of triangulation as “an act of imagination” (p. 81): “Three points. Where you stand, where you strive to be and the unreachable star by which you measure” (p. 81). Audubon responds, “You have laid down the coordinates of my life” (p. 82). Bayfield continues,

'Of mine as well. Where I stand, where I strive to be and the fixed point which defines both. Between these three is a relation. Once you know it, it can be used to discover any distance you have not yet travelled.' (p. 82)

Lifewriting is all about recognizing (as in knowing again) one's position and the possibilities of relationship that emerge from a keen sense of location.

Lifewriting Is Enlivening: Why Do I Tell Stories?

According to Miller (2005), "now that we inhabit the age of the memoir, we find ourselves surrounded by those who write to distinguish themselves from the crowd by capturing the deep particularity and pathos of their own past experiences" (p. 20). I'm not sure that those of us who write autobiographically are really seeking to distinguish ourselves from the crowd. In much of my writing I think I am seeking to understand how I am part of the crowd. Most of the time, I feel eccentric, idiosyncratic, unique, alone. What I want is to feel like I am a part of a crowd, a network, a collective, a community. Like Miller (2005) I think,

...the memoir allows one to plunge into the darkness of the past; it provides the means both for evoking and for making sense of that past; and it can be made to generate a sense of possibility, a sense that a better, brighter future is out there to be secured. (p. 20)

As Miller (2005) understands,

...every shoe salesman and waitress, every school teacher and cop, every politician and pundit has a story to tell and wants to share it now via the Internet, on some television talk show, or on the printed page. The chosen media doesn't seem to matter. The stories will out. (p. 20)

In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers (2001) shakes up memoir with a keen subversive delight:

Further, the author, and those behind the making of this book, wish to acknowledge that yes, there are perhaps too many memoir-sorts of books being written at this juncture, and that such books, about real things and

real people, as opposed to kind-of made up things and people, are inherently vile and corrupt and wrong and evil and bad, but would like to remind everyone that we could all do worse, as readers and as writers. (p. xxi)

In Ionesco's (1962) drama *The Chairs*, two characters named Old Man and Old Woman plan to commit suicide. A third main character named The Orator sits on the stage. Old Man explains: "My life has been a full one. My mission is accomplished" (p. 173). Old Man and Old Woman expect The Orator to recount their life stories. Old Man:

So make my philosophy known to the Universe. And do not omit the details of my private life, whether they're comical, painful or touching, my habits and my tastes, my gorgeous greed ... tell all you know ... speak of my dear companion ... of the way she used to prepare those marvellous little Turkish pasties of hers, and her rabbit *rillettes à la noman-dillette* ... and don't forget to mention Berry, where I was born (pp. 173–174)

In response to Old Man's narration, Old Woman sobs and calls out: "Yes, yes, let us die in our moment of glory ... so that our names become legendary ... at least we shall have a street called after us ..." (p. 174). As Old Man and Old Woman eagerly share their stories with The Orator, he remains silent. After Old Man and Old Woman jump out a window, the Orator indicates he is deaf and mute. In Ionesco's world, our stories are absurd, and nobody is listening. He might be right, but most of us will not stop telling our stories, filled with inextinguishable hope that somebody might be listening, some time, somewhere.

Window Seat

I'm squat in the window
seat of an Air Canada Airbus,
a cigar tube with wings, flying
from Halifax to Vancouver,
while claustrophobia seeps
into my swollen feet, my luck
to be squashed in the worst seat
after my assigned aisle seat
disappeared in a new plane's
design (the plane is full, sir),

panic about needing the lavatory
(airplanes, the only place I use
that word), and the woman in
the middle seat smells like Avon,
or my long-gone grandmother,
and waves through the window
at people she can't see, who can't
see her, a kind of hopeful, hopeless
sentimentalism, and I know I need
to breathe, in and out, but I want

to scream, at least histrionically, and last night while visiting my parents, Uncle Bert dropped in as he does on Sunday evenings, and told stories about all the fights he's had and continues to have (he listed a veritable *Who's Who* of local businesses, bank managers, bureaucrats, a litany of complaints about almost everybody, a victim of a convoluted vicious conspiracy, even though it always seems to me my uncle lives a charmed life), and suddenly my complaints about my seat and the waving woman are Uncle Bert's complaints. Everything works or doesn't work according to laws of physics or philosophy or fate or faith. Things work out, at least sometimes, at least somehow, in some ways, perhaps. I could

spend my entire life being upset, fighting with people and ghosts, and while I want my aisle seat, and I want somebody to show more interest in my poetry, and I want to publish more, and I want to be cited, and I want to lose weight, and I want clerks at Wal-Mart to smile a little more, and I want people at Silver City Cinemas to turn off their phones and chatter and translations, I mostly just want to grow enough wisdom for deciding when to speak up and when to ignore stuff. So, I smile at the woman crammed into the seat beside me, and I wave through the window just in case somebody in the terminal can see us, even though I know they can't.

In his memoir, *A Magpie Life: Growing a Writer*, Bowering (2001) explains that he

...learned essay writing from Warren Tallman. He taught me that an essay was what Montaigne knew it to be—writing a life, living a life. He did not have much use for the usual academic essay because he could not find delight in it. (p. 217)

I like the reminder to attend to writing that knows delight.

A Final Word: I

Miller (2005) calls for “pragmatic pedagogy” (p. 140). He calls on educators “to provide our students with the opportunity to speak, read, and write in a wider range of discursive contexts than is available to them when they labor under the codes of silence and manufactured consent that serve to define the lived experience of subordinates in the culture of schooling” (pp. 140–141). But Miller is no wide-eyed zealot with an infomercial for enhancing literacy. Instead, he reminds us that “the danger of the written word is ... its promise; the fact that it can't be finally and completely controlled means that it forever retains the power to evoke new possibilities” (p. 194). Lifewriting is full of danger and promise. Indeed, the danger and promise are one. Lifewriting can evoke new possibilities, but only as we are willing to enter into the crowded, busy, frenetic, frantic places where misunderstanding, misreading, and misrepresentation are inevitably and inextricably interwoven with interaction, interrogation, interruption, interjection, intercession, interception, interference, interdependence, interfusion, interpellation, intersection, interchange, intercourse, intervention, interdiction, interlocution, and interpretation, all imaginatively interdigitated with the immeasurable idea, identity, and ideology of I.

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