



Through the Lens of One Day Last December: A Poetics of Narrative Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Thoughtful teaching requires the mapping of one's own life, a land marked with features of recalled sites. In the studio of my own classroom practice, working material resides in the poetic groundwork of after-school treks along contours of a New England shoreline. A black stone library. A harbor sound. The placement of a dog-wood by a marshy pond. Through the lens of one day last December, read on...

While composing her own story of growing up, Annie Dillard (1987) came to realize, "When everything else has gone from my brain—what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that...the city poured rolling down the mountain valley like slag..." (p. 3). Within the terrain of a lived story, the curriculum of the present emerges from selected texts of recollected pasts—narrations in returning futures. Thoughtful teaching requires the mapping of one's own life, a land marked with features of recalled sites. In the studio of my own classroom practice, working material resides in the poetic groundwork of after-school treks along contours of a New England shoreline. Treads of white-walled radials wear a path through crushed asphalt and marsh. Stopping along the way, I place chosen moments in a wire basket attached to the chrome of rusting handlebars. Back on my turquoise bike, I ride off, charting chosen scenes of life in teaching. Read on...



Through the lens of one day last December
The aperture of memory takes photographs without a flash,
A succession of scenes
Spread along a coastal breakwater.

From a distance
Tankers watch the rocky shoreline,
Where shutters of July homes catch snowflakes
Drifting into currents of offshore ferries.

Standing near a boat house window
Painted metal pail in hand,
A sea glass collector sifts through the presence of low tide
Past images catalogued in current color.

At the side of a beach wall landing
Stone steps bring her to limestone benches,
Time pieces fixed in fragments of inner conversations
Slipping by like sailboats unnoticed.

Across salt stained slats of late summer tables,
She arranges remembered moments
Culled from curricula
Of never forgotten time.



Next to a cedar street hedge
A library stands in memorial of black stone marble,
Rooms of casement windows fill walls with fables long ago
Biographies of familiar strangers.

Footing a narrow stairwell
Alcoves of shelves store geographies next to world globes.
Stacked newspapers hold readers' attention
As lights flicker in between iron laths of an upper floor.

Stacked on a check-out counter overlooking oak stained chairs
Books take turns being stamped by fines of overdue dates,
Front foyers opening up into metal carvings
Lean against the remembered meanings of another day.



On the branches of a feral apple tree
Hammered pieces of plywood act as the fort's sentry,
To the right, tall grasses border an eastern hill
Pushing sleds onto icy mats of a reedy field.

Undetected from above
An underground hideaway carves into earth with borrowed shovels,
Ladders lashed together with found string and sticks
Permit entry into secret quarters.



Across the mowed lawn
The lilting call of a red-winged blackbird
Perches on pulleys attached to a clothesline railing,
A metal milk box awaits delivery unopened.

Looking back through sketch pad pages
Forsythias color lilacs with the pastels of a painter's box,
Willows weep next to dogwood trees on distant hills
Backing onto a deserted barn filled with paper.

Raked into uneven piles in front of a detached garage
Mosaic tiles leave red and orange maples,
Hours later, an unsuspecting swipe of a double-pawed calico
Slinks into the shadows of a public motorcade.



After replacing one more moment
Into her metal pail,
The sea glass collector
Packs up and turns towards another poem.

Without warning an unexpected moment of memory
Tilts sun umbrellas staked next to a harbour road,
Pinwheels circle the front entrance of a candy store
Shaded by the weather of striped awnings.

Installed next to a sunken barge
Whirligigs set down in sand bar waters,
Moving out of tune
Timed to the dials of transistor radios.



Placed on the striped towel of an early evening swim
A beach ball slips away from the pull of incoming tide,
Footprints fade into the cadence of waves
Leaving latticework of salt and seaweed.

While winkle shells disappear for the night
Fireflies blink the last call of a lemonade stand,
Porch lights pursue pebbled paths ending in screen doors
Opening and closing against the frames of another day.



When Georgia O'Keefe taught, she wanted to show her students a way of seeing. She told them that there was meaning in "...the way one addressed a letter, combed one's hair, or placed a window in a house" (Lisle, 1986, p. 71). In the lines of poetic observation, past experiences act as reference maps of topographies in future presents. Working material of memory makes meaning in the teaching of curricular plans. Icy mats of a reedy field become fables of an apple tree. Rooms of casement windows stage puppets beside a chalkboard wall. Sketchpads draw words in colors, shapes, and other ways to know. Adler (1958) observed that we are both the picture and the artist. I say the poem and the poet, moving within selected moments of perceptual time. A black stone library. A harbor sound. The placement of a dogwood by a marshy pond...

References

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Cynthia Morawski received her doctorate from Columbia University Teachers College. She is currently an associate professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, where she teaches integrated language/arts, literacy, disabilities studies, and literature, and researches literacy learning; bibliotherapy; women's lives; and arts-based learning, including poetics of memory work in teaching narratives and learning differences.