REMEMBERING AND REUNITING FRAGMENTS: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF CHILDREN’S STORIES OFFERING HEALING AND HOPE TO A YOUNG CHILD

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores my relationship with my mother as a young child through the lens of children’s fiction and film. It is comprised of poems, each of which embodies my understanding of aspects of texts I engaged with throughout my early childhood. The poems are my response to themes, images, and phrases that I integrated into my own world view and belief systems in the context of a turbulent childhood.

Themes that emerge include: a mother-daughter relationship, family secrets, trauma, abuse, and the transformative power of children’s book characters and stories. My exploration reveals the key role libraries and children’s fiction and film played in informing my childhood story. Children’s stories pulled me up and out of the ashes and rubble of my familial home and abusive maternal relationship. Children’s stories showered me with hope where none existed. This thesis is my attempt to distill the shadows and suffering of my childhood into something luminous and light (Martel, 2009).

Visiting the library as well as reading and viewing children’s stories, helped me prosper emotionally, cognitively, and relationally; stories offered me healing. Through reading children’s books and projecting my thoughts and emotions onto the characters and their individual plights, I gathered insights, encouragement, clarity, and courage that helped me understand my mother in the broader context of my life, and to move beyond survival to thriving as a grown woman—as mother to my own children, as well as professional teacher nurturing the minds and hearts of others’ children.

Following the poetic component of the thesis is a discussion of the approach I have undertaken, which might be described as a combination of poetic inquiry, narrative research, memoir, life writing, autobiography and autoethnography. I have elected to position this piece following the thesis, as a reflection, so as to let the poetry stand in the first place on its own, as a
valid form of academic discourse.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author Karen M. Ehrenholz.
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To my daughters Hannah and Vanessa, for your tangible love that trusts and believes and reminds and reflects that I am a walking miracle and a magnificent mother.
Dedication

My story is for you, Hannah.
Written to you, for you, and with you in mind.
You who love me always
You who see the loveliness in me when I cannot
You who believe in me when I lose hope.

This story is for you, Vanessa.
You who stand with me and by me
when the ghosts of the past cloud my countenance
you love me all the more.
You who wait and touch me tenderly and with compassion
when I descend, then
disappear into my faraway place
where you cannot follow.

My story is for you both
and your daughters
so women in our ancestral lineage are aware that we are free
of familial abuse
because I broke the silence
Because you cared
to listen
Because it mattered
to speak my truth

To push my shadows
into the Light.
Introduction

This thesis explores my relationship with my mother as a young child through the lens of children’s fiction and film. It is comprised of poems, each of which embodies my understanding of aspects of texts I engaged with throughout my early childhood. The poems are my response to themes, images, and phrases that I integrated into my own world view and belief systems in the context of a turbulent childhood.

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1963

In the Beginning
I Have a Dream

March on Washington, August

Tonight I have a dream
   a bad dream
I walk into the living room
   where Father stands
and Mother sits
   shouting
Mother tells me
   to quiet down

She turns
   and yells at the box
with the rabbit ears
black and white beads
   run all over the screen
Father pounds his fist on the box
   “Piece of rubbish”

Father stands
   beside the box
Mother shouts “Don’t move”
He holds the rabbit ears
   in a funny shape
A fuzzy sound crackles

“There he is”
Father bends
   forward
the rabbit ears stretch
   apart
all I see are black and white beads
Mother yells “Don’t move”

I lean into the couch
   it holds me
my fuzzy pajamas
   warm me

I look over at the box
I see black and white people
   Everywhere
A man is shouting
   Loud
Shaking his fist
He has a dream

“Huh! A Blackie thinks he can change
the world  Everyone thinks he can
change the world”

Father drops the rabbit ears
the box goes fuzzy

Mother marches me to bed
I have no dream

just a wish
   for Mama to look
       at me
      and smile

September

Today we moved
   to a new house
       on a new street
           in a new city
               in a new province
in the same country
in the same world
where frogs chatter
in the laurel trees outside
and sing so loud
I cannot hear
   my little sister cry

Mother does not like
the pink and blue paint
   in the kitchen
Men come to scratch it off

Mother’s kitchen is cloudy
then everything turns brown
I liked the pink and blue kitchen best
because I could breathe
Now something heavy
presses down
choke my breath
my chest gurgles
like a diesel truck
idling
each time I inhale

Mother plugs in a machine
that spits steam into the air
“It will help you”

Mother presses me down
against my mattress
scrubs my swollen neck
and chest with Vicks Vapor Rub
I wriggle and twist
Mother shouts “Hold still”
Stuffs a blob up my nose
Mother forgets
that I am not the kitchen linoleum
with black scuff marks

“Say your prayers” comes the command

“Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
love stay with me through the night
wake me with the morning light”

“Now, go to sleep”
I suck in a deep breath
“Do you love me?”

“Go to sleep”

“Click”
the light goes out
“Clack  Clack”
Mother’s shoes walk away
“Clunk”
the door snaps closed

Now I miss my old house
and my backyard skating rink
and my log cabin playhouse
And sunshine at bedtime
where I could breathe
and Mother did not yell at me

I close my eyes
I have a dream
that I can change my world

**November**

Today I am sad

Brother runs past me
    Fast
Points his toy gun
    “Bang Bang You’re dead”

a gun shot
JFK

a very sad day
1964
Are You My Mother?

“Out came the baby bird!
‘Where is my mother?’ he said” (Eastman, 1963, p. 9).

“‘I have to find my mother!’ he said. ‘But where?
Where is she? Where could she be?’” (Eastman, 1963, p. 27).

January

Mother steps around my bed
pushes away the curtain
plugs in the humidifier
my lungs are plugged with phlegm
and groaning
So is Mother

I am sick Again
Another cold in my chest

Mother leans over
my head
Her lips touch my forehead
Quick Cold Hard
like the man at the post office
who pounds the envelope
with his inked stamp

Are you MY Mother?

March

Mother grips a pair of scissors
Orders me to stand on the toilet
Her long finger nails painted red
cut into my arm
She snaps the scissors open and closed
across my brow

I squeeze my eyelids together
hold my breath
a sour smell
pushes against my face
I scrunch my nose
   “Stand still”
Her nails bite deeper
   into my arm

The cold blade   cuts a path
from ear to ear
shards of hair
   prick my face
I pray   her hand stays steady
   that her sour breath
is only unbrushed teeth

Are you REALLY my Mother?

April

I jump up
tug open the curtains
sun smiles inside my room
outside   in Mother’s garden
rows of flowers
   wear yellow bonnets
   and swing in the sunshine

little fairies wear pink skirts
   and dance in the tree
   like Ann’s tutu
wind blows
one pink fairy   lets go
jumps free
   spins and twirls
   round and round
to the ground

*******

It is Saturday
Baton lessons
at the Dunbar Community Centre
I hold a shiny metal stick
   with hard rubber
   like old chewing gum
stuck   to each end
Mother brushes my hair
   into two pigtails
Pulls my black leotard
   with green fringe
Hand sewn  Straight  Even
like grass strands around Mother’s garden
   like my bangs

Mother sees a loose hair
Yanks
   without warning
Pain bites my scalp
like a needle poking skin
   to remove a sliver

Coats drop  shoes scatter
stocking feet patter
mothers sit on benches
My Mother stands      apart

girls wait
   for the music to begin
I swing in circles
   to make my fringe dance

“March”  Mother says with her
meat grinder eyes
then turns  and leaves
   to buy groceries
   across the street at Stongs

I am smallest
the caboose   in a long line of girls
   who march around the big room
I pull my knees up high
swing my baton
   forward and back
I march   two steps
   then run    to catch up
then march again

I watch my feet
   and the wooden floors
   painted with squares of sunshine
where tiny specks dance in the air
The music stops  class is over
Mother glances over  at the other ladies
a pasted smile
  like my Barbie doll

I jump into the back seat
  of our Chevrolet Impala
Mother turns around “Bad girl”
Mother wants to be a majorette
I want to spin with the fairies

Figure 1. Karen in her baton costume. Circa 1966
[primary source].

May

Without warning
a hurricane hits the house
thunders down the hallway

I dive into my closet as
  my bedroom door flies open
“Wait till I get my hands on you
  You little bastard”

I wriggle behind winter coats
tug my knees against my chest
Mother moves wildly
    pulling open and slamming drawers
    throwing blankets aside
Her shoes stop

Mother inhales and exhales
Her breath blasts
    in and out
    like wind
thrashing shirts and pants
    pegged to our clothes line
My chest thumps
echoes in my ears
I squeeze my eyelids together

This is not like playing Hide n’ Seek
    with Heidi
Heidi’s mom whistles
    Her words smile when she speaks
    and makes us lunch

I open my eyes
Mother’s feet stare up at me

“Wait till I get my hands on you
    you little bastard...”
Her arm reaches in
    shoves coats and dresses aside
A well-worn leather strap
    grazes my leg
    swings by her side
I press my spine
    against the back of the closet
hold my breath
my bottom still burns fire
    from Mother and Father yesterday

The gap disappears clothes sag
shoes stomp away
door slams
bedroom walls groan and shudder
    under seismic stress

my body shakes
shock waves ripple
long after danger
    has passed

The room grows dark
    and still I crouch behind coats
    the closet door still slightly ajar
afraid to move
legs jittering
breath held
    calming
eyes staring
thoughts melting
    afraid to break
    the silence
to stir the air
    with my step or breath
uncertain if wild animals
still hunger
for flesh

How could SHE
be MY Mother?

**June**

Mother spends his money
    to dress me like a porcelain doll
Father sees and
    yells at Mother
Mother yells
    at me
    “Do NOT cross the street
Do NOT get dirty”
Mother’s warning

I stand in the front yard
    on Mother’s grass
looking
I watch a robin splash in the small puddle
    in front of Mrs. Gow’s house
I squint step onto the road
    to see better
my dress flutters
my shoes tap
they have never seen sunshine

it rained yesterday
today the puddle is full
of fresh water
sunlight jumps and plays on top
tossing pieces of happiness my way

Robin flaps her wings
sunlight leaps into the air sparkles

I step closer
to see better
to dip my shoes in
so I can make sunshine dance

I copy Robin
make big splashes with my feet
I wonder how big the joy
when I jump in with both shoes

Sunlight bounces up
drenches me
I smile from head to
toe Mother does not

She marches over
Hauls me away
from Robin
the puddle
and all my sunshine
Figure 2. Karen standing in the backyard of her Vancouver home. Circa 1964 [primary source].

August

Mother watches wrestling with Father
Every Saturday
Inside the house

Mother is angry
Bulldog Brown is winning

Outside the air is cool
The grass soft on bare toes
Sister and I swing
  bare legs pump the air
toes touching sky
wind tickles rosy cheeks

Shoes stomp down stairs
Across concrete Grass flattens
  my swing halts
Mother clamps her fingers
  around my arm
Drags me behind her

Across the lawn
Up the back stairs
Through the kitchen
into the bathroom

Television Loud Wrestling over
Mother becomes Bulldog Brown

No she is not
my mother

**September**

I step around the back corner
of the house
duck under
the overgrown laurel hedge
to see Mother standing
in the same spot
she occupies every summer night
at dusk--in her vegetable garden
a narrow strip of soil
on the south side of the house
she reclaimed for herself

I catch my request in my throat
not wanting to interrupt
the stillness that surrounds her
She is quiet peaceful
Her thumb pressed over the hose nozzle
so water leaps out to quench her
“thirsty tomato and zucchini plants”
I hear her talking
to her plants
her face is soft

A mosquito buzzes
lands on my bare arm
I swing
to slap it away

Mother startles turns
Her face washed with anger
“What are doing back here?
Get inside right now”
I wish
   I was one of her tomatoes

October

I am playing
   in my room
   snipping scraps of fabric
when Mother grabs me
   from behind
   by the scruff of the neck
Mother drags me
   from my bedroom
   down the hallway
   to the bathroom
Mother holds tight
   grips and twists my hair
   in her fist
Hairs snap

Mother stops
   at the toilet bowl
Lifts the lid
Shoves my head
   inside the hollow
something foul grazes my cheek

Mother yanks my head up
   fist locked around my ponytail
twists my head
   pushes my face down again
   into gooey fabric
my underwear
I hid in the laundry pile

How could she?
   be my Mother?

*******

Mother wears
   a beehive wig
   that sits on the back of the toilet
   on a styrofoam head
False teeth
sit on the counter
by the cold water tap
Every night they appear
Every morning
they are gone

Mother’s nails are long
painted red perfect
her touch
is not
Mother’s lips are wide
painted red perfect
her words
are not

I want Mother to hold me
touch me
talk to me
kindly

Mother yells “Not home”
Mother locks herself away
when I knock on
her bedroom door

*******

I walk down
to the basement
hugging the rail
step by step
I descend
stairs groan

in the laundry room
I stretch up on tip toes
lift one arm high
fingers snag a string I tug
a naked light bulb stirs awake
dusty cobwebs dimming its glow
light spreads like sunshine
in winter cool faded
paints shadows on the walls

cobwebs cover the window
thick like tattered torn
curtains
electrical wiring
   threads a haphazard path
   along exposed two-by-fours
a spider sails across the room
   on a filament I jump back
another spider setting up home
   in the shadows

I step across the plywood floor
   buried beneath an avalanche
   of dirty clothes
push my arm through
   clean sheets to press a button
Dryer jolts
   begins to hum

I crawl inside the laundry basket
   wrap towels around me over me
press my shoulder lean my head
   against metal
I close my eyes
Dryer’s steady hum
   soothes comforts

I am baby bird
Big warm wings around me
hold me close

You are my
   Mother

As long as I keep
   my eyes closed

*******

“He looked way, way up. He saw a big plane. ‘Here I am, Mother,’ he called out. But the plane did not stop. The plane went on” (Eastman, 1960, pp. 42-43).

“‘Oh, you are not my mother,’ said the baby bird.
‘You are a Snort. I have to get out of here!’” (Eastman, 1960, p. 48).

“But the baby bird could not get away” (Eastman, 1960, p. 50).

*******
1965
Mary Poppins

“But Mary Poppins’s eyes were fixed upon him and Michael suddenly discovered that you could not look at Mary Poppins and disobey her. There was something strange and extraordinary about her--something that was frightening and at the same time most exciting” (Travers, 1981, p. 12).

“All day long Mary Poppins had been in a hurry, and when she was in a hurry she was always cross. Everything Jane did was bad, everything Michael did was worse. She even snapped at the Twins. Jane and Michael kept out of her way as much as possible, for they knew that there were times when it was better not to be seen or heard by Mary Poppins” (Travers, 1981, p. 151).

“So Mary Poppins put on her white gloves and tucked her umbrella under her arm...How could you leave your umbrella behind if it had a parrot’s head for a handle? Besides, Mary Poppins was very vain and liked to look her best” (Travers, 1981, p. 16).

February

Mother likes Mary Poppins
  I do not
Mary Poppins scares me
  like Mother

April

I stretch back
  close my eyes
grass is soft
  like duck feathers
  granny stuffs in her pillows
blades of grass
  gentle against my neck
tickle

Mother gives her grass
  medicine to make it
    grow tall  healthy
I wish  Mother had medicine
  to help me grow  tall  healthy

I squint up at the sky
  whipping cream clouds change shape
before my eyes
like a flag tossed in the wind
a breeze brushes my cheeks
caresses

my jaw and chest muscles sigh
unfurl
trusting
like sea anemone tentacles dancing
in the ebb and flow of still waters

pink blossoms cover our tree
burst open like popcorn
wind tugs at their stems
teases

blossom petals drift sleepy
onto the lawn
flakes of snow
I stretch flap arms and legs wide
my springtime snow angel

********

I sit on the living room couch
Mother glares “Put your legs together
You can see right up your panties”
I squeeze my legs together
They split apart
like ‘Pick Up Sticks’

Mother barks “You are going to put me
in a clinic”

I wish for an umbrella
like Mary Poppins
to fly
above rooftops

away from here
to where blossom trees
always bloom
and wind warm
always tickles my cheeks
May

Sister sits outside Father’s door
I sit beside her
Sister cries
Father opens his door
lifts her inside
Shuts the door

I wait
cheeks wet   eyes swollen
Sister’s giggles   trickle under the door
   burn like candle wax

I cry
Mother steps over me   opens the door
Leans inside
“Why?
   Why won’t you let Karen in?”

Father is studying
Mother closes the door
Steps
   over me
disappears
down the hall

I wish    I had a
   Mary Poppins umbrella

June

I peer from the hallway
careful
   not to be seen

I see Mother
   inside her closet
Shoes of every colour
   lined in a row
   like crayons in a box
Clothes on hangers   squeezed tight
   like me   this morning
Under my metal bed
   hiding
Mother’s suitcase sits
on her bed   Open   Empty

Mother stares surrounded
by
Gloves
Stockings
Scarves
Hats
Coats
Boots
Shoes
Shirts
Skirts
Dresses

Mary Poppins’ bag
would fit every   Thing
Mother loves

Clothes
Shoes
Boots
Furs
Plants
Cats
Hairspray
Nail polish
Kitchen table
Bathroom towels
Leather strap

*******
Mother leaves today
    for five days
Mother never
    goes away or visits anyone
    no one visits her
Mother has no people friends
    only plant friends
I watch Mother
    drizzle pink water
    onto their roots
    when Father
    is not home
Mother whispers words
    I cannot hear

Who will water them when she is away?
Not Father He hates her
plants Grumbles at clay pots
    that sit shoulder to shoulder
    on the window ledge
branches and green leaves
    gazing out
    the windows
    of his study

I hope the plant
    with the tiny orange lanterns
    will be okay
I will talk to it
    from the hallway
    where Father cannot hear

*******

Mother has to have an operation
    to fix her hearing
Mother is like Mary Poppins
She leaves
    without saying good bye

*******

Five o’clock Time for dinner
Father feeds us
    Mother’s meatloaf
Father drops a thick slice onto my plate
Shakes a Heinz bottle Ketchup spills out
    painting my meatloaf red

Father forgets
    to say “Eat and shut up”
    like Mother does

Still no one talks
forks and knives clang
Sister Brother Father eat
I stare at meatloaf on my fork
cold colourless
I nibble
chew
    swallow
meatloaf stops in my throat
    refusing to go down
minced meatloaf spills onto my plate
Father glares the strap hangs nearby

Plates empty Father nods at
Brother Sister chairs scrape
I poke meatloaf stuck to my fork

clock’s long metal spokes click
fridge clunks
    settles down for the night

I need to pee
Father nods

In the bathroom
I unclench my fist
    “plop” goes meatloaf mush
    “flush” goes the toilet
I return to the kitchen
    show Father my plate

Free
    to scoot to the bathroom
to pee again
this time for real

*******
Mother returns home
a steel rod inside
    one ear
Mother snaps  “Everything is too loud”
Mother shouts  “You’re cruisin’ for a bruisin’”

Her leather strap sits on
the kitchen counter
    still warm from earlier
I wait
    for Mother to turn around
so I can
    melt away

**July**

My stomach hurts
    all the time
    like I swallowed
    rocks from Mother’s garden
My chest hurts
    all the time
    like I am buried beneath broken concrete

The doctor scribbles words
    onto white paper
Mother walks next door
a man in a white coat
sells Mother   another bottle
    of medicine

*******

Mother holds my mouth open
exposes my teeth
    speckled black and grey and white
    like a Dalmatian

The doctor scribbles   another note
Mother buys   more medicine
Shovels a spoonful
    down my throat

I do not remind Mother
that Mary Poppins
adds sweetness
to help her medicine
go down

October

Mother lines us up
in the hallway
Measures us
one at a time
Mother presses a book
on top of my head
heavy like a brick
“Stand taller” Mother darkens
my ‘old’ pencil mark
Sister gets a new pencil line
that sits above mine

*******

Mother marches in
points at me
“She hasn’t grown in two years
All her teeth are rotting”
I stare up at Mother
startled

Mother glares at the doctor
“No more medicine”
Mother grabs my hand Marches away
yanking me behind her
Outside Mother lets go walks away
“Hurry up”
I run to catch up

*******

A new boy moves in
across the street
he throws rocks at birds and animals
today he hurls a stone
that smashes
dyeing my hair red
a bump
the size of a lemon erupts
on the back of my head

Mother marches across the front lawn
shakes the bloody stone
   in the new boy’s face
hammers him
   with words

I hover behind Mother
   not needing to fly away
Not today

*******

Mother boils a bag of herbs
   in a pot on the stove
I drink the hot mixture everyday
my rumbly chest quietens

Mother places the humidifier
   in a box downstairs
I begin to grow again
   like some of the flowers
   in Mother’s garden

Figure 3. Karen in Mary Poppins costume. Circa 1965 [primary source].
“Mary Poppins sighed with pleasure, however, when she saw three of herself, each wearing a blue coat with silver buttons and a blue hat to match. She thought it was such a lovely sight that she wished there had been a dozen of her or even thirty. The more Mary Poppins the better” (Travers, 1981, p. 30).

“From the carpet bag she took out seven flannel nightgowns, four cotton ones, a pair of boots, a set of dominoes, two bathing-caps and a postcard album. Last of all came a folding camp-bedstead with blankets and eiderdown complete....” (Travers, 1981, p 13).
1966

Where the Wild Things Are

“The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another his mother called him ‘WILD THING!’ and Max said ‘I’LL EAT YOU UP!’ so he was sent to bed without eating anything” (Sendak, 1991).

Mother parks the Chevrolet Impala
   in the parking lot at Stongs
Mother shops for food
Brother and I walk
   across the street
   to the Dunbar Library


I stop in the children’s section
books with beautiful pictures stand
   proud  tall  on the ledge
their covers wave “Pick me  Pick me”
I lift one  two  three
   books into my arms
scan  shelves  for more stories that
call to me
with colour and characters
with big words I cannot read yet

I drop cross-legged onto the floor
a little boy
in a cat costume
grins up from the page
green trees grow
in his bedroom

M-a-x
Max
in a boat on the ocean
sails away

Monsters
with sharp teeth
jump off the page
claw at me
I slam the book shut
chest pounding

Stuff the book back
onto the shelf
where monsters
cannot find me

Figure 5. Dunbar Branch of Vancouver Public Library interior. Dominion Photo Co. 1950. Vancouver, British Columbia. Dunbar Branch Library [Online Image].
Public domain. VPL Accession Number 9988.
S-ee K-a-r-e-n
er-e-e-a-d
S-ee D-i-ck r-u-n
S-ee J-a-ne r-u-n
S-ee S-p-o-t r-u-n

See Karen r-r-r-un
down the hall
See Karen le-e-e-a-p
onto her bed
See Karen sh-sh-a-a-k-k-e
because Monsters
growl and
gnash their teeth

See Karen read
See Dick hit
See Jane hit
See Spot cry

********

Monsters
growl
under my bed
howl
at my face

Monsters
grab
at my head
mash
at my back

Monsters
wake me
at night

Mother
growls
at Father
Monsters
live
at my house

********
Where the Wild Things REALLY Are

She skips and flutters
down the hall
smiling at sunbeams

Wild things roam
grab her arm
dig sharp claws
smack
turning pink skin
black and blue

Monsters growl
bedroom walls quake
bending low
biting deep
fairy wings crumple

Hidden in a hedge
eyes closed
she huddles
drifts away
a sunlit room
pillowy softness

Hunger pinches her belly
cold earth penetrates her socks
darkness dissolves her dream

She creeps across the lawn
tiptoes upstairs
scanning searching

wild things
asleep
till tomorrow

********

“And Max said, ‘No!’ The wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws but Max stepped into his private boat and waved good-bye” (Sendak, 1991).

*******
Way out at the end of a tiny little town was an old overgrown garden and in the garden was an old house, and in the house lived Pippi Longstocking. She was nine years old, and she lived there all alone. She had no mother and no father...there was no one to tell her to go to bed just when she was having the most fun, and no one who could make her take cod liver oil when she much preferred caramel candy” (Lindgren, 2005, p. 12).

‘Oh, isn’t it glorious to be alive!’ said Pippi, stretching out her legs as far as they could reach” (Lindgren, 2005, p. 39).

‘You see, I am really very shy, so if I didn’t give myself some commands I’d just stand in the hall and not dare to come in’” (Lindgren, 2005, p. 120).

```
January

“Grade 2’s go to your spots
Time for handwriting practice”
Teacher stands Tall Waiting
I step to the side blackboard
clutch a chalk stick
stare straight ahead
Boy stands beside me
bends my way
whispers “Karen”
my eyes follow his fingers
perched above his head
pressed against the board
Boy grins
I hunch
squeezing eyelids
pressing palms against my ears

Boy drags fingernails down slow
a screech ripples across drills deep
into my head
rips up and down my spine like a knife
stripping
protective plastic off wire
```
Boy giggles
   no one notices but me
Boy plants his nails
   begins again
his smile grows wide
I shake my head “No”
Another long slow scratch
   overwhelms

I wish I could make him stop
   could pick him up like Pippi
walk outside
hang him over a high branch
   in the huge Maple tree
   that stares down at the school
“What an unkind thing to do
to the smallest girl in class”
   I would glare
   “Never do that again”

I want to make Boy stop
   and Father stop
   and Mother stop

But I am Annika Much afraid
I say nothing
   do nothing
am silent
so suffering does not stop
   pain does not go away

March

“...Amen” Sister and I say
“Now go to sleep” Mother says
Her feet march down the hallway
   around the corner out of sight
door ajar hall light
   beams across my face like sunshine
   warms comforts assures

Sister punches her pillow
   with her head
   up and down again and again
punches like Father hitting	nails into wood

Eyes wide Open Alert
a sentinel watching
listening waiting
a cat growls another cat shrieks
two cats
tear at each other
trees groan beaten by the wind
a cupboard slams in the kitchen
television mumbles in the living room
Sister is quiet now and still

I pull my legs closer
hug my pillow harder
tug my blanket tighter over my head
a bubble of breath hidden warming

Nighttime noises startle
Nighttime noises frighten
scared to be lost in nighttime
forever

********

My shoes scuff against pavement
legs heavy like sacks of potatoes
stored in the pantry downstairs
grey tights eyelids sag

cool air scurries across my cheeks
pinches them pink
billowy clouds exhale
flapping my pigtails
fingers wiggle inside mitts
Up the hill across Marine Drive
One potato two potato three potato
four long blocks
I step up to John King’s door
five six seven potato more
Another steep hill before we arrive
at our schoolroom door

********
Elbows rest on my desk
head sinks into my arms
  soft like a pillow
Teacher’s voice
  marches forward steady
my mind drifts to birds bobbing
  on a branch outside
green leaves applaud their song
  call me to join them
one robin jumps free
  sails through the air is gone
“Karen? Your turn to read”

********

Teacher reads a story
  about a magic carpet
I close my eyes words drift
  over me under me inside me
a carpet small fringed
  floats above streets thick
  with people cars animals
     spices and sounds
high above the city
  I fly with birds on waves of wind

Teacher snaps her book shut
Eye  Open  Startled
  back in my desk with a bang
my magic carpet ride
  popped like a bubble in bathwater

Shoulder to shoulder
  in the cloakroom coats zip
I head home with Monte
legs flop like jello onto the sidewalk
  tired we cross the street
endless blocks stretch before us
our street a distant dot

Leaves strong thick shiny
  like the hedge leaves
  outside my bedroom window
I pick a handful
  drop them onto the sidewalk
“These will work” I smile
one shoe on top of each
I hold Monte’s hand in mine
determined
“imagine a magic carpet”
hopeful we squeeze eyelids fingers
I fly floating free

a car
eengine noise
spoil our
magic vanishes

Green leaves
peek out from under shoes
sidewalk all around
same spot no closer to home
heads dip low
hands let go
feet step forward
heavy like wading through thick mud

no magic
no carpet
no ride home

******

Today Mother sits on a picnic blanket
legs stiff fancy shoes pointed
straight ahead
other ladies sit nearby chatting

Edie Barter charges by
Brother Sister and I jump up
join other children running
scrambling swarming to touch
his Pied Piper
candy covered coat

handfuls of penny candy
tossed high
sweet confetti blowing in the wind
spills from the sky

Laughter Sunshine Sweetness
speckle a grassy field
I crouch pick up Mojos
my favourite

Races over
tummy rumbling
barbecue salmon roasting
corn on the cob  sizzling
Mother says “Time to go”
“But I’m having fun”

Mother drives along Marine
I unwrap another Mojo
  chew  sweet  white toffee

Mother says church ladies
  act superior
  stick their noses
  in the air
Mother says no more
  Sunday School picnics

*******

I shiver
downstairs in the basement
  the furnace blasts out  heat

I lean in  rest my cheek
  on cool white stillness
  my bedroom wall  solid

I exhale  a balloon letting go
  Mother’s rage drains away

my head stops  spinning
my body stops  shaking
my world stops  collapsing

May

Mother unscrews my training wheels
  holds my bike seat
I climb on  clench handlebars
  “Don’t let go” I beg
I stretch toes to reach pedals  push
handlebars zig zag
twisting sideways
I squeeze tighter  knuckles whiten

My bike bounces up and down
picks up speed
past Sidney’s house
  past my house
    bike wheels  halt

I turn to see Mother’s hands at her side
“You didn’t hold on”
“No”  Mother says
“I rode all on my own?”
Mother nods
I look for a smile  but Mother
  is already walking
    up the street

**September**

Father builds a Go Cart
  four wheels  a plank  a rope
I watch  hoping
Father builds only one  for Brother

Mother snaps  “What do You
  want a cart for?”
I hope  Brother gives me a ride

*Figure 6. Vancouver childhood home. Circa 1973 [primary source].*
I sit behind Brother  holding tight
hair jumping around my face
my bum bounces up  bumps down
we whiz past our house
wheels stop turning
we hop off  run up the street
   for another ride down
Joel hops on
Brother and Joel
   whiz down the street  laugh
I stand  watch  hope
   Brother gives me another turn  soon
Father would build me a cart
   with a rope
to squeeze  tight
to steer over bumps and dips
    in the road
to hold for the run uphill
    for another ride down
if  I was a boy  oh boy

December
winter  school is closed
    for Christmas
out my bedroom window
slate skies  grey rooftops iced
    with creamy quietness
gutters hung  with icicles
hot oatmeal  brown sugar  milk
Mother fills our empty bowls
Father sits at the table  no one talks
Mother serves bacon  fried eggs  toast
no one smiles  I am careful
    not to look at Sister
    sitting across the table
I stare at my food
my feet stick out  I try
to keep them close
Sister kicks me hard
I groan soft
Father’s eyes flash
yells points
exiles me to my bedroom

Father enters
Sister slips in smiling
sits on her bed
Father stands over me
eyes burning
like a hot iron on fabric
I step back
Father steps closer
points his finger
between my eyes
fire blazes from his fingertips
I freeze stiff still as a statue
arms pressed at my side

Father yells a long time
Mother calls it the Third Degree
I blink Father explodes yells
to look at him when he talks
my eyes widen
stare straight ahead
his finger shakes
a slug wiggling in my face
Father pulls down my pants
orders me to bend over
I hold my breath
his hand hits high on my back
Father swings again and again

Father walks out
I pull up my panties
Sister’s grin grows wider
like a Cheshire Cat

I limp to my bed
my back and bum throbbing
where it hurts
to sit
to walk
to run
no where to run to

Mother says “I will report you
if you hit her again”
Father hits me again
Mother never calls

*******

I love snow
the soft breezy kind
the crunch beneath your boots kind
the roll it into a snowman
   swish it into an angel kind
the stick to woolen mittens
   press it into an igloo kind

   sweaters and tights
   pants and coat
   hat and scarf
too much clothing

I move stiffly like a robot
   careful on icy porch
I look up flakes floating
   melting on my tongue
I snap an icicle licking
   slurping nature’s popsicle

Snow piled high
my boots sink in disappear
Brother and I push snow aside
   trudge to the front yard
snow covers every driveway up Highbury

Brother has a plan
in the basement he chooses one shovel
   I lift the other heavy awkward
I follow
dragging it behind me
Brother digs scoops tosses
I push my shovel
   as fast
   and steady
   and hard as Brother
I feel strong like Pippi
We shovel a long driveway to a cottage
two old sisters smile
they can drive their car
We smile
our pockets full of money

I walk beside Brother steps strong
my shovel trailing
sliding over snow
we stomp on the mat
snow tumbles from boots
beaming I step into the kitchen
Mother frowns
“No more shoveling snow for you
You will strain yourself”

Her words dampen melt away strength
Vacuum up my happiness

Mother spoons out bowls of steaming
Campbell’s Tomato Soup
with “cheese grilled” sandwiches

I slump in my chair
like a balloon without air deflate

Brother leaves
to shovel more driveways

I sit scared to strain myself

*******

Brother drops the needle
onto the record in the living room
a Christmas tune spins round
“He knows if you’ve been
bad or good
so be good
for goodness sake”

I bury fingertips into my ears
hum to block out words
that burn a hole
allow fear inside

I ask God
“please help me be good
so Mother won’t hit me
so Father won’t hit me
so Santa won’t give me coal
so some one will
love me
Amen”

*******

If Santa Claus gives Pippi
a lump of coal
I hear Pippi say “Thanks Santa!”
and ‘see’ her build a fire
to roast marshmallows

*******
“With trembling legs Annika climbed up in the tree again, and Pippi helped her with the last hard bit. She drew back a little when she saw how dark it was in the tree trunk, but Pippi held her hand and kept encouraging her” (Lindgren, 2005, p. 73).

“But the policemen were certainly tricky, because the minute they were down on the ground again they pounced on Pippi and cried, ‘Now you’ll get it, you little brat!’

‘Oh, no, I’m sorry. I haven’t time to play any longer,’ said Pippi. ‘But it was fun.’ Then she took hold of the policemen by their belts and carried them down the garden path, out through the gate, and onto the street. There she set them down... ‘Wait a minute,’ she cried and ran into the kitchen and came back with two cookie hearts. ‘Would you like a taste?’ she asked” (Lindgren, 2005, p. 44).

“Now [Pippi] took a bath brush that hung on the wall and began to beat the pancake batter so hard that it splashed all over the walls” (Lindgren, 2005, p. 22).

“‘I don’t think you have a very nice way with ladies,’ said Pippi. And she lifted him in her strong arms--high in the air--and carried him to a birch tree and hung him over a branch. Then she took the next boy and hung him over another branch...and the next she threw right over a fence so that he landed in a flower bed...The boys were absolutely speechless with fright...

‘Is there anything else you have to say about my hair or my shoes? If so, you’d better say it now before I go home.’ But Bengt had nothing more to say about Pippi’s shoes or about her hair either” (Lindgren, 2005, p. 33).
1968

Oliver Twist

“Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed by his own temerity,—‘Please, sir, I want some more’” (Dickens, 2009, p. 23).

“...and crouching in the corner, [he] tried to sleep; ever and anon waking with a start and tremble, and drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its cold hard surface were a protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him” (Dickens, 2009, p. 26).

January

Today my eighth birthday
Mother gives me a new top
I rub blue fabric hold it close
Mother says, “Go put it on”

My bedroom
  one big room two beds
  identical bedspreads
Sister sleeps beside the closet
I sleep near the door

I open the door
Sister sits cross-legged on her bed
wears a new top grins

I stare plop onto my bed
  my top limp on my lap
Mother walks in
  “I don’t play favourites”

I drop my head blink quickly
identical new tops
  Sister’s red
  mine blue

Mother says “Your sister will cry”
Mother does not notice
  me crying

**********
Grey clouds squeeze
   buckets of water
      all over
   my birthday party

I step into the kitchen
   dressed    hair brushed
Mother walks by
   Stops
   Spits    on her finger
Reaches for my face

I scrunch my nose
   collapse my head
      toward my shoulder
      like tulip petals
when
   darkness
      rolls in

Mother’s fingernails scratch
   a path across my forehead
Her finger leaves
   a trail of spit
      like slug slime

“Hold still”
   a needle sharp prick
      stings my scalp

“Got it”    Mother holds
   a blonde hair    that strayed

Where is love?

*******

Children knock at the front door
rubber boots  drip
   onto Fir floors
damp coats  drop
   onto Mother’s bed
Girls in party dresses    cluster
   around Mother’s dining room
   table  Polished    Shiny
      wiped clean of dust
this morning

Girls pull elastic around chins
    anchoring party hats
my hat tips sideways
I pull too hard
a thin elastic
    snaps
    smacks
    my neck

Sister sucks in a big breath
exhales air bumps out
    choppy like a truck motor
Everyone laughs

Sister  Inhales  Exhales
    Again  Again
I wish Sister would  Stop

Mother holds a birthday cake
    from Stong’s bakery
    fancy cursive “Happy Birthday  Karen”
candles burn
    everyone sings
my heart fills up

Father holds his camera
Mother says “Make a wish  Smile”

flash does not work  Father fumbles
grumbles  Everyone waits
    holding smiles
“Your camera never works
    on her birthday”  Mother snaps
candles melt  drip wax

“Blow out your candles”  Mother says
I forget to wish

presents from friends
    on the carpet
more presents from Mother
    on the coffee table
    piled high
wrapping paper  ribbons
litter carpet

Children
  button coats
  tug rubber boots
I slip into my room
  a mountain of presents
  on Sister’s bed

Every gift from Mother
  has a twin sitting on Sister’s bed

grey clouds dump another bucket
I run for the front door

Figure 7. Karen’s eighth birthday party. 1968
[primary source].

Kids climb into cars
windshield wipers wack
  rainwater aside
Mother clutches the steering wheel
  leans forward
  drives to the Dunbar Theatre
my friends chatter  giggle
Mother does not shout “Shut up”
Mother buys tickets
I melt into my seat
lights go out
excitement expands
fills me to bursting
   like Jiffy Popcorn
   warmed on the stove

I forget
   Sister wears a twin top
I forget
   that buckets of rain
   fell today

because Oliver Twist
   came to my birthday party

**February**

Saturday morning cartoons
cross-legged on the carpet

Mother turns the knob
   “One cartoon   no more”

Screen jumps into action
Popeye and Sindbad the Sailor
Brother’s choice    Again

Popeye punches Sindbad
Olive Oyl cheers

*******

Saturday morning   Errands
Mother parks in the lot
   beside the Scotia Bank
steps out slams car door
Brother   Sister   me
   like three ducklings
trail behind Mother
   to the Dunbar Bakery

Screen door springs open
   bounces shut
wooden door swings wide
   warm sweet smell
   welcomes

Baker lady smiles a
   “glad to see you” smile
reaches across the counter
offers us each a cookie
   that melts sweetness
   onto my tongue

I watch
   big fat loaves of bread
   slice and shuffle
   thin like cards
a red twist tie on top
   says “stop”
   to tumbling slices
Fresh baked bread
   exhales inside
   clear plastic bags
   like warm breath
   on my bedroom window
   in winter

Back in the back seat
   with Sister
Brother beside Mother
   “You can have one slice each”
Brother grabs first
picks the crust
   my favourite
Sister digs down deep
   pulls out the other crust

Bread tossed toward me
   I pick a slice
   press warm against my cheek
   inhale fresh white softness
happiness sweeps through me
   like sweet cherry filling
   into an empty pie crust

a hand brushes my shoulder
grabs the open bag
eyes open I take a bite chew
stare out the window
back in the backseat
  of our Chevrolet
driving down Dunbar home

******

I like my hair
  short  sassy
Easy to wash  quick to brush
  no tangles

Mother likes my hair
  long  to my waist
Easy to grab  quick to knot
  when she is angry

**March**

Mother stands  stirs oatmeal
  bubbling in a pot
Father sits  reads
  a newspaper  covering his face

Mother stands  spoons hot oatmeal
  into bowls
Brother sits  waiting

Mother stands  walks hot bowls
  to the table
Sister sits  swings her legs
  looking for mine

Mother stands  butters toast
Flips eggs  bacon grease crackles

Mother stands  pours coffee
  for Father  orange juice
  for Brother  Sister
  me

Father sits  hidden
  behind a newspaper
  spread  wide
wings of an eagle
  hunting  ready to pounce

Mother stands  slices beef
makes sandwiches for lunch
  at breakfast

Father sits  newspaper wings rustling
Father  speaks
I stop  chewing  freeze
Father  shouts
He wants  a spoon
  for his coffee

Mother drops  her knife
wipes her hands on her apron
  steps across the kitchen
  picks up a spoon from the drawer
  places it beside Father
Father keeps reading

No  thank you

May

Food  gone
Brother  Sister shovel
  breakfast  into their mouths
  cheeks ballooning
Mother smacks blackberry jam
  onto burnt toast
the way Father likes it

I mumble  “I didn’t get any bacon”
Mother turns  knife poised
  “Well  the early bird
    gets the best crop”
my jaw opens  slams shut

I plop onto my chair
Mother drops a plate of toast
  onto the table
bodies lunge  hands grab
platter empties  scoured
by vultures

I take a piece
   eat
   silent

last in the bathroom
last to the table again
God says the last shall be first
Mother says the first are the best
   the last forgotten

Where is love?

*******

I slip out of bed
   scurry to the window
       pull open curtains
cold air swirls around my ankles
a grey sky hangs heavy
   sinks low
       seeps melancholy
inside through window and door seams

In the kitchen
Father sits lips thin white paper
Mother stands lips painted red
Mother scrapes butter across
   the sandwich bread
each slice sinks
   yielding to the pressure of her knife

*******

Heidi’s mother sings
her words melting
   like molasses in warm milk
       like honey on toast
Mother shouts
Her speech spreading
   like sewer water
       that overflows
       our basement in winter
Mother’s talk floods every room
   of our small house
Mother shouts louder
   “Why can’t your brother
      or sisters take Him?”
Father shakes his head
   “You haven’t seen Him
      in over 25 years”

Father pulled
   the shortest straw

********

Father reads his paper like always
   no one talks
Grandfather sits stirring his coffee
   round and round
      spinning his spoon
   banging his cup

Father’s hands tighten
   choke paper edges

Round and round
   spoon clangs
Round and round
   swirling milk sinks
      into blackness

Newspaper crumples
Father slams his fist
   cups jump cutlery rattles
my eyes widen
Grandfather stirs
   Round and round
      a resounding clang

Father’s face grows hotter
kettle boils on the stove
   coffee brews
toast burns the way Father likes it

Steam rises Grandfather lifts
   holds his cup between both hands
Slurps raspy
    like a straw sucking up
    last drops of juice

Father stands peers down
Grandfather slurps another mouthful
coffee hangs on his mustache
    like tinsel
    on a Christmas tree

Father shakes his fist
    in Grandfather’s face
I tremble
    as if Father yells at me

Grandfather stares at Father
    “Where am I  dear?”
Father yells louder
Thrashes his fist faster
Father wants him to stop
    I want Father to stop
Grandfather shrugs
    “I don’t hear you  dear”

Father’s anger splits open
    splattering like a can of paint
dropped from the ceiling
    sticking like tar

Father walks away
    Slams the door
His words hover
    like smoke from a fire
blackening beautiful
fingers of sunshine
    waking up in our kitchen

I sit
    trembling like jello

No one wants
    Grandfather

*******
Grandfather sits in Father’s chair 
folds brown sugar into porridge 
stirs round and round 
chews mouth wide open

“Shut your mouth” Mother says 
Grandfather lifts his head 
“The war I cannot hear you dear”

Mother walks around the table 
“Don’t stuff so much cotton 
in your ears”

Mother picks up his bowl 
Grabs his arm 
Shoves Grandfather 
downstairs to his room 
Slams his door

Mother stomps upstairs 
Mutters “Grandfather Bad manners”

Grandfather chews 
his mouth wide open 
Alone 
Downstairs

Upstairs 
I keep 
my mouth shut

Where is love?

*******

Grandfather lives downstairs 
Out of the way 
Safe from Mother’s anger

I huddle upstairs 
out of the way 
against an armchair 
focused fingers stitching 
a dress for my doll
Broom closet door
  smacks the wall
I jump  drop my needle
panic rips through my chest
  “Where to hide?”

I whip open  front closet
Sister huddles  beneath coats
on top of boots
glares  no space for two
Sister pulls  door closed

my heart pounds
I turn to escape
  down the hallway
  freeze
Mother steps around the corner
Looms overhead
Grabs my ponytail
  my neck twists  cranks forward
Mother flares  arm swings  Strikes
Leather slices
  across my neck
Batters my back

Mother’s fire simmers
  like the stove turned low
till another spark  blazes
  like a match  tossed into a forest

Mother strides away
  strap trailing behind
limp  worn out  shiny
  with my oils

I rub my neck  my hands  tingle
  face feels  numb
  back  burns
    like my doll must feel
  when I pop off her head
to empty her of bath water

********

I stare at the bathroom door
  unlocked
slightly ajar
the way Mother likes it

Footsteps in the hall
bathroom door swings open
Mother marches in
I fold scrunching small
tights in a pile at my feet

Mother admires herself
in the mirror
adjusts her wig
rifles through a drawer
sprays her hair
a mist descends sticks

Sim walks in
jumps onto the counter
Mother strokes his back
fur dander
explode into the air

Mother runs tap water
fills his glass
Sim slurps greedily
Mother purrs “Thirsty boy
aren’t you”

Her voice sweet
like too much icing

Mother flips off the light
walks out
forgets I sit on the toilet
in darkness

I stand stiff
shake tingling legs
to wake them up
Sim grooms himself
leg high in the air
licking private parts
on the counter

I wash my hands exit fast
before someone else walks in
Mother sits in her spot
at the kitchen table
face painted  wig sprayed
dressed
  eyes smoldering
    like wet autumn leaves
Mother stands
  tugs her mini skirt
twists her Go-Go belt
  “Eat and shut up”

my stomach lurches
throat tightens
I stare down
  at my bowl
tears pool  wrestle free
plop into milk
ripple like waves to shore

Where is love?

Mother turns her key
  presses a button
I watch the car roof collapse
  like an accordion
I shade my eyes
Mother ties a scarf
  to protect her towering curls
unfolds sunglasses  wide white rims
  big as tea saucers
Mother spins the steering wheel
drives Sister and I to school

Wind grabs Mother’s scarf
  teases  like a kite tail
    fluttering  provoking
I stretch my arm out
  to touch the wind
  “Get your hands inside  now
    a car will chop them off”

Mother stops the car  by the front door
steps out   one shiny white
   Go-Go boot at a time
a five foot two Barbie  chin tipped high
   struts inside
Sister holds her hand  beams
I shrink  pretend I am invisible
   that I belong
   to someone else’s family
   that She
is not my Mother

*******

Mother finds me  hiding
   under  Father’s desk  last week
in  the front closet  yesterday
   under  my bed  today

Mother grabs my arm  wrenches
my feet slide across the floor
   polished  slippery like ice
Mother drags me to my feet
pain sears my shoulder

Mother’s other hand
   swings wild
Leather hits my neck  stings
   hits my back  burns
Mother shoves me away
I spill to the ground
“No one will ever love you”
Her words bite
   like swarms of wasps
I wither
   like springtime blossoms
   deprived of rain  bitten by frost

My lips tremble
   eyes water  Mother sneers
“Toughen up” she snorts

Where is love?

*******
Mother grabs a clump of my hair
close to the scalp
hairs tighten
like strings on a violin
wound too tight
screech snap
in terror

Mother twists tighter
another rotation
more hairs scream in protest

********

Grandfather sits
reading the newspaper
at the kitchen table
a narrow channel
from chair to fridge
tummy sucked in pencil thin
I tiptoe quietly quickly
a hand darts out grasps
like jaws of a hunter’s trap

I pull away
Grandfather squeezes tighter
my wrist begins to throb
“Let go” I plead
Grandfather grins
trapped my wrist groaning
I cry out
Mother hears
Stomps into the kitchen
Smacks Grandfather releases his hold
“Stay away from him”
Mother walks away

Where is love?

********

My tongue touches
empty space
where my front tooth sat
a steep angled point
replaces rolling ridges
I press my right shoulder
  against the car door
gaze out the window
tears drown my vision  flood my cheeks
my breath steams the glass

Mother parks the car
  “Remember what I told you
    or you will Really have
    something to cry about”

Mother strides ahead
  nose tipped to the ceiling
    Queen of Sheba
I follow head hung low

the dentist swivels his chair
  “What happened here?”
Mother hovers
Glares at me
Her lips pursed
Her eyes pressing

My voice stuck captive
  “She fell down basement stairs”
    Mother answers
I want to jump up scream
    nothing comes out

Mother stays talks to the dentist
I lay in the chair  fighting back tears
  seething with anger
wanting to speak the truth
    what Really happened

Dentist decides to leave
  my tooth broken
cap it when I am older
Mother says No

Dentist holds a drill  that roars
drowning out my screams
  locked inside
a strange smelling powder  fills the air
Drill stops
Mother leans over
I shut my eyes
“A little more on the left side”

More grinding more powder
drifts into the air tears trickle
puddle in my ears

Mother says “That will do”
Dentist holds a mirror
My beautiful front tooth
My new grown-up tooth
reduced shortened flattened

Mother bolts ahead
to her car
never says “sorry”
for losing her temper
for smacking my face
with her ring finger

Where is love?

********

I practice over and over
not baton twirls
not Math addition tables
I practice for perfection
for protection

I race to the front door
grip brass knob
twist left
slide golden chain
to freedom
legs braced
I heave muster force
door slowly drags over
shaggy red carpet
I swing around squeeze through
narrow opening
my escape route
to the front yard
away from the strap
away from Mother
from Father
away

********

I jump over the rock wall onto dirt
squeeze behind the woodpile
to hang out with spiders until
Mother
calms
forgets she is mad at me

Sun drops behind trees
I huddle cold shivering
soggy muddy stocking feet
tears dried on cheeks
hugging knees together
head resting eyes closed
listening

Musical notes
sweet soft drift my way
like dandelion seeds
blown by wind

First one note
then another
wanders over a neighbour’s hedge
creating a symphony of sound
a salve salvaging

I burrow in sheltered by firewood
close my eyes
I am sitting next to Jennifer
on her piano bench
feet dangling
over the edge
her fingers touching tapping
clean white keys

Sound rises up hugs me
delicious like blackberry jam
piano music washes over me
cleanses away my sadness

I want to make music
with my fingertips
I want to make sweet berry jam

********

I open my eyes
above an indigo sky
a star shimmers
next door someone plays piano
I could be learning to make music

inside Mother Father
yell hit make war
“Another day shot” Mother moans

outside hiding
another precious day
lost

********

Mother cuts meat for dinner
I stand at the far end
holding onto the counter

“Mother may I” I falter
“Speak up”

I wiggle my toes “I want to play piano”

“No money” Mother’s knife blade knocks
the cutting board
“Brother has lessons” I say
staring at the floor

“He asked first he’s a boy”

Brother has a guitar electric
with a big black box
an amp that screams
when he touches a string

********
Mother hands me the dish cloth
“Girls wash dishes Not boys”

Brother sits watches me
scrub dinner dishes smirks

Sister sprays cold water
making them harder
to dry with my dishcloth

Where is love?

********

I lean across the bathroom sink
stare into the mirror
at my reflection
I whisper “you are loved”
over and over and over
again and again

I exhale
look myself in the eye
“You are loved”
till I almost believe it

********

“He had listened to their taunts with a look of contempt; he had borne the lash without a cry: for he felt that pride swelling in his heart which would have kept down a shriek to the last, though they had roasted him alive. But now, when there were none to see or hear him, he fell upon his knees on the floor, and, hiding his face in his hands, wept such tears as, God send for the credit of our nature, few so young may ever have cause to pour out before Him!” (Dickens, 2009, pp. 60-61).

“The blessing was from a young child’s lips, but it was the first that Oliver had ever heard invoked upon his head; and through all the struggles and sufferings, and troubles and changes, of his after life, he never once forgot it” (Dickens, 2009, p. 62).

*******
1969
Blind Men

“It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!” (Saxe, n.d.).

September

My new teacher is different
from my other teachers
She has the name of a bird
that visits my backyard in winter
a little bird
that flew by
when God was eating spreading
raspberry jam
on little bird’s tummy
instead of toast
turning brown feathers bright pink
forever

Miss Finch
Miss Raspberry Finch

November

Snowflakes the size of quarters
tumble from heaven sticking
painting my street serene
coating colourful clothing
tickling noses chilling cheeks
wind blows   snowflakes frolic
   teasing me   calling me to play

Monte throws handfuls of snow
   showering my face
fragments of light   tiny shards   prickle
   pinching my cheeks   pink
Monte runs ahead
   “Catch me if you can”

I follow   his footprints
   leading   to school
cars move like caterpillars
tires crunch to a halt
drivers peek out of
   snuggly cocoons

Icicles hang from window ledges
   like jagged teeth
school door opens
flakes of snow rush to greet us
boots stomp
mitts caked in snow
scarf warm with wet breath
frosty eyelashes   cold feet

Teacher stands in the hallway
   “Girls   straight to the washroom”
   “Boys   to class”
my smile fades
Monte looks at me   “See you after school”

Principal’s voice blasts
down the hallway
reminding   Girls no pants
   at school

Washroom packed
girls   pulling off pants
   tugging on skirts
I change
drop   warm comfy pants
yank   scratchy droopy tights

Pants   like my birthday
   only once a year
when it snows heavy

********

Miss Finch
Miss Raspberry Finch
flies to the classroom door
sweeps it open
“Good morning, children”
students file past her

Her smile flows over me
like warm sunshine
follows me to the cloakroom
like a beam of light
I patter to my desk
“Good morning Karen” Miss Finch chirps
I shuffle past her voice singing
gladness into my heart
melting winter away
inside Miss Raspberry Finch’s classroom
my woolen tights
are not so scratchy

********

Miss Finch drags our desks around the room
poker straight rows and lines disappear
She pushes and pulls
dragging desks like giant Lego pieces
building clustering
I sit across from Glen who winks
beside Graham who makes me laugh

Miss Finch sings
“Christopher Columbus sailed
the ocean blue in 1492”
I remember history dates
because Miss Finch turns them into song

My Socials group works in the hallway
“I trust you” Miss Finch smiles
we unroll our paper onto the floor
I lay on my tummy swing legs in the air
colour my bubble letters joyful
I draw pictures of the Bealies
    my imaginary family
Papa Bealie  Mama Bealie
Brother Bealie  Baby Bealie
      Me
    in the middle
oval heads  wide  smiles
    kindness  grin from the paper

Figure 8. Karen posing in her new pink dress.
Circa 1969 [primary source].

Miss Finch reads us a story
    about an elephant  and men
      who cannot see
blind men yell  I am right
      like Mother

Miss Finch  her story
splashes me with
      possibility
pushes me outside
      Mother’s box
no one  is better  than another
no one  right way
I now see different ways
to hang Mother’s dishcloth

but I keep draping it her way
for now

March

Easter morning
a box with a cellophane lid
my own milk chocolate Easter egg
decorated with coloured icing
KAREN in big white letters
flows across the middle
Stong’s bakery makes my name beautiful

my chocolate egg fills both hands
like a softball
the shell cracks like ice
when I carefully poke the back
I snap off a small piece
pop it inside my mouth tongue tossing it around till
it melts into creamy sweetness
I stow my Easter egg under my bed
hidden safe
each day I nibble savour

Sister and Brother gobble theirs

discover my hiding place
devour mine

May

Dawn’s mother invites me in
I sit at her kitchen table splashed in sunshine
She pours me a glass of orange juice
Smiles when I take a sip
Smiles when I jump in the air
clapping my hands overhead
“Tah wit tah woo fifteen cents” I say
dropping coins by a spotted owl
on a spotted mushroom

Dawn’s mother
my Brownie leader
Smiles
at me

********

Dawn and I play outside
she asks “Do you know what
your first mistake was?”
I shrug my shoulders “I don’t know”
Dawn laughs “Being born!”

Her words
knock me sideways

“It was a joke”
I gasp for breath for words
fight back a tear

I don’t have her mother who smiles
who sits beside me
arms wrapped around me
squeezing love inside
whose forehead wrinkles with concern
when I don’t feel well
who frames my artwork
who delights in my everything

Walking home
I don’t feel wind
hold breathing
I don’t see pink blossoms
leaping twirling

Walking home
I hear my shoes hit the pavement
I hear Mother wishing
I wasn’t born

August

Mother tells me
what clothes to wear
so I match Sister

“Twins” strangers say
“No” Mother says
“Really?”
Strangers like to guess who is older
Always point to Sister

Mother tells me
what colour to wear
out in public
so I match Mother
And Sister
I want to wear green
Mother says “We all wear orange”

********

Today is the Abbotsford Air Show
Mother says “Wear purple”
I sigh thump down the hall
carpet absorbing my anger
I leap onto my bed cross my legs arms

Tai Ti wanders in stretches up
pads my knees with front paws
I scoop him up hold him tight

Tai Ti rubs his velvet wet nose
against my neck under my chin
whiskers tickle

Tai Ti’s purrs roll over me
like ocean waves
steady to shore

********

I lace up my brand new runners
walk up the street along Marine
to John King’s house first
to Johanna’s front door second

Johanna spies my runners
“Youre not Real North Stars”
I stare at her feet
two bright blue stripes
slender zip zag edges
NORTH STAR printed across
“Yours are not leather”
They turn walk up the hill
laughter spilling behind them

I stare at my shoes
my feet heavy
like Brother’s lead fishing weights

my new white runners from Sears
three navy blue stripes
chunky zig zag edges
No North Star to guide my steps

I want to rub dirt
to dim their brightness
so No one else
sears me with their laughter

*******

End of today
Each day
Every day
Mother sighs
“Another day shot”
a blast of filthy air
filling the house

I wrinkle my forehead
confused shake my head puzzled
so many scrumptious people to meet
delicious food to eat
so many beautiful places to see
things to learn

Another beautiful day

*******

I hold on
to a thread
a finely spun filament of
spider’s silk
my feet sink beneath me
wash away
by the tidal wave of tears engulfing
swallowing “Help” I sob
no one hears
I clench teeth
hand forms a fist
punches My leg
over and over
breaking tearing tender
blood vessels
hurting bruising skin
“I hate you”
I pound harder
“You’re stupid
“I hate you  I hate you”
muscles scream in protest
“You never NEVER do anything right”
thigh muscles throbs
I collapse onto my bed
tears fall like a truck unloading sand
dump heavy
tongue reaches out
catches tears that meander too close
like a Venus Fly Catcher  salty

Tears dry higher up
leave a film on cheeks
sandpaper to my fingertips
I drag my bedspread over my head
around my body
aftermath waves rise swell
shake my chest soften roll away

Calm settles
I am adrift
with no solid safe spot to land
lost to who I am
alone on a vast sea

another wave crashes in I tremble
surrender allowing the wave
to wash over and through
I pull knees tight to chest wrap arms
around tight tuck inside a cocoon
eyes close
breath flat faint
I want to disappear
wash away pain
that rips scrapes

Wash away
agony hiding
inside

Wash away
me

*******

Today I drape the dishcloth over
the sink

Mother picks it up
folds it over the door
in its “proper” place

Heidi’s mother
drapes it over
the faucet

Three ways to hang a dishcloth
Alright

All right

*******

“The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!” (Saxe, n.d.).

*******
1966
Red is Best

“*My mom doesn’t understand about red*” (Stinson, 1988).

“I like my red boots the best. My mom says, ‘You can’t wear your red boots in the snow. They’re just for rainy weather.’ But my red boots take bigger steps. I like my red boots the best” (Stinson, 1988).

“But I can jump higher in my red stockings. I like my red stockings the best” (Stinson, 1988).

I watch Mother
from the shadows
wait for her to begin

Wind moans outside
thrashes against the porch screen
   wanting in
slithers through cracks in the door
slinks low across the linoleum
bites at my ankles

Rain smacks against the window
drops heavy
weeps
blurs the apple tree
a cup of water spilled
   on my landscape painting

Dinner dishes done
kitchen table clear
Mother unfolds red fabric
stretches it out like a table cloth

Red fabric
my red fabric
a giant pancake
   covered in strawberry jam
   fills my tummy
makes my heart sing
I like my red fabric
Mother lifts her sewing basket
opens the lid
wooden spools
piled high like walnuts in a bowl
one falls
onto the floor
with a crack
rolls
unravels
a thin red trail
Hits the fridge
Stops dead

Mother snaps her scissors open
a hungry mouth
devouring
scissors stop
hand stiffens
“Someone always dies” Mother mutters

Eyes
flash fear
like an animal
stunned
by headlights

Mother shakes her head
Scissors
slice UP and
Down
Snap
open and closed
across
the red landscape

One piece
Two
Three
giant puzzle pieces

drop
onto the chair
limp

A screech
of brakes

Mother lifts her head
a knock
   at the front door
“Who would that be
   at this time of night?”

Scissors drop
   Heavy
   onto the table

Mother patters down the hallway
   to the front door
I slip through the living room
Mother flips open the brass viewer
A young man’s voice “Sorry to bother you
   I hit a...”

Mother slaps the viewer closed
swings the door open wide
wind heaves and groans
a sea of wetness
   rushes in

Mother screams “Oh my God Sim”
The man lifts Sim
   limp dripping
onto Mother’s outstretched arms

“I’m so sorry I didn’t see your cat
It was dark raining”

Mother talks to Sim not to the man
   “I’m so sorry”
Mother strokes Sim’s head
   “I should never have cut red cloth”

The man turns walks away
I step back
into the shadows
chest pounding
like a scraped knee
pressed with pebbles
on fire

Red
   my Christmas
      Concert costume
Red
   cut
   red cloth

Red
   Mother's
   cat

Cut
   Red
   Danger

Cut
   Red
   Death

*******

“But red paint puts singing in my head. I like the red paint best (Stinson, 1988).

*******
The Method to My Madness
Choice of Texts

As a young child growing up in Vancouver in the 1960’s, I often frequented the local public library, as well as attended the occasional Disney film that showed at the nearby theatre. When selecting children’s stories, in book and film form, for this thesis, I began by recalling memorable stories that impacted me during my childhood (see Appendix A). Several stood out above the rest: P. D. Eastman’s Are You My Mother?, P. L. Travers’ Mary Poppins, Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, Astrid Lindgren’s Pippi Longstocking, Charles Dicken’s Oliver Twist, and John Godfrey Saxe’s The Blind Men and the Elephant. Although I viewed the film Oliver! (based on Charles Dickens’ novel Oliver Twist) only once on my eighth birthday and the musical film Mary Poppins (adapted from P. L. Travers’ novel by the same title) when I was five-years-old, lyrics, dialogue, and visual images from both made a permanent impression that validated and informed, motivating me to seek something beyond the destructive messages at home. Red is Best, written by Kathy Stinson, was selected as the seventh and final children’s story because of the power of its words, text, and message to heal the childhood trauma around the colour red that I carried into my adulthood. As I listed my seven selections, I noticed a pattern--each of my chosen children’s stories ‘belonged’ to one of my formative years from age four to nine.

Process

In preparation for writing responses to my story selections, I read books on crafting a memoir. Following Myers’ (2010) suggestion to select major turning points, “time[s] of power and energy” (p. 30), I jotted down compelling fragments of memory while reflecting upon each chosen text. My bits and pieces of remembered childhood revolved around a common theme--
that of my mother and her abusive behaviour toward me. Myers states that themes may emerge through the process of selecting major life events. Because Myers also recommends building scenes to include rising action, one major climax, and a resolution, I structured my outlined scenes to form a traditional story arc; however, when I began writing, surrendering to words and images that I felt in my body, allowing them to flow through me onto the page, this traditional arc did not materialize. Instead, because I trusted and accepted what unfolded, welcoming the unexpected (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 50), my memoir resembled a series of small hills with many highs and lows (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Story arc resembling a series of small hills. [primary source].
Poetry as My Mode of Expression

According to Carl Leggo (1997), each of us has a “distinctive voice that blossoms in particular genres as preferred modes of articulation” (p. 7). During the writing process, words poured onto the page, artifacts of my childhood finding their voice in poetic narrative; in a sense, poetry chose me. I recall expressing myself in a similar style of writing years ago during my high school English classes. This past year, through poetry, my inner child found her voice, expressing herself through simple, lyrical language that created image--her babble and doodle (Leggo, 1997, p. 132). What Leggo (2014) calls the capacious nature of poetry meant endless opportunities to explore and play with language and structure, thereby creating multiple meanings.

My artistic, intuitive, and curious personality found a compatibility in poetry, giving me courage to express myself with confidence (Lamb, 2008, p. 11). My kinetic, musical side discovered the riches of rhythm in the hum and beat of words and phrases. Poetry can be iambic, imitating and complimenting the rhythms of breath and the heart (Leggo, 2014). Employing lyrical language and rhythm empowered me to authentically express myself.

When writing my poetic narratives, I experienced the power of poetic language to soothe negatively charged memories. Gregory Orr (2002) has personally experienced the transformative power of writing poetry, a redemptive repository for his incomprehensible suffering (pp. 6-8). As I settled into writing, the world fell away. I entered a sacred space where self disappeared and words, images, and scenes flowed, bringing forth connections and insights. Poetry allowed me to write an ever-changing kaleidoscope that combined lyrical, narrative, philosophical, and language-focused elements (Leggo, 2014). In this way, writing poetic narratives facilitated
making visible my invisible childhood worlds so that what I crafted was more than “a mere articulation of experience” (Parini, 2008, p. 181).

**Research Methodology Approaches**

**Writing Autobiography**

According to hooks (1998), writing autobiographically to recall and recapture past events and experiences has limitations. Autobiography is a subjective recount, evoking the spirit of a unique personal experience rather than the accuracy of its details (pp. 430-431). hooks (1998) comments that telling one’s story is “a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release” (p. 431). This notion that remembering can usher the autobiographical writer into a sense of reunion and release with beautiful and broken bits of self is valid, and one I personally experienced when penning my recollections. My unspoken hope has long been to permanently separate myself from the storehouse of painful memories my inner child housed, snipping the threads that wove me to her story. However, during this writing process, I rediscovered, one layer at a time, the beauty and courage of this inner child and her resourceful, indomitable, and imaginative spirit. I felt acceptance, love, and pride for her and what we had lived through together. The fact that she mustered a sense of agency in midst of physical and emotional ‘starvation’, engaging with story book characters to imagine possibilities for a more promising future, emblazons her in my heart as one of my heroes.
Writing Memoir

Linda J. Myers (2010) states that memoir provides a space to voice one’s truth. During the writing process, past hurts and shadows fall away, making space for new insights and empowering the individual (pp. 133-134). I agree with Myers’ perspective on the benefits of writing personal narrative; as I wrote poetic scenes, the emotional textures associated with what I lived as a young girl washed away, releasing, in its wake, new understandings and compassion for both myself and my mother. Writing about my childhood secrets diminished their potency, allowing new awareness to surface.

William Zinsser (1998) states that compelling memoirs are well-crafted, honest where the writer makes sense of their past, present, and what shaped them, and nourishing for the reader because suffering is presented without judgement (pp. 4-6). Because of regular counseling support over the years, my thesis functioned as a site for discovery rather than for unloading unprocessed emotions.

Jill Ker Conway (1998) believes that in order to effectively write memoir or autobiography, detachment from the events is necessary. She suggests a minimum of twenty years so that sufficient distance separates the writer from the content. Although the gap between my thesis and my childhood spans forty-five years, temporal detachment does not guarantee emotional healing or the ability to write clearly and meaningfully. For this reason, prior to and during the writing process, I sought the support of a counselor when emotional blocks surfaced and interfered.
Personal Narrative

Vivian Gornick (2001) uses “personal narrative” and “memoir” interchangeably, stating, “without detachment, there can be no story” (p. 12). Gornick’s assertion that effective personal narratives require sufficient detachment from the material influenced how I approached my childhood memories. Throughout the writing process, I strove to maintain a detached but attentive and present posture. While re-experiencing the events and emotions of my early childhood, the adult in me situated herself as an omniscient observer watching the scenes unfold with objectivity and compassion. According to Gornick, another important consideration of personal narrative is that “[t]he poet, the novelist, the memoirist--all must convince the reader they have some wisdom, and are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what they know” (p. 14). I focused on writing what needed to be spoken, rather than on persuading reader response.

Writing Autoethnography

Because I was writing about myself within the context of my relationship with my mother during the 1960’s, I initially concluded that my narratives fit an autoethnographic model. Although Louise Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2008a) discuss issues related to writing stories and personal narratives within an autoethnographic and ethnographic paradigm of social scientific writing, some of their points compliment and support my writing approach. Their research, particularly in the section titled, Writing Stories and Personal Narratives, demonstrates how autoethnographic writing has cross-overs to the work I produced. They stretch the boundaries of autoethnographic writing by encouraging the inclusion of aspects of storytelling and narrative writing. More specifically, they encourage (auto)ethnographers to “construct...narratives that situate one’s writing in other parts of one’s life such as...research
interests, familial ties, and personal history” (p. 965). My poetry is written in the context of my maternal relationship growing up as it relates to selections of children’s fiction. There are additional parallels between autoethnography and my writing. Carolyn Ellis (2009) encourages other aspects of autoethnography that, on reflection, feature in my personal narrative process. These include writing and representing content honestly but ethically.

**Poetic Inquiry and Life Writing**

According to Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo (2009), stories shape us. The act of writing poetic autobiography and life writing allows us to connect with and construct meaning from lived experiences (p. 55). They observe that life writing encompasses a broad spectrum of narrative genres, including memoir, poetry, creative non-fiction, and poetic prose - it is much broader than the other narrative categories in that it includes journaling, creative non-fiction, personal essay, and letters (p. 7). Whether one labels my poetic writing memoir, life writing, autobiography, autoethnography or creative non-fiction, my personal poetic narratives tell pieces of my story that create meaning, transform, strengthen self-identity, and make connections to a broader context (Ellis, 2009, p. 165; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009).

**Research Methodology**

Having explored a variety of scholarly writings on research methodology, I see little difference between narrative genres except for the academic fields in which they operate. These many narrative expressions of storytelling that include life writing, personal narrative, poetic prose, memoir, autobiography, and autoethnography intersect and overlap as they serve to accomplish a similar goal--that of creating meaning and connection to self and others, and of
enriching and enhancing understandings in academia. By providing a theoretical framework for my poetic narratives, I have come to appreciate the process of writing my stories within the broader context of others’ theorizing of their personal narratives. I have felt particularly validated by the creative journeys of Ellis (2004), hooks (1998), and Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009), as well as the psychoanalytical perspective of Miller (2001, 2006, 2009, & 2014), through which I viewed my poetic narratives.

Although writing personal narratives can be a frightening and risky endeavor because of the permanent “traces” of ourselves left behind (hooks, 1998, p. 430), the need to express ourselves through our stories is fundamentally human (Pennebaker, 2011). Despite the risks involved in exploring and sharing the shadows of our lived experiences with others, the general consensus among many scholars is that it is an empowering, liberating, and transformative process (hooks, 1998; Orr, 2002; Ellis, 2004).

When crafting narratives in an academic context, it seems to me that the process of writing naturally becomes one of inquiry and research. In this way, the personal storyteller is simultaneously researching, inquiring and mining the heart for its lived experiences that, when shared, will transform, inform, and connect.

Gregory Orr (2002) and Nancy Lamb (2008) comment on the dichotomous nature of the human personality--how we all have shadows. By acknowledging personal shadows, Orr experiences and models their transformative power. Lamb encourages incorporating themes of light and shadow when crafting narrative. Writing my personal narratives with themes of trauma and abuse was frightening; however, knowing that both Orr and Lamb applaud delving into our personal stories of suffering and sorrow validates my work and gives me confidence. For Gregory Orr, writing his pain into poetic personal lyric began the process of healing. For me,
reading stories transformed my lived experiences of pain and trauma into something of hope and beauty. For example, as a young child, my mother’s superstitions distorted my view of the colour red. However, with each reading of the light-filled, delight-filled children’s story, *Red is Best*, my fears slowly dissolved. The power of words and image changed my lived experience from one of terror and panic to one of calm and content.
The Merit of Personal Narratives and Poetry Within Scholarly Research

In his book, *Living the Narrative Life*, Gian Pagnucci (2004) effectively combines narrative--personal stories and poetry--with theoretical research. These seemingly incompatible writing approaches demonstrate that “essayistic literacy is not the exclusive means by which one can create knowledge in the world” (p. 2). In his forward to Pagnucci’s book, Lad Tobin understands that not everyone will appreciate “read[ing] scholarship that includes or even relies on stories...even if that story is clearly there to illustrate a point and even if the rest of the article clearly demonstrates intellectual rigor and sophistication” (Tobin in Pagnucci, 2004, p. ix).

Both Pagnucci (2004) and Leggo (2012) push the boundaries of traditional academic research by juxtaposing story, poem, and prose alongside scholarly essay and research. Patricia Leavy, in her forward to Leggo (2012), describes the significance of this blended approach, stating that Leggo “not only represent[s] the best of arts-based research, but he is developing a new literary architecture that thoughtfully combines essay, prose, and the poetry he so loves” (p. xi). Narrative stories now have a voice within academic writing thanks to Pagnucci (2004), Leggo (2012), and other scholars who pushed academic boundaries on behalf of narrative writing, thus “claim[ing] new space for narrative scholars and teachers, new room for [us] to tell the stories that matter” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 2). This movement has paved the way for me to include poetic narrative within this thesis.

Tobin (as cited in Pagnucci, 2004) believes narrative strengthens and enhances scholarly writing. However, the position of narrative in academia is often undermined by the flawed belief that the latter is superior. Mark Turner (1996) argues that neither takes precedence over the other--both have a vital role in scholarly writing. Turner gives credibility to the narrative story when he states that it is “the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon
it” (p. 5). Turner goes on to say that “[narrative] is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition generally” (p. 5). Turner’s statements substantiate the value of narrative writing within a scholarly domain. Clearly, narrative can and should hold its own as an equal partner alongside theoretical research and essay writing.

Jeff Park (2005) builds on Turner’s perspective, stating that narratives should not be relegated to a secondary position. He believes that “narratives are the heart of the book because they evoke the experiences of the writers...constantly negotiating meaning and significance in their lives” (p. 47). In much the same way, my poetic narratives are foundational to this thesis because they show the powerful and meaningful relationship I developed with children’s literature, which throughout my life has been a source of healing and comfort. The employment of evocative narrative language seeks to usher the readers of my thesis into my world as a child.

Park (2005) speaks of interweaving narrative and paradigmatic writing (p. 51). These effectively work in tandem to “create a deeper meaning and understanding for the reader” (p. 51). I offer poetic narrative stories from my childhood to more powerfully show the role children’s books played in my rising above an abusive maternal relationship. The theoretical substantiates and gives a contextual framework for this poetic narrative. Jane Hirshfield (1997) states:

And because [poetry] thinks by music and image, by story and passion and voice, poetry can do what other forms of thinking cannot: approximate the actual flavor of life, in which subjective and objective become one, in which conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one (p. 32).

Hirshfield’s statement that poetry is both conceptual and emotive adds weight and value to the notion that creative forms of writing have a substantive place within academia.

bell hooks interweaves personal stories in her scholarship to enrich her theoretical positioning. Working in tandem, story and theory produce an effective and powerful multi-
sensory reading experience. This is evident when her essays and non-fiction are sprinkled with her personal memoir (1998, 2004). Other scholars’ work (Pugnucci, 2004; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009) also brilliantly juxtaposes personal narratives and poetry alongside rigorous theoretical discourse. Their work mirrors my partnering of life writing and theory.

According to Weinberg (2008), although autobiographical and life writing have gained ground in scholarly circles, they continue to be stigmatized as the “‘bastard’ children of academe” (as cited in Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 3). Narcisse Blood, in his introduction to Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009), states that writing autobiographically as an approach to knowledge contributes to the relevancy of academia (p. xvi). As life writing continues to partner with theoretical research in academic contexts, life writing and its sister genres will continue to gain ground as a credible, vital mode of adding to the body of academic knowledge.
Deconstruction

The meanings I derived from my engagement with story, both as a child and as an adult, were influenced by my imagination and personal experiences in the context of a middle class family in the 1960’s. Growing up, I approached each story with a childlike eagerness, trusting the meanings I constructed. I never once questioned my interpretation. It is apparent now, forty-five years later, that the notion of deconstruction was operative, giving me unspoken permission to imagine and interpret the characters’ choices and behaviours as they suited my personal needs. (Leggo, 1997). Approaching children’s stories with this open-ended mindset “help[ed] [me] find a centralizing narrative for [my] life” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 45). Giving my childhood self the freedom to interpret and make multiple meanings and connections deepened my engagement with and experience of children’s stories.
**Reader Response**

Louise M. Rosenblatt (1978), a pioneer of the reader-response theory, challenged the notion that there is one right way to interpret literature. Rosenblatt developed transactional theory, an open-ended approach to discussing and analyzing literature where personal aesthetic engagement and responses between reader, writer, and text create meaning and result in diverse interpretations. Rosenblatt’s approach where the reader is actively engaged with text, validates the way in which I approached the stories I read and viewed as a young child. I generally saw stories as an invitation to discover, connect, and wonder rather than a code to decipher (Leggo, 2014). According to Rosenblatt, we bring different life experiences to the pages of these children’s stories, resulting in equally valid but vastly different perspectives of the same picture book.

Carl Leggo (1997) presents a fresh look at reader-response theory and the dynamic and active relationship readers have with the words of text. Engaging with a text gives the reader an opportunity to create meanings from their own first impressions and reactions (p. 32). This clarifies how reader-response theory functioned whenever I viewed, listened, or read text as a young child. Unlike today where information is instantly and readily available, in the 1960’s I often had only one chance to engage with a film or story, as was the case with *Oliver!*, *Mary Poppins*, and *The Blind Men and the Elephant*. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to share my responses with siblings, parents or teachers, or to discover how others responded to a similar story. However, I recall making connections and posing questions to myself that I pondered and ruminated over. A process of inquiry was taking place, but one that was modified and incomplete because I had to compensate for the lack of people with whom to share my thoughts. Sharing and responding occurred within my head, with me taking both sides -- an ongoing two-way conversation with myself around a curiosity or question that puzzled or
intrigued me.

According to Leggo, there are myriad ways to respond to text. As a child, I connected to children’s stories by bringing my personal experiences or responding to the mood, emotions, and characters (p. 32). My childhood response to Sendak’s book, Where the Wild Things Are, demonstrates how powerfully my abusive home environment, where I experienced terror at the hands of my mother on a daily basis, impacted my perceptions and response to the fictitious monsters who gnashed their teeth. Sendak’s text and images terrified me. I chose to walk away from mounting terror—something I could not do in real life. When Max romps among wild animals gnashing their teeth like the God’s description of hell, I slammed the story shut, not revisiting the text until years later. In this way, books empowered me to honour my inner strength and voice. As an adult and parent, I brought new experiences and life history to Sendak’s story, this time appreciating the main character’s playful imagination and his mother’s loving gesture of a hot meal on the closing page. As a graduate student, I reverted to an efferent perspective (Rosenblatt, 1978). I felt embarrassed that, as a child, I was frightened of Sendak’s ‘wild things’ and wished I had experienced his story in a positive light similar to my peers.

Reader-response theory also influenced my interaction with other texts, such as the poem, “The Blind Men and the Elephant”, by John Godfrey Saxe, which my grade four teacher read aloud. Like the Sendak story, I brought my personal lived experiences to the text. My mother’s controlling ‘one right way’ to do anything began to dissolve as the blind men demonstrated more than one way to perform a task. My mind squirreled this truth away, applying it to my life at home whenever my mother wielded control, saying that her way was the only way. As a result of engaging with Saxe’s poem, a chink developed in the armour of my mother’s incontestable words.

As an adult, Rosenblatt’s approach to text provided me with ways of making
transformative interactions between my perceptions of the colour red formulated from traumatic experiences lived as a child and Kathy Stinson’s picture book, *Red is Best*, which I read aloud to my toddler shortly after its publication. This story offered another perspective, leading to a response of delight to red, different than my previous experience of fright.
The Cathartic Comforting Nature of Reading Story

According to Rob Bittner (2011), young adult literature addresses a plethora of adolescent topics and issues and has the capacity to help its readers “cope with trauma and adversity, and find healing”. Because children’s literature is also filled with characters facing conflicts and struggles, such as P. D. Eastman’s picture book, Are You My Mother?, where baby bird ‘loses’ his mother, children’s stories can also be a significant source of healing and comfort. In her article, Bonding in the Broken Places, Kathy Cline (2001) mentions that when readers engage with characters’ fictitious problems, literature becomes the “catharsis for healing, rebuilding, and changing” (as cited in Bittner, 2011, p. 2). If the storybook character successfully navigates frightening, disappointing, and overwhelming situations, a message of hope and courage is transmitted that the reader, who can apply that message to his or her own difficulties and challenging life circumstances and no longer feel so alone. As my poetic narratives show, children’s stories have the capacity to comfort, heal, and transform the broken places of a child’s heart.

In his 1950 Nobel Peace Prize speech, William Faulkner (Nobel Media, 2014) exhorted poets and writers to hearten and buoy up the human spirit by writing about qualities including courage, hope, honour, and compassion. Both Oliver Twist and Pippi Longstocking are such heartening books. The protagonists respond with courage, humour, and compassion to difficult situations. Reading such texts provided me with positive role modeling that lifted my spirits as a child, helped me survive and endure, and eventually to overcome. Francine Prose (2006) comments that rereading the writing of other authors inspires, energizes, and gives her courage. Reading about the lives of fictional characters who struggle and prevail can embolden and empower.
The Power of Imagination to Transform

The relationships that Dennis J. Sumara (2002) developed with “literary characters and their situations” impressed upon him that he had the power to change his lived experiences (p.31). He states that a person’s identity can be informed by the relationship people have with books (p. 9). I believe readers can forge important relationships with the characters in fiction and film. As I positioned myself alongside many of the characters who behaved and made choices that I respected and admired, many of these characters became friends and mentors speaking into my life. In Narratives of Struggle, bell hooks (1991) shares how her relationship with books saved her, how she entrusted her ‘broken bits’ and became whole again, and how her relationship with books allowed her to imagine new promising possibilities for her future (p. 55). Using my imagination alongside P. D. Eastman’s text helped me navigate times of loneliness and survive. A laundry wicker basket and a humming dryer represented the only source of nurturing maternal love, made real and tangible as I re-enacted the image of and my emotional connection to baby bird safely snuggled inside a cozy nest beside his comforting mother bird. Imagination is a powerful starting point toward transformation.

Wendy Lesser (2014) states that one of the many rewards of reading includes “find[ing] [one]self in someone else’s words” (p. 3). Lesser speaks of her fictional experiences often surpassing reality (p. 5). Her most memorable conversations with text were in “mute communion with absent authors” (p. 7). Both Lesser and hooks discovered tremendous healing and growth from the relationships they forged with books. Through unleashing the imagination as one engages with a variety of texts, readers can develop deep, meaningful, and transformative connections with the material they read, and in doing so, experience the power of books to heal. As a young child, using my imagination allowed me to step inside the pages and words of Eastman’s picture book, Are You My Mother?. Similar to Lesser and hooks’ experience with
books, this children’s story helped transform my pale day-to-day reality into something much more palatable.

Christina Baldwin (2007) states that while attending to another’s story, we “accept an invitation into experiences that are not our own” (p. 7). Once ‘inside’, we scan our own memories to make connections (p. 7). This overlaying of another’s words on our own experiences is what I did when I read and listened to stories as a young child. The power of others’ words and the connections I made helped me reshape and recreate my reality.

Louise Hay (1999) says every human being needs to know and believe that they are worth loving. I gleaned this life-changing message from my engagement with children’s stories where, for example, images of Oliver smiling beside his surrogate grandfather and baby bird snuggled up close with his mother presented a reality that I wished were my own. I integrated their experiences into my world, and realised I must also be worth loving.

Ellis (2009) claims that education exposed her to “diverse people and ways of thinking,” affording her the luxury of choice, enabling her to design who she wished to become (p. 49). Similarly, children’s stories exposed me to diverse ways of thinking, providing me with choices and tools to craft who I wished to grow up to be. In this way, story deepened my connection to the world of others (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 26) and launched me out beyond my mother’s orbit into realms of possibility (Neufeld, G. & Mate, G., 2004).
A Psychological Perspective

Alice Miller (2006), a German Jewish psychoanalyst, weaves pieces of her own traumatic childhood stories into her books, addressing child abuse and mistreatment at the hands of often well intentioned but uninformed adults. Unlike Miller, who had no opportunity to view her mother’s abusive comments against the behavioral backdrop of other maternal figures, I was able to make comparisons between my lived experience of adults who figured in my childhood and the affirming and frightening adult characters in the stories I read.

Miller (2001) states that in order to change anything in our lives or the world, we must first make the distinction between what is good and what is bad (p. 102). According to Pagnucci (2004) “[c]hildren use stories of good families or heroes to develop notions of good and bad and how they will conduct themselves (p. 44). My engagement with children’s stories helped me make this distinction. Pagnucci believes that “the stories we learn as children from our family members are stories of identity”(p. 89) and that our personal narratives create our belief systems (p. 4). Children’s stories were instrumental in the construction of new beliefs and a strong sense of identity.

Miller (2006) also believes that young children who blindly comply to social moral norms and standards, especially the fourth biblical commandment (honour thy father and mother), often do so at the expense of their psychological, emotional, and physical health and well-being. Attending church in the 1960’s and hearing Billy Graham and other evangelical Christians pressing their congregations with guilt and fear axioms, including the commandment of honouring parents, added to the fears already building inside from abusive interactions experienced at home. However, because I engaged with children’s stories featuring characters who resisted this cultural notion that children should be seen and not heard, I wrestled with, rather than swallowed, this biblical absolute. Pippi fearlessly and cleverly stands up to a pair of
policemen who attempt to place her in a foster home, and Oliver asks the orphanage’s authorities for more porridge on behalf of his fellow orphans. Their choices and examples encouraged me to tenaciously voice my disenchantment even in spite of the ensuing negative consequences for doing so.

According to Shaun Duggins (2011), a sense of agency includes the conviction that one has the ability to succeed. As a young child, ‘meeting’ strong, independent fictitious characters, ones who resisted social norms, heartened and mobilized me. Promising endings to painful stories also contributed to fostering a pertinacious belief that I could and would overcome. In particular, witnessing Oliver create something better moved me onto a trajectory where I knew it was entirely possible for me to do the same.

Miller (2006) believes that we can provide the unconditional love, respect, understanding for our emotions, and protection that our parental figures withheld (p. 22). Although, as a child, I did not fully understand what respect meant, witnessing story characters who operated in kind, compassionate, and protective ways gave me an experience of what constituted a loving relationship.

Children’s stories offered another powerful form of support that Miller (2006) calls the ‘enlightened witness’. Miller believes that in order to heal from childhood trauma, we need an experience of love, achieved when someone shares or witnesses the horror, danger, and loneliness of what our little child suffered (pp. 22-23)--providing a safe space in which to be heard. Children’s books and stories became my enlightened witness.

According to Miller (2006), “children pay a high price for denying and concealing the truth of [their] abuse from [them]selves; this knowledge buries itself in [their] body as some form of physical illness” (pp. 15, 33). Similarly, Gabor Maté (2003) speaks of repressed emotions manifesting in physical illness. Had I not had access to children’s books and stories to
witness my painful reality, I may not have had the courage to acknowledge the reality of my abuse. Without Oliver and Pippi and the others who witnessed my life, I expect I would have remained alone and hopeless. With no one to hear my pain, I expect, as Miller points out, I would have repressed my mother’s destructive behaviour. Undoubtedly, these storybook witnesses minimized the negative effects of my abuse by keeping me aware and determined, ensuring that I would not blindly repeat the harmful patterns that had been modeled to me (Miller, 2001, p. 97).
A Cathartic Closing

It was the power of poetry that served for Gregory Orr (2002) as a tool for healing the damage and trauma of his childhood, enabling him to recover. Words were also instrumental in my healing process. However, in my case, it was the power of reading others’ stories, presented in picture books, poems, novels, and film, that provided healing and hope. Richardson and St. Pierre (2008a, p. 481), as well as bell hooks (1998), speak of the power of words to heal wounds, especially, according to hooks (1998), when we, as reader and writer, remember and reunite with shattered and shadowed pieces of our fragmented lives. hooks describes a wish to obliterate or ‘kill’ her young self, thus releasing the grip of painful memories. She believed that once she spilled her inner child’s anguish and torment onto the page, she would be free (p. 429). However, hooks discovered that reuniting with, rather than rejecting, her shadowed and broken places is how the transformative and integrative healing power of words began working its magic:

In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she had often felt alone and uncared for as a child. Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, “the bits and pieces of my heart” that narrative made whole again (p. 432).

Honouring the urge to craft my childhood experiences as poetic narrative for this thesis allowed me to bring my silenced voice out into the open so, like hooks, I could reunite with my forgotten fragments, making real and permanent the shadowed remnants that unfolded behind cloaked windows. Framing my life writing with a theoretical perspective completed the cycle of healing, validating something deep within because my stories are braided into the collective mosaic of stories (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009). By “bringing the world to the window” (Zusak, 2000, as cited in Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 24) of my familial home, I bear witness to the power of children’s story to heal the reader and the magic of sharing stories to heal the writer.
I salute the many scholars (e.g., Pagnucci, 2004; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2012) who forged ahead, going to battle on behalf of narrative writing, thus “claim[ing] new space for narrative scholars and teachers, new room for [us] to tell the stories that matter” (Pagnucci, 2004, p. 2). Their arts-based narratives pave the way for me to share my personal narratives. Pagnucci (2004) observes that we risk telling our personal stories within an academic context because its integral to who we are--“[we] don’t have a choice” (p. 17). It has been liberating to speak my stories as a valid and important aspect of this thesis--to come in from the margins and make my voice heard.

My hope in writing and sharing my personal poetic narratives, and situating them within my research interest of children’s literature, is that they will evoke conversation and inquiry around the value of children’s libraries and literature, and its potential to heal, bring hope, and transform children’s lives. As well, I hope this thesis will evoke conversation as to the value and rightful place of stories and poetry in academic writing.
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Appendix A

About the Selected Literary Texts

*Are You My Mother?*

*Are You My Mother?*, first published in 1960, is written and illustrated by Philip Dey Eastman (Eastman, 1960). This early picture book is about a baby bird who emerges newly hatched from his shell to discover he is alone because his mother is out hunting for food. Baby bird steps out of the nest, venturing forth into the unknown world in search of his mother. Having not yet met her, baby bird approaches all manner of possibilities from living creatures to machines. Baby bird’s excitement dims when the plane overhead fails to acknowledge him. Fearing the worst when the metal jaws of a giant machine scoop him up, he panics, screaming out for his mother. His worries are assuaged when the ‘Snort’ drops him safely into the nest beside his mother.

*Where the Wild Things Are*

*Where the Wild Things Are* has amused young readers for over fifty years since its inception in 1963. Maurice Sendak wrote and illustrated this children’s story that has garnered numerous awards, including the Caldecott Medal for most distinguished picture book of the year (1964). Sendak’s is an imaginative tale about young Max whose mother sends him to his room without dinner because his behaviour is too wild. While sitting in his bedroom, Max imagines himself sailing to a magical world where he is king of the wild things. When hungry and tired of romping, roaring, and gnashing his teeth with the wild beasts of the forest, Max steps into his sailboat for the return voyage home. Back inside his bedroom, he discovers a hot meal waiting.
**Pippi Longstocking**

First published in North America in 1950, *Pippi Longstocking*, by Astrid Lindgren, follows the rollicking adventures of a strong-spirited young girl who lives in a house at the edge of town with her horse and monkey. Since Pippi stepped onto the children’s book scene, her bold, quirky, non-conforming, uninhibited character has endeared and delighted readers, including me. However, for some, these same qualities sparked concern that Pippi, who was labelled mentally ill right from the first book launch and accused of selfishness and self-centredness, represents a poor role model for young readers. Concern stems from the disrespectful way Pippi interacts with authority--namely, teachers and police. In 2008, Pippi’s handling of two policemen sparked much debate in China (Lindgren, n.d.). Pippi’s spunky character continues to be questioned and blamed, perhaps most recently receiving her hardest blow yet. According to Birgitta Steene (2007), Pippi has had a detrimental effect on parenting in Sweden, where a local paper suggested retiring Lindgren’s *Pippi* because children ‘worship’, respect, and follow Pippi’s destructive example instead of the positive guidance of their parents and teachers.

**The Blind Men and the Elephant**

Nineteenth century American poet, John Godfrey Saxe, based his poem, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, on an Indian fable. Each rhyming stanza demarcates one of the blind men’s experiences of the elephant as he attempts to describe his first impressions through touch. Because each approaches a different side or part of the animal, each presents a different conclusion. A lively argument ensues wherein each blind man thinks his depiction is the correct one. Their diverse experiences are summed up in the final stanza: all six answers are correct.
because each contributes to the whole, yet all six are inevitably ‘wrong’ because each blind man has only ‘seen’ in part (Saxe, 1963).

**Red is Best**

Author Kathy Stinson paired up with illustrator Robin Baird Lewis to create *Red is Best*, a charming tale of a pertinacious toddler’s preference for everything red. Each time her mother suggests a piece of clothing or object, three-year-old Kelly insists on the red version. With lyrical and visual simplicity, Kelly explains why everything tastes, feels, and works better when it comes in her favourite colour. Her childlike rationales as to why red is best make perfect sense and are infectious.

**Mary Poppins**

The children’s novel, *Mary Poppins*, written by P. L. Travers and first published in 1934, tells the story of a stern but unusual nanny who blows in with her magical umbrella to rescue the glum children who live on Cherry Tree Lane. The Walt Disney film, of the same name, adapted from Travers’ story and with her consent finally granted, was released in 1964. This musical fantasy film filled with memorable tunes sung and danced by Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke delighted viewers with its innovative integration of animation and live action (Levine, 2014).

**Oliver Twist**

Charles Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist*, published in 1838, is the rags-to-riches story of a young orphan, Oliver, and his plight to survive oppressive and impoverished conditions, first in a workhouse and then in the streets of London, where he joins a gang of street kids who
pickpocket in exchange for food and lodging. Rubbing shoulders with criminals, he narrowly
escapes death. Unaware of his true lineage, Oliver has a half-brother who schemes to kill him in
order to inherit Oliver’s portion of their father’s will. In a twist of fate and due to the kindness of
an older lady friend, Oliver finds his way to the home and heart of a loving and wealthy
grandfather figure. The 1968 film adaptation *Oliver!* is a musical adaptation of Dickens’ novel.