COMMUNITIES: WHEN WE BELONG AND WHEN WE TRESPASS

by

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ABSTRACT

While teachers and scholars agree on the benefits of building community in the classroom, and consequently work to develop communities within schools and classrooms, many of our students continue to struggle to belong. Indeed, many of them experience school as a place that is so void of community, that they experience themselves as trespassers on territory that for both known and unknown reasons is inaccessible to them. Similarly, their personal territories often fall victim to being trespassed upon by school communities that are not truly accepting of and inviting to all. Both experiences can inhibit a students' ability to experience a profound sense of belonging to their community. In turn, this experience of trespassing can ultimately inhibit learning.

Inviting children to experience and explore different communities through story is a very effective means through which to build community in the classroom. Coupled with discussion and other language strategies, the telling and retelling of stories from communities near and far provokes the students to imagine alternative ways of existing in the world; it nurtures empathy and it embraces difference. Through listening to their stories, my stories and the stories of others, we all come to know and to understand the characters in our stories, and in doing so, we come to know ourselves. Ultimately, this heightened understanding of self and others establishes a framework for the children to experience a sincere sense of belonging within their classroom community.

Using narrative inquiry and fictionalized life-writing, I examine my own experiences with belonging and trespassing. In my encounters with both familiar and unfamiliar communities, I explore the rewards and challenges that have awakened in me a poignant, yet basic, understanding and appreciation for others. It is this appreciation that compels me to nurture community in my classroom. It is this understanding that encourages me to immerse my students in the diverse and wonderful world of story.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................ ii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................ iii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... iv
Dedication ....................................................................................................... v

**Introduction** ............................................................................................... 1

**Trespassing on Childhood**
Jesus Loves the Little Children ..................................................................... 15
Behind the Bedroom Door ............................................................................. 21
Street Lights .................................................................................................. 25
Under the Porch Light ................................................................................... 29

**Trespassing in Vancouver**
Navigating Main Street ................................................................................ 35
This Ain’t No Potlatch .................................................................................... 42
Remembering Recess ..................................................................................... 51
Classrooms and War Zones .......................................................................... 61

**Trespassing in Canada**
Beachcombing ............................................................................................. 66
Picking Tobacco ............................................................................................... 69
U’mista ........................................................................................................... 76

**Trespassing Overseas**
Content to Be ............................................................................................... 87
Our Geraldine ................................................................................................ 91
Shades of Faith ............................................................................................... 95
Hushed ........................................................................................................... 97
The Res ......................................................................................................... 99

**Conclusion** ............................................................................................... 100

References ..................................................................................................... 106
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The first day I read one of my stories aloud to a class of my colleagues, my heart beat wildly and my tummy turned tumultuously with the fear of making myself vulnerable to, what felt like, the entire world. When I completed the reading, I tentatively glanced up at my professor who was simply nodding her head and smiling at me. I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Karen Meyer who has been a great inspiration to me and a constant source of encouragement in my writing. I want to thank her for asking the thought-provoking and challenging questions that inspired me down the path to this thesis.

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DEDICATION

To Mark Gruft,
my partner in crime and in love.
Thank you for inviting me to hold your hand
and your heart, and thank you for believing in me.
You are my greatest source of light.
INTRODUCTION

I work to recover our collective awareness of the spirit of community that is always present when we are truly teaching and learning. (hooks, 2003, p. xv)

Our world is constructed by a plethora of communities each defined and regulated, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by its membership. What defines a community? Is it rules and religion? Ethnicity or economics? Is it a shared need to touch and to be touched by something in ourselves that is mirrored by others?

Communities around the earth are shaped by a shared identity and a sense of recognition that allows each of us to know when we belong - and when we don't. Our sense of identity and our need for belonging is so compelling that we structure our lives to accommodate this need. We are comforted by our shared identities, and within classrooms where individuals from a vast selection of communities are represented, it is essential that we nurture a sense of belonging within that space. It is essential that we build community within our classrooms.

Both spoken and unspoken social norms, values, beliefs and laws determine who belongs to a family, a neighbourhood or a country, and similarly, who is trespassing. Even in my classroom there are rules, expectations and procedures that only those of us in the classroom community are fully aware of because it is our space: our territory.

Cornelis Bakker and Marianne Bakker-Rabdau (1973) explore the field of human territoriality.

An individual’s territory consists of those areas in which he has special expertise, shows initiative and takes responsibility – in other words where he has control...man’s sense of territory not
limited to physical space alone, but extends to many other aspects of his social and intellectual life. (p.11)

This definition is not limited to the physical world of property and objects but extends to include the emotional and mental realms of ideas, thoughts and beliefs. Trespassing, therefore, is not simply unlawful entry on private property. In this thesis it is a term used to describe the real or perceived experiences of imposition, infringement and intrusion. Humans have a strong sense of territory and willingly defend it, consciously or unconsciously, with “tone of voice, change in posture, or by the simple sign, ‘No Trespassing’” (Bakker & Bakker-Rabdau, 1973, p. 4). It is obvious that in an urban area personal territories and community territories overlap countless times. The same is true for schools.

In a multicultural society and certainly within our diverse classrooms, we are often called upon to find a place “in the midst of incompatibilities between cultures” (Sandhu, 2000). That is, we need to be able to exist safely and comfortably when immersed in the unfamiliar territory of others, and we need to extend an invitation for others to immerse themselves in ours. When individuals, either inside or outside of the community, overcome the barriers that successfully divide us, the potential for meaningful learning is immense. When the visible and invisible walls that protect, seclude and isolate those who dwell inside and outside of them are deconstructed, individuals in our schools, and indeed in our world, have the opportunity to connect to others with empathy and understanding. In her book on teaching community, bell hooks (2004) suggests that “our emotional awareness can serve as a force to bind us together in community and enable us to transcend difference” (p.114). What tools can we use in schools to invite others to experience the physical and emotional territories of others?
How can experiences of intrusion be converted into invitation? I believe that one of the most comfortable and imaginative means to experience different communities is through stories: real life stories.

Schools need to be places where people grow in the conviction they have value, they can help shape their worlds and they can know the pleasure of transformation, individually and communally. (Leggo, 1995, p. 7)

Through stories, the walls of my classroom are frequently deconstructed as my students are transported back in time to unfamiliar neighborhoods that exist across oceans, over mountains and sometimes even within our own city. One of the most important ways I have come to understand myself is through stories. Using memory, creativity and imagination in the telling and retelling of stories, I have developed a heightened understanding of how real life experiences can be meaningful teaching tools. Consequently, I often use stories to guide my students in understanding the world around them. With fictionalized memoirs of my childhood, my travel experiences and my encounters with the milieu of people I meet locally, I invite my students to imagine the possibility “that we are all more than our differences” (Scap in hooks, 2003, p. 109). Further, I invite them to imagine their own possibilities. Ruth Falk Wiebe (2000) speaks to the power of story in the elementary classroom in Reading New Worlds, “She [the teacher] invited us to imagine, collectively, new worlds and, in doing that, performed an important step in helping to create them” (¶ 26). In sharing myself and my experiences of community through story, I extend an invitation to my students to both listen and be heard, to trust, to understand and to imagine. I invite them to belong.

With my stories, I am temporarily transformed from being their freckle-faced teacher to being a brave explorer, a daring revolutionary, a misunderstood tomboy or
I am a leader, a follower, a victim and a heroine. While I may take creative liberty with the details of my stories as they evolve from year to year, the essence of my words remains the same, and the intended purpose of these shared moments remains intact. I use stories about community, both mine and others, "to carefully and critically examine a given notion, to clarify and make sense of what is confusing, to articulate what's hidden and to plumb the depths of what is only superficially presented" (Bai, 2004, p.17). Our stories matter and much can be understood if we carefully examine and study our stories about community experience. In his work on phenomenology, 
Researching Lived Experience, Max van Manen (1997) describes the aim of phenomenology as "a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience" (p. 36).

When my students enter my class, they enter hoping to belong, to connect and to be accepted. In one hand they carry the values, beliefs and expectations of their family and cultural communities, and in the other they carry a backpack full of pencils, gel pens and duo-tangs. The two have no direct connection, and in some cases can even come into conflict with each other when the expectations of one load outweigh the other. In Karen Osterman’s (2000) research on school community, she emphasizes the importance of belongingness in the classroom community, “Being accepted, included or welcomed leads to positive emotions such as happiness, elation, contentment, and calm, while being rejected, excluded or ignored leads to often intense negative feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy and loneliness” (p. 9). I believe that creating community and
belongingness in my classroom is a necessity. In order to create community, however, we must understand community.

As a teacher, I challenge myself to create a classroom environment that embraces each child with a strong sense of belonging and membership. I invite them to participate, to share themselves and to honour the contributions of others. In doing so, I hope that they will experience a sense of safety, and a sense of responsibility towards our space and towards those with whom they share their space. Finally, I hope that they will ultimately "come to belong" (Bai, 2004, p. 18) in our classroom community.

I use their stories, as well as my own, to build community through both our shared and our unique experiences. In his picture book on race, Julius Lester (2005) concludes, "To know my story, you have to put together everything I am" (p. 26). As we travel through our stories and the stories of others, we move back and forth and in circular directions in our discussions. We recognize our similarities and differences and grow to respect that we are all more than what is immediately visible. "Caring educators open the mind allowing students to embrace a world of knowing that is always subject to change and challenge" (hooks, 2003, p. 92).

In observing my students' experiences of belonging and of trespassing within our small community and in seeking to understand these phenomena, I have been challenged to examine my encounters of them in the world outside of my classroom. In order to understand their possible experiences of belonging and trespassing in communities, I wanted to examine my own. "This starting point of phenomenological research is largely a matter of identifying this interest as a true phenomenon, i.e., as some experience that human beings live through" (van Manen, 1997, p.40). As sharing stories and memoirs
has become so entwined in my teaching, it seemed natural to pursue an inquiry on community through a collection of narrative. “Narrative inquiry in the folding and unfolding gives rise to possibilities of interpretations, possible meanings, possibilities of truths” (Sandhu, 2000). Through narrative research, my personal experiences with diverse communities might lend themselves to a greater appreciation for and understanding of my place in the many communities from which my students come.

In addition, my understanding of community and belonging may contribute to my skills and ability in creating the classroom community that I believe is a key to learning. As Osterman (2000) maintains, “While students who feel accepted and secure are more likely to evidence autonomy and self-regulation, students who experience rejection often exhibit an unwillingness or inability to conform to norms and appear less able to act independently” (2000, p.327). Indeed, feelings of belonging and membership are imperative to a child’s development and education and, as a teacher, it is incumbent upon me to foster such membership. Further, she states, “Community is not present until members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others and safety” (Osterman, 2000, p.323). How does one foster feelings of belonging, trust and safety in the classroom? How can I meaningfully use my experiences and understandings of different communities in my practice?

Using fictionalized life-writing, my thesis explores experiences of belonging, feeling included, welcomed and accepted, and of trespassing, feelings of imposition, intrusion, and dislocation. The stories that follow address the poetic burdens and rewards of being different and how such challenges and gifts can awaken a poignant yet basic understanding and appreciation for others. Through my perspective as a girl, the stories
explore both the comfort and pain of belonging to communities defined by kin and socio­
economics. Further, through adult eyes, my stories examine the challenges and rewards of immersing myself, however temporarily, in the social and ethnic communities of others. This collection attempts to convey how both positive and negative experiences of communities, both near and far, have cultivated my ability to live and to teach with love and compassion.

Trespassing on Childhood

Community is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships (Palmer, 1998, p. 90).

In the Courage to Teach (1998), Parker Palmer explores, among many issues, the different models of community and the role they play in education and in the classroom. He explores three models of community. The therapeutic model of community describes the sense of community that children experience first. This type of community is defined by the loving, trusting and accepting human relationships that children experience within families and in schools (Palmer, 1998, p. 90). While this initially appears ideal, Palmer points out how it is potentially problematic because of the imperative for intimacy (p. 91). Human beings in close proximity do not naturally establish community; we are often too busy protecting our individual territories.

As children, we do not yet understand that “difference enhances life” (Scapp in hooks, 2003, p. 115). Consequently, as we navigate our way from childhood to adulthood, there is an inner tension around feelings of being the same and being different. In the story Jesus Loves the Little Children, I am confronted with the painful reality that I
am different from the children at my Sunday school. I am aware of the negative stereotypes that accompany being poor and internalize them as shame. These negative feelings inhibit my sense of belonging; I feel I am trespassing in this house of worship. I see this community as a place where I do not belong and, I, consequently, terminate my membership with it establishing my own territory of belief.

As exemplified in this story, Bai (2004) states that, “Confusion and superficial understanding about something is typically an obstacle to its promotion” (p. 17). The experience of confusion in partnership with misunderstanding resulting in obstacles is a theme that is explored in many of my stories, but it is particularly poignant in its relevance to children and their understanding of the ways of the world. In my stories Under the Porch Light and Jesus Loves the Little Children, there are layers of confusion; the emotional impact of which is never fully addressed. Experiences of trespassing and being trespassed upon often cannot be understood without emotional guidance or acknowledgement. The required emotional guidance takes place in Behind the Bedroom Door, and a family community is consequently strengthened. In Under the Porch Light and in Jesus Loves the Little Children, however, there is no discussion or exploration of feelings and the individuals are subsequently, whether by choice or otherwise, displaced from the community. “Our emotional awareness can serve as a force to bind us together in community and enable us to transcend difference” (hooks, 2003).

The richness of a familial sense of community is explored in my stories Behind the Bedroom Door and Street Lights. Confronted by adversity and surrounded by play, the sense of belonging, of shared responsibility and of love nurture the relationships shared by a family community. Embraced by the safety net a family typically provides,
children can grow to assume new roles and responsibilities after being tested by both invited and uninvited challenges. Similar experiences can yield similar responses in the classroom. Within our families and our schools, however, there are boundaries and it becomes necessary to respect private territory as trespassing can present great challenges. Even within communities in which our membership is assured, we can be both a trespasser and a victim of trespassing.

**Trespassing in Vancouver**

An ethnographer seeks to distill the essence of a people, a poetic sense of wonder of who they are, the unique qualities that allow them to live, the pressures and challenges that urge them forward (Davis, 2001, p. 6).

In Vancouver, we flourish in a sea of diversities. Our communities are shaped by ethnicity and culture, by values and beliefs and by socio-economics. The differences that exist in our city make diversity a fact rather than a choice. How we choose to involve ourselves in and among these diverse communities truly determines our success as a city. Heesoon Bai (2004) speaks of the space of intersubjectivity. She claims that “to be intersubjective is to participate in another’s reality, not abstractly but in the concrete reality of mind-body-heart” (p. 19). As a member of a multi-ethnic city infused with individuals of varying abilities and socio-economic power, and as a teacher, I am constantly confronted with the imperative to exist in this space of intersubjectivity. In stories and lessons around cultural difference, I welcome my students to do the same.

Moving along Vancouver’s Main Street, I attempt to make pure observations in *Navigating Main Street*, a narrative about one of our city’s most fascinating streets. I
comment on the sights, smells and sounds of the communities that call this concrete artery home, all the while recognizing that on the sidewalk, I neither belong nor am I trespassing. In being present, however, in being intersubjective, I welcome the possibility for greater understanding. "Moving through fear, finding out what connects us, revealing our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community" (hooks, 2003, p. 197). This notion of moving through fear is exemplified more directly in my story *This Ain't No Potlatch*.

In contrast to Palmer's therapeutic model of community, there is his model of a civic community, "where people who do not and cannot experience intimacy with each other nonetheless learn to share a common territory and common resources" (1998, p. 92). At a pub on Vancouver's downtown eastside frequented mostly by First Nations people, I experience a blend of the therapeutic and the civic community. There is difference and yet there is a closeness that seems particularly unique to the community of people inside the pub. Some communities are defined by culture; understanding how a culture views the world is necessary in order to appreciate that community and not trespass upon it. For some, the world around us helps us to construct our values and our identities, while others experience it the external world as something different.

Most indigenous people view the world as independent of their beliefs about it. It is an external reality that is in a continuous state of transformation. It is the interaction of all of these parts that is important rather than the different parts. (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p.75)

Sometimes we cannot belong in communities that are not our own, but understanding the values and beliefs of neighboring communities helps to ensure that we don't trespass.
My search for understanding of the urban community has often compelled me to the downtown eastside where “on the basis of differences we come to reject, exclude, debase, exploit and incarcerate others” (Bai, 2004, p.18). Some of my most heartfelt learning took place there as I came to see the beauty that exists there, and as I confronted my own biases and irrational fears of the many compromised individuals that make up this community. In the narrative Remembering Recess, I am confronted by the profound reality that all people need to be seen, valued and honoured no matter their circumstances. Carl Leggo (1995) reinforces this reality in his article, The School as Community, “We need to acknowledge one another with our eyes, making eye contact, and with smiles, with a recognition that the other person is not invisible” (1995, p. 7). In a real community, no one need experience invisibility.

Trespassing in Canada

In loving others, we want to cherish and honour them for who they are in themselves and for themselves. (Bai, 2004, p. 22)

The diversity that exists in Vancouver is but a small sampling of the diversity that exists elsewhere in Canada. While birth and nationality may determine belonging, we are often, when dislocated by choice, employment or otherwise, forced “to occupy a very different standpoint” (hooks, 2004, p. 21). In the stories Picking Tabacco and U’mista, I explore what it means to be excluded because of perceived differences, and what it feels like to want to be included in a place where differences inhibit the degree of inclusion that occurs. Certainly, I belonged in both places, but my sense of trespassing was acute all the same. Transposing these experiences into the social and learning experiences of
the students in my classroom community leads me to understand that while they may know they belong, there is still the real possibility of experiencing a sense of unintentional trespassing. Consequently, knowledge that one belongs is not enough. My students need to truly feel that they belong.

**Trespassing Abroad**

Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished. (hooks, 2004, p. 43)

In broadening my understanding of community, I found it meaningful to delve into my experiences of communities overseas. The communities that I explore in my thesis are defined by national borders, religion, culture and lifestyle. I have always welcomed the challenges and blessings of being a foreigner “negotiating identities in these folds amongst multiple worlds...that contains assumptions dictating appropriate thought and behaviour” (Sandhu, 2000). In both *Our Geraldine* and *Content to Be*, I dwell in communities where I have no history and no definitive membership, and where I have to rely on loving compassion and trust in human kind to ensure my safety.

Traveling and collecting authentic experiences of community as an outsider has allowed me to appreciate the unpredictability and ever-changing ways of the world, and has ultimately encouraged me to embrace change in community and in my school. “To see things as permanent is to be confused about everything; the alternative to understanding is the need to create temporary harmonies through alliances and relationships with all forms and forces (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p.77).
In reference to researching narrated experience, Gurjit Sandhu (2000) states that it “requires a synchronicity of understanding in past, present and future thought, where each moment informs the next and is informed by that which proceeded” (¶ 6) Our classroom communities exist within family communities, neighborhood communities, cultural communities and country communities. Our children navigate their way through the values and expectations of each community of which they are a part. It is my hope that my narrative inquiry into community will enrich my understanding of the diversity of communities so that my students of today and of the future can celebrate membership in a community that is rooted in love and compassion.

These are my stories.
Trespassing on Childhood
Jesus Loves the Little Children

At the front of the rows of wooden pews, right near the piano where Mrs. Jones plays, a white toy church rests on the wooden ledge that separates the red carpeted area from the tiled floor. On the roof of that tiny church, there is slot for coins: for birthday coins. I have happily joined in to sing Happy Birthday as one of the other kids in the congregation has walked joyfully to the front and has deposited her money into the toy church. I dreamed about the day that it would be my turn.

I remember my eldest sister crying on the Sunday it was her birthday, on the Sunday it was her turn. Each week Mr. Jones, the minister, would pick up my siblings and I, as well as other children in the neighborhood, in his yellow, wood-paneled, station wagon. In the back, there were two seats that faced each other; my sisters and my brother and I would often get to occupy those seats on the short drive to our church. On those days I felt like a princess in a chariot. But on this particular day my sister, who should be happy, has been crying and her sadness grips my heart.

There is no money at home in my mom’s purse. And so there is no money for the small toy church to celebrate my sister’s birthday. The birthday ritual in the church will be incomplete. Perhaps without coins for the toy church, she will not be able to walk to the front to join Mrs. Jones at the piano. The disappointment of this consumes my sister and, in turn, it consumes me.

I am relieved, however that before we move to Sunday school classes, we do sing Happy Birthday to my sister. And then I am surprised when she walks to the front while Mrs. Jones smiles happily at her and drops a coin into the slot on the roof of the piggy
bank church. I am proud of my sister up there, smiling from beneath her halo of auburn hair that is exactly the same colour as Jesus'. And then I remember the story from last week's Sunday school class where Jesus turned one fish into many, and I look skeptically at my sister with her flushed cheeks. We are just like the other kids in the church. By some miracle we are the same.

Mrs. Jones gives my sister a pencil that says 'Jesus Loves You'. And I am jealous of both that love and the pencil. Then I learn that Mrs. Jones also gave her the coin, and my sense of wonder disappears. I know it is not supposed to happen this way. And this breakdown in the order of how things are supposed to be makes me realize in one crushing moment that we are not the same. And I am ashamed of those differences.

The smallest kids, like my brother and I, have our Sunday school class in the living room of the white house that is down a short pathway behind the back doors of the church. Small school chairs are positioned in a circle in the living room, and I marvel that such chairs could actually be in somebody's house among their sofa and their lamps. I wonder what other mysteries lurk beyond this room where each week I sit and listen to tales about Jesus, and his Mom and his Dad. Jesus, I discover, had two Dads, which seems a bit unfair since I barely have one.

Mr. and Mrs. Jones's daughter is in my Sunday school class. She wears black, shiny shoes: the kind with a delicate strap that goes over the top of her white ankle socks. In the centre of the living room, a chandelier hangs from the ceiling. It's made of diamonds, and the light that emanates from the bulbs in the middle of the chandelier reflects off the polished toes of the shiny black shoes. I long to own a pair exactly like them.
Glancing at my own feet, I see the tip of my big toe poking through the end of my worn, orange sneakers. I tied the knots myself even though the ends of the shoelaces are frayed. The light from the chandelier does not shine off my small toenail. I couldn’t find socks that matched in the clean clothes pile before the yellow station wagon pulled up and honked. I know it’s wrong to not wear socks; I know it’s wrong to have a hole in your sneaker. I cross my ankles and tuck my feet under my chair as far back as I can to hide my hole. I think that Jesus might not mind as he liked to wear sandals, but a quick survey reveals to me that nobody else has holes in their sneakers. I long for the pews where I can hide my feet easily, where I can hide myself easily.

My sister’s birthday is just four weeks before my own. Yet I know that I have never put coins into the miniature white church, and I have never been given a pencil that reads ‘Jesus Loves You’. My mother’s purse continued to be empty of coins, and we had to move. And so, Mr. Jones could not come anymore to pick us up, and after that I never listened to any more stories about Jesus.

But after three or four moves, and a marriage that brought me a new Dad (so that I now had two Dads, just like Jesus), we returned to the neighborhood of the small church. Shortly after our arrival, my teacher gave each student in our class two tickets to a free puppet show at the little church. Thrilled by the idea of returning to a place where I’d once belonged, I carefully tucked that ticket into my pocket for safekeeping.

As the rain poured from the sky the following Sunday, my brother and I excitedly tucked our jeans into our black gumboots, zipped up our coats and rode our bikes up the road to the entrance of the church. My brother was excited, and I felt proud of myself for
being old enough to take him somewhere. Our bikes didn’t have fenders, and the mud splashed up from the road and onto our pants and our coats. We didn’t care.

We propped our bikes up against the front wall of the church and moved towards the doors. I felt in my pocket for the two free tickets I had kept safe all week that guaranteed our admission to the puppet show. When we entered the church, I felt happy to be in this place that was once so familiar to me. I wondered if the white, toy church was still by the piano, and if the little kids still sat on school chairs in the minister’s living room.

I look around for somebody to give the tickets to, but nobody seemed to be in charge. The lobby was filled with kids who were clean and tidy and who were wearing their best clothes; they obviously hadn’t ridden their bikes. I took my brother’s hand, and as I did I overheard a woman comment on how wet we were. She took our coats and held them as far away from her body as the length of her arms would allow, gripping the collars with her shiny, red polished fingernails. Sissy, I thought. I clutched the tickets in one hand, and my brother in the other.

I held out the free tickets puzzled as to what to do with them. Somebody told me that we didn’t need the tickets, and that we could just take a seat. So we did. We walked to a pew near the front so that we would have a good view, and we sat quietly. I was confused, however, as I didn’t understand why tickets would be handed out and then not collected. I carefully put the tickets back into my pocket in case they were meant to be collected after the show.

In the silent moments before the minister spoke, I became painfully aware of my brother’s and my attire. Once again I was outshone by white ankle socks and black
patent leather. I tucked my gumboot covered feet under the pew as far back as they
would go. Even though inside my gumboots I was wearing my cool, striped toe socks, I
was still uncomfortable, and I wished that I hadn’t come. I wondered how long it would
be before we could get on our bikes and escape. My brother was oblivious.

There was a prayer, and a song. I didn’t know the words but I didn’t care because
I didn’t want to sing like the girls in their skirts and sissy shoes who were sitting beside
their Moms with delicately painted fingernails. We didn’t bring our Mom like the other
kids had. She doesn’t wear fingernail polish; she wears jeans like my brother and me.
My Mom liked puppet shows, but I only had two tickets. Besides, I liked babysitting my
brother, and we loved riding our bikes. Even in the rain.

I noticed to my left that a wooden bowl was being passed down the pew. As each
person took it, they dropped money into it. Inside my body I felt panic. Money? The
puppet show was free, I thought. It said so on the ticket. Should I put my ticket in the
bowl? Is that what I am meant to do? Nobody else had. I didn’t know what to do. It
said, “Free.” The ticket said, “Free.” Why were people paying?

My brother took the bowl and passed it to me without giving it a second thought.
I was angry that he was younger and that this problem had fallen upon my ten year old
shoulders. And so I, with my eyes downcast, passed the bowl along to somebody who
was sitting further down along the pew obviously fearful that my muddy wet pants might
brush against their white socks. I wanted to make excuses for my empty pockets. I
wanted to say, to shout, I thought it was free! But I am in church. It is a sacred place, and
so I am silent. I am silent.
The tickets were a lie, I think, and I am angry. The puppet show isn’t free. It was a lie, and I had been tricked, deceived and humiliated. And I did not believe that Jesus loved the little children of the world. Sitting on the wooden pews with our wet, ginger hair slicked back on our heads and our jeans tucked into our gumboots, I knew that we didn’t belong, and my heart pinched with anger. When the puppet show ended, my brother and I grabbed our coats and our bikes, and escaped into the rain. The mud from the wet, unpaved sidewalk splashed up against our backs -- cleansing us as we rode away from the church. And we never went back.
Behind the Bedroom Door

I hadn’t meant to eavesdrop. I had just heard the words. They entered my ears without my permission and without my intent. As my slipper-covered feet shuffled by the closed door of my Mom’s bedroom, her words slipped from her mouth, penetrated the wooden door with its squeaky hinges and simply took refuge in my ears. Cancer…he thinks it might be cancer, she said to the person on the other end of the phone.

The words were not said in her usual voice. Her voice crackled, and the words were cloaked with fear. And although I wasn’t speaking, the sound of that poisonous word made my throat crackle too. Silently, it crackled, and my legs, numb with fear, carried me noiselessly into the bathroom.

As I child, I loved being sick so that I could stay at home with my Mom. Sick days were the only ones that I could bask in the light of her love without having to share her with my siblings. On those days while convalescing under a blanket on the couch, my head resting on my Mom’s warm lap, I received a kind of education not offered in school. While one of her hands stroked my ginger hair and the other entertained a Player’s Light, my Mom would talk to me, and I to her. And we would listen to each other’s wondering and wisdoms and whatnot’s while we watched Mrs. Chancellor and Victor Newman love and war with everybody in Genoa City.

On sick days, I learned about how people were different, and the same. I learned how to express myself, how to defend myself and, most of all, how to be honest with myself. My Mom was the greatest teacher in the world.
On this particular day, however, my Mom and I had not been consumed with conversation; we had not snuggled on the sofa to watch *The Young & the Restless*. Instead we had driven in our tomato red Valiant to the doctor's office where we both had an appointment with our doctor.

Mom came in while Dr. Ken listened to my chest and made me say, "Ah". He made some jokes about freckles before sending me to the waiting room to wait for my Mom. She'd told me that she had to talk to him about "women's stuff." I knew that was code for periods. Gross. My sisters had them, too, and I didn't plan to ever have one. I figured the less I knew the better, and so I happily sat in the waiting room looking at pictures of movie stars in magazines.

At home I stared in the mirror behind the closed door of the bathroom. Cancer. I could see a box of maxi pads on the shelf behind me. I didn't know that cancer could be a woman thing. I did know, however, that it was a thing that people caught before they got really sick and skinny, lost their hair, and died. It had happened to my cousin the year before. His parents tried to give him their blood so that he could live, but he still died. I would give my Mom my blood I decided.

The words echoed off the inside of my head and tore wildly at my heart. Despite all of our talks, all of our lessons and all of our love, I had no words for her. I had no words for my Mom when she emerged from the bedroom with red eyes and told me to put on my coat and my boots. I obeyed silently trying not to look at her and forcing myself to behave normally. I tucked my jeans into my gumboots so that she wouldn't have to remind me to do so although this was abnormal. Simultaneously, I tucked the
terrifying words into the pit of my stomach where they lay in silence. Silence, too, was abnormal for me, for us.

We drove to the elementary school to pick up my brother and my sisters, which almost never happened. They were elated when they saw the Valiant and clambered into the car with wet jean cuffs as though it were a celebration of sorts. I stared at my Mom and she stared out the windshield at the road as the wipers moved the rain back and forth across the glass. All the while my older sisters argued while my little brother broke into song.

I wanted to scream, to run, and to escape from the secret that was devouring me. I wanted to tell my siblings what I had heard so that I would not have to suffer alone; so that my Mom and I would not have to suffer alone. But I did not open my mouth. Silently, I watched my Mom, her hands clutching the black steering wheel. I knew this was not my secret to tell.

We drove to my Dad's work where she got out of the car despite the rain, leaned against the front bumper and lit a cigarette. When my Dad appeared at last, he took my Mom into his arms and she began to cry. For the first time since they had climbed into the car, my siblings joined me in my silence: Though my secret remained hidden, our young minds were united in the fear that something was not as it should be. Our mother's tears both mystified and terrified us.

Later with Chinese take-out boxes sprawled across the coffee table and dinner plates askew on the hardwood floor, that evening actually did take on the appearance of a celebration. My family seemed to forget about my mother's tears; they forgot in the midst of their chicken chow mein, that things had gone awry. But I could not forget. I
threw up twice and my freckled shoulders trembled from the physical exhaustion of fighting back tears and the emotional exhaustion of being held hostage by grown-up secrets.

At day's end when my Mom came into my room to take the cold cloth from my brow, to kiss me good-night and to make certain that I knew where the bucket was beside my bed, I could contain myself no more. My shoulders shook and heaved and tears burst from my eyes as I blurted the question that had consumed me like a parasite all day. I blurted the question that gave shape and substance to my greatest fear: Mom, are you going to die?

She wrapped her strong arms around my little back and began to cry. I held my Mom as tightly as I could, as tightly as she held me, and we cried together. As our tears mingled before trickling down our cheeks, I began to stroke her long, silver hair and made hushing sounds as she had done for me so many times before. When my tears subsided, I continued to hold her. I whispered to her that everything was going to be OK. I told her that I was there, and so everything would be OK. And strangely I knew that it would be in a way that I had never known before.

In those moments of shared fear and despair, I transformed. I was no longer just my mother's daughter, a member of her brood; I was her friend. Our shared secret, our shared trust and our shared love made me realize that I was not merely the recipient of her love, her care and her support; I was responsible for reciprocating it. My Mom had become my friend, and I was grateful. I was no longer afraid. On that day, my small hands and young heart took care of her and it made me love her all the more.
Street Lights

Playing kick the can on the quiet, tree-lined roads that surrounded our Maple Ridge neighbourhood had become a summer time ritual. Our friendships with the neighbourhood kids had been established more out of convenience than of choice, but these issues of choice did not concern us. The new housing development that had grown out of the forest behind my own house had street lights all along the row of houses that were in various stages of completion. The light that emanated from those poles high above our heads created a comforting glow of safety for the younger kids, while the dark, empty houses created an air of danger for the older kids. Each evening, we'd trickle out of our homes and onto the streets in search of each other, in search of ourselves.

The summers of my childhood were a time when I could experiment with both the physical and emotional limitations of my girl body in the midst of neighborhood kids with whom I mostly felt very safe. Racing against the boys and the older girls I experienced power, humility and acceptance, both of my own abilities and of theirs. Hiding in the shadows of sunset on the edge of an ominous forest that, like the forests of all great fairy-tales, was undoubtedly filled with all of the evils of the world, I wrestled with, surrendered to and sometimes even conquered my fear of the unknown.

One night, hiding behind the Emerson's station wagon, it occurred to me that I couldn't remember where I left my runners and felt mild pangs in my stomach at the thought of explaining to my mom, once again, that I lost my shoes. I edge along the wood-paneling with my ears tuned for the sound of running feet when my eyes focused
on the old, weathered coffee can. We used this can all summer, and its once shiny, green exterior now boasted the dints and rust of being kicked and dropped and forgotten in the rain. I heard my brother giggle, and we made eye contact. In the dusk, he was still visible in his usual spot behind the green hydro box. I saw his toothy smile as he giggled mischievously. I held my finger to my lips to shush him. He placed one freckled hand over his mouth and, in solidarity, silently pointed a warning finger towards the Emerson's open garage. Where are my runners?

I was at the end of the station wagon, and my fingers clutched the bumper that was still warm from the heat of the evening sun. I could see hues of pink and orange reflected in its shiny surface, and I knew without looking, that the sun had dipped behind the mountains. My brother, like me, had taken shelter behind the station wagon. I threw him a warning glance as I heard his giggles escaping from behind his hands. I glanced up at the dark streetlights and then again at the can which was sitting in the middle of the road. I knew I didn’t have much longer. Any effort to try to get closer to the can, so that I was not immersed in a running race that I was sure to lose, was too great a risk. I was weighing the options when I heard it. Coming from the Emerson's garage was the threatening sound of running shoes pounding against the concrete.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I emerged from my secure spot at the bumper and raced towards the can. My bare feet felt every pebble and bump on the road, but I could not indulge in the burning pain that was building on the soles of my feet as I sprinted in the darkness. The runner was close behind and, without looking, I knew exactly who my competition was. I was uncertain if I’d get there first, but legs willed
me towards a speed that made me feel as if I was falling through the air and not running. I heard my brother cheering me on as the space between my body and the can decreased.

I was aware that others were emerging from their hiding spaces to watch the race when in a quick, sweeping motion I lifted my right leg and triumphantly kicked the can just as the street lights came on.

Street lights are on! somebody hollered as the can bounced across the cement making a tremendous racket. I collapsed on the ground grinning and whooping in victory, while simultaneously clutching my bleeding, throbbing toe. My competitor jested with me as he and I caught our breath in the spotlight cast by the light overhead. I was filled with the pride and joy that comes with victory, and I laid back on the warm concrete to bask in the electronic brilliance of the streetlight above.

As the last of the neighbourhood kids emerged from their hiding places and offered congratulations, I looked around to gather my siblings into my sight. My brother's silly grin reflected pride as he ambled towards me. Maybe next time I'll let him kick the can, I thought as I glanced down at my bloody toe. My sisters, surrounded by chatty and giggling friends, walked back slowly to the spot where I lay. Teenagers. One of them carried my forlorn and forgotten sneakers and tossed them to me one by one as she approached.

“Come on,” says the other, pulling me up before I could slide my sneaker over my hurt, but victorious toe, “the streetlights are on. It's time to go home.”

Some of the older kids, who were no longer ruled by the streetlights, sat down on the edge of the sidewalk as the rest of us clustered together to walk home in our
respective directions. As I gathered my brothers and sisters into my sight, I wondered about the great mysteries of being a teenager and felt a familiar sense of frustration and impatience about the limitations of being a child.

As my siblings and I left the brightness of the streetlight to walk home together like we did every night in the summer, we called out our good-byes to our friends and our plans to meet the next day. The promise of tomorrow's adventures and the sense of belonging that came with it shrouded us in comfort as we walked silently together, protected from the darkness by the streetlights, and by each other.
I first met Jimmy Nixon in grade one. It was before I knew of gentle words like disabled or challenged. I had probably described Jimmy Nixon with harsher words like retarded: mentally retarded. He was a teenager who lived in my neighborhood, but who did not attend my school. He was too old for elementary school, but probably not too smart for it. Often he would ride his bike up and down the same sidewalk all afternoon. I don’t remember if I ever talked to him or rode bikes with him prior to bumping into him that day along the field. He was on the fringes of my grade three existence; I suspect he lived an unsolicited solitary life on the fringes of our entire community.

I knew that there was a school somewhere near the big prison in New Westminster where retarded kids could go. I liked driving by there in my family’s station wagon. It amazed me that the prison looked so much like a castle with its turrets and its long, concrete staircase that led up to the grand entrance and was bordered by gardens. I liked imagining that it really was a castle and that its insides were filled with velvet chairs and candelabras. It also amazed me that the school for retarded kids was so big; it looked like an old mansion. Those kids were lucky, I thought, to have such a beautiful school. Jimmy, however, seemed quite content with hanging around my school making noises like a crow and having bike races with nobody but himself.

The day I bumped into Jimmy I was with a friend who has taken on such mystical qualities in my memory that I sometimes wonder if she was real. Though I do not remember her name, I think she was a gypsy. I’m not certain if this was something she told me or if it was something I conjured up on my own. I have no other memories of
her outside of this incident, nor do I know what became of her. She is not in my grade three class photo. But I am positive that when I saw Jimmy Nixon that day, she was beside me, whispering to me from beneath her long, brunette spiraling curls. She was holding my hand, and I was holding hers.

Playing on the new adventure playground that was embedded in bark mulch that smelled like the wildness of a forest trail was a favourite past time of mine whether it was recess or Saturday afternoon. Climbing up the log structure again and again just to fly down the big silver slide that burned my legs on hot days kept me happy for hours. On the weekends, when it was time to go home, my sister would stand at the end of the school field and holler at me until I waved, then she would disappear. The sound of my name echoing across the empty soccer field made me feel special though this responsibility, undoubtedly, made my sister crazy.

I likely took one last slide that day before walking with the gypsy girl down the dirt path that had been worn in the grass. It was the same path I walked each day before and after school. Bordering a chain link fence, the path separated the school field from a forest I was forbidden to play in. While kicking our way along our familiar and dusty route, we heard a voice calling to us from the forested side of the fence. We were surprised to see Jimmy standing among the trees. I wondered where he had left his bike.

Jimmy stood on the other side of the chain-linked fence with his pants around his knees and his penis in his hand. We stopped walking and stared shockingly at the site in front of us. He somehow came closer to the fence, and put his penis through one of the chain-linked holes. With his funny voice, he asked us if we wanted to touch it. My tummy began to hurt.
I had seen a penis before. My brother and I had not yet stopped taking baths together. I knew our biological differences, but they were not a big deal to me. We often brought my Barbies into the tub to play. Once we had even brought in one of his Tonka trucks, but the wheels had left marks on the tub, so we had to promise to leave it in the yard. My brother's body did not scare me. It did not make me uncomfortable. It was just a part of him.

Jimmy's, however, was gross. And I knew that what he was doing was bad; I knew that what he was asking us was really bad. Jimmy looked kind of sick or something, and for the first time, I felt afraid of him. My tummy really began to hurt, and I pulled my friend away.

We left Jimmy standing there with his pants down as we quickly hurried down the path towards the gate. I don't remember what we talked about, but I do remember wishing that my sister was there. I wished she had waited for me. When I reached the gate at the end of the field, I ran towards the tall cedar trees that marked the edge of our yard.

I saw Jimmy Nixon only one more time. When I arrived home that afternoon, I told my parents what had happened on the trail. My Dad was furious, and he swore a lot; my Mom had tears in her eyes. Their reactions scared me much more than Jimmy had. I showed them that I was okay, and wondered aloud, weren't they proud of me for doing the right thing? This didn't help at all, and instead my Dad put me in the station wagon before we'd even eaten dinner and made me show him where Jimmy lived.

Because we had to go all the way around the school to get to the Nixon's and because my Dad was too angry to talk, the drive to there seemed to take forever. As we
pulled into driveway the wagon’s headlights flashed across the front of the house
announcing our arrival. My Dad went to the door. I, however, remained in the front seat
clutching my stomach. I watched my Dad talking to Jimmy's Dad. Mr. Nixon peered at
me in the car, and I slid down the seat and looked at the floor.

When I raised my eyes, Mr. Nixon had buried his face in his hands. My Dad was
shaking his head back and forth. I was embarrassed to have caused such a scene. I was
embarrassed by these grown-up men who were talking about something that happened to
me, but who wouldn’t invite me to be a part of their conversation. I slid further down in
my seat. I was scared sitting there by myself. I looked up to the windows of the two-
storey house to see if I could see Jimmy. I couldn’t, but I would.

The next evening, long after the street lights had come on, there was a knock on
the front door of our home. My parents didn’t seem to be surprised when they opened the
door to find Jimmy and his Dad standing on the bottom step of our porch. My tummy
began to hurt immediately. My Dad made me join him at the door. The porch light held
Jimmy, and I could see that he was terrified. I was scared, too.

Mr. Nixon pushed Jimmy up the two stairs by the scruff of his neck. Jimmy was
sobbing uncontrollably and staring down at his feet. His father was yelling at him, but I
couldn’t hear his words. I felt sick and afraid. Jimmy muttered something through his
sobs to my family and I who were standing inside the door. Jimmy’s father wasn't
satisfied and yelled at him some more while shaking him by the collar. I couldn't
understand a word of what Jimmy was saying, but I knew instinctively that it was, Sorry.
Sorry I showed you my penis.
I was sorry, too. I was sorry that I had told on Jimmy. He hadn't hurt me; he had only scared and startled me a bit. I was sorry that Jimmy was retarded, and that he didn't know any better than to put his penis through a hole in the fence. Mostly though, I was sorry that the grown-ups were treating him like he did. I was so very sorry.

After that night on my porch, I never saw Jimmy Nixon again. One day he was part of our town and our community, and the next day he wasn't. He had broken a rule that was beyond repair and whether or not he knew the rule seemed to be irrelevant. Jimmy was banished. For a while I missed seeing him racing on his bike. I even missed the sound of him calling to the crows from the playground. Secretly, I hoped that he had gone to the school that sat like a mansion on the hill above the river. I also hoped that he hadn't realized that I was the reason he had to leave.

From time to time, I have wondered what became of Jimmy - where his family actually did send him. I have wondered if he ever stopped crying; if he ever stopped feeling sorry. I have wondered if his Dad forgot all about that night and never mentioned it again just the way my parents had. Mostly I have wondered if he's alright, and if he remembers that terrifying and humiliating night on my front porch as vividly as I do.
Trespassing in Vancouver
Navigating Main Street

A dynamic portrait of the contrasting colours of poverty and privilege is created as one navigates the length of Vancouver’s Main Street. Many only know Main Street’s wonders through the window of a Skytrain or a car while en route to other neighborhoods -- those which are more familiar or perhaps safer. Others become familiar with these communities by patronizing a Chinese or Indian restaurant, visiting a few antique stores or maybe attending a parade ensuring, of course, that there’s enough change for the parking meter. To know this street and its neighborhoods, to understand what and who has shaped them, one must take to the sidewalk.

Below my dangling feet an enormous puddle pools beneath the bench. It is filled with cigarette butts, small crab claws, and a lone, drowned band-aid. Its meaningless garbage, yet these remnants of addiction, or nature and healing, seem a metaphor for something greater. I tentatively lean back against a metal plaque implanted in the wooden bench that is dedicated to 11 women who were once missing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, most of whom are now confirmed dead.

As I contemplate this memorial that sits only seven meters from a playground, my ears are simultaneously filled with the lapping of waves against a rocky beach and the electronic purr from the Port of Vancouver. The clanging of metal from ships being loaded and unloaded echoes off the antique buildings behind me. Seagulls provide the vocal accompaniment to this urban cacophony and the entire orchestra is cloaked in shades of gray. Like so many other neighborhoods in this city, the urban landscape is
juxtaposed against and within a natural one. It is one of the many dichotomies that define this city.

This is the foot of Vancouver’s Main Street. It is as if this thoroughfare emerges from the sea before it penetrates the old heart of a new city and navigates its way south through densely populated neighborhoods before disappearing at the river. Main Street is merely seventy-five blocks long from the shores of Burrard Inlet to the banks of the Frasier River, but its length is rich in history, diverse in culture, polarized in socio-economics and home to so many playgrounds.

Main Street links some of Vancouver’s most distinct, famous and historical neighborhoods. Through these diverse and distinguished neighborhoods patterns of what is essential and what is esthetically pleasing emerge, often along cultural and economic lines. Main Street reflects a full spectrum of colour in the faces of its residents, the walls of its buildings, in its shops and coffee houses.

While Crab Park is empty apart from myself, a lone beachcomber and seagulls that lord over the deserted playground, the presence of people who dwelled on these shores long before Europeans and Asians are not forgotten. These beaches were known as “Lucky lucky” to the First Nations people who once lived here. It’s ironic that two blocks from here, some of Vancouver’s most “unlucky” and unhealthy natives reside in what is known unofficially by the Downtown Eastside community as “Hastings Reserve.” Only words engraved in rock and stone remain to remind those of us who wander these urban shores that this is Native land.

Leaving the park two Chinese lions cast in stone stand guard on either side of a blue bridge that separates the park from the Downtown Eastside. The solitude of the
beach gives way to busy and crowded streets lined with strip clubs, the police station, pawnshops, the Provincial Courts, the city jail, and bars, lots of bars.

Those who are poor, mentally ill and/or addicted create and dominate the prominent street culture here. It is an area too often defined by the exploitation, entertainment and emergency response vehicles that keep its streets busy. Despite this relative dark side, however, there exists a very strong sense of community within the grey walls of Carnegie Center, the community library and recreation centre, sitting, as it has for a hundred years, at the heart of it all. Everyone is welcome here.

Clustered around the entrance of the center, are the many faces of poverty in all shades of light and dark; male and female; young and old. Yet no matter the unique features of its residents and its strong sense of community, the Downtown Eastside is dulled by the pervasiveness of grey concrete, urban filth and strangely enough, white.

White police cars oversee the white Vancouver Gospel Mission whose volunteers hand out white Styrofoam cups filled with coffee and hot chocolate to the homeless and hungry that carry white plastic bags filled with bread from the local food bank. White is simple, institutional, and cheap. It is the colour of poverty in Vancouver.

Three blocks from the lions who stand guard on the bridge, the red and gold colours of Chinatown intersect with the Downtown Eastside. The embroidered, shiny, silk dresses and vests inside shops beckon to passerby to stop and touch while the dried, yellow pungent smelling items in herb shops are reminders of the foreign culture that dominates here. In this place, Chinese - Canadians are not a minority group, and their ‘differences’ become invisible.
Chinatown is a city within a city. It has its own history, culture, norms and standards. To the families who regularly shop here, these red and gold decorated streets, and the people who move among them, are ordinary. The colour along Main and Pender is so bright, that the overwhelming levels of poverty that exist on the previous blocks are almost hidden and are momentarily forgotten even though the poor here are among the silk and herbs.

The colour here or lack thereof, is not associated with poverty or privilege. It is intricately linked with culture. Colour in this context takes two powerful meanings. The red and gold are hues and shades traditionally honoured and used in celebration by the Chinese culture. In contrast, however, the hues and shades of Chinese skin have been used to identify, to label and to oppress. It is a coincidence that the city’s poorest and most destitute have been driven into an area that borders Chinatown, one of Vancouver’s first non-white neighborhoods?

Just up the hill, Kingsway intersects Main, and the Mount Pleasant neighborhood subsequently unfolds. This area is a hybrid. A growing sense of community has developed among the multi-ethnic locals who reside in low- and high-income housing, wearing clothing bought in both consignment and designer shops.

Brightly coloured awnings that advertise Subway, Starbucks, and Blockbusters dominate on several blocks. These modern awnings intermix with dilapidated buildings and dull store fronts which have yet to be re-leased, remodeled and refurbished to meet the changing needs of this community. Mount Pleasant is very colourful. The colour, however, is not a reflection of any traditional culture; it is a
reflection of popular culture. It is a reflection of varying levels of prosperity and of great attempts of urban ‘cool’.

In this neighborhood, families spend their weekends in coffee houses in which the baristas and cashiers sport tattoos and green hair and dangle shiny, silver rings and studs from their noses, eyebrows, lips and ears. Prosperous families feel safe among these warriors of the espresso machine. The baristas are students and artists, not residents of the Downtown Eastside and not immigrants from some foreign place. These colours and this urban culture is what are normal and ordinary to them.

In Mount Pleasant there is a silent recognition and understanding of the proximity of this neighborhood to the one that is much less desirable. The shared wall between Bello Wedding World whose windows display beautiful white wedding dresses, and Red Hot Video whose windows are painted black, speaks to the dichotomy and contradiction that exist here. Like the Downtown Eastside, this area’s coffee shops are also filled with police. Though here, they sit around a wood burning stove drinking coffee from deep red and brown coloured cups while eating low fat, whole wheat muffins.

This is a community speckled with privileged individuals and families who happily reside in the midst of people who are of middle and low socio-economic status. It is a diverse and colourful community that has been shaped for the last century by immigrants primarily from the European, the familiar, part of the world.

Midway along Main, the commercial buildings disappear and are replaced wholly by residential housing. Houses from different eras line this section of the street and are only broken up by the intermittent corner store. The lack of shops means there are fewer people on the sidewalks, and consequently, a significantly reduced sense of
community. Hundred-year-old character homes painted bright colours with SUVs parked out front surround a large, grey and white low-income townhouse complex lined by bus stops.

It has taken forty blocks, but once again, urban poverty is exemplified by the pervasiveness of white. And grey. Big parks and grassy areas surround this complex where all of the units are stacked and in line and appear identical apart from the odd flowerpot or bicycle left on the doorstep. The poverty here doesn't appear as severe; evidence of illness and addiction don't fill the puddles. There are no memorials to murdered street workers; no plaques acknowledging that this is Native land.

Just as on the Downtown Eastside, the colours in this area merely sustain life in the community rather than invite residents to engage with it. The institutionalized appearance of impoverished areas of our city as evidenced by those on Main is pervasive and strongly contrasted by the hues and shades of more privileged and more culturally rich communities.

The final burst of colour on Main Street is Punjabi Market, which is two decorated blocks of Indian restaurants and shops. Scents of cardamom and curry permeate the street and brilliantly coloured saris decorate the sidewalks. Punjabi Market is smaller than Chinatown and is, consequently, less intimidating in its foreign-ness. Like Chinatown, however, the colours which brandish this portion of Main are culturally and ethnically based. To the outsider, one style or colour of sari does not reveal the socio-economic status of its wearer; we see only the sari. To visitors of Punjabi Market, knowledge and understanding of who is privileged and who is impoverished is hidden
behind layers of silk or rayon and does not really concern those of us who visit the neighborhood for the $7.99 vegetarian buffet.

At last, at the south end of Main Street just before the Fraser River, I sit on a bus stop bench to contemplate my surroundings. The hum of traffic from the Superstore parking lot and from Southeast Marine Drive fills the air. Bulk shopping drives the economy of this neighborhood. Remnants of the Punjab community dot this busy intersection though residences become less and less visible. Despite this spattering, this area is void of real culture; it is void of colour. The contrast of poverty and privilege has ceased to be clearly evident. Only the red and green of the traffic lights, which indicate whose turn it is to enter the shopping mecca, are of interest to anybody.

The bench on which I sit is decorated only with graffiti. This neighborhood has no memory; it has no stories to tell. The empty puddle at my feet reflects grey clouds that settle on grey buildings, both of which blend into a sea of grey fog, mist and rain. Perhaps it is only against the stark greyness of Vancouver that colour, or the absence of it, can take such significance.
This ain’t no potlatch

As a young child, I knew about drunk Indians. My cousin married an Indian from the valley, and she was always drunk. Cass was a drunk Indian, and no matter what she did or why, that’s what the grown-ups called her. My cousin was always drunk too, but he didn’t get called anything; my family pretended not to notice. Cass had gone to a residential school in the valley. It closed in 1984. By then, however, Cass was dead, and apart from being a drunk Indian who worked in the cannery in the summer and lived off my cousin and the government the rest of the year, I don’t remember ever hearing anything else about her.

In fact, apart from learning about long houses and visiting the Museum of Anthropology in grade four, I don’t recall ever learning anything about the First Nations people of this province. It was only in 1994, ten years after BC’s last residential school closed that I discovered what happened to the native children of this country and to their families under the policies of the Indian Act. It was then that I began to understand the full extent of the oppression and systemic abuse that First Nations people endured during the first 140 years of Canada’s history. It was only then that I understood how they were made to feel like they were trespassing on their own land, and I felt shame.

I squint in the darkness of the spacious and shadowy room and am momentarily lost in this unfamiliar space. As I tentatively survey the faces of the other patrons in the bar, I see that in some way they, too, are lost. Our silent similarities comfort me, and I
quickly take a seat without meeting anybody's eyes. I don't want them to see my reluctance for I fear it will be mistaken for vulnerability.

I am waiting for my boyfriend to finish an afternoon rehearsal at a jam space nearby. I'd anticipated wandering to Gastown to do some writing in a coffee shop, but as I walked by this place, I felt compelled to go inside. I am curious, and I like the challenge that comes with planting myself someplace new. Besides, I want to stay close to my friend's rehearsal space.

The décor of the bar is sadly reminiscent of a more prosperous time that has long since passed. I can imagine how grand this room may have once been in the days when Vancouver was still young, and East Hastings Street was a thriving business community. I try to imagine ladies with white gloves and men with bowler hats sitting together, smoking cigarettes and drinking high balls, but it is hard to imagine something so splendid in the midst of so much adversity. Yellowed by decades of nicotine the walls are rich with history and yet despite the wealth of their years, they speak mostly of the ills of addiction, poverty and racism.

"Are you alright there, ma'am?" a waitress with long black braids asks me.

She is wearing denim cuts-offs belted at the hips and a ball cap with a bald eagle on it. The ball cap is new and the beak of the cap does not yet boast a manicured curve. She is being formal with me, and I am certain that it's not because I look like a good tipper. I don't belong there, and she knows it. Her demeanour doesn't imply that I'm not welcome, but it acknowledges that in this place, filled mostly with First Nations people, I am different. Her brown, tattooed arm carries a tray of glasses that are brimming with draught beer.
I smile, trying to hide my discomfort at being different and being called, “ma’am,” and ask her for a glass of beer. She is carrying a tray of full glasses, and I have observed others who just take what’s on the tray. The beer is likely Blue or Canadian, and it’s pre-poured by the bartender who knows that the cheap house brand is what everybody wants. I’m too embarrassed by my dislike for this swill and by my ability to pay for something better to order anything else. She quickly takes a bubbling glass off her tray and deposits it on the table in front of me without spilling a drop.

“That’ll be $1.50, ma’am,” she tells me waving at somebody who’s just come in.

I hand her a toonie, and as she begins to dig in the ashtray of coins that’s resting on her tray for change, I tell her thanks. I tell her, that’s great, and she simply nods and walks away. I look at the glass of beer shocked and amused by how cheap it actually is, and I suddenly develop a prudent appreciation for the house swill.

As I sip my beer and inconspicuously take in my surroundings, Patsy Cline comes on the jukebox. My heart is tickled when a small woman at a nearby table smiles at me. I have caught her singing along and though I know all the words to the song, I do not join her. Like most of the women in this old bar, she is native. Her wrinkled face is intriguing, and, despite its worn and weathered appearance, her eyes reflect a certain joy and contentment. She is comfortable in these familiar surroundings and knows many of the people. I try to catch her eyes again, but she’s too busy looking around and watching the other patrons, the regulars, in the bar. It’s normal to sit here alone even if you’re a woman. Even if you’re a woman who is from a time when only ladies of ill-repute sat alone, drinking in bars.
I glance around to see what she sees. Above me ornate wooden beams line the ceiling. They've been painted red like the lead pipes that run along side them; the colour diminishes their grandeur. The red paint is an obvious inexpensive attempt at trying to brighten the bar. My eyes meet a man who is sitting slightly behind me. He asks if I'll join him for a shooter. He's sitting with a friend and both men look like they got off the wrong bus en route to the suburbs. They look smarmy: likely small town drug dealers or johns. I decline. They persist. I smile and turn away. Like me, I suspect they are not regulars, and so I am not interested in them, their shooters or their stories.

My comfort grows as I sit cross-legged on my chair in the midst of the country music and the people who are lost in nostalgia, varying states of inebriation and loneliness. Everybody is drinking the same bubbling glasses of beer from the waitress' tray. A few individuals order two beers at once. Like me, some patrons sit alone while others relax with company. Talking and not talking, but always sipping beer.

A couple, easily in their 70s, wanders in slowly, letting their eyes adjust to the change of light. They are holding hands, and it is obvious that there is something precious about their partnership. The woman is very small and, despite her urban environment, she is wearing a straw hat. The waitress calls to them affectionately, and they smile and lift a hand to her in response. The woman looks like a grandmother. Her wrinkles and the silver hair that is pinned neatly under her hat do not disguise her beauty or her innocence. The man, the gentleman, holds her hand with care and with pride, and I feel my heart sting with the apparent simplicity of their love. They sit together in the back smiling and greeting friends as they do. They're regulars. The waitress walks to their table and places two glasses of beer in front of them.
The jukebox has gone off and the hum of half a dozen TV sets mixes with the din of conversation. It is perhaps not a din; the energy in the room is too subdued, too hushed, and too tired. The walls bear old photographs that have been enlarged to mural size. One is of a parade of old trucks with “Fraser Valley Ice Cream” on the side. The other is of a theatre, but I can’t get a good look at it because it’s behind the shooter men, and I don’t want them to mistake my interest in the photo as interest in them.

I catch my reflection in the mirror and in the space; I even look peculiar to myself. I look on guard. Body closed. Hair in a ponytail. Prim. Proper. My pen, I think ironically, cost the same as the glass of beer. I try to relax my body as I pull the elastic out of my hair and wipe my tinted lip balm off with a tissue I find in my handbag. I feel peculiar because I don’t fit in, and while it doesn’t even make sense to me, I want to.

More people are filling the bar. It’s near 4:30 and it seems that even on the downtown eastside there is an after work crowd. Some younger men carry hard-hats on their hips as they enter the bar and walk in their muddy, steel-toed boots directly to the smoking room. They, too, are native, and I wonder what compelled them to come to the city and, particularly, to this neighborhood in the city. Is this where they feel they belong? Is this sense of belonging more important than a nice neighborhood with safe streets? I want to ask them, but I am rooted in my chair. I sip my beer slowly.

_You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling_ comes on the jukebox. The lady who was singing knows everybody. Between the lyrics of this classic song, which she also knows all the words to, and sips of her beer she calls to people, asks after them, and hugs them. She is drunk. Lots of people are. It doesn’t seem to bother or concern anybody. This is
normal. It just is. The waitress brings her another glass of beer. The singing lady counts nickels and dimes and quarters to pay for it.

I hear the singing lady say, “Hey, it’s Mary from residential school!”

These words fascinate and surprise me. Residential school is a phrase typically reserved for the news and for history classes, but the singing lady has just uttered them so matter-of-factly. They are not ashamed of those words or of that part of their history. It is a reality to them, and for the first time, I experience my own shame about it.

I look around and see a woman smile, nod and wave at the singing lady. I wonder which residential school they went to. I wonder why I feel like I can’t ask her. Why can’t I ask casual, polite conversations about it? When I hear people speaking Hebrew, I’ll talk to them about Israel. Yet my curiosity about my own country is silenced by some barrier I am only beginning to understand. Is this story, this history, mine to know? How can I honour their past respectfully and authentically? I don’t know how to bridge the distance between myself and these people with whom I share the city.

A man with a rugged yet kind face walks by my table, pauses and then asks what I’m writing. He is native, and I am grateful for his question. I am grateful for the opportunity to converse with a member of this community and a local from the bar. Instead of the truth, however, I surprise myself by telling a lie. It’s my journal I tell him, and my face grows red with the heat of my lie. Damn. Why can’t I tell him the truth? Why can’t I tell him that I was writing about him, about the people in the bar and the people in our city? It occurs to me that I am on the outside looking in just as a visitor to a zoo is no matter how much they want to pet the animals that sit within cages.
He senses my lie, I think. He nods and walks away. I don’t want to be seen as an intruder, but my reflection in the mirror tells me that I am.

I have finished my glass of beer and contemplate staying for another. I look for the waitress, and try to make eye contact. She eventually walks by, without having made eye contact with me, but her tray is empty when she does. I watch as she waits at the bar while the bartender organizes a new round of glasses on her tray. She laughs with the men who are sitting on bar stools watching a baseball game. When her tray is full, she goes straight into the smoking room and begins to deposit the frothy glasses on various tables as she makes happy conversation immersed in the thick cloud of cigarette smoke. I wonder if she’ll come back to me or if I’m being sent some sort of hint. The bar is much busier than when I first arrived, and she, undoubtedly, wants to tend to the regulars first. I decide I don’t want another beer. It will mean finding the bathroom, and from my comfortable spot on my chair, this seems like a daunting task.

Beside my table there is a jelly-bean dispenser and as a man turns the knob on the red machine, he comments on my journal. He used to keep a journal, he tells me, but he couldn’t keep it up. He praises me for finding the time to write in one. He has assumed my notebook is a journal, and I don’t tell him otherwise. He thinks I am writing about my own life when really I am writing about this moment in his life.

Everyday is an interesting one, he tells me and walks away with a full palm of multi-coloured candy.

*You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling* is on the jukebox again. Ah, the elusive love. It haunts everybody with its bittersweet nature. I entertain the idea of plugging some
quarters in the jukebox so that I might fill the bar with music. I wonder, if I were brave enough to ask, if perhaps the singing lady might help me to pick some songs.

I look again at my empty glass and notice that the afternoon shift of bartenders has arrived. The stand at the bar with the waitress and chat and laugh as they keep their eyes on the TV: the baseball game is in its final inning. The singing lady calls out to yet another woman who, instead of just waving, comes over and hugs her.

I check myself in the mirror. I appear relaxed. Is it the beer or is it some real sense of ease. Have I grown comfortable in the place? I pull out my lip balm and reapply it. The singing lady calls to the bartender who has just removed his apron. He gets a coke from the bar, plunks a straw in it and then comes over to join her. I watch him sit down; he is quite obviously tired from his shift behind the bar, but still takes some time to catch up with the customers.

The smoking room is packed, and the subdued atmosphere has been replaced by a growing symphony of conversation. Despite the changing atmosphere, many of the silent and still customers remain unchanged behind their beer glasses. A beautiful, elderly man has sat beneath the Fraser Valley Ice Cream photo during my whole visit. His body is curved and worn with age and hard work, and he has no teeth. A khaki toque flops over the top of his tired, bald head. I wonder if his children know where he is.

*Ring of Fire* by Johnny Cash fills the room, and I glance over at the singing lady to see if she knows the words. She does. I begin to sing, too. I marvel that so many native people are in the bar. I have always wanted to go to a potlatch, and I sadly wonder if this is as close as I’ll ever get.
I'd like to stay for another glass of beer. I consider bringing some friends down and sharing this remarkable place with them, but immediately decide against it. I want to be OK in this place without the safety net of my friends and without the comfort of familiarity. I want to deconstruct the walls in my being that make me feel separate and apart from the people in this community. I'm so pleased that I passed up the comforts of Gastown for this experience.

I tuck my notebook into my bag and make mental plans to return. I want to play some music on the jukebox so that the singing lady and I can sing together. I want to answer people's questions honestly and sincerely. I want to come back and offer the people in the bar some of the same gifts that they've just given me.
Remembering Recess

Standing awkwardly on the corner of Princess and Hastings in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, I scan the neighbourhood, tentatively, looking for a beginning. It was easy enough to get in my car and come here, but gaining entrance into this community is challenging. Intimidating. The laws are unlawful, the norms are abnormal and the rare and wonderful beauty that exists here, at first, appears ugly. In the midst of concrete, contrast and irony, I venture forth.

Memories of my own elementary school experience drift in and out of my mind as I look into the faces of people I pass on the street. Interestingly, when I'm usually in this neighbourhood I often avoid eye contact as I don't want to invite conversation. Today, however, I want to talk, and, more importantly, I want to listen. I am on a quest. Each one of these individuals who I encounter on the street, compromised or otherwise, had a childhood and presumably, an elementary school experience. Was that childhood beautiful and promising? And if so, what happened in that in-between space between here and there?

Elementary school is perhaps one of the most significant events in a child's life. Ideals exist regarding what is meant to happen in this space. They are ideals that have been expanded and narrowed with evolving values and with the passage of time. This single constant that unites all schools is that these institutions are places for children to learn. With some exceptions, it is a place that all of us know about through memories of our own experiences. For some, revisiting that memory brightens a face with a smile; for others it casts dark shadows. My meetings that day began with the former.
Escaping the drone of the tumble dryers at the Sunny Laundromat, the man with mocha-coloured skinned hoists a duffle bag over his shoulder and begins to walk comfortably and purposefully in my direction. When our eyes meet, he returns my smile from underneath his ball cap. It is all the invitation that I need, and I approach him gingerly with my question.

Smiling and maintaining eye contact, he removes his duffle bag from his shoulder and rests it at his feet as he begins to talk. His accent is strong and syrupy and reveals that he has not lived in Canada long. He delights in reminiscing about his Catholic elementary school in Mexico City, and I delight in listening. He remembers the name of his school, and the beauty of his Cuban grade one teacher. Yes. His memories are joyful ones: his elementary school was filled with friends, play and happiness. I am pleased that I have transported him from this urban sidewalk to the playing fields of his school in Mexico.

His smile breaks only temporarily when I ask him if he lives in this neighbourhood. In that moment, a poignant vulnerability is revealed that tells us many things. This is neither his neighbourhood nor his community. He is not proud of living here. He knows, I suspect, of the assumptions others make about new immigrants who live in this neighbourhood. I also suspect that he has faced discrimination because of these racist stereo-types. I wonder if a lack of income is the reason he lives on the downtown eastside. He does not want to live here, but does, he tells me, for now. He, like so many others in this community, is here out of necessity.

As a police car speeds down Hastings Street with its light flashing and its sirens blaring, I suddenly feel that I have taken this happy schoolboy and dropped him into the
urban chaos that surrounds our brief conversation. I do not think this schoolboy or his Cuban grade one teacher ever imagined he would end up in a place like this. Perhaps for him, it is only a stepping-stone to his new life in Canada. I am hopeful that his elementary school in Mexico taught him to believe in himself and to always strive for a better life and that this is why he has emigrated here. Perhaps this is a beginning.

I shake his hand and wish him well. He thanks me, and I him. Each of us strangers in a strange neighbourhood. He hoists his duffle bag back onto his shoulder and continues along, smiling.

Further along the block, a gothic princess with facial piercings protruding from her lower lip, smiles shyly at us from behind her dark, Asian, twenty-something eyes. I guess she is curious about my notebook and pen, and in the conversation that ensues I discover that she is both observant and reflective. The princess accepts, without any thought, my invitation to talk to her about elementary school. When she talks she looks directly into my eyes, and I am invited to look, beyond the piercings, directly into hers.

She tells me that she has lived in this neighbourhood her entire life. She remembers fondly how the teachers at her school made the children feel welcome and safe. The expression on her face, like my friend from Mexico City, speaks louder than her words. Her experience at elementary school was a positive one; it gave her a solid beginning. She likes her neighbourhood, she volunteers, even with the increased police and with growing drug trade. As a resident of this neighbourhood, Naomi accepts this: she bears witness to it every time she leaves her home.

She is eloquent and intelligent and still there is something that does not fit. It is the five spiky studs sticking out from her bottom lip. They seem to function both as a
shield and as weaponry. When she first began to speak to me she covered her mouth as though she had been caught chewing gum in class. She relaxed quickly, however, and dropped her hand. Potentially inviting discrimination and exclusion from certain social groups and employers, I wonder silently if the studs are an act of rebellion. Perhaps in the midst of one of Vancouver's definitively Asian communities she needs to stand out? Perhaps she needs to look threatening? I do not ask her about the facial decorations, and she does not tell me.

Glancing about at the people who inhabit the block around us, I ask her what would probably be on the minds of anyone not from this community, Do you feel safe here?

She smiles beautifully and confirms that she does. Is her sense of safety, I wonder, rooted in the fact that all of this is familiar? That she feels a sense of belonging to all of this urban chaos and decay? Does it stem from the values instilled in her at her elementary school? I leave the princess standing courageously and comfortably in her neighbourhood at the bus stop on Hastings and Princess.

This stretch of Hastings Street is referred to by the aboriginal people who live here as "Hastings Reserve." This, like all of Vancouver, is native land and members of Native communities from all over British Columbia live here. I am reluctant to hear about the elementary school experience of First Nations peoples, both young and old. Even though the last Indian Residential School closed more than twenty years ago, the wounds of institutionalized assimilation are still festering.

On the weathered sidewalk that borders Oppenheimer Park, I pause with reluctance. At first glance, the occupants of the park appear dangerous and
untrustworthy. They lay on the grass in various states of sobriety and mental clarity; they huddle on benches in the midst of their meagre belongings and share cigarettes. I consider not going in, but then I see something that my fear had blinded me to. I see community, and I see belonging. I step into the park and try to make eye contact with different members of this community.

I wonder how I appear to them walking slowly with my notebook; hidden behind my sunglasses. I lift the glasses onto my head and squint in the afternoon sun. Some people nod at me, and a woman asks if I have a smoke. I shake my head smiling, and am immediately dismissed with a turn of her head. A handful of native men are sitting together under an awning alongside the community centre building where soup is being served. One of the men looks intently at me, and I return his gaze as I walk purposefully towards him.

He looks frail and has aged beyond his years. He nods silently when I ask him if he'll tell me about his elementary school years then pushes his bowl away from him and wipes his mouth on a paper napkin. He holds out his hand to me and introduces himself as he motions to an empty chair at the table. The other men acknowledge me with nods and hellos; one asks me if I'd like some soup. My heart lightens, and I feel grateful that I have been welcomed into their small community.

His memories are a significant contrast to what I have just heard. He tells me, in a soft voice, that he was forced to leave his parents and grandparents in the interior of BC to attend a residential school on Vancouver Island. There, he was disciplined for speaking his language among other things. He does not give me details, and I do not ask.
As he continues with his story, he alternates between looking at me and staring into the park. He shares some memories about play time at school, but any hint of smile is overshadowed by the dark memories that he is visiting. He tells me when I ask that since being taken from his reserve to go to residential school that he’s never felt like he really belonged anywhere. He returns again and again to his loss of language. I know instinctively how identity is intrinsically linked to language. I can only begin to imagine what the loss of identity, compounded by the loss of opportunity for traditional schooling has meant to this man, and to hundreds of thousands of other aboriginal people who have suffered as a result of residential schools.

In his soft voice, he tells me that he understands more than he can say. He says this in reference to his language, but to me it takes on much greater meaning. His experiences at school have silenced him. He continues by telling me, the white teacher sitting beside him, that he does not teach; he shares. What he has shared with me is profound. Despite being isolated from his family and suffering abuse at the hands of the church and state, he has emerged with some traditional values: sharing, respect, individual responsibility, proper conduct and, yes, even the oral tradition. I notice that a park employee has written, “Soup at 5:00” on a chalkboard. I hear some mutterings about chili.

With his sister’s encouragement, he thinks that one day soon he will complete his claim form so that he can seek compensation for the abuse he suffered at school. I wonder if monetary compensation will give this broken man who is trying to heal access to the new beginning that he so desperately wants. Will legal and public
acknowledgement of his suffering and the loss of his cultural identity give him back the
childhood and the community that was stolen from him?

As he navigates the steep road of recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, he is
giving back to the community in the way that he can. He volunteers at a church in the
morning where he helps to feed other residents in the community. He is trying to stay
clean. He tells me where I can find him at the church. I think it is an invitation, and I
receive it gratefully. I feel blessed to have met this inspiring man. I hope he feels that he
has been heard and understood.

Before I leave, I ask him about his sense of safety in this neighbourhood. The
moment the question leaves my lips, I want to take it back. I am doubtful that since his
first day at residential school that he has ever known the luxury of safety. He looks at
me, momentarily puzzled, and tells me that if he didn’t feel safe, he’d leave. I silently
wonder where he’d go. The space between the residential school experience and the
Hastings Reserve is intense and our urban centres, where thousands of displaced
aboriginals live, are for many a lost and dark place. It is often a place of struggle and
hardship where the edges are dulled with narcotics and sharpened with violence. I think
that it is also a healing space in which some of the cracks in our city’s sidewalks are filled
with hope.

I walk away from my new friend in an overwhelmingly heavy cloak of silence. I
feel hushed by the shame of what he has shared and what he has not. I want to sit alone
somewhere to reflect on the words I’ve just heard and the feelings I’ve just experienced.
I look toward the people in Oppenheimer Park who are anything but silent, and I am
immediately comforted by the life that pulses through their veins as they sit in the warm sun surrounded by friends and familiar faces. It is a good day to be alive.

My wistful reflection is interrupted and I am captivated by a man with a mass of long, tangled blonde hair who is wielding a weapon. It is a harmless pink and yellow super-soaker, but it is fully loaded. Its owner carries the water gun like Rambo carries a machine gun. It is apparent that a child lingers in this adult body.

Rambo is a showman and a story-teller. He is happy and theatrical, and he is more than willing to talk to me. It is immediately apparent, however, that he wishes to control the conversation, and so I let him. He speaks rapidly while pacing left to right and refers to himself in the third person. Rambo tells me he is part of the witness protection program, and tells me that I can’t use his real name.

"It’s easy," he says looking at me sideways, “they find me, I die.”

He’s crazy, I’m certain, and though I feel somewhat uneasy in his presence, I sit on the curb to listen to him.

He has had a dynamic and diverse life. He describes to me how his quick reaction stopped a potential explosion at a university; he claims to have saved thousands of lives as a result. He rants a bit about his relationship with the police and his lack of protection under the witness protection program. He brings up Robert Pickton who is currently on trial for the murder of 27 women, and my breath stops. It is reasonable that people in this neighborhood knew him, or of him. Certainly many of them knew one or more of Pickton’s victims. Rambo tells me that he warned the police about Pickton, many times in fact. Then he shrugs. I push on about elementary school wanting to change the subject.
When I ask where he went to school as a child, his demeanour darkens. I feel that I am no longer on solid ground, and I am a bit frightened by the unpredictability of the situation. He turns his head and looks at me from the corners of his eyes. He never went to elementary school, he says matter-of-factly. He suffered from a serious skin disease and, consequently, wasn’t allowed to go to school.

"Would you want me in your class?" he asks and immediately begins to pace again. I wonder if it is a question that has plagued him since childhood. I wonder if the lack of acceptance he experienced at school has contributed to the outrageous behaviour he is currently displaying. I think about how challenging it is to have special needs kids in my own class.

My gun-toting friend tells me that if I ever want to party that I should come and find him. It is another invitation, but this time, I do not feel grateful or blessed. As a final thought, he shows me what he claims is his only picture ID. I wander closer to him and see that it is a card from Corrections Canada. I thank him, wish him well and walk away from him hoping he won’t shoot me, or follow me.

With my mind and heart filled with the sights and sounds of the neighborhood and with the voices of those who have shared their elementary school memories, I return to Strathcona Elementary where I have parked. A car wash is in progress on the opposite side of the lot, and a group of youth is frantically waving “Car Wash” signs.

I walk towards a boy and introduce myself as a teacher. I show him my school ID and then chat with him a bit about the car wash. Internally I acknowledge the different way that I approached this member of the community. I know his teachers have taught him stranger danger, and I want him to trust me enough to talk to me. Like the first
interviewee of the day, he smiles at me from underneath a ball cap. And like the princess, and so many others in the neighborhood, he, too, looks at me through Asian eyes.

The boy’s presence in my day and in the neighborhood is refreshing. He, like the princess, thinks that his school is great. The teachers plan lots of good field trips and are always kind. He likes his neighborhood, and like all the others I’ve spoken to that day, this small and young being feels safe here. I wonder about his future and ask him if he thinks he will live in this neighborhood when he grows up.

He glances around quickly, nods slightly and responds, “Yeah, probably.”

It is a beautiful endorsement, and a perfect ending to the day.

I dig $5 out of my pocket to pay for the car wash, and surrender my vehicle to a group of animated teens wielding soapy sponges.
**Classrooms and War Zones**

“You need to go over there,” he tells me staring straight into my eyes, “those kids need you.”

His features are pronounced by his shaved head and his uniform makes him extremely conspicuous in this Vancouver bar. Three medals hang from his chest. As a teacher, I am always amazed by the broad range of definitions that people use to describe what I do: teacher, mother, counselor, sister, cook, baby-sitter, coach, saviour. I am honoured that he thinks I might be what the children in a war-torn country need. Perhaps they just need anybody to teach them; to care for them.

The soldiers are in the city celebrating; remembering. It is unusual to see military personnel in parade uniform in the downtown core. I, like many others in the bar, have noticed them and feel a certain respect for them. So, when a young man with far too much dyed-blonde hair and far too much beer in his belly feels compelled to approach their table to ask if they enjoy killing people, I feel compelled to move to their table so that I can tell Blondie to go to hell and to mind his manners. The soldiers insist they can take care of it, peacefully, and so instead I am indulged in polite conversation. The decorated soldier waits for me to explain why I won’t teach in a war zone.

“I don’t think I’m strong enough…” I try to explain feeling ashamed as I do.

He has recently returned from a tour of duty with the Canadian army. Peacekeeping. It is just his job he tells me, but I know it is far more demanding, both mentally and physically, than my job in the classroom.
“Canadian kids have a lot of people watching out for them,” he tells me, “taking care of them. Lots of those kids are orphans; they don’t have anybody,” he has a soft voice and his eyes are a gentle.

He is a captain. It is a title that means nothing to me. I remember that Hawkeye Pierce was a captain and want to make a joke about that, but I can see the captain is not really much of a comedian. I suspect that he has not visited an inner-city school or any Canadian school for that matter. He does not know that some Canadian kids, many Canadian kids, don’t really have anybody watching out for them either. I’m not in the mood to explain, and besides, I am enchanted by the idea of teaching overseas and want to indulge in the potential idea of it.

“I guess I’m afraid,” I shrug hopelessly as I say this.

It’s an ironic conversation to have with a soldier: fear. He nods knowingly, but I think he doesn’t know. I do not know his fear as a soldier or as a man and he, consequently, does not know my fear as a civilian or as woman. I think he can not possibly know my fear of being in a land where my female body is not valued by law or religion in the same way that a man’s is. Yet, I value this conversation and want it to continue; I am intrigued by this conversation about how children in a far away land need me. Blondie has at last given up his idiotic tirade, and the other soldiers have gone into another room where a band is playing wild Celtic music.

“T’m not afraid to die,” I tell him blinking and while I’m really not afraid to die I feel slightly ashamed of having said this to a guy who has confronted the possibility of his own death in the midst of enemy bombs and bullets.
I muse at the memory of the Canadian army boots that I'd bought at an army surplus store in university. I often wore them during my student teaching experiences. A grade seven boy once asked me if the boots had ever been in a real war. Strangely, I'd wondered that, too.

The captain looks puzzled but smiles, fills my glass with beer from a pitcher and, again, waits patiently for me to explain. I feel my white, privileged, North American existence consuming me as I search for the words to explain my fear.

"It's just that...I couldn't survive being hurt...I couldn't survive being raped," I tell him staring straight into his eyes. And he stares back.

"I couldn't," I tell him again. And he does not blink. It is an act of war which exists and for which he has no explanation. He has no response; no words of support. And his silence validates and justifies my fear.

Just then a sudden burst of applause combined with hooting and stomping captures our attention and ends our conversation. A soldier in a kilt is dancing a jig on a wooden table among beer glasses and empty dinner plates and his woolen garment is swinging dangerously high. He is tall and his head almost touches the roof as he bounces from one foot to the other. Below him, customers have gathered and are boisterously cheering him on.

The captain excuses himself, and stands up keeping his eyes on the highlander and moving quickly but calmly in his direction.

The captain stands at the end of the table and says something that I cannot hear above the fiddle music and hooting, but clearly the tartan-clad soldier does. Looking
somewhat sheepish but still wearing a broad smile, he quickly descends from his makeshift stage and straddles the bench below, his kilt spilling over the tops of his knees.

As the captain, after nodding politely at me, joins another pair of soldiers at the opposite end of the table, I take a seat across from the perspiring and popular soldier. Admirers throughout the bar are slapping his back and are sending drinks his way. I delight in the camaraderie that exists among these strangers and sit comfortably in its midst as another fiddle tune erupts from the band.

"Were you just ordered to stop dancing?" I ask with false shock in my voice still feeling somewhat determined to make a Hawkeye Pierce joke. I am fascinated and mildly entertained by the discipline and respect that accompanies the hierarchy of rank in the military.

The ginger-haired soldier who is a significantly bigger man than the captain smiles and nods, "Yeah, I think I was," he says as he takes a big swallow of beer and looks towards the other soldiers.

"He's my captain," he says proudly and then continues, "He's a good guy. He's just watching out for me..."
Trespassing in Canada
Beachcombing

“I like your sunglasses,” she tells me staring up from beneath her cropped blonde bangs. “They have rainbows in them,” I smile down at her as she, without an invitation, begins to climb up to where I am sitting.

I’d only just arrived at the beach after having cycled massive hills along the forested shore line to get there. My cycling glasses were certainly not the fashion accessory of the century, and while I felt a bit conspicuous in them I didn’t care enough to pack a second pair. Charmed by her compliment, and tickled by her magical mention of rainbows, I slid my bag and helmet over to make room for her beside me.

She is a stranger: a fellow beachcomber. She has clambered up on to the storm-tossed tree stump to sit beside me. I discovered the stump the previous day and was amazed at how the sea had worn away the wood to create a near perfect Adirondack chair for two. Her skin is tanned a deep brown and her skinny knees, like mine, bear the wounds of other independent expeditions.

“What happened to your leg?” she asks looking at the still raw road-rash on my knee. I indulge her in an exaggerated description of how I had ungracefully fallen off my bike the previous day. She giggles at my tale and then begins to mindlessly pick at the scab on her own knee.

“I bet it stings,” she says looking up at me with a crinkled nose while using her hand to shade her eyes from the sun.

This Gulf island had become a retreat of sorts to me. I had come here wanting to escape the inevitable conversations that consume my thoughts and my time when I’m in
the city. Surprisingly, the first two days of silence had been overwhelming to me: deafening. The minutes ticked by, and I felt tortured by my solitude. And now on my fourth day, I had fully embraced my silent and simple existence. Despite this milestone in just being able to be, I was thankful for her company. I felt blessed by her wee presence in my intentionally uneventful day.

"Do you have a pair of sunglasses?" I ask her looking into her blue and vulnerable eyes.

There are other people on the beach peeking under rocks and staring into tidal pools, but I have no idea who she belongs to. The rocky, drift-wood littered beach sits on the eastern most point of the island where the wind is the strongest and where the setting sun casts a long shadow beneath the lighthouse that stands guard on the shore. The wind carries the soothing murmur of their voices and their laughter up the shore and into the trees.

"Yeah," she answers, tucking her golden locks behind her ear. She glances out to the sea, "but they don’t fit because my step-mom bought them for me."

I toss her words around in my thoughts and marvel at their brilliance. They don’t fit. I wonder if this means that the glasses don’t suit her or if, in fact, they truly don’t fit. I look to a woman who is tentatively glancing up at this tiny bikini-clad waif as she moves slowly in our direction. She is wearing black open-toed dress shoes; her fuchsia nail polish glitters in the sun as she painstakingly steps from one log to another. The woman is lost in this environment, and she is floundering. She is a logical explanation for the ill-fitting sunglasses. I nod to the girl knowingly.
I resist the urge to give her tiny shoulders an encouraging squeeze. I suddenly feel protective of this young being. She seems as much a part of the natural world around me as the seagulls and the trees. In this uninvited moment I want to tell her that I understand. I understand how a new member in the family can make us suddenly feel estranged; I want to explain to her how thoughts and feelings pass if we don’t hold on to them too tightly.

I want to yell at the glittery woman to take off her damn shoes so that she can talk and listen and truly be with her step-daughter. I consider going over to the woman and helping her over to my majestic seat so that I can perhaps facilitate this process, but I selfishly like the quiet, thoughtful company of this rugged and delicate girl.

“They’ll fit one day,” I tell her smiling and hoping that they will.

She shrugs her tiny shoulders with indifference, and together our thoughts drift elsewhere as we relax into our carefully crafted chairs and look silently out to the sea.
Picking Tobacco

Even in the dark of night, the humidity cloaks us in a fog of warm, wet air. The branches of the trees that sit high above the ravine gently sway to an invisible breeze that has blown in off of Lake Erie. I imagine that I can feel its gentle caress on my damp, freckled skin, but even this imagining brings no relief from the weight of the air.

It’s probably raining in Vancouver, I think, as I watch the others in the ravine passing around cans of Labatt’s Blue. Somebody has brought a portable stereo down the steep path and the sounds of Pink Floyd fill the air. While we are cloaked by the same inescapable heat and humidity, there is no warmth between us.

They are fishermen and tobacco farmers; waitresses and mothers. And I, I am the girl from Vancouver. No matter where I work or how I exist in their small town, I cannot escape the fact that I am from the city. They talk about my home like it’s a fantastical place, like Oz. They look at me skeptically when I answer their questions, and perhaps I look at them skeptically, too, because no matter what I say, it’s never the right thing.

“Why’d you come here anyway?” one asks me between swallows of beer.

He is wearing a faded Toronto Maple Leafs ball cap over his curly mullet, and I smile at his redneck appearance despite myself. My answer will be judged and weighed for truth and logic. I consider my words carefully. I explain how I’d met a gal, a local, who suggested that I could make a lot of money picking tobacco. Since I wanted to travel and explore another part of Canada, it made sense to me to give it a try. He nods in contemplative silence.
“I’d give anything to go to Vancouver,” he tells me, and at that exact moment I know exactly how he feels. I tell him that he should go. I describe why I think it is a remarkably beautiful city.

“Yeah,” he says with a wrinkled brow, “but if it’s so beautiful, why would you want to leave? Especially to come to this dump?”

He is perplexed. Skeptical. It’s as though I’m some sort of spy and nothing I say can be believed.

“Itchy feet?” I try this answer on for size and wink at him as I do.

He tells me I’m cute, and then gets up to join another conversation.

Cute, I think to myself, but untouchable. Even the women keep me at arm’s length. Their subtle attempts at kindness are cloaked with a clear intent to keep me in my place. I am a potential threat to their stock of men, and so they work hard at keeping me in my place. Interestingly, I enjoy myself in their milieu. They are good people and even if I am continuously regarded as an outsider, I appreciate being with them. They invite me mostly out of old-fashioned, rural hospitality, and I attend because, quite frankly, there are no other options.

I really have come to this tiny hamlet in Ontario to work in the tobacco fields; I have plans to go to Asia and need to fund my trip. Itchy feet had been the bain of my existence that year and had already lived in two other provinces and had had a couple of interesting jobs. As it turns out, however, I am too early for the tobacco harvest so I have a job at the administrative office of a wildlife association, which is a much better suited to my urban sensibilities.
I rent a room from an eccentric, old woman who is an antique dealer. She owns a magnificent 160-year-old home that had previously been the county’s funeral home. The house is beautiful with its high ceilings, brick fireplaces and grand porch that circles the house entirely, but it is also creepy. The fridge and pantry are in a cold, insulated room set off from the kitchen by a dark, heavy curtain. I imagine that it was the room where the dead were once kept. If the owner isn’t home, I quit drinking fluids by 5pm just to ensure I won’t have to walk by the dark windows and down the creaky staircase to go pee in the middle of the night. As much as I love the house in the day, I am terrified to move around in it once the lights have been turned out, even with Bud, the old woman’s golden retriever, faithfully at my side.

Most of the houses in the area are constructed of brick, are well over a century old and very likely have their own creaks and moans in the night. They fascinate me as do the old, abandoned mills, barns, cemeteries and churches that I discover in the area. I’d found a cobweb-covered bike in the shed at the back of the yard and use it to get to and from work, and to explore the rural roads around the hamlet. My solitary time and the cycling adventures gave birth to my interest in drawing. For the first time in my life, I feel compelled to capture what I see with pencils and paper, and I discover that while sketching I can lose all sense of time and of place, and could in spite of my loneliness, I am able to experience a sense of fulfillment in myself and in others that I hadn’t previously known.

Sitting on the edge of a dusty road with Bud at my side, my sketchbook in my lap and pencils littered about my feet invited a lot of attention. Not surprisingly, however, only the town’s children approached me. They, as children will, marveled at my sketches
as they endlessly questioned me. Why am I drawing that old building? How come I
don’t use paints? Am I going to put the drawing on my wall? Am I scared in the
cemetery? Have I ever been to a museum?

In response, I invited them to sit and to sketch with me. Ripping pages out of my
sketchbook and handing them out along with pencils and charcoal to the flock of kids that
gathered had become as much a part of the drawing experience as the changing light.
Among these young locals, there was a sense of trust, of acceptance and a beautiful sense
of belonging.

Their parents were humoured by me and by their children’s interest in sitting still
to draw. They thank me for watching their kids; for keeping them out of trouble. One
even bought me a new sketchbook, but despite these gestures of kindness and gratitude,
they, like the younger adults in the hamlet, still regard me with curiosity.

As the days and weeks pass the fields, with their growing seas of tobacco plants,
become a rich green. The sun becomes stronger and, unbelievably, the humidity becomes
more unbearable. The kids begin to seek me out to show me the drawings they’ve
completed at school with their smelly felts and finger paints. Sitting together in small
gaggles on grassy knolls we find around town, we enthusiastically study each other’s
creations as though we are art critics at a major exhibit. A couple of kids, however, never
want to draw. Instead they are content just to sit with us; to pet Bud and to be part of our
company. One of those children is a tall, blonde, gangly girl named Theresa.

Theresa isn’t interested in drawing anything: not barns or flowers or imaginary
places. From time to time, she picks up a pencil only to twirl it between her fingers like
it’s a baton, but she won’t take any paper. She sits with her head resting on her bent
knees watching us and listening to us while she casually picks blades of grass and tosses them onto her feet. There is a great sadness about her that holds her heart and inhibits her from wanting to experience joy. One clear afternoon as I was in the yard washing the bloody area around Bud’s ears that the deer flies had been feasting on, Theresa rode her bike into the yard, dumped it onto the overgrown lawn and sat beside me on the picnic table without saying a word. She picked up the dog brush and began to run it down the length of Bud’s back as she did he leaned forward to lick her face.

None of the kids had ever come by the house, and I was both puzzled and tickled by her visit. Even on her own, however, Theresa was very quiet and I struggled to make conversation her. She raised her eyebrows with interest when I told her that my Mom had called from Vancouver that morning. It felt good to describe to her what we had talked about: my sister’s pregnancy, my brother’s part-time job, my grandfather’s health. Theresa was captivated by all of it. She politely giggled at my description of my crazy family and nodded empathetically when I told her that I missed them.

“Your family is important,” she stated, and it was my turn to raise my eyebrows with interest. I asked her about her family, and she seemed momentarily uncomfortably.

“Do you want to go for a bike ride?” she asked me and thinking she wanted to change the subject, I left my question about her family. We laughed together as Bud busied himself rolling his clean, wet fur in the grass. I felt very sisterly towards the girl, and worried about her sadness. I also thought it ironically hilarious that the only invitation I’d received since the ravine party was this one being extended to me by a twelve year old girl. I went to get my bike from the shed.
Wearing a helmet didn’t seem necessary on the quiet country roads that snaked their way between the tobacco fields, and the sensation of my hair blowing in the wind as we sped down hills made me feel youthful and carefree. Teresa smiled contentedly as she rode, and I smiled watching her.

I want to show you something! she called back to me as she turned up a road I hadn’t yet explored because of the tremendous hill that stood at its beginning.

I geared down, and followed her begrudgingly up the hill. The ride was lovely and the road was lined with two-storey tall structures that will be used to hang the tobacco leaves for drying. I saw more of the tall, strong brick houses surrounded by wooden barns that I so loved to sketch.

When we approached a sign advertising vegetables, bread and preservatives for sale, Theresa stopped and waited for me to pull up alongside her. In smaller print at the bottom of sign was the name of the Mennonite group who grew and made all of the items for sale inside the small shop I could see at the end of a long driveway. I didn’t know there were Mennonites in this area, and was fascinated by what I was reading.

“Mennonites,” I said questioningly raising my eyebrows and wondering if we had stopped because she was hungry. I wondered how much money I had in my pockets and began to fish in them.

“We’re from Mexico,” I heard Theresa say tentatively, and I looked at her confused. She drew in a deep breath, “This is what I wanted to show you. This is my family.”

She was testing me, and I looked into her blue eyes suddenly understanding. Like me, she was from another place, and perhaps like me she was lost in her surroundings. I
reached out and squeezed the small hand that was still clutching a handlebar as I rapidly blinked away the tears that were pooling in my eyes.

"Thank you," I said to her as she released her hand from the bike and took hold of mine smiling proudly.

"Come on," she said pushing away on her bike," my sister’s pregnant, too. You can meet her; you can meet everybody."

I followed her down the lane as a woman wearing a print dress and a white kerchief came out of the shop to wave at us.

Later that day as I rode my bike back into town alone with a full tummy and a full heart, a pick-up truck pulled alongside me. The familiar Toronto Maple Leafs cap poked out from the driver’s seat.

"Hey, cutie, there’s a pig roast on Saturday night on the Point. You want a ride out there?"

I felt my stomach pinch both at being called cutie and at the thought of a pig on a spit and stopped myself before I could wrinkle my nose. If I wanted them to accept me and to really get to know me, I had to do the same. I had to trust them the same way Theresa had trusted me.

"Absolutely," I told him smiling, come early. "My mom just sent me some photos of home. I’d love to share them with you."

Something new came into his eyes as he regarded me thoughtfully, and then said with sincerity, "I’d love to see them."
"What's yer name?" a small native boy peers at me curiously from his hiding spot behind the life jacket container. From my seat on the rusted BC Ferry that travels from Port McNeil to Cormorant Island, I have been watching this boy and a collection of his friends engage in some sort of imaginary battle. I am both flattered and taken aback by his question. I tell him my name and ask him his.

"Jason," he answers without blinking and then quickly disappears beneath a row of plastic chairs. One of his friends has caught him in this unguarded moment and is now firing rapidly at Jason with his toy gun. I, too, consider ducking but the appeal of the surrounding sea keeps me riveted in my seat. I know this sea, but not these islands or the distant coastline. Geographically, I don't really know where I am. I've not been here before and know nothing about this island that I'm about to visit. Still a smile plays on my face as a boys' war game erupts around me, and the ferry approaches the dock on Alert Bay.

From the window I can see the northern shore of this native fishing village; it is inviting and somewhat mysterious. The beach is lined with docks weighted down by dilapidated buildings and great piles of fishing nets. A low hill is decorated with colourfully painted wooden houses. The odd fishing boat rests against the barnacled tiers of the dock appearing lonely in comparison to the dozens that are moored in a marina further along the shore.

As I hear the announcement that we are approaching Alert Bay, something curious catches my attention. At the most northern part of the coastline before
civilization gives way to the trees and forests, there is a grand longhouse. One side of it is covered with a painting of thunderbird on top of salmon. It is remarkable, but is not as riveting as the three-story concrete building, which stands stoically behind the longhouse. Its ominous structure is out of place in this setting, and while it appears to be mostly abandoned, its presence seems haunting. The building reeks of institution, and though I've never seen one, I know it is a residential school. I pick up my pack and make my way to the car deck.

There is one road that runs along the perimeter of the island. I know from the map provided on a large billboard welcoming visitors to 'Namgis territory that the youth hostel is to the right. I see a small grocery store and wonder if I should buy some food for dinner or breakfast, but I am weary after a long day on the Greyhound and want to rid myself of the burden of my pack. I meander along the road in search of the hostel, resisting the urge to photograph both the pioneer-style, flat store fronts whose doors touch the edge of the road, and the forgotten wharfs that are slowly being claimed by the sea. Apart from a short boardwalk with decorative street lights and hanging flowers, this ancient place has not yet experienced the unsightly impositions of modernity and technology.

I am surprised when a woman in a passing car lifts her hand from the steering wheel to wave at me. I tentatively wave back. Perhaps I look like someone she knows. I am about to dismiss the event when the driver of another car and his passenger both lift a hand in my direction. It's what they do here. I smile thinking of Jason on the ferry and his comfort in asking me my name. When the next car approaches, I surrender my urban inhibitions, and I wave first. Most of the people I see are First Nations; I've not
experienced this before. The cloudless sky is a remarkable shade of blue and the still sea that is lazily washing in reflects its cloudless brilliance. The driver waves back, and as I begin to hum, I completely forget about the weight of my pack bearing down on my shoulders.

As I continue along Fir Street, the docks, wharves and shops on the right side of the road disappear and give way to a long stretch of rocky beach. The beach is clear and empty apart from a spattering of logs which have washed up on its shores. On my left, silhouetted against the clear sky, I see a cluster of totem poles. I quicken my pace until I can see their lengths entirely. Surrounding the base of the poles, are many tomb stones of various size and shape as well as other shorter totems. It is a native cemetery. A wooden sign explains that prior to contact, the island was a burial ground for the 'Namgis. The sign also asks that non-native people not enter the sacred site. I both like and dislike this request. I wander slowly past then look ahead down the road for the old Anglican Church that has been converted into a hostel.

I pass by an old hotel that is painted bright yellow and make a mental note in case the hostel is less than satisfactory. Wooden houses pop up along the road, all colourfully painted. Some have B&B signs out front beside native carvings of various beings. As the sun drops toward the mountain peaks on neighbouring islands, I pass a recently constructed pub with a patio that hangs over the sea. I decide that this will be my dinner spot and hurry along so that I might catch the setting sun from the patio.

Eyeing my pack, a man approaching me on the opposite side of the street asks if I’m going to the hostel. I tell him that I am. He crosses the street and in an east coast accent introduces himself as the hostel’s manager. Chris points towards a pale yellow,
rancher-style building with a wrap-around deck, tells me to grab any bed and that we’ll sort out particulars in the morning.

Tentatively I open the door to the hostel, and am overwhelmed by the coziness of the space. It is a long and airy room. A lengthy dining table runs along one side of the wooden interior which is filled with old, overstuffed chairs and sofas arranged into conversation corners, and in one space around a TV. At the front of the room, two stairs lead up into what must’ve been the pulpit, but is now a library. Opening up to the beach across the street, is large, arched window. I find a room filled with bunk-beds, throw my pack onto a lower bed and collapse. The walk here has amazed me, and while hunger and the setting sun beckon, I need to collect my thoughts.

I survey the spacious pub for a waitress while an old Aerosmith song fills my ears. Apart from the music, it seems a quiet night, and I’m uncertain if I should order from the bar or wait to be served. Chris from the hostel interrupts my wondering. From the corner of my eye I see him walking towards me. He tells me to order from the bar, and to come and join him outside. Grateful for the invitation, I place my order with a handsome native man sporting a Canucks t-shirt. Carrying my pint of beer in one hand, and my journal in the other, I walk towards the patio door.

Chris is sitting with four men of various ages; they are locals. One of the men moves to another chair at the table as I approach so that I can sit beside Chris. The conversation that had been underway when I arrived continues: they are talking about fishing. I listen and nod and learn. I quietly marvel at how this is the first time I have sat and conversed with First Nations people. I marvel at what is missing from my experience and knowledge as a Canadian.
The men tell me about Village Island where, in 1921, the RCMP raided a potlatch and took all of their masks and coppers which were subsequently sent to museums in Ottawa. They encourage me to visit the heritage centre, the longhouse with the thunderbird and salmon, which had been built in 1980 in preparation for the homecoming of those “stolen” possessions. They share with me with their stories of Alert Bay and its history. The men excuse themselves when they swear as a lady is at the table, and haughtily remind each other if one slips out. I am flattered by these old-fashioned manners.

Billy, the oldest member of my party, tells me that while he didn’t have any positive experiences with teachers that he very much respects that I am one. He tells me that being a teacher is a great responsibility and a great honour, and then he is silent. The others join him in his silence. I am uncertain if I should speak, or if I, too, should be silent. Nobody looks at me, but nobody looks away either. I nod slowly, and look to each man before responding.

In a cautious and caring tone, I assure them that I honour the kids in my class and all of the many homes and places from which they come. I speak about some of the responsibilities I encounter not only as a teacher, but as an adult in a child’s life. I tell them that I believe that being a good teacher means I have to be a good learner, and that I am committed to being both. They listen intently, nodding and smiling when appropriate.

I feel both pride and honour to be having this conversation. I answer their questions, but I keep mine close to my heart. I want to ask where they went to school and
if, indeed, the big building was a residential school, but decide to save that inquiry for the next day.

Before I leave that evening to wander back to the hostel in the moonlight, all of the men offer to take me on a tour to Village Island in their boats if only I stay for a few more days. The sockeye season is upon them, and they can’t take time off. Some local women at a neighbouring table overhear the offers and, with much jesting towards the men, recommend that I not get into any of their boats. It isn’t my personal safety they are concerned about; it is the quality of the men’s boats. While I am delighted to be in the midst of local banter, I decide to walk with Chris back to the hostel. I am tired and know I have a great day of exploration ahead of me.

In the morning, the road brings new sights, including small gatherings of people at various spots along the beach working around a fire. As I near the first one, I realize they are busy cooking salmon. The salmon are splayed and are attached to sticks that have been planted in the soil around the fire. I watch with interest for a while, and then continue past the ferry dock towards the U’Mista Cultural Centre and towards the old building which overshadows it.

The road curves gently around the shoreline, and before I know it I am walking up the crescent shaped drive to the ominous building. A concrete imprint of the year 1929 is mounted just below the centre peak of the building’s face. The remains of a second floor balcony wither away beneath peeling paint and rusted railings. Concrete stairs lead up to the main door where a plaque is mounted on the left side of the entrance. It reveals, as I had guessed, that this was a residential school: St. Michael’s Residential School. It was in operation from 1929 to 1975, and currently held the offices of the ‘Namgis Nation. It
strikes me as peculiar that the band would use this terrible place as an office. Testing the
door, I am delighted to find it unlocked, and so I go inside.

I consider momentarily that I should seek permission before wandering around
this building, but decide against it as I don’t want to make anyone feel that their history is
a museum attraction for me. Not that I am approaching the old school in that fashion, but
I am on the island as a tourist and I keep that in mind. Not only do I want to see the
school; I want to feel the memories of its hallways and classrooms. I walk along the lit
corridor purposefully.

The main floor has clean and shiny floors. All of the offices have closed doors
without windows. Many of them have signs indicating whose office it is or what band
business goes on behind the closed doors, but I do not stop to consider any of this
information. At the end of the hallway I see a modern EXIT sign, its letters shining red.
I am trespassing, I think, and my pulse quickens with that thought.

Behind the exit door is a short flight of stairs leading to an outside door as well as
full flight of stairs leading to the second floor. Without pausing I quickly move up the
stairs clutching the worn, wooden railing and I listen as my footsteps echo in the stairwell
creating a lonely and haunting sound. The second floor is not lit, and as many of the
rooms are without doors, the sunlight from the dirty windows lights my way.

The corridor is murky and dust from years past covers the floor. I pause to
imagine children in these hallways, but the children I envision are not laughing and
causing a raucous as my students do in the hallway. A chill overcomes me as I think of
the abuse and horrors thousands of children were subjected to in residential schools just
like this one. The walls are bare yet they tell a decade’s long story.
I peer into one room, and when I see the old chalkboard mounted on the far wall, my eyes fill with tears. I can hear Billy’s wise words from the evening before, and as I glance around the near empty space, I feel shame. A silver radiator sits in the far corner against a yellowed wall. The sunlight streaming through the dirty and aged windows casts an odd light in the room. I enter the class my feet moving silently across a water-stained and unfinished wooden floor. It is strangely silent even with the wind blowing outside the windows.

A wooden chair, its back missing, sits forlornly in the middle of the room. Overwhelmed, I sit on the broken chair, wipe the tears from my cheeks and look up at the chalkboard. The remnants of a fraction equation remain on the board: \( \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} = \frac{4}{4} \). How painfully perfect that the only evidence of learning that remains in this classroom is question with an incorrect answer.

The antiquity of the room is almost appealing though the influence of the 1960’s is present: fluorescent lights have been attached to the ornately tiled ceiling. I wonder what else this space may have been used for between the school’s closure and now. Assumedly the fraction question was calculated more recently than 1974. There is no other furniture in the room apart from the chair on which I’m sitting. I gently rub the edge of it as if to soothe the aches of the past. My senses feel full. I am emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed and while I want to explore more, to know more, I know it is time to go. I walk up to the board, and look back on the classroom as though I were about to begin a lesson. As my eyes brim again with tears, I touch my index finger to my tongue and then, with my saliva, I make a checkmark on the board beside the math
equation. Content that I've left the room a little better than the way I found it, I walk silently out of the room.

Outside I avoid walking straight into the U’Mista Cultural Centre though the path leads directly there. I need some time to sit with the sea and to think about what I’ve just experienced. Understanding what took place in the past is one thing, when the past resides within you, it is quite another. I have not yet been in Alert Bay for twenty-four hours and already it has been a life changing experience. I am learning, and while these real life learning experiences are playing havoc with my emotions, I am immensely grateful for them.

I sit on a log and gaze out at the fishing boats that are bouncing gently against the sea. As wind tousles my hair, I hear a voice call out to me. I look down the beach in the direction that it came. Three men are cooking salmon around a fire.

“You ever had sockeye cooked on the beach?” one of them calls to me. I shake my head no.

“Come on over then. You’ve never tasted anything better.”

As I walk towards them blinking rapidly to erase the redness in my eyes, a man with long black hair pulled back in a pony tail rips a piece of cardboard from a beer case and puts a substantial piece of salmon on it. Another man wearing a ball hat with thunderbird on the front asks if I want a beer. I smile widely, put my sunglasses on my head and introduce myself.

I sit with them on a log near the fire, wedge my beer between two rocks and begin to eat the salmon with my fingers. It is true; it is the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted.
As I savour the salmon, I see their pile of fish and begin to fire questions at them about the technique they are using to cook it.

"Hold on," the first man who is wearing a faded camouflaged t-shirt tells me gently laughing, "Why don’t you tell us who you are, and what brought you to Alert Bay, and then, if you want, we can put you to work. You can help us to get the next round of salmon ready."

In the Kwakw̱ala’wakw language, u’mista means the return of something important. The intangible gifts bestowed upon me by the ‘Namgis people and their community were incredibly important. They were a reminder of the human ability to reconcile, to heal and to trust -- even a stranger. The warmth and strength of these people was inspiring, and it resonates with me still, especially when I stand in front of my chalkboard and look out to the students in my classroom.
Trespassing Overseas
Content to Be

The first thing I smelled was concrete, which struck me as odd since I seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. I carefully surveyed my surroundings until I saw a row of street lights. That must be it, I decided, and began to tentatively make my way towards the well-lit road that was bordered on one side by a date grove and on the other by an industrial yard filled with concrete slabs.

As a volunteer, I was assigned to work in the place that first called to my senses: the concrete factory called Spancrete. Each morning as the sun was rising I'd walk beneath the distant stars and the glowing strand of electronic light to my work site. Initially, my feet would drag with the dread of the labour intensive day ahead while my eyes frantically scanned the road and bushes for snakes and lizards.

The kibbutz was hard work both physically and emotionally. I had arrived anticipating that communal living would be something akin to living on one the Gulf Island hippy communes. I was all about the love and anticipated I'd have no troubles fitting comfortably into the routines of life on the kibbutz. The first morning, I greeted everyone I passed with an enthusiastic Shalom! Some responded in kind, others however, said nothing. Volunteers had been coming and going for decades; another foreign face in the kitchen or in the factory was commonplace and was treated appropriately.

At the concrete factory, I worked on a forklift with a young Palestinian man, Achmed. He lived in a nearby city with his family and was, like many people on the
kibbutz, a hired worker. Our work was monotonous and boring and was made worse by the heat and noise of the forklift coupled with the heat of the Mediterranean sun. Neither of us really belonged, but as we drove back and forth in the dusty heat of the concrete factory immersed in laughter and conversation, we managed to forget about the world that surrounded us.

We’d take turns telling tales between bigger discussions on politics, religion and love. He wanted to know about Canada, and I wanted to know about Islam. Our conversations would move from snow and Christmas trees to Mohammed and Mecca. Conversations with Achmed were gifts, and they were often the best part of my days in Israel.

Away from my adventures at Spancrete, I lived with other volunteers from around the world in old military barracks. The beds were infested with bugs, and the walls bore the graffiti of every other volunteer that had slept in the room. Despite this, the collection of volunteers from Europe, South Africa and Japan became my family. We traded vegemite for peanut butter, shared calamine lotion and kosher tooth-paste and kept each other from becoming too homesick or lonely.

We worked six days each week, and on those six days we’d gather in the dining hall with the 350 residents of the kibbutz at meal time. There were designated tables for the volunteers, and so while we shared a common living place, we did not really live together.

An old bomb shelter had been converted into a pub, and some of the young men who had completed their military service and were waiting for the next chapter of their lives to begin, stocked the shelves with beer and whisky and opened it up for us
and the other young people on the kibbutz. In our hovel below the earth, we’d dance and laugh and love. We’d play backgammon and trivia games and drink Gold Star beer from bottles.

Communal life wasn’t at all what I had anticipated it to be, but I adjusted to life on that piece of land in a remarkably short period of time. After the first couple of weeks, during which I regularly hitch-hiked to Tiberias to shop or simply for a change of scenery, my desire to leave the kibbutz vanished almost entirely. I appreciated the volunteer outings and the occasional Saturday trip our motley crew would make to the river, but otherwise I was just content to be. It was a feeling I hadn’t known previously and I relished it.

This street-lit road bridged me from life in mainstream society to communal life on a kibbutz in Israel. Its individual bulbs were not only practical sources of light; they came to represent steps on a journey of self-discovery. Each day I’d walk along them, and with each passing, I was remotely aware something inside of me was changing: transforming. My experiences in Israel provided me with a more profound understanding of life – in Israel and beyond. People could belong and not belong and could, if they wanted, navigate their way between those two places. Governments willing.

The day I left the kibbutz, I wandered slowly down that dusty road for the last time. I felt fearful about leaving the comforts of the kibbutz and my family of volunteers, but my mind willed my legs down the long road to the highway. I stopped briefly to wave to Achmed in his forklift, to laugh as a lizard scurried across my path and then to stare reflectively down that same row of street lights that had marked the beginning of
my journey and the end.
Our Geraldine

I looked around the room with fascination and then looked down at my clothes in horror. I’d spent the day hill-walking and my boots were caked with mud and, quite likely, sheep manure. I sat down gingerly beside Patrick’s granny; my eyes riveted on the other people on the room. Handsome priests with stark white and pretty nuns in freshly pressed habits holding mingled happily among the guests in the hotel.

Patrick had told me that we needed to stop by the hotel to meet his family for a drink. I had assumed that meant his six brothers who we’d often met at the local pub after they’d come in from the fields. To say I was surprised to see that the whole family, all sixteen of them, as well as the entire town had also come to the hotel for a drink was a bit of an understatement. I asked Patrick what was going on.

“A man from our town has just been ordained,” he answered, “Do you want a pint?”

I hit him twice on the shoulder.

“You’ve let me come here dressed like this? With you dressed like that? What does ordained mean?” I demanded in frustration and embarrassment as I glanced around at the other guests.

They looked lovely, and their faces glowed with pride and happiness. The men wore ties and the women dresses, even the children were tucked in and tidy as they ran about the room chasing each other. The village was primarily a farming community, and I recognized many of the guests from the pub where I’d seen them in muddy overalls and
boots in far worse condition than mine. Many of the young adults were opting to travel to Waterford for work and their experimentation with urban sophistication was apparent. Still others remained unemployed, on the dole and playing host to a certain Canadian girl.

Patrick explained that a man from the town had become a priest, and I suddenly understood the unique presence of the nuns and priests. I had been to some Catholic churches both at home for weddings and funerals and here as a tourist. The presence of the nuns and priests captivated me and I watched them with interest. I liked that they were there, but the idea of talking to one of them made me feel overwhelmingly uncomfortable. I wondered if my feelings were rooted in some misplaced sense of shame or inadequacy. A couple of the priests were holding pints of Guinness, and I felt a smile grow on my face when I reflected that we at least had one thing in common.

I turned to Patrick's granny who was wearing a pale pink dress with a crocheted collar upon which a gold crucifix dangled and gave her a quick squeeze in greeting.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know we were coming to a celebration. I would've worn a dress or something if I had known...look at my boots! Patrick and I have been hill-"

She interrupted my rant by putting a withered hand decorated with pink polish on my chest. The previous day I'd bought a Guinness t-shirt and was regretfully wearing it now. Not only was I underdressed, I looked like a silly tourist.

"Pay no mind, love," she said to me rubbing the yellow crest on my shirt and smiling up at me with eyes blue as sapphires, "it's good advertisin'."

Bless, I thought, and took her hand from my chest and held it in my own as she turned to Patrick's sister, "Our Geraldine needs your lipstick."
Claire dug a lipstick out of her handbag, handed it over with a wink and pointed in the direction of the toilets. I had fallen in love with being called “our Geraldine.” Hearing those words was like being embraced in the warmest of hugs. I belonged to them and they to me. I excused myself and took the most direct route to the bathroom.

I had been in the village just under two weeks and already felt like a local. Each morning after the boys had gone to the fields, I’d help Patrick’s ma with a mountain of ironing and would then take his youngest siblings by the hand to the shops. I’d grown used to the singsong greeting of, “Y’alright, Geraldine?” being called to me from people I didn’t know or recognize. I felt protected by this familiarity.

It was a charming place made beautiful by the simplicity of the daily lives of its citizens. I’d even grown to respect the traditional roles that were accepted and upheld by the men and women. As a visitor, however, I received the best of both worlds and could, after a day with the women, leave them with their children to meet the men and boys at the pub.

I spent as much time with Patrick’s ma as I did his granny and his baby sister. Often, all four of us would be in the yard together as his Ma hung the wet laundry on the line or as we sipped mid-morning tea. This place didn’t suffer from the segregation of generations; they embraced each other young and old. This celebration was a prime example, and I admired the women who stood with babes in one hand and a shandy in the other.

Traditional music filled the room and people had begun to trickle onto the dance floor. I watched in amazement as a few nuns moved on to the edge of the wooden floor and began to dance with small, conservative movements. Patrick’s young cousin Noel
grabbed my hand and pulled me to the dance floor. Despite my initial feelings of discomfort, I had let go of my worries about my appearance if only because no one else really seemed to notice. Or care.

I held hands and laughed with the wee man in front of me as we danced in celebration of priest’s union with his God and with his community. I smiled to the nuns and the priests and to the familiar faces in the crowd as we danced by, and I felt joyful. I was a stranger, a foreigner in this land, and I did not believe in their God, but no one really seemed to notice. Or care.
Shades of Faith

Another cathedral. Another collection of masterpieces depicting the horrors of Jesus’ life. Another wait in an endless queue under the blistering heat of Italy’s summer sun. I am tired. I am tired of being hot; tired of being different; tired of being foreign. I am tired of not doing things the right way, and am I tired of my regret for having done them the wrong way.

I am fascinated and amazed by all that I see and do; I am grateful to be here. I really am. Still, I am tired. The art and the architecture are beginning to blend into one, and it has been days since I have truly experienced joy. I move robotically from one cathedral to the next, from one gallery to the next, from one café to the next, and I don’t really feel anything. I am numb.

Fortunately, the queue is not as long as the one I endured in Venice. Interestingly, the other visitors and I have to stand in a dehumidification room before we are allowed to enter the chapel that houses Giotto’s frescoes. I think I have seen some of his work elsewhere, but have become disenchanted by details. The dehumidification room is wonderfully cool. I am confident that I can stand there all day if only they’ll let me, but before I am able to cool down completely we are ushered into the chapel and the door closes behind us.

Rolling slowly down my quivering spine, a single bead of sweat comes to rest upon the cotton waistband of my skirt. I can feel the dampness of the fabric against my skin, and in the new coolness of the chapel, I feel a chill. My breath comes quickly as I
crane my neck to stare at the ceiling which floats above me. The colour of the artificial sky is so thick that I can taste its turquoise shades of midnight. I am captivated by what surrounds me and am overcome by a wave of emotion.

I stare into the deepness of its hues as I stare into a lover’s eyes – searching for meaning, digging for understanding. The eyes on the figures in the paintings which surround the chapel entirely do not convey fear and terror; instead I see trust, love and adoration. My eyes scan the ceiling of blue to absorb the details of a life shaped by hope, by faith and by deception. I have seen this story portrayed in art many times before, but I have not seen it depicted so beautifully. I am enchanted. Exhilarated. And I am, at last, seduced, however briefly, into believing.

I long to bask in the light of the blue skies, but before I can absorb anything more we are herded out another door into the glaring brightness of the real world outside.
Squinting from the brightness of the sun that is reflected off the whitewashed surface of the prayer-flag adorned temple, I whisper. My friend, whose mocha coloured skin stands out against the temple like the deepest foot-print in freshly fallen snow, covers his eyes also and gently smiles at my wonder. Marveling at the great, white, domed walls that stand proudly before me, I am humbled. I think it ironic that such purity can exist in the midst of such squalor. I shield my eyes against its brilliance while simultaneously drinking it in; filling myself up. The reflection of light is so powerful that it is impossible to remain there long, though our spirits will us to. The mocha coloured hand takes my own, whispering, and we turn our backs on the stupa. Together we walk away in its shadows towards the entrance of the temple.

We are silent now, and we do not touch. We remove our sandals and walk barefoot through the first entrance way. We hold up our right hands to spin the enormous, brass prayer wheel that rests in the centre of the room. The coolness of the metallic cylinders embedded with rows of prayers is calming, and strangely exhilarating. The current of empowering thoughts, wishes and, yes, even prayers that flow from my mind and heart, through my fingertips and onto the wheel is cathartic. And I am grateful for the release.

Moving through the second set of doors that lead to the main temple, a monk wearing a burgundy robe with yellow trim, steps aside so that we can proceed to the Buddha who sits in a golden hue at the head of the temple. I close my palms together, lower my eyes and nod my head ever so slightly towards the monk; he returns the
gesture, bowing to the god within me. In this place, I am welcomed and honoured.

Freely.

The smell of incense fills my nose, and I inhale it slowly taking it into my lungs; into my body. Monks with shaved heads sit in silent, individual prayer on either side of the temple. Our bare feet make no noise as we walk pass them. We are not directed in prayer or in song, guided to a seating place or passed a wooden bowl. Our time in this temple is just that, our time, and so we are left just to be. This temple, this sacred place, fills my senses and touches me with my own possibility. I am hushed by the beauty of it, and I welcome my silence with open arms.
The Res

I am bewildered by the sign. I have read the words before, but did not anticipate that I would see them here. This is private property? The wooden sign is shaded by the cedar tree to which it has been nailed. It's once bright red letters are weathered and worn and seem to be forgotten. Still, I feel obliged to honour the “No Trespassing” order. This is not my community, and according to the sign, I am not welcome on this reserve.

As I contemplate a possible means of navigating this road block, a woman with long black hair drives by in a SUV and waves at me. I tentatively wave back. Gestures of familiarity from strangers often surprise urbanites. Its kind, but having rarely experienced these social customs, we’re suspicious. I realize the reserve is its own community, and like other neighborhoods in the city, is subject to its own norm. Its own rules.

I stare longingly at the sign that prohibits me from gaining access to this community. I need an invitation to be here. I need a reason to belong.

While I am both perplexed and exasperated by it, the sign comes to symbolize the real and invisible barriers that I have encountered elsewhere in the city and beyond. Until this one, all the barriers that I’ve experienced have been self-imposed by fear, discomfort, distrust and even shame.

As I drive away from the sign, I smile at the sweetness of the First Nations world covertly telling me that, for now, this is as far I can go.
Conclusion

Life is a collection of stories woven into a web that holds together the strands of an individual’s life. When viewed as a whole it is sometimes challenging to know where the stories begin and where they end. My introduction to the communities of others began in my early years of elementary school, and they began with a friendship. A simple invitation to play after school opened up a world of possibilities to me. It opened up the possibility of this thesis. My conclusion is a beginning, and it is a story.

As a child, I was friends with a girl in my class whose father was the principal of the neighbourhood high school. Nobody in my family was a principal or a teacher. In fact, for the most part, the women in my family worked at home and the men worked with wood or metal. It fascinated me that my friend’s dad actually had the same job as the principal at my school who, as everybody knew, was very, very important and very, very powerful. As a grade four student, I thought my principal probably knew more than all of the teachers combined.

One rainy afternoon, my friend’s dad had to run an errand to a local university, and we accompanied him. I had perhaps heard of this place; at the very least, I had heard about universities. I had certainly never been to one. I remember driving up the long, steep hill on that foggy and rainy afternoon to that campus whose concrete exterior mirrored the greyness of the sky, and I remember being very excited.

Seeing the library and its numerous stacks of books dumbfounded me. I’d never seen such an immense collection of books, and it seemed wondrous to me to have so many in one place. I had spent the summer making date due cards for the books on the
shelf in my bedroom so that I could, subsequently, pester my family to sign the books out. My dream was to have a date stamp and an ink pad.

What amazed me more than the library at the university were the students. As we walked through the corridors, I saw people huddled together at tables talking over books and piles of paper. I stared with wonder at the many people who had actually fallen asleep on top of the books they were reading; some of them were still clutching pens. I smiled back at the people, who with heavy backpacks, smiled down at me. And I began to dream about the day that I was going to go to university. After all, I’d fallen asleep many times while reading novels at bedtime. I was getting exactly the experience I needed.

In my family community, however, nobody had ever attended university or college for that matter. My parents, most of my aunts and uncles and even some of my older cousins hadn’t even graduated from high school. The distance between my family community and the university campus was vast, and overcoming this distance would be one of the most challenging and rewarding journeys of my life.

In conversations with my students about their futures, I keep in mind the many challenges that, like me, some of them face and the expectations that other students face because of the family communities they have inherited. I implore them to imagine their possibilities whether it is university, college, family life or otherwise. I speak to all of them like they will be university graduates, artists and athletes, and I shed equal light all of their dreams for a potential future. I ask them to consider themselves in their present and their future, and to take inventory on who they are and what they’ll need to become who they want to be.
Being embraced by the love, warmth and sense of belonging that our families and cultural communities provide roots us in our sense of identity and secures us in our sense of knowing where we belong. Often these communities encourage and expect their young to venture forth to explore the world and to explore the possibilities of self. These communities equate success with university, a career and owning a home whether it is close to the nuclear family or not. Other communities, however, nurture their members to remain within the community or, at the very least, to stay close. Allegiance to the community is determined by the individual’s physical and emotional proximity to it. As long as one is happy making an honest living, nothing else really matters. In many family communities the idea of being something different is a threat to the territory shared by the family.

In the autumn following graduation from high school, my closest friends packed their backpacks and boarded public transit for that campus in the sky: SFU. Despite a high GPA and a desire to go, I didn’t apply to that university or any other. I couldn’t get my head around the idea that I was meant to go. My parents neither encouraged nor discouraged me; it merely wasn’t an issue. The truth was I didn’t know how to go. I didn’t know who to ask about it, I didn’t know how I was going to get there, and I didn’t know how to pay for it. Moreover, I didn’t know how to exist in that world of people who were going to be principals and lawyers and doctors and nurses and teachers. These people were different than me and they, consequently, had access to things-to knowledge and know-how that I did not. I knew in my heart that I was as good a person as anybody; but somehow I felt inferior. And I was afraid of those feelings. Besides, I had a job at a popular record store. Wasn’t that good enough?
Being good enough is something I've struggled with since childhood, and I recognize this diminished sense of self-worth in my students. I believe that through membership in a classroom community where differences, whether they are based on ability, ethnicity or socio-economics, are celebrated and where each individual is valued for what they contribute that my students will come to know that they are truly good enough – for anything.

As a young adult, I didn’t believe that I was good enough for university. Was I more insecure than most kids? Was I more resilient than others? The answers to these questions can not be addressed fully without examining the family and cultural community of the child. My family would say I am more resilient: stronger and smarter. Outside of my community, however, may claim that it is possible that my insecurities and sense of self-worth prevented me from applying and subsequently going to university. I wonder how many of the students in my class are closing future doors because the places they want to go not because they are shy or insecure but because their possible destinations are essentially uncharted territory by their communities: they are afraid or intimidated by the unknown.

Traveling alone across Canada and overseas literally opened the world to me. In these experiences, far from home, I was liberated from the expectations, values and beliefs of my community. Protected by a new sense of personal identity and unhindered by my personal and familial past, I was able to both socialize and reside with numerous communities defined by different religions, socio-economic status, family make-up, gender, ability and international borders. My real world education wasn’t always easy, but it gave me inner-strength and a sense of personal pride that I hadn’t known
previously. It also gave me a tremendous collection of stories to awe and inspire my students with. My real world education gave me permission to believe that I was good enough to go to university, and good enough to be a teacher. I believe wholeheartedly that my experiences with community, both positive and negative, have contributed to my ability to work with my students with acceptance, compassion and love.

My classroom is my favourite community. Every September, I work with the students in my community to make them feel that they belong: I invite them to claim their territory both physically and emotionally. Similarly, I work equally hard to make certain that none of them experiences the feelings associated with trespassing: I welcome them to our space all day every day. I want them to experience belongingness daily. We share joy and laughter and build trust and empathy through explorations of differences both real and perceived. We contribute to our community, and we share the responsibility of caring for it. Like my real life education, building community is hard work. I believe, however, that it is the most important work I do in my classroom.

To ensure that I’m not imposing or intruding on familial territory, I try to understand what responsibilities, expectations and values each child carries to school so that I can work within, around, in conjunction with and sometimes in spite of them. I recognize that the most dynamic classrooms emerge when all of the students in that space experience the long term rewards of belonging. As a teacher I’ve come to quickly learn that when something dynamic is going on learning is taking place.

I remember that when I interact with my students, that I am also interacting with their families, their history and their families’ history. I honour the aspect of their lives
that I am a part of, as well as that aspect that I am not. I remember that they have inherited the gifts and burdens of their family communities and that each one of them is entitled to respond to the place in life they’ve been given. Finally, I embrace and celebrate the differences that make the students in my class unique, and I implore them to join me, for I know, that like the world, these differences that exist within our small community are what make my classroom a beautiful place.

I am a story.
So are you. So is everyone.
My story begins the same way yours does.
I was born ------ .(Lester, 2005, p. 3)
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