

Heavy Work
Living with Children in Schools

by
JACKIE SEIDEL

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Department of Language Education

The University of British Columbia
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This thesis is a series of meditations, stories and poetry focusing on living in classrooms with children, and on the meaning and place of education and schools in our lives. This writing is the emergent result of a commitment to the seeking of a generous language to understand and describe the work of teachers in schools, to the hope for human(e) and compassionate spaces for children to spend their days, to living with openness and creativity, to the having of challenging and wonderful conversations about life with children, and to the freedom to raise questions about the ways children and teachers (might) live together in schools. This writing is a story emerging at the point of intersection between what we might learn from children if we listen to them and remember them, and reflections on readings in ethics, education and literature.

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The chaos and tumble of events. The first sentence of every novel should be:
“Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.”
Meander if you want to get to town.

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*, 1987, p. 146)

The chaos and tumble of events.

This writing is a story about the *chaos and tumble* of life in classrooms, about how we might understand our work as educators, how we understand the children we live with every day and our relations with them. This story is also a meditation on my own experiences with children in schools. And this story is perhaps also a confession, of sorts, of what I have learned from children about the work of living this life, about teaching. This story is not a line.

“Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.”

This story begins from several different places. First, I believe that the stories of children and teachers in schools should be told, *must* be told, that we must meditate on them to understand what kinds of places schools are, might be, and what kind of world our children are living in. Our work demands that we must be ethically and critically thoughtful about what it is we are doing there. It should be our passionate pursuit in our classrooms to reflect on how our understanding of this world, this time and space into which we are born, shapes our practice and our acts of pedagogical discernment; decisions we make every second, every day about the lives of children and the experiences they will have (or won't have) in schools and how they will carry

these with them through their living. In coming to think about these things, it is likely that we will realize that many practices in schools are neither good for children, nor about living well together. This is difficult work. We are bound to it.

The term "curriculum" is a problematic word, a vague term that can be understood in many ways, and for that reason I use it with some reluctance. The word "curriculum" in this writing refers to a traditional or conservative notion of curriculum,¹ to the way it is used in our daily discourse not just in schools but by the media, public and government, as that which is laid out for children to learn, preplanned and predetermined, as that which defines what teachers are supposed to do and what children are supposed to learn/become through their experiences in school.

Curriculum, when used in this sense, is something that is both measurable and achievable. This thesis speaks to what is outside such an understanding or definition of curriculum, to what is not contained there, to what is outside the boundaries, to *the chaos and tumble of events* in classrooms and in our lives. "Curriculum" is not used in this writing to mean, except where referred to specifically, that which emerges through our living together in schools, that which is generative, alive, deliberately open and

¹ Here is a typical definition of curriculum, one that would be understood by most people in conversation, both educators and non-educators.

What do we mean when we use the word *curriculum*? As one would expect, the definitions offered run a spectrum. At one end, curriculum is seen merely as a course of study: at the other end, curriculum is more broadly defined as everything that occurs under the auspices of the school. In the middle of the spectrum, curriculum is viewed as an interaction between students and teachers that is designed to achieve specific educational goals - it has been defined, for example, as 'a plan for providing sets of learning opportunities to achieve broad goals and related specific objectives for an identifiable population served by a single school center' (Saylor and Alexander, 1974), p. 6) and as 'the reconstruction of knowledge and experience systematically developed under the auspices of the school (or university), to enable the learner to increase his or her control of knowledge and experience' (Tanner and Tanner, 1980, p. 38)." (Miller and Seller, 1990, p.3)

In this thesis, the understanding of schools goes beyond the one end of Miller and Seller's spectrum, beyond "everything that occurs under the auspices of the school" (p. 3). The true meaning and consequences of living together in schools cannot be contained in such a definition.

creative, fluid, emergent or organic.

Another beginning place in this writing is the notion that it is absolutely foolish to think that we know what we are doing in schools, that this can be defined or contained, or to think that we are doing it well. We should realize that whatever schooling is, it isn't a place we will ever "arrive" at, that the work is always emerging before us. We must realize that there is no fixed method and truth for this work, that it slides and evades, always. In the end, there is only this day, these children, this teacher, working and living together. This is what is important. Sometimes our talk about schooling erases these stories. This writing is an attempt at remembrance, at seeking a generous and open language through which to understand what it is that happens - or might happen - in school and in our living and learning together. This is not something we can, finally, say. There is no last word.

Meander if you want to get to town.

Here is a beginning. Once, there was a grade three teacher who didn't know what she was doing. Every day she tried this and that. She didn't know what it meant to be a teacher although she thought much about this question. She was especially worried about time, that the day would be so long, that she couldn't have possibly planned enough to fill it, that there would be a lull, a space, a void, a terrible and dreadful vacuum that needed to be filled. And what about tomorrow? She was scarcely surviving yesterday, not to mention getting through today. Tomorrow seemed like a nightmare coming much too fast. Tomorrow she would be asked to assess children in ways she didn't understand, she would be asked to pass judgment on their abilities and write something official about that. And she had to plan for tomorrow. What were they going to do to fill all that blank, open time? She really had no idea.

She did have a lot of experience with school, this teacher. About eighteen years of it. One might think that all that experience would be helpful, that one would know what was supposed to be going on. But this teacher didn't find all that time in school helpful now. There had not been much joy there. She thought there should be. And so she wondered a lot about how things could be different. Her own experience of school had taught her that it could be a frightening and stifling place. She never had really understood what was happening in school or what she was supposed to be doing or what the teachers were talking about. She never understood how school was connected to life, but she supposed that everyone else around her knew. No one else seemed to be confused. School seemed to be full of rules that every one else knew. Sometimes she thought she knew a rule but the teachers said no no no. She became convinced that she was not smart. She became good at committing facts to memory.

And then giving them back. She lived in fear that someone would find out what an impostor she was, that they would find out that she didn't really understand. That they would find out that she really wasn't smart. So she pretended. And everyone was fooled.

She didn't actually mean to become a teacher. And so, she found herself in a classroom, in this position, with some surprise. And also with some excitement. Actually, she had enjoyed university much more than her earlier schooling. For the first time things made sense, things seemed somehow connected together and the world seemed more open and exciting. She learned about politics and history and economics and literature. And she learned something about thinking about children and schools, and that maybe, just maybe, there was the potential for things to be otherwise, to be other than the way they were. She became excited about understanding the ways children learn and think. And she rediscovered literature, reading for the first time in years.

But still, here she found herself with this awesome responsibility of caring for 24 eight year olds for a year. And she most certainly did realize what an awesome responsibility that was. How to live it out, how to practice and realize the responsibility was the question rising before her now. Every day. She did ask for help. But she didn't understand the answers. The answers seemed too familiar somehow, in that old stifling way, closing down and darkening. And she was wishing for something new, waiting for something more hopeful.

Waiting.

And now what was she supposed to do?

(Once or twice she even put her head down on the desk after school and cried.)

Now, what was she supposed to do?

What was she supposed to be doing there?

The children are coming.

Hello. The door is open. Come in.

* * *

See.

While discussing the earthy bodily mysteries of life cycles and fertility, this shedding, this giving, a child leaps suddenly into the air, eyes shining with wonder. *Cool*, he says, *That is so cool, do you think god already knew that would happen when the world was created?* If this hidden secret, what else might there be? There is always more. Our eyes open to life. Wonder.

* * *

And then, see this young woman, weeping after school, about to depart on a journey to meet the family to which she's been promised. It's an arrangement good for everyone, a trade of possessions. That is how she feels. In this time, this moment, torn between culture and culture, she tells me she feels like she is dying. What she really desires - to go to university, to study literature and creative writing - she will likely never know. And she does not look forward to this lonely plane trip across continents to meet the man she will marry. *I might just run away on the stop-over*, she suggests, hopeful. *Will you?* I ask. The girl smiles: *No*, she says, *no. They might kill me if I do that. There would be no safe place in the world. I belong to them. You can't understand how I belong to them. They would find me anywhere...* And I say to her, *I hope you come back. We really want you to come back.* While at the same time even as I speak these words I know that there is no language of consolation for this young woman as she faces this unfaceable. The absence. In our classroom the next day, this absence.

* * *

And see. This boy who memorizes maps. He can draw the world but cannot talk to another child. Sometimes he stands, rigid and unmoving, or rocks back and forth sitting cross-legged in the corner. Any words he writes are not his own but a flash of memory, something he has read somewhere and stored for later use, he prints it out like a photo. When he starts crawling under the desks, growling like an animal, I do not know what to do. I just watch him and wonder what it is he sees in this world. I wonder what it is like to be him. Sometimes he laughs, and his eyes connect with another, intersecting worlds. Sometimes when we read a novel he suddenly speaks about one of the characters as if he really knows them, as if they are here in the room with us. And when we talk about the world and maps, he seems to know pretty much everything and he teaches us more than we teach him. These precious moments before he goes away to that unreachable place inside himself.

* * *

And see. This girl. She never stops laughing. She reads books as she walks to school. In the classroom she is gentle and generous to everyone. You can see her, often, watching silently, observing life around her, learning. She loves to write stories. She is also writing a math book she hopes to publish. Can you understand it? She will explain patiently to you if you are confused. Some other teachers say she is too smart, it is too difficult to have her in the classroom, she talks too much they say. I wonder why they don't listen to her. Sometimes she says she feels alone. She always speaks out for the one who has no voice. She is ten years old. I have no answer when you ask me, *how did she learn this?* How did she learn this?

* * *

And see also, this young woman who hides behind her hair. She rarely speaks, barely a word. Sometimes I notice her talking with the other young women so I know that she *can* speak. But I cannot find her. She is nowhere in her writing, a scramble of letters and words, disconnected. And when I read her school file, I cannot find her either. In nine years of schooling there are no clues, no evidence anyone has ever seen her, that anyone has cared for her or even noticed her. Her story has not been told. For more than a year I talk to her everyday, about her writing, about books, about anything. Her head is always down, eyes turned away, covered with a veil of hair. Then sometime in the second year she speaks to me, spontaneously, suddenly, asking a question. And then she has stories to tell. During those two years, the exact time is not marked nor important, she begins to write more than a few disconnected words, poetry, and she begins to paint and draw, and now we can know her and we can see her, and we can see that she understands so much more about life than we do. What a remarkable human being she is.

* * *

And here is someone you haven't met yet. See this young man. See how he sits angrily at a table by himself. See how for him to participate in what happens here he has to give too much of himself. Watch him carve a gang tag into the brand new metal table leg. He is leaving a piece of himself here. He is giving something. His defiance and silence shout loudly into the space of the room, even though he does not speak. You might be wondering why he joined this small group of students, only 10 of them, who gather here to write poetry. And you are probably wondering why he just sits here. I walk up to him and sit with him. Listen to our conversation, to us laughing and talking about nothing in particular. Maybe we are talking about soccer, or a television show, or maybe I am recommending a book, or maybe I am asking him why he just sits here.

See the conversation take a sudden turn and memory jolts violently, time bursts into time and sears us, a brand. How do our tongues speak of such things? Fathers murdered in Guatemala. This grief uncovered here. Our lives are poetry whether we write them down or not.

* * *

Life rushes over us. Gathering moments of surprise, grace, sadness, sudden insights and a million tales to tell.

* * *

As I have gone about this work of writing about the experience of being a teacher, of what it is to be with children in the spaces we call schools, of telling these tales and thinking about what this work is about, I wonder how is it that our lives might be inscribed on this clean white page? How do these events, these memories, become words and move into language? What is lost in this process? Something is created. I do not know how to write about it except to tell these stories, except to give pieces of memory, fragments of this life, except to move into language. I cannot say that any part of *this* is whole, that *this* is what it is for or about, that *this* is what teaching and living with children are. There is no *this*. There is only the unpredictable dailiness of those days. These stories to tell.

* * *

Much of the educational research I have read seems to point to the simplicity of the projects, to a question, a thesis, a pathology and then to a diagnosis and a remedy. It forgets to say that living is difficult work. It clamours loudly to show that there is something wrong and that it *can* be fixed. Trying to climb out of life rather than falling

into it, this longing for the perfect future away from vulnerability, we become blinded to moments of light and loveliness in this dailiness, this today. In my reading of the research I seldom find any familiar stories, only a covering up of the complexities of the lives of children and teachers in schools, only a desire to make things seem simple, reducing life and experience to a few words, asking answerable questions; as if the openness of life, the unanswerable questions are not to be tolerated. Are we afraid that language cannot tolerate openness and ambiguity? Or are we afraid that if we do not hold it tightly enough, life and language will slip away from us and our lives will become ungraspable, undefinable? How desperately we try to force purpose and language upon everything, rather than allowing it to emerge, to come to us, to surprise us. How desperately we try to lay out the foundations and road before we even get there. But life is just not like that. And life is what we have in schools. It cannot be contained. *The children are coming.* Today.

* * *

What hope is there for individual reality or authenticity when the forces of violence and orthodoxy, the earthly powers of guns and bombs and manipulated public opinion make it impossible for us to be authentic and fulfilled human beings?

The only hope is in the creation of alternative values, alternative realities. The only hope is in daring to redream one's place in the world - a beautiful act of imagination, and a sustained act of self-becoming. Which is to say that in some way or another we breach and confound the accepted frontiers of things.
(Ben Okri, 1997, p. 55)

* * *

See. Our fragile lives brushing against each other. The classroom as a site of imperfection. A place of wonderful, giddy joy balanced with frailty and mortality. A place to break boundaries and create new ones or live without any altogether. A space to imagine life differently. Language invents us again and again.

* * *

When we let go of our desire for perfection, the desire to be at the front and on top, the desire to climb away from life, then we might be able to seek a way of living without the kinds of boundaries imposed on us by schools, or at least, with different boundaries, to welcome that which changes and shifts around us as part of the ecology of living. We can climb into life. Fall in. Our work with children, over and over, sometimes gently and sometimes with jolting violence, brings us to a place where to move at all, to be free and not paralyzed by the work, we must come to understand that there really is no predetermined road. The way lays itself out before us. We become ourselves as we walk it. The map is not finished. There is no great plan that we must figure out, no great goodness, no high ethical life, no ultimate moral story to guide us.² In this unmapped space we are free to move, to breathe fresh air, to understand this life, to live with one another and with ourselves. To imagine life differently. To be reinvented. To fall in.

² Throughout this writing are scattered footnotes. These are stopping points, markers on my own reading journey, examples of the places I traveled while writing. They are the words and ideas that sat with me, visited over and over.

Deconstruction shows how a film of undecidability creeps quietly over the clarity of decisions, on cat-soft paws, clouding judgment just ever so much, so that we cannot quite make out the figures all around us. But do not be mistaken. Deconstruction offers no excuse not to act. Deconstruction does not put up a stop sign that brings action to a halt, to the full stop of indecision; rather, it installs a flashing yellow light, warning drivers who must in any case get where they are going to proceed with caution, for the way is not safe. Undecidability does not detract from the urgency of decision; it simply underlines the difficulty. Deconstruction takes as its subject matter the task of making one's way along an aporia, along an almost impassable road, where the ground may at any moment shift beneath our feet. Deconstruction issues a warning that the road ahead is still under construction, that there is blasting and the danger of falling rock. (Caputo, 1993, p. 4)

* * *

We fall into life. We are moved into such a space not only through lived embodied experience in the world, but also through language, through reading, through conversations. This spring, during one week, an image comes to visit me three times, insistent and persistent. The image is this: humans as disastered, *dis-astered*, separated from the stars:

Modern scientific theory holds, without the slightest romantic embellishment, that our bodies are the remnants of the originative astral explosion called the Big Bang. We are, to be etymologically precise, a disaster (dis + astro), a falling out with, or fall-out from the stars. (Kuberski, 1992, p. 64)

We fall into life. How do we find our way? Where are we going?

John Caputo tells us: "To suffer a disaster is to lose one's star (dis-astrum), to be cut loose from one's lucky or guiding light" (1993, p.5). Losing our faith, we are lost. Lost in this lovely life, who wants to be found? "It is not a question of knowing what to put in their place, but of just getting along without such a place, of conceding that things are just 'decentred', 'disseminated', 'disastered'" (Caputo, 1993, p. 5). Here, we can leave the path, get on with living, fall into life. We can be free, redream the world, "breach and confound the accepted frontiers of things" (Okri, 1997, p. 55).

Now what are we supposed to do? The children are coming.

* * *

Of course, I love the stars. Billions of them illuminating the black prairie sky. The absence of them in Vancouver as I write these words under a dimming moon. Once,

from the high desert in New Mexico, bright as day and the red sand glowed beneath our feet. This light reaching across time's gap, a measurement of antiquity, messages from stars long gone. The gnostics thought that humans "fall" into our bodies in the way light falls from the stars towards the earth, that this falling is our souls turning towards matter, the mother, like light reaching for the ground (Kuberski, 1992). We fall into life. I love the stars, yes. They are scattered throughout the rest of this work. While we may be metaphorically detached from what has guided us in the past, or becoming detached from what guides us in the present, from our faiths, from those ideas that seemed to many to be fixed and true and stable, we remain bodily and in memory ecologically connected to everything: those stars, all language, these rocks and leaves I gather on my walks, these children who come to our classroom. *The children are coming*. And we are bound to them, obligated to these children, these leaves, these bodies, these stars, this life.

To say that obligation 'happens' is to say that obligation is not anything I have brought about, not anything I have negotiated, but rather something that happens to me. Obligations do not have to ask for my consent. Obligation is not like a contract I have signed after having had a chance first to review it carefully and to have consulted my lawyer. It is not anything I have agreed to be a party to. It binds me. It comes over me and binds me. (Caputo, 1993, p. 7)

We fall in. The children come. Remember?

* * *

Our children who are on earth
and who will still be here
after we are beneath it.
Remembered be thy names

for having filled them with hope.

But neither let probable oblivion concern you,

for infinite are those forgotten who are worthy of memory.

The air and time are full of names:

every generation breathes them.

(Jesus Lopez Pacheco, 1991, p. 78)

* * *

As I write these words, we struggle once again (still) to make sense of another disaster, refugees spilling over borders and boundaries that once marked their "homes". Again we are brought to that place where we must think deeply about what it means to live with one another, how we are to live with ourselves. Our attentions focus now on one particular place, although there are many of us who understand that in focusing on this one place there are many other places and peoples we forget. We are reminded that this talk of breaking borders, of living in chaos, of not having rules that tell us what to do, of having lost our stars is not simply another catchy way to talk about how we can be in schools, but a reflection and embracing of the world and our lives as they really are; chaotic, wild, unpredictable, and profoundly difficult. When we try to live outside this, confining and controlling life, we become ill, we lose ourselves. We lose the opportunity to engage in re-creation and re-dreaming the world, in that "sustained act of self-becoming", which is always an act of breaching and confounding the boundaries, the "accepted frontiers of things" (Okri, 1997, p. 55). Living within the accepted frontiers in schools holds us back from caring for children. Some things just cannot be possible, simply cannot happen within such a simplified view and one which narrowly defines what children will be like and what they will know. We ignore them. They are erased. This child who sits defiantly at a table by himself while the

others write poetry. What explanations do we give for this? What opportunity for him to re-dream his world? Maybe we hope that he will not come to school tomorrow. Or perhaps he will do something so terrible, something that breaches all our boundaries, and we can send him away from the school, absolved of our responsibilities to him, oblivious to the politics and histories that have shaped his life, that shape our lives. If we are not ourselves, as teachers, engaged in acts of understanding this world beyond these classroom walls, of re-imagining this space inside the walls, such children will always be pushed out. There is no place for them.

As we attempt to understand the profound implications for our work, in classrooms, with interpreting curriculum, with the children and their families who survive these traumas coming to us - *the children are coming* - bringing with them intergenerational memories of conflict and pain, is it possible for our response and obligation to them to grow from the place where we understand that we are, indeed, *dis-astered*?³ Answers are not so simple here. In *The Ghost Road* (Pat Barker, 1995), the English soldiers are marching back to the French front. Night finds them in conversation, sheltered in the safety of an abandoned home. Their thoughts, as always, are on the war. The young soldiers who have not yet been in battle are hopeful and idealistic for the cause. They speak of the purpose of their work and their journey, their feelings and hopes that the war is "just". Billy Prior, their captain responds to them, haunting words: "I think things are actually much worse than you think because there isn't any kind of rational justification left. It's become a self-perpetuating system. Nobody benefits. Nobody's in control. Nobody knows how to stop." And Wilfred Owen, the poet, adds, "You say we kill the Beast," Owen said slowly. "I say we fight because men lost their bearings in the night" (p. 144). Disaster; our bearings lost in the night.

³ "Still, I would say, obligation happens, the obligation of me to you and of both of us to others. It is all around us, on every side, constantly tugging at our sleeves, calling upon us for a response. In the midst of a disaster" (Caputo, 1993, p. 6).

The children are still coming. How are we obligated⁴ to them?

* * *

While we mourn the conflicts in our lives, Owen's insight that we have lost our bearings in the night seems not something to despair over, rather something open, good, welcoming. It is the place from which we can fall into life, fall into our bodies, turn our souls toward matter rather than towards futuristic and ethereal goals. It is the place where we can be vulnerable, always start again, tomorrow. It is the place where we can admit that we do not know what to do.

(Now, what was she supposed to do?

What was she supposed to be doing there?

The children are coming.)

This is the place we are taken apart. We come undone. *We fall in.* To me it is the place of infinite possibility, or perhaps what Derrida would call im-possibility,⁵ as the possible is what we already can imagine and have. The roads we have and are building already lead to the possible. But the impossible. That is what calls out to us to live in such a dis-astered state, not seeking new stars to guide us but simply living this day out as it presents itself to us. Living this day out, with one another, with these children in our classrooms, in a way that is mindful of the surprise of impossibility, open to the call of justice and responsibility and memory. An opening up to what might be. The coming of children is not what we should be afraid of. More, we might fear the

⁴ "Obligation - the unconditional hospitality owed to the other - is the ethical beyond ethics" (Caputo, 1999, p. 84).

⁵ The '*possible*' is a term of art for Derrida, which means the foreseeable and projectable, the plannable and programmable, what he calls the 'future present,' the future that can come about with a little luck and a lot of hard work, the sort of thing "role models" and "strategic planning" help us bring about. This '*possible*' future is '*already present*' as an ideal before it rolls around in actuality, which it can do - it is possible - at least in principle.... To desire the impossible is to strain against the constraints of the foreseeable and possible, to open the horizon of possibility to what it cannot foresee or foretell. (Derrida/Caputo, 1997, p. 133)

language of an educational establishment that thinks it rests upon a firm foundation, that believes its bearings are fixed and immutable. The im-possible is much more interesting, for this is what our work seems, full of overwhelming surprises, creativity, imagination, joy, life. In our living with children there is nothing we need to plan or orchestrate, yet paradoxically, everything needs to be thoughtfully planned and carefully orchestrated in preparation, in readiness to slip through porous boundaries when they suddenly appear before us, so that we can push against the limits of the possible on our journey to what we couldn't have known was there before we arrived. We fall into life.

* * *

So much of the educational writing and research I read tends to be critical of teachers' inadequacies. (Because it is the teachers' fault that we have lost our bearings in the night?) So many of us have this sense that all was not right in our own experiences of schooling and that things are certainly not right for many children in schools now. How easy it is to lose sight of the places where life is growing, where children are loved, where something entirely new is being created and generated. How difficult it is to write in a way that recognizes that teachers and schools are not a mono-culture. How might a million (and more) stories be reduced to one, generalizing the ungeneralizable? There is always the danger to speak in such a way about our work and for me this points to the profound difficulty of speaking at all. The permanence of the words upon this page. The interpretability of the words upon this page.

* * *

As I lived with children in the classroom, I began to wonder about the danger of our futuristic orientation in schools. This fear that there may be something coming that we

won't be ready for. I worry that such an orientation, focusing us on what we don't know is coming, distracts us from this day, today, from what is coming today. It erases today. *There are children coming to school, today.* This is important. In fact, it might be the only really important thing. Focusing on the future distracts us from noticing the profound intricacies of this day and this time and these relationships in this *Now*. There is only this day, there are only these people who come together in this space usually not of their own choosing - not the space and not one another. The obligation we have to each other here. This gathering of bodies and stories and lives filled with possibilities - who knows what could happen? - stands against an image and language of schools and curriculum that already says ahead of time what will happen, that knows how we should be preparing, that already *knows what it is that children should know*. This is the pathology of our work. It is this that stops us from being able to care deeply for children, that makes difficult a commitment to an openness and incompleteness and to that which is yet to come, rather than language and practice that attempts to define and complete life before it has even happened. "Today is its own time, all the time there is, all the time one needs to be concerned with. When tomorrow comes, tomorrow will be today; in the meantime, let tomorrow worry about itself" (Caputo, 1999, p. 91).

The children are coming. Today.

* * *

So now, today, I give these pieces, bits of memory, bits of lives. Time and memory. They are not a chronology. It is difficult to understand time. These events happened and are no longer happening except in memory. Something else is happening now. I no longer know many of these children whose stories are part of this text. I do not know where they are or who they have become. I hope for them. And I invoke their presence

with language. Time is strange. Slipping backwards and forwards, we cannot stay in one moment, although it seems often that many moments can exist simultaneously, that time does not pass in an even, steady, fixed or measurable way. Memory binds us to time and to the earth. To remember is to pass back through the heart,⁶ scarred with life and laughter and longing. We become more beautiful through this living. The stories of children and teaching scattered throughout this text are interruptions and punctuation, the fissures and cracks in the life in a classroom. There is nothing neat, tidy or predictable about this world. Everything is as it should be.

* * *

In schools, *the children are coming*. And life rushes over us. Today.

* * *

And in this now, one more story:

See this young woman. She is in grade 9. She is 16, already 2 years older than most of the other grade 9 students. She speaks fluent Cree and Blackfoot. Something she is proud of. But, she is so embarrassed by the way she speaks English. She always asks, almost everyday, if I think her accent sounds funny. *Do you think I talk funny?* she says. What you can't know when you see her here in this classroom space is that she is a champion jingle dancer and lives passionately for the pow-wow dance circuit. What you see when you come into this room is a child who seems ill. She has open sores on her arms and hands. She appears seriously underweight. You might see her being disruptive, swearing or yelling in class, perhaps stomping out of the room, or you might see her painting quietly at a table by herself. It just depends what kind of day this

⁶ For this image and the reference to the Latin 'recordis', *to pass back through the heart*, I am grateful to Elizabeth Lira (1997) for her essay "Remembering: Passing back through the heart" in Pennebaker, J.W., Paez, D. and, Rime, B. (Eds.), Collective memory of political events (p. 223 - 235). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

life has given her today. If you talk to her she might tell you about her grandmother's Blackfoot stories. I want her to tell us some. She says she can't. When I ask her why, she laughs and says they have too much sex in them. She says we wouldn't like these stories. She says they can't be told in English. She says you have to be Blackfoot to understand them. Recently, this young woman was in a car of young people who had been drinking. The car crashed and rolled. She saw her cousin smash through the windshield glass and die. I know this because she told me about it. It matters that we know these stories.

Remember them.

At night and on the weekend, she hangs out on the streets downtown. She doesn't always come to school. She wraps her arms around herself and looks like she is about to throw up most of the time. She comes to school some days in a drugged post-alcoholic stupor. *Why do you do that?...* I ask her. She shrugs at me. *It's fun*, she says. And then she smiles.

If we give this young woman tests - measure her by government curricular standards - we learn that she reads and writes at a grade one level. We learn that her numeracy skills are basically non-existent. Does it surprise us then that she doesn't even try to do any work at school? She tells me she never understands what is going on. She tells me she feels so stupid. She doesn't try to fool anyone. Our hearts are broken. She knows so much. She is an artist. She paints. She draws. And she dances.

But such knowledge doesn't often matter in the measurement of children.

She doesn't measure up.

It doesn't matter that she can dance.

She wants to show me her dances. She brings her jingle dress into the empty classroom at lunchtime - I can hear it ringing in its special bag before she even opens it. She has worked on this dress for years, with her grandmother, adding more fringe,

adding more rolled tin can lids. We push the tables out of the way. She puts her dress on and a cassette tape into the ghetto blaster that usually pounds out loud rap music. And then she dances.

Her dance fills the room. Her self consciousness about her body, her appearance, is gone. She is not worried about her accent or the fact that she cannot read. Her feet are flying. Her arms are not wrapped around her body but reach out to embrace the world. Her dress fills the room with sound, rhythm, beauty. And her feet - her feet - they move so fast.

This young woman cannot read or write... but you should see her dance.

This is a literacy we cannot even begin to understand. We cannot read her world, the hours of practice, the delicate work sewing this dress, her moccasins.

Her body *is* the music. There are no boundaries.

Nothing is holding her down.

Then she wants to dance for all of us. We can hear her dress ringing as she comes down the hall. She is so nervous. She seems so alone. She is afraid to come into the room. She thinks the others will laugh at her. She doesn't know that they will be stunned to silence by her beauty. They applaud at the way she fills the room with her mocassined feet moving so fast. They applaud for the wonderful music of her jingle dress ringing and ringing and filling the room with dancing moving sound. They applaud for her because she is their friend. Because there is life and joy there. She shines, her life's light sunshine filling this space.

Of course there are always many beginnings, and many convergences and divergences in any story, but to tell this story we must pick one place, designate a spot as the beginning of this particular path. Remember that teacher who didn't know what she was doing? After awhile, she discovered a way to fill time, those dreaded lulls. Reading aloud. Talking. Writing. They read novels together. She really still had no idea what she was doing. Or perhaps, looking back, perhaps she did know. In any case, intuition intervened. She chose to read Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* (1975) with that first class of grade three students and nothing was ever the same after.

Someone, probably a wizened and wise professor at the university, had taught her about Reader Response and she had faithfully learned The Method and Its Techniques. After all, such a Method did make a lot of sense and made things seem easy. Controlled. Orderly. It did seem so much better than anything she had ever experienced in school herself. It seemed logical and right that children needed a frame, guidelines, some help. Especially in the form of sentence starters. From there they could go anywhere, couldn't they? Sometime near the beginning, maybe even before the first day of school, maybe even before she met the children, she spent an evening writing the guidelines for Reader Response in her best teacherly printing, probably with smelly markers, on a poster: ... i wonder... i guess... i think... i feel... i liked ... i didn't like... i wish... You know.

Eight years later this teacher worked with student teachers at the university. They too had faithfully learned The Method and Its Techniques. And she tells them this story. Looking back, she can't remember the catalyst, the exact second when everything

changed. But it might have been something like this: when they read together, the teacher also kept a journal and wrote whenever the children wrote and she realized that the way they were doing things was hard and boring and soon no one was following those sentence starters anymore. Instead, they began to draw pictures, and write letters, and write poetry, and just write and write, words that came to them, just whatever. And they shared. They shared a lot. And they wrote in each other's journals. But mostly, they just talked for hours about the books they were reading and the things they were thinking about. Sometimes they didn't even want to go out for recess. About the sentence starters, she said to the children, *These are pretty dumb aren't they?* The children agreed. *Don't use them anymore*, she told them. She ripped the posters down from the wall and they hung their drawings there instead. The posters she rolled neatly and stuffed into the back of a cupboard. Are they still there today?

Around this time the teacher read Aidan Chambers' *Booktalk* (1985) and was amazed. Suddenly there was someone describing what she was experiencing in the classroom. Chambers was talking about children and books and language, about reading and writing with a sense of reverence, with a sense of hope and possibility for the emergent in literature and reading together. She read many of the novels and picture books he discussed in his essays. She attempted to read the writers who had clearly influenced Chambers: Barthes, Gadamer, Iser, philosophical works by people she'd never heard of. She did not understand what these authors were talking about. She gave up on these for the time being and kept reading literature, for herself and with the children.

The teacher began to suspect that some of the things she had been told (and probably memorized for a test) at university about children were simply not true, especially

about the length of their attention spans and the kinds of activities and conversations they are capable of and interested in. It became obvious that no frame for response was needed, that attention spans of eight year olds were much longer than 15 minutes - as long as the teacher did not talk on and on and on about nothing, as long as there was *something* to talk about. Gradually, she gave up on planning for "time", on writing plans on sheets of paper divided into segments for activities and lessons. From then on she wrote "plans" on blank paper. She would sketch out the kinds of ideas she had for the day's unfolding, speculate on questions she thought might emerge from their reading, notes for conversations about mathematics and science. Where before it had seemed impossible to plan for all those segments of time, now it was exciting to think about the possibilities the day might hold. It was one piece of time, flowing, punctuated only by surprises and that predictable bell. As for tomorrow, it would come and it would be a surprise, full of as-yet-unimagined potential. It depended what happened today. Planning "unit plans" in the way she had been trained was no longer a possibility. She never kept anything to use for the next year. Today, she has nothing to show, no binders full of plans to revisit, no folders of units and worksheets to pull out another time, later. Everything was always new and never repeated. The world is always open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Some of her colleagues told her to stop reinventing the wheel: "it's all been done," they said, as if life is a pattern that is repeated over and over. Some people think so. When she worked with student teachers, she watched them frantically collecting binders full of resources and plans. They were so worried that they wouldn't know what to do, that there would be too much time to fill, that they would never have any ideas. She understood exactly how they felt.

In the beginning, when this teacher thought about curriculum, it had seemed so small,

constraining and confining. Perhaps that was why she had felt there was so much time to fill and nothing at all important or interesting to fill it with. But then she suddenly realized that everything was contained within that curriculum. That all life was there. That it was freedom. That it was not constricting. That each word could be unraveled and interpreted into an infinite chain of language and meanings. That each day could unfold as it would. This was the seed of an idea that began to grow, a search for an open practice, for language beyond the curriculum to describe what was happening in the classroom and the kind of conversations she and the children were beginning to have.

And then they read *Tuck Everlasting*, and they went to a place even their other readings had not taken them. This novel opened a sudden and unexpected space. A framed and frameless space where they could be both inside and outside the text, both inside and outside the words. *Tuck Everlasting* is an earthy, earthbound, timebound sort of story.⁷ Their minds were on fire with unexpected questions the story

⁷ The novel begins on a stifling, still, hot August day. There is an isolated wood, a cottage at the edge of it. In this "touch-me-not" cottage, surrounded by a white picket fence, lives a ten year old girl, Winnie Foster, with her parents and grandmother. Winnie is playing in the yard, inside the fence, but looking out and wondering about the world. She decides to "think about running away" (p. 4). Eventually, Winnie does climb the fence and ventures into the woods where she meets a young man, Jesse Tuck, drinking from a spring under a giant ash tree. He forbids her to drink from the spring, telling her the water is "probably pretty dirty" (p. 29). What Winnie does not know is that this water is the spring of everlasting life, that to drink it, even one sip, means that one will never, ever die, will always be caught at the age and moment of the drinking. Jesse's mother Mae Tuck and brother Miles show up, realize the consequences of what is happening, and kidnap Winnie, taking her home with them. Meanwhile, the villain of the story, the man in the yellow suit, a greedy and creepy character who is searching for this water, a man whom Winnie has already met when he shows up outside her fence asking about the wood, sees the Tuck family running away with Winnie, follows them, and hears the story of the spring. At their home, the Tucks desperately try to explain to Winnie why she must never reveal the secrets of the spring. In the beginning, she is angry and terrified, hoping to be rescued. But slowly she comes to love the Tucks, to understand the ecological significance of what they are telling her. She becomes their friend. The man in the yellow suit creates a plot to become owner of the wood, trading his knowledge of where Winnie has been taken for the wood, shows up at the Tucks home and tries to take Winnie by force. Mae Tuck cracks the barrel of a shotgun into his head, killing him. Mae is put in jail and sentenced to the gallows. Of course, she cannot die. No one must discover this. The Tucks and Winnie break her out of jail, Winnie taking her place and hiding on the bed in the cell to give the Tucks time to escape. The end of the novel finds the Tucks returning, years later, to the town of Treegap and finding Winnie's grave in the cemetery. She chose life.

asked of them. Is it wrong (always) to kill another person? Is disobedience to one's family wrong? Who owns the land? How far under the crust of the earth does land ownership extend? What is time? What is life? What is death? What is freedom? Are there ever answers to these questions?

The public reading of this novel created some controversy and trouble. The children talked about it at home, talked about the conversations they had at school. She heard about it in the principal's office. She had always been a good girl. It was the first time in her life she had been called to the principal's office. Now she was in trouble for reading a book about Everlasting Life Without God. A book of a rather fearsome mortality. *"We have a big problem with this book"*, said the parents. *"We want our children to read Archie comics."* Of course, that made sense. Good, wholesome reading material about nothing. No opening rift in life. No asking of questions. No surprising or unexpected spaces. Just Jughead's stupidity and fast cars. Nothing. Some of the children then brought their Archie comics to school and looked defiantly at the teacher as they laid them open on their desks. The teacher watched them in silence, with a sinking feeling. One child came with a watch and timed every second spent on reading, on mathematics, on conversations, on art. Until the principal came by and noticed and made an irate call home to the parents and the watch was put away.

During this time, other parents came and spoke about the wonderful conversations they were having with their children around the dinner table because of the books the children were reading. They supported the teacher and often hung out in the classroom, joining the children and teacher in conversations. The principal supported the teacher. The teacher became friends with these families. In the classroom the

children and teacher kept reading novels aloud which made space for the asking of questions they had never thought about before. They couldn't stop. Where a few months before there had been too much time to fill, now there never seemed to be enough. There never seemed to be enough time. There was always more to say.

As much as we can fix a beginning in one place, it must sit here. In this classroom. With this book. Everything hinges there. One day uncertainty. The next day, uncertainty. Nothing is for sure. Here is the hinge: a conversation occurred on one particular day. When Mae Tuck is imprisoned for killing the man in the yellow suit, at the moment the Tucks and Winnie are poised to break her out of jail, Winnie to take her place to give the Tucks time to get away, Winnie Foster thinks a line of poetry: "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage" (p.123). These words were written on chart paper, where the children and teacher were sitting on the carpet together. *"I wonder what these mean?"* the teacher said. *"We will hear them today in the story. What could they mean?"* They never got around to reading that day. Instead, an hour of rushing, bursting words filled the classroom. Freedom? Can you be free in your mind but not in your body? Can you be free in your body but not your mind? One of the students in the class had recently lived in the Persian Gulf during the war. That War. The teacher knew he was still remembering this experience every day. She knew, because his mother had told her, that he had lived in his bathroom for several weeks as American scud missiles flew over his house and landed nearby, shattering the earth. Shattering everything. She knew he was always remembering this experience because he was so afraid of everything. His hands and voice shook all the time. Sometimes he would burst into tears when the bell rang or a door slammed. The boy never talked of this experience until Winnie Foster thought about these words and called them all to thinking these questions.

Now, today, this child had something to say. He knew something with all his being, with all his body. He knew something about freedom. He told them he thought you could be locked up, by yourself, for your whole life and still be free in your mind. He told them that no one could ever steal the freedom inside your mind. He told them he thought it their own responsibility to take care of the freedom in their minds. He said, *even when I was in the bathroom my mind was free*. His body grew tall when he said this, sitting amongst friends, cross-legged on the floor. He waved his hands about, wildly gesturing meaning to his words. His mind could not be contained.

Eight year olds know such things.

This boy's mind was free. But his body, imprisoned by memories. Loud sounds brought tears to his eyes. His hands shook constantly. Concentration was difficult. But perhaps that conversation gave back something of his life. It gave them all something of life. Nothing was the same after this moment. At once, they had not only the story of the Tucks and Winnie Foster and the tree of life (everlasting), but they heard the story of a war, far away, brought home to them in their classroom. And every person there, every *body* there, knew something they hadn't known before. More than one person was transformed on this day.

A conversation had occurred. Everything hinged on this moment.

Nothing was the same after.

These children, even years later, when the teacher would meet them in the grocery store or library, would unfailingly ask about what books she was reading aloud to her new class. And what they really wanted to know: was it *Tuck Everlasting*?

Now what was she supposed to do?

The teacher couldn't have known, could not even have predicted, that this text would seep into their lives, leaving an *everlasting* and indelible mark on each of them. She couldn't have known that the children would be so moved, that she would be so moved. She learned something important in the moments of that conversation, in the space opened by the story. This book would represent a turn toward a different practice, that every book read together and every decision made for children would circle around this moment. Here, it became clear that it is important for the teacher to recognize the moments of profound possibility that emerge in a classroom, that in responding to these moments we are responding to emergent life itself, that such moments can never be planned for, only prepared for and expected. She began to live her life with children expecting and preparing for such transformative and open moments.

How can we ever be prepared for what we don't know will come?

All of life is what we don't know is coming.

There is often an attempt in our general approach to schooling and curriculum to make it seem like we know what is coming, like we *should* know what is coming, like it has already been forecast and predicted and foreseen. There. It waits for us. Nothing to do but plan the proper lesson and lead the children to it.

But we don't know. We really do not know what is coming. There is a lesson to be learned here. Think of Winnie Foster, the moment when she "decided to think about running away" (p. 4). This moment begins a chain of events that no one, least of all Winnie, or we as readers, could have foreseen. This teacher (*who hadn't really meant to be a teacher*) suddenly found herself in a space of creativity and openness, on an unexpected path that called out loudly to be followed. Suddenly she could imagine no other life. All points converged here and led everywhere at once. Everything was new.

For by sharing the Texts we each individually hold within us - a different book for each one, though we have all read the same book - we build another, corporate and multiple Text, always more complex, always more interesting, always other than the Text we made our own as we read. (Chambers, p. 132)

While reading *Tuck Everlasting*, a common, public text emerged in our classroom. It was completely unexpected. It was the surprise of the ground shifting, the world being suddenly opened, turned toward us; we fell through. This new text wrote itself and wove us together through our conversations and writing. This new space enveloped all those things we understood about living, about making decisions, about responsibility to life and to each other and to this earth. There we were. Time found us: a particular group of people being together with a particular text at a particular moment in history with each of our particular lives and histories. We have never forgotten it. The children asking me, even years later, about the novel, points to the ways we have been bound together forever by that reading. After we read together, "nothing remains but the experience of having done it - or rather, what remains is the memory of the

⁸For the words in this title and throughout this section, I am indebted to David Jardine's paper, "Birding Lessons and the Teachings of Cicadas." We read:

"A birding lesson: I *become* someone through what I know."

"This little lesson may be the great gift that environmental education can offer to education as a whole. Coming to know ... is never just a matter of learning the ways of a place but learning about how to carry oneself in such a way that the ways of this place might show themselves. Education, perhaps, involves the invitation of children into such living ways." (p. 94)

The implications and challenge of this deeply life-affirming and impossibly terrifying truth is that in schools, this place, children spend their days coming to know certain things about life, themselves, others. I worry when I read these words. I worry about who we become through what we come to know in schools. If we begin our understanding, interpretation and living of our work thinking that every act, every conversation and every response is part of us becoming someone, that it flings itself into the future with far reaching consequences in ways we will never know, how will we know the ways of this place and will we carry ourselves here? How important are those conversations and acts? How might we want the ways of this place to show themselves? In children shooting other children? In that vicious knife fight? In a philosophical conversation about how we are to live together? In reading together, in quiet meditative times, in walking together under the trees outside? ... in how much we laugh together?

experience" (Chambers, 1985, p. 134). For me, the memory of that experience of reading *Tuck Everlasting* has haunted and wound its way through every reading, through every pedagogical act and decision in my classroom since. It has been a sort of endless re-responding, and something against which to hold all my work, all thinking and conversations with children. Now, eight years later, I remember that experience with those particular children as if it were today, this instant, so deeply is it engraved in my body and memory. I know still how it felt to sit there and listen to those children speak, to watch them struggling to find language to express their ideas, the excitement as one idea gave birth to the next and to the next, our enchantment with the story, our horror at the realizations of the terrifying and hopeful possibilities that hung in the balance: would the secrets of the water be revealed? how was it possible to stop the man in the yellow suit? would May Tuck go to the gallows? what would happen when she couldn't die? what, especially, would happen when she couldn't die - the ecological implications of this were nearly too horrifying to contemplate. I can smell the classroom and I know who was there and where each was sitting. I am bound to that moment. When I come back now to *Tuck Everlasting* and re-read it, it brings me back to that place of beginning, to a new place, and also to every place in between.

I began to understand through those experiences with children and literature that reading together is profoundly different than reading alone, that reading collectively, sharing a text and surviving it, living through it, allowing it to undo us and rewrite us publicly, is something that draws us together in a way made possible by few other experiences. How important it seems then, that we think carefully about *what* it is we read together, and how we read it, because what we read together has something to do with who we become. The language of those stories calls out to us, overtakes us. We become the language even as it becomes us. I also came to understand how

important it is to listen to the questions that emerge in that intersection between the text and our lives, those unanswerable questions, to let them just linger, to “hang out” with them. Our questions stayed with us long after we finished reading the book. They became part of us. We became someone else because of them. We don’t know what will happen when a question is asked. It is philosophy.⁹ It is creation. It is very likely that it will cause the world (as we know/read it) to unravel, to come undone, and something new emerges in its place. It is likely that we might have to respond to the world and each other in a way we did not before. We knew things we didn’t know before. No wonder those parents were so nervous and worried. Something deeply transformative was happening in that classroom as a result of that public reading of *Tuck Everlasting*.

We were all becoming someone.

The world was changing in response to our response.

We fell into the world.

It seems to me that those parents who were so afraid of language and ideas, who prefer and can morally justify the reading of Archie comics over literature, may really be deeply afraid of imagination and creativity, of all that is new and emergent, generative and evolutionary. They cannot trust the world beyond their own experience. They cannot and dare not ask any questions for fear their world, the structure(s) of their world, might crumble and in its place will be either nothing or something terrible. Through the conversations I had with these parents, I began to feel that we are human(e)ly and ethically called to pay attention to the terror some parents feel for their children going out into the world. How is it we care for their children? How is it that schools respond to and recognize this, and might the response be generous and

⁹ “Philosophy is the right to ask any question about all that we hold sacred, even and especially about reason and philosophy itself.... The ‘right to philosophy’, both to study and to teach it, to read and write, discuss and publish it, is everyone’s” (Derrida/Caputo, 1997, p. 55).

gracious? In our school's mission statement we used words such as "safe" environment, but how can we say this when there is nothing safe about what is happening in schools. Learning isn't safe. It changes us. We are called out into the world. Whether we are aware of it or not, everyone is becoming someone. Teachers are afraid of parents who are afraid of the school. And the parents are afraid of the power teachers seem to have to determine their children's lives, to choose what their children will know and won't know. Remember: *We become someone through what we know*. What I have witnessed, what sometimes seems to arise in these language/literature conflicts, is a two directional, two dimensional language of contempt. And then the parents remove their children from the school, or start their own school, or teach their children at home. They feel neither welcome nor invited into these (so-called) public spaces. How important it is to invite them into a living conversation, to speaking a multi-dimensional language, we (might be) are having about learning and life in schools. The terror they feel is very real, very rational, very justified, a mirror of the terror felt by the Foster family as they forbid Winnie to leave the white picket fence of the "touch me not" cottage. They know that if Winnie goes out into the wild world that the world will change her, that the world outside the fence is a dangerous place. They know that once Winnie goes outside the fence she will become someone else, that the world will leave a mark on her. So they keep her safe inside and let her know that the world is a frightening and dangerous place. But they cannot contain her in the end, cannot stop her from "thinking about running away" (p.4) and then breaching their stronghold and entering the world after all. Of course, the moment she enters those wild woods, Winnie Foster is promptly kidnapped and taken far away, out of reach. She is lost to them. She becomes someone: herself. And we became someone because of her.

In Salmon Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), Haroun, son of the gifted

storyteller Rashid Khalifa the Shah of Blah, questions everything. Most of Haroun's questions centre around the origin of stories: where do all his father's tales come from? how can there possibly be so many of them, an unending number? His father explains that the stories come from the Sea of Stories and that it is "much Too Complicated To Explain" (p. 17). What we learn from Haroun's story as it unfolds, and from the story of the reading of *Tuck Everlasting* in that first classroom, is the deep danger of asking questions. It can get us and everyone else around into a lot of trouble. It changes things. It opens the world to what we didn't know was there. What seemed calm, orderly, organized, falls into chaos. *We fell through*. There might be emergent patterns in the chaos, but they are always a surprise and arrive when we least expect them. We cannot plan for them, only plan to leave a space for them to come to us. If we are not willing to live in a way that is open to surprise, then we'd best not ask any questions. Haroun does not know this and one day he "asked one question too many, and then all hell broke loose" (p. 18). *All hell broke loose*. Certainly, all hell broke loose when we read *Tuck Everlasting* and this has happened to me with several novels that I have read with children since then, and to many of my colleagues as well. It is impossible to predict which stories will create this dangerous space. We don't know.

Haroun's one question too many is: "What's the point of it? *What's the use of stories that aren't even true?*" (p. 22) Is this the same question some of those parents were asking? Or was the real fear not that the stories are not true, but rather that they are deeply true, too disturbingly close to what we don't want to know about life? What would be more "true" about *Tuck Everlasting* or the other books we were reading than an Archie comic? What perhaps makes the Archie comic less frightening is that it seems to open less spaces for the asking of any real questions about this life and how

we are to live. Of course this is not "true". If we allowed it, Archie could unleash a multitude of questions. Life is everywhere and kaleidoscopic. There is less possibility of suffering a disaster if we keep our world small and contained. Haroun's hell raising question - *what's the point of so many stories if they aren't even true?* - opens a space for the possibility that things as they are understood might not be true and the world unravels as something very sinister is discovered and uncovered. The boy and his father, the storyteller, travel to a secret and hidden moon that circles the earth in an attempt to save the Sea of Stories, that place of the origins of all words and language, from being polluted by Khattam-Shud. Or worse. Khattam-Shud is attempting to plug the spring, to dam the source, completely and forever. Haroun's father explains that Khattam-Shud

is the Arch-Enemy of all Stories, even of Language itself. He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech. And because everything ends, because dreams end, stories end, life ends, at the finish of everything we use his name. "It's finished," we tell one another, "it's over. Khattam-Shud: The End". (p. 39)

The people of Khattam-Shud's country live in complete darkness. Their lips are sewn shut as a symbolic gesture against speaking, against asking questions, against the telling of stories. There is no language there. They worship an idol who has no tongue. They are able to detach themselves from their shadows. Their shadow selves are able to wander far from their bodily selves, these shadow selves, a sort of anti-self, canceling out the real. There is no space to be real there. No space to be alive. No space to be dead, either. Nothing can change. The absence of story. The absence of language. The end of everything.

I am reminded of the Tucks trying to explain to Winnie Foster why they needed to

kidnap her. They need her to understand that if she reveals the secret of the spring, of the water that grants eternal life, that it would be the end of everything, the end of change, of language, of ecology. They need her to understand what their experience has taught them: everything will fall apart if people drink from the spring. It must not happen. Life will not hold together. People will become, in Tuck's words, like "rocks by the side of the road" (Babbitt, 1975, p. 64). *Khattam-Shud, The End*. Haroun discovers that, in his factories, Khattam-Shud is manufacturing shadow stories to cancel out other stories, and with these he pollutes the waters of the Sea. The stories are silenced, muddled and disappearing. They can no longer hold together, there are no new stories, the creative integrity is lost. I read this story, now, and in memory of that experience with *Tuck Everlasting*, as a warning against the silencers of language and stories, those who would censor words; the ones the authors write and the ones we write together as we share these texts.

What is it that occurs when we read together in an open and generative way? Perhaps the sharing of stories in our classrooms, and the conversations that arise around emerging questions and ideas from them might be one of the best ways we have in schools to walk away from the Socratic tradition where teacher knows all the answers and children must play "the game of guessing what is in the teacher's head"(Chambers, 1995, p. 118)¹⁰. This distressing experience of guessing what the teacher had in mind was my own experience in school. I knew only that what was in

¹⁰ Talking about literature ... and talking about what we thought and felt while reading a book lie at the heart of all teaching of literature. Yet I have to say I find this to be the least well-handled part of all our work in classrooms - whether with adults or with the young. Two interlinked elements seem to me to determine what happens in our discussions. We bring to the talk a critical stance, our currently favoured view of literature. This predicts the kind of discussion we will generate. If we believe, for example, in the idea that there is one correct reading of a text, we will tend to lead the talk into a kind of right-or-wrong answer, a Socratic dialogue, in which the teacher knows most of the right answers and the pupil tries to give them. This is the game of guessing what is in the teacher's head, and it dominates most Western educational practice. Any pupil whose reading of the text considerably disagrees with the teacher's finds his reading disregarded" (Chambers, 1995, p. 118 - 119).

the teacher's mind was definitely not what was in my own mind. In such a practice, other stories, our own stories, other interpretations of text, the children's experience of text, are disregarded. There is only one truth and we are judged for how close we can come to that truth. Think instead, of the ways that reading together might create the space for many truths¹¹ to exist simultaneously, for new understandings to be created, for us all to know something about life and *to become someone*. Something might happen that we, through no amount of careful planning, could have foretold. Aidan Chambers (1995), writing about the act of teachers and children sharing literature together, tells us:

And finally, as a result of their corporate and shared experience, the group reconstructs the book they have all read. Thus, the final act is to become aware of the book that comprises each individual interpretation - even the author's - thereby becoming something greater than all. (p. 119)

When working with student teachers who were engaged in reading with children in classrooms, I encouraged them to let the text speak to them, to allow questions and ideas to emerge from their common readings. How do we learn to do this? How do we come to the place where we can let go of being in control of the answers? What I saw was their struggling between this, a living and generative practice, and the way they have always understood and experienced in their own schooling. I watched them imitate a lifetime of learning and experience of the teacher interpreting a text for children, through a structured questioning, a structured pattern of response, and of course, through The Method they had learned in their curriculum classes at university. *We become someone through what we know*. What I came to know through that fateful reading of *Tuck Everlasting*, was that at last, school could be completely different than I

¹¹ Derrida thinks not that literature and language have no meaning, but that there are too many meanings and that this "is not bad news" (Derrida/Caputo, 1997, p. 59).

had ever imagined it previously. I didn't know that such things could happen, even that the conversations we were having were possible. Once they became possible, every book we read opened such a space. How do we move to a place where we imagine reading together not as

an act of Socratic cross-examination but of participatory conversation, of exploring and sharing; a creative act, mutually enriching. It is an act of truly democratic proportions, never reductive to an lowest common denominator. On the contrary, when well done, the act elevates the participants to a high mutual achievement and is an example of democratic action in human affairs - as literature is the record of human experience. (Chambers, 1985, p. 119)

Reading together, understood as an act of democracy,¹² means reading must always change us, must always rewrite us, must always open a space for the asking of questions that may cause everything to shift and change, everything to fall. And we fall into the world, over and over. And life is new. *We become someone through what we know.*

¹² "Democracy survives and flourishes just to the extent that it preserves the right of all to philosophy and literature, which is the right of a democracy to criticize and correct itself, to ask any question about itself" (Derrida/Caputo, 1997, p. 59).

For Derrida, the end of democracy would mean the end of reading, and the end of philosophy - the right to ask questions about everything we hold sacred - would be the end of democracy. Although our rhetoric about schools often includes the words "democracy", I believe we have not come to terms with the implications of using this word, what it means for our work in that space. To have everything in our classrooms emerge from conversations and questions, on philosophy and literature, this would be an act of democracy. Not having stupid conversations about rules, or should we be able to chew gum or wear hats in schools, or putting up our hands to vote on such things. Those conversations are pale and meaningless compared to talking about what it means to live well as a human being with other human beings in this place and time. Literature can open up this space. We cannot help but fall into life there.

"... the human conversation about what it is to live humanly is never over, and we have a deep responsibility to protect the conditions under which that conversation can continue" (Smith, 1999, p. 109).

In the beginning there was a grade three teacher who didn't know what she was doing. Every day she tried this and that.

Now, eight years later, I can no longer recall why I chose to read *Tuck Everlasting* to that first class. I can't remember at what time during the year we read the book, nor can I remember what else we were working on at the time. What I do remember is the experience of reading *that* book with *those* children. When I hold *Tuck Everlasting* in my hands, its cover - yellow water-colour painting of the Tuck's home, Winnie and Tuck in the row boat at dusk on the pond - when I open to familiar words anywhere in the book, a sudden rush of memory is invoked. The classroom. Each of the children. Running through the woods in the wild lot next to the school. We played and hid in the waist high grass, wrote about the trees growing there, that blue blue sky arching above and beyond us, the Rocky Mountains in the distance, a piece of wilderness in the middle of the city. This book brings everything back, has become a container for memory. It is not simply words upon a page, not a simple children's story. There is something to be learned here about how stories might hold life together, bind us to certain people and places and times. Why else do we tell them? What better reason might we have for reading books with children in schools than for the ways they might hold us together in a binding integrity to life and to each other in a common place?

It seems to me now, rereading *Tuck* yet once again, that the book is also a receptacle for many truths about living this life, for the ways that our disconnection with the living earth has torn our hearts from our bodies; ecological, ethical and mythical imprints, words of connection, fossils waiting to be excavated and interpreted again and again. I read it differently now, through the layers of the past, with deeper insight into the

places the emergent and surprising questions we asked were leading us. The book opened a space for us to contemplate our responsibilities to one another, ourselves, the world. It opened the way for a meditation on understanding that every act and decision of our lives is significant and has consequences. Winnie's deciding to think about running away sets into motion a chain of events, linked not through fate but through the living and decisions of all the people in the story. Through Winnie's story, her experience with the Tucks, the spring, the man in the yellow suit, we lived the text and we learned lessons in life. Those words and our words, a gathering of time, memory, meaning, mortality. For me, these experiences and conversations opened the path for an ongoing pedagogical meditation on what schools are for, on being human there, to a commitment to thinking with children about this and to creating the kind of space where important questions might emerge. We might call this ethics, or we might just call it living well (as well as we can) in this time, today.

What really bothered the *Archie comic parents* perhaps, was not so much the fact that the story is about "Eternal Life Without God", but that it is about fragility and mortality, the passing of life, the coming of life, beginnings and endings. That such ideas have a place in a grade three classroom challenges conventional and popular notions of curriculum and schooling, and challenges our ideas about morality and ethics and what place conversations about these might have in a school. The importance of our reading of *Tuck Everlasting* was that it pushed against the boundaries of what *seems* possible in a grade three classroom. Our reading and our experience of language, our own language, our philosophical conversation, pushed "against the impossible" (Derrida/Caputo, p. 58).¹³ This text brought us both in language and bodily into experiences of this impossible earth. It is always too big for us. There is always too

¹³ "If philosophy is a questioning that pushes against the limits of language and knowledge, that is no less true of literature and of its experience of language; both philosophy and literature push against the impossible" (Derrida/Caputo, 1997, p. 58).

much to know. *Life* is impossible. No matter how much we try to define and hold and figure things out, they are always eluding, mysteriously and elusively slipping past us as our language and experience refuse to be stable and fixed. If schooling becomes an attempt to reduce daily living to the believable and possible, then such an experience as we had with *Tuck* could be considered dangerous and terrifying, as much as it was exciting. If knowledge and learning are considered something done to us, something given to us in school, separate from ourselves and our engagement in the world, rather than something that undoes us over and over, transforming us, then such an experience as we had with this text is indeed impossible. What happened with that text was, then, an act of defiance, like Winnie's act of defiance, climbing over the white picket fence into the wild world, an act of transformation, of climbing into the earth, of coming close to life, to decay, of climbing into what is impossibly coming rather than into what already (possibly) is.

While thinking about these earthly beginnings and endings, another story, Isobelle Carmody's (1996) "Long Live the Giant", comes to mind. Borth, a god, is placed on trial by his immortal race for the creation of humans - beings they see as imperfect, flawed, mortal. Borth has created humans from a type of clay used only for practice, a clay that decays and falls apart when exposed to sunlight, a clay into which the gods are forbidden to breathe life. To the gods, Borth's humans appear greedy, violent, destructive. To the other gods, the mortal decaying humans' lives seem useless, filled with a pointless misery. Standing before his peers, Borth defends his creation against these charges, pointing out the gifts that imperfection has brought them and what he has learned from humans:

In spite of all that, they create, just as we do. They create beauty in their music and their words, in paintings and buildings and sculptures. They make for

themselves a bittersweet immortality. Think of it! *No other race we have created, creates! ...*

It is their fear of death, and their knowledge of its inevitability, that gives them such transcendent power.... [They] have a fleeting second - a minute lightness between birth and death which is their lives - yet they exist like a nova exploding in the infinite darkness of space. Our lives are dim candles beside theirs, for we have no passion, and our creations are as cold and perfect and lifeless as we ourselves have become. (p. 146)

In the judgment of his peers, the immortal Borth is sentenced to mortality, given "the gift of death" (p.147), and sent to live amongst his imperfect and mortal "monsters", his own body to die and return to the clay of the earth. The earth takes Borth in with a generous gesture.

Like Borth pointing out that it is the knowledge of mortality, a move away from perfection, that opens the space for life filled with creativity and passion, like Tuck telling Winnie the story of the lifelessness and loss of immortality and living separated from the earth, these stories remind us that we are always part of the earth and that we must understand ourselves that way. In reading the story we experience the suffering of the Tucks, their profound loss and disconnection with life. One of the children thought that what the Tucks had was "worse than dead". Death is what they desire but they have become unbound from both time and life, cast out of any meaningful possibility of movement, transformation and unpredictability. Their world no longer has anything impossible about it. In their unbinding immortality, the Tucks suffer the greatest possible loss. Nothing new is ever coming. Separation from the living earth. A distancing of eternal, immortal proportions. It is the kind of totalizing closure desired by Khattam-Shud in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* when he attempts to dam the source of language, the kind of "totalizing closure" (Derrida/Caputo, p. 61) that would be

brought about by the end of reading, which would mean the end of democracy, the end of the impossibility of anything new. How could we read if we didn't want to experience life's passing, if we didn't want to be taken apart by it, if we didn't want to be continuously transformed by language and the experience of stories? Reading is agonizing and difficult *and* lovely. We don't know what will happen to us. While reading *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), later, with another group of children, one student shared during a conversation that what she finds both difficult and wonderful about reading is that it is like looking at life through a one-way mirror. We are able to look into another world and experience it and live there, and it changes us. From our journey, we come back different every time. We have to be prepared for that. We have to be ready to meet life there.

I worry about the way our school buildings and life in the cities separates us from any experience of the living, changing earth, from the experience of earth time and mortal time; we forget that this air we breathe comes from somewhere, that this paper we write on and carelessly throw away was once a tree, that this electricity we burn comes from this coal (ancient plants crushed by eons of earth weight) we have ripped from the ground and from this river we have dammed that was once water raining and snowing from this sky we play under, that this person who stands before us has a life story completely different from our own. We talk about the cycles of life in science, but how often do we actually experience them with our bodies? When I took my students camping, there were several who had never been outside the city limits. The city was their white picket fence. They had not had the experiences of playing freely in the fresh open air under a boundless sky stretched wide from horizon to horizon, of floating down a river on their backs, of smearing sun-warmed mud on their bodies, of just sitting alone and quiet under the stars. And I worry that the experience of school not

only separates us from the earth and a bodily memory and knowledge of it, but may also separate us from one another. It is easy to be enemies in the cramped school building governed by human time and rules ringing bells, by competition and government exams and lists of linear competencies that say what we should know at certain ages and something is wrong with us if we don't. It might be easy to think we are immortal in those school buildings, to suffer the loss of creativity and passion, the loss of our connection with one another, the loss of our ecological memory, the loss of any remembrance of our frailty and mortality. I have noticed again and again that children who are not friends at school suddenly play together when they are outside. Barriers fall back. *We fall in.* The world is so big. There is more than space enough for us all. From stories we learn something about the significance and meaning of time in our lives, earth time and human time, our mortality. But it is more than that. There is something about reading *Tuck Everlasting* and other books, something emerges through that experience of reading together, that brings to us an experience of the ecology of life and our belonging to this earth, that calls to us for another way to think about time and our lives and this world we share as our home. We remember what we know.¹⁴ Remember: *We become someone through what we know.*

In a recent newspaper I noticed a large photograph of a class of Kindergarten children sitting in rows at computer stations. I am not so sure that this is an image or an accomplishment we should be celebrating. We might wonder both what these children are coming to know and who they are becoming through that knowing. Haunted by the picture of the children's still bodies sitting on hard chairs in front of monitors, I find this

¹⁴ How are memory and life held in the gravity of this earth, this universe? What do we lose in forgetting our profound ecological connections to the past, perhaps so far back as to be the dis-astered remnants of exploding stars; a kaleidoscope of memory calls for a deep understanding of what it means to live here, today, to be part of the movement of the earth, the memory of life held in everything and everywhere, in this body, these plants, this water, this river. "The river's every movement recollects every movement it has ever made, every nearly silent splash and jostled rush forward both recalls and foretells other movements" (Kuberski, 1992, p. 131).

a rather alarming image (even if the picture were of adults my terror would not be diminished), a remembrance of the factories of the industrial revolution. Although it certainly may be a way of controlling wildness - a white picket fence of technology! - what those children were doing there strikes me as profoundly undemocratic. Each of them was sitting isolated (*a computer for every child...*) from one another. I wonder if we could say anything about them participating in the creation of something new when they are interacting with what has already been created for them. It seems to me that what we do when we read together is something entirely different than sitting by ourselves at computer stations (or sitting by ourselves at our desks working on work that already has predetermined answers). What I saw in that photograph was an image of separating children from life, from each other. I saw the terror of the future, the terror that we will not be ready for it whenever it comes and that children are being "prepared" for whatever it is that we don't know is coming. I saw the impulse to compress and suppress what is lively and lovely, the loss of a sense of wonder in the world. The photo was, for me, an example of the ways an effort to contain, control and discipline children blinds us to the possibility of the new - new eyes, new ears, new minds, a new text. The children at the computers seemed stuck, like Tuck and Winnie sitting in the pond, the rowboat drifted firmly against a tree while life flows by and changes all around them.

After the Tucks have kidnapped Winnie and taken her home with them, they try to convince her that she must never, ever reveal the secret of the spring to anyone. They try to show her the consequences of immortality, of sipping that water, what it means that they have been cast out of the possibility of being, disconnected from the gravity of the earth's memory. When that child referred to the Tucks' lives as "worse than dead", she was talking about a kind of limbo, a time and place neither here nor there. Tuck

takes Winnie out onto the pond in a row boat. Winnie feels brave because she is still sure that the man in the yellow suit saw them take her and will come to rescue her. While they sit, still in the dusk light in the living pond, the boat wedged tight and unmoving against a fallen tree, with that water flowing past them, Tuck tries to show Winnie how the stream gathers and remembers life but is never the same twice, how the earth always pulls itself back to itself, how gravity holds our feet to this ground and that being human is part of this. We should walk upon it as often as possible so we don't forget life. As they paddle in the evening twilight, he tells Winnie:

Know what that is, all around us, Winnie? ... Life. Moving, growing, changing, never the same two minutes together. This water, you look out at it every morning, and it *looks* the same, but it ain't. All night long it's been moving, coming in through the stream back there to the west, slipping out through the stream down east here, always quiet, always new, moving on. (p. 61)

Tuck continues to explain to her,

It's a wheel, Winnie. Everything's a wheel, turning and turning, never stopping. The frogs is part of it, and the bugs, and the fish, and the wood thrush, too. And people. But never the same ones. Always coming in new, always growing and changing, and always moving on. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's the way it *is*. (p. 62)

As Winnie watches the life of the pond flow around and past them, as she listens to Tuck, she suddenly, for the first time in her life, realizes that she is going to die someday. "It was a certainty" (p. 63). She speaks for the first time in their time together: "I don't want to die." And Tuck responds to her:

But dying's part of the wheel, right there next to being born. You can't pick out

the pieces you like and leave the rest. Being part of the whole thing, that's the blessing. But it's passing us by, us Tucks. Living's heavy work, but off to one side, the way *we* are, it's useless, too. It don't make sense. If I knowed how to climb back on the wheel, I'd do it in a minute. You can't have living without dying. So you can't call it living, what we got. We just are, we just be, like rocks beside the road. (p. 63-64)

Tuck's words, this heavy vision of mortality, the fragility of life, the belongingness of these things in the story of our lives, came at us with a rush in that classroom. These are the things we contemplated in our conversations, in our writing, in the woods when we watched the summer's passing and recorded these events in our notebooks. This, in contrast to a curriculum that generally does not acknowledge life's passing nor remember that "living's heavy work", that attempts to make living into an organized lesson plan reducible to supposedly achievable goals and objectives. During my undergraduate studies in education one of our mandatory courses was taught through the university's nursing department. In this course we "learned" that it is important to "teach" young children about death, as if such a thing is possible, and that the best way might be to have pets in our classrooms so that if the beloved pets died we could address the "issue" of death with children. The rationale for such a conversation eludes me still. The course caused several students extreme discomfort although we could not name the reasons at the time. We knew something was not right. It was not until long after, when I had lived with children in classrooms, that I understood the ways life's heaviness is silenced, brushed over and forgotten, death dare not cross this threshold of the school - ah, but it does - and we live with this, just as Winnie struggles with "the anguish of all these things" (Babbitt, p. 64). In our hearts we carry the death of a child's mother, a teacher's child, our own families, the suicide of a colleague, the murder of a child. We try to find room for these things. And still, the walls of the place seem to somehow hold out against a daily living with the knowledge of our mortality,

our part in this ecology of life, our walking on this earth.

When we would go outside and play under the blue blue sky in those precious trees near our school yard, we experienced the birth and death of that year, the leaves falling, the bright snow and stark cold in the windsharp winter, and the new leaves and waist-high grass in which we hid in the spring. In the children's writing, especially in their poetry, I saw their words revealing their already intimate knowledge with the beginnings and endings of life. That life comes to an end, they know this *already*. They know so much already. This may be what caused our discomfort in our nursing class. I think we already suspected that there were things (most things) that we could not teach children, that in fact this might not be at all what our work should be about, that there was nothing important we could really "teach" them, only this experience of living life together and seeking to understand what that means. The arrogance of thinking we know what and how to teach children blinds us to understanding what they already know about life, to the possibility of creating a place where life emerges through our living. If everything is preprescribed and preplanned, if we don't open a space for openness, if we think that we must teach children about life, we will never know what they already know. Reading literature together seems to bring us to a space where children can say what they already know about life, the stories reminding us of our living and all the beginnings and endings we are already experiencing.

In the story of Borth, the god tried for creating humans, Awen-Du, the storyteller and a human witness at the trial, speaks of her own life as she faces her death: "life is sweet to me, it has a beauty that brings me to tears. Sometimes it has such radiance that it fills my soul and pains me sweetly. That is something the immortals can never know or feel" (Carmody, 1996, p. 148). Awen-Du believes that the immortals have no stories

because they have no concepts of endings: "How dreary for them, poor things" (p. 149). And with these words she ends the story. How often in a school day do we experience life with a radiance that fills our souls, pains us sweetly? How often are we overcome with a beauty that moves us to tears? This did happen to us when we read *Tuck Everlasting*. I have experienced this while reading many novels with children since, living together, beginning, ending, beginning, ending. Sometimes in schools it seems we pretend there are no endings, and we reach for immortality, this preparation for the unknowable future, this rush to get ready for it, to beat others to it. As if we are trying to guarantee something. But nothing in this life has a guarantee, especially not this lovely earth, these mortal lives. What difficulties this causes us to bring such a consumeristic attitude of permanence and lasting into this place, when everything is fragile and passing, ending and beginning. Imagine if we put a guarantee on the school experience. But perhaps this is what many people are looking for and hoping for: a guarantee of children's future success, of their ability to thrive in a fairly hostile world, hostile to anything that is categorized as not "excellent" and "able" by definitions which exclude most. The kind of standards and criteria we place upon curriculum and child development seems to be a violence of the worst kind through exclusion and a guarantee of lack of success for many. It often seemed to me that the success and ability to thrive at all in this world were far away and had not much to do with the daily lived lives of the children in my classroom. The popular conversation about schooling, the language and actions of the ministries of education, seem an attempt to formulate an "unassailable position" (Miller, 1994, p. 268), a sort of dominance over nature, survival of the fittest hierarchy outside of time, outside of ecology, outside of any kind of ethical relationships and responsibility to other human beings or to this earth. If we create a place that enables us to live without obligation to another, where our relationships are based on competition and standardized

measurements, we can create a place that allows us to avoid vulnerability or the admission of our own frailty, a place to avoid thinking about living with compassion and justice and what that means for our living together.¹⁵ This is not living. It is more like Tuck's rowboat, stuck against the tree, never moving along with the current of life, the kind of life the Tucks suffer, what that child referred to as "worse than dead".

The turning point for Winnie Foster is that ecological moment in the rowboat with Tuck. She suddenly finds herself in the grasp of obligation. She is bound to life, to the Tucks and to the living, moving earth. She is ripped out of her touch-me-not cottage and seized by the world. Life comes crashing in on her the moment she realizes her own mortality and the ways she is part of life beyond her own body. She is taken apart and comes undone. She is new after. She is called by something beyond herself. She is connected to something larger than herself, her circle of self-interest shattered forever. The novel did this to us as we read, took us apart, put us back together, we were new after. Winnie realizes something about ethicality, the call of justice in the world, that

¹⁵ Living ethically might be understood as coming face to face with our mortality and frailty in such a way that we are able to give up our desire to stand above other human beings, giving up the need for control and safety and predictability. It is the place we come to understand our deep connections with this living earth, that we are part of it all. "In this death of the desire to be unassailable, and this wakening to the other as other that makes it possible, occurs the turn, the reversal, the conversion that institutes the ethical relationship. By relinquishing the attempt to secure an unassailable position for oneself, one ceases living as if one's own ontological preservation were the primary good to which all others are subordinate Abandoning this project entails a radical and irreparable disruption of the economy of self-interest" (Miller, 1994, p.268). This is what John Caputo calls a shattering of our circle of self-interest, the place where we hear the call of justice, the call of obligation that binds us to others and to life. "Obligation is not one more thing I comprehend and want to do, but something that intervenes upon and disrupts the sphere of what the I wants, something that troubles and disturbs the I, that pulls the I out of the circle of the same" (Caputo, 1993, p. 8). Obligation is not something that belongs to us, rather we belong to it, we are bound to it - "As soon as I come to be I am already in its grasp" (Caputo, 1993, p. 7). This is the place of compassion, the living manifestation of the realizations that "you and I are the same thing" and at the same time that "I am not you and you are not me" (Loori, 1996, p. 234). Without this understanding we are always in the position to violate others because we do not see them as separate from our own selves, they do not exist, we can suppress the call of the ethical. This openness to our fragility and giving up control is "the end of the world founded on the arche of self-interest and the emergence of all others in their otherness: it is something like the beginning of a million different universes, none of which is, or ever will be, under our control. From each of them there issues a call to justice that we are capable of hearing only if we remain in that condition of destitution to which deconstruction brings us" (Miller, p. 270).

she is responsible for far more in life than just herself, that she is obliged to the world, to time beyond her own living - and in a sense, with this decision she must make about the spring and who will know about it, the weight of the world rests upon her (as it always does with such decisions). She could not have responded otherwise, her obligation to the earth and to the Tucks transcended any obligation she had to her family, her home, their land, to anything known or defined as justice. Her obligation to the "wheel of life" demanded her response. It grabs her and shatters her circle of self-interest. We don't know if everything - all life - hinges on the moment of our decisions. Perhaps this novel teaches us that we should live as if this is how things are.

In the beginning, *Tuck* provided an excuse to go outside and observe life (I probably made some vague connection to science), but once I began to notice what happened to children when we went outside, we spent more and more time there as a living part of our days together. Sometimes work and sometimes play. And what's the difference anyway? How important it seems that we leave the stiff, immovable walls of our classrooms and those musty carpets behind, that we spend time outside under the sky, our feet in the earth, walking, time to be quiet. There are things we can't talk about. We don't need to *talk* about mortality - the way we were asked to do in our nursing course - or even about how we are connected to life. Are there ever enough words for this? We only need to walk there and wonder at these leaves, this film of ice on the puddle that crackles under our feet, the roughness of the bark on the trees and the caterpillars that crawl there, our bodies running.

And then there are things we can talk about. In our classroom, those moving conversations and writing we shared about this novel brought us to the place where we knew more about each other. The fragility of life. A boy who lived through a war in

terror, waiting for a missile to strike his bathroom hideaway. This became part of our collective memory as much as did the reading of *Tuck*. When we are face to face with other people, and also with the frailty and fragility and utter beauty of this life, when we walk outside and remember the ways we are called back to the earth, then the whole educational endeavor looks quite different. Most of what we do in schools begins to seem completely ridiculous. And we come face to face with the folly of some of our struggles that matter so little in the broader scope of time and life, the evolving life on this planet, the daily life of the humans who live together here. How we *can* live together becomes important there. What it means for us to gather here in a room together, daily, for a year, becomes important. A place for memory, a holding together of life, we are bound.

We had read other books before *Tuck Everlasting*. I can't remember which. But I do remember every single novel I have read with children in all the years since then. The reading of that novel fundamentally altered my understanding of teaching, literature, life perhaps, and especially of the kinds of relationships we have with children and what we are doing in classrooms. Our conversations made us free. I become unbound from narrow readings of curriculum and the purpose of schools, always and ever since seeking to live with children in the margins, spaces and possibilities that emerged before us. This is hard work. This is the heavy work of life. For all of us together in that classroom it was the beginning of some difficult philosophical conversations, of seeking a way of living and being together, of living and learning together, a space to play. Our conversation pointed to the slipperiness of language and living and the one thing we knew for certain was that there is no final answer to those questions the story made us ask. The one thing I knew for certain was that this was something that needed to happen every single day in school. This

opening. This following of the undetermined, not preordained path. Over time I came to understand that the only way to plan was to prepare as far as possible for all the surprising moments not planned for. This living in creative spaces and opening the way for them is not something coming from nothing, but a "radical openness" (Smith, 1999, p. 21 - 22)¹⁶ to *impossibility* and to what might emerge.

On what understanding of knowledge and learning are the ways decisions about what kinds of classrooms children will be coming into made? To what understandings of life and time are we bound? Is there space for generosity, compassion, love, for walking with our feet on the earth?

The children are coming.

Now what was she supposed to do?

Now what was she supposed to do? This seems to me now, to be the very question that any and every act of pedagogical discernment calls for. Now. Now what am I going to do? This question calls for a watchfulness and a carefulness beyond watching and care. Now. Right now. Today. For these children, in this moment, what am I going to do? In our decisions about our work, about what our classrooms will be like, we are timebound, to these children, to this moment, to this now, and also to the interpretable past and the unknowable, boundless future. We cannot know what will happen today. As we live our lives together in classrooms, we probably fail to be as generous and loving as we hope. But it seems worth it. Living is heavy work. We can't know if we are making the right decision or what the consequences will be. Like

¹⁶ One begins to understand how pedagogical confidences learned in one's teacher training may have only limited application in the face of any classroom's true complexity; and that dealing with that complexity requires not yet another recipe for control, but precisely the opposite, namely a radical openness to what is actually happening therein, in the lives and experiences of both students and oneself, and an ability to deal with all of it somehow on its own unique terms. (Smith, 1999, p. 21 - 22)

Winnie Foster, perhaps we carry the future of the world on our shoulders with each one. Seems like an ethical way to live. Seems like the only way to live.

There can be no absolutes: no absolute good or evil; no absolute way of living.
No absolute truth. All truths are mediated and tempered by the fact of living.
Being alive qualifies all things.
(Ben Okri, 1997, p. 54)

one

This hallway, filled with mysterious tongues of memory. Who hears who? See all these children speaking so many different languages. Wonder about this. Do their new tongues cause them to forget, to drift, to come apart, to lose their past, to come undone. Sometimes it seems so. What are they connected to? Where are they at home? Where do they find themselves in this building? Where can they bury their roots in this earth? What binds them to life? When will their exiles end? Do they hear the call of their ancestry? Will they be able to answer it? When will they know those stories that have been so long forgotten but are woven through their bodies carrying secrets they don't even know? And the school building becomes haunted with a thousand untold tales, waiting, silent, speechless. This archeology of ancestral memory. A haunting. We only think we can ignore it. Ghost lips sewn together¹⁷.

two

We learn about geology. The curriculum tells us to do this. It gives us language: tectonic, volcanic eruption, plates, limestone, earthquake, pressure, continental drift, fossils, evolution. Then, the curriculum comes to life. It writes itself. While we study and marvel at the power of crushing, crumpling continents we forget and remember this instant of our own lives, an unearthing of a story that came before what we know and brought us here. Where we might have come from. We catch a glimpse of it and wonder at life.

¹⁷ Remember Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). The people in the place of darkness who have their lips sewn together. The end of language. The end of stories. Full stop. Totalizing closure and complete silencing. Forever. *Khattam-Shud*. The end. The end of it all. We must uncover and recover our political, historical and ecological memories, to understand these lives we live together. We must know all the children's stories. They mustn't be silenced by our silence, ignorance, curriculum, goals, objectives or learning outcomes.

three

We also learn about the universe. The curriculum says we must. But it did not tell us to sit in this fantastic blow-up planetarium that touches the library roof and whisper our horoscopes to one another. Suddenly we are free, again. And we sit there under the glowing arch of the western sky and read stories to each other. It is magic. Then we sit under the glowing stars of the eastern sky. More magic. More stories. We forget about everything. The school is gone. Everyone else is gone. We only have the planetarium on loan for one week. We stay in there nearly a whole day, full of precious time. Then we go get the kindergarten class and share this wonder with them. No one speaks as the stars on the tent's dome spin through a thousand and one nights right before our eyes. And we remember that story, from our mathematical conversations, about the Babylonians building their tower towards the sky, magical mystical numbers failing them in the end, or perhaps they discovered something we have not yet imagined, and we know why they did this, this reaching. And we feel like we know them, lights calling to us from time far away.

four

This faint starlight. We walk under it when we go camping. Inhale this sweet air. This earth. We walk upon it. Remembrance of time reaching across fossilized time, layers compressed by those gathering over, we excavate memory through an erosion of forgetfulness. Calling out for beginnings. Illuminations of eternity. And in the darkness, the swallowing black hole, time and space the singularity, at once. We know something about infinity here, that time slips past itself, that there is a point where time and space become undefinable and even light is swallowed. If we could go there we might know everything, our mortal bodies would be torn apart. Imagine. Compressed points of living, each a beginning and an ending, free falling through something that is

not space. It might be love.¹⁸ Our broken hearts crushed in these layers of life are ground by memory and return to the earth. Gravity calls and we are bound to life. A trace is always left. Fossil stories waiting.

five

And these infinite intricacies, these lovely layers.¹⁹ “The tectonic layers of our lives rest so tightly on top of the other that we always come up against earlier events in later ones, not as matter that has been fully formed and pushed aside, but absolutely present and alive” (Schlink, 1998, p. 217). Guard against the stitching of lips. Here. Today. The memories that rush over us. The ways our lives brush together. That space between the human beings that we are, our histories and the geologies of our lives, and those images of what school is or should be. In that space, life happens. *The children are coming*. Uncovered and remembered.

¹⁸The only thing worth living for is love. Love for one another. Love for ourselves. Love of our work. Love of our destiny, whatever it may be. Love for our difficulties. Love of life.... The love that can make us breathe again. Love of a great and beautiful cause, a wonderful vision. A great love for one another, or for the future. The love that reconciles us to ourselves, to our simple joys, and to our undiscovered repletion. A creative love. A love touched with the sublime.” (Okri, 1997, p. 57)

the boys baptize their bodies
with mud down by the river, their white
teeth and eyes flashing with laughter and hysteria
and as they stomp and slosh and
unsettle the earth the softening mud
rises, squishing through
their toes, past
their ankles, half-way
to their knees and with
mudballs flinging and slinging and clinging in their hair
they wave mud-gloved hands hey! look at us!
then they float silently, faces to the warming sun, drifting
with the current that runs through the prairie and on down
all the way to
the mississippi
clean and free

starlight ruminations and windwhipped sandstone silty river swimming

64

After marshmallows smoky fire and hot chocolate too much sun and journal writing we walk in the nightbright moonlight seeking solitary space one by one the places call us off the path carcass of a deer ribs flesh blood bone flies surprises us around the corner and we sit on the edge of cliffs edge of the earth feet dangling dangerously quiet and alone but not really the night is loud and full and comes to meet us here we abandon ourselves to stars infinity strands us on this ancient shore laying on fossil layers of beach crushed sand we are swallowed and time bound where does it end and the prairie grass exhales sweet air caresses us good night.

Six weeks after being hospitalized with a mystery infection he comes back to school. A cortisoned steroidal chipmunk, a hugely puffed balloon towing a squeaky oxygen tank behind him, those rubber tubes a harness binding him to breath, cutting lines into his cheeks as they lead in to his nose. No matter where we are in the room we can hear that wheeze and are reminded that we nearly lost our friend. He is different. He used to laugh a lot, not serious about anything. And now, when he looks at us, his eyes peel our souls and leave them raw and sore and open to life.

Tall, she walks, proud elegance
hands and feet henna-stained,

head wrapped in scarves.
When the boys are gone

she shows us her
hair.

Smiling white teeth
laughing

She smiles, all day.
Smile: always.

But what we
can't see,

certain bruises.
By life and stories

she cannot tell.
She smiles

when we visit the zoo,
when she tells us about

the giraffes running
free.

But nothing else.
Nothing about

her running.
Nothing about

her father,
where is he?

Not a single
word

about her home.
If you can

call a seven year
stay

in a refugee camp
home.

Her wrist watch chants calls to Mecca,
this novelty makes her an instant hit

with everyone
not to mention that smile,

always.
But what about

those stories she cannot tell.
Maybe

the next generation
will hear them

and our
children's children

will remember.
This story of life.

About united nations
danger lists and people

running across borders
away, so far

we can't even imagine
thedeathshowmanywedon'tevenknow.

Knowing what we
do not.

She needs not to
be written

by this
forgetfulness story

our curriculum tells.
It crumbles to dust

under our fingers
and erases her.

The classroom door is ajar, we couldn't close it if we wanted to because, with sweet marijuana breath, a child swings on the door handle, back and forth she rocks, unfocused eyes and a lopsided grin she's actually kind of sweet like this, her usual bad temper somehow reversed to silly sloppiness, I had already instructed the student teacher to ignore the child, promised I'd take care of any disturbances, for this was her evaluation day, that one day she had to prove herself worthy of this profession, of being able to handle any situation, of having clear goals objectives outcomes and achieving them with perfect elegance and grace, afterwards getting an evaluation letter that apparently is her ticket to future employment, so I hang out at the back of the room, near the door, and the university practicum supervisor makes eye contact, raises her eyebrows at me - a challenge - what are you going to do? and I grin and shrug at her and I wonder what she's thinking, maybe she understands, I think, maybe she understands, I hope, Why don't you suspend her? she says, later, Where would she go? I respond, Just where do you think she should go? and besides this swinging back and forth on the door handle is nothing compared to the scene we'd have if we tried to do something, the children are used to ignoring her and staying out of her way anyway and she might learn something she seems to be listening back there after all, isn't it ironic that from the windows of this classroom we get a full view of the nearby back alley where an enormous cannabis leaf is brightly-green painted on someone's garage door, our school is near the airport and a few days ago when we came into the classroom someone looked out the window and laughed - hey! look at that! - scavenged boards from the construction yard spelled out F-U-C-K across the field, huge bold letters, pine two-by-fours accented on spring-greening grass, yelling up to the airplanes taking off over the earth noisily passing by so close overhead that if our windows were open we couldn't hear each other talking, who would think of doing such a thing, even the teacher had to laugh, it was cleaned up pretty quick, more quickly than all the other unsightly garbage scattered around the neighborhood for at least the last eternity, but anyway the student teacher got a good evaluation and the child recovered her usual grouchiness within hours and was suspended from school after all for swearing or disturbing people, you know, the usual, just another ordinary day.

long and lovely
black waving cascade
brushes waist swinging
pride once upon a time, that was,
but now it falls out
on the floor in the brush in the bed on the clothes
and she tells the teacher but please please don't tell anybody else

in the classroom after school we
braid it brush it bundle it
what is left of it that is
she hangs her head upside down
 (- can you see? she says
 - yes, i tell her, but we will try to hide it
 what are you going to do if more falls out, i ask her
 wouldn't it be better just to tell your friends?
 -don't know, she says, i am afraid
 they will laugh, she says, they might laugh)

we try another way
and another

here is a problem:
gymnastics time so fun and she is very very good and she wants to flip and jump and
cartwheel routines together but upside down force of gravity unveils scalp, hairless
and shiny underneath, by her ears, by her neck, at the top of her head, more and more
falling out everyday

she tries to wear a cap at school but of course this is against the rules and another
student rap star a la L.A. Tupac Shakur in cool-black-shades and rip-off Nike track

pants always on the hunt for hypocrisy grabs hat off her head throws it across room
and raps out favour-girls-and-before-you-were-racist-teachers-why-can't-
boys-wear-hats-too-you-are-so-sexist-fuckin-stupid-school-oppresses-us
or something like that, i've heard it all before, every day diffuse potential and
remind him that i am always and forever blind to their hats and i laugh at him and wave
and tell him to go away, time to go home, bye! he laughs too and leaves, no hard
feelings but of course this does not solve the immediate problem of gravity and beauty

and then it is the end of the year and we all move on
and i don't know about her hair now
only remember the heavy shiny blackness of it in my hands
and the tears on her face
life sometimes isn't what we deserve, not happily
or ever after

Spring fever in the sunshine, under
the dappling trees canopy,
the grade sixes marry each other.

I do I do I do!

And they come back after recess
holding hands and
laughing about
who kissed who
today.

note:

did you like it when
we got you up your ass when
you were bent over the bicycle
handlebar?

voice:

c'mere baby ya know ya shouldn't wear that shirt 'cause it turns me on oh
baby i can't control myself no more be careful careful baby just be careful

hand:

i take your
legs your breasts i touch
you
here you are mine

note:

we bent you
over the bicycle handlebar
when we got you up your ass
did you like it

did you like it did you like it did you did you did you

eyes:

crying
no

interruption
knocks rudely
breaking open silent space

dragged reluctantly from
this sweet word place,
I answer

at the door
a girl dangles
like a naughty kitten, caught
by the scruff of her neck
in the phys. ed. teacher's hand

unnoticed
she had slipped
so silently
out the open window

out
out
out

into the enemy camp
the phys.ed teacher,
dressed in battle gear
grandiose nose in air
his face so red
he says:
a defector

a traitor caught
out of control
outofcontroloutofCONTROL

a small bit of mirth
must have escaped in my turned up mouth
wrinkles by eye
body, not angry enough

Now he is angry.

in the principal's office
the phys.ed. teacher's face is redder
and redder
and most impossibly, more red still
and he stabs at me
his finger
points sharply
jabbing

outside
on THAT chair
she awaits her fate
distraught sobbing
catching her breath
until our eyes connect
through glass windows
raised brows
and a wink
bring relief

the principal
witness to this silent exchange

smiles
eyes betray
polite coughing behind
her raised hand

three generations of good girls
mock the mad man
smile at one another
laughter scarce contained
bubbling up
at thoughts
of her slipping through
that open space
breaking through
and sliding down

the flowering earth below
called out
and received her gently

he brings a jacket for another boy a layer of warmth against the shivering cold wind
biting snow blue fingers and only a thin sweatshirt, a piece of himself to wrap an other,
a gift freely given, a kindness, a goodness, let's call it love, responding to this world:
"don't worry, it's extra," he says, "don't worry, i don't need it anymore, you can keep it"
the same boy later comes to school with a hunting knife concealed in his backpack
secret weapon, waiting, hidden fury, explosive response to this world
(ready to kill, oh yes, he admits it, he was gonna do it, oh yeah, believe it)
and he is outoutout forever banished exiled Out Of Here
we never ever see him again
just think how many people we are at once and how
we should remember that jacket, that generous gesture

The snow, so beautiful. Someone
has built an ice-slide on the side of the hill at the edge
of the field. The world is calling us out.

Narrowed squinted eyes look at the pile
of old photocopy paper boxes. They are
teenage skeptics, very cool,
skater jeans and high heels.

Come on! Let's go! The sun is shining!

Sliding down the ice-slide on their cardboard toboggans.
Laughing. More join in from spectator positions, crowd
more than possible onto a flattened box, the ones
who don't fit push with open hands, faster
and faster, until their feet
slide out from under them
they all fall together,
a heap, laughing loudly.

See those hands and bodies touching
in the midst of all this movement sliding falling laughing.
Inside they are
enemies. Sitting in separate spaces they
do not see each other, they
do not hear the others' words. Out here,
an intimate gesture under
the blue sky, separation swallowed,
for awhile.
The boundaries cannot hold.

Post-Script:

Afterward, soggy flattened boxes flung
into the big blue dumpster behind the school.

One boy wants to keep his box. *Please,*
he says, *please let me take this sled home with me.*

I want to come back after supper. And then
this 14 year old, who was in jail this year, *skips*
down the street toward home, smiling,
gripping his dripping cardboard. Learning
to slide down ice-slides on boxes must
be somewhere in the curriculum.

I know it. I just can't remember
the page number.

do you blame him for his
tears
and those shaking hands
do you put a big

X

on his work
a big X
on his life *needs improvement and try harder and
concentrate more and a little more effort required*
or

do his eyes remind you of
gulf black out scud missiles
earth shaking on fire, friendly fire that is, all around while
for three weeks
he lived in a bathroom
on the Iraqi - Saudi border

be certain that every cell in
his body
remembers

1. rat

Templeton was up on the top shelf, safe in his cage, perhaps running on his exercise wheel. To be honest, I didn't like him too much. The sight of his long ropey tail disgusted me; also there was simply something bothersome and unnerving about his beady, dark, watchful eyes and his all-too-human paws gripping the cage bars. There was something too intelligent and too lonely in the way he quietly observed everything, as if he were simply biding his time.

Templeton belonged to one of the children in the class, a gift from this boy's cousin in BC. The children who didn't mind that ropey tail would take Templeton out of the cage and cuddle him, sometimes encouraging him to clamber up their arms, onto their shoulders where he would perch, king of the world. On the day in question he was on the top shelf as he had been distracting us, kicking paper and wood chips out of his cage, a frantic entertainment. I always wondered if Templeton did this performance on purpose and with intent, as that is how it seemed.

Fifteen minutes before the day's end, while enjoying the novel we were reading aloud together, a sudden interruption: a man in an official looking uniform struts importantly into the classroom, without knocking, as if this is his space and not ours. I stop reading and my eyes look poison daggers at him to say how unhappy I am with the impoliteness of this intrusion. But, my mouth smiles and sweetly asks, "Can we help you?"

I see from his uniform that he is not a cop, just dropping by to surprise some delinquent youth, but then who? He opens his mouth, without smiling, such a serious and deep voice meant to impress, he asks: "Is there a rat in this room?"

Silenced by the sudden realization that other adults would dare walk into a classroom, *as if* it were their own space, *as if* it doesn't matter, *as if* they weren't interrupting anything of any importance, *as if* no one would be upset by their presence, *as if* they

couldn't wait for 15 minutes until the bell rang, I decide to be as unhelpful as possible.

"A rat?" I repeat, frowning as if I am not exactly sure what that is (aha! sudden recognition, the animal by-law officer). The children play along, protecting Templeton by not looking toward the shelf.

Obviously not fooled by my innocence, he tries again: "I *know* there is a RAT in this room. I want to see it right now. Where is it?"

The children look at me to see what I will do.

He starts babbling in his loud, deep voice something about how rats are illegal in Alberta and it is a rat-free province and blah blah blah. Throwing my innocence away, I make no move to help him except to wave my hand vaguely toward the shelf. The caretaker and you-know-who stomp over and haul down the cage and look seriously at the rat, stroking their hairless chins with thoughtful importance. Templeton's owner, not bearing this another second, runs after them shrieking: "You can't take my rat!" He is trying not to cry.

They do take the rat after giving the owner the opportunity to say a sobbing good-bye and lecturing the rest of us about how we should have known better and that if we ever again see a rat we should report it right away as they are (beware) Deadly Dangerous Disease Spreading Pests. Templeton meets his (very sorry) end and Alberta is once again, proudly, rat free.

2. ladybugs

The colony hangs from the ceiling in large screen bag. To feed them we must open a zipper on the side. We buy food at the nature store, a fact which goes to prove that everything under the sun can be bought at the shopping mall.

Outside, the sun shines and ladybugs breed in manic numbers by every tree, blade of grass, under stones. The children bring them inside in jars and by the handful. It is difficult to convince the ladybugs to leave the jar and hands for the net, and as they

climb up the children's arms and into their shirts the children squirm and scream with laughter.

More and more and more spread their wings and take to the air, somewhere, they are so small we can never catch them, though, laughing hard, we do halfheartedly try. (Just, there are so many of them). Some children have corralled hundreds of them on one of the tables with a chain of rulers and are trying to put them one by one into the net. The bugs crawl frantically back and forth, back and forth, bumping into the rulers, till they remember their wings and spread them wide, high they go...

The caretaker stomps into the classroom after school and says in his loud deep voice: *no more damn ladybugs I'm finding them everywhere.*

3. tadpoles

she is looking at the tadpoles sprouting arms and legs but out of her mouth rushes if i swallow sperm in oral sex can i get pregnant the boys say so will it grow in me

4. rabbits

Promised pets

the dusty musty musky animal smell of them fills our windowless room, stifling.

When we are quiet the rabbits are noisy.

Round and round they run in the cages scattering and kicking their pellets all over the floor all around and they pee on the carpet so soon some children refuse to sit there ever again and pretty soon no one wants to take care of the rabbits so we give them away and the girl who loved them next won a big prize at the rabbit fair.

And I don't tell the class the next year about the rabbit pee on the floor.

5. snake

The boa-constrictor lives across the hall. It is longlonglong and fat. It looks slimy but its skin is dry and smooth. The girls carry it around at lunch time, a snake-shawl, wrapped around necks, slithering around arms. It eats live mice. They run about the snake cage terrified - they must know the smell of snake is one to fear, instinct, for surely they have never seen one before - until the hovering snake strikes and squeezes the breath out of them. The mice only struggle for a minute, then they are still.

One time, the snake began to eat a mouse sideways. Once it begins to eat, the teeth/scales inside its mouth prevent it from bringing the mouse back out. Such commitment. Out of the snake's mouth hung a head, one arm, one leg, the tail. All day long the snake smashed the mouse and its wide-stretched mouth against the glass, trying to jam the mouse down its throat, to ease this discomfort. The children were very worried, but slowly, slowly, the mouse eased in and we all cheered when that arm and leg finally disappeared and the snake could rest. For a few weeks the snake's insides would work hard at digesting its prey. You didn't want to be around when it emerged from the other side. Snake shit smells like hell.

7. paramecium

We bring the outside in.

The other teachers have grown tired of the microscopes, of the mess, of marking journals filled with answers to questions that no one wonders about, of drilling students on pieces of one-celled organisms and pieces of microscopes: lens, eye-piece, slide, light, power, clips...

Now we have all the microscopes and half the world scattered on our tables and desks. Plants and fibres, hairs and pond scum. Everything we can find, everywhere.

A calling fills the air: *Oh! Come see! Come see! Hurry, it's swimming away!*

The pond water is alive with things we have never imagined. Someone brings a book and we read the names of these creatures. We do this all day, every day, day after day. We try to paint and write the story of this new world we see.

There is so much to say.

Laurie knocks over the container of paramecium water the other class has given to us. They were bored of that one cell. They had seen enough. Laurie falls on her knees to the floor, crying, trying to save the tiny creatures she cannot see from certain death as they soak into the carpet. She knows there is life everywhere. *I'm so sorry little paramecium*, she is saying to the wet spot on the rug. *Don't step on them!* she yells.

The carpet dries by the next morning, but for the rest of the year Laurie refuses to step there.

the boy lays on the hospital bed
his white face
my white face
the doctor's white face
our wide eyes see
the red red blood
the life dripping
the drenched t-shirt and jeans

my hand rests on his leg as I sit on the stool near his feet
his body shakes and shakes, or is it mine
his fingers, a fist, clench tight, not in anger now but fear
and clench and unclench, a measurable rhythm
"are you sure it didn't spurt, not even a little bit?"
the doctor asks for the nth time
the boy's hands still a silent pulse, clench and unclench
as the doctor is
hunched over a gaping wound in the boy's neck
infliction via exacto knife blade meant for art project
murderously slashed
now the needle goes in and out and in and out a slow
rejoining flesh with flesh

the boy squeezes his eyes shut, tight, shudders
"you boys have got to stop playing around like this,
you understand?" says the doctor
"less than a millimetre away from your jugular vein,
you understand?"

the first day back at school they push each other hard

hardhardhard
against the lockers

you understand?

Sixteen, he looks about twelve. Or maybe even eleven. He really needs a belt to hold up his too big jeans. And his glasses are thick and big and dirty on his face. Sometimes I think life is too big for him. He is so small. And somehow, life just happens to him. Like it just happened to him that he ended up in jail for three weeks. No one even told me, for crying out loud, I'm his teacher. Shouldn't I be the first to know if my student is missing because he's locked up in prison? I notice that he is not here and it matters that we miss him. I phone around looking for him, thinking maybe he's just hanging out at Mac's since the sun's come out. That's how I find out about jail.

Later, we talk. Tears well up in his eyes. *It was pretty bad*, he says. He seems even smaller now than before. He says it again, *it was pretty bad there. I hated it*. We are working on math, adding, basic numeration. He should have understood this all long ago. Really, long ago it should have made some sense to him. It does matter that he's missed three more weeks of school for stealing a CD from Sam the Record Man, or maybe it was HMV. He says his friend told him to do it. Maybe, maybe not. Maybe he just wanted that CD but couldn't figure out how to pay for it. *Won't be doing that again*, he says, *I learned my lesson this time*, he says, *it was pretty bad in there. I was so lonely. I was locked in a little room or I got to sit in the common room but there was nothing to do anywhere and there were lots of big guys*. He is still blinking back tears. I am too, thinking about those big guys.

Of course it was bad. He is not one of the big guys. Life just happens to him. Like he was just in the music store and then it just happened that he was stealing a CD. Everywhere he goes life just happens to him and it is just bad. He just can't make sense of it the same way he just can't make sense of those numbers. But he tries. I see him trying every day that he is here and he didn't hurt anyone here and he didn't steal anything here that I know about and he mostly came to school every single day except sometimes when he forgot or just didn't feel like it. And he had lots of stories to tell, every day, I looked forward to hearing them. And he wasn't lonely here and he wasn't locked up in a little room learning his lesson like someone decided he should.

When will we learn? Someone must have thought this was justice but it sure wasn't me. No one asked me. I would have told them to send him back to school. But what does a teacher know about justice anyway?

about generosity when
you filled your shoebox for the children in Bosnia
with your treasures, your own treasures, loved by your hands
roughly played broken treasures
and a roll of toilet paper a bar of used
soap, Ivory.

And that letter - you were the only one who took time
to write - with your picture, dirty fingerprints a
trace of you on the paper:

*I am sorry
for your war and that you are cold.*

And how you meant this
more than anyone
because you were already intimate
with the terrors of the night,
sad and hungry.

And how you came to school
late, every single day
we waited for you and hoped
you would come and that
you were ok.

And how you brought that teeny
tiny kitten with the huge eyes, the one
you bought for free,
the one you loved so much
to school in your backpack and
it came climbing out onto your desk.

And how, later, in the middle of a tantrum,
you told us that your dad threw your
teeny tiny kitten that you bought for free

out the window, you were
nearly screaming with your rage
and grief.

And how you would come close
when we read stories out loud
as if you could never get close
enough, leaning against us.

And how you would try to
steal warmth food love safety
from backpacks and lunches and desk drawers
your appetite for these things insatiable.

And how we could not
give you these things in a shoebox, we wished
we could, we always wished we could.

And how you understood the meaning
and purpose of this life
because you taught us this.

god slept in
mind eclipsed in dark
matter turned inside out
just for a second
everything stopped
as her life was taken her
breath, stopped her
blood, stopped her
brain, stopped her
life and stopped her
and then

the universe expands around
exploding stars eternal

they complain complain complain

he kicks them
and stabs his pencil lead into them
and pushes them while waiting for the recess bell to ring

wait be patient keep being kind don't push back play together

soon

he speaks more
he stabs less
he tells of his class in the north of China
where the teacher slapped for wrong answers
where he had to sit on his pins-and-needles-hands for hours on his hard wooden chair
where had to stand with his nose against the chalkboard, tired and swaying
he can't remember why
and he is smiling when he says this
i am happy here he says

soon

in his first tongue he teaches us math
it is very easy for him
and he laughs at us
our clumsy fingers writing the symbols
onto special paper he has brought for us

soon

he talks all the time
and talks and talks and talks
laughing with his friends

rocking back and forth, cross-legged on the carpet
hands fist-balls hard pressed into his eyes
'till he forces stars into being
a noise, barely a groan, agony and
voices are telling him don'tworkdon'tworkdon'twork or
they will kill him
or hurt someone will get hurt or
something very bad will happen
if you listen you can hear his voiceless voice saying *the spots the spots the white spots*
more and more white spots are floating making white spots and more against the dark
this incantation he thinks to quiet the voices
in his mind creating black background, white spots,
if only this carpet, if only some
magic, could fly him away from here
out to the stars he dreams

Spinning she comes into the classroom she says do you like my new pink shirt it is so beautiful. Dark brown stains the back of her jeans, down one leg. And the unwashed body smell catches breath short; take a step back. Her hair, uncombed for days, a tangle around head and a plastic headband with a Big-Red-Bow. She says oh that (laughing) i had my period *last* week it's old no one would buy me anything you know those things you need for it i asked them. She says nope can't go home no clean clothes. She says hate my bedroom smells like pee. She says no washing machine these are the cleanest and no clean panties either. She says (laughing) because i peed on the floor. She says hate my bedroom. She says i met a nice man on the street yesterday. She says locked in my bedroom for being bad. She says that nice man invited me over to his house. She says but i can't go home to change (laughing again) i already told you no - clean - clothes. She says oh i was bad really really bad you wouldn't want to know. She says because what was i supposed to do when i had to go you know when you have to go you have to go but i always just do it in one corner. She says i knocked on the door and yelled but they wouldn't let me out. One day when she moves far away to a new school they phone the very next day what is going on they say what is going on
whatisgoingon.

outside the snow falls and
 gathers softdeeplysilent in the woods
waiting quietly undisturbed

(Not that we can see it, mind, our classroom window faces the outside wall of another portable just two feet away. We can see into their classroom but don't look too often. I don't think they watch us either. We are split, fragments, divided from the weather and each other, we cannot see the sky or open the tiny barred window to smell the air. We tried to paint pictures of outside to hang on the walls to pretend a connection, but there is only this earthrot under this foundationless airless portable classroom and something always smells bad in here causing chronic allergy coughing. It drives us out, often, or at least that is the excuse)

so

out we go
 skisbodieslegs polesarms wavingwildly
a tumble of giddy silly laughter
 we leave a cascade
 of tracks
 down the hill
 by the woods
 at the back of the school

inside our opened math journals
 lay
on desks we have forgotten
please can we please do it please again tomorrow please
 of course we do
and tomorrow and again

(We remember something out here. How to play. How to fall down laughing. How to nearly die laughing. How to laugh loudly not afraid of disturbing others. How to be friends with people that stuffy building usually separates us from. How, out here, in this big whitebrightness, everything is different. That's what we remember when we go back in. We are different there too, because of out here. That's why we come back again tomorrow)

Again. Here we are again. This ritualized sadness every June is nothing to look forward to. We've barely begun to know so much about each other. It always seems like we just started yesterday. It always seems like the end comes too quickly and we haven't finished being here and we don't know what to say after this rush of report cards cleaning being tired phone calls finishing everything and the walls are bare and sad, and moms cry and kids cry and teachers cry and couldn't we just go slowly, remember what has happened, this history we've made, the books we've read, the stories we've told, the laughing we've done, the places we've gone, the surprising spaces we've discovered, the amazing projects we've created, the things, wonderful and terrible we've learned about everything. Couldn't we just linger over these last days when the sun and warmth have finally come and the light has finally come and the leaves have finally come and everything is new and even we are new though we maybe won't remember for years how our lives have brushed against one another and it seems really awful to say goodbye. This was something good. You always ask, will I ever see you again? And I ask it, too. Again.

The children are coming...

while walking
we find leaf skeletons
and wonder at the way
the life of the leaf has
dissolved become
earth
we cannot find even evidence
of the leaf in the soil
but our hands hold this planet's
breath
life structure fine bones so fragile remember
snows frost insects bite
sun wind rain dark

fading light gives way to
gravity calling earth back to earth

*a sudden genesis
something from nothing
exploding stars the fingers of gods
violently disrupt the dark*

*now - then - tomorrow
the gods walk the earth
and shout*

crying lips pour forth surprised words

it is happening

watery burial spinning sun deathly grave growing light shifting green
pulling moon tidal rush crushing sand moving rock plates collide
spewing fire volcanic ash growing life solid stone eating flesh
massive monsters drowning mud claiming life giving life

imagine

the first time we see
time's tattoo, the
fossilized evolutionary past

begin
breathe words
wind shifts
come life

seeds of life new yet already history
moving moving moving always
dying gods
gifting bodies to life

begin again

etched in our imagination
the mythic image
bone becoming stone
carrying life

in the beginning is no thing
it is something not yet born
phan-ku emerges from the egg
carves the world with his chisel, holds up
the sky with his hands

the world not complete until he dies,

*blood becomes water,
filling rivers and seas,
flooding over the earth.
bones become stones*

skull holds up the dome of the sky

life emerges in the instant of death,

eternal resurrection to new life²⁰

our fascination with digging up
those bones far deeper than we know
is settled in souls intent on divining mysteries

are birds the living descendants of dinosaurs?
will the secrets be revealed in the excavation
of this earthly narrative?

begin

out of dust

bones

a rib - flesh - breath

beginnings rooted in soils

earth already witness to decay

we find another bone and everything
we thought

²⁰ See "Phan Ku", a story in: Hamilton, Virginia (1988). *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

we knew
erodes
to new truth

begin again

*in the yawning gap between north and south
between light and dark
that space where warm and cold meet,
the dripping water births the god imir
his licking tongue creates monsters from ice*

*then, murdered by his brothers
blood spills out
and out
and out*

*drowning monsters
filling the rivers, flowing to the seas*

*bones become stones
skull holds up the dome of the sky
decay breathes life²¹*

begin again

we walk the alberta badlands,
once swampy green fungus and monster filled,
and crush dinosaurs under our feet

²¹ Another creation story from Virginia Hamilton's book, "The Frost Giant - Imir the Creator", this one from Iceland. The children were fascinated by the similarity between these two stories, particularly the notion of the god's death being the beginning of life, and the god's body becoming the earth, a continuous re-creation and rebirth to new life.

we try to walk carefully but
there are too many bones and teeth,
fragments fallen from cliff faces, eroding into the rivers
joints from dinosaur knees and dinosaur hips waiting on rocks,
too big to be washed away
this summer
our hands hold them, gently
and when we lay down with our
noses to the hard-packed earth
we see millions of teeth
a sacred bone ground
everyone is quiet

wonder

*wonder about this place,
once so alive and full
of breathing killing eating life*

they fell by the waters

perfect conditions for a burial in sand and mud,

*preserving connections through time,
bones becoming stones then waiting -*

*- the rain and mud now wash away the stone
reveal ancient lives
move them away*

if we come back tomorrow it will all be new
we cannot hold it here

*more bones will wash down from the cliff
these too will pass into the waters
where, even now, more stone forms
below the crushing sands*

the children call out as we are walking back
they see a different bone, a flat-disc, a sharp-edged tool
shines exposed in the harsh sunlight
people made this, long ago
shaping the bone
carving it with stone
scraping flesh from hide and flesh from bone
they did not live here in this harsh land
someone dropped this tool while walking through
walking home
stopping perhaps to rest eat play by this river

and now we leave this bone behind
in this hollow where we found it
more connected to this land than to us

it is not ours
but our fingers held it as fingers held it
long ago
it whispers a life story telling us
we are not the first to walk these steps
and crush these bones beneath our feet
under these wide, high, prairie-wind skies

bones and stones hold us together here
we feel so new

begin again,

and again,

ancient landscape of ocean beach
surprises us with shells above our heads
we see, walking past a cliff, imprints of life, millions of years ago
our fingers feel these shells and
we imagine sea-shore-waves
crashing
bringing them up
burying them
under the rolling, shifting sands and
we see shells today, now, in the middle of this dusty land
the wind almost sounds like ocean
as it blows through grass and hair

more, newer bones, shining white in the sun
near the path on the walk home
a deer was eating here
drinking from this now dry creek when water
ran in the spring
blinded by the clear bright light
a day like today
a dangerous vision
a coyote - bear - cougar ate here too
leaving a sign of passing
only this carcass now
dragged through the grass by others
also passing
we wonder who shared this meal
- or perhaps,
an old deer
lay down to rest here in this place
of bones
and did not wake in the morning -

- bones joining the stones
body giving life back
breath now wind
blowing over bones
whispers through dusty grass
now, tomorrow, yesterday, again

it is quiet around the fire later
our words left behind
back with those stones and bones

it is all too big for words
as we sit under the living trees
with the river running past
and the enormous star-lit sky
held up by the dome of our skulls

above
leaf skins brush together
skeletons rattling
wind-breath-whispering life

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