FISHTAILING

by

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Abstract

Fishtailing, by Wendy Phillips

Fishtailing is a young adult narrative in free verse poetry in six voices. Set in Vancouver, B.C., it is the story of four teens who navigate the complexity of modern high school as well as their own inner mysteries. Against the backdrop of a high school season and a poetry unit in English class, the four are caught in a web of past torments, present conflicts and future dreams. When their interaction touches secrets, the explosion of passion and violence transforms them all.

When Natalie arrives at the school, she causes ripples in the smooth surface of the high school. A troubled soul with self-destructive habits, Natalie attaches herself to Tricia. Tricia is alienated from her newly reconstructed, all-white family, and her habitual compliance is wearing thin. Tricia’s need to be chosen makes her vulnerable to Natalie’s influence, and her changing image makes her at the same time more confident and more fragile.

Kyle is a talented mechanic and reluctant poet who learns that words help him not only connect with Tricia, the girl he can’t stop thinking about, but also discover his own voice. Kyle’s science partner and Natalie’s other target is Miguel, a traumatized refugee from a civil war in Central America. The loss of his parents leaves Miguel withdrawn and isolated in the hustle of a modern multicultural Canadian high school. At home, his uncle and cousin support the armed struggle, while he struggles with his own reactions to the violence. At school, Miguel is drawn out of his isolation into the mainstream of the school social scene, and into tragedy.

The four play out their fragmented roles, interconnected by their passions and their misunderstandings, and observed by their detached poetry teacher and compassionate but ineffectual counsellor. As the web of events rises to a climax, Natalie’s dark secrets and Miguel’s deep, unresolved grief leave them broken; for Kyle and Tricia, however, transformation leads to hope.
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Thank you to my thesis supervisor, Alison Acheson, and members of my thesis committee, Alison Acheson, Judith Saltman and Rhea Tregebov, and to my students, past and present, who have taught me new ways to encounter poetry.

Thank you also to my family, who listen.
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Tricia
across the crowded classroom
speaks louder
than the droning recital
of paragraph structure.
*I know you*
  it says
*You are mine*
  Something inside
  shifts.
In dreams
I swim through
underwater hallways
slapping my head
against the lockers
fighting the current
down the staircase,
fishtailing forward.

They watch me
school eyes
do not blink
my scales shine
sleek
slippery.

I awake
mouth
open
fins
morphing
into fingers
to: Margaret Farr
from: Janice Nishi
subject: Natalie Anderson

Natalie Anderson (student number 062372) has been enrolled in your English class. She comes to us from a district secondary school where she had some difficulty with peer relationships. Please make her welcome and keep me informed of any difficulties.
Natalie

First day
at the new school
I can tell
it will be
easy
like shooting
fish in a barrel.
Birthday

They're wrapped up here
in neat packages
bow on top
a little girl's birthday present.

I'm crashing this party
like always
A mark on my forehead
warns parents off
but draws innocents
like kids
to a clown.

Behind my make-up
a long-fanged
hook-clawed
monster.

Natalie Anderson
Mrs. Farr

You have an admirable grasp of sentence structure and a rich vocabulary. However, your images are disturbingly violent. Perhaps you can find more optimistic diction to flavour your poetry. We can all use optimism.
Tricia

I know
my mother loved my father
once
and Jason is a carefully
friendly
stepfather

but the mirror
shows my mother’s round eyes,
my father’s black straight hair.

I wonder
why she couldn’t choose
someone
a little less
white.
She doesn't know I'm here.
Her hair from the back is like my mom's black velvet dress shiny shiny
my hand wants to stroke it.
Grease under my fingernails keeps them tapping the surface of my desk.
Miguel

Voices here
in fast English
talk of things
I don’t know.

I know
the burn of hot sun
and blue water
the length of my father’s back
in the bow
the hum of my village at night.

My hands know
how to
paddle against an incoming tide
gut a fish
assemble
and shoot
a mobile
rocket launcher.
Natalie

Mum sold another house today. 
She's passed out  
on the couch  
cradling 
her wine glass.  

Macaroni for supper again. 
extra cheese 
throw it all up later.  

Mum's snores  
float down the hall  
to the TV room.  

Jay Leno kisses me goodnight.
Miguel

In biology class
while the class
recoils
I dissect a perch,
pin back its scaly skin,
expose
its vital organs.
My lab partner
may not talk much
but his fingers
know one end of the scalpel
from another.
Tricia

Standing beside her
in the caf line up
my flowered sweater wilts.
Her slouch just so
black lined eyes
leather over belly ring
--something lithe in the line of her elbow—
her hands clutch
fries and gravy.
I look at my veggie wedges.
She cocks an eyebrow,
leans, shrugs.
*Easy come, easy go.*
Natalie

In English
it's silent
writing time.

Dust motes dance
above the earphones of the quiet
guy tapping his fingers

shine a halo
around the dark hair
clenched jaw
of the guy behind.

He looks back.

His eyelids
close
and open

close again.
Feelings poem

Black, black, black
is the colour of my true love's hair.
Her lips are something roses fair,
The purest eyes and the neatest hands.
I love the ground on where she stands.

I know my love and well she knows.
I love the grass on where she goes.
If she on earth no more I see
My life will quickly fade away.

Black is the colour
Of my true love's hair.

Kyle
Mrs. Farr

I am glad to see you are reading poetry, young man. However, “Black is the Colour” is a traditional Scottish and then Appalachian folk tune. Presenting it as your own constitutes plagiarism. Please rewrite and see me.
Miguel

The new girl has a look
that cuts right
through the scales
to my cold fish heart.
I read Pablo Neruda
at night
under the blankets

*Into the night of the heart
your name drops slowly
and moves in silence and falls
and breaks and spreads its water.*

Nata Natalie Natalia
Sounds like music

*“Slow Lament” by Pablo Neruda, trans. Donald D. Walsh*
Kyle

Nights at my dad's garage
I tinker with a timing chain.
You got good hands, kid,
my dad says.

The car is for Tricia's stepdad.
When he drops her at school
she shoos him off with a wave
blows kisses at her little sister
in the back seat.

I tighten the bolts,
take extra care
to make it purr.
Tricia

School-issue gym shorts
sit cocky on her hips,
not bunched in t-shirt lumps
like mine.

Her slim legs flash
when she walks
the hem brushes a ring of cuts
around her golden thighs

I ask
she hits me with her lightning eye.
*Cat,* she says.

Running gym laps
we keep pace.
The other girls watch
from a distance.
I am chosen.
Feelings poem - rewrite

A regular guy lived in Vancouver city
He liked a girl. She was pretty.
He thought to kiss her would be real fine.
He wrote her a poem. It's bad. It's mine.

kyle
Kyle

That black haired poem
is what I mean,
not this nursery rhyme
crap.

My motorcycle fits together
neat and smooth
bolts and casings
pistons and pushrods
everything in place.

Words just lie
on the page
no schematics,
no fuel lines
no chassis.

A poem is a bucket
of bolts.
Feelings Poem

When the aid worker
pulled him out
from under the bed
long after the guns had stopped
he held his breath
over and over
in the silence.

Vamenos, she said
covered his eyes
on the way out of the house
but from under her fingers
he could see a leg
splatters of blood
his mother's kerchief.
In the street
bits of flesh stuck to the walls
crushed heads lay
in sticky red puddles
their bodies swollen crumpled
full of bleeding holes.
Shhh, she said. Tú eres seguro
You're safe.

From Canada
it felt like a dream
or a poem
a string of fear full moments
tucked deep in his memory chest.

by Miguel
Mrs. Farr

Your narrative line of the Central American village massacre rings with authenticity and verisimilitude. It is a dreadful chapter in that region's history, and an individual tragedy for anyone involved in it. If this is your experience, my sympathies are with you.

In your poem, however, you dwell on blood and carnage excessively. Perhaps an uplifting moment of redemption is in order for the protagonist. You might also reconsider your point of view.
I am concerned about the violence in Miguel’s poetry. Is there something I should know about behavioural anomalies that might affect the class’s (or my own) safety?
to: Margaret Farr  
from: Janice Nishi  
subject: Re (I): Miguel  

Miguel's traumatic experience has manifested itself only in withdrawal and periods of selective mutism. There is no suggestion he poses a risk to anyone but himself.

Please keep me informed of any further concerns.
Tricia

Black heavy boots
heat up my feet.
Tight ripped tee shirt
digs into my armpits.
Natalie says
I'll get used to it.
A scar cuts across his dark hand,  
clenched on the desk,  
a light flickers in his still brown eyes.  
From the shift in his posture when I enter the room  
the shake of his floppy hair  
I know a tug on the line.  
He's been caught before  
and will require careful playing.

Tonight I prepare bait  
hunch on the edge of the bathtub  
paint toenails with glitter  
shave calves silky  
with the razor blade  
make careful, measured slices  
around my thigh  
high enough  
to hide under gym shorts  
deep enough  
to let the hurt out

I stroke the tender blue skin of my wrist.  
In my last school,  
others told me,  
across is for help  
down is for goodbye.

From the mirror  
she watches me  
eyes narrowed.  
Not today, she says.  
Too many fish in the sea.
Kyle

Last week
my fingers burned
   to stroke
the length
of her smooth hair.
   It pulled me
like a magnetic charge.
Now
it's clipped short
   like feathers
   and
my fingers still burn.

   In the library
   I watch her,
memorize the angle of
   golden cheekbone
   see
her mum's eyes
her dad's skin
   the best
   of both
distilled
   in her face.

   Her eyes skim over me
   like tires over pavement
   make me hum.
Tricia

The librarian tell us
we’re here to distill
the truth
from its many representations.
I open the encyclopedia
to Riel, Louis

glaze over.

It’s not that I don’t love Emily.
She’s two, curly, cute,
and she needs them.

but they hardly even noticed
when I cut my hair.

At the next table
Kyle opens
and closes
his hands
looks up from his book.

I can tell
he noticed.
Natalie

Sleep flashes
through the dark eddies of the night
escapes me.
My pillow hot
my feet cold.

In front of the gas fire I suck on tobacco smoke,
through squinted eyes
match logs that never burn.

I see his hair in the curled tendrils of flame.
Today I slipped my number into his pocket.
He didn't call.

I need to draw him out
or he'll snap
when I'm not expecting it.

Silver slides over my eyelids
I dream of fire.
Kyle

Her hands generate electricity. When she takes one paper, passes the rest back, there’s a spark.
Tricia

I've put her on
like new clothes
dark
edgy

Gone
the tremors
at a teacher's glare

the sickness in the pit
of my stomach
at Mum's disappointments

the storm in my brain
from rusty Japanese
after a weekend with my dad
and grandmother.

I meet the eyes
of guys who seek mine

eat french fries for lunch
chocolate milkshakes when I come home
easy come, easy go.

When Mrs. Farr asks
what the new image is about
I shrug, play with my tongue stud

Whatever.

No matter how hard she looks
she can't see me anymore.
Miguel

My mother swims
through the river of my dreams
nudges me gently
out of the shallows
floats downstream

belly up
Tricia

My mother
says Natalie
is a bad influence.
She phoned the school counsellor
asked her to move Natalie
to another class.

As if
it's only her.

Homework is a constant mutter
class is a drone
except for that short, sharp
bite of the bell.
Kyle

In the mirror
I make five test runs.
Then I ask her
for help.

You do homework?
she says, a laugh
shakes her shoulders
like a choked engine.

Her dark eyes
on high beam.
Write a poem
about your motorcycle.
Farr would like that
she says.

I lean against the lockers
wheels spinning.
Miguel

Her number in my pocket
rolled thin
like a candy wrapper

thought I'd lost the taste
but hunger in the gut
hooks me in.
Mrs. Farr

I am becoming increasingly concerned, Tricia, about your growing list of assignments NHL.* However I'm sure you can complete them all before MCO** should you put your mind to it. I am available for consultation should you have any doubts about EC***.

*not handed in
**marks cut off
***evaluation criteria
Tricia

The only other time
I was in the counsellor's office
was for career planning.

*The future looks bright,*
Ms Nishi told me
then.

It's crowded now
me in one chair
in the other
my mother
stroking the baby hair
of little Emily on her lap.

*You've always been such a good girl.*
she tells me.
*Is this rebellion because of Emily?*
*You know Jason and I love you both.*

I shrug.

Ms Nishi moves
the desktop Zen garden.
A fluorescent bulb is blown
there are new shadows.
My motorcycle dream

The wind blowing in my face
when I'm on my wheels
makes me fly
like a bird on fire.

I gun my engine till it roars
The pistons explode between my legs

I hear Bruce Springsteen
in my helmet screaming
"Wrap your legs 'round these velvet rims
and strap your hands across my engines."*

I'm spinning down the streets
of my own runaway dream.

by kyle

Bruce Springsteen, “Born to Run”
Mrs. Farr

A most effective (and might I say, unexpected) example of a grammar poem. You have made an excellent choice in writing about a topic you care about so passionately. However, you need to be careful of innuendo. You might tone down the more overt sexual references in order to make it suitable for the poetry display board.
Kyle

sexual references
Miguel

My uncle’s jaw
ripples with muscle spasms
as he stands at the stove
holding the cooking spoon
with his two remaining fingers.
Natalie

I am in the bath when the phone rings
I know it's him before he speaks
He hears me splashing in the shallow end.

We're going to the Aquarium
Saturday
lunch in the park.

I smile
as I push
END.
West coast rain
makes November
dark.
Bike tires
skid around corners
like my gut
when I pass her in the hall.
Cargo pants
fishnet shirt
eyes and lips lined with black -
commando.
Sparks fly
from her eyes
settle on my bare skin
burn like fresh shrapnel.
Make-up assignment – social commentary poem

“Out of Step”

A soldier
steps out of line
on the road
from infantry
to adultery

drill sergeant yells
lieutenant halts the platoon
colonel writes a report
general reconsiders
the military objective.

She is swarmed
It’s a jungle out there
the company moves together
orders come from above
yours not to reason why
yours but to do
or die

the soldier looks back
sees the line
from a whole new perspective
marches
to her own
new
drummer

and the other war begins.

by tricia yamashita
Mrs. Farr
(make-up assignment: Tricia Y.)

An interesting analogy for teen rebellion, and you have foiled our expectations by making the soldier female.

However, I am concerned that you seem to regard adolescence as a war against authority. Superior officers often see the big picture. An army couldn’t function if every soldier gave his own orders, now, could it?
Natalie

Mum's got a date
with Mr. Topselling Remax
(local office).

She borrows my black sweater.
I feel just like a girl,
she twitters.
Don't wait up, Nat.

I try to write a poem for English.
drip frozen lasagne
not quite heated
on the keyboard
think about my father.

Mum says he's a monster
never gave her money
or compliments
or took her on dates
or watched me so she could go out.

She has no idea.
That's not a monster.
Miguel

The aquarium draws
me, slapping
waves, the squealing
breath of the sea lions, the blue silence
through the downstairs viewing window.

The light on her face
leaves shadows
under her eyes
in the hollows of her cheeks
in the blue mask of her face
the eyes, so alive
dark lips smiling
faintly.
Social Commentary Poem

Internet Safety Workshop

Childhood is a bubble
they tell parents
once burst, forever gone.

The burn on the retina of images that
should not be there
the screaming mouth of a
six-year-old victim

the luring come-on emails of the polished and hungry
saliva dripping from his mouth
as he pounds the keyboard,
licks his lips
squirms, turned on, before the web cam shots
of eager technokids

while blithe innocents google away
their afternoons
with a slide into darkness
frozen forever in the nowhere
that never disappears.

by Natalie
Mrs. Farr

This is a shocking poem, with a horrific message. You use impressive vocabulary, Natalie, creating vivid images.

However, your response to our Internet Safety presentation does not follow the designated criteria. You show an almost voyeuristic depiction of detail of sexual predators and a hopelessness inherent in the innocence of children. Perhaps you might include some solution to the frightening situation. The nihilism in your poetry disturbs me.
Natalie
Solutions
disturb me.
teacher says
songs count for poems
gives me a library book
of 80s rockers
These are pretty hip,
she says.
I blow off the dust with laughing
find my dad's shower songs
my mum's red wine Friday dancing music.
Reading the lines
I feel the vibration of the speakers
through my sock feet
see my parents' arms
around each other.
Put some engine noise
to the words
they're not half bad.
I download them
to my MP3.
Tricia

Miguel’s story was strictly
cidential
and whipped
through the school
like fire.
His scars impress us
parents lost
eyes haunted
almost wordless the first three months
we’re gentle with him

But Natalie’s new.
When I told her, she promised
she wouldn’t bite.
Natalie

At lunch we sit
together
she watches me slant-eyed.
I hear her voice
low
bored
cool
an edge I knew would sharpen
that first day.

I tell her about
the park
the dark viewing room
at the aquarium

She grins
Catch she says
tosses the salt.
Miguel

I’ve carried the blue glow
all weekend
cold but shining
shadows in her eyes
lure me in.

Don’t know what I expected
Monday morning
across the cafeteria
a look that clicked
like a calculator
her friend
looked over at me
laughed

You’d think I’d have learned
not to take the bait.
Kyle

teacher staples my motorcycle dream
to the display board
Tricia wanders over
reads it
I watch
She turns
stares
raises an eyebrow
drifts to my table
*Told you Farr would like it* she says
*Not bad.*

I swallow a frozen lump
*Wanna ride sometime?*
She lifts her chin
narrow her eyes
I look away from the glare
Yeah she says, today
walks away.

So
poems are good
for something.
Miguel

She comes up behind me
drapes herself over my back
nuzzles the nape of my neck

I leap clear
but I'm reeled in
by the hurt in her eyes

I thought you'd like that
she says
I flounder for a second
Yes, I say. Only surprise.

But I am afraid
of her barbed laugh
her measuring looks.

A net
drapes itself over me
like a blood wet
kerchief.
Natalie

Miguel prefers shadows
But I tease him with exposure
I like the alarm in his eyes
when I hook a finger in his gills
Tricia

In PhysEd we do warm-ups
*Breath deep, bend low, deep lunges, now.*
and memory kicks in.

With every breath
the leather of his jacket
air thick with rain and cedar.
I press against his denim thighs
the solid muscle of his back.
Across the Starbucks table
brown hair flopped over his forehead
fingers laced around his coffee mug
rough fingers, black around the nails,
want how they'd feel across my cheek.
From the look in his eyes
he wonders too.

*Right – six laps of the gym! Go!*
My shorts sit cocky today.
I almost forget
to look for Natalie.
Natalie

Motorcycle boy
is hot

but she'll have to learn
not to leave her friends behind.
Kyle

She fits on my bike
like a casing on an engine
like a fender on a wheel
like a nut on a bolt
When I gun the engine
it seems
it can roar
till next week.
Her arms around me
tighten around corner bends
but she laughs
and breathes magic down
my neck.

Daydreaming in English
I flip through old poems
find it’s not just me
The light that blooms in your body
blooms in my hands. Around us the ground
is strewn with its petals.

Suddenly
I can hear
poem voices.

*Poem without voices by Robert Bringhurst
Miguel

At school the Multicultural Leadership Committee
leave no one out
when they celebrate.
They sell bashes at a piñata
for the trip to the Guatemala orphanage
fill the display case with a huge menorah
plaster posters down the hall
to advertise the Diwali fashion show and fireworks display
to respect the hungry Muslims for their Ramadan fast
to invite canned food donations for Santa’s breakfast.

The voices all shout at once.
The others attend all the parties.

But at home
it’s not a party.
We are a household of men.
my cousin, my uncle, me,
all that’s left.
We don’t talk much.

Tenemos muchos diablos para quemar,
my uncle says, his words scorching.
We have many devils to burn.
We follow our new year tradition,
scour the house for anything *frivolo*
to throw away.

There is not much.
Kyle

We find corners
I'd never noticed

lean into them

breathe wordless
down each other's neck
in each other's mouths.

We walk aimless
in the early dark.

Rain sizzles
on our faces.
The rest of the country gripped
by a cold I cannot imagine.
My life has been lived in rain
according to coolly followed plans.

On TV the newscasters' breath puffs.
Between their flushed cheeks
and the camera
small hard snowflakes.

Tricia
The rain slides down classroom windows
and my pen slides across the page.
Mrs. Farr's inbox yawns like a monster rising from the deep
snapping at my ass
and the words spill out.

As I write
the sun comes out
gleams through the prism of raindrops
scatters a thousand colours across my page.
Tricia

Here on the coast we wallow.

Mum phones Aunt Susan back east
brags about the weather
Jason mowing the lawn in December
t-shirt Sundays jogging the seawall
trips to the park with Emily's pre school crowd.
She'll send baby pictures of Em,
who's changing so fast.
Tricia? She's the same.

*We love winters here, she says,*  
*and we're all so happy,*  
*so happy.*

It's all shit  
The clouds rest their heads on the ground
Can't see past the windshield wipers
Cloud voices leave a constant slanting drip
across a window

I shake my head to dry my hair
swallow the bile at the back
of my throat
think of Kyle's leather shoulders.

It's time I let one burn.
Kyle

Late at night
I strum my guitar
garage door closed.
The chords stroke the words
I write about her.

My voice
is changing.
Tricia

I tell Natalie
about skipping Chemistry
riding with Kyle
down the rain slick streets
our alcove encounters
my heart
    between my teeth
Motorcycles are a turn-on she laughs
if it weren't for the guys drivin em.

I smirk.
My jaws hurt from clenching

She rolls her eyes. *You could try mi novio*..
*I'll try motorcycle boy.*

I hold it back
but I know it shows.
*Your eyes went weird* she says
*You gotta problem*
*sharing with friends?*

We lock eyes. I'm helpless
target practice.

*No, I say, yeah, I don't think*
*I want to.*

I look away
swallow the empty space
where my lunch was

bite down.
Natalie

My sleeves are long enough to hide
the lines carved into the inner elbow.

I invite her in
with the jolt
we'll be fused for good.
Tricia

She promises
a river of forgetting
a sensation
past imagining.
My bitten heart
trembles
before her eyes.
Winter solstice celebration poem assignment

At the /oasthe virgin
looks the devil in the eye
He breathes fire upon her
dances, wiggles, taunts
You’ll lose;
turns to the audience
and for a minute,
this Central American Community Centre
with echoing stage, silk plants, sagging velvet curtains

becomes the bright clothed
hot afternoon in the village square
the Virgin of Guadeloupe standing tall
driving down with her will
this quivering devil.
Their houses empty of vanities,
the villagers shout No! and he melts
under her burning eyes.
The virgin has triumphed.
The villagers explode fireworks
shoot off guns that were
hidden in boxes
under beds
in closets
in violation of the ceasefire.

In the background a Canadian salsa band
takes it away.

by Miguel
Mrs. Farr

Your celebration is not one with which I am familiar. Interesting personal connection with the local centre and the description of (I presume) your own village square. You seem to find writing cathartic and therapeutic.

Curious how many solstice celebrations involve cleansing rituals, setting the world to rights before beginning afresh. Wouldn’t we all like to have that chance? Those devils don’t always melt away, though, do they?
Natalie

Mum's gone again
conference weekend at Whistler
motivational seminars all morning
ski all afternoon
screw their brains out
when the fire dies down.
She frowns when I talk this way.

I call my father. Six thirty
and his tongue is already thick
words slurred
his random heartiness
booms and fades.

He says

You're okay, right hon.
(not a question.)

I say

Fine, Dad, fine. Great.

He says

I may make it to Vancouver
one of these days,
or you could take a bus
to the Interior. I could pick you up.

I say

I don't think so.
I don't think so.
I don't think.
Don't think.
Ms Nishi calls me in to the counselling office.

Tricia's mum says someone is leading her astray wherever that is.

I give Ms Nishi my poems. She reads looks at me sharp flips the page to read the comments smiles.

You do understand her mother's concern.

I shrug.

I ride my own road.
Ms Nishi

They bleed all over the page.
I wonder that she can read them
and not be marked.
I wonder that she can
still see
ink.
Natalie — Memory...

New email new address
doesn’t wipe out
my last paternal contact.
Dad’s passed out in the La-Z-Boy
CD blaring
the Avril Lavigne I brought for him
  He was a sk8r boy, she said see ya later, boy.
  He wasn’t good enough for her.
I like that poetic justice.

His upstairs neighbour, Andy
mouth lazy
arm languid
draped over the back of the river blue couch
fingers hooked over my shoulder.

Pink lemonade gin courses
through my veins
blur
the feeble shakes
of my head

“Sk8r Boi” Avril Lavigne, Scott Spock, Lauren Christy, Graham Edwards
Miguel

My cousin, Juan, says
tradition is a lie.

No one defeats the devil
And we are not
sick of sin.

We escaped
but our people still need our help
and we will send it to them.

Then he laughs.

But it’s not for you to know,
muchacho.
Kyle

I almost don't need
to see her
She's welded on the inside
of my eyelids
her voice whispers
in the strings
of my guitar.
Miguel

At home
we do not talk
we simmer.

I walk the cool night streets
my blood hot.

My hands ache
knuckles shredded
by cement walls
that do not punch back
only rip the skin
of my fists.
Natalie — Memory...2

Wanna show you something he tells me.
Dad’s snoring. We leave him there.
A hand hooked under my arms
to help me up the stairs.
My legs fold
head spins.
The door lock clicks behind us.

His screen saver flips
from centerfold
to centerfold
heads flung back
lolling tongues
swollen breasts
gaping vaginas
That’s only the beginning
he says,
plays a loop of movies
watching my face
my stomach lurches
at the desperate
disconnected
eyes of the children

He switches on the web cam
pushes me back on the bed.
traps my wrists
in one hand.
My head rolls back
and forth on the blanket.
The voice
that wails
from my throat
is not mine.
to: Janice Nishi
from: Margaret Farr
subject: Natalie

I am concerned about Natalie’s tendency to write on inappropriate topics. She attempts to draw attention to herself by including shocking, violent, nihilistic details. Perhaps you can speak to her about exercising some restraint.
to: Margaret Farr  
from: Janice Nishi  
subject: Natalie

Natalie has a disturbed home life, and I believe the school district has not been told the whole truth about her past. I don’t believe she has been taught much about restraint. I will have a word with her when I get a chance.
Memory...

Daddy's still asleep
when I stumble downstairs
my stomach churning
my body bruised
and burning.

It smells of smoke
and old couches.

I crawl
oozing
into bed.

When I get home
Andy sends me an email
tells me I'll be
famous.

I throw up.
Change my
address
start a new work of art
in blood
on my thigh.
Tricia

She’s taken me
into her confidence.
I have no cat
she says.

Her house is empty
She lives in lucky silence
Mum at work
No toys
or two year old
or mother in a sour milk
marshmallow bathrobe
or family pictures where
she doesn’t match.

We eat lean cuisine meals
for afternoon snack.

Watch me, she says.
sits on the edge of the tub
razor poised like a paintbrush
over the blank canvas of her arm.
With each touch a tracery
of beaded bubbles
winking to the surface.

Now you.

We look at each other
like we’re about to kiss.
Natalie

She holds the blade
like it will bite
slips as I knew she would
afraid to be afraid
gushes, spurts blood.
With a cry
she clamps a cloth to her arm
folds into her elbow.

I pull her open
Feel it, I say, feel it.

What? she says.
Her frightened eyes dart
like a bird in a cage

But the red drip drip drip
on the polished linoleum
is our bond.
Miguel

Beside my village
ran a blue river
where the canoes lay
on the sandy shore.

Juan tells me,
for a week
after that day,
it was so choked
with bodies
you could not breathe
for the smell.
My father's
was among them.

Juan says the blood
made the river run
red.
Tricia

I avoid Kyle
to protect him from Natalie.
His muscles are hard
but his eyes flicker
with need.
When our eyes catch
only the prickle of dried blood in my elbow
keeps my knees from buckling.
I pick at the scab.
Kyle

I see her cheek in the curve
of my guitar
her long tapping fingers
in the frets.
Power is in her fingertips.
I am driven.
Miguel

From soft whispers
her voice sharpens to a cutting edge
Tricia and I are best friends, she says.
We share everything.

A translucent lid is drawn
across her eyes
She can see out but I can’t see in.

“My life grows tired, hungry to no purpose.
I love what I do not have. You are so far.”*
My mouth is open
but no air comes in.
I’m out of my element.

* from “Here I Love You,” Pablo Neruda, tr W.S. Merwin.
Ms Nishi

A steady stream today
in the hallway outside
the counselling suite

Something
has awakened them
skin thinned
blood pulsing below the surface.
Poem about Poetry

My words
like gears
drive thoughts
through school traffic congestion

My voice
like an engine
roars along the passing lane
in internal combustion

My poem
like a loose fan belt
spins on its pulley
with a high pitched scream

Put it to music
The world would listen then
as I am listening now.

by Kyle
Engine similes are powerful, Kyle. (No pun intended.) I notice you have copied the structural pattern of Shelley’s “To a Skylark,” an unexpected but notable allusion. Your technique is improving remarkably.
to: Janice Nishi
from: Margaret Farr
subject: Kyle

I am concerned about Kyle’s sudden discovery of poetic aptitude. Having caught him once in an act of plagiarism I am concerned he is being dishonest again. Perhaps you can speak to him about intellectual integrity. Goodness knows I’ve made few inroads.
from smoulder to flame
and back again
Tricia's eyes are darker today.
They flick towards Natalie
as I approach
then
flick away.
Miguel

At night
I smear ointment on my bleeding knuckles.
Uncle Eduardo,
depth in phone conversation,
does not notice minor injuries.
He plans to drive out the devils
find freedom through the barrel of a gun
make our home a shrine to justice.

The troops are moving again,
Juan whispers. Our people are defenceless.
His mouth thins.
But not for long.

I go back to bed
pull the covers over my head,
dream of dodging gunfire
as I float down a blood river
on a raft of human bones.
Tricia

They're a lovely family
I'm sure
Mom and Jason dress up
for the preschool parents potluck
Emily looks adorable in frilled overalls
and big blue eyes.

I so don't belong here.
Kyle

In the garage, door closed,
I bring out my guitar
play it till my fingers hurt
same chords over and over
till I don’t have to think
the voice in my head screaming
till it’s all I can feel.
Thoughts on razor blades

The smooth surface of school invites perforation penetration
The teachers wear polite masks that look in only one direction. Such a blank canvas begs the artistry of the razor, the bloody beauty of wounds.

by Natalie
Mrs. Farr

I’m afraid I cannot give balanced praise and criticism to this hardly veiled threat. I am forced to submit a copy of your assignment to the administration for disciplinary measures.
MsNishi

The poem lies before me,
decorated with Post-It forms
from teacher and admin.
The counsellor form is still blank.

Her blank gaze confronts me
across the desk
She rakes the mini Zen garden,
separates all the rocks
digs a moat around each
with her little finger.

No, she says, I have nothing
I want to tell you.
At the elementary school playground
after dark
I meet Natalie.
We graduate
from holding hands in side-by-side swings
to clutching in the gravel
under the climbing platform.
Her lips are soft
taste of water melon.
Her hands fumble under my shirt,
slide down to my belt..
I'm hungry she whispers.
A dog-walker's flashlight
breaks us apart
gasping.
Dear Mr and Mrs. Lawson

Kyle's Tech teacher has suggested Kyle consider a career in mechanics, as he has a natural talent in this area. He wants to take Kyle to the Trades Career Fair on the Professional Day next week. If you agree, please sign the attached waiver and permission form and return to me by Friday.

Sincerely

Ms J. Nishi
Counsellor
Career Advisor
Kyle

My dad says
he wants to frame the note.

The first step down your father’s road!
He spreads his hands on the kitchen table
strong fingers, nicked with healing scratches.

My hands clench
voices sing in my head.
I used to be so certain.

My mom smiles.
Just keep your options open.
Mrs. Farr

The ProD day seminar
is on the Adolescent Battle for Emotional Development
and the Role of the Teacher in the Trenches.
The presenter
  livewired with a remote control
  computer slide show
  complete with imovie illustrations,
tells me I am the front line
that it’s my job
to measure negative self image
uncover the disturbing secrets
of my 230 students,
then save them from themselves.

I’m sorry.
After 26 years of adolescent crises
it takes a lot to move me.
I can teach them to write.
End of story.
Miguel

I get home late
Uncle Eduardo is in the spare room
kneeling before an open wooden crate.
Inside guns nest in wood shavings.

He watches Juan
lift one out
stroke the curls of wood from the blue barrel'
reach forward with the sight
tip the door shut
in my face.
Tricia

Natalie tells me exactly
how far to go
how to pull back
leave him wanting.

I tell her I will.
I don’t tell her it’s because
I want him too.
Miguel

I lie awake in darkness
the smell of gun oil
seeps through the crack under my door.

Uncle Eduardo tells me nothing.
*I promised your mother,*
he says.

But Juan gives clues.
*A truck will head south next week.*
*Until then, they are ours to protect.*

My mother’s ghost hand reaches out
of the water
to stroke my face.
*There’s more,* she whispers,
*than hurting.*
Her face ripples and is gone.

Maybe
but I cannot see it.
Natalie

Bring him along
then cut him cold
leaves him with an unquenchable thirst.
Poor boy.
The hum of a well-adjusted motor
filters into my secret guitar harmony.

A stash of music
locked in my tool box.

I take it out
when no one’s around
my worker fingers
pluck from the strings
the delicacy of disharmony.

Mum looks in sometimes,
shuts the door behind her.

She knows
but no one else does.
In the girls’ change room
he freezes.
I pull him into a shower stall
and in a minute we’re kissing
and I can’t breathe
something inside me is exploding
and I don’t want to stop

but as agreed
Natalie sends in the PhysEd teacher
who pulls aside the curtain
glowers.
Kyle

In the garage
I sing for her, my voice
raspy and raw.
From the look in her eyes I think
I've crossed over.
Miguel

When I reached for her hand today
she slapped it away
looked fury at me.

What is it? I am adrift.

If you don’t know, no point
in telling you.
Kyle

She cuts me in the hall
but her body speaks another language
the one I listen to.
Natalie

Mum's moving
to the next stage
in her relationship,
a weekend at the hot springs,
just the two of them.

Whatever

I wouldn't
have wanted to come anyway,
and besides
it must be
party time.
You going to Natalie's Friday? Kyle asks me.
He's wary.
I don't talk to him at school.
I look around. Yeah. You?
He rakes me with a look that leaves me weak-kneed.
I squeeze my thumb into my elbow.
See ya.
Ms Nishi

After a few years in this business
you get to know when something's up.
but when I cast into the waters
I get no bites
only shadows.
Tricia

My mother lives
on another planet.

The sliding door from the family room
to the dark back yard
rumbles a little
in the midnight house
but not too much.
Miguel

My father never visits me in dreams. Uncle Eduardo tells me it is because his spirit lives on in our dreams of freedom.

I think it is because he is gone.
Tricia

After school
I go to Natalie's to help
with preparations.
Her place is clean as a show house.

Washtub with ice
for beer and coolers
(Natalie has connections)
bowls for chips and dip
pick out music.

At midnight
we bring out the razor.
My touch is surer now
as the blood wells to the surface
I can almost taste it.

At home I start my homework:
   immigration policies of the West essay
cancer cell diagram
   quadratic equations.

The hush of the sleeping house
presses on my shoulders.
to: Janice Nishi  
from: Margaret Farr  
subject: Tricia

I am concerned about Tricia's decline in English class. Her latest efforts have been desultory and sporadic, and verging upon disrespectful. Perhaps you can speak to her about her lack of focus.
Tricia

My old friends
my mother
my teachers
warn me that Natalie
is bad news.

I tell them all
she just knows
the secrets
they try to hide.
She knows how to live
on the edge.

We link arms in the hall
I feel the blood
and sparks
flow between us.
Kyle

At the grads' coffee house
I step up to the open mike.
    My throat opens
in time to my drumming heart.
    Heads swivel towards me
eyebrows raised.
    In front, beside Tricia
    and Natalie
    Miguel nods in time.
At the back with the other
teacher chaperones
stands Mrs. Farr,
eyebrows raised.
Natalie

So he's not just motorcycle boy.
That raspy voice belongs to star maker machinery.
But there's more than one way to get attention.
Tricia

He voice is raw
and his guitar vibrates
under his magic fingers
Through it all
he looks at me, sings

It cuts like a knife
But it feels so right*

He sees
through me.

"Cuts Like a Knife" by Bryan Adams and Jim Vallance
When my dad asks over dinner how the career fair went I tell him I'm not going to trade school. I wanna be a musician.

My father's back stiffens. That's not a career, he says. It's a hobby. And you won't see a penny from me. (Now dear, says my mother) Your old man's work isn't good enough for you, is that it?

Dad, I say, Dad you got it wrong.

But he waves my words away like they're nothing.

I slam the garage door, play the same chords again and again.
Make-up assignment: Poem about Poetry

Write a poem, the teacher says,
put in it your deepest feelings
so I can give you
carefully worded encouragement
constructive criticism
and a mark out of ten
to factor into the class average.

Here you go.

by Tricia Yamashita
Mrs. Farr

Your assignment borders on insolence. Please rewrite in a vein more suited to the spirit of the assignment.
Tricia

With the Friday afternoon bell
we ride the wave of students
out the front door
sloughing off school
like an old towel.

In the crush
I feel a hand at my waist
breath in my ear.
I'll be looking for you
tonight
Kyle whispers
then catches the current
to the motorcycle parking.

Natalie grabs my elbow
Party, party
she says,
pulls me along.
Natalie

I turn up the music
feed Tricia strawberry coolers
In the kitchen
I sip rum and coke.
No more gin
for this girl.
Tricia

by 10:30
the voices are so loud
they drown out the music
by midnight
it's difficult
to move through
the noise and bodies
I hear glass breaking
drunken laughter
things
are coming apart.
Kyle

I have no party language
spot a guitar
strum a few chords
and around me clusters a circle
of wondering faces.
Beyond them
Tricia stares
catches my breath,
slips away.
Natalie

Loud strangers crowd
the hallway, the kitchen, the living room.
The spreading stains and destruction
feed my emptied stomach.
Tricia

Someone has broken
the fern.
Natalie pulls me behind it
slips me a note.
*Timing is everything,* she says
her voice manic.
I fight my way to the kitchen
to find Miguel.
Kyle

Natalie sidles down beside me.

She'll be waiting for you
when the song ends,
leaves a whispered kiss on my earlobe.
My fingers stumble.
Miguel

A poem from school stumbles through my head.
My father's body was a globe of fear
His body was a town we never knew*
and the ghosts within me
are louder than music.

* Letters and Other Worlds by Michael Ondaatje
The lights are off.
When I call her name she whispers

Shh
pulls me to the pillow
her hands move
quick
across my body
peel off my t-shirt
before snatching
my breath
with a hungry mouth
that tastes of watermelon
and I know
it’s not Tricia.
Miguel

There is
heat
in my mind
party music cannot
cool.
Tricia hands
me a note:
up the stairs
2nd door on the right
I'm waiting.  N.
I mount the stairs
two at a time
The hallway light
reveals
a bare torso
a startled face.
Kyle's.
Miguel, she breathes,
and the heat
explodes.
Natalie

Miguel's face
an orgasm of anger
his body an explosion
of motion
as he lunges
towards the bed.
Tricia

I hear a roar through
a haze of coolers
and the thudding
bass
in the kitchen
speaker

panic
and Natalie's name

Up the stairs in slow
motion
and Miguel's fist
smashing into
a face
again
and again
the meaty thuds
in ridiculous
synchronization
with the party
music
and I see
he's killing
Kyle.
Natalie

When the others
drag Miguel away
push him
swearing and swinging
through the front door
Kyle’s face
looks like raw meat
but he’s breathing.
It was so passionate
it was poetry
Tricia

What is he doing here?
I left him playing to his audience.
From the bed
I hear
Natalie’s
loud breath.

Electricity snaps
through the air
between us.

I expected Miguel
and he...
her eyes shine
with tears.

Kyle rises
on one elbow
his bloody face beseeching
I thought she was you.

I turn
to comfort Natalie.
Miguel

I rage through empty streets
before my eyes float
  Natalie’s half smile
  the laughing faces of soldiers
  my father’s limp body.
My fists find the cement wall
jar pain
up to my shoulders
I hear a groan
that must be
me.
Tricia

When the police come
they say
*The neighbours made
a noise complaint.*
When Kyle staggers
bleeding
down the stairs
they say
*Let’s go, kid.*

We’re bathed in
flashing blue silence
at the doorway
and I realise
the music has stopped.
Miguel

*Stupid boy,* says my uncle,
*to bring the police to this house.*
*You know what we have here.*
*The police are not our friends.*

On a kitchen chair
in the corner
Juan smoulders

In my room I lie back,
stare at the ceiling.
My mother's voice is silent.

The space around me
narrows to a black tunnel.
I have
no choice.

From under my bed
I pull out the gym bag
slide out the blue
barrel
cradle it in my bleeding
hands
spin the chamber.
Tricia

As dawn breaks she tells me
it was her best performance poetry
  Kyle's shock
  Miguel's anger
  my loyalty
the house is shattered around her
and she's laughing so hard she's crying
I back carefully
out the door.
Natalie

Mum was so pissed
by the end of her weekend
she said next stop
was a foster home.
I told her she was lucky
she had connections
in the home repair business.
Kyle

My face will heal with adjustments they tell me. They don't know about the other wounds.
Ms Nishi

When I tell her that
Options Alternate School
is her last chance
Natalie shrugs.
Her mother looks at her watch.
She’s beyond me, she says.

She was beyond us
when she arrived.
Around her lies wreckage.
When they tell me
he is dead
bullet
in the mouth
they look at me
like I pulled
the trigger.

In the mirror
in a moment of stillness
I see the fangs
behind my lips.

Sometimes
I think I see him
stirring
in blue shadows,
tell him
I didn’t mean
that.

I make sure
no one sees me
cry.
to: Janice Nishi
from: Margaret Farr
subject: grief

I appreciate your offer of grief counselling
but I don’t think I’ll need emotional support.

I have my own coping methods.
Tricia

The pain
has nothing to do
with the breakfast
that sits still
in my stomach.

My footsteps make no echo
on these floors,
washed clean daily
of spilt blood.

At the nurse’s station
they tell me
where to go.

I’m sorry
I whisper
I should have believed
you.

His rough hand
on my arm
sends music
into my blood.
At school I mutter
through clenched teeth
and jaw wire
my face a tire tread
of stitches

but
Tricia's fingers on my cheek
let me smile.
I tell her
kissing will be safer
without the tongue stud.
She says
she believes me.
Tricia

After Miguel’s memorial service
My shoulder nudges Kyle’s arm
we walk so close.
Outside, under the oak tree,
I hug him so tight
he winces,
grins,
cries.

On the road
my face pressed against his jacket
the bike roaring between us

I smell spring.


