



On the Pedagogy of Poetics

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I (Sanni) wish to situate what you are about to read, dear reader. This paper represents a collection of creativity at the Calgary Narrative Collective in the form of examples of the therapeutic poems we write to our clients as part of our daily practice.

The representation of these poems is a reach to show you our collective work in Narrative therapy in a way that 20 pages of prose could only long to do. These poems will reveal much of the ambition and joy at the heart of our work.

When I first began writing poems for clients, I could not have imagined putting together this paper today: I find I am no longer alone. I never thought that either colleagues or students would join me in this venture of therapeutic poetry writing with such imagination, larceny, and passion. The writing of therapeutic documents is our only agency requirement for all new therapists who train with us, but even then, I have always been cautious to state: “this requirement of therapeutic documents can take the form of letters, poems, notes, songs, postcards, certificates, stories, etc.” as I can imagine no worse perversion than that of “mandated poems.” We indeed need therapists who, as Ursula LeGuin reminds us, “remember freedom.”

So imagine my surprise to find myself surrounded by all these therapists who are writing poems as matter-of-factly as to say, “um. How else would you start a session, or know your client, or structure your work, or create trust, or record their achievements if you didn’t write poems?” As a therapist and teacher, it is a great vexing question to me why people no longer hear stories of radical others. Over time, I have become convinced that this happens because people have been convincingly initiated in what to hear instead. If I had a life mission as a teacher, it would be to remove these instructions imprinted on otherwise entirely capable human ears so that they could hear a radical other speaking and respond as spirited and curious human beings all over again: such that they could linger over the imagination of others’ experiences with rich and specific language and an affectionate notice of their world.

The practice of writing poems has proven of great use in this regard. The craft and habit of surveying session notes and writing to every client, after every session, has pressed a reorientation from therapist’s anxieties and self-conscious questions in the aftermath of their





days to a repeated practice of a focused concentration of attention on clients' stories and contemplation of the idea proposals that spell possibility.

The incitement to write nothing short of poems in syntax and form also seduces therapists away from one of the great pitfalls and complacencies of our time: the reduction of the beauty and complexity of life to the lowest common denominator of something akin to SMART goals. When faced with the necessity of poetry instead of a therapeutic check-sheet, problems can suddenly appear interesting again. Problems can rise to be political and poetic dilemmas and spawn into tetrallemmas that any living person should rightfully lose much sleep over. The exorcising of problems into neatly boxed externalizations slightly loses its appeal next to clients' chaotic and living descriptions. No matter how much I wished to bestow all goodness to my clients and all badness into problems, the writing of poems has not born out this view to me: once one eschews the stretching of pithy metaphors over the richness of experience, it all becomes, well, interesting.

The writing of poems can cause the pause that spells fascination, not just in regard to problems but in regard to change. In restriction and revolution. In dragons and quests. But even writing these juxtapositions belies the true fascination: the interest in human beings. In the education of attention on both the moments of complicated problems and the moments of halting transcendence human beings reveal character, intent, and history to me as a witness. Poems are the counterpractice to the pain of experiencing the world in an anonymous, vague, illegitimized, and labelled manner. They work as a way of passing on knowledge, lived experience, solace and solidarity about our rarest human moments that, if it were said directly, wouldn't work. They allow descriptions of ideas and lives in one page rather than 15 pages. I am not a particularly concise speaker in my therapy sessions, and it gives me great grief at times to think about how to pose the heart of the matter. The whole idea of the poem is to cause a surprise change – otherwise the poem is useless to me. Poetry interests me because it is brief, it cannot say everything, but it puts an idea in motion, in the form of instant dialogue between my client and myself. I chase the moment when you can make a poem burst into a soul with good will and boldness. I think this happens when you catch what is at the heart of the matter for a living person, when you are able to speak of failure without hanging people, when you come close to inching to precipice that spells transformation, all set in the ordinary lives of persons, and in their own dialect. This surprise halts the slide back into our usual eyes in favor of the possibility of lingering: the ability to think while being swept up in the sensory emotional experience of the world. That's the kind of poem I want to write, the kind that stops being about word-play, and starts being about life.





And above all else, poems are an anti-dote to despair: ours and our clients. What has surprised me most is how the passion of writing poems restores itself, - I don't understand it. The poems can happen without trying so hard, they prove our work without proving our self-consciousness about our work. And dare I say it, there is a kind of happiness to them that is the true purpose of this paper.

In preparation for this collection of poems I asked the team of therapists at the CNC to tell me why they started doing it, and why they have persisted with it through the years. Each of them passed on their thoughts to me generously, and I cast about for a while with the question of how to represent their ideas. I had in fact, set up complicated bulleted lists of shared themes before it came to me: write a poem! So the following poem is constructed in its entirety from the words of the therapists who responded to my question:

***A Response to the First Time Sanni Assigned an Easy Task:
Why did you start writing poems for clients?***

*As I sat there, listening
I had been shriveling up like a rose bush in dry soil
In the barren landscape of counsellor training:
The parrots were squawking:
Microskills, lists of good questions, SMART goals
Was THIS what I had put my mind to doing?*

*The spirit of the poems grabbed me:
This was real talk defending clients' honor
And there were swear words, metaphors and rich details
The poems were alive
Subversive, moving, funny, and human
And I was enlivened:
Alert, vibrating, writing notes vigorously
It opened a door to another world.*

*It was the poems that set me ablaze
They were my way into Narrative therapy
And I don't understand how therapists who don't do poems do it
Because how do you do Narrative therapy
Without this: People's. Words. Matter.*





*You have to understand:
I too, have the whole: "I-Am-Not-a-Writer
And-I-Certainly-Have-Never-Tried-To-Write-Anything-Since-A-Grade-7-Haiku" -thing
Going on,
I still don't think of myself as a poet,
I would never win a poetry writing contest.
But I listen for the poetry in a person's story without trying
And how do you explain THAT?*

*I am not a preschooler,
And I believe that my mind has the ability to create
Something unique
I do not need a "fill in the blanks" form.*

*So I hit the ground running and never looked back.
And here's what I learned:*

*Lesson number 1:
Writing poems catches people by surprise!
I saw them weep, laugh, and beam with pride.
They print them, post them, share them, bind them, re-write them in calligraphy
They wait with baited breath for the next one
And I can't wait to read them to him or her or them
"Yes, read it now!" People say,
"Aahhh, I have a poem written just for me."
"You just broke through 364 days of loneliness."
And if I had a nickle for every time a person says
"I feel so heard"
I wouldn't have to work anymore
But I would choose to do THIS.
And that's not all.*

*Lesson Number 2:
It takes a lot of attention
To put together a piece of writing
In a way that has the potential to be healing.
If I don't pay attention*

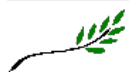




*People can feel like shit.
People's responses to the poems
Are the ultimate supervisor of my work:
They require me to puzzle on clients' dilemmas
Sweat with power dynamics
Choose poignant moments*

*The poems are a gauge
And they keep me on my toes:
They show me
What I did in session,
And if struggle writing a poem,
It tells me it was a shit session:
Creativity arises most readily from creativity.*

*The form of the poem invites it to be dynamic
and changeable
unlike a letter that is so paragraphy:
Prose cannot capture a love that is at risk of a rebel coup,
or the discovery of childlike gentleness as an "anti-anxiety" strategy
Or what a pill bottle by the bed spells:
"and when I see it
by the bedside
it's a pill container full of trust"
Would we have the same thing to work with
If I had read a dreary letter saying
and then you did this, and then you did this...?
A poem does not bind you to the conventions of regular speak.
You can convey big ideas and big feelings in so few words.
You can be weird and interesting.
Perhaps the thing I love most about poetry is the tonality:
In a way, you have the ability to infect someone with a vibe,
like a give-no-shits vibe,
or a this shit is a s-trrrr-r-u-g-g-l-e vibe,
or an frantic vibe,
or a calm vibe,
or an 'I got this!' vibe,
or a deep with feeling vibe ...*





*And if people can be moved by their own stories
Laugh at their oppressors
Feel empowered
And catch a glimpse like this:
“if that person is the person I am in this world
then goddamn why do I hate myself so much sometimes?
I loved the person in the poem, she was jovial yet deep.
She is handling and coping with the situation beautifully with grace and dignity”*

*Then
I say,
Go ahead
Don't trust me
Write a poem instead,
Listen carefully to their response.
And
Then wait for what it is that will come next*

*Shh:
If it's neither
Unicorns
Nor
Vicarious Trauma
Would you be surprised?*

A Collection of Poems with Brief Introductions

Tara Luhtanen:

The following two poems are dedicated to one of my most favorite people whom I talk with. The brief background is that at a very young age she found herself in addiction and living with a much older drug dealer who was not going to let her leave him. After 3 days of 24/7 partying, she was dope sick and lying there on the bed and he had gone out - for cigarettes or drugs or some brief trip - and she had been given some drug that was laced with something and it woke her with a fit of adrenaline, and she knew instantly, if I don't do it now, I never will. She got up and ran out the door and she doesn't even recall putting shoes on, and she certainly did not pause to close the door behind her. She ran straight to the police station, and she said that moment was





"as if I was running through a field of daisies." In a session prior to me hearing about this story of running, she told me about her before-dawn drives to find spots by the river where she would sit - feeling safe - in quiet and darkness - knowing if he were around, she would hear him through the quiet. I so admire this woman who feels safe alone in the quiet darkness in the middle of nowhere. This one drive was to get a tattoo, and she stopped first to have coffee by the water and watch the sunrise, knowing that she is safe with the timing of nature and that it will take time for her to move past all that happened. She got a full back tattoo that day of a moth that is flying over a mountain – and she described this peace on the other side of the mountain. I share both poems with you here, the one before the other. Every time I read the “Running Poem,” I get shivers. When I read it aloud to her, I choked up with tears and had to stop reading a moment. When a poem that I wrote has this effect on me, I know it's because of what happened in the session, because of what she shared and how she shared it.

The rise and fall of the sun

*In the peace of the mountains
with no yelling, cars or noise
with my coffee
and the dogs swimming
I sit at the river's edge and wait
for the transformation
to rise
with the sun before me
in its own time,
the clock of nature
where everything comes and goes
and in this dark peace the world has its sounds
and its rhythm
and I **will** take part in it*

*This energy
of writing
while the fire crackles
and the water rushes
and the dogs lie lazily
and the blanket pulls snugly
lying in the back of the truck
this energy of writing
prompted by the sunset*





*is energy sent out into the quiet still moment
it is not energy for you
it is yelled into the woods
with my knees on the cold hard ground
and when I rise
my back turned on you
as if with a rebirthing
the moth flies over the mountain*

*A full back tattoo
paints over your knowing of me.
this back
that I turn on you
dude
all you know
is an unrecognizable
version of a me that
has flown over the mountain
in a last-minute decision
that is all the time you're worth*

A split second of insanity or, A split second of sanity
*Did you ever just know: this was your moment?
Did you ever run, feeling like nothing can stop you?
Did you ever run, as if through a field of daisies
Did you ever run, like you have the warm wind behind you
propelling you forward
pushing you but also just carrying you in its embrace
like a moth catches an air current over a mountain
and ahead the road is rising up to meet you
and there are no stop lights
and there are no street signs
because none are needed
there's only one path
so clearly laid out before you
Did you ever know something deep within you
so much that you didn't even have to think about it anymore
that your body could embrace the action*





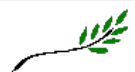
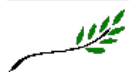
*knowing that your mind and soul had already fully embraced it
Did you ever embrace a moment
Did you ever take one moment and put everything you have into it
in a now or never kind of way
Did you ever just get up and run
and not even close the door behind you
or take anything but yourself
Did you ever care for yourself that much?
Did you ever just take yourself somewhere, and nothing else?
Did you ever just run, knowing it was your moment to run across the daisy fields to freedom*

*And did you see those fields begin to open up
where you took yourself
and where you find yourself now
when you feel for once
you could just ride forever
with your dearest love
and not worry where you're going
with tall grasses and growing dusk as the sun sets
Did you ever know when you were running free
that you were running
to fields like this?*

Crys Vincent:

The following poem was written for a young Indigenous woman and mother, Jane. Jane chronicled for me the long history of her family, punctured by the childhood loss of her mother, the estrangement from her sister, and the loss of her daughter to Child and Family Services. But Jane's story was not overcome by Loss, no, her story was one of rich family ties spanning generations. There were ways her mother's wisdom continued to guide her even years later, even as Jane herself had become a mother at 12, to both her sister and herself. This wisdom, these knowings continued to inform her as we spoke and she fought to get her daughter back from foster care and curate the next evolution of her family, spirited by her mother's energy, but with people of her own choosing.

As we continued to meet, Jane told me about the visits she was allowed to have with her daughter. She told me about hunting the concrete city for pockets of nature so she could expose her daughter to the ways her culture connected with nature. Jane spoke of herself as a Mama





Bear, ready to fight as she prepared for another meeting with her social worker. I was struck by the fullness of Jane's identity that encompassed both the Hunter and the Bear along with the cultural significance these symbols held for her.

The Hunter and The Bear

*Sometimes I am the hunter
Smelling that smell
Of earth, dirt, and water, and air
Hunting the city limits
For pockets of nature,
Of beauty
Of leaves my daughter can crunch
Beneath her feet*

*Hunting for connection in dreams
And meaning in challenges
And truth in everything*

*Sometimes I am the Bear
The fierce Mama Bear
Who protects and fights and never loses sight of her young
Even the ones she only sees in her dreams*

*The Wise Bear with instincts that knew even as a child,
that a person is more important
Than a can of beer
The Brave Bear who risked it all
To protect the young
And still keeps watch in the "no go zone"*

*I am connected to my culture
My spirit
My family*

*Sometimes, I am the Hunter
Sometimes, I am the Bear*





The following poem was written after the first session with a young gay woman navigating the micro system of the gay community in a midsized western Canadian city. She spoke of this community as a circular cage, where she continued to run into the same people, the same ex-lovers, the same drama everywhere she turned. I love this poem because I can hear her voice so clearly. Lois had a distinct cadence and vocabulary that captivated me right away. She spoke of mistakes as "garbage" and the drama within the gay community as "fire," and her girlfriend as a "cool glass of lemonade" in the midst of the flames. Lois spoke of the desire to walk away from the fire that burned inside the cage. To watch the flames from a safe distance, but be able to have a calm mind.

Garbage on Fire

*Lately, I've been feeling like a broken record
Someone change the vinyl!
I'm sick of this song on repeat
The song of confusion
The song that keeps repeating every dick move I've ever made
And calls me garbage*

*How about some refreshments?
She was like a cool glass of lemonade
An ice cube, sounded by a ring of fire*

*But this town is small, man
And it feels more like a circular cage
So that no matter how fast I run
I keep running back into the same damn things
The dick moves
The betrayals
The secrets
The hopes that maybe this time
It might be different*

*Not all half-truths are lies
You know how hard it is to have any privacy in a circular cage?
Maybe I'd like to tell you who I am
Outside of the cage
And away from the fire*





*Turn off the soundtrack
And let me out!
I'd like to know who I am outside
Without the lyrics of loss
You insist on repeating
Echoing in my ear
It's enough to drive anyone crazy
So that must mean I'm perfectly normal
Yeah, I might be screaming
But this shit is on fire*

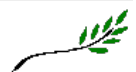
*I'm not even angry anymore
I don't have any anger left
I'm tired of watching people I love
Add gasoline to the fire
And then ask me why I'm so hot*

*I've been burned, that's why
And you've looked at my scarred skin and
Figure it's what I deserved
You know, cause of the garbage*

"I'm only here until I find someone I like more"

That's garbage on fire

*Maybe I am still angry after all
Looks like I still have some fight left
And maybe I'm only really sad
When I have to hear that song on repeat
The one you wrote
But have stuck my name to
I didn't write that crap
And I'm not reaching for the fire extinguisher
If you want to burn it down
Go ahead
Maybe I'll roast a marshmallow*

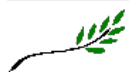




*Maybe I'll just walk away
Maybe I'll watch from a safe distance
And do my best to avoid the sparks*

Sarah Green:

This is a poem I wrote recently for a client who is a new mum. I've changed the names of people and places to protect their privacy. This new mum, we've chosen to call her Sally, first came to me to discuss anxiety, something with which she has had a long relationship, and has actually found to be quite helpful, especially in her job. But since her pregnancy and the birth of her child, she has found that there has been an increase in anxiety and the biggest impact being on the relationship between her and her husband, "Mike." She complained to me that she cannot let things go, or just do things and go places, and that this makes no sense to Mike. Sally and I have had 3 sessions now, all over zoom, and all of them with the baby, "Oden" present, being lovingly cared for by Sally. We've discussed the huge weight of responsibility that falls on mothers, the aloneness that Sally feels with these responsibilities, and the ways in which she's been determinedly practicing her ethics and values of care. She doesn't let them go. The poem is not particularly pretty, or linguistically musical. But Sally still shed tears, and thoughtfully responded to the poem, not only because it summarizes the story of our sessions, but because it offers a position which problematizes cultural assumptions about the distribution (or lack thereof) of responsibilities between women and men when it comes to child-rearing, household duties, and of keeping our concerns and anxieties to ourselves. In our most recent session, the one in which I read this poem to Sally, she thought aloud that perhaps she did not actually want to attempt to let things go because she does really care about those things, but rather find ways of sharing the burden of responsibility with others, and with Mike. I'm proud of this poem, not because of its prettiness, or its polish. It might seem at first as though it is simply a list of the things that Sally has told me about her problems, and then a happy triumph at the end. But it did a lot more for Sally than just remembering everything we talked about, or validating her feelings. Sally was really thoughtful about how the only other people she knew who shared similar experiences as her were other women that she knew, and how drastically their lives changed after having had babies, whereas their male partners and spouses had very little change in lifestyle. I'm proud of this poem because of how it offers a position on gender norms and societal pressures to "let it go." from inside of the story of her experience with anxiety, her marriage, and motherhood.





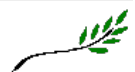
I Don't Let It Go

*His name is Oden, our first.
When I was pregnant anxiety was all about trying to protect the baby.
I thought once I saw him it would be ok.
That was wrong.
The biggest impact is probably on me with my husband.
I was really on one end of the spectrum of careful.
Mike was on the opposite end.
I asked him to wash his hands.
Is that reasonable? Or completely driven by anxiety and how ridiculous am I being?
It was just one of the ways that I could do everything to protect him.*

*Whatever it is I get stuck on, I don't let it go.
Mike literally can't grasp what anxious feelings could be like.
Don't tell me to let it go!
Don't tell me to calm down!
I've been trying to protect this little guy for almost a year.
Strict on the food I was eating and things.
Knowing with my job some of the bad things that can happen:
Those things are real. I see them.
And with my job, anxiety is actually helpful, productive, a key component for where I am today.*

*Before this recent third wave lock down, almost 6 weeks post c-section,
I was going to take Oden to my parent's house so that I would have someone to help more
consistently.
I desperately wanted to go.
Anxiety reminded me that my sister has daycare aged kids,
that I should keep trying to check that his car seat was in right,
that packing is up to me,
that I could not talk about it all week because I would seem ridiculous.*

*I knew in my mind the night before that I would find a reason that sounded reasonable enough to
not go.
"You haven't started packing yet?" said my husband,
because packing is assumed to be my job.
It would be nice to be out of these walls.
But what would I forget? What about a car accident, or a cold?*





*These considerations are also my responsibility alone.
Anxiety tries to help, but the aloneness and burden of responsibility become a monster.
When the time comes I'll be thinking carefully about everything.
I won't let it go, but we will go.
He's a bit older. He has his first set of vaccines, everyone in my family has been vaccinated.
I'm feeling excited.
There will be more hands.
The care load has been just on me.*

*Then comes a call from the university to say can you come for your second vax?
But I am alone because Mike is away playing golf and I am secretly upset but not upset.
I either have to find someone to take him or take him with me.
That set me into a tail spin, prior to him peeing on me and my lunch beeping at 3:00.
In his mind, booking his golf today and his motorcycle road test tomorrow morning is nothing,
because he is not responsible for worrying or thinking about "what-ifs?" or planning.
And he doesn't understand anxiety, it's mine alone.
I didn't know until last night that he wasn't going to be here for all of these hours.
Don't tell me to let it go.*

*The burden falls on mum.
Who's going to be up with him half the night after a 3.5 hour drive?
I'm still going to go, but now I'm like, shoot,
getting vaccinated next week is no longer fine, I messed up royally as a mum, it didn't even
dawn on me that I was putting my baby at any risk,
because this responsibility is mine alone.
Going to parents isn't even a risky situation. Plus I have the vaccine booked.
My anxiety doesn't like last minute changes in plan.
My husband would probably say, "Well why didn't you just go?"
I don't know if I'll even tell him; I don't want to explain it to him.
Its not just about anxiety, but the burden and the monster and aloneness.
Then of course I'll think about it all day, because it is my responsibility alone and I won't let it
go.*

*I didn't let that vaccine phone call go.
I hopped in the car with Oden and drove to the clinic.
I have been vaccinated with my second as of this morning!
Made for a busy exit out of town, and I have anxiety in tow.
But the monster isn't stopping me, and we are half way there, and I'm not looking back!*



**Chelsey Morton:**

The following poem is about a woman who has decided to get a divorce and leave a relationship that was fraught with control and dominance. She knows leaving this marriage will leave her in an economically precarious situation. She spoke of not wanting to be a doormat anymore.

You Think You Know Anything About Doormats?

*This doormat just got legs and its standing up
It took its time
Waited it out
Hoped for a peaceful transition
The in-and-out traffic of the door
Provided a soft place to wipe your feet
Or remove your shoes
It was welcoming – it was giving of itself
Over time with constant use
The doormat was drowning in melting snow
Eating shit
And playing dumb
It was drugged and drug
Just to show up
With its tidy fringe
A betrayal pierced a hole in the weave
And the mat felt under attack
Uncertain if it could continue playing the game
It had been witness to so many attempted escapes
But it kept getting the dust beaten out of it
Laid back on the floor
For fear of punishment
Until this doormat got legs and stood up
Pulled back it's truth
It cancelled the steam clean
Refused a particular pair of shoes for the first time
The doormat knows fear is a prison
Strategy is escape
Courageous and planful in its care
To rebuild a foundation*





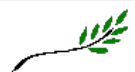
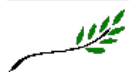
*This doormat just got legs and it is standing up
On sturdy beautiful floors
That are grounded in intention
It is a home and a place of belonging
Just beyond fear
The doormat has been woven with golden threads of beauty
Fine chains of a compass lace the edges
Flower petals have dyed the fibres
And this doormat just got legs and it is standing up
For a life of freedom*

This second poem is dedicated to a young queer person who struggled with belonging and feeling like they are not 'normal' -they spoke about how weeds are misunderstood and maybe dandelions are beautiful.

Picking Through the Weeds Finding Dandelions

*Normal weeds parade as potential flowers
And go on to suck the nutrients from the soil
In noxious and diminishing ways
And the gardener is forced to
Spend all day on her hands and knees
Dissecting which sprout is worth keeping
Thorns of tough love can be pretty prickly
Leaving days to pull out each puncture
Caused by attempts at 'normal'*

*What might become a surreal blossom
Of weirdness
With aromas of tender care?
The dandelion of course!
Feeding the bees with early pollen
The bold yellow flower
Giving a place of belonging
In the contrast it provides
There is an ease in spotting the dandelion
But an effort, not so easily traced,
In appreciating it*



**Larissa Szlavik:**

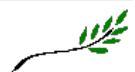
I am all ears when my client (I will refer to her as 'Erin') tells me that for some weird reason, she thinks of her grandfather any time she sees a black bear – which is often! We are at the threshold of Summer, a time of year that brings the kind of sadness that speaks to an absence of family, and an absence of her “most special” person. It's been 2 years since her grandfather passed away, and the pain of being excluded from his funeral is especially present today. She grew up in a particular church that is imbued in homophobia and patriarchy. Erin did not feel she belonged there. Eventually, her family turned their backs on her when she announced to them her truth: she's queer. Her grandfather was the one family member she could count on to love her no matter what, just as she is. The following poem was written in response to the re-membering conversation that ensued – it is not only an attempt to bring Erin closer to her grandfather's spirit, but also to an identity that was stolen from her. See, Erin tells me that her grandfather was indigenous on his mom's side – Mi'kmaq, she suspects – a truth that was silenced by Shame, the Indian Act, and a church fire that devoured the birth records. Erin feels a sense of “loss” over this. I highlight the agency of her longing to know about her indigenous ancestry and culture as “clinging to memories that refuse to get lost” and a series of questions that Erin poses. These acts are not mundane, they are a counter to the forces that want to erase her indigenous heritage entirely. I did a little research and came across the Mi'kmaq legend of Muin, the bear who was called to bring medicines to the human people¹. It's a beautiful story about humans living in harmony with land, animals, and plants – which is very fitting as Erin has a strong connection to nature. I pitched the metaphor that her grandfather brought medicines to her heart, which she loved. The poem tells a story of a woman who is able to access her grandfather's medicines, even after death, by walking in his footpath.

Reference

1. Mi'kmaw Culture - Legends and Stories (muiniskw.org)

Bear Brings the Medicines

*I've wandered these woods
following the footpath Bear left behind –
It leads me to a strawberry patch
all plump with the end of summer.
Heart pangs like a lump you can't swallow
like a church fire that devoured part of my history*





*like a clenched fist clinging to memories
that refuse to get lost.*

*There is so much I would want to know.
Where did his mom come from?
Why did she leave the reservation?
What was she like?
What was the rest of my family like?
What did being indigenous mean to him?*

*I used to go to the old Bear's house
on Sundays
instead of playing with the church kids.
Play Scrabble,
read John Grisham,
adventure on the four-wheeler.*

*He sensed the loneliness
thawed it's cold right outta me with his warmth
He used to call me 'Moonbeams'
not because my white hair,
but because I was different.
He saw me shining—
“you're gonna do big things” he'd say.*

*Bear would always bring medicines
to my heart.
Didn't matter what was going on
or what I needed.
He saw how I refused to play certain roles
for certain people.
His love was unconditional,
always —
We were each other's most special person.*

*He used to love how much I loved to read,
and when I'd get up from the dinner table
to help myself to seconds or thirds,*





*he'd say, "Eat! Eat!"
We were the same in spirit,
the Bear and I,
voracious
for big words
insatiable curiosity
I remember his big bear laughter
strengthening my resolve
to live my truth.*

*He no longer roams this Earth,
but I still walk in his footpath,
with gentleness and
Stewardship to the land.
Closer and closer I come
to the medicines*

*and I find Freedom
in the quiet moments
between each step.*

Sanni Paljakka:

The following poem is written for Raine, a pseudonym chosen with pride by this client. Raine is a young queer woman who struggles with physical symptoms of anxiety as a result of a lifetime of disregard and abuse of her person and the queer-phobic questioning of her experiences and decisions by powerful others. She came to consult with me under duress as she had recently taken her courage in her shaking hands once more to explore the kind of intimacy, romance, desire and want that would befit her soul. Prior to this conversation, people had told her in no uncertain terms that these explorations of hers were “unhealthy” – this poem sought to capture her lived experiences and her decision making to claim her moral authority on her ways of loving. Raine commented that this poem honored her and made her proud.

Wonder

*How do you build a life
Within your own skin
In a world that is scary as hell?*





*I'll tell you:
If you decide to take a measured look at scary
And aim the steering wheel right into
It even if your hands shake
The comfort in your skin will grow
-It's a wonder.*

*And after you decide that foursomes aren't for you
And your ride picks you up
And you drive into the night as your hands shake
The knowing in your skin will grow
In the presence of a friend
-It's a wonder.*

*And after you risk
And lean over to kiss the man with the beard for the first time in your life
And he turns out too shy
Or after you risk and smile at the woman who has a belly just like you
And she turns out too straight
The hope in your skin will grow
-It's a wonder.*

*If you look at skin and blood and bones
And ask them what they long for
They might tell you:
I want to build a family
My chosen family
The one I painted when I was six
The one to jump into cold water with
The one to go to Christmas parties with
The one to care for a kitten with
The one to drive long into the night with
The one to trace our ways into our skins with
-Like wonder.*

*My hands tell me
My longing*





*Is for family-esque
And so, with shaky tender hands, I brought home a kitten today:
We're ready.*

Tiffany Saxton:

This poem is from a conversation with an older Indigenous man, the week after the presence of 215 unmarked graves was confirmed by members of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation, with the help of ground-penetrating radar, at the Kamloops Residential School. He had previously been under increasing pressure from suicidal thoughts and in this conversation, remembered what he knew about the life-saving power of being seen and believed. He came to our next session and responded to the reading of this poem with, "I'm good now. Listening to you telling the stories of my knowing did it. I guess you and me, we saved my life again. Yeah, my soul's good with living in these old bones."

Homecoming

*Surely
With the 215
you cannot turn away from the Truth
We always told:
For five springs I went to him,
Begging for a job,
an escape,
From the beatings
From the loneliness
From the shame
From the train tracks.*

*There were 6 of us in my family;
I am the only one left
of our generation,
Stolen to unlearn the Truth
of who we were,
To have the Indian slaughtered
out of our bones and souls.*

When I was 13,





*He said yes
and
saved
my
life.*

*I worked hard
for decades;
He is still my mentor
And I have become a knowledge keeper
of both his craft and my legacy.*

*Knowing that you will walk with us
Allows my journey home;
To stand tall once more,
To finally know
How to live again
In these bones,
With this soul.*

