



A house of good words: A prologue to the practice of writing poems as therapeutic documents

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*I'm quite a proper person - at times -
she said.*

*But now, the responses are pouring in
and I am conspicuously absent,
yet again.*

*Secretly,
these things mean a lot to me,
and I have a lot to say.
Can I please say something else,
with hands freed by your grace?
You see, there's just no going back.*

*(Tiffany Saxton's 'rescued words' from our conversation regarding the writing of this paper.
Tiffany will make a few guest appearances in this paper as my colleague and friend and fellow
poet... And incidentally, the **effervescent oxygen mask to my plane crash.**)*

Dear David, Dear Tom,

I had a dream last night. I dreamt that I was called in to write an essay in a classroom at a school. I showed up on this day carrying a box of odd items:

1. a golden fountain pen
2. a painting of what can only be described as hungry ghosts
3. a photo of a woman looking out of a car window on the passing prairie landscape
4. a stash of yellowed old cards with quotes on them
5. a shimmering toy dragon

However, when I took my seat in the classroom, I was asked to hand over my box of items and my pen and given a promotional pen still in its plastic wrapper to write with instead. My heart sank in horror. I stared at the writing on this promotional pen which seemed to read "RSP",



which might stand for “Rescued Speech Poems,” or otherwise some awful composite of retirement savings plans and a French call to respond.

David, Tom, you asked me to write up my recent presentation on the practice of writing poems in response to therapeutic conversations. I felt honoured by your request and so I have been looking over my notes for said presentation. But, my dears, I have come to the conclusion that there is no going back! That particular hot mess has blown up, blown over, and I sit here back home at my office amidst its fertile ashes. I would much rather write you some thoughts from this new place of beginning life. What do you think?

I would venture a guess that you two might gladly humour me in the escape from any promotional pens in plastic wrappers and take a tour with me of the box of odd items instead!
So let us go then, you and I...

1. A golden fountain pen

The practice of writing poems in response to therapeutic conversations crept up on me slowly and steadily over the course of my life and work. Its beginnings reach far back into my life as a young person. I went to school in a small town, in Austria, outside of Vienna, where children still wrote with fountain pens and were taught to admire musicians, artists, and writers of all kinds. Poetry was all around me then. My parents read poems to us. My teachers read poems to us. In fact, my German language teacher of 6 years dramatically *performed* poems to us. His performances of his favorite poems (many of which he read to us again and again over the years) were booming and breathtaking, enough to stun any class of unruly and derisive teenagers into silence. He also required and insisted that we write essays in response to the poems, and deliberate on the meaning of the sometimes ancient words to us in our personal lives. He scrawled his encouragement and enthusiasm for any sincere efforts of writing such essays in huge oversized letters in our notebooks.

Since that time, I have heard many people expressing that they do not “understand” poetry and that their own encounters with poetry in and outside of school had been anything but inspiring. My appreciation of my teacher’s larger-than-life passion has grown with the understanding of how he rescued me from a fate of viewing poems as obsolete curiosities that can only be approached by a chosen few. He opened my ears to hear how lines written long ago could come to life and accompany me everywhere I went. My life, thanks to him, was rich and teeming with imagery: the crows flying overhead were never the same after hearing “their”



poem. The panther caged in a zoo, the couple stirring silently in their coffee cups, the overflowing fountain, the dog that barks in the night, the soldier without his armour carrying a flag, the weeping woman – they all came to life and afforded me with riches to live by. In moments of great chaos, I still find myself remembering and repeating lines from poems – the words and their rhythm settle me and bring me solace.

When I left Austria to move to Canada as a young adult, my best friend, who had sat right next to me over the past six school years, gave me a tape recording of her rendition of some of those poems that this teacher had read to us. The rhythm and cadence of his reading mingled with my best friend's voice as I listened to the tape over and over on my travels in this vast new country. The poems spoke to me of home. They taught me that words can be with us to suspend our gravest moments of loneliness. They gave me hope that I might yet belong, perhaps not in any country in particular, but among its people and their words.

2. A painting of what can only be described as hungry ghosts

Recently, Tiffany and I sat down for lunch to reflect on her thoughts after a round of particularly mind-boggling team-work, and she sighed, "I am so hungry..." A poem was born:

This is hungry work

With you at the table

I want to eat words

So yes, please

Give me your round cracked words

Your tart chewy words

Your liquid honey words

And tell me my friend

How words seeped into your blood

And effervesced in your veins

And plopped to thought bubbles

That you only had to read with your mouth.

Tell me

I am so hungry.

I now know that the practice of writing poetry in response to therapeutic conversations came to me as a series of hauntings by hungry ghosts. The ghosts were hovering about me on a snowy afternoon at the University library when I was desperately looking for "templates" to write better letters for my clients. I stumbled upon an article by Christopher Behan about what



he termed Rescued Speech Poems and was immediately taken by a sense of delight and wonder. I found myself thinking about how transcribing the speaker's words into a poem might make it possible to "rescue the said from the saying of it" (White, 2000). I tucked this idea and its delight away in my mind.

The ghosts looked on quite sincerely a half a year later as I sat under the tree outside of my office building on a sunny afternoon. I sat there in a daze, thinking about the person who had just left after our conversation; her words swirled and echoed in my mind, and would not leave me alone. I thought about how on earth I might write a letter to her and let her know how profoundly she had moved me, and how I had caught a glimpse of her spirit, shining through the problem story she had caught me up on. 'This will be a lengthy letter full of quotes,' I thought a bit mournfully as I contemplated the impossibility of doing justice to what I was experiencing by way of a wordy letter and its quotes.

The ghosts were impatiently stirring in the corners during a conversation with my supervisor, Alan Parry, when he asked me the question, "If your frustration could speak, what would it say?" Now, in hindsight, the question might have been amended to 'If your frustration could speak, and wasn't permitted to simply incriminate you for your failure to be a better therapist, what would it say?'

The answer to that question might have been another question: 'If I cannot reproduce Michael White's beautiful maps in my work and if I also do not have the wits about me to ask the beautiful story-telling questions of David Epston, what the hell CAN I do?'

Where are the bells that I can ring? How can I deliberate together with people on the living of their lives in some way that would honour their character and expand the horizons of possibility? How can I compellingly show my regard? I felt myself to be a thoroughly witless person with no useful understanding of maps to show me out of the territory of the swirling words. But the words! They followed me home; they startled me awake; they kept coming to me in the kitchen and in front of the bathroom mirror. "I want to replace the kitchen god for the sake of my daughter!" I heard in my mind's ear every time I walked in to my own kitchen. "I am the great gadfly!" I heard when I was sitting with my friends at the bar. "I am a mountain of a girl" I heard while sitting in tiny waiting rooms. "This is my body, this is its shape, this is its pain, and this is its healing," I heard in front of the bathroom mirror. I felt myself to be sitting on a treasure but not knowing what to do but sit, ever more uncomfortably. **Who is hoarding all this rare work?**



3. A photo of a woman looking out of a car window on the passing prairie landscape

I take some pleasure in imagining what the ghosts might have been doing on the day when the first poem crept onto an actual page on my computer. I do know that on that day, the pressure of time and happy accident came to their aid. It was my last day of work before a vacation and I was sitting in my office with a stack of therapeutic letters to finish. Time was of the essence as the evening light had already turned from dark to darker. It had long been my habit to start a new letter by reading over my hand-written notes from the conversation and then transcribing my client's verbatim quotes onto an empty page on the computer. The letter to be written would be formed around these quotes of the person's own words, and would include some questions and thoughts of mine, opening and closing lines etc.

That evening, I started as usual, lifting quotes from my notes onto a new page, intent on forming a letter, but for some reason I stopped and looked again at the seemingly random collection of the person's words on my page. It read:

*I feel haunted
By the emotional scenery.
It goes past and I see
Upset, anger, depression, anxiety, lethargy
- Familiar landscapes.
Oh and then, of course (how could I forget?):
Work, work, work.*

*But I want to MOVE
I want to BREATHE.*

*With everything I have done
Am I able
to recognize the winds?*

*So instead of taking it in,
Taking it on
In silence
I SPEAK
Until the edge is gone.*

I sat back and thought that it looks and sounds like a poem. (The ghosts might have felt a case of "Duh!" or "Whatever took you so long?" at this point.) In my defense, at least I felt a strong



hesitation about going in and “breaking up” these sentences with my questions and thoughts. I could see that she had already expressed what she wanted to about both the problem (described here as the “familiar landscapes”) as well as her intentions for her life apart from the problem (“to move, to breathe, to recognize the winds, to speak”) and that my musings might not be required; in fact, any musings of mine might detract from her own words. And the last line, to speak until the edge is gone, was breathtaking to me in its ‘knowing’. Therefore - and significantly prompted by time pressure to move on to the next letter - I thought perhaps I will give this poem to the person who spoke these words exactly as is and see what she might make of it.

As I was preparing to meet with her again after a week’s vacation, I had many questions about the ethics of what I was doing. I worried that she might feel uncomfortable about seeing her words put together in this way; I was concerned that the poem might have misrepresented what she was wanting to say about her life; I fretted that I might be immortalizing her dilemmas by presenting them to her in black and white and by having had the temerity to call the writing a ‘poem’. I admit to hoping that she might not come to our appointment so that I might have a little more time to write a proper letter for her. But she did. And after some apologetic explanations to her about the strange form of the ‘letter’ she had expected and clumsy invitations to please refuse it, I finally read the poem aloud to her. To my all-out surprise, I saw her becoming tearful during the reading. After many moments of silence that I did not know how to fill (thank the gods!) she said quietly, “This is so beautiful. I had no idea that I sounded like this. I had no idea that I knew this.”

In fact, after a few years and hundreds of other poems later, I can say that this is one of the most common responses people utter upon being presented with their own words in poetic form: a sense of surprise and delight about hearing their words and catching a glimpse of themselves as the speaker in a slightly different way.

This first ‘poet’ and I went on to have a very different conversation as a result of opening our meeting with my reading of her poem which I had contrived. She expressed that for the first time she recognized her own idea, “speaking until this edge is gone”, as a legitimate tack to take in response to her dilemmas. I found her suddenly eager to tell me about other times in her life she had done something of this sort. And this was soon followed up with an account of many more steps that she had taken now that she had perceived her own knowledgeable.



Her response to the poem was a turning point for both of us. For her, it meant a vision of someone who knew how and what to say about her own life. For me, it hurtled me into the venture of writing Rescued Speech poems in earnest. After she left my office, I sat there and thought, 'What if I could inspire something similar in more people? What if I could start more conversations, not with my own words or questions, but with what people knew to say the last time we spoke and see where that might take us this time?! And, pray tell, how might this change the spirit of my conversations with the people I meet?'

4. A stash of yellowed old cards with quotes on them

Ever since that day of the first poem, I have been deeply curious about the 'real effects' of the practice of poetry writing on the people on the receiving end of such poems. Some of these 'effects' come in the form of words, in people's expressions in response to the reading of a poem. Other effects, such as a change in my relationship to people or the change in the spirit of a conversation, remain a bit more elusive, more sensed than spoken.

In a recent conversation with Tiffany, she said to me, "Do you remember, Sanni, when it used to take three sessions for a person to feel like I got it, I got what they were trying to say and have some trust in that? Have you noticed how the poems leap over two entire sessions to get there as soon as they hear the first poem?"

So perhaps the poems leap. Perhaps they forge trust. Perhaps they speak secret messages in between the lines, messages of forgotten wisdom, of togetherness, of a suspension of shame and of courage in the night.

Jane (2008) writes that:

Perhaps this way of working has captured my attention because it is in these moments of receiving poetic documents, or in the experience of hearing poetic versions of their conversations read out to them, that I have most consistently witnessed the people consulting me stepping into a space that exoticises the domestic, the everyday, the taken for granted and the unquestioned in their lives. It is within this context that I have most regularly witnessed people positioning themselves as curious co-researchers or anthropologists, engaged in the pursuit of making the familiar in their lives unfamiliar. (p.94)

Inspired to inquire into such claims, I have recently begun to collect and categorize people's responses to hearing their poems read out loud to them. Below are excerpts of this



'categorizing' work, with titles lifted from some of my favorite poems to express the possibilities of themes for the effects of poems. The quotes refer to my transcription of people's responses to questions such as: What was it like for you to hear this? What does hearing this get you thinking about? What moved you? You smiled, - why? Do you recognize your words?

Come Now, This World Is Wiser Than You Think

- *I did not know I knew this...*
- *When you were reading this, I felt like I am understanding deeper the changes I am going through...*
- *I wouldn't have remembered any of this; because these things are harder to remember; the problem overwhelms me...*
- *This is so moving to me. It is shocking to hear this. Shocking in a good way. I did not feel I had shared that much, and now I am so surprised...*
- *When you read it out loud, it feels like an expansion. It expands my consciousness, there is another dimension, and I think: 'Did I really go there? Did I really know to say this?'*
- *I don't always speak so positively. These words see so much beauty in me...*
- *You make it sound so beautiful (tearful). You are such an asshole! I wore make-up today! I wasn't going to cry...*
- *It helps encapsulate my feelings; I remember I spent most of that meeting crying; now when I hear it again, I think: 'why is this so moving?' I think these are tears of recognition; I am feeling the gravity of those lessons...*

To Achieve the Together-Coloured Instant

- *I have never experienced this way of counselling before; I feel so well heard; I realize now how I need to tell my story. And you capture the spirit, the visions, images, and values of what I am holding.*
- *I love that so much. You make it sound so good. I want to hang it somewhere. These expressions: "to light up this ordinary life", "the I that wanted to be here", They were not so pretty when I said them. It seems to me that you are writing what I am saying. It's hard to remember we talked about. You are creating a language to what happened. It's easier to remember when we create a language together.*
- *That's the amazing thing. You are really listening in your poetry.*



- *You listened to my story; and you wrote it as if from my own perspective; you wrote down the heart of what I was expressing...*
- *I am blown away, by the idea that you spent the time on this. I can't believe you did this for me. Hearing it makes it real, and there is something else, an injection of love and caring into my words...*

You Wouldn't Hang me? I Thought Not.

- *There is something bizarre about offering this: it doesn't shame me. For the first time in a long time, I am not ashamed of this.*
- *Somehow, when I hear you read my words, I feel stronger, more affirmed, I don't feel as flawed; it went inside; under my skin.*
- *It feels so evocative. When I listen to this, I forgive myself (somehow) more each time because it feels reasonable and rational to be where I am and to have experienced what I have experienced...*
- *The very first thing that stood out to me was the first sentence; here it is acknowledged so plainly and openly; in my life it is my secret. And here it is. Oh my secret. But it's okay. With you, it's okay.*

Lie With Me, Courage, At Night

- *May I have this? I want to tape it to my bathroom mirror. I want to see it when I wake up...*
- *When you are reading this, I realize even though I am in the dark, even though I am in the ocean and there is no direction, I know I was known. I hear this like music and it says to me someone is with me, someone is thinking of understanding me. It is profoundly meaningful to be known.*
- *Every time I read these... I know 'fireworks' sounds corny... but I feel ribbons of electricity and color explode all over again....*
- *Maybe I can go to another counsellor and they might say, "Yes I understand. I am with you." but it is not like this. A poem can touch me. I was just speechless in that moment when you were reading it, like some spot inside my heart was touched which can be only touched by a certain kind of art rather than the formal trained language of therapists. This is its power. And suddenly my life is not so miserable, not so pathetic.*



5. A shimmering toy dragon

People who come to consult with someone like me often bring with them particular ideas or visions (or metaphors or pictures-of-the-mind) of the process of such a consultation. Our cultural context strongly encourages an image of the unfolding of therapy along the lines of what Michael White might call an “ethic of control” (White, 1997). Within this image, it is the expertise of the therapist that is to form the center of the consultation, and there is a sense that the therapist with varying amounts of collaboration with the person will somehow bring about changes in the person’s life.

This image also operates on me as the therapist. I notice its beckoning call whenever I feel myself starting to long for “the one fell-swoop” of action, or what Michael White termed a particular definition of “effective action” (White, 1997).

In her reflections of Wittgenstein’s ideas on “pictures”, Cressida Heyes (2007) writes that “we must approach the world with some kind of picture, that we are held captive by a picture for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably”.

The pictures that might be pressed upon me about myself as a therapist might take the form of an ‘analyzer of things’, an ‘arbiter of normal’, a ‘legitim�er of experiences’, a ‘deliverer of techniques’, a ‘pattern detector and breaker’, a ‘strategist for Christmas-time despair’, a ‘karaoke therapist’ (this term originates with Kay Ingamells) emulating Michael White or David Epston...” etc.

I will let you in on a secret. Poems may possibly serve to rescue people’s words, and the people who consult with me may experience all sorts of things as a result. But my secret is, the writing of poetry *rescues me*. It rescues me out of the clutches of this ethic of control, of the pressure to deliver the solution that takes the form of “one fell swoop” of a single decisive action that will fix it all.

It does this for 4 main reasons (this is a preliminary list from where I am sitting now):

First, the writing of these kinds of poems necessitates a deliberate attention to the speaker’s actual words. It requires faithful note-taking and encourages me to pour over people’s spoken words, both during and after the actual therapy session. In the therapy session, this has immediate effects of my deliberately slowing down the pace of the conversation, of “my



reading back what was said and clarifying meanings”, of “noticing what we don’t know yet (rather than making assumptions)” etc. When I take notes in order to write poems from them, a spirit of care and deliberation about how we speak about our lives ineluctably finds its way, seemingly taking over the conversation.

Tell me, dear reader and receiver of half-baked goods, what would you think or feel, if you heard the following sentence, spoken to you casually in a therapy conversation:

*“I come from a long line-up
Of store-bought EVERYTHING.
But I have been baking as of late.”*

Would it halt you in your tracks? Could you hear the cadence of beauty of the seemingly ordinary words, put together this way? Would it form a stirring 3-line poem in your mind’s eye? And would it change your conversation, or perhaps your life?

And, just for the fun of it, since we are on the topic of baking and half-baking, here is another glimpse into words spoken, that we as witnesses might not want to pass by or let disperse into the ether without a trace:

*“I might tell you sister
If I catch a glimpse of your daring life alongside mine
But do not hang me stranger
Don’t you hang me out where only freight trains run
Clickety clack
I do not come to you from the pages of holy books
Or fairy tales
I come to you straight from the middle of the grocery store
And I have one question
To revolutionize a woman’s life:
Where THE FUCK is the baking aisle?
Because grocery stores are bothersome
For those of us
Without keys to E-Z-Bake.”*

And would you then believe me, if I told you that I am sitting on dozens of poems that take a position on the matter of baking alone, each more searching and risking than the next? And, what do you think happens to me, if I should find myself baking on any given sunny afternoon?



Outside of the therapy session, I notice that the writing of poetry helps keep me on track with my wish to sidestep ideas of control. When a person leaves my office, I might feel overwhelmed by particularly vicious problems and oppressive contexts. I might sit there and feel a familiar sense of if-only-I-knew-ALL-the-wisdom-in-the-world. But then I remember: I have the person's words! And in those words, there are always characters walking themselves into initiatives, longings that dared to be spoken, dangers that are drawn into full view, whispered wishes dreamt into being, protests against trespasses sworn, questions about the matter of living noted. What I now realize is required of me is that I only have to keep faith in following the threads of those words in my writing.

Second, poetry takes on a unique and specific shape on paper. It lends itself to the transcription of speech in stanza form as it closely follows the pauses, silences and emphases of speech; therefore it can be more immediately accessible than the cleaned up prose of most transcriptions. In addition, poems, for lack of a better description, leave room on the right side of the page. They 'breathe'; they do not require complete story lines or finished sentences; they allow for multiple voices and complex descriptions of seemingly unrelated topics. Christopher Behan put it this way:

"Poetry has space between to describe multiplicity, tentativeness, and ambiguity and is perhaps better suited to render visible these subtle stories from therapy conversations" (Behan, 2003, p.1). Dear reader, perhaps a poem might make these ideas more visible to you:

*Have you heard a story of longing
A soul's longing for belonging?*

*This is a story with a dangerous edge
Told against a backdrop of vicious words
Like "sinner" and "abomination" and "illegal"
Or just "ill."*

*This is a story with companions
Who came to my house late at night
Inches from the TV while my parents were asleep.
They came to me on the pages of books at the library
And on other pages hidden in the bottom of my locked drawer.*

This is a story with many voices.



*One of them my own:
On Thursday January the 24th at 9.20AM
I sat with Karen in the closet
And said
"I am not going to see Mel Gibson because I am gay."
And Karen's voice joined mine in safety:
"I am not laughing. You are not the only one."
And Charlie.
I can hear his voice clear as day
That day when I stood outside the church door.
Charlie and the round table.
You saved my life Charlie.
You and my anger that day.*

*This is a story of longing
A longing that grew within me like a seed
No matter what they called me.
It is a longing that knew
Of a life
Of a lover
Of a transformation
Of a belonging
At the round table
And under the beauty of a billion stars.*

*This is a story of longing
That has asked me to risk myself
To hazard my heart
For the right kind of peril.*

*This is a story of longing.
And it is not finished with me yet:
I can feel it
And I am both frightened and emboldened.*

*You see, my longing stands by a doorway now
Laughing
Beckoning
Saying*



*"Come now
I am not laughing.
You are not the only one.
Because oranges are not the only fruit, honey."*

As an alternative to the 'ethic of control', Michael White proposed an 'ethic of collaboration' that might encourage people to co-investigate those easily overlooked actions that "contribute to the establishment of a foundation of possibility in persons' lives" (White, 1997). Sheridan Linnell (2004), in leaning on the work of Couze Venn, writes about a metaphor of "an apprenticeship to the other" as a possibility of understanding her own "ethical self-constitution" in her work. This metaphor suggests that the self is formed always in relation to the other, not only through learning and reflection, but an experience of connection. The other metaphor is the "rescued form of account-ability" (not accountability as a normalizing technique of the neoliberal self): literally the "ability to account" – "our ways of telling about this work, the skills and practices involved in producing rich and multilayered accounts...." (Linnell, 2004, p. 51).

The following is a lively rendition by a client of mine of the idea of an "ability to account:"

*For so long, I lived in anticipation that words would be bad
Because we learn:
We learn
The gravity and power of words.*

*I did not know
That the power can be harnessed
-How words are used
What is said
And who is speaking.*

*But I know now
I can live in a house of good words.
So we wrote poems
On the floor
On the beams in the walls
On the bedroom drywall.
Poems on eating and drinking, on friendship and wild geese
And kindness*



-It was worth the death of a Sharpie.

*Home does not exist in floors or a ceiling
But in standing on each other's shoulders
To write our intentions all around the house.
Home is not a place to watch TV
But to live off our connection.
Home is a house of words,
Those of our friends, our poets, the strangers we meet,
Ourselves.*

*For a long while I was anchored in another house
And silly in my restlessness:
I can't sit through this.
But now I am not scared to sail
For a house of good words on the horizon.*

Imagine a house of good words! Imagine an "ability to account!" Such ideas press different metaphors upon me as the therapist: 'a rescuer of words'; 'a witness'; an 'apprentice'; 'a poet'; 'a fireworks specialist'; 'a person with an ability to account'; 'a wordsmith'; 'a person intent on contributing to the foundation of possibility in others' lives'; etc.

If all of this should sound a bit vague or overly theoretical, let me share a poem that might shed some light on what I wish to express. This poem was written by my friend and colleague Keri Murray at a Narrative Gathering of therapists here in Calgary. At this gathering, I was interviewed about "the ethics that drew me to this work" and Keri rescued my words in to the following poem:

*I think about how I sit there in my office
After a person leaves.
And how I ask myself:
'With what sort of sense of herself did she leave?
'What do I wish for with this person?'*

*And then I remember
A conversation I had long ago.*

*I was subjected to the sort of ritual humiliation they speak of.
He wanted to talk about my body*



*He asked me for numbers
He asked to see the scars
And whether my parents loved me.*

*And in an instant, I became just another resistant client
In front of him.
I answered nothing
I looked out the window.*

*And then I cried.
I wept and looked out the window
And said nothing.*

*After a long silence
He shifted and said,
“What do you dream about for your life?”
And I thought
THIS is a conversation I CAN have
And I started talking to him
About my dreams of going to university
Of how I wanted to write, how I thought I could write, and learn.
I spoke about my wish for having different relationships with men,
My dream of having children.*

*He listened for a long while.
And when I was finished
After another long silence
He asked:
“Can you promise me that you will go and do all the things you just said
And never come back here?”
And I looked at him
And said, “Yes’.*

We shook on it.

*Whatever he assumed about me in one conversation
Was unmade in the other conversation.
I left
With a sense of respect for my life.
And he let me leave
With a sense of respect for my life.*



*So when you ask me
About the ethics that drew me to this work*

*I think of my wish for people
To leave my office
With a sense of respect for their lives
Underfoot.*

Third, due to their unusual form (the lack of requirement for the shiny completeness of sentences and ideas in prose text), these poems have opened up a unique way for me to play with ideas. Writing in poetry form allows me to pit the horrors and hauntings of a problem story against a confection of possible counter-story ideas with no regard to orderly sequencing of life experiences or the flow of a therapy conversation. In fact, I would propose that the poems have quietly supervised me into strange territory in my therapy sessions: I can no longer un-hear or bypass people's unique dictionaries in describing the living of their lives nor can I refuse invitations to see dilemmas as breathtaking dramas, taking place in grocery stores, gynecology offices, and seemingly ordinary bedrooms. Due to this strange supervision, I ask strange questions, in which every word matters: but WHAT did you bake? -It may matter whether it is lemon cakes or rye bread. The taste of lemon cakes, I have found out, spells sanctuary for a woman, whereas rye bread puts another in touch with her ancestors. But WHAT did you steal from people's gardens? It definitely mattered that it was rhubarb and carrots as sustenance for 2 young people's escapes from the horrors at home rather than random vandalism.

A poem comes to life only in the distinct and irreplaceable nouns and verbs of a person's life - note that I did not add adjectives to this list, as we are currently running on a dry spell on adjectives in our conversations with each other. I might venture that the more matchless the vernacular of a story, the more universally recognizable and delightful it rings, even in stranger's ears.

Consider the following poem, in which patriarchy is delightfully re-termed as "sandpapering" and "domestication" efforts:

*I roam a world of smooth
And I am weird and jagged
You see, I tried to be smooth
And it nearly killed me.*



*Every day, I am still offered
Sandpaper to smooth my skin with
Only now I decline.
I have suffered too much
I have watched that life,
The bondage of domesticated life
In this city of miserable people,
To think that sandpapering is the way.*

*Do you know what I did instead?
I went to float naked
In my un-sandpapered skin
And I listened.*

*When I got really quiet
I could hear my heart beating
Just for me
And for my children.
I could feel my limbs extending:
My legs have strides
And my arms wrap around
And my body that bore my children
Is full of magic and life.
I am a woman on this earth
And my breath has many different colours.
I am at sea
And it tantalizes me
It calls me:
Give me your ideas,
Your revolutionary ideas.*

*This is my primal home.
And welcome home, daughter of mine.*

In my late-night writing sessions, the words that are spoken to me in my office have taken on an urgency: construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the session from earlier in the day, find the person's own words, deliberate on the political context and the teeming master narratives of our time, implicate the suspect authorities, and show, as compellingly as you can, your client's



substantive and beautiful wrestling with timeless moral questions. “Counter-mock the white-maned lions”, a woman said, - the “white-maned lions” are the enforcers and lieutenants of master narratives, or in other words, dominant understandings.

Consider the following attempt:

This has been the theme of my life:

Doing things I “can’t” do.

Recently it has meant

Saying Yes

When I mean it and

Opening my fists

To touch another:

I say Yes instead of “I can’t.”

My combined Yeses since December tell a brand-new story

About me and what I can do, yes.

I barely feel I am the same person, yes.

My Yeses came to me

Unexpectedly and surprisingly last night:

I could no longer

Let him do what he wanted to do and disregard me.

So

Instead of pretending

Instead of pleasing

Instead of being who I “ought to be”

-The pretty girl who says Yes by being quiet

I said No.

And that was true.

I never knew that by saying Yes

My No would change places

And grow firm.

In the history of all the pretty girls

Who has had the courage to say

Yes or No

And really mean it?



*Or better yet:
Who has ever asked a girl
What she wanted and really meant it?
Every other time I regretted it the next day
But today I feel free.
I would like him to understand the difference when I do want to
He shouldn't enjoy it when I don't want to.
Physical touch is a conversation.
And wouldn't that be just a new and
Marvellous thing if I said Yes
When I wanted to?*

One final example to reflect the honour and privilege I feel to accompany people in these searching conversations:

*War taught my grandfather
Burning images into his soul
And my grandfather taught my father
Burning punishments into his hand
And my father taught me
Screaming the last of the burns
Over our heads.
The beating of my heart that I feel
At the table,
The look on my father's face
As he is watching my children's elbows on tables
And hears the gulps of water -
These are the ruins
Of an ancient war
Pressed onto and into our bodies.
These are the lingering effects
Of trespassed humanity
Of those who were big and strong.
My father's kindness is not for others to see
But I caught a glimpse nevertheless
In the normalized violence
He lived.
I don't need a token,*



*I am a woman
I breathe in colours
I was raised in a secret garden
Recently baptized in salt waters
And my arms are home and relief
For those who are hurting.
I am big and strong
And big and strong
Enough
For expressed kindness.
And to stop this war
And this hate
At this table
On this night
And for all nights to come.*

Fourth, the writing of these poems beckons me to step into the realm of imagination. Alan Parry recently took my mind on a grand tour of the history of this rather forgotten and largely scorned practice of imaginative soaring. Here is an excerpt from this conversation:

*Imagination suffered a forgetting
In the West
Next to all things scholastic, theoretical, empirical
And dry.
We have to be reacquainted.
Where is Plato when we need him?
Where did the Sufis disappear to?*

*CBT tells us that we govern our own thinking
But this is an illusion.
Thoughts come to us
And we launder them
And embellish them.
We make or break our stories this way.
Don't be close
Don't show anger
Don't exist
We have to escape the fates of these stories.*

But how might we give ourselves over?



*What if imagination was a valid source of information?
What if we were to imagine
That our lives were governed by soulfulness?
What if the whole idea of "As if" came to us anew
And we lived in the world 'as if'*

*Sanni
You better be careful with yourself
If you don't watch out
If you linger over
What someone just accomplished
Pretty soon
You'll find yourself imagining
A whole life.*

Alan is paraphrasing Vladimir Nabokov (1972) in the last stanza here. The original quote from the novella "Transparent Things" reads:

A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now should please not break its tension film. Otherwise the experienced miracle worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish.

In the rather irreverent words of a song by the Cat Empire, I say, "Welcome fishies, to my hook...."

Dear David, Dear Tom,

I suspect that this rather lengthy letter will spawn many more questions. I suspect I will have no answers. But perhaps I will live the questions and live my way into their answering. Or perhaps, I knew all along when I was very young, standing and listening to poetry being performed by one passionate teacher that poems can make our minds soar. Poems can reveal our world to us. Poems can ask us to take a position on the living of our lives. Poems can invite us to put down the weight of our aloneness for a moment. Poems can belong people. Like the sound of a violin in a busy building can settle a man's heart and tell him, "Welcome back, Jessie. Tell me where you have been. I will listen. And together, we will imagine just where you will go."



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