

Love as Inquiry:

My Autoethnographic Story of Coming Out Later in Life

Christina J. Flemming

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Nova Scotia Inter-University Doctoral
Administrative Committee and Mount Saint Vincent University
In Partial Fulfilment for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies**

Halifax, Nova Scotia

@Christina Flemming 2024

Abstract

Love as Inquiry: My Autoethnographic Story of Coming Out Later in Life is a PhD dissertation in two parts. Part One is comprised of a collection of autoethnographic stories based on my own lived experiences as a queer woman, mother, writer, and educator. Part Two of this autoethnographic research details process-related elements, ethical considerations, and the non-linear nature of doctoral research with the aim of offering new educational researchers guidance and insight on autoethnographic writing. This work:

- serves as a disruptive force, while striving to unhinge normative narratives,
- reinforces the importance of storytelling within the field of education,
- seeks to honour members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community who may struggle to embrace authenticity and their own vulnerability, and
- enables future researchers to consider the complexity of the ethical considerations necessitated by autoethnographic methodology.

At the heart of things, this research is about love: losing love, finding love, maternal love, and romantic love. In using love as both process and product, this research aims to help explore the question posed by Sameshima and Leggo (2013): *What does love have to do with education?*

Keywords: *autoethnography; arts-informed research; love; education; storytelling; coming out; autoethnographic ethics*

Dedication(s)

You might romanticize the moment you finish a lengthy manuscript. In reality, though, it's a random Tuesday, and you were up late crying because a mouse emerged from your closet. And then another mouse ran across your living room floor. To start the day, you were a half-hour late for your dental appointment. You didn't even think you were going to finish a draft of your manuscript on this particular day; it just happened during your daily writing session. That's the way most extraordinary things unfold—they just slip themselves into the run of an ordinary day without warning.

I would like to express my love for so many people who helped me find my way.

Ethan – You are a hero. Your kindness is greater than all the films in the “obscure” section of any video shop. If Matilda could say words aloud, she would tell you what a wonderful father you are. She would say, “I love you.” I couldn't ask for a better co-parent and co-conspirator. You were always my best friend. And I'll always love and admire you and your spirit (Trucker Ethan). You demonstrate to me, on a daily basis, what it really means to care for someone. I can't count the number of times you said, “It will be okay,” exactly when I needed it the most.

Ardra – The first time I met you, it was kind of like when my friend Crystal was in an elevator with Prince (after he had changed his name back from an unpronounceable symbol)—Crystal didn't know who he was and proceeded to criticize his hat. To be fair, it was a fedora. While no one would ever criticize your hats, Ardra, I didn't realize what a big deal you were when Dr. Harkins first suggested that you might be my doctoral supervisor. Quickly, I began to read your work on arts-informed methodology and became rather nervous during our subsequent meetings. After a while, though, I slipped more into myself and, perhaps because of this change in me, I was able to deepen my connections with others. You have been a constant source of support during a transformative time in my life. I admire your intelligence, your cool and steady manner, your fondness for commas, and, obviously, your clothing. I appreciate all the times you listened to my stories—whether about mice in my apartment, that forty-pound thanksgiving turkey that I bought accidentally, or struggles with my research path. Whenever I talk with a former student of yours, it doesn't matter how many years have passed, they enthusiastically say, “Tell Ardra I said ‘hi!’” I love working with articles submitted by academics all over the world in my capacity as Managing Editor of *Art/Research International*, but the best part has been our weekly Zoom meetings. Thank you for reading my work, and thank you for inspiring me with your own. But, mostly, thank you for being you.

Susie – For being such a powerful embodiment of everything a researcher could aim to be with your artful social justice oriented research.

Laura-Lee – For being such a passionate, kind, and wonderous educator who made us all fall in love with the PhD program (and you) during our summer intensive.

MK – I don't know if I would have made it through all this without you. I don't mean the writing; I mean the living. You are brave. The courage you show with your own writing inspires me. Thank you for reading all my shitty drafts. And then, later on, all my better drafts.

Stephanie – I wish you could see yourself through the eyes of your students. It seems to me that you always underestimate the guidance and kindness that you show others. It doesn't go unnoticed. You are so selfless. You give yourself so freely to help others. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have known where to begin with my doctoral studies. But you weren't just there for me in the beginning, or in the middle; you were there until the very end. I hope you know how highly I value your intelligence, your friendship, and your support. You have seen me at my worst. You have been around as I sobbed for hours. But you always showed up. You didn't just show up, you showed up with Kleenex. Thank you for making me feel loved. I hope you know that you are loved too.

Addison – In a book of stories about love, there has to be a dedication to you. When we first met, you trusted me with your story. You showed me who you were when it didn't feel safe to do so. I recall touching your hand and feeling so honoured that you saw me as the kind of person you could trust to hold your truth for you. Since then, we have become good friends. You guide me. You listen patiently even when I tell you the same thing twenty different ways. You are a storyteller too. Your heart is so huge that it shines whenever you are onstage, right along with your sequins. Thank you for crying with me. Thank you for singing with me (sometimes). And thank you for showing me how vastly you can share love. I hope you remember to receive love just as openly as you give it.

Matilda – Whenever someone asks me what you're like, I tell them that you're quite a swashbuckler. Sometimes I cry because I worry things will be hard for you. But I know more surely than I know most things that you will be okay. You're the strongest person I know, and you're only five. I love you as your mother. But I also love you as someone who gets to witness your strength and your fire. I hope you always challenge people because the world needs more of that. You don't need words to show love. You just need love to show love, and you have lots of that.

Rose – Today, my friend Heather said to me, "I hope Rose knows how deeply she is loved by you." I am unsure of whether you can know intellectually (because it's so much), but I hope you can feel it. You are a true original. I admire your creativity, your song-writing, and your irreverent stage presence. A lot of people know Rosie the Rockstar, but I don't know if as many people understand how kind and gentle you are. I see the way you talk to animals, the way, when a friend is hurting, you truly listen and offer advice from your heart. I see how you love your family—whether you are helping your mom fix her washing machine, designing a blazer for Liam, singing a song with Aub (*Ace, Paddy's and The Edge, is where we go on Tuesday nights*), or writing a song for Sasha's birthday, it's filled with joy and laughter. I love and admire your curiosity. You have taught me so much about research. From you, I have learned about everything from lumens to Hen-of-the-wood mushrooms. The world is more sparkly (sequined) because you are in it. You are strong. I have witnessed part of your healing. You picked me up when I was barely able to move, and then you set me free once I was healed. Our love will never be confining; it's not that kind of love. It's the kind that moves as we move. It's the kind that grows and changes. I love you. I admire you.

Mice – Thank you for motivating me to finish this dissertation. I need to get out of this apartment.

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	7
A Note on Autoethnographic Methodology	8
<i>Part One: A Collection of Stories</i>	13
Soup Sobbing	13
The White Carpet	25
Her	27
“The Land Before Time”	38
Greeting Cards	40
The Yoga Retreat	46
Transitions	55
Second Birthday	58
Foolish Flag	67
Alone Forever	75
Clothing	85
Junior High	90
Hallmark Movies	96
Graduation Day	104
Friend	119
Rose	120
More Than Friend	125
My Valentine	126
Frozen Blueberries	133
The End	135
<i>Part Two: Contextualizing My Collection of Autoethnographic Stories</i>	142
A Story to Begin	142
A Little About Stories	144
A Short Interlude – Advice for New Doctoral Students	151
Love as Inquiry	153
<i>A Series of Research Framing Questions</i>	154
<i>Autoethnographic Ethics—My Process</i>	201
The Highway	209
Questions to Ask Yourself Before Committing to an Autoethnographic Project	210

One Last Story. 211
***References* 213**

Introduction

Here, it may be helpful for me to offer you, the reader, a bit more of a roadmap for what follows within this dissertation. Part One contains a series of autoethnographic stories about my coming out as queer later in life. The collection of stories is meant to be disruptive. I believe that stories have the power to enable people to recognize the need for change, through an honouring of diversity, and an evocation of emotion. In this way, stories can unhinge narratives that may appear to be fixed, expanding our capacity for loving, learning, and living authentically. My overall aim with this research is to help explore the question posed by Sameshima and Leggo (2013): *What does love have to do with education?* While the stories perform as sites for research, they also provide a rendering of the many facets of love—losing love, finding love, maternal love, romantic love, and, perhaps, above all, wondering whether I am worthy of love.

Part Two of the dissertation serves as contextualization for this type of autoethnographic storytelling. Although the dissertation is divided into two sections, the elements in both parts are deeply intertwined. Stories as research must grow and reach outside of the self to interrogate wider sociocultural issues. Much like Carl Leggo (2012), “I am committed to exploring the intersections between creative practice and critical pedagogy, and creative pedagogy and critical practice” (p. 146). Just as the two parts of my dissertation are connected, I see my teaching in the field of Education as guiding and informing my research. When I teach, or think about, the social and cultural contexts of learning, I honour and celebrate the voices of those who have been historically misrepresented. In this way, to me, social justice discussions are not inherently negative—much like storytelling, critical thinking provides us with pathways toward joy, community, and connection.

As I conceptualized Part Two of the dissertation, I came to see love as a force for forward movement. In some ways, the second half of my dissertation is a love letter to those who helped me birth the creation of a “new family.” Many members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community struggle, in many ways, to be themselves. I wanted to illuminate the challenges that still exist for those who do not find acceptance in the most intimate spaces—the places they call home.

Structure-wise, in Part Two I elaborate on why stories are important to research before I invite readers to encounter a series of research framing questions which I developed early on during my doctoral work, and aimed to explore as my studies progressed. I elected to return to those questions as a means of offering structure to the second section of the dissertation, but also, importantly, as a means of self-reflection. As I read a variety of completed dissertations during the course of my own PhD studies, I wanted to craft research with the potential to help other students navigate autoethnographic writing and reflection. I, therefore, also view this section as a hand-holding gesture for new researchers, to allow for a glimpse into the process of crafting a dissertation—all the years of thinking, and writing, and imagining, that create the final product. In Part Two, I also elaborate on my experience and process with regard to autoethnographic ethics. To conclude, I offer a series of questions for those who are curious about autoethnographic writing and the many considerations that accompany this type of methodology.

A Note on Autoethnographic Methodology

A friend asked me whether I like the person I met through this autoethnographic process. That is a complicated question. I am unsure of how to answer. In short, yes. Yet, now that all the stories are written, I find myself caring more about the stories of others—when, for so long, this writing seemed to be centred around me. This type of research allows for the opportunity to show others what happened from a personal perspective, but there is also a certain fear that goes

along with knowing that you will be asking friends and family to relive sometimes painful moments from your and their lives. Within these pages, I hope to honour not only my own stories, but the stories of those who showed me grace and kindness—and edits—as I offered them drafts of stories that depicted parts of our lives and received them back for inclusion in this dissertation.

I worked in an iterative manner with those depicted within the collection of autoethnographic stories to ensure considered and ongoing consent. The ethics process will be more fully outlined within Part Two of the dissertation, but I want to offer a bit of grounding in advance of presenting the collection of stories. As Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest, “When you’re writing about family members or intimate others, you have to go to great lengths to take the role of the other, to interrogate your own role and motives, to imagine how other people will respond and how you and they may feel later” (p. 150). In the first few weeks of my doctoral studies, I developed a fondness for the educational philosopher Maxine Greene (1995) and her belief that we are always in the process of becoming. When I read more about autoethnographic methodology and delved deeply into the work of autoethnographers such as Carolyn Ellis (1993; 2004; 2008; 2009); Arthur Bocher (2016; 2000); Bochner and Ellis (2002; 2016); Stacy Holeman-Jones (2014); Tony E. Adams (2011; 2021); Holman Jones and Adams (2010); Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013); and, additionally, Holman Jones and Harris (2019), I became cognizant of the importance of remembering that the self is always dynamic and always in the process of shifting. The unstable nature of one’s viewpoint is a challenge for anyone undertaking life writing—as what I believe to be true today could be drastically different, for example, in a year’s time. As I approached this research, I knew that my own perspective would shift—but I also understood that the perspectives of those implicated in my stories would

undergo a similar metamorphosis, especially as doctoral work often takes years to create and complete.

Early into my own reading, I encountered the complexity of relational ethics through the work of Carolyn Ellis. Ellis (2008) writes about immersing herself in the lives of people located in an isolated fishing community while conducting her early research (p. 272). As most of the people in the community were illiterate, she assumed they would never read the results of her research. As it turned out, another researcher subsequently highlighted sections of her work, took the writing to the small community, and read passages to the people Ellis had befriended and then written about. As Ellis (2008) says,

The fisher folk had known I was doing research. But I had been there for 9 years, and they forgot. At this point, to them I was pretty much just Carolyn coming to the community to visit. They were extremely hurt by what they heard. I had described them as smelling like fish and other things equally devastating. These people had become really good friends of mine. I loved them and cared for them, and what I said was very painful for them and also for me. I went back to the community and talked with them.

Some people forgave me. Some people never did forgive me. (p. 272)

As I approached my own research, I often thought of the emotional pain Ellis had mistakenly fostered—both her own, in the realization that her research had caused harm to people, and that of those she had depicted. When I thought about ethics, I was primarily concerned with protecting those depicted in my collection of stories, and myself, but I also needed to devise a procedural path—a process that would allow me to proceed with my storytelling while maintaining considered and ongoing consent.

Admittedly, I was initially terrified about applying for ethics clearance through the university research ethics board (UREB). I wondered if they would have an understanding of autoethnographic methodology and, if not, whether I was capable of devising guidelines for myself—a process that would satisfy the UREB and protect those depicted within the collection of stories, while also allowing my research to feel organic. As elaborated upon in Part Two of the dissertation, I carefully read the guidelines for conducting autoethnographic research developed by Toronto Metropolitan University (2017). These guidelines helped me to design a process of obtaining considered and ongoing consent that felt natural to me and would offer the greatest freedom to those depicted within my stories—in terms of their ability to request edits or request their removal from the stories altogether.

Based on the guidelines from Toronto Metropolitan University, I devised a process to ensure considered and ongoing consent, which I outlined in my UREB application. I obtained initial consent, verbally, from anyone depicted within the collection of stories in advance of writing. Next, I emailed each person portrayed within the stories a letter of information and consent, detailing my research project in everyday language. Each person then had an opportunity to read each “working” copy or draft of the stories within which they were represented. At that juncture, the person portrayed could read and review the story and ask for their portrayal to be altered, edited, or removed altogether. I felt that offering early drafts to those depicted would lessen the pressure on each person to agree to any aspect of their portrayal, as it would be easy for me to make edits during an early stage of the writing and research process. Once “final” versions of the stories were complete, each person portrayed, again, had the opportunity to ask for further edits or complete removal from the story/stories within which they were depicted. Lastly, each person portrayed was offered the opportunity to read the completed

dissertation and, again, I notified each person of their right to ask for revision or removal from each story. I felt that this process not only protected those depicted within the stories; it also allowed me to acknowledge the fact that a writer cannot predict the final product of their artistry in advance of the writing process. In other words, I could not explain to a person depicted in one of my stories what the story would look like, in any exact sense, before the story was complete.

As my daughter is a minor, I crafted a letter of parental consent for her father's consideration. Within the letter, I explained how I maintain an awareness that I could never speak on behalf of our daughter, or her experiences, but, rather, I would recount my own experiences and thoughts about motherhood. In other words, I believe in centering the experiences of women and honouring the type of everyday knowledge gained from the work of mothering.

In the case of my parents, I elected to fictionalize their portrayal—omitting their names, geographical location, occupations, physical characteristics, and additional features that would make them recognizable. I employed a writing technique referenced by Bochner and Ellis (2016) in their book *Evocative Autoethnography* “using what Yalom (1991, p. 169; see also Speedy, 2008) calls ‘symbolic equivalents,’ by which he means fragments of real occurrences presented in a fictionalized way that preserves the meaning, complications, and feelings of the raw events” (p. 152). Within the collection of stories, I have attempted to portray not only their unwillingness to accept me as queer, but also the deep love that exists alongside of their fear.

Part One: A Collection of Stories

Soup Sobbing

I tried to come out to my mother before. This was in junior high.

“Maybe I’m a lesbian?” I said.

“No, you’re *not*. Do you want to kiss girls?” she asked me.

No one wants to admit something like that to their mother. In junior high school everything is already heightened by the jail-like feeling that you’ll never make it out of adolescence alive. Just getting the wrong kind of sneakers could be social suicide.

So I said no.

Twenty-five years later, at age thirty-seven, I came out again. The timing was much better because it was during the beginning of a global pandemic.

As Sara Ahmed writes, “A story always starts before a story can be told” (2017, p. 4). Everyone who identifies as queer has their own coming out story.

This is the story that I tell.

April 29, 2020 – Initial Coronavirus Quarantine

Everything revolved around the grocery store. That’s because the grocery store was the only place people were allowed to go. Everything else was closed. No schools, malls, restaurants, libraries, coffee shops, clothing stores—or any of the other places you might go under normal circumstances—remained open. Most office workers were working from home. Parents were going berserk as they attempted to do their jobs (from home offices or living rooms) while teaching their kids a small fraction of what they might have learned in school. The more creative parents seemed to be forgoing calculus and biology in favour of practical lessons on things like changing car tires. All meetings, whether work or Weight Watchers, had moved

online. A friend of mine was looking for pyjamas that somehow resembled a blazer for Skype meetings. People joked about goblets of wine becoming the new mugs of coffee. The internet was full of COVID memes. I posted a drawing of a group of aliens in their living room “watching season 2020 of earth.” In the cartoon, one green alien tells the others, “Shit is getting wild down there!”

Driving through the rotary had never been easier. But, in this case, the lack of traffic just added to the eerie atmosphere. My friend JJ created a playlist of apocalypse songs. She shared it with me, but somehow “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper” was not lifting my spirits. Everything changed so rapidly, it seemed. My writing group had planned on holding our St. Patrick’s Day meeting in a bar but, just before that, everything abruptly shut down. It was hard to even wrap your head around the fact that there was nowhere to go.

Suddenly, the morning newscasters were not in the studio; they were instead broadcasting live from their basements (some with better lighting than others). And, as the days passed, we watched our hair crawl past our shoulders, wondering how primordial we might all look by the time hair salons reopened. Some people had already started suggesting that this virus would never truly be over. They proposed that a *new normal* would emerge and stay with us forever. I had to ask myself whether this was some kind of foreshadowing for what I was about to do with my own life.

During this time, grocery stores had barricades obstructing their front doors. You had to walk around these concrete blockades in order to enter and, even then, you were faced with an employee and a security guard. The employee was stationed right inside the door to verbally detail the new rules. I felt for her because she had to say the same spiel over and over again: *You must maintain social distance, keeping at least six feet away from the other shoppers. You must*

follow the blue tape arrows on the floor. The arrows are directional. If you forget something, don't go back; you'll have to circle around—pretend it's part of your morning exercise routine!

I did appreciate her sense of humour. She laughed quite heartily at her own exercise joke.

On the news, they announced that each family was to designate one person to pick up groceries. Couples, no matter how elderly, could not enter together. Mothers could not bring their kids. I wondered what single mothers were supposed to do. Then, I wondered if I classified as one of those. Was I a single mother? I was newly separated from my husband. But my daughter and I had been staying with my parents. There must be some rule whereby if you aren't paying rent and you have people cooking dinner for you, you cannot fully claim membership to the single mother's club. A friend of mine insists that you'll always be a child while you're under your parents' roof. From the outside, it might have looked like I was just there to be helpful and protect them from COVID. In reality, I was not financially independent. I was a full-time student.

Inside the grocery store, you saw various people wearing masks, or thick scarves wrapped and tied around their mouths. Gloves were a must. I had yellow latex dishwashing gloves. They were the only kind of disposable gloves still in stock at the grocery store; otherwise, I would have gone for clear plastic (more chic). It felt exceptionally strange to wear dishwashing gloves while grocery shopping, and it certainly presented a challenge when you attempted to yank your credit card loose from the tight slots in your wallet with your oversized rubber fingers.

The whole world felt suspended. It was as if someone had pressed a giant pause button and, for once, we all froze. On TV, you could see shots of Rome without people on the streets.

You could see cafés in Paris without anyone brooding inside over bitter espresso. (I guess the French had to brood at home during quarantine.)

Meanwhile, I was trying to determine whether I should steer the ship that was my life into an iceberg. Did I really want to split everything open and start again?

A student in our writing group, who was working on the final assignment of her master's degree, once said emphatically in her thick Jamaican accent, "I'm strugglin'!" I kept thinking the same thing. Over and over, I thought, *I'm strugglin'! I'm strugglin'!* It felt like I had swallowed a secret about thirty years ago and couldn't keep it down any longer. Meanwhile, the world went on. Or did it? Not really. At least not in a way we had ever experienced before. It was like the whole world was in a big airport and it was impossible to tell how long the layover might last. Just like with a flight delay, quarantine ushered in that classic mixture of feeling trapped while also feeling incredibly bored. Too bad reading magazines is never as delightful as you think it will be when you buy them.

I didn't know if I could tell my parents the truth that day or not. They didn't even know any gay people, aside from maybe Ellen DeGeneres and the one gay man that my dad had worked with years before. My dad always recounts how he complimented this man on his Hallowe'en costume during a social function, but, it turned out, the man was just wearing red leather pants with a black mesh top. The only thing I knew for sure was that I needed to get groceries. I was doing grocery runs for my parents because they were in their seventies and, truthfully, more susceptible to the virus. On this day, I knew that my dad had eaten a hamburger bun for lunch the day before. We were *that* low on supplies.

I drove to the grocery store, but I couldn't bring myself to get out of the car. This wasn't the time to be weeping my way thorough the only public place we were allowed to visit. Morale was low enough.

I pulled down the car's sun visor and looked at myself in the mirror. I remember thinking it wouldn't matter whether I was gay or straight if I didn't get myself together, because who would be interested in someone with a face like an anguished pumpkin? As I watched myself in the tiny rectangular car mirror, I observed a tear slipping its way out of my eye and across my cheek. It actually amazed me how awful I looked. You know how people glow when they're in love? I'm pretty sure this was the exact opposite of that. Not to mention, I was slightly hungover. In an effort to forget about my inner turmoil, I had drank too much chardonnay during our writing group the night before on Zoom. And then, afterwards, I uncharacteristically drank some more. The bright sunny day wasn't helping. My head was splitting as if I were a pumpkin being carved by a dollar store knife. I wanted quarantine to be over but, more than that, I wanted an Advil.

I took out my phone and googled "how to come out." This was the millionth time I'd done that, but I kept repeating the same Google search and hoping for different results. Everything on the subject seemed to be written for adolescents and teenagers, not thirty-seven year-old women! Not people with two year-old daughters! I wondered, as I had wondered all along, if it really was too late. It felt as if the gay ship had already sailed. Could I stay put, or was I going to slip into the ocean and try floating toward the unknown?

At the time, I was reading a book of advice columns by the writer Cheryl Strayed (2012). At the end of one of the columns, she gives advice to a man named Johnny who had written to

tell her that he is afraid of falling in love: “We're all going to die, Johnny. Hit the iron bell like it's dinnertime” (Strayed, 2012, p. 18).

I kept thinking about that line: *Hit the iron bell like it's dinnertime!*

Have you ever felt a pull that you just couldn't ignore?

First, though, I needed groceries. But I was too emotional to even open the car door, let alone walk across the parking lot and go inside. I cried even harder. I soon discovered a thick coating of desecrated Kleenex at the bottom of the mess inside my purse. Before having a child, I regularly cleaned out each handbag, keeping them in pristine shape. After having Wren, each handbag became a bottomless wasteland. I extracted an overused Kleenex and attempted to use it before the thing just plain disintegrated and disappeared. Everyone was saying that quarantine was precipitating mental health issues. I had a fear that someone might see me crying in the car and come knocking on the window on some type of rescue mission. I knew they couldn't help. Unless they wanted to drive back to my parents' house and announce that I'm gay. I imagined that for a minute. That would be a great service, if you could hire someone to knock on the door of your parents' house and have them undertake coming out for you. They could drive around in a rainbow van. Or maybe that would be too conspicuous.

You have to go in, I told myself after a considerable amount of time had passed.

But what if I just turn around and drive home? I thought.

I wasn't sure what explanation I would give to my parents if I just abandoned the grocery store trip altogether: *Hamburger buns for lunch again everyone! Add some peanut butter and carry on! Sorry about this! I'm gay!*

I knew that going in would buy me some time. *This could be the day I come out, or it could also be just another day in quarantine with a fresh bottle of ketchup*, I thought.

I dragged myself through the grocery store. My mother wanted diet ginger ale. Naturally, there was only one bottle of diet ginger ale on the shelf, and it was pushed to the very back. Just out of reach. My body felt like it wanted to turn into liquid and get swept away by a grocery store mop, rather than attempting to reach the bottle. The shelf was a mountain that I did not have the energy to climb. But I couldn't leave the last bottle of diet ginger ale behind; that would have been madness. So, I slid my foot onto the edge of the bottom shelf and batted the bottle of pop with my hand like a gorilla. I successfully knocked it over and watched as it slowly rolled toward my outstretched hands.

Over the PA system, announcements about social distancing were constant. *Hello shoppers. This is a friendly reminder to maintain social distancing, keeping at least six feet away from other shoppers.* My paranoid side wondered if I had accidentally went too close to another shopper and they were making the announcement *because of me*. I looked over my shoulder to see whether anyone was watching me. I tried to avoid any aisle with another person in it. Whenever I passed someone, I held my breath. I didn't know whether I was more worried about COVID or about pissing someone off. Nerves were high. Especially mine. Because what was I going to do? Would I come out? Or would I just present the last bottle of diet ginger ale like the hungover gorilla I'd become?

I knew that if someone yelled at me for going too slowly through the store, or for walking in the wrong direction, I would completely break down. My head hurt. So much. I blinked back tears as I tried to see the cereal aisle. I knew that if my nose started running (a COVID symptom), a security guard might tackle me.

But I managed to go through my grocery list and dutifully collect most of the things. Except all-purpose flour. Flour had been sold out everywhere since the pandemic hit. But there was something comforting about the fact that, while the world may have been ending, people were still baking tea biscuits.

The employee at the checkout appeared to be a young gay man. *Why does he get to be gay, but I can't?* I thought, feeling a bizarre mixture of both mirth and despair.

I was exhausted, both mentally and physically. Unloading the contents of my grocery cart onto the conveyor belt seemed to be taking all that I had. I fantasized about sticking my head inside a green Sobeys bag, just to escape the world for a while. Just then, the cashier announced that there was a new policy in place and I'd have to bag my own groceries. I felt too tired to even keep crying. I nodded vigorously so that he would be less likely to notice my tears.

I used what little energy I had left to ensure that I didn't squish the bread or break the eggs (the precious diet ginger ale got its own bag).

You would think a five-minute drive home would provide ample clarity in terms of deciding whether to tell your mother that you're gay, but I was unsure whether I would say anything by the time I pulled into the driveway.

Lucky for me, Wren and my dad, Poppy Pete, were out playing in the yard. When I went inside, my mother didn't notice that my eyes were as red as the raspberries I had picked up. I finally got my Advil but, like everything else, I wondered if it was too late. Maybe the headache would be permanent. And what would it have mattered anyway? There wasn't anywhere to go except the grocery store.

Though I felt like I should have helped my mother unpack the grocery bags, I sat down instead. I felt emptier than the frozen fruit section, where the shelves had been completely bare (I really didn't think people were that healthy).

Pulling out a can of Campbell's tomato soup, my mother said, "You got light again. Light isn't as good as regular. You did that last time too. Light has no flavour."

Without pause, I burst into tears. I was absolutely sobbing. Soup sobbing. But it had nothing to do with the soup.

"I'm so sorry," my mother said. "I didn't mean to upset you about soup!"

I shook my head. I could tell that she was assuming the crying was about leaving my husband. *I know I can just go with this*, I thought. *If I don't want to come out right now, I can just pretend it's a more heterosexual type of devastation.*

"It's okay. Everything is going to be okay," my mother said. "We love you and we support you no matter what."

This seemed like a good opening. The door was wide open. The dinner bell was waiting for a hit.

She came out of the kitchen and stood behind my chair, giving my shoulders a hug.

"We love you no matter what," she repeated.

"There's another part of it too," I managed to say. I was ugly-crying at this point. Slobbery and wet like a dog's face. Tears were falling and splattering on the table.

My mother was quiet.

"I've always felt. . . well. . . I mean. . . I'm gay," I said.

"Nooooooooo!" she said, giving my shoulders a gentle shake as if she could rattle it out of me.

“Yeah,” I nod.

“You mean, you’re attracted to women?” she asked.

“Well, yeah.”

“How long have you felt that way?” she asked.

“Ever since I was little.”

“Well, that’s certainly a surprise. But we love you no matter what,” she said.

Little did I know, she would change her tune as the days, months, and years unfolded.

I gulped down some coffee, somehow managing to choke on hot liquid.

“Well, I’ve never been attracted to women, so I can’t help you there,” my mother said after a few minutes with a friendly-seeming chuckle.

I certainly wasn’t looking for help. I just needed her to know.

She went back into the kitchen to continue unloading the groceries and then said one of her best lines up to that point: “So you’re attracted to women who look like men? With big belts?”

“Not all lesbians look the same,” I told her.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“There are feminine lesbians too.”

“Well good luck finding one as feminine as you!” she said.

We laughed. I own a lot of dresses, not to mention the fact that I have a large industrial-sized clothing rack along with several closets full of jumpsuits, blazers, handbags, scarves, and shoes.

“Maybe you were just bored with Jack! What if a handsome man comes along?” she asked.

I went back to eating my Montreal bagel. Time was running out because I knew that when Wren came inside I'd be chasing her all over the house as usual. She required constant attention. I told her that we were not doing "terrible twos," we were doing "terrific twos" instead, but she still had the occasional tantrum.

My mother then began talking about lesbians as if they were a flock of geese.

"Debby worked with a bunch of them at the nursing home. She said they were always bickering and fighting. And they always cheat on each other."

I took a sip of my coffee.

"Maybe you're more like Angelina Jolie," she went on.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She can go either way," she said.

I decided to just nod and drink my coffee.

"Well, I won't have another son-in-law, I'll have a daughter-in-law. I'll have to tell people, 'This is my daughter and this is my daughter-in-law!'" she said, as if voicing her inner monologue.

"Yeah," I said.

"Good thing you already had Wren!" she added.

"Yeah," I said again.

She went back to unpacking the groceries and then asked, "Is this for sure or is this a maybe?"

"I'm sure," I said.

I wasn't crying anymore, so that was good. I got the sense that there was a bit of disbelief on my mother's end. But I appreciated that Campbell's soup was involved, because I've always been fond of Andy Warhol.

At this point, Wren and my dad came inside. Someone, somewhere, must have been looking out for me because Wren was so sleepy that I had to take her into the bedroom for a nap right away.

In bed, beside a sleeping Wren, I decided to distract myself by reading a Laurel Richardson article concerning poetry and the assumptions we make about research validity. I was scanning the words but not exactly taking them in. I was also aware of the strangeness of undertaking scholarly reading in the wake of a life-altering conversation. At least Richardson is a sociologist.

After a bit more time elapsed, my mother's head appeared in the doorway and she announced, "Just don't go in the gay parade. I'm not coming!"

Just when it seemed she was doing so well.

Next, I emailed my one lesbian friend, Lena, to tell her the news. My email subject was "Coming out Wednesday!" She wrote back and said, "The crying thing is a requirement, so no problems there, and it's almost inevitable it all spills out on a day you'd not think would be memorable otherwise: own grocery bagging, headache, etc."

A few minutes later, Lena sent a second email. It contained a link to the song "I'm Coming Out" by Diana Ross.

The White Carpet

I am unsure of what happened to “We love you no matter what.” But, after separating from my husband, my daughter and I moved back into my parents’ house where everything is white. This isn’t a metaphorical plot device for the sake of making my story more literary. I am serious. Everything in the house is white. The carpets are white. The walls are white. The ceilings are white. The kitchen cupboards are white. The sofas are white. Even the towels are white, so you really can’t even wash your face without anxiety. As you can imagine, it was the perfect setting for a two-year-old. Luckily, my daughter Wren was still eating in a highchair, which meant that we could swaddle the floor underneath in a thick blanket to protect the precious white carpet.

“Wren didn’t ask to come from a broken home,” my mother began to repeatedly remind me. Whenever Wren went to her father’s house, my mother would say to me, “How would you like it if you went home and mommy wasn’t there?”

I was struggling with the idea that being gay was selfish. *Maybe it really is too late*, I kept thinking.

“You can’t be gay anyway. If you were gay, why would you marry a man?” my mother kept asking.

That was just the first in a series of questions that would seep into my body the way any little splash of coffee would absorb itself into the white carpet. Other questions in the series included:

“If you were gay, why did you have a crush on Mitchell Bishop?”

“If you were gay, why did you watch all those Brad Pitt movies?”

“If you were gay, why would you ruin someone’s life by marrying him?”

“How could you do that to your daughter?”

“How will you feel when none of the kids at school will be allowed to play with Wren because of her lesbian mother?”

“How will you feel when Wren chooses her father’s new family over you?”

“Why don’t you just run off and live your silly little lesbian life?”

“How can you be so *selfish!*?”

I never had any answers for these questions. I mean, I did, but I was too heartbroken to actually make words come out of my mouth. My friend Kate would ask me why I didn’t get mad at my mother. It’s hard to be angry when you feel so deeply alone that you go outside on the back porch and hug the wooden post that holds up the deck.

I wonder how many tears of mine absorbed themselves into the white carpet over the course of the year after I came out. The salt in seawater comes from the weathering of Earth’s surface. The salt in the white carpet comes from the weathering of a daughter who feels like her mother might not love her no matter what.

Her

Surety about anything can be difficult. I believe that, for most of us, love is the closest we ever come to surety.

Capturing the love I felt for Lena in words I have also found to be an impossible task. I say *I have found* because I did try. Calling someone my “first girlfriend” at this age seems a bit off, a bit too adolescent, but she was the first woman I fell for.

Right from the start, I was drawn to poetry. It was the only form that captured the force of what I was experiencing. She made me understand e. e. cummings (1952) when he wrote, “you are whatever a moon has always meant” (*Poetry Foundation Website, 2021/1952*).

I was so mesmerized by her that I started writing my own poetry. That was new. Has anyone ever inspired you to the level of making art?

One day I cried in the shower, tortured by the idea that Lena and I might never actually be together. I was pained by the seeming impossibility of us ever becoming an *us*. After a burst of inspiration, not in the shower but while blow-drying my hair, I scribbled this poem down:

Two Bags (2020)

We can pack the moon in a bag for our travels. If we lose power and get stuck in an elevator, we'll still have light.

Shoot, we'll need to pack the sun too.

If two crows are good luck, two of anything must be. When we make it to the sea, I will hold up the world's biggest mirror, allowing the moon's face to gaze upon itself.

Yesterday I cried in the shower and dried my tears with the blow-dryer because you don't know the ploys I would hatch for you.

At night I'm awake thinking about the way your face looks at mine when I'm telling a good story. Only the moon knows. But thanks to my mirror, she'll be distracted by all the silver stars in need of polishing.

Spring 2020 was a period of time wrought with uncertainty. The province of Nova Scotia had just announced mandatory quarantine as the COVID-19 virus began its insidious spread. This province-wide shutdown meant that I didn't know when I would see Lena again. So we started emailing one another. Sometimes as many as three emails each per day. Our correspondence was packed with musings about books and poems and art. We wrote about our likes (hers: jellyfish, coconut gouda cheese, puzzles) and dislikes (hers: onions, olives, pastry crust—*Who doesn't like pie crust?* I asked her over and over again). Also, we shared our prized childhood memories. In one email she wrote, "Mr. Dressup was my world. For nearly all of my life, my family kept a range of Hallowe'en costumes and dress-up accessories in a box labelled the 'Tickle Trunk.' Completely earnestly." How could I not fall in love with someone who could talk about Mr. Dressup but in the next email use the word obstreperous?

I liked her even more when she showed me a photo of herself as a little girl on the first day of school. She wore a tiny dress with green and white gingham trim and turtles on it. It made me think about my own dress on the first day of school—blue with a white Peter Pan collar. She told me that, as a child, she had declared in writing, "I love school and I love art." It was just like meeting myself.

When I was in grade seven, the principal had one of my stories bound like a book and placed in the school library. Like my principal with me, Lena's teachers noticed how special her writing was. They singled her out. As a child, she won her father a \$169.99 (maximum retail value) propane-powered barbecue from Copps' Building Supply for penning an award-winning Father's Day poem. The radio station sponsoring the contest, CFPL 98, phoned early on a school day morning to announce the victory. When the radio station announcer asked how she felt about

winning, she replied truthfully, “Well, I’m not very excited about it but my mom is dancing around the kitchen in her nightie.”

I liked Lena’s stories so much that I found myself concocting reasons to email her. On my end, it wasn’t just communication; I was trying hard to impress her. I went so far as to type up an entire passage from Jeanette Winterson’s book of essays, *Art Objects*. I thought she would like the notion that art “against the daily death does not die” (Winterson, 1995, p. 19). The passage I emailed her:

We know that the universe is infinite, expanding and strangely complete, that it lacks nothing we need, but in spite of that knowledge, the tragic paradigm of human life is lack, loss, finality, a primitive doomsaying that has not been repealed by technology or medical science. The arts stand in the way of this doomsaying. Art objects. The nouns become an active force not a collector’s item. Art objects. (Winterson, 1995, p. 19)

She told me that she doesn’t consider herself to be an artist, citing the time she enrolled in a ceramics workshop and the instructor suggested, “You have talents in other areas.”

Yet I know we are both artists because we are both writers. And also because our minds can flit from the everyday to the fantastical in a matter of seconds. After we’d been dating for a while, she suggested we have a themed date once a month. On Photo Day, we pretended to go to Paris. We bought croissants, macaroons, quiche, and French wine, did a virtual tour of the Musée d’Orsay, danced to cheesy Americanized French music in her office, and kissed underneath a photo I printed of the Eiffel Tower (and subsequently Scotch-taped to the wall). We were just as happy, maybe happier, than two people on the Champs-Élysées.

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (2020) suggests, “Sometimes the best thing about writing is the way you feel afterwards. Like there finally might be space in the sky. Like there finally might

be space for more writing. Like there finally might be more sky” (p. 83). That’s how time with her made me feel, like there was more sky.

But it also made me feel greedy. I wanted more.

* * *

There was something between us from the beginning. We both felt it. The first time we went for a coffee, I walked back to my car in the parking lot thinking to myself, *Shit. I’m in trouble*. Later on, she told me that she’d said to her friend, *I think I just went on a date?* As the essayist Laura Lee said of her first female partner, “With her, falling in love wasn’t a choice” (2021, p. 166).

I need poetry in order to even approach the way I felt. Sue Goyette says it better than me:

The city turned on its streetlights so we could find each other
in the dark. Love is like that. It knocks on doors.

and urges you to vote. It stands on the corner
and croons a cover tune of promises. (2019)

It was like that. It knocked on my door and I knew, with certainty, that I had to answer.

Before her, I never felt like I wanted to save someone. But, during a faculty event at the university, I noticed her sitting alone on a sofa in a room full of people. She’s brilliant but, in that moment, she looked so sad. The depleted look on her face suggested a need for something, but also a tired acquiescence to whatever was missing. I wanted to raise my hand right then and there. I wanted it to be me.

* * *

Initially, she had no idea how I felt for her. How could she have guessed that I would stare at the ceiling some nights, unable to sleep, because I was in such awe of her?

We were just friends when our emails began. But then I separated from Jack. Not because of her; I didn't want to put that pressure on either of us. We were still just friends when I told her I was gay. She offered her support, along with space for me to figure things out for myself.

I didn't want that space. I wanted her.

* * *

Right before we got together, we drove each other crazy with want.

There were too many poems and emails to count before we even kissed. On the day that it happened, I went to her apartment in the morning. Though we had whipped ourselves into a frenzy of anticipation the night before this visit, we sat down in her living room and chatted as if nothing were out of the ordinary. She told me about working at Dairy Queen as a teenager. Her uniform was red and brown, with a visor. In an attempt to be a good host, she offered me a glass of whiskey. I accepted, even though it was morning. We both knew we were just stalling. After a while she cleared her throat and said, "I think the time for social niceties is over. Can I kiss you?"

My face lit up.

We kissed.

Months later, we would laugh endlessly about her line, repeating *I think the time for social niceties is over* at every opportunity.

* * *

When it was just the two of us, it felt like the summer of 2020 couldn't stretch itself out slowly enough. One July morning we drove to the seaside town of Lunenburg. In my favourite vintage shop, we invented our own games. We looked at Royal Doulton figurines and attempted to shout out their names before flipping them over.

Mabel!

Catherine!

Olivia!

Gwendolyn!

Together, we thumbed through a big box of old postcards. In pointy cursive writing, a woman named Berenice complained of the constant fog, the wet Spring of 1953, and her stubborn husband, Howard. This invited us to create a whole narrative for Berenice and Howard. Did feisty Berenice secretly have a crush on her female neighbour that she indulged while Howard was away on business?

The day was punctuated by emergency alerts that blared and beeped on our phones. Apparently, a man with “no shirt and no shoes” had stabbed a police officer in Bridgewater and run off. I kept saying that he probably found a shirt and shoes after eight hours on the run (clotheslines)! I remember thinking that it would have been a relief to run into an unhinged, shirtless man rather than my parents. They didn’t accept or understand the love Lena and I shared. Luckily, we encountered neither.

On the way home, as we drove past one of many beaches, I felt the sudden urge to jump into the ocean. I quickly pulled the car into the gravel lot edging the beach. Though it was cooling off, I put on my bathing suit underneath my dress, discarded the dress, and made a point of running straight into the ocean. I dove right in without even a pause.

“I did it to be surprising and sexy!” I announced afterwards.

“It wasn’t surprising,” she said.

“It was surprising and sexy,” I clarified.

“It was surprising and sexy,” she agreed with a smile.

She wrapped my shivery body in a towel and we sat together on the beach as the sun went down.

The depth of our feelings took us both by surprise.

It wasn't just art that we shared. I cherished the banality of our daily updates too. I told her about the tiny grey berries that Wren routinely picked from the neighbour's hedge before someone told me that the man had a five-year landscaping plan. She told me about the weightlifters who moved into the apartment above hers and ended one email with, "Anyway, I'm off to bed, provided I can sleep through weights clanging on the floor overhead. Maybe I'll suddenly go deaf just for a change of pace."

* * *

"You have absolutely nothing in common," my mother frequently declared.

In truth, she knew nothing about our relationship. She didn't know how we could laugh at things that other people wouldn't understand, like how the poet Rilke was sometimes "overwrought" as we agreed in one email. But even though we chuckled at Rilke, I sent Lena the following passage:

Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. (p. 24)

From what I can tell, the coming out process makes one into an artist. I mean, you cannot suddenly force a new identity. You have to be patient with yourself.

I wish I could say that the strength of our love helped me to overcome my mother's comments. But coming out is scary. In my case, it felt a lot like opening my chest so that people could use my heart as a punching bag. My mother thought our eight-year age difference was too vast. She saw Lena as a predator, even though I was the one who pursued her.

Looking back now, I see that I internalized my mother's hatred of our relationship. When friends celebrated the fact that Lena and I were together, I felt surprised. It was as if I expected everyone to cast the same stones my mother did. I wanted to protect Lena but, in reality, I was the frightened one.

* * *

I was attempting to teach Wren the alphabet one evening, but my mother kept interrupting with her comments. She was circling around because I had accidentally mentioned I'd be going to Lena's to facilitate our writing group.

"Do the others in your writing group know that you are two lesbians?" she asked as if we would surely be shunned.

"Can you say apple?" I asked Wren.

"You're going to pimp house. Old lesbians are just like pimps. They complement you and manipulate you, and tell you, 'Oh, you're so wonderful,'" she said.

"A is for apple, B is for ball, C is for cat," I pressed on.

"Can you say, 'Mommy is going to pimp house?'" she said to Wren.

"A, B, C, D, E, F, G. . .," I sang louder and louder, as if increasing the volume would make my mother disappear.

"They must wonder what you see in her. Those people in the group must all scratch their heads," she continued.

“Can you say ball”? I asked Wren.

“You’re going over there with her dirty old cats?” my mother continued.

“Can you say ‘C is for cat’?” I then asked.

“Can you say, ‘Mommy, get rid of the old hag?’” she said to Wren.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I finally said. “That is not nice.”

If I wasn’t brave enough to defend myself or Lena, at least I had the courage to stop my mother when it came to Wren’s witnessing of it all. Yet, I felt guilty because a child shouldn’t be subjected to irrationality like that and it was supposed to be my job to protect her.

Shortly after my mother’s onslaught, Wren’s father picked her up. As usual, I had to scramble to get Wren ready, get dressed myself, put my makeup on, collect my laptop, ensure I had my notes, and, finally, find my gloves and keys. My back had a dull ache from carrying Wren around all day. Plus, Jack was running late, so I had to rush to get ready during the few moments left over for myself before my facilitation of our weekly academic writing group.

“Poor Jack. He looked tired,” my mother said after he left with Wren.

“He looked fine to me,” my father said. “How do you know he’s tired?”

“You know what it’s like! It’s tiring to work all day! And then to have to entertain a child. The poor man,” my mother said.

I wanted so desperately for her to see me. Why couldn’t she acknowledge that I was tired too? I was physically tired from carrying a thirty-pound person around all day, anxious about not having the ability to squeeze in much PhD research, worried about my future career prospects and lack of financial independence (which all depended on me actually having time to work on my PhD research), stressed about navigating the details of my separation from Jack, disturbed by

the idea that I wasn't in any shape to be a good partner for Lena, and out of time to prepare for my workshop.

“Give her a message from me!” my mother said as she continued to follow me toward the door.

In that moment, I wished that I could close my ears, just like you can close your eyes.

“Tell her to do us all a favour and go hang herself!” she said.

“Oh my God,” I said.

It felt the way I imagine being in a car accident feels. You wonder if you will ever get to be the person you were before. My mother was a different person. It was like my coming out had poisoned her somehow.

In the car on the way to Lena's, I cried and cried. I had to focus to take in little breaths of air. I had to wipe my eyes to see the road. I thought about driving straight into the traffic in the other lane. An announcement about mental health awareness came on the radio—people were struggling because of COVID—and, even though I was driving alone, I said aloud, “No kidding!”

Poor Jack seemed so tired.

I wasn't sure if I could pull myself together enough to even facilitate the writing group. I didn't know how I could face Lena. I was sick of driving to her apartment in tears. Who would want a partner like that?

“Is there any way you can move out of there?” she had once asked me gently.

“I don't have the money,” I admitted.

I felt shame for allowing myself to become financially dependent on someone else. But I also wanted to protect Jack and couldn't handle the idea of making him suffer any more than I already had.

In the end, we had a good workshop. No one knew that my insides felt like they were decaying. It felt as if my stomach would just fall out on the floor. On the outside, I was a tailored blazer and glossy blonde hair. It's surprising how you can push everything down. The problem is that it won't remain there. It will come back up eventually.

“The Land Before Time”

“What’s your biggest fear?” other kids would ask when we were little.

“My parents dying,” I always answered.

The first time a story made me cry, there were few witnesses. I was six years old but felt smaller in the movie theatre’s endless space. Onscreen, a cartoon dinosaur named Littlefoot watched his mother die protecting him. Worse, Littlefoot had to leave home and embark upon a terrifying journey toward the unknown. He would supposedly find happiness in the Great Valley. I doubted it. Because who could be happy without their parents?

I cried vigorously.

Across the aisle, there was a small Asian boy with his mother. He seemed to be doing fine. This was my first time watching a movie in the theatre. Maybe he had been to other movies?

For me, it was sixty-nine minutes of loneliness, grief, and forced journeying.

The theatre itself is now extinct. The Hyland Theatre perished in 1992 when a faulty popcorn machine burst into flames. A movie called *City of Joy* was playing when it burned to the ground. The theatre opened on October 7, 1955, with the screening of a British submarine movie. In keeping with the nautical theme, the navy brought a brass band, a sixteen-foot model of a submarine, plus diving and navy equipment.

I keep returning to myself sobbing in the theatre with uncertainty about what I am attempting to excavate. It’s about honouring the power of story, I try telling myself. In truth, that is not the significance of the memory. It is my fear of losing my parents.

“You have to live forever,” I once said to my father.

He said that he would.

I've noticed that I'm now of the age where people feel compelled to say things like, *My parents are still alive.*

Lena said she still hasn't forgiven her parents for dying.

"I still needed them," she told me.

I wonder if anyone else carries a fear of mortality, hatched inside a movie theatre that no longer exists?

I also wonder at what point in life some of us come to understand that we can lose our parents even before they die.

Greeting Cards

“What kind of a woman doesn’t own a blow-dryer for God’s sake?” my mother snapped.

I was packing for a couple days away with Lena and had made the mistake of asking my mother if we had an extra blow-dryer.

My father, being helpful, fished a dusty blow-dryer that he’d used for some kind of construction project out of the basement. It was, indeed, covered in a thick coating of grime.

“You might get a little dust in your hair!” he joked.

“Have fun in a damp old musty cabin,” my mother said sarcastically.

Lena had rented us a little white cottage with red trim in a tiny coastal place called Green Bay. Having grown up visiting the Green Bay antique shop, Mrs. Oikle’s, while eating Moon Mist ice cream from Macleod’s Canteen, it had always been a dream of mine to stay in one of the small wooden cottages. I couldn’t believe my luck when Lena said she wanted to go. Yet, my excitement was tinged with worry, as everything was, wondering how my mother might react at the news of our trip.

As usual, I had overpacked. Though I had several heavy bags and suitcases, my parents did not help me drag them outside as they usually would have. They refused to acknowledge Lena, and she was picking me up.

“Hope you don’t freeze to death out in a cabin with the old hag,” my mother said as I left.

I felt a bit shaky getting into the car. The comments went into my body, it seemed, the same way my bags went into Lena’s trunk. Perhaps hurtful comments are like that; they get packed into our bodies until we do the work of unpacking them ourselves.

* * *

A million miles from all of my unease, our front porch overlooked the sea. We sat and listened to the soundtrack of the waves on the beach across the street. In September, the beach was empty. There is something even more romantic about a cold beach in autumn. By this time, Lena and I had been together four months, although it felt like a lifetime because we were such co-conspirators. We had a shtick that involved me asking whether she had done any number of absurd things, Lena answering no, and then me admitting that I also hadn't.

“Have you ever won first place in a wood chopping competition?” I asked her.

“No, no, I haven't. Have you?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

We concluded that it would be prudent to just use the already chopped wood we had packed in our car trunk, rather than chopping additional wood out back.

Our only visitor was a fat raccoon. Two word-lovers, we stayed up late playing Scattergories. Though I usually beat her, we laughed and laughed when I listed “pterodactyl” under dinosaur names beginning with the letter ‘T.’

“I can write, but I never said I could spell!” I yelled.

“Are you sure you should be doing a PhD?” she joked.

The cottage didn't have heat. Lena taught me how to make kindling by peeling the birch bark off of our logs, and then how to prop them up, just so, in order to allow the sparks to explode into a fire.

“Have you ever won an Olympic gold medal for performing with the Canadian synchronized swimming team?” I asked her.

“No, no, I haven't. Have you?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

Despite our lack of gold medals, we swam in the ocean late into the afternoon. No one really talks about how September is secretly the best time to swim in the sea.

We bought wine at the local general store and it wasn't very good but, at the same time, it was perfect. Sometimes it's the context that makes the wine, not the grapes.

On our first night, after Scattergories, we went for a walk after dark. Since there were no streetlights at all, we clutched onto each other's arms and tried to make our way along the gravel road. Everything seemed heightened by the blackness of night, including the sound of the waves, the full-mouthed snoring of the ocean. It felt like we were the only two people in the world. Sometimes I try to take a photo in my mind so that I can hold onto a moment forever. I've done this since I was little even though it doesn't work.

“Have you ever discovered a new constellation and subsequently had it named after you?” I asked her.

“Yes, yes I have. Can't you see the Lena Dipper there?” she asked.

We laughed and laughed.

* * *

Did you ever notice how two days on a trip can be memorable for the rest of your life, while two days in a normal week can slip by, unnoticed forever? Those two days were full of chocolate chip scones from the local bakery, skinny dipping (me—before I noticed a man watching), and the wind whipping our hair as we drove into the seaside town of Lunenburg. The only trouble happened when we got into town.

We didn't always hold hands as we walked down the street, but on that day we did. Being gay was new for me, I was still figuring out how to be in the world. It made me slightly nervous to hold hands in public. I worried my mother would pop out from behind a lamp post.

While most of the shops sold faux sou'westers, lobster trap keychains, and seashell wreaths, we stumbled upon a little place with an array of queer giftware. There were rainbow keychains, Pride stickers, and greeting cards featuring two brides or two grooms.

Here's to the brides-to-be!

Congrats on being each other's Prince Charming.

"Wouldn't this blow your mom's mind?" Lena said holding up a card featuring two women with a new baby and a congratulatory message.

In those greeting cards, I saw a reality that seemed not to exist when I was growing up. That kind of celebratory acceptance was so far from my own experience that I felt a pang of sorrow. No one in my family would ever give me a card like that. Before Lena could see my watery eyes, I bounced out of the gift shop. I didn't want to ruin our perfect day by inviting my unease into the souvenir shops.

Outside, I grabbed Lena and dragged her toward Pop's Buy and Sell.

* * *

Inside Pop's, I was closely inspecting the array of vintage jewelry when my parents walked in. I almost stopped breathing. I knew they would not acknowledge Lena, but I hoped it wouldn't be worse. I imagined myself as a lobster in a trap.

"That's a strange outfit you've got on," my father said to me.

I was wearing a silk robe with paisley swirls and maroon fringe, a cream-coloured dress, a jaunty beige beret, and bedazzled pink Miu Miu sunglasses.

“It’s cottage chic!” I announced nervously.

Earlier on the trip, Lena had made a similar joke: “That’s your rustic outfit, is it?”

My father then laughed and departed for a walk around town. I think he was grateful to escape trailing behind my mother as she poked through various gift shops.

I felt sick to my stomach as my mother proceeded to pore over the vintage jewelry. Lena stayed on the other side of the shop where she’d been when they suddenly appeared. I don’t actually know whether she was reading the old post cards, flipping over the Royal Daltons on her own, or looking at wooden folk-art ducks, because I could not bring myself to turn around and look at her. I prayed that my mother would just be nice.

I wondered if I would throw up in an antique punch bowl.

“I don’t see anything,” my mother abruptly announced. “Not nearly as good as usual.”

She left the shop.

The day was suddenly stained. Those greeting cards were created for families celebrating love. Mine wouldn’t even say hello.

I turned back toward Lena. Neither of us said anything. I wasn’t even sure if she noticed my parents had been there. She allowed me to drape an array of necklaces over an arm she held aloft so that I could determine which one to buy. I wanted so badly to apologize. But I couldn’t apologize because I knew she would say that it wasn’t my fault, and then the tears would come, and if they came, I knew that they wouldn’t stop.

* * *

“If I end things with Lena, maybe I won’t have to suffer my mother’s abuse. But I don’t know how I can forgive her for this,” I told my friend Helen.

I felt shame for not being stronger.

* * *

When I broke up with Lena, she looked at me and said, “You should have taken better care of my heart.”

Afterwards, I sent her a melodramatic letter in which I wrote, “You are right. I should have taken better care of your heart by listening to mine.”

The Yoga Retreat

I was in love with Lena when I broke up with her.

What a heartbreaking story. I wonder, if your parents were more supportive, whether you would have stayed with Lena, my friend Helen wrote in an email.

I knew the answer.

A relationship is often categorized as a friendship in the eyes of disapproving parents. Growing up, I heard my father and aunt speak about the one gay man we knew. “Walter and his friend went to Florida for the winter,” they would say. Even as a kid, I could tell there was something different about the way they said *friend*.

My father’s way of referencing Lena was worse.

“I call her What’s-her-name. I try not to remember her name,” he said.

Friend would have been a step up.

* * *

When I self-identified as a lesbian in a cover letter for a teaching job, my parents paced through the house as if the hallway was a racetrack.

“It’s goddamned foolishness! What does it matter who you’re sleeping with? It should be the best person for the job!” my mother said.

Her words made me feel like a child applying for a job. I cried all over my CV.

“Don’t identify as anything other than normal. Do you hear me? *Do you hear me?*” my father yelled.

* * *

Even though they allowed me to move back home, they would not accept my separation from Jack.

“You will never find another man who loves you that much!” my mother said one day.

“I don’t want to find another man,” I said. “That’s kind of the point.”

“Be quiet! The neighbours will hear!”

I went to bed not as myself, but as a thing to be hidden from the neighbours. My daughter, Wren, slept peacefully in the bed beside me. I worried that her pillow might float away. Mine got so wet, I had to flip it over.

* * *

An elderly neighbour once told me her husband was so handsome that she would sometimes stand beside the bed and just stare at his face while he slept. It was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. I do that with Wren sometimes. My camera roll is full of photos of her sleeping face.

* * *

“Everyone thinks it’s so easy to be gay these days. But you tell your parents you’re a lesbian and they hate you,” I told Jack one day.

“They don’t hate you,” he said.

I hugged our daughter greedily as we talked.

On another day, Jack said, “I’m having a hard time understanding how your sexuality could be more important than our family.”

“Me too,” I said truthfully.

November 2020

“She’s trying to kill us,” my mother said when I registered for the yoga retreat. The plague of 2020, as a writer in *The Paris Review* called it, did seem to be making a comeback.

“It’s only eight people, plus two instructors,” I told her.

“What are they, a bunch of gays?” she asked.

“They’re a bunch of moms,” I said.

Looking back, I think joining a flock of moms was my way of trying to prove something to my own mother. Something along the lines of, *See, I’m one of them!*

* * *

On the day I broke up with Lena, I went upstairs where my mother was folding laundry. I falsely assumed that making a grand gesture would prove that I was genuine.

“I love her,” I said.

“You love her as a friend,” she said.

“No. I am in love with her. As in, romantic love.”

“Well, if you make the choice to live as a lesbian, you should give up Wren.”

When you hear the unthinkable, it’s odd how everything continues. Why didn’t the windows shatter? Why didn’t the birds fall from the trees, dead?

“What?” I said. “She needs her mother.”

“Jack’s new partner will become her mother. You should stay out of her life completely.”

“How can you say that?”

* * *

I had never attended any kind of yoga retreat before, but the description seemed to be written with me in mind. It read:

Let’s face it, life has been heavy. 2020 has pushed us in ways we didn’t anticipate. Many of us turning to a state of survival, making it work moment by moment, day by day. This retreat is open to anyone who feels comfortable in spaces that centre the experiences of women.

I kept staring at the words, *state of survival*.

By this time, Lena had taken me back.

Meanwhile, Jack had been seeing a marriage counsellor without me.

“Marvin says you have to make the decision that is best for your daughter,” he told me after one of his sessions. “It’s better for Wren, and our parents, and everyone, if we stay together. I’m not worried about the gay thing.”

The gay thing. As if it was just some minor flaw I had, like not enjoying football on Sunday evenings.

My mother was already suggesting that I had ruined Christmas, even though it was only November. I worried about Lena because Christmas was different for her without her parents. Her father had passed away just before she began her PhD studies, and her mother died before she graduated. What happens to family traditions without the family?

Holiday melancholy always makes me think of my boss when I worked at the liquor store. As we listened to the same holiday playlist of chipper songs for hours on end—*It’s a marshmallow world in the winter!*—he pointed out that Christmas is not a happy time for a lot of people. He stared out across the store as if it were a vast plain. Eventually, he told me that his best friend had died by suicide around Christmas.

“My dream was to become a firefighter, but I didn’t do it,” he then told me. “My girlfriend at the time didn’t want me to move for the training. So I didn’t.”

At nineteen, I didn’t know what to say.

Day One

The retreat was in a red cottage in the middle of the woods. There was a woodstove in the living room, but the floor-to-ceiling windows gave it a modern feel. All the pillows were handmade and, on various tables, little signs instructed visitors not to attempt washing the pillows should anything spill.

I had already seen the rainbow staircase on the Airbnb website. But since being gay was new for me, I interpreted it as good luck.

Still, I was confused. I knew my love for Lena was not a form of cruelty toward my daughter, but when you hear the same story over and over, you begin to question yourself. Bad mothers do not easily recognize themselves. Perhaps the most difficult thing for a mother to grasp is the fact that the only person she has to impress with her parenting is her own child.

I drove there, through the pine trees, hoping the collective wisdom of a group of women would uncover something for me. A deer crossed in front of my car just as I was turning down the driveway. I tried to imagine its knowledge too. Ultimately, I failed to appreciate the beauty of the deer because I was attempting to decipher its meaning instead.

It was my first time telling a group of strangers that I had a female partner.

“I love Lena. But Wren is only two. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” I said.

“You’re saying that you don’t know what you’re *supposed* to do, not that you don’t know what you *want* to do,” a woman named Rachel with wild red hair pointed out.

Rachel’s two daughters were older—one a teenager, the other in her early twenties.

“Does it get any easier?” Anne, a woman with two toddlers, asked.

“No. Instead of dealing with things like nightmares, the sleepless nights come when you’re helping your daughters talk through things like their first sexual assault,” Rachel said.

We were sitting atop the three beds in the room with our legs crossed or pulled up under our chins. Growing up, I didn’t know that mothers were allowed to not know things.

* * *

There was a yoga studio in the basement. As soon as I sat on my mat, the tears came. I felt like a traitor for telling the others some of the things my parents had said to me. My mother had helped me pack for the trip. She had hemmed my frayed pyjama pants. And even though I told her not to, she spent a long time picking little bits of dried leaves out of a fuzzy white blanket that I had taken on a picnic, just in case it was cold at the retreat.

Day Two

The facilitators encouraged everyone to get high for the painting session after lunch. One girl got so high that she sat there motionless. Another woman cried violently.

“All those years! Taking care of everyone but me! All those meals, laundry, cleaning, cooking. All that work for everybody else! Losing myself. . .” She smeared paint on her face, trying to wipe off the tears. Her crying was so deep and primal that we all felt unsure about whether to continue painting.

Someone said the last retreat was much worse. People came with boxes full of edibles, skipped the yoga classes, and then complained they weren’t being transformed.

“So when should I start potty-training Wren?” I asked Anne, determined to learn something.

* * *

That evening we sat around the woodstove talking.

“My daughter said she wouldn’t play with the brown doll at school. I asked why not and she said, ‘Because brown is dirty.’ And that’s when I knew, unequivocally, that I had failed as a mother,” Anne said. She then elaborated on how she had proceeded to teach her daughter about the beauty in all shades of skin, but her grief stuck in my mind. I suspect that fathers don’t blame themselves for what their kids don’t know.

Using the poker, I jabbed at the logs in the woodstove. It was my fire. I made it myself earlier that evening.

Talk turned to men. Blowjob. Husbands. One woman’s son said an ornament on their Christmas tree looked like “a penis butt.”

“You’re so quiet,” someone said to me.

I shrugged.

It was the first time I was aware of myself as being the only person who didn’t entirely fit. The group didn’t realize me being gay made the conversation different on my end.

“When I mentioned the retreat, my daughter said, ‘No lesbian stuff mom. No sleeping with women!’” one woman had said earlier, laughing. Like it was a big joke.

That night beside the fire, I realized that I had allowed my own place in the world to prevent me from seeing the way things are for others. Like when a black friend visited me in Nova Scotia and said people were staring at her everywhere she went, and I thought to myself that it simply wasn’t true. A lack of awareness is not innocent, even though we think it is.

Sometimes my queerness reminds me of that feeling you get when you have a new pair of shoes that don’t fit quite properly, so you are never able to just forget about having something on your feet.

Day Three

It wasn't cold enough for a fire on our last morning, but I made one anyway.

"What's that noise?" I heard someone in another room say.

"It's probably just Christina making another fire," another voice answered.

I was wearing an expensive black bejewelled blazer with torn black jeans and studded boots. Sitting there, controlling the fire, I felt like the best possible version of myself. Normally, I'm the kind of person who waits for a crowd to gather and then stands just outside of it. On this morning, I built a fire and everyone else came and sat around me.

One of the yoga facilitators left a box of animal spirit cards on the table and I proceeded to give people readings, even though I didn't know how. I read the description of each animal aloud in a theatrical voice.

"Well, we all know what Christina is like during story time with her daughter," someone said.

"That's a mom voice for sure!" someone else said.

I would like an audio recording of that moment.

* * *

We were supposed to do yoga on our last morning.

"I should tell my husband to bring the dishes instead!" one of the facilitators suddenly shouted.

"The dishes?" someone asked.

As it turned out, Liv had had a box of old dishes rattling around in her car for months. She suggested that we each take a dish and smash it on the ground.

This was not my vision of a yoga retreat. I thought we would all be sitting in a circle chanting in the sunshine. Instead, one by one, we smashed things.

“I’m not an angry person. I’m smashing this plate in celebration!” I told the group.

Rebecca took an old glass mug and raised it as high as she could in the air. When it hit the ground, it bounced. It didn’t break.

“STORY OF MY LIFE!!!” she screamed in frustration.

The second time she threw it, the mug hit the concrete, broke apart, and scattered big chunks and smaller fragments of glass all over the place.

The writer in me wanted to make meaning of the plate smashing. We were near a place called Candy Mountain Road; surely that signalled something too. Not to mention all the fires I’d built that weekend. But, in the end, I decided to just stop thinking for once and drive myself home, through the woods.

Transitions

There is a whole co-parenting language. I never thought I would use a word as clinical as “transition” in relation to my daughter. But every few days, even now, we undertake Wren transitions. I’ve learned that most split-up parents rotate on a weekly basis, but neither of us can stand the idea of being away from Wren for that long, so a few times each week she travels from my house (my parents’ house) to her father’s.

It was much worse when it all first began. When her father would ring the doorbell, Wren would seize my hand as if the power had suddenly been cut.

“It’s your dad!” I would exclaim, trying to build excitement.

In an attempt to evade the situation, she’d escape into the hallway. I would drag her back out to the door, squirming, where her dad was waiting. Wrestling her to the floor, I’d try to pull on her little pink pants. Her face would transform into a round tomato of misery. Then, her face would burst, and she’d start crying at the top of her lungs. I would struggle to slip on her socks as she wailed and kicked her feet. Next, she’d throw her entire body forcefully against mine, hugging me, her hands around my neck, with surprising strength for a two-year-old. She would clutch onto me as if I were about to float away. She would cry as if she’d never see me again. Such emotion is usually reserved for movie scenes, not for people in real life on a Sunday morning. She was born on a Sunday afternoon. At that time, none of us had any idea that we would find ourselves living in different places, navigating what it means to be a family that has taken on a new shape.

“Wren didn’t ask for this shit,” Jack kept telling me.

“I know,” I would say, feeling the weight of what I had done to our lives.

During these tearful transitions, we would attempt to approach something bordering on positivity. Wren loved the visits with her father and her Korean grandparents. In fact, Jack would often text me a video of her squealing with joy while running toward the fish tank in the lobby of the apartment, moments after one of her startling departures. Yet for those few minutes of pure sadness at the front door, it felt like death. It felt as if there were a part of my world where it would never rain and all the flowers would die, and it was only because I made it so. I knew that I had the ability to say, *Wait! Let's stop this!* and the garden would be beautiful and flourishing once more. Restored.

Outside, Wren would screech at the top of her lungs all the way to her car seat in the back of her dad's BMW. I would watch from the doorway feeling like the worst person in the world.

"The neighbours hear her screaming whenever she leaves here," my mother said one day.

"That doesn't matter," I told her. We are all wrapped up in our own lives and if we judge the pain of others, it is only to make ourselves feel better. I knew that, yet, I couldn't completely shake what she was implying.

"Wren must be so confused. She has no place to call home. Doesn't this make you feel bad? I would feel really bad about myself if that was my daughter," my mother continued.

Imagine doing something that breaks your heart while someone stands there telling you that you *should* be devastated.

"What a crazy, mixed-up situation," my mother added, shaking her head.

What about me? I wondered. It was all my fault, I knew that, but I still selfishly yearned for someone to offer comfort.

My mother never once said, *How are you doing with all this? It must be hard.*

“It would break my heart to see my child like that. To have her grabbing for me and crying like that,” she said.

“Of course,” I said.

Of course it did.

After these transitions, I often went into the bathroom to cry alone. On many days I played a little game with myself where I would see if it was possible to go an hour without tears. What is the price of self-awareness? And how sure of yourself do you have to be? I could have called it all off and gone back; there was still the possibility. Yet there was something inside of me that knew I couldn't go back. It felt as if I had slipped myself off a bridge; it was that level of helplessness. In her book on feminist research literacies, Lorri Neilsen (1998) writes, “It takes years of experience to realize that life goes through us as much as we go through life” (p. 22). If I could teleport back in time to find myself huddled in the bathroom crying, I would cry too. Then I would remind myself of the time when I was little and our elderly neighbour said, “No offense to the Lord, but I don't believe in the Lord!”

“Who do you believe in then?” I asked.

“Child, you have to believe in *yourself*,” she said.

May 13, 2021

Second Birthday

Wren will be three years old next week. For someone who has been chronicled from birth in her mother's writing, she is not one for words. She says only one sentence. At first I thought she'd picked it up from a Christmas carol, but I soon realized it was from the song "Wheels on the Bus."

"All through town!" she often declares.

Lately, she's also taken to counting from one to nine and then screaming out the number ten at the top of her lungs:

"TEN!!!!"

Her father told me that last night he covered his ears when she got to nine.

She's quite a swashbuckler, I tell anyone who asks about her. Physically, she has the strength of ten toddlers. She delights in doing forbidden things, like ripping the Christmas ornaments off the tree and hurling them across the room like grenades (photos of my parents' 2020 Christmas tree illustrate how it only had decorations on the very top—she is thorough). Even though we are allegedly in the terrible twos, Wren laughs more than she cries. She often claps her hands, as if applauding life.

Her silent ways have made her into a master of non-verbal communication. When she wants milk, she simply pulls open the refrigerator door. When she wants to play with the tap water in the bathroom sink, she grabs me by the hand and drags me down the hall. If she wants to go outside, she carries her little shoes to the door and plunks herself on the floor. If anyone in the room happens to have a plate of food, she will swiftly snatch whatever happens to be on the plate, run across the room, and shove it into her mouth.

"What are you, Aladdin?" I'll say.

Then, she'll giggle wildly.

"She's way cuter than those kids in the Gap ads," my mother said one day.

"Jack suggested we get her an agent, but imagine the mayhem if she was on a film shoot," I said. "She'd grab all the food off the craft services table!"

"She'd be a cute little actress, but it would be kind of hard without the talking," my father joked.

My mother has often blamed me for Wren's lack of progress on the talking front.

"The poor thing, she must be so mixed up! How would you like it if you went home and mommy wasn't there?" she has often said.

Other times, she blames the fact that Wren is learning two languages.

"It must be so confusing when she goes over to her other grandparents' and they're talking in Korean all day," she'll say.

Even though I shouldn't have to, I regularly point out how important it is for Wren to learn Korean. How untethered she might feel if we failed to honour a major piece of her identity. Sometimes I think about a friend who was adopted from Korea as a baby and raised in Nova Scotia by white Canadian parents. When she visited Korea as an adult, the locals yelled at her, frustrated by her lack of understanding. It felt, to her, as if Korean people looked down on her because she didn't speak the language of home. Stacy Holman Jones and Anne M. Harris (2019) write,

Being adopted is a life woven out of threads of outsidersness, shame, guilt, embodiment, memory and most of all, a yearning for home. Though our home is not the same home that others talk about, and love is not the same love that majoritarian people enjoy; home and love are contingent, illusive and often (if not always) disappointing. (p. 112)

Holman Jones and Harris proceed to liken the experience of being adopted to the experience of being queer (2019). Both groups, at times, feel shut out.

A gay friend recently asked me whether my parents are in the “tolerance” stage or the “acceptance” stage. She said that while her mother completely accepted her queerness right from the beginning, initially, her father only tolerated it. My parents, on the other hand, seem to be in the denial phase. Yesterday, my mother interrupted my snacking to suggest:

“You will have to find out if Orville Redenbacher has any rich sons.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you eat so much popcorn!”

I immediately emailed my friend Helen, writing:

“I don’t think this gay thing is sinking in!”

“You need to put that in your book,” she wrote back.

* * *

“I do not know many parents who think they have succeeded as parents,” Joan Didion (2011) writes in a book dedicated to her daughter Quintana (p. 93). Because my coming out was greeted with outrage from my own mother, I cried a waterway of tears throughout the year 2020. On a recent trip to the optometrist, I learned that there is a stigmatism in my right eye.

It must have been caused by the magnitude of my sadness, I thought. It must have been all the crying.

“Oh really?” I asked casually, as if to avoid implicating myself in my own sadness.

“Your eyes are also really red and dry,” the optometrist said.

They must be drained like a desert from all the tears, I thought.

I recalled how a surgeon had told the writer Emily Bernard that medicine is often more art than science (2019). In the alchemy of the body, emotional pain likely causes more violence than we imagine.

“Don’t forget to listen to your body,” my therapist, Kay, often says.

Over the past year I have cried hot tears all over the top of Wren’s head. I have worried about my sadness somehow seeping into her. It was in junior high biology class when I learned the word *osmosis*.

“You only care about yourself!” my mother declared after my coming out.

That is untrue.

I care so deeply about everyone else that if you measured my guilt, it would be much larger than anything capable of fitting on an eye exam chart.

* * *

In my parents’ house, we have a specific ceiling light from which we hang bundles of balloons whenever one of us has a birthday. The night before Wren turned two, the balloons were hung in the required place, and her toys were wrapped. Amongst the gifts I got her, she would discover a new car for her collection—a miniature blue Porsche that would complement the bright red miniature Lamborghini she picked out herself at the store. Race cars suit her. I liked the Volkswagen bus with the daisies painted on the sides, but Wren, in true fashion, went for the Lambo. She does not play with dolls.

On Wren’s birthday eve, my mother was in a fury because I had disclosed my sexuality to my doctoral supervisor. It wasn’t arbitrary; I was applying to teach a course at the university and had self-identified as a lesbian in the cover letter. It seemed fitting to elaborate slightly.

“She might not want anything to do with you now,” my mother said.

“It’s fine,” I told her.

“It’s all foolishness. Why would anyone care anyway?” she huffed. “Who cares!”

I was too defenseless then to recognize that *she* was the one who cared. Not about me, but about the opinions of others.

“Well *I’m* not telling the relatives, *you’ll* have to tell them!” she announced before rushing out of the room.

I had never before felt like an intruder in my parents’ living room. Over the years, the three of us had smiled and posed for countless photos underneath various bundles of balloons in the spot where Wren’s were now hanging. Jack had patiently snapped the photos so that it could be just the three of us, like always.

After my mother left the room, I sat on the floor. I have found that there is something about being closer to the ground that makes you feel safe. It was hard to imagine that any of our relatives would be offended if I revealed I am gay. It wasn’t that idea that hurt me anyway. It was my mother’s scorn. As Adrienne Rich (1976/2018, p. 120) writes, “There is no indifference or cruelty we can tolerate less, than the indifference or cruelty of our mothers.”

Wren, also on the floor, was playing with her school bus toy. I turned my attention toward the plastic alphabet letters, poking ‘L’ with my fingertip.

“I love you,” I said, kissing the top of her head.

I say those words to her a lot because I wish someone would say them to me.

And also because I adore her.

The little swashbuckler.

* * *

In a strange twist, Wren began her terrible twos with my sobbing rather than her own.

As I fed Wren her birthday breakfast, I kept hearing the words, *I'm not telling the relatives, you'll have to tell them!* They played over and over in my head like the music from one of Wren's YouTube cartoons. *All through town!*

I had succeeded in warding off the weeping on her birthday eve, but my body knew better than I did. Tears fell from my eyes and spattered onto the blue plastic tray attached to Wren's feeding chair.

I felt ashamed of myself for crying like that. A friend of mine once said that if your child's arm gets cut off and she comes to you with blood dripping everywhere, you have to smile and tell her everything will be okay, because that's your job as a parent. Here I was crying over nothing more than words. Meanwhile, Wren smiled and tried to peer through the hole in a cheerio as if it were a telescope.

When my parents came down for breakfast, I turned my face away. It's hard to hide the shame of being a bad parent in front of your parents.

Though the pandemic still raged, I bought Wren a pink tulle dress to wear with a matching crown that spelled out "Birthday Girl" in sparkly pink lettering. After breakfast, I managed to dress Wren and then pull on my own pastel floral dress trimmed with white lace in the shape of daisies. We would have been a cute pair, except that my face was blotchy and my eyes were red and brimming with tears. I thought about my own second birthday. I wore a white lace dress and blew out a big candle in the shape of a two. I know because there is a picture of me sitting behind a giant chocolate cake. My mother's feelings for me then were untarnished.

Even if my body were not cooperating, I was determined to document Wren's birthday with photos. It was sad to think that there would be no photos with my own mother in them. But I wasn't capable.

When I look at the photos now, I feel relief. From the outside, we look happy. The only indication of my sorrow is the fact that I am wearing sunglasses in all of the photos. I remember wiping each tear away as quickly as possible whenever one happened to slip out from underneath.

Months later, my mother said, “If you’re so happy with this separation, why were you crying on Wren’s birthday? Doesn’t look very fun to me, being gay.”

It took me by surprise because no one had acknowledged that I’d been crying that day. I suppose it was naive of me to think they couldn’t tell.

I admitted to my mother that the crying was because of what she said the night before.

She just scoffed.

The relatives still don’t know.

Not because I am unwilling to tell them, but because I don’t want to anger my own parents.

* * *

We are, none of us, ‘either’ mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both (Rich, 1976/2018, p. 144).

When my mother was only ten years old, her own mother died by suicide. When I asked about my grandmother as a child, my parents told me that she had died of cancer. I learned the truth when my cousin came to stay with me in Montreal, during my graduate studies. I don’t blame my parents for such an omission, even if I would do things differently with Wren. Sometimes the truth can result in more questions than you care to confront.

“How could you abandon your daughter?” my father asked me the day after I defended my PhD portfolio.

I did not know what he meant. There was never a time when I considered removing myself from Wren’s life. Even later, when I started to experience waves of nausea and suicidal thoughts because of their disdain, I knew that I wouldn’t go through with harming myself because I wouldn’t want that to become Wren’s story.

“Poor Wren. You can’t have her growing up around lesbians!” my mother said.

“People will think What’s-her-name is your mother,” my father continued. “Wren can’t grow up around the two of you, that’s just ridiculous.”

“How *could you* do that to your daughter?” my mother demanded.

I was crestfallen. My portfolio presentation had been a success. I had spoken about Wren’s penchant for picking up sticks in the yard. And the way she surprised us by belly-flopping head first into the icy water at the beach, even though she can’t swim (necessitating a quick reaction on my part). Passing the presentation meant that I had become a PhD candidate rather than a PhD student. All I wanted was for my parents to say congratulations. For them to be proud of me.

“You are making your mother cry,” my father said.

Grasping for words, I found none. Their interrogation was unexpected.

“Your mother knows what it’s like to grow up without a home,” my father said to me on another occasion. “She doesn’t want that for Wren.”

Home.

I finally understand that home doesn’t feel safe for everyone.

I also acknowledge that it could be much worse. My mother takes care of us. She washes Wren's dresses—always covered in dirt and grass from our playground trips. She cooks us dinner most nights. Tonight, for example, she is planning to sauté the fresh fiddleheads that my friend Kathy dropped off in a bag on the porch (because the province is under another lockdown and we are not allowed to come into contact with others). She puts the coffee I like to drink on her grocery list.

It feels cruel to write down the things she has said to me. But this seems to be the only way I can get them out of me. They haven't come out with the tears.

Maybe my mother doesn't know how to deal with monumental change because in her life, change came with finality. It is possible that I should thank her for trying to protect my daughter so fiercely that she would reject her own.

"It's not your job to process emotions for your mother. She has to do that herself," Kay once said during a therapy session.

But what if she never had anyone to show her how?

Foolish Flag

Being sad in the summer makes you feel as if you're doing something wrong. It feels incompatible with the perky pineapple-shaped cups, and the festive coconut scent of your sunscreen, and that rainbow you see if the sun shines just right in your neighbour's lawn sprinklers. Even liquor stores have pyramids of cheerful rosé and sweet Muscat near the cash. The whiskey hides out for winter, I guess. Adding this all together, if you can't just be happy in August, you begin to suspect that the problem is actually you. In the summer of 2020, I was trying so hard to be cheerful like the smiling people you see on the posters outside of the liquor store with their heads tossed back and their glasses of wine held aloft in an endless toast. It wasn't working, of course, because I was still desperately seeking a type of acceptance from my parents that I've slowly learned not to expect.

Sometimes when you're suffering, you feel as if it might be possible to jump in the car and drive away from the pain. As they say in radio songs, *leave it all behind*. This also doesn't work, though, because your emotions are not like the plants you water before you pack up the car, they go wherever you go.

"Why don't we go to the cottage?" I asked my parents one weekend in August of 2020.

What if we went to a place that existed before I let them down? That's what I was thinking. It had been only four months since I'd come out, but it felt like four years. I had never used the word trauma in association with myself, but hearing over and over again how you are failing your daughter, how you are selfish, how you ruined someone's life by marrying them, how you've shamed your family, eats you up like the ants gnawing on the wooden deck at the cottage. I thought about the little piles of sawdust we'd sometimes find in the spring from the destruction caused by the ants; they were just like the little pieces of me. I wasn't myself. I was

fragile and fragmented, like those loose piles of sawdust. It felt as if a gust of wind could blow me away. Back then, I didn't know that it would be up to me to rebuild myself. That I wouldn't find the tools within my parents, like I had always done whenever I seemed to be in trouble.

As an only child, I always felt a measure of loneliness. Even as an adult, I still wish there was someone else who could understand what things are like for me on the inside. Perhaps that's why I loved the cottage so much. She was like a sibling I never had. An escape from school and the city, and everything that happens from September to summer vacation.

"Well, I guess we'll have to sell the cottage because you won't have a man around to take care of it!" my mother said one evening. She was trying every tactic she could think of. As if I could just reverse myself back into the closet like the beach blankets after a long summer.

Up until this point in the pandemic, cottage visits had been banned by the province. In the spring of 2020, it was illegal to visit your cottage. In August, Dr. Strang, the province's chief medical officer—a man who was largely unknown but had become a household name because of the pandemic—gave everyone permission to visit their cottages. It was a little like a get-out-of-jail-free card.

"I'm so surprised that people actually want to go there!" my dad said happily.

As the years passed, we didn't get to the lake often. But when I think about my childhood, I can still see the spindly water spiders darting underneath my cottage friend, Tressa's, wharf. And the dried-up snakeskins I would collect along the dirt road. I can almost hear the never-ending humming of the heat bugs on hot July afternoons. What do those look like anyway? You don't see them; you just hear them.

Another feature of our summers at the cottage was the Mahone Bay flea market, located glamorously in the parking lot of the Foodland grocery store. My mother still uses a tall glass vase that she bought from one of the regulars. This woman was there every week, perched on the back of her truck, waiting for customers to buy things from her array of glassware. The woman explained that the vase was well-used because her husband bought her a dozen roses every week of their lives. He never missed a Friday, she told us. Not until he died.

“I don’t even like flowers. It was a waste of money,” she concluded, wrapping the vase in newspaper and handing it to my mother.

It’s funny how the stories of strangers come to be our own. And, sometimes, their belongings too. Also, did that woman really dislike flowers that much? If so, was it merely the ritual of buying the flowers every Friday that her husband had enjoyed? It’s possible that rituals are partially what defines a romantic relationship—the idea of doing something over and over for someone you love. Even if, secretly, you’re only doing it for yourself.

After the flea market, I would often strip off my clothes, pull my bathing suit on as if it would disappear if I didn’t manage to get it adjusted in ten seconds, and jump into the lake to cool off. The world felt really big inside the waves. So big that it made you dizzy.

Hemingway said the best early training for a writer is an unhappy childhood (as cited by Nathalie Léger, 2016). I didn’t have one of those.

* * *

You only get one summer each year and I wanted to share the lake, and the water spiders, and the bats with two year-old Wren. But I also had a secret aim. I was still desperately seeking my parents’ approval. I wanted them to see that I wasn’t going to destroy Wren’s life, even if I was queer. I wanted them to recognize that me being myself was not an act of cruelty. The

problem, looking back, was that it still felt as if I were making a choice. Jack wanted to reconcile our marriage. I still had the option of making everything okay again.

Since, much like an airport, a cottage stands outside of time as we usually conceive of it, I suspected it could be the only place on earth where my parents might forget how much I seemed to be disappointing them. I was never gay when we went there before. At least, none of us knew it. Myself included.

* * *

In a *Globe and Mail* piece, Marissa Campbell (2021) reflects on her marriage to a man prior to coming out at age forty-eight, suggesting, “It was a life made for someone raised to believe a heterosexual life is what life was supposed to be.”

My father had already started making comments around Wren like, “Wait until the boys come around!” or, “All the boys will be chasing you in your new dress!”

I didn’t want what happened to me to be repeated.

I didn’t want my own daughter to grow up thinking that there is only one way to fall in love. To consider any kind of love to be *normal* would detract from the pure magic of love itself. Yet, I was too afraid to stop my father from saying such things. I was still crying, almost daily. Sometimes I cried alone in my childhood bedroom, other times I cried beside Wren after she fell peacefully asleep.

* * *

If there were a place where I might have deduced that I had an undeniable attraction to women, it would have been the cottage. In retrospect, my bedroom seems like a rather revealing time capsule. On one wooden wall, there is a collage of women in bathing suits. It was a cottage craft that I made as a child. I cut the scantily clad women out of the Sears catalogue. They’re

surrounded by sand and seashells that I collected from Rissers beach and glued to a piece of cardboard. One of the women looks slyly over her shoulder, her blue bathing suit sparkling post-swim. Another woman coyly winds a strand of blond hair around one finger. The other piece of original artwork on my cottage bedroom wall is a collection of hand-drawn cats. How did I not know?!

For me, the cottage was also a place of athleticism. In my twenties, I would jump into my running shoes and take off down the dirt road immediately after breakfast. Then, refusing to allow my sweat to dry, I would dive into the lake. After my swim, I might hop into the canoe for a paddle before lunch. A few times, I swam across the lake while my father patiently floated beside me on a paddleboard for my safety. Not because I didn't have the stamina to make the roughly two-kilometer swim, but because neither of us wanted me to get run over by a speedboat.

* * *

One day Jack suggested that I wouldn't have come out if my life involved more struggle. "Most people don't have the luxury of sitting around thinking about things like this," he said.

Afterwards, I wondered if there was a hint of truth to his suggestion. In her memoir *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson (2015) writes,

I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth. I would also like to cop easily to my abundant privilege—except that the notion of privilege as something to which one could 'easily cop,' as in 'cop to once and be done with,' is ridiculous. Privilege *saturates*, privilege *structures*. (p. 97)

People are sometimes afraid to talk about privilege. I told my friend John that my parents rejected me after I came out. That's not entirely true. What I experienced was not the same as losing the safety of a place to live. Even if the place I lived felt unsafe, at least there was a roof over my head.

And how can a person with a family cottage complain? Growing up, I had not understood that there were others keeping watch over the land long before my parents bought their lot. In school, we never spoke about Indigenous history. Only in recent years have I truly learned that the land does not belong to us, and yet we persist in pretending it does. But even my refusal to celebrate Canada Day feels like another manifestation of privilege. As if it helps missing and murdered Indigenous women for me to refuse a hot dog.

* * *

In the summer of 2020, we were miles away from knowing when a COVID vaccine would be invented. They said that the virus could be lurking anywhere—*On any surface! For hours!* Plus, my mother had taken up morning recitations of the alarming COVID statistics printed in the newspaper. All this meant that it was not possible to forget about the virus and its threat. There was always something dark and deadly present, even on the sunniest days.

Yet, the cottage provided a sundrenched counterpoint to the low-level fear that we all carried. It was just the four of us: Wren, me, and my parents. There were no strangers there to avoid. No need to wear masks. No need to sanitize your hands every time you touched something.

“No virus here!” I declared, standing like a mountaineer on the empty deck overlooking the lake. I was doing my best to trick my body into being happy. Changing locations can't fix things, but it can help.

A family joke was that my mother always wanted to leave the cottage as quickly as we'd arrive. As soon as the freezer bag was unpacked, she'd contrive of an activity someplace else.

"Who wants to sit around in the woods?" she'd often say before suggesting we drive to Mahone Bay to poke around in the gift shops or go for a walk in Lunenburg.

On this day, she suggested we take Wren to a small ocean beach on the outskirts of Mahone Bay. It felt as if things would be okay, for just one afternoon.

While we were gathering our towels, sunscreen, sand buckets, and plastic shovels, Wren ran into my bedroom. Though the collage of women on the wall had taken on a new significance for me, I'd forgotten about the small rainbow flag on my bureau. There was nothing mystical about the flag; it was just something they'd given out one year during Pride week at a department store.

As it turned out, the miniature Pride flag was the perfect size for Wren's little hands to wave. When she emerged from my bedroom with the flag, she was running. She tore across the living room, waving it furiously. I grabbed my phone to capture the moment. For a second it felt as if I could see our future. It felt like everything was going to be fine. One day, I would take her to the Pride parade. One day, I would be able to feel proud of myself instead of ashamed. Maybe I would even get through this one cottage weekend without crying.

"Don't let her bring that foolish flag!" my mother snapped.

Maybe it's the tiny things that break your heart even more than the worst of it. As my mother snatched the flag from Wren's little hands, I slid myself down onto the wooden floor of the cottage. I felt the tears, but I shoved them back inside of me. I needed to take Wren to the beach. There is something primal about the urge to protect your child from your own suffering. It

Alone Forever

“A seal is broken through a combination of forces” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 60).

* * *

You might assume there would be a single, pinpointable moment when one realizes that one’s marriage is over. There isn’t. Ending a marriage doesn’t happen in an instant. It’s like when they slowly knock down a residential apartment building. First, there is a lot of resistance (sometimes from people who aren’t really even involved). Then, daily, you drive past, expecting there to be nothing left, but it takes time for the frame to collapse in on itself. And there are always fragments of what once was flapping helplessly in the wind. The ground surrounding the ghost of the building is littered with traces of past lives (these are the things you can no longer do because it is too upsetting):

- That movie (*Scarface*) you can’t watch with anyone else (*Who do I trust? Me!*).
- That place where you couldn’t possibly eat sushi with someone else. (What if the waitress asked where he was? You would 100% cry right into the little soy sauce tray.)
- That park where you took your wedding photos. (The two of you atop a hill together with your veil blowing like a magical piece of lace from a fairy tale.)
- That theatre where you went on dates together in your twenties (where you jabbed him with your elbow when he inevitably fell asleep—and snored!—during the university student theatre performances).

When you think about the years that stretched themselves out during a fifteen-year partnership, you can see a younger version of yourself in your mind’s eye. All those memories—setting up apartments, packing up apartments, new licence plates, trips to the carwash, trips to the emergency room—all those bits and pieces of life you shared together do not dematerialize.

“Is this all worth it?” Jack kept asking me.

I wasn’t sure.

After I broke up with Lena, Jack and I tried to get back together.

“If you guys give it a try for three months and that doesn’t work out, you will know you’ve done everything you could do for your daughter’s sake,” Marvin, the marriage counsellor, suggested to us.

“Maybe this whole lesbian thing is like a heroin addiction,” Jack said after one of our sessions with Marvin. “You can just get over it.”

My own therapist suggested that it all sounded like conversion therapy.

* * *

“How do you feel this morning?” Jack asked during our purgatory phase.

“Still gay!” I said.

We both laughed.

“You’ve been gay all along, but it never bothered you before,” he said more seriously.

“I wish I didn’t feel this way,” I told him.

We always thought we were meant for one another. I still think we were. I imagine (I hope) that he will always be one of my best friends. It takes someone extraordinary to stand with you in the rubble of your life, and still embrace you, even though you’re the one who tore the building down.

I tried to see leaving as an act of love, but it never felt that way.

* * *

On the day we decided our reconciliation wasn't working, he walked me to my car in the parking lot of the apartment where we'd brought our daughter home from the hospital one sunny May afternoon. I took a garment bag full of clothing and the vase of flowers he'd given me for Valentine's Day.

The day inched forward like any other. My father had a doctor's appointment and there was a tin of chocolate chip cookies on the kitchen counter, yet my marriage was over.

* * *

If I wasn't hard enough on myself—and I *did* feel cruel and guilty for hurting Jack—I had my mother's help. She constantly offered me reminders of what a disgusting choice I was making. Not only that, but she promised, "You'll never get a penny to help with a house for a lesbian!"

I never asked for pennies or houses, but it hurt anyway.

"Why do they always rub it in our faces?" she went on, "Don't *you* go walking up the street holding hands!"

"What are you so afraid of?" I finally managed to say.

I genuinely wondered. Two people, who care for one another, clasping hands cannot be that dire.

A few days later, she gave me an answer: "I am afraid you will be alone forever, and I am afraid for Wren."

I excitedly told my therapist that we were making real progress—meaning that I appreciated how my mother had, at least, considered my question. My therapist was less celebratory.

* * *

When my friend Helen texted me to say that she was engaged, I screamed.

Her text read:

HE PROPOSED

We're engaged

You are the first to know

Gotta go!

Helen asked me to write a speech for her wedding. It struck me a few days after I accepted the request that I might cry during the delivery. It was set to be my first time attending a wedding without a date. When you have spent fifteen years in a partnership, you forget what it might be like to show up for things alone. To have only one name on your invitation. To write just your name on the gift.

In preparation for composing Helen's wedding speech, I looked through our old email exchanges. The year Prince William and Kate Middleton married, Helen wrote to me: *I have royal wedding fever! Did you know you can buy a giant window decal of Prince William's head on eBay?*

After attending a friend's wedding, she observed: *I have realized that weddings make me emotional. Just as Emily, the bride, was about to come out yesterday, I felt tears coming on, but I held them back. At the reception, the bride and groom leaped out of fog from a smoke machine and danced to a Led Zeppelin song, and even that made me emotional.*

As I considered her fiancé's rooster wall art from Home Hardware for inclusion in the wedding speech, I wondered: *What if I am alone forever?*

"What does marriage mean to you?" Jack repeatedly asked me. He posed the question in person, on the phone, and via text, throughout the first twelve months of our separation. The

question stung because the implication was that marriage meant nothing to me. In his eyes, he explained, marriage meant that you made a commitment to be miserable together.

Of course, when I married, when I wrote the vows for our wedding myself, I did so with forever in mind. At that time, I was so deeply in the closet that I had no idea it was even possible to come out of it.

Though we didn't take any video footage on our wedding day, I do have an audio recording of the various speeches. I felt proud when a guest said afterward, "I could tell the speeches were made by a bunch of writers because they were *really* well-written!"

I wrote the ceremony myself too.

I loved our wedding day. The clouds were threatening rain. My mother was frantically insisting that we move everything indoors. But the weather held out and we had our ceremony on a hill overlooking the ocean. It is a great privilege to gather together everyone you love in one place. On that day, I felt loved in a way I never had before. It wasn't just about one union; I realized that there were lots of people in my life who weren't going anywhere, who would help me to pin my veil back on when the wind grabbed it, and who would support my wobbly legs after I'd had too many tequila shots and the photographer wanted me to stand on a chair for a silhouette shot.

"What a goddamned waste of money that wedding was!" my mother said recently.

I can't help but feel that it wasn't. Jack and I loved each other and the wedding was a celebration of us and everyone we held dear.

* * *

I used to comfort myself in the wake of my mother's comments by considering that my favourite writer, Jeanette Winterson, did not get married until she was fifty-six. I came across a

wedding photo of Winterson and her wife on Twitter. They are beaming. Jeanette is wearing a simple knee-length dress and her new wife, Susie, is wearing a gold cocktail dress.

Winterson shared her vows in *The Guardian*. To her wife on their wedding day, she said,

I promise to look at you and always see you.

I promise to listen to you, even when you say things I don't want to hear.

I promise to respect you: the you that is you; the you that is not me; the you that is not us.

I promise to stand by you in the world.

I promise to delight in you.

I promise to treat you like a Jewish princess.

With my body, with my mind, with my heart, with my imagination, I promise to love you for as long as I live. (Winterson, 2017)

My initial thought was that I managed to break the last line's pledge: *I promise to love you for as long as I live*. But when I think about it, that's not true either. I *will* love Jack for as long as I live. It's just that the shape of our love will be different.

Academic John Marc Cuellar left his wife after admitting to himself that he was gay, but his writing reflects the care and tenderness that existed in their life together. He suggests, "Maybe marriage can be more than the socially constructed notion of a husband and a wife. Maybe it can transcend beyond linear limitations. Maybe when a marriage ends, it still goes on in its own way" (Cuellar, 2017, p. 52).

The day Jack and I got engaged was one of the best days of my life. Every second felt like it was bursting with possibility. We walked through the Public Gardens, where we encountered an elderly man sitting on a park bench, in the shade of an enormous willow tree. I hate to think of the fact that we disturbed his solitude now, but he obligingly took my pink Canon camera and snapped a photo for us. He was so old I wasn't sure he could stand up, let alone take a picture, but he did.

“Good luck to the both of you,” he said. There was something profound about the moment, perhaps because his voice was low and unenthusiastic. The flat pitch of it, the lack of energy in it, suggested that he knew much more than we did. But, whatever it was that he knew, we were sure we would learn it together.

After separating from Jack, I would often cry during my afternoon writing sessions at the university library. How can you mourn something that you yourself decided to give up? It may have seemed disingenuous, but I suppose my tears existed, in part, to honour the future that Jack and I had planned. After a while, I noticed that someone placed a box of Kleenex where I usually stationed myself. I didn’t know if it was deliberately placed there for me, but I liked to think it was.

* * *

When I talk to Wren about marriage, I am careful not to use language that implies she must wed. In order to accomplish this, I leave *when*, as in, “*When* you get married. . .,” out of it.

“I wonder if you will get married, Wren? Maybe you will wear a little suit!” I said the other day.

“Who the hell would want to wear a suit!” my mother said.

“Meeeeeeeeeeee!!!” Wren then shouted.

* * *

One evening Wren and I were having a dance party. The song “Everybody Needs Somebody to Love” by The Rolling Stones came on. Mick Jagger advised that sometimes in order to get what you want, you have to lose what you have. But his main message echoed the song’s title. Everybody needs somebody to love. It was joyful.

“If I ever get married again, I’ll walk down the aisle to this song!” I declared.

“I *hope* you never get married again!” my mother snapped.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why would you?” she countered.

“For a companion,” I said.

Furthermore, for all the reasons Mick Jagger was listing: everybody needs somebody special to hold, to kiss, to miss.

“I would never get married again if I broke up with somebody. Besides, they all end up in breakups anyway,” my mother then said.

It struck me as sad that someone would wish their daughter a lifetime of loneliness. While I was never that keen on princes and frogs, I am a romantic at heart. Songs about love make me cry (even in public). Tender kisses make me feel as if I’ll melt right into an IKEA sofa. Old couples at the grocery store make my heart happy. And there is nothing better than having breakfast with the person you love, laughing together in the morning about nothing in particular, and knowing that no matter what happens during the day, you began it together.

“You love hard!” my therapist said one day.

It’s true.

Maybe that is why I am so enraptured with stories. As Dorothy Allison writes, “Telling the story all the way through is an act of love” (1996, p. 90). I started telling this story because I needed to tell it in order to survive. Writers are always talking about the books that saved them. I have never been saved by a story. But maybe I have been saved by storytelling. I used to think that if stories are medicine, I am going to need a stronger prescription.

* * *

Of course, I have stories about how close I was with my parents. In some ways, I used to think they were the loves of my life.

My first job was working at a store called Destiny Jewelry. I was eighteen. It seemed like my coworkers, all young women, were always attending parties.

I had to walk past a hotel lobby on my way to work at the jewellery store. When I saw a sign reminding hotel employees about their annual staff party, I figured that it made sense for me to attend, even though I did not work for the hotel, nor know anyone who did. Since I wasn't exactly friends with any of my coworkers, I informed my mother that we would be attending the hotel staff party. For some reason, she agreed. My father dropped us off.

Contrary to my belief that the hotel likely employed such a surplus of people that we would get lost in the crowd, we found ourselves amongst an intimate group. In fact, we were the only two people on the dance floor. Soon, the song "Bootylicious" came on. Two men—perhaps the only men in attendance—swooped in and began dancing with us.

"You don't look familiar," one of them said.

We left quickly after I won a door prize.

My father picked us back up again.

* * *

Helen made a speech at my wedding. She concluded by saying, "Christina once wrote on Twitter that the older you get, the more you realize that there is nothing to say as best as to quote Oscar Wilde. So in honour of Christina's wisdom, I would like to share a line from Mr. Wilde that encapsulates what I have learned from her and our friendship: 'Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.'"

Those two words are so easy to say: *Be yourself*.

But isn't the most never-ending thing the search for who that is, along with the ultimate realization that "the one" is actually yourself?

Clothing

We were silently standing beside my grandmother's casket in the funeral home when I said, "She made a great blueberry pie."

"Her black forest cake was the best," my aunt added.

After the viewing, when we were back in the car, I remembered that I'd written about my other grandmother's cherry cheesecake in the eulogy I delivered during her funeral.

"I don't have a dessert," I told Jack, "What will people say when I die? That I did a PhD?"

"They would say you were stylish," he said.

* * *

"I love this whole power suit thing you have going on here. OH MY GOD, the shoes!"

A young man working at the bookstore clasped his hands in front of his chest the other day when he saw my robin's egg blue patent leather brogues. They went well with the tailored teal suit I happened to be wearing.

"Every single place you go, someone compliments you," Jack said when we first started dating. "You go for Chinese and the waitress likes your necklace, you go for a walk and someone on the street likes your coat, you go to the movies and the girl selling tickets likes your dress. What's it like to be complimented everywhere you go?"

"I don't know," I remember saying.

The truth is, it's not bad.

My interest in fashion started in junior high, at which time I was voted "Fashion plate of St. Agnes."

In high school, my English teacher beckoned me over to his desk one day and said that I reminded him of Sophia Loren. A paper bag looks more like Sophia Loren than I do. I can only assume the compliment had something to do with the way my clothing helped me carry myself. If a timid teenager can somehow resemble an Italian bombshell, there is a lot to be said for a well-thought-out ensemble. For a brief stint in grade ten, I took to wearing my grandmother's white bellbottoms from the seventies. Whereas I was always shy, my clothing never was.

In undergrad, it wasn't uncommon for someone to ask whether I was from New York. It thrilled me a bit to think that my style of dress exuded the excitement of a place much bigger and better. Even now, strangers in Halifax often ask, "Where are you visiting from?"

When I lived in Montreal, friends would rush over to my closet just to take a look, as if it were a museum—which, in some ways, I suppose it was. A collection of selves.

"How does she know which shoes to wear?" a friend's boyfriend asked when he saw a photo of my bookshelf of heels.

After graduate school, the famed fashion journalist Jeanne Becker came to my apartment with a camera crew, and my closet was broadcast all across the country. The profile of me as a "stylish Canadian" aired on daytime television. The idea of the segment was to present viewers with the opposite of a makeover by featuring someone who didn't need one. In one scene, I hold up a nautical-looking coat, navy with gold buttons, and tell Jeanne that I was reading *Moby Dick* when I bought it. When she pulls out a dress with a tulle ballerina's tutu on the bottom, I tell her, "Well, if it's never actually *in style*, then it can never go out of style!"

Why don't you have a fashion blog? people have often asked. I try to explain that it isn't words about clothing that I find so enticing; it's the physical objects themselves. The colours, the feel of different textures, the way you can play. In a museum, I will spend hours reading the art

labels, getting the stories behind the artists and the subjects of each painting, eventually having to remind myself to actually look at the art. But with fashion magazines, I gravitate toward the photographs.

At one point, I contemplated studying fashion history.

“All women like fashion,” my father proclaimed dismissively.

I always felt a bit ashamed by my interest in clothing. The frivolity of it.

When I first came out as a lesbian, Lena suggested that it might take me some time to figure out how I want to be in the world. While she was categorically right in terms of the work it would take for me to probe who I am, I assured her that I wouldn't be changing my style of dress in order to suit some preconceived notion of what a lesbian should look like. Yet, almost a year later, when I found myself going on a date with Parker and her queer friends, I stood in the mirror and wondered whether my dress looked too feminine. When I asked Parker how she would describe her style, she said, “I dress like a sixteen year-old boy who hasn't quite got it together.”

Lesbian couples are frequently asked, “Which one is the man?”

The standard reply: “There is no man, that's kind of the point.”

People make assumptions tied to gender based on clothing. But, as Jenn Shapland (2020) notes, “Clothes offer a way to try on different identities, different manifestations of selfhood. They express more than gender, certainly more than binary gender, and more than sexuality, too” (p. 114).

My two idols when it comes to style are Tom Wolfe and Oscar Wilde. Their outsides seem as artistic, fanciful, and extravagant as the insides of their books. Once, I got to see Tom Wolfe read in Boston during a conference on narrative non-fiction, and he wore a three-piece

white suit with a baby blue pocket square and a matching blue dress shirt with a wide seventies collar. I am not the only writer who jumbles up writing and wardrobe. Heidi Julavits (2014) shares, “Even when I was very young, I knew I wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to be stylish, because to be stylish was to be poised on the precipice between reality and fiction” (Heti et al., 2014, p.6).

When I was a young girl, the first novel I read was *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As I tumbled down the rabbit hole along with Alice, the strange vividness of Wonderland surrounded me as if I had slipped from black and white into technicolour. While I was concerned about the plight of Alice, the nonsensical world—at once whimsical and terrifying—was what truly enchanted me. It was the first time I was aware of this link between story and style. I wanted to be the Queen of Hearts. I wanted to own the Cheshire Cat. And I wanted to have tea with the Mad Hatter. I think what I love is how when you are reading a good story, there is a sense of possibility—an *anything could happen!* feeling—and this is the feeling you sometimes have in a small-town vintage shop, or as a child in your mother’s closet. In other words, a good story can conjure up the feeling that you are somehow, in that moment, connected to all the important tales that have ever been told, and when you are wearing just the right thing, you can feel as if you’re part of the wider world made up of all the people who have lived throughout time, something bigger than just yourself moving through space.

* * *

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (2020) writes, “Sometimes, when you don’t write about something, it goes away. And sometimes, when you don’t write about something, it never goes away” (p. 43).

One summer evening when my friend Sloane and I were thirteen, we stood on the edge of a park, near the road, and counted how many men in passing cars honked at us. We wore ice-cream-coloured tube tops and denim short shorts. At the time, it felt like power. It seemed as if we were orchestrating the symphony of honks. Another time, in a green mini skirt, I caused a traffic accident. This happened when a car stopped to allow me to cross the street, and a man on a motorcycle ran into the back of the car because he was staring at me. *Let them look!* I thought triumphantly. But it felt less like power when a man grabbed my ass one time as I walked out of a movie theatre wearing black velvet pants. And another time, when I was jogging home from the gym in my workout wear, a man popped out of the bushes, pretending to ask for directions, but then exposing himself to me. As Sara Ahmed (2017) writes,

Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight.

The past becomes heavy. We all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen; and how we are not seen. (p. 23)

I suppose I am thinking about this now because in a heterosexual world, you learn from a young age to associate the way you dress with desire. Now, I feel differently moving through the world because I know that I am not attempting to attract the male gaze. Even if, on the outside, this is just a secret I keep with myself.

Junior High

It's unclear to me whether I ever learned more about the complexities of life than I did during junior high.

"I *hate* rich people," Brandy frequently declared. She often looked directly at me when she said this.

I went to junior high with a mix of kids. Some of us were from the adjacent suburbs, and others were from a nearby public housing development—the pubs, as everyone called it.

How the other half live! my parents would sigh in reference to people with antique cars and mansions on the sea. But to the kids from the pubs, we were the other half.

In grade nine, Chris sold drugs. I remember him pulling a large wad of cash from the pocket of his jeans one day. It was an unreal sight, like a prop in a play, only it wasn't. I remember him talking about rocks. He also had a son, a chubby baby, who wore miniature Nike sneakers. The one time I saw the Nike-sneakered baby, outside of our classroom near my locker, it seemed just as unreal as the wad of cash. At the time, I was wearing blue lipstick and using Scotch tape to affix pictures of friendly rappers like Puff Daddy and Mase to the inside of my locker door. I had never even held a baby.

"Are you going out tonight?" other kids would sometimes ask.

I was thirteen. Where would I be going?

There were school dances, though.

"I'm lucky, I know how to dance because I have an older sister," I remember Laura Skinner bragging.

I later learned that to dance, you just stood in place and maybe swayed around a little bit. Definitely not much arm movement. That would be social suicide.

My first time at a dance, in grade seven, I didn't dance with anybody. They played the song "Pony" by Ginuwine, it seemed, on repeat.

"Can't they play *any* other song?" I remember Miss Chisholm, our chemistry teacher and dance chaperone, saying.

I walked home with a group of girls who weren't really my friends but who had, for some reason, invited me anyway.

"Who did you dance with? Who did *you* dance with?" they asked each other.

I was hoping they wouldn't get to me. Unfortunately, I did not go unnoticed even though I was trailing behind the clump of girls.

"Who did you dance with?" Kelly Miller asked me. She smacked her gum against her lips after asking.

I wasn't sure how to do that gum maneuver, either. Maybe she had an older sister too.

"No one," I answered.

"Why?" Kelly Miller asked suspiciously.

"Because no one asked me?" I offered.

"*You* have to ask them! They don't ask *you!*" Kelly Miller said, rolling her eyes.

The truth was, I didn't really want to dance with any of the boys. I was already very familiar with their plaid cotton boxers because it was the convention to allow their pants to sag well past the hip. Other girls were nonetheless intrigued. After a while, the school had to declare a "hands-off policy" for dances because there was so much groping.

* * *

"I hate Chinese people, gay people, and people named Gina!" Brandy regularly announced. She said it so often that I can still hear her voice saying it in my head.

Fag was the insult of choice at the time.

The only junior high conversation I remember about lesbians took place when Rosie O'Donnell publicly came out. People felt a sense of betrayal because of her well-documented crush on Tom Cruise. Our English teacher, Mrs. Hemming, brought up O'Donnell during one of our classes.

"People are saying they knew she was gay! Why would they say that? What made them think that?" she demanded.

Our class was silent.

I nervously raised my hand and hazarded, "Because she always wears pants?"

"I wear pants! Does that make *me* gay?" Mrs. Hemming yelled. "Do you think I'm gay? You're wearing pants. Are *you* gay?"

Everyone looked at me.

I felt deeply self-conscious.

* * *

During this time, my friend Heather's mom began hanging out with the only two lesbians I'd ever met in my life. Heather's mom was taking a massage course, and Bonnie was in her class. Bonnie was always laughing and she had a thick Irish accent.

"I love the smell of me own farts!" she would announce, before inhaling deeply and then bursting into giggles.

She once asked Heather and me if we were gay.

"No!" Heather said right away.

"How do you know?" Bonnie demanded.

"*Because!*" we probably said in unison.

“How do you know you don’t want to kiss a girl until you try it?” she continued.

We just laughed nervously.

I’m sure Heather would never remember that conversation. Because it didn’t mean anything to her. As Sara Ahmed (2017) writes, “A story always starts before a story can be told” (p. 4).

* * *

In grade eight, when we were instructed to choose a mentor and write their biography, I did my project on Dennis Rodman.

Dennis Rodman was my idol. I loved his Moon-Mist-coloured hair. I read his book, *Bad as I Wanna Be*. On the cover, Denis Rodman sits naked atop a motorcycle with a basketball between his legs. For the project, I drew a portrait of Dennis Rodman in coloured pencil and wrote his catchphrase in giant letters above it: *Don’t let what other people think decide who you are*.

My heart would pound in my chest and my palms would sweat when my mother drove me to school because I knew I’d face a certain amount of scrutiny for whatever ensemble I happened to be wearing. In a sea of Adidas and Columbia jackets, I wore green pleather pants, white platform shoes, iridescent hologram skirts, and fitted camo blazers.

“*Ew!* Put some clothes on!” Brandy screamed at me one day in front of the whole class.

I was wearing a Calvin Klein belly top.

In my defense, it was that era. Guess jeans. Cindy Crawford. Diet Coke.

Perhaps I survived St. Paul’s only because the pub kids saw something in me. It’s sometimes hard not to appreciate queerness in a person. I don’t mean that anyone knew I was

queer; I mean that I was odd enough to be acceptable to a bunch of swashbuckling kids who could have easily turned on me.

* * *

After a while, some of the kids in my class started robbing taxi drivers and making fun of their terror the next day at school. But it wasn't just the pub kids who stole things. My friend Melissa, who lived in a house in the suburbs just like mine, started shoplifting. At first it was just makeup from the drugstore: lipstick, nail polish, eyeliner. After a while, she transitioned to department stores. My parents were horrified when she gave me a silk nightgown and a gold bracelet for Christmas because they didn't think I'd spent enough on her gifts in return. They had no idea that my presents were pilfered from Eaton's.

Melissa went on to become a pharmacist. Brandy, even though she constantly spoke about wanting to become a police officer, ended up working at the grocery store. I am not saying one job is better than the other. It's just that some people are able to make mistakes much easier than others.

* * *

In grade seven, I had a crush on the girl who sat next to me, Robin. Even though I would stare at her shiny lip gloss, I didn't admit to myself that I had a crush on her. She was always telling me how tired she was. After a while, I started saying I was tired too, even though I wasn't.

"Who do you like?" she asked me one day.

"I don't know," I said.

"Who do you like?" she then asked the boy sitting in front of us.

He slowly pointed an index finger at me.

“You two are together now!” Robin then proclaimed.

“Okay,” Ryan W. acquiesced.

Luckily, it was Friday, meaning I wouldn’t have to see Ryan W. until Monday. That would give me the weekend to come up with an exit strategy.

Someone had already developed a cruel yet efficient breakup method. You just snipped two fingers like a pair of scissors and declared, “You’re cut.” That’s what I did on Monday morning when I saw Ryan W. by his locker.

Decades later, Ryan is now married to a man. I have realized that a number of my early dates were with boys who later turned out to be gay. Perhaps we saw something in one another. A lack of belonging. Maybe they appreciated my fashion sense—or, was it a shared lack of lust when it came to each other?

* * *

“If you’re actually gay, you would have said so before now for God’s sake!” my mother said after I came out.

“I did try to tell you before,” I said in a low voice.

“*Well*, I don’t remember that!” she snapped. “When?”

“It was in junior high.”

“I certainly don’t remember,” she said.

Hallmark Movies

During the first springtime with the COVID virus in our lives, suburbia was imbued with a slightly old-timey feel. Neighbours you had never spied before in your life were suddenly out in their front yards. For entertainment, people (even those without dogs) went for early evening walks past the houses surrounding theirs. It wasn't creepy per se, but there was something odd about the fact that, under normal circumstances, we wouldn't have been greeting each other as heartily. In fact, we probably wouldn't have been out there at all. Instead, we would have been rushing home from offices and plunking ourselves down in front of our televisions.

Inside, in my parents' living room, my father's programming of choice played endlessly.

I wrote about it in an email to Lena:

My dad is great in many ways, but he likes to watch those awful Hallmark-type movies on the Women's Network. Here's what happens:

- A small-town bakery/country fair/inn/whatever is in trouble
(Really bad somber music)
- A man from the big city comes to shut it down/purchase it and turn it into a big conglomerate
(Really bad menacing music)
- A small-town girl (who has since relocated to the city, but now returned to her hometown for an unexpected visit) realizes she *must* intervene
(Really bad sentimental music)
- The girl joins forces with her ex-boyfriend
(Strangely upbeat music)
- Together, they save the whatever it is
(Strangely upbeat music continues)

And, as my mom says: "You know the stupid thing is over because they always have to kiss at the end."

Lena wrote back:

OMG, I know those movies! They were the ones my mom watched, except they were the Christmas Hallmark ones, which were even worse with the attempts at the sprightly re-done carols and inevitably a leading man with teeth whiter than the studio snow.

I had no idea the Women's Network runs those all the time—that is tragic. The very worst kind of formulism, and buying into so many dangerous economic, sexual, racial, cultural and political 'normalities.'

And ones into which I clearly bought as a youngster, writing unrequited love scripts between two beautiful (straight, white, English) people.

The night I received her email, the announcer happily relayed on the five o'clock news that they'd be screening the Hallmark Christmas movies every afternoon to help people through the virus. *Those movies are the virus!* I wrote to Lena. She and I would never see ourselves in those Women's Network movies. There are never two women who fall for each other during the annual pie-eating contest.

* * *

After we moved our way through a second springtime with the virus still wrapping its invisible hands around our necks, I came to hate those movies a lot less.

It should have been the other way around. I knew that.

"You're going to have to explain yourself, mister!" Lena told me one night when I admitted there was something strangely comforting about them.

She was right. We were living through a time of righteous rage on behalf of black and Indigenous lives, I was the mother of a bi-racial daughter, I was about to teach a critical literacy course, and I had just come out as queer. It did not seem like the opportune time to grow a fondness for normative narratives. In fact, Lena and I might not have been able to salvage our friendship, if we bought into the script that the loss of romantic love marks a permanent divide between two people.

There is no complicated love, like the love between Lena and me, in those Hallmark movies. Instead, viewers are falsely offered the singular idea that irrevocable romantic love is the only thing of value in life. But in a COVID-filled world where nothing seems certain, there is something of comfort in the predictability of plot. Or maybe there was comfort for me in seeing my father relaxed. I knew he wouldn't have any racist or homophobic outbursts—usually promoted by Fox News—while watching Nancy and Paul save the town apple orchard from demolition.

Still, underneath the fake snowflakes and the actors who were forced by wardrobe to wear three layers of shirts (no one wears all those layers in real life), there is something insidious. The true danger of these stories is the idea that love is only one thing. Misconception can shape our lives more quickly than stories can. The complexity of a good story takes time to digest. Delusion, on the other hand, is easier to latch onto.

Here, I am reminded of a story of my own.

I am not sure if I was six or seven years old. As I waited for supper, I stood watch over the room where my grandfather's bridge buddies wrapped their wrinkled hands around sweaty scotch glasses. It was my grandfather's birthday party. I can't remember why the topic came up, but I can remember someone starting the conversation, and what really stuck was the way that everyone in the room joined in.

"Two men, imagine! It's disgusting!" someone said.

"We're all supposed to think it's wonderful!" another person added.

"What about two women? What do they even *do*?"

When you are a kid, you always know when people are talking about sex. Especially if they assume you don't know what they're saying.

“If everyone was homosexual, people would go extinct!”

Another round of chuckles.

Perhaps I remember the feeling in the room as much as the words. There was no space for any other opinion. I wonder now, though, if there was anyone in the room who felt silenced, if any of those bridge buddies would have lived otherwise had they felt safe enough to deviate from the pack.

Another problem is that the play button on these narratives gets pressed when we are so young. One evening, I was carrying three-year-old Wren to the car on our way to the waterpark. When the neighbour walked by, I explained that she was crying because she didn’t like her new bathing suit.

“Tell her that her boyfriends probably like it!” he joked.

I pretended to laugh.

But alone in the car, I frowned.

How do you mitigate the danger of a single story? How do you show your daughter the truth—that there are many ways of being? When I worked for a financial services company as the in-house writer, our boss developed a cheesy list of core values for the business. One that she often reiterated was, “We lead by example.” As Adrienne Rich (1976/2018) asserts in her essay on motherhood,

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children’s books, movies, television, the schoolroom. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. (p. 137)

When I started writing my story, it felt like I was writing about hatred, homophobia, and the loss of love. It seemed important to lay myself bare because I couldn't find a story like mine when I needed to hear it.

After a while, I started to wonder whether the story is actually about love. In writing about my parents, I am attempting to honour the ways in which families can mend, even while they also wound. The other day my mother offered to pay for the repairs on my twelve-year-old car. I burst into tears because the offer meant that she might still love me. I had been wondering.

She might not say it aloud anymore, but she does show me. She spends hours removing Kraft Dinner stains from Wren's dresses, carefully matching up her miniature pastel socks, and sitting with a sleeping Wren while I work. When someone cares for your child, they are caring for you too. When I write about the terrible things my mother says about me, or about Lena, I am trying to rid myself of them. I am not trying to incriminate her.

* * *

"Why do these LGBT-whatever-it-is people think I care what they call themselves?" my father said one day. "I don't care about their crazy names. People are people. I just call them people."

"I don't think they care what *you* call them," I said in response to the frustration in his voice.

"Oh yes they do. It's all about attention. They just want attention," he snapped.

In that moment, I was unsure how to say anything of value aloud. There were thoughts swirling around in my head, but I couldn't put any of them together. Did he include me in the group of *LGBT-whatever-it-is* people?

It was not attention I wanted; it was acceptance.

I made the mistake of talking to Lena on the phone while my parents were home.

“Why are you talking to that poor excuse of a woman?” my mother demanded after we had hung up.

“Because she’s my best friend,” I said in a moment of honesty.

“If it wasn’t for your *best friend*, your marriage would still be intact,” she snapped.

Though I thought I had come so far, her words left me feeling gutted again. Infante.

I always feel strangely shocked when others are nonplussed about my coming out, because being crucified has been my experience at home. During our Pride month soiree, Lena and I ordered a pizza. I skipped to the door and met the delivery woman with an oversized plastic rainbow ring and rainbow suspenders on. Afterwards, I couldn’t believe what I had done. The pizza lady was not at all fazed.

“Cute outfit,” she said.

* * *

I can tell when my mother is upset about my gayness because she starts exhaling and attempting to say something, stopping and starting, until she finally blurts out something hurtful. It’s a very specific series of noises that I have come to recognize. In advance of the first university course I taught, she was extremely concerned about the idea that I would tell students I was queer. She seemed to assume that they would cast me off as some sort of pervert. That they would be just as horrified as she was.

“You’ll get bad ratings and never be asked to teach again,” my father said one day.

By “ratings” he meant course evaluations.

“No one cares!” my mother added.

“It’s no one’s business who you’re sleeping with!” my father added.

The two of them were hovering around my bedroom doorway as I attempted to work on the course syllabus. Making a syllabus is difficult at the best of times.

On another day I happened to mention recording a video for my class on personal narratives and reflective writing. I knew some “advice” was coming because my mother started her series of exhales in the kitchen.

“What will this video be about then?” she eventually said.

“It’s about how personal narratives can connect us with new perspectives, worldviews, and a multiplicity of voices,” I said.

“So you’re not going to do the queer thing then?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Are you going to be queer on the first day?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Yeah, I guess,” I said, acting nonchalant even though I had already considered the importance of self-identification in a course that delves into positionality and unhinging fixed beliefs.

“They might not care to know,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t think they’ll care. No one cares about their professor, they just care about getting a good mark,” I said, knowing what she meant, but choosing not to acknowledge it.

“I mean, they might not care to know at all,” she said.

This level of restraint—for her—was unusual.

“Who the hell cares about your sexuality?” she eventually said.

“You seem to,” I pointed out.

The problem with those Hallmark movies is that they present only good and bad. There is no slippery in-between like we have in real life. There isn't a world in which a daughter is gay and her mother tries in a very backwards way to protect her.

Graduation Day

One day in our junior high English class, the teacher, Ms. Hemming, informed us that we would all suffer at some point. It was rather dramatic and existential for a grade seven English class. *Sorrow is inescapable and will be a part of everyone's life. If you haven't experienced a period of suffering yet—you will.*

This was a terrible realization for me. Up until that point, no one had ever mentioned looming anguish. I remember being so touched by the song “When You Wish Upon a Star” that I would cry listening to it. If that isn't optimism.

Decades later, I am fairly certain that no one else from our class would even recall this discussion. I also can't remember whether Ms. Hemming offered up the ominous foretelling in reference to a piece of literature we were reading, or whether she was talking about her own divorce (she referenced her ex-husband frequently). Either way, the comment filled me with lifelong anxiety. I spent years waiting for my own inevitable sorrow, like some reluctant kid at a bus stop.

I'm not sure everyone can do this—say with certitude what the worst day of their life has been thus far—but I can. The worst day of my life was Sunday, November 1, 2020. It feels a bit odd to offer up this piece of information, especially because I know others have had much worse days. But trauma is not a competition. It is something we feel so deeply that it shapes who we are. It creeps into our lives year after year. It follows us.

Sunday, November 1, 2020

Wren was in the living room playing with her blue tractor. She liked to flip it upside-down as if doing maintenance on the giant wheels. My parents were crunching up toast for breakfast. I was already finished my morning bagel when my friend Kathy texted.

Her gray text bubble read:

Happy belated birthday. I hope you had a good day.

Mom died Friday morning before Britt got here. . .

I didn't want to bum you out on your birthday.

Kathy's sister didn't make it to her mother's deathbed. I wanted her sister to be there, for Kathy's sake. But it must have been awful for her sister too. To be up in the sky on an airplane when all you want is to be down on the ground for your mother's final few seconds, minutes, or hours. To pack your suitcase when your mother is alive, but to unpack it after she is dead.

They discovered the cancer just after COVID-19 drove us all into hiding. Here in Nova Scotia, they called it "lockdown," but it was really just hiding in our houses, trying to make sense of things. A lot of people lost their jobs. Sabrina Orah Mark (2020) recounted the questions we started asking ourselves, "What does it mean to be worth something? Or worth enough? Or worthless? What does it mean to earn a living? What does it mean to be hired? What does it mean to be let go?" (para 3).

The virus itself was cruel by nature, but perhaps equally cruel was its complete disregard for extenuating circumstances. Initially, it was illegal for Kathy to visit her mom in the hospital. Only one visitor per patient. Kathy's mom's partner, Todd, could sit by the bedside, but Kathy herself couldn't be with her mom on those hard hospital days. It had to be worse sitting home with only her worst imaginings. To have the unthinkable unfolding, but then be prevented from being part of it.

The same restrictions that kept Kathy away from her mom, kept me away from Kathy. It was illegal to socialize with anyone outside of your immediate family bubble. After twenty years of friendship, I couldn't offer Kathy a hug when her mom stopped eating.

* * *

Thanksgiving 2020

That Sunday morning when I saw Kathy's text, I was filled with regret over what had happened the last time I saw her.

I was the one crying.

It should have been the other way around.

We had gone for Saturday brunch on Thanksgiving weekend at Brooklyn Warehouse. That restaurant is our place. Kathy loves the Brooklyn burger so much that I gave her a glass hamburger ornament for Christmas one year. In fact, we go there every December in order to exchange Christmas gifts over dinner. Once, we went in a raging snowstorm and the restaurant lost power just before we paid our bills. The server had to use one of those bulky credit card-swiping gadgets, like in the old days before everything was electronic. Another night when Kathy and I went there for dinner, the man at the next table secretly paid our bill.

"Richard Cameron has already covered it for you," the waitress informed us at the end of our meal as we were pulling out our wallets. We had no idea who Richard Cameron was.

"Maybe he heard me say that I have two part-time jobs!" Kathy joked.

"And I'm a student!" I said.

We laughed together at ourselves. I think that's a big part of friendship, laughing together about yourselves.

When we met on the Thanksgiving weekend of 2020, we were without the knowledge that Kathy's mom wouldn't have the strength to hold on until Christmas.

"I just want her to be around to see out this shitty year with the rest of us," Kathy said.

The night before our brunch, I had been invited by a professor to attend an Indian dinner at his home. The traditional dinner was a thank-you for the work we had completed on his research project. After the dinner, I spent the night at Lena's. All felt well. I even phoned my mother from Lena's to describe in detail how whimsical the evening had been—one of the other students sang Patsy Cline's "Walkin' After Midnight" while playing the Indian version of the ukulele. And we ate savoury samosas with mango chutney on the floor of the professor's music room. Yet, the next morning when I returned home to change, my mother was livid.

"Your clothes stink! You absolutely reek! Disgusting! You might as well throw those clothes in the garbage!" she said.

In that moment, it felt like I had two lives: the one where I was a well-liked doctoral researcher, and the one where I was just a big fat idiot.

The evening before, I felt blessed to be part of the small group who got to hear the professor play the harmonium and sing.

"Get comfortable, it's a twenty-minute song!" his wife advised.

Indian classical music is improvised. Once the performer learns the melodic framework, the rest is guided by inspiration. The music we heard that day will never be played in the same way again. It was, therefore, an ephemeral moment.

Before beginning the song, the professor invited us to close our eyes and look inward. I kept my eyes closed for the duration of the song. Over and over again, I commanded myself not to cry.

Do not cry! Do not cry! This isn't the time to cry. Okay, Christina, if you cry, pretend you are really inspired by the music. . .

I felt like crying because it was a holiday weekend and my family refused to acknowledge my partner. It made me wonder if they would ever accept *me*.

Over dinner, I felt proud of Lena because one student mentioned enjoying her course. Yet, I couldn't say, *I'll tell her you said so!* because no one knew we were together at the time. In some ways I felt like a fraud. Why couldn't I just blurt out, *She's my girlfriend!*

* * *

"Don't come near me!" my mother said the next morning.

It wasn't about the smell of my clothing; this was the shape her hatred for Lena was taking that day.

I retreated into my bedroom to get dressed for brunch with Kathy. I thought about the ending of the play *Mother Courage*. It ends with a mother holding her dead son's body on the battlefield, and instead of shouting, her mouth opens and issues a silent scream. I tried to be silent. I wanted to cry without noise too. The excitement of wearing my new silky orange floral dress, that I'd saved especially for the brunch, was ruined by my sadness.

When I emerged from my bedroom to slap on some makeup, my mother turned her inquiry toward my plans for that evening. Even though we weren't making a Thanksgiving turkey together, Lena was cooking me dinner. She bought special ingredients, including fresh rosemary, for her rosemary ragout stew.

"And you're her little piece of pie for dessert!" my mother spat out.

Even though I didn't want a trail of mascara running down my face, I couldn't keep the tears in my eyes.

“Jack should throw all your clothes out on the lawn and put a ‘free’ sign on them! That’s what I would do if I were him! Have a nice life with that old hag! The two of you will be sitting around alone forever. Sounds really fun to me!” my mother continued.

I didn’t even bother with the metallic orange shoes I bought to match the dress. I just pulled on my scuffed black boots instead.

“Okay, bye?” I uttered, not knowing what to say. I was much too weak to defend myself.

There was a terrible silence when I closed the front door.

I managed to drive myself to the restaurant. As if choreographed, the tears rushed out of my eyes when I pulled my keys from the ignition. I was past the point of wishing Lena could join us for Thanksgiving dinner; all I wished for was to be left alone. All I wanted was to feel safe. Whenever I went home, my mother would rush at me like a desperate seagull pecking apart a piece of bread.

Inside the restaurant, I managed to hold myself together long enough to sit down. At this point in the pandemic, masks were mandatory in public, and there were red tape arrows on the floor indicating which direction to walk.

“I’d hug you, but I’m trying not to kill my mother,” Kathy said.

I didn’t want to complain about my mother. Hers had terminal cancer.

My goal of putting on a cheerful façade turned to mush as teardrops splattered all over the pile of French toast on my plate.

Attempting normalcy, I shoved hunks of bread into my mouth. A few times I didn’t chew enough and felt the uncomfortable pressure of the French toast trying to force its way down my throat. At that point, choking to death would have seemed like a reprieve.

“Okay, I can’t just sit here,” Kathy said, pulling her mask on and rushing around the table to wrap her arms around me.

It should be the other way around, I kept thinking.

Afterwards, we stood on the sidewalk with our masks on and hugged one another.

“You keep being brave,” Kathy whispered to me.

“You too,” I managed.

I couldn’t see then that it was okay. Two friends can both be sad.

* * *

On the Sunday that became the worst day of my life, when Kathy texted to say her mom died, I felt deeply sad for her.

This day was also Lena’s official graduation day. Yet the ceremony was another casualty of COVID. After five years of working on her PhD, she wouldn’t get to walk across the stage. She wouldn’t have loved ones sitting in an audience or snapping photos. Instead, she could tune in and watch a digital scrolling of names.

“No floppy hat!” we kept saying.

I felt sad that it wouldn’t be possible for me to even watch the digital ceremony with Lena. Wren was with me, and I wouldn’t ask my parents to watch her for any reason other than work.

My parents did not realize Lena and I were back together. Under pressure, I had broken up with Lena a week before my birthday. It made me so sad to be without her that one evening I cried into a plate of spaghetti. Even I found it slightly funny. The wet pasta. How pathetic I looked hunched over it. How everyone pretended nothing unusual was happening.

“Breakups are never fun,” my mother said one day. As if she’d been normal about the relationship at any point.

But Lena eventually took me back because we both felt so deeply for each other.

On the day that Kathy told me her mom died, I made the mistake of mentioning Lena’s graduation.

“Are you back with that old hag?” my mother snapped.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled.

I could feel the dread inside of me.

“What do you mean you don’t know? You either are or you aren’t, there’s no such thing as not knowing. Why would you say, *I don’t know*?” she said.

“Because I don’t like to be attacked all the time,” I said in a small, barely audible, voice.

“I knew it! That old bitch!” my mother said.

The swearing was something new. It was unnerving.

“She’s back with that old bitch!” my mother then repeated to my father.

“That’s the stupidest thing in the world,” he said.

Some of the lines I would play over and over again in my head. That was one of them.

The-stupidest-thing-in-the-world!

The-stupidest-thing-in-the-world!

The-stupidest-thing-in-the-world!

The-stupidest-thing-in-the-world!

The-stupidest-thing-in-the-world!

I wanted so desperately to stay calm for Wren. You can’t constantly feel bad for yourself. It seemed more important to focus on Kathy.

“That old hag is so conniving. She tricked you into running right back!” my mother said.

It hurt me to hear her talk that way.

I was the one who sent Lena a bouquet of flowers—purple, her favourite. I was the one who made a mistake. She was the one who forgave me.

My belongings were still, for the most part, stored at Jack’s apartment.

“You are NOT moving all your junk back from the apartment in December,” my mother then said.

“You’ll have to throw out your furniture and half of your clothing. That’s all there is to it,” my father added.

“And you can throw all your nice Christmas ornaments in a box and take them to Value Village!” my mother yelled.

This hurt more than it should have. I’d been collecting special Christmas ornaments since I was twelve. She knew how much I loved my glass octopus from Italy. My sugarplum fairy from a local flower shop. My glass bee with his wooden jar of honey.

To make matters worse, that morning Jack wanted to talk on the phone. My mother wouldn’t stop following me through each room in the house. It is nearly impossible to have a conversation about the dissolution of your marriage while your mother is lurking just behind you. Maybe it’s greedy to have the expectation of privacy while living in someone else’s home.

“I could tell you were back together,” Jack told me.

“I’m sorry,” I said into the phone.

“I don’t care about your sexuality,” he said. “We can still save our marriage.”

How do you do this? my brain asked me.

I didn't feel comfortable in the house, so I decided to take Wren out in the yard to play. She wiggled as I changed her diaper, as I struggled to pull on her pants, and shirt, and sweater, and jacket, and shoes. As we were going out the door, my mother came after us.

"You can't live here forever you know! This house will have to be sold!"

Live here forever. I am barely surviving now, I thought.

"Let's go play!" I tried to say cheerfully to Wren.

As I lowered Wren over the front deck railing, softly placing her little feet onto the grass of the yard, I tried to breathe.

How did I let myself get into this situation? If I had a job, I could leave. Why am I a student at this age? How could I have been so stupid?

When Jack arrived, I was following Wren through the yard as she picked little red berries from the hedge. Not noticing us, Jack rang the doorbell and my mother answered. She cried and wrapped him in a big hug. I couldn't believe how alone that made me feel. Certain images stick with you forever.

She hugged him.

She shunned me.

After that, Jack and I packed Wren into the stroller and went for a walk around my parents' neighbourhood.

"I will not be the one to pull the plug on our marriage," Jack announced.

He truly loved me.

I loved him too. But in a new way.

I felt frustrated with myself. Twice that week I had undergone the uncomfortable conversation about needing to be true to myself and ending our marriage. It just wasn't getting through. But the stress was. I had taken to eating a lot of popcorn. You find comfort where you can.

"Your sexuality is not an issue. I love you just the way you are," Jack said.

He had a girlfriend himself but, he told me, he was willing to end things with her if we could reunite.

Even though Jack and I were having a distressing conversation, he felt like a safe haven. When I told him it was Lena's graduation day, he offered to watch Wren so that we could go out to dinner.

"Finishing a PhD is a huge accomplishment. You need to go out to dinner," he said.

I felt so grateful for him in that moment.

"Why don't I talk to your parents?" he suddenly suggested.

He was concerned that their hatred would drive me closer to Lena and further away from him.

"That's okay," I said, knowing it wouldn't do any good.

"It will be like a restorative justice session, or a talking circle," he suggested.

"I don't think," I said.

"Let's just give it a try," he said.

He told me later that he wasn't anticipating anything as bad as what happened.

Inside, Wren went straight back to playing with her tractor. Jack asked my parents if we could all sit down together. He explained that he thought it would be helpful for everyone to

have the opportunity to express themselves. I couldn't imagine finding any words. I sat on the sofa with my head hanging down.

My father, as it turned out, had a lot to say.

"It's the stupidest thing in the world! Christina doesn't live in the real world. She's taken up with this old lesbian spinster who could never relate to Wren. Your mother said something earlier and I agree—she is *never ever* welcome to set foot in this house! The family doesn't know about this, it's a terrible thing for the family. Christina is lucky we don't kick her out."

That was another line that stuck in my head:

*Terrible thing for the family! Terrible thing for the family! Terrible thing for the family!
Terrible thing for the family! Terrible thing for the family! Terrible thing for the family! Terrible
thing for the family! Terrible thing for the family! Terrible thing for the family! Terrible thing for
the family! Terrible thing for the family!*

My stomach felt like someone had scooped it out and then tried to shove it back into my body.

"Go ahead and cry! Cry all you like! Cry your eyes out!" my father then said.

I remember the tears streaming onto the floor, me watching them as if they were falling from someone else's face.

"Do you know how confusing it would be for Wren to have three moms?" my mother then said to Jack.

"Christina and I are more used to this whole gay thing than you are," he said, trying to reason with her.

"She can go live with her if she wants!" my father said, throwing his hands up in the air.

“That’s what we don’t want,” Jack said calmly, “We don’t want Christina to think it’s a good idea to move in with Lena.”

“She can stay here,” my mother then said.

“What would you do if she moved to Toronto?” my father demanded.

“I wouldn't leave Wren.”

“So you're not committed to her!” he snapped.

I couldn’t figure out what he was getting at.

“I can't leave Wren,” I repeated.

“So you're not committed to her then,” he said.

What was he hoping to hear?

It was noon, so I decided to feed Wren lunch. My father thought I was an embarrassment to the family, but I still needed to feed my daughter lunch.

She was still in her highchair at the time. They continued to talk as if I wasn’t there.

“She has her brainwashed,” my mother told Jack.

Wren happily ate her lunch as if nothing was going on.

My father then yelled at me, “*YOU* have to make a decision! You cannot let this go on for three years.”

I didn’t know what he meant. Did he mean make a decision about leaving Jack? I had already left. Did he mean make a decision about Lena? We were back together. Did he mean make a decision about where to live? I didn’t have the money to move out.

Snot was running from my nose and falling on my pants, but it didn’t feel worthwhile enough to wipe it away. I felt like garbage. Jack kindly put an arm around my shoulders. I will

always remember that hug. It was a profound hug for me. I felt less than human. But he offered his grace.

“I am going to be watching Wren sometimes so that Christina can see Lena,” Jack said.

“We will certainly not be doing that! We are not the babysitters of the world!” my father snapped. “We will not be babysitting while she runs around with her. It’s a terrible thing she’s doing while she’s married.”

No one said that about Jack’s girlfriend.

I would never ask my parents to watch Wren while I saw Lena. Nor would I ever have asked Jack; it was only because it was Lena’s graduation day. I kept wondering how I would show up for her that evening. I was finding it difficult to breathe.

“This whole thing is ridiculous. When they go places, people probably think they are mother and daughter,” my father said then.

At one point he added, “I try not to remember her name.”

I couldn’t eat lunch.

Lucky for me, Wren went to sleep just after I managed to feed her. Just after I found out how embarrassing I was for the family.

I lay down in the bed with her and tried to catch my breath.

“Don’t forget that Wren *is* your family,” my therapist reminded me. She suggested that not all LGBTQIA+ people have their parents in their lives. I couldn’t take that thought. We were always so close. The Three Musketeers.

I could hardly talk when I arrived at Lena’s that evening. There were half-thoughts floating around in my head, but I was too rattled to put any of them together. Something about mothers and daughters.

“Your mother is failing you when you need her the most,” I remember Kathy saying.
It felt like I needed someone, a mother, to protect me.

The pain of hearing you are an embarrassment to your family is physical. Even though I didn't have any weight to lose, I was getting skinnier.

I started thinking about suicide. Not actually doing it, but the idea that everyone would be better off if my body would somehow just dissolve into the air like powder you stir into a drink. I thought about the opening lines in Anne Sexton's poem “Wanting to Die” (1981) because it felt like I was just existing each day:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage. (*Poetry Foundation Website*,
2024/1981)

I would not harm myself though because I wouldn't want that to be Wren's story. I thought it was storytelling that was saving me. But maybe it was my own daughter.

Friend

On Monday July 5, 2021, at 6:20 pm, I made a new friend. I know this because that's when Rose and I first messaged each other on the dating app.

Rose

Her online dating profile says, “Yes ppl I have a vagina (saves you from asking).”

That’s how we met. Online. I didn’t know it at the time, but she would become one of my favourite people in the whole world.

We have been friends for five months now. During those months, she bought an old RV to sell for parts, wrote a song about the RV, and then filmed a music video of herself singing the song and playing her guitar in what remained of the RV’s skeleton. The pants she wears in the video are tomato red. She has a presence. Insubordinate charisma. I once told her she reminded me of postmodernism because it’s impossible to nail down.

Sometimes I call her Rockstar. As in, “Goodnight, Rockstar Rose.” One night when she crashed a dinner with me and my friends, I requested that we drive around afterwards in her car so that we could sing the RV song. We drove through the quiet streets of a nearby suburb, right past the elementary school I went to, screeching out the lyrics at the top of our lungs (well that was more me, really):

*Bought an RV from a man in Digby
Drove it home safe but illegally
Nineteen eight nine, Ford Econoline
Royal Classic, four sixty fuckin’ engine size*

*It was in pretty rough shape, thought I could fix it
Paid \$2,200 said, “What the heck, I’ll risk it.”*

*But when I got it home
realized I’m alone
And this camper is a big
piece of garbage. (Folks, 2021)*

It reminded me of what it might feel like to be friends with The Rolling Stones. She’s cool. Not someone you would describe as cool. But someone who is actually cool. There’s a difference. *One in a million*, my friend said when I described Rose to her.

The first time I met Rose, we both concluded that our worlds were too different for romance. “But us pussy-lickers need to stick together!” she said in a follow-up message. I’ve talked to her almost every day since.

She wrote a song about me. But maybe it said more about her than it did about me. How she listens to my joys and sorrows. How she remembers little things, like my love of rosemary bagels, fanciful clothes, and ketchup.

She’s the only one I know who has seen ghosts. She was a teenager. It was during her paper route. She said they didn’t look like transparent people; they were more like balls of energy.

* * *

One day, when everything seemed like too much, she messaged me. I was crying alone in my car in the mall parking lot, watching people enter and exit the food court, blowing my nose into a crumpled napkin I’d extracted from the cupholder.

“Cars are a safe space for processing,” she wrote.

She has a way of making things more okay.

Sometimes things feel sideways for her too. On those nights she’ll make herself a chicken burrito and then proceed to pick all the chicken out of it.

“Maybe you should go for a walk,” I will gently remind her.

She sometimes walks to think. *Like Dickens*, I once said. For a while after that she signed off from our chats as Charles.

She sends me drafts of the songs she’s writing and I send her drafts of my stories. We talk about creativity and why it’s so hard to define. She likes art. “Keep talking dirty to me,” she says when art comes up.

In some ways, we are both dreamers. Together, we devised a list of slogans for a series of queer Christmas shirts that we'll never actually make:

- Dyke the Halls
- Jingle Butch
- Seasons Queerings
- Let the Yuletide Be Gay
- All I Want for Christmas is You (and for everyone to use my correct pronouns)

We also devised a podcast to co-host. When I said the tech guy at the university could help, she said, "I am the tech guy." When it comes to technology, she can figure anything out.

Sometimes when she laughs, she really laughs. She'll throw her head back even. Most times I'll be drifting off to sleep just as she's beginning to work on constructing her studio, or on writing a new song. 10 p.m. is noon Rockstar time.

One morning when she was making herself breakfast, she explained that her fancy waffle-maker came from the Bed Bath & Beyond dumpster.

"It's my favourite dumpster," she told me.

I was interested in hearing more about dumpsters. When I asked about other dumpsters, she explained that stores like Sport Check have compression locks that prevent you from getting in.

"What happens if other people are in the dumpster?" I asked.

"I once got caught by a security guard in the Bed Bath & Beyond dumpster. I offered him a down-filled comforter. I said, 'The ladies love them sir! I won't tell anyone, your secret is safe

with me! Look at that expert packaging!’ It was obvious that he was trying really hard not to laugh.”

Did you ever meet someone in your adult life and feel as if you’ve known each other since the days of lockers and soggy cafeteria lunches? You want to go back in time and punch the bullies for that person. But all you can do is listen to the echoes of their nasty ghosts. Like the teacher who yelled at her for going into the girls’ bathroom in grade six because she looked more like a boy than a girl. I want to go back and punch that teacher in the throat. She doesn’t need that, though, because she is stronger than she gives herself credit for. She also brings more joy to people’s lives than she knows.

For her mother’s birthday, she wrote a song called “Playground Superhero.” Her mother worked in local schools for thirty-one years, helping countless kids with autism and other needs. When she retired, they gave her a plaque thanking her for her many years of service. And some plastic flowers from Dollarama. Also, they either threw in a Kit Kat bar or she already had one in the bottom of her bag—we are unsure. Rose surprised her mom by performing “Playground Superhero” during a family birthday brunch. Her numerous aunts ended up belting out the chorus with her. I know, because of the song she wrote for me, that there are gifts more precious than ones from your favourite store. For Christmas she is writing a book for her nephew entitled “What is a hippie?” He asked one night.

We often message each other before falling asleep.

“Close your eyes and dream of epoxy resin and all the nice things in the hardware store,” I recently advised.

“Thank you. That really helps!” she said.

She told me an ideal gift for her would be good quality garbage bags. But I want to give her something better. I can't make things, aside from with words, so that's what I'm trying.

There are bracelets, and tattoos, and lots of physical ways to commemorate your friendship with another person, but it's really the feeling of knowing there is someone out there who will message you if they feel like they might get murdered that counts. Someone who also cries during Christmas commercials. Someone else who is also trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

We once went to Value Village. She took a photo of me wearing a foam hat shaped like a hamburger. She bought herself a jacket covered in bars of gold.

"I'm glad you have her," my therapist said.

"Me too," I said.

More Than Friend

I fell for Rose.

My Valentine

Coming out late in life is weird because you experience the teenage moments—jitters and giggles and first kisses—all over again. Perhaps I felt this new adolescence more acutely because, on top of everything else, I moved back in with my parents. Moving back in with your parents as an adult—one who has *just* discovered her true career path—is the closest you can come to having one foot in a canoe and one foot still on shore.

February 2022

I asked Rose if she would be my Valentine. I wanted her to be *that* person. Which means a lot because I take things like Valentine’s Day more seriously than most people. To me, it’s a day that twinkles through the bleakness of February.

Even the look of the date on paper seems special to me: February 14.

“Yes, baby,” she said right away.

I loved hearing the word *baby* from her in conjunction with me. It made me smile bigger than the width of a heart-shaped box of drugstore chocolates.

“What does that mean to you?” she then asked.

“It means we go on a date!” I said.

It actually meant more than that to me.

It meant that she was the person I would pick out of all the other people.

The longer you live, the more you begin to understand that connection—the feeling of being deeply accepted and understood by another person—is the best thing there is. I often think of these words from the poet Rilke (1875/1984):

Believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it. (p. 43)

An interviewer once asked Joan Didion how she met her husband. When Joan explained that they were friends first, the next question was, *When did it change?* Rose and I were friends first. I could relate to the question because I know the moment it changed for me.

I realized I loved her on New Year's Eve. Not the confetti-strewn, champagne-popping, countdown-clock kind of New Year's Eve. It was instead in the fluorescent light, sterile, life-draining, purgatory of the hospital eye clinic.

Due to some unknown allergic reaction, my eye was nearly swollen shut that day. It was so bad that the doctor recommended I go straight to the hospital. Water dripped out of it and settled all around my eye like dew on an old garbage dumpster. Still, I persisted in staring at my phone through the painful eye, messaging her for hours from the waiting room. At one point, I shuffled into a desolate corner because I needed to plug in my iPhone. I told her there was a woman with four-inch nails and wearing an ugly, ripped-up jean vest sitting across from me in the waiting room.

"Is her name Cindy?" she asked.

She has a way of making me laugh, making everything okay, even when it isn't.

"Cindy sounds cool," she added.

"We should go skating sometime!" I told her.

Even though I hate skating, I wanted to go with her with all my heart.

After waiting for hour upon hour, once I got released from the exile of the waiting room, they quickly dilated my eyes, pronounced the problem to be nothing more than allergies, and

then abruptly sent me away. I've been drunk with better eyesight. I could hardly see enough to press the button for the elevator. Downstairs in the maze of the hospital, I stumbled down a nearly empty corridor, spotting a vending machine. Rose and I have a joke about Big Daddy cookies. They're these giant cookies that you can find on the bottom row of select local vending machines (Rose used to have a job restocking vending machines). The package features a man who looks ready to chop wood, his burly arms crossed across his chest. Each cookie has 400 calories minimum. I am unsure of who their target market is, but it probably isn't me. I *had* to send her a photo of all the blurry Big Daddy cookies. Despite the fact that I could not see which button I was pressing on my phone, I managed to take a photo, and then, somehow, against all odds, through my undulating eyes, I managed to text Rose. She answered back right away, like you do when it's all new.

* * *

Understandably, Lena had never come around my house. How could she when she knew that my parents said she would never, under any circumstances, be welcome?

Rose, on the other hand, rang the doorbell when she came to pick me up.

She rang the doorbell!

When I opened the front door—terrified of what might happen if my parents were to trail into the room behind me—Rose was standing there in a blazer with professor patches on the elbows, bright red pants, and a grey Carhartt beanie. She was holding a red vase with a red rose and baby's breath shooting out of its mouth. The rose made me squeal and clap my hands over my mouth.

She leaned forward.

Before I knew what was happening, we had our first kiss.

It was like going up in the world's fastest elevator. My cheeks were the colour of the red vase. I felt like a firework.

"Do you want to leave this here or bring it with us?" she asked about the rose.

I felt a little lost in her brown eyes.

"Bring it!" I said.

Down in the driveway, as she was putting my bag—way too large for an overnight trip—into her trunk, she said one of my parents gave her a friendly wave from the window.

"No!" I said in disbelief.

I still don't believe it.

"It must have been your dad," she said. "It must have been Poppy Pete!"

* * *

At the hotel, I could hardly kiss her because I was smiling too much.

"You have to relax your mouth!" she said.

"I can't!" I told her.

It was true. I couldn't.

We collapsed into a pile of laughter on the bed.

My out-to-dinner drink of choice is a gin martini, a little dirty, with olives and a twist. Then, I usually explain that Anthony Bourdain was the one who recommended olives *and* a twist. I do this regularly even though my friends have all heard this explanation countless times.

"What does 'dirty' mean?" Rose asked.

"It means they pour in some olive juice," I explained.

This was the phase of our relationship before I realized that Rose was repulsed by olives. When you meet someone, you have no idea what food they hate.

We went to a fancy pub, and I ordered a giant plate of Brussels sprouts. We shared a delicate piece of salmon and some other sides.

It was the night before a huge February snowstorm. We were staying in a downtown hotel for our Valentine's celebration, but it looked as if Rose would have trouble driving home the next day.

"Can you call your mother and ask if I can stay over tomorrow night?" Rose asked with a smile.

Bolstered by the gin and olive juice, perhaps, I picked up my phone and joke-called my mother.

"Are you really asking?" she looked hopeful and curious.

I shook my head no.

"That makes me sad," she said, turning serious.

In that moment, the impossibility of it hit me so hard. I didn't want my Valentine, for a second, to feel the way I felt. To feel invalidated by my mother. Stupid. Small.

In the middle of our Valentine's dinner, it was as if all the wetness of winter seeped from my eyes. I began to cry. The vast loneliness I wanted to keep inside persisted in coming out.

"Are you crying?" Rose asked with alarm.

She then rushed over and put her arm around me. I wanted to accept not being accepted, but my body would not allow it.

“Is there a cure for homophobia?” I once asked my therapist. I asked the question as if I were kidding, but I was half-hoping. You can fool yourself into believing the impossible if you have enough hope in your heart.

“Or is there some way I can be more okay with the things my parents say?” I asked her.

“You are not supposed to be okay with homophobia. It’s not okay,” she told me.

The morning after our tearful Valentine’s dinner, we wrapped ourselves in white towels and went to the hotel pool. I asked Rose if she would sing to me in the hot tub. She did. I could have floated away in the chlorine just as easily as I had almost floated away in my own tears the night before. I pulled myself onto her lap and we attempted to take some photos.

An older woman with flowing silver hair swam across the pool toward us.

“Do you want me to take some photos for you?” she asked.

Being queer in public is new for me. Whenever strangers are kind, I am overly touched because I feel as if everyone will react the way my mother reacted. I have come to expect being shunned.

In the hot tub, Rose and I put our arms around one another as the woman took our photo. My heart glowed from inside. The woman’s silvery hair glistened under the pool lights. I wondered if she was a mother herself. I wondered what my life would have looked like with someone like her, a mother who would happily take my photo.

* * *

I dreaded going home because I was unsure of what the reaction would be. As it turned out, the road was too snowy for Rose to drive up. I still regret jumping quickly out of the car in

order to hike up the hill on my own, with the red vase and the red rose tucked under my arm. I was in such a hurry because I felt such fear. Would I be attacked? I didn't know.

Inside, my parents acted as if I had been home the entire time. *What do you want?* you might ask. I should have been happy they didn't say anything. But there is also a certain level of pain in the silence.

Frozen Blueberries

One Monday, after daycare drop-off, I pulled my car over to the side of the road and sobbed into my hands. A country pop song about letting things flow was on the radio, and I was crying into a crumpled COVID mask from the cupholder. Wren was about to turn four. A friend of mine had a daughter the same age who requested a Paw Patrol birthday party with only the girl puppies. Wren does not communicate in sentences, let alone refer to television shows. She barely utters words. I told Rose that I know I shouldn't compare, but sometimes hard not to.

“Wren is a special kid. She doesn't give a fuck about Paw Patrol. That show is for people interested in being normal,” Rose told me.

One of my favourite things about Rose is that she can instantly make me feel better. One of my favourite things about Wren is that she is an original.

I recently asked a pediatrician the unthinkable: *Is it possible that Wren will never talk?*

“Well, I'm an optimist,” the pediatrician said, “She's been making progress, so there is no reason to think she will stop.”

It feels unfair that someone should have to be an optimist in order for me to believe that my daughter will, someday, be able to tell me what she wants for her birthday.

Sometimes at daycare pickup other children run toward their mothers in the parking lot yelling, “Mommy! Mommy!” Wren, on the other hand, silently approaches me. Sometimes, she runs toward me, and I bend down so that she can throw her little hands around my neck, and she smiles. That should be enough. But part of me wishes that I, too, could hear, “Mommy! Mommy!”

Being a mother, though, means cultivating the understanding that you cannot shape things to suit yourself. Perhaps my mother struggles so much with me being gay because, like rhubarb on pizza, she didn't expect it (yes, my coming out was probably on par with rhubarb on pizza; even pineapple would not incite such unmitigated rage).

When I was twelve, I auditioned for a local television show and they asked me to cry during the audition. It would be so easy now. When I turn on myself (and every mother probably does attack herself at some point because it is better to blame yourself than to seek the root of whatever is upsetting you), tears immediately slide down my face and fall into my lap. Here is my deepest fear in the form of a question: *Did I do something wrong when I was pregnant?* That is not how autism works, they say. I am not even suggesting that autism is a negative label, but the truth is that no one wants their child to have more challenges than anyone else. No one wants their daughter to face obstacles that others won't have to confront.

Here, I have to remind myself that mothers are protectors. I cannot protect Wren with fear. I can only protect her with love.

If she never talks, I can talk.

I will talk, and talk, and talk, and fill up all the silences with my love for her.

Or we can sit in the quiet and eat her favourite, bowl after bowl of frozen blueberries. We won't need to say anything at all because we will be busy trying to wash the purple from our teeth and chins—and, in her case, hands, because she isn't that interested in spoons.

She doesn't have to be who I thought she might be before she was born; she just has to be herself.

The End

There are a million ways to love your child, some big and some small.

I wanted my story to be about love. Who doesn't hope for a happy ending? But no one tells you that there is a certain amount of freedom in pushing away your yearning for acceptance. Because you do not deserve to beg. There are a million ways to love your child, and none of them involve an ounce of hate. Over the past couple of years, I have attempted to figure out my mother's comments. I have played many games inside my head in an effort to understand why she will not abandon queer stereotypes in order to look at the person standing right in front of her, but the why-why-why maze always leads nowhere. If any of it was a means of protecting me, it did the opposite. You do not get to be hateful and claim it is an act of love.

I want to say that again.

You do not get to be hateful and claim it is an act of love.

At a certain point, does it stop being therapeutic to put my mother's words on paper? Does it actually give her harmful words more space in the world? These are not questions that I am equipped to answer. Because I need to get her words out of me and onto the page.

One night as we hugged each other in bed, Rose told me that her own mother never once said a hurtful word to her. Not in her whole life. There, in the dark, in my imagination, I saw a different reality. Her mother had given me an amethyst that day from her collection. *Oh no! No, I can't. Those are special!* I said when she first offered me one. *You're special!* she said, slipping one into my hand.

Earlier that afternoon, I had walked with Rose's mom across the backyard, and we picked long leafy stalks of lovage. Lovage is a tall green herb akin to celery, but more peppery when

you take a bite. *Take some home with you, if you want!* Rose's mom offered. *I just love giving things!* (She said this with such delight that, it seemed, I could almost see how big her heart was.) I made myself a leafy green bouquet of lovage.

From across the yard, closer to the house, Rose pointed her camera at the two of us. In the photo, her mom and I are just miniature figures against the expansiveness of the blue sky and red river flowing behind us. The water blinks back at the spring sunshine. And there is a beam of light streaming across the right corner of the photo. The clouds are just perfect whispers of white. Rose's mom is heading toward her birdbath. I noticed Rose taking the photo and extended the lovage bouquet high in the air, like someone who just won a competition. Like someone special.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875/1984) once said, "Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered" (p. 4). They say that you have to love yourself before you can love someone else. This is probably true. And if I didn't love myself, I wouldn't have been able to share my story like this. But sometimes you have to feel love from others in order heal the parts of you that feel broken when everything is quiet.

Historically, the stems, roots, and leaves of lovage were used for medicinal purposes. The roots are rhizomatic. From what I know about rhizomes, they twist out in all directions and they cannot be contained. Love is like that too. It's unruly and thick, and you can never say exactly where it begins.

Bees hold each other's legs as they sleep together, tangled up inside of flowers. Rose makes me feel that safe sometimes.

The day of Wren's second birthday, I cried from morning until about four o'clock, when I ran out of tears. *I'm not telling the relatives, you'll have to tell them!* my mother had said the night before. In her eyes, I was a secret to be kept. Something shameful. In my eyes, I was failing my own daughter because of my crying.

The evening of Wren's fourth birthday, I also spent sobbing. Just before she fell asleep, Wren noticed my tears. We were lying in bed together, her face suddenly loomed just above mine like an eclipse. Her eyes seemed huge in that moment. Two dark buttons looking straight at me. Next, she put her two little arms around my neck and gave me a hug. Sometimes you don't require words to know what a person needs from you.

"I love you so much," I whispered to her.

I waited until she was asleep before I allowed myself to cry again. My mother is still able to hurt me. But I have grown stronger. Quarantine is over. I have gone out into the world and seen how much love there is in it.

Earlier that day, I had invited Rose for a piece of Wren's birthday cake. All went well until my mother figured out what was written on her t-shirt.

My mother never waited until Wren was asleep to make her attacks. She could have at least given me that courtesy.

"You won't need an academic job. You might as well sell all your dresses and get rid of all your clothes and move to the country and work with migrant workers," she ranted. She seemed fixated on the notion that one could not work for a university and be queer. The *president* of our university is a queer woman.

Plus, I was offended on behalf of migrant workers. They are obviously no less valuable than academics. Or any other group of people.

“I do like manual labour,” I offered.

I was on the toilet. It was a new level of humiliation for me to be berated while attempting to pee.

“If you ever wear a shirt like that, I’ll kick you right out of the house!” she went on.

The shirt in question read: *Dyke*. Rose had made it herself, but I decided not to point that out.

“Don’t you have a sense of humour?” I managed, “It’s just a funny shirt.”

“Funny! There’s nothing funny about it!” she snapped.

“It’s a reclaimed word,” I then said.

“Reclaimed! I should kick you right out of the house!” she repeated.

“Well, maybe I should get kicked out of the house because I’m tired of being treated like this because of who I am,” I said.

It was different for me to be talking back. Two years before, I would have slid off of the toilet and cried on the bathroom floor.

“Why do they always have to rub it in our faces? We get it, you’re gay! You’re gay! Why do they always have to go around kissing and hugging each other? Normal people don’t have to do that,” she then said.

“Maybe they’re just happier,” I said, unsure of exactly who we were talking about. Rose and I had not displayed any type of physical affection toward one another during the visit.

“They’re not happy! Their relationships always break up,” she continued.

I stopped talking then because it didn’t matter what I said.

“I can’t *believe* you have succumbed to this. You need to have your head taken right off and shaken!” she said.

In the middle of it, Wren ran to the freezer for a third piece of ice cream cake. When I grabbed her and took her to bed, I noticed that my right arm was shaking. It felt like the tremor in my arm was happening to someone else. Like I wasn’t inside my body.

My mother said other things that evening, but there comes a certain point when I have to stop honouring such useless words by recording them. As Lorri Neilsen Glenn says, “Writing is my lifeline to make sense of the world, but it isn’t my entire life” (2022, p. 73).

I am now free from the weight of desperately wanting things to be different. At a certain point, relentless hope punctures you. I won’t allow this to poke holes in me anymore. Instead, I will be the girl with the lovage bouquet held high in a perfect sky. Somebody special.

During her visit, Rose played the guitar and sang one of her original songs. She told me afterwards that she could tell the energy was off. I had wanted so desperately for things to be okay that I didn’t decipher what was actually happening. It would be impossible for me to tell Rose what her visit meant to me, what it still means. She did something terrifying. For me. In doing so, she helped me to zoom out and see myself from the edge of the world. There, I recognized my own strength.

Last spring, I went for a tarot reading. The woman on the other side of the narrow table, Linda, looked at the burden card and told me, “You will not be persuaded by others. You are strong and you will make up your own mind.” Even though it was hard to believe, I knew she was right.

In the wake of the pain, Rose and I joked about designing some new t-shirts. One for me that would say:

Dyke

(I got kicked out of the house for wearing this.

Please offer compliments to make the shirt worthwhile).

And a miniature one for Wren that would say:

My mom is a dyke.

If you are able to laugh at the things that hurt you, you can take away their power.

Sometimes this takes time. Sometimes it takes rhizomes of love.

* * *

In the morning, my mother pretended nothing had happened. She read me a true story from the newspaper about a woman named Anna Swan who was eighteen pounds at birth. Anna, born in 1846, went on to become a circus act. By the age of seventeen, she was seven feet and eleven inches tall. Eventually, Queen Victoria had a wedding dress commissioned for her (Anna had been presented to the queen for amusement, and Victoria had taken a liking to her). She married an irregularly tall man. They met at the circus.

I did not care about Anna Swan. Except that I could empathize with someone being judged for her differences. I could see why she ran away to Europe. Why she ended up travelling the world in order to escape the cruel words of those at home.

That day, I sent my first inquiries about an apartment of my own. For me and Wren. It was time.

* * *

Can you write a coming-of-age story about a woman in her late thirties? The answer is yes. The next question becomes: *Why?* The purpose cannot be to simply answer the question, *Who am I now?* because we are always in flux.

I have become increasingly obsessed with the crows that fly past my office window. If I spot one crow, I will stand up and twist myself around in an effort to find another one. It was my superstitious grandmother, Melba, who taught me that one crow brings sorrow, while two crows bring joy.

Here is what I want to tell you:

Sometimes you have to believe that good things are coming. If you don't, you're left with a single crow. And you deserve joy.

I wanted my story to be about love.

It took me a long time to understand that it is.

Part Two: Contextualizing My Collection of Autoethnographic Stories

A Story to Begin

The vineyard was full of grapes. Little purplish clumps of grapes that would look fake if you weren't sure you were standing in an actual place where they make wine. I used to say that my favourite places were vineyards and museums. A vineyard is sort of like nature's museum—but with drinks. Also, both places sometimes serve cheese, depending on the occasion.

My partner and I were on a trip. It was the Labour Day long weekend and, after a leisurely afternoon, we decided to swing by a winery. We held hands as we walked along the perimeter of the vineyard. At one point, I leaned my phone against the edge of an outdoor tent to take a photo of the two of us. The sun was streaming down and there were people seated in the restaurant eating wood-fired pizza. Further along the property, a large white tent housed a boisterous wedding.

“This is our chance to crash a wedding!” I said to Rose.

“We should probably get a drink first,” she said.

I got a glass of white wine—it was some kind of pinot grigio and Acadie blanc blend. Rose got a thick and cloudy ginger cider. We joked with the server about how to pronounce the German name of the cider: *Heiss*.

“I think it's short for Heissenberg?” the server said.

“I'll have to google it now,” Rose said.

“Noooo!” the server laughed. “Don't hold me to it!”

We made our way outside and settled into two Adirondack chairs. We could hear joyous commotion coming from the wedding tent.

“Imagine how amazing it would be if two cool queers crashed your wedding. We could just say that we went to school with. . . Michael,” I said as we gazed toward the tent.

The music slowed down.

“It’s Ed Sheeran for their first dance!” a girl at a nearby table announced to her family.

Back at the Airbnb we had rented, Rose and I had ahi tuna steaks waiting to be barbecued. It would be our first attempt—we still had to make a dry rub, using sesame, wasabi, and turmeric.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” I asked, as we chatted about the recipe we found on YouTube.

“The worst that could happen is that we will have absolutely nothing for dinner,” Rose said.

We laughed.

Eventually, we concluded that the only responsible measure would be to order a pizza at the winery. An appetizer pizza. It was 6:30 pm and the restaurant was open until 7 pm. There were still lots of people on the patio eating, but there were also numerous empty tables. I went inside to order, as our server had told us earlier that it would be no trouble if we changed our minds and wanted food to accompany our drinks.

Inside, though, there was a different server.

“Can we order a pizza?” I asked.

Her face narrowed.

“We’re kind of full.” she said, shaking her head.

“We are already sitting in the chairs out front,” I persisted.

The server looked unconvinced.

Overhearing, the chef in the kitchen shouted, “What kind of pizza are you looking for?”

“Mushroom,” I said.

“I can make that for ya, no problem!” he said.

I paid for the pizza and went back outside. Behind me, an entire table of silver-haired men and women in linen outfits were being seated for dinner on the patio. There were lots of empty tables. I could not make sense of why the server would suggest that the restaurant was full. It was not full.

“Why would she say that?” I kept asking Rose.

“They said it was really busy here all day, maybe she’s just tired and cranky,” Rose said.

“It is not full. Look at all those tables,” I said, twisting around.

When our pizza arrived, they did not offer us plates or napkins. That may have been because we were sitting in the Adirondack chairs and not on the patio.

Was the restaurant “full” because of our queerness? Or was that particular server just having a long day?

We will never know.

As Forrest and Joy (2023) suggest, “Living with and internalizing the stigma of being queer can result in self-vitiating attitudes and behaviours such as believing the debasing opinions that one imagines others hold to be true” (p. 9).

Was I just imagining the server’s intolerance? It is entirely possible.

A Little About Stories

I am a lifelong storyteller. The sharing of stories is integral to both my research and teaching. In both cases, stories help to build community, deepen our interest in social justice, and

offer alternatives to normative narratives. Whenever I share a story with a class of students in which I detail a microaggression that was directed toward me, there are always students who offer their own stories. Following these stories, the remainder of students—usually those unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of verbal slights—often remark that they have never considered such things. There is power in the storytelling for both those offering stories, and those listening. Clark and Rossiter (2010) argue that there are three ways we learn from stories: hearing stories, telling stories, and recognizing the narratives within which we are positioned (p. 6). In both my research and teaching, I strive to uncover the ways in which normative narratives have shaped our thinking. There is a Korean saying that it is always darkest right under the lamp. As Clark and Rossiter (2010) suggest in their theory of narrative learning:

This type of learning is critical and even emancipatory. It presumes that our thinking is shaped by sociocultural forces; recognizing our narrative situatedness enables us to identify and critique how that shaping takes place. One example would be Americans traveling or living in a non-Western culture and being able to recognize their own positioning within a Western narrative that privileges the individual over the community, and rights over responsibilities. (p. 6)

Along the same lines, in every course I teach, I direct students toward the words of Maxine Greene (1995), who suggests that “the world perceived from one place is not the world” (p. 20). If I had come to this understanding sooner myself, had I known more concretely that forces outside of myself—structures of power—shaped my view of the world, perhaps it would not have taken me decades to accept my own queerness. A student recently said to me, “I don’t know if this is too personal, but did you always *know* you were gay?” It is difficult to identify a truth about yourself when you understand that, in order to live that truth, you will fall outside of

everything you have ever known. You ask yourself over and over, *Is this really true?* That is not what I told the student. I simply said that I always knew. This is also a version of the truth because, on some level, I did always know. The stories in Part One of this dissertation depict the trouble I had coming to terms with my own identity. Perhaps I would not have experienced the same level of internalized homophobia had I grown up experiencing stories that showed me more than only the love between a man and a woman. Diverse representation matters because, otherwise, our lives are shaped by only a limited amount of stories.

When I share my own stories with students, I am careful to point out that I do not speak on behalf of all 2SLGBTQIA+ people. I am cautious because my story is only one, and there are many other untold stories in our community. As the researcher Byrony Oncuil (2013) points out, “Despite the implication of being grouped under the term community, communities are not homogenous, well-defined, static entities. On the contrary, they are porous, multifaceted, ever-shifting, loosely connected groups of people” (p. 84). To me, this insight reinforces the importance of sharing stories—so that we can uncover our similarities and our differences.

When you receive advice about your writing, people often tell you to show, not tell. Why do they not give the same advice when it comes to research? They do if you are undertaking autoethnography. Autoethnographer Tony E. Adams (2021) suggests that an autoethnographer must think and research like an ethnographer, yet write like a novelist. His assertion reminds me of one of the many books on the art of writing that I read as preparation for the storytelling stage of this dissertation, Vivian Gornick’s *The Situation and The Story* (2001). Gornick tells us that, in each piece of writing, there is the situation (what happened) and the story (the true meaning of what happened). Yet, meaning-making, especially in a research context, is not that simple. We often make assumptions in life—I do not know, for example, whether the server at the winery

was homophobic. It is possible that the story is actually about how those of us who belong to historically marginalized groups hold a constant fear of rejection. In other words, the story could truly be about internalized homophobia. As Adams and Holman Jones (2018) note, “‘Autoethnography’ is an approach to doing and representing social research that uses personal (‘auto’) experience to create a representation (‘graphy’) of cultural (‘ethno’) experiences, social expectations, and shared beliefs, values, and practices” (p. 142). Autoethnographic methodology is not purely about “self;” rather, the methodology reaches out to explore the ways in which the world works. In a sense, the crux of the methodology lies in a particular story’s ability to encourage readers to question their own privilege, unconscious bias, and ways of reading the world. As Leggo (2015) said of his own life writing, “I am always hopeful that I can transmute and translate memories into stories, not necessarily stories that are coherent or entertaining or true, but stories that help me and others grow in wisdom and wellness” (p. 253).

I have found that autoethnographic writing can allow one to explore her own resilience, while prompting readers to undertake a similar process of self-validation. During a Critical Reading course that I facilitated, I shared “The Yoga Retreat” story with students. I was teaching a session on personal narratives, and, therefore, it seemed fitting that I share a story of my own. As usual, when I read my writing to a group of people, each student related to a different aspect of the story. One student submitted the following reflection about her experience hearing the story (offered with permission from the student):

When you shared your story, I was moved, but what I found so interesting was that the parts that moved me weren’t moments mentioned by my group when we spoke about your story. Their moments were segments of your story that I’d heard, but not absorbed with the weight others did. In my reading group, I am the only member who

uses the label “mom” as a part of my identity. When you spoke about motherhood, coming together as a community of women, and questioned if fathers were worrying about certain things the way mothers do, I cried. When your family and internal monologue questioned your capacity to mother, I cried more. You have a level of authenticity and bravery that I’m still developing. I think hearing your story in this setting is a moment that will stay with me; never ask your students to do something you won’t, and remember that a personal story can reach people in more ways than a research article ever could.

Since becoming a mother, I haven’t heard stories of motherhood within the academic environment. It was a moment of connection that you wouldn’t have realized we had, but your words made those anxious pieces of me quiet for a moment.

It’s not just me. Motherhood is a strange village because half the time you don’t have the opportunity to really see who’s walking with you. It’s daycare drop-offs, fleeting moments at a park that is always just a bit too close to the road for comfort; it’s fast, and most communication is a reassuring smile because they’ve also carried their toddler away, red-faced and screaming from the swings. It feels as though society rarely shows the hard unless it is an edited, acceptable version of it that can fit onto the grid. I would have said that becoming a mother has opened me to people’s secrets I’d never have learned, but I’d now say it’s opened my heart to stories that have always existed.

This reflection is meaningful to me in particular, because the student noted that she had previously not encountered stories about motherhood within an academic environment. It was the same for me until I began my doctoral research and explored an entire body of work by academics, writers, and poets, all devoted to uncovering the ways in which motherwork shapes

us (Barg, 2001; Cusk, 2002; Dungy, 2018; Gringle; 2023; Haugh, 2016; Sangha, 2012; Trussell, 2015). This work was vital for me. As I gave birth to my daughter six weeks before beginning my doctoral studies, I needed a way to bridge my academic life and my new life as a mother. As a form of methodological wayfinding, I wrote a series of letters to my then-infant daughter subsequently publishing some of the letters (Flemming, 2020; 2022). Though the letters did not find their way into my final dissertation, they allowed me to explore the reading I was doing on arts-informed methodology, social justice, and motherwork. During the early stages of my PhD research, I knew that I wanted to take an arts-informed approach, as the tenants of the methodology aligned with my desire to disrupt normative ways of thinking. As artful researchers Gary Knowles and Ardra Cole (2008) suggest,

The use of the arts in research is not for art's sake. It is explicitly tied to moral purposes of social responsibility and epistemological equity. Thus, the research text is intended to involve the reader/audience in an active process of meaning making that is likely to have transformative potential. (p. 62)

Just as the letter writing served as a form of methodological wayfinding during the first year of my doctoral studies, the collection of stories comprising Part One of this dissertation represent a type of personal wayfinding. I wanted to take an exploratory approach to the creation of my research, and autoethnographic methodology fit that aim because, although one can shape stories around various themes—motherhood, coming out, identity/clothing/transformation—it is impossible to know exactly how the stories will flow during the writing process, and how they will eventually fit together as a collection of stories. As St. Pierre (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) famously suggests, “Writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery” (p. 967).

After coming out, I faced a great deal of uncertainty and wondered whether I made the wrong choice. One reason I wanted to craft the collection of stories was to show others that they could struggle greatly, yet still survive it all. My PhD research is informed by a doctoral dissertation entitled *Breaking Silences, an Inquiry into Identity and the Creative Research Process* by Douglas Gosse (2005). Like Gosse, I seek to connect my creative work with wider sociopolitical issues. More specifically, Gosse and I both seek to extend our stories beyond the academy in order to offer hope to members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community who may, at times, like myself, feel marginalized and rejected (Gosse, 2008; McDermott & Roen, 2016; Yallop, 2016). I have been sharing versions of my story with others via writing workshops and public readings. Each time I share a story, I wonder whether there is someone listening whose perspective is altered. It is possible that by living as my unapologetically authentic self, I am allowing others to imagine doing the same? As autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis (2009) suggests, Effective autoethnographies are not victim tales; on the contrary, writing autoethnography well produces survivor tales for the writer and for those who read them. Accomplished autoethnographers do not proclaim how things are or how life should be lived, but instead strive to open up a moral and ethical conversation with readers about the possibilities of living life well. (p. 17)

Before beginning my doctoral work, I was not one to be overly critical. I was too close to the lamp, as the saying goes. Over the course of my doctoral research, I finally began to delve into developing a deeper understanding of the workings of structures of power and privilege. I started to see the advantages I was born with, and the ways in which narratives, stories, are shaped in order to preserve the structures of power already in place. As Stephen Brookfield (2012) suggests, “personal identity is not developed in a series of purely self-contained,

individual choices, but is shaped by collectively generated and maintained roles, assumptions, images, and expectations associated with one's race, class, or gender," (p. 139). The collection of stories in Part One of this dissertation aims to explore how this shaping happens, but also how time and persistence—and a lot of crying—can result in the active dismantling of this shaping.

A Short Interlude – Advice for New Doctoral Students

I read a vast sampling of doctoral dissertations during my PhD studies. Through this process, I became well-acquainted with how idiosyncratic PhD research can be. No matter the methodology, doctoral work is a personal pursuit. In case you are a student reading this dissertation yourself, I would like to offer you an important insight: I did not always know where I was going with this research. In fact, for the past couple of years, I have been invited to speak to the new PhD cohort in the Nova Scotia Inter-University Doctoral Program in Educational Studies. My advice to the new students is always to allow yourself to change direction. To never be overly attached to your original idea. All of your reading, writing, collaboration, and, perhaps, teaching will shape your thinking in ways you cannot anticipate. Playfulness, in my opinion, is essential in any endeavour that takes years to complete. During my first year of doctoral studies, I created a [podcast on arts-informed methodology](#) (Flemming, 2021). I interviewed two students who were close to the completion of their PhD research. As I prepared a list of questions for the podcast, I thought to ask fellow arts-informed researchers Stephanie Mason and Keith Williams for advice they might give to a student who may be considering taking an artful approach to research. To my surprise, both Stephanie and Keith prepared a list of questions to offer the imagined student in response to my question. At the time of our recording, Stephanie was preparing final edits on her dissertation. From the standpoint of one nearing the end of her

doctoral studies, she suggested that a student considering arts-informed research might ask: *Can you handle not knowing? Can you get to the end of this and deal with the fact that there's still more unknown out there? Can you imagine that your research is a very small piece of the puzzle and maybe it doesn't take you fully through to the end of what you expected?* Keith echoed Stephanie's sentiments, adding, *Are you comfortable with ambiguity?* And, lastly, *Will you enjoy it?* (Flemming, 2021).

“Enjoyment” is not exactly a buzzword in academia, but perhaps it should be. Bill Green (2015) reminds us that Barthes once said that research ““Must be conceived in desire,”” otherwise ““the work is morose, functional, alienated”” (p. 9). That said, arts-informed research is about more than just passion. As Cole and Knowles (2008) suggest, arts-informed research representations “are not intended as titillations but as opportunities for transformation, revelation, or some other intellectual and moral shift. They must be more than good stories, images, or performances” (p. 66). Autoethnographers are guided by the same tenets. Autoethnography is a methodology that requires more than just good storytelling. I agree with Adams and Holman Jones (2018), who suggest that “as both a method and form for doing social research, autoethnography bridges the creative arts—most notably, literary and experimental writing—with the social and cultural in order to teach us about the work of life” (p. 142).

I recently co-constructed a conference presentation on life writing with my friend Adrian Downey during The Currere Exchange 7th Annual Conference and Retreat via Miami University (Downey & Fleming, 2023). The goal of the conference was to illustrate the ways in which scholarly life writing can be a method for personal development and political action. The sessions were exploratory and intended to allow like-minded scholars to explore writing projects prior to their completion. I still think about an insight written on one of the very first slides. It

read: “Do yourself a favour, unplug.” In his opening remarks, Dr. Thomas Poetter suggested that, as much as possible, we set our phones aside. As I am in the process of offering advice to new doctoral students, I feel compelled to mention this useful recommendation. Ironically, as I type these words, my phone (hidden from view behind my laptop screen) is making a friendly beeping sound. It is likely a nice message from one of my friends. I will not look until this two-hour writing session is complete.

* * *

Update: I did look at the phone.

Another piece of advice I always give to new students: do not be too hard on yourself.

Love as Inquiry

I came to understand that the collection of stories that comprises Part One of my dissertation is, at the heart of things, about love. In my own research, and in my teaching practice, I see love as a sort of foundation—as an ungraspable presence during my own writing, course-planning, and class discussions. I agree with Pauline Sameshima and Carl Leggo (2013), who suggest that love is “an epistemology, a way of seeing the world, a way for organizing research, a way for teaching, a way for learning, a way for living” (p. 90). I once opened a *Foundations of Education* course by reading part of a graduation speech written by novelist Anne Lamott. I had organized my lecture around the question posed by Sameshima and Leggo (2013): *What does love have to do with education?* In writing the lecture, I was trying to answer the question for myself while, at the same time, encouraging students to think about their own answers. Practicing reading Lamott’s words aloud in advance of the class, I cried, alone, in the PhD student office. She suggests:

You're here to love, and be loved, freely. If you find out next week that you are terminally ill—and we're all terminally ill on this bus—all that will matter is memories of beauty, that people loved you, and you loved them. (Lamott, *Salon Online*, 2003)

The stories in Part One of this dissertation explore many facets of love—losing love, finding love, maternal love, romantic love, and, perhaps, above all, wondering whether I am worthy of love.

Through the process of writing, and living, and sharing stories, I have come to understand that, although it may take years, it is possible to explore questions that once seemed unanswerable. This brings me to the series of questions that I set out to explore within my research.

A Series of Research Framing Questions

During the beginning stages of my doctoral research, I conceived of a series of questions to guide my exploration. Looking back, I can recall crafting each of the ten questions. Each one seemed difficult, if not impossible, to answer at the time. In part, I resisted the idea that my research would yield answers. I clung to Elliot Eisner's (2008) words:

The deep strength of using the arts in research may be closer to the act of problematizing traditional conclusions than it is to providing answers in containers that are watertight. In this sense, the products of this research are closer in function to deep conversation and insightful dialogue than they are to error-free conclusions. (p. 22)

Yet, I knew that it would be helpful to have a series of questions to frame my exploration. The research framing questions, I thought, would help me to connect my own personal story with wider questions and contexts. Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest, “Evocative autoethnographers

carry the burden of making meaning out of all the stuff of memory and experience. We theorize by telling stories that put meanings in motion where they can be used, discussed, debated, and prolonged” (p. 117). Like Bochner and Ellis, I wanted to theorize through storytelling but, as a beginner researcher, I also wanted to *think with* the work of other writers, educational theorists, and autoethnographic methodologists. I developed the following list of questions as a roadmap for myself. Granted, at the outset of my PhD studies, I was unsure of whether these questions would make their way into my final dissertation.

It seems fruitful to revisit the questions here as a form of critical reflection. In this pursuit, I align myself with Jan Fook (2015), who suggests:

Critical reflection emphasizes the idea that we are all both teachers and learners, even though our formal roles or statuses might be more differentiated. This is an important point—effective critical reflection can only take place in a climate that is egalitarian and participatory. Knowledge creation, through ongoing reflection on experience, is something that never stops in a committed practising professional at any level.

Furthermore, the critical reflective attitude is about always being prepared to question (and change) deep-seated assumptions and practices. (p. 451)

In the following section, I will attempt to offer, if not answers, a series of musings on how my research addressed the topics that I set out to examine. Returning to the words of Eisner (1981), I agree that we must seek meaning with our research, rather than concrete truths: “Truth implies singularity and monopoly. Meaning implies relativism and diversity” (p. 9). Within the following series of questions and musings, I draw upon the words of writers, educational theorists, and autoethnographic methodologists, and allow their thoughts to inform my own thinking, questioning, and writing.

#1. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

In her genre-bending memoir, *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson (2015) writes, I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth. I would also like to cop easily to my abundant privilege—except that the notion of privilege as something to which one could ‘easily cop,’ as in ‘cop to once and be done with,’ is ridiculous. Privilege *saturates*, privilege *structures*. (p. 97)

Autoethnographers are sometimes charged with being solipsistic. In what ways will your stories address the notion of privilege? Writing itself is a privilege, as is reading. How will you share this work with others, outside of the academy, who may not have time to read?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

As someone who teaches future teachers, in the B.Ed. Program at Mount Saint Vincent University, I often facilitate class discussions about issues that feel like big unsolvable problems—homophobia, racism, ableism. White students sometimes tell me that they are afraid to talk about race because they do not want to “say something wrong.” I suspect, these white students did not grow up talking about race. For them—and for me—our everyday lived experiences did not necessitate discussions about race because we did not face barriers in our daily lived experiences due to our race. As Robin DiAngelo (2018) suggests, “Being perceived as white carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others” (p. 24). Even though I am now more aware of the level of privilege my whiteness provides—as

compared to my level of awareness at the outset of my doctoral studies—anti-racism work will be a lifelong commitment for me. I am always in the process of unlearning because I have only, in recent years, started to uncover the ways in which my thinking has been shaped by structures of power that advantage white people, like me. In one of the stories within Part One of my dissertation, I write,

That night beside the fire, I realized that I had allowed my own place in the world to prevent me from seeing the way things are for others. Like when a black friend visited me in Nova Scotia and said people were staring at her everywhere she went, and I thought to myself that it simply wasn't true. A lack of awareness is not innocent, even though we think it is.

I am constantly attempting to explore my unconscious bias and the mistakes that I have made in the past. This passage is embarrassing to share, yet it is important for me to illustrate the ways in which my unconscious bias may have caused harm to others in the past.

Later in life, my daughter's birth drew my attention toward race in a way that I had not previously experienced. As the White mother of a Korean-Canadian daughter, I am often asked whether my daughter is adopted. One day, during a class discussion, I shared how these queries are hurtful—even though the questioners mean no harm—a few students spoke about experiencing a similar line of questioning within their own interracial families. One student thanked me for starting the conversation. She had never talked with anyone about the issue before, despite the fact that she had been experiencing this type of microaggression for her entire life. Again, I feel that sharing stories can help bring issues to light and build community by making students feel that they are not alone.

This mirrors my goal of writing the collection of stories in Part One of my dissertation. I want to share stories that make others feel like they are not on the margins. A story can be a warm blanket draped over someone in need of comfort. An autoethnographic story, I think, can be both a warm blanket and a political act—a way to provide comfort in the form of critique—a means of not only questioning why so many stories are never told, but of proceeding to tell them. Here, I am reminded of Darlene Clover and Kathy Sanford's (2016) research on the narratives historically presented by museums. They suggest, "By both tactical and unconscious inclusions and omissions, museums legitimise a prevailing order of social, cultural and political power, and represent and propagate sexist, racist and other problematic understandings of the world" (p. 127). Just as museums can foster understandings of the world that exclude or misrepresent groups of people, if we are not mindful of the stories we share, we can do the same. Yet, just as Clover and Sanford argue that museums can be liberatory and transgressive, with care and effort, stories can do the same.

I tried to explore my own privilege within the collection of stories comprising Part One of this dissertation. As said, though, my understanding of the layers of privilege provided to me by the intersectionalities that comprise my identity is ever-evolving. As explored in the story "Junior High," my first awareness of my own privilege arose during adolescence. I observed how economic structures of power allowed me to have certain advantages that others in my school did not have. In her research on critical literacy, Barbara Comber (2015) has written about the need for educators to address economic imbalances in the classroom. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, she also proposes that critical literacy entails:

- Repositioning students as researchers of language
- Respecting student resistance and exploring minority [sic] culture constructions of literacy
- Problematizing classroom and public texts. (Comber, 2015, p. 363)

In my own research and teaching, I aim to disrupt normative narratives by structuring my work around privileging the voices of those from groups that have been historically marginalized. I try to problematize classroom and public texts by drawing attention toward the voices and versions of history that may have been previously excluded from classrooms. To give one example, I often have students in my classes read the work of Chantal Gibson. In her poetry, Gibson (2019) critiques Canadian classrooms, where students were presented with passages like the following—extracted from assigned vocabulary readers:

bullet points

All rights reserved—no part of the book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine or newspaper.

— *We Grow Up*, The MacMillan Company, 1939

- P.19 Jupie is a good cat. He lives alone in a little red farm house.
- P. 57 Dick is the mailman on the train. He has bags full of letters and packages.
- P. 62 Jack is a pilot of a big airplane that flies at night. He has a radio.
- P. 88 A brownie is about a foot high. He lives in a cellar. He has a brown face. He looks queer, lives in queer places and does queer things.
- P. 160 Little Ugly Face lives in an old Indian village. She looks so queer that the children laugh and call her Little Ugly Face. She is sad. She has no friends. She really is not pretty at all.

Gibson's found poem illustrates how language has been used in ways that may have been perceived to be "neutral" (vocabulary readers) in order to shape our thinking in ways that perpetuate racism, sexism, and fear of the unknown. Across the collection of stories comprising Part One of my dissertation, I have explored similar concepts. I sought to illuminate Len Unsworth's (2001) suggestion that:

Transformative knowledge initially involves questioning the taken-for-grantedness of systematic knowledge, understanding that what appears to be the 'natural' view of phenomena is actually a view produced by particular combinations of historical, social, political influences, and that alternative combinations of these influences could produce different views. (p. 21)

As I write this passage, social media is buzzing with the news of upcoming protests against inclusive educational practices in Canada. More specifically, groups of people across Canada are planning demonstrations to suggest that schools should not allow students to identify by their chosen names and pronouns without parental permission. This rule could place trans and queer youth in danger. In many cases, where parental support is absent, school is the only safe space for kids in the process of navigating an identity that falls outside of what has historically been considered normative. The protests are planned for all major cities across Canada on September 20, 2023. Hate is obviously ignited through fear of the unknown. Sometimes I think that stories are not always enough. A story cannot march in the street during a counter protest. A story cannot always change someone's mind. Historically, stories have also been used countless times to oppress and to "other" people. Yet, stories do not always have to centre the oppressor; stories, as I have been saying, can make one feel seen in ways one so desperately needs—

precisely because of all the external opposition and hatred in the world. When I initially encountered the words of Sara Ahmed (2017), I could hardly read through my own tears.

Ahmed suggests,

To leave a path can be to leave a life even though when you leave heterosexuality you still live in a heterosexual world. But this is what leaving heterosexuality felt like: leaving a life; leaving a world where your being is supported. (p. 48)

That's how things felt for me—that I was exiting a world where my being was supported and entering into the complete unknown. Though it may sound overly dramatic, I do think that the act of writing my stories down for the purpose of this dissertation, was life affirming. At times, when I needed courage the most, I wrote. Not everyone has this luxury. My writing saved me. I worry about others who may not have an artistic outlet for their pain. Yet, as Adrienne Rich (1997/2018) suggests, art happens everywhere, daily:

Art is reborn hourly in prisons, women's shelters, small-town garages, community college workshops, halfway houses—whenever someone picks up a pencil, a wood-burning tool, a copy of 'The Tempest,' a tag-sale camera, a whittling knife, a stick of charcoal, a pawnshop horn, a video of 'Citizen Kane,' whatever lets you know again that this deeply instinctual yet self-conscious expressive language, this regenerative process, could help you save your life. (p. 322)

I plan to extend my stories, and my presence as a proud queer person, into various spaces. In June 2023, for example, I was the emcee of the first queer prom in the rural town of Windsor, Nova Scotia. This was not just an excuse for me to execute cartwheels across a stage while wearing rainbow sequins (although that did happen); it was also an opportunity to provide visibility to youth who may not otherwise encounter stories like

their own. The gathering created a place where people felt seen and accepted in ways they do not always experience. At one point, a middle-aged woman ran up and threw her arms around my neck. She had tears in her eyes, “Thank you for what you’re doing! My son is trans. And this all means so much to me,” she said. She did not know that her embrace of *me*, the embrace of a supportive mother, held special meaning on my end. She did not know that in our short moment of connection, I appreciated her just as much as, or probably more than, she appreciated me.

During Halifax Pride 2023, I performed my first stand-up comedy set. Prior to my writing the set, students in one of my classes, teachers from a rural Canadian province, spoke about parental resistance when their small town proposed a rainbow crosswalk near a school. They said that parents were concerned that the town—due to the crosswalk—and, by extension, the school, for not opposing the crosswalk—was “pushing the gay agenda.” I wrote a stand-up set centred around the idea of the “gay agenda.” While I joked about missing out on the mailing list sign-up and, therefore, not receiving my copy of the gay agenda, the set had a serious message in the end. I sought to draw attention to the misguided assumption that information is the same as indoctrination. I agree with the feminist activists The Guerrilla Girls, who suggest, “If you can make someone who disagrees with you laugh, then you have a hook inside their brain” (Guerrilla Girls, 2023). Comedy is, of course, another form of storytelling. A way to reach audiences outside of the academy with messages of resistance and hope.

#2. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Autoethnographers Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams (2010) suggest,

When we say, ‘No theory, no politics, just stories,’ we forget the differentiating, strange-making impulse of critical inquiry and scholarship. Instead of stories *or* theory, emotionalism *or* explanation, seeking *or* representation, aesthetics *or* knowledge, we need a language that unsettles the ordinary while spinning a good story. We need the shifting, refiguring, and excessive talk of *maybe*, about what *matters*, that says something *queer*. (p. 137)

Their idea of presenting theory + story in such a way that it becomes jarring reminds me of Brechtian theatre where the goal was to startle the audience in such a way that they’d become removed from the emotionality of the plot in order to imagine ways to bring about social change. If you think about the form of your dissertation, will you weave theory throughout the stories? Do you agree with Bochner’s (2014) suggestion that “there is nothing as theoretical as a good story”? (p. 292). As Thomas King (2008) suggests, “the truth about stories is that’s all we are” (p. 14). How will your stories serve to ‘queer’ narrative epistemology?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

To guide the creation of the collection of stories in Part One of my dissertation, I attended a variety of writing workshops. Cooper Bombardier, the facilitator of the writing workshop entitled *Queer Bodies, Queer Forms: Leaving Behind the Retrograde*, introduced us to a Canadian 2SLGBTQIA+ literary magazine called *Plenitude*. Though I was not ready to submit any of my own writing, a line in the submission guidelines stuck with me: “We are not interested in genre writing, political essays, or rants; that said, we recognize that LGBTQ2S+ experiences are often inherently political, and we invite submissions that explore this through creative writing” (Plenitude Magazine, 2023). I

have come to understand that my very presence in a space can function as an inherently political act. My partner hosts a weekly open mic in the rural town of Port Williams, Nova Scotia. Week after week, we show up as ourselves in a space that does not always feel queer-friendly. I sometimes read my own poetry—always about queer love.

Obviously, about Rose. Like any other couple, we hold hands and complement each other on the microphone during our performances. We have come to not only be accepted, but applauded, by a range of people in the small community. An elderly woman, Joyce, even gifted me a sequined blazer. After months of hosting the show, a man in a large white cowboy hat took me aside one evening. He held my hand, with tears in his eyes, and told me a secret that he had waited sixty years to reveal. He told me he was gay. He told me about his fear should anyone else find out the truth. He said that he felt comfortable telling me his secret because I had been so open about my own love. I do agree with Bochner's (2014) suggestion that "there is nothing as theoretical as a good story" (p. 292).

Prior to writing the stories in Part One of my dissertation, I experimented with writing in fragments. I wondered if there was a way to "queer" the writing structure itself. I cut one of the stories into strips of paper and arranged and rearranged the ordering of the story in the middle of the living room floor. I seriously considered turning the stories into fiction. Ultimately, I decided to tell my own stories because authenticity is a value that underpins my research and my teaching. I agree with Thomas King (2008): "the truth about stories is that's all we are" (p. 14).

#3. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Jenn Shapland (2020) says of queer relationships, “Love must be public, shared. If you keep it to yourself, it doesn’t really exist; it has no practical use in the world” (p. 242).

How has coming out changed your thoughts on relationships or familial structures? Many members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community have chosen families. What does

“community” in this sense mean to you?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

I am astounded by this question. When I came out, I felt so alone. I would not have thought it possible to foster the type of connections I currently have with people. Perhaps it is easier to move through the world when there are not things about yourself that are unsaid, unacknowledged, unrecognized, and unperceived. Sometimes I believe that the real importance of sharing our stories lies in their ability to allow others to uncover what is unsaid in their own lives. The writer Alicia Elliott (2019) captures it perfectly in her description of reading the work of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer, activist, and teacher Leanne Betasamosake:

Every sentence felt like a fingertip strumming a neglected chord in my life, creating the most gorgeous music I’d ever heard. It was the first time I, an Indigenous woman, had read the work of another Indigenous woman. It was such an intimate and personally revelatory moment—as if she had reached out from the pages, lifted my face and smiled. *She can see me*, I thought. *She can see me*. I was twenty-five years old. (p. 23)

Elliott’s words remind me of a moment during a critical literacy course I facilitated.

When I showed the class a photo of a black actress as Cinderella—to disrupt the blond,

white version so engrained in our minds by fairy tales—one of the students spoke about her Black niece watching that very same play and exclaiming, “She looks just like me! I didn’t know that Cinderella could look like me!”

I have had moments of joy, reading the work of queer writers, especially those who are mothers. In everything I undertake, I want to show my daughter that I love her with “maximum maternal velocity” (Strayed, 2012a, p. 268). As Rich (1976/2018, p. 137) asserts in her essay on motherhood,

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children’s books, movies, television, the schoolroom. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life.

I came out partially because I wondered how I could teach my own daughter to be true to herself, if I was not doing the same.

Returning to my original question, I have cultivated a chosen family over the past few years, filled with people I love and care about. The man in the cowboy hat, mentioned above, has become one of my closest friends. Returning to the role of storytelling, bell hooks (2010) suggests: “Telling stories is one of the ways that we can begin the process of building community, whether inside or outside the classroom” (p. 49).

#4. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Childhood is littered with the beginnings of our stories. Strangers from childhood linger as formidable figures in our minds. Audre Lorde (1982) begins her own story by recalling her neighbour's presence:

DeLois lived up the block on 142nd Street and never had her hair done, and all the neighbourhood women sucked their teeth as she walked by. Her crispy hair twinkled in the summer sun as her big proud stomach moved her on down the block while I watched, not caring whether or not she was a poem. Even though I tied my shoes and tried to peep under her blouse as she passed by, I never spoke to DeLois, because my mother didn't. But I loved her, because she moved like she felt she was somebody special, like she was somebody I'd like to know someday. She moved like how I thought god's mother must have moved, and my mother, once upon a time, and someday maybe me. (p. 4)

How will the writing in your dissertation travel back and forth in time? Who are the figures that shaped you throughout life, and are they relevant to the person you have become, or to the person you are in the process of becoming?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

When I think about structuring autoethnographic writing, I recall Arthur Bochner's (2000) suggestion that this type of artful research involves "structurally complex narratives, stories told in a temporal framework that rotates between past and present reflecting the nonlinear process of memory work—the curve of time" (p. 270). Process-wise, I wrote each of the stories contained within Part One of the dissertation with a certain theme in mind—whether motherhood, clothing and identity, or fear/love. I

focused on continually writing, rather than imagining how the stories would eventually fit together as a whole. It was not until the end of the writing process when I experimented with ordering the stories. For me, it seemed to make the most sense to order the stories in a semi-chronological manner. Since writing my own collection of stories, two friends have asked me to read their own life writing. In reviewing their work, it became clear that one of the greatest challenges in terms of writing about one's lived experiences is the ordering of memories. I am certainly not suggesting that stories should be told chronologically, but rather that an integral part of the autoethnographic process is scrutinizing how the writing will flow for the reader.

In terms of "travelling back in time," the writing was therapeutic. Yet, it is painful to read and revisit the stories again, even now. The hurt, though, is outweighed by the love implicit in the stories. I found chosen family when I needed it the most. The stories are also about self-love because a lot of strength was required on my end. When I first started teaching courses at Mount Saint Vincent University, I would endlessly debate about when to come out to the class. A series of questions would swirl around in my head: *Should I tell them on the first day? How will I slip it in? Do I have a responsibility to tell students because we will be discussing 2SLGBTQIA+ issues? What if some of the students from other cultures do not accept gay people?* These questions, which once seemed heart-stopping, are now hardly an issue. I have arrived at a place where it feels natural to tell students that I am queer. Part of acknowledging my own unconscious bias entails understanding the importance of offering a short statement to students about my own positionality; for example, if I were to omit mentioning that I am a white, cis-gender,

able-bodied, settler, I would be denying layers of privilege that I hold because of those identity markers.

Returning to the original question above, regarding the figures who have shaped my life, it seems relevant to mention the curated nature of autoethnographic writing. While the stories that comprise Part One of my dissertation are informed by my own lived experiences, they are curated snippets of life, crafted in a writerly manner. The stories are recounted from my own perspective only. In a chapter on the relevance of personal storytelling in education, bell hooks (2010) illustrates the impossibility of any single story being deemed “truth”:

I have told many stories about my childhood, whether writing memoirs, feminist theory, or about race and class. I have used fragments of memories, and at times huge chunks, as a catalyst for critical essays, cultural criticism, and books for children. In every book I published, there is a sibling reader who is eager to remind me that what I am describing never really happened, or it did not happen the way I am describing it. This occurs even though I have shared that there is no absolute truth, that we all believe what we see from our perspective, and that the individual perspective is always limited. (p. 50)

As stated, I am more concerned with meaning-making than proximity to absolute certainty. Yet, as autoethnography entails portraying one’s family and friends, the researcher has an ethical responsibility not to inflict harm upon others. This is why I elected to create composite characters in the case of my own parents. Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest that some autoethnographers blend fiction and non-fiction while others “invent fictional stories, using what Yalom (1991, p. 169; see also Speedy, 2008) calls

‘symbolic equivalents,’ by which he means fragments of real occurrences presented in a fictionalized way that preserves the meaning, complications, and feelings of the raw events” (p. 152). In terms of the portrayal of my own parents and their unwillingness to accept my queerness, I elected to change the dialogue, omit their names, geographical location, occupations, physical details, and any other interests, characteristics, or features that would allow one to recognize who they are. I have elected to create “fictional equivalents” for “Mother” and “Father” in an effort to preserve faithfulness to my own experience—the pain of being rejected by one’s family—while protecting the identity of those who inflicted trauma upon me.

The purpose of research ethics is to protect research participants, as it is assumed that the researcher holds the power. It is the researcher who has the expertise and the space to present her work in the form of stories, memories, thoughts, and ideas. Yet, in cases where the researcher lacks power—and trauma is being inflicted upon the researcher—I argue that it is not ethical to require the researcher to obtain permission in order to tell her own story. Despite this belief, I undertook the thinking and writing required to complete the Mount Saint Vincent University Standard Research Ethics Application Form (REB.FORM.001). I want to protect anyone implicated in my research and storytelling. I have debated constantly, for years, about the ethics of my own autoethnographic writing. I was taken with Leggo’s (2007) thoughts on ethics:

How do I make the decision regarding what stories I want to focus on. I have written about terrible things. How did I decide to write about those terrible things? And not write about other terrible things? The questions that the writer needs to ask frequently are: When is silence ethical? When is silence unethical? (p. 31)

It is important to state that I have not included every story that might be relevant to the collection of stories that comprises Part One of my dissertation. I have elected to omit stories that may cause undue distress to others. In centring myself, I strive to emphasize that these stories are told from my vantage point only, during a particular moment in time. A challenge faced by all autoethnographers is the shifting self. As Carolyn Ellis (2009) suggests, “As an autoethnographer, I tell a situated story, constructed from my current position, one that is always partial, incomplete, and full of silences, and told at a particular time, for a particular purpose, to a particular audience” (p. 13).

If I were to write a collection of fictional stories, it would feel, to me, like another form of silencing. As I have said, representation within the field of education, and within public spaces, is vital in order for change to happen.

I offer the following brief story as a reflection on writing about my parents:

The Heart Attack

To explore love, in any of its many forms, is to also explore complexity. While I made a deliberate decision to fictionalize the scenes depicting my parents and their unacceptance, I have to ask myself—did I also fictionalize the ways in which they loved and cared for me? Have I depicted all the ways in which we never gave up on each other?

I know that my parents’ lives were disrupted too.

I know that it is not possible to view the world, let alone one’s own lived experiences, subjectively. Writing about personal narratives, Bochner (2000) notes,

The purpose of self-narratives is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived. These narratives are not so much academic as they are

existential, reflecting a desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning, which is what gives life its imaginative and poetic qualities. (p. 270)

* * *

When I did finally move into my own apartment, I started to answer the phone less and less when I saw that it was my mother calling. One morning, she called and I did not answer. I was in a Zoom meeting. She called back immediately. I still did not answer, thinking, perhaps, the second call was in service of leaving a message. She called a third time. Looking back, it would be easy to suggest that I knew something was wrong. I am unsure of whether that would be true.

“Dad had a heart attack,” she told me, after I did call her back.

Fear.

I felt small and afraid.

I knew that if I were still married, I would have had someone to help me through it all. There is a sense of safety when you have someone to park in the dark hospital parking garage with you. When you have someone to hold your hand as you navigate the colour-coded hospital wards, trying to find the right room. When you have someone to grab coffee from the hospital cafeteria for you and your dad. When there is someone else who can offer a reassuring nod when your dad needs one. I felt shame for giving all that up.

I felt the weight of things in a way I would not have felt if I had siblings, if my parents and I came from a close-knit family, if there was anyone else who could have visited.

For perhaps the first time, I felt as if I was someone’s adult child—which, of course, I was. Why did I not already know?

I went to the hospital right away. I sat by my dad's bedside. He was out for a Sunday morning bike ride when it happened. A couple of neighbours helped him up the street and into the house. He was adamant that calling an ambulance was unnecessary. The neighbours called one anyway. The paramedics said he was lucky. If it was not for that phone call—

* * *

The morning after it happened, Monday morning, I had to teach a class. I sobbed in the bathtub before leaving for the university. I cried like a child. I cried like that because I knew that no one was coming to comfort me.

I told the students, "My dad had a heart attack yesterday, so it is possible that I might cry at any point during class today."

Whenever I teach, I am aware that there could be countless people in the room who are silently holding grief in one of its many forms. I try to honour our humanity just as much as our learning.

I felt better after class.

* * *

"I wonder how long before I can exercise again?" my dad said in his hospital bed.

In that moment, I saw not my dad, but myself.

It was something I would say. I could understand his unwillingness to accept that he might not be able to do the things he always did. That somehow, without his permission, he had changed.

My mother was grateful for my hospital trips. She was sick with a cold at the time and, therefore, unable to attend hospital visiting hours herself.

"Love you!" she said when I picked up a care package she had put together for my dad.

“You too,” I said in a low voice, still unable to offer the same words back. As I drove to the hospital, I thought about how she was never alone like that. The only one home after dark. I knew she was probably scared too.

The obvious thing to suggest is that an autoethnographer cannot capture life exactly as it was lived. There are too many moments that exist off the page. Quiet moments, loud moments, and mundane ones too.

There are lots of stories that I could tell about my parents. Good ones. After all, they supported me when I moved to Montreal to study creative writing. Others may have suggested a more lucrative career path. They believed in me as a writer. They believed in me as a writer, even without knowing that writing would save me. *This writing* saved me. Maybe in a backwards way, my parents rescued me. I say that because it is true that I already had all the tools I needed to survive it all. We all did. My dad bounced back after his heart attack. My mother is currently painting the baseboards in their house white; she is doing this because she is getting new white carpet installed on Monday. Life goes on. . .

I know this:

My parents love me.

If they need me, I will be there.

If I need them, they will be there.

#5. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Spending time with queer friends has caused you to reflect upon what your appearance says about you. In what ways is clothing relevant in terms of queer identity?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

This question reminds me of when I first came out and asked my therapist if it was okay for me to call myself queer. What I did not understand, at the time, was that how one elects to identify is a completely personal choice. I never needed permission. As I recently explained to a class: *You could ask twelve queer people what being queer means to them, and each person could give you a different answer. There is no “correct” or singular definition of “queer.”*

While I knew that I would not stray from my fanciful clothing in order to fit into a predetermined box, on some level, I wondered whether my appearance was “queer enough” to legitimize my existence as a queer person. This was an idea that I explored in the story “Clothing.” I also wanted to explore the ways in which the female body collects experiences based on the ways in which it is perceived and, subsequently, treated in the world. I ended that story with the following thoughts:

As Sara Ahmed (2017) writes,

Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight. The past becomes heavy. We all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen; and how we are not seen.” (p. 23)

I suppose I am thinking about this now because in a heterosexual world, you learn from a young age to associate the way you dress with desire. Now, I feel differently moving through the world because I know that I am not attempting to attract the male gaze. Even if, on the outside, this is just a secret I keep with myself.

As explored within the story, I could personally relate to Ahmed’s notion of “biographies of violence.” In thinking about the ways in which structures of power have shaped the lives of women, I am reminded of Adrienne Rich’s (1980) work on unexamined heterocentricity. In an essay written in 1980, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich suggests, “The institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled—patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality—are being strengthened by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery, and efforts at censorship” (p. 11). Forty-three years later, her words still ring true in many ways. Yet, there are, as there have always been, pockets of resistance.

As for the final few lines in the “Clothing” story, when I workshopped the piece during the Graduate Student Academic Writing Group at Mount Saint Vincent University, a friend asked me whether it does feel different—to move through the world without attempting to attract the male gaze. It does. It feels liberatory. Of course, no one is impervious to the external judgements of others. To a certain extent, I am still working through these questions: *If I am different on the inside, should I be different on the outside?* As mentioned in the story about my junior high years, the only publicly visible lesbian during my adolescence was Rosie O’Donnell. As her appearance was significantly more masculine than mine, I questioned my own queer feelings. Again, this speaks to the importance of representation, and my insistence on sharing my own story.

The autoethnographic writer faces an interesting challenge in returning to writing from several years past. At the time of writing the story about fashion and identity, I was nervous about identifying as part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. I recall going to a favourite clothing store in search of their logo t-shirt in rainbow colours and feeling

unable to ask the sales associate whether the “Pride shirt” was in stock. I did not see it on the shelf and, noticing other logo t-shirts in the store, I asked, “Do you have any other versions of the shirt?” I was too nervous to ask directly for the rainbow version. Now, I have a large fan in bright yellow that says “QUEER” on it. Perhaps part of the beauty in writing about the self is that it offers one the opportunity to reflect upon how much change has occurred. In my case, internally first, and now, externally as well. On the other hand, sometimes as you write, you wonder how you will ever grow into the shapes you yearn to take on. You must be comfortable with the unknown in this type of research. Even when it feels as if you will never answer the questions you keep returning to, you must be patient. As the researcher Kathryn Church (2007) suggests, “Perhaps we always do our best work just on the verge of knowing” (p. 433).

As my research progressed, I took a variety of self-portraits in order to document the collection of selves that carried me from beginning to end. As crying was part of my process, my body was, in some ways, instrumental to my forward movement. The collection of photos, gathered in the video below, begins six weeks after I have given birth, and ends just as my daughter is about to turn six years old. Contained within the video, there are many photos in the PhD student office at Mount Saint Vincent University. A few of the photos were captured inside the deserted university library during the COVID-19 pandemic. These empty spaces were, at times, the only places where I felt safe enough to embrace my authentic self. I am not the same person I was at the outset of this collection of photos. There has to be a certain willingness to change on the part of the researcher, but I think that if one is open to possibility, it would be impossible not to grow as one moves through the various stages of the doctoral research process. Perhaps I

documented myself during this time as a way to prove that I was still okay, even if I did not feel that way on the inside. Maybe I was also curious about how much I could, or would, change. Through sequins, leather, and velvet, the collection of photos documents how fashion, as a form of self-expression, is another kind of storytelling.

In my courses, I often present students with the idea that an article of clothing can function as a text. In order to illustrate this point, I show a photo of a dress by Indigenous fashion designer, Lesley Hampton. The particular dress was created in response to *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (The Government of Canada, 2024). Hampton herself said the dress was conceptualized with the spirit of a warrior woman in mind (Lonergan, 2020). Much more than just a garment, the dress showcases defiance, it presents the wearer with a way to take up, and reclaim, space. My future research plans include further exploring the intersections between texts, such as clothing, and critical pedagogy.

Figure 1*Video slideshow*

Note: Video features a collection of selves from the beginning of my PhD Program (July 2018) until present (March 2024). [Click to watch](#)

Returning to the original question, it also felt interesting to explore thoughts about fashion within my research as, prior to beginning my doctoral studies, I may have assumed that the domain of fashion would be completely separate from the field of education. To my delight, I learned that many researchers have used fashion for political ends (Butterwick, 2017; Church, 2007; Cole, 2004). This type of research sparked my interest in embodied learning. As Shauna Butterwick (2017) notes in a chapter detailing a series of feminist political fashion shows, “Embodied knowing is gaining more attention in the field of adult education. As Lawrence (2012, p. 1) argues, such knowing occurs throughout our lives, although ‘traditional schooling forces us to check our bodies at the

door’; being in our bodies is ‘a source of discomfort for many of us’” (p. 73). As part of a group of researchers at Mount Saint Vincent University committed to showcasing the use of the arts across disciplines, CAIRT (Community for Arts Informed Research and Teaching), I recently presented a Pecha Kucha on crying (Flemming, 2023). We do not often think of crying as a feminist act, but perhaps we should. In my presentation, I spoke about how the act of crying was a research method during the creation of the stories within Part One of my dissertation. Crying was a part of my process because of the kinds of questions you ask yourself while writing about your own lived experiences, and because of the types of memories you relive. Within the Pecha Kucha, I also spoke about crying in the classroom. Students in my classes often cry. This is, in part, because they often share personal stories from their lives. I try to cultivate a space within which students feel free to share their own stories, as connected to the theory and concepts we are discussing in class. I often tell students that Rich (1983, p. 588) says, “There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors.” I agree with Alterio and McDrury (2003) who suggest in their work on storytelling and teaching:

In our experience the most significant learning frequently takes place during or after powerfully emotional events. This phenomena is recognised by Postle (1983) and Criticos (1983) who suggest that had we known beforehand what emotional chaos we might encounter in some situations, we may well have avoided these learning opportunities. Yet these very traumatic experiences often yield the most significant learning. (p. 26)

In recent years, I have thought about my life as akin to a cupboard. Sometimes one has to dump everything onto the floor, creating a giant mess, before it all fits back into place.

Before each object finds a place, you contemplate giving up, usually more than once. But then you don't.

In preparation for the writing of my own stories, I read countless memoirs. I read so many memories that a member of my PhD committee actually asked, "Why did you read so many memoirs?" Fair question. There are many answers. I believe we learn about the world through stories. We learn about others through stories. We learn about ourselves through stories. We learn how to tell our own stories through witnessing the ways in which others tell their stories. We heal with stories. I could go on...

Recently, I facilitated a course on Critical Reading. In an effort to privilege oral storytelling over the written word, I decided to hold a story slam on our last day of class. This idea was inspired by The Moth podcast. Each student would have seven minutes to tell a true story from his/her/their life. They would have to memorize the stories—no looking at notes! The stories would be organized around the theme of transformation. I wanted the stories to explore a moment when they read the world differently than they had before; a moment that forever changed who they were. I provided students with storytelling tips from The Moth website: the story must be nonfiction; the story must be on theme; there must be something at stake within the story; it must be your story to tell; and it cannot go beyond the time constraint (The Moth, 2023). I could tell that students were nervous about this assignment. I assured them that we would work on the stories throughout the duration of the course. Reading their final reflections, I learned that most students felt dread when they first looked at the syllabus and saw the story slam assignment. More than one student wrote about fearing that their story would not be as

important as the stories of others. They wrote about fear of crying in front of the class. They wrote about feeling, initially, as if they did not have a worthy story to tell.

We did an initial writing exercise in class to help students choose their stories. In another class, I offered students the time to practice saying their stories aloud—recording on their phones—either with video, or just audio. Many students later reflected on how this technique allowed them to work in a new way, they had become accustomed to academic writing, and they were beginning to understand that the process of creating an oral story was different from the process of writing one. I also allowed them to workshop their stories in their assigned reading groups. Many students later said that sharing their developing stories was nerve-wracking, but realizing that peers were just as nervous, was helpful. I offered students an idea I encountered in the book *How to Tell a Story* (Bowles et al., 2023)—an oral story is alive; therefore, it will be different every time you tell it. You should not try and memorize the story because if a story is alive, it will be different during each telling.

I was honoured, and many of the students reflected about feeling honoured, to witness the many stories told during our class story slam. Students wrote about feeling more connected to their classmates after the story slam, even though they had been in a cohort together for over a year. Some wrote about how constructing their oral stories was a healing process. Many wrote about the pride they felt in themselves for excelling at an assignment that had, initially, made them want to flee the course. Others, elementary and secondary teachers, wrote about the idea of adapting the assignment for their own students. We all felt as if something important had occurred, and that we were a part of it together. The story slam reinforced what I had been attempting to convey throughout the

duration of the course—the idea that we can honour our full humanity while learning about our fears, our triumphs, our failures, and our resiliency, through stories. We also observed the ways in which stories can help us think more critically. At the outset of the course, I asked students to read a chapter from Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's book, *Hospicing Modernity* (2021). I wanted to not only show students that stories can help us to think differently, I wanted them to think differently about stories. As de Oliveira suggests,

This approach to storytelling and the stories that come from it emerge from oral practices where voice, pitch, pause, breathing, rhythm, intonation, relationships, setting, and repetition are all integral to the mutual dance that the telling and the story create. I am not convinced that alphabetic writing, with its usual focus on fixed form and general obsession with description and prescription, can have a similar effect or do justice to this approach. On the other hand, if we are open to different possibilities for seeing, sensing, relating, and imagining, we will need to figure out how to interrupt our usual ways of doing things and the satisfaction we have with what has been normalized as natural, true, and desirable. (p. 46)

I have always been intrigued by the idea of interrupting our usual ways of doing things.

This notion is foundational in my own research, teaching, and living.

#6. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

In his memoir, David Chang (2020) tells us about lobsters and how they transform:

Lobsters grow by molting. They shed their old shell to reveal a new, soft shell that will eventually grow and harden around them. By the time they're done, there's

no sign of the lobster they were. It's an exhausting, dangerous process. It takes a tremendous amount of energy and leaves them vulnerable and exposed while they're in the middle of it. (p. 235)

In what ways do you think this research will change you? What do you think will surprise you the most about this research process?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

Autoethnography entails a high degree of vulnerability. One has to be aware that representations of self, once published, cannot be retracted. I often think about autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis and her book *Revision* (2009). Within *Revision*, Ellis recounts autoethnographic stories published early in her career and how her thoughts on the lived experiences she recounted within the stories have changed over the years. In one story, she wrote about her mother's coldness in the wake of her brother's sudden death in a plane crash. Years later, after talking with her mother about what happened, Ellis came to understand that her mother's lack of emotion was, in truth, an attempt to protect everyone else in the family from the depths of grief—and not, as Ellis had assumed, a lack of care or form of emotional detachment. This example, I think, depicts the slippery nature of autoethnographic writing. The researcher cannot speak on behalf of others, she can only write from her own perspective and, oftentimes, one's perspective does not paint the whole picture. If we are to zoom out, perhaps, we should not be scrutinizing autoethnographic writing for its proximity to reality—perhaps we should be more focused on a story's ability to illuminate universal human experiences. As Ellis writes (1993):

This article is a personal narrative of a family drama enacted in the aftermath of my brother's death in an airplane crash. 'True' stories such as this fit in the space between fiction and social science, joining ethnographic and literary writing, and auto- biographical and sociological understanding. My goal is to reposition readers vis a vis authors of texts of social science by acknowledging potential for optional readings and encouraging readers to 'experience an experience' that can reveal not only how it was for me, but how it could be or once was for them. This experimental form permits researchers and readers to acknowledge and give voice to their own emotional experiences. (p. 711)

What surprised me the most about the research process was the fact that I could not find it in my heart to sway from autoethnographic methodology and elect to write fictional stories. For ethical protection of those depicted within my stories, I considered turning each story into a work of fiction. I care deeply about protecting the people depicted within the collection of stories. Like many autoethnographers, I have written about those closest to me. For years, I have wrestled with whether to tell my own story because I do not want to emotionally harm anyone. In terms of my own research and teaching, I highly value authenticity, sharing stories that disrupt normative narratives, and sharing lived experiences with the aim of prompting calls for social justice, and offering a form of representation that may have been unencountered before. Ultimately, I considered questions such as: *How could I tell my students about the importance of the "I," if I were to silence my own voice? How could I tell queer students to be proud of who they are if I were to hide myself? How can I speak about authenticity while not staying true to the research I truly need to undertake?*

In order to protect those depicted within my stories, I came up with an iterative process of gaining considered and ongoing consent. As recommended by the Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) research ethics board (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2017), I acquired verbal consent in advance of beginning the writing of the autoethnographic stories. Verbal consent in advance of officially proposing to write autoethnographic stories is important as it helps to counteract any pressure on the part of participants to agree to be part of the study (if I were to ask only after the stories were written, they might feel more pressure to grant permission). After a draft of each story was written, I ensured that those depicted understood they could ask me to edit the story or to remove their depiction entirely. Within my letter of consent, I made it clear that anyone depicted could withdraw—request to be removed from the stories completely—by emailing, texting, or calling me on the phone. I wanted to provide multiple options to ensure those depicted would feel comfortable expressing requests for edits or to “withdraw” from the research entirely. An iterative process of this nature—allowing those depicted within stories to read autoethnographic drafts, with the knowledge that they could request edits—can serve to negate misrepresentation. If Ellis had allowed her mother to read the aforementioned story, perhaps her mother would have explained how she was feeling in the wake of grief, and the story would have been edited accordingly. Of course, in the case of my own collection of autoethnographic stories, this iterative process did not negate discomfort for those depicted upon first read. The stories venture through the emotionality and grief of love lost, and relationships forever transformed. This is where I had to ask myself whether the benefits of sharing my stories could outweigh the potential discomfort that the reliving (or reading) of stories may cause

to those depicted within their pages. As the stories may offer a lifeline to a reader—someone who may wonder whether they can go on or whether they can live as the person they truly are on the inside—I think this life-affirming potential outweighs the emotional reaction that was elicited for those portrayed within the collation of stories. I worked to depict everyone with love. To me, this meant being respectful of the right to privacy that each person depicted deserves; as much as possible, omitting personal details about others; changing identifying details whenever possible; and depicting the complexity of each relationship within the stories themselves.

How much to share is another important question when it comes to autoethnographic research. It may cause undue distress for someone I shared a life with to read about a new type of love that I share with someone else. For this reason, I offered those depicted within the collection of stories a choice—I could send all drafts of stories (the whole collection of stories) if it would help to contextualize the parts within which they were depicted, or I could send drafts in which their depiction was contained (and not the entire collection of stories as a whole).

Within the collection of stories that comprises Part One of the dissertation, the only people portrayed fictionally are my parents. I elected to change the dialogue and omit their names, geographical locations, occupations, physical details, and any other interests, characteristics, or features that would allow one to recognize who they are. As my queerness represents a disruption they seem unwilling to accept, I would not want to offer them a series of stories about my identity development—on the grounds that it might cause further emotional agitation for them rather than increased acceptance. In this case, I did make the choice to fictionalize or offer “symbolic equivalents” of interactions

with them, as it seemed the most ethically sound. This choice maintains my ability to share my experience but lessens the risk of harming others. I was also cognizant, throughout the writing process, of the need to depict their love for me. This complexity, I knew, would ultimately strengthen the storytelling and the truth of my own story as well.

While writing the collection of autoethnographic stories, I questioned whether further academic contextualization was necessary. My own teaching and my work as Managing Editor of the academic journal *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* provided me with the answer: yes. In my teaching, I often offer students the opportunity to reflect upon course materials in a creative manner—via collage, painting, monologue, poetry, or any alternative creative form. While these creative works are usually evocative, I find that the artist statement—which is part of the assignment—serves to reinforce exactly how students are critically connecting course content with their own reflective practice. Noticing how the student artist statements deepen my understanding of their work drew my own attention toward the importance of contextualizing the collection of autoethnographic stories that comprises Part One of the dissertation. In addressing the series of questions that I included in my dissertation proposal, I aim to show that this work stems from my desire to offer stories that disrupt normative narratives, stories that inspire reflection and resilience in others, and stories that may help others to deepen their interest in social justice and the humanity of those who have been historically marginalized. To this aim, I appreciate the ways in which autoethnographic writing explores complex issues using everyday language. In her memoir, Samra Habib (2019) writes about the lack of representation for queer Muslim

women. She mentions having encountered her own story in academia but still feeling excluded:

Much has been written in academia about queer Muslims, but often the ideas and findings are disseminated by scholars who have far more privilege than the subjects of their work. I've sat on panels where I felt excluded from conversations by the barrier of academic jargon. It seemed as though meaningful dialogue was available only to those with a PhD. In this way, the language is inaccessible to those who need to be comforted most. (p. 175)

Within my own research, I echo Habib's desire to create queer stories that may offer validation or comfort to those outside of the academy. During the writing process it was *me*—I was the one who needed to hear survival stories in order to ensure my own.

In my role as Managing Editor of *Art/Research International*, I often read autoethnographic work written by academics across disciplines. I have observed that the scholarly contextualization serves to strengthen the work. I have noticed that, in addition to encountering a story within an academic context, I have the desire to engage with the thinking behind the work. I had the opportunity to interview artful researcher Patricia Leavy for *Art/Research*, and we chatted about the slippage between truth and fiction in both life writing and methodology such as autoethnography. I asked her whether, in her experience, writing fiction could be as therapeutic as writing about one's own lived experiences. She shared:

The most cathartic experience I've ever had in my life was writing my novel collection *Celestial Bodies: The Tess Lee and Jack Miller Novels* (2022). The protagonist, Tess Lee, was a childhood sexual abuse survivor, which played a

central role in her life experience and the novels. I, too, survived this kind of abuse. Writing about the lifelong process of healing from that kind of trauma, especially through a group of characters who were kind and loving, was profoundly cathartic and healing. (Leavy, 2023, p. 358)

As I fictionalized some of the interactions I had with my own parents within the collection of stories in part one of my dissertation, I could relate to healing from trauma through one's research whether or not you portray your experience exactly as it unfolded. It is not the dialogue being identical to the way it was delivered that matters; it is the emotionality behind each scene that conveys the truth of an experience for the autoethnographer.

#7. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Patti Lather (1991) suggests that deconstruction “foregrounds the lack of innocence in any discourse by looking at the textual staging of knowledge, the constitutive effects of our uses of language” and in doing so, “provides a corrective moment, a safeguard against dogmatism, a continual displacement” (p. 156).

Would you say that heteronormative staging of language delayed your own coming out process by preventing you from hearing or seeing alternatives? How will you consciously use language as a disruptive force within your dissertation?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

In the courses I facilitate, we always discuss language and its connection to structures of power. I often assign an essay by Emily Bernard entitled “Teaching the N-Word” (2005). Students usually assume that the article will be a how-to guide for

teachers, an instructive piece in terms of how to address students when they use harmful words in your classroom. It is not that. Instead, Bernard explores her own experience of the n-word as a Black professor who teaches mostly White students. She explores how the word is used by various friends, relatives, acquaintances, and students. In my own classes, after reading the piece, students often ask what they should make of the article. In other words, they want to confirm, “She’s saying we shouldn’t say it, right?” Bernard does not make it that easy. She troubles the word. For some, Black rappers for example, it is a reclaimed word. For others, it carries a type of hurt that cannot be shaken. I entice students to ask themselves whether it is the intention behind the word that we should scrutinize or whether, knowing the history and harmful nature of the word, we should not use it at all. Like Bernard, I do not offer clear answers. Students hold onto their chairs when I read passages from the article. I am White. I should not be reading the word aloud, they think.

I agree.

In one of my courses, after the work of autoethnographer Stacey Holman Jones (2015) ignited a conversation about the word “queer,” two older students told me they still thought about the word in a pejorative manner. When they were younger, the word was used as a cruel insult. As Porter Braswell (2022) suggests, “The beautiful thing about language is that it is always changing. It’s therefore a historical record of how *we* change” (*Fast Company Website*). I told the students that many people view “queer” as a reclaimed word. I explained that the word is special to me because it represents not only my sexual orientation, but also the way I see myself in the world—as rather fanciful and out of the ordinary. To me, it also represents my desire to disrupt

and to decolonize. In order to challenge their previously established assumptions, the same two students signed up to present a seminar based on an article by Jason Fan (2019) entitled “Queering Disney Animated Films Using a Critical Literacy Lens.” As the course progressed, one of the two students shared that her visceral reaction to the word “queer” had changed. She said her aversion to the word originated during her school days in a rural community. Growing up, she had been best friends with a boy who was gay. In their high school days, people would taunt him with cruel remarks—“queer” was a word used to break him down. In presenting a seminar about queering Disney films—or reimagining Disney characters as queer—the student had shifted her deep-seated feelings about the word. Rather than shuddering, she said, she now sees the joy in the word. Again, we see how critical literacy and changing the narratives of familiar stories can shift our perceptions. As Fan (2019) suggests, “A skeptical attitude towards texts, such as Disney’s films, provides a useful basis for a queer reading. The critical reader can ask questions such as: How are characters’ gender differences and sexualities represented in the text? Who or what is missing from the text? In whose interest is the text?” (p. 123). I strive within both my research and teaching to always interrogate what may be missing.

#8. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Jeanette Winterson (1995) writes,

The most powerful written work often masquerades as autobiography. It offers itself as raw when in fact it is sophisticated. It presents itself as a kind of diary when really it is an oration. The best work speaks intimately to you even though it

has been consciously made to speak intimately to thousands of others. The bad writer believes that sincerity of feeling will be enough, and pins her faith on the power of experience. The true writer knows that feeling must give way to form. It is through the form, not in spite of, or accidental to it, that the most powerful emotions are let loose over the greatest number of people. (p. 105)

If your fiction can capture the raw emotion of this period in your life, do you think readers will assume it is non-fiction? What will it mean if that is the case?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

When I asked myself this question, I was planning on fictionalizing the collection of autoethnographic stories contained in Part One of my dissertation. As discussed, I could not bring myself to fictionalize the entire collection of stories. In her book on writing, Anne Lamott (1994) references an old Mel Brooks routine where a psychiatrist tells his patient, “Listen to your broccoli, and your broccoli will tell you how to eat it” (p. 110). She suggests that the same concept applies to writers: listen to that voice inside and it will tell you what to write. It seems to me that autoethnographic methodology selected me, rather than the other way around. Yet, my interest in arts-informed methodology meant that even before discovering autoethnography, I had an interest in experimenting with the use of different artistic forms within my research. I have already mentioned my use of letter writing (Flemming, 2020; 2022). During the writing process, I also wrote poetry as an autoethnographic method. Poems offer such an expanse of emotion in a small amount of space. As Leggo (2012) suggests, “Poetry speaks languages that are not necessarily readily translatable, languages filled with riddles, oxymorons,

litotes, paradoxes, hyperbole, all the devices of discourse that can be overlooked in efforts to tame the wildness of language” (p. 152).

Whenever I write a poem, I am usually thinking about love. Or loneliness. In an effort to try something new and experiment across forms, I wrote a poem for the 2022 Mount Community Art Show and Rose translated the poem into a song (Flemming & Folks, 2022). It was interesting to see how my words transformed in her mind. I had no idea what melody the poem that I wrote might take on. I was also nervous about sharing such a personal poem with everyone who visited the gallery. I was not accustomed, at the time, to displaying my own queerness for all to see. Looking back, though, the poem may not have seemed particularly “queer” had I not introduced the poem by telling the audience it was about Rose, and had Rose not then proceeded to play the song for the crowd gathered in the MSVU art gallery. I read the poem before she played the song, as I wrote the poem first. We wondered if the poem might read differently had she played the song first.

I am including both the poem and the song here because one of my aims as a PhD student was to take an exploratory approach to my research. Meaning, I would experiment with different forms and creative practices in order to discover how these processes might inform my writing. Much like Leggo (2012), I believe in collapsing the divisions between who I am as a researcher, as a person, and as a teacher. As a student, I saw everything I encountered as informing my work—whether it was a songwriter’s circle, an art exhibition, or a drag show.

The Stars Might / Christina Flemming

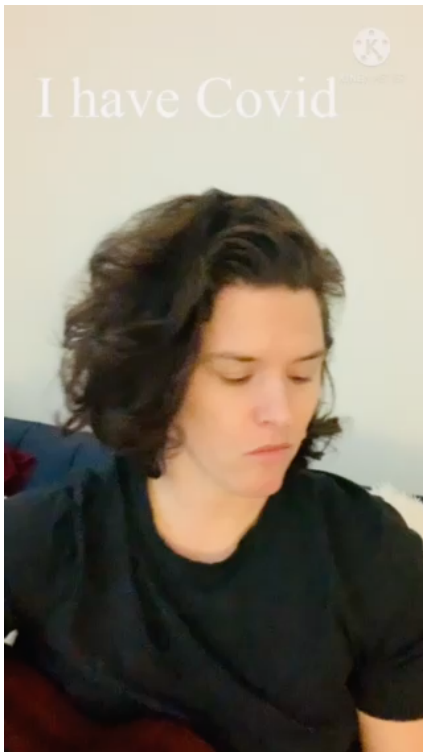
You make me want the power to go out.
 I have a theory that everyone smiles for a split second in the blackness,
 just before it gets cold.
 I could probably still hear the softness of your lips.
 Inside the world under your blanket,
 would you trace the outline of my body with your finger?
 Could I feel the weight of your hip just next to me in the bed?
 We would be there strictly for warmth.
 Obviously.
 But that doesn't mean that you couldn't whisper me a story,
 I want to hear about that time you saw a ghost.

If we keep this up, the stars might catch fire.
 The body doesn't lie like the mouth can,
 it longs for whatever it needs
 milk, toast. . . you.

Your body charged and waiting like a poem.
 In the alchemy of an afternoon without power
 we can turn each other into gold.

Figure 2

"The Stars Might Catch Fire" by Rose Folks, 2022



Note: [Click to play a video of an early version of the song](#)

Previously, in the summer of 2020, I took a writing workshop through the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. Though the workshop took place on Zoom, I made friends with a fellow attendee. John J. Guiney Yallop is a poet and writer and was a professor in the School of Education at Acadia University at the time. I had been exploring my queer experiences in the form of poetry, and John's dissertation, *Out of Place* (Yallop, 2016), was comprised of forty-six poems exploring his experiences growing up gay in rural Newfoundland and, subsequently, working as an openly gay educator.

When I told him a bit about my research methods, wherein I use writing *as* process and writing *to* process, John emailed back kind words of encouragement (written in a rather snazzy email font, I might add):

Don't force yourself to write about something your body, and your writing hands, are not ready for. Write about what comes. Write about what is asking to be written about. Don't force the writing. Respect yourself and what you are being called to do. Don't force. (I know I'm repeating myself.) I find that when I force, my ego comes out. When I listen, really listen, the writing that needs to come comes. Go for a walk. Take a bath. Watch a good movie. Write. Repeat. Coffee also helps, as does red wine; or, they did for me. (personal communication, November 10, 2020)

During this period of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 virus—and lots of other

things, in my case—John’s advice to take pause and listen to one’s writing hands seems particularly salient. We often think about the white space on a page of writing and why it matters, but we don’t give our minds the same room.

I was particularly struck by an article John sent me in the mail—admittedly, I paid particular attention because he told me this article is the one he is most proud of when he considers all the works he published throughout his career—*Exploring an Emotional Landscape: Becoming a Researcher by Reawakening the Poet* (Yallop, 2005). The article speaks about the capacity of poetry to allow a researcher to explore emotionality and the multiple facets of one’s identity. It also references poetry’s ability to function as a disruptive force (Yallop, 2005). He writes:

My poetry is about a child who is poor and gay, an adolescent who seeks in poetry some understanding of his identities, and an adult who finds in that *poor gay child* and that *adolescent poet* a muse. All are *queer*. All are marginalized. When they speak, all are disruptive. (Yallop, 2005, p. 140)

Yallop’s words on the disruptive nature of poetry resonated with me for many reasons. When I first began my doctoral research, I was interested in the storytelling components of disruptive art curation. I had a desire to unhinge exclusionary narratives.

Going back to my original question, it seems ironic that I was concerned about capturing the “raw emotionality” of the period of time in my life when everything felt beyond repair. Another facet of autoethnographic research I had not anticipated fully was how I would feel in the wake of ethics approval from the university. While I had assumed it would be a relief, and it was to some degree, I was also filled with new anxiety about sharing the stories with those in my life who had been depicted. I wanted each person to

know how much I valued them. I wanted each person to know that I did not just take our stories and transform them into curated chapters of my life without great care, worry, time, effort, and love. I, therefore, decided to write each person a letter. While those depicted within the stories had already reviewed and signed the letters of consent required by the university ethics board, the new series of letters would be personal and personalized (meaning, I would write a letter to each person separately, expressing how much they mean to me). I wanted the letters to convey that this is not purely an academic process for me, it is also a deeply personal one.

#9. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest that autoethnographic researchers are able to “artfully arrange life in ways that enable readers to enter into dialogue with our lives as well as with their understanding of their own” (p. 79). How will your research be evocative or relevant to readers who have never questioned their own identity?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

Thomas King (2008) suggests that stories are medicine. Margaret Kovach (2009) has written about the inseparable relationship between story and knowing. I have already written about how this research was life-affirming and therapeutic for me. I have written a collection of “coming of age” stories at mid-life. The focal point of the stories is the development of my queerness, and my expression of it in the world. Yet, whenever I share stories with students, they respond with varied stories of their own. Resonance is not found in parallel experience. Stories that sparkle with authenticity create connection. As said, I am not the only researcher to explore love and its many rhizomes. Ardra Cole

and Maura McIntyre (2006) have explored concepts of love within their community based arts-informed research. They assert,

Love is the central defining concept and construct of our work. We use ‘love’ in the broadest and most inclusive sense—as concept, phenomenon, structure of experience, theoretical construct, emotion. For us love, in all its meanings and manifestations, is about connection. (p. 62)

I had coffee with a friend today who, at one point, exclaimed, “You care so deeply about people.” In response, I said truthfully, “I wish I could just take care of everyone!” I see this research as a form of self-care, but also as a type of care and tending of the past. This type of research is a privilege. Most people do not have the luxury of sharing snippets of their perspective with those implicated in their lives. Under normal circumstances, life chugs along and we never offer others a look behind the veil of our own experiences. I hope that this work allows others to see how deeply I appreciate the care and love and support that they have offered me.

#10. Research Framing Question (posed to myself in October 2021):

Sara Ahmed writes that the “moment of queer pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you” (as cited by Nelson, 2015, p. 18).

How can you get to this place?

Current Thoughts (January 2024):

During my doctoral studies, sensing that I had a poetic sensibility—or overt sentimentality perhaps—the external examiner during my portfolio defense, Dr. Karen

Magro, suggested that I read *Letters to a Young Poet*. I clung to the words of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875/1984) who suggested in one letter to a younger writer:

I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (P. 34)

Autoethnographic methodology calls for the same approach. Halfway through my doctoral research, I recall visiting Ardra's office to talk about the direction of my dissertation. I was unsure of how it would all unfold. "Sounds like you're living it!" she said.

I have a document on my computer desktop called "Interesting words." A friend of mine who is a songwriter told me he keeps lists of words he might like to use in future songs, so I decided to give his technique a try in service of my own writing.

Subsequently, I forgot about the initiative. Months later, I see there are only three words in the document:

Ungraspable
Belongingness
Interconnectedness

What a coincidence that these three words almost perfectly summarize the narrative arc of the stories contained in my dissertation. Accepting myself fully is an ongoing process. Art, teaching, research, and community have shaped my travels toward self-love in ways

that I would not have imagined. Am I in the place of pride that Ahmed mentions now? I would say, truthfully, sometimes yes, sometimes no. I have travelled a long way from who I was at the beginning to my writing to who I am now.

Autoethnographic Ethics—My Process

As a lifelong storyteller, it was not the writing of my dissertation that presented a great struggle. Rather, the greatest challenge implicit in my autoethnographic approach was the process of devising a way to obtain considered and ongoing consent from those depicted within the collection of autoethnographic stories. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that the real struggle was the nagging worry I had for the safety and protection of those mentioned within my autoethnographic stories. Before I devised an autoethnographic ethics process and procedure for myself, I debated endlessly about whether this type of research was even worth the emotional pain it could potentially inflict. I cared, and still care, deeply for everyone mentioned on these pages. Ellis (2007) suggests:

Autoethnography itself is an ethical practice. In life, we often have to make choices in difficult, ambiguous, and uncertain circumstances. At these times, we feel the tug of obligation and responsibility. That's what we end up writing about. Autoethnographies show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean. (p. 26)

While I agree with Ellis from a meaning-making perspective, it was not enough for me to suggest that autoethnographic methodology itself, by nature, is an ethical process. I needed an approach to ethics that would be less abstract, and more concrete, to help guide my research. Next, I offer the reader, and potential autoethnographers, a quick-glance version of my process before elaborating on how I navigated autoethnographic ethics:

- **Who:** Identify who will be depicted within the autoethnographic stories.
- **Verbal Consent:** Seek verbal consent (in advance of any writing) from those depicted in your autoethnographic stories.
- **Letter of information and consent:** Craft and send each person a letter of information and consent. The letter must explicitly communicate that each person can ask for edits during any stage of the process, or request their removal from the stories completely.
- **Letter of parental consent:** If you are depicting a minor, you will need to determine who can offer consent on behalf of the minor.
- **Story drafts:** Offer each person depicted in your autoethnographic work the opportunity to read a rough draft of the stories within which they are depicted (with the option to request edits, or their removal from each story within which they are depicted).
- **Final drafts:** Once a “final” draft of each story has been complete, again, offer each person depicted the opportunity to read and request edits, or removal of their depiction entirely (this step is important as the researcher often edits each story as time passes—*writing is rewriting!*).
- **Final dissertation:** Finally, offer each person depicted the opportunity to read the completed dissertation in its entirety if they choose (again, with the option to request edits or removal from the stories within which they are depicted).

As mentioned, gaining verbal consent from those depicted within the stories constituted the first step in my autoethnographic ethics process. The guidelines for conducting autoethnographic research offered online by Toronto Metropolitan University (2017) suggested verbal consent as a first step:

Individuals conducting autoethnographic research must seek and obtain initial consent from all participants involved in their study before any data collection can begin. This means that prior to researchers beginning to write their first draft, researchers must obtain initial consent from their participants. (Retroactive consent is unacceptable as it can create undue pressure on participants to agree to partake in research-related activities.).

(p. 5)

The reviewer of my UREB ethics application pointed out that it is impossible to obtain permission in advance of data collection, as autoethnographers draw upon past memories and experiences. Yet, receiving verbal consent from each person depicted was nonetheless an important step in the process. A verbal request in advance of any writing is a means of protection for the autoethnographic researcher as well—if I were to write a series of stories and someone depicted did not want to be portrayed at all, that work would be lost as I would be ethically bound to omit those stories.

Once verbal consent was obtained, I proceeded to craft letters of information and consent. As the letters would be emailed to those closest to me, friends and family members, I sought to use plain language as opposed to overly academic language. I wanted the letters to explain my research so that readers would understand what I mean by “autoethnographic stories,” my overall goals for the dissertation, and their involvement in the research. As my daughter is a minor, I penned a letter of parental consent for her father to sign on her behalf. In my case, four out of five people signed the letters and sent them back almost immediately. One person expressed that the letter seemed formulaic. In this person’s opinion, the letter could have been more personal, customized to reflect our relationship. I provided the same letter of information and consent to each person depicted in the stories. Perhaps in future autoethnographic research, I would

consider crafting more personalized letters of information and consent. Yet, I like the idea of providing each person portrayed in my collection of stories with the same letter (as I did), for consistency and, additionally, I would not want any personal details or anecdotes to detract from the overall purpose of the letters—to articulate the research goals, aims, and structure and to explain the iterative process that I was using in order to ensure considered and ongoing consent.

Sharing the Stories

Though I had developed a process allowing those depicted within the stories to review my work and I had obtained UREB approval, the process of showing each story, and obtaining considered and ongoing consent, differed according to the preferences of each person portrayed in the stories. I applied for ethics clearance to depict five people from my life, those who were part of my life during the time of my coming out and, therefore, relevant to the story I sought to tell. The main participants included: myself, (1) my former husband, (2) my daughter, (3) my first female partner, (4) my current partner, and (5) a close friend of mine.

I included myself on the list as I knew it was vital for me to be aware of the dangers of irrevocably sharing personal information. As noted in my UREB application,

According to the ethical guidelines established by Toronto Metropolitan University (2017), “It is important for researchers to think carefully about not disclosing things about themselves that they would not want others to know. This typically includes embarrassing items, intimate information, and stories that may have legal and/or professional implications. In cases where researchers wish to reveal sensitive information about themselves, they should consider implementing safeguards to protect their own confidentiality.” As follows, I have reflected deeply upon the type of information that I

will reveal. I will extend this type of careful consideration to the treatment of all others depicted within the stories. (Flemming, UREB application, 2023)

While I knew from reading about autoethnographic methodology that the writing process is often emotionally fraught, I did not anticipate how difficult it would be to approach people from my life and ask for their review of the stories within which they were depicted. My former husband expressed how hard it was to read the stories, based on the fact that they recount a difficult and painful time in our lives. He did not wish to read multiple versions of each story, but only wanted to read the final draft of the dissertation. We cried together and we spoke about how much we still love and care for one another. I felt a surge of regret for writing the stories, even though he felt that they stayed true to a difficult time in our lives and he did not request any revisions. As our daughter is a minor, he also signed a letter of parental consent on her behalf. Within my UREB application, I wrote about maintaining an awareness that I could never speak on behalf of my daughter; rather, I wanted to focus on centering the emotional labour and work involved in motherwork, while honouring the everyday knowledge gained from the act of mothering.

Though I am still close friends with my first female partner—and she read early drafts of the stories contained within my dissertation and gave me verbal approval to use them—she was still hurt by the content when I showed her the “final” drafts of the stories within which she was depicted. Though I offered her the opportunity to read the collection of stories in its entirety, she opted to read only the stories within which she was depicted. When I showed her the “final” iterations of each story, she expressed that they were extremely difficult for her to read. I was surprised by this, as she had encountered earlier versions of the stories and had given me her verbal permission to write about any part of our lives that I saw fit. Here, it is important to

acknowledge that feelings can change. Even if someone grants you full reign to write about your lives today, his/her/their opinion could shift over time; this is why the autoethnographer must be ready to pivot and alter the work, if requested.

“Lena” also requested a series of edits upon reviewing the “final” iteration. Again, I was surprised. The edits that I made, as requested, were changes that felt minor from my perspective but held great emotional weight for the person who requested them. Though she did provide consent for my inclusion of the stories in the final dissertation, our conversation about my research was imbued with so much more than was written on paper. She expressed regret about our relationship ending and unresolved pain, and our conversation about the stories was tearful and painful for us both. As we sat across from one another at a coffee shop, taking turns crying, with the stories between us on the table, I again wondered whether my writing was really worth the pain it had caused. Then, not long afterward, we exchanged Christmas gifts. My Christmas card contained a note from her about being honoured that I chose to write about her. I was again reminded of the complexity of this type of research.

My current partner, Rose, read early drafts of each story. I remember finishing new stories and excitedly emailing her, then pacing around as she printed and read each one. When I sent her the final story in my collection of autoethnographic stories, she emailed back and said, “Although I cried through the entire story, it was also like being slapped across the face with a fresh piece of lovage. I am humbled, honoured and so excited to be a part of your story; our love story.” Rose did not request any edits. Similarly, my close friend also read each early draft. She requested minor edits throughout the writing process, but none upon the completion of my dissertation.

In order to further protect the anonymity of those portrayed in the stories, I changed names, aside from Rose's, and avoided physical descriptions. I focused on dialogue-driven writing instead. As Lamott says in *Bird by Bird* (1994), "One line of dialogue that rings true reveals character in a way that pages of description can't" (p. 47). Rose and I debated about whether to change her name or not. Ultimately, I wanted to celebrate our love, and so we made the decision not to use a pseudonym.

I have come to see the pragmatics of autoethnographic ethics as another expression of love for those depicted within the stories. They provided me, as an autoethnographic researcher, with a roadmap and a way forward with this type of writing. Yet, they also represented a means of care and protection for those mentioned within the stories. Here, I am reminded of the words of Carol Gilligan (2002) who suggests that love is a map for all of us:

Maybe love is like rain. Sometimes gentle, sometimes torrential, flooding, eroding, joyful, steady, filling the earth, collecting in underground springs. When it rains, when we love, life grows. To say that there are two roads, one leading to life and one to death and therefore to choose life, is to say in effect: choose love. We have a map. We know the way. (p. 235)

As mentioned, I received UREB clearance to depict my parents fictionally. I elected to omit their names, professions, physical descriptions, and any other personal characteristics that would potentially identify them. Though the reader understands that I am depicting emotional experiences in relation to my own family, there are countless members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community who have struggled for familial acceptance. Unfortunately, there is a universalism in my experience that many others can relate to.

The stories, to me, depict the harm that fear can cause. I am still deeply grateful for everything my parents have given me. As an only child, I have played a huge part in their lives, as they have in mine. Though they were not interested in reading this work, I suspect that is ultimately for the best. There have been optimistic moments when I imagined that sharing my collection of stories with them could be cathartic for us all. Yet, they continue to show their unease in relation to me acknowledging my sexual orientation publicly. The emotional pain depicted in my autoethnographic stories has not been recognized in the form of an apology, but we forge ahead because I have been unwilling to give up having my parents in my life. When I mentioned this disconnect to a friend, she told me that her parents kicked her out, years back, when she told them she was a lesbian. She saw her mother recently on the street, but her mother refused to speak.

When I first started writing the collection of autoethnographic stories, I desperately wished for a happy ending. To be specific, I dreamed of walking across the stage during my doctoral graduation with my female partner and my proud parents in the audience. From my current vantage point, I see that endings are often surprising and frequently differ from what you once hoped. There were many points during the writing process when I said, “I don’t know how this will end!” I spoke about my uncertainty despite knowing exactly how I hoped it would end: with acceptance. My story does end with acceptance, though, as I have learned to embrace and celebrate myself. In doing so, I have found others who joyfully love me—all of me, not just the parts they can accept. Chosen family is not a replacement for one’s own family; it is something altogether new—and fresh with beauty.

The Highway

Throughout the past year, I have developed a relationship with the highway. Living an hour away from your partner, as I do, necessitates many trips back and forth. City to valley. Valley to city. Tank after tank of gas. Despite my elegant demeanour, I am an expert at the pumps. I have wanted to make art out of the journey. But how can you nail down something as ephemeral as a drive? Two trips will never be exactly the same. I often point toward two crows along the shoulder of the road and smile. If I spot a single crow, I scan the horizon for a second. It is a bad practice, from a driver safety perspective.

There have been trips with rain pounding down on the windshield. There have been trips in the thin film of wet snow. There have been trips when I had to squint into the sunshine. I have laughed and cried across miles of highway, alone in my 2009 Chrysler Sebring. Even when the weather was its worst, I knew that I would arrive. Autoethnographic methodology is a lot like the drive. Just like with a car trip, if you were to sit down and undertake the writing tomorrow, it would take on a different shape from the writing you might undertake today. There is no way of predicting what kinds of weather you will encounter in the distance it takes to arrive (doctoral work takes years, after all—babies are born, relatives are lost, jobs change, old cars are replaced by new ones, unfortunately, without CD players. . .). Yet, you keep driving. You keep driving even when it looks like you might not have enough gas to get there. There will always be a gas station somewhere. Get some coffee. You might need it.

I would like to conclude by offering a brief list of things to consider if you are planning to undertake autoethnographic writing. If you are reading only parts of this dissertation in anticipation of your own research, know that I wish you good luck. As a new doctoral student, I

read many dissertations that came before mine. In service of those undertaking a similar process, I have created the following list of questions:

Questions to Ask Yourself Before Committing to an Autoethnographic Project

1. How far removed am I emotionally from the events I will be recounting? I think it is okay to write from within an experience, but you will also need emotional distance in order to deepen your perspective. How much time are you willing to devote to reflection and rewriting? How will you feel if, perhaps inevitably, this type of writing requires more of a pause than you had anticipated?
2. This could be an emotional process for those implicated in your stories. How would you honour reluctance on the part of those who are closest to you?
3. How will you complicate your own perspective in order to consider other angles? How can you deepen your understanding of the perspectives of those who are implicated in your stories?
4. What will be the organizing thread that pulls your work together narratively? If not chronologically, how will you structure your story?
5. How will revisiting events feel for you? How will you practice self-care during the writing process and the revision process? What might revisiting your earlier self entail?

6. What discoveries might be brought into the world through your research? You may not have a single research question, but what would you like to explore or uncover with your writing?
7. How do you imagine knowing that you are done? It can be difficult to envision an end point when taking an autoethnographic approach.
8. How might you structure the scholarly contextualization of your autoethnographic writing?
9. How comfortable are you with uncertainty?

One Last Story . . .

In advance of teaching my first master's level course, I attended a talk on Indigenous pedagogy. When the session opened up for questions, I asked an Indigenous Elder for the advice he would give to someone about to teach her first university course.

He paused for quite a while.

I felt embarrassed for having asked such a question. As the talk was part of an online conference, I was suddenly keenly aware of depicting myself as a complete novice in front of scholars from across the country.

“That’s a good question,” the Elder said.

He paused some more.

“That is your first lesson,” he said after a while. “When a student asks a question and you’re unsure of the best answer, don’t rush, just tell them, ‘That’s a good question,’ and pause for a while. Gives you space to think.”

I nodded. In my notebook, I wrote: *Don’t be afraid of silence!* A good piece of advice not just for facilitation, but for life in general. The Elder then held up a turtle shell. He pointed to its roundish segments.

“See how there are thirteen big segments on the turtle’s shell? Each one represents one of the thirteen moons,” he explained. “When the turtle is afraid or worried, she retreats into her shell. This allows for self-reflection. There, inside her shell, the turtle is able to reflect upon all the things she’s acquired from living her life—it’s all already inside of her. Then, and only then, does she emerge from her shell. You, like the turtle have everything you need—the knowledge and skills—inside of yourself already.”

If you are just beginning your own doctoral research, remember: you’re the turtle.

* * *

In the waiting area of my therapist’s office, someone hung up a sign that says, *Sometimes the fear won’t go away, so you’ll have to do it afraid.*

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Adams, T. E. (2011). *Narrating the closet: An autoethnography of same-sex attraction*. Routledge.
- Adams, T. E. (2021, March 2). The art of autoethnography [video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-CyUBLhk6Q>
- Adams, T. E., & Holman Jones, S. (2018). The art of autoethnography. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *Handbook of arts-based research* (pp. 141-164). The Guilford Press.
- Allison, D. (1996). *Two or three things I know for sure*. Plume.
- Alterio, M., & McDrury, J. (2003). Chapter 2: Storytelling influences. In M. Alterio., & J. McDrury, *Storytelling in higher education: Using reflection and experience to improve learning* (pp. 19-29). Taylor & Francis.
- Barg, R. M. (2001). *Motherwork: Subsistence learning* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/16327>
- Bernard, E. (2005, Sept 1). Teaching the n-word. *The American Scholar*. <https://theamericanscholar.org/teaching-the-n-word/>
- Bernard, E. (2019). *Black is the body*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Bernstein Sycamore, M. (2020). *The freezer door*. MIT Press.
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2002). *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics*. AltaMira Press.
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling Stories*. Routledge.
- Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 266–272.

- Bowles, M., Burns, C., Hixson, J., Austin Jenness, S., & Tellers, L. (2023). *How to tell a story*. Random House.
- Brookfield, S. (2012). Chapter eight: Critical theory and transformative learning. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning : Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 131-146). John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Braswell, P. (2022, June 14). What's wrong with the word 'minority'? *Fast Company*.
<https://www.fastcompany.com/90760220/whats-wrong-with-the-word-minority>
- Butterwick, S. (2017). The contributions of political fashion shows and fabric to visual arts-based practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2017(154), 71-81.
 doi:10.1002/ace.20232
- Church, K. (2008). Exhibiting as inquiry: Travels of an accidental curator. In J. G., Knowles & A. L., Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues* (pp. 421-434). Sage.
- Clark, M. Carolyn. (2010). Narrative learning: Its contours and its possibilities. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2010(126), 3-11.
- Clover, D., & Sanford, K. (2016). Contemporary museums as pedagogic contact zones: Potentials of critical cultural adult education. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 48(2), 127-141. doi:10.1080/02660830.2016.1219495
- Cole, A. L. (2004). The Christmas doll. In S. Weber & C. Mitchell (Eds.). *Not just any dress: Narratives of memory, body, and identity* (pp.137-144). The Falmer Press.
- Cole, A. L., & J. G. Knowles. (2008). Arts-informed research. In J. G., Knowles & A. L., Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research*. (pp. 55-70). Sage.
- Cole, A., & MacIntyre, M. (2014). Loving daughters loving mothers: A dialogue about care

- and caregiving. In R. Ewing & A. L. Cole (Eds.) *Performing Scholartistry* (pp. 126-141). Backalong Books.
- Comber, B. (2015). Critical literacy and social justice. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(5), 362-367. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44009159>
- Cuellar, J. M. (2017). Marriage or mirage? The breakdown of a break-up. In S. L. Pensoneau-Conway, T. E. Adams & D. M. Bolen (Eds.), *Doing Autoethnography* (pp. 45-53). Sense.
- cummings, e. e. (2021/1952, May 11). “[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in)]” [poem]. [https://www. poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/49493/i-carry-your-heart-with-me-i-carry-it-in](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/49493/i-carry-your-heart-with-me-i-carry-it-in)
- Cusk, R. (2002). *A life's work: On becoming a mother*. Picador.
- DiAngelo, R. J. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard to talk to white people about racism*. Beacon Press.
- Didion, J. (2011). *Blue nights*. Vintage International.
- Downey, A., & Flemming, C. (2023, June). *Affect, tears, and small moments: A dou-currere in the foundations of education*. Paper. The Currere Exchange: 7th Annual Conference and Retreat. Miami University, Online. Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C. (1993). “There are survivors”: Telling a story of sudden death. *Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4), 711–730. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1993.tb00114.x>
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.
- Eisner, E. (2008). Persistent tensions in arts-based research. In M. Cahnmann-Taylor & R. Siegesmund (Eds.), *Arts-based research in education: Foundations for practice* (pp. 16–27). Routledge.

- Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Ellis, C., Bochner, A., Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y., Morse, J., Pelias, R., & Richardson, L. (2008). Talking and thinking about qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(2), 254-284. doi: 10.1177/1077800407311959
- Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Left Coast Press.
- Fan, J. (2019). Queering Disney animated films using a critical literacy lens. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 16(2), 119-133.
- Flemming, C. (2020, June 6). Dear Matilda: Letter writing as research method. *Antistasis*, 10(1), 1-14. Retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/antistasis/article/view/30379>
- Flemming, C. (Host). (2021, April). Arts informed methodology panel podcast [audio podcast episode]. *Spotify*. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/59N1uMAndVTPvmaetOvcIB?si=68ba8da46bf74f9b>
- Flemming, C. (2022). Arts & letters: Meditative inquiry as invitation. In A. Kumar (Ed.), *Engaging with meditative inquiry in teaching, learning, and research: Realizing transformative potentials in diverse contexts*. Routledge.
- Flemming, C. & Folks, R. (2022, February). The stars might catch fire: A poem turned song [art installation]. Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Flemming, C. (2023). Crying as Process(ing). PechaKucha: A Visual Storytelling Event. CAIRT (Community for Arts-Informed Research and Teaching. Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

- Fook, J. (2015). Reflective practice and critical reflection. In J. Lishman (Ed.), *Handbook for practice learning in social work and social care* (pp. 440-454). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Gibson, C. (2019). *How she read*. Caitlin Press.
- Gilligan, C. (2002). *The birth of pleasure*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Gornick, V. (2001). *The situation and the story: New edition for writers, teachers, and students*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Green, B. (2015). Research, practice, emergence; or, Emergent methodologies in cultural inquiry and educational research. *Fusion*, 7, 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.fusion-journal.com/issue/007-fusion-mask-performance-performativity-and-communication/research-practice-emergence-or-emergent-methodologies-in-cultural-inquiry-and-educational-research/>
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination*. Jossey-Bass.
- Gringle, M. (2023). Engaging resistance: A poetic hermeneutical phenomenology of mothering. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 8(1), 245-269.
- Gosse, D. M. (2005). *Breaking silences, an inquiry into identity and the creative research process* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Toronto.
- Government of Canada (2024, May). Federal pathway to address missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1622233286270/1622233321912>
- Goyette, S. (2019). "from Ocean" [poem]. <https://writers.ns.ca/programs-awards/poetry-in-motion/home-2019/>
- Forrest, M., & Joy, P. (2023). Shame and disavowing queer reality: An autotheoretical

- analysis. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 8(1), 69-99.
- Fowles, S. M., & Sookfong Lee, J. (Eds.). (2022). *Good mom on paper: Writers on creativity and motherhood*. Book*hug Press.
- Habib, S. (2019). *We have always been here*. Viking.
- Haugh, B. (2016). Becoming a mother and learning to breastfeed: An emergent autoethnography. *The Journal of Perinatal Education*, 25(1), 56-68. doi: 10.1891/1058-1243.25.1.56
- Heti, S., Julavits, H., & Shapton, L. (Eds.). (2014). *Women in clothes*. Penguin.
- Holman Jones, S., & Adams, T. E. (2010). Autoethnography and queer theory: Making possibilities. In N. K. Denzin & M. G. Giardina (Eds.), *Qualitative Inquiry and Human Rights* (pp. 136-157). Taylor and Francis.
- Holman Jones, S., Adams, T.E., & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of autoethnography*. Left Coast Press.
- Holman Jones, S. (2014). Always strange. In J. Wyatt & T. E. Adams (Eds.), *On (writing) families* (pp. 13-21). Sense.
- Holman Jones, S., & Harris, A. M. (2019). *Queering autoethnography*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2010). Telling the story. In *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom* (pp. 49-53).
- King, T. (2008). A million porcupines crying in the dark. In J. G. Knowles, & A. L. Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research* (pp. 13-25). Sage.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations and contexts*. University of Toronto.
- Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. Pantheon Books.
- Lamott, A. (2003, June 6). *Let us commence*. Salon. <https://www.salon.com/2003/06/06/>

[commencement/](#)

- Lee, L. (2021). *A history of scars: A memoir*. Atria Paperback.
- Leggo, C. (2007). Writing truth in classrooms: Personal revelation and pedagogy. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 3(1), 27-37. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.msvu.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=25611285&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Leggo, C. (2012). Living language: What is a poem good for? *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 10(2), N/a.
- Leggo, C. (2015). Loving language: a poet's vocation and vision. In S. Walsh & B. Bickel (Eds.), *Arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching: Honoring presence* (pp. 141–168). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Loneragan, P. (2020, January 27). Alumna Indigenous designer Lesley Hampton in the spotlight after dress turns heads at golden globes. *University of Toronto Alumni News*.
<https://alumni.utoronto.ca/news/alumna-indigenous-designer-lesley-hampton-spotlight-after-dress-turns-heads-golden-globes>
- McDermott, E. & Roen, K. (2016). *Queer youth, suicide and self-harm: Troubled subjects, troubling norms*. Springer.
- Neilsen, L. (1998). *Knowing her place: Research literacies and feminist occasions*. Backalong Books.
- Nelson, M. (2015). *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press.
- Onciul, B. (2013). Community engagement, curatorial practice, and museum ethos in Alberta, Canada. In V. Golding & W. Modest (Eds.), *Museums and communities: Curators, collections, and collaboration* (pp. 83-96). Bloomsbury Academic.

- Orah Mark, S. (2020). Fuck the bread. The bread is over. *The Paris Review*. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/05/07/fuck-the-bread-the-bread-is-over/>
- Plenitude Magazine (2023, Sept 11). *Submission Guidelines*.
<https://plenitudemagazine.ca/submit/submissionguidelines/>
- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 959-978). Sage Publications.
- Rich, A. (1976/2018). Motherhood and daughterhood. In S. M. Gilbert (Ed.), *Essential essays: Culture, politics, and the art of poetry* (pp. 107-146). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Rich, A. (1997/2018). Why I refused the national medal for the arts. In S. M. Gilbert (Ed.), *Essential essays: Culture, politics, and the art of poetry* (pp. 319-325). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Rich, A. C. (2003). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence (1980). *Journal of Women's History*, 15(3), 11–48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0079>
- Rilke, R. M. (1984/1875). *Letters to a young poet*. Random House.
- Sangha, J. K. (2012). *Stepmothering: A spiritual journey*. Demeter Press.
- Sameshima, P., & Leggo, C. (2013). How do you spell love? Curricular conversations. *Creative Approaches to Research* 6(1), 89-109.
- Sexton, A. (2024/1981, May 14). “Wanting to die” [poem]. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42567/wanting-to-die>
- Shapland, J. (2020) *My autobiography of Carson McCullers: A memoir*. Tin House Books.
- The Moth (2023). *Storytelling tips and tricks: How to tell a successful story*.
<https://themoth.org/share-your-story/storytelling-tips-tricks>

- Toronto Metropolitan University (2017, November). *Guidelines for conducting autoethnographic Research*. <https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/research/documents/ethics/guidelines-for-conducting-autoethnographic-research.pdf>
- Trussell, D. (2015). Pinstripes and breast pumps: Navigating the tenure-motherhood-track. *Leisure Sciences*, 37(2), 160-175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2014.980590>
- Unsworth, L. (2001). *Teaching multiliteracies across the curriculum*. Open University Press.
- Winterson, J. (1995). *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. Jonathan Cape.
- Winterson, J. (2017, April 8). We need to be more imaginative about modern marriage. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/08/jeanette-winterson-marriage-monogamy-wedding>
- Yallop, J. J. G. (2016). *Out of place*. Friesen Press.