

# Ways of Attending: Art and Poetry

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**Abstract:** We have been making art and writing poetry together for many years. As colleagues in arts-based education research, we have journeyed together with many colleagues and students, in many research projects, in dreaming possibilities for teacher education, in promoting the value of a/r/tography as a way of understanding our intricate and composite identities as artists, researchers, and teachers. For us, seeing is not solitary. Instead, seeing is a creative practice of living well with one another in relationship to the world. So, in this article, Rita L. Irwin's photography and Carl Leggo's poetry come alongside in order to perform ways of attending.

**Keywords:** A/r/tography; Art; Photography; Poetry; Attending; Ekphrasis.

## Carl Leggo's prefatory note

In collaborating with Rita, I am reminded of Richard Miller's (2005) observation that "sustaining a self and sustaining a culture are ceaseless activities. Both projects are always under construction and always under repair" (p. 49). As a poet and researcher and educator (a/r/tographer), I am always eager to journey with visual artists in the ways of creative exploration, incisive interrogation, and pedagogic playfulness. Like Wendell Berry (1990) understands, "any poem worth the name is the product of a convocation. It exists, literally, by recalling past voices into presence" (p. 89). So, with Rita I call out, hoping to invoke and evoke and provoke our shared enthusiasm for the arts and learning to live well in the world. Like Barbara Kingsolver (2002), "my way of finding a place in this world is to write one" (p. 233). For many years I have enjoyed the privilege of journeying with Rita in writing and art making, in finding a place where I can linger in being and becoming, always sustained with creative hope and conviction.

I was recently enjoying brunch with a colleague at the Steveston Hotel Café when my colleague noted some birds outside the window. She asked, "Are those seagulls?" Here is the poem I wrote after our brunch. I wrote the poem as a rumination on a pedagogical encounter that I want to continue to learn from.

## Snow Geese

at the Steveston Hotel Café  
Laura and I discuss poetry  
loss trauma blessings

Laura asks, are those seagulls?  
silver birds with dark wing tips  
hover outside the expansive window

(perhaps ducks, I wonder how many  
birds live near the Gulf of Georgia)  
Laura notes, they're snow geese

just the day before I had walked  
to Garry Point, everywhere snow geese  
I didn't see, or at least didn't look

even though I grew up with  
Dick's reminding Sally  
*Look, look.*  
*Look up.*  
*Look up, up, up.*

gap of poetic awareness  
caught up in whirling busyness  
saturated inattentive senseless

knowing how little I know,  
will ever know, I will heed  
Dick's wisdom and look, look

### **Rita L. Irwin's prefatory note**

In collaborating with Carl, I am reminded of Pauline Sameshima (2008) who states, "Teaching and learning occur everywhere, not only in the classroom. Learning occurs in the in-between spaces of liminality, between the lines of the poem ... between fiction and non-fiction" (p. 49). To live well in the world, Carl and I embrace the potentials we experience in-between our visual and poetic practices. I too am always eager to journey with poets and have enjoyed many years of collaboration with Carl. Both of us have explored a/r/tography and other forms of artistic research. For us, a/r/tography is an ontological positioning that embraces both questioning and questing (Irwin & Ricketts, 2013) through artistic and pedagogical encounters, those in-between spaces where we can linger in the unexpected, embracing the liminality of what may unfold through ambiguous, embodied, and intuitive invitations to material and conceptual practices (Triggs & Irwin, in press).

When a/r/tography was first conceptualized, renderings were presented as a way to understand concepts as methods: a way of disrupting taken for granted social science methods. Sylvia Kind (2006) describes them as "an entangling of art and text" (p. 49). She suggests that when they are woven throughout the process, practice and text of inquiry, they become "the substance, shape and process of inquiry ... constitutive encounters and interconnections that speak in conversation *with, in, and through* art and text" (p. 49, italics in the original). In this way, a/r/tography is at once a material and conceptual practice always in a state of movement that exceeds any perceived products, protocols, or practices, in order to embrace emergence, always in movement, always becoming. As such a/r/tography is also committed to reciprocity. To work alongside others opens ourselves up to the unknown and to becoming co-creators of knowledge, co-designers of pedagogy, and co-participants in communities of practice. It is through this reciprocity with others that we become attuned to the potential for inquiry. After all,

becoming requires the presence of the other: it is through our dialogue that encounters, invitations, and conversations inspire opportunities to learn anew. In this conceptual back and forth of art and poetry, theorizing and practicing, we engage in material and conceptual practices exploring our ways of attending. In giving attention to this evocative and provocative rumination, we explore the multiple ways we attend to many creative potentials of living our lives with artful engagement and poetic delight, and we hope our ways of attending find resonance with others who engage with artistic and poetic ways of attending.

The photographs shared here are entitled as propositions to attending. Propositions draw our attention to potentials and through these photographs we linger in the potential for attending, to attunement, for insights somewhere between actualities and potentialities (Whitehead, 1978, pp. 185-186). The images were taken during forest walks as I attended to the proposition of movement beyond my own. The blurring of images, a result of moving the camera, evokes a liminality that calls us to think again, to search again, to create again. In relationship with the world around me, I moved and was moved, to reimagine my everyday walks and meanderings. Carl accompanied me (from afar) through his poetry and together we ruminated on pedagogy.

### **Ruminating on photography and poetry**

In *What photography is* James Elkins (2011) notes that “seeing is essentially solitary, and photography is one of the emblems of that solitude” (p. viii). We, on the other hand, find that our ways of seeing are challenged, enhanced, and complemented when we learn to see together. We have been making art and writing poetry together for many years. As colleagues in arts-based education research, we have journeyed together with many colleagues and students, in many research projects, in dreaming possibilities for teacher education, in promoting the value of a/r/tography as a way of understanding our intricate and composite identities as artists, researchers, and teachers. For us, seeing is not “essentially solitary.” Instead, seeing is a creative practice of living well with one another in relationship to the world. So, in this article, Rita’s photography and Carl’s poetry come alongside, in order to meet metonymically, in order to perform ways of attending. According to Elkins (2011), “we all use photographs to help us think of ourselves and our world” (p. 38), but Elkins is especially concerned about all we “scrupulously ignore” (p. 38). So, Elkins demonstrates how to attend to photographs so the viewer pays attention to more than what is clearly and readily present. Elkins critiques Roland Barthes’ *Camera lucida* because he wants “to find another sense of photography” (p. ix) that extends beyond “one of photography’s indispensable theoretical concepts” (p. ix)—the punctum—the “little point of pressure or pain, hidden in every photograph, waiting to prick the viewer” (p. ix). In particular, Elkins complains that the punctum is “a tourism of the overlooked, spiced with little surprises and ‘shocks’” (p. 38). Instead, he wants viewers to attend to photographs “where the world is fractured, folded, faint, undependable, invisible, more or less ruined” (p. 34). Elkins promotes looking carefully (with consummate care) at photographs. Rita’s photographs in this article represent a fragment of many photographs made during a/r/tographic walks in Pacific Spirit Park on the edges of the University of British Columbia (Triggs, Leggo, & Irwin, 2014). Carl has been responding to these photographs for over ten years, and he is still learning new ways of attending. In turn, Carl’s poetry invites Rita to see her art differently, to see with prepositional possibilities—in, through, with, under, over, between.... Like Elkins we are concerned about “what counts as normal seeing” (p. 68),

and like Elkins, we know that the more we look the less we see (p. 72). Elkins calls for photographs that “re-enchant the world” (p. 86).

In this article Carl has written poems in ekphrastic response to Rita’s art as he continues to learn to acknowledge the ways that Rita enchants in her art making and as he seeks to “re-enchant the world.” In turn, Carl and Rita ruminate together as a/r/tographers on themes and questions of attending to the world and words, art and art making, teaching and learning. In the article we also perform artfully and a/r/tographically as we meander meaningfully amidst the words of others.

### **Ruminating on resonance**



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #1*. Digital photograph.

### **Photosynthesis**

when I write  
a poem I begin  
by laying down  
letters and words  
even though I  
seldom know  
where the words  
will take me

I am always on  
a Winnie the Pooh  
meandering explore  
that might lead  
somewhere but  
probably will not

I must be patient:  
how many colors  
    of green are there?  
can the colors  
    of green be counted?

Rita's photo does not  
call my attention  
to a punctum

instead I am lost  
in the maze maelstrom  
chaos except I am not  
really lost I feel  
a sense of belonging  
here a sense I cannot  
make simple sense  
of this image composed  
of shadow lines colors

I see the sunlight  
in the gaps I gasp  
because I also see  
the light in the leaves

I can almost see  
photosynthesis at work  
the leaves convert  
light energy into  
chemical energy  
and oxygen for  
sustaining life  
on Earth I want  
to attend to light  
I want to know  
synthesis I want  
to acknowledge  
how the parts are  
put together made  
wonder full

like art and poetry

I will learn to breathe  
with the tree like  
pulmonary veins  
carry oxygen  
from lungs to heart

I will linger  
with Rita's art  
so I can see with  
the heart how all  
of life is created  
connected sustained  
by intricate networks  
of communication  
steeped in love

While we contend that photographic art and ekphrastic poetry invite careful and close attending to the world around us, we are not suggesting that the world is simply grasped in the ways of presentation and representation. In *Rarity and the poetic: The gesture of small flowers* Harold Schweizer (2016) claims that “a poem gestures rather than means or represents; it does not produce knowledge” (p. 6). What we seek to know in our artistic collaboration is how to be more attentive to the rare gesture of poetry and art. Instead of seeking meaning or interpretation, we seek connections, we seek to linger with texts in order to know their textures, the complex interrelationships of parts that connect and do not connect. Schweizer writes about how a poem “‘gives off’ something that, although we assign it the solidity of concepts and meaning, more often than not consists merely of intimations as airy as the dust of the flower’s stamen” (p. 4). For Schweizer, the poem is “endlessly opening to further readings” (p. 5). This is our experience of collaborating in responding to one another through art and poetry. As Schweizer knows, the kind of creative language we are always seeking “is not language as representation but language as experience, embodied language, not language to produce knowledge but a fluttering, an intimation of that which speaks in us when we speak” (p. 16). We seek to live in art and poetry that “convey resonance, timbre, silence, intimation, tone” (p. 11). The word *resonance* is etymologically derived from the Latin *resonare*—‘resound’ or ‘echo.’ In our art and poetry, we are seeking to call out, to resound, to echo what we hear when we walk in the forest, when we linger with words, when we look with the camera, when we imagine possibilities, when we call out to one another.

## Ruminating on surprise



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #2*. Digital photograph.

## Ravelling & revelling

scholars like to analyze  
methodically, meticulously  
incrementally, iteratively  
comprehensively, cohesively

scholars engage in  
examination, investigation  
inspection, survey  
study, scrutiny  
probe, research  
review, evaluation  
interpretation, dissection

the kind of language  
we mimic in the social sciences  
but

not the kind of language  
we hear in the arts

from the Greek *analysis*,  
unloose or loosen up,  
to analyze is to unravel

but to ravel is also to unravel  
instead of separating something  
into its constituent parts, let's  
acknowledge the myriad elements  
flowing like untethered hair in the wind

may we revel in ravelling  
    may we ravel in revelling  
may we travel in rebelling  
    may we rebel in travelling

analysis is divergent  
unravelling, not a convergence  
on a theme, moral, point

poetry is not seeking  
to make a point  
poetry is the point

poetry is a making,  
an opening up,  
a playful engagement  
with abundance

like art

may we dance in the light  
of merriment, revelling in  
the ravelling creation  
ancient, always in process

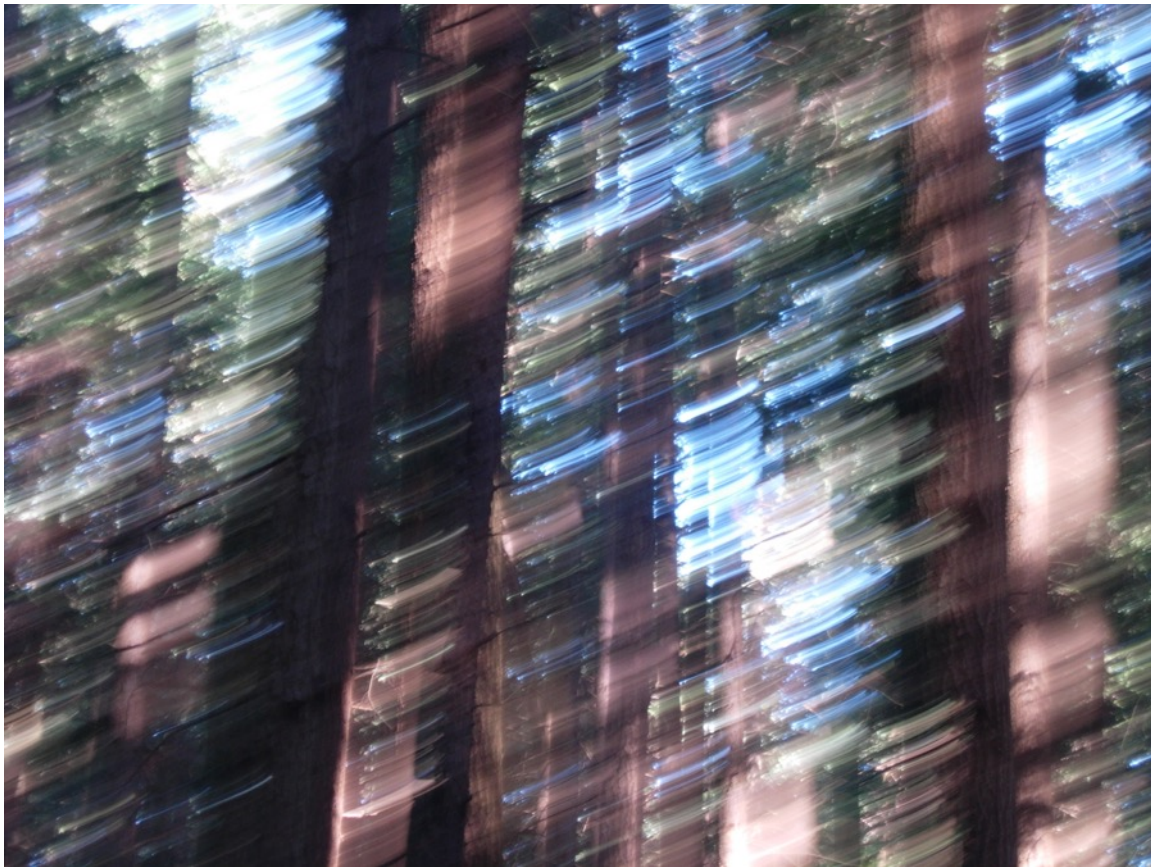
instead of disentangling  
let us tango like Rita and I  
dance in a choreographed celebration  
of playful purposeful walking  
in the midst of creative possibilities

Though we have titled our article "Ways of Attending," any such title can only gesture toward our intention. We could have titled the article "Ways of Seeing," or "Ways of Hearing," or "Ways of Knowing," or "Ways of Being." What we seek to know is a sense of sensual and embodied experience that is intangible, intuitive, and



imaginative. We seek to be attuned to tone and timbre, to listen to the vivacious voice of creation that is both definable and indefinable. We agree with Schweizer that “a poem’s intricate rhetoric, its puzzling formalities, its difficult words, its fragile reticence, require of us no less than to become listeners” (p. 31). In a similar way, we are learning together to attend to sounds, silences, and resonances in each other’s art, in poetry and photography. And we are learning how to linger with indeterminacy, mystery, and surprise. We are always open to being surprised by one another. In the experience of surprise we know there is always more to be known. There is always the shimmering, shade-filled, light-ludic wonder of seeing *what is* while knowing there is always more to see. About poetry, Schweizer invites us “to hear a speaking that extends beyond the conceptual, visible, and audible evidence of the words on the page” (p. 90). And we seek also to hear “a speaking that extends beyond the conceptual, visible, and audible evidence of” the pixels on the screen. We need to learn to hear with acute attention.

### **Ruminating on ambiguity**



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #3*. Digital photograph.

### **High School Chemistry**

*I saw in a dream a table  
where all elements fell  
into place as required.*

*Awakening, I immediately  
wrote it down...  
—Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev*

in grade eleven  
I remember the clock  
ticking inexorably  
with the rhythms  
of Mr. Howell's voice  
like a metronome  
more logically precise  
than the elements  
of the periodic table  
where chemistry  
was laid out in tidy rows  
    messiness belied  
    mystery disguised

a tabular arrangement  
    atomic numbers  
electronic configurations  
    chemical properties  
periodic trends

I always wanted  
more chemistry  
in the chemistry class

I wanted to know  
what I know now

how the Russian chemist  
Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev  
formulated the periodic table  
after a dream, always ready

how on April 27, 1862  
he married Feozva Nikitichna Leshcheva  
    became a professor  
    a doctor of science  
    an international scholar of chemistry  
    almost a Nobel Laureate

and in 1876 fell in love  
with Anna Ivanova Popova  
courted her   proposed  
threatened suicide if she said no  
divorced his first wife   married

his beloved in 1882 a scandal  
in the Russian Orthodox Church

at sixteen I memorized  
the Periodic Table  
but I wanted chemistry  
full of blood breath longing

in old age I am still looking  
for the Mendeleev crater  
on the far side of the moon  
remembering the dreamer

In *Why art photography?* Lucy Soutter (2013) promotes a contemporary perspective on viewer response akin to reader response where the reader or viewer responds to a text by connecting personally, by acknowledging the personal and political and pedagogical positions that contain and even constrain the experiences of reading and viewing. Soutter recognizes that photography is “a perfect medium for enacting postmodern critiques of representation” (p. 4). Postmodernism promotes the constitutive dynamic of language, rejects totalizing narratives, understands how the subject is a construct in process, resists closure, and celebrates knowledge as partial and fragmented (Leggo, 2006). Rita’s photography is art, and like Soutter claims, “to its detractors, art photography is elitist, pretentious, irrelevant, self-indulgent and even misleading—a kind of distortion of photography’s proper function as a democratic medium for depicting the world we inhabit” (p. 7). Rita’s photography deliberately and creatively refuses to depict “the world we inhabit” or at least the world that we typically see represented in so much photography. Instead, Rita’s art invites the kind of heartfelt engagement that sustains our contemplation and curiosity. Rita’s photography does not invite a literal response or interpretation. Instead, Rita’s photography invites multiple responses that are steeped in imaginative possibilities and ambiguous meaning-making. Hence, Carl’s poetic responses to Rita’s art are intended to open up even further possibilities for interpretation. Regarding contemporary art photography, Soutter promotes “an ambiguity of meaning in which different interpretations—even mutually contradictory ones—may be held at the same time” (p. 28). According to Soutter, “such interpretive conflict” is “regarded as a sign of desirable openness, reflecting the layered reality of experience in our time” (p. 28). Soutter recommends that precedence be given “to viewers’ direct experience” of the art work (p. 87) because “contemporary art photography can be read as offering openings onto the real, not merely representations of events taking place in another time and place but also sensory encounters that are present in themselves” (p. 88). In our art and poetry we offer “sensory encounters” that we hope will engage, provoke, incite, and enthuse others.

## Ruminating on juxtaposition



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #4*. Digital photograph.

## Belonging

once upon a time  
for a long long time  
I longed to belong  
with cool cachet  
like a Billabong shirt

doing ding  
dong ding  
doing dong  
ding dong

no longer at home  
in the academy  
no longer at home  
in the church  
no longer at home  
in my mother's house

no longer at home  
in the world

all circles are cracked  
with wholeness  
only a pretence  
the hole is home

Our art and poetry invite new ways of looking, seeing, and attending. There is a juxtaposition between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This process of defamiliarization invites a response that is riddled with dizziness, with asymmetry, like a whirling maelstrom. Our art and poetry invite viewers to extend beyond their customary ways of viewing photography and art to consider the limits and limitations that characteristically compose our ways of seeing by rendering invisible so much of experience that is chaos, complexity, and conundrum. Elkins does not want closure or consumption. He wants photographs that “fail to reward me with a story or a subject that can help my eye escape” (pp. 86-87). He wants to be reminded about “the distracting matrix in which we are all ... embedded” (p. 91). He is interested in inquiring about “what actually happens in photography, when we stop thinking in optimistic metaphors of light, representation, and realism” (pp. 29-30). He calls for photography that is “hypnotic, riveting, compulsive” (p. 63). Elkins claims that photography teaches us “how hard is it to see the world” (p. 76), and he recommends that “sometimes the best strategy for changing a way of thinking is to just spend time looking differently” (p. 152). This is what we do in our creative and scholarly collaborations.

## Ruminating on rhythm



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #5*. Digital photograph.

### Spellbound

like Dick and Jane  
(and James Elkins too)

the more I look, the more I see  
the more I see, the more I look

I am spellbound as I spell the light in words  
like a school of purposeful porpoises

full of playful propositions  
for opening up poetic possibilities

in motivated and momentous movement  
where the end is now, already present

I will surrender to the swirling flourish

like the unseen breath that animates the alphabet

In *Poetry* David Constantine (2013) claims that “poetry is at one and the same time plumb in the midst of social living and at an angle to it, odd, slant, strange” (p. 3). It is poetry’s commitment to signifying and calling attention to strangeness that “requires our keen attention” (p. 13). Poetry transmutes the personal into the paradigmatic, the idiosyncratic into the universal, the familiar into the figurative, the example into the evocative. Constantine explains how “many poets understand the composition of the poem as a process by which an already existent thing is uncovered, brought to light” (p. 24). This is, of course, integrally connected to the photographer’s art as well. While poets write in words, and photographers write in light, poets and photographers are all seeking languages for expression, communication, understanding, interpretation, responding, and translation. This creative work is akin to embodiment, incarnation, inspiration, and enthusiasm. Poetry and photography seek truth by seeking pleasure. When we engage collaboratively in seeking to apprehend living possibilities, opportunities for being and becoming, we understand how experience is sensuous, how language is sensuous, how walking is sensuous, how thinking is sensuous, how making art is sensuous. Our bodies and all our senses and all our physical and emotional and mental and spiritual faculties are called together to play with rhythm, imagery, and form to keep the heart alive and supple, especially in the midst of the countless dynamics that are aimed at constraining and containing wildness and wilderness. The artist’s vocation is to call the haunted and haunting wilderness into the world, to infuse us with enthusiasm for living hopefully in the creation. Art and poetry teach us to attend to rhythm, to the measure of each heart beat, all resonating with the heart that pulses in creation.

## Ruminating on mystery



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #6*. Digital photograph.

### Waiting

in the season of Lent each day is  
jam-packed and I wait restlessly

while astronomers recently found  
evidence for a theoretical perspective

Einstein proposed a century ago  
regarding gravitational waves

that emerged after two black holes  
touched 1.3 billion years ago

what is a moment, a day, a week,  
a century, even 1.3 billion years?

what are forty 40 days  
in the mystery of creation?



I live like an impatient patient  
in the emergency ward of a hospital

with little hospitality when I want  
to learn to wait and lean into

the moment, both now and new,  
ancient and iterative, always

In *Multiple arts: The muses II* Jean-Luc Nancy (2006) notes that “poetry is at ease with the difficult, the absolutely difficult” (p. 4). Indeed, according to Nancy “poetry ... is not the slightest bit interested in problems: making things difficult is what it does” (p. 4). Nancy understands that “poetry refuses to be confined to a single mode of discourse” (p. 5). Instead, poetry is devoted to “the discourse of the dialectic” (p. 4) and the course of “another path” (p. 5). Poetry is devoted to plurality and polyphony (pp. 19, 43). Therefore, Nancy insists that “poetry must be taken into account in everything we do and everything we think we must do, in our arguments, our thinking, our prose, and our ‘art’ in general” (p. 15). By promoting the significance of difficulty in the arts, Nancy reminds us that our collaboration in art and poetry is deliberately focused on transcending the familiar by translating experience in diverse ways that honour complexity, mystery, and conversation. We are not trying to present a clear, coherent, cogent, comprehensive version or vision of the world and experience. Instead, we are seeking ways to open up difficult questions about how we know what we know, how we know who we are, how we know our relationships with one another. In our collaboration we are seeking ways to honour difficulty and difference, to swim in the swirl of images, colours, and rhythms that refuse binary oppositions, linear progression, predictable rhetoric. Instead, we are engaging together in the kind of discourse that defies formulae as we seek other paths, other forms, other possibilities. Our collaboration is not guided by rule books or GPS or measured, even magisterial, research methods. We want to be mesmerized in the maelstrom that whirls and twirls. We are motivated by the marvellous messiness of the world to meander in meaning-making by writing in light and language, always hopeful that collaboration and conversation will prove efficacious for learning to live well together as we learn to attend, to experience the mystery that is often hidden by a rush to name mediocrity.

## Ruminating on memory



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #7*. Digital photograph.

### Dandelion

from French *dent-de-lion*  
tooth of the lion

how dandy a pesky weed  
with numerous nutrients

everywhere dark and light  
like a newspaper or zebra

rendering visible the invisible  
surrendering to wonder

knowing almost everything is missed  
still refusing to miss the mystery

learning with every careful decision  
about brush colour stroke

how all artful knowledge is only  
enough to trust intuition and hope

the yellow flowers of dandelion  
become a sphere of white seeds

blown by the wind    parachutes  
for carrying the seeds faraway

throughout the earth on voyages  
where wishes come true

In *Contemporary poetry* Nerys Williams (2011) illustrates “how a plurality of approaches to poetic form and linguistic textuality enables innovative modes of thought” (p. 2). Poetry is both practical, a practice, as well as theoretical, as it analyzes language and uses language to inquire. We are devoted to making art as well as to inquiring about the poetics and aesthetics of art making, as well as the countless questions and themes that emerge from arts practices regarding pedagogy and curriculum. As we consider ways of seeing, and hence ways of seeking, we are reminded by Williams that “a key role of writing and painting is to activate memory” (p. 42). In our collaboration we are engaging ekphrastically, as we render “visual art into poetry” (p. 41), but in addition to the ekphrastic focus of our inquiries, we are also engaging periphrastically by “refuting direct statement through digressive techniques” (p. 40). So, as we collaborate and respond to one another, as we learn to breathe with one another, simultaneously breathing on our own and breathing in rhythm with each other, as we learn to see, we learn to see with love, we learn to lean into love. We are engaged in creative processes of remembering even while we acknowledge the many challenges of memory including amnesia, nostalgia, idealizing, romanticizing, and fictionalizing. And as we engage in these creative processes, we are reminded of what Williams (2011) calls the “viscosity of language” (p. 44). Williams sees “language as a painter’s palette” (p. 44). We are artists, researchers, and teachers who work with many languages, and in collaborating we encourage one another to explore creatively the possibilities of our scholarly engagements. We are deeply connected to one another and to ways of being in the world. We understand how all the arts are inextricably related to the construction of identity, to the nurturing of interrelationships between the past, present, and future, and to honouring the mystery that is human being and becoming. In our work together we raise questions about language, representation, syntax, and epistemology by performing artistically in ways that recognize play, playing, and playfulness in a performative dynamic that is always open to surprise.

## Ruminating on chance



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #8*. Digital photograph.

## Dappled

we old men wander  
amidst the dew-dappled alders  
on ancient trails almost lost  
where other stories haunt  
us with sensual memories  
like plastic can't decompose

we continue to be composed  
in the decomposition or  
decomposing or that  
which can't decompose

on all these trails the stories  
live on like a nuclear residue  
or fallout

remembering loss while  
ruminating on the lost

living in the midst  
of loss and sadness,  
full and happy,  
daily dancing  
a tango with paradox

in busyness how  
do we sustain rhythm,  
even the heart's beat?

I am embracing  
mortality and finitude  
and limits with almost  
enthusiastic gusto

so much of life (past and present)  
is beginning to make sense  
in ways I have never known

after days of winter rain,  
the sky is blue  
on this lovely Saturday

I will embrace the possibilities  
or perhaps the possibilities will embrace me

the stories continue always:  
while much has changed  
everything has changed  
inevitably, still looking  
over my shoulder  
see(k)ing the blind spot

In *Nine gates: Entering the mind of poetry* Jane Hirshfield (1997) calls for “new stories, new aesthetics” that create “new truths” (p. 5). Hirshfield notes insightfully that the central energies of poetry are “the concentrations of music, rhetoric, image, emotion, story, and voice” (p. 7). In our collaborations we understand how both poetry and visual art call together the same concentrations. For all the differences between visual art and poetry, both depend on “the concentrations of music, rhetoric, image, emotion, story, and voice,” but it is not sufficient to claim that knowing these concentrations means that we can make art and poetry. Certainly knowledge and experience are integral to successful creative explorations. We know how much we need to train ourselves to attend, to build on what we know, to learn all we can, but our collaborations depend on another energy, too. Hirshfield notes that “chance is fundamental to the workings of the creative mind” (p. 45). In our creative collaborations we are seeking to give chance a chance. Therefore,

we are not eager to present this article as a typically academic logical and linear exposition. Instead, we are performing our creative inquiries, and we are trusting the dynamic of chance in our creative collaborations. Like Hirshfield we are “learning to trust the possible and to accept what arises, to welcome surprise” (p. 50). Above all, we are continuing to learn to trust one another because like Hirshfield we know that “truth and beauty live most happily amid complexity and paradox” (p. 102). Our artful collaborations and conversations are offered as performances of seeing and listening, remembering and imagining because “art springs from a heightening, widening, and deepening of attention” (p. 111). Hirshfield reminds us that the word *idea* is derived from the Greek verb *idein*, meaning *to see* (p. 128). How and why have so many scholars usurped the concept of *idea* in order to promote a fundamentalist focus on exposition, debate, argument, and persuasion? Hirshfield understands how art works by “seeming obliqueness and riddling meanderings” that “are not arbitrary” (p. 111). Instead “the circuitousness of artistic form” allows “the deeper grain to be revealed” (p. 111).

### **Ruminating on apprehension**



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #9*. Digital photograph.

### **Turning Too**

the earth turns  
with patience,

waits still  
with hope

poets too  
will learn  
earth's rhythms

where are the shadows?  
what are the limits of imagination?

winter casts a spell  
I am spellbound  
confused, caught in  
movement, whirlwind

the body's senses are  
woefully inadequate  
to embrace the sensuality  
of a winter's day

the sky might be falling  
the sky might be reaching  
low to hold hands with earth

instead of flowing  
I am transfixed  
I cannot move  
I can only remember  
I cannot forget  
the creation is wild

by writing poems  
I do not tame the wildness  
only recognize it again

even as the earth tilts  
on the keen edge of weariness  
infused with more wonder  
than any poem will hold

David Constantine (2013) understands the motivation of so much of our collaborative research when he writes about how artists are “wholly engaged in the apprehension of a moment, a glance, of life—knowing it for the living part of the living whole” (p. 93). Therefore, artists “quicken us to the condition of being human” (p. 99). In a like-minded way, Mary Oliver (1994) claims that “poetry is a life-cherishing force. And it requires a vision—a *faith*, to use an old-fashioned term” (p. 122). She spells out her understanding of vision by focusing on how “luck, diligence, spontaneity, and inspiration are all needed” (p. 114). In our collaborations we engage with language as “a vibrant,

malleable, living material” (Oliver, 2013, p. 91), and we engage with our creative practices as life-affirming, hopeful encounters with lively and lovely possibilities. We are encouraged by Oliver’s claim that all the arts began “within the original wilderness of the earth” (p. 106). She adds that the arts “began through the process of seeing, and feeling, and hearing, and smelling, and touching, and then remembering” (p. 106). In our artistic collaborations we are learning to look, to attend sensually to the particulars of the creation so we can acknowledge the wonder of the creation.

### **Ruminating on love**



Rita L. Irwin. (2010). *Proposition for Attending #10*. Digital photograph.

### **Wild Words**

remembering and forgetting  
are light and shadow

we ask,  
what does the alphabet reveal?  
we ought to ask,  
what does the alphabet conceal?

the alphabet is a synecdoche



a part suggests the (w)hole  
but have we forgotten  
to see the (w)hole,  
fooled by the part disguised  
as the (w)hole?

we need to return to the place  
at least in imagination  
before language divided the creation  
to defamiliarize the familiar  
a kaleidoscope of possibilities

as an educator I want  
mystery not mastery  
I want imagination  
that is holy and whole

we are too pragmatic  
too literal when we need  
to linger in the littoral  
too serious when we need  
to revel in the ludic

instead of seeking to please  
we need to seek pleasure

disenchantment   enchantment

we grow up in another's image  
when we really need imagination

we wander as if lost  
when we need to attend to wonder

we are the object of others' verbs  
when we need to be the subject

a ray of sunshine hints  
at spring's promise,  
no fire, a candle flame,  
flickering hungry hopeful

learning to let go  
to lean into words  
with faithfulness  
to hope they can sustain  
the poet and the poetry

words are not wild animals  
 to be domesticated, contained  
 words are wild animals  
 to be ascertained  
 in playful ludic wildness

In *Place, being, resonance: A critical ecohermeneutic approach to education* Michael W. Derby (2015) calls for “an ecohermeneutic attention” that “is humbly drawn towards the earth” (p. 2). He regards the “application of the full attention” as “a gesture of love” (p. 2), and he considers “education as home-coming, as home making (literally *ecopoiesis*), as finding ourselves already home in a world thrumming with resonant meaning” (p. 9). This is the heart of our collaborative journeys. In our a/r/tographic explorations we are seeking to acknowledge the experience of home-coming “in a world thrumming with resonant meaning.” We live in a world that is “thrumming with resonant meaning,” but we are not sure we are able to attend to the thrumming and meaning. Too often we are distracted and alienated. We agree with Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber (2016) that “distractedness and fragmentation characterize contemporary academic life” (p. 90). They claim that “slowing down is about asserting the importance of contemplation, connectedness, fruition, and complexity” (p. 57). We need sensual attunement and creative imagination to know the creation as a manifestation of ancient and ineffable glory. Like Derby (2015), we ask, “What might we learn if we listened to the thrum beneath us?” (p. 32), and like Derby, we know that “attentiveness is an active, conscious and intentional discipline” (p. 38). We have come to a new proposition: Learn together how to attend. By engaging in collaboration and conversation, we teach one another, and we learn from one another, what it means to attend as artists and researchers and teachers.

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