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## **I never quite got it, what they meant: an introduction to poetic teaching**

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I Never Quite Got It, What They Meant: An Introduction to Poetic Teaching

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### Abstract

This paper theorizes a poetics of teaching. Through our time teaching English, we have become well-familiar with how unpoetic teaching can be. The prevalence, furthered by much recent reform, of a systematic school culture focused on accountability, standardization, and learnification often renders teaching dehumanized work. We begin with a consideration of form - what it is we mean by *poetics* -- with a focus on *figurative language* as a concept at the core of the art. Figurative language, we argue, offers a model for *figurative education*, in which teachers treat their practice as metaphors treat language, a move that opens education towards complexity and ambiguity. Further, we consider what makes poetry matter to people: *resonance*, how it depends upon relational aspects of the writing. We explore resonance in conversation with the work of philosophers of education on *relationality*, theorizing how poetic teaching necessitates an engagement with the relational. Through that consideration, we find what may be required to teach poetically is risk-taking, risks all the more beautiful for the ways they engage teachers and students as complex persons in meaningful work.

*Keywords:* poetics, teaching, resonance, figurative language, relationality.

## **I Never Quite Got It, What They Meant: An Introduction to Poetic Teaching**

He wants to make us see something we do not yet have eyes for  
to hear something that was never sounded.

-- Anne Carson, *Float*

Teaching at its heart is a messy endeavor. Teachers are consumed by the uncountable intersections of being and event in daily life, how it all waits at our door, calling to us. The work of teaching poetically, of making poetry out of our teaching (and writing it up here) may hardly make things better. "If my writing makes a mess of things," writes the poet Douglas Kearney (2015) "it's not to flee understanding, but to map (mis-)understanding as a verb." (p. 29) If we are to begin this paper in an honest way, we have to acknowledge the messiness of poetics and teaching. We endeavor nevertheless to draw a map, one that sits in the contradictory space between understanding and misunderstanding. Within the elusive and uncertain nature of contradictions we see, like Whitman (1892/2018), the possibility of a poetics.

Recently I (first author) received an email from a student I taught three years ago. The student, Kevin, sent a clip from John Patrick Shanley's *Prodigal Son* (2016). In the video, a distraught student argues with his principal, questioning the ways power works in his school and the ways we come to feel we matter, how others help us succeed or not. Kevin went on in the email to discuss the deep resonance he felt with the clip. How, when he saw it, he was moved to tears. Kevin shared that he had taken up acting, and that he had been practicing this particular monologue over and over again for an audition. He wrote: "In the monologue, Jimmy yells to the headmaster, 'Mr. Hoffman finally SAW ME.' And every time I get to that line I choke up. You saw ME". I was baffled and awed at this. I had never felt particularly successful teaching Kevin; as a teacher I often felt limited by the time I had to connect individually with each student, to

discern what they might find of use in my British Literature course. With Kevin I recall a particular time we were reading *Hamlet* aloud and he began acting out the many parts, taking a variety of tacks: comedic at times, sincere at others, yet inscrutable throughout. Which is to say that all the days I taught Kevin I never knew if the lessons compelled him; what I knew was to keep trying everyday. I turn to this moment because I was moved, if perplexed. I didn't know what I had done.

That three years later, Kevin was reminded of some feeling in that scene, and felt compelled to share the moment with me—that event suggests a layering of resonances. The layers of a particular text, its mo(ve)ment in time and space, its connections across persons, its unexamined moves, and all the present absences--all of this can lead to an encounter with literature that convinces us of our own little truths. Here, in these phenomena, I see the poetics of teaching. This is what I think Carson (2016) means above when she asks us to “see something we don't yet have eyes for or to hear something that was never sounded.” In this essay we hope to conjure a form of poetics through teaching, some sensibility or recognition of what we might do pedagogically to invite humanity into the work, even prioritize it.

We theorize in what follows a poetics of teaching, one formed from lives as former classroom English teachers and current English educators. Throughout our time teaching, we have become well-familiar with how unpoetic teaching can be. The prevalence, furthered by much recent reform, of a systematic school culture which privileges “standardization, efficiency, predictability, and operationalizing student understanding” (Judson & Egan, 2012, p. 39), and which prizes classroom management strategies, accountability measures, and data-driven instruction, or what Biesta (2010, 2014) calls the “learnification” of education, too often renders teaching dehumanized work. The standards movement, for example, works to diminish the

influence of any particular teacher over curriculum, despite the fact that a teacher is the person best positioned to teach her students, the person who is there *with* students everyday in their shared context. Educational technologies similarly promise to scale the work of teaching across contexts and continents, such that an instructor in a MOOC might teach tens of thousands of students all over the world. While undeniably efficient, the sheer logistical demands of such a move all but dismiss the relational aspects of teaching, forfeiting the development of any one distinct relationship between student and teacher and instead de-personalizing the work. All of which strike us as profoundly unpoetic<sup>1</sup>, for the ways it diminishes the beauty and ambiguity and connection which mark the best songs and seminars.

And though we started this essay long before COVID-19 shuttered our world, we can't help but note that this is an even more pressing inquiry now, as the educational landscape tilts precipitously towards exclusively online learning. The curriculum shifts necessarily towards what little is possible now that we are all overwhelmed: forms of homework, mostly; frazzled parents serving as adhoc teachers, the video conference too often acting as a poor substitute for being present with each other in a classroom. As distance learning becomes the norm, educators and students around the world wonder how we might do so in ways that connect and humanize. In the midst of that project, we will all grapple with the slippery intersections of our personal and professional lives, the unwieldy weight of working through grief, new envisionings of what gratitude and joy may look like, and continued questions of the relevance and meaning of the content we teach.

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<sup>1</sup> We write this allowing for the possibility that new forms engender opportunities for novel artistic works and practices to emerge. Rather than neatly cleave the educational landscape in two – the poetic and not -- what we're trying to articulate are conflicting tensions we've experienced in our work. It may be that, in encountering the ideas in this paper and bringing them into their classrooms, educators find that a poetics of teaching looks very different than what we theorize here; this should be to some extent expected by the relational nature of these ideas in application and by the differences across discipline and context. Which is to say: we do not set out to here to define poetic teaching for the reader but instead to offer possibilities for how it might be conceptualized.

Poetry is a form which depends on its capacity to engage reader and writer in a relationship -- one of wonder and resonance, in which poetic forms promise profound if ineffable connections across persons. As a way of countering the dehumanizing trajectory of much contemporary education, we hope poetic teaching can offer similar connections of resonance, engaging teacher and student in meaningful experiences. In what follows we provide our vision for doing so. We begin with a consideration of form -- what it is we mean by *poetics* -- with a focus on *figurative language* as a concept at the core of the art. Figurative language, we argue following Fendler (2012), offers a model for *figurative education*, in which teachers treat their practice as metaphors treat language, a move useful for the ways it opens education up towards complexity and ambiguity. From there, we consider what makes poetry matter to people: *resonance*. Closely reading resonant poems, we consider resonance in conversation with the work of philosophers of education on *relationality* (e.g., Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Bingham, 2011), theorizing how poetic teaching necessitates and privileges the relational aspects of the work. Through that consideration, we find what may be required to teach poetically is risk-taking, risks all the more beautiful (Biesta, 2014) for the ways they engage teachers and students as complex persons in meaningful work (Hansen, 2004). Ultimately we draw these threads together through a self-authored poem, one which renders poetically the teaching we hope to enact.

### **Defining Poetics**

In order to imagine the poetic in teaching, we need to spend time defining the term *poetics*. To do this we draw not only upon its elusive conceptualization across literature and in the field of English but also its appearance in everyday life, how moments occur that we understand as poetic. We understand the poetic as some translatable aspect of a contextual and

temporal profundity, a resonance we may struggle to articulate but which we nevertheless experience in encounters with texts and in the course of our daily lives. For example, when Hass (1979) writes that “longing is full of endless distances”, we follow his yearning and form it into our breath, because we have not yet met a human who hasn’t longed for something and because we, too, inhabit that longing in handshakes, stares, and the illusions of the could-be, should-be: the varied distances of life. But each longing is not the same. Its appearance permeates encounters always and never. You look up and it’s there. You look up again and it never existed. As such, everything might be poetic. If we trace the term etymologically, *poesis* (2019) comes from Greek: “to make or create.” As we understand it, we collectively conjure the parameters of the term *poetics*; we name it into being. Therefore, we attempt to “make” it through definition here, providing our own renderings of poetry and threading them through encounters in the teaching world, but that is not to say our poetics is yours. It is in the symmetry of difference that we see the possibility of poetic teaching.

The only way we can find the language to begin defining poetics is through the poetry we have encountered. Or perhaps the only way to do this work is to poem (Wittgenstein, 1984, p. 28). There are many lines of conceptualizing poetics we might trace in this defining (form, sound, rhythm, and rhyme, among others), but we have decided to think with a form of poetics that is particularly compelling to us at this moment. In order to theorize around a term so exhausted and contested, we think a poetics may need to be explicated through engaging the possibilities of a ubiquitous (which is to say: cliché) metaphor: the moon. The terms *poetry* and *poetics* can be understood through the ways each of us sees the moon, through the ways an artist renders moonlight. Of course the moon has found its way as an invocation of wonder into numerous poems. We imagine this is because we often don’t walk out into the night without



pointing to that trepidatious circle of light modeled in the sky. We say to each other, “Look, the moon!”; its familiarity a proponent of its extraordinary nature. Like poetics, “the moon holds no grudges whatsoever” (Eliot, 1911/2018). It is there as we conjure meaning, open to what we might interpret it to be. As Forché (1981) has it, “The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house”; it sets the ominous tension of the scene. Hass (1979) wagers that “we crave cold marrow / from the tiny bones / that *moonlight* scatters.” In prose Marilynne Robinson (2014) writes of an essay assigned by a philosophy professor, wherein reading she “found in it a glorious footnote on moonlight, and was liberated” (para. 1). We look for it. We watch as it creates in us the beginnings of humanity. We sometimes call these moments “suspended disbelief”; at their core they are the beginnings of poetry. Henry Mancini learned that the name “Blue River” had already been taken, and settled on “Moon River” instead. (Now we can’t believe the song was meant to be called anything else.) This, here, is the rendering of the poetic at work: we tilt our gaze to see something familiar -- the moon -- in its many forms.

We consider this metaphor a form of the poetic in action, because the moon, to poetry, functions analogously as poetics does to teaching. In the sense of origins, poetry begins with metaphor as teaching often begins with questioning. Just as metaphor needs connective tissue to contain meaning; it needs the unraveling of difference: it is as much what it is as what it is not (Zwicky, 2014). Thus we see the seams of wisdom caught in contradiction: “...the shape of metaphorical thought is also the shape of wisdom: what a human mind must do in order to comprehend a metaphor is a version of what it must do in order to be wise” (Zwicky, 2014, foreword). Poetics centers then on the ambitious nature of metaphorical thought, jutting out, initiating and interlacing reorientations of thinking, events patterned by multiplicity and

emergences. In teaching, and daily life, we move through these events, conjuring stops and starts, paralleling and interspersing lines, compelling movements of thought into being.

### **Figurative Language**

A favorite professor once told my poetry class, “If you write a line as good as this, you don’t need to show up anymore.” The line came from Mina Loy’s “Songs to Joannes” (1917/2000): “We might have given birth to a butterfly / With the daily-news / Printed in blood on its wings.” I never succeeded at matching that stunning metaphor – I’m sure no one did – but the contest didn’t matter. The point was that we were all compelled by the metaphor, its demonstration that figurative language is often the site where poems fascinate. We understand the poetic use of figurative language as the bringing together of multiple, seemingly unrelated things, through associative configurations, and placing them side-by-side in order to reorient thought towards new and unexpected profundities (Authors, 2019a). Coming across particularly moving metaphors, say, Rollins’ (2017) “finch weaving myth into a nested crown of logic” or Zawacki’s (2013) “bunker / of some private Soviet / Union you & I” or Carson’s (2015) “cries of birds on the air like jewels” we are reminded, as Borges (2002) puts it, that “we have in language the fact (and this seems obvious to me) that words began, in a sense, as magic.” (p. 81). To be enchanted by poetry, to be reoriented towards the world by metaphor, means “to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday.” (Bennett, 2001, p. 4)

We like the sound of that for teaching, and we think following Fendler (2012) that figurative language is one place to start. “Figurative education,” she writes, invites teachers to make “evocative gestures [that]...like figurative language, may catalyze, spark, inspire, generate, move, provoke, and/or persuade...it has the ability to gesture beyond itself” (p. 9). Just as

metaphors unfold multiple interpretations, unfixed from any singular meaning, so figurative education unfolds the work of teaching, rendering poetically a teacher's practices. In envisioning figurative education, Fendler contrasts it with *representational* approaches to teaching, which correspond to representational uses for language, in which "texts are assumed to have meaning, and education becomes a process in which readers find meaning" (p. 8). Representational approaches constitute the norm for teaching today, and particularly in the prevalent reform culture noted above, which seeks a use-value for every teaching encounter such that the work can be measured and predicted; teacher practices reliably represent knowledge for students so they can acquire skills and meet the day's objectives. A figurative approach, meanwhile, promises that "knowledge is not represented by educational practices...figurative education expect[s] that I will have my way with a text, and make of it what I will...[it] evokes meaning in me" (p. 9). In other words, the outcomes question of teaching practices becomes beside the point, as students' encounters with figurative lessons prove fruitfully unpredictable.

The oft-cited Billy Collins poem "Introduction to Poetry" (2003) provides a helpful example here. We turn to this poem like many others before us because there are good reasons, we feel, that people gravitate towards certain poems, the kind that offer useful "equipment for living" (Burke, 1974; Robbins, 2017). The poet contrasts two ways of teaching poetry, which correspond to Fendler's two approaches to education. Representationally, the poet laments, students "tie the poem to a chair with rope... They begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means." That is, students take an extractive stance towards their learning, violently in the poem's framing, seeking out a singular understanding to be acquired: the knowledge to be gained, the objective to be met, the "point" of the lesson. Figuratively, Collins' teaching looks quite different. That mode asks students "to waterski / across the surface of the poem... / or take

a poem / and hold it up to the light / like a color slide”. It’s unclear what this exactly means. It’s a suggestion that requires translation and attempt on the part of the teacher. The teacher must sit with and savor it before trying it out in the classroom, an attempt that may bear little resemblance across teachers and contexts. All the better. Figurative language excites us for the ways it demands we look at the work of teaching with an *n* of 1, for “poetry is the refusal of concept and category, of positivism”. (Zawacki, 2010, p. 227). Here, we find it helpful to turn to *The Things They Carried*, wherein O’Brien (1990) weaves the tangible and the figurative throughout the novel. Soldiers in his story carried “wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum” (p. 2) and also “...the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it...they carried gravity” (p.14). We know the weight of what we carry varies. In its literal form, we can claim it, but the figurative can sometimes take up more space, filling us with the abstractions of ourselves and our humanity. This is the metaphorical we are working towards, the figurative we leave undefined – how when teaching I will post this and many versions of these quotes on my wall and its contours of feeling will extend to some and go unrecognized for others. Sometimes, many times, I won’t remember it is there, and neither will my students. Occasionally, we will ruminate on it, reading it aloud multiple times. The weight of something doesn’t have an ending -- not in memory -- but it has moments of intensity, moments where it is held, until it moves to live on the peripheral, perched and waiting. Yet to cultivate poetic teaching it’s not enough to just make use of metaphors. As with poetry an educational metaphor matters only if it resonates with the reader.

### **Relationality & Resonance**

We are interested in the concept of resonance because it invites a recognizable promise of connective powers across people, words, things, and moments. It encompasses the mystery of

how and why we relate. In situating relationality threaded with resonance across education, Bingham & Sidorkin (2004) argue compellingly that schools are primarily spaces of meeting. We find this important, though complicated, as we recognize the multitude of meanings held by “meeting” in the midst of this global pandemic. We have become well aware of the humanity that sifts in the interstices of the everyday, and its increasing absence in the present: what happens when the hallways are empty? When chatter at the lockers dissipates? Do we have room to accidentally recognize another at the local coffee shop? We know these in-between moments. Now, living without them, we begin to see the contours of what we have lost in the encounters of the everyday. This is true for teaching as well. Turning towards the poetic offers a chance to see how we might remake connection in this new world.

If we follow this idea, how might we begin to reimagine the role of the teacher? In a poetic mode, the teacher becomes translator of experience, content, and interaction (Bingham, 2011). Carson (2016) understands the act of translating such that “languages are not sciences of one another, you cannot match them item for item.” We, too, see the impossibility of translation as a literal endeavor of rendering the identical. Translation is instead a place for meaning to emanate, not to stall or stay static. This is where we find room for resonance, in the heart’s recognition: “The eye latches on / to the butterflies as they fly / and the quick heart follows, not / a root in nothing but a thread across abstraction. They fly away.” (Beachy-Quick, 2016). Or, Glück (1995), who tells us how “the soul creeps out of the tree.” Even Hass (1979): “everything dissolves: *justice, pine, hair, woman, you and I.*” Embedded in each of these is a way for us to inhabit the abstraction and tightrope walk across its particularity into another way of seeing.

The teacher’s role becomes that of a creator of spaces engaged in giving over curricular scope to the “the butterflies as they fly” so that the eye may latch and the quick heart may follow.

The relational event is the thread of abstraction; it is those eerie moments when, as any English teacher knows, you read a text aloud in a class and find that students somehow seem to respond to the same phrases (Authors, 2020). We call out the lines to each other. But our rootedness in any particular line is different; we come to the text bundling our original experiences in our palms. We each see something, some form of similar belief or feeling. Even as the line or the moment flies away. In the midst of it, we begin to tie the thread. Maybe this is where our language dissolves, as Hass invites. The “you” and “I” distinctions falter. Carson (2016) offers a way into this connection through poetry: “Relations with rhythm, a fragrance / where skin meets time on which / No pronouns fall, here in the presence of.” As does Beachy-Quick (2017): “And who are you / Anyway. Pronoun of the 2nd person. Lover, / Stranger, God. Student, Child, Shade. / Something similar gathers in you.” Nestled in our hesitancy around a relational pedagogy is the incapability of ever fully knowing ourselves, let alone others. (Author, 2019b).

Yet, as teachers and people, we still move in ways that promote encounters that harbor the potential for relationship. Inevitably we begin class asking “How are you?”, and sometimes it’s a performance with a perfunctory response, and sometimes it rings sincere, and we tell stories, and we show, sometimes, what we love -- “where skin meets time.” Teachers attempt human connection daily, negotiating that space between “you” and “I”. The varied distances of life. This negotiation is a form of poetry. It is a disposition of the attempt to know without knowledge. Wright (1997) asserts, “I never quite got it, what they meant, / but now I do.” This “ontological understanding is rooted in the perception of patterned resonance in the world” (Zwicky, 2014, p. 7). As Wittgenstein (1996) puts it, “The same -- and *yet* not the same” (para. 174). Resonance is the space where we are asked to recognize the breaking down of that

contradiction. It is both what is and what is not; this simultaneity gives us a glimpse into how we might see the person in front of us, and how we might begin to see ourselves.

This ontological reckoning reveals a certain kind of justice needed in schooling. Drawing on Hansen's (2017) conceptualizing of what it means to do ontological justice, "to try to perceive the person at play, the human being, rather than to remain on the behavioral surface which, in nature of things, may appear highly conventional and predictable" (p. 12), a poetics of teaching re-renders teaching as "a function of attunement" (Zwicky, 2014, p. 47). This means the teacher makes a conscious effort to compel the tracings of resonance, the awarenesses of particularities within encounters, the unconscious which suffuses the classroom experience. Put differently, the teacher creates "the capacity to experience meaningful coincidence of context" (Zwicky, 2014, p. 21). Or, as Bingham (2011) would have it, "the teacher still has the role of one who creates the circumstances for belonging and meaningfulness." (p. 517)

### **The Beautiful Risk of Poetic Teaching**

The beautiful risk, borrowing from Biesta (2014), of poetry lies in the multiplicity that the figurative opens up, how that may lead to a type of resonance which invigorates and humanizes the work of teaching. The risk, of course, is that it may also not. What poetry does, and thus what poetic teaching may do, is always already uncertain, as metaphors are, in need of interpretation and human intervention. Even then we can't know what may come of poetic teaching. We hope it will not resemble what we understand as unpoetic teaching, approaches that deemphasize relationality and instead prioritize objective knowledge, uninterested in the risks of the imagination and ineffable moments. One pointed example is scripted teaching, wherein the teacher reads from a prepared text written for them as a particularly strict means of standardizing curriculum across classrooms. Poetic teaching instead involves at least two forms of risk: the

first entails the pushing of boundaries with language and meaning through its figurative use; the second the sharing of personal moments, awakenings, intimate events, ordinary observations, crises, traumas, joys. In contemplating the messiness of the pedagogical endeavor, we are also compelled by the ways risk invokes a necessary attention to renderings of criticality. We recognize that teachers and students taking such risks need to be reflective and critical of their approaches and language. With both forms of risk, poetic teaching foregrounds the complexity and humanity of persons in the room.

We wonder what would it mean, for example, to teach poetically, to frame our work with more imaginative uses of figurative language, as Collins (2003) suggests, asking students to “press an ear against [a text’s] hive”? What do we expect them to hear? What do we think will happen? (How will we avoid being stung?) How can we plan for it? Assess it? What if we were to take another suggestion, and “drop a mouse into a poem / and watch him probe his way out”? How do we teach educators to do this? How does it scale? How do we express to policymakers the urgency of this work? How do we assure concerned parents and under-pressure administrators that teaching this way matters?

One way we have drawn on the poetic in our own teaching was to rethink the ways preservice teachers assess their peers’ microteaching. Instead of taking an evaluative and outcome-oriented stance toward the microteaching lessons, we moved preservice teachers’ assessment towards figurative approaches. We did this by offering space to engage in a process of what may be created meaningfully and resonantly across persons (See Authors, 2019a). Of course, the contours of the poetic are elusive and the attempts towards it will look and move differently – in their varied contexts, poetic teachers will enact a multiplicity of ways to answer the questions above.



The map we've endeavored to draw here, then, is a messy one that threads itself across many contradictions. We know that teachers attempting to teach poetically will spend time similarly caught up in contradictions, in between the normative practices constituting school and the poetic gestures they might make. Indeed the norm, informed by dominant ideologies of technocracy, the knowledge economy (Alsup, 2015), and evidence-based research science, strikes us as profoundly unpoetic, in that such systems eschew the uncertainty of poetic dispositions (which may lead teachers and students everywhere and nowhere) in favor of the certainty of rigorous standards and proven methods. The two approaches might well be at odds. We acknowledge the impermanent and individualized nature of poetic teaching, but we also recognize that that malleability, the way poems slip like liquid through liminal space, is what makes it so intriguing for teachers in their daily work. Doing so requires, we think, mostly just the move towards it, the decision to sit with it – because the enactment of the poetic lies in the willingness to look, to try. The poetic teacher will live in both worlds, the dominant and the liminal, instrumental and imaginative, the poetic possibility and the unpoetic reality of schools just as we run with contradictions here. We try.

So you see: this is a risk. We do not know what will happen if we begin to teach poetically. Poetry is notoriously, as my Pittsburgh family would say, “slippy”. It “counters clarity with drunkenness, truth with falsity.” (Beachy-Quick, 2010, p. 85) Yet we understand this risk as a beautiful one, for it invites moments of resonance where our humanity begins to show, ones which might prove profoundly moving to teachers and students in the encounter. Here we return to this paper's initial anecdote. The beauty of poetic teaching is that it risks *seeing* students; and in it, we (educators) risk being seen as well.

Moreover we understand that in some sense teaching inherently presents such a beautiful risk. Biesta (2014) has convinced us that:

Education always involves a risk. The risk is not that teachers might fail because they are not sufficiently qualified. The risk is not that students might fail because they are not working hard enough or are lacking motivation. The risk is there because, as W.B. Yeats has put it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. (p. 1)

A beautiful risk worth taking. Poetic teaching then, we think, makes plain its stance, its willingness to take this risk. “The classroom should fall apart. The walls should fall open. Boxcars, boxcars, boxcars, whatever they were.” (Goransson & McSweeney, 2010, p. 188) Perhaps the poetic offers space to inhabit those connections we are without in this current moment in new ways, to imagine an education worthy of the whole human. The risk still lies in giving language space to function figuratively, so that it might reorient students in newly resonant and enchanting ways. The risk lies too in inviting every part of the students’ identity -- and our own (Author, 2019b) -- from the world beyond school into the classroom. These are, we believe, the needed and important and beautiful risks of education if we are to indeed make the work human and meaningful. Like Hansen (2004) we feel embracing the offering of those risks, attempting to teach poetically, is a way of participating in “the neverending task of articulating the significance and nature of teaching” (p. 142). It’s a way of attempting, over and over again, to make English education and educative experiences broadly worthwhile for students, to see them, and ourselves in the work, despite so much pulling us elsewhere.

### **Epilogue**

We hope this essay serves not as a comprehensive statement defining poetic teaching, but rather as an invitation to the work to come. “A definition is a sorry thing” writes Dean Young (1995), “but / we will all be redefined.” In closing we provide a poem, then, that works to further redefine poetic teaching in figurative terms:

When It Rains, I’m Envious.

*After Dan Beachy-Quick*

And what would others abandon to possess  
 this feeling. This absence renders the sinews  
 of resonance fresh: what are these words  
 perched and vibrating like butterfly wings  
 on delphinium. As if I were at all concerned  
 with flowers enumerating fields -- somehow  
 we all exhale but my breath could never enfold  
 a landscape, not in the same ways a question approaches  
 vision. Teachers move in an absence  
 that lingers like humility. What could you ever learn  
 in a classroom? I keep quiet  
 in this fragmented connection: shredded  
 bark that puzzles together the tree.  
 These are all poorer ways of saying: I’m wading  
 into the mystery every day, residing in this collapsible  
 gaze, a child turned and tilted toward her new pet.  
*The beginning.* And what do questions do anyway?  
 Something gathers in the teacher and the purity  
 that never was sits and assembles: I know  
 what it’s like to read Ada Limón and see a new fold  
 in the window of my world. Heat-dazed and glaring.  
 Some semblance of the teacher who told me to look, see,  
 that’s Joyce, singing. I never knew the shapes of amazement,  
 how they dangled and silhouetted words. Listen:  
 this is not what we were hoping for. Look:  
 What have you brought with you?  
 Here, arrange the desks how you want.  
 Or ask them. The teacher will sit and try to talk,  
 like always. There are still poorer ways to say this:  
 you too are concerned with the swift explanations  
 of moonlight. You too are a composer of sentimental  
 residue. We all know dogs are better than some humans  
 and if you misunderstand the mountains, what does it matter?  
*In the beginning,* we are the enactment  
 of unsayable praise. I did not believe

the Romantics. Sometimes I can't move  
in any other way but remain in figurative dust, failing  
explanation. I swear to you though:  
I cannot move in any other way.

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