Capturing the Aesthetic Moment, even in a winter of discontent
a performative narrative

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On a rainy evening in early March, I walk home along Granville Street, the words of curriculum theorist Maxine Greene running through my head. “There have to be disciplines, yes, and a growing acquaintance with the structures of knowledge, but at the same time, there have to be the kinds of grounded interpretations possible only to those willing to abandon already constituted reason, willing to feel and to imagine, to open the windows and go in search,” she says, and I wonder how, in this city of concrete structures and endless suburbs, I will ever be able to open the windows onto the kind of pedagogy I seek. Granville Street at dusk is crowded with commuters rushing to get home, and the streetlights cast shadows across their faces as they wait in long, patient lines for the buses that will take them there. They do not look at me as I pass them; their eyes stare into some middle distance, without emotion, without expression. A young beggar sits outside a sandwich shop, asking for leftovers. So far, he has had no offers, and his feet are getting wet in this rain.

I cross the street to listen to a busker, a man with a large belly and a grey beard who sings union songs from the 1930’s and accompanies himself on a banged up guitar. His voice is deep and gravelly, and rides above the honks and engines of the passing cars and buses. In between his choruses, he plays a harmonica, his guitar slapping his ample hip. I stand in the rain and watch him play, oblivious to the crowds pushing past me, their sneers and swears, their demands for me to “get out of their way.” When the busker has finished his set, I drop a couple of twoonies in his open guitar case and thank him. He looks up at me and nods, smiling slightly. Water drips from his beard onto his faded blue t-shirt, and suddenly I remember the next line in Greene’s essay, that “the search—sometimes rigorous, sometimes gay—ought to be accompanied by the sound of a blue guitar.”

When I get home, I turn on lights and the radio to make me feel less alone. The news announcer speaks in slow, neutral tones about the latest casualties and advancements in Iraq. His voice has that a flat, mid-Prairie tone that gives him a certain folksy appeal out here in the rain forest, the kind of voice that can recite pickled herring recipes, hockey scores, and stories of miraculous pets in the same breath as rumours of a strange new illness now taking hold in parts of southern China. I want his voice to tell me something, to move my mind forward, to bring out a dazzling blue guitar that on this stormy evening only I will be able to hear. The wind twists the tree outside my apartment window so it hits repeatedly against the glass. I am reminded of another windowpane in another storm, in a cabin on a mountain deep inside the valleys of the Cariboo. And I want to write about this memory, this feeling, so badly that I begin to shake, to cry. I do not breathe until I find a pen and paper.

I scrawl the first words I ever read by Greene across the top of the first page: “Art offers life. It offers hope; if offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light. Resisting, we may make the teaching of the aesthetic experience our pedagogic creed.” Then nothing. I begin to question, to doubt myself. In the times we are living today, do these words appear trivial? If we seek the aesthetic in our teaching, are we denying the larger issues and struggles surrounding us, our families, our learning communities? Or, by allowing our selves to re-connect to what keeps us alive, are we finding an opportunity to build strength, solidarity, and resistance?

I look up the definition of aesthetic, “concern with beauty or the appreciation of beauty, a moment of feeling truly alive,” and compare it with the entry under anaesthetic, “a drug or
gas that causes a loss of sensitivity to pain.” I make two columns on the page and draw a line between these two opposed meanings. From which can pedagogy be born?

Stop, and for just a moment find your heartbeat, your pulse. Close your eyes if you want to. Allow yourself to breathe as deeply as you need to. This might hurt, might sting a bit, for if I said you will feel nothing I would be lying. This is, after all, not intended to be an anaesthetic narrative.

I want to tell you a story of how I have come to understand the aesthetic, the ecstasy as well as the pain, of what Ted Aoki calls the “lived curriculum.” It is a creative telling, one I wrote that rainy night during the war. I wrote of memories, embodied experiences, of the last time in my life when I felt most truly alive, when following Greene’s call for a pedagogy of the aesthetic came naturally. It was five years ago and I was a community educator in Lytton, population 800.

This night in March, when winter seems to be near its end and I so desperately want to breathe of spring, I write of the seasons, of their power to hurt and to heal. I write of enquiry, and memory, and how both a life and a pedagogy can be lived within them. I write first of Fall, starting here, in a house on a cliff, with frost covering the grass in the early morning, suffocating what remains of my garden. I can no longer walk barefoot from the porch steps to the creek, and for a moment I am afraid of the changes ahead. I put on my hiking boots and walk down my trail to town, to the last farmers’ market of the year. Hunting season starts this weekend, so the market is quieter than usual. The farmers stand beside their pickup trucks chatting, smoking, and stamping their feet. I can see their breath in the late afternoon air as I choose the ingredients I need for pumpkin soup. My clothes already smell of this season: of bacon and wood smoke and only occasional rain.

I climb the trail back to my house, gathering kindling from piles of fallen twigs. In my kitchen I shake dry mud and leaves from my boots. I run my fingers through my hair, finding twigs and leaves. Across the valley the leaves are changing, and I can see small bursts of red scattered just below the tree line. My cat has fallen asleep in front of the wood stove, her stomach stretched out in a curve to face the warmth.

On a Wednesday morning, Johnson shuffles into my classroom, his hands dug deep into his back pockets. He smiles as he approaches my desk, lowers his eyes and fumbles with his pocket. A dented package of cigarettes, half smoked, falls out first. Then a wad of paper. He unfolds the paper for me, smoothes the pieces out on top of my daybook. Poetry. His own.

Um, I think these might be good for that book thing you were talking about. His voice is barely a whisper, and it takes forever to reach me. With that he is gone, a final finger tap on the desk, a slight kick at the door. I am left behind a sterile desk that has trapped me in a code of lesson plans and outcomes for far too long. My fingers trace those first words, written in a hurried, edgy scrawl. Poetry is what you wanna say when fear gets in the way. The wisdom of these dozen words leaves me silent, humbled, questioning. I listen to the stillness of my classroom and finally allow myself to find my heartbeat. I do not move from my desk until I have committed his entire poem to my memory.

I speak next of winter, remembering that this house was designed decades ago by a man whose wife was dying. He did not want her to suffer within these walls, so he made sure every room had a view of the mountains and the river. When she was too weak to go
outside, she sat here, beside the stove, and watched the birds flying across the valley. I do not know where she was when she died.

The creek beside my house has long since frozen, making me forget the sound of water on stones.

Light becomes all-important now. It constantly lies to me, cheats and abandons me, distorts my sense of time and place. There are a few hours each day—a listless, in-between time—when the sun rises over the mountains, but it drops back behind them before I can feel any warmth.

The road from my house to town has been covered in ice for three days. My car is stuck in the drift, so I take a garbage can lid and slide on it down the trail to town. I carry it with me into the bar, where four unemployed loggers take turns putting it on their heads and singing songs about lumberjacks.

I rise in the dark, and go to the porch to collect wood. But the ice is black, so I slip. I hit the woodpile on the way down and lodge a sliver under my right thumbnail. I find a flashlight and a needle and work the sliver out. I suck some blood from my finger, but it only feels like ice.

Curtis is trying to write a mock provincial exam. English 12, checking his ability to spell, to comprehend, to formulate an argument. This will be his third attempt at graduation, and I think it may stick this time. After an hour, he starts to rock back and forth in his desk, tapping his pencil on the metal edge of his seat. “When can I get out of here?” he asks me. “I’m starting to feel like a rat in a cage.” A minute later he tosses his paper on my desk, shouts to a friend down the hall as he leaves the building. I see him in the parking lot, lighting up a cigarette, getting in his car. The next day I find two fresh cuts of venison on my kitchen table. This in itself is not a surprise, as I, like most people around here, never lock my door, but I wonder who left them just the same. The next time I see Curtis is the morning of the real provincial exam. As his teacher, I cannot be in the room when he writes it, so I wish him luck and continue down the hall. A couple of hours later, he passes my room. “Hey, England,” he grins. “How’d you like those steaks?”

Next come memories of spring, with the creek melting now, soft rivulets of mountain water threading their way through patches of moss. When I hike further up the hill, to the plateau behind my house, I find the first flowers of the season. The fiery red bottlebrushes remind me of childhood nursery rhymes about little girls lost in forests.

My woodpile is almost finished now. I chop some more, wearing only a t-shirt, allowing the sun to soothe my rough, pale arms. It has been eight months since they were last touched this way.

Chunks of ice float down the river, each one’s journey destined to be incomplete. They will melt before they reach the coast, and no one will remember what they looked like.

Spring break-up means the snow melts and my trail and road become mud. Boots sink into the thick muck, cars get stuck on the roads. We spend hours cleaning floors, shaking boots, scraping tires.

A package in the mail: goat cheese, spices for a Thai curry, two books. I stay up all night.

http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v12n02/articles/england/index.html
reading one of the books, a collection of poems written by a Quebecois poet who died young.

My father’s voice on the other end of the line: *it doesn’t look like she’ll beat it this time, the cancer I mean. we need you to come home.* I pack my car, leave my cat with my neighbour, and drive south. Four days later I am in my mother’s kitchen in Victoria, trying to work the stove. I have brought treats from the North: smoked venison, salmon jerky, loganberry jam. But her illness has made her nostalgic for the sweets of her childhood, for sugar tarts and chocolate mousse. She never eats more than a spoonful of what I give her.

We plan a field trip for the spring, a trip to the city. We raise enough money, through bingo and bake sales, to take the class to a matinee of Phantom of the Opera. We leave before the sun rises, in a convoy of three mini-vans. When we get to the city, we have enough time to walk around Stanley Park, take a tour of the UBC campus; we eat our packed lunches on Locarno Beach. They seem overwhelmed with all this newness and scale, and I wonder if we have tried to do too much, to show them a future they don’t want. It is after dark when we hit the Canyon, and most of the students are sleeping. Mindy says she wants to sit up front, she thinks the stars will look better from there. “That UBC place, that looked really cool. That’s where I’m gonna go be a lawyer,” she murmurs before she too falls asleep. I drive the rest of way through the canyon, alone.

Now, finally, as it hits three in the morning in Vancouver and the rain shows no sign of stopping, I tell of summer in the canyon, of the first time I wade in the creek behind my house. I scoop my hands into the water and splash it over my head, my shoulders, my thighs. The northern lights caress my naked body as I lay on the grass at midnight, drinking hibiscus tea.

When I first arrived here three years ago this summer, my father and I drove our rented van down the dirt road to my house and almost crashed into the village fire truck. Parts of the cliff behind the house were on fire, and a dozen locals were running around with water buckets, brooms and hoses. The flames died out after a few hours, but the smell of burnt wood lasted for weeks. This summer the fires are everywhere, spreading a pink fog across the valley. The tourists think this makes for more photogenic snapshots.

The end-of-summer fruit has begun to fall from the trees in my garden: apples, cherries, peaches. My neighbour and I gather them in old boxes and sacks. We will give some away, bake some into pies, can the rest. Even now we are planning for the next season, the long days of darkness we know lay ahead.

Tomorrow, I will go into my classroom to start preparing for the new year. Some news: Curtis has found work in Alberta, Mary has moved back to Saskatchewan. Mindy will start grade nine in September. My principal thinks the registration will be up a little from last year, and that the senior boys basketball team will give those Kamloops boys a run for their money. I sink my feet into the long grass beside my herb garden. The air is full of parsley, basil, mint. I pick a sprig of fresh sage, roll it between my fingers, think about what to cook for supper. My cat rolls lazily on the porch, catching the last of the evening’s sun. The entire valley is bathed in the kind of hazy golden light that no art or memory can truly describe. Somewhere a bird is singing.

This is my home.

Stop. Run. Listen to what you know as well as what you don’t. Learn to trust the voices
and hearts you never knew were there. Find the aesthetic moment, make it your own. Be taught, be curriculum. Live within the beauty and life of silences when you need to. Yes, there are wars raging on the planet, and people we love are dying. Yes, cutbacks have made our work heartbreakingly difficult, almost impossible. Yes, I wept for two days straight when I found Johnson on the corner of Granville and Davie last November, his arms pocked with needle tracks, his eyes vacant as he asked me for money. But you know what—he also asked me to read him a poem as we held hands in the dark and the rain and the cold. So maybe I was weeping for that.

It is almost dawn when I finish writing, my eyes watery and my hand shaking. In the apartment next door, an alarm has gone off, maybe someone working an early shift, and for a moment I am startled that someone else was sharing this space with me all night. I try to bring this story to a conclusion; I give it a title, “Explaining the seasons to one who is not here,” and struggle, like a good researcher, to find a way to ground it in literature. I feel too raw, too exposed, to rationalize this story, and wonder if I have hit what Greene calls “the pursuit of freedom and critical understanding that lead to a transformation (if we are lucky) of lived worlds.” I hurt, but I am alive. And that is what counts. Here. Now.

I want to quote bell hooks and John Dewey, to echo their notions of ecstasy and experience in education, but I hear instead the words of James Baldwin arguing that “the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers,” and Walt Whitman singing to me to “love the earth and sun and animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labour to others.” And I think maybe he has a point, that when my school district cuts its music program we’ll simply take our students down to Granville Street so they can learn how to sing from an elder in a blue t-shirt. And so I will keep writing, and creating, and asking questions about peace and pedagogy, about the heart and where it fits in curriculum. I won’t stop taking walks around the city late at night in search of my own blue guitar. And yes, godamnit, when the school district cuts our supplies my students and I will make our own stunning guitars, and we will paint them any colour we want.

Suddenly, in the midst of this long, sad winter I know that there must be a spring somewhere around the corner. I know too that we as educators, artists, researchers and academics, should never be afraid of turning towards the aesthetic, that which makes us feel most alive, no matter how much it may hurt. For if we do, we will ultimately be what Greene calls the “persons able to call, to say, to sing, and—using their imaginations, tapping their courage—to transform.”

Sshh . . . listen.

That is the sound of your own blue guitar, waiting for you to find it.

About the Author

Jacynthia England is a Drama educator and writer who has lived and worked in Canada, Thailand, Tanzania, and Kazakhstan. Her curiosity has taken her on countless adventures around the world, and winds of change brought her recently to a new life in Singapore. In the midst of this crowded island/city/state, she is thrilled to be teaching in an international school that sits on top of a jungle-covered hill and has a view of the ocean from her classroom window.