I am a composite of all the people I have experienced. My words are a composite of all the words I have experienced. Because words come from people, it is fair to say that my writings represent those people I have crossed paths with. The form I use to employ my writings is auto/biographical poetic word portraits (APWPs). APWPs are biographical poems about an/other that allow for the illumination of the self and of course the other. APWPs are a re/search of the self and the other allowing the writer and the reader/listener to take a point of view on “being” that otherwise would not have been at their disposal. This type of poetry that frames its research as auto/biographical word portraits does not claim to discover anything new, only to re/mind people of what they once knew. This way people can continue with their lives as they are or make changes if need be, but most importantly know why it is they do what they do. The underlying premise is that an APWP allows for a mirroring of the reader’s or listener’s own experiences so that he can engage not only with the re/search of the writer and the writer’s others but with a re/search of him/self and his others. This would make the reading and/or listening of APWPs a re/searching activity just like writing and/or presenting of APWPs is a re/searching activity. APWPs are created from the lived experiences of the poet researcher. Some might say the end result is a philosophy of the self, a philosophy of the other, and a philosophy for
others. By philosophy I mean a way of thinking. It can be argued that it is a philosophy of the self because no matter who the poet researcher is writing about, it is himself who he is describing to different degrees. It can also be argued that it is a philosophy of the other since a philosophy of the self can only be made visible if there is a philosophy of the other available to contrast with. Finally it can be a philosophy for others since the two previous philosophies described provide a springboard for those interested in making visible their own philosophy. I see APWPs as a re/searching process that culminates in the three described types of philosophies.

INTRODUCTION

I moved to Milltown
After accepting
A teaching position
At the local high school there

I had more ups than downs
During my time in Milltown
And thus have many fond memories
And of course
Some not so fond memories
That helped to make me
Who I am today

In the end
It was whisky and friends
That got me through
The tough times
And whisky and friends
That got me in trouble
A bit too often

After I left Milltown
I lost touch with the friends
I had made there
But the same whiskey
Still lingers on my breath
Which is why I can remember
My days and the people
In Milltown
Like it was
Just yesterday

WORD PORTRAITS

Mr. Brown
The retired teacher and me
Shared the same fishing hole
Only it was he
Who got all the bites
And me
Who cleaned one walleye
After another
As he reeled them in

In the end
It was a fair exchange
Since I ate
Most of the fish
On the account
He had a receding gum line
That made eating
Even the flakiest fish
A painful endeavor

He was a man of few words
My guess was
Maybe for the same reason
His appetite was small
Nevertheless
When he did share
A few words or more
They always stuck with me
Especially now
That I was getting on in years
And understood what he meant
When he said old age is a bitch
And retirement its ugly cousin

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Billy
Whether it was class
Or basketball
When the going got tough
Billy bailed
And when he got the courage
To try again
It was too late

I hated nothing more
Than being part
Of wasted talent
But when it came to Billy
I was at my wits end

In the end
He remained a high school flunky
Who relived his glory days
Every Tuesday evening
At the high school
That was home
To the senior men’s basketball league
A far cry from where he could have gone
If he had stayed in school
Like I had told him to
Who knows
He might have gone on
To play some college ball
Earn a college degree
And leave Milltown behind
Instead of becoming
One of the many drunks
That could be found
On most days of the week
At the local bar

**Mr. Blue**
What you saw
Is what you got
Which was why
I loved the man

He was a family man
Who managed to find time
For a rookie teacher
And drunk like me

There was no one
I’d rather polish off
A bottle of whiskey with
Since drinking with him
Reminded me of my father
At his finest moments

The true man came out
When he drank
Which was why
He wouldn’t simply drink
With anybody
But only with those
He could trust
In his vulnerable state

He shared the tales
That explained the anger in his face
So I’d know
He’d aged for a reason

His tale
About how he watched a child
Die in his arms
After being on the wrong end
Of a speeding car
Always stuck in my mind
And may explain why
I drove slow
And cursed those that didn’t

Brent

The only time he missed
My biology class
Was during hunting
Fishing
And trapping season
Which luckily for me
Was most of the year
And the only reason I held onto
Some of my sanity

In class
He fished the pike
Out of the tank
Turned the turtles
Upside down
Ripped the leaves
Off the tobacco plants
Took bites
Out of the deer liver
While outside of class
I’m sure he skinned
Gutted
Tarred
And feathered
Everything he could get
His little grubby hands on

When it was report card time
I sarcastically wrote
He was a pleasure to have in class
Under the comments column
Getting a chuckle
From the other teachers
But never did I expect
Brent to react
The way he did

He told me
It was the first time
Someone had ever
Said something nice about him
And that it was the only reason
He showed his report card
To his parents
That was otherwise
Full of failing grades

I realized that day
How powerful words could be
And that indeed they could touch lives
Sometimes even
When you did not
Expect them to

Mr. Green

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Just outside of town
He had an acre of land
In his and his wife’s name

Here
I often found myself
Shooting the breeze
With the old timer
Who said I’d always
Have a place by his fire

Our talks about
What we’d do
If we ran the school
Always quickly turned into
Talks about
What we could have been
If we had done things
A little differently
During our youth

He wanted to be
A professional athlete
While I wanted to be
A journalist
But both our dreams
Ended prematurely

Only now do I realize
That teaching
Was our true calling
After all
What other type of profession
Has the ability
To help others reach their dream
By not reaching yours

Mrs. Pink

The way she taught
Earned the respect
Of boys twice her size

She ran them
Seldom sat them
In PE class
Since she knew
They were a bunch
That learned by doing
Not by listening
The boys’ hearts pumped
Faster in her class
Than in any other
Not because of her good looks
Or the strenuous workouts
She put them through
But because when she spoke
She spoke to the heart

Not a day went by
In which she didn’t tell
All of the boys
How proud she was
Of each and every one of them
For going all out
In a day and age
Were many students
Have simply given up
Deciding it’s easier to coast
Through their young lives
Than make something of them

They shared many
Heartfelt moments
Before it was time
To go their separate ways

**Ben**

He’d come stoned to class
After which he’d be told
More often than not
By the principal
To go home

Out of ideas
On how to help her son
His mother called me
And asked
If I would speak with him
Since he looked up to me
Which was definitely
A surprise to me

The next day
I took Ben aside
During open gym
And told him
He needed to change his ways
Before it was too late

He told me to chill
And to go smoke a joint
Since he knew
I had before

Our conversation ended there
Since I knew
I was in no position
To discuss the matter further

Mr. Black

His phone rang
Off the hook
Both at work
And at home

Being a teacher
In a small town
Meant you were
Constantly under fire
Wherever you went

I still remember
The day I went
To visit him
In his home
And he told me
How he had had enough
And was going to leave it
All behind

After his wife left
We split the last beer
He had in his fridge
So we could talk freely
Man to man

We talked about kids
Those at school
And those at home
And how if you neglected them
They’d grow up
Resenting you

We talked about women
Those we worked with
And those at bars
And how if you let them
Speak their mind
They’d always be
At your beck and call

We talked about friends
The ones we shared
And how if you stood by them
Through thick and thin
They’d always be there
In your darkest hour

The beer we had nursed
Was long gone
When his wife returned
And said it was time
For me to go home
Since for now
Tomorrow was
Another workday

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Miss Yellow

She was a young English teacher
Who taught a bunch
Of high school students
Creative writing

At years end
Each student had produced
Personal narratives
That found their way
Onto the pages
Of the school paper
And
Or
Various other rags
Around the globe
Much to the disapproval
Of the older teachers on staff
Who believed
Words that originated
In a teacher’s class
Should remain there

Miss Yellow
Was no fool
Knowing all too well
About what happens to those
That open themselves
Up to the world
And so she taught
Not wrote
What she thought

In the end
She was always thankful
When she’d come across
A student or two
Who had the guts to do
What she never could
Which simply was
To publish personal works
And not be afraid
To parish afterwards

Mrs. Violet

She went to all
The school dances
Not just because
It was required supervision for her
But to make sure
All had a good time
Which wasn’t the case
When she was in high school
And attended
Various school dances

She danced with those
Who had no one to dance with
Chatted up a storm
With those that too often
Kept to themselves
And made sure
Appropriate tunes were played
So all felt at home
The dances she supervised
Were always about
Good wholesome fun
In a drug free
And safe environment
But she knew all too well
About the after parties
That were not so
And thus could only hope
Those that attended
Did so with care

**Tom**

When it came to excuses
For not having homework done
I’d heard them all
That was
Until I met Tom

He told me his father
Had thrown him
His brother and mother
Out of the family home
Before he had time
To grab his school books
And that even when he tried
To sneak back in
The next day
To gather his homework
And some of his belongings
While his father was at work
He couldn’t
Because the locks
Had all been changed

He told me
That the three of them
Had walked barefoot in the snow
To their grandmother’s house
At which point
I’d heard enough
And told him
To go see the school counselor
Something he had yet to consider
Since he gave teachers like me
More credit than we deserved
Mrs. White

It seemed as if
Every student
Regardless of academic ability
Was taking my chemistry courses
For the simple reason
They thought that’s what
Would get them a job
At the local mill

I told Mrs. White
She should stop adding
Academically challenged students
That had no chance
Of passing a provincial exam
To my chemistry classes

She flipped her lid
And told me off
Saying why don’t you try
Telling a student they will fail
You’ll quickly learn
They need to find that out
For themselves

After I relaxed
My hard stance
She told me in words
I could get
That we live in a mill town
Where most of the workers
At the local mill
Have nothing more
Than a high school education
That includes a chemistry course or two
And for that
They can earn
Close to six figures
So what you have to understand
Is that right or wrong
A precedence has been set
And for that reason
Your chemistry classes
Will always be filled
With regular shmoes
And not just those
Headed for Academia
Like you’re accustomed to

Later that day
I went to a buddy’s place
And shot beavers
From the porch
At which point I realized
I too
Was a regular shmoe

Mr. Purple

When the teaching position
Was left vacant
All the boys pitched in
For a bottle of Canada’s finest whisky
And went over to his place

After getting him
And themselves liquored up
They cut to the chase
Of why they thought
He should put his name
Back into the hat

Each of the boys
Shared their favorite drinking tale
About him
But in the end
The one that put him over the edge
As to why
He should reapply
Was mine

It was the story of Candy
A young girl
With an attitude
Who always fought for the underdog
And listened to no one
But him

I told him
Candy had told me
About how he had taken her aside
And told her
She was a leader
Unlike any
He had ever seen
And that if she continues
To work hard
There is nothing
She can’t achieve
It wasn’t long before he realized
The story of Candy
Was his story too
At which point
He shed a whisky tear
And said
You boys are right
I am the man
For the job

Candy

Being a biology teacher
Candy figured
I was the one to go to
To help her with what
Kept her up
Late at nights

It was a young moose
She saw every day
On her parent’s land
And since hunting season
Was right around the corner
She wanted to know
How she could make the moose leave
For her own good

I told her that moose in general
Were easy targets for hunters
Because they often remained
In one area
For long periods of time
And that really
There was nothing she could do

The young hunters
In my class
Had caught wind of what I’d said
And on opening day
Of hunting season
They went to Candy’s
And shot dead
The baby moose

Understandably
After that
Candy seldom came
To my biology class
But I hoped
That one day
She would find it
In her heart to forgive me
And once again come to me
When she needed help
So that I could make up
For not taking into account
The young hunters
In my class
Before I shot my mouth off

Mitchell

It was in my first class
On my first day of work
That I met Mitchell

He had his feet
On his desk
And his arms
Behind his head
When I walked into the classroom
To begin
My teaching career

Without a pen in sight
Or a book of any kind
He uttered the words
Teach me teach

Needless to say
I wasn’t pleased
As I told him
To sit up straight
And only talk
When he was spoken to
He told me
That I should chill
Lose the attitude
And start teaching
Since I was on the clock

The class chuckled
At Mitchell’s remarks
But there was no smile from me
As I started in
On my lesson plan

Mitchell would be
A constant thorn in my side
Until the day
I crossed paths with his father
At the local bar

Me and his old man
Drank longnecks that night
As we talked about everything
From teaching to agriculture

The next day
Mitchell told the class
I was one of them
Since I had beers
With his old man
Something few teachers
Had ever done

Mitchell and the rest of the students
Behaved
From that day onward
Showing me how
If you take the time
To drink with the locals
Not only will you learn
About their ways
They will learn
To tolerate yours

Zack
I did my best
To make him smile
But I knew down deep
The only thing
That could ease his pain
Was time
And maybe
The arts

He quit the basketball team
Never tried out for volleyball
And upon my suggestions
Acted out his pain
With the drama club

He also wrote lyrics
Late into the night
About what it was like
To want something
You just can’t have

His ex-girlfriend
Really had done
A number on him
So much so
He started a band
With a good buddy
Who was able to vocalize the words
He kept inside
For far too long

After making a demo CD
They played the local bars
And made a name for themselves
All of which
He would have given up
For the girl
That had started it all

Clint

He lived to rope
Texas longhorns
And the way he saw it
School was just a necessary evil
He had to get through
If he wanted to continue
Doing what he loved

After high school
The only thing holding him back
From going down south
And pursuing a Pro career
Was his girlfriend
Who he loved
More than life itself

He was afraid
He’d lose her
If he went away
Even if it were
For just a short period of time
Now that her father
Had lost his ranch
And she was living in town
Thus spending more time
With the townies
And less time with him
And the country folk

He knew that once
She found something
To replace her passion
For riding horses
She’d have no reason
For going to visit him
At his parent’s ranch

I felt bad for Clint
Since he was too young to know
That chasing a dream
Always led to a heartache
While chasing two dreams
Was enough
To kill a man

Mandy

She had spent her entire life
Living for others
Which was why she had no idea
Of how to go about
Living for herself

She was stuck bagging groceries
In a town
Where girls married young
And worked two bit jobs
That never paid the rent
And thus were forced
To rely on men
To make ends meet

I helped Mandy
And girls like her
With their studies
Even though I knew
They were nothing more
Than baby factories
That felt more pain
With every ounce of knowledge
That they gained

The lucky girls
Were the ones
Who made it to the cities
With only a child or two
While the unlucky
Remained barefoot and pregnant
With a child on their hips
For much of their lives

The day I ran into Mandy
In the big city
Brought a smile to my face
Because now I knew
That all my teachings
Had not been for naught

Kendra

She was the only girl
In shop class
And the only girl
In the school
Who didn’t shave
Her legs and armpits
Leading me to believe
The two
Went hand and hand

She put up
With one sexist comment
After another
Which the boys in class
Called nothing more
Than harmless shoptalk
Since the shop teacher
Not only approved of it
But encouraged it

She finished the year
At the top of her class
Which she figured
Wasn’t hard to do  
In a class  
Full of morons  
And in her free time  
Earned her welder’s certificate  
Making her more qualified  
Than her sexist male teacher

The following year  
There were two girls  
In the shop class  
But the year after that  
There weren’t any

**Chuck**

In chemistry class  
He added acid to the tank  
That was full of water bugs  
Just to see living things  
Go through a slow  
And painful death  
Or maybe because  
He wanted me to know  
What it felt like  
For a three hundred pound boy  
To lug himself to class  
Everyday  
Only to be laughed at by me  
And his fellow classmates  
When yet another chair he sat on  
Shattered to bits

It took a tank full of bugs  
To make me realize  
How one person’s laugh  
Was another person’s tear  
And that maybe  
If I cared half as much  
About my students  
As I did  
My bug collection  
I might actually make  
A good teacher  
And not just another scientist  
Who treats his students  
Worse than lab specimens
Allen

He was one of those students
Who never wrote anything down
Simply figuring
If it was worth remembering
He would

He had little use for books
Simply sitting back
And learning orally
From his teachers and classmates
Since everyone had a story
Whether they knew it or not

His marks weren’t great
But he got by
And in later years he excelled
Because he drew wisdom
From himself and others
And not from old texts
That collected dust
Because no one understood
What they really meant

For him
It was communication between people
That was important
Not a book
Which as far as he was concerned
Was nothing more
Than a last resort
Since it told the same story
Over and over
In the same way

Missy

Teachers spoiled ballots
By the hundreds
Just to get
Missy elected
As school president
Since they knew
She would serve them
And not the students
She was supposed to

In class
She read everything
She was told
And wrote everything
She read

She didn’t have
An original thought
In her
But what she did have
Was a free ticket
To a higher education
Of much the same

Teachers controlled
Her every move
And I’m sure
It was only a matter of time
Before
She herself
Became a teacher
So she could rule
Another’s life
In much the same way
Hers had been

Thanks to her
And teachers like her
Nothing ever changed
In our educational institutes
Except for names

James

He was labeled
As having FAS
But the only thing I saw
Was an affectionate youth
Who cared more about
His fellow students
Than he did for himself

The students loved him
Especially the girls
Since he handed out hugs
Without expecting anything
In return
But the male teachers
Felt this was a problem
And that he needed
To learn some boundaries
Because of him
The male teachers implemented
A no touching policy for boys
Making him feel
Like he had done
Something wrong

After that
The boys ridiculed
The uptight male teachers
For their paranoia
And the girls hugged James
Whenever
A male teacher was around
To show whose side
They were on

**Fabio**

Insecure
Always craving attention
And seeking the approval of others
On even the smallest of matters
Meant his choice
Of a career in modeling
Was a good one

How Fabio
Got to be
The way he was
Was no accident
As far as I was concerned
And he wasn’t the first
Nor would he be the last student
To feel the way
That he did

His mother worked and lived
In another town
During the week
So he only saw her
On the occasional weekend
While his father
Was always out
Getting drunk with the boys
When he wasn’t at work
Meaning the only family
That he saw
On a regular basis
Was his sister
And that was only because
They lived under the same roof

As a child
Fabio never had a chance
At a happy life
He didn’t even know
What a happy life was
So he figured
For the rest of his
He would pose
As if he knew
What happiness was
Since for him
That would be
As good as it got

Miss Tangerine

She worked at the local school
And even though
She was constantly being told
By administration
Teachers and parents
How great she was
At her job
She knew down deep
It wasn’t her calling

She kept doing
What she wasn’t meant to do
Since she knew
That if she stopped
The town she lived in
And its people
Would have no use for her

No one cared
She wrote poetry
And the fact she was good at it
Only worked against her
Since Milltown
Was a town that celebrated
Hockey players
Not poets
That could put into words
What their town
Was all about

During school holidays
She began to travel
To different parts
Around the world
Hoping that would silence
Her inner poetic voices
But it did the opposite
And reinforced
What she already knew
Simply that
She was a poet
Leading a teacher’s life

Bruce

His girlfriend
Looked on proudly
As he played his guitar
While singing a song
To the graduating class
That put into words
What high school
Had meant to him
And I’m sure had meant
To many of his classmates

His lyrics
Were about friends
Teachers and parents
That helped shape his life
For the path
He would embark on

The chorus
That he kept repeating
Was about how he believed
That only through relationships
Does life have meaning
And that thanks to his time
At the high school
He had made
Many of these connections

He finished his song
On a sad note
Not because he was unsure
Of what the future had in store
But because he knew
It was impossible
For his life to get better
Than it had been
During those years
He spent at the school

CONCLUSION

To this day
Whenever I long
For my Milltown days
I pour myself
A glass of whisky
Turn on
Some country tunes
And sit in the dark
So I can go back
To that place and time
Where and when
My life took a turn

Someday
In the near future
I hope to return
To meet with the men
Women and children
I simply can’t
Get off my mind.

About the Author

David Raju is a PhD student at the University of Victoria and a biology instructor at Camosun College in Victoria, British Columbia.