How I want to keep saying it

Sheila Stewart
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

In the beginning

word leapt from body and never went back. Body said, you’re mine, all mine. Word said, I’m free, I have to paddle my own canoe. Page waited patiently for word, knew word would want to lie down in time, would fall in love with crisp white sheets, with making a mark. Rub herself along page, and lie, still.
Giving my name  
- Taddle Creek Park

I’m sitting under a beech — balmy —  
*Tree* carved into its crotch. Next to *Tree*,

lovers’ initials in a heart. Beech thicker  
than a man. It gives me a roof. *Tree* to climb.

Black ants crawl its trunk. Tree cut into, scarred —  
its initials growing with it. Knobbed where they cut

off big limbs. Seams, bulbous growth. Thin branches  
from thick. I push my hands into the bark.

I am cut, cutting into words.

**Paper**

over experience with words, words laid up close so there’s no light between, dense text  
dampening, words wondering, wanting, probing, speculating, words like tiny windows, so  
small and close a mesh obscuring, paper like covers, two people pulled, pulling together,  
the weave of the sheet on the doctor’s table, words examining, words luring the outdoors  
in, words flattening whole forests to paper for us
Calligraphy

moon writing
   on water
what we want
read to us

Avoiding poetry

like a friendship
when something is amiss – words
floundering
That’s the problem
with poetry. Friends,
you can cook for. Sometimes
it’s all awkward – don’t know
what to do. If only you wrote
more, tried harder: everything
forgiven.

The call

Casting, conjuration, words wanting
air, mouth round. Paper

actively fraudulent, counterfeit. Late slip.
Overdue. Bad news. Bad cheque. Names

like breath, fricative, what the tongue
can do, lips pursed and puckered. Nouns

like kisses, wanting all of you. Oil on skin.
Words like willows. Willows don’t care.

Verbs won’t make them better. All
we have uttered, will utter. Announce.

All that words ask.

A story
   we step into
our bodies travel through woods
gorge

lake water
turning push, pull, glide
returning most of her submerged
arc of her arm shoulder meets air
a swimmer buoyed
trailing a wake strokes are phrases
water syllables:
water wants her

spring sun warming one side of her face
she always forgets

a wardrobe where snow
is falling

**Are we writing**

to forget tuck
it in to paper
**letters of the alphabet holding**
our arms at our sides
straight
stiff as capitals
to remember the smell
of old books decay
absence
when they taught me how
to make a capital S in cursive I wrote it for you
in the snow on the way home
my first S in a snowy bank
and all along until we turned
Mornington Street

**Making room**

In the park the sky lifts, making room for my midwinter steps. I can only write poems to people I know. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone. Sky and snow everywhere, bare limbs of damp trees exposed.

Early February small sounds far away within the earth, one voice stretching toward another. You, longing to write, what do you want to say? Is it patience – how the weather shifts?

Make room for our hands, what is outside the window, what weighs heavy, what lifts us like the sun warming the backs of our heads as we walk – all the while considering the dog’s constant sniffing. The poem is sometimes prairie, sometimes portal.

**Reading room**

Smooth skin, angora sweater
jeans slim over hips, a bit of belly exposed.
The next generation is taller.

My young full-faced self, schooled in another era
another university’s similar rooms
dark with regal wood. I look at middle-aged men

in portraits. Try to imagine the past.
I have been buried in the stacks without
a word. Being watched, as if that were enough.

My essay on Donne, undone.

**In concert**

Notes written up the back of the cellist’s hand. We are fathers and mothers sitting on hard chairs in the hot school auditorium, our children’s smooth faces before us. Big band tunes, glint of brass. I change seats to better see my fourteen-year-old daughter, to watch her eyes above sheets of music, her eyes on the conductor. I’m glad she chose French horn rather than the clarinet, my grade eight instrument.

The other day I cycled past a music store, glimpsed a row of clarinets, hanging like trophies: keys bright. My father had said, *I will get you one for Christmas if you promise to practise, if it won’t sit in the case, if you are serious.* I pedaled back, looked in the window, but couldn’t go into the store. I wanted my own instrument. I wanted him to give me what I wanted.

**Learning the alphabet**

I’d always known
the letter T, the lines on my mother’s chest, one across, another down between her breasts. A Roman cross. T for turtle, trunk, time, taste, trust. Never mentioned it, asked about it. Never touched it. “No,” she said, “I can’t wear a neckline that low.” My chest is uncut, skin intact. My children have all their limbs. The tiny suture on the last born is a faint thread. “Inguinal hernia,” they said. “Better safe than sorry.” The most recent: a squiggle above her eye, stitches from a bump against a window. We watch each other, my generation. What are the signs? Quiver at the neck.

A bit thinner. Talking, truth, touch. How do we keep each other alive? You look back at the seniors’ home and your great-aunt is waving. She waits to hear if they’ll operate. Her thin arms score the window.
We write facing the window

  push our right hands across the pages,
don’t interrupt, we can talk later. I try to ignore the café clatter, mothers with toddlers:

We have all morning together. Can’t we get along. A pair of old ladies walk past,
one gesturing, her hands in a child’s striped mittens. Another time I sat opposite you.

You waited. I started to talk, walking between fears, like pools surrounding me.
When my voice dipped, you leaned toward me. Crow’s feet forming around our eyes,
lines at the corners of our mouths. Our children have outgrown us. Whose tippy cup?
Whose hat? Brendan’s mother is driving us to gymnastics. I want you to get along

with Brendan. Hurry up. We are no longer mothers urging good cheer. You ask,
You can’t concentrate? You dip your head behind your book. I will walk you home.

The old woman’s mittened hands in flight. Her friend inclines her head, wanting
to catch every word.

Most cafés have a big man

at a small table telling the details. I always
give her a great bonus at Christmas. $5000 this year. She’s been with me
since the beginning. Voices murmur together like rivers, till a word pops out
like a rock. Stop. Hit that one. The consoling smell of coffee and art. It’s quieter at home but so many drawers and papers lie in wait, eager
to interrupt. Email too – someone always needs help. Someone’s dying. You want another language, parts of speech trading places, bleed together: only sounds, promising nothing. Words sitting like the budgie
singing in its cage, squawking to be let out. Asking for music, but a voice will do.

**Theory to practice**

She can’t read a word she’s written. Manages to carry her work to the table, but can’t
go further. Arms rest on paper, head drops, hair and cheek fall to the first page. Horses charge through her.

She’s observer. Rider. Horse. All her dreams line up, fold away, hide. She wakes to bright midday
light, remembers. She can’t write a word. Pen to paper. Words chase her. She can’t find them. Face them. Reluctantly she sews

the elastic on her daughter’s first point shoes. Busy since her own childhood. Hardly a day off unless you count maternity leaves.

Craving moments alone when her brain would stop repeating what she said she said what she said shouldn’t have. Oak alone. Not all stories are redemptive. She will draw you to her. Kiss you. Or, write *kissing*. Imagine her way into you.

**Flight**

the garden a canvas
winter dull full
of sparrows

among your books one I meant
to open *The Roots of Language* I could ask

what is language explain
the years of your life one by one
I could ask what is meant by leaving leaves
wings beat here we are
mid-flight – our words
lifting
How you want to keep saying it

Poetry isn’t a theory of anything. It’s lonely and afraid, small and quiet. If you love it right, it turns to you, tells you what it needs. Turns right round and looks you in the face. Your breath shallow. Call it map or lover if you like, call it what you will. You are here only once. You can sit by yourself listening to guitar music. Pat the dog. Look in your daughter’s guitar case, lift up all the dog-eared pieces of music, rub your hands over fuchsia velvet, strange and soft: a colour you’ve never seen. Laugh at yourself and the dog and the word dog, how you want to keep saying it. Look at your daughter’s pages called Guitar Tablature. Don’t know that word: you could say it all day. Tablature. Velvet brush cut, the hair on the back of your first boyfriend’s head, before he left to summer in the naval reserve, your fingers brushing, he would stroke your face till you thought he could hold you. Words in the ends of your fingers. You used to fall in love with artists. Now: Tablature.

Poetry is the old woman next door alive in spring, banging at an overhanging branch of your tree with a rake. It’s the way she can lift it over her head, give it a shake. It’s her orange sheer covering pink foam curlers.

Poetry is your father’s scarf the day after he died, how it was all you wanted. How you were afraid to ask. How you love what they say about tablature in the dictionary, how you believe words help. We place them on a page, give them to each other in an act of faith. How love lunges from noun to verb.

About the Author

Sheila Stewart is an adult educator, poet and PhD student at OISE/UT examining the intersection of narrative and learning across differences in adult literacy. (www.literaciesoise.ca) Her research with literacy practitioners uses arts-informed approaches. Her poetry collection A Hat to Stop a Train was published by Wolsak and Wynn in 2003.