

## Writing a Life: Representation in Language and Image

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### Seeing and Seeking

I recently spent several days reviewing more than twenty-five thousand digital photographs I composed and collected during the past decade. I have been feeling a sturdy need to organize and preserve these myriad and multiple images of quotidian life, each image like a fragment of memory, a trace of the heart's desire. In some of the photographs I saw my father, the man I knew and did not know, the man I can only recognize as familiar and unfamiliar. Christina Baldwin (2005) claims that "when we live in a family, a community, a country where we know each other's true stories, we remember our capacity to lean in and love each other into wholeness" (p. 18). This is my hope—to learn how to tell true stories, at least stories full of truth, and to learn to lean into wholeness. But I always know Isabel Huggan's (2003) wisdom that "stories are only partial truths" (p. 25). In much the way that photographs change life into images, Huggan reminds me that stories "change life into language and keep it firm" (p. 25) so we can cling "to our fabricated versions of history" (p. 234).

In Roland Barthes' autobiography titled *Roland Barthes*, Barthes (1977) begins with the following advice for reading his autobiography: "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel" (p. 1). Like Barthes, in all my autobiographical writing, in every poem, anecdote, narrative, or incident, I perceive myself as a character in a fiction, in a story that has been made up. I am both present and not present; or more accurately, I witness a person who is both me and not me. Like Barthes I know "a state of disturbing familiarity: I see the fissure in the subject" (p. 3). It is the sense of "disturbing familiarity" that both holds me as if enthralled, and that compels me to write more as if I can break loose from enchantment by stacking images like bricks in a tower to a mysterious knowledge that teases and tantalizes. But, for all my writing, I never know much. Instead, what happens is that the fissures open up like sudden cracks and gaps in ocean ice when spring writes with warm breath. And, so, like Barthes, "I abandon the exhausting pursuit of an old piece of myself, I do not try to *restore* myself (as we say of a monument)" (p. 56). Instead of restoring myself, instead of seeking ways to patch up the fissures, I story myself; I seek connections amidst the cracks and gaps; I spell out a series of images. As Barthes suggests, "You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens" (p. 36). We know ourselves only in images, written in words and light.



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My sense of who I am in the world is an effect of language, a sense of presence, a representation, seemingly whole but always fragmentary.

For over two decades I have been writing autobiographical poetry and fiction about my father in an effort to know him and to know my relationship with him. And in all my searching for my father, I am reminded of Robert Bly's haunting advice (1990): "It is possible that we will never have the closeness we want from our fathers" (p. 121).



### **In My Father's Arms**

*all my life I have wanted my father to hold me in his arms and tell me, I love you*

I went to a counsellor, empty but still full of fear, and she walked me through the tangled garden of five decades of living in the earth to a quiet meadow where my father and I stood all alone with the dandelions, both dazed and lost. I was once more a small boy. Faraway, I heard a soft voice, what do you want? I began to weep.

*all my life I have wanted my father to hold me in his arms and tell me, I love you*

We are each shaped by the first years of our lives; we learn how to live with one another from the stories we have been invited to live with others. Fathers and sons live in an alien world born in contest, often confused, where we seldom know how to name our desires. My father says, I'm a depression baby but I'm not depressed.

*all my life I have wanted my father to hold me in his arms and tell me, I love you*

In middle age I know my desires with an ache that pushes against the walls of my heart, and I know I will never lie in my father's arms, but I will still know my father in love, thankful for all stories, written, to be written, all fragments, only, subtending the whole and holy story that always exceeds the geometry of the heart's tangled lines.

On November 18, 2008, at seventy-eight years old, my father died with a brain tumour. Our story is over and not over. I am left to write the story as well as I can, with as much wisdom as I can. What follows is a series of ruminations and poems, mostly remembered and composed during two weeks in October, 2008 when I lingered with my father in the palliative care unit of the Western Memorial Regional Hospital in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. As Brian Brett (2009) knows, "Death is not about the dead. It's about the living. Our grief, and our inability to speak it. The tragedy of death only exists when you are still alive" (p. 22).



## Rumination 1

In the last two months of his life, my father both lived and died with a brain tumor that stole most of his energy, much of his speech, and even more of his spirit. In this liminal space between living and dying, I ruminated on memories, and experiences, and questions of love, relationship, ethics, and spirituality. I also read Lesley Craig's (2005) *Burning Fence: A Western Memoir of Fatherhood*, a sad, humane book about family. Craig writes: "Tricky business, fathers and sons" (p. 7). Craig acknowledges that while he and his father "had only the sketchiest history," he still "longed to have a relationship with him, some moments of intimacy and connection" (p. 305). Craig feels "the terrible pull of my father's blood" (p. 141), and knows only with his father's death that "all my questions remained unanswered" (p. 272). What is the obligation of a son to a father? What is the hope a son carries for his father?

### Slow Motion

In the beginning my father lost his nouns.  
Then he couldn't find his memories.

Now my father sleeps with a wide mouth.  
His breathing is shallow and guttural.

He lies on his side with his fingers splayed  
on his forehead, his thumb under his chin.

He wakes long enough for ginger ale,  
chocolate pudding, and a tea biscuit.

I change my father's diaper, wishing  
I had practiced more with Madeleine.

Each day, my father defies the doctor's  
dire diagnosis by dying in slow motion.



### Rumination 2

My time with my father is drawing to a kind of close, and my thoughts are focused almost entirely on living and dying, and the challenges that extend beyond a poet's imagination and resources. Living is always a tangled story that often is, but never should be, taken for granted. In *My Father's Footsteps: A Memoir*, Sebastian Matthews (2004) writes about his father, the well-known poet William Matthews: "This song for my father is also the song of myself" (p. 44). In his memoir, Matthews explains: "I launch myself over and over into a reservoir of memory. Each time I dive, I hope to go deep. Each time I come up for air, I hope to emerge new" (p. 274).

## Hip Waders

I bought hip waders last summer  
so I could go trout fishing  
with my father. Like we often  
fished when I was a boy.

I should have bought them a long  
time ago. Today, my mother called  
with hard news, and I know  
our fishing stories are done.

And the hip waders will hang  
in his garage as a sign I loved  
my father, even if too slowly, not  
nearly enough for happy memories.



## Rumination 3

The invitation we are offered with birth is the invitation to learn to live well, and to live well is to live with wisdom, and to live with wisdom is to live with a perpetual curiosity and courage and conviction. In *The Eyes of the Heart: A Memoir of the Lost and Found* Frederick Buechner (1999) writes about his father who committed suicide when Buechner was a boy, “one way to read my whole life—my religious faith, the books I have written, the friends I have made—is as a search for him” (pp. 23-24). As an old man, Buechner confesses: “My father has been dead for more than sixty years, but I doubt that a week has gone by without my thinking of him. In recent years I doubt that a single day has gone by” (p. 60).

## Intrepid

The doctor tells Skipper, You're fiddly fit.  
At seventy-eight, from May to September, he wants  
to fish in the ponds, a lifetime familiar, but most  
of his buddies didn't make it much past seventy.

Because he is living a long life,  
a lot longer than many, he is often  
called to be a pallbearer, each funeral,  
a testimony to the doctor's diagnosis.

For years he was a warden (not a prison warden  
he reminds me) to the local Anglican priest,  
happy he was always available, with the key  
in his pocket, and no taxing theological issues.

His neighbour planted a pot-bellied stove  
in his front yard. Skipper, What do you think?  
Skipper didn't know what to say, so he said,  
That's some pot-bellied stove you've got there.

Like a Rubik's cube and crossword puzzles,  
my father is an inscrutable text, indecipherable.  
As usual I am trying to know him,  
still seeking the cipher to the enigma.

Perhaps this is a son's plight, wondering  
if I will grow old, perhaps even with enough  
sense to know that a pot-bellied stove in the front  
yard isn't my idea of art but can be yours.



## Rumination 4

Our storied lives are never only unique and idiosyncratic accounts of individual and isolate experiences. Instead, our stories are always part of a network of communal and collaborative stories, a network that knows no beginning and no ending. As human beings we are inextricably and integrally connected like fire and water and air and earth, sustained by an ecology of ancient elements. In *Enough About You: Adventures in Autobiography* David Shields (2002) claims that he writes confessionally in order to present himself as “a representative human being” (p. 53). Shields also notes that “language is all we have to connect us” even if “it doesn’t, not quite” (p. 98).

### **I Still Hear the Bell Ringing**

On long walks from Crescent Pond  
in cool/warm Mays on the keen edge  
of promised summer (our creels  
heavy with a dozen trout more  
than the law permitted) my father  
offered the only advice I remember:

Take your garbage home,  
and in my knapsack, then and now,  
empty Vienna sausage cans,  
wax paper, pop bottles

If you don't know a word,  
look it up in a dictionary,  
strong advice, for now I know  
many words and in words I am known

Never hate anybody,  
wisdom like an iron bell ringing  
from a gray sky, its echoes  
heard through the years

Never hate anybody  
                    Never hate anybody  
My one wish (who needs three?):  
on long walks from Crescent Pond  
through the dense spruce, across the bog  
on a trail only my father could see,  
I wish he had taught me how



### Rumination 5

In order to live with wholeness and love in the world, we need an ongoing commitment to exploring the places of dreams and visions, including the precocious psyche, the inimitable imagination, and the ineffable heart. Why am I reluctant to journey in the interior places—the less familiar places, the places for which I do not necessarily have well-prepared maps, the places where mystery reigns? I have so little experience with those places. In *Listen to Me: A Book for Women and Men about Father-Son Relationships* Gerald G. Jampolsky & Lee L. Jampolsky (1996), a father and son, claim that “like us, many men in our culture have lost all awareness of their souls. It has been replaced with the need to achieve, succeed, compete, and conquer. As men, we need to return to our soul” (p. 111).

#### The Same Nose

Carrie says Skipper and I  
have the same nose.

The son is in the father,  
the father is in the son,  
perhaps.

Skipper daily disdains snobs:  
Cobb Lane snobs, and snobs  
who join, even want to join,  
the Blomidon Golf and Country Club,  
snobs who attend the Arts and Culture Centre,  
snobs who moor in the harbour of Wood's Island



in big yachts to yak the weekend away,  
snobs who eat at the Glynmill Inn  
with prices three times higher  
than the Seven Seas Restaurant,  
snobs who drink coffee at the Natural Bean  
instead of Tim Horton's (with dozens of donuts),  
all the snobbish things I enjoy except  
golf which I despise (even though  
I've only ever played mini-golf twice).  
Skipper snubs snobs with dismissive swipes.

Skipper's emotions wig-wag like a tall alder  
in a hurricane shaken by hyperbolic currents:  
*Jobs? Things are so bad at the hospital,  
you can be standing at the counter,  
and the nurse admitting you will  
receive a dismissal slip; she can't  
even finish filling out the form,  
she just gets up and goes.*

Loud laughter like a gust of spring  
punctuates Skipper's stories.  
Carrie still responds, after all these years.  
I grew up with a stand-up comic team:  
George and Gracie, Lucy and Desi,  
Ralph and Alice, Carrie and Skipper,  
the busker, the jester, bursting out  
always in song dance mimicry oratory.

Like a newsroom wire service Skipper  
has information and opinions on everything,  
especially municipal provincial national  
international intergalactic politics.  
Convicted truth shines hard in the air  
around his head in concise editorial comments:  
*They think they're smarter than everybody else.  
He's not right in the head.  
They ought to put a bomb under his bum.*  
He never changes: father of the poet,  
he offers me his stories, and stands still  
long enough for me to know the poems.  
He watches me writing in my journal.  
*It's all going down there now,* he says.  
He trusts me with his stories, even  
invites the neighbours to read my poems.

The father is in the son,  
the son is in the father.

Carrie says Skipper and I  
have the same nose.



## Rumination 6

There is a healing power in stories and sharing stories. Perhaps lingering with the dying will help me learn living. We are all wounded; we are all living with death and dying. So, how then should we live? What does it mean to be human? Regarding his father's desertion, Thomas King (2003) writes: "I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live" (p. 9).

### **Bogart**

when Humphrey Bogart died,  
Lauren Bacall said, spring  
is a shitty time to die

from the hospital's third floor  
autumn in the Humber Valley  
is a cheap Chinese combo

gold silk, mustard pungency,



crimson memories, gelled orange,  
nature's flamboyant dying

I could climb a poplar tree  
and fall into the low gray sky  
if I had enough faith to trust

the geometry of possibilities  
in the countless shapes of trees,  
rationality only one way of being

my father stirs, crazy with not  
knowing, his brain now owned by  
a tumour with a despot's humour

everything is okay, I lie, wanting  
more malleable truth, knowing only  
autumn is a shitty season to die



### Rumination 7

Each of us is called to live a story in the world. Some of us live long stories like Victorian or Russian novels that extend for a thousand pages, and some of us live short stories that end with suddenness, and many of us live stories that are neither short nor long, but almost none of us is eager to write *The End* to our stories. We want our stories to continue, like a TV episode that ends with *To Be Continued*. But none of us is entirely in control of the stories that we live. As George Elliott Clarke (2009) observes with wry wisdom, “every life carries an expiration date” (p. 70). Even though Clarke’s story with

his father was mixed with long periods of estrangement and rejection, Clarke confesses, “I was absolutely unprepared for the death of my father, William Lloyd Clarke, on August 31, 2005, at age seventy” (p. 70). Even though Clarke “still felt the need ... to punish” his father “for not loving me enough as a child” (p. 72), he is poignantly surprised by how his father’s “end hurt me most, wounded me most deeply, and was the most psychologically crushing, perhaps because we had not been as close as I would have liked, even though I now know his influence—for good and for ill—has been indelible upon my life” (p. 71). In his grief, Clarke gives a voice to the experience of so many sons as they remember their fathers.

### Remains

after the surgery  
    with only  
a sickle of staples to stitch your head  
together, the ambulance carried you  
across the island to months in palliative care,  
the inevitable long walk up the church aisle,  
the silent parade to Mt. Patricia Cemetery near  
Wild Cove (where we once often spent Sundays  
sitting in the sun, eating egg salad sandwiches,  
glad for whatever the day might mean),  
and the last slow slip into the dry ground  
like an elevator shaft to somewhere we couldn't go,  
and now I stand in the mirror, naked, wrapped only  
in your memory, and I see more and more of you  
each time I glimpse like a ghost is writing me  
from somewhere faraway I know I don't  
    want to know



## Seeking Still

My father is my father, and his gifts are the gifts I received. I love him for who he was and for the gifts he lived. It is fruitless to focus on what was not, or could not be, and what was not given or could not be given. As Christopher Dickey (1998) writes about his father James Dickey, the poet, “blood doesn’t let go of you” (p. 16). My experience of more than two decades of writing about my father is like Dickey’s experience: “The more I sifted through his life and mine, the more I tried to bring my father to myself, the more I realized that what I was looking for lay somewhere between truth and imagination” (p. 30).

Margaret Atwood (2002) proposes that “writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light” (p. xxiv). Atwood also suggests that “*all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (p. 156). So, I will continue to write—in words, in darkness, in light, in images—always seeking what likely cannot be found, knowing only that seeking can lead to seeing, at least seeing something that can sustain the heart’s longing.

When I remember my father, one of my favourite memories will be the way his fishing line hung still in the air with each careful cast like a line of poetry seeking its catch. My father died in the fall, and in the long bleak winter, I remember him, the last summer I saw him, standing still, waving with what I then thought was a lackluster show of civility, but now remember as a sad final farewell: Take care, with a sigh that holds me till spring light.

**Homework**

When my son was young,  
most nights I helped him  
with his homework  
and remembered how  
Skipper sat close beside me  
on the edge of his big bed  
while I memorized textbooks  
and answered questions.  
In spite of long days  
in the mill and frequent calls  
from neighbours to fix their  
ovens, toasters, electric kettles,  
Skipper always quizzed me  
for tests, sometimes for hours,  
and never complained.  
When we studied  
geography, Skipper said,  
*Wherever you go, know  
where you come from so  
you can find your way back.*



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