Teaching as a Human Experience

Contemporary Teaching and Learning Poetry Series

Series Editor: Patrick Blessinger

Teaching as a Human Experience:

An Anthology of Contemporary Poems

Edited by

Karen J. Head and Patrick Blessinger

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Teaching as a Human Experience: An Anthology of Contemporary Poems

Edited by Karen J. Head and Patrick Blessinger

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

https://www.hetl.org/

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7655-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7655-1

THIS VOLUME OF POETRY IS DEDICATED TO EDUCATORS ALL OVER THE WORLD AND TO THE MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING AND LEARNING ASSOCIATION WHOSE CREATIVE PASSION FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IS HELPING TO TRANSFORM THE FIELD OF EDUCATION IN MANY POSITIVE WAYS.

CONTENTS

List of Contributors

Sandra Alcosser

Laura Apol

Andrew Bailes

Luci Gorell Barnes

Susan Cherie Beam

Brian Beatty

Dennis Ken Bideshi

Amanda M. Bigler

Patrick Blessinger

William (Bill) Edgar Boyd

Eva Wennås Brante

Matt Bryden

Lori B. Caress

John Casquarelli

Dadi Chen

Paula Marie Coomer

Marie Cook

Maria Dolores Costa

Barbara Cozza

James Curran

Chad Davidson

Robert H. Deluty

Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi

Jonathan Porter Eastman

Donna M. Elkins

Nathan Elliot

Meg Eubank

Steve Evans

Roberta Fabiani

Sandy Feinstein

Beverly Fenig

Gregory Fraser

Alice Friman

Alice B. Fogel

Louis Gallo

Frani Geiger

Terry Gifford

David Gordon Goddard

Norma Walrath Goldstein

Richard K. Gordon

Alisa Gordaneer

Eimile Máiréad Green

Sinead Hahessy

Elaine Handley

Erik G. Hemming

Danielle Izzo

Murray Jennings

Gunhild Jensen

Hershman John

Rae Desmond Jones

Angela Masterson Jones

Christopher (Kit) Kelen

Jennifer Lagier

Ronna J Levy

Ashley Lister

Michael Kgomotso Masemola

Jill Marie McSweeney

Peter Meinke

Jim Mello

Lucy Michael

Erica Vernold Miller

Shannon Morreira

Laura Morrison

Charmayne Mulligan

Rich Murphy

Mark O'Hara

Kate Oxley

Sylvia Petter

Robyn Philip

Philip Porter

Annette Priesman

Patricia C. Robinson

Kabini Sanga

Martin T Sedgley

Noel Sloboda

Kathryn Sutherland

Peter Charles Taylor

Mimi Thebo

P. L. Thomas

N. N. Trakakis

Danielle Valenilla

Elizabeth VanDeusen-MacLeod

David K. Weiser

Roel Wijland

Jennifer Wilson

Robert Edward Witmer

Daniel Xerri

SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

What is an anthology? Broadly defined, an anthology is a collection of writings, such as poems or short stories or other creative works, centered on a similar theme or topic or time period, with contributions from different/various authors. The theme and requirements for the anthology are determined by the anthology editor(s). The works are chosen by the anthology editor(s) and the editors are responsible for compiling the entire volume. The editors typically publish some of their own works alongside the contributors' works. The works that appear in the anthology may include both previously published works and original unpublished works. An anthology is a good format to showcase both established writers and new writers.

The purpose of the HETL Anthology Series is to use the medium and craft of poetry and creative prose to explore teaching and learning as a human experience. This series will provide educators with an artistic and literary medium for expressing their individual and shared experiences as educators. It will provide many windows and doors into the varied perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of educators from around the world. It seeks to showcase the creative use of language and writing and how language and writing can be used as vehicles for inquiry, creative self-expression, professional development, and personal empowerment and agency.

Viewing teaching and learning from the lens of poetry and creative prose provides a novel way to engage teachers and students more deeply in the teaching-learning process. A such, the focus of this series will be to use creative writing as an artistic means to express and describe those aspects of teaching and learning that are most meaningful and life transforming. This series will include several volumes that will showcase all types of poetry (e.g., free verse, blank verse, rhyme) and short creative prose (e.g., lyric essays, prose poems, short creative nonfiction). The volumes in this series can also serve as textbooks for college courses in poetry and creative writing as well as supplemental readings for courses in instructional leadership, teacher preparation, and the like in schools of education.

What is poetry and why is it, and this anthology series, important? Poetry is a literary art form that uses the aesthetic qualities of language to express the full depth and breadth of human experience in personally meaningful ways. Poetry is a type of subjective interpretive process used to better understand and convey the full depth and breadth of the human experience. Poetry is a multidimensional form of language and artistic expression concerned with the full range of human experiences. Poetry uses the pen (or keyboard) as its brush, ink (or pixels) as its paint, and paper (or screen) as its canvas. The writer thus makes creative use of language (the play of words and their many multi-layered meanings) to paint a unique and rich depiction of life and to express the manifold aspects of human experience in unique and meaningful ways.

For example, poetry (and creative prose) uses such literary devices as metaphor, simile, allusion, analogy, personification, sound, form, repetition, rhythm, irony, symbolism, paradox, and imagery to express the deeper meanings of human experiences. Poetry draws on these devices, and many more, to help convey the full depth and breadth of human experiences. Poetry not only deepens our understanding of what it means to be human but it also aims to more deeply engage our intellect, emotions, and imagination, all at the same time. Poetry can help educators and students and others move towards a deeper awareness of and appreciation for experiential knowledge, which in turn, can foster more effective and meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

This series also welcomes literary forms and subgenres of creative prose that are closely aligned with poetry (e.g., lyric essays – poetic essays, prose poems, short creative nonfiction). These forms allow the writer to intersect and merge elements and techniques of the more commonplace genres of standard poetry and creative prose. This series also welcomes experimental forms of creative writing that seek to express and interpret the manifold meanings of the human experience by creatively mixing, synthesizing, re-purposing, integrating, and dancing with the various elements and techniques of different genres in innovative and meaningful ways.

Patrick Blessinger
International HETL Association and St. John's University (NYC)

VOLUME EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Poetry, according to Aristotle, is a made thing. Poetry is architectural; this is why it takes on so many varied forms. Poetry also has a performance quality when it is spoken aloud, either by the poet or by someone else.

Teaching also has a sense of architecture. Preparation requires construction of lesson plans, or in some situations, the ability to inspect the viability of a lesson plan. Teaching is also a performance.

Poetry and teaching have much in common. Teaching itself could be called a kind of poetry, speaking the broadest sense of poetry, as in poetry in motion.

Poetry also affords people the opportunity to use metaphor to define things that are abstract. No doubt this is why there is so much love poetry. It should come as no surprise, then, that teachers might turn to poetry to try to give meaning to the work they do. While some of what we experience as teachers is fairly straightforward, much of what we must address with our students, if we are trying to be the best teachers, requires a variety of approaches. The notion of "teaching," not unlike concepts such as Truth or Beauty, is hard to explain. Even harder to explain are the interactions we have with our students—the interactions that require much more from us than simply providing a grade on an assignment.

Providing a poetic outlet to explore some of the complexities of teaching was the impetus for this anthology.

Many of the teachers present in these pages do not identify as poets, more they expressed their sense of being "students of poetry." Others are well-established poets whose work has appeared in many of the best literary journals. Whatever their backgrounds, they share two common goals: to be exceptional teachers and to never cease being learners themselves.

The collection represents a variety of experiences from many different countries and cultures. Some of these experiences will seem particularly familiar, or as Lori Caress writes in "An Uncommon Lens:"

> Each day opens
> a tall white canvas
> on towering wood frames,
> and I brush back the lashes
> of motherless girls,
> tack down the legs
> of wandering boys,
> as an architect lays girders
> for a magnificent construct.

Other poems will be difficult for some of us to comprehend. For example in Robyn Philip's "Absent on Manus Island" where we encounter a teacher's horror at a detention camp in Papua New Guinea; the speaker describes the death of one of the refugees: "we didn't talk about him at breakfast / we didn't discuss him in the morning seminar / I didn't add his name to the role."

Most readers will sense the beauty and the challenge in both the mundane and the extraordinary. In Laura Apol's "Dragon Dance," we find both qualities in a poem about Chinese girls left behind by parents who have gone to the cities for work:

> In the hallways, the girls are small
> and unsmiling. They pause for the cameras,
> hair neat, uniforms pressed,
> a red kerchief knotted at every neck.
> Behind their eyes, home waves it banner,
> distant as a kite—
> until the dragon dance begins,
> and they shed their serious skin,

Many of the teachers are responding to the idea of themselves as teachers —a person who can seem like a kind of other, a persona, even a ghost. The exploration of moving between private self and the public "teacher" self can be strange, or as Roel Wijland writes in "In the Quadrangle Theatre,"

Autonomously,
their testudo formation
becomes a single Roman shield
becomes a blur becomes
a space only in my head
that I can't ever seem to remember.
I notice being me
when I clear
my throat.

Overall this anthology represents a diverse group of teacher-poets from over 80 institutions in 16 countries. It is a collection you can read in starts and stops (not unlike a daily devotional), but it will likely keep you longer than you expect.

I want to thank the teacher-poets for sharing their work, their experiences, their messages with me, with all of us. It is a wonderful thing to see so many people fully engaged in the practice of the two arts I value above all others: teaching and poetry. Both art forms require constant revision and practice.

Ultimately, I hope you find solace and inspiration in the images and the ideas that will surely resonate with and become part of you. I also hope you will share it with fellow teachers. Even more, I hope you will share it with your students—it is the students who remain at the heart of *Teaching as a Human Experience*.

Karen J. Head
Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA, USA

The poems in this collection deal with the real life-worlds of professors, instructors, lecturers, teachers, and others working in education. This volume covers contemporary teaching experiences in education, including the many roles that teachers play such as instructing, lecturing, mentoring, facilitating, coaching, guiding, leading, etc. The role and process of teaching embodies and involves many varied psycho-social interactions (e.g., teacher-self, teacher-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-administrator, teacher-parent, and teacher-community). As such, teaching provides a context for meaningful personal and professional relationships across the full range of human experiences. This volume covers the manifold life

experiences and perspectives of being and working as a teacher in education and the epiphanies (i.e., experiences of deep realization) experienced in that role.

As such, this volume gives creative voice to the full range of experiences by teachers, students, and others. It seeks to empower readers with inspiration and personal agency as they evolve as self-creating, self-determining authors of their own lives, both personally and professionally. In short, this volume seeks to expand our consciousness of what it means to be a teacher in contemporary life and within diverse learning environments and cultures. The poems are largely based on teachers' meaningful experiences in and out of the classroom and will provide artistic inspiration and creative insight to others who currently work as teachers or those students who are preparing to be professors, instructors, and teachers or those students who simply enjoy the creative voice of others.

Patrick Blessinger
International HETL Association and St. John's University

POEMS

PAPERS

SANDRA ALCOSSER

On the great estate my Great
Aunt said *stay until you grade*
Those papers. One girl exclaimed
She loved *Sham pain*.
On hands and knees
The maid asked *how's teaching*?
Fine, if not for papers.
That's why I quit said the maid
Testing polish on slick parquet.
From his death bed, to ease
The family, Gerard Manley Hopkins said *at least*
There will be no more student papers to read.
And then *I am so happy.*
I am so happy. I am so happy.

VOODOO, CENTRAL PARK[1]

SANDRA ALCOSSER

There is a pig's head hanging
from a sycamore in Harlem Meer,
a woman's earring knotted in human hair
placed within a circle of rice grains,
and as we follow Montayne's Rivulet
toward l04th Street we find a rabbit
with a knife in its breast.
Its rotting flesh smells like thick ink.
I ask the children to study an oak tree
with *Fistulina hepatica* growing at its base,
but they will not come near me.
The fungus is deep red and they swear
the tree is bleeding.

[1] This poem was previously published in *A Fish to Feed All Hunger,* Ahsahta Press.

DRAGON DANCE

LAURA APOL

1.
At night we cross the river in the dark,
the next day we meet the river in the rain:
Yangtze—Golden Waterway, path
of winding dreams.
We leave its wide banks
to drive into the mountains,
climb the steep roads

—through the countryside,
terraced rice fields, garden plots
with bamboo trellises
training vines of beans and peas;

—through the village,
open-air shops selling vegetables and fruit,
trussed chickens and slabs of pork spread
on plastic tables in the streets.

2.
This is the journey the children make
up the mountain each Monday morning;
this is the journey the children make
down the mountain each Friday afternoon.

In between, they sleep
on rows of bunks in rows of rooms,
hang towels on rows of hooks.
The windows, crossed by metal bars,
open onto distant valleys, misty skies.

This is the village school,
home to left-behind children*
who each morning fold their blankets
into neat squares on the end of the bed,
wait in a double line to brush their teeth.

This is the dragon school,
home to four bright creatures on the hill
keeping watch, sparkling Ss in the grass
overlooking the playgrounds and dorms—
grinning sentries with fiery tails.

3.
In the hallways, the girls are small,
unsmiling. They pause for the cameras,
hair neat, uniforms pressed,
a red kerchief knotted at every neck.
Behind their eyes, home waves its banner,
distant as a kite—

until the dragon dance begins,
and they shed their serious skin,
birth themselves,

their good-luck held aloft—
a small wood bench
transformed by yellow silk,
its spine crisscrossed in red,
face bright foil and scarlet net.
There are four, there are six,
there are eight dragon girls
engaged in the dance,
raising the dragon bench high, swinging it low,
moving over and under, under and through—
dragon daughters who stop time
with their intricate steps.

* "Left-behind children" is a term used to describe children who remain behind when their parents leave rural areas to work in the city in the hope of providing the family a better life.

They invite us to join. We link hands,
lift over, bend into, step toward.

Then the bench is once more a bench,
the yellow cloth set aside,
the left-behind girls
returned to their everyday lives.

4.
We, too, move in reverse:
past the shops and stone steps of the village,
past the narrow houses, beanpoles,
chickens scratching in the mud,

follow the road, slick with rain,
down to the winding waters of the Yangtze
as the golden river
leaves the mountains, the village, the school—

travels east to the city,
makes its serpentine way to the sea.

LOTUS

LAURA APOL

I love the lotus because while growing from mud,
it is unstained.
—Zhou Dunyi

The rain is falling on Chongqing,
one-and-two-and-
on the Yangtze River and the mountain forests,
the bamboo, the ginkgo and mulberry leaves;
on rice fields that line the river's path.
It has been falling for three thousand years,
ancient calligraphy on the scroll of the earth:
brush, stone, paper and ink.

The rain is falling on Chongqing,
three-and-four-and-
on the Beibei Special School,
on the Beibei Special children—
soaked backpacks, damp uniforms
and sodden shoes. Umbrellas, open,
line the hall outside the Lotus classroom door.

Orchid, lily, peony, poppy—
here the always-labelled children are named
for flowers they may never see or touch or smell,
gathered at their desks, yellow and red
bouquets.

For the Lotus class, the rain falls
to the beat of a lesson on rhythm,
one-and-two-and-
Lotus children clapping, counting,
keeping time, out of time.
three-and-four-and-

Stamping together, they chant the verse:
The sun is high up in the sky.
The flowers are smiling.
The birds are singing, *Good morning,*
why do you have your schoolbag on your back?
Stamping together, they chant the response:
I'm going to school.
I'm never late for school.
I love going to school,
and I'm always working hard.

The rain is falling on the pond
outside the Beibei Special School—
the pond clustered with blossoms
that bob on the surface in the rain—fill, empty,
fill once more.
one-and-two-and-three-and-four.

The rain has been falling,
the Beibei Special children have been chanting,
and the lotus blossoms have filled and emptied.
Three thousand years.

RECITATION

LAURA APOL

Most of the second-graders in the English language class
have never left Beijing. This is home, the world they know.
The rest is the world they may someday see.
Today's lesson is Australia.
The teacher says it first and they repeat:
Australia *Australia*
Australia *Australia*

Forty second-graders shape their mouths
around this strange word. Taste it: *Australia*.

Forty second-graders read the dialogue in the book.
Underline the useful phrases, the teacher says
and forty second-graders pick up their rulers
and position them on the page.

They make their travel plans as one,
book the same tickets in their minds:
I like Australia *I like Australia*
One day I will go there *One day I will go there*

They have passports in the names of Annie, Peter,
Tony, Lily and Joy.
They have visas in the names of Gary, Mike,
Beauty, Windy and Paul.

They are partnered for the trip, seated side-by-side
at their double desks. Like old couples,
their dialogue smoothed by use:

What language do they speak in Australia?
Australian people speak English.
Why do you want to go to Australia?
Because I love Australian animals.

What animals live in Australia?
Koalas and kangaroos live there.
Why do you love kangaroos and koalas?
Because they are very very cute.

Their declarations go on and on.

The teacher asks the room:
Do you like Australia?
and in unison they shout, *Yes*!
Do you want to go there?
and in unison they shout, *Yes*!
Do you love the animals?
and in unison they shout, *Yes*!

Then the bell rings, and they reclaim
their Beijing lives and names:
Wen, Ni, Ying, Xue
Li, Feng, Ming, Yong.

They pack their rulers into cases on their desks,
wave from the doorway and, with one voice, shout
Good-bye!

EXAM ROOM

ANDREW BAILES

eyes rise like surfacing swimmers
for the clock, for air
for an idea, there
above the whiteboard shimmers
the ghost of a thought
caught, as in a summer’s afternoon -
shuffling papers, dusty room - it was taught.

SHE GOES TO PRAY

LUCI GORELL BARNES

The first week
I lay out crayons and paper.
The other women grab them, but she sits still.
Her left forearm has a latticework of scars
(It's the right forearm if you're left-handed).
I slide a sheet of paper towards her,
'I can't draw,' she says.
Her thin brown hand touches one of the craters on her cheek
That looks like it was made with a cigarette.
At 3 o'clock, she goes to pray.

The next week
I bring the beautiful paper my sister brought back from Japan,
Spread it out in a fan.
The window bars throw striped shadows across the battered table.
The other women make cards to send their children.
At 3 o'clock, she goes to pray.

The next week
I bring a small box of printing blocks.
She lifts the lid and closes it again
Almost immediately.
At 3 o'clock, she goes to pray.

The next week
She opens the box and picks out a tree.
I slip her some paper, and she makes a single print on it.
At 3 o'clock, she goes to pray.
She returns and presses a flower block into the inkpad.
Press, paper, press, pad, press, paper, press, pad, press, paper…
Until there is a blanket of flowers under her tree.