

Becoming Lyrical: Poems That Depict Our Reflective Journeys In Online Teaching

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Online and blended learning over the years have brought great challenges and opportunities. At the beginning of this project, we asked: How do educators reflect on teaching online in particular? And how do we articulate our reflections in creative ways? With these questions in mind, the authors took on the challenge of the artistic expression of writing and reading poetry to reflect critically and creatively on our experiences of teaching online in higher education. By drawing connections between theory and our poetry we provide insight into our lessons learned from teaching online. We conclude with encouragement to use creative writing to foster a collective and reflective environment in higher education and for personal awareness and growth.

Academic writing is often bounded by structures and norms which leave it feeling “dispassionate, [...] lacking in darkness, in surprises and, above all, in ambiguity” (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2023, p. 3). Especially when reflecting on teaching practices, academics can leverage the ways ‘writing differently’ to engage in formative learning *through* the writing process (Weatherall, 2019). Specifically, writing and reading poetry has benefits that include reflection, connecting to personal experiences, building imagination, viewing ideas from different perspectives, and expressing feelings and emotions that might not otherwise be captured on paper. At the same time, online learning has been transformed in the past few years with many challenges, opportunities, and self-realizations. To share our experiences the authors used poetry as form of creative and critical reflection, and to invite readers to consider less conventional approaches and challenge “hegemonic styles of structures of writing to unsettle the reader and writer into thinking differently” (Weatherall, 2019, p. 108)”.

On Friday afternoon, April 28, 2023, during an online conference we read our poems for the first time in a public setting. There was excitement, nervousness, tears, emotions, heartfelt discussions, self-realizations, and a lot of humanity. We had done it! A poetry reading at an academic conference. Our poems were our own reflections, our own experiences of teaching online and living through the COVID-19 pandemic in a virtual world. In this paper, we share

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with you our approach, our poems, and our own reflections on writing poetry to reflect on and make meaning of our teaching experiences, thoughts, and feelings. We intentionally align our writing style with our methodology, aiming to break free from traditional academic structures and encourage vulnerability in our reflections. Through our poetry we are modelling a deviation from normative structures (Weatherall, 2019). Readers may feel uncomfortable with dominant knowledge structures missing, and we encourage you to appreciate other knowledge structures and methods that are given prominence and agency in this paper.

The Context

Patrick is the one who brought us all together, thus we start with his story of the beginning: When the call for proposals came out for this conference, I tossed many ideas around in my brain but nothing stood out as a meaningful and interesting contribution to the conference theme of *Collective transformation: How blended and online learning have changed higher education*. Then one wintery morning walking my daughter to school we were having fun talking in rhymes. Later that day the idea of poetry as a way of telling my story of online teaching and learning came to my mind and I realized I needed help. I yearned for people to hear the stories from different perspectives and disciplines. When I reached out to colleagues with the idea to my surprise they said yes. This would be an exciting and challenging journey as three of us hadn't written a poem since junior high school, and our fourth presenter had experience writing lyrics. With encouragement and awkwardness, we started writing poems that captured our experiences of online learning.

Why Poetry?

The impulse to be lyrical is driven by the need to feel unconstrained by ourselves. As poems have testified for centuries, we become lyrical when we suffer, when we love. But like poems themselves, we exist because of constraints – cultural and linguistic ways of organizing experiences that allow us to know who we are. (Logenbach, 2018, p. 11)

As Logenbach (2018) alludes to, poetry stems from learning who we are through emotions and experiences. Boud and Walker (1990) highlighted the importance of the link between personal experiences and learning, while emphasizing that emotions are core to those learnings. Hunt (2021) argues that to be critically reflective is to look inwards on our own beliefs and assumptions, and to find those that are standing in our way of further self-understanding. Thus, reflection is a personal journey through time, revisiting experiences, and then expressing learnings in personal ways. Reflection can be found across all disciplines yet what reflection looks like varies (Schön, 1991). For educators, thinking through their experiences brings awareness and meaning to their practice to promote actions for change and solutions (Efu, 2023; Jung et al., 2021). Poetry is a form of artistic expression, and the use of artistic expression among educators has been reported to provide “profound opportunities to reflect” and requires one to be

vulnerable (Clarke & Bautista, 2017, p. 64). Landau-Donnelly (2024) wrote “by writing more unruly, vulnerably, and poetically, I found my own way of doing my academic career differently” (p. 222). Poetry brings the “whole complex of thoughts, images, feelings, memories, and imaginings” (Constatine, 2013, p. 7), it captures emotions, feelings and learnings of experiences (Osmond et al., 2022) while bringing self-awareness. (Donovan, 2021). Within any discipline, yet particularly in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines where rational approaches to decision-making are highly emphasized, being able to reflect with emotions is important to breaking down this hierarchical dualism (Lönngren et al., 2020). Often rational and emotional knowing is valued separately from knowing, rather than integrating these approaches to learning how emotions are integral to STEM problem solving (Kellam et al., 2018). Research has found that personally reflecting through stories relevant to the topic supports connected learning (Kellam et al., 2018; Csavina et al., 2016).

By writing through poetry we, the authors, are breaking free of normative practices and making room for ways of thinking differently to explore less structure and more fluidity in our personal reflections (Weatherall, 2019). We argue that poetry is a way to engage all students and academics in reflecting on their own and collective teaching and learning experiences. Our poetry and process reflect the very nature of the power of imagery, bringing life to complexities, feelings and emotions from within the variety of disciplines and experiences of teaching online in higher education.

Our Process

As Longenbach (2018) tells us, writing poetry allows the writer to feel unconstrained, to be in touch with their body, mind and spirit, and to learn who they are. Intentionally reflecting on our teaching is a well-established practice for continuously improving ourselves and the student learning experience in our classrooms (Kenny et al., 2017). Taking the time to think critically about what worked, what didn't, and what we learned about ourselves while teaching online created multiple learning and lyrical opportunities for each of us. This reflective process allowed us to think creatively and concretely about the imprints and influences being online made on our teaching identities (Brookfield, 1995). Writing and sharing our poetry was a meaningful experience for us and was strengthened through the SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) practice of making our pedagogical learning public (Felten, 2013). Through poetry we abandoned the traditional detached style of discussing our teaching and instead embraced an emotive, personal, generative, and sometimes rhythmic practice of reflecting on our teaching (Virtue, 2021).

Our Poems

As we engaged in writing and sharing our poetry we came to the realization that our poems were a personal expression. The poems are presented here in the same order we read them at our conference session to reflect the larger image of our collective story. For each poem we

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first provide a brief preamble to introduce ourselves and along with some context about the poem. We do not however explain the poem, our rationale, nor justification for writing the poem. The authors leave it to the reader, you, to interpret the poem and encourage you to clear your mind, to be present, and to feel your own emotions and feelings. At the end of each poem each author provides their reflection on the process of writing and sharing their poem.

From the Beginning

by: Patrick Kelly

Preamble: I have been working in education technology and instructional design in higher education for over 20 years. As an undergraduate I had a summer position helping implement the university's first mainstream learning management system. I have used and provided support for learning technology ever since and have seen a diversity in its uses. Yet, I still see some of the same frustrations with technology that I saw at the beginning of my career. I also see joy and appreciation for the opportunities that technology creates. My poem reflects my time working with technology, listening to those that use it and the emotions of online teaching and learning.

The poem

Nineteen Ninety Nine

WebCT was all the rage

With so many options

It was hard to be on the same page

Blackboard came and gone

Centra, Elluminate, Zoom

Where do I start, when do I stop

D2L has held on strong

Discussion posts

Here, there and in every place

Did anyone see me, did anyone hear me

Or was I floating in space

Who is in my class?

Assignments can't be found

Wait, I missed a due date?

It is like looking through a misty glass

Be there, engage, interact

Dust off the shelves

Organize content, create modules

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Let students express themselves

Time goes by fast

Rubrics, due dates, clear expectations

Create content in different ways

How do I help students last?

It worked in the classroom

It fell apart online

Tears of frustration, Tears of joy

These tears are mine

Patrick's reflection: I found the intricate process of finding words to describe my thoughts challenging and rewarding as it brought up dormant memories and new emotions. As one experience lead to another my story came to life. Emotions that I hadn't felt in a long time came flooding back and at the same time, I became more aware of my current practices as an instructional designer in higher education. The process of writing and sharing our poetry built trust and empathy within our group. We created a space that permitted ourselves to be vulnerable with each other and ourselves. Leaning into these learnings I reflect on my current practice with renewed curiosity, empathy and awareness of the importance of fostering trusting and honest relationships. Teaching online can be bundle of emotions stemming from the many challenges, opportunities and positive outcomes. Much like poetry, when teaching online we need to be open to new pedagogies, be empowered and creative, be ourselves, to connect with our students and colleagues, and to share our experiences.

I Will Bring Them Voices

by: Craig Ginn

Preamble: I teach in the Department of Classics and Religion at the University of Calgary. In my philosophy of teaching Confucius takes a privileged place. Not that I am a Confucian scholar, but as a casual reader of the *Analects*, I have been drawn to one of his teaching statements in particular.

The Master said, "I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out anyone who is not anxious to explain himself [themselves]. When I have presented one corner of a subject to anyone, and he [they] cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson." (Confucius, *Analects*).

The statement suggests an interesting ratio of 1:3, i.e. for every effort made by the teacher, the student commits to three. When I share this ratio with some of my classes, it seems that some students would prefer the ratio to be reversed, i.e. for every effort made by the students, the teacher commits to three. In the physical classroom, I encourage students to ask

questions, to engage in discussion, to present research summaries, and so on. It is an embodied experience. They are lifting corners, and I am generally aware of their efforts to do so.

In July 2019, prior to COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020, I joined an online course project initiated by the Faculty of Arts. The goal was to increase online offerings. Of course, COVID-19 changed the playing field dramatically and soon almost all classes shifted to online delivery. But as I approached the task of building an online course in Indigenous Worldview and Traditions, pre-COVID-19, I was unsure of how to fulfill the “Confucian ratio.” How would I compensate for the disembodiment of virtual education?

Given the emphasis on oral tradition in Indigenous traditions (at least those that I am familiar with) I decided to “bring them voices.” I recorded podcast conversations with scholars (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), musicians, artists, authors, elders and knowledge keepers. Voices. And in addition to a traditional research paper, I assigned a weekly learning journal and a learning summary. Students were required to compare knowledge learned from the conversations with other course materials, drawing connections between concepts presented in podcasts and readings.

The poem

The Analects, from another time, another place
many centuries before the computer age
Teacher and students, in conversation face to face
A mentor, embodied, lifts one corner of the page

What is the virtual page that I will hold?
The virtual student I will not see?
How will I lift back one fold?
How will they lift the other three?

I will bring them voices
Sharing knowledge, sharing story
Pages of life pedagogy
I will bring them voices

What are the legacies of colonizing faith?
Hear stories from the heart, words fall short to explain
Some reject, some accept, some braid the ways
Resiliency through seasons of pain

She walks the beaches of the northern shore
To find the teeth and bones of the whale
She will fashion jewelry from the sea
But the Spirit of Sedna is not for sale

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Testimonies of a singer in his songs
Just like his father, he performs Gospel First Nation
Learn to defend the man who cannot defend himself
Let truth lead the way to reconciliation

I will bring them voices
Sharing knowledge, sharing story
Pages of life pedagogy
I will bring them voices

Learn the history of his family name
A tribute to the British monarchy
He walks the ground between his nation and his church
What is the land? What is property?

Hear the elder share her vision for the future
History of displacement in her bones
Pilgrimage to learn about her people
From the road allowance to the safety of a home

Every color in the painting carries memories
Ancestors whisper to her heart
He paints to honour his spiritual tradition
Blackfoot ways of being embedded in his art

I will bring them voices
Sharing knowledge, sharing story
Pages of life pedagogy
I will bring them voices

I have not brought them voices to believe
Nor convert them or convince them to defend
But to hear, consider, understand
Ways of knowing that have been condemned

In the pages of their journals, I hear their voices
The students speak of knowledge they have gained
Through the stories they have learned to respect
Changed by voices, they will never be the same

I will bring them voices
Sharing knowledge, sharing story

Pages of life pedagogy
I will bring them voices

Craig's Reflection: Student feedback indicated that the podcast conversations were successful. Students enjoyed listening to the conversations! In most cases, students reflected thoughtfully in their journals. In fact, the journals indicated that the students tended to listen to the recordings attentively, some students listening to recordings two or more times. Evident in their journals, students were generally enthusiastic in listening, journaling, drawing connections, and self-evaluating their learning experience. Most students shared the impact of particular voices, two or three voices that struck them deeply. Some even sounded surprised by the impact. For some it changed the way they considered Indigenous worldviews as well as their approach to research. In a few cases, students shared their vocational goals, such as social work, medicine, and law, indicating how they would integrate knowledge learned from the conversations. And I hadn't even solicited a response per transformational learning. It simply happened due to students putting in a personal effort, lifting the other three corners. Circling back to Confucius, the *Analecets* hold the teacher accountable to awareness of learning, The Master said, "If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others." (Confucius, *Analecets*). Writing poetry about teaching was a self-reflective learning experience for me. In an unexpected way it helped me appreciate the commitment to student-centered teaching and my role in sharing knowledge to students through personal voices.

Listening Hopefully

by: *Cari Din*

Preamble: When Patrick invited me to develop a poem which critically reflected on my experiences doing online learning without thinking, I all-caps replied, YES! The struggle to create the poem which follows was visceral and satisfying and frightening for me. The last poem I wrote before listening hopefully was panned by my grade 11 English teacher. The people in this group and the process of using poetry to reflect on my teaching allowed me to go somewhere I have not explored before. The process I used to create my poem involved exploring and distilling images and emotions which signal my personal transformation, which began abruptly on March 13, 2020, when emergency remote teaching and learning started. Interesting I label this personal, as technically, it was my professional transformation, but throughout the last three years, my professional and personal blurred and blended. I walked outside and gave myself time to think about teaching online, to consider what I struggled with, learned, and am now incorporating in the teaching and learning spaces I am proud of today. I jotted down notes on scraps of paper and in my phone over a few months and began to see a pattern and chronology of transformation, which is depicted my move from traditional left margins (the past and what did not enhance student learning) to new ways of seeing, thinking, and enabling learning – symbolized by right justified type.

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The poem

Circle light, “YouTube quality,”
Flower Darby & James Lang,
Am I becoming someone else?
Circling the drain.

Black squares, Brady Bunch blank stares.
Crooked teeth, crow’s feet, no jaw line.
Autotune for eyebrows – should I blur or background?

Google Docs crashing,
Content found and shared:
“She taught me nothing.”

Can I be endangered while teaching what enables safety?
Select the red button in the bottom right corner of your screen:
Leave meeting. M 0 0 V E.

Press my phone to my ear, ask, listen, step, hear – hold, soak, slide.
“This was not made for me or my family, it is White, it is racist, and it is reproducing
mythologies.”
Feel, hear, step, hold, step, expand slide.
Nothing like an old sock glide.

Gagan, David, Isha, JEAN, Chiamaka, Shae, Alison, Harveen.

Our third space, this PERIPATETIC pace,
Reimagining ethics, and virtues, and “how to” in place.
Foot first gliding, pliés rising, blistering, goddess pose not hiding.

Cartography without A.I.
Audio-blurring Calibri with my voice and the sky
Bone-knowing this is a proxy race

To

travel

HOPEFULLY.

Superstore blankets and a 70s foamy reveal this Sonic Soul
Our cadence is agency. Our rhythm is identity. Metacognition plays bass.

Re-treading CONFUSION as discovery’s foothold.
Anti-racist feminist leadership and redemption songs by Helena Liu Stick. Like. Sand.

Talk and walk to release the wrecking ball we needed.
Keegan hears the curve.

This path will not be lit by a circle light or made sublime by the right mic;
It features paper butterflies and parking lot art showings. It holds power, it holds privilege, it
holds us while we hike it.

Where audios are heart songs, the Jam_(board) is sweet,
My socks slide, and boots grip.
Community c r u s h e s Content ‘in synch’ here.

Walking in relationship with lifeblood uncertainty, abandon, heals.
Apathy remains our enemy –
Chasing delta beyond trying, we are virtually flying hopefully.

Cari’s reflection: Beginning, struggling with, and polishing my poem was an incredibly concrete process of reflecting on my teaching to improve it. I have spent many hours prior to this reflecting in what I will call, more traditional ways of reflecting on my students’ learning and how I can improve my teaching to serve it (Brookfield, 2015). Developing this poem marks my first time using an artistic and public medium for teaching reflection. Harvesting snapshot-style memories and deciphering each one’s influence on my evolution was alternatively painful and playful. The emotional texture of my poem is expected, I feel before I think or act. Ultimately, I discovered and over time made sense of a collection of distilled images, feelings, and experiences which depict sometimes abstractly and in other places concretely transformations to my teaching identity and practice. Despite many pangs of fear, I am strengthened by the experience of creating and sharing this artistic work in an academic context. The consolidation of my learning which this process facilitated is remarkable to me. As a kinesiologist, a person whose purpose is to help folks move across their lifespan, the embodied experiences I connect to in my poem bring a warm and crooked smile to my face as I walk outside in the warm sun. My gratitude to my co-authors for welcoming me on this **walk** is as real as the healing which making and saying my poem enabled.

Parallel Transformations

by: Robyn Mae Paul

Preamble: When I sat down to write my poem (which was the first time in 20 years I had attempted poetry), initially I felt as though I was lost in unfamiliar territory. I am an engineer, not a poet. I had no idea what I was doing. I watched a few “how to write poetry” YouTube videos, and even did some brainstorming with ChatGPT doing different prompts to see what kind of poems came out, what I liked, and what felt like my style. It was evident that the poems

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ChatGPT wrote sounded nice, however I really felt that the poems were too structured without enough soul.

As I began writing on my own, the words that came to me really reflected how in 2020 I was just becoming confident in my own teaching methodologies and particularly my teaching philosophy. I was reflecting about my online teaching as I wrote, but I was also really reflecting about coming into myself as a teacher and as an academic (I was halfway through my PhD in 2020). There were these parallel changes happening both internally and externally as we learned to teach online, which became the focus of my poem.

The poem

I am an engineer

I was trained to be rational

Objective and mathematical

And now you ask me to write poetry?

Should my poems have rhymes or symmetry?

I am an engineer, a haiku perhaps:

Solve problems with code,

Engineer's mind sharp and clear,

Great innovations

Nope, that's still no good.

I doubt you even understood

And an engineer named "ChatGPT"

Helped to write that one for me

I am an engineer:

I was trained to follow structures and rules

And I always listened through all of my schools

But recently, my heart has been driven by activism

Advocating for education with more collectivism

My teaching aims to break down structures of culture

So let's loosen up this poem, with free flowing composure

I am an engineer

I am also a human... even if engineering told me otherwise

Because in engineering

We teach, we calculate, we teach, we calculate, we teach, we calculate.

There is little time to be with our humanity

To have feelings, or emotions, or to have heart

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And yet, engineers design products to fix our hearts
They manipulate data to find our heart's soulmate
Their designs often choose whose hearts have more value.
And the newest technologies always pull at our hearts' desires.

And yet, in engineering,
We teach, we calculate, we teach, we calculate, we teach, we calculate.

And so. I transformed my teaching.
We have calculators to calculate
We need engineers who have emotional states
Who can articulate, who inflate, and who deflate [BREATHE]

We need to cry, and to weep, to shriek
Because when you look at the state of our world, if that doesn't make you cry?
You are not human.

We need to laugh, to delight, to elate
Because when you look at the state of our world, if that doesn't make you crave joyous
community?
You are not human.

We need to rage, to wrath, to scream
Because when you look at the state of our world, if that doesn't make you want justice?
You are not human.

And so. I transformed my teaching.
And then our world transformed.

And my students
My students who had been fearful of reflection assignments
Who had scoffed at my "pointless" ramblings
Who had critiqued my value in the classroom
My students had got the message – they are human.

And I cried.
I cried for the student who couldn't work at home because of an abusive household.
I cried for the student who couldn't travel to India to say goodbye to a dying parent.
I cried for the student with four younger siblings who had to work at 3am to get computer access.

But I also had joy.
Because these students came to me

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They shared with me their fears, anxieties, and triumphs

They had achieved the most important engineering learning outcome.

To know that they are human, that they matter, and that their feelings are valid.

They were resilient. And my soul glowed with pride.

But I am just an engineer

I was trained to be rational

Objective and mathematical

Robyn's reflection: I have never once successfully read this poem without crying. I practiced over a dozen times before our poetry reading, hoping if I read it enough, I would eventually become numb to the tears. I was nervous about putting myself out there, about wearing my heart on my sleeves to a public audience. But I eventually realized that without the tears, my poem was inauthentic. The tears were part of the poem and the reflection. This was the most powerful part of the process for me. As engineers, we are taught to take emotions out of everything, when I believe that emotions are an essential part of engineering problem solving. And in 2020, I was beginning to understand this belief as core to my teaching philosophy.

I'm not one who often believes in signs from the Universe, but the magic that our group created was truly a sign to me. I didn't tell my group members, but the week of our poetry reading I had acknowledged that I was suffering from burnout which was negatively impacting my mental health and ability to function. I was starting a short mental health leave in May, and our poetry reading on the Friday afternoon of April 28th was the last thing I did before my leave. Sharing those 60-minutes with my co-authors and the attendees was my sign from the Universe that I had made the right choice. As reflective teachers and educators, we often focus our reflections on how to better support students, and what was beautiful about this experience was that the focus was on how to ensure we are supporting ourselves through the journey as well.

As a beautiful coincidence (or perhaps another sign), finalizing this paper comes on the last day of my mental health leave, I return to work tomorrow where I will be finishing my PhD thesis over the next few weeks, and starting a faculty job next month. The insights I gained from individual creative writing and collaborative vulnerability with a group of academic colleagues will stick with me as I transition back to work in a way that is healthy for my soul. My faculty role has me teaching 1500 engineers every year. As I prepare for this, I can feel that one of the foundations holding me up to succeed in being vulnerable with so many students comes from this collaborative experience of reflective poetry. The wisdom I gained will truly stick with me for a long time, and for that I am deeply appreciative.

Our Final Thoughts

Writing poetry is a process of reflection, finding words to express those reflections, which in turn leads to new images, recollections, thoughts, and realizations. Reflection on our online teaching allowed us to explore what we remember, notice, and feel – it helped us process

and improve our influence on student learning in higher education (Felten, 2013). Deep reflection stretched our perspective and bolstered our commitment to strengthening student learning (Rodgers, 2000) to ultimately improve our teaching (Hubball et al., 2010). Like Guiney-Yallop (2017) in his work “Loving Teaching”, we used poetry to allow us to look back and consolidate our learning about teaching within the context of caring deeply about our practice and improving it to strengthen our capacity. Together we chose poetry as our reflective and artistic medium, to challenge us to be creative and to bring life to our experiences and words.

Learning about our teaching through reflection and in conversation with each other allowed us to explore “an entanglement of ideas, disciplines” (Keifer-Boyd et al., 2017, p. 55) which supported our poetry making, sharing, and learning. The artistic expression of poetry enabled us to share our feelings, emotions, sufferings, and humanity about who we are and our collective experiences with online learning. Our collective learnings highlight that something always happens in an online course: A student posts to the discussion board, the instructor provides feedback to a student, a live discussion through a computer monitor and headphones, the internet stops working, an assignment is submitted late, or a student doesn’t log into the course for a while. These are the happenings that have helped transform and shape higher education and those within. We have transformed. We are all reflective in our work and lives; pushing ourselves to creatively reflect in the world of poetry brought new and different meanings to our experiences. To share our poems publicly encouraged us to be ourselves and, in a way, comforted us to be with one with the poem, our thoughts, and reactions from others. Because in the end, the poetry is for ourselves, the process was priceless, and the impact was collective. We invite you, the reader, to reflect on your own practice through poetry to capture the images, thoughts, feelings and emotions of your own experiences. To keep your poems private or share with others is yours to decide. Thank you.

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