

# Snow in Summer

## Poetic Teachings from Cottonwood and Ponderosa

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### Article abstract

In this article, art is used as inquiry to ask powerful questions, untangle paradoxes, and help us navigate loss and grief in the Anthropocene. Several central questions are considered and animated through narrative and poetry. How do we live poetically (Leggo, 2005) in a world that we need to exploit in order to survive? How do we engage in a more-than-human world full of ambiguity and paradox? How might nature become a teacher or mentor (Jickling et al., 2018), and what anthropocentric barriers do we face? How can stories and poems facilitate holistic expression and place-based connection? As we elucidate the wonder and loss of cottonwood, and the mentorship of ponderosa, Carl Leggo (2004, 2005, 2012, 2016, 2019a, 2019b) serves as a guide for artful attending and hopeful imagination for living poetically. Joanna Macy's (Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Macy & Brown, 2014) work that reconnects and Leggo's curriculum of joy offer parallel paths of grief and hope so that we might find our way through the Anthropocene.

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## SNOW IN SUMMER: POETIC TEACHINGS FROM COTTONWOOD AND PONDEROSA

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**Abstract:** In this article, art is used as inquiry to ask powerful questions, untangle paradoxes, and help us navigate loss and grief in the Anthropocene. Several central questions are considered and animated through narrative and poetry. How do we live poetically (Leggo, 2005) in a world that we need to exploit in order to survive? How do we engage in a more-than-human world full of ambiguity and paradox? How might nature become a teacher or mentor (Jickling et al., 2018), and what anthropocentric barriers do we face? How can stories and poems facilitate holistic expression and place-based connection? As we elucidate the wonder and loss of cottonwood, and the mentorship of ponderosa, Carl Leggo (2004, 2005, 2012, 2016, 2019a, 2019b) serves as a guide for artful attending and hopeful imagination for living poetically. Joanna Macy's (Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Macy & Brown, 2014) work that reconnects and Leggo's curriculum of joy offer parallel paths of grief and hope so that we might find our way through the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** poetic inquiry; storytelling; trees; Carl Leggo; more-than-human

## Introduction: The Trees are Coming Down

The trees behind our home are being taken. A new property owner has decided to clear their lot. For the first cedar, a chainsaw amputates each limb, one by one, until the naked trunk stands as a skeletal wisp. For the final cedar, the land now strewn with dozens of tree bodies, there is room to topple her in one fell swoop. The reverberation of her huge body thumping the ground still beats in my chest. Shock is all that remains, and a grief too great to bear for this once-home to deer, creek, and fern (Fig. 1). Now an excavator removes the debris behind our home. Its sound, constant and mechanical, growls through the day.

### **Figure 1.**

*My children playing in a forest no longer there.*



What can poetry, narrative, and photography offer in the face of such devastation? Arts-based inquiry can construct possibilities and facilitate openings for exposing both human ambiguities and more-than-human significances. In this article the art is inquiry, a path through the grief and toward the wonder. The narratives and poetry consider and animate several central questions. How do we live poetically (Leggo,

2005) in a world that we need to exploit in order to survive? How do we engage in a more-than-human world full of ambiguity and paradox? How might nature become a teacher or mentor (Jickling et al., 2018), and what anthropocentric barriers do we face? How can stories and poems facilitate holistic expression and place-based connection?

I am a descendant of European colonial-settlers, and currently reside on the unceded, traditional territories of the WSÁNEĆ peoples. I bring the lenses of poet, educator, scientist, and philosopher to this work. As an ecologist I understand the interrelatedness of organisms and their environment, while as an artist I appreciate the power of creativity for personal expression and social change. Can bringing this arts-based inquiry into pedagogical practice shift our consumeristic, human-centred society toward a more inclusive and mutually beneficial paradigm?

The import of storytelling is evidenced by Archibald's (2008) storywork where a more holistic picture is drawn of the researcher. Instead of the objective observer privileged by science there is a resonance with body, mind, emotion, and spirit brought forth by positioning the researcher in terms of both place and belief. Storywork has spread to many areas, such as international decolonization efforts (Ashworth, 2021), STEM teaching (Tzou et al., 2019), and black storytelling research (Toliver, 2022).

In this article—part autobiography, part story-making, part poetic philosophy—the cottonwood and ponderosa pine are focal points for storywork, told in first person, with minimal academic citations to avoid distracting the reader from the felt-sense of these experiences. Photographs are included to evoke alternate sensorial engagement and a chance to pause from the text. The stories that follow honour our tree elders and wrestle with our caretaker roles as humans during the climate crisis. My process for engaging in storywork and poetry involved lingering in and attuning to the places of these stories. Further, "Writing autobiographically is entering into a chorus of voices" (Leggo, 2019a, p. 145), and the cottonwood and ponderosa are vital parts of this chorus. Humans—specifically my neighbours and mother—were also a part of this conversation and understood and supported the idea of their experiences informing this research.

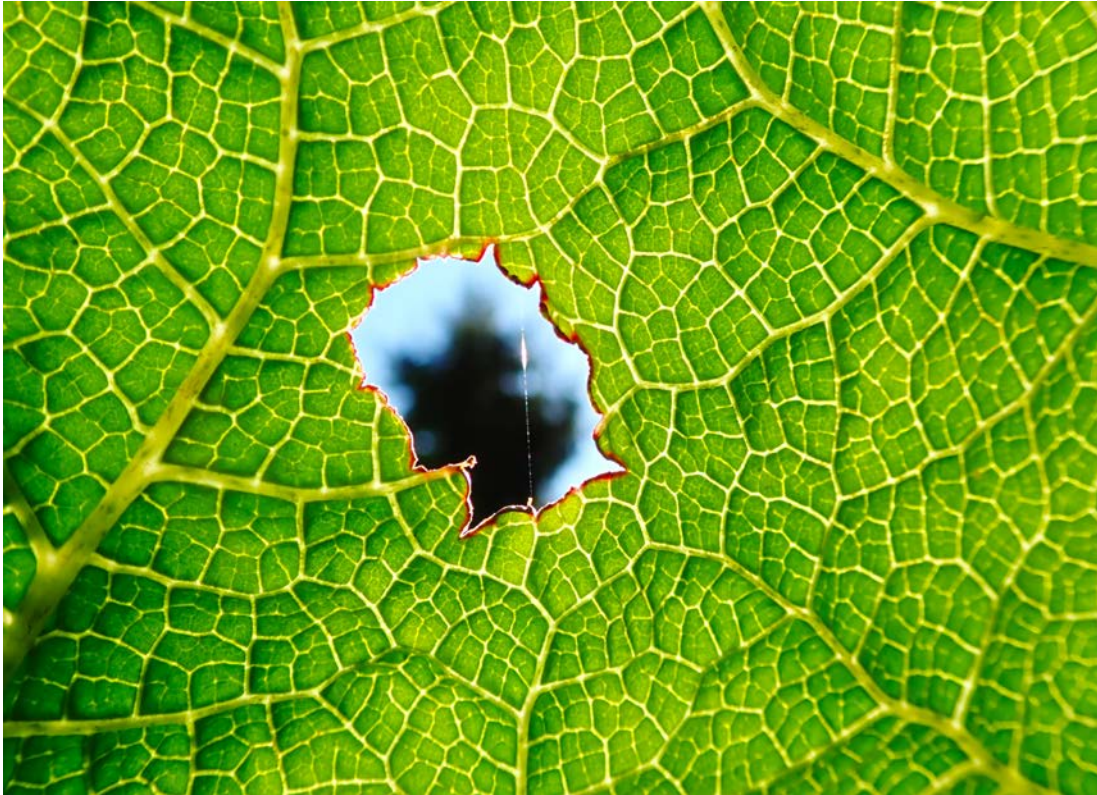
Through arts-based approaches to pedagogy, often facilitated outdoors, I hope to cultivate relational connections with the more-than-human world through patience, practice, and trying to quiet the ever-present human-centered mind. As David Chang states, "word-craft can be person-craft, a way to shape thinking and being, a way of forging perspective" (Chang & Beavington, 2020, p. 260). Composing can be transformative for the poet while the stories created offer immersive journeys that open possibilities. I invite you, the reader, to join me in this journey to remember, honour, and question our role as humans in a world where the more-than-human is often relegated to the material realm. Poetry and poetic inquiry can animate what Western ways of thinking often deem inert and unworthy of moral consideration (Beavington, 2017), be a way to witness and move toward "personal and social transformation" (Thomas et al., 2012, p. xii) and is a well-established form of resistance (Faulkner & England, 2020).



What resistance can I offer? I stare through a torn *Gunnera* leaf (Fig. 2), this portal to the sky and sun. A fragile miracle. Dear reader, I invite you to pause and consider the gifts of the leaf: oxygen, shade, clean air, jigsaw patterns, sugar, sustenance. Breathe them in.

**Figure 2.**

*The leaf is a portal to life.*



**Overview of the Three Stories**

In Story One – Cottonwood, the shifting baseline of nature is explored through narrative and poetry, as well as the role that trees play—beyond economic value—for contemplation and spirituality. In Story Two – Ponderosa, I consider Leggo’s contributions to poetic and narrative inquiry, nature as co-teacher, and the struggle to live our lives with reciprocity and reverence for a natural world being dismembered. In Story Three – The Eagles, the tensions between respecting the natural world and living as a human that must use nature to meet our needs is examined.

## Story One – Cottonwood

Snow in July. White flakes drift, dance, and swirl against a sky of deep summer blue. Like a murmuration this snowstorm flashes into sudden existence. My eyes marvel over thousands of flitting puffs, this blizzard of cotton fruits. Each bears a hopeful seed. The cottonwoods are reproducing.

These trees are my companions as I walk Zero Avenue. A path to contemplate the end of my first relationship, the death of a pet, my parents' divorce. I grew up here, next to this road that separates British Columbia from Washington State. Zero Avenue straddles the Canada-USA border and flows into Peace Arch Park and the Pacific Ocean beyond. As an adolescent I gave little heed to this arbitrary and invisible boundary, hopping between the Canadian and American soil.

One evening, the air heavy with an approaching storm, I am pulled outside. The subtle breeze whispers its electric wisdom. I look to the black cottonwoods. Their branches, spears of foliage, sway their prayers to the sky. What hopes and dreams do trees hold? The flicker of leaves betray a higher wind yet where I walk is calm. Like a boulder in rapids, the cottonwoods' lower trunks remain solid in their confidence. I take solace here.

Black cottonwood (or *Populus trichocarpa*)—the people's tree. I gaze up at these towers of leaves. The antioxidant buds treat everything from fever and burns to inflammation and arthritis (Moore, 1993). Their catkins, scattered in spring across the grass like caterpillars of pollen, are ripe with vitamin C, while the salicin in the resin serves as nature's aspirin. In addition to their myriad medicinal properties, First Nations also carved cottonwood into canoes, parts of cradles, and fishing weirs (Turner, 2007). This balm of Gilead possesses gifts far beyond what they offer humans. Eagles and great blue heron nest in their upper branches, and I've spotted bees visiting their bark: these pollinators spin cottonwood's gluey resin into a wind and pathogen barrier.

As a young zoologist-in-training, fascinated by cheetah and platypus, I walked unaware of the offerings of cottonwood. I knew only the magic of their summer snow, and the quiet comfort they exude like sap from maple. One summer afternoon a few years ago, my mother spotted a work crew near the cottonwoods on the USA side of the park. "There's worry one of these tall trees could fall down across Zero Avenue," the foreman stated matter-of-factly, "and damage one of the Canadian homes. We don't want to be held liable." That evening my mom gave each of these trees a hug. For forty years these cottonwoods had served as her guardians. The next day they were gone. What remains is a line of stumps, wooden gravestones for the ancients that once watched over this place. No more snow in July. My mom is a storyteller. She shares the tale of these trees to keep their memories alive.

But the story of tree destruction does not end there. I remember the massive L-shaped cedar hedge at Peace Arch Park that made for a perfect afternoon of climbing

and tree sitting. I remember the dense grove behind the family house where eagles roosted. I remember the moose that wandered into a friend's treed property. And I remember the row of cottonwoods that I slalomed as a child. All are gone, every tree a stump. Even these last remnants were often bulldozed into oblivion.

The neighborhood I grew up in, like many others, is developed almost beyond recognition. Displaced nature is spoken about in negative connotations: coyotes eating cats and birds pooping on cars. Yet at least one haven for the wild persists on Zero Avenue. The family home, Westwood, stands among cottonwood, cedar and fir. My mom's property, yet to be subdivided, offers stewardship to the other-than-human species. The neighbouring property, slated for development, harbours hundreds of nitrogen-giving alder left to grow in the absence of human occupation. A family of deer nests here. A raccoon ambles out like clockwork at dinner time. A resident possum scouts underneath my mom's deck for a place to birth her young. Countless birds fledge here before they take to the sky.

Again and again I struggle with the human alteration of the landscape and the clearing of our photosynthetic kin. I see sky where memory says sky should not be seen. This is something I have witnessed hundreds of times. I turn to poetry to articulate this sense of loss and disbelief.

#### Leafless

I drive home to Westwood

the horizon

is wrong

too bright   too wide   too blue

leafless clouds I should not see

#### The Trees

have been taken

forty years we grew together  
green seedling to longhair

now sidewalked    subdivided

another neighbour has developed  
a taste for progress

my steady-state universe  
tilted perpendicular

the horizon  
is wrong

fir  
pine  
alder  
cedar  
stacked  
delimbed

maple corpses now cast no shade  
their last shadows gifted  
to those who cut them down

my neighbour has houses to build  
yet each tree is home  
to one thousand species



now levelled into sawdust

human need

is clear cut

too bright too wide too blue

the horizon

is wrong

to cut an old tree

is to cut a bridge to heaven

the ancients remind me

I too am rooted

in fertile darkness

I stretch my human fingers

not far enough

only leaf veins

touch the blood of the sun

I pull into the driveway

the sky

stares

me

down

these trees cannot be fixed

with a price

leaf's currency is measured  
one breath at a time

In these powerless moments I find it hard to breathe. My hurt needs time to shift to anger and to grief and (hopefully) action. The two-way exchange—our carbon dioxide flowing into leaves, their oxygen slipping out of their stomata as a photosynthetic by-product that is anything but secondary to life—is increasingly a one-way street. We inhale plants, and they inhale us—our exhalation, our pollution, our desires. How do we find the motivation and vitality to act when our more-than-human community members are continually being cut down? When it comes to bearing witness, how much is too much?

The excavator behind our home continues to scrape, dig, crush, and snap. To bear witness to this destruction, and comprehend the deep and often irreparable harm being done during this human-caused sixth extinction (Ceballos et al., 2017), is to steep in loss and despair. How do we avoid feeling overwhelmed, not concede to inevitable ecosystem collapse, and keep at least a sliver of hope alive? Joana Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) offer a path forward, where we acknowledge and experience grief: the trauma to forests clearcut, the eradication of entire species. But we also recognize that Earth-centred acts, no matter how small—the creation of ecological art, ecopedagogy in teaching practice—are to be valued for the seeds of inspiration and action that they fold into the soil.

## Story Two – Ponderosa

Even in death there is life. The forest lives and breathes this maxim. Many trees hold more living biomass in their bodies *after* they die. I wonder, what other unexpected life might spring forth if we waited long enough for the seed to germinate or the spore to grow? I walked through the temperate rainforests of Mayne Island one day, angry with the busyness of life, my head full of dark meditations. This poem rose from my mortal thoughts in a forest that cycles daily between life and death.

Forest Cemetery

bracket fungi rise from the fallen fir  
erect as gravestones  
they mark her time of death

rot squares her round trunk  
 sowbug millipede bacteria each take a turn  
 a century's weight rent to dust

I stumble upon white bones buried in the moss  
 marrow sucked dry  
 the ghost of a deer  
 there is an order after death  
 teeth rib vertebrae laid out  
 a vulture's science experiment

each turn of the forest trail  
 reveals a secret sense  
 licorice fern and broken eggshells  
 baby robin blue  
 I forget my family car house dream  
 the trees receive my breath with gratitude

I walk this lonely path  
 to connect—no, to escape  
 into the mantras of birds and insect  
 droning on and on with singular focus  
 no deadlines jobs meetings  
 just the search for morsel and mate

I do not want to know my life  
 nothing is lighter than death  
 if there is a choice

to be here  
or return to the dirt  
how long must I wait?

We cannot afford to wait any longer, to fall into despondency. The rate of species extinction, habitat loss, and forest decimation is unprecedented (Berry, 1999). Macy and Brown (2014) implore us to feel the pain of the world, embrace “the Great Turning” (p. 6), and move toward a life-sustaining society. We can also look to Leggo (2004) and his curriculum of joy that involves artful attending and hopeful imagination. He found joy in a ponderosa tree outside his office. Ponderosa, sometimes planted in cemeteries, represent the continuity of life. Yet, the pine Leggo bonded with still stands as the centrepiece of the Ponderosa Commons at the University of British Columbia where he taught.

The ponderosa pine is sacred to Indigenous peoples. In addition to carving this pine into dugout canoes (ponderosa is also prized by loggers for its straight wood), Indigenous peoples use the needles to line food caches and the branches for floor covers and bedding (Turner, 2007). Evergreens such as the ponderosa defy gravity. Their positive phototropism sends their trunk up hundreds of feet, while negative geotropism digs their roots into the Earth, tendrils in search of water, minerals, and a firm hold on the planet. These sentinels continue to stand, grow, and provide their myriad gifts even as bark beetles consume them and the climate crisis rages on.

If we heed the words of Leggo (2012) that “Poetry is prophecy” (p. 390), where doubt and despair live alongside creative imagination, perhaps the ponderosa can be our mentor and guide for standing tall. As Leggo (2016) wrote:

your wildness cannot be contained in my poem  
any more than I can hold the moon’s fullness in a pail

ever green, ever rooted, ever patient,  
ever willing to teach us if we are willing to learn

teach us to remember we are guests  
on an ancient land with countless stories  
(p. 363)

The Wild Pedagogies movement reminds us that nature as a co-teacher can sometimes offer “something beyond our ability” (Jickling et al., 2018, p. 82). To learn with nature, rather than about or from the natural world, requires attentiveness, de-centring the human voice, spending extensive time in place, and being open to emergent learning possibilities. For example, if a group of learners stumbled across an elder ponderosa, they might ask, “Why is its bark orange?” A quick response would be, “Because that tree is old,” yet, there is also an affordance here to learn about how a tree grows and matures, fire resistant bark and seeds, and the reproductive benefits of wildfire.

One profound experience in my life occurred with another being during a three-day sojourn on the slope of a mountain. She did not talk, nor did she acknowledge my presence in any noticeable way; though *her* presence permeated every second.

#### Ponderosa Pine (For a Moment)

I am Buddha beneath the pine  
her pointy leafskin bristles with chlorophyll  
each needle harvests light  
please show me the sun

Ponderosa  
you are my confidence  
fire only makes you stronger  
can you withstand my sorrow?

I am roots that clutch below  
hands of the earth  
networks the soil-skin  
into the living forest



Ponderosa  
you are my every breath  
I sit in your shadow  
burdened by your scars  
that hold the weight of centuries

Ponderosa encouraged me to slow down and attend to this place, my basecamp on a lower shelf of the Cascade Mountains. Ponderosa does not ask me to speak, or to move, or to philosophize. She simply asks me to *be*.

I am not much of a companion on my first day. I struggle to quiet my mind enough to hear the antics of warblers hopping in the understory and the pine needles caressing the breeze. Her bark is a puzzle that I cannot decipher. The second day the forest, perhaps recognizing my intention to be an apprentice of this place, reveals colours beyond leaf and bark. I notice how cones nestle with the wolf lichen, and the creatures that call this pine home: spiders in every bark crevice and ant trails that march up to the highest boughs. I try to climb her. Red guardian ants swarm my hands. I decide to listen and leave her branches alone.

Our third and final day together, Ponderosa is a steadier presence that offers a certain confidence. I note how she “reports the wind’s character second by second” (Haskell, 2017, p. 127). Her needles do not move randomly; Ponderosa has agency. My scientifically trained mind wants to interrogate nature; yet, perhaps, in a Goethean sense, we can follow nature (Landman-Reiner, 2020). Goethe’s delicate empiricism is a methodology for holistic participation with the subject of study. Through creative expression and imaginative-temporal engagement there is an opportunity to understand nature inwardly from a lens outside the industrial-exploitative. I wonder, if I spent a thousand days with Ponderosa, what wonders would I see and hear that I am blind and deaf to now?

In befriending Ponderosa—although a part of me feels she could not care less about my wellbeing—I am reminded of the various tree companions that have graced my presence throughout my life. What lessons did they try to teach me that I didn’t have the patience to hear? How many voices of nature have I ignored, the “movements, activities, sound waves, radiation, or as reflections of sunlight” (Jickling et al., 2018, p. 38), because I did not allow for the time and space needed? As I get older, I notice that certain trees start to feel like family.

## Story Three – The Eagles

“They cut down the eagle nest!”

My five-year-old son cannot mask his excitement. Dread wells in my gut. I race to the back fence of my mother’s property, a half-acre on Zero Avenue propped between the USA border on one side and development hell on the other.

A single excavator gathers debris—cottonwood, cedar, alder, fir—in gaping metal jaws. It drops the limbs of the forest into a growing pile of ruin. I look up. Trees still stand here. But something niggles, like a memory that will not surface. I look down at a sizeable stump (Fig. 3). This ancient black cottonwood, one of the oldest residents of what is now called Summerfield, is gone. Her striated bark, home to lichen and moss, the squirrel pathways that meander across her boughs, and the huge nest made of branches the length of my body—all open space. There’s nothing left. The eagle’s nest must be in that trash heap.

### **Figure 3.**

*The stump of the black cottonwood once home to resident bald eagles.*



I stand frozen in place, helpless. The excavator digs away the memories of my nascent years. I played here as a child, built forts, laid down trails, got stung by wasps, imagined fantastical stories, and once tried to cut down a young tree, thought better of it, and let her be. For years I checked on the progress of that red alder to ensure my

shoddy axe work had left some life in her inner cambium. I was continually amazed by her resilient growth. Now she is gone and, by tomorrow, the adjacent lot will be cleared as though a wildfire has raged through.

To learn respect for life and place, must we first cause harm? Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, contends that the “inescapable tension between honoring life around us and taking it in order to live is part of being human” (p. 177). Does the human necessity to take life to survive provoke a secondary desire to exploit and harvest more than we need?

Dawson and Sawyer coordinate this development (Fig. 4). The 93 townhouses, with yards the size of picnic blankets, stand closer to each other than COVID-19 social distancing allows. This development is called The Eagles. In fact, the first line of Dawson and Sawyer’s sales pitch states that these townhouses are “situated directly on a Bald Eagle conservation area” (Dawson + Sawyer, n.d.).

**Figure 4.**

*A sign of the Anthropocene.*





Everywhere I go trees are coming down. One lot after another in Surrey is being cleared, the ancients being chainsawed, sometimes replaced by manicured saplings with no semblance of wildness. In the co-op where my family lived at the time, the oldest trees are scheduled to be cut because they are a nuisance, with too many needles and dripping sap, or their roots stretch too deep toward the foundation. Must these plants, the foundation of countless food webs, be cut so that we can save our human-built foundations that serve our species alone? How much must humans remove and consume before it becomes too much? I'm not sure if we're capable of this foresight. Do our numbers alone, nearly eight billion, justify taking up so much space?

My family moved to one of the Gulf Islands to dwell among the evergreens. Otters sometimes run through our front yard and, just down the road, dozens of seals bask on the reef. People are drawn here by the golden arbutus, Douglas-fir that furrow toward the sky, and the life-giving Western redcedar.

Yet one day, like *déjà vu*, we arrive to Dancing Tree—the name of our home—and something feels off. The air hangs quiet enough to hear the sharp downstroke of a raven two properties over. My wife spots the change.

“Look there. I can see the sky. I'm not supposed to see that part of the sky.”

Our neighbour to the north cut down every last cedar at the back of her property. Where once a wall of leaves danced and mesmerized, not even a sparse skeleton remains. The property owner used the cut cedars to make a fence, to separate her property from the one being developed to the west. Perhaps, also, this neighbour wanted more light. That's a habit of trees. They grab the light and, in turn, gift us with breathable air.

Prior to my family living here, our property was cleared. Some trees were spared, including a Douglas-fir with tree-sized roots and a Western redcedar pushing 200 years. I have pledged to let every remaining tree stand.

Kimmerer (2013) reminds us to honour the past by acknowledging what has come before and appreciating what we have now. At Dancing Tree, the original building plans show how the septic field shifted from the marshy backyard to the front. A guided tour provided by the Mayne Island Conservancy focused on the plants on this land. Our door is painted—a child wields an umbrella delightfully in the rain—by deceased Mayne Island artist Cedar Christie. These glimpses into the past omit many narratives. Did the Tsartlip First Nation use this land? What wetland creatures swam and spawned in the backyard before it became a lawn? How many cedars were sacrificed to allow us to live here? Part of our stewardship is to respect what we have now and share the stories of shrub, tree, bird, and boulder. Lawn weeds such as dandelion become medicine, red alder moves beyond allergy-maker to soil-enricher, cedar is not a backdrop but the Tree of Life, raven is not a pest but an important messenger, rocks are not simply inert matter but mineral-rich gifts from the mountains.

Human instinct, at least for Western ideologies, compels us to 'reclaim' the land from the natural world. We drain the swamp despite the fact that wetlands are carbon sequesters and, therefore, one of our greatest allies in mitigating the climate crisis. Once, friends staying at Dancing Tree, in a desire to help, brought out the clippers and weed whacker. Along the driveway they lopped off the grand fir limbs where we used to put our Christmas bulbs. Just outside the front door they weed-whacked a salal plant into oblivion; I had published a found poem, excerpted below, about this very salal (Fig. 5), a precious plant deemed unwanted.

Dear leaf,

map of the world

delicious decay

fragile and finite

in bright golds and yellows

and reds like blood

spilled out on the ground

at my feet



**Figure 5.**

*A salal leaf in delicious decay.*



How do we combat plant blindness when we can buy nearly anything with a single click, pre-packaged and promptly delivered with no thought required for its origin, harvest, and crafting? Even I am discriminatory in my plant relationships, choosing what to kill (weeds, invasives) and what to keep (ferns, cultivars) in my yard. Labelling a plant as a weed or ornamental is based on perspective.

As a matter of course, humans modify their environment to persist. Recently, I witnessed our island neighbours to the east, a lovely couple, removing trees in order to build their family home. A massive cedar is on the hit list. My kids and I played hide and seek around her trunk, studied her bark for spiderwebs, and caught raindrops from her boughs. A local tree feller—a friend—comes to bring this mother cedar down, first her limbs, then her torso, one section at a time. Eventually, all that remains is the base of her trunk attached to the root bole below. This weighs more than our Mazda5 car.

By one count, Western redcedar has 368 different uses for Indigenous peoples (Moerman, 1998). An excavator arrives to tackle this stubborn concentration of life. First the digger strikes the stump with its metal bucket, over and over, trying to weaken the cedar's hold on itself. The bucket teeth chip away at root and trunk to little avail. Finally, the excavator grabs the whole cedar remnant in its steel jaws, lifts her as high as it can and drops her unceremoniously to the ground. The whole excavator shakes from the effort. The cedar, meanwhile, maintains her integrity.

How do we forge ahead with a human population and economy that are voracious in their appetites? We can start, as these neighbours did, by keeping as many trees as possible and building small. Yet to move beyond the anthropocentric mindset is to elevate the voices of the more-than-human community with whom we share our land. The trees have held membership cards much longer than we have. They have agency, and their own wants and needs. We can see progress in this direction with the rights for nature movements. Personhood is granted to rivers (Alley, 2019), where representatives are appointed to speak on behalf of these waters. Similarly, the Council of all Beings (Macy & Brown, 2014) is a process that allows for an intentional gathering where the experiences, welfare, and desires of many—cottonwood, moose, eagle, human, river, fern—are equal participants in the conversation. Imagine the kind of sustainable development—or respectful, responsible, and reciprocal living—that becomes possible when all community members are equal and active participants for collective decision-making.

Story Three ends on a sliver of hope. Going back to the eagles' nest, and to the credit (or, at least, obligation) of the developers, they consulted local eagle expert David Hancock (Goulet et al., 2021). A platform was built for the eagles to make a new nest near First Avenue. Though I cannot help but think of the European colonists, including my ancestors, who came to Canada, displaced Indigenous peoples from their lands, and then offered them a lesser, if not genocidal, alternative. If this is progress, it is moving at the pace moss grows on the trunk of a cottonwood.

How do we be good neighbours? Can we care instead of cut, revere instead of monetize, give space for instead of restrict? If we learn to listen to the needs of the larger community, attune to voices other than that of our own species, we might be more willing to make sacrifices to reduce our footprint and rampant consumerism. We can reevaluate our (actual) needs, build houses smaller, and accept that risk is a part of life. If we learn the stories of the sentinels that live on the lands we call ours, perhaps our children's children may still experience snow in summer.

## Epilogue

Shortly before he died, Carl Leggo was presented a copy of his collected works *Storying the World*. In this book, he contends that love of poetry and language can help us live poetically: a life of wonder and joy, but also of promises and remembrance. He argues for the importance of autobiography being connected with poetry (2019b), how “Lifewriting lives in the intricate interstices” (2019a, p. 16) where dreams and delusions overlap and new possibilities emerge. We may doubt and despair, yet we can take a parallel path filled with our creative imaginations that offer us a glimpse of the light (Fig. 6).

The excavator behind my home has now gone quiet. The logs are neatly stacked, the ground cleared of shrub, fern, and den. What would Leggo say about the possibilities of this place? Is artful attending and hopeful imagination enough in the face of ecological destruction? I’m not sure. Yet if we strive for living with intention informed by direct “experiences of the body, heart, imagination, and mind” (Leggo, 2004, p. 32), perhaps we can design a new philosophical framework, and fulfill a “prophetic passion” (p. 38) that shifts nature from being a backdrop to being an ever-evolving web of reciprocity.

### **Figure 6.**

*The language of light.*



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