



Poet to Poet: Mentorship Across Divides

Fiona Tinwei Lam and Henry Doyle reflect on their experiences of mentoring and being mentored beyond the boundaries of class, race, and socio-economic differences.

POETRY: FOR ANYONE, ANYWHERE, ANYTIME
BY FIONA TINWEI LAM

One Thursday in November 2009, I passed through the usual throng milling outside the Carnegie Centre on the corner of Main and Hastings in Vancouver and headed up worn marble steps to a meeting room. Thursdays Writing Collective, a group of about fifteen eager writers from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), led by Elee Kraljii Gardiner, was waiting. They listened to my poems with an intense receptivity, and then I listened to them read aloud what they had written in response to a prompt I'd given them. I was struck by the honesty and power of their words. We had a stimulating discussion that left me feeling as excited as they were about the possibilities of poetry.

It was the efforts of Ethel Whitty, the director of the Carnegie Centre, and Betsy Warland, founder and director of the Writer's Studio (TWS) program at Simon Fraser University's downtown campus, that brought Thursdays Writing Collective into existence. Warland first consulted writers in the neighbourhood in order to design an approach that would be a good fit for the community, then initiated the annual Downtown Eastside Writers' Jamboree, an event with roundtable discussions for DTES writers to meet

with professional editors, authors, and publishers as well as one-on-one blue pencil consultations. TWS organized it with support from the Carnegie Centre, Friends of the Vancouver Public Library, People's Co-Op Book Store, and the Geist Foundation.

The Jamboree spawned Thursdays Writing Collective, an ongoing free and inclusive drop-in writers' workshop. Kraljii Gardiner, a TWS graduate, led the workshop for eight years, incorporating Andover Breadloaf's grassroots, non-hierarchical approach to literacy, which emphasizes the value of co-learning and the abundance of each individual's lived experience. She sourced funding to produce, edit, and design the collective's several publications, and arranged innovative collaborations, including one with the UBC School of Music and Instruments for Change and another with UBC law students at the Carnegie Centre and at the UBC Farm. Kraljii Gardiner also coordinated the Collective's participation in many readings, festivals, and literary events across town. (The Thursdays Writing Collective formally wrapped up in 2018 with the launch of a final anthology and is now running as the Downtown Eastside Writers' Collective with a different format and leadership.)

I got to know Henry Doyle through his poetry when I judged *Geist* magazine's Downtown Eastside Jamboree Writing Contest in

2011. His poem “Drunken Laundry Day with Charles Bukowski” (see page 21) stood out because of its distinctive voice and vivid imagery. In 2012, I became Henry’s mentor as part of the Downtown Eastside Manuscript Consultation program sponsored by TWS and the Carnegie Centre.

After the program, I stayed in touch with Henry informally. His prize-winning poem still haunted me: I could see it had the potential to become a terrific poetry video, given its underlying message that poetry is for anyone, anywhere and anytime. We ended up collaborating with three talented animation graduates from Emily Carr University to make a poetry video that has been screened at festivals in Montreal, Portland, Los Angeles, Budapest, Moscow, and the prestigious Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Muenster/Berlin, Germany. Thursdays Collective members were invited to the premiere at Vancouver’s DOXA festival in 2017.

I’ve continued to meet with Henry about every two weeks at a local coffee shop and by phone when we can’t meet in person. Sometimes he’ll hand over a stack of typewritten poems or a story for feedback. Other times we talk about the logistics of writing — things like cover letters or how to use Submittable. (I ought to heed the same advice I give him about regular reading and writing and persistence. Physician, heal thyself!) We’ve become friends over the years. I send him postcards when I travel and seek out books that might inspire him.

Despite his long hours at two gruelling jobs, Henry remains committed to writing. He painstakingly types out notes he makes during the day, retyping each revised version from scratch. He’s brimming with gritty and engaging frontline stories about his time in prison, in shelters, and on the streets that could fill at least a few books.

I want Henry to know that his words matter, that he matters. His writing needs to get out to the world, to those living in the well-heeled parts of our cities and country who don’t understand the diversity and humanity of a community that continues to experience innumerable, deeply rooted challenges and injustices.

Fiona Tinwei Lam has authored three poetry collections and a children’s book and edited The Bright Well: Canadian Contemporary Poems on Facing Cancer. Her work appears in over thirty-five anthologies including The Best of the Best Canadian Poetry: Anniversary Edition (2017) and Force Field: 77 Women Poets of BC. Her poetry videos have been screened at festivals locally and internationally. A former lawyer, she teaches poetry writing at SFU Continuing Studies. fionalam.net

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

BY HENRY DOYLE

I’ve got a Ph.D. in living and surviving on the streets. In my first foster home in Timmins, when I was six and seven years old, I got beaten a lot. I was a runaway from age nine until my teens because of those beatings. When I was about 16, I got a job picking tobacco in Southern Ontario. When I went to Ottawa, I ran into my old friends. We got pinched for armed robbery, and I got left holding the bag and was sentenced to two years less a day when I turned 17. Prison definitely changed me. If you got into a fight they threw you into the hole for two weeks at a time. I did well over a year in solitary.

Inspired by Hunter S. Thompson, I tried to get a newspaper

going in jail. I wanted to do the sports page because I really liked boxing. I got permission to get a typewriter and paper, but some extremely paranoid dudes in jail busted up my typewriter and busted me up too. So I just wrote in my journals.

After I got out, I boxed for a few years but went back to living on the streets and at the Sally Ann, working in the labour pools in Ottawa and Toronto. Then I got a job at the Fred Victor Mission in Toronto as a dishwasher and a short-order cook. I worked at Toronto’s Street City, Ottawa’s Union Mission and Shepherds of Good Hope, and Vancouver’s Salvation Army. Now I work for a Vancouver shelter as a custodian and maintenance man.

I started going to Thursdays Writing Collective at the Carnegie Centre in 2009. It was life changing and a safe place to go where nobody judged anyone else. I looked forward to the community of writers every Thursday afternoon. The coordinator, Elee Kraljii Gardiner, was everybody’s mentor, including mine. She invited writers like Brad Cran, Michael Turner, Joanne Arnott, Kevin Spenser, John Asfour, and others. I dedicated my second chapbook to John Asfour. He was blinded by a hand grenade when he was 13 years old and living in Lebanon. He used to ask me to read my work to him after class.

I first met Fiona Tinwei Lam when she was a guest speaker at Thursdays Writing Collective. When I got into the Downtown Eastside Manuscript Coaching Program, I was over the moon but felt nervous about working with her. Why did this university teacher want to have anything to do with me? But it was a really good opportunity to work hard on my poetry, and I started taking it more seriously. It gave me direction and focus. I had to set goals and stick to a writing schedule.

Over the years, we’ve become friends, too. Fiona gives me feedback on my writing and encourages me to keep writing and to send out my work. She’s given me books by Al Purdy, Patrick Lane, Peter Trower, Raymond Carver, Brian Brett, and Philip Levine. Our video poem project was a waking dream that came true. I remember rushing out of the DOXA festival screening, saying to Fiona, “I hope I never become famous like Bukowski.” I still don’t want to be famous.

I’m working on three projects right now and another chapbook. Poetry and writing can find you when you least expect it. I have a second job as a janitor at a public washroom on the corner of Main and Hastings, and I write a daily journal. I take it home, rewrite the material, and bring it to my meetings with Fiona along with other writing. When I can, I go to the Downtown Eastside Writers’ Collective meetings briefly before work.

There are so many lost souls down here in the DTES, but writing gives me a sense of identity and belonging. Writing is something you sometimes have to fight for and lose, but you’ve got to try again and again until it works.

Henry Doyle has published work in Poetry is Dead; Megaphone; Geist; and the anthologies V6A: Writing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012) and From the Heart of it All: Ten Years of Writing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (Heidi Greco, ed., Otter Press, 2018). He is launching his third chapbook this spring. His award-winning video poem based on his award-winning poem, “Drunken Laundry Day with Charles Bukowski,” has screened locally and internationally. wastelandjournalschapters.wordpress.com