

The Burden of Gravity: Poems

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By

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ABSTRACT

The Burden of Gravity, a poetry collection, explores the fraught history of Woodlands School, a former institution in New Westminster, British Columbia. Woodlands opened in 1878 as the Provincial Lunatic Asylum. Over the years the institution evolved into a facility for children with disabilities, then simply a catch-all for children who were rejected by mainstream society. Shortly after Woodlands' closure in 1996, public accusations from former residents and their families began to make headlines claiming physical, verbal, sexual, mental and emotional abuse. In 2007, Woodlands Memorial Garden was built on the former cemetery property, featuring recovered gravestones on memorial walls. The last remaining section of Woodlands, the Centre Block Tower, was demolished in 2011.

The Burden of Gravity imagines residents based on researched source materials. While dehumanizing practices quite likely occurred throughout its history, this collection focuses on the 1960's and 70's. The poems strive to portray the residents' lives through an empathetic lens, shifting the focus from the staff to the experience of residents. The collection employs ekphrastic, erasure, free verse, found and constraint poetry to shed light on British Columbia's treatment of its marginalized and vulnerable, and also explore the histories of those who perished and suffered a myriad of abuses at Woodlands.

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To the former residents of Woodlands School, may your lives and stories never be forgotten.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

I was introduced to Woodlands School in 2009 during a creative writing class with Professor Andrea MacPherson at University of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford, British Columbia. We were given photographs and asked to write an ekphrastic poem. I stared at the photograph of a room in my hands, noting its checkered linoleum floor, the bars on the windows and the rows of metal cribs with what appeared to be a chicken-wire-type material on all four sides. When the photograph's origin was revealed I was shocked to learn that a place like Woodlands existed. That semester, I began researching Woodlands School and visited Woodlands Memorial Garden. I was overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of gravestones and memorial plaques with inscribed names. My indignation for Woodlands and my empathy for its residents grew as I read the information panels. That semester I only wrote one poem about Woodlands. It was too unsettling to delve further at that point, but I was significantly struck by how few of my friends and family even knew about Woodlands' existence while everyone had heard of Riverview, the other local hospital that treated mentally ill. I could not shake the heaviness of knowing that through my own childhood just twenty-five kilometers and a bridge away, children my age were living and dying behind the walls of Woodlands. I attempted the topic of Woodlands again in a historical fiction writing class in 2012, but found my short story focused too heavily on the violence that occurred; I didn't know how to process all the research I had done. At the time I was still too outraged to understand the dangers of telling someone else's story. I had not yet found the right medium to uphold the respect, dignity and show the empathy that is necessary when delving into a history such as Woodlands—a history rife with silence and abuse.

In fall 2015, upon entering the MFA in Writing program, I returned to the history of Woodlands. I was inspired by Nadine McNinnis's poetry collection *Two Hemispheres*, which focuses on photos and diagnoses of patients at the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum and also Lisa Bird-Wilson's *The Red Files*, which incorporates archival material and family history to explore the effects of residential schools in Canada. These two collections provided ways to consider an ethical approach to exploring Woodlands' history through poetry. From my previous research I knew that there were works of creative writing that focus on life within institutions, but there was a relative absence of material on Woodlands except for Gina McMurchy-Barber's young adult novel *Free as a Bird*, as well as personal accounts like Carol Dauphinais' *Living with Labels and Lies: a Life Story*.

The central challenge for this project was how to explore Woodlands through the genre of poetry. Patricia Levy believes that poetry can be used as a narrative that "can help us access the *subtext* that helps shape our experience, perception, and understanding of social reality" (162), which I believe is crucial when delving into the sordid history of Woodlands. Poetry is also a direct engagement with silence. Because of the elements of erased histories, undocumented abuse and secrecy among the staff, Woodlands' history holds a significant stake in secrecy and silence which can be negotiated within the poems' relationship to the white space on the page.

My stance as a witness is one of a secondary witness through archival material combined with personal proximity to the site itself. It was important to me in this role to raise questions; as a result numerous poems pose more questions than they provide answers. This view as a secondary witness can also be seen in Picasso's *Guernica*, based on

the 1937 bombings on Guernica, Spain by German bombers. In “A Witness to Guernica,” Patrick McCaughey focuses on the weeping woman, who is prominent in *Guernica* and also in subsequent postscript paintings. McCaughey describes the shift between Picasso’s paintings, “The shift in the images from painting to postscript is a shift from being a participant in the holocaust of Guernica to a witness of that drama. The screaming mother becomes the weeping woman. Both the link between them and the transformation of feeling from agony to grief, is what sustains the power and presence of the *Weeping woman*. The painting is without a vestige of sentimentality because it belongs to and witnesses a tragedy of modern history.” With Woodlands, I serve as a witness of the drama through the archival material, but also recognize that there are survivors still alive. There were living victims of the attack when Picasso did his painting, but they were obscured by both the medium and the style; thus the obligation to protect the privacy of the victims was fulfilled while preserving the documentary integrity of the piece. Likewise, my collection is sensitive to the privacy of the survivors, therefore no real names of residents are used. In regards to the ethics in the depiction of Woodlands, the poems are drawn from real events and anecdotes discussed in the limited archival material. As such I recognize my responsibility to depict things accurately within the medium, which could be considered a modified journalistic code.

The collection can be broken down into three main strands. Firstly, witness poems provide an intimate look into the daily lives of an imagined core group of residents. Secondly, ekphrastic poems allow the poet and reader a window into the environment in which the residents lived. Photographic sources allowed me to connect visually with the residents and how they appeared in Woodlands’ environment. Thirdly, erasure and other visual poems became a way of using archival materials to write about the silence associated with Woodlands.

The first section of this collection, *Confined Sp/Faces*, consists of witness poems that focus on the 1960’s and 70’s. During my research I found that those time periods held the most documented photographs and other archival materials of Woodlands’ history. Carolyn Forché, in her *Poetry Magazine* article “Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art” defines poetry of witness as “a mode of reading rather than writing, of readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representational—as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood.” The public will never fully know exactly what happened behind the walls of Woodlands. I have never lived at Woodlands School. I cannot claim the experience as my own, and am grateful that I cannot.

This collection aims to explore the lives of others through an empathetic lens and not allowing what happened to be forgotten and erased, no matter how much societal pressure there is to simply ignore it all. It was very important to me that none of the poems were written from a first-person perspective. There are question poems that inquire about actions that the staff took or the reasoning behind the care of residents. The voice in these interrogative poems is not my voice, but rather an outside perspective trying to make sense of what occurred inside Woodlands. It is clear that the answers will never be known, but they are still questions that need to be asked.

Many of the poems present brief narratives, but rarely show any altercations or instances of abuse. Instead, they imply what has occurred. The intention of the poems in *Confined Sp/Faces* is to humanize the residents who were in a dehumanizing environment.

This prompted me to create fictive names for individuals in the poems. Once a name and personality are connected to a resident it creates an opportunity for connection and empathy between the reader and the residents. Jen Rinaldi and nancy viva davis halifax describe this connection as the readers becoming “‘co-witness’ – propelling forward a politics of reading. Reading, listening to these poems implicates us – we become those who know and in knowing can orient ourselves in an ethical turn,” (253) which links back to my belief that the lack of public knowledge about Woodlands is wrong. Through the narrative poems the reader becomes a co-witness, observing lives that they never knew existed. The hope is to open the eyes of those who may have never heard anything about Woodlands and for those who already knew, to provoke a sense of responsibility to question the past, current and future treatment of the vulnerable and marginalized.

Archived photographs of Woodlands School and its residents provided a haunting visual record that facilitated the writing of ekphrastic poems. In “Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis,” Peter Barry says, “ekphrastic poetry seems to embody an acknowledgement of the unbridgeable hermeneutic gap between poetry and the real” (157). Visual images of Woodlands allowed me tangible access into the world of the residents and an opportunity to consider what may have occurred before and after the photograph was taken. Being able to see their bodily poses and facial expressions provided a dimension beyond simply reading about residents’ experiences. Barry goes on to say that “writing a poem about (say) a photograph seems to involve tacitly accepting that poetry can only deal with representations of reality, never with reality itself. There is no easy contact between the world of the poem and the ‘extra-literary’ world beyond, and the two can only communicate with each other through the intervening medium of the ekphrastic object” (157). Readers of my collection do not have access to the original archival photographs; therefore they must build their vision through my filtered perspective and interpretation, placing an added responsibility on me as empathetic poet to be keenly aware of the power of my words and to make it a priority to uphold the dignity and respect of those in the photographs.

The collection’s second section, *Erased Pl/Faces*, has an obvious and dramatic tonal shift—specifically, the section deals with the period after the closure of Woodlands. While researching the post-demolition media materials I had to consider what was essential and what information I could put aside. Similarly, Catherine Frazee, et al, describes the process, “sometimes the problem with history is locating it, sifting through haystacks of detail to find the nugget, the kernel of experience that connects lives across time” (37). Newspaper articles online particularly drew my attention. During the time leading up to the demolition, news coverage about Woodlands increased, with survivors discussing their past and the significance of demolishing the last physical piece of Woodlands. Those articles encapsulated too many emotions and thoughts to build those experiences into poems. Instead, I took to visual poetry as a way to boil down what I had found in these materials and express what I believed to be at the core. I was greatly inspired by Mary Ruefle’s use of erasure in *A Little White Shadow* and also Nadia Myre’s work with using beads to fill in the negative space of the Indian Act. It was once I delved into Austin Kleon’s *Newspaper Blackout* that I found a format that I felt fit with the media around Woodlands School, specifically sections of blacked-out found text. Examples of these pieces in my collection include, “Headstones” and “60 Pages.”

The second section of *The Burden of Gravity* presents a more distanced stance than the first section. While the first section strove to connect readers with the residents of Woodlands, the second section delves into aftermath of the school's closure. In "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics," Travis Macdonald identifies an essential aspect of erasure poetry, as "poets employ and adapt the words of another in order to manifest and convey their own intent or meaning." In the second section *Erased Pl/Faces*, the reader is encouraged to step back and see the anonymity and silence that continued around Woodlands after its closure. The intent of the erasure, pantoum and the other visually arresting poems is to bring attention to the overwhelming silence. Woodlands was fuelled by silence. The necessity to have a code of silence, to leave incidents undocumented and to keep residents suppressed all factored into what happened there. It is in the silence of these poems, the blacked-out lines and the white space, where all that cannot be said is held.

Along similar lines, the representation of institutions was also a key concern in creating the setting of these poems. Canada has a dark history when it comes to institutionalization, from an underfunded mental health system that often shares space with correctional institutions to the internment of German and Japanese citizens during WWII to the residential school system. While many of these wrongs have been acknowledged, not all have seen redress. Instances of abuse have been a nationwide epidemic. There is a significant amount of overlap in the case of Ontario's Huronia Regional Centre, which had the largest class-action lawsuit of its kind. Woodlands experienced an overcrowding as it became a catch-all for those who had mental illness, disabilities, were wards of the state, orphans or simply unwanted by their families. It shifted from originally being a hospital to temporarily being a school, then simply being a warehouse of the unwanted. Jes Saschse suggests that "both prisons and massive residential institutions are warehouses of violence and abuse that have had a huge impact on disabled history in Canada and the production of disability itself, through abuse and neglect, racism and colonialism" (203). Instead of helping those who are put into care, the system tends to prevent progress or healing and often operates like a prison rather than a care facility. In *From Asylum to Welfare*, Harvey G. Simmons touches on the misdiagnoses of those admitted to asylums as "many people who were not mentally ill, but mentally retarded, senile, criminal, unemployed, poor or unwanted by families and municipalities and vulnerable to the authorities were deliberately certified as insane when they were nothing of the kind" (6). This parallels Woodlands in that once residents were in the system, they were treated inhumanely. Children and youth were forced to wear diapers despite being capable of using the washroom. The intention behind the diapers was possibly to be efficient, but the reality of it was that it demoralized those who didn't need them. Like the previously mentioned Huronia, "the legacy of "warehousing" is applicable not just to prison spaces but also to residential workforce schools for children and adults with disabilities" (Sachse 202). The trend of increasing population in facilities directly correlates with the lessening of care. Simmons states "asylums began to rapidly fill with incurables, and particularly with mentally retarded people. It soon became obvious that the curative goals of the asylum were being undermined by the pressure of numbers" (9). This can be seen throughout Woodlands' history as they started with a manageable amount of patients for the staff, but as the years continued and the "warehousing" became a reality, the ratio of staff to patients was no longer in favour of either group.

A further challenge associated with this collection is the representation of disability. While reading through archival material, it was evident to see the progression and changing views about disability held by those who are not disabled. The language was insensitive and derogative, which was technically acceptable in society at that time, but was still demeaning to those who were subjected to it. I made a point to stay away from the controversial terms, as my goal was to humanize and give the residents the respect they deserve. Jeffrey Preston addresses a great concern I had while writing this collection as, “popular culture enforces myths of disability based on three common myths: the hero, the villain, and the burden/child” (165). It was important for my imagined residents to not fall into a myth of disability. I did not want to exploit those with disabilities, but rather attempt to have their disability in the background, and let their personalities and experience come to the foreground. Preston touches on the inaccurate portrayal in that, “while these three myths dominate the popular discourse of disability, they rarely speak to the actual lived experience of disability, not to mention contributing to the isolation and erasure of race, gender, sexuality, etc” (169). It was important for myself as a writer and human to be very conscious of my choices in how I depicted disability, especially when humanizing these residents was such an integral part of the collection.

Related to the legacy of warehousing, themes of silence and confinement are central throughout this collection. Not only was Woodlands located next to the British Columbia Penitentiary (which closed only sixteen years before Woodlands did) but also they were similar in their function and provided the same sense of imprisonment. Erika Dyck recognizes “regional studies are essential for improving our understanding of the impact that deinstitutionalization has had on mental health services as well as for deepening our historical appreciation for illness narratives, patient activism, and post-World War II psychiatry” (190). Looking at situated contexts, such as where I grew up in the Lower Mainland area in British Columbia is important; it is also necessary to understand the role of institutions in a Canadian context. There is a spatial theme that is woven throughout the poems, recognizing the residents’ relation to their personal space, the building, and the outside world. An inherent sense of captivity is created through images such as: windows being too high for residents to look out of, doors and other barriers to freedom like locks, darkness and gates. Some of these spatial images are exemplified in poems such as “We’ve Got a Violent One Here”, “Debbie listens for the night” and “Waste Not”.

The title of the collection itself, *The Burden of Gravity* uses gravity as a metaphor for Woodlands as it acts as a pull to keep the vulnerable people confined. The poem of the same name grew out of an anecdote from *Memories of Woodlands*, a collection of stories, put out by The Government of British Columbia Ministry of Social Services, and told by the staff that worked at Woodlands. From the line, “one of the residents on Ward 74 liked to jump off of things” (55). I questioned why jumping off of things was so integral to that resident. For a split second the resident is able to experience freedom, a disconnection from gravity, and also the reality happening around them. Despite holding the title of school for some time, Woodlands was not a place of safety or somewhere that residents would graduate from. The scenario for over three thousand residents was that the only way out of Woodlands was through the final escape of death. *The Burden of Gravity* represents the inescapable barriers, labels and stigma placed upon residents. Also, it challenges and offers an alternative perspective than the one held in the introduction of *In the Context of Its Time*, “It has been said that a society is judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable

citizens. If that is true, British Columbia must be very high on the list of civilized societies” (v). It’s imperative that we as a society learn from what occurred at Woodlands and be proactive in creating a future of safe environments. It is not enough to construct a garden and bury the past. The government needs to begin the healing with an apology, a public acknowledgement for their failure to protect and provide, then focus on providing care and resources to our most vulnerable people with respect and dignity, now and in the future.

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Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
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DEDICATION

*For my grandma, Mary Kantor,
who taught me to see stories in the clouds.*

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