

**Structural Relevance: A Poetry Cycle in Response
to My Great-Grandmother's Voice**

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For Marjorie

You are my mother's mother's mother.
Almost six decades ago
your daughters gathered your writing
and bound it into a small book.

Your words have found their way
into my hands.
A thread between you and me stretches
across decades, generations, lands.
I've landed
near your final home
on the west coast,
among Douglas firs and Garry oaks.

A bright bud curled up within each of us.
You escaped to your studio
in the garden, hid in your imagination.
A world where you could create and dream
beyond your family and the farm.

I am your daughter's daughter's daughter.
My world is the world,
which I move freely around.
I escaped family and farm
to follow the desires
that tug at my heart.
Your creativity and curiosity
pulse through me.

Home

I feel your presence
in this house
even though you've
never been here.

This house was built
a decade after you died
but memories of you
are kept safe within the wallpaper,
layered in the coats of paint.

Your daughter made your recipes
in the kitchen, spoke your name
aloud in the garden, told stories of you
in the living room.

Every story is an invocation,
an invitation,
a wish for you
to be close.

We Have the Same Lips

tiny rosebuds
perfectly tied bows
ready for a kiss
whisper secrets
taste like honey

if lips could twinkle
ours would

Speak of the Desert

One of your poems
is called "In the Desert."
I know you lived
in the coastal rainforest
and possibly never
saw a desert in your life.

When you speak of the desert,
you're speaking of faith, your relationship
with God, your "vast aloneness."
When I read your poems, I wonder if
the desert was your spirit,
the place within you that didn't see rain
for months.

How did you quench your thirst?
How did you find God
in the rainforest around you?

(Inspired by “In the Desert,” Field, p. 23)

More Than God

So many of your poems
are about God.
Your unwavering faith.
The beauty of
the natural world.

Did you ever question God?
Did he disappoint you?
What is the foundation
of your devotion?

I don't have this bedrock,
this certainty in devotion.
I believe in god with a small 'g'
or the suffix '-dess.'

I flirt with deities
from other religions
and see aliveness in everything.
I don't have faith
in organized religion,
or institutions, structures, hierarchies.
I question and doubt. I am only devoted
to the phases of the moon
and the cycles of growth in the garden.

Spring Equinox

On the first day of spring
I imagine you among the apple blossoms
on the farm in Metchosin,
walking through the orchard
seeing god in everything around you.

With the longer days and brighter light,
the warming earth,
you feel lighter and happier than usual.
Your spirits are sparked
by the birth of lambs
and burst of chicks on the farm.

Is spring your favourite?
Does your melancholy lift
with more sun on your face?
Do you feel the balance of the earth,
poised on the edge
of a new season?

Treasures

I found the wooden box
inside of a cardboard box
labeled with my mother's name.

In the bottom of the box was a letter
written by Marjorie, in the handwriting
I'm now able to recognize as hers.
That's how I know the box is a "work box"
and not a jewelry box.

She wrote the letter to my mother's mother
in 1938, blessing her
new job and new life
as she started out in the world.

Marjorie's mother gave the box to her,
the eldest daughter,
and she passed it on
to her eldest daughter,
who held on to it
until her eldest daughter
was in her 50s.

The work box found its way to me,
also an eldest daughter
in this lineage.

I'm the end of the line
having no eldest daughter
of my own.

The work box
will stay with me
until the end.

I will repair the silk lining,
polish the mahogany exterior,
place my jewelry

and other treasures
within its safe interior.

Structural Relevance: A Poetry Cycle in Response to My Great-Grandmother's Voice

When I moved into my great aunt's house after she died in 2017, I became the reluctant steward of my maternal lineage family archives stored in the basement. Archives is a generous term, as there was no order or logic to the photos, artwork, notebooks, and knickknacks. As I prepared to renovate the space, I tried to organize the materials into boxes, but they still needed more attention and care to become fully fledged archives.

In an attempt to make sense of the generational legacy in my basement, I decided to do a master's degree and use the materials as the basis of my research. I started Athabasca's MA-IS program with a vision of myself sorting through the materials, making amazing discoveries, and connecting ancestral dots.

Instead, I found myself feeling avoidant and overwhelmed (and I ended up writing about this for my courses). I derived no pleasure from digging through old things in a cold basement. One of my advisors encouraged me to continue digging, even if I didn't enjoy it, and suggested that I find an entry point, a person or place that I could dive into and apply my skills of storytelling and worldbuilding.

While rifling through a box of paperwork, I came across a slim volume of poetry written by Marjorie Field, my mother's mother's mother, my great-grandmother. I already knew this book of poetry that my grandmother and her sisters had compiled in 1966, years after their mother's death. I recalled my great aunt (known to everyone as Auntie Kay) showing me this

book with an air of reverence and love, telling me about her creative, sensitive mother who was often ill and retreated to her studio on the family property to write and paint. When I heard these stories as a teenager, I related to this long-deceased ancestor because I also aspired to write and make art. I understood the appeal of retreating from the world to create.

After reconnecting with Marjorie's book, I started a practice of writing poems in response to her poems and work. I also wanted to learn more about Marjorie's life, so I started poking through the boxes in my basement. I discovered photos, artwork, letters that she'd received, and her diaries from 1934 until her death in 1940. Through these texts, I started to craft the story of her life and build a relationship with her.

Let me introduce Marjorie. Most of what I know of her is what I remember hearing from Auntie Kay (whom I was closer to than my grandmother) and what I learned in the short bio in her book of poetry, *Petals from God's Garden*. I know she was born in Derby, England in 1892 and her family moved to Victoria, BC in 1909, when she was 17 years old. I don't know why the family left their successful photography business in England for the remote west coast of Canada, although I gleaned from her poems that she was happy in her new country:

In the Land of the West I found my Place,
 When led by a Guiding Hand;
 And the Way illumed by His shining Face,
 He brought me to the fair Land. (Field, 1966, p. 89)

When Marjorie was 25, she married Lee Llewellyn Field, a farmer ten years her senior who lived in the rural community of Metchosin, and shortly thereafter they had three daughters, Dorothy (my grandmother), Kathleen (Kay), and Muriel. Marjorie played piano and taught

Sunday school. From her poetry, I learned that her faith and relationship with nature played a central role in her life. From her diaries, I learned that her daily life revolved around her health; she wrote often about staying in bed all day, extended hospital stays, and debilitating symptoms such as headaches and stomach pain.

Marjorie died at age 48 in 1940. I'm not clear what caused her death. In the last two years of her diaries, the entries were sparse and focused on the activities and social lives of her daughters rather than her health. The final entry in her diary, on December 29, 1940, was written by Auntie Kay: *My mother Marjorie Field passed away suddenly around noontime. Dad & I with her (she asked him to kiss her just before she died).*

This is what I know. There is much more that I don't know. I'm trying to fill in the spaces between the known and the unknown.

Connecting with the Ancestors

How can poetry be a practice of ancestral veneration and discovery? I held this question as I revised my poems and waded into the legacy that Marjorie had left behind.

Now let me introduce the cycle of poems. They start with "For Marjorie," an invocation in which I call in my great-grandmother and find the parallels between us (creativity and writing). In my cultural context, I have the freedom to move and follow my dreams while she centred her family and her faith. In "Home," I respond to Marjorie's poems about the importance that home played in her life, while acknowledging that I live in the home that belonged to her daughter.

"We Have the Same Lips" is based on one of few physical similarities we share. This poem has a change in tone and structure, using word play and lower case words throughout. The

following pieces (“Speak of the Desert” and “More Than God”) respond to and reflect on the role of faith in Marjorie’s poems.

I also explore faith in “Spring Equinox,” and name the depression that I intuit may have been the source of her illness. The cycle closes with “Treasures,” a reflection on lineage and the treasures that are passed down from generation to generation. It’s the only poem where I use the third person to refer to Marjorie; most are in second person, as I address Marjorie directly. My poems are full of questions which may never receive answers.

Remembrance, Ritual, and Restorying

In order to understand ancestral veneration, we must first understand what is an ancestor. One of the most cited definitions of an ancestor is anthropologist Meyer Fortes’ declaration that an ancestor is “a named, dead forbear [sic] who has living descendants of a genealogical class representing his continued structural relevance” (1965, as cited in Hill et al, 2016, p. 5) This relationship is tended through remembrance and ritual.

Researchers in the field of anthropology focus on studying ancestors from other cultures, particularly Africa and East Asia, and thus I have not come across much research or resources on ancestral practices of settlers on what is now North American soil. These practices and their study seem to have been lost in the process of colonization.

Lacking cultural models and community, I feel like I have to figure out things for myself as I yearn to tend to my beloved dead. I have looked into the Anglo Saxon/Celtic practices of my ancestors, but I feel disconnected and unanchored from them. So I’ve developed practices for myself, primarily to cope with grief. These are practices I started after my mom’s sudden death in 2020. She died at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I couldn’t hold a funeral

immediately after her passing due to restrictions on gatherings. Bereft and isolated, I set up altars around my home and created little rituals to maintain a continuing bond with my dearly departed.

I found comfort through these practices and have integrated them into my life. One of these practices is journaling, so it's natural that I've used writing to tend to Marjorie's spirit although this was the first time I wrote poetry rather than free-form confessional prose. I worked with a therapist who specializes in ancestral discovery and grief for guidance on bringing ritual into my writing practice through simple steps: setting up a small altar near my desk, placing photos of Marjorie (and other family members) around my space, lighting a candle before I sit down to write, making offerings of flowers and herbs, and speaking her name, using my voice to express gratitude and ask for support.

I also found guidance in *Poetry as Spellcasting* (2023), although I'm careful about what practices I borrow from the marginalized communities featured in the book. The authors assert that writing poetry is a kind of alchemy:

Our awareness – our focus, our attention – becomes the vessel in which the possibilities of a new knowingness arise... with poetry, we begin with the tools at hand. The obsession or idea of what we want to write is the initial substance to be transformed. (p. 84).

I have learned that not all researchers embrace dialogue between the living and dead. In his review of good and bad ancestors, William H. Newell (1976) asks “Can one really talk about a dead person having social relations with the living?” (p. 17). I find his interpretation very literal in its assumption that communication could only happen through a medium.

I have found that poetry allows one to connect with the beloved dead in the realm of the imagination. It doesn't matter whether we can literally communicate with the dead. While I

wrote poems for my great-grandmother who has been dead for 85 years, I didn't wait for signs from her or hold seances in my basement. However, I admittedly did at times feel like I was guided by her. An example: while searching for artefacts for another project, I was drawn to a box of Auntie Kay's notebooks and letters, even though it didn't make practical sense to look through it. I was astounded to discover Marjorie's journals within – and I feel like she nudged me along.

Poetry gives us a lot of licenses and allows room for realization. As Kooser reminds: “You can think of writing your poems as a means of persuasion because a poem can be looked at as something designed to bring about an action” (p. 38). The actions I'm trying to bring about through my poems are connection and love.

This project has also been a means of using poetry for restorying. Marjorie set forth a narrative for her life in her poems, and my poems in response allow me to explore new facets of myself. In her exploration of the wild women archetypes in Claudia Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Carmen Knudson-Martin (1995) notes that female development must be understood within the cultural context of the time (p. 100). In doing so, women are able to bring more of themselves into relation and become less willing to sacrifice important parts of themselves.

From what I can gather, Marjorie was not a wild woman, and her Christian beliefs would probably not have permitted her to be inspired by myths and archetypes of other cultures. On the other hand, I have more than a little wild woman in me, and I feel confined by traditional religion. I live in a different era than Marjorie, with more exposure to possibilities for life. In the cultural context of the early 20th century, women were expected to run their homes and raise their families. Nevertheless, I have to wonder if her illness was the result of not being able to fully

embrace herself and her passion. Her poetry and art were an outlet, but I'm curious if there was something more that was out of alignment.

Even while I try to construct Marjorie's life story through the fragments left behind, I question how well I can know Marjorie through her poems. "The 'I' is always a construction in poetry," notes Paige Rekdal (2024, p. 32). Is it fair to assume that Marjorie's poems are autobiographical? Am I certain that she was always writing about her lived experiences? I face this tension when I compare her poems, which focus on her faith and nature, to her diaries, which focus on her health and the minutia of domestic life.

Conclusion: Between the Known and Unknown

Ancestors have a great deal to tell us, and we ignore them at our peril. (Hill et al, 2016, p. 31)

In my experience, poetry has been a portal for ancestral veneration. I have experienced this through ritual, honouring what the beloved dead left behind, giving attention, and restorying.

Natalie Goldberg (2013) says that "writing is the act of discovery" (p. 88). She elaborates that in a consumer-based, capitalist society where everything has a price, poetry is a practice that "can take us to the place where we might encounter the unknown that has always been known" (p. 162).

In this analysis, I've been focused on poetry as ritual and a tool for transformation, but I've also experienced the therapeutic power of writing poetry. As Gillie Bolton (2006) notes, the initial act of writing is cathartic, but the value is gained in the act of reworking which brings insight and consolidation. It is a "powerful, deeply thoughtful process" (p. 120) to capture something in poetic words and images.

It has been a powerful process to engage with my great-grandmother's poetry, write my responses, then revise and contextualize my work. It has been an exercise in sitting in the known and unknown, as well as asking questions and not expecting a response. I'm grateful for this opportunity to learn the structural relevance of a beloved woman in my lineage, stretch my creative muscles, and discover new things about myself.

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