

Reading the Stones

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Abstract

This poem tells the story of a school camping trip with a group of children to Dinosaur Provincial Park in southern Alberta. Using this format to tell the story was an attempt to name the earth as a place of story and remembrance without the kinds of boundaries generally imposed by schools, and also an attempt to describe some of the ways we are bound to the earth through time, geography and evolutionary history. How can we come to understand our outdoor education activities as engaging us in a more embodied learning experience of an earth(ly) literacy and intimacy?

Résumé

Ce poème est le récit d'une expédition de camping faite par un groupe d'écoliers au parc provincial Dinosaur, dans le sud de l'Alberta. Le recours à la forme poétique vise à nommer la terre comme un lieu de récit et de souvenir, en faisant abstraction des types de limites généralement imposées par les écoles, et à décrire certains des liens temporels, géographiques et évolutifs qui nous lient à la terre. Comment peut-on favoriser la compréhension des activités éducatives de plein air comme étant l'occasion d'une expérience d'apprentissage plus intimement liée au monde qui nous entoure?

while walking
we find leaf skeletons
and wonder at the way
the life of the leaf has
dissolved become
earth

we cannot find even evidence
of the leaf in the soil but
our hands hold
this planet's breath

life structure fine bones so fragile remember
snows frost insects bite
sun wind rain dark

fading light gives way to
gravity calling earth back to earth

*a sudden genesis
something from nothing
exploding stars the fingers of gods
violently disrupt the dark*

*now then tomorrow
the gods walk the earth
and shout*

crying lips pour forth surprised words

it is happening

*watery burial spinning sun growing light shifting green
pulling moon tidal rush crushing sands moving rock plates collide
spewing fire volcanic ash growing life solid stone eating flesh
massive monsters drowning mud claiming life giving life*

imagine

the first time we see
time's tattoo, the
fossilized evolutionary past

*begin
breathe words
wind shifts
come life*

*seeds of life new yet already
history moving always
dying gods
gifting bodies to life*

begin again

etched in our imagination
the mythic image
bone becoming stone
carrying life

*in the beginning is no thing
it is something not yet born
it is called phan-ku¹*

*phan-ku emerges from the egg
carves the world with his chisel, holds up
the sky with his hands
the world not complete until he dies,*

*blood becomes water
filling rivers and seas,
flooding over the earth
bones become stones*

skull holds up the dome of the sky

life emerges in the instant of death,

eternal resurrection to new life

our fascination with digging up
those bones far deeper than we know
is settled in souls intent on divining mysteries

are birds the living descendants of dinosaurs?
will the secrets be revealed in the excavation
of this earthly narrative?

begin

out of dust

bones

a rib flesh breath

beginnings rooted in soils

earth already witness to decay

we find another bone and everything
we thought
we knew
erodes
to new truth

begin again

in the yawning gap between north and south²

between light and dark

that space where warm and cold meet,

the dripping water births the god imir

his licking tongue creates monsters from ice

then, murdered by his brothers

blood spills out

and out

and out

drowning monsters

filling the rivers, flowing to the seas

bones become stones

skull holds up the dome of the sky

decay breathes life

begin again

we walk the alberta badlands,
once swampy green fungus and monster filled,
and crush dinosaurs under our feet

we try to walk carefully but
there are too many bones and teeth,
fragments fallen from cliff faces, eroding into the rivers
joints from dinosaur knees and dinosaur hips waiting on rocks,
too big to be washed away
this summer
our hands hold them, gently

and when we lay down with our
noses to the hard-packed earth
we see millions of teeth
a sacred bone ground
everyone is quiet

wonder

this place,
once so alive and full
of breathing killing eating life

they fell by the waters

perfect conditions for a burial in sand and mud,
preserving connections through time,
bones becoming stones then waiting

*the rain and mud now wash away the stone
reveal ancient lives and
move them away*

if we come back tomorrow it will all be new
we cannot hold it here

*more bones will wash down from the cliff
these too will pass into the waters
where, even now, more stone forms
below the crushing sands*

the children call out as we are walking back
a different bone, a flat-disc, a sharp-edged tool
shines exposed in the harsh sunlight
who made this
shaping the bone
carving it with stone
scraping flesh from hide and flesh from bone

someone dropped this tool while walking through
walking home, stopping
perhaps to rest eat play love by this river

and now we leave this bone behind
in this hollow where we found it
more connected to this land than to us

it is not ours
but our fingers held it as fingers held it
long ago

it whispers a life story telling us
we are not the first to walk these steps
and crush these bones beneath our feet
under these wide, high, prairie-wind skies

bones and stones hold us together here
we feel so new

begin again,

and again,

ancient landscape of ocean beach
surprises us with shells above our heads
we see, walking past a cliff, imprints of life, millions of years ago
our fingers feel these shells and
we imagine sea-shore-waves
crashing
bringing them up
burying them
under the rolling, shifting sands and
we see shells today, now, in the middle of this dusty land
the wind almost sounds like ocean
as it blows through grass and hair

more, newer bones, shining white in the sun
near the path on the walk home

a deer was eating here
drinking from this now dry creek when water
ran in the spring
blinded by the clear bright light
a day like today
dangerous vision
a coyote bear cougar ate here too
leaving a sign of passing
only this carcass now
dragged through the grass by others
also passing

we wonder who shared this meal
or perhaps,
an old deer
lay down to rest here in this place
of bones
and did not wake in the morning

*bones joining the stones
body giving life back
breath now wind
blowing over bones
whispers through dusty grass
now, tomorrow, yesterday, again*

it is quiet around the fire later
our words left behind
back with those stones and bones

it is all too big for words
as we sit under the living trees
with the river running past
and the enormous star-lit sky
held up by the dome of our skulls

*above
leaf skins brush together
skeletons rattling
wind-breath-whispering life*

Notes

¹ See “Phan Ku” (pp. 21-23), a story in Virginia Hamilton’s (1988) book *In the beginning: Creation stories from around the world*. I have re-told the story here on the right hand side of the page. Some words and phrases have been used directly from Virginia Hamilton’s story.

² Another creation story from Virginia Hamilton’s book, “The Frost Giant - Imir the Creator” (pp. 69 –71). The children were fascinated by the similarity between these two stories, particularly the notion of the god’s death being the beginning of life, and the god’s body becoming the earth, the skull holding up the sky, and the images of continuous re-creation and rebirth.

Notes on Contributor

Jackie Seidel is a PhD student in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta.

Reference

Hamilton, V., & Moser, B. (illus.) (1988). *In the beginning: Creation stories from around the world*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.