

The background of the cover is a painting. It depicts a forest scene at night or in a twilight setting. The sky and background are a deep, layered blue. Several tall, slender, dark tree trunks stand vertically. A network of thin, reddish-brown lines, resembling a wireframe or a scaffolding, is stretched across the scene, connecting the tree trunks and extending into the background. Three figures, dressed in long, flowing white robes, are positioned within the scene. They appear to be interacting with the wireframe structure, with their arms reaching out towards it. The ground is a light, pale blue-grey. The overall mood is ethereal and contemplative.

# POIESIS

A Journal of the Arts & Communication

Volume 21, 2024 • Next Steps, New Beginnings

*M. L. L. L.*

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Cover Art: *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 107cm x 148cm, by Pilar Sousa

# [context, or autoethnographic fieldnote of a poiesis]

Gracelynn Lau

*like someone telling you metamorphosis is a process where the caterpillar  
completely breaks down into molecules but you are a dying butterfly;*

*like a tornado sweeps through your village every season but it never kills you  
and you sit amidst the ruins staring at the cracks and broken highways don't  
even want to stand up;*

*like a time traveller trapped in a gap between worlds looking at time passing,  
while the whatever inside continues to deteriorate.*

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These were the only words I wrote after I collapsed. For three months there were no words but dead silence. These words were written on the back of a Traditional Chinese medicine prescription. On my way to a Chinese medicine doctor appointment, I saw a butterfly



on the sidewalk, dying. On the front side, the doctor prescribed fifteen kinds of Chinese herbs. My diagnosis was spleen deficiency and depressed liver stagnation, with syndrome of dampness retaining in the spleen and the liver, which caused excessive heat. I remember the doctor said, overthinking hurt the spleen; and "When you're depressed we should work on your liver".

I remember googling two of the fifteen Chinese herbs: Grass node in the stomach of cow and goat (牛羊草結) and Chicken gizzard membrane (雞內金). How can some half-digested grass found in the stomach of livestock stabilize my unpredictable mood swing, hyperventilation and heart palpitations?

I wanted to tell the doctor that he should focus on regulating my parasympathetic nervous system. I wanted an herbal formula that can magically turn my breathing back to normal so I can take longer exhales to calm my vagus nerve. I wanted to challenge him with Polyvagal Theory. I wanted to tell him I had worked on increasing the "window of tolerance" to feel all undesirable emotional tensions and sensations in the present moment, as suggested by Peter Levine and many trauma experts. That I had developed a healthy relationship with my frontal lobes and amygdala, diligently and compassionately. That I had established many inner "islands of safety" within the body (van der Kolk, 2015: 247) through art-based practices and co-regulation with fellow therapists in my trusted circle. That I could explain my anxiety symptoms in trauma-informed languages based on widely cited literature. And, I wanted to tell my Chinese doctor, nothing had really worked and I had given up. *Does it mean the unprocessed emotional residues are kept in my liver and spleen?* I wanted to know, but I did not have the mental strength to summon any words and utter them, so I remained silent.

For three months there were no words but dead silence. A friend played an hour of piano just to accompany me in that silence. Another, also trained in expressive arts therapy, sat with me for two hours every week only to wait for a chance I might have the strength to entertain any curious impulse. My community had me in the weekly heart circle, although all I could do to participate was lying flat on the floor, over Zoom. One thing I did to entertain myself through



that time was to re-watch all the recorded talks from the Collective Trauma Summit and every recording from a trauma-informed leadership training course. As if being well-versed about my situation in robust neuroscience vocabularies was a different kind of professional development.

When I saw a butterfly on the sidewalk, dying, those words arrived out of nowhere. Sitting at the Chinese doctor's office, I jotted down those words on the back of the prescription. As I was transported from the dying butterfly to a post-tornado damaged village in the imaginal, I vaguely remembered the Chinese doctor's assistant saying something like: "Add 4 1/2 bowls of water into a ceramic or clay pot, soak the herbs bundle for 15 minutes. Then over high heat, bring the herbal medicine to boil; switch to gentle heat and let it simmer for 40 minutes, until the liquid reduces to 1 bowl."

I took home five paper bags of Chinese herbs bundles to make batches of decoction. My treatment was hilarious—benefitting *qi* for invigorating spleen and dispersing stagnant liver *qi* to clear heat and eliminate dampness. Perhaps far too hilarious, it made me laugh my way home. First laugh in three months.

I don't know if it was I who had finally let go of the inner therapist agenda, or the agenda had finally let go of me, or the dying butterfly, or the poetic verses, or the "grass node in the stomach of cow and goat," later that night when I watched the 4 1/2 bowls of liquid slowly evaporating, I stopped trying to fix myself, or the world, or any problem. I stopped trying to be in control.

I don't know if you have ever had doubts about the method of expressive arts therapy, not being able to see it as magical as before, or at odds with yourself about it. If you have, you're not alone. I'm with you. At my lowest of the low, I questioned my capacity to respond to the emotional messiness I found myself in. I questioned our capacity to respond—we human beings as a species—to the messiness we find ourselves in. Even though *poiesis* promises an innate

capacity to respond, the response might not be effective, or timely.

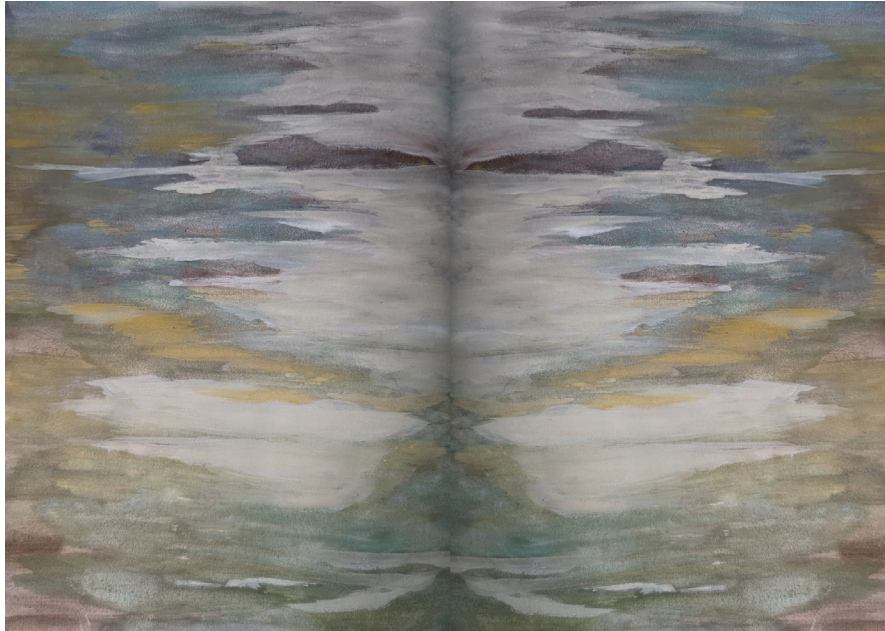
And, even though the response might not be effective, *poiesis* promises an innate capacity to respond. In *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul*, Stephen K. Levine (1997) discussed the ways in which sharing a presentation of one's suffering through artistic forms in a group and being witnessed by others, can be an act of *poiesis* akin to "bearing a gift to the feast" (Levine 1997: 58-59). The following poems, the watercolour paintings and photography is me bearing my gift to the feast. I made them over eleven months, on a slow journey to move in and out and through burnout.

Japanese American artist and theologian Makoto Fujimura says, "The path of creativity gives wings." If we have the audacity to ask: How is our culture doing? It is unlikely to stay out of some kind of angst or doubt. But as Fujimura puts it, "The essential question is not whether we are religious, but whether we are making something. When we stop making, we become enslaved to market culture as consumers... The act of making is the antidote to our current malaise [...]" (Fujimura 2021: 24).

Even though the response might not be effective, *poiesis* promises an innate capacity to respond.

I wonder if the best gift we can bring to a time like ours, is more therapeutic methods or the awareness to behold beauty itself, whether we need more therapists, or more imagination. The post-punk and alternative rock musician Nick Cave recently said in an interview: "it is the audacity of the world to continue to be beautiful, and continue to be good in times of deep suffering [...] it was sort of not paying me any attention, it was just carrying on, being systemically gorgeous. You know, how dare it. But then you have it." "[...] it feels like an active kinda cosmic betrayal for this to be going on." (Tippett, 2023).

May we each find our way of *poiesis* to join this active kind of cosmic betrayal.



every door is a welcome home, and goodbye. you close one door and enter into the next until you find another door to open, and close. every new moment arises is another liminal and another and another. you behold the thin layer, decide which way to lean in, for now, for how long, back and forth in stillness, to stay or to shift. every moment is collaborating with you; you can dance with it, or tune out, say no, and walk away and it never leaves, never goes away, and there it is again another moment, another breath. the intangible is incredibly tangible, so simple it makes you laugh with it and at yourself.



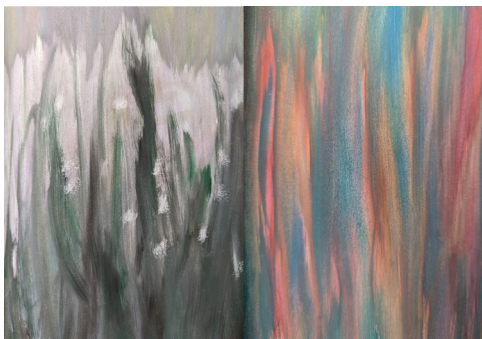
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### When numbing seems to be your only option

When life seems to have survived a deadly storm  
and you found yourself staring into the ruins alive  
but half dead; you have nothing left in  
you to stand up in the rumble of chaos.

When your heart slowly hardens  
by the darkening of our times  
and unfulfilled promises,  
being exiled from that which you have held dearly for decades.





When darkness becomes too comfortable  
turning on the light hurts your eyes;

May the light of daybreak warm your spirit;  
May refuge come to seek you in exile;

May you find the strength to walk the parched places of your heart;  
May you hear the whisper in the rumble:  
the bleakest place is where the invisible grace  
meets you most profoundly.



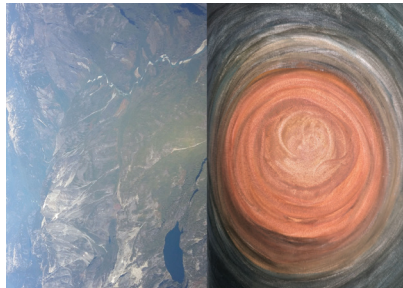
When you've meticulously calculated all possibilities  
to eliminate every worst case scenario and  
life still takes you in the other direction;

When your past lays claim to your present and future  
and your eyes are captivated by the rear-view mirror;

When the seeds of bitterness germinate  
like invasive species from another kingdom;  
and you look in the mirror but  
don't recognize the face anymore.

May the call to your destiny wake up in you;  
May your limitations humble your heart but do not crush your spirit;  
May faith grow in you to live in the tension of the already and not yet;  
and in disorientation may the wall come down around you  
and you will cease to do this alone.

May you be in awe by the miracle that you are  
still being breathed by this breath of Life today.



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"The beginning is always today."

–Mary Shelley



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