Fireflies
Memory, Identity, and Poetry
David P. Owen, Jr.

Fireflies is a book about how writing poetry can help us explore memory and identity, and it is also a book of poetry that explores memory and identity. This work is an example of the “liminal” scholarship advocated in The Need for Revision (2011, by the same author), occupying a space in the academic world’s “windows and doorways,” not exactly in any one field but rather in the “spaces-between where the inside and outside commingle”; it seeks to trouble the boundaries between teacher and writer, critic and artist, writer and reader, and teacher and student in a way from which all parties might benefit. Fireflies aims for a different kind of scholarship, and hopes to offer new ways for teachers to be professional and academic.

The second section of the book is a full-length poetry text—the author’s own exploration of the notions that people who teach writing should also be writers, and that poetry is more something you do than something you are. The book says we should write poems not because of some inborn gift for it, but because the act of writing poetry is good for us, and helps us understand ourselves better; it is a book written in the hopes that other books will be written. Maybe by you.

“David Owen has taken his understanding of currere, the root of curriculum, to a new level with his demonstration of the value of reading and writing poetry. He argues that writing poetry develops an ‘attitude of adventure’ into everydayness. As his first chapter ‘Songs of Ourselves’ suggests, we all can be Whitman’s if we take up our pens to celebrate what lives around us as well as in us. Owen demonstrates this theory with a calendar of poems he wrote that share small frozen moments of the seasons of a year. Connecting his memories with forays into night skies and fireflies and ‘the fractals that God makes,’ David Owen’s poetic images suggest that our deep connection with Earth can be recovered if we let a little more ‘oak in the voice’ of our words.” – Mary Aswell Doll, author of The Mythopoetics of Currere

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Memory, Identity, and Poetry

David P. Owen, Jr.

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For Courtney and Patrick, the two best poems I know
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I first want to thank God for a world full of mystery and wonder and beauty, even if we don’t always see it. I would also like to thank all of the family and friends who find parts of their own lives in these pages, and Mary Aswell Doll, Matt Gramling, Sheila Hancock, Jason Harwell, Drew Lawson, Carl Leggo, William M. Reynolds, and John A. Weaver for their advice and encouragement about this project. Finally, I want to thank the hundreds of students over the years whose poetry experiments have helped me form these ideas.

The following poems appear in a different context in *The Need for Revision: Curriculum, Literature, and the 21st Century* (2011), and I thank Sense Publishers for allowing them to be part of this work as well: “Each morning is a gift,” “Forsythia,” “Phaethon,” “Humidity,” “Resurrection,” “Procrastination,” “Love and Hate,” “Vacation Bible School,” “A Short Interview about Poetry,” “Memory,” “Smoke,” and “What it Meant.”
SONGS OF OURSELVES

Why We Should All Be Poets

This is a book of memory, identity, and poetry—and also a book about memory, identity, and poetry. It is also a book about writing books—a book written in the hopes that other books will be written. Maybe by you.

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World. (Percy Shelley, 1840/1977)

Poetry is dead. Does anybody really care? (Bruce Wexler, 2003)

To live is to read texts, but to be alive is to write them. (Alan A. Block, 1988/1999)

The question, O me! So sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. (Walt Whitman, 1892/1993)

When Percy Shelley said poets were the “unacknowledged legislators of the World” (1840/1977) in his Defence of Poetry, poets were rock stars. Or at least that’s how they seemed in high school literature class (in this case courtesy of McDougal Littell Literature: British Literature, 2011). Shelley embraced radical politics (p. 846), William Blake had prophetic visions (p. 752), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a philosopher/opium addict (p. 796/p. 825). William Wordsworth was a proto-hippie (p. 782) wandering the Lake District, John Keats died young and then got famous (p. 860), and Lord Byron was, well, Lord Byron, inventor of most of the rock star clichés you can think of (p. 832). Later, Robert Browning had fanatical followers (p. 924), T.S. Eliot called the world a Waste Land (p. 1092), and Dylan Thomas gave passionate, emotional performances and had a massive drinking problem (p. 1158). Sure, there were poets who were no doubt quiet, upstanding members of their communities and devoted family men, but they seemed like the exception rather than the rule; poets, for a long time, were “solitary figures engaged in a long, and sometimes elusive, quest; often they were also social nonconformists or outcasts” (Abrams, 1999, p. 179). They were pioneers and visionaries, unique and
powerful voices of a generation endowed with a special sensitivity to the world and a heightened gift for “the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (Shelley, 1840/1977, p. 485).

This “rock star” impression holds pretty well until and through the time of actual rock stars; the famous music film/goodbye concert of The Band, *The Last Waltz* (1978), is a “who’s who” of rock and roll royalty, but it also features readings by Michael McClure and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. And some of those rock stars were actually occasionally called poets; in fact, not only can you still find Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, and Leonard Cohen in poetry anthologies, here and there, but Dylan has just been honored with a Nobel Prize in Literature. Even today, you could make the case that poets enjoy a special esteem in our culture; we still name a U.S. Poet Laureate every few years, and while musicians and football teams get invited to the White House on a pretty regular basis, when it’s time to inaugurate a new President, we sometimes bring in a poet for the ceremony.

However, in some ways even rock stars don’t seem to be rock stars anymore, diminished by factors like slowing sales and the absence of a cultural mainstream, and not everyone these days thinks that writing poetry, or even reading it, is a good use of anyone’s time. These people, and there are lots of them, and many that I would call friends, usually say the kinds of things that Bruce Wexler does in his article for *Newsweek* entitled “Poetry is Dead. Does Anybody Really Care?” (2003). Since I first read this article, I have used it countless times with my students in order to have just this discussion about what poetry is, and has been, and will be in the future. Wexler, like many of us, “can no longer even name a living poet,” even though he claims to have once loved Lowell and Berryman. He says he “hated the poetry unit in English class,” with its “rhymed and rhythmic writing” and “tangled symbol and allusion,” and complains that he always wondered why poets “couldn’t just say what they meant.” And though he claims that at some point in college, he “got it,” he also reports that he soon “got married, had children, pursued [his] career, bought a house,” and eventually “found more relevance in articles about interest rates.” Many of my students agree with these sentiments, and even some of those who like poetry, or are at least sympathetic to its plight (or mine), agree with Wexler that today “people don’t possess the patience to read a poem 20 times before the sound and sense of it takes hold.”

These conversations with my students are hard for me, even if I think they are important to have. I try to get them to see how Seamus Heaney told us we could “dig” for ourselves with poetry (1998), how Walt Whitman encouraged us to find the “open road” (1892/1993). I show them how Langston Hughes used poetry to mine a difficult background in “Cross” (1926/2002), and how Sharon Olds said we should use our own voices in “Take the ‘I’ Out” (1999). I point out that poets are often trying to say things that can’t be said—at least easily—and so they are
trying to say what they mean. I even try to get them to explore the ways in which hip hop and other popular musical forms keep alive an attention to wordplay and poetic techniques. A lot of my students, though—at least at first—agree with part, or much, of what Wexler says about poetry’s death. And though I think they are wrong about poetry—enough to write a book about it, even—I understand where they are coming from, and why they feel the way they do. After all, even though poets seem to have been rock stars in Shelley’s day, they still had their detractors, even then; it is worth noting that Shelley felt the need to write a “Defence,” of course, and Raymond Williams points out that “the last pages of Shelley’s Defence of Poetry are painful to read” (1962/1970). As he puts it, Shelley can say that poets are the “unacknowledged legislators of the world” (1840/1977), but the description of them as “unacknowledged” unfortunately “carries with it also the helplessness of a generation” (Williams, 1962/1970, p. 285). Writers in Shelley’s day were trying to learn to trade a “system of patronage” for the “general commercial publishing of the modern kind” (p. 272), and that new reading public seemed to increasingly want the same kind of practical relevance that Wexler describes. High school literature books may make poets, especially the Romantic ones, sound like rock stars, but even if our impression is accurate, it is also likely that they were the kind of rock stars who had to endure growing criticism and pressures from people like the drunken friend in the famous poem “Terence, this is stupid stuff” by A. E. Housman (1896/1993, line 14): “Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad.”

And when I was my students’ age, I have to admit that I would likely have agreed with Wexler, and maybe even that famous friend of Terence, on many points as well. I liked poetry well enough, at least as a diversion from the math and science studies I thought were more practical, and serious, and useful. But I didn’t read much poetry, and I never wrote any. I was a big reader of fiction, but I had very little arts education growing up, and most of my free time was filled with sports. I don’t think these things were bad necessarily, but they don’t really lay a good foundation for a love of poetry at a young age. Even when I did decide to try my hand at creative writing, I chose songwriting; I wanted to learn to play the guitar, I enjoyed singing, and I’m sure I would have told you then how much more relevant it was, or at least more fun.

But then I became a literature major in college, and found myself reading, and liking, a lot more poetry. And a few years later, when I began teaching literature and writing classes, I found myself assigning students to write poetry as well. About the same time, I began to write some of my own poems. And when I went back to graduate school, this time in curriculum studies, I went with a new appreciation for poetry, and it seemed that everywhere I looked there were theorists ready to tell me why I had changed my mind. Here was Alfred Hofstadter, explaining that for Heidegger, “at the basis of man’s ability to build in the sense of cultivating and constructing there must be, as a primal source, his poetic ability, the ability to take
the measure of the world” (1971, xiv); there was Hegel, arguing that “poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature” (1886/1993). By the time I got the chance to write my first book, *The Need for Revision: Curriculum, Literature, and the 21st Century* (2011), I had become convinced that the world, and certainly the public school curriculum, needs more poetry in it. I argued for the study of poetry as well as for living and working more poetically in the broader sense, in a variety of fields, and pointed out that literature courses for high school students are the ideal places for these approaches to take hold. In the second chapter, I dealt particularly with poetry, and even wrote both *in* poetry and about it.

What I had discovered is that studying poetry, and especially *writing* poetry, is good for us, for me, for my students, in so many ways. It lets us express ourselves free of the prison of social language convention; it lets us explore complexities, and subtleties, and details everywhere that so often go unnoticed in the rush of the day-to-day; it lets us swim in the rich, full, turbulent sea of metaphor; it lets us live free of the answer key. As Sandra L. Faulkner puts it, we can “say things in poetic lines that can’t be stated in other ways” (2014, p. xxvi). It is also perhaps, because of these qualities, the best way to experience autobiography and *currere* as theorists like Pinar and Grumet explain them. Grumet says that in autobiography, “the writer can turn back upon her own texts and see there her own processes and biases of selection at work. It is there that curriculum as thought is revealed as the screen through which we pass curriculum as lived” (1980/1999, p. 25). She also says that “I organize my story as I organize my world, and it is my story of the past that can tell me where I am and where I am going” (p. 27). Pinar says of his “method of *currere*” that it is “regressive—progressive—analytical—synthetical” and hopes to “explore the complex relation between the temporal and conceptual” in order to “disclose their relation to the Self and its evolution and education” (1975/1994); the recollection of details from our past and articulation of our hopes for the future seem like ideal material for poetry. I had discovered, in short, that poetry isn’t really some mystical ability that blesses a select few; poetry is something you *do*, a way of living and approaching life that enriches it, no “rock star” context required.

In fact, maybe this “rock star” impression isn’t good for us, or for poetry, at all. First of all, as many have noted, the poets we study in school are overwhelmingly old, white men. And while that might be historically accurate for a British Literature textbook, at least in terms of fame and influence (or maybe access to fame and influence), it is hardly representative of or relatable to the variety of students studying literature in our classrooms today. Secondly, even if we ignore race and gender and culture, the same visionary, blessed, powerful uniqueness that makes our rock star poets so impressive also makes them distant and untouchable; over and over again, we are reminded that *they* are not *us*. And anyway, it almost always isn’t even true; lots of great poets were pretty regular people as well. The same McDougal-Littell text that
SONGS OF OURSELVES

gives us so many juicy details about the Romantics also tells us that Matthew Arnold was a school inspector (2011, p. 1034), and Adam Kirsh reminds us that “William Carlos Williams was a family doctor,” and that “T.S. Eliot was a banker when he wrote ‘The Waste Land’” (2016). Maybe we have it backwards, and Lord Byron is not the model but the exception. I wonder if this “rock star” idea about poets also led, strangely, to what at least seems like Wexler’s most damaging criticism of contemporary poetry: “poetry is the only art form where the number of people creating it is far greater than the number of people appreciating it” (2003). In other words, poets are rock stars with no fans. Ouch. But wait—can that even possibly be true? Wexler makes it sound like there are people out there who write poetry but somehow don’t like it. Surely that can’t be what he means. Is he saying, instead, that the number of people who write poetry is greater than the number of people who like poetry but don’t write it? Here Wexler seems to be imagining a distant, admiring audience that used to exist but doesn’t anymore.

Who are those people, the ones who love poetry but don’t write any? And if they ever existed in large numbers, wouldn’t that be highly unusual? Wexler seems to argue that something is only lively and successful if it has throngs of fans who don’t participate in the action. Such a situation in any art, or field of interest, or form of entertainment, is pretty hard to imagine: scores of baseball fans who never picked up a bat or wore a glove, crowds of people who love to hear stories but don’t tell any themselves, music nuts everywhere who never started a band in their garage. Sure, only some poets become “pros,” but the same is true in football, and no one thinks it’s dying. The very opposite of Wexler’s point seems to be more likely, all over the place, and certainly in poetry: we participate in the things we love, and that love grows with the participation. Do we really think baseball is dying if the kids who watch it sign up for little league? If adults join softball leagues? If music fans start bands or sing karaoke—or just in the shower—does that mean popular music is in trouble as an art form? I would argue instead that poetry is the kind of thing that comes to life the more you participate in it; perhaps the best way to “get” poetry, and maybe to come to love it, is to write it as well as read it.

And the more we participate in poetry, the more good it does us—the more we “get” ourselves, too. Sandra L. Faulkner (2014), for one, likes that “poetry is a conversation between my personas, a recognition of how identities are multiple, fluid and sometimes contentious” (p. xv). Carl Leggo (2012), as well, supports “a poetics of research by investigating ways that creative writing contributes to knowing and understanding” (p. xiii). In fact, there are many poets who seem to think of poetry in this way, and when I first encountered the ideas of Grumet and Pinar, I couldn’t help but think of Robert Penn Warren. Warren is maybe the most famous poet no one’s heard of; he’s won seemingly every award a writer could hope for, including a Pulitzer for both prose and poetry, and yet I didn’t encounter his work until graduate school, and still get confused looks when I cite him as one of my favorites. When I did finally find his poetry, though, I was hooked for good, and found myself
reading again and again the handful of (poorly) Xeroxed copies of Warren’s late works, which I eventually traded for his *Collected Poems* (1998); in the foreword to that text, Harold Bloom says it is an “American masterwork” and that between the “ages of sixty-one and eighty-one, [Warren] had enjoyed a poetic renascence fully comparable to the great final phases of Thomas Hardy, William Butler Yeats, and Wallace Stevens” (1998). No one has made me want to write poetry more than Warren, and I was struck particularly by the way Warren turned again and again to the subjects of time, memory, and identity in his late work. He seemed to be doing in those poems much what Grumet and Pinar say we all should do.

James Dickey once described Robert Penn Warren’s considerable body of work as “a long, lyric, and dramatic meditation on time” (1984, p. 81), and one does not have to look deeply into Warren’s poetry for evidence of this statement. The concept of time seems almost to play the role of an allegorical character in much of Warren’s poetry; Dickey even goes so far as to say that “the excruciating mystery of being, and being in time … is Warren, and has been with him always” (p. 88). Countless critics have written countless articles and books that explore Warren’s uses of time, many of which assert some variation on the idea that Warren is constantly concerned with “the need for one to accept the past if he is to live meaningfully in the present” (Brooks, 1986, p. 27). This view of time and memory, however, is a characteristic so often attached to Southern writers since the Civil War that it has almost become platitudinal; to make this statement about Warren’s use of time is almost akin to explaining his poetry by saying that he is from Kentucky. Not only is this particular subject one that Warren never exhausted, but it deserves to be examined carefully, especially in regards to late poems like “Old-Time Childhood in Kentucky,” “Old Photograph of the Future,” and “Covered Bridge.” In eighty-four years, Robert Penn Warren surely saw enough time and wrote enough about it to move beyond what has become a stereotypically “Southern” understanding of the past, present, and future, and his discussions of memory and identity in poetry are especially interesting regarding the formation of the self.

In order to explore the role of time in Warren’s poetry, one must first consider what the term means to him. The definition offered by *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* that is most similar to Warren’s concept of time calls it “a continuum which lacks spatial dimensions and in which events succeed one another from past through present to future” (1990, p. 1235). To Warren, time is something separate and inhuman. It is an independent entity with which man coexists, struggles, and measures the changes and events he experiences. Time is not so much a player in the game of life as it is the field on which the game is played; it only seems “savage” and “innocent” at times because it is “morally neutral” (Berner, 1980, p. 68). Because man is in the motion of history through a stationary time, Warren is able to use it in his work as a series of reference points from which to formulate a concept of the
self, much in the way Grumet or Pinar might recommend. While race, class, and gender are more popular factors of identity determination today, Warren uses time to construct the nature of the self, believing an understanding of the ways in which one changes over time to be “essential to successful self definition” (Clements, 1981, p. 229). In the great “continuum” of time that man walks through, Warren begins his search for identity by stepping out of line, looking behind him and in front of him in an attempt to figure out exactly where and who he is. As A. L. Clements says, “a man in Time cannot know the end, cannot know until he is out of Time” (p. 220), so Warren in his poetry “abstracts himself” (Dickey, 1984, p. 82) from time in certain frozen moments that he hopes will help make sense of his identity as a whole.

This method of defining the self is necessarily dependent on a sensitive memory, which Warren uses “combined with the discoveries achieved in maturity to provide insight toward the relationship between the self and what John Crowe Ransom called ‘the world’s body’” (Corrigan, 1999, p. 157). Since in Warren’s poetry, “any event in time is meaningful only in relation to past and future events” (Clements, 1981, p. 228), the idea is to pull one moment frozen in memory out of sequence in order to better see its meaning in relation to the nature of one’s self. While Cleanth Brooks (1986) and others are certainly correct in emphasizing the importance of the past in Warren’s work, the shortcoming of their expression of this idea is that it only seems to include history, or the events and actions in which man participates. Warren’s view of time does include history, but it is also conscious of the “continuum” described in Webster’s definition; history is made up of the events that happen in time and are captured in memory. The process of finding identity through time for Warren works much like a library, with the time continuum being the shelves, memories being the books on those shelves, and history being the information contained in those books. Once Warren “abstracts himself” from time, he then becomes a visitor to the library who takes down one volume from the shelves in an attempt to better understand the nature of the series which makes up his life. While merely stepping out of the historical line of all men helps Warren define himself against them in a negative sense (who he is not), examining his own history through the books of memory, much as Pinar might, helps the poet define himself in a positive sense (who he is). As Richard Jackson puts it, the whole picture of time “becomes known by the differences established between discontinuous moments, experienced by a central self which yet finds ‘definition’ in that very experience” (1980, p. 62). Three different ways of examining this process are found in “Old-Time Childhood,” “Old Photograph,” and “Covered Bridge.”

“Old-Time Childhood in Kentucky” (1998) shows a narrator using the library of time effectively, whether he finds what he is looking for or not. Here, as in the other two poems, the narrator is an older man looking far back through time into his childhood, hoping to understand who he has become in the present and why. The
narrator’s memory in this poem works splendidly, recalling vivid details like “the pink inner flesh of black fingers/ Crushing to green juice tobacco worms plucked/ From a leaf” (lines 3–5). He remembers clearly the books he read to his grandfather (line 25), words that were spoken in his youth, and even details like “The marks of the old man’s stick in the dust” (line 22). The use of memory here is more successful than in the other two poems; when the narrator speaks with full confidence of “the encroachment of shadow” (line 40) so long ago or his childhood visit to the cave with his uncle and grandfather, it is indeed like he is reading from a book or describing events that happened just yesterday. His memory is almost photographic at some points, capturing “The great trout, Motionless, poised in the shadow of his/ Enormous creek-boulder” (lines 6–8). The narrator’s powers of recollection, at their most effective, are even better than a photograph, moving deeper than just events and pictures into the richer realm of thoughts, dreams, and feelings. He does not just remember the circumstances surrounding General Jackson’s duel for honor, but can still feel what it was like to struggle with that concept, how he “longed to understand” (lines 16–17) what it meant.

What is perhaps even more interesting than the narrator’s ability to remember as an older man is his ability to understand time and the world as a young man. The narrator begins the poem by saying that “When I was a boy I saw the world I was in./I saw it for what it was” (lines 1–2). Though this statement sounds at first like a young man’s thoughts filtered through an old man’s experience and wisdom, the rest of the poem soon pushes the audience back toward an honest reading of the first two lines. The memories that follow these lines are the poem’s most visual and photographic, all discontinuous flashes of the present. The images of canebrakes, tobacco, and the “great trout” are, truly, the world as it “was”; that is, the world as it existed in those exact moments. For the narrator, the world in his childhood was one of immediacy, one that only existed in the now. However, this world of the present eventually changed when, as the narrator says, “the past and future broke on me, as I got older” (line 9).

The young man grows into the past first (line 10), which Brooks would agree is not at all “Strange,” if he is to grow and live properly in the future. In fact, the boy does all the right things in order to understand the past: he handles “the old bullet-mold” (line 10), he studies history (stanza 3), he listens to his elders and asks them questions. The narrator-child also ponders strategies (line 19) and motivations (General Jackson), searching beyond the facts of history and into the minds of those who created it. He even tries in his youth to comprehend “the magic word” (line 17), honor, in order to understand the spell that it casts on men. However, despite his attempts to make sense out of history, when his grandfather explains to him through the fossils in the cave that this was “‘All once under water’” (line 31), he is at a loss. Soon, the boy sees that the “world runs the risk of meaninglessness” (Runyon, 1990, p. 59), and he asks his grandfather, “‘what do you do, things being like this?’” (line 33). This struggle with a typically adult idea and resulting conversation with the
grandfather are what makes the audience trust the narrator’s claim that he knew the world “for what it was” in the first line. The grandfather replies,

Love
Your wife, love your get, keep your word, and
If need arises die for what men die for. There aren’t
Many choices.
And remember that truth doesn’t always live in the number of voices.
(lines 34–38)

Though the grandfather’s attempt at clarification is a noble one, it is maybe too simple for the narrator-old man, whose ambivalent tone throughout the poem suggests that he has still not resolved the issue.

After answering the narrator, the grandfather leaves him alone to think about the advice and to wonder how he can figure out what he “would be, might be” (line 47) in a possibly meaningless world. In the narrator’s consideration of his grandfather’s words, the audience finds him not only unusually able to access time and history through memory, but also to become part of foreign stretches of it through imagination. The narrator-child simply stands in the darkness, throws his head back and his arms out, and is fantastically transported “eons back” (line 45) in time. The boy’s answer to the problem of finding identity in the midst of meaninglessness seems to involve blurring the boundaries of his own time and memory in an effort to position himself in the grand range of all time, even moving beyond human experience. To return to the library analogy, the boy effectively takes the series of books on his life and moves them to a place on the shelves that he feels is better suited to his pursuit of self. He is not satisfied by simply seeing the crinoid stems; he wants to understand what it is like to be them. He imagines that he belongs to the time “no saying the millions/Of years” (lines 31–32) ago, alive “in that submarine/Depth and lightlessness” (lines 45–46). From this point in time, the boy feels he might be able to eventually “discover/What (he) would be” (lines 46–47), possibly hoping that the crinoid stems existed before the world became meaningless. Jackson would say that the narrator-child feels that this is possible because, in Warren’s poetic world, “we can re-begin in time; we can invent the history by which we will structure our futures” (1980, p. 163). To Warren, all times are accessible, because the “past is not separate and completed in itself but an ever-developing part of a changing present and future” (Clements, 1981, p. 228). As “Old-Time Childhood” shows, this sort of access to the whole of time seems to begin in the past and depend on memory (occasionally aided by imagination), and the narrator here is in no short supply.

In “Old Photograph of the Future” (1998), the main character performs an act more literally like looking at a book of his past than in the other two poems; he is staring at a photograph of himself as a child. The situation here again involves an old man
looking into his past with the hope of coming to terms with a sense of self, but this man has very different abilities than the narrator in “Old-Time Childhood.” As much as the first poem was about extraordinary powers of memory, “Old Photograph” is about the lack of those powers. One way that Warren calls attention to the main character’s lack of memory is by the fact that the picture of the past in this poem is not a recalled mental image (as it is in “Old-Time Childhood”), but an actual photograph. In this photograph, just as in the old man’s mind, colors that were “no doubt, pink and white” (line 2) are now faded into “only a trace/Of grays” (lines 3–4). Not only is the old man reliant on the photograph for pictures of his past, but he does not even seem to be familiar with the photo itself. He can only guess at the color of his “infantile face” (line 1), and if he remembers seeing the expression on it before now, he does not recall the information (line 4).

The next two stanzas examine the images of his mother and father. However, these images are not accompanied by memories of them or stories about the picture itself. The mother is described as a “pretty and young” (line 6) woman who gazes at her infant child with a “look of surprised blessedness” (line 7), but these do not sound like the personal reflections of a son. They are, rather, little more than any stranger would say about a picture of a mother and child. Similarly, the father is said to loom behind, “face agleam with achievement and pride” (line 10). He is a “masculine figure” (line 9) who assures his family that “the world’s in good hands—lay your worries aside” (line 12). Again, there are no references to lessons taught by his father or time spent with him, just as there is no mention of the mother’s nurturing in the previous stanza. This family is clearly not the family from “Old-Time Childhood”; both the mother and father here are stock characters with only the classic traits of typical young parents attributed to them.

The photograph in some ways does provide the access to all times found in “Old-Time Childhood,” since it belongs to the past, contains a frozen moment of the present, and depicts the infant child who is to be the “future.” However, the problem for the old man in this poem is that he cannot make a connection with the photograph because it is a false memory. Even though the photo is like a book of the past for the main character, it is of no help in his search to understand himself, because he cannot claim any kind of authorship of it. To use Grumet’s terms, the narrator seems stuck in the realm of biography, rather than autobiography. Any such photograph has the potential to be useful, but it would have to be accompanied by the memories and feelings necessary to make the picture a real part of his past and his identity. Since it is not enhanced by these things, it is no more a clue to the old man’s understanding of self than if it were a picture of someone else’s family.

The main character’s separation from the image of his past brings up another important point about the lack of memory in the poem: the consequential dependence on others. The photograph is, after all, a visual memory “abstracted” from time by someone else for the main character. Dependence on others is an issue that appears early in “Old Photograph of the Future,” and it is a problem for the old man that shows up in more than just memory. He is called twice in the first two stanzas “That
center of attention” (lines 1 and 5), and he indeed seems to miss his parents less for being two people he loved than for the attention they gave him. To his mother he was “precious” (line 6) and a “mysterious miracle” (line 8); to his father he was something to be proud of (line 10) and to protect (line 12). The tone of the poem suggests that without them, “That center of attention” is left with only bitterness for having believed them and “guilt” (line 19) for letting them believe in him as the “future.” The old man’s dependence on others is also noticeable in the existence of a narrator other than the main character in the poem. As the poem unfolds, we notice that not only does the old man not tell the reader anything personal about his mother or father, but he actually does not tell him anything about himself, either. In the final stanza, the narrator reveals that the child-turned-man stands “there,” not here, and the audience sees that the description of the photograph was, in fact, given by a stranger. This revelation shows that the thoughts in the first eighteen lines belong to the narrator, not the old man holding the photograph, and that even the main character’s feelings in the final two lines are only outside interpretation. Even if the narrator is omniscient, which seems to be the case, the fact that information about the main character is second-hand is still important and suggests dependence. By the end of “Old Photograph of the Future,” Warren has shown that the main character’s inability to recollect worsens a position of general dependency in which he needs photographs for memories, parents to give him self-worth and protection, and a narrator to tell his story.

The old man’s failure to use a frozen moment to learn anything about his identity can be explained by the fact that in Warren’s work, “Self-knowledge is difficult because the self is not so much just a knowable object but rather a series of relations in time” (Clements, 1981, p. 230). The old man fails, then, because while he has the beginning of the series in the photograph and the end of it in the present, he lacks the necessary middle to draw them together. He lacks “synthesis,” as Pinar (1975/1994) might put it. Without memory, he is unable to connect his past self with his present self in order to understand the whole of his identity. After seventy-five years, he is in such poor condition that “old landscapes blur” (line 19) and even the “promises unkept” that he remembers are “nameless” (line 20). He is left so detached from the past and so far from an understanding of self that even his despair is “undefinable” (line 20).

While the man in “Old Photograph of the Future” lacks the ability to use time and memory to understand the self, the man in “Covered Bridge” (1998) is not only able to use the process, but he also understands it well enough to analyze it. Through memory, the narrator here takes the audience back to his childhood, during which he was “another self” (line 1). While the man in “Old Photograph” also understands the concept of being two selves, the difference here is that the selves are linked. In a stanza that provides direct evidence for the “library” way of understanding
Warren’s discussion of time and memory, the narrator in “Covered Bridge” claims that his two selves are connected by everything “that has happened since” (line 2), which he keeps “arranged on the shelf/Of memory in a sequence that I call Myself” (lines 3–4). These lines also speak to the fact that to Warren, understanding identity “is a process of continuous becoming” (Clements, 1981, p. 230), because the self is constantly changing as it passes through time. This is reminiscent of what Derrida says about “iterability” in an interview with John Caputo (1997), that what we have done or been one day must be done or lived again and again in order to be true; we “will have to reinaugurate, to reinvent,” and “the inauguration has to be reinvented everyday” (p. 28). In Warren’s concept, the narrator’s complete collection of these memories creates a series of multiple selves, with each successive memory containing a different self. The resulting identity, then, is achieved by forming many different selves into one self, which is what the narrator calls “Myself.” However, despite testimony in the first stanza that the narrator understands the process of defining oneself through time, his tone throughout the poem is that of an old man still unsure about his identity.

This doubt is evident in the first line of the second stanza, when the narrator begins by wondering, “How can you think back and know” who you were before the present? Here, the narrator also noticeably changes the subject of the poem from “I” to “you,” signaling that his questions and experiences concerning time and identity in the following stanzas are one man’s explorations meant to address a universal struggle. To start, he tries to answer his own question in the third stanza by removing a volume from his series in the library of time. In this particular chapter of his life, he remembers how he used to wonder as a child about “starlight on the river” (line 9) and whether or not the star in the sky noticed its reflection in the water. When the narrator considers the river and the star’s “motionless, holy self” (line 10), he also attempts to connect process (the river) and stasis (the star), the momentary and the eternal, history and the continuum of time. The narrator feels, just as he remembers that he did in his youth, that if he could find a connection between these two things, he could somehow figure out his identity. This connection he seeks is the same one addressed in the first stanza: a link between the process of forming many selves and the one “Myself” that encompasses all of them. Apparently, being able to “call” them “Myself” (line 4) is not the same as understanding the nature of “Myself.” The narrator believes one can find this connection because, in Warren’s poetry, the “presence’ of past, present, and future within the horizon of the moment provides a referential structure through which the self can define its own history” (Jackson, 1988, p. 38). This effort to place all times in the “horizon of the moment” perhaps explains the narrator’s fascination with the old covered bridge. The bridge in this poem works like the connection the narrator seeks, being motionless and yet representing motion. This is why the echo “of hoof or wheel” (line 15) on the bridge is able to fill “the vastness of [his] mind” (line 20), because that first “impact” (line 15) represents to the narrator the experience of being part of both history and time at once. In his own mind, the boy had not yet participated in this connection
by crossing the bridge, and therefore could not yet know his identity. The narrator realizes now that this is why he used to lie awake at night, wondering when he would “proceed/To trot through the caverning dark beneath that roof” (lines 22–3). For these purposes, his destination would not have to be known, indeed could not be known; what he needed was “Just going. That would be enough” (line 24).

However, since by the time the story is being told the narrator and “you” have already crossed the bridge, the poem provokes a few questions. Having connected the momentary with the eternal on the bridge, why does one need to “prove identity” (line 30) by raising one’s “scarcely visible” hand in the “gloom” (line 31)? If one can understand the nature of time and memory as they relate to the self (stanza 1), can extract moments from history for examination (stanzas 2–6), and can draw connections between those moments and the whole continuum of time (bridge), then why is it that one still cannot understand the nature of one’s self in old age? Why doesn’t Warren’s narrator achieve the “synthesis” Pinar (1975/1994) describes? The answer to these questions is the same, and part of it is revealed in the last two stanzas. Even though the narrator claims to have all “that has happened since” his childhood “arranged on the shelf/Of memory” (lines 2–4), this is not entirely true. His memory has begun to slip; he states that “you” cannot now recall “What pike, highway or path” (line 28) has led “you” from place to place and time to time to where “you” are now. These lines show that even the narrator, who has been so concerned with retaining and arranging his memories, cannot remember everything. Though Lesa Corrigan speaks of “memory’s timelessness” (1999, p. 145) in Warren’s poetry, memory is not completely timeless. Though it is timeless in the sense that it can freeze a moment out of time, memory is only timeless, or lasting, as long as it can be recalled from storage. As Warren shows in “Covered Bridge,” the trouble is that man cannot ever truly complete his library of memory, and the poet uses these verses to ask how this realization affects notions of identity and meaning. While the man in “Old-Time Childhood” is ambiguous in his answer and the man from “Old Photograph” cannot remember enough to fully address the question, the narrator of “Covered Bridge” understands and makes no pretensions about the limitations of defining oneself through memory. The real problem, the reason that the narrator looks for his hand in a panic of futility, is that he now knows that he has spent his entire life trying to define himself through what is perhaps the most unreliable of methods. The narrator writes to “you” because the fragility of what he calls “Myself” has become apparent. Since time lacks “spatial dimensions” and man is constantly moving through it, it is truly accessible only through memory; when memory fails, the series is broken, and complete identity becomes impossible. The imagination, or “creative memory” (Justus, 1981, p. 78), used with such power in “Old-Time Childhood” is really of no help in Warren’s system of self-knowledge, since imaginary moments are only capable of producing imaginary identity. Realizing this, the narrator of “Covered Bridge” abandons his search for self-definition through time for the only option that he believes is available: to strain his eyes after his own hand in the darkness.
Why, then, write a book of poetry to explore memory and identity, as I have done here, if memory is an ultimately unreliable way of understanding the self? Maybe the problem is not the use of poetry to explore memory and identity, but rather the assumptions about how memory works, and how complete it can be. This “library” concept in Warren’s work is fascinating as a way of thinking about time and identity, but it is also faulty, as his narrators often discover. For one, it does not fully take into account what Derrida calls “inauguration” (Caputo, 1997); in other words, yesterdays—all of them, maybe—are important, but maybe not more important than tomorrows. As he puts it, “if tomorrow you do not reinvent today’s inauguration, you will be dead” (1997, p. 28). And there is always tomorrow, and tomorrow we will be someone new, at least a little different than today’s version. This is something akin to what I tell my students about their insecurities over not having “read everything”: even if we could read everything ever written, they’d print more books tomorrow. That certainly does not mean we should quit reading books, though, or that they can’t help us figure out ourselves and the world we live in, at least a little better than we knew them before. Another important difficulty of Warren’s “library” concept of identity is the incomplete nature of yesterday’s records. I played four years of basketball in high school, and took it very seriously, but can’t remember a single final score to a single game. On the other hand, I can tell you that a mile is made up of 5,280 feet—or 1,760 yards. We remember so little, really, and who knows if it’s the important stuff? If I gave my students the world’s best lecture on this material, and then told a good joke at the end, which would they be more likely to recall? And this is why I think an attitude of adventure is better than one of accounting when it comes to writing poetry in order to figure out who we are; an admission of mystery instead of a quest for the “truth”; a “space of exploration, of bringing the inside out” (Morgan, 2016, p. 52). Even the “creative memory” Justus (1981) refers to can be useful, and should not be dismissed as if this were a court of law; what I imagine and the ways in which I imagine it are also valuable texts for identity formation. I do know that I have been assigning my literature and writing students to write poetry for years now, sometimes personal and sometimes less so, and it seems to be doing them a noticeable amount of good. In purely practical terms, even the ones who never come to love poetry admit that they get better at analyzing it, having had to write it themselves, much in the way an auto mechanic probably understands cars better if she has to build one herself. I also notice an improvement in their writing across the board; the strict and demanding attention to word choice and imagery, the pressure to be creative and possibly original, are good for their writing voices overall. But maybe more importantly, they gain a confidence in self-expression and an expanded self-awareness that can only help them, no matter what they do with their lives after my class. Each fall for sixteen years now, I have hosted a public poetry reading for my students, at which they perform their own work, complete with microphone, requisite overwrought coffee drinks, and plenty of
nerves. Almost everyone who participates—and most of my students choose to—has never done this kind of thing before, and part of my pitch to them is “If you can read your own poetry, in public, into a microphone, and care about it, what are you going to be too scared to do after that?” They almost always find it less terrifying than they expected, and they often discover that they are better than they thought, too. I have found over the years that, like Meredith Walker says, “there is something positive about people of all kinds finding something of themselves and their world in poetry” (2016, p. 67), no matter their previous experience or future vocation.

Part of the reason Bruce Wexler can say that “poetry is dead” is that it just has so much competition for our attention these days, and much of that competition is loud, literally and figuratively. But I argue that while this may make poetry unfamiliar for many of us, it does not make it dead. In fact, poets like Billy Collins believe that this unfamiliarity can be rectified, and that much of the answer lies in making poetry a more normal, more approachable, more regular part of our lives, and this idea is one of the big reasons I assign students to write it. In Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry (2003), Collins has assembled 180 poems—one for each day of school—that he hopes will be read as part of the morning announcements, not as part of an assignment or accompanied by teacher comments or explanation; rather, he hopes students will “just listen to a poem every morning and off you go to your first class” (p. xvi). His idea is that poetry too often seems obscure and unapproachable, and he is hopeful that this approach, with “short, clear, contemporary poems” (p. xvi), will help bring in new readers and writers who assume they don’t like poetry in part because they have limited experience with it. The Poetry Society of America is one of many organizations devoted to similar ideas, in this case setting a goal of “bringing poems back into everyday life” by placing poetry placards “in the transit systems of a dozen cities across the country, reaching over thirteen million people a day” (Paschen, 2002, p. xxiii). William Louis-Dreyfus calls these poems “resting places along the road, each with its own portion of intimacy, calm, wisdom, and nourishment” (2002, p. xxii). What advocates like these seem to agree upon is that we need to live with poetry and live in poetry—we need participation.

And participation means that we cannot just read poetry more; we need to write it. This is just as true, and maybe more so, for teachers of literature and writing as it is for students. Dennis J. Sumara points out that while “in recent years there has been increased attention to the teaching of writing, in many cases writing is not being taught by writers,” and further argues that this is one of the reasons that “most young people would say that neither reading nor writing literature matters” (2002, p. 157). He has a point: vocal coaches should be singers, art teachers should be artists, etc. Teachers should be intimately familiar with both the difficulties and benefits of writing, especially the creative and personal, if they want to convey those things to their students. No wonder we have a tough time selling the importance of writing
when we don’t do it much ourselves. So where do we find these writers to teach writing? As is often the case when we need something we are afraid we won’t find, we should look in the mirror. If we do not think of ourselves as writers, we should—and then we should become writers. Maybe that will make us uncomfortable at first, but so what? Our students already know this discomfort all too well. Teachers are students, too, let us not forget, and often profess to be interested in passing on an attitude of lifelong learning to their students. Are we still learning, though, growing as our students do? Let us not coast, and rust, and fall into the hollow safety of clichés on kitten posters that we pretend our students don’t see through. And even if poetry does not naturally come to us, we can work at writing just as our students do, to the benefit of all. To paraphrase Derrida, we might have spent years of college studying literature, but if we do not “reinaugurate” that knowledge, that skill, that participation, we will lose it, and likely our ability to make literature—or maybe much of anything else—come to life for our students. After all, as Alan A. Block says, “To live is to read texts, but to be alive is to write them” (1988/1999). And if we do finally confess our insecurity about such things, and worry that we can’t do what we know we should; if it doesn’t always go well, and millions of people don’t clamor for our autographs, I’m just not sure it all matters very much. What matters is the doing, the making, the creating, the “singing” of the self as Whitman once urged us to, a unique voice in the chorus of mankind. As Henry Miller put it, in the preface to his water-color album called The Angel is my Watermark (1961/1962, p. 38), “we don’t have to turn out a masterpiece every day. To paint is the thing, not to make masterpieces.” So let us all write our books of poetry, masterpieces or no. Walt Whitman himself said we could “contribute a verse” (1892/1993); do we really need someone else’s permission (or commission)?

The book of poetry that follows, called Fireflies, is my way of putting my poetry where my theory is. This work is an example of the kind of “liminal” scholarship I advocate in The Need for Revision (2011), occupying a space in the academic world’s “windows and doorways” (p. 2), not exactly in any one field but rather in the “spaces-between where the inside and outside commingle”; it seeks to trouble the boundaries between teacher and writer, critic and artist, writer and reader, and teacher and student in a way from which I hope all parties might benefit. The intended audience for this book is anyone who works with or is interested in poetry, curriculum theory, secondary public education, literature, the humanities in general, or any combination thereof. Specifically, this group would include curriculum scholars, teachers and students of literature and other humanities courses, and curriculum directors. And while this work is not a textbook, exactly, it is also intended for use as a course text in teacher preparation programs like Curriculum Studies, Curriculum and Instruction, and English Education, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. This is a book of poetry, but it is also a book about poetry, and about how much we need poetry
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to play a larger role in all our lives—about how we need to live more poetically. As such, it is intended to be an approachable text about big ideas and issues that can be useful and appropriate in a variety of settings.

*Fireflies* is a book about memory, and the way each year is full of many years; it is about the way memory makes us who we are, despite the fact that it isn’t comprehensive, or chronological, or even stable, but rather comes to us in little flashes, like fireflies in the dusk. It is a work inspired by the poetry of Robert Penn Warren, Billy Collins, Jean Toomer, and Fred Chappell as well as Carl Leggo and Sandra L. Faulkner, and keeps as a guiding principle Whitman’s notion of the “Song of Myself” that is really the song of everyone, beginning with the personal but aiming for the communal, the shared experience. The book is made up of three sections, each one corresponding to a four-month period of the year. Each poem in each section is nestled in that part of the year, whether by events or imagery or thematic association. In this way the book plays loosely with time, just as memory does; “A Light Blanket” is set in the fall season generally, “New Hope” was inspired by a specific date from a specific spring that lingers and affects me many years after, and “Wine-Dark Seas” is about every May of my life—and maybe lots of people’s lives. And while the idea for the book began with “Dance of the Ancients,” inspired by my thirtieth birthday and an impulse to do some personal stock-taking, it has become something that moves both backward and forward in time from there; sometimes the memories are about being a young boy, and sometimes about being the father of a young boy. Some of the poems are pretty directly about school, as both student and teacher, and some are more about the kind of things I bring with me into the classroom whether they are in my lesson plans or not. The poems, like memories, are both distinct, individual flashes—fireflies—without clear context, and also the pieces we use to build what we call ourselves.

I hope you like it, I hope it resonates with you and your own experience—but mostly I hope you go looking for your pens.

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