

Touching the Inexplicable

Poetry as Transformative Inquiry

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TEACHING IS A COMPLEX PROCESS BRIMMING WITH POTENTIAL for transformation, engagement, and change. Along with these possibilities, every learning environment holds underlying, often hidden, issues of power and inclusivity that influence learning. Teachers must continuously negotiate the diverse learning needs of students, be accountable to an externally mandated curriculum, and facilitate a fair and equitable environment. To add further complexity, teachers typically enact their own personal beliefs around what they feel is most true and important for students to learn despite what is prescribed in curricular documents. The incongruences between these realms can lead to disruptive encounters that shake our epistemological and ontological beliefs. Rather than ignore or diminish the tensions inherent in this milieu, Aoki (1985/2005) suggests educators must constantly endeavor to “dwell aright” in the intricacies of their teaching practice (p. 163) to manifest the potential held within each day.

Disruptive encounters are common, yet are all too often swept aside within the unrelenting demands of teaching practice. In this article we bring forward two such encounters that we have dealt with personally as educators: Michele conveys an experience of her own layers of homophobia and Vanessa, an exploration of her privilege in cross-cultural contexts. Despite long term efforts of educators and communities to make schools more equitable, just, and inclusive, disruptive encounters around these issues are still very much a part of most educational contexts. For example, related to Michele’s topic of homophobia, we see that hostility towards LGBTQ students is rampant in schools and can have devastating effects in terms of suicide rates, substance abuse, dropout, etc. (Holmes & Cahill, 2004). Vanessa’s topic of privilege is negotiated in classrooms as different cultures hold varying beliefs around definitions of wealth, mobility and success; teachers need to continuously navigate relationships with each learner across these potential similarities and/or differences. These brief descriptions of homophobia or privilege that disrupted our beliefs are, of course, only the tip of the iceberg. Our purpose here however, is to focus on how a particular process of creating poetry influences such disruptive encounters, while at the same time, they work to alter our long held patterns of

bias.

As educators we, Michele and Vanessa, attend carefully to our personal beliefs so that we might lessen our role in the perpetuation of harmful norms that occur in schools and schooling. Chambers (2004) suggests that to understand such pedagogical intricacies, we must *dwell* in that which is not right, including our own faults. Here, dwelling is about a commitment to attention, to taking time; it is an act of showing up and staying with. Congruent with Chambers (2004) description, we are learning to dwell as an act of living in places that are not always comfortable to us; to hold gently the suffering that exists around us in all its many forms, and that we are a part of. Chambers reminds us, “dwelling has a bad name in our ahistorical, pleasure seeking, and time-crunched society” (p. 11). We live in a pervasive culture of efficiency (Stein, 2002) where speed and productivity trump stillness and contemplation. However, by dwelling mindfully with what is not right in our world and within us, we become better educators amidst disrupting encounters that are often both common and the same time, inexplicable, Inexplicable is that which “cannot be unfolded, untwisted, or disentangled” (Oxford English Dictionary). It is not that the phenomena of privilege and homophobia are obscure, but that there is no way to fully understand them.

Within this act of dwelling, *how* we attend is also very important. We use the phrase *holding gently* because our intention is to stay present with all that is revealed within a given topic. We are not seeking to oversimplify, make formulaic sense or ultimately “fix” these issues. Rather, our attitude is to let the issue breathe and shift so that we can see more of its fullness, comprehend complex layers, and ultimately expect ourselves to be changed. In this way, we seek to create more equitable, just and inclusive classrooms not only through prescriptive efforts, but also through personal transformation that leads to meaningful action; we hope to walk our talk.

The type of poetry we describe is rooted in the philosophy of Transformative Inquiry (TI), a specific research approach for educators developed by a team of teacher educators and pre-service teachers at the University of Victoria (Tanaka, 2014). The practice of TI is engaged within a required course in the final months of our elementary teacher education program. During the course, students unearth salient issues about which they are personally and professionally passionate; typically they choose topics relevant to the context of their own teaching practice and therefore, topics that also matter to other educators. Michele was an instructor in the course and Vanessa was a previous student and then later became a part of the research team.

Each inquiry in the TI course is explored by focusing on open-ended and unbounded questions (Henderson, 1992). Participants are encouraged to follow where the inquiry takes them, rather than look for specific prescribed outcomes; to focus on process more than the product of learning. Topics are investigated reflexively and relationally within larger educational and socio-cultural contexts. This process is assisted by a series of one-on-one mentoring sessions with the course instructor where individual interests can be teased out and suggestions made for further exploration. Along with dwelling and holding gently, attention is also given to important concepts including *generous listing, mindfulness, disrupting binaries, following questions, safe (enough) space, emotional engagement, walking our talk, and welcoming awkwardness* (Tanaka, Stanger, Tse, & Farish, 2014).

Typically within public education, the spiritual or the sacred is ignored. We, along with other holistic educators, oppose this exclusion (Miller, 2000). To this effect, the TI stance does not promote any one religious path, but welcomes spiritual knowing into the inquiry process so that the richness of each topic can be explored. This attention to the inner life is important if we

are to dwell aright in the Aokian sense; we need to know ourselves holistically – body, mind, emotions and spirit. We argue that disruptive encounters quickly go beyond the physical and intellectual, into realms of emotions and spirit. TI poetry can be a vehicle for exploring these less tangible spaces.

The cultivation of TI has been the primary goal of a four-year study funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. With over 200 pre-service teachers and five instructors participating, the study has looked closely at mentor/mentee relationships, student work, and the transformative processes of instructors in order to more fully understand and articulate the nuanced and distinct process of TI. According to our data, the exploration of disruptive encounters, things that worry us and/or provoke our passions, is an important doorway into changing the beliefs, values and attitudes that guide teaching behaviors. Here, we attend to our own disruptive encounters as a subset of the larger project.

The authors first met when Michele was a mentor to Vanessa in the TI course. Vanessa was intent on pursuing what she felt would be a cerebral inquiry; her initial list of possible topics included Brain Gym, brain-based learning and minorities in the classroom. Yet, her buried sentiments were churned through Michele's question to the class: What do you *really* care about? With trepidation Vanessa added a final possible topic: her own biracial identity. After class, she wrote her first poem in a very long time. Through Michele's encouragement, Vanessa continued to write poetry to explore what would become her question for further inquiry: what does it mean to be a racialized teacher teaching in predominantly white spaces? Vanessa found articulating her thoughts and questions about race and identity difficult, and poetry became a way for her to plunge into the cracks of her knowing. Thus, she endured the disorienting space of challenging and ultimately transforming what she knew. Initially, Michele was hesitant about Vanessa's use of poetry as she had little knowledge of poetry in and out of the TI context. However, Michele took a leap of faith and consciously chose to take Vanessa's lead which was based in Vanessa's prior use of poetry as a vehicle of inquiry. The development of this mentor-mentee relationship is described more fully elsewhere (Tanaka et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, at the time of the meeting Vanessa had lost her drive to write poetry due to the slog of academia; her poetic inclinations had wilted as she constantly ruminated on other scholars' interests. The TI context reignited her passions and moved her to write poetry once again. The context of TI offered a unique opportunity in that she had time and space to dwell and hold gently the sensitive issues that led to vulnerable and uncomfortable places. Additionally, TI required the intimate sharing of our passions, inquiries, and vulnerabilities within a professional community; we wrote over time in a relational process that extended well beyond the required course. This involvement is in direct opposition to academic patterned ways of knowing where intellectual exercises concentrate on the dissemination of knowledge from expert to novice (as is often the case at academic conferences, for example).

The TI context encourages other ways of knowing beyond typical academic discourse and through it we often come to reconsider the purpose of education and our place as learners, teachers and researchers within educational contexts (Tanaka, Nicholson, & Farish, 2012). TI is both a practice and an attitude directed at changing educational awareness and contexts. Participants of the process engage in potent learning that breaks down binaries, deconstructs the archetype of teacher as transmitter, and addresses power structures. For many, the TI process has cracked open the tough exterior plaster that surrounds antiquated notions of learning and teaching leaving room for new possibilities around just, equitable and inclusive classrooms.

Central to the TI approach are questions suggested by indigenous science educator,

Gregory Cajete (2009): How do we care for the devastation we are causing to the planet? How do we learn to get along with each other? How do we care for our own souls? The approach asks us to engage creatively and imaginatively in pedagogical issues we care about; thus TI often evokes visual imagery, music, dance, and poetry (See, for example, Stanger, Tanaka, Tse, & Starr, 2013). For us, poetry became an increasingly powerful way to dwell in the uncomfortable nuances of our disruptive encounters. Creating poetry was a recursive and dialogic process as we attended carefully to the often emotional images that these topics evoked in us. We wondered together, what does our lived experience offer? Where do we hesitate in our dwelling? How do these issues play out in our teaching practice? Poetry became a place where we could dwell with integrity as well as grapple with ideas that felt too vast to be fully recognized within more analytical ways of knowing.

The need to transform the heart and soul of educational communities endures (Abbott, 2010; Freire, 2005; hooks, 2003; O’Sullivan, 2002). To this effect, we use poetry to help “find a new language of spirit” (hooks, 2003, p. 183). We found that language learned as teachers and academics falls short of embracing the complexity of disruptive encounters; poetry enabled us to come alive in the spaces of our unknowing. For us, poetry has become another way of knowing that embraces the unknown. As Bai (2003) emphasizes, “discursive explanations are no good for non-discursive experience!” (p. 47).

Disruptive encounters such as homophobia or privilege have meanings that can be only partially understood through acknowledgement of their intricacies. We believe that comprehending them should move beyond the attempt to triangulate their definitional landscape. Instead, through our poems we engage more fully in the postmodern act of *crystallization* (Richardson, 1994), a multi-layered process that “provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of a topic,” wherein “paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know” (p. 522). When we look through one facet of a crystal, we know that we see only one side of a many-faceted object. To some extent, Michele already knew homophobia and Vanessa knew privilege; we had encountered them in our lived experiences in various ways. However, we felt compelled to further engage these topics in ways that revealed the more inexplicable realms of their being. Through poetry we entered into the paradox of knowing and not knowing, and how these contradictions exist not in binary opposition to one another, but fold back on one another in a more circular fashion. We were entering into a circular process where, as Palmer (1980/2008) suggests, “the apparent oppositions of life meet, touch, and flow seamlessly into one another” (p. 63).

To dwell aright as educators, our poetry helps us attend to the inexplicable. Charles Simic (2003) articulates, “[m]y hunch has always been that our deepest experiences are wordless . . . The labor of poetry is finding ways through language to point to what cannot be put into words” (as cited in Luce-Kapler, 2009, p. 77). Another paradox surfaces in that poetry can hold experiences that language cannot grasp and yet poetry is a medium heaving with text and symbols.

We have written and interspersed multiple poems into this writing. Some deal specifically with homophobia (“Of My Quiet Violence”) and privilege (“How the Stars Shine”), while others speak to our shared TI poetry process. We suggest the reader consider both types of poems as sacred narratives. Hendry (2010) notes:

Sacred narratives do not require analysis or interpretation or verification. . .they require that scholars attend to them fully and be present. Whether it is sculpture, myth, painting,

dance, or sermon, these are narratives that ultimately speak to the human condition. Being present in the encounter with no other purpose than attending to and being open is what makes it sacred and illuminates its potential to be materialized. (p. 75)

There are numerous ways to comprehend sacred narratives. Resonant with this sensibility, our poetry will for the most part, be left up to the reader's interpretation. Imagine each poem as a warm fresh egg handed to you; there is no need to crack or dissect it to understand its meaning. Rather meanings are multiple, and we ask only that you dwell for a time, hold it gently, pay attention and listen to be changed (Altman, 2012).

Slipping

handful of ocean
cupped in a nest
of fingers.
a moment in time.

·
holding gently
a spoonful of the
teeming depth

·
cradled in this mortal
cup, we know only
a snatch in flux

·
breathing through
and seeping into
the infinite

·
renounce the longing
to impale the
fluttering wing, suck
dry and fossilize –
Ah! But now we *know!*

·
in the release
soars the questions –
flows and billows
into the horizon

Because we feel surrounded by a culture concerned with knowing a literal truth, this type of dwelling is difficult; our patterns are towards the reductionism of pinning down rather than holding gently. Our tendency is to shy away from mystery, the very spirit of the concerns we so anxiously hunger to comprehend. Through poetry we begin to reside more fully, to hold our fears gently, breathing with the essence of our issues. Here, we are able to “touch the heart of what it

means to be human” (Luce-Kapler, 2003, p. 80). Rather than clinging to answers we thought we already knew, we move towards nourishing what might be possible within educational contexts, walking into the complexity of learning, teaching and researching with courage and intention.

In our poetic TI process, we followed our passionate concerns regarding people in our respective communities who were affected by specific disruptive encounters. Michele wrote about a faint unnerving feeling of aversion that arose when her son came out, while Vanessa processed the profound experience of visiting impoverished communities in India. These topics may initially appear to be unrelated to our classroom teaching. However, they inform how we interact and behave in classroom settings because they were so heartfelt. Our profound connections to who we are at our core move out into our teaching; our passions guide us as educators. Imbued with TI, our poetry enables us to take in the fullness of these topics; we explore in an embodied, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional way.

We believe that we teach who we are (Palmer, 1998). To understand more fully the common and inexplicable disruptive encounters of homophobia and of privilege, we needed to attend beyond the stories of our classroom experience to see more fully what we bring to our teaching. Our emotions acted as windows into our deeper beliefs, and our poems moved us beyond self-indulgence, as they helped us come closer to understanding the essence of what we care about. The process became one of self-disruption. We realized that if we wanted to walk with more consciousness and compassion alongside those who are marginalized through homophobia or privilege, we needed to disrupt the heart of our own dispositions – our beliefs, values and attitudes. This was our conscious intention in writing these poems.

Further, we recognized that our world desperately needs citizens “who live well in their places” (Orr, 1994/2004, p. 4). As we entered more fully into the depths of this call, we also acknowledged the importance of thinking in community. For us, community was “a place where the connections felt in our hearts make themselves known in the bonds between people and where the tuggings and pullings of those bonds keep opening up our hearts” (Palmer, 1980/2008, p. 90). We found that as our hearts opened in our time together, as emotions were laid bare, poetry poured out.

Through poetry, we inquire into and “seek the way/ the wisdom for living well/ in the longing of language” (Prendergast & Leggo, 2007, p. 1465). We have found, like Neilsen (2004), that writing poetry is “a long journey of listening” (p. 42). To live well we realize that we must inquire while attending mindfully and with depth. We must also listen generously (Thayer-Bacon, 2003) to all that is: the knowable, the enigmatic, and what might be true of another.

We engage in poetry as a prolific site to channel our embodied knowing (Wiebe & Snowber, 2011). After reading Wiebe and Snowber’s “The Visceral Imagination: A Fertile Space for Non-Textual Knowing,” Vanessa created the following found poem. Here, poetry is illuminated as not exclusively privileging the cerebral, but embracing the sensuous and spiritual, which are integral parts of our poetic inquiry in TI. Poetry for us became a way of attending, a way of seeing, “a way of being in relation with the world” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 31) and we began to relate to our disrupting encounters through new eyes.

Embark

Visceral imagination opens
the place wonder is born.

Beyond imagination, living
the poetry in our lives *that is*

our lives. Sensuous connections.
To be with poetry – closer

to finely nuanced textures;
rhythms in the landscapes

of experience. Cultivate awe,
deep curiosity, alchemy –

senses split open. Illuminate
ways of being. Gently rock

into mindful listening.
Sacred, sensuous membrane
of knowing.

Our poems speak to our process; they are the way we navigated our topics. For the most part, our inquiries did not occur outside of the poems. By this, we mean that we did not research and then reflect our findings in our poems. Rather, our poems were the agents of our inquiries and were inextricably entwined with our wonderings, becoming “an act of transformation and an art of transformation” (Leggo, 2012, p. 142). As we were molding our poems they recursively began to mold us. This relationship between the creator and the created infused liveliness to the interplay of our inquiries. Repeatedly, we would return to our poems, and pick them up like gathering shells at the ocean. Placing our ears to them, we listened for the inexplicable, the voices that were not our own. In this way, we waited for our poems to teach us.

Our writing occurred over three months where we met six times specifically set aside to engage jointly in the alchemy of poetry. Immediately before each of these meetings we spent time individually to center in on our own writing and topics. This gave us time and space to depart from our busy lives and transition into a more poetic way of being; to recursively write and listen to our topics in a more liminal time and space. We “witness[ed] each other in a mindful loving attentiveness; this [required of us] intention, time, and vulnerability,” (Snowber, 2012, p. 122).

Meeting

Dusk falls outside.
Shadows and
memories rippling –

retreating,

we find presence
in sorrow.

The furnace burns.
Quiet fire.
Our bones rattle,
splinter, touch
Witnessing spirit
courage rises.

During our poetry sessions, we consciously set aside our conversational minds and actively shifted towards “the immediacy of the encountered world” (Bai, 2003, p. 49). In that dusky calm richness we began to paint with our words the lived reality of our respective topics. We entered into the essence of our experiences and held them gently, suspending our judgment. Poetry was a fluid space where we were in flux; our dispositions around our topics began to open and shift. Rather than remaining in our heads, we moved towards listening through our hearts to the “*withiness*, in words, in work, in the world, in heart, in earth, in body, mind, imagination, and spirit” (Prendergast & Leggo, 2007, p. 1470).

**Michele’s poem:
Of my quiet violence**

These statistics are now in my heart.

*LGBT students hear anti-gay slurs an average of 26 times a day
43 percent of trans identified persons attempt suicide
26 percent of queer youth are told to leave home
30 percent of suicides are queer*

Numbers.

opening another gate of sorrow
pulling my heartstrings

his new wings

First
blood toiling

Protective thoughts of safety.
Who has hurt you?
How have I?
What might I have failed to do?

mind racing
trying to place

my feet back
on now moving ground

Later
blood boiling

pressure times three.
a friend says:
“I’m fine with it
until I think about
What do they *do*?”

yes.
what could this intimacy look like?

I recognize
echoes of my own dismay,
my own loss of certainty
my loss of courage

our shared questions
revealing
the bare bones
of my quiet violence

tracing my own flesh and blood.

Then
blood oiling

I move.
Through hesitation
through dusty ways of knowing
reminding my creaky bones

towards openness.
gently urging
honesty.

Isn’t this more than physical?

So I ask:
What might this intimacy
sound like?
taste like?
smell like?

feel like?

And the answer,
is always
Love.
Simply love.

How is it that
we are so often
repulsed
by our sweet,
shared,
vulnerability?

Finally
blood coiling

born into relationship
invisible umbilical cord
swirling through and beyond
mother~son
son~mother
mother~son
connection eternal.

I gather what was almost forgotten
welcome into my body still.
The spirit of Love.
of our shared connection.

Now
blood roiling

I witness my shift.

new configurations
mixing
emerging
new relationships
changing
connecting.

Vestiges of revulsion,
must leave

as I cannot.

This diversion of blood,
must cease

as I open further

to undefended love.

Still
blood soiling

muddying
eroding
what I believed was
solid ground.

Shifting
nourishing
messy earthing.

These statistics are now in my heart.

Through the cracks of light
by the movement
of whatever may come

I welcome
their gate of sorrow
this blood infused
flow of love.

**Vanessa's poem:
How the stars shine**

The scratch, the hiss –
the blazing white tail of chalk
that darts across a green plane.
Cinnamon hands hold tender
notebooks and yellow pencils.
Naked cement walls, barred
windows and a tiny clump
of playground comprise their school.
Yet, it is always the singing

I remember. A frothing
chorus of voices in flight
that sound out loud and
uninhibited. Their privilege
is joy. A joy slippery
and singed. They are not
distracted: not fat with
abundance and starving with
greed. Their joy is the simplicity
of not being blinded by
life in Technicolor. I
marvel at the sweetness of
empty hands.

A tap, a flash –
a ripple of figures and
lines blossom on a white screen.
Girls in braids and boys scrubbed
clean shuffle to a carpet
pad. Backpacks and books overflow,
with faithful ABCs marching
across the board. A school, fresh
with colorful chaos is
strapping on their indoor shoes
for the day. Innocent children
scampering in jeans sewn in
sweat shops. Young lives, whose show-and-
tell will drive the exploitation
of millions. Their privilege is
their education, their
neighborhood, their car, their pets,
their peace. Their privilege is not
knowing that what they consume
comes at a cost they do not
pay. Their privilege is a whip
across the nations.

Even in the land
of milk and honey –
cancer chews, hearts break, tears spill.
An abiding chord of
suffering woven into
every human heart. A tangle
of wealth and poverty. Some
mysteriously stricken and
others stricken with the

mystery. And always the
in between. Still,
their song drifts through me, drenching
me like incense. My knowing
fails, and I simply feel, live,
breathe in this song of the stars.

Twenty-five dollars
Canadian is equal
to one thousand rupees.
One billion people live on
one dollar a day.
Two billion people live on
two dollars a day.
I was not born in a caste,
I am not a rat catcher,
and my father does not drive
a rickshaw. My family has
six cars for five people, a
clear blue pool in the shape of
a jellybean and a house
with twenty-foot ceilings. I
have walked through slums, but have
never lived there. I have
held the hands of deprived
children, but have never carried
their burdens. I try to
transcend privilege, but there is
always that Wall.

My privilege is
to walk into their world. To
look at how the stars shine
from their side of the mountains.
To be rewoven in the
abundance of a poor child's
smile. I walk the streets where they
make their lives. Then I am gone.
I return to a world where
they may never come. My stars
are not their stars and my path
has forks and turns that they may
never know. A privilege some
call opportunity – but
I am not so sure.

Kindled through my
 time with you, a small vine
 twines its body along the
 Wall. Small leaves dappled with your
 fingerprints from another
 world. Its green body splits the
 rock. Between the cracks I hear
 the singing. Your fingerprints
 live inside my soul.

Poetry is a living thing (Lacey, 1972) and an act of inquiry (Sullivan, 2012). Through our poetry we resist:

The tidy summary . . . the happily ever after – yet we know that life, people, emotions, and circumstances are extraordinarily complex and sometimes . . . not easy to face. Yet how can we turn away from each other’s pain, how can we refuse to honour their winding paths, the complex journey they have made? (Neilsen, 2004, p. 42).

Our poems are not answers but unravelings and reweavings. We see in them an elixir of mystery and certainty. This process for us has been a powerful orienting towards the pain of others. And we are changed. We will in turn, change our teaching.

As our poems entwine here in this writing, we begin to understand that both our topics have to do with connection and our struggles of having authentic, genuine relationships with others across difference. Rather than Michele ignoring the comment about what gay lovers might do, poetry helped Michele find a way to recognize, hold gently, and eventually dwell aright in uncomfortable feelings. Through the poetic process, she was able to look at her own shadowy fears with a generosity of spirit, enacting a compassion for her friend, herself, and her son. As Vanessa looked at her connection with people who live thousands of miles away (both in location and culture), she began to perceive the nuances inherent in the binaries of privileged and underprivileged, and evaluated how those who may not have abundant material wealth, in some circumstances might be better able to live more holistically. These recursive realizations now play out in our teaching.

By incorporating poetry in the TI process, the TI process became an act of mindfulness that continues to help us live well in our places, especially when dealing with things that are inexplicable. If we are living well, our hope is that we will be teaching well too! Through the following poem we invite readers to lean into the inexplicable in their own lives. Our hope and call is for educators to become more mindful, responding with integrity to the needs of all students, whatever label they are given or give themselves. TI poetry is an effective way to do this; our poems permeate the boundary between the professional and the personal, as they call forward the textures of being, both in life and in practice, which sculpt our dispositions. This approach resonates with the hard work educators are called to do as, “not only does one believe what one believes but one *teaches* what one believes” (Fish, 1980, p. 364).

Our quiet manifesto

*Deep darkness dwelling
is sometimes needed
to live in the light.
Holding what is
with gentle attentiveness*

*we swirl
deeper
echo-locating*

*within enduring love.
a tender inquiry of*

*a
c g
h u c
e i o w
s l n o
 t f n
 u d
 s e
 i r
 o
 n*

*Born into relationship,
we have forgotten.
Individualism!
Independence!
We are engulfed
in Narcissistic Isolation!*

*Yet
disconnection is impossible.
Spirits spark,
entwine
into relationship
 shared openness
 and vulnerability
poems of courage*

*It's not enough to say
there is suffering.
We crave more:*

*Mindfulness opens
questions beyond
simple labels*

*QUEER
POOR*

*What is the fuller integrity
of that within which we dwell?
us in it,
and it in us?*

*Yearning to live well
with~in difference
with~in suffering*

*the inexplicable
calls us*

*the labyrinth of being
stretches wide*

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