OISE, University of Toronto

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**Back to school poetry**

**Workshop description:**

Our 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities these poems about adolescence and school (as much more than an institution) can offer us as we read mainly contemporary poets exploring contemporary situations we encounter while in the throes of life and school and otherwise as both students and educators.

The purpose of this workshop is to share contemporary poetry and the experience of writing poetry in community, and to ultimately think about the possibilities for contemporary poetry in our lives and classrooms as educators. Today we explore poems about school, and consider not only the content but also the sonic and structural choices poets make, as a way to consider the possibilities that a creative writing practice has to offer us as writers and educators.

We are grateful to be a part of a community that values engagement with writing and reading.

**Workshop outline:**

*(5 minutes)*

**Welcome participants & introductions / check-ins**

Names, pronouns, a word to describe how each person is feeling today

*(5 minutes)*

**Share the purpose of this workshop**: **To engage in reading/ writing about...**

* NB: All these poems imagine a physical school space, or at least physical bodies in close proximity; now we are virtual, we are recalling a past of schooling as well as physical and emotional experiences of school spaces that are not at all the experiences/ reality of virtual school. This is a weird (unprecedented) time for us as educators and our students.
* Some of the curricular choices we have made as teachers haunt the virtual classroom in various ways. There is tension in taking physical school and translating it to these online spaces.
* What happens when we write about subjects that are not traditional to poetry? Here we bring the classroom into our poetry instead of poetry into the classroom…

*(10-15 minutes)*

**Participants volunteer to read through all of the poems at least once (Quaker style):**

**Danez Smith, “Rose”**

*Possible prompts*:

* Reflect on someone, maybe you, who had a tough/ rough time in PS/ HS/ or otherwise in a social setting; their name is the title, explore specific instances of their victimization/ cruelty, how they reacted, chart the evolution and rationale behind this teasing/torture
* Include the story of when a curse word entered your vocabulary and how you used it
* Include a past wish of yours, what you imagine another’s wish was at that time
* Include an invented saint (Smith writes, “saint of getting roasted in the hallway”)
* Use the phrasing: “At times I wake in the middle of the night and think\_\_\_\_\_”

**Natalie Diaz, “They don’t love you like I love you”**

<https://poets.org/poem/they-dont-love-you-i-love-you>

*Possible prompts*:

* Take lyrics (or if you know how to read music, notes or riffs) from a song that you’re listening to on repeat these days or had been listening to this summer and write into them; what do they mean/ what is this narrative (or an alternative interpretation of the narrative presented in the lyrics)
* Take a line from the lyrics and turn it into life advice from a parent/ mentor
* Use the phrasing: “What is \_\_\_\_\_\_ if not\_\_\_\_\_ and/ or \_\_\_\_\_?”
* Use the phrasing: “All this time…”
* Use the phrasing: “When you/ I said \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ you/ I meant \_\_\_\_\_\_\_”
* Option to title the poem a line of the lyrics from your chosen song

**Bob Hicok, “In Michael Robins's class minus one”**

<https://poets.org/poem/michael-robinss-class-minus-one>

*Possible prompts*:

* What/ whom is missing from classes? How? Write into the absences, especially missing life/ lives.
* Include a series of unanswered/ unanswerable questions OR ask questions of a natural phenomena and include its answers
* Include a promise made by a specific element of the natural world

**Langston Hughes, “Theme for English B”**

<https://poets.org/poem/theme-english-b>

*Possible prompts*:

* Consider an assignment you’ve asked students to complete with some pushback, write in the voice of a student commenting on the assignment; or write in your own voice as to the (ir)relevancy of the assignment
* Explain your location using a series of landmarks. Connect those physical locations to your sense and definition of self
* Include an alliterative list (eg “Bessie, bop, or Bach”)

**Nick Flynn, “Forty-Seven Minutes”**

<https://poets.org/poem/forty-seven-minutes>

*Possible prompts*:

* What do we tell ourselves to get through the school day? Where do we locate meaning, or the absence of meaning?
* Take a sentence and divide it up/ slow it down using commas
* Begin your poem by referring to a past event that goes unexplained (eg “years later”)
* Consider what you pretend matters (in your classroom or generally in life)

**Mary Oliver, “The Poet Dreams of the Classroom”**

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/519485-the-poet-dreams-of-the-classroom-i-dreamed-i-stood>

*Possible prompts*:

* Come up with questions students have interrupted your lessons with or questions you wish they’d interrupt your lesson/ classroom with; OR come up with questions you’d like to ask at faculty meetings and imagine responses from administration and fellow faculty
* What do you need to keep your heart awake?
* Use a refrain (eg “sit down, he said”) that repeats 3 times in your poem

*(40-45 minutes)*

**Participants write**

* Using the prompts offered, participants mute their mics and write.
* Participants are encouraged to consider: What else do you see happening with language and imagery and topic in these poems? Feel free to include other things you notice in these poems or anything else that inspires you at present!
* ***Write for 45 minutes***
* After writing:
  + Everyone is called back and invited (to voluntarily) share what they wrote or a section of what they wrote...

*(5 minutes)*

**Ideas for exit conversation**. **Participants invited to discuss and reflect on the experience:**

* What did you notice as you read and wrote? Were you surprised by anything in particular?
* Benefits / uses of reading and writing about school at the beginning of the academic year? At the beginning of this year specifically as many of us are teaching/ learning online?
* Do you think you will incorporate any of these poems, themes of the poems, or this method of writing together in a virtual room in your own teaching? In what specific ways? If you would use these texts, you’d use them in conjunction with what other texts/ ideas/ questions?
* Are your students writing creatively together in virtual spaces? What does that look and feel like?

**Other resources/ poems about school**:

<https://poets.org/poem/prompts-high-school-teachers-who-write-poetry>

<https://poets.org/text/poems-about-school-subjects>