OISE, University of Toronto

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**Epistolary poems**

**Workshop description:**

This 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities epistolary poems offer as we investigate what it means to use letter writing as a catalyst for a poem. Here we read poets who write to the world, a place/ space, an absent friend or lover, the past, their past or younger self, and often a combination of people, places, and things. What does this form specifically invite or inspire?

We also look at self-addressed poetry writing as lineage and ultimately turn to Frank O’Hara’s poem “Katy”, which includes the line “someday I’ll love Frank O’Hara”. Decades after O’Hara wrote this line, Roger Reeves’ then Ocean Vuong use this self-address to write their own “Someday I’ll love…” poems.

The purposes of this workshop are: to share contemporary poetry, experience the act of writing poetry in community, and to think about the possibilities for contemporary poetry in our lives and classrooms as writer educators. We aim to 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 or two to describe how each person is feeling today

*(5 minutes)*

**Share the purpose of this workshop**: **To write a letter poem to someone else and/ or write a self-addressed poem that begins or includes “someday I’ll love *\*insert your name here\**”**

* Epistolary poems offer a specific invitation to write to someone, or a group of people, in and through time. You can even write to yourself, which we invite you to do here…
* Definition: *Epistolary poems, from the Latin "epistula" for "letter," are, quite literally, poems that read as letters. As poems of direct address, they can be intimate and colloquial or formal and measured. The subject matter can range from philosophical investigation to a declaration of love to a list of errands, and epistles can take any form, from heroic couplets to free verse.* (https://poets.org/glossary/epistolary-poem)

*(10-15 minutes)*

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

*(40-45 minutes)*

**Participants write**

Using the prompts offered, participants mute their mics and write (for 45 minutes). Participants are encouraged to consider: What else do you see happening with language and imagery and topics/themes in these poems? Feel free to include or mimic other things you notice in these poems or anything else that inspires you today!

After writing:Everyone is called back and invited (to voluntarily) share what they wrote or a section of what they wrote...

**POEMS:**

**“On the persistence of a letter as a form” by Paul Guest**

<https://poets.org/poem/persistence-letter-form>

* Reference real or imagined violent experiences with everyday objects (here a bike bends under the speaker, a guitar is smashed over a brother…) or even a death that happens intimately close (here a pet dies at the speaker’s feet)

**“Letter” by Mark Strand**

<http://mondaypoems.blogspot.com/2014/08/letter.html>

* Describe the movement of a thing in the world; how “things fall to others”
* Include the time and what the sun or moon or weather is doing as you write your poem

**“Letter to Brooks [Spring garden]” by Major Jackson**

<https://poets.org/poem/letter-brooks-spring-garden>

* Make a list of locations you spent time in as a child. Who will remember them? Who will forget them?
* Follow the pattern of “Flick of flat sticks”: two rhyming words, interrupted by a word that shares the first letter of one of the word

**“Dear P. [If you are}” by Victoria Chang**

<https://poets.org/poem/dear-p-if-you-are>

* Include something that it is okay not to do
* Let something be itself

**“6.3.96-6.4.96” by June Jordan**

<https://poets.org/poem/6396-6496>

* Make a list of things that love helps to resist, or is “pitted against”
* Make a list of words in which some of the internal letters switch positions (ie: die/deify)

**“The Letter” by Mary Ruefle**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54121/the-letter-56d2341c76d44>

* Include an “innermost thought”
* End your letter halfway through

**“Letters from Elders” by Brenda Shaughnessy**

<https://calypstory.wordpress.com/2020/12/>

* Address future humans or humanity in your writing
* Make a list of words, then add a prefix to them to make a new set of words, and use a pair in close proximity (ie: “well-deserved, we served”)
* Include both a product and a brand name of the same product (ie Cling Film, Saran Wrap)

**“A letter: the Genesis poem” by Bob Hicok**

<https://muse-jhu-edu.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/chapter/468240>

* Include a list of objects on your desk, in your room, or nearby
* Include a portion of writing using this constraint: use only words found in one of the poems we read this evening
* Include today’s date in your writing

**“Self-Portrait as Letter Addressed to Self” by J. Michael Martinez**

<https://poets.org/poem/self-portrait-letter-addressed-self>

* Start a line with the word “Someday…” then predict a future moment for yourself and describe it with as much detail as you want.
* Include a short recipe for something you know how to make (it could be a recipe for something difficult like cookies or directions on how to cook something easy like fry an egg. Martinez offers “your mother's *Strawberry Fruit-Salad Recipe”*)

**“Katy” by Frank O’Hara**

<https://readalittlepoetry.wordpress.com/2016/04/06/katy-by-frank-ohara/>

* include a short list of 3 or 4 complaints people (family, friends, and foes) have about you and comment on each one - maybe with an anecdote
* include the phrase “someday I’ll love *YOUR NAME*”

**“Someday I'll Love Roger Reeves” by Roger Reeves**

<http://getlitanthology.org/poemdetail/88/>

* once you’ve included “someday I’ll love YOUR NAME” write about what happens until that day comes… What do you do in the interim? What happens around you? Maybe you offer instructions or observations.
* describe an everyday scene as a moment of love (Roger Reeves describes a door closing on a child’s finger!)
* repeat a short phrase (almost like a stutter). Reeves writes “ Then let us. Then, let us hold each other toward heaven”

**“Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong” by Ocean Vuong**

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/04/someday-ill-love-ocean-vuong>

* Address yourself a few times in the poem, you can offer directions, offer a calming sentence, or question or whatever suits the poem you’re writing. Ocean Vuong uses:

“Ocean, don’t be afraid”; “Ocean, are you listening?”; “Ocean. Ocean. Get up.”

* Repeat a phrase, as many times as you want, that addresses your own body. You can use Ocean Vuong’s sentence to begin: “The most beautiful part of your body is…”

*(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 a workshop like this?
* 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?