OISE, University of Toronto

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**Family: looking back and forward**

**Workshop description:**

This 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities of reading and writing poems about family and our relations past, present, and future. Here we read poets who write to: parents/guardians before they took on that role and long after they’re gone to us and the world, siblings, aunts and uncles, partners, children, chosen family, lovers ... Looking at these relationships and zeroing in one and looking at it singularly allows us to time travel within those relationships to previous versions of the other and, perhaps more importantly here, previous or future or just alternate versions of ourselves. Who made you? Who sustains you? How are you in the world with or without family?

As always, we’re thinking through what this theme specifically invites or inspires as we ask ourselves: What are we navigating in the murkiness of our relations to family and our own lineages/ ancestors? What kind of ancestor will we be? Who are we in relationship to family given and chosen? In what configurations do we collide or support each other?

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 explore the surface and depths of those who raised us, those we love and call family, the intricacies of their personalities and life and how it has left a print on our own
* To explore the past, present, and future real and imagined of family and how we exist together and apart in this world… To explore relationships our parents have to their own lives and lovers before they have children, our childhoods, and our futures as people who care for and take care of those we love intentionally

*(10-15 minutes)*

**Participants volunteer to read through all 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**:

**“A family history”, Julia Spicher Kasdorf**

<https://poets.org/poem/family-history>

* Describe one or more scenes - one for each of your parents/guardians as young people (In that moment - What are they doing? What are they wearing? How is their hair? What do they care about? What is their physical environment and their relation to it? What’s the weather? What are the politics of the place?)

**“I go back to may 1937”, Sharon Olds**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47057/i-go-back-to-may-1937>

* Describe the moment your parents/guardians or grandparents met *or* fell in love. Where was this? Feel free to turn violent images gentle or calm and vice versa (For instance, Olds writes: “red tiles glinting like bent/ plates of blood behind his head”)
* Address the couple directly while they’re in this moment - What do you have to say to them as their future offspring?

**“This be the verse” Phil Larkin**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48419/this-be-the-verse>

* Use the phrase “They fuck you up… ” or “They *don’t* fuck you up... ”

**“Ave Maria”, Frank O’Hara**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42670/ave-maria>

* Address present day mums or dads or parents generally - what might they be denying their kids of or insisting they experience; venture a guess at what would happen if they took your advice and ignore your advice (O’Hara recommends mothers let their kids go to the movies and explains what will happen if they do let them go to the movies and what will happen if they deny them that opportunity…)

**“Remember”, Joy Harjo**

<https://poets.org/poem/remember-0>

* Recall the roots of your life -- you can write about your roots temporally (and write about the beginning of your life) or physically/ spatially (and write about family, the soil, water and air, etc.) or otherwise
* Use the repetition of “remember” like Harjo does in her poem (she uses it as an incantation to call herself back to specific places and time and people). What will you ask yourself to remember?

**“Driving home from keyworths”, Tennessee Hill**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/156064/driving-home-from-keyworths>

* Recall an early memory of being in a car or doing something forbidden and fun with a parent/ guardian
* Include the question “have you ever known the home of your own name?” and, if you want, answer it in your poem

**“Sweet daddy”, Patricia Smith**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/156345/sweet-daddy>

* Address a loved one who has died - detail what celebrating their most recent or upcoming birthday would be like if they were here. Include: their age (which they’ve never lived until your poem), a toast to them, a phrase someone they knew says about them…
* Consider what you do with them on this day to celebrate. Explore this outing in as much detail as possible (who’s there, what are you doing/ eating/ drinking, what is the music/ lighting/ atmosphere, etc.)

**“Telemachus” Ocean Vuong**

<https://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-prizes-for-poetry-2/ocean-vuong/ocean-vuong-telemachus/>

* Include an important, pivotal moment in the life of a parent or guardian and imagine inheriting that moment (Vuong inherits his father’s drowning). Recall other things you inherit from the people who raised you - comment on these in any way

**“Autonomous Song” Hoa Nguyen**

* Include some specific traditions (cultural or familial) that your parents refused and some that they embraced

**“My mother’s name Lucha”, Juan Felipe Herrera**

<https://poets.org/poem/my-mothers-name-lucha>

* Play with word spacing on the page, use tabs or gaps instead of punctuation

**“Glitter in my wounds”, CA Conrad**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/148106/glitter-in-my-wounds>

* Describe a poem not written by a poet

**“I invite my parents to dinner”, Chen Chen**

<https://poets.org/poem/i-invite-my-parents-dinner-party>

* What sorts of security blankets do your parents employ? Which ones do you use? Include one of them in your writing

**“Sherbet”, Cornelius Eady**

<https://poets.org/poem/sherbet>

* What language would you use to translate “eye motions” or “afternoon silence”? Include some untranslatable physical gestures in your writing

**“Grown daughter”, Lucille Clifton**

<https://www.reddit.com/r/Poetry/comments/n8bczb/poem_grown_daughter_by_lucille_clifton/>

* What is something you do differently than your parents in the kitchen?
* End your writing with a repeated question

**“He raids the refrigerator and reflects on parenthood” Alden Nowlan**

* Did you have any teenage rituals? If so, include one in your writing, or include an instance when that ritual was spoiled in some way

**“White Paper Birds” Shannon Bramer**

<http://www.minolareview.com/shannonbramer>

* Notice the alliterative pairs throughout the poem: sing/sleep, wolf/weep, shiny/shovel, swans/swimming, tiny/torn. Make your own list of five alliterative word pairs and include some in your writing

**“When my Brother was an Aztec” Natalie Diaz**

<http://teaching.lfhanley.net/english495sp19/natalie-diaz-when-my-brother-was-an-aztec/>

* Include words or phrases in another language
* Elevate one of your family members to the status of a god or deity

**“My grandma told stories or cautionary tales”, Marlanda Dekine-Sapient Soul**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/155931/my-grandma-told-stories-or-cautionary-tales>

* Do you or any of your family members have any cautions or superstitions they rely on? Was there a story, fable, or place you were particularly scared of as a child? Include one of these in your writing

*(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?