OISE, University of Toronto

Hosted by: Ashleigh A. Allen & Ben Gallagher

**Life and death (but life)**

**Workshop description:**

Our 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities these poems offer as we investigate what it means to see, feel, or experience a death without actually dying; here the focus is on living and how life often sits beside death.

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 engage in reading/ writing about various dimensions of dying, alongside living and/or returning to life:**

* In these poems, while contemplating death we take a stand against it; we create in the face of it and advocate for life. Many of these poems take the fact of our own death and sit it alongside the ongoingness of life. As we come out of winter and enter into spring in this hemisphere, the kinds of ways life (spring) and death (Covid19, illness, etc.) sit alongside each other in our lives and in our art are worth attention.
* Each of these poets takes a different approach to language and narrative; we’re always searching for ways to write into an unspeakable experience. These poets are trying to find their way towards and around that unspeakable, seemingly unnarratable silence (death, physical and/or spiritual), through experiments with language.
* What do we, the living, uncover in this space of death or dying? What does it mean to meditate on this? Many of the poets we read today offer the poem as a meditative space.
* We’re offering a *content warning* that in these poems there is mention of: suicidal ideation, HIV/AIDS, anti-semitism/ the Holocaust, racism, terminal illness - … These topics aren’t to be celebrated, but these poems offer powerful examples of what humans have lived or died with and beside, which they offer hope, love, grace, and life in the face of these things.

*(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:**

**Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “The world is a beautiful place”**

<https://poets.org/poem/world-beautiful-place>

* Try writing lines that step away from the left margin, explore an open spacing on the page
* Make a list of 5 verbs, then describe each of them as a “scene” (eg: the love scene, the fun scene)
* Make some word pairs using multisyllabic words (eg: distinction/extinction, segregations/investigations) to use in your writing

**Margaret Gibson, “It doesn’t take much”**

<https://poets.org/poem/it-doesnt-take-much>

* Use an animal in your writing as an ambassador from somewhere
* Ask a *how* question, followed by a *why* question
* Include a moment of “injured life” in your writing

**Melvin Dixon, “Heartbeats”**

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

* Choose a number between 2 and 9, then use that number to determine the number of syllables per line (this poem uses 4 syllables per line)
* Use the instructions “breathe in. breathe out” in your writing
* Make a list of 3 compound words. Use both the compound word and the words split apart in your writing (eg: sweetheart, sweet heart)

**Matthew Dickman, “Stroke”**

<https://www.rattle.com/stroke-by-matthew-dickman/>

* Choose a word, then remove letters from it one by one in your writing (eg: hotel becomes OEL, then O)
* What happens in the various rooms of your body?
* Describe something that is not a design or an idea

**Tony Hoagland, “I have good news”**

<http://www.divasofverse.com/2018/11/i-have-good-news-by-tony-hoagland.html>

* Include a prediction about your reader (eg: “you shall squat down”)
* Make a list of 3 simple joys, and include one in your writing
* End your poem with a bicycle

**CAConrad, “Glitter in my wounds”**

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

* Who do you want to “dream forward”?
* Include the voices of a stranger and a friend in your writing
* What are some other poems not written by poets?

**Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49000/lady-lazarus>

* Present parts of your body to the reader (Plath writes: “These are my hands/ my knees”)
* Describe/ assert yourself. Include the phrase: “I am a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ human/ woman/ man”
* Use repetition (Plath repeats: “So, so”, “Ash, ash”, “Beware, beware” etc) Or repeat entire phrases (Plath repeats: “I do it…”, “It’s easy…”, “I am…”)

**Jenn Givhan, “Endtime meditations on mothering and self-care 1”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/155671/endtimes-meditation-on-mothering-self-care-1#2a>

* After you’ve written your poem, go back and add footnotes
* Include the word “before” or “after” or “during” and repeat it (Givhan uses “before”)
* Mention an app. you use and what you use it for

**The Cyborg Jillian Weise, “DMs with Corbett O’Toole”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/155652/dms-with-corbett-otoole>

* Finish the phrase: “I’m lost and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_”
* Include a few single exclaimed words (Weise uses “Help!” and “Hello!” but you can use any word)
* Include the full name of a friend or person in your life in the poem or in the title of the poem (partners, colleagues, neighbours…) Feel free to include dialogue/ DM dialogue in the poem
* Ask a question and repeat it

**Lucille Clifton, “Won’t you celebrate me?”**

<https://poets.org/poem/wont-you-celebrate-me>

* Invite others to celebrate you or a specific aspect of you (Clifton writes “won’t you celebrate with me/ what I have made into a kind of life?”) Maybe you even lift this line for your poem?
* Include something specific that often works against you but does not succeed in diminishing or ruining you (Clifton is vague and writes that it’s “something”, but it could be work, a person, an aspect of contemporary society or politics…Try to be honest in what takes from you and maybe even in what it takes)

*(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?

***Other possible poems****:*

Xandra Pilips, “Edmonia Lewis and I weather the storm” <https://poets.org/poem/edmonia-lewis-and-i-weather-storm>

Gwendolyn Brooks, “We real cool” <https://poets.org/poem/we-real-cool>

Paul Celan, “Death Fugue”<https://poets.org/poem/death-fugue>

Judy Grahn, “A woman is talking to death” <https://poets.org/poem/woman-talking-death>