OISE, University of Toronto

Hosted by: Ashleigh A. Allen & Ben Gallagher

**Looking at forms: Abecedarians & Ghazals**

**Workshop description:**

This 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities of reading and writing poems that follow a specific form -- in this case Abecedarians and Ghazals. We look at a range of contemporary poets pushing against or harnessing these forms for their own purposes, to think about the possibilities they offer us for our own writing and thinking.

The purposes of this workshop are: to share in the reading of contemporary poetry, experience the act of writing poetry in community, and 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:

**(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:**

**Abecedarian poems**

[*https://poets.org/glossary/abecedarian*](https://poets.org/glossary/abecedarian)

*The abecedarian is an ancient poetic form guided by alphabetical order. Generally each line or stanza begins with the first letter of the alphabet and is followed by the successive letter, until the final letter is reached.*

**Natalie Diaz, Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56353/abecedarian-requiring-further-examination-of-anglikan-seraphym-subjugation-of-a-wild-indian-rezervation>

* Use someone’s full name and an abreviation/nickname (e.g. Gabriel/Gabe)
* Include a collection of animals, and what they symbolize (e.g. bats, owls, coyotes all mean death)

**Torrin A. Greathouse, Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination Before a Diagnosis Can Be Determined**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/152964/abecedarian-requiring-further-examination-before-a-diagnosis-can-be-determined>

* Experiment with punctuation: e.g. replace commas with quotation marks
* Make a list of things you have been tested for, or tests you’ve administered, and include some in your poem

**Jessica Greenbaum, A poem for S**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/55645/a-poem-for-s>

* Include letters or characters from a different language or alphabet (e.g. aleph, tav)
* What is a simple action you can perform in order to ask for or receive forgiveness?

**Sun Yung Shin, Abecedarian: On Purchasing and Receiving Genetic Information from Two Commercial DNA Companies**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/152957/abecedarian-on-purchasing-and-receiving-genetic-information-from-two-commercial-dna-companies>

* Include blood in your poem
* Take a noun or any word and repeat it making it a gerund the second time (adding -ing to the end). Here Shin uses “condition” and “conditioning”
* Write a poem about your immediate and distant ancestors (where are they and you lucky or unlucky)

**Sharon Olds, Early abecedarian**

<https://salmagundimagazine.tumblr.com/post/64403120469/early-abecedarian>

* Include a section (or many sections) or the alphabet; this can be sections of letters or sounds
* Write about your early relationship to an alphabet or written language

Kaie Kellough, Alphabet

​​<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPa6gUYdbMM>

**Ghazal poems**

[*https://poets.org/glossary/ghazal*](https://poets.org/glossary/ghazal)

*The ghazal is composed of a minimum of five couplets—and typically no more than fifteen—that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous. Each line of the poem must be of the same length, though meter is not imposed in English. The first couplet introduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain. Subsequent couplets pick up the same scheme in the second line only, repeating the refrain and rhyming the second line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet's signature, referring to the author in the first or third person, and frequently including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning.*

**Adrienne Rich, Late ghazel**

<https://shenandoahliterary.org/blog/2012/01/late-ghazal-by-adrienne-rich/>

* Write a distance using the structure “From \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_”
* Finish the line “memory says....”

**Luisa A Igloria, Ghazal, with cow burial**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/154928/ghazal-with-cow-burial>

* Include a list of roles (“ matriarch, widow, wife”)
* Give yourself a nickname no one you know would give you ( “Bob (beast of burden)”

**Tracy K Smith, Ghazel**

<https://poets.org/poem/ghazal-1>

* Finish the line “history is a…”
* Repeat a short phrase, like an incantation (“Our name our name our name our fraught, fraught name”)

**Issabella Borgeson, Ghazal on how to birth a boy**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/154692/ghazal-on-how-to-birth-a-boy>

* Write a prose poem of the birth/ changing into a new version of yourself at a pivotal time in your life
* Use a simple rhyme refrain (“tomboy to strong boy...can I come along, boy?...  I long boy...you belong, boy...after dawn boy”) It might be most helpful to write these out before you write your poem

**Angel Nafis, Ghazal for becoming your own country**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/90977/ghazal-for-becoming-your-own-country>

* Use a noun as a verb (e.g. “the body prayers home”)
* Include one or two sentences or partial sentences beginning with “if” (e.g. if you lose your stop. If even the medicine hurts too)

**Tarfia Faizullah, Infinity ghazal beginning with Lice and Never Ending with Lies**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/148372/infinity-ghazal-beginning-with-lice-and-never-ending-with-lies>

* Make a list of words with the same vowel sound (e.g. tree, need, seed, breathe, leaf) to include in your poem but not at the ends of lines
* Make a list of word pairs where one word will stand in for another (e.g. tree/refugee), and then direct your reader to replace one word for the other

**Sanai Qaznavi (Trans. Khashayar Mohammadi)**

<https://nowruzjournal.com/translation/ghazal-63-by-sanai-qaznavi-translated-by-khashayar-mohammadi/>

* Write through a process of negation (make a list of things that are not/will not/ cannot etc)
* Make a vow to something

**John Thompson, Ghazal XIV**

* Include both a colon and a semi-colon in your writing
* Describe losing something and finding something else (e.g. losing the sun, finding poetry?)

**Phyllis Webb, Sunday Water: 13 anti-ghazals**

* Pivot in one line from not-doing to doing something (e.g cannot dance with/danced in black)
* Make a list of words beginning with the same letter. End a sentence with one word, begin the next sentence with a word of the same letter (e.g. “A mist in the harbour. Hydrangea bloom turns ink.”)

*(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?