

Poetry and dance

Workshop description:

This 90-minute creative writing workshop unpacks the creative possibilities of reading and writing poems that explore the movement of dance. These poets explore what it means to move and dance with the self, another, or many others, both by chance or by choice. They consider how we hold, trust, or distrust ourselves and our bodies in the movements; how we welcome or reject the beauty and pain of dancing; how the steady pace and unpredictable directions a dance takes can evoke alternative ways of being. These poems are meditations on dance.

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)

Cornelius Eady, Victims of the latest dance craze

- Imagine your neighbourhood or city is alight with everything and everyone in the throes of dancing. Zoom into specific moments, people, shops, cafes, objects, etc. and describe the scene (their movements/interactions - including your own)
- Instead of a formal dance name, invent a new name for a dance that is the movement of the previous scene (Eady says of his dance: “We call it scalding the air/ We call it dying with your/ shoes on”)

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Doing the twist on nails

- Include a dance on an uncommon (if not painful) surface
- Describe how life and/ or death can “dance” (be specific in their sounds and movements)

William Carlos Williams, Danse Russe

- Include an anecdote of dancing naked, freely
- Finish the line “Who shall say I am not _____?”

Billy-Ray Belcourt, Sacred

- Include an anecdote of dancing alone but surrounded by people
- List an ordinary thing you do that can also be interpreted as protest (Belcourt names painting his nails)

Danez Smith, The 17 year old & the gay bar

- Bless something in your poem
- Create a list of at least 3 specific desires and begin each desire with the words “I want...”

Anne Sexton, How we danced

- Repeat the phrase “We moved like...” three times
- Include three different animals (ie: dog/serpent/swan)

Matthew Dickman, Slow Dance

- Make a list of alliterative word pairs to use (yogurt/yoga, haiku/honey, orange/orangutan)
- Describe several ordinary activities as a kind of dance

Bob Hicock, Confessions of a Nature Lover

- Make a list of words that are only different by a single letter (ie: location/locution)
- Which natural phenomena would you take on a date?

Michelle Brown, On Not Becoming Famous

- Use your writing to predict things that will happen tomorrow
- Include the names of singers/musicians who matter to you (ie: Beyoncé, Ella Fitzgerald)

Brenda Shaughnessy, Dancing in My Room Alone

- Make a list of rhyming word pairs, include one at the start of a line and the other at the end of the next (ie: blue/true, given/horizon, sun/undone, fall/ball)
- Begin your writing alone and end with a stranger

(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!

(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?