

“Dictators kill poets” (but not their poetry)

HOSTS:

Ashleigh A. Allen &
Ben Gallagher

Workshop description:

This 90-minute creative writing workshop unpacks the creative possibilities of reading and writing through poems that respond directly to fascist or totalitarian politicians and their regimes and that think about the political possibilities within art and poetry, especially when pitted against repressive brutality. This is in response to marking one year since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the fall election results in Italy and Sweden, the recent move towards legislating anti-trans bills, anti-choice bills (and others aimed at women and queer people) and the general growing global rise of fascism. Thankfully, there are movements in many countries of communities rising up and fighting back. (*The title of this workshop comes from this article on [LitHub](https://lithub.com/dictators-kill-poets-on-federico-garcia-lorcas-last-days/) that explores the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca’s life and poetry and his early death, which was ordered by Franco in 1936: <https://lithub.com/dictators-kill-poets-on-federico-garcia-lorcas-last-days/>*)

As always, in our monthly writing workshop, we look at a range of contemporary poets (and modern poets here) who push against or harness this issue of Fascism and dictatorship 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 and modern 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

(15-20 minutes)

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

(20-30 minutes)

Participants free write

POEMS & PROMPTS:

“I explain some things” by Pablo Neruda

- Make a list of items you find when walking around your neighbourhood
- Refuse a metaphor (eg: “from the streets the blood of children ran simply, like blood of children”)

“To those who follow in our wake” by Bertolt Brecht

- Begin and end a poem/section of a poem with the same line (eg: “Truly I live in dark times!”)
- Who or what does your language betray?

“A leaf, treeless” by Paul Celan

- Explain an injustice in the world to a tree

“Stonewall to Standing Rock” by Julian Talamantez Brolaski

- Use text abbreviations (eg: thinking of u w love) and/or include some text exchanges in your writing
- Describe a music video or mention a singer that matters to you

“The Creator is Trans” by Billy-Ray Belcourt

- Describe a psychology experiment and what it determines
- Complete the phrase “heaven is a place called _____”

“The Firing Squad is Singing in Chile” by Martin Espada

- Locate a feeling in a body part (eg: fear-eyed)
- List some repressive policies or absurd bureaucratic mandates

“Not one more refugee death” by Emmy Pérez

- Include signs or slogans you’ve encountered at a protest
- Make a list of word sound clusters (eg: *bullfight ring lights, pleas not to leave in white rosary beads*) to draw on in your writing

“The End of Exile” by Solmaz Sharif

- Explore the scenes of injustice you are audience to in your life and how you react/interact with them.

“What kind of times are these” by Adrienne Rich

- Start to describe a place you love in great detail, then stop yourself abruptly when you're halfway done
- Finish the phrase "It's necessary to talk about..."

"We Are Not Responsible" by Harryette Mullen

- Write a mock interrogation of you or someone you love. What would authorities say to them, what would they be detained for, what would this process be like, etc. Feel free to write bizarre, atypical things authorities might be concerned with.

"Logic" by Alice Notley

- Explore the experiences in life, yours or the collective we, which are left (partially or fully) undescribed or unexplained
- Use the phrase "I repeat" and repeat an earlier line later in your poem

"Oblivious Imperialism Is The Worst Kind" by CA Conrad

- Mention some small thing you do as a homage to something larger
- Write a string of one word lines extending down the page

"We Lived Happily During the War" by Ilya Kaminsky

- Describe or explore aspects of your life, small things that have brought you joy, in the last year or longer despite the state of things locally, nationally, and globally. Balance atrocity with the simple pleasures in life as Kaminsky does here.

"I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies" by June Jordan

- Finish the phrase "I must become..." and use it as a refrain throughout your poem.
- Interrupt yourself in your writing with an all-caps interjection, even possibly a question. Jordan stops herself mid-sentence with "WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH ME?"

(10 minutes)

Participants are invited to share their writing or a section of what they wrote