OISE, University of Toronto

Hosted by: Ashleigh Allen & Ben Gallagher

**Contemporary engagements with the “natural” world**

**Workshop description:**

Our 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities these poems offer as we investigate the interrelated themes of nature and emergence, and new ways to reflect on our experiences of the natural world one year into the Covid19 pandemic.

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 love and anti-love**

* As spring approaches (in a few days) and the weather warms, we may find ourselves re-engaging with the outdoors in new ways. Today we are considering how we welcome and reject elements of nature, how we resemble what we find there, how it sometimes echoes what we feel or desire to feel or are trying not to feel.
* What do we find in the world that’s natural? What in us is natural? What in us and what in our relations mirrors or speaks to what we find there? What are we even doing outside? These questions seem particularly heightened as we all grapple with being a year into a pandemic and induced isolation.

- There is a long tradition within poetry of contemplating the natural world, and particularly seasons such as spring (a favourite of Romantic poets). Contemporary poets have also taken up these themes, but filtered through modern approaches to language (Lockwood) and also contemporary concerns with racial injustice (Ross Gay), a sense of isolation (Hoagland), gender and sexuality (Conrad), and bodies (Limon).

*(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:**

**Ada Limon, “Instructions on not giving up”**

<https://poets.org/lesson-plan/teach-poem-instructions-not-giving-ada-limon>

* Name something in nature/ the natural world that “gets to you.” What is this plant/ species? Describe what you see it “do” and how it transforms or alters over the course of a year. What does it do in springtime? Is there something about this pattern or movement that you see in yourself? Are there elements to it that are human-like in appearance or behaviour? Describe these.
* Is there advice it offers through its existence? What might it “say” about life or living?

**e. e. cummings, “Spring is like a perhaps hand”**

<https://poets.org/poem/spring-perhaps-hand>

* Include bracketed sections in your poem
* Repeat a simile that asserts and repeats (cummings writes: “spring is like a perhaps hand”)

**Ross Gay, “A Small Needful Fact”**

<https://poets.org/poem/small-needful-fact>

* Build your writing around a hypothetical (ie: perhaps, in all likelihood)
* What or whom in the world does your breath connect you to?
* Include the suffix -ful to alter a word (ie: needful, hungerful)

**Patricia Lockwood, “Natural Dialogue Grows in the Woods”**

(from *Motherland, Fatherland, Homelandsexuals*, 2014)

* Include fragments of a conversation
* Make a list of 5 different landscapes (ie: woods, desert) and 5 different fairy tale characters (ie: Red Riding Hood), and put one of the characters into a landscape
* Repeat the opening word of a sentence (ie: hopefully, hopfully/totally totally)

**Tony Hoagland, “A color of the sky”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42595/a-color-of-the-sky>

* Juxtapose an element of spring (ie: dogwood tree) with an urban scene (ie: youth centre between liquor store and police station)
* Make a list of 5 word pairs that share the same internal vowel sound (ie: ground/clouds, sudsy/mug), and use pairs of them in close proximity
* Name someone you won’t apologize to

**Frank O’Hara, “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57555/adieu-to-norman-bon-jour-to-joan-and-jean-paul>

* Include an anecdote about the exact time and place where you are now
* Finish the phrase “I wish I…”
* Write something you’ve done (and don’t comment on whether it was done well or poorly, just that it was completed)
* Name the last place (as vague as a country or city or as specific as a street) that you looked up on a map and list things that happen in that place/ space, who is there, what they do, etc.

**CAConrad, “Bee Alliance”**

<https://pen.org/bee-alliance/>

* Find something in your house to taste before you begin writing. Take notes on the experience of the taste to include in your poem
* Dedicate your writing to someone, and then address them throughout (ie: Dear Fred)
* Take a lyric from a song (ie: “shake it off”) and use it in relation to an animal

*(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?