OISE, University of Toronto

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**Poems that write into an absence: spaces, places, people and events that haunt**

**Workshop description:**

Our 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities these writings about absence, loss, and abandonment have to offer us, as we continue to experience the physical (and otherwise) absences produced or amplified by the global covid-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this workshop is to share contemporary poetry and the experience of writing poetry in community, and to ultimately 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 absence**

- Poetry often confronts absence through writing about lack or loss in the form of the elegy, thinking about the absences produced by loss and various forms of death. On another level, poetry thinks about the power of language to evoke things that are absent, and also language’s (in)ability to actually bring anything into being.

- The need for physical distancing has also brought about a number of unexpected absences into being, and as we approach the holidays we wanted to make space in the workshop setting to consider how poetry might speak into the new set of absences we’re currently experiencing

*(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 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:**

**Henri Lefebvre’s book *The Missing Pieces* (an excerpt) :** <https://www.berfrois.com/2014/12/missing-pieces-henri-lefebvre/>

*Prompts:*

* Write some specific moments that were meant to happen but didn’t (parties, gatherings, moments with loved ones, etc.)
* Recall things that have been destroyed, abandoned, or lost - art pieces, physical objects, relationships, specific sites in the natural world, etc. Include these as a list maybe with anecdotes if you wish. List as many you want; they don’t need to be clearly “related” in any way
* Include an idea you’ve imagined with someone (maybe you were going to write or create something or take a daytrip or vacation) that never came into fruition.

**John Berryman, “Dream Song 29”:**

<https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2016/04/26/dream-song-29/>

*Prompts:*

* What “sits” on your heart? What is this weight’s duration of being/ “sitting” there?
* Include + finish the phrase “All the bells say: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_”
* Include the phrase “Nobody is ever missing”

**Margaret Atwood, “This is a photograph of me”:**

<https://poets.org/poem/photograph-me>

*Prompts:*

* Refer to a photograph you’ve taken in the last year of an outdoor scene, then…
  + imagine there are ghosts in this photograph of moments past, maybe you are one of them - what were they doing then? What are they doing now? What happens here? “Scan” the scene...Imagine what else/ whom else might be there and what they are doing.
* Try to remember the day/ moment this was taken and maybe even the intended purpose of the photograph - include these details
* Include + finish the phrase: “If you look long enough…”

**Kenyatta Rogers, “Labyrinth”**

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

*Prompts:*

* Include the phrase “I’ve lost\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_” and describe it
* List 3-5 things in your home that are “almost completely useless”
* Include the phrase: “The rule is:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_”

**Kevin Young, “Urgent Telegram to Jean-Michel Basquiat”**

<https://poets.org/poem/urgent-telegram-jean-michel-basquiat>

*Prompts:*

* Write a portion of your text in all caps
* Spell out some punctuation (comma, exclamation etc) as in a telegram
* Directly address an artist or creative figure of importance to you

**Heid. E. Erdrich, “Red Language”**

<https://poets.org/poem/red-language>

*Prompts:*

* Recall an important conversation you had with someone -- describe its effect on you, without giving any details about the content
* Explore the difference between living and choosing to live
* Make a list of word pairs that share a common vowel sound (ie: rough/scrub, kind/mild) and use two sets in your poem

**Matthew Roher, “Poem Written with Basho”**

<https://realpants.com/surrounded-by-friends-by-matthew-rohrer/>

*Prompts:*

* Include a dream or dream fragment
* What does Thursday feel like to you?
* Include two environmental elements (ie: fog and wind)

**Mary Ruefle, “Favorite Song”**

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=QM7nDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA37&lpg=PA37&dq=mary+ruefle+favorite+song+my+life+is+a+passing+september&source=bl&ots=bp2hFyUEE8&sig=ACfU3U3L00wCz1_C4jq4rMyUnIHl7Hpb-g&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiU8_zm5LftAhV8FVkFHZRVDJcQ6AEwBnoECAcQAg#v=onepage&q=mary%20ruefle%20favorite%20song%20my%20life%20is%20a%20passing%20september&f=false>

*Prompts:*

* Use only periods, no other punctuation mark
* Use the same simile twice (“like a horse ridden to death”) to alter what it describes
* Create a list of rhyming pairs and include one to make a couplet (ie: knickerbockers/ locker)

*(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?