

OISE, University of Toronto

Hosted by: Ashleigh A. Allen & Ben Gallagher

Ghosts/ Hauntings/ Haunted

Workshop description:

This 90-minute creative writing workshop explores the creative possibilities of reading and writing poems about ghosts - who/ what/ where haunts us and the places and people we haunt. Relationships with ghosts are still relationships, and thus, require an ethics and a mode of engagement. These poems explore a variety of perspectives and narratives about our loved ones haunting us or even strangers as we inquire into what we did with our loved ones when they were with us and what we can do with them in their memory now that they're gone, what these ghosts still teach us and what we can learn from ourselves in ghost form... Keeping in mind that ghosts have a life of their own (pun intended), what are *our* ghosts doing in *our* lives and what are we doing in theirs? What is to become of these experiences? How are we summoning or being summoned in a spiritual form and what happens once the ghosts arrive? When they depart? Some ghosts tear us apart, some put us back together, but their presence offers something and we will try to uncover that.

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:

- These poems create invitations for us to experience or imagine experiences with our dead, those close to us such as family members, animals, historical figures, pop culture icons, etc.... Some of these poems reach back in time, some locate themselves in the present moment, and some lunge forward into the future and imagine hauntings in a future time and place.

- Some of the questions we explore in the reading and writing poems today:
 - What are our ghosts and what is their function in our lives? What are we doing in theirs?
 - What is to become of these experiences that seem to happen parallel to or embedded within our “real life”?
 - How are we summoning or being summoned in a spiritual form and what happens once the ghosts arrive? When/ why/ how do they depart?
 - What is this presence offering us? What do we offer the ghosts who arrive?

(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:

Saeed Jones, "A Stranger"

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/a-stranger>

- Imagine a stranger interacting with the ghost of your loved one. Where does that happen and what do they see/ smell/ feel of this ghost? Vividly describe the scene.
- Where do you live in the spirit of the ghost at this moment? (For Jones, they have potentially become the song their dead mother’s ghost hums, maybe you’re in the walk, or the way they cut a specific vegetable, etc.)

Wendell Berry, "A meeting"

<https://brtom.typepad.com/wberry/2017/04/on-reading-wendell-berrys-a-meeting.html>

- Include an indulgence of the ghost of a loved one. Berry’s ghost has “been eating peaches off some mighty fine trees” - what has your ghost been indulging in and how do they phrase it to you, a loved one?

Gabrielle Calvocoressi, "Miss you. would like to take a walk with you"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/156433/miss-you-would-like-to-take-a-walk-with-you>

- Write in short, curt, simple or fractured phrases things you would like to do at present with your beloved who is dead. What do you eat? Where would you walk to or visit? Describe the scene vividly.
- Calvocoressi lists things she misses and things she wishes for from her beloved. Feel free to create a similar list, starting each item with the refrain “Miss you...” or “Wish you’d...”

Hala Alyan, “Turnpike//ghosts”

<https://poets.org/poem/turnpike-ghost>

- Name a thing you still do/ have done for someone who is dead and describe the scene. (Alyan wears a red dress.)
- Turn home into an equation... ***** + ***** + ***** = home (You can use division or subtraction or other mathematical operations, of course.)

Yusef Komunyakaa, “Deck”

<http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/poems/komunyakaa/deck.php>

- What questions did you have for your dead that you no longer have? (These questions have been answered by your day to day living/ doing) Unpack that moment or series of moments - what was the task or topic you had questions about? What were the tools involved? How did you accomplish it without this advice from your departed? (Komunyakaa builds a deck, and other things in his life, without his father.)

Cathy Linh Che, “Becoming ghost”

<https://poets.org/poem/becoming-ghost>

- Recount an experience of someone ghosting you/ turning you into a ghost when you are, as we know, very real. How do we turn loved/ known people or places or things into ghosts/ unknowns?

b: william bearhart, “On the backs of american bison”

<https://poets.org/poem/backs-american-bison>

- Write in the voice/ from the perspective of an animal or extinct animal. (bearhart writes from the perspective of a crow.) What are your habits or sensitivities? How do you live in the world? What other animals do you rely on and in what ways? Do you rely on other animals or forms of life? Do your loved ones recognize you in this form?
- Include the phrase, “My _____ used to call me _____”

Tiffany Midge, “Distracted from covid19...”

<https://poets.org/poem/distracted-covid-19-attention-shifts-mia-maiden-land-olakes-butter-box>

- Address the ghost of a pop. culture icon from the past that no longer exists or exists in a different form/ shape (or has been altered if not eliminated). What did they represent?

What were they “selling”? After exploring this fictional character's existence and death/ disappearance, write into the experience of what a real person/ animal version of the pop culture icon in our world would experience. Midge describes how indigenous women and their disappearance is addressed (and speaks to how MMIWG are often not part of the narratives of missing persons or women and girls).

- Include a phrase (or a few) beginning “O...”

Elaine Equi, “Ghosts and fashion”

<https://poets.org/poem/ghosts-and-fashion>

- Include a word in quotes (e.g. “appear”)
- What clothing does your ghost wear?

Kiki Petrosino, “Ghosts”

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

- Create word pairs that share a common vowel sound (ie: herons/wearing, lonely/ghostly) to use in your writing
- Categorize your ghosts into groupings (e.g. mothers, birds, planets)

Margaret Atwood, "Morning in the burned house"

<https://poets.org/poem/morning-burned-house>

- Begin two lines describing things you can see, followed by something you can't see

Jane Wong, “This is what survival looks like”

<https://yalereview.org/article/what-survival-looks>

- Is there a dream that haunts you?
- End your writing with a series of “what if” questions

Margaret Noodin, “Nimbawaadaan akiing/ I dream a world”

<https://poets.org/poem/nimbawaadaan-akiing-i-dream-world>

- Make a list of dreams you have for the future, to use in your writing
- Intersperse lines in another language, if you speak/write a second language

Robyn Sarah, “Night visit”

(From *Questions About the Stars*)

- Make a list of half-rhymes (ie: grieving/breathing, mother/weather, man/undone) to draw on in your writing

Louise Glück, “At The River”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/12/at-the-river>

- Discuss something in general and something in particular (e.g. parents and sex)

- Make a list of dead real things (e.g. the stars) and another of unreal lifelike things (e.g. the rock explosions), and include some of them in your writing

Ginsberg, "Howl" part III only ("Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland...)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49303/howl>

- Is there someone you want to be with right now? Where would you two be together? Let that place become a refrain in your writing
- If your soul is on an airplane, where is it going?

CAConrad, "Scryer's invitation"

(From *Ecodeviance...*)

- If you have two mirrors in your house, use them to perform a scrying before you begin to write, or as a way to get unstuck if your writing reaches an impasse
- Use the format of the phrase "let us begin to begin," so "let us _____ to _____"

(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?