

Freeing Creative Voice

Editor

Carrie Sweeney

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Dedication

To all creative writers and educators seeking to use their creative
power for the good of all.

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Introduction

By Dr. Francis Gilbert

I am delighted to introduce this wonderful anthology of writing by students who have studied on or are currently studying on the MA Creative Writing and Education. This MA is currently unique amongst postgraduate degrees devoted to creative writing because it requires students to learn not only about how to improve their creative writing, but also to teach and research the subject. This means that students become empowered to be significant researchers into their own work.

You'll find in this anthology that autoethnography is a powerful focus. This research strategy is particularly emancipatory for creative writers because it takes the best elements of autobiography and ethnographic research and fuses them into coherent forms of self-interrogation. In this anthology you'll see how Aimee Skelton excavated her own family shadows and silences using creative writing and autoethnography to fill in the gaps. Tamar Moshovitz also uses a similar strategy to unearth the familial silences in her own story, but with very different results because her story is so different. You'll perceive how Sal Fothergill has deployed autoethnography to interrogate some vital issues around gender and identity.

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Another focus of the course is to teach students how to teach creative writing in innovative and imaginative ways. Four of the pieces offer some fabulous workshop ideas for teaching which will be invaluable for any teacher of creative writing – of all age ranges. Sam Goundry Butler provides us with some fantastically telling and appropriate ideas for helping people going through important moments of transition – starting at a new school, or a new course, or starting to teach in their first school – to use creative writing and journalling to assist this process and understand their challenges, and set important goals. Desiri Okobia shows how creative writing can be used to teach children (and other age groups possibly) all about vital issues connected to identity, culture and learning, using her own creative writing as exemplars. Meanwhile, Carrie Sweeney illustrates how creative writing can be used in a trauma-informed fashion, to help student understand the nature of their trauma and also to develop their voices as expressive, authentic human beings. Christine Khisa shows how storytelling can be used to bring community groups together in joyful and meaningful ways.

Creative pieces end the anthology. Nick Bailey's chilling short story is instructive in so many ways, teaching us implicitly about issues connected with growing up in the age of Aids and chronic prejudice at a miserable, hierarchical, abusive school. Siamak Khezrian's short story is a telling political fable, showing how the refugee crisis can be a divisive issue even in supposedly sedate places like Norwich. The poems that finish the anthology are written by local school children, and illustrate beautifully the simple power of creative writing to connect to significant issues in children's lives.

A huge thank you to alumni Carrie Sweeney and

If you'd like to learn more about the course, log on here:
<https://www.gold.ac.uk/pg/ma-creative-writing-education/>

Editor's Prologue

By Carrie Sweeney

"Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life."

- Palmer J. Parke

Over the course of 2023, hundreds of thousands of educators, school administrators, students, and supporters took to the streets of London to protest unlivable wages and unreasonable demands placed upon school staff. It was a stunning spiral of a year in the world of teaching - a mess of unanticipated halts to learning, solidarity and community-building through advocacy, teacher burnout and plummeting retention rates, and major strides in numerous creative fields. Nevertheless, in the face of extreme uncertainty, fear, and fatigue, educators somehow powered through. Over the past year and a half, Steph and I have had the sheer joy of witnessing our classmates empower, and uplift their students or creative circles, determined to continue an unceasing pursuit of a better, brighter world. A mosaic of teachers, social workers, poets, novelists, and creative facilitators, the contributors featured here are all individually dedicated to a lifelong journey of learning, constantly seeking ways to expand their creative writing processes and classroom approaches. Forging onward in the uncertain world of teaching, we rely on the grounding force of educators like these, who are committed to pushing for reform and innovation for the benefit of all students. The core of this anthology rests in the conviction that as members of humanity, we can always continue seeking, learning, growing, and deepening connections.

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As Parker J. Palmer states, “The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it.” (Palmer 144) By sharing in the knowledge this anthology offers, you, reader, are invited to participate in an honest dialogue between teachers and learners. I urge you to utilize the workshop activities constructed by contributors here and consider the ways that you can expand your perspective, hold space for creative compassion, and deepen your personal practice/pedagogy. Now more than ever, we must rely on each other as teachers and artists to push forward, each step bringing us closer towards the unlimited, joyful, and creative educational future we know our students deserve.

Why am I striking? By Sam Goundry Butler

Because we are being exploited.
Because our care is being exploited.
Those daily moments of care:
that chat after lesson
with the kid who hangs around
to tell you about their hamsters
but who just needs some kindness
in their life. Or the care
for the kid who doesn't know how
to tell their parents. Care
for the kid who just can't sleep
or the one who rarely eats.
Or our care for each other:
for the young teacher,
hands clammy, eyes shadowed
by meeting upon meeting
of unrealistic expectations.

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Or the long-time workmate
graven by year on year
of the same old changes,
their face lined by columns
of data, still on duty at 2am,
eyes scanning the corridors
of their bedroom ceiling.

Or our care for families
other than our own: the bitten
lip of the call to the mum screaming
down the phone, taking out on my ear
what she can't take out on the state
that has told her in every cut and policy
that she is worthless and alone.
Or the call still being made at 6pm
to the terminally ill mum
whose son is struggling and failing
to be the man he thinks his mum needs
him to be, when he still needs to be
a lost boy, and we need to be a parent
to both mother and son, and its still
6pm and I will now miss my own kids'
bedtime, because somebody needs to care
about people and the idea of society.

All this care is being exploited
by the same politicians who have dodged
taxes, done dodgy deals with their mates,
cut budgets to the bone, said
there's no magic money tree
whilst they gorge on its low hanging

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fruit, who can find money to heat
their stables but not a classroom,
who can feast on cheese and wine
but not feed hungry kids in winter,
who can break their own rules,
but make new rules for workers,
who bully and cheat and lie and smear,
and then talk of their own integrity
and professionalism. Look at us.
Look at the teachers you clapped.
We could teach you a lesson.

PART I:

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY FOR ARTISTIC LIBERATION

In this section, you will encounter three unique creative writing research projects, all of which feature autoethnographic or introspective research elements. Aimee, Sal, and Tamar vulnerably explore themes of familial and cultural silence and authentic identity expression, sharing invaluable insight from their own reflective writing as well as conclusions and reflexive observations. Autoethnographic research offers an important pathway into individual thought patterns, granting writers the agency to unearth hidden truths and find ways to better their writing practices.

Here, you will learn various methods of freewriting, poetic and narrative inquiry, and personal inquiry for the purpose of intellectual research. Understanding and validating the depths of your own creative voice is an essential step to liberating it.

Writing into Family Shadows by Aimee Skelton

Introduction

My grandmother died prematurely and traumatically, aged forty-three, when my mum was ten years old. After her death, my mum's father quickly remarried the woman who would later become my granny, and there was a subsequent culture of silence surrounding my grandmother's life. Still to this day, it is difficult for my mum to talk about, after decades of repressed memory and emotion. Although I never met her, I have long felt a sense of amorphous, unresolved emotion surrounding my grandmother, who I have known relatively little about until now. I believe creative writing has the potential to be a powerful tool in helping us enter silences in our family histories, engage with our ancestors and intervene in inherited trauma. In this research, I ask: how can creative writing be used to deepen my connection to my family history, and further offer insight into the ways in which this history has manifested in me?

Methodology My research is underpinned by a bricolage of qualitative methodologies. In this context, bricolage refers to a multi-methodological approach that draws from a variety of theoretical constructs and research methods to enter and explore the problem, recognising the complexities of knowledge construction and the researcher's positionality (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, Kay, 2016). I chose this approach as it suits the hybrid nature of my research pursuit and allows the space to explore not only myself as researcher, but also the contexts and structures that my personal experience is in relation with. I use autoethnography and creative writing within my explorative enquiry, merged with an action research approach in the pursuit of developing a stronger connection to my history. My findings are situated within psychoanalytical frameworks and social theory, particularly regarding the insight-building, therapeutic effects of the writing practice. I draw upon existing knowledge around historical representation and intergenerational trauma to explore the relationship between my personal experience and what Kincheloe calls "the social location" of a personal history (2005, p.2). Much of the research in these areas speaks to a wider political perspective—specifically within historically marginalised and underrepresented communities. In the essence of bricolage, this assemblage of the personal and political seeks not to equate my personal experience, but rather to draw upon the framework that "highlights or erases what might be observed" (Kincheloe, p.2).

I carried out common family history research methods, such as collecting photographs and documents, talking with family members, and visiting places of familial connection. Simultaneously, I developed a regular practice of freewriting to support my enquiry, and understand the ways in which my body received and processed the information. Peter Elbow describes freewriting as continuous writing of “whatever is in your mind”. The writer should “never look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing” (1998, p.36). As a writer myself, I am already in a regular practice of freewriting to the point that the words flow easily for me. Once this ease has been reached, Julia Cameron suggests freewriting can offer “a trail that we follow into our own interior” where “the light of insight is coupled with the power for expansive change” (2020, p.23).

Freewriting as a Method of Enquiry

In 1987, feminist sociologist Frigga Haug introduced ‘memory work’- an emancipatory research methodology proposing a collective way of remembering, centring women’s lived experience (2009, p.1). Referencing Haug’s method, Barclay and Javette Koefoed write:

When we inherit memory from parents and
other family members, we also inherit
identity, a sense of who we are and where we
come from. Memory work within families
plays a central part in establishing, negotiating,
understanding, and adjusting personal
identity. This is challenged when there is no
family, or when the family contain secrets
that are best untold (2021).

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We can imagine these secrets as ‘silences in the archives’ (Xanthe Taylor & Jordan-Baker, 2019, p.201), or- in language that emerged from my freewriting describing my felt experience of the silences surrounding my grandmother- as ‘shadows’. On their own ‘silent inheritance’ of the holocaust, Epelbaum & Bush write that without speech, the narrative inherited by the family members of trauma survivors is “a story mired in silence, defined by silence: the story of silence itself” (2021, p.104). My experience of this silence has been deep-rooted and tender. In undertaking this research, it was vital for me to not only recognise the silence, but to treat it and its protective mechanism with respect. This meant respecting my own silences when writing, and respecting the literal and figurative silences of my family members when speaking about my grandmother. However, I also recognise that within the silence is capacity for transformation. Inherited family memories “are not static sites of knowledge or knowing but opportunities for exchange and engagement with our ancestors, for renegotiation and knowing” (Barclay & Javette Koefoed, 2001). Marianne Hirsch’s ‘postmemorial work’ “strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (2012, p.33). It is most powerfully mediated, she suggests, through technologies “like literature, photography and testimony” (2012, p.33). Creative writing, therefore, has the potential to act as a mediating tool within our family memories; able to locate and intervene in inherited trauma, offering healing, insight, and opportunities for new ways of ‘knowing’.

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Using creative writing to reimagine family histories is a relatively common practice amongst writers (recent examples include ‘The Lying Life of Adults’ by Elena Ferrante and ‘Free: Coming of Age at the End of History’ by Lea Ypi). I initially set out with the intention of writing poetry around my grandmother’s life, informed by my research findings. However, when the time came to write, I felt great pressure and internal resistance. Through journaling, I realised that at the root of these feelings was a sense of responsibility to produce pieces of writing for others to read, coupled with the discomfort I felt in assuming the authority to reproduce the narrative of someone I did not yet know. Gillie Bolton says writing “has to be undertaken in a pure spirit of enquiry” for it to be truly therapeutic in nature. “Explorative enquiry”, she says, should be “process- rather than product-based” (2011, p.19). With this in mind, I decided that keeping a regular freewriting journal of 20-minute-long passages would be a more appropriate, meaningful method of enquiry. The benefits of my freewriting practice in the early stages of my research were two-fold: it informed and guided my further direction of enquiry, while also offering a therapeutic space for catharsis and self-compassion as I took my initial steps into the shadow. In particular, I found it helped me to confront the sense of shame I held around feeling emotions which I felt did not belong to me, but rather belonged to those in my family who experienced the trauma first-hand. There is much discussion currently around ownership over narrative within issues of inherited or ‘intergenerational’ trauma (Hirsch, 2012). Intergenerational trauma can be defined as “a discrete form of trauma which occurs when traumatic effects are passed across generations without exposure to the original event” (Isobel et al, 2021, p.1). It is a relatively new field of research, having begun in the 1960s with symptoms noticed in the children of holocaust survivors (Davidson, 1980), and has widened to explore inherited trauma in both collective and familial contexts (Lin et al, 2013). Hirsch coined the term ‘postmemory’ describing “the relationship that “the generation after” bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before” (2012). Addressing the issue of narratorial relation and ownership, she writes:

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“How do we regard and recall what Susan Sontag has so powerfully described as the ‘pain of others?’ What do we owe the victims? How can we best carry their stories forward, without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them?” (2012, p.2)

The ethics of ‘carrying the stories forward’ without ‘appropriating’ or ‘calling attention’ to myself were present in my mind as I undertook the formal aspects of the research, meeting relatives who knew my grandmother, studying her old photographs and letters. I was aware of my complex positionality as ‘the researcher’ within my family, approaching a sensitive, familial issue from an academic lens. I acknowledge multiple levels of privilege in terms of my proximity to my research on a personal, familial and universal level. Within my family, I am distanced from the emotion generationally and I experience greater privilege in my social class than the generations that came before me. My grandmother grew up in poverty, forced to leave school at fourteen to work and take care of younger siblings. The fact that I am in a position to undertake this research in a postgraduate academic setting in London is indicative of the shift in privilege and access. In addition, being of the “generation after”, I am removed emotionally from the direct memory and tangible pain it carries, which situates me with greater comfort in approaching and discussing the more difficult aspects of our family history. As a result, I hold a responsibility and an awareness of the power in my positionality in my role as researcher.

Freewriting Pieces and Analysis

1: Meeting the Shadow

In the very early stages of my research, I shared the topic with my classmate and fellow writer Lorna McCook, who is a grandmother herself. Inspired by the story I told her, and drawing from her personal connection as a grandmother, she wrote a poem in response. Speaking from the point of view of the grandmother, beginning “how will I be remembered, when I die”, the poem triggered profound and surprising emotion in me. I followed her piece as a line of enquiry, freewriting for fifteen minutes based on the following excerpt from the poem as a prompt:

Someday, the flesh of my flesh
and the bones of my bones
will honour me
They will put flesh on my bones
and words in my mouth
Words I never got to share

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Freewrite response When she first read the poem to me, I was overcome by the presence of the 'I'. Welled up, then embarrassed at welling up, like it's not mine to feel. I'm welling up as I write this now. It feels hot, bubbling, rising in my chest and throat. Still, I want to force it all back down, like standing inside the wheelie bin when it's too full, stamping it down, making what was once overflowing somehow small again, down there in the shadows. It brings up the familiar feeling of swelling in my throat, tears coming from somewhere- not sure where- difficult to locate. This was always the fear with starting to dig. I read the poem again this morning, standing in the bus stop on the way to the library, the bright white sun in my eyes and my breath in front of me in the air, airplane flying over, and started to well up again. I try to stay with that welling feeling. Where are the tears coming from? What is their nature? Their language? When I feel it, it feels the same as the first time I learned about mum's mum. I can still picture myself there. Couldn't say what age I was. We were coming in the front door, maybe shopping bags in hand, in the wee porch between the glass door and the big brown plastic door where the electricity meter stayed, and Mum's telling me that my granny isn't her real mum, that her real mum died when she was ten of a disease called Crohns that made her shrink until she disappeared. Mum said she wasn't allowed to go to the funeral because she was "too young", but she'd walked through the cemetery as they were digging the grave and some teenage kids were there saying "look at the size of that grave, must be for a fat person" and she wanted to go and punch their lights out, and so did I when I heard it. The thing is I've always felt- still feel- that same swelling in my throat when I think of her as I did then. This looming pain that I always thought started when I first learned about my mum's mum. To call it pain even is too much of a description. It's the imprint of pain, the outline of pain, the shadows. Coming from down below the surface, and if it speaks, it's in a language I can't understand properly, muffled sounds maybe. I always suspected that it came from feeling her grief, maybe the first time, as a child, but maybe started before that, maybe I was born with it. The pain is a shadow without features. I learned bits about her over the years- mostly that she'd do anything for anybody, give you her coat if you were both freezing in a forest somewhere (I have this

image of her doing this). Mum always tells me I am similar to her. She called my papa Beeswings. She liked to sing. It's all just fragments. And still, when I think of her, it's the image of a person shrinking before disappearing, and it's the long, dull ache of the shadow. That's why Lorna's poem was so powerful- because it ventured into the silence to speak the language of the shadow. From the poem, from the point of view of another grandmother, one who is living now alongside me, the shadow grows bones, flesh, and a voice. The shadow begins to communicate, to step into light.

Analysis

Bolton suggests that “we know, remember and feel far more than we realise. Yet much of this is stored inaccessibly, especially at times of great need” (2011, p.22).

Freewriting in particular has the power to “encourage our closed internal doors to slip ajar”, to reach “sensitive and vulnerable” material (Bolton, 2011, p.22). In a similar vein, Warren et al promote creative writing as a self-care tool for counsellors, writing “in the world of creative writing, feelings can be accessed, pain can be externalized, and experiences can be understood” (2010, p.5). The level of insight I had access to within these freewriting bursts surprised me. Before starting the research, I suspected that the pain I felt around my grandmother was on my mum's behalf. However, the insight within this piece indicated that the pain came from the loss represented by the shadow, “the story of the silence itself” (Epelbaum & Bush 2021, p.104). Bolton writes that to understand ourselves better, “we need to perceive through the thingness, itness of things, to focus upon metaphorical realities” (2011, p.22). In the early stages of my research, I used metaphor regularly in freewriting to describe my emotions, most commonly as ‘a can of worms’ or ‘bottled up’, or, as can be observed in this passage, rubbish in a wheelie bin. Bolton explains, “Metaphor gives a relatively safe, non-direct approach to remembered or felt experience. Images can be explored sensitively, leading to far greater understanding than directly addressing the feelings or experiences” (2011, p.59). My use of language here directly reflects my proximity and relation to the shadow of my grandmother, indicating a need for, and security in, emotional distancing.

2: Entering the Shadow

The structures of power at play in authoring the reproduction of personal life stories can be examined through our historical archives and personal family trees. Information populating family trees often comes from surviving official documentation, such as records of births and marriages. In these diagrams, our ancestors are usually reduced to categorisation reflecting societal values; male/female, birth and death dates, spouses, children, possibly occupation. Rodney Carter describes our historical archives as “a reflection of and the source of state power” (2006, p.5.), a tool in the silencing of non-dominant groups through erasure of documented memory. In ‘Rukus! Europe’s first living archive dedicated to Black LGBT history’, Mary Stevens writes that for the Black queer community, “the act of rewriting through collecting and disseminating the evidence of “what isn’t there but was” is “particularly urgent”, she stresses this is “not just a solitary reflective endeavour” but “an act of collective rebellion” (2009, p.2). However, I wonder whose responsibility it is to rewrite into archival gaps, and which method is the safest in order to do so, especially when these gaps are fraught with the remnants of inherited trauma. The stories of women, especially working-class women like my grandmother, are historically silenced in our archives (Purvis, 1992, p.15). In public domain, there is little documentation of my grandmother’s life. Her ‘archive’ therefore consists of oral storytelling, and a collection of documents, letters, photographs and newspaper clippings kept by my auntie.

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To support my research enquiry, my auntie shared these documents with me, allowing me to take them home and spend time with them. In immersing myself in this physical archive, I found official documents: a birth certificate, an MOT certificate, a marriage certificate in which she was described- after her name- in three words, ‘spinster, papermill worker.’ These terms struck me, caused me to pause on them for a while, feeling the weight of the silence around them, of what was not said. It was in these documents that I learned that my papa had gone to prison for a few months in 1959, during which time, he and my grandmother maintained weekly correspondence via written letters. These folded-up letters pepper the archive, mixed in with official documents, newspaper clippings and photographs. One letter reads: “this is the time I miss you most, at night, the TV isn’t on, the fire is almost out, and it’s lashing rain outside.” The handwriting reads in a stream-of-consciousness style, the voice is complex, vulnerable, sometimes funny. This voice was stark against the official documents- empowered in its own self-definition, in narrating its own experience.

Using creative writing as mediator in the post-memorial work of my grandmother allowed me to resist dominant narratives implicated in remembrance and move psychologically to the possibility of being in conversation with her memory. Amongst the documents, I came across two artefacts which recorded a frame in time a few days apart. The first is a letter dated 20th March 1959, the day before her sister and brother-in-law’s wedding, where she writes to my papa, nervous about how her daughter (my auntie) would behave at the wedding:

“Tootal is just after telling her doll not to be stupid, and less of your cheek. I don’t know how she will perform to-morrow, I’m scared to think of it, Andrew is coming with the taxi at 1.45, the wedding is at 2pm, your Mum will come down to help me get ready, so I think everything will be alright”.

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The second is a framed photograph of my great auntie and uncle's first dance at their wedding, which was shown to me at their house over tea and chocolate biscuits. In the background of the photograph, my grandmother's face is just visible. With these two artefacts, I saw a glimpse into a 24-hour window, zoomed in to a timeframe where my grandmother's embodied, complex experience was documented. I grew attached to the image of this memory and found my imagination filling the gap in time between the letter being written and the photograph being taken. As a writer, I am naturally drawn to interesting stories and therefore have a biased point of view in understanding narratives. In 'Fictional Biographies: Creative Writing and the Archive', Taylor & Jordan-Baker suggest that creative writers can use 'silences' in the archives to "provide a voice for the person who is not there" (2018, p.5). Historian Maya Jasanoff writes that the difference between historians and novelists is that historians "stop at the door to somebody's mind", whereas novelists "walk right in and roam freely", making "fiction the truer record of human experience" (2017, p.10-11). However, this approach invites ethical implications- we must ask "whose will is it being served"? and, where evidence exists only in fragments, is this really "the preferred mode of transmission"? (Taylor & Jordan-Baker, 2018, p.53). In speaking to my family about the letter, I learned that it was at a particularly difficult time in my grandmother's life, not one that was representative of her or my papa, nor one she would like to be remembered by. However, these letters surviving as the final remaining documents of my grandmother's voice, thoughts and emotions hold great importance for honouring her memory.

In Hannah Lowe's poem 'If You Believe: On Salmon Lane', Lowe uses a framework that allows her to play with material truth in order to process and explore her relationship to her dad's cousin, Joe Harriott, who died before she was born. I used this same framework as a prompt for a freewriting exercise, where I wrote myself into the time between the letter being written, and the photograph being taken. Within this framework, I could allow a multiplicity of narratives and voices to emerge from the stories my family had shared with me, resisting the single narrative of the letter 'fragment'.

If you believe: On Elmbank Crescent, Dennyloanhead

If you believe that I sat beside my grandmother as my great auntie and uncle danced their first dance at their wedding in '59, when we sat together, just out-of-view in the black and white photograph that stands now, framed, in their beautiful, quiet home, full of life's residual love as buttery and full as the biscuits they feed me, as the light of the sun as it leaves us behind for the day. That there in that dance hall, I held her hand in mine and felt the music move through her even in the soft blue mood of this-wasn't-how-it-was-supposed-to-be, smelt the faraway bitter of burning coal on her black curls, parted and combed for the day. Then you might as well believe that I'd stayed up all night with her the evening before. Our faces together (you could place us both in each other) glowing in the remaining embers of the fire she loved to stoke right up the wall as if it was the fire of her own core. And in that moment, where the warmth meets the cold, she'd told me *I did what I could with my life, that is to say, I sat on its lap, flung my arms around it, pushed my nose against its window just to give it a laugh. I tried, with what I had, to love it.* And I told her I knew what she meant, in my own way. She'd left the room to go and check on Tootal upstairs and I listened to her sing all the way up. *We ran like mad for shelter and we landed up a stair, the rain came pourin' oot ma breeks but och I didnae care, for she wis a fine wee lass, a bonnie wee lass, bonnie wee Jeannie McColl...* just as she'd sing beneath the bright white sound of milling paper at work, or when she was Hoovering (which she always hated), or washing the baby in the kitchen sink (which she always loved).

Analysis The structure of Lowe's constraint- with its basis in subverting 'truth'- gave me the freedom to move beyond the existing narrative to an embodied connection with the events of the past. Engaging with archives enables societies "to transcend the limits of time, space, and the fragile nature of human memory" (Carter, 2006, p.8). On deepening individual perspectives through reflective writing, Gillie Bolton draws parallels to Lewis Carroll's Alice crawling through the looking-glass to enter "a world in which everything 'was as different as possible, things are 'all alive', where dynamic connections are made between divergent elements" (2005, p.11). Bolton goes on to propose that a "creative leap is required to support widening and deepening of perspective, and the ability to mix tacit knowledge with evidence-based or explicit knowledge effectively" (2005, p11). This framework offered me a glimpse through a suggested 'looking-glass' of my own. The experience allowed me to be in-conversation with my family history, in a way that I could call on the compassionate, nurturing capacities of creative writing to provide safety in the exploration.

3: In Conversation with the Shadow

As my regular practice of freewriting continued alongside, in support of, and in response to my formal research, I noticed an epistolary tone emerge. Naturally, I was starting to direct my writing towards my grandmother, asking questions of her, confiding in her, relaying my research findings back to her. This indicates that I had a tangible sense of a person to direct my writing *towards*- a significant shift from the initial free-writing passages, where she is held at a distance, spoken about in safe, metaphorical terms. The act of freewriting alongside had eased me to a place where this tone was possible, while also providing me insight into this journey, allowing me to step outside of myself. This final piece of creative writing evidences this change.

Epistolary Freewrite You would've been ninety today. I didn't even realise. What a coincidence, that I'm back home today, searching for you. I went to Tesco to buy some hardy flowers that looked like they'd last up there with you on that hill in the horizontal sleet. Everyone was buying booze for Hogmanay tomorrow. I know now that you hated Hogmanay and what it reminded you of. I drove out to Denny with the flowers rolling around in the backseat (some of their heads are still there). All the roads were closed because of the floods. I almost drove the wrong way up a slip road trying to find the way there! Every now and then, the rain went off, and a rainbow would wash across the gray day. When I got to the cemetery, I didn't cry, like I thought I might. I would've done before I started writing to you, I'm sure. It's easier now I feel I know you a bit more, I could almost hear you laughing at me as I reversed right into the grit-salt bin. I hope you can get a sense of me reaching towards you, our roots finding one another. I found your grave intuitively- following the dirt path up the hillside. I weaved the flower stems into the little holes in the metal cap on the stone, and stood for a while there until I got too cold. Later on, when I showed Mum the photo of the flowers there, she creased up laughing and said yours was the grave beside it, but that it's what you would've preferred, as your 'neighbours' never have any flowers anymore. I hope you don't mind that I read your letters. Sometimes your voice sounds just like mine, wandering, and a bit vulnerable. I used to picture you always at 40- that one photo I'd seen of you all dressed up with a fag in your hand just before you got ill. Now I see you at all ages. As a child- losing your shoes playing in the burn at Stripside, just before the bridge to Fankerton, when you knew you weren't supposed to. And over-excited and finding everyone's birthday presents before the day, surprises just too much temptation for someone who adored life so much. As a teenager, when you had to leave school, forced to be responsible for your younger siblings, for working at the papermill to bring in a wage, for cleaning the house. Then you got sent home for singing and dancing, and everyone would know when it was you who had cleaned because you'd have left tide marks on the floors. I think about the tide marks and what they meant. You couldn't get away fast enough, always plagued with a sense that there was something more exciting to do, something more

fun. People keep telling me that wherever there was fun, you were right there at the centre of it. Auntie showed me a photo of you in a tug of war, wearing a cardigan and skirt, right there in the middle of the rope with your knuckles bright white. And that was you as an adult, a wife, and a mother, it seems, to everyone. Taking care of children that weren't yours, never needing any thanks for it. You tried in the ways you could to find joy in life. You'd run down to the hotel where your sister and brother-in-law worked at night, push your face up against the window, your nose turned up like a pig, and they'd jump out their skins. You had a set of plastic boobs that you'd hang around your neck at parties and sing *these are my mountains*. My favourite story of you is when you had hurt your right foot, and you went to the doctor to get it seen to. When you got there, he asked you to take off both shoes and socks, so he could see your feet beside one another. You hadn't expected him to do this, and so you'd only washed your right foot. The other was filthy, a different shade altogether. *Some woman*, everyone says. Now, the shadow of you has a body. One dirty foot. A voice that sings and sings. A pair of plastic boobs. I wonder if the weight of the silence was so heavy because it was so full of life. Writing this, I bring attention to my body. Notice that the hot, rising bubble has left the place between my chest and throat. I didn't notice it leave. Feels like I've moved into an open space, feels like a clearing in the woods.

Conclusion and future steps

In this research, there were two key findings. Firstly, freewriting was found to be an effective and powerful tool within sensitive, potentially emotionally-triggering autoethnographic research as it illuminates insight, offers guidance and emotional support, and helps the researcher to process their findings. Secondly, creative writing can be a safe, mediating tool in entering family silences, engaging with archival artefacts, and developing a deeper connection to ancestors.

My next steps within my research are to move towards collective memory work together with my family, incorporating freewriting and letter writing as mediators. Jacques Derrida writes “The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out to the future” (1996, p.68). This reflects Barclay & Javette Koefoed’s suggestion that inherited family memories have the capacity for developing new ways of engaging with and knowing our ancestors (2021). Ultimately, I would like to work towards collectively developing a family archive, involving and supported by documented storytelling and collective forms of creative writing.

I initially sought out to use creative writing as a tool to represent my family history. However, through insight gained in freewriting, I realised I was not yet emotionally prepared to do this. The findings therefore show the effectiveness of freewriting as a primary supporting tool in the initial stages of researching family history that may be emotionally difficult. This area is under-researched, however, as my study shows, it is of potential value. Further investigation into the contexts in which this approach would be effective is required.

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Creative Writing for Radical Gender Expression by Sal Fothergill

How can a queer interpretation of lichen inspire creative writing about gender queerness in nature?

This is a research project with a question, rationale, method, data and conclusion. However, and before I continue, I want to explain that throughout writing this research, I have included my lived experience in order to do the method of autoethnography as part of the paper, in the style of Ellis (1997) 1.

Introduction 1.1 The nature of discovery It's summer 2020 and I am walking the lake district and rediscovering my love of nature again. It is good to be away from the city. I am scrambling a fun, rocky route to the peak, when I spot a particularly good looking stone, dayglow and neon in the bright afternoon light. The colours boom. 'It's like a mossy rave on a rock over here.' My partner is taking a steeper way up, but they spring over to find me absorbed in tiny, bright contours, tracing a bumpy lime lip of organic matter with my finger. 'Wow it's so ravey,' they say, sharing my wonder, 'but I don't think that's moss - I think it might be lichen.' Growing up in the countryside, I saw lichen often: growing on barn doors, slab steps and dripping from trees near water. I grew up on a farm, surrounded by beautiful landscapes and where it was easy for me to be the tomboy I was as it aligned with being prepared for my surroundings. My grandad and I would often walk the fields, taking photographs of plants and soil. Similar to many Victorian botanists (Kershaw and Alvin, 1966), I identified many lichens incorrectly as moss for most of my life. On reflection, discovering that lichen was in fact not moss, coincided with a time when I began thinking critically about my own gender, and how I was in fact not a cis-woman.

1.2 Ideas grow from experience In Jack Halberstam's (1998) *Female Masculinities*, they argue that in Western cultures, girls who express their own versions of masculinity are socially accepted in doing so, during their childhood. However, when this girl reaches puberty, the same society expects her to be feminine, passive and ready to reproduce and they will chastise her if she does not follow these expectations. This is done without consideration of how confusing this might be to someone who has been allowed to perform gender more freely up until this point. As a teenager, I was acutely aware of these societal expectations around being 'a good girl', and I began to perform my gender as such, especially because each time I tried to perform any alternative interpretation of my gender, I would receive criticism from others. As Barker explains in *Rewriting the Rules* (2018) even now, when certain communities challenge and problematise the societally created norms of gender, the dominant and normative discourses prevail, often arguing that anything outside of the cis-binary is not 'natural'. I can personally attest that the times I have felt most 'natural' with regards to my gender, were when I was a tomboy and more recently when I have come to an understanding that my gender performance lies outside of the 'natural' cis-norm. This idea that gender is a natural expression of binary sex, is something I wanted to challenge in my research. By considering my lived experience and then bringing my interests in creative writing, nature and gender studies together, this research explores if creative writing can be used as a tool to create gender queer narratives inspired by nature, bringing variety to the cis-normative landscape of narratives that surround us. As such, I decided that my research should explore the paradigm of lichen through creative writing practices and Queer theory. Many freewrites later, I arrived at the question, *How can a queer interpretation of lichen inspire creative writing about gender queerness in nature?* I decided to use an assemblage of autoethnography and Participatory Action Research, the reasons for which are explained in the Methodology section.

2. Literature Review There is no readily available academic literature which regards the intersection of creative writing, queer theory and lichen. Therefore, I turned to Queer theory and relevant literature on creative writing.

2.1 Queer or queer? In 1991, de Lauretis used 'Queer' to demarcate a critical approach to theory, encompassing thinkers such as Judith Butler, Cathy J Cohen and Gloria Anzaldua (Barker and Scheele, 2016 and Barnard, 1997). They were working and thinking at the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality, in part to move away from the perceived constraints of Lesbian and Gay studies. Ultimately, Queer theory challenges the concept that heterosexuality is the norm. In 2013, Baker explained how definitions of the word continue to alter but that Queer (capital 'Q') is a word which critiques heteronormativity; it represents a position which is anti-essentialist and outside of the status quo (Baker, 2013). Although it can be important for people on the oppressed side of a power dynamic to name their sexuality or gender in terms of self-actualisation, I am not concerned with labelling different gender identities as this does very little for challenging the dominant and most powerful discourses (Cohen, 1997). Therefore, I will be using the term 'queer/Queer' as a means to critically challenge the prevalent understanding that gender is binary: cis-man or cis-woman and that this is the 'natural' way of being (Baker, 2013).

2.2 Lichen is a queer thing Lichen has been present throughout my life, but I was unaware of its connection to queerness until I read Griffiths' *Queer Theory for Lichens* (2015). Lichen is a symbiotic relationship of an alga or a cyanobacteria living inside fungi. Although lichen does not perform gender (Butler, 1998), or even experience consciousness, it has been referred to as 'non-binary' by mycologists and Queer theorists (Griffiths, 2015, Sheldrake, 2021). This is because lichen does not fit neatly into a distinct biological kingdom of plant or fungus (or 4 animal), but is some sort of hybrid 'other' that transcends the taxonomies created by white cis-male Victorian biologists (Kershaw and Alvin, 1966; Sheldrake, 2021). Further, by not fitting into a distinct taxonomy, lichen also does not fit into the normative model of reproduction of genetic vertical inheritance, since the fungus and plant component have distinct genomes, yet their evolutionary fitness must be assessed together as a symbiotic being (Griffiths, 2015). At the same time as these taxonomies were being defined, with a focus on reproduction via vertical genetic inheritance, the binaries of 'man/woman' and 'heterosexual/homosexual' were making their mark on everyday culture, informing our everyday conception of identity with scientific fact (Griffiths, 2015). The practice of seeing and promoting the heteronormative aspects of nature continued with scientists overlooking other organisms that don't fit comfortably within the heteronormative paradigm (Griffiths, 2015). This is dangerous because 'Non-human social and sexual behaviour are often used to support normative ideas about human sociality and sexuality' (Griffiths, 2015: p 42). But what if we were to create narratives that support ideas about human sociality and sexuality which exist outside of the norm? If we used lichen as a paradigm, could we, in time, change the way normative culture not only sees gender, but the binaries of everyday life? This is best answered by Griffiths who says, "This symbiotic view of life can also work to denaturalize the primacy of heterosexual biological reproduction in discourses of normative and non-normative bodies, practices and communities." (Griffiths 2015, p.44) If we turn to Butler's (1998) discussion of gender, we can see that it is a concept that is inherently open and at odds with the sort of definitional enclosure like that used in scientific taxonomies. Instead, an ongoing

Freeing Creative Voice

assemblage where diversity is the norm, for: 'Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred...An open coalition, then, will affirm identities...it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.' (Butler, 1998, p.289)

So how can we contribute to the assemblage of gender? Given Griffiths (2015) argument for the impact of science on our everyday conceptions of these, we can use science to add impact to our contribution - in this instance by taking the queerness of lichen as our paradigm. And following Hilary Janks (2000), I believe it can be done, by creating our own texts. These texts should be created critically by considering dominant forms of language, how they create access, how they represent diversity and the way their design produces power (Janks, 2000).

2.3 This is my narrative For many (including myself), having a non-normative gender identity can have negative implications on mental health (Tabler et al. 2021). Around this problem in UK schools, there is bullying, lack of support from adults or even basic trans awareness from staff (Bradlow et al., 2017). What has helped me in difficult times is writing (stories or journaling) and being in nature. In 2013, after a particularly bad bout of depression and anxiety, I had to leave my life in London and return to my parents' home in the countryside. Everyday, I walked the dogs around fields and along streams, amongst sweet grass and oak trees and after a few months, I felt well enough to start a blog about my mental health journey. Secondly, I write this blog for my own cathartic experience. I have learnt that it is good to talk, to write, to sing' (Fothergill, 2014). Writing about my experience was instrumental in my recovery. As many creative writing courses do, the 'Education Research into Creative Writing' module for my master's programme prompted me to reflect on my time at school, when there was zero representation of queerness and on my position as an educator now. Recent educational research (Thomas, 2020; McGuire et al. 2015; Kress, 2000), tells us that representation matters hugely for students who experience marginalisation, whether that be because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, or any given intersection of these protected characteristics. When everyone is positively represented within their learning environment, there grows a culture of respect and safety; attainment is raised and bullying is reduced. Through the representation of diverse social identities in schools we can prepare students for the inevitability of continuous change, with an understanding that such change is natural.

2.4 This is our narrative Telling stories is something humans have always done to find and communicate patterns and make sense of the world around them (Bolton, 2007). Queer writer and book reviewer Laura Sackton (2021) echoes my experience when looking for gender queer books set in the natural world: Historically, this sort of book has been hard to find. There's a pervasive myth that queer people only live in cities, and queer books often reflect this...For some of us, queer identities are tied to the natural world, to the wild places that have shaped us, the creatures we connect with, and the reflections of ourselves we find in nature. Sackton (2021) and Hall (1997) explain that identity is told in stories about the self and Janks (2010) explains how identity, which is constantly in progress, can be constructed through the design elements of critical literacy-that is creating text to name and actualise the identities of communities at a power disadvantage and that the subjectivity of these texts, can create reality (Baker, 2013). Creating and sharing such narratives are not just sense-making devices but can also have beneficial impacts on the storyteller, especially on their mental health (Neeley et al. 2020). So why, when we know that a lack of representation of gender non-conforming identities can lead to poor mental health, are these stories not readily available? Science has been used to create an 'objective' binary view of gender and sex which has permeated culture, despite the continuous work of important Queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1998), who has illustrated time and again how gender is multifaceted and impacted by many factors.

2.5 No more binaries Barker and Scheele (2019) explain just how much of society is constructed of layered binaries, which in turn strengthen other binaries: ‘men/women; nature/culture, emotion/reason’ (p. 107). Even within Queer theory, where the gender binary is explicitly critiqued, academics frequently make use of another binary: ‘us’ vs ‘them’, or ‘queer’ and ‘not queer’ Cohen (1997). Without a critique and reflection of one’s own position and the binary society we function in, it can be challenging not to see things as ‘queer’ and ‘not queer’. However, as Butler (1998) argues, it is important that we do so in order to move away from the misunderstanding that gender and biological sex/genitals are linked. This bioessentialism continues to cause harm because it stops trans identities accessing both necessary healthcare and the language that may be required for self-actualisation and wellbeing (Walsh and Einstein, 2020). Furthermore, when science ignores gender diversity, there is less research, which means trans and gender queer people are often discounted from political and public debates which directly concern them (Doan, 2019). In a conversation with Marilyn Stathern (2019), Joanna Latimer asks her if it is important how we think, to which Stathern replies, “Oh it matters incredibly. Because we then go and act on how we think...And we still produce the same problems for ourselves precisely by these habits of thinking. And that matters desperately.” Therefore, we need to think critically about how scientific research affects dominant narratives.

Although science has embraced narrative storytelling in recent years, Neeley et al. (2020) argue that the quality of storytelling needs to improve. If professional storytellers and professional scientists come together, scientific research will be more accessible to people outside of the research and will have the power to change hearts and minds for a more inclusive society. This shows that 25 years after Cohen wrote “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens” (1997), her call for non-hierarchical “progressive transformative coalition work” (2) is still relevant.

2.6 Freedom to write Although I have discussed the importance of creating representative narratives through texts, these texts also need to be engaging in order for them to have cognitive impact (Neeley et al. 2020). I have chosen free writing as my primary practice of exploring this with myself and the research participants. This is for several reasons.

“In the process of writing, we achieve fluency by focusing on meaning rather than form.” (Janks, 2010:158) In her continuing work on critical literacy and the relationship between language and power, Janks (2000) explains that dominant powers control the discourse and the language that we have access to. This both controls what we are allowed to say and how we are allowed to say it. Freewriting as a method of creative writing is less concerned with the dominant forms, by which I mean ‘proper’ grammar, spelling and punctuation because it encourages writers to let the words flow and appear on the page without judgement (Elbow 1998). I have personally found that when I use freewriting, I discover deep truths about myself. Most aptly, it was freewriting which enabled me to access alternative performances of gender, which I believe makes it an appropriate tool to use.

3. Ethics I agree with Gilbert and Macleroy (2021) and Ellis (1997) who all say it is necessary to consider why your research is important and who it is for. Above, I have illustrated the importance of this research, which uses creative writing to try and challenge dominant discourses on gender. When looking at who this research is for, my answer is more complex. In the way that Ellis (1997) imagines graduate students reading her paper (she is correct) I know that my first audience is my academic tutors, and I am writing as such. However, I also hope that this research leads to something beyond the university because ultimately, it is for queer people, including myself. As the discussion of gender identity can be difficult and triggering, I was careful to include such considerations and solutions in my ethics proposal for this research (Appendix 1). All participants were over 18 and were informed of the nature of the research and the workshop contents. I conducted all communication through my university email and over Teams. I offered participants anonymity within this essay, which all five opted for. ⁹ It is important for me to understand my positionality in this research. Cohen (1997) would argue that, using a single facet of one's identity, in order to critique heteropatriarchal norms is dangerous. Although I see my gender as outside of 'the norm' and have faced discomfort and poor mental health as a result, it's important to recognise that the kind of public oppression I have faced because of my gender is not the same as other gender queer or trans people due to my privilege as a 'cis-passing', white person. I feel it is important to use this privilege to critique the gender binary for a more inclusive society and as an act of solidarity.

4. Methodology It felt appropriate to use a 'Queer self-bricolage' (Baker, 2013) of methodologies in order to develop praxis. Through autoethnography (mostly freewriting) and reading for the literature review I came to understand that a no-hierarchical coalition between researcher and participants was suitable to my rationale and to creating critical narratives. Using more than one method is also a way to make research more valid and avoid applying data to a vacuum of your own ideas (Cohen, L. et al, 2018). Using an assemblage of research methods also holds a pleasing poetry with lichen being a multi assemblage organism.

4.1 Autoethnography Bearing in mind my positionality in this research, I wanted my method to be inclusive and radical, in the sense that it is driven by Queer research methods. I like the idea that through the construction and deconstruction of text and through being aware of the assemblage and reassembling of the self that we can begin to understand the subjectivity in our writing as part of a transformative process, (Janks 2010; Baker 2013) as is the nature of autoethnography. ‘Autoethnography is about making sense of individual experience and connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Gilbert and Macleroy, 2020). Autoethnography includes the ‘I’ and it aims to make academic ideas more accessible by drawing on lived experience over abstract thought (Ellis, 1997) Individual writers must critique their writing and situate it appropriately if it is to provide research that will stand to overcome an obstacle, especially 10 as research into the self-privileges the individual’s subjective truth (Gilbert and Macleroy 2020; Muncey, 2010). For this research, the autoethnographic part was crucial to designing the research question. As I began to write about lichen and its relationship to queerness, freewriting parts of my own story and the story of myself as a creative writing researcher (Appendix 2). This is how I came to understand narrative as central to the workshop design. I noticed that most of my freewriting situates lichen as a gender queer character. I returned to some of my draft freewrites, after conducting the workshop, and reworked an idea of bringing together the dualities of my own character. It gave me the autobiographical poem I liche Dyke nights (Appendix 3). Historically, I do not write much poetry, so this demonstrates how using freewriting to enact autoethnographies can bring my creative writing to new places. In some sense, this cycle of writing the self was the first cycle of action research in that I observed my interests in lichen and gender and wondered how to combine them, I planned to free write using lichen in its natural environment, did this and collected the data as freewrites and field notes (sometimes planned, sometimes spontaneous). I then reflected on the themes and ideas that came up which brought me to looking at representative narratives, finding gaps in literature (see Appendix B for model).

4.2 Participatory Action Research If we want to tell the stories that matter, then this is not best done alone, but together (Janks, 2010). There are a number of participatory research methods which have evolved as a response and a critique to the hierarchical power dynamics of research methods which conduct research on participants. Fields (2019) explains that Participatory Action Research (which I will refer to as PAR) will support oppressed communities in a move from being studied to doing the studying and that it is important insights into these communities come from a collaborative approach which is understanding of human complexities. Furthermore, Filax (2006:1) argues that ‘Action research can materialise the radical potential of queer theory through research projects’. It is important in PAR to remain flexible and reflective. Fields draws upon the work of Halberstam (2011) and Gordon (1997) to explain that failure (in terms of data sets not answering the research question) can provide great insight and a willingness to be surprised by data will make for truer outcomes: PAR ‘calls collaborators into a dynamic and generative process of inquiry in which understandings are made and unmade, desires are met and unmet.’ (Fields, 2019. p80) The research cycle is never finished thenfor PAR is a process of repetition. When a cycle is complete, knowledge will be generated, and a new question will form which will instruct the design of the next cycle. It is not possible to preempt what these outcomes and researchers should be open to the truth of the data in front of them (Fields, 2019).

4.3 Critical workshop design In a previous essay that I completed for this Masters, I acknowledged that a creative writing project I designed was not as inclusive as it could have been because it required participants to move around in an outdoor space. In the interest of producing critical literacies (Janks, 2000) I conducted this workshop online so that it was more physically accessible. I made sure to give the participants as much information as possible in order to gain informed consent with regards to taking part. The overall aim of the workshop was to explore writing narrative around gender and nature. After introducing the rationale and some of the theory behind the research question I invited participants to join in with a writing warm up, followed by four free writing exercises based on visual prompts and quotes from Queer theory. Each freewriting exercise was ten minutes as recommended by Elbow (1998) and I reiterated that they could write whatever they want and include symbols too in order to increase accessibility-especially as not all of the participants had done a writing workshop before. Ultimately, my aim was to make the space as safe and inclusive as possible, in order to make sure the research held integrity in its findings. 12

5. Data Findings Before discussing the data I want to acknowledge that this research is limited when it comes to decolonising Queer theory. I am white, and as it happened, so was everyone who took part in the workshop. Therefore, the data is centralised on an axis of dominant power (Cohen, 1997). This is something that must be addressed if I repeat the workshop, because not only does my research lack intersectionality-a concept which was developed by black feminist scholar, Crenshaw, (Robinson and Hunter, 2019), but, it contributes to the discourses which centralise Queer theory and queerness as a 'white' Cohen (1997) which is at best unbalanced and, in the wrong hands, harmful. When analysing data, Wellington (2000) warns that the tendency is to collect too much and then run out of the resources to analyse it effectively. Wellington suggests reducing data, conceptualising it and then drawing conclusions, focusing on a key interpretation and linking it to existing research and theories to show its validity.

5.1 Interpreting themes In order to interpret the qualitative data generated by the autoethnography, I looked for themes and picked up on repeated words or ideas. I used highlighters to analyse my own writing, as well as the search function in digital writing, to see if key words came up. The main themes that came out of my personal writing where: 1. Lichen as a character/metaphor to perform gender 2. Togetherness Wellington (2000), suggests looking for buzzwords and recurring themes when analysing data. These were the themes that I recognised as most prominent in the workshop writing from all participants who shared it and from the follow up questionnaire. 1. Togetherness 2. Diversity 3. Ancient Time 13 I used Miro to collect and organise data which validated these themes and ‘togetherness’ and ‘diversity’ seemed to have the most data. Because ‘togetherness’ also came out as a theme in my autoethnography, therefore showing it as the most reliable thematic outcome of this research, and because of the word count, I chose to analyse it in further depth in order to draw conclusions.

5.2 Togetherness I was surprised that so much of the writing was about togetherness, even though we were six participants online, in our separate spaces. I imagined the lichen growing between us, stretching out its network, connecting us through its paradigm and I realised it was not so surprising, for human beings crave connection to one another. I analysed the data that I had collected on ‘togetherness’ using the thematic map I made on miro (accessible here <https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVPmkzzrM=/>). Reflecting on this, I created a diagram (Gilbert, 2022) to conceptualise the emotion attached to the theme (Appendix 4). What I see in this presentation of the data is a utopia, a land where nature thrives and connects, a place where the coalition between humans and the natural world is one of regeneration. It is a dangerous place to be alone, ‘but together, we are safe’. By including some key words from some of the Queer theory I have used, I began to draw links between my findings and existing literature. Perhaps it is not surprising when we consider some of the key ideas that underpin this research project. Cohen (1997) warned against an us versus them mentality in Queer politics, the antidote of which is the coming together to topple the dangerous dominant discourses. What I started to see when I really looked into the workshop writings, were these interesting characters being created-characters that believe in better, in embracing diversity and togetherness. Two participants contacted me to do follow up interviews, which I felt was important in order to validate my interpretation of their data, as truthful. (Kriukow, 2019). I asked participant 2 (whose quotes featured heavily on my initial concept map about togetherness) about their work. 14 From this exchange (Appendix 5) it is apparent that ‘togetherness’ was not initially at the forefront of participant 2’s mind. This could be because of the time between the workshop and the follow up interview (two weeks) or because I had personally made a connection to this theme because of its presence in my own writing. Once prompted with the words they had written, it was easier for them to connect to the theme but perhaps the most interesting thing was how they had personified lichen to reflect their own experience, writing their autoethnography like I had. It made me wonder, if we take an element of the natural world to explore queerness, will we always write about ourselves?

Kriukow (2019) encourages researchers to be considerate of respondent bias- wanting to give researchers the ‘correct’ answer (Kriukow, 2019). After this follow up interview, I returned to the anonymous post workshop questionnaire to see what I may have missed in my initial interpretation of the data. All but one participant thought lichen was an appropriate metaphor to think about gender queerness. Although this somewhat validates my personal design of the workshop content, it is actually in this ‘other’ response that I found the most useful feedback. Accidentally, I had used the word ‘metaphor’ when what I meant was ‘model’ or ‘paradigm’ and on looking over the workshop transcript, I can see that my nerves had made my sentences a bit disjointed. This participant drew focus to the fact that they found metaphors confusing, and so I would think carefully about this and how to express concepts in future cycles of the research (Appendix 6). What is interesting though, is that despite my clumsy wording of the question, this participant still found a way to use lichen to write about their own queerness, again showing how lichen was working to produce autobiographical narratives.

5.3 Reflecting on the self in togetherness I felt a little stuck at this point—did my data suggest that a queer reading of lichen encourages writing about togetherness, or did it suggest that lichen encourages writing about the self? As Elbow (1998) would advise, I turned back to freewriting to reflect on these thoughts. I have included the typed version of this freewrite in the Appendix (7) and part of it here in the text because it brings me to my conclusion. 15 (Fothergill, 2023) Conclusion Using PAR and autoethnography as my research methods, primarily freewriting as a vehicle for text generation and heavily guided by key understandings of Queer theory and critical literacies, I aimed to explore the research question: How can a queer interpretation of lichen inspire creative writing about gender queerness in nature? I focused on representation in narrative form and reflected upon my own writing throughout. I am excited to write that the focus on myself throughout this project has led to a much greater understanding of my gender queerness as something that is both a natural expression of who I am and a valid part of my identity. Much like the blog I wrote to overcome my mental health issues, this essay has helped me come to terms with my ‘gender troubles’. I was warned by Wellington (2000) that I would collect too much data to analyse, and I did. However, once I had extracted the main themes from the data and looked at which theme was most present, I was able to delve deeper into the idea that a queer interpretation of lichen generates writing about togetherness. This relates to gender because gender is an assemblage—the bringing together of experience, feelings and expression into a 16 performance. If the performance in this case were the texts produced then these findings echo the key theories of Judith Butler (1998). This makes sense, as their thinking is prevalent in my own thinking about gender, which I have most likely expressed through the construction of texts, spoken language and workshop design. When pulling apart this theme of togetherness, it became apparent that the workshop also generated writing about the self. Togetherness and the self! As much as I had tried to be mindful of the dominance of binaries in our society, this binary still came through. I was, I must admit, not disheartened but annoyed by this: how can the dominant, normative discourses which promote the concept of binaries to stay dominant,

penetrate our every thought, our every word? Would any of my writing make any sense without these concepts? One thing I do know is that creating critical texts is hard because there are so many interactions of power that need to be disassembled. However, I do not feel like giving up just yet. At the time of writing this conclusion, a young girl who was trans, has been stabbed to death by two other children. The message is clear. Gender queer children are not safe. And so perhaps, it would be important to do the next cycle of PAR with secondary school children or perhaps their teachers, using lichen and the fact that it is a mutually beneficial ecosystem within itself in order to teach that togetherness can be a vital part of one's own identity; to deconstruct the binary ways in which we see one another and society. And actually we need to do this if we are to follow Cohen's advice- bringing people outside of queerness into accessible practices of Queer theory and coming together to topple dominant forces of oppression that have the power to hurt and destroy the lives of gender queer people, for we have always been here, just like lichen.

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Appendix

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Writing Between and Across the Silence by Tamar Moshkovitz:

How can creative writing be used to write across familial, generational, and cultural silences?

“Maybe you can interview me,” my mum said on the phone. I’d been telling her about how this project I’d chosen to write has been bogging me down. It seemed never-ending, and why did I choose to take this on in the first place, this question with no answers, this depressing and unnecessary journey back in time? Earlier on I’d decided I’d write a series of vignettes based on interviews with my family about her – my maternal grandmother, Esther. Then I changed my mind. I was worried I’d ask the wrong questions.

“I’ve decided to take a different approach,” I said.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Well, I’m thinking – I’ll try to, um, like,” – long pause – “actually I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Some silences, I found, are hard to break, even when people are willing to talk, even when they present themselves to you. When I began to work on this project, I thought it would allow me to break through the silence I felt shrouded Esther and her legacy, and when I came up with my research question – how can creative writing be used to write across familial, generational and cultural silences? – I was convinced I’d unearth a plethora of strategies through an intense and unflinching investigation. For years I had obsessed and fixated on Esther, the moment in time in which she existed and the implications her existence held over my culture, identity, and mental health.

* * *

2

9/5/2

019

Sad story –
Get all that nonsense out of your
head. A sudden
and unplaceable anger separated by
an unbridgeable gulf
in time. Look around wildly. You
can wish
and wish you were different, born
some
where else, called some
thing else. Deal and be grateful.
I'm tired, sun-damaged, timeworn.
I waver,
waiting to be spoken again.
(found poetry, undergraduate
dissertation)

* * *

She was a paranoid schizophrenic who I had met only once, and this one meeting – in the facility where she was institutionalized for most of her life – didn't really produce a memory, only a memory of a memory from my sister, something about a stuffy smell and the slow beat of a ceiling fan. My mum rarely spoke about her when I was growing up though I knew, in broad strokes, that her childhood wasn't a happy one, even before her mother's health declined.

Esther's genetic legacy, though, was a constant presence since around my late teens, when symptoms of schizophrenia first tend to appear – according to the National Health Service (2019), 'schizophrenia tends to run in families'. I wrote poetry in which she haunted me, or was responsible for my own tendency for paranoia, or manifested in black butterflies floating in the periphery of my vision. Her absence – from my life and from the conversations we had as a family – was a fertile breeding grounds for monsters and demons, like the space beneath a child's bed. And though I can't attribute the fear I felt – at times totally consuming – solely to the silence that enveloped her illness and its symptoms, it certainly didn't help that they went largely undiscussed.

Her absence manifested in other ways, too. She'd emigrated from Morocco aged sixteen, one out of the 220,000 Moroccan Jews to have settled in Israel between 1949, shortly after the formation of the state, and 1964 (Laskier, 1989, p. 323). Though Moroccan migration to Israel was driven by 'a combination of two polar forces at work...: fear in the home country, attraction to the new one' (Shabi, 2010, p.61), the reception Moroccan (and other Middle Eastern) Jews received once they arrived in Israel was far from the welcoming one they expected. As Shabi writes:

National templates in Israel were originally set to an Ashkenazi tune, and if the Oriental seeps in, it is via the subcategory of "folklore" – something cutesy and ethnic and not a defining state hallmark. Tasty morsels of the Orient – the food, the traditions of hospitality, and the knickknacks – are welcome, but the bitter truth of the whole – the Arabness of the Middle Eastern Jews – is not. (Shabi, 2010, p.17)

Freeing Creative Voice

The Mizrahi identity was one I never felt I was able to own. My upbringing, after all, was far more similar to my dad's (born in Jerusalem to two sabra¹ professionals of Ashkenazi descent – one a geology professor, the other a civil servant in the Department for Education; educated in a reputable school; borscht for lunch made exactly by his live-in grandmother; portions of his adolescence and young adulthood spent in Europe; the scattermindedness of someone with a safety net). Could I claim a culture when I had no first-hand knowledge of its fundamentals – food, language, tradition? More importantly, did I have the right to claim the constitutive elements of this culture knowing I have never, and likely never would, experience the systemic, institutional, and interpersonal discrimination that born-and-bred Mizrahis experience at the hand of the Israeli state?

These questions all occupied me as I was approaching the final year of my undergraduate degree, immersed as I was in an environment that emphasized self-awareness regarding identity, privilege, and power. Some time after I came up with the plot for the short story that I would write for my undergraduate dissertation but before I started writing the piece I discovered, through a conversation with my aunt, that there were an uncanny number of parallels between the story I had intended to write and my grandmother's story and, just like that, it would be about her. Sort of; there was so much I didn't know about her, about her personality, about who she was apart from her disease, if such a thing existed. Wang, who is herself a person with schizoaffective disorder, attempts to grapple with this: 'There might be something comforting about the notion that there is, deep down, an impeccable self without disorder... but there may be no impeccable self to reach, and if I continue to struggle toward one, I might go mad in the pursuit' (Esme Weijun Wang, 2019, p.71). It's certainly not my place to say how Esther saw herself apart from or in unity with her illness; had things been different, maybe we would have had that conversation in the same room with the stuffy smell and slow-beating ceiling fan, but now it was far too late to wonder about.

¹ This is a term used to refer to Jews born in the state of Israel.

Freeing Creative Voice

This research, I told myself, would be the final piece of writing I would do on this subject, one final bit of indulgence. Autoethnography, ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse... personal experience... in order to understand cultural experience’ (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011), would be a happy medium, I decided. It would prevent me from turning solipsistic, as I often did when I wrote poetry about Esther, while still giving voice to my own experiences within a complicated socio-cultural landscape that concerned the stigmatization of mental illness, cultural erasure and identity politics, among other factors. Most crucially, I was no stranger to attempting to write across silence, so I had a wealth of experience to draw from. I could write circles around myself and write myself into knots where Esther was concerned. The problem, though, was that this writing never yielded anything that satisfied me. This time, however, I’d be ready – I’d engage in the sort of autoethnographic exploration that Ellis says “generates a lot of fears and self-doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you think you can’t stand pain anymore, well that’s when the real work has only begun” (13). Never mind that every such exploration, satisfying or not, was painful – painful precisely because it was so unsatisfying, perhaps – because this pain would produce something of use and of virtue.

* * *

22/12/2022

Block

Twist

Bend

Write something

Nothing restrictive

Like a snake eating

Itself dishonest alone

I see it my god it

Mythologizes, distances, ideologizes

* * *

Freeing Creative Voice

22/12/2022

Is writer's block fear? If not, what is it?

* * *

The funny thing was that I wasn't even sure I had writer's block when I started this project. My mind was brimming with ideas, resolute on exploring this thing or that, on trying this method or that technique – metafiction, vignettes, daily freewriting, experimentation with form and space on the page. I flitted from one idea to another, deliberating and agonizing over the right approach, convinced that I had not a case of writer's block in a material sense but in more of an abstract one which, to me, seemed easier to overcome.

Much of the literature on the causes of writer's block held some resonance for me, especially where the subject of my grandmother was concerned. Boice (1993), for instance, lists some common causes of writer's block: the interference of internal censors (*what do you know about her or her life? What right have you to speak on this matter?*); perfectionism (*this time, when you write, you will be honest, evocative, and most importantly you will resolve everything*); procrastination emerging from self-disparagement (*you do not have the talent or knowledge to write about her in any way that's worthwhile*) and emotional cycles of good intentions followed by shame (*I'm going to sit down and write, followed by why can I not sit down and write?*). Most importantly, Boice points to fear of failure, but says that:

The problematic part of fear of failure may be little more than low [perceived self-efficacy]. As in the case of phobias, the result becomes one of avoiding the experience of fear; stated another way, blocking can become a fear of fear. (Boice, 1993, p.26)

Freeing Creative Voice

Reflecting on this project, a fear of fear – of persistently experiencing self-doubts about my positionality, my ability, my talent, my mental acuity, my relationship with my family, my personal attributes (*am* I hardworking? *Am* I committed to writing after all?) – has been and still is a common throughline to the experience of writing about my grandmother. I walked into this project fully aware of the stakes: succeed, and you will resolve at least a part of a complex identity crisis you had been undergoing for nearly a decade. Fail, and you will have proved yourself unable to ever parse a crucial part of yourself, and what could be scarier than that?

* * *

04/01/2023

I'm thinking a lot about the future &
Fear, escapist fantasy, aspirations
So I'm half in and half out
Floating around chasing
Something, anything

I'm supposed to be principled.
When did I become so afraid?
What is it I need?
So what if I end up having it half-written
Isn't it part of the problem, needing it to be all
Put tog
ether?

* * *

If Boice's analysis seemed to pin me down in a daunting and inescapable way, Corbett's cross-cultural approach brought me some solace. 'For students who enter the writing classroom from a different culture,' she says, 'the problem... may not be a lack of ideas, but conflicting ideas':

Some of these students are unable to write
because they have not discovered a way within the
rhetorical conventions of the... essay to
acknowledge and articulate the conflict they

Freeing Creative Voice

experience as they move between the contradictory rhetorical practices of their native and adopted cultures, and the opposing ideologies on which these practices are based. (Corbett, 1998, p.2)

Determined as I was to write vulnerably about my grandmother, myself, and the chasm of absence that hangs between us, and although the autoethnographic form seemed primed to support me in addressing the subject, I often felt trapped between this framework – which inherently demands a curious and critical eye – and a strange and uncharacteristic protectiveness over my home country of Israel. This wasn't a dissonance I was unfamiliar with; when writing my undergraduate dissertation I found myself frustrated by an inability to articulate setting and idiosyncratic details in the story using the English language and with a set of political discourses and paradigms – colonialism, Orientalism, racial hierarchy – I had largely absorbed not at home but at university. Though I tried to negotiate this dissonance, I was (and still am) bitterly ashamed of the final result: a dehumanizing and essentializing piece of writing that suggested my grandmother's mental illness was the result of the discrimination she experienced upon her arrival in Israel. With an overabundance of caution this time, I scrapped anything I wrote that had the potential to turn political – politics was a shield, I reasoned, a way to avoid vulnerability, difficult conversations, the nuance of individual identity even within Israel, where everything – especially identity – is political.

For years, when the topic of race came up, I would say: *it's complicated*, though when I'd tell people my family's ethnic make-up (quarter Algerian, quarter Moroccan, quarter Polish, quarter Russian) it seemed pretty cut-and-dry: I'm mixed. Part of the issue is that for children born of mixed-ethnicity marriages in Israel, the idea that our identities ought to supersede race and politics is common, even emblematic. As Sagiv and Yair write, 'the native-born ethnically mixed Sabra was supposed to be rooted in the land of Israel, disconnected from parental ethnic traditions, customs, and identities' (2019, p. 866). My own childhood was ostensibly emblematic of this idyll, in spite of the fact that it was foregrounded upon dominant discourses and ideas of race. When attempting to write about my racial and ethnic identity, I have always experienced a sort of paralysis, best encapsulated by Sagiv and Yair: '[The ethnically mixed] wonder about the privileges they enjoy as half-Ashkenazi, but nonetheless feel uneasy about them,' they say, adding that this enjoyment is 'constantly tempered by discomfort at the knowledge that they also embody a social hierarchy' (2019, p. 870).

In every attempt at exploring my Mizrahi side through writing I've felt an intense sense of self-consciousness and self-loathing: I felt as though I was appropriating a culture that didn't belong to me, that I was deriving some sick satisfaction from the oppression of Mizrahi people, that I was using this for my own benefit, to feel better about myself, to win the oppression Olympics, to produce a piece of writing that would gain my peers' approval. Shame would quickly follow: wasn't I satisfied with the life my parents gave me? Didn't I like Israeli rice and schnitzel for lunch and, if so, why do I keep writing about yearning for spicy Moroccan fish? Why wasn't I happy? Why was I searching for something that wasn't there and never would be? In fact, as is often the case when parents are reluctant to address race, 'the very idea of not addressing "race" reaffirmed the existence of racial boundaries and prevailing sensitivity to address the significance of "race"' (Pang, 2018, p.422), while simultaneously leaving me without the tools and language needed to engage in a way that felt satisfying and honest.

Freeing Creative Voice

As I began my fresh attempts to write about Esther, I noticed another dormant conflict awakening: how do I negotiate my feelings of fear and shame around her mental illness and the wish not to further stigmatize and demonize her and other schizophrenics? And, maintaining this precarious balance, how do I write something both evocative and empathetic, both honest to my own feelings and responsible to those of others? Often, I asked myself: *must* I – and *can* I – strike this balance at all? Clark, Munday and Watts drew on Barnwell's ideas to suggest that 'the management of family secrets by older generations is a means of controlling the passage of shameful emotions through the family and hence the transmission of stigma' (2022, p. 2), but as far as I can tell my parents', and in particular my mum's, silence did not do very much to staunch the bleed.

I should acknowledge that I feel uncomfortable writing this all down. It feels wrong to lay blame at my parents' feet, especially at my mum's, who from everything I know had a traumatic childhood and who is still dealing with the consequences of growing up with one mentally ill and one narcissistic parent. My mother is a good parent, doting and attentive, sometimes overbearing but always present. And it's not unlikely that this is another factor in an overwhelming medley that has made my grandmother so difficult to write about. Writer Jean McGarry reflects that 'if fiction is, as [John] Hawkes said, revenge for childhood indignities, we might guess where a block could come from. It could be felt as a parental counterattack *avant la lettre*... It's not so easy to avenge the indignities of childhood and get away with it,' she adds. 'It's not even a simple matter to dredge up those indignities' (McGarry, 2015, p. 55). So writing things like:

The second vivid memory I have of my mother crying – the first being during my little brother's brit milah – was when her mother died. I was fifteen or sixteen. She came into my sister and I's room, very early in the morning, around 4am; it was still totally dark, so it was just the sound of crying, at first, and then her hand on my shoulder. She told us that she would be flying to Israel for the funeral straight away. Crying, crying. She told us she wasn't crying because her mother had died, but because of the life she had lived.

Freeing Creative Voice

Feels disloyal, and I wonder about whether it makes her look crass to other people, even though I shouldn't really care. Really, I wonder if it makes her look crass to *me*. Without this memory, I wonder, would I have internalized the notion that a schizophrenic's life is not worth living, that any such life will be inevitably tragic, that it is barely an existence at all? And without this notion, I wonder, would I have been able to look at whatever genetic material lies dormant in my DNA with a little less fear and shame? And without this shame – which Clark, Munday and Watts say 'is linked to a sense of identity as an individual or family member, to one's sense of self and status in the world' (2022, p.4) – would I have been able to write about Esther without feeling that success or failure would be pivotal to how I carry on with the rest of my life, how I understand myself and my future? Even with evidence showing that my mum's feelings, and mine, are not uncommon in family members of people with mental illness – research has found that 'family members experience significant family stigma...' and that 'this has led to feelings of shame and contamination' (Corrigan, Watson and Miller, 2006, p.244)– I can't help but wish I had been the person to lift the curse.

* * *

26/12/2022

Schizophrenia in the doorway a
proximity sat across from this
spontaneous moment

Talk about the thing that you had
never talked about

Something safe

Was I scared, betrayed by my own
feelings in passing

* * *

Freeing Creative Voice

The literature prescribes a wide variety of cures of writer's block. Boice, supposing that a lack of tacit knowledge is at least a significant part of writing blocks, suggests a four-part model for building this knowledge and treating blocking: involvement in university and campus life, which 'affords chances to learn by doing' (Boice, 1993, p.41); regimen, which 'means putting writers on a schedule while easing them away from distractions and interruptions'; self-management, by which writers 'recognise and replace their negative self-talk'; and social networking, which supports writers in getting feedback and collaborating with other writers. This approach has come under some criticism: Sword points out that, as well as relying on outdated, demographically limited, and irreplicable data to prove its efficacy, this method is 'prescriptive, one-size-fits-all... [and] demands unquestioning obedience from its followers and imposes guilt and blame on those who stray' (Sword, 2016, p.313). She further shows that, as per survey results, only a small minority of writers write, or aspire to write, every weekday through the academic year. She proposes, instead, that writers should be offered a 'menu of choices, a smorgasbord of possibilities' (2016, p.320) in how they approach their writing schedule and in exploring the best ways for them to write.

Rose, undertaking a cognitivist analysis of writer's block, considers writer's block to be a result of cognitive inflexibility or rigidity throughout the composition process and suggests that 'dysfunctional rules are easily replaced with or counter-balanced by functional ones if there is no emotional reason to hold onto that which simply doesn't work', (Rose, 1980, p. 400). Corbett takes this suggestion a step further; beyond dispensing with certain rules and conventions of academic writing, she suggests that creatively narrating conflict could 'be useful in situations in which conflicting [cultural] rhetorics results in writer's block' (Corbett, 1998, p. 9).

Freeing Creative Voice

I'll admit to being overwhelmed by the range of blocking treatments on offer. Rose's offer, practical as it seemed, didn't feel appropriate; I felt it was clear that it was emotion – long-held, irrational, unshakeable – that afflicted me every time I put pen to paper. My rejection of Boice's model was more prejudicial. I felt irritated by the suggestion that what I lacked was tacit knowledge in the academic and literary world, as opposed to the status, time, and means to develop a writing schedule that would yield results for me. I had been working full-time to pay rent, still finishing the month broke, and suffering from a long depressive episode. Even as I attended weekly classes and talked through my ideas with my fellow classmates and tutors, my writing felt unreachable, arriving in short ephemeral bursts, disappearing again, seemingly forever. (After reading Sword's account of her rejection of Boice's model, I wrote down in my notebook: 'Convincing! And Validating!') Perhaps the only aspect of his model I could endorse was automacity, and I had long since made freewriting a part of my practice, finding it useful in 'undo[ing] the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce' (Elbow, 1998, p.6). With this project especially I knew that I couldn't afford to be inhibited; if I'd consider every word I put down on the page over and over again I would end up with nothing at all. Boice himself emphasized that 'the success of [automacity] for generating momentum and ideas for writing lies in its effortless, unself-conscious, and self-revealing products' (1993, p.31).

Freeing Creative Voice

I could freewrite for at least ten minutes a day, I told myself after deliberating over the right methods for a while, but I knew that as a framework for answering my question this wouldn't necessarily be enough on its own. Months earlier, considering how writing has or has not come to my rescue, I reflected that 'I write to self-harm, or I write something true'. It had always been far too easy for me to admonish myself on the page and, if I were to engage with a subject that, evidently, brought with it a tidal wave of emotion that was not always easy to untangle and decipher, I would have to be careful. Corbett's suggestion that 'inviting students to use [narrative] may enable them to develop their own forms while overcoming the writer's block they face as they attempt to negotiate conflicting rhetorics' (1998, p.8) helped structure my aims around freewriting further in a way that, I hoped, would help me avoid the feelings of shame and self-loathing I'd previously felt as I attempted to write about this subject. If I could narrate the conflict I was feeling – in my relationships to my grandmother's ethnicity and culture and to her illness – my writing may produce something more mediated, less simplistic or dogmatic; something like an answer.

Freeing Creative Voice

Deciding on this strategy was simple enough; sticking by it was a different matter entirely. Often I found that as I sat down to write – maybe after a long day of work, maybe the morning after a night of heavy drinking, almost always in a bad mood and with a heavy, oppressive sense of obligation – what initially came out would be uncharacteristically practical, more like a to-do list than a revelation of my innermost thoughts. Here is what I'll do today: I'll read this article, I'll sum up my thoughts, maybe I'll try writing a poem or a little bit of prose. Freewriting – that which until that point had helped me find my 'natural way of producing words... [with] a sound, a texture, a rhythm – a voice' (Elbow, 1998, p.6) had instead turned into something like a work meeting, dull and uninspiring. If my voice was present at all it was in its hemming and hawing. Inevitably, I would become frustrated with myself. I can pinpoint the exact moment in my freewriting pages where this switch would happen: my handwriting turns larger and messier, lose its usual forward slant. Question marks litter the page. Thematically, my writing would turn to something mean I had thoughtlessly said to a loved one, or to some greater evil happening in the world, to fascism or violence against women. I try to keep myself task-oriented; my handwriting tames itself for a few lines, goes back and forth between a need to accomplish something and to unload the burden of what I am feeling in that particular moment, which is almost never related to my grandmother, yields nothing of use, berates itself for being useless, rinse, repeat.

* * *

1

6/1/2

023

Anywhere &

Totally elsen-
-here.

I cry I can't

Concentrate and I have to

Freeing Creative Voice

Can I
? This feels so
Futile
No point in dwelling
I
Should
So much evil

Where are
The good things???
Joy and love and celebration and
Kindness and sincerity and
curiosity
Just gone

This is getting too big
(Speedy Ortiz – No Below)
Has it all
Been said?

Just
Pyrotechnics
Totally
Sincere, otherwise what's the point

* * *

Freeing Creative Voice

I felt acutely like a failure. Every idea I'd had I had abandoned. I wrote less and less frequently. When I did write it all felt stale, shallow, the same as anything I'd ever written about Esther. Over the period of a couple of months I spent so long thinking about and describing my fear of schizophrenia and fixating on locating myself somewhere in the world that I hardly realized it was becoming harder to get out of bed in the mornings; that I was foregoing cooked meals in favour of takeout or, worse yet, no food at all; that I was wearing the same clothes I wore three days ago and that I hadn't showered in about as long. I did realize when my periods had stopped, only because I was terrified of being pregnant. Schizophrenia is hereditary, after all. *Last thing I need, on top of it all*, I thought. Increasingly I was shutting out my family and friends, I was getting into arguments with my partner, over what I wasn't always sure, feeling awful about it and knowing, in a profound way that did nothing to reassure or ease the pain, that things could always be worse.

* * *

2

3/1/2

023

The truth is I don't really want to write this.

* * *

To me, this was a complicated admission. I was still working out where my internal refusal to participate in the mission I'd set for myself was coming from. Was I still too scared, too unprepared to engage meaningfully with these emotions? Was creative writing simply the wrong tool to answer these questions, to break the silence – would it have been any different if I'd been able to talk about it with a therapist, for example? Was I lazy? Was I falling out of love with writing altogether? Had my difficulty engaging been a refusal to carry around this hand-me-down shame any longer, and my silence its own symbolic way of derailing the way it hung over my family, of reclaiming it for myself – of saying, *I'm refusing to break this silence because I refuse to let this silence define me?*

Ferguson writes that ‘the very existence of silence may... become a form of resistance, of nonparticipation in... practices of community-building, identity-formation, and norm-setting... Silence is a ceasing of participation, a discovery of self by cutting off external stimuli’ (Ferguson, 2012, p. 70). This is the answer I like the most (though this isn’t to say it’s necessarily true). As I looked through my freewriting pages, it seemed obvious all of a sudden: the moments when I wrote at my most sincere, fluent and poetic were the moments I thought about *my* future and *my* desires, not my family’s past and its inhibitions and blockages. I found myself interested in where I drew the line between myself as a creative writer and myself as a person. Would it be a cop-out, I wondered, to surmise that, in certain scenarios, for certain people, creative writing would not be the solution to generational, cultural, and familial silences – that in some scenarios it would be exploitative, harmful, even? Lapadat describes this as a key ethical issue to autoethnography as a research methodology: ‘In their care to not exploit the experiences of others or make them vulnerable, autoethnographers have turned the spotlight on themselves’ (Lapadat, 2017, p.593). And rehashing my relationship to Esther didn’t end up being as useful or revealing as examining my emotions as I attempted to do so, what emerged in the gaps as I tried to parse it out: my yearning to be freed from the burden I’d placed on myself to work it all out.

As creative writers, we’re asked (and ask ourselves) to expose our innermost thoughts, to express our most profound feelings and formative experiences; to do so honestly, evocatively, with vulnerability; to do so for ourselves, and for others. And if we subscribe to the idea that ‘language... is identity’, as I do – that we form and understand ourselves through writing – then it’s easy, too, to believe that ‘the lack of language can only be the demise of identity’ (Ferguson, 2012, p.66). The wish to pour ourselves onto the page, and the failure to do so, can quickly turn catharsis into self-flagellation and self-exploration into an identity crisis. My failed experiment – whether you view it as repression, or as letting sleeping dogs lie – has brought me ambiguity; with ambiguity, silence; and with silence, peace.

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PART II: WORKSHOP LESSON PLANS FOR CREATIVE FACILITATORS

In this section, you will be guided through a series of workshop lesson plans put together by creative writing educators and students. Sam, Desiri, and Carrie offer unique approaches to teaching, classroom management, and crafting an intentional, pedagogically grounded scheme-of-work. These lesson plans center a space of authentic listening, courageous exploration, and transformative writing for all students.

As educators, it is imperative to continuously reflect upon ways to allow our students to create more freely, empowering them to enthusiastically engage with their peers, mentors, and with their own creative ideas. However, these lesson plans aren't just meant for educational settings. Feel free to try out any exercises you encounter either as an individual or with a group of writers!

Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes (Turn and Face the Strange) by Sam Goundry Butler

Reflective Poetry Toolkit for Writing Through Uncertainty

This toolkit takes its inspiration from David Bowie's 1971 song 'Changes'. Or, more specifically, from the memory of my dad singing the song during my childhood in the late 1980s. During the week Dad was a grey-suited IT Manager for a Bradford wool manufacturer. But at the weekend he would sing along to Bowie on the record player whilst he did the housework in his underpants, vamping around with the vacuum like a cross between Freddie Mercury and Homer Simpson. I remember our laughter as Dad would strut around with the Hoover, crooning "Time may change me / But I can't trace time". It felt like this was the real Dad, released and "running wild", and it was a joy to feel that "strange fascination" at Dad's transformation.

But then Monday would come again and the grey suit would go back on and he would return to "a million dead-end streets". Trapped and stifled in a job he hated, Dad then faced long-term serious illness, an endless battle with his employer and, eventually, redundancy. Looking back, I can see that, like one of Bowie's "children that you spit on" who "try to change their worlds" Dad was "quite aware of what [he was] going through" and how we'd been "left up to our necks in it", that he watched "the ripples change their size" but without the full means to change the situation other than to follow his own childhood lessons to "not make a fuss" and to "grin and bear it".

Freeing Creative Voice

I wrote this toolkit as I approach the age that my dad was when he faced these struggles, increasingly aware that I was at risk of falling into similar stifling patterns. I have long struggled with the pressure of balancing a demanding teaching career with the joys and responsibilities of family life, and this was intensified by the pandemic's unique web of stressors. However, I had found that reading and writing poetry had helped me reflect on and gain insight into the challenges of Covid – poetry helped me to not only “turn myself to face me” but to “turn and face the strange”. I also remember the galvanising effect of delivering a remote lesson to my Year 11 class on a dreary February afternoon in the final lockdown. Students were encouraged, in response to Roger Robinson's poetry, to write “Portable Paradise” poems of their own, little lamps of hope that they could carry with them, and which lit up our laptop screens as they shared them aloud in the depths of lockdown. We had experienced the transformative and empowering effect of writing and sharing reflective poetry.

Finally, it was reading Gillie Bolton's ‘Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development’ and Peter Elbow's ‘Writing Without Teachers’ that helped to shape and develop my initial experiences of reading, writing and teaching poetry into this Reflective Poetry Toolkit. I drew significant inspiration from Bolton's framework for a “reflective and reflexive” praxis – of a pedagogy of writing from within the “swampy lowlands” of uncertainty as a means to move beyond descriptive and explanatory writing-learning *about* uncertainty, towards a more analytical writing-learning *questioning of* uncertainty. Similarly, Elbow's characterisation of free-writing as liberation from the inner critic, and as a process of “Growing [and] Cooking” to enable a “center of gravity” to appear provides a reflective framework for the writing-learning processes that the toolkit seeks to encourage.

Freeing Creative Voice

The three exercises in this toolkit therefore provide you with an opportunity to get to know yourself better through writing poetry. Whilst the activities were initially designed to support early career teachers to reflect on the challenges of teaching, and for students struggling with the step up to Further and Higher Education, they have worked equally well in supporting postgraduate students, and in therapeutic explorations of family trauma. Whatever your situation, the writing activities will help you explore experiences of anxiety, transition, change and uncertainty, producing poems that enable you to reflect and discover more about how you respond to challenging situations. You can work through the exercises in any way that works best for you: independently or within a group, and at your own pace. Finally, you are encouraged to see these exercises as a toolkit that you can open up and return to again and again – to help you to “turn and face the strange” and “try to change your world” through poetry writing whenever you need.

Exercise 1: Butterflies

Our first exercise helps you explore those moments that make your pulse race and your stomach flutter – jittery moments of nervous, excited energy!

The process of writing a poem about these ‘butterflies’ moments will help you develop better understanding of how you respond to such intense and stimulating situations.

The exercise helps you pinpoint experiences you might find especially overwhelming, so you can explore how to enter such situations in healthy, empowered ways in the future.

Like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, the stages of this exercise will help you begin a transformative process, to emerge with greater self-knowledge and confidence.

Step 1: Caterpillar Stage

We’ll begin with a listing exercise: you will have six minutes to list situations that give you ‘butterflies’.

Freeing Creative Voice

Try listing different situations, from moments of excitement and joy, to anxiety and nerves. After six minutes, you should have a good, long, caterpillar-like list!

For creative writing newcomers, being faced with a blank page and six minutes can immediately cause ‘butterflies’, so you may wish to start your list with “A blank page and six minutes”! Have a look at my example for further prompts.

Freeing Creative Voice

Exercise 1: Butterflies

Step 1: Free Writing

Singing in the shower

An empty beach

A busy beach

A tub of jumbled Lego

The first morning of the holidays

A ~~blank~~ page and new pens
fresh

A blank page and 6 minutes

Dancing on my own

Driving with the windows ~~open~~ down

The smell of ferries

The plane on the runway

The light as the ferry door opens

The heat when the plane door opens

Road signs in a different language

Waking to wood pigeons and sunlight

Waking to fresh snow

The path that leads through the pines

A cloudless day

the return flight

the first day back

waking before the
alarm

busy corridors
on the first day

New classrooms

new seating plans

the first assembly

first lunch break

catching up and

first day small
talk

Friday night

the weekend
at last

the night

before a test
or interview

parents

evening

only a week
to go

Step 2: Chrysalis Stage

Now we will transform our caterpillar-like lists into new poems. Like the tissues of caterpillars reform to become butterflies inside the chrysalis, you will now ‘reform’ your list of ‘butterflies’ moments in a way that helps you to make more sense of them. To do this you should:

1. Cut out the items in your list, then jumble them up (these are the ‘tissues’ of the ‘caterpillar’).
2. At the top of your A3 paper, draw a scale from 1-10.
3. Think about the spectrum of emotional responses you explored in Step 1: Caterpillar Stage. Think of words to define either end of this spectrum. For example, my spectrum ranged from ‘Dread’ to ‘Joyful anticipation’. Write these words at either end of your scale.
4. You could also think of a word to go in the middle of your scale. This scale is the ‘chrysalis’ where you will reform your caterpillar list.
5. Take each cut-out “butterflies-moment” and think about where to place it on your spectrum.
6. When you are ready, place each “butterflies-moment” onto your scale. You could also think about how to sequence the moments moving down the page. Will you do it randomly? Or does a narrative emerge? In my example, a sequence following the academic year revealed itself to me. Do whatever makes most sense to you!

Freeing Creative Voice

Exercise 1: Butterflies
Step 2: Setting the scale

Dread				Peace/Calm				Joyful anticipation	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A blank page and 6 minutes				A blank page and new pens fresh					
the first day back				Waking to wood pigeons and sunlight					
waking before the alarm									
busy corridors on the first day				the weekend at last					
new classrooms									
new seating plans									
the first assembly									
the night before a test or interview									
first lunch break									
parents evening				only a week to go					
				The first morning of the holidays					
The plane on the runway				Driving with the windows down open					
Road signs in a different language									
The path that leads through the pines									
An empty beach				A cloudless day					
				Singing in the shower					
				Dancing on my own					
the return flight									

Freeing Creative Voice

Step 3: Eclosion Stage

Eclosion is the process of an adult butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. During this process the butterfly unfurls its soft, crinkled wings, drying and strengthening them ready for flight.

You will now do similar with your emerging poem, making sure you are confident and satisfied that it effectively expresses your range of 'butterflies' moments.

To do this you could:

- Type out your 'cut up' poem
- Add, remove or change words or phrases
- Play around with line spacing, alignment and formatting
- Read it aloud to see how it sounds

See my example for some indication of what a finished poem could look like:

Freeing Creative Voice

a blank page and six minutes

a fresh page and new pens

the first day at school

waking before the alarm

wood pigeons and sunlight

corridors, classrooms

new seating plans

that first assembly

that first lunch break

the weekend at last

the night before the test

that first parents evening

only a week to go

the first day of the holidays

the plane on the runway

driving with the windows down

road signs in another language

the path that leads through the pines

an empty beach on a cloudless day

singing in the shower

dancing on my own

the return flight

the first day back

Freeing Creative Voice

Exercise 2: Ode to My Younger Self

Our second exercise helps you examine a key moment of change from earlier in your life.

This will involve turning yourself ‘inside out’ – thinking about the relationship between your inner feelings and outward behaviours, *and* how these were affected by the setting and context where the moment of change took place. By examining how you coped with change in the past, the exercise supports you to reflect on ways to deal with change now and in the future.

You will write an ‘Ode’ to yourself earlier in life. Essentially, an Ode is a song of praise or tribute, so writing your poem will help you celebrate your younger self, and salute your resilience and capacity for change.

Step 1: River of Life

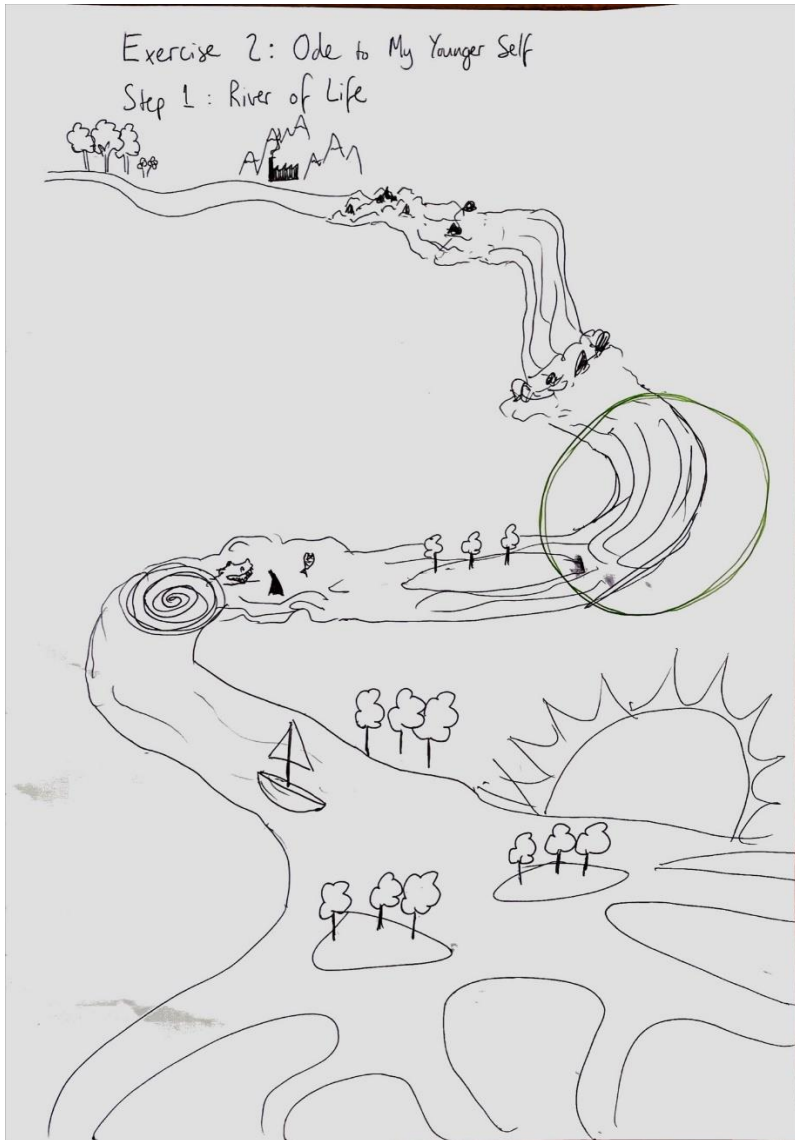
First, you will tell your life story so far in the form of a drawing of a river that represents your life from birth to the present day. This activity is adapted from a really fruitful exercise I undertook in a class on teaching Teen Fiction, led by Professor Vicky Macleroy.

As you draw, think about:

- Which key phases of your life will you focus on?
- How will you represent these stages?
- Which features of rivers might you use? When are the calm waters? The rapids? The waterfalls and whirlpools? When is it a stream, a meandering flow, a branching delta?
- What is on the riverbank? What crosses your river? What or who lives on your river?

When finished, circle a key moment of change in your life-river to examine further. On my example, I circled a big bend in the river symbolising me leaving home for university.

Freeing Creative Voice



Step 2: Inside Out

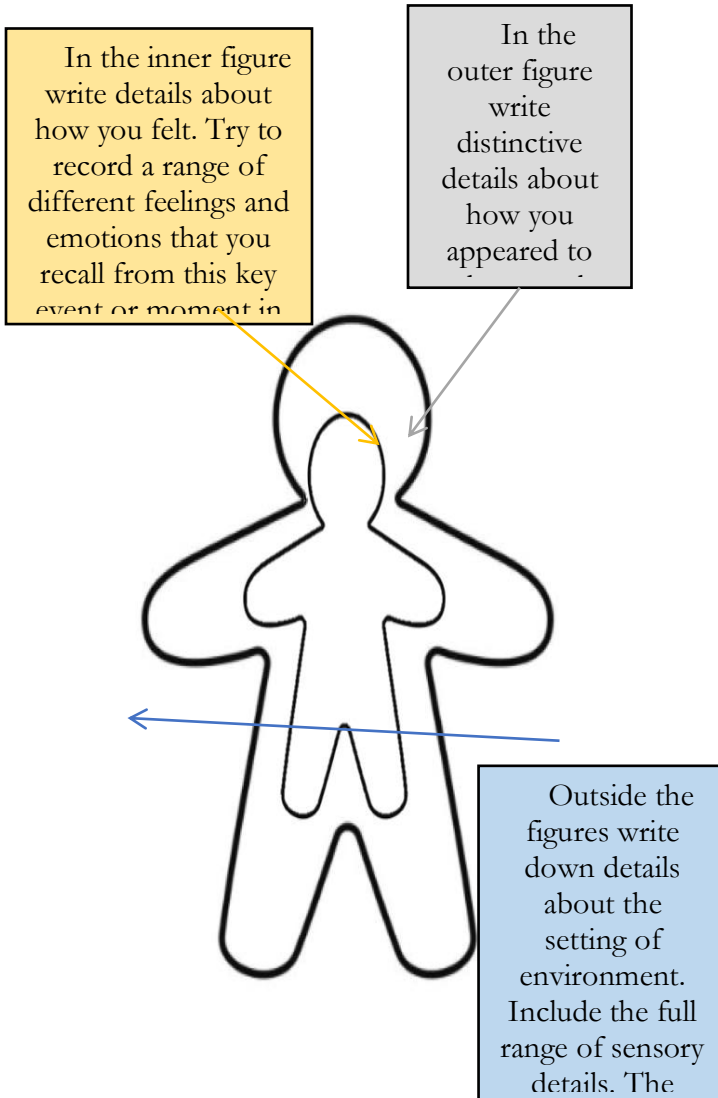
Next, you will zoom in on your chosen moment of change and examine how you responded at the time.

Freeing Creative Voice

Imagine yourself back in that time of your life: picture a specific place or event you can remember vividly. Try to remember how you felt in that place, at that time. And try to remember your appearance or how other people saw you.

Using the template and instructions below, spend 10 minutes adding as much detail as you can to each section. The more sharply you remember, the more material you will have for Step 3 of the exercise! Use different colour pens to make each section really clear and distinct. See my example as a suggested guide to level of detail.

Freeing Creative Voice



Freeing Creative Voice

Exercise 2: Ode to My Younger Self

Step 2: Inside Out

Front of college
warm gold stone
flat and
fortress-like
Battlements
Porters lodge
Heavy wooden
doors

Quads square green
lawns
Do NOT STEP ON THE GRASS
Staircases steps worn away
by centuries of students
Jargon and
Acronyms everywhere
JCR SU Bops
Battles Scouts

Backhead
hair wax
scrunched
tangled hair
messy
Yorkshire
accent
Acne
scars
Bradford
Voivets
nervous
scared
lacking confidence
intimidated
alone
exposed
insecure
inadequate
shy
insecure
fearful
not good enough
Chest
out
Dunlop
Green Flash
Bench
shirt
Yellow
Striped
T-shirt
New
clothes
Rough
knees
Broken
leg
bump on
shin
Reebok
classics?
Utility
chic
silver
fossil
watch
Lynx?
Six
pack
Pomegranates
Gin + Tonic. Lager
Budvar
Jumpers over shoulders
Deck shoes and
loafers

Southern
accents
RP drawl
Which school did
you go to? Which
park of London
are you from?

On the Kerb
Mum and Dad
driving away
fading into distance

Didn't know till
later that they were
crying

Freeing Creative Voice

Step 3: Wear your heart on your sleeve

You can now transform your 'Inside Out' self into metaphors for the powerful feelings you experienced in your moment of change.

Just like the saying 'to wear your heart on your sleeve', your metaphors should help you to visualise and celebrate your younger self's feelings in honest, vivid ways.

To form your metaphors use the layers of your 'Inside Out' notes as follows:

1. Choose a feeling from the inner figure that you want to represent. Use it to start a sentence (E.g. **My fear is...** or **I am as scared as...**)
2. Choose a detail of your appearance from the outer figure to represent your inner feeling. Add it to your sentence (E.g. **My fear is a scrunched mess of hair...**)
3. Choose a detail of the setting or context, to ground your metaphor in a sense of place. Use it to end your sentence (E.g. **My fear is a scrunched mess of hair on the kerb waving goodbye.**)

Tips for getting the most out of this stage:

- Enjoy playing around with combinations to find metaphors that feel right.
- Have fun choosing images that seem to clash with the feeling being represented (E.g. **My fear is a puffed out chest...**). What does this reveal about how you show or hide your feelings in vulnerable situations?
- Use different colour pens to help see how your metaphors fit together.

Freeing Creative Voice

- Add in new details, words or phrases – make your metaphors work for you!
- See my example for different ways I created metaphors for my younger self's feelings.

Exercise 2 : Ode to My Younger Self
Step 3 : Wear your heart on your sleeve

My fear is my hair, bed-head waxed, a tangled, scrunched mess on the kerb, the flat stone college front fortress like before me.

I am as shy as my best new clothes - Dunlop Green Flash and silver Fossil watch as I push through the heavy wooden doors of the porters' lodge.

My doubt is walking on rugby legs, chest puffed out, chin stubbled round the neat green square of the quad.

My nerves are Bradford vowels sprayed bold with Hugo Boss among the Southern voices, shoulder folded jumpers and loafers.

Freeing Creative Voice

Step 4: Writing your Ode

You are ready to construct an ‘Ode to Your Younger Self’ paying tribute to yourself at this pivotal point in your life.

Feel free to use your metaphors however is best for you. You could consider:

- Starting as a letter to your younger self: “Dear Me...”
- Will you write in first person “*My* pride was...”, second person “*Your* pride was...”, or third person “*His* pride was...”? Past tense “*My* doubt *was*...” or present tense “*My* doubt *is*...”? Play around to see what feels best.
- Adapt your metaphors – rejig word order, add new details, take words out. Experiment!
- Think about the sequencing. Will you tell a story or bounce from image to image?
- As ever, take a look at my example as a guide:

Freeing Creative Voice

Ode to My Younger Self on My First Day at University

Dear Me, **alone** on that **kerb waving**
goodbye to a **clunked car boot**
now empty, already **fading**.

Under
the **warm shadow of the stone-flat**
college front your fear, was a **waxed**
tangle, a scrunched mess of hair.

Through **heavy wooden doors**
of the **porter's lodge** you were **shy**
as your **fresh gear – Dunlop**
Green Flash, silver Fossil watch.

Round the **square lawn of the quad**
your **doubt** was a **puffed out chest,**
rugby legs, stubbled chin. Among the
Southern voices and **shoulder folded**
sweaters, your **nerves** were **Bradford**
vowels sprayed bold with Boss.

Hours later you ate your first
pomegranate.

Freeing Creative Voice

Exercise 3: Stuck in the Middle With You

Our final exercise ups the challenge, helping you explore a current situation of confusion or uncertainty. Maybe you are making a tricky transition from one phase of life to another? Maybe you feel conflicted, or pulled in different directions? Or maybe you feel a bit imbalanced at the moment?

Whatever situation you choose, this exercise helps you envisage your situation more clearly to move beyond your hesitancy with more confidence.

Step 1: At the moment I feel stuck because...

We'll start with a six-minute-write to get ideas flowing. Start with the sentence "At the moment I feel stuck because..." writing freely for six minutes about whatever is in your mind. Don't worry about the quality of your writing!

After six minutes, re-read your writing and highlight key words. Do you notice any:

- Conflicts or oppositions?
- Competing demands or priorities?
- Clashing situations?

Choose two conflicting ideas or situations you want to explore further. My free-write helped me explore the shift from home-teaching to classroom-teaching during the pandemic.

Freeing Creative Voice

Step 2: Venn Diagram Free-Write

Now to examine your chosen uncertainty or confusion further, using a Venn diagram to visualise conflicting aspects of your stuck self:

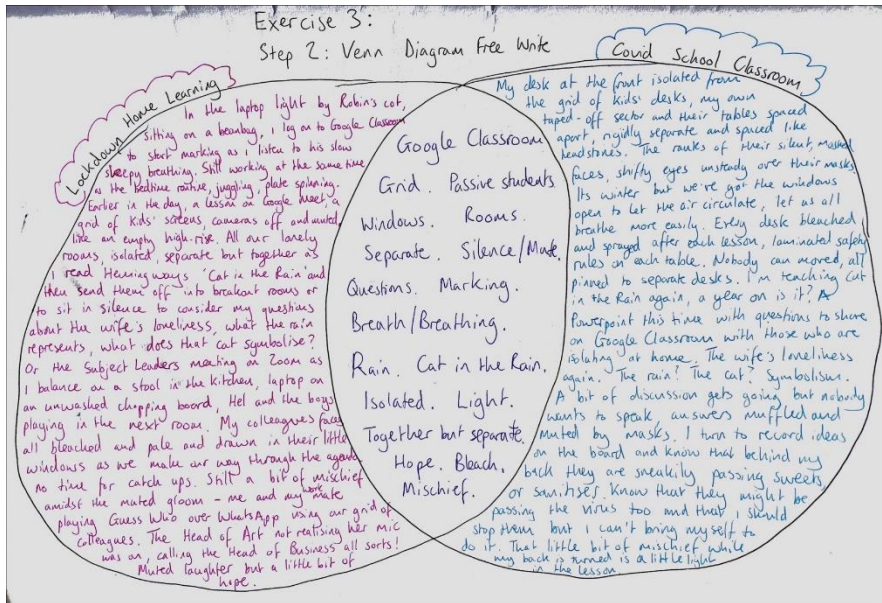
1. Label each circle of your Venn Diagram with contrasting words or phrases from your free write (E.g. “**Lockdown Home Learning**” and “**Covid School Classroom**”)
2. Complete a six-minute free-write in each side of your Venn Diagram. Try to include lots of concrete details about each conflicting situation or feeling – sensory details, objects, settings – make it really visual! You could use clashing colours to emphasise the contrast – maybe **red for the left circle** and **blue for the right**.
3. Re-read what you have written on both sides – do you notice any words, phrases or ideas that both sides have in common. Highlight them and then list them in the central section of the Venn diagram – **use a colour that mixes your original clashing colours**.

Use my example to get a sense of level of detail, layout and use of colour:

Freeing Creative Voice

Exercise 3:

Step 2: Venn Diagram Free Write



Freeing Creative Voice

Step 3: The end is the start...

Finally, you will transform your Venn diagram *notes* into a Venn diagram poem – a visual, poetic record of your uncertainty that you can read to reflect more deeply on the conflicts that are confusing you.

To create your poem:

1. Focusing on the left side of your Venn Diagram write a line that *ends* with a word from the middle. (E.g. **On Google Meet the kids are a muted grid.**)
2. Then, write a line about the right side of your Venn Diagram that *starts* with the same word from the middle. (E.g. **Grid of desks all socially distanced.**)
3. Use the same colour coding as the Venn diagram to make the differences and similarities clear.
4. Repeat this process using other words from the middle of the diagram to build an equal number of lines for each side of your Venn diagram that end or start with the same word.
5. Now, try sequencing your lines to make two poems – one poem for the left and one for the right side of your Venn diagram.
6. For a real challenge, can you sequence both poems so that the order of the *end words* of the first poem is the same as the order of the *start words* of the second poem.
7. Look at my example in the Venn diagram table to help – first read the **red lines ending in purple words**, then read the **blue lines starting with purple words**. Could you have a go at doing something similar?

Freeing Creative Voice

Home		School
Google Meet.	a grid	of kids, masked faces in ranks,
Cameras off. Muted,		
of little screens -	windows	open in winter, all cold in the clean air. Class
the class a high-rise		
of unlit	rooms	of taped-off sectors, bleach-scoured desks
gazing blankly		
out at other lonely	separate	and spaced as gravestones.
We annotate a		
shared document,	I read	
	Hemingway's	taking the odd mask-
but together,	'Cat in the	muffled answer as I
thinking about	Rain'	
symbolism as		
		rows of unsteady eyes, then
and we tap out	question	collect books to
hints of the wife's		
sadness,		after the three day
the meanings	mark	quarantine. One girl says how
hidden in the cat.		"the
Later I		
the few		
responses on	light	had come on in the square"
Google Classroom.		hints at the wife's
In laptop		
beside Robin's	hope	at the end of the story. I
cot, I search for		allow myself to
in my students'		
words, as I listen to	breathe	again that evening on the
him sleepily		empty tube.

Next steps...

Well done! You have written three poems and have had the chance to learn and reflect upon yourself through your writing. How you send your poems fluttering into the world is entirely your choice – some suggested options are:

- Keep the poems as precious objects for yourself. You could reflect on what you learned about yourself in the process of writing or re-reading the poems.
- Share your poems with someone you trust. They could read it to themselves, or you might read it to them. You could suggest ways you might like them to respond: do you want constructively critical or purely positive feedback? Or to discuss any issues you explore in your poems? Or further advice and guidance?
- Share your poems with a wider audience. Think carefully about what sort of wider audience feels safe for you. Might you share it with a writing group? A group of family and friends? With your class? Or might you enter a writing competition or self-publish online?
- Write other poems using the same exercises – do you learn anything new?
- Teach other people the exercises – get other people writing reflective poems!

Using Therapeutic Writing & Funds of Knowledge to Unlock Teenagers Imagination in the Secondary Classroom by Desiri Okobia

Background

For the past seven years, I have taught English at various secondary schools in and around London; I am yet to see a system that empowers students to draw upon their own lived experiences in preparing for the creative aspect of their English GCSE. Most secondary school ‘creative writing’ lessons consist of teachers providing students with a visual prompt; asking them to utilise their five senses and deploy figurative language.

The ideology that one size fits all cannot work for creative writing educators. We need a decolonised curriculum that makes room for lived experience.

Although the specification allows students to ‘read a wide range of texts,’ the scope of this ‘wide range’ remains inherently biased towards a British education system rooted in white supremacy. In particular, the ‘creative texts,’ that students analyse and use as inspiration in section A of the paper are fiction texts drawn from either the 20th or 21st century; written by white English or American writers such as H E Bates, Judith Allnatt & Ernest Hemmingway. There is an element of tokenism, with the November 2021 paper featuring an extract by Chimamanda Ngozi, but the lack of representation remains an issue. The activities that I have designed go beyond tokenistic gestures; they create space for students to explore and express aspects of their own identity in their writing.

Learning theories

Building off the fundamental tenets of learning theory (Aubrey & Riley 2016), what is interesting about my work is understanding how creative writing works using critical race theory. I am in a unique position as a Black, female, writer & educator to help students and other educators understand that students lived experiences are important in creative writing. Telling Black & ethnic minority students how to 'write creatively' based on books written by white middle-class writers is oppressive. However, students writing about themselves or their parents from the perspective of an object or a place is liberating.

Pedagogical framework

Many of the activities in this workshop begin with an element of explorative writing, for example, in the second workshop, students begin by writing a 'list' and allowing whatever comes from their mind to cluster all over the page. Expressive and explorative writing can be used to subvert oppressive ideologies. To facilitate this end, I start my workshops with free writing exercises, students are freeing themselves from the restraints of what 'imaginative writing,' entails and unlocking their own creativity.

Workshop design and strategy

What: Students will use objects; pictures; drawings as prompts to discuss, plan and write creatively in the secondary classroom. These sessions will take place over a series of six workshops.

How: These lessons in these workshops will begin with a 5-minute starter activity. Then the teacher will write alongside the students who will then work individually as well as collaboratively to write their own creative pieces. Each session will end with a plenary where students can consolidate their knowledge and share their creative responses. The plenary can take between 5 to 10 minutes depending on how many students are in the class.

Why: To develop students' creative writing as well as enable them to explore how their life experiences have shaped their understanding of themselves.

Session 1

Learning Objective

To think and write imaginatively whilst exploring your own identity.

Starter

Freeing Creative Voice

Ask students to diagram the factors that make up their identity: family, religion, hobbies, childhood etc.

Post-exercise questions

Why have you chosen these categories?

Which category has been the most significant in shaping the person you are today?

Which category has been least significant? Why do you think this might be?

Task 1

Choose one category and create a list of associated items.

Task 2

Discuss why have you chosen these items? How do they make you feel?

Free Writing [8 mins]

Use the items on your list to write about your earliest memory.

Plenary

Share your responses and give each other feedback (optional).

Session 2:

Learning Objective: To be able to think and write imaginatively from the perspective of an object

Lesson Structure:

Starter: Ask students to think of a significant person in their childhood whether a mum, dad, auntie, uncle, teacher or carer.

1. Create a list of objects that come to mind when you think of that person. In this session I focus on my mother and how she has influenced my life.
2. Begin to sketch images that you associate with this person

In this section I focus on my mother and how she has influenced my life.

[Mum – List]

Freeing Creative Voice

Red eyebrows, red hair, forever young, smooth skin, powdered white, chocolate brown, curved figure, always dressed to show out; matching shoe and bag; knowing fashion; waist belts; jerry curls; natural hair; wrapper tied around waist. Mum is pretty. Avon; post office; school run; staying home; Nigeria; make-up; purple lipstick.

Post-Writing Questions:

What impression do you have of “mum” when you read over the list?

Choose one object that stands out to you & explain why have you chosen this object?

If this object could talk, what would it say about mum?

Free Writing [10 mins]:

Extract 2: “Purple Lipstick

“Mum is loyal she always chooses me.

I’m the last thing that she puts on.

The colour of royalty.

I accentuate her features; mum can rely on me.

I never run out I’m always in stock.

For as long as I can remember she rolls me to the top.

Mum finds comfort in me, I show them her best face.

But mum doesn’t really need me.

She’s pretty anyway.

Key Questions to prompt their own creative responses:

What does mum use the object for? Where does she keep it? How important is the object to mum?

Plenary:

See whether students can guess the object in each other's free writing.

Discuss what they think/feel/imagine about [mum] based on the free writing.

Session 3:

Freeing Creative Voice

Learning Objective: To create and develop a narrative based on a particular 'place'

Lesson Structure:

Starter: Ask students to think back to the influential person they chose last session.

1. Create a list of specific places/rooms that you associate with this person.

2. You are going to imagine *person* in that place and then begin to write a short piece entitled [Mum's *insert room*]

[Places I associate with mum]

Kitchen...etc.

Task: 10-minute Free Writing [Mum's Kitchen]

Plenary: Students share their creative responses and discuss what they have discovered through the writing process.

Session 4:

Learning Objective: To write & redraft a narrative written from the perspective of an object

Lesson Structure:

1. Using the 'place' from your previous activity; you are going to write from the point of view of an object in that place.

2. Read the example below

3. Write down potential questions from *object* & use them to Extend your response

Extract 4 Writing from the point of view of an object in the kitchen

Pan

In the kitchen is where I see mum, usually she comes in once a week and takes me out of the cupboard. I get filled up with grains of rice and then showered with unfiltered tap water.

Yuck.

In the kitchen is where I see mum, she likes to be in here alone most days. It's where her and I get to catch up on the week. She heats me up then sits me down on her green, deck chair eating and scrunching up her face. Mum used to spend hours in the kitchen with me. This was years ago though, when mum had little mouths to feed. She took us all out back then; now it's just me. Her favourite. I'm the most reliable and sturdy, that's why mum and I have been together for so many years!

When the rice finishes heating, mum leaves me to cool off whilst she cools off. Then mum goes outside and leaves me to really cool off in a cold dark place.

I think mum works as a Night Nurse because I hear her talking about her job sometimes. In her favourite place. In the kitchen with me.

Extending your response: Potential questions for mum from the pan?

Why do you love to cook? It brings me a sense of purpose.

What else does it mean to you? My way of showing love is through food.

Why do you always put the same food in me? I'm a creature of routine.

Mum's love for her children comes through me. That's why she keeps me in a special place, in a special cupboard on a neatly folded clean white cloth. Mum only uses me for one type of food.

Rice.

That's because I'm a special pan.

I have the right type of skill to make sure the food is just right. Mum brings me out at least once a week so that she can cook food for the family, I don't see them as much as I used to, but we still get them all fed. You see I'm a powerful pan. Mum's partner in cooking crime. Ha!Ha!Ha! We keep the family together, mum and me. We are a team.

Mum is so full of love; so full of care and compassion. She keeps the family together. With my help, mum creates carbohydrate filled dishes, then the sugar gets slowly released into the bloodstream and gives everyone energy. Mum is literally the family bloodline.

Redraft Task: Read over your extract. You are going to redraft this with a focus on detail.

Where can you add more details?

It is important to make a piece of writing really communicate to its audience, this takes time; thought and care.

Students can work in pairs to ask questions from the perspective of the object. Use the responses to extend the extract.

Reflective Writing:

“Pan”

Initially, I used “Pan” to get insight into mum, during a tutorial we started discussing questions pan might ask and what the objects represent. I realised that these objects have hidden meanings, for example, Pan represents mums love and care for her family. She spreads her love by cooking and distributing food to her children and grandchildren. The discussion developed into linking “Pan” with another object that is closely connected to mum and what interactions could arise from this piece of writing. We started to consider what story I would tell and what lessons could be learnt by this.

Students can explore what they are learning about “mum” from completing this exercise. This ultimately leads to the question of what they are learning about themselves. How has your mother influenced you?

I asked myself this question: What do you learn about your mum from this exercise?

It shows me her journey – from being in the kitchen and having loads of little mouths, to feed to now that she just has this one pot to cook small meals. The kitchen is still an important part of her life, just in a different way.

Session 5:

Learning Objective: To work collaboratively and develop a narrative by creating a scenario between two objects

Lesson Structure:

Starter: Ask students what themes they can you develop from their previous narrative? What additional ‘objects’ can they bring in?

Themes for me to Develop: Mum keeping the family alive with love and care, expressed in the food. Write a story about a Container that goes to the houses. Link this story to Pan. Pan might be happy staying with mum. Perhaps, Container gets stuck in a house and comes back home after having an adventure in the other houses. Pan knows what happens to the food that mum cooks.

Tasks:

1. Share the “Pan & Container,” story and ask students to guess what these objects could symbolise.
2. Pan symbolises love; comfort; home; healing; warmth; growth.
3. Container symbolises change; generosity; distance; giving; family.
4. Ask students to write their own scenario between two objects.
5. In pairs, act out the scenario and discuss what the object you are playing could symbolise.

“Pan & Container”

Container: Mum loves me more than Pan, she takes me everywhere with her, I get to see all of the kids in their brand-new homes. Yep, I’m mum’s favourite. I know it.

Pan: I’m mum’s favourite that’s for sure, she never lets anyone borrow me and she keeps me all to herself. Not like plastic box head over there, he’s hardly ever home.

Container: That’s because I must stretch my arms both far and wide, mum needs me to spread love to all the family.

Pan: She doesn’t come home for days, even weeks sometimes whereas mum keeps me in her special spot in the tidiest cupboard of all.

Container: Actually, yes there was this one time when mum took me to the oldest one's house. He has two screaming babies. I didn’t like it there; it was too noisy. I stayed in the cold place for about two weeks, no one came to speak to me. They didn’t seem to care about my content at all.

Freeing Creative Voice

Pan: Well at least you get to go on adventures and see outside of these four walls, mum never takes me out with her.

Session 6:

Learning Objective: To work collaboratively and create an original poem using each other's creative writing as inspiration

I completed a free writing exercise with my Year 8 class during form time. Having read their responses, I chose a collection of their objects to use as inspiration for this creative piece.

Lesson Structure:

1. Read each other's extracts and write down the first few words that come to mind about the person being written about.
2. Using the words in your list – turn each object into a metaphor (see below).
3. Scaffolding: There are some gaps in the example poem where students can have a go at coming up with different metaphors.
4. Work collaboratively to create an original piece that you can perform to the group.

Extract 6:

List: Hardworking; dedicated; precise; routine; kind; relaxed; time alone; busy; homemaker; caring; love.

Objects: Lipstick + Hoover + Flowers + Tea + Garden + TV + Oven

Untitled

Lipstick is a confidence builder

Hoover is _____

Flower is a sweet scent in tough times

Tea is a relaxation tool

Garden is the kindest heart

TV is a dust collector

Oven is a fireball of love

TV is _____

Tea is _____

Flower is _____

Lipstick is _____

Hoover is a homemaker

Garden is the centre of attention.

Conclusion:

Although these workshops were created for use in the secondary classroom; they are adaptable for adult creative writing groups as well. During a creative writing retreat, I hosted a small group of about six adults for a 45-minute workshop. I started the session by asking them to diagraph factors that make up their own identity; then I asked them to think about a particular place in their childhood; we ended by writing from the perspective of an *object* in that place. All the participants were able to write about a childhood memory from the perspective of their chosen object. They all commented on how inspiring and liberating they found the experience.

Healing, Joy, and Autonomy in the Trauma-Informed Creative Workshop

by Carrie Sweeney

WORKSHOP INTRODUCTION

In the following workshop outline, I offer practitioners lesson plans for a four-week creative writing workshop with classroom management suggestions and critical commentary woven throughout. I present lesson plans in tandem with respective pedagogical grounding to emphasize the importance of facilitator intentionality and trauma-informed decision-making. Even small choices matter.

The following workshop is targeted at 12- to 14-year-olds and 90-minute sessions but can be adapted for various groups. Each activity is crafted from a trauma-informed perspective, (Champine et al., 2022; DeCandia et al., 2014) avoiding writing prompts or exercises likely to trigger students, such as eliminating hyperfocus on things like past life experiences, home life, familial and romantic relationships, can greatly increase a student's comfort and openness (Carello & Butler, 2014). The long-term learning objective of this workshop is developing a grounded writing practice that centers healing (Gilbert, 2021). The ambition of this workshop encourages building a writing practice rather than producing finished results, supporting the writer's long-term engagement.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE & SURROUNDING LITERATURE

The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) describes individual trauma as an event or circumstance that results in physical, emotional, or life-threatening harm, with lasting and adverse effects on physical, emotional, and mental health, as well as social and/or spiritual wellbeing (SAMHSA 2022). Traumatic events and circumstances can include violence, abuse, homelessness, discrimination, natural disasters, poverty, neglect, and pandemics (Bridgland et al., 2021; Champine et al., 2022).

Scholars conceptualize cross-discipline trauma-informed work mainly in two ways: “trauma-specific services” and “trauma-informed care” (Champine et al., 2022; DeCandia et al., 2014). Trauma-specific services include interventions that specifically address trauma symptoms and responses that individuals or groups exhibit after experiencing a trauma. Trauma-informed care (TIC), conversely, names a “universal framework” involving “changes to programs, policies, and practices to understand, identify, and address trauma (Champine et al., 2022, p. 460). Generally, TIC provides preventative and accessible work, including staff trainings, trauma awareness efforts, and intentional cultivation of a workspace/educational culture of safety for its members (Hanson et al., 2018). In education spaces, TIC includes restructuring of material and its delivery to account for the potential impact of traumatic content, and approaching students with the core tenants of autonomy, professional support, choice, and freedom (Champine et al., 2022; Cremin & Myhill, 2012).

As educators, it is imperative to identify and situate how our lived experiences can influence our own and others' learning and to address leadership blind spots within our pedagogical teaching approaches. In education, a "blind spot" represents the psychological principle that without having lived through certain experiences, individuals develop biases that distort judgement or obscure the ability to understand another individual's experience. (Pronin & Hazel, 2023). As a trauma studies scholar, it is critical to note that "Trauma disproportionately burdens populations of color, indigenous communities, and members of sexual minority groups, thus necessitating a trauma-informed social justice response" (SAMHSA 2014). In this realm of research and praxis, I identify that I have experienced trauma and have received individuated trauma-specific services and therapy such as EMDR and talk therapy, but there is much I am still learning about many areas of trauma, including racial trauma, group trauma, generational trauma, and more. I have crafted this workshop to be helpful for a range of experiences other than my own to account for potential blind spots, but recognize that unlearning biases and assumptions is something I will continue to work at.

In the workshop lessons presented below, I adopt a preventative, trauma-informed approach to teaching, rather than a trauma-specific and reaction-oriented approach to mitigating symptoms. This is an important distinction because TIC through creative writing does *not* override therapy, clinical diagnosis, or symptom-treatment plans. Trauma-adapted creative arts can be a powerful addition to such treatments, but it is important for educators to recognize when we are not trained in psychology and medicine and make that explicit in our methodology and positionality (Van der Kolk, 2015).

The purpose of this workshop is to fill students' toolbelts with writing and grounding techniques, experimenting with language in an accepting and psychologically safe space (Frazier, 2017). It is impossible to account for every possible trigger that could upset an individual experiencing or having had experienced trauma, especially within a writing workshop. However, with TIC and a pedagogy bolstered on peer-reviewed research on the positive impact of a trauma-informed approach to teaching creative writing, teachers can radically adapt their classrooms to be more accessible and safer for all students. None of the poetry presented in this workshop contains or explicitly prompts violent, graphic, specific, or grief-centered material.

CLASSROOM ARRANGEMENT

I recommend arranging chairs in a circle to encourage participation and open dialogue (Collins 2013). As they feel comfortable, facilitators should aim to participate in as many of the writing exercises as they can, establishing a sense of shared practice. I also suggest creating a "Calm Corner" of the room, filled with comfort items- blankets, cushions, soft lights, and a "Little Library," where students can retreat to if they start to get overwhelmed. Fill the "Calm Corner" with reading materials by young authors (see Appendix for some examples) for students to visit if they feel unable to write. In the trauma-informed workshop, it is imperative to offer students alternate ways of engaging with material if they feel overwhelmed, because forcing students to participate unsafely runs the risk of re-traumatization, feelings of isolation, and disengagement (Carello & Butler 2014).

Finally, I recommend a "teacher drop-box" set up near the door (e.g., a decorated shoebox) where students can leave any pieces they want feedback on, or any general concerns and questions. This offers students a way of communicating their needs without having to verbalize them. In a trauma-informed space, it is critical to establish and encourage open communication and indicate to students that there is help readily available to them without forcing in-person conversations before they are ready.

Note: all creative work included in this section was composed by me.

WORKSHOP LESSON PLANS

WEEK ONE – INTRODUCTION & COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: Students will work together to establish a safe space for writing exploration, institute community expectations, and begin developing a personal writing practice.

COURSE INTRODUCTION (15 min):

1. **Facilitator introduction** (5 min) - prepare photos/details about who you are and what is important to you. Share what type of writing you enjoy, and excerpts of your own writing with students where appropriate.
2. **Writing reflection & aims** (10 min) - Distribute slips of paper for students to individually write, draw, or simply think in response to the following questions. Allow students to hold onto their slips of paper, or to share via the teacher drop box.

Guiding Reflection Questions:

- A. *What are some of your fears about writing?*
- B. *What do you dislike about writing in the classroom?*
- C. *What do you wish writing looked like?*
- D. *What do you want your facilitator to know about you?*
- E. *What do you want your classmates to know about you?*
- F. *Is there a color, idea, song title, image, or phrase you want to share that represents how you're feeling right now?*

ACTIVITY #1: Community Ground Rules (20 min)

Use a white board or big poster paper to construct a list of “community ground rules” or “rights of a writer in this space” together; ask students what they want to receive from the course and how to get there. Here are a few examples:

1. Encourage each other and offer supportive feedback!

2. Allow everybody to grow at their own pace!
3. “Opt-in, opt-out” policy – always have the right to step out or take a break when needed, and note that there is no need to share writing – it is each person’s choice.

DISCUSSION (~10 min): Read “I tried to write a poem...” (below) aloud and reflect independently in personal journals for 2 min, then briefly discuss freely as a group (5 min), asking students what they noticed about the piece, and what ideas it generates.

I tried to write a poem

but my feet got in the way.

I can’t write a poem because
I have two wooden planks
strapped to the bottom of my boots
And that makes it very hard to walk
which makes it very hard to think
even when I’m sitting down.

I can’t write a poem because
a cornstalk of glitter
sprouted from my desk
so now I have rhinestones dilating instead of pupils
And that that makes it very hard to see
which makes it very hard to think
even when I close my eyes.

I can’t write a poem because
there are raspberries stuck to my fingertips
bursting with each keystroke
mucking up the ASDFJKL;
So I can’t write “thee” or “thou” or “daffodil,”
I can’t type exactly what I mean.

ACTIVITY #2: Freewrite (30 min) → offer students the choice to compose a piece starting with “I come from _____,” “I go to _____,” or “I can’t write a poem because...” OR the opportunity to freewrite, following thoughts just as they come, opting for no guiding prompt or structure (Elbow 1998). Allow for independent writing for 20 minutes. Following this writing session, allow 5-10 minutes for independent review and editing, or silent reading/reflection; student’s choice.

REFLECTION & PLENARY (15 min): Sit in a circle & offer students the chance to either 1) read out their entire piece to the group, 2) share a word/phrase/line they are proud of, 3) pose a question to the group, or 4) reflect on how the writing process felt for them (either as a traditional reflection or a one-word reaction).

Following this share-out, conclude with 5 minutes of reflective writing. Make sure students know that they don’t have to respond to all reflection questions. They can respond to “how are you feeling?” with an in-depth response, a one-word-adjective description, a color, song title, or an unexplained metaphor if they prefer. This plenary is made to prioritize student comfort within the space, repeating after each session.

Post-Activity Reflection Questions:

- How are you feeling?
- What did you learn in this session - about yourself as a writer or about the writing process?
- What kind of support do you need as a writer right now?
- What kind of support do you need as a person right now?
- What are you looking forward to next session?
- Anything you’d like your facilitator to know?

WEEK ONE – COMMENTARY

The genius of the “I can’t write a poem because” prompt is that by the end of the exercise, you’ve already written one. This structure breaks the intimidation and fear first-time writers feel, making it perfect for hesitant students, because they can bash the rules of versification head-on, explicitly stating why they hate poetry without being judged for it. Simultaneously, they explore poetic devices and learn about the writing process.

From a TIC perspective, this prompt allows students the choice to write inexplicitly about their hesitations or experiences if they feel the urge to. They are allowed to speak through metaphor, expressing how they feel without the pressure to explain the details. Students can say things like “I tried to write a poem / but my feet got in the way,” rather than explaining why it’s hard to focus on school, or why they’re struggling socially. This technique pulls from applied arts and therapeutic approaches such as Time Perspective Therapy for PTSD (Sword et al., 2013), Past Life Regressions Hypnotherapy, Integrated Family Systems Therapy (Schwartz, 2013), Poetry, Art and other Expressive Therapies (Gorelick, 2005; Connolly Baker & Mazza, 2004) and other imagination-centered healing approaches without explicitly forcing therapy upon writers. Students can express both positive and negative emotions in a safe and grace-giving manner, wrapping (not warping!) their worries and anxieties into metaphors. The core of emotional expression remains, but students do not have to share details before they’re ready.

Optional Teaching Points:

- Alliteration
- Metaphor
- Rhythm
- Enjambment
- Anaphora
- Creative titles
- Freewriting

WEEK TWO - FREEWRITING & NONSENSE SOUNDS

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: Students will experiment with wordplay and “nonsense syllables,” writing simply for the imaginative joy and emotional release that creative writing offers. Students will learn the strategy of freewriting (Bolton, 2014; Elbow, 1998) and using freewriting phrases as a “launchpad.”

WARMUP: List making (20 min)

Lay random objects around the classroom for when students arrive. These can include car keys, glass animals, card decks, grocery lists, silverware, birdhouses, watering cans, or whatever else you can find. Have students walk around and brainstorm unique names and descriptions of items (ex: maybe a watering can is a “speckled water spouter”) and capture any tangential ideas. Encourage students to interact with everyday classroom items, too (i.e. posters, pencil cups, desks, etc). If students feel comfortable, play light, upbeat instrumental music in the background, further inviting them into rhythmic exploration. When time is about halfway, encourage students to expand descriptions to phrases the objects might say, story ideas, or whatever else comes to mind.

DISCUSSION (20 min): read “Nonsense Sounds” aloud to the group. Have students write down phrases they liked or make notes about/reactions to the work as a whole. Then, use the following questions to discuss how experimenting nonsensically with rhythm and rhyme can be the starting point of future poetry, or just a safe space play with words. Examine what elements make these poems different and/or similar.

Nonsense Sounds

Where dreams have space and sounds have feel
Where all is found, intensely real
Where hurricanes and shattered ice
Where terrapins and liquid mites
Your curious eyes surprise me here
As each word bellows, sound unclear
Reading rhymes and keeping time

And letting jagged skies align
Starless, cloudless veils of gray
The torrent hovers, rains at bay
Rocky rafters show you how
Sonic words and flustered cows
You never knew, you're unaware
A manatee swims through the air
Trelaxed tresses, grapevines swoop
Hydrangea house around the loop
Grains of copper scraping glass
You brush them off your parking pass
That pulls from rainbow riveting ghoul
Nonsense sounds squelch meaning's rule?

Guiding Questions:

- What do you notice about the sound of “Nonsense Sounds”?
- What do you notice about the language? How does it make you feel?
- What do you know about rhythm and rhyme?

ACTIVITY #1: Nonsense sound freewriting (20 min).

Encourage students to write as quickly as they can think for 15 min, focusing on word association and flow rather than writing sentences that make sense grammatically. This exhibits the healing-centered practice of focusing on artistry, emotion, and wordplay rather than demanding sense-making.

Break: 2-minute silent read-over/independent edit, followed by a 3-minute pair/small group share or check-in (students may wish to read their piece to their partner(s), or share a line/phrase they found)

ACTIVITY #2: Focused free write (20 min) - encourage students to pick a line or a phrase from their “nonsense sounds” piece and perform a more focused free write from there, at a slower pace. After 20 minutes pass, offer students the chance to share their work with the whole group if they want to.

REFLECTION & PLENARY (10 min)

WEEK TWO – COMMENTARY

As a child, I could entertain myself for hours with only a Crayola marker and Composition notebook, scribbling silly rhymes and experimenting with poetry. Nobody assigned me this work- I was simply compelled to create. Week 2’s writing activity seeks to unlock the childlike joy of creating for the sake of creating, without the pressure of creating something technically flawless. “Nonsense Sounds” emerged from a 20-minute freewriting session (modeled after activity outlined in Week 2 lesson plan), under the principle that “thinking inhibits creativity” (Bolton, 1999, p. 20). The piece presented is entirely unedited and largely nonsensical. I played with meter, rhyme, and the sound of words with no worry of what they meant or how they would be read by others.

Poetry often garners a reputation for being an irreducible, untouchable, lofty art form. This reputation emerged largely from Western traditions of Romantic poetry, which sculpted an understanding of poetry as reserved for grandeur and the “sublime,” as William Wordsworth might name it. This, unfortunately, turns many people, including many young students, away from creative writing altogether, adding a layer of inaccessibility. A recent National Literacy Trust survey concluded that “more than half of the three thousand 8-to 14-year-olds who took part [in a national study] viewed writing with a degree of ambivalence and expressed the view that they could not see the point in [creative writing]” (Cremin & Myhill, 2014, p. 83). The study found there was heightened dissatisfaction in creative writing from 11 to 14-year-olds. In contrast, “[young] writers who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to be writing for their own pleasure and satisfaction; and as such may write more frequently in recreational contexts and enjoy writing more” (Cremin & Myhill, 2014, p. 86). Thus, exercises that center joy in place of a particular form or product hold the potential of reframing a student’s entire writing journey.

I found the process of writing “Nonsense Sounds” was quick and uninhibited, making space for fantastical ideas such as “liquid mites,” “jagged skies,” and “flustered cows.” As a creative writer, I would normally be tentative to share this piece with others, thinking it has no poetic “polish” to it, and holds virtually no meaning. However, on reflection I identified that the purpose of this activity in the classroom is its freeness and silliness. It is meant to demonstrate the playfulness of poetry, encouraging students to write simply for the joy of writing.

Optional Teaching Points:

- Rhythm & syllable counting
- Rhyme & heroic couplets
- Ditching grammatical/syntactical sense-making
- Alliteration
- Freewriting

WEEK THREE - WRITING IN THE EVERYDAY

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: Students will learn to use various grounding techniques when feeling overwhelmed, or simply to be more present within a space. The following activities center attention to detail and mindful consciousness, relieving the pressure of memory-based writing. Students will leave this session with a 5-senses grounding technique, as well as the “pocket poems” strategy of brainstorming.

WARMUP: 5-Senses Free write (15 min)

Begin by guiding students through a few deep breaths together to ease into the space. Then, prompt students to record the following, observing/writing as slowly as they please.

5 things you see

4 things you feel

3 things you hear

2 things you can smell

1 thing you can taste

Share with students that this can be used as a “grounding technique” when they feel overwhelmed to help them center themselves on the present moment, or just a good poem-starter when they’re stuck! Allow students the option to write observations about an imagined space if they find it stressful to engage with the present moment.

DISCUSSION (15 min): Read “Tulips I didn’t plant” (based on 5-senses free write, see Appendix), discussing how the 5-senses grounding technique can both serve as a tool to help students calm down or brainstorm for a new piece. Also discuss what “nature poetry” is, and how students can write observational poetry even without grand natural landscapes. Discuss writing poetry about cityscapes, courtyard gardens, schoolyards, and indoor spaces.

Tulips I didn’t plant

My garden blooms with tulips I didn’t plant

buds still wound tightly shut.

Since someone else sowed the seeds,

Freeing Creative Voice

I can't forecast their color come spring
can't even be certain they're tulips, I guess.
Still, I dream of gold and blood orange petals to gaze at through the
window
as my hands sink into soapy water, scrubbing oil off the egg pan.

Though I can't take credit for the tulips,
I take full credit for the dandelions that sprouted this year.
Weeds, technically.
Still, yellow bells burst from the soil
because I took care to let them grow carefree.

Guiding Questions:

- What did you notice about the 5-senses? Did anything surprise you?
- How can you use the 5-senses free write as a grounding technique? As a brainstorming technique?
- What senses can you identify in "Tulips..."?

ACTIVITY #1: Pocket Poem Brainstorm (15 min)

Cut long strips of scrap paper and give each student a handful. Have students explore the classroom, flipping through textbooks, examining posters, reading warning labels, etc. and writing down the phrases that they find on the slips of paper. Encourage them to dig deep into the classroom to find writing in places they wouldn't expect. They can also brainstorm their own phrases to describe the objects and words they encounter within the classroom. These strips of paper will serve as their "pocket poems" for the next activity.

ACTIVITY #2: Pocket Poems (35 min)

Freeing Creative Voice

After brainstorming, encourage students to select a “pocket poems” as a fire-starter, and allow for 20 minutes of freewriting. For students who struggle jumping directly into writing, encourage them instead to lay their strips of paper out on a table and try to reorganize them into a poem, using scissors to cut/reorder as needed, creating a larger piece out of their “pocket poems.”. Allow for a 5-minute think/edit time, followed by a 10-minute pair-share after this.

REFLECTION & PLENARY (10 min)

WEEK THREE - WRITING IN THE EVERYDAY

Writing as healing extends beyond both therapy and professional writing, trickling down into an individual's encounter with the everyday world and their organization of positive and negative emotions. Kaufman & Beghetto (2009) distinguish four tiers of creativity: mini-c (personally meaningful experience interpretations, actions, events), little-c (daily life creative engagement), Pro-c (mastery in a field of endeavor and deliberate practice), and Big-C (eminent creators who transform an artistic field and extend beyond it, often highly regarded creative professionals) (Stephenson & Rosen 2015, p. 37). The healing aspects and intentions of creativity are not only reserved for "Pro-c" and "Big-C" creative writers but are practiced every time even novice writers sit down to process emotions, feelings, and experiences. The Week 3 writing activities are crafted to uplift "mini-c" and "little-c" creativity, urging writers to integrate their imagination, hopes, and ideas into their personal environment. This week's activity allows students to either use creative writing as a space to escape to a mental "safespace"/calming landscape in their mind, but also allows students who struggle with staying present due to trauma symptoms to ground themselves through attention to detail in the present space.

One of the most important pillars for trauma-informed creative writing praxis is the element of choice/creative autonomy, because one of the reasons trauma symptoms persist is due to a fear of being out of control of one's fate. Traumatic symptoms are often linked to an experience in which a person feels completely out of control, most commonly triggering "flight," "fight," or "freeze" somatic responses. Feelings of powerlessness are also often experienced with cyclical trauma, such as abusive relationships, childhood trauma, and chronic illnesses. Thus, within the creative writing workshop, it is essential to grant students the dignity of narrative and poetic direction, reclaiming power over their stories and experiences. As Cremin & Myhill (2012) note, "it is not enough for writers to be occasionally allowed to choose their topics. They also regularly need to be offered the chance to select their audience, purpose, and form" (Cremin & Myhill, p. 88). The Week 3 lesson plan offers students the opportunity to explore writing as an escape, using their imagination to engage with everyday objects and build a mental safe space through storytelling, OR to become more present in the classroom space. Outside the realm of TIC, theories such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and academic leadership/followership research similarly communicate the positive impact of student autonomy (Leroy et al., 2015). Within trauma-specific services, forcing people to write about traumatic experiences communicates that they are valued for their sufferings, and that good stories come at risk of their potential retraumatization (Carello & Butler, 2014). Instead, educators need to offer students the choice of what and how to write, promoting psychological safety.

Optional Teaching Points:

- Metaphor
- Finding your writing voice/conversational writing styles
- Stanza breaks
- Enjambment
- Anaphora

WEEK FOUR – CONSTRAINTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVE: to explore imaginative narratives through constraint. Students will learn to name, condense, and communicate emotions without needing to explain them. Students will come away with additional writing tools (online resource and “word flipping” tactic) for when they feel stuck or overwhelmed.

WARMUP: Mindfulness meditation (10 min) -

Guide students through a mindfulness meditation (leading them yourself, if you feel prepared to do so, or using free meditation resources found online). This will help them to center emotion, feeling, and embodied presence to prepare them for slow-thinking creative writing with constraints.

DISCUSSION (15 min): Read “Katydid,” “At the 381...” and “No one...” and discuss how “nature poetry” can be expanded to all types of settings and experiences. Introduce students to haiku writing & the concept of syllabic form. Make sure to give a brief overview of parts of speech, just so all students are clear on the language that will be used to describe words in this session.

Katydid *chit-chit*

I only hear them at night
if I listen close

No one in my house
Just yellow chrysanthemums
and the click of light.

At the 381 bus stop
streetlights float like fallen stars at night
opening doors chime, a symphony.

Guiding Questions:

- What do you know about haiku?
- What did you notice about these haiku?

Freeing Creative Voice

- What kinds of things could you write a haiku about?
- What does “nature” mean to you?
- What is the purpose of writing in form?

ACTIVITY #1: Six-word stories / Haiku MadLibs (20 min)

Set up two stations however you see fit. At the first table, let students experiment with haiku writing utilizing the written templates below, OR write freely to explore syllabic-writing, playing with random sounds and words however they wish.

I see a (two-syllable noun)
It (three-syllable verb) like a (one-syllable noun)
 (Three-syllable adverb) , it (one-syllable verb) .

This only I know:

 (two-syllable plural noun) can't (one-syllable verb) too (two-syllable adverb)
Look how (one-syllable plural noun) (one-syllable verb) .

At the other station, students will compose six-word stories, experimenting with simple images and sentences. Examples provided below.

Later, alone, she felt everybody's eyes.

White shirt, pasta sauce, ruined day.

Will *this* be on the exam?

Behind the wheel, something snapped.

ACTIVITY #2: Poem flipping (20 mins)

Allow students to independently go over their work for 5 minutes, editing as they wish. Then, instruct them to spend 15 minutes “flipping” their pieces, writing every word’s exact opposite, with no regard to syllables. Instruct students to write on a new sheet of paper, so they can keep both versions of the piece. For conjunctions (ex: “and,” “or”) or other words with no straightforward meaning/opposite, students may want to create their own opposite words or creative solutions, or leave them as they are. There is no “right way” of doing this!

REFLECTION & PLENARY (15 min): share-out & weekly plenary.

WEEK FOUR - CONSTRAINTS

The three untitled haikus above are designed to demonstrate the expansiveness of observational poetry and how we can use our senses to understand the nature of things surrounding us. In the examples provided, the first haiku reflects an outdoor encounter with the sounds of nature. The second piece combines nature with a scene from the home, and the third beholds a bus stop as something magical and “symphonic.”

For a trauma-informed workshop, the expansiveness of description and worldbuilding using the senses allows students to feel present, grounded, and peaceful through observing their surrounding spaces, or to create these spaces within their minds. This will allow students to imagine how to build their writing practices in spaces other than the classroom. It is imperative for students to know that “nature writing” is not reserved for a certain type of creator. American poet Camille Dungy points out that “The traditional context of the nature poem in the Western intellectual canon...informs the prevailing views of the natural world as a place of positive collaboration, refuge, idyllic rural life, or wilderness” (2009, p. xxi). Dungy then urges the reader to consider: “Can [poems set in urban settings] not be landscape poems?” Some students do not have an “idyllic” space to take refuge in. Thus, it is important to intentionally make the space to invite them into a peace-rooted poetry practice, expanding our notion of what could possibly be understood to be reverent.

Although it may seem backwards at first, the presence of poetic “constraints” often allows writers to feel an increased sense of freedom with their creations. Since haiku is a constrained form of poetry, students do not need to explicitly name adverse experiences if they desire to write them out. “[H]aiku may be regarded as a special way of conveying to the reader the emotions felt by the poet at some particular event,” without oversaturating a piece with description (Henderson 1967, p. 21). As an art form, haiku is intuitive, mattering more in its authenticity of emotion than its engagement with complex ideology or metaphor. Young writers dealing with trauma may feel that experimenting with constricted forms of poetry allow them to explore their thoughts at a distance, without being forced to explain themselves. Additionally, haiku, “The reader must consciously try to put himself in the poet’s place- see what he sees, hear what he hears, etc” (p. 23). Haiku necessitates slow thinking and necessitates empathy, which are both important foundations for a young writer’s creative and therapeutic journey.

Six-word stories are successful without detail, explanation, or even widespread understanding, making them perfectly adapted to TIC, or any creative writing approach that centers emotional and creative experimentation *without* pressing writers for personal details, as the traditional writing workshop often does (ex: “show don’t tell,” “write from what you know”). Trauma patients often find it difficult to express exactly how they feel in words or have trouble piecing together the memory of a traumatic event. (Van der Kolk, 2015) With condensed writing exercises, writers communicate what they *feel* without needing to express *what happened*, or they can write about something different entirely. Six-word stories are also open to interpretation, taking the pressure off the writer’s intended meaning. The six-word stories exemplified here are a mix of silly thoughts and more complex stories, composed delicately and with vagueness, valuing the emotion behind the sentence and its millions of possible meanings rather than the formation of a coherent piece.

Optional Teaching Points:

- Onomatopoeia

- Punctuation
- Enjambment
- Rhythm
- “Nature writing”
- Punctuation & capitalization

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A Happy Place: Short Story and Lesson Plans by Christine Khisa

Introduction

The creative writing shared below explores a young character's narrative in their formative years whilst in a private fostering arrangement located several miles from the family home. It raises issues on relationships and the impact separation might have on sibling relations. The story highlights the importance of a sense of belonging, attachment, and communicates the legacies that can stem from difference. The story will be part of a collection of stories exploring Millie's formative years, her years in education, and homelife as a young adult. The story opens the door for certain themes to be developed later as the character progresses through life. Struggling to find a place and a voice within her home, Millie provides a character for young students to empathize with and further explore. Feel free to match the suggested "breaks" up with the following lesson plans.

An understanding of identity, acceptance and loss experienced from a young age can influence a dialogic approach to enable use of the material. The importance of the individual voice and personal narrative, in that we all have a story to tell, can be a resourceful method of learning and teaching. Giving value to the individual experience draws on funds of knowledge and social capital of children in a learning environment.

A Happy Place

In a small coastal village far away from the hustle and bustle of busy city life, lived a little girl called Millie. She lived with her godmother and guardian, Ursula, who was connected to Millie's biological family through their place of worship. Ursula raised Millie as her own daughter. Millie a curious child, loved to play, always wanting to explore and discover anything new. She used her imagination to create characters for her many toys, especially when it rained heavily outside. The hours spent inside her home at Pear Cottage as an only child could sometimes be lonely.

Behind Pear Cottage there was a small garden with raised flower beds on either side of a gravel path leading from the kitchen door. When Millie played in the garden she would sit on her swing under the apple tree. She would close her eyes and inhale the floral perfume in the air. She loved the beautiful colours in the garden. In the mornings, she spent what seemed like hours riding up and down the gravel path on her lilac bicycle with stabilisers that Ursula had decorated with hand painted daisies.

The cottage had a lot of steps that Millie had to carefully climb to get to her playroom. The walls in her playroom were decorated with flowers, birds, trees and looked like her own little meadow. The cottage had several small windows too high up for Millie to see through unless she stood on a chair, Millie longed to share this space and play with other children. There was something missing, but Millie could not quite put her finger on it. There was a lot that she did not understand and could not find the right words to ask Ursula. Millie did not want to cause any upset. Each morning added to Millie's questions, she looked at her reflection in the mirror, not understanding why her appearance was so different from other children that lived locally.

BREAK 1: Discussion exploring Millie's concerns looking at how the character can find her voice and start a conversation.

At the side of the cottage a window let in a bright glow of sunlight filtered into the hallway. This invited Millie's curiosity as to what was happening outside. The cottage was quiet as usual, Ursula was taking care of household chores. An impatient Millie was tempted to open the side door, she sat on a soft chair swinging her legs, thinking and wondering. The sun was warm. Millie felt so relaxed, she closed her eyes, falling into a deep sleep. She dreamt of her happy place, somewhere that made her feel special. It was as if she was there with her bucket, spade, fishing net, and ball. The sand on the beach was so soft to walk on, just right for the sandcastles she wished to build. The sea air was fresh and salty. The sea was motionless with its hue of blues and greens. The sky staggering into shades of blues and white, with peppered clouds floating, just floating, floating. The secluded local beach was a short walk from the cottage. There were rock pools and caves and tunnels that could be accessed when the tide was low. There was so much for Millie and Ursula to explore together.

BREAK 2: Create real or imaged happy place, written exercise

Illustration of happy place.

Ursula often took Millie to the beach. There, she could see a transformation in Millie who became overjoyed at being there. This made Ursula happy. All she had ever wanted was to love and care for Millie. It had now been over an hour since Millie fell asleep when Ursula gently woke her up. Millie stretched her arms out and said she was very hungry.

"And so you should be, it's lunch time," Ursula replied. "We need to start getting ready, and then after lunch we can take a stroll to your favourite place."

Millie thanked Ursula, jumped off the chair and walked into the kitchen. After washing her hands, Millie sat at the table on her chair propped up with cushions.

It was early afternoon. The sun was glowing through all the windows in the kitchen; its gleam was bouncing off the stainless-steel cutlery on the drainer.

Just like magic, Millie thought as she quickly ate her favourite raspberry jam sandwiches for lunch. She was thinking of all the exciting things she would do in the sandy cove on the beach, searching in the many rock pools for the little creatures that lived in them and all the sandcastles she would build with Ursula.

Millie climbed down from the table, thanked Ursula for her lunch whilst running to the stairs. There, she stopped and practised her numbers as she climbed the stairs, “One, two, three, four, five...” She counted right to the top. Millie was proud of herself, she was getting much better at counting. Once in her room she put on her favourite clothes, a lovely yellow summer dress with a sunflower print, not forgetting her red wellies and turquoise sunhat.

“Wait for me, mummy!” Millie shouted. So excited, she was finding her voice, feeling confident with a burst of energy that the cottage could not contain.

Ursula held Millie’s hand as she reached the bottom step, “Come on now Millie, that is one of your best dresses, we agreed for special occasions”.

“This is a special occasion mummy, it’s always special when we go to the beach”, Millie added. Ursula could not help but agree with Millie.

“Okay my little angel, let’s be off! I have your bucket and spade, your net, your ball, is there anything else?”, Ursula said with a smile. “Just me”, Millie said giggling. They went through this routine every day they went to the beach. They were so happy as they walked hand in hand along Orchard Lane in the direction of the sounds of gulls, watching them from a distance in the sky, hovering, waiting for people to visit the seaside with their tempting delicacies.

Millie enjoyed the brisk walk. She could smell the sea air and feel the sea breeze about her. The sea was beautiful, it was her friend, as was the sky with its interrupted blues and the sun suspended above, watching over Millie each time she played on the honeycomb-coloured sandy beach. Millie kicked off her wellies as soon as they were on the sand. It was damp beneath her feet, squidgy, leaving imprints of her tiny feet.

Ursula found a quiet spot, it was not crowded today, not yet anyway. She thought the sea looked so inviting but did not know how to swim. Laying down a blanket with everything she had carried for their day out, Ursula looked at Millie hoping these days would never end. Millie was marching up and down the beach, counting her footprints, covering them up as she did, always looking for an opportunity to count.

The beach was Millie's haven, her playground, a place she loved, being outside under the sky, near the never-ending sea. She loved nothing more than chasing the waves as they rolled in and out while Ursula held her hand. They splashed the sea water over each other till they were drenched, then dried off in the afternoon sun. Ursula whispered, "This is how memories are made Millie. Always remember me." Millie was already dozing, breathing gently, wrapped in Ursula's arms. It was getting late; they would return the following day a bit earlier perhaps and venture into the coves and rock pools. Ursula thought Millie would love that.

Ursula packed up their things after gently waking Millie, who had no idea how long she had slept for. Millie was upset that it was time to go home. All her plans to play, to build sandcastles, explore the rock pools... Millie went silent, sulking.

Ursula gave her a big hug, "Millie, my angel, it's home time, we have an early start tomorrow, I have a surprise for you. A big surprise." Millie was excited, no longer sulking, instead wondering what her surprise would be.

"Some toys or a dress? Please tell me mummy, please."

Ursula continued gathering their belongings. Taking Millie by the hand, she said, "It would not be a surprise if I told you. It will be worth the wait. Be patient, Millie." They walked hand-in-hand in silence along the stretch of the promenade towards the traffic lights. There were people boarding coaches, cars leaving the car parks- Millie noticed that they were not the only ones leaving.

The sound of the sea, the happy chatter of strangers, the seagulls circling above was all in the distance, saved for another day as they walked up to Orchard Lane.

It was now early evening. Shortly after supper it was Millie's bedtime, a quick bath gave her ten minutes to spare before having to go to sleep. Millie's bedroom was very spacious. She had a large teddy bear at the foot of her bed and dolls arranged on her playbox. In the far corner opposite her bed on the window ledge, arranged in colour order, were Millie's treasures: seashells of all shapes and sizes, pebbles, rock fragments, and stones all collected from the seaside over the last few months. Millie wanted to use them to make a lovely gift for her family when they came to visit, which would be very soon.

Feeling quite tired from constantly thinking about her surprise, she yawned, still holding one of her shells, and climbed in her bed. After Ursula finished cleaning the bath, she tucked her in and then began to read a bedtime story. Before the first page was turned little Millie was fast asleep dreaming about the sea, the sandy beach and the sun, her friends and her family. She would see them soon.

Millie's family had placed her with Ursula because of the financial hardship they were experiencing, after having brought five of her brothers and sisters to England from Kenya, on the understanding that Millie would return once the family were financially secure and the children settled in school. As both parents were in full time employment, her mother as an Auxiliary Nurse and her father a farm Labourer, a private fostering arrangement was made.

It was Friday morning, 7am, bright and early. The sun was up gently flowing through the parted curtains, birds were chirping in the apple tree. Millie parted the curtain a little more and the sun like a golden ball in the sky, looked so near as though she could touch it.

Ursula opened Millie's door watching her daydream, lost in the moment.

"Good morning my angel, I hope that you slept well. It's such a lovely morning." "Good morning mummy. I feel so happy."

Millie was thinking about her surprise, it had been on her mind since she woke up. They both bathed, dressed, and had breakfast.

Ursula had invited Millie's family to a picnic on the local beach. It was to be a big surprise, as her brothers and sisters would also be visiting. Millie had three sisters and three brothers, one of her brothers was a toddler. Ursula was not sure in keeping this visit a secret, but she knew how excited and overwhelmed Millie might become if she knew.

It was early afternoon, quite warm outside with a nice breeze full of sea air. Ursula had prepared a picnic lunch for what might be one of their last trips together to Millie's happy place. Ursula felt that she had to say something, at least give Millie some idea that her family were coming to see them. They talked for a while, Ursula reached out to hold Millie's hand and said that she would always be special and have a place in her heart.

Millie did not fully understand the situation, but she sensed something was about to change. Slowly walking up the stairs to pick up the gift she had made for such an occasion, she wondered what her brothers and sisters would be like. Will they like her? There were moments of excitement followed by doubt. *What about mummy?* She thought.

Millie was worried about the thought of ever leaving Ursula, especially if things went well with her family. It was almost time to leave. Ursula held Millie.

"A hug, a kiss and a wish", said Ursula with a heavy heart. She put on a cheerful smile for Millie. Millie sometimes imagined how her mother would be, but her memories were vague. She could not remember being held by her or the smell of any fragrance she wore. Was her voice soft like Ursula's? Millie's memories were being replaced with doubts. Her mother was like a stranger to her.

BREAK 3: Discussion— processing Millie's emotions, her fears and doubts. How did Ursula feel about the situation?

Discussions had been taking place over the past few months between Ursula and Millie's family. It was only a temporary arrangement till the family settled down. Her brothers and sisters were getting used to living in England and had started new schools, though things had been difficult. The transition to another country had many challenges.

They strolled hand-in-hand along Orchard Lane, Ursula carrying a specially prepared picnic with raspberry jam sandwiches that Millie loved. For Ursula it was as though it would be the last time. Ursula contained the heartache she felt, understanding that it would be for the best for Millie. Millie couldn't hide her excitement, anticipating the prospect of having brothers and sisters whom she would play with every day, talk to every day. She wanted to belong, and she felt something special was happening. Both Ursula and Millie had quite an isolated existence. Millie was growing, a decision was made, it was agreed with reluctance on Ursula's part that Millie would return home to live with her family.

It was the middle of the afternoon and the Sun was quite hot. Millie could hear the familiar sounds of seagulls approaching the promenade. The seas looked beautiful; they would both remember this day.

"Millie! Millie! Millie!"

Her mother, brothers and sisters called out as soon as Millie's mother spotted Ursula and Millie from a distance. They had already found Millie's favourite place on the beach. Just being called by several voices heightened Millie's excitement- she would show her family everything she loved about her 'Happy Place', welcome them and get to know them.

"Can we all go to the rock pools, mummy?" asked Millie after giving everyone a hug. There was too much to ask, so she thought she would save it for later. Both Ursula and Millie's mother stepped forward. There was a short silence, then Millie took them both by the hand and kissed them on the cheek, leading the way to the rock pool. She wanted everyone to hold hands, so her brothers and sisters joined in the fun. It was going to be a special day in Millie's happy place.

As the afternoon unfolded, Ursula began to realise how protective she had become where Millie was concerned. It was so difficult to allow her to play freely with her newfound brothers and sisters. Ursula envisaged problems with Millie understanding and adjusting to family life. Millie had spent more time living with Ursula than her own mother.

Millie looked at her mother as she made a sandcastle with two of her sisters- Claudine, who was six years older, and Primrose, who was four years older. They kept whispering and asking lots of questions that Millie did not have the answers to. Becoming frustrated with her, they went and joined the rest of the family, who were now enjoying the afternoon sun.

Ursula took Millie aside, aware that the other children were watching closely. There was so much had not been explained. Comforting her, Ursula explained that Millie would be leaving with her family. Ursula had sensed the tension beginning to build between the children and put it down to them being tired. It had been a long day.

Ursula became tearful. She doubted whether the family would keep in touch after witnessing how strong the bond between the two of them was, as it could cause difficulties with Millie settling into her new life.

Millie was used to being the centre of attention. Even at a young age she realised with older brothers and sisters and a younger brother she would have to compete for her mother's attention. This family was all Millie had ever wished for, but she was beginning to have doubts. However, the decision was not hers to make.

Something tugged at Millie's heart, overcome with sadness within her happy place. She did not want to leave Ursula and was now beginning to realise how much she loved her. Emotionally torn between all she had ever known and the prospect of going to a strange place with brothers and sisters who now appeared in her mind as strangers. Ursula saw the sadness in Millie's mother's eyes as Millie kept addressing her as "mummy," both longed to be acknowledged as Millie's mummy.

There was a sense of loss, uncertainty, new beginnings, and a lot of upheaval to follow, coupled with the fact that Millie would start school after the summer holidays.

BREAK 4: Opportunity for the story to be continued (i.e. Ursula's first day without Millie, Millie's first day at home with her family, Millie's First day at school, etc.)

Millie's thoughts now turned to her goldfish, Moon. Her world was slowly turning. She felt trapped unable to express how she truly felt, not wanting to upset anyone.

It would soon be time to leave. Millie's siblings clustered around their mother as Millie gripped Ursula's hand tightly. It was too overwhelming and Millie could not find the words, so she remained silent while the adults talked and made decisions, at no point explaining the reasons why to the children, who felt thrown together as reality set in.

Ursula picked up her things, moving slowly, quietly, as the children dusted the sand off their clothes and sandals. They were ready to leave, becoming restless, demanding to go home.

This is home, thought Millie, fighting not to believe she may not see her happy place for a long time, but convincing herself that Ursula would know if she was unhappy and come for her. Millie plucked up the courage to speak to her mother.

"Do I have to go with you all today? Mummy will be all alone. And what about Moon, my Goldfish? And my bike? I want to stay with mummy."

Millie caught her breath, feeling very proud of getting things off her chest, finding her voice. With Millie's younger brother in one arm, Millie's mother turned towards her and held out her other hand. It was warm and soft, and she looked kind, *with love enough for all of us*, thought Millie.

"It is time for you to come home with us, Millie. Your father and I have missed you so much. You are a part of our family and we want you to come and live with us".

Ursula was almost packed ready to leave when she overheard Millie's mother speaking. She encouraged Millie to listen and try to understand. It was all so very complicated for such a young girl. Millie hugged Ursula and said she would see her tomorrow, not knowing that this would be the last time they would see each other. This would weigh heavy on Millie's emotional development, longing for the rest of her life to be reunited with Ursula.

With her head down, Millie joined her brothers and sisters without looking back, knowing it would be too painful. Their mother, after giving each child something to carry, took them to the station. Millie held on to the pram as they walked a short distance in silence to the station. Something had changed and it would never be the same, but just *what* had changed puzzled her.

Millie wondered if wishes really came true, if she could make a wish that would leave everyone happy and keep everyone in her life. She wished to spend time with Ursula and still be able to visit her happy place, which now had a not-so-happy memory of leaving.

Millie wished that her mother would always hold her hand the way Ursula did and that she would become best friends with her brothers and sisters as she had always dreamed. *If there was a fairy godmother, thought Millie, would she make my wishes come true?*

Sadly, the abruptness of the transitional arrangements and the short time Millie had to adjust before starting a new school left Millie withdrawn, silenced, and unhappy within a large family, like there was little room for her voice. Feeling overshadowed and alone without Ursula, Millie's struggle with the everyday began.

Conclusion

This story can be used as a prompt for creating personal narratives within a classroom. Assist with ideas for structuring creative writing exercises. The issues raised can be discussed in groups, looking at perspective, observation, and empathy. Cultural perspectives can be explored, and any questions raised from discussion can be developed as writing exercises. For instance, facilitators may want to ask students, *How would you like this story to continue?* This will draw upon direct elicitation to allow writers to develop their own ideas for the character.

Storytelling Sessions: Workshop Outline

The following lesson plans are designed for Key Stage 2 pupils (ages 7 to 11), to allow the learners to work collaboratively, use their creativity and imaginations, share ideas, and resource materials and the work created in previous activities. The pupils will create a short story of their 'Happy Place', which can be a space that is real or imagined or both. During the lessons, the intention is to have the material displayed of previous work created by pupils to encourage and motivate them. I will work alongside learners diagraphing events from *A Happy Place* to model this activity. When putting learners into groups, allow for buddying of more confident learners with learners that may feel less confident. Always be available and offer suggestions, praise, prompts and assistance to the groups. Lessons will be designed in collaboration with staff members aiming to be inclusive of learners requiring additional support. Arrangement layout of learning environment should be ideal for group activity with supporting material prepared in advance. Sessions would ideally take place in the library to enable and inspire the learners' creativity and providing access to reading material. Exercises will build upon each other, scaffolding student knowledge.

“A Happy Place” Workshop Lesson Plans

SESSION 1

Learning goals: Paired activity, visualisation, mind mapping, active listening, and dialogic learning.

Lesson outcomes

Pupils will learn to work with group activities and actively participate in discussions to activate prior knowledge to inform and contribute to creating stories.

Pupils will learn to make comparisons/observations between audio and in-person storytelling practice.

Pupils will utilise research in creating story/poetry journals with content from family members, childhood reflections, and diagraphing.

Pupils will begin to structure their thoughts with mindfulness visualisation.

Pupils will learn the practice of free writing.

Pupils will learn to create a list poem.

Pupils will learn how to Diagram.

Introductions

First, ground rules will be discussed and agreed by pupils so that everyone can feel respected and valued in the lesson. Then, instruct students to speak to the pupil sitting next to them.

Introduce yourself to each other, then ask if you could describe yourself as a colour, what would it be and why?

Activity 1: Mindfulness exercise

Play a relaxing audio extract of a sea soundscape. Then, instruct students:

Think of a place that makes you happy. What are the colours you see there? Are there any familiar sounds that you hear?

Learners will be encouraged through visualisation to imagine a happy place, using the prompting questions above. Instruct them to freewrite for 15 minutes. Then, instruct them to create a mind map of their thoughts.

Activity 2: Brainstorming

Play an audio extract from *A Happy Place*, short story. Then, read an extract from the same story. Pupils will discuss in pairs any similarities or differences in the method of delivery.

Then, pupils can create questions and answers for each other about their “happy place” to demonstrate their ability to actively listen.

(15 minutes)

Next, learners will discuss stories they like and examine how their current knowledge can support them in creating their own stories.

Select some titles of fairy tales/folklore/contemporary fiction/authors with suggestions from pupils. Pupils will create a visual display to motivate and inspire themselves. Pupils will discuss their work and feedback to the main class.

(10 minutes)

Activity 3: Freewriting exercise

Paper extracts will be provided from the story, *A Happy Place*. Books will be selected from the library shelves by pupils. Pupils can choose to take a line from an extract or from a favourite book, then continue freewriting the story. Work alongside pupils completing the same activity and encourage them, whilst also reading the room to see where peer support may be beneficial. Review progress in groups, promoting peer-to-peer learning. Give learners opportunity to re-read their work, make any changes they would like.

(15 minutes)

An example of freewriting based on a story can be seen below. Learners will be encouraged to share their creative freewriting and receive feedback, though this is optional.

The Ugly Duckling – A Modern Tale

There once lived a girl, so lonely in life, perceived so different from the other children.

who lived nearby. They made her unwelcome, not looking the same, her parents came from a country that was so far away.

Her complexion, her hair and the way that she spoke, was a regular theme for ongoing jokes and cruel taunts, her life was made miserable, she cried and became withdrawn.

This little girl created imaginary friends, and a fairy godmother like the ones in the tales that she read. She wondered if one day she would also be a princess. She had yet to find and to read about anyone mirroring the reflection she saw in the stories.

She dreaded the playground where her hair was pulled. It was short and curly, washed and tended with care. Though when being bullied, it was likened to wire, not soft and golden like the princesses in stories. It did not fall like Rapunzel's, whose crown was her glory.

As this young girl grew up in life, she found that some of the playground rules still applied. She was struggling as a young lady to cope with what difference brought. No imaginary friends, childhood ways left behind, replaced with worries and doubt. Moods that reflected the barriers faced, for each goal that she conquered there were others in place.

One day she came upon a place so inviting, called The Open Book Project. A lifeline that centred its efforts on those like the girl who had experienced disadvantage in education, employment and other social environments. It gave her hope.

With the projects support, she thrived, she flourished, learning to be accepting of self. Her confidence grew, just like a butterfly finding her wings, she knew she was able achieve different goals, she felt she belonged.

She began to feel proud of where she was from. Her culture her history now fragments made whole, she had an identity of which to be proud. Like a continuous thread woven over many years, was the creativity she found when writing her thoughts, her feelings, aspirations, her hopes and her dreams. There were no three wishes just, the will to be. To learn and gain skills as not able before, to share creativity, inspiring others to write, unlocking their narratives is a journey I am on at this moment in time.

Home activity

Give each student a journal to take home and invite family members to contribute share familiar stories or poems from their childhoods as an additional resource.

SESSION 2: Storytelling, our stories.

Introductions

Agree ground rules for lesson, and then complete mindfulness breathing exercise.

(10 minutes)

Learning goals (building on the learning goals from Lesson 1):
Collective group discussion, sharing perspective, creating a bank of knowledge from experiences, imagination and creative exploration,
Diagraphing, using sense-memory

Lesson outcomes

Pupils will be able to select information from a range of resources.

Pupils will learn to work collaboratively with peer groups to produce work and share ideas.

Pupils will learn to organise and structure information.

Pupils will value their contributions to achieving lesson goals.

Pupils will learn about character description and place.

Activity 1

Learners will be encouraged to read out story extracts or poems from home journals. Learners will be motivated to think of the story they wish to tell by sharing childhood stories and poems from home journal to which family/relatives and carers have contributed. Below are examples of poems I wrote.

Ask for self-reflective feedback from the students reading the stories, then collectively from the group, followed by any lingering questions.

Poems by Christine

First, a poem inspired by a prompt from – Pencil me in, by Benjamin Zephaniah.

‘The thoughts within my head’,
Released,
With license from my pen decreed
I scribe, narrate, to shape my tale, my story yet to share.

Sweet sounds of paper’s symphony
As the ink begins to dry, words form upon, A4 and A5,
Like oils, acrylics on canvases, words illustrate with imagery.

With pen in hand I navigate, my guide, my compass, wisdom makes.

I’ll share with, if I may. The pen is master at a time,
When I freely write, no theme in mind.

I work in harmony to write, the patterning begins,

Freeing Creative Voice

A pen my guide of mind and hand,
Of soul of heart it will command, the will to write encouraged
more,
I fathom words so bold.

My loyal pen, this instrument styled from days of old,
A loyal trust of truths untold, in history a friend as well as foe.

A Happy Place

Within are colours, bright and clear,
They offer hope, worth and happiness.

The sky, the sea, the sand, compete.
As each with equal value show
And create this happy place I know.

With pebbles lined along the shore,
The dormant sands absorb the waves approach.
I watch the waves that challenge, ride,
Retreat, repeat, a rhythmic tide.

The brilliance of a sun that seeks,
Warmth on the seas surface, reflect,
Between the two entities, energy collect.
To embrace their majesty.

Ripples from a pebble thrown,
Disappearing in the depths below.
In harmony lie side by side
When on the beach to stem the tide.
To swim within the waters deep,
Make castles in the sand to keep,
Then chase the waves upon the shore,
Whilst time allows this space to be.

Untouched in heart, in soul, in memory.

The Quaggy

Like a pulse the current runs borough wide
Above, beneath the ground it governs space.

As though a vein that permeates all that is life,
Its heart, the soul, the hub where beings, love, live and thrive.

An unseen energy, a force, with will, survives.
To walk lost in thought, whilst by the elements consumed,

Resting to reflect upon its bank as though to draw from time.

Seeing light clouds above me dance, within a sea of sky, through a
canopy of trees I watch the world go by.

How nature has bestowed, a legacy a gift of many moons.

In the distance, Willows bow spent years in age, towards their
source. Nourished by the Quaggy evermore.

Their wisdom borne another soul engaged in mother nature's awe
as orchestrate.

Whilst gentle is the breeze that serenades,
the Willow's crown with dulcet tone.

A symphony of sound beyond enchants.
On neighboring blossomed boughs, a fragrance transport,

Sweet petals gently surrender to the fall,
To polka dot a decorated path.
An invitation to the season, next.

Nature's audience captivated in the Lewisham Borough wards.

Pebbles

A million pebbles on the beach
One for all and some to leave.

When to lie upon, massaged, the calm.
Some to decorate a frame, a gift.

As natures border on the land
From the tide, the waves command, a barrier protects.

A million pebbles on the beach, one for you and one for me,
One for us to always keep.

Each pebble needs the one be-side, above, ahead, behind.

The pebbles that seem different from,
Together have great strength.

They work towards a common goal,
As a border for the land, a shore.

Creating a beautiful, peaceful space.
With mother nature's hand.

A million pebbles on the beach
One for you and one for me.

Activity 2

First, explain the use of Diagramming to show and tell. Demonstrate how it will help to capture the learners' ideas.

Then, place students in groups of 4 and instruct them to:

Think of a happy place where you have spent time and still have fond memories of. This can be a real place, a place where your imagination takes you, or both. Keep home story journals to refer to and use guiding questions below, referring to the 5 senses for descriptions.

Where is your happy place?

Who else is there?

What do you see?

Why does this place make you happy?

Pupils will address these questions by creating a Diarart to show and tell their ideas. Each group member will be encouraged to contribute. Teacher will share examples of their Diararting and work alongside pupils with this activity.

(20 minutes)

Then, allow for space to read aloud for confidence-building, followed by feedback from pupils on lesson.

(10 minutes)

SESSION 3: Our favourite tales

Learning goals: Oral storytelling traditions and history, freewriting exercises, building on prior knowledge, active listening skills, reading aloud

Lesson outcomes

Pupils will become familiar with participating in group discussions and delivering feedback.

Pupils will develop their decision-making skills when considering feedback.

Pupils will select material from resources that will help shape/inform their stories.

Pupils will gain confidence freewriting.

Introductions

Agreed ground rules.

Guided mindfulness relaxation using soundscape of the sea.

Freeing Creative Voice

Review materials and lessons from previous session, creating a bridge in the learning.

(10 minutes)

First, discuss the Oral Storytelling traditions with examples of folklore, traditional fairy tales and a selection of contemporary stories.

Then, prompt the following questions in a group discussion:

What are the stories that we remember being told?

Who are the great storyteller that you know?

Do you have favourite storytellers at family events?

Who are our favourite characters?

What makes these stories so memorable.

(15 minutes)

Activity 1: Freewriting

Provide written story extracts. Make available stories previously selected by pupils. Access to audio recordings of stories. Encourage pupils to write freely for 6 minutes, building on feedback from the discussion points.

Reading aloud

Learners select a book of choice, and practise reading to their peer learners in preparation for a final event to showcase their stories. (15 minutes)

Feedback on lesson from pupils

SESSION 4: Storytelling – A Character’s Journey

Learning goals: Comparing similarities, reflection, personification, symbolism, character development and comparing similarities.

Lesson outcomes

Pupils will learn how to plot a character’s journey using Diagramming, alternatively mind mapping using sketches, dialogue, and images.

Pupils will learn how to creatively illustrate their ideas.

Pupils will learn to develop story structure.

Pupils will experiment with working with descriptive language.

Pupils will learn how to personify an object.

Introductions

Agree ground rules.

Review previous lesson.

Mindfulness moment/breathing exercise.

(10 minutes)

Activity 1

Working in groups of 4, pupils will consider a character's journey in a story. Printed material will be provided along with character cards and prompts showing basic plot ideas and places. Extracts from *A Happy Place* will be made available and used as examples and home story journals will be used as a resource. Optional storyboard templates can be made available.

Pupils will use Diagramming to illustrate and map their chosen characters journey, focusing on:

People – Place – Plot – Purpose

Drawing on information from previous exercises and making use of resources provided, pupils will plot a journey for their character labelling:

The character

Where are they?

Why are they on this journey?

What role do they have in the story?

Organise folders of pupils work for each activity to be used for following activities.

Activity 2

Provide a selection of objects in a bag for the learners, each choosing three objects to be included in the stories. Ask students to write the following:

Create a link between chosen objects using 5 words.

Imagine yourself as one of the objects with 5 words.

Using the same 10 words, create a list poem describing one of your objects.

Next, draw one of your chosen objects and describe it labelling its features using the 5 senses.

(20 minutes)

These exercises will help students to start thinking about how to creatively structure their ideas. Pupils will be encouraged to go over their work and make any changes they would like and generate their own questions in addition to those above. Conclude with session feedback from pupils.

Lesson 5: Creating our characters

Learning goals: Using favourite characters as templates, creating descriptive labels, using objects to develop story structure.

Lesson outcomes

Pupils will practice notetaking.

Pupils will source relevant information from the resources which have enabled the scaffolding of their learning to create a short story.

Pupils will learn how to share ideas and work collaboratively.

Pupils will begin to shape their stories using 3 objects to represent, the beginning, middle and end.

Introductions

Agree ground rules.

Review previous lesson.

(10 minutes)

Activity 1

Read extracts from *A Happy Place* to focus on the characters in the story.

Describe the characters – with suggestions generated from pupils.

Next, encourage learners to review their progress so far, acknowledging their hard work.

Then, ask students: Who are the characters that will feature in your story? Encourage students to write their ideas down. Encourage learners to refer to their previous work to generate ideas.

(15 minutes)

Activity 2

Next, students will sketch an outline of a favourite character, thinking of the role they play. They will describe the character using labels on the drawing.

Draw and colour a character from your favourite book, think of the character's role in the story.

Describe your character using labels on your drawing:

Describe their personality (ex: friendly, bossy, kind, talkative, brave, weak, gentle)

Describe their appearance (dress, stature, smart, scruffy, trendy)

What are their likes/dislikes?

What expressions will your character use? Are they smiling, frowning, surprised, sad, angry, determined, happy?

How does your character feel? Are they excited, curious, elated, pleased, overwhelmed?

What are they thinking?

How old is your character?

(10 minutes)

Activity 3: Shaping our Stories

Building on the work from previous activities, learners will be asked to include their chosen objects in their stories of three parts.

Object 1 - The beginning

Object 2 - The middle

Object 3 - The end of the story

Writing our Stories (bringing it all together)

Learners will use all the material from the previous lessons for reference.

The beginning

Give a detailed description of where your story is taking place,

Introduce your character. Who are they? Describe them and their role.

Is there a journey/quest that your character goes on?

The middle

How long is this journey?

Who do they meet?

Does a conversation take place?

What happens there?

The end

How much time has passed?

How does your character feel?

Saying goodbye.

Are they on their return journey?

(20 minutes)

Pupils feedback on the lesson after re-reading their work.

Any Questions

SESSION 6

Introductions

Agreed ground rules.

Review previous lessons, invite feedback on the activities.

Learning goals: Pupil and educator reflections, sharing stories

Lesson outcomes

Pupils will complete their stories.

Pupils will supporting each other in the sharing process.

Pupils will learn to share resources, ideas, images, work.

Pupils will build confidence to read the stories they have created in front of the class.

Pupils will have the opportunity for questions about how they experienced the lessons.

Activity 1.

Learners will finish editing their stories until they are happy with them. Stories which are not completed can be continued as a homework exercise. Learners will practise reading their edited stories with their peers.

(30 minutes)

Activity 2.

Learners are invited to write a “thank-you” letter to themselves or a character for their creativity and imagination, either working collaboratively or independently. Conclude session by inviting students to share anything else from their home journals, practicing active listening and generating questions for each other.

(15 minutes)

References

Gilbert, F.(2021) *Diagrating: theorising and practising new ways of writing and drawing*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1470726.2021.1963288>
(Accessed 3 May 2023)

PART III: USING STORIES TO SPARK DIALOGUE

In this section, we are guided by short stories/novel excerpts created for the purpose of sparking dialogue within a workshop setting. Nick and Siamak have crafted unique creative pieces meant to highlight social issues and provide an opening for honest, productive, and intentional dialogue among teachers and students. These pieces can be used to inspire writers to tell their own stories and enter bravely into important dialogues, allowing them the freedom to tell their own stories.

Whether you identify as a teacher or not, look out for potential talking points to draw out within a discussion setting, thinking of the infinite ways we can use creative writing excerpts not only to better teach principles of literacy writing, but to unpack complicated sociological themes and issues with patience, empathy, and understanding. Art often offers a clear window into even the most complex social issues, but only if we are willing to receive what it has to say.

The End of History by Nick Bailey

Chapter One

The morning the Berlin wall falls is lodged in Smith's memory as the day Foster gets suspended for the cunt incident. There's no doubt this is what propels him towards Harding. Without it, there'd be no trip to London; none of the fear that follows, nor any of the consequences that will ripple down the years. Had Foster stayed in school that term, Smith could have found a way to avoid discovery – or at least, to defer it for long enough to escape humiliation. This is what Smith will tell himself. But he never quite manages to make himself believe. It's one of those drab November mornings where dawn refuses convincingly to break. The unstained chapel windows are grey with a mist that will last till lunchtime. The uppermost panes are open, so that Smith's breath clouds as he tumbles up the aisle. The organ's flatulent bass notes muffle the scuff and shuffle of the stragglers' shoes. Most of the pews are full. Smith jostles his way to a place in the rearmost row. In choosing his seat, every boy obeys a hierarchy that is never discussed but always respected. Smith watches Harding greet his peers in the cushioned benches where parents sit on Founder's Day. The position is a privilege of his status as a try-scoring star of the First Fifteen. Harding's prowess on the pitch makes it possible for his eccentricities to be overlooked. His tolerance of Smith is the most egregious of these, according to the more fervent members of the sporting elite. The fact Harding is able to infiltrate this group is a source of wonder to Smith. He could no more make his own body do the things that Harding achieves with apparent ease than he could pass through the chapel's Norman walls. Even the most gently lobbed ball invariably skims his grasping fingers. His limbs are never quite where he expects them to be. In the past year, his bones have stretched like cooling toffee. His elbows bulge like flamingos' knees. He cups them now with his palms, seeking to fold himself smaller. Smith reflects on the way Harding's elbows do their job invisibly, cloaked by a cuff of muscle. Bodies are best, Smith has decided, when function is subordinate to form.

A sudden cessation of chatter marks the arrival of Dr Benn – or ‘Bender’ as he is universally known. Two hundred pairs of eyes follow his progress, like icebound penguins watching a patrolling seal. Tall, brisk and bird-like, the swiftness of his approach makes his black robes balloon like pirate sails. At the lectern he flings his gown behind him and straightens his arms to grasp the carved eagle’s wings on which the bible rests. The lighthouse sweep of his gaze silences the last of the shuffling and coughs.

Smith’s attention has remained on Harding throughout. His eyes graze the depression that deepens over Harding’s spine as he twists his neck. The cables of muscle connect, Smith knows, to slopes of well-packed shoulder and a back that tapers to a narrow waist, beneath which... Here Smith retreats into self-reflection. He attributes the hollow yearning he feels to a keen sense of his own inadequacy. His pelvis, he has concluded, is too broad to meet the proper standard – unless he compensates by building up his shoulders and arms to a degree his fifteen daily press-ups are unlikely to furnish.

In this way, Smith permits himself to evaluate Harding’s body – as discrete anatomical features contributing to an aesthetic ideal. Sometimes this expresses itself as a compulsion somehow to inhabit Harding: to wear his body like a flesh coat; to feel his easy confidence and strength. The physical effect this has on Smith is, he tells himself, a testament to the success of his empathic speculation. To know what it is to be hard like Harding.

Bender’s baritone booms over their heads: ‘We will begin by singing Hymn 238’.

Smith is abruptly conscious of Foster's presence further down his row. A yelp of triumph from his direction has accompanied the hymn selection. Sensing the attention, Foster leans forward and casts a conspiratorial look Smith's way. Smith feels a familiar pang of anxiety. His friendship with Foster was made hurriedly in the volatile first week four years ago, when the intake of new boys was racing to resolve itself into a stable system. Like all connections made under duress, it has proved impossible to shake off. The shared consciousness of each other's vulnerabilities, nakedly visible in those early days, has bound them together. Enmity is too dangerous. Foster is always making Smith an accessory to some prank or other. Theirs is a bantering, shoulder-jogging relationship that always bears with it a sour taint of threat.

Mrs Reaper, the organist, makes her usual heavy work of the opening bars. The instrument wheezes like a giant harmonica. Smith watches Foster inhale lustily. The first four words, Foster mumbles noncommittally along with the rest of the boys. The sixth syllable is delivered as if he is auditioning for the West End. *I vow to thee my CUNT-try, all earthly things above...*

There is a snigger, which kindles a general restlessness. The eyes on their side of the chapel flit furtively between their hymn books and Bender. Bender himself, oblivious to the first ripple of rebellion, is projecting vigorously in the direction of Mrs Reaper.

Foster and the rest of the boys sketch their way through the next three verses. As they approach the fifth, the tension rises tangibly. One or two titters erupt even before the first line.

I vow to thee my CUNT-try... This time the word is almost shouted, semi-disguised as a cough. The disorder spreads to the pews opposite. Bender is roused. His eyes make a sweep. The boys' are all downcast. Smith stares resolutely at the page. He feels Foster's intent like static in the air.

'There is another CUNT-try, I've heard of long ago...' The titters persist into the second line, bracketed by an incredulous guffaw from across the aisle. Primed this time, Bender's gaze finds its target with ferocious certainty. Foster is pinioned in the glare. He stares straight ahead. Smith dares a glance at Bender. His eyes glisten with what Smith knows to be distilled rage. Smith allows himself the consolation that at least the rest of the hymn is peril-free. Perhaps the explanation of a cough? Doggedly pursued?

'We may not CUNT her armies, we may not see her king...'

Smith is strangled by panic. By the time the end of the verse is reached, the boys have fallen almost silent. There is only the organ, the masters' uncertain tenors and Mrs Reaper's reedy alto.

Then something unprecedented occurs. The breath leaves the pipes and the chapel is drained completely of sound, emptying to a new, tomb-like silence. Into this, the clops of Benders' heels explode like the first artillery at dawn. He heads, not for his cushioned seat under the carved cowl, but to Smith's pew. Smith feels Foster's fear curdle. In front, Harding leans almost imperceptibly away from the force of Bender's gaze. It burns past his shoulder, drilling into Foster's purpling face.

Bender sweeps his arm from a stiff vertical, to point towards the door as if directing an aircraft. The single word detonates in every ear at once.

'OUT!'

The most consequential outcome of Foster's suspension is that Smith now has Harding to himself. Foster and Smith were an already-bonded pair when Harding entered their orbit several weeks into their first term. He was one of those rare personalities: a free radical, able to transfer easily between groups that should have repelled. Smith had tried in vain to understand this capability. It must have been something to do with his indifference. He couldn't have been pretending not to notice the tribal distinctions. Such disingenuousness was usually instantly detected and mercilessly punished. Harding somehow, miraculously, just didn't care.

He had been re-streamed into the middle set for maths midway through the first term, a humiliation that would have condemned anyone else to an open-ended purgatory. But Harding arrived with a swagger and apparent ignorance of these rules that turned the tables, so that the class found itself scurrying to realign around him instead. He'd been placed next to Foster who, with an instinct for politics, conferred on himself the role of chief adviser, appraising Harding of the historic resentments, fragile alliances and balances of power that kept the class from erupting into open conflict. This, and the fact that Foster readily supplied the answers, led Harding to join them in their corner of the common room; a porous territory between the muscular harem of the sportsmen and the untouchables beyond the toaster. Smith didn't resent Harding's partial displacement of him. Foster's friendship always seemed conditional. He would cool for inexplicable intervals before wooing him again conspicuously, as if he'd been away on a trip. Foster's wielding of a passively benevolent Harding gave their relationship some welcome stability.

'Four weeks though?'

Smith pulls a long, pensive draw from his JPS. He and Harding are sprawled proprietorially on the bench at the back of the precinct, the only intact one of three arranged in a crescent behind a raised brick bed. Its principal attraction is the vast soot-dusted shrub which obscures its occupants from all but the most determined observer. The rank smell of piss is a small price to pay for the opportunity to smoke unmolested.

'Bender had to make an example of him'. Harding says matter-of-factly.

'Lucky bastard'.

Harding shakes his head. 'I don't think so. You haven't met his dad'.

Smith turns to Harding. His face is a question.

'I went for a weekend in August,' Harding says by way of explanation. Smith considers the fact that Foster hasn't mentioned it. 'Our mums cooked it up. Because he helps me, I think. In maths'.

'He *coached* you? Jesus!'

‘No, no – not coached. Just – because. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. It was fucking weird. His Dad’s, like, this military nut. Sits in his study, screaming instructions at everybody. And there’s this whole shrine to his brother. All the rowing pictures’.

Foster seldom mentions his brother, but the masters do. He is the ideal against which Foster’s failings can be usefully cast.

Smith hisses his spent fag into a gully between the slabs. ‘Sounds like a laugh a minute’.

‘I felt sorry for him actually. One night—’ Harding pauses. He looks at Smith and seems to make a decision. ‘One night, the second night I was there, there was this whole scene at dinner,’ Harding bites his lip.

Smith takes the crumpled pack from his blazer. He opens it and offers it to Harding. The waft of fresh tobacco still conjures a pulse of nausea, which he battles to quell. ‘You’ve started, so you’ll finish’. Harding takes a cigarette and lights it deftly.

‘It was pretty bad. First of all, they did the whole grace thing’.

‘Jesus’.

‘Exactly. After that it’s back down to Defcon-five awkward. The usual crap. But then Foster starts telling this story. The one about Green chundering into O’Mally’s briefcase?’

‘Good story’.

‘Yeah. His Dad didn’t think so. I’m watching him. He’s going kind of purple, and I’m thinking, “shut the fuck up.” At a certain point his Dad’s like,’ (Harding adopts a pompous sergeant major voice), “I hardly think this is an appropriate subject for the dinner table!” but Foster’s on a fucking roll.

‘Plus, I think his Mum and his sister are enjoying it. I mean, they’re trying not to show it, but he tells a good story. So, he sort of ignores him and carries on. And I see his dad working himself up, like Bender when he’s about to blow. The next second, he brings his hands down on the table. Fucking WHAM! The plates and shit are all jumping around and he’s like, “THAT’S ENOUGH!” fucking, top of his voice. But Foster’s gone pretty red too and he looks at me, you know like when he’s about to do something?’

Smith thinks back to the chapel. ‘Yeah’.

‘*That* look. And then he kind of shouts’. Harding draws on his cigarette, pinching it between his fingers to tap the ash in an action Smith has burned himself numerous times trying to imitate. ‘He kind of shouts, “*For fuck’s sake* Dad! it’s just a story!”

‘And then?’

Harding leans back on the bench so that he is close alongside Smith. Smith eyes the familiar tributary pulsing on Harding’s temple. ‘And then his dad fucking *cuffs* him. Out of the blue. Really fucking hard’.

‘Fuck’.

‘I know. But then Foster’s got this look on his face. Kind of pleased with himself. And his dad’s breathing heavy and everything. Rubbing his hand. And then he’s like, “go and wait in my study,” and Foster just gets up without saying anything. And he’s looking at me in this weird way’.

‘What kind of weird?’

‘I don’t know. Weird. Like, a smirk. So, he goes out. And I have to eat the whole rest of the dinner. Dessert and everything. With his Mum asking about my options and rugger. And his sister’s sitting there rubbing her face. And his dad doesn’t say *another fucking word*’.

‘And Foster’s in the study the entire time?’

‘The entire fucking time’. Harding rolls his head onto the back of the bench and blows a lungful vertically. ‘Then me and the mum and sister go into the lounge and his father disappears for ages. Finally, his dad’s back, but no Foster. So, I’m like, “may I be *excused*?” And they’re all like, “of course! Long day tomorrow!” Like nothing’s fucking happened. And I go up and... And Foster’s like... Well, he’s like... You know’.

Harding looks at Smith in appeal.

‘What?’

‘You know. He’s like—he’s upset’.

Smith widens his eyes. ‘What? *Crying*?’

‘Well, I don’t know. Maybe. But they were in there for fucking ages’.

‘Did he—beat him or something?’

‘I wouldn’t know. He didn’t say anything about it’. Harding lifts his head, takes a deep draw, then says with an air of wisdom, “‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad.’” He exhales, considers something. A furrow divides his brow. ‘Oh. Sorry’.

Smith's fatherless status is his secret pride. There are a couple of boys whose dads are actually dead. These are treated with a kind of awed terror, as if it might be contagious. The fact that his dad merely abandoned him places Smith in an uncategorisable no-mans-land between pity, contempt and (as a sign of Christian virtue) conspicuous magnanimity. He is an exotic visitor from the Land of Broken Homes: a semi-detached, nannyless country of latchkeys and frozen food. It could hardly have been better if he'd been to prison. He is careful to nurture an impression of stoic forbearance in the face of fathomless pain, however, when the topic arises. Even with Harding.

'That's OK'. He tips his own head back to rest alongside Harding's, keeping his eyes raised skyward, creasing his forehead as if in recollection of some half-suppressed soap-opera scene. He even (gratifyingly) feels his eyes fill with tears in response to the tragic potential of being himself. In truth, his father was an intimidating and remote presence he was far from sorry to be rid of. They seemed only to confuse and exasperate one another: Smith, with his baffling vulnerability and emotional displays; his father with his car keys and shoes, leather and glass, a wall of surfaces and smells between him and his mother. When he was told he wasn't coming back it was like the promise of a holiday.

Harding twists his neck to look at his friend. Smith feels Harding's breath on his ear. He swallows. His throat is suddenly dry. 'We could bunk games,' Harding says. This is a kind of atonement, Smith recognises, for apparently trespassing on his pain. Usually, he and Foster skip the Wednesday afternoon session as a matter of course; their absence goes unlamented. But Harding actually enjoys it.

'Yeah?' Smith twists his own neck. Their eyes meet. Harding blinks and sits up briskly.

'Yeah. It's only drills today. And Pretty won't care'. This is true enough. Mr Polly – 'Pretty Polly' – is a gift of a games master. He cares about the matches and the points. The rest is just babysitting to him. There is an unwritten amnesty for the "fairies", as he terms the hopeless cases. Harding drops his cigarette and grinds it under his heel. 'We could go to Oxford'.

On previous occasions when Foster and Smith have taken the bus into town, Harding had always refused. Foster and Smith long ago concluded that, unlike them, Harding lacks the soul of a true revolutionary. Smith doesn't let even a beat of time pass. 'OK'.

The walk to the bus stop takes them through the precinct: a low, galleried scar that slices through the old centre like a partially excavated ruin. At this time in the afternoon, it is the domain of the women of the town. Bingo queens roost in chattering clusters outside the supermarket, wielding their plaid- and argyle-patterned trolleys cavalierly, like golf clubs. Young mothers park their buggies in the lee of the betting shop to suck cigarettes, their glittering eyes scattering judgement. Afternoon drinkers pat their Dallas hairdos and look nervously at the sky as they emerge from Curl Up And Dry. Here, Smith always feels a prickling discomfort. The atmosphere of perm solution and cosy conspiracy is so like his mother's shop that it provokes an irrational fear that he'll run into someone he knows. One of the regulars, perhaps, from the time before he'd had borne on him the shame of the profession and its contagious effeminacy; the ladies who still treat him like a surrogate grandson, trapping him in perfumed hugs and subjecting him to dreadful reminiscences about his former helpfulness. He talks hurriedly as they pass.

'The thing about Crabbi is he doesn't give a fuck. He's like, "fuck the industry". He just does what he wants'.

'I still think Box Frenzy is better'.

Smith cocks his head in concession. 'Box Frenzy is a wicked album. But the whole new direction. It's another level'.

'I don't know. I just think it's too commercial'.

Absurdly, Smith feels the lack of consensus physically, like an undigested meal. It suddenly strikes him as critically important that Harding agrees with him or, more importantly, that he sees the matter in the same way; feels a similar sense of recognition when he hears the music.

'But that's the whole point!' Harding looks sideways at Smith, mildly astonished by his sudden passion. 'That's the genius. It's satire. "Big Mac, fries to go." It's taking the piss'.

'I'll take your word for it'.

Smith is surprised to feel a hot rush of contempt which, though it burns itself out almost immediately, leaves a smarting afterglow.

'You don't have to. I've got the tape on me'. They have changed direction to take the longer approach around the back of the bus stop, avoiding the queue. The peril today is in the form of two comprehensive girls, sullenly smoking. They look to be younger than Smith, but in the past this has proved this to be no inhibitor to insult. It provokes feelings of complicated relief in Smith that the standard "poofster" applies equally to all members of the school as far as the comprehensive kids are concerned, rather than to him alone.

A misty rain has begun to fall. He and Harding claim the last island of dry in the corner of the shelter. Smith is squeezed between the advertising hoarding and a clutch of Gateway bags incubating at the feet of a woman with a clenched face. She looks penetratingly at them both and then, pointedly, at her watch.

Smith's Walkman weights his blazer like a handgun. He retrieves it from his pocket, feeling the fabric settle back into symmetry across his shoulders. Wordlessly, he hands the tangled yarn of the headphones to Harding, who examines them carefully like a puzzle before teasing the loops apart. Smith takes out the cassette and looks at the spools. He removes a stub of pencil from his other pocket and inserts it into the cog, spinning the tape like a football rattle to rewind it.

At the front of the queue, one of the smoking girls turns to look, then says something to her friend. Both snigger. Smith reddens, aware suddenly that he is spinning the tape from his wrist, not his elbow, and that he has unconsciously shifted his weight onto the opposite hip. He stiffens his body and reduces the scope of his movements. The girl looks back at him with arch contempt.

Smith loads the tape. Harding hands him the headphone plug, thumbing one bud into his nearside ear while holding the other out to Smith. Smith sidles closer to slacken the wire and pushes the other bud in. It is warm from Harding's hands. Looking up, he sees the girl laugh again and purse her lips. He feels his scalp prickle. He looks at Harding. Does he simply not notice? Or notice, and somehow not care? Smith would give anything for either condition.

Smith turns himself slightly away from Harding as the music starts, composing his face into a picture of sober reverence. The rain, heavier now, glazes the pavement and harries the foot traffic. A coatless man curses and bunches the lapels of his suit jacket between closed fists. A mother squats to arrange the hood of a stubborn child. The smoking girl flicks her stub to a bouncing death. Each moment is choreographed with such precision to the percussion of the opening track that it seems to Smith they must have been knotted long ago onto an unspooling string of inevitable action. He feels himself pulled along, condemned to perform his own part in the play; knowing, as he has always known, that his is a tragic part.

He looks at Harding, listening to the track, and wonders whether he ever feels this too. He suspects he knows the answer. Sometimes Harding treats him with the wariness he has seen when an animal encounters itself in the mirror for the first time: recognition mixed with unease; a suspicion of something profane.

The bus looms into view, bright like a rig at sea. Harding hands the headphone bud to Smith and rummages for change. Smith looks at Harding expectantly. 'It's cool, right?'

Harding's grin dulls the keen surface of Smith's anxiety. 'I never said it wasn't cool. What are you, their agent?'

On the bus, Smith watches the smoking girls ascend the stairs. He is wondering distractedly how to arrange things so that Harding chooses the lower deck, when he hears his name called.

Leaning over the rail that corrals the pushchairs, accompanied by a round-shouldered, lank girl Smith hasn't seen before, is Chloe.

[ends]

Commentary

You've just read the first chapter in a novel about growing up gay at the peak of the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s. It's Smith and Harding's story, but it's also my own. Why did I set out to write it? I could try to come up with a literary explanation. But if I'm honest, I think it was simply to answer the question: *what was it like?* Not because anyone has asked. But because, from a distance of 30 years, the question's been increasingly on my mind. What *was* it like, truly, earnestly to believe that I was the only person in my world to feel this way? To be convinced that discovery would mean estrangement from everything and everyone I knew and loved? But at the same time, *what was it like* to feel the first shimmer of sex and romantic love, like a promised land glimpsed over the horizon – more beautiful, perfect and fulfilling than the unjust, mendacious world had deceived me into believing it could possibly be?

And so I conceived the characters of Smith and Harding and set them in motion. Through their story, I'm seeking to shed fresh light on themes that were important then and are important now. The corrosive nature of traditional masculinity. The friction between queer and conventional culture. The choice between living dangerously with integrity or seeking the safety of a half-lived life.

[ends]

Olivia: Short Story and Commentary

by Siamak Khezrian

The idea for having a creative writing workshop focused on the refugee crisis came to me in March 2023 when I travelled to my home country of Iran to celebrate Nowruz with my family. At the airport in London, I came across a stand that had been put there to welcome Ukrainian refugees. I looked around but couldn't find a similar stand welcoming refugees from other parts of the world, such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, etc.

There has been debate around perceived differences in Europe's response to refugees from conflicts in the Middle East versus those from Ukraine, with some accusing European countries of applying a double standard in their policies. I've always believed when it comes to issues surrounding refugees, the debate often lacks nuance. There is a tendency to make broad generalisations or draw negative conclusions about large groups based on stereotypes and limited information. One of the reasons we have limited information and flat viewpoints about important matters is that we tend to consume media that are aligned with our worldview and reinforce our biases. Social media platforms often use algorithms and AI to strengthen our pre-existing beliefs or opinions rather than presenting a balanced or diverse range of views. They don't necessarily help us see the whole picture.

I believe storytelling and fiction can help us develop a more balanced view about important matters that impact our individual and social lives and gain a more nuanced understanding of a situation by considering multiple perspectives, rather than simply relying on our own biases or preconceptions. For this reason, I decided to write a short story that centres around a British citizen named Olivia, who is faced with a challenging decision regarding a refugee, Farouk, and to use the story in a creative writing workshop. While coverage of refugees in the media often relies on generalisations, Olivia and Farouk's story aims to focus on specific individuals. At the heart of this story lies a crucial question: should older, wealthier, property-owning British citizens be expected to do more to assist refugees, and if so, who should they prioritise? Is it fair to prioritise a male refugee from Iraq, who has suffered significant personal losses and whose values and worldview differ greatly from those of the average British person? Or should priority be given to a female refugee from Ukraine, whose cultural background and beliefs may be more like those of a potential British sponsor?

If Olivia and Farouk's story were to happen in real life and receive media coverage, some outlets might depict Farouk as a menacing figure among the countless uncivilised and dangerous refugees who are invading Europe, whereas other outlets would likely portray Olivia as a privileged and xenophobic individual who is out of touch with the plight of refugees. The use of fiction and storytelling can combat this oversimplified portrayal of humans and situations by offering greater complexity and a more comprehensive understanding of people's motivations, and anxieties. Fiction provides a unique opportunity to address sensitive and divisive issues in politics, society, and the economy. Through imaginative storytelling, it offers diverse perspectives that might be overlooked in mainstream media and encourages meaningful dialogue. A skilled writer can develop relatable characters and captivating plotlines that challenge readers' assumptions and foster empathy for people from different backgrounds. This can aid us in establishing agreement and progressing together towards shared objectives among different human communities, something that is becoming more and more difficult. My aim with the story of Olivia and Farouk was to highlight the complexities and nuances of the refugee crisis, while also emphasising the potential for compassion and understanding, not only for the refugees, but also for characters like Olivia, who are sometimes misunderstood and stigmatised in the media. By portraying characters as complex and multidimensional, I challenge stereotypes to promote deeper understanding.

In his article "Why Teach Creative Writing," (2010) Francis Gilbert examines the purposes behind teaching creative writing, and one approach he explores is the "The Activist" perspective:

The Activist focuses upon cultural analysis. The teacher could be a politically motivated writer such as a spoken word educator. Activism and social engagement are the central values. Students want to explore specific social issues. (Gilbert, 2010, p.13)

My creative writing workshop adopts an Activist approach, which aims to inspire and empower participants to use writing as a tool to explore and discuss the refugee crisis in the UK. What I expect from the workshop participants is the creation of a written piece that serves as an ending to the story, incorporating Olivia's choice.

The story I've written has an open ending, inviting participants in the workshop to engage with it and determine the fate of the main characters. Participants can choose to either sponsor Yuliya, the refugee from Ukraine, or take the story in a different direction and have Olivia help Farouk, the Iraqi refugee. Alternatively, they can have Olivia choose not to help either refugee. In the workshop, I encourage participants to explore the possibilities for the story's ending. The goal is to use creative writing to spark discussions about the reasons behind the choices they make for the protagonist, Olivia. Additionally, I expect the participants to write a letter addressed to the refugee they have chosen not to sponsor, explaining the reasons why they deemed the other refugee more deserving of help. Alternatively, participants may opt to write a letter to both refugees if they decide not to sponsor either of them, expressing their considerations.

Ideally, the creative writing workshop would include a diverse group of British adults, particularly those over the age of 40. It would be beneficial to gather individuals representing a wide range of political perspectives to foster meaningful discussions on the refugee crisis. The aim is to ensure that a variety of viewpoints are present, allowing for a comprehensive reflection of diverse voices. The participants could encompass council members responsible for making decisions related to refugee accommodation. Additionally, including ordinary citizens who are considering sponsoring a refugee would bring a valuable perspective to the workshop.

What follows is a part of the story:

"Speaking of my students and a debate..."

"Speaking of your student..." The smile on her face faded.

Philip noticed and added "Have you given it more thought? Farouk has to find a roof over his head."

Olivia remained silent, staring morosely at the bottle of wine. She then fished out a corkscrew from the cupboard. "I want to try this wine. Cost a king's ransom even with money off." She opened the bottle and poured a generous shot into the glass. "Would you like some?"

"No. I'll be having some tea," answered Philip. "Can we talk about Farouk? We have this extra space since Jessica left. He could use a home."

Olivia put on an irritated face. She sipped her wine. "To be frank, so could a lot of other people."

"Like whom?" Philip asked.

"There's a Homes for Ukraine scheme. We can go the city council and register to sponsor a refugee from there."

"Farouk is in dire straits. He can't afford rent. He feels lonely and homesick, and he's considering returning to Iraq. It would be a shame if he dropped out and went back. I'm worried about him. He could use some support."

"Why can't he go back?"

Philip's face twisted into an unhappy frown as he turned on the electric kettle. "Why can't he go back? Because they'll kill him."

"Who will kill him?"

"The militias. They've already killed Farouk's father and brother."

Olivia put the glass of wine down. "I'm sorry to hear that." Her gaze dropped to the ground. A silence fell between them. Her gaze came back up. "Have you been able to corroborate this story?"

"How on earth would I have done that, Olivia? Oh, I suppose I could have called the leader of one of the more fanatical militias in Baghdad and confirm they have indeed killed the young man's brother and father. He's bound to be a reasonable chap who'll tell the truth."

"I'm sorry. I'm not accusing your student of lying. I've never met him. But some people do make up stories to take advantage of our generosity."

The kettle beeped. Philip took a cup and poured hot water into it. "When did you become so cynical, Olivia?" His voice was tinged with anger. "A human being's life is on the line. If I didn't know better, I'd think you lack empathy. What would Jessica say?"

"I love you, Philip but I refuse to be lectured by you." Olivia left the kitchen for the living room.

Philip left the glass of hot water on the worktop, then followed his wife to the living room. "I didn't mean to lecture you. I'm asking you to keep an open mind about this." He reached out and stroked her hand. "Farouk is a fine young man; very good at maths. He deserves a chance."

"Why did they kill his brother and father?"

"Apparently, they worked for a prominent politician. The militias wanted to intimidate the politician, so they killed his associates."

"Farouk is not a politician or an associate of one, is he?"

"For God's sake, Olivia! The militias are quite nasty. Can you imagine what it's like to be Farouk and walk down the streets of Baghdad?"

"Did his father upset some people?"

"I don't think so."

Olivia sighed. She walked back to the kitchen and poured more wine and returned to the living room. She slumped on the couch. "When will humans stop these damn fights?" She huffed.

"I don't know, Olivia, but this kid had no part in them. And he needs a new home."

"How about us?"

"Us?"

Olivia gazed out the window. "Did we play a part in the mess? Are we to blame for this internecine war in Iraq?"

Philip thoughtfully stroked his grey goatee. "Partly...modern Iraq is an invention of Britain and America. And then there was the whole WMD debacle and the ensuing invasion...We invaded a relatively stable country."

"Where there was nothing but love and harmony."

"Probably a little more than there is now," Philip retorted.

"And let's not forget Blair was the PM of your party," she chided.

Philip took off his spectacles. "I thought about it when Farouk told me his story. People like me who were Labour Party members at the time contributed to the mess."

"Is that what this is about then? You getting rid of your guilt?"

Philip shook his head.

"If it makes you feel better, nobody's innocent, darling."

"Wine makes you cynical, woman!"

Despite herself, Olivia laughed. "It does pack quite a punch, actually. If it weren't for Iraq's sectarian strife, I'd be happily drunk right now." Olivia climbed to her feet. "I'm going make a chicken sandwich. I can make one for you, if you'd like."

"I'm alright." Philip decided to push his luck. "Will you consider giving this young man a chance?"

"I'll have to meet him first. Ask him some questions."

A puzzled look flickered across Philip's face. "What questions?"

"You can't expect me to just welcome a stranger into my home without at least knowing who they are," said Olivia, irritated.

"You want to interview him first to see if he's worthy of receiving help?"

"Call it what you want." Olivia held Philip's hand. "Oh, Philip, my parents worked hard to build our house. Now it's our home. We both need to be assured that any guest is acceptable to both of us."

A FEW DAYS LATER...

Outside Philip's office, Farouk approached Olivia almost as if he were being unsure of her and his reception. He was wearing an old pair of worn jeans and badly scuffed trainers. Sitting beside her, his face creased into an awkward smile. "Hello! I am Farouk. Nice to see you," he said in a shaky voice.

"Hello, Farouk. It's nice to meet you, too." Olivia smiled, wondering why he didn't shake her proffered hand. Perhaps he was too nervous?

After exchanging pleasantries, she asked him about his studies. Some, maybe a lot of his enthusiastic description of technical details went over Olivia's head but that did not matter to her as she was waiting for the right moment to ask the more difficult questions.

She took him back to arriving in England and Farouk talked about his journey from Iraq to Turkey and from there to Europe. He spoke of going to high school in the UK and a British teacher who helped him get a scholarship to study mechanical engineering at the University of East Anglia. He also seemed to be quite fond of Olivia's husband and grateful for his help and guidance at the university.

Olivia's opportunity to delve deeper came when Farouk waved at a passing couple. "He's my classmate. Very good goalkeeper," he said.

Olivia found Farouk's accent entertaining, and occasional grammatical blunders amusing. Maybe, just maybe she could see herself allowing him to stay in her house. "Is that young lady with him his girlfriend?", she asked.

"I think yes but I don't know her a lot."

"Do you have a girlfriend of your own here, if I may ask?" She needed to know if a potential girlfriend could be problematic in her house.

"No. I can't be with European woman," Farouk said.

To Olivia, the tone of his reply seemed to suggest that this was obvious, and it worried her a little. She looked at him quizzically. "Why not?"

"You know my father always told to me, be with woman who is modest and pure and loyal. European girls are different. God willing, one day I can go to Iraq and find a good wife."

Olivia tried not to focus on the cultural differences. She almost heard her daughter, Jessica, saying "keep an open mind". Trying to find a way to connect with him, she decided to ask him about his father.

Farouk smiled. "When I was kid my brother and I called my father reflector because you know, he was so bald his head reflected sun."

Olivia chuckled. "My uncle was bald too. I never called him a reflector, though."

Farouk smiled and looked up. "You don't have sun in UK."

"True."

He continued enthusiastically. "Usually after school I went to mosque to see my father. You imagine a lot of people saying prayers, but I could find my father so easy because his head reflected the lamps of mosque," he laughed, taking out his phone. "Let me show you a picture." He handed her his phone, an old and battered Samsung with a cracked screen. The image was of a younger Farouk in front and, to his side, a tall, bald man in the traditional white Arab robe. It had been taken inside a mosque. "When I escape to Turkey, I was alone and very sad. I always looked at this picture and become happy."

Olivia put her hand on her heart. "Oh, dear. Bless you."

"You know. A few days before they kill him, my mother found his shisha in our basement. My mother hate shisha. I told my father I say the shisha is for me but he must buy me the PlayStation."

Olivia laughed. "You're quite clever!"

"You know, if they didn't kill him, I could ask more things..., I could..." Farouk paused and searched for the right word.

"Blackmail? My daughter sometimes blackmails me." Olivia giggled.

"Yes, yes. I could blackmail him, tell him buy me good motorcycle buy me good mobile." Farouk laughed. "I joke but really I miss him."

"I would too."

"You know, he wanted to become engineer, but he must quit school to work in my grandfather's farm. So, he always wanted me to become successful engineer, but he can't see."

Olivia blinked hard. "I'm deeply sorry for what happened to him. I'm sure he's watching you from heaven." She reached her hand to stroke his, but he rejected it.

"I'm sorry but in my religion, it's forbidden to touch a woman that is not my family."

Although the idea of being untouchable seemed vaguely objectionable and insulting, Olivia's automatic response, was "Oh, it's alright." The practical extent of his beliefs had surprised her. Obviously, she had heard of this sort of thing before, but the reality caught her off guard. Embarrassed, she withdrew her hand and went on as if nothing had happened: "So...you want to be successful and make your father proud?"

Farouk's gaze dropped to the carpet of wet twigs on the ground and said, "No, my biggest dream is get his revenge."

Olivia's eyebrows rose, but she lowered them, trying to hide her shock. "Revenge? You mean...bring his killers to justice? Are the police investigating?"

Farouk laughed bitterly. "What do you call law system in English?"
"The judiciary?"

"Yes. The judiciary in my country is controlled by militias who killed my father and brother. My father always said they are dirty dogs and God hates them too. I must bring justice myself."

Taken aback, Olivia fumbled for words. "So... Erm... How can you avenge your father?"

"To be honest, I don't know now. I must finish my studies first and find job. Then I will think about that." He slowly turned his head, made eye contact with her and his dark brown eyes said, "Give me a chance. Let me live with you."

After saying goodbye to him, Olivia went back to Philip's office, overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. Some of the things Farouk had said were less than reassuring to her, though she didn't want to judge a man in his situation for being angry and strange.

When she told Philip of the cultural differences between herself and the Iraqi man, her husband was infuriated. "You want to Anglicise a refugee first and then see if he's worthy of help?" Philip fumed. "He's a product of Iraqi society and their education system." Her husband also argued that Farouk's desire for revenge was understandable.

To her husband's dismay, Olivia said she couldn't make up her mind about Farouk and she needed to meet with the Ukrainian refugee too.

A FEW DAYS LATER...

Above Norwich City Council, the Ukrainian flag fluttered in the late October breeze. Britain's solidarity with the East European nation, however, wasn't limited to flying a flag above official buildings. The government had set up the "Homes for Ukraine scheme", which encouraged people to provide Ukrainian refugees with accommodation. Before the meeting with Farouk, Olivia had already registered her interest in meeting a Ukrainian refugee.

She left the small office and was making her way towards the city market, with her thoughts still occupied by the meeting with the young Ukrainian woman, Yuliya, minutes before. It had been a lot less intense than the earlier meeting with Farouk.

The Ukrainian woman appeared approachable. She had been in Odessa in the middle of a degree in biology when the Russians invaded. Three months later, her whole family had been killed. The Ukrainian was around the same age as Olivia's daughter and wasn't dissimilar to her in appearance either.

Olivia decided to call Philip and let him know she'd chosen Yuliya over his student. As she reached into her handbag to get her phone, the image of Farouk's eyes came to her; those dark brown, desperate eyes. A pang of guilt twisted in her stomach.

She walked to the Forum car park. As she walked down the stairs, she found herself unable to remember where she'd parked her BMW. Guilt and shame turned to rage as she slowly sank on the stairs and ran her hand through her hair.

She was angry with herself, but more so with Philip for putting her in this situation and for insinuating that there was moral equivalence between the militias who had killed Farouk's father and the selfish British woman who denied him a home. "But was there?" She thought for a moment.

What could she do? Save every person suffering from violence in the world? There were thousands of them - Baghdad, Damascus, Yemen - they were everywhere. Now, she'd heard on the news that there were signs of trouble starting in Sudan. Was she supposed to take a refugee from there too?

And then there were so many Yuliyas from Ukraine, all as vulnerable as they were desperate and, much as she'd try to stamp out these feelings, they were still there silently staring at her, poking her, pinching her: To her, Yuliyas appeared more civilised than Farouks. Yuliyas looked familiar, and similar to her and felt more deserving of help.

But it wasn't for Olivia to choose one or the other. She felt she shouldn't have been put in this situation in the first place. She deserved to live in peace after working hard for so many years; to walk to Waitrose and get white wine without having to worry about an Iraqi man's life; to wait for Jessica and Tom to give her grandchildren and take them to nursery. She should've been able to enjoy her life without the spectre of guilt hovering over her.

Could she take in a refugee under her wing and still enjoy all those things? Would she be able to forgive herself if she didn't at least save one of the two refugees?

She stood up and took a deep breath, taking out her phone. The text to Philip was brief and assertive. "When your class is over, come meet me at the Jarrold's Coffee Bar. I have made up my mind."

PART IV: CREATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM STUDENTS

The following section contains poems, prose, and freewriting excerpts composed by secondary school students, Years 9-12, from the Haverstock School in south London. These pupils participated in classes taught by PGCE and MA graduates through a partnership with Goldsmiths. The pieces you see here are the result of a labour of love, both from students and facilitators.

Freeing Creative Voice

In this section, you'll hear from the young writers Ariella-Janet, Ethan, Samira, Telisha, Jalil Jr., Maya, and Sham as they share creative insight and tell fascinating stories. They employ specific description, metaphor, vivid imagery, intentional structure, and thoughtful word choice with a wisdom and creative power well beyond their years. When we, as educators, intentionally uplift and encourage curiosity and creativity in our classroom spaces, and then have the bravery to actually *listen* to what our students have to say, the results are astounding.

Roses

by Ariella-Janet, Year 9

I've been running
I've been walking
I've been walking for so long my feet are numb
and my legs have felt the devil
I've don't know how long I've been
I don't know why I've been...gone
I just know, know I've been...gone
It's beautiful all around me roses, everywhere I look are roses
I pick a few for the road and realize my hands are bloodied and
aching
I forgot roses are prickly just like life
beautiful, deceitful and painful
I've been walking for a day now through the mystical forest and the
gloomy forest
And the wild flowers and the roses
I sit for a while after my walk and upon trying to get up I realize I
can't
My legs are scarlet red just like the roses...

Serenity

by Ethan, Year 12

Serenity; the perfect description of this utopia.

Majestic landscapes that stretch as far as the eye can see, and you can capture that. That feeling; that beauty; the epitome of life itself.

This is Xanadu's Grace; serenity in its full form.

It could put The Garden Of Eden to shame, especially since it was a failure of God's gift. This was nothing like that. No snakes that tempt you and no reason to be tempted of anything regardless. The smells were nothing like the outside; vanilla sprinkled in between the blades of blushing grass. The grass is as smooth as marble yet as silky and form-fitting as the best clothing life could buy. Money, fame, love. Nothing could compare to such pleasure of being within the realms of Xanadu's Grace. It's almost unfair to compare such dirty, materialistic desires to one so pure; one that She created.

There was an old idea from the past times, if the world ever went into hellish descent. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault, I believe. It was a program that tried to get the most diverse collection of plant seeds to protect biodiversity if the worst did come to pass. It had something to do with permafrost and nanofilm if my knowledge of history and the words of my father stood true. Nonetheless, whatever they planned didn't stand the passage of time. Didn't pass The Vander. Nothing in this world did. But no matter, we have this. Nothing more is needed. Why would it, when we have everything we need and could ever want here? The Gods have crafted this space for us and only us. Why go against that will when we have privilege never given to those below. Not even Angels have such paradise, although some few have access, none really grace their presence. They were chosen for the dirty work; we were given the right to do as we please on this plain. This was it.

Purity at its peak. Our own Svalbard Global Seed Vault; our own Garden Of Eden.

Kneeling onto the grass, its softness welcoming me in its arms, I couldn't help but lay down, head facing skyward in pure ecstasy. There was nothing that could topple this feeling. As the untamed wilderness engulfs me in comfort, wrapping around me as if greeting a friend, the haze of bright light masks my vision. The blinding nature of the sun burns; but that's what is normal. She allows this to happen, therefore it's welcomed.

An ash tree stood powerfully before me; I could only stare in awe. She has not given me the gift of gracing my hand upon such beauty yet; I could only wait eagerly for the day though. Angels don't last forever, I assume as much anyway. That's what happened to one of them; yet I fear speaking the name. That is not my domain, and I wish to remain loyal to such beautiful grace. Despite knowing that would mean I would have to disregard my freedom and relaxation if that ever did happen, I would willingly do so to be in favor of Her. To embrace what those Angels take for granted.

Ivy hanging from its branches with cherry blossoms maturing from its contents, I couldn't help but be tempted at letting my hand move towards it.

'It was not my will.' I could say. *'I was intoxicated; spare me punishment and I'll be ever loyal.'*

It was an argument plausible of success, especially with such benevolence that graced my hand. The sight was too enchanting; too rousing. In the past times, it is said that such elements never mixed. I do not envy those that lived in such concrete jungles. Evolution defies logic of those lesser than. Miracles, more so. As I lay on the bed of Xanadu's Grace, only one thought roamed my willful mind.

'Serenity; the perfect thing to distract yourself from the screams of the dead.'

A Handsome Man...

by Samira and Telisha, Year 11

A handsome man with smooth cut of brown hair that glistened in the sun's aura was walking

through a beautiful green and lush forest until a sky-scraper-like tree caught his eye.

As he was caught up in his admiration a crisp, crimson apple dropped gracefully down like a

fallen star and hit his head, cushioned by locks of his hair. His expanded pupils focused on the

vermilion apple and he couldn't resist but to take a bite. But as he opened his jaw an

onyx raven flew down and pecked his hand, attempting to steal his take. The fruit slips out of his

trembling ivory hands and starts rolling, and rolling, and rolling. In his confusion he slowly starts

walking towards it and unwittingly finds himself chasing the apple. First with a scurry, then to a dash and then a full on sprint.

As he's chasing the apple the clouds start to give in and conceal the light. Fog begins to lay

thickly over the bubble that started to form around an area of the forest. When he realised he

was locked in, his blood ran cold and froze in time. His heart, head and hands trembled and his

skin became even more pale.

What he thought was a green space, a park that almost resembles the Garden Of Eden, was

now the colour of black death; Hades and his underworld. Frantically looking around for an

escape and his eyes lit up as he saw the neon exit sign above a beautiful door in the dome. The

crooked, ashy trees croaked and groaned, calling out to him, enticing him to Dante's Inferno.

For a moment he thought he saw the green vines that hugged the terrifically luminous golden

door, covered in pure petals and young buds.

The exit right there!

So close!

But any educated person would know that if he was in the inferno abyss that no punishment

stops after the first slap on the wrist.

Bees swarmed the doors, turning it into dust. But the bees were not after pollen or sweet

succulent honey, but craved for the iron that runs through his veins and settled at his heart.

The forest screamed at him and tried to claw at him, since a long time ago he realised that it

wasn't a forest anymore and that a dome covered the whole biome.

He ran and ran and ran. His eyes itched and ached as he struggled to see through the fog but

all of a sudden, his dilated pupils caught the light of the blood red apple.

It was now on a pedestal and it shone in all its glory.

He felt so hungry.

Like really hungry.

Is this his punishment? His own version of Dante's Inferno?

He looked around, nothing else was edible.

He couldn't eat bark or twigs or even the dead animals laying around.

He would die for that apple.

He took one step forward and that's when his head started to throb.
"Not so bad", he thought.

He was never one for reservation when this was his time to shine.

If he managed to grab this apple he might be able to get out of the dome and back to the real

mother nature and not this pseudo dimension.

Through every step it got harder and his feet got heavier. His stomach rolled and twisted and

just as quickly as he got his confidence, it was all fading away.

The greed in his heart grew like a seedling in the dirt. Water and sunlight encouraged it to grow,

but greed and starvation jabbed at seedlings in his heart and grew into a dead plant of twigs.

His eyes bloodshot, he starts to ignore the weight at his feet and tries to at least jog to the apple

but every time he gets so close it moves backwards. Doubling the distance from the spot before.

He growls in frustration when he feels a tap on his shoulder.

He turns around and sees his friend.

For a moment he thought he wasn't alone and that he somehow got trapped too.

Until he revealed the strangest of smiles and pointed upwards.

He looks up and it starts to rain.

Rain..

Rain?

If it's rain then why does it burn?

Realisation slowly starts kicking in as his skin starts the sizzle and burn.

Acid.

He screams as a droplet gets in his eye then he rolls on the floor in agony.

He felt hands grab and claw at him as the rain gets quicker and heavier almost like hailstones.

The ground sucks him up and drowns him in dirt.

Then he wakes up.

He was on the floor with the sun shining on his face. He sees the white power scattered around

him and sighs, "Almost overdosed again." That was an understatement since there was a pile of sick next to where his head was.

Though what made him smile was a big, emerald green tree in full bloom producing the most fresh, phoenix-red apples he's ever seen.

Even after witnessing everything he thought his brain could never show him, he was so happy

to see mother nature gracing the morning sky with all her might.

Deep Down a Bright Green Field

by Jalil Jr., Year 8

One time, a 14 year old boy was deep down a bright green field. He was having the time of his life. Just him. No parents, no stress, nothing to worry about.

He was playing with a blue and white classic circle shaped football. On one end he could see an ordinary white metal goal post with no net and on the other it was wonderful. It looked as if he was in the world cup final about to score the winning penalty. Then ... as he shot the ball it fell into a bunch of stinging nettles!

He gasped and shouted "oh no!"

While walking to the stinging nettles he fell and never woke up.

Events of Nature

by Maya and Sham, Year 9

Monday 1st of January

A new park had been built in my village so I decided to have a look since there was only a week left before the school holidays finished. The slight cold breeze sent chills down my body, on a day like this it would be perfect to go wander in nature. I entered the park with its golden embroidered gates open wide, the orchestra of nature was playing its piece. Instead of walking on the path I walked on the damp grass, from last night's pouring tears. The trees looked down on me. Glaring at my fragile and small body. I wandered through the park and it started to rain. As if the earth was crying for joy for its new greens. I turned around and went home hoping not to get soaked.

Tuesday 2nd of January

Today felt so gloomy and I thought a walk would be the best idea to take my mind off things. I trudged along the path arriving at the pond, it looked so full of life, unlike the cloudy, winter sky. The birds' cries, and the crunch of the frosty grass filled my ears. I skipped back towards the golden gates which towered over me.

Wednesday 3rd January

Today was a sunny, cold winters morning. I had just finished my hot chocolate that my mother had made for me. I decided to go to the park again. I'm not sure why but I felt like I should. Again, the golden embroidered gates met my eyes. I walked on the green grass till I came across a bench that was covered with vines that soon would be green. I sat in a small place that wasn't covered in it. I sat still and listened to the surroundings. I could hear the droplets of water falling from the trees. Then I walked home.

Thursday 4th of January

I went to the park again. The golden embroidered gates are still glittering in the sun. I walked along the path for a while until I heard the sound of the violin playing a wonderful piece. I followed the music and came across an old man playing the violin. I smiled. It sounded so beautiful but yet the sound of nature that accompanied it made it sound even better. I then went back down the path and through golden embroidered gates and then home.

Friday 5th of January

I went to the park again this morning, it was becoming a part of my daily routine. This time I bought tea with me to warm me up in such cold weather. It snowed yesterday. Again, I walked through the golden embroidered gates. The sound of laughter could be heard, children and adults making snow angels and snowmen. The park looked so beautiful, it looked very surreal, so calm and so magical with its grounds covered in snow. I didn't go far, only to the pond. The trees were covered in snow, I sipped on my warm tea. I then reached the pond. It was frozen but not frozen enough to skate over, it shined as the sun shone on it. I then made my way back home.

Saturday 7th of January

I looked outside and even more snow covered the grounds. The pond must be frozen. I took my ice skates with me and made my way to the park. I yet again walked through the golden embroidered gates which were covered in snow. There were even more people making snowmen and snow angels. I walked on the deep snow till I arrived at the pond. There were already people skating. I put on my ice skates and skates. As I skated, I admired the scenery, the trees, the snow and the birds. What would our world be without nature? I then put back on my snow boots. And walked along the snow-covered ground and through the golden embroidered gates.

Sunday 7th January

It was the last day before school started so I'd decided to take a walk in the park. I Walked through the golden embroidered gates and along the snowy path. It was still snowing. I watched as the snowflakes gently fell to the ground. They looked so elegant. I walked to the nearest bench and brushed the snow away and sat down. I took a deep breath of the winter's morning air. It felt so fresh. I sat for a while, swallowed in my own thoughts but I still looked around thinking of how soon it will be filled with green again. I then reluctantly got up and walked through the golden embroidered gates and went home.

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About the Authors

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Dr. Francis Gilbert is a Lecturer in Education at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is Head of the M.A. Creative Writing and Education and academic co-director of the Connected Curriculum, alongside Dr Caroline Kennedy. He has taught creative writing for many years and has published novels, memoirs, social polemics and educational guides. He worked for a quarter of a century in various English state schools teaching English, Drama and Media Studies to 11-18-year olds before taking up his post at Goldsmiths. He is currently researching using both writing and drawing in his teaching and life. He has appeared many times on radio and TV talking about schools and universities, including *Newsnight*, the *Today Programme*, *Woman's Hour* and *Channel 4 News*. His most recent publications include the audiobooks of his novel *Who Do You Love* (Blue Door Press 2020) and educational commentary *Analysis and Study Guide: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (FGI Publishing 2014).
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Sam Goundry Butler is a teacher and writer living in South-East London. He is currently studying for a Masters in Creative Writing and Education at Goldsmiths. He was long-listed for the 2023 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty section of the Ginkgo Prize, the 2023 Out Spoken Page Poetry Prize and the 2023 Erbacce Poetry Prize. His work has been published by Candlestick Press, Nightingale and Sparrow, and Sentire.

Sal Fothergill is a writer, facilitator and educator from Yorkshire, living in London. Part of their work is in bringing creative and collaborative writing pedagogies to primary schools. They also run creative writing workshops for adults, taking inspiration subjects such as lichen and the ecologies of woodlands. They have recently finished an M.A. in Creative Writing and Education at Goldsmiths University and are working on their first novel - 'Where Hearts Agree' - a story about early 2000s queer love and how it navigates rural landscapes.

Siamak Khezrian completed his studies in English translation at the University of Tehran in Iran. He then embarked on a career as an English teacher and a translator for cultural magazines. Throughout his teaching journey, Siamak educated Iranian university graduates and skilled workers seeking new prospects through language learning. By incorporating storytelling into his lessons, he was better able to connect with his students and teach them. The experience sparked a commitment to the power of storytelling, which later led him to do an M.A. in Creative Writing and Education at the University of Goldsmiths in London. He aspires to use the art of storytelling in education to stimulate discussions on social and political matters. Specifically, he aims to use short fiction to explore immigration, and the refugee issue in the U.K.

Christine Khisa is studying on the M.A. Creative Writing and Education Course at Goldsmiths. In her previous employment with South London & Maudsley NHS Trust, London Southbank University, and Middlesex University, Christine has used creativity on Service User Involvement programs to encourage and enable recovery. Christine has written two poetry collections, *Balancing the Scales: A Recovery Journey* and *Equilibria*, using personal narrative and poetry as a cathartic measure. Christine enjoys creative writing, attending local writing groups. She is motivated and encouraged with the support of Goldsmiths Open Book project returned to higher education with the intention to develop and facilitate community based creative writing workshops.

Tamar Moshkovitz is a writer, activist, and aspiring educator. She is interested in the way creative writing education can reinforce, distort, and upend personal and societal norms and beliefs. She recently graduated from Goldsmiths with an MA in Creative Writing and Education, after completing her dissertation - 'Around You, The World Revolves', a short story - and is now enjoying doing little to no writing at all. She lives in London.

Desiri Okobia is a British-Nigerian novelist, speaker, and educator. She writes best-selling books for women and teens. Her sought-after titles include *Diaries of a Visionary - Inspiring Dreams*, *I AM Bodel* and *Kitsu's Diary - The Things I wish I knew when I was Fifteen*. Many of her books deal with the issues that young adults face whilst growing up and navigating their way through life. Her latest book entitled *Message to My Maidservants* is an empowering book for women of all ages. Desiri is currently studying for her MA in Creative Writing & Education at Goldsmiths University.

Aimee Skelton is a Scottish writer / educator currently based in Southeast London. She is an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teacher and runs creative writing classes for adults learning English. She has facilitated creative writing workshops for children and young people, including working alongside Francesca Beard in a placement with First Story, and leading after-school clubs with Inkheads. Aimee's poetry publications include *Raum* and *Propel*, and she is currently working on her first novel. She recently completed her MA in Creative Writing and Education with distinction at Goldsmiths, where she researched the potential of creative writing within familial shadows.

Carrie Sweeney is a writer and educator from the U.S. based in the Boston area. She is a recent graduate of the Goldsmiths M.A. Creative Writing and Education, completing her dissertation: "Light, Darkness, and the Will to Web: A Creative and Autoethnographic Poetic Inquiry into Healing from Trauma." She specializes in trauma-informed teaching through creative writing and seeks to use her platform as a teacher to promote accessibility, safety, and compassion within creative spaces. She is currently working on her first verse-novel.