

Poetry Workshop for Sheffield People's Theatre: Writing Responses to Scale by Helen Mort

Hello, I am glad you have decided to join us for this poetry workshop. I want to say now, you need absolutely no experience to do this workshop - it is for anyone and everyone - to do either alone or with the friends, family or housemates you are isolating with. You could even do it with someone else online if you fancied having a friend. It is fun having someone to share bits with - no matter how silly or simple.

All you need to get started is a pen and some paper. Or if you want to type you can - on a computer or phone - whatever is easier. Feel free to pause me as you go where there are longer writing tasks and then restart again when ready.

To start with, I would like you just to take a minute to ground yourselves. Be quiet for a minute, notice, the sounds, smells, sights around you. Maybe even have a little stretch, shake out your shoulders and get comfortable.

So, we are going to start with some lists. Lists are a great way to start writing without having to worry too much about what you are putting down. That is the most important thing. For these first exercises I want you to try as hard as possible just to keep your pen on the paper, writing everything and anything that comes into your head. They don't have to be sentences, could just be words, and it definitely doesn't have to make sense. Right now you are creators not editors so try and turn off that critical, editing part of your brain.

So, each of these exercises should take thirty seconds to a minute. Set a timer if you can, so you have to be quick! If you do a minute on each, this should take you maximum 15 minutes.

Let's write.

- All the colours you can think of.
- All the animals you can think of.
- All the television shows, films you can think of.
- What's inside your cupboards.
- What's outside your window.
- Smells of childhood.
- Tastes of home.
- Places you love.
- Gestures of love and kindness you have given, seen or received. (Try to think about touch). Eg, hand passing me a mug of tea. Food packages left on doorstep.
- Sounds of community
- The smells of cold weather
- The smells of hot weather.
- The sights of cold weather.
- The sights of hot weather.

Now, put your pen down. And if you are with someone else share one or two things from each list with each other. You may have some strange ones in common.

Pick back up your pen. We are now going to do some longer free-writes. This time I will give you sentences starters and I want you to carry them on - again writing the first things that come into your head, not judging yourself and trying to keep you pen on the paper for the whole time. So for these, we will have three minutes.

Ready. The first one is...

- The sky looks like it is... (a sheet stretched tight to shade the sun, lots of turtles swimming though the ocean)...
- Early in the morning I...
- At night I...
- A picture of love looks like...

Times up. Again if you are with someone you may want to pause the video to share some of the lines you have written. Now, you are going to pick back up you pen and read over everything you have written to mine for gold. 'Mining for gold' is underlining anything you have written, which you like, are surprised by, or want to come back to. There might be lots, there might be nothing! Poetry often makes us see things new: its like closing your eyes, and opening them, and seeing things in a new way. That may be a person, a feeling, a landscape, a memory.

We are now going to write a simple haiku under the title 'I am made of'. In all the exercises you have just done, you have been listing and writing words that make up you. A haiku is a poem that has five syllables on one line, then 7 syllables and then 5 syllables. As a reminder a syllable is a vowel sound, so the word water has two syllables, whilst dog has one. If this is too confusing you can do the same exercise but doing a line with three words, five words, and 3 words.

For example, by I am Made Of Haiku would be:

Muddy Dorset tracks
Wild garlic roaring on tongues
As I run freely

5, 7, 5.

The aim of this exercise it to try and force you to write ideas in as few words as possible. What words are essential? What words can you get rid of? Spend five minutes on this exercise.

We are now going to read a poem called Scale by Helen Mort a brilliant local Sheffield poet. The poem is attached.

Scale

BY HELEN MORT

My weight is
four whippets,

two Chinese gymnasts,
half a shot-putter.

It can be measured
in bags of sugar, jam jars,

enough feathers for sixty pillows,
or a flock of dead birds

but some days it's more
than the house, the span

of Blair Athol Road.
I'm the Crooked Spire

warping itself,
doubled up over town.

I measure myself against
the sky in its winter coat,

peat traces in water, air
locked in the radiators at night,

against my own held breath,
or your unfinished sentences,

your hand on my back
like a passenger

touching the dashboard
when a driver brakes,

as if they could slow things down.
I measure myself against

love — heavier, lighter
than both of us.

Spend some time thinking about what you like about the poem? Look at the images she uses. All the different objects, landscapes, feeling, senses she uses to describe her weight. Try and notice where she is more literal and more metaphorical. What is the effect of this? Do you notice a journey in the poem - if so, what might it be? There are no right and wrong answers.

We are now going to spend the next 15 minutes trying to write our own 'Scale' poem. This is not as scary as you may think as you have already done a lot of the work earlier in your lists and free-writes. You should have all the material you need. If it is helpful you can borrow Helen Mort's structure and use the repeated 'I weigh'; or you could use the phrase 'I am made of' or 'I come from'; or you can choose your own. The poem can be as close or different to Mort's inspiration as you like! Pause me and write for 15 minutes.

Well done! Hopefully you have now got a few lines on the page, or maybe pages and pages. Whatever you have done is great. The main thing is hopefully it was enjoyable. Again, if you are with other people, now would be a good time to share some or all of what you have written. There is a joy in hearing other people read what they have written - we don't need something perfect, or even great, it is just lovely to be given the gift of listening to someone describe themselves in words. It is a window into each other lives, thoughts and feelings, which is always special.

The final stage of this workshop is editing. A lot of you are probably now thinking - 'I am done, I have a poem!' - and you are right, you do. However, up until now we have been in our creator brains and now we need to challenge ourselves to use our editor brains. It is often during this process of editing that what is at the heart of the poem becomes clear and it is like we are weeding a garden - getting rid of all the excess plants and foliage so we can see the flowers, soil and shape of the land lying underneath.

- Go through the poem and look for any repetition. Are there any repeated words? Are there any repeated ideas? If so can you think of another word to replace one of them? Or could you delete one of them entirely? Try and get your poem between 50-100 words. What does that force you to delete? How does that make you re-shape your phrases?
- Be specific. Go through the poem and see whether there are moments where you can be more specific. If you are talking about 'pain', I want to know what pain feels like to you. Is it sharp like the point of a needle or steady like a boat chugging out into the ocean? What is amazing about poetry is that we get to see how other people experience the world. The way two people see pain is never the same. We want to see how you see the world!
- Surprise yourself. Try and notice the bits of the poem which were a surprise to you as you wrote them. As we write often we surprise ourselves with what comes out and this is really positive. A poet once said 'no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader'. If there is nothing in your poem that surprises you, go back to your original lists - maybe your description of what you can see outside your window could actually be used as part of what you

weigh. E.g I measure myself against the stretch of the sky and it bends and finally meets the sea.

To finish - try sharing your poem with friends or family. Maybe you could read it to them now. Or send it to them in an email, whatsapp or text. Maybe you could put it through your neighbours letterbox. Or you can just keep it for yourself! A treat in these strange times. I hope you have enjoyed writing these, and hopefully, we will be able to share them altogether soon, in person back in our lovely Sheffield Theatres building.

There will be another poetry challenge starting in a few weeks, so if you enjoyed this we will keep you posted to get involved in that too!

Thank you for taking part,

Connie.