



REACHING:

BY CAITS MEISSNER

A CREATIVE WRITING WORKBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

“Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we can predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.”

—Audre Lorde

When I read this quote by Audre Lorde, I am reminded of the vitality and true purpose of poetry. How many times have I thought I was accessing the urgency of writing-as-survival while in the role of poetry-teacher-talking-head? How many times have I caught myself preaching to the world, prompting everyone to write because “it’s good for them?” How many times have I ignored my own journal, pretending that thinking is a substitute for getting the words on paper? How many times have I gotten frustrated by apathy, or what presents as apathy, and gently (and not so gently, let’s be honest) scolded a classroom for a late assignment, for not accessing emotion, for building walls around the heart? How often have I forgotten to allow my own heart to unfold its clenched fist on the page?

One of my life’s greatest teachers came in the form of a writing group I facilitated in a maximum security women’s prison. In fact, a version of this introduction was first written in honor of these women, as an opening to our poetry chapbook. In this group there was no need for “teaching” in the proper formula. Each woman took the reigns of her own writing growth, challenging the self into new themes, working with strange prompts, dropping crutches (no more rhyming! Just see what happens!), pushing into more surprising imagery, chopping away lines that no longer served. I watched the magic of a writer at work in real time: a page transforming, an edit that put the final pin in the poem, a commitment to risk and vulnerability, an ability to be shocked by our own imagination, to laugh hard, to be moved to tears by words alone. And I reaped strong benefits myself — witnessing the dedication, I grew inspired. That notebook cracked open on my bedside table. I got the assignments in, too.

There is another ineffable, glorious byproduct of a writing group that extends beyond what words can explain, even for a group of poets. It is vibe and flow, the camaraderie and support that emerges from the process of shaking it all up. Safety is a word we used in our room, a pathway to emotional nakedness that didn’t open easily in the world outside the classroom doors. Is it possible to say there was trust? I think so. There was trust in our process, in sharing memories and deep feelings, in each other as writers with missions, loving hearts, ready voices — who cheer loud when a great poem smacks down on the table! Writers who choose, against all odds, to continue surviving. Lorde hits the nail on the head with her

declaration, but I think we got a step beyond in our group. We began to thrive.

When my own book of poems was released in October 2016, I thought of our women's group, and the writers I'd communed with in other jails and prisons. I thought of the writers I wouldn't encounter at a local writing group or open mic night. In response, I planned a reading tour that brought free writing workshops and collaborative readings to prisons, jails and reentry programs in New York, Massachusetts, California and Texas. When possible, in each city or town where I read to an audience on the outside, I also visited an audience on the inside. Out of the tour effort grew this workbook. If you were in one of the tour's workshops, what a gift it was to commune over language with you. If you are new to this experience of writing, or simply new to me, welcome. Thank you for opening these pages.

This book is for anyone and everyone, regardless of where you land on the writing spectrum. Seasoned and novice writers alike, these pages are for you. Here is my hope: you'll find the same reprieve in words that we did in our women's group — a way towards honesty, emotional bravery, imaginative visioning, creative relief and connection with self and others. Perhaps you'll write submission-worthy work and get published in literary journals. Perhaps you'll mail a poem to a loved one. Perhaps you'll fill a journal to the margins and never show another soul. Perhaps you'll launch your own writing group utilizing the resources in this publication. There is no wrong way to use this book in service of your own desires and needs. At the very least, I hope you have some fun playing with words or else what's the point?

A few disclaimers and notes: I designed and illustrated this book (cover art was made using the paper cut out method). The few example poems in this book are written by me. I wish I could print the poems of other writers, and I encourage you to seek out (and read beyond) the recommendations I've listed. Many, if not most, can be found online with a quick search. Special thanks to The Pollination Project and Puffin Foundation West believing in my vision and for funding this effort. Their grants provided the ability to print and send 200+ books back to the classrooms I visited on tour.

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BEARING WITNESS TO OURSELVES & OTHERS: THE FRAMEWORK OF THIS BOOK

Audre Lorde articulated the role of poetry wisely in her essay *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, which I also quoted from in this book's introduction. She wrote, "I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience." I have gathered from Lorde, and other artists, that it is through self examination, and a willingness to look at, analyze and translate our own personal stories that we grow the muscle to transform ourselves, and then turn those tools on the task of changing, challenging and contributing to the world. There is nothing new, no new feelings, Lorde purported. Everything we've experienced is connected to the experience of another who came before us, who is living among us now, who will arrive when we have long ceased to exist in the physical plane.

And thus, I have divided this book into the two categories. *Reaching In* (bearing witness to self) lights a path into our individual internal landscape, while *Reaching Out* (bearing witness to others) pulls into focus the issues and stories that lay beyond the borders of our own being.

Poet Carolyn Forché is credited with coining the term "poetry of witness" — the gray area between the personal and political, where our stories tangle with the stories of others, and where we can inhabit and examine the complexity of multiple truths. Her frame positions poetry as testimonial vs. intentional advocacy or activism, an archival artifact vs. a tool to wield in the face of injustice. Of course, poetry can also be the latter, a smack-in-the-gut political statement. But I am personally excited by the space and nuance "of witness" allows, the act of grappling with what it means to be a human being in conversation with other human beings — where we are complicit and culpable, where we see ourselves in the "other," where we uphold our own stories as important, where we uphold and share important stories, even if they are not our own. Poetry calls us to the duties of raising questions, and challenging the reader into a deeper dialogue with the world and their place in it. Welcome to this difficult and rewarding work.

Some of the fears of writing about ourselves revolve around the notion that no one cares about our story — and why should they? "We are nobody" with "nothing to say." To answer this, I implore you to dig into the stories, songs and poems in your own personal archive, and examine why they moved you, what mirror or comfort or tool do they offer? Locate their resonance — how do they push you to think beyond boundaries, how they make you feel inside, what do they inspire you to notice or change? These clues will help infuse a sense of worth and urgency into your own writing. In this process you'll probably discover pretty quickly that there isn't always a tremendous distinction between reaching in and reaching out. Whichever direction we lean — in or out — the work is inherently in service of both ourselves and others. This discovery is thrilling to me, another piece of proof that our interconnectedness is undeniable.

I often think of a quote poet and activist June Jordan wrote in her *Poem For South African Women*,

perhaps her own words, perhaps borrowed from a maxim with debated origins, sometimes credited to Hopi elders. The phrase echos with both electric self-indictment and tremendous hope: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.” No one will write the books for us. We must tell history through our unique perspectives and experiences. We must drum up the courage to write for a future we cannot yet envision. We must envision.

Though my words in this book are poems, please do your creative reaching in the form of writing that most resonates with you — essay, prose, fiction, song lyrics. There are infinite ways to approach a given topic, so use the scaffolded prompts to your advantage, but never let them get in the way of your writing. If inspired, loosen the reigns and let it ride! You can always return to the prompts later. They aren’t going anywhere, but a good sentence can disappear into thin air if you don’t get it down on the page.

With love & hope,
Caits

PREPARING TO WRITE

Reflect —

Often the blank page can present a daunting situation, even for seasoned writers. We worry that the first mark must be perfect, or we fear the surprising power of the buried emotions that might suddenly come rushing to the surface. Before embarking on the writing prompts, it might be worth taking a moment to center yourself and address anxieties that might arise. You also might consider this first step an act of intention-setting. Take some space to journal out the following questions, or invent your own:

- What are your fears about writing — about the self and beyond the self?
- What possibility exists for you in writing — for healing, advocacy, creativity, connection, etc.?
- Is there a way to get writing “wrong?” Why?
- What is the point of writing? What are you hoping to gain from the process?
- Have you tried to write before? What happened?

You’ll notice that I frame much of this work as witnessing ourselves and others. Let’s get clear on what it means to witness, in your own terms:

- Journal/free write about a time you were witnessed — in your pain, or success.
- Who witnessed you? What did it feel like to be seen?
- How did they let you know they saw you, and held you?
- What was the difference between being watched and being witnessed?

Gather a bank of topics to draw from —

What are possible entry points into our work? Create a bank for each category:

Your own personal stories that encompass your trials and tribulations, your successes and perceived failures, family legacies and childhood experiences, romance and vices — all stories count as good fodder.

Stories of your family and/or close friends — while we want to be sensitive in how we handle the intimate story of another, careful not to exploit it for our own use, often the stories we witness or hear of from loved ones can serve as powerful inspiration.

Local struggles and triumphs in your community — any issue that affects a community you live in or have lived in — be specific about how these struggles and triumphs play out in the context of your community.

National struggles and triumphs — women's reproductive rights, religious intolerance, hate crimes, sexism, racism, homophobia, climate change, mass incarceration, poverty, etc. Feel free to name specific stories under the larger umbrella topic.

Global struggles and triumphs — you might consider researching in books or news articles to spur on these writings. Spend some time gathering 5-7 possible articles to work with from reliable news sources. The more specific the story, the better. Choose only what deeply compels you. You may not use them all, but they are here, as options, just in case.



PROMPT: LOVE LETTER TO SELF

Step One: Ask Questions —

- Write a list of all your burning questions about life. You may want to address questions for yourself, for the universe, for someone in your circle, for us. (Why do good people do bad things? Who is God? Is there life on other planets? What does my dog think? What came first, chicken or egg?)
- Write a list of your greatest desires and dreams in life. Imagine that there were no barriers holding you back. (I'd go to the moon! I'd graduate college. I'd become a famous singer. I'd sleep better.)

Step Two: Gather Images —

Jot down quick answers to the following. Let your mind flow. Don't labor over these:

- The fabric of your favorite childhood clothing:
- The sound of an instrument you love:
- An animal you have loved (a pet and/or wild animal):
- An avatar (a character from a book/television show/movie you love):
- A flower or piece of nature that resonates with you:
- Food/drink that makes your mouth water:
- A person who means a lot to you:
- What you would wear to a party (you pick: house, ball, etc.):
- Striking scenery you imagine — a nature scene or city scape, for example:
- An image that symbolizes love (no hearts, I'm saving you from cliché!):
- An image that symbolizes hurt (no tears, no knives!):
- A memory you cherish:

Step Three: Name Your Gratitude —

Read this journal-ed, raw prose I penned inspired by Barbara Ras, who wrote a fantastic poem titled You Can't Have It All (if you can find the poem, it's so worth it.)

"You can't have it all but you can have a window, a light switched on, a door to close. You can have the hallway's echo, turned down in the brain like radio static. You can find a clear pool buried in the mind to dip your toes clean as the skin of a fish and you can fly away on dreams I am told, to Mexico or Paris or home's sweet memory, for free. You can share a table with young women with invisible wings, who flap through a hot cloud of yes and don't even ruffle their feathers, you can have their smiles breaking across the day like a band of horses running towards water and you can make a world of poems and step into it

like a snow globe. You can remember your favorite songs, even if you haven't heard them in years and you can sing every word, even if you cannot sing and you can say I love you to a stranger, and somehow it can be true, you can want to wrap them in you arms, take turns as the egg and spoon, cup a chin in your hands and kiss the scuff and bruise. You can have fire, anger, a chance to release the demons and dance soaked in gasoline moon and sweat and blood, if the night calls for it and you can hold a council for your neighborhood, built of kale and candy canes, trombones and tattoos, beards of incense and truth, sticky truth clinging to the roof of your mouth. You can spit it, sling it, cradle it, yes, you can have truth, though it may sting the heart until it swells to balloon and you can have forgiveness as medicine, and penicillin if the ache won't stop. And the ache will stop. And it will rise again. And still, you have this. This wet mess of alive, this siren, this warning to the world that you, against all odds, are here."

Now write your own transformative gratitude list, recognizing the tension between gratitude and loss as poetic and powerful. What lessons and silver linings can you find? Try to get five down on the page:

You can't have _____, but you can have _____.

You can't have _____, but you can have _____.

You can't have _____, but you can have _____.

You can't have _____, but you can have _____.

You can't have _____, but you can have _____.

Step Four: Read A Poem —

Dearest Caits,

If I can call you by your nickname,
the cat is calling for food down the hall.
Whom have you cared for today?
Count your blessings.
The goddess brandished
on your forearm calls you to self.
This is no metaphor.
Why is it that pain forces breath?

How do you feel about the word lover,
what does it mean to you?
How many miles might you go
for a kiss that blossoms bright flower
on the first day of spring
promising nothing but beauty
before decay turns dirt fertile.

Reincarnate over sleep and sweet tea.
What do you call yourself in the dark
when no one is listening?

You miss your best friend.
You wish for Zimbabwe
the hot ball of sun in your mouth accidentally
swallowed your tongue again.

A warm hand finds the soft small of your back.
You wish for India, for forgiveness.
I've known there is a traveler
living in your skin for years
and it's feet are tingling.

That man is good, don't hurt him.

You have food, shelter, clean water,
a dirty bathtub and one good sponge
under the sink, your heart, that is.

If there is one thing you understand, it's love.
Don't argue with me, it's love.

Your belly is a fat cat named Bootsy.
Your pulse can drum like a moth.
Your spine dances like it got the shakes
and people have begun to stare.
Let 'em have it. Go hard.

Your imagination ran away from home, again,
don't follow her into the dark this time,
it's ok, we know you live for the story.
The way it unfolds into origami armor,
draped over like the fiercest dress.
You wear that well, sister, can I get
a *mmhmm* and a finger snap.

What has Brooklyn made of you?
Guilt doesn't suit you, but decadence,
well, let's talk about that second slice of
cheesecake. Cigarettes. The mess
of sheets sleeping on the bed.

Now breath deep.

Take it in. Turn it to gold, each hint of regret
has built this body whole.
Now unravel it all. The night calls
blindly before it turns to bird.
Ruffle your wings, little thing,
it's time to claim the sky.

Other poems worth searching out:
Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong by Ocean Vuong
Contradictions, Tracking Poems by Adrienne Rich
Wild Geese by Mary Oliver

FINAL PROMPT —

Using the “sparks” you
jotted down — the
questions and the lists —
craft a love letter to self.
Address yourself by name
(or nickname) and
explore the concepts
above. Converse with
yourself. You do not need
to use all the questions or
desires, pick the ones
that you feel most drawn
to. Incorporate the
textures and colors of
your memory, hopes,
dreams and internal life.
Offer yourself the
kindness you'd offer
another. Be the parent to
your inner child. Name
your regrets and release
them. Forgive yourself.

PROMPT: THE STORY OF MY NAME

Step One: Ask Questions —

Examine this quote from poet Warsan Shire:

“the name warsan means good news in the somali language. i hated it. i despised my name. i wanted to be called something soft, something that ended with an “ah” sound. my name is difficult to whisper into the side of my face. my name is easy to use with a hard voice. i appreciate that now. the hesitation on the other side of the phone. the way they would replace my name with ‘baby.’ give your daughters difficult names. give your daughters names that command the full use of tongue. my name makes you want to tell me the truth. my name doesn’t allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right. my mother calls me ‘warsanay.’ if a man ever tried to call me that, it means he understands that i am someone’s daughter. it means i’ll let him call me down from a long building. praise my grandmother, warsan baraka. my father’s mother. the woman i was named after.”

Journal in response to the following questions:

- What do you know about the source of your name?
- What name/nickname have you taken on and why?

Step Two: Take Notes —

QUESTION	BIRTH NAME	CHOSEN NAME
I am named after:		
I feel this way about my name:		
I want to be called:		
My name is difficult to:		
My name is easy to:		
My name doesn’t allow me to:		
My name makes people understand:		

Step Three: Stretch The Imagination —

The way that benches in the park are named after benefactors, or the way buildings and streets carry the names of extraordinary leaders, or how tools are named after their inventors, think about what you would allow to carry your name. Think about what you would not allow to carry your name.

What can carry my name (i.e.: a library)

What can't carry my name? (i.e.: a weapon)

Step Four: Read A Poem —

Poems worth searching out:

My Name by Sandra Cisneros

The Names by Billy Collins

The Name Drawn from the Names by Juan Ramon Jimenez

I Have a Musical Name by Iman Mersal

Names by Fady Joudah

FINAL PROMPT —

Tell the story of your naming: Do you like your name? Do you dislike it? Did you once dislike it but now love it? Do you prefer to be called something else? Is there pain connected to the old name? If so, what did it mean to reclaim your name? What made you choose the new name? Who named you and why?

You might also consider approaching this prompt as a mythology of self. Take on a new name, right here on the page, and tell that origin story. Another option is to unveil what you are named after — tell the story of the ribbon cutting for the [your name] library or a commercial for the [your name] supersonic pressure cooker or an ode to the [your name] teleportation device.

PROMPT: INSTRUCTIONAL MASHUP

Step One: Ask Questions —

What activity/hobby/passion holds you up, makes life worth waking up for? Or think of it this way: what makes time stop for you? What do you get completely lost in? (Music, letter writing, spending time with loved ones, playing a sport, etc.)

On the flipside, what is something you hate to do, but must? (Cleaning, waking up somewhere you don't want to be, making money at a boring job, working with a person that annoys you, etc.)

Step Two: Write Instructions —

Write a how-to guide for someone else who wants to experience your bliss — the answer to your first question above — in 5-10 steps. What are the steps it takes to reach this kind of aliveness? What will they want to bring along? What will they have to leave behind? How does this thing work? What are the actual steps to the dance? Write out at least 5 steps. Add more if needed. Feel free to be both literal and figurative in your approach.

Ex: Instructions for Letter Writing

1. Locate your favorite pen and a good quiet place to write.
2. Choose the appropriate paper — color or white? Lined or blank?
3. Start with a simple story about your current life.
4. Ease into the heavier emotions — be vulnerable, open up.
5. Close with questions for your beloved, ask about her day, her dreams.
6. Sign your name with the loopy letters you can — make it beautiful.
7. Address the envelope carefully so the postal worker can decipher with ease.
8. Put the letter in and seal it with the tenderness of a kiss.
9. Buy a stamp to mail, pick one with a good design if there are options.
10. Wait for a reply — keep busy, don't stress, have patience, trust it's coming.

Your instructions for _____:

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. | 9. |
| 5. | 10. |

2. Now write the steps to the negative experience, the one you don't want to do but have to.

Instructions for:

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. | 9. |
| 5. | 10. |

Step Three: Read A Poem —

Poems worth searching out:

Instructions On Not Giving Up by Ada Limon

Instructions for Stopping by Dana Levin

Twenty-six Ways of Looking at a Blackman by Raymond Patterson

Recipe for Prison Pruno by Jarvis Masters

Learn to Sail With Your Dad by Melissa Queen

10 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird by Wallace Stevens

FINAL PROMPT —

Combine the two threads of writing into one poem. Rearrange, cut and paste, add and subtract until the poem jigsaws together in an interesting manner. A high school student of mine on Rikers Island once wrote a mash up between writing letters to her boyfriend and going to court. It was an unbelievably moving combination.

PROMPT: IDENTITY FLIP

Step One: Ask Questions —

What are your identities (gender, race, religion, hobbies, job titles, relational)? Think on multiple levels:

The world sees me as (at face value)...

My family and friends see me as...

I see myself as...

Choose one identity to move forward with as your writing focus. Decide if it serves you more to choose one you'll have fun writing about, or one that you need to write about for therapeutic purposes.

The identity: _____.

Step Two: Gather Tools —

Identify all the markers and tools of your identity — both the ones you claim proudly, and those that you reject (perhaps they contribute to stereotyping your identity.) A cultural identity might include specific food dishes, clothing, sayings, colors, etc. For example, a Muslim woman might choose spiritual markers such as the Quran, prayer rugs, hijab, etc. A gender identity might allow you to work with socially constructed (often problematic) representations of identity: a hammer for a man, a broom for a woman. Jot down your positive and negative markers/tools.

Step Three: Identify Your Power —

Identify all the ways, inside your chosen identity, that you (and your people) specifically hold tremendous qualities of power. What are those qualities, markers and tools? For example, if your identity is woman you might think of women you know. What can serve as a symbol or representation of their power? Is it blood-red lipstick? Fly clothing? Deep commitment? Outspoken words? Poems? Prayers? Community building? Write them all down — the physical, spiritual and mental characteristics of your identity.

Step Four: Name The Stereotypes —

Identify all of the stereotypes you hear about your identity that you'd like to dispel, or do not relate to. What riles you up? What is false? Ignorant? For example: stereotypes about a woman might be: weak, overly emotional, not smart enough to run organizations, cut out to only be caretakers, cold if too powerful, etc.

Step Five: Read A Poem —

Mostly Water

The girl is trying to say she's not a body as he bites into the scoop
of tender meat behind her knee. There is evidence the body is real:

lilac vein protruding at wrist, lamp's light chasing skin.
It's said the spirit can travel at night – her dress: an illusion

of sky slumped on floorboards. On days when the earth's laid claim,
she ticks off how many clouds can be eaten in place of bread, pulling cotton

from ceiling while he parts her legs, flooding with the damp flush of blood.
Proof she is real, he says, taking iron to tongue like Sunday wine.

She is the wine. She is a faucet, a river, an ocean on which to craft a boat,
a dream – a dream! Remember decorating her Bougainvillea toes?

Back porch door unhinged, grass wet, chasing boys whose smiles broke
the girls like yolk, broke under dress, then laughter, then the silence of stones.

The tentacle-tail aches when winds change, stiffens up: a bad limb.
At night the monstrous thing unravels from its curl in her underpants,

she rubs it with butter, soaks, spreads out each scale across the tub like lily pads,
holds it like a baby or heaves, spits, tries to wrench it from skin, leaves it in the gutter.

Inside: she is escaping form. Inside: a wall of rain. Inside: sloshing tide as
he searches for the bottom, which is endless, not knowing that she is also the sail.

Other poems worth searching out:

You Bring Out the Mexican in Me by Sandra Cisneros

Who Understands Me But Me by Jimmy Santiago Baca

The Powwow at the End of the World by Sherman Alexie

& even the black guys profile reads 'sorry, no black guys' by Danez Smith

Thirty Lines About the Fro by Allison Joseph

Rhapsody by the Feminist Narwhal of Retribution by Karen An-hwei Lee

FINAL PROMPT —

Woody Guthrie, an American folk musician from the 1930's had the message "this machine kills fascists" written on his guitar. In this spirit of reclamation and symbolism, we're going to flip the meaning of tools and symbols in your own life, considering an aspect of your chosen or assigned identity that has either been challenged or painted in a negative light. Go ahead and claim your Guthrie spirit. Reclaim your truth and your light.

PROMPT: PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY

Step One: Locate Your Story —

Check in with your brainstorm list. What story of your own is calling to you? Which story feels most available and ready to splash on the page? Which story is hiding in the closet, knees shaking behind a flimsy curtain? That might be the story that needs pulling into light. Grab its hand.

Step Two: Say It Plain —

Once you locate the story you'd like to tell, write it in plain language, timeline-style. Don't try to make it sound good, just tell the truth. Write past to present, linearly.

Step Three: Gather Images —

Imagine back to you or your characters' lives/homes (the player/s being written about in the poem)...

What is on their kitchen table?
What smells coat the skin of your characters?
What images live behind the character's eyes?
What fabric fills their closet?
What tastes do their tongues miss?
What physical gestures do they perform mindlessly?
What is their favorite childhood toy?
What is the color of the paint on the walls?
What is in the bedside drawer?
What do the floor tiles look like?
What commotion is happening outside the window?
What shape are the windows in?
What kinds of plants or flowers are in their home or garden?

Step Four: Connect Narratives —

Is there a story you've heard or read about that easily makes a connection with your experience? If so, write about it here. There is no pressure to use it in the final step, but give it a shot, see what comes out.

Step Five: Read A Poem —

The Room Of My Life

Caits Meissner

Two gold hands sit upturned in offering:
thumb and forefinger welded together, puddles
of wax licking each palm, once candle

now ruined by cigarette ash, summer's ants stick
to an abandoned honey spoon, air's smoke smells
of shower steam, unwashed private skin and teeth.

In the guest room a rubber tree perfects it's subtle
choreography until each green spine bends back
in unison grabbing the simple morning light.

Stretch, discipline, the steady engine of truth
and avoidance of truth, it's a balance, really,
the tart brilliance of counter top lemons

and the tea kettle's clean cat call thrown crisp
against the bedroom's criminal scene:
clothes sucked of bodies, ransom receipts,

pill bottles huddling the dresser gossiping about
who they'll need to fix now that winter's blown
its blues down the gallows of this tiny town (pop. 2).

Even a hard-skulled wind won't freeze the whale's
tail bone, rattling floorboards with its steady slap,
swimming below an impermeable dark cloud

of foreignness & finances, fidelity & fertility –
freedom, yes & sometimes secret desires, though
mostly, *will the two ever be great enough?*

In the livingroom the books conspire – to what?
A less ordinary story: to jump from window straight
into the fight's closed fist or pick pocket for drug money

or ride a cop car as it blares its dirge, warning
the block's boys to scatter towards shadows like roaches
or a particular unlucky roll of dice.

I conspire, too, to join the books in pursuit of a bigger
adventure to make it all worth life's heavy weight
and though I'm not sure how the thing looks, I know

what the books don't: that the world out there is a cuss
word heating itself in the mouth of a giant and I don't want
to be an accomplice hiding out in the shell of my skin,

but I don't want to raise the flag that angers the bull,
red-tailed, don't want to be caught when the guns
go off, a dancing jester in the line of fire.

Other poems worth searching out:
Haiku by Etheridge Knight
Persimmons by Li-Young Lee
What the Angels Life by Marie Howe
Still Life by Sharon Olds

FINAL PROMPT —

Tableau: a group of models or motionless figures representing a scene from a story or from history; a tableau vivant. Write a series of tableaus that retell the story of what happened. You'll want to use the first step as your narrative arc, and you might consider working in the gestures and color palettes from the second step. Some will fit, some may not at all. Do not feel pressured to tell the full story, sometimes a glimpse is enough.

What do I mean by creating tableaus? For example, instead of saying, "I broke my grandparents trust all the time as a kid," I might paint the scene as: Mid-afternoon the girl stands with her hands behind her back, smiling at her grandmother. The wrinkled hand is warm and fresh against her cheek, stroking the lines where the cheek creases. Hidden we see a cookie stolen from the open jar on the counter. Sometimes it looks like a wad of cash. Look fast and it is a gun."

I want to feel, as the reader, like I am looking in the window at different times of day. What am I seeing? How am I feeling? Comfort, anxiety, pain? What does each scene look like? What has the camera captured? As if storyboarded, can you offer us a glimpse into each movement? Don't be afraid to add some surreality to the poem (that wad of cash becoming a gun from my example above? Likely just in the child's mind, or a symbol for danger/pain.)



PROMPT: I BELIEVE MANIFESTOS

Step One: Identify Issues —

Go back to the lists you wrote during the “preparing to write” section of this book, or identify anew, your hot button issues. What are you fired up about? What do you want to address in this manifesto? Choose injustices that touch you directly, indirectly or both.

Step Two: State Your Beliefs —

What do you believe in, unshakably, in relationship to each category listed below? (And beyond!) These beliefs might take the shape of sayings or concrete items. For example, one might write: I believe in God, the goodness of all people, I believe in trees that help me remember how long this planet was around before me, I believe in the honesty of two women swimming nude, I believe in the beauty of moonlight on Black skin, I believe in fresh mango salsa, I believe in saying what you mean. Your beliefs in relationship to:

Work:

Spirituality:

Race, Class, Gender & Identity:

Family & Friends:

Health & Wellness:

Art & Expression:

Healing:

In relationship to current events:

In relationship to humanity:

Step Three: Transform To Metaphor —

Of course, you might simply translate your list into a full piece, choosing to write a statement poem that utilizes the “I believe” refrain. But you might also feel that is too on the nose, and search for a different form for the poem to take. See what arrives when you transform your belief statements into metaphor. For example: “I pretend to be something I’m not” might become “a mask with two faces” or “I never walk home past dark” might become “I am a sun that never sets.” Weave the phrases into your poems. You might end up using both the statement and the image.

Step Four: Read A Poem —

Homegirl Manifesto

Caits Meissner

Inspired by Kathleen Hanna's Riot Grrrl Manifesto

BECAUSE we twisted spine, we pool of bruise,
we fish tail & top spin, we curse sailors & sing
saints, spit rainbows on the pavement.

BECAUSE we walrus big, G I A N T big, steel toes
clap night big, pump heel caught trailing clouds
like toilet paper in a public restroom, naw, we
never ashamed of our tail of soot & rain.

BECAUSE we titmouse small, hide in the wall small,
we curl Russian doll small, we trick you invisible
small, we glow worm & firefly.

BECAUSE our asses spark.

BECAUSE our tusks dig graves.

BECAUSE we make a bed of sky & sure do
muddy up our knickers, wet.

BECAUSE we cook snails & sweet tea, bend
our bodies into greed.

BECAUSE we consume until we drown
then lift.

BECAUSE we've been caught eating stars &
grew bright, bled into buckets & tossed
the town in red like dressing, boy

we got fists & breasts, collarbone & kick
& brain matter, we got slick throats,
eyes burned with images best forgotten in
order to go on living.

BECAUSE we've seen our siren sisters spread
across rock like a fish gut brew.

BECAUSE our mouths lost the words I'm sorry.

BECAUSE we fly.

Haven't you seen us rolling the wind outside
the window? We smoke the breeze. We wind hips.
Haven't you seen us levitating in the fields?

Watch us bend down to pray to whatever creature birthed us.
Watch the diamond of our birth-holes burn a seance into sand.

BECAUSE we've squeezed our hardened hearts
to solid stone & we still produce juice, still want to love
this world without dying or playing dead.

Other poems worth searching out:

Poem About My Rights by June Jordan

Art Poetica #100 by Elizabeth Alexander

The Making of Poems (article) by Gregory Orr

What I Believe by Michael Blumenthal

Equinox by Audre Lorde

FINAL PROMPT —

Gather together your beliefs and expand on them, or subtract them to create a poem or piece of writing that infuses vibrancy, boldness, justice and meaning into our world. You might choose to write about one belief, narrowing in one topic. You might choose to write a statement of belief that addresses many areas of life. We need your beliefs, and we need to hear them loud and clear! As always, feel free to flip and play with the prompt to serve your needs and desires.

PROMPT: DOCUPOETRY

Wait, Huh? What's Docupoetry?

Docupoetry is poetry created out of primary source materials such as news articles, medical records, diaries, court transcripts and other public records. Poets may use direct lines from their sources and rearrange them, interpret meaning through original work or engage a mixture of both approaches. Oral history poetry, another form of docupoetry, is what it sounds like: poems inspired by and crafted from interviews, often that the poet conducts themselves.

Setting Intention —

I bristle when an artist says they are “giving voice to the voiceless.” My belief is that everyone has a unique and capable voice, we arrive into this world equally equipped with personality, opinion and ability to translate our stories creatively. It is our society, where explicit and implicit bias infiltrates our systems, leaders and gatekeepers, that does not weigh voices equally. Certain voices are favored and privileged, while others are silenced, erased or dismissed as a product of hidden and/or blatant sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia and other discriminatory beliefs and actions.

Instead of giving voice, I have come to think of my work as the amplification of voices. My questions when considering a project then become: WHY am I interested in telling this story? WHY am I a good fit for this project? Is there someone who might be better at this particular project? Is there another way I might approach this topic through another route or lens? HOW can I honor the voices that exist, while using my specific skills in service of a collaboration of shared purpose? What feedback have I been given? Have I listened? In full disclosure, I don't always find these questions easy to answer. But I do encourage intentional reflection. Some other questions you might ask — why are you interested in writing beyond the self? What are your motivations? How might you describe your orientation to this work?

In this prompt, we are just beginning with a single poem. But if you become sparked and decide to experiment with a series of writings, here are some folks you might seek out as inspiration:

Tarifa Faizullah wrote a haunting collection of poems SEAM, where she interviewed women who suffered torture under the Pakistani army during the 1971 Liberation War. Tarfia, like the women she interviewed, is from Bangladeshi descent, but is also a child of immigrants who settled in America, and she grapples openly with the complexities of both shared and divergent identity in bearing witness. Throughout the book are “interviewer's notes,” through which she often asks herself questions in poetic form that remain unanswered, illustrating her consistent return to her why, her intention — and her process.

C.D. Wright is a poet I often look to for guidance. Before she passed on, C.D. left behind a series of projects that engage the documentary and oral history form. In her book *One Big Self, An Investigation*, created from material collected on visits to Louisiana state prisons, Wright proposes her "why" in the introduction: "Not to idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain. Not to demonize, not anathematize. What I wanted was to unequivocally lay out the real feel of hard time." C.D.'s frame clues me into her thinking on the project. This is not advocacy, it is illustration. Readers are then invited to struggle with their own meaning.

Step One: Locate Your Point Of Entry —

There are a few ways to determine this.

1. You might consider actually interviewing someone you know, work with, someone in your family, a friend, etc. 2. You might locate — or ask a friend or family member to locate — an oral history interview or series of interviews to use as inspiration. 3. You might use source material found in archives, magazines, court documents, newspapers, etc.

Once you decide your approach, and the topic you're interested in working with, see below. I recommend looking back to your topic bank and noting if any themes jump out.

Step Two: Set Your Intention + Question Process —

Examine your intentions and the process you'll engage, using the following questions to journal. If you feel iffy by the end of the reflection, pick a new direction. You'll want to feel connected to the story you are entering.

Why am I interested in telling this story? Why does my opinion matter on this topic, and am I offering anything new to the conversation? Why and how am I a good conduit for this story?

How can I honor the voices that exist, while using my specific skills in service of collaboration that can share important stories with a new/broader audience?

Who invited me into this conversation? Is there a trusted person who can support my entry and provide feedback, or do I have to win the trust of those whom I am hoping to work with? Am I willing to establish and build authentic relationships?

What do I share in common with this story, if anything? From what position am I speaking? Does this awareness of my own identity in relationship to the story need to actually enter the text?

Step Three: Gather Source Material —

1. Conduct interview: Go ahead and interview your narrator!
2. Locate an interview. These resources are internet-based, and may require enlisting the help of a friend, family member or penpal. <http://www.oralhistory.org/centers-and-collections>
3. Locate source material. Newspapers, magazines, documents, etc. Here are some resources that are internet-based, and may require enlisting the help of a friend, family member or penpal: <http://www.poetryriver.org/sources.html>

Step Four: Read A Poem —

Poems worth searching out:

100 Bells by Tarifa Faizullah (and book SEAM)

On Privacy by C.D. Wright (and book One Big Self)

Poems from Kwame Dawe's Haiti Earthquake project

In the Office of Temporary Assistance by Susan B.A Somers-Willet

Your Village by Elana Bell (and book Eyes, Stones)

Sudan by Aracelis Girmay

Vietnam by Wislawa Szymborska

FINAL PROMPT —

Uh oh, we've come to the experimental step, wide open to interpretation! Consider the ways you might step into this practice listed below— or invent your own approach. Be absolutely fearless in this first draft. (After all, you can always rip it to shreds later if it isn't working.)

Though you haven't read their poems mentioned in this book, I will leverage the technique of a few poets I admire in order to share various approaches to this exercise: Like Tarifa Faizullah, embody the voice of your narrator, sprinting off from their words or write interviewer's notes, using what you've learned and gathered to transparently turn the questions back on yourself. Include the actual notes! Mimic C.D. Wright and create abstracted impressions, or snipped parts of actual interviews to interweave with your own words in the poem's text. Inspired by Aracelis Girmay, situate your poem with information from one of your sources — open the poem with background context, a quote or story, before diving in. Like Wislawa Szymborska, create an imagined conversation inspired by research.

PROMPT: THE MASK OF PERSONA

What Is Persona Poetry?

A persona, from the Latin word for mask, is a character taken on by a writer, speaking through their imagined voice in a first-person poem. At best, persona poetry ignites our imaginative capacity, launching us into deep consideration of another's experience. It allows us to use our form to pick up cues from the fiction writer, crafting monologues and narratives beyond the scope of "writing what we know," which is an exciting challenge for our practice as authors. What does it mean to be placed as a writer and reader into the body of another person through voice, and to notice how it reverberates within our own bodies? When persona is done well, it brings us to voices we might not typically encounter, and charges us with a sense of profound connection and understanding. To write towards "the other" is the task of connection across disparate identities, experience, difference and other forms of disconnection — if we can search towards this in our writing, perhaps, at our most optimistic, we are reaching towards this occurrence in daily life, creating brave kin between once-strangers.

It is worth a paragraph dedicated to encouraging a reflective conversation with self before embarking on the writing. The literary community is engaging critical conversation, asking difficult questions about how to write respectfully and with honor about identities that do not mirror our own. Persona can go painfully wrong when we've taken someone's story as our own to flatten an identity and leverage it as a tool to hurt, to expose or to do cheap emotional labor. In writing persona, to question if you're heading down one of those problematic paths, examine your lens. What are you projecting onto the poem? Are you ignoring a power dynamic? What work are you and the poem doing in order to earn the right to tell this story? A reflective section in the prompt is included to help guide this aspect of your work.

Step One: Identify Who —

There are two ways to approach WHO — is this a real person, for example a historical figure? Or are you inventing a character? Either method can work. A way into this might be to look at your list of important issues — perhaps you speak in the voice of a person connected to one of those topics. A person you have empathy/respect/admiration for can work as a subject, but so can a perceived enemy.

Your "who" might also be an object connected to a particular person or issue (once a high school student of mine wrote from the perspective of Malcolm X's glasses!) In my sample poem, I am speaking with a singer I love, taking on both my voice and hers. Once you have your who, pass them (or it) by your internal ethical checklist to determine if this is a persona you feel comfortable in conversation with.

Step Two: Reflect On Your Connection

Why did you choose this person? / Why do they (or it) represent?
What are the first three questions you would ask them/it?
What would you want to learn from them/it?
What do you and your chosen person/object share in common?
What is different about you/it?
What qualities of theirs/its would you like to possess?
How could you imagine taking a lesson from them/it and applying to your own life?
If someone wrote a poem about you, what would you want them to write?

Step Three: Sketch The Character —

Even if you do not use the material generated here, it helps us enter into another voice, so go ahead and sketch! If you do find poetic use for the material, great.

What are three things you imagine your "who" does in private?
Who do they love?
What are their hobbies?
What do you think they are afraid of?
What do they dream about at night?
What are they envious of?
What are they angry about?
What do they dress like?
What brings them hope? Joy?
What do they want? What is their motivation?

Add any other questions to this list that might help guide your own process.

Step Four: Try On Voice —

I am (two special characteristics of your person)
I wonder (something you imagine they are actually curious about)
I hear (an imaginary sound your person hears)
I see (an imaginary sight your person sees)
I want (what do you imagine this person wants?)
I pretend (something you think this person pretends to do, think or feel)
I feel (what do you imagine this person feels?)
I touch (what do you imagine they touch?)

I worry (something that really bothers the person you chose)
I cry (something that makes this person very sad)
I understand (something you think is true about the person)
I say (something you imagine this person believes in)
I dream (something you actually dream about)
I hope (something you imagine the person hopes for)
I push through (what tough times do they traverse to get here?)
I risk (what did they/do they risk?)
I leave behind (what is their legacy?)

Step Five: Read A Poem —

How Mavis Staples Healed My Heart

Caits Meissner

I try to think about it so it will be real.
You will be touching down on my soil tonight to her arms.
I am, too, in transit, riding a train that smells of people's waste
bowels, minds, it all hangs out in the air, unkempt.
The night is charcoal blue.
Spots of porch lights peek through tree's willowy arms,
reaching, as if Pollock relieved his brush, weighted
with black paint, in a single flick of its heavy back against sky,
it is still summer after all, the silhouette of leaves.

Under headphones, Mavis Staples crawls into the hurting parts.
She is awkward, but persistent, squeezing her round maternal body
into the tiny cracks. Shimmy's up the pipe of my heart.
Stomps her feet against the wound. Rolls her eyes.
Says, *toughen up, mama, this ain't the end of the story, yet.*
She holds a kettle beneath my tear ducts.
Shakes her head and throws it on the stove.
Beans and rice, again.
She pulls out a chair from the table and wipes her hands
on her apron, *how do you feel, child*, she asks.

I tell her I am coming home to a home we did not share.
It's a new home and it fits me.
There is a tea shrine in the kitchen, a yellow pot

on the burners that I light with a match over gas.
There are the things that belong to me,
there are things I love, like books, many books.
There is a backyard with one crooked tree
to carve my secrets in. There are angels in the mantel.

Mavis pauses to wipe the sweat from her brow,
puts her hand to hip and juts it out, shoulder thrown back,
are there lovers?

Oh, there are always lovers, I tell her.
Mmmmmmmm. Hmmmmm.
Her lips are a crescent moon.
And then she opens her mouth so wide
I think she might swallow the house,
the neighborhood, the Caribbean accents
and the young people who look like me
spoiling it all, swallow the trains
and the booming radios, swallow me.
Mavis could turn it all into a hair-raising
church song and I have my soul clap ready.
But she doesn't.

She inhales so deep half the kitchen gathers
in the back of her throat, rattling together.
It vibrates for a moment, deafening.
And then she exhales.
The kitchen falls back to place,
each spoon returned to its cradle,
the wine opener back in its nook.
She grins. Takes my hand in hers,
and sings my favorite song.
I know a place, ain't nobody cryin'....

Other poems worth searching out:

The Meaning of the Shovel by Martin Espada

Poems from poet Ai's collected works

The Bullet, In Its Hunger by Ross Gay

Poems from Patricia Smith's book Blood Dazzler

Poems from Tina Chang's Of Gods & Strangers

Touch Up Man by Yusef Komunyakaa

Frida Kahlo to Marty McConnell by Marty McConnell

Ellen West by Frank Bidart

Poems from Cornelius Eady's book Brutal Imagination

THE FINAL PROMPT

If you have an idea of what this person/object wants to say — go for it! Dive right in.

If you are still grappling with an entry point, look at what you've generated above and pick a starting place that feels most possible to you. For example, you might spring off from the three private things this person does, and decide to have them walk through their bedtime ritual — and through that, reveal something about them/an issue you're exploring. You might look at the "who they love" question and decide that they are writing a letter to a child or spouse. You might look at the envy question and they enter a tirade. They may even be writing to you!

Consider writing a single scene in the person's life (when Biggie got his first check from a song...) Consider writing a conversation between two people that are diametrically opposed — speak in their voices, or choose one person to the other (I have forever wanted to write Emily Post, etiquette queen, in conversation with raunchy rapper Lil Kim...) You might also decide to simply rearrange and swap, chop, add to, mark up what you've written above. Collage it to be a poem entirely your own.

What is important to decide: what do you want this poem to say or reveal about the person or object? Or the experience they are in? Then run with it.

PROMPT: ODES AND PRAISE

A little bit about praise poems...

At times it can feel that engaging joy and gratitude is a downright selfish act. It nearly goes without saying that taking in the world around us can be deadening and numbing. Anxiety, anger, sadness, depression — of course these are all authentic, normal reactions that fuel powerful art. Poets are good at writing pain. But I think writing towards joy is harder. It can feel strange to write praise in a landscape rife with violence. It can feel almost cruel to locate the good in a difficult circumstance. But then I think of stories of extraordinary kindness in history, and how they fuel my desire to keep living. I think of the weight of songs and poems in places where people are imprisoned. I think of humor's ability to offer a reprieve from a difficult conversation. I think about nature's insistence on relentless, undeniable beauty.

Joy can be a rainbow-colored spit in the face of evil. When joy persists, forces its way into the cracks, even if just for a moment, we have a chance at surviving what is unsurvivable. It is the job of poets to find these cracks, to lead us into our own hearts, to illuminate what others might not see. In witnessing, we are charged with watching for not only human violations, but also for human beauty. And often, we are looking for the beauty that pushes back on human violations — the stories that transcend, uplift and rumble with spirit.

Praise poems and odes can be surprisingly political in nature. I don't know that I can write a full lesson on this work of joy — it is a task each writer must conjure from within. Here are a few ideas about how to approach the task: by locating the good, by uplifting a collective triumph of a people (your own... or not your own), by striking through horror to find the beautiful heart buried somewhere beneath, by witnessing a moment of unlikely kindness, and of course, to find a way towards the ultimate truth our humanity seems to always forget: by reminding us that we are all inextricably linked, made of that fantastic star dust, that we are surely interconnected, whether we like it or not.

This prompt invites you to create your own prompt. I will not offer a step-by-step guide — the praise poem is yours to create freely. It might help to carry a notebook and jot down when you notice both obvious and unexpected acts of beauty. It might mean scouring the news for an uplifting tale or triumph relating to an issue you wrote about. It might mean an ode to a friend or a stranger or an object that can reveal a greater truth. Enjoy the process.

But first, READ A POEM (OR TWO) —

Praise Poem

Caits Meissner

*For the Poets at Bedford Hills
Correctional Facility*

The circle's purpose is to see each other
our unspoken rule: commit to looking.

We were born and we will die, everything
in between is filler, debatable, for example
we have hated a woman for snatching
our man away like morning eggs.
We stay awake at night counting
constellations of guilt.
We both feel menstrual today
don't talk to us.
We call our mothers for comfort
and if they answer, tenuously

measure the distance between truth
and the length of rain.

We read books to remember stories
not of our own making or mess
and thank god, they are good
and thank God they are tragic.

Tragically, we both wonder if we deserve
anything good at all, to feel beautiful

or enjoy the pleasure of another body
when we've screwed or screwed up
we dream of undisturbed sand
covering each track and vanishing.

But in this room we crawl through
the window inside, dig up from burial
the dusty banjo of memory, we play
on childhood's climbing tree,

branches shedding crab apples
snatched up by the deer.

We can praise the fawn for cleaning
the lawn with her hunger.
We can name her tracks in fresh mud,
we can call her kin, coo the name

we've crowned her when she shows
her face in the damp morning grass.

And though some of us didn't have
backyards or a steady bed or a tree to love
we can write a porch into the scene
or a birdhouse or untie a hurt until
it stretches its arms out wide as the sea.
We can invent this common history,

waking up what is untouched and tender,
lit deep inside our bodies' vast night.
We can remember, it has been proven
that we are made of stars, always vibrating,

sparkling, even if it cannot be seen by
the foolish eye and each era, there we are,

unmistakably, a presence growing larger.
Yes, we are spinning: the entire revolving sky.

Other poems worth searching out:

wont you celebrate with me by Lucille Clifton
On Kindness and Ode to the Watermelon by Aracelis Girmay
In Celebration of My Uterus by Anne Sexton
Poems from the book Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude by Ross Gay
The Life I Am Living by Roger Mitchell

On Living by Nazim Hikmet
Pablo Neruda's ode poems
Gate A-4 by Naomi Shihab Nye
A Small Needful Fact by Ross Gay

Ode to the Window

Caits Meissner

A wolf carries
a human baby in its jaws,
delivering her into
my arms to be mine.
The highway is the same
stretch of asphalt
from a dark window
on any map.
I can see crests of waves
as they rise and break:
a rabid dog living
in the shallow end of sea.
I let balloons go
& a cart of oranges
tumbles to clouds.
If dreams are a kind
of window, I am waiting
for the world to come to me,
slow as a yawn.
Hello you perfect eye,
steady frame, your patience
for murder & kindness,
expressionless witness,
I am looking
through you to myself.
This platform is my stage.
I call doves to shoulders,
breasts: two winking eyes,
round pride, the weight
of blinking fruit in my hand,
breath on the barrier,
proof of life, of living
so close but not touching.
Let me learn how
to look without moving.
To be so still no one
notices my face,
the way you offer

a frame to the sunset
as she insists upon sky
saying, come, belong
in this world, we want you
here & says it to everyone,
no matter who they are,
in a language no one
& everyone speaks.
I want to be useful, too,
how you are a tool
to study the shape of loss
as it stuffs itself into
the tiny bodies of flies
disguised as seeds
in a gutted papaya,
small planets black
as the eyes of a deer.
Teach me to tape
eyes wide when I want
to curl into myself,
an insect trapped in amber.
This is my test: to pull
the curtain closed
& see straight through
to sky, the window
of memory standing up
on its hind legs
as I lay on my back,
invisible & everything
becomes music,
listening to children
& the feet of mice
& bullets turn to rain.



POETIC DEVICES CHECKLIST

SOUND DEVICES	CHECK
RHYME: correspondence of sound between words or the endings of words, especially when these are used at the ends of lines of poetry.	
HALF OR SLANT RHYME: Half rhyme or imperfect rhyme, sometimes called near-rhyme or lazy rhyme or slant rhyme, is a type of rhyme formed by words with similar but not identical sounds. In most instances, either the vowel segments are different while consonants are identical, or vice versa.	
RHYTHM: a strong, regular, repeated pattern of movement or sound.	
REPETITION: words or phrases that repeat in the work.	
ALLITERATION: the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words. (Adam's apple was astonishing!)	
ASSONANCE: the repetition of the sound of a vowel or diphthong in non-rhyming stressed syllables near enough to each other for the echo to be discernible (e.g., penitence, reticence, "Hear the mellow wedding bells" by Edgar Allen Poe, "Try to light the fire", "The crumbling thunder of seas" by Robert Louis Stevenson)	
CONSONANCE: a pleasing sound caused by the repetition of consonant sounds within sentences, phrases, or in poems. Typically this repetition occurs at the end of the words, but may also be found within a word or at the beginning. (e.g., blank and think, spelled and scald, dawn goes down.)	

POETIC DEVICES CHECKLIST, CONTINUED

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE DEVICES	CHECK
SIMILE: a figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid (e.g., as brave as a lion, crazy like a fox).	
METAPHOR: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. "I had fallen through a trapdoor of depression," said Mark. He drowned in a sea of grief. He was fishing in troubled waters.	
PERSONIFICATION: the attribution of a personal nature or human characteristics to something nonhuman, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form.	
ALLUSION: an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly; an indirect or passing reference.	
SENSORY DETAILS	
SIGHT	
SOUND	
TASTE	
TOUCH	
SMELL	

HOW TO: EDITING/WRITING HACKS

— WORD FREQUENCY: am I repeating the same word more than once in a piece? Is this a purposeful choice or an accident? If not an intentional choice, can I cut or change the repeating words?

— I THINK / I FEEL/ I REMEMBER: these phrases are overused in creative writing. How else can you state the memory? Do you need those words at all? Scrap them and see how the line sounds on its own, without these lead ins.

— CLICHES: did anything come too easy to you? Have you heard it before? Are you saying something in its most original form? Revise towards strangeness, as Robert Frost says, “no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”

— ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS: are you overusing adjectives and adverbs? This can create wordiness, and often can feel like a lazy way of writing that leads to boring reading. Is there a way to show us that adjective instead?

— SHOWING AND TELLING: create a mix of both methods of storytelling. You want to strike a balance between statement, image and action.

— FIND THE BEST LINE: once you identify the best line, ask yourself, do all lines feel as strong? If no, is the line helping our understanding or to propel meaning? Here you want to determine if the line is needed — if it’s not as strong as the best lines, or close, and it’s not doing other work, get rid of it!

— UTILIZE THE DEVICES CHECKLIST: begin to create an awareness of which you’ve utilized.

— REARRANGE: what happens when you begin the poem from the bottom up? Or when you scrap the first stanza or last stanza? Play with the poem to see how it feels in different forms.

HOW TO: SPEED POEMS

Speed poems can be a magical process to seed new works. You might use this format in a group setting as an opening assignment, or create your own speed poems to implement when feeling stuck on what to write. The trick: write on each prompt for only 1-2 minutes each (I typically use four to a page, see the following example, which is inspired by different learning modalities). The goal is to scrawl out quick and dirty, without thinking deeply or worrying about whether the writing is “good.” The hope is that you might get a start to a poem that is worth revisiting and expanding.

LEARNING STYLES SPEED POEMS

LOGICAL/MATHEMATICAL

Write a haiku jumping off from your lines above. Imagine that object/living thing doing something, or existing somewhere else. What would it be doing? For example: a turtle swimming in the sea, an apple rolling off a desk and out the door, etc. (5/7/5 syllables).

LINGUISTIC

I met myself to day and I was...

[adjective] _____ as a

_____ [object/living thing].

[adjective] _____ as a

_____ [object/living thing].

[adjective] _____ as a

_____ [object/living thing].

BODILY/KINESTHETIC

Make a loud noise! Write the sound down. What does that sound remind you of? Free associate.

MUSICAL

The sound of what musical instrument captures your feeling today? Describe the sounds, the song, the playing.

HOW TO: START A WRITING GROUP

SETTING UP

Many of the spaces I've visited do not have a regular writing group run by an outside facilitator or staff member. Luckily, all you need for a writing group is a dedicated core team of curious people interested in the journey of writing, along with some writing utensils and paper. But if you're interested in best practices for group dynamics, here are a few ideas and exercises to get you started. And of course, please feel free to utilize the prompts in this book (seriously, I'd love it if you did.)

GROUP COVENANT: See the next page for my notes on creating a group covenant — one of the most important tasks of setting positive and supportive group dynamics.

OPENING RITUAL/WARM UP: A ritual, such as reading a meditation, or engaging a check-in go-around, or a silly theater exercise can help the space shift, mark that it is time to enter an environment of writing and help pull the energy of the group into the present, shared experience.

BALANCE OF SHORT AND LONG PROMPTS: You'll notice that each of my prompts in this book are layered with many mini-prompts. The blank page can be overwhelming, daunting and even frightening. Warm up questions help us fill the paper before we are tasked with producing a first draft of the piece. It shakes away some nerves, gets the writing muscle pumping and offers language and ideas to pull from later. When building your own prompts, you might source journaling questions from the group.

READ READ READ: I'm tempted to write an entire page of the word "read." I believe, as many writers do, that reading is the single most significant act (other than actually regularly putting pen to paper) that will improve writing skills. Read widely and bring an array of identities, voices, styles and forms into your group as sample work.

GRAB LINES: A quick, easy and nearly always effective writing exercise: grab a line from a poet/writer you admire and jump off the cliff of their words. See where they take you! You can remove the instigating phrase later, or if you choose to keep it, be sure to credit it.

SHARING OUT: Community is created largely through the sharing process, but many resist sharing their work, feeling too raw and exposed. I often offer the option of sharing just a few words or phrases if the author isn't ready to share the whole piece with the group.

MAKING A GROUP COVENANT

Good writing often, if not always, requires accessing a measure of vulnerability. In an unsafe environment, this can provide a sticky conundrum. Though it is not fail proof, a class covenant can serve as a set of ground rules that keeps the group operating from a place of mutual respect. Though you might begin with a foundation of basic suggestions for the covenant, it is important and necessary to create class agreements that source directly from the specific group's needs and wishes. These agreements often address the need for confidentiality, full participant presence, an equitable distribution of voices, a foundation of respect, a commitment to questioning an idea over attacking a person, a charge to speak up when hurt, and to apologize when you've harmed (especially when unintended), and orienting to the room as a container for love, expansion and growth.

In the spirit of transparency, even in an intentional community, moments can arrive that I call a "wild card." Bringing writers together from varying backgrounds to do this profound work can surface unforeseen circumstances, including but not limited to perceived ignorance, insensitivity and triggering dialogue. I choose to see these experiences through a lens of growth, and understand sticky territory is inherent in this work. What I hope my groups can do, and many have done successfully, is leverage these moments as places of growth, honesty, learning and deepening connection. Below is a statement on how I define brave space. When I run a new group, I often use this as our starting place, asking that they read, and to the best of their ability, uphold the covenant of protecting a nurturing, courageous and expressive community. Feel free to use my words as a jump start to your own covenant creation.

OUR BRAVE SPACE IS A PLACE...

... where all participants are encouraged to openly express and explore their personal stories, dreams, ideas and experiences as respectfully as possible to other participants and self.

... where every story is honored as holding its own version of truth.

... that operates from the assumption that all participants enter with good intentions.

... where participants can grow and learn from differing perspectives and experiences, often exposing and uprooting harmful, hurtful and sometimes unintentional behaviors and words in our peers.

... where we work to give and receive loving but fiercely honest feedback.

... where we can voice when we've been hurt, and be brave in cleaning up hurt we've caused.

PUBLICATION AND RESOURCES

These publications specifically support the work of imprisoned writers, but I encourage submitting beyond this niche list. Ask your librarian for copies of *Writer's Digest*, *Poets&Writers* and *The Writer's Chronicle* for extensive listings of places to submit for publication. The PEN American Center Prison Writing Program, listed below, has a special program where writing mentors offer feedback on your work via the mail.

THE AMERICAN DISSIDENT

217 Commerce Rd.
Barnstable MA 02630

Send in English, Spanish, or French poems and essays (650 words) with a dash of personal risk, stemming from experience, conflict and/or involvement with power.

JOURNAL OF PRISONERS ON PRISONS

c/o Justin Piché, PhD, Assistant Professor
Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa
120 University, Room 13049
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5
www.jpp.org

Prisoners and former prisoners may submit papers, collaborative essays, interviews, book reviews, and photo or graphic essays. No fiction or poetry.

MURIEL RUKEYSER POETRY WALL

Cathedral of St John the Divine
1047 Amsterdam Avenue
New York NY 10025

"The place where poems will always be accepted." Send poetry, signed or unsigned, in any language, for public display on church walls.

PEN AMERICAN CENTER PRISON WRITING PROGRAM

588 Broadway, Suite 303
New York NY 10012
www.pen.org/prison-writing

Free Handbook for Writers in Prison, mentoring program, and annual Prison Writing Contest (submission between January 1 and September 1 of each year).

PRISONS FOUNDATION

2512 Virginia Ave. NW, #58043
Washington DC 20037
www.prisonsfoundation.org

Prisons Foundation publishes books, plays, poetry collections, art and comic books by and about prisoners on the web. Send SASE or visit the website for guidelines.

PRISONER EXPRESS

127 Anabel Taylor Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca NY 14853
prisonerexpress.org

Free newsletter published twice a year with information on the latest writing and artwork projects organized by the Prisoner Express program.

PRISON RENAISSANCE

Camille Griep/Prison Renaissance
P.O. Box 2711
Lynnwood, WA 98036
Write for submission format, or visit prisonrenaissance.org.

Prison Renaissance began with a group of incarcerated artists who experienced a rebirth of their human values. Artistic expression changed the way they see themselves. Art and education will allow them to help change how other incarcerated people see themselves – as citizens and community builders instead of outsiders and burdens. We hope that a return to civic duty among incarcerated-Americans will change how the public views its incarcerated population – the largest in the world.

THE REJECTED QUARTERLY

PO Box 1351
Cobb CA 95426

Specializes in rejected literature - must submit 5 rejection slips for each piece you submit. Send SASE for guidelines.

THE SUN MAGAZINE

For subscriptions, write to:
The Sun, Subscription Department
P.O. Box 5837 Harlan IA 51593-1337

Send submissions to:
The Sun 107 North Roberson Street
Chapel Hill NC 27516, (919) 942-5282
thesunmagazine.org

Independent, ad-free monthly magazine that publishes personal essays, short stories, interviews, poetry, and photographs by emerging and established artists. Free subscription offered to prisoners. Also accepts submissions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following poems appear in the book *Let It Die Hungry* by Caitis Meissner (The Operating System, 2016). Some poems first appeared in literary journals as noted:

Mostly Water (first appeared in *Adroit*)
The Room of My Life
Homegirl Manifesto (first appeared in *The Fem*)
Praise Poem (first appeared in *Day One*)
Ode to the Window

How Mavis Staples Healed My Heart, written by Caitis Meissner, appears in the book *The Letter All Your Friends Have Written You* by Caitis Meissner, co-written with Tishon Woolcock (Well&Often 2012).

Pieces of this book were originally piloted in the Digging Deep, Facing Self course, and the Poetry of Witness course, hosted by the Transformative Language Arts Network. The Story of My Name prompt was developed in collaboration with Angel Nafis for a workshop held at MoCADA museum, co-facilitated with Morgan Parker. This version has been modified for the workbook.

A warm hug of sincere gratitude to all of the many students and participants along my path who've pushed me to grow, and the organizations (and mentors and collaborators within) that have allowed me to teach for them, and who have taught me – most notably: The City College of New York, Bronx Academy of Letters, Rehabilitation Through the Arts, The New School, New Design High School, Urban Word NYC, Urban Arts Partnership, Sadie Nash Leadership Program, the Center for Urban Pedagogy, Voices Unbroken, Tribeca Film Institute and Facing History School.

Thank you to all of the funders of and believers in The Humans That We Are poetry tour, and the organizations and leaders who welcomed me into their work. Thank you to the Pollination Project and Puffin Foundation West for supporting this book's existence. It's wonderful to find kindred spirits and mirrors in so many pockets of this world. This resource wouldn't exist without you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caitis Meissner is a New York City-based writer, artist and cultural worker invested in the transformative, rehabilitative and change-making capacities of imagination and creativity. She is the author of the illustrated hybrid poetry book *Let It Die Hungry* (The Operating System, 2016), and *The Letter All Your Friends Have Written You* (Well&Often, 2012), co-written with poet Tishon Woolcock. She has taught, consulted and co-created extensively for over 15 years across a wide spectrum of communities. Visit her online at caitsmeissner.com.

