

POETRY FOR WELLBEING
WORKSHOPS

WORKSHOP 6
**INNOCENT
BYSTANDER
OR MATERIAL
WITNESS**





INTRODUCTION

Our thanks to John Glenday for writing this workbook for us.

It felt like a hint of spring this morning. I heard a skylark, believe it or not, over the golf course. And the other day, a school of dolphins were at play in the bay. And a few mornings ago, just at dawn, nacreous clouds over the Firth.

And this morning, although I didn't witness it, two earthquakes in south-eastern Turkey killed over a thousand people.

All of these events are a part of our world and, although it can be difficult to understand how beauty and catastrophe can coexist, it's our duty to notice them both. The first step towards being a good writer is to be a good watcher. To take notice of things.

We're all living fast, demanding lives. And we live them so fast that the world around us can diminish to a blur. What I love about poetry is how it refuses not to notice the world. And it does that for a reason. It does that so that we remember we're a part of the world we're ignoring. So when we don't notice the world, we're not noticing ourselves. And poetry is all about ourselves – how we live in the world. How wonderful it is, even though we sometimes don't see it. And, as I've mentioned before, we don't live in one world, we live in two – the world we inhabit and the world which inhabits us. The world of our emotions and desires. Both contain both beauty and strength and uncertainty and loss.

It's difficult balancing the bad of the world with the beautiful, but the two go together, inseparably. That's why writing poetry is difficult, because it's writing about something which is all paradox and contrast. It's writing about something we don't fully understand, ourselves. If it wasn't difficult to do that, it wouldn't be real.

TO BEGIN: TWO POEMS

Read: 'The Summer Day' by Mary Oliver

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-133/the-summer-day/>

Discuss together: Discuss what people notice as they read 'The Summer Day' and how the poem makes them feel.

Read: 'Smoke' by Jacob Polley

<https://poetryarchive.org/poem/smoke/>


Discuss together: Again, discuss the meaning here, and how the poem resonates for people.

EXERCISE 1: FURNITURE GAME

Read: 'Not the Furniture Game' excerpt by Simon Armitage

https://simonarmitage.typepad.com/homepage/2005/11/not_the_furnitu.html

Write: Describe someone, or yourself (you don't need to say which) by writing down ten of the 'and if she were...'s on the next page, completing each one as rapidly as you can. Keep it as surreal and inventive as you can. Write as many and as fast as you can. Especially important is not to think about it, just write at speed for five minutes, trying to imitate the detail and weirdness of Armitage, though remember your tone could be positive, lighter, loving. Then decide which you want to read out. Some will be boring (you don't need to read these), and some may be baffling (definitely read these out!).



and if she were a piece of furniture, she'd be...
and if she were a building, she'd be...
and if she were the weather, she'd be...
and if she were a country, she'd be...
and if she were an animal, she'd be...
and if she were a car, she'd be...
and if she were an insect, she'd be...
and if she were a song, she'd be...
and if she were a TV show, she'd be...
and if she were a film star, she'd be...
and if she were a bird, she'd be...

The beauty and the challenge of being human resides in how we acknowledge and reconcile all aspects of the world – its capacity to enrich our lives and its capacity to break our hearts. Both are equally important.

In the wonderful book *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, a young boy with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is trying to come to terms with his father's death in 9/11, and his search for meaning leads him to be reconciled with it despite never finding meaning. Yet his search enriches the lives of everyone he meets. At one point he says: 'You cannot protect yourself from sadness without protecting yourself from happiness.'

Perhaps the key to happiness isn't to defend ourselves against the paradoxes and uncertainties of the world, but to be open to them and to acknowledge them both as part of what makes us human.

EXERCISE 2: GHAZAL

A Ghazal is:

- A poem written in a series of two-line verses (couplets). These can be quite separate in meaning.
- There should be at least five couplets.
- The first couplet ends with same word or phrase; for all other couplets, the second line ends with that word or phrase.
- The first line of the last couplet should contain a reference to the writer's name – either directly or indirectly.

You can read more about the form here: <https://poets.org/glossary/ghazal>

Read: 'The Causeway' by W. S. Merwin, which is an example of the Ghazal
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=39885>

Write: Spend 20 minutes writing a ghazal of your own, taking time to share what you're written afterwards.

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