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### Be Your Own Valentine Writing Workshop

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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# ***Be Your Own Valentine Writing Workshop***

*February 13, 2021 with Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg*

## ***Ground Rules for Writing Workshops***

1. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, and most of all, making sense.
2. Write what you know as well as what you don't know.
3. Follow your writing, not the suggested exercise, the facilitator or what you think you should write. Write what wakes you up the most.
4. Feel free to experiment with poems, stories, dialogues, essays, letters, and whatever other form the writing wants to be.
5. Practice trust. Trust yourself to write what you need to write, how you need to write it.
6. Remember that all revealed in this workshop is confidential.
7. Treat all newborn writing with great respect and tenderness so that it can grow.
8. Reading your writing aloud is always optional.
9. No self-deprecating remarks allowed (especially when preparing to read your work).
10. Strive, as much as possible, not to compare your writing with the writing of others, and not to critique, interpret or analyze away what your writing is trying to show you.
11. Witness others. Listen carefully with your full attention. It will enhance your ability to listen to your own words.
12. Please share your responses to one another's work—what moves you, what stands out for you – but please refrain from critiquing or analyzing the work.
13. Treat all you do as a delicious and invigorating experiment. Play. Take chances. See what way leads to way, and what words lead to words.

## ***Writing Prompts***

1. Write about meeting yourself for a meal and treating each other with great tenderness.

### **Love After Love**

The time will come  
when, with elation  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror  
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was your self.  
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored

for another, who knows you by heart.  
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,  
peel your own image from the mirror.  
Sit. Feast on your life.

~ Derek Walcott

2. This poem can be used many ways, such as in the film “In Her Shoes,” in which it speaks to the bond between two siblings. Consider someone whose heart you heart in your own, and start with the line, “I carry your heart...” (or a variation).

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in  
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere  
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done  
by only me is your doing,my darling)  
i fear  
no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want  
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)  
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant  
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows  
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)  
~ e.e. cummings

3. Muriel Rukeyser’s poem speaks to the deep stories beneath the stories of how we connect. Take the line, “Speak to me....” and so from there. Or write about speech between you and someone you love could look like.

### **Effort at Speech Between Two People**

: Speak to me. Take my hand. What are you now?  
I will tell you all. I will conceal nothing.  
When I was three, a little child read a story about a rabbit  
who died, in the story, and I crawled under a chair :  
a pink rabbit : it was my birthday, and a candle  
burnt a sore spot on my finger, and I was told to be happy.

: Oh, grow to know me. I am not happy. I will be open:  
Now I am thinking of white sails against a sky like music,  
like glad horns blowing, and birds tilting, and an arm about me.

There was one I loved, who wanted to live, sailing.

: Speak to me.      Take my hand.      What are you now?  
When I was nine, I was fruitily sentimental,  
fluid   :   and my widowed aunt played Chopin,  
and I bent my head on the painted woodwork, and wept.  
I want now to be close to you.      I would  
link the minutes of my days close, somehow, to your days.

: I am not happy.      I will be open.  
I have liked lamps in evening corners, and quiet poems.  
There has been fear in my life.      Sometimes I speculate  
On what a tragedy his life was, really.

: Take my hand.      Fist my mind in your hand.      What are you now?  
When I was fourteen, I had dreams of suicide,  
and I stood at a steep window, at sunset, hoping toward death   :  
if the light had not melted clouds and plains to beauty,  
if light had not transformed that day, I would have leapt.  
I am unhappy.      I am lonely.      Speak to me.

: I will be open.      I think he never loved me:  
He loved the bright beaches, the little lips of foam  
that ride small waves, he loved the veer of gulls:  
he said with a gay mouth: I love you.      Grow to know me.

: What are you now?      If we could touch one another,  
if these our separate entities could come to grips,  
clenched like a Chinese puzzle . . . yesterday  
I stood in a crowded street that was live with people,  
and no one spoke a word, and the morning shone.  
Everyone silent, moving. . . . Take my hand.      Speak to me.  
~ Muriel Rukeyser

4. Consider writing your own “Dear love...” starting piece or take a phrase here, such as “save only love” or “and none but love,” write it down, and see where it leads you.

### **Evening Song**

Dear love, what thing of all the things that be  
Is ever worth one thought from you or me,  
    Save only Love,  
    Save only Love?  
The days so short, the nights so quick to flee,  
The world so wide, so deep and dark the sea,  
    So dark the sea;

So far the suns and every listless star,  
Beyond their light—Ah! dear, who knows how far,  
    Who knows how far?  
One thing of all dim things I know is true,  
The heart within me knows, and tells it you,  
    And tells it you.  
So blind is life, so long at last is sleep,  
And none but Love to bid us laugh or weep,  
    And none but Love,  
    And none but Love.  
~ Willa Cather

5. Write of dancing with someone you love, including dancing solo.

### **American Smooth**

We were dancing—it must have  
been a foxtrot or a waltz,  
something romantic but  
requiring restraint,  
rise and fall, precise  
execution as we moved  
into the next song without  
stopping, two chests heaving  
above a seven-league  
stride—such perfect agony  
one learns to smile through,  
ecstatic mimicry  
being the sine qua non  
of American Smooth.  
And because I was distracted  
by the effort of  
keeping my frame  
(the leftward lean, head turned  
just enough to gaze out  
past your ear and always  
smiling, smiling),  
I didn't notice  
how still you'd become until  
we had done it  
(for two measures?  
four?)—achieved flight,  
that swift and serene  
magnificence,  
before the earth  
remembered who we were  
and brought us down.

~ Rita Dove

6. Write your own “song of myself,” or take a phrase such as “Earth of...” and keep filling in the blanks.

### **Song of Myself, 21**

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,  
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,  
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,  
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

I chant the chant of dilation or pride,  
We have had ducking and deprecating about enough,  
I show that size is only development.

Have you outstript the rest? are you the President?  
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on.

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,  
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night!  
Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!  
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!  
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!  
Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!  
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!  
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!  
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!  
Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossom'd earth!  
Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!  
O unspeakable passionate love.

~ Walt Whitman

7. Write about your heart, including what images come to mind about your physical and emotional heart.

### **Heart to Heart**

It's neither red  
nor sweet.  
It doesn't melt  
or turn over,  
break or harden,  
so it can't feel  
pain,  
yearning,  
regret.  
It doesn't have  
a tip to spin on,  
it isn't even  
shapely—  
just a thick clutch  
of muscle,  
lopsided,  
mute. Still,  
I feel it inside  
its cage sounding  
a dull tattoo:  
I want, I want—  
but I can't open it:  
there's no key.  
I can't wear it  
on my sleeve,  
or tell you from  
the bottom of it  
how I feel. Here,  
it's all yours, now—  
but you'll have  
to take me,  
too.  
~ Rita Dove

8. Holding someone's hands is so evocative, especially in tender times. Write about taking the hands of someone you love at some point in your life, whether that someone is a parent, child, friend, sweetheart, or other.

### **Taking the Hands**

Taking the hands of someone you love,  
You see they are delicate cages...  
Tiny birds are singing  
In the secluded prairies  
And in the deep valleys of the hand.  
~ Robert Bly

9. Write your own sweet invitation to evening to come.

### **Let Evening Come**

Let the light of the late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
in long grass. Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
in the oats, to air in the lung  
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.  
~ Jane Kenyon

10. Write a love poem to your body, starting with, "My body, you are...."

### **I Talk to My Body**

My body, you are an animal  
whose appropriate behavior  
is concentration and discipline.  
An effort  
of an athlete, of a saint and of a yogi.

Well trained  
you may become for me  
a gate  
through which I will leave myself  
and a gate  
through which I will enter myself.  
A plumb line to the center of the earth



and a cosmic ship to Jupiter.

My body, you are an animal  
for whom ambition  
is right.

Splendid possibilities  
are open to us.

~ Anna Swir, translated from the Polish by Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan

11. Write about the circle that surrounds you – the land and sky and/or people you love and community.

### **A Circle Begins**

in the surround of snow-touched mountains  
a circle begins  
in a meadow by a melt creek  
where hands weave a house of thin green saplings  
    it is a way of song  
    a way of breathing

a pure womb to center oneself through sweat  
a way of blessing and being blessed  
a circle of humility, prayer and asking  
and there are no clocks to measure time  
but the beating of our singing hearts

~ Harold Littlebird

12. Consider Rumi's last few lines about having good roots, even if something is sprouting, as a base for growth, and write. Or write about what you truly know of love.

### **Love**

Are you fleeing from Love because of a single humiliation?

What do you know of Love except the name?

Love has a hundred forms of pride and disdain,  
and is gained by a hundred means of persuasion.

Since Love is loyal, it purchases one who is loyal:  
it has no interest in a disloyal companion.

The human being resembles a tree; its root is a covenant with God:  
that root must be cherished with all one's might.

A weak covenant is a rotten root, without grace or fruit.

Though the boughs and leaves of the date palm are green,  
greenness brings no benefit if the root is corrupt.

If a branch is without green leaves, yet has a good root,  
a hundred leaves will put forth their hands in the end.

~ Rumi, from *Jewels of Remembrance*, Trans. Camille and Kabir Helminski

13. Write about darkness as a sweet experience that brings you another kind of vision.

### **Sweet Darkness**

When your eyes are tired  
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone  
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark  
where the night has eyes  
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure  
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb  
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon  
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.  
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds  
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet  
confinement of your aloneness  
to learn

anything or anyone  
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.  
~ David Whyte

14. After relaxing and making contact with your body, start writing with the phrase, “This is my...” and put in any part of you – physical or otherwise (your lungs, your stamina, your heart, your feet), and see what it has to say.

### **This is My Heart**

This is my heart. It is a good heart.  
Bones and membrane of mist and fire

are the woven cover.  
When we make love in the flower world  
my heart is close enough to sing  
to yours in a language that has no use  
for clumsy human words.

My head is a good head, but it is a hard head  
and it whirrs inside a swarm of worries.  
What is the source of this singing, it asks  
and if there is a source why can't I see it  
right here, right now  
as real as these hands hammering  
the world together  
with nails and sinew?

This is my soul. It is a good soul.  
It tells me, "Come here forgetful one."  
And we sit together with lilt of small winds  
who rattle the scrub oak.  
We cook a little something  
to eat, then a sip of something  
sweet, for memory.

This is my song. It is a good song.  
It walked forever the border of fire and water  
climbed ribs of desire to my lips to sing to you.  
Its new wings quiver with vulnerability.  
Come lie next to me, says my heart.  
Put your head here.  
It is a good thing, says my soul.  
~ Joy Harjo

You can find much more at [CarynMirriamGoldberg.com](http://CarynMirriamGoldberg.com),  
including one-on-one [writing coaching](#) and [classes, readings](#), etc..  
You can also sign up for my email list and subscribe to my blog.

Please join me 2/16 at 6 p.m. CST for a poetry reading and conversation  
with Roy Beckemeyer at Watermark Books, via Zoom. [Details here.](#)

My next pop-up workshop is 3/13: "The Yoga of the Page,"  
through Create and Replenish. [More here.](#)

For a self-paced poetry class, see "[Truth to Power.](#)"

***Thank you so much for joining me today,  
and Happy Valentine's Day!***