



#WRITETHROUGHTHIS

An Anthology of Poems by Young People, 2021
Edited by Cecilia Knapp, Young People's Laureate for London

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Spread the Word & The Young People's Laureate for London

Spread the Word is London's writer development agency. They help writers across London; kick-starting the careers of the best new talent, and energetically campaigning to ensure mainstream publishing truly reflects the diversity of the city.

Each year, Spread the Word appoints the Young People's Laureate for London, a young poet who uses poetry to give a voice to young people in the city. The Laureate undertakes residencies with four cultural organisations, as well as delivering work in schools, youth groups, and online to engage young Londoners and to offer them a platform to share their poetry.

The 2020–21 Young People's Laureate for London is poet, playwright and novelist Cecilia Knapp. Over the course of her year as Laureate, Cecilia has delivered workshops for over 800 young people, and led online activity reaching audiences of more than 110,000. She has worked with Young Roots and the Refugee Council, The Royal Court Theatre, the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM), Street Soccer, and the South London Gallery.

#WriteThroughThis was an online programme developed Cecilia in her role as Laureate, which used writing to find a creative outlet and a community during the challenges and uncertainties of 2021. This booklet contains participants' poems which were developed during those sessions, or inspired by the methods they explored. This group of young writers show that writing together can help us process whatever situations we may face, and help us find each other

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Introduction

I came up with the *#WriteThroughThis* campaign because, truthfully, I was feeling stuck. I'd just been appointed Young People's Laureate for London and my job was to try and increase the visibility of poetry for young people and create opportunities for them to have a go at writing. How could I do this in the throes of a global pandemic when it wasn't safe to physically come together?

People's appetite for online activity was definitely whetted during Covid restrictions. With everyone stuck at home unable to socialise, try new things, meet new people or be creative in a guided group setting, it became the default means by which to hang out, attend workshops and learn. Furthermore, at a time of increased uncertainty, anxiety and disruption to our lives, these moments to come together as a community of writers became more important than ever before. So I decided to launch a campaign; free online workshops for anyone 16–25 as well as a series of 'writing tips' videos.

I wanted to reach people and spread the positive impact of reading and writing poems. To provide them some dedicated time to themselves in a safe and low-pressure space, whether they were a seasoned poet or someone wanting to try new things with all this pandemic-induced boundless time at home.

The online model proved really useful for this. We reached big numbers of participants. It meant we could come together without having to travel, without even having to get out of our pyjamas. It made it more accessible and, for some, less scary. I think this meant that some young people who may have before seen poetry as something intimidating and impenetrable were able to show up and write, which is one of my main ambitions as Laureate: to help more people access poetry even if they are coming to it with a degree of doubt.

Of course I wanted participants to learn new skills and create work they were proud of, but this was secondary. I mostly wanted the sessions to be about joy and play; the sense of wonder and discovery achieved when you let go of intention or logic and just write. What can you find out about yourself and how can you find the language to say it? This impetus felt all the more important during the stresses of the pandemic.

Lockdowns came with pressures to be productive: learn new languages, finish that novel lurking in your drafts, bake a thousand banana breads and sweat

through another home workout video. *#WriteThroughThis* wasn't about that. It was designed for whoever needed it to help them reflect, process, write and meet new people. And we definitely created a community through the campaign, vital to myself and a lot of people who were, and still are in some cases, isolated.

It was such a fantastic joy to run *#WriteThroughThis* and to meet so many wonderful young writers from all over, a multitude of unique voices. I wanted to celebrate those voices we met, the diversity of thought and style and show that there is so much to contemporary poetry from young people. That's where this digital anthology comes in. What you'll read here is a selection of poems created entirely remotely during the course of the campaign. Despite it all, we managed to come together. Those who'd never written before tried something new and hopefully see poetry as something they are entitled to, something they are good at. More experienced writers found new writing pals and a protected space and time for them to write and grow. We're incredibly proud of each and every one of these young writers, and the moments we all shared together.

Cecilia Knapp, Young People's Laureate for London
September 2021

Groceries ghost

The world has beautiful things
that help us everyday be.
For example,
today a ghost in the supermarket
got stuck in my feet,
helped me carry the groceries,
and came to live with me.

Not everything was easy,
our memories were different,
but we grew fond of each other,
because we are both apple pie lovers.

It is the color of a desk,
the sound of my grandpa's car music,
my hand writing by herself,
a white feeling that is elusive.
It likes bananas
in the shape of the moon,
and it wears the dresses
that are hidden inside my room.
It walks like it's always dancing,
a piano note in every step,
and people get happier,
when we pass across the stairs.

And when I feel lonely,
it reminds me I like to bake,
guides my hand to paint,
until I recognize myself again.

Such beautiful things that we find
going to the groceries,
a safe place to remember the past,
a memory overseas.
My ghost,
is my window to the past,
what it could be,
and what it now can.

Maria Fernanda Corona
25, Greater London

FRESH

Dancing in the rain
Will the music ever stop playing?

An emotional kill, you won't recover from

Confident, loud and kind queen
She made me feel at home

Human rights: simple peace and love
Dreaming of a world free from evil

I fear the world itself. Secrets
I can feel the magic under the stars

Nuts for healthy glowing skin
I'm loving this moment

I will be okay, your voice will echo some day

Kimberley Van Tonder
25, London

I'd like it to be,
But that's not how it happened.
I'd like it to have been cinematic,
Full of heart-wrenching and coherent arcs,
And lessons of redemption,
And earned rebellion,
That was all worth it in the end.
Instead it spread out slowly,
Unnoticed,
Like black mould.
It started with a crochet hook,
Left behind by someone,
Who shot off their mortal coil,
Faster than a whippet after a hare.
I'd like to say I missed her,
And that she missed what she left behind.
But she left with a smile on her face, at least.

Amy Spaughton
23, London

The Soul Speaks

If I could, I would yell
and break my soul's silence, I should have
let the glass slip.
Why did you remain still for so long?
Self-portrait as a bottle of perfume.
There are reasons to fight quiet air that lingers for too long —
goes stale.
Here is how you make a sandwich of yourself when life has starved you of enough
but we still believe in food being good for the soul and it's
even better when home-made.
The last time I was here I drank my body weight in tears and
suddenly found myself wishing for a life jacket.
Watching the sea is like wishing I had that to drink in the middle of the night instead.
My favourite weather is one that knows it's needed and doesn't need to be described.
I can't tell you the last time I belly-laughed myself into abs that were not present
before
but I can tell you that my bed feels more welcoming than I'd known it to be.
I fear the word 'old' because I'm trying to find more of my youth in every day.

Anneliese Amoah
25, London

Dolphin Skin

If I could, I would pour my forgiveness into you, so you could stop questioning it.
Self-portrait as a hospital band sliced in two,
your name a split lip, first and second separated by a fault line.
The stitches made you whimper. I hummed our favourite song.
There are reasons to fight, but mostly with ourselves.

Here is how you get used to arguing in public:
weave yourself a shame-proof layer. Let the embarrassment slide right off,
like you are a dolphin, emerging, and it is water, rolling down your rubbery skin.

We still believe in redemption, even if it hangs on a thread,
even if the thread is wet and chewed up in a child's half-moon mouth.
The last time I was here you told me I wouldn't care if you were dead.

Watching the sea is like the blue curtains closing,
the nurse approaching you slowly, cautious you might lash out.
I say 'he won't hurt you', like she is a toddler and you are a dog on a lead in the
park.

My favourite weather is whatever as long as you're alright.
I can't tell you the amount of times I have braced myself to lose you.
But I can tell you I forgive you, I am trying to forgive myself.

Charlie
24, Birmingham

Father [russeting]

Cheekbones too tight, for the weather
is shrinking to winter. Leaves wear my father's scripted
memory & the old silence we used to play,
humming like a baby's rattle on the brink
of the bin's lip. Still I name them russet,
rather than ash or sepia, & think of the horizon's tide line
coming in. How tonight the sunset is thin
as your tightest smile. How still you held me,
with teeth gritted for a snowy road. Saying I love you
with the clench of your hold like a breath grasped
at the last moment. I wonder if your absent shape
is what's leaking through my ribs. The truncated warmth
like a summer closed too soon, where skin has closed in
on my bones: the rungs protruding, like they're asking
to be gripped.

Eva Lewis
21, Manchester

Is sister supposed to feel like grief

Matching necklaces
like conjoined twins,
the pearls coming
undone on one
neck,
trickling into
the choke of another,
tied together
like chains for safety.

The etymology
of sister being
'one's own woman' —
I want to hold
my sister's hand
like touch
is Chinese whispers. Is sister supposed to feel like grief?

Lauren Temple
21, Manchester

Exhibition of your life where you star as memory

This woman is the ventilator, from whom my life, hooked up, has gathered its breath. A momentum of shadows at my feet & all of dusk hissing for my attention.

The mountain's ledge a stethoscope checking my heart beat. Its echo of my mother's; her mother's; the world I have just passed, inlaid with the waterfalls dripping

into oceans. They would say her dancing meant anything like joy or the whirring frill of a comeback. The jealousy hidden in her man's heart

that made a conch shell of her sight. So all she could see: the refrain of waves; reciting his face in every stranger; putting his lips to other men's mouths

till she grew into the fear the police would take him away. No address to her yearning, she stooped down to her shadow and asked it

to stop her hitting ground. The bush of its tail following her like the stubborn birthmark of a body. I remember when hands scooped wings

from the light pressing its face against the walls. How easily hands feathered, furred, muted their human shape in a wall's dark mirror,

a zoo of shadows stunted by the size of what can be held. & this is why you were always an impossible task, scraping at my heart

from where I held you tight against it. As if to let you in
wouldn't mean small surgery; splitting seams to stretch
the delicate skin's petal-red hide over

the human shape. How to fit a mother then, or anyone
larger than yourself — men by default of a decided
biology. Sometimes even words

are too big to take inside. No matter how much love
there is, the weight of all this memory carted
around inside of us, waiting

for the right face to scribble onto, unwrapping
its reel like a peeled rind closeting segments. Saying I told you
I can contain everything, even a body, even a wilting.

Kate Lewis
20, Bangor

Dormant Volcano

A dormant volcano is one that isn't currently active
buried within it is a force
still capable of erupting
How much space are we allowed to take up?

These bricks and floorboards are our playground
we do the opposite of sheep
be cross-legged
isolate but don't disconnect
be a voice to count your breaths

Communion is cancelled
your kitchen — pub
your window — cinema
Is your forehead safe to kiss?

Be the den made out of pillows
hold up your blanket with an old torch
gather shadows from the bulb
fill afternoons with stillness

We do not crowd
but worries gather in our heads
hands sore from sanitising
reach out but do not touch
How much space are we allowed to take up?

Be an all-day daydream
silhouettes on the ceiling are indoor clouds
be a sealed envelope full of good news
the frozen soup

the eye winked
hand waved
kiss blown

We enclose ourselves
conceal our fire within four walls
unmoving
allow yourself to take up this space
keep moving
in time
we will erupt

Kat Head
25, Glasgow

hangover

she couldn't put her finger on what it was,
something was just a bit *off*
about the whole thing.
maybe her mind was playing tricks,
was that really how he remembered it?

the event, or what the event looked like
when held up to a mirror for inspection?
or did the truth lie in the gaps,
the missing space between reality
and its distorted reflection?

alternative versions grow and spread
like tumours, or wildfire—
a false truth has more speed than a whippet after a rat.

the stolen pub pint glass sits empty on the windowsill,
still where it is on the morning after the night before,
where they lie side by side together and he tells her about
all the things she said and
all the things she did and
who she hurt,
the friends she thought were friends,
the words stuck like a fishhook through her cheek.

she thinks: where do we go from here?

Meg Hansen
23, Devon

LXIX
Five Alive

—*Take Five*

Have a break

—*Take Five*

Enjoy a warm date

—*Take Five*

Don't fall for that bait

—*Take Five*

Relax, it's okay to be late

—*Taking Five*

Remembering to breathe in deep and be alive so stay awake and do not die

—*Taking Five*

To try walk with gentle footsteps as *you all move side by side*

Being grateful to those all around you making it for you all fine

—*Taking Five*

Knowing humanity's grace is around us so all will be fine

Dude, just try to smile

—*Taking Five*

Call her and see if she will join you tonight

—*Took Five*

You now have the gift of a little more Time

—*Took Five*

So thank them all and thank the divine

—*Took Five*

Best wishes to you and goodnight

Mustashrik Mahbub
Cambridge

Salvation

My parents taught me
stone manners, then set on me
an open-mouthed world

I bought a cloud of
bananas, instead of ripe-
ening, it flew off

I gulped down the groans
of grapefruit as he told me
to trust him (I did)

He caressed me with
sugared smiles, unzipping the
inevitable

Last night I dreamt of
my younger self with wings, then
awoke in the ground

Night is like an old
wound, slowly rippling open—
a vacant crime scene

I count calories
just like my lovers; with thick
trickles of warm shame

What is beautiful
is untouched, one's choice between
museum or farm

Joanna Woźnicka
22, London

Portland's Nightlife

Heads hidden in hoods,
we slipped into the dark night
under a moon that shimmered
like scales on the sleeping sea.

We hid in the shadows,
our enemies lurked in
the garden;
what do we do now?

Weapons at the ready,
we rolled onto the damp lawn
and prepared to fire!

Our enemies went down
one by one,
their cries washed away
by roaring black waves.

The last one lost
to the salty, sinister depths
as Grandma called us
in for tea.

Meg Greenhalgh
25, Lancashire

Tell me I'm interesting

Better yet, back away slowly, muttering something about your phone ringing
Better to be the woman rope-bound to train tracks
In the mirror I see myself reflected, duh
That's why I'm looking
An older girl told us to put it between our legs
A tiny pink foil balloon trapped in a pylon
Better to be held up to the light by the scruff of your neck than to be found
holding your own spotlight
Standing in front of a jury, in front of a judge, in front of god, in front of my mum
I wait
So used to being told what to do
A dog whistles and I beg for what I already own
The food rotting in my fridge. Paw out.
My coffee stained teeth. Lie down.
Like a painter only ever makes half art
No puddles without holes
A silicone mould
No body until held

Sophie MacArthur
26, North Yorkshire

What you don't need but ask for anyway

The best weather is whatever makes time stop.

If I could, I would go to the very edge and watch everything unfurl like rolling waves.

Here is how you make a solution before you are ready to see the problem.

There are so many reasons to fight, I want to make sure I pick a good one.
Maybe I don't need it to be good.

The question I never need answered will always be asked first.

But we still believe in hope, in longing, in love when we don't need it, when we aren't hanging on its every word.

Watching the sea is like staring into the future. It's the thing I miss more than anything else actually, it is what will hit me the hardest.

The last time I was here I knew what I wanted, knew what could happen next and how to fix it.

The last time I talked to her before I stopped trying was on a beach, I was asking for help in finding shells, no big story, just casual conversation.
I didn't know it was coming.

I fear the word goodbye but I fear its absence more.

I can't tell you how I got here.

But I can tell you how you can join me.

MK
25, London

The Me Before You

My nose, my mouth, my face, my body, I touch it all
Wanting so badly to believe that I am not yours, however small

But it is you I see in this hollow face and these empty eyes
The puppet master at work, pantomiming more and more of their lies

I scratch the surface, far and wide, under which a storm is brewing
Blood falls from my face, blood that is yours, yet I feel nothing

The damage had been done before we first met
The seeds once sown; a harvest, its emptiest yet

Is there nothing I can do to rid me of you?
To shake off the stalker whose gaze I see through

It is your nose, your mouth, your face, your body, that looks back at me
The shadow of a person I have never wished to be

Naomi May
25, London

In our garden

the soil holds and gives,
the flowers are various,
sprayed across the high grass.
Wads of crocuses push through dirt.
Here we are, warm. The air is pink
and tender. There are no tall fences,
large hands, dark suits. Instead,
we plunge wrist deep
into the earth, heated
by the weather and we plant,
women touching shoulders.
Water shoots from rock.
We cup our hands and drink.
We eat until we glow like eggs.
We know what we deserve.
It happens as it should.
Easy sleep, exhausted
from the day. Here, no dark
corners, only the shade
from the heft of clever trees.
Here, our pain is old and shared,
a wooden bowl passed between us.
Somewhere, birds spit song
from their throats and the sea
is near but mild. The sun
comes out over and over
like a reel of film. Shame vanishes
like water dried on a stone.
Here, families stay together.
Here, there are fathers, boys.
And the tea is hot and ready.

Cecilia Knapp
Young People's Laureate for London

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