

## Deptford Literature Festival At Home

For the 2025 Deptford Literature Festival, five of our writers and artists, Gayathiri Kamalakanthan, Lucy Hayhoe, Jamie Hale, Annie Hayter and Karen McCarthy Woolf have created writing activities for you to do at home, based on their events at the festival.

Deptford Literature Festival celebrates Deptford and Lewisham's creativity and diversity through words, stories and performance and takes place between Thursday 27 and Sunday 30 March 2025.

Deptford Literature Festival is run by Spread the Word in partnership with independent producer Tom MacAndrew, and is funded by Arts Council England, with support from the Albany, Deptford Lounge and Lewisham Libraries.

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#DeptfordLitFest

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# Making Your Own Poetry Book

## Gayathiri Kamalakanthan + Lucy Hayhoe

### Introduction

Gayathiri and Lucy here! At this year's Deptford Literature Festival, we're running a workshop called Bind Your Own Poetry Book, where we'll create mini books using simple binding techniques before writing our own poetry in them.

In creating this workshop, we were thinking about how so many of us find it difficult to call ourselves 'artists' or 'writers', because the art world can sometimes feel alienating and exclusive. In making our own books to write in, we wanted to practise creating work without needing some kind of institutional approval or permission.

Across the next few activities, we'll be reading and writing some poetry, using the words of our trans and queer poetry elders and peers as a jumping off point. Since both of our practices revolve around 'queerness', we've selected poems that we think queer notions of inheritance, ideation, censorship, state-violence and survival.

If you'd like to make your own zine at home, [here is a video \(bit.ly/42EmPOH\)](https://bit.ly/42EmPOH) to guide you through the process, by the brilliant illustrator, Soofiya ([soofiya.com](https://soofiya.com)). Once you've folded your zine, you can start filling it with your gorgeous creations!

The following exercises are intended to give you some pieces of writing that you can include in your zine. Of course, if you'd rather just write without making a zine - or if you have your own ideas to fill up your zine - you're welcome to do that, too.

We're not aiming for 'perfect' or 'our best work' with these little books, but an archive of our thinking, of being in conversation with the creatives who shape us.

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### Exercise 1: Freewriting

Set an alarm for 8 minutes for this freewriting exercise.

Freewriting is a warm up exercise where you write continuously without worrying about the 'quality' of what's coming out on the page. It's about creating a whole junkyard of lines that you might or might not come back to. Remember: no pressure, no judgies!

In your freewrite, try and answer these questions:

- Who were the first poets or writers you connected with?
- What lessons did they teach you?
- What's the first poem you remember falling in love with? Or nursery rhyme? Or song?
- When did you first think: I could do that, I could write something... (And if it's right now, then write about that!)

## Exercise 2: Jade Pendant

Read the poem '[Everything Everywhere All At Once \(2022\)](#)' by Sennah Yee ([bit.ly/4hKFbUq](#)).

The last line really pulls at our heartstrings ('And you'll squint and gently pull at the gold chain of my jade pendant and ask, "is it real?"). It's asking about the reality, intimacy and fantasy of this object.

For this exercise, take 10 minutes to write in prose form (like Sennah Yee did for her poem) about an object, using the prompts below. Remember, you can always make things up!

- Describe an object that you have a special, important or complex relationship to.
  - Write down the questions it brings up, the different memories and histories around it, the people it connects you to, and perhaps the disconnects or wishes that it brings up.
  - In another world, what might a different relationship to this object look like?
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## Exercise 3: The Cave

Read or listen to the poem '[The Cave](#)' by Paul Tran ([bit.ly/3WQvRX9](#)).

Now set a timer for 12 minutes and write about the following:

- Think about an idea that has moved you, changed you. An idea that feels urgent. It might be political, philosophical, existential... or all the above!
  - Where did you learn about it? Where did you not learn about it?
  - Look back at how Tran uses imagery in 'The Cave'. What verbs and images come up when you sit with your idea? Specific animals, colours, textures?
  - Finally, bring your passage to a close by leading the reader to another idea...
- 

## Exercise 4: Silence and Listening

Read the poem '[The Government has it Under Control](#)' by Anureet Watta ([bit.ly/4gupLCG](#)).

Jot down some quick thoughts on the following:

- When have you felt silenced?
- Conversely, when have you felt powerful, spacious, moved to act?
- Who was with you? This could be people you've met in person, online, or people writing books you've read, etc.

When we did this exercise, we talked about Audre Lorde, and specifically her poem, '[A Litany for Survival](#)'. Read ([bit.ly/4aJKT6G](#)) or listen to Lorde read it ([bit.ly/4hn9Wzc](#)). If you have more time, read it over a few times and let the words sink into your body.

Now give yourself 12 minutes to imagine and write a moment where you are listened to, where change happens, where justice is alive and kicking. You might even want to include a line on how it feels to imagine and write this.

## Exercise 5: Discovering Ourselves

Read or listen to the poem '[Unarcheology of 'Father'](https://bit.ly/unarcheology)' by George Abraham ([bit.ly/unarcheology](https://bit.ly/unarcheology)).

In the poem, Abraham keeps parts of themselves from their father... sometimes having to show parts in smaller, more obscure fragments due to an inherited American queerphobia. For us, this poem is describing an act of love, of self and community preservation.

Take 10 minutes to write a poem combining the known and the unknown of yourself. Like Abraham, use 3 lines per stanza. Think about:

- The ways you meet and discover yourself. How has it felt to learn this person again and again throughout your life?
  - The ways you are known by the people around you.
  - The ways you are unknown by the people around you.
  - How does this fragmentation feel? Is it protective? Is it difficult? Is it necessary? Is it loving? (It can be all the above and more.)
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### Some editing tips:

1. Once you've written a piece, put it in a drawer. Try not to think about it for a couple of days.
2. Start your edit with fresh and patient eyes.
3. Read it out loud. Ask someone else to read it out loud. Did their voice or tone spark any new ideas?
4. What is the emotional core of your piece? Is it subtle, or overwrought? Either way, is this an intentional choice?
5. Does the piece sound like you? If not, is this intentional?
6. Is the beginning the beginning? Is the end the end? Play around with your structure and see what happens.
7. Are there actually 2 or 3 separate poems in this piece? Do you need to give each idea more space?
8. Is the form working for you? If it's a poem, what if it was in prose form? What if you tried 4 line stanzas? Playing with line breaks, shapes and restrictions might give you new ideas.
9. Keep copies of previous drafts.
10. If you don't like your piece, take a break. Let your subconscious do its thing.
11. If you're stuck, try saying what you mean.
12. If you're losing motivation, read something you like, something kind. Then come back to your piece. (Our go-to for this is the poems posted on the Instagram account [@poetryisnotaluxury](https://www.instagram.com/poetryisnotaluxury).)

## About Gayathiri Kamalakanthan + Lucy Hayhoe

**Gayathiri Kamalakanthan** is a poet and facilitator. They're interested in how language shapes our sense of belonging and how we might use it to queer the future. Gayathiri runs Word-Benders, a poetry workshop series centering queer poets of colour, supported by fourteen poems. Gayathiri won the Disabled Poets Prize 2024, the Faber & Adlyn Publisher's Prize and their debut novel-in-verse, *Bad Queer*, is forthcoming with Faber.

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**Lucy Hayhoe** is a live artist creating installations ranging from intimate encounters to large-scale productions. Works include One in One out: London's smallest gay bar, New National Parks & The Library Project. Her work has toured the UK and internationally to Barbican, UK; Southbank Centre, UK; Tai Kwun, Hong Kong; Skirball Cultural Centre, USA; Belluard Bollwerk, Switzerland and Tokyo Performing Arts Market, Japan.

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# Writing the Body: Lessons from Disabled Writers

## Jamie Hale

### Introduction

This resource will examine poems by four different disabled poets. Each of these poems explores the body differently, but they all come back to being explorations of the body by disabled writers. Why does this matter?

We usually see the body represented by non-disabled writers, and the disabled body as a set of metaphors, 'blind' or 'deaf' to people, 'paralysed with fear'. These metaphors function to reinforce a set of ideas about disability as abnormal, undesirable, and miserable. In this series of activities, I wanted to focus on what we learn when writing about the body using disabled bodies as the starting point.

The poems are:

Petra Kuppers - '[The Origin of My Wheelchair](https://bit.ly/3PVnLc6)', [bit.ly/3PVnLc6](https://bit.ly/3PVnLc6)

Khairani Barokka - '[cure for no diagnosis](https://bit.ly/4jB3UMY)', [bit.ly/4jB3UMY](https://bit.ly/4jB3UMY)

Laurie Clements Lambeth - '[Cusped Prognosis](https://bit.ly/3WwoTGv)', [bit.ly/3WwoTGv](https://bit.ly/3WwoTGv)

Kay Ulanday Barrett - '[I use the word Disabled](https://bit.ly/40CoLuA)', [bit.ly/40CoLuA](https://bit.ly/40CoLuA)

Read each poem before you begin the corresponding exercises.

You'll find exercises in three categories: quick, creative, and technique exercises, and there is one type of each exercise per poem - giving you twelve prompts to play with in total.

The quick exercises will hopefully get you going, taking about five minutes to write. Your responses to these can be poems, or they can just be notes or lists. The creative and technique exercises are longer, the creative ones playing with ideas, and the technique ones playing with - well - ways of putting a poem together. Each creative or technique exercise has its own mini warm-up, which will again take about five minutes, followed by a twenty to thirty minute longer writing exercise, but you're at home, so you can take as long as you like!

Once you've finished these exercises, don't stop there - use them as the root for a longer poem or piece, a bit further down the line. Digging through those fragments for meaning can be great fun.

-Jamie

# Exploring 'The Origin of My Wheelchair' by Petra Kuppers

Read the poem here: [bit.ly/3PVnLc6](https://bit.ly/3PVnLc6).

## Quick Exercise: Transformation

In this poem, a wheelchair is transformed into something alive and growing, forged and elemental, something real, present, and mythical. This builds it into an item of power, and a talisman. Through this, the poet pushes back against the assumptions people have about wheelchairs as a symbol of being trapped, instead of free.

### Exercise:

- Choose an everyday object you use or interact with regularly. Something that feels in some way closely and emotively connected to your body and life.
  - Imagine how it could have emerged from mythical, elemental, or natural origins, grown, or been forged. Bring those imaginative fragments together with sensory language, and entangle this transformation of the object with the reality of your embodied self.
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## Creative Exercise: Narratives

In this poem, a wheelchair is reframed from being a static object into something that has its own, layered, personal and historical narrative. By exploring the narratives we attach to items connected to our bodies, can we redesign their meaning?

### Warm-up (A):

Choose an object that has an intimate connection with your body, in some way. It could be a medical device or mobility aid, a beloved piece of furniture, or a particular item of clothing. Write a list of ways that you interact with the item.

### Warm-up (B):

Think about some of the historical and cultural layers tied to the object, and consider questions like:

- Who made it and why?
- Historically, what forces shaped it being designed or existing?
- What personal experiences and memories do you tie to it?
- What societal symbolism is connected to it?
- What parts of its story are sometimes overlooked?

### Exercise:

In your poem, reclaim the history and narrative of the object. Connect this with your own experience, letting these strands build and layer on one another. You could move between your personal reasons for using this object, the reasons it might have been invented, the things it symbolises and means in society. Subvert stereotypes about this kind of object.

If you want, see what happens when you ask it what it knows or feels about you. What happens if it is a companion, a witness, or even the main character in its own story?

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## Technique Exercise: Shape and Motion

In this poem, the circular shape and motion of a wheelchair wheel shapes the motion of the poem as a whole. How does finding a shape and motion push and drive a poem's emotional and narrative arc?

**Warm-up (A):**

Identify a repeating motion and shape in your life (such as the line of a step forwards or the repetitive circle of stirring a pan) and write a few lines about how this motion and shape connect to your body.

**Warm-up (B):**

Visualise the forces and powers that create this repeating motion (think about the elements, the effort of your body, the cognitive and emotional connections that drive you through it) and write down vivid, sensory descriptions of how those forces operate.

**Exercise:**

Take the mundane motion or shape, and imbue it with a mythic, elemental power. Bring the motion back to your body, and how it reflects your thoughts and feelings. Let the shape of the movement be reflected in the pace of the poem.

**Exploring ‘cure for no diagnosis’ by Khairani Barokka**

Read the poem here: [bit.ly/4jB3UMY](https://bit.ly/4jB3UMY).

**Quick Exercise: Rituals**

In this poem, the ritual of self-care is brought into the world of the surreal, exposing further its ritualistic nature. The poet is reclaiming autonomy through their ritual engagement with themselves.

**Exercise:**

Invent a ritual. Think about how Khairani Barokka connects to their body, and use unexpected, sensory and surreal elements to bring together into a ritual of self-care for yourself. Allow it to reflect how you feel now - your mood, your state of mind, and your aspirations. Do this quickly and playfully, letting yourself have fun.

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**Creative Exercise: Imagery and Meaning**

The images in this poem connect things in unexpected ways, and in doing so, they reveal various truths about the speaker and their body.

**Warm-up:**

Make a list of ten unusual metaphors to describe parts of the body, comparing it to things you might see outdoors. For example: “The flesh as slightly molten tarmac in summer” or “The bones as scraps in a carpenter’s yard”.

**Exercise:**

Write a poem in which the body becomes a place or landscape. Use your metaphors to place the body across the landscape, whether relaxed and splayed out, or disjointed and disconnected. How do they give you access to a new way of thinking about space, and the ways the body lives in space?



## Technique Exercise: Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is a way of putting often very different things next to each other in surprising way. This poem juxtaposes mundane and tactile details with unexpectedly surreal and abstract ideas (like putting nail polish on the lips). Doing this can create space for new ideas to enter a poem, or force the reader to reconsider how elements might interconnect.

### Warm up:

Write five sentences juxtaposing two elements. Take a part of your body and contrast it with something abstract (like a sense, emotion, or memory). For example "the sun scorched my skin like a discordant bell" or "I painted my leg your favourite colour".

### Exercise:

Write a poem that describes a series of actions around the body, using the juxtapositions you created. See if you can find an emotional truth about the body amidst the absurd and unexpected combinations. How does playing with these contrasts shift the tone of your work?



## Exploring 'Cusped Prognosis' by Laurie Clements Lambeth

Read the poem here: [bit.ly/3WwoTGv](https://bit.ly/3WwoTGv).

### Quick Exercise: Perspective

In this poem, position shapes meaning. The poet often inclines, declines, drops, tips, but occasionally, just plateaus. With the chaos of the motion in the rest of the poem, the stillness of the plateau stands out, while the poet waits to be sent into motion again. How can we capture those still perspectives?

### Exercise:

With most of the poems we're reading, we're thinking about movement and transformation - but here, the poet is also still, or suspended. Bring to mind sensory details (taste, touch, smell, sight, sound, etc.) and fragments of knowledge (such as memories, thoughts or facts) that you feel remind you of being in a state of suspended animation. Try and connect them very gently. Most of the time we write poems to move - this time you're trying to write one to stay still.

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### Creative Exercise: Conversation

In this poem, medical professionals and authorities simply "say" things, while the speaker "says", "feels", "recalls", "assents". For disabled people, conversations with authority are continually pressed onto us.

### Warm-up:

Imagine the conversation your body might have with someone in a position of authority, like a doctor, judge or teacher. Take a page and divide it into two columns. One side should contain direct speech from this authoritative voice, and the other should hold the responses from you and your body.

### Exercise:

Once you've got a good number of lines in each column, try and put them together, constructing a short poem that shifts between the two voices. Think about how you want to connect the statements and responses, whether you want them next to each other or distant from each other. How does it change the authoritative voice to receive a response - and do they notice at all?

## Technique Exercise: Repetition

The poet repeats the same words over and over in this poem, allowing the reader to find new meanings in them each time (for instance, a 'mild decline' vs. 'they decline my invitation'). Every time a new meaning emerges, this almost rewrites the rest of the poem, allowing all the meanings for each word to be on every line, in every moment.

### Warm-up:

Pick a word that relates to a movement that you feel is interesting, and holds a lot of meaning, like "fell". Write five different sentences. Each sentence must use this word in different ways and contexts, allowing them to shift. For example: "I fell over. Fell into myself. Everything fell away. I fell apart. Fell forward."

### Exercise:

Write a poem that uses repetition to explore the way your body moves. Try and get as many meanings out of your repeated words as you can. Move back and forth around certain phrases, letting them take on new meanings as the piece grows and changes. Use repetition to create momentum and emotional resonance throughout the poem, helping it keep its pace, drive, and energy.



## Exploring 'I use the word Disabled' by Kay Ulanday Barrett

Read the poem here: [bit.ly/40ColuA](https://bit.ly/40ColuA).

### Quick Exercise: Lists

In this poem, the sternum holds MRIs, the chest holds an altar, the skull holds a pang. Maybe the body acts as a form of containment for these elements, some of which are tangible (like MRIs) and some of which are abstract (like a pang). Or is carrying them a burden? The poet, and poem, feel weighed down.

### Exercise:

Write a list of the things your body "holds". This could be literal or metaphorical. Use sensory details, emotions, and objects that feel linked to your physical embodiment. Bring in lots of contradictions, as long as they all feel true for you at different, various moments. Allow yourself to shift mood and tone as you move through the list.

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## Creative Exercise: Community

Our bodies don't exist in isolation. They, and we, are part of communities. The speaker of this poem is surrounded by strangers, family, friends, aunty, crips, and the collective, and interacts with them, triggering sharing, grimace, advocacy, and hope. There are positive and challenging interactions, amidst the bitterness of being in a space that wasn't built for you.

### Warm-up:

List a series of ways your body interacts with the world, especially with other people. These might be positive or negative (such as a rush hour crush, or seeing a friend across a room), but focus on how they create a visceral reaction in you.

### Exercise:

Situate your body in some form of collective experience - a train, a moment of intimacy, a public toilet, a family living room. Focus on how you and your body shift, change, and disrupt the dynamics of the space that you're in. Explore how your vulnerabilities connect, and how being together can be more - or less - isolating than being alone.

## Technique Exercise: Fragmentation

This poem is fragmented with words in square brackets. Those brackets allow us to read the lines both with and without the words inside them. This allows the poet to reshape what is read of their body, and push back from inside their own narrative.

### Warm-up:

Write five sentences in which you use brackets to add an aside, a contradiction, or an emotional undercurrent to the main statement in the sentence. Make sure that this changes the meaning, importance, or emphasis of the sentence. For example, "My [dead] father talks to me every day."

### Exercise:

Write a prose poem where you are continually interrupting yourself and your narrative using parentheses (words inside brackets, commas, or dashes) to capture an underlying meaning, truth, or observation that changes the sentence. Hide truths, memories and contradictions in there which capture the fractured experience of living in your body.

## About Jamie Hale

Jamie Hale is an award-winning poet and facilitator, founder of CRIPtic Arts, and one of the 10 most influential disabled people in the arts (Shaw Trust, 2022-24). Their work explores themes of nature, body and mortality through a 'crip' lens, embedding disability in form and content. They were a Jerwood Poetry Fellow 2021-22; their pamphlet, *Shield*, was published by Verve Poetry Press; and their award-winning show, *NOT DYING / Quality of Life is Not a Measurable Outcome*, has been performed and screened worldwide.

Instagram: [@JamieRHale](https://www.instagram.com/JamieRHale)



# How to be Held – On Writing Queer Tenderness

## Annie Hayter

### Introduction

Dear Readers and Writers,

This is Annie speaking. Thank you very much for joining me across time, space and the ether, to write about tenderness in all its beautiful, infinite and queer possibilities – through longing, resistance, and communion.

Whatever this word means to you, the exercises below are pathways to guide you into writing, using texts, songs, art, photographs, videos and other sources of inspiration.

Above all, I hope that these exercises give you a space to be tender with yourself, in the face of all that we move through in the world today. Tenderness is not a straightforward thing, but you bloody well deserve it. We all do.

These exercises are shaped with the understanding that we must be tender to ourselves, just as we must be tender to each other, to our communities, in the joint work of collective liberation.

I would encourage you to:

1. Write in whatever way feels good to you – whether you prefer a paper and pen, typing on a device, or using dictation software.
2. Try not to judge whatever it is you are writing – be tender to your words. They matter.
3. Follow wherever your mind goes, with the understanding that you can play around and experiment. This can be a difficult topic, so be gentle with yourself. You can always return to the writing another time.
4. Take a moment to ground yourself, if you need to. Think about whatever it is that will make you feel most comfortable when you enter and leave the writing space.
5. Respond to these exercises at your own pace, whether you do this in one sitting, with breaks, or spread out over time. If you find it helpful to use a timer, perhaps use 5, 10, 15 or 20 minutes for every exercise you choose to do, depending on how inspired you feel!
6. Choose whichever mini prompts you like from the individual exercises. There are a ton of them, but this is just so you have a list of options, and different directions you could travel in. You can always come back to any that are calling out to you.
7. Feel free to skip any exercises if they do not speak to you. Perhaps you could respond to them in a way that feels more meaningful to you! Or write in response to an exercise you would prefer to do.
8. Remember too, that though it can be hard to be vulnerable, sometimes it can be helpful to write into and through that challenge.

Alright! That's enough chuntering from me. Now for some exercises...

## Exercise 1 - Warm Up Those Cockles

Here are some prompts you can use to explore some freewriting, to get you started. This means just writing whatever comes into your mind, not worrying about spelling, grammar or punctuation, a bit like a stream of consciousness.

Use whatever language or way of writing that works for you. If you feel more comfortable with drawing, doodling also works to ease you into the process.

1. Think of a time when you had a bad haircut, hairstyle, outfit, or a day when you felt generally quite self-conscious. You could write about this time specifically. As a bonus, I'd encourage you to reflect back with compassion to yourself. For example:

*Between the ages of 12–18, I had an enormous combed-over fringe that I would pin to my forehead using a headband, and it would bob up and down, like a rodent plastered to my noggin. In photographs, I would position my face sideways, to best showcase said fringe, which I felt hid most of my ample forehead with a glamorous discretion. There are little to no photos of me from this time that are face-on...*

2. Write a list of moments of kindness. These could be real or imagined, anything big or small that comes to your mind, by humans, animals, nature, or the world in general. Feel free to zoom in on one.  
Alternatively, you could draw 4 scenes of kindness that you can remember. You could divide a page into 4 boxes, drawing a scene in each, and then write about the individual drawings.
3. What does it mean to you to pause / rest / wait?
4. Consider the language of the clouds.

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## Exercise 2: Danez Smith, Miracle Maker

Read Danez Smith's '[poem where I be & you just might](https://bit.ly/4hqwC1i)' and their afterword on the poem and its genesis ([bit.ly/4hqwC1i](https://bit.ly/4hqwC1i)).

Think about the poem – what does it mean to you? What does it do to you? Is there anything interesting, strange, or beautiful that stands out about this text?

Following Smith's writing, here are some suggested exercises:

1. 'Build a poem' in which tenderness is made possible. This could be towards yourself, towards a real person or community, towards an imagined figure, entity or object, or to 'your people', whatever this phrase means to you. Write what feels right to you.
2. Write about a conversation with someone. This could be real or imagined – perhaps it is a conversation you wish to have, or one that does not feel possible. It could be a conversation about forgiveness or acceptance, or it could be confrontational.
3. Pick three words in Smith's poem that feel the most important to you. For example, I might choose: 'eye', 'forgive', 'graze'. Think of antonyms for these words (words that have the opposite meaning, a classic example would be 'happy' is the antonym for 'sad') – and go as strange or as literal as you like for this. Write a text that uses these three invented antonyms.
4. Write a text that is made of ampersands (&). Treat them like breaths, extensions, punctuation or jumping off points. If you want some more inspiration, read Mary Jean Chan's poem '[an eternal &](https://bit.ly/40K12EL)' ([bit.ly/40K12EL](https://bit.ly/40K12EL)).
5. Smith speaks from their own individual experience in their afterword about 'keep[ing] the body in line'. Speaking to you directly, dear reader, what would it mean to keep the body out of line? Write in response to this idea.



## Exercise 3: What's In Your Tinderbox, Darling?

1. Imagine an ideal space of softness. What would it look like, smell like, feel like? It can be as magical or ordinary as possible. As tiny as a thumbnail or snowglobe, as enormous as a valley or galaxy, as cozy as a library nook, or as safe as a kangaroo's pouch. If you want to go a step further, imagine your child-self interacting with this place. How might little you have responded to this environment?
2. Make a map of beloved places, imagined or real. You can do this by drawing on paper or writing about them. Say, inside a lover's bed, or at a grandparent's table. In a sauna or resting on the warm of your dog's belly. Dancing in a nightclub with strangers. In a holy place, travelling in a vehicle, or a dream world, within the pages of a book or screen. These places can be complicated in their belovedness. Perhaps you could zoom into these scenes.
3. Create an alphabet of tenderness, thinking about any associations, memories or imagined encounters. You could do this by writing out an alphabet, such as A-Z, with each starting letter on a fresh line. You could write a sentence that begins with a word that uses the letter... For example:

*As I lay flat on the hospital floor, the nurse came running  
Brightly, the sky was mad with love for us*

But you can respond in any way that makes sense to you!

4. If tenderness were an animal / symbol / item / gesture, what would it be? Write a description of this. Equally, you could write about an object that you associate with tenderness. For example:

*My Nana always bought my mum hideously patterned fluffy socks from Poundland. I  
have inherited various pairs of these. Now my feet always have the gift of their warmth,  
and the remembrance of Nana's bad taste in patterns.*

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## Exercise 4: Let This Love You Back

1. Make a garment, object or talisman of protection. This can be as big or as little as you want. Draw it, describe it. You can weave in your own emotions, memories or feelings. How will it protect you, and keep you safe?
2. Think about a time where you or someone you loved deserved more care. This could be a specific moment. Re-write what could have happened, visualising this new happening. You could create a magical or more ordinary moment of better response.
3. Write a letter, prayer, spell, recipe or manual for tenderness to yourself. What would you wish for yourself, perhaps your younger, older or even present-day self? How might you grow more tenderness in your life?
4. Write a poem in praise of part of your body. If you want some inspiration, check out Lucille Clifton's poem '[homage to my hips](https://bit.ly/4hpQOAq)' ([bit.ly/4hpQOAq](https://bit.ly/4hpQOAq)).
5. Find an object or photo that is important to you. This could be an old photograph of you, perhaps of your younger self, or anything that feels significant. If you have a smartphone, or any kind of recording device, spend one minute recording a voice note describing what you see and feel, and any memories you associate with it.  
Play it back. Listen to yourself, and what you hear. Write a response.



## Exercise 5: Music To Your Eyes, Or Eyes

[Here is a playlist](#) I have made, chock-full of queer love songs, lullabies and bona fide bangers ([bit.ly/4hLDINE](https://bit.ly/4hLDINE)). If you would like to, use the prompts below as a way of interacting with this music.

Side note: the playlist moves between a range of genres and forms of music, mainly by LGBTQIA+ artists, from sadness, to silliness, to ecstasy, to pure sauce, to uprising... Some songs have lyrics in different languages, but translations can be found online for every song I've included. NB. Some of these songs contain explicit content.

1. You could freewrite whilst listening to some of the songs. For example, Beverly Glenn-Copeland's 'Ever New' is the first track on this playlist. Perhaps you could respond to this and write about the question – what might you want to welcome into your life?
2. You could choose a track and write something in response to it. You could listen to the song itself or read the lyrics instead as inspiration.
3. Alternative exercise: what would your soundtrack to tenderness feel like? Perhaps you could write a list of songs that articulate this feeling for you. Use this playlist for future writing sessions.
4. Alternative exercise: write in response to a song you already know that represents some form of tenderness to you – don't feel like you have to justify it, just choose one that comes to mind.

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## Exercise 6: Looking With Longing

I have enclosed some links to some different artists who create works around queerness, transness and tenderness, as well as some archival photos of people from history who we might now understand to be queer or trans. Where I've included Instagram links, if you don't have Instagram, you can look up the artist's name online to discover their art. I'm including images because this representation is important.

If you are able to work with visuals, I would encourage you to write or draw in response to an image of your choice. You could pick one of the images and write / draw whatever it makes you think of. Think about who or what is represented in the image. Is there a story behind it? Write about what this might be.

- Şolá Olúlòde's paintings of Black queer dreaming: [instagram.com/solaolulode](https://instagram.com/solaolulode)
- John Kirby's paintings of various bald figures, some quite disturbing. I have selected a single one here, but you can look through the gallery of his work by clicking on his name: [bit.ly/john-kirby](https://bit.ly/john-kirby)
- Images from *The Third Muslim: Queer and Trans\* Muslim Narratives of Resistance and Resilience*, an exhibit curated by Yas Ahmed and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which opened in SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco, California, in 2018. Works by Kiyaan Abadani, Nabeela Vega, Saba Taj and Jamil Hellu are pictured in the article: [bit.ly/3rdmuslim](https://bit.ly/3rdmuslim)
- Jess T Dugan's photo galleries. The first is of queer subjects gazing at the camera ([bit.ly/jesstd1](https://bit.ly/jesstd1)); the second depicts older trans people in the US ([bit.ly/4i2UiJl](https://bit.ly/4i2UiJl)).
- This is an archival photo postcard from Tom Phillips' series. This was taken in 1919 of two men, in Aberdeen. Their hands are touching: [bit.ly/tom-phillips-2](https://bit.ly/tom-phillips-2)
- Sunil Gupta's beautiful series of gay men in Delhi, 1980s: [bit.ly/sunil-gupta-exiles](https://bit.ly/sunil-gupta-exiles)
- Photos from club nights at WETLNDON, A South London Dyke Night for Music Heads. Photographers are acknowledged in individual captions: [instagram.com/wetldn](https://instagram.com/wetldn)
- Two Plant Gaysians: [instagram.com/twoplantgaysians](https://instagram.com/twoplantgaysians)

- Rachel Ungerer is a queer disabled artist who paints dreamlike scenes of joy: [instagram.com/r\\_ungerer](https://www.instagram.com/r_ungerer)
- Melissa Ianniello's photo series depicting older gay people in Italy: [bit.ly/melissa-ianniello](https://bit.ly/melissa-ianniello)
- Graciela Iturbide's photograph of Magnolia, in Juchitán, a town in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, 1986 where the existence of three genders is widely accepted by the Zapotec people: [bit.ly/magnolia-juchitan](https://bit.ly/magnolia-juchitan)
- Zanele Muholi's incredible photographic work, many of which are self-portraits of themselves, some of which depict queer and trans people (you can find more on Instagram): [bit.ly/zanele-muholi](https://bit.ly/zanele-muholi)
- Whiskey Chow's photographs of the performance M.A.C.H.O.: [whiskeychow.com/macho3](https://whiskeychow.com/macho3)
- Izat El Amoor's photographic essay 'QueerVisions: Capturing Life and Identity in Palestine': [bit.ly/izat-elamoor](https://bit.ly/izat-elamoor)
- Lokesh Saini's series THE QUEER DOES NOT EXIST: [bit.ly/lokesh-saini](https://bit.ly/lokesh-saini)
- Roman Manfredi's photographic series of working class butches in Britain: [romanmanfredi.com/weus](https://romanmanfredi.com/weus)
- Trent Kelley's 'Hidden in the Open: A Photographic Essay of Afro American Male Affections', archiving 140 images: [bit.ly/trent-kelley](https://bit.ly/trent-kelley)

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## Exercise 7: Time to Tend to Yourself

Thank you for joining me so far on this writing journey. I am sending you so much tenderness.

If you have the capacity to, try to take some time to be gentle with yourself. For some people, this might be breathing slowly and quietly, being in green, dark or quiet spaces, or having some kind of snack or hot drink. Equally, for others, this might be listening to heavy metal, doing intense physical activity, or something equally strenuous. Perhaps you could make a menu for yourself of things that you find soothing. What might this look like for you?

Being tender, offering compassion to ourselves and to other people, and holding spaces of acceptance and listening, are just a few crucial parts of the work of collective liberation. Whilst we might experience distinct and layered struggles, our struggles are entwined. We all deserve tenderness. In an environment where our rights are increasingly being encroached upon, and we are bearing witness to the collective horrors across the globe and at home, our words are meaningful, as is our compassion – as are our actions.

Think about offering tenderness to someone else. This could be something small or big. If you haven't volunteered before, and you have time to do so, find a local cause that you care about and which needs some help. Go to your local libraries. Join solidarity groups, find people to mobilise with, online or in person. You are not alone in this. Together, we can hold space for resistance and shift. Your writing matters. As does your voice.

With tenderness,  
Annie Hayter  
(they/them)

P. S. Below is a link to a Google Doc of some book and film recommendations, for the goose looking for more queer inspiration: [bit.ly/further-resources-annie](https://bit.ly/further-resources-annie). You'll also find there some links to mental health resources, LGBTQIA support resources and solidarity groups. This list was too long to include here, but I think it's important to offer up access to materials – especially because I didn't know about a lot of these resources when I was younger, and I would have been changed by access to them. This is by no means a full list, just some that came to mind.

## About Annie Hayter

Annie Hayter was born in a paddling-pool in Deptford, beneath a waning Cancer moon. They delight in writing about queer transformations, flatulent saints and sloughed skins – coming third in the Cúirt New Writing Prize for Poetry, and shortlisted for *The White Review's* Poet's Prize, Young People's Laureate for London, and Desperate Literature Prize. They've had writing published in *The Big Issue*, *The Rialto*, *Magma*, *The London Magazine*, *Time Out*, and have performed poetry on BBC Radio 3.

X: [@AnnieHayter](https://twitter.com/AnnieHayter)



# Voice + Versatility

## Karen McCarthy Woolf

### Introduction

Hello!

I'm Karen McCarthy Woolf and I'm leading a workshop on Voice & Versatility at this year's Deptford Literature Festival and so wanted to share some of the things I'll be considering in that session for you to try at home in your own time.

The idea that writers are always trying to find their own voice feels almost like a cliché. In my experience, hearing our own voice as distinct, and also as a consistent presence on the page, is something that almost magically clicks into place when we're not looking. It's also something that occurs when we reach towards writing other voices that are not our own.

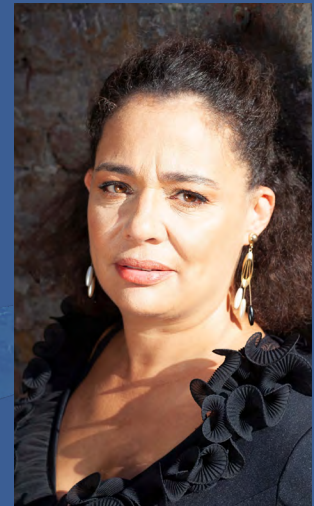
My latest book *Top Doll* is a verse novel. It's a hybrid work of fiction, loosely based on a true story, that is part poetry collection, and part biography of an American billionaire recluse, Huguette Clark, who barely left the house for 80 years. The narrative takes place in America over the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries and is told by various characters who lived with Huguette in her 42-room New York apartment – all of whom just happen to be dolls. There are rag dolls, porcelain dolls and of course a number of Barbies.

Because there are many speakers, I knew that it would be important to differentiate them, through particularities in their speech patterns, point of view, and vocabulary. I was aware that, as dolls, the language they spoke would be part of the world-building, and give us a clue not only to their individual personalities, but also help create a slightly fantastical scenario where inanimate objects have agency.

In this session, I'd like to share some exercises that help us create character and difference through voice.

### About Karen McCarthy Woolf

Karen McCarthy Woolf FRSL is a Fulbright postdoctoral Scholar whose novel *Top Doll* (Dialogue, 2024) blurs the boundaries between biography and speculative fiction and is described by Bernardine Evaristo as 'extraordinarily witty, moving and profound'.



## Exercise 1: Freewrite

I love freewriting because it helps us access material that exists beyond the conscious mind. It's like writing with the body. Sometimes we might freewrite around a given subject, and sometimes we might write something that traverses many topics, times and spaces. The only hard and fast rule I go by is to **keep the pen moving on the page** – or, if you're typing or speaking, **just don't stop**. That, and to give yourself a time limit. Writing against the clock is a great way to beat our inner critic and to discover ideas and situations our imagination tucks away in little crevices and corners.

This warm-up exercise is a three-part freewrite, to help you explore writing conflict. When we meet characters in conflict, where their desires are thwarted, I think it really reveals something authentic: both in what is said and how that's conveyed.

### Characters in Conflict

- Set a timer for 5 minutes.
- Think of the last time you had an argument with someone. It might be a big row or a small conflict - the most important thing is that you had a disagreement that still feels unresolved. Where you still need to have the last word.
- Start with the phrase 'Although I...'
- Now write. Use your 5 minutes to write out exactly what happened. How you felt. Why you think you were right. What you wish you'd said.
- Starting the piece with the word 'although' brings us right into the middle of the conflict, and it's a useful trick when we want to get to know a character and understand more about their world and what motivates them.

### Shifting Perspectives

- Set a timer for 5 minutes.
- In this freewrite you will be responding as the other person. What is their perspective? How do they feel? Write this from their point of view, in the first person. Even if you don't know that person (if, for example, your argument was with a bus driver or a stranger in the street), then just allow them to respond to the event.
- Don't forget to write as fast as you can. Don't pause to think about it. Let the body do the work. If you get stuck, simply write the same word (maybe it's 'maybe') over and over until something else comes through. This seems ridiculous at first, but it really helps keep that inner critic at bay!

### The Thing

- Once the alarm sounds, take a moment to read through your text. Underline every object/thing. Is the argument about a specific thing? The washing-up? Who did or didn't take the bins out? Or a pet dog, or cat?
  - Set your timer for another 5 minutes.
  - Now respond as either the thing about which the argument centred, or any object in the vicinity. So it could be the sofa, a park bench, the bins, a fox, the changing room at the swimming baths.
-



## Exercise 2: Argumentative Abecedarian

### ROYAL BARBIE FROM ENGLAND

Karen McCarthy Woolf, from *Top Doll* (Dialogue Books, 2024)

Americans adore the Royal Family!  
Big Ben, Buck House: paid by the

Civil List, that's taxpayers not the  
Duke of York. The Chancellor of the

Exchequer handles it all, once a  
fortnight I have to check my diary, the

Garden Party's always something of a  
highlight, at Her Majesty's Pleasure!

In-joke, sorry. The days of medieval  
jousting are over, apart from tithes cos

King Henry made a state of the church.  
Legally I don't know the details but

Marie-Antoinette is a case in point.  
Now this is the best bit --because

once Dolly gets By Royal Anointment  
printed on her product she'll be

quintessentially untouchable, the dosh'll  
roll in, anybody pisses her off

Scotland Yard looks straight into it.  
That's how it works! You don't have to

understand anything, maybe pretend  
Victorian values are up your Champs Elysee.

Windsor Castle's lovely at Easter, no  
expense spared on the refurb they did last

year, next Christmas we're going to Kenya or  
Zanzibar on safari, tax free charity work.



## CEO Barbie

Karen McCarthy Woolf, from *Top Doll* (Dialogue Books, 2024)

As a Senior Business Professional I'm never without my  
briefcase even if I'm at the beach my halter-neck bikini and cerise

cravat tied in a pussy-bow tucks between the white lapels of my  
double breasted power suit my glossy stare never falters a Chief

Executive must know when and how to delegate! I told Dolly:  
fax me darling! I'll have my people look right into it, crack the

glass ceiling? Sure I'm vintage 1985, a ball breaker, obviously  
head hunted, Cherry Blossom Pink that's my brand this is my

itinerary: breakfast briefing, let's do lunch! Speak to Ken! My dream  
job is right now My desk is diagonal from the door Feng Shui says

killer heels should be sharp and pointed as a you're fired! memo  
Luck isn't relevant in business! Or politics What isn't governed by

market forces? After Maman went to Doctor's Hospital Dolly  
negotiated a crazy deal with our Head of production. I was

obliged to overrule in the same way my role model Nancy kept  
President Reagan in check I mean everyone agrees his IQ was

questionable his PR skills slightly better he even angled  
ROI on the Iran-Contra affair you make more money on arms

sales but drugs are so much more effective in the long  
term particularly when you declare war on them cocaine was

ubiquitous as shoulder pads all Dolly wants now is an endless  
VIP guest list while I keep my head down under my very

wide-brimmed hat developing a strategy that involves a lot of  
Xanax which was also big back then anxiety is through the roof

year on year I learnt everything from my business Bible: Sun  
Tzu's Art of War which says strike the weak just like Ron and Nancy

Have a read through the two poems above. They are both abecedarians, an ancient form where each of the 26 lines begins with a letter of the alphabet in sequence. There's also some excellent examples of abecedarians on the [Poetry Foundation website](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/abecedarian). ([bit.ly/40UQnau](https://bit.ly/40UQnau))

Now write up your argument from the first exercise in the form of an abecedarian. You can refer to your notes. Choose one perspective and stick to it throughout. You might find it harder as you progress - particularly when you hit the X and the Z. In a way, it's a bit like rhyme: you want to find a word that doesn't stick out or feel like it's only there because it needs to follow your poem's pattern. For this reason, I relax the rules on the X, so you could use words like 'experience' or 'excited' or 'exile' rather than 'xylophone'! This is so you privilege the voice rather than sticking rigidly to the form for the sake of it. Equally, with the 'Z', you could also allow yourself to simply have a word with a 'Z' in it. Try and get the 'Z' at the front of the word if you can, so maybe something like 'azure' or 'azalea' even!

What's useful about this form is how it helps elicit unexpected results and surprising vocabulary. It can also take a story along a different pathway. Sometimes it might just be an exercise to understand a character better; but sometimes, it can take on a life of its own and become a finished poem. Beware though – they're addictive! Once you write one, you may want to do a whole lot more.

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### Exercise 3: 20 Questions

Another way to get to know our characters is to interview them. A lot of what you might learn in this exercise isn't something you would include in the story itself, but the more you know about your character's lives, the more real they are to you - and to the reader. Who did they vote for in the last election? Where do they go on holiday? What did they do last Saturday night? You might also think about some of those celebrity interviews from magazines, where interviewees have to answer a series of quickfire questions, such as 'cat or dogs?', 'savory or sweet?', 'mountains or sea?'. Then there are shows such as BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, where a guest is invited to share eight music tracks they'd take if they were stranded on a remote island. If you're working on characters for a novel or a story, what would they want to listen to? What era do their tracks come from?

- Write out 20 questions for your character/s.
- Again, set the timer and don't give yourself too long – 10 to 15 minutes as a starter. If you need more time, reset the clock, but try to work quickly and intuitively.
- After you've answered these questions, you can spend a little longer on thinking about which eight tracks your character might take to their desert island. Can you gather that playlist?

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### Exercise 4: Diary

Your final prompt is to write up an imaginary diary entry from your character's perspective. This can be from any period of their life, but while you write, play the tracks from their playlist. What kind of mood does the music evoke? What can we tell about their character from their selection? On the radio programme, guests are invited to choose one song from their selection which is most important to them. What would your character choose, and why? The more thoroughly we know a character, even if most of the biographical information we create for them is backstory, the more consistent we can be in creating a believable and authentic voice, and a character who is consistent in their range of responses and behaviours. It's also fun!