Hope on a postcard

John Challis and Sinéad Morrissey introduce poetry writing exercises inspired by The Mighty Stream: Poems in Celebration of Martin Luther King

Introduction

Inspired by Dr Martin Luther King’s visit to Newcastle University in 1967 to accept an honorary doctorate, and by the anthology of poems published by Bloodaxe Books and the Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts to honour his visit (The Mighty Stream: Poems in Celebration of Martin Luther King, 2017), poets John Challis and Sinéad Morrissey were invited to run poetry workshops in a male maximum security prison. They explored, with a group of self-selecting inmates, the three themes of King’s acceptance speech: poverty, racism and war.

The following exercises are the ones that that really connected with the prison group, and you are invited to try them yourselves as individual writers, or as part of school or other poetry groups. Read more about the prison workshops in Poetry News online at bit.ly/hopepostcard.

“We can’t get enough poetry in prison”
– Participant in a 2017 poetry in prison workshop
A Martin Luther King Golden Shovel

The Golden Shovel is a new poetic form devised by poet Terrance Hayes to celebrate the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. The last words of each line in a Golden Shovel poem are, in order, words from a line or lines taken often, but not invariably, from a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks. However, instead of using a line from one of Brooks’ poems, Patricia Smith, in ‘How I Won the War’, uses a well-known quote from a speech by Martin Luther King Jr. Read the poem below beginning to end, then read in order the last word of every line. What does it say?

Patricia Smith
How I Won The War

This country wages a savage war inside the blurring borders of my body. I gulp gorgeous poisons in an attempt to unsettle the soldiers, but they refuse to cease their incessant bludgeon and scrape. Hoisting their weapons to threaten my throat, they crash wildly through my ribs, urging me to accept their generous, just-once offer to lay down arms – but only if I abandon the thread of Mississippi in my name, scour my skin of shadow and ash, view myself as they view me. I am screech, belly and head rag. I’m too brash, that girl who turns landscapes restless and bellows the curious wrongs of mankind, over and again, I’m just a motto machine. That bothersome blip in my chest is the cold murmur of the soldiers’ cocked rifles. The preacher warned me, so long ago, that this body – and the shreds of soul clinging to it – might tragically be the spoil of war. Unless I was Negro wide and aloud, my body was bound for other hands, for bluster and primp, my exotic womb would be measured to explain any residual daylight. Preacher, know that every damned day I fight the

Poem continues overleaf
faceless regiment inside me, that I’ll battle until the night is blown starless, 
fight unskirted and dirty, straight through the slow dawn and that midnight
you warned me against. My country seems dead set on draining me of
you. It mocks your softness, says your lessons are ludicrous now that racism
is such a small spot over our shoulders. Dismissing your words as poems and
music, it doesn’t know that every single word you uttered was a call to war,
a fervent war with this hated black body as both focus and reward, a war that
wanted my mama’s and daddy’s Southern names, wanted to straight up slap the
crime of dark deeper into my history. Every day, this war holds up another bright
lie, your words tangled, a fiction I have to surround and shatter to find daybreak.

Preacher, it’s true that fewer of us are discovered dangling from the tired arms of
trees. But how many brown men were simply grown into the trees, at peace
with their hearts thrumming in the bark? For them, I wish that justice and
righteousness came just because it had to, because it was time. Brotherhood
is again a concept, thanks to a white man who struggles comically before he can
remember your name. But preacher, I want you to know that I have never
forgotten. I sing you to the reckless soldiers in my body until they become
wary of their weapons, until they forget they have sworn to lay waste to a
woman who knows and loves you – not as or in a dream – but as her reality.

Exercise 1

Using a quote by Martin Luther King in the way Patricia Smith does in ‘How I Won
the War’, try writing your own Golden Shovel. You might like to write the words in a list down
the right-hand margin before you start. This way, you’ll know which word each line needs to work
(see our example, right).

The words from the chosen line must appear in order at the end of each line of your poem. Like in
Smith’s poem, you may wish to address your poem to a country, or to someone particular.
Here are a few famous quotes by Martin Luther King that you could use in your Golden Shovel, though please feel free to look for and discover your own.

“If I cannot do great things I can do small things in a great way.”

“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

“Let no man pull you low enough to hate him.”

“Only in the darkness can you see the stars.”

“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

“Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love war.”

“We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope.”

“We may have all come in different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

“We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”

“The time is always right to do what is right.”

“Only in the darkness can you see the stars.”

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“We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”

“The time is always right to do what is right.”
Enjambment in poetry is the running on of one line onto the next without a terminal end to the line (i.e. a full stop). A use of enjambment helps to place stress on the last word in a line in order to carry the reader forward onto the next part of the sentence. This combined with caesura, which is the ending of a sentence using a full stop mid-way through a line, can create various rhythmical and dramatic effects.

Read the poem below, ‘On Disappearing’ by Major Jackson about race and politics, and which displays interesting uses of enjambment and caesura.

**Major Jackson**  
**On Disappearing**

I have not disappeared.  
The boulevard is full of my steps. The sky is full of my thinking. An archbishop prays for my soul, even though we met only once, and even then, he was busy waving at a congregation.  
The ticking clocks in Vermont sway back and forth as though sweeping up my eyes and my tattoos and my metaphors, and what comes up are the great paragraphs of dust, which also carry motes of my existence. I have not disappeared.  
My wife quivers inside a kiss.  
My pulse was given to her many times,  
in many countries. The chunks of bread we dip in olive oil is communion with our ancestors, who also have not disappeared. Their delicate songs I wear on my eyelids. Their smiles have given me freedom which is a crater I keep falling in. When I bite into the two halves of an orange whose cross-section resembles my lungs,
a delta of juices burst down my chin, and like magic,
makes me appear to those who think I’ve
disappeared. It’s too bad war makes people
disappear like chess pieces, and that prisons
turn prisoners into movie endings. When I fade
into the mountains on a forest trail,
I still have not disappeared, even though its green facade
turns my arms and legs into branches of oak.
It is then I belong to a southerly wind,
which by now you have mistaken as me nodding back
and forth like a Hasid in prayer or a mother who has just
lost her son to gunfire in Detroit. I have not disappeared.

In my children, I see my bulging face
pressing further into the mysteries.

In a library in Tucson, on a plane above
Buenos Aires, on a field where nearby burns
a controlled fire, I am held by a professor,
a General, and a photographer.
One burns a finely wrapped cigar, then sniffs
the scented pages of my books, scouring
for the bitter smell of control.
I hold him in my mind like a chalice.
I have not disappeared. I swish the amber
hue of lager on my tongue and ponder the drilling
rigs in the Gulf of Alaska and all the oil-painted plovers.

When we talk about limits, we disappear.
In Jasper, TX you can disappear on a strip of gravel.

I am a life in sacred language.
Termites toil over a grave,
and my mind is a ravine of yesterdays.
At a glance from across the room, I wear
September on my face,
which is eternal, and does not disappear
even if you close your eyes once and for all
simultaneously like two coffins.
Now write a poem about disappearing (perhaps about an instance where you felt you had disappeared). Here are some prompts to help:

- Have you ever disappeared? Perhaps there was a time in your life when you felt invisible?
- Or perhaps you are being erased? From where? Someone’s memory?
- What does it feel like?
- What are you disappearing into?
- Where are you? Are you inside or outside?
- What time of day is it?
- Perhaps you are becoming liquid, or immersing yourself in water?
- Or perhaps you are becoming air?
- How long does it take to disappear?
- What is left after you’ve disappeared? Clothes? Objects? Rooms?

After you have written freely, spend some time producing a new draft from what you have written. Try to include at least three uses of enjambment in your poem.

- Think about where you will break the line.
- How can you create a similar effect to Jackson in ‘On Disappearing’?
- Try to vary your line length to create a varied sound.
- Use a mixture of lines. Some should be complete phrases with full stops at the end, and some should run onto the next line.
Your Hometown

Raymond Antrobus’s ‘Jamaican British’ is a part Ghazal (Pronunciation: “guzzle”). Antrobus’s Ghazal consists of syntactically and grammatically complete couplets that each end on the same word or phrase (the radif). In this example it’s ‘Jamaican British’.

Read the poem below and note the ways in which Antrobus varies the sentence structure, grammar and syntax so that the phrase ‘Jamaican British’ takes on new meaning in each couplet.

Raymond Antrobus
Jamaican British

after ‘Broken Ghazal’ by Aaron Samuels

Some people would deny that I’m Jamaican British.
Angelo nose. Hair straight. No way I can be Jamaican British.

They think I say I’m black when I say Jamaican British
but the English boys at school made me choose: Jamaican, British?

Half-caste, half mule, house slave – Jamaican British.
Light skin, straight male, privileged – Jamaican British.

Eat callaloo, plantain, jerk chicken – I’m Jamaican
British don’t know how to serve our dishes; they enslaved us.

In school I fought a boy in the lunch hall – Jamaican.
At home, told Dad, I hate dem, all dem Jamaicans – I’m British.

He laughed, said, you cannot love sugar and hate your sweetness,
took me straight to Jamaica – passport: British.

Cousins in Kingston called me Jah-English,
proud to have someone in their family – British.

Plantation lineage, World War service, how do I serve Jamaican British?
When knowing how to war is Jamaican British.
Now try writing your own broken Ghazal about your hometown in the style of Antrobus’s poem. Instead of using the phrase “Jamaican British” at the end of each line or couplet, you should end each couplet with the name of your hometown. The poem can be as gritty or as celebratory as it needs to be.

About the poets

**Raymond Antrobus** is a poet and educator born in London to an English mother and Jamaican father. He is the author of *Shapes & Disfigurements*, *To Sweeten Bitter* and *The Perseverance*. In 2019 he became the first ever poet to be awarded the Rathbone Folio Prize for best work of literature in any genre.


**Patricia Smith** is an American poet, teacher, and performance artist whose work has won many prizes and accolades. Her latest book, *Incendiary Art* (TriQuarterly Books, 2017, & Bloodaxe, 2019), won the 2018 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and the 2017 Los Angeles Times Book Award in poetry. She is professor of creative writing at the City University of New York/College of Staten Island.

**Sínéad Morrissey** and **John Challis** both teach at the Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts. John’s latest collection is *The Black Cab* (Poetry Salzburg, 2017) and Sínéad’s is *On Balance* (Carcanet, 2017).

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