

In lockdown, I have been working with Y11 and 13 students whose schooling ended very abruptly in March to offer them some continued contact with school and an opportunity to think creatively. Some Y12 students have joined us too. Creative writing is a brilliant focus for these unsettling times; it is good to be intellectually and creatively busy and logging on for regular sessions gives shape to our days and helps to support a positive and engaged outlook on the world. I have been writing a scheme for Y11 called the Cultural Capital Creatives in which we examine myths and stories from Ancient Greece, often those found in Ovid, and track their appearance through poetry, music and art history to the present day, before writing in response to each story. With Y13 I have been offering a blend of such sessions and stand-alone ones focusing on individual poetic or literary forms or stimuli. Students comment on one another's work and have time to develop their writing between sessions. Throughout, I have written alongside students and enjoyed this work very much. I am so proud of the work they have written in these jangling months and feel that the level of skill and confidence in their writing that they now display is joyful and heartening stuff. I do hope that you will enjoy this selection of work from some of the students who have participated.

Justine Cohen – English & Drama

*

Molly Y13

After engaging with Ovid's retelling of the greek myth of Diana/Artemis and Actaeon, we wrote responses which didn't have a prescribed form or style but tried to use perspectives on the story that were maybe less obvious.

Good dog

I know a boy
He put worms and wasps in a jar in his garden, buried in soil
To "see who would win".

Ha.
Grub bodies were bloated and swollen and stung and the wasps needed air.
Like the film where the boy tied a rock to a frog and it sank and he laughed
Then his mum fell through ice, drowned herself.

Actaeon hiked with Tycho his dog, not like the old story,
With Killer and Chafer and Donner and Blitzen, Snowy and blah blah Bashful.
And he wasn't a fool - he wore Timberland boots, had some crisps and some water, an ipod,
Binoculars.

Hunter gatherer pack mob mental
Just saw toes and his eyes squeezed shut
But in his head the feet trailed up

And as the thought is the crime,
Tych was chasing a laughing chain of sausages

Yum yum yum yum

They smelled like treats, his park buddies, tennis balls and bollards.
Dinner scraps, which flew up a tree so playfully

Actaeon was being chased by his mum.

And she knew he stole her cigarettes and smoked them all at 14

And she knew he was gay

And his head was suddenly made of branches and caught stuck crack

He vomited on hooves, felt the guilt and tar

Fingernails rolled away, binoculars cracked.

Diana watched and was bored,

A conductor of her own teeth,

Grinning leather boots.

But there's only so many Adam's apples you can cut out for beast blackberry pie.

And there's always a surplus of men.

Meanwhile half-a-boy's mum was at home hoping her son would find someone nice soon.

She could pretend to be surprised and they could all go skating.

*

Clemmie Y13

After looking at Kim Addonizio's Sonnet form, in which a line is taken from an existing sonnet as the starting point, and then one word from within this line repeated on each subsequent line, I wrote one using a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 65 as my first line, and "hold" as my repeating word.

In the Eye of the Beholder

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,

But with a hand holding a hand as one drifts through consciousness,

Beauty will hold Rage in her palm like a honey bee,

A sugary breeze closing her fingers, but withholding at the promise of a sting.

Rage sits on the steps and weeps, Beauty holds such power

Over her, un beholden, with eyes that whisper and a tongue that tricks.

Rage sputters and gulps and holds out her hands -

And the world tells her she is toxic. Rage upholds

Her roaring truth and they grab a hold of her and shake.

Beauty holds onto her words, twisting them over dough hooks.

Beauty puts Rage in a chokehold and nails down the lid of her coffin.

Beauty calls the doctor and dances to the hold music, feet slapping on the deck,

Twirling lovers in the moonlight, holding herself insurmountable,

Sneakily taking a bite out of each of them, and never holding herself accountable.

Sylvie Y11

This piece of prose was written for a Cultural Capital Creatives session on Echo and Narcissus, and the Ancient Greek notion of there being several sorts of love, aside from passionate and romantic love. Sylvie looked at one particular type of love: Pragma

Pragma

Today is like yesterday. She wakes up at six thirty, and sits on the edge of their bed with her head turned wistfully toward the window. He stirs, makes a soft sound, then is deathly still again, face hidden in their blanket.

Her gaze travels on and on, wanders out through the glass and roams the gently rolling hills. She isn't wistful for anything in particular, she knows; but this vague, plaintive longing veils her vision every now and again, like a pearly silk sheet: a faint idea of something extravagant and impossible, very distant. She will never find it, and in that knowledge she is content.

They have a nice house in the hills, overlooking the lake. Different shades of evergreen crowd the speckled shores, an ever-hopeful, whispering audience- they remind her to buy broccoli on the shopping run.

She wakes truly for a second time as she stands. Slippers, stairs, bathroom, the mirror. Grey hairs. Bags under her eyes like luggage. He doesn't mind, she thinks, though he doesn't have to say it. Brush teeth. Radio. Feed the shepherd dog (Molly). Coffee. Kitchen table. Sunlight warms the surface of the stained wood and makes shades of autumn out of the brown kitchen tiles.

She looks around the room with care. It's full of fragile souvenirs- an unwashed set of plates were a gift from him to her, an anniversary- no, a wedding present from her mother. Thirty-one years, as of last week. They are piled unceremoniously on the draining board, with day-old baked beans on them. The shelves need dusting.

He comes down the stairs just as she burns a slice of toast. He greets her surreptitiously, with a croaky voice, and she responds with a smile. They are often strangers in the morning.

At seven, he walks the dog. Molly barrels gracefully through the heather, panting passionately by his side at the notion of a stick. He appreciates loyalty like no one else she has known, and sometimes it agonises her- whatever feeling she has ever known has now transfigured over time into a secular, familiar faithfulness. A loving faith, but a plain one. She is thinking this as she leaves the front gate, and on her way to the village to buy groceries, umbrella in hand on the warning of an overcast sky, her eyes are drawn up to the hills. On one of those green sunlit slopes, he is standing. She feels it immensely.

Days pass like a lullaby. She still hums discordantly while she paints. He still sits on the porch alone to smoke a cigarette after dinner. The lake is still bright and distant. Neither will ever complain.

Grace Y13

The way I created this poem from the stimulus was from exploring the story of Icarus and the artwork of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who painted significant literary events happening alongside ordinary village life.

Why is Icarus so often blamed for his fate?
A boy raised in the yoke of his father's
Actions and responsibilities, how was he to fully
grasp the danger of a world he had not seen?

Oh the novelty of wax and wing! For the first time,
The sun and the sea and the sky were not a tableau
Framed by the stone walls, but hot and panting and
Spread further than he could comprehend.

So of course he flung himself forward with such
Naive vigour. He who had been starved was
Gorged; he who had been denied was suddenly
Being necked by the warm, grasping sun above.

It reeled him in, and perhaps Icarus was not
Flapping his arms - not flying upwards, at all -
But instead reaching, fingers splayed out in front of him,
Grasping for a new touch other than a paternal embrace.

How could he have known that the sun would burn?

I found the inspiration for this free-write through my discovery of a phenomenon called "single night houses", or "tŷ unnos", in Welsh - in which if you could build a house on common land in a single night, the land then belonged to you.

It's incredible how quickly you begin to lose it, when without other people. Build a house in one night on an abandoned rocky flatland; throw your axe as hard as you can and where it lands is now the boundary of your property. Get the chimney smoking and huddle by the hearth, listening to the wind pushing forcefully on the walls. In the morning, feed the animals, stare at the endless horizon, feel it staring back. Build a barnhouse for the animals - did you leave the hammer there? Surely not. Surely it's nothing. Fall asleep sat up, staring at the front door with hammer in hand. Wake up, nothing. Tend to the animals - one less than normal. Get a dog to guard the sheep. Stare at the hills in the distance; stare at the solitary light half way up it.

Nia Y13

After looking at Simon Armitage's poem, 'Not The Furniture Game', I tried to write my own poem about a person, using shapes, sounds and elements of their personality to create interesting and sometimes discordant metaphors that connected their features.

Her hair was a drained mop head, smeared in the leftover nutella
and her eyes were the broken seal of the nutella pot
and her blink was the fridge door, at odds with the flickering light within
and her teeth were buttons on the remote control
and her bite was half a sucked lemon.
Her nostrils were plug sockets.
And her mouth was the dark cavern of an old singer sewing machine, running on steam
and her smile was a surgeon's needle
and her tongue was a fur scarf that fed through the needle
and her whistle was a tape measure passing through fingers
and her laugh was the clang of a thimble.
She coughed, and it was rhubarb jam.
And her headaches were the mobile cranes upstairs
and her arguments were the empty rooms they filled until claimed by the NHS
and her neck was her resolve that kept her going
and her arms were the different attachments for the electric mixer.
Her elbows were the speed control knobs.
And her wrists were rotary whisks
and her handshakes were hugs
and her fingers were hand-knitted scarves securely fastened
and the palm of her her hands were cross stitch designs
and both thumbs were her cats' curled tails that my dad sat on.

*

Isabel Y12

We focused on images for the prose task - some Hopper, Degas (I chose Vallotton's The Box at the Theatre, Gentleman and Lady) - first thinking about questions in relation to it, and then using it as a stimulus for writing.

When I am laid in earth. Layèd. When I get...For men create women in books, where they can kill them for being desirable, send them to the theatre box, push them under a train, and in times to come we will call it freedom. So I am trapped, in this box, in this hat, like a voice trying to pronounce *Heimlich* while choking. How lightly she moves, an arachnid, her, the one in the silly felt crown. When I am laid in earth. I must write

to...hm, no. I must fetch the keys out of the nursery. For death is now a welcome guest, and I shall give him tea, and poppy seed cake, and a memento mori to hold in his hand, like the fire of Vesta.

Would you like to watch a tragedy with me, he said, and I could have said, *we have already*, but I slipped my gloves on, a way of saying, there are diseases, keep your distance, keep away. As we drove away and I looked backwards, I thought how much my receding home looked like the tide, like his hairline. We were not children together. Remember. Did Eve take Adam's ribs with her, breathless? Forget my...

When Dido next saw Aeneas, she turned away, and so so do I, leaving him there amidst the encores and snoring duchesses, watching him receding like...never mind. Thinking *creep* as slipped feet slip down the spiral stairs, *snob*, swallowing the night air like a sword, *supercilious*, cool and cold like a sunken ship. I must fetch the keys out of the nursery. I must take my hat, my diseases, my rib with me. I must not look back.

*

Eleni Y11

I arrived at this poem from the stimulus of Pygmalion, exploring Galatea's reaction to the first human sensation she feels.

Coming alive

One kiss, rough and unwelcome,
bound hellishly with the immediacy of warmth;
the warmth of coming alive, turning cold
from the aching bind to her lips.

Life was in her bones,
but it was gone, unfelt, with the trace
of this kiss; now she was no
more than a breathing statue

confined to his iron chains.
Any endeavour to escape would be fruitless;
she could do nothing
but submit to revulsion.

*

Hana Y13

The sonnet form is often associated with love poetry and I wanted to keep to that tradition but without focussing on romantic love, instead looking at familial love.

A striding hunger to bond disease
Falls short to this pale, gaunt marrow,
An indent of the bone and back bowed knees
Presents a spawned and black horned sparrow.
The start of this flight to a perfection flail
Calls for the frank, flesh fitted pastor,
To rip a wing from this shadowed entrail
And feed it to their flickering master.
But my master is that worm from mother to mouth,
Was strong when the chill came flocking,
Though couldn't fight morning's music south,
Taken by the sharp gate's knocking.
There I come, to see your gold resting set,
With you, lay my black horned sparrow's fret.

The task was to write a limerick on falling in love, so I decided to take the concept of 'falling' literally.

I'm scared that I'm too close to falling
The fear that I feel is appalling,
The height isn't bad, nor my choice of the lad
But hitting the ground I'll be bawling.

*

Lydia Y13

Freewriting on unused time.

In between time

habitual checking of watch, four fourteen, nothing really happens at four o'clock, chews bottom lip...

something called incarnathan is on the radio, sounds awful, spreads vitalite on a rice cake, boils kettle, eats rice cake, burns finger on kettle, Nathan is a black widow spider this week (has started to listen against her will), runs finger under cold water, still eating rice cake with other hand, Nathan gave an underwhelming moral performance as a house cat the week before (Cunk's voice makes her finger redder), chews bottom

lip (that's redder too, now), in actuality, feels quite grey (has been inside all day) maybe she will go for a walk, Nathan has just been eaten by his wife.

Sitting with her bare bum on a tree trunk since the toilets were closed because of improper use (sign read: THESE TOILETS HAVE BEEN CLOSED BECAUSE OF IMPROPER USE), pulls trousers up, bangs head on tree trunk, thinks about the analogous connections between the natural world and human experience, trips on untied shoelace, wonders if trees are wise (Olive McWaters said that trees are wise), trips on untied shoelace again, wants a rice cake, she thinks that trees probably are wise because they look quite wise and they feel quite wise and Olive McWaters DID say that they were wise, sees a jumper hanging on the bench, it is quite wet (it's raining), takes arm of jumper out from the inside to get a good look, man sees her considering taking someone else wet jumper, she moves away from bench, thinks about the stock market to soundtrack of country hit 'chicken fried' by Zac Brown Band, ow (her finger), wonders how many strangers' pictures she is the background of, little bit o' chicken fried, cold beer on a Friday night, mmmhhmm mmm fit just right mmhmm, chews bottom lip.

Habitual checking of watch, eight thirty-four, thinks that it is probably time to go home, things usually happen after eight thirty-four.

Written in response to Edward Hopper painting:



Your knee dug into me before did you know? Surely not, contortion is for those below. A compact is a mirror, not a pose. You hold it, You impose- I reflect (looking good handsome!), back in your pocket. The air around you crunches I am mean to smooth it I would rather crack it brittle air STAMP.

You don't see the fragments, shouts seep into the fabric of the evening. Legions in the air ooze oily blood. Your skin is leather, your hair is wire. I am about to-

Oh. I am being painted. I turn away- hand on piano, slanted shoulders (one must be modest above all!)

I am 9 years old. I am eating sticks of butter while my tea goes cold. Forbidden? Pah! I, cut another stick (the knife too, you say?)

'Your tea is going cold!'

I never did like tea. She says I must like tea for ladies like tea and she says I must not eat butter for ladies do not eat butter but I saw her cramming a twix in her mouth in the car yesterday; she swallowed the thing whole! Hypocrite (I learnt that word yesterday when dad was shouting at her)

'Be there in a sec!'

Instead I run out to the dirt. It smells of lemons. Edward Berger, you say? Who is that?

In retrospect I have worn my life like a plastic bag. Oh! I can over boil an egg, play piano if the occasion demands, I was once in an Edward Hopper (or someone like me, for I never recognise that woman).

The years smell of the clearing of a throat, a cough, noticing a piece of dust. Every task done at 100 miles an hour... the hours never smell of lemons. Perhaps if I had- but I posed instead- hand on piano, slanted shoulders (one must be modest above all!)

*

Tatiana Y11

Alice's World

Alice's brain was purely scrambled,
Her schizophrenia barely handled,
Her pills changed and turned up a notch,
Still the White rabbit stares at his watch.
The Chesire cat still stuck in a grin
And the Knave of Hearts still rapt in sin.
The doormouse still sleeping her various dreams.
The Queen of Hearts yelling her sudden screams.
The magic tea in which the Mad Hatter sips, the march-hare behaving and refraining from hits,
Still tucks in his napkin as he watches their trips.
The real good shroom was where the caterpillar sits
His wise manner as he Rambles his wits
The nicotine still helping his god awful fits.
Poor Alice still stuck on her special "retreat",
Only friends with the twins from her brain she did greet
Who she only knows as tweedledum and dee,
This enchanted world is all she can see.
Her therapist says shes on the right track
But alice's trains gone, theres no going back

No longer is possible to see the sane station
Instead a place where you lose concentration
A place of good thoughts but a mind stuck in time
Not even the rabbit to keep you in line
Not a story which changes at the bell chime
A place the mad hatter could not withstand
And Most definitely not called a wonderland.

*

Elika Y13

Short story inspired by Edward Hopper's painting 'Automat'.

Past:

Sipping her cup of coffee or tea in her ungloved hand, there's more to this one than that meets the eye. What are you doing out so late my dear? The darkness seems particularly concentrated right behind her, and she stares at the cup (is it really that delicious?), focussed, as if to deliberately ignore it. I don't think it's coffee, you definitely would not drink coffee at this time of night unless you wanted to stay up, which maybe, she does. Can't face going back outside and facing that darkness, ramming itself up against the glass, panting on it eager to swallow you up? I don't blame you, that's some very hungry darkness you've got chasing you. Look there's so much of it that when it must've rammed itself against the glass chasing you into the cafe, it went splat and now its splat itself all over the glass. As if someone hurled a bucket full of black aiming for you safe in the cafe.

At least the two train tracks of light, piercing into the darkness show a path to follow although its upside down. Who is chasing you my dear, who are you hiding from? You stare at the cup in fear, because you know that as soon as you finish it, you'll have to leave, and they you will be swallowed up by that hungry darkness. That volume of tea or coffee, is proportional to the time you have left.

Present:

Indeed she had heard the soft footsteps of a dark thing prowling after her, that evening, as soon as the sky turned purple like a bruise and the street lamps buzzed on with their feeble yellow light. At first she ignored it, it couldn't be chasing her again? That was just a bad dream she'd had as a child. But when she felt its hot breath licking at her ankles, that was when she ran, and something aimed at her right hand, jaws clamped around the tip of her middle finger, and then her right glove was gone. Maybe it wasn't real, maybe it was, but she wasn't about to take her chances. Into the nearest cafe she sought salvation and slammed the door shut. All heads turned to her. *Splat* she heard the dark thing smash into the door she had just shut. Hissing disappointedly like a burnt out fire, it prowled round and round the cafe, waiting for her. A glove was missing. She ordered a coffee, to keep her senses awake and alert, and sat at the only table available, which was unfortunately the one near the window. So at least she sat with her back turned turned to it. Perhaps it was foolish of her to show the predator her back, but then who could blame her for not wanting to look at such a thing? Delighted that she was so close, the dark thing moved its all encompassing sludgy mess from all across the windows and doors, to concentrate itself thickest on the part of the window closest to her, just directly behind her. Maybe if it pressed itself hard enough, it could break through the window and reach her.

Future:

She has finished her coffee. Despite that she had gone from big scalding gulps and then medium mouthfuls and then conservative sips and then tiny drops (was the coffee really that delicious?). Now she had no coffee left, no time left. I ordered her another. Since she looked like she enjoyed the coffee so much. Surprised, the waiter brought her the coffee 'from the gentleman over there' he said, confused because this was not a bar, and she looked at me even more surprised and confused, then embarrassed and bashful. *I know something is chasing you, stay as long as you need* I smiled back. She sipped the coffee pensively. Little does she know I'm far worse than anything out there. Grimacing, it was plain to see she was at her coffee limit, the coffee here isn't even that good. She finished it and I got her another, and another and another. Eventually she stood up, and rushed to the bathroom. No wonder considering she had just finished her 6th cup. On returning she made straight for the door avoiding my gaze. I got up after her, got to the door first and held it open for her, go outside and be swallowed by the dark thing right in front of you, with me right behind, or stay here getting pregnant with coffee.

Poem written in response to a task based on getting creative sparks out of lists.

In a bungalow in a valley beside the river
There lies my Grandparent's house
surrounded by hedges that have berries in summer
in front of a river we swim in in summer.

In this bungalow in a valley beside the river
there are so many books
books in every room from every time because Grandpa is a classicist
and studies that sort of thing
in white bookshelves built into the walls
Did grandpa install them there or did he buy the house because of the bookshelves?

In the books
there is probably a lot of dust
because there's so many books
and only two people living there
so mice take up residence to give them company.

In the mouse traps sometimes
there's a dead mouse.
And adorning the mustard yellow
walls of the entrance hallway
are two taxidermy wolf heads.
But they look slightly more comedic than scary.
I think I was a bit scared of them when I was small.
But now I'm tall enough to get a closer look
One's missing some teeth
Another's jaw is sagging.

In the windows of the entrance hallway
sometimes there's a dead moth
that found its way in and never got out.
I also found a dead moth in Grandma's study

In Grandma's study
there's the yoga mat
and the unfinished portrait of dad that mum made
decades ago when he had hair.

In the guest room there is another portrait
labelled 'possibly Richard Pusey'
possibly he is my ancestor.
Once dad said he thinks he saw Richard Pusey's eyes follow him when
stayed in that room.

I think dad may not have been joking,
not because I think a painting's eyes can move
but because dad is bipolar.

Nevertheless if this man who is possibly Richard Pusey possibly our ancestor
I don't think he'd mean us harm.
Nevertheless I don't like changing in that room
because Richard Pusey is a middle-aged plump-faced man.

In the other guest room is the bed that
Auntie Tessa died in.
Dad also says that in that room he hears strange bumps in the night.
I tell him that if it's Auntie Tessa, his big sister, she wouldn't mean him any harm.

In the space under that bed there are drawers
which store sheets and cousins playing hide and seek,
And maybe even the remains of the cereal we spilt there
years ago.

And that's probably the real reason why the mice visit.

In my other grandparent's house
there is a Buddhist temple (think tatami mats, cushions and wooden pillars).
My other grandpa is a priest you see.
And in the space under the central buddha statue
is me playing hide and seek.