On Isolation

A Series of Poetry Prompts and Exercises on Growth, Healing, and Crisis

Presented by Alums of the National Student Poets Program
featuring

Daniel Blokh
Aline Dolinh
Maya Eashwaran
Eileen Huang
Kinsale Hueston
Heather Laurel Jensen
Juliet Lubwama
Joey Reisberg
Maya Salameh
Ariana Smith
Daniel Blokh is an 18-year-old American-Jewish writer with Russian immigrant parents, currently attending Yale University. He is the author of the memoir In Migration (BAM! Publishing 2016), the chapbook Grimmening (forthcoming from Diode Editions), and the chapbook Holding Myself Hostage In The Kitchen (Lit City Press 2017). His work has appeared in The Kenyon Review, The Adroit Journal, Cosmonauts Avenue, Permafrost, Blueshift, Cleaver, Gigantic Sequins, and more.
My favorite prompt to run in poetry workshops is something I call the Mermaid prompt. It gets at the root of what I love most about poetry: its ability to make us see things in the world which we’ve become used to—events, emotions, etc.—in a completely new light. In a time when many of us are spending day after day in the same space, I hope this prompt can help you re-approach the things around you, to find surprise in the places, people, and things you’re probably becoming bored with.

Preparation (optional): Read some of Pablo Neruda’s poetry for inspiration. His ‘Odes’ do the exact thing you will be doing in this prompt: they take something ordinary and daily, an onion or tuna fish or a pair of socks. They discover the surprise of poetry in places one would never think to look for it.

1. Pick something from the space in which you’re quarantined, something you encounter every day, as your subject for this prompt. I suggest an item from around your room, but it could be a pet, a person, even a concept you’re often thinking about. Usually, when I run this activity in poetry workshops, I pick a creature most people are familiar with and likely disinterested in — the Mermaid.

2. For one minute, write whatever word associations you have with your subject. When I run the prompt with Mermaid, students usually come up with a list of words like “hybrid, fish, human, half, ocean, water, mythical.”

3. Next, give yourself five minutes to write a description of your subject. The challenge: write these descriptions without using any of the words from the previous step. This is to push you to find descriptions which you don’t automatically come up with, asking you to become more inventive in the way you describe your subject.
4. Once you have your description, write down the nouns, verbs, and adjectives you’ve used. In the mermaid prompt, this will usually include words like “scales, tail, swims, beautiful, dangerous, hair,” and so on.

5. For the last step of this prompt, describe your subject once again, but this time don’t use any of the words you’ve written down during step 2 or 4. This step should push you even further in the creativity of your descriptions! When I run this prompt with students, I’m consistently amazed at the workarounds students have for the words they’re not allowed to say. Since they can’t write “tail,” they write “single fleshy leg which navigates the currents;” since they can’t write “ocean,” they write “deep pit of blue in which this creature lurks.”

I always come away from this prompt with that wonderful feeling of poetic surprise, my head ringing with the many incredible ways students have outsmarted their limitations and found new ways to express the idea of a “mermaid.” I hope you come away with the same feeling of wonder at the description you’ve found for your pillowcase, your dog, your coffee mug, or whatever you’ve chosen. Not only will you have a surprising description to use in a new poem of yours, you might find a whole new world of inspiration within the boredom of your quarantine.
aline dolinh was the 2013 National Student Poet for the Southeast. She is a graduating fourth-year student at the University of Virginia, and will be an MFA student in poetry at Boston University from 2020-21.
**why beauty?**

Writing Exercise #1:

**Read:** Solmaz Sharif’s “Beauty”; Lisa Russ Spaar’s “Duet”; Deborah Landau’s “Soft Targets”; Camille T. Dungy’s “What to Eat, What to Drink, and What to Leave for Poison”

**Part I:** To start, think about what first comes to mind when you think of the word “beauty” — it could be a person, a treasured possession, a place you want to return to, etc. — and consider what makes that entity precious. Make sure you write it down. Briefly consider some of these questions: Why does beauty matter? What does it mean to keep demanding beauty from the world? Is wanting beauty a distinct goal from wanting justice? It’s worth considering that questions of beauty can also have horrific answers — for example, women in the 18th century slowly poisoning themselves from lead makeup, radium-based creams in the early 1900s, the psychological and physical violence that beauty standards (of any kind) can enact — so can we ever consider wanting beauty a worthy goal in itself? At a time when it might feel extravagant and even harmful to keep longing for beauty, is the pleasure that it affords still necessary? If so, why?

**Part II:** Turn to the readings’ considerations of beauty, pleasure, and indulgence. Think about the literary strategies they use to represent beauty, such as enumeration, intense descriptions, allusions to other works — what makes these poems effective?

**Part III:** After you’ve read these poems and taken some time to consider what is (or isn’t!) working for you within them, come back to that beautiful entity you began this workshop with. You’re going to build a poem driven by that initial knowledge: “I know ____ is beautiful.” You can use that as a starting line in your poem and choose to justify, qualify, and/or expand upon that claim however you like, but you also don’t have to. Maybe it’s beautiful precisely because you’re the only one who recognizes it as such. As long as your poem narrates something beautiful to you, you’ve fulfilled your mission.
Writing Exercise #2:

Read: Hanif Abdurraqib’s “Carly Rae Jepsen – “E•MO•TION”; laurel c’s “I’m Waiting For It That Green Card I Want It”; Christina Im’s “IDOL”; Morgan Parker’s “Slouching Towards Beyoncé”

Part I: The canon of contemporary pop music — Carly Rae Jepsen, Lorde, the Korean pop group BTS, and Beyoncé respectively — forms the driving engine of these poems! Take some time to think about how each poem portrays its subject differently — for instance, the only direct reference in Hanif Abdurraqib, Christina Im, and Morgan Parker’s poems comes in the title or epigraph, while laurel c’s directly interpolates lyrics from various Lorde songs to discuss the experience of being an undocumented immigrant. What surprises you about these poems? How are they transforming their source material?

Part II: Think about a song you just can’t get out of your head right now. It could be a current Top 40 hit, a tune that makes you feel nostalgic, the song that always hits differently when you’re lying in bed and feeling overwhelmingly sad — the only requirement is that it should prompt a strong reaction in you. Maybe it conveys a feeling you wish you could articulate in words; maybe you can’t explain what precisely about it moves you but it’s one of those songs that whenever you hear it and stare out a window you feel like the protagonist of your own coming-of-age film. Play it exactly once and write down everything that comes to mind while you’re listening.

Part III: Now it’s your turn to translate your experience of this song into a poem. There are a lot of approaches you can take here — maybe it’s performed by an artist you love and you want this poem to be a monument to them, or there’s a particular lyric that gets you every time. Maybe this song only matters to you because it makes you think of a specific person, or it’s saying something you wish they could hear. The only rule is that whatever makes this song stick in your head ought to go on the page.
maya eashwaran

is an Indian-American poet and writer originally from the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. She is currently a junior at Princeton University, majoring in Politics and pursuing journalism and creative writing. Maya has been nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, and she served as the 2016 National Student Poet for the Southeast. At Princeton, she is a freelance journalist for the University Press Club and a member of a volunteer organization that brings arts and crafts workshops to young students in the nearby city of Trenton, New Jersey. She is a strong advocate for the em dash, hot coffee, and female entrepreneurship, among other things.
I miss everything about “normal” life, even the little annoyances, the mild discomforts. The feeling of having to stand too close to a stranger on the train. Spending too much time choosing out something mundane at the grocery store. Hugs. Libraries. The easy way life seemed to slip in and out of my hands, unburdened. I do believe, though, that during these times of great uncertainty and upheaval, art is healing, growing, a way of coming to understand a changing world in new and different lights. It is medicine for the connection-starved life we now call our new normal.

During this period of self-isolation, I have felt claustrophobic and boxed-in nearly all the time. Poetry has provided a way for me to explore new worlds, break out of the confines of my physical space into one that is free, open, and oftentimes magical.

**Writing Prompt #1: Stuck in a Box**

In this exercise, we will explore the ways in which poetry, like us, can break out of form and take new meanings. Consider the sonnet. Defined rigidly, it seems inflexible. Great poets like Terrance Hayes have adopted form and molded poems with incredible movement and range. Read Hayes’ "American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin — "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison." Here are other poems from the collection.

Write a sonnet in the style of Hayes. Imagine you are stuck in a box. What is the box made of? What/who else resides in it with you? Are there ways out of the box? How must you sustain yourself within the box? Is there light? Darkness? How is life expressed? Let your imagination run wild. The box can be anything you want it to be. Incorporate these ideas into your sonnet.

Feel free to try out other poetic forms using this frame of mind! Consider sestinas, ghazals, or other traditional forms.
Writing Prompt #2: Finding New Realities

In this exercise, we will look at ways of redefining reality. Using unexpected metaphor, language that questions the readers' assumptions, and form that manipulates the meaning of the poem, we can see how poetry can construct new realities, new futures, and new ways of coping with the unexpected.

Read Alberto Rios' "The Border - A Double Sonnet." Notice how Rios uses the same sentence structure throughout the poem ("The border is a...") Using the work we did in the previous exercise, redefine your "box" using Rios' style. Explore new meanings of what it means to be confined. Open the box and jump out.

Writing Prompt #3: 'Loud Silence'

I've been revisiting Ada Limón's "Late Summer After a Panic Attack" during this season. She writes, "a siren whining high toward town repeating/that the emergency is not here, repeating/that this loud silence is only where you live." What does it mean to be in the eye of a hurricane? What does it mean to find peace and love in the middle of emergency? Quickly, without thinking, write out a list of things, places, or people that remind you that there can be light and the noise of life even in this "loud silence...where you live." Then, write a piece incorporating these elements into a poem or letter of gratitude and hope. A praise poem of sorts, this exercise is meant to help you find that source of light in your box, harness that light, and create something magic.
Eileen Huang was the 2015 National Student Poet for the Northeast. She is currently a sophomore studying English at Yale College, where she serves on the board of the Asian American Students Alliance. Her work has been featured by NowThis, The Adroit Journal, The Kenyon Review, and is forthcoming in Hyphen.
Note: The workshop below is the first part of the Asian American Feminisms Reading Group that I am running. If you are interested, you may sign up here.

At a time when Asian Americans are being racially profiled and assaulted due to xenophobia exacerbated by COVID-19 fears, I hope to explore the history, politics, and activism of Asian America through literature. Instead of requesting writing and content, as it’s difficult to produce work at this challenging time, I want the readings below to generate insights and discussions (and perhaps poetry, if willing). I believe it’s important—especially when reading from writers of color—to read work within its historical, cultural, and social context. Asian American authors are not writing in a vacuum. Rather, they’re responding to histories of exclusion, exile, war, imperialism; writing against the model minority myth; bringing attention to microaggressions; and gesturing toward larger structures that enable White supremacy.*

The label “Asian American” itself is complex, difficult, and, at times, frail. What does it mean for this label to encompass so many diverse communities? What binds Korean Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and so on? What does it mean when some in our community face higher rates of poverty while some are more policed, harassed, and profiled than others? Does this label flatten and homogenize us, leaving many to fall in the cracks, or is it a powerful tool for organizing and solidarity? How do we “write back” against structures such as patriarchy, White supremacy, etc?

I definitely cannot respond to these questions on my own, but the writers below may bring us closer to answers. Cathy Park Hong writes about histories of anti-Asian racism in light of the coronavirus; Jenny Zhang talks about literary yellowface; and Fatimah Asghar writes a beautiful poem of solidarity.

*I’m also consciously choosing not to hyphenate Asian American — you can read why here!
Writing Exercise:

Read: “The Slur I Never Expected to Hear in 2020” by Cathy Park Hong, an essay discussing the harassment of Asian Americans amid coronavirus fears.

Question(s) for Discussion: I’m haunted by the ending of this essay. Why do you think Hong chooses to end on this sardonic note? What does it say about White America’s relationship/proximity to a history of anti-Asian violence?

Read: “They Pretend to Be Us While Pretending We Don’t Exist” by Jenny Zhang, an essay about the controversial choice of one White writer to use a “Asian” pen name.

Question(s) for Discussion: "White supremacy tries to reduce people of color to our traumas. Resisting white supremacy means insisting that we are more than our traumas.” What does this look like in practice? How do we write back against marginalization and commodification?

Read: “If They Should Come for Us” by Fatimah Asghar, a poem about community in the face of violence.

Question(s) for Discussion: I love Asghar’s use of the word “claim” in this poem: “I claim her my kin / I claim them too.” How does this poem create a sense of community? Does it bring us closer to answering what binds Asian America together, or does it repel the homogenizing nature of that label?

Writing Prompt: Inspired by Zhang’s essay, write something that writes against histories of marginalization. Smash stereotypes and disrupt conventions.
kinsale hueston

is a Diné (Navajo) writer who was the 2017-2018 National Student Poet for the West. She is the founder and editor of Changing Womxn Collective, and currently a sophomore at Yale University, where she is a Mellon Mays scholar and a 2020 First Peoples Fund Fellow. Her work has appeared in Time Magazine, The Adroit Journal, Nylon Magazine, Refinery29, The Los Angeles Times, and more. She’s spent most of quarantine stress-eating baby carrots and procrastinating on papers.
joy harjo workshop 1/2

It’s hard to stay motivated as a writer, especially during a time in which I’m constantly worried about my family’s health, the health of my home communities, and academic workloads. Reading poetry and taking this time to create new work, however, has allowed me to reflect on how I’m feeling and tether myself to what I love. I chose to share these two workshops because of how close they are to my heart, and because Joy Harjo (Mvskoke Creek) is currently the first Native American U.S. Poet Laureate. Workshops to me have always meant community, mutual understanding, and safe spaces to speak truth. I grew so much as a person and a poet when I was able to hold these workshops and interact with young writers.

Now, in quarantine, I hope to extend these experiences in some new way to those of us in isolation who cannot attend or access physical workshops. By writing praise poems and home poems, perhaps we can effectively use this time to find what we are truly grateful for and dissect our ideas of place and identity together. Poetry has always lent me a feeling of unity, and knowing that there may be people out there using these prompts and creating new work helps me imagine that perhaps we remain threaded together, though distant from each other.

Writing Exercise #1: Praise Poems for the Earth

In this exercise, we will be writing praise poems, which are tributes to certain people, places, ideas, objects, feelings. More specifically, we will be writing praise poems for the Earth, because I really miss being outside and in nature. Since Harjo is a master of writing nature poems that are more than what meets the eye, be sure to think about what lies just beyond your initial brainstorming. How can we create poems that reach further than just an aesthetic appreciation of nature? How can we relate what we remember and observe to deeper notions of relationships, kinship, time, community, identity, etc?
Prompt #1: Read Joy Harjo’s “Praise the Rain” out loud and note which places in the poem rhyme. How does the repetition and rhyming make the poem more meaningful? How does sound effect what is emphasized in her piece?

List your favorite characteristics of the earth, memories you have related to spaces in nature, and brainstorm for a few minutes. Try to challenge yourself and think of non-cliché parts of the earth to praise. For example, do you want to praise rain? Think of what you specifically like about rain (the feeling of it? the knowledge that it is coming?), and mention that instead. Start with the line “Praise the _____,” and write a poem inspired by that one line. We don’t want to copy Harjo—just use her work to be inspired!

Writing Exercise #2: Writing About Home
In this exercise, we’ll be writing about the people, places, and ideas that are homes for us. Since quarantine began, I’ve been reflecting on where I feel most at home to try to combat the cabin fever and frustration I’ve felt at not being able to help my relatives on the Navajo Nation. Establishing connections to the things we identify the concept of “home” with can help resolve complicated, muddled feelings, and hopefully may help relieve some anxiety over disconnection or distance. Though we are maybe far from our concepts of home, we can remain connected to them. How can we practice proximity, even in quarantine?

Prompt #2: Read Harjo’s poem “My House is the Red Earth.” Brainstorm for a few minutes what home means to you. Is it a person, a place, an idea? What do you first think about when you imagine being safe or truly happy? Try to remember what makes it special or different from other spaces you typically occupy. What makes this thing different? Try to brainstorm without pausing to think too hard, and just write down whatever you feel or visualize. Begin the poem with “My home is ______.” Build off of your brainstorming and take note if you’ve subconsciously created a theme. Have fun!
is coping with quarantine by becoming extremely over-hydrated. She drinks at least 160 ounces of water a day and was the National Student Poet of the Southwest in 2018. She pees hourly and is also a co-founder of Creative Youth of Arizona, which administers the Phoenix Youth Poet Laureate program. Sometimes, if she's feeling particularly frisky, she puts an entire sliced-up lemon in her water. You can find more about her and her work at heatherlaureljensen.com.
As we go through this isolation, I’ve been thinking about natural cycles and changes. Though a pandemic isn’t our typical “natural,” we still respond instinctually. Some thrive in quarantine, experiencing a creative rebirth, while others struggle without structure. We are all feeling both respite and anxiety, a paradox of internal gestation but loss of external learning. In an attempt to break the news cycle’s effect on me, I’ve especially thought about growth — about the bloom of flowers on the side of a highway, about my transition from high school senior year (class of 2020, we’ve been robbed) to this new, extra-large summer, and how my writing has changed over time. I hope that the following helps create personal solace within the rapidly changing world.

Writing Exercise #1:

Think about events that changed you. Whether it’s something large, like a trauma or loss of a family member, or something smaller, like getting stitches and a resulting scar, make a list of 5-10 events that changed you, your outlook on life, your body, or other aspects of your selfhood.

Read: “River of Milk” by Kaveh Akbar; “blessing the boats” by Lucille Clifton; “Sorrow Is Not My Name” by Ross Gay; “A Summer Garden” by Louise Gluck.

Prompt #1: Pick an event from your list and reverse it. (Example: Instead of crashing your bike, it levitated and flew away.) Write a poem narrating what connects, or doesn’t connect, these two opposites. How would the opposite event have changed you? How have you changed since that event?
Prompt #2: Pick an event from your list and think about what may have observed you in that moment, whether the observer is a person, an object, a societal standard, a web of surveillance cameras, a wild animal, a plant, etc. How might your actions change something else’s view of the world? How might an observer perceive a younger version of you in a moment of change? Write a poem taking that thing’s point of view.

Prompt #3: If you have older poems, go through your archives, pick a poem, and rewrite it. How have you outgrown, or not outgrown, your original message? What’s changed, and why?

Now, take your poem and tape it to your mirror, or above your bed, or on your window — anywhere you’ll see it often. In a week, rewrite it and see how your perspective has or hasn’t changed.

As poets and as people, we often turn the camera inward. In recent weeks, although our physical selves have been separated, our inner selves have been inextricably tied into our communities, into this communal experience. After we have done all we can to help others, however, we must find a way to ground ourselves. That is the utility of writing—to make our abstract experiences concrete. The world right now feels abstract, alien, bizarre. Make yourself concrete. I hope that writing can help. Good luck.
I desperately miss my occasional trip to Phoenix-area coffee shop Fair Trade. Are there bigger problems in the world than my unquenched desire for homemade ice cream, vegan burritos, and adorable seating? Most definitely—the amount of death, unemployment, chaos, and overall turmoil in the world right now is weighing on my mind. But amidst strife, I usually turn to some mild form of escapism, whether that’s Fair Trade, a trip to a public park, or even going to work. With all those places now barred, I am instead transmitting my love for locations through words. I want to discover what kinds of stories I can tell through my pre-loved niches. With this workshop, I hope you, also, find new stories.

Writing Exercise #2:

Make a list of your favorite places. Try to pick about 4-7 places you’ve already been and can describe well. This could range from a favorite coffee shop to a nostalgic vacation spot to your best friend’s bedroom.

Read: “Aubade with Burning City” by Ocean Vuong; “Dinosaurs in the Hood” by Danez Smith; “Blood Soup” by Mary Ruefle; “The Place Where Clouds Are Formed” by Ofelia Zepeda.

Prompt #1: Personify one of your places. Think about how you feel about the place, how the place might feel about you, about how you might introduce yourself to the place if you had a do-over. Write an ode to your place that describes it and its significance to you.

Prompt #2: Take one of the places and pretend it has suddenly become a movie set. Write a poem with a cinematic feel. What kind of movie would be filmed there? If you were in the movie, what role would you play? What would that movie mean to you?
Prompt #3: Choose one of your places and think of the best, worst, or most bizarre thing that could happen at that location. What would it look like, for example, to have a childbirth occur in your local supermarket? In what ways can a place break from the norms? Write about this imaginary experience and connect it back to the mundane.

Now, take the poem you’ve written and think about its line breaks. (If your poem does not have line breaks, consider giving it line breaks for the purpose of this exercise.) Use this website to randomize the lines of your poem. From there, send the scrambled lines to a friend and ask them to unscramble the poem. Though their order of lines will most likely be different from yours, use the ‘new’ version of the poem to consider new ideas as you edit your poem.

As we shelter in place, I’ve been trying to remember what I’m grateful for about normal life, and especially about the people and places to which we will eventually return. Whatever locations you wrote about, take the time to write a Yelp review for a local business, or tell a friend how much you miss their backyard trampoline, or make plans to return to the local skate rink as soon as it’s safe. I hope that writing has helped you escape, if only for a little while.
served as 2017 National Student Poet for the Northeast. She’s currently a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania, and a member of the Excelano Project, Penn’s (according to her) best-dressed and only spoken word group.
celebrating ourselves

Even though we’re physically distancing from each other, this moment is extremely close to all of us. It’s difficult to avoid this moment entirely, and while staying informed is entirely reasonable, it isn’t always the best for our mental health. Some reminders: it isn’t selfish to hit pause on productivity when the world is experiencing a pandemic. It’s okay to take breaks from the news. Take time to nurture yourself, to give thanks to yourself and to your body.

Writing Exercise #1:

Read “Everything Must Go” by Imani Davis, “letter from my heart to my brain” by Rachel McKibbens (scroll down to find the poem; if you can, read some of the others too!) and “won’t you celebrate with me” by Lucille Clifton.

Pay attention to the different ways these poems celebrate and honor themselves. Write down the three verbs or nouns that reach out to you in each poem. The words that cradle you, or the words that dig into you. Is there any difference between the poems?

Prompt #1: A beloved part of you has been caged; set it free. Be as ferocious or as gentle as you want. Remember, there are different ways to set something precious free: by destroying its confines, by coaxing it out with food or clothes, by singing a passionate ballad. If you want, write multiple poems, executing the escape from different angles.
This next prompt steps outside of ourselves a little bit. For a lot of people, this quarantine has meant grieving what could have been. Competitions, conferences, ceremonies, reunions. Staying present has helped me stay afloat in a sea of could-have-beens and now-uncertain promises. One part of my routine—drinking tea in the morning—has evolved into a privileged necessity, one of many small things keeping me with myself. Hopefully, these poems and this prompt can help ground you, too.

**Writing Exercise #2:**

This first step isn’t required, just a practice in noticing: Try to remember one favorite food you ate in the past week, or what the brightest/most memorable color you saw today was.

Read “june 8, the smiley barista remembers my name” by Wo Chan, and “Ode to the Hotel Near the Children’s Hospital” by Kevin Young. Feel free to ask yourself what these poems are celebrating—both on a small scale, and on a greater one.

**Prompt #2:** Write an ode to any little thing near you right now—maybe it’s outside the window, or on your desk, or on your head. Maybe it’s a pencil, or a ring, or a napkin, or somebody’s sudden laugh, or a toothbrush, or a shadow. Anything you want to say thank you to.

If you want, you can follow Kevin Young’s example and start each line or stanza with “Ode to...,” but don’t feel chained to that structure.
joey reisberg

was the 2016 National Student Poet for the Northeast. He is currently a sophomore at Goucher College in Baltimore, MD, where he studies history and creative writing. His work appears in Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Red Queen, Moledro, and other online publications.
An ode is a poem of celebration and praise, generally around a single object or idea. I think a lot of their appeal comes from the wildly different and creative subjects poets choose to celebrate. Here’s a famous one by Pablo Neruda, translated by Stephen Mitchell. Notice how much personality is granted to the artichoke and how a narrative is set up through image and word choice.

Shira Ehrlichman’s new book, Odes to Lithium, is a remarkable collection exploring bipolar disorder and self-worth, told through a series of odes to the poet’s lithium medication. The lack of punctuation and dreamy, reflective tone really carries this poem to wonderful discovery. Here’s one of her poems, “Ode to Lithium #1: The Watchman.”

Of course, odes can express all sorts of emotion as they address their main subject. Poems are never one emotion, and always lead us through some sort of transformation. Kevin Young does this masterfully in “Ode to the Midwest,” from his book "Dear Darkness," which happens to be filled with odes to his favorite foods and places. This poem has a wonderful balance of humor and pathos. There is loneliness here too, though, perhaps highlighted by the sparse form and lack of people.

Try your hand at writing an ode like the ones linked above!
Poets rarely get to walk a red-carpet or enjoy glitz and glam, other than in a metaphorical sense. So, have fun writing a celebrity poem. There are tons of examples to choose from, but here are three I particularly love.

Aracelis Girmay’s book, "The Black Maria," is an otherworldly and beautiful collection. This poem is a little more grounded, because of its inclusion of Neil deGrasse Tyson as a child. Although we look to celebrities as an escape from reality, think about how Girmay ties in societal problems like racism or over-policing into our admiration for public figures. The poem also moves us toward a personal scale, amongst all the star stuff.

Dorianne Laux is a poet known for her exciting and energetic verse. I love this poem about Cher, because of its accessible and vivid language, as well as the permission it gives the reader to look closely at the more vulnerable side of an iconic figure.

Khadijah Queen is fascinated by fame, which is why her book "I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On" lists the celebrities she has met, and as the title promises, what she was wearing at the time. The untitled poem below paints a picture of a less than satisfactory encounter with Elton John. The prose form makes it feel even more diary-like and confessional, while the expressive imagery and language lets us know Queen sees little distance between speaker and reader, an admirable task to accomplish in any poem. This poem is the second of five on this link—of course, check out the others too, if you want!
maya salameh

is a poet studying at Stanford University, where she serves as Artist-in-Residence at the Markaz. Syrian by way of San Diego, she is a 2016 National Student Poet, America’s highest honor for youth poets, and is a poet fellow of the William Male Foundation and Leonard Slade Endowment. Her work has been published in The Greensboro Review, Asian American Writer’s Workshop, and Burningword Literary Journal, among others. Maya is the author of rooh (Paper Nautilus Press 2020).
As we face diverse iterations of quarantine, many of us find ourselves in homes that feel newly alive, or especially occupied. As we become more aware of the chemical equation that is our bodies inhabiting a space, embark on a poetry exercise on home; its multiple shapes and smells.

Writing Prompt #1: Derived from Charif Shanahan

Read 'yasmeen' by Safia Elhillo and 'genealogy' by Camille Rankine, paying particular attention to how each poet creates a sense of belonging from mundaneities; names, foods, textures.

Write an anti-genealogy in the style of Camille’s. What are tastes, foods, geographies that evoke home for you?

Writing Prompt #2:

Watch 'When Love Arrives' by Sarah Kay & Phil Kaye

Home often comes outside of four walls. Describe a time you found a non-physical home, whether that be in a person, feeling or idea.

Writing Prompt #3:

Read 'Blood' by Naomi Shihab Nye

Think of a favorite recipe from home. Write a recipe for a place or a person you didn’t get to know well. Or, imagine the perspective of you from a loved object — a painting, a pillow, a necklace. What do you hear? What funny moments do you catch?
As we develop new ways to digitally connect, it can be easy to forget the physical experience of emotions. Zoom does not display the increased heart rate excitement can induce or the flush anger brings us. This exercise is focused on the sensory experience of our emotions, particularly anger, and the healing sense of sitting in a feeling without judgment. Today, watching disease and debates spread, our anger is a valid and useful tool for us to process increasingly disorienting news cycles and worlds.

Writing Prompt #1:

Begin by making a list of things that annoy you/pet peeves.

Think about a good thing that’s come out of a bad experience. What have you learned from annoyances & inconvenience?

Writing Prompt #2:

Read 'From "summer, somewhere"' by Danez Smith, with particular attention to how their anger evolves, softens, sharpens, throughout the course of the piece.

Think about the last time you were angry. What world did you imagine in rebellion? What did that world like; what language(s) are spoken, what do mountains look like there? Bring us into your anger’s living room.
served as the National Student Poet for the West from 2018-2019. She is an incoming student at Howard University. Ariana has been featured in Ebony, Vulture, and the Washington Post.
Throughout the course of these past couple of months, I’ve had nothing but time to reflect on how this pandemic has revealed how white supremacy’s very own systems, which were designed to oppress, kill, and hurt, are now “inconveniencing” the very beneficiaries of such systems. This pandemic did not nationally “reveal” that the medical institutions in place are inadequate, Black people have known this and have said this for years. What this pandemic HAS shown, is that perpetrators of white supremacy and the racially and economically privileged were simply unbothered by the outcry of Black folks who have faced medical racism and shared their experiences until such “inconveniences” of a global pandemic has affected them. I say all of this to say, this is not the first time Black, poor, queer, disabled folks have experienced such violence and neglect. Black folks are disproportionately affected by this pandemic, due to medical disabilities, and our likelihood to work in the service industry and at essential businesses.

As young people, especially as young Black people, there is this constant feeling of we must do this, fight this, speak on this. But I call on those Black and young, to understand the usefulness and the power of rest, calm, and reflection. These are all revolutionary acts. A little unsolicited advice: Understand wherever you stand in the midst of this pandemic, be mindful, take in what you can, and then give yourself rest. Rest is a privilege not many of us can afford right now, so if you’re capable of it, please do so.

With all of this in mind, I present these poems that have provided me solace and cradled me in these times of uncertainty with writing exercises to go with.
Writing Exercise #1: A Moment of Grief

Read “Under the Edge of February” by Jayne Cortez and “A Litany for Survival” by Audre Lorde.

Prompt #1: What do you miss? What do you have to say goodbye to? What are some inner grievances you just can’t ignore? Are they of the mind and body like your comfort, freedom, feelings of stability? Or something exterior? Your home? Your bed? Your friends? Confront your grief and become sentimental to what uplifts your livelihood.

Writing Exercise #2: A Celebration of Your “Nest”

Read “Requiem for a Nest” by Wanda Coleman.

Prompt #2: As we all have our own variations of what quarantine looks like, think of what makes a home for you. Whether it’s already where you live or who you live with, or where you wish to live, reflect on what visualizes a “Nest” for you. A place where you’re most comfortable and celebrated, and where your rest is honored and respected.
(a few) COVID-19 relief funds

1. Asian Americans for Equality: Emergency Small Business Relief Fund
2. Dumplings Against Hate: Supporting NYC’s Chinatown
3. List of initiatives/funding supporting AAPI, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities
4. Stanford Worker’s Covid-19 Relief Fund - Venmo @stanfordworkersfund
5. Trans Women of Color Solidarity Network Fund
6. Queer Writers of Color Relief Fund
7. One Fair Wage Emergency Fund
8. Asian Pacific Environmental Network (California-based)
9. Database of Localized Resources During COVID-19 Outbreak
10. Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund
11. Diné College Fund
12. Bluff Area Mutual Aid Fund