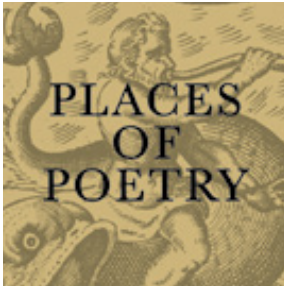


PLACES OF POETRY



TOOLKIT 2: FOR INDIVIDUAL WRITERS



Places of Poetry is a community arts project, centred on a newly designed digital map of England and Wales. Over Summer 2019, writers of all ages and backgrounds from across the country will be invited to write new poems of place, heritage and identity, and pin them to the map. (Under 13s will require a parent, teacher or guardian to do this.) Places of Poetry will help us reflect on our national and cultural identities, and celebrate the diversity, heritage and personalities of place.

This toolkit – produced by The Poetry Society – provides hints and tips for writing place-based poetry. Think about the heritage that surround you – the Roman ruins, the post-industrial landscapes, the sports-ground sites of historical victories – write us your poems, and pin them to the Places of Poetry map.

FINDING OUR PLACE IN POETRY

Place has long been the subject of poetry. We are shaped not only by our place of origin, but also by the places we visit and spend time in. Who we are determines the places we are interested in, the places we know about, and the places we picture in our heads and dream of going to. Place is a defining aspect of who we are that affects how we understand the world and how we communicate that understanding to others.

Poetry can be a way of going beneath the surface of a subject through close observation, listening and reflection. Poems about place can sharpen our senses, show us what we might not otherwise have noticed and lead to new discoveries.

PICTURING

Look at the following two poems, both set in London. The first is by the American poet Amy Lowell observing a street at night during a visit she made to the city in the early 20th century and the second is by Alfred Lord Tennyson written in the mid-19th century about a place in London he knew well: the house where his great friend Henry Hallam had lived.

Lowell was one of the founders of the Imagist movement in modern poetry. The Imagist poets sought to describe their subjects in great detail with simple everyday language, using words to present an image, not to fit a particular rhythmic

pattern. Tennyson, writing almost a century earlier, wrote more in the Lyric and Romantic tradition, concentrating on emotion or feeling and using a specific meter and rhyme. Both poems are written in first person, offering a very personal reflection on place.

A London Thoroughfare. 2 A.M. By Amy Lowell

*They have watered the street,
It shines in the glare of lamps,
Cold, white lamps,
And lies
Like a slow-moving river,
Barred with silver and black.
Cabs go down it,
One,
And then another.
Between them I hear the shuffling of feet.
Tramps doze on the window-ledges,
Night-walkers pass along the sidewalks.
The city is squalid and sinister,
With the silver-barred street in the midst,
Slow-moving,
A river leading nowhere.*

*Opposite my window,
The moon cuts,
Clear and round,
Through the plum-coloured night.
She cannot light the city;
It is too bright.
It has white lamps,
And glitters coldly.*

*I stand in the window and watch the moon.
She is thin and lustreless,
But I love her.
I know the moon,
And this is an alien city.*

Try using the last line of Lowell's poem, or a version of it, as the first line of yours. This is an alien city/country/building/temple/garden/farm. Think of a place you've visited which felt unfamiliar, strange. Or better yet, take yourself somewhere new that you have never been to before and write about it. Use your pen as if it were a paintbrush. Notice everything you can about this place, the sights, the sounds, the smells. What it makes you think of. Write each observation simply and clearly with the intention of creating an exact picture in the reader's head

67 Wimpole Street by Alfred Lord Tennyson

*Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,—
A hand that can be clasped no more,—
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.
He is not here ; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly through the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.*

Picture a place that holds particular significance for you. Perhaps it's a park you once visited with family or friends. Maybe it's a wood you played in, or a castle you once visited, or the place where you got your first job, saw an outdoor theatre performance, went to a rugby match, had a party, graduated, got married, visited a newborn or spent time with someone during a period of ill-health.

Make notes about this place and what it means to you. What has made it stay so strongly in your memory? Write your first line introducing that place, e.g. These rooms where we first laughed and played

See if your first line suggests a particular rhythm or form to continue with. Tennyson's poem is written in iambic

tetrameter, that is each line contains four beats of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. The rhyme scheme Tennyson uses is ABBA. Writing in form can sometimes help to contain and intensify the emotional quality of the poem. Here's a useful guide to poetic terms and forms www.ypn.poetrysociety.org.uk/poetry-glossary

LISTENING

Encountering people from places and cultures other than ours, especially if we know nothing about their heritage or history, helps us search for the common ground between us. Taking the time to listen to the sounds of a foreign tongue and absorb the natural rhythms of a place can produce a new kind of familiarity in the senses and tell us as much about our own history and cultural heritage as this new one we are encountering.

Alice Oswald spent three years recording conversations with people who live and work on the River Dart in Devon, and produced a book-long poem, *Dart*, which won the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2002. Here is an extract from that work.

Dart [Extract]

*Dartmeet - a mob of waters
where East Dart smashes into West Dart*

*two wills gnarling and recoiling
and finally knuckling into balance*

*in that brawl of mudwaves
the East Dart speaks Whiteslade and Babeny*

*the West Dart speaks a wonderful dark fall
from Cut Hill through Wytman's Wood*

*put your ear to it, you can hear water
cooped up in moss and moving*

*slowly uphill through lean-to trees
where every day the sun gets twisted and shut*

*with the weak sound of the wind
rubbing one indolent twig upon another*

*and the West Dart speaks roots in a pinch of clitters
the East Dart speaks coppice and standards*

*the East Dart speaks the Gawler Brook and the Wallabrook
the West dart speaks the Blackabrook that runs by the prison*

*at loggerheads, lying next to one another on the riverbed
wrangling away into this valley of oaks*

More details here www.archive.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/archives/places/dart/

Written 150 years earlier, Charles Kingsley's poem 'Dartside, 1849' results from spending time by that same river.

Dartside 1849 by Charles Kingsley

*I cannot tell what you say green leaves,
I cannot tell what you say:
But I know that there is a spirit in you,
And a word in you this day.
I cannot tell what you say, rosy rocks,
I cannot tell what you say:
But I know that there is a spirit in you,
And a word in you this day.
I cannot tell what you say, brown streams,
I cannot tell what you say:
But I know that in you too a spirit doth live,
And a word doth speak this day.
"Oh green is the colour of faith and truth,
And rose the colour of love and youth,
And brown of the fruitful clay.
Sweet Earth is faithful, and fruitful, and young,
And her bridal day shall come ere long,
And you shall know what the rocks and the streams
And the whispering woodlands say."*

Try going to an area of natural beauty, a heritage site or place of interest where you can sit by yourself undisturbed for a reasonable period of time. Take a notepad and/or a sound recorder with you and record the minutiae of sounds going on around you: people's voices, footsteps, birdsong, wind, leaves rustling, machine noises, plates clattering, whatever. Imagine these noises are a language, the language that the Place uses to speak. What is it saying about itself? What is it saying to you? about you? Write a poem in the voice of the place.

PAUL FARLEY PROMPTS

Poet Paul Farley is one of the founders of the Places of Poetry project – try some of his short and sweet place-poetry-writing prompts.


- Can the place you know be 'summed up' or evoked using an object you could hold in the palm of your hand?
- Write about the place you know in two contrasting kinds of weather – the same features in sun and rain, under frost or baked in drought, in spring and autumn – or the same place by day and by night.
- Do you feel as though the place you know has 'edges', borders where a different accent or dialect comes into force, or the food changes – or a physical change in the landscape, across a river, on the other side of town, over the hills? Write about where this edge lies, and what it separates.
- Is there a word used where you live which doesn't 'travel', which would seem strange or attract blank looks when used or spoken elsewhere? Write a poem using this word as your title.
- Identify the very last place in the landscape you think you can write a poem about – a recycling plant, a bus stop, a lake with no name – and write a poem about it!
- What does 'home' really mean? Is it where you grew up, where you live now, where the people you love are, where you 'feel at home', or does it lie ahead, waiting to be discovered? Write about where home is.
- Is there a local story particular to the place where you live? Can you invent one? Try cutting it down into forty lines or fewer to make a poem.
- If your place had a symbol – an animal, a sign or object – what would that symbol be?
- What would happen if the place you know could speak? What would such a place sound like, how would it address the listener, and what would it have to say for itself and to the people who live there?

THE POETRY SOCIETY

The Poetry Society was founded in 1909 to promote 'a more general recognition and appreciation of poetry'. Since then, it has grown into one of Britain's most dynamic arts organisations, representing British poetry both nationally and internationally. Today it has more than 4,500 members worldwide and publishes the leading poetry magazine, The Poetry Review. With innovative education and commissioning programmes and a packed calendar of performances, readings and competitions, The Poetry Society champions poetry for all ages.

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your poems to
the map!



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