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Spring June 8th, 2018

# Voices from Verse: The Power of Poetry for Seattle's Homeless Youth

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## Recommended Citation

Hadley, Savannah Grace, "Voices from Verse: The Power of Poetry for Seattle's Homeless Youth" (2018). *Honors Projects*. 79.  
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Voices from Verse: The Power of Poetry for Seattle's Homeless Youth

By

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A project submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the University Scholars Program

Seattle Pacific University

2018

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### Abstract

This paper is a creative nonfiction essay combining research, interviews, and personal experience to discuss how and why poetry is helpful in a therapeutic context, specifically working with at-risk youth. Pongo, a program that provides incarcerated youth an opportunity to write poetry, under the direction of Richard Gold, has found through survey responses that with the Pongo Teen Writing Method “100 percent of youth enjoyed the writing experience, 98 percent were proud of their writing, and 73 percent wrote on topics they don’t normally talk about” (Gold, 21). I came to understand, through time volunteering with the writing groups at the New Horizons Ministries youth shelter and training with the Pongo poetry therapy program, that the aspects of poetry that most lend itself to therapy are its brevity, rhythm, use of imagery and metaphor, and compact address of complex problems. The homeless youth at New Horizons shared some of their poetry with me, and it was evident that the poems allow them to discuss and process many aspects of trauma and identity. They also build community through the act of sharing the poems in groups. Through the poems of the at-risk youth outlined in this paper, the youth give a glimpse into the ways poetry has assisted them in facing the difficulties and heartbreaks of street life in Seattle.



## Voices from Verse: The Power of Poetry for Seattle's Homeless Youth

“Everything is a pattern,” Goddess announced leaning against the table of the New Horizons conference room. Goddess (they/them pronouns) is a regular at our weekly writing group. They were dressed in a flowing galaxy robe dusted in golden stars and moons. They sat leaning back at the table drawing a face with neon highlighters during writing time, a face with curving lime green eyebrows and hot pink swishes of lips, agreeing to come up to writing group on the condition they not be limited to writing poetry. After everyone around the long table introduced themselves, Goddess immediately started drawing until it came time to share.

“Everything is a pattern. Everything from the flower you see by the road to your thoughts and movements. Everything.” The group around the table nodded. I wanted to tell Goddess that for not being a “poet” that seemed perilously close to a definition of verse.

“I also want to read you all this thing my friend sent me.” They pulled out their phone from a hidden pocket beneath the curtain of their celestial robe. Goddess went on to read the story of Narcissus, the legend of the man who stared so long at his own reflection that he perished. Everyone around the table clung to Goddess's words like life rafts, enchanted by the story being told. Finally, once they were finished, Goddess shifted uneasily and looked around at all of us watching.

“Anyway, sorry that was hard for me to read, I'm super high right now.” The group chuckled, and some of the stillness was lifted.

Since it was my first-time volunteering at writing group, I triple checked the bus schedule on my phone. It was a straight shot from the Dravus Avenue stop right in front of Seattle Pacific

University. It is a simple route, a quick trip to the Cedar street stop on either route 13 or 3. Robin, the lead mentor for the writing group, had given me directions and was going to meet me. I pulled on my old gray marching band jacket against the chill in the October air. This jacket had been carefully selected. Such a baggy worn out piece of clothing does not pose a threat, I hoped. I will not look pretentious, like those Patagonia jacket-wearing rich Seattle types. This old grey shapeless lump of cloth would make me relatable. It would make them feel safe with me. I filled the pockets with my slightly warped house key, change for the bus, and mango flavored Chapstick. I was nervous. I had met with Robin just the week before to have an interview of sorts for the volunteer position as a writing group mentor with New Horizons Ministries. She invited me to her warm office, full of children's games, in a row of neat and rather ominous looking stocky buildings near Lake Union. This office was much closer to my on-campus house than New Horizons, so I decided to walk there one warm late September morning. Robin is a therapist and has been working with the young people at New Horizons and the writing groups for decades. I arrived sweating and breathless after underestimating the time it would take to walk there. Entering the room a little frazzled, I perched myself on her couch and glanced around at some of the puzzle pieces spilled onto the floor in piles. She smiled at me, gave me a moment to get settled, and then handed me a sheet of information about writing group. She wanted to meet with me before I went in.

“Drop-In can be intimidating your first time.”

Drop-In intimidated me long after my first time. The straight shot bus dropped me across the street from New Horizons Ministries, a youth homeless shelter in Seattle. Drop-In, a space for any and all young adults under the ages of 25 to rest, eat, and get cleaned up almost always buzzed with a chaotic energy. The entrance is through the back door of the New Horizons

building. It is heavy, gray, and propped open with a brick. There are concrete steps leading up to an inner entrance. These riser like stairs are usually packed with residents and their dogs. Inside the inner door is a brightly lit area full of chairs, couches, and a pool table. It feels part high school cafeteria and part living room. The large middle space holds round gray tables next to a section of couches surrounding a projector and screen. There is an open air industrial kitchen, a row of rainbow painted showers, a laundry room, and a wall full of clothes and toiletries. Drop-In can be packed or almost empty depending on the day. Usually it is full of youth dozing off, working on their homework at the computers, or eating. By nine in the evening the room is transformed. The round tables are whisked away replaced by roughly thirty fold-out beds. Downstairs, anyone can stay the night as long as they get on the list in time. There are only so many spots.

I first encountered Goddess in the drop-in area. The volunteers were serving spaghetti that day and the projector cast a nature documentary on the screen. It was my first time, and I wavered, in my too big gray jacket, looking for someone to approach. During the first few minutes of our time at New Horizons each week, we recruit people from downstairs to come to the upstairs office area to our writing group room. I saw Robin sitting and chatting in a familiar way at one of the cafeteria tables. I slipped into a chair between her and one of the youth. The young person wore a shiny black robe and was speaking in Spanish to another across the table. The words tossed casually between them over the round cafeteria table top as easily as you would throw a crumpled napkin, the conversation a flurry of English and Spanish nailed firmly together. The non-robe wearing friend had donned a fuzzy panda hat and had meticulously painted dark blue nails. The hat-wearing boy turned to me.

“What’s your name?” he asked. I told him, apparently too softly. “What the hell did you say your name was?” he asked, just as casually as before. I repeated it a little louder, and he nodded. “I’m Santo.” I turned to the person sitting right beside me.

“What’s your name?” They arched an eyebrow and turned their head ever so slightly to look past me, smiling a small smile.

“They don’t have a name.” Santo chuckled, his eyes reading his friend’s posture.

“No name?”

“My name is No Name,” the robe wearing figure sighed eventually, before turning back to their spaghetti. The introductions were over. I decided to abandon the search and began asking shyly if they would like to join us in writing group. Their responses came in the slow and guarded manner I would come to expect. On occasion someone would respond to the proposition of writing group with a solid yes and an enthusiastic light in their eyes. Much more frequently, they would mull it over half a second before shrugging and giving a maybe. Maybe almost definitely meant no. This no could not be taken personally. They might be worn out, have a housing meeting, or need to catch the bus to find another open shelter spot. They might just not feel like writing today. Santo and his friend conferred with each other briefly before agreeing to make an appearance. The conversation drifted on to other things.

A few minutes later I felt a touch on my arm, intentional and gentle, and heard a voice much warmer than before. “My name is Goddess.”

Goddess indicated something significant when they shared their thoughts on the patterns present throughout our worlds and lives. These patterns provide rhythm, a daily beat, a pulse to which we step. It seems that some of the healing in poetry comes from the poems ability to



create a rhythm. The poem not only has this ability but thrives on it, the rhythm a pulse to check the strength of the verse. In *Poetry as Healer: Mending the Troubled Mind*, Joost A. M. Meerloo, M.D. begins the chapter titled “The Universal Language of Rhythm” with a quote from Novalis. “Once we have command of the rhythm, we have command of the world.”

For the young people of New Horizons, not much about their lives lies within their command. They rely on local churches for their meals, donations for their clothes and toiletries, and shelters or friends’ couches for their housing. Usually, the rhythm of their lives has not been steady. The beats have raced ahead from packed bags to new families. The beats have dragged behind through long cold nights with strangers, their unknown hands resting gingerly on the bruises of all the falls from jolting tempo changes. They have never known what the rhythm would do next, bodies tensed against the possibility of the unstable meters. These meters might pound them with trochees, whirl into anapests, or pause for a brief beautiful moment iambically. Their lives move through life’s meter on wounded feet. When they write poems, they create a rhythm. They decide the meter. Out of this command of their words, they look up from their feet. Out of this structure, their hearts speak. Rule number one for writing group: write from the heart.

Meerloo writes that “rhythmic interaction is of great importance in any form of human communication. The moment there is rhythm, something is shared by the participants. The young child reacts more to the cadences of poetry than to the words: he claps his hands in time, mouths and recites the music of the words. At the other end of the life span, when many functions of the mind have broken down, senile patients repeat rhythmic whisperings of the music of words” (4). At the beginning and the end of our lives, it is the most fundamental rhythm that we remember. When other memories have become sun bleached or water damaged, the songs of our playgrounds, the poetry of our high schools, in some part remain.

The rhythms in poetry allow the message to continue, even when the story being told is incredibly difficult. “When verbalization of the message is no longer possible, the meter remains” (Merloo 4). Human beings respond innately to rhythm from inside the womb until the very end of our life. “From the eighth intrauterine week, the organism lives in an envelope of rhythm; rhythmic reactive and protective movements are noted. The fetus reacts to sounds from the outside world; it lives in a floating rhythmic sound world filled with auditive impressions” (Meerloo 5). After the baby is born, it continues to exist in this rhythm, breastfeeding, napping, and moving in beats. (Meerloo 7).

We are healthiest in a steady cycle of resting and working. Babies move naturally to the beat of music. Whether it is sex, dancing, or breathing, there is a fundamental and natural beat within human beings. Poetry creates a rhythm in which to express emotion and release tension. This rhythm appears naturally through the writing of poetry as opposed to other forms of writing. Journaling and narrative work hold incredibly important places in expressive writing therapy, but the appeal of the rhythm comes from verse.

“This subject of rhythmic communication has become more and more significant since we have become aware that rhythm in one person can be transferred directly to another. Rhythm represents the collective memory of mankind; there exists a compulsion to imitate and cooscillate” (Meerloo 11). The rhythmic way Goddess spoke to the group about patterns, with the repeating lines and steady beat, sounded a lot like a poem, though Goddess was not trying to have this effect when sharing with the group what they wanted to say. The patterns that they recognized resonated with everyone around the writing table. Life follows a pattern, a rhythm of days and nights, and that pattern or rhythm allows poetry to access one of the deepest parts of our human nature.

This rhythm helps those who share poetry come together in community. Using Goddess as an example, the way that the sharing of a rhythmic piece brings a group together is evident. Goddess began to speak as if reading verse. The repeated line “Everything has a pattern,” settled from Goddess’s tongue into the room around the group as something tangible to include them in the performance. It caught the attention of the other participants in the room.

Had Goddess simply discussed pattern in a rhythm like any other conversation it would have been easy for the others to nod along and move on. Goddess’s words stepped into that room with confidence and took up a march that commanded attention. Rhythm allowed the others in the group to feel connected to the rather abstract ideas Goddess presented. Goddess’s words called for attention, and it was evident in the other writers that they gave it.

When Santo first arrived in the conference room for writing group, he sat stiffly on his chair at the head of the table.

“I’m not a writer.”

“I know you have things to say” goaded another girl at the table, a veteran of writing group. “You be telling me your life story every day, and it’s enough to write a book.” Santo smiled in an embarrassed way. Robin, the lead mentor, suggested a free association exercise just to get started. The exercise was to make a list of the first 100 words that came to mind. Santo considered this idea, head slightly tilted, then nodded once.

“I can do that, but they’re just going to be random words.”

And then Santo wrote. His pencil did not stop moving for the first 20 minutes of writing group. As Nina, another of our lead mentors would say, “His hands had a lot to say”. The long

column of words pooled at the bottom of the page before shooting up into a second line. Word after word came from those hands with their perfectly painted dark blue nails.

“I think I’ve written all the words inside of me, and I feel better,” he laughed. “Maybe I’m crazy.” All of this was said so softly the rest of the group hardly noticed. Sharing time came next, and Santo resisted.

“It’s literally just a list. Why do you want to hear it?”

After some gentle nudging from Robin, Santo agreed to read. He began. At first, he shoved his words aggressively out, pushing each one to the finish, just trying to shove them into the air as quickly as possible. After about 15 words, his speaking started to slow. The front ends of each word weighed more heavily, until each one took up a beat. They were random words. They were just words out of his head. But what important words they were. They were words like “trans”, “homeless”, “Mexico”, and “Alaska”. They were words about him, and he read them with a rhythm that captivated us. He made his list into a list poem. The beating of these words forced the rest of the group to pay attention, something important was being said. The rhythm caught us, and the whole group applauded and cheered when Santo was done.

“See you next week?” Robin said, more statement than question.

“Maybe,” Santo tossed the word back over his shoulder like glitter and turned towards the door with a smile on his face.

The physical benefits of writing expressively are surprising and impressive. Poetry is gaining more and more acceptance in the medical community as a legitimate assistance to healthcare. In fact, those who write expressively are less likely to contract a cold or a flu. “Those who write are less likely to get sick...Persons who wrote about an emotional topic evidenced

greater blastogenic activity than those who wrote about a control topic” (Kaufman, 265). This blastogenic activity is a response to “the mitogen phytohemagglutinin (PHA). PHA stimulates the proliferation of helper cells, and blastogenesis is the measurement of the proliferation of lymphocytes in response to mitogen stimulation” (Kaufman, 265). Simply put, writing about an emotional topic that allowed for the participants to express themselves actually boosted their immune systems, like a vitamin to take with your morning milk or orange juice, or exercise to do daily for better quality of life. This benefit even proved true for participants who wrote about emotional events that did not happen to them personally. The act of writing and processing through an emotional event provided a release and allowed their bodies to be more prepared to fight illness. Children with asthma found their symptoms decrease after writing expressively. Poetry has a reputation of being primarily in an academic head space, but this is not at all the case. Poetry has real visceral impacts on the bodies of many who include it in their lives. Writing expressively biologically affects and helps us. Expressive writing is truly a way to improve mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health.

Tangible benefits of writing as therapy are analyzed by Stephen J. Lepore and Joshua M. Smyth in *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being*. Though poetry therapy is still a relatively new field and little quantitative research has been done about its impacts, Lepore and Smyth have gathered the experiments and research that have been done to reach conclusions on what effects, if any, writing has on the emotional and physical well-being of those suffering and in pain.

The chapter that most resonated with my own experience at the writing groups was Chapter 4: *Writing for their lives: Children’s Narrative Supports for Physical and Psychological Well-Being*. Lepore and Smyth analyze in this chapter attempts to improve conflict resolution

with adolescents in an urban setting. The setting they describe fits very closely to the setting that many of the youth in New Horizons also face. They are exposed to the harshness of social systems and environments not built for them. “Environmental conditions and social stresses pose serious health threats to children living in urban settings. Crowding, inadequate resources, and high population turnover are associated with violence, which accounts for one third of the injury deaths of young people in the United States and for the chronic physical and psychological problems that plague survivors of violence (Hamburg, 1998; Laub & Lauritsen, 1998)” (Lepore and Smyth, pg. 53). These environmental factors clearly complicate the lives of the Seattle youth facing these same urban conditions.

“I’m sorry I’m a little out of it, I haven’t slept in over 24 hours.” Kyle leaned forward over his paper slightly. His skin and eyes both a flushed red. Robin stepped in and took Kyle outside for some one-on-one time. Today we had started our exercises with a list prompt. Write 30 things that make you smile. One young woman sat propped on the cabinets by the door. In a few minutes she would be asleep stretched out on the wood counter in torn fish net tights. Fisher, a girl in an oversized dark green hoodie, filled her list almost entirely with the names of the New Horizons staff.

The New Horizons shelter has an overnight facility called The Nest. This is where the residents of New Horizons can rest safely from the world outside. They shut the doors at 9 pm. To become a resident of the nest, there is an application process. They also pay forty dollars a month in rent. It is a transition out of the shelter into hopefully more permanent housing. Santo had told me during dinner that evening that he would come up for writing group, but he had been preoccupied filling out an application for housing. He swirled his nails, not dark blue this time,

but black and red, through the air as he wrote out page after page of the application. When I asked him about group, he responded quickly, distracted. It was one of those maybes you knew meant no, but who could blame him. He continued working through the housing application, each line another hopeful rescue flare persistently fired above the Space Needle. He never made it up for group that week.

Kyle came back in with Robin after some time outside. She had asked him to write about what his anxiety felt like to him using the senses. The group had been lagging. Everyone in the room drooped wearily in their chairs and stared through dull eyes. The others sharing had shared a sentence or two. They kept it generic and safe, perhaps too tired to dig any deeper. But Kyle began to read, and the air of the small room stilled. The faces around the table got more alert. Kyle went on to describe in visceral detail what anxiety sounds like, tastes like, looks like, smells like, and feels like. His images took us through the claustrophobic and panicked feelings anxiety gives. He brought us smashing our chins into the flat wall it drops in front of us. After receiving a lot of encouragement from the room, Kyle smiled. He looked more alert and aware. He looked more himself. The next few weeks he would come up, but only if Robin was going to be there to work with him.

Kyle used his poetry to describe his anxiety in an abstract way separate from himself. The difficulties of navigating adolescent and emerging adulthood are heightened by abuse and isolation for many of the residents at New Horizons. Mental illness adds to many daily challenges faced by the homeless young people. New Horizons puts on a training for volunteers every few months called Ropes. The Ropes training outlines the specific demographic of New Horizons as well as the underlying causes of homelessness. One of the myths that the Ropes training dispels is that of drugs and mental illness being a leading cause in homelessness. I

always assumed that the people on the streets and the buses muttering to themselves, or flying into a rage at people only they could see, had fallen into homelessness because of their mental illness. The Ropes training put on by two staff of New Horizons, formerly homeless youth themselves, delved into this assumption. The truth is, the vast majority of people develop or exacerbate mental illness after becoming homeless. It is the state of homelessness that worsens or develops the symptoms of the mental illness. Many of the young people at New Horizons began drug use after they became homeless. Many of them developed a mental illness after becoming homeless as well. The leaders in the Ropes training asked us to think about the homes we have to run to, should we need to cry or scream. When you are homeless, you do not have a private space to run. You have the streets, so anything you are going through is witnessed there. According to our Ropes training, many mental illnesses that already exist are exacerbated by life on the streets.

Writing group intersects with the battles the mentally ill young people must face every day. Olive suffers from severe social anxiety. Kyle has generalized anxiety. Ocean is on fluctuating dosages of medicine for schizophrenia. I have not met anyone at New Horizons who is not dealing with their own desperate battle with their mind, working through trauma, and trying to survive in the world.

Poetry knows a long history of providing solace to those with mental illness. For thousands of years, from shaman's incantations to modern slam poetry in bars, verse allows those who struggle with their thoughts and dark thinking patterns to gain control and discover a more hopeful alternative. Wordsworth's poetry famously provided this kind of healing for John Stuart Mill during a period of deep despondence and mental agitation. Today, Mill could have diagnosed his symptoms more specifically; however, with the knowledge of the time



surrounding mental illness, Mill referred to his distress as “a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times becomes insipid or indifferent; I seemed to have nothing left to live for” (Leedy 32). Mill sought relief from his ailment in every way that he could to no avail. “I became persuaded that my love of mankind, and of excellence for its own sake had worn out...In vain I sought relief from my favorite books, from which I had hitherto drawn strength and animation. I read them now without feeling” (Leedy 33). Mill’s new apathy crippled his desperate attempts to break free of this distress, as he began to consider suicide as his only option. He reflects that this collection of poetry gave his frazzled mind exactly the dose of medicine that he needed. The healing behind these poems sprouted from their relevance to the disordered and pained thoughts he struggled with at that time. “What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind was that they expressed not mere outward beauty but states of feeling, and of thought colored by feeling under the excitement of beauty...I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest in the common feelings and common destiny of human beings.” (Leedy, 34)

Mill found healing through Wordsworth’s poetry due to the imagery of the natural beauty and the focus on common feelings and destiny. Poetry provides this connection back to common feelings by making the subjective more universal. The universal ideas that Wordsworth’s poetry dealt with and revealed allowed Mill to find the healing for his specific situation. Poetry allows for a kind of community not just with the poet but with humanity. This community through the universal human experience gave Mill, and many others, hope.

In Myers's article, he outlines the idea that traditional medicinal techniques, at times, are lacking. "I commend to you, fellow physician, the pragmatically useless treatment called *poetry*, whereby we might leave our patients less alone when our medicine leaves us all alone, when the body's belonging in the world cannot be sustained according to our hopes. And it might be for you, as it has been for me, that by poetry, you'll be left less alone in the private struggle with the limits of medicine's magic" (Myers, *Where Medicine Leaves Us Alone*). There is a gap between what the prescriptions, procedures, and prodding can do to heal a human being. This is not, of course, to diminish the wonderful and real work that the medical field accomplishes every day. This is simply to say, there is more. There is poetry, which Myers argues is a way to combat loneliness. It is a way to create in us belonging.

New Horizons shows the truth in Myers words. The writing groups are a smaller setting than the downstairs drop-in and dinner. Each participant has a lot more time, should they wish to take it, to share and open up. But somehow it is more even than simply the intimacy of the group setting that creates what Myers calls "belonging in the world". Somehow the act of writing and sharing poetry tears the veil between us, and if the participants reading and the participants listening are receptive, a kinship blossoms. Rule number two in writing group is to not criticize others, because writing group is a safe place.

Fisher wore a large oversized dark green sweatshirt. She managed to have a presence, to take up space as it were, though she spoke with a tender softness and though her body was small and wiry. She loves Pokémon. Soon this classic franchise became the topic of the chatting between several of the writers before writing group started. Fisher went on to say that the poem that comes up after the credits of one of the Pokémon games made her cry. The poem is about

belonging. It thanks the player for being there throughout the story, and it talks about how glad the characters are to have met us, the players. Robin suggested that Fisher use this format of the Pokémon end game message as a writing prompt for the group. Fisher read the poem aloud then we responded to it on our own. A veteran of writing group, she had proudly shown Robin and me her phone where she writes and saves all of her work. What she shared with us astounded me. These poems were developed. Her images painted vivid pictures, and her word choice had all the flavor of someone who had read their fair share of fantasy novels. Robin emphasized to Fisher her writing abilities, giving her more responsibility in the group to bring writing prompts and contribute.

The moment of sharing creates community for the participants. Poetry writing and sharing increases empathy in the group. Clare Hopkinson, in an article titled *Using Poetry in a Critically Reflexive Action Research Co-Inquiry with Nurses*, explains that nurses witness struggle and hopelessness throughout their long and arduous shifts. Hopkinson speaks about how important she has found using poetry as a nurse to express her feelings. She describes writing a poem about one of her more demanding patients who had throat cancer. This poem allowed Hopkinson to feel empathy for the patient. She saw the patient as more than just her individual needs and difficulties. She saw the patient in a whole way (Hopkinson, 39). When Hopkinson asked her fellow nurses how they felt towards this particular patient, none of them expressed similar feelings of empathy. They simply remarked on some of the ways the patient had been difficult. Distressed by this, Hopkinson decided to share her poetry and see how the conversation might change:

I was nervous and told the staff they would probably think I was a bit ‘crazy’ for writing poetry. To my surprise, the quality of our conversation changed where some

powerful reflections were shared which was unusual. The nurses told me they felt cross and angry with Mary. We talked about the ethical dilemma we faced about creating some boundaries such as a daily wash while respecting Mary's decision to refuse the nasogastric feed... Tonight I think the nurses realized they wanted to get her home with support and the staff nurses noticed they had been avoiding looking after her because they saw her as difficult. They recognized a lack of empathy towards her and her situation... There seemed a stronger team connection after the poem which was unusual (Hopkinson, 39).

Hopkinson notes that the reading aloud of her poem about her patient, Mary, created an entirely different attitude towards the patient among the nurses. This poem allowed a feeling of empathy and intensive discussion of Mary's needs. The nurses talked about the despair they had already been feeling but had not been recognizing. "Usually we 'just got on with it', that is, giving care, not reflecting on care" (Hopkinson, 39-40).

The nurses did not deal with the messier psychological trouble they were feeling about caring for a dying woman, because they have other patients to tend to and must keep going. They must "get on with it". The sharing of the poetry created a space among the nurses to discuss their emotions surrounding Mary's care as well as their complex feelings around the situation. The poem planted and nourished more feelings of empathy within the nurses as well, who undoubtedly struggle with compassion fatigue in such a strenuous caregiving role. This increase in empathy assists the nurses, of course, but also allows the nurses to provide the best care they can to their dying patients. It bridges the gap between them and the other.

Those in the New Horizons shelter are also in a kind of "get on with it" survival mode. When you are on the streets, there isn't time to focus on how you feel. When you are on the

streets, there isn't a safe space to allow yourself to feel empathy for all the pain you see around you. When you are on the streets, you block out anything that could make you weaker. This means that the vulnerability of emotions and shared experience is often avoided. The poetry of writing groups creates a space to come to terms with complex feelings in a safe and supportive community. It allows them to bridge the gap between themselves for a while, before they go out into the world again.

Today, volunteering at New Horizons left me heavy inside. Today, most said they were too tired, and they were. I could see it in the way they sat in the chairs, slouching. I had been running into no luck at all with spurring interest in group before I spied her. She was sitting at a table alone, eating her food and dressed in a light green long sleeved shirt that covered all of her long thin arms. Even from far away, she had a sweetness to her demeanor that shocked me in its contrast to the roughness of the room. By the time most of the youth have made it to New Horizons, the outside world has made them spiky, sharp, and tough. Somehow this girl still looked soft. She told me her name when I asked. This was different. Most of them don't like just anybody knowing their name. It gives others power over them. It gives insight into their lives. She told me hers though, and we chatted lightly about a lot of things, tossing words gently back and forth. She had just listened to a new album by an artist she recently discovered. She loved the way that it sounded. She told me about how she wants to learn to cook more and explained to me all about her grilled cheese recipe that she had picked up in her last group home. She explained that she's going by her middle name right now, Rachael, because she only wants to switch back to her first name once she gets housing. And that made all the sense in the world.

When you're living on the streets and everything has changed, why would it feel like you're the same name? Why would the same name fit the right way on your new tough skin? And I have to tell you I almost cried right there in front of her. Thank goodness, I did not. That would have bewildered her, because what on earth is so sad about names and grilled cheese recipes? That's where the heart stumbles, though. It has forged armor for the big events of life. It has patched all the leaks and holes to prepare to hear about Trauma with a capital T. The heart practices blocking out the big events, otherwise we wouldn't be able to wake up to news like mass shootings and famines and racism. Then you meet a girl so soft you think she must just melt into the streets like a shadow, because how else could she survive out there? Then you meet a girl who talks to you about grilled cheese recipes and wants to learn to play guitar. You meet a girl with a voice like background music in a nice restaurant. You wonder how she escaped getting spiky like the rest of them. You realize that she has been crushed instead of hardened. When she talks, she looks at my cheek, because my eyes might hurt her. She knows the power eyes and names and grilled cheeses have. She undid the armor I had prepared to face today. I had made it too strong. It had not been built to block out gentleness. It had not been built to block out a slight stutter and eyes that wouldn't meet mine. It had not been built to block out grilled cheese. I asked her to please come to writing group. She fumbled with the words. "Not this time, thanks." That is all. And then we parted. What if I never see her again? What if I don't? And that was all.

Though my new friend from down stairs did not come up, we had a large group today. Our prompt was to write about the color you were feeling. They were instructed to include as many images as they could. "According to scholar Wallace Bacon, literature is the author's act of interpreting the fragmented parts of the whole... In the act of telling the story the writer

reattaches the fragments to the whole and gains greater insight into life and nature. In mathematical terms, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The eye and the I play essential roles in healing, wholing and the re-invention of self” (Reiter, pg. 14). Poetry allows the writer to take the fragments of an experience and create a new total from all of the parts.

Red seemed reluctant to share. He had written a poem for the color of your feelings prompt, yet he seemed uneasy. Robin suggested he include it in the book of poems with the other two from his group, but he resisted. He continued to insist that it wasn’t finished quite yet. He asked us if people are allowed to lie in poetry. This poem did not seem completely true to him. He began the poem describing what color he was feeling. He felt “the color of a wilted rose.”

“I don’t think that’s actually the color I’m feeling, though. Is that alright?” He explained that parts of the poem were true to him, but definitely not all of it. He did not want to lie. He stayed after group had ended, worried that he had lied in his poem or that he had said a half truth in an attempt to make the words sound beautiful or profound. He was not sure that being the color of “a wilted rose” meant all that much at all. The others were encouraging. One, sitting straight across from me with big rimmed glasses, chimed in.

“It doesn’t have to be completely true, to reveal true things about the world.” Red relaxed slightly. Perhaps, this poem followed what Reiter described in her book *Writing Away the Demons*. Poems allow the poet to pull together parts and create a greater whole. This poem about the color of a wilted rose might not have entirely described the experience of this one young man, but it resonates with parts of him. It resonated also with the others in the room. He touched upon some universal cord. After all, who would have thought that being the color of a wilted rose could create such a vivid image? But it is true that we all know exactly what that color is, or rather what it is to us. The color of a wilted rose summons an exact image in all of our brains.

We all “get it”. We know exactly what he means. Yet, I suppose if you asked us all to paint it, it would come out rather differently. Some might picture a red rose wilting on a stem, others a pink rose almost entirely shriveled. Others still, might picture a single rose dropping crumpled petals to the floor. The young writers were able to bring their own hurts to the interpretation of this metaphor.

Red is a heroin addict. He was just released from a hospital after falling off a concrete bridge while he was sleeping. Of all the colors to be feeling, I had expected him to pick something vivid, angry, and wild. Instead, he wrote of a wilted rose, tired, faded, and still soft somehow. The next time Red came in would not be for several months. I did not recognize him at first. His long hair had been cut short, so his face was now clearly visible. He had the same slow sleepy gait as he pulled open a notebook.

“Hey this is mine” he mumbled and then began to read. “I am the color of a wilted rose.” Months later he read this poem, nodded to himself and showed it around the room proudly. Red was so proud to have this poem with his name on it.

When thoughts and feelings remain formless and invisible, the demon may dance in the shadow of your mind. But when pen is put on paper, and you hold that paper up to the light, your honesty and courage overpowers the dark. In many civilizations, there was a strong belief that to name someone or something was to magically possess it or have power over it. In ancient Egypt, for example, the name not only expressed the identity, it was thought to be the essence of a person’s being, and was believed to be essential for survival (Reiter, 5).



This is not news to the youth at New Horizons. They understand the power of names. Many of them adopt street names like “Zombie” and “Promo” to introduce themselves to those they interact with on the streets. Their former names, just like their former lives, have limited space in this new reality. The importance of naming would make sense to them. They understand that telling someone your name is not a casual exchange. It is a gift. It is an act of confidence. Emerson writes “the poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty” in his essay *The Poet*. Giving a name to what you carry within you gives you some sort of mastery over it. When there is an altercation between people at New Horizons, the staff sit the two parties apart and have them fill out a complaint form. They are able to name what has happened. They know also to know someone’s name is to know a deeply important part of them. We begin every writing group by going around to say our names and pronouns. The young writers are able to express not only what title they would like to be addressed by but also their preferred pronouns. For the youth here, many identify as transgender or gender non-binary. This is a crucial part of their identity to be able to express and name the way they are presented in the world. A youth who is a regular at our group on Thursday mornings decided to go by Pink Ice on their poems. The group provides one space for them to rest in the identity which is most true to them, preparing them to live that truth out in the world.

Leedy speaks particularly of his personal experiences with the abilities of poetry to transform the lives of young people. “Poetry can serve as a two-way door, opening toward the world of fanciful childhood play or toward the reality-oriented fantasy-concealed world of adulthood. As a therapeutic tool with adolescents, therefore, poetry has two potentials; to uncover and reveal the wishful dreams of childhood, and to convert these dreams into socially

acceptable yet pleasurable adult forms” (Leedy, pg. 195). The time of adolescence, at least in North American culture, is widely recognized as a time of searching for identity and purpose. It is when the question of what do you want to be when you grow up begins to take a more pressing and urgent tone. It starts to become less cute to speak of your far-fetched dreams. How do we reconcile our inner fantasy worlds with the outer realities of the new adult world? This is difficult even for those growing up in supportive and enriching environments.

This struggle for identity becomes even more tumultuous without a supportive network and in an unstable environment. They are facing these things without a guide. The staff at New Horizons does an incredible job of supporting these young people as best they can and providing resources. This work proves difficult, of course, when many do not come regularly or refuse help.

Part of the community that poetry builds in writing groups is one of recognition regarding shared experience. Most of these youth do not have a guide to say “What you are feeling is normal,” or “I used to feel the same thing.” Leedy addresses this need to locate fellow participants in our experiences. “The reader may enter as a guest into the private world of the poet, yet he soon recognizes familiar landmarks. He quickly finds that he is no outsider. Though the poet speaks for himself, the reader discovers his own psyche, his own thoughts and feelings, being expressed. He is not so alone as he had imagined himself. He finds his identity disclosed in the world of a fellow human being. The very pulse of poetry and the pattern of its rhythms appeal to something basic and atavistic in our nature” (Leedy, pg. 212). Leedy goes on to describe the experience of a young woman that he worked with. This woman, Lorene, never left her house. She suffered terribly from eczema all over her body. This made her self-conscious of leaving her home. She suffered greatly with physical pain and emotional despair. At first, Lorene

had no real interest in Leedy or his therapies; however, this all changed, when she came upon a poem by Emily Dickinson in one of her sessions.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you --- Nobody --- too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd banish us --- you know!  
How dreary --- to be --- Somebody!  
How public --- like a Frog ---  
To tell your name --- the livelong June ---  
To an admiring Bog!

Lorene changed drastically after this reading. Leedy describes his interactions with her after this lesson. "Lorene asked me for information. She wanted to learn something of the poet's life. I told her the story of Emily Dickinson --- of her idiosyncrasies, her isolation, her unhappiness, of the posthumous discover of her poems and her brilliant position today in world literature. She was fascinated. She seemed to have found a rapport with Miss Dickinson" (214). Lorene found hope in realizing that someone else before her had felt the way she was feeling now. She does not stand before her monsters alone. These monsters are not new creatures. They have been troubling hearts and minds for years. "It is clear that Lorene's problem was emotional as well as medical. The lines of communication between her and the outside world needed mending before anything could be done for her in the hospital. The line, 'I'm nobody,' must have moved her strongly, reflecting as it probably did her own opinion of herself. Additional

defenses fell with the question, 'Are you nobody, too?' Lorene was also undoubtedly gratified to be included in the admonition 'Don't tell --- They'd banish us you know'...When Lorene brushed the hair away from her face and permitted the world to look at her, she had traveled an incalculable distance" (215).

It is evident that even just the reading of poetry has therapeutic value for many. Lorene herself did not need to be writing poetry to feel connected to a bigger whole. Her inclusion into another's experience sprung from simply reading aloud the words of another that resonated with her. Returning to the example of John Stuart Mill and his use of poetry in a healing way exemplifies the same concept. Mill did not need to write his own poetry to find relief and solace to his worn mind. His past reading of Byron had not provided him with the same feelings of comfort as Wordsworth, because Byron's "state of mind was too like" his own. "His was the lament of a man who had worn out all pleasures, and who seemed to think that life, to all who possess the good things of it, must necessarily be the vapid, uninteresting thing which I found it" (Mill, 103). The poet that will best resonate with a client depends vastly on what the client is looking for. Both Mill and Lorene found a companion in the poets they chose, someone to walk with them through times of darkness. In group settings, with many different clients and needs, this could be difficult. There are many suggested poems that poetry therapists have compiled and suggested for various therapies. At the back of Leedy's book there is a list of suggested poems as well as the mindset or ailment that might be best addressed by that poem. Nina emphasizes in our own groups at New Horizons including young poets, poets of color, and LGBTQ+ poets. Representation of your demographic group allows for the reader to resonate and understand the struggling being described there and gives an option of hope and redemption.

During my training with the Pongo therapeutic writing program, they stressed the need to end on a positive note. For example, it is important that young people talk about their suicidal feelings; however, it is best that the mentor try to lead the writer into a hopeful ending. This way they leave the session feeling that they have something to hold on to, a kind of hope. Unless they are advanced writers, ending a poem on a negative or hopeless note will not be as beneficial. It will still have the benefit of expressing heavy emotions and putting them into words that are easier to share and understand, but it will not provide the writer with different steps to work through these tough times. Pongo trains its mentors to guide the youth into a happy or hopeful place. They encourage them to write about something that makes them feel safer or more secure. They also encourage them to dedicate the poem to someone in their life, allowing the young people to make the poem more of a message to those with whom they interact. The writers and the mentors know that a hopeful ending is not always possible, yet, there needs to be some light or line given to the youth as light to keep making their way.

She was there again last night, Rachael. I had scurried in the back door at New Horizons hurrying to escape the sharpness of the cold. The air seemed especially unyielding that night, as if it would fight anyone who tried to pass through it, as if it would clamp its icy teeth into your skin. Drop-In was packed. The cold had driven many more bodies than usual into the safety and warmth of New Horizons. Today they were serving burritos, so stuffed with cheese and meat that the tortillas were cracking under the strain. I surveyed the room, so full of bodies and sweatshirts and dogs, and I saw her. She was sitting on one of the black sagging sofas underneath the screen that plays nature documentaries. She wasn't watching. She was staring down and picking at the burrito on her plate. She was alone.

“Hey, I think we met a few weeks ago.” She looked over my shoulder and smiled slightly.

“Yeah we did.”

I wasn't sure if she remembered me from all the other volunteers who come and linger at New Horizons on Monday nights. Then she shifted and said,

“Did you get a chance to look up that artist I told you about?”

“Oh no, I forgot. How do you spell it again?”

“Daley” she said softly.

We kept talking then. Today she was wearing bright red pants the color of Christmas or new lipstick. We talked about the sports she likes to play. She likes soccer and football. She used to play in school. She's from Port Angeles “which I think is close to here”. She had a cold. She coughed into the neckline of her sweatshirt. She said New Horizons is out of cough drops. I was also sick that night. I remember the friends next door who brought tea, Emergen-C, and lemon-flavored cough drops to my bed. I remember how I skipped class to cocoon myself deeper into my quilts. I suspected there wasn't anyone who would be able to bring her hot tea or cough drops. I hoped at least she had a bed.

“So, writing group?” I asked hopefully. She paused to consider.

“I don't really write much. Well, I mean I guess I write when I need to talk about bad things. I write when I want to get my thoughts together. But I'm not really a writer.” We talked for a while more about this and that. At first, she seemed halfway interested in the writing group, but by the end of our talk, she became unsure.

“Not this week,” she mumbled looking down at her knees.

“Maybe next week?”

“Maybe.”

We were entirely unsuccessful this night to generate any interest among the youth. They were tired and cold. Several were already unfolding the cots they sleep on to rest. Kevin, the other mentor volunteering with me this night, shrugged.

“It’s sad, but there are weeks like this. I guess we just go home.”

So we left.

Kevin drove me back to my house, and I rushed into the warmth of the heater. I remember how excited we had all been for the snowflakes a few days ago. I remember how we wished it would snow more. Then I thought about her with her red pants and her cough. I thought about another young woman, April, who said she needed to repair a hole in her tent to keep out rats. I do not think I want it to snow anymore.

It was early west coast time when I called Paul Sznewajs to talk about the program he started in Chicago, Snow City Arts. Though Sznewajs is no longer the director of this nonprofit program, he knows the ins and outs of its inner workings, after having worked with them for many years. Snow City Arts works with several medical centers in the Chicago area. They provide multidisciplinary programs in the arts for terminally ill kids. They offer sculpture, painting, animated shorts, digital music, film, and poetry. Though Snow City Arts usually works with kids one on one due to the strict hospital scheduling, they occasionally do have groups. Either way, Sznewajs explains, the kids benefit greatly from these programs.

The model is similar to that of the writing groups at New Horizons. The kids are given a writing prompt, though they do not have to follow it, and they are supported in their process as they work to put together a poem. They will often use already existing poems as prompts. The

kids will read the poem with the mentor, and they will then try to write their own from any inspiration they have from the one they read. I asked Szniewajs if he noticed an improvement or change in the kids after working with the program. Though he said he knew very little about the medical specifics behind the ways that art helps physiologically, he did notice a difference. He described the way the hospital rooms first looked when they came in to meet the kids. Usually the kids are laying in the dark, with the blinds draw and the T.V. on. At first, they are wary of Snow City Arts, but once they see other kids having fun, they try it themselves and start to show more enthusiasm. The T.V. gets turned off, and the blinds come up. The kids look more awake as they begin to participate in programming specifically tailored to fit their physical and emotional capabilities. Szniewajs recounts many stories of the kids looking and feeling more energized after working with the program. They are also usually much more eager to participate with the Snow City Programming after this first time. They are experiencing similar feelings to those in the shelter. They too feel isolated and separated from the rest of the world. They too are trying to find meaning in a world that seems to have forgotten them. The arts allow them to connect their inside world into the world outside. This disconnect and isolation whether it is homelessness or terminal illness can create a lack of hope. Poetry can help create this hope.

The truth that the youth at the shelter and the kids in the medical centers are struggling to say is usually not easy to swallow. It is usually a truth about dying. It is a truth about getting kicked out for not babysitting your sister. It is a truth about being an undocumented immigrant, barred from the process to achieve citizenship due to a minor infraction. It is a truth about not having papers needed to travel in search of work. It is a truth about family. It is a truth that your heroine-addicted father will be released from prison just weeks after you are being sent there for



possession of stolen property. It is truth in a letter you write to that father asking his forgiveness and telling him you will try to push off your court date until you can at least say hello in person after 15 years apart. It is a truth about forgiveness. It is truth about being locked up for possession and showing your scabbed knuckles in group, wounds from fighting off a man trying to force you to give him a blow job. It is truth about social anxiety that makes each word come out full of static. Sometimes saying these things is impossible. There are no words, and, even if there were, it is hard to see the point. When they write a poem, they create something beautiful with their truth. When you cannot say it in exacting language, metaphor and symbol will assist. When there is no way to speak the ugly inside, there is a way to write that ugly beautiful.

She was there again today with blue jeans instead of red. I had arrived before the other mentor, and the raucous room overwhelmed me. Seeing a familiar face made me feel calm in a noisy and wild crowd. I made my way to her.

“I looked up the musician you told me about. I really liked him.”

She smiled as wide as you can with your lips still together.

“Doesn’t he sound like a better version of Sam Smith?” The cold from last week lingered in her voice. She had asked some of the New Horizons staff for cough syrup, and while we were talking, they were looking for it.

“I hope they hurry up” she sighed softly. “I’ve got to go somewhere.” She was heading to another shelter for the night. She wanted to make sure she made it in time for when they called her name. She wanted to make sure that she had a place to stay. I did not even ask about writing group this week, assuming that since she was leaving soon, it would be another no. She wandered off to ask again about the cough syrup leaving me with two young men I had not met

before. I asked them about writing group. They were tall, tough-looking types. Someone who would, I had assumed, have no interest in writing poetry. They had both been focused on eating and talking about a fight, so I was surprised when they both looked up with interest.

“Yeah, okay. I might come through.”

Ashley and I led those two and Fisher upstairs to our table. The prompt was “If you knew me, you would know...”. TJ, one of the young men I had met downstairs, put his head low and started writing. He wrote steadily the entire 30 minutes we allowed them to work. He never looked up or got distracted when his friend made comments. The group focus felt intense and good. It felt like this was a group that knew what they needed to say.

When it came time to share, TJ volunteered. He prefaced his work before opening his notebook.

“I came up here to write about my life. That’s the only thing. That’s what I came to do.” After this introduction, he started reading. He read with a voice like a bedtime story, clear in our quiet room. He had written about his life, just as he said. It was a story about family, a family who threw him out. It was a story about a family who hit him and abandoned him when he once refused to babysit his sister. TJ kept asking his main question. Who was going to love him if his own flesh and blood doesn’t? Who was going to be there for him if his family isn’t? He read on simply and without fanfare. He read as if he was reading about the weather or a history textbook. He read like it was a part of his daily routine. He read about being abused as a child and then kicked out to fend for himself before the age of ten. He drifted between unsympathetic relatives. He grew up between these families, passed around like hand-me-downs. He articulated the loneliness of abandonment by a family—the new eyes you have after watching them grow smaller in the distance. Who is going to love him if his flesh and blood don’t?

“I’ve never told anybody all that before. This is the first time I’ve written it all down. People always tell me they see something in me. Strangers will come up to me and say that they think there’s something special about me. They think I’m going to go far one day. People come up to me and say that all the time. That sort of stuff confuses me. What is it that they see in me?”

Later, a young man came up to the group. Normally, we do not allow them to come in and interrupt group if too much time had passed, but Ashley and I recognized him from previous groups and allowed him to come in. Fisher stiffened when the new person entered the room. It took me awhile to realize she had stopped talking entirely—her body tilted away from the newcomer. Ashley and I did not notice that something had changed in her until it came her turn to share. She did not respond to our questions. She sat her eyes focused and her face blank. The new comer reached over and grabbed a few of her candies to which she protested but maintained her tense glance.

“Did something someone shared upset you?” I asked feeling helpless.

She shook her head.

“Is someone here making you uncomfortable?”

A nod. I took her aside away from the others to some of the couches near the staff cubicles and sat while she rocked back and forth on the couch. She continued to be nervous, searching over her shoulder the whole time. I sat and talked with her. She eventually calmed down enough to read me her poem. She had answered the question through the eyes of her different book characters instead of herself. Telling me all the things I would know about them if I knew them well.” Just like the use of nicknames in the streets, characters shield and provide a safe space to express parts of ourselves.

She then used my phone to look up her blog and show me some of her most recent posts. Slowly, the reading of her work calmed her. Her body stilled, and her face began to melt again, becoming a little more animated. While I was working with Fisher, the group with Ashley grew uneasy. Two more men had joined the group late, and they sat tensely, bodies leaned way back in their chairs, stiff like pencils. Several times she had to remind them that in writing group we don't use negative language or say hurtful things to each other. Eventually, a staff member got involved. The group headed out soon after this, leaving Ashley and I, worn out and a little sad, to pick up our pens and notebooks. But TJ wrote what he needed to write. He wrote about something that he never had before, so the night was a success. All the cruel words and panic attacks in the world couldn't make it any less true that something good happened for TJ.

Cooke and Turner posit that there is a need to do ordinary actions, like movement, in an extraordinary way, like dance, that comes from a place of utility and survival. "Resemblances between play and art or ritual and art have often been noted. Like play, art often is characterized by novelty and unpredictability, surprise, ambiguity, fantasy, and make-believe; both are self-rewarding, performed for their own sake" (31). The authors discuss how "play allows young animals in a protected...arena to develop practical and social skills that can be used later...ritualized behaviors formalize, stylize, and emphasize ordinary attributes that thereby acquire a secondary communicative function and ritual" (Cooke and Turner 32). When little kids don their parents' oversized shoes and clothes to play "house" they are training in a safe environment for the future days to come. We pretend to have children, romantic relationships, and a job. We are practicing skills.

Perhaps writing group is not so different. We are safe. We sit in a circle around a table and set ground rules. This is a safe space. It is easier to talk about abuse in this way rather than to the abuser, to our friends, or to the police officer at the door. It is easier to communicate your fears in group rather than in the midst of the anxiety attack. The upstairs writing group room muffles the loud sounds of the voices and car horns echoing off the slimy street pavement. For that hour they are safe and warm. Here they can write and practice communicating complex emotions in a space where failure will not cause them to lose something crucial. They practice expressing and sharing emotions that normally humans instinctually keep tucked away.

These youth train day in and day out in the art of survival. In a very real and visceral world full of uncertainty, they have learned to rely on themselves. They have learned how to sense in people capacities to help. They have learned how to harden their skin against cold, fists, and harsh words. They have learned to fight for everything they own. They fly into a rage when someone steals their candies, because those candies were four dollars. Four dollars they might not have tomorrow. Four dollars on the streets means a lot. Four dollars buys several bus tickets across the city. Four dollars can be saved away for the \$40 rent in the Nest. They are masters of survival.

One could argue then that poetry would not be relevant to these young people. I will admit that on many nights leaving the doors of New Horizons, I would plug in my headphones and close my eyes. I will admit that many times I have come home from group to my housemates with no inspiring stories to tell them. When asked how it went, I have more than once sucked in my cheeks in shame and cried. Is this really doing anything at all? Nina sat across from a perspective mentor for the writing groups. The new mentor had a hot pink and sherbet orange pixie cut, and she raised soft brown eyes to survey Nina.

“I’ve got to tell you,” Nina began leaning back a bit in her chair “this work often seems unrewarding. Results are not often tangible, and they might not appear until years later. There are always those bright spots that keep us going. There are always those kids that melt and open right before your eyes.”

So what about poetry could ever tempt these utilitarian survivalists? They come to group, because they know that to survive, really, they need more than food and a roof. They know intuitively that to survive there are other skills worth practicing. On one warm May day, one of my last times at New Horizons, Tay sat on the desk near the door. The prompt was “If I had leisure time, I would...” Nina explained that this meant what would you do if you did not worry about finding a place to stay at night or food to eat?

“Honestly I would write poetry.”

Tay coughed this out as if ashamed.

Poetry could be a little like playing house to learn life skills or dancing to become stronger and more graceful. Poetry helps them, safely, learn to look inside. It allows them to communicate to someone, anyone, the complexities they’re feeling. Because I assure you masters of survival cry too. Masters of survival make mixed CDs. Masters of survival want to learn how to cook. Masters of survival like to dye their hair their favorite color. Masters of survival know that to survive as humans they are going to need more than what a doctor could prescribe. Poetry gives this to them. Poetry allows them to see themselves as more than just surviving. They are feeling. They are rapping. They can rhyme and make images. They can communicate their hurt without fists. They can feel their hurt without drugs. Poetry allows them to express their emotions. It is a release, but it is also practice. These young writers do not go from writing group into magically safe environments. They continually face new trauma. Now

they have a way to talk about what happens. Now they have practiced how it feels to look at the trauma and make something that touches others out of all that dark. Angel reaches out from her dark in her poem “Seven”.

Seven: by Angel Gardner, Seattle Youth Poet Laureate

It happened when I was seven  
yet this remains my favorite number.

Funny how trauma can't  
always taint the simpler things.

It happened when I was seven  
and it was the first and last time  
I'd ever loved.

Whoever said I was too young  
didn't know my old soul shelters a tired mind  
but back then that mind knew more  
about compassion.

I was seven and nothing was lost.  
I didn't misplace my virginity,  
it was robbed.

My thighs and the soft dips under my eyes  
were chafed and raw.

I didn't need pills,

I needed to know it wasn't my fault,  
that boys might be boys  
but raping girls wasn't a rite of passage  
for every bastard with a pair of balls.  
I was seven when I learned how to break down  
but never let a tear break the surface  
When I learned secrets  
were the most dangerous weapons.

This striking poem, honest and painful, comes from *Blood Melody*, a poetry book published by Angel Gardner, a former Seattle Youth Poet Laureate. Angel frequents the writing groups at New Horizons. She herself used to be a regular there. Her own story, full of trauma, abuse, and neglect, brought her, like so many others, to seek refuge in the New Horizons walls. She found that refuge even more fully in her poetry. She became a regular at the group upstairs. Her writing and use of language is one of a natural artist. Not only does she have a poignant story to tell, she has a grasp of language and imagery that creates an even more potent presence. Angel gives us an example of someone whose poetry really brought deep transformation to her life. She has housing now for herself and her son. She works full time, and she has spoken at events about her poetry with such notable figures as Sherman Alexie and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The days when Angel is free to attend writing group are special ones. The participating writers respond to her like to none of the other mentors. She knows their language. She knows their rhythms. She knows their stories.



Angel's poems speak often of her abuse and the subsequent trauma that led her to a rough and unsteady existence. She grapples with mental illness, self-harm, sexual trauma, racism, stereotypes, broken social systems, and familial relationships. Angel, a young, vibrant African American woman with fuchsia braids and fish net tights, a mother, an overcomer, a poet, shows the youth at New Horizons that hope still exists. Hope is not just for the white writing mentor with the blue Patagonia jacket. Hope looks like fuchsia braids. Hope looks like brown skin. Hope looks like fish net tights.

When I talked with Natalie, another resident of the Nest, about her poetry, Natalie looked to Angel as a model. I asked her if she knew Angel. She said she did. She told me all about her published book of poetry.

“Maybe you'll be published one day.”

“One day that will be me,” she affirmed with certainty. It was not a maybe.

The poet and writer Maya Angelou was raped as a child by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Angelou articulates the complex knot of guilt, anger, and grief that she felt during the trial and following years in her autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Though he raped an eight-year-old child, Mr. Freeman was only given one year and a day in prison. He never made it there though, as he was found murdered the day after the trial. Maya Angelou felt certain that it was her fault he had been killed. She was so filled with guilt and pain that she “had to stop talking” (Angelou, 87). She sensed, as Natalie told me, that “words have power, and you have to be careful how you use them”. If words could have such power as to point the accusing finger at a man that would lead to his death, better forfeit the power, better not to risk the unleashing of it at all:

I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me. I walked into rooms where people were laughing, their voices hitting the walls like stones, and I simply stood still—in the midst of the riot of sound. After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten up all the sounds. (Angelou, 87)

Family members and teachers constantly chastised Maya for her voluntary muteness. Despite this, she flourished in school. She wrote beautifully and read with great comprehension all the literature she was given. She turned to writing and reading when speaking could no longer offer her solace. Then, Ms. Flowers came into the young brokenhearted little Maya's life. Ms. Flowers took an instant interest in this young, silent girl in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou recounts one particular interaction with Ms. Flowers that opened her eyes and even freed her tongue again.

Now no one is going to make you talk---possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals...Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper means.'... 'There's one more thing. Take this book of poems and memorize one for me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite.' (Angelou, 98-100)

Angelou would bring the memorized poems to her lessons with Ms. Flowers. She would recite. Her mouth would open and some of the sounds she had harbored would be released. The

colorful exotic words of her heart, that had roosted long enough behind the cage of her teeth and that had been singing to themselves for far too long, were set free. The key that would welcome her lips to part had not come with the force of a crowbar. It came with the gentle invitation into the world of poetry and stories, the world of Ms. Flowers.

Nina, the lead mentor for our Thursday morning group, poses a similar figure to Ms. Flowers. In writing group last Thursday, Nina brought in several sample poems. She passed them around to the three young men seated there, in various postures of attention. Andrew, though high and making vulgar comments throughout the session, offered to read the poem out loud. At first, he faltered, stuttering. When he finished, he insisted on reading the poem again, this time smoother with more fluidity. One of the other writers commented on his good reading voice, and Andrew nodded solemnly. This moment of pride in his reading aloud was one of the only times he was serious throughout the hour and a half we worked that day.

There is power in reading and writing, but something both Pongo and the New Horizon's writing groups have recognized is that something particularly special happens in the sharing aloud of a work. There is a magic space that is created, a sacred space. There certainly is still healing that comes from writing for yourself, and that is a valid stage in the process. Many participants are not quite ready to share their work with the others just yet. When they do share, even if it is not their own work, their eyes brighten. They sit up straighter in their chairs. The feedback from their peers and the mentors soaks into their skin, vitamins to strengthen them against whatever is to come, against rainy Seattle days. Putting words to trauma that allows traumatic feelings and events to be communicated to a community and controlled by the writer, gives order and catharsis to a chaotic and bruised life. Maya Angelou found her solace when she

could not bring herself to speak, in writing, reading, and listening. Her healing began to come when she found a community and shared experience in the poems she internalized and read aloud, her voice bringing to life once again the magic of these pieces of art.

Ocean came into writing group a few weeks ago with torn raw places on his knuckles. When he came to group last week, he stormed in 45 minutes late, obviously distressed. When asked if there was anything on his mind or that he wanted to write about, he responded heavily that he always solves problems with his fists. His cheek had a raw red spot on it. Another 15 minutes into the session, he was fast asleep on the table.

Solving conflicts become even more difficult without a support system and with triggers from trauma that make dealing with conflict in a non-violent way extremely counter-intuitive. According to Lepore and Smyth, writing allows people to change their narrative. If someone can write about who they are and what they feel, they can have more control over how they identify themselves and respond in conflicts. "Writing narratives about one's life, for example, is an activity involving the presentation of self in social context, as well as an emotional release. Young people can use this context to connect program-based social values with their own experiences and imaginative processes" (Lepore and Smyth, pg. 58-59). Though this research focuses on the benefits of narrative writing, the idea of telling your story translates into poetry writing as well. Through the poems the youth express their anger and other emotions in a way that distances the participant from the conflict and gives space to process.

The youth had all dispersed after a fight that morning, the eating area empty save for the few volunteers packing up tables and mopping the floor. We weren't hopeful that writing group

would be able to happen, since there was only one young man in the entire area, sitting unperturbed at his computer. Nevertheless, always hopeful, we went up to our room. We pulled out the poetry prompts binder and adjusted the chairs. Nina and I waited, hoping that maybe someone would come up with a hankering for poetry writing that day.

This was my first time volunteering at the Thursday morning group, and my first time meeting Nina. Her hair was more silver than you would expect for someone with her smooth face. She kept it pulled back in a low ponytail just peaking beneath her faded red cap. She's originally from Yugoslavia, now Bosnia—with an accent that makes her words feel more important, weightier, and intentional. I had been nervous volunteering with another group, unsure what to expect, but Nina immediately made me feel at ease. As we sat waiting for any stragglers to make their way to our little room, she asked me about my life. While I explained my project, and my difficulty in finding people willing to share their poems with me, she brightened. “You should talk to Natalie.”

Natalie, luckily enough, was sitting upstairs waiting to fill out some housing applications. She reclined into the corner of the narrow couch just outside of the writing group room. She wore a large sweatshirt and kept the hood up the whole time we talked. She leaned back and a little away from me, facing the room at large, directing her comments to both the staff member at the desk, another girl on an adjacent couch, and me all at once. Her curly light brown hair tumbled out from her hood and over one shoulder. While I asked her questions, she reached into her bag and pulled out a Capri sun, sipping it while she flipped through her notebook to show me her work. The first page she rested on read like this:

I find myself picking at my own brain  
I find myself living for the rain  
I find myself kissed by the sun  
I find myself in just about anyone  
In truly bad terms I am a chameleon  
In truly good terms I am an alien  
In finding me, I discover truth  
In finding me, I am recluse  
I find myself uneasy in self-expression  
I find myself in the bliss of self-reflection

Natalie had sketched an eye on the front cover of her poetry notebook. She laughed when she first saw it.

“I don’t remember drawing that, but the eyebrows look good, don’t they?”

She looked down for a minute at the eye, then flipped to a page in the middle of the book. She stretched out the book towards me pointing to one of the manila-colored pages.

“This one is a good one. You could use this one.”

She had built a house of words. The strict parallelism formed the walls. She found herself “picking” at her own brain. She furnished her poem’s rooms with the thoughts that keep her awake at night. The repetition of “I find myself” not only emphasizes this search for identity in an unstable and fluctuating environment, but it also supplies a set structure for the poem. The rhythm is steady. Each finding of herself creates another pillar to support the poem. Her use of repetition works to build the structure of her poem. It sets the wooden outline of the house. It

nails in the planks to form the skeleton of her shelter. It allows something as complicated and murky as finding ourselves to be built on solid ground. It allows her heart to sit within a house frame. The parallelism pulls up walls, and the imagery nails in shingles a few feet above thick insulation. The extra words paint the walls many colors, clean the windows, and adjust the plumbing and appliances. The other words pull in a worn couch from the good will and set it next to the lava lamp that doubles as a speaker. This poem builds a house for a girl without a house. This same girl who holds her bag of possessions while she sleeps so that nobody steals anything builds a house with her own tongue—her words a team of construction workers with bright yellow safety hats. When Natalie shares her poem, she is opening the door of her new home to the rest of us too.

Natalie recognizes in this poem that the art she creates here comes from an important spot within herself. The “bliss of self-reflection” comes from finding a way around the “uneasy” feeling she gets when she expresses herself. Expressing hard and vulnerable truths, even if, maybe especially if, you are asking for help is an incredibly uneasy situation. Most of these young people come from backgrounds where home was not a safe place. Losing their homes, becoming homeless, threw them into insecurity that was different but not unfamiliar. Many of them might say that they were homeless long before they no longer had a place to stay. For them, housing is not the only necessity they are missing in their lives. Stability, a structure, provides the safety they need to drop the walls, peel off their armor for a moment, and check on the damages to their bodies from the battle. It is scary work to take that armor off, when you do not yet know if the battle is over. Yet underneath your chain mail you might be bleeding to death.

The youth are experts at suffering in silence. Many times, they will get spooked by a prompt. It calls up too many emotions, so they feign sleep or leave the session early.

Natalie explained this simply in her quiet straightforward voice.

“Writing helps me sleep. I haven’t been writing lately, so I’ve been having trouble sleeping. It helps me get my thoughts out. It’s hard to sleep in places like this. People steal things.”

“So is that why you write poetry, because it helps you sleep?”

“Yeah, and words have power.” She stated simply. “We have to be careful how we use them.”

“What do you write about?”

“My thoughts and my son mostly.”

“Do you read your poems to your son?” I asked.

“Oh. No, I haven’t seen him since September.”

Her son was what had brought Natalie to this couch on this chilly January morning. She sat here waiting for some housing applications. Natalie hoped to get some sort of housing for her 5-year-old son to come home to when her sister brought him to Seattle in February. Her eyes did not flash with anxiety when she talked about this. Her voice remained steady, quiet, and straightforward. It was just something she needed to do. It was just something happening and just something that was:

Stuck inaring [sic]

Between two forces

Screaming for help

No one comes

The physical state



Paralyzed

Scared

Until the moment comes when you realize

You must help yourself

Awake.

Natalie's voice shines through this poem immediately. The poem is short, written sometime near her beginnings with writing group. At the start, she did not know what writing group was or that she would find a knack and a love for poetry. Writing group was an awakening for her. Here she writes, as many with trauma do, about the feeling of paralysis and helplessness. With these words she is able to claim that terror swirling deep in her bone marrow and use it to bring herself into an awareness and light. Natalie's situation is still tenuous, but it has improved. She has a job working as an administrative assistant for New Horizons and has a regular spot in the Nest. Nina describes Natalie's case as one of those hopeful stories that keeps you going. She's a flare, a warm candle as the other youth maneuver their way towards stability.

Running free through a field of hay

Mane blowing in the wind

Catching all of the good energy of the morning.

The smell of the grass and trees.

Captivate my brain in ways unattainable.

My legs trotting along the ground

Feeling the greatest they've ever felt.

I have no human to stabilize me

I am free. Indeed.

This poem, describing the speaker as a free-spirited horse, shows Natalie after the years of struggle reaching a level of stability and rest. She is not all the way to her goals yet, but she has come a long way from where she started. She is free, indeed.

Evident in Natalie's poetry is an expression of her feelings about her identity. She articulates her freedom through the perspective of a horse running. In her first poem, she gives voice to deeper feelings and insecurities through imagery and metaphor. She does not say she struggles with a shifting identity. Rather she writes, "In truly bad terms I am a chameleon". She also is honest that she struggles with self-expression in the final lines of the first poem she shared. Yet, she recognizes a need for self-reflection and indicates that reflection is occurring in the poem.

Natalie's poems are free verse, though she uses rhyme and repetition to create loose rhythms. Many of the poems written by the writers of writing group are looser and free verse form rather than a more structured poetic form. They have grown up on a rising tradition of spoken word in bars, on street corners, and on YouTube. They engage with one another and their situation often through the relatable lyrics of rap. This tradition of performance poetry is evident when many of the youth share their poems. They read it off, despite nerves, with a musical energy. This looser style of writing is not exclusive for the youth, but it is how many of them start. It is familiar, and they are able to put themselves and their story into the verses. The spoken word movement has also aligned itself with many forms of activism. At an event I attended recently at the Seattle World School called Girlvolution, several teenage girls performed spoken word dealing with issues of sexism, racism, ableism, and xenophobia. Many find spoken word

useful in the telling of their stories. The response from some poets to this movement, though, is that spoken word may be useful in its own right, but it is not poetry.

In order to say that poetry provides a therapeutic benefit, you have to be able to give a rough ballpark surrounding what poetry is. One of the trickiest questions when approaching the youth's poetry has been how does one define poetry. Does it need to exist in a strict meter or rhyme? Does it need to express emotion through metaphor or symbols? Perhaps poetry requires all of these or none of them. The struggle to define poetry has persisted through the ages, and I suppose it probably will continue to persist. It is important, however, for poetry therapy, to have an idea of what makes a poem. Without that, there is no way to distinguish the good poetry therapy is doing from any other written therapies. The youth often write in a haphazard way, dipping their toes in, just to test the temperature of these lines. They are wrestling not only with the words and meter of their poems but with deep and knotted emotions they need to untangle to express. Often when they write, it does not have a strict meter, but it creates a rhythm of its own. Reading their poems, a tumble of letters on the page, makes the reader feel. It resonates with them, changes them, but can it be defined as poetry? Well yes, of course, my gut proclaims sternly, but why it is poetry is a trickier question.

Wordsworth writes that all good poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (UPENN English Dept., 1). That certainly feels like what happens in writing group. It is often like watching the cracks form in ice that is melting from spring's first exploratory rays. The youth come at first a little cool, a little hard. Perhaps ice melting is too passive, perhaps it is more like a dam breaking. Sitting around the table at New Horizons and interacting with one of the street youth, it is easy to forget what lays inside of them. They can seem spiky, hard. They can seem so fiercely independent that you question perhaps if they need to be loved by you at all.

Their skin stands like a firm stone holding back the rivers of emotions unfelt, a stone wall built up slowly, without them even knowing, through the years of pain, through the life exposed to the indifferent Seattle streets. What else could it be, but “a spontaneous overflow of emotion” when a prompt is given and they write and write? They write like they cannot get the words across the dam quickly enough. They write with the aggression it would take to gouge a big crack in the stone wall. The vulnerability expressed often with a little prompting is encouraged in the sacred space of the writing room. Here the emotions bubble up. Here they crack through drug hazes and sleep deprived stupors. Here they have “an overflow of spontaneous emotions”, so they are writing poetry.

Wordsworth emphasizes the repetition of the act of writing poetry that allows the poet to best connect with the reader. Natalie and Angel are perfect examples of this. Natalie began writing poetry in the group without any previous experience. Now she considers herself a poet. The other mentors in group know her story well. She has been able to speak out of her overflowing emotions. She has honed her ability, and now she wishes to continue to grow in her craft. She writes on her own outside of group. Experiencing her poetry, as a reader, I can tell that she has practiced and repeated the work it takes to write a poem. As Natalie recognizes, words have power.

Wordsworth defines a poet as:

a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind...delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these

qualities he has added... an ability of conjuring up in himself passions...whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels (UPENN Department of English, 1)

The youth who come to our group are poets then, at least in the sense that they are compelled to wrestle with topics of the Universe around them and inside of them. They struggle with expressing what they think and feel but do so through their verse. Through the form of poetry, even if only a loose form, they grapple with huge questions and small questions all at once. They are poets. They are humans talking story to other humans. They have learned beyond their years “a knowledge of human nature”. Human nature that is to hurt where you have been hurt. Human nature that is to ignore where others are hurting to save ourselves, but also human nature that is to persevere. Human nature that is to paint our nails meticulously in the colors of hope even if we get into a fistfight later. They question the universe. They grab the universe by the hair and demand answers. Sometimes they make the universe tea and ask if it might want to sit awhile. The youth at the writing table do not talk much to us or each other during this time about housing, food, or where they’re going to do their laundry. They do not talk about those practical challenges, often so insurmountable, that weigh on them daily more than they need to talk about them. They sit across the table from each other, debating what it all means, whether or not there is hope beyond rationality. They debate the essence of the universe. They are poets.

Wordsworth describes that meter is what allows poetry to carry great pain and still bring about beauty and pleasure. “There can be little doubt but that more pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose.” Richard Gold, founder of the Pongo poetry therapy program that inspired the New Horizons writing groups, agrees that

poetry has an ability to carry more pain, to deal with complex issues, and to transform that pain into something more understandable than prose. Those who are carrying more pain in their composition, those who are building their own houses out of their verse, will find it easier to do so in poetry than in prose. The strong arms of the rhythm will be able to carry their burdens further than other forms. Even when reading some of the darkest poems by the youth, there is still a feeling of release. It is very similar to the feeling achieved after crying. After sobbing for a while, though the situation hasn't changed, a feeling of peace and relaxation fans throughout your body, through your limbs and up to your running nose and aching eyes. Poetry sobs for us, and afterwards we are able to face this pain with more strength and bravery.

Gold also posits that poetry is so helpful in these contexts because of its brevity. The youth compact and deal with complex issues in a quick space. This makes logistical sense for Pongo—as they work with incarcerated youth and have only a short time with them. The line breaks of the poem also allow the writer to mold the pauses and experience of the reader much more tangibly. It allows them a greater sense of control of the way their writing is portrayed.

There is a man who improvises poetry outside the doors of an expensive organic grocery store in Seattle. He stands alone, his grey cap shielding his ears from the sharp air. He told me he writes poems for his son and his family to make ends meet. I asked him for a poem. He asked me what I wanted it to be about. I said sunshine, because that's tough to come by in January. He tucked some of the cold air into his lungs before he began. He spoke of sunshine in tree branches and roots deep beneath the city, of young skies in the morning, glowing golden and new. He told me he has been writing ever since he was little to help cope with broken parts of his life. He said he's going to teach his son to write too. Before he began his poem, he paused. Then he asked me

if I wanted to record it. Most people record the poems he speaks, so that they can carry them with them away from there. While he performed, a steady stream of shoppers pushed by with their groceries weighing down their arms and eyes. They didn't even look at us as they passed.

Goddess wrote the following poem in response to the prompt "What I need to say is...".

The idea of not being able to speak and having thoughts that needed to be expressed originated from a poem that we read in group.

What I need to say  
is awake rise be free  
to be thy see key of  
the one chi.  
Si yo puedo vivir  
libre y lleno de luz y  
amor quiero decir que  
soy hombre y mujer  
fuego y agua  
vida y muerte  
el amor  
yo su hijo  
Inmortal corona  
de forma de  
galaxias  
pies

de montañas.

-Goddess

This poem was inspired by the poem we read in group “The Dream About Shouting” by Dominique Christina. She came up in my search for poets who wrote for young people of color after Nina’s suggestions that poets of color are important for many of the youth at New Horizons. I found Dominique Christina in an article asking several young people of color to identify their favorite poets and poems. Dominique Christina is an African American poet and activist. She performs in national poetry slam competitions, and she has published several collections of poetry. The poem suggested by the youth in the article is “The Dream About Shouting”.

“The Dream About Shouting” by Dominique Christina

in the dream every word

is red paint

i speak, it look like a murder scene.

they try shutting my lips

with caution

but I am burnin’ my mouth down.

it’s gon’ come back to me

a new thing

no troll bridged tongue

no yawping

soundless empty.



in the dream  
 i am waiting for my mouth to be born  
 when she is...  
 everything gon' be loud.

The group was small that day. Goddess came in a little late and spread out their watercolors and parchment paper at the end of the table. We went around reading the poem. Out of this poem Nina created the “What I want to say or what I need to say” prompt. As Nina would tell me after group when I was interviewing her, these young people do not have a lot of people in their lives asking them what they are thinking or feeling. At times, it would be easy to forget that thoughts and words exist inside that have never had a chance to come out. Michael, a youth I had never met before, sat across from me. He finished the prompt after two minutes, put down his pen, and impatiently waited for the others to finish. He lay down across the chairs to stretch out his back. He was the first one to share, his eyes flicking to the others to gauge their reactions. Next it was Goddess’s turn. They took a deep breath and read, switching easily from the crisp syllables of English into the soft notes of Spanish.

“Que Bueno” another girl in the group acknowledged. “How good.”

Goddess smiled and nodded slowly raising a fist to rest over their heart.

“You want me to translate it? It means that.”

If I can live

Free and full of light

And love I want to say

That I am man and woman

Fire and water

Life and death

Love

I am your child

Immortal crown in the

Form of

Galaxies

Feet

Of mountains.

The group sat quietly, impressed by the imagery Goddess had used. Usually, when Goddess comes up to group at all, it is only to draw. Today started the same. For the first few minutes of the group, Goddess dropped some paint on the parchment then blew it through a straw into a slashing design. They were calm. They were expressing themselves the way they liked. Then for some reason, they started to write. They wore the purple quartz crystal around their neck like always along with their celestial robe. I saw them then, as they wrote themselves, free and full of light, man and woman, crowned in galaxies and feet like mountains. The next week Goddess had moved on. They had found an opportunity to live with a friend and start searching for a job in a new area, and I know that Goddess may not remember that sunny April day in writing group. They may lose the paper with their poem in the move. I might never see them again, but for that time they were able to tell us the entire worlds they hold inside of them. They were able to put words to an identity that is complicated and difficult to express. When group ended and I asked to use Goddess's poem, they hesitated swirling their crystal necklace between their figures.

“I’m not a good writer.”

“That poem you wrote is amazing.”

They considered this then nodded, allowed me to take a picture of the page, packed up their paints, and gave us all a wave—their many rings catching the fluorescent light.

The Good Friday service was beautiful. The church sat dark and heavy, full of mourning for the death of Jesus. Friday, we grieve before the celebration of Easter Sunday. The mass soothed me with the peaceful rhythms of the responses. We made our rows for the Veneration of the Cross in the center of the church. The cream-robed priest held the large wooden planks, bearing their weight on his shoulder. Each person, one by one, came to kneel and kiss the cross. After each kiss the priest would sweep his hand holding a white cloth to clean the wood. I came, knelt, and kissed the rough tree, pressing my lips unevenly to its bumpy edge. I rose quickly and hurried away, tears coming to my eyes. It seemed audacious and presumptuous then to raise my eyes up. It seemed unfathomable to make eye contact with anyone. I could not bring myself to look at the cross directly for the rest of the service. After the mass, the parishioners trickled out into the chilly evening air.

The Catholic Newman center is a simple building, all smooth wood and graceful windows, stationed staunchly in the middle of squat, rowdy University of Washington student apartments. The few times I have accompanied my roommate, Annesley, to mass, I am always struck by how quickly the quiet reverent air of the church dissipates and blows away amidst sirens and drunk college men bellowing “My Heart Will Go On” from their second story balcony. Tonight, the reverence lingered. I felt as if perhaps I was still kneeling. We all slipped

into my roommate's car and waited for the traffic from the church to ease up enough for us to pull out onto the busy streets. Annesley guided her car towards University Avenue, the vibrant aorta of pavement running near the University of Washington pumping with music, food, and people. The streets were full of the usual mixture of crowds floating between their destinations. My eyes stared out of the back-seat window, glazed, as we pulled up to the traffic light before the Ave. Then I saw her.

It was Rachael. I had not seen her at New Horizons in months. She was walking along the street. She was walking alone. Her hair, with its tight curls, had grown longer. She wore a light blue jacket zipped all the way up to her neck, like a life vest. She walked with her serious eyes straight ahead and her hands plunged into her pockets. I hadn't seen any of the youth outside of New Horizons before. "I think I know her." I said aloud in the car, more for myself than the others, "I think she goes to New Horizons."

"Oh, really?" Annesley asked. The car turned down the street and we pulled past Rachael. I lowered my eyes—suddenly ashamed—though I knew she would not be able to see me and might not even remember who I was. I dropped my eyes to my lap. How presumptuous, how audacious to stare at her as we drove past.

I remained silent the rest of the drive home. Annesley, raising her eyes to the rearview mirror, asked "Was that one of the youth you've interacted with a lot before?"

"A bit. I've asked her several times to come up for writing group, but she's never come." I settled back into silence. It was not until we had driven home, parked the car, approached our house with its warm windows, cheerful eyes determinedly staring back into the night, that I paused, my hand fumbling inside my pocket to find my key.

Annesley turned to look at me, and my eyes flooded with tears. Their wetness relieved me, though you do not build homes with tears. The soft-spoken girl who wanted to make grilled cheese, walking on this chilly Good Friday, miles from New Horizons, her legs moving in long determined steps, was alone. I had no idea where she would be headed. Would the stream of people push her in her life vest coat to some buoy? I thought about all of this while we unlocked our heavy door, gave it a good shove open, and stepped into the gentle warmth. We slid the deadbolt into place, locking out the dark grieving of the Good Friday night.

The walk from Seattle Pacific University to Queen Anne, despite the slow relentless climb of the hill, is lovely. The road is lined with tulip magnolias, pink and welcoming. The houses stand cheerfully on their large man-made hills—sharp inclines of rock and garden separating them from the street below. Mostly the houses are quiet. Occasionally, at night you see the flashes of T.V. screens. On days like today the eaves of the houses shade their windows that look out on the street below like a hand resting above the eyebrows. Today I passed several young mothers, hair pulled smoothly back, in athletic wear. They pushed strollers with coverings shading the babies' eyes and they smiled at me when we passed. Their faces reminded me of their houses, bright, clean, politely welcoming, and a little far away. I made it to the top of 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue a little out of breath. I weaved my way between throngs of people, everyone out enjoying the early Friday evening sun. The golden air warmed my cheeks. I pulled off my coat and pulled up a big smile that reflected in the windows of Café Ladro and the eyes of the families I passed. I remember one day a young man at New Horizons told another that it is always good to go on long walks.

“Don’t you just ever walk on and on without knowing where you’re going?” he asked combing his long dark hair away from his eyes. His eyes were warm and welcoming in the unapologetic two-armed hug kind of way.

“I would highly recommend it.” What good advice, I thought as I swayed in my peaceful bubble. The Queen Anne hill takes a sharp dive down after the South African tea joint. It plunges into lower Queen Anne steeply before spilling into Belltown and Downtown. This is the same path my bus takes on the way to New Horizons. I did not remember this until later. I was too caught up in how good it felt, and how introspective and intentional I was trying to be on my walk. In my glow, I moseyed by St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, and I remembered the prayer labyrinth tucked away there. The gratefulness for the sunshine and the smiles made me feel in the perfect mood for a sunny prayer labyrinth walk. It nestles against the side of St. Paul’s, a small circular garden rimming the open space. In a box filled with information pamphlets the steps of the labyrinth are explained.

### Entering the Labyrinth

A time to release and let go of distraction, perhaps focusing on a special intention or prayer for the walk. Moving at your own pace, you may pass people or others may pass you.

### Reaching the Center

A time for openness to the divine Spirit, allowing guidance and inspiration. When you reach the center, remain as long as you wish, receiving what is to be received.

### Going Back

A time to retrace steps and return to the world, embracing the Spirit that heals and transforms. With each repetition of the walk, you are being strengthened for growth and change.

The labyrinth is a pause in the middle of the packed Seattle streets. While beginning the labyrinth laughter from a nearby bar, conversations from passersby and the uneven beat of traffic all filled up the small circular garden to the brim. That evening I walked into the labyrinth feeling confident that with a few deep breaths I could center myself enough to enter a time of prayer. Then I noticed someone was sleeping, pressed against the outer wall and under the bushes. The sleeping bundle seemed to be the size and shape of an adult man, though it was difficult to tell with all the layers. The figure lay wrapped in several dark coats. I glanced that way, took a deep breath and entered the labyrinth. Entering the labyrinth is to be a time to let go of distraction. I lined my sneakers up at the first straight pathway, and I began to walk. The footsteps took up a steady slow rhythm as I kept my eyes turned down towards my sneakers. Let go of distraction. I moved through the tight turns, the path folding in again on itself. I thought of the youth and of New Horizons. The second rule of writer's group is that it is a safe space. Let go of distraction.

I noticed from the corner of my eye a security guard enter the labyrinth space. He was a young man, and he approached the figure huddled by the wall reluctantly. Let go of distraction.

“Sir,” he said in a firm, but not unkind voice, “Sir, you need to wake up. You can't stay here.” The figure shifted a little and mumbled something. When he moved, a heavy thick smell spilled out into the garden. As the security guard reached down to tap the figure on the shoulder, I reached the center. A time for openness.

“Sir, you can’t stay here.” The figure grumbled and sat up blearily. Standing in the center of the labyrinth I looked into his face. He was an older man, his face lined and creased, worn from many years sleeping huddled beside walls. His gray hair flew in tendrils wildly around his temples, and his cheeks were a deep red. The first rule of writer’s group is to write from the heart. A time for openness.

The man looked at the guard. “Just leave me alone you son of a bitch.”

I watched from the corner of my eyes, my feet moving slowly through the labyrinth. Each turn a new line break. The patterns lulling me. “I said just leave me alone you son of a bitch.” The man sat upright now crouching and angry. The guard calmly answered, “I’m so sorry sir, but you cannot sleep here. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” I lowered my eyes to my shoes.

As the man pulled himself heavily to his feet, the security guard took a step back, and I began to make my way out of the labyrinth. A time to return to the world. The third rule of writer’s group is to be respectful. The third rule is to listen. I thought of them all. I thought about the youth almost certainly not born in the houses on top of Queen Anne hill. I thought of the youth who wanted so desperately to have a home. I thought of the youth who liked the streets. They had a family there. They were free. A time to return to the world. My feet began to quicken, getting closer.

“Thank you, Sir.” The guard stood waiting as the man made his slow way from behind the wall. He was still cussing. I looked at them both, and my feet found their way out of the labyrinth. I looked at the pair. The guard stood apart looking calm and a little uncomfortable, his eyes telling me he would much rather have allowed the man to sleep. The grizzled figure, making his way slowly behind the wall, shocked me with the wobbly steps he took. It seemed



without the wall he would collapse. His gnarled hands lay splayed along the brick stretching to find a way to hold himself up and extricate himself from his hideout. Return to the world. I hesitated a beat too long then turned, walked past the pair of them and out to the street.

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## Appendix I:

## Statement of faith:

I believe that God gives us passions in areas that God can best use to bring about God's glory and sanctify the world. I have always had a passion for writing and reading poetry and listening to the stories of others. I did not realize there was a way to combine these two passions until coming to college. It was here that I was introduced to the Pongo poetry therapy program's work with incarcerated youth in the King County juvenile detention center. Through the Pongo training I learned the skills and techniques I needed to begin volunteering with the New Horizons writing group. It matters to me that people are able to express themselves and their hurts, because I believe deeply that it matters to God as well. I believe that God is a loving and gracious God. I believe that it matters to God that the people of this world are cared for. It is heartbreaking to see the large homeless population in Seattle's streets. Heightening this heartbreak for me is the wide disparity between these homeless folks and the extreme wealth also represented within Seattle.

Homelessness is a deep and complicated issue. Tent City 3, a community of homeless folks who have their own community government and positions, was staying on our campus this year. Seattle Pacific University, in light of sharing space with this community, put on a campus event to watch a documentary surrounding the issues of homelessness. One man interviewed suggested that people give and help out the homeless communities with their talents. He said that they are grateful for food, but everybody tries to bring food even if that is not where their heart is leading. He gave examples of groups who cared about education, so they provided tutoring and other services. This resonated with me, especially now that I had found a way to help with the skills that I have.

I have encountered God in a deep and significant way during my time volunteering with the New Horizons community. I was often uncomfortable—which I have learned is usually where God teaches me the most. I was also encountering young people my own age who had ended up in very different life situations, often through no fault of their own. This, of course, forced me to grapple with the questions many people have to face. Why are some people given so much and some people have so much taken away? I failed frequently in my attempt to be present for this hurting community. There were many sessions where my heart was not in it. There were many times that I wished no one would show up for group, because I was tired. There were many times that my prompts were not relevant or helpful for the youth. It was deeply humbling for me to realize that I was not essential to these young people's lives. They might not even remember me. I also came to terms with the idea that what I did mattered just the same.

Yet, here I am making a faith statement about all the individual and significant lessons I have learned. This individual change and sanctification is important, and I believe strongly that God cares for individual journeys; however, something else that I have learned from this experience is that it is not about me. It has never really been about me at all. This was something I had always known in my head, but I had never really felt it as a truth. God's plan is big, and it is a blessing to attempt to be a part of it. Even though there may be few visible impacts from our actions, I believe that we are called to continue using our gifts and passions to fight injustice and give back to our communities.

Appendix II:

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank a million times over my professors Drs. Thorpe and Maier for their care and attention during this process. I could not have completed this project without you all. I would also like to thank my loving family, friends, and Seattle Pacific University Community. Most of all, all of my thanks go to Richard Gold with Pongo and the youth at New Horizons. Pongo is doing extraordinary things, and I was blessed to be able to participate in a small way. To the youth at New Horizons, this thesis is for you. These are your stories. These are your poems. I am eternally grateful.