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Writing Together — Creating Words from Silence, Hope from Pain

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Only the day before the tragedy at London Bridge on 29 November 2019, Writing Together students had gathered in the Learning Together Study Centre at HMP Whitemoor. They had just finished editing each other's work with their writing partners and had selected a title for the jointly produced and published anthology which was planned, 'teeth of a comb'. A few months later, the national lockdown as a result of Covid-19 followed. In the midst of all of this, Writing Together students worked determinedly on their anthology. As Sofia, who edited the collection put it, 'We decided that it was even more important that we finished the anthology, instilling it with the values that all involved with Learning Together and Writing Together had shown us and inspired in us. The anthology became bolder and kinder, more outraged and more hopeful.' Testament to their hard work, passion and creativity, 'teeth of a comb', was published in September 2020.

That might be enough of a 'good news' story, but the positive ripple effects of this special writing community grew further. During lockdown, the Learning Together team began to learn that some students from the course were still coming together to write, as a way of processing their collective experiences and staying connected and part of a meaningful and supportive community. In particular, we learnt that one student, Al, who works as a prison officer at Whitemoor, had been writing collaborative poetry with some of his fellow students who are resident at Whitemoor.

It feels important to raise up these examples of creative comings together — spaces within which hope, empathy and connectedness have been nurtured, amidst the many profound challenges of our current circumstances and the anxiety, heartache and sometimes hopelessness that many of us feel. With this in mind we asked some of our writers to come together again, and write together again, about their experiences of

lockdown. Writing together, from afar, during Covid-19 has been fraught with practical difficulties reliant on chains of paper carried from one person to the next in the post. But, just as Sofia put it in relation to 'teeth of a comb', we hope that the collaborative process that has birthed this piece of writing, and the feelings and experiences that are shared within it, 'confront you with radical possibilities — the possibility of creating words from silence, hope from pain, and justice in an unjust world.' The world will 'unlock' and we will write and learn together again, soon.

A Locked-Down World

By Al, Dawood, Maddi, Nathaniel and Sulaiman

A lockdown world, police state, 'keeping everyone safe'
but is it okay to say that this makes me feel
Unsafe? Wear your mask, track and trace
Always followed, all movement watched and noted by
the state
Remain at home, bricks to bars, semi-detached
suburban cage
Shouldn't complain, but all the same, trapped in my
head and going insane
Please don't leave me with these hollow bricks again-

Me vs Covid that's a fight I got to win
Ops never got me how is this virus gonna touch my skin
Covid tries to stab me so I hit him with a sharper tool
Weapon broke,
Covid tried to hit me with a double hook
I had to duck and dive and come back with an uppercut
Visualising my family they're the ones I love
Covid's deadly but my blood is dangerous
Our love is like dynamite it blows like C4
Good times bad times
Up and down
Seesaw
Be Alert!
Stay awake
In the streets a sneeze could have your chain broke

No joke.

Have you ever had peace of mind?
Have you ever had it five times a day?
Every day?
Especially during those thirty days?
Imagine doing something every day
All your life
Walk down the same street
Reach the same destination
Ablution complete
Front row of the formation
Shoulder to shoulder
Feet to feet
Intentions aligned
With the rest of your tribe
But now they're saying you can't go inside
So, you ask them
Have you ever had peace of mind? —

Sometimes in this secure place, where they claim men remain secure
And in this secure place wearing a mask feels just the same as when you wear your fake face.
Now you appreciate this mask as the enemy has been replaced
They say it hunts for prey from a particular race.
I hear track and trace, when it feels more like track and replace
The numbers are astronomical
The reasons are unjustifiable
So I stay vigilant
A cough, a sneeze, high temperature
Keep a safe distance away from me
Social distancing is a myth as loved ones have become strangers
You can't change what's written and you certainly can't skip the pages.

Wake up, same day, different date,
Stay away, visit no one.
We need to see our loved ones, not strangers at Tesco's,
Where masked faces at a checkout sympathise with your woes
Online shopping, face time memories, the internet's gone viral,
A new slogan, a change of rules,
YES! Back to normality
NO! Complete confusion

Can I,
Can't I,
Mr Johnson please explain.
Use the App, second wave, Big brother state of mind
Them watching us, me watching you,
When will this madness end?
Maybe never

I stand and look upon my kingdom of all this lost time
All the love and memories I was promised and worked myself to death to earn
Three meagre years in paradise, the pinnacle of my whole life
Snatched away and forced into my hands is this watered-down replacement
I've done my time inside and now I'm filled with rage because I see
I'll never get the opportunity again
All that pain, those sleepless nights and breaking my back and fighting for my place
For nothing.

About the authors

I'm Al a Prison Officer at HMP Whitemoor. I believe that education and inclusion is the way of creating a positive environment filled with opportunities and success for all residents and staff.

I'm Dawood, a Learning Together student held captive at Whitemoor. Born in Uganda, raised in London. My goal is to empower the weak and oppressed through my writing

I'm Maddi, a third year English student at Jesus College. Most people know me for my half-pink-half blue hair, many tattoos, and my long conversations about rowing.

My name is Nathaniel. I am currently accommodated in HMP Whitemoor. I am a Learning Together student and I love what I do as it shows people that I am more than the environment that I was raised in.

I'm Sulaiman, a third year History student at Cambridge. Born and raised in West London. My mission in life is to ensure that all people have access to equal opportunities to learn, grow and thrive.