

WRITE TO LIFE



Issue 1 / June 2021

We
cannot
walk

alone

**FREEDOM
FROM
TORTURE**
EMPOWERING
SURVIVORS
REBUILDING
LIVES

WRITE TO LIFE

Issue 1, June 2021: We Cannot Walk Alone

Edited by Marsha and Lucy Popescu

About Write to Life

Write to Life is the world's only long running creative writing group for survivors of torture. Our members meet each week to explore stories and ideas. If they choose to write about their experiences, we help them process thoughts and feelings in a safe environment.

Write to Life has been working with survivors from around the world for more than 20 years.

About Freedom from Torture

Freedom from Torture is dedicated to healing and protecting people who have survived torture.

We provide therapies to improve physical and mental health, we medically document torture, and we provide legal and welfare help. We expose torture globally, we fight to hold torturing states to account and we campaign for fairer treatment of torture survivors in the UK.

For over 30 years, through our services, we have been helping survivors overcome their torture and live better, happier lives.

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Editors' introductions

Our Write to Life Zine

In March of this year, we had an exciting workshop with the catchy title of 'Zine'. Exciting because it sounded like something new and powerful. By the end of the workshop, we were ready to put together and edit our own Write to Life zine with a first publication date scheduled for Refugee Week 2021.

Before I share my experience as co-editor, I must introduce Write to Life properly. Write to Life is a unique creative writing group within Freedom from Torture, that has worked with survivors of torture for more than 20 years. We meet every week to share ideas and stories. Not all of us arrive familiar with creative writing skills, especially in English. However, the group has provided a platform for countless learning, publication and performing opportunities for the members who proudly identify as creative writers now. We always feel safe and supported if we want to share our experiences of torture with other members and mentors.

The idea behind this digital and print zine is to increase Write to Life's visibility in the world. We have chosen the Refugee Week 2021 theme, 'We Cannot Walk Alone', for the title of our first issue. Future zines will be themed around significant dates and events as well. In line with Freedom from Torture's policy of being survivor-led, one of the writers will work with a mentor to edit each edition of the zine. Writers are also encouraged to share how they would

they like to see their pieces illustrated with images, drawings and so on.

I volunteered myself as a co-editor because of past experience in this field. I wanted to recall my editing hours back home as a sub-editor of several fashion and lifestyle magazines, as well as the feature sections of national newspapers. Now I work in the finance sector. Moving from numbers back to words makes me feel passionate again, and I have also been grateful for the chance to learn from my experienced co-editor Lucy Popescu during this project.

When I started reading my friends' pieces from Write to Life, I felt extremely proud of them. I was wondering about the friend Nalougo pictured in his poem titled 'Speak to Me'. Then I realised that 'friend' is not just one person, it is about all of us, all of our Write to Life and Freedom from Torture friends. I discovered that my friends' writings have been fed by their struggles and pain. My own short story is about the possibility of starting something simple but effective in our community, to bridge differences of national identity or culture.

I am confident that this collection will display the writers' hard work and how they benefit from the group. In doing so, I hope it shows the wider world the reality of the lives of people like myself and my fellows in Write to Life.

Marsha

Walking Alone

It's been my privilege to work on Write to Life's (WtL) inaugural zine, a collection of stories, poems and memoirs from our talented group.

A narrative arc swiftly emerged from the writing submitted. It began with Jade's introduction to Refugee Week and what it means to refugees the world over. Patrick writes persuasively about the betrayal felt by refugees when they are forced to flee a tyrannical regime, and Joy illustrates the conditions in certain countries that will lead to climate/environmental refugees in the future. Aso describes the dangerous journey by sea made by many desperate people attempting to reach safety, while Yogi poignantly reveals the joy of being reunited with his family.

Memories of prison are ever present, as Haydeh reminds us. The writing that follows, by Nalougo and Kayitesi, brilliantly illustrates the existential despair many refugees struggle with as they adapt to their new lives. Tanya gives one of the most lyrical accounts of recovering from coronavirus I've read, while Aso reminds us of the "wide embrace" of the empty skies we experienced at the beginning of the first lockdown.

Some of the accounts of injustice are tinged with anger. Shahab and Yonas have written powerful and profound meditations on belonging. Finally, as the writers gain confidence, despair is transformed into hope, exemplified by Marsha's upbeat celebration of community. When WtL met in person, we would share a simple meal at the beginning of every writing session and Marsha reminds us of the importance of breaking bread, of sharing sustenance, of celebrating what unites us.

Together, these pieces reveal the refugee journey: from fear and desperation, through frustration and sadness, and finally to acceptance and hope. Their words remind us of the importance of finding people with whom they can share and alleviate their pain. This collection is a testament to the resilience of the WtL group and a poignant evocation of Refugee Week's theme this year: We Cannot Walk Alone.

Lucy



REFUGEE WEEK

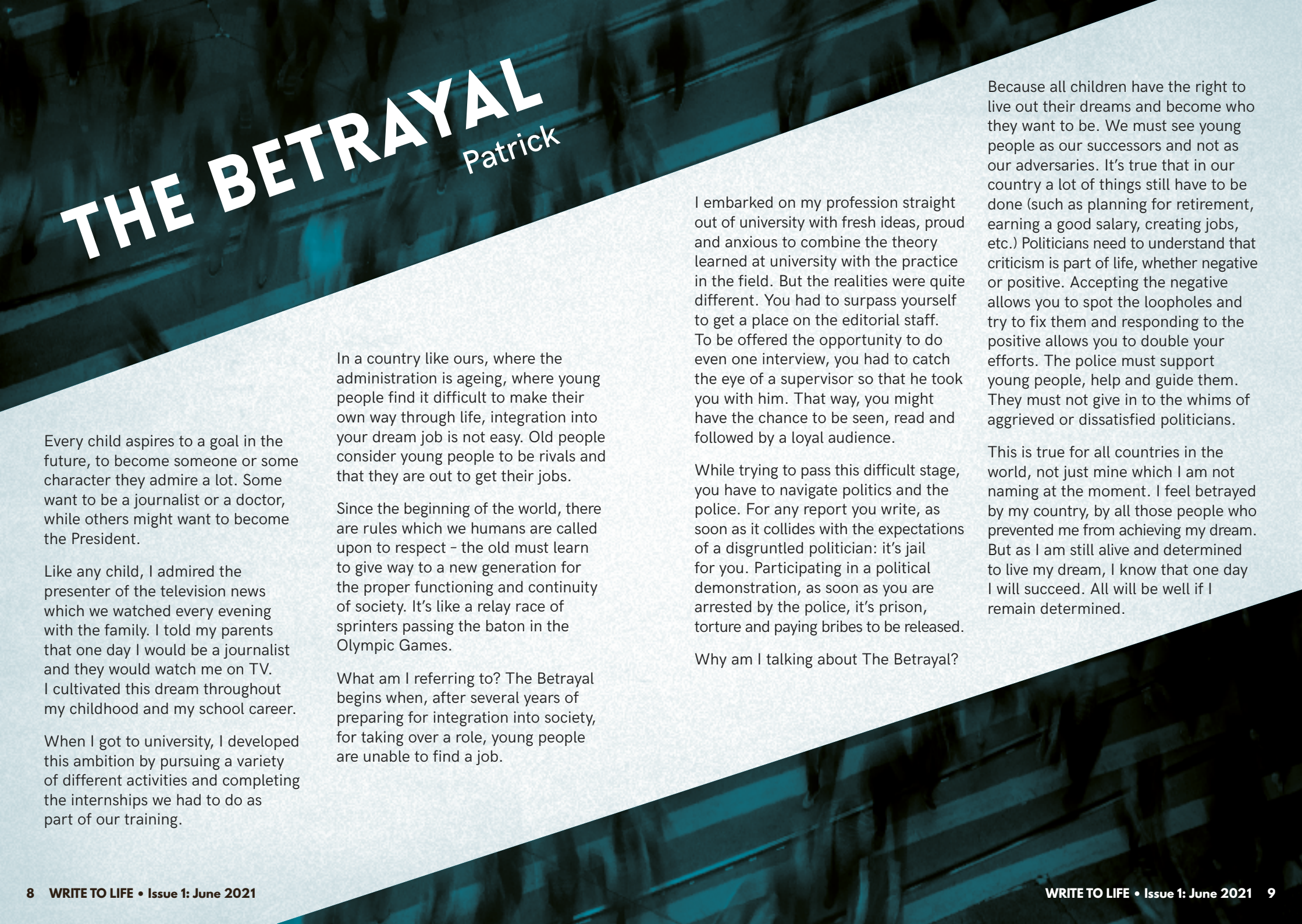
Jade

We are not the first or the last people
To be kicked out of their countries
Many people before us left their homes
And were treated badly
For no reason at all.

It is sad to know
Your own people did that to you
And that there is no end to it
We are cursed.
Rulers of these countries
Think about themselves and their pockets
Not the people.

As Refugee Week arrives
Let us remember
The children, men and women
Who were swallowed by the sea.

Let us remember
The wonderful people who put their lives on hold
To help refugees and asylum seekers
For without them
I would not be writing this poem.



THE BETRAYAL

Patrick

Every child aspires to a goal in the future, to become someone or some character they admire a lot. Some want to be a journalist or a doctor, while others might want to become the President.

Like any child, I admired the presenter of the television news which we watched every evening with the family. I told my parents that one day I would be a journalist and they would watch me on TV. I cultivated this dream throughout my childhood and my school career.

When I got to university, I developed this ambition by pursuing a variety of different activities and completing the internships we had to do as part of our training.

In a country like ours, where the administration is ageing, where young people find it difficult to make their own way through life, integration into your dream job is not easy. Old people consider young people to be rivals and that they are out to get their jobs.

Since the beginning of the world, there are rules which we humans are called upon to respect – the old must learn to give way to a new generation for the proper functioning and continuity of society. It's like a relay race of sprinters passing the baton in the Olympic Games.

What am I referring to? The Betrayal begins when, after several years of preparing for integration into society, for taking over a role, young people are unable to find a job.

I embarked on my profession straight out of university with fresh ideas, proud and anxious to combine the theory learned at university with the practice in the field. But the realities were quite different. You had to surpass yourself to get a place on the editorial staff. To be offered the opportunity to do even one interview, you had to catch the eye of a supervisor so that he took you with him. That way, you might have the chance to be seen, read and followed by a loyal audience.

While trying to pass this difficult stage, you have to navigate politics and the police. For any report you write, as soon as it collides with the expectations of a disgruntled politician: it's jail for you. Participating in a political demonstration, as soon as you are arrested by the police, it's prison, torture and paying bribes to be released.

Why am I talking about The Betrayal?

Because all children have the right to live out their dreams and become who they want to be. We must see young people as our successors and not as our adversaries. It's true that in our country a lot of things still have to be done (such as planning for retirement, earning a good salary, creating jobs, etc.) Politicians need to understand that criticism is part of life, whether negative or positive. Accepting the negative allows you to spot the loopholes and try to fix them and responding to the positive allows you to double your efforts. The police must support young people, help and guide them. They must not give in to the whims of aggrieved or dissatisfied politicians.

This is true for all countries in the world, not just mine which I am not naming at the moment. I feel betrayed by my country, by all those people who prevented me from achieving my dream. But as I am still alive and determined to live my dream, I know that one day I will succeed. All will be well if I remain determined.

Waiting for the Rain

Joy

When the sky is dark, everybody's eyes are lifted to the sky, waiting for the rain.

People strain to work out from the clouds when the rain will start. The people of my country are very happy when it rains because often there is no water; sometimes three or four days with no water – even in the big cities like Kinshasa. Not just in the villages. People are often seen carrying buckets on their heads searching for water so they can sell it. They go to places where the water comes every day. The people go to where the water is.

The water companies say there is no pressure. Like electricity, some places have it and other places don't.

Suddenly, one day in the week, there will be electricity, at other times you have no electricity all week. When you look at a map of the countries surrounding Congo, you will see small villages bright and full of light, but when you look at our country it is often dark, even in the big cities.

It is the same with water. Some people have big houses with a toilet inside, but they can't use them because there's no water. They have to go outside in holes and use sand to cover it. The smell is indescribable, so people use petrol to conceal the smell. Everywhere smells of petrol.

Naturally, everybody waits for the rain.

When it starts to rain everyone is happy. Everyone rushes to put their buckets and basins and barrels outside. People attach barrels to the end of the gutter, so as much water as possible can flow into them. The kids are outside washing themselves and playing in the water, everyone is happy, rushing back from work to

get home to put buckets out. There is a feeling of euphoria, people are ecstatic to be getting fresh water.

The buses and taxis often have broken windscreens and when it rains the water comes gushing in, so the drivers don't want to risk going out. Everything stops. People cover everything with plastic and just wait for the rain to end. They sit under the plastic. If you are stuck at work when it starts raining or if you're out anywhere, you usually can't get home. You can't even get a group taxi, so you often have to stay where you are until the rain stops – which could be days.

Those people who have regular water – those living by streams, rivers and mountains – are not always happy when it rains elsewhere, because they make money from the water that comes to their place. They charge £2 for one bucket of water, so they lose money if the rain continues. They are ordinary people just trying to make a living.

However, some people block the pipelines built by the water companies and siphon the water off for themselves. These people are wicked, stopping the water getting to everyone. But in the end, it is not their fault either. The government doesn't make effective water pressure available for everyone – they are selfish and corrupt.

It doesn't always rain when we expect it to. At the end of the day, sometimes it is dark and windy but there is no rain. The weather forecast is often wrong. People can tell from looking at a dark sky where the rain will fall. We often call each other to check if it's raining. We don't follow the weather forecast.

We know that when it's really hot at the end of the day, the rain is coming soon and our eyes are lifted to the sky with joy.

New Arrivals

Aso

We are in Calais, France. We're waiting to cross the channel; this is my third attempt, maybe the fourth.

This time it will be different. Instead of a lorry we are going to use a small inflatable boat; it is more dangerous and could be our final challenge. This is our fate, this is a one-way road to glory, there is no turning back.

The road to heaven is never ending.

It could be a mirage,
this heaven might not exist.

But we have just left hell, that's why we believe suffering must end somewhere.

We are illegal and the wild passengers of this endless path, carrying pain and stories, looking to settle somewhere, on the edge of life.

But we always depart and never seem to arrive.

This is our last chance.
Things will end here, somewhere between stopping and continuing...

The challenge will start soon.
Our destiny is to reach our final destination.

Either we will end up under the English Channel or in English heaven.

We are in Calais.
We're waiting for it to get dark.

The night always protects us from the eyes of the light... from the guardians of heaven.

We are like a ball kicked between Monsieur and Mister.

Everybody likes to kick the ball.

But nobody wants the passengers.
No one holds the hands of the barefoot children.

We are in Calais.

We are waiting for the inflatable boat, full of fear and uncertainty.

Finally.

We are on our way,
the moon in the dark sky offers the light of a candle.

Its reflection in the sea is bright.

The moon tries to come with us, to be a refugee on the waves – just until we arrive, then it will return to the sky.

We are leaving Calais...

I remember being in Sri Lanka, although it feels a long time ago. Thirteen years ago, and before, I remember being very depressed. My chest was tight and my heart was unhappy. I remember feeling that I was never free. Today, right now, I am happy. When I am able to sit down and eat a meal with my family, I feel free. I enjoy every second, I love every day.

What has happened in between, after thirteen years of being in the UK, is a lot to tell. It is an entire short story. I can't say it all here. I can't describe the feeling, on 10 April this year, when I saw my family again.

**

I am a medical refugee. My various conditions and what I have been through have made me vulnerable and if I don't have my medication my health is severely at risk. I am also a Tamil. Because of who I am – my identity and my beliefs – I am persecuted in my country.

When my asylum was rejected in 2017, my first thought was to go to the temple. Then I realised that I didn't believe that God would look after me. I took an overdose. First, I was in hospital then homeless, and finally I was given accommodation in a shared room.

I was helped by Freedom from Torture (FFT). I am still in touch with the people who helped me so much, the people who supported me throughout this time. With therapy, I recovered a lot mentally, and I managed to get better accommodation with a separate room.

In 2019, FFT organised a holiday for me and other survivors of torture. I am still in touch with the family who hosted me. They send me news about marriages and other events, and we exchange birthday cards.

**

Reunion

Yogi



Last year, just before the coronavirus lockdown hit, I got my visa to remain in the UK. I felt really happy and started the process which would allow my wife and daughter to join me.

I had waited thirteen years to see my family again. When I had previously considered returning, I decided, after talking to the authorities here in the UK (and only three days before I was about to leave), that it wasn't safe for me to go.

On 10 April, those last twelve hours before they arrived, when my wife and daughter were in the air flying from Sri Lanka to London, seemed to last forever. Even though I'd waited thirteen years, I felt I wouldn't be able to last those final hours.

In the arrival lounge, my heart was pumping so much and so fast, it felt worrying to me. I watched the people get off the planes and looked at all their faces.

When at last I saw them in the airport, it was unlike anything I have experienced in forty-nine years of being in this world. It was different from any other feeling I have ever had.

The last time I had seen my daughter in real life, she was two-years-old. Now she's fifteen. These past few weeks since they arrived, I've been happy.

That they are here now is thanks to God.

SPEAK TO ME

*(In the voice of my friend
at Freedom from Torture)*

NALOUGO

My friend
From our first meeting
just looking at you
I understood all that was
going on inside you
Looking in your eyes
Full of joy and happiness.

Another day
After some weeks of life together
Looking again
I seemed to see a stranger,
calling for help
Your eyes were questioning,
unhappy, anxious
Reading your feeble gestures
In silence, you were screaming
and crying for aid.

At this time
I was feeling all your anxiety,
anguish, pain and sorrow
I was troubled, captivated
attentive

I long for you to free your brain
and your spirit
Relieve yourself by speaking to me.

I want to help you overcome all this
Help you to remove the load
which is destroying you
And which, every day
Submerges you

Adrift in an ocean of loneliness.
Share this darkness with me
I will make it mine
To relieve you of this burden
A burden which is suffocating you.

Your silence is my pain
I feel all that you're feeling
Beyond the limits of your
imagination.

With every second,
as it seeps over me
My heart stops beating
The blood stops flowing
in my veins.

As weak as you are
You put us both in danger
By refusing to speak to me.
Under the gaze of my eyes
Your life is changing
I'm afraid of losing you.

I beg you to speak to me
Share with me your troubles
I'm your friend
Please
Speak to me.

**I have a message to anyone who is
feeling lonely or is alone – just hold on.**

**There is someone or something
out there that can help you.**

**I hope you will soon find that one
person who can reach out and
help another person such as you.**

**The strength that we can find
in ourselves is immeasurable.**

I am learning that.

**When I feel I am important
and my opinion is valuable,
I don't feel lonely anymore.**

LONELINESS

Yonas



SLEEP AND AWAKE

Haydeh

Dreams and nightmares come from the depths of our feelings and thoughts – reflecting our anxieties and our hopes. After nearly thirty-five years, I still vividly remember the dreams and nightmares I had in prison. I don't think I have ever talked about them until now.

The very first night I was in prison, they put me in a cell with a dirty old blanket. As the police guards wanted to check me every single minute (I was on suicide watch), they kept the door open and the light on and told me not to cover my face or head. I sat on the blanket for a while, and then I folded it – one half to lie on and the other to cover me. I was wearing a head scarf, a long coat and a pair of trousers.

Eventually I lay down but kept my shoes on as it was so cold. I wrapped myself in one half of the blanket. My body was motionless, while my brain was a storm of questions and worries: My friends, who might be arrested, what they might

know about me. What should I say in the interrogation? What subject and people should I avoid and perhaps deny? I thought about my mother and my family and how they would cope. Little by little, I forgot about my arrest, the shock, and mainly thought about my family.

Eventually I fell asleep. I don't know how long I slept but I woke from a terrible nightmare. I dreamt that I was in the same cell. I had no blanket on me, just the same pyjamas I wore at home. From all around the cell, particularly where the walls joined the floor, cockroaches were swarming towards me. Some of them were biting me, but mostly they were running over my body. In a few seconds I was covered in them and could feel their little feet on my hands, I could feel them moving across my face and trying to get into my mouth, the corner of my eyes and into my ears.

I woke up with my heart beating fast, my hands rubbing my head, my face and body as I tried to get rid of these beasts. At last, I was awake enough to realise that it was a nightmare. I sat on the blanket, head forwards, my arms holding my knees tightly to help calm myself down. A police guard noticed me and laughed, jeering at my behaviour.

After being in prison for almost three-and-a-half years, my sentence came to an end. As I did not comply with the conditions of my release, they kept me there. It was February and cold. I became ill with a high temperature. I was shivering when I had another weird dream.

I dreamt I was taking the cover off a big white tub, where I had left some fish eggs to grow. Many women were clustered around me, my mother included. They were trying to see what was under the cover. We watched to see whether the eggs had developed into fish or had died. I was nervous. Eventually I took off the lid and, amazingly, the tub was filled with goldfish, all a deep red colour. There were so many of them that you couldn't see the bottom of the tub. Everybody cheered, clapped and murmured: 'Wow, so many', 'They're all red', and 'nice big fish'.

As I watched the fish shoal in the white tub, I felt exhaustion and pain, deep in my body and soul, for having reared so many fish. It was as if nobody could see my sacrifices, the hard times I had endured – only the wonderful outcome.

I was released a month later.

FREEDOM

Kayitesi

During my childhood I felt relatively free. I was the youngest and loved by my parents. I suppose I was spoilt and thought the drums would never change their rhythm. I had freedom to do things my way and, as a child, had no regrets. There was little friendship between me and my brothers and sisters; they had no time for me and were not always at home. I felt free, though, I was comfortable with my thoughts and enjoyed playing with other children in my neighbourhood.

I felt free when I was with my parents. Even when I had my own kids, I never felt the world would turn against me and that I would lose my freedom of choice, my wellbeing, thoughts, eating, happiness, laughing, clothes, playfulness; the freedom I had when I was a child.

I am no longer playing with my shadow. I am blinded by thoughts of how I live, not knowing what's real; things grow in

my mind, creating a new reality. I hope there is someone out there who can make me the person I should have been:

Free from worry
Free from pain
Free from depression
Free from nightmares

Free from the negative things I can never be free from as a human ... bound by rules, laws and choices. I am never free from the limits of my freedom. I sometimes scream and cry and then go silent, listening to my brain melting, my bones shattering into fragments, my heart beating too fast. I start breathing heavily, thinking of what is to come on this journey, leaving everything to God. I am being squeezed tight as though I will never be free. This is what I know. A heart wanting nothing but to be free. I yearn for a time when I don't need

anyone's approval to be free and when my mind is free from the chains which hold me in this oppressive world. Then I will have reached enlightenment.


It was during the rainy season that the drums changed their rhythm and nothing was the same. Freedom was stolen by the evil militia in our home village. We became unfree. Every minute, day, night, we thought we were going to die. The freedom of talking, walking and even sleeping was stolen from us. This person who used to go and collect firewood far from home and enjoyed the company of others; that life had ended.

I felt unfree when I could not stay in the kitchen to prepare a meal for my kids because of the fear of being killed. I would cook as early as possible and keep my mother and children in the house. Eventually it became too much, and we had to run for safety.

When I arrived in the UK, I thought I would have the most freedom I'd ever wished for. Instead, I am shedding tears every minute. I thought being unfree was only in my own country. Even in a first-world country I am still unfree. I can only dream of freedom of choice, speech, movement, eating, sleeping, wellbeing, comfortable clothing. It's like being in prison, not knowing when you will be out and what crime you have committed; unfree.

Living in shared accommodation: you argue with your housemates, they call you all sorts of names, especially if they are not from your country. Unfree. Imagine walking out of your room, desperate to go somewhere but you don't have any coins in your purse. I am not free.

Freedom is when you are in charge of your time and not dominated by a watch; that's freedom.



Without hope
the sky is a slate, blank, unwritten
I exist in a void
I can't focus on my life
I can't stand on my feet
I've fallen to the bottom of the abyss.

My life has no direction, no meaning
My feelings drag me from my thoughts
Time has no value to me
Everything around me seems unimportant
My sleep is ripped by nightmares.

HOPE Nalougo

Recurring Dream JOY

I don't sleep like I used to.
I have a recurring dream of being deported.
The people back home are laughing at me
because I am barefoot with no luggage and
wearing a detention uniform.
I am humiliated by my own people.



Last night, I had the dream again.
I dreamt I was in my church back home.
Everyone was clean and smartly dressed.
I was the only one who had not washed,
and my hair was undone.
Everyone was laughing at me and saying:
“Look at her... she just came from
Europe, but she doesn't have anything
decent to wear. She looks so dirty.”



A STRANGER IN A FOREIGN LAND

Where Do I Belong?

YONAS

I am a foreign stranger.

Born in Eritrea, raised in Ethiopia, now living in England; where do I really belong? This is a question I have asked myself silently over the years. I am a foreigner everywhere I go, even in Ethiopia. “You always think like a white man,” is a statement I get wherever I go. It’s not the words, but the way they say it that makes it sound positive. As if thinking like a black man is a weakness!

Last year, while training as a community organiser, I was asked to talk about something I felt was unjust. It was about my racial identity. My distress would have poured out of my mouth, if only I had the words. Instead, uncontrollable tears ran down my cheeks as if someone had just stabbed me. I couldn’t say the words. It was in that moment I realised it had all been boiling up inside me, waiting for that one person to ask the question. And that question started my mind running through my life experiences and raised the question of belongingness.

Where do I belong? Who am I? And most importantly, what am I going to teach my children about who we are and where we belong? All my life I have sought acceptance. Denying my true identity, trying to fit in with my white friends. It’s as though I’m an actor who has been given the role of a white man. Only now I realise how exhausting it is to pretend to be someone you are not, just to please others. Only now I question my family members who dread going out in public with their hair braided.

Some reading this might say, why don’t you go back to your country if you feel you don’t belong here? But they fail to understand that I don’t feel at home anywhere. It is about how valued you feel in the place you live. Although Covid-19 has brought so much heartache to us all, it brought me joy for a limited time.

I have been working as a care assistant/support worker for three years on a zero-hours contract. During the first lockdown there was nationwide appreciation for care workers as “key workers”. The anti-immigrant rhetoric paused for what seemed like a second and was replaced with: “Covid-19 doesn’t discriminate” and “We’re all in this together”. That was not the reality, though, with ethnic minorities suffering the brunt of the virus. Ethnic minorities have a higher risk of death from Covid-19 compared to white people. What’s more, a majority of people from ethnic minorities work in health and social care. And most key workers were represented in the lowest paid 10 per cent. Now tell me, how are we all in this together?

It became obvious that we were out there fighting, while the privileged were hiding, only to come out and clap their hands every Thursday evening. I’m not going to lie. I enjoyed the hand clapping, especially when I was out wearing my uniform. I felt happy, I was finally seen as an important person. I felt accepted and valued by society. I enjoyed the priority service I was given at supermarkets, where I didn’t have to queue anymore, the box of chocolates and bottle of wine

I got from Waitrose. It didn’t matter how my hair looked or the colour of my skin. But as a key worker, I was still getting low pay for what was considered a very important role during the national health crisis. The appreciation didn’t change the fact that I was still on a zero-hours contract, it didn’t pull me out of poverty. When will I ever be seen as a valued member of society with equal opportunities? When will my financial wellbeing and mental wellbeing be considered a priority?

These burning questions keep me engaged with Write to Life and, more importantly, I no longer need to hide my struggles or hide behind a screen to write an essay only to be read by my mentors. The struggles are not fiction, but my life with the mental distress of not feeling at home or part of the community and, on top of that, the anxiety and fear caused by poverty. It’s called lack of job security – I have lived it. We need real change, but you can only make true and lasting change by listening to the people who have gone through the pain and go through it every day.

I am going to challenge these inequalities by speaking out and trying to change government policy. I’ll speak out, not only about my experiences but also about the lives of other people affected: Those who understand what it means to wake up in the morning with uncertainty and whose mental health, trauma or distress have been caused or worsened by unfair policies.

Surviving Covid

What happens when everything
dries up in your life?

The things that used to
brighten your day
The people whose laughter
put air under your wings
No longer come to visit
The air escapes and you
are earthbound.
The friend you had lunch with
Now eats alone
The doctor gives you
instructions on the phone
You are told to dial 111.

The brook begins to run dry
No one coming up the driveway
No crunch of wheels on gravel
No patter patter
of feet
No squeals of
"Nana! I have lost a tooth!"
The food we had planned to share
spoils in the fridge
The daily errands we used
to take for granted
have become treats
As remote as the stars.

Never had it entered
the heart or mind
That one day
We would be more afraid
of each other than burglars
Everything swept from
under our feet
No stability in life.

My brook began to dry up.

It started with a raging headache
The backaches
Then the cough joined in:
Persistent, irritating
Like a dripping tap.

The fever
Not to be left out
Made its habitation in my body
Diarrhoea, raging like a storm
Also settled in
Not to be outdone
were the taste buds
They left me, taking
with them the appetite
that would have helped
me battle the invaders.

I had no energy to take a bath
(Luckily I couldn't smell
myself either)
I just wanted to sleep
and sleep
and sleep.

The brook is dry, cracked
and dusty
And now I feel the fire
First my head burns
like molten metal
My mind is in denial
"This can't be it."
I wait, when I should have fled
and let the flames envelop me
with delirium.

And then the brook dried up...

Tanya

I sleep, and wake, and
sleep, and
wake
Minutes are hours, slipping away
Until jerked awake by
a shower of sparks
Under the skin
My brain stops.


Everything I eat tastes like poison
No appetite
No rest
Who's this, pounding in my head?
The brain sends its messages
But they get lost on their way
The joints lie
Dull and aching
Going upstairs, carrying
a bag of cement
It's not possible.

They tell me:
"Self-isolate for ten days"
Ten days!
For weeks the firestorm rages
Consuming me
Fever, vomiting, backache, delirium
While my body is tossed to fro
without mercy
And when I most need others' help
The others are kept away
No cups of tea
No one to change my tangled,
sweaty bedding
No cool hand on my hot forehead
No knock on the door
No voice asking: "How are you?"

And then, as courage fails me
When I no longer care
If I live or die, just then
The fire begins to burn itself out
I make myself do little things
The first cup of tea
The insulin injection
I force myself to eat
the soup I cannot taste
I try to replace the fluids I have lost
For three days I survive on
Oranges and Vitamin D3.

I realise I can taste the oranges
They taste like summer
I feel their nourishment trickling
through to my feet
I start to think: "I might survive"
I decide to live.

The hazy, jumbled world
Begins to clear and take shape
The days arrange themselves
in the right order again
The sleep is proper sleep
that brings healing
The birds return, singing:
"Good morning, lazybones!"
My heart calls back:
"Thanks for waking me!"
The brook fills up with
cool refreshing water
My parched soul has been restored
No more self-defeating thoughts
No vacant stares
The brook is flowing again.

A photograph of a rainbow arching over a dark, stormy sea under a blue sky with grey clouds. The rainbow is vibrant and multi-colored, stretching from the left side of the frame towards the center. The sea below is dark with white-capped waves breaking. The sky is a deep blue with some lighter, greyish clouds near the horizon.

*The blue sky opens its wide embrace
And allows the rainbow to jump
Between the grey clouds and the sea
There are no aeroplanes any more
And the birds haven't flown south.*

Love in Corona Season

Aso

In our Suitcase

Shahab

Even though my mother tongue still dances in my mouth, my only choice is to talk in this foreign language, English. When I travelled from my homeland, nothing and no one accompanied me. Fate and destiny did not join me on my journey. Looking around, I thought that maybe I should dye my hair blond or red, then no one could doubt my right to be here. When I arrived, I alone peeled off the destination sticker from my suitcase.

When I opened my suitcase, I saw that our suitcases all have the same belongings inside.

For example, when we entered this life we were all uninvited guests in some sense. We never fully belong to where we are at any given moment. When Adam and Eve left paradise, we all left paradise. It is true to say we don't belong in one reality, because nothing is ever stable. We inherited the idea of virtual realities: we understand that we do not belong in any one place, that what we see is only one version of what there is.

We can broaden our perspective.

Even people in positions of remarkable power are refugees or migrants of some sort or other. Our prime minister, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel: Johnson's paternal great-grandfather was the Ottoman journalist Ali Kemal, of Turkish and Circassian origin, who was murdered for his anti-nationalism. While Priti Patel's grandfather was from Gujarat. As Home Secretary she has cut the rope connecting her to new migrants to the UK, despite being born in a Ugandan-Indian family who could not have migrated with the new migration rules.

If we were to have a heritage DNA test, we would discover how many brothers and sisters we are related to in other parts of the world and how many bloodlines we're made up of. Like the shape of water, we don't have an essential nationality. When we pour water into a vessel, it becomes the shape of the vessel. In our case, we are the shape of the most noble of animals: The Human.

Imagine your lifespan as a field of crops. Someone sows seeds in late winter. Under the right conditions the crops will grow through the spring. By the late summer the grains are mature and another person is appointed to harvest the crops.


Considering all this, how dare we assume that from the start of our life until the end our state is solid and pure! We have never been pure and won't remain solid. We are born to migrate from one life stage to the next, even if we stay in the same country, because we are always being challenged to adapt.

Whatever passport we have, there is no letter of guarantee that promises our lives will remain the same or that we will always be safe and secure. We're all refugees from our darkest moment to the bright future and we have to make the decision about where we belong and who we are.

Wherever and whenever we find a place to live safe and secure, that elusive place is our fatherland.



WE ARE ALL IMMIGRANTS

A photograph of a dark brown branch with several pink cherry blossoms in various stages of bloom. The flowers have five petals and prominent yellow stamens. The background is a clear, bright blue sky. The branch enters from the top left and extends towards the right side of the frame.

I would like to be happy
To live a normal life
To blossom
I would like to contribute to
the flourishing of the world

Finally, I discover there is hope
Knowing that without it
I will achieve nothing.

HOPE Nalougo

Together We Know Food Better

Marsha

It's a bright summer morning at Sunnyside Community Garden. I'm the only person here this early on Saturday. I keep an eye on both entrances but I'm not in a hurry. Meanwhile, I shuffle through the photos on my lap. Today the 'Together We Know Food Better' community project is relaunching post-COVID.

In 2019, I started this tiny community project with two friends. The three of us, coming from different cultures, discovered that each had traditions for using food that would otherwise be wasted. We circulated an invitation to explore how to reduce food waste by sharing knowledge from our different cuisines. The response and success of the project were incredible.

I'm excited to meet new members and to catch up with existing participants as well. I concentrate on the photos in my hands. Here I am, proudly smiling with my delicious pot of cauliflower stem curry. This is how it started, my childhood in Bangladesh: my mother used to make this dish with the scrap parts of the cauliflower. And I realised that many cultures have ways of making use of things that would otherwise go to waste. After that, we taught each

other dishes and recipes using common food ingredients. I became tearful when I discovered that I could recreate the taste of Bangladeshi fish dishes in the UK using imported Thai and Filipino Kaffir lime leaves.

In another photo, Mrs Kibibi from Tanzania is using gluten free sorghum flour, and other ingredients from East African cuisine, also available in supermarkets and grocery shops in the UK. It was a great experience, not only because I didn't know about the ingredients before, but she suggested affordable substitutes found in East African cuisine which can be used in dishes local to the UK. This reduces the use of ingredients that potentially contribute to climate change.

I'm looking forward to seeing Mrs Daria again. The whole group learned a lot from her Persian heritage and cuisine. She has a big family which makes her a natural host, and she never tires of cooking or sharing meals and recipes with her neighbours. In the photo, Daria is showing off her knife skills on a pomegranate. Next to her, a variety of herbs are gathered – she shared tips with the group on storing and using herbs in the kitchen as well.

In the coming sessions of this monthly meeting, others plan to share their knowledge of how to store food at home and what should go in cupboards, fridge or freezer to extend their shelf life. We also want to help people better understand the expiry dates on food packaging.

While I'm deep in thought, Mr Kerzi is the first to turn up for the meeting. He has recently moved with his family a few doors from my house. He runs a Turkish restaurant in Haringey, and is concerned about food waste in his restaurants and overall in the UK hospitality industry. He plans to reach out to local restaurants on behalf of the project, to request they consider giving away any leftover food half an hour before they close.

The grand finale of the project will include a food tasting event, open to all. As I show Mr. Kerzi the photos from last year's event, his eyes sparkle at the prospect of the next one. His voice full of emotion, he says: 'Together we are building a better neighbourhood, and a better world.' I couldn't agree more.



Never Look Back Jade

I do not want to walk backwards
And watch the bad, the good and the sad.
I want to walk and look forward
To see what is ahead of me
I want to experience new things
Which might be better than
What I left behind.
You never know what will be waiting
Around the corner
Be prepared for the unexpected
We are here for such a short time.



Writers' biographies

Haydeh

Haydeh is from Iran and was imprisoned for political reasons. Living in England as a refugee has shown her new aspects of life. Studying at university, working as a school teacher and joining the Write to Life group has given her the motivation and enthusiasm to learn more about literature and music.

Jade

Jade was born in East Africa, studied journalism and worked as a sports reporter. After members of her family were killed and her own life was threatened, Jade was forced to flee and arrived in the UK in 2001. She joined Write to Life fourteen years ago. Jade volunteers at the Refugee Council, published her first collection of poetry, *Moving A Country*, in 2013, and regularly recites her work in the UK.

Joy

Joy is originally from The Democratic Republic of Congo. She has been a member of Write to Life since 2015, regularly writes poems and prose and is an enthusiastic singer and writer. She is also a member of Freedom from Torture's choir. She loves laughing with her friends, but likes learning even more. She lives in London with her two beautiful children.

Kayitesi

Kayitesi thanks Freedom from Torture, especially Write to Life and its volunteers, who have given her the moral support to start a new life, to become who she is now. Sharing her experiences through poems and other writing helps her to cope with her trauma.

Marsha

Marsha is from Bangladesh, where she worked as a journalist. She came to the UK in 2012 to study international relations. Due to her family's involvement in national politics, her life and those of her family members were endangered. Freedom from Torture helped her to feel safe again. Since 2017 she has been a member of Write to Life, pursuing her passion for creative writing with the help of mentors.

Nalougo

Nalougo is a science teacher from Ivory Coast. He has been coming to Write to Life since 2019. He wasn't aware of his poetic gift before joining the group. He speaks French and Senoufo. Writing in a new language helps him to express himself and relieves the sorrow inside him. He thinks everybody should join Write to Life!

Patrick

Patrick is from central Africa. He worked as a journalist covering politics, sports and social issues and was part of a human rights group which organised a conference addressing citizens', including children's, rights and how to keep people informed about their rights. He was imprisoned in his home country, but managed to get to the UK in 2018 and joined Write to Life in 2020. Besides loving to write, which he does in French at present, he is passionately interested in nature.

Shahab

Shahab means 'shooting star'. He arrived from a country which has never accepted religion in a true sense and where the youth are still tolerating the disastrous results of their fathers' revolution. He suffered violence in prison for speaking freely. He is a passionate violinist and writer who believes that following signs allows you to become the writer of your own story and not just the consumer of others' stories. His star's destiny brought him to the UK and the gods shone on him in 2019 when he arrived at Freedom from Torture.

Tanya

Tanya was born in Zimbabwe, where she was a primary school teacher for fifteen years. Tanya and her family started speaking out against the regime in 1999, when it was becoming more and more oppressive and violent. Some of her family were killed and maimed as a result of their protests and Tanya was forced to flee. She arrived in the UK in 2013 and was referred to Freedom from Torture in 2017. Tanya loves nature, gardening and writing.

Yogi

Yogi was born in Sri Lanka, and was forced to flee thirteen years ago, leaving his wife and daughter behind. He joined Write to Life last year. Yogi volunteers and teaches cookery online. Since 11 April this year, he has lived with his wife and daughter in London.

Yonas

Yonas was studying biomedicine at university in East Africa when he joined a protest meeting. He was arrested, tortured and imprisoned for a year. When he was temporarily released, he grasped the opportunity to escape to the UK, arriving in 2002. This year he finally received indefinite leave to remain which means he has the security of family life here with his partner and two children. He joined Write to Life in 2017. A lifelong writer, he is passionate about writing.

Mentors' biographies

Ella Berny

Ella lives in South East London and has been a Write to Life mentor since the beginning of 2020. She has an MA in Creative Writing and enjoys reading and writing creative non-fiction. She loves working with Tanya on her beautiful poems and stories: "She has a wonderful way of using her passion for nature to express herself in a unique and charming way. We learn and laugh a lot together."

Simon Bracken

Simon is a gardener, writer, juggler and glutton from South London. He writes poetry and prose. He sometimes leaves the house as this becomes increasingly possible. He has been involved in Write to Life (WtL) for a year and has previously been involved in housing activism and community work in various forms. Working with WtL is for him a constant revelation into the power of storytelling and of the common journey of human experience. His dream is to be able to build a hut in his garden. Simon mentors Shahab and Yogi.

Carmelle Denning

Carmelle has been a mentor in Write to Life for five years and previously volunteered for ten years for Freedom from Torture's Holiday scheme. In the past she worked as a teacher, an editor and finally as a consultant, specialising in textbooks and other learning materials for international development organisations which led to working in Asia, the Caribbean, countries in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and some thirty countries in Africa. Carmelle works with Patrick and Yonas.

Sheila Hayman

Sheila coordinates Write to Life in between her film and other projects. Working in film and TV, projects are, for the most part, transitory and ephemeral. The huge satisfaction of Write to Life has been seeing it grow steadily, from a small group of half a dozen writing for themselves and each other, to fifteen or more skilled and confident writers and performers holding their own in public arenas from the Victoria and Albert Museum to the Tate Gallery, the Roundhouse and top literary festivals. Sheila mentors Marsha and Nalougo.

Arazoo Kadir

Arazoo produces thought leadership content in the technology world and is also a student of Conflict Resolution in Divided Societies with a focus on the Kurdish question and minority rights. "Having worked as a mentor for the Write to Life group over the last year, it's been incredible to be exposed to the writing produced by the talented group. It drew me to create a workshop on Liminality, where the writers were prompted to explore thresholds and spaces of uncertainty. The writing produced was inspiring." Arazoo works with Haydeh.

Lucy Popescu

Lucy has been a mentor with Write to Life for eleven years. She worked with the English Centre of PEN, the international association of writers, for over 20 years and was Director of its Writers in Prison Committee. She is the author of *The Good Tourist* and has published two anthologies, *A Country to Call Home*, focusing on the experiences of young refugees, and *A Country of Refuge*, a collection of writing on refugees and asylum seekers by some of Britain and Ireland's finest writers. Lucy works with Aso and Jade.

Emi Slater

Emi has been a mentor with Write to Life for ten years. She is a teacher, trainer and former theatre director. She finds working with the writers in this group deeply inspiring and never ceases to be warmed by their enormous and joyous approach to life. Emi mentors Joy and Kayitesi.



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