

# WRITE TO LIFE



Issue 2 / Dec 21

**FREEDOM**  
**FROM** EMPOWERING  
SURVIVORS,  
REBUILDING  
LIVES  
**TORTURE**

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# **WRITE TO LIFE**

Issue 2, December 2021

Edited by Tracy, Yonas and Simon

## **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 experience, 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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## Introduction

This zine is written by writers who belong to a group called Write to Life, which is affiliated with Freedom from Torture. This group encourages therapeutic creative writing, an activity which can help survivors, refugees, and asylum seekers process complicated feelings, develop social skills, as well as improve their engagement and written communication. Therapeutic writing enables us to recognise the relationship between emotional and cognitive development. We are able to gain perspective and recalculate the emotional significance of past and present events, by using story and metaphor.

Therapeutic story writing can intervene in our dark past and allow us to dramatise our experience. Using metaphors helps to bring about healing in traumatic circumstances - such as those following loss and other awful life events - by distancing the writer from the feeling of those events. Therapeutic writing can resolve disturbing thoughts and feelings. It is a tool that can clarify the emotions caused by those horrible situations. These emotions become easier to name and to figure out. Troubling memories are often worked through in non-confrontational ways, while happy events can be stored as precious memories.

Therapeutic writing gives the members of Write to Life a chance to have our say, in our own words, about what happened to us and all the challenges we are facing, without criticism or judgement.

In all these ways, therapeutic story writing gives us a chance to detach ourselves from horrible events and keep the happy events in our memories. Therapeutic writing is creative writing that destroys negative thinking and gives us positive coping strategies to add to our toolkit for social and emotional well-being.

The stories in this online zine are written by Write To Life members with the help of their mentors.

### Tracy

## There are no words - Tanya

I read once of a little girl who was blind. But the problem was not irrevocable, and a great physician performed a series of operations on her eyes.

He peeled back the bandages slowly a few at a time, allowing more and more light to penetrate to the optic nerves until finally the last bandage was removed. The little girl, sitting on her mother's lap, looked around.

For the first time, she saw her mother's face: her milky white teeth; her warm, loving eyes; her radiant skin. She slid off her mother's lap, walked over to the window and looked outside. Seeing the blue sky, the green grass, the flowers, the trees, the children playing, she burst into tears. She ran to her mother's arms sobbing.

"What is it, sweetheart?" her mother asked.

"Mother, why didn't you tell me it was this beautiful?" the girl asked.

"Sweetheart, I tried but it's hard to describe in words the colours, the clouds, the sky. I did my best, but there are no words to describe nature in its glorious beauty."

In my vocabulary, there are no words to describe the treasure trove of nature:

The zigzagging dance of the dragonflies

The fiery orange of sunset as it surrounds the earth with its blanket warmth

The deep howling of the desert winds

The sun-kissed cheeks of children playing in the river

The lush tingling of new grown grass on my bare feet

The vast glorious white of snow-capped mountains

The V-shaped swarm of migrating birds which have no geographical barriers

The cascading waterfalls

The mist that envelops everything in a grey cloak

The pounding of rain on asbestos

The yellow sparks of storms

I have no words to explain the cooling air as you sit under a leafy green tree

The sound of birds chirping

The African fields carpeted with green maize

The skies jewelled by many stars.

Words fail me.

## Gerdo - Haydeh

I like the sounds you make  
When you roll over each other.  
It sounds like a river  
Moving happily  
Over soft-edged pebbles underneath.

It is exciting to crack your shell  
Carefully and with strength,  
Finding the delicate balance  
To break you open  
And not smash you.



Your taste is quite special to me.  
I like you with  
Some cheese or a touch of salt.  
Even when you get soaked  
For a while in some water  
You taste fresher and softer.

I really like the shape of walnuts.  
When they come out of the shell  
Whole.

It looks like a human brain -  
Harmonious and full of nutrients.

## **Christmas is a Time for Refugees - Yonas**

Sometimes it seems the original meaning of Christmas has almost been forgotten. Christmas is the time of year when we tell the story of a refugee family, fleeing through the night to escape an oppressive regime. And even today, at this time of year, many refugee families are fleeing through the night to escape oppressive regimes. And the Bible tells us, repeatedly and unambiguously, to welcome immigrants. Exodus 23: “Do not oppress a foreigner.”

But this year in the United Kingdom, we anticipate a Christmas of fevered xenophobia, and greater barriers for migrants seeking asylum. The government and media characterise some asylum seekers as economic migrants. Current events in Afghanistan, the ongoing barbarity of Islamic State, the persistence of Al Qaeda make it easy for unprincipled politicians to stoke inchoate fears of others. Every refugee is a terrorist, a criminal or, at best, a greedy intruder imposing on our goodwill to steal our jobs. To a demagogue, even migrant children aren't victims, but enemies-in-waiting.

But if we look carefully, how is it possible to miss the parallels between the young family in the stable in Bethlehem and the new wave of refugees searching for a safe place to live, to rear their children? They lack food and clothing, and they have been turned away from one potential shelter after another. They want nothing more than a reprieve from the political machinations that threaten their survival. Many even come from the same part of the world as that young family in the stable.

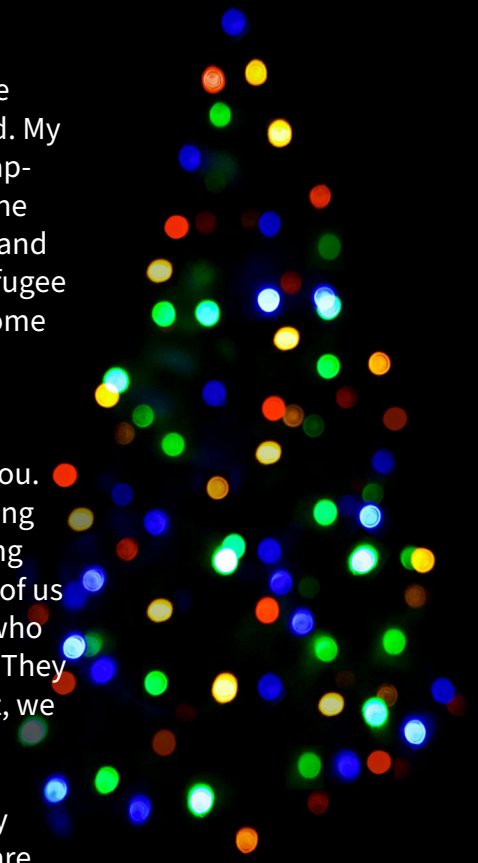
In the most profound way, Christmas is a remarkable refugee story. Christmas invites all refugees to find their way to their heavenly home. We are all refugees. Christmas invites us to lovingly serve our neighbours, pick up their baggage, and ask them to join us on the journey. Unfortunately, there are many other homeless refugees who will need our help this Christmas. One in two refugees have had to sleep rough, or in a homeless shelter,

after being forced to leave asylum accommodation.

Last winter, many refugees, young and old, decorated their Christmas tree with hope. Save for horrific memories of their journeys, it was all they had. My neighbour arrived from Afghanistan 3 years ago. Back then, he was not happy to celebrate at this time of year. “All I wish is to see my parents again,” he would say, «and to be accepted in this new society.» Now he feels settled and able to celebrate at this time of year. «We should care about the global refugee crisis. We should not fear refugees,» he says to me now. «We should welcome them.» I agree, of course.

«I love to help people, to empower women, men and children who are refugees to stand on their feet.» This is what I say to my neighbour, and to you. The reason we need to hear that, over and over again, is because in learning from people who have directly experienced trauma in their lives, and being present with them, we get to address our own fears and our anxieties. All of us are afraid of our vulnerability, but people who are homeless and people who are without friends are people who need real courage to get up each day. They give us an opportunity to let them become part of our lives. As we do that, we deal with our own fears too.

All refugee families express kindness and gratitude for the generosity they have experienced. They’re going to make us better people. The refugees are our teachers.





## Ektara - Marsha

Ektara is a traditional string instrument of wandering bards and minstrels from the Indian subcontinent. It is plucked with the index finger and represents spiritual and religious beliefs in folk music and art.

There,  
She never missed a folk concert  
Sitting on the dusty grass  
Or a torn discoloured rag  
Dreaming amongst  
The mesmerised audience.  
Twilight faded slowly  
With the resonant echo  
Of the Ektara  
Ting ting .....  
Tinggg ....  
Ting ting .....

Open air,  
Magical baul singer's voice and  
Lalon Shah's mystic lyrics  
'If you want to drink  
Only the first raindrops  
Extracted, like ambrosia,  
From clouds,

You must work hard'  
Casting a spell of cool and quiet  
Over the summer evening.

Here,  
She hesitates even to go  
To the Cambridge folk festival.  
She sees herself as an outsider,  
Who doesn't know what all this means.  
Fighting with the bitter wind,  
Wellies stuck in a muddy field,  
She doesn't even know the lyrics,  
The feelings  
Or the world they come from  
None of it.  
She can't join the cheerful chorus  
Or slip into the dance moves.

Her roots grow  
From this musical instrument

Of dried bottle gourd,  
Bamboo  
And a single metal string.  
She carries in her heart  
The philosophy  
Of the same Fakir Lalon  
'There is a season for everything  
And once it's past,  
Your effort will be wasted'  
She thinks of those spiritual baul

And baulini traveling barefoot  
The land they knew  
Before the borders  
Were drawn on the map.

Her heart clings to  
Inherited ancient knowledge:  
Live and Let live.

Soul always searching  
To be free from the delusions  
Of the material world,  
Virtual praises,  
And relentless pursuit  
Of the new.

She wants to remember  
Who she is and  
where she came from.  
When she finishes her graveyard  
Shift in the West End.  
When she goes for a lonely walk  
On Felixstowe Beach.  
When a kind heart asks her,  
'How do you say  
'Thank you' In your language?'



A Baul (travelling bard) with an ektara. Sketch by Marsha.

## Books - Kayitesi

Books help you to feel more confident  
help you travel around the world.  
Books develop your personality  
Books provide food for thought  
Books make you laugh and think

Books bring out writing talent  
Books help in communicating  
Books clear vision  
Books satisfy curiosity  
Books help to make better choices  
Books help to build literary talent

Books do not require special devices to teach  
Books increase attention span  
Books can be used any time, anywhere  
Books provide entertainment when others fail

Books make you powerful  
help to know the whys and hows of everything  
help to update with facts and figures  
help spread love, affection and knowledge  
make the best of friends  
take you to an intellectual environment  
entertain the mind, broaden your horizon  
bring about personality change  
bring nature to your doorstep  
they don't require company

Books are stress busters  
Books provide mental and physical relaxation  
Books provide emotional strength  
Build self esteem

Help you grow  
Take you to a world of dreams  
Transform lives, inspire, motivate wonderful experiences  
and achieving goals

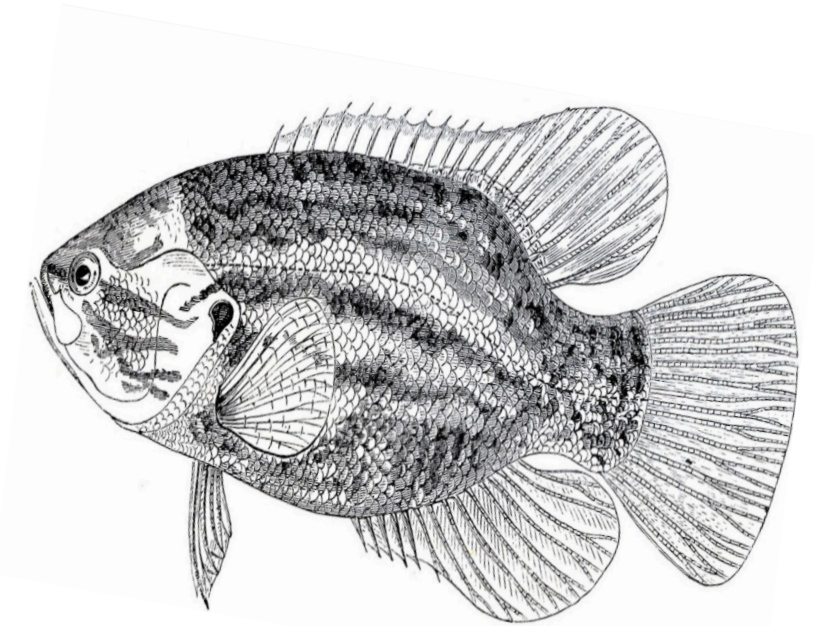
Why not start reading books  
Not just storing them!?

## Missing - Jade

I lost my delicious tilapia  
When I was forced to leave  
My former country  
I think of it every day  
Cooked and mixed with groundnuts  
When I pass by a market  
I always look around  
Hoping I might see some  
Brought from my country  
However, I see nothing.

You can have everything  
But you always miss something  
You were used to  
Other people might call it madness  
And say: "How can you miss

The fish from that country?"  
Yes, there are plenty of other fish here  
But for me, tilapia is precious.





## Through the window - Aso

Through the window I see things slowly moving  
The sun wants to push away the white clouds  
Opening its eyes, rays stream through the air  
The earth grips the heat and swallows it down  
The sun and sky and earth belong together.

Through the window I see the River Thames  
The sun calmly lies on its surface  
The river hugs the blueness of the sky  
The river is waving  
Billions of drops splash and hit the banks  
Tiny globules but combined together  
They generate great power  
They belong together.

Through the window I see trees moving in the breeze  
Birds are flying among the branches  
One is leaving, another is coming

Green, yellow, red, orange and purple leaves  
Hold a trace of dew on the top  
Birds drink the dew and sing  
I listen to their lovely voices  
The roots beneath the tree's trunk  
In the deep dark world  
Want to meet the sunshine  
Everything is crumbling and separating  
They belong together.

I see white-tailed eagles, cranes and willow warblers  
But there is no human noise  
The children are no longer playing over there  
No shoes are left  
But the echo of their laughter remains  
Their tiny steps have disappeared  
But the tears of joy have not quite dried  
Their shadows belong together.  
Through two eyes I see a large sick body  
trapped inside himself  
I can't move, I am staying home  
Home is murky  
Outside my window is just a picture  
I want to fly, catch the gleam, brighten my soul  
I am stuck inside an old man's body

Through his wrinkled eyes I see my dreams  
Floating with the rain and disappearing  
Before they fall to the ground.  
I want to catch your dreams instead  
I want to leave this body  
Jump up and climb the tree

To drink the dew and become a bird  
To see, a new perspective, the stream below  
Instead I see myself.

Rivers flow from their source

They never return

I'm parched inside this cellar  
I want to leave this body  
I want to leave  
Home is just a dim heartbeat  
That doesn't allow me to breathe.

I want to open the window  
But the window is a delusion  
I am stuck inside my dreams of tomorrow  
And tomorrow might never appear  
I want to leave.

## The Power of Writing - Shahab

When I was 18, my tutor taught me how to illustrate my imagination in writing. I found out that being a writer means you can talk whenever you want with whoever you want and it taught me to control my emotions. My professor in University told me to write whatever I want when my temper is high and then throw the papers in the bin! I also discovered that writing allows you to challenge others without having to directly confront your opponent.

ندی رب رس هب نپ اب

This phrase in Farsi is similar to the English phrase “to kill someone with kindness.” The literal translation of this phrase in Farsi is sounds brutal: to behead someone using cotton. Cotton is soft, whereas metal is sharp, so the implication is that it doesn’t hurt. If this is so, then writing is like the sharpest cotton I have ever seen, which works its magic in the world of the imagination. It enables you to remove someone’s head from their body like you would a lego figure’s head, and take it to new places, without using a blade at all.

I learned that writing lets me have control in all situations, but with it comes responsibilities. It’s like the time I washed my grandfather— who had Alzheimer’s — in the bathroom, despite the fact that one of my friends had said, “let the carer do it; he doesn’t know who you are.” “But I know who he is,” I replied. That is how I understand and how I can express my difficulties with writing and with the power it brings. I know whether what I say is true and what effect I intend for the reader.

Writing reminds me of my grandmother’s old rusty vintage treasure chest which was used as a family filing cabinet and a safe for precious items and her will. The treasure chest itself doesn’t have value, but the content could make you a millionaire or famous.

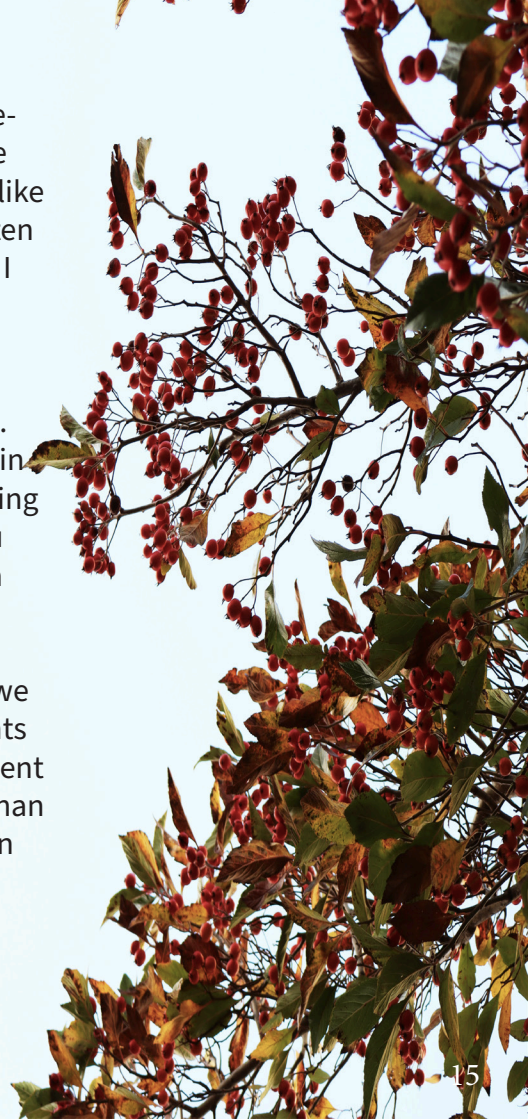
A piece of paper has no value, but its contents can be powerful. Whoever thought in the past one piece of paper was able to change a country’s future. Writing is used everyday to condemn or exonerate people. In my country, a bit of writing written by the judge can sentence a guilty person to the other world or give

prisoners a second chance with their family again.

There is usually a thick and distinctive border between regular physical experience and your imaginative experience. Sometimes though, the imaginative can be more real than the physical. Sometimes imagination and sensations like touch and smell are stronger than the narrow physical experience we are often condemned to repeat in our everyday lives. This is particular understanding I have gained from going through PTSD.

In my opinion, controlling the reader's emotions is an art and artists can do it. The artist doesn't necessarily need to place an image in front of your eyes. Sometimes, in writing, you are required to imagine and build up your world in the mind. And sometimes, when you are busy with your creative writing - using your imagination - some other part of you, your spirit, is able to flourish. You are able to observe yourself like another person, like you are a character in a scene, or in a computer game level.

Imagination is powerful, like how we can cry in movies at things more than we cry in real life. Sometimes watching a horrific depiction of the extreme extents of war can be worse than your own experience of war. Or watching the different religious rituals around funeral rites in a culture alien to you, can be worse than your own mourning. It can bring home the reality of loss more than your own experience.





## Life - Nalougo

Sitting a few minutes with you  
brings me the greatest joy  
Snuggling up to you  
Let me never be cold  
I long to hold you close to me  
And stay with you forever.

Life is a choice  
That sometimes we ignore  
From you I discovered some of these choices  
You taught me so much about life  
Don't let fear lead you anywhere  
If you can't do big things, then do small things in a big way  
You are no better than the others, you're just different, with your different faults.  
We all want to change the world, so we had to change ourselves first  
I must have understood that.

Life is a dream, let's make it a reality.  
Life is a challenge, let's face it.  
Life is a chance, let's take it.





## Christmas On Wednesdays - Tracy

Every fortnight on a Wednesday, we at Write to Life gather around the tables at 17:30 pm to have dinner, which is tastier than my dinner at home with my son. These dinners bring back the memories of having a big family, which I used to encounter on Christmas Day before I came to this part of the world. I was the only child, which, with my two parents, made us three in the house. However, on Christmas Eve, my uncles, aunties, and families used to come to our house. We would celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day together.

One thing which I didn't like was that I would have to leave my bedroom for visitors on Christmas Eve. I would sleep on the air mattress with my cousins in the living room. This subtracted from my happiness a bit; nevertheless the anticipation of what was to come on Christmas Day overcame the boredom of being crushed on the air mattress.

And knowing Christmas Day was a double celebration for me also doubled my joy: Christmas Day is my birthday. Please don't envy me, thinking that I get double presents; I always get only one. In fact, I'm thinking of changing my birthday, or having two birthdays like the Queen. I can do that since I am a princess, not in the UK but where I came from.

Sitting around the big table eating together on a Christmas day is something I lost long ago, the day when the journey of being a refugee began. However, those happy memories are replaced by the fortnightly meeting, the therapeutic creative writing gathering with Write to Life at Freedom from Torture.

After half an hour of eating and talking, the mentor who will be leading the session will start by saying something like: “Just write what you feel, and it will be good if you can remember to include in your creative writing the impressions made on your senses... try to see, hear, smell, taste and touch or hold the thing you are writing about, in your imagination.”

This type of sensory prompt is not included in most kinds of treatment or therapy. Yes, I know that not every survivor or refugee has difficulty registering what their senses tell them, but most of us do. The trauma of our experiences blunts memory, enters our bodies as pain or numbness, and can even silence us altogether.

People receive and process sensory information in different ways and respond differently. Perceptual problems can be helped with therapeutic writing, like what happened to me: torture robbed me of the ability to write, or even speak.

Back home, it was a must for my parents to celebrate Christmas Day, because it’s my birthday. But since I left my country, Christmas has triggered terrible associations for me. Now, since I joined Write to Life at Freedom from Torture, which I have attended since 2009, I am happy to say that I have been able to recalibrate my emotions about Christmas Day, and deal with the loss of sharing it with my family.

This might appear to be a little thing to some people, but it was a big issue to me. The issue of the loss of my family Christmas symbolized everything which had been shattered and lost in my life. My arrival in the UK followed by being told that my brain could never again learn anything new. This was my medical diagnosis. Even all the knowledge I had previously acquired was rubbed off, due to my torture in perpetrators’ hands. I had been in a coma for six weeks, and had a heart attack due to the stress of overthinking: “Why me, why did

this happen to me?”

The Wednesday fortnightly meeting for therapeutic writing has helped me. Indeed, due to my torture, I would not have been able even to read what I have written here.

Yet, here now, writing this, is a woman who has gained three degrees here in the UK, a mental health practitioner who has done many mental health assessments and countless care plans for other people living with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

To me, therapeutic writing is a powerful cure.

All there is left to say is Happy Christmas to you all!

## BIOGRAPHIES

### WRITERS

#### 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 chance to carry on learning about literature and music which was interrupted after the Islamic revolution in Iran.

#### 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.

#### Tracy

Tracy Yamikani has been a member of Write to Life since 2009 and co-edited this zine.

#### 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 a creative writer from the Write to Life group. She has been living in London for the last nine years. She likes the challenge of introducing new cultures and the process of translating their literature.

#### 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!

## **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.

## **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.

## **Aso**

Aso is from Iraq.

## MENTORS

### 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 and writer 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.

### 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.

**A big welcome to our new mentors Aalian Khan and Rogelio Brava, and to Lucy Katz, our new coordinator.**