

## Writing Toward our Lost Ones Matisse Rosen

**Grade level:** High School

**Time frame:** 1 hour

**Required materials:** Pencils, paper

### Sequence of Activities:

#### Step 1: Warm-up (5 min)

To hit the ground running, I tell students I am going to begin by reading a couple excerpts from writers who inspire me for the way they write about their ancestors. I invite them to get comfortable, listen, and jot down any notes that come up in response to hearing these small pieces of writing.

Then I share the following two quotes from M. Jacqui Alexander and Yanara Friedland:

“The dead do not like to be forgotten. Sentience soaks all things. Caresses all things. Enlivens all things. Water overflows with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory. Crossings are never undertaken all at once, and never once and for all.” M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of the Sacred*

“The dead are dear to me. Not because I am romantic, though probably nostalgic, but because they are good collaborators. . . . When writing my first book, *Uncountry*, I could not decide whether it was novel, a collection of stories, poems, myths or all. But I could identify that its primary impulse came from the charge and care for what is forgotten, exiled, no longer locatable. As I was thinking about the title “Uncountry” I found that it signaled, among other things, a place . . . that hovers between my own body and world. This space is movable, does not clearly belong to one [person] or another, and yet the moment we *encounter* we participate in its existence and vitality. It is the act of caring for a particular occurrence, face, roadside that catapults us into a territory slightly outside of ourselves. The question that propelled the work was not what is the story, its form, or language? Rather what meets me when I begin to (take) charge (of) this ancestor, history, memory?” Yanara Friedland, *Unknown: Sound of Water Against Stone*

#### Step 2: Discussion (10-15 min)

Then I pose the following discussion questions to the class: “Are there people in your family lineage that you wish you knew better? Stories you have never heard but are curious about? Maybe there is somebody you never met, who died before you were born, or lived a few generations back in a land your family moved away from to come to the USA. Or maybe this is a person who has been estranged from your life for whatever reason.”

After or in between hearing from students I like to share a story about how I came to write about my great-grandfather who I knew very little about. All I knew was that he died in a snowstorm in Poland because he was too stubborn to wear a jacket outside on a winter night. I didn’t even know his name, but somehow I started spending time thinking and meditating about my grandfather’s life, and then he started to show up in my writing.

Then ask the class the following question: “What might we get out of spending time with our dead and lost loved ones, with our ancestors we’ve never known?”

### **Step 2: Making Lists (15 min)**

Next, I tell students to select a person or group of people they would like to try to spend some time with during today’s session. After choosing, they will make lists of anything and everything they know about this person or people, including where they lived, their name, biographical information, family stories, etc. Then, after they’ve finished the first list, they will make another list for the things they wish they knew, things they are curious about, questions they might like to ask this person/people if they ever got the chance.

### **Step 3: Writing Time (20 Min)**

Now, working with the information on both of these lists, students can spend time writing between the gaps to create their own poems or vignettes. I might pose the following questions as prompts for students to choose from:

- How might you listen to the gaps between what you know and what you don’t know to write toward your person/people?
- If silences could talk, what would they say?
- Where does your mind or heart go to first make contact with your person/people?

Students should feel free to explore this prompt in a mode that best suits them. Maybe they want to experiment with writing in the voice of their lost ancestor, or maybe they want to try to write them a letter, maybe they begin simply by meditation and free association.

### **Step 5: Sharing / Wrap-up (10 min)**

Leave ten or so minutes at the end of the session for desiring students to share anything they have written.