

FALLING APART

A set of workshops on the theme of falling apart and picking up the pieces.

Some years ago, writing about bodily injury (a torn calf muscle, a dislocated iliac joint), I'd found myself wanting to explore the notion of falling apart. The exploration became a workshop rather than an essay due to my sense that everyone had such a story, that falling apart meant many things beyond my own small story of middle age.

What developed was a set of three workshops run over a day and a half as part of a Lapidus weekend event but the workshops could be separated out to run over three or four weeks.

Falling apart, for me, meant ageing: ideas of the self as competent and ambitious starting to break apart; physical disintegration as a metaphor for failure and for a loss of sureness in what I was doing, as if I had been disabled, almost literally disconnected from listening to the rhythms of body, voice, breath. But alongside that, was a sense that what I make a poem out of is exactly that uncertainty, those questions, fragments of consciousness – the not-yet-articulate. That connection between the inarticulate self and the worded self is where art happens. And it is that journey (both therapeutic and artistic) which this set of workshops attempts to clarify.

WORKSHOP 1

FALLING APART (2 hours)

This opened with a 15 minute reading of several poems and prose excerpts which talked about situations of injury or mental breakdown. Participants then divided briefly into small groups to discuss how each of them might interpret the theme. This was followed by 45 minutes writing time, each person writing either their own or someone's else's story of injury, ageing, illness – of falling apart: jotting it down however they liked. Afterwards we gathered briefly to talk about how people had tackled the exercise but nothing was read out of this stage.

This was followed by an entirely different, less introspective piece: a 15-minute quick fire 'listings' exercise in which I asked people to list as many synonyms as they could for falling apart or breaking (eg sunder, split, divide) along with associated words (eg departures, particles) and expressions (eg part and parcel). This was followed by a very quick read around. What had we got? What meanings were they suggesting? The idea of this exercise is to develop a pool of words which participants can then dip into as they go along, and which might provide images and ideas beyond the words themselves.

PARTINGS & DEPARTURES (One hour)

The second and shorter part of the morning was based on the related theme of partings and departures. Again, I opened the workshop with a five-minute reading of three or four poems on the subject of partings and departures. We then discussed briefly, again in small groups, what might be included in departures and partings, followed by 40 minutes writing time, with a brief gathering at the end to talk about what had been written.

This first workshop was a gathering of ideas - an accumulating of experiences - and there was no attempt yet to produce finished work. The idea was simply to find subjects and to experiment with ways of expressing them.

WORKSHOP 2

BREAKAGE (One hour 45 mins - two hours 30 mins)

For the afternoon workshop participants had been asked, if they wished, to bring in a broken object or simply to bring one to mind, so we began with 20 minutes of show-and-tell. This added a sense of the material world and moved the focus from the self to something that might be written about in its own right or used as a metaphor.

There was then another quick-fire exercise; a listing of broken objects and parts of objects, followed by a quick read-around and then by 40 minutes writing time. Participants gathered in their small groups to talk about or read out what they had written. In the context of a large number of people, the small group talk was important for people's sense of security. Some participants brought traumatic and highly emotional experiences to the workshop which they might not have felt able to express in front of a larger group.

This workshop closed with small group discussion of the day's writing and preparation for those who wanted to read at the evening ceillidh but in another context this might simply be a final read-through in the wider group.

WORKSHOP 3 (Two hours thirty mins)

BEING A PART OF (MENDING)

In the third workshop we started to draw together those broken parts. I began by reading a short quote from Gary Snyder *'To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is a whole. You start with the part you are whole in.'*

We then went straight into a (ten minute) quick-fire 'listing' exercise. Drawing words from the previous 'listings' exercise, people were asked to list sound patterns for these words and phrases, and then any images or word-associations that were summoned up. This was followed by a brief read-around.

Having got energy and minds going, we could move into something more contemplative with a reading of four poems including Henry Reed's 'Naming of Parts' and Glen Colquhoun's 'A spell refusing to consider the mending of a broken heart'. I then outlined the aim of the final piece of writing: either a piece which, like 'Naming of Parts', draws together more than one meaning of the word – this might be a synthesis of two of the earlier pieces – or a Spell for Mending based on the ideas in Glen Colquhoun's poem. (One hour's writing time.)

On the original Lapidus weekend this workshop finished early to allow time for a bonfire which provided perfect closure but in the usual course of events the workshop would finish with the coming together to talk about or read (as people wished) any of the pieces written over the series of workshops (30 mins).

Details of where to find poems and prose quotations were included on the workshop handouts. The readings functioned as a way of puncturing the intensity of the workshop, giving people listening space as well as inspiration and ideas of ways of proceeding. For some of the workshop's participants 'falling apart' meant the taking apart of a dissatisfaction, part of the process of finding a new way to live. For others it meant a story of accident or illness, a breaking point, moving and traumatic, which remained in the small group in which it was written, not to be shared beyond that intimacy. The idea of the workshops was always that they moved back and forth between words spoken by the facilitator, the small group discussion and the personal time of the writing, with the open arena of discussion and reading in the wider group for those who were happy to do this.

RESOURCES

WORKSHOP 1

FALLING APART

from *The Wilderness*, Samantha Harvey, Cape (2009)

'Right Hand', Vicki Feaver, from *The Handless Maiden*, Cape (1994)

from 'My Heart', Semezdin Mehmedinovic, translated by Celia Hawkesworth, in *Granta Medicine*. Issue 120: Summer 2012

from *Faces in the Water*, Janet Frame, The Women's Press (1980)

PARTINGS & DEPARTURES

'Walking Away', C Day-Lewis in *Selected Poems*, Penguin (1969)

'Departure', Carolyn Forché, from *The Country between Us*, Cape (1983)

'Era', Jo Shapcott, from *Of Mutability*, Faber (2010)

'Ebro Crossing, 1938,' Jane Duran, from *Silences from the Spanish Civil War*, Enitharmon (2002)

WORKSHOP 2

BREAKAGE

'The World Egg', Gerrie Fellows, from *The Body in Space*, Shearsman (2014)

'Breakage', Mary Oliver, from *Wild Geese*, Bloodaxe (2004)

WORKSHOP 3

BEING A PART OF (MENDING)

Start with the part you are whole in, Gary Snyder, from *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry and Translations*, Counterpoint (2000)

'Naming of Parts' ('Lessons of the War (i)'), Henry Reed, in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited Helen Gardner, Oxford University Press (1972)

'The fifteen Devices', WS Graham from *Collected Poems 1942-1977*, Faber (1979)

'A Proprioceptive Manifesto', Gerrie Fellows, from *The Body in Space*, Shearsman (2014)

'A spell refusing to consider the mending of a broken heart', Glen Colquhoun, from *Playing God*, Steele Roberts, New Zealand (2002)