

East of Hastings

Writing Poetry about Your Neighborhood and the People in it



Read each of the following poems from *East of Main: An Anthology of Poems from East Vancouver and Hastings-Sunrise* and fill a page (minimum) with free-writing on the questions and prompts provided.

1) “Blackberries” – Pauline Rankin

In her poem “Blackberries”, Pauline Rankin describes the blackberries that wind “all through the eastside” (line 1), and uses them as a metaphor for the neighborhood itself. She says that people have negative views of the East Side, for example, that it is “dangerous” (line 32), and also that people try to change it into something more “smooth” and “neat” (lines 45 and 46). But the poem has a defiant tone. It says that (the people of East Vancouver) “will hang on” and won’t change or leave, just like “the blackberry vines / with fruit and thorn” (lines 49-50).

Pick something that you can find in your neighborhood—perhaps something that not everybody notices, but you have noticed. Write about it—where you find it, what it looks like, etc. How might this thing be turned into a metaphor for the neighborhood itself, and your feelings about the neighborhood?

Identify prominent themes.

2) “7:59 a.m.”, “The Washers’ll Wash It”, and “My Job” – Michael Turner

In the three poems, “7:59 a.m.”, “The Washers’ll Wash It”, and “My Job”, Michael Turner describes workers, employers, and working itself. By focusing on individuals, he is able to write detailed and interesting portraits of people.

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We could do the same thing for students, teachers, and studying. Pick a student, a teacher, or a certain situation, and describe it in detail. Try to be empathetic towards your subject. In other words, don't try to make someone look bad. Try to make your reader feel pity or admiration for that person instead.

Identify prominent themes.

3) "Race Relations" – Sadhu Binning

In his poem "Race Relations", Sadhu Binning represents a particular group of immigrants in Canada. Who are they? What do they do to fit it?

Sometimes we may feel that our efforts to become our best selves are foiled by obstacles, both internal and external. What would you like to see happen in your life? What do you need to do to get there? Do you anticipate (or already experience) some hurdles in your life pursuits? Explain.

Identify prominent themes.

4) "The Postman" – Sadhu Binning

The speaker of "The Postman" describes a day in his life through vivid and emotionally-loaded imagery. Describe a day in your life (or someone else's life...perhaps even a pet) using as much imagery as possible. How do the motions of your life become part of who you are?

Identify prominent themes.

5) "Chhalede"(Chameleons) – Sadhu Binning

In the poem, "Chhalede (Chameleons)", the speaker selects details and anecdotes from his/her life in order to illustrate her relationship with her own ethnic background and feeling more at ease within it.

How do you relate to your own ethnic/cultural/religious/family background? What details or anecdotes would help to illustrate that? What feels like *home* to you?

Identify prominent themes.

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6) “Equal Opportunity” – Jim Wong-Chu

“Equal Opportunity” by Jim Wong-Chu relates a story from Canadian history which describes a social injustice.

Describe one of the darker moments in Canadian history that left a mark on you. Try to help your reader to get that same impression.

Identify prominent themes.

7) Writing About Your Neighbourhood: Poetry by Bren Simmers

There is a movement towards poetry with no titles. What effect does this produce? If you could give Bren Simmer’s poems titles, what would they be?

#1 [no title] Suggested title:

#2 [no title] Suggested title:

The geography of our neighbourhood often becomes a part of who we are. We come to rely upon familiar surroundings to group us and make us feel like we are *home*. Is there a place you like to go to for its ambience, food, company, etc.?

Describe a place in your neighbourhood (or along your commute) that you frequent. What makes this place special to you? If you were to move, what would you miss most about having this place part of your “routine”?

Identify prominent themes.