



نامه‌های کنار دریا: امیدهایی برای آینده

Letters by the Sea: Hopes for the Future

A multilingual creative writing workshop with a  
women's mixed-level ESOL group in North Somerset



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- Introductions from Lorna Rossi and Helen Patuck
- A letter of hope
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## As reported by Lorna Rossi to the South West Councils ESOL network

*"On an overcast autumn morning in North Somerset, a group of women gathered for a unique creative writing ESOL workshop titled "Letters to the Sea". Designed for mixed-level learners, the informal session explored themes of letter writing, shells, expression, and the gentle power of nature as a space for healing, imagination, communication and learning.*

We began by exploring a map. Many of the women are from Afghanistan or Iraq and prior to living in Weston-Super-Mare had not previously been familiar with the sea or seaside. Anyonewho knows Weston-Super-Mare knows it is very much a seaside town with a long promenade and vast beachfront. We then introduced the activity with a simple, visual word bank activity. The group explored words connected to emotions through shells. This activity is well-suited to all levels and with some complete beginner learners very new to the group, we were fortunate that one of the participants was happy to translate allowing for inclusive use of first language and some natural translanguaging.

Words such as calm, quiet, strong, lonely, safe, sad, open, brave were shared with drawings of shells. Many enjoyed the drawing itself and created beautifully detailed pictures of all types of shells. We learnt that shells hold a symbolic importance in Afghanistan and are often used to protect and guide children in making the right choices in life.

For the women with higher levels of English, this became an opportunity to articulate metaphors: "shells protect," "shells are safe spaces like little houses," "shells are beautiful treasures of nature." For pre-entry learners, the activity was easily accessible with pointing, repeating, choosing colours that matched their feelings with lots of peer support and shared learning. A sense of community and connection emerged.

### **A visit to the beach**

You can't do a workshop about the sea and shells just a stone's throw from the beach without visiting the beach itself, so we walked to the seafront together, children and babies in tow. It was a brisk autumn day, so the wind energised us all and stirred typical smells of the sea in the air. It was a treat when we found lots of shells that had not long been washed up by the waves,

especially as most of the beach is pure white sand! The more we discovered, the more the shoreline became a living classroom that stimulated conversation and introduced new vocabulary. The women wandered, collecting shells that spoke to them: tiny spirals, smooth stones, broken edges, colourful fragments, along with some twigs and leaves and driftwood.

Some said picking up shells and looking out the horizon felt peaceful. For learners still developing their English vocabulary, the moment was simply joyful: pointing, naming colours, feeling the textures and finding ways to communicate that transcend language entirely.

#### Letter writing - expressing and communicating

Back in the classroom, with pockets of shells washed and tipped onto the table and warm tea poured, letter writing began. The theme was to simply write a letter to the sea or to anything the sea represents. The results were deeply personal and beautifully varied.

Some women wrote to their home countries, sending wishes, hopes, prayers for peace, dreams for their children's futures. Others wrote to family members still far away, addressing the sea as the messenger between two worlds. A few wrote to each other, offering words of encouragement, appreciation and friendship.

Others wrote to their future selves, envisaging strength, confidence, and new beginnings while many who were still building foundational vocabulary simply chatted about what they would write or continued drawing with the children. For higher-level learners, sentences and full letters emerged which were read together as a group and translated across languages. Everyone was fully engaged and able to participate in a way that felt inclusive, safe, expressive, and meaningful.

The workshop ended with a table of shared food and inevitably conversations about different traditional dishes from around the world. We shared fresh bread, cheeses, fruit, biscuits, tea and enjoyed the time as connections grew and nobody needed to worry about correct English but more to enjoy simply being together and communicating. Stories travelled through gestures, expressions, different languages and warm smiles. Through the simple act of writing short letters, the group opened to themselves, to each other, and to hope and possibility.

## More than a workshop

*The workshop became much more than a creative writing activity. It found its own legs with so many unexpected benefits -*

- a trauma-aware space for gentle self-expression
- an opportunity to build emotional vocabulary
- an opportunity to build confidence
- a time of calm connection with nature and each other
- an inclusive activity that allowed participation at all levels
- a way of strengthening community among women far from home
- a way to informally develop cognitive skills such as memory, focus, attention, processing, expression, core motor skills, vocabulary acquisition and so much more which all lead to deep language learning and expression

*By the end of the day, everyone left with a smile, children left holding shells as if they were treasure, drawings, letters and most importantly, all with a sense of belonging and a reminder that voices matter, in any language.*

*Read some of our letters here."*

- Lorna Rossi  
December 2025

## Helen Patuck on facilitating and reading everyone's writing

*I had felt intuitively like the theme of shells had unlocked something in participants, in their drawings, words and wands on that November day in Weston. But it was only when I read their stories in translation that I felt the true impact of the day. Small wisdoms lay behind every elegant inscription of Farsi, carved onto paper shells and letters translated between teacher and student.*

*I share the writing prompts developed for this day and the treasures they revealed, which speak for themselves.*

- Helen Patuck  
January 2026

# A letter, in Farsi and English

*Written by a student, translated by a teacher*

آرزو درد دل  
من در زندگی آرزو دارم وطنی ما آرزو  
هر دم مایه های کار سود حیان های اخلاقی  
پنهان حق دستی های دیگر گام گذشته نشود ،  
زدن های آزادی پسید آگند پسیم یکار نزدی خود  
مشل سایق ادام بدهند و مردم از مردمهای آرزو  
سوزند و آرزوی دیگر من این دست نه عادم  
چو خود دستی های اعضا های غایل آرزو باش  
و مادرانی با آرزوی ششم و محبت کامل داشته  
ی ششم  
با احترام  
سیم

## Hopes of my heart

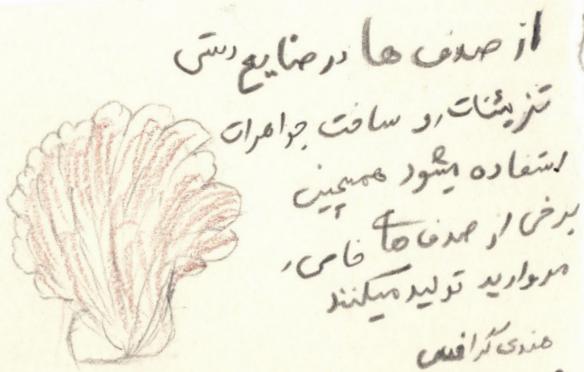
I hope my country will heal and be restored in my lifetime. My people are now deprived of food, employment and the good things of life. I hope it will improve. I don't want to see the youth of Afghanistan continue to die unfairly. I want women in Afghanistan to find freedom; they should ~~be~~ live as they did before: working and living their life. I long for the restoration of peace. I hope for my mother to feel well and the whole family to ~~be~~ live in calm, as we do in the UK.

I hope to see you soon

Zarmina

# Coming out of our shells

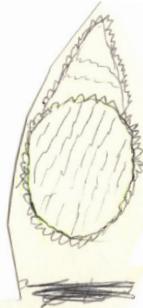
Written by Afghan and Kurdish women attending ESOL class at Lowering the Bar



Shells are used in handicrafts,  
decorations, and jewelry making.  
In addition, some special types  
of shells produce pearls.

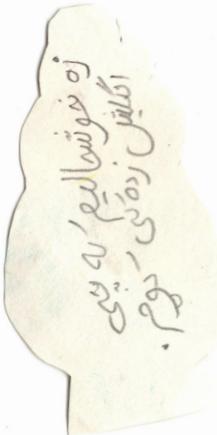


sadafoo



In Afghanistan, People  
wear shells around their  
necks like a necklace.

من خوشام از سی و بار برا



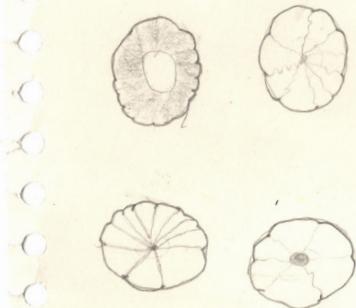
I am very happy when  
a friend comes to my  
house.

“The meaning of happiness is not arriving.”

“Living in England does not automatically make us happy.”



خرفت دریا یعنی یوستهای سخت و رسیاک  
خانگی مخصوص دم در دریا است. رنگ های  
و شکل های کوکوش یادگار آرامی  
و راز دریاست. برخی سنت های دری خود  
برواریده های سازند. گوهرهای نعمتی صبر و  
زیبایی طبیعت است.



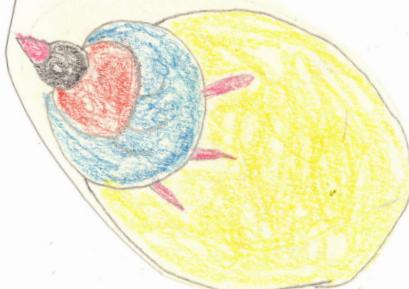
گنج زیر خاک باید طابهای را زن

کوصر دریا به زنان خوف زیبار

I wish learen English.



از زوکها صیباکی اولادهای



Beautiful sea's  
Flower Shell

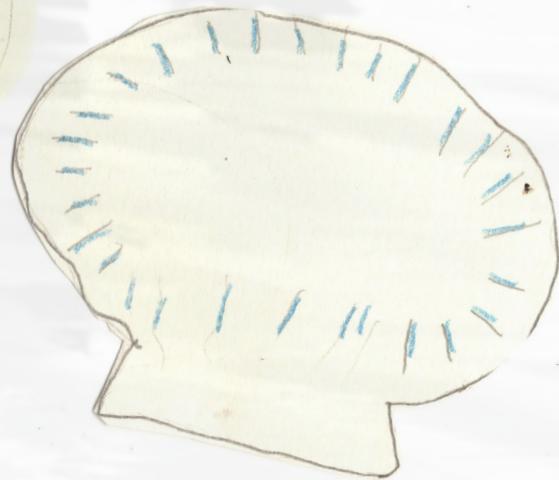
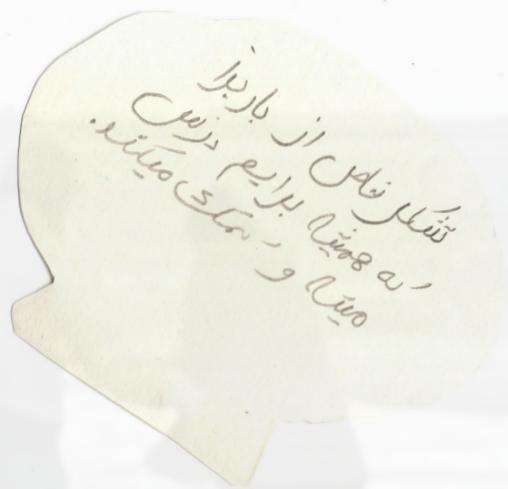
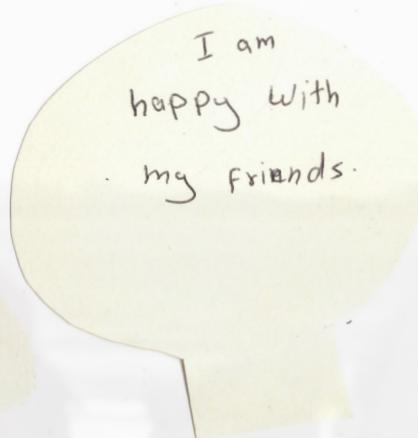
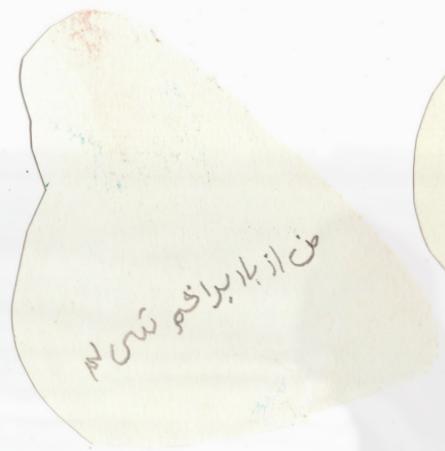
I like





"Purpose draws the human being forward, not the destination. The movement along the path toward perfection has value in itself."

"Purpose in life is not something we reach and then finish with; rather, it is a path that transforms the human being. If only the destination matters, then once it is reached, meaning disappears. But if purpose lies in the movement itself, life continually finds meaning."





صرف یک نام مقبل است. زیارت صدوم همانام دنست فوراً صرف  
آن مانش و هم هم صرف را دعسته درام و عقیقت که صرف هم  
در دریاچه بینم روحی ام کاره هم شود.

I love my classmates  
and Shena.

"Purpose is an attractive name, because purpose is distant, whereas a destination is near. We move more easily toward a destination, and when we reach it, we are released into a sea of purposelessness."



I like shell ti is have it beautiful

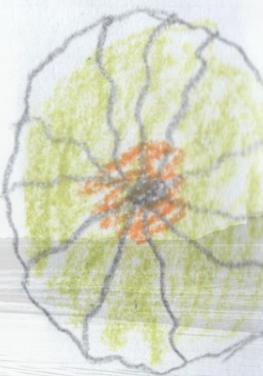
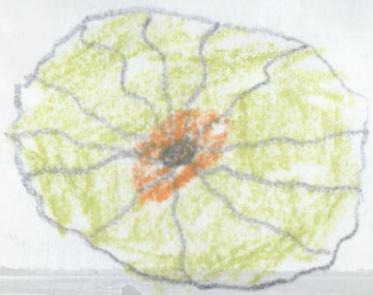
Color and like to give shell from my friend.

my



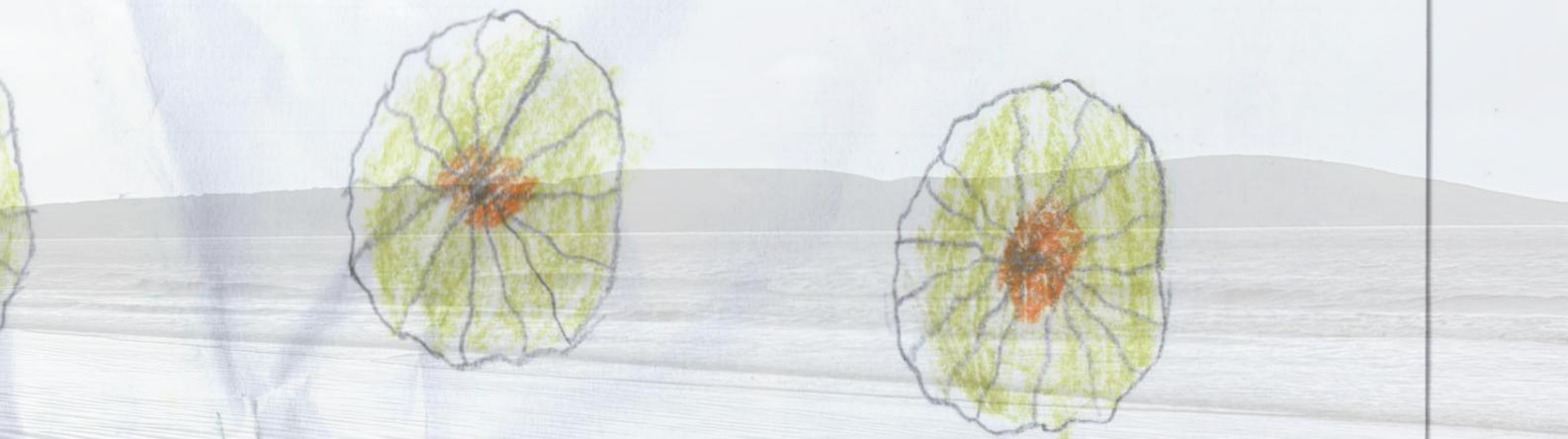
“Purpose is not a fixed destination but the perfection of the human being. In human ethics, purpose lies within the person rather than in an external endpoint. In earlier times, it was said that ethics is not about the goodness of things themselves, because goodness does not reside in objects, but in the quality of human character. Fulfilment, or true happiness, is the continual movement from one state to another, always toward a higher level of being.”

## Limpet Shells



Limpets have a strong hold to hold on tight.

تیر کے لئے مدد کریں گے جو اپنے  
وہ تکریز ہے۔



ng muscular foot which always  
to rocks.

لسمة كان ينبع حاملا  
ألا ينبع من ماء كثيف



I hope to



# Prompts for creative writing used in our workshop

## **Activity 1: Introducing ourselves by Coming Out of Our Shells.**

*Prompt: Talk about shells and feeling shy, and how language gives us the ability to open up to each other and the world in a new place.*

- Each woman chooses a word that feels like hope or future in her own language, cuts out a shell shape on paper, and decorates it with her word
- Then we introduce ourselves in a circle and display these words in the middle.

Variation for mixed learners:

- Beginners can copy or dictate with the help of translation tools.
- Intermediates can extend this by writing short phrases ("My hope is for...").

## **Activity 2: Letters by the sea**

*Prompt: "If the sea could carry a message for you, what would you want to say.... to yourself, your family, your new home, or your future?"*

- Using simultaneous translation/translation tools, or English, each participant writes (or dictates) a short letter, note, or drawing.

Variation for mixed learners:

- Beginners can fill in a guided frame, for example:

My name is \_\_\_\_\_.

I am from \_\_\_\_\_.

In the future, I hope for \_\_\_\_\_.

I want \_\_\_\_\_ for my family.

The sea will carry my letter to \_\_\_\_\_.

- Intermediates can write freely or translate their words into English with support from their teacher.

### **Activity 3: Walking to the sea to collect shells**

*Prompt: Each woman can collect an object or take one photo that represents her hope or the contents of her letter*

- We share a hot drink together and something sweet before walking down to the beach
- Women collect physical objects or images, this could be a photo of waves, sky, footprints, horizon.
- This could also be a drawing, if women choose to stay inside.

### **Activity 4: Bringing the sea into our classroom**

*Prompt: What did we find that resonates with our lives and hopes?*

- In this final moment we will share our photography and add it to a book of our day together, with multiple languages.
- We share words, emotions then food and goodbyes.

## About Lowering the Bar

We started teaching ESOL occasionally as volunteers with Refugees Welcome North Somerset. After a while, demand in the community grew so much that we set up a separate CIC. As an independent non-statutory organisation, we are able to be agile and reactive to student needs. For example, new students can start at any time; we can move students to a different group whenever they are ready; and mothers can bring babies.

We have been teaching more formally for over four years and currently hold five sessions a week: two separate mixed-level groups of 15-20 people meet twice a week and one session is an IELTS group comprising 7-8 people. Although most of the students are refugees or asylum-seekers, we also attract other migrants.

Some funding comes from the local authority, a few students contribute a nominal amount and some teaching remains voluntary. With support from South West Councils, eleven students gained a City and Guilds Entry-level certificate in 2024-25.

- Shena and Barbara  
January 2026

Visit the website at: [www.lowering-the-bar.org.uk](http://www.lowering-the-bar.org.uk)

I am  
happy with  
my friends.

Kib  
Caj  
iho gba





Weston-super-Mare

November 2025



## In our words: “Who I am in English, and in my language too”

Planning creative writing workshops with ESOL provision networks in south-west England. Helen and Lorna are both ESOL-qualified and are excited to work with teachers and students of English for Speakers of Other Languages.

Creative writing exercises...

- “Letters from my Future Self”
- “Who I am in my language / Who I am in English”
- Co-creation of ESOL Board-game: “Paths to Confidence”



Lorna Rossi  
South West Councils  
SMP ESOL Coordinator



Helen Patuck  
Writer and illustrator



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