



Poetry of Witness

Research Journalism Initiative

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from *Ourselves or Nothing*, by Carolyn Forché

It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or nothing.

This packet explores some of the foundational concepts of poetry and poetics from a variety of world cultures, allowing students to develop their writing and sense of personal poetic while it facilitates their poetic self expression. Whenever possible, students are encouraged to share their work with their peers, to provide constructive feedback to each other, and to take part in an international poetry exchange with students in the United States and Palestine through the Research Journalism Initiative (go to <http://rji.tiged.org/acw/videos> for samples of digital poems from JDKlein's Advanced Poetry Class). The full Poetry of Witness course packet used in Palestine can be downloaded at http://www.4shared.com/document/Vr_9wLYq/RJI_Poetry_Workshop-Full_Pack.html

These Poetry of Witness materials explore the following:

Fundamentals of poetry:

- show, don't tell—inherently visual, not didactic or direct
- visual word choice—choose the most visual, resonant words (i.e. die vs. crucify)
- avoid ineffable words—love, soul, forever...
- avoid rhyme and meter (patterned)—free verse gives you more creative freedom
- use line breaks, capitals and limited punctuation for natural flow/rhythms and increased resonance; read aloud, listen to and think about the rhythms of language choice
- disparate imagery—trust odd ideas (tasting sounds, smelling tastes, etc.)
- engage multiple senses (textures, sounds, tastes, smells, sights)
- make up your own rules, and break them whenever you feel like it

Poem as portraiture—poems that describe life via a person—visual features become a metaphor for personality characteristics (see Rainer Maria Rilke and Pablo Neruda)

Poem as a snapshot—using the poem to describe a moment. Family albums, snapshot moments that capture life, family, etc. (see Anna Ahkmatova)

Poem as a house, structure, place—show your life through the nuances of your home, street, yard, bedroom, neighborhood (see Willie Perdomo)

Poem inspired by art—use a favorite painting, sculpture, photograph, etc. as a vehicle for exploring life or the future you hope for

Poetry of Witness—using poetry to express and bear witness to the realities of daily life during conflict (see Carolyn Forché and Denise Levertov)

Poetry as a Letter—write a poem as a letter to your own younger self or later generations (see Claribel Alegria)

Attack Poetry—write a poem that attacks a person or topic that really makes you angry—but try to stay poetic/visual and avoid slogans and war cries (see Kofi Awoonor)

ANNA AKHMATOVA (1889–1966)

Born near St. Petersburg, Akhmatova gained a reputation as a poet in the years before the revolution, opposing symbolism while advocating a poetry of tangible experience. She was married three times: her first husband, the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, was executed for anti-Bolshevik activities in 1921; her second marriage, to Tamara Shileiko, lasted only three years; and her third husband, Nikolai Punin, died in prison. The poem “Requiem” arises out of her experience of her son’s confinement. Her work was unofficially banned in the USSR from 1925 until 1940, and then again for a decade after World War II. Only in the late 1950s did she once again gain recognition; in 1964, she was elected president of the Writers’ Union, from which she had earlier been expelled.

≈ Requiem

1935–1940

No foreign sky protected me,
no stranger’s wing shielded my face.
I stand as witness to the common lot,
survivor of that time, that place.

1961

Instead of a Preface

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

“Can you describe this?”

And I said: “I can.”

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

Leningrad, 1 April 1937



from

THE PROVINCE OF
RADICAL SOLITUDE

CAROLYN
FORCHÉ

It is possible to practice meeting the world, rather than regarding it as an object of knowledge, to leave behind the desire to appropriate experience, and begin to think in terms of relation. Levinas says that ethics is a response to the face of a stranger that “*summons me, questions me, stirs me, provokes my response or my responsibility.*” This stranger is anyone *other* than ourselves. We don’t write “about” the Other or another, purporting to capture, describe, render, or represent Otherness. We write out of our encounter and out of our being marked by it.

To enter into relation, not only with the world but with one’s work, it is necessary to let go of the desire to have experiences; one does not journey, labor, love, or even read in order to have them. Experience as such occurs within the self, and whatever it is, it is only of the self, and not of the world. When the world is regarded as an object of knowledge or a source of experience, the meeting is not with one’s full being. Part of one’s being is “having” experience or “learning” the world.

In conditions of extremity (war, suffering, struggle), the witness in relation cannot remove him- or herself. Relation is proximity, and this closeness subjects the witness to the possibility of being wounded. No special protection can be sought and no outcome intended. The witness who writes out of extremity writes his or her wound, as if such writing were making an incision. Consciousness itself is cut open. The self is fragmented, and the vessel of self breaks into shards. These may be pieced together, but the cracks remain visible. The narrative also breaks. At the site of the wound, language breaks, interrogates itself, becomes tentative, kaleidoscopic. The form of this language bears the trace of extremity, and is often composed of fragments: questions, aphorisms, broken passages of lyric prose or poetry, quotations, bits of memory and dialogue, brief and lucid passages resembling what the voice recognizes as its former work.

"A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips"
by Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine

He dreams of white tulips, an olive branch, her breasts in evening blossom.
He dreams of a bird, he tells me, of lemon flowers.
He does not intellectualize about his dream. He understands things as he
senses and smells them.
Homeland for him, he tells me, *is to drink my mother's coffee, to return
at nightfall.*

And the land? *I don't know the land*, he said.
I don't feel it in my flesh and blood, as they say in the poems.
Suddenly I saw the land as one sees a grocery store, a street, newspapers.

I asked him, but don't you love the land? *My land is a picnic*, he said, *a glass of wine,
a love affair.*
--Would you die for the land?
--*No!*
All my attachment to the land is no more than a story or a fiery speech!
They taught me to love it, but I never felt it in my heart.
I never knew its roots and branches, or the scent of its grass.

--And what about its love? Did it burn like suns and desire?
He looked straight at me and said: *I love it with my gun.*
*And by unearthing feasts in the garbage of the past
and a deaf-mute idol whose age and meaning are unknown.*

He told me about the moment of departure, how his mother
silently wept when they led him to the front,
how her anguished voice gave birth to a new hope in his flesh
that doves might flock through the Ministry of War.

He drew on his cigarette. He said, as if fleeing from a swamp of blood,
*I dreamt of white tulips, an olive branch, a bird embracing the dawn on a
lemon branch.*
--And what did you see?
--*I saw what I did:*
a blood-red boxthorn.
I blasted them in the sand . . . in their chests . . . in their bellies.
--How many did you kill?
--*It's impossible to tell. I only got one medal.*

Pained, I asked him to tell me about one of the dead.

He shifted in his seat, fiddled with the folded newspaper,
then said, as if breaking into song:
He collapsed like a tent on stones, embracing shattered planets.

*His high forehead was crowned with blood. His chest was empty of medals.
He was not a well-trained fighter, but seemed instead to be a peasant, a worker,
or a peddler.*

*Like a tent he collapsed and died, his arms stretched out like dry creek-beds.
When I searched his pockets for a name, I found two photographs, one of his
wife, the other of his daughter.*

Did you feel sad? I asked.

Cutting me off, he said, *Mahmoud, my friend,
sadness is a white bird that does not come near a battlefield.
Soldiers commit a sin when they feel sad.
I was there like a machine spitting hellfire and death,
turning space into a black bird.*

He told me about his first love, and later, about distant streets,
about reactions to the war in the heroic radio and the press.

As he hid a cough in his handkerchief I asked him:

Shall we meet again?

Yes, but in a city far away.

When I filled his fourth glass, I asked jokingly:

Are you off? what about the homeland?

Give me a break, he replied.

I dream of white tulips, streets of song, a house of light.

I need a kind heart, not a bullet.

I need a bright day, not a mad, fascist moment of triumph.

I need a child to cherish a day of laughter, not a weapon of war.

I came to live for rising suns, not to witness their setting.

He said goodbye and went looking for white tulips,
a bird welcoming the dawn on an olive branch.

He understands things only as he senses and smells them.

Homeland for him, he said, *is to drink my mother's coffee, to return, safely,
at nightfall.*

(Translated by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché)

**“A Margin for a Nomad”
by Falastine Dwikat, Palestine**

I try to keep our basils green
But I am not a hero
And autumn has wrapped its' shawl around us
And we will never have our coffee together.
You may not know that I don't like coffee
But I can never forget that you said
It tastes like me
Tense but yet, sweet.
Now I know, coffee is not sweet
And so are your words.

I am not a hero
It's meaningless to stand alone
When all the stories collapse
What's our life without a story?
What would I say to my epithets?
Doctrines can't give us love
Only principles can.

I am not myself anymore
Don't remind me of my promises
My gushing passions
“Love itself is what's left over
when being in love has burned away”
I stand in the rows
Walk down all the ready made phrases
I prefer life beyond philosophies
And death... beyond sour words
But life is not you and I
And the rain writes its' own poem
Where we are not.

We are two lost souls
Struggling to finish their last dance
While love sits in a dark corner
Waiting for the rain to fall
Wash our gestures
And give us a second chance
To be anyone, anything, but ourselves.

Nomads we will always be
Living in words
With nothing living inside of us
Nothing within

And our search will go on
Find your words and swords
And I'll be looking for my home
A margin, where words can grow.

* Louise de Bernieres: Captin Corelli's Mandolin.

"Rock Stars"
by Saed Abu-Hijleh, Palestine

We are rocks my dear and stars are still far
that is why we long for
the light
to enter every cell
so we can tell
the truth

We are stars my dear and soon we'll become rocks
like withering candles
time will come
when the flame
stops

But I have hope
that this voice
this very voice
of mine and yours
shall never fade away
and shall vibrate
at a steady rate
in every place
a mantra of love
that permeates
all of creation...

**“Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal”
by Naomi Shihab Nye, Palestinian-American**

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, I heard the announcement: If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well — one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.

Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly.

Shu dow-a, shu- biduck habibt, stani stani schway, min fadlick, Sho bit se-wee?

The minute she heard any words she knew — however poorly used – she stopped crying.

She thought our flight had been cancelled entirely.
She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said no, no, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just late,

Who is picking you up? Let’s call him and tell him.
We called her son and I spoke with him in English.
I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her — Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it.

Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies — little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — out of her bag — and was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a Sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo

— we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers — non-alcoholic — and the two little girls for our flight, one African American, one Mexican American — ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend — by now we were holding hands — had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing,

with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere.

Not everything is lost.

**Papo's *Ars Poetica*
by Willie Perdomo**

I'm stuck
in a poem
that sounds
like the rounds
of bullets
you expect
after the sudden
screech on the
avenue.

I'm stuck
in a poem
like a mother's
long cry that fills
the empty
hallways and
sneaks under
my door like
the beginning of
dinner.

My eyes
are buried
in this poem
like traffic
lights peeping
last night's
rites and
passages,
painting a dog
and cat jungle
boogie chase.

My teeth
bite on
this poem
like the wind
that chews on
tomorrow's myths
that men
are busy
making on
noontime
corners where
my ears are
stashed on
the down low:

“I heard Papo fell
off like a bad
bag of----”

I'm stuck
in this poem
like a squealing
rat caught on a
discount glue
trap or dead
flies floating on
fresh streams of
piss psst psst
mira mami
I'm home in
the street of
this poem where
I'm stuck.

PROMPT: Write a poem focused on
evoking your life through your home,
street, bedroom or neighborhood.

≈ From the Bridge

I have freed myself at last
it has been hard to break free:
near the end of the bridge
I pause
the water flows below
a turbulent water
sweeping fragments with it:
the voice of Carmen Lira
faces I loved
that disappeared.
From here
from the bridge
the perspective changes
I look backward
toward the beginning:
the hesitant silhouette
of a little girl
a doll
dangling from her hand
she lets it drop
and walks toward me
now she's an adolescent
gathers up her hair
and I recognize this gesture
stop girl
stop right there
if you come any closer
it will be difficult to talk
Don Chico died
after seven operations
they let him die
in a charity hospital
they closed Ricardo's school
and he died
during the earthquake
his heart failed.
Do you remember the massacre
that left Izalco without men?
You were seven.
How can I explain to you
nothing has changed
they keep on killing people daily?
It's better if you stop there
I remember you well at that age
you wrote honeyed poems
were horrified by violence
taught the neighborhood children
to read.

by Claribel Alegria

What would you say
if I told you that Pedro
your best student
rotted in jail
and that Sarita
the little blue-eyed girl
who made up stories
let herself be seduced
by the eldest son
of her employers
and afterwards sold herself
for twenty-five cents?
You've taken another step
you wear your hair short
have textbooks under your arm
poor deluded thing
you learned the consolations
of philosophy
before understanding
why you had to be consoled
your books spoke to you
of justice
and carefully omitted
the filth
that has always surrounded us
you went on with your verses
searched for order in chaos
and that was your goal
or perhaps your sentence.
You are coming closer now
your arms filled with children
it is easy to distract yourself
playing mother
and shrink the world
to a household.
Stop there
don't come any closer
you still won't recognize me

you still have to undergo
the death of Roque
of Rodolfo
all those innumerable deaths
that assail you
pursue you
define you
in order to dress in this plumage
(my plumage of mourning)
to peer out
through these pitiless
scrutinizing eyes
to have my claws
and this sharp beak.
I never found the order
I searched for
but always a sinister
and well-planned disorder
a prescribed disorder
that increases in the hands
of those who hold power
while the others
who clamor for
a more kindly world
a world with less hunger
and more hope
die tortured
in the prisons.
Don't come any closer
there's a stench of carrion
surrounding me.

TR. DARWIN FLAKOLL

Prompt: Write a poem as a letter to your former/younger self. Remember to stay visual; notice how Alegria uses snapshot memories to show her advice.

PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER
AS A YOUNG MAN

by Rainer Maria Rilke

In the eyes: dream. The brow as if it could feel
something far off. Around the lips, a great
freshness—seductive, though there is no smile.
Under the rows of ornamental braid
on the slim Imperial officer's uniform:
the saber's basket-hilt. Both hands stay
folded upon it, going nowhere, calm
and now almost invisible, as if they
were the first to grasp the distance and dissolve.
And all the rest so curtained with itself,
so cloudy, that I cannot understand
this figure as it fades into the background—.

Oh quickly disappearing photograph
in my more slowly disappearing hand.

by Pablo Neruda

I am the Pablo bird,
bird of a single feather,
I fly in the clear shadows
and the confused light.
My wings are invisible,
my ears vibrate with sound
as I fly among trees
or underneath tombstones
like a sorrowing umbrella
or a naked sword,
formal as a bow,
or round like a grape.
I fly, I fly unaware
in the hurt of night.
There are those who expect me,
those who don't like my song,
those who wish me dead,
those who don't know I'm coming,
and who won't be out to get me,
to wound me, to misunderstand me,
or kiss my tangled feathers
with a whistle of the wind.
That's why I come and go,
but, flying or not, I sing:
I am the raging bird
in the quiet of the storm.

Me llamo pájaro Pablo,
ave de una sola pluma,
volador de sombra clara
y de claridad confusa,
las alas no se me ven,
los oídos me retumban
cuando paso entre los árboles
o debajo de las tumbas
cual un funesto paraguas
o como espalda desnuda,
estirado como un arco
o redondo como una uva,
vuelo y vuelo sin saber,
herido en la noche oscura,
quiénes me van a esperar,
quiénes no quieren mi canto,
quiénes me quieren morir,
quiénes no saben que llego
y no vendrán a vencerme,
a sangrarme a retorcerme
o a besar mi traje roto
por el silbido del viento.
Por eso vuelvo y me voy,
vuelo y no vuelo pero canto:
soy el pájaro furioso
de la tempestad tranquila.

Prompt: Write a poem which paints a portrait of
someone in your life—or of yourself. Be sure to stay
visual—show the personality through visual features.

Songs of abuse: (i) To Stanislaus the renegade

KOFI AWOONOR (Africa)

This is addressed to you, Stanislaus, wherever you are.
Listen you punk, the last time we met you were selling
faulty guns in Addis

I heard you panting afterwards in a Cairo whorehouse
Before I knew you had split with my spring overcoat
a cashmere job I danced for in a bar in Kabul.

I heard you were peddling fake jewelry to Pueblo Indians
and Washington hippies. The jail you occupied in
Poonaville, Tennessee

was burnt down after you escaped; they could not eradicate
the smell.

Verna wrote the other day, you remember Verna
the lean assed girl whose rent money you stole in Detroit,
she wrote to say you are still running around in her
underpants.

What is this I hear about you preparing to settle in the
Congo

to grow hashish in the valley of the Zaire?

I will be waiting for you; for every gun you buy
I shall command a thousand assegais, for every sword
a million Ashanti machetes and Masai spears

I am not afraid of you any more. Those days are past
when you stole my school fees and my catapult
and fled into the cove beyond bird island.

I too came of age.

Prompt: Write an attack poem (an African poetic genre) about a person or event that infuriates you. Remember, try to stay visual!

by Denise Levertov

LIFE AT WAR

The disasters numb within us
caught in the chest, rolling
in the brain like pebbles. The feeling
resembles lumps of raw dough

weighing down a child's stomach on baking day.
Or Rilke said it, "My heart . . .
Could I say of it, it overflows
with bitterness . . . but no, as though

its contents were simply balled into
formless lumps, thus
do I carry it about."
The same war

continues.

We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,
our lungs are pocked with it,
the mucous membrane of our dreams
coated with it, the imagination
filmed over with the gray filth of it:

the knowledge that humankind,

delicate Man, whose flesh
responds to a caress, whose eyes
are flowers that perceive the stars,

whose music excels the music of birds,
whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,
whose understanding manifests designs
fairer than the spider's most intricate web,

still turns without surprise, with mere regret
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

We are the humans, men who can make;
whose language imagines *mercy*,
lovingkindness; we have believed one another
mirrored forms of a God we felt as good—
it is necessary; these acts are done
to our own flesh; burned human flesh
is smelling in Viet Nam as I write.

Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space
in our bodies along with all we
go on knowing of joy, of love;

our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
day and night,
nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,
nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,
the deep intelligence living at peace would have.

[1968]

Prompt: Write a response poem on qualities
you feel redeem humans and provide hope
for peace