

**‘DREAMS ARE LIKE POEMS’: THE RADICAL HEALING
POTENTIAL OF POETRY**

Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF)
Rutgers Chapter

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February 2021

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I - INTRODUCTION

‘Dreams Are Like Poems’: The Radical Healing Potential of Poetry

Nada Faris

“By making us stop for a moment, poetry gives us an opportunity to think about ourselves as human beings on this planet and what we mean to each other.” – Rita Dove

As a tool of cognition, poetry beats any existing form of analysis (a) because it pares down our reality to its linguistic essentials, whose interplay, be it clash or fusion, yields epiphany or revelation, and (b) because it exploits the rhythmic and euphonic properties of the language that in themselves are revelatory – Joseph Brodsky.

“Dreams are like poems” writes the American poet Michael Dickman (263). He elucidates: “In a dream, anything is possible. You can fly, you can travel to foreign countries or unknown universes. You can experience your wildest fantasies and face your most terrifying fears. In this way dreams are like poems. They have their own stories to tell and their own music to sing, and they play by their own rules” (263). Dickman clarifies that “the secret to how dreams work is the word yes. Dreams never say no to anything, no matter how weird.” (263). Dickman provides the following example: In a dream someone could be flying then sprout three heads, find themselves on Mars, Mars could shrink to the size of a cell phone, which then rings and speaks to the three heads. He asks, “what happens if we keep saying yes in our poems?” He then suggests that two crucial outcomes might occur. First, “it will free us to say some things we feel we can’t say given the rules of our actual lives and the physical world,” and second, saying yes in our poems “will sharpen our imaginations in a culture where everything seems already imagined for us” (264).

Making our poetry weirder and weirder may help us say things that might embarrass us if uttered in public, and it might also enable us to become more creative. It is the inextricability of one's life from the very substance of one's dreams that seems to be missing from Dickman's phrasing. In other words, dreams do not bloom in a vacuum, nor do they occupy a space of pure imagination where anything can happen. The socio-political and psychic constraints on what is possible and impossible to say or write in a public setting also impacts the content we imagine while asleep.

An early attempt to describe the nature of dreams can be found in Plato's *Republic*. "Isn't dreaming," writes Plato, "precisely the state, whether one is asleep or awake, of taking something to be the real thing, when it is actually only a likeness?" (196-197). It is worthy to note that Plato describes dreaming as a state occurring during both *wakefulness* and *slumber*, which lends support to the idea that dreams are like poems and that poems are like dreams – in the sense that dreams are where one encounters content, and poetry is where one is able to shape and mold the visual and emotional substance of our dreams. However, Plato proceeds to differentiate between what is real and what is only a likeness of that reality, and he describes a person who lacks true knowledge of the world as someone who "dreams his current life away in a state of semi-consciousness" (267). In other words, there is a real world, and there is a dream world; then there is a state of dreaming or a state of semi-consciousness, which can take place while one is asleep or awake.

In this paper, it will be argued that the dream-world itself and the logic of the dream-world in our poetry provide opportunities for us to stretch and flex our imaginations, to straddle both states of semi-consciousness and keen attentiveness; however, two questions have to be raised before we deconstruct the power of dreaming and of writing poetry. (1) Are dreams venues for sheer fantasy? Or are they not so different from our actual world in terms of what can and cannot be permitted? (2) Additionally, should we write only to enhance our imagination in a world where everything seems to be imagined for us? Or is there a more vital need for improving our ability to think outside of prescribed material at the level of our thoughts and desires, and at the deeper level of what makes us human in the first place? The way we approach dreaming and poetry writing will depend on the way we answer those questions.

According to Sigmund Freud dreams allow visual access into our unconscious minds. Annie Finch sums it up in *A Poet's Craft*: "We dream in images that evoke feelings" (127). Theorizing the function of dreams, Freud proposed that they both controlled and protected the anxiety associated with some of our repressed desires. Over the years, researchers on sleep discovered that dreams enabled people to revisit their painful memories and to create a space in which they could attempt to work through their hurt,

disappointment, and unmet needs. For example, researchers identified that nightmares embodied our inability to work through repressed fears and prior pain.

This paper begins from the premise of acknowledging the ubiquitous possibility of having experienced agony or even trauma in our lives. The events of this century and the one that preceded it have been immensely devastating for our world, impacting the livelihoods of both humans and nonhumans. This discussion about dreams and poetry is thus more concerned with its serious and sobering potential. It views our dreams as virtual spaces allowing us to relive and reprogram our pain, and views poetry as another dream-like space providing even more tools that can facilitate the healing process. John Fox writes in *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*, “Poems distill experience into the essentials. Our personal experiences touch the common ground we share with others. [. . . Poetry] used in this healing way helps people integrate the disparate, even fragmented parts of their life. Poetic essences of sound, metaphor, image, feeling and rhythm act as remedies that can elegantly strengthen our whole system—physical, mental and spiritual” (3). This would mean that the secret to dreams and poetry is not simply saying yes to more weirdness. Rather, the secret to dreams and poetry is perhaps the potential to observe what can and cannot be said or imagined in our bodies, in our homes, in our societies, etc. It is, in other words, as valuable to say yes in dreams and poetry, as it is to stay cognizant of the psychic zones of disturbances that lead us to say, no, no, no, no. If we practice noticing what is mentally permitted and when our psychic barriers show up, or where we find it difficult to articulate concepts in dreams and in our poetry, we will develop into more sensitive, complex, creative, and authentic individuals.

Whereas poetry is proficient at documenting fleeting moments of joy or wonderfully witty and weird thoughts, in *Making Poems* Todd Davis and Erin Murphy state that if poetry were “merely about such ecstatically fleeting moments, [. . .] then the burgeoning floodwaters of inspiration might have drowned us in [. . .] an artistic drought to end all droughts.” Simply put, if our poetry comprised of only joyful observations, then the art would not have persisted as an integral aspect of humanizing humans, politicizing politics, and collectivizing individuals into communities. Poetry can certainly be about vision and inspiration. It is also important—in the context of our bodies and the communities we inhabit—to continue asking what roles our poems might be playing.

In “How Trauma Affects Dreams,” Rob Newsom reminds us that “While science has come a long way since Freud, more recent hypotheses remain surprisingly consistent with [Freud’s] early ideas. Many neuroscientists and psychologists believe that dreams help to integrate our experiences into long-term memory, a process called memory consolidation. When our experiences are traumatic, dreams may reflect the body attempts

to cope and learn from these situations.” He goes on to say that “After a traumatic experience, many people want to forget about what happened and move on. Unfortunately, trying to forget or suppress thoughts and feelings may make trauma-related nightmares more frequent.” Thus, a specific branch of therapy has been formed around the idea that writing down nightmares and turning them into literature can help rewrite the story or feelings associated with images in a way that resolves the crisis that gave birth to them. This is called Image Rehearsal Therapy (IRT). It should not replace the most essential part of coping with trauma which is asking for professional help from licensed doctors, counselors, and therapists trained in treating nightmares and trauma-based responses. Nonetheless, poetry-making itself is a process that inherently contains a radical healing potential, for not only does writing poems allow “us to make profound discoveries about ourselves,” but also, Fox explains, writing “even a fragment of a poem may serve as the balancing point which [one’s] eyes focus on in order to walk over difficult terrain. Keeping [one’s] eyes on that balance point prevent [one] from falling upon rocks of despair and sadness that can afflict our daily lives” (35, 11).

In “The Power of Writing,” the therapist Elizabeth Sullivan explains that “Most of us do not think in complete sentences but in self-interrupted, looping, impressionistic cacophony” (qtd. in Tartakovsky), thus Margarita Tartakovsky—the writer who interviewed Sullivan—concludes that writing “helps us track our spinning thoughts and feelings, which can lead to key insights.” Sullivan adds that since writing is speaking to another consciousness, whether to a reader, or another part of one’s own self, “We come to know who we really are in the present moment.” Sullivan adds that what makes writing “therapeutic” is one’s willingness and success in “telling the truth.” This reminds me of W.H. Auden’s quote about writing truth in poetry: “A poet cannot bring us any truth without introducing into his [*sic*] poetry the problematic, the painful, the ordinary” (qtd. in Finch, 151). In order to be truthful, it is not enough to focus on only one emotional tenor, or one facet of the human experience, since truth-telling requires the ability to be authentic and whole, which need a certain degree of comfort with contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox. In fact, discovering a way to express real-life paradoxical experiences in their poems, is to embrace one’s whole life. Similarly, reading poetry—not just writing one’s own—contains healing potential. Fox writes, “Because the feeling-oriented, nonlinear logic of poetry allows for paradox and even celebrates it, familiarity with poetry will expand [one’s] range of possible emotional choices” (12). Simply put, not only will writing truthfully about one’s experience sharpen one’s interiority and capacity for articulating or naming and reshaping their pain, reading poetry will furthermore equip the poet with a broader spectrum of emotional complexity and nuance, and that in turn will help

individuals respond to diverse events and situations in creative ways, rather than merely resorting to a narrow-minded set of options that perpetuate cycles of abuse or violence.

Poetry is vital in the reconciliation process even at the political, social, or communal levels. In the powerful anthology of poetry *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, the American poet Carolyn Forché writes that while many poets did not survive the destructive experiences of their times and the dark places in which they dwelled, “their works remain with us as poetic witness” (29). Forché differentiates between the American publishing’s comprehension of the labels “political” and “personal.” For American publishers, the former refers to “a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary,” while the latter calls to mind “lyrics of love and emotional loss” (31). Forché writes:

“The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality.” (31)

Therefore, Forché calls for a third term, “one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal,” and she suggests naming it “the social” (31). Like dreams, the social level should not be thought of as a pure venue for sheer choice. Because it is a place “where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated,” the social can become a location of struggle and resistance, a “sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice” (31). While poetry can heal and transform our own anxieties, fears, and unmet desires at the individual level, our written and oral poems during our lifetimes and the works we leave behind can additionally act as witness to our experiences and those of others. As such, they can speak truth to power and rally communities behind unifying themes. Forché calls this kind of writing, “Poem as trace. Poem as evidence” (31).

Because this paper is concerned with healing rather than extremities and resistance, it should be emphasized that every individual’s attempt to write poetry is inherently worthwhile. Value in politics might mean highlighting some voices over others, especially if this power-balancing act is meant to rectify inequality in the social, political, and economic fields (for example, in award committees, editorial boards of journals, and other job opportunities). The power-balancing act committed by institutions and organizations, however, should not discourage anyone from utilizing and constantly stretching out their

own lexicon to build an interior space in which one's "intuitive voice may awaken and thrive" (Fox, 4). Because "Poetic language expresses what plain language cannot," the healing potential of poetry exists for everyone, not only for those who experienced the most pain and horrific traumas. (Fox, 9). In fact, the more that an individual learns about the world, and the more that anyone sharpens their powers of observation and empathy, the more that they will undoubtedly come across even more heinous and despicable forms of exploitation, and even more unfortunate people who suffer in terrible ways. Yet a question continues to persist in writing workshops today: If after weighing our anxieties with the anxieties of others we discover that ours cannot match or even come close to their nightmarish experiences, does it mean we are not allowed to write about our pain, or that our voices ought not to be expressed?

To answer this question, I turn to two other essential anthologies of poetry. The first is Hayan Charara's *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Arab American Poetry*, and the second is Fatimah Asghar's and Safia Elhilo's *Halal if You Hear Me: The Breakbeat Poets vol.3*. In the introduction of *Inclined to Speak*, Hayan Charara writes, "In an issue paper published by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, regarding the negative images of Arabs in American popular culture, the author notes that 'Americans know a great deal about Arabs. The problem is that so much of what is known is wrong'" (xvi). Charara concludes, "The task, then, becomes to reverse the scenario." Why should we write? Why are our experiences inherently valuable? Why must we never compare our pain with the pain of others? And why must we attempt to express our own perspectives, thoughts, imaginings, dreams, and desires? Because every one of our poems contains the potential of "invalidating an image that is at best misguided" (xvii). Charara states it is "dangerous" for those creating myths about others, as well as those being constituted by those myths, and thus, the task of the poet becomes erecting new ideas about identity and destroying previous ones; she writes, "we may build what we demolish. Yet in this engagement of myth-making and myth-breaking, Arab American poets open doors of possibility—quite revolutionary—that lead to the reinventing of the images of Arab American people, culture, literature, and history" (xviii).

Furthermore, in Fatimah Asghar's and Safia Elhilo's anthology, they add two essential reasons why it is important for us to continue to write whether or not we think our experiences are worth their ink and worth our readers' time. In Elhilo's Foreword, she talks about the phrase Good Muslim and Bad Muslim and explains that such terms can appear when the representations of what it means to be a Muslim are minimal, and extreme, either pure and ideal, sticking closely to doctrines, or at the far end of the spectrum: entirely reprehensible and evil, committing horrible acts in the name of the religion. Since, Elhilo

states, there was nothing in between, she grew up hearing terms such as “‘bad Muslim’ and ‘good Muslim’ and thinking of them as fixed identities” (xii); she therefore argues for poetry as a “a safe space for those who keep getting left out of the conversation about Muslims and Muslimness” (xiii). She describes their anthology, as “a space where we [Arabs and Muslims] don’t have to be afraid of our own people, of being disqualified from our identities,” (xiii). Fatimah Asghar adds on to the value of this virtual terrain, by explaining that in addition to righting the wrongs of previous identity-myths, turning our poems into a safe space will help other Arabs and Muslims who—upon reading verses that speak to them—will no longer feel isolated and different. “[I]f one of my poems could make someone else feel seen,” writes Asghar, “feel safe for a brief moment, feel a little less alone, I would have accomplished my goal [. . .] because I felt aloneness, an otherness that I could not talk about with anyone. Because I could not name my desire. Because I could not reconcile the many things I was within an identity that was accepted” (xvi).

In sum, writing poetry matters: (1) Because a poem is like a dream, and dreams are interior areas where we can heal our pain. This means that poetry contains healing potential. (2) Because poems are evidence and trace, or witness of a life that has been lived in dark times, and in places in which political authorities exercise tyrannical powers over what is and isn’t permitted for public sharing, thus it means that poetry contains political or social potential. (3) Because there are already numerous myths around identity that hurt both those who are constituted by them and those who entrench them in structures of power and domination. By writing about our individual experiences, we end up cracking those dangerous myths. Finally, (4) because we may begin to build a safe space where individuals unite over shared experiences; a place where, as Asghar reminds us, “the hijabis, the haraamis, the uncovered, the gender-nonconforming, the queer, the married, the never-married, the virgins, the non-virgins, the brown, the black, the white, the yellow—can just be. Can just be seen. Can just be heard. Can be celebrated. Can live, and make our own freedoms” (xvi).

In this paper we mentioned the topic of truth and of likeness. For writing to be therapeutic, for instance, we noted that it had to be true. Yet Plato’s *Republic* makes it clear that the world of dreams and the semi-conscious state of dreaming are environments of non-truth, or an experience that merely resembles the real world. If we, like Plato, differentiate between the experiences we encounter in sleep and wakefulness—which are necessary for a whole and healthy consciousness—should we also adopt Plato’s distinction of truth and nontruth—that is, should we take our dreams—which are only a likeness of the events that take place outside of the dream-world—as nontruths? Perhaps, it is better to phrase this question differently: How might we approach writing in an honest and

vulnerable manner in order to heal our own pains and to empower our community even though we are aware that our semi-conscious state is not a factual one, and that our poems will not aspire to measurable and verifiable information? In *Against Forgetting*, Forché cautions: “A poem cannot be judged by simplistic notions of ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth to life.’ It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confessions, by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth. In fact, the poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence.” And while, as mentioned earlier, poems of resistance and witness are vital components of the radical healing potential of poetry (since healing does not mean blinding oneself to the trauma, but facing it), there is more to the truth of poetry—including verses of witness and trace—than mere documentation. Poems can record our past, yes, but they can also transcend the archive.

It thus might be helpful to recall the words of the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who writes, “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth,” (Abrams and Greenblatt, 794). In poetry, truth is only an image of life, and not a document that aspires to veracity and facts, for Shelley this does not mean moralizing in the political or religious sense. In fact, he differentiates the disciplines of moral philosophy from poetry. In moral philosophy, he says, scholars hope to ascertain what is right or wrong, what is moral or immoral, what actions and desires benefit the harmonious operations of society and which ones harm the community, whereas poetry, “acts in another diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand apprehended combinations of thought” (796). In other words, poetry becomes “truthful” once it has broadened the consciousness of its writer and/or its reader. He writes further down, that to be moral or “good,” one “must imagine intensely and comprehensively” (796). For Shelley, this does not mean writing weirder and weirder poetry, it means rather enhancing our ability of putting ourselves “in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of [the poet’s] species must become his [*sic*] own.” Shelley emphasized that “[t]he great instrument of moral good is the imagination” (796). When we endeavor to understand perspectives that are unlike ours, or when we allow others to exist in the same space we do, without feeling the need to eliminate one expression of humanity for another version, we are thus embodying a heightened level of creativity. Imagination can furthermore facilitate our efforts of rebuilding our communities as it enables us to dream up more complex and harmonious solutions to others’ grievances, hurts, and desires. Most importantly, with heightened imagination, we will be able to respond to evil, or to danger, in ways that will not resume the cycle of violence. As the world’s capacity to imagine

alternative solutions keep shrinking, it seems more and more likely that the only possible solution to negative feelings is projecting onto others.

This is why the concept of “non-violent” resistance continues to lose support in our contemporary climate, and why it is extremely difficult for some to comprehend even as a viable response among others. In the Introduction to *The Force of Non-Violence*, Judith Butler writes, “an ethics of nonviolence cannot be predicated on individualism, and it must take the lead in waging a critique of individualism as the basis of ethics and politics alike. An ethics and politics of nonviolence would have to account for this way that selves are implicated in each other’s lives, bound by a set of relations that can be as destructive as they can be sustaining” (9). Expanding one’s imagination in order to see where others are coming from does not mean pretending that violence is not taking place or ignoring injustice and inequality, it means rather zooming out of the limited perspectives of the self and its pain or pleasure to adopt a broader vision that encompasses the complex network of relations binding us to one another. In fact, Butler argues in “Political Philosophy in Freud: War, Destruction, Mania, and the Critical Faculty,” that love:

is defined by ambivalence, structured by the oscillation between love and hatred. The task appears to be finding a way to live and act with ambivalence—one where ambivalence is understood not as an impasse, but as an internal partition that calls for the ethical orientation and practice. For only the ethical practice that knows its own destructive potential will have the chance to resist it. Those for whom destruction is always and only coming from the outside will never be able to acknowledge, or work with, the ethical demand imposed by non-violence (172).

It must be therefore underscored that those who suffer from a flat consciousness, a narrow scope of cognition (for example, seeing the world in only distinct—and violent—binaries), who lack humility and self-awareness of their own negative thoughts, and who fail to identify a rich—often paradoxical—spectrum of emotional register in themselves and in others—are themselves the most in need of poetry’s radical healing potential.

This brings us back, full circle, to our Dickman quote: “Dreams are like poems.” For Dickman, it is important to utilize dream-logic in our poetry, because doing so “will sharpen our imaginations in a culture where everything seems already imagined for us” (264). With Shelley, we understand why it is important to imagine differently, namely, that in order for us to be good—to do good in the world—we need to be less self-centered, less narrow in our feelings, less constrained in our ability to see and feel others. Imagination allows us, says Shelley, to be good, because one way to be moral, is to tap into other people’s experiences, which poetry enables us to do.

I would like to conclude by quoting Dorothea Lasky's essay: "The Beast: How Poetry Makes Us Human." Lasky writes, "[A]nimals, poems, ids, and egos are all part of human consciousness" (72). When we insist that writing about our experiences (regardless of how severe or unique) challenges the myths that have been erected on the alters of identity, we can apply more pressure on these myths by going further back in time and asking not simply what is an Arab, or a Muslim, or a refugee, or a gender non-confirming being, but what does it mean to be a human in the first place, not as a way to invalidate these other forms of identification, but to expand and heighten our imagination, and to render more questionable the bloody myths we have inherited. After all, the human, as a concept, has been produced and is maintained by the very structures that developed these other categories: i.e. Arab, Muslim, refugee, gender non-confirming being, etc. In "Nonviolence, Grievability," Butler writes: "the human is a historically variable concept, differentially articulated in the context of inegalitarian forms of social and political power; the field of the human is constituted through basic exclusions, haunted by those figures that do not count in its tally" (59). In poetry we find a space for innovation and exploration, and it allows for diversity and creativity in examining what it means to be human. Because humans are not finished products, completely known, or separate from all the other atomic configurations that make up trees, or animals, or ghosts, or even planets, Lasky asks, "What does poetry teach us?" and answers, it teaches us "that poems are the electrical outlet into a humanity that has found a song to cope with its death." In other words, "To cope," says Lasky, "is to never die" (75).

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II - POEMS AND POET BIOS

1. "Dream," Muhammad Al-Maghut (Syria, 1934 – 2006)
2. "Dream," Vahan Tekeyan (Armenia, 1878 - 1945)
3. "The Dream," Irving Feldman (America, 1928 - 2020)
4. "Dreamers," Siegfried Sassoon (Britain, 1886 – 1967)
5. "my dream about falling," Lucille Clifton (America, 1936 – 2010)
6. "Goodnight, Dear," Oscar Hahn (Chilean, 1938—)
7. "Lullabies of the Onion," Miguel Hernández (Spain, 1910 – 1942)
8. "Lullaby," Rita Dove (America, 1952—)
9. "Midnight Singer," Bei Dao, (China, 1949—)
10. "The Shortest Night," Yusef Komunyakaa (America, 1941—)
11. "Little Night," Paul Celan (Kingdom of Romania, 1920 – 1970)
12. "Steps in the Night," Mahmoud Darwish (Palestine 1941 – 2008)
13. "Ode to Night," Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1904 – 1973)
14. "White Night," and "In Dream," Anna Akhmatova, (Russia, 1889 – 1966)
15. "Night," Federico García Lorca (Spain, 1898 – 1936)
16. "Your Sleep," by Yvon Goll (France/Germany, 1891 – 1950)
17. "Last Night As I Was Sleeping" Antonio Machado (Spain 1875 – 1939)
18. "Bread, Hashish and Moonlight" Nizar Qabbani (Syria, 1923 – 1998)
19. "Last Night I Dreamed" Hafiz Shirazi (Persia, 1315 – 1390)
20. "As Night Let Its Curtains Down in Folds" Ibn Al-'Arabi (Andalusia, 1165 – 1240)
21. "Awaking in New York" Maya Angelou (America, 1928 – 2014)
22. "I wake and ask dawn about you: Have you woken?" Adonis (Syria, 1930—)
23. "Morning" Duo Duo (China, 1951—)

Dream

Muhammad Al-Maghut

Translated by Mounah A. Khouri and Hamid Algar

Since cold and closed doors were created,
I, like the blind, have stretched out my hands,
Searching for a wall
Or a woman to shelter me.
But what can the blind gazelle do with a flowering spring?
The captivity nightingale with the horizon which brushes the bars of his cage?

In the age of the atom and the electronic brain,
In the time of perfume, soft light and song,
I told her of Bedouin chanting,
Of journeying to the desert
On camelback,
And her young breasts listened to me,
As little children sitting around a fire
Listen to a charming tale.
We were dreaming of the desert
As the monk dreams of a woman's arms,
And the orphan, of a flute.

I said to her, as I cast my gaze
On the distant horizon:
There on the blue sands we will lie
And sleep silently till daybreak,
Not for want of words,
But because the weary butterflies
Will be sleeping on our lips.

Tomorrow, o beloved, tomorrow
We will awaken early with the sailors and their sails,
And we will rise on the wind
Like birds,
Like raging blood,
And roam over the desert
As lips roam over lips.
Locked in embrace, we slept throughout the night,
Our hands upon our baggage.
And in the morning
We renounced our journey
For the desert was in our hearts.

Muhammad al-Maghout (1934 – 2006) was born in Syria. He wrote his first poems in the 1950s on cigarette papers while in prison. These poems constituted a documentation of his prison experience and later became ‘revolutionary poetry.’ Al-Maghout did not receive formal training or education in poetry. He relied on his vivid imagination, deep ties to the Arabic language, and his own creative instincts. He is now known as the “Father of the Arabic free verse poetry” after revolutionizing the structure of Arabic verse, and inspiring generations of poets to forgo traditional (metrical) forms and experiment in new ways.

Dream

Vahan Tekeyan

Translated by Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian

I dreamed the heavy sky suddenly opened a gate.
The leaden heavens, sinking with weight
almost flattening us, by pressing down,
loosened, like a lid, so I could see in

that place (no longer dim). Sitting beside
clear running water and green fields: lively children,
shy bridges, and virgin girls with downcast eyes
and smiles carefree and bright.

Happy mothers nearby, tears of tenderness,
old men, haloed with silver hair, on rocks,
brave men, blessing the peace. And grazing

around them, their centuries-old flocks
of lambs. In the distance, muzzle bent,
a wolf slinking off, surprised, to see his victims again.

Vahan Tekeyan (1878-1945) was an activist and writer born in Armenia. Tekeyan was the most famous poet of the Armenian diaspora in his lifetime and remains a significant symbol of Armenian identity and cultural heritage. He survived the Turkish execution of over two million Armenians in 1915. He travelled to Cairo when news of the genocide reached him and lived in exile until his death in 1945.

The Dream

Irving Feldman

Once, years after your death, I dreamt
you were alive and that I'd found you
living once more in the old apartment.
But I had taken a woman up there
to make love to in the empty rooms.
I was angry at you who'd borne and loved me
and because of whom I believe in heaven.
I regretted your return from the dead
and said to myself almost bitterly,
"For godsakes, what was the big rush,
couldn't she wait one more day?"

And just so, daily somewhere Messiah
is shunned like a beggar at the door because
someone has something he wants to finish
or just something better to do, something
he prefers not to put off forever
—little pleasures so deeply wished
that Heaven's coming has to seem bad luck
or worse, God's intruding selfishness!

But you always turned Messiah away
with a penny and a cake for his trouble
—because wash had to be done, because
Who could let dinner boil over and burn,
Because everything had to be festive for
Your husband, your daughters, your son.

Irving Feldman (1928—) was born in New York City. He was a teenager when the atrocities of World War II unfolded in Europe. While the Holocaust haunts much of his work, Feldman embraces diverse forms and tones in his writing. To deconstruct all aspects of the human condition, he has written everything from essays to jokes to prose poems to aphorisms and even psalms.

Dreamers

Siegfried Sassoon

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.

Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers, when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was born in England. He was a writer and soldier who became one of the leading poets of the First World War. His poetry both described the horrors of the trenches and satirized the patriotic pretensions of those who, in Sassoon's view, were responsible for a jingoism-fueled war. His dissent culminated in his admission to a military psychiatric hospital. Surprisingly, his admission into the psychiatric hospital resulted in his forming a friendship with Wilfred Owen who was greatly influenced by him and who became another significant war poet.

my dream about falling

Lucille Clifton

a fruitful woman
such as myself
is
falling
notices
she is
an apple
thought
that the blossom
was always
thought
that the tree
was forever
fruitful
a woman
such as
myself.

the fact is the falling.
the dream is the tree.

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) was born in America. She was a writer and teacher, who won numerous awards for the way in which she depicted the black body and the black experience. Clifton used her writing to reinvent and reframe black myth and identity. Put differently, she used her poetry to subvert racist stereotypes that ridicule and humiliate African-Americans, and she replaced them with a new positive mythology rooted in the black perspective.

Good Night, Dear

Óscar Hahn

Translated by James Hoggard

Good night, dear
may you dream about demons
and white cockroaches
and may you see eye-sockets
of death looking at you
from my eyes in flames

and let it not be a dream

Óscar Hahn (1938—) was born in Chile. He was a writer and poet, who was taken prisoner in 1973. He was lucky to survive the random assassinations, though his colleagues weren't as fortunate. When he left prison in 1974, Hahn left Chile to settle down in America. He taught at The University of Iowa, then moved back to Chile when he retired from teaching to focus on his poetry.

Lullabies of the Onion

Miguel Hernández

Translated by Philip Levine

Dedicated to his son after receiving a letter from his wife saying that all she had to eat was bread and onion

The onion is frost
shut in poor.
Frost of your days
and of my nights.
Hunger and onion,
black ice and frost
large and round.

My little boy was
In hunger's cradle
He suckled on
Onion blood.
But your blood is
frosted with sugar,
onions and hunger.

A dark woman dissolved
into moonlight
spills, thread by thread,
over the cradle.
Laugh, child,
You can drink moonlight
if you have to.

Lark of my house,
laugh freely.
Your laughter in your eyes
Is the world's light.
Laugh so much
that hearing you, my soul
will beat through space.

Your laughter frees me,
gives me wings.
It banishes loneliness,
tears down these walls.
Mouth that flies,
Heart that flashes
on your lips.

Your laughter is
the supreme sword,
conqueror of flowers
and larks.
Rival of the sun.
Future of my bones
and of my love.

The flesh flutters
as sudden as an eyelid;
life, as never before,
takes on new color.
How many linnets,
wings beating, take off
from your body!

I woke from childhood:
don't you ever.
I wear my mouth sadly:
always laugh.

Stay always in your cradle
defending laughter
feather by feather.

You are a flight
so high, so wide,
that your flesh is heaven
just born.
If only I could climb
to the origin
of your flight!

For eight months you laugh
with five orange blossoms.
With five little
ferocities,
with five teeth
like five young
jasmine buds.

They will be the frontier
of kisses tomorrow
when you feel a gun
in your mouth.
When you feel a burning
past the teeth
searching for the center.

Fly, child, on the double moon
of her breast:
it is saddened by onions,
you are satisfied.
Never let go.
Don't ever know what's coming,
what goes on.

Miguel Hernández (1910 – 1942) was a 20th-century Spanish-language poet and playwright. He taught himself literature as his family came from low resources, and his abusive father forbade him from spending time on books instead of working. He was imprisoned due to his participation on the Republican side of the civil war. As a result of Pablo Neruda's intervention (who was the Chilean ambassador in Spain at the time), Hernández escaped the death-penalty. His last book was published after his death. It's a collection of the poems that he wrote in prison. Some pieces were written on toilet paper, others were preserved in letters to his wife. His last book is considered one of the finest pieces of Spanish poetry of the 20th century.

Lullaby

Rita Dove

(after Lorca's "Canción Tonta")

Mother, I want to rest in your lap again
as I did as a child.

Put your head there. How it floats,
Heavy as your whole body was once.

If I fall asleep, I will be stiff
when I wake.

No stiffer than I.

But I want to lie down and do nothing
forever.

When I was angry with your father, I would take to my bed
like those fainting Victorian ladies.

I'm not angry at anyone.
Mostly I'm bored.

Boredom is useful for embroidery,
and a day of rest never hurt anyone.

Mother, I want the birthday supper of my childhood,
dripping with sauce.

Then you must lie down while I fix it!
Here, a pillow for your back.

I can't. The school bus is coming.
She'll be waiting at the corner.

Already? So soon!

Rita Dove (1952—) was born in America. She is a poet and essayist who was the youngest person to hold the position of United States Poet Laureate, and one of the few African-Americans who have earned that honor. Her writing is known for its rich and eloquent explorations of the English language as well as depicting aspects of individual and collective experiences of Black people in America.

Midnight Singer

Bei Dao

Translated by David Hinton

a song
is a thief who's fled across rooftops
getting away with six colors
and leaving the red hour-hand
on 4o'clock heaven
4 o'clock detonates
in the rooster's head
and it's 4 o'clock delirium

a song
is an ever hostile tree
across the border
it unleashes that promise
that wolf-pack feeding on tomorrow

a song
is a mirror that knows the body by heart
is the emperor of memory
is the waxen tongue
flame of talk
is the flower garden nurtured by myth
is a steam locomotive
bursting into the church

a song
is the death singer
his death-night
pressed into black records
singing over and over and over

Zhao Zhenkai (1949—) was born in China. He is a writer and activist, who publishes under the pen name: Bei Dao. He is one of the most acclaimed Chinese-language poets of his generation, and has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. In addition to writing poetry, Dao writes fiction and nonfiction. He has played a part in creating a new form of poetry in Chinese literature. In its exploration of individuality, Dao's poetry revels in linguistic experimentation, and the embrace of complexity and paradox. His form is known in the West as "Misty" or "Obscure" poetry, and it is often written as a reaction to the artistic censorship of the Mao era.

The Shortest Night

Yusef Komunyakaa

I went into the forest searching
for fire inside pleading wood,
but I can't say for how long
I was moored between worlds.
I heard a magpie's rumination,
but I don't know if its wings
lifted the moon or let it drift
slow as a little straw boat
set ablaze on a winding river.
I learned the yellow-eyed wolf
is a dog & a man. A small boy
with a star pinned to his sleeve
was hiding among thorn bushes,
or it was how the restless dark
wounded the pale linden tree
outside a Warsaw apartment.
Night crawls under each stone
quick as a cry held in the throat.
All I remember is my left hand
was holding your right breast
when I forced my eyes shut.
Then I could hear something
in the room, magnanimous
but small, half outside & half
inside, no more than a song—
an insomniac's one prophecy
pressed against the curtains,
forcing the ferns to bloom.

Yusef Komunyakaa (1941—) was born in America. He served in the Vietnam War as a correspondent. To create complex images of life in peace and in war, Komunyakaa weaves together personal narrative, jazz rhythms, and vernacular language.

Little Night

Paul Celan

Translated by Michael Hamburger

Little night: when you
take me inside, take me
up there,
three pain-inches above the
floor:
all those shroud coats of sand,
all those can'thelps,
all that still
laughs
with the tongue—

Paul Celan (1920 – 1970) was born in what used to be called the Kingdom of Romania to a German-speaking Jewish family. In 1938, Celan was in Paris studying Medicine. He returned to Romania before the outbreak of World War II, where he was captured and forced to work in a labor camp for 18 months until he escaped, though both his parents had died. Celan was familiar with at least six languages. He taught German language and literature in Paris where he settled after his escape.

Steps in the Night

Mahmoud Darwish

Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies

Always,

 We hear at night approaching steps

And the door flees from our room,

Always,

Like departing clouds.

Your blue shadow, who draws it away

Each night from my bed?

The steps come on, and your eyes are countries,

Your arms a blockade around my body.

And the steps come on,

Why does the shadow that depicts me flee?

O Shahrzad?

And the steps come on and do not enter.

Be a tree,

That I may see your shade.

Be a moon,

That I may see your shade.

Be a dagger,

That I may see your shade in mine,

A rose in ashes.

Always,

I hear at night approaching steps,

And you become places of exile,

You become my prisons.

Try to kill me

Once and for all.

Do not kill me

With approaching steps.

Mahmoud Darwish (1941 – 2008) was born in Palestine. His family, who came from al-Birwa in Galilee, had missed the official Israeli census when the soldiers occupied and razed the village. As a result, Darwish and his family were considered “internal refugees” or “present-absent aliens” while they lived in Palestine. Darwish was imprisoned in the 1960s for reciting poetry and traveling between villages without a permit. He was placed under house arrest when his poem “Identity Card” was turned into a protest song. Darwish then spent many years in exile in Beirut and Paris, and he is considered a “resistance poet” by many in the Arab world.

Ode to Night

Pablo Neruda

Translated by Ilan Stavans

Behind
the day,
in each stone and tree,
behind each book,
night,
you gallop and labor,
or rest,
waiting
until your withdrawn roots
develop your flower and foliage.
Like
a flag
you flutter in the sky
until you fill not only
the hills and seas,
but the smallest cavities,
the tired peasant's
iron eyes,
the black coral
of human mouths
given to dreaming
You run free
over the savage course
of rivers,
covering secret paths, night,
depths of loves star-stricken
by naked bodies,
crimes splashing
with the scream of a shadow,
meanwhile trains

run, the stokers
throw the nocturnal coal on the red fire,
the busy statistician
has immersed himself in a forest
of petrified pages,
the baker kneads
whiteness.

Night also sleeps
like a black horse.

It rains
from north to south,
over the grand
trees of my country,
over the roofs
of corrugated metal,
the night's song
is heard,
the metal of the singing spear
is made of rain and darkness,
and stars and jasmine
guard
from the darkness above,
signs
we will understand
little by little
at the speed of centuries.

Night,
night of mine,
night of the entire world,
you have something inside you, round
like a child
about to be born, like
a bursting
seed,
it is the miracle,
it is the day.

You are more beautiful
because with your darker blood
you feed the poppy being born,
because you work with eyes closed
so eyes can open,
so water can sing,
so our lives
might resuscitate.

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) is the pen name of Chilean poet-diplomat and politician Neftalí Basoalto. Neruda was known as a poet since the age of 13. He continued to write prodigiously, and, though he received adoration, he remained poor. Becoming a politician did not elevate his financial status, yet his appointments enabled him to travel to different parts of the world where he learned about the plights of the colonized and the downtrodden. In 1948, he wrote an open letter criticizing the president of Chile, and was expelled from the Senate as a result. Neruda hid to avoid arrest then slipped out of Chile. He returned in 1952 when the political climate became favorable. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971 and died shortly after.

White Night

Anna Akhmatova

Translated by D.M. Thomas

I haven't locked the door,
Nor lit the candles,
You don't know, don't care,
That tired I haven't the strength

To decide to go to bed.
Seeing the fields fade in
The sunset murk of pine-needles,
And to know all is lost,

That life is a cursed hell:
I've got drunk
On your voice in the doorway.
I was sure you'd come back.

In Dream

Anna Akhmatova

Translated by D.M. Thomas

Black and enduring separation
I share equally with you.
Why weep? Give me your hand,
Promise me you will come again.
You and I are like high
Mountains and we can't move closer.
Just send me word
At midnight sometime through the stars.

Anna Akhmatova (1889 – 1966) was born Anna Andreyevna Gorenko in Russia. Her work, which was censored by Stalinist authorities and which provides a powerful female voice, meditates on memory and time and the challenges associated with writing under a dictatorship. She chose not to emigrate and remained in the Soviet Union to use her craft as witness. Her first husband Nikolay Gumilyov was executed by the Soviet secret police, and her son Lev Gumilyov was imprisoned for many years. Her common-law husband Nikolay Punin was also arrested. He died in in the Gulag.

Night

Federico García Lorca

Translated by Jaime de Angulo

Candle, lamp,
Lantern, and firefly.

The constellation
of the dart.

Little windows of gold
trembling,
and cross upon cross
rocking in the dawn.

Candle, lamp.
Lantern, and firefly.

Federico García Lorca (1898 – 1936) was born in Spain. He encountered Surrealism when he joined a group collectively known as the Generation of '27 (that included Salvador Dali). Lorca's early works explored themes of romantic love and tragedy and they incorporated deep songs, Gypsy culture, Spanish folklore, and Andalusian flamenco. He was arrested in 1936, at the onset of the Spanish Civil war, and executed by a firing squad a few days later.

Your Sleep

Yvan Goll

Translated by Paul Zweig

Your sleep is a closed almond
The almond of strength, of growth,
There is nothing that does not happen inside this fruit!
You are the earth of a great dream
From your heart small rose-colored almond trees are growing
Oh happy Umbrian countryside!
But on the hill the huts of men are burning
And their sons will die before Easter
Cracked bells beat at your ear
I hear them as if they were in sea-shells
Death-candles shine through your temples
Blood runs from your closed eyes
Alas, when you open them,
What color will they be?

Yvon Goll (1891-1950) was a French-German poet who wrote in French and German. He was educated in Berlin before World War I. At the outbreak of the war, he fled to Switzerland then moved to Paris where he became one of the founders of surrealism. Goll was forced into exile again at the outbreak of World War II, where he went to New York and remained there until 1945. He died 5 years later in Paris of leukemia. Goll was, basically, a poet who lived between two wars, two languages, and more than one culture or one aesthetic form since he had close ties to both German expressionism and French surrealism.

Last Night As I Was Sleeping

Antonio Machado

Translated by Robert Bly

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.
I said: Along which secret aqueduct,
Oh water, are you coming for me,
water of a new life
that I have never drunk?
Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures.
Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that a fiery sun was giving
light inside my heart.
It was fiery because I felt
warmth as from a hearth,
and sun because it gave light
and brought tears to my eyes.
Last night, as I slept,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that it was God I had
here inside my heart.

Antonio Machado (1875-1939) was a Spanish poet and one of the leading figures of the Spanish literary movement known as the Generation of '98. Initially modernist, his work moved towards an intimate form of symbolism with romantic traits. He gradually developed a style characterized by both an engagement with humanity on one side and a hermetic contemplation of existence on the other, then he moved to social realism. He relied on memory and consciousness and used both to ponder Spain's historical landscape through a sympathetic as well as a critical lens.

Bread, Hashish and Moonlight

Nizar Qabbani

Translated by Suheil Bushrui

When the full moon is born in the East
And the white rooftops go to sleep,
Beneath waves of light that are deep...
People leave their shops and in throngs move forth
To meet the moon
And to the mountaintops carry bread ... a radio ...
and their opiates.
There they sell and buy fantasies of the mind
And images,
And they die when the moon comes to life.
What does a disc full of light do
To my land?
The land of prophets
The land of simple folk,
Those who chew tobacco and are drug merchants
What does the moon do to us,
That we lose our pride
And live to beg from heaven?
What can heaven offer
The lazy and the weak?
Those who turn into dead corpses when the moon comes to life
And shake the tombs of saints
In the hope that these tombs may bestow
upon them some rice, some children
Their beautiful and elegant carpets they spread out

And console themselves with opium
that we call Fate and Destiny
In my land, the land of simple folk.
How weakness and dissolution
Afflicts us when the light shines forth!
The carpets and the thousand baskets,
Glasses of Tea and Children all over the hills.
In my land,
Where the naïve weep
And live in the light they do not see;
In my land
Where people live without eyes
Where the naïve weep
And pray
And fornicate,
And in resignation continue to survive,
As they always have lived in resignation,
Calling on the crescent moon:
“O Crescent Moon!”
O Fountainhead gushing forth, raining diamonds,
Hashish and drowsiness!
O suspended God of marble!
O Incredible object!
For the East, for me, you have always remained
A cluster of diamonds,
For the many millions who have been rendered senseless.”

In those nights in the East when
The full moon shines forth
The East relinquishes all honour
And ability to defend itself
For the millions who run barefoot
Who believe in having four wives,
And in the day of judgment.
The millions who find their bread
Only in their dreams;

The millions that spend the night in houses
Built of coughs
Who have never known what medicine is
And fall down dead beneath the light.
In my land,
Where the stupid shed tears
And perish weeping,
Whenever they see the crescent moon
Their weeping intensifies
Whenever a lowly lute touches their hearts ...
or they hear the song “of the Night”
Which in the East we call
Songs “of the Night”
In my land
In the land of simple folk
Where we ruminate endlessly the night songs
A form of consumption decimating the East;
Our East that ruminates its own history,
Its languid dreams,
Its hollow legends;
Our East that seeks to discover every heroic deed
In some fanciful tale of Abu Zayd al-Hilali.

Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998) is one of the most revered contemporary poets in the Arab world and is considered to be Syria’s National Poet. His poetic style combines simplicity and elegance in exploring themes of love, eroticism, feminism, religion, and Arab nationalism, and throughout his professional life Qabbani has been known as a diplomat, writer (specifically, as a poet) and a publisher. While he was successful, he also encountered backlash for his writing. One of the poems that ruffled dictator-feathers was titled “When Will They Announce the Death of Arabs?”

Last Night I Dreamed

Hafiz Shirazi

Translated by Mahmood Jamal

Last night I dreamt
Of angels descending into the tavern;
Taking the clay of Adam,
They fashioned a cup
And the dwellers of heaven
Sat with me
And the heady brew was passed around.
Houris danced,
Thanks were offered to the Lord most high;
Friends had made amends,
The cup of thanks imbibed in ecstasy.
The sectarian path was left behind;
They had strayed from truth of unity
And followed trivial fantasies.

The heavens could not bear my debt
And wrote me as a madman in my fate.
But lovers bled their hearts
And on the face of the Beloved
Did a beauty spot create.

The fire that burns
In the flame of the lamp
Is not the fire;
It burns in the essence of
The moth and consumes him entire.

None has lifted the veil
From reality as, *Hafiz*, you have done.
You have unravelled the locks of
Poetry's bride and with your skill adorned!

Hafiz (or Hafez) (1315-1390) was a Sufi, Persian poet. Known as ‘the memorizer,’ ‘or the safekeeper,’ He wrote lyric poetry or ghazals to express divine inspiration as was common in the Sufi tradition. His work remains influential 7 centuries later. For more on how beautifully, spiritual poetry can be controversial, one need only study the history of Arab states adopting Islam. Sufism was viewed as a threat to more “sober” and “rational” (one might say, fundamentalist) interpretations, and thus it was attacked by Arab, Sunni sheikhs and rulers.

As Night Let Its Curtains Down in Folds

Ibn Al-'Arabi

Translated by Michael A. Sells

Peace, Sálma, and peace
To those who halt awhile
At al-Híma. It is right
For one like me to greet you.

Would it have hurt her
To return the greeting?
Ah, but a statuette
Goddess is beyond control.

They left as night
Let its curtains down in folds.
I told them of a lover
Strange and lost,

Surrounded by yearnings,
Struck by their arrows
On target always,
Wherever he goes.

She smiled, showing her side teeth.
Lightening flashed.
I couldn't tell which of the two
Split the darkness.

Isn't it enough she said
I am in his heart
where each moment he sees me,
isn't it, no?

Ibn Al-'Arabi (1165 – 1240) was born in the southeast of Spain. He was sufi philosopher who gave the mystical dimension of Islamic thought its first philosophic expression. He had a vision in 1198 that he should set out for the East. He never returned to his homeland. Instead, he scripted numerous books and treaties on Islamic thought. While in Mecca, he met a beautiful young woman who played in his life a role that resembles the one Beatrice played for Dante. Ibn Al-'Arabi, like Dante, wrote a collection of love poems (*Tarjumān al-ashwāq*; “The Interpreter of Desires”), and he composed a mystical commentary on the poems. His “pantheistic” view of God (Allah) and his love poetry drew the wrath of the Muslim orthodoxy, but he remains both a celebrated and in some circles a venerated scholar who is elevated to the rank of prophets and/or saints.

Awaking in New York

Maya Angelou

Curtains forcing their will
against the wind,
children sleep,
exchanging dreams with
seraphim. The city
drags itself awake on
subway straps; and
I, an alarm, awake as
a rumor of war,
lie stretching into dawn,
unmasked and unheeded.

Maya Angelou (1928—2014) was an American writer and a civil rights activist, with numerous publications spanning poetry, memoir, plays, movies and television shows. She held numerous job positions before her first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), brought her international recognition and acclaim, these include: correspondent in Egypt and Ghana during the decolonization of Africa, actress, director, producer of plays, movies, and public television programs, Christian leadership conference coordinator, fry cook, sex worker, and nightclub performer. Angelou is still highly respected as a crucial voice of the Black experience, and her works are seen as a defense of Black culture in the United States of America.

I wake and ask dawn about you: Have you woken?

Adonis

Translated by Khaled Mattawa

I saw your face sketched around the house
on every branch I carried dawn on my shoulder:

 She arrives,
or is it the dream tempting me?

 I asked the dew
On the branches, I asked the sun, have they read
 your footsteps? Where did you touch the door?
 How did they walk alongside you, the roses and the trees?

I am about to break my days and split in two:
my blood there, my body here—sheets of paper
dragged into the ruined world by sparks

Ali Esber (1930—) is a Syrian poet, essayist and translator who published under the pen name: Adonis or Adunis. Influenced by T.S. Elliot's modernist techniques, Adonis led a modernist revolution in the second half of the 20th century. He helped create a new form of Arabic poetry in the 1960s, one that found inspiration in the works of Sufi poets. This new form included elevated diction and complex Surrealism. Adonis is highly prolific and impactful, often nominated for a Nobel Prize in Literature, and described as 'the greatest living poet of the Arab world.' He received tremendous backlash from the Arab world throughout his life. Religious sheikhs issued fatwas for his assassination, and Arabs burned his books.

Morning

Duo Duo

Translated by Maghiel van Crevel

in the morning or at any time, in the morning
you dream you wake up, you're afraid of waking up
so you say: you're afraid of the rope, afraid of the face
of a bird on a woman, so you dream of your father
speaking birdwords, drinking birdmilk
you dream your father is by himself
and by chance, not in the dream
had you, you dream the dream your father dreamed.

you don't believe but you're inclined to believe
this is a dream, but a dream, your dream:
once, it was the handlebar on a bicycle
its shape squeezed into it by a hand
now, it droops from your father's belly

once it was a foetus refusing birth
now it is you crawling back to that handlebar
you've dreamed all the details in your dream
like the teeth your father left on the ground, flashing
and laughing at you, so you are not death
but a mere case of death: you've dreamed your dream's death.

Li Shizheng (1951—) is a Chinese writer who publishes under the pen name: Duo Duo. He was born shortly after the turnover of political power in 1949 and a few years before the “anti-rightist” movement in 1957-1958. These upheavals interrupted his formal schooling and then eventually ended it altogether when the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. Like many of his peers, he was sent to the countryside to receive “re-education.” Duo started writing in 1968 in the style of classical Chinese poetry, but upon reading poems by Baudelaire, he switched to the modernist tradition, and his style received another shift in the mid-1980s when he adopted longer, more philosophical explorations in his poetry. Like Bei Dao, Duo Duo was also a member of the underground poetry movement described by authorities and the West as “Misty” or “Obscure.”

III - WRITING PROMPTS

“We dream in images that evoke feelings” – Annie Finch

From: *A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry* by Annie Finch, 2012

“An image is not an idea or a thought; it is sensory information.”

“Words such as pastures, sea, rock, sun, tree, woodland path, and breathe, are concrete. Words such as anxious, care, love, forever, and immigrant are abstract.”

“Ideas are, of course, essential to many good poems, but unless a poem has imagery, it is likely to leave the reader behind, without a real emotional connection.”

“Imagery refers to the sensations produced in the mind by the language of touch (including kinesthetic sensations: awareness of muscle tension and movement), taste, smell, sound or sight.”

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1. Browse through a sizable group of poems by others* and jot down all the images that strike you. Play with these images, arranging them in groups of abstractness and concreteness. What tendency do they have in common? What does your attraction to these images teach you about your own tendencies as a poet? Now browse through a group of your own poems and do the same thing.

* Explore the poems in this packet.

2. Go to a place you like, close your eyes and remember everything you can about the place. Write it down. Look around again. Repeat steps one to three more times. Use every sense: touch, smell, sight, sound, taste. What was the experience like for you?

3. Write a poem of at least 20 lines that conveys a mood entirely through concrete images. While all words have a degree of abstraction, your image poem should employ as few abstractions as you can possibly manage. Remember to include only information that you can see, touch, hear, smell, or feel, and to delete all interpretations, explanations, and generalizations.

4. Choose two contrasting states of mind (peacefulness/anxiety; melancholy/elation; anticipation /regret etc.), and go to the same place, one that is rich in detail and imagery, then write two poems, one for each mood, by describing the scene using only images that convey the mood.

5. Write a dialog between yourself and a particular object or scene. Take both voices and keep the dialog going until you reach some kind of resolution. This part of exercise comes from Shamanic teaching tradition.

From: *Open the Door: How to Excite Young People About Poetry*. Edited by Dorothea Lasky, Dominic Luxford, and Jesse Nathan. Illinois: Poetry Foundation, 2013

Michael McGriff's "The Image List" (301-303).

FIVE MINUTES

"In five minutes, make a list of *at least* fifty objects that are important to you. Remember, these are objects that are important to *you*—they don't need or sound special or "poetic." For example, your list might include things such as 'the grass by our fence, Dad's boots, the old woodstove in our living room,' to use a few examples from my own image list. There are no right or wrong objects to include on this list. Everyone is going to have a very different list containing a wide range of objects. The key to this exercise is to keep from overthinking—make a list of whatever comes to mind first. Keep your pen moving (or your fingers trying) until you've reached five minutes. Once you get started you'll quickly see that you can generate far more than fifty objects."

TEN MINUTES

"Now that you have these fifty objects in your mind, it's time to make a second list. Take ten minutes to list the first twenty memories that you associate with the objects on your list. These

memories don't need to be elaborate; think of these as notes to yourself. Your list might look some-thing this:

- Visiting my mom in the hospital
- Noticing the way rain sounded against my window the night I got in trouble with cops
- Listening to Chopin for the first time

And so on. Again, there is no right or wrong way to make this list. Everyone is going to have different memories. Some memories might be serious, some might be funny, and some might seem very ordinary. Again, the key to this list is to write down anything and everything that comes to mind. After all, there is no subject too ordinary, too outrageously funny, or too serious for a poem.”

FIVE MINUTES

“For the third and final list, select two memories from the list of memories you just made. For each memory, make a list of as many sensory details as you can think of. Remember, a sensory detail is a detail that pertains to how something looks, feels, tastes, sounds, or smells.

Combine all three lists and you have what I call an image list, a blueprint that contains everything you'll need for making a poem. The image list is full of things you know, full of things you have personal connections to, and full of sensory details. Just as important, the image list is devoid of abstractions and generalities. Abstractions and generalities can often feel vague, unconvincing, and unimportant to a reader, whereas the contents on the image list will feel personal, intimate, and convincing. The more a writer can *show* an experience, the more the reader will sympathize and understand it. The contents on the image list can be used to make a small poem, such as one of Buson's great haiku, or a large, detail-stuffed epic such as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

To see how this exercise can be used, check out the following poems, each of which uses the kinds of details and plain language that you'd find on an image list: “Things I Didn't Know I loved,” by Nâzım Hikmet; “Nostalgic Catalogue,” by Garret Hongo; “Getting it Right,” by Matthew Dickman; “We Went Out to Make Hay,” Stephen Torre; “To a Friend,” by Zubair Ahmed; and “Inventory” by Günter Eich.”

From: *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making* by John Fox, 1997

Capturing Images (37-39)

“Focus on a physical sensation/image to connect with your creative healing process. For instance, what does the sound of water at the shore bring up for you? [. . .] Write everything you can about the connections sparked by these images and sensations.”

Releasing Emotions (51-53)

“Is there an emotion or circumstance in your own life which has suppressed your voice? What images arise? Write these on paper. Let your words flow. Don’t erase or worry about spelling. Paint freely with your own words. Don’t hesitate to use the powerful images, sounds, bodily sensations, or vibrant words from your word-flow.”

Finding Your Scared Place (5-6)

“Imagine or recall in detail the place or places you feel most able to let your writing emerge. It doesn’t have to be just one place. This place could be in your present home—or a home that you design to support your creativity. It could be an interior place shaped by your imagination or a spiritual realm you visit.”

Companion (6-7)

“Consider poetry or the poetic spirit as your companion. Imagine this poetic spirit befriending you. [. . .] How and when does this Muse appear? What does your Muse look like?”

Words that Cry Out (17-18)

“I ask workshop students to speak strong and vibrant words out loud, words that leave the roots and dirt on. As they are spoken, I write the words with colored markers on a large pad. These are not necessarily words that shock or have a coarse edge. They’re magnetic words that stir attention and feeling. The potent energy contained within such words ignites the authentic development of your poem. [. . .] What words can you say and write that show ‘dirty’ on the roots of your poem?”

“Choose words that interest you, that have impact, that reveal something about you and your state of mind, problem or hurt right now. Choose words that are related to the body, to nature and your emotions. Pay attention to how the sound of a word communicates the feeling of that word.”

Listening Well (41-43)

“What does listening tell you about relationships? What does listening have to teach you about being close to your creativity and healing process?”

“Practice listening. For instance, listen to the sounds of your child or children at play and when they speak to you.”

“Listen to emotionally charged sound.”

Reclaiming Feelings (43-47)

“What image or metaphor describes the experience of suppressing your feelings? What image or metaphor could illustrate giving those feelings more room? Without allowing the emotion to overwhelm you, what would giving your feelings more room in your life look like? Make a poem about this.”

Connecting the Personal with the Universal (55-56)

“Write about an experience, object, place, time in your life, or person toward whom you feel a deep personal relationship. Using metaphor, simile or another poetic device, allow your perception of that connection to expand in a way that links you and what you are writing about with something beyond yourself, something larger.”

“Look at an experience that is painful in your life—loss of a loved one, loss of a place you loved, the loss of someone’s friendship and esteem, your feelings about suffering or social injustice in the world—and make a ‘poetic panel’ to represent your connection to that person, experience or circumstance in the world. [. . .] Use magazine clippings, photographs, poems, pieces of cloth, phrases, poems or words. Create your own poetic collage to connect you with a wider circle of humanity.”

“Truly, the work is not only reading or writing a poem, it is in living on: living on through heartaches of loss and disappointment, flourishing in spite of your ‘rough seasons.’ But how do you choose to live on? One way is by expressing the ‘good singing’ of poetry. Make room for your cry of pain in a poem. Speak of the place you are glued together. Find yeast in words so your poems will become like ‘fresh bread on the table’” (30)

IV - QUESTIONS FOR YOUR WRITING JOURNAL

WHAT KIND OF WRITER AM I?

Who am I?

Name, age, gender, nationality/political identity, position in the family, favorite food, color I hate most in the world and the reason I hate it, etc. All the things that I know about myself.

Who am I *as a writer*? Which aspect of my identity above is active in my writing? Do I want to expand it now that I've thought about the two as separate? Do I want to consolidate my writing identity, or do I want to evolve it beyond its current shape?

What is at stake for me in my writing?

What do my demons look like? What are some of the social or political obstacles I encounter?

How does my ego/pride feature in my work? Will my writing impact my present/future?

Will it impact my relationships with my family members? Is the impact worth the risk?

Can I live with the consequences?

Why do I write / need to write / want to write? Joy, education, sharing, communication, etc.

What do I write / need to write / want to write? Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, humor, horror, social commentary, nonsense, revolutionary works, summaries and reviews of others' opinions, my feelings, etc.

Who am I writing for? Who are my readers? Do they look like me? Do they sound different? Do they think different from me? Why should they read my work? Am I writing so that they can understand? Am I writing *at* them or *for* them? What does that mean in terms of my craft choices?

Is my writing in conversation with anyone? Am I writing within a tradition? Am I writing in response to a book, an author, a genre? Am I writing against anyone, against a tradition, against a form, etc.?

How do I write? Do I need to be inspired? Have I disciplined myself to be continuously generative? Do I write sloppy first drafts? Do I wait until I can write perfect finished poems? Do I keep a journal? What does my writing style say about my fears or my obsessions? How can I dramatize these concerns in my writing?

What is creativity in my opinion?

Can it be taught? Have I researched it? What are some of the opinions circulating around the topic? Which ones align with my worldview the most? Is the writing process linear? What does it actually look like? How do I feel about “failure”? Do I enjoy the process itself?

What is my philosophy about revision?

Is it re-vision, i.e. *re-seeing* the work with new eyes, or is it about editing, *making better* what is available? For instance, polishing spelling mistakes and grammatical structures rather than transforming the work into something completely different.

Do I want to publish my work? Do I know where I want to publish? Why do I want to publish? What does it give me? What does it make me feel? If I want to publish, do I know my publisher’s writing philosophy? Do I care? Am I the kind of artist that respects the community, or do I only believe in the individual? Do I believe in both? How do they intersect in my work?

How can we criticize literature and writers? How can I judge myself while writing? How must I *never* judge myself while writing?

Can writing change the world? Should it? Must it?

V - RECOMMENDED READING

Writing as Therapeutic Practice

Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making by John Fox, 1997

Poetry Anthologies

Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness, edited by Carolyn Forché, 1991

Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Arab American Poetry, edited by Hayan Charara, 2008

Halal if You Hear Me: The Breakbeat Poets vol.3. edited by Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo,
2019

How to Shape Your Poem

A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry by Annie Finch,
2012

Making Poems: Forty Poems with Commentary by the Poets, edited by Todd Davis and Erin
Murphy, 2010

VI - NADA FARIS'S BIO



Nada Faris is a writer, teaching-artist, and performance poet based in Kuwait. She is an author of three international books, an Honorary Fellow in Writing at Iowa University's International Writing Program (IWP) Fall 2013, and an alumna of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) April 2018, USA: *Empowering Youth Through the Performing Arts*. Faris is the recipient of an Arab Woman Award from Harper Bazaar Arabia 2018 in the category of Inspirational Woman for her impact on Kuwait's creative sector. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in poetry and translation from Columbia University.

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