A post-Nuclear Poetics? Poetry in Our Age of Despair

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"Excluding anything from poetry is a violent act equal to excluding anything from reality."
-Nico Peck

"Now writing starts with difficulty--difficulty being in a body, difficulty having an experience, difficulty locating myself in a landscape among others."
-Laura Neuman

"Reality is the absence of contradiction. The marvellous is the eruption of contradiction within the real."
-Louis Aragon

Good morning poets and students, and thank you for your time. While I am mostly a stranger to you, and you are mostly a stranger to me, we have an alphabet in common, and this is enough for us to get started together. I want this to be a genuine dialogue, and I want your ideas to be the most memorable part of this discussion. With this in mind, there is no single inappropriate time for your input; your questions and ideas are welcome throughout.

I. Prelude to Despair: Our Atomic Age

Before we really get started, I want us to consider our time and *our* manifested despair. For me, the bedrock of despair is entwined with our nuclear capability. J. Robert Oppenheimer did much more than forever change physics and warfare--the human consciousness aware of the potential of nuclear collapse (both societal and environmental) is forever impacted in a way that I seriously doubt existed in the human psyche prior to the atomic bomb's invention. Already this conversation feels artless. Where's the poetry in this? I debated even including this as part of our conversation, but I want to be honest about how my idea of despair exists. The bomb dropped. So many years later we're here, and somehow we're writing poems.

What suddenly comes to mind are the words of environmental activist and Indian scholar Arundhati Roy, from her essay "The Cost of Living:"

> It is such a supreme folly to believe that nuclear weapons are deadly only if they're used. The fact that they exist at all, their presence in our lives, will wreak more havoc than we can begin to fathom. Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behavior. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. They bury themselves like meat hooks deep in the base of our brains. They are purveyors of madness.

I've only been familiar with Roy's writings for a little over a year, but she's become critical in my understanding of nuclear potential on the physical landscape, the creative landscape of the human psyche, and even the landscape of spirituality. In another essay, "The End of Imagination," she concludes, "The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever

made. If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: We have the power to destroy everything that You have created." That essay was published in 1998.

Readings change after our gaze of the world changes. In middle school, William Blake's "The Tyger" was a poem about creation. After seeing images of Hiroshima, or entire bombed-out cities in Iraq, "The Tyger" is a much darker poem for me. Even if the poem is about a hundred years older than the nuclear weapon, it's hard to imagine these lines as about anything other than the manufacturing a weapon of mass destruction:

> On what wings dare he aspire?
> What the hand, dare seize the fire?
>
> And what shoulder & what art,
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
> And when thy heart began to beat,
> What dread hand? & what dread feet?

Maybe William Blake was trying to get to the dark core of what *is* sinister and why is it here. Maybe I read this poem differently, because in the 21st century my understanding of what is sinister, or the "fearful symmetry" I can picture is the arsenal used to kill human beings and kill the planet. Thankfully, poets like June Jordan have lived among us to testify to the absurdity and immorality of our weaponized abilities. Jordan's "Bombing of Baghdad" drops the word *bomb* in quick, rapid-fire succession, signifying in language a deadly spree or cluster of bombs across a landscape:

> we bombed Iraq we bombed baghdad
> we bombed Basra we bombed military
> installations we bombed the National Museum
> we bombed schools we bombed air raid
> shelters we bombed water we bombed
> electricity we bombed hospitals we
> bombed streets we bombed highways
> we bombed everything that moved/we
> bombed everything that didn't move we
> bombed Baghdad
> a city of 5.5 million human beings.

How to imagine a landscape now. How to reconcile that I am capable of love and extreme tenderness while also being capable of extreme harm. Poets, I am working through this. I am still trying to make a poem that is honest about each.

II. To Avoid Despair / To Confront Despair

I distrust binaries because they almost always rely on imperfect generalizations, but for the sake of this section poems will be divided between ones that avoid despair and ones that confront despair. This section specifically is viewing the latter.

Good news--the poem that is large enough to hold despair has the means to synthesize it into new shapes, and this feat is the wonder that keeps me coming back to poetry. Even June Jordan's "Bombing of Baghdad" reaches deep within itself and its own logic to find the means to confront the despair it conjures, and in the unlikely shape of an early American murder:

> This was Custer's Next-to-Last stand
> I hear Crazy Horse singing as he dies
> I dedicate myself to learn that song.

Can you feel this poem rushing to find and fill the shape of its own limit? Poet Dan Beachy-Quick describes it this way:

> That the poem must create within its own thinking a momentum strong enough to break its own limits. Form marks the boundary in which knowledge comes to be knowable—necessity of the poem to forge on the blank page the nature of its formal life. Epistemological crisis which the poem creates in order to discover.

Despair has a body. The body of the poem is often the body of despair made in such a way we can confront it. Or catalyze toward a momentum strong enough to break past the limit of despair. Jordan's poem continues, several times revisiting Crazy Horse and the song whose potential is unknown but crucial to us. Part of the wonder "Bombing of Baghdad" is that we're not dealing with the corpse of Crazy Horse, but Crazy Horse:

> And this is for Crazy Horse singing as he dies
> because I live inside his grave
> And this is for the victims of the bombing of Baghdad
> because the enemy travelled from my house
> to blast your homeland
> into pieces of children
> and pieces of sand.

How does June Jordan confront despair? Why in a poem about Baghdad does Jordan insist on revisiting Crazy Horse, over and over? To help us consider, let's look at Adrienne Rich's writing on despair, from her essay "What Would We Create?":

> We see despair when social arrogance and indifference exist in the same person with the willingness to live at devastating levels of superficiality and self-trivialization. We see despair in

> the self-hatred that clogs the lives of so many materially comfortable citizens… We see despair in the political activist who doggedly goes on and on, turning in the ashes of the sample e burnt-out rhetoric, the same gestures, all imagination spent. Despair, when not the response to absolute physical and moral defeat, is, like war, the failure of imagination" (17).

Imagination is the pivotal moment of confrontation. The poem unafraid of imagination is well-equipped to reckon with despair. But surely there has to be a negotiation; imagination can also lead the poem astray. When we take that imaginative leap, how can we be sure we haven't landed too far from the despair we need to reconcile? We're not told the song that Crazy Horse is singing, but we know it carried him. The poem wants a song that can carry us, too. The final stanza of "The Bombing of Baghdad:"

> And this is for Crazy Horse singing as he dies
> And here is my song of the living
> who must sing against the dying
> sing to join the living
> with the dead.

Wherever the song goes after it leaves us, we have to believe is somewhere we can't know, but our children will touch all the products of its making. Throughout writing this section, the sentence that's been with me is a quote from Claire Schwartz: "The subject of love need not be visible for the work of love to be evident." Can we see all the transformations against despair in "The Bombing of Baghdad" and ultimately call this a love poem? This is a genuine question on my part, because I am not certain what constitutes of love poem. It's possible the act of love is in the defiant imagination, the lens that refocuses the poem from its burrowing grief of *the bomb the bomb the bomb* to Crazy Horse's song that threatens to fill the space of the poem --and break through the space of despair joyously. Of the power of the imaginative leap, Modernist poet Mina Loy writes, "BUT the Future is only dark from outside. / *Leap* into it--and it EXPLODES with *Light*."

The imagination it takes to confront despair is ever-present in Danez Smith's "Tonight, in Oakland." This poem carried me fully through 2018. Every line offers a transformation that's nothing short of magic, or the poet's ability to choose tenderness:

> Give me rain or give me honey, dear lord.
> The sky has given us no water this year.
>
> I ride my bike to a boy, when I get there
> what we make will not be beautiful
>
> or love at all, but it will be deserved.

How necessary these lines in how they contain at once both despair and hope, like two hands to the same body. When the anaphora of "tonight" comes in, we begin to see true imaginative potential:

Tonight, east of here,
two boys, one dressed in what could be blood

& one dressed in what could be blood
before the wound, meet & mean mug

& God, tonight, let them dance! Tonight,
the bullet does not exist. Tonight, the police

have turned to their God for forgiveness.
Tonight, we bury nothing, we serve a God

with no need for shovels, we serve a God
with a bad hip & a brother in prison.

Tonight, let every man be his own lord.
Let wherever two people stand be a reunion

of ancient lights. Let's waste the moon's marble glow
shouting our names to the stars until we are

the stars.

Even the word *tonight* promises a passing. That whatever suffering and despair exists, exists right *now*, and what is tonight but the end of a present tense? Another poem that feels like it's using *tonight* as the same hopeful crux against despair is Agha Shahid Ali's ghazal "Tonight," in which the ghazal's refrain word is the same:

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates--
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

God's vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar--
All the archangels--their wings frozen--fell tonight.

Lord, cried out the idols, *Don't let us be broken;*
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.

Whether in Danez Smith's "Tonight, in Oakland" or Agha Shahid Ali's "Tonight," we see how even a single word with enough imaginative authority can confront despair, line by line.

Say you're writing a poem and its landscape is thick with your despair. Do you have a single word that you can incant over and over so it grows large enough to confront it? And what of Abyss? The original despair, the ultimate despair, enemy of memory, enemy of human voice, enemy of recorded /

accessible archive. On my best days, I believe every poem we write is carving our space against abyss. As Emily Dicksinson, has written: “Abyss has no biographer.” As Ralph Waldo Emerson has added (even though Dickinson’s succinct-ness never needs to be added to): “but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts, --*I and the Abyss*.”

III. Vulnerability

Where does the confrontation of despair lead us in a poem? I don’t believe the poem stops at simply buffing against despair over and over. If this were the case, Jacob would wrestle the angel eternally. The tower of babel would still have no end in sight. There’s no single right answer to how a poem reckons with despair. But--the reaction to despair I’m most interested in is vulnerability. What do we get out of being vulnerable? We open ourselves to harm--where is the peace in this? The easiest answer I can offer, or rather--the answer I’m letting myself believe is that vulnerability, while allowing the potential for harm, also allows the potential to heal. The “I” in Danez Smith’s “Tonight, in Oakland” manages to create dialogue as a wonderful consequence of practicing vulnerability. The exchange that happens at the end of these lines makes me hold my breath. Smith doesn’t leave violence out of the world of the poem when they make these vulnerable steps, but instead makes a landscape where both can exist within each other:

When I get to the boy

who lets me practice hunger with him
I will not give him the name of your newest ghost

I will give him my body & what he does with it
is none of my business, but I will say *look,*

I made it a whole day, still, no rain
still, I am without exit wound

& he will say *Tonight, I want to take you*
how the police do, unarmed & sudden.

Maybe the best outcome of being vulnerable in our poems (and in our lives) is that we open a channel of dialogue crucial to keeping ourselves alive. Alive physically, and alive morally. Detroit-based poet Jamaal May, investigating vulnerability sees the horror of physical and moral death in his poem “The Sky, Now Black With Birds:”

Riot helmets outnumbered the protesters
who, after Troy Davis was executed, stuck around
to throw useless punches into the courthouse grass,
while a woman near the forest of batons
lay sprawled facedown in the lawn gripping a Bible,

a green sea beginning to memorize
the shape of her grief. If I say *Death,*
cure death, and have such power over the scythe,
how many cranes will it take to lift her
out of this drowning?
If I tell you white
supremacist Lawrence Brewer was executed
five hours earlier for the murder of James Byrd—
if I ask you to look for birds foraging
between his intricate tattoos,
I don't mean to distract you from the cross
that still burned on his arm that day.
I don't expect you to stare into a graffiti
of iron-crosses and spider webs scrawled
across flesh and find a thrush vibrating with birdsong,
but I want you to know why I listen for more
than the cawing of crows:

The reflection that happens next is one of the most beautiful answers to despair through vulnerability I've ever read. vulnerability allows us to question our subjects and question ourselves in the same space. The speaker of the poem recognizes Brewer isn't the only enemy of the speaker's peace, but that the speaker's own harm is just as malignant:

I wanted Brewer dead.
So dead, my tongue swelled fat with hexes, so fat
I wonder how *forgive* could ever fit inside my mouth.
Somehow it's always there, fluttering in the larynx
of Ross Byrd—the man whose father was dragged,
urine soaked, by Lawrence behind a truck.
Watch him say it.
Forgive.
I swear,
the word has feathers. I want
to learn to get its wings between my teeth
before more retribution
blots out the sky.

The blunt honesty feels like such a drop of in syntax from the poet's previous stanza of manipulating our gaze through minute but vivid details of the executed man's tattoos. And then it picks back up as *forgive* grows until it breaks the boundaries of its own alphabet and must be understood through metaphor. Trace with me this similar metaphor in two stanzas of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Jerusalem:"

Once when my father was a boy

a stone hit him on the head.
Hair would never grow there.
Our fingers found the tender spot
and its riddle: the boy who has fallen
stands up. A bucket of pears
in his mother's doorway welcomes him home.
The pears are not crying.
Later his friend who threw the stone
says he was aiming at a bird.
And my father starts growing wings.

Each carries a tender spot:
something our lives forgot to give us.
A man builds a house and says,
"I am native now."
A woman speaks to a tree in place
of her son. And olives come.
A child's poem says,
"I don't like wars,
they end up with monuments."
He's painting a bird with wings
wide enough to cover two roofs at once.

What these poems from Jamaal May and Naomi Shihab Nye have in common is that they achieve healing through vulnerability--vulnerability that puts the speakers and subjects at risk in different ways. That we could find a method to heal each other in the presence of these despairs is the greatest possible outcome. But I don't want to mislead--Agha Shahid Ali's ghazal "Tonight" exercises high degrees of vulnerability, and the poem still ends with the speaker abandoned by a beloved and processing impending death:

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love—you've invited them all?
This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

What's gained from the poet's vulnerability here? Is despair confronted and triumphing anyway? It's hard to say. At the end, even God is grieving, and the poet has to console him. Maybe the poet is the best person to do this. Indeed, the poet accepting the new identity ("Call me Ishmael tonight") feels like accepting a new position in the order of things. Not so much a higher calling, but a kind of recognizing that stagnance is the enemy of the harmony the universe is depending on the poet becoming. It's here I lean on Carl Phillips. In *The Art of Daring*, he writes:

> I've been thinking lately that the lyric poem is always at some level a testimony at once to a love for the world we must lose and to the fact of loss itself--and how in that tension between love and loss that the poem both enacts and makes space for, there's a particular resonance that I'll call mercy.

And later, in the same essay:

> This taking in of the world is a kind of loving. A sustenance. Never mind that it will not save us. Every poem is, somewhere, both a form and an act of love.

I'd like to end on a fragment of Sappho--one which Anne Carson has translated so masterfully to contain within its short moment a civilization's worth of joy despite despair; a necessary moment against the abyss which only our voice can survive. Fragment 147:

> someone will remember us
> I say
> even in another time

Poems:

The Tyger: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger

The Bombing of Baghdad: https://poets.org/poem/bombing-baghdad

Tonight, in Oakland: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58027/tonight-in-oakland

Tonight: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51652/tonight-56d22f898fcd7

The Sky, Now Black With Birds:
https://www.kenyonreview.org/journal/summer-2013/selections/jamaal-may/

Jerusalem: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54296/jerusalem-56d2347ab7a20