

2017 One City One Prompt



Poems & Prompts

Stonemason
James O'Hern

My stonemason John says
he uses Elberton granite from Georgia
It has the best grain and lasts the longest
How long is long I ask
Oh he says a thousand years

I want more than hard gray stone
to guard her silence
I want stone that stays alive
a megalith jammed deep into earth
an antenna to amplify the signals
emitted from her ash and bone

I went to Ireland
looking for the perfect stone
found stone cottages and monuments
mountains and fields of stone
continuous rows of stonewalls
wound round the island like an offering

I found stone carvings of mermaids
and ancient unnamed river gods
a Sheela-na-Gig I thought I recognized
having seen her name
on the walls of a cave in the Dordogne
along with her portrait cut and shaped
on the rounded surface of soft white stone

There are no stones
where my mother and I were born
only the jagged edges of memory
ground down by the desert *molcajete*
to caliche and polished round pebbles
leaving no trace of history
but an abandoned *pulque* farm
an adobe jail
and a dried up river bed

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Prompt: What stones do you (your community) have that keep you from amplifying your voice? Where are there not any stones?

[Where do words come from?]

Vénus Khoury-Ghata

Where do words come from?
from what rubbing of sounds are they born
on what flint do they light their wicks
what winds brought them into our mouths

Their past is the rustling of stifled silences
the trumpeting of molten elements
the grunting of stagnant waters

Sometimes
they grip each other with a cry
expand into lamentations
become mist on the windows of dead houses
crystallize into chips of grief on dead lips
attach themselves to a fallen star
dig their hole in nothingness
breathe out strayed souls

Words are rocky tears
the keys to the first doors
they grumble in caverns
lend their ruckus to storms
their silence to bread that's ovened alive

Prompt: Write or have a discussion on where you believe words come. What are words to you?

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If You Go into the Woods You Will Find It Has a Technology

Heather Christle

This tree has a small LED display
It is glowing and it can show you words
and it can show you pictures and it can melt
from one choice to another and you are looking at it
and it wants you to share the message
but it can't see that you are the only one around
and that everyone else is hibernating
which you love You are so happy and alone
with the red and yellow lights It's a nice day
to be in nature and to read up on the very bland ideas
this tree has about how to live This tree says
grow stronger and this tree says *fireworks effect*
This tree is the saddest prophet in history
but you don't tell it that You are trying to show it respect
which gets tiresome but then it flashes
a snake at you It's a kind of LED tree hybrid joke
and you could just kiss it for trying For failing
But it can't see you and it starts to cry

Prompt: Write about a form of nature that speaks to you,
"grow stronger." From where do you get your motivation to
keep going, to amplify?

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When we are on the right track we are rewarded with joy

Brian Teare

wretched thou art
wherever thou art

I sit and work on a line and lean into the pain my mind
continues
trying to think and all I come up with is a texture without
ideas

and to whatever
thou turnest —

the body I have is the body I once had but they could not
differ more
the teacher Agnes says abstract form holds meaning
beyond words

I turn the pages
of the old book

the way certain feelings come to us with no discernible
worldly cause
the teacher Buddha says the practitioner agitated by
thoughts

I have not held
since childhood

makes stronger their bondage to suffering and the sting
of becoming
during the time illness makes me feel most tied to the
material world

its binding broken
its brittle paper

I sit in meditation and sunlight from the window calms
my nausea
since the emergency I feel such sharp tenderness toward
common objects

its dog-eared corners
torn at the folds —

sort of attached to the white wall white door white dust
on the wood floor
mostly pain is an endless present tense without depth or
discernible shape

miserable are all
who have not

an image or memory lends it a passing contour or a sort of
border
the white door open against the white wall snuffs
headache's first flare

a sense of present
life's corruption

I remember a man patiently crying as doctors drained his
infected wound
lying on the gurney in my hospital gown we suffered
from having been being

but much more
miserable are those

adjacent and precarious the way a practitioner sits alone
on a cushion
resting alone unwearied alone taming himself yet I was
no longer alone

in love with it —

Prompt: Amplify someone else's voice or pain.

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by the Academy of American Poets.

If My Voice Is Not Reaching You

Afzal Ahmed Syed

If my voice is not reaching you
add to it the echo—
echo of ancient epics

And to that—
a princess

And to the princess—your beauty

And to your beauty—
a lover's heart

And in the lover's heart
a dagger

Prompt: Begin with the first to lines: "If my voice is not reaching you/add to it—" and continue with your own words.

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English as a Second Language

April Bernard

That voice—from the tv—that *voice*,
thick smoky cheese, or, no—
dark as burnt flan, sweet,
venison-sweet in the heavy smoke
of a tavern hearth, and hot as brandy.
I served that voice for months,
in a theater on 13th near Third
where losers are the ones who crack first.
I gave you azured hours, nights,
and you placed your soul,
pretty as a dead mouse, at my feet.
Gutturals, the candles guttering backstage.
Your voice went everywhere
you dared not put your hands.

Prompt: Share about a voice that stands out for you.
Maybe it's someone you know directly or someone you've
not met. How does that voice make you feel? What does it
make you want to do? Contrast it to your own voice.

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To the Reader

Jena Osman

There's a voice in the room and what are you noticing. What are the sounds in the room. Is there a bell that says that the dinner is ready to be served. Is there a bird warming up outside that you are noticing. In what ways does that noticing mean anything good. Is this its own performance or part of something else. Are you listening to someone's voice while reading this to yourself. Are you listening to the words that the voice sounds or simply to the sound. What kind of sound are you hearing beyond the voice that's sounding. Do you hear the cars on the road. Do you hear the hum of the fan on the floor. Do you hear anything from the hallway or from the rooms next door. Do you hear the one voice whispering to the other. Do you hear the chairs scraping against the floor. Do you hear a door closing and a latch latching. Do you hear the sound of the breath of the person next to you. Are you noticing your own body as it sits in the chair that may or may not be comfortable. Do you find yourself slowing down, looking up, tracking back.

Are you following words that are sounded and trying to situate yourself in relation to them. Are the words the wallpaper that surround the true activity of someone sitting up straight in front of you and you admire that person's coat or hairstyle or the meal that they have ordered. Do you feel that the words are about you simply because of a pronoun, or is empathy outside of grammar. Are there clues in a text like a hand intimately clasping. Is the skin there complete sensation. Are there two seeds from an orange on the table.

Does the butterfly serve as some kind of analogy, a quasi-splice for reeving new halyards. Are you noticing. Is this an easy space for capturing your attention. Or is the smoke beginning to get to you. Are you noticing a waver in the over of the edge. Are you noticing a cross-current in the waving having and the come on over here of the wave. Do you wish you had eaten a bit more before reading this. Which tree wavers under the weight of the bird. Did you drop this. Have you forgotten the beginning before my interruption. Does the first person pronoun jar unwelcome and unkind or does it reveal a body that is foreign and only good. Do you remember the aphetic elixir of the waver wavering wave. How straight is your spine. How sharp is your tongue. How is the shoulder, soldier.

Is it a large or small crowd. Would you use the word successful to describe a crowd or a poem. Are you sure you're in the right location. Have the birds started to warm up yet. Are the lyrics to their songs like oo la la. Are you frapping for lashing drumheads and mousing hooks. Are you surging a line on a wince, then jamming a bight of the fall into the upper block. Could this be some kind of bid for a recently vacated cabinet position. Do you marry the two lines, laying them into each other. Are you the clove hitch, the slippery hitch, the stunner hitch, struggling with your own personalized orange revolution. Do you tie the shoe clerk's knot, the bow tie, the mermaid's braid, the bell knot. Have your fingers made even the slightest mark or indentation.

Prompt: 1) Respond fully to any one of the questions posed here,
or 2) Write a prose poem full of questions on the theme
“Amplify.”

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Peace

Leslie Ullman

Keep your voice down, my husband
hissed this morning across his plate,
then knotted his tie
to a fist that would hold
all day. Wedged in our thin
walls against the silence of neighbors
we haven't met, I folded
my napkin, shoved the last word
back in my throat
and later jogged extra laps
as though my feet could make
some mark on firm ground,
could make everything clear.
I remove my damp
sweatclothes, shivering now
in the best boutique I can find.
An older woman shrugs out of a fur
soft as fog and gathers up jade, silver,
apple-green silks, all hushed
and viciously expensive.

She wraps herself in a gown
the color of doves, a shadow body
that follows no husband. I'm sure their house
holds a room where she dreams,
sends letters, while someone downstairs
seasons the greens and filets
and a reasonable hunger warms her like firelight.

If her children should quarrel
on the darkening lawn she drifts outside
to soothe each with a story, her voice adding
girth to itself like the wine,
open, breathing by his plate.

I want to ask for my size
in a gown like hers. I want to fill
a gown with breasts like hers, and move
through our rooms like a boat

through any water. I finger aqua silk
made for real hips and shoulders
I, too, could have after twenty seasons--

it turns a whole room blue
where I enter myself as I dress,
where my garments turn overhead light
back on itself like fine paintings.
Downstairs he slices meat striped with fat
and pink flesh, while I finger each
pearl on the choker he gave me when money
was tight. The blue folds drift
over my body, that house
filled with rooms left by daughters
and sons, that house given over
to pale silk and stone, its silence
my secret, my eyes raised
to meet hers in the triple mirror.

Prompt: Describe a time you felt or were told you could not speak. What was the situation? Who was involved? What did you think? How did you respond?

From Are You Experienced? Baby Boom Poets at Midlife, edited by Pamela Gemin, published by University of Iowa Press. Copyright © 2002 by University of Iowa Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Chopin

Emma Lazarus, 1849 - 1887

I

A dream of interlinking hands, of feet
Tireless to spin the unseen, fairy woof
Of the entangling waltz. Bright eyebeams meet,
Gay laughter echoes from the vaulted roof.
Warm perfumes rise; the soft unflickering glow
Of branching lights sets off the changeful charms
Of glancing gems, rich stuffs, the dazzling snow
Of necks unkerchieft, and bare, clinging arms.
Hark to the music! How beneath the strain
Of reckless revelry, vibrates and sobs
One fundamental chord of constant pain,
The pulse-beat of the poet's heart that throbs.
So yearns, though all the dancing waves rejoice,
The troubled sea's disconsolate, deep voice.

II

Who shall proclaim the golden fable false
Of Orpheus' miracles? This subtle strain
Above our prose-world's sordid loss and gain
Lightly uplifts us. With the rhythmic waltz,
The lyric prelude, the nocturnal song
Of love and languor, varied visions rise,
That melt and blend to our enchanted eyes.
The Polish poet who sleeps silenced long,
The seraph-souled musician, breathes again
Eternal eloquence, immortal pain.
Revived the exalted face we know so well,
The illuminated eyes, the fragile frame,
Slowly consuming with its inward flame,
We stir not, speak not, lest we break the spell.

III

A voice was needed, sweet and true and fine

As the sad spirit of the evening breeze,
Throbbing with human passion, yet devine
As the wild bird's untutored melodies.
A voice for him 'neath twilight heavens dim,
Who mourneth for his dead, while round him fall
The wan and noiseless leaves. A voice for him
Who sees the first green sprout, who hears the call
Of the first robin on the first spring day.
A voice for all whom Fate hath set apart,
Who, still misprized, must perish by the way,
Longing with love, for that they lack the art
Of their own soul's expression. For all these
Sing the unspoken hope, the vague, sad reveries.

IV

Then Nature shaped a poet's heart--a lyre
From out whose chords the lightest breeze that blows
Drew trembling music, wakening sweet desire.
How shall she cherish him? Behold! she throws
This precious, fragile treasure in the whirl
Of seething passions; he is scourged and stung,
Must dive in storm-vest seas, if but one pearl
Of art or beauty therefrom may be wrung.
No pure-browed pensive nymph his Muse shall be,
An amazon of thought with sovereign eyes,
Whose kiss was poison, man-brained, worldly-wise,
Inspired that elfin, delicate harmony.
Rich gain for us! But with him is it well?
The poet who must sound earth, heaven, and hell!

Prompt: How does music amplify a thought or a feeling? What is it about the sound, flow, rhythm that amplifies feelings and thoughts? If you (or your community) were a musical instrument/band or song, what would it be? Why?

Directions for Lines that will Remain Unfinished

Sarah Messer

Line to be sewn into a skirt hem
held in my mouth ever since the unraveling

Line beneath a bridge
for years without hope I stretched my arms into the river searching for you

Line to be sent to the cornfield
history is a hallway of leaves.

Line written for electric wires
your voice inside the no history, sitting still

Line for future people
inside the work, only my empty teeth

Line from Maharaj
Presently you are in quietude. Is it on this side of sleep or on the other side?

Line that cannot be read because of its darkness
*impossible walk under weight of honey
away from your hands that break me in half*

Line addressing President Lincoln
*when the handle and blade are gone, what remains
of your axe?*

Line to be run over by a lawn mower
afraid of everything and to be of no use.

Line for a distant midnight dog-pack
because I can never speak it

Line to be sewn into a shirt collar
the streak of your finger across the hood of the car

Line for a stone growing old
a sunburst that lands inside a flower

Line written only with your mouth
desire is a trick ghost

Line for the garden weeds
slowly I am nearer to you

Line describing the better qualities of monsters
are we afraid of what we wished for?

Three lines written for bears
*inside cells, water, trees, I am meaningless
darkness and light wind like breath on fur
I carry the circling cities inside me*

Line for a leaf blown into the hair of the Master
seeing you, I want no other life

Line for a mouse
to die like that, held in your hands

Prompt: Use the top line for every couplet here are your first line to your couplet (you will replace the following lines with your own words/responses).

Example –

Line to be sewn into a skirt hem (line from the poem)

To keep my legs from turning ink blue (my line)

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The Little Mute Boy
Federico García Lorca

The little boy was looking for his voice.
(The king of the crickets had it.)
In a drop of water
the little boy was looking for his voice.

I do not want it for speaking with;
I will make a ring of it
so that he may wear my silence
on his little finger

In a drop of water
the little boy was looking for his voice.

(The captive voice, far away,
put on a cricket's clothes.)

Prompt: Tell an imaginative story about a character
looking for its voice.

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Wide Sigh

Melissa Broder

I thought that there were two
The good voice
And my voice
I thought the good voice was buried
And I would have to go
Under my voice
Which is glittery and cold
To get there
Then I heard them
A drumbeat and hawks
Also snakes
Many wild voices
Heartbeats
Big beats
One beat
All over
Do you hear it?
I hear it now
Speeding up
Taking me up

Prompt: Write about discovering your voice.

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For Crying Out Loud

Terrance Hayes

And I understand well now, it is beautiful
to be dumb: my tyrannical inclinations, my love
for the prodigal jocks aging from primetime
to pastime, the pixilated plain people and colored folk

with homemade signs. Cutouts, cutups, ambushes,
bushwackers. The clouds are overwhelmed
and vainglorious. MC Mnemosyne showed up

around midnight like the undetectable dew
weighing the leaves, and I was like Awww shit.
Why ain't I dead yet
like the man who wanted to be buried

with the multi-million dollar Van Gogh he bought?
(Members of The Arts League said No
because there was culture to be made into money.)

The volant statues of the aviary, the jabber-jawed
cable channels and the book in which nothing is written
but the words everyone uses to identify things
that can't be identified. Not that I ain't spent

the last ten years of my life refining my inner cyborg.
Interview questions included how did the DJ break his hands,
who's gone bury the morticians who bury the dead,

And what to do about the sublime and awful music
of grade school marching bands?
Not that Neanderthals have a sense of the existential.
Me and my forty-leventh cousins lolling, and LOL-ing

like chthonic chronic smoke, like high-water suit pants
and extreme quiet. Everybody clap ya hands.
Like fit girls in fitted outfits, misfits who don't cry enough,

who definitely don't sob, but keep showing up sighing.
Everyone loves to identify things that have not been identified.
The rabbit hole, where ever I find it, symbolizes solitude.
So that's exciting. And an argument can be made

on behalf of athletes, rap stars, and various other brothers
who refuse (click here for the entire video)
to wear shirts in public when one considers the beauty

of a black torso. If and when the dashiki is fashionable
again I will sport it with the aplomb of a peacock plume.
For now, I have a row of coin-sized buttons tattooed
down my chest so it looks like I mean business

when I'm naked. I know that means a lot to you.

Prompt: Write or discuss what it means to rebel as a way to amplify your voice. What rules or ideologies are you "fighting" against as an individual, community, race? And how are you choosing to respond?

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In the Waiting Room

Elizabeth Bishop

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
the *National Geographic*
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
--"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.
And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;

even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I--we--were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world.
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts--

held us all together
or made us all just one?
How--I didn't know any
word for it--how "unlikely" . . .
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

Prompt: Describe a time, either as a child or as an adult,
that something you said or how you said it reminded you
of someone in your family.

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