A packet of resources, inspiration & writing prompts from poet & facilitator Caits Meissner

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June 16 - July 25th in the Poetics of Witness online course.
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Connecting Personal & Global Loss: A Multi-Step Prompt

“Poetry of witness occupies a third realm between the “personal” (lyric acts) and the “political” (oratorical acts). Forché opts to call this the “social” realm of our lives. While all three realms can house resistance, social resistance incites a peer—whether a character in the poem, or its reader—to connect, and finds strength in connection. The social act is one of conversation; Forché uses the example of Miklós Radnóti’s speaker, in “Forced March,” engaging the man who will ‘move an ankle, a knee, an arrant mass of pain, / and take to the road again.’”

— Sandra Beasley, from the article “Flint and Tinder – Understanding the Difference Between ‘Poetry of Witness’ and ‘Documentary Poetics’

1. Gathering Ingredients: Ask Questions

   a. Identify a moment of personal loss — romantic, family, work, etc. Journal the questions below that speak to you.

   ● Who/what did you lose and what did they/it mean to you?
   ● What did the person or experience look like?
   ● What were the special quirks and habits they held? Any rituals?
   ● What did they represent to you? Identity? History? An action? Emotion?
   ● Did you contribute to the loss? If so, in what ways?

   b. Read the paper — where are you seeing loss in the world? Pick one story of loss that deeply touches you. Examine your global story of loss, journaling the following:

   ● What is the pain people are experiencing?
   ● Who are their family members? Who is affected by this circumstance?
   ● What have they lost? What are they losing? What do they still have?
   ● Transcribe the details from the article in your own words and then fill in the blanks with your imagination.
   ● What part of the story you think is not being told?

2. Gathering Ingredients: Gather Images
Google your subject and look at the images OR imagine it in your head. What does it look like where they are? What do the people look like? Try to hit the five senses in your description.

3. Final Prompt: Write the Poem

In our world, the only thing we are promised is the end. It is the only sure thing each human being experiences, no matter their life circumstance. Let us use this commonality to draw parallels between cultures, beyond our identities, to the heart of the human experience. If brave enough, you might even try to blur the lines of culture and which tale belongs to whom. Use generated work from your gathering ingredients exercises to support writing the final poem.

Use this refrain if it helps you get started, you can drop these prompts later:

While I am (feeling, doing) ______________
They/You are (feeling, doing) ______________
Examples of Poems Connecting the Personal & Political

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Here is an old poem of mine that connects personal and global experiences, written in 2008 for a project that invited poets to capture a year in America through responding to news articles. It was inspired by Audre’s Lorde’s *Equinox*, which follows.

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**What Bright Star**  
Caits Meissner

*After Audre Lorde*

There is a woman who lives under my sink.  
When I am good she gives her face for my study.  
Her mouth holds all of the great world,  
a beautiful weeping sore, perfect round egg  
of salt and blood, I think, *how does it fit in there, the world like that?* As it opens to swallow  
the moon, an omen I do not understand.

* 

It is an unforgiving cold January when  
my neighbors in Brooklyn get robbed.  
Down the street, my love watches helpless  
as a grown man picks the smallest of five boys  
licht single fist and beats him against  
the rusty spine of a ball hoop.  
Young laughter echos as his limbs flail,  
easy as a rag-doll tossed by wind.

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In Kenya, a man thrusts a child  
to the flames of a burning church
and covers his ears hoping to save
memory from sound.
But the boy's ghost will follow,
hiding in the pot's bottom before water
is poured, in the call of morning birds.
The man's nostrils burn with sickness
as he turns from the ceremony,
his black eyes wet pools of horror
turned back on himself, at what evil
ordinary man can do.

*

When I let the day go come night,
a ship full of immigrants arrives
in the ocean of my unleashed thoughts.
I am ashamed when I cannot help
but think go away, leave me be.
They beg something of me that I cannot give.
What can I offer? Where do I go to hide
from the world and its misgivings?
How much imagining can one body take?
Call me selfish, but there are certain
things I wish to never see.

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In Kenya, daughters and husbands
bury their hearts into the ashes of friends
and lovers, wait for flowers to bloom.

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In the midwest, scientists busy
their hands building new drums:
stripped skeletons of rat nerves & tissue
with each cell added, a brief flicker
of song swims through the tiny
Instrument, a veiled hope:
Perhaps the scientists can bring us
new hearts, ones that don't blister
and crack, cave in on themselves
with the deep ache of what it means
to be human.

*

It's been predicted Smith's cloud will hit our galaxy in 20-40 million years, igniting the sky with countless new suns. In the reports there is no mention of us. It is assumed that we will have already killed ourselves out of existence.

I wonder, what will take our place, who will live between the woman’s two prophet lips and how will earth know which bright star to call home.

—

Equinox
Audre Lorde

My daughter marks the day that spring begins. I cannot celebrate spring without remembering how the bodies of unborn children bake in their mother's flesh like ovens consecrated to the flame that eats them lit by mobiloil and easternstandard Unborn children in their blasted mothers floating like small monuments in an ocean of oil.

The year my daughter was born DuBois died in Accra while I marched into Washington to a death knell of dreaming which 250,000 others mistook for a hope believing only Birmingham’s black children were being pounded into mortar in churches that year some of us still thought Vietnam was a suburb of Korea.
Then John Kennedy fell off the roof of Southeast Asia and shortly afterward my whole house burned down with nobody in it and on the following sunday my borrowed radio announced that Malcolm was shot dead and I ran to reread all that he had written because death was becoming such an excellent measure of prophecy As I read his words the dark mangled children came streaming out of the atlas Hanoi Angola Guinea-Bissau Mozambique Pnam-Phen merged into Bedford-Stuyvesant and Hazelhurst Mississippi haunting my New York tenement that terribly bright summer while Detroit and Watts and San Francisco were burning I lay awake in stifling Broadway nights afraid for whoever was growing in my belly and suppose it started earlier than planned who would I trust to take care that my daughter did not eat poisoned roaches when I was gone? If she did, it doesn’t matter because I never knew it. Today both children came home from school talking about spring and peace and I wonder if they will ever know it I want to tell them that we have no right to spring because our sisters and brothers are burning because every year the oil grows thicker and even the earth is crying because Black is beautiful but currently going out of style that we must be very strong and love each other in order to go on living.
Through the Lens of Dignity and Worth: A Story & Prompt

The Story:

It was our last high school class before Thanksgiving break. We sit in a circle and I have one rule: give the topic and the student your full respect. I have four bags of candy to toss to the reader and to the best to give warm feedback that is specific. It is hard to choose, each time a reader closes, so many hands shoot up in the air with poignant feedback, I wish I had twenty bags of candy. The candy wasn’t even needed.

They are reading the letters they wrote today. Tough letters. Letters with no answers. The assignment was to research a human injustice of their choice that affects teens throughout the world. Child prostitution, labor, soldiers, female circumcision, drought and famine, repression of freedom of speech. After researching, they each invented a character based on their findings that give a personal face and a story to their population. Who are they? Age? Location? Situation? What is a typical day like for them? Are they religious? Who do they live with? Is someone manipulating them? What are their dreams?

On the next page, using this information as a guide, write a letter to your character. A love letter, not in the romantic way, but in a way that tells them they are important. What can the person oppressing NOT take from them? (Their spirit, their heart, their intelligence.) What is beautiful about them? What do you respect about them? Write it to your character as if they are a real person. Put emotion and feeling into it. Support them.

Many letters included students phone numbers at first, offers to lend an ear, directives for their character to “work hard” to get out of their situation or “leave your country.” Sitting one-on-one with students earlier in the session, I asked each of them to rethink this. Could we really help them? Do you really think they can just work their way out? Their Americanness shone like a pretty penny. No, they came to the conclusion. No, they cannot. I cannot. I feel helpless.

So what then? Why affirm them? We ask this question of each other after each letter shared aloud. What can we do here?

I don’t have the answers, don’t look at me, I said. This is challenging for me, an adult in the world, and I knew it would also challenge you. When we begin to ask the questions, to do the work, we begin to open our minds to the possibility of creating new solutions, new change. You are the next generation and amazingly, you truly care. You really, truly do. This is why I brought this task to you.

They said: We can inform others. We can open our eyes. We can appreciate what we have. We can affirm a human life. We can tell someone that no matter what their circumstance, they matter, they are, too, important. They are, just like I, worthy of love and joy.
The Prompt:

Get brave like my old high school students and give this assignment a try — pick a social issue that moves you, invent a character and offer them words of dignity and worth. See what arrives on the page. What about this task challenges you as a writer, and as a human being? What feels ethical, what feels inauthentic? Is there another route in or approach that might feel better than creating a person to address and letter writing? What are your questions that arise?
An Small Archive of Inspiration: Kick Start Your Journey of Witnessing with These Powerful Collections

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- **22 Poems That Got You Through 2016**, compiled by Saeed Jones who says of these works, “Amidst the ongoing wars over culture, truth and language that defined 2016, here are some of poems we read in order to find America's pulse.”


- **The Quarry: A Social Justice Poetry Database**: *The Quarry* is a searchable collection of over 300 poems by a diverse array of contemporary socially engaged poets, published by Split This Rock since 2009. Like all of Split This Rock’s programs, *The Quarry* is designed to bring poetry fully to the center of public life.

  http://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database

- **Witness Journal**: *Witness* blends the features of a literary and an issue-oriented magazine to highlight the role of the modern writer as witness to his or her times. Launched in Detroit in 1987, the magazine is best known for showcasing work that defines its historical moment; special issues have focused on political oppression, religion, the natural world, crime, aging, civil rights, love, ethnic America, and exile.

  http://witness.blackmountaininstitute.org/