

Meeting Halfway

Behold this empty space
between your certainty and mine,
this arena of sunlight free
of claim and counter claim,
this bright meadow where no one
has shouted, bullied, or begged,
where butterflies are sovereign,
where birdsong is our legislation,
where you and I could walk
out into the open, look around,
and speak—first of the children,
then of our dreams, and only then
of the work we will do together.

Prompt: Invite someone you disagree with to a beautiful encounter, a meeting in new ground, in a place where it would be difficult to argue in the old way...

Advice from a Raindrop

You think you're too small
to make a difference? Tell me
about it. You think you're
helpless, at the mercy of forces
beyond your control? Been there.

Think you're doomed to disappear,
just one small voice among millions?
That's no weakness, trust me. That's
your wild card, your trick, your
implement. They won't see you coming

until you're there, in their faces, shining,
festive, expendable, eternal. Sure you're
small, just one small part of a storm that
changes everything. That's how you win,
my friend, again and again and again.

Prompt: Speak in the voice of a creature or feral element to invite humans to think in a new way...

New House Rules

In order to get beyond impasse,
Congress has replaced debate
with a listener's furthering response:

*You sound upset...
I see...that makes sense...
Tell me more about that...
I'm sad to hear your pain...
Let me see if I'm understanding...
How does this make you feel?
Have you felt this way before?
Say again what you just said —
I need to understand.
How can I help?*

Prompt: Propose a benign set of rules for someone wallowing in dysfunction, anger, denial...inviting them into a new way to behave...

Easy Pickings

It's easy to laugh in the blueberry field,
staccato plink and plunk as berries plummet
into the pail, and you hear children banter
in a dozen languages among the green rows.

It's easy to forgive there, too —
viewing old betrayals sweetly diminished
by the honeyed crush of berries
on your tongue.

It's even possible to imagine peace
between people who hated each other
before their children met between these rows
and asked one another, "Shall we pick together?"

Come pick with me, my enemy, my angry self,
come, split couple bickering over money,
come to the blueberry field, Palestine & Israel,
come bow and squint under the sun-splashed leaves,

come peer into these dark shadows for blue.

Prompt: Write a poem that joins naming what is most difficult in the world with what is most beautiful...terror, honey, pestilence, child...

Dew & Honey

Sip by sip in thimble cup
the meadow bees will drink it up
then ferry home to bounty's hive
by flowers' flavor hum and thrive
to show us how through word and
song,
by gesture small and patience long,
in spite of our old foolish ways
we may fashion better days.

So, my friend, come sip and savor
syllables as crumbs of pleasure.
By sunrise, in our conversations,
we begin a better nation.

*Prompt: Write a little spell with
rhyme and sweet words to invite
your people to the hard work we will
do...*

White Flag Patriots

The children went first
because they had the most to lose —
no color, no emblem on their flags,
no shouting, surrendering instead
as they shuffled toward
the White House,
some crying, some stern,
a few humming lullabies
their mothers had taught them.

In the Rose Garden, where men
babbled into microphones,
the children lay down in the grass
to watch clouds drift west
until speeches trailed off
and only the wind was heard.

Then white flags flashed
as the children rose and sang together,
*You have overcome, but we
are not afraid.*

*Prompt: Tell a hard story, ending
with a line from a song you
love...*

Nest Filled

Use your whirling wings to find the right tree.
Use your pert eye to choose the level limb.
Use your nimble feet to cherish the hospitable fork.

Use your fearless beak to gather twigs, leaves,
grass and thistle-down to weave your basket-house
open to the wuthering sky.

Use your body to be the tent over tender pebbles,
lopsided moons. Then wait — warm, alert, still
through wind and rain, hawk-shadow, owl night.

Use your life to make life, spending all you have
on what comes after. And if you are human, a true
citizen, fully awake, then learn from the sparrow

how to build a house, a village, a nation. Use instinct
to find the right place. Use thought to know the right
time. Use wisdom to design the right action.

In the era of stormy weather, build your
sturdy nest, and fill it with the future.

Prompt: Learn from a creature how to prevail...

What Can a Poem Do?

When they learn I spend my days
scribbling little songs, people ask,
“What can a poem *do*, in this
troubled world? No offense, but
what difference can a poem make?
With war, and all our suffering,
why words on a wisp of paper?”

I've learned to hold my peace
as the mountain does when asked
“What can a mountain *do*?”
Or the wren when confronted,
“Why *sing*?” Or the mother
with infant in arms, “Why
love this helpless little thing?”

I'll answer with a song.

*Prompt: Is there a question people keep asking you, or
you keep asking yourself? Post the question, then
answer from an oblique realm of experience...*

Child in the Corn Field

Out of the blue I received a poem
from a man who takes his sleepless newborn son
for a drive in the wee hours, and when the baby sleeps,
he writes little human stories under a streetlight
where all is quiet.

So I wrote him back, and we discussed poetry
and infancy and the virtues of the very early morning
until for what he perceived as my kindness, he
wrote me about his sister, who had been a soldier
in Afghanistan.

And so I wrote to her about the importance of her
brother's poetry, and she sent me a small collection
of her own—poems about what goes on even
as the war goes on: the chance life
of children.

And in the book, was a postcard of a child
in the corn field, somewhere high above the fighting
and I cried, looking out at the haze of trouble
beyond this moment of golden stillness
where our future stood alone.

*Prompt: Tell the story of how a thought came
to you—the random sequence of life that leads
you to a recognition...*

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When they consider the rings of the tree
you plant today, they will celebrate
the concentric center and say "This
is the year Greta crossed the sea.

This is the year they gathered to lament,
then turned lament to frenzy. As fire
pries open a fisted cone to scatter
seed, they made grief seed action.

By the rings ever outward, our descendants
will trace the great change—summerwood
as the tree rises to journey through time
building bounty for all beings.

Will the great change be destruction?
Will we build a furnace out of Eden.
Will our comforts kill our children?
Shall oil burn the sky? Or can

human wisdom like a sapling
grow taller, greener, more generous?
How can we know what lies ahead?
Plant a tree, and see.

Prompt: Prophecy with warning & hope...

The Turning

When they cut a tree, plant ten.
When they stain the river, welcome rain.
When they say no to wisdom, say yes.
When they say yes to greed, say no.
Know comfort and convenience kill.
Know economic growth withers earth.
How long shall we smoke the sky?
When they take the easy road,
choose the stony path.
If you cherish the children,
turn grief to gusto
and make sorrow sing.

*Prompt: Write your own instructions for
changing the world...*

Dear Mr. President

In sheer contradiction of your efforts
to warn our fellow citizens of the danger
of immigrants, a certain Antonio—from Michoacán,
who has been living without documents
as my neighbor for fifteen years—has put me
to shame with his work ethic, thrift, good humor,
and courage, building stone walls, repairing roads,
tilling gardens, and otherwise inflicting beauty
and good order on this neglected corner of our nation
in spite of all you say to drive him away.

You, sir, are not getting through!
He keeps smiling, and bending to any task
we offer for simple wages, humming a song
I can't get out of my head or heart.

I do not know how to advise you, sir.
You have labored long and loud to cast him
down, cast him out, but he just keeps
humming that song: *Que linda esta
la mañana, en que vengo a saludarte...*
He is saying the morning is beautiful,
sir, and he greets you, singing.

I thought, Mr. President, you should know.
With all due respect,
a Citizen

*Prompt: Tell a tyrant about something
you find beautiful...*

A Proclamation for Peace

Whereas the world is a house on fire;
Whereas the nations are filled with shouting;
Whereas hope seems small, sometimes
 a single bird on a wire
 left by migration behind.

Whereas kindness is seldom in the news
 and peace an abstraction
 while war is real;

Whereas words are all I have;
Whereas my life is short;
Whereas I am afraid;
Whereas I am free—despite all
 fire and anger and fear;

Be it therefore resolved a song
 shall be my calling—a song
 not yet made shall be vocation
 and peaceful words the work
 of my remaining days.

Prompt: Write a document consisting of your own “Whereas series, leading to a bold “Therefore....”

Connect the Dots

A veteran, slumped in a midnight doorway, was trained to kill, killed, and killing banished sleep.

A hurt child, age thirty-two, who never had the food he needed, haunted by his father’s blows, shoots meth.

A mother, abused as a girl, can’t speak of it, can’t trust any boy her girl brings home, shuns touch.

A nation, founded by the shot heard round the world, prevailing at Hiroshima, can’t understand daily massacres.

Yet a life of kind words and gentle gestures, planting seeds and seeking peace—where could that lead?

Prompt: Write your own clusters of connection—the dark ones, and the ones filled with light...

Blind Masoomeh Weaves Our Carpet in Iran

Her hands know connections
where others do not.
Her smile knows peace
where others do not.
She knows strong cords rise
for soft cords knotted between.
Her soul is here to give delight
to those who can see what she
knows, can feel what she brings forth
from beautiful darkness, from deep
living spirit. Touching this carpet,
their souls receive her gift
and begin to smile.

Do you know
a greater miracle?

Prompt: Describe the beautiful action of a person your country considers an enemy...

What Generals Might Learn from Mothers

Repertoire of the General:
attack, retreat, clean your weapons,
die, surrender, live to fight another day.

Repertoire of the Mother: listen, ask,
offer, cajole, listen, laugh, feed, remember,
sing a story, listen, ask, distract, embrace,
think, listen, play, wonder, change.

Prompt: List the skills of people in the tribe of the past, and skills in the tribe of the future...

Acknowledgments: “Easy Pickings” appeared in *Reunion of the Rare: Poems for Oregon*. “Nest Filled” and “A Proclamation for Peace” appeared in *The Flavor of Unity: Post-Election Poems*. “Dear Mr. President” appeared in *Peace Warrior: Poems in English & Spanish*. These books can be found here: <https://www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?keyWords=kim+stafford&type=>