

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

Instructor: John Nguyen | SPLASH 1 April 2023

Conversations! What is poetry?

1. Ocean Vuong (1988-): “The reading of poetry is an act of political resistance to the mainstream... Poetry acknowledges the true complexity of what it means to be human, which is that nothing is ever that certain.”
2. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886): “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the ways I know it. Is there any other way?”
3. Ada Limón (1976-): In response to a question about poetry raising awareness around climate change: “Poets—incredible nature poets like Mary Oliver, Gabriela Mistral, or Audre Lorde—look deeply at the world and make us feel like we are connected. Poetry that addresses the natural world helps us repair that connection. When you are paying attention to something, it’s a way of loving something. How can we continue to hurt something that we love?”
4. Marianne Moore (1887-1972): “Poetry is the art of creating imaginary gardens with real toads.”
5. Jericho Brown (1976-): “How to break rules. Whenever I lay down a maxim to students, it makes them want to overcome it. Poetry is about surprise. Every time you write a line, you want to subvert it.”
6. Martín Espada (1957-): "I wonder, sometimes, assuming this poetry survives, assuming anything of this culture survives, is this the way people will understand what we went through? Does this contribute in some way? I hope it does. There's no way to prove that, of course. We just have to keep writing."

FLOATERS

Martín Espada

Ok, I'm gonna go ahead and ask ... have ya'll ever seen floaters this clean. I'm not trying to be an a\$\$ but I HAVE NEVER SEEN FLOATERS LIKE THIS, could this be another edited photo. We've all seen the dems and liberal parties do some pretty sick things.

—Anonymous post, "I'm 10-15" Border Patrol Facebook group

Like a beer bottle thrown into the river by a boy too drunk to cry,
like the shard of a Styrofoam cup drained of coffee brown as the river,
like the plank of a fishing boat broken in half by the river, the dead float.
And the dead have a name: *floaters*, say the men of the Border Patrol,
keeping watch all night by the river, hearts pumping coffee as they say
the word *floaters*, soft as a bubble, hard as a shoe as it nudges the body,
to see if it breathes, to see if it moans, to see if it sits up and speaks.

And the dead have names, a feast day parade of names, names that
dress all in red, names that twirl skirts, names that blow whistles,
names that shake rattles, names that sing in praise of the saints:
Say *Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez*. Say *Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos*.
See how they rise off the tongue, the calling of bird to bird somewhere
in the trees above our heads, trilling in the dark heart of the leaves.

Say what we know of them now they are dead: Óscar slapped dough
for pizza with oven-blistered fingers. Daughter Valeria sang, banging
a toy guitar. He slipped free of the apron he wore in the blast of the oven,
sold the motorcycle he would kick till it sputtered to life, counted off
pesos for the journey across the river, and the last of his twenty-five
years, and the last of her twenty-three months. There is another name
that beats its wings in the heart of the trees: Say *Tania Vanessa Ávalos*,
Óscar's wife and Valeria's mother, the witness stumbling along the river.

Now their names rise off her tongue: Say *Óscar y Valeria*. He swam
from Matamoros across to Brownsville, the girl slung around his neck,
stood her in the weeds on the Texas side of the river, swore to return
with her mother in hand, turning his back as fathers do who later say:
I turned around and she was gone. In the time it takes for a bird to hop

from branch to branch, Valeria jumped in the river after her father.
 Maybe he called out her name as he swept her up from the river;
 maybe the river drowned out his voice as the water swept them away.
 Tania called out the names of the saints, but the saints drowsed
 in the stupor of birds in the dark, their cages covered with blankets.
 The men on patrol would never hear their pleas for asylum, watching
 for *floaters*, hearts pumping coffee all night on the Texas side of the river.

No one, they say, had ever seen *floaters so clean*: Óscar's black shirt
 yanked up to the armpits, Valeria's arm slung around her father's
 neck even after the light left her eyes, both face down in the weeds,
 back on the Mexican side of the river. *Another edited photo*: See how
 her head disappears in his shirt, the waterlogged diaper bunched
 in her pants, the blue of the blue cans. The radio warned us about
 the *crisis actors* we see at one school shooting after another; the man
 called Óscar will breathe, sit up, speak, tug the black shirt over
 his head, shower off the mud and shake hands with the photographer.

Yet, the floaters did not float down the Río Grande like Olympians
 showing off the backstroke, nor did their souls float up to Dallas,
 land of rumored jobs and a president shot in the head as he waved
 from his motorcade. No bubbles rose from their breath in the mud,
 light as the iridescent circles of soap that would fascinate a two-year-old.

And the dead still have names, names that sing in praise of the saints,
 names that flower in blossoms of white, a cortege of names dressed
 all in black, trailing the coffins to the cemetery. Carve their names
 in headlines and gravestones they would never know in the kitchens
 of this cacophonous world. Enter their names in the book of names.
 Say *Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez*; say *Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos*.
 Bury them in a corner of the cemetery named for the sainted archbishop
 of the poor, shot in the heart saying mass, bullets bought by the taxes
 I paid when I worked as a bouncer and fractured my hand forty years
 ago, and bumper stickers read: *El Salvador Is Spanish for Vietnam*.

When the last bubble of breath escapes the body, may the men
 who speak of floaters, who have never seen floaters this clean,

float through the clouds to the heavens, where they paddle the air
as they wait for the saint who flips through the keys on his ring
like a drowsy janitor, till he fingers the key that turns the lock and shuts
the gate on their babble-tongued faces, and they plunge back to earth,
a shower of hailstones pelting the river, the Mexican side of the river.

LANDSCAPE WITH FALL OF ICARUS: OIL ON CANVAS: BRUEGEL: 1520

Paul Tran

Given that the door had to be opened and closed,
the jeans unbuttoned and unzipped, the right hand placed over my mouth
while the left hand held me, held me

there, held me down, I can't help
but think, again then, then and again, that
suffering, its human position, isn't entirely random

because someone has to decide, at some point, with purpose
or not, that they're going to get
what they want or what they tell themselves they want

in order to get what they really want
even if it means hurting another, even if it means hurting them both,
even if they can't discern what they really want

or that they're hurting, yet,
until the hurt and the want, lacking
explanation, or eluding it, become indiscernible

from the rest of their suffering, confused for and eclipsing
that suffering, the way the story of sunlight melting wax wings
is confused for the story of hubris and eclipses the story of the child

following the father, as the child was instructed to,
from one dungeon to another
of sky, and given that, given all that followed

when I followed my father
from our dungeon to one of men
not unlike my father and me, I could've blamed him

for the him who followed, could've maintained the story
that it was neither sunlight nor hubris
that defeated me but descent

while bystanders stood by, and I could've reframed
the defeat as the defect of wings, my descent as my dissent to flight,
and though I did, though I did whenever and however

to suit my schemes, my shifting schema,
I accept, for now, just now, that
in the story it was me, and only me, falling from the sky

to the sea, that as I struggled against my end
I struggled, too, against the fact, falling
and falling, that the end would end, and as I fell

from one blue dungeon to another, I saw
as I fell closer and closer
to the end, the instant preceding the end

when everything could still be changed, in the infinite blue of the water
the infinite blue of the sky
and my face, my father's face and his, looking back.

POSTCOLONIAL LOVE POEM

Natalie Diaz

I've been taught bloodstones can cure a snakebite,
 can stop the bleeding—most people forgot this
 when the war ended. The war ended
 depending on which war you mean: those we started,
 before those, millennia ago and onward,
 those which started me, which I lost and won—
 these ever-blooming wounds.

I was built by wage. So I wage love and worse—
 always another campaign to march across
 a desert night for the cannon flash of your pale skin
 settling in a silver lagoon of smoke at your breast.

I dismount my dark horse, bend to you there, deliver you
 the hard pull of all my thirsts—
 I learned *Drink* in a country of drought.

We pleasure to hurt, leave marks
 the size of stones—each a cabochon polished
 by our mouths. I, your lapidary, your lapidary wheel
 turning—green mottled red—the jaspers of our desires.

There are wild flowers in my desert
 which take up to twenty years to bloom.

The seeds sleep like geodes beneath hot feldspar sand
 until a flash flood bolts the arroyo, lifting them
 in its copper current, opens them with memory—
 they remember what their god whispered
 into their ribs: *Wake up and ache for your life.*

Where your hands have been are diamonds
 on my shoulders, down my back, thighs—
 I am your culebra.

I am in the dirt for you.

Your hips are quartz-light and dangerous,
 two rose-horned rams ascending a soft desert wash
 before the November sky untethers a hundred-year flood—
 the desert returned suddenly to its ancient sea.

Arise the wild heliotrope, scorpion weed,

blue phacelia which hold purple the way a throat can hold
the shape of any great hand—

Great hands is what she called mine.

The rain will eventually come, or not.

Until then, we touch our bodies like wounds—

the war never ended and somehow begins again.