

Poem (I lived in the first century of world wars)

Muriel Rukeyser, 1960

I lived in the first century of world wars.
Most mornings I would be more or less insane,
The newspapers would arrive with their careless stories,
The news would pour out of various devices
Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen.
I would call my friends on other devices;
They would be more or less mad for similar reasons.
Slowly I would get to pen and paper,
Make my poems for others unseen and unborn.
In the day I would be reminded of those men and women,
Brave, setting up signals across vast distances,
Considering a nameless way of living, of almost unimagined values.
As the lights darkened, as the lights of night brightened,
We would try to imagine them, try to find each other,
To construct peace, to make love, to reconcile
Waking with sleeping, ourselves with each other,
Ourselves with ourselves.
We would try by any means
To reach the limits of ourselves, to reach beyond ourselves,
To let go the means, to wake.
I lived in the first century of these wars.

Things We Carry on the Sea

Wang Ping, 2018

We carry tears in our eyes: good-bye father, good-bye mother
We carry soil in small bags: may home never fade in our hearts
We carry names, stories, memories of our villages, fields, boats
We carry scars from proxy wars of greed
We carry carnage of mining, droughts, floods, genocides
We carry dust of our families and neighbors incinerated in mushroom clouds

We carry our islands sinking under the sea
We carry our hands, feet, bones, hearts and best minds for a new life
We carry diplomas: medicine, engineer, nurse, education, math, poetry, even if they
mean nothing to the other shore
We carry railroads, plantations, laundromats, bodegas, taco trucks, farms, factories,
nursing homes, hospitals, schools, temples...built on our ancestors' backs
We carry old homes along the spine, new dreams in our chests
We carry yesterday, today and tomorrow
We're orphans of the wars forced upon us
We're refugees of the sea rising from industrial wastes
And we carry our mother tongues
爱(ai), حب (hubb), ליבע (libe), amor, love
平安 (ping'an), سلام (salaam), shalom, paz, peace
希望 (xi'wang), أمل ('amal), hofenung, esperanza, hope, hope, hope
As we drift...in our rubber boats...from shore...to shore...to shore...

Optimism

Jane Hirshfield, 1997

More and more I have come to admire resilience.
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,
mitochondria, figs — all this resinous, unretractable earth.

Resistance

Simon Armitage, 2022

It's war again: a family
carries its family out of a pranged house under a burning thatch.
The next scene smacks
of archive newsreel: platforms and trains (never again, never again),
toddlers passed
over heads and shoulders, lifetimes stowed in luggage racks.
It's war again: unmistakable smoke on the near horizon mistaken for thick fog.
Fingers crossed.
An old blue tractor tows an armoured tank into no-man's land.
It's the ceasefire hour: godspeed the columns of winter coats and fur-lined hoods,
the high-wire walk
over buckled bridges managing cases and bags,
balancing west and east - godspeed.
It's war again: the woman in black gives sunflower seeds to the soldier, insists his
marrow will nourish
the national flower. In dreams let bullets be birds, let cluster bombs burst into
flocks.
False news is news with the pity
edited out. It's war again:
an air-raid siren can't fully mute the cathedral bells - let's call that hope.

Ode to Hope

Pablo Neruda, 1950

Oceanic dawn
at the center
of my life,
waves like grapes,
the sky's solitude,
you fill me
and flood
the complete sea,
the undiminished sky,
tempo
and space,
sea foam's white
battalions,
the orange earth,
the sun's
fiery waist
in agony,
so many
gifts and talents,
birds soaring into their dreams,
and the sea, the sea,
suspended
aroma,
chorus of rich, resonant salt,
and meanwhile,
we men,
touch the water,
struggling,
and hoping,
we touch the sea,
Hoping.

And the waves tell the firm coast:
'Everything will be fulfilled.'

Crepusculo marino,
en media
de mi vida,
las olas como uvas,
la soledad del cielo,
me llenas
y desbordas,
todo el mar,
todo el cielo,
movimiento
y espacio,
las batallones blancos
de la espuma,
la tierra anaranjada,
la cintura
incendiada
del sol en agonía,
tantos
dones y dones,
aves
que acuden a sus sueños,
y el mar, el mar,
aroma
suspendido,
coro del sal sonora,
mientras tanto,
nosotros,
los hombres,
junto al agua,
luchando
y esperando
junto al mar,
esperando.

Las olas dicen a la costa firme:
"Todo será cumplido."

A Better Day Will Come

Hosnia Mohseni, 2017

Sister,

The day will come when you and I will fly
Over the proud hills of our land.

A day will come when the doors won't be locked
And falling in love will not be a crime.

You and I will let our hair fly,

Wear red dresses,

And intoxicate the birds

Of our vast deserts

With our laughter.

We will dance among the red tulips of Mazar

In memory of Rabia.*

That day is not far.

Perhaps it is just around the corner.

Perhaps it is in our poetry.

*Rabia: First recorded woman Persian poet, she was killed for falling in love and writing poetry.

Harlem

Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?