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## Three Poems in Search of Justice: A Postmortem

Dean Rader

*University of San Francisco*, [rader@usfca.edu](mailto:rader@usfca.edu)

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THREE POEMS IN SEARCH OF JUSTICE: A POSTMORTEM

Dean Rader

B: *But why, then, do you write? —*  
A: *Well, my friend, I say this in confidence: until now, I have found no other means of getting rid of my thoughts.*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the above passage from the infamous German philosopher has been banging around in my head like an oblong bell. In one of the sections from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, typically translated as *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche conducts a fictional interview between “A” and “B” (which I have always assumed are the rational and irrational sides of the self) in an attempt to justify what we, as writers, do with our lives. In the case of Nietzsche, A’s answer resolves a conundrum that is primarily private, but more and more frequently, I have been thinking of my writing as mode of discourse that is primarily public. Put another way, I have not been approaching writing as a way of getting rid of my thoughts but rather as a means of seeing if my thoughts overlap at all with what others are thinking. Poetry as a form of shared aesthetic consciousness. Poetry as community. Poetry as both critique and connection.

For me, this has meant writing poems that look outward rather than inward; poems that are less about my own internal landscape and more about our country’s and our world’s varied cultural topographies. How, I keep asking myself, can a poem be a poem but also a form of justice?

As appealing as such a project may sound, there is a danger in walking poetry down such a political path. For example, overly rhetorical poetry can come off as righteous and preachy rather than artful and nuanced. Even worse, though, is offending readers with clumsy content. In the last year, there have been several rather high-profile instances of tone-deaf poems by white men that revealed both blindness and ignorance about race. I like poems that are risky, that push boundaries, but crossing them with clunky entitlement undermines poetry’s potential to connect.

Because political poems often carry ideological underpinnings about the author, I thought I would do something in this essay I’ve never done before: talk about three socially oriented poems—all written and published within the last twelve months—in an attempt to demystify the poetic/political project. I’ve chosen three different poems that not only look and feel differently from each other but that have also led three different lives since being out in the world. I believe this is an interesting exercise in part because it explores how a genre known for its internal searchings can point its lamp toward external issues; and in so doing direct that beam on the murky gap between what the author intends and what the reader perceives.

Since the Trump presidency, I have become acutely aware of the deployment of the word *war* by the administration, journalists, politicians, and other writers. The ease with which “war” was used made me want to write a poem that problematizes the word but that also problematizes poetry (or at least poetic form). The American presidency and poetic form are regimes, and I was interested in engaging and challenging both. Here is the result:

**When They Ask, Tell Them This is a Sonnet for the New Order**

The war, like all of us, was once merely a being alone in a field of becoming.  
The war (which others call the Universe) is composed of infinite numbers of bodies.  
The war, flown by a squadron of birds, is still dropping its wings on our damage.  
The war, some believe, is an action. Not so. It is a place. Not so. It is placed. Not so. It is.

The war is the sound of you being born.  
The war does not rely on invisibility but rather on luminescence, gossamer, the always unfolding.  
The war the way the day the door the din the win the corps the core the kill the fill the for the for.  
The war is here, right here. Look closer to find your face in its glow. See how you shine.

Turn away if you must. You don't have to look. There. Let me tell you all about the war.  
What you want from this life has nothing and yet everything to do with the war.  
The truced trees filled with smoke, the stars in helmets of bone, the broken hills still hot with war.

One day, of course, it may stop, but that doesn't mean the end of the war.  
By *help* I mean *assets*. By *soften* I mean *bomb*. By *love* I mean *cleansed*. By *save* I mean *war*.  
The war begins. The war does begin. The war begins. The end begins. The war begins the war.

Many readers know of the sonnet—its requirement of fourteen lines and its expected rhyme scheme at the end of those lines. I love the sonnet, but I don't always love end rhymes, just as I love America, but I don't always love our choices. Thus, in order to raise questions about both, I changed how the poem addresses “rhyme” in the octet (the opening eight lines) by putting the rhyme at the beginning of the line rather than the end. I then switched that for the sestet (the final six lines) to disrupt the poem's “order” but also to try to encode a sense of war's monotony, its seeming endlessness. I did not have a specific “war” in mind; rather, I was thinking about the many different modes of war—racial, economic, military, gender—in which our country and our culture seems perpetually embroiled. I wanted the poem to raise questions about war without being deterministic. I also wanted the poem to be at war with itself.

This poem was published on the environmental Website *Terrain.org* in late December of 2019 but was re-posted on some social media sites in early January when the United States assassinated Iraqi General Qasem Soleimani, leading many to speculate war between the two countries was imminent. When Iraq retaliated a few days later, the poem began circulating again. Of course, I had no hint of the bombings or the assassination, but there was nonetheless something bizarre about the timing, and rather suddenly, my poem began to acquire new shadings, new relevancies that had nothing to do with me.

Poetry can function as a bridge between reader and event because of its uncanny ability to meet the reader where she is. “That's an interesting thing about a poem,” the great poet Kay Ryan notes, “it's a lens we look through to see our own lives.” In this way, a poem is like a horoscope or a psalm; we find in it what we need. I have heard from more than one reader that this poem has enabled them to see the “war” on the COVID pandemic in a new way, though clearly, I had something else in mind. At its best, art meets us where we are but also pushes us to a place we feel we may need to go.

After I finished the war sonnet, I felt I needed to push my work to a new place. I still had war on the brain but also many complex ideas and emotions about race and history. The result was the following poem, which appeared in *Terrain* alongside the previous poem. In fact, I think of them as companion meditations on different kinds of wars:

## **Ink**

*after Terrance Hayes*

This page. This print. This black. This brown.  
This black. This ink. This name. This land.  
This mouth / in print. This cry / in the box  
and the shadow in flames where I stood. This

fire is not my name, this name is not my box.  
How often must a word be said? How dark  
must a letter be typed? Typed like that,  
like this. This stanza, this color. These tracks. How,  
like that / or like the knuckle bone, the tooth.  
This mouth. This ink. This ink in the mouth.  
This print. This poem in a box, this empty box,  
this shoe / that foot / this mouth in a box.  
This mouth in a mouth. That foot in the flame.  
Typed like a last name, typed like / this body  
of ink. How deep must the ink sink? How long  
will the touch stain? Blood in the mouth. Blood  
on the map. Map of a land. Name in ink. Ink  
in the blood. Black in the name. Name in print.  
Light in the box / light / in the mouth. Mouth  
on the flame. Flame in a box. Box on the mouth.  
Mouth on a map. Map over flame. Flame under  
skin. Burns on the skin. Burns on the land. Burns  
on the map typed like the name on / a box.  
Typed like burns on the skin, typed like this.

“Ink” is a response to two different but interrelated texts. The most overt is “Wind in a Box” a brutal but brilliant poem by Terrance Hayes, arguably the most talented American poet of my generation. The other is a more obscure essay from 2007 by the great poet Major Jackson, entitled “A Mystifying Silence: Big and Black.” For Jackson, the mystifying silence is what is *not* said by those who have the power and skills to speak, in this case privileged white poets: “what seems odd to me,” writes Jackson “(and this I find most appalling about contemporary American poetry) is the dearth of poems written by white poets that address racial issues, that chronicle our struggle as a democracy to find tranquility and harmony as a nation containing many nations.” I wanted my poem to enter into conversation with Hayes’ but also further a conversation about the very issues Jackson enumerates, including the history of (not) writing about race and the complicity of whites and the publishing industry in marginalizing writers of color, in particular Indigenous and African American voices. Wrapped up in there is the history of maps and documents of authority, the metaphors of *black* print on *white* pages, the ink of the ballot *box*, the legacy of fires, flames, and burnings.

However, since the murder of George Floyd, the protests his killing catalyzed, and the nearly revolutionary reframing of racial consciousness both engendered, I have not known exactly what to feel about “Ink.” I’m not sure the poem is a success. On one hand, I’m proud of the poem’s lyric intensity, its sonic insistence. But, on the other, I worry it misses the mark. I worry I might be seen as coopting Hayes. I worry the poem and its ambitions are too vague, too circular, too safe, too limited. I wonder how the poem will feel to me (and readers) in 2021, 2031 and later.

Taking on complex and controversial topics is difficult, but it is also one of the great challenges of being a writer. And, it was with this in mind that I began work on a poem at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. People around the world were dying from this disease at an alarming rate, so it was not something to take lightly or get wrong. But, I felt compelled to try to engage and articulate the anxieties we were feeling (and continue to feel).

### **Meditation on Transmission**

The map on my  
tv reddens the  
way a wound  
might spread  
across skin,  
here, the earth's  
blue body brutally  
infected, its slim  
shape shrunken  
somehow huddled,  
like a child waiting  
to be picked up,  
held, carried to its  
bed and sung to sleep,  
in its dreams, death  
comes dressed as a  
doorknob, a handle  
on a bus, a button,  
a bowl of nuts,  
the sun-stroked  
sky, a whisper, a kiss,  
and it says *breath  
of my breath*, and it  
says *take me inside  
you*, and it says,  
*teach me to multiply*,  
and the earth  
says, *Look, I am  
living*, and the  
earth says, *holocene*  
and the earth  
says, *if something  
isn't burning, it is  
incubating*, and  
the waters do  
not part, and  
the sun does  
not slide into  
its black box,  
and the stars  
do not switch  
off their lights,  
the rain does  
not ask the  
ocean for  
water and yet  
above a  
chorus of

clouds bristles  
with birds about  
their work  
reminding  
not everything  
moving through  
the air destroys.

The title is a play on the various uses of transmission—disease, information, media, movement—as the disease was literally in and metaphorically on the air at all times across the planet. Of the three poems, this one is easily the most read (it appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle* in early April of 2020) and also the most appreciated. I think this is because the gap between what I wanted this poem to do and what it accomplishes is narrower than the previous two. It is also, despite its topic, the most optimistic. I don't know how many people contacted me to thank me for the final three lines—dozens perhaps. To me, those last three lines are the weakest of the poem, but, again, they must have been what people needed.

In retrospect, I realize that all three of these poems engage topics that, at their core, incite fear. This was not intentional, but I do believe there is something about poetry's ceaseless quest for understanding that somehow deescalates. None of these poems provide any answers or even advance any knowledge, and yet, I would argue that through that lack of certainty the poems find affinity with readers. We don't turn to poetry for data; we turn to it for the correct questions. "Therefore," writes Andre Gide, "is a word the poet must not know." Ultimately, it is through shared searching that, paradoxically but appropriately, poetry and justice meet.