

Poetry Matters: Each Precious Life

By J L Williams

So often these days I'm aware that my life, with its gentle rhythms of eating and sleeping, working in a building filled with glass and light and books of poetry, enjoying time with friends at literary festivals, walking streets lined with blossoming gardens and glittering shops — all that comes at the cost of the exact opposite for so many people in the world.

I was asked to read at a poetry festival in Turkey last year, and then one in Northern Cyprus this year. Many of the poets at the festival in Turkey had stories of being imprisoned at one time or another for not going along with the government's wishes, and we participated in a reading one evening that was in memory of nineteen-year-old Ali [İsmail Korkmaz](#), who was beaten to death by shopkeepers because he showed support for the protesters in Istanbul's Gezi Park.

In spite of our common concerns and love for poetry, some of the people around me had a very different perspective on world politics than the one prevalent in the country of my youth — America — which for some in Turkey was seen not as the victim of terrorism but rather as a power-hungry, terror-inspiring aggressor. Who the terrorists are, who the enemy is, depends on so many factors ... beliefs, allegiances, the land you call home and who is claiming rights to that land, this fragmented earth that we all belong to but which we can't seem to share.

Before travelling to Northern Cyprus I'd been worrying about my safety and the safety of my friends in Turkey following the bombings in Istanbul a week before the festival, and after I arrived it became clear, as our group of international poets sat in the sunshine eating ice cream very near the heavily guarded border crossing in the heart of Nicosia, that I was not fully aware of the implications of our visit. We delicately discussed the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the fact that Northern Cyprus is only recognized as an independent state by Turkey. This raised the complicated question that at some point is likely to arise for any writer or artist with a burgeoning international profile and festival invitations — where do you choose to travel in order to share your work and expand your

horizons, and what might you be seen to be supporting in so doing? From my perspective, I'd thought of these trips as a way to explore a part of the world completely unknown to me, to make friends with poets who could teach me about their culture, religion and experiences and to share my work with new audiences who might in turn give me insights into what I am trying to achieve. Yet as one of our group observed, after we were photographed with the local mayor and featured in the national papers, it would be naive to think we weren't also participating on some level in the activities of the state.

In spite of these complexities I was touched, as I have been on all my international poetry trips, by the personal and revelatory connections that were made. A local official told me that he had a granddaughter studying music at the University of Glasgow, and I spent time talking to the Iraqi poet Ghareeb Iskander about his devastated homeland. I spoke to the Hungarian poet Orsolya Fenyvesi about Hungary's terrifyingly right-wing prime minister and to the American poet Elena Karina Byrne about our shared fears regarding the rise of Donald Trump in the run up to the US presidential election. I was charmed by the young Iranian waiter at our hotel, Mohsen Azimi, who had a degree in marketing and wrote poems from his dreams.

I worry about my carbon footprint and seek to limit my flights in the hope of lessening my environmental impact, but I also know that I learn more from these personal interactions than I could by trawling the internet. I find that face-to-face, in new surroundings, I can put my embarrassment aside, ask my most naive questions and develop in ways that make me a better person and a better poet. I spoke with the English poet and programmer SJ Fowler, who was also on the trip, about his increasingly global experience of being a travelling poet, and we wondered if there are places one wouldn't, couldn't or shouldn't go. Would you read in Israel? Would you read in the Ukraine? Would you read in China? Would you read in America? Should one avoid reading in places where the regime is corrupt in some way or where the politics are too complex? But of course the next question is: what governing regime isn't corrupt or involved in shady complexities, or at the very least taking where it could be giving, suppressing in order to succeed? Is that the nature of survival, for humans as much as it is for governments, or is there a better way? And what role does poetry have in all this?

These are questions that perplex me and haunt my poems. I believe that poetry, like all art, is a force for good in the world even when not politically engaged, and

that it is an effective tool for raising awareness and addressing great imbalances. Claudia Rankine's recent bestseller *Citizen* is an example of a book that uses a masterful, intoxicatingly freewheeling exploration of form and content to engage directly with the questions America needs to be asking itself, that we all need to be asking ourselves, about deeply embedded racism and inequality in our societies. I love how in her book you think you are reading an essay until suddenly an image reminds you that the book is art, suddenly a word slips and you realise that you are reading a poem. One gets the sense that the words themselves are refusing to be boxed into one type of writing or another; a literary example of the kind of freedom that should be on offer to all people. It showcases the by no means new but always refreshing idea that experimenting with form can help us find better ways of talking about difficult subjects, and while I can think of many heartening examples of exciting poetry in the UK that is challenging both in form and content, there is still a dominant traditional mainstream that could use some pushing against, just as our individual notions of borders and boundaries need to be provoked and questioned. (Have a read of the excellent essay [‘Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK’](#) by Sandeep Parmar for more on that subject.)

We live in an age of drones and secretive wars on terror. I go through phases when I pay attention to the news-blogs-updates in an attempt to be tuned into what is actually going on in the world, and find that I am overwhelmed by the constancy of the nightmare and the lack of clear messages about who is doing what where and why. We are lucky to have access to an internet that frees us to some extent from controlled portals of information; but it is a challenge to sort out from the extraordinary amount of information available what is — I daren't say truth — perhaps 'accurate reporting' and 'unbiased commentary' are better phrases, from all that isn't. Poetry is good for reminding us that we are all connected. It cracks open deep fissures that let light in and it sparks emotions necessary for empathy and compassion. Sometimes when a news report showing a village being blown up makes us switch off, a few lines in a poem about a child looking for her lost hand can wake us up. Poets aren't angels or infallible purveyors of goodness, but they tend to have a talent for observing and sharing observations in a way that exposes those dusty corners that we forget about or choose to ignore.

At a recent conference in Wales run by Literature Across Frontiers and Literary Europe Live, poet and translator Caroline Stockford spoke movingly about the

plight of [Kurdish civilians being killed in Turkey](#). So few of us in the room knew of this, and we kept asking ourselves why. It is my duty both as a human being and as a poet to learn more about this and so many other desperate and complicated situations in the world, and to write more about them in the hope of stimulating thought, inquiry and, ideally, compassionate action.

When I'm travelling these days, people often ask me if I am a Scottish poet or an American poet, and as the balance of years I lived in America and years I've lived in Scotland nears a tipping point, that question feels increasingly complex, and yet somehow also increasingly irrelevant. What seems more important is how welcome I feel in this place I call home, and how lucky I am to be able to choose where I live and how I live. Don't we all deserve that? Through travelling I constantly widen my perspective, and through writing my last full collection, *Locust and Marlin*, I came to the conclusion that I'd rather be home the way stones are home in the soil, the way birds are home in the air — not home because of a passport or because I'm on one side of a border or another. I cannot help but hope for peace, but individual, historical and societal complexities cannot be ignored, and through travel either on the page via the magic carpet of translation or in person we begin to really learn about the world and ourselves. I want to read poetry from all over the world, to meet poets from every corner of the earth and to hear from their mouths how we are related, how similar we are in our fears and our desires, how funny, beautiful and strange we all are as individuals, and how precious is each life.

Hey Did You Hear About the Kurds in Turkey?

Why so serious, Goldschmied? You forgotten how to laugh? What kind of
laughter, young man, did I ever have?

— from 'Resurrection' by Jakov Lind

Hey did you hear the earth is moving out of her orbit?
It's funny how people keep killing people,
it's a secret did you hear
the tiniest bugs even are less violent than inventive people.
It's the funniest joke, how this big old earth is shifting up closer to Mars,
the earthquakes on population control
and the oceans splashing around.
No worries all the voices keep shouting — that's what we're best at,
babble babble babbling babble babble,
did you hear the sound of the ocean
is the sound of bubbles in waves?
That's a little like laughing, don't you know, all that precious hot air.
A man, his dog and his last penny driving off a cliff,
that's funny right? You laugh so much you cry,
or that old holocaust memory — you cry so much you laugh.
Either way, the ocean laughs up, takes off the clothes and fur,
leaves the salty bones on the beach for the beetles to find.
Beetles know how to build houses, they only talk in beetle language,
they don't laugh, they build their houses in the airy chambers of bones.
All those bodies in the street, don't forget there's a sniper,
his sights trained on your mother.
Don't expect her to pull your rotting body out of the road.
She'll join you anyway; die of shock, die of her hunger strike.
That's a joke I heard. There are lots of jokes like that.
Hey did you hear about the weasel
riding on the back of the woodpecker?
I used to laugh all the time.
You ask me in your language why I'm not laughing?
You ask me why I do not laugh?

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