

Poetry of Resistance

Caged Bird

By [Maya Angelou](#)

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

We Are Not Responsible

By [Harryette Mullen](#)

We are not responsible for your lost or stolen relatives.
We cannot guarantee your safety if you disobey our instructions.
We do not endorse the causes or claims of people begging for handouts.
We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.

Your ticket does not guarantee that we will honor your reservations.
In order to facilitate our procedures, please limit your carrying on.
Before taking off, please extinguish all smoldering resentments.

If you cannot understand English, you will be moved out of the way.
In the event of a loss, you'd better look out for yourself.
Your insurance was cancelled because we can no longer handle
your frightful claims. Our handlers lost your luggage and we
are unable to find the key to your legal case.

You were detained for interrogation because you fit the profile.
You are not presumed to be innocent if the police
have reason to suspect you are carrying a concealed wallet.
It's not our fault you were born wearing a gang color.
It is not our obligation to inform you of your rights.

Step aside, please, while our officer inspects your bad attitude.
You have no rights we are bound to respect.
Please remain calm, or we can't be held responsible
for what happens to you.

Dakota Homecoming

By [Gwen Nell Westerman](#)

We are so honored that

you are here, they said.

We know that this is

your homeland, they said.

The admission price

is five dollars, they said.

Here is your button

for the event, they said.

It means so much to us that

you are here, they said.

We want to write

an apology letter, they said.

Tell us what to say.

Helen Betty Osborne

By [Marilyn Dumont](#)

Betty, if I set out to write this poem about you
it might turn out instead
to be about me
or any one of
my female relatives
it might turn out to be
about this young native girl
growing up in rural Alberta
in a town with fewer Indians
than ideas about Indians,
in a town just south of the 'Aryan Nations'

it might turn out to be
about Anna Mae Aquash, Donald Marshall or Richard Cardinal,
it might even turn out to be
about our grandmothers,
beasts of burden in the fur trade
skinning, scraping, pounding, packing,
left behind for 'British Standards of Womanhood,'
left for white-melting-skinned women,
not bits-of-brown women
left here in this wilderness, this colony.

Betty, if I start to write a poem about you
it might turn out to be
about hunting season instead,
about 'open season' on native women
it might turn out to be
about your face young and hopeful
staring back at me hollow now
from a black and white page
it might be about the 'townsfolk' (gentle word)
townsfolk who 'believed native girls were easy'
and 'less likely to complain if a sexual proposition led to violence.'

Betty, if I write this poem.

Do Not Be Ashamed

Wendell Berry

Do Not Be Ashamed

*You will be walking some night
in the comfortable dark of your yard
and suddenly a great light will shine
round about you, and behind you
will be a wall you never saw before.
It will be clear to you suddenly
that you were about to escape,
and that you are guilty: you misread
the complex instructions, you are not
a member, you lost your card
or never had one. And you will know
that they have been there all along,
their eyes on your letters and books,
their hands in your pockets,
their ears wired to your bed.
Though you have done nothing shameful,
they will want you to be ashamed.
They will want you to kneel and weep
and say you should have been like them.
And once you say you are ashamed,
reading the page they hold out to you,
then such light as you have made
in your history will leave you.
They will no longer need to pursue you.
You will pursue them, begging forgiveness.
They will not forgive you.
There is no power against them.
It is only candor that is aloof from them,
only an inward clarity, unashamed,
that they cannot reach. Be ready.
When their light has picked you out
and their questions are asked, say to them:
"I am not ashamed." A sure horizon
will come around you. The heron will begin
his evening flight from the hilltop.*

The Sign in My Father's Hands

By [Martín Espada](#)

—for Frank Espada

The beer company
did not hire Blacks or Puerto Ricans,
so my father joined the picket line
at the Schaefer Beer Pavilion, New York World's Fair,
amid the crowds glaring with canine hostility.
But the cops brandished nightsticks
and handcuffs to protect the beer,
and my father disappeared.

In 1964, I had never tasted beer,
and no one told me about the picket signs
torn in two by the cops of brewery.
I knew what dead was: dead was a cat
overrun with parasites and dumped
in the hallway incinerator.
I knew my father was dead.
I went mute and filmy-eyed, the slow boy
who did not hear the question in school.
I sat studying his framed photograph
like a mirror, my darker face.

Days later, he appeared in the doorway
grinning with his gilded tooth.
Not dead, though I would come to learn
that sometimes Puerto Ricans die
in jail, with bruises no one can explain
swelling their eyes shut.
I would learn too that "boycott"
is not a boy's haircut,
that I could sketch a picket line
on the blank side of a leaflet.

That day my father returned
from the netherworld
easily as riding the elevator to apartment 14-F,
and the brewery cops could only watch
in drunken disappointment.
I searched my father's hands
for a sign of the miracle.

What He Thought

[Heather McHugh](#)

We were supposed to do a job in Italy
and, full of our feeling for
ourselves (our sense of being
Poets from America) we went
from Rome to Fano, met
the Mayor, mulled a couple
matters over. The Italian literati seemed
bewildered by the language of America: they asked us
what does “flat drink” mean? and the mysterious
“cheap date” (no explanation lessened
this one’s mystery). Among Italian writers we

could recognize our counterparts: the academic,
the apologist, the arrogant, the amorous,
the brazen and the glib. And there was one
administrator (The Conservative), in suit
of regulation gray, who like a good tour guide
with measured pace and uninflected tone
narrated sights and histories
the hired van hauled us past.
Of all he was most politic—
and least poetic— so
it seemed. Our last
few days in Rome
I found a book of poems this
unprepossessing one had written: it was there
in the pensione room (a room he'd recommended)
where it must have been abandoned by
the German visitor (was there a bus of them?) to whom
he had inscribed and dated it a month before. I couldn’t
read Italian either, so I put the book
back in the wardrobe’s dark. We last Americans

were due to leave
tomorrow. For our parting evening then
our host chose something in a family restaurant,
and there we sat and chatted, sat and chewed, till,
sensible it was our last big chance to be Poetic, make
our mark, one of us asked

“What’s poetry?

Is it the fruits and vegetables
and marketplace at Campo dei Fiori

or the statue there?” Because I was
the glib one, I identified the answer
instantly, I didn’t have to think— “The truth
is both, it’s both!” I blurted out. But that
was easy. That was easiest
to say. What followed taught me something
about difficulty,

for our underestimated host spoke out
all of a sudden, with a rising passion, and he said:

The statue represents
Giordano Bruno, brought
to be burned in the public square
because of his offence against authority, which was to say
the Church. His crime was his belief
the universe does not revolve around
the human being: God is no
fixed point or central government
but rather is poured in waves, through
all things: all things
move. “If God is not the soul itself,
he is the soul OF THE SOUL of the world.” Such was
his heresy. The day they brought him forth to die

they feared he might incite the crowd (the man
was famous for his eloquence). And so his captors
placed upon his face
an iron mask
in which he could not speak.

That is how they burned him.
That is how he died,
without a word,
in front of everyone. And poetry—

(we’d all put down our forks by now, to listen to
the man in gray; he went on softly)— poetry
is what he thought, but did not say.

Phenomenal Daughter

By [Nathalie Handal](#)

She told me, Mama, I want to see the world. I told her, Go. When she returned she said: I saw barefoot women carry water from village to village, saw men limp from border to border, saw children disappear in tunnels that lead to freedom, or so they hoped. I saw families who lost everything, even what they dreamed they'd have one day. Saw history hide its shame in the huts of poor people. And one night, I saw girls count stomachs swelled up like small balloons, while boys played with empty soda cans. They were so hungry. I saw madness. I told her, What a terrible world. She told me, It's also in that world that I saw the sky speak to the wind, the wind to the sea, the sea to the waves, and the waves to rising souls that sang with voices so clear, everything took flight. Mama, you have to be brave to see. In their phenomenal eyes, I saw a promising world.

A New National Anthem

[Ada Limón](#)

1976 –

The truth is, I've never cared for the National Anthem. If you think about it, it's not a good song. Too high for most of us with "the rockets' red glare" and then there are the bombs. (Always, always there is war and bombs.) Once, I sang it at homecoming and threw even the tenacious high school band off key. But the song didn't mean anything, just a call to the field, something to get through before the pummeling of youth. And what of the stanzas we never sing, the third that mentions "no refuge could save the hireling and the slave"? Perhaps the truth is that every song of this country has an unsung third stanza, something brutal snaking underneath us as we absent-mindedly sing the high notes with a beer sloshing in the stands hoping our team wins. Don't get me wrong, I do like the flag, how it undulates in the wind like water, elemental, and best when it's humbled, brought to its knees, clung to by someone who has lost everything, when it's not a weapon, when it flickers, when it folds up so perfectly you can keep it until it's needed, until you can love it again, until the song in your mouth feels like sustenance, a song where the notes are sung by even the ageless woods, the shortgrass plains, the Red River Gorge, the fistful of land left unpoisoned, that song that's our birthright, that's sung in silence when it's too hard to go on, that sounds like someone's rough fingers weaving into another's, that sounds like a match being lit in an endless cave, the song that says my bones are your bones, and your bones are my bones, and isn't that enough?

Three pages from KEEP MOVING, by Maggie Smith

This is from a 221 page book, I don't know which pages

A Body's Universe of Big Bangs

[Leslie Contreras Schwartz](#)

A body must remind itself
to keep living, continually,
throughout the day.

Even at night while sleeping,
proteins, either messenger, builder,
or destroyer, keeps busy
transforming itself or other substances.

Scientists call these reactions
—to change their innate structure,
dictated by DNA—cellular frustration,
a cotton-cloud nomenclature for crusade,
combat, warfare, aid, unification,
scaffold, or sustain.

Even while the body sleeps, a jaw slackened
into an open dream, inside is the drama
of the body's own substances meeting
one another, stealing elements,
being changed elementally,
altered by a new story
called chemical reaction.

A building and demolition,
creating or undoing,
the body can find movement,
functioning organs, resists illness—
or doesn't. Look inside every living being
and find this narrative of resistance,
the live feed of being resisted.

The infant clasping her fist
or the 98-year-old releasing
hers. This is how it should be,
we think, a long story carried out
to a soft conclusion. In reality,
little deaths hover and nibble,
little births opening mouths
and bodies the site of stories
and the tales given to us, and retold, retold,
never altered, and the ones forgotten,
changed, unremembered
until this place is made of only
ourselves. Our own small dictators,
peacemakers, architects, artists.

A derelict cottage,
a monumental church
struck in gold, an artist's studio
layered with paints and cut paper,
knives and large canvas—
the site the only place
containing our best holy song:
I will live. I will live. I will keep living.

To the Censorious Ones

By Anne Waldman

(Jesse Helms & others...)

I'm coming up out of the tomb, Men of War
Just when you thought you had me down, in place, hidden
I'm coming up now
Can you feel the ground rumble under your feet?
It's breaking apart, it's turning over, it's pushing up
It's thrusting into your point of view, your private property
O Men of War, Censorious Ones!
get ready big boys get ready
I'm coming up now
I'm coming up with all that was hidden
Get ready, Big Boys, get ready
I'm coming up with all you wanted buried,
All the hermetic texts with stories in them of hot & dangerous women
Women with lascivious tongues, sharp eyes & claws
I've been working out, my muscles are strong
I'm pushing up the earth with all you try to censor
All the iconoclasm & bravado you scorn
All the taunts against your banner & salute
I'm coming up from Hell with all you ever suppressed
All the dark fantasies, all the dregs are coming back
I'm leading them back up now
They're going to bark & scoff & rage & bite
I'm opening the box
boo!