


**Poetry in Times
of Uncertainty**
Healing the Past,
Imagining the
Future


with Brynn Saito



June 28, 2023 | Write-Learn-Lead: Revitalizing Teachers and Teaching | National Writing Project | WRITE Center


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**What is
a poem?**



The poets Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich

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Ocean Vuong
"Someday, I'll Love Ocean Vuong"
from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*

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Exercise #1: "Someday..."

- Begin with the title: Someday, I'll Love [Your Name]
- First line: [Your name], don't be afraid...
- Use the phrase "the most beautiful part of your body..." three times!
- Use the words: *spine*, *shadow*, *whittle*, *road* and *wind*

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The poet Amanda Gorman reading "The Hill We Climb"

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"Stone in the Desert Camp" from *Power Made Us Sworn*

Manzanar National Historic Site
in the Owens Valley
Imprisoned approximately 10,000 people during WWII

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Exercise #2: Persona Poetry

- Think of an object associated with your ancestors/family/community. (Is there an object that connects you to your grandparents, for instance?)
- Assume the voice of that object, then write
- Use the first person (the "I" voice)
- Write without thinking too hard, write without stopping (i.e., freewriting)
- Starter line: "I have something to tell you..."

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Writing into family histories

Grandmothers, Marilyn Oh and Alma Saito (and me)



Above: My grandparents, Alma and Mitsuo Saito. They met in the Gila River Prison Camp during the WWII-era (1942-1945) imprisonment of 120,000+ Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans on the West Coast

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Saburo and Marion Masada at Yonsei Memory Project's "Storytelling for Change"
YMP was founded in 2017 by Nikiko Masumoto and I
www.yonseimemoryproject.com

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Community writing and performance workshops
 Left: YMP Storytelling for Change participants; Middle: My parents, Janele and Gregg Saito;
 Right: Poet Brian Komei Dempster facilitates an intergenerational writing workshop for YMP

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Yonsei Memory Project at the Fresno Fairgrounds Memorial
 The Fairgrounds and the Pinedale "Assembly Center" were two sites of detention in Fresno, each imprisoning about 5,000 people
 Mandala design by Patricia Wakida

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Left: Gregg Saito at Gila River (sketch by Manivone Sayasone)
 Right: Gregg Saito portrait by Dave Lehl
 More at www.youaremissino.com

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Exercise #3:
 Write a letter
 To a person, to a place,
 to a love,
 justice) To an ancestor,
 to a future ancestor
 To a flower, tree,
 element, or landscape
 (ecopoetry) 1
 3
 To your mother, father,
 or another family
 member

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Resources

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Someday, I'll Love Ocean Vuong
 by Ocean Vuong
After Frank O'Hara / After Roger Reeves

Ocean, don't be afraid.
 The end of the road is so far ahead
 it is already behind us.
 Don't worry. Your father is only your father
 until one of you forgets. Like how the spine
 won't remember its wings,
 no matter how many times our knees
 kiss the pavement. Ocean,
 are you listening? The most beautiful part
 of your body is wherever
 your mother's shadow falls.
 Here's the house with childhood
 whitewashed down to a single red brick.
 Don't worry, just call it home.
 & you'll never reach it.
 Here's today. Jump. I promise it's not
 a lifeboat. Here's the man
 whose arms are wide enough to gather
 your secrets, & here the moment,
 just after the lights go out, when you can still see
 the faint torch between his legs.

How you use it, again & again
 to find your own hands.
 You asked for a second chance
 & are given a mouth to empty into.
 Don't be afraid, the garden
 is only the sound of people
 trying to live a little longer. Ocean, Ocean,
 get up. The most beautiful part of your body
 is where it's headed, & remember,
 loneliness is still time spent
 with the world. Here's
 the room with everyone in it.
 Your dead friends passing
 through you like wind
 through a wind chime. Here's a desk
 with the gimpy leg & a brick
 to make it last. Yes, here's a room
 so warm & blood-close,
 I swear, you will wake—
 & mistake these walls
 for skin.

from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* 15

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Stone in the Desert Camp, 1942
by Bryn Sato

Between the tuffe rock and the cone rock
the children found me. I was shining
and smooth and silent about my secrets.
One day above me my little
shoobies came and built the barracks.
Then I couldn't see the sky for the rising camps
and I couldn't feel the winds, whipping
between the ranges. I couldn't see the ranges.
After a short time voices moved in
and I heard singing. Months later, dancing.
But mostly what caught me was the quiet, 1
concentrated chatter of elders. 6
How long before a working above?
How to make a garden in this cradle
of limestone? How to coax a stream

from the highest of peaks in the forest of reds,
in this nation we sought for the blinding?
Some days no one heard the tears
but I felt them: they coated me the evidence
of a prior sea. I thought: this must be
how the humans fell when the rains
broke above them every two hundred days
and the waters for cows didn't leak
through their rocks and they were happy.

from Power Made Us Sworn

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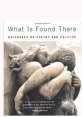

Glitter to My Father
by Bryn Sato

There's a new way I see the
garden now
the one you've been
tending for decades on
Garden Avenue (of all
names)—the street of our
family home.
In holes written by camp
prisoners,
discarded
seasons are
tossed by the
falling leaves of
the moss room,
poet to earth.
Poets in camp
numbered
months and
years by the
memory
of their home gardens
left behind on the West
Coast, flowering
rhododendrons and
peony buds they
imagined as vibrant,
the talk remaining.
From I think of us

Here in the southwest, I find
myself spring
for the Great Central Valley,
as I did when I lived in New
York or that decade in the
Bay, exhausted from cold
bridges
and colder waters, longing with
my entire body
for the landscapes of
childhood's kingdom, Sings
clust and all.
I understand
now I am
nothing, I'm the
daughter of a
living father, 1
bleaded to be 7
returning to you
after our fire-and-ice
travels through North
American landscapes
sprayed by our elders'
lives, their prison
desert homes, and
other jobs and
prisons—with
and without bars or barbed
wire. You were our illness.

from Under a Future Sky

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Doorways to Poems and Poetry
Books by Tarrick Boyer, Destiny Hampshill and Lisbeth White;
Adrienne Rich, Mindy Nattfow, Jane Hirshfield, and Matthew Zapruder

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Poetry,
community,
struggle, and
freedom



Clockwise from top
left: Judy Grahn,
Maxine Hong
Kingston, June
Jordan, Gloria
Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde
