

TOWERS OF WORDS: THE PLACE OF POETRY IN CRISES

AS A HUMAN, I watched the Towers implode from my office window on Duane Street, six blocks from ground zero. I thought, What to do? My response was to write a poem. And I wasn't alone. Towards the hole in the energy center, towards the sacred burial site of steel, concrete and ash, words began to emerge, looking for meaning, mourning, attempting to understand. Words on Missing Posters, words on makeshift memorials, scrawled on post-its and written in the dust on the windows of J&R Music, on the canvases at Union Square, in emails.

The impulse to build a Twin Towers of Words, to create a poem replicating/remembers what had been blasted by humanity's failings, a response of art, this came later. The word went out that a Tower was being built at the People's Poetry Gathering website (www.peoplespoetry.org). The Gathering, a biennial festival of international poetries sponsored by City Lore and Poets House, is a place where all traditions of poetry, written and spoken, are celebrated, where connections are made and understanding is meaning. It was a perfect site for poets to post their hearts, and they did, often leaving whole poems rather than simply adding a line. So I wove lines together, creating a single poem out of the many submissions. 110 lines were selected, one for each floor in the Towers, from more than 150 submissions. Steve Zeitlin and Joe Dobkin helped with the creation.

The second tower was invitational—I sent out 130 invites, and most poets responded positively. Kathleen Masterson responded very positively—she was the first poet to submit a line. Eileen Myles edited some lines, including the first one, instead of writing her own.

Poets were invited to place their lines wherever they wished, so the poem kept changing, evolving into itself. About halfway through, my hard drive crashed and I lost all the names—very embarrassing to have to ask which brilliant line was whose. Robert Kelly wrote back, “Who cares? Aren't we all the poet? It sure is all the same crisis anyhow.” The poets range from the well-known to the unknown, from teenagers to septuagenarians, text, hip-hop, language, avant garde, formalists. College professors, homeless poets, politicians, cynics. Again, Steve Zeitlin and Joe Dobkin helped form the poem.

In a crisis

In times of crisis

Poets lose words

They lose them

Find them here

Find some

—Bob Holman

TOWER ONE

- 1 In a crisis, poets lose words
You can find them here
Wisewomansaid: crisis = danger + opportunity
Wisewomansays: Como el fénix, alzemonos de entre las cenizas un pueblo unido.
- 5 Dress in purple grief
And do Nothing—listen to Silence
Do Anything—get between our lobes & valves again.
Topfloor. Hold eyes. Hold hands. Take wing.
Better to fly than do nothing.
- 10 Out the window, PS 234, “Teacher, the birds are on fire.”
Fire turns into sky,
Better to fly than do nothing, better to fly.
Soaring eagles spy glowing ember—
The pyres of the Phoenix and the Turtle burn wholly.
- 15 Wailing whispers. Lost angels
Wrapped in dust drift down,
An avalanche of ash disappears the world,
With every breath, a shower of shoes.
The day's sandwich is uneaten.
- 20 My sense of security jumped out the window.
I cannot determine what is the worst thing.
Fear rips out my tongue.
The dead race for the sky.
My peace lies beside your peace.
- 25 Gone Calder, gone Nevelson, gone Lichtenstein, gone Miró
Follow us as we run up streets.
How fast can you run, tough rubber boots?
The fireman's feet blister,
Dogs listen, breathing pain.
- 30 We have become the heat-slick melt of infrastructure.
Who should I hate for this?
You called me? Hello?
Can we answer?
Your cell phone call our last connection voice stream
- 35 To that spinning jig dirge called life.
That nothing sound — I want to get it tattooed on my chest.
Shhhhhh you can hear the twisted bedrock groaning.
I nominate the silence.
Then finding the lost words of poets
- 40 I tremble as I write.
My peace lies beside your peace.
“Drop a sandwich, drop a bomb.”
Let's dream our flying dreams again,
Let's collect the scattered polka dots
- 45 And put them into coffee cups to circumnavigate utopia.
Loose words — the antidote emerges,
Unfurling through the eyes of my 12-year old daughter.
Dig for strength. Do not presume to know.
Arms circle children, comfort the distant.
- 50 We pay in children.
Maybe we should tell them our names
To silence fear, anchor life.
Maybe we can learn their names.
Call me. Call me you.
- 55 Someone tries to light a candle but tears keep putting it out.
What's the worst thing? My son asks, “Is God still alive?”
What does it matter? Oculus blinded.
We're bleeding, we're alive.
Tie a string on my finger to remember to be kind.
- 60 Maybe if I fill up the hole in my stomach I can fill up the hole in the building
and plug up the emptiness fill up the hole plug up my heart in my stomach
the building fix and patch and fill in the emptiness fix the world my head
my heart the building and stuff in and fill and patch my heart and fix the
world and and and stuff and patch and fix and fill and fix
I wish I were a large gorilla,
able to swat planes out of the sky,
then perhaps I could dream about
bananas again, and days in the sun.
Then on the screen, a sports star tv high to the religion-bound
Dust like snow clouds, smoke like dry ice
Radio muttering war cries
- 65 Moviemakers rushing to the scene
Where the Twin Towers turn into the Coliseum
Extras fall screaming murder murder murder
Who died, who lived—thousands of lifelines,
Of stirs & swipes, flagging down right and wrong
- 70 Desperate for a piece of silence, the silence of peace.
Now a microcosmic militia invades
Our homes, lives, and bodies
With killing snow
And bleeding intentions.
- 75 Mankind bitten by a recluse
Poison injected from a web secluded.
There was a Turkish girl who'd been sick at school.
Anthrax! said the doctor and the papers. Terror! Here!
Gonna wage holy war against you baby!
- 80 The trap of vengeance closes on the hand that sets it.
This crisis ends begins a new crisis,
Wicks of two candles forever burning out.
Give me crisis hope.
Give me a history more ancient than calendars to resurrect skylines.
- 85 Osama bin Laden I am haunted by your morning
Red sun rises on broken sky line,
The day hangs heavy on the sidewalks.
From far away we feel so close.
We all live in Ground Zero.
- 90 We are the endangered species.
Now from window, wind.
Now from sirens, sighs.
Cava mi cuerpo noche vacia. I'll grow in flowers to witness.
“There once was...” as all stories begin. But not here. Never again.
- 95 Rosebud on a flagpole. Ivy twines the cannon.
This place cannot hold the memories—they come alive,
Lead to a future, all and each, a dance that erupts.
This poem is in Shock.
Its sense of security jumped out the window
- 100 Through golden grates and iron barricades,
Sing! don't argue.
Chanting throats boil rage.
Mah ra kah sah sah Mah ra kah sah sah
With the taste of burning metal.
- 105 Slalom Aleichem Bismilliah, Alhamdulillah.
My peace locked inside your peace.
But that always toxic taste.
La illaha illa lah Kyrie Eleison
Like moths slapped silly by the bulb.
- 110 Tips my tongue that is loose
with words
words that cannot stop.

1 Bob Holman, 2 Steve Zeitlin, 3 Lois Wilcken, 4 George Zavala, 5 Jeffery Beam, 6 Bob Holman, 7 erik, 8 unknown, 9 Jan McLaughlin, 10 Bob Holman, 11 rob, 12 Jan McLaughlin, 13 Penni Moore, 14 Susan Katz, 15-16 unknown, 17 Roberta Singer, 18 rennie/Georgia A. Popoff, 19 Kristin M. Petersen, 20 Heather Bourbeau, 21 klonskyj, 22 stargazer lilly, 23 Gary Mex Glazner, 24 Ellen Feighny, 25 Susan Katz, 26 Karen Karpowitch, 27 Karen Karpowitch/aerohead, 28-29 aerohead, 30 unknown, 31 John Kulm, 32-33 unknown, 34 Mauree Pendergrast/David Osgood, 35 Gary Mex Glazner, 36 Gary Mex Glazner/Joe Dobkin, 37 Gregory W. Farrell, 38 Joe Dobkin, 39 Susan Katz, 40 Joe Dobkin/Bartolome de las Casas, 41 Ellen Feighny, 42 Joe Dobkin/unknown 43-44 denise, 45 denise/andruid, 46 andruid, 47 Gene Bryan Johnson, 48 Stacie Barry/unknown, 49 Paddy Bowman, 50 Ellen Feighny, 51 Jill Bressler, 52 erik, 53 Jill Bressler, 54 unknown, 55 Martha Garvey Jr., 56 klonskyj/Leonore Gordon, 57 Heather Aileen Mahoney/Catherine Rauch, 58-59 D. Sturmbaugh, 60 Paula Panzarella, 61 Joseph McElroy, 62 Vincent Katz, 63 binda23/Steve Zeitlin, 64 binda23, 65-66 Steve Zeitlin, 67-68 Susan Katz, 69 erik, 70 Gene Bryan Johnson, 71-74 dck134, 75-76 Molly O'Neal Stone, 77-78 Ed Foster, 79 Jack Foss, 80 unknown, 81 Martin Tsahai, 82 Gregory W. Farrell, 83 Susan Katz, 84 Rebecca L. Metzger, 85-87 binda23, 88 unknown, 89 moteck, 90-92 unknown, 93 Javier Eduardo Perna, 95-97 unknown, 98 deafpoet, 99 Heather Bourbeau, 100 Joe Dobkin, 101 Heather Bourbeau, 102 Gary Mex Glazner, 103 erik, 104 Heather Bourbeau, 105 erik, 106 Ellen Feighny, 107 Susan Katz, 108 erik, 109 Ben Zeitlin, 110 Susan Katz. Poets listed as “unknown” are those we were unable to reach to get their correct attribution. In some cases the names that appear here are taken from email addresses. Some lines were added after the graphic image of the towers was created.