

Poetry of Witness

Assignment: To write two poems of witness based on photographs.

- 1) Using either photograph about Israel OR photograph about Palestine.
- 2) Using a photograph which witnesses something about your life:
an event, relationship, situation

Photographs must be scanned and included with the final project.

Ways of looking at photographs ie methods of visual literacy :

Gesture, Expression, Background, Props, Clothing

With thanks to Jennifer Klein and [Carolyn Forché](#)

Techniques/ Ideas for writing poem based on a photograph

Who is the narrator/speaker?

What is the narrator/speaker's relationship to the subject of the poem?

What tone will you use- angry, rueful, objective (just says what happens), warm?

What is the "guesswork" the before and after the poem? (emotions suggested by pictures, thoughts of characters)

How will you begin the poem? (Will you be speaking to an audience? "My Wicked Wicked Ways" ? Will you be in a setting and finding the photo "Photograph of My Father"? or will you be describing fr the outset what is in the picture ""The Car in the Picture")

What meaning will your title have?

How will you use sensory detail?

Will your last line have impact, a twist?

How will you use setting? Multiple settings?

How will you handle time? ("Fifth Grade Autobiography"?)

Will speaker/narrator be in poem?

Will the subject matter of your poem be emotionally intense?

Will you use direct address?

Will you use dialogue?

Will you use questions?

Will you use historical/social background?

Will your poem say a lot about you or nothing about you?

What point of view will you use?

How will you use similes, metaphors, personification, alliteration, and sound devices, repetition?

What language /style will you use? Will you create a persona? What tense /tenses will you use and why? present, past, mixture

Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-Second Year

Raymond_Carver_

October. Here in this dank, unfamiliar kitchen
I study my father's embarrassed young man's face.

Sheepish grin, he holds in one hand a string
of spiny yellow perch, in the other
a bottle of Carlsbad Beer.

In jeans and denim shirt, he leans
against the front fender of a 1934 Ford.
He would like to pose bluff and hearty for his posterity,
Wear his old hat cocked over his ear.
All his life my father wanted to be bold.

But the eyes give him away, and the hands
that limply offer the string of dead perch
and the bottle of beer. Father, I love you,
yet how can I say thank you, I who can't hold my liquor either,
and don't even know the places to fish?

FIFTH GRADE AUTOBIOGRAPHY by Rita Dove.

I was four in this photograph fishing with my grandparents at a lake in Michigan.
My brother squats in poison ivy.
His Davy Crockett cap sits squared on his head so the raccoon tail flounces down the
back of his sailor suit.

My grandfather sits to the far right in a folding chair,
and I know his left hand is on the tobacco in his pants pocket because I used to wrap it
for him every Christmas.

Grandmother's hip bulge from the brush, she's leaning into the ice chest,
sun through the trees printing her dress with soft luminous paws.
I am staring jealously at my brother; the day before he rode his fist horse, alone.
I was strapped in a basket behind my grandfather. He smelled of lemons, He's died-but I
remember his hands....

My Wicked Wicked Ways by Sandra Cisneros

This is my father.
See? He is young.
He looks like Errol Flynn.
He is wearing a hat
that tips over one eye,
a suit that fits him good,
and baggy pants.
He is also wearing
those awful shoes,
the two-toned ones
my mother hates.

Here is my mother.
She is not crying.
She cannot look into the lens
because the sun is bright.
The woman,
the one my father knows,
is not here.
She does not come till later.

My mother will get very mad.
Her face will turn red
and she will throw one shoe.
My father will say nothing.
After a while everyone
will forget it.
Years and years will pass.
My mother will stop mentioning it.

This is me she is carrying.
I am a baby.
She does not know
I will turn out bad.

Student Poems Based on a Photos
Horizon by Kelly Wehrle

Father and daughter look so intently
at the entire world laid out on a map. Its creases reflect the sun like a mountain ridge,
and the paper is soft and sunscreen-scummified, like
the napkin cast into the backseat
At the mercy of the violent white Californian sun.
The day is at standstill, watching the figures in the car—
Both are bedraggled, anxious, sweat drips down her curling hair and
His too-small khaki hat flails to shield the stickiness.
They are fugitives on the sly, running from the law,
Deciding where they should run to and wondering
If this car will lead them there,
Looking for the location of the horizon
and when will they reach it. And
after the car passes it by,

(just another truck stop offering a two-for-one
special on soggy apple pie)
Will they just fall off the edge of the earth?
Only to land next to the napkin in the backseat,
Doomed to look over the shoulders of more

Travelers, who sit, sweating
on the new leather seats,
in the convertible, (plastered with those
disturbing warning stickers about death
or serious injury that may occur)
Looking over the map.

Mystery Man
Poone Shoureshi

Shuffling through oceans of paper, envelopes, and stamps,
there it was.
A picture of three men,
two of whom I didn't know,
but the middle one was hard to miss.
It stuck out like a fish out of water,
the picture of him, the picture of my father.
He stood there, leaning on two chairs,
smiling about something
-a date
-a joke
-pure excitement
Must have been the era of disco balls,
the Bee Gees, and gold medallions;
judging by the suit he was wearing.
A mustache and combed back hair.
He was James Cagney in Smart Money,
and Clark Gable in Gone with the Wind.
Where was he?
Was he in his house?
Perhaps, but it didn't matter.
All I could focus on were the shutters in the background;
the shutters that put a cloak over the rest of the world
so that this moment was the only thing that mattered.
I put the picture back,
and I walked away.
Questions lay in my mind,
but some things are better left untold.

[Carolyn Forché](#) and Poetry of Witness

Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness collects poetry by over 140 poets who, according to the anthology's editor [Carolyn Forché](#), "endured conditions of historical and social extremity during the twentieth century—through exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination." By gathering work that she defines as, "poetic witness to the

dark times in which they [the authors] lived," Forché intended *Against Forgetting* to reveal the ways in which tragic events leave marks upon the imagination. Even in poems that do not explicitly take historical events as their subject matter, tragedy's after-image floats beneath the surface of the language.

Against Forgetting is organized according to historical tragedy, starting with the Armenian Genocide and proceeding through the twentieth century to the pro-democratic demonstrations in China. Each section is preceded by a short statement that gives historical background for the events in order to place the poems in a proper context. Within the sections, the poets are organized chronologically according to their year of birth and Forché presents a brief biographical note elucidating the poet's personal experiences with the historical situation.

Memorial Day for the War Dead

by [Yehuda Amichai](#)

Memorial day for the war dead. Add now
the grief of all your losses to their grief,
even of a woman that has left you. Mix
sorrow with sorrow, like time-saving history,
which stacks holiday and sacrifice and mourning
on one day for easy, convenient memory.

Oh, sweet world soaked, like bread,
in sweet milk for the terrible toothless God.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding."
No use to weep inside and to scream outside.
Behind all this perhaps some great happiness is hiding.

Memorial day. Bitter salt is dressed up
as a little girl with flowers.
The streets are cordoned off with ropes,
for the marching together of the living and the dead.
Children with a grief not their own march slowly,
like stepping over broken glass.

The flautist's mouth will stay like that for many days.
A dead soldier swims above little heads
with the swimming movements of the dead,
with the ancient error the dead have
about the place of the living water.

A flag loses contact with reality and flies off.
A shopwindow is decorated with
dresses of beautiful women, in blue and white.
And everything in three languages:
Hebrew, Arabic, and Death.

A great and royal animal is dying
all through the night under the jasmine
tree with a constant stare at the world.

A man whose son died in the war walks in the street
like a woman with a dead embryo in her womb.
"Behind all this some great happiness is hiding

Yehuda Amichai

Yehuda Amichai was born in Wurzburg, Germany, in 1924 and emigrated with his family to Palestine in 1936. He later became a naturalized Israeli citizen. Although German was his native language, Amichai read Hebrew fluently by the time he moved to Palestine. He served in the Jewish Brigade of the British Army in World War II and fought with the Israeli defense forces in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Following the war, he attended Hebrew University to study Biblical texts and Hebrew literature, and then taught in secondary schools.

I Belong There

by [Mahmoud Darwish](#)

Translated by [Carolyn Forché](#) and Munir Akash

I belong there. I have many memories. I was born as everyone is born.
I have a mother, a house with many windows, brothers, friends, and a
prison cell
with a chilly window! I have a wave snatched by seagulls, a panorama
of my own.

I have a saturated meadow. In the deep horizon of my word, I have a
moon,

a bird's sustenance, and an immortal olive tree.

I have lived on the land long before swords turned man into prey.

I belong there. When heaven mourns for her mother, I return heaven to
her mother.

And I cry so that a returning cloud might carry my tears.

To break the rules, I have learned all the words needed for a trial by
blood.

I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them
a

single word: *Home*.

Mahmoud Darwish

Mahmoud Darwish was born on March 13, 1941 in Al Birweh, Palestine, into a land-owning Sunni Muslim family. During the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, his village was destroyed and his family fled to Lebanon. They returned the following year, secretly re-entering Israel.

As a young man, Darwish faced house arrest and imprisonment for his political activism and for publicly reading his poetry. He joined the official Communist Party of Israel, the *Rakah*, in the 1960s. In 1970, he left for Russia, where he attended the University of Moscow for one year, and then moved to Cairo. He lived in exile for twenty-six years, between Beirut and Paris, until his return to Israel in 1996, after which he settled in Ramallah in the West Bank.

Considered Palestine's most eminent poet, Darwish published his first collection of poems, *Leaves of Olives*, in 1964, when he was 22. Since then, Darwish has published approximately thirty poetry and prose collections which have been translated into more than twenty-two languages.

Some of his more recent poetry titles include *The Butterfly's Burden* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006), *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems* (2003), *Stage of Siege* (2002), *The Adam of Two Edens* (2001), *Mural* (2000), *Bed of the Stranger* (1999), *Psalms* (1995), *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* (1994), and *The Music of Human Flesh* (1980).

Darwish was an editor for a Palestine Liberation Organization monthly journal and the director of the group's research center. In 1987 he was appointed to the PLO executive committee, and resigned in 1993 in opposition to the Oslo Agreement. He served as the editor-in-chief and founder of the literary review *Al-Karmel*, published out of the Sakakini Centre since 1997

About Darwish's work, the poet [Naomi Shihab Nye](#) has said, "Mahmoud Darwish is the Essential Breath of the Palestinian people, the eloquent witness of exile and belonging, exquisitely tuned singer of images that invoke, link, and shine a brilliant light into the world's whole heart. What he speaks has been embraced by readers around the world—his in an utterly necessary voice, unforgettable once discovered."

His awards and honors include the Ibn Sina Prize, the Lenin Peace Prize, the 1969 Lotus prize from the Union of Afro-Asian Writers, France's Knight of Arts and Belles Lettres medal in 1997, the 2001 Prize for Cultural Freedom from the Lannan Foundation, the Moroccan Wissam of intellectual merit handed to him by King Mohammad VI of Morocco, and the USSR's Stalin Peace Prize.

Darwish died on August 9, 2008, in Houston, TX, after complications from heart surgery.

RJI Materials

<http://www.researchjournalisminitiative.net/lessonplans.htm#poetryofwitness>,

1. Choose one photo from the POW collection (<http://www.researchjournalisminitiative.net/flickrpoetryofwitness.htm>) and write a poem about or in response to the imagery there.

The goal of this unit is to engage students of Creative Writing in poetry as a means of exploring Palestinian life. Students will watch various RJI films to give them a sense of

daily life in Palestine, and will read a variety of Palestinian poetry, both by famous poets and young unknowns. **RJI Resources:** [Falastine's poetry](#) and [photographic portfolios](#) by M. Faraj (An Najah University, Palestine); one short film on life in the West Bank (RJI)

Big Ideas: Poetry and photography as a means to bear witness, poetry and photography as the expression of personal experience, poetry as dialogue, literature's capacity to simultaneously participate in and transcend politics.

Enduring Understandings:

- Real politics is about people and their actual individual lives, daily experiences, etc.
- Poetry and photography can serve as a way to bear witness to personal experiences
- Literature allows readers access to personal experiences in global regions of conflict which are typically difficult to discuss
- Photography and film allow viewers access to personal experiences in regions of conflict via visual nuances
- Because literature transcends politics and shares personal experience, it can help readers develop an authentic, compassionate understanding of different global experiences, thus participating in the formation of cross-cultural global empathy

Essential Questions:

- What are the nuances to life in Palestine expressed by Falastine's poems and Faraj's photographs?
- Can we enter someone else's life authentically through literature and photography?
- How might the arts provide a means of communication between cultures? Does artistic expression allow the discussion of difficult regions and political climates better than other means of communication?
- How does cross-cultural artistic exchange change the way we think or feel about the world and other people's experiences?

Activities: Students will...

- View photographic portfolios of Mohammad Faraj
- View one short RJI film on life in the West Bank
- Read the poems of Falastine
- Choose one of Faraj's photos and write a poem of witness
- Or write a poem of witness based on a photograph about Israel or the

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<p>Holocaust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write a poem which bears witness to an experience in your own life/world	
<p>Authentic Assessment: Students will develop and demonstrate proficiency in...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Verbal poetic analysis• Verbal photographic analysis• Writing poetry in response to Palestinian or Israeli photography• Writing poetry to bear witness to experiences of their own lives <p>Final Assessment: Students will produce a final “show” (either in published, online or gallery form) of student poems with the Palestinian pieces which inspired them - View examples of student responses</p>	