

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets Respond! The Poetry of Social Justice

Alexis Rhone Fancher · Wednesday, July 26th, 2017

Poet activist, Kelly Grace Thomas runs a monthly workshop series in Los Angeles called the Poetry of Social Justice, where poets of diverse ages and backgrounds come together to raise their voices through writing.

Cultural Weekly is proud to premiere these poems by Kelly Grace, her workshop partner, Tresha Haefner-Rubinstein, and four workshop members; Angela M. Franklin, Julayne Elle, Monique Mitchell, and Jane Marla Robbins.

— Alexis Rhone Fancher, Poetry Editor

When Mama Sang the Blues

by Angela M. Franklin

I hated the blues because
Daddy hated them more.
He came home from work.
The 33's spinning under diamond tips.
Mama nursing a cold one instead
of shoving cornbread into a hot oven
or sautéing onions for smothered steak.

Mama's blues came by invitation
liberation flowed through
gold-capped teeth.
Blues stole my mama
made her backtalk her angry
man. Whoever said a black woman
was always liberated
didn't walk in my Mama's heels.

Her blues erupted like crude oil

in the middle of a pristine lake without notice.
 Mama nursed a black eye after salty talk
 crushed Schlitz cans
 stacked on our dining table instead of dinner.

Angela M. Franklin is a poet, essayist and visual artist. She is a 2016 Fellow for the Community Literature Initiative, a 2015 Fellow for the Nora Zeale Hurston/Richard Wright Summer Writers Workshop and a 2015 Fellow for the Voices of Our Nation Art, of Southern California. World Stage Press will publish Franklin's first book of poetry Poems Beneath My Keloids in 2018. Her poems and essays are forthcoming in Leimert Park Redux, and Unmasked, Women Write about Sex and Intimacy after 50. She has traveled to African countries to capture stories of women suffering from the ravages of civil war. As a fervent supporter of impoverished women and children, she fights to lift them out of poverty, through clean water and educational projects. Locally, she is a regular participant of the Poetry of Social Justice Workshop, where she joins diverse poets to write and discuss social justice issues.

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Return to Sender

by Julayne Elle

**Since 1953, Korea has sent over 150,000 children to the USA via inter-country adoption. Due to a loophole in the Child Citizenship Act, there are numerous inter-country adoptees living without US citizenship. Some have been deported to their country of origin.*

Korea exported me to America
 Before I could speak my name.
 Minnesota, Land of 10,000 Lakes
 Better Life, education

Forever family bruises
 denied me US citizenship.
 Homeless, absent high school degree
 starvation shoplifts
 military time served
 America's Promised Prison Land

Deported back to Korea
 Incheon Airport lobby
 solitary confinement persists
 no Welcome sign
 not even a?????

family reunions surround me
 mother's bouquet
 embraces graduated daughter

No arms encircle my ghost body.

Korean streets handcuff
 my life sentence
 birthland homesickness
 leftover kimchi barely sustains
 midnight Han River bridges
 protect my frozen soul
 brain resists foreign language
 ?????
 throat chokes syllables
 language is life
 ???

Let me survive.
 My lifeless sentence.

Julayne Elle is a 1.X generation adopted Asian American poet, activist, writer and occasional blogger. Writing is a source of liberation and survival for her. Julayne was a Community Literature Initiative Scholar in the Poetry cohort and you can hear her work at open mics throughout southern California. She has spoken on adoption at symposiums and universities in Korea and the US. She is a member of the Adoptee Rights Campaign working to pass the Adoptee Citizenship Act to ensure all inter-country adoptees have US citizenship. Her first book of poetry is forthcoming. <http://adopteerightscampaign.org/aca/>

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Prey

by Monique Mitchell

Has the mantis seen
 the god she prays to?
 Devout servant
 of the unseen
 she is.

You are
 one prayer away from salvation.
 One offering from forgiveness.

Bow before your flag and forget
 how it chokes you.
 Fashioned from the blood of your grandfathers.
 The blue of your grandmother's bruised thighs.
 White of teeth broken
 for blasphemy.

Our bodies lay broken
 as human sacrifice
 on the altar.

Mimic the mantis
 in fervent prayer.
 Bow to the unseen god-
 the myth of American freedom.

Monique Mitchell is a Los Angeles native writer and educator currently serving as Education Coordinator at Get Lit-Words Ignite, a non-profit youth poetry organization. Through this position, Monique serves disenfranchised youth by empowering them to strengthen their voice through poetry. Community organizing is dear to her heart, and she strives to create safe spaces for all to write, speak, and empower themselves.

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My Prejudice

by Jane Marla Robbins

My prejudice eats bacon and eggs for breakfast.
 My prejudice reminds me I'm Jewish
 and that I loved my African-American teacher,
 a gentle genius. My prejudice grieved his suicide.

My prejudice hated my bigger, not quite Jewish nose
 and had it made smaller.
 My prejudice loves my illegal cleaning lady
 and wishes she weren't illegal.

My prejudice laughs and kills
 like any good stand up comic.
 My prejudice has orgasms but not
 always with a partner.
 My prejudice cuts flowers,
 loves beautiful clothes,

meals like paintings on a plate.

My prejudice wants to sleep
on clean sheets.
My prejudice goes to sleep
with me even though I'd rather
sleep alone.

My prejudice will also get its hands dirty.
My prejudice talks to God
when it remembers, or when it believes
there is a God who'll listen.

Jane Marla Robbins's two-character play, A Radical Friendship, about the passionate friendship and galvanizing civil rights work of Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Heschel, was produced in NY and LA starring Ed Asner. Jane's workshops based on her best-selling Acting Techniques for Everyday Life: Look and Feel Self-Confident in Difficult Real-Life Situations, have helped at-risk youth find their truth, veterans prepare for job interviews, and more. The Kennedy Center commissioned her to write Reminiscences of Mozart by His Sister, which, like her play, Dear Nobody (produced in NY and London), is about a real (Eighteenth Century) woman whose life was tragically compromised. A finalist for a CAPS Grant in Poetry from the National Endowment of the Arts, Jane is the author of Poems of The Laughing Buddha. For more information visit www.janemarlarobbins.com

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Don't Worry About It

by Tresha Haefner-Rubinstein

Don't worry about the man's hands growing.
like a rope around the neck of the girl in the alley.
Don't worry about the boys who huddle too close
to your daughter in the elevator
Don't worry about the fingers, the size and weight of tombstones
they could bury in her neck.
Don't worry
about the boy who doesn't come home.
Or the girl who turns red, like a newly boiled lobster
after her first date. Don't worry
about all those fires you see,
smoldering in the heart,
or the hearts broken.
Like bombed out newspaper buildings in Tehran. Don't worry
about the poor, or the prejudiced, or the letter N
parading through the streets like a balloon in its own brigade. Don't worry

about the car, broke down on the side of the country,
 or the country, breaking in the fist of a boy.
 Don't worry about the tiger that stalks the cage of your own bones,
 or the boots that blacken up your personal sky.
 The water that graveyards your strangers,
 or the desert swallowing your neighbor's breath. Don't worry
 the night with your prayers.
 Or the synagogue with your candles.
 The moon is a fool if it thinks it can hear you,
 and the sun, when it rises,
 has burned all its own listening to sand.
 And the tongues of your mothers to ash.

Tresha Faye Haefner-Rubinstein's work can be found in such journals and magazines as The Cincinnati Review, Poet Lore, Prairie Schooner, and Rattle, to name a few. She holds an M.A. in Psychology with a specialization in Creativity Studies, and is the founder of The Poetry Salon in Los Angeles. She provides inspiring workshops where writers come together to explore, express, and grow together in the arts. She is so happy to partner with Kelly Grace Thomas, who leads the monthly writing workshop The Poetry of Social Justice. It is truly a place to gain inspiration, open conversation, ignite new ideas, and find encouragement and support among a growing group of friends. Tresha believes that writing has the power to help us express ourselves individually, and build powerful communities.

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We Look at Blackbirds Different

by Kelly Grace Thomas

Crows remember the grudge
 of faces. The weapon
 of a man.

Each face passed down among the murder.
 An inherited revenge. A hangover of wars
 not won.

Somewhere a bird hatches with rage
 Knowing it doesn't match the flowers.
 And somewhere a bird learns it has to circle twice
 to be fed.
 Perhaps man is more bird than body.
 Collecting crime like surnames.

Another reason to let anger in
our bed.

There are things we are birthed
to hate

even if we
never met.

Kelly Grace Thomas is the winner of the 2017 Neil Postman Award for Metaphor from Rattle and a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Kelly was also a 2016 Fellow for the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop. Kelly's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in: Nashville Review, The Boiler, Sixth Finch, Muzzle, Rattle, PANK and more. Kelly's chapbook, Zersetzung, was a finalist for the 2017 Lorien Prize from Thoughtcrime Press. Kelly works to bring poetry to underserved youth as the Manager of Education and Pedagogy for Get Lit-Words Ignite. She is passionate about helping youth develop and strengthen their voice, to speak up about issues of social justice, urgency and identity. At Get Lit they call this movement the #LiteraryRiot. For more of her work please visit www.kellygracethomas.com

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