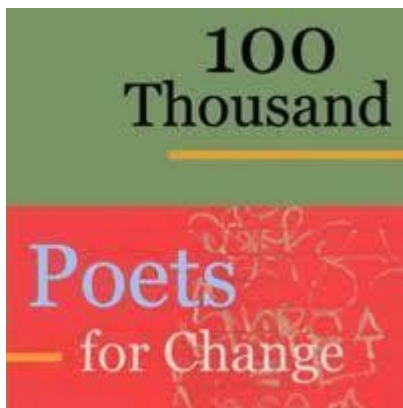


Poets Stand Up

By Sarah Browning, October 12, 2011



In Paris, poets staged a flash mob outside the Louvre Museum. In North Carolina, they sent poems to their state legislators, calling on them to restore arts education funding to the decimated state budget. In Vancouver, BC, poets cleaned up a beach before their reading. There was a reading in solidarity with the people of Tibet in Pasadena, California, events throughout Mexico City demanding an end to violence, and "an exorcism of fear and helplessness" in Norman, Oklahoma. Poets gathered in Fez, Morocco, and Jalalabad, Afghanistan and Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

All this – and more – made up 100 Thousand Poets for Change on Saturday, September 24, 2011. Poets gathered in over 550 cities in 95 countries to speak out for peace and sustainability. For some poets, it was their first time gathering with an agenda for social change.

I live in Washington, DC, however, that most political of cities. Poets have been gathering here for years to speak out against war and for a more just world. The organization that I run, Split This Rock, was founded for just this purpose, to call poets to the center of public life. I didn't want to mark this global occasion, this uprising of the poets, with what for us would be just another reading.

Walk of Shame

In a brainstorming conversation, the event organizer, San Francisco poet and publisher Michael Rothenberg, mentioned that he'd begun hearing from poets who would not be participating. "Imagine," he said. "We're kicking around all these possibilities and there are place where poets can't do anything public at all. They'd be arrested – or worse."

My brain flashed, as one hopes it will do at moments such as these. "What if we stand outside the embassies of some of those countries and read the silenced poets' poems so they can be part of 100 Thousand Poets for Change too?"

The Poetry Walk of Shame was born. We chose three countries with egregious human rights records, from three parts of the world, whose embassies were within walking distance of one another. Sadly, this was not a difficult task. The embassies of Yemen and Burma are tucked into a leafy corner of DC called Kalorama, just northwest of Dupont Circle. And just downhill, on a stretch of Massachusetts Avenue known as Embassy Row, stands an unprepossessing row house, the embassy of [Turkmenistan](#). Not only do these countries routinely fall in the "Not Free" column produced annually by [Freedom House](#), but two of them – Yemen and Turkmenistan – are U.S. allies, partners in the so-called Global War on Terror. This would give us the opportunity to call our own government to account for supporting regimes that routinely suppress one of our own most cherished rights, the right to free expression.

Next, we set about finding poems to read. Burma and Yemen were easy. A fine Burmese poet-in-exile, and FPIF contributor, Kyi May Kaung, lives in the DC area. She immediately accepted my invitation to [read her own poems](#) at her country's US headquarters.

Searching the web, I found that the UK literary journal, [Banipal](#), had published a special issue dedicated to Yemeni literature in translation. Several poems from the issue, by Mohammad al-Qaood and Shawqi Shafiq, were perfect for our purposes and had the added benefit of having been translated

from the Arabic by Iraqi poet and New York University professor Sinan Antoon, a Split This Rock Poetry Festival 2010 featured poet. I invited the locally based Lebanese poet Zein El-Amine to read the poems at the Yemeni embassy.

The Problem of Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan, a closed country, was another story. For many years, the previous dictator allowed the publication of only books by a single Turkmen author, his own.

No one on the U.S. or international translator networks my colleague Yvette Neisser Moreno belongs to translates from the Turkmen or knows anyone who does. We found a website in English devoted to the 18th century poet Makhtumkuli, considered the national poet of Turkmenistan. We figured one of his poems might work on the Walk, but it was a far cry from a contemporary poet writing under duress or in the ache of exile, as was the case with our other poets.

Meanwhile, we were proceeding, with the help of FPIF/IPS, alerting the media and spreading the word. I was about to start looking for Uzbek or Kyrgyz poems, figuring that neighboring human rights violators could represent the whole region in a pinch.

Then one morning less than a week before September 24, I received a phone call from a correspondent of Radio Free Europe-Turkmenistan, stationed in Vienna. During our interview I had to admit to having a hard time finding poems in English by Turkmen poets. I might also have admitted (but didn't) that previous to organizing this event I knew next to nothing about his country and that I chose it as a target in part because its embassy was only a short walk from that of Burma. "I am a Turkmen poet," Yovshan Annagurban replied. "And I have translated some of my poems into English."

And just like that, the Walk ceased to be primarily an organizing challenge and came alive. Yovshan sent me the link to his [piece](#), in Turkmen, and it suddenly seemed possible that poets locked inside the country might learn what we were doing, might draw a bit of strength from it. What more could a poet-activist hope to achieve?

Yovshan also sent a few of his poems and one he had translated by Annasoltan Kekilova, who'd died in a psychiatric hospital during the Soviet era. (This continues to be a favorite tactic of the Turkmen despots, scooping up dissidents and squirreling them away in psychiatric hospitals. You can read about recent cases [here](#).) But the Turkmen government has sealed the country so effectively that human rights organizations have very little access. As [Amnesty International](#) says in one of a handful of documents about the country on their site, "Only a fraction of cases involving human rights violations come to the attention of human rights observers." And indeed, how often do we see news of Turkmenistan in the Western media?

Expanding to Bahrain

The day before the Walk I got another startling call, this one from the overall event organizer Michael Rothenberg. He told me he'd heard from a poet in Bahrain, another U.S. ally brutally repressing its people. Just this year, in fact, a young poet, Ayat Al-Gormezi, had been arrested and sentenced to a year in prison for reading a pro-democracy poem at a peaceful demonstration in Bahrain. International pressure resulted in her release, but not before she'd been tortured and not before the message had been sent to the country's writers and activists to keep their mouths shut.

Despite the risks, he and his fellow poets were meeting – in secret – the Bahraini poet told Michael. They had read about the DC poets' Walk on the web. Would we be willing to read in front of their embassy, too, in solidarity with their clandestine gathering? How could we say no?

The Walk itself was a powerful act of witnessing, each embassy shuttered, the streets quiet. We handed out poems to those few who walked by and we honored the voices of the brave poets laboring under the most difficult of circumstances. When we were done, three of us drove to the Bahraini embassy and stood in front of a fence at a desolate, isolated spot, where I read Ayat Al-Gormezi's words of defiance.

"Thanks a lot dear American friends," wrote *Desperate Turkmen* in a comment on the RFE article. "I really appreciate your kindness. One Turkmen poet says that if a poet will kneel, his countrymen will be slaves."

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