

## Lifting poetry off the page

### Annie Altamirano

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#### Originally (1990) by Carol Ann Duffy

We came from our own country in a red  
room  
which fell through the fields, our mother  
singing  
our father's name to the turn of the  
wheels.  
My brothers cried, one of them bawling,  
*Home,*  
*Home,* as the miles rushed back to the  
city,  
the street, the house, the vacant rooms  
where we didn't live any more. I stared  
at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw.

All childhood is an emigration. Some are  
slow,  
leaving you standing, resigned, up an  
avenue  
where no one you know stays. Others are  
sudden.  
Your accent wrong. Corners, which seem  
familiar,

leading to unimagined, pebble--dashed  
estates, big boys  
eating worms and shouting words you  
don't understand.  
My parents' anxiety stirred like a loose  
tooth  
in my head. *I want our own country,* I  
said.

But then you forget, or don't recall, or  
change,  
and, seeing your brother swallow a slug,  
feel only  
a skelf of shame. I remember my tongue  
shedding its skin like a snake, my voice  
in the classroom sounding just like the  
rest. Do I only think  
I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of  
first space  
and the right place? Now, *Where do you*  
*come from?*  
strangers ask. *Originally?* And I hesitate.

#### Neighbours by Benjamin Zephaniah (from 'Propa Propaganda')

I am the type you are supposed to fear  
Black and foreign  
Big and dreadlocks  
An uneducated grass eater.

I talk in tongues  
I chant at night  
I appear anywhere,  
I sleep with lions  
And when the moon gets me  
I am a Wailer.

I am moving in  
Next door to you

So you can get to know me,  
You will see my shadow  
In the bathroom window,  
My aromas will occupy  
Your space,  
Our ball will be in your court.  
How will you feel?

You should feel good  
You have been chosen.

I am the type you are supposed to love  
Dark and mysterious  
Tall and natural

Thinking, tea total.  
I talk in schools  
I sing on TV  
I am in the papers,  
I keep cool cats

And when the sun is shining  
I go Carnival.

### **The Day the War Came by Nicola Davies**

The day war came there were flowers on  
the window sill  
and my father sang my baby brother  
back to sleep.  
My mother made my breakfast, kissed  
my nose  
and walked with me to school.

That morning I learned about volcanoes,  
I sang a song about how tadpoles turn at  
last to frogs.

I made a picture of myself with wings.  
Then, just after lunch, while I watched a  
cloud shaped like a dolphin, war came.  
At first, just like a spattering of hail  
a voice of thunder...  
then all smoke and fire and noise, that I  
didn't understand.

It came across the playground.  
It came into my teacher's face.  
It brought the roof down.  
and turned my town to rubble.

I can't say the words that tell you  
about the blackened hole that had been  
my home.

All I can say is this:

war took everything

war took everyone  
I was ragged, bloody, all alone.

I ran. Rode on the back of trucks, in  
buses;  
walked over fields and roads and

mountains,  
in the cold and mud and rain;  
on a boat that leaked and almost sank  
and up a beach where babies lay face  
down in the sand.

I ran until I couldn't run  
until I reached a row of huts  
and found a corner with a dirty blanket  
and a door that rattled in the wind

But war had followed me.  
It was underneath my skin,  
behind my eyes,  
and in my dreams.  
It had taken possession of my heart.

I walked and walked to try and drive war  
out of myself,  
to try and find a place it hadn't reached.  
But war was in the way that doors shut  
when I came down the street  
It was in the way the people didn't smile,  
and turned away.

I came to a school.  
I looked in through the window.  
They were learning all about volcanoes  
And drawing birds and singing.

I went inside.  
My footsteps echoed in the hall  
I pushed the door and faces turned  
towards me  
but the teacher didn't smile.  
She said, there is no room for you,

you see, there is no chair for you to sit on,  
you have to go away.

And then I understood that war had got  
here too.

I turned around and went back to the  
hut, the corner and the blanket  
and crawled inside.  
It seemed that war had taken all the  
world and all the people in it.

The door banged.  
I thought it was the wind.  
But a child's voice spoke

"I brought you this," she said "so you can  
come to school."

It was a chair. A chair for me to sit on and  
learn about volcanoes, frogs and singing  
And drive the war out of my heart.

She smiled and said "My friends have  
brought theirs too, so all the children  
here can come to school"

Out of every hut a child came and we  
walked together,  
on a road all lined with chairs.  
Pushing back the war with every step.

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#### Useful resources:

**Carol Anne Duffy** <https://www.panmacmillan.com/authors/carol-ann-duffy/e19637b0-b62b-4bfa-a1dc-08d5dcdedd41>

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/originally>

Comic creators <https://www.makebeliefscomix.com/Comix/>

<https://www.pixton.com/>

Student video representations <https://youtu.be/Bh06kbCwUP8>

[https://youtu.be/x\\_ISCjKuXUE](https://youtu.be/x_ISCjKuXUE)

**Benjamin Zephaniah** <https://benjaminzephaniah.com/>

[https://www.best-poems.net/benjamin\\_zephaniah/index.html](https://www.best-poems.net/benjamin_zephaniah/index.html)

'Neighbours' in the voice of Benjamin Zephaniah [https://youtu.be/FEw-j2LR\\_-w](https://youtu.be/FEw-j2LR_-w)

'I am not de problem': Benjamin Zephaniah on modern racism – Newsnight  
<https://youtu.be/RXDxMH2EUTY>

Dread Poets Society <https://youtu.be/SOr0-iDE8dY>

We Refugees <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/we-refugees/>

**Songs** <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/songs-against-racism/>

<https://www.grammy.com/news/fight-power-11-powerful-protest-songs-advocating-racial-justice>

**Poems** <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/poems-on-racism/>  
<https://interestingliterature.com/2022/03/best-poems-about-race-racism/>

Nicola Davies <https://nicola-davies.com/blog/?p=661>

Refugees [www.helprefugees.org](http://www.helprefugees.org)

An Amnesty International human rights resource on asylum and refugee issues:  
[https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2017-06/Activity%20-%20Seeking%20safety.pdf?QEgP75\\_LXPGt0d91YCDXgx0efPQ4SI3u=](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2017-06/Activity%20-%20Seeking%20safety.pdf?QEgP75_LXPGt0d91YCDXgx0efPQ4SI3u=)

“Teaching About Refugees” from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
[www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-about-refugees.html](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-about-refugees.html)

Warsan Shire reading her poem Home, <https://youtu.be/nI9D92Xiygo>  
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/home-warsan-shire>