

Close Talking Episode #108

9/11 Poems

September 15, 2020

<https://soundcloud.com/close-talking/episode-108-poetry-and-911-part-2-international-perspectives-and-the-rush-to-war>

Show Notes

(Close Talking theme music)

Jack 0:08

Hello and welcome to Close Talking the world's most popular poetry analysis podcast from Cardboard Box Productions Incorporated. I am co-host Jack Rossiter-Munley and with my good friend Connor McNamara Stratton, we read a poem,

Connor 0:21

talk about the poem,

Jack 0:23

and read the poem again.

Connor 0:25

Before we get into today's selection, a quick note that if you like what we do here, at Close Talking and have a spare minute of your time, it would mean the world to us, if you would give the podcast a rating and review on Apple podcasts.

Jack 0:40

Those ratings and reviews help boost us up the algorithm, and find new listeners.

Connor 0:44

And, if you have suggestions for future episodes, or comments on this one, you can send us an email at closetalkingpoetry@gmail.com.

Jack 1:04

And you can also find us on social media, on Twitter the show is @closetalking, I am @jackrossitermun, and Connor is @connormstratton. On Instagram the show is @closetalkingpoetry, and on Facebook it's facebook.com/closetalking. We also have a website closetalking.com where you can find all of the past episodes of the podcast.

Connor 1:18

on with the show.

Jack 1:23

Hey everybody, this is Jack, really quickly before we get into today's episode, I just wanted to note that this is part two of our three part series on poetry and 9/11 and poetry in the aftermath of 9/11. In our first episode, we really focused on the day itself and poetry that was processing trauma. And in this one, we move a little bit farther along to looking at how poetry engaged with parts of the 9/11 story that were left out. And the role that poetry played during the rush to war and in the wars that came after 9/11 with a particular focus on international voices, and voices from outside the United States. We are also breaking our usual read the poem talk about the poem read the poem, again, format, and we're kind of bringing a lot of different poems to one subject in these episodes. Hope you like it.

Connor 2:12

The way that the Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan have, are talked about now, it's like, generally accepted as two total catastrophes and terrible ideas. Which, I mean, is the case and in some ways, I think has actually opened the door for somewhat of a reckoning of like the rise in Islamophobia and all that stuff, which is just like, oh, if you know, the war was a disaster, then probably the rationales to justify things were a disaster and then maybe we shouldn't have been so Islamophobic. But at the same time, you know, it's, it's still hard. And part of this is is the distance that we have from other countries and in some ways like any country has from another country that's far away, but, but also like the way our military has become, so, like without the draft, it's it's become very isolated in some ways, I think from other parts of the population, but that the true toll on Iraq and Afghanistan and other parts of like the Middle East and West Asia and South Asia has just been horrific. And you know, you said 37 million displaced. I think the war in Iraq itself has casualty toll of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis which is just exponentially higher than the total of US troops, which is also very high. And then, of course, the fact that many or most of those people in Iraq are were not soldiers, but were civilians. And even as we say, it was kind of like, sometimes I feel like it's talked about a little bit as a woopsie or something. And it's like, there's there's a, I think, because I guess like because the US struggles to understand its role in the world as maybe not always the best and having a long history of using violence on other people for its own power and security, and economic gain, that even even when something as as obviously disastrous as these two wars, there's still not an ability I think to reckon with, like what that has meant for other people.

Jack 5:28

I think that's so right. I feel like the wars get wrapped up in this conversation of like a fated response. Like when you try and engage, at least this has happened to me on a few occasions, when you try to engage with people who were pro-war at the time, their response now is like, 'Oh, they were obviously a mistake. But like we were all kind of in a weird place back then.' Which is like, a complete abdication of responsibility on one level for, like the fact that you were willing like I there were plenty of people who weren't in that place there were global protests on a massive scale to US war in Iraq. There were a lot of people literally screaming, stop, don't do this. It's not right. So to just try and play it off is like, well, you know, it was it was a different time it was, you know, we couldn't possibly have known, it's like, no, it was

pretty easy to know, like, or, if not easy, it was at least like not hidden. The the opposition was very present, and the counter arguments were present. But in the authorization of powers for George W. Bush, the increased executive powers related to war-making you see the intense pressure that elected officials were feeling in the wake of 9/11, to, you know, at the very least look and act tough, which is highly unfortunate. But in terms of removing complexity from narratives around 9/11, something else that happens pretty early on is that the sort of imagistic representation of the day becomes very particularized, especially for an American audience. And so the image of firefighters raising the flag, which is already a visual echo of Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima becomes the most circulated image of the event, when in the early days after 9/11, the really iconic image was known as the falling man, which was a person who had jumped out of the Towers, as many, many, many people did on the day of the 9/11. And, again, on one level, there's a very human personal reason for those images not to be widely circulated. It is such an intense and existentially dreadful type of pain and fear that you are sort of confronted with when you look at those images. But the fact that people who jumped on 9/11 are not a bigger part of the popular 9/11 story is another level on which the focus was moved pretty early on to who are the heroes of the day. And most of them are NYPD, NYFD, and at the time, and especially then much more so than now particularly NYPD, mostly white, mostly men, in almost entirely men in the entire New York City Fire Department of like, I forget how many thousands of people I think there were like 11 women on 9/11. But this interest in image curation, in narrative curation, whether conscious or unconscious ends up creating a very particular view of the event that in some ways, downplays some of the greatest pain. But there is this poem by Christine Hartzler, "The Diver", which came out in 2003, which is a really powerful sort of grappling with, with the people who, who jumped and it's called "The Diver".

I saw Greg Louganis dive in St. Louis
in 1984. Oh the way he folded and
unfolded in the air. We all gasped
when he split the surface and disappeared.
But he rose up in a shimmering swath
of bubbles. unbounded joy.

Seventeen years later, a man steps out
through the lattice of a skyscraper
and folds himself into a breathtaking pike.
An anonymous diver abandoning his
day job. Maybe you've seen the
photograph? A single body falling white
oxford full and fluttering, like a peony,
blowsy on that singular day.

And that's that's directly about the falling man image if you've seen it, that is referencing it specifically. And that image hasn't totally vanished from cultural consciousness, the ad campaign for I believe the fifth season of Mad Men was accused of looking too much like the the falling man image. And that that is sort of the the one image of people who jumped but by

and large that's not a huge part of the retold story of 9/11 in the way that that many other stories are retold.

Connor 10:32

Yeah, no, that's that's really interesting. Um, it's yeah, it's, I guess, like, kind of jumping off that, you know, we we found a few different kind of like responses to both the falling man image and just the event itself. And, you know, it's it's just, I think there, there was in the immediate aftermath, so much complexity in how people were responding to it, and I think, you know, maybe we didn't have the capacity to hold that now. But maybe we can hold a little bit of it. There was a poem I found by the poet, Samuel Hazo, who is the son of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants. And this is just an excerpt, but he wrote a poem September 11, 2001. The sort of the end of the poem goes,

Of all

the thousands there, we saw
those few, just those, freefalling
through the sky, like flotsam from a blaze ...
Nightmares of impact crushed us.
We slept like the doomed or drowned,
then woke to oratory, vigils,
valor, journalists declaring war
and, snapping from aerals or poles,
the furious clamor of flags.

Which actually interestingly captures sort of both those those two in the transition to those from the first image to the second image where this the speaker sees people jumping from the from the Towers and the nightmares of impact crushed us and then woke to oratory and journalists declaring war and then the furious clamor of flags so like, you know, the next figurative day you have the you know, the image of the the firemen raising the flag. And that kind of like, hyper patriotism. And another another poem that I think was fairly, I mean, I wasn't aware of it at the time because I was young, but I but it from what I've read about it, I think it was fairly widely circulated. But it was by the poet Suheir Hammad who yeah, is a Palestinian, was born in in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan and then moved to Brooklyn when she was a young child. And wrote this poem "First Writing Since", which is a long poem, but this this part has been, I think I've seen it excerpt excerpted a few places.

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilots heart failed,
the plane's engine died.
then please god let it be a nightmare. Wake me now.
please god after the second plane, please don't let it be anyone
who looks like my brothers.

Which I think yeah, I mean sort of speaks for itself. But, you know, I think like it's something that kind of like mainstream white America has taken time to realize that like, you know,

Islamophobia and like the racialization of Muslims and just like the kind of racism against people from the Middle East or South Asia - like, kind of got more intense after 9/11 but I think for people sort of those identities, the, the awareness that this kind of event would do that in America was immediate, you know, which this kind of like poem speaks to, which is like, oh, please, just like, let it be not someone who looks, you know, like me, because I know what will happen as a result.

Jack 15:31

And I think that's another instance where historical context comes into play because most of the terrorist acts leading up to 9/11 itself that had taken place during the '90s were domestic terrorism; the Oklahoma City bombing, the various government standoffs at Ruby Ridge or in Waco, like these were not you know, the the sort of fear of the other existed in American culture and was reproduced constantly but the real threats had been coming from white nationalist neo nazi groups. And so that moment of seeing a major terrorist attack and thinking, obviously, it could be somebody who looks like me, but I hope and pray it isn't like you see that tension grows under the weight of history as well. Yeah, just a different kind of assessment of the danger and the trauma and the fear that came after 9/11 because, and again, this isn't like a clean break between white writers and bipoc writers, but many many writers of color after 9/11 were identifying different kinds of threats and different kinds of fears and a different just view on what was happening and where the country could go. There are very few white writers who actually write really perceptively about 9/11, they write perceptively about the emotions of 9/11, but not necessarily the context of 9/11, and where you find a lot of that, in poetry as well as in, like, more general commentary is from writers of color. And I think you see that here.

Connor 17:10

And you also see, you know, equal amounts horror at the act itself, you know, like this, this little excerpt of the poem is like, please god let this be a mistake or be a nightmare and not be real. But it's just that there's a complexity to it that it's like, this is a horrible, unspeakable act and also, like it has, will have enormous consequences on myself and you know, my communities.

Jack 17:44

Absolutely.

Connor 17:45

There are sometimes an unfair pressure put on those writers as well to sort of declare that they didn't stand by the acts of 9/11 when it's like, obviously not.

Jack 18:00

Well you see that with elected officials as well, Ilhan Omar the degree to which she has had to clarify to the nth degree any statement relating to 9/11 that she has ever made is something that you just wouldn't see with a white politician or possibly even a politician who doesn't wear a head covering.

Connor 18:21

Yeah, yeah. No, it is. Ilhan Omar is such an interesting example. I mean, there was that was the some Republican state house had that poster they were distributing that like had Omar's face juxtaposed directly with the burning Twin Towers. Which is like, I mean, yeah, totally wild, but at the same time, in her own biography, like her own life, the she didn't - after 9/11 was when she committed kind of, as she talks about it to wearing hijab, that like, she kind of saw this sort of increase in Islamophobia and wanted to sort of like, show this visible pride for Islam. And, in doing so, like, provide a kind of model of representation that it's, it's one of those complicated things where, on the one hand if you avoid wearing it, like you yourself might sort of evade some level of, you know, maybe you can pass as, you know, non-Muslim sometimes and avoid the kind of hatred directed at you. And yet at the same time, you know, and especially since she's become more visible and public, like her presence sort of by wearing it provides this counter narrative, sort of visual narrative of like, here's Ilhan Omar who like, is a champion of Medicare for all and the green new deal and like, you know, has gotten a lot of, like important - I don't know has, you know, has put forward a pretty, like, compassionate radical legislation in the house and, you know, um, and also does, you know, speak critically at the State of Israel and it does get her into trouble some, somewhat fairly and some less than fairly, but, um, I think it's a it's a burden that she takes on herself, but it, it sort of, I think makes space for others to kind of like to wear the hijab or you know, because there's now this like really visible figure who is a badass.

Jack 21:11

Absolutely, I mean, the next elected official who wears hijab is gonna have it infinitely easier because she was willing to take that risk and and be the first and that is such an incredible task to take on for yourself, I cannot even imagine.

Connor 21:27

There's so much to talk about, there's obviously been so much written about 9/11 in such such from so many different angles.

Jack 21:36

Um, I think it's useful to break it down just a little bit. And we've sort of done this, but there are different responses to 9/11 from different sectors. And a lot of times what's talked about in terms of 9/11, again, the narratives that come out of it is this moment of national unity. And again, there is a level in which that's true. This was a national trauma, and you hear that in Claudia Rankine writing about her own surprise, her speakers I should say, surprised response to Rudy Giuliani, like there was a level of national pain that was being felt. But having talked to a lot of people about 9/11 there are distinctive differences in response, and that kind of plays out in the artistic response. Being in New York City was a fundamentally different experience of 9/11 or being near New York City than anywhere else. People there to this day, have a different relationship to that attack than anywhere else.

Connor 22:31

Something also that's important, of course, is that there are two other planes. You know, there's one that went into the Pentagon and one that went into a field in Pennsylvania. And there's, I think, like another slightly wider, wider circle of like the northeast. You know, I know Sarita who is the dedicatee to every episode, except for one grew up outside Philly, and we've talked about our experiences on 9/11. And they were just wildly different. She wasn't it wasn't the same as being in in the city itself, but it was a lot more.

Jack 23:14

It's a lot more immediate. Yeah, I think that's that's absolutely true. And even within New York, there are people who talk about it being a different experience where in Manhattan or in the city you lived, right as for some people, their entire neighborhood they described as looking like or feeling like a warzone for months. And if you were at the tip of Manhattan, you might not even know that that was still happening. So even within New York, I think Art Spiegelman also talks about that in his book about 9/11 how it feels like different worlds even within the island after a certain point. So there's sort of Lower Manhattan, broader New York and then the Northeast, that's kind of the the center of 9/11 unsurprisingly, because that is where all of the planes went down. As you saw rightly pointed out, it's not just New York. And then like the rest of the country had a very different relationship to it. It was big, like we Connor and I were both outside Chicago at the time. Like it was a massive event, but it didn't necessarily touch and alter your life in the same way like people in and around New York, if you saw the New York skyline, it was materially changed, it looked different, there was dusting clouds of ash in the air for days like you could see the impact. And then, beyond the United States, there was a very different reaction from the rest of the world because so much of the narrative in the US was an offshoot of a certain kind of American exceptionalism because the United States has never been bordered by significant adversaries. So there was this narrative around like the world coming home to the US and this new kind of terror visiting its shores, and not in a callous way, but a lot of response from the rest of the world was incredibly sympathetic, incredibly passionate and responsive and receptive to the United States. But there was also on some level, if you talk to individuals from other countries, there was a level of like, well, we've been here before, we have had experiences that look like this, and in fact, you can see, with the bombings that took place in Madrid or in London after 9/11, there is not the same massive alteration to the society. Internationally, the response was different than the United States. So this kind of geographical separation happens. And then as we discussed a little bit, there is a, you know, and there's complexities within these because there's such big categories, but by and large, the popular white response to 9/11 was different from the way that people of color, even within the United States, were experiencing it. And you see that in terms of the popular culture that's made about it, like the world of hip hop and rap at the time, there were much more critical responses to 9/11 than in almost any other genre. And there's a reason for that, because it was a group of people who had seen the ways that the system had failed them. And they saw all of the same parts of that system that had failed them ramping up in response to 9/11. And in fact, that's what played out with the militarization of police forces. And but in terms of the international response for a lot of people in the United States, it's just a way of thinking about 9/11 that will never meet you, unless you actually talk to people from other countries or engage with media made about 9/11 from other countries, because it is this wildly

decentering act because however complex the narratives about 9/11 get, there is this core understanding of the event as so big, that it changed everything. Even when complexity in historical context, are brought to it, it's usually context about US involvement with other countries, it's not necessarily context about global acts of terror over time. And there is a movie that I recommend to everyone, which is called "11'09"01" and it is a bunch of short films from directors around the world from different countries. And each film is 11 minutes, nine seconds and one frame long, and they all in very different ways are about 9/11. To this day, it has never found a US distributor, they won awards at the Venice Film Festival, but it came out so soon after the attacks and it contained messages, none of which are necessarily wildly radical, but which were so outside of what the popular culture could contain at the time that it never made its way to the United States. It puts 9/11 and what happened to the United States in a global context and there are quite a few pieces from it that I think about all the time. And the stuff that's in it is the stuff that often gets left out of the US story. There's a whole piece that the one from Mexico which was actually by Alejandro Inarritu, who has now won Oscars. Oh, yeah. But it's it's mostly a dark screen with like audio, from the day it's absolutely horrifying. Not my favorite from the group, but one that definitely stands out for being one of the most visceral. But the one from Japan is fascinating because it is about a traumatized World War II veteran who thinks he's a snake. It's, I it's really I highly recommend it. It's got a lot going on it, but what you see from other countries is this kind of global conversation that can incorporate and is big enough to hold an event like 9/11, whereas the national conversation in the United States often feels like it's not necessarily big enough to hold an event so complex.

Connor 29:13

Yeah, no, that's really right. And I have not seen those films and I need to, they seem really so necessary. It reminds me of I found this years ago and I just love I love them. But they're there's a form of poetry form called the called the landay, I think is how you say it. And it's like a very short, originally like oral form of poetry from like, around Afghanistan, and it's interesting because it's primarily written and sort of shared by women and among women, and it has this kind of sometimes it's sung, but it has this you know, sort of like often subversive quality or or there's, there's this situation with the form and the fact that it's a poem or singing, that allows sort of, and has allowed women for a lot like I think thousands of years, it's very, very ancient, to kind of like express certain things that in sort of a, you know, accepted society would be taboo. But there was this journalist who kind of translated them from, I think Pashto is the was the language and they're, they're very short - they're like Haiku almost. And they've and you know, so here's one that's that's not sort of like related to anything that we're talking about, but just one that I said, I like a lot.

I call. You're stone.

One day you'll look and find I'm gone.

And there's a lot of like love poems obviously, and kind of interesting sort of things like that. And, you know, then it's also kind of like evolved on Facebook and social media and kind of is shared that way. And it's really fascinating. But there's also this sort of, current of, you know, because like Afghanistan has been occupied, you know, the US war in Afghanistan is in still

going on. Despite this, sort of hobbling, peace talks, since 2001. I mean, so the US declared war in Afghanistan in October of 2001. So basically a month after 9/11. Which is and it's still happening.

Jack 32:16

And the authorization for the use of military force or AUMF under which all those were authorized, was signed just days after 9/11.

Connor 32:25

Yeah. Anyway, so there's this one that I love that's called that goes,

O darling, you're American in my eyes.

You are guilty; I apologize.

Jack 32:39

I like that.

Connor 32:40

Which is kind of interesting. And it's, you know, it sort of speaks to, you know, there's just a ubiquity in certain places of US forces. And oftentimes, I think, different forces get conflated into American forces. But there you kind of get this like mixture of a little bit of the love like flirty tone mixed with responses to US imperialism which I find that funny. There are some that are more intense and I guess like I find them interesting and you know they're not like representative of the entire genre or of you know the views of all people but um but i think you know in terms of like decentering kind of the US they they kind of make it an important point you know, there's one that goes:

My Nabi was shot down by a drone.

May God destroy your sons, America, you murdered my own.

Which has a obviously a violent sort of impulse, but, you know, it comes from the perspective of like, having, you know, it was written by a mother whose whose kids were killed in a drone strike. And this is like the most privileged way of accessing this but in the after the George Floyd was murdered, and sort of in the uprisings and then when the guard came in, there was a drone above our house that was like a predator drone and there were soldiers everywhere and I can just, it was nothing compared to having them around all the time just to grow up with drones constantly overhead and having them fire hellfire missiles you know, just like like, at a semi-regular occurrence. But I think one thing that at least has felt important for me to hold is like, and that I've tried to, with my one sort of minor experience with being in a militarized zone is like, it feels terrible and like you're constantly being surveilled, and under threat, and like, also the impersonality of it, but the violence that it does, and I think like it's just, yeah, I just think it's, it's, it's been important for me is like trying to be a semi-decent American citizen or something. To be like, this is actually we're doing this, you know, and like, my money is you know, my little my tax dollars are funding these little predator drones. And I don't know when I

when I read these poems, it kind of like, it opens me up to, there's such a dearth of representation of kind of that experience from the US like, media and art, I think most of the time. Like a lot of times in the kind of the homeland/CIA thriller type genre,

Jack 36:36

Jack Ryan

Connor 36:36

Jack Ryan yep, you'll have like a character whose like family was maybe killed by US drones or missiles or some kind of attack, but they're always framed as a counter narrative at best basically, which is like, either they're the bad guy and you just like feel somewhat bad for them. Never you, you just, you don't see it where they are the protagonist or they're the central part of the story. You know, and like it's and it's so rare, like Malala Yousafzai, is like such a rare example. And even she has been kind of, I don't know, like the Western media has wanted to talk about her in a certain way as like a champion of kind of just like, you know, education and women's liberation in that way. But at the same time, when she met with Obama, she was like, maybe don't do the drone strikes so much because they're fueling terrorism and violence and they're not accomplishing good things. And but it's like she's like the only person who's like been accepted by, you know, or one of the very few people who've sort of been 'accepted' by the western kind of discursive, whatever, who can make such a claim, like, from their own sort of lived experience, which I think is kind of interesting. But these yeah, anyway, these poems are just really, they're, they're often like, yeah, they're just like, I don't know, it's it's just really interesting. One that I that I thought was also powerful as the last one I'll shares is:

Come to Guantánamo.
Follow the clang of my chains.

Which I thought was powerful, which I think and and apparently, we'll we'll link to this but um, there's there's a great kind of piece about this this form that has like, sort of contextualizing, you know, pros about it. But basically, there was this family who, like their son, and someone else in their family like went missing, and they didn't, they didn't know where they were. They hadn't heard from them in six months. And they actually just assumed that they were in Guantanamo Bay that somehow that the US troops had taken them, and they were in Guantanamo. And so this, her name is Hiram Beebe started singing these landay's, and one of them was "Come to Guantanamo, follow the clang of my chains". Eventually, they learned that they were in Afghanistan being held by US troops at an airfield. So there you go.

(Close Talking theme music)

Jack 39:55

And that's such an important part of the 9/11 story because that is how it reverberates out through time it is through what ended up becoming basically just accepted aspects of what was American, and what those included were all sorts of extrajudicial actions justified under the rhetoric of fighting terrorism. Hi everybody, this is Jack again just quickly jumping in to again

say thank you so much for listening and also that this is the second part of what is a three part series about poetry and 9/11 and the aftermath of 9/11 including the wars created in its aftermath and in our next episode we're especially going to be looking at the ways that 9/11 and its influence is still felt today and how poetry has continued to a really valuable way for artists to look at the cultural impact and political impact of 9/11 and to continue raising important questions about it even as it moves farther and farther from the present. So we hope you'll join us again for that episode, and thank you so much for listening to this one.