



RESNICK ASPEN
ACTION
FORUM

COURAGE
HEALING+
REPAIR

SEMINAR READINGS

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
2300 N Street NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20037
www.aspeninstitute.org

Published in the United States of America
by The Aspen Institute

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2023 Resnick Aspen Action Forum Courage, Healing, and Repair

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Seminar One

June 25



bagaball, Sankofa (go back to your roots--ashanti saying in twi), 2009. Available via Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sankofa.jpg> Originally posted on Flickr, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sankofa.jpg> (February 21, 2009). Reused under the terms of a [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/). The image has been fit proportionally into the frame.

Sankofa (pronounced SAHN-koh-fah) is a word in the Twi language of Ghana meaning "to retrieve" (literally "go back and get"; *san-* to return; *ko-* to go; *fa-* to fetch, to seek and take) and also refers to the Bono Adinkra symbol represented either with a stylized heart shape or by a bird with its head turned backwards while its feet face forward carrying a precious egg in its mouth. Sankofa is often associated with the proverb, "*Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi,*" which translates as: "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten."

Courage

by David Whyte
(1955–)

1 COURAGE is a word that tempts us to think outwardly, to run
bravely against opposing fire, to do something under besieging
circumstance, and perhaps, above all, to be seen to do it in pub-
lic, to show courage: to be celebrated in story, rewarded with
5 medals, given the accolade. But a look at its linguistic origins
is to look in a more interior direction, and toward its original
template, the old Norman French *coeur*, or heart.

Courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with
life, with another, with a community, a work; a future. To be
10 courageous is not necessarily to go anywhere or do anything,
except to make conscious those things we already feel deeply
and then to live through the unending vulnerabilities of those
consequences. To be courageous is to seat our feelings deeply
in the body and in the world: to live up to and into the neces-
15 sities of relationships that often already exist, with things we
find we already care deeply about: with a person, a future, a
possibility in society, or with an unknown that begs us on—
and always has begged us on. To be courageous is to stay close
to the way we are made.

20 The French philosopher Camus used to tell himself quietly
to live to the point of tears, not as a call for maudlin senti-
mentality, but as an invitation to the deep privilege of belong-
ing, and the way belonging affects us, shapes us and breaks
our heart at a fundamental level. It is a fundamental dynamic
25 of human incarnation to be moved by what we feel, as if sur-
prised by the actuality and privilege of love and affection and
its possible loss. Courage is what love looks like when tested by
the simple everyday necessities of being alive.

From David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of
Everyday Words*, revised edition (Many Rivers Press, 2001), pp. 49–51.

2 **Courage**

1 From the inside, it can feel like confusion; only slowly do
we learn what we really care about, and allow our outer life
to be realigned in that gravitational pull. With maturity, that
robust vulnerability comes to feel like the only necessary way
5 forward, the only real invitation, and the surest, safest ground
from which to step. On the inside we come to know who and
what and how we love and what we can do to deepen that love;
only from the outside, and only by looking back, does it look
like courage.

Seminar Two

June 26

Let's Meet at the Crossroads

by Dr. Bayo Akomolafe
(1983–)

1 Thank you for this privileged invitation to speak at a time of
many silences. I am grateful to be “here”—whatever “here” means
these days. Where I come from, nestled between the Atlantic
Ocean and Wakanda—a little black nation called Nigeria, we love
5 the ritual of greeting: so, I want to acknowledge the village—the
beautiful community of learning and unlearning that is Pacifica,
and its many people and elders—many of whom work humbly
behind the scenes to create (over and over again) the conditions
that make it possible for you to do the things you do. I acknowl-
10 edge Dr. Thyonne Gordon (chair of the board of trustees), Dr.
Steve Aizenstat, the chancellor emeritus and founding president
of Pacifica (whose superhero appellation would be ‘Sandman’),
the President, Dr. Joseph Cambray (whom I have known these 50
years—if you took African time seriously), Peter Rojcewicz, the
15 Provost and VP of Academic Affairs, and all the staff and faculty
of this institute.

I have enjoyed myself teaching with my colleagues in the
Community, Liberation, Indigenous, and Eco-psychologies wing
of Depth Psychology—and celebrate Professor Susan James (who
20 first reached out to me a couple of years ago), and Professor Mary
Watkins, whose kindness and warm hospitality still lingers. Most
of all, I reserve my blessings and most excited greetings for the
Classes of 2020 and 2021, your families, your ancestry! You’ve
all worked so hard to be here. Congratulations on reaching this
25 place of celebration and prophecy.

I’ve only been to the sprawling campus of Pacifica once—
and if my memory doesn’t embarrass me, I remember gleam-
ing phallic towers of glass and steel stretching into the sky and
extensive networks of asphalted highways surveilled by flying

From Dr. Bayo Akomolafe, “Let’s Meet at the Crossroads,” commencement keynote ad-
dressed delivered at Pacifica Graduate Institute (May 21, 2021), <https://pgiaa.org/alumni-resources/12044/>.

1 military-style drones. I kid! It felt like home. I love film and stories—and the grounds at Pacifica felt like *sanctuary*, like a subterranean embassy for the *otherwise* in a time of crippling normality.

5 But this is surreal stuff—all of this, me *speaking here and now*: when I got the invitation to speak, I tried to think of all the things that came together to make it happen, everything and everyone I am indebted to. I am a Nigerian kid; I am of the Yoruba people—son of Ignatius Abayomi Akomolafe and
10 Olufunmilayo Ibidapo Akomolafe. My mother celebrated her 70th birthday last November. My father, he was tall and noble—and one of my best friends. He died in my youth...when I was fifteen. He wasn't there the three times I earned degrees and graduated; when I got married to Ije, the most beautiful woman I had ever
15 met; when our first child, our daughter Alethea, shrieked into the world with the joy of neonatal inquiry. I know he would have been proud. I think he's proud now.

At a defining moment in our lives as lecturers in a university in Nigeria, my wife and I decided to leave our professions behind
20 —to seek out a smaller life, to deepen our intimacy, to treat our children as if they were prophets not mere receptacles for things we already knew. Describing myself as a recovering psychologist, I wrote a book, travelled the world speaking, and started an organization devoted to what I called “postactivism.” At some point
25 during my development, I did have desires to one day speak to a graduating class—it is what nerds think about to compensate for their lack of poise in social contexts. I imagined I would speak in front an audience – as has become my vocation for a decade now. But even though I have given a thousand speeches, a commencement
30 address (especially one given to a North American virtual audience) is a different beast, I reckoned: so, asking myself questions like—should I type up a speech or speak “from the heart”—I looked up a few other addresses: from Jim Carrey's comedically
35 extravagant sermon on fear and the future to Steve Jobs' penetrating inquiry into the nuances of motivation and becoming creative.

But those instances were during “normal” times; and there's nothing normal about where we are: *these are not normal times*.

40 I speak to you from India, my wife's country, where I live with my family. It's night, in more ways than one. There's death around, pain and suffering. I myself am still struggling with COVID, along with the rest of my family. I am at home with our children under

1 strict lockdown measures imposed by the Chennai government,
 as a new COVID-19 mutant iteration of global concern prowls the
 streets. Elsewhere in the world, an iceberg the size of the Amer-
 ican state of Rhode Island breaks off an ice shelf in Antarctica; a
 5 tense ceasefire stretches on after a protracted spell of asymmet-
 rical warfare between Israel and Palestine; in Morocco, hundreds
 of families try to steal into the European exclaves of Ceuta and
 Melilla; the US congress discusses Unidentified Aerial Phenome-
 na, potentially unravelling the discourse on what it means to be
 10 human in an interplanetary age; and the Anthropocene—these
 moments of loss and instability—spins madly on. I heard some-
 one say recently that 2019 was the last normal year. I understand
 that, but I don't think so: the normal is always subsidized by the
 occluded invisible, centralized by displacement. We are living in
 15 the times of George Floyd, yes, but we've for long lived in a world
 where the slave ship is possible. And even as I congratulate cit-
 izens of the US for the drop in COVID cases, the relaxation of
 emergency public health protocols, and the growing number of
 vaccinations recorded, I cannot trust that 'health' is an individu-
 20 ated property that can be domiciled in single, isolatable bodies.

It's all awkward. There's a theme of awkwardness that runs
 through these days of Zoom: children appearing on-screen in-
 terrupting business-as-usual, the eternal undecidability in the
 question of whether a speaker is wearing clothes beneath the
 25 screen. These are days of failure, of loss, of confusion. Even right
 now, I am mostly reading a text—because I couldn't depend too
 much on my exhausted powers not to traipse off into something
 else. It feels like the end of the world—which brings us to these
 questions and considerations:

30 *What does it mean to graduate at the end of the world, during a pan-
 demic? What are these gatherings for? What does a ritual celebrating
 the attainment of mastery signify—if anything—at a time when mas-
 tery is troubled by the breakdown in the world? When what it means to
 be human is no longer clear?*

35

I want to tell you a story, here at yet another end of worlds. It
 might help us make sense of these questions—but even more,
 40 and hopefully, it might open space for us to travel to places we
 don't know yet. My story is a story about resistance, freedom,
 losing hope, and the queer art of failure. It's about what hap-

1 pens when things don't work out the way you expected them to,
when visibility is low, when you are told to look down and hun-
ker down. So, my story is about *blackness*.

5 *You might have already guessed where this is going:* I am **not** here
to tell you that you are going to *make it*, that all you need is hope
and grit, that the world is coherent and readable. I am not here
to pray for your success. *You went through Pacifica; I'm sure you can*
take this. Yes, I am here to speak about fissures, fault lines, rifts,
splinters, wounds, and all the many cousins of cracks.

10 I speak to you about the world "kicking back," about things
straying away from their algorithms, about an insurgency of in-
visible critters, about the loss of stability, about disability. For
those of you who like movies, the films—*A Quiet Place* and *Bird*
Box, released the same year 2018—tell stories about what hap-
15 pens when something strange and foreign crashes through the
veneer of the familiar, disarticulating bodies in the shock of their
traversal penetration, turning on its head what it means to be
capable and what it means to be disabled. They are filmic explo-
rations of *cripistemologies*—the term that designates the study of
20 how able bodies are produced and how other bodies are simul-
taneously rendered disabled as a result. In *A Quiet Place*, elocu-
tion and voice suddenly become a handicap. *If you speak, you die.*
And in *Bird Box*, perhaps more critically, sight—that most prin-
cipal of our senses—becomes a handicap. To see is to break. I
25 wonder then: what if in today's world of pandemics and climate
chaos, succeeding is a handicap? What if to be whole, to have
a clean bill of health, probably written with the gilded ink of a
recent vaccination, is to ironically feed a hungry beast whose
nourishment depends upon our claims to independence? If hu-
30 man centredness has contributed to practices of dismissal and
abuse, then isn't a healthy human, unbothered and enclosed, an
ecological burden (Professor Cambray either made a grave mis-
take inviting me—or there might yet be a surprising abundance
when we stay with these troubling considerations!)?

35 But let's stay with this textured inquiry: *what to do at the end*
of the world? How to be response-able to these times of dramatic
shifts and troubling encounters at the edges of our flesh?

Well, first, the world has ended many times. I am not speak-
ing about extinction level events, and spectacular arrivals from
40 the skies. I am speaking about all the ways something unexpect-
ed slips through and breaks the familiar so thoroughly, like an
accusation in Salem, that forward movement becomes impossi-

1 ble. Critically the world has ended many times to make room for
whiteness—the world-performing imperative that enlists bodies
of all kinds to perpetuate secure arrivals and safety. Even more
critically, there isn't one world—one dominant already-made
5 world. The world has never been coherent or okay for many of
us. And endings are plentiful—often happening at the edges of
our tongue.

Let me tell you how my world certainly ended. I even know
the date. June 30, at 4pm Indian time. Proverbially, like Icarus of
10 old, I was soaring in the sky, returning home from a hasty trip
to the Netherlands where I had been invited to speak. My flight
home was punctuated by the good but anxious news that my
wife was in the hospital—many days before term—about to give
birth to our second child, even though I had pressed my lips on
15 her belly before leaving home, asking the young'un to wait till I
was back.

His arrival signalled a cut in the fabric of things so severe that
we are still processing these memories to this day. First, we had
always wanted another girl, two girls, that was the plan. A little
20 sister for Alethea. But the world kicks back hard—and Kyah, our
beautiful son, was born to us. My mother gave him the name Aba-
yomi, after my late father. We loved him to bits—as we do today.
We would do anything for him. But then one day, when he was
almost two, we started to notice strange things...it began with
25 silence: when we called out his name, he didn't answer—and he
wasn't nearly as vocally gifted as his sister when she was his age.
We told ourselves it didn't matter, that children grow different-
ly. My mother assured us that boys often speak later than girls.
But when he started to reject food and would throw tantrums so
30 loud that an airport terminal would freeze to figure out what was
going on, we knew our worst fears had happened. Almost un-
avoidably, a diagnosis came: Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

The thing is, we didn't see Kyah coming. *I didn't see him coming.*
He came out left field, from outside the blueprint, like the errant finger of
35 *a young human child into the path of diligently working ants.*

In more ways than I can even understand, I was ushered into
a time of grieving. To be honest, at some level, I still struggle with
“why me” questions. My grief wanted to fix him, to mend him. To
make him whole. My son Abayomi was a crack in the container
40 of my most powerful aspirations. How was I going to play with
him, grow with him, if he was only partly there?

I styled myself his hero. I was going to rush into the wind

1 and drag him out of the storm. What I failed to account for was
how I was already (beyond my best intentions or worst impuls-
es) implicated in producing him as inadequate, the algorithms
that led me to reduce things that were wrong to what was hap-
5 pening in his three-year-old body. I wanted to capture him in
the promise of complete and total health, to vaccinate him from
the injuries of the world—much like Freyja attempted to freeze the
universe so that her son, Baldur, would not die. And like Baldur,
who would fall to Loki's mistletoe, my son Abayomi would not
10 be fully named, fully captured. He slunk away, spilling from my
grip, resisting attempts to fit in, to be complete. Like a fugitive.

There is a tale coming from the days of the transatlantic slave
trade—a tale of a woman who was stolen at night. With her child.
Aboard the ship headed for Brazil, the poor child could not con-
15 tain his misery. He flailed and wept and stretched. There was no
solace aboard that floating vessel. But then this mother was in-
spired: legend has it that she took her clothes and tore out a piece
of it with her bare hands. From the shreds, she braided a ragdoll
and offered it to her child as a plaything. A plaything in the belly
20 of a slave ship. *Like a song in Auschwitz.* And for a moment, that
child was consoled. The grateful mother, from the Yoruba peo-
ple, named the ragdoll Abayomi—the name that is my father's
and my son's. The name means the enemy would have over-
whelmed me, but God did not allow it. It also means *they thought*
25 *they buried me but did not realize that I am a seed.* It also means, if
you kneel on my neck, you too will break. It also means, there is
strange power in depths and in discarded places. It means that
the colonial enterprise is undone by the very fact that nothing is
entirely capturable—everything spills, moves. Everything is ec-
30 static, beside-itself, mad with emergence.

The elders from my world might agree that the ragdoll was
no mere assemblage of cloth and tears. It was Esu himself, the
Òrìsà and superhuman deity that stole into the masters' registers
and upset its claims to integrity, becoming the missed spot, the
35 unaccounted-for body aboard that rational vessel of quantitative
supremacy. Esu is the Yoruba trickster god of the crossroads—
the man that holds agency, that disciplines our claims to com-
pleteness with homeopathic doses of monstrosity, that breaks
the binaries with which we see the world and opens up a third
40 way. Such is Esu's gift. The gift of the crossroads. *That ragdoll*
took a sailing vessel of misery and transformed it into a wooden
womb, pregnant with a god and a people who would later in-

1 fuse the diasporic world with a magic liveliness. That ragdoll has
 become a symbol of queer resistance in favelas in parts of Bra-
 zil. Abayomi is a reminder that power isn't might, and that the
 work of responding to colonial times isn't necessarily to win, to
 5 be seen, to be acknowledged by the state—as it is to learn how to
 listen, to learn how to get lost.

Abayomi is my father that lingers; Abayomi is my son who
 will not be contained. Abayomi is the exceeding excessiveness
 of things that means even the prison cell and all sorts of mas-
 10 ter's tools will not always abide faithful to their programming.
 Abayomi is the glitching off-the-record-ness of things. Abayomi
 is blackness—and the heart of my pixelated invitation to you,
 Classes of 2020 and 2021, here beneath strange skies.

Make no mistake. Just like autism is not exclusively about
 15 neurological events in my son's head, but about the ways we pro-
 duce and name bodies and the worlds that sustain them...to the
 exclusion of different ways of being embodied, *Blackness* is not
 about black people (any more than whiteness is about white peo-
 ple), even though it arises from a studious consideration of their
 20 contexts, experiences, and journeys. Blackness is a criptestemol-
 ogy that considers the Man, the Anthropos—and what it does,
 what it produces, what it excludes; blackness is the quest for
 new disabilities, new corporeal fidelities. It is about the machinic
 world that names specific kinds of bodies as special—and oth-
 25 er bodies as discardable appendages, closer to the animal, never
 quite touching the glory and nobility of white-identified bodies:
 a nobility that is heavily subsidized by censorious denial of the
 vitality of the material world. Blackness is not about *getting our*
own, getting even, getting equal, getting paid. Not the prescriptive ad-
 30 versariality in the vehicle of white progress. It is about the ways
 bodies become stuck in the worlds they create, in the worlds that
 create them—and the openings, the cracks, that often emerge,
 almost miraculously—the portals through which a different way
 can be sensed with an animal keenness.

35 Blackness is the strange quality of abundance that sprouts in
 the most improbable of places. A youthful green stalk in the des-
 ert, a mushroom growing out of an abandoned radioactive tank
 in Chernobyl, a ragdoll on a slave ship, queer life in the middle
 of a pandemic-inflected Anthropocene. Blackness is death—not
 40 the *terminal deletion* of western imagination, but the dying that
 cradles life, that says where we stumble is a treasure, where we
 fail and lose hope are spiderwebs upon which drunken gods slide

1 from the divine to the oceans to make new worlds from their cal-
 abashes of sand.

2 This is why Frank B. Wilderson III, in his book *Afropessimism*,
 states that blackness calls for nothing less than the end of the
 5 world. Is there hope for peace in the Middle East? Can this ex-
 hausted contraption of nation-states ever account for violence
 done to the so-called Global South? Will a billion euros cheque
 from Germany to Namibia for the genocide of the Herero and
 Nama people from 1904 to 1907 touch the bones of those killed?
 10 Will the dyadic arrangement of the clinical therapeutic alliance
 be enough to help us come sensuously alive to the world that is
 the condition of our days? Is there room for white-identified bod-
 ies to know the joys of a wild animist world beyond the Faustian
 capture of the nation-state? There is no hope to be had within
 15 the present arrangement of bodies, no peace to squeeze out of
 the pulp of colonial capture. No justice could be enough that is
 already programmatically connected to the circumstances that
 produce injustice.

We need a break.

20 Blackness is the matrixial upset, the break...not a single an-
 swer, but a cartographical project of losing our way...the invita-
 tion to become lost, the dignity of failure, the imperative of the
 compost heap.

25 Put simply, blackness is the permission to fail—but not just
 that, the promise of newness in fugitive failure. And I could think
 of no greater thing to share with you than this invitation to fail.
 I call this failure generative incapacitation—my unschooled chil-
 dren, 7 and 3, call it whatever they want.

30 The point is we cannot risk being successful; we cannot
 risk doing everything we set out to do. I mean, it is beautiful to
 achieve what we set out to do, to see things happen, to dream
 good dreams, to do something with our time. The success I speak
 of is not so much the text as it is the book, the ways we are caught
 up in patterns of behaving that prohibit and are insensitive to
 35 the imperatives of loss, of dying well, of losing ground, of be-
 coming-other, of being disturbed, of being met and defeated by
 things that exceed us. We cannot risk smooth sailing from here.
 We cannot risk arriving; we can't risk being saved if transforma-
 tion is our longing. To be saved is to restore the recognizable,
 40 and reinscribe the formula of the same: this is the very grammar
 of unbothered closure that is implicated in the heating up of our
 oceans, in the pandemics, and even in the cyclical repeatabili-

1 ty of contemporary justice-seeking activisms and liberal politics,
 when it uses the same tools of stuckness to create an ethical to-
 tality that yields to nothing other than its sense of righteousness.
 You see, we must leave some room for goddesses and ragdolls.

5 This is what it means to meet at the crossroads. It is to live as
 if we live with and through others—because we in fact do. It is
 to notice that every straight line is haunted by intersecting lim-
 inal trajectories, and that continuity is indebted to those places
 where bodies bump into other bodies. It is to heed the voice of
 10 Harriet Tubman, to get off the highway and wade in the waters,
 to treat with some hospitality the things that cross us. The end of
 the world is not the end of the road—such a framing is too Euclid-
 ean to be adequate to our times. Instead, the end of the world is
 the spirit of the chiasmus, the place our bodies meet their mak-
 15 ers. Failure is the munificence of these troubling encounters.

*And now the contractual moralistic bulleted list that in my survey
 of impactful commencement addresses was adopted by their speakers;
 don't worry—I give you permission to dismiss everything I say in its
 entirety if need be:*

20 This is the time of the fugitive, the decade of descent.

If your mastery must be become response-able to these
 charged times, let it be mastery with a lisp, the kind of mastery
 that slows down and listens—the kind that makes you animal
 enough to be sensuously keen and alive to possibilities the sur-
 25 face knows nothing about.

Things won't always go our way, and that's not such a bad
 thing. In fact, it is why we Africans offer libations. Not just to re-
 member the joys of ancestrally gained stability, but to honour the
 gift of crisis, and—in the selfsame moment when the drink hits
 30 the earth and whips up dust, as if to unsettle the very grounds we
 stand on—to prophesy at the feet of the yet-to-come unthought
 and unimagined. We pray to hasten demise in order that we
 might live. A prayer of contradictions.

Today, scientists tell us about zombie bacteria and queer bio-
 35 spheres and their civilizations within the ground, which we once
 imagined to be still and useful only for cradling dead things. We
 are in the age of the hyposubject, the beneath-subject; the age of
 subsurgence, not transcendence. A electrifying invitation fills
 the air: it is time to go down, to explore our failings and their
 40 myriad intrasections as porous places, to experiment with ap-
 proaching the more-than-human.

If you have been a good white ally, I celebrate you. But even

1 though I need you, I cannot stay here. And that's probably true
 for you too. I cannot risk being included in these sites of power.
 Occupying the upper deck on the slave ship still leaves me here,
 still leaves us here—on this vessel. So, I do not want a seat at
 5 the table, I want to fly—like the Igbo men and women flew from
 Dunbar Creek. Maybe in my flight, you might notice that in the
 larger flow of things, it might matter little if you've been a good
 citizen or not. Maybe in my flight, you might find that you too are
 sensuously becoming something else. You too are not still and
 10 have never arrived.

Don't be so tethered to your quests for the extraordinary. In-
 deed, these days we must seek the fiercely ordinary—because
 the ordinary is what the extraordinary desires to become. To no-
 tice the sacred, to sense the playful indeterminacy of things, one
 15 must be sufficiently pierced. It is only with the wounds granted
 to us by these shifts at large that we become stranger.

Our work is intergenerational. Our failures must be let into the
 room. We won't be finally woke, or finally just. We must allow
 that our lives are not durationally competent enough to hold all
 20 the questions we could possibly explore, for lives and deaths are
 not matters of duration alone. *And this is why death needs a new
 cosmology.*

And finally, *find the others*. I don't know who they are, what
 they are. But the openings in our flesh crackle with the frequen-
 25 cies of their desire to meet with you downstream. Find the others.
 Here's a map: listen to your failures, don't cover the cracks up,
 go deep in there. Whatever you do, don't try to make the world a
 better place; instead, consider that the world might be trying to
 make you a better place. *Listen.*

30 I must end with the question I began with: *what if justice gets
 in the way of transformation?* What if the world has changed so
 radically that we must learn to meet it differently? What if my
 son isn't in the storm, what if my son is the storm? What if my
 fatherhood is not about disciplining him to walk the straight and
 35 narrow? What if it could be about the engorged possibilities, mon-
 strously abundant, that are available in the things we often learn
 to pathologize? What if my so-called sanity has always been my
 prison, and that this messianic wound urges me to something
 different? Something incalculably stranger than anything we can
 40 come up with?

In these times, as the highway bleeds, and as fugitive cross-
 roads sprout from the places of rupture, may you fail generously

- 1 to know worlds many may never know. May you come alive so richly that we would need to invent new words to describe the grace and gravity of your dancing in the village square. May your road be rough, and may the disturbance be your sanctuary.
- 5 Class of 2020 and 2021, let us meet at the crossroads.
Ase.

The Other Half of Kabir's Doha

by Tabish Khair
(1966-)

1 Now that the world has proved porous
How will we ever separate
The dagger from the skull?

5 Who having gathered up the broken
Pieces of a voice will speak
In his own voice or her own voice
Or the voice of his mother?

10 Who will follow you now, Kabir,
From the marketplace of deceits
Through the song of protest
To that hut where a king of kings
Came without his crown?

15 Who will turn the oceans to ink,
All the forest trees to quill,
And still fail to inscribe earth?

20 Who will whittle the world to songs
And keep wisdom from words?

Who will be willing to be torn
Between two final truths
25 And turn flower?

And yet, when I think of this world
Which has turned porous, I recall
The time I voiced a line from your dohas, Kabir,
30 Struggling to set it free from the prison of a book,

Tabish Khair, "The Other Half of Kabir's Doha." From *Where Parallel Lines Meet* (Viking, 2000), pp. 96–97.

2 Other Half of Kabir's Doha

1 And heard my grandfather's wordless cook
Casually complete your couplet.

Seminar Three

June 27

Please Call Me by My True Names

by Thich Nhat Hanh
(1926–2022)

1 Don't say that I will depart tomorrow—
even today I am still arriving.

5 Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

10 I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.

15 The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
20 that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
25 that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
30 selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

Thich Nhat Hanh, "Please Call Me by My True Names," Plum Village, June 3, 2020, <https://plumvillage.org/articles/please-call-me-by-my-true-names-song-poem/>.

2 Please Call Me by My True Names

1 I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.

5 And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
10 with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his “debt of blood” to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

15 My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

20 Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

25 Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Speaking Tree

by Joy Harjo
(1951-)

1 *I had a beautiful dream I was dancing with a tree.*
—Sandra Cisneros

Some things on this earth are unspeakable:
5 Genealogy of the broken—
A shy wind threading leaves after a massacre,
Or the smell of coffee and no one there—

Some humans say trees are not sentient beings,
10 But they do not understand poetry—

Nor can they hear the singing of trees when they are fed by
Wind, or water music—
Or hear their cries of anguish when they are broken and
15 bereft—

Now I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in a moist,
dark earth
Between sunrise and sunset—
20

I cannot walk through all realms—
I carry a yearning I cannot bear alone in the dark—

What shall I do with all this heartache?
25

The deepest-rooted dream of a tree is to walk
Even just a little ways, from the place next to the doorway—
To the edge of the river of life, and drink—

Joy Harjo, "Speaking Tree." From *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (W.W. Norton, 2015), pp. 118–119.

2 Speaking Tree

1 I have heard trees talking, long after the sun has gone down:

*Imagine what would it be like to dance close together
In this land of water and knowledge...*

5 *To drink deep what is undrinkable.*

Seminar Four

June 28



(1)



(2)



(3)

James Abraham, *The Banyan Tree of Auroville*. Reprinted with permission from the photographer.

Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude

by Ross Gay
(1974-)

1 Friends, will you bear with me today,
for I have awakened
from a dream in which a robin
made with its shabby wings a kind of veil
5 behind which it shimmied and stomped something from the south
of Spain, its breast aflame,
looking me dead in the eye
from the branch that grew into my window,
coochie-cooing my chin,
10 the bird shuffling its little talons left, then right,
while the leaves bristled
against the plaster wall, two of them drifting
onto my blanket while the bird
opened and closed its wings like a matador
15 giving up on murder,
jutting its beak, turning a circle,
and flashing, again,
the ruddy bombast of its breast
by which I knew upon waking
20 it was telling me
in no uncertain terms
to bellow forth the tubas and sousaphones,
the whole rusty brass band of gratitude
not quite dormant in my belly—
25 it said so in a human voice,
“Bellow forth”—
and who among us could ignore such odd
and precise counsel?

From Ross Gay, *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), pp. 82–93. Copyright © 2015 by Ross Gay. Reprinted by permission of University of Pittsburgh Press.

2 Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude

1 Hear ye! hear ye! I am here
to holler that I have hauled tons—by which I don't mean lots,
I mean tons — of cowshit
and stood ankle deep in swales of maggots
5 swirling the spent beer grains
the brewery man was good enough to dump off
holding his nose, for they smell very bad,
but make the compost writhe giddy and lick its lips,
twirling dung with my pitchfork
10 again and again
with hundreds and hundreds of other people,
we dreamt an orchard this way,
frowning our brows,
and hauling our wheelbarrows,
15 and sweating through our shirts,
and two years later there was a party
at which trees were sunk into the well-fed earth,
one of which, a liberty apple, after being watered in
was tamped by a baby barefoot
20 with a bow hanging in her hair
biting her lip in her joyous work
and friends this is the realest place I know,
it makes me squirm like a worm I am so grateful,
you could ride your bike there
25 or roller skate or catch the bus
there is a fence and a gate twisted by hand,
there is a fig tree taller than you in Indiana,
it will make you gasp.
It might make you want to stay alive even, thank you;
30
and thank you
for not taking my pal when the engine
of his mind dragged him
to swig fistfuls of Xanax and a bottle or two of booze,
35 and thank you for taking my father
a few years after his own father went down thank you
mercy, mercy, thank you
for not smoking meth with your mother
oh thank you thank you
40 for leaving and for coming back,
and thank you for what inside my friends'
love bursts like a throng of roadside goldenrod

1 gleaming into the world,
 likely hauling a shovel with her
 like one named Aralee ought,
 with hands big as a horse's,
 5 and who, like one named Aralee ought,
 will laugh time to time til the juice
 runs from her nose; oh
 thank you
 for the way a small thing's wail makes
 10 the milk or what once was milk
 in us gather into horses
 huckle-buckling across a field;

and thank you, friends, when last spring
 15 the hyacinth bells rang
 and the crocuses flaunted
 their upturned skirts, and a quiet roved
 the beehive which when I entered
 were snugged two or three dead
 20 fist-sized clutches of bees between the frames,
 almost clinging to one another,
 this one's tiny head pushed
 into another's tiny wing,
 one's forelegs resting on another's face,
 25 the translucent paper of their wings fluttering
 beneath my breath and when
 a few dropped to the frames beneath:
 honey; and after falling down to cry,
 everything's glacial shine.

30 And thank you, too. And thanks
 for the corduroy couch I have put you on.
 Put your feet up. Here's a light blanket,
 a pillow, dear one,
 35 for I can feel this is going to be long.
 I can't stop
 my gratitude, which includes, dear reader,
 you, for staying here with me,
 for moving your lips just so as I speak.
 40 Here is a cup of tea. I have spooned honey into it.

4 Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude

1 And thank you the tiny bee's shadow
perusing these words as I write them.
And the way my love talks quietly
when in the hive,
5 so quietly, in fact, you cannot hear her
but only notice barely her lips moving
in conversation. Thank you what does not scare her
in me, but makes her reach my way. Thank you the love
she is which hurts sometimes. And the time
10 she misremembered elephants
in one of my poems which, oh, here
they come, garlanded with morning glory and wisteria
blooms, trombones all the way down to the river.
Thank you the quiet
15 in which the river bends around the elephant's
solemn trunk, polishing stones, floating
on its gentle back
the flock of geese flying overhead.

20 And to the quick and gentle flocking
of men to the old lady falling down
on the corner of Fairmount and 18th, holding patiently
with the softest parts of their hands
her cane and purple hat,
25 gathering for her the contents of her purse
and touching her shoulder and elbow;
thank you the cockeyed court
on which in a half-court 3 vs. 3 we oldheads
made of some runny-nosed kids
30 a shambles, and the 61-year-old
after flipping a reverse lay-up off a back door cut
from my no-look pass to seal the game
ripped off his shirt and threw punches at the gods
and hollered at the kids to admire the pacemaker's scar
35 grinning across his chest; thank you
the glad accordion's wheeze
in the chest; thank you the bagpipes.

40 Thank you to the woman barefoot in a gaudy dress
for stopping her car in the middle of the road
and the tractor trailer behind her, and the van behind it,
whisking a turtle off the road.

1 Thank you god of gaudy.
 Thank you paisley panties.
 Thank you the organ up my dress.
 Thank you the sheer dress you wore kneeling in my dream
 5 at the creek's edge and the light
 swimming through it. The koi kissing
 halos into the glassy air.
 The room in my mind with the blinds drawn
 where we nearly injure each other
 10 crawling into the shawl of the other's body.
 Thank you for saying it plain:
 fuck each other dumb.

And you, again, you, for the true kindness
 15 it has been for you to remain awake
 with me like this, nodding time to time
 and making that noise which I take to mean
yes, or, I understand, or, please go on
but not too long, or, why are you spitting
 20 *so much, or, easy Tiger*
hands to yourself. I am excitable.
 I am sorry. I am grateful.
 I just want us to be friends now, forever.
 Take this bowl of blackberries from the garden.
 25 The sun has made them warm.
 I picked them just for you. I promise
 I will try to stay on my side of the couch.

And thank you the baggie of dreadlocks I found in a drawer
 30 while washing and folding the clothes of our murdered friend;
 the photo in which his arm slung
 around the sign to "the trail of silences"; thank you
 the way before he died he held
 his hands open to us; for coming back
 35 in a waft of incense or in the shape of a boy
 in another city looking
 from between his mother's legs,
 or disappearing into the stacks after brushing by;
 for moseying back in dreams where,
 40 seeing us lost and scared
 he put his hand on our shoulders
 and pointed us to the temple across town;

6 Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude

1 and thank you to the man all night long
hosing a mist on his early-bloomed
peach tree so that the hard frost
not waste the crop, the ice
5 in his beard and the ghosts
lifting from him when the warming sun
told him *sleep now*; thank you
the ancestor who loved you
before she knew you
10 by smuggling seeds into her braid for the long
journey, who loved you
before he knew you by putting
a walnut tree in the ground, who loved you
before she knew you by not slaughtering
15 the land; thank you
who did not bulldoze the ancient grove
of dates and olives,
who sailed his keys into the ocean
and walked softly home; who did not fire, who did not
20 plunge the head into the toilet, who said *stop*,
don't do that; who lifted some broken
someone up; who volunteered
the way a plant birthed of the reseeding plant
is called a *volunteer*, like the plum tree
25 that marched beside the raised bed
in my garden, like the arugula that marched
itself between the blueberries,
nary a bayonet, nary an army, nary a nation,
which usage of the word volunteer
30 familiar to gardeners the wide world
made my pal shout "Oh!" and dance
and plunge his knuckles
into the lush soil before gobbling two strawberries
and digging a song from his guitar
35 made of wood from a tree someone planted, thank you;

thank you zinnia, and gooseberry, rudbeckia
and pawpaw, Ashmead's kernel, cockscomb
and scarlet runner, feverfew and lemonbalm;
40 thank you knitbone and sweetgrass and sunchoke
and false indigo whose petals stammered apart
by bumblebees good lord please give me a minute...

1 and moonglow and catkin and crookneck
 and painted tongue and seedpod and johnny jump-up;
 thank you what in us rackets glad
 what gladrackets us;

5 and thank you, too, this knuckleheaded heart, this pelican heart,
 this gap-toothed heart flinging open its gaudy maw
 to the sky, oh clumsy, oh bumblefucked,
 oh giddy, oh dumbstruck,
 10 oh rickshaw, oh goat twisting
 its head at me from my peach tree's highest branch,
 balanced impossibly gobbling the last fruit,
 its tongue working like an engine,
 a lone sweet drop tumbling by some miracle
 15 into my mouth like the smell of someone I've loved;
 heart like an elephant screaming
 at the bones of its dead;
 heart like the lady on the bus
 dressed head to toe in gold, the sun
 20 shivering her shiny boots, singing
 Erykah Badu to herself
 leaning her head against the window;

and thank you the way my father one time came back in a dream
 25 by plucking the two cables beneath my chin
 like a bass fiddle's strings
 and played me until I woke singing,
 no kidding, singing, smiling,
thank you, thank you,
 30 stumbling into the garden where
 the Juneberry's flowers had burst open
 like the bells of French horns, the lily
 my mother and I planted oozed into the air,
 the bazillion ants labored in their earthen workshops
 35 below, the collard greens waved in the wind
 like the sails of ships, and the wasps
 swam in the mint bloom's viscous swill;

and you, again you, for hanging tight, dear friend.
 40 I know I can be long-winded sometimes.
 I want so badly to rub the sponge of gratitude
 over every last thing, including you, which, yes, awkward,

8 Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude

1 the suds in your ear and armpit, the little sparkling gems
slipping into your eye. Soon it will be over,

5 which is precisely what the child in my dream said,
holding my hand, pointing at the roiling sea and the sky
hurtling our way like so many buffalo,
who said *it's much worse than we think,*
and sooner; to whom I said
no duh child in my dreams, what do you think

10 this singing and shuddering is,
what this screaming and reaching and dancing
and crying is, other than loving
what every second goes away?
Goodbye, I mean to say.

15 And thank you. Every day.