

SPAO - Call and Response - The Walls of Jerusalem

Poems & Response by: Pearl Pirie

For: Cities of Stone - People of Dust

Photos by: Leslie Hossack

<http://www.spao.ca/projects/callandresponse.html>

The fly on the Western Wall

*"in the bend of her arm
a simple tent of solitude"
~Robin MacDonald*

we seek out where we can be smaller
without debate. the Red Sea competing
with us for miniaturization. mountains,
towers and a wall with one stone of
570 tons. we capitulate to what can't be won.
today we'll leave the men to their ways
the tallit, tefillin and kippah stays theirs.
it is a kind of relief to redirect ourselves
to be tyrants of the dishpan, master to the
housefly, or perhaps, seeing it walk
without gravity over our heads, deem it
a draw. the small have no responsibility
but to wash their hands before they eat.

Photo: *Woman Praying, Western Wall, Jerusalem 2011*

Children's Memorial

further, repetition is resistance
and the leaning lavender

outnumber me. they
convince themselves

that they are flowers
by blossoming.

what more evidence
do we need of human?

no. how many times I tell you?
she scolded. *only look.*

repetition is a seed
you have to take all of.

the entire is in the part
and is in the particular.

the cypress is flame-shaped
you may take this to Hades.

see that pillar broken off.
a scent and a stem in hand.

Photo: Children's Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2011

Bridge of string

there's symmetry in having two hands
each with a girl's hand in it

a symmetry to each having a parallel path.
and mother herself pulled in the tension

of years and turns between. the harp
that holds up this road hums the wind.

in the blur of wet street and within
the daily, they merge into one grey joy.

Photo: *Bridge of Strings*, Jerusalem 2011

Process of Writing Poems as a Response to Photographs

My considerations on entering this project was to figure out what the photos were saying and why, and what a fitting response would be that would recognize the communicative act of image, and to reply.

To pair words and an image is a practice in Japanese arts called haiga. The trick is for the words to complement and extend, not act as a redundant subtitled for the image. The two arts should be in dialogue, a conversation in which one speaks in the visual and one in the verbal.

What as writer do I need to know?

A concern in composing poems of the Middle East is anticipating what needs to be unpacked. What do I need to know in order to have an understanding the significance of what is portrayed?

What is a particular building? Who does it have meaning for? What does a color of skull cap signify? The project was an invitation to update my understandings of Jerusalem and become a reporter for the voices that don't often migrate to secular English. It is not called the *Wailing Wall* anymore. It is the *Western Wall*. The language matters just as *Eskimo* and *Inuit* connote different routes of history, *Wailing Wall* and *Western Wall* embed a different narrator of history. An image doesn't need this distinction but verbal does.

As an outsider it was important for me as a poet-journalist to get the facts straight and not impose cultural misunderstandings. The places have no meaning to me; a red stone wall without history, what looks like basalt columns without point of reference. To someone who knows what they are looking at, each would mean a great deal. Even a word that causes shivers to someone with a story behind it is just points of articulation to another; sounds have no inherent meaning. The word *Masada* may be a bird, a brick, a hero, a type of moss. Labels are entry points for learning what sets of historical significances has been placed behind a word.

What's Behind?

One is never a blank slate. One is never fully informed either. One never knows every word in a language but one knows enough to function. What amount of information is necessary to know enough to say anything that one can be reasonably confident about, without brokering in ignorant misinformation?

There is an informed bias before the shutter is released that is partly cultural aesthetics of what a good image looks like, and partly a cultural understanding of what things in the frame mean. Leslie Hossack, or any photographer, has to be informed in order to frame an image. There is a world behind an image just as there is a world behind a word choice.

The viewer has to be informed to see something other than sky, built environment and figures. In words or image we are brokering in expectations already embedded in the audience. With image and with words we aim to overlap and extend some knowledge in the viewer and make a new connection in the viewer.

What can I assume the viewer will know?

A word is a portal to more understanding. If I say *tallit*, some people will be locked out. From context one may move on, knowing enough. If I say *prayer shawl*, other people may gain entry, but we lose the language that the person portrayed in image would use and downgrade our expectations of what the viewer can understand. One never wants to talk down to the audience or echo back only what they already know and believe.

By giving a word, one gives an equipment to open up further information. If the photo shows an archway, an arcade, without a word, one only has geometry and its moods. When one is given the word *qanatir*, one can explore deeper, have a key to learn the origin of the stone. Especially in the context of the Middle East, who is doing the telling is loaded.

Words convey the taste of the place. By using the local words, one has the soundscape of the place to add to the visual. I wanted to equip myself with appropriate language and know the connotation and implication of what I say and how and what I omit.

Whose stories are represented?

We know from our background knowledge some of the conflicts and centuries of tumult of these contested points of land yet the images portray moments of quiet to the degree of being ethereal. The focus of the photos is on what is taken as holy, not on the brick-a-brac markets. Absent are the souks, the tourists, the burned out cars, tanks, the blur of bustle, the congestion. Even the men in the crowd of their rocking prayers are made small in the frame of the size of the Western Wall. It is a monolith. They are a monolith and there is the sense of constancy and permanency suggested by the framing.

I can speculate on Hossack's sympathies by what and who she frames and excludes. The men are photographed from a distance and the women framed to fill a frame. The Muslim women and the Arabic men are taken as part of the wider scene, situated in the landscape whereas the Jewish women have intimate portraits.

Hossack included in her images the demographics of family, Arab, Muslim, Jewish worshippers and the landscape as a character. This suggested the plurality of voices of that place that come together each for their own purposes. I consciously sought out references that would bring in the voices, people on the ground, epigraphs from various background of writers.

What to Omit and Include?

Part of composing a poem is to speak to a particular audience. Part of the process of writing is to create expectations of the bias of the audience, of what they know and believe and reply to that. I presume that gallery-goers are mostly media-savvy, university-educated, literate, probably of secular-belief and interested in world events.

Write from what you see and *write from what you know* can involve asking questions and learning. The problem with still images for me was not having all the details I needed. An image is silent. I had no point of reference of what the motion is like of prayers. I could read what people say, talk to people who had been there and found footage of people at the wall to understand better the feeling of being there.

When I saw her images of the women at the Western Wall, I was taken aback because tourist guides said people must cover their heads, and if they came inappropriately dressed, they'd be covered on site. Her photos showed women bareheaded. In further research I found by "people", the guide meant men and there's a whole world of contentiousness of women's clothing rules for praying.

Although Women of the Wall, these conservative Jewish protesters, were not portrayed in the images, they are part of the backdrop in a nation that seeks full suffrage. Women in Israel are segregated from men on some busses. While there are 100 Torahs on the men's side of the Western Wall, only one is on the shrinking women's side which is now 1/4 the size of the men's section.

Although prayer is not a political act in some places, in Israel, it is. Only in the 1960s did the access to the prayer wall become more open. Prayer may be a civic protest when Women of the Wall choose to wear the prayer shawls and prayer hats that are permitted only to men. The separation of genders informed one of the poems.

What would link to the images and extend them?

I wanted to weave in the understandings of voices from there. I looked for epitaphs and stories that would flesh out the meaning of places, such Meir Wieseltier and bringing ideas of worldviews with me that seemed salient, such as what Morten Søndergaard said about the meaning of meaning.

The graveyard pictured contains the plot of a poet. I naturally gravitated towards finding epigraphs from her because she is a Jewish woman of Israel and the bias of the images is towards sympathy for Jewish women.

This woman, Else, was controversial because during WWII she continued to write in German, taking both Germany and Israel as her countries without a conflict. She also was a bridge in a country of walls in that she happily went between Christianity and Judaism.

I picked up on voices who were of my own bias, such as Naomi Shihab Nye who speaks for peace between Palestine and Israel. I speculated on the thoughts that might pass through the head of a western male as he stood as a tourist —one of 800,000 tourists who pass annually through the Holocaust Museum — trying to comprehend what he has just witnessed.

On looking at a city from a hillside, one naturally gets a higher vantage point. It seemed an opportunity to look at this mess of regional history and hope, like John Lennon imagined, which to me is a greater transcendent hope than any religion or nationhood can offer.

Pearl Pirie, July 2011