

College Guild
PO Box 6448 Brunswick, Maine 04011

Poetry Club

~ War ~

Unit 6 of 8

THE MOMENT

by Mitchell Goodman

*Fireflies among falling stars.
Full summer. Trees murmuring
In moonlight. I take a deep breath.
For a moment it doesn't matter, the
preparations for war, the lying face
of the President, the frenzy
on the television screen seen
through the window.*

“The Moment” could have been written for any time (although this poem is from Mitchell Goodman, a 20th Century writer made famous for his role in the protest movement against the Vietnam War). It seems there are always preparations for war and lying politicians, yet summer and fireflies and moonlight are even more universal.

1. Do you think “The Moment” is an optimistic or ominous poem? Explain.

There’s no question that the following poem is a dark one with graphic imagery. It captures the faces and bodies of those who were imprisoned in concentration camps during World War II.

MEMENTO

by Stephen Spender

*Remember the blackness of that flesh
Tarring the bones with a thin varnish
Belsen Theresenstadt Buchenwald where
Faces were a clenched despair
Knocking at the bird-song-fretted air.*

*Their eyes sunk jellied in their holes
Were held up to the sun like begging bowls
Their hands like rakes with finger-nails of rust
Scratched for a little kindness from the dust
To many, it is beak, no dove brought answer.*

Spender uses powerful imagery, such as “faces were a clenched despair”. The last line, by contrast, moves from the faces and bodies of the victims to a more general metaphor.

2. How can faces “knock” at “the bird-song-fretted air”? What does that image mean to you?

3. What is the message of the last line?

The following three poems were written specifically about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Cardell Johnson captured the moment it began for this country. He chose to use the voice of one of the planes that hit the twin towers.

by Cardell Johnson

*Nobody knew except me
When evil boarded
That balmy morning
The ice had melted from
My fuselage
Stubborn, I was,
Refusing to respond to
The master ignition,
People would die,
So would I,
But I soared anyway
And the evil took
Over
I'm a twisted pile
Of metal...
My charges are skeletons
It was 9/11*

4. Was using the voice of the plane more or less effective than if Johnson had written in the voice of a passenger? Explain.

5. Write a poem about September 11, 2001 from any perspective – plane, passenger, New Yorker, rescue worker, citizen of another country, etc. You can even write from your own experience of 9/11.

by Carlos Bellamy

*She cries to herself
as she
wanders
across oceans of sand
separated from her battalion
three days now. An angry
ambush drove her away.
Her water runs low. Her*

*food even lower. Her
 rifle is working well.
 She has plenty of shells
 but there is no one
 to shoot.
 On her neck beside
 her name tag lies
 a picture of her
 only son.
 He is four.
 She is twenty.
 She only wanted
 money
 for college.*

6. Why can learning about one person's experience touch us in a deeper way than hearing about thousands who suffer in a war?
7. The previous poem is told in the third person. Write a poem by a soldier, sailor or Veteran in the first person as if the poet is in a war zone, or remembering his/her military service. You can choose any period in history.

W IS FOR WAR

by George Held

*In the old alphabets
 Kids learned "A" is for apple
 And "B" is for ball,
 Innocent images for all.*

*Soon enough they learn
 That "F" is for fate
 And "P" is for pain
 And "W" is for war,*

*That takes their dads and mums
 Away to "I" is for Iraq
 And "O" is for oil
 And "W" is for war.*

*Soon they learn
 That "A" is for amputee
 And "B" is for bomb
 And "D" is for death*

And "W" is still for war.

Held begins with the way we teach young children to learn the alphabet.

8. Why does the opening, which is reminiscent of children and innocence, work so well to convey the poet's message?

Too often, we only see the war from one side. Because this country is fighting Islamic extremists, too many Americans distrust all Muslims. Fear prevents us from seeing people as individuals.

AN EMPTY LETTER

by Yassin Aref

*Yesterday
I received a strange letter
Without a name or return address.
Eagerly I opened it.
I did not find my name
Not even a hello or salutation.
It was a small card
With a verse from the Koran:
"Have patience...
God is with those who are patient."*

*The letter took me back to my country
When we had no rights, no freedom,
We communicated in silences
By hint and signal with our eyes.
We became mystics and surrealists,
We wrote and spoke fugitively,
We sent many empty letters
To show love and support to each other.*

*My heart is full of fear
My mind is full of worry
Because this letter is telling me
Here, in this country,
All people are not free,
Some are terrified
To show love and express
Themselves and their feelings.
They send an empty letter
Without a name or address.*

9. Think of a person you consider an enemy. Write a poem in his/her voice.

Fallen Leaves

by Carlos Bellamy

*An arrogant wind howls at my window.
 Outside my door
 crestfallen grass, tired of being
 stepped on, refuses to grow.
 Maybe the moon is a cold monster
 with distant evils and incorrigible habits.
 Maybe love is unflinching and dishonest.
 In intervals, I stare at the sun
 hoping to get a glimpse of god.
 All I see
 are fallen leaves
 clutching their wounds
 like American soldiers
 in an Iraqi desert.*

“Fallen Leaves” is not really about war; it shares the same bleak feeling of a war zone from the perspective of a prisoner. But the final lines are such a powerful metaphor that they take us right to the battlefield.

10. In what ways is imprisonment like war?**11. Bellamy uses fallen leaves. Think of another metaphor for war that comes from nature.**

Finally, we come to the “battle” of the sexes. Note the war imagery in the following poem – the poet has maintained the metaphor of love as war throughout. It’s not easy to build a poem around a single metaphor, so that each specific reference fits the theme.

by Dan Grote

*The light of a candle
 is just romantic arson
 wax dripping like syrupy
 sands of time*

*Casting shadows over
 love that turns to doubt
 the burning wick just
 a burning fuse*

*To an incendiary heartbreak
 a long road strewn with
 landmines dressed up
 as rose petals*

*Looking at you through
 the demilitarized zone that
 is the line of discontent separating
 anniversary from divorce*

- 12. Think of another metaphor for love that you can imagine building a whole poem around.
- 13. What title would you give your poem?
- 14. Write an original poem, one created specifically for this course, on the subject of your choosing.
- 15. What have you learned from these poems or poets that you might want to apply to your own work?
- 16. Which poem is your favorite and why?

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes