

Write More Light—Live! Day 4 prompt: “Let the world punch itself out” – After Tanya Olson’s “Ain’t I Pretty”

For today’s prompt, let’s start by reading Tanya Olson’s poem “Ain’t I Pretty” from the book *Boyishly* (YesYes Books, 2013):

Text/Audio: <https://pankmagazine.com/piece/aint-i-pretty/>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGBPfxdfW0A>

This is a terrific example of a poem doing several things at once—all of them terrific. For starters, it’s a persona poem, and what a daring choice to write in the voice of one of the most famous people on earth in the last 50-60 years: Muhammad Ali. The word choice, the phrasing & dialect, the famous quote at the end of the third stanza all help to recreate Ali’s voice & style.

But this poem also offers a list of animals in conflict with people, animals who appear to be retaliating against humans for our inherent crimes against the earth & cruelty toward the animal kingdom. In noticing this combat & in this observation of justice, this identification with struggle, Ali becomes a perfect voice & vessel—it’s not only the poetry of his speech that make this such an effecting persona to inhabit, but more so his skill, talent, and character that stand out.

Ali was not always popular for his acknowledgment of “shifting times” but the conviction, authority—and music—his persona conveys is exactly what this kind of difficult observation needs.

For this prompt, start with an observation—maybe a nagging question that’s been following you; maybe it’s a problem you’ve become more aware of, or have started noticing more frequently; maybe it’s something you’ve seen a lot lately, or over time, and the more you see, the more it causes you to wonder. It can be local or global in scale, or anything in-between, so long as it gets your curiosity pumping.

Then, try to find a persona to inhabit that serves your observation in a way you might otherwise not be able to address (think of Olson’s use of Ali—how his history of struggle for justice & his success in boxing, along with his gift for language, make him a fitting persona to inhabit to look at inter-species violence & the struggle for environmental justice). Consider not only the style & voice of the persona, but also the history, behavior, ethos, etc. of the persona. Here are some great examples and ideas on this approach from Rebecca Hazelton’s terrific essay “[Learning the Persona Poem](#)” at the Poetry Foundation website:

Rather than preaching “write what you know,” consider persona poetry. It seems paradoxical, but writing as someone else—exploring what you don’t know—can prove an excellent method of coming to know yourself as a writer. Using a persona allows a student to temporarily shake loose her devotion to portraying her “true” self and be someone else for a while. Your students are already familiar with persona in other genres, which makes introducing the concept in the classroom a multimedia opportunity. Of course, novelists often write from different points of view, and even musical artists employ personae. You can bring up examples from the music world with your

students, such as David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, Garth Brooks's Chris Gaines, Beyonce's Sasha Fierce, Lady Gaga's male alter ego Jo Calderone, and the various personae employed by Nicki Minaj. For many of these artists, using a persona permits explorations of gender, sexuality, and social behaviors in their music with less fear of public or private repercussions. By focusing class discussion on what employing a persona allows an artist to do, you may find productive conversation about what we think we can do in art.

Once you've settled on a fitting persona, go for broke—try to push in to the persona as far as you can. Think about how your observation and curiosity might be filtered through the lens of the persona, and also consider how the persona might look at this observation in a different light. Rather than conjuring a perfect imitation, look for places where you and your chosen persona might differ, or be at odds, rather than always seeking agreement—that tension can be exciting & insightful.