

In violent times

by [Peggy Rosenthal](#)

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Art can bring together those parts of us which exist in dread and those which have the surviving sense of a possible happiness, collectivity, community, a loss of isolation,” wrote the American poet Adrienne Rich. Her insight helps me see why I’ve turned so often to the arts since September 11. I’ve sat on the couch meditating with a CD of Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings.” I’ve sat on a museum bench meditating with Robert Motherwell’s *La Danse*. And I’ve sat in parks, in restaurant corners and at home, meditating with poems like Adam Zagajewski’s “The Greenhouse.”

Of all the arts, poetry is the most portable. I can carry a poem in my pocket, to turn to on lunch break or in a traffic jam. I can even memorize parts of it, to mull over throughout the day, as in the ancient practice of praying with scripture known as *lectio divina*.

I’ve been sitting these days especially with contemporary Polish poets like Zagajewski. Because out of their country’s previous half-century of suffering violence, from the Nazi occupation to communist totalitarian oppression and terror, they have developed a voice and vision of wise reflection on the interchange between public evils and the individual human heart.

The poem starts in a world of sinister darkness. The anonymous town—“your” town, the poet insists, putting me at once into the poem’s world—is so black, sooty and shadowy that even trains passing through get the creeps and are anxious to leave. Yet the glimmer of a brighter world is offered at the end of the first stanza: the inside walls of a gray building (a greenhouse, we know from the title) are “mother-of-pearl.”

“Forget the snow,” the poet suddenly commands; forget the bitter cold blows of the outside world. “Inside” the greenhouse is where he takes us, to its lush greeting of a fanciful “anthology of breezes” and the whispering welcome of “vast leaves.” There’s a mystery in here, the poet hints, but it seems exotically intriguing rather

than a threat.

The poet's contrasting commands continue in stanza three. The reader is ordered to "forget" the outside world's dark sadness and weight. (Are "Sundays" particularly "thwarted" because they're the day of the resurrection, of light and hope?) "Stadiums," "streets" and the "Sundays" hinting at churchgoing: these are images of places where people should joyfully gather. Yet in this dark town, the "happiness, collectivity, community" of which Adrienne Rich speaks have been thwarted by an unnamed dread. So the poet urges us to "accept" instead the healing "warm breath wafting" from the greenhouse plants.

He himself initiates this process of "forgetting" harsh outside realities as he sinks into the alluring sound, feel and scent of the greenhouse's alternate world, "beckoning you on."

And then he leads us on—tentatively, gently, with his "perhaps" which opens the next verse. We are beckoned into the world of the free imagination: sailing ships, rosy mists, a fantasy world of "what never was." And through imagination's realm, we're brought to "people with lives/ like your own."

Coming to these people is a double jolt. First, we'd never have expected to arrive by way of fantasy at real people like ourselves. Second, we suddenly realize that up to this point there have been no people in the poem. The only life in the poem has come from objects (the anxious trains) or the greenhouse's protected environment (whispering leaves and welcoming breezes). But now, glimpses of longed for or lost dreamworlds have dissolved the barrier between outer and inner worlds that dominated the poem's first half: the barrier between "those parts of us which exist in dread" (as Rich puts it) and "a surviving sense of possible happiness." Being able to imagine idealized worlds allows us to break through the dreadful dark isolation of an oppressive reality, to a new reality promising hope because it is peopled with our own soulmates.

From this instant, all darkness vanishes from the poem. "You see the world lit differently." And in this new light, this new lightheartedness, images of the possibility of human community are released: delightful images of people's doors swinging open for a moment, so that "you read their hidden thoughts," and—a marvelous image of freedom from envy and fear—"their holidays don't hurt."

How wildly wonderful is this loss of isolation. “Lose yourself,” the poet gleefully shouts, and we may hear an echo of the gospel injunction to radical self-abandonment. “Go blind from ecstasy” so that you can start seeing totally afresh. Let yourself be dispossessed of “everything” that you were so sure you understood. And then, in this utter emptiness of blessed forgetfulness, deeper truths have a chance to slip in. “And you’ll hear yourself saying,” in the hush now of a prayer, “I don’t know how—/ the palm trees opened up my greedy heart.”

I don’t know how such transformation happens, but I trust it does. The poem has renewed this trust by taking me through an experience of transformation’s mystery. The transformative experience in the greenhouse can be at once a symbol of possibility for each of our hearts and also for our nation or the globe.

[The Greenhouse](#), by Adam Zagajewski