

Words against fear: A journalist and poet

by [Eliza Griswold](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue



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In both poetry and journalism, I've always been drawn to the edges of metaphysical and physical places. A poem is a prayer, and a risky one at that: reading or writing a poem requires that we step out of ourselves. We have to enter the world of the poem, and this can be dangerous. As a foreign correspondent, I do the same thing. I lean on certain basic tools, above all a willingness to slow down, step out of myself and listen to what's happening around me. Both vocations require a love of looking and a tendency toward fierce self-appraisal in order to scour away as much of the muddy distortion that ego offers in a given moment. Both require a nose capable of sniffing out the closest thing to truth.

Growing up as the child of an Episcopal priest in suburban Philadelphia, I frequently felt out of sync with the comfortable, "ordinary" world that surrounded us. I felt that we lived at the portal to a sacred and dangerous world. I was painfully aware, as so many children are, that where our family lived was weird. Our flagstone and clapboard house might look like the others on the block, but it led away from the

familiar land of school plays, ice skating and tennis lessons. We lived next to the church in the rectory, on semisanctified and consecrated ground. I had a profound sense that the home we lived in was borrowed. It didn't belong to us. It was a sanctuary for those in need of pastoral counseling, which sometimes took unusual forms.

One afternoon my mother and I returned home from my school to find a thief wandering around upstairs in our house. We must have surprised him, for luckily he took nothing. When we confronted him, he descended our front stairs in a sport coat and offered this elegant and impossible lie: he'd mistaken the rectory for the local college.

My mother said nothing, of course. What could she say? Her role was to welcome wayward strangers. Until that afternoon, the door to our home had never been locked. Instead my dad had offered us other kinds of protection: he once took a piece of my blue sidewalk chalk and scrawled a Greek prayer of safekeeping on the kitchen lintel.

As a child I was drawn to Emily Dickinson for her quiet ferocity—and no doubt because her cadences were rooted in those of the Protestant hymnal with which I spent so much time. On my bedroom wall hung a watercolor of one of her poems. It began:

Hope is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

I clung to other scraps of folk prayer and song that I picked up half-consciously:

Touch the lintel, touch the wall
Nothing but blessings here befall.

Along with the Dickinson poem, I used to soothe myself by repeating these lines. Yes, they were incantatory; they were also poetry. As I grew older, words became my most powerful talismans against the fearful world of potentially dangerous visitors and the spirits whom I believed dwelled in the in-between place—the limbo—that our home provided for them.

Words also offered me a curious gift: they taught me that I was safe, and could be safe, far from the wealthy world of the suburbs. From the point of earliest memory, I felt I was an interloper in the world of boxwood hedges and heady whiffs of chlorine from other people's swimming pools. I eventually decided that safety wasn't physical, like a fence or a locked door. It was something that I carried with me, or what I later learned was a metaphysical state. I could take comfort from words in the most desolate locations, whether in stories or drawn from the world around me. As a child, the Maine coast became one such place; its bleakness was a salve to a primal wound I couldn't identify—the reflection of a subtle inner state.

As an adult I have found solace in another kind of bleakness: the far-flung and troubled corners of Africa and Asia. I've worked in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and many of the other messy places that have made the news over the last decade. But it's the liminal places—the borders—that draw me most. I spent seven years traveling along the fraught fault line where Christianity and Islam meet in Africa and Asia to ask what role religion plays in fomenting violence between these two global forces. In Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, I've investigated church burnings and the desecration of mosques, as well as the massacres of both Christians and Muslims. I've examined the role that religious violence plays in political elections, droughts, floods and even arguments over electricity and drinking water.

Out of this work, I write as a journalist. At the same time, I keep one eye out for what sparks my poems: situations, people, moments that challenge me and things that I can't understand. Through poetry and journalism, I carry my childhood totem of language to define the utmost edges of human experience.

Read two poems by Griswold, "[Foot Washing](#)" and "[Waiting For My Volcano](#)"