

The Beat Within: This Is a Poem About What Causes Poems Like This to Be Written

Before I begin this poem ...

I'd like to ask you to join me in a moment of silence ...

In honor of those who died in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon

On September 11th 2001 ...

I'd also like to ask you to offer up a moment of silence ...

For all those who've been harassed, imprisoned, disappeared, tortured, raped or killed in retaliation for those strikes ... for the victims in Afghanistan, Iraq, in the U.S. and throughout the world ...

And if I could add just one more thing ...

A day of silence.

For the tens of thousands of Palestinians who died at the hands of U.S.-backed Israeli forces over decades of occupation.

Six months of silence ...

For the million and a half Iraqi people ... mostly children ... who died of malnourishment or starvation as a result of a twelve-year U.S. embargo against that country ... before the war ever began ... and now ... the drums of war beat again ...

Before I begin this poem ...

Nine months of silence

For the dead in Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Where death rained down and peeled back every layer

Of concrete, steel, earth and skin
And the survivors
Well they went on as if they were alive ...

One year of silence ...

For the millions dead in Vietnam ... a people ... not a war ... for
those who know a thing or two about the scent of burning fuel
– their relatives' bones buried in it – their babies born of
it ...

Two months of silence ...

For the decade of dead in Colombia ... whose names ... like the
corpses they once represented ... have piled up and slipped off
our tongues ...

Before I begin this poem ...

Seven days of silence ... for El Salvador

A day of silence ... for Nicaragua

Five days of silence ... for the Guatemalans

None of whom ever knew a moment of peace in their living years
...

1,955 miles of silence ...

For every desperate body that burns in the desert sun
Drowned in swollen rivers at the pearly gates to the empire's
underbelly

A gaping wound sutured shut by razor and corrugated steel ...

Twenty-five years of silence ...

For the millions of Africans who found their graves far deeper
in the ocean than any building could poke into the sky

For those who were strung and swung from the height of
sycamore trees

In the South

The North

The East

The West

There will no DNA testing or dental records to identify their remains ...

100 years of silence ...

For the hundreds of millions of indigenous people from this half of right now

Whose land and lives were stolen

In postcard-perfect plots like

Pine Ridge

Wounded Knee

Sand Creek

Fallen Timbers

Or the Trail of Tears

Names now reduced to innocuous magnetic poetry

On the refrigerator of our consciousness ...

From the somewhere within the pillars of power ...

You open your mouth to invoke a moment of silence ...

And we are all left speechless

Our tongues snatched from our mouths

Our eyes stapled shut

A moment of silence ...

And the poets are laid to rest

The drums disintegrated to dust ...

Before I begin this poem.

You want a moment of silence ...

You mourn now as if the world will never be the same

While the rest of us hope to hell that it won't be

Not like it always has been

Because you see

This isn't a 9/11 poem

This is a 9/10 poem!

A 9/9 poem!

A 9/8 poem!

A 9/7 poem!

This is a 1619 poem!

A 1492 poem!

This is a poem about what causes poems like this to be written

But if it is a 9/11 poem

It's a September 11, 1973 poem for the people of Chile

It's a September 12, 1977 poem for the Steven Biko of South Africa

It's a September 13, 1971 poem for the brothers at Attica prison in New York

It's a September 14, 1992 poem for the people of Somalia

This is a poem for every date that falls to the ground

Amidst the ashes of amnesia

This is a poem for the 110 stories that were never told

The 110 stories that history uprooted from its textbooks

The 100 stories that CNN, ABC, The New York Times and Newsweek ignored

This is a poem to interrupt their programs

This is not a peace poem

Not some poem of forgiveness

This is a justice poem

A poem for never forgetting

This is a poem to remind us

That all that glitters

Might just be

Broken glass

And still you want a moment of silence for the dead?

We could give you lifetimes of empties;

The unmarked graves

Lost languages

The uprooted trees and histories

The dead stares on the faces of nameless children.

Before I begin this poem ...

We could be silent forever ...

Or just long enough to hunger for the dust to bury us

And would you still ask us for more of our silence ...

Well if you want a moment of silence ...

Then stop the oil pumps

Turn off the engines

The televisions

Sink the cruise ships

Crash the stock markets

Unplug the marquee lights

Delete the emails and instant messages

Derail the trains and ground the planes

If you want a moment of silence ...

Put a brick through the window of Taco Bell

And pay the workers for wages lost ...

Tear down the Liquor stores

The Townhouses

The Penthouses

The Jail houses

And the White Houses

If you want a moment of silence ...

Then take it now!

Before this poem begins

Here's your silence

Take it!

Take it all!

But don't cut in line

Let your silence begin

At the beginning of crime ...

Jesse Jackson, 52, is currently in the San Francisco County Jail for a probation violation. He has spent the better part of the last 35 years in and out of the criminal justice system.

[The Beat Within](#), a publication of writing and art from incarcerated youth, was founded by David Inocencio in San

Francisco in 1996. Weekly writing and conversation workshops are held in California, six other states and Washington, D.C. Submissions and new partners are welcomed. Write to him at inocencio@thebeatwithin.org.