

Erica Hunt

Dear Neighbor

a poem of "what if" for Liz Magill and the University of Pennsylvania

"What is it to talk as if the world you know is the world?"

Dionne Brand

Dear Neighbor:

I can easily imagine we have met before
 seated, facing the same direction
 attentive to what's next
 side by side in an airplane
 the department of motor vehicles waiting room
 the grocery line
 perhaps hopping into a shared ride for the short trip
 to the next
stop sign— the signal we've begun
Another beginning
 the day after the end

And we break a customary silence to
consider the scene before us:
 the present undoes us daily—and not in a good way
 the taste of metal invades the tongue
 holds words hostage—

"What is that color again?" Magenta? Cerise? Vermillion? Carnadine?

Or perhaps we plunge

impulsively down corridors of intimate speech
during which every other word
is a revelation to ourselves.

We think to pass the time— to “kill” it as they say, but instead, we wake
our fiber from its slumber,
alive to how we are more alike than lazy observation allows:
for what menaces me is a secret nemesis for you.

Dear Adjacency:

We exchange addresses with every intention to be in touch
later. Days and months cue up
aging buildings are replaced with glass
exclamations of “progress”--
boiling points rise triumphant to the sky
Streets keep their names, Locust, Spruce, Walnut,
But our cups separate and still
overflow with prophetic discontent.

Small victories miraculously escape
the snares of unforeseen misfortune –
We discover it takes several pounds of worried flesh to
patch this wounded world.
we tangle with a cumbersome

inheritance of missed and dismissed opportunities and more profitable tangents—

—indisputable “realisms” in the unshakeable calculus of scant means can meet only a few faltering ends.

Dear Adjacency:

Consider the story just below the sound:

Who here has changed spots?

One day the leopard, the next day prey?

Who here has cowered?

Who has caused others or wished to cause others to cower?

Who here has been shocked to call themselves a coward, studied for their turn and failed in courage?

Who here has fallen? Who here has gotten back up?

Who here has felon? Who here has been at fault?

Who here has been broke?

Who has broken bread with strangers? Who here has been the stranger?

Who here has been too strange?

Who filters light to let the sun reach the ground to ripen seed to fruit?

Who has held back light, so saplings never thrive?

Dear Ally:

For a brief time, we think we can read each other
and stand in for an author who writes what we know.
We think we know how to survive the popular innocence:
those who would rather not know

Sorrow falls like ashes into drinking water,
Sorrow bows down insulin-collapsing shelves of sugar and
white flour
Indifference to sorrow thins the oxygen of classrooms'
dwindling public support,
Sorrow floods courtrooms, where it is already too familiar

We already know where we can find discontent and
the clamoring contents of the given.

*We'd be better off stopping or turning around here
at the threshold of address.*

Dear Neighbor:

Yet, in the space of these few hours on this day
we expectantly embrace beginning again
—as neighbors—
we do not entirely know each other, but it can't stay that way
look closer at the
map of our here and now

Let us ignore the chafing bracelet of rationed patience
and meet this moment with “virtuous impatience.”

Let curiosity guide us closer to one another

I’d borrow from Homer, another poet

“He saw the cities of many peoples, and he learned their ways.”

And change the line to

“They saw the many cities of people with whom they live and learned their ways,”

Dear Neighbor:

I find you in the future by zooming in

As if to meet you for the first time

larger than life

Neighbor, I remark— Penn still crowns a hill
rises from the rumpled quilt of Philadelphia

When I last saw you, welcoming your new leader— red and yellow stars showered
on blue-lit fields

Dear Future; Dear Neighbor

I see the expanded glossaries of the possible you’ve created by proving that
speaking freely and with respect are not contraries.

I see the books that map the not-quite-yet; they grace shelves encouraging the
public to dream.

I see new constellations you've named on our barely mapped earth trace the organisms that share "knowledge"¹ that keeps the planet alive.

Dear Future Neighbor:

I see feats of engineering and technology that connect every hamlet on the globe to medicine, libraries, and care. In turn, these faraway places reciprocate with lullabies and meditations—an abundance of time-slowng ways' in a time-starved world.

I meet you again, making a course for our future in legal clinics where youth practice restorative justice and temper revenge with reconciliation.

I hear porch stoop poets and musicians toss thrilling words, images, and music that defy the speed of sound.

Dear Future Neighbor:

I see you making space for new neighbors
A diverse kindred—kind with no closing line
But an unstoppable passion for the
never-complete task of repairing the world.

¹ This line of thought is influenced by recent discoveries in ecology underlining the role of mycorrhizal association or **cooperation** between fungi, tree, and plant root systems crucial to forest health, and in turn carbon and water production crucial to the planet. See *Mushroom at the End of the World* and other publications.

