



# POETIC ADDRESS TO THE NATION 2016

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EVERY YEAR, THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE SPONSORS THE **PEOPLE'S STATE OF THE UNION**, inviting us all to host a national conversation in our own homes, schools, houses of worship, and community organizations, sharing stories that reveal the state of our union. Then, inspired by hundreds of stories submitted from across the country, an amazing group of poets collaboratively composes the **Poetic Address to the Nation**. On Saturday, February 20, the 2016 Poetic Address was performed at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, PA, recorded and streamed live by Philly CAM, and distributed nationally by Free Speech TV.

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## THE POETIC ADDRESS PROCESS

The 2016 Poetic Address to the Nation is inspired by stories shared at People's State of the Union community events and by individuals across the country in late January 2016. USDAC Rhapsodist of Wherewithal and Philadelphia Poet Laureate Yolanda Wisher commissioned a group of diverse poets from across the U.S. to contribute sonnets on the state of our union and story poems inspired by stories uploaded to the #PSOTU2016 Story Portal.

The Poetic Address to the Nation may be downloaded, shared, and performed freely, so long as acknowledgement is given to the USDAC and poets cited.

## PARTICIPATING POETS

Bethlehem & Sad Patrick, Cathy Linh Che, Thomas Devaney, LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, Denice Frohman, Ross Gay,

Bob Holman, Trapeta B. Mayson, Jena Osman, Margaret Randall, Luis Rodriguez, Frank Sherlock, Monnette Sudler, J.C. Todd, and Yolanda Wisher.

## THE USDAC

THE USDAC IS A NATIONAL ACTION NETWORK of artists and cultural workers mobilizing creativity for social and environmental justice. Organizing locally and nationally, the USDAC exists to spark a grassroots, creative change movement, engaging millions in envisioning and enacting a world rooted in empathy, equity, and social imagination.

## CONTACT US

Ask for more help or information anytime. If you perform the Poetic Address, please send us a picture and/or a note about how it went: [hello@usdac.us](mailto:hello@usdac.us).



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TOGETHER, WE CREATE.

[USDAC.US](http://USDAC.US) | [HELLO@USDAC.US](mailto:HELLO@USDAC.US)

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# 2016 POETIC ADDRESS TO THE NATION

## PEOPLE'S SONNET NUMBER 5

by Luis Rodriguez

Let us dare haunting verse of the oppressed,  
poems with hoodies, finger-tapping, ambling.  
I mean pissed off and ardently expressed,  
poems delirious as midnight rambling.  
Bebop, Hip Hop, a decima or slam,  
metered lyrics, free shaped texts... no matter,  
bring out the fire, the punch, a resounding jam.  
Let it ring far, a magnificent chatter.  
Naming the nameless, voicing the unheard,  
questioning the questions, swimming, splashing.  
No expert strokes but damn if not expert word;  
every line bleeding, grieving, pleading, slashing.  
The power of poetry is its stance,  
page or stage, electrifying or trance.

## SEEK SHELTER

by Trapeta Mayson & Monnette Sudler

In one breath,  
in one gulp of thin reedy air,  
one fading and fatigued red white and blue pining  
we are told that all of this,  
this United Place of America  
belongs to us.  
In another breath, one air raid angry siren  
one hulk spit war cry from a hate filled mob.  
you are told *get out, go back to where you came from*  
you and your kind  
you marred  
you stained  
you low man, woman on the totem pole.

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And we are pitted against one another  
in this new world fight club -  
in one corner:  
the aging prize fighters of the *American Dream*  
holders of picket fence mirages  
wavers of flags that witnessed the forced seizures of land  
wicked water hoses and hoofs galloping on Black backs.  
And in another corner:  
the new arrivals  
Flyweight fresh bloods  
weary eyed crossers of borders  
novices of green cards and status  
head tied or fully garbed  
refugee or traveling free.

We bob and we weave -  
engage in bare knuckle scrap matches  
for a place to call home.  
We tussle hard for the golden ticket,  
the dangling carrot  
while 'round us bark the Gatekeepers  
the sons of privilege and lineage  
who move the line  
and set the bar  
and change the rules  
and won't let us in.

*These are the stories of belonging and not belonging* says Alice in Ithaca.

Phoebe says, *I am so in pain most of the time,  
I want to go into the closet and lock myself up  
Just Go under my bed and hide  
But I can't*

But I can't *cause I've come this far by faith* says Marcus in Brooklyn

But I can't *because we are dealing with a crisis of spirit* says Jesse

But I can't *cause I yearn for this country to be for everyone* says Alice in Maryland

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Oh give me shelter in this fractured Union  
Give me shelter in this fractured Union  
Stitch up these worn bones  
Open my mouth  
Rip this silence from my foreign tongue  
Move this wedge of indifference  
Show me a sign that I am home  
Take away our boxing ring of conflict  
where we bloody each other with pride and prejudice  
Put out a welcome mat

Oh give me shelter in this fractured Union  
For I too am a sister and a prodigal son  
I've walked the earth and need to settle  
Give me space to be  
Let me be  
let me be in this United Place of America.

## STATE OF THE UNION: HIGHER EDUCATION

by Cathy Linh Che

Dollars fly into the mouths of the rich.  
Student debt bloats, fat with interest.  
Our university presidents  
sail off with million dollar bonuses.  
They sleep in the Hamptons, in summer homes purchased  
with tuition. We eat instant ramen,  
stand in lines outside of the grocery store,  
the snow swirling and sticking to our eggs.  
Oh, groceries, which shiver in our bags.  
We can eat poetry but our guts feel the difference  
between a hot meal and a dream's theoretical nourishment.  
Poems don't pay the bills, but a job doesn't pay much more.  
To the 16 million children impoverished,  
America, you owe much, much more.

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## BECAUSE IF THEY TAUGHT GENOCIDE

by Denice Frohman read by David Escobar-Martin

& the children drink (poisoned) water  
& nobody drops their coffee mug  
because the dying didn't happen  
overnight

& when I say nobody  
I mean the bodies that lose no sleep  
because saving a few  
dollars is softer than saying we didn't plan

on investing in you anyway  
& in a few years, if a bullet misses them  
& the water doesn't,  
colleges will look like a ghost town

& they'll say, well, what happened  
why didn't they study harder.

## LIKES

by Jena Osman

Like we can do that?  
like, ok, I'm not gonna work this month  
like I am patriotic, I have beliefs in this country  
like to tell  
like almost everyone there  
like it. Not at all. It isn't right  
Like this

Like you, I have my foot in both worlds  
like you. You slap me. You shoot my brother  
like this. There was one after the death of one  
like I mean it LOL  
like minded people  
like a life or end in the dark?"

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like I'm different than everybody else  
like they are someone I could be vulnerable with  
like I didn't belong  
like I didn't belong here,  
like I finally found where I belong  
like that

like to be in a situation when you are  
like this, an event to build community  
like "what do you do when he's done  
like, "I don't really know  
like I didn't get the benefit of the doubt.  
Like there was something wrong with me  
like if they didn't have that experience?  
like that back then

like a sailor  
like I had no choice, because I had no sense left  
like government cheese poor  
like I have really benefitted from the programs  
like I was, and I feel very lucky to have come full circle  
like a pancake?  
like family  
like me  
like this

like you're not welcome here, in our neighborhood  
like I belonged with the kids  
like many in this country  
like Safe Passage  
like her, without even knowing it  
like my grandmother the whole time, my whole life!  
like how to pee in the woods and how to not freeze to death  
like you're going to die at all times  
like that

like fire in my hands  
like numbers...enslaved by technology  
like being segregated as if I am orange wedges

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like it addresses me as a person  
like I've had a very complicated relationship with America my whole life  
like I had this greater understanding of American flaws and was un-fooled by the American dream  
in a very extreme way  
like all tough relationships, like a relationship with my mom.  
like if my grandfather was leaving the country or something it would be  
like "the eagle has landed."  
like "I'm suddenly part of this American story of people on shores waiting for people"  
like "this could be happening

like "How? How? How? How?"  
like all this stuff starts in the family  
like, let's try to figure out what's making you sick  
like, here's a bunch of pills  
like I could be a conscientious objector  
like I understood the war well enough to give my life to it  
like that

## GOODBYE

by Ross Gay

Oh who among the chatterass unwagged  
accosts the sweet upthrusted gold and shagged  
and grizzle-grinned lustmust of honeybee,  
unshedding lawnmowers, grabbing no-glee  
aglow in gummy plastic sprayerthings,  
you you you you you you you you poor thing.  
How bout you drop t'your knees, lay face inside  
one flower in the flower's trillion flowers  
(that seemed to make no sense but it is true)  
and doze awhile? Who knew the sky was blue  
like that. The cardinals always playing tag.  
My dumbass shitty death love going vag-  
abond. Goodbye dumbass shitty death love.  
Yes, fare thee well dumbass shitty death love!

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## STATE OF THE UNION SONNET, 2016

by Bob Holman

When in the ramble of Utopic Imagination  
You find yourself in Alaska living in languages  
That have been outlawed for over a century  
But have somehow survived as surely as the 5 hours'  
Sunlight we'll have here in Anchorage today, January 6,  
2016 – well, you might just want to count those languages (20)  
And make them official, as happened here in 2014  
Finally beginning a Repatriation of Respect for #49

It's here that languages live tight to the people  
This multi-dimensional place, still known as Seward's Icebox  
The incredible variety of tongues marks Arctic diversity  
Support immersion classes! Thriving Tlingit, Iñupiaq,  
Yu'pik down to dear sleeping Eyak, w/ no speakers, also "official."  
(As Tim Argetsinger says, "What good is official, if your language  
is dying?")

#NOAFRICANAFTERSP.M.

by LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs

"Vegan?! VEGAN?! I CALLED OUT SICK FOR YOU TO ANNOUNCE YOU DONT  
LIKE BACONS NO MO?! @Beyonce"

Tweet from @RoseMadness

kiwi bitch slaps w/ a pink dildo. treaties trans Wilma's flint  
Jacksonville quackery & Affleck's omitted nut sacque. check it: trump  
like his lamb halal. won't admit he fidgets w/ watermelon for stiff dumps.  
me needs to get my Berber on. flex like documented Slovenian olms. flaunt  
bent

babel vowel Yoncé. got my papers in pollen oday? hella young for kerplunk.  
yella Curry dunkadunk. Catlin where you be? Dhabi got your Kashmir boy on lease.  
memoir's short due to glaciers leaky. beez on time suck online. worldly? nay. sent  
Syria not Tuvalu. don't believe me? der were pearls before crude. bumps



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back on sugar tit to mask lead. sentiments tweeted. televised absent ma's liniment.  
Boko Haram. who dat? cerise stagnant ikor down a Bronx street. Chi-raq blackness.  
breadfruit rotted. Pan of Africa now Beijing duck on defected hover boards.  
Zika like Nestlé. wise monkey Detroit. Kiribati lagoon a minor viral crease.

but that dress! gold? Suisse pleats? benevolent blue ain't confessing. adjourn lord.  
no comfort for Holtzclaw. mauled by a kudu. a daydream for Orwellian wackness.

## THE STATE OF THE UNION

by J.C. Todd

What is the state of the union?

the u-n-i-o-n

the union undone?

What is the state

the ex-state,

the S-S state

of the union

the union undone?

And who is undone

when the union's undone?

Boys who bleed red

in playgrounds and parks

street corners and porch steps

boys murdered

by blue shirts

their mothers'

and fathers' wails

muzzled,

their sisters' and

brothers' wails

muzzled

by juries

too lily-white and

too grand

to indict.

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What is the state of the union?  
the u-n-i-o-n  
The union undone?  
What is the state  
the ex-state,  
the S-S state  
of the union  
the union undone?

And who is undone  
when the union's undone?

Old folks and children  
their food stamps and CHIP  
chipped down to nothing  
their water leaded  
their air toxified.  
Unfed and un-well  
laid off and un-homed  
but never un-hungered.  
What is the health of the union  
the u-n-i-o-n  
the union undone?  
What is the health  
of the ex-state,  
the S-S state  
of the union  
the union undone?

And who is undone  
when the union's undone?

The strivers and seekers  
who squeak by  
on ramen  
on small squares of  
bullion  
to pay back  
crushing loans  
from their days as students  
lit up by learning  
hoping for good work

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and good earnings.  
What is their state  
when jobs slip  
overseas  
when homes slip  
underwater?

What is the debt of the union  
the u-n-i-o-n  
the union undone?  
What is the debt  
of the ex-state  
the S-S state  
of the union,  
the union undone?

What about the undoers  
who will never be done  
undoing  
the union,  
the U-n-I-o-n.  
undoing the state  
as they build  
the ex-state  
the S-S state  
of their union.

What about our union?  
The U- n-I-on  
U-n-I on  
the union  
You 'n I  
have got  
to take back  
and redo.  
Undo the undoing  
Redo  
the union  
the U-n-I-on  
U-n-I-on  
the UNION  
of WE.

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## MOTHER OF EXILES

by Bethlehem & Sad Patrick.

*Inspired by stories by Caryl Henry Alexander, Melvin Davis, Tracy R-T and Delfine from Corvallis, Oregon*

Outside it's cold and gray  
People don't get in my way  
The margins are wide enough, to hide all of us

Who don't belong in the light of day  
Who look like we started from far away  
Who were born and raised without a break, and bruised ever since

Inside shines like a dream  
Of freedom and time to breathe, of safety  
Ways, and means and justice indivisible

Sometimes I think "I'll get to go there"  
Sometimes I think I'll find someone to care

But I'm not like them so they dislike me  
And hearts get hard so easily  
When you're afraid you're losing your dream

Round and round for a hundred years  
Politicians trade on fears  
While the Mother of Exiles slowly disappears

And with her all those streets of gold  
And all the dreams our heart could hold  
And all the promise of this promised land

Oh how I wish I could go there  
How I wish I had someone to care

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## LOOK ME IN THE FACE SONNET

by Thomas Devaney

The hurt, the kind other people can see, but  
you can't see yourself. Some blur, some gloom  
glow, face faster than film, pinched eyes.  
And the aunt who isn't your aunt comes closer and  
asks, You alright? Well that's not you. Not the guy I know.  
Stop fretting, let's talk. Nobody else can tell your story.  
WHO has that? And me, she says, What do I want?  
Look me in the face. OK. I do and we sit and find out  
she's been sick for six months. Why tell? she says.  
Anyway I'm telling you now: My body hurts like hell,  
but my brain is fine. My appetite is amazing.  
I'M STILL ME. Do me a favor and sit for  
another minute. We don't have to talk so much.  
You're hooked baby, hooked with the phone and  
The Everything Else. Unplug. Leave it HOME,  
wherever that is.  
When you're doing the dishes: DO the dishes. Tunneling?  
Dig the tunnel. Telling a story, tell it to me.  
There's no secret what we need.

## BABYBREATH RATTLE

by Frank Sherlock

I did not come  
w/ a story but  
stories of people  
born while dying  
came along  
when I  
arrived Babies  
are cute whatever  
  
but then they grow  
into monsters or  
at least that's what  
monsters

---

posing as people  
w/ their torches  
& pitchforks insist  
Everybody  
makes a big deal  
about these fingers  
these toes but how  
do I say now  
that air  
flow's vital  
too so much  
involved to  
keep going  
From the start  
I rattled when  
I took in what  
refineries shat  
sentenced to  
entertain  
death before  
learning to read  
if only for  
entertainment  
Listen to me  
breathe Concentrate  
on your lungs  
w/ thanks that  
you don't have  
to heave & pray  
in efforts  
to get it out  
A prison  
wasn't built here  
because it'd be  
cruel & unusual to  
force inmates  
to inhale  
So instead  
there was porn  
& junkyards &

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us & asthma  
Living on  
cancer alley  
was a joke  
as children at  
play until it  
wasn't a joke  
being jealous  
of lifers as  
a child in the  
waiting room  
shut down  
before being  
admitted  
Risk assessment  
is bureaucraspeak  
for trying to find  
ways to not die  
No more talk of  
landscapes in  
sunshine black  
smoke  
made sundowns  
majestic painted  
in shades of  
toxin  
Trigger alert  
this shit is funny  
these habits of  
unseeing for  
survival There's  
fun & importance  
in teaching a child  
to pee outside &  
keep from  
choking to death  
In slag &  
dross is the elusive  
taste of laughter  
moving as

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fluid circulates  
disposed to  
mood & condition  
We this history's  
desperate surprise  
We this mammoth  
fuck-up Trying to  
get away from  
fossil fuels I got  
stuck in the  
band of a tire  
Silica dust in  
plastic bags  
keeps me from  
getting too high  
So hahaha I  
was so relieved  
when I learned  
that rage could  
indeed be  
productive  
Some ftp  
in a suit &  
tie rage some  
audubon talk  
not for the birds  
rage some  
going to  
the desert &  
coming back  
w/ love getting  
that it was  
love all along  
Some of this  
is sounding  
incorrect  
okay you  
might be  
right but to  
remove it



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would be  
incomplete  
I can't speak  
each language  
to communicate  
w/ others whose  
most epic  
struggle is for  
that one  
clear breath  
whispering into  
their chests an  
assurance that  
things will  
continue  
Radioactive  
works as  
a metaphor  
except for  
cancer wards  
here & villages  
bombed just  
pick one  
The shit of  
oil by the airport  
makes warplanes  
go so they can  
shit overseas  
The light here's  
all wrong quit  
telling me the  
full moon makes  
people crazy  
    Money does  
The villagers  
& me we need  
new light  
to belong to  
a different  
constellation

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glinting w/  
the import  
of stars to  
sailors Of  
course we suspect  
it's already  
here Look I think  
it might be  
the night lights  
There are lovers  
who would find  
each other by  
following  
patterns in  
darkness This  
isn't some  
three kings shit  
I didn't get  
this from rumi  
times this is  
some 21st  
century oakland  
shit playing out  
in a poet's backyard  
Moon king &  
moon queen  
are now moon  
king & moon  
king not together  
but together  
& there's no  
saudi crown prince  
doing that  
Studies commence  
from up  
here on the roof  
The veteran  
who burned the  
flag made me tea  
from crates

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that washed up on  
the shore from  
once upon a time  
Can I Can I  
just sit up here  
& drink this  
yogi green  
to breathe  
I light a match  
& fingers burn  
A newborn knows  
this story

## SONNET FOR THE 2016 POETIC ADDRESS TO THE NATION

by Margaret Randall

Amy reports all pedophile priests to get an eternity  
at hard labor, the cops who shoot black youth  
life sentences in prisons run by their mothers.  
The people have spoken: our lives finally matter.

Bernie's so far ahead in the polls, he's a shoo-in  
for the big white house. All other candidates  
have dropped out, leaving their war chests to the poor,  
sustainable energy or refugee relocation.

Like the biblical Samson, He Who Cannot Be Named  
has lost his hair, his polling numbers plummeted  
and he retired to his tower's oblivion.

I wake from this dream  
and it's 2016:  
truly a New Year has dawned!

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## ONE FLAME

by Trapeta Mayson & Monnette Sudler.

*Inspired by Helen's story in Ithaca, NY*

and a stranger held my hand  
and I remember thinking,  
this is how we get through  
this sort of thing

take the hand  
that has been extended -  
don't dwell on anything else  
not on one thing that will sever us  
that will divide us

take the hand  
that has been extended-  
don't dwell on who leads the hand to bed  
or if it's clasped in solemn devotion  
or if it's raised up,  
palms facing Mecca  
proclaiming God's greatness.

take the hand  
that has been extended  
this is how we get through  
how we get by  
how get on  
how get forward  
we don't leave a hand  
lone and dangling -  
like a strange fruit  
that its community has dropped  
that the bastards will pluck  
that defeat and alienation will rot  
we take the hand  
this is how we get through this thing  
the thing that separate us  
together  
we find a candle

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together  
we hold steady  
together  
we create the fire  
together  
we keep the flame

and a stranger held my hand.  
and I remember thinking,  
this is how we get through this sort of thing.

take the hand  
keep the flame burning  
give energy  
give power  
give life in solidarity  
in community  
this is how we get through  
we take the hand  
we become the keepers of the flame.

TBD

by Yolanda Wisher

Our union the Night in your Tunisia itchin to be young again, mornin breath against thigh & knees against hips, the burnt sage of Mr. Don's sax caught in the 9 o'clock trees like Pieces of a Dream, Ms. Barb bent over crushed flowers closest to the curb. Jimmy Next Door no longer sittin baldheaded & big-bellied on the porch, writin a novel in his minivan or beltin Zappa into anything-but-gentle evenins. The state we're in the neck-back soup your mother used to make. All the stuff you don't want, some stuff you do. Everybody had their own piece of chicken & once upon a time, people would suck the marrow out of bones, make sure something would survive. God's in other places. God's busy. God's too full so we take over for a spell-check, fall into each other like clothes in the dryer. What Tish says in Beale Street, "like getting hit by a truck"—we step from our love scenes into streets where sentient buses race to end our all. She's talkin about Fonny's lovemaking—"...but it was the most beautiful thing that happened to me," still I see Baldwin like Jimmy Next Door preachin between the lines of a wraparound porch built onto the side of a negro mountain waitin to be renamed. Such that the Ganges & the Flint flow like the rivers of Jordan & Wonkaland, our union like poetry of bathroom stalls, sanctified like our begats, odds & ends.