

## Poetry Slam #1 - Foundations of American Lit

# The Powwow at the End of the World

By Sherman Alexie

I am told by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall  
after an Indian woman puts her shoulder to the Grand Coulee Dam  
and topples it. I am told by many of you that I must forgive  
and so I shall after the floodwaters burst each successive dam  
downriver from the Grand Coulee. I am told by many of you  
that I must forgive and so I shall after the floodwaters find  
their way to the mouth of the Columbia River as it enters the Pacific  
and causes all of it to rise. I am told by many of you that I must forgive  
and so I shall after the first drop of floodwater is swallowed by that salmon  
waiting in the Pacific. I am told by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall  
after that salmon swims upstream, through the mouth of the Columbia  
and then past the flooded cities, broken dams and abandoned reactors  
of Hanford. I am told by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall  
after that salmon swims through the mouth of the Spokane River  
as it meets the Columbia, then upstream, until it arrives  
in the shallows of a secret bay on the reservation where I wait alone.  
I am told by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall after  
that salmon leaps into the night air above the water, throws  
a lightning bolt at the brush near my feet, and starts the fire  
which will lead all of the lost Indians home. I am told  
by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall  
after we Indians have gathered around the fire with that salmon  
who has three stories it must tell before sunrise: one story will teach us  
how to pray; another story will make us laugh for hours;  
the third story will give us reason to dance. I am told by many  
of you that I must forgive and so I shall when I am dancing  
with my tribe during the powwow at the end of the world.

# Grief Calls Us to the Things of This World

By Sherman Alexie

The eyes open to a blue telephone  
In the bathroom of this five-star hotel.

I wonder whom I should call? A plumber,  
Proctologist, urologist, or priest?

Who is blessed among us and most deserves  
The first call? I choose my father because

He's astounded by bathroom telephones.  
I dial home. My mother answers. "Hey, Ma,"

I say, "Can I talk to Poppa?" She gasps,  
And then I remember that my father

Has been dead for nearly a year. "S\*\*t, Mom,"  
I say. "I forgot he's dead. I'm sorry—

How did I forget?" "It's okay," she says.  
"I made him a cup of instant coffee

This morning and left it on the table—  
Like I have for, what, twenty-seven years—

And I didn't realize my mistake  
Until this afternoon." My mother laughs

At the angels who wait for us to pause  
During the most ordinary of days

And sing our praise to forgetfulness  
Before they slap our souls with their cold wings.

Those angels burden and unbalance us.  
Those f\*\*king angels ride us piggyback.

Those angels, forever falling, snare us  
And haul us, prey and praying, into dust.

# Captivity

By Louise Erdrich

*He (my captor) gave me a bisquit, which I put in my pocket, and not daring to eat it, buried it under a log, fearing he had put something in it to make me love him.*

*—From the narrative of the captivity of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, who was taken prisoner by the Wampanoag when Lancaster, Massachusetts, was destroyed, in the year 1676*

The stream was swift, and so cold  
I thought I would be sliced in two.  
But he dragged me from the flood  
by the ends of my hair.  
I had grown to recognize his face.  
I could distinguish it from the others.  
There were times I feared I understood  
his language, which was not human,  
and I knelt to pray for strength.

We were pursued by God's agents  
or pitch devils, I did not know.  
Only that we must march.  
Their guns were loaded with swan shot.  
I could not suckle and my child's wail  
put them in danger.  
He had a woman  
with teeth black and glittering.  
She fed the child milk of acorns.  
The forest closed, the light deepened.

I told myself that I would starve  
before I took food from his hands  
but I did not starve.  
One night  
he killed a deer with a young one in her  
and gave me to eat of the fawn.  
It was so tender,  
the bones like the stems of flowers,  
that I followed where he took me.

The night was thick. He cut the cord  
that bound me to the tree.

After that the birds mocked.  
Shadows gaped and roared  
and the trees flung down  
their sharpened lashes.  
He did not notice God's wrath.  
God blasted fire from half-buried stumps.  
I hid my face in my dress, fearing He would burn us all  
but this, too, passed.

Rescued, I see no truth in things.  
My husband drives a thick wedge  
through the earth, still it shuts  
to him year after year.  
My child is fed of the first wheat.  
I lay myself to sleep  
on a Holland-laced pillowbeer.  
I lay to sleep.  
And in the dark I see myself  
as I was outside their circle.

They knelt on deerskins, some with sticks,  
and he led his company in the noise  
until I could no longer bear  
the thought of how I was.  
I stripped a branch  
and struck the earth,  
in time, begging it to open  
to admit me  
as he was  
and feed me honey from the rock.

## Indian Boarding School: The Runaways

By Louise Erdrich

Home's the place we head for in our sleep.  
Boxcars stumbling north in dreams  
don't wait for us. We catch them on the run.  
The rails, old lacerations that we love,  
shoot parallel across the face and break  
just under Turtle Mountains. Riding scars

you can't get lost. Home is the place they cross.

The lame guard strikes a match and makes the dark  
less tolerant. We watch through cracks in boards  
as the land starts rolling, rolling till it hurts  
to be here, cold in regulation clothes.  
We know the sheriff's waiting at midrun  
to take us back. His car is dumb and warm.  
The highway doesn't rock, it only hums  
like a wing of long insults. The worn-down welts  
of ancient punishments lead back and forth.

All runaways wear dresses, long green ones,  
the color you would think shame was. We scrub  
the sidewalks down because it's shameful work.  
Our brushes cut the stone in watered arcs  
and in the soak frail outlines shiver clear  
a moment, things us kids pressed on the dark  
face before it hardened, pale, remembering  
delicate old injuries, the spines of names and leaves.

## Prologue

By Anne Bradstreet

To sing of Wars, of Captains, and of Kings,  
Of Cities founded, Common-wealths begun,  
For my mean Pen are too superior things;  
Or how they all, or each their dates have run,  
Let Poets and Historians set these forth.  
My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth.

But when my wond'ring eyes and envious heart  
Great Bartas' sugar'd lines do but read o'er,  
Fool, I do grudge the Muses did not part  
'Twixt him and me that over-fluent store.  
A Bartas can do what a Bartas will  
But simple I according to my skill.

From School-boy's tongue no Rhet'ric we expect,  
Nor yet a sweet Consort from broken strings,  
Nor perfect beauty where's a main defect.  
My foolish, broken, blemished Muse so sings,  
And this to mend, alas, no Art is able,

'Cause Nature made it so irreparable.

Nor can I, like that fluent sweet-tongued Greek  
Who lisp'd at first, in future times speak plain.  
By Art he gladly found what he did seek,  
A full requital of his striving pain.  
Art can do much, but this maxim's most sure:  
A weak or wounded brain admits no cure.

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue  
Who says my hand a needle better fits.  
A Poet's Pen all scorn I should thus wrong,  
For such despite they cast on female wits.  
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,  
They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance.

But sure the antique Greeks were far more mild,  
Else of our Sex, why feigned they those nine  
And poesy made Calliope's own child?  
So 'mongst the rest they placed the Arts divine,  
But this weak knot they will full soon untie.  
The Greeks did nought but play the fools and lie.

Let Greeks be Greeks, and Women what they are.  
Men have precedency and still excel;  
It is but vain unjustly to wage war.  
Men can do best, and Women know it well.  
Preeminence in all and each is yours;  
Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours.

And oh ye high flown quills that soar the skies,  
And ever with your prey still catch your praise,  
If e'er you deign these lowly lines your eyes,  
Give thyme or Parsley wreath, I ask no Bays.  
This mean and unrefined ore of mine  
Will make your glist'ring gold but more to shine.

## The Author to Her Book

By Anne Bradstreet

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,  
Who after birth didst by my side remain,  
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,  
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,

Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,  
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).  
At thy return my blushing was not small,  
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,  
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,  
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;  
Yet being mine own, at length affection would  
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:  
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,  
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.  
I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,  
Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet;  
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,  
But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find.  
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.  
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;  
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,  
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:  
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,  
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.

## **Before the Birth of One of Her Children**

By Anne Bradstreet

All things within this fading world hath end,  
Adversity doth still our joyes attend;  
No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet,  
But with death's parting blow is sure to meet.  
The sentence past is most irrevocable,  
A common thing, yet oh inevitable.  
How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,  
How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,  
We are both ignorant, yet love bids me  
These farewell lines to recommend to thee,  
That when that knot's untied that made us one,  
I may seem thine, who in effect am none.  
And if I see not half my dayes that's due,  
What nature would, God grant to yours and you;  
The many faults that well you know I have  
Let be interr'd in my oblivious grave;  
If any worth or virtue were in me,  
Let that live freshly in thy memory  
And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms,  
Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms.

And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains  
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.  
And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,  
These o protect from step Dames injury.  
And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,  
With some sad sighs honour my absent Herse;  
And kiss this paper for thy loves dear sake,  
Who with salt tears this last Farewel did take.

## To My Dear and Loving Husband

By Anne Bradstreet

If ever two were one, then surely we.  
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.  
If ever wife was happy in a man,  
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.  
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,  
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.  
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,  
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.  
Thy love is such I can no way repay;  
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.  
Then while we live, in love let's so persever,  
That when we live no more, we may live ever.