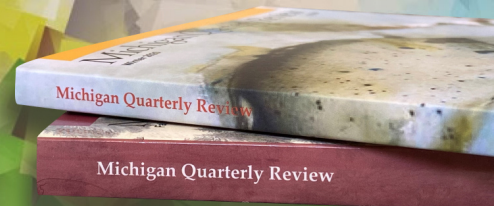


# Lifting the Page

Resources for Teaching Writing

 Michigan Quarterly Review



# Talking to the Water Narratives of Flint

Flint and Beyond. Vol. 55, No. 2, Spring 2016 Issue

Created for MQR by Carlina Duan

“The first time            my father threw me into you  
I became hieroglyph        a wet braid  
caught            in your throat”

—Tarfia Faizullah (168)

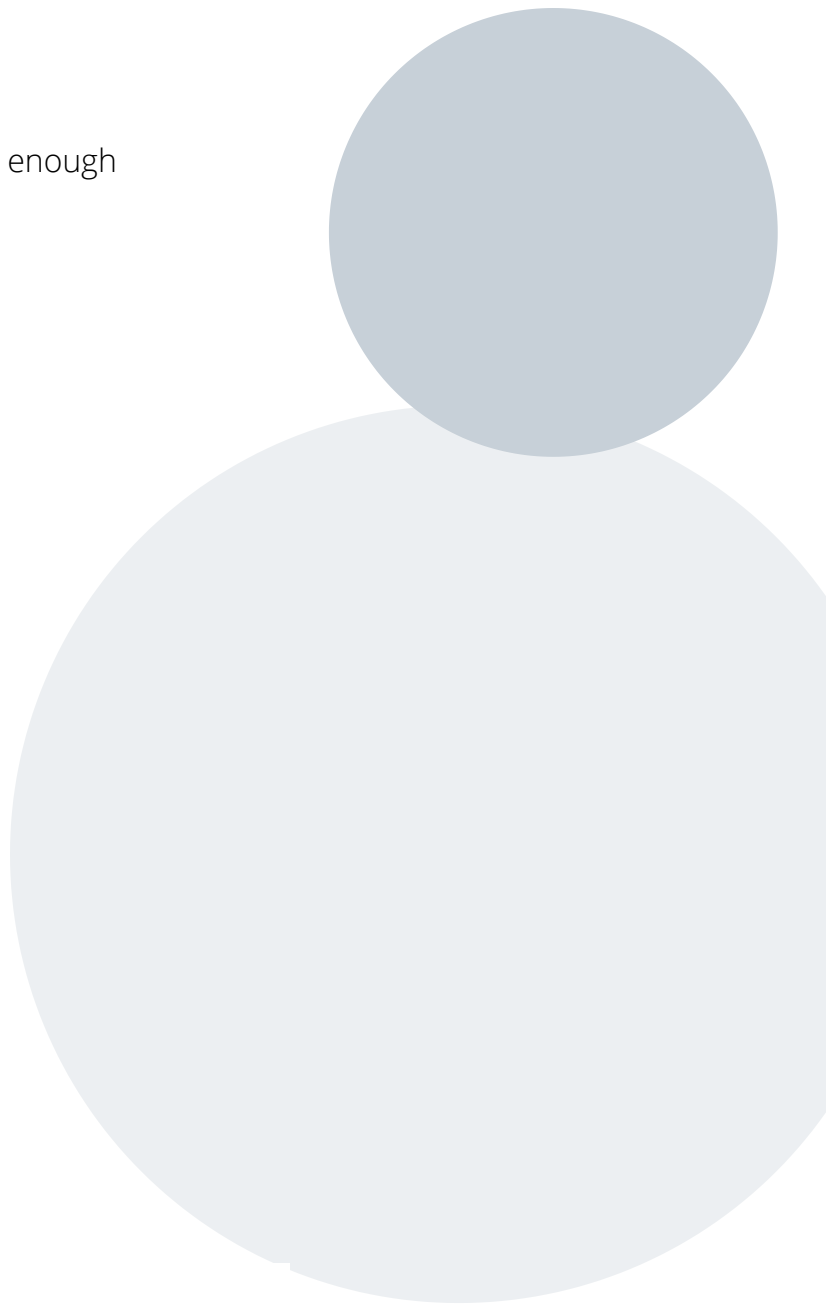
Contextual Note for Teachers: The following poem is from MQR’s “Flint and Beyond” issue, which focuses on stories surrounding the Flint water crisis of 2016, and stories of, about, and around life in Michigan. In the introduction to the issue, editor Jonathan Freedman writes, “Pure Michigan is a fantasy concocted by ad men.” This issue features literature that disrupts the “Pure Michigan” fantasy, and forges new Michigan narratives in its stead. In order for students to gain a contextual understanding for this poem, students should first read about the Flint Water Crisis. From here, students can also read Freedman’s introduction (pp. 149-151). For further narrative context, students can check out Kelsey Ronan’s piece [“Blood and Water”](#) (pp. 153-167), which documents Ronan’s personal reflections on Flint. This lesson can be used in social studies, journalism, literature-based courses.

## **I Told the Water**

*Tarfia Faizullah*

*for Flint*

I told the water    You're right  
the poor are  
    broken sidewalks  
we try to avoid  
Told it    the map of you folds into corners small enough  
to swallow    I told the water  
You only exist because of thirst  
    But beside your sour membrane we lie  
    facedown in dirt  
The first time    my father threw me into you  
    I became hieroglyph    a wet braid  
    caught    in your throat  
I knew then    how war was possible  
    the urge  
to defy gravity    to dis-  
    arm another  
    I knew then we'd kill  
to be your mirror    You    black-eyed barnacle  
    You    graveyard  
of windows    I told the water  
Last night I walked out onto your ice  
    wearing only my skin  
Because you couldn't tell me    not to



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# Entering the Poem:

**1. READ & LISTEN.** I love entering poems by giving them voice – reading them multiple times. First, to myself, silently and on the page. Next, out loud. Sometimes, I even record myself reading a poem – then play it back, paying attention to what I hear, and what I see.

In reading Faizullah’s poem, experiment! First, read this poem out loud. Be a witness to your own curiosity. Jot down notes on what excites you, or stumps you.

Next, [listen to Faizullah’s recording of the poem](#) on PBSNewsHour.

As you listen, highlight or underline the moments that stick with you – your personal “heat points” of the poem(s). These could be moments where your tongue trips, your heart thumps, a moment you’re puzzled by, or want to spend longer with. Pay attention to what/where these moment(s) are. Ask yourself questions: Where’s the stories in these poems? Who’s speaking? (Who’s not speaking?) What’s conjured? How does this poem invite comfort and/or discomfort? What other emotive energies does it bring in?

**2. RESEARCH & UNDERSTAND.** In [an interview with PBSNewsHour](#) on the creation of “I Told the Water,” Faizullah speaks about her creative process in making the poem. Read through the article, which presents an initial window into the Flint Water Crisis, and the power hierarchies behind allocation of natural resources. Write down any thoughts or questions that surface for you. Use your notes and questions as jumping-off points for more research – into the Flint Water Crisis, the history and contemporary moment in Flint, water security, Michigan-based activism and justice, or another topic. Online resources such as The Getty Research Institute are helpful places to begin. (Keep in mind, too, that “research” is not limited to facts, or figures. “Research” can be visual. “Research” can be conversation!)\* You might think of grounding your creative work in this research, by embedding quotes, facts, or sources in your own writing. You might also use this research as a way to discover other writers, musicians, and/or artists who are creating documentary work(s) about places, people, and their histories.

Note: “Entering the Poems” is scaffolded for at-home learning, but could be used for collective and in-person learning settings, too.

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"I was thinking about things like helplessness and poverty and allocation of resources and how we can simultaneously sort of take something like water for granted," [Faizullah] said. "Even if you consume something like water, you have no idea necessarily what its contents are or what [it] is going to do to you."

**3. REFLECT & FREE-WRITE.** Thinking of Faizullah's observation on "tak[ing] something like water for granted," think of a time when you've taken something in the world for granted. This could be a person, a space, a natural element. Free-write about that experience. When did you learn – or realize – that you were taking your topic for granted? And afterwards, what – if anything – changed?

\* I love the Univ. of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity's framework for diversity research, which a friend shared with me recently. Their framework helps me de-mythologize the research process as belonging to a specific group, or necessitating a certain kind of language. It helps me, rather, understand how accountable research seeks to inform, challenge, illuminate, and contextualize. View their framework [here](#).

# Discuss:

**1. In her poem "I Told the Water," Faizullah addresses the water directly.** "You're right," she writes, "You only exist because of thirst." Considering Faizullah's intention(s) to draw attention to the power – and inequity – of distributing natural resources, and of the people affected by this distribution, what is the purpose of speaking to the water? Consider the function of dialogue, here. What's said? What's left unsaid?

**2. "I knew then // we'd kill / to be your mirror," Faizullah writes. What do you think she means here?** How does water become a character? What do you think Faizullah is suggesting about the power of water? About Flint?

*These questions are invitations to engage with these poems either on your own, or in a collective group setting. If you are moving solo through these questions, consider writing down your ideas in a notebook, or recording yourself thinking out loud.*

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# Create:

Think of a specific natural landmark you want to have a conversation with. Think of the geographical, political, historical circumstances surrounding this landmark. This may require some extra research – think back to your notes from the earlier “Research” activity. (For example, you might think of decolonizing national park systems. Or, consider the language used to speak towards the climate crisis.) Attempt to have a conversation with this natural landmark. What would you tell it, if you could? What would you warn it against, or of? How would you celebrate it? How might speaking to this landmark reinforce, expand, or allow for new understandings of place? Of self within a place?

Feel free to take this prompt and translate it to any creative genre: a poem, an essay, a poem-video, a collage, a visual object.

**Share:** Use tags #MQR and #LiftingThePage when you share your writing with the world. You can also tag us on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). We look forward to reading what you create.