

Words Rising

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In the beginning was the Word. And the word was sweeeeeet and harmonious because all humanity spoke the same language. But soon afterward, folks grew arrogant and built a tower to reach heaven. "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth..."

At the time it may have seemed that way. But with unusual hindsight, it seems apparent that the Creator got it right, for it is certainly languages that have given the planet its remarkable cultural diversity, its distinctiveness, and its array of poetic traditions. In language is the vigor of variety, the clash of cultures, the Mystery and the Beyonsense!

If we could read each other's thoughts, suggests writer Shirley Newman, there would be no need for language. Shared thought moves through language. We communicate through a system of language that constructs itself with metaphor and metonymy, figures of speech expanding on concepts like up and down, hot and cold. The collective creation of language is a poetic act. As Octavio Paz writes, "The true author of a poem is neither the poet nor the reader, but language." Poetry is embedded in language, in the way we speak, every conversation a kiss of meaning. And writing good poetry is difficult partly because daily speech itself embodies so much rhythm and intensified language. It takes a remarkable poet to pull off the magic trick of saying, this is a poem — a good poem — mark my words!

New York has built skyscrapers of glass and steel, bastions of business and commerce, twin towers, Trump towers, ivory towers, and to the victors belong the penthouse views. But with the insanity of Zorba the Greek, who danced *syrtaki* when the times were tough, taking his cues from

Homer the Greek, we are building another kind of tower, a minaret of words, a cloud buster with words for bricks, gathering all the world's languages back together, multi-valent synchronous translations, blaring them out to all the world via the *Peoples Poetry Gathering*. (And please don't forget the pixel dance on the worldwide web at www.peoplespoetry.org. Visit our new World Poetry Map for poetry from the world's endangered and contested languages, curated by Catherine Fletcher.)

Most linguists agree that half the world's languages will fall silent in this century. We are hard at work preserving endangered species of flora and fauna — but where is the call for preserving our endangered Languages and Literatures, whole systems of consciousness?

Welcome to the *People's Poetry Gathering 2006*, featuring oral traditions, folk songs, performance poetry, and literary forms. Literature and folklore have common roots in the oral tradition, and the *Gathering*, founded by City Lore and Poets House in 1999, represents a pioneering collaboration between the two disciplines. Join us as we highlight both poetry from the world's endangered and contested languages and poems from a city where many of those languages are spoken, a city that, at every turn, reaches toward the heavens.