Jim Cunningham:
Welcome to the very first episode of Artists in the World, brought to you by Carnegie Museum of Art and WQED in Pittsburgh. I'm Jim Cunningham, WQED FM's artistic director, and I'm joined by my co-host Dana Bishop-Root, the director of Education and Public Programs at Carnegie Museum of Art.

Dana Bishop-Root:
Thank you Jim. Artists in the World features artists in conversation with people across disciplines, geographies, and life experiences. These conversations invite us to wonder, consider, feel, and stretch our imaginative capacities through relationships of thought, practices, intimacies and research, bringing a world of thought to Pittsburgh, and then extending the exchange back into the world and your home. This season of Artists in the World has been created alongside the 58th Carnegie International, the longest running exhibition of contemporary international art in North America.

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Dana Bishop-Root:
I'm so moved Jim, by the way in which Solmaz invites us into her practice of poetry. She talks about how she writes against the readymades, how she resists that there's a set number of shapes and ways of being in forms of living. She opens up the question about why artists are called on when we're in a state of emergency. As a poet, as an artist, as a human being, she says the emergency has already been happening. We are in it right now. She uses and thinks about her relationship to language, the restlessness of language, the transformative shapes that language can take, as a way to look at emergency and be in emergency for the things we are not naming, the things we have not found yet. She talks about an experience when she was in an eclipse in Palo Alto, and she looked around her and noticed that everyone was looking up. And Solmaz says, "And I looked across. Someone needs to keep guard of the eye level."

Jim Cunningham:
Okay, I'm ready to listen. We open with Sohrab Mohebbi, curator of the 58th Carnegie International, followed by poignant reading by Solmaz of her poetry, and then transition into a reflective conversation between Solmaz and Negar.

Sohrab Mohebbi:
Thanks everyone for being here tonight. For those who have seen our exhibition in the Hall of Sculpture upstairs, there are 10 frescos by Thu Van Tran. These works titled, Colors of Grey, are made from variations and the colors of the Rainbow Herbicides. These were a group of chemical agents. Most famous one is Agent Orange, but there are other agents. It's Agent White, Pink, Green, Blue and Purple. They were used by the U.S. military during the war in Vietnam, sprayed over millions of acres of central highlands devastating plant, animal, and human life. An example of operational art, the agents extracted the word rainbow from the lexicon and turned it into a toxin.

Solmaz Sharif's a book of poems, Look, lifts or expropriates, a term from the United States Department of Defense's, Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. She shows how warfare is a linguistic operation. In addition to military one. "Daily, I sit with the language they've made of our language." She
writes in Personal Effects. At times, the poems examine the wounds of warfare in the English language. Looks at them closely, tends to them, licks them and whispers them back into the world, where words or attempts to name their nameable and to communicate what is left and said. Other times, they show the cruelty of the neutrality of terminology, directing words to meanings, feelings that have been trained to glide over.

I was reading a lot of Alejandra Pizarnik, Clarice Lispector, June Jordan and Bernadette Mayer, But Solmaz Sharif, took me, made me, rather, to confront something that I've been repressing. That's a condition of exile. But in a way, all poetry is exile if it means refusing what is given, and a desire for what is yet to be imagined.

Her second book Customs did something else as well. It retooled one language to speak another one through it. There were moments when I could not figure out if I'm reading in Farsi or English. Poetry resides in a space in between the lines, and as the Salvador poet Roque Dalton said, "Poetry, like bread, is for everyone."

After the readings, Solmaz will be joined by Negar Azimi, who somehow back in 2003, decided to think that I could write for the magazine Bidoun, that she edited, and she still continues to do so. The truth is I couldn't write, but Negar could. But other than writing, I tried to learn from Negar how to read. And all these years later, whenever I'm struck by a poem or a prose, I know that most likely she has already read it, or as Sauntac (6:13) would say, "It's on her list."

Negar and I also collaborate on our presentation of Fereydoun Ave's collection, which is on view and the Hines Architecture Center as part of 58th Carnegie International. I'm also among many others who are eagerly waiting Negar's forthcoming book. There is a tale of the contemporary history of a twisted country, which I only know little fractions from and I can't wait to finally get a fuller picture. Please join me in welcoming Solmaz Sharif. Thank you.

Solmaz Sharif:
Thank you so much, Sohrab, for that beautiful introduction. Thank you Dana and everyone at Carnegie, and you all for joining me tonight. I will just read a few poems and I think maybe I'll start with Look, which as Sohrab mentioned, uses terms from the Department of Defense’s Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.

The DOD, for example, had redefined the word look to mean in mine warfare, the period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence.

Look. "It matters what you call a thing. Exquisite a lover called me. Exquisite. Whereas, 'Well, if I were from your culture living in this country,' said the man outside the 2004 Republican National Convention, 'I would put up with that for this country.' Whereas I felt the need to clarify, 'You would put up with torture, you mean?'. And he proclaimed, 'Yes.'.

what is your life? Whereas years after they looked down from their jets and declared my mother's Abadan block probably destroyed. We walked by the villas, the faces of buildings torn off into dioramas, and recorded it on a handheld camcorder. Whereas it could take as long as 16 seconds between the trigger pulled in Las Vegas, and the hell fire missile landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask, 'Did we hit a child? No. A dog.' They will answer themselves.

Whereas the federal judge at the sentencing hearing said, 'I want to make sure I pronounce the defendant's name correctly,' whereas this lover would pronounce my name and call me exquisite, and lay the floor lamp across the floor softening even the light. Whereas the lover made my heat rise, rise so that if heat sensors were trained on me, they could read my thermal shadow through the roof and through the wardrobe. Whereas, 'It's not walking to the grocery store here. It's not like that. It's Iraq.
You know it's Iraq. It's kind of like acceptable to see that there and not, it was kind of like seeing a dead
dog or a dead cat lying.'.

Whereas I thought if he would look at my exquisite face or my father's, he would reconsider. Whereas,
'You mean I should be disappeared because of my family name?' And he answered, 'Yes, that's exactly
what I mean,' Adding that his wife helped draft the Patriot Act,

Whereas the federal judge wanted to be sure he was pronouncing the defendant's name correctly, and
said he had read all the exhibits, which included the letter I wrote to cast the defendant in a loving light.
Whereas today, we celebrate things like his transfer to detention center closer to home; whereas his son
has moved across the country; Whereas I made nothing happen; Whereas you know not, which shall be
on the marrow for what is your life? It is even a thermal shadow. It appears so little and then vanishes
from the screen.

Whereas I cannot control my own heat, and it can take as long as 16 seconds between the trigger, the
hell fire, missile, and 'A dog' they will answer themselves. Whereas, 'A dog,' they will say. Now
therefore, let it matter what we call a thing. Let it be the exquisite face for at least 16 seconds. Let me
look at you. Let me look at you in a light that takes years to get here."

Desired Appreciation (10:44)."Until now, Now that I've reached my thirties, all my muse's poetry has
been harmless, American and diplomatic. A learned helplessness is what psychologists call it. My docile,
desired state.

I've been largely well-behaved and gracious, I've learned the doctors learned of learned helplessness by
shocking dogs. Eventually, we things give up. Am I grateful to be here? Someone eventually asks If I love
this country.

In between the helplessness, the agents, the nation must administer a bit of hope, must meet basic
dietary needs, ensure by tube, by nose, by throat, by other orifice. Must fist bump A janitor. Must muss
up some kids' hair and let them loose around the Oval Office. Click, click, could be cameras or the teeth
of handcuffs closing to fix the arms overhead.

There must be a doctor on hand to ensure the shoulders do not dislocate, and there must be prince's
raspberry beret. Click, click could be Morse code tapped out against a coffin wall to the neighboring
coffin. Outside my window, the snow lights cobalt for a bit at dusk, and I'm surprised every second of it. I
had never seen the country like this. Somehow I can't say yes.

'This is a beautiful country. I have not cast my eyes over it before, that is, in this direction,' is how John
Brown put it. When he looked out from the scaffold.

'I feel like I must muzzle myself.' I told my psychiatrist. 'So you feel dangerous?' She said 'Yes.' 'So you
feel like a threat?' 'Yes.' Why was I so surprised to hear it?"

So, that poem, Desired Appreciation, the title of which is a term from the Department of Defense's
dictionary feels like a bit of a pivot poem to the ones in Customs, my second collection. Customs began
obviously, perhaps as a kind of closer look at the customs of border patrols and of arrivals terminals and
various ways of stamping entrance and gaining approval. And of course, as I was writing it, I was on tour
for my first book and getting to see kind of how the sausage was made in terms of literary production in
the U.S. in the 21st century. And so very quickly, it became also about the customs of writing at all and
writing in English in particular, and of writing in English in the U.S. in the 21st century. And all the ways
that we're kind of asked to quietly malform, or domesticate, or defang our speech in order to make
ourselves more pleasant citizens, model citizens for the nation.

And Desired Appreciation, I guess, is one example of me kind of wrestling with that. And here's another
one from Customs, it's called Patronage 14:09."They say willingness is what one needs to succeed. They
say one needs to succeed. Our poets do not imagine a screaming audience. Our poets are used to padding, vinyl, on the foldable chairs, bookshelves on casters moved aside to make space for them. A world's polite for their words. A well behaved.

A world's behavior malformed, and they step in as one steps into a nursery and quiet calms the tantrum, attempts not to wake the sleeping, the milk-drunk and burped babe, out poets coo. And beg to be placed in a large, large room

Prize ring. Bowl ring. Lion through the ring of flames. Poets convinced they are ringmaster, when it is with big brooms and bins, in fact, they enter to clear the elephant scat.

There was an inlet. I pulled over once to watch the sunset, which was still another hour or so away, the light just low enough there to begin to change. I should have stayed. I should have stayed. A life of idle with money doing the work. A life beholden but bestowed. To make reformists of us all, even the fascists. Especially the fascists.

But he's a patron. But he makes a star of us. But he makes us a rank. But he's a churchgoer. And they place their hands on him and pray and bountiful, grow their wives' bellies, a bully for each family, exponential doom. Singing to each other in the private gazebo of their youth.

Now sing. I said what I meant, but I said it in velvet. I said it in feathers. And so one poet reminded me, 'Remember what you are to them.' 'Poodle,' I said. 'And remember what they are to you.' Meet."

*Social Skills Training.* Studies suggest, 'How may I help you officer?' Is the single most disarming thing to say and not, 'What's the problem?' Studies suggest it's best to help reply, 'My pleasure.' And not, 'No problem.' Studies suggest it's best not to mention problem in front of power, even to say there is none.

Gloria Steinem says, women lose power as they age. And yet the loudest voice in my head is my mother. Studies show the mother we have in mind isn't the mother that exists. Mine says, 'What the fuck are you crying for?'.

Studies show the baby monkey will pick the fake monkey with fake fur over the furless wire monkey with milk, without contest. Studies show to negate something is to think it anyway. 'I'm not sad.' I'm not sad. Studies recommend regular expressions of gratitude and internal check-ins. 'Enough,' the wire mother says. History is a kind of study. History says we forgave the executioner. Before we mopped the blood we asked, 'Lord Judge, have I executed well?' Studies suggest yes. (17:38)

'What the fuck are you crying for officer?' The wire mother teaches me to say. While studies suggest, 'Solmaz, have you thanked your executioner today?"

I'm still internally reeling a little bit, because I just learned before I came up here that there is a dentist in Brooklyn that has a copy of my book in the waiting room. And I think this is just the best thing I've heard in my life. Consider gifting this book to your dentist. There are true patrons, it turns out. Amazing.

So I'm my apologies to everyone that's waiting for a root canal and then gets these arsenic-laced little diddies in their ear. Not very calming, but who needs calm really? I think I'll just close with this poem because I'm very eager to speak with one of my favorite minds, Negar. And it's a real honor to be here today with her and with you all. And this poem I wrote, it's called *Without Which*. And I wrote it when I returned from my last trip home I'll say, which was 2014. And every kind of bubble of nostalgia that I had popped, it was just one of those brutal trips of nothing of this is yours. The idea of yours doesn't even exist. Absolute ego death. And I lost desire. And with the loss of desire, I lost language. And with the loss of language, I lost writing. And so, I had a lot of difficulty writing for a long time. And luckily I'm a diagnostic poet, which might maybe why I'm in dentists office. So I decided to turn actually toward naming the brokenness of that speech and the stuckness of that self. And so this poem is a bit of a
longer one and there are echoes of its images throughout the book, because I return and recur obsessively as one does in exile.

(20:13) Without Which. “I have long loved what one can carry. I have long left all that can be left behind in the burning cities and lost even loss. Not cared much or learned to. I turned and looked and not even salt did I become.

I have long not wanted much touch to turn away from and sleep a sleep to bring the spoon up and slur the soup I don’t notice, gone. Like that mostly, my life. Until I see something new. It does not happen much. Except in the sense that everything is new.

Three baby teeth and a washed-clean baby food jar rattling, as the drawer opens and closes, or the train passes underneath, or our bed bumps into the nightstand into the wall, sliding across the room, chattering loose teeth I wanted to hold onto in a glass jar, for what? For how long? Eventually I paired down what of me I can’t stand to look at, what of me I’d never want recognized, by whoever will clear out my drawers, whoever does such a thing at the end of a life, who years wanted nothing, who was dead before she died.

Before you came, I hadn’t touched another in years. It was unintentional. Frugal. Later, and the satisfaction of a small life closed in a single mind. Your thin drawer, pocket squares folded into neat stacks, wristwatches laid out into neat. You looked at me looking at your things. I touched the satin squares. I touched the satin scar where you had been cut. Your healthy walking. Your wristwatch removed and ticking in this room. To watch you get dressed while still in bed, is a little city where I’m most grateful to be alive, gently ticking, naked, leisurely, watching a slightly warped record turn, its tiny hills raising the needle too gently

Of is such a little city and can only hold so much. Of is the thing without which I would not be, of which I am without or away from. I am without the kingdom, and thus of it. I am even when inside the kingdom without. Smelling the dried dill, the day old-slick fish, even my hems, what with the gutters of the kingdom I am of, even so more so out of it. A without which I have learned to be

On the edges of the cities, our boiling vats. The tanneries do not smell good. Did not. The skins boiled to loosen the flesh to pull clean what will be leather, be bucket to lower in a well. Out around the edge of the city is where you would find the tanners, push there by rot. We who at the edge of the kingdom, pulled dead from dead to sculpt the simplest, repeated thing now obsolete, leather buckets to pull up out of the dark, a cool shimmering surface to see yourself in one single shimmering eye. This glimpse of myself, bucket by bucket is what I am missing.

The crumbs have been swept from the table, shaken from the skirts, the dates return to their containers, the last of the mourners gone. Homeland is where one’s wake was held. And so, no cruel word then return. No greater lie. The gates may open but to return. More gates were built inside.

I’ve learned the sound of nestlings being fed. Their mad chirping now clear in the trees I walk beneath. There are languages I didn’t know I wanted to know. I’ve learned the sound of jets over Oakland for Fleet Week.

Something about a nest. Something about a tree scared bald and shaken free so all its empty nests are exposed. Something about my neural pathways. Like, that I’ve decided is the cruelest word. To step out of my door and hope to see something like a life, something passively me. Like the cage of canaries baba put out to sun in the Shiraz courtyard, the birds dropping dead onto the ship covered newsprint when a cat slunk by.
I prayed for the smallest happiness today, a pool of water in an Oakland pothole, a single likeness to see feathers lifting, then shaking free, then something like a cat I became to frighten dead any hopeful thing. Some days, I am almost happy having never lived there, to lose even the laws.

Some days, just to think of with washing some dishes, mismatched and in a rust-stained sink, touching things I have spent my whole life touching."

Thank you.

Clapping

(26:00) Negar Azimi:

First, it's a huge pleasure and honor to be here tonight with, I guess, my favorite living poet, which begs the question, who is my favorite dead poet? And it might be Elizabeth Bishop, but I think it's a draw between you two. And also to be here with Sohrab, who is an old friend, but also someone whose work and thinking I admire endlessly. And it feels really apropos to be here tonight at the Carnegie Museum on the occasion of an exhibition that takes empire as its point of departure in some ways, as it's animating conceit, empire's legacies, it's paradoxes, it's overreaches. And I think that was quite evident in some of the poems that Solmaz just read. Solmaz is the poet of empire we always wanted, but never had. She's the poet of borders, and airport terminals, immigration cues and checkpoints, of paradox, Ambivalence, not knowing, selling out, bad dreams, dreams, power, powerlessness, uncertainty.

What is language? Who gets to speak? What is the nation? What is home? And maybe most pertinently, what does it mean to stand outside and look in? These are some of the questions that course through her poems and animate her work. She has called her work antagonistic. "I think of my poems as laced with arsenic," she once said. Since I first came across her work in a residency space in Martha, Texas a few years ago, I've returned to them time and again, I'm always rattled. Solmaz's words are lyrical, brave, true, but always unsettling. They cut through you like a knife. They are not in the artist Adrian Piper's words, a manifestation of what she called easy listening art. Which is to say benign, consensus driven and polite. I might go as far as to call her poetry and art of discomfort. There's a word in Farsi that comes to mind when I think of these poems, which is not easy to translate, but it sort of evokes struggle or wrestling. [foreign language 00:28:29]. Is to wrestle and struggle with something physical, but also one might suggest metaphorical and tangible.

Words are from medium. But it should be said that in Solmaz's work, words are far from innocent. Her first collection Look, as Sohrab pointed out, takes a Department of Defense wartime dictionary as its point of departure, and suddenly weaves in personal history while always, always laying bare the abuses of language. The term look, according to said dictionary, refers to a moment when a mine detonates, I'm condensing that. Words, in other words, can be bombs. They can maim, and they can obfuscate like a mist. But they also at best, have the ability to cast little beams of light. Not to clarify per se, but maybe even to further confuse. But I want to suggest that this is a productive confusion.

Solmaz's second and latest collection of poems, as you mentioned, is one that I hope will discuss this evening, it's called Customs. That's obviously a word that elicits a plethora of associations. So Solmaz, again, I'm so happy to be here with you.

Solmaz Sharif:

Thank you. Go ahead.
Negar Azimi:
And perhaps we'll open with a deceptively straightforward question. Which is just to warm up, which is how did you find poetry or how did poetry find you?

Solmaz Sharif:
(29:53) Thank you for that question. Well, my mother, I was a kid, now I have to talk about my childhood. That thing they tell you never to do in a job interview because nobody's going to take me seriously for the rest of this talk. But poetry was big in my mom's life and remains big. And in her own other wises, I imagine she would've been a writer. She read new poems, she had a typewriter. And I really liked playing with the typewriter. And in particular, I liked hitting the enter key. And I liked it just rolling up and the feeling of importance of that. And it always felt so important, that rolling and that taking up of space. And it was also this private conversation that we would have as the poems that she would share with me like, Whitman, or were a lot kind of raunchier, sexier than our conversation would be face to face. So poetry for me was this side conversation that you could have where anything could be said. And in fact, everything must be said. Even amongst two that don't say much about each other to each other.

And I was also very lucky in terms of my undergraduate career at UC Berkeley. There was a program that was founded by a late poet and activist and scholar, June Jordan, called Poetry for the People. I enrolled in that pretty immediately upon my arrival on campus. And I didn't know much about June. I just saw the words, poetry and people, together. And for me, my kind of political sensibility has always been wrapped up in writing and wanting to write. So that was the turn I took. And now here I am.

Negar Azimi:
(31:50) Yeah. I wanted to speak next about place and exile. And I think I read somewhere that you'd moved really consistently in your life every four to five years, it had become a kind of ritual. And I guess this quality of being peripatetic, unsettled, forever a fresh arrival, always on the edge of something maybe ineffable or homeless to evoke Edward Said, who I think is a spiritual father hovering over this talk at some level. I guess his qualities especially manifest in the new collection Customs. And I guess I wanted you to wonder or ask you if you can talk a little bit about how that quality of restlessness or withoutness has found a place in your poetry.

Solmaz Sharif:
(32:48) Yeah. I hate writing about place and I hate thinking about place. And it's one of the last things I notice. I think because it's such a painful reminder of my displacement, it makes one confront one's displacement in a way that can't be ignored. Although I live in Phoenix now, and there's no way to not notice the desert. You know, and it feels also a bit of a demented Los Angeles. And I've spent a lot of formative years in LA. And so now I'm just walking through this weird inner memory of what LA is or was. And it's making me think about place again.

But my greatest hope for language is that it remains restless, and unhoused and unmoored, and in continual kind of agitation. Which was my physiological reality and my physical reality certainly as a kid. And so when I'm in a good mood about moving along, in a good mood about exile, I think about how this is the truer existential reality of how we are as moral beings.

And when I'm not in a good mood, I think it has its usefulness in terms of particularly revolutionary possibility, which requires that constant agitation and unwillingness to allow language to come in and fix what is happening, and demarcate what is happening, and contain what is happening. So that balance
between the two, my own (long pause) dissatisfaction with language and feeling hemmed in by it, and my desire to reveal the more nomadic reality in which we are all living, are at constant odds and a central concern of my writing, I'd say. Yeah.

Negar Azimi:

(35:03) Yeah. I mean, it feels like the author of these poems is on a search of some sort, but it's not a search for home. I mean, that's a term that is loaded. And it's not nostalgia because that's different set of problems, I think. But I guess my question is, what are you searching for, if anything? And could the search and these gaps be your final destination in a way? And is poetry the medium through which you're negotiating that?

Solmaz Sharif:
Absolutely.

Negar Azimi:
Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif:

(35:40) Yeah, absolutely. And I've said this in other interviews, but I'll say, I came to poetry somewhat opportunistically, perhaps. I could have done a number of things. I could have been a documentary filmmaker, I was a sociologist, I wanted to go to law school. There were a number of ways that one could maybe take on the DOD, or do the work that I wanted to do.

But there is something about the threads of the erotic and the elegy, Eros and elegy which gets worked out of every other medium, but poetry is kind of tap root, that I felt really insistent on staying close to. And so my devotion ultimately is to poetry itself, is to writing itself, even if I did come to it opportunistically. And I'm finding that that is changing me in ways that I can't quite control and I didn't anticipate. So whereas, at first I was a poet of the material world, observational poet. You look at the thing, you describe the thing. My goal is actually to name the is-ness of the thing, and get as close and as accurate to that thing as possible. I have a lot of objectivist tendencies. I have a lot of pounding and tendencies. I need to be aware of my own fascism, in other words.

But through devotion to that kind of attention and bringing that attention to the material world, I noticed that that kind of attention started shifting and going further. Spatially, I think of it as back, I think of what is happening just behind the material world. And I don't have words for that part yet, but it feels like a type of music or frequency that a devotion of poetry can tune oneself to catch every once in a while. And I'm just trying to trace the exterior of that, or the blips that I do catch.

And I know that that will be all there is, right? There no there, right? There's no rival, there's no home. But there still is this sense of getting closer, scratching away at a thing that will ultimately give. But yeah, I seem insistent on following.

Negar Azimi:

(38:31) Once in a while is important, if it's not never reached that destination, but you might scratch at it.

Solmaz Sharif:
Yeah.

Negar Azimi:
(38:40) I guess I mentioned Edward Said and he said something, I think it was an essay on Adorno in the collection, *Reflections on Exile*. I'm just going to read it. He suggested that the world is full of readymade forms, pre-fabricated homes as it were. Everything is a commodity, even language. "And to resist this state of affairs," he said, "is the intellectual mission of the exile." And I've just been thinking about syntax and your particular syntax, this collection in particular, which is full of fragments and fishers. And I just wondered if we could talk a little bit about both form, but also you referenced in your introduction, writerly convention or you motion toward it. And I just wonder, can we speak of *Customs*, I mean, to go back to the title of this essay collection, *Customs*. *Customs* in the literary world. And even your place amid them and even your [foreign language 00:39:46]. Yeah. Is it a constant back and forth in negotiation and struggle?

Solmaz Sharif:
(38:57) Yeah, it is a constant back and forth in negotiation. And it's difficult to not turn it into a reactionary, and not let my aesthetics be. I mean, I am a creature of antagonism and my work certainly is, but I don't want the entirety of the work to be understood as such, because I don't want my life ultimately to be prescribed by the powers that be as much as possible. I think with, *look*, there was a faith... Oh, how cute. There's a faith and a data gathering or something. Or if I just get the right names in front of people, at the right moment and in the right context, then something would crack open.

We all know that, or it's not true. And many people had already warned me that it's not true and that won't work. But I have to put my hand on the stove myself. And I think there is this moment too... I was talking to a friend actually just an hour or two ago about this boom in political work, in poetry in particular, and this greater kind of diversity of voices that are being published, and I mean racial, sexual gender, diversity.

And ultimately, I think as long as it remains about the nouns, it will not give us the change that we need. In other words, if nouns are being plugged in to the sentences or the syntax that already exists, there's a new dean, there's a new provost, there's a new president, it's not enough. And my question has always been about our formal understandings of power, and how we might read into the syntax of power as it is playing out amongst our lives. And there are a lot of writers that have devoted themselves to upending and upsetting syntax, in order to become less consumable, less digestible.

I'm not sure that that's where my work is going necessarily, I think my work is just... I know that I don't want to write a sentence where if you mad-lib it and it becomes about Vienna, it feels good or normal. There has to be something that feels a little bit more this, antagonistic, I guess.

So that too, I think is tied to this devotional practice of poetry. Wherein you start to recognize more and more the shapes, the repetitive shapes and musics, that in my case, actually govern our lives because my obsession is power. One becomes more and more aware of them. And so, I'm trying to write against those readymades. Particularly because I don't hold onto a sense of a spiritual grand design, that says that ultimately there are only a set number of shapes that we... That's the thing I'm actually kind of wrestling with most right now. As I say, I don't believe it, but yet, I don't know. Yeah.

Negar Azimi:
(43:48) Yeah. You gestured toward politically, it's hard to characterize politically engaged art, politically engaged poetry. We're certainly seeing more diversity. And there's historically been a distrust of
politically engaged art. And this cliché, this belief that there’s a tradeoff between the topical, political and the formal and the aesthetic. And I think your work obviously gives life to that cliché. In the past, you’ve quoted Adrienne Rich’s poem, *Dreamwood*. She says, "Poetry isn’t revolution, but a way of knowing why it must come."

And I guess, how do you see your work existing in that landscape of false binaries, but also in the political landscape? How do we know? And what ways of knowing are available to us as humans? I guess. How do we know?

Solmaz Sharif:

(44:50) That’s a tough one. I’m going to have to pause on that. But I am thinking about this false binary in my own, that sense of ready madeness. And there have been, frankly, a number of fair weather political poets in my time. I've seen, and I feel the tides are turning again. And obviously this is always a pendulum. And so there will be that reaction against the diversity and politicization that we’ve seen of art making and of writing in recent years. It is, and will rear its head again.

I actually noticed that during that Trump era, in that 2016 moment where there was a panic, the critics that would call political work lesser work, because it puts content ahead of form, which is often a core reading of the work, obviously. But we’re scrambling to find someone to make sense of this moment. All of a sudden it was like, where are our poets? Are our artists that will guide us through this? And I found my work get a lot more quiet actually, because I feel ultimately that the poet is some sort of guardian of what is not being turned to or cared for, whatever reason. What is being seen as too small or too irrelevant. And so when there's all this noise, it’s like, why do I have to name the emergency? We're all in it right now. We don't need somebody to name it. I want to talk about the ways that we’re not... What we’re not looking at. And so to go back to our ways of knowing and not knowing, I tend to think really visually. So whatever this experience means to people.

I remember there being an eclipse over Palo Alto, and I was walking to a Starbucks. And the eclipse was physically happening, and I noticed that I was looking up at eye level, and I don't do that usually. And I was like, "Why am I doing that?" And then I saw that everyone else was looking up at the sky. And I was like, "Oh, that's why I'm doing it." And then I was like, "Somebody has to keep guard of the eye level right now." Usually I'm watching the ground and what's the trash.

Or else being on a bus and looking up Google Maps and it being satellite view. And next to the bus where I happen to be is a satellite view of a penitentiary. And you see men walking the yard and these long shadows. So just spatially, if we expand our scope a little bit or make it smaller in that moment, whatever is not happening to keep one's guard toward that and attention toward that, is I think the knowing that we need more and more of.

Negar Azimi:

(48:08) And Look came out just before the unamiable.

Solmaz Sharif:


Negar Azimi:

Don’t even want to say his name. But the noise that you gesture toward.

Solmaz Sharif:
Yes.

Negar Azimi:
And would you say you retreated at that moment to?

Solmaz Sharif:
Yes. Yeah.

Negar Azimi:
Yeah. writing became?

Solmaz Sharif:
Yeah. Yeah.

Negar Azimi:
I mean, you can say that your work was prophetic in many ways. I mean, it felt extremely on point. I wanted to just transition to one of the conceits in *Customs* is the epistolary form, and there's a series of *Dear Aleph* letters, one of which I have the privilege of publishing a couple years ago. I wonder if you could read that one.

Solmaz Sharif:
Sure yeah.

Negar Azimi:
(48:48) Ethel Rosenberg. And I wanted to talk to you a little bit about, maybe ask you about the epistolary form, which sometimes is viewed as sort of the quintessential form of the exile, format for the exile. But also talk a little bit about empathy in the context of that poem.

Solmaz Sharif:
Sure.

(49:09) The poem is, *Dear Aleph.*"You're correct. Every nation hates its children. This is a requirement of statehood. This and empathy. Empathy means laying yourself down in someone else's chalklines and snapping a photo. A Chrysler with four bullet holes in the rear passenger door just drove by calmly, signaling before it turned.

'Oh, Mrs. Evans, you're such a wonderful woman,' said supposedly, Ethel Rosenberg to the woman who walked her to the chair. It was empathy on Evans' part. Love on Ethel's. I'm a wonderful woman more often than I care to admit. We are going to have our first woman president."

Negar Azimi:
(50:00) That's beautiful. Thank you. I just wondered vis-a-vis empathy. I wondered if you could riff a little bit or think with me a little bit about its value, but it's also it's limits. And is it possible to articulate or to tap into someone else's suffering and interior worlds? And that feels like it's a question that animates a lot of these poems.
Solmaz Sharif:

(50:25) Yeah. The value of empathy is almost occupational. I mean it's useful in therapy offices, police training. If you really want to know how to interrogate someone, you have to have empathy. It's useful in kind of lubricating state-sponsored violence. It's no coincidence that when Marilynne Robinson and President Barack Obama sit and talk about the relationship between literature and citizenship, the word that keeps coming up is empathy and not love. Empathy is what allows one to keep a kill list and remain functional.

And I was teaching, in 2014, I was teaching a workshop and I was asking for more empathy in a poem. And then I stopped myself because I was like, why am I using this word? I'm using it because I've heard it used. And then I said, Actually, the word I mean is love. But it feels really corny to say, you need to love this person in the poem more. But if we're actually talking about writing and of being with each other, that is what it is. And I think when one loves, one is boundless and unboundaried. So isn't this sense of stepping into another and then stepping out of another, there's no sense of leaving the other. There's a sense of whelm and overwhelm. And I think all of these things are necessary in order to write of somebody else's suffering, which I think is possible. And I think not only possible, but a part of my duty actually, is to imagine and be willing to figure out, which requires a lot of work and study, how to write outside of myself.

I don't believe a self exists, but I think that's also a little bit too easy of a theoretical answer. I think that that moment of Akhmatova standing outside of prison, and somebody in line waiting to go in and see her son, somebody turning to her and saying, "Can you describe this in your poems?" And she says, "Yes." I want to do the yes. I don't want to do the, "No, it's impossible. It's too problematic. It won't be real. It's just inscribing violence." I'm thinking about who is it that's writing the yes, because I know I've needed that in my life. And I know that I've been around people that have needed that. Yes. And I know at the very end, in those partial moments, there is that feeling of please tell someone, please let them know this is happening. And also get this word to my mom.

And those are the modes of speech and of speaking to each other that I want to prepare myself for. Letters. We were talking about letters, right?

Negar Azimi:

(53:58) Yeah. Yeah. And Dear Aleph, which is the first letter of the Arabic, Farsi and Hebrew alphabets. How did that?

Solmaz Sharif:

I mean, for me, it's partly about the prison stories that I grew up with, and partly about being raised outside of the country. And in the '80s, and phone calls are very expensive, so we would mail letters. But more often than not, actually, which was not often at all, maybe once or twice a year, we would mail a cassette tape. So there's a cassette tape recording of just my mom saying, "Solmaz is six months old, laughing." And then it's five minutes of her tickling me so her mom and sister could hear and get a sense of who I even am or what I am, and the smallness and ordinariness of it.

But the change in the quality of attention that's brought to its scarcity. When one doesn't have too much information, one is really pouring over what one does get, right? And there's a lot more pressure on what is getting out. But interestingly enough that pressure means not, yesterday, Solmaz did this thing, and then today she's doing this thing. It becomes this small... What is the thing that you miss? The thing that you miss after you've spent days with someone, not in that first gush of trying to catch each other up on the data.
I think often about prisons and only being allowed a sheet of paper or not allowed paper, I think about people who inscribe just various ways of inscription to get words down, to get word out, even if it is just out of self and it will not reach someone.

Negar Azimi:
(55:56) Do you still have those cassettes in the family?

Solmaz Sharif:
I do.

Negar Azimi:
That's great. And the carceral comes up a lot in your work, and you don't have to answer this question, but were these friends, comrades, family members who are in prison it in under this regime or in Iran or?

Solmaz Sharif:
Oh, both. Any. Take your pick.

Negar Azimi:
Yeah, both. No, in that notion of also a poem being something, I mean, just like I'm jumping, when you're robbed of all your possessions, but the richness memorization of poems in a carthal context is kind of a miracle, isn't it?

Solmaz Sharif:
Absolutely.

Negar Azimi:
You take that with you.

Solmaz Sharif:
Yeah.

Negar Azimi:
There was one line in the poem that you just read. Empathy means laying yourself down in someone else's chalklines and snapping a photo. And the snapping a photo part always throws me off, because I think it injects a bit of cynicism or does it not? I don't know of just a seta sizing suffering or the token gesture, but am I reading that wrong?

Solmaz Sharif:
Yeah. seta sizing suffering, the performance of it, the need to share that one tried to understand a suffering moment. I guess my question is, how much of your love is being publicly performed, and how much of it is a more private devotional act, around which the rest of your work is built?
Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif:
Yeah.

Negar Azimi:
(57:32) But I also just wanted to ask you, that feeling of being on the edge of a language that could have been your mother. I don't know the strict definition of mother tongue, but that could have been your most fluent, primal language. And that's something that is intimate throughout *Customs* in particular. And I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that, your relationship to... The poem *Without Which* is very much about the person you would've been, could have been, had political circumstances turned out differently, this collision of forces that left you in different places in the United States and here today, which is the case for many of us.

Solmaz Sharif:
(58:22) Sure. I have had, and I'm still prone to having some kind of romanticized and frankly nostalgic idea that there is this language within which I would be more comfortable and more at home. And I would be addressing those that I most want to address. I think that's one of the cruelties of English, is that for me, it will necessarily always be outward facing. I am not necessarily addressing an Iranian audience. So sometimes I return to that. But I think it's ultimately my dissatisfaction and discomfort with English, which is the language of my dispossession that has made me a poet. I don't think I would be a poet in Farsi, if that romantic idea were true. I think there's something about wanting to keep rearranging and breaking and breaking, that made me have to be a poet in this language in order to survive the language.

Negar Azimi:
That's interesting.

Solmaz Sharif:
(59:36) But I think in the past, I have thought that I would write better poems and Farsi, I would think more clearly, and I would just be a better human. Run five miles in the morning or whatever. But I don't think that's true.

Negar Azimi:
But this idea that dissatisfaction or that desire, that distance made you a poet is fascinating to me.

Solmaz Sharif:
Yeah.

Negar Azimi:
(1:00:01) Couple things about *Customs*. It just ends like without a full sentence. The last line is, "I pass through there so that," I just wonder if maybe without getting too deeply into that poem, I just wonder why you didn't an end effectively. And I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about that. And then maybe I'm just lumping in one more question, which is, in the acknowledgements, you thank many people,
institutions and also fear. And I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about fear. So either one of those questions, I would be curious to.

Solmaz Sharif:

(1:00:45) I mentioned earlier that I'm a diagnostic poet, and what that means is just quite simply trying to name what is, rather than change what is, and a faith that in the naming, eventually the change will come outside of the poem with the readers. Among readers.

But the changing happened within myself through this mode. And I found that I didn't want to keep naming the same things. I didn't want to keep naming the material world that I was seeing. I didn't want to keep naming compromise and foreclosure. How many times can I name it? And actually, I'm thinking of the arc of [inaudible 01:01:28] titles, of her books. And it's a pretty typical, I guess, journey for a writer to go through of the kind of enclosed, closed, foreclosed, captivity of earlier work in which one proves oneself, or lays out one's like intellectual project in a sound way, prove your mastery over it. And then the moving into the so that, the moving toward honestly the revolutionary gesture and what might it mean to start to name things that are not materially true yet, but are possible.

And can come and in my head, the so that, is operating as the title of the next collection. So I'm actively writing toward it, even if that doesn't end up being the title. But I also liked the idea of the book kind of dissolving into white is how I pictured it, rather than offering a closure, because that's what it felt like, honestly, to write it.

Negar Azimi:

Yeah.

Solmaz Sharif:

Yeah. Thanks for that. That's beautiful. Fear?

Negar Azimi:

(1:02:43) Fear. Yeah, I don't know, I think it's still there, but I think there were mentors I didn't want to upset, dinner parties that I needed to behave at and trying to figure out how to navigate it and a lot of smiling, and in the work too. And I kind of enjoyed this forced smile with blood coming out was the tone, or the affect as I experienced it. But I think I just feel honed by the fear. I feel like I've sharpened myself against it enough, and I'm ready to move on.

Jim Cunningham:

(1:03:31) Thank you for listening. This has been Artists in the World, brought to you by WQED and Carnegie Museum of Art.

Dana Bishop-Root:

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