

POETIC ENCOUNTERS

**Prompts for Engagement, Curiosity,
and Wonder**

**by Ama Codjoe, 2023 Guggenheim
Poet-in-Residence**

GUGGENHEIM

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The first time I visited the Guggenheim Museum was to see the exhibition *Picasso Black and White* in 2012. The person I was kind of dating—a science teacher—invited me to the museum during the NYC public school midwinter break. At the time, I was cobbling together jobs as a teaching artist, and the admission seemed steep, but I wanted to spend time with the science teacher so I coughed up the dough.

My date suggested we experience the exhibit without looking at the wall text. I'd never done this before. I'd never thought to do this before. "Sure," I agreed.

Over the next few hours, this prompt evoked an engaging, mesmerizing, mysterious set of encounters. In short, it was a lot of fun.

Looking back, what I remember most about that afternoon is the feeling of journeying.

Because of their thingness, we often think of paintings, sculpture, and photography as static objects. We call dance and theater the “ephemeral arts.” But we are the ephemeral ones. We move through space as moments die one after the other, swallowed whole by time.

Human beings are fleeting, but we can behold.

This is the romance of a museum.

Quiet
your mind
the raucous
your snap judgements.

**Consider all the stewards
of the museum:
all of the caretakers of the space.**

**Architects, artists, art handlers,
conservators, curators,
facilities,
security guards, staff,
teaching artists, trustees,
and visitors.**

**Picture all of these people's
handprints
covering the museum walls.**

**Listen for the sound of the sky
knocking against the museum's
oculus.**

**Consider an art object as if staring
at a sunset.**

**Contemplate and observe a piece
of art
for as long as it takes
for the sun to sink out of view.**

Dare to stay even longer.

What else can you notice?

Find a shadow.

**Find your favorite color, smell,
or sound.**

Find a poem.

**Make up a scene in your
mind's eye.**

**Choose a piece of art and imagine
what the artist's studio looks like.**

Is it tidy or messy?

Is there music playing?

If so, what album or song?

What color are the walls painted?

What is the artist's go-to snack?

**After passing by the next stranger,
imagine
their beating heart.**

**Imagine that same heart has been
broken . . . mended . . . broken . . .
mended.**

**Listen to your own aliveness.
What is its texture, vibrancy,
or song?**

What aren't you noticing?

**What have you forgotten
to pay attention to?**

If you had a pair of binoculars,
what would you want
to more closely examine?

Take a photograph—real
or imagined—
of how you feel right now.

The photograph must:

- Not include any people in it
- Not include any discernible artwork
- Not include any prominent architectural features

Title your photo with a word
or phrase
that evokes this feeling.

**Imagine snow is floating down
from the oculus onto the
rotunda floor.**

**Imagine the tracks people make
as they cross the rotunda floor.**

**“Prescribe” a piece of artwork
to one of your friends.**

**After your visit,
send a description or photograph
of the artwork and explain why
you chose it.**

**Imagine the museum is an aquarium
—everywhere around you is water—
and you are a bright fish swimming
and blinking.**

**Can you tell what time it is without
using a device?**

Become the face of a clock.

**Imagine what the space feels like
at midnight.**

**Imagine what the space feels like
at dawn.**

**In the space between
you and a piece of art,
make a poem.**

Breathe poetry into the space.

**Find a place that curves like
an ear.**

Whisper a secret dream there.

“I feel, therefore I can be free.”
— Audre Lorde,
“Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (1977)

The Poet-in-Residence at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is a one-year position created in collaboration with the Academy of American Poets that focuses on public engagement. The museum selected Ama Codjoe as the Poet-in-Residence for 2023. Codjoe is the author of *Bluest Nude* (Milkweed Editions, 2022) and *Blood of the Air* (Northwestern University Press, 2020).

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