

# Trying to Talk with a Man

Out in this desert we are testing bombs,  
that's why we came here.

Sometimes I feel an underground river  
forcing its way between deformed cliffs  
an acute angle of understanding [5]  
moving itself like a locus of the sun  
into this condemned scenery.

What we've had to give up to get here –  
whole LP collections, films we starred in  
playing in the neighbourhoods, bakery windows [10]  
full of dry, chocolate-filled Jewish cookies,  
the language of love-letters, of suicide notes,  
afternoons on the riverbank  
pretending to be children

Coming out to this desert [15]  
we meant to change the face of  
driving among dull green succulents  
walking at noon in the ghost town  
surrounded by a silence

that sounds like the silence of the place [20]  
except that it came with us  
and is familiar  
and everything we were saying until now  
was an effort to blot it out –  
coming out here we are up against it [25]

Out here I feel more helpless  
with you than without you  
You mention the danger  
and list the equipment  
we talk of people caring for each other [30]  
in emergencies – laceration, thirst –  
but you look at me like an emergency

Your dry heat feels like power  
your eyes are stars of a different magnitude  
they reflect lights that spell out: EXIT [35]  
when you get up and pace the floor

talking of the danger  
as if it were not ourselves  
as if we were testing anything else.

[5] **acute:** sharp or pointed, critical or severe (of a situation), less than 90 degrees (of an angle)

[6] **locus:** a particular position or place where something occurs, a curve along which an object moves according to mathematically defined conditions.

[7] **condemned:** pronounced guilty, sentenced to punishment, marked for destruction

[10] **playing:** here means showing (of a film)

[17] **succulents:** plants with a thick, fleshy surface that is used to store water

[18] **ghost town:** a town that has been abandoned by its former inhabitants

[31] **laceration:** a deep cut or tear in the skin or flesh

## Get In Gear

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This poem describes how the poet and her husband venture into the Nevada desert to protest against a nuclear test that's being carried out by the United States government. Do some research online and determine the following:

- What does the Nevada desert look like?
- How many nuclear tests were carried out there in the 1960s and 70s?
- What kind of public reaction did these tests provoke?

## Tease It Out

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### Lines 1 to 25

1. The poet uses the word 'we' in line 1. Is she referring to a) the United States military or b) herself and her husband? Give a reason for your answer.
2. The poet also uses the word 'we' in line 2. Who is she referring to in this instance?
3. In line 2, the poet declares, 'that's why we came here'. Describe in your own words why the couple have come to the desert. Do you think that there is more than one reason for their journey?
4. According to the poet, the landscape is composed on 'condemned scenery'. Look up the word 'condemned'. Could more than one of its meanings be relevant here? Which of its meanings is most relevant?
5. In lines 8 to 14, the poet remembers the life she's shared with her husband. In pairs, use this series of images to write a paragraph describing a typical day in the life of this couple.
6. Which of the following statements, in your opinion, best describes their relationship:
  - They were a blissfully happy couple whose relationship never experienced any difficulty.
  - Their relationship was happy overall but experienced its fair share of trauma.
  - They were absolutely miserable together.Write a few sentences giving the reason for your choice.
7. What phrase suggests that they've sacrificed their comfortable lifestyle in order to devote themselves to protest and political campaigns?
8. 'this desert/ we meant to change the face of'. Once again the poet uses the word 'we'. To whom is she referring on this occasion? How do these people intend to alter the 'face' of the desert?
9. Class Discussion: In lines 18 to 22 the poet mentions two different types of 'silences', the 'silence of the place' and another that 'came with us'. How are these silences different? To what specifically does each of these silences refer?
10. How did the poet and her husband attempt to 'blot out' the silence at the heart of their relationship?

### Lines 26 to 39

11. The poet and her husband reach their final destination. Read lines 26 to 39 carefully. What type of building or installation do you imagine? What type of safety features might be present? Are there any other people present?
12. What do the poet and her husband talk about as they wait for the detonation to occur?
13. The speaker describes how she feels helpless. Does she feel:
  - Helpless to respond to any emergencies that might occur if the test goes wrong?
  - Helpless to alter her government's destructive nuclear policy?
  - Helpless to fix her failing marriage?Rank the above statements in order of plausibility.
14. True or false: 'Her husband's presence eases the poet's concern and makes the poet feel more capable and confident'.
15. What makes the speaker feel 'helpless'? What does this suggest about the relationship?
16. '[Y]ou look at me like an emergency'. List three adjectives you associate with the concept of an emergency. Based on this line, does the poet's husband have a positive or negative view of the poet and their marriage?
17. The poet feels the heat emanating from her husband's body and compares it to 'power'.
  - Her husband, as a man in a male-dominated society, has power over her life.
  - Her husband, as a privileged white male, is associated with the government and the military elites that created the nuclear tests in the first place.
  - Her husband is a powerful and capable individual.Rank the above statements in order of plausibility.
18. 'The word 'EXIT' has two meanings, one relating to the observation post from which the couple watch the nuclear test, one relating to the failing state of their relationship'. Write four sentences in response to this statement.
19. In the last line, the poet describes how she and her husband have been 'testing' themselves. What are the results of this test? What have they learned about their marriage? What do you think will happen to their relationship now?

## Think About Themes

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1. Write a brief response (three or four paragraphs) to each of the following statements:
  - 'This poem movingly describes a marriage where communication has broken down'
  - 'This poem details a last, desperate effort to repair a failing relationship'
  - 'By the end of the poem, the poet associates her husband with the enemy, with the US military, the government and the corporate forces they are sworn to resist'

## Trying to Talk with a Man



### LINE BY LINE

Between 1951 and 1992, the US government conducted over 1,000 nuclear tests at various sites in the Nevada desert: ‘Out in this desert we are testing bombs’. This series of explosions had a profound effect on the landscape in and around the test sites. The surface features or ‘face’ of the desert would be altered by the government’s irresponsible actions: ‘Coming to this desert we meant to change the face of’.

These detonations attracted a motley crew of interested parties: journalists, serious anti-nuclear campaigners, hippies, hangers-on and tourists from Las Vegas who simply wanted the thrill of seeing a mushroom cloud up close. The poet and her husband have journeyed into the desert in order to protest against such a scheduled explosion: ‘Out in this desert we are testing bombs// that’s why we came here.’

### THE DESERT

The desert is depicted as an incredibly arid environment. The only moisture present is an ‘underground river’ the speaker somehow senses beneath the desert floor: ‘Sometimes I feel an underground river’. Perhaps she can faintly hear the water gushing beneath her feet, or perhaps she can sense the vibrations caused by the river as it flows deep underground.

The poet imagines the water travelling in a curve or ‘locus’, the course of the river veering at a sharp or an ‘acute’ angle as it travels beneath the landscape. She imagines that the course

of the river traces the path of the sun, flowing from east to west across the condemned scenery of the desert: ‘moving itself like a locus of the sun/ into this condemned scenery’.

The desert is almost devoid of vegetation. All that grows there are ‘dull green succulents’ (cacti and other similar spiny plants), whose hardiness and capacity for water-retention allows them to survive in this cruelest of landscapes.

The desert is filled with ‘deformed cliffs’, with rock formations that have been eroded by sandstorms and scorching desert winds until they have a bizarre and twisted appearance. It is also possible that damage caused by nuclear explosions has lent such cliff-faces their unnerving, alien appearance.

According to the poet, the desert is a place of ‘condemned scenery’. This suggests that the desert is such an oppressive and inhospitable landscape that it might have been condemned or cursed by God. But the term ‘condemned’, of course, also suggests that the desert itself is scheduled for demolition, that it will be reduced to rubble by the seemingly endless nuclear tests.

The desert, it seems, is completely unpopulated. As they travel to the protest-site, the poet and her husband pass through a ‘ghost town’ and stop briefly to explore. A ghost town is a town completely abandoned by its former inhabitants.

Perhaps, in this instance, the townspeople left because they were threatened by the military activity going on nearby. Or perhaps they moved on because it was impossible to make a living in such an unforgiving desert environment.

## LIFE BEFORE

The poet reflects on the life she shared with her husband, describing items and events that mattered a great deal to them, the personal moments that filled their relationship with meaning. She recalls going to see films in local cinemas. We can imagine the couple seeing their own passionate relationship reflected in the love stories portrayed on screen. They identified so strongly with these romantic movies that they felt they were starring in the films they watched: 'films we starred in/ playing in the neighbourhoods'.

She recalls the vinyl records she and her husband purchased over years, how they built up collections of soul music, of classical, of jazz: 'whole LP collections'. We can imagine the memories associated with each beloved album, how particular tracks will forever be linked with particular moments in their lives.

She recalls bakeries that sold 'dry, chocolate-filled Jewish cookies'. We can imagine Rich and her husband purchasing such treats for their three sons. Or perhaps they treated themselves to these delicious confections as they walked near their home in Central Park West after brunch on a sunny New York morning.

She describes romantic afternoons they spent 'on the river bank', where they pretended 'to be children'. Perhaps the couple went paddling, playfully splashing around in the water just as children might do. Or perhaps she means that she attempted to shut out all adult worries and concerns, to spend an evening living in a care-free almost child-like fashion.

Somewhat surprisingly, the speaker includes not only 'love-letters' but also 'suicide notes'. Both the poet and her husband, we sense, experienced their fair share of psychological trauma. At least one of them, it seems, has contemplated suicide so seriously that suicide notes have actually been written.

There is an especially jarring contrast between these two concepts – the language of 'love-letters' and that of 'suicide notes' – and yet the poet presents them side by side. She acknowledges that shared suffering was an essential part of the couple's relationship. They are bound by the challenges they endured and overcame together, just as they're bound by pleasant memories of walks along the riverbank.

## DIFFICULTIES

Over time, it seems, the poet and her husband have gradually grown apart, the emotional distance between them increasing

until they can no longer communicate on a deep and meaningful level. There is now a 'silence', the poet declares, at the heart of their relationship.

The speaker describes how a silence surrounds them as they travel through the desert: 'walking at noon ... surrounded by a silence'. But she is not referring to the physical silence of the desert landscape, to the 'silence of the place'. Instead, she's referring to the silence that has appeared in the centre of their marriage. This is the dreadful emotional silence that they have brought with them into the desert: 'it came with us / and is familiar'.

The poet and her husband have spent a long time ignoring this emotional silence. They have focused on the hustle and bustle of everyday life, rather than on their emotional difficulties. They would engage in endless, trivial chitchat, concealing the fact that they had nothing meaningful to say to one another: 'and everything we were saying until now / was an effort to blot it out'.

In the emptiness of the desert, however, they are no longer able to 'blot out' this emotional silence. There is nothing out here to provoke such meaningless chitchat, no hustle and bustle to distract them from their predicament. Alone in this strange and haunting landscape, they must deal with their inability to communicate. They must directly confront the silence at the heart of their relationship: 'coming out here we are up against it'.

## WAITING FOR THE TEST

The poet and her husband reach the location from which they will witness the test taking place. They're probably in one of the semi-official observation posts set aside for members of the press, for representatives of NGOs and for protesters like the poet and her husband. In Nevada, such facilities were located a minimum of six miles from the test-site itself.

Yet there is an atmosphere of tension while those gathered in this installation wait for the explosion to occur. Nuclear detonations are unpredictable affairs, after all. There is always the possibility that the test could go horribly wrong and that those in the observation post, including the speaker and her husband, might suffer greatly. They might suffer tearing or 'laceration' caused by the fury of the blast. They might be left to die of 'thirst' in the desert's unforgiving landscape.

Perhaps understandably, then, the poet's husband apprehensively paces around the room, talking about the danger posed by the test and the various pieces of safety equipment present in the installation: 'You mention the danger/ and list the equipment'. The poet and her husband discuss how those present might tend each other's wounds if such an emergency did indeed occur: 'we talk of people caring for each other/ in emergencies'.

## THE END

The speaker says that she feels ‘helpless’. There are probably several different types of helplessness involved here. She feels helpless when it comes to protecting herself or others should the test go wrong. She feels helpless, no doubt, when it comes to influencing the harmful nuclear policy of her government. She might even feel helpless (as we all do at times) before life’s everyday challenges and difficulties.

The presence of the speaker’s husband, however, does nothing to diminish her sense of vulnerability. She suspects, in fact, that she’d feel less helpless if he weren’t around: ‘Out here I feel more helpless/ with you than without you’. The presence of the poet’s partner should make her feel nurtured and reassured. But instead it has the opposite effect, making her feel vulnerable and helpless.

The poet, in a most unusual turn of phrase, describes how her husband ‘look[s] at me like an emergency’. The poet’s husband, it seems, stares at her the way one might regard a serious and dangerous situation unfolding before one’s very eyes. He looks at her as if their relationship brings danger and unpleasantness into his life, as if their marriage has become an ordeal to be survived.

As the husband paces the floor, the exit signs of the observation post are reflected in his eyes: ‘they reflect signs that spell out EXIT’. This suggests the speaker’s realisation that her marriage is over; that there is nothing that can be done to rescue her relationship. The only available option is to ‘exit’ the emotional mess that her marriage has become.

## FORM

The poem contains 39 lines, broken up into nine stanzas. The stanzas vary in length from one to seven lines. Strikingly, the first two stanzas consist of just one line each. This visually evokes the fact that although the speaker and her husband have come to the desert together – ‘we came here’ – in many ways, they are separate and isolated from each other.

## TONE AND ATMOSPHERE

From the very first line, the poem’s atmosphere is one of dread, danger and tension: ‘Out in this desert we are testing bombs’. A tone of frustration and struggle is introduced with the image of the ‘underground river/ forcing its way’ between the couple. The poet uses the phrase ‘condemned scenery’ to refer not just to the desert but also, implicitly, to the battleground of her marriage.

There is a brief respite from imagery of struggle and dread in stanza 4, when the poet describes happier days with her partner: ‘films we starred in’. However, even the pleasant atmosphere of this stanza contains an ominous detail: ‘the language ... of suicide notes’.

Stanzas 5 and 6 describe the oppressive, tense ‘silence’ that seems to follow this couple around, no matter where they are. The pace of the poem quickens in the final stanzas, as the poet’s partner ‘pace[s] the floor’ furiously and talks about the ‘danger’ they might face in the desert. In these closing lines, the couple is framed as a ticking time bomb: ‘as if we were testing anything else.’

The poem’s lack of punctuation also adds to the tense atmosphere. There are only three full-stops in the poem – in lines 2, 7 and 39. From stanza 5 onwards, there is very little punctuation, and the poem unfolds as a torrent of imagery. This speeds up the pace of the poem, suggesting that the end is fast approaching for this couple.

## METAPHOR AND SIMILE

There are several ways in which the desert landscape serves as a metaphor for the poet’s relationship:

- The physical barrenness of the desert reflects the emotional barrenness that has crept into the couple’s relationship.
- Like the desert, the couple’s relationship has become distorted and ‘deformed’.
- Like the desert, the couple’s relationship is ‘condemned’ or destined to be destroyed.
- The unseen river that flows beneath the desert represents the underlying problems in their relationship. The fact that the river is ‘underground’ suggests that they don’t talk about these problems, preferring to pretend ignore them.

The poet associates the river with understanding and suggests that it moves at an ‘acute’ angle. The poet says that the river moves at ‘an acute angle of understanding’. This suggests that when the poet and her husband finally confront their issues, they will gain knowledge of a sharp and unpleasant nature.

Another striking metaphor is the poet’s description of her husband’s eyes as ‘stars of a different magnitude’. This is quite a beautiful description, but it also suggests that his eyes are blazing with anger.

## IMAGERY

Stanza 4 presents us with a series of images associated with the couple’s life together. Compared to the harsh environment of the desert, their home life is cozy and carefree: ‘LP collections, films we starred in ... chocolate-filled Jewish cookies’. With one important exception (the reference to suicide notes), this stanza resembles a montage of their happier moments together. Contrasted with this are the images of the desert’s arid, alien landscape, its ghost towns, ‘deformed’ cliffs and succulent plants.

## THEMES

### LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

'Trying to Talk With a Man' movingly depicts a failing relationship. Once, the poet's marriage was a happy one, filled with music and cookies, with movies and 'afternoons on the riverbank'. And even the couple's struggles, we sense, used to bring them closer together. Such togetherness, however, is now a thing of the past. Their relationship is now characterised by an emotional distance, by a terrible 'silence' at the heart of their marriage.

The couple, then, have come to the desert not only to protest against nuclear weapons, but also to confront this toxic silence that's eating away at their relationship. They feel, no doubt, that in the desert they'll be utterly free from any distractions, which will allow them to overcome such emotional distance and communicate in a meaningful manner. The emptiness of the desert will make it easier for them to have a full and frank discussion about the issues confronting their relationship.

Their journey, then, can be viewed as a last-ditch effort to rescue a failing relationship. For it's not only the military that will be 'testing bombs' in this desert landscape. The couple, in a metaphorical sense, are braced for a detonation of their own. Their conversation will be emotionally explosive, since it will involve a full and frank discussion about the state of their marriage. The couple will finally confront the silence at the heart of their relationship.

Both the poet and her husband, then, have developed extremely negative feelings about their relationship. Each has come to view the other as a source of emotional danger instead of emotional support.

The poet, as we've seen, feels more rather than less vulnerable in her husband's presence. The husband, meanwhile, views the poet as if she were an emergency, as if she brings turmoil and uncertainty into his life: 'Out here I feel more helpless/ with you than without you ... you look at me like an emergency'.

The husband paces the room and talks about the dangers associated with the nuclear blast. But the poet realises that their relationship, too, is a source of danger: 'Talking about the danger/ as if it were not ourselves'. Their marriage has become a source of psychological and emotional tension, a most serious threat to the couple's well-being. They talk of 'people caring for each other/ in emergencies' but seem incapable of caring about each other anymore.

The drive into the desert was a final 'test' of themselves and of their relationship: 'as if we were testing anything else'. The poet hoped that in the space and silence of the desert they might have found a way to discuss their difficulties. This hope, however has proved a false one, for their difficulties, it seems, are too firmly embedded to be overcome. The exit sign reflected in her husband's eyes indicates the only way forward. All in all, this poem is a brilliant depiction of two people who know they shouldn't be together, but are as yet unable to say the words out loud.

The poem's opening line is open to two very different readings: 'Out in this desert we are testing bombs'. On one level, the word 'we' refers to the United States government, and the word 'bombs' refers to the actual nuclear weapons the government is testing. On another level, however, the first 'we' refers to the poet and her husband, and the word 'bombs' refers to conversational bombshells.

### PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION

The poem highlights the oppression involved in the nuclear programs pursued by wealthy, Western nations. The tests carried out by the US government in the Nevada desert



oppress the region's people, altering the landscape, turning settlements into ghost towns and having untold long-term medical and environmental consequences. But the weapons being tested, of course, are also designed to oppress foreign populations, allowing, as they do, the US government to impose its will around the world. [Russia, France and Britain were also carrying out such programs at the time]. The poet's use of the word 'we' in the opening line signals her awareness that, as an American citizen, she bears some responsibility for the actions her government is carrying out: 'Out in this desert we are testing bombs'.

The poet and her husband enjoy a privileged life. We imagine a comfortable, well-to-do existence, one characterised by a reasonable level of luxury and leisure. Increasingly, however, they have begun to sacrifice more and more of their free time to campaigning against oppression in its various forms. Their hobbies and intellectual pursuits have begun to take a back seat to activism. The fight against their government's oppressive policies has begun to take over their lives: 'What we had to give up to get here'.

### THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

When the poet stands next to her husband in the observation post, she can feel heat radiating from his body. His temperature, we imagine, has been raised not only by the sultry desert conditions but also by the emotional stress he experiences as they wait for the test to commence. The poet, in a startling turn of phrase, compares this heat to 'power'.

- We can imagine how her husband's hot, musky, masculine smell might remind the poet of men in general and the power they wield over women.
- We might also imagine that the heat emanating from her husband's body reminds her of the terrible heat of an extremely powerful nuclear blast.
- The poet might be reminded how the masculine drive to dominate others led to the creation of nuclear weapons (as well as all other weapons of mass destruction) in the first place.
- Finally, the poet may be thinking that men use their privilege and power to oppress women in society just as wealthy countries their power to oppress less privileged populations over seas.

The poet compares her husband's eyes to stars of extraordinary brightness: 'your eyes are stars of a different magnitude'. We can imagine her husband's eyes flashing with intense emotion as he paces the floor of the observation post. We sense, however, that the poet sees her husband's eyes not as beautifully sparkling diamonds, but as raging furnaces of emotion. The furious glint in his eyes, like the heat emanating from his body, is associated with the power of men over women and with the imminent nuclear detonation. (The stars, it is important to note, are sustained by the nuclear reactions that take place deep within their cores).

