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Distinguished Poet José Angel Araguz: The Interview

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distinguished poet

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José Angel Aragoz



the interview

Q: Having published many of your poems in past issues, we've noticed a consistent structure we'll call "intense brevity". Each poem hints at a much longer story, a complete narrative, a broad character study, though you only provide us with the details most essential to each specific experience. Do you feel your poems are exploring different moments of the same narrative? 'He', 'she', 'the father', 'the child'—are these unique to each poem or is there a larger context in which they live?

I'd like to first admit how influential the experience of submitting and being published in *The Inflectionist Review* has been. From reading through the "Inflectionism" statement as well as the first issue which had poem after poem that lived up to the ambitions outlined in said statement, I was hooked. I immediately began to think that here was a new avenue and shape of thinking, one that rang true to me. This original inspiration came at a time when I was working with a varying five-line form which I call "hands," kind of the unkempt poetic nephews of Yasunari Kawabata's palm-of-the-hand stories. With Inflectionism in mind, I went to work on batches of these shorter lyrics.

In my general approach to short lyrics, I am heavily influenced by the short poems of Stephen Crane and Yannis Ritsos as well as my reading and writing of haiku and tanka. In the work of Crane and Ritsos, there's a fatefulness and vividness which is the heart of lyric poetry, a heart which pulses via voice, image, and brevity. This famous one by Crane will serve as an example of what I mean:

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;

"But I like it
"Because it is bitter,
"And because it is my heart."

What keeps me coming back to this poem is the turn at the end, where the content sinks into its multiple meanings, moving the reader to return to the

beginning and see the whole enterprise of the poem in a different light. For me, poetry is all about that turn where you realize the stakes are personal, both for the poet and the reader, all of it happening indirectly via the poem.

As for the influence of haiku and tanka, there's a notion poet Dennis M. Garrison calls "dreaming room" which he describes as "some empty space inside the poem which the reader can fill with his personal experience, from his unique social context." This idea is similar to Inflectionism's descriptions of poems where "[there] are gaps between images and ideas that the observer fills in with their own perceptions." While each of these forms – haiku, tanka, "hands" – has its respective formal and conceptual sensibilities, there's a common strand of insistence on space for the reader to engage, of the poet backing off content for the sake of possible intents. This, in short, is the overall conceptual context of the poems.

Q: Although you portray intimate moments between flesh-and-blood people, there is often a sense of distance between them. What intrigues you about human distance (especially between family members) and why do you feel it resonates with readers?

The concept of human distance is a fascinating one. This term makes me think of the ways distance plays out. There's the physical distance between people, the way people move away. In my family, it's the distance my mother put between herself and my father, which turned out to be the distance between one country and another. The (im)migration of family members between countries plays out in the culture I'm from in terms of work; I have uncles that only see family during seasons of unemployment, for whom family time is bittersweet because being with them means being without the means of providing for them. I feel a parallel distance in terms of the physical distance of my leaving home to pursue an education. These physical distances play out in terms of concentrated efforts at communication via phone calls, letters, conversations and visits that are too brief.

There's also the distance of memory: When you've been separated from someone for a long time, which you do they remember? Certain stories and jokes get repeated, shared almost like charms to reaffirm who we are to one another. I would add to this emotional distance: the distance needed from actually feeling things in order to see what was felt. It is these last two especially that I feel make for compelling writing. I feel human distance resonates with readers because of the intimacy (and lack of) implied.

This train of thought makes me think of the elegiac themes in my writing. I like the word "elegiac" specifically because of how it can be read strictly as "like an elegy" but not. Elegies tend to be final words, whereas in the poems about my

father that keep coming, the drive seems to be not to come to a final word but to keep seeing what there is to see, using absence as a fulcrum to dig into the present. It also makes me think of something Jim Harrison said in an essay: “The unanswered question is why a poet transforms experience, not so much to make it understandable, but to make it yield its aesthetic possibilities.” This idea of aesthetic possibilities, that’s where connections happen. Not the facts for the sake of themselves, but facts that lead to the artifacts of feelings.

Q: Can you talk us through the metaphor behind this stunning, ambiguous line: “Who she is lies in the time between the eyes taking turns being cloudy”?

This question on a line from “The Story of Eyes” makes me realize how much of a teenage poem I had written. The girl in the poem goes through having her parents separate, an event that plays out in being able to cry only from one eye at a time. When with one parent, she cries from one eye, and cries from the other when with the other parent. I call this a teenage poem because it is in the human distance (to use a new favorite term) created by the parents separating that the girl in the story can see clearly. Each parent brings sorrow to an eye; she is only able to glimpse an idea of who she is beyond those feelings of torn loyalty and betrayal when moving between parents.

Q: Many of your poems convey a sense of allegory, and you even include direct reference to ‘the story’ in two of the poems in this issue. Can you speak to this idea of storytelling, of the story-within-poem technique?

Ultimately, it’s a matter of context; a poet can get into any territory given the right framework or conceit. Sometimes it takes years. I recently wrapped up a book-length project which combines elements of fragmentary writing, autoethnography, essay, and lyric sequence, a portion of which is comprised of a series of poems about the devil I’ve tinkered with for ten years. I returned to them on and off over the years, never knowing how to move beyond vague ideas of the devil and devilhood. It wasn’t until recently when I began digging into a narrative that had nothing directly to do with the devil that I suddenly realized the possible tones those other poems could add to a highly personal project. I say all this only to say that any concept I have of storytelling involves misdirection and perseverance.

My guides into allegory poems are Jack Gilbert and Yannis Ritsos as well as Zen koans and Sufi tales, the latter of which use symbolism to convey lessons. Gilbert incorporates myths into a personal lore of his own. His poem “Michiko Dead” about a wife that passed, mentions her only in the title. After that first line (“He manages like somebody carrying a box / that is too heavy”), the reader’s given a thorough, objective description of grueling physical effort and persistence, all of

it hinged to emotion via that quick simile “He manages like . . .”

With Ritsos, there is an impulse towards what I would term abstract allegory. He has a poem entitled “Protection” which starts off:

The sky bends over us, responsible,
as our poem bends over the sadness of mankind,
as the sensitive, initiated eyelid bends over the eye,

He then goes on to deliver a concise, powerful meditation of the eyelid that astonishes me every time I read it. This idea of abstract allegory is where my “story” poems come in. I suppose I’m fascinated less with storytelling (which implies the story can be told, beginning, middle, and end) and more with storymaking. As in “The Story of Eyes,” there are the elements of the story (eyes/parents separating), and then the stories that play out, both the fable-like narrative and the emotional undercurrent. My goal is evocation of feeling; or, as is nicely noted on *The Inflectionist Review* site, a poetry that “asks questions and lets the reader answer them.”

Q: Since the *Inflectionist Review* is run by a Russian and a Bostonian who have escaped to Portland, Oregon, it’s only natural to ask: would you be willing to share some of your family history and comment on its impact on your life and work? What role, if any, has immigration played in your family?

As I alluded to before, I have a particular narrative and engagement with the idea of (im)migration. I toy with the spelling of the word not out of any random whim; rather, I feel compelled to personalize the word for myself. I mean, two letters separate this charged word from what birds do seasonally. In terms of family and writing, I write about the border what I know about the border, what I’ve picked up from conversations growing up as well as what I’ve seen going back and forth. I know my mother and aunt who raised me were born in Matamoros. I know that my mother was mistreated and looked down upon during the first years after crossing over into Texas with my aunt. I know my mother marveled at first seeing the skyscrapers that line Corpus Christi Bay. I know that my mother had me at fourteen, a time in her life when she swears she knew nothing about what was happening to her. I know that there are stories I was told to keep to myself. I know that if I ever ask about the hardships of those early years, my mother tears up and changes the conversation. I know that these days my mother refuses to go to Mexico because of the border violence, the gangs and drug trafficking. I know that my aunt still goes and visits family. I know that my aunt has been held at gunpoint more than once in the past five years on these visits. I know there are stories I can’t share without tearing up myself.

Looking back at the above, the role of (im)migration can be said to be one primarily of momentum and work. The border, the Rio Bravo (or the Rio Grande), the Spanish of my household and the English of my schooling, the fear of being seen as different and the desire to fit in, all of it meets in motion. My mother moved here to find a better life and she did, the whole time urging me to follow a similar momentum and better life. There was no clear definition of what “better life” meant, and so naturally it came to poetry, with its fluidity and momentum.

I say *naturally*, and I don’t mean it lightly. I grew up having seen my father only twice in my life; he died when I was six. This absence, along with the absence of details from my early family life, leave a lot of white space in the mind. Writing has always been a place to land but also to move slower, to keep moving when life feels stuck. Between what I know and don’t know, I feel my way through to the truth of each moment, an (im)migration of the soul.

Q: What is, to you, a life devoted to one’s art? Recently we’ve learned of your work for the *Cincinnati Review*, which must be a most delightful experience. At the same time, we understand you are pursuing a PH.D. Can you tell us more about these engagements? In a life of an artist, how do other parts fall into place to contribute to a meaningful and productive whole?

Alan Berecka, a South Texas poet, recently paid me one of the most meaningful compliments while introducing me at a reading; he said that most writers he knows wear many hats, but that he considered me someone who kept one hat on, that of poetry. I was moved to hear him say that because it is something that I strive for, to live by and for poetry. Everything I do of value starts in poetry. This goes for the other genres I write in as much as much as the life around the writing.

James Wright said in an interview once that he wrote poetry for a kind of emotional stability, and I say: Yes, that’s it! Once I got hooked, poetry became the anchor, the compass. I can always tell how well my life is going by how much writing I get done and how true it rings. There have been dark years when little got written, and the little that did get written felt false. I keep to a regular writing schedule, at least half an hour a day. If I can indulge in a little more, all the better. And always something new as well as something old. I’m revising as much as I’m writing most of the time. This practice has kept me and my writing alive with a kind of fluidity that can be achieved only by process. There in the ink, in the line break, in the irreverently phrased lyric paragraph is the pulse.

My work at the CR has been illuminating. I like to think of it as another aspect

of the big conversation and community. Sometimes you're the person sending poems out; sometimes you're the one reading them. The biggest lessons, in fact, come from reading through submissions and taking the time to listen, to hear a poem through and consider it. As for the PHD, I wanted to get back into teaching. I took a six year break after my MFA, mainly to get over myself and the bitterness of getting a full dose of workshop/publishing world vibes. Going back for the PHD, I had with me many lessons of what not to value as well as what to look for. As I enter my final year and prepare to enter the job market, there's a lot of fear of what comes next, on the practical front. Yet, I feel armed with hope; there's much good to be done by creative writers in academia as well as outside it. As writers, we do the kind of work that people find meaningful. Write a good poem, and people will share it, will blog it, will copy it out and pin it to a community board, will quote it on social media. That's amazing to me. Our work has us engaged with creating meaning, which puts us in the position to guide people on how to find meaning for themselves. One solid metaphor can change a life. We know this firsthand. In whatever classroom I'm in, that is one of the key lessons I try to bring. In this way, I come back to poetry, the art helping me understand the life, and vice versa.

Q: Many of your characters are presented amidst their suffering, and the poet's commentary is warm and compassionate. What is the role of empathy in your approach to poetry? Is art about pain or about laughter?

Empathy, for me, is all about attention and listening. As in prayer, so in poetry; words come into play for the service of something other. Any suffering in my poetry is present to be listened to and given space. I believe as poets we have a gift to listen closely to the poems that come and surprise us on the page, and to transcribe them in a way that makes them available for others to listen in on. I mean, we write poetry alone by listening to ourselves long enough to hear past ourselves; readers of poetry are put in the same space as the poet, a space of human listening.

In regards to poetry being about pain or laughter, the writer Norma E. Cantú said a wonderful thing in an interview, essentially that there is a kind of sensibility inherent to South Texans (my hometown is Corpus Christi) that allows one to laugh through their sorrows – not laugh them off, but rather to be able to laugh in the midst of the struggle. Whatever hardships there were growing up, I always remember them being handled with a mix of tears and laughter. In conversation, I'll find myself relating a story that has me eating nothing but mayonnaise sandwiches one summer as a kid in a garage apartment or having a beer bottle broken over my head in my twenties, and I'll find myself delivering it with a bit of laughter, only to look up at someone blank-faced. It's not that I take these things lightly, but rather that, to survive them, you have to survive yourself, your hurt self, your broken self. For me, poetry is about both pain and laughter,

each a half of the whole of life. More and more, I feel that my mode is to put on the asbestos gloves and really get in there, handling the hazardous materials of the heart, not with bravado but with conviction and resilience.

Q: Why has poetry in the U.S. dwindled to a genre of interest predominantly to other poets, which is not the case in many other world's locales? Is it Shakespeare's fault? What can we do to invigorate modern poetry and expand its audience?

A loaded set of questions, no? Let me start by answering the first one by saying that, in my eyes, poetry has and will always be “a genre of interest predominantly to other poets” for the same reason most fans of professional sports will engage at one point or another in pick-up games. When you fall in love with something, you want to on some level engage with it, learn the terms and practices, try your hand at it, etc. When the human mind is fascinated, it wants more of the story of what it's fascinated by.

Billy Collins noted: “the trouble with poetry is / that it encourages the writing of more poetry.” I would quibble with this a bit and say not “trouble” but “the trial of poetry;” it's good poetry if someone turns around after reading or hearing a poem and finds themselves wanting to open up like that, even if only for a second of thought. And yes, I'm counting “poetic thought” as falling under the category of poetry practice. I've known people revise their lives with the same kind of earned and fought-for insights poems are revised out of darkness from. Also, if the U.S. poetry scene is viewed as being limited to those who win the big prizes or are in the big name magazines or published by the big presses or headlining AWP, then that's a very ungenerous take on American poetry. Poetry matters to more people than you think. There are poets on Instagram and Twitter with followers in the hundreds of thousands (not all of them poets themselves), not to mention the poetry slam and spoken word scenes or the number of regional poetry festivals that happen around the country via community centers and writing groups. While some mistakenly argue against the merits of poetry on social media, in performance, or outside of the “po-biz” as it is called, there's no denying the connections poets and non-poets alike have with poetry wherever they find it. I have been fortunate enough to have people come up to me after a reading and say, “Y'know, I don't read poetry, but I liked what you did up there.” I have shared the stage with slam poets who can command a room of hundreds down to a hush, but who have never been heard of by National Book Award winners or academic scholars. Essentially, my favorite poets haven't heard of your favorite poets, and vice versa. That's America. America's also about turning people on to things. To quibble again, not “dwindled” – we've kindled, and keep kindling!

As for it being Shakespeare's fault, only if by Shakespeare you mean the canon.

Shakespeare, from what I know of his lore, placed butts in seats and kept folks entertained; and, from what I've read of his poetry and plays, he kept them there with quality. But that's an argument for the artist. Ideas of tradition and canon(s) are dangerous when prescriptive. These days, we need to think less in terms of canons and more in terms of playlists. On one of my current playlists, I have a trap rapper, a British female rocker, a California rock band, and a Colombian rock star all taking turns enriching my life. The best way to invigorate modern poetry would be to read and write as widely, joyfully, and as intensely as you'd put together a playlist. We all need more stories. Putting your stories out there is participating in the conversation, helping to shuffle the stories around.

