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Interview with Virgil Suárez

by Fred Alsborg

FRED ALSBERG:

How old were you when you first discovered you were interested in poetry? What was the occasion?

VIRGIL SUÁREZ:

I had always been fascinated by poetry, in particular the poetry of Neruda and Lorca. As early as I can remember my grandmother also read to me translations from ancient Chinese poets. I couldn't tell you which ones because she was reading me translations in Spanish. I suspect they were either Tu Fu or Li Po or Pu Chuy, or even Confucious. She also read to me plenty of Jose Marti. I must have been seven or eight. In the last years of my life in Cuba, in my childhood paradise, as I've come to call it, I was also lucky enough to go to school at Cal. State Univ. Long Beach and fell into the hands of Elliot Fried, Charles Stetler, and Gerry Locklin. They were there writing and publishing a storm of poetry. Those guys lived and breathed it. They were great at getting a tremendous scene established. It was poetry for me from the very beginning. I made the silly mistake once of thinking that there might be some money in it if I wrote novels. I still laugh at my foolishness. Ah, innocence! Ah, crazy nonsense. Writing a novel is like going fishing without bait, heck, without even a hook. It's rubbish to think that one writes to make money. The business of writing and publishing and selling novels is just that, a crazy business. I want my words slim and pure, no strings attached. That's why with poetry I'm free. Nobody messes with poetry, at least not with mine.

ALSBERG:

How important is family in your work? How important is your early life in Cuba to your work?

SUÁREZ:

Family is central to my work. Also community. I have struggled to make a great community

out of my life in Miami in these last ten years. I know a lot of writers I think of as friends. Denise Duhamel and Nick Carbo are now down in South Florida, so I see them often. My friends Geoffrey Philp and Ricardo Pau Llosa. Also Mitchell Kaplan, owner of Books and Books, who loves poetry and keeps the best poetry selection in the Southeast. He keeps me well supplied. It's a great place, Miami, which includes lots of family, and the vibrant Cuban-American community. Lots to write about. I wish I could live down here 12 months out of the year. God knows I'm trying to make it down.

ALSBERG:

Has living in Florida influenced your work in any way?

SUÁREZ:

All of Florida is influential, from the Panhandle to the Keys. I live in Key Biscayne and Coral Gables, so that whole tropical world seeps in. The woods in Tallahassee have also done enough to entice me. I was born in a big city and have always lived in the city, but there are things about the country I love.

I love the Everglades. I love how everyday there's a new color to its water. A new hue. You can enter Florida and never leave, which is what I think has happened to me. I love it. I love its people, the heat, the water, and all that Uva Caletta, which is now back in full force around Key Biscayne after Hurricane Andrew. I love the feral iguanas. I love the blue crabs scuttling across the parking lots in the morning rains . . . it's as magical a place as we can hope for. It's also a great place for writers and writing. It's got a tremendous literary tradition. Of all the cities in it though, I love Miami the most. It's where I feel most comfortable. I belong there. I will be buried in Miami one day.



ALSBERG:

Would you comment on your drafting process?

SUÁREZ:

An idea for a poem strikes and I will spend however long, sometimes a poem comes fast and some times it'll take a week, but the process for me is always the same. The computer, the cursor, the emptiness of the screen. My job is to fill it, begin to craft words from a single image or idea. I swing between writing narrative poems and poems that are completely mood-driven or image driven. I will work on a poem until it begins to ring true in my years.

I will revise and read aloud as many times as it takes until I arrive at a poem that, if I were an audience member at a reading, I would say pleased me. A poem I would want to hear, read, write. I like most of my childhood poems because they take me back somewhere that no longer exists, or that perhaps exists only in my imagination. "Writin' is fightin'" as Ishmael Reed calls it. For me putting in 10 hours a day writing a poem is not uncommon, but then I write like this all the time. Perhaps it has become an addiction which has no cure. I'm long gone, I think. Thank heavens it is writing and not robbing banks!

ALSBERG:

Which American and English poets have influenced you and why?

SUÁREZ:

Plenty. I love the work of Stephen Crane, Hart Crane, Sylvia Plath, and mostly Poe. I love Poe. I spend most of my time reading the contemporaries though. Tremendous poets the likes of Timothy Liu, Denise Duhamel, Kim Addonizio, Li Young Lee, Juan Felipe Herrera--Lord, there are so many of them. You know, I can easily say that the American novel is DEAD, but poetry is ALIVE and KICKING. Kicking some butt. Yeah, plenty to read. My all-time favorite poet right now (and I gauge this by how voracious my appetitie is for

his stuff) is Adrian C. Louis. Sherman Alexi too. Mark Tercotte. These guys write a great line, great poem. I like poetry that takes chances.

ALSBERG:

How has your knowledge of the Spanish language and Spanish poetry affected your poetry written in English?

SUÁREZ:

It's a blessing to have two languages. God knows remembering words in Spanish has been a muse to me. My poetry is infused with Spanish. I love the sound of certain words. I love the images my parents put into my head by using words I had never heard of before. Take "guanabana" as an example. It is soursop. It's a prehistoric fruit, at least it looks it, though I don't know how old it is. Very tropical and very delicious. Lots of words like that. I think of the word, then tinker with the poem about what the word means. Lots of my poems begin with a word in Spanish. I use them as a catalyst for ideas.

ALSBERG:

A quick take on Lorca? Neruda? Paz? Vallejo? Which Cuban poets should we read?

SUÁREZ:

Great poets, though I'm not too crazy about Paz. Paz is too dry, too dull, too much of a brainiac, not enough passion like Lorca or Neruda. I would not put Paz in the same grouping. I would put Paz and Borges together. I think we should all read Jose Marti. Also Nicolas Guillen. Great rhythm and great sounds.

ALSBERG:

How important is sensory detail?

SUÁREZ:

Which relates to the way we feel, see, hear, touch, taste the world. Colors are important, but the image is what lasts. The red wheel barrow, no, the white chickens, the rain water. Ah, unforget-



table. I have measured out my life in tea spoons, but I have also drunk my share of Cuban *cafecitos*.

ALSBERG:

What are the qualities and characteristics of the poetry you find most engaging?

SUÁREZ:

They tell me a story, but they also leave a lasting impression through images, which are constructed by language. A few years back I was devastated by the power of Bruce Weigl's poetry. He's an amazing poet. So is Rita Dove, so is Charles Wright. I love poetry that takes me to a place, a time, an individual and an individual's struggle. *WHAT SAVES US* by Weigl is a must-read-and-must-reread collection.

So are most of the books written by Adrian C. Louis. Poetry that zings with vibrancy, the electricity of the soul. Poetry with Lorca's Duende zapped with *cojones*.

ALSBERG:

How would you like to see your work develop in the coming years?

SUÁREZ:

This is a good question. You know, I take it one poem at a time. Sometimes I begin writing a sequence, and that sequence leads me to new place. I've been doing lots of Jesus poems lately. I like Jesus. I like the idea of our idea of Jesus. He's a great myth. Enough power behind that myth to write a thousand books!

