



An Interview
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author of
The Portable Famine

by
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Winner of the BkMk Press John Ciardi Poetry Prize, selected by Robin Becker

ISBN 1-886157-53-7, \$13.95, 64 pages, trade paper, November 2005

BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5101 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110, (816)235-2558

www.umkc.edu/bkmk

Is sense avital longing that gives shape and life to your poems in *The Portable Famine*. Would you please say something about their impetus?

The Portable Famine consists of mainly “on the road” poems written as I traveled either for business or my annual vacations that I always take alone. I worked on these drafts of poems for about 5 years. This process allowed me to honor the spontaneity available in travel with the deliberateness of craft that I require of my work. There is indeed a sense of longing in this collection, a longing that will never be answered. The more I travel, the more conscious I’ve become of the fact that I don’t fit easily anywhere. It is like being homesick for an imaginary place.

Did you have a muse or a coterie of muses that accompanied you as you wrote and constructed this book?

Instead of muses, I have a coterie of ghosts. Some have appeared in other books (Uncle Rachel, my drag queen uncle, for example) and others startled me with their new presences (Mormon friends from my Utah years). Betsy Sandlin just recently wrote a scholarly paper on my being a “haunted” poet, even though she hadn’t yet read *The Portable Famine*. But my “invisible guests,” as Czesław Miłosz writes in a poem, do not frighten me or arrive with messages or even tasks to complete to help them. My poems may help keep these ghosts from a final, even more profound death: They must not be forgotten.

Absences due to death, racism, “the unscripted hangover of other people’s desires” pressurizes many of the poems. It seems

as if you are de-constructing the many mirages of America’s image. Do you believe that poetry has the power to break through popular illusion? What roles does poetry play in shaping public consciousness?

I like the use of the word “mirage” in your question. There are many times in my life when I’ve reached a goal (my first book, love, Ph.D., etc.) and discovered how I’d been chasing a mirage. I had to ask myself why I had allowed myself to be fooled. This is when I started noticing popular culture and images, of how there were things missing in the public mirrors of television, film and books. As a gay man, I found assumptions of either naturalized heterosexuality or victimhood of “the other.” As a Puerto Rican, I found that I had to “translate” the black and white America I saw and heard. Latino culture respects a poet, but in turn the poet must be a witness of *el pueblo*. Taking this to heart, I write of the impossible *pueblo*, the one not on screen or even in poetry books.

While you are not afraid of detailing gritty reality, there is a dreamlike quality that infuses the atmosphere of many of your poems, yet in “Returning to Puerto Rico As a Stranger” you end the poem with “I won’t waste my powers on dreaming.” The dynamic of resistance and release suggests a sexual tension that energizes the poems with a romanticism that doesn’t avoid difficult truths. Is this tension a structuring element that you consciously work with as a poet?

Again, I like mixing things up—high culture and low culture, straight and gay, etc. The word “dreaming,” in all of its forms, is a dangerous word. We use it in the expression,

"The American Dream." We also tend to dismiss someone if "they're only a dreamer." For me, in "Returning to Puerto Rico as a Stranger," I want to emphasize the need to value this reality, what is around us. I find nostalgia to be a very dangerous poison. Discovery (or curiosity) keeps us conscious of things and moments that can so easily be taken for granted. Creativity, sexuality, laughter, and associative-thinking are revealed only by the specifics (sometimes "gritty" details) of our shared lives and times.

In these poems do you feel as if you're "hiding in plain sight"?

One can hide in a poem, but one cannot hide in a book of poems. Narratives emerge; ideas are echoed throughout the readings. Today's poet and reader are living through the most dangerous times in American history. I know this is a radical claim, but I see proofs of this on a daily basis. I especially applaud librarians who well understand the evilness of the Patriot Act (what a great phrase). Now there are "minute men," once called vigilantes, patrolling American borders. Such activity is also occurring in the world of letters—who gets published, whose work is distributed, etc. Censorship works best as a preventive measure rather than after the fact of publication. Yet, here I am—a gay, Puerto Rican, and former working-class poet who has an audience. The gay world has always double-voiced, has understood the power of encoding and decoding. I see my work as working in many worlds at once.

Does your addiction to "dawn, to light, to vision" hint at prophecy? What role does the prophetic voice play in your poetry?

Unlike most of my friends, I write at dawn, the earlier the better. I get to see the world turn from darkness to light. This is also when my ghosts mostly visit; the grave does not have a sunrise or the colors yellow or blue. It's easy being "prophetic" in this time of global homogenization for corporate profit. Being a prophet is another matter, as I learned from W.B. Yeats and Yannis Ritsos. It is only after a lifetime of poems, of difficult work, that a man or woman can be judged a prophet. I think of Emily Dickinson in her obscurity, of Frank O'Hara's prolific body of work in an era of personal and public repressions, and of Pablo Neruda's last years on an island as the world praised him. I never worry about publication for often I write to the future, to younger readers, and to those who only exist now as ideas.

Does your poetry leave its readers with "forwarding addresses?"

There is an expiration date to any forwarding address, when mail is returned to sender (thanks Elvis Presley). Having lived at 50 addresses so far, I've learned to pack well and take what is necessary. The rest will follow on its own volition. The line your question quotes is from "Imitations Of Bruce Springsteen" in which the Mormon angel Moroni refers to the loss of the ancient American civilization that would someday return via Joseph Smith's mantle as prophet. What poet

doesn't hope to be read, re-read, or reclaimed at least by a future audience? In my poems, everything I hold to be dearest to me awaits the reader.

The perception that you don't belong to the country of your origin or the U.S. haunts your poetry with all of your ghosts. Where do you belong and where does that position your poetry? Is *The Portable Famine*, in its way, an attempt to create "a country that doesn't exist"? What would be the salient characteristics of your "imaginary nation"?

I've lived in all the regions of the United States, including Puerto Rico, and yet have always felt like an "interior exile." This has allowed me to get a different perspective on our country than someone who is perhaps strictly a regionalist or who writes selectively within ethnic identity. Many of our "border crossings" have nothing to do with actual countries. Instead of living in a gay community, I now live in Toledo near the Jeep factory where all kinds of people live next to each other. Neighbors have gotten used to us: our "noisy" house color (South Beach gold-green), askew garden, antique French doors we chose over an expensive car. I prefer a real place rather than an imaginary nation; the ghosts remind me to value what is here, what might be realized.

What about Shelley makes him your beloved?

I love how Shelley isn't self-conscious—he embraces all his emotions. The ephemeral qualities of his poetry bespeak vision and craft. He has always been a contrast to his friend Lord Byron whose work is not dissimilar to my own: he uses personae, has a wicked sense of humor, and is pensive sometimes at great cost. I do not classify myself as a Romanticist; human nature intrigues me much more than nature does. *The Portable Famine* does evoke many earlier writers, but not merely as touchstones. They are friends.

If questions are feasts, is the famine a lack of questions that follows you from place to place?

I've learned that one's hunger(s) follows you from place to place. Learning how to ask real questions is everyone's life's work. Occasionally, real answers arrive. Most often, though, illusion (or the "mirage" from the earlier question) is a safer route, a less taxing choice. Yet, that is also the route of eventual suffering. Even though I'm not religious, I'm attracted to two religious figures: Isaiah of the Old Testament who knows about human ache and also the Laughing Buddha who knows of the curative powers of laughter and joy. Who knows more about place than the displaced? I crafted this book to be about feasts, famines, and to honor the art of thriving against all odds.



