

THE SRPR INTERVIEW: JACOB SAENZ

Joanne Diaz: Thank you for sharing your work in this issue of *SRPR* and for taking the time to talk with me. If I may, I'd like to start our conversation by asking about the narrative excitement in your work. When I read your poems, I feel like I am launched into dramatic situations that feel urgent and necessary. How do you think about arriving at that place of maximum interest, not in the fifth or sixth stanza, but from the opening lines of a poem?

Jacob Saenz: Initially, in the first drafts, it's often an image or a few words phrased together that prompt me into the flow of the poem. For example, in "Bait" which is featured here, I had had that idea for years, and it was something that I recently revisited. For me, what tends to drive and keep the flow of a poem going is image—in this case, the image of a young boy going into the bar to find his father—but also I'm driven a lot by rhyme and sonic devices. I let those guide me and take me further into the poem and explore the sonic aspects but I also pay attention to how it looks on the page. In "Bait," I was very much driven by assonance and consonance ("a pool shark chalking / up his cue stick") as well as alliteration ("dark bottles of beer, burning"), which is a tool I use often in writing. I like deploying those devices as a way to give the poem a musicality that, perhaps, the narrative might lack.

I tend to write in spurts. I'm not a very disciplined writer, so when I feel the urge to write, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. In the process of revision I'll stick with what I feel is strong and build on that. Whether that is an image or sonic devices or the metaphor that I'm trying to explore, I try to let those guide me.

JD: When you use assonance and consonance, you create really powerful percussive effects in your lines. It doesn't feel gratuitous—it feels effective and essential. I wonder if you could say more about the auditory experience of your poems.

JS: I grew up listening to hip-hop and rap music as a kid, and I'm not a rapper at all, but I know a lot of verses off the top of my head, and

I feel that that has seeped into my work in different ways. I try to follow it and it helps guide me from one idea to the next as I'm writing. But like you said, a lot of my poems are narrative-based as well, and I think that too is linked to hip-hop. A lot of the great hip-hop songs are just stories told in a great, rhythmic way. For example, Ice Cube's "It Was a Good Day" or A Tribe Called Quest's "I Left My Wallet in El Segundo." I can't emulate that, but I try to incorporate the tools hip-hop artists use for telling their stories into the particular story that I'm trying to tell.

JD: In addition to your conversation with the hip-hop tradition, how are you also in conversation with other poets?

JS: There are definitely poets in my head and I try to incorporate the devices they use. One of my influences is Ed Roberson. He was my professor at Columbia College Chicago. It was an eye-opening experience having him as a teacher and reading his work, which I'm a huge fan of. There's this musicality to his work and he goes in these strange and beautiful directions. It blows my mind how he gets from one point to another. I don't always understand what I'm reading, but I know that there's something there that intrigues me and moves me. A lot of my early poems were definitely influenced by him and what I saw he was doing in terms of craft.

Another influence is the poet Sharon Olds. I love the brutally and beautifully honest way she writes poetry. While I wouldn't call my work confessional, I tend to write autobiographically and I feel reading Sharon Olds's work helped me in that regard early on. I feel her work gave me permission to open up and explore myself.

I also feel that I'm just trying to keep up with my peers in terms of what they're writing. I'm thinking more in terms of Latino poets and trying to keep up with the tradition of Latino poetry—telling our stories and telling them in a fresh and moving way.

JD: Who are some of the Latino poets who have provoked or challenged you to think in new ways about your own work?

JS: I'm a huge fan of Erika Sánchez. We're both from Cicero, Illinois. I feel a lot of her work is really great, and I'm trying to keep up with her in some ways. But also I really enjoy Carmen Giménez Smith and Eduardo Corral. Eduardo's book *Slow Lightning* is just beautiful.

Another of my earliest influences was the work (poetry and fiction) of Sandra Cisneros. Her having a Chicago connection made her work extra sweet for me, as I recognized many of the landmarks and people in my own life. Pablo Neruda is also a major figure in my life, particularly his love poems, which made an impression on me as a high school student. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* is one of my favorite books ever!

Last year I participated in CantoMundo, an annual intensive workshop for Latino poets. It was such a great and nourishing experience for me, not only in terms of writing, but also emotionally. I made a lot of great friends and connections that I'll have for a long time. Erika Sánchez and I both got to go the same year. She had a great way of talking about the CantoMundo network—sometimes as Latino poets we have to explain ourselves and where we're coming from. We'll have to justify poetic choices in a traditional poetry workshop, but at CantoMundo, everyone essentially knew where we were coming from. Obviously we all have different backgrounds and upbringings, but there was an essence there that connected us.

Let me give you an example of what I mean with my poem "Poem for the Grandmother." At CantoMundo there was talk about this idea of the "abuela" poem. As Latino poets, everyone sort of has their abuela poem, and this was my attempt to write it while being aware of the tradition. Do you know the poet Paul Martínez Pompa? He's in Chicago as well. In his book *My Kill Adore Him*, he has an abuela poem. In my poem that's featured here in *SRPR*, I feel like I'm riffing off of that in some ways. His is a two-part poem: one part is written in a very traditional way, heavy on clichéd images of grandmothers, and the second part is the real story, what actually happened with his grandmother, written by a poetic speaker who doesn't speak Spanish. So I wanted to be playful with that, but I also wanted to connect with the idea of an abuela poem. Sometimes you've got to write it and get it out of your system.

JD: And you got the Coke-bottle glasses and the pink rollers in one line!

JS: That's because it's right there, all in one photograph, literally.

JD: In this feature, you've shared such a range of poetry, and I admire how different each of the poems is in terms of shape and structure.

For example, in “Bait,” I love how your line moves in and out from the left margin. In “The Lot as Boxing Ring,” I was paying attention to how you proceed from one stanza to the next, following both the sense of the line and the sense of the sentence, and I was intrigued by how in “After the Game” the rhetorical shift in the poem was mirrored in the actual indentation in the middle of the poem. And I love the tercets in “Showering.” What does shape—the shape of the line, the shape of the stanzas—do for you as a writer?

JS: Lately I am trying to get out of certain forms that I’ve been trying to write in. I love quatrains and tercets and couplets and those are my go-to forms when I’m writing. With the poem “Bait,” for example, I was interested in having the lines have this movement that mirrored the ocean or even a fish that’s caught. It was something that I was keenly aware of and something I hadn’t explored before. In other poems like “The Lot as Boxing Ring,” it’s just a simple narrative-based poem in which I tried to let the sentences guide me. And then for “After the Game,” there was an abruptness that inspired that poem and so I wanted to have that somehow come across in the form and language of the poem.

JD: Years ago, I heard Mark Doty talk about tercets in a craft workshop at the Dodge Poetry Festival. He said that tercets provide poems with a figure of incompleteness. The three lines of a tercet have an asymmetry, a lack of balance that needs resolution, perhaps in the next line, perhaps in the next stanza. There’s a tension inherent in the number itself. Is that what guides you to the tercet in “Showering,” for example?

JS: That’s a great way to think about tercets. I don’t know if it’s true. What I like about tercets is that for me, I get a feeling of the opposite—more completeness, more closure, even than in a quatrain. There’s still a symmetry to it. Just having the three there for me is a tool that I can build upon and end upon, knowing that it can end at this third line and it’ll be fine. With tercets, quatrains, and couplets, there’s a safety to them for me, as opposed to poems that are more free verse. It gives it this quality of closure that other poems I write don’t have.

JD: You tap into so many kinds of forms and constraints in your work, even when the poem appears in what seems to be free verse. In the case of “Poem for the Grandmother,” you draw from the particular