

THE SRPR INTERVIEW: RUBEN QUESADA

Joanne Diaz: Thank you so much for being our Featured Illinois Poet in this issue of *SRPR*.

In preparation for this interview, I was reading your older work from *The Next Extinct Mammal*, and of course the newer poems that you've been publishing over the past few years in various magazines. As I did, I kept returning to what D.A. Powell and Juan Felipe Herrera have said about your work. D.A. Powell writes that your work carries readers toward "'that seam in space' where dreams and experience intersect" and Juan Felipe Herrera says that you write "the city, the flesh and the cosmos—if they can be aligned in that manner with a knife, that is, with impeccable clarity and edge." That word—cosmos—was important for me, because it's what I love most about your work. In many of your poems, you frequently return to the boundary between earth and the cosmos—galactic bodies, planets, stars. In "Kingdom Come," this is evident even in first few lines:

At first glance, you may imagine comets,
stardust raining down in streams of colored
beams—a spectrum—in every color that
exists.

"Kingdom Come" is an ekphrastic poem, but even when you're dealing with ekphrasis, it's often in this way that alludes not only to a physical art object, but also to what is beyond us. It also happens in "To a Poet on the Planet," "This is the Way the World Ends," "Leaving for College," and many other poems. Once I started noticing it, I couldn't stop. It seems as if in so many of your poems, you're investigating that moment where something on earth elevates to something beyond it, or vice versa. It's almost like there's no boundary there. I wonder if you could talk about that. Where does that come from?

Ruben Quesada: When I was growing up, I was interested in the idea of time travel. I remember being eight years old and going to the library and finding books on Einstein and the theory of relativity and being interested in the way light traveled and light worked. For a long time during my early adolescence and into high school, I

became very interested in physics and chemistry. I actually thought of majoring in physics at one point. I love science, but I didn't pursue it after high school, because I thought if I wanted to pursue it further, I could explore it in my own writing.

I was recently talking with the poet Rosebud Ben-Oni, and we were discussing the possibility and potential of other intelligent beings on other planets in the universe, and how the poems we are writing are subconsciously influenced by our desire for there to be life elsewhere. I know that sounds strange, but I think it's true.

JD: If it's true that we're all made of stardust anyway, it's not that much of a stretch.

RQ: That's true. I'm very aware of my use of celestial bodies and my interest in space and how I find ways to incorporate that into my work. I remember very specifically in 1986 being in my friends' backyard and seeing Halley's Comet—I was ten years old. I still remember what it looked like—a lit match streaming across the sky. It was amazing. I know that there's more there, but there's something about not being able to see everything about the comet first-hand. I imagine what it might be like and how these sublime bodies in the universe might interact with me in my imagination and how I can bring them down to Earth so that they're with me. How can I engage with them in a way that I can live with them, if only in my poems?

JD: It doesn't surprise me that you had an interest in math and physics when you were younger, and to this day. Whenever I ask mathematicians and physicists about their research, their answers are always so poetic. I met a mathematician at a wedding a few weeks ago. I asked him what he works on, and he said, "The closeness of numbers." That sounds so romantic! The same is true with physics—whether it be physicists who work on light or lasers or the planets—they are always talking about things that they will never see. What a radical act of the imagination. To think that you would draw from that magic in your work makes a lot of sense.

So many of the poems, in both *The Next Extinct Mammal* and in your newer work, draw their inspiration from art objects. I've started making lists of some of my favorites. I love the way you bring to life that headpiece in "Kingdom Come" and imagine a whole life and set

of motives for a young king; and in “Resurrection,” a poem about a coronation stone. That interest in kingship is so intriguing. And of course you have a lot of poems inspired by photography in the first book. How do these ekphrastic poems evolve?

RQ: The Art Institute of Chicago specifically asked me to write poems about the artwork in the Galleries of African Art and Indian Art of the Americas. About a month and a half ago, one of the museum educators gave me a tour of the museum, and I had so many questions for her. The Galleries of African Art and Indian Art of the Americas is on the first floor of the museum, but it’s far off, in the southern wing. So when you come in, you have to go through many other collections, and to be honest, I don’t think I had discovered that wing until I had been coming to the Art Institute for a couple of years. I didn’t think there was anything beyond the main concourse. I asked why this artwork wasn’t more present—why isn’t the art that reflects Chicago’s population more prominently displayed? And the answer that I got was that the African and Indian Art of the Americas hasn’t been the subject of academic research until very recently; as a result, not much value has been placed upon the art and the artefacts. So it’s slowly growing and this poetry series that they’ve started in conjunction with the support of the Poetry Foundation is meant to draw more attention to this work.

On that tour, there was a figure of a king sitting on a stool and his feet were lifted off of the ground, and behind him was a very tall female figure. I asked the museum worker about that particular work of art. Behind that seated figure was a headdress with these long beads, and that’s the headdress I write about in “Kingdom Come.” The headdress, and the figure sitting on a stool, are both from the Idoya tribe. Apparently the child king’s feet lifting from the floor are meant to suggest that he is an otherworldly figure. He is imbued with these divine powers where his feet do not touch the earth; in fact, he is beyond the earth. And so this child king’s relationship with the earth and heaven—that’s how this particular poem came about.

JD: Can you talk about “Resurrection,” and the nature of your engagement with ekphrasis in that poem? You’ve talked about how you were drawn to these pieces in their gallery spaces. But how would you describe your encounter with these pieces? Do you see these as

arguments? Provocations? Descriptions? How would you say that you're using the visual art to create these poems?

RQ: In hearing your question, what comes to mind is another poem called "Fortune Teller." I wrote that poem about a painting at one of the museums I visited in San Francisco a couple of years ago. When I see a work of art that I'm especially interested in, I want to find ways that I can get my reader to engage with the work of art in a more imaginative and informed way. I want to be able to humanize the work of art in some way. I think of the coronation stone in "Resurrection"—it's significant in time itself, but there's more to it: how might a Western audience be able to create a relationship with this Aztec object? The stone is covered with Nahuatl icons. I tried to find contemporary ways, in this poem, to translate something that is ancient. To a contemporary observer, these Nahuatl symbols may look like emojis. If that's how someone today might understand about how this language functioned, then so be it. At least it acquires some value in that way.

JD: Why does "Resurrection" look like this? A single column of text—how did you arrive at this arrangement on the page?

RQ: I was interested in a concrete form that resembled the work of art itself. The coronation stone is somewhat rectangular in nature, and it's two-sided, which obviously I couldn't replicate on the page. Still, I wanted to create that resemblance.

JD: It reminds me of the cards on museum walls that attempt to evoke something about the art.

RQ: That poem also came to me in syllabics. 10–12 syllables, every line.

JD: I was also intrigued "This is the Way the World Ends," the title of which signals its debt to T. S. Eliot's great poem "The Hollow Men." In his poem, Eliot is responding to the traumas of World War I. Your poem, like Eliot's, has cosmic concerns and an eerily prophetic voice. Where did this poem originate?

RQ: Well, T. S. Eliot is probably one of my favorite Modernist poets. I'm especially interested in his *Four Quartets*, which was also his response to the War. I remember reading "The Hollow Men" when I was in high school, and those lines always stayed with me. Of all of Eliot's poems, this line is the one that haunts me the most.

I became very ill this summer and I was quite feverish for some time, to the point where I thought I was going to die. So I started to imagine what it would be like to die of fever, or heat, like from a nuclear weapon. And so I just imagined this idea of an apocalyptic moment where you and others might be aware that the end is coming. I see it in my mind. I think about a lot of different visual interpretations of these apocalyptic nightmares. Do you remember the film *Red Dawn*? I'm afraid of dying, but the idea of dying from a nuclear blast, or a slow death as a result of fire was something I was thinking about here—the idea of dying in the middle of the night and not knowing that death is coming.

Recently I read a chapbook called *1989: The Number*. It was cowritten by Nate Marshall and Kevin Coval, both Chicagoans. The chapbook has an audiotrack. For each poem in the collection, there's a song on the audiotrack that was released in 1989. The songs are gangsta rap, hip hop, R&B, and I began to listen very closely to the very brief excerpts at the ends of the poems. All of the poems are written and sung by African American artists and the lyrics are about oppression and this public image of what an African American might have been like at the time. These artists were responding to the world at that moment, to a particular idea of cultural suppression.

JD: It's fascinating to hear the origins of the poem, which seem so deeply personal, and yet when I read the poem I would never have presumed that. It feels so engaged with history. And I think I feel that way because of that second sentence which is probably my favorite: "This is how the story will be told." It's already happened, which means that the speaker of the poem is not capable of telling it, but someone in the future will. There's something so chilling about the possibility that the poetic speaker cannot speak the lines. It's beyond words now, but someday someone will be able to create a narrative about it.

RQ: If this poem were read at some point in the future, at least this moment has been recorded. That line also resonates with me: "This is how the story will be told" as in "how will I be remembered?" When I was sick this summer, there was a moment that I was so feverish that my neighbor had to call an ambulance so I could go to the hospital. And that was the second time I had to go to the ER for this one ill-

ness. My fever wouldn't break; the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. I thought I was going to die of this fever that would never go away. It was awful. So, this poem was something that had been sitting with me all this time, and I thought: I need to write something about what it feels like to face death. I thought, maybe I'm going to die from this fever, and if I do, how will I convey this sense of approaching death in this way, of feeling like my insides are boiling.

JD: This metamorphosis of the body and the mental state you're describing—this idea that the body's distress directly affects the mind—appears in several of your poems. "Belladonna" and "Woman in Black" are clearly interested in transformed mental states. I wondered if you could talk about those poems. Do you see these as fairy tales? Allegories? Metaphors?

RQ: "Belladonna" is a poem that I've been sitting on for a few years, actually. I wrote this poem as part of a project I worked on for Tupelo Press, where I had to write a poem every day for a month. At the time, I thought, what's the easiest way for me to produce a poem every day? So I turned toward narrative. "Belladonna" is part of a series of poems about a place in South Carolina. There's an oak—it's called the Angel Oak, and apparently it's haunted—

I imagine what this oak would be like in a fictionalized place, with different creatures living in it, with different people who inhabit the place somehow. So there's this woman who is approaching the oak. Something catches her eye, and the natural world comes and attacks her and drags her off. An eagle comes down and grabs her and leaves a slipper behind, which recalls Cinderella. In the poem that follows this one, she's stuck in a nest at the top of the oak tree, and my series of poems follows this woman and how she escapes from the nest. So I was just having a lot of fun with that imagined narrative in this poem.

JD: Initially you were accepted to NYU for their dramatic writing program. Would you say that drama and dramatic writing are still part of your sensibility as a poet?

RQ: Absolutely. I believe that all genres of creative writing are forms of storytelling. "Belladonna" reminds me of Anne Sexton's *Transformations*. We like to find ourselves in stories. It's what draws us to film, to novels, to other forms of art.

JD: You've already talked about some of your influences, but what else were you listening to and reading as you wrote these poems?

RQ: Let me talk about "Woman in Black" to provide you with a couple of examples. A few years ago, the Art Institute had a special exhibit on Victorian-inspired artwork and it featured this painting by Édouard Manet of a woman wearing a black dress. I thought about the figure as a character and how that character may have entered the narrative of my life. I imagined waking up to her in the middle of the night. Who is this woman? If she were to come to life in some way, what would she do? There was something haunting about the contrast of her very fair skin and very dark dress. If she were to appear to me in the middle of the night, there would be something wicked about seeing her in the dark. This moment at which she appears would only happen in a state of half sleep, or in an altered state of some kind.

Those last few italicized lines of the poem recall these lines from Suede, one of my favorite bands. Suede has a long history—in the mid- to late 80s, the band members had relationships with Johnny Marr of the Smiths, Damon Albarn from the band Blur, and Justine Frischmann from a band called Elastica. The sound of their second album is quite dark. It's like industrial electronic music—they use a lot of interesting sounds that sound like whales, horns, and something that recalled to mind a very surreal moment, and these lines helped me visualize how I would encounter this woman in a black dress.

JD: We talked about ekphrasis as being instructive, as an opportunity to cast light on something that's been obscured or underappreciated. In this poem, it feels like ekphrasis is a form of activation, that it gets a static object moving.

RQ: For a long time I've believed that poetry is a curation of time, of history. I feel that same way about paintings. There's more than just a moment in a still image.

JD: What are you working on now, and when can we anticipate a new book of poems?

RQ: A couple of years ago, I very deliberately set out to write a collection of ekphrastic poems. Recently, though, I've started thinking about how necessary it was for me to write ekphrastic poetry. What's the value in that? At the time I started becoming more engaged in

supporting Latino writers and trying to find ways to create a community infrastructure with more Latino writers. I spent the last two years visiting museums around the country and most of the work that I found had very little Latino representation. I began to think about different ways to write ekphrasis. I was inspired by my experience with the Art Institute of Chicago. Because they needed more foot traffic and exposure for their collection of art from Africa and the Americas, they asked me to write those poems. I think it's important to write about Latino culture in order to elevate its status in the world. So I'm reevaluating that ekphrasis project with that in mind.

A lot of the poems I've been writing have been more personal, too—about the body, about relationships—and I've been trying to find ways to create a balance between what seem like two different manuscripts: a collection of more personal work, and a more seemingly objective collection about ekphrasis.

In the meantime, I'm wrapping up an anthology of essays by Latino poets on Latino poetry that I edited. I'm working on the introduction now and the book is due to come out this year from the University of New Mexico Press. I'm very excited about it. And I'm also trying to work on a collection of videos—translations of poems into video forms. Some people might call them cine-poems. I help curate and edit some online journals, so that's another thing I'm working on.

Up until last year, I had a tenure-track position at Eastern Illinois University, and I left that position to focus more on my writing and editing. I feel like leaving academia was incredibly risky. It's been something I wanted to do for so long—I was being trained to teach, to secure a tenure-track job. I found that teaching was exciting and satisfying, but along with that came a lot of administrative work, and I just didn't have a lot of time to do the writing and editing that I wanted to do. Now I have all this time, and the only commitments I have are to myself.

JD: Of course, your heart and memory and sensibility have been informed by living in a variety of places—California and Texas in particular—but right now you're an Illinois poet. How has the experience of living in Illinois worked on you as an artist?

RQ: A lot of the reviewers of my first book talk about how I'm a poet of place. I'm very proud of having been born and raised in Los Angeles

and having lived in California and Texas. But now that I'm here in Chicago—it's funny. My mother just arrived here for a visit, and we were driving through downtown. I was pointing out all the different skyscrapers and their significance, and she said to me, "You really love it here, don't you?" and I do. I love it. When I was growing up in Los Angeles, it didn't feel like a bustling metropolis to me. I always wanted to live in the heart of a city. As an adult, I lived in Hollywood for a brief period of time, and it felt like there was an energy on the street. I've visited New York City many times and I feel that energy, but it's quite overwhelming for me in New York. Here in Chicago, I feel like I get the bustling downtown and skyscrapers and lots of great culture, and I also get a little bit of the sprawl and neighborhood of Los Angeles. It's a confluence of LA and New York, and it just makes me so happy to be here. The space itself makes me incredibly happy.

When I first moved here, I was so eager to find community among the poets and writers. This is the home of Gwendolyn Brooks and *Poetry* magazine, and there's such a rich literary history here. So when I moved here, I had already become familiar with a few writers here. There was a long series—the Dollhouse reading series—that helped me meet new writers. Writers here are very accessible! Even now when I go to events at the Poetry Foundation, it feels like there's a great sense of being welcomed, like they want me here. And I want to be here.

JD: Thank you so much for welcoming us in to your work, Ruben. It is a pleasure to talk with you.