

## THE SRPR INTERVIEW: IRA SUKRUNGRUANG

**Joanne Diaz:** Thank you for sharing your work in this issue of *SRPR* and for taking the time to talk with me. In these new poems, I admire how you keep returning to memory and dreams—how they expose the landscapes of mind and thought, how they deceive us. I'm drawn to these lines from "Holding Shallow Breaths in the Heart Cage": "Hurt is like this: a pointed shard in the ribs, / memory unshakeable." I also can't stop thinking about these beautiful lines from "And then," a poem that keeps returning to memory and its losses: "And then memory of my lips // that night, and hers, but a name lost / in some sidewalk crack." This preoccupation with the world of dreams is most prominent in "Dream Journal: A Sestina," when your innovations with that poetic form draw attention to the unruliness of the speaker's dream world.

I marvel at your ability to chart these nuances. How do dreams function as a source of inspiration for you?

**Ira Sukrungruang:** My good friend and mentor, Stephen Kuusisto, said to me once, "Dreams are about being rescued." This simple statement has been playing in my mind for a while now. I've been turning it over and over. It makes me think, in my dreams, am I the rescuer? Or rather, what do I need rescuing from?

Poetry exists in this dream state—that fuzzy line between the conscious and subconscious. Even the look of a poem connotes a dream—meaning coming from arrangement and sound. How a poem arrives to me is very much like a dream, a strange and haunting image floating in my brain, and it is without story but not without sentiment. In fact, it is full of sentiment. And it is sentiment I dig at. The arrival of it, the story of it, the language of it. To me this is like the three-pronged purpose of poems.

Sometimes the poem becomes nonsensical, like a dream, like the poetry of Russell Edson, these little nuggets of what-the-hell. But in a good way, an enchanting way. Or the language of a poem creates the sensation of a dream, the haziness of it, that mystical fog that hovers

and permeates and hugs at our psyche, the layering of sensorial detail that doesn't lead to a place or a world but rather the mind of the poet. I love being given access to the poet's mind, love that dream world where nothing is what it seems. It's almost like I'm talking about magic. Dreams are a bit magical, aren't they? The way they transport. The way they give way to another life or lives. Sometimes, I think the dream world is truer than the walking and talking world.

I tell my students, we are personae. We show what we want to show. We share what we want to share. We guard our secrets. We shield our desires. Meanwhile our internal lives are living a multiplicity of selves, dreaming multiple dreams. And these dreams give truer access to the self than what we do in the world. The poet uncorks this interiority, this dream life we live, and in it a fountain of wants. When I read Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Variations" I can't help but be taken by this dream of a world that accepts blackness. This world that embraces the speaker of the poem. "While night comes on gently, / Dark like me— / That is my dream!" He holds on to this dream—like we all do to a dream we don't want to forget—even in the closing lines of the poem. "Night coming tenderly / Black like me."

The book that opened a lot of doors for me, the one that brought the poet back (I had thought poetry left me; but as it turned out, I left poetry) was Richard Hugo's *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. His letters are some of the most vulnerable poems I've ever read. They situate the reader in the textural world, in a past of regret and depression and sadness. They do what good letters do: they connect. They do what good poems do: they connect. Juxtaposed to these poems are Hugo's dreams, which are without logic, but yet they provide a space for stunning lyric leaps. This is the beauty of dreams.

Some dreams leave lingering images, fragmented images, and if I wake with energy I quickly grab something to record the fading remnants of the image. Or I go to a dream dictionary and see what it has to offer. I remember reading this wonderful poem by Nick Carbó, "Ang Tunay na Lalaki Writes His Dream Dictionary," where the speaker, the Filipino version of the Marlboro man, pens his dreams. It is at once hilarious, like dreaming of baby corn means yearning for the comfort of small people, but also a social criticism on Asian masculinity and /

or lack thereof. These dream definitions give over to commentary without the commentary. The poet presents the dream, and the dream shoulders the work.

**JD:** You say that you thought poetry left you. What do you mean by that?

**IS:** I went through a time when I was experiencing major doubt. Every writer does, but I truly thought I was a fraud. Especially in poetry. I didn't think I was a poet. Poetry, for a long time, was a secret I shared with no one. There is something wonderful when your art is yours and yours alone. There is something wonderful about secrets too. I learned poetry on my own, reading two or three books a day, scribbling down verse in a notebook. I read lots of prosody. I never stepped foot in a poetry workshop. I've sat through a multitude of fiction and creative nonfiction workshops, but never a poetry one. I didn't want anyone to call me out. I didn't want anyone to take my joy away. But no one ever did. It was me who did it. Me who never thought I was good enough. Even when my first book of poems won a prize. Even when it was published. Maybe because it was published. So I stopped writing poems. I thought I'd never write a poem again. But then I read Hugo's book and I began writing letter poems—some were good, some were awful—but it didn't matter because I was writing again. Obsessed again. When I write poetry, it is a mad rush. I write three or four poems a day, up to twenty poems a week, for three weeks. And maybe out of that craziness six poems are OK, workable. So when I came back, I came back with a new energy. I came back as a student still wanting to learn more, do more, try more things. In the end it is never the art that leaves the artist. It's always the artists that leaves the art. I left. I came back.

**JD:** In your work as a memoirist, you have described your spiritual journey as a Buddhist, and that was definitely on my mind as I read these new poems. I was especially drawn to your spiritual inquiry in "The Storm in Alabama," which fuses Buddhism with a Judeo-Christian narrative. The "drowning / boy bouncing like a buoy" seems to be tossed not just by winds and rain, but by a spiritual crisis. How does spirituality inform your work, and has it changed over time?

**IS:** When I first started writing, I tried to separate my religion from the world I found myself in—the world of an immigrant son in a

Buddhist family in a foreign home. My poems concentrated on Buddhism in the family, Buddhism in the Asian cultural context via lore and original Theravadian concepts. Those poems found a Buddhist speaker wrestling with the religion itself, wrestling with how it shaped and conflicted with the external and internal life. A lot of those older poems in my first book, *In Thailand It is Night*, found Buddha or Buddhism as the focal point.

As of late, in my newer poems, I found that my understanding of religion was not solely shaped by endless questions of Buddhism, though I still have a lot of questions and doubts. These questions and doubts will be the fuel for my writing for years to come. My poems have shifted because what I want from my poems has shifted. Though I often write about dislocation, I hadn't written about being Buddhist in a Christian nation in poetry. Retrospectively, I find it odd that I haven't. Buddhism, for so long, has been in the realm of family rather than spirituality. But now I see my spirituality has been shaped somewhat by my sense of being "other" and my curiosity of what my life wasn't. Kids wore crosses. I wore Buddha. I read the Bible. I studied it in college. I took in story. I took in biblical language. My spirituality arises not solely from who I am but also from the sense of who I am not. This conflict becomes not a separation but a joining.

There is a tree in my mother's yard in Chiang Mai, Thailand. I don't know the name of the tree, only that it's been there for years and blooms these fragrant white flowers shaped like the fade of a firework. My mother grafted the limb of a Brugmansia, or angel's trumpet plant, onto this tree. And for months these two plants were at odds—like two people tangled in each other but refusing to hug. Then each created its own beautiful bloom. But in the end they became one tree. In a way, it illustrates the look of my spirituality.

Last year, I was part of a poetry and scripture reading group at the school I teach at. It was comprised of creative writers and those in theology. Each week we brought a poem and a religious text. The conversations that came from that group were really illuminating. We read poems by Bob Hicok, Maggie Dietz, James Wright. Coupled with these poems were stories from the Bible, Quran, Buddha's doctrine. I started to see the connection in language—that thin line between fable,

myth, and poetry. We talked about the heightened state of a poem and how that heightened state lends itself to the spirit, or sometimes, the broken spirit.

**JD:** Can you talk about your attention to the earth, to waste, to the allusions of ecological crisis that bubbles up in these poems? I notice the concern in "Second Moon," which begins with an incredibly powerful image of the sheer quantity of our waste, and again in "The Storm in Alabama," where "water rises / and the bay swallows the detritus of earth."

**IS:** First: I think my favorite word is "detritus" and my second favorite word is "amalgam," though I don't think I've used either in a poem before. Detritus is a visual word. When I hear it, I see it. It's a word that contains so much in sound.

Second: We are in the Anthropocene, the first geological age where human activity (interruption) has had a profound effect on our planet. I'm not an environmentalist by any stretch of the word. I do what I can. I recycle. I conserve. But I drive a car. A lot. I live in Florida where my air conditioning is on most of the year. The idea of pristine nature no longer exists. That world is gone. Has been gone a good while now. Was gone as soon as humans came into being.

As a poet, I need to keep both eyes open. A tree is a tree but with a grocery store bag in its limbs. A new leaf, perhaps? What comes from the oily swirl in rivers? There is a strange beauty in that, too, isn't it?

There is an essay by Bill Roorbach I love teaching. It's called "Scioto Blues," and the last movement talks of the flood that comes to this river in Columbus, Ohio. Roorbach takes his wife and dogs to the flood to observe the rage of the water and the litter that is tossed around in the water. The last sentence is long and lyrical with repetitions of phrases and images, overlapping one another, repelling off each other—much like the movement of water itself. It's beautiful. The sentence is poetry. But why end with a beautiful sentence to describe litter in a river? It's because this is the new nature. This is the natural world we live in.

Living in Florida, I see this every day, this clash of the natural world and human habitation. An alligator finds its way to a pool. Cranes court along the side of an interstate. Ospreys nest on electric poles.

Florida is wild. I believe if everyone in the state of Florida left the state for one month, the green world would take it back. At the same time, Florida contains the firm hand of human habitation. It is a clash of two worlds. These worlds are shaping themselves into one language that is finding itself in my work. Just now, a red-shouldered hawk flew and rested on the ledge outside my very concrete office. This is the nature I—we—live in.

**JD:** I love the forms and modes that I see in these new poems, especially in “Dream Journal: A Sestina” and “Ode to the Jasmine that Never Blooms.” Can you say a bit about how forms and other kinds of constraints inform your work?

**IS:** Ted Kooser said that a poem creates its own form. I love that idea. I also love what Jane Hirshfield says: poems are a “language awake to its own connections....” When I started writing poetry—this secret I shared with no one—I only wrote free verse. They were like my essays or short stories with line breaks. And because of that they weren’t really poems. I knew they weren’t poems. I felt it. I wasn’t doing what Hirshfield observes of the poem. I wasn’t “awake” to the poem’s language. I wasn’t creating language. A poem, to me, is a creation of language itself. I started to add constraints to my work, though “constraints” isn’t quite the right word. When I think of constraints, I think of restriction, and these new challenges I posed on myself were not restrictive, but rather a form of liberation. This is the beauty of working in form: you are never far ahead of yourself. Such a Buddhist notion! What I mean is the poet deals with the line as a line, the word as the word. In form you are allowing the poem to find its own identity, shaped by the subconscious. Your job as a poet is not your allegiance to the content of the poem, but rather to rules of the form. What often arises is something wholly unexpected, something born without expectation, something new.

**JD:** Absolutely. And each form carries its own rules, and the rules then create something that couldn’t have existed otherwise. Why did you choose the sestina form for “Dream Journal”? What are the specific formal properties that allowed this poem to thrive in this form?

**IS:** I have a love affair with the sestina. It’s my favorite form. It forces me to think beyond a page. The hardest thing about a sestina is how

to sustain it. You have to use the same six words. How does a poet do this while still maintaining urgency and originality and music? You can do it by breaking the form, as in Terrance Hayes's "Liner Notes for an Imaginary Playlist," where each stanza is a new song and artists. I know some poets who elongate the line as the poem progresses so there is greater space between the repetition of words, which makes it less obtrusive to the ear. I've also read sestinas where the poems narrow and widen like a breath—look at Nicole Sealy's sestina "Clue." But I wanted to see if I can maintain the poem's shape. I don't know why I wanted equity in the lines, but it was a constraint I put on myself. And the words—some of the words were images in actual dreams, like "hands," or "cracks" in the earth, or the shouldering of a "world."

**JD:** Elsewhere, you've described your influences—especially Stephen Kuusisto and Raymond Carver—on all of your modes of expression. What is influencing these new poems? What are you reading these days?

**IS:** Too many things are influencing my work right now. On a sentimental reason, my son. Who is in everything I write, even if he isn't mentioned. As soon as he was born, my perception of art shifted. My perception of most things in life changed. With this new being in the world my focus became about the world away from the self. An examination of the world he is born into. Because of this I've been reading Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Bao Phi's *Thousand Star Hotel*. Both Rankine and Bao Phi are wrestling with injustice, the uglinesses of this world, the interrogation of "other," the (dis)location of poet, and the beauty that arises in the dreams of a better world. When I read these poets, I can't help but think of art in moments of social upheaval. I can't help but think about the role of the poet in times of change. In every social movement at the center is the artist. I'm not a social critic. I'm more of an observer. My mother and father named me Ira, which means watcher. My job is to watch and let the image carry my criticism rather than possessing a speaker's charged rhetoric. Everything is so charged nowadays that it seems to soften the criticism. It falls on deaf ears. Nothing surprises. This to me is where poetry can make an impact. Poetry is a state of surprise. A poem—a good poems—awakens.

On a less serious note, I'm trying to locate my inner weird. I've been reading a lot of strange fiction and poetry. Poems that presume persona. Poems that activate the imaginations in unique ways, strange ways. This is why I'm always revisiting Russell Edson and James Tate. Sometimes I read their work and go, "What the hell?" In a good way. Sometimes I read their work and think we are too serious about our lives. Loosen the reins. Allow language to be euphoric and strange. The poet is weird. We are a weird specimen of people. I like to keep my company like that.

**JD:** I first encountered your work when we read together at the Writer's Center in Washington, D.C. At that reading, you read some terrific excerpts from *Talk Thai: The Adventures of Buddhist Boy*. That memoir includes an epigraph by Mus Soseki which is so compelling to me:

Sometimes, while wandering,  
when I cannot find which road  
leads back the way I came,  
the road goes anywhere,  
and anywhere at all is home.

As you know, the SRPR Illinois Poet feature is meant to showcase the work of a poet with an Illinois connection. When you think about your connection—your birth in Chicago, your upbringing in Oak Lawn, your graduate work at Southern Illinois University Carbondale—how does your connection to Illinois inform your work? How, if at all, does it inform your sense of home?

**IS:** I was talking to a student the other day about revisiting old neighborhoods. He was from India and said he went back recently and walked his childhood haunts. He knew where everything was after years away. He not only knew, he felt it in his body, this automatic response to place. In a similar conversation, my friend and wonderful writer BK Loren talked about the people who never leave. Most of my friends from the old Chicago neighborhood haven't left. For a long time I thought this was sad. To be stuck. To not know the big world. It dawned on me that this was the privileged part of me that thought this—the one able to move about, to experience, to afford movement. The truth is: I didn't want to leave Chicago. I only left because my mother made me. Because she sensed if I stayed I would be swal-



lowed. She wanted me as far away from Chicago as possible, without leaving the state. So I found Carbondale, Illinois, which was such an alien landscape, so different from the urban life I was accustomed to.

To BK, there is a beauty in knowing one place so well. You know the secrets. You know the stories. You have a love for the land that is beyond blood and bone. I am but a passerby in the landscape of their lives.

But I started thinking about my old neighborhood. In my mind, I walked those streets again. I knew where things were. I grew up with South Chicago in my veins. Those streets were my streets. I felt they were mine, even if my family said I hailed from a land 8,000 miles away. I still knew them like how I still remember my childhood phone number. When I recite that number, I'm singing a song from the past. What is a song but a type of poem? My metaphors, my language lexicon, are born from all the landscapes I've known. At the center is that first world—that Chicago in the 70s and 80s and 90s. In fact, every poem about place gets sorted through that lens, and it is somewhat dirty and rough and gray and yet containing all the color of life. I miss Chicago. I miss Carbondale. I miss Illinois. I've visited briefly, a quick weekend. It's hard to stay. It's hard to recapture that love. Most of the time, Illinois comes back in a dream.