

## THE SRPR INTERVIEW: ANGELA NARCISO TORRES

**Joanne Diaz:** Thank you for these new poems and for this interview. You and I first met years ago when you had just moved to the Midwest. We were part of a small writing group that met every other Sunday. In recent years, life has pulled us in various directions, but I still remember those Sunday afternoons with real fondness and gratitude for all that I learned.

**Angela Narciso Torres:** We moved from the San Francisco Bay Area to Chicago in 2008 and I remember meeting you in the spring of 2009. I remember how grounding it was for me both as a transplant and as a fresh MFA graduate to have our writing group as a touchstone to return to every other week, and later, as a springboard to the larger Chicago writing community. Taking the downtown train for our Sunday meetings was a highlight for me in those early years, not in the least for the friendships forged and the valuable poetry and life lessons learned, but also because I felt part of the fabric and creative energy of this city I've grown to love as one of my poetry homes.

**JD:** In all of your work, I admire your attention to the past and what's lost in the tunnels of memory. In *Blood Orange*, your first collection of poems, the speaker's mother appears at the height of her intellectual powers—as a physician preoccupied with healing others. In these new poems, however, she is afflicted with memory loss that is so profound that she “sleeps away the daylight” (“What Happens Is Neither the End”) and no longer recognizes her own husband (“Pearl Diving”).

Can you say a bit about your exploration of memory loss in these poems—especially “Pearl Diving,” which beautifully juxtaposes this loss against the danger of diving for pearls?

**ANT:** We turn to poetry for various reasons. For me, writing poetry has always been, among other things, a stay against oblivion. In *Blood Orange*, many of my poems cast an eye toward that lost country of childhood to which one can never return. But in more recent work, and since my mother's Alzheimer's diagnosis, I've become obsessed with

chronicling her struggle with memory loss and also with trying to capture in writing whatever stories still remain in her long-term memory.

My mother was an animated, engaging storyteller and often the life of the party. Hers was the table you wanted to be seated at. Every family has a historian, a keeper and teller of family narratives—ours was my mother. So when her memory slowly faded, and with it, her language, it felt natural to record what I could—even if it meant sometimes having to prompt her with key words or phrases. Over time, these prompts yielded less and less, and I had to rely on my own memory of her stories to fill in the gaps. Indeed, it was like diving for pearls—both of us aimlessly stumbling around in the dark and murky waters of her memory. The danger of course was finding that some of those pearls were gone forever, irretrievable.

Fortunately, there's poetry. Poetry is transformative—its power, metamorphic. It fills gaps. Out of the meaninglessness of life-threatening illness, loss, and death, we create new sense, new narrative truths. Poetry makes meaning out of the inexplicable, unearthing and recreating what would not normally be accessible through other forms of discourse or knowing.

**JD:** Rainer Maria Rilke once said that if we turn our attention to childhood, we can “raise the submerged sensations of that ample past” and write about it for much of our adult lives—a fact that you have acknowledged many times in your work. For example, in “Translating the Dead,” you shuttle beautifully from the present to the past in order to resurrect the dead, at least within the world of the poem. Can you say more about how this poem came to be?

**ANT:** I like that Rilke quote. Flannery O'Connor said that too, but a little differently: “Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days.” This also makes me think of Proust's madeleine and how it returned him to his childhood memories of Combray, giving rise to the seven-volume *In Search of Lost Time*, one of the greatest novels in literary history.

As I mentioned, I do return to the past in many of my poems. Things are revealed to you there, even though when you begin writing you don't yet know where it may lead.

Perhaps this is why the mind constantly insists on going back—to find out what we didn't know we knew. That to me is the most exciting thing about writing poems. It's always worth following the golden thread—that niggling feeling, the tingly “spidey” sense you get when you strike upon a spark for a poem. It may be an image glimpsed from a train, a flash of memory triggered by a scent, an old photograph, or a long-lost letter or journal entry you come across. You write your way into meaning, to that point where you can say to yourself, “I never knew.”

For years, I kept returning to that day I received a letter from my grandfather shortly after I heard he'd passed. Then, I was a graduate student in Boston, my first year living away from my home country. How magical and strange it was, to find a letter from my dead grandfather in my mailbox. How heart-wrenchingly sad yet at the same time how deeply consoling to know that despite my absence he'd not only been thinking of me a day or two before his final breath, but had also mustered the effort to dictate that letter. Those typewritten words brought him to life for a brief moment, and it was then that I knew the power of words. Furthermore, I realized how words not only embody life but have a life of their own.

When I started this poem, it brought me to another memory: how my grandfather always asked me, upon arriving home from school, “Are you here now?”—a question which sounds rather awkward in English, but which in Tagalog is colloquially acceptable: “Nariyan ka na?”—a rhetorical question of course, but I always answered it anyway: “Yes, Papa, I'm here.” This ritual exchange between us became the central trope of the poem and embodied for me all those decades of love that went unexpressed between us.

**JD:** I wonder if you could talk about how your poems take shape. “Pearl Diving” has a ghazal-like quality in which each numbered section feels like both a stand-alone poem and a part of a unified piece. “Disappearing Act” and “Friday Night” are wonderful prose poems that capture dramatic scenarios with a precision and intensity that I admire. “The Abscission Layer” incorporates found material into a poem that is both clinical in its definition and personal in its emotional intensity. Each of these structures feels entirely appropriate. How do you know when the shape is the right one?

**ANT:** Thank you. I do take form very seriously in my poems, even though, like most of my poem-making, finding the right shape is largely an intuitive process. I often start with pen and paper, writing in longhand in my journal. When I reach that point where I feel a poem is on the brink of becoming, I start transcribing the poem onto my laptop. Seeing the words on the screen often suggests to me what shape they will take as a poem. The ease of cutting and pasting on a word processor allows one to try various shapes, line lengths, and stanza lengths. It's an organic process, often requiring several tries before the right shape presents itself. I've always found it uncanny how just changing one's line or stanza length can really alter the pace and emotional impact of a poem. I suspect this is because poems are just as much about the lines as they are about the white space—the breath—between the lines and words. A poetry teacher once told a friend who believed she had to move to another city in order to write better: "You don't have to change your life. Just change your line length."

**JD:** I love the materials to which you allude in "Sea Psalm": kelp, mollusks, plankton-rich waves, nacre, abalone. Your poem is so alive with the possibility of radical, metaphor-driven transformation—such a departure from the psalm that inspires it. Can you say more about the conversation between the psalm from the Hebrew Bible and your own?

**ANT:** Having grown up Catholic and educated in Catholic schools all my life, I've always loved the music and poetic language of the psalms. I'd consider them the first poems I ever loved, probably from hearing them constantly in Sunday Mass, where even as a child, the responsorial psalm, whether sung or recited, was always my favorite part. The sheer beauty of the psalmist's words, and perhaps more importantly, the repetition of the response, like much of prayer, had an incantatory power that took hold of me like a magic spell. Growing up, I turned to the psalms at various points in my life, and it seemed I could always find one to match any given emotional state—confusion, despair, jubilation, anxiety, gratitude. I suppose, in the end, it was the humanity, the frailty, and perhaps the brokenness of the speaker, and yet the childlike, unabashed trust in the very act of crying or singing out from those depths, that allowed me to relate to them so deeply. Isn't that what we do in poetry, too?

Psalm 86, on which “Sea Psalm” is based, has always been one of my favorites. For a long time I kept a copy of it in my car’s glove compartment like a talisman. I wrote this after we had left Chicago and moved to Southern California, where I currently reside just a couple miles from the Pacific Ocean. I have always regarded the sea as the ultimate metaphor for life and death—how they are parts of a whole. The ocean, from which all life originates, and whose rhythms remind us of our watery first home, the womb; but in whose depths and rages there could also be death and destruction. Ultimately, for me, being near the ocean has always felt like a coming home, a calming, familiar, healing presence but also one that strikes a kind of awe and sublime terror of the unknown. I grew up in the Philippines, an archipelago of 7,000 islands, where one is never too far from the sea. So in this poem, it felt natural to use sea imagery to reinvent a psalm in which the speaker seeks healing, fortification, and a return to wholeness.

**JD:** I’ve always been drawn to your explorations of the complexities of migration and the gaps that evolve between geographical places. At first, those gaps seem like losses, and yet they seem to provide you with sources of inspiration. Your very word choices point to this richness—in these poems, you draw from English, Latin, Spanish, and Tagalog and allude to everything from oxtail stew to kundimans, the rosewood beads of a rosary, Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, and Lou Malnati’s Pizzeria. Can you say more about the ways in which your poems draw from the richness of these linguistic and cultural multitudes?

**ANT:** Having moved around so much since coming to the United States as a wide-eyed-twenty-three-year-old made me a “bag lady” of sorts—in the best possible sense. I love the idea that

A poem is a box, a *thing*, to put other things in.

For safekeeping. Okay. Or it’s a time capsule, or even a catapult, for poets with more public ambitions, overarching, or just arching enough. (Sorry, there it goes, getting bigger...) So again: as a box, the poem *contains*. As a box, it is carried place to place. And closes. And has secrets. And can weigh quite a bit.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Boruch, “Heavy Lifting,” in *The Little Death of Self: Nine Essays toward Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 54.

So for me, having made homes in many places since leaving my homeland, a poem is a convenient container to hold all the manner of curiosities, keepsakes, and talismans—physical or intangible. I’ve collected them from every place I’ve lived. We are creatures of attachment. Every encounter, every relationship, every place you’ve experienced, leaves its mark. Whether it’s a word, a foreign phrase you learned, a meal you savored, a piece of music you fell in love with—these have the power to hold the entirety of felt experience. They are the ephemera that make up a life—and indeed, all our lives, past and present. For we do contain multitudes. Seamus Heaney said at a reading once (another thing I keep in my back pocket): “In poems, small things can bear the weight of anything.”

**JD:** As you know, the Illinois Poet feature is meant to showcase the work of a poet with an Illinois connection. Years ago, you wrote beautifully about poetry and place for the “Genius of Place” feature on the SRPR blog.<sup>2</sup> I’d love to know how your various *genius loci* have informed your work over the years. How did your connection to Illinois infuse your poems? How, if at all, did it inform your sense of home? What does home mean for you right now? Where are you living? What does it look and feel like?

**ANT:** The poet James Galvin once said that you sometimes have to lose yourself in a place in order to find yourself. Because the Midwestern landscape was so diametrically different from the Philippine landscape where I grew up, and from the California landscape where we lived for fourteen years before moving to Chicago, it somehow brought those remembered landscapes into sharper focus by sheer contrast, putting them in a kind of relief, if you will. Additionally, the experience of living through the cycles of the seasons—from the stark, bleak whites of winter to the riotous exuberance of spring to the dramatic crimsons and golds of fall—seasons I had never experienced growing up in Manila or under the yearlong endlessly blue California sky, granted me access to a whole new lexicon of metaphor.

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<sup>2</sup> Angela Narciso Torres, “The Poem as Locus: Walking through Donald Justice’s ‘Memory of a Porch,’” SRPR (blog), December 21, 2014, <http://www.srpr.org/blog/the-poem-as-locus-walking-through-donald-justices-memory-of-a-porch/>.

Also, it was during our decade in Illinois that my mother succumbed to Alzheimer's, that strange, seemingly sunless land for which as a family we still had no vocabulary. It was also during this time that my boys went through their sometimes tumultuous middle and high school years and eventually prepared to leave home for college, another huge emotional mile-marker of parenthood for which there is no preparing, in a sense. So in the same way that I was learning to cope with, while simultaneously marveling at, the change of seasons, I was also stumbling through the wasteland of my mother's disease and the strange country in which I found myself as our grown children began to leave home for college. The poet Sharon Olds told me once that all you need to do if you're feeling stuck with a poem is to look out the window or take a walk in nature, look closely, and ask yourself how that thing you are observing is like something in your life. Poetry is the act of paying close attention. So it is no accident that certain Midwestern trees, flowers, plants, and birds, the view from a passing train, the warehouses and skyscrapers of Chicago, the color of the sky before nightfall or the particular blue of a lake have made their way into the emotional vocabulary of my poems.

While every city in which I've lived thus far has contributed to my growth as a writer—Manila, Boston, Tucson, Austin, the San Francisco Bay Area (to name a few), and now, Los Angeles—I still consider Chicago my true literary home, perhaps because it was here that I birthed my first book of poetry, *Blood Orange*. From the various writing groups I've been fortunate to be a part of (like that little bimonthly poetry table in Argo Tea on Dearborn where you and I met eight years ago), to the editorial "family" table at *RHINO Poetry*, to Woman Made Gallery's magical network of women artists, curators, and writers, to the innumerable lively poetry reading venues around town (in cafés, bars, and independent bookstores), to programs like Louder Than A Bomb and Poetry Out Loud that encourage poetry among the youth, and institutions like Ragdale Foundation and the Poetry Foundation—how could I not feel utterly nurtured and sustained by the very air I breathed in this literary giant of a city? Have I mentioned the people? In no other city have I felt embraced by such a warm, welcoming, inclusive, generous, and collaborative writing community. For this I will be forever indebted.

**JD:** You are nourished by all of these experiences, but you do so much to sustain and nourish the work of other poets, too. You serve on the editorial panel of *New England Review*; and, as you say, you're a senior poetry editor for *RHINO Poetry* and you help to coordinate events for the Woman Made Gallery in Chicago. What do you learn from these pursuits? How, if at all, do they inform your poetic practice?

**ANT:** As an editor for *RHINO* and an editorial panelist for *NER*, I'm constantly humbled by the sheer magnitude of poems that we receive every year. Behind every submission we receive (and at *RHINO* we receive at least 10,000 poems a year), there's a poet just like you or me toiling away after midnight, or in between driving the kids to school or cooking dinner, or while sitting up late at night keeping vigil over an ailing parent. It's daunting to see not only how much talent there is out there, but also how powerful and insistent is this drive to keep creating art and beauty despite all evidence to the contrary. It reminds me that as a writer, my job is simply to show up, be humble, and do the work.

On a more practical note, being around so many excellent editors and readers at *RHINO* has taught me the importance of learning to cut, cut, cut. Having sat for countless hours around the editorial table with seasoned mentors such as Ralph Hamilton, Helen Degen Cohen (whom sadly, we lost three years ago), Virginia Bell, and so many others, most of whom are/were working poets, it's hard not to be reminded of the discipline of pruning away everything that "isn't" the poem, the same way Michelangelo said sculpting was like taking away from a slab of marble everything that wasn't the sculpture.

In my work as a publicity coordinator for Woman Made Gallery, my previous involvement with *RHINO*'s community efforts (the *RHINO Reads!* monthly reading series and the *RHINO Poetry Forum*, a community workshop we offer at the Evanston Public Library), and most recently, as *RHINO*'s new reviews editor, I've learned firsthand how the poetry community, and indeed, any arts community, is only as good as the generosity of its members. I've been lucky enough to have these avenues to give back, to champion other poets and to help open doors for them in the same way that other individuals, organizations, and institutions have held a door open for me. It's a reminder that we



all need each other in order to thrive in a society that doesn't necessarily value or reward artists and writers for the intangible gifts and talents they bring to human flourishing. It's a reminder to be generous literary citizens. And to always be grateful.

**JD:** "What Happens Is Neither the End" provides a stunning meditation on the losses that you allude to throughout this group of poems. I wonder: are these poems part of a larger project that you are working on, and might this poem be the final one in that collection? Please say yes—I am eager to read book number two!

**ANT:** This poem is indeed part of a group of poems that I started writing at the onset of my mother's Alzheimer's and, subsequently, during my father's struggle with cancer. In terms of the larger project of a second book, this group forms roughly a third of the manuscript. Other poems in the collection deal with one's changing relationship with the body through various stages of life, the evolving textures and terrains of long-term love relationships, the consolations of art and nature. Ultimately, its overarching question is, how does one continue to choose beauty and meaning in the face of brokenness, division, and loss?