

Interview with Bryan Thao Worra

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How did you get started, and what keeps you going as an artist?

I grew up in a house full of books, the son of parents who each spoke 5 different languages, with only one in common. My father was a librarian and a professional genealogist, and my mother worked in various capacities at local universities, eventually ending up as a library assistant herself. Our shelves brimmed with histories, mythologies, classical and modern literature, as well as religious and spiritual texts, back issues of National Geographic, and a variety of guides to historical photography, linguistic theory, and independent scholarship. Our home was a rich and eclectic cultural and literary nexus, a good place for a child to encounter the written word in its myriad forms. I found poetry partly through its presence on the shelves and partly through my father, who'd read Dylan Thomas' "A Child's Christmas in Wales" to us every Christmas in his deep sonorous voice. Poetry lurked in the corners of conversations, in the religious scriptures we studied as a family, in my fascination with line and shadow in art, and in my parents' love of puns and word play.

I wrote my first poem in fourth grade, in Canada, for a girl. I had a crush on her that year, but was too shy to say anything. And then, one day, she was gone. The teacher told us she had died of a rare bone cancer. And I recall a great emptiness inside and a desire to do something for her, to give something back. And so I wrote some lines down, assembled my first poem for her, then stashed somewhere beneath my bed. Perhaps it is only fitting that I began with an elegy, that love and loss are always intricately woven together in the things I write. I think I keep writing because I want to give voice to the small and silent miracles of the seemingly ordinary world. I love to discover what lies just beneath that surface. As the artist, Kandinsky says, "even a white trouser button glittering out of a puddle in the street....Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks."

Although writing can often be a lonely task, I keep writing in part because I have been blessed with a such good community of fellow writers. Many of my closest friendships with other writers were forged at the Kundiman Retreat and they remain vital and inspiring influences today. It's important to have a home, even as we move place to place, moment to moment. It's strengthening to know that you have a family of writers, a circle of lifelong friends.

What are the themes you really enjoy examining in your work?

I find myself returning frequently to the themes of exile and memory. I think we live in a fractured and dislocated world. It's easy to be misplaced and displaced in our modern age. I'm fascinated by the way we try to link ourselves back to some notion of "home"—whether it be physical, familial, spiritual, or national—we carry the remnants of our world with us and look for its image and echo in whatever spaces we pass through.

My first book, *The Lost Country of Sight*, is obsessed with variations of that theme and how ultimately it relates to the exile of the body, the exile of death. But beyond this, I think the theme of displacement and exile is also entwined with the idea of beauty and the memory of loss. These too seem to creep into my work, sometimes planned for, sometimes unbidden. Lately I've also been intrigued by our relationship with technology and the ways in which the machine, especially the computer, is an invisible other in our texts, an absence which speaks somewhat to our fear of the unknown, somewhat as well to the emergence of an alternative and seemingly unnatural form of beauty.

What is your process like for your writing?

I find that I write in phases. First, I assemble. I tend to do a great deal of reading and note-making. I collect lines and ideas, quotes and odd facts. I research and leave a lot of things at the back of my mind to percolate. Then, at some point, I start pulling out my notes, finding useful triggers and writing from there. Sometimes the poem emerges quickly and takes its final shape on the computer screen in an hour or so. Most often though, I write recursively. I write one line, then read it aloud and try to hear the next line in the silence following it. I reject the easy images. I keep going back until the line is good. Then, I begin again at the beginning of the poem and read. Each line is the sum of the force and pulse of the previous ones. Each line stitches itself into the fabric of the poem. Still, once a poem is completed—it may not really be done. I'll wait a few hours, a few days, maybe even a week. Then, read it again and fine-tune the lines, interrogate again the images. Question always the sound, how the poem feels in the mouth.

Where do you feel you are really trying to push yourself in your art these days?

One of the great challenges once you've finished a manuscript or published a book, is figuring out what to do next and how it will be different. It's not enough to simply repeat or continue down the path. Finishing a manuscript gives you the opportunity to look back and consider what you have learned. For me, I can see that I have spent much of the first book invested in the narrative lyric approach. While I really love working in this vein, I feel that it's important that I stretch and try my hand at the fragment and consider other forms and relationships with language and image. I want to pay closer attention to absence. I'm also working on ways to keep poems inspired by historical figures and moments interesting and engaging to a contemporary reading culture.

What's the next project you'd like to take on?

I'm currently working on a manuscript entitled *Babbage's Dream* which explores the themes of isolation, beauty, and loss in the world of computers and computer programming. It may sound a little bizarre, but as a former computer games programmer, I feel there's a lot more in common between the programming world and the writing world than may appear at first glance. It's an examination of modern exile, and also an exploration of machine beauty and the odd intersections between programming and poetry as creative obsession with rules and language. Some poems redefine computer and programming terms in lush lyric sequences. Another section revolves around Charles M. Babbage, the 19th century mathematician who designed the first mechanical programmable computer. Still others attempt to peel back some of the

mystery and veneer of the programmer label and reveal something of the human side of a world that is frequently misrepresented or ignored.

What are some of the qualities you admire in the writing styles of your favorite writers?

Good question. I really admire the way Philip Levine uses breath in his lines. Each phrase builds on the next. Carefully assembled, precise, and surprising. His poems are narrative, but not straight—reflecting much more of the way the mind operates, how memory draws its associations, calls things up from triggers, and builds image upon image. Poems like "My Father With Cigarette, Twelve Years Before the Nazis Could Break His Heart" stick with me, for the risks they take and for the seemingly effortless glide of language and thought.