

Of Poets & Poetry



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See page 4

SILVIA CURBELO

Cover photograph by Tom Errico





CAN YOU STAND
PERFECTLY STILL AND
HOLD THIS
MOMENT OPEN?

~ Silvia Curbelo

PROFILES IN POETRY



Silvia Curbelo reading her poem "Notes of Courage" at the installation of Tampa Mayor Jane Castor, photograph by Kimberly Defalco.

the poet...

Silvia Curbelo

Q&A WITH AL ROCHELEAU

Tampa poet Silvia Curbelo came to the United States as a child from Matanzas, Cuba. Her poems pull from her personal experiences, but also touch a cord that is universal. She is the author of three poetry collections: *The Geography of Leaving* (Silverfish Review, 1991), *The Secret History of Water* (Anhinga Press, 1997) and *Falling Landscape* (Anhinga Press, 2015), as well as having her work published in anthologies that include *The Body Electric: America's Best Poetry* from the American Poetry Review (2000), *Snakebird: Thirty Years of Anhinga Poets* (2004), and the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2010). | Curbelo has served as the editor of *Organica Quarterly* and is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Florida Arts Council, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, the Cintas Foundation, the Seaside Foundation, and the Atlantic Center for the Arts, as well as being a Mid-American Review's James Wright Award and American Poetry Review's Jessica Nobel Maxwell Memorial Prize recipient. Currently, Curbelo is one of FSPA's nominees for the Florida State Poet Laureate.

The following pages are a window's view of her poems, and her take on poetry's landscape.

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Rocheleau: How has your dual experience as a young Cuban expatriate, then American, informed your work? **Curbelo:** Coming to a new country, learning a new language and figuring out how to navigate in a new world are definitely the kinds of things that shape you as a person – and I imagine, as a poet as well. I was separated from the only world I knew at age 11, and it was all very swift and final. They say you can't go home again, and that is meant as a kind of metaphor. But for me it was very literal. I really couldn't go home again, at least not for a very long time. So, in a sense, I was separated from my childhood. Even my memories seemed to be separate from my new life, enclosed in glass, things I could still see but never touch again. There is a clarity in that kind of remembering that invites powerful language to come to the surface. Many of my early poems were about that restricted and somewhat uncomfortable way of looking back. Another thing that comes to mind about this: English was my second language, and I didn't speak a word of it until I was almost 12. I wrote some poems in Spanish early on. Compared to the English language, Spanish is so fluid. Everything flows and spills over and trails off. It's almost too easy to be lyrical, to get carried along by the music. As I read more and more books in English, particularly poetry books, I learned to love the harder edges and sharp turns of the English language. I think that was an important influence. I stopped writing poems in Spanish altogether at some point in my late teens.

Rocheleau: Many find a dreamlike quality, albeit often combined with religious symbolism and the politics of freedom, to exist in the ethos of Latin-American poets, those like Neruda, Borges, Vallejo, and in earlier centuries, Marti and Sor Juana de la Cruz. Do you think, as we do, that this spiritual DNA has carried on to contemporary poets such as yourself, Virgil Suarez, and Alberto Rios? **Curbelo:** It's a beautiful and intriguing concept, the idea that whole generations of poets can carry and distill the essence of their profoundly brilliant predecessors. At the same time, it feels terribly presumptuous to think so. I'm going to pass on this question.

Rocheleau: Of those poets or other masters, can you comment on your own great personal influences? **Curbelo:** This is a question that comes up a lot. And I tend to always answer it the same way. I think the most important influences are the early ones, the first poets you read when you don't know what poetry even is yet, when you discover words have a life of their own. | Federico Garcia Lorca and Antonio Machado were two of my father's favorite poets. He had memorized many of their poems and would recite them to me as his own version of bedtime stories when I was a child. Or he would recite them to no one in particular as he stood shaving at the bathroom sink. But I was in the next room, and I could hear: Verde que te quiero verde. I would wander in, and he would ramp things up for my benefit, just to make me laugh. To this day, Lorca is still my number one. I'm not sure anyone has ever squeezed such beauty and mystery from the language – any language. | I also remember sitting in a Freshman Lit class during my first semester of college and listening to a young teacher read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" out loud to the class. I had heard of T.S. Eliot, had even scanned some of his poems in anthologies, but nothing really resonated with me. Then I heard the poem out loud. It was a spectacular moment. I remember closing the textbook afterwards. I couldn't tell you the name of the book, Great Literature of the Western World or some such thing, but I remember the orange letters of the title seemed to be vibrating a little, and I could see the hair on my arms was standing up. There have been literally hundreds of moments like that in my life since then, a physical sensation brought on by a great poem, or a great line even. But that was the first time, or at least the first I can remember. | So I learned to love Eliot and carried his small books in my purse. I also remember being quite

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enthralled by Sylvia Plath around the same time. Then shortly after that, I discovered contemporary poets in the literary magazines – *Tendrils*, *Antaeus*, the *Indiana Review*, the *Iowa Review*. That’s when I started reading the generation of poets that were making their mark at that moment, writers like Mark Strand, W.S. Merwin, Carolyn Forché, Marvin Bell, Adrienne Rich, Jack Gilbert, Susan Stewart, and a little bit later, Frank Stanford and C.D. Wright also became important to me. These were the living poets, not the textbook poets – not yet anyway – and they were opening doors for the rest of us.

Rocheleau: What do you think were the stepping stones of change and growth on which you treaded to or between your three collections, released in 1991, 1997, and 2015, respectively?

Curbelo: I would say life intervened in all the ways it tends to do. Things changed, and I changed with them. I did a little traveling in Europe and met some fascinating people along the way. I landed a job as an editor and got to correspond with and even get to know a few of my heroes. And I read a lot of wonderful work along the way that helped shape my world view and my own work. | My husband Tom and I raised a child. My father died. Then 12 years later, my mother, in 2004. That was the year I began writing *Falling Landscape*, my most recent book. The first poem I wrote after a short mourning period is called “Hurricane Watch.” 2004 was also the year when four major hurricanes threatened the Tampa Bay area in a matter of a few weeks. My life was in shambles, and it seemed the weather and the world around me were in terrible chaos too. My work had been changing slowly, but at that point the poems became less narrative, less autobiographical, more internalized.

Rocheleau: Many of your poems, such as “Tonight I Can Almost Hear the Singing,” seem not only aphoristic on the whole, but also constructed of separate small aphorisms than can themselves stand alone as statements of depth. Do you feel that such poems might be constructed as a mosaic of such smaller poetic inlays?

Curbelo: I’m always drawn to the integrity of the line, its singular beauty. I can spend an inordinate amount of time on just one line. It’s interesting that you bring this up because a lot of the time my writing process is very much about creating individual lines until I have several pages of them. They may be loosely connected or not. Then I go through them and start moving them around, arranging them in some way that makes sense, and throwing out others that maybe don’t seem to belong. So it’s very much like building a mosaic, or putting together a jigsaw puzzle of sorts. The final step for me is heavy editing, trying to remove all the lines I think may be unnecessary. I’m a big believer in creating a lot of space within the poem for the reader to enter and fill in. | One of my favorite poetry exercises involves writing tons and tons of haiku – very loose ones, not the 5-7-5 syllable ones, but just haiku-like things, one, two or three-line mini-poems. You walk around for a week or so making all sorts of haiku. You carry a notebook with you and continuously jot down these tiny poems. You keep doing that until you have a whole slew of them – the more the merrier. Then you look at them all together and try to fit them into one big poem. Because you’ve written them within a short period of time, it’s likely there will be something that connects many of these lines together. It’s a beautiful exercise, and it really immerses you in the creative process, so that you’re at the grocery store or standing in line at Starbucks and the whole time you’re writing these little poems in your head. I’ve had great success with it. | For a while I also became enamored of the list poem. It’s the same idea, but simpler, much more pared down. The lists can be metaphors, or they can just be single words that are evocative on their own, like harbor, or lantern, or face. You walk around all day making these poetic lists in your head of everything you see. It can get a little OCD, and it’s hard to shake it off.

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At some point you have to read a whole bunch of Shakespearian sonnets or something to help clear all the lists out of your head.

Rocheleau: When you teach poets, what major things are most important for you to get across?

Curbelo: I seem to be that rare exception in the literary world – I don't teach. I've been a guest lecturer and done short, one-day workshops, but even that has been minimal. I also never studied poetry at the university. I'm pretty much self-taught when it comes to poetry, so maybe my lack of interest with teaching comes from that.

Rocheleau: You have a strong relationship with Anhinga Press in Florida. Any advice for poets seeking to publish in journals or publish their collections here or elsewhere? **Curbelo:** It's wonderful to find a press that will nurture your career, and put out the new work and keep the old books in print. That's becoming quite rare, I think, so I've been fortunate. My first recommendation to anyone trying to publish is to familiarize yourself with every place you are thinking of submitting to. Pick up a couple of back issues of the magazines, or get an online subscription and read some issues cover to cover. This is particularly important if you're trying to get a book published. Before you send in your manuscript, buy a couple of the press' books and read them carefully. It's the best advice, and it serves a dual purpose. You get to know a little about the kind of poems the editors tend to favor, which may help you determine if your work is right for them. And by purchasing the books or magazines or online access, you help support the journals or presses and the poets they publish. Everybody wins.

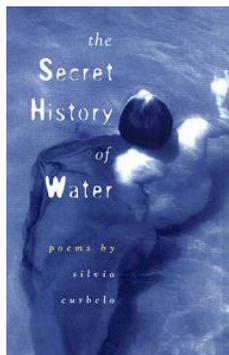
Rocheleau: In 2019 you received your second Hillsborough Arts Council grant, to go with various national and international prizes, grants, and fellowships. On the local side, your identification with Tampa is obvious. What is the state of poetry in West Florida? **Curbelo:** I can't speak for all of West Florida, but we've been very fortunate to have had a great roster of incredible poets and writers in the Tampa Bay area, starting with Peter Meinke, our current Florida Poet Laureate. Many people consider Peter the grandfather of poetry around here, someone whose kindness and generosity towards young writers know no bounds. I don't want to name any more names because it would be a very long list, and invariably, I would forget to mention someone. And this would cause much hand-wringing and mea culpas on my part, something I try to avoid. | We're lucky that the University of Tampa and USF now have excellent writing programs that attract some wonderful up-and-coming writers, so the new generation of poets is being shaped right in our own backyard, and a number of them may eventually lay down roots here. UT also brought the AWP (Associated Writing Programs) Conference to Tampa in 2018. It's the largest literary conference around – 12,000 people or more attend on any given year – so that was huge. | There have always been interesting journals coming out of our area as well, from the well-known *Tampa Review* to a small, obscure indie magazine called *white mule from the 80s*, to Richard Matthew's beautiful letterpress broadsides, this area has had its share of great publications. I've been involved with Gianna Russo's YellowJacket Press, which for a long time was the only press in the state publishing chapbooks by Florida poets. (Anhinga Press has recently started the Rick Campbell Chapbook series.) Greg Byrd and I actually edited their anthology, [Glass Bottom Sky: 10 Years of YellowJacket Press](#) about five years ago. | We also have an amazing reading series at the Dalí Museum, run by St. Pete's own Poet Laureate, Helen Wallace, and all kinds of weekly and monthly open mikes throughout the area. | I would love to see more interconnection between the different areas in West Florida and the rest of the state, more exchange, more writers coming in from other areas of Florida, and more invitations for our writers to read and lecture throughout the state.

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Rocheleau: You are among FSPA's current nominees for State Poet Laureate. While all candidates have their own perspectives, what do you think the new Laureate, when selected, should be looking to do with the weight of that position? **Curbelo:** I am honored for the nomination, particularly because there are so many Florida poets that are so deserving and would do an amazing job. Although I would like to add that our present Poet Laureate leaves an incredible legacy and enormous shoes to fill. For all practical purposes, the Poet Laureate becomes the face of poetry in the state of Florida, and that's a sobering concept and a huge responsibility. | I think most people would agree the PL's most obvious role is to bring poetry into unexpected places, to people that may not be familiar with it. To young people, of course, but also to adults who maybe haven't read a poem since their Lit 101 class. Even though there is more poetry being published today than ever before, poetry is still rather elitist and isolated, and not a part of people's daily lives. There was a time when newspapers and mainstream magazines were publishing poems, but that hasn't been the case for many decades. So why not work towards bringing some of that back? Why not have a Poet Laureate get up and read a poem in a place you would never expect it? Say, a baseball game, a sales meeting, a political rally? | Beyond that, I think the PL's second most important job is to continue to bring Florida writers together. I'd love to see more conferences like FSPA's and the FLAC (Florida Literary Arts Coalition) Other Words conference, and the old Sun Coast Writers Conference at USF St. Petersburg, which USF has talked about starting up again. | It would be wonderful to bring about a partially state-sponsored literary conference, a mini-AWP for writers in Florida that gets all the different arts councils involved. Is that doable? Who knows? A Poet Laureate could be instrumental in making something like that happen.

Rocheleau: You will be installed as a new FSPA Chancellor at the organization's 2020 Spring Convention (April 18 in Zephyrhills), and you have been given a free hand as what you may teach or read as we honor you during that event. Any hints on what we may expect? **Curbelo:** Yes, and I thank FSPA for the honor! At this point I haven't really decided what I'm going to do yet. More than likely, I'll be keeping things simple. I will probably have a few new poems to share, and a few old favorites, so I'll read those and discuss how they came about. Maybe I'll talk a bit about how I approach the writing of a poem, my own particular rituals and prompts, and the way a poem might take shape on the page. I'm not quite sure yet. It's still a work-in-progress.

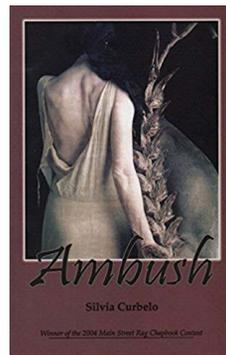
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POEMS BY
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CURBELO

Before the Long Silence

Some words open dark wings
inside us. They carry us off
in the telling, the air going on
beyond language, beyond breath.

It's the small moments
that change everything.
On the last night my father
woke from a long, restless sleep
and pointed to a corner
of the room. A bird, he said.

—*from Falling Landscape (Anhinga Press)*

Learning to Play Coltrane

She thought it was green, not
the emerald green of Indian summer
but a green like a darkening plain,
or the shadow rivers cast.
She thought it was light, a glint
or a warning, the shine
at the papery edge
of storm clouds. The way
a voice rising and falling becomes
a premonition, a dampness
at the back of her neck. Or maybe
it was more of an imprint,
a memory of sound, some afternoon
after the circus has left town
and all that remains is a field
strewn with garbage, a music
of pasted stars and ruin.
And she thought of a color
like that, mud-green, the green
of a small sadness, shapeless
as the wind itself. And for a moment
she owned everything inside it,
the light, the field, the wind.

—*for Adrian*

POEMS BY
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CURBELO

Tourism in the Late 20th Century

Blue boat of morning and already
the window is besieged
by sky. Grace takes no prisoners
in a town like this. Think of the girl
sipping white burgundy
in the local café, her straw hat
with its pale flower, indigenous
and small as the white roll
she's buttering one philosophical
corner at a time. Even the rain
that falls some afternoons here
is more conceptual, more a tribute
to rain than actual rain falling
on the tulips, a rumor
the wind carries all the way
down the beach.
And would you ask the sea
to explain itself? wrote Kerouac once
in a book about a woman
that was already a metaphor,
rose fading in its glass bowl.
He always knew the world is sentimental,
waving its lacy rags over the face
of the familiar, an architecture
of piano notes and hope.
And what about the girl,
her hat gone, her bread
finished, holding an armful
of tulips in the rain?
She knows each road leads

to other roads, to small towns
with solid names like Crestview
and Niceville, where even dust has
a genealogy and an address,
as if there's more forever there.
The tulips long to be metaphysical,
closed-mouthed, more faithful
than the rose. Let the windows
take over. Lean out the small
square of the day, past
the rain, past the idea
of rain, to where the sky
is snapshot blue, the sea
blue by association.

—from *The Secret History of Water* (Anhinga Press)

POEMS BY
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The Lake Has Swallowed the Whole Sky

Some dreams are like glass
or a light beneath the surface of the water.

A girl weeps in a garden.
A woman turns her head and that is all.

We wake up a hundred times and
don't know where we are. Asleep

at the wheel. Saved by
the luck of angels.

Everyone touching his lips
to something larger, the watermark

of some great sorrow. Everyone
giving himself away. The way

the rose gives up its stem and
floats completely, without history.

In the end every road leads
to water. What is left of a garden

is the dream, an alphabet of longing.
The shadow of the girl. Perfume.

—from *The Secret History of Water*

POEMS BY
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CURBELO

Painting Gala

Gala in childhood. In rain.
In white garments. On a train
with a book and a suitcase.
Gala with swans, untouched
by sadness, feathers
tumbling from her mouth.
Without shoes. With a glass
of warm milk, sitting
crosslegged in the garden chair.

Gala in a taxi. In sleep.
In love with silence, her good
friend, her confidante,
and behind her left shoulder
the road. A madonna,
a bird, a many-
ringed thing like a tree
trunk. Windblown.

Sullen as a starfish.
Marooned, a beached
thing, moonlight spreading
the great satin sheet of her dreams.
Her pillow licked by flames.
The nightgown burning. Torn loose.
Rising like smoke, like Gala

in her suit of lights. So many
stars in her arms, so many
dead leaves. Gala with stormclouds.
In freefall. With pearls in her lap
and blood money in her fist,
a sudden loneliness

in the folds of her green dress.
So many untold distances
unfolding from her
whispering fingers. Awash
in sunlight. Lounging poolside
with a paper umbrella in her drink.
Swallowing every wish.

—from *Falling Landscape* (Anhinga Press)

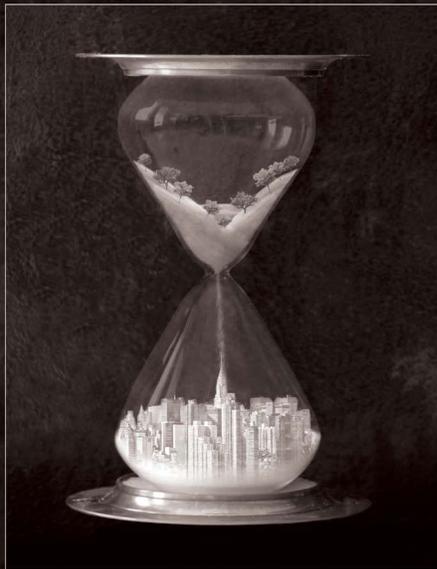
POEMS BY
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Shine

The day seemed strangely
out of context, black and white
as our hearts. We hated the smell
of sunlight in the alleys, the ruined
voices on TV. We couldn't read
between the lines. We craved
meaning and sleep, a hole
swallowing a hole.
Elsewhere there were trees,
there were sidewalks
and food. We had music and
cigarettes and cars, the ownership
of light and noise, loneliness, air.
As if a boy had smashed open
all the windows. As if
the ashen sky meant rain
and nothing more. At night
we saw dogs rooting in the shadows,
and men walking in the cold,
their hands drifting out of warm
pockets reaching for what? Solace?
A match? Imagine something
shines in the dark and something
moves towards that small
brightness. Haven't you
ever touched someone
in just that way?

—from *Falling Landscape* (Anhinga Press)

FALLING LANDSCAPE



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