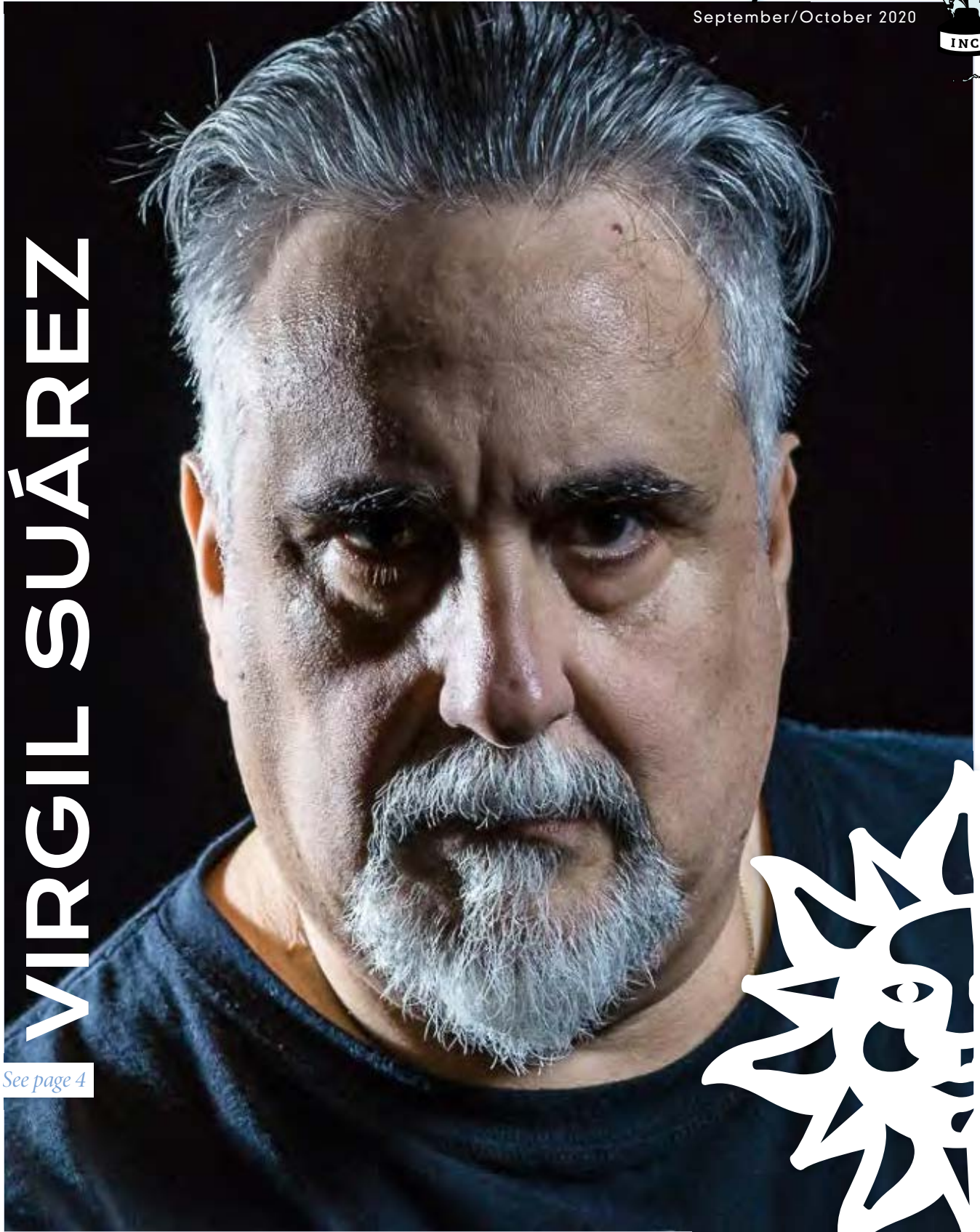


Of Poets & Poetry



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VIRGIL SUÁREZ

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Cover photograph: self portrait of the poet

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or a serious one until
the words start combining
on the page.

~ Virgil Suárez

A conversation
between Al Rocheleau
and FSPA's Chancellor

VIRGIL SUÁREZ





Photograph by Carlton Temple

VIRGIL SUÁREZ

Virgil Suárez was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1962. At the age of twelve he arrived in the United States. He received an MFA from Louisiana State University in 1987. He is the author of eight collections of poetry, most recently *90 Miles: Selected And New Poems*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. His work has appeared in a multitude of magazines and journals internationally. He has been taking photographs on the road for the last three decades. When he is not writing, he is out riding his motorcycle up and down the Blue Highways of the Southeast, photographing disappearing urban and rural landscapes. His 10th volume of poetry, *The Painted Bunting's Last Molt*, will be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in the Spring of 2021.

Artist Statement:

Both my photographs and mixed media art try to capture the erasure of time. Both also concern themselves with decay, detritus, and the decomposition of man-made things. Both of these things also inform my poetry and writing. Nature wins each and every time. Humankind eventually will perish and the planet will recalibrate itself. Even in the face of some cataclysmic and/or nuclear disaster the planet will survive and morph into something new. I am also concerned with the plight of the underdog, the inaudible voices that perish daily trying to survive—my attempt to preserve witness to the mundane and the daily grind of lives being worn down to nothing.

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Rocheleau: Most of two American generations have missed out on the unique allure of Havana, as well as the hard effects of its political isolation. Can you share something of your young life there?

Suárez: I had a wonderful childhood in Cuba, since basically I was raised by my mother and grandmothers. I had a chance to receive all of that wonderful sensory tropical material early in my life. Marvelous fauna and flora. A fern that when you touched it the leaves would close. A multitude of butterflies and colors of ladybugs I've never seen again. Fish. Flowers. Fruit. Amazing. The child was fine, but the child's parents were not. My parents decided to leave for all of the political reasons someone would not want to live under a dictatorship. My parents did not want me conscripted into the military by the age of 15, so the clock ticked while we all waited for our exit to be granted. In the meantime, I lived my life as an only child spoiled principally by his paternal grandmother who read to me from the Harvard Edition of *A Thousand And One Arabian Nights* and who told me these marvelous stories of living in Manhattan as a young girl. My grandmother was a retired teacher earning her American retirement in Cuba. She told me stories and taught me basic math. We left Cuba in 1972 and she did not survive long enough to leave with us.

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Photograph by Carlton Temple

Rocheleau: Was your great “The Dirt Eaters” a personal poem or emblematic?

Suárez: No, that poem is a literal poem. I ate dirt as a child as I played with mud and made forts and soldiers out of the dirt. By the time we left Cuba there was a great scarcity of toys, so the kids in the neighborhoods reverted to all sorts of entertainment and DIY toys. Darts made out of chicken feathers, a twig, and a needle. Sling shots made out of bicycle inner tubes. We played with snails. We went to the stream to fish little mosquito fish to keep in glass bowls. We hunted butterflies. We hunted lizards and used them to fish spiders out of their holes. We climbed mango trees. We hunted, we hungered for something to do, and we waited for our parents to be allowed to leave.

Rocheleau: You were twelve or so when you emigrated to the United States from Cuba. What was that change like for a boy soon to grow into manhood?

Suárez: It was very drastic. The first thing that everyone realized, mostly teachers, was that I was deficient in all sorts of things, including math and science. I could read and write okay, but I was in trouble academically, so it took me a while to catch up. Spanish teaching is mostly memory learning. You read and recite back after you memorize it. Boring. No chance to be imaginative nor creative. This was in the two years we lived in Spain and then in the United States where we arrived in 1974, it was a brutal realization that I was going to live inside of a monster I could never tame. My first class on my first day of school I was assigned physical education and I was made to take off my clothes and shower with another 200 kids. I was so nervous that I fell and hit my head on the slimy tiles. It was a horrible afterbirth into what my father called living in a country where people “barked like dogs.” I have never really recovered from that trauma. I’ve written about it time and again, trying to understand but I keep drawing blank cards.

Rocheleau: Was there for you a fulcrum between the two cultures on which some of your poetry depends?

Suárez: Yes, my parents, my home life. My home language. I arrived too late to forget Spanish, but young enough to learn English quickly. I think the worlds of home and the outside have served my poetry well. Often, my work is informed by the mixture of the two or some sort of cultural translation of customs I ended up performing. Also representation of how both of those worlds mix in my work to create something new. Although I tend to write solely in English, Spanish is always lurking in the background in particular with my vernacular and syntax.



Photograph by Enrique Grosso

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Self portrait of the poet

Rocheleau: What is the main difference you find between writing poetry in Spanish versus English?

Suárez: I don't write much in Spanish but only as a way to insert certain codes or untranslatable things into my lines and images. I use Spanish sparingly, but musically it helps to be bilingual. I think being able to use both languages at the moment of creation is like jazz to the ears. There's a groove. A sonorous call and response. I am also a firm believer that part of the job of the poet is to go beyond his/her/their boundaries to discover work that they can import back through translation or through the work as editor.

Rocheleau: Which Latin poets have most moved you or inspired your work over the years? And among English and American poets?

Suárez: Early influences were Gary Soto, Lorna D. Cervantes, Tato Laviera, Pedro Pietri, and so many others. But earlier influences were also folks like Neruda, Guillen, Parra, Borges, and then in English I owe a lot to Edgar Allen Poe, Whitman, and of course Ginsberg. Denise Levertov became a favorite. Current poets I love are Denise Duhamel, Charles Harper Webb, and the late Adrian C. Louis.

Rocheleau: You incorporate both pathos and humor in your poems. How do you decide which way a poem will go, or how the two roads might meet?

Suárez: For me that is the magic of discovery. I sit down to write with just an inkling of an idea and then I let the poem surprise me. I never know if it is going to be a humorous poem or a serious one until the words start combining on the page. Part of me cannot resist being funny or witty, tongue-in-cheek. For some reason I cannot resist the urge when I am writing overtly political poems. Politics is absurd. You have to have a great sense of humor to survive the political fuckery of the times.

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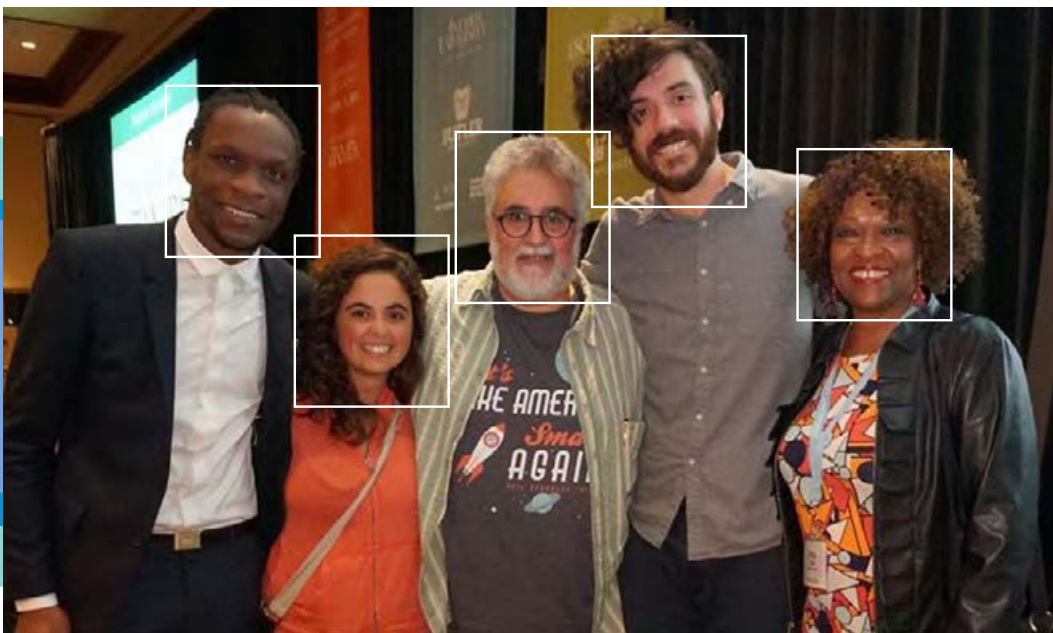
Rocheleau: You have a strong social voice; what are the difficulties a poet must consider when addressing political issues in their work?

Suárez: I only react to things that really hit me hard, like children being kept in cages, clowns and hocus-pocus bullshitters pretending to be presidents. I can go on and on. A poet can write about these things and in my case I cannot resist the urge to be funny to hit back hard with more absurdities. The fact that American Politics have been turned into the NFL. Red vs. Blue. And depending on what team you play then they expect you to send them money. WTF? You get shit from both, and they expect you to pay to play. Blue is only slightly better than Red. I've been independent most of my life, but the Red team has lost its mind on religious fanaticism and extreme neglect of their civil duties to safeguard humanity, so Blue is all we have left.

Rocheleau: You often write of family, as many of us do. What takes such a poem beyond ordinary reminiscence to resonate in the mind and heart of another?

Suárez: This is an excellent question on which I never try to ponder beyond the basic need of trying to relate a universal about human experience. Family is an important aspect of the human cycle. My reminiscences are only a way to get at those universals. Birth, childhood, marriage, children, death. I know that my upbringing and my family life has been exceptional in ways that others are not. I think time and environment and political circumstances have marked my family and myself. My journey has been different. I think this is the early realization or epiphany that made me think I could be a poet. I am a working poet.

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From left to right: *Ishion Hutchinson, Gabriela Suarez, Virgil Suarez, Kabeh Akbar, Rita Dove.*
Photograph by Fred Viebhan

Rocheleau: I shared a place with you years ago, along with another FSPA supporter, Sue Walker, in an issue of *Poetry Salzburg Review*. It was indeed one of your family poems and I have taught it in several of my classes. What encouragement might you have to share for poets who want to try their luck submitting to journals?

Suárez: Don't give up. Don't think that nobody likes your work because one hundred journals have turned you down. Your work will be received somewhere. We all get published for a first time and then it's what we make of it. Nobody is going to come look through your drawers to publish your work. You have to be proactive. You have to promote your work, and the younger you are the more you have to do it until two decades later when some editors will contact you and invite you to submit new work. Again, don't give up.

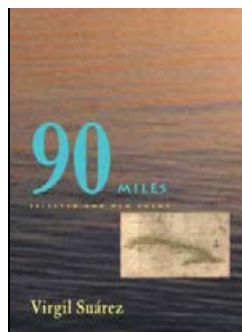
Rocheleau: What have you found to be the greatest natural strengths, as well as weaknesses, of the younger poets with whom you engage at FSU?

Suárez: My students are eager, and I love that about them. And they are disciplined and want to write. Their main weakness is that they need to read more. Read more. Keep reading. Reading for the poet is like breathing. You can't write poems if you are not reading poems. Talent alone is not going to keep you writing poetry. Reading contemporary poetry will help you keep writing.

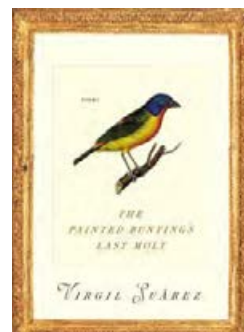
Rocheleau: If you had just a few minutes to spend with an aspiring poet, perhaps a momentarily lost or demoralized one, what one thing about our art would you like to leave them with?

Suárez: Read! Write! Revise. Read more. Always read. Always engage with long-dead and present poets. Don't give up. If it is in your blood, you will not give up no matter rejection or travail. Difficulty and rejection are part of the writing life for the poet. The less you fear the act of creation, the stronger you will be. Be thick-skinned too. Don't take rejection sitting down. Be the best promoter of your work.

TWO RECENT BOOKS



[Link to Book](#)



[Link to Book](#)

AFTERBIRTH

A rat snake slithers
into a Cardinal's nest
snug on the Y branch

of a Camelia bush.
The snake devours
each of the three

nestlings. I watch
from the porch,
a distance of twenty-five

years. One. Two. Three.
Lumps inside the snake.
A broken rosary.

The day breaks
Into a flood of blood.
Bird parents' ruckus,

as they try desperately
to save their offspring.
Between the trees

Shadows speak in riddles.

~ **Virgil Suárez**

BIG PHARMA BLUES

Better living through pharmacology,
except when CVS can't fill a pres-
cription, claiming your mental
health pills are no longer available.
Suddenly, the old fears emerge:
a man drifting through the back
roads, wandering between burning
pines and wild boars grazing
at his feet. If this is how the world
ends, then I want to be food
for the animals. They can sniff
out danger and the flesh of this
man gorged on Japanese natto
and tobiko. Sometimes you have
to lose in order to come back
in new formulated chemistry.
Nature doesn't need medicine
to know how much fuckery
there is in the human heart.

~ **Virgil Suárez**

ECO PRINTING

We gather ferns,
fallen leaves, tendrils
of Spanish moss.

We place the plants
between sheets of water
color paper.

Stack the sandwiched
flowers inside a plastic
container, press them

down with planks
of wood and heavy rocks,
add tea, coffee, and ash

for good measure. We
discuss the nature of evil
in the world. Green

spiders float on this soup
we've made. Nothing
changes for the smaller

creatures. What corrupts
absolutely is our hunger
for control. Who will save

us under the weight
of our own sorrows?
It's midday. All we can do

is wait for the paper
to tell us what stories
will make us cry or sing.

~ **Virgil Suárez**

THE GALL OF MY BLADDER

I'm going to miss you, you little fucker,
after all the paté and fois gras and hog's
head cheese (not to mention those sweet
scrapple sandwiches) I shared with you.
After all the unconditional love
I showed you and now you cannot
live with me anymore, which is fine.
I happily grant you the divorce,
and effective this Friday, I've convinced
the surgeon to pickle you in a jar
and let me bring you home so every day
you can witness my consumption
of all that low fat, low sodium, high fiber
food traversing my gullet and stomach,
and I will play you that duet made famous
by Barbara Streisand and Neil Diamond.
There will never be any more flowers
between us, or love songs, but/and when
someone brings me that slice of pancetta
and I catch you licking your chops, I will
feed it to the dogs and let you suffer.
Yes, for the gall of it, and for old fuckery.

~ **Virgil Suárez**

THE COTTON BALL QUEEN

In 1970, Havana, Cuba, my mother
took it upon herself to inject

B12 on the butt cheeks of as many
neighbors as brought her doses

and paid for her service. My mother
wanted to be a nurse but was not

a nurse, but the house filled with women
waiting for their shots and I, at eight,

watched them lower one side of their
pants or shorts or pull up a dress

to expose their flesh to the needle.
The needle disappeared into the flesh.

My mother swabbed their skin
with a cotton ball drenched in alcohol

after each shot and threw it in a bucket
by the kitchen door. When she was

not looking I reached for a handful
and went outside to look at how

the blood darkened. I wrapped my
toy soldiers in the used cotton.

They were wounded. Cuba
was sending military personnel

to Viet Nam. My mother shot up
more people, "patients," as she called

them. When my father came home
there was no trace of anyone ever

been over. My mother expected
me to keep her secrets. On the mud

fort I had built in the patio all my
soldiers lay wounded, bloodied

and dying. At night I dreamt
of the house filling with mother's

pillow cases full of cotton balls.
In the United States, my mother

worked in a factory, sewing zippers
at 10 cents a piece. 25 years.

She never looked up from her machine.
Her fingers became arthritic . . .

Every time I cut myself shaving, I reach
for a cotton ball to soak up the blood.

Blood is a cardinal taking flight
against the darkening of the sky.

~ **Virgil Suárez**

SUCCULENT GARDEN

for Laure-Anne Bosselaar

These are days when song birds
Perch near-by, offer regal plumage

And amorous chirping to invisible
mates gathering moss and twigs

with which to make an early
nest. Melancholia is in the way

the sun casts shadows on the deck.
Tall and skinny, cut and disappeared

Into that place of constant anticipation
of bridging the distance and separation

between the departed. Here now, there,
Where we make sanctuary for ourselves.

All this blushing in the morning sun
of the love taken from us too early.

~ **Virgil Suárez**