

**The Asian American Literary Review**

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## A Lettre Correspondence

AALR's 2014-2015 A Lettre Fellowship Program is a project to nurture emerging Asian American writers and grow community across literary generations. We asked prominent members of the literary world to nominate the best emerging Asian American writers based in New York City, and from the impressive pool of nominees, we chose poets Ocean Vuong, Cathy Linh Che, Eugenia Leigh, and R.A. Villanueva as fellows, then paired them with established poets Arthur Sze, Rick Barot, Julie Enszer, and Ray Hsu to conduct mentorships "a lettre," by letters, over the course of Summer and Fall 2014.

The fellowship culminates in a reading at the Poetry and Literature Center of the Library of Congress in Spring 2015, and in the gathered correspondence that follows: in this issue, exchanges between Ocean Vuong and Arthur Sze and between R.A. Villanueva and Ray Hsu; in the Spring 2015 issue of *AALR*, exchanges between Cathy Linh Che and Rick Barot and between Eugenia Leigh and Julie Enszer.

## Ocean Vuong & Arthur Sze

Dear Arthur—

Thank you so kindly for participating in the Asian American Literary Review's mentorship program. I am so honored and grateful for this opportunity to speak and work with you. I do not have any formal education in poetics and what I have learned has been mostly self-taught via the abundance housed in libraries—so communicating with an accomplished poet like yourself is a rare occurrence for me, one I am very excited about.

I was born in 1988 in Saigon, Vietnam, and emigrated to the U.S. in 1990 with seven family members. My ancestors and elders were rice farmers in the old country—and all of them were illiterate. In fact, I am the first in my family line to read and write. However, poetry has always been an integral part of our history. For centuries, farmers, including my grandmother, would recite epic poems while they plowed, tilled, and harvested the rice paddies. With no printing press and no radio or telephones lines, spoken word was the most practical way to spread news and information. Naturally, the occurrences of everyday life would be put into rhyming couplets and sung from farmer to farmer. This way, everyone was informed about who was marrying who, whose father just died, which crop had failed and which flourished and, eventually (and most sadly), whose village was the latest to be bombed and pillaged, which was the fastest route out of the country, etc...I wonder what your own lineage looks like, both familial and literary.

My life in America has been both exhilarating and perplexing (but perhaps this is how it is for most if not all of us). Being brought up with such traditional values while arriving in America so late (most Vietnamese immigrated after the Fall of Saigon in 1975), I feel quite distant from my young Asian American peers—who often cannot speak their native language. I carry with me and exhibit Confucian values of respecting elders and understanding of reciprocal bonds embedded in wisdom and restraint. So much so that when I visited Vietnam for the first time in 2009, I found myself at odds with the youth, youth who themselves have Westernized and abandoned the teachings and practices I grew up with. I felt as if I have been locked in a time capsule! This is not to say that one set of values is superior to another. I just wonder if you experienced a similar encounter with cultural dichotomies. I am starting to think that to be an Asian American is to build one's own nation—within one's body. And maybe my best tools happen to be words and language. Through language, my nation remains malleable, ever changing, and

borderless. My citizens are words and words belong to all who use them. At least this is the hope of the inexperienced and naïve poet!

Anyway, this letter is getting quite long—for which I apologize. I just wanted to start off by introducing myself through my little journey thus far. So if you don't mind, I would like to ask how you arrived at the blank page? Who are some of your influences and, most importantly, how does poetry inform your daily life—and vice versa?

Arthur, I thank you deeply for your attention, kindness—and mostly, your presence.

In respect and brimming gratitude,

-Ocean

ps: I have attached four poems as an introduction. Please feel free to share some of your current work if you like.

## Telemachus

Like any good son, I pull him out  
of the water, drag him by his hair

through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail  
the waves rush in to erase. Because the city

beyond the shore is no longer  
where we left it. Because the bombed

cathedral is now a cathedral  
of trees. I kneel beside him to see how far

I might sink. *Do you know who I am,*  
*ba?* But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming  
with seawater. He is so still I think

he could be anyone's father, found  
the way a green bottle might appear

at a boy's feet containing a year  
he has never touched. I touch

his ears. No use. I turn him  
over. To face it. The cathedral

in his sea-black eyes. The face  
not mine—but one I will wear

to kiss all my lovers goodnight:  
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own & begin  
the faithful work of drowning.

## My Ulysses(s)

The road that leads me to you is safe  
even when it runs into oceans.

—Edmond Jabès

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Then, as if breathing, the sea swelled beneath us. If you must know anything,  
know that the hardest thing is to live only once. That a woman on a sinking ship  
becomes a life raft—no matter how beautiful. While I slept, he burned his last  
violin to keep my feet warm. He laid beside me and placed a word on the nape  
of my neck, where it melted into a bead of whisky. Gold rust down my back. We  
had been sailing for months. Salt in our sentences. We had been sailing—but  
the edge of the world was nowhere in sight.

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When we left it, the city was still smoldering. Otherwise it was a perfect  
spring morning. White hyacinths gasped in the court house lawn. The sky  
was september blue and the pigeons went on pecking at bits of bread scattered  
from the bombed bakery. Broken baguettes. Crushed croissants. Gutted cars. A  
carousel spinning its blackened horses. Ash rose from the plazas until sunlight  
broke it to pieces. He said it was like the shadow of god's fingertips playing an  
air piano above the embassy. He said *there is so much I need to tell you.*

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A purple sun about to drown. He takes the bullet salvaged from a sawed M-16,  
carves another day into the mast. Somedays I feel like an ampersand. I wake  
up waiting for the crush. Somedays I hide all morning inside one of the red  
rowboats, remembering our honeymoon. A sunlit balcony looking over the  
garden. The city already torn at the edges. I could feel, through the floorboards,  
that someone was playing a harp in the next room—but the song, safe as low  
tide, doesn't reach us. He turns to me. His mouth opens and closes like a man  
reciting a psalm only the listener knows. So I listen—but can only recognize

the silences between his heartbeats: a hundred hooves galloping on a wooden bridge—going nowhere.

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Stars. Or rather, the drains of heaven—waiting. Little holes. Little centuries opening just long enough for us to slip through. A beige shine of vomit increasing from the side of his face. A machete on the deck left out to dry. My back turned. My feet in the eddies. He crouches beside me, his breath a misplaced weather. I let him cup a handful of the sea into my hair and wring it out. *The smallest pearls—and all for you.* I open my eyes. His face between my hands, wet as a cut. *If we make it to shore, he says, I will name our son after this water. I will learn to love a monster.* He smiles. A white hyphen where his lips should be. There are seagulls above us. There are hands fluttering between the constellations, trying to hold on.

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The fog lifts. And we see it. The horizon—suddenly gone. An aqua sheen leading to the hard drop. Clean and merciful—just like he wanted. Just like the fairy tales. The one where the book closes and turns to laughter in our laps. I pull the mast to full sail. He throws my name into the air but the syllables keep crumbling into stones across the deck.

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Furious roar. The sea splitting at the bow. He watches it open like a thief staring into his own heart: all bones and splintered wood. Waves rising on both sides. The ship encased in liquid walls. *Look!*, he says, *I see it now!* He's jumping up and down. He's kissing the back of my wrist as he clutches the wheel. He laughs but his eyes betray him. He laughs despite knowing he has ruined every beautiful thing just to prove beauty cannot change him. And here's the kicker: there's a cork where the sunset should be. It was always there. I stared at it each morning I pressed my lips to his cheek as he steered. There's a ship made from toothpicks and Super Glue. There's a ship in a wine bottle on the mantel in the middle of a Christmas party—eggnog spilling from red Solo cups. But we keep

sailing anyway. We keep standing at the bow. A wedding-cake couple encased in glass. We keep swerving one iceberg after another. The water so still now. The water like air, like hours. Everyone's shouting or singing and he can't tell if the song is for him—or the burning rooms he mistook for childhood. Everyone's dancing while a tiny man and woman are stuck inside a green bottle thinking someone is waiting at the end of their lives to say *Hey! You didn't have to go this far. Why did you go so far?* Just as a baseball bat crashes through the world.

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if you must know anything, know that you were born because no one else was coming. The ship rocked as you swelled inside me: love's echo hardening into a boy. Sometimes I wonder if the body is the only question the seasons can't extinguish. How many kisses have we crushed to our lips in prayer only to pick up the pieces? Still, the best way to understand a man is with your teeth. Bite through the words and into the answers. Once, I swallowed the rain through a whole storm. Lying on my back, my girlhood open. The field everywhere beneath me. How sweet. That rain. How something that exists only to fall can be nothing but sweet. Water whittled down to intention. Intention to nourishment. It is night in the mind. God, at last, has opened his other eye: two moons in the sky. Everyone can forget us. As long as you remember.

## Deto(nation)

There's a joke that ends with—*huh?*  
It's the bomb saying here is your father.

Now here is your father inside  
your lungs. Look how lighter

the earth is—afterward.  
To even write the word *father*

is to carve a portion of the day  
out of a bomb-bright page.

There's enough light to drown in  
but never enough to enter the bones

& stay. *Don't stay here*, he said, *my boy*  
*broken by the names of flowers. Don't cry*

*anymore*. So I ran. I ran into the night.  
The night: my shadow growing

toward my father

## Devotion

Instead, the year begins  
with my knees  
scraping the hardwood,  
another man leaving  
into throat. Fresh snow  
crackling on the window,  
each flake a word I've shut out  
for good. Because  
the difference between prayer  
& mercy—is how you move  
the tongue. I press mine  
to the navel's familiar  
whorl, those molasses threads  
descending towards  
devotion. & there's nothing  
more holy than holding  
a man's heartbeat between  
your teeth—sharpened with  
air. This mouth the last entry  
into January, silenced  
with fresh snow crackling  
on the window.  
& so what—if my feathers  
are burning, I  
never asked for flight.  
Only to touch  
this fully, this entire—the way snow  
touches bare skin  
& is, suddenly, snow  
no longer.

Santa Fe, NM  
May 26, 2014

Dear Ocean,

Thanks for your letter and poems. I read both with great pleasure.

My family lineage is Chinese. My mother grew up in Beijing, my father in Tianjin, and they met in America when they were college students. I was born in New York City and, as I grew up, the visible spectrum of expected professions was scientist, doctor, banker, lawyer. You ask how I came to the “blank page”; I was a freshman at MIT. Bored in a math lecture, I opened a notebook and scribbled some phrases. That night I worked them into a poem. Soon I was writing all the time. In my sophomore year, I took a poetry workshop with Denise Levertov, who had just taught at UC Berkeley. I transferred to Berkeley and created my own self-directed major in poetry. Josephine Miles was my mentor. There, I was determined to learn enough classical Chinese to read Li Po, Tu Fu, and Wang Wei, and I translated their poems into English to honor them as well as to learn my craft.

From your letter, I see that you are 25 or 26. Here are a constellation of questions (no need to respond to them all): How did you come to the blank page? Who are the poets that most move you (any time/any place)? Who are your favorite Vietnamese poets? Does knowledge of Vietnamese language and culture influence how you use the sounds, rhythms, imagery, and syntax of your poems in English? Who is your father? When I was 25, I loved Pablo Neruda’s *Residencia* I and I and reveled in his work. Does he speak to you?

You ask about cultural dichotomy and dislocation. Yes, I experienced that; I grew up in Garden City, New York, a suburbia where there were few other Asian Americans. I do remember going to Chinese language sessions on weekends, where each student was given pages with empty squares and asked to write a set of characters fifty times each. My parents spoke Mandarin at home, so I did have early ear training... In any case, I think dislocation is an essential source of energy. Like it or not, the

entire world is convulsing in all sorts of dislocations and divisions. In New Mexico, it is a cliché to say that the cultures—Native American, Hispanic, Anglo—live in harmony and respect. In fact, it’s the cultural tensions that make northern New Mexico such an interesting place to live. When you ask how the practice of poetry informs my daily life (and vice versa), I can only say that I have been writing for so long I find there’s no separation between poetry and my daily life—poetry is as immediate and essential as breathing.

I like that you recognize “my best tools are words and language” and that “through language my nation is borderless.” I also like the emotional pressure behind the language of your poems. Once Derek Walcott visited my poetry class at the Institute of American Indian Arts. (By the way, have you read “The Schooner Flight”?) On the car drive over, he said that he thought behind every poet there was someone who said, “This (poetry) is no worth doing.” For Derek, it was his mother. For me, it was Josephine Miles. Just in case no one has said it to you yet: I say, “This (poetry) is worth doing.”

All best,



Arthur

P.S. I’m enclosing a copy of a newly completed sequence, “Water Calligraphy.”

## Water Calligraphy

1

A green turtle in broth is brought to the table—  
I stare at an irregular formation of rocks

above a pond and spot, on the water's  
surface, a moon. As I move back and forth,

the moon slides from partial to full back  
to partial and then into emptiness; but no

moon's in the sky, just slanting sunlight,  
leafing willows along Slender West Lake,

parked cars outside an apartment complex  
where, against a background of chirping birds

and car horns, two women bicker. Now  
it's midnight at noon; I hear an electric saw

and the occasional sound of lumber striking  
pavement. Glancing into a teacup, I notice

leaves at the bottom form the character  
*individual* and, after sipping, the number *eight*.

Snipped into pieces, a green turtle is returned  
to the table; while everyone eats, I feel

strands of thrown silk tighten, tighten  
in my gut. I blink, and a woodblock carver

peels off pear shavings, stroke by stroke,  
and foregrounds characters against empty space.

2

Begging in a subway, a blind teen and his mother stagger through the swaying car—

a woman lights a bundle of incense and bows at a cauldron—

people raise their palms around a nine-dragon juniper—

who knows the mind of a watermelon vendor picking his teeth?

you stare up through layers of walnut leaves in a courtyard—

biting into marinated lotus stems—

in a drum tower, hours were measured  
as water rising then spilling from one kettle into another—

pomegranate trees flowering along a highway—

climbing to the top of a pagoda, you look down at rebuilt city walls—

a peacock cries—

always the clatter of mah-jongg tiles behind a door—

at a tower loom, a man and woman weave brocade silk—

squashing a cigarette above a urinal, a bus driver hurries back—

a musician strikes sticks, faster and faster—

cars honk along a street approaching a traffic circle—

when he lowers his fan, the actor's face has changed from black to white—



a child squats and shits in a palace courtyard—

yellow construction cranes pivot over the tops of high-rise apartments—

a woman throws a shuttle with green silk through the shed—

where are we headed, you wonder, as you pick a lychee and start to peel it—

3

Lightning ignites a fire in the wilderness: in hours,  
200 then 2,000 acres are aflame; when a hot shot  
crew hikes in to clear lines, a windstorm  
kicks up and veers the blaze back, traps them,  
and their fire shelters become their body bags.  
Pinyons in the hills have red and yellow needles—  
in a bamboo park, a woman dribbles liquefied sugar  
onto a plate, and it cools, on a stick, in the form  
of a butterfly; a man in red pants stills  
then moves through the crane position.  
A droplet hangs at the tip of a fern—water  
spills into another kettle; you can only guess  
at how flames engulfed them at 50 miles per hour.  
In the West, wildfires scar each summer—  
water beads on beer cans at a lunch counter—  
you do not want to see exploding propane tanks;  
you try to root in the world, but events sizzle  
along razor wire, along a snapping end of a power line.

Two fawns graze on leaves in a yard—  
 as we go up the Pearl Tower, I gaze  
 through smog at freighters along the river.  
 A thunderstorm gathers: it rains and hails  
 on two hikers in a the Barrancas; the arroyo  
 becomes a torrent, and they crouch for an hour.  
 After a pelting storm, you spark into flame  
 and draw the wax of the world into light—  
 ostrich and emu eggs in a basket by the door,  
 the aroma of cumin and pepper in the air.  
 In my mouth, a blister forms then disappears.  
 At a teak table, with family and friends,  
 we eat Dungenness crab; but, as I break  
 apart shell and claws, I hear a wounded elk  
 shot in the bosque. Canoers ask and receive  
 permission to land; they beach a canoe  
 with a yellow cedar wreath on the bow  
 then catch a bus to the fair grounds powwow.

—Sunrise: I fill my rubber bucket with water  
 and come to this patch of blue-gray sidewalk—  
 I've made a sponge-tipped brush at the end  
 of a waist-high plastic stick; and, as I dip it,  
 I know water is my ink, memory my blood—

the tips of purple bamboo arch over the park—  
 I see a pitched battle at the entrance to a palace  
 and rooftops issuing smoke and flames—  
 today, there's a white statue of a human figure,  
 buses and cards drive across the blank square—

at that time, I researched carp in captivity  
 and how they might reproduce and feed  
 people in communes—I might have made  
 a breakthrough, but Red Guards knocked at the door—  
 they beat me, woke me up at all hours

until I didn't know if it was midnight or noon—  
 I saw slaughtered pigs piled up on wooden racks,  
 snow in the spring sunshine—the confessions  
 they handed me I signed—I just wanted it all  
 to end—and herded pigs on a form—wait—

I hear a masseur striking someone's back,  
 his hands clatter like wooden blocks—  
 now I block the past by writing the present—  
 as I write the strokes of moon, I let the brush  
~~swerve~~ rest for a moment before I lift it

and make the one ~~stroke~~ hook—ah, it's all  
 in that hook—there, I levitate: no mistakes  
 will last, even regret is lovely—my hand

trembles; but if I find the ~~gaps~~ resting places,  
I cut the sinews of an ox, even as the ~~sun~~

moon waxes—the bones drop, my brush is sharp,  
sharper than ever—and though people murmur  
at the evaporating characters, I smile, ~~frown~~,  
fidget, let go—I draw the white, not the black—  
oh, my asthmatic niece will be released today—

6

Tea leaves in the cup spell *above* then *below*—  
Glancing out the kitchen window, I catch

a spray of wisteria blossoming by the porch.  
What unfolds inside us? We sit at a tabletop

that was once a wheel in Thailand: an iron hoop  
runs along the rim. On a fireplace mantel,

a flame flickers at the bottom of a metal cup.  
As spokes to a hub, a chef cleans blowfish;

turtles beach on white sand; a monk rakes  
gravel into scalloped wave patterns in a garden;

moans issue from an alley where men stir  
from last night's binge. If all time converges

as light from stars, all situations reside here.  
In red-edged heat, I irrigate the peach trees;

you bake a zucchini frittata. Water buffalo  
browse in a field. Hail has shredded lettuces,

and, as a farmer paces and surveys the damage,  
a coyote slips across a road, under barbed wire.

The letter A was once an inverted cow's head,  
but now, as I write, it resembles feet  
planted on the earth rising to a point.

Once is glimpsing the Perseid meteor shower—  
and, as emotion curves space, I find  
a constellation that arcs beyond the visible.

A neighbor brings cucumbers and basil;  
When I open the bag and inhale, the world  
inside is fire in a night courtyard

at summer solstice; we have so loved living here  
and will miss the bamboo arcing along  
the fence behind our bedroom, the peonies

leaning to earth. A majordomo retrenches  
the opening to the ditch; water runs near  
the top of the juniper poles that line our length—

in the bosque, the elk carcass decomposes  
into a stench of antlers and bones. Soon  
ducks will nest of the pond island, and as

a retired violinist who fed skunks left a legacy—  
the one she least expected—we fold this  
in our pocket and carry it wherever we go.

Astoria, NY  
June 7th, 2014

Dear Arthur—

Thank you for your letter and suite of poems. I keep hearing the line in the 5th poem: "I know water is my ink, memory my blood." I love that line; how strange yet true it feels. How palpable. And I think I like that most in poems: the possibilities found in oddity, unbounded by rationale. Your poems embody that lush specificity that I find often in Derek Walcott and John Ashbery. The world you possess is so actualized, in every detail. It is such a present, patient way of composition that truly pays homage to the image. I am grateful to read them and know them and have them with me.

I have been writing poems for only 5 years—although it already feels like a lifetime! Like you, I can't imagine my life without it—or even how my mind worked before I started thinking seriously about poems. And yet I know I have so much more to learn. I came to the blank page out of the practical need for preservation. In 2008, after my grandmother passed away at age 67 from bone cancer, I was suddenly faced with the daunting fact that I was the only one in my family capable of recording her stories and songs onto paper. So I transcribed as much of her corpus as I could: stories and poems, all of which she composed in her mind. It felt strange to be the only literate person in my family, and even stranger to see the words, which, until then, only existed in the ethereal cadence of her voice. This eventually led me to create my own poems. I think I started to write them more as a way of conversing with my grandmother, the dead. I often wrote my own pieces in my journal, right alongside hers.

It's funny you mentioned Derek Walcott. I just happened to be reading his *Selected Poems* (for the first time in years) the day before your letter arrived! The cosmos must have been listening to our words. I don't know if it means much, but he was the first poet who had me in tears. I remember reading *The Gulf and Other Poems* on the subway here in New York nearly 4 years ago. When I got to "Guyana," I ended up having to get off the train to weep alone on a bench at the next stop. He is someone I return to again and again and am so glad you share the same interest in

his work. Some other poets who have been influential to me are Li-Young Lee, Yusef Komunyakaa, Dickinson, Lorca, Rilke, Dante, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Hass, Jane Hirschfield, James Schuyler, Lao Tzu, Chung Tzu, and Vietnamese poets like Linh Dinh, Ho Xuong Xung, Ngo Tu Lap, and Nguyen Chi Thien, who wrote nearly 300 poems by memory while imprisoned for 27 years in a communist re-education camp.

Despite many influences, I tend to find my inspiration in independent moments rather than entire works or authors—even going as micro as the singular line or syntactic unit. In this way, I try to find influence in nearly every poet I read. Of course, this is not always the case—but I think it's still beneficial to read with this gaze, this aspiration. I just figure that if someone spent so many hours writing and thinking about a work, there must be something it can teach me. And more often than not, that is indeed the case. Naturally, this inclination extends beyond poetry. And I have been thinking: maybe it's helpful to approach a work of art sans the confines of its genre—or even its artist, but more as a phenomenon of raw observation—removed from ego and the (faulty) expectations harbored through one's name, identity, or school of thought. What do you think? I think I try to approach the world as an artist by trusting in its inherent potency—my work being only one interpretation of its abundance.

You wrote of your Chinese lineage. I should mention here that although I identify as Vietnamese, I am actually mostly Chinese. My father is a first-generation ethnic Chinese born in Vietnam—his parents fled to Vietnam during the Cultural Revolution. This makes me half Chinese, a quarter Vietnamese, and a quarter Caucasian. My mother is Hapa—her father was an unknown American soldier during the war. Talk about cultural dichotomies! Speaking of which, I loved that you find them to be a “source of energy.” I agree—I often find that complex identities push us toward more intricate questions. And although the answers might be tenuous and sometimes non-existent, I think it is the possibilities, the other routes we find in the asking, that bear the most fruit. In this way, I think writing, to me, is not so much an architecture for closure, but rather, a searching for a myriad existence. “I contain multitudes,” says Whitman. And I'd like to think the poem embodies this as well.

I will try to answer more of your questions in the next missive. It is raining here in New York and the fire escapes are all jeweled with these little tiny blinking eyes. It's kind of creepy—in a beautiful way. I'm off to Poets House library, hoping to find more of your books. I loved what I read online—but alas, the poet's budget makes

acquiring books a rare luxury. Also, how did you end up settling in New Mexico? I feel in your suite a tender notion of an ode to your current locale—is this true?

I go on wishing you  
Every Blessing,

Ocean

Santa Fe, NM  
July 8, 2014

Dear Ocean,

Thanks for your letter. It's great to see some of the writers who have been influential to you, and I am especially interested in the Vietnamese poets. I know Ngo Tu Lap's work through Martha Collins's wonderful translations, but I wasn't aware of Nguyen Chi Thien. It was a revelation to learn that he went to prison for challenging the official account of the end to the Second World War as described in Vietnamese history books. By mentioning the United States and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he challenged the authority of the government. He probably would have been given a light sentence, or even released, if he had "apologized" or found some way to temporize with the time. Instead, it was not in his character to do so. That fortitude of character and commitment to the truth is something we all need—maybe now more than ever.

It's interesting to see that our family histories are deeply affected by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Although most of my family left China before or during the Second World War, one branch of the family, on my mother's side, stayed. They suffered terribly during that decade, and I found their first-hand accounts powerful and unforgettable. Many of those tragic stories have found their way into my poems and are like genetic history. I like that your poems are, on a deep level, a conversation with your deceased grandmother. It must have been amazing to write down her stories in your handwriting so that you were channeling her voice and language. Then, in writing your own poems, maybe her words provide a crucial impetus that enables you to reach out into the world in unanticipated, moving, and mysterious ways? It certainly makes for an important mythic dimension to your work.

I like that you find writing "not so much an architecture for closure, but rather, a searching for a myriad existence." Frank O'Hara once wrote, "Grace to be born and live as variously as possible." I agree with the assertion and would also substitute "write" for "live"—"grace to be born and write as variously as possible." Also, I am

in strong agreement with, "It's helpful to approach a work of art sans the confines of its genre—or even its artist." I can work with a loose distinction between prose and poetry—it's probably impossible to arrive at a set of necessary and sufficient conditions to formally define what a poem is—but when people start to talk about "lyrical nonfiction" I think the boundaries of genre become an obvious hindrance. There are, in addition, too many expectations based on "one's name, identity, or school of thought." It doesn't do justice to a poem or poet to call one "experimental" or "formal." Our commitment is to poetry, and we need to approach each poem by experiencing it on its own terms. That often means reading and rereading and, as in writing, not knowing too soon what the poem is about. It's a process—Stevens says, "Poetry must resist the intelligence *almost* successfully—and it's essential that the poem communicate in the body, through sound and rhythm, image and spell, before it's comprehended by the mind."

And this set of assertions leads me to another observation. In my experience, there are poems that I read once and am very excited by, but, when I reread them, I experience diminishing returns. Sometimes, after many readings, I find these poems of little interest. Then, there are other poems that I read and at first don't understand (in high school, Yeats's late poems were good examples), but something—a haunting phrase, an image, a powerful rhythm—keeps pulling me back. With repeated readings, these poems reveal themselves and grow in resonance. Over time, they enrich and nourish me. To write these deep poems requires, as Rilke attests, slow and arduous work. And, in writing these poems, we are fighting for and affirming our recognition of human experience against the inevitability of death...

You ask how I came to New Mexico. In 1972, when I was close to graduating from UC Berkeley, I talked to Josephine Miles about what to do next. I wanted to go somewhere I had never been before, and she suggested Santa Fe. She gave me the names of two poet friends, and I came here to try it out. One of them told me about the New Mexico Poetry-in-the-Schools program. I applied, was accepted, and, for the next ten years, worked all over the state. I worked on many Indian reservations, in many Spanish-speaking communities, and, at one point, even with an inmate on Death Row at the Penitentiary of New Mexico. New Mexico was so different from anything I had experienced before—I was exhilarated and excited by the challenges and cultural differences. The poetry in the schools program never provided enough

money to live on, so I also worked in restaurants, painted houses, did construction work—I was a terrible carpenter but turned out to be a decent plasterer—whatever, to get by. But I was always putting my best energy into my writing, and I stayed in New Mexico because I felt that my poetry was growing and growing, and that's still true today.

How are you making your living? It's important to find a way to nurture that hunger for "a myriad existence." I believe we need to revel in diversity: in writing and in life. It's important to find a way to gain precious time so that, in your writing, you can mistake, blunder, blunder again, so that you can deepen and earn your singular voice and vision and not just hunger for but *actualize* a myriad existence.

All best,



Arthur

Astoria, NY  
August 26th, 2014

Dear Arthur—

Many thanks for your rich and informative letter. I have returned to it often, for guidance and meditation.

I apologize for my delay in response. I was in Iceland for much of July. I used some grant money that I was awarded to conduct research there, interviewing a small but thriving group of Vietnamese refugees who immigrated there after the war. And speaking of myriad: the landscapes in Iceland are some of the most complex and disorientating I have ever witnessed. Within a mere one hour drive, one is confronted with emerald-earthed sheep farms unfurled into the foots of massive and monolithic mountains, vast plains made from volcanic boulders overgrown with soft, carpet-like moss, jagged violet glaciers clinging to stretches of shoreline, mustard-shaded dunes where geothermic geysers erupt and pour forth rich, pungent sulfuric gas, all this with regular intervals of rain, mist, and searing wind often quickly breaking into intense and sharp Aryan sunlight. It was a splendid trip and the interactions with the tenacious refugees were humbling and taught me lessons I had foolishly believed I had already learned, being an immigrant myself.

I loved how you mentioned that "[o]ur commitment is to poetry, and we need to approach each poem by experiencing it on its own terms." This, I believe, is such a critical point to return to. I say "return to" because I believe, in a culture obsessed with glamour and fame, it is so easy to forget this vital footing at the cusp of every poem. I have been studying the *I Ching* lately and was struck by its insistence that the most potent creative force operates on the Yin—or feminine—stance of observation. In other words, the artist sees clearest when he observes phenomena through the receptive gaze, which ultimately leaves the phenomena to grow and shift "on its own terms." This, opposed to the Yang's active tendency to seek out creative force, which often limits and narrows the possibilities, as they extinguish before they are capable of fruition. This echoes, in a way, Rilke's claim that "[t]he deepest experience of the creative artist is feminine, for it is an experience of conceiving and giving birth.... It seems to me that every poet has had that experience in beginning to speak." And

like birth and/or the nurturing of a child in the womb, Rilke, as you mentioned, also attests that such creative output consists of “slow and arduous work.”

I admire your recounts of your early days of making a living through your many jobs and also trying to find your space and “singular voice” as a young poet. It gives me hope and courage to know that you, too, faced such pivotal yet nourishing challenges. You ask how I make a living and try to actualize a myriad life. It’s interesting how our narratives blur in this area as well. I have done many things as a teenager to help my single mother pay the bills. For many summers I worked on a tobacco farm in rural Connecticut alongside migrant workers from Mexico and South America. I was on a team of harvesters. We would trail the cutters by about 50 feet, picking up the cut stalks of large, veined tobacco plants. Each team would cover the width of 4-5 rows, picking up stalks and piercing them on a speared staff mounted on a rolling trolley. Once the spear was full, one of us would carry the loaded rack to the truck which, when full, would carry the crops to a barn at the edge of the field for drying. The work was exhausting, but when you are 15 or 17, the promise of a fistful of hard cash at the end of the day was enough to make you forget the numbness in your thighs, the creak of bones in your swollen wrists. I was the only non-Spanish-speaking worker there, so I communicated mostly through smiles. Which was what surprised me most. These men, who worked and lived on the field (they were housed in trailers and tents at the edge of the farm) were always smiling, even through the heat and ache. They sang and joked with one another, stripping away the leaves and using the long tobacco stems for impromptu sword fights (which I giddily joined). With a few seasons of work, most of these workers would have enough money to purchase sizable amounts of land back home, on which they could build houses for their families. The perspective was dizzying for me at the time. Their whole lives and the lives of those they loved, in another country, can be changed by merely three or four crops of tobacco.

These images and scenes never made it into my poems. In fact, I hardly mention them these days. But I felt, innately, that the work itself was very much in tune with what I do today, with stanzas and linebreaks—although I don’t know exactly how or what. Maybe it has something to do with the rhythm of methodic movement. That the hand that pulls roots from the earth is also the hand that plants words onto the page. On a recent visit to Connecticut, I returned to the field, mostly out of nostalgia, but was saddened to see it replaced by a new and sprawling upscale housing complex. I think of the wealthy folks eating their dinners, watching TV, and

running on their treadmills where we once sat, in the middle of the field, the dusk deepening around us, telling stories I understood only through facial expressions, the erratic or melodious hand gestures, the sun a dark ember in each of our eyes. I think of José, whether he ever made enough to send his 10 year-old daughter to college. Or Hector who was saving for a wedding, where he would marry his teenage sweetheart. I think of them standing by the dust-swept road as I rode my bike home on those amber, musty summer streets. As I look back I can see Manny waving to me, all four fingers silhouetted against the fading light, and hearing the various shouts of, “Adios! Hasta mañana, Chinito!” as I plunged my bike into the cricket-dark—towards home.

I ended up working at the farm until I left for college. Sometimes, to supplement money from the field, my friend and I would sell bagels to our classmates in high school. At night, after the bagel shops closed around the city, we would sneak into the dumpsters out back. Having worked for a stint at Panera Bread, I knew that bakeries tend to throw out everything they didn’t sell by day’s end. A worker would just empty racks and racks of baked goods into a large black trash bag and then toss it into a dumpster out back. My friend and I would wait until the bags were put out and then go in and get them. Besides being a little smushed here and there, the bagels were clean and still tasted good. We would go home, sort out the bagels into plastic bags, and sell them for a dollar each the next day. It wasn’t uncommon for each of us to make about \$30-50 by the end of the school day. Of course, this wasn’t much, but it sure added up when the bills came.

Currently, I am living off a grant generously awarded me by the Elizabeth George Foundation. I was also awarded a stipend by NYU to attend their MFA program—which I will begin next Tuesday. I am nervous about it since I am not very adept in new social scenarios. But I’m also very excited to work and challenge myself as an artist. I don’t know if I’m “making a living” yet—but this is, in any case, more money than I’ve ever possessed—although most of it will go into a fund to buy a house for my mother and little brother—who are still living in social housing in Hartford.

What are you working on now? Are there any shifts you see yourself making in relation to your previous work? I am always curious to see how a poet decides (or maybe doesn’t decide) to change or develop his or her voice from book to book, a poem to poem (line to line?). Do you ever feel the pressure to preserve that “singular voice” you speak of or is it possible to see the voice as a variable tendency rather than a singular vehicle? I think, specifically, of Fernando Pessoa and his multitudes. I ask



because I hear, again and again among my peers, particularly in America and the West, an anxiety of finding and nurturing a “unique voice.” I do think a singular voice is necessary—but can the fear surrounding its necessity actually hinder or limit its development? Can one cling to a perceived voice too soon—thus forgoing a more vital, truer metamorphosis? Some have said that a mark of idiosyncrasy in style is consistency—but isn’t it possible to read repetition as complacency as well? What do you think?

Thank you for your wisdom and generosity, as always, dear maestro.

Onward, in every word,

-Ocean

Santa Fe, NM

September 4, 2014

Dear Ocean,

Thanks for your wonderful letter. It was such a pleasure to read about Iceland—what intense and varied terrain and what a surprisingly diverse community there. And thanks, also, for sharing your experience of tobacco farming: your descriptions are so vivid. Although images and scenes haven’t appeared in your poems, I like how you physically connect that work experience with planting words on the page.

We share a keen interest in the *I Ching*. Just this weekend, my wife, Carol Moldaw, who is also a poet, and I took turns tossing coins and generating a hexagram on the floor in our living room. We’re about to move from the house in Jacona where we’ve lived for the last 18 years to a house we’ve renovated in Santa Fe. Rather than accepting some naïve notion of the occult, I like using the *I Ching* from time to time to question, suspend, or even subvert linear causation or narration. I like how generating the hexagram requires concentration and time: it foregrounds and extends the process of discovery (with the yarrow stalk method, the generative and sifting process is even more extended). It also raises issues of intention and effect, chance and fate, appearance and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, and even one’s relationship to language.

You’ve asked a cluster of questions, and I’m not sure I will respond to all of them in this last letter. At the moment, I’m writing poems, one at a time. I have no idea where they’re going, but I can say that I’ve recently completed a poem that is a single run-on sentence that is in the voice of a lichen speaking to a man. It’s odd quirky, but I rather like it, and it appears to be an outgrowth of my sequence, “The Unfolding Center,” where I have two monologues inside of the larger sequence.

In terms of shifts from book to book, I like to think of each book of poetry as having an inner urgency that shapes the work. For instance, *Archipelago* was inspired by a visit to Ryoanji, the Zen temple in Kyoto, Japan. When I visited that garden and

saw that the cluster of stones were set a different angles and depths so that it was impossible for a viewer to see all fifteen at the same time, I became excited. I walked back and forth and observed how the stones appeared and disappeared. When I returned to Santa Fe, I realized the field of energy could provide a structure for my book. I experimented with different clusters to the poems, and I wrote the longest sequence (“The Redshifting Web”) only after I had the beginning and end and was working toward the center. I knew then that each poem was like an island in the sea and that, below surface, they connected.

In the case of my latest book, *Compass Rose*, I initially laid the poems out on my studio floor and felt the relationship between the poems was static. I tried dividing the book into sections, but that only heightened the separation. Then one day I looked at the poem “Sarangi Music”: it’s written in thirty-one one-line stanzas. I suddenly realized this poem could be separated into fragments (“to the writer of fragments, each fragment is a whole” is a line from the book that serves as an *Ars poetica*) that would keep reappearing. It took me many months of playing with the structure, but eventually I found that if the lines appeared in 1,2,3,4,5,6,7, and then 9 lines, there was a rhythmic unfolding that was compelling. While I was playing with the combinations of lines, I was also experimenting with where to locate the major sequences and also the discrete poems. They influenced each other, and eventually I felt the shape was earned.

I make these comments about *Archipelago* and *Compass Rose* because I believe that conscious work on structures can organically lead to developments in style and voice. Your questions about voice are important ones. As you say, in America there is an anxiety of finding and nurturing a unique voice. In my opinion, if one obsesses on this, the problem only gets worse, because one is trying to separate out prematurely or self-consciously elements of style that need more time to mature. A metaphoric jump to Chinese calligraphy might be helpful. You probably know three important styles of calligraphy are “normal” script, “running style,” and “grass style.” In normal script, you are just writing out the characters with their particular stroke order and direction. These characters, to me, are words in the dictionary, waiting to be used. No one word is inherently more poetic than another. When you start to write “running style,” the characters are still readable, but now the calligrapher has personalized the language. There are certain short cuts to the strokes, certain shifts

of accent or emphasis in the writing, and this is where the poet seizes language and makes it his or hers. In pursuing intensity of expression, the poet is actualizing his or her voice. And this voice is in no way monolithic. I don’t think it’s necessary to invent a group of personae, but each voice naturally has a range of diction, syntax, rhythm, emotional and imaginative pressure. In the end, the poet who personalizes and shapes this imaginative language sounds like no one else, and then suddenly the issue or problem of voice is no longer the problem it appeared to be. Anyhow, that’s what comes to me at this moment.

It has been a pleasure exchanging letters, and I hope you find NYU inspiring and challenging.

All best,



Arthur