

## An Interview With Danielle Georges

By Christina Pham

CP: What book have you read that has had the greatest influence on you?

DG: That's a tough one. I don't think I can name just one book. Books I've read in the past 10 years that have stayed with me include Marlene Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks* and *Looking For Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*. Édouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* and Edward Said's *Orientalism* have also had a great influence on me. I love the work of Toni Morrison, Maryse Condé, Rikki Ducornet, Harryette Mullen, Octavio Paz, Aimé Césaire, and the short stories of A.S. Byatt. I've also found John Keene's *Annotations* and Nurudin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* to be great.

CP: Which three words would you use to describe your poetry?

DG: I hope that it is true, engaged, and engaging.

CP: Your book will clearly have an effect on Haitian Americans. Is that the audience you primarily have in mind or do you feel that Maroon will cross cultural barriers and have an impact on the average reader?

DG: My hope is that *Maroon* appeals to all types of readers. I'm always happy when my writing resonates with Haitian Americans, and with readers of other backgrounds.

I think that my Haitian-American experience is probably not unlike other immigrant experiences. I think the immigrant experience is really the American experience (whether the

cont. on page 6

## HOW TO KISS

The children know how to kiss,  
to descend stairwells when called  
into rooms of colored lips

whispered *entendres*, demure smiles,  
the uncle who an *Kreyol* calls us  
"kochon mawon," "wild pigs."

We walk into crooned *comment va tu*  
*uus* rolling too long from gold-filled  
mouths,  
thistly jowls. We kiss

the cheek, the next cheek, and more  
cheeks, the odors of Vitalis  
(the smart man's hair tonic),

of Bain de Champagne, Chanel No. 5,  
Eau de Floride, of various adult *eau*.  
We bristle in advance against the teenager

whose five-o'-clock shadow goes  
from sun-yard  
to sit in parlors, his knees eclipsed in  
cloth,  
a foreshadow that we too would be  
the kissed.

But Pascale had the audacity, once,  
to alter form, opening her mouth  
to snake a tongue that swept

beige powder from the face of Madame  
Altagrâce LaVache, exposing a patch  
of brown from chin to ear.

"Un véritable scandale."

"Tongue on cheek?!"

"Truth indeed, the wild pigs!"

—Danielle Legos Georges  
From, *Maroon*

## Conversation by the Sea: An Interview with Roberto Sosa

by Jo Anne Engelbert

In Yoro, Honduras, birthplace of poet Roberto Sosa (1930), it occasionally rains fish — symbol, for García Márquez, of Latin America's magical realism. Showers of fish are not the town's only miracle, as we learned in an interview with Sosa during a conference in Belize.

JE: What was it like growing up in a remote rural area like Yoro? How did you learn about poetry there? There could not have been many books in Yoro.

RS: There were almost none. There were very few books in the entire town and hardly any in my school. It was almost impossible for me to find books. But nevertheless I discovered poetry there at the age of thirteen.

JE: How did that happen? What did you discover?

RS: I learned that poetry has the power to console. And because it does, we have to have it. Poetry fills a human need.

JE: How did you learn this?

RS: I'm blessed with an odd gift. I've always been able to memorize verses just by hearing or reading them a couple of times. I started repeating verses to myself in my mind, over and over. I would recite, mentally, *La prière pour tous* by Victor Hugo, actually the Spanish translation by Andrés Bello, *La oración por todos*

JE: That's an amazing translation; I love it too. Where did you hear or read

cont. on page 3



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## From the Publishers' Desk

### From the Desk of the Editors

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have inflicted trauma upon the country. We have probably all noticed how in the aftermath people have turned to poetry and music for solace and comfort. Auden's "September 1, 1939" was widely reprinted and circulated on the internet. At Curbstone, we also read together Yeats' "Lapis Lazuli" during our intern meeting (and determined not to break up our lines to weep, but to continue our work with the same determination as ever). Never has our mission seemed more important. Never has the need for intercultural understanding seemed greater, and the search for reconciliation or peace in this world more difficult.

We also found ourselves rereading Claribel Alegria's *Sorrow*—a poetic rendering of the process of grief, and Penny Rosenwasser's *Voices from a "Promised Land": Palestinian & Israeli Peace Activists Speak Their Hearts*, first published in 1992 but (unfortunately) as relevant today as ever. A number of people called us to say that having read Marnie Mueller's *The Climate of the Country* had helped them in dealing with issues of stereotyping (and several political leaders commented that we did not want to repeat the mistakes characteristic of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II).

We hope you enjoy the article on the dedication of the new Julia de Burgos Park—it is a community project we're proud to be part of. Our writers also continue to present workshops (in both Spanish and English) in public schools through Curbstone's educational outreach programs, with great results.

We want to express special thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts and the Connecticut Commission on the Arts for awarding grants that have been critical to Curbstone's publication program. Please consider helping us raise the matching funds for these grants by sending a donation in any amount that you can afford.

With all best wishes,

Judith Ayer Doyle and Alexander Taylor

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### MISSION AT THE HELM:

Curbstone Press, a 501(c)(3) arts and education organization, was founded in 1975 in Willimantic, Connecticut. Throughout its history, the Press's Board and Co-Directors have nurtured Curbstone's focus on creative literature that invites readers to examine social issues, encourages a deeper understanding between cultures, and reflects a commitment to promoting human rights. Curbstone's mission weaves together two interdependent programs: 1) publishing creative literature that illuminates the issues of our time, and 2) bringing writers into U.S. communities to promote literacy, knowledge about many cultures, respect for human rights, and appreciation of good literature, among people of all ages.

## Roberto Sosa Interview cont.

La oración por todos *if there weren't any books where you lived?*

RS: I have to thank my teacher, Joaquín Reyes Tejera. He was my Spanish teacher in public school. He loved poetry, and he put together a handwritten anthology for us.

JE: *How did he make copies?*

RS: He dictated the poems to us in class and we wrote them down. Then he corrected the copies and gave them back to us. And then they were ours to keep. I still have my copy.

JE: *What a labor of love.*

RS: He loved poetry, as I said, and he wanted us to love it too.

JE: *What poets were in the anthology besides Victor Hugo?*

RS: Rubén Darío, Amado Nervo, our Honduran poets, Juan Ramón Molina, Luis Andrés Zúñiga, Froylan Turcios, and many others. I memorized every poem.

JE: *Is that when you began to write poems?*

RS: Yes. I was fascinated by images, metaphors, and with the phenomenon of the truth expressed in verse. I guess you could say that I began to feel a desire to write because of what my teacher gave us to read, what I was exposed to. He showed me a path I could follow.

JE: *Did he help you?*

RS: When he saw I was interested in literature, he showed me the one or two books of poetry he possessed. Some elements of my poetry probably came from that reading. My fascination with the adjective, for example. I remember being astonished by the adjective “*espléndidas*,” for example, applied to a woman’s temples in a poem in my teacher’s book. I had scarcely even heard the word – or most of the other words for that matter. I think this teacher “put the arrows in my hand,” as we say in Spanish.

JE: *Were there other influences besides Joaquín Reyes Tejera?*

RS: A few years later, still in the forties, I came across a book by Giovanni Papini that made a tremendous impression on me. It was an autobiographical work called *Un uomo finito*, which I read in the Spanish translation, of course. What was so interesting to me was that Papini described the readings that led to his knowledge of literature. I had nothing else to go by, so I decided to follow this outline. Thanks to Papini, I read Homer, Dante, Petrarch, and all the other authors he mentions. By then I could get books in Tegucigalpa. But it was always hard for me to find them and then of course to afford to buy them.

JE: *Did you read them on your own?*

RS: Yes, I had no other choice. I remember one of the authors I read was Knut Hamsun.

JE: *Did he mean a lot to you?*

RS: Yes, I was impressed by his simplicity, his absolute lack of rhetoric. Nothing but the bare word. I consciously tried to imitate him. These readings began to open a new way for me, a kind of personal creation that was very simple, without pretension, and I hope without rhetoric.

JE: *When you started to write, no one in Honduras was doing what you were doing. You gave a model of a new kind of poetry.*

RS: I was attracted by testimonial writing. I suspected that this type of writing came closest to the truth. And for me, truth, a specific truth, had to be the basis of poetry. Honduras was not a folkloric reality, it was a transcendent reality, and this transcendence had to find its aesthetic formula. We had to find an exact base and the form to express it – this had to be balanced, integrated, like two halves of the same thing. I started from the social reality, the life I lived, the city reflected in mirrors, and tried to find the form.

JE: *Was it dangerous to publish Los pobres [The Poor]?*

RS: *Los pobres* was not extremely dangerous. At that time in Honduras there was not so much persecution as an eye watching you, constant surveillance. Intimidating, yes.

JE: *How about your next book, Un mundo para todos dividido [A World for All, Divided]?*

RS: Well, it’s an extension of the world of *Los pobres*. But the tone is more accusatory. My friend Andrés Morris said it conveys an atmosphere of fear. I guess he’s right. I wanted to portray the nervous system of a society in the process of collapse

JE: *I know that Secreto Militar was dangerous for you. I personally heard death threats.*

RS: *Secreto militar* was written to raise consciousness, to denounce a real gallery of criminals invested with absolute power: Somoza, Stroessner, Duvalier, Pinochet, Carías. It was a necessary book. I think I would have been incapable of not writing this book. I paid a price for it at the time. But strangely enough, these three books, *Los pobres*, *Un mundo para todos dividido* and *Secreto militar*, although they were problematic for me when I wrote them, had positive consequences for my life. They have been my way of earning a living.

JE: *It’s always seemed ironic to me that these books that branded you as someone to be watched are now required reading for Honduran students. Secreto militar was an exorcism, no? Your next two books, El llanto de las cosas [The Weeping of Things] and Máscara suelta [The Lifted Mask], have none of that vitriol.*

RS: In *El llanto de las cosas* I wanted to return to the things closest to my heart. It is practically a book of elegies. But the elegies are not for the dead, but for the living, for what I love and honor — persons, things, animals.

cont. page 6

## Dedication of the Julia de Burgos Park



On September 22, 2001, more than 150 people celebrated the opening of the Julia de Burgos Park in Willimantic, Connecticut, and paid homage to the noted Puerto Rican feminist, nationalist and poet, Julia de Burgos, with music, poetry, food, and laughter.

The park is the result of two years of planning by the Julia de Burgos Park Committee which included Windham Selectwomen Susan Johnson and Lourdes Montalvo, Curbstone co-directors Judith Doyle

and Alexander Taylor, artist Imna Arroyo, Carmelo Lebrón, local activists Yolanda Negrón, Juan Pérez, and Pedro Pérez, and architect Paula Stahl, who donated her time to the project. Juan Pérez was the committee chairperson and a driving force behind the project.

Jack Agüeros, who translated and edited the first bilingual volume of Julia de Burgos' poetry *Song of the Simple Truth*, delivered a moving tribute (see facing page) to this gifted



poet who was years ahead of her time politically and socially. Julia de Burgos was also honored with music by former Connecticut state troubadour Hugh Blumenfeld, and local folk musicians Arnalno y su Vertetú. Poetry

readings were given by Nicholasa Mohr, Martín Espada, Naomi Ayala, and Tino Villanueva. State Representative Walter Pawelkiewicz and First Selectman John Lescoe made speeches praising the community spirit of the park project. In addition to poetry and music, delicious food donated by members of the Latino/a community, as well as idyllic weather created an afternoon full of joy and spirit. Juan Pérez commented, "The crowd was really wonderful, the diversity of the group was great...there was a great sense of pride, of unity. To see all the people who knew of Julia de Burgos and her work and knew why the park was being dedicated in her memory, that was what I enjoyed the most."



That and the fact that it is a wonderful acknowledgment of the cultural contributions of the Puerto Rican community."

The park committee encourages the use of the park for poetry readings, theatre, and music. Architect



Paula Stahl designed the park with poetry in mind, including a small stone amphitheater. Imna Arroyo created a sign for the park, and Carmelo Lebrón from Pride's Corner Nursery donated plants and shrubs. The Curbstone-sponsored advanced poetry writing

group gave a very special gift to the park—a bench inscribed with lines of poetry.

The park is located across the street from Curbstone's offices. In the two weeks since the dedication, it has been a great pleasure to look out the window and see members of the community enjoying this space. Like any park, it is a piece of tranquility in a world of traffic and concrete. More than that, however, this park is



truly a symbol of community, creativity, and spirit. If the gathering on the twenty-second was any indication of things to come, the Julia de Burgos Park will provide a much-needed center where the creative spirit of a diverse and vibrant community can be explored and expressed.



Photos, clockwise from top left: Hugh Blumenfeld; members of the advanced writing group and Curbstone Co-Directors Taylor & Doyle with the poetry bench; young spectators; Nicholasa Mohr; Tino Villanueva; Rep. Walter Pawelkiewicz with Reverend Ana Maria Falcón and Juan Pérez; Naomi Ayala; First Selectman John Lescoe. Top right photo by Stephen W. Welch; all other photos copyright 2001 by Doug Anderson.

Facing page: Jack Agüeros.

## A Tribute to Julia, by Jack Agüeros

Good afternoon, friends and neighbors.

Good afternoon, Julia de Burgos.

Julia, we love you.

We love Julia de Burgos because she was an exemplary human being. Julia de Burgos was a country girl and grew up dirt poor. A fair student, she won scholarships to high school and college and became an elementary schoolteacher.

We love Julia de Burgos because she was a woman ahead of her time – who fought sexism, who fought fascism, who fought class and racial prejudice.

We love Julia de Burgos because she spoke out against fascism, and against colonialism, and she lambasted dictators.

We love Julia de Burgos because she admitted that she came from the quote “existential nothing” unquote.

And we love Julia de Burgos for her indomitable spirit—her spirit which is here today—with us—in this wonderful park.

Hello, Julia, ... we love you.

We love Julia because she suffered what so many Puerto Ricans and other migrants suffered—marginal jobs and poor pay. And, when she finally got a decent job in Washington, D.C., working for an agency directed by Nelson Rockefeller, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI forced Rockefeller to fire her.

We also love you Julia de Burgos, because you left us some superb poems... Here are some of your lines Julia...

*En mi no, que en mí manda mi solo corazón.  
Quien manda en mí soy yo.  
Not in me, in me only my heart governs.  
Who governs in me is me.*

*Río Grande de Loíza! Alárgate en mi espíritu.  
Río Grande de Loíza! Elongate yourself in my spirit.*

*Ay, ay, ay, que soy grifa y pura negra.  
Ay, ay, ay, that am kinky haired and pure black.*

*Yo quise ser como los hombres quisieron que yo fuese  
Pero yo estaba hecha de presentes...  
I wanted to be like men wanted me to be  
But I was made of now's...*



*Como suena en mi alma la idea  
De una noche completa en tus brazos.  
How the idea resonates in my soul  
Of a complete night in your arms.*

And for the dictator, Trujillo:

*Que ni muerto ni las rosas del amor te sostengan,  
General de la muerte, para ti la impiedad.  
May not even dead the roses of love sustain you,  
General of Death—for you impiety.*

Julia, tomorrow is the 133<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of “El Grito de Lares” that first attempt of Puerto Ricans to be independent from Spain...

*23 de septiembre, santo y por siempre vivo  
y gritando en los héroes sobre toda la tierra.  
23<sup>rd</sup> of September, holy and forever alive  
and howling in heroes all over the earth.*

Julia de Burgos, this is why we love you. This is why your friends made a park for you. *Disfrútalo*—enjoy. We love you, Julia. We mean it.

We love you Julia...

Because you are beautiful like the grass.

Because you are essential like the grass.

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*Song of the Simple Truth* by Julia de Burgos, edited and translated by Jack Agüeros. ISBN 1-880684-24-1, \$ 21.95 paperback, 523pp. Published by Curbstone Press.

migration happened a decade ago or a few hundred years ago). My feeling is that we, in the Americas, are all marked in some way or another by movement and displacement. *Maroon* takes some of this on, but it also takes on moments of everyday life that occur between the larger motion.

CP: What is your aim in writing poetry?

DG: In reference to the power of poetry and the word, the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca said, "Oh it caught me up in the fiercest typhoon I had ever been in and from which I never escaped. I have continually swirled like a leaf." Strong feeling, but not unlike how I feel about writing poetry. I feel compelled to write. What I hope emerges is writing that is meaningful to others.

## Recommended from Other Presses:

*So You Want To Write* by Marge Piercy and Ira Wood (LeapFrog) • *Carver: A Life in Poems* by Marilyn Nelson (Front Street) • *The Ordinary White Boy* by Brock Clark (Harcourt) • *Payday at the Triangle*, poems by Ruth Daigon (Small Poetry Press) • *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* by Christoher Hitchens (Verso) • *The Best of Times* by Haynes Johnson (Harcourt) • *Stop Breaking Down*, short stories by John McManus (Picador) • *An American Child Supreme: the Education of a Liberal Ecologist* by John Nichols (Milkweed) • *Catfish & Mandala* by Andrew X. Pham (Flamingo) • *Sleeping with Cats: a Memoir* by Marge Piercy (William Morrow) • *Solitude of Self* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Paris Press) • *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* by Linda Van Devanter (University of Massachusetts Press) • *The Half-Finished Heaven: The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer* translated by Robert Bly (Graywolf Press) .

*Triolets for Triolet*, has been published by Curbstone in collaboration with its author, Marilyn Nelson, to benefit L'Association D'Alphabetisation de Fatima, Triolet, Mauritius — a literacy program in Triolet. This handsewn booklet is illustrated with drawings of masks by Stephen D. Arnold. There are 300 numbered copies in this edition, signed by the author and the artist. As Marilyn Nelson states in her preface, "I got to know the people of a Creole village called Triolet during a visit to the island nation of Mauritius in 1999. As Creoles—mixed-blood people of African descent—they are at the bottom of their social and economic scale... A few months before my visit, Triolet was firebombed in the night, an act of racist violence. Eighteen houses and a school were destroyed. I spent a lot of time in Triolet during my visit. As we exchanged smiles, theirs shyly respectful for the rich black university professor from a distant world they could not dream of ever being able to visit, I felt both our differences and our affinity, as descendants of African slaves.

"There are diasporan villages like Triolet on islands in two oceans, and on three continents. Their inhabitants range through the same beautiful spectrum of browns, and suffer the same poverty, the same indignities, the same inherited shame. By coincidence, I discovered the poetic form just as I decided to try to do something to raise money to help the people of Triolet... This poem is for Triolets everywhere."

Because *Triolets for Triolet* is being published in a small, limited edition, and sold to raise funds for the community in Triolet, it is only available direct from Curbstone Press, from the author, and the artist. No discounts are available for this book. \$25.00 / ISBN: 1-880684-85-3 / 24 pages.

Any additional donations for this project can be made to Curbstone Press, and write "Triolet" on the memo line.

JE: And Máscara suelta?

RS: The theme is woman. Eroticism, but a "musical eroticism" — not desire, but a restrained, attenuated emotion that would show the complexity of a hand reaching toward another hand.

JE: This woman is not an object?

RS: Oh, no. She is companion, friend, lover, defender of the hearth, the balance between spirit and matter.

JE: I have never seen woman less objectified, more complete.

RS: I mean for her to be the symbol of the genius of the species.

JE: You identify woman with the sea.

RS: My link to the sea started in the womb. My mother was in Trujillo before I was born, a beautiful port where the waves crash against the shore. The sea is a center of beauty because it is a terrifying mass. It attracts us strongly because we can't save ourselves from it and because we know that we emerged from its waters. The shore attracts us because we want to come closer to the sea, we want to submerge ourselves in it, even though this ice can become death; we can't resist. The sea makes us feel humble, helpless, completely defenseless, because it most resembles the unknown. Love may be the only salvation from the destructive image of the danger of the sea. The music of the sea is the music of the spheres the philosophers talked about. When everything has turned to stone, the music of the sea may persist.

JE: I was just thinking about Joaquín Reyes Tejada. Teachers can never be sure what they may set in motion.

RS: That's a good thing!

"Freedoms, like privileges, prevail or are imperiled together. You cannot harm or strive to achieve one without harming or furthering all."  
—José Martí  
Cuban Statesman (1853-1895)

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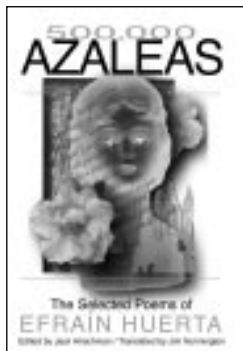


Residents of New York City's South Bronx neighborhood live in the most severe and widespread poverty of any U.S. metropolitan area.

*In the South Bronx of America* offers an intimate view of life in this neighborhood and a context for understanding decades of social decay. Mel Rosenthal's photographs celebrate the human spirit that survives amid economic hardship and political neglect. They have been exhibited nationwide to critical acclaim.

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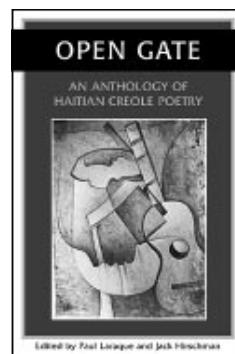


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