

Ralph Angel Interviewed

by John Pursley III

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John Pursley III: Before we begin talking about the poems in your new book *Your Moon*, winner of the 2013 Green Rose Prize (forthcoming from New Issues Press: Spring 2014), I was hoping you might reflect a bit upon the your career as a poet. In 2006 Sarabande Books published *Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986-2006*, a book of selected poems which spans two decades of your writing life. Putting this book together must have been challenging in a number of ways, but I wonder if putting the book together forced you to evaluate your place in American poetry, and if so what were some of your conclusions?

Ralph Angel: No, I was just working away, making the greater assemblage of the book. The title, the selections, the new poems were a given somehow, and the tracking of the selected poems was essential this time around, tracking had a lot to do with *Exceptions and Melancholies*.

JP: The idea of tracking is an interesting one because it acknowledges the breadth of the poetry through the years as well as the depth thematically. I wonder if this process felt markedly different when composing your new collection, *Your Moon*, as the follow-up album after a sort of "greatest hits" record? Is this idea of tracking applicable to the creation of new work as well?

RA: Each collection has been assembled differently. Yes, I needed *Exceptions and Melancholies* to track somehow, but the book that came out before it, *Twice Removed*, was arranged wholly by tone. It's not unlike entering into the making of a lyric poem. I don't much know where I'm going, but it's my job to go there. Even if at times I don't want to find out what's there, it's how any given poem gets made. Though I always know when I have a new collection, I never know what it looks like. This time around, as it turned out, the shape of *Your Moon* grew from expressions of personal and spiritual intimacy. And what we're talking about, of course, is the "art" part, of which the reader never need be aware.

JP: I'm happy to hear you mention this idea of arranging by tone. I've always thought of *Twice Removed* as somewhat like Mark Rothko's color fields or Joseph Cornell's boxes in that the poems in this collection seem to balance the very tangible, often multidimensional nature of a cityscape while also embracing an abstract expressionistic quality of arrangement leaning toward the surreal. The poems feel very selfless to me. They have an almost out-of-body or alienated sensibility to them, a Whitman-esque looking outward to define the self and the reality of the self. Whereas, the poems in

Your Moon, as you've said, growing from expressions of personal and spiritual intimacy, bring to mind Dickinson's poems in the way that they seem to look inward as a way of knowing the world. I guess that's a long way of saying *Twice Removed* seems to reflect outward whereas the new collection seems to reflect inward. Can you identify where this shift in perception happened—an event in your life? A new influence?

RA: Hey, thanks for your characterization of the two books. And such company! Maybe after we finish this interview we could all meet for a drink or something! But no, no event or new influence. Whenever I find myself thinking that this is what I'm doing, I'm quite certain that I'm already doing something else. I'm not much interested in the story of my life. I am interested in the fact of my reality. I'm interested in the language of presence and immediacy. Language that both generates and depicts it. And if a poem spins a reader into his or her own reality, then, well, I'm always especially grateful and happy to hear about that.

JP: I might even be willing to pick up the bill for an evening like that! One thing that I've always recognized in your work is your ability to keep your poems spontaneous and immediate in a way that brings to mind many of Charles Olson's revolutionary ideas in "Projective Verse" . . . ideas certainly championed and written about a lot today by Donald Revell. All of which seems to relate with Lorca's duende. I suppose I don't have a specific question here, but I would really be interested in hearing you talk more about these concepts and perhaps the idea of the poet as artist and/or arbiter of poetry . . .

RA: Spontaneous and immediate sound good to me. You know, it's the job of the artist to be attentive. And to be attentive is to be present. It's a discipline, and it takes practice, and, like poetry itself for me, it becomes a way of life. Interesting that you mentioned Rothko in your previous question, as I quoted him in a talk I gave last month at Vermont College of Fine Arts: "The progression of a painter's work," he wrote, "as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the observer." Why would anyone reach for less?

JP: I've read you worked for the Union Pacific Railroad while earning your undergraduate degree at the University of Washington. I would venture to guess—it certainly was true in my case—that for most people those undergraduate years are pretty formative. I grew up in a small town in rural Missouri and worked a number of jobs throughout college and grad school—from working graveyard shifts at a gas station to operating heavy machinery building in-ground swimming pools—and ultimately found those experiences hugely rewarding, though challenging at the time to say the least; however, somehow they've brought me to the place I now inhabit. Can you talk a little about your journey, which some might see as circuitous, from your early experiences to your role now as a renowned poet and professor?

RA: Good question. I don't think we make the big decisions in life. Just all the little decisions along the way. And eventually we find ourselves doing what we're doing

because of who we are. I'm second-generation American, and was the first in my family to go to college, and I loved every minute of it. And at the same time I worked freight trains as a switchman alongside union guys for union wages. And I learned a lot from those guys, a whole lot. And each world kept the other in perspective somehow. It was an intensely rich time. Just like life! The joke about me in my family is that, from the get go, my middle sister had both feet planted in the old country, and that my little sister had both feet in the new country, and that because I had one foot in each I had no choice but to make art! Go figure.

JP: I like the idea of the artist as multifaceted, with a foot in two worlds at once. It seems to me that balance is important to making art, and it's something that I see often in your work. "Nature," one of the poems in your newest book, really strikes me in this regard. The relationship between the natural world (the trees, ivy, stones, etc.) and the manmade world (the air conditioner, plywood, generator, etc.) is interesting to me because you resist the urge to romanticize either one of them and allow them to coexist, whereas I recently heard that Andrew Wyeth, to bring another painter into the mix, intentionally left out power lines, telephone poles, and any signs of modern technology to make his paintings more austere and iconic. Has this impulse changed for you over the years?

RA: You're right, now that I think about it—I don't much distinguish between the two, or of even the third, unseen part of it all. I'm a helplessly urban person, but that doesn't really explain it. I began making "Nature" the way the poem itself begins—looking out a window into some trees, and noting that and what I saw there. And then noting other details and images that were there, or that came to me as they came to me. Images that I'd been carrying around for a few days or weeks. And though I hesitated more than once along the way—I mean I wasn't saying anything, was I?—I could hear the music in it, and could sense its own momentum. I don't remember exactly when I wrote Nature at the top of the page, but it was near the end, I think, and I must have sensed at that moment that I'd been saying it all along. Defining it even, maybe.

JP: Could you talk a little bit more about this "third, unseen part of it all"? I know this could perhaps mean different things to different people, but I'm wondering if you see it functioning within your work and/or within art in a more general sense?

RA: As the elders say, "The groundlessness beneath your feet." And yes, it's all over my work, and all over my life, especially as I grow older.

JP: I love the poem "Conversation" in which you say, "So I / talked to I, I said / fuck death, everyone / I meet knows / someone // I know. I said / it's nice to be happy, / but no one / believes / me." I feel like this is (pardon the expression) a conversation that continues throughout the duration of *Your Moon*, but what interests is how the simplicity and boldness of the statement *it's nice to be happy* is complicated by the enjambment surrounding it, which encourages the lines to be read in multiple ways.

Could you talk about this technique, particularly in this poem, but perhaps also as it functions through the book? I really love the sincerity of that statement and how distrustful we are of it.

RA: You're right, the conversation continues throughout. You might be getting that sense because *Your Moon* is really driven by poems of address—poems addressed to a you. And you is unique. It's the only pronoun that can't stand alone. There can be no you without an I. And so, by the nature of the pronoun, those poems depict relationship, or intimacy, or the lack thereof. There are multiple speakers in *Your Moon*, and multiple addressees, and I probably couldn't put a name to many of them. In my trance I often felt like I *was* in conversation. At times, I was flat-out channeling. Very weird, very lonely, in an ironic sort of way, and fun. In fact, I had fun making "Conversation." I'd been mostly holed-up for a couple days, and my head was a garbage dump of too much thinking. So I was pretty much disgusted, but I was really listening, I just kept listening, and every time I entered my trance another convoluted rubbishy thought got expressed in very simple language. It was embarrassing, and made me laugh.

JP: One of the qualities that I've always admired in your work is the stillness you create within your poems. In the poem "Fear of Death," that mode is particularly striking in the way it isolates each element in the scene, particularly the person's hand, and creates an intimacy with a moment rather than with a living subject. The poem concludes:

And next to the bowl of plums

a small bronze coffee pot

right where your hand

is nearly touching it.

Yes,

it's the best spot

and exactly where to stop.

RA: Thanks, John.