

New Interview from Larry Abbott: Suzanne Rancourt on Poetry, Myth, Nature, Indigenous Life

Suzanne Rancourt's new book of poems, *Old Stones, New Roads* (2021) builds on the work of her two previous books (*Billboard in the Clouds*, 2014, and *murmurs at the gate*, 2019). She dedicates the book to her grandmother, Alice Pearl, "who told me stories of where each stone came from that she used to build the hearth at the camp on Porter Lake." The "old stones," the stories, link past to present, and are both literal and symbolic, representing not only one's personal past but also the psychological markers of family, relationships, art, history, culture, and heritage. In the same way that Alice's stones are laid and build, "braided," to create the hearth, Rancourt's poems create a braid of the natural world and the human world, memory and the present, and myth and history. The "old stones" are also the poems from her earlier work that create a pathway to the present and the future.



The first poem in the collection, “Tunkashila” (which means grandfather in Lakota), links the natural and human worlds. As a child, Rancourt “becomes” an eagle as she climbs a white pine, going further into the sky: “I climb to teetering ethers/I stretch as mist/along the silver thread thrown down from the heavens.” As the poem ends she hears her mother and father calling her name, and “my grandfather/calling.” The connection to nature is also revealed in “Cyclops Fermata.” As Rancourt prays she observes the animals around her and recognizes a symbiotic relationship with them: “We listen to one another even when everyone goes silent/for the hawks who wait for me/to place fingers in my mouth and whistle back.”

In "When the Air is Dry" from *Billboard in the Clouds* Rancourt writes "these memories are distant/yet as shadows leak through pine needles,/ . . .they continue to seep . . . through my mind/into my children's lives." Memories are not compartmentalized and bracketed, but bear, in both positive and negative ways, on the present. Memories of childhood experiences and family relationships go hand and hand with memories of trauma and loss. She develops this theme in "In My Mother In Me" from the new collection. She recalls some familial details about her mother, but more importantly shows how deeply her late mother's presence is embedded in her and the family: "You are in the bowl of consciousness everyone feeds from/at family dinners, birthdays, and wakes./You are in my heart and hand that grips the sword."

In one of the best poems from the new collection, "Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me," she develops similes based on personal memories to express recognition of the "jolting screech" of death: "ceased engines from pistons thrown/or the menacing zing of circular saws at Grampa's lumber mill/stopped solid by hardwood knots" At the same time she understands that "My dreams/Mum's dreams/are a place where this one moment/is all moments/an electric arc of connections . . . "

Myth and place are also central to Rancourt's work, where ancient regions bear on the present. She locates some poems in Greece and weaves myth with her sensations and observations. In "Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay" she writes: "More ancient than these chiseled stones/spit forth from the annals of Khaos—I remember and return— . . . "

Methana, a Greek town on a volcanic peninsula, holds special import. Poems such as "Leaving Methana" and "The Shores of Methana," where "A Poseidic wave draws love from my chest," use place to connect their ancient stones to new roads.

Similarly, in "Voyage," she imagines a return to primal beginnings: "I would slip across cold waters to warm shores/archetypical images of real lives, hardships

fossilized/in the caves of Innis nan Damh rumbling/in the hollow rib cage of the oldest known cave bear skeleton . . .
" The imaginative memory takes her to Ullapool and Achadh Mealvaich and "braids me with the Norse Moors of Scotland."
She ends:

*I would go there again as my ancestors
Travel gulf stream waters to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia,
Where the Red Paint people curled into the shape
of an ear to earth we listen
as our ochre painted bodies—our blood painted bodies
return to life*

The poem is a way to show a reciprocal relationship with her ancestors. For Rancourt the myths and stories of Greece and Scotland shape her life in the same way that indigenous myths and stories shape that life. Rancourt, like Whitman, "contains multitudes." The interlaced braids of one's existence, Rancourt suggests, should not be unwound, for to do so would make a counterfeit of life. Her poems remind us that, as much as we might wish, we are not just "of today" but are the living legacy of the "braided stones" of our past and will become a "braided stone" for the future.



I discussed some of the poems with Rancourt. That conversation follows.

LARRY ABBOTT: What is the importance of Greece and Greek myths, like in the poems “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” “The Shores of Methana,” and “Akhelios Comes to Shore”?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: Everything! My need to travel is about collecting all the parts of me while honoring all of my ancestors, experiences, and the sense that maybe this isn't the first time I've lived through these experiences. The poems you mentioned are layers of memories, experiences, and sensations that aligned in one moment of enlightenment and from that emerged the poems. For example, in “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” there is a real, physical place that I go to in Greece, called Methana, for the natural volcanic, outdoor, sulfur baths. Methana is technically not an island, however, the land bridge is barely a two lane road. Thus, it holds its own identity which hails its support for Sparta – back in the day. There is this phenomenon referred to as “collective consciousness,” which can feel like a *deja vu* experience or a slight vibration or recognition that may not make sense but is quite real. Methana does that for me and by giving myself permission to bathe in this resonance, healing can occur in my recognizing a familiarity or kinship or existence or “I've been here before.” The Greek spelling of “Oya” is “Oia.” It is pronounced “EE-yaa.” It is this literal sound of the name that aligns, in a calibrating manner, cultures, my own lived experiences, metaphors, temperament, traits, and ancestors. My family has a history of lightning. My three military enlistments. Three marriages. The role and strong attributes of Oya (Santeria) in my contemporary life are significant. The cover of the new book is a photo of the altar at Acropolis Oya, which is a real place. As a writer, a witness, I gave myself permission to feel this place and its power. At times, overwhelming, but nonetheless what emerged were the alignments of emotions,

memories, and “aha” moments that as writer I crafted into this poem. First, the initial write to allow the synchronicity to emerge naturally, organically. Then, I allowed the poem to inspire and guide further research. War is as ancient as the beginning of time and thus warriors are equally ancient. And if war and warriors are as old as the beginning of time, so is PTSD, and so is the need for healing, and so is the migration to sacred springs and sulfur baths and to bathe in waters that Spartans had bathed, to walk to the Acropolis Oya to the altar stone and spring to overlook the bay, well, that’s pretty damn powerful.

In “The Shores of Methana” the tone and imagery create the in-between space where I, as a simple human being, am easing into the power of place. Wherever we travel, for whatever reason, a significant part of understanding history, people and culture, is “feeling” the environment, the power of place. It usually takes me a bit of time to “settle down” enough to ease into to place. Listening to the space, employing spidey senses, or dowsing – whatever you choose to call it – is step one. Giving yourself permission to acknowledge any recollections, memories, while taking note, literally, where in your body you feel this is significant. Self- forgiveness is a biggie in my world, and in the world of survivors’ guilt along with the “should’a, could’a would’a” shit. Healing takes time – lifetimes.

Regarding “Akhelios Comes to Shore,” on trans-Atlantic flights I always carry a small journal with me. I simply free write. I take note of sights, sounds, smells, gestures. It is good practice, in general, leading to spatial awareness, situational awareness. Later, I’ll go back and see what emerges. There is a lot of truth in the world of absurdity because truth can definitely be absurd. I gave myself permission to honor the tone of this poem’s narrator. The poem was inspired by a real person on a very long trans-Atlantic flight. I let the poem sit for a bit and then out of

curiosity I wanted to know if there was a Greek deity that was a shark. And guess what I found? Akhelios. And guess what? People make billions off wars.

LARRY ABBOTT: “Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me” is one of the best poems, with strong similes. There is a merging or weaving of past and present: “this one moment/is all moments.” Can you discuss the poem?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: Time, and its concept, isn't just a singular, linear event. Perhaps for folks whose vagal system has not been awakened by threats of death and other trauma intensities that flip sensory systems on, or people who have not experienced death in what some refer to as Near Death Experiences (NDE), perhaps life is one-dimensional. For those who have experienced the scenarios previously mentioned, “time” and “life” are multi-dimensional with layers of events occurring synchronistically. Western medicine, for the most part, doesn't acknowledge this perspective. My Indigenous, cultural perspective, elders, and traditional ceremonies do. So did Einstein. The line you sight is a line describing the moment where a calibration clicks in. These moments can be disconcerting. They are fleeting and an individual can begin to “chase them.” Don't do that as the present moment is gone. Instead, acknowledge, to the best of your ability, in a mindful manner, to the best of your ability, what that “aha” sensation literally felt like in your body. Focus on that for a moment. This poem was indeed inspired by the dream described in the poem. This is a non-fiction poem. In my culture, dreams are powerful. Write them, sing them, dance them, paint them – people need your art, need to hear that their experiences are not isolated. Remember – lifetimes of wars equal lifetimes of warriors equal lifetimes of PTSD, grief, comradeships, unified purpose, service, loss, moral dilemmas and needs for healing. Pay it forward by sharing your experiences in an honest manner. Be authentic. Be yourself.

LARRY ABBOTT: In “Voyage” what is the Scottish and Red Paint People connection?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: This poem is another true-events-and-facts poem where in my travels I am not only honoring all of my ancestors, but in so doing I am regrouping the scattered fragments of my identity, humanness, and personhood. The poem addresses the synchronicity of overlaid time and events. Again, some of these natural experiences can be disconcerting. However, the Northwest Highlands are naturally mystical and that’s where I actually was, physically hiking the land. This poem speaks of my ancestors and tribal clans from Scotland. Keep in mind, that the waters of the Northwest Coast, Scotland, are Gulf Stream currents that carried ancient peoples back and forth all the way into Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Maine. Their use of ochre in burial rituals is also connected to the constellation Cygnus, as well as the Milky Way. Seafarers were keenly knowledgeable in the areas of navigation by stars. A voyage can be lifetimes. All my ancestors are of warrior class. Navigating the home journey can be rough. For me, understanding where I come from clarifies my forward motion. I am never alone and my ancestors are always present.

LARRY ABBOTT: What are the “humming strands of DNA” in “When Your G String Breaks”? Native and European heritage? Any other poems along these lines?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: The Vibration Principle. Quantum Physics. Hair carries DNA. Among Indigenous people hair is especially sacred and is only cut in rare circumstances. It has always been, and continues to be taught, that hair connects us to our ancestors and that long hair is special. I was prohibited from cutting my hair in Basic Training, MCRD, Parris Island. I’m grateful for that. This poem was inspired by my actually needing to change the strings on my 12 string guitar because, yes, the G-string broke. Literally, the strings looked like long hair draping over the body. I gave myself permission to

use all of my senses, to feel, remember, and to simply free write. This poem was not written in one session. I would let it season and then go back in to further explore, do more free writing, even when the surprises surfaced. Because the guitar is a vibrational instrument, the metaphors emerged naturally. As a writer, I researched various science fields for language that fit both the concrete and abstract metaphorical aspects. DNA is a code in the most microchip data concept imaginable. It is an ID, a tracking device, storing our personal history record; constructed to make certain we don't truly lose ourselves; every single cell of our physical body carries this information. Our bodies remember everything, and whether we cognitively acknowledge those memories or not, our bodies do. Thus, being in places, doing particular things, "awakens" memories. For healing purposes, where we go, what we do, and with whom we travel, matters. There are some places I have an aversion to.

LARRY ABBOTT: What is the importance of these specific places, like in "In the Regions of High Metamorphism"?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: First off, I found the similarity between amygdaloidal and amygdala fascinating. One references the geological phenomenon creating vesicles that form in igneous rock, or cooled lava, and the latter, references the almond-shaped part of the brain significant in regulating fight, flight, or freeze emotions and survival responses. Of course, metamorphism is changing the shape of things. I had to travel far from certain environments to change something, to heal something, to appreciate something. For me, to set out of chaotic conditions, I was drawn to Methana. I stood inside a volcano's lava tube. I gave myself permission to feel with my body, to receive a vibration, perhaps, to give myself permission to live, to heal, to receive life while honoring who and what I am as a human being. High Metamorphism.

LARRY ABBOTT: "Swan Dive" a concrete poem. I don't recall you've done others like this.

SUZANNE RANCOURT: I mentioned the constellation, Cygnus, also known as the Northern Cross, earlier. It is significant for navigation. This poem also asked of me as a writer to have a shape. It is a poem about letting go of the various types of control that keep memory doors shut, compartmentalized and finally, feeling safe enough to open them. We white-knuckle our shit as though we're the only ones who have had certain experiences and while no two people have the identical experience, it is also true that as human beings we can relate through emotional context. For example, most humans have lost a loved one to death. We can find areas of common emotional experience when we are honest with ourselves. This takes courage and often times, proper support. This poem for me is a type of resolution that finally I feel I have explored all my nooks and crannies of shit and, finally, I'm o.k. with knowing where I've been because I'm here now. Something about the sulfur baths washed clean many haunts.

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Old Stones, New Roads, Main Street Rag Publishing,
www.mainstreetrag.com

murmurs at the gate, Unsolicited Press,
www.unsolicitedpress.com

Billboard in the Clouds, Curbstone Press/Northwestern University Press, <http://nupress.northwestern.edu/>

See also:

Rancourt's [website](#)

[*Native Voices: Indigenous Poetry, Craft, and Conversations*](#), ed. by CMarie Fuhrman and Dean Radar, Tupelo Press.