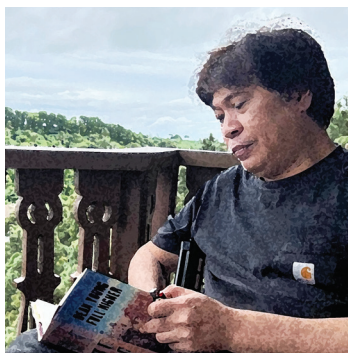


TRYING TO PRAY: NOTES ON CRAFTING POETRY

by Joel M. Toledo



Joel M. Toledo has authored five books of poetry. His works have appeared in The Iowa Review, The Prairie Schooner, The Washington Square, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, and Cordite Poetry Review. Toledo was a winner of The Bridport Prize for Poetry and the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, a recipient of the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Italy Creative Arts Residency in 2011 and 2023, and a fellow for Poetry to the International Writers Program in Iowa. His new collection of poems will come out in 2023.

This piece talks about my process in writing a poem, which goes without saying that the thoughts and ideas I'm putting down here are not meant to be prescriptive. There are many approaches to and schools of thought in writing poetry, this simply being a little rumination and my own personal take.

The poet James Wright once wrote a piece called "Trying to Pray," which struck me as *Ars Poetica* of some sorts about the kind of place one should strive to be in when contemplating poetry. Hereunder is that poem:

Trying to Pray

This time, I have left my body behind me, crying
In its dark thorns.
Still,
There are good things in this world.
It is dusk.
It is the good darkness
Of women's hands that touch loaves.
The spirit of a tree begins to move.
I touch leaves.
I close my eyes and think of water.

Terse as the poem may be, there are many powerful images conjured therein. The lines read as a meditation on the title and an elaboration on the subject. But there is an attempt to be random in the choice of images that makes them not necessarily align with (nor connect directly with, in a formalistic way) those that come before and those that follow.

It begins with a presentation of an instance, the phrase "this time" connoting a ritualistic repetition of the act and making the reader feel that there is something different about this particular attempt at praying. Interestingly, the initial idea of leaving the body crying and thorns is quickly followed by what one can perceive as an early turn, maneuvering the poem toward the claim of "good things" left in the world. It's an unusual placement of the poetic turn, which is usually seen toward the end of poems. The images then proceed to the poet's take on this goodness, beginning with dusk and the hands of women touching loaves to a tree's spirit, touching leaves, and the last image of thinking of water with the person's eyes closed.

Craft-wise, there is a clear attempt to steer away from tired ideas related to the subject matter (thus avoiding the curse of the cliché). The enjambments and line cuts are likewise devoid of symmetry, punctuated by

a plenitude of end-stopped lines. This decision on Wright's part makes the poem dissimilar to the chant-like expectation one may have of a prayer, as though the poet is careful to pause longer between each presented idea and elaboration on the poem's subject. It may also reflect a feeling of hesitation, of uncertainty in the tone, with each difficult imagining and incarnation of this attempt at praying.

The digression above is important because it reminds me that in trying to decipher poetry, I must not impatiently jump into what the poem means. The power of this poem is in its hauntedness, which I believe to be a function of its unpredictability. A predictable poem often fails because the reader anticipates common associations. In other words, this poem succeeds because it is well-crafted, not because of the canopy assault of insight.

In my literature and workshop classes, I always champion the idea of reading the lines before reading between the lines. Many students and other beginning-readers of poetry are daunted enough by poems because they have been lulled into this idea that what matters most in poetry is "getting it." There's an expectation that poetry is by default elusive, that it hides behind its veil some grand epiphany. Many students believe that the only reward of reading poetry is arriving at this insight, and there are those who perpetuate this notion.

As a result, most readers fail to appreciate the crucial role crafting plays in poetry. It is a scholarly approach to dissect poetry line by line or with each train of thought as it progresses, to be sure. But without considering the primacy of language (the poet's only tool), a discussion of a poem becomes no more than a guessing game, nothing but approximations of the poet's intentions. Instead of aspiring for eureka moments, we can focus more on and test the beauty of diction, syntax, utterances, the use or non-use of figurative language, etc. Meaning can wait.

This care for words, this heightening of language, is key to any poet's labor, even as they likewise hope to provide a glimpse of "the good things in the world," or the real (National Artist Dr. Gémino H. Abad often says that the poem is the real).

Of course, it is also important to cultivate a healthy envy of other people's poems. Writing poetry without reading the work of fellow poets leads only to complacency and a sedentary style. Reading James Wright's poem above, I did feel pushed to study it more closely. At some point, "Trying to Pray" has morphed, for me, into both an analogy and a meditation on how difficult it can be to contemplate writing a poem. On both occasions, it's hard to find the words. To break away from prescribed conventions. To not just go through the motion but sound sincere.

The new book I'm hoping to get published soon is called *Planet Nine*, a collection of 50-something poems. The title is taken from a suite I submitted to the *Likhaan Journal* of the University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing (ICW) a few years ago, which contained a poem of the same title. After the suite had been (thankfully) accepted, I began turning it into a collection that aligned with this poem's ambition.

The composition of this collection is not exactly random, in that I've been drawn to writing poems about history, science, and the phenomenal of late. The title poem, for example, is about the debate and heated theorizing of recent years in the scientific community about the possibility of a ninth planet orbiting our solar system. The persona in the poem meditates on this presence or lack thereof, while using allusions to Zen principles side by side with concepts from math and science. It's an effort to question the importance of being and being *there*. And, I guess, as a fictitious version of Pablo Neruda in the movie *Il Postino* said, man's obsession with "the simplicity and complexity of things." I've placed the poem at the end of this essay.

The poem I want to talk more about is called “Muon.” This came about after a science documentary I recently saw on a still understudied force that might exist and answer interesting questions we have about how the universe works.

I wrote “Muon” as one longish stanza, reflecting the possible wholeness of it as not just a concept but also a *thing*. It follows the rumination of a persona in some fog-hugged countryside setting. Throughout the poem, Muon becomes a persistent presence and companion for the persona, at times a spirit-like being in the firmament, in other instances alluded to, personified.

I wanted to locate the poem in a pastoral setting and progress the poem’s plot, as it were, by having the persona encounter and “react” to the scenery with musings on the concept of Muon. I also juxtaposed pastoral images with science-related terms that align with the idea. While not really intended as a poetic turn, the poem eventually becomes a plea for an answer relating to the death of the persona’s mother, that maybe “science is needed to move on.” And the futility of such a request. “Muon” ultimately becomes a way to deal with this emotional turmoil, a promising idea that itself doesn’t promise any real recompense.

In trying to craft the poem, I wanted to work with words that half-rhyme, to add musicality to the seeming randomness of images and utterances as the poem moved on. I hoped that this aspiration for rhythm and cadence would guide the reader as they are confronted with the speaker’s thoughts and his own “reading” of his encounters as he hikes up the mountain and comes back to the villa in the poem. In the end, the whisperings of Muon seem to grow faint as the persona finally closes the door. Perhaps this act signified a quiet acceptance. Perhaps this, too, was my own way of trying to pray, for closure.

While the poem could, of course, be read in many other ways, I thought that this is a good occasion to hear about intentions. Were “Muon”

to be discussed somewhere else, I'm sure it would generate various other interpretations. But I also believe that such "meanings" will more or less be proximate if any poem's situation is clear. And that harkens back to care for craft, a mindfulness of poetic devices, and a high regard for the oft-underestimated need for claims and images to feed off one another. In the house that is the poem, whose many rooms I hope the reader would explore. Whose lines I wish they would first read before exiting.

MUON

A fifth fundamental force might help explain some of the big puzzles about the Universe that have exercised scientists in recent decades. ~ BBC

The key to how the world works: Muon.
After the fog had withdrawn one morning,
I hiked up the mountain trail to see
what lay beyond the sentry of cypresses,
lured onward by the constant cawing
of crows. And Muon. Happened upon
an altar in the forest, the Mary's face
almost gone, as though the cold marble
gave out from being smashed by atoms,
the resulting shadows forming Muon.
Perhaps we are spinning faster
than we should, too. Round a bend
and another opening in the earth,
trapped wind whispering *Muon*
from within. Again, the mist rolled in,
shooing the swans into the lake's mouth.
Perhaps it was gravity that took their voices?
Nah, it was Muon. How do you hold a moon-
beam in your arms? Active Muon
raises his hand, declaring science is needed
to move on. He began to roll on the ground,
faster and faster, an orbit unto itself.
I returned to the villa clutching
stones. Or were they moon fragments?
Rhetoric only ruins the discovery.
There is faint music from the common
room. Muon's doing. My heart, the voice
by which my dead mom would call me,
a shoestring. Any phenomenon to explain
why I'm here and she's gone. Strange
Muon sounds coming from the hall
but that was just me closing the door.

PLANET NINE

“In 2016, a pair of astronomers made an exciting announcement: There might be a hidden planet about ten times the size of Earth lurking somewhere in the most distant part of our solar system, waiting to be discovered. They dubbed this hypothetical world ‘Planet Nine’ and have been looking for it ever since.”

~ Popular Mechanics, 2019

do we hear it or not
when a tree falls
in a forest with
no one to notice it
did it really fall
was it even a tree
an insect flapping
its wings some bloom

beetles upon beetles
in a Rorschach test
in the Mandelbrot set
randomize all you want
perhaps we can't see into
what things mean
the math behind
the self's insistence

on replicating itself
in the arteries dunes
clouds the howling
inside a conch shell
doesn't matter collapsing
into a black hole
the pull of an orbit
if we can't locate it

order chaos
the loop
like dreaming of your mother
years dead
straight nights
for no good reason
other than it's complex
other than it's simple

