



FSU English professor and poet Virgil Suárez's latest poems reflect on the transformations around Cascades Park. VIRGIL SUÁREZ

Walk *with* history

Writer taps 'the chill' of resurrected
memory in Voice of Trees

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

"October's/crisp air is upon us, and for the jogger/it is refreshing and energizing. I am/in the middle of a city coming to terms/with its history of how one brick kisses/another brick to lay the foundation/of the new, something far reaching/and ageless."

These are poet Virgil Suárez's reflections on Cascades Park. The FSU English professor and winner of a G. MacArthur Poetry Prize has made Tallahassee his home for several decades now. He recalls when Cascades was once deemed uninhabitable, littered with hazardous waste signs. He witnessed its rebirth and revitalization, and yet from the ashes, how it is steadily being encroached upon by new development and high rises.

"Cascades was an off-limits place, and they took something that was completely polluted

and turned it into something beautiful," says Suárez.

His words will live on as part of the Voice of Trees Tallahassee sound walk. A collaboration between COCA, 100 Thousand Poets for Change and the City of Tallahassee Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Affairs Department, this walk uses the Echoes app to allow pedestrians to access readings of poems around the park.

In addition to Suárez, local poets include Summer Hill Seven, Terri Carrion and Michael Rothenberg. This project was first developed by Italian artist Giovanna Iorio who sought to preserve the voices of poets in relation to their poem's landscapes. Suárez was captivated by the project's capacity for longevity.

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Suarez

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“As you travel around, these poems begin to find you, and as you listen to them maybe they’ll get you to stop for a moment and pay attention to your surroundings,” says Suárez. “Often times you go to a park and see people with their headphones in. Now I look at them and think, maybe they have them on to ignore the world, but maybe they’re listening to a poem.”

Poetry sunk its hook into Suárez during his eighth-grade year after arriving in the U.S. by way of Cuba and Spain. With the help of his teachers, he took an interest in English language and literature classes, falling hard for Edgar Allan Poe and his dark, gloomy atmospheres. English is his second language, so at home, Suárez was able to keep his new world of writing short stories and poetry private from his parents who spoke Spanish.

He was deeply affected by “Of Mice and Men,” “Lord of the Flies,” “Miss Lonelyhearts,” “Metamorphosis” and “Pedro Páramo.” The latter three novels taught him the importance of writing concisely, and that even the shortest novels can pack a punch.

Soon after, Suárez was filling journals and began publishing and sharing his work in the public sphere. He noticed a shift in his writing when he moved to Tallahassee and began pulling inspiration from the environment.

“We moved out to the woods and at night it’s very quiet and dark, so I get bombarded with all sorts of noises,” says Suárez. “The other night I was looking up whippoorwills, because I heard them. That’s how often the work arrives.”

Suárez says he was built for the routine that quarantine put in place the past few months. On the days when he is home and not teaching, he will wake up, take his coffee on the porch and watch woodpeckers go to work in the trees. He will watch a pair of wrens build a nest that he will later fiercely defend from a corn snake’s grasp. But he will also debate whether or not he should have interfered with the life cycle, something that gets filtered into his work as he types up his newest poem.

Then he’ll move on with his day, abandoning the new poem and putting it away to read later with fresh eyes. Suárez is also a mixed media artist and tends to pull out his palette of colors for inspiration. Pigments like verdigris and vermilion will start to color his

If you go

What: Voice of Trees

Where: Cascades Park, 1001 S Gadsden St.

Contact: To learn more and view the map, please visit coca.tallahasseearts.org.

pages and his words. Other times, he waits for “the chill.”

“I start to get chills when I think of particular lines, images and ideas and I know I have to write it down,” says Suárez. “The chill comes from tapping into a memory from someone who has been gone, or I haven’t seen in years, or someone from another time and place, or someone who is dead in my life. Those images make you think of your own mortality, how little time we have on the planet, but also the realization that I have another day, so let me get on with it.”

Suárez shares this process with his students and encourages them to stay active and disciplined in their writing. He is also truthful in his thoughts on the advantages that writing poetry in America comes with, including the absolute freedom to write without governmental interference. He recognizes the double-edged sword within that gift as well, since a lack of governmental support, in grants or otherwise, mean only a handful of people, if anyone at all, may end up reading the work.

Participating in the Voice of Trees project energizes him for this very reason. It gives him “the chill,” to connect with so many people, regardless of where, or even when. He thinks back to Poe, who wrote in relative obscurity and only became well recognized after his death. Suárez wonders where his poetry and voice may end up in years to come.

“Long after we’re gone, maybe people can still download that poem when they’re walking around Cascades Park which is thrilling to think about,” says Suárez. “You will write in anonymity for a good long time, and if the muses have their way, maybe 50 or 100 years from now someone rediscovers you and then you become someone that everyone has to read. You come back to the land of the living. That is an amazing, magical act.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).