

# Simultaneous/Sequential

## The Poetry of Arthur Sze

Barry Schwabsky

SOME POETS SAY SO LITTLE. THAT IS, they say little in, as it were, their own person. Their art is a strange manner of standing aside and (as Stéphane Mallarmé put it) ceding the initiative to words.

Arthur Sze is one of those quiet or reticent poets. A New Yorker by birth, he has lived in New Mexico for most of his adult life, becoming the state's poet laureate and teaching for many years at the Institute of American Indian Arts, a public land grant college in Santa Fe. His new book of poetry—his twelfth, not counting a collection of translations from the Chinese, and the first since the publication of his collected poems in 2021—has a title that makes a point of his affinity for silence: *Into the Hush*.

That title made me uneasy at first. This might have been an wayward association, but I couldn't help thinking of how Ron Silliman—another of my favorite poets—used to insist on dividing American poetry into two irreconcilable streams, “post-avant” (good) and “the school of quietude” (bad). Reiterated endlessly on Silliman's blog, back when blogs were important, this simplistic dichotomy did what simplistic dichotomies do best: It drilled itself into my brain. And so I had to ask myself: Is Sze with his “hush” revealing membership in the fatally lulling school of quietude?

The six-poem sequence that lends the book its title includes a statement backed up by Sze's five decades of writing, that “When you've / worked this long, your art is no longer art / but a wand that wakes your eyes to what is.” Doesn't that statement (with its wand whose magic is claimed to break illusions rather than to generate them, as though Prospero had found a way to keep using his staff rather than breaking and burying it) suggest that this might be a poetry in danger of losing sight of its own artifice, which would make it a deceptive and conventional-minded simulation of naturalness? Luckily, I can give a short answer to those questions: No. But suggesting why may take a bit more time.

Parts of the explanation lie with a second book Sze has published alongside his new collection of poetry. *The White Orchard: Selected Interviews, Essays, and Poems* (Museum of New Mexico Press) is a relatively slender book, given the length and distinction of the poet's career, reflecting its author's self-effacing stance. Notably, it does not include anything in the way of manifestos or statements of position, and neither does it contain critical writing on the work of other poets, whether contemporaries or precursors, except for brief but generous remarks on many of his fellow Asian-American poets given in a 2019

talk at the Library of Congress. The book mainly consists of interviews, which tell us something further about Sze's manner of saying little: He speaks, usually, about what he does as a poet and how he does it, while leaving the *why* implicit. While the first person singular is rather rare in his poetry, it comes to the fore in the interviews, but for similar reasons. The “I” of the interviews is an expression of modesty. He says, to take an example at random, “I often play with shifting pronouns and point of view and believe that's part of the destabilizing and provisional nature of things,” framing this choice not with the bombast of a position taken, but as a predilection shaped by essentially technical considerations. To use shifting pronouns that convey the instability of reality is not a mandate that the contemporary poet might follow or fail to follow—it is not something that Sze enjoins on anyone; it is simply a possibility offered by the language that Sze finds interesting.

The interviews often go quite deeply into the choices made in writing particular poems—choices of form, choices of diction, revisions from draft to draft. He points out, for instance, a poem that uses the word “as” twenty times, but in each case with a different meaning. He also illuminates the way that in his poems, silence functions as a counterpoint to what I guess has to be called noise. He explains that in his earlier work, he “often conceived of fragments as shards of a pot. I liked the jagged edges and how the stillness between them suspended narrative motion.” Elsewhere he muses that the “silence”—that is, the blank space—between fragments might be like the gold-dusted lacquer used to mend broken pottery in Japanese *kintsugi*. Although he then explains that he has subsequently approached the idea of the fragment in other ways, this metaphor of the assemblage of pot shards still seems valid for much of Sze's writing.

As an example of Sze's concatenations of fragments, or “glimmering shards” as he calls them in one poem, I can point to the first stanza of the third poem in “Into the Hush”:

*Lichens on a bridge absorb truck fumes;  
larger than Manhattan, an iceberg  
calves off the Antarctic shelf;  
a man at a gas station opens fire onto others.*

A single sentence, this stanza contains three independent clauses, bringing unrelated events into nonspecific relation. Or are they events? The absorption of fumes by lichens—those strange hybrid multispecies colonies—is more like a process; the calving off of an iceberg might be an event but it too is the outcome of a long process; and what about the action of a gunman at a filling station? It's notable that two of these happenings are “natural” in immediate appearance, without any visible human actor, though in fact caused by the activities of humans who might never observe these results, and somehow we have to realize that the unexplained shooting—is it being done for robbery? For revenge? Simply at random?—might be the result of a slow build-up of forces not unlike the poisoning of the lichens or the deterioration of a polar ice cap: the outcome of a process that gives the illusion that it was inevitable. Such a connection among the three statements that make up this single stanza that is a single sentence is logically defensible but does not account for its uncanny force, which is the implicit sense that these three detached phenomena are part of a single manifold in reality—that somehow the lichens and the iceberg and the man are not simply comparable but in some way that we might call occult, are causally related by way of indeterminable forces that we might be aware of in a vague way but cannot predict or control, that they haunt each other.

Of course, such connections are at best implicit in Sze's juxtapositions—or maybe it

is more accurate to say that the reader, more than the poet, must take responsibility for them; they might be readings-into rather than readings-out-of the poem. Only rarely does he thematize his bundles of images. One time he does so is in a brief poem called “Venn Diagrams,” the second half of which presents:

*An array of sharpened  
pencils in a cup; cars parked  
at a casino; along a trail, small  
puffballs—these clusters manifest  
chance; and, pondering three  
who furthered you on your way,  
you grieve, yearn, hope, make lines  
against a void, the void, in an at-one-go.*

The positioning of objects in the world—whether placed there, perhaps, by a single person who might be a writer keeping a cup of pencils on a desk; by numbers of people, such as those who arrive separately in their cars; or by natural forces, like mushrooms—is somehow aleatory: The person who put the pencils in the cup, for instance, did not put them *just there* but any old place as long as it was in the container. And the poem makes a second-order cluster of these clusters of things: a cluster of descriptions. But in the poem, unlike the parking lot, chance has very little to do with it. Remember all those revisions that Sze likes to make. It might even have been chance that brought these three sightings to mind together but the poet’s work has made a determinate synthesis of them that strangely recalls a different kind of cluster, three people (unnamed) who helped “you” (which could be the poet addressing himself or another person)—and that, we must imagine, as little as we are given to know of the matter, really was chance.

Sze has various ways of assembling his fragments, various devices. I’ve quoted a couple of instances in which he uses the semicolon—according to a recent article in the Washington Post, a punctuation mark in decline, but one which will flourish as long as Sze continues.

A very different tactic is exemplified by “Vectors,” whose first lines read:

*First extinction in the Galápagos Islands,  
the least vermilion flycatcher—  
Hopis drill a foot deep and plant blue corn  
along a wash—  
Danger, a woman brushed on the side of  
a napalm bomb—  
in an oblong box emptied of firewood,  
a black-widow web—  
shaving, he nicked himself and stared in  
the mirror in a moment of blood—  
out of a saddlebag, a teen pulls a severed  
goat’s head—  
before signing his name, he recalls  
hotel rooms were once used as torture  
chambers—*

Where the semicolon pauses while implying some form of coordination, the dash cuts, and this cut is emphasized by the blank space between lines, the fact that the lines are unable to join up as stanzas or as complex sentences. Even where the words preceding the dash can be read as forming a complete sentence, the dash renders it incomplete, and declares that the sentence has been interrupted before its conclusion. The implicitly or explicitly violent content of some of the imagery in this poem seems to reflect its exploded and unmended form. Notice, too, the variations in grammatical and, as it were, phenomenological form of the fragments: mostly full sentences, some of which have more determinate subjects than others (the Hopis who drill versus the anonymous “he” staring at his bleeding face in the mirror, and who might or might not be the same person thinking about sinister hotel rooms) but also a non-sentence that seems to encapsulate a moment of perception, but without a clue as to whose perception that might be, and another, the poem’s opening line, that presents a molecule of knowledge that could never have been available to direct perception. The multiplicity of images that in “Vectors” fly apart in the mind even as they remain steadfastly fixed there as a constellation

on the page can hardly be the contents of a single consciousness, but neither can they be ascribed to a novelistic omniscient narrator. The fragments remain fragments; they seem to exist in relationship, but the nature of that relationship is tenuous and undefined.

A curious aspect of this method of composition by fragments—one might even speak of non sequiturs—is that it does something strange to the temporality of reading. Even without a linear narrative, the act of reading itself is a linear act, and a poem is read from the first word to the last in order—but Sze’s fragments, which can be thought of as images not so much because of any specifically pictorial form as because of their intensely sharp and exact sensory content, also ask to be conceived of as simultaneous rather than sequential. On the page they succeed each other, but in the mind they detach themselves from that order and mingle freely. “Simultaneity is important for several reasons,” Sze tells one of his interlocutors in *The White Orchard*:

*First, it provides a structure that is nonlinear and allows for the co-existence of different worlds where one world is not necessarily prioritized over another; second, things can happen in close contact or across great distances, but they require close or even arduous attention to understand how the events may be relational. This requires imagination, insight, and understanding.*

As an example of the interconnectedness of things across distances, Sze observes, “What we don’t understand today in a remote part of the planet can arrive, say, in the form of a virus, and threaten us all tomorrow,” to which he has added the note, “I said this in 2019, before Covid struck.” Poetry will never teach us to predict, diagnose, or cure the effects of a microbe, but it can tell us something about the reality of our uncertain condition in a world about which we can never know enough and where we can only ever proceed by way of

more or less attentive leaps in the dark.

I said that Sze’s fragments appear as simultaneous rather than sequential, but now I have to qualify that assertion. They are simultaneously simultaneous *and* sequential. After all, many of Sze’s works are precisely what he calls sequences, and he has said on several occasions that he considers the sequence “the form of our time.” What is a sequence for Sze? Very simply it is, usually, a group of numbered pieces under a single title—neither a “long poem” nor a gathering of separate poems. By composing the sequence as an agglomeration of semi-separate parts, each of which is already in itself an agglomeration of fragments, he extends his fundamental structural strategy to a second level. The relation between the numbered sections is as tenuous and undefined as that between the lines within each section, but if nothing else, the numbering underlines that there is an order to the sections, that they could not have been reshuffled like a deck of cards. They contain chance, but not in that way. The poet collects his molecules of poetry and arranges them as a mosaicist arranges tesserae, recombining them through what Sze says may be “as many as one hundred drafts to complete a poem.”

Moreover, in recent years (and this is true again in *Into the Hush*) Sze has in an unusual way extended this compositional dispersal to a third level, that of the book itself, by dispersing one poem in bits scattered throughout the book—as if one had scattered parts of a painting in different rooms throughout a house—so that one truly encounters them as separate fragments but also has to imagine them as somehow connecting the book’s various sections (which only become sections through the periodic interruption of another part of the scattered poem). Thus the note that precedes the Contents page of *In the Hush*: “The poem ‘Zuihitsu’ is published in seven untitled sections interleaved through this

book.” Each of the seven parts of “Zuihitsu” (this Japanese word refers to a literary genre in which works are compendia of scattered observation, such as the *Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon) in turn consists of two parts, one set in roman type followed by one in italics. The parts in roman follow Sze’s usual method of leaping from one topic, one mode of perception to another, while the lines in italics present a single ongoing anecdote, told by an “I” who describes working with another person who together practice calligraphy by holding a single brush together with their two right hands. (The speaker, “*left-handed, felt awkward holding it.*”) But the story of the brush painting ends unfinished, with one of Sze’s dashes, just as does the roman sequence above it: “*we brought it*”—the brush—“*vertically down below the horizontal line, ran it / from left to right, then I gasped, gaped at emptiness—*”

That glimpse of emptiness might be a limit point for this poetry, but the emptiness that is conveyed, beyond the word itself, by the following dash reminds me of an insight articulated two centuries ago by Arthur Schopenhauer, that “the conception of the nothing is essentially relative, and always refers to a definite something which it negates.” What is negated in the emptiness glimpsed in Sze’s poem? My guess is that it is the self as organizing or crystallizing principle for a world, in the sense of what is sometimes called a lifeworld. Or really, because Sze is an American poet in the lineage of Whitman, whose figure for the “all” is precisely, “myself,” and whose “I,” in order to be so capacious as to democratically comprehend the equality of all with all, must become transcend all the facts that it encompasses—must become a

fiction, a myth, a hero named Walt Whitman. Only in that way could all contradictions and incongruencies be reconciled in his endlessly rocking psalmic verses. Sze wants to encompass as much as Whitman—perhaps more, since he lives in a time when “America” would be a limiting term and not an expansive one, and therefore he ignores national boundaries whether geographic or ideological—but he does so without conjuring an image of the poet who ties it all together. The “I” who appears in these poems might refer to Arthur Sze or it might not; likewise, the “he” who appears in these poems, like the “you” who appears in them, might or might not. It doesn’t matter. (Curiously, there are only a few occurrences of “she” in *Into the Hush*—perhaps because, while Sze does not need his “I” or “you” or “he” to refer to himself, he does not want his pronouns to refer definitively to someone else.)

Only when this “I” explicitly writes are we, perhaps, warranted to think that the poet in person is intended. “I write into the hush,” according to one such passage—not “I write about” (the hush as essayistic subject) or “I write to” (address, apostrophe) but “I write into,” suggesting the hush is an open space that the writing can enter, that the hush can serve as the background to an act of writing. And then: “I write along / the curve of an expanding wave that delineates / the shapes of all things.” To “write along” something is to take it, not as a space, but as a surface. This is writing as exploration rather than invention, but no special image of the writer, the poet, is built up. The fictive Walt Whitman was, as Jorge Luis Borges once pointed out, an Everyman, but Sze eschews the figure of Everyman to make room for just anyone. .a