

## An Interview with William Archila

Conducted by Aaron Michael Morales

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**William Archila** lives in Los Angeles, California with his wife. He earned his MFA in poetry from the University of Oregon. His poems have been published in *The Georgia Review*, *AGNI*, *Poetry International*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Poetry Daily*, among others. He has been awarded the Alan Collins Scholarship at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He has also received a nomination for a Pushcart Prize in 2010. His first book *The Art of Exile* is the recent winner of the Emerging Writer Fellowship Award from the Writer's Center. *The Art of Exile* is also currently featured in "First Things First: The Fifth Annual Debut Poets Roundup" — the Jan/Feb 2010 issue of *Poets & Writers*.

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**Aaron Michael Morales:** Before we begin our discussion of your poetry in detail, I was wondering if you might speak a bit to your exodus from El Salvador. Because the idea of exile—as a state of existence, as a physical location, and as a political identity—features so centrally in much of your poetry, I think it would be interesting to hear about the circumstances surrounding your own exile.

**William Archila:** In November of 1980, I left my native country of El Salvador. I was only twelve when I left the war that tore my country apart. Without having read enough Salvadoran history, I arrived in Los Angeles, with many questions unanswered, conversations unfinished, and young years of my life unfulfilled. I had to learn a new language and culture. I became part of the growing immigrant community. Twelve years later in 1992, a peace treaty was signed between the left and right wing parties in El Salvador. I decided to go back, hoping to find a home, but in my own native country, I was a foreigner, a stranger. I searched for something that no longer existed, a quality remembered from my childhood, a sense of belonging to a country and a language that had changed. I also had changed. I returned to Los Angeles feeling not quite at home. Here I realized that home is neither here nor there. However, the need for a sense of home as base, a source of identity, grew deep inside of me. I began to understand that homelessness and its loneliness is the identity of the exile writer. And as an exile writer you try to rebuild your home in your work.

**AMM:** How did you come to poetry—both as a means of catharsis and as a means of expression? Was there one defining moment, one Freudian “primal scene” that led to your obsession, or was it a series of events?

**WA:** Like many young writers, I began writing long before I read any poetry that excited me. My writings were one-liners, verses or scribbles not meant to be taken seriously or even shared. Around the age of fourteen or sixteen, I pursued this calling in secret without ever thinking of becoming a writer. I was writing for myself. In my college years, I tried to read all the great monsters of the English language: Shakespeare, Milton, Joyce, Hemingway, Whitman, but none of these writers spoke to me, or should I say, I wasn't ready to listen. As

an immigrant, the people around me were preoccupied with war, immigration, low-income jobs, and the constant feeling of being “the other.” It wasn’t until I read “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg that I was amazed to discover I was not the only young man who saw the best minds of his generation destroyed. As if I was the only one—what an ego. This happened in 1992, when I came back from El Salvador. I had returned from a war-torn country full of poverty, death, silence, illiteracy, and crime. All my friends and family members were gone, especially those destined to change a society. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. I came back to California, lived between Los Angeles and San Francisco, with these feelings of exile. That’s when I began to write. I could not cope with these feelings. As a kind of release, I wrote down what I couldn’t express. I wrote poems inspired by the voice of Ginsberg. From this group of poems, I realized I had a strong yearning for union with my country, my family, and other immigrants like me. The most interesting aspect in this period of my writing was my need to write my thoughts, and the immediate satisfaction it gave me to put them to words, on the page. Within a few months of discovering Ginsberg, I found a more satisfying model: Pablo Neruda. I think this was the first time I realized I was consciously writing poems.

From Neruda I learned to take the pen and move it, run with it, like horses galloping through our continent of Latin America. I could remember the tree outside my window, the eggs from my mother’s store, the light bulb and the moon. I could go into the kitchen, look at the salt shaker, the pepper, oregano, smell the basil, and see how the olive oil runs. I could go outside, feel the cracks of the street, remember that small country of El Salvador. Under Neruda, I found other Latin American Writers that have influenced me a great deal, either with their language or ideas: Roque Dalton, Claribel Alegria, Eduardo Galeano, Cesar Vallejo, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and of course, the Spanish poets Federico Garcia Lorca and Miguel Hernandez. It was “Poet in New York” that brought me back to the States, and gave me the opportunity to reunite with an old friend: Whitman. Now I started paying attention to writers of the English language, like John Keats, John Milton and W. B. Yeats. Today I identify with the work of great poets such as Philip Levine and Yusef Komunyakaa. If I’m influenced by them, that influence, I hope, is internalized.

This is how I came to poetry, but I think there’s an earlier defining moment, the “primal scene” that you referred to that led me to writing poems. I was ten. My father was gone, already living here in the States, and my mother decided to wake me up in the middle of the night to listen to this strange voice coming out of the radio. It was Pablo Neruda reciting his love poems. Violins played sentimental music in the background. For two years I fell asleep listening to the voice of Neruda, rising and falling as if the waves of the sea were recorded and played on the radio, filling my head with poetry, urging me to put down my words on the page. I consider this moment essential in the formation of my poetic consciousness. It left a strong, vivid impression in my young mind.

**AMM:** Like most people in exile—or, at least, most exiled writers—you seem to have a love/hate relationship with your homeland. Or maybe it would be more appropriate to say a relationship of nostalgia/disappointment. Or longing/regret. Nevertheless, there are beautiful moments, intimate gestures wherein you describe a lamentation for a lost land (“how I will cup my hands, carry this earth in my pockets,” or “My country falls on me like a hammer”), and jarring moments where the harsh realities of the land you’ve left behind seem

more negative or brutal (“officers / in green, billy clubs raised in the air, chased / [a] boy down the alleyways,” or “a charred city, / crumbling into the streets”). Tell me how one learns to cope with these mixed feelings, if indeed you have managed to cope. And, if you would care to, please explain where you find yourself now, after the publication of *The Art of Exile*, in regard to your identity and relationship with El Salvador.

**WA:** I learned to cope with these mixed feelings by writing my poems. When I first encountered these emotions, I found out I had to work them out. I realized I had certain assumptions about myself, El Salvador, and the world at large that needed to be critically examined. As a beginner, I found my homeland sweet and I thought my role as a writer was to preserve El Salvador’s cultural identity and become some kind of cultural ambassador through my writing. However, as I began to revise and revise my poems, I let go of those assumptions. When I let go of these certain dogmas, I began to mature as a writer. I began to see every country and everything in it as native. I could claim the world as my homeland. At this moment, writing became a form of rebirth. It taught me to be more compassionate, more decent, more open, more tolerant and more loving as a human being, even if just a bit more. This was my way of coping.

Today, I still write about the homeland, but I’m also aware of the world at large. If I can transcend my national limits, I can begin to embrace the humanity of the world. However, somehow as an exiled writer, the world is still a foreign land. I really don’t know the answers. That’s why I write.

**AMM:** I wonder if we can move into your perceptions of America. You have a uniquely different perspective from the vast majority of Americans, which is to say you began a life outside of our country and then moved here. What was your initial impression of our country and how did it stand up to your perceptions of our country before your arrival? Also, how do you view America now, after living here for thirty years?

**WA:** I was only twelve when I arrived in California, so my impression was a bit superficial. I knew we were coming to a country with opportunities, where we could survive financially, but most importantly find refuge from a war. I was happy to be here. However, once I entered the educational system, my life began to change. I had to learn a new language and culture. I had to relearn the fact that America was a country, not a continent. “Go back to your country” echoed throughout these years. In the process of my Americanization, the cultural cleansing, and institutionalized education, I literally went numb. I became part of the growing immigrant community: the ones underrepresented, and disempowered, the ones who practice the language of silence out of fear of being deported. I was only a teen trying to fit in, but something began to throb in me, some kind of fire that led me to anger, a hunger for knowledge and a quest for answers. In my early years of college, I became politically aware that many countries in Latin America had been assaulted by the United States—directly or indirectly—their governments replaced by dictators and other pro-Washington leaders. El Salvador was one of these countries.

Today I know that the U.S., like most other empires, is founded upon genocide. However, if I compare the daily freedom—or should I say the illusion of daily freedom—I have and enjoy here with the lack of freedom and comfort experienced in other countries, which is

considered the norm, especially third-world countries, I must say that I'm very fortunate to have come to the U.S. I realized that I've allowed this country to shape me into the best of what it can offer, but I also believe that I'm adding shape to this country and I want to offer the best of who I am. I think poetry helped me decipher these experiences that were difficult to pinpoint. It gave me back what I had lost in my Salvadoran childhood, my American teens. It gave me a greater awareness and understanding of my world. That's why today, if I want to understand the culture of the United States, I go to its poets. I don't go to its politicians or generals or businessmen. I go to the poets.

**AMM:** Another related question I'm curious about is your poetic sensibilities in regard to place. One reads your poems and can tell that you "get" the bucolic nature underlying a war torn El Salvador, but you also "get" the harsh angles and the potential coldness of an urban environment, what was dubbed by Isaac Brock as "the lonesome crowded west." Can you discuss the juxtaposition of these two settings in your work and in your life? How do they interact with one another in your poetry?

**WA:** I think the juxtaposition of these two settings relates to my search for a homeland. I have searched for it in both places, but haven't been very lucky. In El Salvador I feel like a stranger and in the inner cities of the States I'm a foreigner. I used to think of my past in El Salvador as home, and my present in the U.S. as foreign, but the more I write about these two places, the more they both seem like a foreign country.

In the essay "Imaginary Homelands," Salman Rushdie states that writers of his position, "exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back...." From this point of view, I reflect on the loss of a place: the homeland. I'm interested in El Salvador as an act of remembrance. I'm drawn to the complexities of loss in a displaced people, what has been lost in the homeland, but I'm also absorbed with one's past resurfacing in the new land. My poems often live in the city, but think about the past in El Salvador, or they visit the El Salvador feeling like a stranger from the city. There's a beauty within both places, but also a horror behind them.

These two settings have shaped my work, and the result has always been loss. I'm interested in reclaiming in my work that which once was lost, and it seems that the only way to find home is in the language of the poems. This is the reason why my book opens with a quote by Czeslaw Milosz, "Language is the only homeland."

**AMM:** When were you first introduced to jazz? I ask this because it seems to me that you feel a deep kinship with jazz as an art form, but also, more specifically, with certain jazz musicians whom you honor and call upon in this collection. How do you see the relationship between poetry and jazz? And what role has jazz played in your life both as a poet and a person whose life has been a series of events that you seem to evoke through a jazz-like freeform association within your poems?

**WA:** Back in my early years of college, Mario De La Fuente, a very close artist friend, gave me a copy of John Coltrane's *Lush Life* on Prestige Records. I loved the sound. I felt a kind of freedom in the playing of the music. It seemed to transcend history. I didn't know then,

but for me, after the war, listening to this type of music was very healing. It was like restoring the world once again. At this time, I didn't realize that the repetitive playing of this music would eventually influence my life and later my work.

I think the improvisational spirit of the music is what captures my imagination. It is this approach jazz artists have toward their music that touches me with significance. Improvisation requires taking risks, and as a writer I would like to take risks when I revise my work. Where does the poem begin or end? How many ways can I write this poem? Can mistakes work in a poem and show its humanness, its strengths and weaknesses? That's what jazz has taught me. Anything is possible in writing. The struggle is always getting there.

I also believe it's the attitude jazz musicians had toward their music and the world around them that today catches my imagination: the way Miles Davis turned his back to his audience, or the fact that you can hear Charles Mingus holler throughout his recordings. To title his songs, Cannonball Adderley used the jargon or slang out of the black neighborhoods of America. Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker brought a genuine, almost punk sensibility toward a traditional form of music. Benny Moré spent his life writing songs about his small island of Cuba. Antonio Carlos Jobim brought the music of Jazz and Samba together in a new rhythm. When John Coltrane played "Alabama," you could see the four little girls who died in a bombing of a black church. Mainly, I think it's the rhythms of this syncopated music that have influenced my writing so much. When I listen to Red Garland on the piano repeating a bar or two over and over again, I think to myself, how can he top that line and reinvent himself? And, amazingly enough, he does with so much originality that I want to recreate that movement and pace on the page.

**AMM:** I am struck by one of the most powerful images in the collection, from the poem "Radio" that you alluded to earlier, wherein you recollect your mother awakening you in the middle of the night to hear Neruda read his poetry over the airwaves—a wonderful childhood memory to share with your readers, by the way—and yet, the very same radio that delivered Neruda and his poetry into your living room was also an instrument of violence and of resistance, as evidenced by the following lines:

The set was big enough for the rusted gun  
mother hid inside, right above the batteries,

a piece ready to target soldiers  
on rooftops, camouflaging the dawn,

or the men of tattered clothes, tired eyes,  
rifles in their hands, running down  
coffee mountain to palace wall.

I wonder if you are purposefully trying to align the act of poetry with resistance, or, at bare minimum, empowering the written word by literally placing pistol and poetry side by side? Was this a conscious decision? If so, what do you hope to achieve by doing this?

**WA:** No, it was not a conscious decision. I was just trying to depict the fragmented image I had of my mother hiding the gun in the same radio we used to listen to Neruda at night. This sort of fantastic realism happens in places like Latin America. However, in my revision process I did become aware of the juxtaposition of poetry and pistol side by side. I didn't mind because I believe the word can be a weapon, and it can influence the reader into social or personal change. I'm not suggesting that poetry will change the world. After all, W. H. Auden already set it straight when he said, "Poetry makes nothing happen." I think he was right in the political sense, but in terms of changing individuals, I believe poetry has that kind of power. It certainly captured and shaped my imagination. Poetry gave me a greater understanding of the world and language. Poetry started a change within me.

I know there's an opposition to poetry for social change. It is categorized as a limited and restricted way of looking at language. I think this a conservative way of looking at poetry. After all, conservative literature has a reason for being conservative. It cannot afford to denounce that which feeds it. To me the function of poetry is to help this globe become a better place. It's not an art for art's sake, but an art for the betterment of the world. It's about naming the truth. However, I don't think that aesthetics should be completely ignored either. After all, poetry is about constructing a new language, but I believe there should be a balance between the two. This is what I believe. I don't denounce other types of poetry, even those that prioritize aesthetics. I think the world of poetry is big enough for all modes of writing. On the other hand, I do think there's a danger, when one type of poetry holds the reins of power and dictates over the rest. Poetry should be plural.

**AMM:** As a writer whose own work often refuses to look away from violence, I have realized that you manage to do a wonderful job of illustrating the way conflicting images—violent and romantic—can coexist. In fact, there can even be beauty in an act of violence sometimes, and you have the knack for rendering violent images as tenderly as most poets would describe, say, two lovers in bed. What compels you to take this idea of violence—which a lot of writers shy away from—and give it so much attention in your collection? What is gained in aligning violence and nostalgia?

**WA:** I write about violence because it is what I know. Violence was a primal experience during the war. It struck a chord in me. The sight of bodies covered with a white sheet by the side of the road was a very common scene. Often, the bodies turned out to be classmates or neighbors. This emotional and psychological pain branded my psyche. Ever since the war, I've been preoccupied with the dead. So it makes it very difficult to escape the violent times in which I was born. I have no alternative but to give it my attention. The dead have taught me the value of life and the end of it. It is where life and death becomes a dialectic pair. One can't live without the other.

I try not to romanticize the violent times I experienced in El Salvador. However, it is almost inevitable because when I do look back, it is with an ache to reclaim something that I've lost. It is an attempt to be present again and somehow have the opportunity to change the course of history. And if I cannot change it, I'm taking it back.

The result is learning that no matter how terrifying the world can be, there's an art to it, an aesthetic that captures the creative mind. There's a beauty in the terrifying reality of the

world. I have also gained gratitude in my soul. I have learned to fall in love with a place and its people in spite of its history.

**AMM:** Let's talk about the poem "After Ashes," which feels as though it could have gone on forever. It's my favorite poem in the collection. The one to which I keep returning. I get the sense that you're not only trying to capture the memories of los olvidados, but also that *The Art of Exile* is your Book of Lamentations, so to speak. What I mean is that of all the many Latin American traits your writing exhibits—the occasional smattering of magical realism, the endless wars and political upheaval, attempting to tend so many numerous deaths without numbing the reader to the gravity of even one death—you seem to return time and time again to the idea of witnessing and remembering. If I had to sum this collection up in a phrase I would say that the true "art of exile," as it were, is the ability to remember that which you left behind. To remember it accurately. To remember it for those who weren't there. And, to remember it for those who cannot recount it for themselves. Is this what you are trying to accomplish with this collection, as well as with the poem "After Ashes?"

**WA:** I believe so. Three influential events have shaped me as a poet: the civil war in El Salvador, the long years of immigration, and the permanent state of exile. The result has always been loss—loss of a place, family, friends, and the self. This is what drives my poetry. It seems like I'm condemned to see and hear that which once was lost and which can only be saved through words. For that reason, I try to construct a language of mourning where the driving force is memory. I believe that to remember is an act of struggle against history. It is an acknowledgement of one's time and one's acceptance of it. As it's been said, forgetting is passive, but remembering is active. And remembering is the ideal vehicle for poetry.

However, Rushdie argues that in our looking "back, we must also do so in the knowledge...that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions." Therefore, in reclaiming my so-called homeland, I'm also trying to create a fiction out of my own diaspora. My memory is fragmented, but it is this fragmentation that brings focus to my work.

**AMM:** I couldn't help noticing that you repeatedly invoke author Salman Rushdie, who is certainly one of the most profound writers alive today. However, he's better known for being one of the world's most famous exiled authors—at least in recent years. This is obviously one of the reasons you feel a kinship with this man. I wonder if you might briefly discuss any other exiled writers who stand out to you. How do they speak to you? Do you feel as though you are a part of this community, despite being "without a homeland?"

**WA:** I'm interested in writers who see home as neither here nor there, those writers whose identity of home is associated with self-discovery, those who have a need for a sense of home as a base, a source of identity even more than a refuge. I'm thinking of Pessoa's Portugal, Neruda's Chile, Rushdie's India, Levine's Detroit, Whitman's American soil, all the way to Roethke's North American sequence poems. James Joyce spent his life obsessively

rebuilding his home in his art. All these writers travel alone in the countries of their minds. If we take into account Edward Said's definition of Exile – "It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" – then I think we can say that the role of the creative writer is to be an exile.

**AMM:** I want to briefly return to "After Ashes," which also seems to be a poem of reconciliation. It is as though you're making peace with being in exile. Would you say that you have achieved that sense of peace, or is this something you will continue to struggle with throughout your lifetime? Is this more of a lamentation or a celebration? Or is it equal parts of both?

**WA:** I think I've achieved a sense of peace, but since life is in constant change, I also believe that I will continue to struggle. I mean, exile is more than a geographical condition. You can be an exile not only in your homeland, but also in your family or community. You can even be an exile in your house or in a room. If I have reached a level of peace within me it is because the old self in me has died and a new self has emerged, hopefully with a higher sense of maturity.

**AMM:** It seems to me that your first book has had a sense of resonance within circles even outside the community of exiles. Could it be that, say, as the world becomes more and more globalized people are feeling displaced? Do you get a sense of exile from people that you might otherwise think would not feel that way? I'm thinking, for example, of American soldiers returning from either (or both, god forbid) of the two wars the U.S. is waging in the Middle East. From my experience, most of these soldiers return feeling as though our country has changed. As if their homeland has been lost during the traumatic experience of war. As if they are exiles in their own country. Have you encountered that yet, or some variation of it, during your travels and contact with people?

**WA:** I think we're living the exile of our time. It is definitely the age of the refugee. Our time - with its modern warfare, imperialism and totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration. Think of the large numbers of undocumented people who will never return home. Los Angeles may be known as a capital famous for its entertainment, but it is also a city where unknown men and women have spent years of miserable loneliness: Mexicans, Guatemalans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Armenians, etc. So I'm not surprised that people have a sense of exile, especially soldiers, who leave their countries to witness some of the worst atrocities of our time only to return home as changed individuals, those who are lost and from now on alienated from the rest of the community. I mean exile and alienation go hand in hand. We have all experienced a sense of alienation from a cultural or physical home. Homelessness is definitely the chronic condition of our society at large.

**AMM: Finally, where does your writing go from here? Have you a new obsession or do you intend to revisit the theme of exile again—perhaps from a different angle or even more thoroughly than you already have? What’s next for William Archila?**

**WA:** I don’t have a new obsession, not one that I’m aware of, but I do know that I’m open to whatever captures my imagination, anything that touches me with significance. However, from my new writing I can see that I’m revisiting the theme of exile again. I’m afraid of repeating myself, but it seems like I have no choice. This sense of isolation and displacement is permanent and I’ll be struggling with it for a long time. I know there’s no homecoming. Home is in the writing. Is this a bit masochistic? Can I be addicted or obsessed with being an exile? Maybe. It’s possible, but I’m constantly working to reconstruct all my connections to the outside world, yet the result is always the same: seeing the entire world as a foreign land.

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