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## Poem + Interview with John Rufo

Ca Conrad

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# POEM + INTERVIEW WITH JOHN RUFO

CA Conrad

CA Conrad writes poems / is a poet / is also a poem.

CA Conrad doesn't put up with bullshit.

CA Conrad speaks out and loves.

CA Conrad spies beautiful animals and works through the becoming-animal.

CA Conrad takes on Walt Whitman, sleeps in the Walmart parking lot.

CA Conrad CAN AND WILL WRITE IN ALL-CAPS. CA Conrad communicates.

His newest work is *WIDTH OF A WITCH*.

This series of poems is in correspondence with the planets.

A new poem, Pluto.4, printed below, is the last poem in this series.



**CA Conrad**

to me

So sorry I'm behind.  
Please send me questions, that is a great idea.  
Thank you John, I'm excited about doing this with you.  
Thank you so much!  
All my very best, CA  
p.s. attaching a new tiny poem



Pluto.4

we win from time to time  
abandoned above adaptable positions of the losing  
we risk everything in thinking we can navigate maverick of the green  
carry a bottle of wine into  
the pumpkin patch looking  
for a new way to  
angle the old songs  
sell me a ticket to  
your dance please  
I believe in the strength of poetry  
a little stone in the moth helps  
balance her on my breath

**CA Conrad:** Hi, did you send questions yet?

**John Rufo:** Here are the questions, below!! This is my first question:

Your (Soma)tic rituals are invested in the individual practice ... i.e., "I go out into the world and perform this action / become involved in an interplay that manifests (sometimes) in a poem."

But how much, too, is a third party – an audience – involved in the practice?

I'm thinking about when you perform your poems vs. the writing of them. Is the performance also a ritual? Lucas de Lima and I recently talked about ritualizing in terms of his garb for performance / this is a way of making a reading into a ritual.

Do you feel as though your readings have the capacity for ritual? And is that similar to the exercise?

**CA Conrad:** There is a long ritual I have been doing for 9 years. On the 3rd anniversary of the invasion of Iraq I stopped cutting my hair and each morning I look at the latest body counts in our wars. Plural, wars. We are bombing people in Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan at this point. It is so depressing the amount of suffering, suffering with real live human beings – that I had to start doing interactive performance art rituals. I needed to speak to the public.

Yes, they are always part of it now. "Resurrect Extinct Vibration" is a new long piece I am working on where I lie on the ground all across the United States and listen to the field recordings of extinct animals. According to the World Wildlife Fund we have lost 52% of all wild animals in the past 40 years. This was also very depressing and I decided to do a ritual where I interact with bees, living creatures.

The bees are also now part of the ritual for that piece. And performance as ritual is also important and Lucas is extraordinary. His poems are amazing and his delivery, the ritual of the delivery is making poetry seen that no one will ever forget.

My rituals involve getting ready to perform. I eat lots of dark chocolate for one thing, which gets me ready to read everything I need to read and not falter in that task. I trained my voice so that I know my vocal range and I score the poems to keep track of how and when to alter my tone, pitch, etc. Glitter is very important to me.

**John Rufo:** So that the ritual is a method of making space / making ready for the performance.

I have another question about space, and I think it directly communicates with Pluto.4, your poem provided above.

The way your poems are typically organized / how they move down the page / becomes a way of CENTERING at the same time as DE-CENTERING – i.e., they are center-aligned, sometimes, but they also jut out left and right. They write at the same time as they dance / they orbit a middle while also breaking away and off that orbit.

Does the structure of your poems depend on this wobble? Is this a kind of queerness?

**CA Conrad:** Starting with the very first of the (Soma)tics, I allowed the poems to direct themselves on the page. I would say it is intuitive, but what I really mean is I am listening to them, the poems, and how they should weigh on the paper. The shapes are completely up to the poems themselves.

Queerness though? Yes. Yes – in that my being queer made me exactly who I am as a poet and I honor that and always will.

**John Rufo:** How the poems communicate in their intuitive states and structures go beyond their individual modes, too. In that you write in series, you conduct various attempts and successes along a path. It is plural, it is a continuum.

Your poems in the past year about Earth have been especially moving and striking to me, not just by themselves, but because you seem to be involved in a constant practice of working through this / these experience(s).

Is each poem part of the working through? Or, similar to what you say in terms of ritual for performance, does each one make space for the next ritual if they do not entirely succeed?

**CA Conrad:** There were three rituals for Earth because it was extremely difficult and one was simply not enough. Or maybe the right one wasn't until the third one – is what I think I really mean to say. But yet each of the rituals and resulting poems helped in their own ways. The third one was an amazing and powerful shift in my life. I am a completely different person now as a result of the third one.

**John Rufo:** So not only making poetry that no one will forget, but making poetry that changes the poet. The ritual and the poetry and the poet all metamorphosing one another.

“Poetry and Ritual,” one of your newer works, is an essay in lines. I LOVE that it is an essay, because it wants a conversation – it wants an ars poetica to be known clearly / but also demands to be read, in lines, as a poem itself.

Does the essay / poem distinction matter to you / does it simply mutter / is it a mother / is it twin-ed?

**CA Conrad:** “Poetry & Ritual” is for you to decide if it is a poem, an essay, or both. The queerness lies in that very question. Queerness as in walking on both sides, male and female and at different times more one or the other. Queerness is not gay and lesbian because gay and lesbian is very defined, more rigid in my opinion. Queerness is truly allowing the continuum its full range.

When I meet men in particular who get offended if someone refers to them as female, that man is NOT queer. Queerness fights misogyny, racism, classism, nationalism, the military, queerness is all about being the one willing to not be defined and to not be accepting of the road we are on politically, environmentally, etc. We are not doing well as a species because the structures we continue to turn

to over and over keep breaking us into the same broken pieces. Radical changes are absolutely necessary now. Creativity is essential in finding the ways to be FREE from former structures of living, communicating, and how we treat the future of this planet.

Judy Grahn's book *ANOTHER MOTHER TONGUE* is a nice start for young queers to get a glimpse of queerness in ancient Europe before the church colonized everyone. Queers were honored for our ease in the continuum.

**John Rufo:** Below, a post of yours I love. Thank you for taking time to talk about the world.



**CAConrad** @CAConrad88 · Aug 26

i had THE MOST extraordinary  
half hour with a butterfly  
i need to take more time to talk about the  
world with bugs

← ↻ 6 ❤️ 34 ⋮

CAConrad's childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. He is the author of eight books of poetry and essays, the latest *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Wave Books) is the winner of the 2015 Believer Magazine Book Award. He is a 2015 Headlands Art Fellow, and has also received fellowships from Lannan Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Banff, Ucross, RADAR, and the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage; he conducts workshops on (Soma)tomic Poetry and Eco-poetics. Visit him online at <http://CAConrad.blogspot.com>

John Rufo is a poet-critic currently working on two poetry manuscripts, various critical pieces, and a book of conversations with contemporary poets regarding race, gender, sexuality, and disability. He will earn his B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies (an interwoven critical mass/mess emphasizing poetics, creative writing, philosophy, history, film, postcolonial theory, Asian/American studies, queer identity/theory, and blackness) this spring from Hamilton College, where he also received a Senior Fellowship for independent thesis study. Next fall, he will begin graduate study in English literature. You can find him online at [dadtalkshow.tumblr.com](http://dadtalkshow.tumblr.com)