

*Tricycle Talks*  
“The Edge of Language”  
Episode #123 with Arthur Sze  
April 9, 2025



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**Arthur Sze:** I think one of the ways that poetry can stay present tense is by foregrounding the image and not trying to make pronouncements in poems but allowing the reader to engage with and to see the world in fresh ways, and when the language can do that through imagery and sound and rhythm, then it stays fresh; it stays immediate.

**James Shaheen:** Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen and you just heard Arthur Sze. Arthur is a poet and translator based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His twelfth book of poetry, *Into the Hush*, experiments with the relationship between sound and silence, and asks how we can live fully in the face of catastrophe. In my conversation with Arthur, we talk about the generativity of emptiness, how poetry stays present tense, and what it means for art to awaken us to what is. Plus, Arthur reads some poems from his new collection. So here's my conversation with Arthur Sze.

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**James Shaheen:** So I'm here with poet Arthur Sze. Hi, Arthur. It's great to be with you again. This is the third time—I think you're now officially our most regular guest.

**Arthur Sze:** Thank you for inviting me back.

**James Shaheen:** Oh, it's a pleasure. So, Arthur, we're here to talk about your new book, *Into the Hush*. The last time we had you on the podcast, you told us a bit about what led you to write the book, particularly the story behind the title. So can you tell us a bit about the backstory for this collection?

**Arthur Sze:** Well, I'll start, I think, with an image of calligraphy, because that runs through the book. I actually had an experience where the one time I met Kazuaki Tanahashi, the translator of Dogen into English and a calligrapher, after dinner he said, “Arthur, we should do two-minded



calligraphy,” and I said, “What’s that?” And he pulled out some paper on the dinner table and he ground some ink and together we held one brush. I had never done this before. And I had the amazing experience of creating one character in unison with him, and places where I expected to move the brush, he resisted and paused, and in places I expected a pause, he moved through. So it was this continual process of revelation, and together we created this one character, Chinese character, and for the purposes of the book, I chose the character “emptiness.”

**James Shaheen:** Right, you know, it’s funny, I was following the brushstrokes, because they run like a thread through the collection, and so I said, OK, there’s the roof, there are the two dots, and so forth, and I said, I think this is emptiness. And at the end, sure enough, that’s what it is, so I was rather proud of myself for figuring that out and following the brushstrokes. In fact, that’s what *zuihitsu* means, right? Follow the brush. So, there’s a certain level of trust required. Obviously, in this case, you’re trusting Kaz’s movements and following the brush, or Kaz’s brush, as well as unpredictability. So can you tell us a bit about what you’ve learned from your encounter with *zuihitsu* calligraphy?

**Arthur Sze:** Yes, I think, as you said, literally, it means following the brush. So on the one hand, there’s the kind of rigor involved in creating the character, but there’s also a sense of risk and discovery and spontaneity. So I love that combination of having a rigor, which is there in the language of the poems, but also a sense of not knowing what’s going to happen, of being open to exploration, and of course, discovery and enlightenment along the way.

**James Shaheen:** You know, I’m going to throw something in here. I mean, you’re drawing lines with Kaz on this paper, and the notion of lines occurs throughout the collection. I think there’s one phrase, drawing a line against the void or something like that, and there are converging lines, diverging lines. Could you say something about that?

**Arthur Sze:** Sure. So as a poet, I’m keenly aware of writing poetry in lines and getting a sense of rhythm and incantation from the rhythm of the language, and in the book, as you say, there’s an



image that once lines converge, they diverge. And the idea there is like once and only once things happen, and they can't be duplicated. And then toward the end of the book, there's the sense of writing lines on the void, the idea of writing in emptiness. So when the character emptiness is created, it's paradoxical for me—the poem, the book then erupts into fullness. There are these, particularly in the last poem that's set on Maui, when I wrote at William Merwin's writing desk, actually, for a month, there's a sense of fullness of being in a palm forest of discovery of literally the sun coming up each morning of the light of the world. So those are all factors that play into this kind of thematic through line of lines and creating lines, creating art.

**James Shaheen:** I love that image of the fullness of emptiness. That's something that I'm sure Kaz has said plenty about in his translations. So the process of poetic creation is a theme throughout the collection, and you focus particularly on what you call vanished languages and what happens when a language's last speaker dies. I remember when I was at Berkeley, there was this Indigenous person named Ishi who was the last of his group, and he died, so that's what it made me think of. Just to get at this, would you be willing to read “Spring View” #4 on page eight and tell us something about that poem?

**Arthur Sze:** My pleasure. Let me read the section first.

The last speaker of Tehuelche dies—  
ants emerge out of a power outlet  
  
and form moving lines; they carry  
bits of marrow from a dog bone  
  
on the floor up the cabinet, across  
a counter then up the wall into

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the opening; they will outlive us all.

The last speaker of Klallam dies—

I weigh, in my mouth, the words

*iguanodon, polypropylene,*

and guess at the millennia between:

when did the first sycamore

leaf emerge? the first owl?

In Tibet we uncover a fossil

of an arctic fox with razor teeth intact;

you cut and arrange purple lilacs

on the dining table, and when

the aroma pours into the room,

we quicken at this flowering.

How do speakers of Guaraní thrive?

So this is section four of a nine-section poem called “Spring View.” It has a connection all the way back to Do Fu, to my translations in *The Silk Dragon*. There's a poem by Du Fu where he looks out at spring coming to a city, but it's a time of civil war, so there's the contrast between the beauty of nature and human destruction.

And my sequence of nine poems, “Spring View,” was written at the outset of COVID, and there is a subtle movement through spring where you can track apricot blossoms, then peach blossoms, then apple blossoms blooming, and you can trace that arc of time and nature unfolding. And against it, there's a sense of how precarious things are, and though it's never stated directly in terms of people dying, there are images of ambulances in the suite. This particular section I



wanted to focus really on the frailty of language and human culture, and so there are three languages, the Tehuelche, which is an extinct language now; Klallam, there's a native poet, Duane Niatum, who's a friend of mine, who is from the Klallam tribe, and there are maybe a handful of speakers left, but basically it's on the verge of extinction; and Guaraní is not an endangered language. It's one of the languages of Paraguay in South America, but it's still kind of outside of the horizon of what we think of as major languages. So I wanted to track in this section the precariousness, and I do it in different ways, talking about ecological time from iguanodon to plastic to polypropylene, or to mention that in Tibet, a fossil of an Arctic fox was uncovered. So, there's this sense of how destabilized everything is.

**James Shaheen:** There's also a sense of resiliency at the same time—the collection explores how languages and poems do survive against the odds, and in one poem, the speaker quotes a line from the classical Chinese poet Li Bai and ponders “how a line written in 740 stays present tense.” So can you tell us about poetry's ability to stay present tense and how this has informed your own writing?

**Arthur Sze:** Sure, I mean, one of the things I love about classical Chinese poetry and why it's still, I think, so read and revered today is it has a kind of present-tense quality about it. You can read a poem from 740 CE, and you don't feel like, “Oh, that was written so long ago.” When I read those poems, I feel like, “Wow, it could be happening today.” There's an immediacy, there's a presence, a power of attention. And yeah, so in the collection, one of the kinds of tensions in the book is the frailty and extinction of language, and also its perseverance, its endurance, and how powerful it can be. And so I think one of the ways that poetry can stay present tense is by foregrounding the image and not trying to make pronouncements in poems but allowing the reader to engage with and to see the world in fresh ways, and when the language can do that through imagery and sound and rhythm, then it stays fresh; it stays immediate.

**James Shaheen:** So you also explore questions of extinction and survival not only with regard to languages but with regard to entire species and landscapes. So the first poem includes a line



about matsutake mushrooms emerging from the rubble of Hiroshima, and later poems survey the wreckage of wildfires, deforestation, and climate catastrophe. So could you tell us how poetry helps you explore these themes of destruction and what survives us?

**Arthur Sze:** I think, for me, one of the vital things about poetry is it really helps a writer ask difficult questions, to not come up with easy solutions, and to sort of live in that moment of trying to find or discover what will suffice, what will be sufficient to allow you to go on to live fully and deeply. And so one can't pretend that these catastrophes aren't happening, but at the same time, one doesn't need to be dominated by them.

**James Shaheen:** Well, that's an interesting point, and certainly an apt one for our time, because people do feel so dominated by these things, but your poetry makes striking juxtapositions, so for instance, there's grief and there's joy, beauty and terror, kindness and cruelty. In the poems, as in life, the sublime exists alongside the destruction and decay. Can you tell us a bit about this dynamic?

**Arthur Sze:** I think it's something that evolved in my poetry over time. I can't intellectually say that I sat down and said, “Oh, we need these contradictions.” You know, in the ancient cosmological Chinese view of yin and yang, of light and dark, the one needs the other. You can't just separate one out. You can't take the cosmos and cut it in half. But the darkness has a point of light. The swirl of light has a point of darkness. They're constantly flowing and constantly transforming. And I think over time, just in the evolution of my own writing, I felt like I wanted to put more and more of the world into the poetry to not exclude. And in doing that, I just found that these oppositions naturally became forces or motions or movements or themes in my poetry without any easy resolution.



**James Shaheen:** Yeah, again, I come back to “Dead Water,” which we mentioned. It's a poem in *The Silk Dragon*, and I really got that sense there. There was a terrible beauty to what he's describing as China emerges into modernity. But would you be willing to read “Midsummer”?

**Arthur Sze:** Sure. So this is a part of another sequence. It's section nine of a nine-poem suite, and behind the title of “Forage” is again the idea of searching. I think we as people in a society, we're always searching for meaning, for what satisfies, and certainly we know in consumer culture, things that might appear to be fulfilling aren't really. They might momentarily be fulfilling, but not in the long run. And so in this suite, there's lots of searching for, in a way, what Wallace Stevens once said, “The imagination is searching for what will suffice, what will truly be satisfying.” So here's the last section, “Midsummer.”

Tiger swallowtails hover over Russian sage—

I smell eucalyptus where there is no  
eucalyptus and locate summer in rain.

Like bats emerging out of a cave at dusk,  
a thread of grief unfurls in the sky.

Neither you nor I can stop the planting  
of mines in a field or the next detonation.

I unclog a drip line along a fence;  
in May, lilacs arced over the road in a cascade  
of purple blossoms. Now, stilled in a minute  
of darkness, I listen to bamboo leaves  
unfurl above into sunshine. Untangling  
a necklace composed of interlocking  
gold chains, then lifting it, I trace  
joy, fear, bewilderment, bliss, a *this*  
resplendent in my fingertips. I slip inside



a strawberry runner that extends root, leaf,  
then stand in morning starlight and inhabit a song.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you. In a number of poems, you experiment with inhabiting different voices and consciousnesses, including those of a jaguar and even an eraser, which I particularly enjoyed. In a way, this collection seems to decenter the human and alert the reader to the presence of nonhuman life forms. So can you tell us about this choice to give voice to nonhuman life forms? What was it like to imagine their perspectives?

**Arthur Sze:** I want to back up just a second and say that in my book *Sight Lines*, I wrote a poem in the voice of a piece of lichen on the ceiling, and I wrote a poem in the voice of salt. And in this particular book, I was thinking about continuing that idea that rather than just think of humans as the center of everything, what if a piece of eraser got to speak? What would it say to a human being? If a jaguar got to speak to a person, what would it say? So I like this idea of giving voice to another species, alive or what might look like inanimate, like the eraser, but allowing them an opportunity to speak. What would it say with a kind of urgency to a human being, not just like, “Oh, I happen to have some thoughts on my mind,” but what would a jaguar who's really being pressured by environmental encroachment, by all of the human disasters and constructions that are happening, what would a jaguar have to say? So in that sense, I wanted to pick things that might be surprising but also had a sense of urgency.

**James Shaheen:** Could you read “Jaguar Song?”

**Arthur Sze:** Sure.

**James Shaheen:** It's on page eighteen.

**Arthur Sze:** Got it.





—Just after you sign and envision building homes on this tract you smell me in the dark know that I move through this terrain at night though you only think of building and selling even now you believe you can borrow my spirit by wearing a mask of my face on your face look at me delve into your fears is your deepest fear to be hacked strangled or be strapped to an IV in a bed with no chance to die I can grasp a turtle and break its shell with one bite I can pounce on a deer and crush its skull and neck with my teeth you slash and burn in the jungle force the snakes and macaws to retreat you even burn your own species alive look into my eyes I am your mirror and transformer if you destroy my species I will shape-shift and hunt you in your dreams the fingerprints of your hands resemble the black rosettes on my skin and you will not escape you will never comprehend the twin nights in my eyes remember as a child you came up the steps from the basement and flicking off the light at the top of the stairs feared a hand about to grasp your shoulder from behind that fear is alive and now as you rummage for keys at your apartment doorstep I am a passing jogger about to pounce I am the creature who smells your darkest thoughts and as you turn the key in the lock day or night out of the darkness I spring—

**James Shaheen:** That's wonderful, Arthur. You know, when I read that, I was thinking that we're all aware on some level or another what we're doing. Sometimes we're very aware of it. We have a heightened awareness of what we're doing by displacing these other species and destroying the Earth. Other times we just go about our business because perhaps we feel there's nothing we can do. But this poem really is haunting. It kind of brings it out in the open: OK, you're doing this, you're going to pay for this.

**Arthur Sze:** Right.

**James Shaheen:** It's so beautifully done.



**Arthur Sze:** Thank you. The seed to it was actually reading in the newspaper about a development in southern Arizona, and the developers had applied for permission to add on a whole bunch of apartment buildings, and then they discovered that, they didn't know beforehand that this was a route that jaguars were actually crossing from Mexico into Arizona through, and they were blocking the jaguar from making that route that it'd been used to. And so they were forcing the jaguar. And when I encountered that I thought, oh, here's a point of urgency. We do these things without really being fully cognizant of how we're impacting other species. It could be a jaguar, it could be a fish, it could be a plant, but how we have a kind of presumptive quality, like we can just do this, and then, yes, as you say, it's the jaguars saying it's going to come back.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, you know when I was growing up in southern California, they were still building a lot. And when I was very young, I never saw coyotes, and all of a sudden the coyotes show up, kind of like “We're here,” you know.

**Arthur Sze:** Right.

**James Shaheen:** And it's the result of being displaced, or “We will eat out of your garbage cans and eat your pets.”

**Arthur Sze:** Right.

**James Shaheen:** That's basically what happened. So, in one poem you write, when you've worked this long, your art is no longer an art but a wand that wakes your eyes to what is.” So this seems to bear out in the collection as the speaker of the poems attunes to different elements of the world around them, almost like tuning to different frequencies of existence. So can you tell us what it means for art to wake our eyes to what is?

**Arthur Sze:** Well, I love what you said about different frequencies of existence. And absolutely, I'm trying to, in a way, expand the range of that or awareness of that. And I think certainly when I was a young poet, and oftentimes poetry, you know, in the classroom and universities is often



taught as something that you learn your craft or whatever, and there's this idea of—and certainly a poem can be well made, and certainly, that's important, that the language be well crafted, but the poem isn't just an object. It isn't a vessel or container. Ultimately, I believe the language of the poem comes alive through voice. It gets activated, and then it becomes a living force. And then the role of poetry isn't so much, oh, here's a beautiful construction in language, but poetry does something more. It helps us, enables us to see what is. It provides a pathway to a way to live, a way of being in the world and not just experiencing art as something external or admiring it as something beautiful for its craftsmanship.

**James Shaheen:** You know, the word wand got me thinking because a wand can be used to cast a spell and writing can be used to cast a spell, and I think of Prospero's wand, which he eventually puts down. It's white magic, but it's deception nonetheless. And your wand here is to wake people up, but at the same time, there's a great potential for language to put us to sleep or to deceive us. Do you ever think about that?

**Arthur Sze:** Yes, and I think one of the tasks of poetry is to struggle against that, to make us pay attention to language. Words matter. Words are important, and they need to be used with care, and the meaning and force behind the language is supremely important. So I feel like, absolutely, poetry has a role to awaken us and to ignite that passion for language. It's often said, you know, that poetry is difficult, that the audience for poetry is small. But, you know, poems are meant to be heard and read and reread. And I feel like poems, good poems, one lives with them. You don't just read it and put it aside. It's not like today's headline or newspaper. A really good poem will call you back again and again. And if a poem is good, there are levels of meaning and depths of experience that you might not get in the beginning. You might be disoriented by the sound or the rhythm or think, gee, I don't quite know what that means. But I trust there's something important going on here. And then that creates a demand and urgency to come back and reread the poem and relive it again and again. So for me, that's part of the urgent, important, necessary task of poetry.



**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I mean, it's what I did with your book, actually. I read it and just enjoyed it. I didn't care whether I understood it or not. I enjoyed the sound of the words, and sometimes I would read aloud. And then I reread it, and then I started to actually look up a few words and say, how is this word normally used? But you use a form called the pantoum, and one of the reasons I bring that up right now is that the same words, the same line, the same sentence, takes on different meanings in different contexts, and it's sort of the work of poetry, I think, in part anyway, to put words together in new ways, because that wakes us up, you know, reading it in a way that we haven't read it before. In the pantoum, that became particularly acute. I thought, I'm reading the same line and it feels very different. Could you say something about that form and why you chose to use it?

**Arthur Sze:** Sure, this is the first time I've written in this form. It's from Indonesia, and I often think of gamelan music from Bali, Indonesia, that has these sort of like processions of sound, and you can hear the changes happening progressively in the music. In the pantoum form in Indonesia, the poems are traditionally written in four-line stanzas, and the second and fourth lines become the first and the third. So there's the kind of procession, there's the kind of repetition and elegant variation as the phrases reappear. The thing I found particularly exciting was, as I wrote the two pantoums in this book, I fulfilled those requirements and then I thought, you know, if I add some silences some white space inside of the lines, I still have the exact repetition of the same words, but if I shift the pauses, I change the rhythm, I change the focus, and I make the reader experience the language in a new way. So that was something I just stumbled into. I didn't say, “Oh, now I'm going to do this.” I just was working with the language and I thought, you know, I like the repetitions, but I need something a little more that's going to sharpen it, that's going to freshen it, and make the reader feel like, “I know the words are going to repeat, but I don't quite know how, something's going to change,” and to create that tension. And so, for me as a poet, it was very exciting to think, oh, this is so simple to use silence, a blank space, but shift it through the line, and that charges and changes the whole meaning.



**James Shaheen:** That was one of the things where you talk about waking up, you know, waking us up. I mean, that's the effect it has. You're hearing the same words, and they're different. So we're not lulled to sleep by shopworn phrases or anything like that. In fact, it's a literal repetition, but it is not something that lulls one to sleep rather it requires one to say, “Oh, this is different now.” So I thought that was very successful.

**Arthur Sze:** Oh, thank you.

**James Shaheen:** Would you like to read one of them? You can pick one of the two.

**Arthur Sze:** Let's see. I'll pick “Shadows of Flames.”

Juniper crackles,        and piñon smoke scents the room;  
bins of coriander, cumin, red chile powder,    fenugreek—  
  
at a keyhole entrance, we gaze into the garden of the Taj;  
bomb warnings        pasted on glass doors and on walls;  
  
bins of coriander,        cumin, red chile powder, fenugreek;  
shadows of flames wash        across our bodies—  
  
bomb warnings pasted on glass doors        and on walls;  
bar-tailed godwits        fly eight thousand miles before stopping—  
  
shadows of flames        wash across our bodies—  
small circles, large circles,        circumference is everywhere;  
  
bar-tailed godwits fly        eight thousand miles before stopping—  
quicksilver lightning, peony moon,        this kiss;

*Tricycle Talks*

“The Edge of Language”

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small circles, large circles, circumference is everywhere;  
at a keyhole entrance, we gaze into the garden of the Taj;  
quicksilver lightning, peony moon, this kiss;  
juniper crackles, and piñon smoke scents the room—

**James Shaheen:** Thank you so much, Arthur. You know, there's another poem I'd like you to read, if you don't mind, I'm really putting you through it.

**Arthur Sze:** No, it's a pleasure.

**James Shaheen:** But, yeah, it's a pleasure for our listeners and certainly for me. Could you read “Architectures of Emptiness,” #4? I forget how many verses there are.

**Arthur Sze:** Yeah, there are four sections to this poem, and before I read it, let me just say that the poem ends on a colon. A lot of the poems in this book end on dashes, a colon. They end on a sense of incompleteness. And there's a deliberate idea that there's no easy closure or certainly no absolute closure to things or to a poem. So there's the kind of porous quality or open-ended quality. OK, here's section four, “Architectures of Emptiness.”

Mark the shadows of aspen leaves  
rippling on grass; beneath a veil  
of white bark, aspens have a photosynthetic  
layer that absorbs sunlight  
  
through winter; a magpie sails  
across a yard, flutters wing feathers,  
and, landing on spruce, squawks—  
it speaks to you; thin-leaf alder



shoots rising out of the ditch speak;  
    you stand in a tree pose: inhale,  
exhale, *inhale, exhale*: water  
    is to emptiness as sun is to language;

you sluice into the infinite tangle  
    of beginnings and ends: cottonwood  
seeds swirl in the air; a wild  
    apricot blooms by the ditch; suddenly

each aspen leaf on a tree is a word,  
    the movement of leaves their syntax:  
*burns diamond light diffuse it*  
    *so we green green,*

*diamond light burns so we*  
    *diffuse it into greening—*  
suddenly you parse the leaves,  
    and they are speaking to you now:

**James Shaheen:** Thank you, Arthur. I have to say, when I saw that colon, I turned the page, and I thought maybe I took two pages, so I was rubbing the page between my thumb and forefinger, but that's a really nice way to end. Talk about tuning in to different frequencies of existence, that the very leaves are speaking to us. So, “Water is to emptiness as sun is to language.” Can you tell us about that line and the different ways the world is speaking to you?

**Arthur Sze:** You know, I'm not sure I can explicate that very well. That just came to me as I was writing, but I think of language certainly as having a kind of fullness. So I feel like on one level



there's sort of emptiness, empty space, language, sound, but also meaning having a kind of fullness, and in a way water and sun are both necessary. So I see them as maybe strong polarities, but not like a direct yin and yang kind of thing. They're more like essential primordial elements. We need water. We need the sun. We need emptiness. We need language. So it's not so simple to be able to say, “Oh, well, it divides into these two halves.” To me, the phrase came to me as I was writing the poem, and it's one of those gifts where the Greeks called it a *hermion*, a lucky find, from the god Hermes, like a theft, a moment of thievery. It just came to me as I was writing and I felt like, yes, this is it. It's hard for me to articulate it, but it embodies, for me, the sensation that these elements are at root to what a poem does.

**James Shaheen:** As I remember, you get up very, very early and write in the dark hours. Is that right?

**Arthur Sze:** Yes, I like to get up before sunrise, like at five in the morning, and write through the literal sunrise, so as I have a nice studio with big windows, and as this light comes up, I can see apple tree branches emerging, or branches of a cottonwood tree. So there's the literal sense of darkness moving into light and things appearing and having definition, and for me, there's that metaphorical wave of starting in the dark and finding my way as things emerge.

**James Shaheen:** You know, actually, when I was reading the poetry, I remembered that because it does have that feeling, very much so. But hearing about, in the poem that you just read, hearing about the apricot blooming by the ditch in that poem, I can't help but think of Wen Yiduo's “Dead Water,” which I told you before was among my favorite translations in *The Silk Dragon*. The last time you were on the podcast, you talked about how translating classical and contemporary Chinese poetry has influenced your own craft. So I'm wondering if you could tell us about how your practice of translation influenced this particular collection.

**Arthur Sze:** Yeah, thank you. What a wonderful question. I'm trying to think about where to start. I think when I'm translating, I'm working at my deepest level as a poet, and I feel the





responsibility to, how do I bring this poem from, say, a thousand years ago or even a few hundred years ago from another language and culture into English, and I want my translation to be alive, to work as a poem. And so I might need to make a few changes here and there because English and Chinese are so different. But those phrases and those moments in translating become powerful moments in my own evolution as a poet. So I can't say that Wen Yiduo specifically was on my mind when I was writing *Into the Hush*, but I can say that of all the translations I did in *The Silk Dragon*, Wen Yiduo was really crucial to me because he took the tradition, and because China was in such turmoil, he thought, “I can't just pretend and write these classical, beautiful verses. I need to confront the ugliness, the tragedies of what's happening, and the poetry needs to be able to break open or find a new way to do that,” and Wen Yiduo created out of the classical Chinese, which are traditionally five or seven characters to a line, Wen Yiduo created a nine-character line. He didn't need to do that, but he saw his work out of the tradition as wanting that rigor and architecture, and he didn't want to write in classical Chinese. He was writing in Chinese. He was writing in vernacular Chinese in 1920 in China. So those lessons of thinking about what Wen Yiduo did have been instrumental in helping me think in creating the poems of *Into the Hush*, where like the pantoum, I'm taking a form, but I'm thinking, well, that's fine, I can fulfill all the rules, but it doesn't quite give the kind of vitality or immediacy that I want or need as a poet, and then I work with that, and I'm putting in a caesura and I'm adding in silences. Or in “Architectures of Emptiness,” the idea that the leaves could be words and the movement a syntax, and then to me it's like you get to that edge, which is edge of language, the edge of what can be said, and then the poem sort of brings you to that, and then you as the reader have to go beyond into that stage or step that's the beyond the language. That again comes out of translation, that sense of being able to work with finite things, but searching for a way to work with the infinite.

**James Shaheen:** I think we have the title of this episode. I think we're going to call it “The Edge of Language.”



**Arthur Sze:** Oh, great.

**James Shaheen:** But, you know, emptiness seems to run like a current through this collection, and in fact it's the character that you and Kaz Tanahashi end up drawing. So can you say more about the role of emptiness or the idea of emptiness in your work and in this book in particular, since you've addressed it so directly?

**Arthur Sze:** Sure. I guess as a preliminary comment, I want to say that many Americans are uncomfortable with emptiness, or if you're, you know, in a room, and people are conversing, if there's suddenly silence, people feel awkward or they feel embarrassed, or there's often a tendency to want to fill up that space. And I feel like from an Asian perspective, the emptiness isn't just a blank; it's generative. It's allowing the speech, the sounds to be themselves, and it's also going beyond that, in that space that's generative, to allow a speaker, a listener, room to think their own thoughts, to not say them verbally, but that breathing space is extremely important. And so, I think there's a sense of not wanting to cram a book in terms of the poetry, wanting to feel like these empty spaces. If you look carefully in the book, you know, they're there in the lines of the pantoum. where there are these spaces happening. There are lines at the end of “Architectures of Emptiness” where there are different spaces between the words.

And just as an interesting aside, most people are going to think, “Oh, Arthur's being really weird,” or whatever. But for the first time in my life, I used a die and I threw it to determine the amount of space between the words, because I thought, if aspen leaves are speaking to a human being. They're not just, if I'm typing on a typewriter, I don't just put “diamond, two spaces, light, two spaces, green, two spaces.” I thought, how do I create a choreography that might make sense but also have a kind of tension? So, I threw a die each time from one to six and created the amount of spaces in between those words so that it looks random, but it might have some meaning from the other side, meaning from the perspective of aspens. So that's an image of emptiness that looks random, but it might have meaning, it might have significance. And this kind of thing is running all the way through the book with *zuihitsu* sections, where the two



characters create this one word, emptiness. There are stops and starts, and in between those, these poems of the book are happening. So I'm really, in a way, trying to allow spaces that are unconventional in a normal book of poetry. There are no section dividers, but to create these spaces or moments where a kind of surprise or insight can happen. And I'll just connect it to the image on the book cover, which is bioluminescence. The artist Erika Blumenfeld was researching phytoplankton, and she discovered that the plankton would erupt in moments of light when they were disturbed, and each one is unique. So I was thrilled to have that image on the cover of the book, like out of this darkness, an eruption of light. So for me, the emptiness is like this black, pregnant, rich space that allows that moment of light to erupt. And you couldn't have that eruption if you didn't allow for those spaces. So that's a long answer to your question.

**James Shaheen:** Now that's a wonderful answer. That touches on so much. I don't know if you ever read Charles Seife's book *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*, this aversion that the Greeks had to this notion of zero or nothingness, you know, the Indian *sunya* which comes into Buddhism as *sunya* as a descriptor for, well, emptiness. And, at the same time, you use the word pregnant. Emptiness is also full. There's potential, and without that, there's no potential. So you describe it beautifully. I wonder if to close, you'd be willing to read one last poem. We're putting you through your paces, although I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

**Arthur Sze:** My pleasure,

**James Shaheen:** OK. So “Architectures of Emptiness” #2.

**Arthur Sze:** OK, great, so just a word before I read this, because it's an intricate piece. There are two narratives that are juxtaposed, and I think of it like a spiral helix, like a DNA spiral helix, where the two narratives diverge and converge. So one narrative has to do with cleaning an irrigation ditch, which is about a quarter of a mile above the house where I live here in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and that water that comes down the irrigation ditch we use to water the orchard

*Tricycle Talks*

“The Edge of Language”

Episode #123 with Arthur Sze

April 9, 2025



and plants. And the other narrative happening inside of it is the end of a Tibetan sand painting where the mandala is being erased or dispersed on flowing water. So here it is.

Clearing twigs and branches, shoveling silt,

*—one monk scrapes  
a knuckle through sand,*

we chop willow shoots rising out of the acequia;

*makes a gray X;  
then another,*

on a post, a spotted towhee rotates its head,

*holding a paintbrush,  
sweeps the colored sands*

sideways, up, down, before flying off;

*from perimeter to center;  
another collects them*

I pause at these minute shifts—

*in an urn;  
then they disperse the sands*

*Tricycle Talks*  
“The Edge of Language”  
Episode #123 with Arthur Sze  
April 9, 2025



in the predawn dark, I am infinitesimal

*on flowing water, laying out,  
in minute detail*

gazing up at Deneb but brighten as the sky

*the palace and ephemerality  
of all endeavors:*

brightens and see our lives unfurl:

*what is stilled, flows,  
what is destroyed, liberates—*

**James Shaheen:** That's really wonderful. You know, Sarah Fleming, our producer, and I were discussing this and we were thinking, “Should we have him read this poem?” And I said, I read it aloud and I changed my voice for the mandala parts, and we said, let's see, but you read it and it worked. We were thinking, how is it to read that? So now we know. That's really wonderful. So anything else, Arthur, what's next for you? Or are you just taking a rest now?

**Arthur Sze:** I'm not taking a rest. I'm writing, but I can't really see what's next. I feel like I've put everything I can into this book, so we'll just see. Yeah.

**James Shaheen:** Some of these poems were published elsewhere before they found their way into the collection, is that correct?

**Arthur Sze:** Yes.



**James Shaheen:** And then did you then create this thread with you and Kaz doing the zuihitsu calligraphy?

**Arthur Sze:** Yeah, I like to think of each of my books as having a kind of organic structure and a through line, and I like to work on the floor. So I took all the pages of the book, I made a mess on my floor, and I laid them out, and I thought maybe this book is in sections. What's the beginning? What's the end? And I couldn't quite figure it out. I knew that I wanted “Anvil” at the beginning, which has this incantation and spell that you mentioned with language. And I knew I wanted the Merwin poem at the end, “Pe‘ahi Light,” that's set on Maui, but I couldn't figure out how to choreograph the journey in between, and sections didn't work at all. And then one day I thought, that's it, the zuihitsu is written in these seven sections, but why put them all together? I could have one, there could be poems, I could come back to the next, there could be more poems, and serve as a fundamental through line that appears and disappears, but is continuous throughout. It's this idea of two people working together to create one character emptiness. And then I got really excited. I thought, that's it. I could never have thought of it, in terms of like, I don't sit down and say, “OK, now this is the book, and here's how it's going to happen.” I was working from the inside out thinking, “I have these poems, I feel that they need to be in this book, but I can't choreograph it,” and then that sense of unfolding, of creating with language. And when that idea came to me, I took the seven sections and I cut them out on different pieces of paper and then I was able to choreograph the whole book.

**James Shaheen:** Now, that's great. Thank you for answering that. I was thinking, I don't know if you'll answer this or not, but thank you for giving us an inside look. Anything else, Arthur, before we go?

**Arthur Sze:** No, it's just such a pleasure to be here. Thank you for inviting me back.

*Tricycle Talks*

“The Edge of Language”

Episode #123 with Arthur Sze

April 9, 2025



**James Shaheen:** Thank you, Arthur Sze. It's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Into the Hush*, available now. Thanks again, Arthur.

**Arthur Sze:** Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Arthur Sze. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!