

## RODRIGO TOSCANO

### Jump out! Sustain! Kick!

*On a poetics of stamina, desiring finesse*

I've been asked to interrelate my experience as a youth immersed in martial arts, my current poetic practice and my mid-life dedication to competitive running. There are indeed common threads that run between the three passions.

From karate (5 hours a day, 6 days a week, 7 years), the problematic of form & content took deep root in my body—as mind. The very notion of “desirable” outcomes gleaned from controlled environments is something that still propels me forward. I don't think of words on the page as “arrangements” (as in a craft sensibility) so much as tactical nodes of energy in multiple arrays of probable results.

By way of aiming trajectories of meaning-force to a specific part of a body (actual, discursive) and remaining alert to multiple responses resulting from that action, I learn a vital portion of the material dimensions of the matters I am grappling with. Representations of poetry as being non-collisionary, boundlessly elliptical—the “wise” Zen-inspired poetics of stillness, I've never been very sympathetic to.

Remaining alert—at the physiognomic level—is key for me. The kind of writing I hate to read never responds in *combinations*. The point is not to land a single kick, line, cadence, but to have that kick, line, rhetorical rejoinder, restage the body in such a way as to *re-ready it* into a form from where it can act *again* with a force and efficiency that is either explosively expended or strategically withheld. I've witnessed many a quiet orator of poetry “dismantle” a loud, boisterous co-reader with well executed combinations—reverse crescent kick followed by counter punch followed 360 degrees scissors floor sweep & lock followed by double chop to the metaphor.

I am also talking about being profoundly competitive—*against one self*. The hours, months and years of dedication to form (form as an actual *place* where unexpected, “happy” accidents can occur)—is itself a form. Self-competition here means to be increasingly conscious of the overall *shape* of one's thinking.

An early and complete immersion in that world of discrete physical materiality – martial arts, is what first led me to meditate on “space”—it's shape. I find nothing more unnerving than poets prattling on about “space” when it's clear to everyone they don't have a developed, tactic-carnal feel for the very *question* of space. Space in no way refers to “silence,” “emptiness,” nor “gaps” of anything. It's more about venturing to gauge the very *horizon* of one's activity—from all sides. The question never leaves one's lips too far, “what am I doing, here, now?” Thus, my transition from karate to experimental writing was seamless.

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Running can be thought of as something most of us are physically “made to do,” and I agree with that evolutionary perspective wholeheartedly; however, running can also be equally

thought of as the *achievement* of running. Same goes for language, we can treat it both as a function of biology as well as a cultural endeavor.

Though running is commonly spoken of as a singularity, at base, it is a confluence of several running “systems.” To do it “better,” to achieve endurance, stamina, ease, and speed, one has to consciously *sync* several interrelated running systems (aerobic capacity, anaerobic endurance, lactic acid clearing processes, etc). Each system can be targeted for improvement, each system is thought of as a site of energy transfer to another.

Writing for me presents those exact challenges. For example, a steady diet of daily writing—slow writing that is not too glamorous (e-mails, letters, communiqués) provides an overall “base” for other kinds of writing. This would be analogous to the long, slow run. The overall writing “capacity” grows, deepens, and it’s from that base, that achieved strength, that short “races” / poems can be executed with greater finesse.

In running, we say that all kinds of training lead to “stress.”

- \* Stress leading to positive adaptation
- \* Stress that is compressed, “stacked,” race-ready
- \* Stress that’s leading to long-term fatigue – burnout, injury.

Most poets have seen their colleagues experience all three types of stresses. Wouldn’t it be mutually advantageous if we could talk more openly about “syncing” our writing activities—poets speaking as athletes!

Competitive runners are also fond of saying that runners essentially do only three things:

- \* Run
- \* Recover from running
- \* Or, do things that aid running (i.e. strength and flexibility exercises)

When you talk to a runner who’s at that very moment not running, trust me, they’re *actively* thinking of it as recovery, whether they’re at that moment walking, sitting at a reading, or having drinks with you).

“How’s your writing going?”

“Well, I’m not writing right now.”

“Ah, so what race do you have your sights on?”