

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOANNE DIAZ

**Kirstin Hotelling Zona:** Welcome to *SRPR*, Joanne, and congratulations! You've just won the Gerald Cable Book Award from Silverfish Review Press for your manuscript of poems, *The Lessons*. The book will come out in Spring 2011, yes?

**Joanne Diaz:** Yes, that's right. Thank you, thank you. I'm excited.

**KHZ:** It's interesting to read the series of poems featured here in *SRPR* on the heels of the wonderful poems in *The Lessons*. These newer poems build upon the strengths of your earlier work—syntactical and discursive dexterity, encyclopedic range, the deliberate interlacing of the personal and the historical—to become more at home with themselves. They're more colloquial, playfully autobiographical, and farther-reaching, both psychologically and philosophically. I'm curious, then, about your own sense of the work collected here as it relates—or doesn't—to the process of writing the earlier pieces in *The Lessons*.

**JD:** Most of the poems that you have in this selection are fairly new. The poems in my first collection, *The Lessons*, are primarily meditative and descriptive, and they really aim towards closure, whereas with these newer poems I'm more invested in associative leaps; long, discursive lines; and treating the poem as a form of argument. I'm not trying to disregard those earlier poems, but they are in debt to a model that I wanted to break out of. In these more recent poems, I am aiming for a poetics that is messier, more—as you say—colloquial, a little more inconclusive. A poetics that provides an indictment of things I am unhappy with, dissatisfied with.

**KHZ:** That's interesting, because one of the things I noted immediately about these poems is that there's no hesitation, formally speaking. It seems that you've found a groove, particularly in the first-person narrative. And I love that you ride this bike of narrative so masterfully—left-handed, right-handed, no handed, bearing down into the sudden rise of the story—and in this way I'm reminded of Bishop's poems at the end of her life, and also, of course, though in a different way, of C. K. Williams. But your tone: there's a directness, a generosity. These poems are wholly unaffected, they're witty, their content range is enormous,

and they're unpretentious. These poems are all yours. And I wonder how this tone, this capaciousness, is related to your comfort with the first-person voice so central to these poems. When I think about writing from the argumentative place you speak of, I imagine you had to reckon with the oft-disparaged use of the first person in your poems, of that voice that is staking a claim, which is really a reckoning with the complicated history of the first-person narrative, especially in this country, during the last several decades. How, then, do you situate your work vis-à-vis contemporary conversations about narrative, particularly the overt first-person mode?

**JD:** C. K. Williams is a major influence on me. The publication of his *Collected Poems* was a huge revelation. If you look at his earlier poems, they are so tight, so lyrically driven. They have that meditative quality but are also very much of the time they were written, the sixties and the early seventies. But then you just watch his poems explode as time goes on; they get more discursive and more overtly engaged with history and cultural issues. That volume is such an argument for a *Selected* or a *Collected*. I've had discussions with poet friends who say, "why can't we just stay true to the individual volumes?" Well, as an intellectual exercise, seeing what a poet does, just the shape alone—forget about rhetoric, about content or topic, symbols or images—just looking typographically at what a poet does across time, and the ways in which that shape changes—this was very instructive for me. Nothing of his that's appeared in major anthologies or in his later work would have revealed this to me.

**KHZ:** That's so often the case, right? Because we want to edit out the disruptions or surprises that disable us from making a particular story out of a poet's "growth."

**JD:** That's exactly right. What I'm trying to do in the poems here is perform acts of simultaneity; so there's pop culture juxtaposed with high culture in the same poem, the personal and the political, the scientific and the emotional. And I'm trying to equalize them, create links between fields of inquiry that are both valid and benefit from these linkages. And here I feel like I'm borrowing very explicitly from Walt Whitman: the longer line, the feeling of several things in action at once. I borrow these moves from Whitman because I feel like they're democratic, egalitarian. Moves that are less interested in hierarchy, less