

THE SRPR INTERVIEW:

JOSHUA COREY

Kirstin Hotelling Zona: Welcome to SRPR, Josh! I'm thrilled to have you as our Feature Poet.

Joshua Corey: Thanks, Kirstin. It's a real pleasure.

KHZ: One of the things I love most about your poetry is its wicked adventurousness and searing focus; movement between a perceived "outside" (adventure) and "inside" (focus) is a signature characteristic in each of your full-length books. With this in mind, I'd like to start our conversation with what you describe in your forthcoming anthology, "The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral," as poetry's "call to the imagination—not to the imagination of dire futures but to the interruptions of poetry." Building upon Wallace Stevens, you point out that because "these interruptions" function as "breaks in the mediated dreamscape of images" we passively consume, they "are also connections, recalling readers to life as it is lived in diverse human and animal bodies, in particular landscapes and cityscapes...."

And yet, while your newest poems (several of which appear here) are obviously indebted to your long-standing interest in the "interruptions" of poetry, they feel different from your earlier work, especially when read out loud. The poems featured here adamantly refuse the pause, the break, the breath's undulation—the "interruption"—as you've conceptualized it until now. These poems are often unpunctuated (or sparsely punctuated), are composed with very few stanza breaks, and usually employ enormous tension between syntax and line break; their heat is nearly aggressive. Poems like "The Millions," "Clandestine Dead Animal Poem," "Though He Was Sometimes Insane and I Was Not That," and, of course, "The Barons" feel unstoppable. While your earlier poems seem to "bear the mark," as you've put it elsewhere, of the pressures of experience, the poems here feel like what's let loose once that pressure valve bursts. Their language floods from that space so carefully wrought by the interruption.

Does my experience of these poems resonate with your experience of them? Or with what you feel is at stake in this writing?

JC: Wow, that's a lot to take in! I'll answer by referring to the splendid and generous review of *Severance Songs* that Mike Theune published in the last issue of SRPR [36.2, Summer/Fall 2011], which is part of a longer essay on the contemporary or postmodern sonnet. I largely agree with Mike that the soul or essence of poetry is the volta or turn, the sudden surprising shift that is the function of the line break—what ultimately distinguishes verse from prose. And I like how you are connecting the importance of the turn with your perception of my long-standing preoccupation with the uneasy interface between inner and outer. I sense that the new poems, instead of presenting a turn, or negotiating rupture, plunge *into* the rupture, like a train that has run out of track but somehow manages to keep going, at least for a while. For almost as long as I've been writing poetry I've been conscious of an inner tension: on the one hand, my longstanding tendency to write, or wish to write, in the mode of a highly formalist, controlled, and Apollonian version of modernism; on the other hand, a powerful and half-suppressed impulse toward the galloping, all-consuming line, a stubborn faith in the holiness of the heart's affections—in short, Romanticism, particularly as it's trickled down to me through Emerson and Whitman, passing through the baroque filter of Wallace Stevens, and lately up-rising through my immersion in Black Mountain poetics. The recent poems may be arising out of a dialectical truce between these tendencies. Now I'm more willing to let contradiction be in my poems.

KHZ: It's really interesting that the seemingly opposite actions of "plunging into" and letting be are coterminous in your current writing practice. And the parity between plunging "into the rupture" and letting (it) be (or go) is super-relevant to a way of being-in-the-world that many younger contemporary poets strive to articulate. I'm reminded here of these lines from your poem "The Millions": "the window's closing / on all that air and light / to render it spectacular and unusable / but for now nothing protects me and I'm glad." Here's where I see your train plunging ahead in the absence of tracks, as when Looney Tunes' Wile E. Coyote sprints off the cliff and stays aloft, his wiry legs a blur in midair—until he realizes that there's no ground beneath him and falls. Maybe your desire to let contradiction be is akin to realizing the danger of looking down; a certain kind of self-consciousness?

JC: Well, a lot of poets, and maybe overeducated Americans in general, feel paralyzed by their self-consciousness, confusing it with self-awareness, even with action. The new poems try—I can't say if they succeed—to go through self-consciousness and actually realize their situation: to make contact with a reality of which the self, and one's self-consciousness, is a legitimate part.

KHZ: Since the Romantics, the role of self-consciousness in American poetry is prominent and fraught, often hinging upon one's assumptions about the so-called political and its "place" in poetry. Your numerous invocations of silence, both in your older poetry and recent work, feel both like a reckoning with self-consciousness and a working-toward that "dialectical truce" between your modernist and Romantic impulses, as in these lines from "The Barons": "Whatever silence/ Have it your way silence / I don't care silence / Depart from this place/ See what you have created // & // see the barons / the barons unmade." These lines not only refuse silence, but indict it as the bystander's complicity, one's refusal to bear witness while inhabiting what you describe in your bio as the "doomy socioeconomic landscape of the early 21st Century."

In an interview with Max Glassburg you said you are "still struggling with the question of whether poems are...to be appreciated aesthetically or for their literary value" or if you "want them to do something else": "I am," you stated, "very interested...in the possibility of kinds of writing that want to make contact with something beyond the poem" (16). Are you exploring this "something else" head-on in these new poems? What are you thinking these days about the ostensible tension between the aesthetic and the political? Is this still a viable or productive opposition in poetry today?

JC: This political/aesthetic tension maps itself pretty well onto the internal division I mentioned before. For quite a while I was obsessed with what you could broadly call Language poetry's critique of capitalist language, of which Romantic and "poetic" idioms were merely a subset. I was powerfully attracted to poets whose work articulated social contradiction in a highly analytical and abstract way, sometimes satirically (Bruce Andrews, Kevin Davies), sometimes structurally (Barrett Watten, Leslie Scalapino). The pleasures of the phrase-making in such poems are largely incidental to the conceptual work they try to do; at their best they offer me a very cerebral sort of high, almost an

“Ah-ha!” moment in the Oprah Winfrey sense. In recent years, I read poems in which the self is just a reflexively ironic node in some larger progress (or degeneration) of the narrative of capital with increasing impatience. I think something’s been sacrificed with the sidelining of the protean self that began with the long backlash against confessional poetry that produced at least two great counter-movements, the New York School and Language Poetry. And something even more fundamental has been lost with the sacrifice of the mythic dimension in poetry—or to put it more precisely, with the (failed) sublation of myth into ideology. This takes us to Robert Duncan, whose work I’ve been immersed in all year. He’s the one who has helped me to understand what it might mean for a poem to be more than, or even something entirely other than, an aesthetic object more-or-less beautifully formed. For Duncan, poetry is a spiritual practice, or to use one of his favorite words, “adventure.” That’s why he claimed not to revise his poems: he wasn’t interested in honing or perfecting the object, but in bringing the reader along as a participant in the process of discovery, even at the risk of looking foolish or getting lost in the imagination of evil, in the articulation of one’s darkest impulses, which are inseparable from the dark impulses of society, humanity, of nature itself.

Here’s what Duncan said to Denise Levertov: “I do not assent to whatever social covenant nor do I assent to the inner command as authority; but seek a complex obedience to ‘What is Happening’” (Duncan-Levertov Letter 410, June 1968). What is happening, that is, in the poem, which is a locus of simultaneity; obedience to what is happening in the self and in the world and in language. Obedience, ultimately, to *and*. That’s where I locate not ideology, but reality.

KHZ: I love how you describe Duncan’s “obedience to ‘What is Happening’” as an “obedience, ultimately, to *and*.” This discussion is particularly relevant to your latest book, *Severance Songs*, for which you won the 2008 Dorset Prize from Tupelo Press. This book of poems was written in the direct aftermath of 9/11, when you also met and fell in love with your future wife, Emily. It’s a collection born of your effort to reconcile the intensity of these felt contradictions (terrorism and love). The final lines of this book have stayed with me, and feel pertinent to what we’re talking about now: “But severance // doesn’t end once love itself comes home / though reaching builds on reaching the fallible