

THE SRPR INTERVIEW:

LINDA GREGERSON

Joanne Diaz: Perhaps we can start with a question about your new book. *The Selvage* is a wonderful title. In a literal sense, “selvage” is a sewing term that refers to the edge of woven fabric that keeps it from unraveling. But I like, too, how the sound of “selvage” resonates with “salvage.” There’s a lot that needs saving in this collection: ecological damage, political damage, damage after the terror of 9/11.

Your poetry has always been full of stitches, hems, seams, and edges, not just in the content, but in form. For example, you frequently use em dashes as joints between ideas and hyphens between multiple words to create a whole new terminology. You also make powerful leaps that stitch the personal to the political and historical.

Perhaps the best example of your literal and figurative use of stitching can be found in the poem “The Woman Who Died in Her Sleep,” from the book of that same title. In that ekphrastic poem, you’re inspired by Jeffrey Silverthorne’s startling black-and-white photograph of a young woman who lies, naked, on a gurney after an autopsy. The speaker in the poem wonders what kind of stitch the coroner used to seal the body up:

Not whipstitch nor blindstitch
nor any
sort of basting stitch I recognize, black

cordage, really, piercing its way from pubis
to breast-
bone [...]

.....
Amazing
what the flesh can make of all this in-

terruption.

As you imagine the clinical, forensic atmosphere of a morgue, you are also capable of imagining the precise nature of the stitch and its power as a metaphor for healing and sealing, and as a metaphor of

interruption—of life, of connections, of cohesion. How are seams, stitches, joints, and interruptions working differently in *The Selvage*?

Linda Gregerson: One of the things you've hit upon is my obsession with the mystery of embodiment, and I suppose that in some ways that's the primary suture. We know better than to talk about a mind/body division. We know that the sense of division is primitive, that it's not warranted by anything that science can confirm. And yet, there's this profound wonder at being constituted by flesh that goes about its business without us, or rather, without our conscious will. It's enfleshed habitation that's the primary mystery here: both the problem and the incitement to true imagination. Why should this wedded-ness of consciousness and body feel so much like division? Why are we such strangers to ourselves?

In terms of the formal phenomena you describe, I came to most of them because I felt I had no other choice. The heapings-up and enjambments, the internal sutures and disruptions: for me, they amount to a fundamental rhythm of thought. I couldn't find another way to write that didn't produce recycling of clichés.

And I think the internal oppositions are about temporality, really, an effort to use the poetry as the instrument it most profoundly is—an instrument for giving us lodging in the present tense. The present is such a mysterious thing, almost as mysterious as embodiment. Lately, I've been rereading Augustine's *Confessions*, the part, in Book 11, where he's trying to think about eternity. But eternity's too hard: we don't have the equipment to conceive of it. So Augustine tries to triangulate, to think about that thing we have instead of eternity, which is time. But it turns out that time isn't very easy to think about either. He begins to ask, "What is time?" Well, there's the past, but we can't really say anything about the past because it no longer exists. It's not *here*. And of course there's the future, but that's not here *yet*. So then there's the present. But it is so sheer, such a razor's edge, that we can only apprehend it by imagining a cusp that is not yet future but about to become the past. Its about-to-be-lost-ness is what makes it so precious.

And poetry is a device for trying to incite in us the feeling that we are there, or at least, that we will have been there, when the present has already become the past. We so very much want to convince ourselves, before we die, that all of this won't have been lost on us.

So what the poet has to do, what any poet does, is to devise strategies for producing the impression of presence. Focused presence—honor paid in the form of attention to the perishing earth—is poetry’s only proper business. And that’s actually why that very old idea of poetry as an act of praise is still a pertinent one.

JD: Maybe I can use that observation as a segue into my next question about devotional poetry. When I look back to *Fire in the Conservatory*, your very first book of poems, I notice that the first poem of that collection is titled “Maudlin; Or, The Magdalen’s Tears.” I love the ekphrastic work that this poem does: it provides moments of aphoristic wisdom, a variety of dramatic utterances, and an exploration of faith. In fact, the poem’s first lines are a hypothesis about faith that reads as follows:

If faith is a tree that sorrow grows
and women, repentant or not, are swamps,

a man who comes for solace here
will be up to his knees and slow

getting out.

That attention to faith, to the devotional, to the spiritual, exists in all of your collections, including *The Selvage*. In the poem “Constitutional,” for example, you provide a meditation on an old man’s “battery-charged devotions” as well as the speaker’s own thoughts on blessings; and in “From the Life of St. Peter,” the sequence that appears here in *SRPR*, you immerse your reader in the meditations of Peter, based on your reading of paintings in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence. How are you a devotional poet, and how do you draw from other devotional poets who have come before you?

LG: The vocabulary of specifically Christian devotion is one that is a sort of mother tongue, and though I am far from observant myself, I feel a great bit of homesickness for that lodging. I’m not sure that’s a very admirable feeling, but it’s what I’m stuck with. I feel profound failure as a parent, for instance, because I was never able to put together a coherent practice of faith that would give my children a vocabulary to reject. I think it’s very useful to have vocabularies to reject. But I couldn’t figure out how to make it work. I feel all kinds

of skepticism about the way faith is invoked in contemporary life. I am keenly aware of the complicity between confessional identities and violent political imposition. And yet, there's a way in which I'm heart-stamped by it and never tire of contemplating the lives of people for whom articles of faith were more of a living reality than they are for me.

Were more: I suppose that's telling too. I find the historical distance helps. I can't find my way to any sort of practical observance myself, but when I work on the Reformation, which is one of my abiding interests, I get to keep company with those for whom the demands were immediate and urgent and involved extremely difficult life-and-death choices. I'm heart-stung by that mode of inhabiting the world, by its paradoxes, and sometimes by its awfulness. There is nothing at the foundation of this particular faith if not paradox. I was teaching *The Merchant of Venice* this week, and we were trying to figure out what's meant in the trial scene by law and mercy, or the covenant of law and the covenant of grace. Look at the logic of Christian redemption: the play presses hard on its likeness to the logic of money; they're a single system-think. On the one hand, the trial scene, like the crucifixion, is meant to abrogate the eye-for-an-eye logic of the old law, but what is it that signals the covenant of grace? The very human sacrifice that Judaism had rejected as barbaric; a dead body, nailed to a cross for our sins. So on the one hand, the new faith is founded on an eye for an eye, or a pound of flesh, in all its bloody literalism, and yet it's also meant to liberate us from that calculus, which Christianity came to construe as a system in which we are all found damnably wanting. I don't think the play "takes sides," by the way. That's why it continues to matter. It was the paradox of both/and, yes/no, the combination of rigor and preposterousness in the dominant faith of his era that Shakespeare found so compelling. And I do too.

I suppose what I'm trying to say is that devotion ought to be a problem if it's going to become the proper business of a poem. If a poem is going to matter, it can't sit tight; it has to ask a question. So poetry is in part my way of trying to be answerable. What I learn from the devotional poetry of Donne and Herbert, for example, is the power of devotion as a generator for high-stakes poetic engagement. The life blood is the struggling to work it out for one's self.