

THE SRPR INTERVIEW: JASON BREDLE

Joanne Diaz: Jason, thank you for sharing your work in this issue of SRPR. You've been interviewed a number of times, and I've noticed that interviewers often ask you about your use of humor in your poetry. I love the way you've spoken about your approach to humor, but perhaps what interests me even more is the melancholy that is interspersed throughout your poems. So often, the speaker in your poems seems to suffer through the quotidian details of life, but with real sadness, and often a sense of crisis. The first sentence from "City of Lavender," the first poem in *Carnival*, alludes to this impending danger: "I had everything I ever wanted to say to you organized in my head but forgot it all when you took my palm in your hand and with your index finger wrote 'disaster.'" Could you say a bit about the heartbreak and loneliness that pervades so much of your work?

Jason Bredle: Ha! I've never really thought about it, but I probably suffer through the quotidian on a daily basis as it is. There's a lot of suffering to be had in doing chores, anyway. When I'm in the middle of writing, I'm not really thinking about humor or melancholy—I'm just thinking about writing something that would interest me as a reader. As a reader, I find humor to be more effective when contrasted with heartbreak or emotional gravitas. George Saunders has pretty much mastered it.

JD: What is it about George Saunders' work that is most compelling to you?

JB: Well, pretty much all of his stories place sincere, well-intentioned characters into absurd situations, which are often the result of an overwhelmingly consumerist society. What I'm particularly drawn to is the way he's able to flesh out real human emotions that I relate to and have sympathy for in the context of these absurd situations, and this is something I've had in the back of my head while writing for the past few years now.

While I was working on the poems in *Smiles of the Unstoppable*, I grew a bit bored of writing about my life—the details aren't that interesting, tend to sway melodramatic, and I'm embarrassed by some

of my early poems, to be honest—so I wanted to get away from that. I didn't want to eliminate the drama altogether, though, because I consider it the glue that holds my work in place in a lot of cases. This isn't to say that I don't enjoy writing a poem with very little drama, like "Beating a Dead Horse," but I don't see much of a point in writing an entire book of "Beating a Dead Horse" without some "Retina Heart" thrown in the mix.

JD: For me, the drama of "Retina Heart" seems to originate in what the speaker cannot know or understand or solve. Juan and the speaker seem out of sorts—disoriented, confused, unable to remember to locate themselves or recognize the customs of those around them. I love the poem's surreal quality—especially the speaker's desire to transfer retina-like qualities to his heart so that the heart might see. Of course, in doing so the speaker loses the tears that gave his melancholy its intelligibility.

Many of your poems resist metaphors that favor a one-to-one correspondence between literal things and their figurative comparisons. While metaphors favor a one-to-one correspondence (my love is a red, red rose), metonymy seems to favor whatever is adjacent or within view (my love was a rose until it fell to pieces on the corner of First and Fourteenth). Certainly, many twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets have privileged metonymy over metaphor—Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara are prime examples—and in our own moment, you keep the metonymic tradition alive, along with Mark Halliday, Tony Hoagland, Denise Duhamel, Lucia Perillo, and a number of other prominent American poets.

How do you conceive of the associative links and leaps between and among your thoughts? How do you approach this metonymy in your work?

JB: I admire many of those poets, and Halliday is a particular inspiration, but what's most important to me, really, is to write the most interesting, unique lines I can think of in order to create some kind of overall experience or feeling for the reader. What that experience or feeling is depends on the poem. "Gore Monster," for instance, was written after reading about PCP and thinking it would be fun to write about a typical evening of my life as if I had taken PCP. That feeling I think of as dark and confusing, somewhat like a nightmare, which I

suppose is different from the feeling of “Retina Heart,” which is lonely and confusing. But with “Retina Heart,” “Gore Monster,” and a lot of my recent poems, the speaker seems to be struggling with how all of the experiences and feelings we have on a daily basis can lead us to something other than an enormous feeling of futility. Questions arise, like, what can we really know about anything, or, is it possible to really know anything? I think that as I’ve grown older, I’ve begun to see my poetry as a fundamental means of making sense of the world, and also a total failure of making sense of the world.

JD: Yes, this questioning is very apparent in these new poems; especially in a poem like “Self-Pie,” in which the speaker’s unknowing provides a baffling Kafkaesque crisis. You take the reader to an extreme state of transformation, but not one that the speaker wished for. How to make sense of transformation in that situation is exciting, but terrifying too.

JB: At the end of the day, when I read, I want to be excited by what I’m reading—by both the words themselves and the ideas—and I really just want to write stuff that would evoke that excitement in me if someone else had written it.

JD: And by *excitement*, I know what you mean because I’m completely won over by the excitements of your poetry. I’m drawn to each poem’s sense of imminent catastrophe, the sense that the world in your poems is not just in a state of disrepair, but on the verge of disaster. Could you say something about the excitement of these new poems in this issue of SRPR? As you say, these poems feel different from others that you’ve previously published. From where do these poems derive their energy?

JB: I think imminent catastrophe is a good descriptor of a lot of my work, although I’ve been trying to get away from that as much as I can because it can become a bit of a crutch for me as I write. Although for a writer struggling with the futility of trying to make sense of the world, imminent catastrophe makes a lot of sense. “Army of Dolphins” certainly fits the description.

For me the excitement of my recent poems comes in the condensed form. It’s fun to get to the point immediately and cut out all unnecessary chatter, unless the point of the poem is the unnecessary chatter,

like in “Army of Dolphins.” I think I took that title from a television show about dolphins, but immediately became interested in making the whole poem about one guy who is stressing out about how we should refer to them, rather than writing another, easier poem about a dolphin general, dolphin admiral, where they train, etc., as an analogy to humans (as I’d originally thought it would be about when I sat down to write it). This harkens back to my love of the dramatic monologue, really. I mentioned how focused on voice I was when I started writing poetry, and I believe it’s an extension of my love of the dramatic monologue. One could easily consider all of my poems to be dramatic monologues to a certain extent.

JD: That is fascinating to me. I hadn’t considered “Army of Dolphins” as a dramatic monologue before, but now I can see how the poem provides a critique of a distrustful voice of a persona that desires preparedness in the face of danger. The allusion to dolphins makes the persona seem absurd, to say the least.

In this and many of your other poems, you seem to be preoccupied with wildness and unmanageability, particularly as it is embodied by animals. In your poems, animals encroach upon the world of humans (as in “Doctor Bronson”), they chase people down (as in “P-Bear,” when “Like a cross/between a puma and a bear, a p-bear/is coming for you/and there’s nothing you can do/about it.”), they are underwater menaces (as with the squid and octopus and sharks in “Sleeping on the Beach” and the dolphin army in “Army of Dolphins”) and occasionally they present themselves as part of the solution (“Bat Sleep”) or as part of the linguistic problem (as with the cliché of “Beating a Dead Horse”). Could you say a bit about how animals work in your poems?

JB: That’s funny because it didn’t occur to me until you pointed it out. In some instances, like *A Twelve Step Guide*, I intentionally put animals into every poem. It seems like there’s a lot of material to be had by examining our relationship with the natural world. Humans are at its mercy, for the most part, but many of us don’t realize it. Also, I just love animals.

JD: Your observations about the power of the natural world lead me to my next question. You’ve lived in Illinois for twelve years, and you’ve lived elsewhere in the Midwest—Indiana, Michigan. As you know,

SRPR is particularly committed to the poetry of place, especially as it is practiced by Illinois poets. How has your environment affected your poetic practice?

JB: I don't really know. Would my work be different if I lived somewhere else? Maybe. Maybe not, though. I've lived in the Midwest most of my life, but don't particularly like it. Perhaps this has a hand in my recent work being a bit more escapist and absurd than it might otherwise be. This thinking has evolved. When I wrote the poems in *Standing in Line for the Beast*, I was adamant about maintaining the colloquial speak of the place I was raised. I was focused on establishing a memorable voice, and I also naively believed that I could write the type of poem that anyone—literary or not—would enjoy, and thought that writing in a colloquial tone would help reach those ends.

JD: Could you say a bit more about that *colloquial speak* and how it edged its way into your work? I've lived in Illinois for eleven years now, and I still feel dislocated from the East Coast—its landscape, its linguistic strangeness, its population density, its cool reserve. It has taken me years to get used to the landscape of the Midwest, and the prairie in particular. With so few trees or hills or curves to interrupt the monotony of the landscape, one can get rather overwhelmed by the feeling of solitude that abounds there. That's part of where my question is coming from. I really am curious about these regional distinctions, and sometimes the lack of them.

JB: My early work was highly influenced by Halliday's *Tasker Street*, Dean Young's *Strike Anywhere*, Tony Hoagland's *Sweet Ruin*, and James Tate's *Distance from Loved Ones*, *Worshipful Company of Fletchers*, and *Shroud of the Gnome*. Halliday in particular has created a voice that I find so relatable and moving that it's as if he's already living in my head. Until that point, I had taken a couple of poetry classes and thought that a requirement for a poem was that it be boring and serious, but these poets taught me that poems can be exciting, funny, interesting, and serious at the same time. It helped, too, that I had a few great teachers—Richard Cecil, David Wojahn, and Thylia Moss—who encouraged me to really get into the voice. So when I started writing the poems that would become *Standing in Line for the Beast*, I was thinking about how to make what I wanted to say excit-