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# spoon river poetry review

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## INTRODUCING THE SRPR ILLINOIS POET:

JOSHUA COREY



*Photo by Vanessa Filley*

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Joshua Corey grew up in Morristown, New Jersey. He earned an MA in English literature alongside an MFA in poetry at the University of Montana, then went on to a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University. In 2001 he moved to Ithaca, New York to pursue a PhD in English at Cornell; it was there, in the aftermath of 9/11, that he began writing the poems that became his third book, *Severance Songs*, which won the Dorset Prize judged by Ilya Kaminsky and was published by Tupelo Press in 2011. His other books are *Selah* (Barrow Street Press, 2003) and *Fourier Series* (Spineless Books, 2005). He has also published two chapbooks, *Composition Marble* (Pavement Saw Press, 2005) and *Hope & Anchor* (Noemi Press, 2007). In Ithaca he married Emily Grayson, an actor and massage therapist, and they have a daughter, Sadie Gray. In 2007 he moved to Evanston, Illinois to teach at Lake Forest College, where he is presently the Gustav E. Beerly, Jr. Assistant Professor of English.

Corey's long-standing interest in pastoral and eco-poetics has led him to edit, with G.C. Waldrep, a contemporary poetry anthology titled "The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral" (forthcoming, Ahsahta Press, 2012). His newest manuscript, "The Barons," from which the poems in this issue of SRPR were taken, grapples in alternately satirical and prophetic tones with the doomy socioeconomic landscape of the early twenty-first century. He is also at work on his first novel, in which he circles back to his perennial engagement with historical trauma, utopian thought, the rhetorical possibilities of narrative, and metaphysical noir.

---

**The Millions**

Epic fail and the man I sing  
above the strip in the heat index  
dead desiring dry tsunami  
curtaining the buildings like fallout  
drifting through corridors tidal  
sweeping sunglasses, crankshafts, I-beams  
before it  
(still itself the  
wreckage amidst  
the wreckage)  
meanwhile staggering  
on the zombie economy  
tries to think itself out of its mind  
like a small vicious strong-smelling  
animal a mink  
exposed in the iron cage of its  
habitat  
we walk until we stop or are  
stopped  
under the interchanges  
abandoned cars strung out like beads  
doors flapped open like tongues  
shading eyes to the horizon  
to the catastrophe  
squatting there with its million tongues  
as if it were that simple to bear to witness  
the event  
if I could get it in gear I  
would believe me  
can't find the wound with my hands  
but it's an arrow piercing me and  
everyone

branching back in ragged feathers its  
purer linearity thrust forward  
between my daughter's eyes  
back turned to webbed simultaneity  
this morning thousands died  
the evening's birth is universal  
no I can't count that high  
on my fingers and toes even  
visual modeling makes a window  
but I don't know the code  
zeroes and ones fly by  
adding up to the noun intelligence  
"as for living, our hybrid vehicles  
will do that for us"  
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  
to be the child of my place and time  
the father too I would make  
a model means of seeing diorama  
glued to a plank in reason  
floating in whatever gutters are left  
under a few stars  
to document my failure  
to secure and see the millions  
find me midstream dragging a hand behind  
grasping fishy Heraclitus  
pulling me back and under  
drowning my life and my life  
together for a breath  
counting cadence to survive  
the work of open eyes

## A Painful Case

Mist-wracked, mis-  
abandoned the smaller  
fields. Tall

as a train Cousin Steptoe  
steps, snapping his suspenders  
against his chest.

Show me your nipples,  
Cousin Steptoe. Oblige  
me, abrigato. He

obliges: they are corn-  
curled pennies, buffalo  
nickels when took of wing.

I have an animal in tow,  
a close relation bred and born  
in the global south:

he's a slipcase for a telephone.

The open dark  
follows us down  
North Clark. Easy loans,

tamale stands. Some  
turn to track my stride,  
his hand on his tail—

indecently, imperceptibly  
a wrong. Take a tall  
tack toward a tasteless

case of lumbago—antiquary  
disease. My cousin mums  
and palms:

he's avalanche recto typhoon verso.

Garnishing my salary  
with a little celery  
in the Don't-Despair-Just-Yet Office

waiting room, I sit  
in Steptoe's lap—he's a grandfather  
clock, I the bit of brass,

swingstarry, struck. His head's  
a combination lock  
inside this fortune

cookie, my mouth.  
Which you parade,  
Doctor Sees-You-Now.

Tapped out. The city beat. Subprime.

I like to died with Cousin  
Steptoe. Outside, the yellow water.  
Inside this number, soldier's joy, the paws.

## Clandestine Dead Animal Poem

Real demons and demons figural.  
My exquisite form is the shape of my death-drive.  
As if you could choose it, your own scarlet A—  
letter I absorb wholly, indigestibly, inside.  
To write it throw the pen down also  
and walk away. *Take a chisel to—*  
Over-determined killers in white suits  
drift down the city's boulevards  
whistling "Lillibullero." I spy  
one from my high window, forgetting  
to turn off the light behind me. He  
looks up and sees a haloed  
target. His face is a white worm,  
his finger is a worm that points at me.  
His bullets are the worms that warp  
my heart, which wakes in stone.

In Spanish punctuation swings both  
ways—root and branch the question  
mark hooks into the soil of the sentence,  
cranes its neck at the end and waits  
for someone to notice it. Someone taller  
than an exclamation point  
gliding by like a waitress on roller skates.

In Spanish *supervivencia* means survival  
as though chanting "I will survive"  
made an anthem to life's  
superfluities and excesses  
as though what we survive is life itself,  
its malign tendency to produce vibrations,

to be summed up as the movement  
of its own clashing colors. To unsettle the mind  
and peaceful body, set them both  
at odds. Standing in front of glass doors  
into which a cardinal has smashed  
looking out at the patio the redwood  
deck the fenced-in yard  
beyond which California sleeps  
and other states are altered  
in the early early morning of that  
residual mirror the glasses on my nose  
somehow got reflected  
the back of my own head  
tensile and alert as others see me, feel me, see  
me. That's what life  
is like, a series of destabilizations,  
unstuck time like fly strips  
plucking us out of ether  
while we're focused on the goal.

Looking back prospectively  
from a city I haven't yet visited  
somewhere in South America  
in extreme old age with liver-spotted  
hands lifted in benediction  
or judgment—it scarcely matters  
whether I or Borges writes this—  
both blind and both rescued  
by what survives the will to survive  
the perdurable remnant instinct  
at the rim of solar vision  
at my feet in the twilight. The cardinal  
has flown. The past  
is a negligible burden

made heavy for a moment by  
a snatch of song from a speaker  
remembering Emerson  
exhuming his first wife, why?  
To prove to himself  
a point? *I am nothing I*  
*see all.* So too the tourist  
is nothing though elegant  
in his white suit and cravat  
black spectacles concealing his eyes  
a newspaper folded on the table  
of an ordinary cafe.  
At the margins of all that life  
still wetting and drying his mouth  
romancing his own language  
which he can no longer read  
nor speak. Yet a letter:  
*I know you and will have known you,*  
*reader listener my daughter*  
*I will say I know you from a place*  
*in the tumble of foreign languages.*  
*I know you and will not guess.*  
A sojourn names me properly  
until these futures go to sleep.

## Material

groin water  
meeting minds  
shock of the Pacific  
redistributing  
electrons stands  
up lasers like skin  
the light conceals  
visible ocean  
here a lake lone  
and level  
coast lets the I  
go off leash to hump  
and snuffle and get  
its fur wet cold  
put a price on it for price  
requires a field  
intelligibly  
there are no Atlantic  
salmon pain  
convicts us  
victory with  
you you want fries so  
that pressure's on  
Lincoln  
pennies state  
of siege surprises  
a seat one  
hundred nights fifty  
ten reason not the  
righteous  
man up at dawn  
wakes in the cell  
on wavering green  
stems fallible  
rushing in  
from weather

## Witness

hides trash from  
climate modeling  
cubic miles of  
gold whaleshit  
to reason both get  
lost in what  
in an unaccountably  
scaled body delivers  
unbuilt and unerect  
landlocked the e coli  
consuming vampirically  
the future tract  
digested and released  
bitter organ  
tags boulders and sand  
like human graffiti  
fallible fishery  
waves of mutilated  
nouns verb  
the visible  
maps of no one's mind  
no one decided  
to frame the empty  
license plates pretty  
secrets ventilate a time  
children need  
to grow to sleep  
flatbed dreams one  
need for  
deathlessness uncanny  
until the itch itself  
to find intellectual light  
fields questions leans  
back to life  
the gap I knows is known  
is level water

## Seek the Faceless Sun of Being

To stand facing it or with my back to it at the track's edge  
Spot of warmth I carry always when the air is cold  
The air is necessary empty it racks the clouds  
Tourbillions overhead to organize the light  
My back to it an organizer of chaotic systems  
Fish suspended in lake ice all winter long  
In my pocket a piece of felt I touch blackly  
Without directing attention to ambushade or death  
Everything's indifference like curtains hung  
To divide a large room from itself  
Pushing through ghostly walls discovering bodies  
Face down on sheetless mattresses or the crook of an arm  
Flung to cover eyes that might not even be there  
It was no dream I lay broad waking the busy sun shone in  
In a beloved phrase I toss like a restless sleeper  
Pressure of an like an insect in my mouth  
Tucked between tooth and lip grinds its isness there  
Will the train never arrive? For never is its nature  
I close my eyes to the open sun  
The sun is the earth I stand on  
The earth is a platform  
To place a man's head inside a bell is a mode of execution  
Get 'er done  
The scratchy tongue telling the kitten it's alive  
The sentiment of nature unfolding in human breasts  
Air is sun so salt is sun  
I make a pact with you Walt Whitman  
I burn in the nothingness of air

**“Though He Was Sometimes Insane and I Was Not That”**

I give you jet  
of blood a de-hierarchized mystification  
of unrestricted ugly gonads pluralistic  
scorpions finding their way to the birth  
canal of the tired old virgin/whore (call  
your mother) for that which cannot be staged  
in sheer white space and room tone  
spattered by braniac intestine  
warfare how young actors are  
running and colliding on a thrust  
stage at any given movement out of the game  
and into the stalls where coats or laps  
conceal neither erections nor bloody flux  
but the all in all of the seated body  
that by amputation transfers pudenda  
(“shameful parts”) northward  
so the heart is the cock or cunt  
the arms are legs folded protectively or  
spread provocatively  
the mouth and nose are the heart and lungs  
the eyes the only face  
the hairline the eyes seeing only notionally  
removed from questions of sin or light  
soothing always that darkness of the shoulder  
the hair still hair  
the dead-alive sexed-up profligate antennae  
point of transference between whether and weather  
until heigh-ho the wind and the rain  
pushes down the bookshelf onto poor old Leonard Bast “mind  
was meant exactly as writing to see mind (his)”  
the out-of-doors eats the implied interior or

green room  
where bearded forked creatures crawl blindly past  
humping each other where they meet in filthy planed puddles  
trailing assorted children behind them like withered limbs  
half-birthing half-birthed well it's hell to audition  
to be heard day after day  
and find no home but one's own declaration  
I belong to these words when torture is proof of life  
I confess nightly just outside authority's earshot  
off-off-Broadway off-off Alexanderplatz  
off-off-Brecht's Mother Courage mopping  
up the sick that makes the black space white  
it all works by contrast by high difference definition  
which yet as continuum never quite reaches representation  
Mishima disembowels himself yet something lacks the color  
something lacking in me the wise child replies  
pulled to its feet at last the audience by sheer virtuosity  
restored to tingling bodies severed stumps of applauding palms  
for I love you and everything is beautiful  
and you love me and everything is beautiful  
who hasn't believed  
what it is to be mad

—*in memoriam Leslie Scalapino*

## The Barons

In the time of ever more rapid diffusion and dispersal of truly humanistic termini  
The time of collective seizure of rapidly diminishing carbon cores  
The time of the barons in their towers growing fatter unto death hooked up to  
    dizzying interconnected internet spirals of IVs sucking everybody's  
    placenta dry

Aka your milkshake aka my humps

In the time of dominoes laid from one end of the asylum to the other

The time of male whores who can't catch a break

Time of the underground economies trading hot licks for rapid desertification

Time of distant thunder

Time of the perpetual el niño

Time of rain filling the abandoned movie house and everything picturesque and  
    prepared for the ancestors

Ancestor-life the only scale that matters now the scale of the illegible the illiterate  
    the unread

Not just a hitler but many come-hitlers in the twilight bathrooms of the barons,  
    making their dicks look small

Being now of sound mind and sound body I, thirty-nine years of age brimming  
    with half-spent undessicated nougat-rich mortality

Say unto thee children, Burn the motherfucker down

\*

Now you've written something and given birth to a critique

First critique says it's in your mind time and space

Second critique says you know very well what to do

Third critique says there's no arguing the taste of this poem yet you'll go on  
    wanting to

Mid 5-am mid-future sleeping families strap on the masks

Air conditioners gust on outside dark houses disturbing the rats

Electromagnetic impulses making the circuit of the only world

I thought gnawing my own leg off would be one way out of the trap

Then I thought dying in the attempt would be another, truer way.

\*

burn baby burn that's the only spirit that matters  
Literally burn the baby endless fields of fucked burning babies  
The barons walk the line innocuous and off the rack  
They're with you tonight in this room they're with you tonight in your televised  
bed  
They're with you tonight in Rockland they're with you on your tax forms  
Just because it's freaking obvious doesn't make it true  
Why this is hell nor am I out of it—master the line of Mephistopheles

\*

My mind won't let me rest until I record here what I've seen  
Four lines of fire razing the land at slightly different rates  
Parallel lines with just enough space between to make a vista  
There's no point in making your planet a hell unless you'll have a view  
The first line is rapid and distills a smokeless flame visible from airplanes  
Mapping the earth's abstract grid a seamless seam running the cornfields  
Second line moves more slowly and mostly invisibly wastes the sky  
The third line makes a lot of stops punctiliously burning each city from the  
outside in  
From suburbs of immigrants and favelas like nooses tightening around the necks  
of people that look like me  
That one sets fires at random it takes a long view to see the line  
The fourth line is last and moves more slowly than the senses can detect yet  
rapidly becoming irreversible  
It's this one that scares me motherfuckers it's the hellhound on my trail  
Close my eyes and I see it spiraling from the horizon flames a mile high crisping  
everything  
Rendering the ground a fertile-seeming black casting down towers and malls  
into architecture  
Blown back by the slow-mo blast that is eating bit by bit my halo and wings  
Eyes shielded from burning pitch and grit solely by remaining open  
Backdrafted into a future built on the continuous present of ruination  
YOUR NAME HERE thou shouldst be alive at this hour

\*

Burn, baby, burn. Commas serve the deficit of reason.  
I'm an attention-deficit hawk I say we have our eyes and lips sewn shut

I'm a suburban father with invisible tattoos on my body  
Which small or midsize SUVs have a column-mounted shifter?  
Be inspired. Great selection. Our instinct is to catch the baby.  
Drop the old ones into their holes. This life is a Viking funeral.  
Like speeches made by law into public address systems that render the words  
unintelligible.

True of every platform. The railroad rides upon us.  
The appearance of full-stops serves the appearance of rhetoric.  
An argument in 1934. Young men are so young.  
The appearance of caesuras serve the appearance of violent birth  
Subdued to softer adverbs. Mechanically. Psychometrically.  
Pastoral a function of our language. Groves are generative grammar.  
The trees of truth cut down. "Tree in the ear," Wunderbaum.  
Inverted tree of an underwater oil surge.  
Its roots come grasping for us.  
And all tomorrows surfacing.

\*

Let prose handle the inwardness that personal history sells  
Let the poem spiral outward like the Kraken in secret thunderdome with  
Leviathan  
Pulling the unread and unseen into mutual unequal struggle  
Game of the corporate state hides the identity of the barons  
Preaching to monster trucks to pine cones to stacks of burning children's books  
Listening respectfully to their own beards the powerful uneducated persons  
The fire lines are racing which will be first to reach the goal  
The end of every burning

\*

"a man who wails is not a dancing bear"  
And a dancing bear isn't a bear and it isn't dancing  
It's an it for our fascinated contemplation layers of years like Band-Aids  
Now and of an age that surpasses ours in cruelty  
Since cruelty requires attention that endangered natural resource  
The bear in its Elizabethan ruff its fur and privates torn by pit bulls  
Baited on its hind legs beats its chest with claws for the spectators  
Who stand in a ring, backs turned

I like to go to the game and listen to it on the radio  
I like to be larger than life and vanish on your retina screen

\*

Seeing is material and being seen is spiritual  
The more you walk the streets invisibly the closer you are to death  
Rich reality of death foaming in bones and capillaries  
Death shining at a millimeter's distance from every moment of skin  
I think I'll buy a malted for the writers in Ghana these days  
No one is deader than the reader more material sunk in aliveness  
The barons are angels shining their bodies themselves are halos  
Eyes uplifted to live feeds tracking the movements of material witnesses  
Listening to "John Wayne Gacy Jr." I am really just like him  
If homicidal homosexual clown isn't an orientation oh my god  
I am not a baron maybe a little bit baronet  
It's my pleasure to serve the oligarchy by not mentioning it  
Every time I click this link it's like I've gone to church  
The contents of their stomachs are mostly plastic  
Decay generates the only heat that warms an angel's bones

\*

Let silence bring to presence. Silence. Silence.  
There is still a little shade  
Trees are noisy  
Silence  
Waiting to be killed  
Bodies quantifiable  
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

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

poem" (65). This "reaching" towards the "fallible poem" feels akin to Duncan's obedience to "and." What is the fallible poem? Where do you think such fallibility is most evident in your poems published here?

**JC:** In *Severance Songs* I was still a bit too concerned with proving to myself and to the reader that I wasn't going to be taken in by my own facility with words; nor was I going to mistake poetic action for action in the world. A theme of that book is that you are, I am, responsible for the world. The poem is an engine of responsibility, an imperfect and fallible vehicle. The way in which we realize our responsibilities is through love: loving the world, which in my case really began with loving one other person, and which in turn begat a slowly expanding circle of love, with the birth of my daughter, and with my very belated realization of my dependence on other people. But maybe I've put too much emphasis on poetry's fallibility; it's not like the world has demanded greater efficiency or efficacy from poems. The world, in fact, has not demanded anything from poetry at all. But poetry demands a stance toward the world that's as serious as love; it calls on all your resources, the writer's and the reader's. That's why it may never be truly popular; that's why I need it. At the risk of foolishness, at the risk of taking life seriously, I want to find a way forward in poetry that's less hedged, less defended against poetry's own weakness. I have a hunch that poetry's ability to dwell in fallibility, weakness, and disability may be its greatest strength.

**KHZ:** The last thing I think you are being is foolish—though I certainly understand that what you say risks being perceived as such. Negative capability, the ability to not only tolerate, but feed, as Keats puts it, on uncertainty (not to digest it but to be, oneself, digested by it), is essential to love, to loving well. I'm reminded here of a line from *Severance Songs*: "I go down, discovering my end. I feed" (12). And it seems to me that it's exactly this connection you are making between a poem's fallibility and the poem as an "engine of responsibility" that deflates the tired opposition between the aesthetic and the political.

**JC:** Oh, absolutely. If poems are abyssal, if they are void spaces in which to encounter failure and foolishness and death, paradoxically that can turn them toward the possibilities of the comic. And the comic can be a vision of healing and reconciliation, as well as recognition

of suffering, and has much more political potential than the tragic or the “doomy.” Comedies end with weddings, not with funerals; they affirm one’s hopeless commitment to the piece of the world that you recognize as yours. “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine”: that’s a comic moment, not because it’s funny for Prospero to acknowledge Caliban, but because he’s committing to what Caliban represents and taking responsibility for him. That’s the path, or a path, that the fallible poem can follow.

**KHZ:** Fallibility, then, is essential to playfulness, and play is key to responsibility, which means that ethics and play are inextricable. Gabe Gudding’s poems and his incisive writing about humor come to mind. I’m also thinking of the amazing last lines in *Fourier Series*: “Migrate to the site of meaning you stand in. / The discursive remnant in the poem, alienated from empirical rationality + / lyric intensity alike, shines through the text, a powerful seam that divides + / connects what would otherwise wear the mask of identity” (95).

**JC:** Gabe is a master, an American original: his work has done a lot to expand my sense of the territory and potential of comedy. Territory being close to “terror,” of course. If the poem doesn’t pretend to be perfect, the last word on a subject, but instead acts as an opening or visible seam, the reader is invited to follow that seam, to unravel it, to recognize him or herself as part of the patchwork, instead of being consigned to the position of spectator awed by a monument. The plus signs in *Fourier Series* allude to the mathematics of the two Fouriers, Joseph and Charles, who were both in very different ways preoccupied with the question of harmonics and, in Charles’s case, with co-existence. In that book, I wanted to create a poem of scope, of some length, that wasn’t synthetic or epic but lyric, because lyric is where the relative porosity of the self gets presented and tested. As I get older I’m more interested in cultivating vulnerability; lyric invites vulnerability, and you have to be as vulnerable to read a lyric poem as you must be in the writing of one (another reason poetry isn’t popular). Of course, vulnerability in the lyric is always a *performance* of vulnerability, but the paradoxical interface between performance (craft, artifice, mastery) and vulnerability (the fallible, authenticity, mystery) is where art happens.

**KHZ:** In the “Reader’s Companion to *Severance Songs*” [available through Tupelo Press, online] you write, “To make oneself vulnerable

to another person means to set aside, at least for moments, pride and shame, lust and prudishness, and simply to accept. But how to accept love in an unacceptable world? Or: how to accept even the unacceptable, without giving way to nihilism?" This core question—"how to accept the unacceptable, without giving way to nihilism"—provides a bridge between your poems and your criticism, namely "The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral," an anthology of North American poets you are editing with G. C. Waldrep, due out in May, 2012, from Ahsahta Press. In your "Teacher's Guide" to the anthology you explicate brilliantly what you coin "the postmodern pastoral":

The terms "pastoral" and "postmodern"...are only apparently incompatible.... Postmodernism is the culture of consumer society: it is the nightmarish or farcical realization of the pastoral fantasy, a world in which meaning(ful) production is not so much obsolete as out of reach.... And by passing through postmodernism's focus on the materiality of language, the historicity of discourse, and the constructedness of subjectivity, pastoral sheds its naivety and tactically refocuses our attention on the strategies of greenwashing and obfuscation by which the corporate powers that be work to hide, quite literally, our own nature from us. ("The Arcadia Project Teacher's Guide," working draft)

How does the "The Arcadia Project," and in particular your notion of the "postmodern pastoral," compliment and/or complicate current conversations in ecocriticism, ecopoetics, etc.?

**JC:** I gravitate toward pastoral because I'm terribly interested in Nature or "nature": the mythic and ideological uses that Western culture has made of notions of the nonhuman. The nonhuman as that which resists us, whether it manifests in an intensely immanentist sense (the Heideggerian notion of "earth") or transcendently ("the gods")—and therefore conditions our sense of everyday life and social possibilities. As much as I value the work done under the broader rubric of ecopoetics (particularly as defined by Jonathan Skinner's invaluable journal of the same name), I sometimes miss that attunement to the mythic. A postmodern pastoral, of course, cannot take the old myths of nature for granted. The postmodern condition is maybe precisely located in that zone in which myth and myth's authority gets reduced to fungible and fallen ideology. I think that myth and the mythic still exist with and alongside modern ideologies—Pan is as alive (and as dead) as Marx. The contemporary poets I admire the most—Lisa Robertson and Alice

Notley come to mind—are mythic thinkers, who swim in the corrosive postmodern ideological sea but still serve that fundamental visionary impulse to create. So postmodern pastoral makes room for the mythic in its corner of ecopoetics, whether those myths are rooted in American transcendentalism or in the high-res landscapes of *World of Warcraft*.

**KHZ:** I'm curious about your use of the term "Outside(r) Pastoral" in your "Teacher's Guide" to "The Arcadia Project":

The proto-politics of the postmodern pastoral cannot be separated from the history and subject positions of its practitioners. To fully grasp its possibilities, we must also be conscious of feminist pastoral, queer pastoral, black pastoral. Even the Canadian poets in this anthology are positioned by virtue of their marginality to American empire as outsiders, attentive to the ways in which their geography and history have conditioned their sense of what nature is and does. ("The Arcadia Project Teacher's Guide," working draft)

Do you feel there's a tension between this "outsider" terminology and the postmodern pastoral's radical inclusivity? Does "Outsider Pastoral," and its umbrella-function as home to poets of color, feminist poets, queer poets, and Canadian poets, risk reinscribing the binary between mainstream (universal, or "natural") and outsider (idiosyncratic, "unnatural"), an opposition that has always worked to naturalize the colonization of these "outsiders"?

**JC:** Of course that's a risk. But there's far too much at stake for these outsiders, in their separate spheres, to simply accept the predominant pastoral paradigm, which still—still!—aligns women and people of color with the "natural" and marks LGBT people as "unnatural." Non-Americans, too, are to some degree consigned to the political "wilderness": remember how frustrated people across the world were by Bush's re-election in 2004, feeling correctly that they were stakeholders in the direction of U.S. politics but unable to participate.

Really, the pastoral moment takes place when: a) someone recognizes his or her separation from nature; and b) wishes for reconciliation with that natural thing. "Straight" or simple pastoral presents such reconciliation as accomplished; a more complex pastoral dwells on the gap, holds it open. The wound, the gap, the ecotone if you like—that's where postmodern pastoral happens. "Outsiders" are a little more sensitized to that wound and are often the most adventurous explorers of it.

**KHZ:** Along these lines I want to highlight your assertion towards the end of your “Teacher’s Guide” to “The Arcadia Project” that if “pastoral has an end—in the double sense of termination and goal—it must be the end of environmentalism” (working draft). In the wake of environmentalism you call for a “truly strange pastoral of wildness” that might “open a path beyond the State, hold open place as a space of contention, refuse technological fixes and New Age cure-alls, re-mark and reconcile us to our woundedness, to living in history” (working draft). I can’t think of a better introduction to your poem “The Barons,” the title poem of one of your current manuscripts. Could you talk about the making of this poem and its relationship to your vision in “The Arcadia Project”?

**JC:** Hmm. Is “The Barons” a pastoral poem? Or even an anti-pastoral? That poem was the follow-up to another longish poem from my new manuscript, “Sæglópur,” which takes its title from a song by the most pastoral band on earth, Sigur Rós. It’s an Icelandic word meaning “lost at sea,” and it’s a song that just keeps doubling down on those chorusing guitars. I listened to it over and over and produced a long, tumbling, visionary poem, and felt afterwards that I had broken into what was for me very new territory, poetically. But it’s territory that has to be continually rebroken and I’ve only succeeded in getting there once more, in “The Barons,” which does derive from an actual moment of vision, the “Four lines of fire razing the land” that came to me in a dream.

**KHZ:** Your references to “new” poetic “territory” and to the “moment of vision” that enabled you to break into this territory make me think of the vexed role in modern poetry of the so-called personal. I think here, too, of your unsentimental alertness to that which we can touch, what manifests in your work as a signature musicality: phonemes, syllables, and words experienced as felt things. This feltness conveys a sense of the poem as a lived experience, vested with emotional complexity—the mark of an actual life. The poet has risked something, something personal and at the same time beyond the personal.

Can you talk a bit about the role of the so-called personal in your poetry? How, for instance, does the “end of environmentalism” and the end of “Nature” (re)shape our understanding of the “personal”?

**JC:** It's interesting to juxtapose this question of the personal with physicality. Poetry has been for me what hockey might be for someone else: a real point of contact with my own body and with other people's bodies, via the tongue and the lips and the ear. Once the body gets involved, everything comes with it—the unconscious, eros, air pollution, traffic. The body is the most intimate environment but it's impossible to draw an impermeable line around it: can I have a body without air, without food, water, shelter, streets, animals, other people? Our bodies are what Stevens calls "fragrant portals": points of juncture and of rupture, and environmentality comes into being when the body connects with the earth. I feel that rhythm, cadence, is the most personal thing, and yet always a participant in forces larger than yourself or beyond your control, like your heartbeat. It's not about personal "content." I'm not very interested in what poems are about, but the force and authenticity of what they do does depend on the personal, and on the complex obedience I spoke of earlier.

**KHZ:** I love that phrase by Stevens—"fragrant portals"! And your intimation that we feel the personal most acutely as such when we literally sense the radical contingency of our being. Rachel Zucker addresses this subject brilliantly in her essay, or GNAT ("Grossly Non-Academic Talk") on "confessionalistic poetry." In contrast to what she calls "autobiographicality," "confessionalistic" poetry "uses the bits and elements of story in the service of larger subjects, subjects that are not limited to particularities of the poet's life." "This is not to say," Zucker clarifies, "that the self becomes symbolic as it did in Romantic poetry, but, rather, that the self is always overcome, overwhelmed, disturbed...the confessionalistic poet...is willing to undermine the boundaries of self. Often, she is writing at the frayed edge of the genre in the busy interstitial space between neurons" (poets.org). Would you say that Zucker's description of the "confessionalistic" poet resonates with your ecological-poetic vision?

**JC:** I think there's an important distinction to be made between the self and the person. I see "self" as occupying a position similar to what Heidegger calls "earth," and "person" as similar to "world." The self is concealed, the person reveals; this revelation is never total or complete, but is always part of a dialectic of concealment and unconcealment. You can never fully disclose the private self, or craft a perfect public persona;

more to the point, you can't cleanly police the boundary between these positions. Zucker's "frayed edge" makes it possible for me to think of environmental or pastoral poetry as profoundly personal—that is, profoundly political—but also as impinging upon and transforming the interior hurricane of the self. So I suppose I am interested in, and a practitioner of, what Zucker calls the confessionalistic.

**KHZ:** In your poem "The Barons" you write, "Let prose handle the inwardness that personal history sells." I'd like to segue here to your recent turn to fiction writing. You just finished your first novel. Did the writing of this novel "handle the inwardness that the personal history sells"? What about the process of writing poetry vs. prose makes the latter, in your view, a genre suited to such a task?

**JC:** I just picked up the Dalkey Archive edition of Viktor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*, which has a terrific preface by Gerald L. Bruns in which he argues that ours is a metonymic "prose universe." "In a poetic universe, every fragment is a luminous detail. It resonates with the supersensuous. It is in perpetual transport from the everydayness of its material appearance to the sphere of the transcendental where it is really located, and its impact upon consciousness constitutes a moment of vision or the sense of embracing the totality of all that is. There are overarchings everywhere. But a prose universe is just one damn thing after another, like an attic or junkyard or side of the road" (ix). Without embracing everything Bruns has to say, or even tackling the historicity of his argument, this statement has a great deal of resonance for me. I do feel an affinity for this untimely notion of poetry as always on the way toward the transcendental, as a gesture toward some notion of truth that is not contingent. That gesture can't be completed, under current conditions, without the resulting poem's suffering from airlessness, a kind of implausibility or autism. Again Duncan is a model for me, because for him, poetry is a gesture that has continuity with the vision of someone like Dante, but which also suffers creatively with "one damn thing after another" and finds resonant possibilities in and with the contingency of being in a particular body and place at a particular time.

My novel, then, is poetic insofar as it seeks to make sense, or super-sense, out of certain personal losses; it is prose insofar as it is conscious of its own artifice, its inability to find or discover meaning: I have to

settle for the manufactured stuff, Cheez Whiz instead of cheddar. The personal history is very simple: my mother, an intensely moody, intelligent, and complicated person, who in a very real sense gifted me with poetry, died of cancer when I was a very young man. With prose—with sentences rather than lines and strophes—I am trying to “handle the inwardness” in a less intrinsically private way. The rap on poetry is that it’s too difficult, but I think it’s rather that poems insist on intimacy in a rather direct and uncomfortable way. Prose is more public, more polite even; it takes fewer liberties and doesn’t intrude as much on the reader’s sense of decorum. And prose fiction provides intermediaries in the form of characters, so there’s more distance for the reader, and more room perhaps for her to invest her own feelings because she isn’t *responsible* for the prose in the peculiar way a reader of poetry is responsible for the poem.

**KHZ:** What a great answer, Josh. I wonder how you approach the teaching of creative writing with these distinctions in mind. I suspect your interests in teaching writing (often approached by beginners as a path to “self” discovery) and in so-called environmental studies (a name that locates what is really a crisis of care somewhere ‘out there,’ just beyond personal, human agency) come together at this interface between “poetry” and “prose”?

**JC:** By far my favorite class right now is one called Environmental Writing: I teach it as a class that thinks about and through environments in this complex and personal way that we’ve been talking about. It’s the first creative writing class I’ve taught that had subject matter rather than a genre (poetry, fiction, etc.) as its focus, and it’s been enormously liberating. It’s not all forests and wetlands: students write about the environments of their dorm rooms, they make psychological maps of their home towns, they go on Situationist-inspired dérives through Chicago. They write prose, they write poems, they produce unruly hybrid texts; they learn, to use Zucker’s terminology, to shift their ground a bit from autobiographicality to the confessionalistic. The class attracts budding scientists as well as traditional creative writers. I’d like to come up with other creative writing classes that use an area of interest or subject as their point of coalescence, a hybrid between a traditional writing workshop and a literature class. Zombies, maybe.

**KHZ:** ENG 101: Intro. to Zombies! I want to take it. Your description reminds me of what you call, in reference to Duncan's work, a "visionary ecology." How is your pedagogy—the way you teach and assess—also a manifestation of this vision?

**JC:** Duncan once described himself as "unbaptized, uninitiated, ungraduated, unanalyzed." Although he was forceful and opinionated to a fault, he strove to be undogmatic: he heroically resisted both the tyranny of others and the tyranny of his own atavisms and pathologies. In front of my students, I try to model a way of being in the world that is confident in its curiosity without having to be "right": a discoverer, but not a conquistador. My favorite teaching moments come when students are disoriented but not disheartened: when they have to let go of comfortable givens and give their full attention to what's in front of them, whether that be an aspect of their own experience that's showing up in a new light, or a poem that takes radical liberties with form.

**KHZ:** Your pedagogical ambitions are not only what make a great teacher, but what make a great parent. You have a four-year-old daughter, Sadie Gray. Do you find that parenting tests your ability to walk this line between curiosity and certainty? Between being the discoverer as opposed to the conquistador? How does poetry serve us in this ongoing effort, not only as parents, but as creatures living only in-relation?

**JC:** Carmen Gimenez-Smith writes: "The days divided into two: working and mothering. The third part, which is me, lives in my dreams." Mothering and fathering are not equivalents, but she beautifully expresses here how the round of a daily life that includes children can push that other self down into the dark. But maybe it also creates that other self. I write what I write because of all that I am and have experienced, and writing is now unimaginable without Sadie Gray, even if I have less time to do it. You work, you earn a living; you answer your kid's increasingly difficult questions as thoughtfully and expediently as you can. And then somewhere in that relation, that binary that seemingly leaves no room for poetry, that third part makes itself felt, and writing happens.

Which is just my way of saying that the impact of poetry on parenting, and vice-versa, has so far for me been almost entirely mysterious and opaque and resistant to analysis.