The SRPR Interview: Rachel Jamison Webster

Joanne Diaz: Thank you for sharing your work in this issue of SRPR, and for taking the time to talk with me. As I read these new poems and the ones that you published in *September* (Triquarterly Press, 2013), I marvel at how the poetic speaker is frequently overwhelmed by the natural affinities between her body and the world. How do you engage with nature to create this kind of unfolding and becoming in your poems? Who are your poetic ancestors? I feel like you might very well be the daughter of John Keats.

Rachel Webster: I am totally humbled by the comparison to John Keats, who has a lushness of vocabulary I could strive for all my life. But yes, I am aware of the fact that I am writing within a poetic tradition that includes many of my favorite Romantic poets. While first drafting the poems for *September*, I was reading a lot of Wordsworth, and noting how he would just come out and make a philosophical statement, like his "blessed mood, / In which the burthen of the mystery, / In which the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened […] we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul" ("Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey"). This impulse of his to instruct may have been vestigial from the eighteenth century, when poetry knit together many grand declarations. So, I was teaching from the *Norton Anthology* and reading the Romantics, and I thought, "I am just going to do this—say something I believe!" And that led to moments like "it is not time that is the great teacher, but the way we understand time" in my poem "Manzanita," for example.

But the engagement with nature, this sense of being in a body like the body of the earth, actually precedes my relationship to poetry. I grew up beside Lake Erie, with woods behind our house and the lake just a quarter mile in front of my house, and the times when I was happiest were spent just *being* in nature, looking at the little ferns of moss in the woods or covering myself with sand and clay at the beach. I think of the water-breath of the waves as my first poem, though I realize as I say this that this rhythm must have felt like poetry because it echoed what really *was* my first poem—the double

heartbeat-in-water of the womb. I think that this feeling—of pure being—and this kind of elemental earth rhythm is what I am always trying to get back to in poetry.

As a child I felt an almost urgent desire to describe beauty, to capture things that I saw and sensed were fleeting. My family took long car trips, and I would look out the window, playing a little mind game, asking myself how would I describe it? Scene after scene. I stored up images and metaphors, and then, when I was a teenager and was assigned Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, I realized that I was a poet, that what I had been doing was banking up poetry. I began writing and reading, and poets became friends, people who may have lived a hundred or two hundred years ago but who shared a sensibility, a way of looking at the world. Often, I would write about something and then read poems on the same subject soon after. I realized that I was exploring experiences and feelings that had already been written, but that was okay, because I had found my friends and my practice.

JD: Now that you live in Chicagoland, how does Lake Michigan influence your work?

RW: I love living by water. The lakefront is crucial to my experience here—as a subtle reminder of the wild, of what is greater than our human machinations. I think it is important for me to live near a body of water that I cannot see the other side of, and I never forget that the Great Lakes are these linked, inland seas that share water with the lake I grew up on.

It would probably surprise readers to know how many of the poems in *September* were actually begun in my notebook while sitting at the park on the water, or at a Lake Michigan beach! "Leaves," "Late September," "The Second of September," "Equinox," "La Porte," and "It Had to End" to name just a few. The lake is both a rhythm and a presence in the book, I think.

JD: Yes, I can certainly see that in those poems. The new poems in this issue of SRPR come from two different projects, both of which you are working on simultaneously. As I read the poems featured here, I notice affinities between the poems, even if they aren't part of the same group. For example, in "It Is Not Dust We Are Becoming," I marveled at the oiling of the feet, and couldn't help but think of Jesus washing

his disciple's feet, which of course brought me to the "finest oil" in "10," from your poetic sequence *Mary is a River*. Could you say more about these kinds of connections?

RW: My process is kind of exuberant and fecund, I guess. Projects spawn other projects, and the challenge for me is always to rein it in, finish the work, and group it in a way that makes sense. But yes, I see that you are right! Even when I think of projects as very different, I keep returning to the same themes because those are the feelings that am legitimately working through at a given point in my life.

I wrote the Mary Magdalene series years before I had lived through any loss like what she describes. I felt like I had some questions to ask emotionally and some premises to explore spiritually that actually could not be contained by my own life. There just wasn't the biographical material to provide image and situation for those feelings. And so I needed an archetype to explore what she, or any of us, would know in such a situation.

Later, after the first draft of that book was written, I ended up in a relationship with Richard Fammerée, and we lived happily and had a child, and then two years after our daughter was born, he was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. I cared for him as he suffered greatly and died in 2011. So these autobiographical poems were written very honestly and literally from my own life. ALS is a disease of incremental, unremitting paralysis, in which the person only dies of suffocation when the lungs can no longer open. And suffocation, I realize now, is also the cause of death by crucifixion. I did spend a year and a half daily massaging and oiling Richard's feet, and, as I was doing it, I was not only aware of the humility it required of me—a strong, smart woman—to become servile and patient in that way, but the humility it required for him—a strong, brilliant man—to be cared for in every way. We were both brought down to a basic element of humanity, an archetypal moment, I guess.

After Richard passed away, I went back to the Mary project and saw that some of the things I had intuited—the way she had to commit more overtly to spirituality after he was gone, for instance—had become true in my own life, as well.

JD: What you're saying provides me with real insight into your work. You write with such sensitivity—and love—about what it is like to

be inside illness, to be so close to the precipice of death. What was it like to write these poems that are so full of terror, beauty, and insight? And what is it like to share them?

RW: Writing these poems was nothing compared to living them. The poems were like sparks that flew from the great annealing and annihilating fire that was our life together. Sometimes it is very hard to read them publicly, though, because they are not just aesthetic or intellectual exercises. They are real moments. So when I say, "today I opened the black box burdened by your name and sprinkled you in rings around the tree," I mean it.

JD: In these elegies, then, there's a strong mimetic relationship between real life events and the lines as you wrote them. In other poems, though, you channel your insights through other voices and personae. For example, in *September*, I was drawn in by the power of your dramatic monologue "Eurydice," and now I am thrilled to see you working with dramatic monologue in the *Mary is a River* series. How did you arrive at the voice of Mary Magdalene? What can she say that no one else can? How does she give you license as a poet?

RW: I hadn't even remembered this, but your question helps me to recall the fact that I wrote "Eurydice," and then a few hours later, from the same spot on the couch, started on the Mary poems. So something opened up that day. I feel like almost every poet writes an Orpheus or Eurydice poem, because they provide one of the first love stories, and because his singing for her after she dies is what makes him our first poet, able to charm the gods and enter the underworld. So this desire—to bring someone or something back—is one of the original impulses of poetry. This is a resonant, important story, but it is not as if I grew up knowing the Greek myths, and so I think of them as somehow elite and safe—stories that remain stories to us. I wanted to work with a myth that is so ingrained in the culture that we do not acknowledge it as a myth—that of Jesus, of course, and Mary.

I grew up Protestant, and there is not a strong female presence in that version of Christianity. We have the male lineages of great names—Jesse, David, Joseph, James—alongside a kind of recurrent Mary, almost as if womanhood is a state of being nameless and