The SRPR Interview: Roger Reeves

Joanne Diaz: Roger, it is a pleasure to meet you and read your new work. I'd like to begin with a broad question about your interests and obsessions. In all of your work, you show a deep interest in elegy. And you're not merely eulogizing the dead. You struggle with them, you argue with them, you meditate on the value of their bodies and their relevance to the living. In "Nostalgia," you write a compelling observation that seems to function as an overarching insight into death and grief for much of your work: "The living have always belonged to the dead first."

You also anticipate death. For example, in "King of the Dead," the speaker describes his father's loss of bodily control, not merely as a loss for the father, but as a problem for the son. Multiple times, the speaker sees the father as an interruption or distraction to his reading, and the reading seems to be of Wallace Stevens, to some extent, and then the poem seems to become a reading of the father's body as a kind of text as well.

How does elegy work on you, and how do you work on it?

Roger Reeves: There's two things I think about that: one is Mary Ruefle's essay in *Madness, Rack, and Honey* where she describes how poets are in conversation. In that essay, she says, that the dead are the only people that one can speak to because they're done with their conversing—they've said everything they want to say. And then I was reading an interview of Foucault's—one of his last, I believe—where he talked about writing as an act akin to death. For him, writing is not redemptive or salvific. If we think about Milton's engagement with the elegy in *Lycidas,* and Renaissance elegy in general, there's always this moment where the elegy is supposed to take the mourner out of grief. There's always this process of rebirth. And then you get into late American Modernism, where there is no redemption in the elegy. The dead will be dead. There is nothing really to learn. So for me, I'm thinking about all of those sort of trajectories, wondering *What is the twenty-first century elegy?* Jahan Ramazani discusses how

the technology of the funeral, as well as the technology of reading and citationality, challenges how we encounter death. I can't help but think about the Charleston massacre in this context. We've never seen a president eulogize the dead; we've never seen a president sing. I can't help but think of our contemporary ideas of media and how they affect certain types of vulnerabilities or ways of seeing elegy.

So I'm grappling with and playing with Foucault's notion that writing is not redemptive. I'm also engaging with a less Western idea of the elegy. Believing that the living start out in the realm of the dead, a way in which they're coming from an ancestral place. That's why I say in that poem "The living have always belonged to the dead first." I can't help but think of Persephone, too, and her straddling that line, and how the gods always want to reclaim humans. They let the humans be human, but they are also always pulling us into the afterlife. I'm thinking about updating the elegy and what we can do in new ways.

JD: Your reworking of the elegy is definitely apparent in your long poem, "On Paradise," a dramatic monologue spoken from the dead. I was about to say "the grave," but the lynched body in this poem becomes disparate, scattered across space and time and notable public events. This isn't a private death of a private self. It permeates and infiltrates everything. When we spoke earlier, you said that the complete poem is much longer—

RR: Yes, about forty-seven pages.

JD: Can you talk a bit about how elegy is working in "On Paradise," especially in the voice of the dead man?

RR: What I believe, in a generalized way, is that as the dead move back into the earth, they become parts of other things. I really wanted to take that on. I really loved A.R. Ammons's *Ommateum: with Doxology*. At the end, he has a very long poem where there's a prophet named Ezra who's picked up by the wind and gets taken to many places. It's a book I return to for two reasons: first, Ammons self-published that book. I just love the chutzpah of someone who self-publishes; and also because of the way it's thinking about the body as something that can pierce time, can move time through space. There's a section [in

"On Paradise"] where I say, "I was born big enough to bear several disasters." I think that the African American body is the body that was born big enough to bear several disasters, from slavery to Katrina to the burning of churches from the 1700s to the massacre in Charleston, SC, and the ones that have happened since. So what I wanted to do was build a body and voice that could encounter all of these things.

Tituba shows up in these poems, and I think about her as an African slave, and how her body was made to bear the disaster of white anxiety. Then I think about Katrina, and I move through different sorts of events, because I think that the black body has been the public body to encounter all of our anxieties—certainly, Toni Morrison talks about this in *Playing in the Dark.* I want to build a text that can encounter that. I want to really mine the Western tradition of blackness.

JD: And that's so apparent in the poems. From the very first poem in this group, you allude to darkness, to journeys, to pilgrimages, to forests, to redemption, and then you allude to Tituba, and before I know it I'm thinking about Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories. I know that might sound strange, but the obsessions that you're working with speak back hundreds of years.

RR: I've read every Hawthorne story, and I teach a course on Hawthorne. I think that he's brilliant. You know, he and Melville were the best of friends. Hawthorne saw his stories as treatises on aesthetics. So, for instance, "The Birthmark." That's all about the ability to create and what you do with your creation and how you can wipe out some beauty through overcorrection. Belle is beautiful, but she has one spot that isn't beautiful, and the scientist is constantly trying to make her perfect. It really taught me about making, in a lot of ways. Because I think one has to leave one ugly spot in the work.

I was reading Larry Levis's "My Story in a Late Style of Fire" last night. And the first two sentences are really long and seem a little pedantic. But then, all of a sudden in the third short sentence we lock in, and then he goes into a metaphor about a house burning and how he once loved a woman in this way, and how he would be willing to let his house burn, the house that now contains his wife and child… and I realized you have to have one sort of mar or blemish. Poets try to make this well-wrought urn that's so tight, and I think that's good,

but there's a way in which we can almost take the human out of it and it disappears into something that's merely an urn.

So, I love Hawthorne. I actually think that Hawthorne is underread by critics and especially creative writers.

JD: What you just said about Hawthorne's stories as treatises on aesthetics is blowing my mind. I tend to think of him primarily as an allegorical writer. But to hear what you're saying about treatise, that's amazing.

RR: What if we thought about Hawthorne the same way we thought about Melville's *Moby Dick or Typee? The Scarlet Letter* is purely about aesthetics. What if you read *The Scarlet Letter* as Hawthrone making a statement about vulnerability, and what it is to make one's life? When Hawthorne gave *The Scarlet Letter* to his wife, she was so upset that she threw the copy into the fire. Because she knew that in the figure of Hester, he built the woman that he had always wanted. He wanted the woman that can defy society. For him, Hester is the hero. She's able to live in a way that Roger Dimmesdale can't. For Hawthorne, she's the ultimate artist. It's an amazing way to think about how the maker has to be willing to transgress in order to be an artist. Hawthorne is super-trangressive.

JD: If we could, let's return to "On Paradise." Of all the saints, why does the speaker of the poem engage with St. Sebastian?

RR: St. Sebastian is the saint of many disasters. It takes many swords to kill him. Or to make him a martyr. To me, St. Sebastian is the saint of hyperspace. He's hyper-pierced. And I can't help but think of that in conversation with lynchings and Whitman. For me, the engagement is actually thinking about different ways of iterating the lynched body, and different patron saints for the lynched body. There's a section where there are guides, where the dead man is trying to figure out how to be dead. And Emmett Till's father shows up. Most people don't know that Emmett Till's father was in the same prison camp as Ezra Pound and is mentioned in the *Pisan Cantos*. Till is killed and in the poem, Pound says, "Till was killed today." But none of this comes out until Emmett Till is killed. So his father is killed when he was several months old. Emmett Till grows up, goes to Mississippi, is lynched, and when Mamie Till is suing in a civil suit for some reparations for

her son's death, the military decides to declassify the records of Emmett Till's father as a way to show a pathological link between the father and the son. There's a really good piece by John Edgar Wideman called *Fatheralong* that discusses American fatherhood in terms of Emmett Till's father.

So there's a way in which the Till family bears these disasters, and in my poem, I wanted to have guides for him. Amiri Baraka becomes one guide; Octavio Paz becomes a guide; Dante is addressed, obviously—Dante has to be addressed in this poem. With St. Sebastian, I'm interested in how often one can be impaled, and yet live. I want to pull him out of the tradition and put him in a new context. That's actually what Steve Martin calls comedy—when you take something from one category and put it in another.

JD: It's the surprise—

RR: Right. So that's why I'm interested in putting Tituba in 2014. Or thinking about how Tituba keeps showing up, in terms of black women's bodies and how they're blamed for a type of anxiety that our culture feels.

JD: You said that "On Paradise" is forty-seven pages…

RR: It's a little longer now.

JD: Sounds like an epic.

RR: Yeah, I'm thinking about it. I look at it as a sort of an epic in scope, and I'm even playing with the idea of it reifying the nation…if we think of the epic as something that discusses nationhood. So yeah, so I do see it as a book-length poem. I just try to be risky. I thought, make the biggest thing you can make, bring your full self to it and see what comes out of it. I'm very scared of it, honestly.

JD: But it's incredibly exciting. For the great poets of the past, there seemed to be this move toward epic as a signal of their mastery. With the exception of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, how many contemporary poets are really tackling the epic mode and thinking about its political, cultural, and psychological implications?

RR: I'm so interested in poems that are journeys, and invoking the pilgrimage. Louise Glück did it in her most recent book *Faithful and*

Virtuous Night, Spencer Reece has it in *The Road to Emmaus*, Dean Young has a poem in *The American Reader,* Terrance Hayes has a few poems in *Lighthead* that engage the notion of pilgrimage. I really am interested in why we don't use it more. It's a great storytelling mode, but also a great mode of democracy. It allows the poet to occupy several bodies throughout one poem. So that's what I'm thinking about when I'm thinking about pilgrimage—how many different kinds of sensibilities I can get into one poem.

JD: You've talked elsewhere about the power of couplets and tercets in your poems, how you like the play that one line can have against another; you've talked about how white space can create tension and surprise between stanzas, as well as silences. But I wonder if you could now talk about lengths of lines and also sentences. So for example, you have a seventeen-line sentence in "Let Us Each Put Out Our Good Eyes"; in "Nostalgia," you have a seventeen-line sentence; and in "On Paradise," you're breaking open your sentences and abandon standard punctuation altogether. It feels like something new is happening there.

RR: In "On Paradise," I was reading a lot of Bidart and how he might be helpful to think about the end of a poem and when a body is totally coming undone. What you see here is the 118th section of "On Paradise." What you don't see is the first section, which is in rhymed couplets. So it starts out AABBCC. Then ABABCC, then ABCABC. What I wanted to do was mimic the rhyme scheme and meter; I wanted to mimic a body coming apart. So these sections are when the body is starting to really come apart and the narrator begins to let us know that.

Then I wanted to move into the ellipses which I borrow from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I think about the ellipses as both a there and a not-there, between meanings. With the sentences, I wanted to disavow a type of eloquence by the end of the poem. I'm predisposed toward eloquence as a poet. But I wanted the poem to embrace the chaos of a lack of eloquence or a different sort of eloquence, which is fragmentation. So when I ask "May we call it a soul?" I'm moving away from the body as a body and toward something that I think poets are reticent to discuss, which is the metaphysical. The metaphysics of disaster and paradise, and what is left after that. So the line lengths and the

playing…I think a poet should always try something they haven't. In *King Me*, I knew how to do a certain kind of line and stanza. In these poems, I just want to master a different formal mode.

I'm obsessed with Berryman. I think formally he's just brilliant. He thinks really well inside his forms. And I wanted to think like Berryman in this six-line form. So I began to play with that and develop my own. Berryman uses quatrains really well. But also I became really obsessed with the sentence. Most people don't realize that Wallace Stevens uses one sentence as a stanza. And then he moves to the next section, so very rarely are there more than one or two sentence in a stanza. Stevens really does short epiphany really well. There's a sentence that opens up a way of thinking or encountering a situation that's troubling or unknown; and then by the end of that sentence, we've come to something else. I think about in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," where he says, "a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well." And I think that's what I'm interested in sentences doing. We haven't apprehended it well in the beginning, but by the end of the sentence, we've apprehended something.

This section I've reprinted here, I was writing this in Marfa, Texas, and I was just really interested in getting outside, of pushing my sensibility. I was really trying to surprise myself.

JD: And as a result, the poem then becomes an experience. When I saw the absence of punctuation, I felt destabilized as a reader; I felt disturbed. If you're writing about the damage to the man's body and all of his afflictions, formally, that seems entirely appropriate to the content. It transforms the content in important ways.

You've spoken at length elsewhere about your upbringing in New Jersey, and the natural world, and your fascination with animals of all kinds. You've talked about spending a lot of time in Texas, and now of course you live in Chicago. And just this past year, you returned to New Jersey as a Hodder Fellow at Princeton. How has your landscape been influencing this recent work?

RR: I moved back to Jersey in August 2014 and my partner Monica and I rented a farmhouse, which was three miles from Princeton. One of the first things we noticed were dead deer along the road, and there

were lots. I would wake up in the morning, and there were be seven or eight deer on the front lawn. And if you get up early enough, you could see thirty or forty. I used to run in this park that was a quarter-mile from the house, and when I would run, I would see as many as thirty deer together. So I was around a lot of deer. Deer and falcons were everywhere. I was on the Raritan Canal, which is hundreds of miles of these trails through old mills. All I was doing was running through these trails and running into deer behind trees or in the brush. What's really beautiful to me about deer and about being human is normally deer can see and hear us, but when you can surprise a deer, there's something to that. All of a sudden, I feel like I've somehow defied cognition in that moment because I've able to surprise something that is normally unsurprisable, because they can hear us and smell us and know we're coming.

The other thing that I've learned is that urban deer will run with you. In Austin, there was a little green space near my apartment. When I started running, the deer would come out and they would run along with me. It's one of the scariest things—they're huge, they're muscularly amazing.

Landscape appears a lot in *King Me*, but I did a lot of editing of *King Me* when I moved here, and I missed the landscape of Texas, missed the outside. In Texas, I'd write in the mornings and go outside. Even if it were ninety or a hundred degrees, I'd be outside, out in the world. I was really influenced by Camille Dungy's *Black Nature* anthology. Natasha Tretheway writes pastoral poems, and Terrance Hayes. I really want to destabilize what it is we think we know about black people and the space we occupy. I was a Boy Scout, so you know…I like being outside. When I moved to New Jersey, I realized there are fears you gain if you're not outside in the woods enough. There's actually nothing scary about it. When I moved back to New Jersey and I was running through these trails, I thought, "What could happen to me?" And I never felt that before.

JD: So Chicago's urban environment has really worked on you.

RR: Yeah, I've made a commitment that I wouldn't regain those fears. New Jersey has bears, but not many, and I started thinking, "What if a bear attacks me?" If a bear attacks me, a bear attacks me. But I

should be out here enjoying this. But, you know, there's also the fear of "What if a white man jumps out and attacks me?"

For me, Chicago has been tough, and I think this is why I write animals and landscapes here. Because I don't get it. I like the city—I like cities—but I have always lived in cities where nature was much more a part of the city. In Austin, Atlanta, and Philly, you can get to the rural very quickly. Twenty minutes, you can be in something and not know that there's a city twenty minutes away.

JD: And on the East Coast, that can happen. Of course, my frame of reference is Boston, but you can drive ten or fifteen miles outside of the city and pick apples, or visit Thoreau's cabin on the Concord River.

RR: But ten miles out of Chicago, you're in the mills of Gary, Indiana [laughs].

JD: You live in this area near the University of Illinois at Chicago, right? It's pretty tough to find green spaces here.

RR: Yes. Very tough, so I go to the lake a lot, and some parks. But it's different. The urban—this is a general statement—the urban doesn't necessarily cultivate discovery. Or what I've noticed is that it cultivates fear in a lot of people. This is the first urban environment where it doesn't make sense to me. And I'm from outside Philly. New York makes sense to me, Atlanta makes sense to me, Austin makes sense to me, Houston makes sense to me, the people there in these different places…there's only two cities where people don't make sense to me—Boston and Chicago.

JD: Now why Chicago? I don't know what you would say about Boston, but I think it's a very dysfunctional place. The lens I've always seen it through is race. There are embarrassments I feel about the history of that city—especially the busing crisis of the Seventies, but other things, too. I've lived in Chicago as well, and I've observed that the segregation here is as certainly as distinct as Boston's.

RR: The thing that Boston and Chicago both share is that they're both suspicious cities, more so than even in New York, I think.

JD: Suspicious, how so?

RR: People are suspicious. In Boston, people, their outward display

is *I distrust you, and if I'm white, generally I dislike black people*. That has been my experience in restaurants, streets, taxis, and bookstores. Here [in Chicago], because we're in the Midwest, we have that veneer of Midwestern niceness, but under that niceness is reserve and suspicion. I remember meeting black folks here too and they're not quick to make friends. They'll tell you they're suspicious and they look at that as a badge of honor. This is the only city where I've felt hostility from communities of color in ways that I've never felt before.

I imagine Chicago is still in the Sixties. That's the way I think about the city. Everything is out of place and out of time. It has the veneer of the present, but nothing about the city, from the politics and corruption to its sense of itself and its communities…it touts segregation. They call it "neighborhood," right? We love the neighborhood, our city's neighborhood-y, right? Well, it sounds like segregation to me!

And I'm actually really interested in communities, and communities of color, but when the North Side of the city is clearly the white half of the city and the West and South Sides are clearly the black and Latino sides of the city…that's not neighborhood, that's just good-old fashioned segregation.

JD: Recently I listened to an interview on "Fresh Air" with Richard Rothstein, who describes the history of segregated neighborhoods in all American cities and how it was a part of federal policy, especially as it related to housing developments post-World War II. We like to imagine that housing decisions are private decisions, but they're also politically legislated decisions, so what you're describing is remarkable.

RR: But I've met some really great people. For me, I connect to a city through my running community. Here, I've connected with runners in Pilsen, a traditionally Mexican community, right—and there's a group called the Venados—I just ran with them last night—and it's a very diverse group. But this city does not make sense to me. The South Side is where I get the most kindness—I do long twelve-mile runs and I'll run through the South Side and I'll hear people go, "Hey! You can do it! You go, brother!"—but in general I find this city incredibly hostile.

JD: What you said about the Sixties, and Chicago being stuck in its past—I can't help but see it, even in the architecture. On my walk here

today [to the UIC campus], I observed that even the newest structures reflect the suspicion you are describing.

RR: Yeah, this is Brutalism! And we know what this style is supposed to do—squelch the human spirit. Even the facelift on some of these buildings—[points to buildings across campus]—these are the same Brutalist structures, except with UV-protected windows. That to me is Chicago.

We just moved to a home that is across the street from one of the schools Rahm Emmanuel just shut down. And this playground is brand new—maybe three or four years old—and the school shut down. And it's right on the West Side. I'll engage the city in my writing one day, but I don't now. But maybe I won't. I have to think about that. Ernest Gaines, the fiction writer, all of his stories are set in Louisiana, even though he only lived there for twelve years. He lived most of his adult life in San Francisco, but he can only write about the South. For me the South is the place of my imagination, the most fecund and transgressive place in this country. Chicago feels doesn't feel transgressive at all, or exciting in that way. It feels like everybody is doing what they should be doing. It's very weird to me. Everybody fits in their box. I don't feel improvisational energy. I don't feel like there's a feeling of we can make something new.

JD: You haven't explicitly incorporated it into your work, and yet it sounds like the resistance or ambivalence that you feel toward the place still informs the work.

RR: Yeah, I used to look outside in Texas and could directly engage in that way. Maybe it's not being in grad school where you're so receptive to everything. You're a sort of open bowl of a person, whereas when you get a tenure-track position, you're the one who's supposed to be dispensing. It just doesn't feel like the city gives in that same way.

What I've tried to do is start readings at my house, salons, as a way to fostering these engagements that I'm interested in in the city. But yeah, it feels tepid. It's like, come on! It's a weird place.

JD: And a rather corporate place, too, no? I'm thinking in particular of how many things that once belonged to the city are now owned by corporations: the city's parking meter debacle is just one example.

RR: There are a number of historians who are interested in the history of capital, and this interests me—this question of how capitalism grows, and its limits. A body that's big enough to bear several disasters is the body of capital. It's the body that does not need to rest, but there's something that happens at the end of "On Paradise" where the body breaks down. It's exhausted beyond eloquence. How long could I make suffering eloquent? There's an exhaustibility to the eloquence of suffering. And I think that's what the elegy is interested in, but in some ways, maybe I'm declaring the end of the eloquent elegy, but I think about that in terms of capitalism, in terms of the exhaustible line. Can we make a poetry that gets me out of the idea that I should be inexhaustible? I want a poetry that can say no, this is the limit, this is the edge, this is it. I don't know if enough contemporary poems are doing that.

JD: But yours do, and I'm grateful to you for sharing them with us, and for sharing your thoughts on space, place, and your creative process. Thank you.