

**Joshua Corey's**  
**SEVERANCE SONGS**  
**(Tupelo Press, 2011)**

**A READER'S COMPANION**

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## *Test of the Sonnet; or, How I Wrote These Poems*

by author **Joshua Corey**

For one of my epigraphs, I've chosen William Carlos Williams' snarky line from his introduction to *The Wedge*: "To me all sonnets say the same thing of no importance." Obviously there's a degree of irony involved in having that line as the preface to a book of sonnets, though that irony is complicated by the fact that many of these poems are not immediately recognizable as sonnets (most of them don't rhyme, and many of them stretch and deform themselves across the page so that the fourteen-line count we expect of a sonnet isn't always apparent). I love sonnets, and I love the skeptical American tradition of Williams with its principled opposition to traditional European forms. Most of all, I love the fact that Williams himself wrote scads of sonnets, and not all of them are juvenilia. He was fascinated as well as repelled by the form, that too-perfect envelope for an argument intended less to persuade than to delight, seduce, or awe its reader.

The circumstances are these: in August 2001 I moved to Ithaca, New York to begin a Ph.D. program in English at Cornell. I'd come from the San Francisco Bay Area, where I'd completed the manuscript that would become my second book, *Fourier Series*, and was at loose ends for my next writing project. One evening, not long after my little apartment on Wood Street was finally unpacked, I sat down and wrote a poem, which I only realized the next day was more or less a sonnet. It didn't rhyme, but it had fourteen lines, was roughly iambic, and otherwise evoked the feel if not the literal qualifications of the sonnet. The next day I wrote another, and the week after classes began, I wrote two or three more. I didn't know where it was all headed, but there was an eminently pragmatic dimension to the project that pleased me: as a new Ph.D. candidate, I simply didn't have the time to devote to a sustained piece of writing that I'd enjoyed while a Stegner Fellow at Stanford. Sonnets have the virtue of shortness; even more fundamental than that, they come with a preset limit to the number of lines you can use. And I enjoyed the challenge of having to present an intuition or argument that must be resolved, one way or the other, by line fourteen, no matter what.

I was out walking my dog on that much-remarked crystalline blue morning of September 11, 2001; Ithaca was far, infinitely far it seemed, from New York City (the city which has always seemed to me like "the world," just as the sonnet form sometimes seems to be "the poem"), but not so far that we didn't sometimes share its weather. There was no one on the streets; I didn't know anything was wrong until I encountered a telephone lineman standing by his truck with a look of confusion on his face. "A plane hit the World Trade Center," he said to me.

"Oh?" I searched for words. "Was it a big plane?"

He shook his head, not in negation but in bewilderment. “Maybe I should just go home,” he said. I went home too and turned on the radio, and experienced what was for me the most frightening moment of that disastrous day: music. There was nothing on any of the stations I could tune in, including NPR, but music. That’s how it will be when the world ends, I thought; no one will have anything to say, they’ll just put on the Engima Variations or Beethoven or something. I dug my 9" TV set out of the closet and plugged it in just in time to watch the second tower fall through a hailstorm of white static on the only station my rabbit ears could pull in, Fox.

I could call that the primal scene of these poems, the primal scene for so many people who remember that day. But there’s another, contesting scene that came about six weeks later, when a famous poet was in town for a reading at Ithaca College. I’m not especially a fan of this poet’s work, but I went anyway, because there was going to be a woman there whom I’d met on [match.com](http://match.com), whose photo--black and white, laughing uncontrollably and all the more beautiful for it--I’d studied as though for clues of my own future. In an uncharacteristic surge of patriotic feeling, I’d attached an American flag pin to the jacket I wore that night--a pin which hadn’t done much, I learned later, to settle her doubts about me. But that was the first night I saw her face and heard her voice and felt her touch, if only a little pressure of the hand. It wasn’t long after that we went on our first real date. And it wasn’t too long after that before I wrote the first poem--I think it was the one that begins, “Many tiers make this world pillowed on stone”--intended for, addressed to, Emily, the woman who would become my wife.

That contradiction--the rending of the veil of history by September 11, and the everyday and eternal act of falling in love--marks these poems with its violence, shapes the climate or “pressure of reality” that forms and deforms their language. I believe poetry is a means for approaching the inexpressible. That’s not to say that poems express nothing, only that a poem is a record of an attempt that succeeds by failing. Put another way, if the sonnet is an envelope, a perfect container for strong feeling, then all of these envelopes are bent, torn, spindled, mutilated. What they actually say (Williams: “What does it matter what the line ‘says’?”) is no more or less meaningful than the record of the stresses they’ve endured, passing over the infinite gap between inside and outside. Or as Wallace Stevens too-beautifully puts it, there are “Words of the fragrant portals,” marked sharply by such passage, expressive of “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” than they are actually capable of expressing.

Put yet another way, these are sonnets under pressure, sonnets that tested me, and that I tested, in a sustained and continual attempt to register the contradictions of my American life in the years 2001 – 2005. While we were all being made familiar with the geography of war, from Tora Bora to Baghdad to Afpak, I was getting to know the pastoral geography of the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, where I lived. While our political discourse was becoming saturated with the horribly transparent rhetoric of racism, war-mongering, and ignorance triumphant, I was speaking words of love to my beloved. While the libraries and museums of Baghdad were being looted and sacked, I was closeted away in Olin Library on East Hill, reading poetry. And even my fitful attempts to close the gap between inner and outer, private and public, were stymied by the habits of everyday life when they weren’t simply and categorically defeated, as when I worked as a canvasser in Pennsylvania for John Kerry’s presidential campaign.



The logic here is the logic of paradox, which Shakespeare's sonnets in particular are replete with. The paradox here serves to hold open the image of the beloved that the speaker carries with him; an image that, careful reading reveals, is not unambiguously attractive. The climate of the surrounding sonnets suggests that the speaker has reason to doubt the faithfulness of his beloved; here "the rud'st or gentlest sight, / The most sweet favour or deformed'st creature" are alike "shape[d] to your feature," renders the image of the beloved sufficiently pliable as to appear rude or gentle, sweet or deformed, depending on what the speaker happens to be perceiving (and thinking) at any given moment. So we can see that even the most traditional of sonnets is more open to contradiction, more connoisseur of chaos, than we might have suspected.

Love, of course, is the riskiest and most commonplace of contradictions. 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? That may seem like a very modern question, if not an aggrandizing one, relevant primarily to the guilty bien pensant liberal who shelters his beautiful soul like a candle flame from experience. As usual, though, Shakespeare got there first, as did all the writers of sonnet sequences that relate, through episodic para-narrative, the course of love. Really it goes back to Petrarch and Dante, whose idealized, untouchable, dead-before-the-age-of-consent beloveds are the necessary object, the X to be solved for, of poems that traverse the searing self-exposure required to make genuine connections. I am haunted by the most mysterious and terrible of Dante's sonnets, the vision from *La Vita Nuova* of Love's intercession in his affair with Beatrice. The translation here is by Frank Bidart:

To all those driven berserk or humanized by love  
this is offered, for I need help  
deciphering my dream.  
When we love our lord is LOVE.

When I recall that at the fourth hour  
of the night, watched by shining stars,  
LOVE at last became incarnate,  
the memory is horror.

In his hands smiling LOVE held my burning  
heart, and in his arms, the body whose greeting  
pierces my soul, now wrapped in bloodred, sleeping.

He made him wake. He ordered him to eat  
my heart. He ate my burning heart. He ate it  
submissively, as if afraid, as LOVE wept.

Bidart's Beatrice is male, and he causes the personified emotion to appear in all capitals, making graphic the "incarnation" of LOVE. His very free translation presents the experience of love as a kind of psychic division: it drives its sufferers mad or humanizes them (and, implies, there is commerce between such madness and becoming human; the intersection is named *compassion*). But the poem's greatest strangeness comes in the sestet, which Bidart presents more faithfully to

the original. The “dream” fulfills the lover’s desire by showing LOVE forcing the beloved—“the body whose greeting / pierces my soul” to eat Dante’s burning heart. LOVE himself changes strangely in this process, “smiling” at the beginning of the vision and weeping at its end, as the fearful beloved yields grudgingly to LOVE’s power. Does LOVE here come to regret his tyranny, or conversely, his apparent slavery to the wishes of a feckless poet? Or does he foresee the coming transformation of Beatrice, whom in the course of *La Vita Nuova* becomes identified with LOVE to the point that she replaces him, as in the *Divine Comedy* she will become the embodiment of Christian love, uniting eros with agape? To my mind, the sonnet is significant for its vision of the poet’s power to represent love, and to imagine love’s power over the (indifferent, or as here “sleeping”) beloved, without making either power actual. All poetry can do—and the sonnet is especially well equipped to do it—is dramatize the plight of the lover-poet, seeking connection while recognizing and sometimes fleeing from its terrors. That push-pull, making the treacherous zone of intersubjectivity actual in language, is what I believe poetry is for.

## *A Rough Guide to These Songs*

by Joshua Corey

The poems in this book have various influences. The list of sonnet writers that have moved me and shaped my sense of the form's possibilities is long. The great sonnet sequences—Shakespeare's above all, but also Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Samuel Daniel's *Delia*—have inspired and humbled me. Of the nineteenth-century sonneteers, Keats has shaped my sense of the sonnet as brimming cup of longing, dread, and wonder; my homage to him here takes the form of two poems in which I borrow the end rhymes from two of his sonnets. Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* stand for me as the terrifying platonic ideal of what a sonnet sequence might be. There is also a rich if subterranean tradition of American sonnets, not all of which rhyme. Robert Lowell's *Notebook* has been a major influence, showing how such a putatively private form might capture public passions and agonies; I learn something similar from the sonnets of Adrienne Rich and Marilyn Hacker. John Berryman's sonnets track the course of desire with antic cleverness and not a little neurosis. Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets* are hugely influential for the ways in which they attack this traditionally expressivist form in constructivist ways, so that the sonnet appears as the assemblage or desiring machine it must have been before tradition took too firm a hold of it. And poets continue to do new things with the form that have extended my sense of its possibilities, such as Jen Bervin's erasures of Shakespeare's sonnets in her book *Nets*, or Paul Hoover's *Sonnet 56*, which rewrites "Sweet love, renew thy force" in 56 forms, including "Limerick," "Flarf," "Answering Machine," and "Course Description."

The sonnet is an intimate form, and an infinite one. As I wrote this sequence, and responded as best as I could (Robert Duncan: "Responsibility is to keep the ability to respond") to the pressures of realities external and internal, I found that pressure manifesting in the writing itself in two major ways. The first was density, as geological pressures turn coal into diamond: each line became more and more syntactically packed, more allusive, doubling back even as it marched forward. The second was fragmentation, or a deliberate ventilation so as to try and relieve some of the pressure of density on the reader. This is how I opened some of the poems, admitting breath and white space by fudging the unit of the line (so that the longest poem in this book is still just 14 lines, yet appears 20 lines long). For other poems I simply introduced line breaks, sometimes adopting traditional stanzas (octave, sestet, quatrain, tercet, couplet), other times approximating the Fibonacci sequence (one line, one line, two lines, three lines, five lines, and a closing couplet; or, the reverse). Mostly I was concerned that the poems not appear too often as solid blocks of text, which to my mind came to have an impenetrable aspect, like dark matter or a black hole.

Like many poetry collections, this one went through a number of versions before arriving at its present form. The poems have gone with titles and without; there have been numbered and titled sections; the ordering has varied; individual poems have come and gone. I came eventually to feel that I didn't want an overdetermined architecture or superstructure for this book, in large

part because I believed it was trying to make the book appear as something it is not: a single unified poem with a narrative. Instead, I wanted to remain true to the tradition of the sonnet sequence, with all the pleasures of digressive meditation and address that enables. Nevertheless, there are roughly three movements of the sequence that readers might find it helpful to know about.

In the first movement, extending from the first poem to about “[I thought shrieking was shrinking but it’s the other]”, we are presented with a kind of descent into the underworld. From the Stevens-inflected opening poem, we move into the speaker’s predicament: isolation that is also a precarious protection from a world becoming infected by madness. The presence of the beloved can be felt, but she is as yet abstract, difficult to distinguish from America itself, while also manifesting as an aspect of the speaker’s selfhood, his anima. The movement comes to a climax, or crisis, with the direct manifestation of the collapse of the World Trade Center (“[Its purity]”), which interpolates found language from news reports about the attacks.

In the second movement the speaker goes to war--or rather, unable to separate himself from a “polis incorporating fire,” violently engages and disengages imaginatively from what is happening “over there.” “After form fails”: that’s the motto of this section, which of course can’t do without form but instead must test form and find it lacking. It’s always risky to speculate about what others will find funny about one’s writing, but I think this movement occasions some of the wittiest writing in the book, as well as the darkest. The beloved wears several guises in this movement but most likely she, like the poem, is “the war on a very plain level.” What’s a plain level? My homage to John Ashbery’s “Paradoxes and Oxymorons,” and to the sinister logic of Doctor Strangelove, which governs all our quests for security and dominion.

The third movement begins somewhere between “[Wedged head down in the icy crevasse the mighty hunter]” and “[In the garden it curled her toes to say]”. This is the equivocal paradiso of the sequence in which the beloved takes on flesh, a mortal woman, whom the poet pursues and wins, all the time conscious of the infrathin gap between lover and beloved, self and other, resorting in manic succession to all the old techniques of sonnet-seduction: the blazon, the appeal for mercy, the elevation and denigration of the beloved, finding at last an ambivalent connection in and through language: “heart of.” But such connections are, must be, sufficient. Or as Michael Palmer remarked about this collection, “Even in severance there is a bond.”

## *An Interview with Joshua Corey*

**by Max Glassburg**

Conducted by Max Glassburg in Joshua Corey's office at Lake Forest College on the afternoon of January 25, 2011.

MG: *To start off, maybe you could just share a few words about how Severance Songs comes out of what you've done in the past, in other words, what were your poetry goals when you published Selah, your first book, compared to where you're at now?*

JC: *Selah is a first book, and I think with first books there's a desire to kind of burst out and kind of make your mark. At the same time, it took time to publish it, so it was and wasn't my first book. Selah was really a kind of fragment of a manuscript I had written some years before that then grew into its own book. I think in some ways there's more continuities than dissimilarities. The book that's really the sort of odd book out in my oeuvre so far is really Fourier Series, which is highly conceptual, this kind of bizarre literalization-meditation on the utopian writings of the French utopian Socialist Charles Fourier with a little bit of John Wayne thrown in just to make it interesting.*

MG: *You speak of "a kind of fragment," and this is something I noticed before in your Reader's Guide, that Severance Songs also came out of fragments put together over time. Is this a typical move on your part, to assemble something out of work that you're doing that eventually coalesces into a whole?*

JC: *It's actually not so much that they are fragments that I stitched together, but having written them, I sort of took a hammer to them and fragmentized them, primarily visually, on the page. That was partly just to leaven the quality of stony denseness that I began to feel they had as just these blocks on the page. The sonnet is a very dense, layered form, it's like layers of sandstone, or something like that, and I wanted to break them apart and give them some air. They do reflect, I think, a very longstanding interest of mine in playing with forms, whereas Selah, I think, is me trying out a lot of different forms. There are prose poems in that book, poems with numbered sections, a poem that's a kind of exploded sestina; so I was very much drawn to traditional forms there. Then Fourier Series is a form that I invented, inspired by the sort of mad, quasi-numerological thinking of Fourier, and now here is the sonnet!*

MG: *Fourier Series involved charts, correct?*

Josh: *Right, those are the ones with the quadrants where little lyrics appear. There are four spaces with up to one, two or three lyrics per quadrant. The quadrant never fills, so even there I had this idea of wanting to put a "hole" in things, leave a space in the poem, and I don't know if you could say this space is for the reader or if it's a space that's just meant to stop things from getting too dense. That seems to be a kind of, to go back to this original question, this desire to*

not present a perfectly polished and finished whole, even though I have strong instincts in that direction—otherwise I wouldn't be interested in sonnets. There's nothing more perfect and complete-seeming than a traditional sonnet.

MG: *It's always about taking a form or even inventing a form and like you said, "airing it out" or trying something new with it.*

JC: Airing it out, putting it under pressure, giving it a whack upside the head, whatever you want to call it, yes. I like form, I also like to see form under strain.

MG: *That's a good time for my next question. I'd like to hear a poem that you find characteristic of this book as a whole, something that perhaps distinguishes itself—and you—from your previous work in terms of a style, intent.*

JC: I feel like there are a couple different choices I could make. You're asking me for something that is a *break*. It's easier, in fact, just the mood I'm in, for me to think of a continuity. The very first poem in the book, for example, riffs off a pretty well-known Wallace Stevens poem and my preoccupation with Stevens has been since I was fifteen years old and I first encountered his poems and had that wonderful, "You can do that?" kind of response to his poems. I didn't even know you could write that way. It's always the best response when I discover something because as soon as I say, "You can do that?" then I want to do it too.

MG: *I had that same response to T.S. Eliot. The first time I read Eliot I threw the book across the room and didn't pick it up again for months because I didn't know what to do with it.*

JC: Yeah. We walk around with these rules or this sense of decorum, we don't even necessarily know where it comes from and then something violates that sense of decorum—it's exciting! Sometimes too exciting and we throw the book across the room, and sometimes you're attracted to it.

Let me read a poem in here that I just kind of like because of the sort of music quality to it and the way it plays with not only traditional forms, but inevitably certain aspects of poetic tradition come into it. For this particular poem I was thinking of the idea of people being turned into animals, which goes all the way back to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, which is a satirical novel. But this is a poem in which I was thinking of that, I was also thinking of Bottom, from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and sort of that notion of the rustic fool who has been transformed and momentarily because of that transformation is in this in this exalted state. The interesting thing about Bottom is that he's ridiculous and low, but, you know, he gets to sleep with the Queen of the Fairies.

MG: *I noticed that there seemed to be a conceit in which the speaker-poet is literally and figuratively transformed into an "ass," a donkey. I'm seeing a lot of other conceits as well, in which the speaker-poet experiences the sublime: through music, the ocean and sometimes I can't even identify where the conceit is coming from, in this case it was the story you had mentioned—*

JC: Right, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, it's a classic ancient Greek or Roman novel, I'll have to look it up.

MG: *Were you doing this directly in a conversation with Petrarch? By that I mean, taking a conceit such as music or the ocean, as I'd mentioned, and kind of putting that into the poem. So I was wondering how that may have filtered through. Page twenty-two for instance, that begins, "I thought shrieking was shrinking," I couldn't identify the conceit there. If I looked at the page without knowing beforehand what was there, I wouldn't have thought, "Oh, sonnet."*

JC: Right. It's a nice question because I think it reflects that just as I'm interested in sort of fracturing forms a little bit, but at the same time the presence of the form, the desire to engage with tradition, even if I want to mess with it a little bit. There is also, I think, just as I think one can mess visually with a poem, there is also that other aspect that sonnet sequences often do present poems with conceits. And you're absolutely right that Petrarch does that, but also even many of Shakespeare's sonnets will present some dominant conceit or metaphor. Love as law brief, right? Or "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," in which the poem inverts the traditional praises of the beloved. Maybe I should read that one. It's an interesting one. I have a preoccupation with Westerns, *Fourier Series* is all over that, and this I guess is a return of the Western to *Severance Songs*. I'll try reading the numbers.

1  
I thought shrieking was shrinking but it's the other  
way round.

2  
                  In the event, matter stoops  
to make its gesture, suborns knees, stubborn  
my sense of the window in its wall.

3  
  Am I outside?

4  
Insider, compass for me what we've prospected  
since sky shelters no perspective and the great house  
squats in emulation of its blank. A little water  
makes a gleam in those eyes I took for coins.

5  
I dehydrate what you see but only to take it in—  
inside's where interest gathers. Montana's a hole  
and so's the Dakota—those names for skimming  
just deserts. But our house

6  
  is another mouth to feed.

7  
Molten on my tongue's the gold made from that watch  
and they say the buffalo are back, but low in fat.

MG: *Something I just noticed is when you said, “deserts,” I thought you had taken the noun, especially in the context of the Western.*

JC: There are many occasions in the book where I intend a word to be ghosted by a kind of a homonym. Unfortunately, English makes you choose which you pronounce. But it’s a funny little poem, I think it certainly comes in that sort of section of the book that is beginning to be preoccupied by the circumstances of the war and there’s this desire to escape, to be outside, but you can’t be outside—there is no outside.

MG: *Do you think of these in terms of having a volta—a turn—like the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets did, and if so does each one take that “turn” wherever, since you’re really playing with the form? Or did you have a more structured or formal plan with that?*

JC: I think some of them have classic sonnet-like turns, or voltas, but I do think part of the fracturing I’m talking about with the sonnets has to do with putting in *lots* of voltas. The poem I just read, the fact that it’s numbered, creates turns, beats or perhaps themes that change from number-to-number. And playing with “seven” as sort of the lucky number of the sonnet: you get two “sevens” and you have a sonnet! But I do think, looking at this poem, the closing two lines represent kind of a turn. There’s a kind of satirical tone, which is a move away from the more exploratory tone, the questioning tone and the desire to escape. There’s a couple of allusions, or I don’t know what to call them in there, but the notion of the gold watch that you get, supposedly when you retire is the desire to retire and be *done*. But here the gold is molten, “the golden tongue,” and there’s also the idea of a tongue that’s burning. Of course, the last line, there’s the idea of the buffalo, this kind of Western depletion: the buffalo are just another consumer product. Not just in the fact that we eat them, but also the idea that “we brought back the buffalo, we saved the buffalo,” that’s another idea that we get to consume and enjoy.

MG: *I’d like to ask a question in relation to your audience, especially because sonnets usually have a specific audience addressed to a lover: fictional, wished for, or realized. Your book is even dedicated to Emily, your wife, but as this is a published work, I’m also curious what kind of audience you have in mind, if you even had one when you assembled the poems, and if that has changed over time from when you starting publishing to now.*

JC: Well, that’s a complicated question, and the sonnet has a funny tradition that way. We think of the sonnet—a classic sonnet—as being something *addressed* to a beloved, but that doesn’t mean the beloved was the *audience*. And I think of sort of the classic sonnet situation, I think of young, clever men at court sort of showing off for each other in manuscript. To publish these works for the *hoi polloi* was unthinkable. They had a very specific audience and were a kind of social currency, manuscripts circulated among men and that was your audience. If the beloved actually read a poem and was maybe therefore persuaded to invite you to her bedchamber, so much the better! But that wasn’t necessarily the point. So that’s kind of an interesting holdover. I wonder about that because here are these poems which I began writing sort of in tandem beginning this romantic relationship, but it wasn’t always directly responsive to or related to that relationship. Many of the poems in this book, especially in the last third, are love poems, and they are poems that I did write for, and give to Emily. But they had this other “life” to them. You know, there are a few poems I have written to her which I have chosen not to

republish and those poems are hers, in a different sense. As far as a larger audience goes, I would like to think that the tradition of the love poem is still compelling to people. At the same time, I think readers who have themselves experienced that kind of “liberal guilty conscience” of the past decade—with acuteness—might recognize something of their own squirming here. I think every writer takes his or her own experience and tries to get enough distance from it that it becomes material, and then you can shape that material. Such material, which may itself not be intrinsically interesting, like my life, which is similar to so many other people’s lives, hopefully, when put under pressure (again, that’s what I think poetry is, is language under pressure) then I think it takes on qualities which I hope readers will find attractive. There’s certainly one thing I’ve *tried*, I don’t get to decide if I’ve been successful or not, but one thing I’ve tried to do here, which is another thing I take from the sonnet, is a tradition of wit. I take wit to mean more than cleverness, but to go back to the idea of the conceit, the idea one is able to take unlike things and juxtapose them in such a way that they seem startling and true.

MG: *In one sense, I saw some John Ashbery in one of your poems.*

JC: Yes, there’s one in which I’m totally stealing from “Paradoxes And Oxymorons.”

MG: *That’s what I thought, and I don’t remember if Ashbery’s poem was a sonnet or not, but I recall that it was playing with a certain formal structure, and what I thought you did, actually, was turn the poem into—well I do and I don’t want to use the phrase “meta poem.”*

JC: I think that’s fair, with Ashbery, especially.

MG: *It seems you turned the poem into the lover itself, but the poem doesn’t need wooing, unlike the fleshy lovers of Petrarch and Shakespeare, but the sonnet in a way could be argued to be a dead form—something that’s just not used. So I wonder if this was an attempt—I thought it was a successful attempt, actually—to reinvigorate or bring back life and love back to the sonnet by doing it that way. And I was curious as to how you thought about this poem, or maybe it was just in direct conversation with Ashbery.*

JC: Well certainly I all but steal outright the first line from “Paradoxes And Oxymorons,” and maybe just for the purposes of this conversation I’ll just read it. It’s not a sonnet but it is in four quatrains, sixteen lines, so there is something very sonnet-like, very evocative of the sonnet there. So this is Ashbery’s “Paradoxes And Oxymorons.”

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.  
Look at it talking to you. You look out a window  
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don’t have it.  
You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.

The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.  
What’s a plain level? It is that and other things,  
Bringing a system of them into play. Play?  
Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,  
As in the division of grace these long August days  
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know  
It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.

It has been played once more. I think you exist only  
To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there  
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem  
Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you.

—from John Ashbery's book *Shadow Train* (Penguin, 1980)

So that's a very marvelous poem of Ashbery's and what attracts me to it is the way it thinks about the very complicated relationship between a poet and a reader, and the way the poem is the occasion for the "you." And the poem "sets me softly down beside you," there's this companionable quality, this desire to reach out and connect, which I think is an explicit theme in my own book *Severance Songs*, the very title suggesting the "song" as an emotive connection that tries to connect, with "severance" being the opposite, obviously. I was thinking about that, but in this poem I was also thinking about the criminality—if that's not too strong a word—of writing poetry while the war is going on, and the relationship of poetry writing to war and power. There may not seem to be any, but I think there sort of is one.

MG: *You seem to reconcile that problem in your last line of the poem, "This poem does not spill a drop of the fluids that are yours." It's almost like you're intentionally shirking away from the issue by presenting the poem as an innocent form, an innocent being in that it doesn't cause violence but it doesn't necessarily resolve it, either.*

JC: No, it is, I think, that the poem is represented as being a kind of construct, a fake construct. The line there, "the fluids that are yours," I was thinking of *Dr. Strangelove* and George C. Scott as General Buck Turgidson ranting about our "precious bodily fluids." And there I was thinking about the justification of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are to kind of preserve our "precious bodily fluids" from the contamination of radical Islam, al-Qaeda, terrorism and so forth. And it seemed to me that if poetry is to mean anything at all in the 21st century, it can't be an enforcer of purity. So this is a poem about the kind of poem I don't want to write. This poem is the war "on a very plain level," so instead of language on a very plain level, it's the war; war being the thing that saturates and connects us in this time of history as much as language. At least, that's the claim that this line is making. The poem is a guilty product of this moment that we belong to. It's a poem about what Hegel called the "beautiful soul," the sort of post-Romantic or quasi-Romantic desire to preserve the beauty of the soul. You know, "I'm a sensitive creature, I just want inner peace," you know, and, "All that terrible stuff is going on over there, it has nothing to do with me." So this is a poem of the guilt of the beautiful soul, if that doesn't sound too elevated.

MG: *No, I like that one in particular too. One thing that I was kind of curious about is that the sonnet just works well for these sort of thoughts and question is because the way we look at sonnets, we always analyze Shakespeare's work is we go line-by-line, we identify the turn, how the meter fits in, etc. There's definitely a musicality to your poems that can't go unnoticed throughout your work, but clearly iambic pentameter isn't the main issue with you. But I was*

*thinking of the sonnet as being one of the best poetic forms to analyze line-by-line, so I was wondering how you would like to see your work received and analyzed. Are you interested in maybe the “Gertrude Steinean” approach, where maybe there’s an instant appreciation for what they see, or what kind of thought process or analysis do you expect or encourage, or maybe just like to see out of your work. Or is that not even a fair question?*

JC: No, it’s a perfectly fair question. I’m not sure I’m happy with my answer for it. I mean, I wish for something that I’m probably not going to get, which is for a general readership of people who don’t necessarily analyze poetry but nevertheless might enjoy reading it. At the same time, I recognize that the situation of poetry in this country is very much defined by its relationship to academia. Poems are judged as academic or else strenuously anti-academic, and I would prefer not to be in either camp if I could manage it. I like to think people read poetry not necessarily to analyze it but to have an encounter with language made a little strange, I hope a little beautiful, and really to kind of encounter themselves as a sort of mirroring, I suppose.

MG: *I was actually curious how, if I were to interview every poet, I’d want to ask them all really what they want out of their readership. I mean, the poem we were just talking about, “This poem is the war on a very plain level,” works, I think, because it deviates in its content from the Ashbery poem, so it has the ability to stand on its own even if someone doesn’t recognize the connection. There’s such a jarring contrast: Ashbery is writing about a poem; you’re writing about a poem, the war and the very real implications about the way we live. So that’s the kind of thing that is often throughout this in the poems I like the most, the poems that play with the tradition that way. So that was just a point I was curious about.*

JC: Yeah, on the question about the relation to the tradition, I would like to think that whenever I have any allusion or anything like that in these poems, like to Ashbery with this particular poem, I prefer to think of it as an “Easter egg” that some readers might enjoy discovering, that isn’t strictly necessary to read the poem. I think that the poem does work for people who aren’t aware of Ashbery’s poem and for those who are there’s another layer of conversation. But I wouldn’t say those people are closer to the core of the poem. If anything, one might be distracted. I think it’s one thing to come across an Easter egg in your travels and another thing to make the reading of poetry into an Easter egg hunt! Then it’s always, “I found another one!” and you’re not necessarily always paying attention to what’s actually around you. So ideally I work toward, probably nowhere close to achieving, writing poems that I think any reasonably educated and curious person with an ear for music will enjoy. And if then the Easter egg hunters want to come in, there are things for them too, but I don’t want to write just for those people, if that makes sense.

MG: *Definitely. I’ll turn the question, it’ll go a little bit off from what we were discussing with Severance Songs because this is something I wanted to bring up: I remember a while ago you blogged some dissatisfaction with the sonnet form. I couldn’t find exactly which post that was, so I can’t provide an exact reference point but I remember you were saying, “The sonnet is dead, I’m done with the sonnet, I’m throwing it away.”*

JC: Oh, dear!

MG: *And this was a couple years ago, I think, but it was clear even then you were struggling with the form. So I wonder if you recall, even though this was over a year ago.*

JC: I don't know about the sonnet specifically. I do know at this moment I'm still struggling with the question of whether poems are beautiful or strange or cunning objects to be appreciated aesthetically or for their literary value, or if I want them to do something else. I think I am increasingly wishing for them to do something else, which may be very counter-productive, right, because a poem at the end of the day is still just a poem. But I'm very interested right now in the possibility of kinds of writing that want to make contact with something beyond the poem. As you know, we're both currently embarked on this anthology we're calling the *Arcadia Project*, which I'm helping to edit with G.C. Waldrep. It's an anthology of postmodern pastoral poems, of which I will say *Severance Songs* could be included if it weren't in such terrible taste to put your own work in your own anthology.

But we can talk about the pastoral a little bit. The poems in *Arcadia* are poems that are concerned, at least in part, with certain realities about the situation of our environment and ecological devastation, realms that are certainly beyond mere aesthetic concern. At the same time, one is writing poems using aesthetic means—literary means—to try to indicate or point at or get to or reflect on that reality. I guess this goes back to why I'm not content to write sort of well-made sonnets.

MG: *Or the need to do something with the sonnet that you feel hasn't been done or has been neglected.*

JC: Yeah. I mean, I don't know. I would hesitate to say I've done anything *new* with the sonnet, exactly. What I've tried to do is take the sonnet and bashed it up in such a way that it's marked by the fact that it's being produced. These are "untimely" sonnets.

MG: *So you took the "Gallagher" approach...*

JC: The Gallagher approach. Does anybody remember him? He's now some kind of right-wing loony, did you know that?

MG: *No, I didn't!*

JC: But yeah, the idea of the sonnet being untimely because you said earlier the sonnet is dead. But so are zombies. That doesn't stop them from walking around in our imaginations.

MG: *So these are "zombie sonnets."*

JC: If you like. That's not bad, I should have called the book that, it would have sold much better. Maybe that's my next project...

But the form, I think, is a gesture toward timelessness. We think of the sonnet as a gambit for immortality. I mean, how many Shakespeare sonnets end with the promise: "In black ink my love still shines bright," the beloved is immortalized with the sonnet, and not incidentally, the poet himself—in Shakespeare's case it worked. But if you're writing a sonnet now, in the 21st century, if I were to write perfectly measured rhyming sonnets—and I'm not suggesting that

would be easy at all—that were formally unmarked, they would kind of be odd freakish little things. Whereas the sonnets I’m writing in this book bear the mark, are scuffed, by the time that they come from, by the experience I have as a 21st century American. So that’s what I was really trying to do is to find a way on the level of form to register that these sonnets are on the one hand very much participants in this tradition, still very much bids for immortality; while at the same time they are scuffed and bruised by the many, many ethical and aesthetic—but really I think ethical problems—with that stance toward writing or that stance toward poetry today.

MG: *Well, those questions were sort of the meatier ones.*

JC: I wouldn’t mind lightening up.

MG: *Well, let’s see. You are a teacher!*

JC: So I am!

MG: *Do you think your time teaching has changed how or what you write, or what you expect from yourself while you’re doing the editing process maybe, maybe even going through student work?*

JC: Well, it kind of goes to the philosophy I’ve come to develop as far as the relationship between my teaching and my writing. I really try to not set myself up as the “master” in the classroom who has mastered some craft or some body of information that I am now going to fill the waiting vessels of you, my students with.

MG: *I took a workshop with you so that sounds—I can vouch for that.*

JC: Okay, don’t say that too quickly now! No, I’ve come to believe my ethics as a teacher—I try, within reason, within certain boundaries, to bring my own struggles into the classroom with me. If there’s a particular problem I’m preoccupied with I will bring that to the students and I will enter into the conversation we have. And the questions I have about the place of literature in a media-saturated society, or the question of the fate of readers and the text, what it means to write from the self or toward a place or toward an object; I think these are all questions that are urgent for anybody who wants to write, for my students as well as for myself. So that’s one part of the answer. As far as editing goes...

MG: *It doesn’t have to be editing specifically, if that’s not how you usually think of your process, in terms of that being—I mean it’s an essential phase, obviously—maybe that’s something that doesn’t change throughout time. Everybody kind of has their own style of editing, time, place that they do it, but maybe that’s not where the inspiration is.*

JC: Right, right. I think one thing that is very true about my style of editing, that I try to pass onto students, is the idea that, and this goes back to something I said earlier, is that anything you’ve written in the first flush of inspiration has to be allowed to cool and become, against to use that word *material*.

MG: *Removed from your own self, emotions.*

JC: Yes, the ego gets disconnected or goes for a walk, or what have you. And you look at the notebook and say, "Well, what have I got here?" Many of the sonnets originally were written as that kind of one pressurized block, right? Fourteen lines, little blots on the page, and it wasn't until much, much later that I came back to them and began to look for fault lines and fissures, ways to create more torque or more space or breathing room, depending on the poem and where I was positioning it in relation to the others. The trouble of course with teaching is you're working by the semester, so students have to be asked to "cool" their work pretty quickly, and not be too invested in the product. I really want students to come away from my classes feeling excited about their own process, and everyone's process, as you said, is quite different. The point is not necessarily to produce the masterpiece... but that would be nice.

MG: *Always would be nice. Something that seems to matter to some, others it doesn't seem to matter at all. When I do any writing I do, I never really concern myself with the medium with which I choose to do it. Laptops are nice because I like to cut things up immediately. But do you prefer paper, typing, do you experiment with that or is it sort of lax, "whatever's in front of me?"*

JC: I very rarely do first drafts on a computer. It does happen, I guess it does happen more frequently than it used to. But for poems I do find myself reaching for a notebook and a pen. And that's partly because I am still, I guess, enough of a romantic or my life is just too frenetic that instead of setting aside time at a desk on a regular basis, poems occur to me, when they do occur, while I'm out and about on the regular business of my life. So I reach for my notebook and my pen and write something down. And then it tends to sit there for a period of time.

MG: *And this is how you wrote Severance Songs?*

JC: Absolutely. I'd write them in a notebook, I basically had this one notebook in which most of the *Severance Songs* were written. There were some others after that but there is somewhere in a box at home a notebook that most of these poems are in, interspersed with notes from classes I was taking as a grad student, thoughts about my dissertation, all that kind of stuff. So they would sit in the notebook, then after a period of days, sometimes weeks--nowadays it can take months--I will "find" them again, almost as if I have to forget them. And when I find them again I'll put them on the computer, usually make some alterations. That's usually *it*. That's sort of the one revision process, from notebook to computer. With *Severance Songs*, because I knew after I had written the first twenty or so I knew I wanted to make a book out of them, there was a period where an extra stage had to happen: after they had been assembled in manuscript then some time passed, then I came back to them and took my hammer and my chisel to them and began to find those stress points I talked about. I feel that was the final moment in which they did become fully a book, as opposed to a collection of poems I happened to share with similar form. So oddly, by making them dissimilar to each other they began to feel more of a whole to me than when they looked the same on the page together. There was an arbitrariness to that, that for whatever reason I don't feel anymore.

MG: *Do you feel contented now with the sonnet?*

JC: Contented now with the sonnet? [Laughs.] Less *angry* now with the sonnet? I will always love sonnets, I will always be drawn to...

MG: *Maybe the personal quality of them? That came through a lot. You want to connect it—to go back to the Ashbery one—you want to connect it to that tradition, but you also seem very concerned with making it you, representative of what you feel at this time, in this place.*

JC: The thing about a sonnet is that it's a very artificial form—of course all poetry forms are artificial—it's got this kind of fustian old-fashioned quality to it. But the nice thing about that is that it does create a little bit of distance, and there is a kind of constructivist quality to writing a sonnet; it's not that different from writing a lipogram or doing something Oulipo-related, and in that sense we are again back with *Fourier Series* and that kind of approach to writing. The sonnet is this kind of mechanical monkey and it does its tricks very well, and because you're preoccupied with making the monkey do its tricks things might slip in there that, in a more guarded moment you wouldn't allow to slip. So I do think that there is a kind of permission for the more personal to slip in there.

MG: *It's done some of the work for you.*

JC: Yeah! Or you're so distracted by trying to figure out how to make it fit that you end up fitting in more than you intended. They're not nearly as transparently personal as Robert Lowell's sonnets are. I'm one of those odd people who prefers the early Lowell to the late Lowell; I really love the baroque musical qualities of a poem like "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket." Whereas when Lowell is being more deliberately plain-spoken there's less of that music that I'm attracted to, that sometimes difficult music that I like in poems. But the sonnet's not going to go away. I can certainly see myself returning to that form at some point in the future, maybe even trying to be a little bit more traditional about it.

MG: *Going in the opposite direction?*

JC: Rhyme, octets, sestets, the whole thing. There are certainly poets out there who manage to write more or less traditional sonnets—Marilyn Hacker is one of them—and for this project I felt like I couldn't do that without in some way violating the mental and emotional and political and *spiritual* environment that the poems were being generated out of. We haven't really talked as much about the pressure that a love poem puts on you, because you are writing a poem—talk about readership! There was this very particular someone that I was writing these poems *to*, and with the more or less open intention of getting her to *accept* me. I felt that to do that, I had to not simply praise and flatter—though there is some of that—but to represent myself, as in the poem I never got around to reading today, "ass that I am"! The sonnet—to go back to the notion of the sonnet as a form of showing off, of young men homosocially showing off for each other—what the sonnet is not, I think, designed to do, is to show vulnerability. But I did feel like I needed to do that for this book. And that is sometimes very literally shown in the form that is broken, and other times it's a matter of content.

MG: *There's that one Petrarchan sonnet in the Canzoniere where he's a ship, battered at sea....*

JC: Yeah, that's a wonderful one. That's true, of course as soon as I said that I began to think of contradictions, and the ship that's "far from port"—I'm not going to be able to quote it—I think Wyatt or Surrey or both of them did versions of that. And Shakespeare was not afraid to depict himself in a very unhappy state—that word *state* comes up a lot in his sonnets. But there is this countervailing pressure of dazzlement and mastery that's very present in sonnets, and I doubt that *Severance Songs* is entirely free of that impulse. And there's this phrase, it's becoming a cliché among my writing students because I repeat it to everyone, that writing happens at the meeting point of mastery and mystery. To mature as a writer, you have to move away from the desire to be the invulnerable master and be more and more comfortable with being in that space of not knowing.

MG: *So if there's an idiosyncratic moment that isn't maybe formally accepted or perfect but represents you in a stronger way, then you think that maybe should be inserted instead of the stronger word you could say.*

JC: Yes, sometimes the weakness is the thing. And this goes back to what I said earlier about the quixotic desire for poems to be more than poems. Sometimes the best *poetry* isn't the best *poem*. Sometimes the best poetry, with the completest arc or the deepest connection, has to risk having some flaws in it.

MG: *I see sometimes poems that seem to be workshopped or revised—and I've done this with what I've written, and if I don't save a draft, and revise the heck out of it—it looks a little stronger, but it feels dead.*

JC: Painters call it "losing the picture." There's that moment that comes where you say, "Oh, just one more little brushstroke *here*"—and it's gone, something is gone. I also think about how in people, the flaws in people can be what's most compelling about them. The way somebody, I don't know, picks her teeth or something, it maddens you but ceaselessly draws you toward them as well.

MG: *There's a Bob Dylan line that's not too often quoted, one of my favorites: "I can't help it if you might think I am odd, if I say I'm not loving you for what you are, but for what you're not." It's from "I'll Keep It With Mine." That line has always been an inspiration to me; I've always liked that idea of letting something go, for its imperfections. People will disagree with that, you'll show them a work and they'll say, "Well, you could change this word or this line," and it's hard to argue against it on an objective level. You might look at it and say, by itself that line would be better, but it would kill me.*

JC: I've sometimes taught Nathaniel Hawthorne's great story "The Birth-Mark," and you might recall in that story there's a man, Aylmer, who's married to a very beautiful woman, Georgiana, and she has one flaw, which is this hand-shaped red birthmark on her cheek. Which her other suitors found attractive, even sexy, but Aylmer can't stand. He can't stand the single flaw in her. And in his zeal to root it out he ends up killing her. So I think that's a really powerful and evocative story of how the flaw is at the root of something, and you tear it out at your peril.