

A CONVERSATION WITH JACQUES J. RANCOURT: In the Nape of the Rake
Lee Sharkey

Jacques J. Rancourt was a *BPJ* intern during the 2008 spring semester. I worked closely with him and fellow intern Matthew Luzitano two afternoons a week; we read manuscripts retrieved from the *BPJ*'s post office box and discussed the ones that piqued our interest, considering their musicality, technical skill, handling of form, consequence, and ability to surprise. The *BPJ* editors have since followed Jacques' poetic pursuits with not a little familial pride, from his graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison to his two years as a Stegner Fellow at Stanford. We were delighted to publish his poem "Field" in our Spring 2011 issue. In March, 2016, Hadara Bar-Nadav chose Jacques' manuscript *Novena* for the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Poetry Prize; Pleiades Press will publish it in February, 2017. Four poems from a new sequence, "Covenant," appear in this issue of the *BPJ*.

LS: Jacques, since *Novena* is among other things a coming-of-age story and I have the advantage of knowing something of your childhood, I'll begin by asking how a child growing up in rural Maine in a French-speaking family with little formal education comes to see himself as a poet and to devote himself to a life in poetry.

JJR: Thanks, Lee, for the question. Honestly, I did not read any poetry until I was a sophomore in college, when I took an intro to poetry class as an elective. Books were not a big part of my home growing up. My mother would read the occasional pulp mystery novel, and I had never seen my father read anything. My path to poetry was further complicated by the fact that my undiagnosed dyslexia kept me illiterate and in Special Ed until I was nearly eleven years old.

What saved me—I truly believe this—was my grandmother, who loved books more than anyone I knew back then. One wall of her house was a recessed bookcase filled with black leather-bound tomes. During these years, I spent most of the summer with her, and she would read to me for hours from these books. Mostly, she read the classics—*Beowulf*, *The Odyssey*, *Great Expectations* stand out in my memory. She was a beautiful reader, and because of her, literature became for me, first and foremost, an auditory experience. My first distinct memory of being in love

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with the way language *sounded* was listening to the way it sounded when it came from her mouth.

I probably would have become literate soon without this experience, but I'm not convinced I would have become a poet, or have been instilled with a love of words, or have devoted myself to a life of writing and reading, once that skill stuck. She died shortly after I left for college, after years of declining into Alzheimer's. It struck me later that as she was giving me this gift of language, that gift was leaving her. Nearly a decade after her death, I am very proud to be able to dedicate *Novena* to her memory.

LS: *Novena* depicts a richly ambiguous relationship between you and your father. The first poem in the book introduces you to the reader as “the Jacques / of a Jacques / of a Jacques” who “broke open the American forest” and asserts that you and your father are “nearly the same.” Yet the lines that follow cast disquieting images suggestive of tensions in the relationship, and in the relationship father and son have to their surroundings:

So you already know we've placed ourselves in the nape
of the rake. Copper harp. Sickle-tongued.

You know

each year we've braided strands of wheat into rope
to tie about our necks.

Though the son looks up to the father, the father doesn't understand this child who “stomps crop circles in the high grass” and dresses in his sister's skirts, for whom the natural world is a vast field for the imagination where danger lurks not far below the surface. I'm struck by your use of natural imagery to suggest rather than pin down the relationship—e.g., father as “black horse,” son as “hummingbird”—and to give us a view from the inside of the boy seeking to know himself.

JJR: The lineage of men I come from cultivated a deep love for the natural world by living off the grid and practicing a spirituality built on manual work. The imagery in *Novena* attempts to capture their world. The queer community's utopia has always been an urban one. It was important for me to create a queer pastoral, one that is utopic in the sense that wilderness provides security and spiritual isolation—a place for desire to

run its wild course, a place that leaves one alone to be one's true self. However, with that isolation comes a sharp, untethered danger. The fields in this book serve as a landscape in that they are wide open spaces, exposed, "more of a stage," and yet in their high grass they hide everything. Similarly, forests offer protection and cover and yet are teeming with hunters. Given that this pastoral is queer, I suppose, one cannot have liberation in it without fear, or freedom without at least the suggestion of death. I grew up partly in the northern terminus of Appalachia; my world was a wild, private, open place, and I wanted to write that into my images. Images are complicated, symbols are complicated; I've admired discursive poets, but I have never been one. How else other than in images does one go about casting one's father as a character who loved you irrevocably and who also feared and hated the queer reflection of himself that you cast? The conjunction can never be "but" between these two perspectives. The father finds in his son a queer shadow; the son sees in his father the idealized model of masculinity, the *objet petit a*, of what and who he will never be.

LS: If the natural world is a pitiless man-space in *Novena*, might we understand religion in the book as the female principle that both structures and softens a world where "animals were always dying"? The two long anchor poems that lend *Novena* its title borrow their form from liturgical novenas; each is a set of nine prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary. Her name morphs deliciously, with each iteration, into another female aspect of the Divine: Ave Maria, Sweet Lady of the Juniper Berries, Beata Virgine, Salve Regina, Eve, Sancta Maria, Proud Mary (a drag queen dressed as Tina Turner), Our Lady of Crocuses, Our Lady of Tornadoes, Mater Dei, Madonna (performing with a boa constrictor). The poems reconfigure longing for God as a transgressive desire for homoerotic love. Yet they seem to me no less religious for that, their quest for transcendence through union with the Beloved no less intense (c.f. *The Song of Songs*).

JJR: Yes, absolutely. I wanted to rewrite the figure of the Virgin Mary through a new lens, so she would be not only a spiritual advocate but a queer one, too. And because my mother was the source of my sharply religious upbringing, some of her voice and protectiveness and power is there in this character, as well.

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According to Catholic dogma, Mary's body was assumed into the spirit realm of heaven, and so she serves as a conduit between the human world and the spirit world. She is believed to understand the weaknesses and failures of the body more than anyone else.

In these sequences, the apparitions of this queer and feminine Virgin Mother are juxtaposed with her foil, the Deerman, who represents a concentrated masculine brute desire that infiltrates the speaker. By the end of the second "Novena," the Deerman claims victory over the speaker, as the illusion of this drag queen Virgin is shattered when the speaker sees her alone in her dressing room. I wrote this sequence as a love poem of sorts, a prayerful petition, to my fifteen-year-old self, who was deeply religious with a newly articulable same-sex desire. This version of the Marian figure—at once entirely queer and yet devoid of sexuality herself—offers a watchful presence, a non-intervention, over the speaker while he falls deeper into a dangerous sexuality. The chopped-up narrative here, of discovering sex and of a sexual assault, surrounds a plea to retain some connection to a religious icon, to feel anchored by a spiritual protector, a figure who was promised never to abandon you.

I love that you mention *Song of Songs*. It's been an important text for me, particularly the translation by Ariel and Chana Bloch. Since a novena is a nine-day sequence of rosaries, as you pointed out, it was critical for me to establish some formal restraints: to keep these poems in nine sections of nine lines, to "hook" the last line of each poem to the first line of the next, and to borrow some of their language and rhythms from the rosary's incantational prayers themselves—namely the "Hail Mary," the "Hail, Holy Queen," and the "Angelus." It's interesting to consider the different reactions I've received from readers: some see the tone of the poems as irreverent, sacrilegious, and profane; others read a sincerity in their religiosity and petition. And I suppose I have meant them to be both at once, in the way these two aspects of my identity at fifteen were simultaneously very much at war and in communion with one another.

LS: I'd like to segue to your new poem sequence, "Covenant," where the setting has shifted radically, from rural Maine to San Francisco, from floating time to time bound tight by history.

Twenty years after the height of the AIDS pandemic, the city is gentrified and “moving on.” A gay heaven that became a hell on earth is fading from memory. The young speaker in the opening poem walks the streets at night and finds himself slipping into the past. He meets an old man from “the other side of catastrophe,” who bears witness to the living scars AIDS left behind, and the speaker, echoing Walt Whitman, tries to position himself—as observer, as imagined participant—*vis-à-vis* what he has not directly experienced:

Nothing has ended; what has happened before
will happen again—the fogbelt will roll in with the chill
of the dead, the moon will be cut by waves,
and I will watch from shore as the boys from seminary
swim naked in the sea. Or else, I will be one of them,
at seventeen, buoyed by waves, hard in seawater,
those white Victorians dotting the hills.

The difference in purpose and language between this sequence and *Novena* is immediately evident. The speaker has assumed a responsibility the younger speaker in *Novena* could not have: to speak on behalf not just of himself but of his community. He will shoulder the weight of the dead so as to carry them back into the light.

JJR: There’s a moment in Sarah Schulman’s book *The Gentrification of the Mind* where she questions whether a young queen she sees walking down the street ever wonders why he doesn’t pass sixty-year-old versions of himself. “Do they know their own history?” she asks. When I first moved to the San Francisco area in 2012, I was struck by the lack of memorialization or institutionalized memory that this historic holdout city has of the crisis years. And struck, too, by the lack of awareness young queers have of their own freedom. We’re living in the age of PrEP and marriage equality, and with it comes a prevailing silence sprung from the false idea that this scourge has been eradicated—an effort to whitewash and commercialize the queer movement. I wanted to write into the mouth of this silence. More than just remembering the lost lives, I wanted this sequence to honor the resistance, the fighting spirit, that has also been lost. What does it mean to be the generation to live in the aftermath of the AIDS pandemic? What does it mean to grow up in its shadow? What does it mean that, even now, it is in no way over? By planting this sequence in

modern-day San Francisco, I seek to look back on the epidemic as a holdout against forgetting, an attempt to be haunted through the places that are left.

LS: This “attempt to be haunted,” this historicization of memory, is the hallmark of what I think of as a moral aesthetic. The covenant of your title seems to be a pact not between Jehovah and his followers but between the speaker and those who came before him, “cast offs / kissed by more than salt.” Like *Novena*, “Covenant” is richly informed by biblical imagery and rhetoric, but the speaker has lost the faith that sustained him in the earlier work: “There was a time / I believed in God: So convinced was I / that the Earth was his own beating heart.” Yet he hasn’t lost the idea of God, or the need to fault him for his cruelty: “that pleasure could poison; / that we could be punished even further.” And for his impotence. In “Abraham’s Pleading,” a contemporary recasting of the patriarch’s plea for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, God lacks even the power to “spare the ghosts.”

JJR: The AIDS fight was originally a moral one, and its activists had to first combat the perception of God’s retributive justice. What was essentially a plague of biblical proportions went unchecked for many years because of two accepted positions: 1) that HIV/AIDS was a moral penalty, and 2) that the righteous were safe from it. It seems impossible to revisit the mire of the eighties and nineties without looking through a religious lens. Yes, the speaker here has lost his faith; if he still hangs on to a scrap, it’s a polemical one. I wanted to use the language of the Old Testament, in particular, since it was the language used against the victims of the epidemic. If political poetry shares a thread with prayer, it is because they share a similar goal: to plead for the audience to pay attention. In my poem “Lot’s Wife,” the speaker, looking back on the city that has been forever altered through death and gentrification, implores the new gay generation, “most of all,” to look back on their own history. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*, “My approach to hope . . . can best be described as a backwards glance that enacts a future vision.” In the 21st century, we live in a denial of the epidemic reminiscent of the Israelites’ lapse at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Before I came out and began to devote my life to poetry, I

had considered joining the priesthood, which is less of a jump than one might think. Like my speaker, my faith has been lost, or more accurately freely traded in, but my urge to spar with God has never been stronger. I find myself writing devotional poetry as a way to manifest my own dispute with devotion.

LS: I'd like to ask you to address the question of witness that is central to the sequence: how one bears witness to a history that has been largely erased. All the while the poems are constructing a linguistic setting in which the speaker and the gay community of the AIDS generation meet, they also acknowledge the impossibility of collapsing time into a simultaneous present. The speaker in "The Wake" searches the registry of the AIDS dead for his name and does not find it: "When I checked the registry I was relieved. / That no one shared exactly my name." This short, declarative sentence, when broken in two, suggests the "relief" may apply to either the results of the search or the act of undertaking it. That no one shared his name may leave the speaker at once relieved and isolated.

The poem that confronts the ethical complexities of vicarious witness most directly is "Kirby," whose source is Therese Frare's achingly tender photographs of AIDS activist and victim David Kirby and his family in the last days of Kirby's life. The speaker's memory of Kirby ("How could I forget") is in fact the memory of a photograph; he projects himself into Kirby's hospital room, but the photographer is there as well, "wiping her lens // with a cloth." Next we learn he is seeing, or "nearly" seeing, "through a slit / in a curtain," a distanced vantage that allows him to perceive, or imagine, Kirby's spirit enlarging at the approach of physical death. No one who actually lived through this, the speaker owns, could experience the scene this way, or would, underscoring the moral peril of mediated witness.

JJR: I'm glad you asked about witness, as it's been one of my primary concerns in writing this sequence. In "The Wake," my speaker admits that "six hundred thirty-six. / Thousand of us have died, and I did not. / Know a single one." There was a time I stopped working on this sequence because I felt that I had no right to its subject. How does one go about evoking a tragedy that he didn't experience? Why go digging up the dead? Writing

“Kirby” was my way of writing these questions into the sequence. At the end of this poem, in this imagined meeting place, the speaker admits his own trespassing, his own safe distance gained through temporality. He is able to read a romanticized holiness into David Kirby’s death only because he is looking backwards over a great gap of time. Writing about Frare’s photographs was also important for me because of the way my relationship to them has changed over the course of my life—and I assume for many of my generation. Though they were published to offer an unflinching look at the humanity of and suffering experienced by American families, for me in the nineties they served only as a warning of how I would die if I acted on my gay impulses. Now, as an adult, I see their iconic bravery.

Thinking on this question, it occurs to me that my own hesitancy to bring the lyric “I”/eye back to the epidemic was in itself an act of gentrification. To return to an earlier moment in our conversation, I wrote this sequence in part to better understand my history, and to look at this tragedy as a way of reminding myself that to be queer is always and will always mean to be on the perimeter of society. We live now in a time of complacency, “in the easy century,” and this in turn has made us vulnerable.

LS: Similar concerns about witness arise in “Voyeurs,” the final poem in the sequence. The poem’s speaker visits a bathhouse, a trip many readers will associate with Aeneas’ trip to Hades in search of his father, or with Vergil’s descent into the Inferno. The bathhouse is a damp maze of tunnels. Everything happens as if under water. Everyone, it seems, has lost the power to speak. Young men, who “came out *after*,” occupy the perimeter (to use your term) while, in the pool, old men touch each other tenderly or float belly up, “half in this world, half in another.” The speaker watches:

from behind the slats in the grill
as they lean their heads against
each other, as water falls in pearls
from their flabby arms

How wonderfully the corporeality of their flesh and their metaphoric transformation in the mind of the speaker come together in this image. In the moment’s compassionate vision,

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the survivor's guilt and fear of inauthenticity that dog the speaker throughout the sequence are resolved. The "voyeur" becomes the watcher, *one who sees*.

JJR: The act of watching is important for this sequence. For as long as I can remember, I have been struck by the briefly mentioned watchmen in *Song of Songs*: "Then the watchmen found me / as they went about the city. / They beat me, they bruised me, / they tore the shawl from my shoulders" (5:7). To me, this excerpt has always offered itself to a queer reading. In my poems, the position of the "watchman" gets turned: watching, or guarding, is not an act of brutal policing against the maligned lover, but a way of protecting and preserving the past. It becomes the speaker's responsibility to take up the mantle of watcher as he connects the past to his present and future.

Your reading of "Voyeur" as echoing Aeneas' journey is illuminating to me. The speaker here expects to find that the bathhouse is a vestige, a journey to the underworld. He's come to gawk at ghosts. But instead he finds survivors who are not only alive but content and thriving. They serve as a reminder that not all was lost, and that the opportunity for connection still exists. This is the last poem of the sequence; I don't think I could have written it without first writing the others (and the dozens of failed poems discarded along the way). A residual effect of the AIDS crisis was that when a whole queer generation was all but wiped out, there was no mentorship for the next generation, and this schism can be felt now more strongly than ever. In both "Covenant" and *Novena*, my speaker searches for a father. Perhaps only in language can such a meeting place exist. I hope I'm wrong in that.