Four Questions and Five Answers

A *Prism Review* interview w/Jared Stanley

Jared Stanley is the author of three books of poetry, *Book Made of Forest*, *The Weeds*, and most recently, *Ears*. You know him because he’s the judge of this year’s *Prism Review* poetry prize, and my relationship with Jared goes back even farther, some 15+ years ago. Once upon a time when we were two of the few poets from the western states attending the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Jared and I recognized that we had something in common beyond poetic sensibility: a shared landscape. Jared’s writing has always been environmentally concerned and informed (you can probably tell from the titles of his books…) in a way that I find pretty magical. In the poem “[One Reason to Gain Years]” in *Ears*, Jared describes how “I went to Nevada / almost at will, almost // an adept of years / a colt or a filly cantering // Hyundai-wise by a roadcut / the very picture of geologic scale. // I’m pretty sure I’m a sorcerer” (23-24). These lines speak to me so clearly, overlaying geologic time on human time, invoking problems of the “natural” landscape vs. the imposed roadcut and the imposed Hyundai, and the feeling of wonder that occurs when a poem draws all of these together… Happily, I don’t only have to just talk to myself about how much I love *Ears*; Jared agreed to answer some questions his book, and I invite you to read our Qs and As, below.

-Genevieve Kaplan

**One**

*GK: If the act of reading a poem, or a volume of poetry, is one that should change us, create a new magic between reader and writer and words and page and moment and pause,* Ears *does this admirably. (In “Abundance,” the speaker asks, “…who are you / To me, and I to you as you read / This? Did you become an interstice?” (44).) Throughout the book the poet/speaker negotiates similarly as he moves through nature, and as nature moves through him. In* Ears*, the poet is a listening and “a watching creature” (33) who notices “the world full / / of all my catching, all my wing” (26), one who wanders and wonders: “I’m not sure: should we be decorous // and let the wind beat” (21). What do you think is the ideal relationship—both in the world, and on the page—between observing and listening or acting and experiencing? Between observing space and intervening or creating new spaces?*

JS: Your question pierces to the heart of my desire to write poetry, and so I don’t quite know how to answer it in prose. I don’t think there’s an ideal relationship, between observing and listening, or acting and experiencing, to be honest—for me, it is the mistakes in observation that give poetry like mine, outward facing, somewhat disinterested in the human world, whatever zest or spice it has.

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But that doesn’t mean I’m not seriously interested in the kind of axes you propose. In particular, the big question for me is whether a poem is an action, which is why some of my work has veered away from lyric poetry in books to forms like oaths and curses, which are these traditional forms of speech-in-action which are said to have real efficacy in the world. I feel like my poems are about actions, while some of my oaths and curse objects are actually actions. Layli Long Soldier’spoem “38” describes, in punishing and amazing ways, how an action can become a poem, or how an action goes beyond language to become a poem.

**Two**

Ears *is a very location-driven volume. The poems here are populated by recognizable, mappable places—BART stations in California, mountain ranges in Nevada—but also by “G Street,” (33), “Beige scrubland with Funyon wrappers” (35), and “the common jackrabbit” (40). How locatable did you want the poems in this book to be? You’re a western poet, yes, but how decisively did you want to make this volume about The West /how important is The West to the experiences and actions and musings we are invited to experience in* Ears*?*

Yeah, I like to know where I am in a poem. When Mandelstam describes the color of the Neva, for instance, I get tingles, and it doesn’t matter that I’ve never been to ‘transparent Petropolis.’ The poetry I like and tend to read is pretty urban in lots of ways, but I live in a kind of small city on the edge of a huge desert, where the ‘rural’ is much more present, both as a marker of ideology, but also because the city, like many western cities, is right up on its outskirts. There’s lights and streets and then there’s dirt. It’s “where the pavement turns to sand” as Neil Young said.

*Nevada, the Great Basin Desert: this is the most blown-up patch of dirt in the US. To paraphrase Robert Adams, this place is a landscape of contempt.*

As for the importance of being a western poet, I’m of two minds about that—on the one hand, Western Poet implies that I’m participating in the tropes of the West—celebrating the shittiest mythological BS about the West and horses and dogeys and campfires and all that crap, or else a kind of romanticized, hard-bitten thing. I’m not interested in any of that, though that mythology and its very real effects are part of the fabric of life here. On the other hand, it’s very important for me to make work that thinks through all of the problems of the West and the ideas about it—for instance, Nevada, the Great Basin Desert: this is the most blown-up patch of dirt in the US. To paraphrase Robert Adams, this place is a landscape of contempt. Poked, Mined, Burned, exploited, neglected ignored, hated. And people are into that contempt! And yet I love it here—that may be perverse, or another kind of romanticism, maybe. But it’s my home, and does, I think, lay bare some hard truths about the US that are not right up in your face in a city, which of course has a whole other set of things it does.

And then, finally, there’s the question of my poetic lineage, which comes through the alternative traditions of the Bay Area, and though that is such a deeply various tradition, it is probably held together most by varying degrees of radical politics. Maybe I am a Bay Area poet who lives in the desert. People in Reno are pissed about California at the best of times, but right now especially, so I don’t say that too loud.

**Three**

*I’m struck by the way two poems that apparently bring in outside texts–-“Reverberation,” with its informative all caps “overlay” (2-3) and “Pauses,” with its newsy and conversational quoted lines (83)–-work to sort of frame the rest of the poems. For me, this framing allows the physical locations of the book to expand to encompass mental ones as well, a sort of opening up of the physical landscape to include the landscape of the mind. Can you talk more about how the acts of listening and reading and writing (specifically in* Ears*, or as part of your practice in general)?*

I’m really going for a porous art. I feel awash in language in the same way that, living in the Great Basin, one often finds oneself somehow covered in dust. I find the interplay between attention and distraction fascinating, partly because my generation was the first to really fully embrace the Walkman. I mean, think of how important the Walkman (and its descendants) have been to the way we walk through the world. The Walkman taught me that art (in the case of the Walkman, music) could supersaturate experience. I wondered if poetry could be like that. It can’t of course, and this is one of the many disadvantages it has, but, I like the idea that one could let a poem wash over a reader, that the poem could come to mind, say, when walking, having sex, that kind of thing.

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I think I’m also really interested in thinking of the poet as a kind of humble figure—I like an ‘acted upon’ or a ‘susceptible’ idea of a writer. I don’t think poetry is creative. I don’t like the idea of the fiction writer as ‘creating a world.’ I was raised in a household awash in a narrative of personal responsibility, and it took me a very long time to think about myself and my life as ‘ecological’ you know, dependent upon others, as something that extended out beyond my own will. This is why *EARS* uses the word ‘dependence’ so much. Robert Duncan speaks of being a ‘derivative’ poet and I have always carried that with me as one of the most thoroughgoing rejections of ‘creativity’ or ‘originality’ which seem anyway like really consumerist notions—fighting and rejecting the past as a kind of planned obsolescence.

**Four**

*One of the recurring themes in* Ears *is actually poetry itself; there is a continual attention to and questioning of how a poem might behave, or what a poem might solve, yet the poems here never feel overly self-reflexive. Instead they just feel whole. What advice to you have for those seeking to write with, as you have done here, a “reasonable, / appliance-like / hum at the center / of the poem” (71)?*

Yeah! Poetry is details. I believe, very strongly, that the very beginning of poetic apprenticeship means writing down weird things you think, weird things you say but don’t know what you mean when you say them, and finding musical ways of describing things around you. For instance, today I was with my daughter in a parking lot. I saw “pigeons eating a solid puddle of ice cream” so I wrote that in my notebook. I had to fiddle with ‘solid’ and ‘puddle’ but the vowels caroming off the repeated ‘l’ and ‘d’ consonants, which shift position in each subsequent word, sounded very melodious to my ear. I told my daughter and she laughed. She said “Solid puddle?” And so, that seemed like it worked out. It’s in the details, and their accrual, that poetry happens. My students love to say that generality makes their poems ‘relatable’—which makes me a little crazy, because *I* don’t relate to them, you know, and they have such a sense of confidence, which seems to me slightly frightening, about what somebody else will relate to. I try hard to encourage them to write with their senses, their fingertips, and their ears, to learn themselves first, and then worry about other people. Not to say that I want everyone to be a narcissist: John Waters has some very important advice about narcissism: “Don’t make movies about your grandma. Unless your grandma rides a Harley.” I just think you need to know where you’re starting from ~ what you decided you are obsessed by. Start there first.

I think I’m going to stop referring to poetry in my poetry, but when you love the idea of a ‘possible poetry’ it’s hard not to delight in thinking it out. I thought the pigeons, in the anecdote above, were acting like poets, feeding off the dropped ice cream of a stranger.

**Five**

A funny thing, too, about wholeness. We came up in a time that was interested in ‘the rejection of closure’, an idea that appeals to me very much, but it doesn’t appeal to me *that* much—I think endings are pleasurable because they are ruses, and ruses are always more fun than spilling the beans on your theories of poetry.