

An Interview with Reginald Shepherd

“He wants to own his music,” ends Reginald Shepherd’s “You Also, Nightingale,” his most recent poem to be published in a *Best American Poetry* (2002) edition. As always, Shepherd reminds us of why the lyricist sings: not only to create beauty, but also as an act of redemption—as a way to reclaim and to restore honor and worth to our everyday experiences. Reading Shepherd’s work is a visceral and transforming act, not how-to advice. He mixes rhythm, phrasing, and sounds in such a way that in his poem “Skin Trade,” for instance, the reader can literally hear the voice fall as it’s thrown into “cold viscous water,” an abyss. Shepherd’s poetry takes up many themes: race (and racism), sexuality, alienation, and narcissism; uses many images: water, color, light, papier-mache, hardback chairs. As readers, we are reminded that the self is not always present and whole; it is often fragmented and stretched. However, Shepherd offers us hope that all is not lost, that what is missing--or incomprehensible, but present--may not be that important after all, that we both effect and are affected by our environments.

Shepherd’s first book, *Some Are Drowning*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1994 as winner of the 1993 Associated Writing Programs’ Award in Poetry. The University of Pittsburgh Press has subsequently published each volume of his poems. *Angel*, *Interrupted* followed in 1996, and was a finalist for a 1997 Lambda Literary Award. *Wrong* was published in 1999, and his fourth book, *Otherhood*, was published in April 2003. Shepherd has received a 1993 Discovery/The Nation award, the 1994 George Kent Prize from *Poetry* magazine, and grants from the NEA, the Illinois Arts Council, and the Constance Saltonstall Foundation. He has taught at Cornell and Northern Illinois Universities. Currently, he’s living with his partner, and writing and teaching part-time, in Pensacola, Florida.

I'd like to start by asking you how a young African American man from the tenements of New York became interested in poetry?

I was always a smart and bookish child, and also very isolated and depressed by both my immediate family circumstances and by my social and economic situation. I read constantly, largely as an escape from my circumstances, and also wrote constantly, mostly abortive science fiction and fantasy epics. I never had much of a grasp of plot: it was the alternative worlds that interested me. I first seriously encountered poetry in the ninth grade, when we read T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in an American Fiction class as a break from all those long novels. The poem made an immense emotional impact on me, though I didn't understand much of it: it had taken my misery and given it form and grace. My mother died soon after I first read T.S. Eliot. I was torn away from my home and everything I knew to live with an aunt in Macon, Georgia (where my mother grew up) among relatives who thought that reading was a bad habit and despised everything I cared about. Poetry became my lifeline then, one of the few things (besides the hope of escape) keeping me sane. At that point it changed from being an interest to being a necessity. I immediately decided that I wanted to write poetry, to figure out where the poem's power came from and to learn how to have the effect on other people that poem had on me.

Which poets influenced you?

Eliot, obviously, was my first influence; after reading "Prufrock" I read and reread his complete works. But it was very difficult to write "like" Eliot without sounding like a parody of him. I then encountered Wallace Stevens, whose work also spoke to me in the way that it embodied ideas in concrete images and landscapes, and in the way that the poems kept their obvious miseries at a chilly distance that took away some of suffering's power to inflict pain. Other

influences over the years have been W.H. Auden, particularly his early English poems, before he came to America; Hart Crane, whose poems embodied such raptures of lush language and imagery, often turned to the celebration of male homosexual desire; Louise Glück, whose poems contained so much passion in their restraint, and who created a mythic world where pain was raised to a higher, nobler level; Jorie Graham, whose work, like Stevens's, made ideas concrete, shapely, and sensuous; and William Carlos Williams, who showed that anything, however seemingly insignificant, could be made into a poem, and whose poems paid such close attention to the everyday world that they transfigured that world while leaving it all the more itself. Other important influences have been John Keats, with his lyric ecstasies and fears, and John Donne, whose poetry, in its joining of disparate or even apparently opposite things, enacted the unified sensibility Eliot writes of in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," a sensibility in which feelings in the sense of physical sensations and feelings in the sense of emotions are indissoluble, and both are indissoluble from thoughts and ideas as immediate experiences.

How did you find (or define) the path you took from the tenements of New York to the Iowa's Writer's Workshop?

My goal, and my mother's goal for me, was to escape the Bronx tenements and make something of myself. My highly peripatetic life since I first got a scholarship to private school in the third grade has all been part of that escape attempt, with some detours. For me, perversely enough, poetry became the chosen path of escape: it offered a vision of a world completely other to that in which I grew up. I was lucky enough to have a mother who really cared about my education and to have received scholarships from an early age, and I continued to receive such scholarships and fellowships throughout my educational career. I would never have been able to get the education that I did or accomplish the things I've accomplished without such ladders out of poverty and the ghetto.

How do your poetry ideas come to you?

In many varied ways: from things I've read (not just poetry, sometimes not books at all—graffiti, signs of various kinds, street names, often phrases misread or misheard), from things I hear people say, from music in general and song lyrics in particular (as I indicated above, I listen to music constantly), from things I see and do, especially things that are out of my ordinary routine, from the landscapes around me (all of my books, I think, are permeated with varieties of place), from seeing and desiring attractive men, and from things that just come to me, lines, phrases, images.

Do you keep a journal? If so, what do you keep in it?

I kept a journal all through high school and college (for a long time I wrote the first drafts of all my poems in it), but I got tired of writing about and to myself and my day to day tribulations, which tended to preserve and reify feelings and experiences I would prefer to forget. Nowadays I often take notes on things that I read, and note down thoughts I think are interesting and can be developed or used. I usually carry a small notebook or piece of paper around with me, and I always note down any line, phrase, or image that comes to me, sometimes even just a word that strikes me. I find that, like writing down one's dreams, the more that one listens and watches for things, the more things come to one. Many of my poems start out as accumulations of these various lines and phrases; the poem is my way of figuring out how they go together.

There is a lot of pathos in your work. Where does it come from?

I've suffered a lot in my life (a simple statement of fact), including poverty, the death of my mother, and many other things, and though I don't consider poetry to be primarily a mode of self-

expression or (heaven forbid) psychological therapy, my personal experience is a major part of the material I have to work with, simply because I'm me and not someone else. That material is what one might call (in Aristotelian terms) a necessary and not sufficient condition of my work, one of its engines. I've always been more drawn to sadness and unhappiness in literature and music than to happiness. In part this is personal—it feels more real to me—but in part I think that art is often made out of the stumbling blocks in our lives, the problems and difficulties. As Anne Sexton (not one of my favorite poets in general) said once, pain leaves a deeper impression. Happiness is harder to write about interestingly and convincingly, though in some more recent poems I've tried.

There are also symbols of homosexuality, alienation, race, and identity throughout your collections. When you're writing, are you aware of using those symbols?

Oh yes, very aware. Homosexuality (not just symbols of gayness but the actual presence of gay desire, gay sex, and the gay milieu—bars and nightclubs and street cruising), alienation, and identity (including racial identity and my struggles with it) are some of the central material of my work. Sexuality, alienation, and race are all deeply intertwined for me and I think for all of us, and ultimately they all come to questions of identity. In my first two parts I was particularly interested in deploying race not just through direct address of the topic but through color symbolism (black and white recur in my work).

How important do you think consciousness is to good writing?

T.S. Eliot said that the poet should be as intelligent as possible, and I have always taken that to heart, especially because I feel that the commonly accepted split between “emotion” and “thought” is artificial and untrue to my experience, in which I feel my thoughts and think my

emotions. The best poetry heals over that rift, at least momentarily embodying the possibility of a whole self and a whole world. Poetry is among other things a mode of exploration, of the world, of language, and of the self and its relationship to others (including world and word).

Consciousness (including self-consciousness) is crucial to that exploration, especially to the essential task of giving shape and form to one's material, of finding the shape within it. Without that shaping impulse, there is no poetry.

I believe your first published collection, *Some are Drowning*, to be an exceptional, emotionally complex. In it you draw on images from mythology, and use water and narcissism as symbols. How did you come to claim those images and symbols?

Mythology, particularly Greek mythology, has been a passion of mine all my life. The world of the Greek gods, figures of pure force, power, and grace, beyond categories of good and evil, arbitrary and often cruel, has always made more sense to me than the moral and ethical certainties and prescriptions of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The power of beauty, and beauty as a kind of power, has been central to my emotional experience of the world. More specifically, I have long been fascinated by the figure of Narcissus. He sums up a central paradox of human existence: he is in love with himself, or rather a representation of himself, but doesn't know that what he loves is his own image, which he can never attain (as he bends over to kiss his reflection, his lips touching the water dissipate the picture of his face the water had given back to him). In one sense he knows himself intimately; in another, he doesn't know himself at all. He is victimized by his own beauty, which has enthralled and victimized so many others.

Water is often a medium of reflection, in both senses, in my poems, as is glass, another recurring image. Water also represents an otherness, to the firm and fixed certainties of land, and to the set boundaries of ordinary life, life on land, as it were, since water's fluidity and perpetual motion

challenge and often overcome boundaries and borders—water is both bounded and boundless, shaped and shapeless. Which is, again, perhaps an image of identity.

You've said that "You Also, Nightingale" is about your relationship to the Western literary tradition, an attempt to claim what is not meant for you. Why is it necessary to claim the Western literary tradition?

For me, it's necessary to claim the Western literary tradition because it is my tradition, the only one I have—I certainly can't claim any other as mine. I don't know what native born American writer could actually claim another tradition as his or her own. It's possible to react against it, to engage in gestures of rejection such as those engaged in by the Black Arts movement—and they are only gestures, dependent on the thing that they refuse, and yes, part of it as well. Refusal certainly has a long history in Western literature and art. I have no desire to "subvert" or "overthrow" the canon or the Western literary tradition—they have formed me as a writer, made my being a writer possible. I simply (or rather, complexly) want to create a space for myself as a writer within it.

Few people, African American or otherwise, have the level of education you have. It could be argued that African Americans at predominantly white educational institutions develop a bicultural sensitivity. What effects have the cultures of the educational institutions you've attended, and the regions in which they're found, had on your poetry?

Well, first and foremost, the educational institutions I've attended (some of them, anyway) gave me an education, which isn't to be taken for granted from the experience of going to school. (I'm reminded this by my own students, many of whom clearly went through grade school and high school with nobody bothering to teach them.) My early experiences of attending private schools

in New York (which I did from the third to the ninth grade) gave me a very solid educational foundation not available to most people, one on which my poetic work has been built. I definitely felt some racial alienation in such predominantly white environments, but I was even more alienated from my predominantly black and Puerto Rican neighborhood, full of people with no ambitions, no hopes, and few interests except sex, crime, drugs, and harassing me because I didn't walk, talk, and act like them. I felt much more alienated from the culture of poverty than I did from at least the promises the schools I've attended held out. Those schools offered me something, even if the offer wasn't always sincere: there was still something there of which I could take advantage, which I could put to use for myself. The ghetto offered nothing, certainly nothing I wanted. In those environments, my primary sense of alienation was class and financial: all these kids, white, black, Asian, whatever, had much more money than I did, and all the opportunities money provided, of which my scholarships gave me just enough of a taste to know that I didn't have them and wasn't going to get them. Nor were the rich black kids any nicer to me than the rich white kids. So, if anything, my bicultural sensitivity is much more to differences of class and privilege, and to the assumptions about themselves and the world and what's possible for both that people of all races make on the basis of their class position, and particularly to the assumptions that people who have attended such institutions because they can afford to (the vast majority of students at elite schools) make about the world and themselves.

Your poems often show an identity in flux, resentful of the culture in which it finds itself, but surprisingly adaptable. What interests you about the fluidity of identity?

Here I'll say that the speaker in many of my poems is both enmeshed within and excluded from or marginalized by the contexts in which he finds himself and by which he is produced as a subject—he may be resentful of his culture, but he also owes his existence to it. This paradoxical situation is obviously the position of many black people, of many gay people, of many black gay

people, at least in America. The speaker has no secure, stable identity in which he can rest, though there are identities on offer (some of which he tries on in various poems, including “Skin Trade”) that all prove inadequate or insufficiently complex. What he has are questions, to which there are various, often contradictory, and always contingent and temporary answers. This situation is pressed upon members of marginalized and/or oppressed groups and may be felt more intensely by them, but it is true for everyone: everyone is several different people at once, in different contexts and social situations, at different times in his or her life, alone and with others.

In your poem “Skin Trade” I can easily hear the emotion in the narrator’s voice as well as see the images, which, of course, are the effects good poetry have. However, I was shocked to find a published poem that describes racism’s effect on the psyche so vividly. Could you speak a bit about the development and publication of that poem?

“Skin Trade” took a very long time to find its shape and its subject; while I like the poem, and it was to my great delight chosen for The Best American Poetry 1996 by Adrienne Rich, I also fear that it might be a bit heavy-handed and over-insistent on its subject matter and the position it takes with regard to that subject matter. I wrote the first version of the poem (at that time it was a prose poem) in high school as a more conventional desire/longing poem about an unattainable or no longer attainable beloved, one of all too many such poems I’ve written; unsatisfied with its lack of a real form, I put it in the drawer. I revised it while at Brown in response to an assignment to write a prose poem with a varying refrain winding through it, on the model of Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*. I chose to repeat the phrase “If there was love,” which is the title of a Liza Minnelli song produced by the Pet Shop Boys. (The poem is actually full of such allusions—to Leonard Cohen’s song “Suzanne,” to Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall,” to the writing on the wall which the prophet Daniel interpreted to the Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar to read “It has been weighed and counted, weighed and found wanting.”) Though the phrase remains in the poem, I

eventually abandoned the device of a refrain—it felt a bit ham-fisted, too superimposed. Still unsatisfied, I put the poem away, fiddled more with it later, and eventually decided to put it into lines so that I could get a better handle on its shape. I also decided or realized that the fears and desires of the poem (which include class issues) were racialized fears and desires—once I got what Jorie Graham calls the poem’s “secret subject,” I remember the final rewriting, in which the poem finally took shape, to have gone rather smoothly.

The Muse in “Skin Trade” is a kind of doppelganger or double: he’s what I want to have and what I want to be. He’s object of desire, the ideal, integral self I’ll never be, a literal inspiration for my poems (so many of which have been inspired or incited by male beauty, a beauty I’ve often felt could never be mine—I could never be it or possess it in the person and the body of another), and an embodiment of the white American ideal and all it implies about safety, comfort, self-assurance, and complacency. This is where the poem’s ambivalence about him comes in: here again is the question of the fluid and contradictory nature of identity and of desire, and of identity constructed through often contradictory or conflicted desires.

How would you define voice and what steps did you take to claim yours?

I’m very dubious of the notion of individual voice and of “claiming” one’s voice, because it implies that writing is simply self-expression, that one’s self is always there, whole and complete and waiting to be expressed, and that there is a transparent relationship between words and the things (including selves) to which they refer and of which they speak. I believe none of these things. If I “claimed my voice,” I did so through writing poetry constantly, reading it constantly, frequently directly imitating and even more frequently stealing from poets I admired, and working through what it meant to write something I could call a poem by the standards of the High Modernist poets who were and are my greatest influences. I was certainly interested in

inserting my own subject matter into such poems, into that language, but to write of myself and my experience was never difficult, was indeed all too easy—the question was, how to make such writing poetry. To the extent that “voice” enters into such a project, it is a matter of producing voice (or rather, voices), not of “finding” or “claiming” voice.

You seem to have developed a unique language in your poetry—as Chase Twichell described it (*Some Are Drowning*), “a weird amalgam of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon”. How much do your subjects define the language?

I’ve always been very interested in integrating the material of race and homosexuality into the poetic language of High Modernism which first inspired me to write and remains my model for what a poem should and could be, so I suppose inevitably that task required modifying that language, turning toward purposes its creators never envisioned. It also meant juxtaposing and blending that language with the languages it excluded, for example the demotic language of gay life and gay sex and of my version of black experience. Much of my work operates through the juxtaposition of disparate elements, imagistic, linguistic, historical, racial, and sexual (I’ve always felt pretty disparate from most things, including myself). Sometimes they collide and throw off sparks (the kindling for a contained conflagration), sometimes they find new ways to co-exist, or even to create wholes that weren’t there before their meeting. My language, particularly the way it draws on different registers of diction and discourse and different realms of experience, both reflects and enacts and embodies those juxtapositions. I don’t think of myself as inventing a language, but rather as listening to different languages and bringing them into dialogue with one another, making them listen to one another. The end result might be a new language, different from any of its progenitor languages, like a Creole arising from the meeting of two mutually unintelligible languages, but if so I want it to be one that takes advantage of and utilizes all the

aural, figurative, and tonal resources of the literary language and tradition which first impelled me to write poetry.

Are there any pitfalls in using language(s) in the way in which you do?

There are some people who find my poetry insufficiently “black,” expecting me to present a certain straightforward image of identity in my style and subject matter that I find reductive and simplistic. For example a reviewer of my newest collection, *Otherhood*, complained that the poems were not personal, though they weren’t meant to be “personal” in that narrow sense: indeed, in that book I was interested in getting away from or dissipating the self, my self in particular. There are also some who find my poetry “difficult” because of the density of its language and imagery, and because of the plethora of references and allusions, and they are put off by that difficulty. If one comes to my poems with an expectation that they will be narrative accounts of experience expressed in apparently transparent language, if one immediately demands a clear and unequivocal “meaning,” one will be disappointed and frustrated.

What are you trying to accomplish with the language?

First and most immediately, I want to create aesthetic objects that have an independent existence in the world, that live independently of me and my desires and limitations, and that will hopefully outlive me. I want each poem to be a unique and distinct entity, one that has some sense that it needed to exist, that it adds something to the world that wasn’t there before. Second, I hope that my poems, by their attention to words and their interrelations, to images, to the matter of the poem and the matter of the world, present a model of attention that can also apply to the world.

How do you discover and define your territory as a poet?

I don't think that I ever had to seek out my material as a poet—it found me, burdened me, even. In many ways much of the progress of my work has been about finding ways to evade or get out from under the weight of the material I've been given—racial, sexual, historical, socio-economic—or at least to find new ways to approach and define it.

Why is poetry important?

Poetry is important because it makes us stop and pay attention, think and consider. This is why in many ways I find “difficult” poetry more interesting: one has to slow down, one has to actively engage it, one has to involve oneself as a reader—one can't just take it in distractedly and say “Oh yeah, I know that.” It doesn't confirm the already known or reflect back to us familiar, accepted (and often distorted or dishonest) images of ourselves, of the world, as so much of the media does (including, unfortunately, a lot of mainstream poetry). At its best, poetry makes us question our assumptions about ourselves, our words, and our world (or our worlds—few of us live in only one). The importance of the individual word, the phrase, the line in poems, the attention paid to them by the writer and the reader, presents a model of a world in which people and things matter, in which things and people exist for their own sake and not as means to an end (as, in our society, they exist as means to the ends of power and money). In this sense poetry presents the possibility (however far out of reach) of utopia, of true freedom. Beauty, which though it has been much maligned lately is very important to me: beauty is the embodiment and enactment of that utopian possibility, what makes us feel it viscerally, turning idea into experience, however fleeting.