

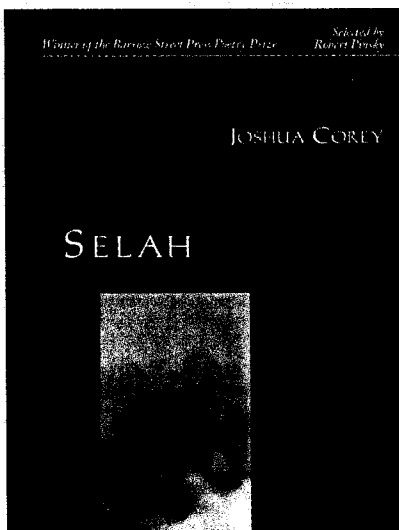
## Rhymes and reason

### The bard of Barrow Street

Anyone who thinks poetry is on the wane should have to lift the pile of books I receive every month. It's no secret in the publishing world that jacket blurbs can persuade an overbooked reviewer to take more time with a particular title, especially one from a first-time author. I admit I look at blurbs, even though their incestuous self-congratulation sometimes repels me. When Author X is blurbing Author Y who blurbs Author Z who in turn blurbs Author X, I often find myself washing my hands of the whole mess.

But in the case of *Selah*, the debut collection from Joshua Corey, the blurb did get me to open it up. *Selah* won the Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize, judged by former poet laureate Robert Pinsky (who was, incidentally, a teacher of mine in college). Pinsky's blurb calls Corey part of "a generation of exciting first-book poets," which sounds pretty good as far as it goes. Not only that, but *Barrow Street's* poetry editor, Melissa Hotchkiss, wrote a book that I liked and reviewed last year.

I'm glad that Corey has been noticed by people who led me to him, because once I opened the book, I wanted to read everything in it. Corey's is an almost manically intelligent voice, and *Selah* is full of high-wire acts. The first poem in the book, "Psalm," is what Corey calls a homophonic translation of a poem by the German-speaking Jewish Romanian poet Paul Celan. "*Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm, / niemand bespricht unseren Staub. /*



**THE POETRY DIARIES** Joshua Corey reflects on the odd nature of poetry publishing, competitions and reviewing in his blog.

*Niemand,*" is the opening of Celan's poem; it has been translated elsewhere as "No one kneads us again out of earth and clay, no one incants our dust. No one." Corey renders it "Neiman Marcus knits a leader out of earth and lime, / Neiman be-shops a western stab. / Neiman." This transfiguration of Celan's words is apparently nonsensical, but Corey's poem as a whole has a dreamlike subtext—and a peculiar integrity—that makes it difficult to forget. It's a daring way to begin the book.

Verbal daring is a specialty here. Corey's lines swoop and dart without ever losing their reference to the gravity of the real world: "Her hair was my bouquet of calf- / skin gloves. It glowed like butter / turning bad..." "You straddled past and put me in your pocket." "The lips of water / kiss me into a chamber, into a basement / where pipes have burst." In the masterful "Echolocation Suite by James

McNeill Whistler," the poet's pyrotechnics dazzle us almost to the point of blindness. But this isn't just sparkle; there's a deeply felt connection to emotion and the terrible cycles of life as well.

Corey is nothing if not self-conscious. In what is sure to become a trend, he lists the address of his blog (<http://joshcorey.blogspot.com/>) on *Selah's* acknowledgments page. In a few postings, he discusses the odd nature of poetic competitions like the one that got his book published, and expresses regret that he has had no direct contact with the big-name poet whose endorsement sets his book apart. Corey is right to question the mechanisms of poetry publishing and reviewing. But in his case, it so happens the blurb was right.

***Selah* is out now from Barrow Street Press (\$14). Look for the next installment of this column in TONY 441.**