

# ¶ Speaking of Marvels

interviews about chapbooks, novellas, and other shorter forms

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## JeFF Stumpo and Logen Cure

June 24, 2015

### Speaking of Marvels

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*Villains* (Finishing Line Press, 2015) by JeFF Stumpo

*Still* (Finishing Line Press, 2015)  
by Logen Cure

JS: Let's kick this off with a question to you. Any of the poems in your chapbook are strong. So how did "Still" get to be the title song, as it were?

LC: The poems in the chapbook are unified by a voice, a single speaker. The speaker is struggling, at odds with herself, and deeply concerned with particular things: relationships, desire, memory, place, the body. I think "Still" shows



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how all of those elements are in play. Also, the word “still” can mean so many things: motionless, hushed, lasting, nevertheless. I wanted to select a title poem from the collection, and out of everything, I felt the word “still” could shed light on every piece in different ways.

What about you? Villains is clearly a play on “villanelle,” but what else went into selecting the title for you?

JS: For me, it was basically a process of “how thickly do I want to lay on the puns?” I started off calling it Heroes & Villanelles, realized it had no heroes, started calling it Villainelles, thought that was just too much, looked up the etymology and found that villain/villanelle actually do share a root (they refer to common folk), and kept it to just Villains. I’m a little worried that people will assume that means I consider all my characters to be bad guys, but some (most? all?) are not bad, they’re villagers of a sort – the Blues man, the kid playing football in a podunk town, the woman working a 9-5 that doesn’t want to let her go, the rapper strutting his stuff. A lot of the characters are at the precipice where they either interact with or are turning into the more popular conception of villain.



I have to come back to “still” have many meanings. Do you feel like there are movements to the collection? That is, do we have a period of time in which we’re experiencing still(ness) as motionlessness, then a few poems of being hushed, or anything of that sort? Or how did you otherwise decide to arrange things?

LC: The arrangement follows an arc. The speaker is definitely experiencing a coming-of-age. The opening of the collection raises a lot of questions, somewhere in the middle we take a difficult turn and things get pretty bleak, and by the end, things are much more optimistic. I think “still” is the through-line of all of that. The speaker is definitely changed by the end of the collection. I think she

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achieves a sort of stillness, or tranquility perhaps, but not without acknowledging the lasting effects of trauma. I think there’s also a struggle between silence and voice happening in these poems, particularly in that middle section. These are not easy poems. For those, I see “still” as an insistence.

How did you manage the arrangement for *Villains*? And as a follow up, what was the first villanelle you wrote that’s included in the collection? Which is the last?

JS: The first poem was the first poem. I didn’t have a name for it; my friend Lisa N. Edmonds-D’Amico came up with “Villanelle in royal blue.” I let it sit there for a couple of months, and then wrote 30 villanelles in 60 days as sort of a personal challenge. These are the 20 I liked best. But as to ordering them? I’m still not super-confident about the order. I “managed” is probably the best way to say it.

When you say your poems aren’t easy... weren’t easy to write? aren’t easy to read? aren’t easy to deal with?

LC: I’d argue that writing poems is difficult in general. Some are more emotionally difficult to write than others. I can’t imagine those poems are easy to read or deal with. The poem in the collection I wrote first would probably be “To Shed.” That poem was also one of the first accepted to a journal, *Sundog Lit*. They like “earth-scorching” work. When I told my mother, she said that it certainly isn’t one of her favorites but “the ugliest thing at the garage sale always sells first.” I’ll never forget that. I was touched. That really is just about the most optimistic thing you can say about that poem.

Speaking of difficult, can you talk a bit more about the process of writing 30 villanelles in 60 days? Why the villanelle?

JS: I had a period of time when I was in the car a lot. Driving to referee soccer. To my psychiatrist. And it would be at least half an hour in each direction, often an hour. So I started trying to write in my head. And one night I sat down and produced “Villanelle in royal blue” while listening to Howlin’ Wolf on repeat, and I memorized it enough to revise it a bit while driving the next day. My friend Lisa

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gave it its title, incidentally. I had this compulsion to keep trying to succeed, to write a villanelle in an hour. And the music helped. One to two songs on repeat for 30-60 minutes, plus a little mental revision while driving. It was kind of a healthy obsession, to be honest.

You ever get like that? Where you're writing, but it's not the surface you that's doing it? It's some deeper you that understands what you are doing better than you do?

LC: Yes. I think all writers have obsessions. The poems in *Still* weren't written with the idea that they would occupy a book together. When I decided to make a chapbook with the best of the disparate poems I had, I was surprised at how many common threads I found. Poetry works in subconscious ways, for both readers and writers. That's the magic, I think.

So *Villains* is influenced by music? Can you expand on that? What about literary influences?

JS: Every poem has a soundtrack. I don't necessarily draw from the lyrics of each song (although I use the chorus of The Cranberries' "Zombie" as an A1/A2 in "Villanelle questioning a pop culture phenomenon"), but the feeling of the music should be present somehow in each piece. Some of the poems are attempts to marry villanelles with the Blues, another form based on repetition and variation. Some are straight-up hip-hop ("Villanelle to all you sucka MCs" and "Villanelle enlisting the ACLU"). There's one that's about listening to Mumford and Sons. Some just draw from the tone, like "Villanelle that is not now nor ever has been." There's a list in the back of the chapbook that tells you what to match with each poem.

For literary influences, there aren't many direct allusions this time around, like in a lot of my previous chapbooks. But the lyrical play and formalism owes a lot to one of my favorite poets, Terrance Hayes, who also digs down obsessively into an old style or form and makes it do new things with the culture at hand. In retrospect, it owes something to Patricia Smith's *Blood Sonnets*, a little bit to Jimmy Santiago Baca's *Meditations on the South Valley* (not in

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form but in subject matter). I'll address it directly – despite being an old French form, these villanelles don't speak much to their white predecessors, the Dylan Thomases and such. They're far more interested in the amazing formal work being done by nonwhite poets.

I know you have another chapbook on the way, *Letters to Petrarch*, that directly addresses one of the Old Masters and reinvents what he had done. Can you comment on the differences between dialoguing with a literary influence, like *LtP*, and writing poems that may have influences but don't go seeking them head-on like in *Still*?

LC: That's a great question. Yes, *Letters to Petrarch* is an entirely different sort of project. It's a series of epistolary poems in direct response to a single influence. *Still* definitely has many influences: Richard Siken, Lynda Hull, Anne Sexton, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Andrea Gibson. I actually worked on both projects in the same years, during and right after my MFA program. I think in some ways, the poems from *Still* were a mental break from the focus of *Letters to Petrarch*. Like I said, the poems in *Still* weren't originally written as a cohesive project. I'd dedicate my time to *LtP* for a while, then my mind would get restless and I'd write other poems.

It's interesting that you used the word "seeking" because I think that's a good descriptor for what you're doing when you write poetry. I think with *LtP*, I was looking at particular things, trying to shed light on certain connections and emotions. I think the poems in *Still* look for something. The process is different for each type of seeking. I think shifting gears over time helped me maintain momentum.

You've written other chapbooks as well. Can you describe those and talk a bit about the differences in creating them?

JS: Not letting you off the hook yet. I like your idea of using different kinds of seeking to maintain momentum. When you're stuck – writer's block, depression, life just plain full – do you find your poetry looking for something or looking to shed light on something? Is there a default position from which you can regain momentum?

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LC: For me, one type of seeking is conscious and one is more subconscious. The poems in *Letters to Petrarch* were an intentional endeavor. The project was research-heavy. I had a plan. I was drawing energy from an outside source. The poems in *Still* just happened. They surfaced from within, from whatever work my subconscious was doing. The brain is an incredible thing in that way. You're right that writer's block happens for various reasons. Either type of seeking can help me break out of it. I can choose to carefully look at something and try to shed light on it with my work. Alternatively, looking for something usually means getting out of my own way, mentally or emotionally, and allowing the work to surface. It can be much more difficult to do the latter, as you can imagine.

How about those other chapbooks of yours?

JS: Similar to yours, in that seeking/ shedding respect. *OsSerp (El Océano y la Serpiente / The Ocean and the Serpent)* was me trying to out-Wasteland Eliot for the 21st Century. Up until I did a 64-page poetic sequence in rhyming verse and visual poems for my dissertation, it was the most ambitious thing I'd attempted. *Riff Raff* just kinda happened, and I lucked into getting it published by Unicorn Press. *The Icarus Sketches* is often the chapbook that people come back to as a favorite, another obsessive mining and turning over of a particular stone, but I'm happy above all that I got to really work with the editor of Seven Kitchens Press to make it a dual-author collection with Crystal Boson, who is by far my superior as a poet but hadn't been looking to publish at the time. I've got samples and more on all of them on my website, [www.jeffstumpo.com](http://www.jeffstumpo.com).

I just ordered five copies of *Still*. Seriously. It's partly the former bookstore owner in me, partly because I want to hand them out to people later. It's something I started doing after I opened Wonderland Books & Games – I'd order extra copies of something I loved and just give away some of them to people who would appreciate them. Not great business sense, but it felt right.

What comes next for you? You've got readings galore on the horizon, workshops, all that. Is there going to be a *Still* tour?

LC: Thanks for ordering *Still!* I love giving things away, too, so I think you've got a great idea. I'll have to get myself some extra copies of *Villains*.

I do have so many events coming up. I'm fortunate to keep busy. You never know, maybe I'll string together enough appearances to call it a tour. In other news, I'm writing a full-length manuscript about my hometown. I'm working a narrative arc and also making poems about the town itself: environment, creatures, history, weather. So far this project has been fun and difficult, both seeking something and shedding light, so to speak. You can find my next readings, workshops, and publications at my website, [www.logencure.com](http://www.logencure.com).

What comes next for you? Readings, events, works-in-progress?

JS: I'm trying to book some gigs around the Northeast. We just moved to Pennsylvania, and I'm within reach of my old stomping grounds from a two-year stint in Portsmouth, NH while Kate did a postdoc. I love the open mics and slams in this region. I'd like to contact some universities as well – I've done university readings and workshops before (they're the best-paying of the gigs I've done), and I feel like *Villains* lets me talk about a lot of craft issues in a workshop setting. Maybe I should see if the Poetry Festival at Round Top is looking for poets from afar – I was a regular speaker there for about three years, and I miss it greatly. And I could see you while I'm there!

As far as projects, I have all these doodles of lines and stanzas and concepts that I've been kicking around for a series of poems I want to give to my daughter, Ellery, someday. The manuscript is definitely called *Dove*, and I know some of what's going on in it, but I haven't been able to nail it down. That's partly because I'm trying really hard to resist the urge to turn everything she does into a poem. The stuff that comes out of her mouth is fantastic and ends up on Facebook a lot, but there's this (strangely?) sincere part of me that doesn't want to be her translator, that wants to just be her dad. I think I'm trying harder at that than at anything I've ever done.

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## *Villains*

Presale: June 22 to August 21, 2015

Release: October 2015

[www.jeffstumpo.com](http://www.jeffstumpo.com)

JeFF Stumpo has been a bookstore owner and a part-time professor, a slam poet and an apologetic telemarketer. His wife is the smart one. His daughter is three going on thirteen. His dogs are nuts. He has a website with samples and ideas and occasional blog posts at [www.jeffstumpo.com](http://www.jeffstumpo.com).

### **Villanelle to all you sucka MCs**

This is my track  
meet. You trippin' on cracks in the street.  
You just backin' that

fat beat. I'm 175 of man  
and muscle. You empty cuz you hustle. Please,  
this is my track

record: I don't lack records. I make black  
records like Glasper makes radio, G.  
You just back in that

saddle, addled, same horse, same stream. I got a knack  
for innovation, always addin' to my team.  
This is my track,

my trade, just call me Jack.  
You fade. You lose. You got a two-bit dream.  
You just backin' that

bad play, MC. This is my track,  
my way, home free.  
This is my track –  
you just backin' that.

\*



*Still*

Presale period: May 19 to July 17, 2015

Release: September 2015

[www.logencure.com/still](http://www.logencure.com/still)

Logen Cure is a poet and teacher. She is the author of three chapbooks: *Still* (Finishing Line Press 2015), *Letters to Petrarch* (Unicorn Press, forthcoming 2015), and *In Keeping* (Unicorn Press 2008). Her work also appears in *Word Riot*, *Radar Poetry*, *IndieFeed: Performance Poetry*, and elsewhere. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She lives in Texas with her wife. Learn more at [www.logencure.com](http://www.logencure.com).

**Condolences**

From now on, I will  
tell people that you died.

I will say it calmly, without tears.  
It is not that I want pity  
or take pleasure in lying.  
I have simply grown tired of  
mapping the perforations we made,  
intolerant of questions  
concerning who-broke-what.

I officially excuse myself from this exercise.  
I am not interested in people's opinions  
of my victim or villainhood.

The only thing people should be allowed  
to say to me about you is  
*I'm sorry for your loss.*

And when they ask me  
what happened to you, I will tell them  
without hesitation that one day  
your heart just stopped.

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