# *Creating the Chorus: Joshua Kryah and the Question of Faith*

*Joshua Kryah's poems slip easily off the contemporary tongue. But they would be just as at home in the mouth of a monk in medieval France, a Brazilian missionary, the courtier to his beloved. Their art is shelter to the questions of a young father, a poet living in Las Vegas, who wonders whether language can do justice to man's desire to know. What meaning lives in the pull of faith? Is there craft in longing? Is there reality in myth? They are questions that come to the reader as voices twining like a pair of dancers: she, what is revered; he, what is from life:*

> *the adored giving itself, unabashedly,*
> *over to the adorer.*
>
> *What I have only just begun to gather up*
> *in my arms.*
>
> *The stone rolled back.*
>
> *Your body no longer.*

*The poet engages our most persistent doubts, our hopes, the range of our desires. Inspired by Saint Augustine, in the tradition of Dante, he presses onward, pursues the religious and transcends it, spilling in his wake a drizzle of words that slide slowly toward the well from which one draws meaning. These drops, colored by the spectrum of contemporary poetics, feature fractured lineation, words as if whispered, the working pause:*

> *shape—*
>
> *thou* dismembered,
>
> dismemberer.
>
> ~
>
> *Necessary, or else*
>
> *said to be so, the damage*
>
> *made all the more real by my thirst for it.*

*A reader interested in other then the seeker's struggle toward the divine will find in these poems that which is decidedly human: the beauty and fragility of the body, life at the mercy of chance, resilience in the face of destruction. He will grapple with the speaker's yearning, the speaker's isolation, the way it mimics his own daily dip into company and drop back out again. Joshua Kryah's work is the lover who closes his eyes, believing as he sinks into sleep, that ritual and solitary journey, his beloved will be beside him until "the coming of light." — Carlin M. Wragg, Editor*

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*Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to enhance readability.*

Joshua Kryah: [Reads "My Easter"]

Carlin M. Wragg: One of the first things I noticed is that sections of this poem seem as if they're taken from Scripture, is that right?

JK: Yes, yes they are. Some of them are direct quotes, and some of them are corruptions, even fabrications. The first one, "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered," is actually from the Book of Mark (14:27). The last quote, "I followed wearing nothing but a linen cloth," I believe comes from Mark as well (14:51) and it's about the arrest of Christ. So yes, these quotes come from the New Testament.

CMW: And so, as a poet, what does blending these words with your own allow you to do?

JK: Well, I think, especially when you're quoting something like the Old or New Testament, there's authority. Quoting Scripture, there is definitely a sense of authority that enters into the poem. I think that certainly in a poem like this — like the book itself, like most of the poems in the book that are dealing with issues of faith and issues of doubt — as the speaker or the voice begins to unwind or unspool, or even go off on a tangent, having that authority step in helps realign the poem; it brings the poem back into focus.

CMW: Can you talk a little bit about the process of writing it?

JK: I think that, in this poem especially, the quotes came in later. At that point I had been looking more into the Scriptures, I'd been looking more at quotes, I'd been looking more at the Old and New Testament, and while I was writing it I had a list of quotes to the side of me — I was always composing new poems — and I would glance over and look at certain things.

I think these quotes helped the next section come along. It was a kind of call and response: the first part of the poem is put forth, then something responds to it, then the next part responds back to that. It creates a slight, if not jilted, sort of conversation between the quotes and the poem itself.

CMW: Conversation, and language itself, seem to be huge features of your poetry. Aside from it actually being written, the ideas of language and communication seem central to your exploration of faith. Is that something you think about regularly?

JK: I think so, and I think directly in relation to what this book was concerned with. Language is very important. It's what we turn to, primarily — again, thinking about the Bible or other books of faith. We look for other words. We look for others who have spoken about issues or experiences of faith and we draw our faith from that.

*"...there's sometimes a problem with whether or not language can capture what it is you're attempting to say, whether language can speak to what it is you've experienced and are trying to put down on the page. There's always that quandary of whether or not language can suffice."*

There's also faith in language itself. I think poetry, writing these poems especially, there's sometimes a problem with whether or not language can capture what it is you're attempting to say, whether language can speak to what it is you've experienced and are trying to put down on the page. There's always that quandary of whether or not language can suffice. In this poem, and in this book, that was a lot of the issue: how language itself necessarily fails constantly, and the attempt to keep pushing it toward some sort of failure, then picking it back up and moving on again.

I think it's really interesting that you mention it because when I was writing this book, especially later in its development, I was reading a lot of PAUL CELAN, whose attention to and own awkward

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relationship with language definitely comes through in this book.

CMW: What were some of the struggles that Paul Celan went through in composing his own work?

JK: Well, Celan — and I'm no aficionado whatsoever so I want to be careful here — but I know Celan, having had experiences during World War II in the concentration camps, a lot of what he writes about later in his poems refers back to this sort of experience.

*"I wanted to see how I could apply that to my own struggles, or tensions, or issues with faith."*

After such an atrocity as the Holocaust how can language suffice? How can it respond back? How can it interject life back into the world after something like that has occurred? And in his poetry you see it. There's a definite constraint. There's a tension. There are times when the words seem to be tearing themselves apart, and it's intentional. He seems to be really struggling with it.

I drew a lot from that, actually. My experience is certainly much, much different then Paul Celan's, but the experience of language and how it was playing out on the page I felt a real kinship with. I wanted to see how I could apply that to my own struggles, or tensions, or issues with faith.

CMW: And does that in some way play into the form you've chosen to use for your poems? They're fragmented a little bit, even though the syntax itself seems to flow easily, and there's a little bit more space between lines then one might expect hearing it.

JK: I think so. It's something that I'd always been interested in. Celan was definitely an influence. George Oppen was another very big influence, Lorine Niedecker. The economy of language and this concisement of syntax have always been very appealing to me. Barbara Guest is someone else that I've been very interested in. These poets, they tend to leave the page open, they tend to leave a lot of white space, and it was very appealing to me to try to resemble that in my own poems.

So yes, the structure itself, and again, this isn't always the same with every poem, but in poems that I'm in love with, those poems that I keep going back to in this book, that sort of spareness allows the poems to keep going for a while. It allows them to pull themselves up to falter then pull themselves back up again. So the poems began to resemble this, I think, physically. There's definitely a staggeredness to them. There's a fragmentation. Which is nothing unusual in poetry, or certainly in poetics today, but I definitely wanted the fragment to be there.

CMW: You said that you think this form is something that may be common to poetry today, and yet you're working with subject matter that has such a long history. How do you see the tension between working with this contemporary fragmented form and exploring the question of faith, something that has been discussed in poetry for hundreds and hundreds of years?

JK: There's a collection of translations of Sappho by Guy Davenport, and in his introduction to that collection he talks about this very thing. When archeologists were going on different digs and different finds in Greece, specifically, in relation to talking about Sappho, they would come across these plaster walls with paintings on them. But they were just the remnants of paintings that had been worn away through time and history.

> *"What he did was to fill in what they had gleaned from their archaeological finds, from the history that they knew —"*

He mentions this instance where a famous British archaeologist comes upon, I think it's just the horn, and maybe the hoof, of a bull on a plaster relief. What he did with his team at that point was to fill in based on what they had gleaned from

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their archaeological finds, from the history that they knew — they filled in the rest of it, which is amazing to think, actually, because there's barely anything there. There's a horn, there's a hoof or two, and they filled in the entirety of the rest. He uses this analogy to talk about translation, specifically translating Sappho, who, as you may know, survives only in fragments. I think that there's only one poem in it's entirety that has survived to today. Most of them are fragmented, there are lines missing, there are lacunae everywhere. And he brings this parallel together.

JK: It's something that was really intriguing to me. Again, not necessarily in relation to Sappho, but to what these poems were trying to approach, which is this idea of faith: what we do know, what we can know about certain things, and what we don't know, and what we can't know about other things. So having something there that's steady, say, for instance, even the quotes from Scripture — it's that horn, it's that hoof — and then having to fill in the rest of it as we go along. Davenport points out that at times these archaeologists got things wrong, they didn't know what they were doing; they were making wild guesses. There's something about faith that speaks to that. You just have to believe that you can fill it in. You're exploring it, you're attempting it. It's the best you can do. You can walk away with just the horn, which I think is precious enough, but to fill in the rest of it is rather daunting, and it's a lifelong work.

*"..which is this idea of faith: what we do know, what we can know about certain things, and what we don't know, and what we can't know about other things."*

CMW: And a personal journey, it sounds like.

JK: Yes, I think so. Again, this book caught me by surprise. This book was never intended, as far as I thought about it as I was writing it over the years, to be a book about faith. It was a book that was addressed to the You, and the You was always emblematic of **THE BELOVED**. It was like Dante's **BEATRICE**, or it was like Shakespeare's **DARK LADY;** it was my beloved. But as I kept writing it, and I kept exploring these poems, I realized that the You was not a beloved in that sense; it was about divinity, some sort of divine presence. So a definite personal journey, most certainly.

CMW: I think your poem, "Come Hither," really does capture that unity of the exploration of faith and the speaker's feelings for a beloved, as you just said. Could you read that now?

JK:[Reads "Come Hither"]

CMW: One of the things I noticed in this poem is that water plays a huge roll. What did the symbol of water allow you to do?

JK: Being from St. Louis, Missouri, and having lived for a while in Iowa, I was just reminded again recently that water has a mind and way of its own. It displaces, it damages, sometimes irrevocably, places and geographies and people.

There's also a nourishing quality to it, especially when you think of it in terms of faith. The obvious example is that of baptism, which is mentioned in the poem. Water being used, or the image of water, as a purifying agent, a conduit to some other place. So the water in this poem allowed me to do that, to come sweeping in. I think that's part of it.

There's something accusing in the poem as well: that water, the flood, the swollen river, its overrunning, can damage much more than someone's spiritual well-being, or their lack of spirituality.

One thing that I think is interesting, it's not really attributed because it's kind of corrupted and half-remembered, but there's a quote in the poem that found its way into the last draft. It was after Hurricane Katrina, the poem was really written before that, but there's a quote borrowed from the testimony of an individual in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, an individual in the Ninth Ward, or somewhere in close proximity, who had experienced massive destruction from the

hurricane, lost just about everything, and yet what this person said is basically, "What man couldn't fix, you, Lord, had."

I've heard again and again this amazing testimony that when people have lost things, even when people have lost loved ones, there still is this call to spiritual presence, to God, saying, "This is God's will. It was God's will." It confounds me at times in my own sense of faith. I don't know if I'm willing to go that far myself. So I think the poem is bracing on that in some way.

*"'This is God's will. It was God's will.' It confounds me at times in my own sense of faith. I don't know if I'm willing to go that far myself."*

CMW: Absolutely. I think you've touched on something that is really at the heart of the debate about faith: how could there be a God in the face of such incredible destruction, and loss of life, and sorrow? As you said, it's so interesting to think that for some this could actually be proof of a divine presence.

JK: Yes, absolutely. I think there's something there that I wanted to get in touch with. I wanted to explore that and see what it was.

CMW: Have you always written poetry, or was prose your medium?

JK: Not always, no, not always. And I'm not one of those who would say I started when I was five, because I did not at all. In high school I thought I was going to be a musician, right, in a band. I was in a band but I couldn't play anything, so I was assigned the position of the lead singer, but I couldn't sing either so that became a problem. Then I became the one who wrote the songs, and then the band went away but I kept writing the songs, and then it became writing poems, and that's how it kept going.

CMW: In that process, when you were starting out with this experiment of writing, and you were writing words that were meant to be set to music, once you moved away from that, did it feel like a natural break?

JK: It did, because often my words weren't put to music, so... [laughter]. And again, I wasn't composing the music, I was pretty much strictly writing — almost in a complete vacuum — lyrics. But once that stopped and I started realizing that what I was doing was no longer writing songs, I was writing poems, it was actually quite liberating because I moved away from the form of songwriting that I was accustomed to, or what I thought I had to do. Then I moved into reading poetry for the first time. So, toward the end of high school, the beginning of college, I started reading more poetry, and I gravitated toward someone like **Yeats**.

I was very interested in Yeats' early work where there were lots of songs, actually, where he was working with poems like **"The Fiddler of Dooney,"** or a few others there, where he is rhyming, and there is a sort of chorus in some of the poems, and they are, for all intents and purposes, almost meant to be sung. So that was a natural progression.

This seemed to make sense to me. Like, "Oh, here's Yeats doing this. There's no band, but he's still writing this poem that's still sort of a song." So I started to attempt to do that myself. Then I fell into **Eliot** and that changed everything.

CMW: Oh, how did Eliot change your thinking from Yeats?

JK: Well, the rhyme was still there. I mean, Eliot does have a lot of rhyming, and the music in his poetry's amazing, and his syntax, the lushness to his lines is just amazing, the repetition that he uses is just amazing. So that carried over in a big way for me.

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It opened it up. It made things more contemporary. You know, at that point I thought I was Yeats and I was writing about Irish folk tales, which I knew nothing about, but Eliot opened it up and made it more modern.

When I read **"PRUFROCK"** I was just stunned. I didn't know what kind of poem that was. It was fragmented, it was broken up into very odd sections, there were weird repetitions, weird situations. It was very disturbing to me, but I was very impressed by it. It wasn't until a bit later that I started to really sink into the poems, what was going on inside of them, what they were really addressing, what they were about. I really was just on the surface for a long time there. But I think that served me well as a craftsman. It really helped with my ear in, I think, a tremendous way.

CMW: Is that still how you read poetry now? Are you reading first for the sound and then the meaning, or have things changed?

JK: They constantly change. I think I've returned to it, actually. Once I went off to college, and went off to grad school, and then I finished off my Ph.D., I think after I finished all that I went back to the surface, to how the poems sounded, at least initially, because I'd forgotten that aspect of them. I was too busy tearing them apart and tinkering with them and trying to find out everything I could about the poem, and I think I got kind of fed up. It sucked the life out of it a little bit.

*""I feel like I've been spending so much time saying things in poems that right now what I'm mostly interested in is speaking in poems. How do I speak in a poem, as opposed to just say something?"*

So I went back to skating along the surface. And I still do. I have a young family now, I don't have a lot of time for writing, especially for reading, so when I do read at times, I skim. I'll have a few books on my desk and I'll pick one or two up and go through and put them down and go to the next book, put it down, open up my own journal, start writing, and then go back and forth.

I'm trying to learn how to speak in poetry, as opposed to say. I feel like I've been spending so much time saying things in poems that right now what I'm mostly interested in is speaking in poems. How do I speak in a poem, as opposed to just say something?

CMW: Can you unpack that a little bit more, your idea about the difference between speaking and saying?

JK: I don't know, I guess one way to approach it is the tightly wound poem, the poem that is crafted as well as it can be crafted that sometimes winds up just "saying" something; it's saying this about language, or it's saying this about faith, or it's saying this about the Beloved, or the condition of love. Whereas right now what I want to do is speak. I want, not to pronounce, but to let the poems go further than they usually have, or that I've allowed them to go.

*""glossolalia - the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, which is terribly appealing for someone who writes poetry, this idea of having something speak through you."*

CMW: Maybe you can read one of the sequences from this new work that you're exploring at the moment?

JK: I'll read the newer one. It's from a sequence titled "Holy Ghost People," which is a reference to glossolalia, which is a reference to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, which is terribly, terribly appealing for someone who writes poetry, this idea of having something speak through you. This sequence deals specifically with the issue of glossolalia as a spiritual experience. Some of the other sequences I've been working on with this phenomenon actually deal with literary

glossolalia, so thinking about someone like Yeats whose work, **A VISION**, involved his wife taking down automatic writing, **JAMES MERRILL** in **"THE BOOK OF EPHRAIM"** using the Ouija board. So there are other instances of this idea of someone speaking through the poet or the writer, going back, of course, to the Muses.

JK:[Reads "Holy Ghost People," sections 1 - 4]

CMW: How do you think these poems go further then the ones in *Glean*?

JK: Well, oddly enough, I don't think they go all that much further. These aren't, I would say, the best examples. The best examples would be what I was doing last night, so it's impossible to include that, know what I mean? It keeps opening up and opening up every time I go back and begin writing again.

These are, again, continuations of *Glean*, but I'm trying to refine the ideas, or push them even further then they were pushed in *Glean*. The series itself is a way to keep pushing them. This idea that you do various takes. The first take doesn't quite make it, so you move on to the next take, and then on to the next take, and you keep going and going and going, and along the way new things occur, new ideas happen, like the idea of voices, or using different references or quotes.

Many of these poems have lots of quotes in them. They have lots of references, or contending voices. Sometimes they're called attention to, sometimes they're not. They're conflations, or they're corruptions, or they're just embedded in the poems themselves, but there are a number of different contending voices, and it's a sort of chorus that's uneven, which I'm very interested in right now.

What I'm really enjoying is trying to work with other language inside of my language, to accommodate that language, to allow that language to speak. That happened quite a bit in *Glean* but I think it's happening more intentionally now. When we were talking about "My Easter," those quotes from Scripture were plotted down and left alone, whereas I think that in these poems I'm trying to integrate them in a more complete way, to make them sound like my poetry, or to make my poetry sound like that piece of Scripture, or that quote.

And again, they're different. They're not all so reverent. The Scripture's in here, but I've also been including quotes from individuals like **SISTER GERTRUDE MORGAN**, who's an outsider artist. Interesting person, a religious person, an artist, and in her art she'd often incorporate text from Scripture, but the Scripture itself would be changed, it would be altered, usually skewed toward her point of view, or her perspective.

It's very reverent, but not at all what we'd consider conventional Scripture. In the transition from her reading it to placing it in her paintings it's gone through a complete transformation, it's become her own, it becomes really beautiful actually, it's become individualized in a way that makes it believable.

I've also found a few personal testimonies about the experience of glossolalia and I've embedded a lot of those in there as well. There are a few books I've found where they've interviewed individuals who have experienced glossolalia, speaking in tongues, and they've basically testified to their experience. I've taken some of those quotes and applied them directly to the series, trying to create a sort of narrative of, say, one person's experience: how it starts, what's happening in the middle, and how they come away from it. So that's been really amazing, trying to work in other voices that aren't my own, but somehow trying to make them my own.

CMW: The idea that it's permissible, as you were saying, to corrupt Scripture, for example, or to borrow from these voices and change them, what do you think about that power, and the responsibility you have as a poet, in bringing these different dialogs together as one?

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JK: It is problematic. I think when it comes to Scripture, that's different, at least in my view. Scripture itself is, every day, it's every second of every day, being appropriated by someone for some reason. It's being used and reused and recycled and changed and altered and clipped all over the place, not just in the pulpit, but everywhere. It's on the street; it's in publications. So I don't fret about that.

*"Scripture itself is, every day, it's every second of every day, being appropriated by someone for some reason. It's being used and reused and recycled and changed and altered and clipped all over the place, not just in the pulpit, but everywhere."*

When it comes to someone like Sister Gertrude Morgan, I'm a little bit more cautions. I'm making sure I give notes that say, "These voices are embedded." However, and again, this may be problematic later, down the road, at this point I'm very reluctant to point out where exactly these quotes are.

But it's interesting because the poems aren't about Sister Gertrude Morgan, they aren't necessarily about the Scriptures, they aren't about these other quotes that I'm using in these "Holy Ghost" poems, the quotes themselves suffice to talk about the idea of speaking, they talk about language, and faith, again. They're not supposed to be biographical in any sense.

CMW: Yes, it seems like a wonderful way of demonstrating that the process of thinking doesn't come from a single source, or even necessarily from one's own head, that there are influences of a variety of kinds, and that you can't always differentiate between one and the other, that you absorb them, and that they become part of your language.

JK: You're absolutely right. Again, with what's happening right now, all this skimming and surface reading that I'm doing, I'm taking bits and pieces, and they do enter in, because as I'm writing these things occur to me, or as I'm writing I think of them, and I go back to them, and I read something from Scripture, or I go back to Celan, or I go back to Oppen, and then these things all wind up together eventually.

It's something that's been done before, if you think about **POUND'S "CANTOS,"** especially. It's sort of a documentary poem. He sometimes attributes things, and sometimes he doesn't, but there're all kinds of things entering in. **"THE MODERNIST,"** of course. **"THE WASTELAND,"** of course. There are all kinds of other voices and scripts coming into those poems that, I think, to me, make them wonderful.

That's what's so appealing, and why I got so excited about Eliot when I was younger. Seeing him import other things into the poem, which again I know are problematic, and I understand theoretically where we stand on this, but there's something that is very appealing about that, bringing in these other sources, not just referencing, or talking about them, or reimagining them, but actually bringing them in.

CMW: Do you think that's something unique to our own historical moment?

JK: I think so, in some ways. I think some scholars would definitely say so. I don't know if I'd agree completely with them, but I know the very general view of **MODERNISM**, right, is, I think, that. If you think about even Joyce's work, ***ULYSSES*** especially. You know, we talk about collage, we talk about pastiche, but that's a lot of what they're doing, importing things that were occurring around them, as well as from other places, and before them, and even, at times, after them. Pound's "Cantos," he brings all kinds of things in there that are strange and bizarre. He's trying to resuscitate his own reading list, which he thinks everyone should pay attention to.

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You know, if you think about the turn of the century, you think about Modernism, I think this is a moment where we had the means to do it. These things became readily available, or much increasingly available, in print, through libraries, through research. We could find these things and then we could put them back into our work. There's something that's actually quite precious about that. There's something very novel and whimsical about it. We do it now in a bigger way, I think, with contemporary poetry.

Now it's quite different though. We take the quotidian, we take the mundane, we take the most normal of things and we import them into a poem. You take the table of contents, or the index from some sort of manual, and import that into your poem, or you make that into a poem, and then you've got it. But it's all referential, it's all still some other voice, or language, coming in that you're using, or reaccommodating for your poem.

CMW: Maybe we can go on to "The Word in Which the Wound"? This poem seems to conflate the word, speech, language, and the body, and the fragility of the body, in a way. I also noticed that you touched on the idea of coming together, communion and wedlock, these two different acts that are toward uniting. I wondered what you were thinking about as you were writing this poem, what were you grappling with here?

*"...the word can't be bound just to the poem, it can't be bound to language, it cannot necessarily be bound to speech, and yet it's all we have."*

JK: The poem really is about the act of talking, of writing poetry. We strive in words, constantly. During communion there are prayers, there are words that are involved. During wedlock there are words. And again, this idea of being bound by words, "The word of him not bound," the word can't be bound just to the poem, it can't be bound to language, it cannot necessarily be bound to speech, and yet it's all we have.

JK:[Reads "The Word in Which the Wound"]

*Joshua Kryah was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he received a Ph.D. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he was a Schaeffer Fellow in poetry.*

*His first collection of poems, "Glean" (2007), won the 2005 Nightboat Books Poetry Prize judged by Donald Revell. His poems have appeared in "Colorado Review," "Denver Quarterly," "The Iowa Review," "Pleiades," and "Verse," among other journals.*

*He lives in Las Vegas with his wife and daughter, where he is a Visiting Assistant Professor in UNLV's Interdisciplinary Degree Programs. He is also the poetry editor of "Witness."*

*To download the podcast of this interview and to read additional information about Mr. Kryah, go to www.openlooppress.org*

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