

Steve Gehrke, author of

## *The Resurrection Machine*

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Interviewed by Heather Haas, May 2000

*Q: How did the collection evolve? Was it a conscious decision to create a collection of poems that explore the intersection of the physical body and the emotional self?*

A: I find the fewer conscious decisions I make when it comes to poetry, the better. As I wrote each poem I could feel its connection to the ones that came before and sometimes sense that more were waiting. But if I had mapped out a list of illnesses, I think I would have failed miserably. I knew, of course, that I was writing a lot about the body and illness. But, at the time, that's the only thing that seemed worth writing about. Richard Selzer, the doctor and author, says that we have an obligation to write about the dying. I believe that.

*Q: What do you see as the basic differences and similarities between the two? How do you see the two shaping each other?*

A: We tend to think of the self as synonymous with the heart or the mind. But a hand or a kidney, when it is weighed on the coroner's scale, is just as big a chunk of you as any. I don't want to ramble on like a fool about the emotional life of the pancreas. Let's face it, there are limits. But, how could our emotional lives not be connected to the workings of the body? They are both sealed up inside us. It's like clothes in a dryer--our jealousy, our circulating blood, tumbling around together. Something like that.

*Q: Have you always been intrigued by science, technology and the various representations of the body?*

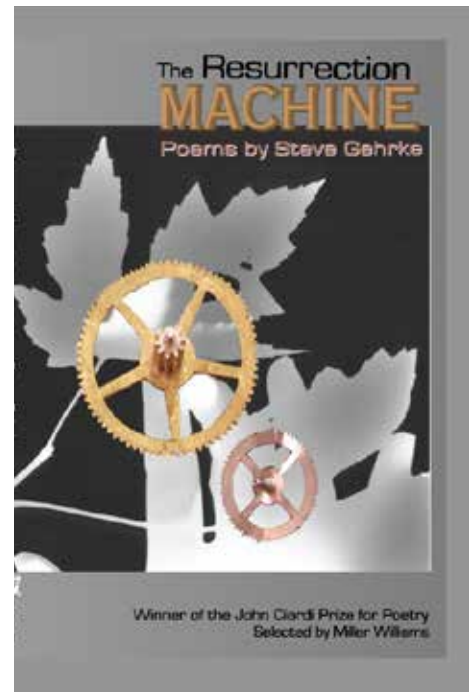
A: Well, I don't know if I've been intrigued. But I've always felt the importance of science. Science is the closest thing we have to real religion anymore. People used to think their survival depended on God; now they think it depends on medical science. It's dangerous really. People know they can screw themselves up to a huge extent--both physically and emotionally--because there are systems in place to repair them.

*Q: How do your own medical experiences influence your writing?*

A: Frankly, I have a hard time keeping my illness out of my poems, even when I'm writing about something else entirely. I'll be writing about a traffic jam and wonder if what I'm really getting at is my illness. I think this actually worked once, with "My Grandmother's False Teeth." Most of the time, though, it just keeps popping its head up, and I keep slapping it away, like a dog that begs too much.

*Q: How would you describe the relationship between the characters featured in the book's fourth chapter?*

A: I like to think of the characters in that section as finding physical solutions to emotional problems. Edward drinks because it's the only way he can still feel love; Muhammad Ali punches for the sake of forgiveness; Anna Anderson dances to quiet the voices in her head; the couple in "Wal-Mart Sestina" shop because shopping offers each one what the other won't give. I don't know if this would hold up for every poem in the section, but it is one of the threads running through there. Hopefully there are others.



*Q: Some of the poems, such as “My Mother at Secretarial School, 1967,” “Three Doctors,” “The Romanian Poet” and “The Block Party at the End of the World,” speak to the physical act of writing and its effects. Do you think writing serves more as a means of communication or interpretation?*

A: I think writing is a way at getting at something you can't get at while speaking, a way of organizing the noise you feel inside you. Hopefully others will understand what you write, or at least what you write will take some shape inside them, different, always, from the shape it had when it left you. But no less significant.

*Q: What projects are you currently working on? Has your writing taken a different thematic direction since the book's publication? Or, did the collection serve to nudge you further into the realm of body/self exploration?*

A: Sometimes, every poem takes a different thematic direction. Mostly, though, I have been working on a series of poems about the ways we lived in our parents' bodies before our birth, and how they live in our bodies now. So, the same and different.



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