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TOM YUILL

EVERYBODY LOVES TO CHA-CHA-CHA: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID BLAIR

DAVID BLAIR GREW UP IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA, and he earned a B.A. in philosophy from Fordham University and an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His first poetry collection, *Ascension Days* (2007), won the Del Sol Poetry Prize, chosen by Thomas Lux, who praised Blair's "wild, restless imagination" as well as "his music, his diction, his refusal to use (ever!) cliches, [and] his syntax," which "all drive his poems and their hearts forward." Lux predicted that Blair would "be in the company of the best poets of his generation," and D. A. Powell also noted that Blair's first book was "refreshingly unlike contemporary poetry."

Blair's second collection, *Friends with Dogs* (2016), was a Must-Read Selection for the Massachusetts Book Awards, and it was praised by David Ferry, who admired "the verve and pace of his lines, the energy and wit, the capacity for what I would call sympathetic pathos; and of how the poems convey their own joy in the experience of being written."

Blair's third collection, *Arsonville* (2016), was published as part of the Green Rose Prize Series, and it featured a wide assortment of characters he had observed firsthand, including kids on the subway, a woman with a lip like a couch, and chin-studded dancers in a bar. The book was praised by Tony Hoagland, who described how Blair's poems "yammer and jam, they aria and catalogue and whine, combining kaleidoscopic perceptual and social detail with a sensibility that is smart, canny, but affectionate."

The poems in Blair's fourth collection, *Barbarian Seasons* (2020), were described by Katie Peterson as "humorous" and "lively," yet they also reflected "a deep understanding of . . . the fact that we live both with and against each other," and she described Blair as "a mystic contemplator whose hermitage is anywhere, a poet of private insight alive in our shared world."

His latest collection, *True Figures: Selected Shorter Poems and Prose Poems, 1998-2021* (2022), contains poems from his first four books as well as several new ones. Stephanie Burt remarked on the quality and range of the collection, noting that "these poems are very good, and internally various as few poets' midcareer poems have ever been." Kathleen Ossip also described it as "an expansive companion: in loneliness, in wandering, in getting-through, in noticing opportunities to be genuinely alive."

Blair has also recently published his first essay collection, *Walk Around: Essays about Poetry and Place* (2019), which addresses a wide range of topics, including his experiences walking through cities, reading poems, and watching films. In the first essay, for example, he noted that as you walk "you become intensely aware in two directions"—that is, to the outer world around you and the inner world of your imagination—and that this kind of distracted contemplation can help "you get out of your own way." Sebastian Smee praised these essays, which he described as "relaxed, funny, improvised pieces" that establish a "kinship" with the reader.

Blair's work has also appeared in *Agni, Barnstorm, Boston Review, Fence, Harvard Review, Ploughshares, Slate Magazine,* and the anthologies *The Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* (2007), *Devouring the Green: Fear of a Human Planet* (2015), and *Welcome to the Neighborhood: An Anthology of American Coexistence* (2019).

He has taught literature and creative writing at the New England Institute of Art, Bentley University, Framingham State University, and Southern New Hampshire University, and he is currently a lecturer in poetry at the M.F.A. program at the University of New Hampshire. The following interview was conducted over email in the fall of 2022.

Thomas Yuill: My favourite experience reading your poems, and the one I have most often, is the experience of what communion back in Episcopal school should be like: deft, gentle, witty consciousness, engaging the world and everything in it, and sizing it up with a moral but never moralistic warmth. In other words, your poems never turn away from the world, but they do recreate it in the warmth of a unique consciousness, with new language making life what it is and yet isn't quite. Do you aim to write poetry that is a varied walking mecca of rhetorical checks and loopy mimesis?

David Blair: I like your idea of a "walking mecca of rhetorical checks and

loopy mimesis," and it's nice of you to say that, but it's also a good description of a lot of the poetry that I love. "Rhetorical checks" because that implies speech and running up against and counter to the highway of canned rhetoric that gets in the way of experience, thus implying the presence of a critical or satirical spirit, and "loopy mimesis" because the instruments we have for perception are indeed loopy, but the need to indicate things we can share, as opposed to engaging in power games, makes mimesis something like fire or wheels, which are necessary depending on how you use them. I would not make the claim that any of my work has the religious value of communion, but my image of communion is like strangers in a city church going back and forth about the show in their minds, in their privacy.

Yuill: Can I ask some nuts-and-bolts questions? In *True Figures*, you peel off poems that originally appeared as sections of sequences, such as "Rabelais," which concludes a sequence in *Friends with Dogs* but is presented here as a finished and individual poem. Of course I love it, since it's a poem about me, but what I want to know is whether you ever plan to write a series, or do the poems appear to belong together as you work on them?

Blair: I think of parts of sequences as individual poems at least in the earliest stages of drafting them. Sometimes I sort of audition other short poems as parts of sequences that I am already assembling. I realize that I am missing something and supply what I am missing while writing something that I already know is a sequence. A book that made a huge impression on me was Fanny Howe's *Selected Poems* (2000), which includes selections from sequences that work as entirely new sequences. "Rabelais" was orginally part of a sequence about the environment getting messed up, which I worked on all together, in order, over the course of maybe two months. In some ways it is a very sour sequence that does not turn away from unpleasantness, so it needed Rabelais and you to remind me that we have to embrace a messed-up world anyway. I left out the rest of the sequence in *True Figures* because the tone or content did not need any of those pieces to flow.

Yuill: Would you talk about your process of composition? To what extent is it governed by sound? Do you hear words and phrases, jot them down, and find yourself weaving them into poems later?

Blair: I have to say that I really don't know. I usually don't begin with phrases or individual words, and I don't just start with the babble of sound. I keep workbooks, and I try to sit down every morning and write a draft down very fast. Then I go back and pull out the pages I want to work on there. I get the syntactical side of music suggested at the same time as I get my sequence images and maybe a rough idea of possible parts, the movement, the surprise. I think of music and sound on two levels: the sentence is the melody you play with your right hand, the lineation is basically left-hand work, and the process of writing is discovery on both. There is also the sort of rhythm of pulses, the syllable-by-syllable work of hearing and expressing, and the colour of sounds, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration. I believe you have to let those happen, the issue of rhyme being a somewhat but not entirely more conscious decision governed by tone, pacing, rightness, and surprise. When I move from first drafts, I make decisions on line regulation and stanza formation, basically in service of the melody or the tune of meaning, which happens on the level of syntax. Something like "Sonnet for Robert Reich" probably had two very clear parts in draft form, and I somehow decided that it was a sonnet, or close enough, so I wrote an eight and six, as if it were an Italianate sonnet. To do the line, I then noticed that they were close to hexametres, like the first sonnet in Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), so I went from there my nonce-sonnet happy way. A lot of times, I give myself not a limit but a range. Strong three-stress and five-stress lines are okay, and I figure the ear will negotiate these and make five-stress lines by hearing two lines together, or the ear will hear a four-stress line trying to be a five-stress line. The idea that we hear one line at a time when we hear lines seems to be something like a superstition to me; really line happens within a poem. I mean, sure I could find somebody's disconnected foot. The way we talk about "an image" is also all wrong and overly linear. We rarely just have one image occurring to us at the same time. We get a flow of images—a chain of them—when they are expressions of feeling. An intuition emerges when sound, image, and feeling come together.

Yuill: Some of your poems make marvelous literary or art criticism. How often do you find yourself enjoying a great book or record only to pause and start writing a poem about it? Or do those poems—I'm thinking, for example, of "Other C'est Moi's," "A Penguin John Donne," and "Black Mountain Music"—more often come after some reflection? Again, it seems clear there

is no conscious plan or schematic, but I'm interested in your artistic methods, habits, and preferences.

Blair: I was just thinking about this because back in May I got to introduce Tom Sleigh and my former teacher Stuart Dischell—two poets whom I have known for years and who both lived for years in Cambridge. For the last twenty-six years, I've been a Boston poet, not really ever aligning myself with any particular group of poets but going out and hearing everybody read. It struck me suddenly that writers are interpreters of texts, situations, and personal history, so of course if you are living around people who are interpreting texts, situations, and personal history, that will start being a notable focus. I think this is true of all poets. I think that when poets make allusions it can be really fussy—a form of showing off—but the interpretive faculty is close to the emotional one, so I think poems that have allusions might only work when they are also emotionally alert to things that do not have status but are intensely viable, interesting, and ultimately loveable, which is something T. S. Eliot and Randall Jarrell are very good at.

"Black Mountain Music" is about the multidiscipline Black Mountain art, architecture, and music show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 2015. It was amazing, but people actually not believing poems being written by voice? Come on. Tony Bennett is right. The pleasures of varieties of bodily life, statures, and the physical world are what we have to sing about. Play is more important than professionalism—starchy, rubric-heavy, categorical, virtue flashing—and so is sincerity and warmth.

A few years ago, I decided to start writing about poets and poetry, and I try to write prose in the spirit of poetry, not the spirit of professional poetry. I think what you're getting at is that poems as acts of interpretation are the best, and I totally agree. Of course they are. But poets have to be careful of their own spirit of pedantry, superiority, and self-seriousness, particularly if they have been clever students, just as they might get rewarded by presenting sentimentalized and overly loveable images of themselves, as niceness attracts capital. I think an example of somebody who does everything in poems while avoiding these pitfalls would be Maureen McLane, but you could say the same of Dorothea Lasky, Natalie Shapero, Cathy Park Hong, Julia Story, Terrance Hayes, Sandra Lim, Tommy Pico, Katie Peterson, Carl Phillips, and so many others. It's a great time to read and write poetry when David Rivard and Donald Revell are writing. There is a lot of love and push-

back against crummy ways of conceptualizing life in poets' work, especially when it is not worried too much about sounding nice.

Yuill: Are there any other poets you admire or feel close to in spirit?

Blair: I tend to feel closest to poets who come out of the New York School of Poets and those I think of as New England Spectacle Poets, like the American absurdists and their students, Thomas Lux, Stephen Dobyns, Charles Simic, Bill Knott, and James Tate, but I read around a lot. I also admire poets who have a lively sense of their individual and contradictory psychologies, like Alan Shapiro, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Louise Glück, and C. K. Williams, who seem more important to me as something of an antidote to the culture of social media, quick political judgments, and ego-feed, our devices working on our minds more or less the same way that video poker machines do.

Yuill: Your poems offer so much perspective. Do you ever think back and say to yourself, "I disagree now with what that poem says"? Or is that a tad pedestrian for these vibrant figures of imagined response or accretions of emotive experience?

Blair: I feel that some poems don't hold up as well as others, but I also have just moved on. I went back and read some of the longer poems that I did not include, and the things I was trying to do came back to me after a few days. Time changing gives us different preoccupations, worries, beefs, and joys. One of the pleasures of working on a selected edition of shorter poems was that I could not say or suggest more exactly what I wanted to say than I did more warmly or selectively the first time around. As for content being pedestrian, I never think something is "pedestrian except for the flourish of style." In my work, there is no poem if you subtract style because style is emotion, which is indivisible from content. This is why blunt poems that are direct statements are so fun to work with tonally, as you can knock on a door in a variety of ways.

Yuill: There is often something Wordsworthian in your work in terms of its pace, as the reader glides gently into realization or into revelatory terrain. And this is often aided by your wit, sentence structure, and enjambment, as

in "The Armies of Being Here." Is your order of presentation often similar to your order of composition?

Blair: That is certainly what I would like to be true when I work on longer and more totalizing poems. William Wordsworth moves by rhythm. I'm happy to hear that a few shorter poems seem to have that sort of movement, which requires less miniaturization of the parts that constitute any given poem's structure. A lot of times my earliest drafts have a basic order that is similar to how a poem ends, though sometimes I scribble down things that I meant to include when the pattern suggested them to me but that I was unable to loop in exactly the first time. I think when I started out, I used to get order wrong, the process of becoming a writer being a process of writing better first drafts.

Yuill: Many of your poems are also about places, like Ireland, Cape Cod, the Jersey Shore, Somerville, and Boston. These poems always have an atmosphere of interpretation capering in them. I mean, they go beyond the workshop admonishment to show rather than tell, serving up an occasion—when one reads them, and particularly when one reads them aloud—of shared opinions, perspectives, and musings. Do you consciously tailor sentence structure—again, it's an instrument you play beautifully—to buoy or complicate the spirit and substance in these poems? Do you ever find, in looking back, a thread of formal preferences appearing in poems about places?

Blair: As a reader at least, I take an enormous amount of pleasure in the musical possibilities of syntax and sentence structure. It's not the only part of music, but it is the melody, to be resisted or not. When I wrote *Walk Around: Essays about Poetry and Place*, I was really talking about place as a sort of metaphor for emotional occasions met with the sensibility we derive from experiences in place, and not so much the Seamus Heaney thing about the names of rivers having magic consonants and such. I never really considered place as generative of language in itself, but the way people trade languages in places is very important to me. As a city poet, and as somebody who lived overseas for part of my childhood, who grew up with people speaking a lot of different kinds of English, and who lives in a place with a lot of great language variety around me, I think a poet has a lot of vocal range, but the range will go with the poet from place to place, like an accent or set of ac-

cents. If you have ever had a different accent than your classmates, as I did because of bussing and because we lived part of my childhood in Ireland, where my grandparents were from, you feel this. I think this is one of the things I loved about working in restaurants, which I did from the age of fifteen until I was practically thirty. There is better language, better swearing, more tone, and more love the further you move away from flat English.

One of the things you can sense if you start reading poets whose work has a certain kind of workshopped quality is that the education system is not an artistic system but rather one that flattens voices out into a sort of conformist and flavourless blah that limits the range of expressiveness and that may help cast some poets into a forlorn mode as they scramble to find connection through allusions to pop culture. When we say such and such a writer is full of voice, what we are hearing in a poet's language is the shadows and voices. One way to explain American poets is that they are writers who have a range of ways of goosing, succumbing to, or trying to establish dominant, safe, or unassailable language systems. I don't really believe in any of the classifications of poetry except that there are these very distinct attitudes towards authority that cross what seem to be the various parties.

Hard-wired and inventive hybridity of voice and range is all over the place in American prose, which is happier to be obnoxious, as in the work of James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, Delmore Schwartz, and Jack Kerouac, whose novel *Visions of Gerard* (1963) is actually him translating the French-Canadian patois he grew up with into English. It's also in American poetry. Alice Notley's essay "American Poetic Music at the Moment" (2005) talks about how fifties' notions of personal prosody led to all sorts of different kinds of voice getting into different poets' lines. She takes apart a few Ted Berrigan lines and finds working-class Providence hanging out in the mix in generative and interesting ways. That all gets run on the laundry lines of poets' syntax and sentence structure.

Cathy Park Hong writes about this beautifully in *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020), and I was happy that she included Richard Pryor, as I think a lot of writers first hear voice from comedy. There is a line from James Joyce to Lenny Bruce to George Carlin to Pryor, who are all very accurate expressionists. I grew up listening to Carlin's albums and his routines about Irish guys hanging out with Black guys and their different languages because my father—a fairly scrupulous user of language, an economist, and an all-around sharp guy—actually grew up with Carlin and

was his tenth-grade lab partner at Bishop Dubois High School in New York City. He would listen and basically get back into his west side but occasionally say something like, "That bit, I can really hear that he was listening to a lot of the guys from the South when he was in the Air Force after he got kicked out of school."

Yuill: When ordering the poems in your collections, after publishing them individually, do you find yourself considering their subject matter or the inspiration for them as part of the arc of a collection?

Blair: As I work on something, it's all about tone and pacing to me. If something has the right tone, then I know it broadly represents my feelings—that is, my need to push against the stupidity or cruelty of the authoritarian pose. Some poems also have the feeling of an opening, while others feel like the middle, and the ending poems feel like closers. I don't entirely call the work I do with things like ordering and writing "thinking," as I make decisions largely by instinct and on the level of pacing, more like "sort of thinking." When I notice there is a lag in pacing, I might become aware of something that feels tonally sour, and I might realize that I was dealing with the same subject or set of subjects and arriving at similar tones or a tone that sounds sour to my ear. Sometimes, for pacing, I might not include a poem that I actually really like. For instance, in the section of *True Figures* featuring poems from my earlier books, I included three that I did not include in *Ascension Days* or *Arsonville* because, for whatever reason, they would have hurt the flow, seemed reiterative, or changed the way other poems would be read. However, many of these poems made sense in *True Figures*, as this was a project in which I was using short poems as a way of reflecting on the public events of the last disastrous twenty-five years or so in personal terms and the places where we can see public psychology in personal poems. That was the case with "For George Romero," "Cowardly Couplets," and the send-up of courtly medievalism in "For William Morris," all of which I may have cut because my first book already had a literary flavour of allusion galore in the Goethe sequence, but they made sense here in terms of pacing and tonal content. In some ways the process of working on a manuscript is similar to the process of working on an individual poem. If your ideas are entirely clear at the start, then there is probably no reason to do the work.

Yuill: In early poems like "Ode to New Poems," "Mirrors ('*Spiegel der Muse*')," and "About the Expatriate Jazz Musician Steve Lacy, after Seeing Portraits of Han-shan and Shi-te," you serve up delightful formal and conceptual innovations of your own as dimensions of poems that also engage with other artists and/or works. Were you conscious of these particular works, and were there times you thought, "ah, I'd like to say this about that," or did these poems and their engagement with Rainer Maria Rilke, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Zen figures, and so forth, spring more organically from inspiration?

Blair: They are all different. For instance, the Rilke poem—from a more surreal period—was inspired in part by an old postcard I had of lions at the Detroit Zoo in the snow, and I liked that because zoos in the snow are a pleasure, particularly the Bronx Zoo and the Kodiak bears there, though I had read and thought about and taught the Rilke poems about zoo animals for years. I love Rilke, and I started reading him in high school, but I think he is so sombre and self-involved in his way of studying things that he can be a bad influence on poets who take themselves too seriously to begin with, as people read him without any push back or play, which can inadvertently cause a lot of romantic buffoonery in their personal worlds. I like Berryman's "Dream Song 3" (1964), in which he says, "Rilke was a *jerk*," and I love Alan Dugan's "Answer to the Rilke Question" (1989), in which he first agrees with Berryman, "You *were* a jerk," and then says, no, "You weren't really a jerk. / Berryman was really a jerk / to say a thing like that." Of course, the other thing about reading Rilke is his tensile packed explosive syntax—I was a rotten German student for a long time, so I enjoy unpacking translations next to the original—and I was sort of tipping my hat to him as well as dunking him in the carnival tank.

The riffs on Goethe in my first book were part of one of my rare extended formal and technical experiments, kind of like the prose poems that were originally in *Friends with Dogs*. One year somebody gave me an exceptionally strange notebook with a sort of velvet cover, which turned out to be a real donkey's ear. I decided that I would use it, so I tried my hand at translating Goethe with my imperfect German. Some lines I could manage, but sometimes I just riffed on sound, or I looked at what the translator said, and I messed around with content, "translating the content" into terms I could understand in my own physical circumstances. For example, the poem "*Die*

Spinnerin," which is about a girl working a spinning machine, became a poem about me trying to grill some franks and burgers on a Weber kettle grill, which looks like a space ship, so it occurred to me that maybe Judy Jetson would distract me. And Goethe is such an authority. I could not possibly imagine checking out anybody the way he does when he sees some peasantry in a *Blumenkleid*. The sexier and funnier Goethe in Rome is a somewhat different story. It was fun to work with him because, aside from *Faust* (1808/1832), I don't think he has had much of an impact on any American poet since Jarrell and W. H. Auden. I used to enjoy reading *Conversations with Eckermann* (1836) as drop-off reading, and I like to read his maxims and his travel writing, but there is something about the authority he takes onto himself that also makes him a natural for pushing against, irreverently albeit affectionately. Reading Czesław Miłosz's American work is like reading a Goethe who has been given a lot of bad news.

Yuill: The kindness in these poems seems clear, even when they are critical of something or someone. What would you say are the sources of that? Is it possible to learn the sweetness or forgiveness these poems confer on an often unforgiving world? Even a poem like "Lousy Person" has a benedictory tint of warmth and understanding. Do you decide, thinking morally, what the right qualities are with which to infuse these poems?

Blair: I think everybody has a share in whatever is messed up in the world. The ability to write a poem or a story is the ability to identify with a wide range of people and to look at them from the inside. I certainly don't try to sound kind, and I broadly agree with the thing Dobyns points out in his essay "Chekhov's Sense of Writing as Seen through His Letters" (2003): the way to elicit a reader's sympathy is to sound a bit tough.

Another answer to this question would be the basic thing my friend Rebekah, a photography professor and culture jammer, tells her students: look around, notice people and things outside your inner world, and train yourself to do that for years.