

Doubly Mad Interview

Let's start with the basics: Who are you? Where did you come from? How the hell did you become a writer?

At the expense of a more allegorical answer, I'll say I was raised in a conservative little town in Pennsylvania Dutch country, about three miles from Hershey. When the wind blew in the right direction, you could smell chocolate in the air as you walked to school. This might have instilled a false sense of security in us, but our town did have one dark distinction: we were the sinkhole capital of the northeast. Parts of the community were built over a porous limestone foundation. Over the years, whole blocks had gone under. Several streets had to be closed. The confluence of these two concepts—that the air we breathed was full of candy promises, and that the ground could open up beneath us at any time—had, shall we say, “character-informing” consequences. Add to that the fact I was a minister’s son. This meant that certain kinds of language were all around me—biblical cadences, hymns, liturgies. You can’t grow up with all that salvation around you and not ponder some of The Big Questions.

I have been writing from an early age, and it has always seemed that I was “meant to” become a writer. I introduced myself to my ninth grade English teacher, Bill Snyder, by dropping a sixty-page play on his desk. By the time I graduated high school, I knew I had to be an English major.

I studied with John Taggart at Shippensburg State College. Taggart is an interesting experimental poet, and he emphasized the need to “find a language.” “Most people your age have nothing to say,” he told me, “but you can learn to work with language, and let it guide you to the right place.” I bristled at the “nothing to say,” but in a sense, he was right. One can have all the “experience” in the world, but without the right words to convey it, you are stuck with platitudes and commonplaces.

Shippensburg had a wonderful series of poetry readings. I was editor of the school literary magazine, and got to interview writers like Gary Snyder and Ralph Ellison. One reading that stands out in my mind was Russell Edson, the prose poem fabulist. I don’t think I’ve ever heard such nervous laughter from an audience. Yes, his pieces are often uproariously funny, but I was convinced that people were laughing in the sad parts, too. Many simply did not know how to take him or his mix of fractured fairy-tale, pathology, and family dysfunction. Anyway, at the after party Edson held a group of co-eds spellbound by musing how bloodstains were just the thing to “set off” John Taggart’s cream-colored shag carpet. Naturally, he entered my “writer’s wheelhouse.”

At Syracuse University, I had the opportunity to work with Ray Carver, whose short stories were becoming very much in vogue. There seemed to be a departmental divide between “traditionalists” (including the creative writers) and the “literary theory” folks. I found myself straddling both worlds. I tried to write some highly experimental work and actually published a bit of it, but the only thing I published in the graduate program’s annual *Syracuse Stories and Poems* was, in fact, a poem, which I was honored to have Hayden Carruth select. I began to wonder, however—what did I want to write? I wasn’t interested in traditional stories. I wearied quickly of plot and character development—all that “furniture moving,” as John Taggart once put it.

As it turned out, I wrote practically nothing for thirty years. I learned to play blues harmonica. I married and began to raise a family. I taught Freshman and sophomore comp courses at S.U. I became a visual artist, too, again eschewing mimetic art for abstract expressionism. Oh, I wrote lots of songs and record reviews, and once in awhile, I'd jot down some "literary" ideas, but nothing came to fruition. I pretty much convinced myself that while I wanted to be a writer, I was not in fact "one who writes."

When we first met it was, in fact, at a blues gig you were playing here in Utica at the Polish Community Club. A mutual friend of ours suggested I meet you. He had studied with you, and as I was searching for local writers who might be interested in publishing with Doubly Mad and its affiliated Black Rabbit Press, he urged me to look you up. The poetry you showed me at the time is very different from what we ended up working on together in your first two books, Reading the Empty Page and Night Class for Insomniacs, and everything else that you've written since then. It's a sort of point-blank question, but what happened?

It was the confluence of several factors. I got a full-time faculty position at Mohawk Valley Community College and encountered a few very good students and writers, so we started *Argus*, a campus literary magazine. These activities relit the old pilot light. I began to write three poetic essays consisting of aphorisms, dialogues, verse fragments and prose explications, somewhat in the manner of Edmond Jabes. Much to my amazement, I was able to set goals—a certain number of pages for each "essay"—and stick to them. And of course it certainly helped that I met you! Just as I was coming to my late bloomer fruition, along comes an editor for a new local press who is interested in seeing my work! Serendipity! With that added motivation, I doubled down. Also, I began to read more poetry—prose poetry, too, since I liked to play in genre's fringes. I came across Charles Simic's Pulitzer prize-winning *The World Doesn't End* (the first book of prose poetry to receive the award). Simic's elliptical prose poems opened my eyes to the possibilities of blending autobiography with surrealism, and his "poems proper" furthered that education. And so my first two books *Reading The Empty Page* and *Night Class for Insomniacs* were born.

A lot of your work from around 2014-2017, when we were working on those two projects together, is focused in one way or another on language itself. It's interesting to me that from a more focused, almost rational appraisal of language, you've moved out to a more and more imaginative one in more recent work.

I'm a believer in epistemic rhetoric—the idea that rhetoric creates reality. Your words don't simply reflect the world as it is. Your words actually shape the way you see that world. So therefore looking for a language is looking for a world. What an artist may be seeking is a *blend* of influences, using a range of languages in juxtaposition—to mix, say, the sacred and profane, pop culture and high culture, the academic and the personal. I think John Ashbery is relevant here; many of his poems are great pastiches of language, often dissolving into each other and never reaching a final destination. Reading most poems is like dialing in a particular radio station until you get a strong, clear signal. Reading Ashbery is like turning the dial from one end of the spectrum to the other and listening to *all* the stations as they blur into each other, as well as the white noise in between. It's the juxtaposing of these many voices—the gospel music, the laxative ads, the Petula Clark song, the right wing commentator, the baseball game, the punk rock—that matters, and not any single one.

Not having to write a “typical poem” conferred a kind of freedom. It probably won’t come as a shock to you to learn that I seldom begin with an idea or subject and then force the poem to fit it. I wouldn’t, for example, say “I think I’ll call this poem ‘The Horse,’” and then write a poem in which every line was about a horse. For me, the poem is a space in which to explore what I *don’t know*, which is pretty much everything. The act of writing, to some extent, involves keeping myself in a state of blissful receptivity. If I think too hard, I lose it. This is not unlike the way some abstract expressionist painters worked; they didn’t begin with a plan of what the finished work would look like. They painted to *find out*.

I established a routine while working on the material in *Holding a Séance by Myself*—which was to write every morning, usually beginning with a line that seemed to bubble up from someplace I hadn’t yet mapped. The line had to sizzle; it had to offer a glimpse of something as if seen by lightning, or perhaps the bioluminescence of deep-sea creatures. That line I would dangle deeper in the dark, waiting for another tug. Sometimes—often, in fact—the next line would feel totally incongruous, bearing no obvious relationship to its predecessor besides contiguity. I quickly learned that this could be a good thing. It *was* a good thing. If I tried to channel the poem too soon, I’d usually lose it. Better to let the poem channel me. I was creating a waking dream, or it was creating me, and it would either find a direction at some point or, if nothing else, remain an interesting verbal Rorschach inkblot. But working this way was exciting! I had a tremendous burst of creativity from 2018 until just recently. Even my heart surgery did little to slow me down—in fact, it spurred me on, in many ways. Certainly, I developed a palette of images to describe my brush with the Big Sinkhole, some of which appear in my two most recent books, *Tangent of Ardency* (SurVision Books) and *Holding a Séance By Myself* (Standing Stone Press). It’s really in these that I begin to find the style that has sustained me.

There is a sort of risk, though, in losing one’s audience this way, isn’t there? We have joked in the past about how people who know you as a blues musician buy your books and wonder after reading a few pages what the hell they’re looking at. Some might even call your work cerebral. I personally feel it is dream-like, and that, especially in the poems of Séance, you have managed to create poems which function very closely to dreams, using, essentially, surrealist techniques. What do you think? Does your style prohibit others from engaging with your work? Or does it allow a glimpse into a deeper reservoir we all contain in one way or another?

Yes, my poems were written under the shadow of surrealism, and surrealism *was* an intellectual movement, with its own theoretical bases—among them Freudian psychology; it is ironic that a group who extolled imaginative “freedom,” unfettered by reason, also gave us a series of manifestos outlining detailed rules for “membership.” Surrealism’s so-called leader, Andre Breton, seemed always to be excommunicating writers and artists who violated these rules. The history of surrealism is fraught with arguments and group fractures over technique and political affiliation (Breton was a communist; Salvatore Dali, the popular surrealist painter, was a fascist who supported Franco). But despite these “all too human” conflicts, the surrealist writers as a group developed “automatic writing” and other aleatory techniques designed to plumb the subconscious—and these techniques became very influential. The surrealists created a new kind of “image” in poetry, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that they created new ways of *contextualizing* images that did not depend on reason, chronology, close analogy or an already-developed allegorical system. “The chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table” is Lautréamont’s famous phrase. Essentially, surrealist free-writing applies the

“condensation” and “displacement” Freud observed in dreams to the imagery of poetry or prose. As in dreams, one image does not “logically” follow another. So while the resultant combinations of imagery may seem bizarre, held together by mere “chance,” they can never be totally random because, after all, a mind has placed them together.

Is this conjuring and arranging of subconscious images “cerebral”? Well, yes and no. As I already explained, these images can’t be summoned by force of will—at least that is my experience. One must place oneself in a state of receptivity and hope they appear. It’s not unlike being a medium. Some days, it’s easy to pick up the signal; other days, it’s like trying to find a radio station while driving through a tunnel. The experience of writing a surrealist poem, therefore, is unlike the experience of constructing a logical argument in a sonnet. But it is still *thinking*, and it demands a particular kind of discipline and “background knowledge.” In this sense, it is cerebral. What’s more, contemporary writers who borrow surrealist techniques often put them to use in more conventionally cerebral ways. For instance, many of my poems, in the process of unfurling their fragments of dream imagery, also address philosophical issues; several allude to literary theory and its specialized jargon, and they do so without providing explanatory toeholds for readers. One function of these allusions is to suggest ways of reading and processing the absurdity of the poem itself. It’s fair to say that my poems’ so-called “formal qualities”—their disjunctive nature, their bizarre imagery, their willingness to leap between many kinds of discourse, and their aesthetic “asides”—stem in part from these theoretical ideas which come under the purview of “postmodernism.” Postmodernism regards with skepticism common sense notions about “self” and “world,” language and perception. My poems sometimes display this skepticism, though seldom in the form of a lucid, abstract argument. Like many postmodern writers, I eschew high-minded seriousness; I deliver most of my allusions “tongue in cheek,” with a sort of Dadaist irreverence, though I doubt the humor matters to readers who lack the background knowledge required to “get” the joke. Consequently, my approach will alienate some readers. Still, what am I to do? I *want* to incorporate these concepts; they *interest* me (at least the ones I understand)—and besides, my goal was never to reach everybody.

Where do you see your work headed?

Well, I’m pretty excited to talk about the three-or-so books’ worth of material that I’ve already finished but which haven’t yet seen publication. *The Shape-Shifter’s Diary*, *Sweet Tooth Talking*, and *The Signal Fades*, all written since 2019, are where the ideas I’ve been talking about here come to fruition, more or less. I’ve become more comfortable with my little waking dreams. I’ve learned to play in the boundaries between poetry and prose, learned to work the disjunctions and repetitions, and, most importantly I’ve learned to tap into a deep well of images that can’t be arrived at through logic or formula. You can’t *will* them into being; you have to sit down and wait for them, every day. All you can do is make yourself more receptive—raise (or lower) that antenna and put yourself in a waking dream state—I call it “one-eyed R.E.M.” This, by the way, is what the title *Holding a Séance By Myself* refers to. It’s about summoning those images, memories, ghosts, textual allusions, and oh yes *feelings*, letting them circle overhead, and trying to “take dictation” from them, getting as close to their original language as possible. Later, if need be, I can try to make more “sense” out of them, but usually my inclination is to let them fall as they may. That’s why some of the pieces seem more “scattered” than others, and I’m fine with that: after all, there’s meaning in the gaps, too. “Let the ghosts speak!” I say—even though I never met Mrs. Yeats!

I like to believe that I'm not merely "inventing" strange images and little else—an accusation that Wallace Stevens hurls at the surrealists; he says that, while they may invent "accordion playing clams," their failure is to "discover" something about the real world. I would argue that dreams are part of the real world—of our human world, anyway. We spend a third of our lives sleeping, and much more time than that never fully awake. For me, there's a permeable boundary between the so-called "real world" and the inchoate, subterranean psychic dwelling places where we actually spend our time. We move through dreams and great constellations of language, which help us to find—and define—ourselves. Who we are at any given moment is dependent on the languages we are enmeshed in at the time, i.e., which verbal maps we're using. Most people remain within what, for shorthand's sake, I'll call *conventional* realms of language: the everyday cafeteria talk, the six o'clock news, social media gossip, family dinner banter, barroom conversations, radio love songs, "work speak," and marketing algorithms. Literature's job—one of literature's jobs—is to *defamiliarize* that language, to get us outside our customary frames of understanding. I take that responsibility seriously because I've seen what happens to people when they're trapped inside carefully constructed echo chambers—even, or especially, in the matrices of poetry itself.

And you know, that's what makes this writing life so exciting, so compelling. That *groping toward*. We call it "looking for a language" or "seeking a style," but that oversimplifies it, I think. Take Hemingway for example: he didn't just sit down one day and say "I think I'll try short, clipped sentences." He worked through lots of influences: Sherwood Anderson (whom he later rejected), Gertrude Stein, Pound, Joyce, the paintings of Cézanne, and perhaps most tellingly, the style book of the *Kansas City Star*. Finding his style wasn't just a matter of selecting concrete words and certain kinds of syntax. It was learning to *see* with them, to map certain kinds of worlds with them.

I understand that my methods might be too specialized for some readers—too allusive, bookish, and strange—but I choose to reach as many as I can by doing what I've *groped toward* all these years. Who knows? You might develop a taste for it! So to those who enjoy the work, who understand, or at least *feel*, parts of it, I thank you, and you're welcome to come along for the next three books!

Tom's Recommended Reading: Ten Books

Ashbery, John. *Your Name Here*. Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. 2001.

Bohn, Willard. *Surrealist Poetry: An Anthology*. New York and London: Bloombury Press. 2017.

Breton, Andre. *Poems of Andre Breton*. University of Texas Press. 1982.

Edson, Russell. *The Tunnel: Selected Poems*. Oberlin College Press. 1994.

Simic, Charles. *The World Never Ends*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovicz. 1989.

Taggart, John. *Is Music: Selected Poems*. Copper Canyon Press. 2010.

Tate, James. *Worshipful Company of Fletchers*. Ecco Press. 1994.

Tate, James. *Shroud of the Gnome*. Ecco Press. 1997.

Wier, Dara. *Selected Poems*. Seattle and New York: Wave Books. 2009.

Young, Dean. *Bender: New & Selected Poems*. Copper Canyon Press. 2012.