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TOM YUILL

KISS THE SKY: AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM SEIBLES

TIM SEIBLES IS ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST INNOVATIVE and urgently needed poets. Born in Philadelphia in 1955 to a high school English teacher and a biochemist, he developed an early interest in Greek mythology, science fiction, and sports. After graduating high school in 1973, he attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where he hoped to play football. He successfully made the team as a freshman walk-on, but he hardly ever played and eventually quit in his sophomore year. At the same time, poet Michael Ryan was starting a creative writing program at SMU, and Seibles took one of his first writing workshops. Reflecting on this experience, Seibles said, "I found a freedom in words that I'd never known in anything else," and "I was easily convinced that writing was something I could and should do *forever*."

He earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1977 and began working as a substitute teacher and stereo salesman. He gradually drifted into teaching full-time—at the inner-city North Dallas High School for eight years and the Episcopal School of Dallas for another two—while continuing to write poems. In 1988 he published his first collection, *Body Moves*, and enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program at Vermont College. While studying in Vermont he became captivated by "how tension and momentum are sustained in a narrative," and he developed a particular fondness for longer, sprawling poems. One of his teachers, Jack Myers, described him as "a natural, gliding up in long sleek poems, crooning the creamy and glamorous politics of need."

After graduating, he received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1990 as well as a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1991, which allowed him to focus solely on writing. For the next two years he worked as the Writing Coordi-

nator of the Fine Arts Work Center, and he also won the Open Voice Award from the National Writers Voice Project at New York's West Side YMCA.

In 1992 he published his second collection, *Hurdy-Gurdy*, which featured several poems that refer to familiar characters from popular culture, including a series of love letters between Boris and Natasha—characters from the popular animated television series *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* (1959-1964). Several poems also explicitly dealt with the issue of race, such as a poem in which the speaker fantasizes about assassinating the white president of South Africa and another that imagines civilization stemming from one African Eve—the mother of all humanity. Mark Cox described it as “an exciting book—at once fluid, shapely, and steady as stone—whose tensions lead us to an authentic meditative wholeness,” and Sandra Cisneros emphasized its haunting, sonorous quality: “This is not a poetry of the highfalutin violin nor the somber cello, but a melody you heard somewhere that followed you home.”

His next book, *Hammerlock* (1999), also incorporated references to popular culture, such as the poem “What Bugs Bunny Said to Red Riding Hood” and a series of poems in the voices of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner—characters from the *Looney Tunes* (1930-1969) and *Merrie Melodies* (1931-1969) theatrical cartoons. As with his previous collection, these poems attempted to use popular culture as a way of examining the state of American society. Bugs Bunny discusses the dangers of urban life, for example, and the Road Runner discusses the spiritual exhaustion of the modern world. In his review of the collection, Reginald McKnight wrote: “A houseful of voices speaks through him in language so tenable, you’ll at times feel bruised, at times made love to. I read a lot of poetry. I’ve never read poetry like this.” Li-Young Lee similarly praised Seibles’ ability to shift “from anguish to comedy, from transcendence to earthly bewilderment,” and he added that “the joy of reading these poems is like overhearing a very smart, crazy neighbor’s thoughts as they move between philosophical inquiry and praise for the everyday.”

His next book, *Buffalo Head Solos* (2004), was divided into four sections narrated by a cow, a mosquito, a primate, and a virus, who each discuss a wide range of topics, including religion, politics, love, and cultural heritage. Seibles said that this style of writing—which he called “persona poems”—allowed him “to escape [his] own tired habits” and “see in a way that [he] hadn’t considered.” In a statement he shared with the online audio

archive *From the Fishhouse*, he also emphasized the importance of using different styles and shifting between different registers: “I think poetry, if it’s going to be really engaging and engaged, has to be able to come at the issues of our lives from all kinds of angles and all kinds of ways: loudly and quietly, angrily and soothingly, with comedy and with dead seriousness. . . . Our lives are worth every risk, every manner of approach.” Joey Rubin praised the collection for its humour, yet he also noted that it is “not just trying to make us laugh.” Nin Andrews also described the book as challenging the modern tendency to ignore social problems: “In this mystical, romantic, and political collection, Seibles is willing to take a chance, any chance to engage the general malaise of our times. He is a musician of the spirit and of the body, and it is that quality which carries us forward breath by breath, line by line. The journey is oddly enchanting, even transformative.”

In 2010 he was invited to serve as poet-in-residence at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where he completed *Fast Animal* (2012), his most successful and celebrated work to date. The poems in this collection not only jump between the past and the present but also explore a wide range of poetic forms, including lyric, ode, and narrative. The publishers described it as a collection that “threads the journey from youthful innocence to the whittled-hard awareness of adulthood” and that “immerses the reader in palpable moments—the importance of remembering, the burden of race, and the meaning of true wakefulness.” The book won the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Prize and the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award, and it was one of five finalists for the National Book Award. The judges’ citation for the nomination read as follows: “Seibles’ work is proof: the new American poet can’t just speak one language. In his new book, he fuses our street corners’ quickest wit, our violent vernaculars, and our numerous tongues of longing and love. He records danger. He records the sensual world. And he records a troubled enlightenment, which is a ‘fast animal’ pivoting toward two histories at once.”

His most recent book, *One Turn Around the Sun* (2016), focuses on the time in life when a person becomes the caretaker of parents, and it also examines the forces that shape a person’s personality and the question of how one can remain sane when political circumstances seem to preclude the possibility of creating a sane world. As he explained: “I was, and still am, interested in how we, as people and artists, can cultivate hope for a future that isn’t simply a prolongation of nightmare. There’s a real sense

that the world isn't working, that it's become this bloody, ugly, consumptive, diseased, fearful place that's unlivable. I'm interested in asking how we might see beyond this." Like his previous collection, therefore, *One Turn Around the Sun* similarly encouraged readers to engage with contemporary life and to resist the desire to avoid pressing social concerns. Kwame Dawes praised the "vulnerable" and "daring" nature of these poems as well as their "alluring sensuality" and "welcoming humor," and Adam Tavel described the book as "a moving and sinuous collection that copes with . . . the ways in which race and technology perpetually complicate American society."

Seibles' poems have also appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Artful Dodge*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Black American Literary Forum*, *Callaloo*, *Cortland Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *New England Review*, *New Letters*, *Ploughshares*, and *Red Brick Review*, as well as several anthologies, including *New American Poets in the 90s* (1991), *In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry* (1994), *Verse & Universe: Poems About Science and Mathematics* (1998), *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (2005), *Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African-American Poetry* (2005), *Evensong: Contemporary American Poets on Spirituality* (2006), *Kiss the Sky: Fiction and Poetry Starring Jimi Hendrix* (2007), *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African-American Nature Poetry* (2009), *So Much Things to Say* (2010), *Sunken Garden Poetry* (2012), *Villanelles* (2012), and *Best American Poetry* (2010 and 2012).

He is now Professor Emeritus at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia and was selected as the Poet Laureate of Virginia in 2016. He also taught for many years in the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Southern Maine, and he currently serves as a faculty member of the Muse Writers Workshop.

The following interview was conducted in Norfolk in the spring of 2019.

Tom Yuill: Childhood is an ideal time, but it can also be infused with adult concerns, as children are often puzzled about things that do and don't work. Can you talk about your poems that recall childhood or young adulthood? Do you think "the child is the father of the man," as William Wordsworth wrote in his famous poem "My Heart Leaps Up," or do Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" and Robert Pinsky's "The Forgetting" make more sense?

In other words, do you find your poems building on the idyllic experience of childhood or musing upon and remaking the past as a necessary creative act?

Tim Seibles: I admit that I do idealize my childhood and teenage years. Between the ages of 2 and 17, my head was not besieged by so much bullshit worry and general lunacy. I didn't walk around with the daily news teething on my brain. I write about those times and who I thought I was then because it helps me see how much I've changed and/or lost in becoming an "adult." And what does adulthood mean: that we've learned to grit our teeth without knowing it or that we've learned to grin and bear a world governed by fucked-up systems that normalize violence, poverty, xenophobia, and environmental stupidity? I don't want that to be what adulthood is, but that's often how it feels.

When I write about my younger years, it's also to celebrate the ease and wonder of those times: how much faith one has in the world and how glorious and noble adulthood appears from a youthful vantage point. Even as a teenager, when you begin to see cracks in the veneer of the adult world, you still can't wait to be one—to be so free and wise in the world. I also want those poems to be elegies for my early life.

Yuill: Poems like "Commercial Break: Roadrunner, Uneasy" and "Midnight: The Coyote, Down in the Mouth" also seem to incorporate elements of children's culture and shape them beautifully into adult meditations.

Seibles: Those are both adult meditations on cartoons that, though loved by children, clearly have a whole lot to say about our embattled adult lives. For example, the Coyote is destined to forever pursue what he cannot have—an obvious nod to our lives as consumers—and the Road Runner always escapes but is never free of the chase—like living paycheck to paycheck. There is no time to think but just to run and run some more.

Yuill: The forms, innovations, and line breaks in your poems seem very informed, both as structures and freedoms, as you demonstrate formal virtuosities as well as a disinclination to obey strict "rules." (I'm particularly thinking of the villanelles in *Fast Animal*.) Do you consciously choose such forms or let inspiration guide you?

Seibles: I do love formal poems—especially villanelles—so sometimes I listen for a 10-11 syllable line that could operate in repetition. It doesn't have to be strictly iambic, dactylic, trochaic, or whatever; if the syllable count is close, line by line, you get a regular groove, but with organic surprises in syntax and sound. However, it's just as likely that I'll stumble into a villanelle, just as I stumble into poems that are free verse in their motions. You can't prescribe too much; you have to trust what bubbles up by its own force, and part of the discipline of being a poet is learning how to be a conduit for whatever comes. If it's of no consequence, then the first draft will die in the notebook. But if a line or a stanza keeps calling you back, then you might really have something. William Stafford talked about this process as "fishing." In effect, he was saying, you can't ignore any bites because you don't always know how big the fish is until you reel it in. I've tried to live by this.

Generally speaking, the formal decisions that govern the length and shape of these poems (and any of my poems) are based on how I perceive the voice that is speaking. Every poem I've written has begun with something that seems spoken in my head. As the poem develops, I try to remain true to how the words come through the voice. The caesuras, the turning of lines, where a stanza ends—all of this is based on something inwardly heard, along with the diction and tone.

Of course, my own strangeness is part of what happens on the page—my intuitions and the gentle gravity of all those writers who helped build the foundation from which I write, such as Langston Hughes, Pablo Neruda, Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Sexton, Lucille Clifton, James Dickey, Primus St. John, W. S. Merwin, and Robert Hayden, to name just a few.

Yuill: What are some of your favourite poems?

Seibles: Though it's anthologized heavily, I often return to Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays." It's simply beautiful and sad and true. I also love César Vallejo's "Black Stone Lying on a White Stone," and of course how can I resist the pulse and uplift of Clifton's "Hag Riding"? I mean, all of us who write poems love many, many poems. It was the falling in love with poems that made us try to write in the first place.

Yuill: Do these poems clarify life for you by bringing it into focus and helping you cope with situations or do you mainly think of them as pleasures?

Seibles: I think poems have to be, in some way, pleasurable. Even if the news they bring is painful or raging or pointing toward abject despair, there must be some good music in them (subtle or symphonic)—something that allows the reader or listener to feel wiser and to sense the world in a way that both clarifies and enlarges our human place in it. We spend many hours of our waking lives befuddled, frustrated, and half-aware. A poem—no matter its subject—should be an antidote to all of that.

Yuill: Your essay on “The Black Aesthetic in Twentieth-Century African-American Poetry” also emphasizes the importance of oral performance. Is this related to the idea that there must be some “good music” in a poem? In other words, does orality enhance the musicality of writing or transform the act of writing into a kind of musical performance?

Seibles: I often think of oral performance—*saying a poem out loud to an audience*—as giving a concert. Your presence, voice, and sense of timing are important to the people who came to listen. It’s also a communal experience, as there’s a real exchange between a poet and her/his live audience. It’s an implied conversation as well as a journey—all of which is connected to what the poet does in the performative moment. I *read* the way I do because I want to bear honest witness to what I hear in my head while composing but also because I am often caught up in the emotions that drove me to write the poem in the first place.

I think every poet would like readers to read their poems aloud. However, what I hope is that, no matter what people get from a reading, they’ll get as much or more by sitting in silence, thinking, and feeling through the poems. A live reading simply adds dimension to the silent reading experience. Perhaps the reader gains a clearer sense of the poet’s music and/or how s/he might feel the language on the page.

Analogously, seeing a musician perform is different from “listening to the album.” You have a chance to witness how the music lives and works on the performer’s body. Jimi Hendrix is a perfect example of this: it’s clear when listening to the album *Electric Ladyland* (1968) that he’s a virtuoso, but *watching* him play completely corroborates the depth of feeling that one imagines from listening. A good performance—whether it is a poetry reading or a concert—also gives the listener permission to embrace the force of her/his own heart as it comes. Most of us spend a *lot* of time avoiding the

weight of what we feel and denying the difficulty of all we suspect is going on within us and beyond us, so a performance in which the artist truly embodies her/his own work is liberating for both the artist and the audience. Federico García Lorca wrote an entire essay, “Theory and Play of the *Duende*” (1933), in which he tried to define the mesmerizing power that informs a great performative exchange.

Yuill: Your reference to Hendrix seems significant, as he figures prominently in your work. Your essay “Some Reflections on Jimi Hendrix” also argues that he “changed our grasp of what might be known and felt in sound” and that he helped you to realize “there was more to me than I was being given by the times.” What do you mean by this?

Seibles: I have loved his music since I was about 12 years old, but my deep connection to what Hendrix made largely remains mysterious to me. I guess something in my head and heart is some approximation of what moved his head and heart. I often felt a little strange growing up, as if I were tuning in to something others were not. As an adult, I’ve wanted to break the boundaries that were supposed to define my life—particularly in terms of race, gender, aesthetics, and religion. I wanted to say what I wasn’t hearing said, and Hendrix struck me as an emblem of daring and freedom. Why else do we fall in love with an artist of any kind? They are saying, singing, painting, or dancing *what we wish we could*. That’s why we mouth the words when our favourite singer is doing her thing. How many times have I recited poems by Hayden, Merwin, Clifton, or Neruda because the words seemed to belong to me and I wished that they were mine?

Yuill: Your most recent book, *One Turn Around the Sun*, is a stunning meditation on life—its genesis, sources, and passing phases. Some parts of our lives seem to coalesce, not when they happen, but when they are rendered into art. Did writing the book shape or inform your own experience going forward?

Seibles: Every time you take a poem through the many drafts required for completion you learn something about writing and yourself—how you sense things, how deeply you feel about things, and what can be known. Given this, in completing a book, an awful lot happens. You feel larger and, in

some ways, more clear about life—or, at least, your own life. In *One Turn Around the Sun*, I was wrestling with mortality and family, and you can't get much more fundamental than that. I think the subject matter and the time spent with those poems made me feel my own life and the lives of others more sharply.

Yuill: The physical world also comes alive in your similes and metaphors, so objects like the sun or a tennis ball seem to be spiritual beings. Do you bestow life on worldly objects as a reflection of a sense of the sweetness of life in the world?

Seibles: Well, in spite of some pretty bad developments on our beloved Earth, I still believe in life and in human beings. I hope that some of my poems insist on the beauty and mystery and good fun here.

Yuill: For many years one of my favourite poems has been “Outtakes from an Interview with Malcolm X after Mecca: January 1965.” The poem obviously honours, humanizes, and showcases Malcolm X, but it also seems to work as a mask—a way for you to ventriloquize and be advised by Malcolm's kind genius. Can you talk about taking for your poem Malcolm's words from after he went to Mecca?

Seibles: In the white imagination, Malcolm X was often characterized as an embodiment of black resentment towards whites everywhere—an anti-Martin Luther King, Jr.—but he was actually much more than that. That's not to say that he didn't have real hostility toward overtly racist whites and the imperatives that drove European whites to colonize and devastate the non-white world. He certainly did—and, truthfully, part of the reason he was so beloved by black people was his embodiment of their righteous indignation in the face of so many horrors.

Before Mecca, Malcolm believed that the problem was white skin—that is, whites were born to wage war against black and brown and red folks through some genetic defect. After Mecca, he realized the problem wasn't skin colour but rather ideology: the ruthless behaviour of whites was caused by whiteness as an ideological construct. In other words, he saw that the virulent racism that had defined most of American history was rooted in ignorance and deliberate deception. White people were as capable of com-

passion as any other people, but they, in large part, had fallen under the governance of white supremacy, which was bolstered and sustained for the sake of exploitation and profit. In this poem I wanted to bear witness to his transformation as well as his ongoing struggle against bigotry. I'd hoped the poem might act as an invitation—to white people and to people of colour—to reconsider who Malcolm X was and to think harder about the toll racism takes on EVERY person.

Yuill: “Ten Miles an Hour” also shows imagined happiness characterized by people being kind to each other. The admonishment to believe in the possible rather than being reduced to the actual is articulated in that sweet voice, already well-established: “I sweartagod . . . There is a place not all that far from here. // . . . inside my hand / there is a sound, and inside that sound / there is a city and inside that city / it is early—with you already awake.” How did you go about saying something so positive after acknowledging such painful truths? Was there a desire to put such a noble vision into language or were you writing the poem and finding your way there?

Seibles: What I'm really doing in a poem like “Ten Miles an Hour” is hitting the accelerator and refusing to use the brakes—just letting my heart grab my head and running for the fuckin' hills. So there is always the sense that one is discovering the poem. You know the old adage: no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. I mean, that's why we write, I think: to see what we know and find out what we feel about what we know.

Regarding the nobility and pleasures of that poem, contrasted with that emblem of hate, well every day the world comes at us with its loveliness and cruelty. I don't care who you are, you can't escape the various insanities and sufferings that go on. When I conceived of this poem, I was sitting in Logan Airport in Boston, waiting on a return flight to Virginia. I was watching all kinds of people go hither and yon and I thought, wouldn't it be righteous as hell if people could simply remake this world for delight? So the poem was me playing with the enactment of that idea.

I never truly considered the nobility of that vision. I believe the human heart is a noble instrument—a beautiful instrument—often ruined by the systems into which we are born. I just wanted to write a poem that said a fundamental “yes” to human passion and sweetness.

Yuill: What are you working on at the moment?

Seibles: “The Dead Play Blues Villanelle” is one of a series of what I’m calling “blues villanelles.” I’ve probably written about twenty of them by now. I love the idea of approaching song aggressively in poems—that a poem might be sung or spoken in a bar far away from the formalities of a *reading*—and I get to approach singing more directly in these poems because the blues and the villanelle both originated as ways to sing. They also originated in the mouths of people who were poor and often brutally overworked—the blues coming from the experience of enslaved Africans who conjured field hollers to make their labour more bearable, the villanelle rising from 16th-century Italian peasants who sang this form into being as they sweated in the fields.

“Like It Or Not” is part of another series in which a poem is a character—or even the *protagonist*—in the poem. This allows me to both discuss the plight of poetry as well as roam that not-quite-wilderness where meanings are fluid and words might add up to sharply different readings. Because a poem is not a person—not a truly animate thing—its *life* bends the rules of life. This allows some surrealist gestures and other ill-defined kinds of subversion.

Yuill: I often think of Ezra Pound’s exhortation to “make it new” (from Canto LIII), which seems to call for the creation of new forms as well as the reimagining or reinvention of older forms. How important is formal innovation in your work? Are you always attempting to do something new?

Seibles: I don’t consciously decide to try something new. What usually happens is that I stumble into a poem that seems unlike others I’ve written. If I like what happens, I’ll try another piece in a similar vein. It’s really rooted in intuition—a feeling of possibility. Sometimes I’ll write something that surprises me, and that’s it—I don’t try to look any further. Sometimes there’ll seem to be a long hall with many doors that I feel have to be opened.

Yuill: Do you ever think about the connective tissue between your earlier poems and what you’re working on now?

Seibles: I don’t think a lot about it, but I suppose these pieces are con-

nected to other work I've done insofar as I almost always think of the music of a poem's language as part of its body of meaning. I also see some connections in my subject matter. For example, I've always been interested in memory—in recalling what once was in relation to what is now. It also appears that sexuality has always been an itch in my brain—something I've wanted to engage and perhaps reimagine in my poetry. But there are new things too—a whelming mysticism, I think, and I believe I'm watching the world through a bigger window now.