

POETRY AND DIALOGUE

with DANIEL MORRIS

Beautiful Guitar (A Murmur of Names)

after Yeats

Last night holding two-week old Hannah,
gazing at Live by Request on A&E,

whom do I see
leading the first disco
punk band to play CBGB?

Joy, I shout to my wife (who was about to say
WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING?),

you've got to come in here quick.

A stupid thing for me to say, I agree.

She's in the boys' bedroom,
changing Aaron, aged one
and three quarters, and it is late
into another sixteen-hour day
of repetitive multi tasking and dish
juggling for two adults involved
in trying to handle three under three
when you are both over 40 and weary
from mere being, three kids or no three kids.
NOT Debbie Harry, but my aunt.

Diane Simon, 78, currently residing in Pembroke Pines, Florida,
but formerly of Plainview, Long Island, nine years my mother's elder,
fronting what I take to be (or used to be??) Blondie.

And now I see as I look even more closely

at the screen that my Cousin Adam,
currently of Rhinebeck, New York,
where he is a spiritual counselor after
leaving the gangster-ridden trucking business
following a promising career as a lacrosse star
at UCONN, has replaced Chris Stein
(Debbie Harry's Beau) on lead guitar.
And a beautiful guitar it is, a Strat.
Odd that he is no longer balding,
but it is definitely Adam Simon, not Chris Stein.
There is so much I didn't know
about this side of the extended family.
We are not a big family, so it is not so hard
to keep pretty close tabs. Diane
is my mother's only sister. Diane
only had two children, Adam being one,
Rise the other. My father, now long deceased,
was an only child, and his parents died shortly
after he passed, as did my mother's parents.
So my extended family pretty much amounts
to the people on stage, as well as Uncle Arnie
(who just turned 80 and shoots under his age),
and Rise, who married a dentist and has a second
home in Marblehead. Families, I guess, are not
as close as they once were, although live/call-in cable
television is bringing us closer to revealing the secret
lives of relatives we thought we once knew at least fairly well.

The last thing I knew about Aunt Diane
was that she was having a cataract.
She has never gotten over the regret of selling her house
in Naussau Country just a few years before
the prices went through the roof. Now she is someone
who not only knows the words to "Tide is High"—

I actually could imagine her knowing one of Blondie's unappealing attempts at crossover, via a colonialist faux Caribbean function at the club to raise money for Hadassah - but also "Call Me," "Dreaming," and the "pain in the ass" line from "Heart of Glass."

O Diane, where did you possibly cop those ultra retro hip Eartha Kitt playing Catwoman rhinestone pink plastic shades circa 1962 East Village hock shop? Are YOU using Botox? Debbie Harry never would use Botox because Debbie Harry is, what, 29 years old, 32 max, and would never NEED Botox. But then I think about my old buddy, the lower east side novelist Chuck Wachtel, who went to high school with Debbie (or was it Cyndi Lauper?) and Chuck Wachtel is certainly in his late fifties or maybe sixty, and his lungs are bad.

But the status of Chuck Wachtel's breath capacity is moot because Aunt Diane is blowing me away. Although the truth is I was always blown away by you, Dear Diane—the frosted hair, then as now, the exaggerated cheek bones, and the just ever so-slightly buck teeth that give a sense of sensuality to a face that remains refined, not cheap, and of course that amazing bust line, with "points of her own sittin' way up high," a wonderfully lucky freckle mole set where anyone's hands would love to caress, and that surprisingly cabbie New York accent combined with the dusky voice of an all night lady jazz d.j. that has never gone away, even after all these years in the Sunshine State. Of course you still blow me away.

But one question. Where is Uncle Arnie in all this?

Is he aware that Aunt Diane has slipped out the screened porch and is at this very moment holding the especially phallic mike to the audience? Because your music is so beloved the audience knows the tunes so well to the point where you don't have to really sing, Diane, just smile knowingly and in appreciation at all the love the audience is giving back to you by remembering the words to songs many had thought were long forgotten. They are shouting NUM-BER One, NUMM BURRR ONE, as if you owned them, as if you had never retired to Florida from your part-time job as a dentist's receptionist, as if the caller from Nashville who snuck in at 14 to CBGBs to leer at your legs and ass and those Marilyn on acid breasts were not now 40, flabby, bald, and, given the state of rock, wishing for a lobotomy from Joey Ramone, who is, like Johnny and Dee Dee, and my father, Ernie Morris, really dead.

INTERVIEW WITH ST. JOHN'S POETRY WORKSHOP - SPRING 2007

Stephen Paul Miller: Do you feel you have found a new genre? What futures to you think you see in it?

Daniel Morris: It's interesting. This piece was rejected by a journal that I have previously published in. The editor wrote that she did not know what genre the piece belonged to—fiction, memoir, prose poem, even though the editor wrote that she was taken by the piece.

So this tells me we are facing a fairly rigid conception of basic categories of experience. For me, in a piece like this, I think you get the sense of undecidability, the real live experience of the blurring between "what is" and "what seems."

There is a famous story by John Cheever, "The Swimmer," in which Burt Lancaster starred in the movie version. In that story the author moves seamlessly from a realistic

if kooky story about a man swimming in different suburban pools to get home, into a story that becomes gothic and surreal as we realize the man is traumatized by loss and is completely out of touch with temporal reality. Cheever deftly handles this shift, and it works. I guess in my case, at least for one editor, it didn't "work."

Kelly Knapp: Do you think this poem is a new modern way of writing poetry? It seems you are trying to go in a different direction, would you agree?

DM: I have to admit I find much formal verse, verse written in carefully regulated lines, to be overly artificial and concerned with filling out a pre-arranged measure, filling out a box. I think an author like your teacher, Professor Miller, has taught me, and many others, to trust the poetry of the unique mind and voice and spirit of the author, to try to capture as honestly and fully as possible what is really going on inside your head and heart. The more complex, funny, knowing, nuanced, and specific your individual voice, the more compelling will be your work.

I think by trying to stretch poetry into forms such as memoir and fantasy and even short fiction, I was trying to break out of the formal boxes for poetry and to suggest we project poetic significance (private meanings) into all we do, including watching cable TV.

Dane Varriano: Do you feel technology has created a gap between families that was not once there, or did the families do this themselves? Is this good or bad for modern day society?

DM: Great question: Oddly in my story technology, cable TV forces me to connect to, and puzzle my way through to family members, including fairly distant relatives, in ways that I would not be able to do without technology. I think economic realities have dispersed families so that I for example work in Indiana because that is where my best teaching opportunity was at Purdue University. My brothers moved to LA for job reasons and my mother and her sister retired to Florida, in that case because of the advent of air-conditioning and cheap air plane flights which made Florida a destination for many retiring New Yorkers like my mother and her sister. So it cuts both ways. Blondie came to me through various media, and through Blondie I had an epiphany about my family.

Leann DeLuzio: Do you feel that family is very important and is there a reason that you discussed how modern day living tore families, making them less involved in each others lives?

DM: I do feel family is crucial for me. Perhaps because my family is dispersed and distant and small to begin with, starting my own family (I have 3 children) has been especially central to me. It saddens me every day that my mother and brothers are not able to enjoy seeing my children grow up, and conversely that I do not get to see them very much. I sometimes think our drive for careers and success and the American Dream has taken us away from the values of a stable sense of place and family.

Michael Ferrari: If there is an emphasis on how distant families are becoming, do you think it is inherently a bad thing? Could it be that because we have such easy access to newer ways of thinking and dealing with problems that we are growing more able to stand on our own without the "old fashioned" reassurance that families once had?

DM: Excellent point. We are adaptable creatures and find ways to survive. We create new communities and support groups to substitute for lost families. Perhaps we find communities of poets or other creative persons to share our visions.

Zyli Capric: Your metaphors are sharp and surprising; are they something you struggle over as you write? How would you describe your poem's imagery?

DM: I think I am proud of the way I described Debbie Harry's glasses, for example. I wrote and rewrote the piece many times until I felt the images were strong.

Dana Ferreri: With all the talk of people that were prominent in the music industry such as Blondie, Joey Ramone, and the mention of CBGB, is music something that was of great importance to you and have you written anything else thematizing music?

DM: That period of CBGB and the new wave was very important to me. I saw the Ramones for my first concert with a fake ID in Hollywood, Florida when I was 17 (about 25 years ago), and then saw them several times at different points in my life. I really

think their lyrics are amazing and what they did was genius. I have written a very long poem about the Ramones, which I researched, but it isn't finished yet. That was the music I came of age with, so it is associated with time and change for me. I can't believe most of the Ramones are dead and that Debbie Harry looks like my mother's sister. It is weird to me to read about new groups who see the Talking Heads as an inspiration in the way I would have thought of groups like the Beatles as being an inspiration. It is weird to become a part of history, something already over.

SPM: Do you anticipate what people whom you know will think of your characterizations of them?

DM: I have been reading the great novel by Roth, *The Plot Against America*, which uses real people including the author Philip Roth as a young man and Lindbergh and Roosevelt, but Roth makes one change. Instead of Roosevelt winning his third term in office, Lindbergh wins, and everything changes from that. This blending of fact and fiction to me creates a weird and satisfying texture. It puts us in that surreal place between what we think of as fact and what we think of as fiction and shows us, as with the butterfly flap of a wing, how tiny changes can make great global differences. I just saw a movie by Spielberg, *Munich*, which similarly plays with fact and imagination.

In general Roth, who wrote about his family, was criticized for exposing the "dirty laundry" of the Jews. A writer must do what he or she can to forget how the writing will affect those immediately around the writer and write in the service of the muse and the best work possible. Everything else will distract from the best work.

SPM: What was it like for a poet to be in Indiana when the Colts won the Super Bowl? What was the relation between Peyton Manning and Prince?

DM: Oddly artificial for me being here. It felt like we were supposed to be lifted up and validated by this win, but for me it felt manufactured. I was glad the Colts won because Chicago is like New York. It can absorb a sports defeat because it has so much else to offer. It is a real living city like New York, but Indy is kind of a made-up city, a few big companies like Lilly, a monument or two, and sports. It is like we have to remember we are a city and in it together. The pride feels desperate.

CLASS: What do you think of the edit we made in the title and reformatting of the poem?

DM: I love this edit. I love seeing this more tilted to the rhythms of spoken word and the intensity and excitement of the wording as the line breaks create a kind of disruption of the norm, which is what the piece is about. It would be cool to see the whole piece turned into a long poem, which could be a big piece of the new book of poems I'm trying to put together for Marsh Hawk.

Very cool and very much gratitude. I admire all of you for trying to serve the poem not the poet and this edit is serving the poem.