

The Venetian Spider Interview: Daniel McTaggart by Shaw Israel Izikson



Born and raised in West Virginia, Daniel McTaggart writes observational poetry about his life experiences. Since 2017, he has been the Beat Poet Laureate of West Virginia. A new and updated version of his 2006 collection, "Midnight Muse in a Convenience Store," has recently been released via Venetian Spider Press. In this interview he speaks about how working the night shift at a convenience store inspired his poetry and how diners are "roadside trauma centers."

Why did you become a poet?

I would have to say it's probably all my mom's fault.

I remember writing my first poem when I was ten years old. It was for my dad who was taking a trip to California. I wrote a poem about the forest because he said that he could see it from the window from his plane. Both my mom and dad are readers. They would quote authors, especially my mom. She would quote lines from Ogden Nash and they would both quote passages from an old poem called "The Cremation of Sam McGee."

Being around that I think just gave me an opening to develop my own knack for poetry. Just being around it all the time. It found its way inside me. They would say these things that they didn't realize that it had an effect on me.

The first poem I remember writing was simply about the forest that you can see from the window in an airplane. After that I wrote some silly rhyming poems, mostly for school assignments and some for myself. Just basically playing with the language and learning how to hone my abilities for it.

What did your parents do for a living?

They are both retired now. But they both worked for West Virginia University Hospitals. Mom was a registered nurse and dad was a laboratory technician.

Did you have any other influences for your work?

They would buy me illustrated children's books when I was young. The ones I remember had poems by Robert Louis Stevenson that I really enjoyed. I also enjoyed simple poems like "The Swing" that he wrote. Little things like that tended to stay with me.

Did living in West Virginia influence you?

Of course. Even where I live in Morgantown there's a lot of stuff to see. Coopers Rock State Forest and just driving around West Virginia's mountains. I wasn't even aware of the rich literary history of West Virginia as I was growing up. I just knew that I liked seeing everything around me. Because of the influence of my parents had on me I was able to put some of that in words more and more.

What are your favorite subjects to write about?

I really love writing about diners. I have a big love for diners because, personally, they are the most conducive environment for writing. Because a lot of stuff happens there that is just so random. It has an impact that doesn't even consider the observer. That crosses over with writing about things that happen during the nighttime. I think eating at a diner at night is one of the best things ever. More interesting things happen during the night than during the day.

What interesting things have you seen happen in a diner?

I remember eating at a diner Great Bend, Pennsylvania after midnight during a long journey on the road. My family and I were stopping for breakfast because our destination was still a couple of hours away. There was this guy sitting at the counter and I remember his appearance. Dark hair and his mustache that combed over almost the entire front of his face.

He was smoking a cigarette and a waitress walked out of the kitchen. He blew this big plume of smoke, not in her face but in her general direction. She was fanning it with a menu she was holding. I saw the smoke go up to the ceiling and just curl on the tiles which were pockmarked and stained with smoke from other smokers.

He had this smarmy smile on his face that said volumes. It happened many years ago but I still remember it to this day.

I love diners because I see them as roadside trauma centers. Growing up, whenever my family went to visit my grandparents we drove 500 miles from West Virginia up to upstate New York. We stopped at a few diners along the way. The road had taken such a toll on us sometimes that stopping at a diner was like an oasis in the middle of a desert.

I was so thirsty not just for water that I drank everything around me. I drank everything I saw, everything I ate, everything I felt. That's how I became close to diners. Whenever I go to a diner, I feel like I'm taken back to that time of when we stopped there and healed before we got back on the road again.

I don't travel as much as I used to, but there still is a healing that takes place when I walk into a diner.

What are your favorite diners?

Locally around West Virginia a couple of my favorite diners are the Ritzy Lunch down in Clarksburg, DJ's and The Poky Dot in Fairmont and here in Morgantown we have Ruby and Ketchy's, which has been around since the 1950's. In Pennsylvania where I've traveled the Dutch Kitchen in Frackville is one of my favorites. It's a classic Silk City diner that has the mosaic tiled floor, with stainless steel around the booths and tables, and a curved roof like the train cars of old.

There's a couple of diners in New York where my parents are from, including the Middleburg Diner. It's a classic kind of diner with a long counter top with the bar stools and all kinds of pictures on the walls with funny things on them. It's right below a cemetery which I think is cool. It's just so weird having a cemetery right next to a diner.

Is this your first poetry collection that you've published or have you had other collections published before?

"*Midnight Muse*" in its original edition was my first published collection back in 2006. For this new collection I've re-written and retooled all the poems in it.

Since then I've self-published several collections. My real labor of love is "Diner Poems" which is a collection of poems that happened in diners, including things that I've witnessed or things that I've thought about while sitting there.

So why the title "Midnight Muse in a Convenience Store"?

For a time between 1998 and 2003 I worked in a local convenience store. All of the poems in the book I wrote while I was at the convenience store, although not all of them happened there.

I worked all kinds of shifts but I mostly worked during the night shift, because a lot of employees did not want to sign up for that.

I would see a lot of stuff during that shift. As for that particular poem, there was this girl who came into the store one night who was just so beautiful that everything turned into slow motion as she walked around the store and shopped. Nothing sped up again until she left the store. What I wrote about in the poem is basically how it happened. It was kind of surreal yet beautiful moment that doesn't come too often. But I try to capture it when it does.

Midnight Muse in a Convenience Store

*She saunters through the door
Accompanied by a breath of smoke
Her summer dress swaying
To the whims of her hips
And the tug of her breasts*

*Slowly she strides the aisles
Skidding her sandaled feet
As she pauses by the milk
Her head lolls over her shoulder
Like a lazy flower*

*She opens the cooler door
Slender painted fingers reach up
Threading long auburn hair
Falling in a gossamer fan
Across her small back*

*After taking a gallon of milk
She briskly rubs a tanned tender calf
Brushing away a sharp chill to no avail
It slithers up along her limber frame*

Demanding a sultry shiver

*She asks for the time
Her voice a feathery husk
Her smile a slim smirk
Her oval eyes like echoes
Flooding with green*

What do you think the key is to writing observational poetry?

I think that there is a lot of honesty that has to come into it. When you are observing you may not always like what you see, but you have to be honest about what you see. Whether it pleases you or disturbs you, you have to put it down on paper. It can be a crapshoot about how you feel and about what you see, but you need to be honest about it. If you change it in any way you are doing a disservice to yourself.

Why did you choose poetry over other writing formats?

Early on, I never thought about going into journalism. I was having such a strong connection with writing poetry that I never even thought about walking away from it in any form. I just focus directly on that. Other writing options never really entered into my mind. I was enjoying the flow and I just went with it.

I think because I've been sticking with poetry so much that it's been my main method for filtering the world out through my fingers.

Do you have any favorite poems in the collection?

The title poem is always one that I always think back on. It was just such a perfect moment in time. There was a poem I wrote about the moon...

Moon Dances, Midnight Leads

*moon dangles on a spider's web
a dewdrop bathed in azure*



*clouds capture the glow
swaying like evening gowns to
the whims of midnight waltzing*

*moon is such a delicate partner
never missing a limber step*

*dancing on velvet floors
toward ballroom's end
fading in the morning star*

When it comes to poems I think that the title poem overrides everything because it's such a wonderful poem for me.

What do you think of the current poetry scene?

It's really heartening to see that a lot of people are getting involved in the arts. When I started getting involved in writing groups there wasn't too much to be found. About 10 to 12 years ago there wasn't that much of that kind of thing in Morgantown. Now, both here and so many other places, there are writing groups of all sorts popping up.

It's a wonderful thing to see because it makes me think that there's still some kind of light in the world. People are choosing poetry as a venue for shining it.

Any advice for poets that are just starting out?

There are a few places around Morgantown that do open mics where anybody can show up and do anything. Whether it's reading a poem, sing a song or read a story. Just to get your stuff out there.

Anything else you would like to add about the book?

The book covers a special time in my life. Prior to working there, I really wasn't writing very much. I had gone through a very bad depression. I had only written about a half dozen poems in the six years prior to working there. One night, I just had a breakthrough and I wrote several poems during one midnight shift.

It felt like something shook loose in my head. It felt like I was giving up on a bad thing and choosing something that would go out of my life. It's a strange marriage of sorts. It's been like that ever since.

I think I owe it to my time working at the convenience store because of the things that I saw, experienced and heard. They all jarred something loose inside of me that has never stopped wanting to be expressed.

What's your favorite meal to order at a diner?

I always liked a good bacon cheeseburger. I think that if a diner has a really decent burger, it's well worth visiting at any time. Sometimes diners don't do much more than burgers, sometimes they barely have a burger on the menu. I think if they can do a very good burger, I would be proud to visit that diner.