

## ***The Venetian Spider Interviews: William F. DeVault by Shaw Israel Izikson***



*William F. DeVault at the Monongalia Arts Center, 2017*

***Poet and author William F. DeVault is something of a gypsy. Born in Greenville, South Carolina (where he left at age 6 weeks and having lived in at least 11 different states and visited all 50) he is the editor in chief of Venetian Spider Press. He was named the United States Beat Poet Laureate for 2017-2018 by the National Beat Poetry Foundation. His book, “Selected Poems and Passions: 1972-2011” (2018, Venetian Spider Press) was released in August and includes nearly 250 of his poems, selected from the tens of thousands that he has written over the years. He is also the editor in chief of amomancies magazine and the editor of the volume “the***

***best of amomancies” (2018, Venetian Spider Press)***

### ***When did you start writing poetry?***

My early years comprised of three phases.

Phase one: I was eight-years-old and in a class, a teacher said: “If you finish this test early, I’ll give you a special assignment.” I finish the test and she gives me a piece of green bar paper. On the paper, she pasted a picture of a boat that said: “Write a story or poem.”

I sat there for about two minutes and then I wrote:

*Oh ship, oh ship.  
Now, where can you be?  
I looked so far down in the deep blue sea.  
Oh ship, oh ship.  
Now I see.  
You were on the deep blue sea.*

The teacher lost her shit when she saw that. She went out of the room and showed the music teacher - and the music teacher said “Oh yeah! We can do something with this!” And they put it to music.

And during the school's May Day parent and teacher performance, me and two back up singers, who were all dressed as sailors (which I'm sure scarred them for life) sang the song. That was when I quit writing poetry for five years.

I was a very weird kid. Three major things when I was eight: I wrote my first poem, I came to my resolution with the concept of death, and I decided that the measure of success is finding out what you are supposed to do, what you are good at, and do it.

Then when I was 12 or 13 years old I would occasionally write something infamously bad because it was usually for someone who asked me to write them something. "Oh, you write poetry?" Yes. "Could you write me a poem for my Halloween party?" Sure. I would write them a two to three line poem and boom...they were gone.

Phase three? When I was 17 years old. I had flirted with several career possibilities, including the ministry. My mom was convinced that I had "the call." As I explained to her, if I had "the call," no one woke me up for it, because I didn't get it. I was however crazy mad in love with a girl in school who was an old family friend.

I would call her up on the phone and we would talk. One day I called her and said "Hey Jo Ann, I wrote you a couple of poems. Can I read them to you?"

She said "Sure, go ahead." I read them to her over the phone and she hung up on me.

I'm sitting there going "What did I do?"

The phone rings and it's her mom. Her mom was somebody who was known for being someone you didn't want to argue with because she was a tough country chick. She goes "Billy, what did you do to Jo Ann?"

"Um, nothing. I just read her a couple of poems. Why?"

"She's up in her room with the door locked and she is crying her eyes out."

And the heavens opened to me - and that was when I knew what I was supposed to be. I haven't looked back.

I do other work to pay the bills. Almost every poet of any interest, even in this day and age where they often came out as college professors, they've had day jobs.

But I'm a poet. That's what I want on my headstone. Nothing else needed. If the best thing they can put about you on your headstone is your job, then you are a failure as a human being.

But I don't consider poetry a job.

When people come to me time to time asking to mentor them, I ask them a very simple question: "Is poetry a hobby, an interest, a possible job, a possible career path, an obsession or a religion?"

If they say anything other than "religion" I don't take them.

To me, poetry is a religion.

Religion is supposed to be the lens we interpret the universe through. It's supposed to be the way we communicate with the divine. I don't know of a better description for poetry.

The divine and religion, seem to be a common theme in your poems. Communicating with the divine. Why do you stay with that tangent? Communicating with the spirit? Communicating with love?

I am a very devoutly religious person. I am a Deist. I was raised as a Southern Baptist but I left them when they started to get crazy. I'm now a Quaker - or what they often call the Friends of Jesus.

Your standard unprogrammed Quaker meeting is a bunch of people come into a room, sit in a circle, and say nothing for an hour. They do this while trying to in the presence of other believers feel the presence of God.

Then you get up. Say a quick prayer, then you go and have lunch.

No jackass up there giving a sermon. No "Let's sing hymn number 427 badly." It's just being aware. To me, that's really important.

When it comes to my poetry, I read a lot of religious literature when I was a kid. While I was thinking about being a minister I took it very seriously.

In my lifetime I have read eight different translations of the Holy Bible. Add to the fact that my dad instilled in me a great love of the classics driven by mythology. He would

read these books to us in order to put us down for a nap. Things like The Iliad. My writings are steeped largely in Greco-Roman and Norse mythology. Although I do have pieces of other religions I have woven in.

Largely, when you see a religious allegory it's either straight up Judeo-Christian, or what I call the Abrahamic phase, or it's Norse or Greco Roman.

Part of that is people, even the most ignorant backward ham-handed Trump supporter in the world, has a general idea that Odysseus was very clever and that Apollo was a god. Jesus says some important shit.

So, it's a way of cutting through some of the cultural bias to get more directly connected. To me, my religions are poetry and love. Both of those are ways to connect with the divine.

### ***What authors influenced you over the years?***

I get in trouble with a lot of people because they say "Oh, you need to read this book by Joe Schlabotnik! He wrote a great book of poetry about what it's like to be a junior college professor in Iowa." No thank you. "Why? Are you a snob?" No. I believe in the Mozart effect.

The Mozart effect: You are a pianist and you compose on the piano. You have never heard of any Mozart. One day, someone comes in and plays you "Der Fledermaus" by Mozart.

One of two things is going to happen: either you are going to pick up a few things out of that and it will start appearing in your works. Or, you will consciously, or unconsciously, make the attempt to not sound in any way like Der Fledermaus. Thereby taking something away from your work. I believe in influences, but I also believe in originality. You see so much out there that is just recycled crap nowadays.

The poetry market is flooded, let's face it. The digital renaissance of poetry has resulted in a hundred times as many books published as were ever published before.

The amount of quality coming out isn't that much higher. You can get around the publishing houses now.

Taking that back, what authors have influenced me? It doesn't take much reading my stuff to go "Shelley?" Yes, Shelley is in there. To me, Ozymandias is the best poem I didn't write.

George Gordon Lord Byron is another influence. I even have a poem dedicated to him called "Radiant Tigers." Edgar Allen Poe and William Blake.

All art, not just poetry, is about resonance. If it doesn't resonate with you it doesn't make it bad, or good. It's just that you don't feel it.

I'm not a huge fan of country music. It doesn't mean it's bad music, even if it is. It means that I just don't get it.

Several years ago a friend of mine said to me "I know you don't like Donald Hall, but have you ever read anything of his that you thought was okay?"

I said yes. I can't remember the name of the poem, but I do believe that it has something to do with waterfowl. That's it, "To a Waterfowl".

It has the line "I'm in poetry." And he is talking about talking to a man on a plane and the man is explaining what he does for a living. And then he asks what Donald does, and he says "I do poetry."

I took that basic concept and a few days later I came up with the poem "I rained poetry."

It's about how when I write it's like I'm a cloud and I'm raining poetry. I'm feeling it flow through me. I think that's the best poets are those who are not the light but the lens. They take the experience and focus it on the page.

### ***How do you create a poem with resonance and feeling?***

My great big rule is that I write when the spirit moves me. I honestly believe that if I was not a writer I would either be dead or an insane asylum. I am a very intense and emotional person. Poetry gave me that outlet. My mother used to joke that, when I was little, that every time I would get upset at her I would go off and write. She was kind of wrong. I would get into arguments with her because I was in an amped state at that point and I needed to write. I wasn't writing about the conflict with her, I was writing about the conflict within.

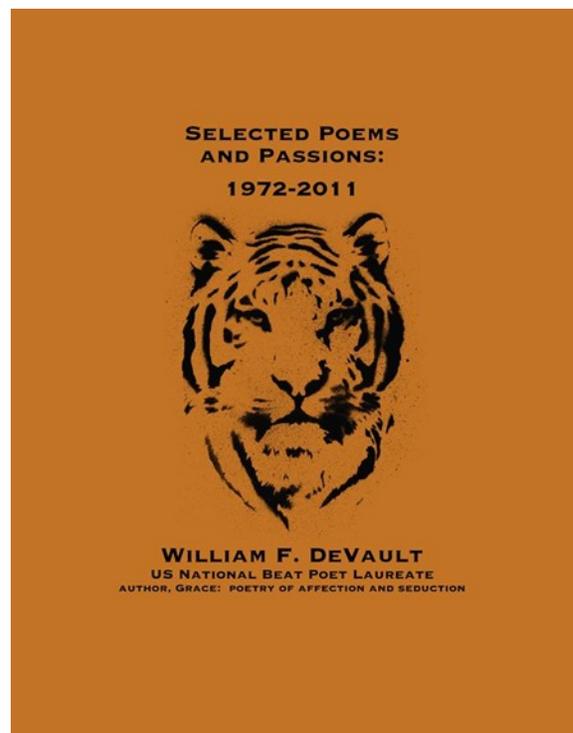
I write when the mood hits me and sometimes I will write four lines. Sometimes I will write madness.

"The Golden Heart Cycles" is 49 poems that I wrote in under 48 hours. "In the Arms of the Dragon" - I was driving home in Los Angeles and I was on a road that you really can't get off of. It started coming and I didn't have a recorder with me. I just started chanting the poem to myself for the remaining 20 minutes of the drive. By the time I got home, it was complete. I ran into the house and wrote it down. That's another thing and people get on me all the time because I don't edit. I clean up a typo or something like that. But to actually change a word in a poem to me is like taking a photograph and running it through Photoshop. You tamper with the integrity of the instant. It has to be pure or it's not poetry.

It's like saying "Oh God, I know this morning that I prayed, 'Hallowed be thy Name,' but at the moment it's really more like 'Hallowed be thy Name and all I say.' Is that okay?" No, you said it. It's done.

I once had a young woman and when she was breaking up with me I told her "I thought you said you loved me and you were mine forever?" She responded "I meant it when I said it."

I believe that when you say it and you mean it, that's truth. And I think truth should be constant. The relationship may fall apart, but 20 years later you should still be able to go back to that moment in your mind and find that little piece of you that goes "Yeah, I loved her."



*"Selected Poems and Passions: 1972-2011"  
(hardbound cover, the paperbound is in blue)*

That's truth. Saying "Oh, I never really loved you." That's bullshit. That's cowardice.

Poetry isn't about cowardice. Poetry is about stating the truest, purest things in the universe.

I believe it was Wallace Stevens who said: "The poet is the priest of the invisible."

They write about truths that no one else can see and we tell everybody about it.

I don't look at a beautiful woman and go "Wow, she's hot."

I look at a beautiful woman and write a crown of sonnets about her (a crown of sonnets is a set of sonnets where each sonnet's end line becomes the first line of the next sonnet and the final one's final line is the first line of the first. A Mastercrown is when there's a fifteenth sonnet that is made up of the first (or last) lines of every sonnet in the fourteen.)

I know very few people crazy enough to write a crown of sonnets. It's really tough to do. But I love doing something like that.

If I read 100 lines of something and I think it's crap, I give it one last read then I throw it away. The one last read is in case there's a word, phrase or line in there that has some evidence of truth to it. In a week, a month or a decade later I might go "I love that phrase." And then I build a whole new poem around that concept using that image. I think emotions should flow, but it should be like an ocean. It shouldn't be like little ponds everywhere. You should be able to access your entire emotional memory whenever the need be.

### ***What are your favorite poems out of your collection?***

I've had a lot of people reach out to me for the poem "I should've been immortal." I wrote that when I was 18 years old. Forty-five years later people are still going "Yeah! I like that!"

If I tell you my personal favorites it almost sounds like to me that I am picking favorites among my children. You are not supposed to admit to bias like that. But the poems that really please me are the ones that get a reaction or the ones that I feel came out well-formed. That is to say that they dance. One example is "Walsingham in Padua." It takes the image of Francis Walsingham, who was the master of assassins to Queen Elizabeth I. But before she took the throne, he had been exiled to Padua because he was a Protestant.

When she rose to power and became queen she called on him. I used that metaphor to mean "you and I both know that there's something here." And like Walsingham in Padua, "I'm just waiting for your call."

I like "Love is an Howling Beast." I wrote that on the occasion of my second divorce. I was very profoundly wounded by it. And I had seen an image of a famous sculpture. It had a giant head and arm reaching out of the ground like he's crawling out of the dirt.

I thought that a thousand years from now someone's going to read that and go "What the hell did this mean?" It's the same thing with poetry. I was fortunate enough early in my career to have a couple reviewers say "I don't know if he'll make a dollar off of it in this life, but I have no doubt that hundreds of years in the future people will be reading this." And that's all I needed to hear.

It's like your mother saying to you "Oh, you're my favorite." Once you have heard that, you're good.

"Love is an Howling Beast" is a very popular one when I read it publicly. You can't just read it. You have to put some GRAVEL into it.

I try to create a distinction between poet and readers because I know of some fantastic readers who couldn't write a poem to save their life.

I have also seen some fantastic poets who can't read. If Poe was alive today he would not be on the slam circuit because he just wouldn't have the "oomph." Byron might. Shelley probably wouldn't because he would probably be busy stealing the girlfriend of whoever was on stage reading.

I didn't appreciate Byron when I was young because I didn't appreciate the man. The man was kind of a scumbag.



As he aged he got better and despite his scumbag tendencies, I can appreciate the beauty of his writing.

It's like actors. You have actors that you cannot like as a person. "I don't like this actor because he is a drug addict, he's an alcoholic and he beats his children!"

"Well yea, but did you see him such and such movie?"

"Oh yeah, that was an incredible performance!"

*"the best of amomancies", cover by Mariya Andriichuk, whom the poet refers to as his "constant collaborator"*

The same thing can happen with any other art. Pablo Picasso was not a nice guy, but he did some pretty amazing work.

***You wrote in your bio that you were raised "all over the map." Do you think that had an influence on your work?***

It has absolutely influenced me - one of the things it's done to me is that I get pissed off when people try to make me a regional poet. I know people who would be very happy to be the poet laureate of Bumnuckle, Nebraska. I have nothing against Bumnuckle, Nebraska. I don't want to be tied down to a location. I'll be happily tied down to a woman for the rest of my life. But I tied down to a location? Not so much. Because it is the breadth of experience and the breadth of observation.

One of my most well-regarded poems involves me standing on the shore of the Pacific Ocean (Thetis). It was a couple of hours before my daughter's wedding, watching the ocean roll in and going "I've been away from the Pacific for awhile." And I was basically saying to the ocean "I'm back!" And the ocean was saying "Glad to have you back!"

I once did a cycle of poems where I walked down to the beach in Venice because I used to live in the vicinity of Venice Beach. I walked down there and wrote poems about what I observed (6 am in Venice)

Locations feed us, but they don't sustain us.

Sometimes we can become self-insular looking at a town, state or region, to the point where we stop being universal. Religion is for everybody and the truth is for everybody. Nothing pisses me off more than when I see somebody who writes a book of spirituality, philosophy or whatever and says that they have found the truth. They have found that which would make the world better, cure cancer and let children play without fear being shot on the playground. Then they want to charge you \$49.95 for the book. That's immoral because truth should be free. This is why I never demand money for my reading.

Now if somebody wants to volunteer money, I've been sent a few checks in my day. But I never say "I am not going to read at your school or at your social club unless you give me a thousand dollars." Never, because I'm bringing truth.

What do think will happen with the future of poetry? One minute it's popular again, next minute it becomes unpopular. It keeps switching around.

I have been to 40 to 50 events in the last three years. The average one has 10 to 20 attendees. Many of them are there because they are all planning to read.

One of my best friends in the world, I used to go to his open mics in Pasadena when he was out in California. I remember going to one at the Moondog Cafe. It was at the location and that night when I wrote "Brisant Revelations" on the back of a napkin. I read it that night, but there were probably 30 people in the place. Of those 30, probably 20 were reading. Probably eight people in the audience were the spouse, lover or best friend of a person who was planning to read. One or two of them were probably there just to get a milkshake.

Poetry is too inbred. I quit open doing open readings after that. I started talking to friends who were musicians, or who had a church. And I asked them "Hey, can I come read?"

I remember one of my best experiences was reading between rock bands in a sports bar in Los Angeles. The audience was not expecting me. They were expecting "Freebird" between hockey games.

At least one person heard me. Jesus didn't say to his apostles "Ok, I want you to go find a place where there's nothing but Christians and I want you guys to talk about your faith. But don't go talking to people who aren't already Christians."

We need to be out there on the streets. I started a thing a few years ago called "Guerrilla Poetry." Every year Dan McTaggart and I celebrate this. We go to random places and read poetry. We'll stand up in a restaurant, read a couple of poems and sit back down.

I read at 6 a.m. on a street corner in the homeless section of Washington D.C.

The winos appreciated it because it gave them entertainment. They asked for money afterward, but what else could I do?

We need to be out there engaging people. Someone once said that 99 percent of science fiction is crap, but 99 percent of everything is crap.

I write 50 times more than what I publish. I throw out the stuff I think is crap. I'm sure that 500 years from now when they are looking over my stuff they will throw out 50 to 90 percent of what I wrote. But one or two pieces will linger.

The measure of the poet is whether or not their work survives them. Does their work affect people?

We need to be careful that we don't overfeed the market. Right now, I now own my own publishing house. I don't mean that I publish accumulated knock off plastic coated pamphlets that I call books. We're a publishing house putting out hardbound books. The first couple of books were poetry because that's what I had available to me. I have a lot of other stuff coming up next year.

The bottom line is this: If people get fed too much crap, then they generalize that all of it is crap.

I've had young poets come to me and say "I want to do a book."

I tell them great! So what do you have?

"Well, I've written two or three poems."

Two or three poems and you want to write a book? "Yeah!"

No. Write a thousand poems. Throw out all the ones that are garbage. Bring me the surviving 50 to 100 and we'll talk about a book.

I found out when I was young and I said: "Hey, I want to do a book!" I had ten good poems. Let me just write 50 more.

Most of those poems were crap. They were done just to fill space. We don't need fillers.

When I go to listen to poets, I tend to stick around. I hate it when a poetry reading starts and there are 20 poets and by the time you get to the 20th poet, 19 have left because those are all the people who have previously read.

The people who interest me are the ones where after their performance, I still remember something of their performance.

Chris Vannoy is a poet where I remember some of the pieces that he read during the last time I saw him, which was months ago. John Burroughs and Carlo Parcelli - these are all guys who get up and read and I remember them.

Poetry is about communication and the sustainment of that emotion and that impact.

If there is somebody who you kissed and then the next day you don't remember the kiss, you probably are not that attracted to them.

But somebody who you kissed and then a year later your toes still curl every time you think of them...why aren't you married to them? Because it's the person you need to be married to!

Poetry is what you need to get out of bed for. I have an old friend who pisses on my work all the time. I know why she does it, but I know the truth. That is that she seduced her husband, who is now the father of her children, using my poetry. They've been married for over 20 years. So I don't need any other vote from her. That's the quality of my work. I already see the quality of my work in the eyes of her children.

It all comes down to when you impact people with your work.