

MARK BELAIR SELF-INTERVIEW

This is the first time you've been interviewed as a poet—and it's a self-interview.

I know. It's weird.

Try to get past that and tell us why, having been a musician all your life, you started also to write poems.

Back in high school I pursued both music and poetry, but I matured far more quickly as a musician. So I went to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, then to New York to become a freelance drummer and percussionist. The beauty of freelancing, for me, is in the variety of musical styles I'm asked to perform in while collaborating with players who provoke me to make contributions I would never come up with on my own.

And poetry is not collaborative.

Right, at least for me. So when I came to feel that I wanted to create something more personal and singular, something not the product of collaboration, I returned to poetry and found that I had acquired a stash of experience and a perspective on it. I had finally matured enough to write.

Why didn't you turn to composing music?

No talent for it. My musical ideas are essentially rhythmic and depend on the workings of collaboration; I need that.

Poetry is grounded in rhythm, too.

For me, that's the connection between my involvement in music and poetry: rhythmic movement, pauses, stresses.

You started publishing in literary journals in 2006 and your first book came out last year. But another book just came out and another is due in the fall. Why no books, then suddenly 3 in 18 months?

My first book, a chapbook of 30 poems called *Walk With Me*, was accepted for publication by *Parallel Press* of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the fall of 2009. But the publication date was not until spring of 2012. So I simply kept writing and publishing in journals until the book was released and by then I had published enough new work for a full, 60 poem collection called *While We're Waiting*. I got lucky in that Karen Kelsay at *Aldrich Press* took an immediate interest and published it within three months of submission.

What about the third book?

It's another chapbook, just 19 poems, about the sudden death of my mother. The poems are linked since they tell the story of her death and our family's reaction to it. So I felt they worked

best all together rather than published individually in journals. I submitted them as a book to *Finishing Line Press* and they took it.

Is it grim?

Well, it does take you into the experience of the death of a loved one, but it takes you out again.

The other two books share an organizing feature defined by their titles.

In the way that as a freelance musician I've played in a wide variety of styles, the poems in both those books range over a wide variety of subjects. So I placed related poems in small sections of three or four poems, as if movements of a little chamber music piece.

For example?

In *Walk With Me* there are sections entitled, "*Walk With Me At the Edge of Suburbia*" and "*Walk With Me Into the Country of the Past.*" In *While We're Waiting*, the subjects include "*While We're Waiting To Fall in Love*" and *While We're Waiting For the Full Story.*"

The poems sound accessible.

Even welcoming, I hope.

Tell us about your work process.

First, I can't write at home. And I don't write well after noon. So five mornings a week I take the subway downtown to The Writers Room, which is an affordable writing space in the East Village. I grab a coffee from the Mud truck and by 9AM I'm at a desk surrounded by other writers. And with this routine reliably cueing me, I begin. Then I go until noon arrives and that's it, I'm done. The rest of the day I'm a musician, my gigs, of course, mostly at night.

Laptop?

Sure. But I also copy every poem by hand as I'm working on it. It's amazing what slips by when I only use a computer. Hand writing makes me downshift, and I always find something.

It's been said that writing poetry is like writing with an eye dropper.

Exactly. Who said that?

I don't remember. What's next for you?

More of the same, I hope. I write mostly out of bewilderment: when something happens that feels meaningful but I don't know how so. That's where a poem begins. And since I'm perpetually bewildered, I don't see myself wanting to—or even being able to—stop.