



Forge

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FORGE INTERVIEW WITH
Mark Belair

by Tim McLafferty

Welcome to the fourth Forge Interview: our series of interviews with makers on making. Conceptually cast as craft interviews, we offer time and space to invited writers, the goal of which is manifold: to get to know the artist better by trying to understand how they make a thing, to better understand the thing itself, and hopefully, to provide a lasting utility.

Our guest is Mark Belair, a talented and creative poet based in New York City. Our sincere thanks to Mark for his time and contributions to Forge.

TM: Describe your poetry, is it a sort of memoir poetry?

MB: It's poetry based on my own experience, but that experience can sometimes be biographical, or sometimes just strolling down the street and seeing what I see. Almost all the poems render some kind of experience rather than just making a statement, although I have some of those too, but most of them just try to relate either a photographic moment or what amounts to a small short story that has to do with my own experience. Most of them begin because something actually happens that *I have no idea what just happened*, and I sense somehow it's meaningful, and so I begin the poem to find out, in a

sense, why I needed to start it. In other words: *something happened here, what was that?* and it's like—try to relate the experience, and in the process of relating the experience, if I can get it right, sometimes that meaning will be there, some latent thing will come out.

TM: In defense of this kind of poetry, let's find out why it is poetry . . .

MB: I think that if I am bewildered and can address that, then it's not really only about me, but about the nature of the bewilderment.

TM: Right, but how does it stand apart from prose?

MB: It's just way more compressed. Prose can tell a story, poetry can tell a story. Obviously, narrative history of poetry goes back to the beginning. You can tell a story in poetry.

TM: Sure, Homer is narrative, but it also has form and meter. I understand that part of contemporary American poetry is the rejection of all that, but still, what is it that you think makes it poetry?

MB: Again, I think just the relating of an experience of some kind: a personal experience that validates some kind of larger meaning that one intuitively when you begin a poem—you know something's there, and then as you render this experience, it can be revealed, or the impossibility of it being revealed is what you come to. I think Seamus Heaney said, it's a personal experience that validates a larger meaning. I think that you can do this in as compressed a way as possible, using not necessarily the poetic forms, but poetic devices.

TM: Like what? This is a craft interview, let's talk about that: what poetic devices do you often use?

MB: Rhythm is the basic thing. When I start to render an experience, there's a kind of unfolding where the information is revealed in the right order, with the right emphasis, and that all has to do with line-breaks, with length of lines, with the rhythms within the lines,

between the lines, between the stanzas—you can create linkages, associations, stresses, delays, all this stuff is available to poetry that is not available to prose—you can smelt it down to something essential that prose doesn't do (it does other things beautifully), but poetry's ability is to really get it down to the absolute essential: you can get a poem to where there's not a word too much. The fewest possible words to get to where you want to go is what makes it poetry.

TM: So you feel that you're using rhythm—the rhythms of American English, right?

MB: Absolutely: the vernacular. Form is something that pre-exists a particular poem, structure is what arises out of a particular poem. Say you're dealing with a sonnet, you're given a certain form, there are certain fulfillments that you have to have; however, if you start just writing in a very compressed vernacular, certain patterns unfold and you start to listen to them and allow the poem to structure itself. Whether it's long and languorous, or very tightly controlled, it starts to tell you what it wants to do. It structures itself, meaning that, from where the poem begins through to the end, it's taut and every word is meaningful—it's not just going on and on. It has a structure unique to itself, it's not a particular form that will be used again, it's only for that poem.

TM: I still think that what you think is the poem telling you what to do is you telling the poem what to do.

MB: It doesn't feel that way. The part of me that writes will just shut down if I give it an order.

TM: I think you do it without thinking about it, yeah.

MB: It's true, I do it without thinking about it because when there's a prompt for a poem, I best serve that by being attentive and listening to the charisma of the experience, and pulling out of that what I think is essential.

TM: Do you go around with a notebook in your pocket?

MB: I do. Most of the prompts for a poem come randomly, seldom sitting at a desk: you're walking around, you're doing whatever, and something strikes me as, again, a moment that's *what was that?* Basically, all poems begin with *what was that?* And, I'll sketch something out and I'll bring it to the computer and start to work on it, and that's where the hard work happens. So there's a kind of sketch that starts, and then I start working it and revising until I think I make it its best self.

The opening lines are the key: if I get the first couple of lines right, it seems that it leads me through. Usually on the first draft or two, I'll get a big chunk of the poem, like eighty percent of the poem will actually be there, but that last twenty percent is where you start sweating the poem.

TM: Okay, what makes you sweat the poem?

MB: Because this word isn't quite right, this rhythm isn't quite right—it's not its best self yet. It's close.

TM: How do you find the right word?

MB: It's attentiveness to the language itself, I think.

TM: Do you use a thesaurus?

MB: I do use a synonym finder, it's easier than a thesaurus. Mostly I use that to find a simpler word. Sometimes the word that will occur to me is slightly off, or slightly complicated, and it's a place-holder word—then I'll go back and use a synonym finder—I know there's a simpler, more direct word here, and I'll use it for that.

TM: Do you use dictionaries too?

MB: Absolutely: I'll use dictionaries just to be sure that I've got it

straight. Sometimes it's nice to use a word that can be read in two ways, and both ways are good, and so I want to be double sure that I've got it straight. It's fact checking.

TM: What about the rhythm, what do you do? Do you start to read the lines out loud, or what?

MB: Not usually, although I find that there's a natural cadence that each poem will set up, and that's why the first couple of lines are so important: within those first couple of lines will be a cadence. In fact, I've even had the experience of hearing the cadence that's next before the actual word that fits it: I just know that a stress should be here or there, or should be a little delayed, or whatever, and then the word will pop up that fits it.

TM: Do you start to read your poem out loud at any point?

MB: No, I read it in my mind. I don't need to use my lips, the rhythm is there. When I do readings, I don't find that there's any problem. The rhythm that I had in my mind is certainly the same rhythm as when I speak it out loud.

TM: You told me once that you put your poems away for a year?

MB: Two years. What I do when I write a poem is that I try to make it its best self until I think, well, this is it—it can take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks before I feel a poem is about right.

TM: Do you just only work on that poem?

MB: No, I always have a bunch of poems, because what I find best is that you work for a certain amount on one poem and that's all I can do for that day, and then I'm refreshed by moving to the next one. The next day I'll run through that same set of poems again. Some resolve themselves very quickly, some take much longer, but, in any case, once I feel I have it, I put it away on file, and every two

years I will review all the poems I've written, and of course by then I'm pretty cold to them, I have no idea what I meant when I started, I don't necessarily even know what the next line coming is, if I read the titles through I don't even know what they refer to, until I start reading the poem and I say, *oh yeah, of course, this one*. At that point, even though when I put it away I thought it was as good as I could write it, now I have the advantage of reading it cold, and I always, literally always, make revisions, small or large.

TM: Well, hopefully you're a two year better poet by then.

MB: That's a good point, that's true too—just by working for two years hopefully I become a better poet, but also I find that the poems are either a little over-written or a little under-written. I'll read the whole poem and go, *what was that, what was I getting at?* And then I'll read it again and go, *oh, I remember*, but I didn't bring it out enough, so, it gives me balance and perspective to revisit a poem a couple of years later. Staying true to the poem, I never do a mammoth rewrite, but I can tinker with it to find that balance between over-writing and under-writing and it just comes out right.

I find that I wouldn't be comfortable sending stuff out unless it had been through this process. I would feel that it hadn't gone through its stress-test. Everybody works in their own way, and I'm a very routine writer, others are binge writers, but I find what works for me is routine, steadiness, and revisiting, revising—all that allows me to saturate with a poem until I feel, when I read it back, *oh yeah*. It could be a very light-hearted short poem about a little moment, just as long as it's its own best self, that's all that matters to me. Each poem is completely different from the other, and I write about a fairly wide variety of different things—I just try to bring the best of my abilities to each of those and make it so that when a reader reads these poems, they too have the same experience that the poet had. They can come to their own conclusions about what that experience means, but I want the experience to be there for them.

TM: You say: *write to the best of your abilities*. What do you do to keep improving your abilities?

MB: Just being attentive to the moment in the poem itself. I don't think it's separate from the act of writing. If you continue to write, you will continue to improve. You get a keener ear for the right word. You get keener to what is working, what is strong, what is a little too removed or remote, what can be brought out—it's almost like intonation in music: you get a sense of pitch.

TM: What about reading? Do you read other poets?

MB: I read all the time.

TM: What do you read?

MB: I'm reading contemporary poets right now, because that's what I'm doing.

TM: Who are you reading now?

MB: I just finished reading Tracy K. Smith "Life on Mars." Marie Howe is really good: "What the Living Do." Lynn Emanuel. I read all kinds of poets, whether they write like me or not, but you tend to love the poets that you're just in-tune with. Writing and reading is like a friendship, it's a personal relationship, you hit it off with certain writers, certain poets—other poets I respect, but I don't hit it off with them—and again, that's just a relationship. These poets, lately, I've just hit it off with them.

TM: Basically, you're just improving by writing steadily.

MB: For me, that's what works. You get skilled at identifying your own faults. I get more skilled at catching something sooner than I would have several years ago. Some people need to jump from style to style to feel refreshed; I may need that someday, but right now, I

feel like I'm still growing in the way I've been writing for a number of years, and so I'm going to continue because it's still stimulating to me, and I feel like I keep growing and thriving in the way I'm going at it. The day that stops, I'll change, but right now I feel it's a fertile field for me, so I'm sticking with it.

I think other people may feel the same way as I do, but the part of me that writes has its own rules and if I try to boss it around, I just go brain dead. Going back to the whole idea of the poetic prompt: what gets you going—something will happen that will create certain options, if you told me I must write about x and x, I can't just manufacture. When something happens, it activates a part of me that wants to find out *what the hell?*, and I can't control what's going to activate that. I can't manufacture what's going to activate that. Once it's activated, then I can bring technique to it. But, the activation moment itself is something that's unpredictable and I am alert for.

TM: It must happen a lot if you're able to go write every day.

MB: Yeah, and I think that it's something that any poet or creative artist will cultivate, which is, instead of blowing by moments like that, you stop. That's one of the key things, just to be alert to the moment—when something weird happens, instead of just continuing on and blowing by it, you stop and go, *wait a minute, what was that?*, and the next thing you know, your mind is going. For me, the ideal state for writing is similar to when you've had brandy and coffee: you're relaxed enough to where all these options are occurring to you, but sharp enough where you can make choices. You're very, very relaxed to where things are coming up, and that is your intuitive part, however, your technique part knows the better options from the worst options. That's what the moment is like for me.

TM: Do you write seven days a week, or five days?

MB: Five days, and frankly, the weekend off is a good idea: the refresher element of it. I work Monday through Friday, Saturday and Sunday I won't write. I'm always open to an idea, if something oc-

curs to me I'll do one of those sketches. I go down to my work space Monday through Friday morning from 9:00 to 12:00—three hours each day, and then I go for a little walk. If I get a new prompt that I can get a few lines from, then at lunch I'll often sketch out the prompt a little more. The morning session is the hard work and finessing and revising, bringing my full attention; other times I'm just kinda open to ideas, or sketching out things, but not in any kind of hard way, just like: *here's a thought, here's a thought*, and once I feel I have some semblance of what the final poem might be like, then I bring it to my work space.

TM: Do you keep a laptop there? Are you writing with a pencil or a pen?

MB: I keep a laptop there. I do the hard work on a computer, but every Friday, I hand copy whatever poems remain. It makes me downshift and slow down, especially for lines. Interestingly you can work on a poem and there are certain lines that bug you, other lines are okay, but by recopying everything, I always find something—maybe I find a better word, or a punctuation change—it's an important part of revising, it makes me go slower, and revisit all parts of the poem. For me, it's very useful.

TM: Are these two-year-old poems, or new poems?

MB: This is with new poems.

TM: How many poems are you working on at the same time.

MB: It's variable, it could be ten or fifteen.

TM: How many of those poems actually end up getting finished.

MB: All of them. I very seldom abandon a poem. I'm stubborn, but when I do one of my two year surveys, there are a few that drop out. I have to wait two years before I can confess that I didn't get it.

TM: You're never going for any sort of meter or form, right?

MB: No. I find that it's a matter of what stimulates you, and I flatline on having to fit to a preexisting form. If my mind is allowed to just follow the vernacular, in as compressed a way as possible, I'll find a structure for it, I'll find a way for that particular poem to be ordered. So, it's just a different way to the same thing. There are certain restrictions or demands or conformities that can be stimulating to some writers, not me. I will say this: to render an experience is its own discipline. It's a very demanding thing. You're not all over the place, you're rendering one experience—you hope in rendering this experience it becomes a theory of experience, saying something larger than itself. That's up for the reader to decide, not the poet. I render an experience—that is my discipline, the demanding thing that stimulates me: to share this one moment in whatever complexity I can manage to see in it. That, in itself, is a tremendous demand.

TM: What is a poem?

MB: I'll go back to what I said before: it's a particular experience that validates some kind of more abstract truth. It's grounded in some kind of experienced reality. If you just have some kind of personal experience that does not, in some way, tap a larger truth, that's a diary. If what you're doing is speaking your abstract truth, that belongs more in an essay. I think what's unique about poetry or fiction, is that the experience embodies an abstraction while being completely particular, so that we can identify with it, we can feel it, we can think it, it has ramifications. If it's not a personal experience, it's just an abstract statement. If it's an abstract statement, it's not a personal experience.

TM: Yeah, but can't an abstract statement be a poem?

MB: It can, at times. It would be a very good one. I do that myself. I've had some where I'm just making that statement in such compressed language that I feel that qualifies as a poem, but ninety percent of my poems are something that happened.

TM: Do you feel that you are writing for a reader?

MB: Yes, but no reader in particular—in fact, maybe I'm writing to myself. I'm writing for myself, certainly, but also to myself, meaning: I'm my own first reader. When I read it back, I read it like a reader. I consider myself a demanding reader of myself. I would never read another poet with as much criticism and scrutiny as I read myself.

TM: Do you have some readers that you try your unpublished poems on?

MB: Yes. After two years of saving poems, I make a private collection, and give it to a few readers. Interestingly, a few years ago, I gave seventy poems to three readers and asked them each to pick a dozen that I should submit for publication. I wanted to get a sense of which ones were being received well. So, they each picked about a dozen poems that they definitely thought I should submit—no poem was picked by all three.

TM: Was that useful feedback?

MB: It was. It told me how subjective things are. It doesn't help me in terms of which poems are better than others.

TM: When you get one of your prompts, how long does it kick around before you start to write it?

MB: I immediately take notes, and I'll probably sketch it out during my next lunch break. Within a day or so, I'm at the computer with it. Once I get a sense of how it's going to go—it's a little bit like a sketch for an oil painting—I sketch it out, nothing is hard, but I know I have something there. Some hang on because there's one little part that bugs me, others go surprisingly smoothly. The sketch is key, because what I try to do, right away, is capture the charisma of the moment: what was going on. Later, I will always know what it was that caught my attention, and I can pull something out of that.

If I let too much time go before working, I'll forget what it was that interested me about it.

TM: Do you have any personal rules for writing?

MB: The only rule I have is to make it as clear as possible. I believe I have general tendencies: to try to be as compressed as possible, to try to be as simple and direct as possible. I don't want to show sweat on the line, I'm not showy, I'm not interested in anything other than getting at the heart of what is was that was bewildering me. If I can do that, then I've done something, at least, for myself, and it's up to the reader to decide whether or not I've done anything for them.

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