

## That Was What Life Was Like: David Blair's *Barbarian Seasons*

*David Blair's poem "At Fenway Park" appeared in SCR 52:1*

David Blair's poems are crowded with people, just like his city settings and pond walks and beach trips. Twice in the early pages of his new book, his fourth, Blair writes, "I am here," and this insistence on his own simple presence is at one with a social world of companionship, strangeness, and difference. Blair's poetry is the kind that takes the mere fact of being with others as a good in itself, refusing to stretch that into similarity or identification. Blair has the kaleidoscopic attention of the flâneur and the open heart of the novelist. But his point of view comes from his participation in, not his voyeuristic removal from, the milieu of jerks, chumps, dupes, "pretzel-eaters," "wicked pissers," high school basketball players, volatile Boston taxi drivers, untalented ice-skaters, and the "hunkered- / down old capitalist in seersucker" on the Metro-North that comprise the dramatis personae of *Barbarian Seasons*.

To match his openness to the world, Blair maintains a voice that's at once chatty and philosophical, ecstatic and mournful. The logic that holds together most of the poems is a restless mind muttering to itself in public, a classic American poetic mode, as in the beginning of "Black Mountain Music": "the looseness of music, / I start to say, but, uh, 10-4, negatory / on that comment." Another poem begins, "Mostly nothing between my mind and poem." Yet for all their apparent casualness and self-revision, the poems are carefully constructed works of artifice. The details the poems pick up are lovingly preserved, like the late winter visit to a supermarket, where "parking lot snow gets old," or the midwinter visit to the Galleria Mall, "when winter comes in / flat as paint drying." There is a lot of summer here too, a day in summer right before it rains: "The wind makes the pale sides / of the leaves turn up." Blair's seasons are barbarous: filled with the possibility of brushing into a stranger or meeting a friend or bursting into color, they speak in ways that make the world unrepeatably, unfamiliar, and irreducible.

The sadness of the book shapes its insistence on being “here”: what will happen when he’s not here, or when someone he loves isn’t here anymore? In “Free Variation on ‘Wildwood Flower,’” the Carter Family song brings Blair to a meditation on what I’d like to imagine is Wildwood, New Jersey, very close to where I spent most of my childhood and adolescent summers. The poem begins with a Wordsworthian moment of hating the daily grind, the “just do your job,” and then being nearly submerged by the rush of detail that comes with a day off, a trip to the beach. The first part of the poem is mostly a description of people who would come into contact with each other at a beach: an old woman, a “demon child,” a kid buried in the sand, a server at a pizza place on the boardwalk. The boardwalk is where the poem lands, and the poet looks around at

the benches  
 screened in and gull-  
 shat railings, where people eat  
 steak bombs, while we look around  
 at who will end up next to go  
 away from all of this sad joy  
 that also covers carapaces  
 right to the hinges, horns  
 and the complex eyes  
 of stranded horseshoes  
 with slipper shells,  
 with fat chance washing back.  
 I’m making a necklace here.

A curious thing happens at the end of this gentle, desperate poem that almost manages to taste like Choco Tacos, Milwaukee’s Best, and Banana Boat sunscreen. The elegiac sneaks in, first as a question about the end of the day—“who will end up next to go”—which then suddenly grows into a larger question—“away from all of this sad joy.” After that, it seems like the roving gaze returns, picking up a derelict horseshoe crab as an objective correlative for the helplessness of time passing.

But it’s really just a feint: the poem does come up with an answer to the loss of time, at least in its own poetic economy of description and narration. As in several other poems from this collection, the final line is an apparently unrelated moment of narrative. “I’m making a necklace here” certainly fits in with the rest of the activities in the poem. Perhaps it refers back to the poem itself, an *ars poetica* in miniature: a necklace might be a good metaphor for the contiguity and metonymy that attracts Blair. More important, though, it

doesn't try to pull the poem into a final moment of stillness or luminous detail. No cresting epiphany emerges from the accretion of detail in Blair's poems.

Instead, the tiny moment of narrative steps in where the great revelation could have been. In "Concord River and Walden Pond," another beautiful poem about time passing, it's mid-August and the poet takes his daughter and her friends to Walden while he prepares to teach Hopkins and Hardy. The poem ends by keeping going:

"You have *thirty minutes*  
to do something."  
"That is enough time  
for us to walk around  
the pond if we go fast."  
Then the shoeless three  
raced off for the woods.

The moral of the story is, in effect, more story, more happening, more making. Narrative is one way that poems index time, and one way to make things continue just a little longer. Blair's poetry is about human experiences had in company with one another. There are very few lessons to learn except that it would be wrong to think that you're better than any of the other chumps distracting themselves, ourselves, from death. It's appropriate that the penultimate poem in *Barbarian Seasons* is a multipart elegy for his friend James Kealey. In this poem, the fundamental tenet of the book—that being with others is a good in itself—slams into the suddenness with which we disappear: "We just stood there talking. And then one of us would fall over. / That was what life was like."