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Colin Bossen
Denison University

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Exile Talks to Poet Deborah Digges

On Thursday, November 6, *Exile's* Colin Bossen had the opportunity to interview poet Deborah Digges. In addition to her most recent book of poetry, *Rough Music*, and her memoir *Fugitive Spring*, Digges has published two previous books of poems, *Vesper Sparrows*, which won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award, and *Late in the Millennium*. She has received grants for her writing from the Ingram Merrill Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Currently, she is an associate professor of English at Tufts University, and lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Exile: I noticed that in your earlier books you tend to write a lot of formal poetry but in your most recent book, *Rough Music*, you seem to have moved away from formal verse. Has this been an intentional move? If so, why have you started to write more free verse?

Digges: I do feel that free verse is a form. I think I just got tired of writing formal poems. I think it's true that you write poems to an audience, but that when you do write a poem, you can only work with what interests you. You are not obligated to write about anything or write in any specific way. You can only write about what truly deeply interests you, and I think that most poets only have one or two subjects they write about. I think I used to work in forms so much, like the sestina, that I had to go into detox. The result of which is my poem "Rocks, Paper, Scissors," which is a great big formal mess. It is sort of like a sprung sestina. After that, I kind of gave up formal poetry. I think that these formal poems were teaching me something about the nature of my language. Sometimes I tell my students to adopt a form over the summer and work it over and over again and then give it up. I tell them that they will see that form influences their free verse or, as I would say, influences the spring inside their language. Because, you see, I don't really think that free verse is free at all. It is sprung from, in some ways, history and traditional forms. It is as highly wrought as a formal line. It has a spring inside of it that makes it work, like in old watches. Poetry is the highest form of human articulate language. It is like bird song to me.

Exile: If there are rules to free verse, how come no one has written about them?

Digges: In some ways the rules of free verse are more abstract than the rules of formal verse. It is not like you have 14 lines of 10 syllables or a toolbox with very specific tools. The form of free verse is point of view. You are answering one abstraction with another. The question is: who is thinking and from where? That is the most vital thing about free verse.

Exile: How is voice a form?

Digges: Well, let's look at a sonnet for instance. Or better yet, one of the odes. The form acts as the point of view. The speaker in those poems can go anywhere as long as the reader has something to hold on to.

Exile: I am not sure I completely understand what you mean when you say that free verse has form. Could you elaborate a little more?

Digges: When you say that free verse has a form, you are saying that free verse has limits because form suggests limits. So when I say that free verse has form, that suggests that it has limits, and you find that upsetting. That is not exactly what I mean when I say that it has a form. I am not saying that it has limits. I mean that the subject of the poem is what gives it form, because there is nothing else that can. The subject of the poem will find a form within the white space of a page. That form has integrity. It is not just anything—it is carefully thought out. Maybe it is the word “form” that you are having a problem with.

Exile: That is exactly it. I think of a free verse poem as the anti-thesis of form. It doesn't have set boundaries to begin. When you write a free verse poem, you are creating a form.

Digges: Look at Whitman. His free verse sets up certain problems for him. His line length, for instance. He goes beyond the classic 10-syllable line. What happens when you extend the line past 10 syllables? What does the problem become? It becomes: how do you keep the poem going? As they used to say, “out there, there be dragons.” And that is what Whitman is doing—he is going out there with the dragons. How is he doing it? Well, for one thing, he uses commas. He doesn't stop the line. So he is understanding that his free verse is finding form by suspending something—namely, the end of the line. His free verse is finding form based on its content. Dickinson, on the other hand, has the opposite problem. She writes a line that is subtracted from the classic line. It is filled with silence. Her problem is not so much how to keep the thing going, but how to keep the thing from going by so fast. One could argue that is why she uses those dashes. She understands that her content has certain limitations that she has to overcome somehow with her form, inside the line. Does that make more sense?

Exile: Yes, it does. It makes perfect sense.

Digges: You just have to remember to take it poem by poem. Every content has its own form, and the content will decide what the form will be.

Exile: What is the purpose of your writing? Or, putting that question another way, what kind of sound are you trying to make?

Digges: It is an interesting question, but I am relieved to say that I don't think there is really a purpose. As for a sound, I like being noisy. I think that language in and of itself is silent and abstract and sort of the means for things. Language resides and begins in the body and then it comes out of the body as noise as bird song. I think that is a conflict in language in that it is both nothing and only the names for things, and that it is a cry of some kind, of experience maybe. So I suppose the sound I want to make is loud and memorable.

Exile: Speaking of bird song, throughout your poetry you make reference to birds. Is there a reason for this? Are birds part of a symbolic language that you use? Or do you just like to incorporate them into your poetry?

Digges: Birds, and sparrows in particular, are a big thing for me. You know, I have a sister who kind of gave it all up and moved Sedona, Arizona, and became a sort of psychic healer, which I think is great. We had a discussion one day about what she calls your totem. I said that it had to be a sparrow because sparrows are everywhere—you don't notice them, because they are hardy little birds. They have tremendous courage. They are terrifically earnest and full of life. They can nest anywhere. I love their ability to survive and actually thrive. You know, they were imported from England in the 18th century. They were so prolific that they were actually called immoral birds. People tried to get rid of them. I also think that the human affinity with flight is very interesting. I think we have always had—because we have this thing called imagination—an obsession with flight. We have an envy of flight. The eating of the wing bones as if that were going to make you dream wizard flights. I guess I kind of fall into that fascination with bird flight. And now with the discovery of the left and right hemisphere of their brains, and that birds learn song the same way we learn language... So I don't know, I just don't have language for a lot of things that I write about, and birds seem to help me deal with that.

Exile: This might sound like an odd question but do you have an obsession with sin? I ask this because a lot of your poems, like "Rough Music" for example, are about being a sinner. They seem to be about how your past, or your sins, not only continue to haunt you, but shape you.

Digges: Sin is one word for it. I really think that poets—and I forget who I am quoting here—cannot be the citizens of any country. I can use science to explain myself. In ornithology there is this term called the abrupt green edge. It is the edge of a forest just before fields or open spaces. Interestingly enough, most of the life resides right there—right inside the tree line. Deeper into the forest is a lot of danger, and the soil is actually fallow. Out in the fields there is richness and fallowness, but most lives are lived right here on the edge—between the borders. This is true of poets. We do not live in culture, and not so far out to sea as to not be able to recognize culture. That is where poetry happens.

When you begin to affiliate yourself and begin to have too many opinions, I think it starts to ruin your poetry. There are a lot of poets who are really political and believe that one needs to take certain kinds of stands. I don't agree with that. I think that poetry takes care of all that eventually. I mean you can read my politics when you read *Rough Music*. I am not interested in political poetry.

I like the notion of the poet as being what Keats calls the chameleon poet: someone who is invisible in culture; someone who is not aligned with any side. When you start to take sides, you become limited.

In "Rough Music," of course, that person is a sinner who hasn't taken sides. Someone who didn't pay their parking tickets. Not because they couldn't but because they didn't want to. The narrator is someone who thinks themselves above the law, and then it catches up to them.

Exile: I think it is very interesting that you didn't start writing till you were older. Because of this, your poetry seems to speak of experience a lot. Would you like to talk about this a little bit?

Digges: You know, most of my students start young and I really admire that, but I think that everybody has a different arc. I mean, with John Keats it is a good thing that he wrote when did, because he died when he was 25. Keats had five or six really good years and just doggedly wrote. Rimbaud is another one. He wrote for a few years and then just wandered around for the rest of his life. He burned out. On the other hand, you have Robert Frost who didn't publish his first book until he was 45. So, where does the fire start? And how far does it burn? There is no right or wrong time to start writing. For me, I am sort of like a squirrel who stores up a whole lot of nuts before starting to write.

I also believe that if one puts the kind of pressure on oneself, it doesn't matter whether one's poems will last. I don't think that we are getting any better as poets. What you are writing now are the great poems of your youth. Ten years from now you will be writing a different poem and you won't be able to get back to that. It is really important that you document what is available to you now—however abstract, however innocent it might be. It has its own integrity. It will be something that you will pick up later on and will not be able to duplicate. You will pick up strains of it here and there but you won't be capable of writing those poems anymore. You will be writing different poems from a different center. So you have to respect yourself, and your work, at all stages.

Exile: I guess that sort of ties into the sort of generic question of what is your advice for young writers, if you have any?

Digges: I don't think that young writers begin to write because they have read a lot—we begin to write because we have to. And then what is very liberating is the reading, because you begin to realize, in all great ways, that you have had that thought, too. Sometimes you read someone and say "You know, I was going to write a poem about that too," or "I also have a story like this that I need to write." In an odd way, reading gives you permission and kind of kicks you in the butt. I guess that is my best advice to young poets. Read books. Mind you, not just poetry, but all sorts of books. Also, I would say to them have fun.

—Colin Bossen '98