An Interview with Joseph Bathanti

By Marina Morbiducci

We are grateful to Joseph Bathanti, contemporary poet closely connected to the Black Mountain College experience, for generously contributing some unpublished poems to this issue of RSA. The interview that follows serves as an introduction, by way of questions, to his work.

MM: *Do you acknowledge any deep relationship with the practice of poetry as performed at BMC and your own writing?*

JB: I discovered Black Mountain College about a decade after I first started writing seriously, simultaneously, almost, with the publication of my first book of poems. I'd like to think the Black Mountain influence was lurking in me all along, and maybe it was – in the vein of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence." But I was innocent – I'm deliberately avoiding the perhaps more appropriate word, *ignoran*t – of the leviathan I now think of as Black Mountain College.

I came to BMC through Martin Duberman's *Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community.* A very prominent poet named Ron Bayes, my Literary Godfather, put Duberman's book in my hands one day in 1987, after I had been teaching ten years and had been under the impression even longer that I was well-educated. The book changed my life and redirected my consciousness in subtle, yet meaningful ways. Initially, I was caught up in the phenomenon of BMC, the mere fact that it had existed in North Carolina, where I had by then been living for eleven years, and that no one I had encountered, up to that point, other than Ron – who had been intimates with a number of the poets there – had even heard of it.

In 1989, my wife, Joan, and our year old son, Jacob, moved to the little town of Old Fort in western NC, just seven or so miles at the base of Old Fort Mountain, which corkscrews up about 1300 feet and crosses the Eastern Continental Divide into the town of Black Mountain. Living

there in the shadow of Black Mountain College, in close proximity to it, I actually began to dig into the poets. The first thing I tackled was Charles Olson's brilliant but disorienting manifesto, "Projective Verse." I felt like I kind of got it, and I began to actively consider in my own work "composition by field," to visualize my poems as having three-dimensional heft, a mass, a thingness; and, thus, I began to experiment. This was a good thing for a young poet – to experiment, to allow himself to be prey to the wiles of change and whim and whenness – though every time I thought I had apprehended Olson, he slipped away from me like quicksilver and I had to return to his famous essay.

I read Duncan. Duncan seems more in line with Olson: the lore and mysticism, the flourish, his compositional bent. I was sure I witnessed in Duncan "projective verse." I tried that too. Then I came to Creeley and Oppenheimer and found a kind of discursive perch there that perhaps I hadn't with Olson and Duncan, regardless of my admiration for their works and intellect. I still take great comfort in Creeley's assertion that "Form is never more than an extension of content."

But back then, in 1987, as well as prior, and for the longest time after, Black Mountain poetry was the "School" canonized in Donald Allen's 1960 volume, *The New American Poetry*: Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Paul Blackburn, Robert Creeley, Paul Carroll, Larry Eigner, Edward Dorn, Jonathan Williams, and Joel Oppenheimer. Four of these poets – Levertov, Blackburn, Carroll, and Eigner – never actually set foot on the Black Mountain campus, but they were associated with the college for having published in affiliated magazines, *Origin* and *The Black Mountain Review*. I very much like the work of those poets; but, thankfully, since Allen, that canon has expanded appreciably to include the great M.C. Richards – it's simply astonishing that she was initially excluded – and many others, including other important women writers like Hilda Morley, Jane Mayhall, and Cynthia Homire.

MM: *In which ways and directions was your work influenced by BMC?*

JB: While I am influenced mightily in temperament and philosophy by Black Mountain – and hope its spirit infiltrates my classrooms, especially

BMC Founder's John Andrew Rice's dictum "Inner freedom in judgment and action" – and while I went through my phase of writing "like" the Black Mountain poets, I find my range and trove in narrative. But their preoccupation with sound and the line hovers over me at all times.

Maybe it's worth mentioning that I have written, and published, a suite of poems influenced by and about John Cage that very much invokes Cage's predilection for chance and sound, the longest of which deliberately mimics Olson's "composition by field," and all of which are pretty experimental for me. There's even a mesostic in this group of poems, a form developed by Cage.

I teach the Black Mountain poets, and I write about them, but I don't write like them. Someone reading my poems would not – I don't think – see a kinship, though there is a decided visceral bond, but little obvious family resemblance.

MM: *Does your vicinity to the physical place of BMC include an additional form of sense of belonging and intellectual tie?*

JB: As I mentioned, when I lived in Old Fort, I felt a palpable kinship to BMC simply by virtue of proximity. I was able to visit both campuses of the College, enter its buildings, walk the same earth that those fabled Black Mountain students walked, breathe the same rarified air. Forgive my over-romanticizing these experiences, but this is how I felt and, in truth, thirty years later still feel. In fact, my enchantment with BMC has only heightened.

I no longer live in Old Fort, but rather in Vilas, NC, about an hour and a half from the BMC campuses. Nevertheless, this part of the Western NC mountains also resides in the sway of BMC. Appalachian State University, where I've taught the past sixteen years, houses the papers of BMC's founder, John Andrew Rice, in Belk Library's W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection. I'm in and out of Asheville regularly. It is home to the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center, founded in 1993, a vibrant, astonishing exhibition space and resource center that "preserves and continues the legacy of educational and artistic innovation of Black Mountain College." The Asheville Art Museum has in its permanent collection a number of

BMC artifacts and art pieces. In addition, the Western Regional Archives, in Oteen, a town that joins Asheville, contains the official BMC records, as well as correspondence, interviews, manuscripts and other documents that went into Martin Duberman's watershed volume, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. So… living in this part of NC is a paradise for BMC scholars and aficionados.

I also remain profoundly intrigued in Black Mountain College as an Appalachian phenomenon. Very little has been explored about BMC and its relationship – spiritual, mystical, mythical – to place, in this case Appalachia. Mysteriously enough, other legendary art schools in western North Carolina – like Penland School of Crafts; The John C. Campbell Folk School; and Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, not far across the NC border in the Tennessee mountains – were also thriving at the same time as BMC. I maintain there's something in the ether, but pinning it down with any definite certainty or scholarship remains elusive. But I and others are working on it. There is a decided and ever-growing regional devotion in these parts to Black Mountain College.

MM: *As for your relationship with US contemporary poetry, how would you locate yourself in the present scenario?*

JB: I am very much a regional poet. My reputation – and I'm hesitant to use that term, as that's for others to decide – resides in North Carolina and into a few of NC's border states in very modest ways. And, because so much of my work is rooted in Pittsburgh, I think it's safe to say that my work is known there. I suppose I don't really feel equipped to answer this question with any thoroughness. I also think that I have a presence among contemporary Italian American writers. My identity as an Italian American writer has been fertile territory for me and I'd venture as well that I've had the greatest and most enthusiastic critical reception in that realm.

MM: *Is your Italian American identity a source of inspiration in your poems? In which way?*

JB: More than anything, my Italian American identity – concomitant, very nearly synonymous with Catholicism, and what I would call my viral

association with the vicious nuns who taught me as a child – and the Italian American neighborhood of East Liberty, the neighborhood in which I grew up in Pittsburgh, continues to be the wellspring of my work – not just in my poetry, but also in my fiction and nonfiction.

Despite the nuns, I think of my childhood as rich and happy, and my very Italian American old world neighborhood – so many households were bilingual – as having more in common with Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Macondo than with a big industrial northern city, at that time the steel capitol of the world.

The most extraordinary characters roamed the streets performing the most extraordinary daily offices and ablutions. It was mythical and operatic. It was loud and funny, tragic and grotesque. My entire voluminous extended family on both sides – *Italian* (we never at that time referred to ourselves as *Italian American*) – lived within easy walking distance. Stories dropped from the sky like Fiorello pears and sprouted from the cracks in the sidewalks. I still can't get over it, and I still can't stop writing about it. Those characters travel with me. One or another of them habitually whispers in my ear – often in broken English. I dream about them – more than anyone about my mother and father. And now that world is vanished. What else is there to do but resurrect it on the page? It feels so much more real to me than now.

MM: *Can you express what features in your writing can be assumed to be typically Italian and typically American, conversely?*

JB: I often feel like an impostor – a bit of a poseur as I have at my disposal only a handful of Italian words, though they often issue unbidden. Again, they are those persistent voices often infiltrating my ear. I can say the following in truth and in certitude: once I realized that my central trove – my primary preoccupation, the subject matter I was most passionate about and would never exhaust – was indeed my Italian American heritage, my writing and my confidence as a writer took a quantum leap. Perhaps the chief anxiety of a writer just beginning is that he has nothing to say, that he has no story. In claiming that Italian American turf, still without thinking of myself as an Italian American writer, I claimed my memory, my imagination, and I knew I had stories to tell. Telling them well was

another matter, and, thus, I embarked, slowly, methodically, but knowing that the vein I mined would never expire. But, again, I must underscore that before I had begun to conceive of myself as an Italian American writer. I suppose I was not quite aware that such an animal existed.

I was introduced to Cesare Pavese in graduate school and was thoroughly smitten. I read the Arrowsmith translation of *Lavorare stanca* and went on to read all the Pavese I could find, including a biography of him and his scholarly work on American Literature. I've since read Pavese's *Disaffections: The Complete Poems 1930-1950*, translated by Geoffrey Brock, which of course includes *Lavorare stanca*. I go back and forth between the Arrowsmith and Brock translations. I like them both, but think I favor Arrowsmith. I claim Pavese as my Italian writer-ancestor. I take great comfort in his discursive narrative style, so deceptively transparent, so very deep and nuanced – such passionate disaffection and ennui.

I realized I was an Italian American writer when I read another life-changing book, *Beyond the Godfather: Italian American Writers on the Real Italian American Experience*, edited by A. Kenneth Ciongoli and Jay Parini. I witnessed iterations of my life repeatedly in its pages. I suddenly recognized myself as having lineage, as fitting into a tradition. Then I discovered the literary magazines, *Italian Americana* and *VIA: Voices in Italian Americana*, began to publish in them, discovered and became a member of a community of Italian American writers and obsessively launched into reading their work. I feel authenticated by that kinship, that tradition and shared mythos.

MM: *Do those two identities coexist harmoniously or do you perceive a sense of double consciousness when you compose your own poetry?*

JB: My reflex is to say that the two identities are seamless, inseparable, but I'm not sure that is true. What I do know is who I am is immutably shaped by ancestry in ways my sons' identities aren't, though they're fiercely devoted to their Italian heritage. They are the sons of a Pittsburgh Italian Catholic father and an Atlanta Southern Baptist mother. They grew up in North Carolina. They are Southerners and proud of it. They have assimilated in ways much different than I and, for that matter, much

different than my wife, Joan. Joan and I were born in the 50s and were both raised provincially in a world that had much stricter borders. I rarely left my neighborhood and that did not trouble me in the least. I didn't see the ocean until I was eighteen and hitchhiked to New Jersey.

I am old enough to have had four grandparents who immigrated to the United States in the first decade of the 20th Century (three from Italy, one from France), to have had three of those grandparents speak exclusively Italian, so those films and those tapes are always playing. I see the people on the streets. I hear them. I see the *baccala* poking black and frozen out of peck baskets at Christmas time in front of the grocery stores. I smell the Parodis and the deNobili smoke. Yet, I am thoroughly Americanized, in all the best ways, I hope; and I have lived very nearly two thirds of my life in North Carolina, the glorious American South, so what am I? It doesn't really matter. I invest in the great Southern genius Faulkner's injunction: "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." Those old Italians, my beloved *famiglia* – how I worship them. They rise up obediently, poetically, when conjured.

MM: *Can you describe the circumstances which inspired your poems "Zippo," "Epiphany Run," "Communion at the Rehab," and "For Frank O'Hara," included in this "L'Inedito" section?*

JB: "Zippo" and "Epiphany Run" are from a very long "single" poem – in truth, a series of linked poems, even bits of fiction and memoir, letter-poems – of a hybrid pedigree I've been working on for years now called "Epiphany Run." It's set in Pittsburgh, where I grew up, and takes place on a single frigid day in January when the adult speaker takes off on a literal morning run and revisits the literal and psychic precincts of his boyhood when he was growing up in the city.

There's more to it, of course, but that's the gist. I teach every year for about two weeks in a low residency MFA Creative Writing Program at Pittsburgh's Carlow University, so I return to my hometown annually, during two terrifically inhospitable weeks of winter weather, and enact this morning ritual out of which the longer poem, "Epiphany Run" emanates. The version published, here, in *RSA Journal* is the poem's opening – literally

the speaker embarking on this run in which he recollects his mythologized and perhaps imagined past.

"Zippo", another of the unpublished poems here following, is more than anything about my father's shiny silver Zippo cigarette lighter that men and women of my childhood carried, almost like jewelry, to light their cigarettes. There was great ritual, it now seems to me, to removing the lighter from where it was secreted in a pocket or purse, then opening it – I can still hear that metallic yaw and then the ensuing grind of the flywheel against flint – and then flame lolling up on its wick and the fumes of the lighter fluid that had to be replenished through a chamber at the base of the lighter. That little engine, that Zippo, was quite mysterious, the province of adults and their mesmerizing esoteric ways.

In 1997, my dear father, at age 82, was hurt very badly in a car crash – from which he characteristically courageously recovered – and for a while he resided in a Rehabilitation facility. On Sundays, a nondenominational religious service was conducted at the Rehab. I wheeled my dad down to the service one Sunday, and it was a dizzying and uplifting mix of the family of man and woman, with a Liberian minister with a beautiful, heavily lilting accent, and an amazing array of Eucharist option to accommodate the various patients' conditions and dietary restrictions. It was comical and lovely at once and permeated with grace and a true spirit of healing. I received the sacrament and felt blessed by it.

"For Frank O'Hara" is set in Gramercy Park in New York City where I spent a few days with my older son, Jacob, and we simply bummed around and took in that abundant neighborhood. It was during the time that the odd and rather unsettling exhibition of human cadavers in titan-like poses, *Body Worlds*, was touring and in vogue, so there were posters advertising it plastered everywhere. Within easy walking distance was a skirmish of fabulous Indian restaurants dubbed Curry Hill, where we dined every evening. The poem is an obvious homage to Frank O'Hara, a poet I much admire, for so many reasons and whose book, *Lunch Poems*, will never stop delighting me. Its line, "Bright yellow the queued glistening cabs," acknowledges and hopefully gives transparent credit to O'Hara's line "hum-colored / cabs" in his well-known amazing poem, "A Step Away from Them."