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## David Ferry's *Some Things I Said*: An Essay in Appreciation

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"We read to find a place to dwell on, and even in, for a time. . ."  
—David Ferry<sup>1</sup>

*Some Things I Said* offers a place in which to dwell for a while, a place that might not offer a sense of certainty or security in knowing where we are. This book gives us a vivid sense of David Ferry's willingness to travel in places where we don't have access to clear and distinct knowledge of the world or of ourselves, for that matter. We have many signals in the poems, as well as in the interspersed photographs by Stephen Ferry, that we will encounter a world of both light and shadows. Visual images evoke and inhabit this place with their compelling and sensuous graininess mirroring that very quality in David's poems, beginning with the image of a tree on the cover, conjuring up a sense of space that is partly obscured, yet strikingly present. Its umbrage foreshadows "Everybody's Tree," the first of the anthologized poems referred to in the collection's title poem.

*Some Things I Said* is not only the book's title, but also names the prefatory poem. In this intriguing poem David strings together lines that respond to the earlier poems of his life, including excerpts from his translations of ancient texts. He responds to the earlier work as things having been

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spoken by him over time, listening to each of his own lines and how each one listens for the lines that follow. A rich dialogue unfolds. It reveals David's profound practice of observing without preconception, honoring the evanescence of things in their beingness as they come and go, willing to be claimed by things as they arise into brilliant presence and move away into ephemeral shadows. Informed by deep curiosity, David plunges into listening to the relentlessness of the onward search of the lines, heightened by the urgency of their repetitions, open to wonder, vulnerable to the bewilderment that might overtake us at the boundary where our knowing and our not knowing intersect. "I said better not know too much too soon all about it" (55).

As readers we are invited to listen in, to find our way through "the cascade of lyric fragments," as George Kalogeris puts it in his afterword (109). He tells us that David described "Some Things I Said" as a "table of contents." This idea guided David's children, Stephen and Elizabeth, along with Dan Chiasson and George in their collaboration with David in creating this collection at the very end of his life. The galley proofs for the book were presented to David in a small celebratory gathering of family and friends the day before David passed away on November 5, 2023, four months before he would have turned one hundred years old. In the book we find each poem in the order it was spoken of in the title poem, letting us travel with David through his listening to his own work created over the course of his long life.

As Chiasson says, this book is "entirely unique" in the way it anthologizes his previous poems through "the sin-

gle weave of one of David Ferry's most beautiful poems, "Some Things I Said" (11). In the logic of an anthology, according to the Greek etymology of the word, the lines of this poem offer a garland, a gathering up (*legein*) of flowers (*anthoi*) taken from the original poems to which this new poem nods in recollective gazes, calling us to a renewed entrance into each of those earlier poems.

The title poem, "Some Things I Said," was originally published in *Poetry Magazine*, September 2019, when David was ninety-five years old. While the reader is not meant to discover an overarching theme that organizes or informs these lyric fragments, we are given a vivid sense of the concerns that occupied David throughout his writing life. In his foreword to David's book, *Of No Country I Know*, Alan Shapiro says of David's work that "His abiding concern is mortality, the fragilities of the flesh, and the precarious nature of the bonds that constitute ourselves as individuals, as spouses, parents, friends, and citizens. This sense of estrangement, desire for connection, and of life as a perpetual wandering tempered only by love and empathy is reflected in the titles of each collection." Here are those titles: *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems*, *On the Way to the Island*, *Strangers*, *Dwelling Places*, *Of No Country I Know*, *On This Side of the River*, *Bewilderment*, and *Ellery Street*. The lyric fragments that form "Some Things I Said" respond to poems from these books, to passages from his translations of Virgil and Horace, to his rendering of *Gilgamesh*, and to a poem of Wallace Stevens, whom David admired. Why he chose the poems he did as he wrote each fragment we are not told. It might be more agreeable to David's sense of things

to consider the possibility that the poems chose him as he wrote each fragment crystalizing around an insight that is sometimes completely graspable and sometimes entirely enigmatic.

Kalogeris brilliantly states that what we encounter in this final book of David Ferry's writing life is "[. . .] his tender, grievously purified, eloquent recognition that we are all fellow sufferers, as inscrutable to ourselves as we are to others." Throughout all of David's work the recognition of the suffering of us mortals and its sometimes bewildering effect on us is left intact, not reducible to thematic consideration, or to any talk *about* it. David's capacity to tolerate his own bewilderment inspires us to drop our defenses against ours and join him in this venture of being right here with what calls to us and claims our attention moment to moment, line by David Ferry line, as we harvest the lyric knowledge that we gain from his poems.

A distinguishing feature of David's poems is that they consistently enact what they say. His lines and stanzas call and respond to each other in this enactment and, as readers, we are asked to enter this dialogue. As we read "Everybody's Tree" (20), we find ourselves in the summer storm with David at fourteen, we might even feel the joy and thrill go through our bodies as if we were there with him. His lines pull us into this feast of delight with the storm and the porch's coolness. "Over my head the lightning skated and blistered / And sizzled and skidded and yelled in the bursting down / Around my maybe fourteen-years-old being [. . .]" These lines don't simply tell us, or describe for us, what the storm was like, they

bring us into it, into the feel and movement of its force. His words carry the sound of the thunderclaps. Thunder greets the lightning. The heat and cool take turns. In the later lines of the first stanza, we feel the peace in the coolness down on the front porch while still in the midst of the storm: "The raindrops on / The front porch railing arms peacefully dripped / As if they weren't experiencing what / Was coming down from above them as an outrage."

And then the lines bring us this surprising moment of awareness that came to him as he considers the "outrage" of the storm: "My body could reinterpret it as a blessing, / Being down there in the cool beneath the heat. / It wasn't of course being blessed but being suddenly / Singled out with a sense of being a being." As in so many places, David carries the reader into the immediate here and now and then suspends it—timeless. In this case he takes us from a moment in the clatter of a storm to this unexpected "sense of being a being." He demonstrates his capacity to embrace the concrete details of our experience and at the same moment to glancingly welcome with his words a transcendent dimension dawning on us ever so fleetingly.

This poem ends with David's lines gathering us all into the richness of this experience we are now part of, to feel the palpable if only momentarily reassuring sense that everything does indeed hang together even while it all comes apart as we hear with him "[. . .] a rhapsody playing a music / Written according to an inscrutable key" and being touched along with David by "an ancient unrecoverable past" (24).

David's poems welcome his reader to join him, as if he feels we were meant to be with him, sharing this journey.

And if he occasionally brings us into moments of peace, David doesn't say what that is, yet points to it. In "Down by the River" (42), we read that "Everything's easy." And later in the poem after hearing of so many details of this "day in June," we are called to rest in this reassuring sense: "Everything going along with everything else, / Moving along in participial rhythm, // Flowing, enjoying, taking its own sweet time."

And without apologizing for it, he also takes us into the depths of grief, his own and that of others. His willingness to open to grief is one of the ways he touches what is true. This is not a defeat. To grieve in David's unvanquishable way is to stay here and unguarded toward what is, what the ancient Greek thinker Parmenides called τὸ ὄν, or "Being." David's poems evoke the being of things in their concrete and unique presence, even as they point to something leaving, something beyond, as "[. . .] the fumes of the material / A tiny glittering machine is putting down. // The fumes are visible and drift away, / Like martyred souls made visible in the radiant air" (66). These lines call us to see and hear the world as David finds it, on an urban rooftop where workers are hard at work as their "glittering machine" produces both "fumes" and "martyred souls," and where he finds himself lost again in the here and now which is also transcendent.

In the second of the anthologized poems in the book, "Soul" (26), we are given a first glimpse of the Orpheus and Eurydice story so central to this collection and to David's attention following the loss of his wife, Anne. It appears here in the haunting question, "Where is it that she I loved has gone to [. . .]?" Two poems later this question arises

again: "Where did you go to, when you went away?" (30). David reveals how lost and disoriented he was: "I have been so dislanguaged by what happened / I cannot speak the words that somewhere you / Maybe were speaking to others where you went." And like Orpheus searching for Eurydice, David listens for his beloved Anne among the shades, now speaking in a tongue he "[. . .] had no gift for speaking," down there where they were "Restlessly wandering, along the shore, / Waiting for a way to cross the river." In this poignant evocation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, David shares his grief and his being bewildered through the music of his lines, as Orpheus shared with his lyre the depth of his longing and his grief for the unexpected loss of Eurydice. David becomes our guide and mentor, our Virgil, in grieving all the way down to the place where the still living come into listening range of those who have crossed over.

Like the ancients, David is no stranger to that liminal realm where the living encounter the souls of departed ones, willing to read "a manuscript / Written in a language only the dead speak" (70). By choosing to include selections of his own translations of Virgil and Horace in this volume, David brings them into call and response with his own poems. In the fragment from "Some Things I Said" that looks back at Book VIII of *The Aeneid*, we get the image of Aeneas laying "there in the darkness watching the / light, the little motions of light moving around the ceiling / and telling him something" (33). In that exchange David encourages us to be attuned in that open-hearted, open-minded way where curiosity, humility, and the willingness to be vulnerable inform and sustain us more than

any knowing we might claim. That is where the words have the taste of astonishment, that is where we dare to grieve, and in grieving to sink deeper into this being human, enfolded in language with all its possibilities and up against its implacable limits. Here we appear to glimpse what is true, seeing the last illusion we've been enveloped in as we are about to step into the next illusion, and atop the arc of our tremulous step, seeing them both as such. David's music carries us right there to the threshold of silence that nourishes even while it challenges us.

What comes through compellingly in *Some Things I Said*, and in all of David's work, is that it matters that we listen and bear witness. It is important we take things as they are and speak of them and for them as truthfully as possible, knowing much remains hidden even as we speak. Another ancient thinker, Heraclitus, whose enigmatic lyric concision David appreciated, said: "The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but gives a sign."<sup>2</sup>

David's poem "Rereading Old Writing" (34; 88)<sup>3</sup> plays on that very theme:

Looking back, the language scribbles.  
 What's hidden, having been said?  
 Almost everything? Thrilling to think  
 There was a secret there somewhere,  
 A bird singing in the heart's forest.

Committed to never overstating or understating what he sees and hears, David stays true to his experience of the places and things he encounters, allowing the details



to speak for themselves without embellishment. In this stanza his thrill “[. . .] to think / There was a secret there somewhere” shows David’s willingness to convey a hint or a promise of something hidden that speaks to us, indeed informs us, even as it is concealed from us. We feel and hear in these lines David treasuring the value of not knowing, enticing us to stretch into it with him. His cadences show us how the iambs and trochees dance between being perplexed and being astonished, between grief and joy, between knowing and not knowing. Again and again the unwavering levelness of his lines reveals his resistance to easy affectation, dedicated as he is to keeping an unflinching focus on our human predicament. “And how we’re caught, I said, / In language: in being, in feeling, in acting. I said, it’s / exacting” (79).

At the end of the book, we meet David “At a Bar” (106), as he enjoins us along with his “[. . .] fellow creature / Bravely standing there”:

“By word, sign, or touch,”  
I cried, in my mute heart,  
“Tell me, be my teacher,  
Be learned in that art,  
What is my name and nature?”

Once more he summons us into the call and response that has carried us along with him through the entire book. We are left with the evocation of tenderness and grief and with the invitation to let our hearts respond in the way that hearts do, which may be all we can do, when our words fail us.

Closing the book is the moving, and indeed monumental picture of David in the act of departing, making his way down the street away from us and toward a light which casts his shadow back to us. Viewing this last photo, the subtle yet absorbing conversation between light and shadow again emerges that David's voice makes audible to our ear and heart, and Stephen's image makes visible to our eye. Here we come into the silence of David's absence and recognize that the book we have in our hand is the last of the many gifts he leaves behind.

## NOTES

1. From an interview with Tess Taylor, *Poetry Foundation* (2011).
2. Author's translation.
3. This poem is repeated in the anthology because David repeats two different lines from it in the title poem. This repetition heightens David's focus, if not obsession, on his concerns with language, death, and his ever-present experience of not knowing.