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# Of Poets & Poetry

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**David Selby**

*Photograph curtesy of David Selby*



Cover photograph: self-portrait of the poet

[FloridaStatePoetsAssociation.org](http://FloridaStatePoetsAssociation.org)



Would you like to be like Quentin?  
That cursed, dashing, sinister rogue  
On a never ending road.  
That peasant, brooding, laughing loon  
Suffering the power surge  
Of another full moon,  
While longing for a funeral dirge  
In the costume that he wore.  
Lugging the burden that he bore.  
All the way from Collinwood,  
A life he never understood.  
Only cure for a wandering mind,  
Follow where it may go.  
You'll never know what you'll find.

~ David Selby  
from "Would You Like  
to Be Like Quentin?"





David Selby speaking at a Dark Shadows event

*"There is poetry in all of us...in everything."*

## David Selby

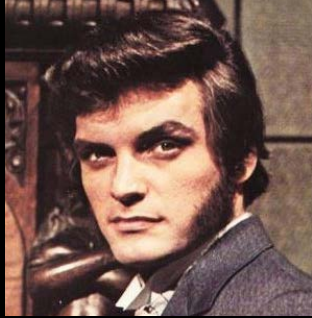
ACTOR, WRITER, POET

David Selby is a veteran of stage, screen, and television. In addition to many Broadway performances, Mr. Selby has appeared with such regional theatres at the Kennedy Center, Hartford Stage, the Alley Theatre in Houston, The Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and the Ahmanson Theatre, Westwood Playhouse, and Los Angeles Theatre Center in Los Angeles, receiving 2 Drama Logue awards. He was inducted into the Cleveland Playhouse Hall of Fame and received the Millennium Award from the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC. Feature films include *Up the Sandbox*, *The Super Cops*, *Rich Kids*, *Surviving Christmas*, *Run for Her Life*, *Dying Young*, *Mighty Ducks III*, *White Squall*, and *The Social Network*. Mr. Selby created the roles of Quentin Collins, on "Dark Shadows," Richard Channing on *Falcon Crest*, Michael Tyrone on *Flamingo Road*, and Xavier Trout on *Soldier of Fortune*. He starred on the HBO series *Tell Me You Love Me* and has guest starred on numerous series, such as *Cold Case*, *Raising the Bar*, *Mad Men*, *Legion* and more recently *Chicago Fire* and *NCIS New Orleans*. Mr. Selby starred as Abraham Lincoln in the critically acclaimed *The Heavens Are Hung in Black*, a play commissioned for the January, 2009 re-opening of Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. He has appeared in two more recent roles as Lincoln at Ford's and does fund raisers there regularly. The author of 9 published books, Mr. Selby also has enjoyed his involvement with LA Theatre Works, recording plays before live audiences in Los Angeles for NPR and the BBC.

*(Continued on next page)*



The American Place Theater



No blue grass  
 nor gentility  
 urbanity  
 eastern shore  
 buckeye  
 nor golden triangle  
 where the Ohio worms  
 to the Big Snake.  
 Surrounded  
 but still the lost island.  
 I write your name  
 idle fingers through my hair  
 years and miles away  
 cooling shadows across  
 your moonlit walls  
 "how majestic and how grand"  
 still a part of me  
 you reached the marrow  
 touched the contours of my soul.

~ David Selby  
 from "West Virginia"

Mr. Selby recently spent time with FSPA's Al Rocheleau.

**AR:** Can you compare the artistic expectations and realities of a young man from Morgantown, West Virginia with those of living and performing in New York City and later, Hollywood?

**DS:** When my wife and I left West Virginia (Morgantown for me... Beckley for her) we had no idea what was ahead. We had no expectations. We went to graduate school and then I went to a general audition in Chicago where I was lucky enough to be offered an apprentice position at the Barter Theater in Abington, Virginia. From there, thanks to noted director, Bill Woodman, who was directing at the Barter at that time, I was offered a job at the Cleveland Playhouse... the oldest regional theater in the country. At that time, it was headed by K. Elmo Lowe, a wonderful man, and matinee idol, whose daughter, Stanja, I would later work with. Shortly after arriving in NYC from Cleveland, I started to take a teaching job but my wife said we didn't come to New York for me to teach. So, she took an editing job to pay our rent while I went to open call auditions, and studied acting with Wynn Handman, a very respected acting teacher who started a very successful theater in NYC, The American Place Theater.

**AR:** Clearly, the theater had entranced you at an early age, and with your wife at your side you were able to follow wherever the call led. What of the poetry? What place did poetry hold for you early, and later on? In one poem you mention Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. Who are some other poets and writers who influenced you?

**DS:** Al, there are many writers I read, especially in college... playwrights like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill....so many. College was where I became acquainted with literature...poetry has always had a place in my life, whether Shakespeare's sonnets, or the simple and profound words of Lincoln: "...his hand and pen, he will be good, God knows when." There was Robert Frost with "Mending Wall," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and "The Road Not Taken."

**AR:** At 27, you landed on the popular daytime horror / fantasy series, *Dark Shadows*, in the role of Quentin Collins, first as a ghost, and cursed in life as a werewolf, but always a flesh-and-blood heartthrob whose story winds across centuries. Along the way you enjoyed a special relationship with a generation of teenagers, landing you incongruously on the cover of a popular teen magazine. At that point, was it the show itself or your life around it that seemed most surreal?

(Continued on next page)



*So you cast the dice  
Knowing the road does not stop  
It only bids farewell.*

*~ David Selby  
from "Happenstance"*

*David Selby as Quentin Collins in  
Dark Shadows Episode 701: The Most  
Important Thing About Quentin*

**DS:** The magazine was *16 Magazine* and headed up by Gloria Stavers. Gloria took me under her wing and helped make Quentin a popular character. The show did not seem unreal. It was a job that I was glad to have because I got to work with wonderful people, cast, crew, writers, directors, producers, and the composer Bob Cobert.

**AR:** In addition to its gothic and fantasy aspects, *Dark Shadows* attracted millions of children and teens (as well as adults) through brilliant storylines which incorporated aspects of nearly forty classic stories, novels, and myths. It was all there, from Du Maurier and the Bröntes, to Poe and Hawthorne, Lovecraft and Wells, Mary Shelley, Stoker, James, and Wilde, even to the Greek tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, in which you played the former of the lovers. The dialogue of *Dark Shadows* over its five-year span was always literate, even poetic within its gripping melodrama. No wonder children and teachers alike appreciated the show beyond the attraction to ghosts, vampires, and werewolves, to consider the stories themselves as not only magnetic but also deeply *instructive*. More than a few kids, like me, may have partly pursued careers in literature because of it. It's also why those kids, now in their sixties and beyond, are among generations that still revere the show and its cast. With the many remakes and spinoffs of *Dark Shadows* over decades, including a prime-time version with Jean Simmons and Ben Cross, as well as the Tim Burton / Johnny Depp film in which you and other *Dark Shadows* originals played party guests (!), what's it like having that sort of staying power with such iconic, well-played roles?

**DS:** What can I say? I was blessed. You must remember that no one ever died on *Dark Shadows*. They may have come back from somewhere but they didn't die. How wonderful it has been to have been part of it all. I will be forever grateful to casting director Marion Dougherty for taking me to meet producer-director Dan Curtis.

**AR:** You have been good to your *Dark Shadows* fan base, making yourself available at various events through the years. Your writer-son Jamison (the namesake of Quentin's beloved nephew on the show) wrote *Return to Collinwood* featuring the original cast. So *Dark Shadows* in some incarnation (pun intended!) just never goes away, does it?

**DS:** For me... no. It will be there all the way. I told you I was blessed.

**AR:** *My Shadowed Past*, a memoir of your own three years on the show has been hailed as one of the best of its genre, and there have indeed been several good memoirs written on *Dark Shadows* by its main actors. Many fans had been waiting a long time for yours. Was it just time?

*(Continued on next page)*



David Selby portraying President Lincoln in Ford's Theatre's play *The Heavens Are Hung In Black*.



David Selby at the National Portrait Gallery.  
Photo by Scott Suchman

*I have not become what I am  
may never pass the night  
still God's wind is calling  
blowing me towards the light  
from my inward fatal flight.*

—David Selby  
from "Faith"

**DS:** At that time, yes it was. And I may have another in mind as well. I wrote another book, actually the first... *In and Out of the Shadows*, but it was a limited edition.

**AR:** Your diction and eloquence of phrase stood out on *Dark Shadows*, even among seasoned actors like Joan Bennett, Louis Edmonds, and Jonathan Frid. You also seemed among the most comfortable at memorizing the daily reams of dialogue. As an actor, did you find it best to break down your lines into individual phrases, not only for memory but for inflection? And did your theater training and personal method better prepare you for such later roles of oratory as that of Lincoln?

**DS:** My background in theater, like that of most of the actors on the show, was very important...not that we were conscious of that. It was just how we were all taught...In those days, it wasn't unusual for actors to get their start in theater. Film and television have long profited from the theater world. Perhaps it is time for some payback.

**AR:** Speaking of the Lincoln connection, over the years you really became identifiable with him, both in stage portrayal and in your writing on his life and persona. I know you have played him in Ford's Theatre (perfect venue!). In fact, you could practically prepare a separate C.V. for Selby-and-Lincoln! Is there something special and personal that attracts you to our 16<sup>th</sup> president, and the iconic history we all share?

**DS:** My wife and I went to graduate school at Southern Illinois University. It was there where I was lucky to become acquainted with Mr. Lincoln. My professor-director at SIU, Christian Moe, was the man who started me on the Lincoln path. During graduate school, I did a few plays about young Lincoln. For a couple of those plays, we lived in Petersburg, Illinois while I was performing at New Salem State Park where there is the reconstructed village where Lincoln had lived. I met a couple of folks who related stories about their ancestors...some of whom knew Lincoln. Lincoln, as a young man, had surveyed the town of Petersburg and lived in New Salem. This was before his time in Springfield where he lived with his wife. I worked in Springfield doing another piece about Lincoln. Through the years, I continued reading and collecting various books about him. Lincoln did the best he could do and knew the odds were stacked against him, but he formed friendships with people such as Frederick Douglas. Lincoln faced great odds but managed to survive the challenges and save the country. You mentioned Ford's Theatre...It is dear to my heart.

*(Continued on next page)*



David Selby with Susan Sullivan,  
Studio press photo for *Falcon Crest*



David Selby with Barbara Streisand,  
in *Up the Sandbox*, studio press photo



David Selby with Jane Alexander,  
in *Tell Me You Love Me*, studio press photo

**AR:** About the novels and plays. You have written a Lincoln novel (*Lincoln's Better Angel*) to go with the play (*Lincoln and James*), among your many other books. Can you touch on that urge for expanded narrative, for dialogue and monologue, and what you feel you have accomplished in those genres?

**DS:** It all goes back to SIU and Chris Moe, my teacher. I would later write *Lincoln and James* because of an article I read in the *Washington Post*. We did the play at the Lincoln Theater in Washington, D.C.

**AR:** A word about your turn on *Flamingo Road*, and then your much longer stay on *Falcon Crest*. The so-called “night-time soaps” collected a harmonic of the emotional splash that was brought to evening television a decade earlier by *Peyton Place*, and these shows have never really gone away since. Seems the heartstrings can always be strummed, and personalities can always clash by night. You were certainly in the middle of all that. Comment?

**DS:** Again, like *Dark Shadows*, I was fortunate to work with very special people. (There was Joan Bennett on *DS* and Jane Wyman on *FC*.) There were in fact many, many established stars of film and television on *Flamingo Road* and *Falcon Crest* through the years. Very lucky actor I was to work with them and hear their stories. How the two shows connected for me is I ran into Earl Hamner on set of *Flamingo* one day. Earl was the creator of *The Waltons*... and I had done an episode for him. When *Flamingo* was over, it was Earl who called me about doing *Falcon Crest*.

**AR:** Going further on this theme, interpersonal relationships, husband / wife, parent / child, are subject vehicles for the poems of most of us, at least in part. They also find a foundation in so much of our stage drama, our novels, and in the drama of real-life which we try so hard to escape, and yet live. In your work you've played stoics, rakes, oblivious husbands and sons, charming heroes and anti-heroes, and done it opposite some amazing women in roles for both television and film (Ms. Bennett, Barbra Streisand in *Up the Sandbox*, and Ms. Wyman). Perhaps we who have lived long lives have indeed felt all of that at one time or another, those shifting roles, as life bleeds into art. At the same time, you celebrated your mother and your profound love for her so beautifully in *My Mother's Autumn*, and you've also happily managed a soon-to-be sixty-year marriage, a rarity for actors or writers, or actually, for any of us. Did the art, within all your many expressions of it, and very much including the poetry, eventually help you to maintain a steady life-compass rather than upset it?

(Continued on next page)

**DS:** My wife has been my “life-compass” from the start. Being an English major and being a college teacher prepared her to tutor me and I have been ever grateful. She is, by far, much better read than I am. She recommends books for me to read. And, she still reads everything I do. We enjoy our conversations about projects.

**AR:** You’ve played characters like Quentin and also Richard Channing on *Falcon Crest*, men who started out as self-absorbed villains and yet evolved to sympathetic, even heroic characters. You seemed to manage those transformations seamlessly, and beyond the script demands, put aspects of yourself into the roles. Does your poetry, and the incisiveness that is inherent in that art, reflect, or perhaps refract, those facets of who you are?

**DS:** Yes, I suppose they do. In *My Mother’s Autumn*, it was my reflection of who my mother was, and the love we shared.

**AR:** A speech or monologue can be very close to written poetry in its planned expression. Given your theatrical background and education, did familiarity with that kind of an available dynamic flow help when you decided to write your mother’s poems?



David Selby on the set of *Falcon Crest* with Jane Wyman

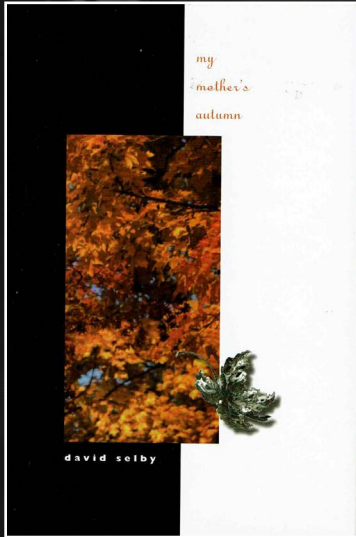
**DS:** Certainly, my finding theater and my continuing in school were important in my finding a voice. But it was my mother’s nudging me along until my wife and I found each other... for which I am ever grateful.

**AR:** You have shown great affinity in your career for aspects of personal exploration and memoir in various forms—prose, plays, poetry. In writing *My Mother’s Autumn* you chose poetry, in both lyric pieces and in many narrative vignettes, writing some of the most introspective observances of your life. *Happenstance* followed a year later. These books, darting from one facet of time to another as one might create an expansive image out of bits of glass, departs from linear prose memoir in striking ways. While the first collection stayed fairly close to prose utterance, with the exception of the title poem and few others, the second book, combining reminiscences of your childhood with aspects of philosophy gained of life’s experience, moved towards a more expansive lyric. In the case of both books, why make what some in the prose world might consider a dangerous and exacting leap to verse for those particular projects, and at such a vulnerable time for yourself? Or perhaps, was it *just* that vulnerability that drove the risk?

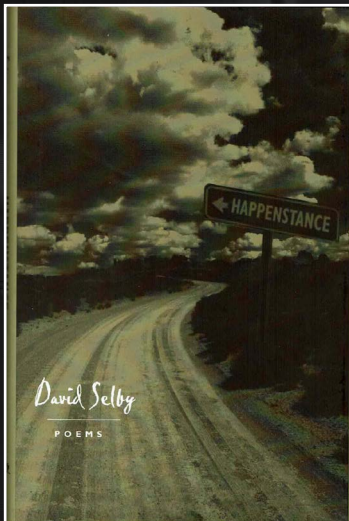
**DS:** Not sure. For me, I did not find it dangerous or exacting...with *My Mother’s Autumn*, I was trying to understand our relationship...wanted to understand my regrets...our lives seemed, at times, like ships passing in the night. But I always knew she was pushing me on...but from a distance. Perhaps it was my fault...I wanted to thank her and the words came...inspired by my mother who grew up on a small red dog road in a very poor coal mining community. I wanted to make her proud.

(Continued on next page)





[Link to the book](#)



[Link to the book](#)

**AR:** The title poem departs slightly from the snapshots of direct narrative and poignant second-person address prevalent elsewhere in the first book, to speak transcendently through objects, especially those *red leaves*, that inevitable change of season. Did this grand poem, with its magnificent final strophe, come early in the collection's progress? And when did you know this would be the name of the book?

**DS:** My mother loved the color red. She was beautiful in her red dress. It was a beautiful fall day... the trees had turned. The title poem came early. I wrote all the poems while I was rehearsing Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* with Ellen Burstyn at the Hartford Stage. The poems came quickly and perhaps easier with Ellen's love and O'Neill at my side.

*I've felt so intimate with Mom in her death. Something I missed in her life. Something she must have missed in mine. It wasn't the love we missed. It was the time.*

~ David Selby  
from "Understanding Mother"

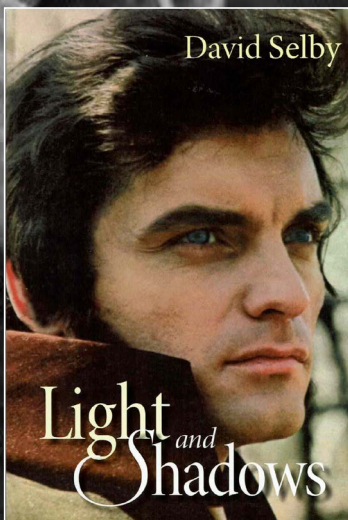
**AR:** We've touched on the important introspective aspects of *My Mother's Autumn*. The second book, *Happenstance*, dedicated to your wife Chip, seems to view the world and the fortunate circumstances of a life (yours certainly, but perhaps, in some ways, our own) more *externally*, the how we get from there to here, and yet, the book is no less personal in its focus.

**DS:** *Happenstance* was definitely a reflection on where I've been, that life is happening wherever you are...as a child and later on. *Happenstance* was written because of my wife...she happened into my life... and that, as they say, made all the difference.

**AR:** Given that vital force, *Happenstance* seems more than just variations on a theme, or an album of memories. It seems to move from long-ago objective recollections, the images stacked and flashing, to the deepest kind of subjective musing, as shown in "A White Picket Fence." Did *Happenstance* turn out to be a philosophical summation of sorts for you, with that invaluable attainment of love as the undercurrent?

**DS:** Yes...One of the poems..."Your Love" (p.55) is about the constant love my wife has given me that has let my world grow.

(Continued on next page)



[Link to the book](#)

**AR:** The “how did I get to this place?” seems to be underscored in poems like “Tree of Life,” a truth-is-stranger account of your first meeting with Barbra Streisand and the role of husband Paul in her then-upcoming film, along with that preoccupying *hole in your sweater* that seemed just then to be more than a hole, just as the *large tree in her yard* somehow became more than a tree. Again, life reveals us through objects, and people, and poetry seems to sharpen the lens.

**DS:** Yes. Poetry allows us to say things that otherwise we might not be able to express.

**AR:** I’ve always held that poetry as both a force and a substance can be instilled into and then lifted from all kinds of art, and your many multimedia projects, from fiction and biography, stage and audio plays as well as your literary poetry itself, seem to represent that idea. Do you agree that there need not be a hard dividing line between these genres, and how has your progress with so many diverse projects in the arts tapped into a group need for poetic display?

**DS:** There is poetry in all of us...in everything. Today, our world is in turmoil...so many awful, tragic, unfair, brutal things we read or hear about on a daily basis. Poetry can help us understand our world, ourselves...poetry can help bring us together as a people. Poetry helps us absorb the shock of the latest mass shooting or the turmoil of our internal world...what we feel...and how we express this.

**AR:** You came back to poetry, including the song form in 2014, publishing *Light and Shadows*, part collection, part photo scrapbook, which contained a dozen songs and poems for those who loved *Dark Shadows*, relating in its foreword how many fans told you the show had helped them escape the difficult conditions of their young lives. The book included broader pieces, too, including “The Day the Sun Turned Cold,” your poignant response to the Newtown tragedy.

**DS:** Just as *Dark Shadows* helped many of its viewers, there have been many fans who have given me so much with their love and support.

**AR:** You are always busy. Is there among your projected work a chance for a new poetry collection, yet another take for David Selby’s current view of the world, the alignment of past, present, and future? (Such a mutable *Dark Shadows*-like question, for a such a seasoned traveler, player, and scribe, ever between stops.)

**DS:** Perhaps so...as well as a play or two that I have been working on with a director and other actors. I do have a couple of other books in mind. Who knows....a Happenstance.



David and Chip Selby have been married for 58 years, they have three children and live in California.



Chip Selby and actor David Selby attend HBO after party for the 59th Primetime Emmy Awards at The Pacific Design Center on September 16, 2007 in Los Angeles. Photo by Michael Tran/FilmMagic

**Our Children**

Adapted from *A Better Place*

Our children are going forward in a world much more dangerous and unpredictable than it was when I was young.

In this uncertain world, part of me wants my children to stay home.

Yet...

they must follow their own paths... paths that could conceal land mines not of their doing...

Where is the light? It will be in the ideas... the grace and love we pass on to our children and grandchildren...

Thoreau's Walden reverberates today. We all yearn for a secret place, a retreat from the world....

Family has given me courage and a reason to go on.

~ David Selby

# BY DAVID SELBY

## EXCERPTS FROM POETRY

Mom loved autumn.  
She loved the color red.  
Not showy or glaring,  
but sort of like the leaves  
a soft merlot color,  
smooth.

I was thinking I would gather  
All these special red maple leaves,  
Take them up to her hospital room  
And cover her with them.  
Prepare her for winter.

~ from "My Mother's Autumn"

That eight by ten piece of immortality  
decorates the walls of car washes  
body shops, delis, hardware stores  
and bad restaurants.  
There's the no money, clueless,  
straight out of the yearbook headshot,  
the no money no hassle taken by a friend headshot,  
the hard-earned first professional  
old chin in your hand headshot,  
the glamour ala Tab Hunter headshot,  
the I don't give a damn take me as I am headshot,  
the real, cool, suave, sophisticated, stern, sexy, sweet,  
pouty,  
sensitive, penetrating please God  
get me a job  
too bad it doesn't look like your headshot.

—from "The Headshot"

They will marvel at you and your  
hummingbird wings as you shoot right past them  
darting from star to star on your way  
into the arms of God.

— from "Face of Death"

# BY DAVID SELBY

## EXCERPTS FROM POETRY

I have always clung to my Christmas tree  
As a child to its mother hoping  
Despite my limitations and frustrations  
I belonged and someday I would find  
My white picket fence.  
Well I did find it  
when I realized that grace wasn't just  
the name of my next-door neighbor  
when I accepted grace  
as the love and favor of my wife and children  
and of my friends.  
So if God is everywhere  
then God is in each of you  
and each of you  
is a light on my Christmas tree  
and each of you  
is a stake  
in my white picket fence.

~ from "A White Picket Fence"

Listen to their music  
the saw  
sander  
hammer  
chisel  
a sprinkle of words  
"that's good, that's good"  
a grunt of agreement  
a straight wall, a level floor, a fine cabinet  
is their legacy  
their letter in a bottle.

~ from "A Gloomy Wednesday"

On the shelf in their bedroom, Mom kept  
Two small brown ceramic bookend bears  
I made in the seventh grade.  
I asked Dad if I could take them.  
"You can take anything you want."  
That's the problem with parents,  
they'll give you everything.

— from "Face of Death"

# BY DAVID SELBY

## EXCERPTS FROM POETRY

“Over the years, I have heard from so many how much the original Dark Shadows television show meant to them. Dark Shadows took them away from what, in some cases, was the hard reality of their lives whether it was trouble at home, or at school, or dealing with loneliness, or not fitting in.

“Whatever the reason, Dark Shadows was there as an escape. It was something we could all, viewers and actors alike, look forward to. For me, this was never truer than when those Newtown, Connecticut school children were murdered in 2012.... I was in a dark sadness. I sat down and wrote a poem/song, and called it “The Day the Sun Turned Cold.” During the writing of it, a line came through as though ordained: “Dark Shadows Was One Thing We Could Look Forward To.”... For many, it still is.”

~ from the foreword of *Light and Shadows*

I wanted to lie down and die,  
The day the sun turned cold  
And heaven was sold.  
The devil put nothing down.  
That clown was so clever,  
The day was like the 12th of never.  
Not a crack of light,  
No hope in sight.  
But something we always knew,  
Dark Shadows was one thing we could look forward to.

~ from “The Day the Sun Turned Cold”

Mom loved autumn.  
She loved the color red.  
Not showy or glaring,  
but sort of like the leaves  
a soft merlot color,  
smooth.

I was thinking I would gather  
All these special red maple leaves,  
Take them up to her hospital room  
And cover her with them.  
Prepare her for winter.

— from “My Mother’s Autumn”

# BY DAVID SELBY

## EXCERPTS FROM POETRY

### A MEMORY

When Al mentioned Anne Sexton to me, I remembered meeting her at the American Place Theatre in NYC...It was founded and directed by Wynn Handman, a renowned acting teacher. Wynn wanted a way to get American poets and novelists to write for the theater...so he came up with the American Place Theater. At that time in the mid sixties, Wynn was my acting teacher and he discussed the American Place. I was searching for a dissertation topic to finish up a requirement for my Ph. D degree. So, I asked Wynn if I could do my dissertation about his theater and he said yes. It was a hard, busy, but wonderful time. I got to meet writers like Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, Robert Penn Warren, William Alfred, etc. During the midst of writing my dissertation, I was offered the role of Quentin Collins on Dark Shadows. There ensued a wild time of digging through the files of the American Place...along with Wynn's files...talking with Julia Miles...who worked with Wynn. Everyone at the American Place was very gracious with their help and advice. Finally, I would complete writing the dissertation and upon so, received my Ph.D.... all the while doing Dark Shadows.

*Throughout my career's journey  
I have shared the stage and screen  
with many wonderful personalities  
and the innumerable talents behind the scenes  
who have helped to bring to life  
extraordinary stories, all I can say is,  
truly, I feel blessed.*

*~ David Selby*

### **A Few David Selby Links**

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