













































































































































































































































































































known as the Pilgrim Bard, homesteaded there after the Civil War. He also participated in the Cherokee Strip Land Run into Indian Territory in 1893. My poem about that event, “10 Seconds After the Gun,” will probably be included in the earth collection.

Another poem that relates to *Subterranean Red*, and will likely be in the collection, is “Alabaster Caverns.” It came about from my experiences in that cave in the Gyp Hills, the largest gypsum cave in the world. The idea of subterranean red reverberates all over the place for me. My Cherokee ancestry is another thing that plays into that title.

**To the Pilgrim Bard, in Gratitude**

I often see you wandering past buffalo wallows, across  
black-willow swales, camped under cottonwoods on creek banks,  
  
your mule cart full of bleached bison bones, the air alive  
with whippoorwill calls, the ticking whirl of rattlesnakes,  
  
wings of wild turkeys rustling in river thickets. I imagine you  
writing verse on stripped tree bark, crystallized gypsum,  
  
and flat stones by fitful campfire light. ... (37)

**How far along is the earth book?**

That book has far to go. I’ve been gathering ideas for quite a while. I’ll have time soon — after I complete my MFA degree — to write more new poems for it. I’m looking forward to being immersed in the project. This collection will be very different from *Burn*.

**You and I are of the first generation in our families not to have been raised on the farm. Yet, you have that connection, that contact, and rural life is a powerful force in your writing. Poems like “Farm Wife” and “Freedom, Oklahoma Rodeo” carry a strong sense of those rural roots, and others, so different, such as “Subtleties of a**

**Winter Twilight” (“Deer forage ghost-like/in fields around the house/”),  
communicate an appreciation for the non-human world. To what degree do you  
consider yourself a rural poet?**

It’s interesting that the word “verse” comes from Latin — *versus*, “a turning of the plow.” There’s a long relationship between poetry and farming.

I don’t really consider myself a rural poet, though it’s true that rural life and landscapes turn up often in my poetry. Yes, my family roots are rural. That way of life has had a lot of impact on me and my writing. The Oklahoma farmland that has been in my family for generations is a very spiritually charged place for me. And I live out in the country now. I like living in a place where I can open my windows at night and hear owls and coyotes. The flora and fauna of the natural world are hugely important to my writing. I believe what Ezra Pound said: “The natural object is always the adequate symbol.” But I certainly don’t want to limit myself to rural subjects. The best thing about writing is the freedom of it. I love the idea that I can write about anything.

**I know that your undergraduate degree was in art history. Your poems that treat works of art point to that background, and many others give a detailed rendering of one or more scenes — “Mosaic” and “Wedding Photo of My Parents, circa 1952.” During the week after I finished reading *Burn* for the first time, there was a particular image that stayed with me most strongly: of the women in “Tornado Warning” who “cautiously press bare feet to cool cement.” Do you consciously use your knowledge from the study of art in rendering such pictures and portraits?**

No, I’m not usually conscious of using my knowledge of art history in my writing,



but I know this background has been a big influence. Bernard Berenson, the famous art historian, said, “Great works of art are almost like nature, a permanent stimulus.” I’ve always found this to be true. Art inspires art. And artworks do turn up in my work fairly often. A fellow poet and friend pointed this out to me a long time ago, saying something like, “*All* of your poems mention a work of art.” I wasn’t even aware I was doing that. I do try to paint scenes with words. Maybe I should have been a painter.

### **Mosaic**

### **Summer**

Hours fan out like mammoth sunflower petals.  
 A wedge of lemon cake waits on an amethyst plate.  
 Afternoons linger long and late. Color is its own language,  
 running rampant as I reach for it. ... (6-7)

**I wondered if the poem “FFA Jacket” — a kind of frame story that shifts across several scenes — was a long time coming. This poem treats difficult a subject.**

Yes, it was a long time coming. It took some time to get to the point where I could write about my father and his alcoholism. I need distance — in this case, a distance of time — to be able to write about things so emotionally intense. When I finally got to the point where I could write about that very serious family problem, I wrote a series of such poems. Many of those are included in *Burn*.

### **FFA Jacket**

My mother lifts  
 the dusty jacket out of her  
 cedar chest, hands it to me. I’m surprised  
 it doesn’t smell of liquor: the dark-blue  
 corduroy jacket with the gold  
 Future Farmers of America emblem across

the back, his name in gold embroidery  
 on the left chest, and the title —  
 National President 1950-51.  
 I think of the scrapbooks full  
 of newspaper clippings, pictures of Dad  
 in this jacket at nineteen, before  
 college and Korea, poised  
 behind podiums, posing on tractors,  
 giving radio interviews, on TV, even tipping  
 his Stetson on a hometown billboard  
 that says *Welcome to Freedom*.  
 ... (22)

**One of those poems, “Grandad Scott,” was one of the most haunting in the book for me — both the subject matter and the form. It made me think of how our knowledge of our grandparents and other relatives is sort of a collection of vague first memories, then clearer memories, images in photos, and family stories.**

**In the poem, you created a catalogue of impressions and finally used the word “cruel,” but without indicting the grandfather. Did you try to write around that word at first?**

No, that poem pretty much came out whole the first time around. As Stanley Kunitz said, “Memory is each man’s poet-in-residence.” I find that the details I remember from childhood are the most vivid ones, the ones that work best for poetry. Images and scenes included in “Grandad Scott” were merely gathered as I remembered them. This doesn’t mean, though, that everything I put in a poem is literal truth. A poem is a constructed thing; you use what you have to make it — including your imagination. I never tried to write around the word “cruel.” It seemed to work in that spot in that poem.

**You are finishing the MFA this fall. I wondered how this undertaking has contributed to your poetry and if you'd recommend getting the degree to aspiring poets.**

In all honesty, the MFA has not helped my poetry. I think MFA programs can benefit some people. I'm just not one of them. I'm nearly fifty. I've been reading voraciously and writing poetry since I was twelve. After such long experience in reading and writing, I am my own best (and probably harshest) critic. At this point, I know what I want to say and how I want to say it. I don't expect anyone else to. I don't want or need a lot of guidance or instruction. I get that from reading the great writers. Besides real-world experiences, I think the best education a writer can get is in the library — and it's free.

**Do you have a regular time for writing?**

My writing waxes and wanes. I'm more disciplined now than I used to be, but I still go through long periods of not writing anything. I've discovered that these times are necessary for filling the creative well. I used to panic when I felt blocked from writing; now I accept it as part of the natural ebb and flow for me. I need large blocks of alone time to write poetry. When I do get in that poetry-writing mindset, words and ideas tend to come in a torrent.

**What helps you get into that mindset? Fewer obligations, more time alone? Perhaps there are certain times of year when the writing is more likely to come.**

My best writing time is autumn. Ideas tend to shoot through my head like shooting stars at that time of year.

Fewer obligations help the writing, yes, and long stretches of solitude. I need that freedom to let my imagination wander and explore. It also helps a lot to read the work of other poets I admire. Great poems inspire me to write. That's why I started writing in the first place. How can you not want to write poetry after you fall in love with it? I'm always searching for new poems to fall in love with. It's always exciting to discover a new writer I click with.

**What is it about autumn? That feels like the beginning of the writing season for me.**

I agree that autumn seems like a beginning. One reason it may be my favorite writing time is because I would wait restlessly in anticipation of fall and school starting again when my kids were younger. Autumn meant long stretches of writing time for me while they were in school. Maybe this habit has stayed with me. Also, of course, fall weather is invigorating — especially after our long, hot, humid Kansas summers. Around here, too, the autumn colors are certainly inspiring.

**End of August**

Tonight, while the half-moon hides  
its dark side,  
the Siamese tom stretches  
black velvet paws,  
claws splayed toward a dream:  
he hunts, sapphire eyes  
focused to sharp points,  
all twilight  
concentrated in his gaze.  
Stealthy as a shadow, he curves  
through a creek-bank jungle  
of giant ragweed, candelaria,  
sunflower stalks.  
Yellow mulberry leaves litter the lawn.  
From low branches,  
bluebirds dive for insects.  
Goldfinches search for seeds  
in black-eyed Susans.

Baby cottontails munch in tall grass.  
Quick eyes everywhere. (36)

**Are there one or two newly discovered writers you'd like to mention?**

I just finished reading *Rattlebone*, a brilliant book of intertwined short stories by Maxine Clair, a writer who grew up in Kansas City and went to KU. The book was published some time ago, but I had never read her work before. I'm surprised she isn't more famous. I was blown away by her talent, the music of her writing, so I did a little research to see what else she has done. Apparently, her first book was poetry, *Coping with Gravity*. I'll search it out. Another poet I've recently discovered is Laure-Anne Bosselaar, who grew up in Belgium. *A New Hunger*, her 2007 book, is a moving and magnificent collection of poems. There's always so much more to learn — and so many teachers.

**In what ways would you say your own writing has changed or developed over decades of practice?**

I think I've learned to trust my own instincts. Writing a poem is all about making choices. Being older — and having lots of experience as a reader and writer — helps you trust your own ability to make the right choices in your work. You get to the point where you know intuitively whether something works or not.

**What made your late forties the right time to seek publication of your collection?**

I'm not sure it was my choice. I would rather have had a collection published ten years ago. Now, though, I'm glad I had to wait a while longer. My poems are more polished now. And I'm hopeful that my poetry will continue to change and grow. I'm much more willing to experiment now. I like what Miles Davis said: "Do not fear mistakes. There are

none.” When it comes to art, I believe that’s absolutely true. I’m not sure I understood that so well when I was younger.

**Are you interested in teaching?**

Yes, I would enjoy teaching poetry or a poetry workshop. I think it would be fun to help spark others to feel the passion I feel for poetry. Maybe I’ll have an opportunity to do so at some point. For now, though, I’m content to follow my own writing to wherever it leads.

**Duende**

Lorca knew these gusts as spirit,  
invisible as wind searching for a spark.  
Don’t we all want to be set on fire  
by a mysterious breath in the dark?  
Some call it selling your soul  
to the devil: mere mortal one minute,  
force of nature the next. We’ve all  
seen it before: Van Gogh burning  
alive with his wheat fields and starry nights;  
Plath pouring out poems in a brilliant fury;  
Joplin’s voice inhabited by hot, hungry gods;  
Hendrix’s long, lovely fingers igniting flames.  
Hard to know when that breeze might  
blow through, the fugitive moment  
when someone gets lit, turns to gold. (43)

**Harley Elliott:****Earth, Sky, and Stone**

*Elliott was born in South Dakota and moved with his family to Kansas when he was two. He earned bachelor's degrees in art and English from Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina and a master's degree in fine arts from New Mexico Highlands University. He taught art at Marymount College in Salina for many years, until it was closed, then worked as the coordinator of education at the Salina Art Center. He has published nine collections of poetry, a children's book, and a book of prose, Loading the Stone.*

*For this interview, I visited Elliott at his home in a quiet, older neighborhood of Salina in early March. It was late morning, front door open, robins singing. Two semi-feral cats ate from dishes on the stoop. Elliott made me a cup of breakfast tea with honey.*

**You've lived in Salina almost all your life, but you went to New York as a young man.**

I'd just gotten out of grad school in Las Vegas, New Mexico, and I had an M.A. in painting and was looking for work. Well, somebody I knew in grad school who was originally from Buffalo said there was a job at the Syracuse University Press for a book designer. He talked to them on my behalf, I wrote them a letter, and I got hired. So I moved to Syracuse and lived there four years, and then the winters got to be way too much, so back to the Plains.

**On the back of your first book, *Dark Country*, it says, “he dreams of moving back west ... — any day now.”<sup>76</sup> You were about 31. Would you describe the feeling you had, wanting to come back, what you missed?**

A lot of it was environmental. One of the first things I did when I got settled in Syracuse was to take off and go to the country a little bit and drive around and see if I could find some sights. Well, it was totally different. I didn't know what I was looking for. But after a while, I realized that the only sky I was experiencing there was some irregular shape between the trees and the buildings. There was no sense of horizon at all. I think that was getting to me on some level. I just missed the sky. I think that was the main reason, being used to this landscape. Skyscape, really.

**We take it for granted.**

I wrote a lot of poems when I was in Syracuse about Kansas and about prairie because I didn't have it anymore and those thoughts would come up.

**I read *Dark Country* as a book largely about the West and the rural landscape. It's populated with coyotes and rattlesnakes and grass. In one poem, “Sleeping in a Field,” you're already writing about finding arrowheads. I think I recognize the ones — “one brown jasper/one white flint” — in your newest book, *Loading the Stone*.<sup>77</sup>**

[Nodding.] Could be.

---

<sup>76</sup> Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1971.

<sup>77</sup> Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2006.



**Sleeping in a Field**

after finding the two small  
perfect arrowheads

one brown jasper  
one white flint

I surrender face down  
between old furrows  
to the flattened field

the triangular stones in my mouth  
dissolving their film of dust

as the mineral and tiny circular  
fossils of their surfaces  
enter my blood

my tongue becomes a fluted instrument  
my body darkens

my brain is a beautiful agate.

...<sup>78</sup>

**In an interview from 2006,<sup>79</sup> you mention your concern about becoming labeled a prairie writer. I wondered if you were already thinking of that when you were in Syracuse.**

I think I was just writing what came up, and a lot of it happened to be about this part of the country. But it was later, after I got a book published, and I was getting all swollen up with that, when I thought, you know, my idea of making something original, whether it's with visual arts or writing or music or anything, is that you do something that falls in the cracks, between the categories.

---

<sup>78</sup> *Dark Country*, pages unnumbered.

<sup>79</sup> Miranda Ericsson interviewed Elliott in October 2006 for the online Map of Kansas Literature. See <http://www.washburn.edu/reference/cks/mapping/elliott/>

Now, publishers don't like that because they like to be able to label things. But I've always thought that if something is truly original, it really can't be categorized that well.

I know poets who are aware of that kind of partitioning off, but it's okay with them and they go for it — Paul Blackburn was a city poet, Ted Kooser is a prairie poet. But my thought was that once you get put in those boxes, then everybody has problems if you do something that jumps outside those categories. So I've tried — and I haven't tried very hard or done anything overt — but I've just been aware that I don't want to get shoved in one of those drawers and find myself locked in.

**Do you think you've avoided that?**

I don't know. I haven't paid a lot of attention! Probably not. I think any poet that comes from Kansas is going to run the risk of being a rural or country or prairie poet. All the way up to the Canadian border, all the Dakota and Nebraska people are in the same boat. This is flyover country, and nobody knows anything about it, so if you come from here, you must be a prairie writer.

I haven't had much trouble with it. I do write a lot of poems that don't dwell on or take into consideration this part of the country. It's kind of wanting to have it both ways because you are really colored by where you're raised, what your environment is, what you're used to seeing.

**Were you consciously interested, in the 1970s, when your first books came out, of finding an audience outside the Midwest?**

[Laughing.] I was kind of interested in finding an audience anywhere! No, I can't say that I was. It just kind of happened that my first few books were published outside the Midwest, unless you count Milwaukee. It was Arizona and New York, but that was just the way it shook out. It wasn't anything that I planned. In fact, I tried to quit thinking about all that stuff about twenty years ago because I realized I was getting way too involved in the business of poetry. You know, what do I have to send out and where's a good place? I was spending more time doing that than I was writing poetry. So I just quit sending poems out, and I quit thinking that way.

**So, with a poem like the new one you just sent me, "Dirt," how much are you thinking about publication?**

Not at all. I still only send about fifteen poems out a year, maybe three packets of five each, and those are only to magazines that have shown some interest in my stuff.

You know, when I was young and ambitious — I don't know how much this will resonate with young writers — I wanted to get published because I guess it was important that someone besides me thought this was good. And then you get published in a few magazines, then you want to get a book really bad. That probably led me to thinking too much about the practical, the business side of things, that ego that wants recognition. I realized that was not the road to go down, so I pulled back.

The blunt side of that knife is if you're not publishing poetry, nobody knows you're writing any. So I fell behind on the exposure, but I think it's more important when I'm working on a poem, like "Dirt," I just want to be thinking about that poem. And I

don't say, oh, this would be good for such-and-such magazine. I want to keep focused on the poem.

### **Dirt**

An infinite component  
of existence according  
to the housewives lament  
our planet calls its  
name in gentle synonym  
while we spend a life

trying to keep it off us  
sweep dust mop  
washing all our objects  
temporarily clean and  
there is no dog lie bastard  
worse than a dirty one.

Beneath our contempt  
dirt continues.  
All the dirt that left  
grand canyons behind  
the ghosts of mountains  
crawl speck by mote  
to the seas

and all that is not dirt  
quietly on its way  
the disintegrating leaf  
before the forest  
as the crumbling brick  
foreshadows cities.

Dirts dominion  
takes its certain time.  
Our ageless companion  
the dirt of stars  
informs the hand  
a kinship best

expressed alone  
grasping and letting it  
fall between fingers.  
Yes. This will do  
just fine.<sup>80</sup>

**I think what you're saying goes in the direction of the poet's responsibility.**

---

<sup>80</sup> Unpublished.

I always like what Paul Klee said about artists: the artist's job is to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. I really like that, both for visual stuff and for poetry. I think that's what it's about.

In terms of responsibility — I guess I have a responsibility not to foment violence or anything obvious like that, but other than that, I don't know. I don't feel like I have a responsibility to a readership or anything like that.

**But it's definitely not to be too focused on commercial success.**

To me, the responsibility is to the process. Some poems start with a concept, then you do the process and you end up with the product. You had an idea or a plan: "I'm sick of war" or whatever. I've written a number of those poems. It's kind of a linear way of working. But I'm never as happy with them as I am with the ones that show up without an explanation or an invitation, but with just some compelling phrase or something that I'll put down without any idea of content or concept. Then things will start adhering to it as it goes along, and eventually it'll end up showing me what it's about, somewhere along the line.

It's the same way with artwork. A lot of times, you get out materials and just start — and then they will suggest something for the next step. With both arts, I spend an awful lot of time between the acts, just looking at what's there. I probably spend more time just looking at what's there than I do putting anything down.

**I like that phrase, "between the acts."**

Yeah. The act is where the fun is, but the thing needs time to speak to me. If I'm doing a visual piece, I'll prop it up in here below the TV where I can see it all the time. During commercials I'll mute it and look at this thing. It may take days, weeks, or months before it suggests — how about some purple, or how about that big brush back there? It'll suggest an idea or a next step.

And poetry'll work the same way if it's process-based, if it just comes out of nowhere and starts itself. It'll give me some other ideas as I keep reading what's there. And I'm a great believer in revision, so I'll go through — I handwrite — and once that page gets all scrawled up with amendments, I'll recopy it. I'll go through five or seven or eight different versions before it even goes to the typewriter. Once it goes there, I'm pretty sure it's done and I'll type it up.

**I went through your poetry manuscripts at the Spencer Research Library at KU.**

Oh, man, that's embarrassing.

**They do have revisions, but a lot of them were very close to the published versions.**

Well, I remember Kim Stafford talking about his father, saying he would start writing, and he would just write whatever, and he said some of those first versions were just awful. He quoted from the famous one about stopping by the road,<sup>81</sup> and he said in one of the first versions, there was the line "I stopped the car." It seems like one of those pedestrian thoughts that would get in early on, but you hope would get out somewhere in

---

<sup>81</sup> William Stafford's poem "Traveling through the Dark," *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1998), 77.

the process. So I didn't feel too bad. My mind throws me a lot of clichés at the beginning, and revision is good for rooting those out.

**I wondered if you would talk about your early influences, experiences, teachers that led you toward poetry or maybe helped shape yours.**

Well, I can talk about that in terms of capital-P poetry, then in terms of real poetry, too, because I was writing “poetry” when I was in junior high school, but you can imagine that stuff. I didn't really have a sense of what contemporary poetry was doing, all the various forms it could take. I knew that poetry was supposed to rhyme and have meter. Well, so off I went, this twelve-year-old with a lot to discuss.

**But you were feeling it.**

Yeah, I needed to express something, and I was also drawing at that time. But I also had this conception that poetry had to do with large issues, like Armageddon ...

**Really large!**

The crucifixion, unrequited love, the Bomb, you know! So I wrote a poem for each of those, and then I was screwed! I mean, what am I gonna do? I wrote my second unrequited love poem, and I had not been in love yet. But on we go. So this really held me back; it was just stupidity. I was just thinking, well, it has to be a theme that's “worth a poem.” I would have never dreamt about putting a parking meter in a poem. So anyway, saddled with these kinds of things, I bravely set out and did these little poems, and they were pretty bad, and I think they've all been destroyed now.

But what really happened was in grad school. I was twenty-three years old, I'd kind of gotten away from writing a lot of poetry because I wasn't very happy with that da-dah, da-dah, da-dah, but I didn't know any better; I didn't know what else it was. I was going to graduate school in New Mexico, and for some reason this little college had a lot of poets come in to read. Duncan was there, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley was there and read, and he just completely baffled me. And then he came back and read, and he brought with him a poet named Edward Dorn, and Edward Dorn just blew my mind open. He read these very quiet, almost conversational poems about very small subjects like the plumber and his daughter sitting on a riverbank.<sup>82</sup> That's the one I remember really, really liking. So, here this guy showed me, well, man, you can write about moments of your own life, and it's all right. Plus, his language didn't sound very high-flown. It was accurate, but it wasn't what I thought poetic language was supposed to be.

So after hearing Dorn, I started following up and reading a lot of contemporary poetry. It was like opening a big door to a big room full of good stuff. You know, anything was possible. It was concrete poetry, the New York School, all different kinds of things. It was a big year for me because I realized it doesn't have to be about big, universal themes. The only thing about the language is it has to be true to the writer. So that really freed me up. And then I started really getting serious about mining my own memories and trying to figure out what my language was. And that's when I think I started writing real poetry. Along the way things have changed quite a bit. People do, so poems do, as well. But I've never been very interested in poetic theory, literary criticism. It just bores the hell out of me, so I just don't bother with it. Plus I think once you subscribe to a school of poetry, man, you're right there in the box.

---

<sup>82</sup> Dorn's poem, "Like a Message on Sunday," *Way More West: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 19.



This was about the time, I guess, the late sixties, early seventies, that a lot of poetry schools started springing up. I never went to any of those. So I kept myself away from any kind of official stream.

**Here's what Denise Low said about your writing in my interview with her ...**

I just saw her yesterday! She was here working on a poetry video.

**She said: "I really credit Harley Elliott with being the writer I most wanted to imitate, as a young writer, because I wanted the language to flow as smoothly as his does, where it doesn't get in the way, it just brings you surprises without obvious flying leaps across the stage." What do you think?**

I like that. I do like it to flow, and I do like it to be accessible. If I'm reading a poem, and there's a French phrase in it, I quit! That poem isn't *for me*, it's for people who speak French. I just can't have it. No, no, no! [Laughing.]

**That is how it makes you feel!**

Well, I'm just not part of this élite, so on to better things. Of course, I've read a lot of stuff like that. When I was way younger, I tried to tackle Pound's *Pisan Cantos*,<sup>83</sup> and it's got Chinese and everything else in it. Of course, most of it was just me staggering around in a morass. Then I realized years later, Pound didn't write this for me. I'm not as well read, and I'm not as fluent in foreign languages, and I'm not interested in putting together all the little pieces. It's just not accessible to me. So I'm just not bright enough for these poems, or learned enough or whatever. And I have that prejudice yet. If I run across a

---

<sup>83</sup> The sixth book of *The Cantos* by Ezra Pound, written in 1945 while he was being held in a military detention center near Pisa, Italy.

foreign phrase in a poem, I get all hackledy. But then that's their business, that's who they want to write for. That's fine.

**Who are you writing for?**

First of all, and this is terribly selfish, but I'm writing for myself. The poems are for me first. A lot of times, it's some portion of myself that isn't usually available trying to tell the rest of me something that it thinks I need to know. And it can't get past all the daily monologues that are going on in my head: Gotta go shopping, time to do this, time to do that. So poetry is the one door where that stuff can come through. I hope I'll learn something when the poem is over. Then it's just a crapshoot as to whoever else is going to connect to it. Some will and some won't, but I want to try to make it as accessible as I can without making it simple minded or sappy.

**I have an audience in mind for this collection of interviews — Kansas people or Midwestern people who aren't necessarily interested in poetry or who have the idea that poetry is about a certain kind of thing.**

That's it! A lot of them *would* be interested if they knew a little more about what's out there. Steven Hind has a couple of poems I've read — the one I'm thinking of is "Finding the Calf"<sup>84</sup> — that make me think, every farmer and every farmer's kid ought to read this poem because I know they know what it's about. But they probably won't unless they stumble into a reading or something, which is not bloody likely.

---

<sup>84</sup> *In a Place With No Map: New and Selected Poems* (Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 1997), 19. The closing lines are: "... Welcome/welcome. Even with no name/you will always be the calf/born on the finest day in April./To see you will make me glad."

**One of my favorites of yours is “After Picking Rosehips.”**

I remember that one.

**You talked a little about where you start or where you don’t start with a poem.**

**Where does a poem like this one start?**

Picking rosehips. And because it was such a one-of-a-kind experience, I guess. I’d never done it before. I boiled them up and made some anti-cold stuff out of them and took a spoonful every morning. And I didn’t get a cold that winter in Syracuse. So I know that works. But I think it was the strangeness of the event that got me kicked into that.

**After Picking Rosehips**

With every soft gush of my feet  
walking in tall pasture grass  
the rosehips at my belt rub together  
an old rosebush song.

The moon rings. The clouds  
are frozen full of geese

and I can feel the darkness  
growing on my skin.  
The world ends tonight

It is so  
beautiful this time  
I have decided  
to move here forever. Even after  
reaching that yellow square of light  
drinking soup  
and going to bed  
I am only another man there

lost in the covers and quilts.

I am only dreaming  
moving still in that space  
of grass and goldenrod

a man with rosehips

walking in the speechless night.<sup>85</sup>

**What got you to go out and pick rose hips?**

We lived behind a large park in Syracuse that had a lot of roses and bushes, and I'd been reading about them, so I noticed them on the plants. So I picked them.

A lot of times it's like the Eureka principle that scientists will use: you climb an apple tree or something and just because you're in an out-of-the-ordinary situation, and an insight will show up. And a lot of poems, for me anyway, come out of those moments that are off the ordinary. Maybe they're a little stronger or I'm looking at things a little closer because it's all new, but that's not a conscious thing.

**It's very freeing to think about just allowing to come whatever is going to come.**

Well, you know, I talked earlier about pulling back from all this poetry biz stuff I was so involved in at one point. Part of the reason was that I was too conscious of poetry and of being a poet, and I realized that a lot of things I'd written poems about could have just as well been deep-sixed and not started, I mean, it was me convincing myself that, well, this was worth a poem. And it wasn't, and the poem probably wasn't worth writing.

So I felt like I had this little editor walking around with me, checking everything out for poetry potential, and I also realized, I certainly don't want to be that way about poetry. So when I thought maybe, well, gee, this should be a poem, I wouldn't touch the idea then, with a fork. I was going the other way. The way to be a poet is not be a capital-P poet. Don't push it, and don't think of yourself in those terms. Just live your life, get rid of the editor sitting on your head, and just do things. And the real poems will insist upon

---

<sup>85</sup> *All Beautyfull & Foolish Souls* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1974), 9.

themselves rather than me insisting on them. I think I've written a lot less poetry, and it's been about twenty years or so, and I think it has been better stuff, by and large.

**“Brothers Together in Winter” is another favorite of mine.**

It's based on an amalgamation of experiences. I have a younger brother, and we fought like hell when we were kids. We just could not get our gears meshed up. And I didn't know this, but someone told me that Denise had told them that when she goes into high schools for workshops, she reads them that poem, and they all say, oh, so you can write poems about that, because they've all got problems with their brothers and sisters, and it really opens them up to content. Maybe they're in the same place I was, where it has to be a big deal before it deserves a poem.

**Brothers Together in Winter**

We are squared off in the snow  
a blue winter evening in Kansas  
and he holds a whetstone in  
his blue white fist.

Yes we are going  
to kill each other this time  
once and for all. It is about  
something one of us  
has or has not done.

On his forearm a murky bluebird  
tattoo flies with blunted wings  
between two veins. His body  
seems to grow around it

and as his fist comes by  
silent as a breath of snow just  
missing my chin we stop  
frozen by the near connection.

Twelve years since that standoff  
and still the moment  
holds us

hard beneath the blurring moon.

We stand his hand comes up  
the stone glides by my chin.  
Snow falls.

The bluebird  
flutters outward  
and our faces are like mirrors.<sup>86</sup>

**The subject of this poem takes me to *Loading the Stone*. Before I read it, I'd heard about your avocation of collecting Native American artifacts from Steven Hind and others. The center of the book is about walking the fields, former village sites, then it fans out to all these other subjects: the historic Native peoples, amateur archeology, art, craftsmanship, utility — but, like “Brothers Together,” it's also about family relationships.**

Fathers and sons. This is one of those bastard books that falls in the cracks, I think, because you can't say it's about archeology, although it sort of is. It's really hard to put a label on it, I think, so I just called it nonfiction because I wanted people to know that, yes, these objects do exist and these things did happen.

**It pushes the boundaries of genre. You could call it an autobiographical novel. It's a book of essays at one level, and many could stand alone. I understand that some have been published, and not necessarily in literary magazines.**

A number of them were published in *Indian-Artifact Magazine*.<sup>87</sup> And it is just about stones, so of course I sent them pieces that had some material about artifacts in them.

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>87</sup> Published in Turbotville, Pennsylvania, <http://www.indian-artifacts.net/index.html>.

**My impression is that the idea for a book about this has been in your mind for a long time because you've been collecting for decades. But what about the process of shaping this unusual book? It has prose, poetry, the journal of an amateur archeologist working at one site for almost two years.<sup>88</sup>**

I've looked for artifacts for fifty years, and probably ninety percent of them I find, you can tell were made for utilitarian purposes. Nothing particularly special about the coloring or the shapes in the stone, no real desire to make it perfectly symmetrical. But every so often you find one that's just gone way beyond utility. A beautiful stone, beautiful stripes or mottling, and really worked until it's perfectly symmetrical. I guess the whole idea for the book came out of conjecture about why the makers would do this. Later in the book, I decide they've loaded the stone in a couple of different ways with this activity.

But as far as physically putting the book together, I had the journal, but I didn't think of including it. I just sat down and started writing different chapters on aspects that were interesting to me at the moment. I didn't try to keep it in any order. After a while, I realized I needed to get some sort of timeline going, so the first section deals with the archaic, wandering, migratory peoples. The second deals with the Smoky Valley hunters and farmers who were just settling on the riverbanks around here and starting to grow a little stuff. The third deals with the Wichita,<sup>89</sup> who were more developed, who were down around Little River [Kansas], who had huge villages, big trade routes, and were really well set up. So the parts are sequential in time. Plus there were the father-son relationships to keep on track.

---

<sup>88</sup> The chapter, "The Rocking Deer Journal," is Elliott's archeological and personal record of his work at a specific site over a period of about twenty months.

<sup>89</sup> Part of the Caddoan cultural group of the Great Plains.

**One of my professors has talked about how he has seen many poets eventually go to essay writing, in addition to poetry. I wondered if you felt, to tell this story adequately — this is an important part of your life ...**

We can say obsession! I am *very* interested in it. And I like about all stones, but flint really interests me.

**It looked as if this was a work that needed to be done by you, but a book of poetry about this would have been a different kind of book. Did you feel you needed to go into narrative for this book?**

I wanted a lot of physical description of the objects, and that would just get tedious in a poem. So I felt pretty early on that this would be prose.

Once I was doing *Mulberry Pass*,<sup>90</sup> I remembered a book that I read way back in the seventies, and I wasn't sure if it was fiction or nonfiction: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.<sup>91</sup> When I read that, I thought, well, this guy got an awful lot in there, and it's not all about taking care of his motorcycle. I liked the way he did it; it jumped out of the categories. Somewhere in the process, it occurred to me that that would be my model for doing a book that was seemingly about something but could encompass a lot more.

**I want ask you about the use of names in *Loading the Stone*, or rather, the lack of names. You create this name, Walker, for the three generations of men whose lives**

---

<sup>90</sup> *The Monkey of Mulberry Pass* (Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Press, 1991).

<sup>91</sup> Robert Pirsig's classic book, which has the subtitle, *An Inquiry into Values*, first published in 1974.



**the book deals with. But it's pretty clear, just three or four pages into the book, that this isn't their name at all but a reference to their activity.**

When I was in junior high school, I was reading a lot of history, a lot of the University of Oklahoma series about different tribal groups.<sup>92</sup> And I started noticing, man, these names of individuals are just killer! They say a lot more than Phil, Bob, and Mary and Louise, you know. They really tell you something about the person. So I started writing them down, and I've got this journal with about four thousand five hundred names in it, alphabetized, of course. They're like little personality poems. So in the beginning of *Loading the Stone* there is the section "The Story of Humans and Flint Through the Names of the People."<sup>93</sup> Those names are taken out of here.

You have a character named Mysterious Walking, for example, or Her Holy Door. They're beautiful — some of them are pedestrian — but almost all of them give you some sort of clue to a personality, much more than our names, which are like logos.

**A few years ago I went to see Catlin's Native American portraits when they were at the Nelson gallery in Kansas City.<sup>94</sup> One painting was of a woman named Thighs. She was beautiful, and I tried to write a poem about this painting. I thought, something's lost in translation; this name meant something to them that we're not getting.**

There is always that standing between the real names and what we get. A person called Night might be referred to elsewhere as Between Two Days, which is a lot more

---

<sup>92</sup> The Civilization of the American Indian Series, published by the University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, was created by Joseph Brandt, who became the first director of the press in 1929. As of 2000, the series included more than 250 titles.

<sup>93</sup> The opening poem, a list poem made up entirely of names that include Rock, Stone, or Point, as well as the two names Flint and Jasper. Examples include Grey Streak of the Rock, Drinks the Juice of the Stone, and Point that Remains Forever.

<sup>94</sup> George Catlin's Indian Gallery, more than five hundred individual portraits painted of Plains people the 1830s, was on display at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art in April 2004.

interesting. But they might be the same person, you never know. Depends on what European was writing it down. The Europeans were so stodgy about things, and the Native Americans were not. They could be pretty bawdy and open.

One story I read was about how the women were butchering bison one day along the riverbank after a hunt, and one of them threw a buffalo penis into the river, and it floated, and this little boy standing there thought this was hilarious, and he pointed at it and started laughing. Well, they immediately named him, and you can imagine they named him Buffalo Wanger or something like that! Well, he grows up, and the Europeans are coming and they need to know the names of all these people. Well, what's this guy's name? Well ... Oh, no, no, we can't have that! So they discussed it among themselves and came up a suitable name for this guy, and his name was recorded from that point on as Sees the Living Bull.

**Not quite the same.**

Not quite! Takes all the fun out of it. You're dealing with that, too, when you see these names. A lot of them were transcribed by Europeans who were finicky or prudish or inept.

**And nevertheless the names are still fascinating. [Reading from the journal.] One**

**Who Walks Laughing. Morning Owl.**

I've gotten them from all kinds of sources.

**One of my favorite poems of yours, “Butterfly Master,”<sup>95</sup> has the lines, “This small hinged mosaic/of orange black and palomino/has been given a name/and the danger of names hovers close to both of us today.” As I thought about the way you have and have not used names in *Loading the Stone*, I thought of this poem. What is the danger of names?**

That particular thing is dealt with in the book.<sup>96</sup> Once you know the name of something — the example used is a woodpecker — once you know that that’s called a red-headed woodpecker, then every one you see, you automatically know what it is, and you don’t have to experience it anymore. When I was in high school I wanted to know the names of all the birds of prey, all the snakes, all the trees, you know, everything around here. I even went so far as to learn the Latin names of some of them. It was years and years before I realized I didn’t even look at that hawk. I just looked at it long enough to say, Oh, that’s a redtail, and on I went. So nothing about the hawk’s personality or idiosyncracies got through to me because I was looking at labels. That’s the danger of names, to me: They have their uses, but they can shut you off from experience. If you trust the world of labels — and it happens without you knowing it, usually — then you’re in danger of closing off from the world of perception.

**How would you say your writing has developed over the past few decades?**

The most important thing is what I mentioned earlier: forgetting about poetry. Not being conscious, letting things take their natural course. That’s probably been the best thing I ever came up with, and it seems so obvious, but at the time I was really hooked up on

---

<sup>95</sup> *Darkness at Each Elbow* (Brooklyn, New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1981), 98.

<sup>96</sup> In the last chapter, “The Cottonwood Line,” 242-243.

being a poet and getting this stuff out there and getting the proper recognition and what-all, and it's really a bowl full of steam, to quote Woody Allen.

There was a time I wouldn't use a conjunction, and I've lightened up a lot about that, where I don't feel I have to quite compress the thing down so far that it takes work to actually unfold it. I don't want it to be immediately accessible, like a grocery list, but I don't want people to have to go to a book to find out what I'm trying to say, and I wanted the connections to be close enough that they can be made. So I've become a little less strict about my language.

Allen Ginsberg said, just let it come out, write it down, and don't mess with it. That's the best it's ever gonna be, that's pure poetry. Well, his brain was a lot more advanced than mine. When I first write it down, the job's just starting, because there's all kinds of clichés and obvious stuff that needs to be weeded out and things that need to be said a little more interestingly or better. And my brain is trying to help, but it'll throw me the most obvious stuff first, and if I went with that, it would just be all doggerel. So I can't work the way he did. And I don't really believe that anyway. I'm sure he revised. But I understand what he's saying — you overthink something and it's dead. But, to me, all the work is in revision and compression. I don't have a problem with imagination, I can take off with that.

**Do you have a regular writing time?**

No, I don't. I used to try to because I'd read that a lot of poets do. William Stafford, for example, would get up and lie on his couch, and he said that was the time of day when thoughts were clean and stuff would show up better, and it worked for him.

I used to write late at night quite a bit. But now I don't have a time to sit down and say, time to do poetry. I have tried that, and there's always something to work on. But it's fifty-fifty. Now I just wait, and when it shows up, I start getting it down, then once I think I've got everything down, I start crossing out, adding, changing things around. Till it works. Sometimes it doesn't. I put it in a folder and it lies there for a year or so. Maybe I find it, and maybe I can cannibalize a line or something for another poem. Or maybe it's ready to take off on its own and finish up. I tend not to worry about it. Just because I start one doesn't mean I feel like I have to finish it.

I wanted to write a poem about yellow, because, you know, it's got a bad rep. I noticed I used yellow in a number of poems, and I thought, there must be something there; I must have something to say about yellow itself. Well, this was a case of the concept coming first and the process just not being enough to support it. So I tried, and I started writing some stuff about yellow, and finally I realized I'm just making this crap up. There's not a poem here. So I put it aside. Someday yellow might show up in spades. I can take off, and maybe that'll give me some raw material to work with. But I'm not planning on finishing that poem. It was a poem I thought I should write rather than a poem that came and said, deal with me.

**Before we finish, I want to ask about two things I've noticed in your poems. There's a sense of history of place, which I'm sure is, at least in part, informed by your study of the early peoples of the area. And there's also a sense of the ephemeral nature of the current civilization. It's a big universe, and what we've got right here right now is not something you hang onto tightly. The current culture will pass.**

I agree.

**In “March Landscape,” you write about how, under the lawn, the prairie waits.**

Well, change is the only inevitability I’m sure of — besides death. It seems like we strive to limit change. We love schedules, and everybody’s got a cell phone stuck to their head now. It’s like they just can’t bear to be at large. You have to be accessible to everybody and know where you are and where you’re going next. That’s the antithesis of poetry to me. Change is a refreshing thing. Not always, but it’s inevitable.

I probably started out having ten or twelve Native sites that I would walk fairly frequently. Over the years, that’s gone down to about three. One has a house built on it now, one is a parking lot, one was turned into a sand pit. All that stuff is gone. And nobody asked anybody, they just did it. It changed. See, I think of all the artifacts under that house, and it really gets to me.

And, of course, farming has changed a great deal. Back in my glory days of the seventies and the eighties, when a lot of this took place, everybody deep-plowed. So that eight inches or so of new artifacts were brought up to the surface every year and then tumbled around in that eight inches of dirt. Well, now, since soil erosion’s bad, everybody’s gone to low-till or no-till, which means you don’t touch the surface, or, at most, you kind of scratch it with a disc, disc it once and then plant. Well, that, at most, disturbs the top three or four inches of dirt. So that top three or four inches just keeps going around and around now. For the past ten years or so, when I got to a site, mostly I came home with just the pleasure of having been there because there are no new objects being turned up. The bad thing is the extra chemicals they have to put on to kill the weeds

that aren't killed by plowing, so we're saving soil, but we're running a whole lot more ugly stuff into the water table and the streams.

***Loading the Stone* and many of your poems add to the written record of what happened here.**

There's a different kind of consciousness that comes in writing. Moving your hand across the page — it's like leaving a trail behind.

**March Landscape**

Coming out of the long winter  
in death mask underwear  
we rejoice in the flat  
brown backyard.

It is not long before  
the children are calling  
each other stupid.

Above growing civilizations of dirt  
the sky undulates a piercing blue.  
Such tiny feet on the  
bird in the grass  
and the child that  
watches the bird.

The green geometry of lawns  
grows underneath them

and deeper still  
the prairie waits.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> *Darkness at Each Elbow*, 17.

**Kim Stafford:**

**The Poet Father, the Poet Son**

*Poet and essayist Kim Stafford came to the Flying W Ranch near Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, for the 2008 William Stafford Rendezvous, a celebration of his father's work and influence. Our conversation took place the morning of Saturday, April 12, in the gathering room of the ranch guesthouse. We got started about eight o'clock as the sun shone through the big east windows. Before I turned on the recorder, Stafford had been talking about how his father, as a student at the University of Kansas, would ramble around inside Watson Library, how Friedrich Nietzsche was one of his favorite writers, and how he once went to the library and looked for the copy of Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy, which his father read again and again. He found a new copy with a plate that read, "This copy purchased to replace the original."*

**You were up early today. Are you a morning writer, as your father was?**

Yes. I think it's physical for me that I'm a pessimist in the evening, but in the early morning, I feel physically capable of anything, and this affects my mind. I feel bad that I'm so easily swayed. But I have a poem that says, "I have a weakness for ... the early morning/when the first gold light touches sidewalk and storefront in Bucoda/...Twisp/...," you know, start listing the little [Washington] towns. Here we are in this room at the Flying W, and the sun's coming gold across the land into the window. This feels like the time of easy discovery, revelation. Is revelation too big a word? I don't think so.



I get up at five, and I feel like a slouch because my dad got up at three, you know, and people ask me, “Do you get up like your father and write a poem every day?” I have had to learn to say, “I am not my father.” No, I don’t have his consistency. I don’t live by his proverb: “Do it now, do it all.” But a day is poorer if I don’t wake early and learn something on my own by writing.

**What are some of the similarities and differences between your style and your father’s style? And you can call style whatever you want.**

Well, we had this wonderful moment when he sighed heavily, and said, “Ah! Baroque prose! First Annie Dillard did it; now everybody’s doing it.”

And I said, “Well, Daddy, that’s kind of what I do in my writing.”

**I like that passage.<sup>98</sup>**

[Laughing.] And he said, “You’re one of the worst,” and shook his head.

There is quite a distinction between his writing and mine. I tend to ramble on, to be rhapsodic. I wrote my dissertation on the most flamboyant poem of the fourteenth century, *The Pearl*: “Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye/To clanly clos in golde so clere . . . .” It’s a piece of music, a piece of golden filigree. And my father’s style was, of course, plainspoken. So when we’d give readings together, I would get out there and sing a song or do one of my lyrical poems, rhapsodic constructions, then he would come forth and deliver his — not terse — but modest, direct, subdued utterances, which I love. But his way is not my way.

---

<sup>98</sup> Stafford recounts the story in his book *Early Morning: Remembering My Father, William Stafford* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2002), 188.

**Do you think your style has become more plain over time?**

I think it has. Yeah. I was sitting there this morning, looking at an old poem I wrote about my father, and it's overstated, so I'm trimming it. I'm getting down to the nub.

He had a way of writing he described to me. "I just start writing along," he said, "with anything that comes to me, and I write into something like a poem, and then I keep writing. And then afterward, I go back and start at the top and find where the poem really begins, take away some lines. Then," he said, "I go to the bottom of what I've written and I go up, looking for where it ended."

I hear in that a readiness to have extravagant experience as a writer in the process of making, but then to go find the heart of it — to go back and seek: What are the bones of this thing? What's the gist? How would it get bigger by taking things away? How would those central notions or utterances loom large by being stripped?

**At the beginning of *Early Morning*, you describe a dream you had on the morning of the day your father died. It was a dream of a father lost, and you wrote it down in your notebook.<sup>99</sup> What are your thoughts about the importance of paying attention to our dreams?**

To me, dreams are the sustaining reminder that human beings are created to understand life by story — by image, by often-strange, resonant detail. When I teach writing, people say, "Well, I can't think of anything to write" or "My life doesn't make sense." And I feel like the dreaming mind is a kind of internal teacher, oracle, shaman, minister even — putting forth constantly, abundantly, poetic experience. Part of the early morning experience for me is to stay close to that intuitive experience of dreaming. When you first

---

<sup>99</sup> *Early Morning*, 18.

wake, there can be kind of unexplained clarity — and before we get too caught up in the busyness of the world or turn on the radio or get out that to-do list, that calendar, that schedule — it's important to remain in that realm of immanence, where one simple thing may be of great importance.

**Did you talk to your father about how he would approach dreams and his sharing of dreams?**

I didn't talk to him about it, but in his daily writings, quite often he would write down a dream as a way to get going. You imagine he's there, in his case, at three or four in the morning, and it's utterly quiet, he won't be disturbed for several hours, and so, how do you get started? Well, one way is, before you start thinking, do some remembering. And maybe the most immediate memory is a dream. So he would jot down, in a few sentences, some enigmatic dream. Many of his dreams were about teaching. He dreamed the standard teacher's anxiety dream: I can't find the classroom; I'm not ready; I read the wrong text; who are these strange people that I'm supposed to teach? Long after he retired, he kept dreaming like that. But he would write it down. He wouldn't use it in his writing often, but sometimes there will be one little detail from a dream that will show up in his poem.

**Your father writes in *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains*, “In everyone's life, there's all this torrent of things happening and a writer ... would be someone who pays attention, and close attention at least at intervals, to that torrent. Or a writer is**

**not someone who has to dream of things to write, but has to figure out what to pick up out of the current as it goes by.”<sup>100</sup>**

**I wondered how you decide what to pick up out of the current, how you decide something is worth writing about.**

Well, this is maybe an odd example, but we got to the Flying W yesterday, and we stepped out of the car, and I looked down, and there was an arrow point on the ground. It was about the size of my little fingernail. It was blood red. And we all stood there amazed. Now, that’s unusual, but my feeling is, if the arrowhead hadn’t been there to distract me, I might have seen something more ordinary but more important. My father used to say, if the first line you think of to write is a good line, it’s probably not yours.<sup>101</sup> [Laughing.] And he didn’t trust good lines; he wanted to start with something very simple.

So, for me, if I look out from the bunkhouse here, it’s maybe the slouch of the gate at the corral — that beautifully undulating, sagging line of the old pine pole that they hung up there a long time ago — that catches my eye. Or in conversation, people are talking along, and something catches your ear — the way my Aunt Mar in Nickerson [Kansas] has a whole repertoire of ways to say the word: yy-yeh-ess, yy-yes! And that catches my ear, so out of the torrent of conversation, the visible, things you touch and so on, it seems that there are certain friendly particulars that ... Would it be too strong to say, they are yearning to be noticed? That’s what I feel. And I think we’re back to

---

<sup>100</sup> William Stafford, “Three Days, Four Poems: An Interview with Vincent Wixon and Michael Markee,” *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life*, eds. Paul Merchant and Vincent Wixon (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003) 109.

<sup>101</sup> Salina poet Harley Elliott, and amateur expert on arrow points and other stone tools of the region, was with him when the group found the arrow point. To use Stafford’s own parallel, the red arrow point was, arguably, more appropriately Elliott’s “line.”

Nietzsche, my father's feeling that for Nietzsche the torrent of life is filled with little handshakes of ideas that are reaching out toward you.

My own formulation for this is that a writer doesn't have to be smart, but only alert. You don't have to be in possession of brilliant ideas; you only have to be aware of the amazing things that are in front of you.

**In *Early Morning*, in the chapter "Sleeping On Hillsides," you say that your parents "entrusted [you] to the dark."<sup>102</sup> They let you sleep out alone as a child; they wouldn't question you when you came in at odd hours from some pretty extraordinary night-time exploration; and even would let you start out early, during cross-country trips with the family, ahead of the car, on foot along the highway in the predawn darkness. How did that kind of free exploration, with their blessing, influence your life as an artist?**

That amazes me. I mean, we'd be crossing the continent, and we'd stop in a little town way out in the open country, and in the early morning it was okay for me to get up in the dark and start walking in the direction of our journey.

**How old are we talking about?**

Well, probably twelve, fourteen. Just set out along the road, with the sense, that, well, we know which road we're going to be on, and so, as far as you get, that's where we'll find you. I couldn't do that with my own son. I feel bad about that. Has the world changed? Am I more timid than my parents? It goes with my parents', both of them, saying, when we would be out in the world, "Don't forget to talk to strangers" — the opposite of

---

<sup>102</sup> *Early Morning*, 175.

frequent advice. If you don't talk to strangers, how can you find your way, how can you learn anything?

We never talked about it this way, but there is a danger — you might get lost, you might meet the wrong person — but if you don't go forth freely, you might not meet the world. You might not become who you are to become. And I think that quiet but persistent danger is part of the bargain my parents were ready strike with the world.

**It's highly symbolic — them allowing you to go out like that.**

Well, you know, I think we're back to freedom. Freedom can be an unused gift lying on the ground beside you. "I could be free, I could do this if I wanted, if I got up early enough, if I put in the effort, if I were brave enough to challenge the ideas of others," and so on. But freedom isn't real unless it's practiced. And that can be the physical freedom of going forth into the dark, or that can be freedom of ideas, of exploring things — like my father's phrase, "the unknown good in our enemies" — with your mind, freedom for going into the dark, for going past the easy signposts of unexamined patriotism or sort of supposed national interests.

**How do you continue to explore that way — in the dark — as an adult, given adult responsibilities?**

Well, I'll tell you — this is maybe an odd example, but when I go to an education conference, there is a hotel, and there are the meeting rooms, and there's the schedule. I have a custom: I need to know something about the place, and I have to go forth — early morning, late at night, between the programs, I do a lot of wandering. And this leads to

some of my greatest learning at such a conference. I'll give one example: There was the National Council of Teachers of English in San Antonio, Texas, 1986, and I talked to the maintenance guy in the hotel and said, "Where's the best place to know this place?" He said, "You've gotta go to Lola's and have a Corona." So I went out, and I never found Lola's, but I wandered through some strange parts of San Antonio, ended up in a little café, and I was sitting down and eavesdropping on these two truck drivers in the next booth, when one of them said, "You could call it the source of all knowledge. You could say, 'self' and be true about all people." They went on like this, and I thought, no one is speaking like this at the conference.

So it's that going outside I need. I remember a conference in Caspar, Wyoming. My head got full of talk, talk, talk. So I went out across a vacant lot and down to the river. I had a sense that, here's the railroad track, there must be hobo camp, and I just have to find it. I was a little spooked, but I found the camp, and here was a tree a beaver had cut down that had been lodged in the fork of another tree, and a tent over that pole, and a little piece of scrap carpet was put down there. I had to lie down inside there and get a sense: What was that like?

Then as I came back toward the conference, it was getting dark, and I was going through a brushy place, and I needed a stick — I didn't know if there were snakes anything — so I fumbled by a little camp spot under the railroad trestle. There was a stick, and as my hand closed on it, it was very smooth, and I thought, oh, this is someone's stick. In the dim light I turned it over, and it was whittled with the words, Live Free or Die. Some hobo had left this there and gone south for the winter. And, again, I felt — this is not meant as a judgment of human beings or their customs — that there is

nothing inside the already discovered realm of the conference that can match, at least in my experience, what I'm finding here outside. So I guess I still cherish the chance to go outside the pattern or the plan, to find what hasn't been known.

**Everybody who's coming to the Flying W today has been inspired by your father's poetry, but nobody has explored his life and writing as deeply as you have. Since his death, what do you continue to learn from his life and his writing?**

Well, first I'd like to say that we don't know if no one has explored as deeply! I've explored as deeply as I can, Kim, the son, the literary companion in many ways. I did have a chance to go out with my father on the road to all kinds of programs and so on, but that doesn't mean that someone, maybe who never met him, encountered in his poetry dimensions of experience that I will never know. I think one of the amazing, miraculous, lucky things about reading is: You can encounter another person in a way that may not have been possible in person. I imagine someone in a difficult time of their life searching for answers, searching for direction, coming upon a poem by William Stafford or someone else and finding there the beginning of a remedy. I think people's lives can be saved by encountering the right poem at the right time.

“Some time when the river is ice/ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether/ what I have done is my life.” You know that William Stafford poem, “Ask Me.” I can imagine someone coming upon that poem and suddenly being liberated from a kind of false accountability and given back an opportunity to live their own life in their own way. That could save your life, not in the sense that you were going to physically die, but, spiritually, people die all the time, and a poem can bring them back.



### **How do account for your father’s kind of spiritual courage?**

There is no accounting for it. There’s this story that I tell in *Early Morning*. Young William Stafford goes off to school as a very young child in Hutchinson. And he comes home and tells his mother that there were these new kids in school, who were black, who were up against a wall being taunted by some of the others. And his mother says, “What did you do, Billy?” “Well, I went and stood by them.”<sup>103</sup>

How do you account for that? Where did he get the notion that one should do that, *could* do that, that he personally could do that, no matter what happened? His first word was “moon” — now, how do we account for that? What does that mean? He had parents who were poor and not broadly educated, but curious, attentive, loved to talk recklessly, fought over books from the library — who gets to read that one first? — eager for discovery. So he had the early cradle of a good situation and a lively family, but as to why he came forth ... I have one little clue about him. I went out to Liberal High School, where he graduated in 1932, and I met with his classmates, and one, a wonderful old lady... I said, “Do you remember William Stafford?” And she said, “Oh yes, he always kept to himself, he was different” — you know, these code words we use for the loner. “But,” she said, “Miss Arington saw that he had something unusual.” Now, Miss Arington was a legend in that school who had taught for thirty years or so by the time my father attended in 1931-32. And, you know, one teacher can make a big difference.

I’m clutching at tentative hints here, so we can’t answer that question except maybe by going into the poetry, his accounts: “Our mother knew our worth — not much”; the world was “a world of our betters” ... That sense of a kind of brutal modesty. And his poem, “Serving with Gideon”: and after all, “I was *almost* one. ... I was *almost*

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 39.

one of the boys.” You know, that sense of being outside, which is a tough gig when you’re young, but for a poet, it can be an enriching predicament to be at the edge of things, to not be given abundance easily and needing to find your own.

**Is it tough — I mean, do you get tired of talking about your father?**

Not at all! I love my daddy. I’ll tell you kind of a spooky thing that happened to me a few years ago. I was talking to an old friend, a man who had been my teacher in college, poetry teacher Ralph Salisbury, and he said, “Kim, there’s something I’ve thought about telling you for some years now, and I didn’t know if I should.”

[Laughing.] And I leaned forward and said, “Well, Ralph, times a’wasting!” And he said, “You know, years ago, your father and I were on a long drive. We were going to a program somewhere at night, and we got to talking about our children, and your father said, ‘Well, I love all my children, but there is one who is myself, and that’s Kim.’”

I said, “Oh, Ralph, I can see why you kept that under your hat for a while.” I don’t know if that’s something I didn’t already know, in a way. My dad and I were very different, but we shared a kind of reckless abandon and a kind of trust in going anywhere — out wandering through the world, and in language, too. That’s a mystery.

**I think people know that. That’s why we ask you to come to Kansas.**

I’ll go anywhere. My mother says, “Maybe it’s time for you to let go of Bill.” And my feeling is, why would I do that? Nietzsche said, “Some people are born posthumously.” There’s an example of a Nietzschean wild thing to say. And I feel that — I wouldn’t say

this directly to my mother — but my response is, have you noticed there’s a war on?<sup>104</sup> Have you noticed that my father’s peaceful words are an elixir in times like these, that not only individual souls but whole nations are lost? And if traveling with my father’s notions of reconciliation and listening and opening your life to the stranger and seeking the unknown good in your enemy can be part of our fate as humans, what other work would I do?

**The book of your father’s early poems, *Another World Instead*<sup>105</sup>, has just come out. What would you like to say about this new collection, and what are some of the current projects at the William Stafford Archive<sup>106</sup>?**

I think the new collection circles back to where we started, because the full line that that title comes from is, “I dream another world instead.” These are poems William Stafford wrote between 1937 and 1947. He’s just starting out. It includes the poem that he identifies as: “Written in study hall, the last semester at K.U. The first time I really tried to express poetry.” So here’s this young person coming out of the Depression. The country is drifting toward war, as everyone knew, and in that dark, difficult time, he is starting to practice his writing.

Some of the poems are clunkers, I would have to say, but they’re all interesting as evidence of someone finding a practice that will lead to amazing things. I take up that book the way he took up the practice of writing: Do you stop because every episode in your learning is not demonstrably successful? No. You welcome every stage. You see his

---

<sup>104</sup> The Iraq War, which began in 2003.

<sup>105</sup> William Stafford, *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford, 1937-1947*, edited with an introduction by Fred Marchant (St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2008).

<sup>106</sup> In 2008, after this interview was conducted, the Stafford family donated the William Stafford Archives to Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon, where William Stafford had been a faculty member.

devotion to hometown, to friendship, to ideas, to peacemaking, sense of place. You see him staking out his territory as a writer and as a human being.

My own dream for the archive is to create something that doesn't exist except in my mind at this point: what I call the William Stafford Studio for Reconciliation. This would be an online set of resources where you could find the digitized first draft of any William Stafford poem. And you could then walk through the revisions with him, and then you could hear him read the poem. We have ninety CDs of his readings, all indexed. Do you want to hear the twenty-five times we have recorded of him reading "Traveling through the Dark" or the twenty times he read "Ask Me"? So you can accompany William Stafford in the creation of one of his poems. And then the next step would be the most important: a set of invitations, prompts, openings for your own writing, for discussion, for being a witness for peace.

My mom calls this the impossible dream, but I think it's the possible dream. I want to make his work available for when I'm not here. And I'm not making a big claim that my father is, obviously, the one and only source, but I want to make what's available in his life broadly available to people everywhere. I think that's the work of our time, to put the resources of human conversation forth.

## Selected works by the poets interviewed

### Harley Elliott

#### *Poetry*

- All Beautyfull & Foolish Souls*. Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1974.  
*Animals That Stand in Dreams*. Brooklyn, New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1976. □  
*The Citizen Game*. Fredonia, New York: The Basilisk Press, 1984. □  
*Dark Country*. Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1971. □  
*Darkness at Each Elbow*. Brooklyn, New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1981. □  
*The Monkey of Mulberry Pass*. Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 1991. □  
*The Resident Stranger*. La Crosse, Wisconsin: Northeast/Juniper Books, 1974.  
*The Secret Lover Poems*. Tempe, Arizona: Emerald City Press, 1977. □  
*Sky Heart*. Milwaukee: Pentagram Press, 1975.

#### *Prose*

- Loading the Stone*. Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2006.

### B.H. Fairchild

#### *Poetry chapbooks*

- C&W Machine Works*. Denton, Texas: Trilobite Press, 1983.  
*Flight*. Blythewood, South Carolina: Devil's Millhopper Press, 1985.  
*The System of Which the Body Is One Part*. Brockport, New York: State Street Press, 1988.

#### *Poetry*

- The Arrival of the Future*. Norcross, Georgia: Swallow's Tale Press, 1985; second edition, Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2000.  
*The Art of the Lathe: Poems*. Introduction by Anthony Hecht, Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 1998.  
*Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2003.  
*Local Knowledge*. Princeton, New Jersey: Quarterly Review of Literature, 1991; reprinted, New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005.  
*Usher*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009.

#### *Literary criticism*

- Such Holy Song: Music as Idea, Form, and Image in the Poetry of William Blake*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1980.

### Steven Hind

#### *Poetry*

- Familiar Ground*. Lawrence, Kansas: Cottonwood Review Press, 1980.

*In A Place With No Map.* Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, 1997.

*That Trick of Silence.* Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, 1990.

**Essays**

*The Loose Change of Wonder.* Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, 2006.

**Amy Fleury**

**Poetry**

*Beautiful Trouble.* Carbondale, Ill.: Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

**Kathleen Johnson**

**Poetry**

*Burn.* Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2008.

**Donald Levering**

**Poetry chapbooks**

*The Fast of Thoth.* Columbus, Ohio: Pudding House Publications, 2002.

*A Folio of Garden Poems.* Bowling Green, Ohio, 1977. Hand-printed on letterpress.

*The Jack of Spring.* Oneonta, New York: Swamp Press, 1980.

*The Kingdom of Ignorance.* Georgetown, Kentucky: Finishing Line Press, 2006.

*Mister Ubiquity.* Columbus, Ohio: Pudding House Publications, 1997.

**Poetry**

*Horsetail.* Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2000.

*Outcroppings from Navajoland.* Tsale, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1984.

*Whose Body.* Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2007.

**Denise Low**

**Poetry chapbooks**

*Dragon Kite*, in *Mid-America Trio.* Kansas City, Missouri: BookMark Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1981.

*Selective Amnesia. Stiletto I.* Lawrence, Kansas: Howling Dog Press, 1988.

*Quilting.* Lawrence, Kansas: Holiseventh, 1984. Fine-press edition.

*Vanishing Point.* Wichita/New York City: Mulberry, 1991.

**Poetry**

*Ghost Stories of the New West.* Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2010.

*New and Selected Poems, 1980-1999.* Lawrence, Kansas/Middletown, California: Penthe Publishing, 1999; second edition, 2007.

*Spring Geese and Other Poems*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Museum of Natural History, 1984.

*Starwater*. Lawrence, Kansas: Cottonwood Review Press, University of Kansas, 1988.

*Thailand Journal: Poems*. Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2003.

*Tulip Elegies: An Alchemy of Writing*. Lawrence, Kansas/Middletown, California: Penthe Publishing, 1993.

*Vanishing Point: Poems*. Wichita, Kansas: Mulberry Press, 1991.

### **Essays**

*Natural Theologies: Essays about Plains Literature*. Lincoln, Nebraska: The Backwaters Press, 2010.

*Touching the Sky: Essays*. Lawrence, Kansas: Penthe Publishing, 2004.

*Words of a Prairie Alchemist: The Art of Prairie Literature*. North Liberty, Iowa: Ice Cube Press, 2006.

*Touching the Sky: Essays*. Lawrence/Middletown, CA: Penthe Publishing, 1994.

### **Books edited**

*Confluence: Contemporary Kansas Poetry*. Lawrence, Kansas: Cottonwood Review Press, University of Kansas, 1983.

*Kansas Poems of William Stafford, with and introduction*. Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, 2010 (second edition).

*Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony*. Co-ed. with Peter G. Beidler. Special issue of American Indian Culture and Research Journal 28.1 (2004), UCLA.

*The Wakarusa Wetlands in Word and Image*. Lawrence, Kansas: Committee on Imagination and Place and Lawrence Arts Center, 2005.

*30 Kansas Poets*. Lawrence, Kansas: Cottonwood Review Press, University of Kansas, 1979.

## **Nedra Rogers**

### **Poetry**

*Soul's Night Out*. Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2009.

## **Kim Stafford**

### **Prose**

*Early Morning: Remembering My Father, William Stafford*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2002.

*Having Everything Right: Essays of Place*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2002.

*Lochsa Road: A Pilgrim in the West*. Lewiston, Idaho: Confluence Press, 1991.

*The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003.

### **Poetry**

*Braided Apart*. (A collection of poems with William Stafford.) Lewiston, Idaho: Confluence Press, 1976.

*The Granary*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1982.

*A Gypsy's History of the World*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1976.

*Places and Stories*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1987.

*A Thousand Friends of Rain: New & Selected Poems 1976-1998*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1999; 2005.

***Books edited***

*Every War Has Two Losers: William Stafford on Peace and War*. By William Stafford; edited, with an introduction by Kim Stafford. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2003.