

DREAMS OF EARTH AND SKY:  
INTERVIEWS WITH NINE KANSAS POETS

By

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## **Abstract**

This thesis comprises interviews with nine poets who have a Kansas background and whose work exhibits a strong sense of place. The interviews took place during the period running from April 2008 through May 2009.

The conversations explore the practice and process of writing; the poets' influences; the shift in consciousness, from adolescence through maturity, about various aspects of writing; ideas about the purpose and value of poetry; and the intersection of the poets' personal experiences with their writing.

Each of the poets interviewed has some connection to the poet William Stafford, who grew up in Kansas, attended the University of Kansas, and in 1970 was Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1970, the position that later became U.S. Poet Laureate. Stafford's influence on several of these poets is strong. His influence is explored in several interviews and is an important subject of the collection as a whole. The last interview is with his son, the writer Kim Stafford.

The collection is not intended to be a representation of the work of all Kansas poets, but rather as a presentation of one poetic aesthetic that occurs in this region. The collection is intended to be an enjoyable, encouraging, and useful tool to aspiring poets and other writers, teachers, and readers who are interested in writing that has a sense of place.

*For my mother*

*Laura Lee Morey Bosnak*

*who taught me to love words*

*and to love the earth and sky*

## Acknowledgements

A version of the interview with Kim Stafford was published in *Flint Hills Review*, Emporia State University, Issue Fourteen, 2009. Versions of the interviews with B.H. Fairchild and Donald Levering were published in *New Mexico Poetry Review*, Santa Fe, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 2010.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Laura and John Bosnak, who, like me, can't stay away from college and who have always supported my belief that learning has intrinsic value.

I also want to express appreciation to the following: my friend, former colleague, and fellow writer Anna Kraxner, who read my first serious poems seven years ago, gave thoughtful criticism, and encouraged me; KU Endowment, my former employer, which provided me with partial tuition support each semester; Kathleen Johnson, Nedra Rogers, and Travis Weller, fellow poets who travelled through poetry workshops with me; Michael Johnson, whose intuition, incisive questions, calm pragmatism, and focus were exactly what I needed as I worked through the MFA program; and Denise Low, for giving me the push to interview Kim Stafford when the opportunity arose and without whose urging this book would not have been written.

I thank all the poets interviewed here for making time to talk with me about their lives, their process, and their poetry.

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## Introduction

About a year ago, on a visit to my parent’s house in southern Johnson County, Kansas, my mother handed me a little black binder. I recognized it right away: my first book of poetry. Like all the poets interviewed for this collection, I fiddled around with writing as a kid. My mother had read to me from before the time I learned to speak. I heard music in language, I loved to play outdoors and watch plants and animals, and I wanted to bring my experience and words together. There are sixteen poems in that binder, each on its own page with a gold number stuck in the corner. Here’s one, “When the Ducks Sit With Us,” written when I was ten:

When the ducks,  
sit with us,  
and we watch them,  
and they watch us,  
and we feed them bread crust,  
they want more.

When the ducks,  
eat the crust,  
and we watch them,  
and they watch us,  
they still want more.  
They are not to adore.

Deciding what to write about was a very conscious question for me as a child — typical, I think, for young people who aspire to be poets. In my interview with Harley Elliott, of Salina, he said of his first poems, written in junior high, “I had this conception that poetry had to do with large issues, like Armageddon ... the crucifixion, unrequited love, the Bomb, you know! ... I wrote my second unrequited love poem, and I had not been in love yet. ... 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."

I admit I didn't have Elliott's early sense of responsibility to the content of poetry, and neither would I ever destroy my ditties. They were my starting point as much as the Robert Frost poems my mother read to me. What I can say for "When the Ducks ..." is that its content is just a little more original than the others in the binder, which mostly were about violets or butterflies or "America," and sound like a cross between the language of 1970s greeting cards and the twisted-corset sentence structure of nineteenth-century rhyming verse. (Steven Hind, ever the teacher of poetry, whose interview is part of this collection, graciously pointed out in an email that the duck poem "rejects the Disneyesque insinuation that animals are cute and anthropomorphic, not 'to adore,' just to feed and for the exchange of mutual observation, other to other.")

What Harley Elliott says — because it has to do with the early urge to create with words — gets at the burning question that led to these interviews: How does a person, particularly a person who grew up in rural Kansas, become a poet? What drives the poet? That is the question I kept before me throughout the process of asking questions and editing the words of these conversations with nine poets whose writing I love. And so the interviews are not about poetic technique or theory or form, or schools of poetry. They are about the experience of the poet across time and in the act of writing a poem.

These interviews are many things, first of all the result of my exploration of, or nosiness about, the lives of poets from this place, Kansas. I was curious about their daily activities, how they support themselves financially, when the writing takes place, how the

poems come, how place finds its way into their work. I wanted to know how their experience becomes poetry.

I wanted to know about the type of bread labor the different poets do. If they don't work in academia, are they outside of a network that could give them so-called advantages? How do those working at colleges or universities, whose time is necessarily fragmented, ever find the quiet blocks of time they need to make poetry? What is the connection between writing at a regular time of day and the content and quantity of poetry produced?

Talking with these poets not only helped me begin to form answers to those kinds of questions, it also helped me get away from writing alone in my study. Writing can be meditative, cathartic, an altered state. It also can be isolating. These conversations allowed me to make visiting part of my work.

As I've already suggested, this collection is, to some degree, a study of the connection between poetry and place. These poets all spent at least part of their growing-up years in Kansas. Most of them speak of how the openness of the land itself, the expanse of sky, and the time available to them in rural places or small towns contributed to their sense of the free and open space of the imagination. In several conversations, the subject of the regional voice also comes up. Some interviewed here seemed to suggest that every writer is somewhere on a continuum of being a regional writer. Some spoke of how the experience of open space, literal and figurative, not only creates space for the imagination but also influences the very subject matter, language, and style of their poetry. The interview with Denise Low, a fifth-generation Kansan and poet laureate of Kansas from 2007 to 2009, addresses idea of the regional voice most directly.

In bringing up the connection between poetry and place, as well as the regional voice, I do not mean to promote the idea that these poets are representative of Kansas poets, whether in style or subject matter or personal background. Their integration of nonhuman subjects or rural settings into their writing, which of course varies even among them, represents just one aesthetic among many in this region. I might go so far as to say that, as a group, they follow the lead (I think it is too soon to apply the word “tradition” here) of William Stafford.

I admit that this body of work is something of an homage to Stafford — Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1970, the position now known as U.S. Poet Laureate — who grew up in Kansas, attended the University of Kansas, and felt a longing for this place all of his adult life. It was reading interviews with him that inspired me to love the poetry interview as a window into personal life, ideas, and personality. Stafford’s discipline, openness, receptivity, and fierce adherence to principle make him a personal hero of mine, and some of the poets I spoke with feel the same way. I see Stafford as a standard-bearer for the poetic expression of a love for out-of-the-way places such as those in rural Kansas, and for the unnoticed and the disregarded, human and otherwise. All the poets interviewed here knew him, were influenced by him, or admired his work. If they didn’t bring up his name (most of them did), I did. I wanted to know about their sense of connection with him.

Stafford is famous for getting up as early as three each morning to do free writing for hours, a practice he developed during his years in the camps where he was held as a conscientious objector during World War II. In certain circles, his practice is held as the standard for daily writing. I asked all nine poets about their writing habits. They vary.

Only two have a daily writing practice, Donald Levering and Kim Stafford (neither works full-time as a university professor; I think that makes regular writing easier for them, and Levering says as much). Kim Stafford, whose interview is last in this collection, said he “feels like a slouch” for getting up at five to write, rather than three, as his father did.

A word about Kim; he didn’t ever reside in Kansas but did spend significant time here as a child with his family. He imbibed his father’s sense of Kansas as a magical place and has visited here many times, in both personal and professional capacities, as an adult. I would call him an honorary Kansas poet. He is a gifted and inspiring writer in his own right, the legal literary executor of his father’s estate, and his father’s literary inheritor. Given the influence of William Stafford on the writers interviewed here, the collection seemed incomplete without a conversation with Kim.

This collection is not an academic study, there are some general ideas that come out of these conversations. None is surprising, and I have mentioned some already.

As we know, influences for writing poetry affect poets early in life. All of these poets spoke of having at least one of the following as young people: space to roam; time to think; a love of words and stories that came from listening to others or from reading; or a very few people who influenced them deeply — teachers, librarians, or a relative who read with them.

All ponder memories of places and people. I remember Professor Michael Johnson counseling us in poetry workshops to “write about what haunts you.” These poets do that. Steven Hind was still writing, decades later, about his teenage experience of finding a neighbor, a man he was very close to, dead at home. Pete Fairchild wrote again and again about experiences in his father’s machine shop in Liberal; I believe the

defining scene in his poetry is the moment of falling light in the silence of the shop after hours. These poets' work is populated with abandoned houses, abandoned towns, and wild animals. In the cases of the poets who have moved to another place (the diaspora of Kansas poets?), the inhabitants of that place — such as the tumbleweeds of the Southwest in Levering's work — inhabit their writing. And the places these poets visit, the humans and others they encounter there, live in the poems also.

These poets speak of their early questions about what was “worth” writing about and the revelation that their own experience is precisely that. For several of them, reading William Stafford's work was a factor in reaching that realization.

As I worked through the Master of Fine Arts program, I considered using my own poems and essays as my thesis, but my inner voice kept saying, “not ready, not ready.” Fairchild's words, in his interview that is part of this collection, burned in my ears: “I ... still believe that well-crafted poetry requires a long apprenticeship. At the end of that apprenticeship, and only then, does one submit poems for publication.” He said this in answer to my question about the fact that his first collection was not published until he was in his early forties. Only now that I am almost finished with this work do I feel myself moving out of that apprenticeship.

But the interviews felt solid and strong, work that could be useful to teachers, students, and readers of poetry. Perhaps they will help aspiring poets (people like me) have greater confidence, or sooner confidence, to write their own lives. And help teachers encourage them to do so.

I have supported myself as an editor for more than fifteen years and have interviewed hundreds of people in that time, but these interviews have been the most

satisfying. They are the place where my own questions about poetry — about the metamorphosis of experience into art, which takes place deep in the psyche — intersects with my confidence in asking questions and writing in a genre that is second nature to me. So I am grateful to Michael Johnson, my mentor from the day I walked into the KU Department of English seven years ago and told the people there I wanted to study poetry, for agreeing without hesitation to let me make these interviews my thesis. I appreciate his characteristic wisdom and openness, and his ability to see the value of interviews as subject matter for a thesis. I am grateful also to Denise Low and Joe Harrington, the other members of my thesis committee, for encouraging me to continue writing about my world, to continue in the role of the sensitive observer, which began in childhood.

*Kirsten Ann Meenen Bosnak  
Lawrence, Kansas  
June/July 2010*

**Dreams of Earth and Sky:  
Interviews with Nine Kansas Poets**

**Denise Low:**

**The Midwestern Voice**

*Low, a fifth-generation Kansan, was born in Emporia. She lives in Lawrence, where she has been a faculty member and administrator at Haskell Indian Nations University since 1984; she is former chair of the English Department and teaches creative writing and Native American studies. She is the author of ten volumes of poetry, as well as collected interviews and essays, and has edited six other books, including Kansas Poems of William Stafford (a new edition was published by Woodley Press, Topeka, Kansas, in early 2010). She has led numerous arts-based projects that interpret and honor life in the Midwest, particularly eastern Kansas. Her work has been anthologized in publications from Harper & Row, Random House, and others. She has won awards and fellowships from the Kansas Arts Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Newberry Library, and the Academy of American Poets, among others. As the Kansas poet laureate for 2007-2009, she launched the Ad Astra Poetry Project, a series of Internet broadsides on Kansas poets, through her blog. The following interview came out of two conversations, a week apart in fall 2008, in an art gallery above a coffee shop in downtown Lawrence.*

**It's your second year as Kansas poet laureate. Have you been even busier than usual?**

In the second year, the events I go to are less glamorous, but there's still a very steady stream of them. I feel like I'm more of an institution now that people know where to find

me, and I get a small, steady river of requests. They can be for very minor things, and poetry really is missionary work. Psychologically, I provide some kind of focus for people's energy.

Just last week, I was at a sustainable-agriculture gathering, a national event, in Excelsior Springs, Missouri. It was really an honor to be part of it, but they had all this political and scientific agenda, so they had me speak at the opening as a kind of secular prayer — it was called a prayer. So many of them who farm or do urban gardening or whatever they do, also do photography or drawing or writing. It's the humanistic impulse, whether it's the arts or it's prayer.

In those situations, I always try to mention [Dakota author] Vine Deloria, who so well articulated the connection to landmarks and sites, specific sites, as part of the Dakota religion. Most native religions have an origin place — Shiprock, or the *Diné* Four Mountains, sacred places. The big red stone down at the dam, right here by the Kaw River, is important. When you have stories and prayers and investment in a place, you care for it.

**Have you gotten to western Kansas as poet laureate?**

Oh, yes, but really it has been the eastern third of the state more, since that's where the population is.

**You referred to poetry as missionary work. Could you say more about that?**

If I really were a Buddhist, I'd be out in the Flint Hills alone. But I have to face it: Part of my heritage and part of my makeup is this darn moralistic piece. William Stafford would

talk about that every so often. It's not always an attractive piece, but this is the right thing to do, to promote literacy and education because it's good.

**Thinking about specific, sacred places, I remember that the first poem of yours I ever read was “Learning the Language of Rivers,” which refers to the Arizona mountains where the poem’s Navajo student is from, and to the river the speaker sits beside after class. From the opening stanza, I think this poem is about language as a medium for helping us understand one another. This poem is from the eighties. That’s right.**

**Even your poetry from back then seems to point to two related things I think you’ve been working on for a long time: building community among writers in this place, this region, and also using expression as a means for building community among all kinds of people here. These goals became intentional for you at some point — or was the writing simply a lot of fun, and then the work toward community began before you realized it?**

It’s intentional. As a young writer, I and my sister — Jane Ciabattari; she’s a fine fiction writer and a journalist in New York City — even when we were little kids, we’d be reading books and saying how neat it would be to be writers, and to be famous writers! It was our idea of being a rock star, a fireman, firewoman — or firefighter. Of course, back in those days, they only had firemen. But it was what ignited our idea of what the future could be. In 1977, I was fortunate to be at *Cottonwood Review*, the literary magazine at KU, and with a fellow graduate student, Robin Tawney, we interviewed Gary Snyder.

And, of course, all along the way, as good Midwesterners — you grew up in Kansas, didn't you?

**Yes.**

Okay. You know, then, you don't brag, and you don't push yourself forward, and you try to be considerate of other people — you know, work with a group. But it resonated when Gary Snyder said, well, here is the deal: What poets do is they digest experience and try to help translate experience for the community. And in that role, you're kind of a seer, you're kind of political, social, you're trying to smooth things. I don't think he spelled it out in that much detail, but it made it clear to me and a number of other people at that time that it was admirable to start focusing on personal transformation and community transformation rather than personal ambition, and I think those are good things. And, as I say, they really resonate with Kansas values.

They also resonate with American Indian values. Gary Snyder did his bachelor's-degree honors thesis on Native narratives and was very influenced by that. And so, as many people in Kansas are part Native or Quaker or other groups that have had a strong conscience about group process, it just seemed to fit pretty well.

**Gary Snyder was a mind-opener for me, too. Reading his work was a beginning for me.**

I was trying to explain to a guy in his thirties how revolutionary Snyder was, and he said, "I can't imagine, but I can imagine, from what you're saying." If you go back, he brought Zen meditation over to this country, and maybe there were a few other people doing it

also, but he, really, for writers, is the person who brought that practice. He went to Japan and practiced it seriously. And then he took Native thought seriously, and he did the book *Turtle Island*, and even though he took some flak for appropriation, at least he was honoring it. And I think that, over time, that is what has come down.

He told me the story about how he was working with some loggers as a young man, and they'd travel together and live together and have time off and drink together, and were a working crew. And at some point, they said to him, oh, yes, we are — and I forget which California nation they were from — but they were clan brothers of that particular tribe.

Of course, at this point, many people don't *look* genetically Indian, but they had that heritage and that culture and that way of thought, and I know that he respected that a great deal.

**In a note on your poem, “Elegy for July 28, 1994,”<sup>1</sup> a place-based poem, you refer to your “commitment to writing as dialogue, not monologue.” Would you expand on that?**

Well, I was doing a lot of reviews of poetry for *The Kansas City Star* in the eighties and nineties, and at one point they were just sending me every single poetry book they got, and I kept them. Other reviewers would go sell them at the used-book store, but I have a terrific collection from a period of about three years. To me that was wealth, great wealth.

After reading stacks of books of poetry, I would be struck by how some writers and poets are just showing off, and they close out the reader. They closed me out. They

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<sup>1</sup> “Notes on the Poem ‘Elegy for July 28, 1994.’” *Words of a Prairie Alchemist: The Art of Prairie Literature* (North Liberty, Iowa: Ice Cube Press, 2006) 79-80.

were acrobats of language. Sometimes it was beautiful to watch, sometimes it was contorted, but it really didn't have anything to do with me. It had to do with getting tenure, it had to do with personal psychodramas, but it really didn't have anything to do with me.

There's a certain point when a writer matures, whether or not they have the facility and skills and craft, but sometimes, to me, that's less important than that voice, that authenticity that can come through, when someone is saying, hey, *I'm* trying to tell *you* about parts of my experience and see what you think. I think part of that maturity of voice comes with understanding that not everything you write is wonderful and that you don't have to tell everything exactly the way it happened, that you can make artistic selections in order to craft the writing to communicate more fully.

**Elegy for July 28, 1994**

Cicadas ratchet against air  
as sun withdraws from  
the garden leaf by leaf.  
Dark collects around  
the first fireflies.

Sycamore leaves lie still —  
limp banners against trunks  
of the neighbor's trees.

Downtown the Gods of this day  
lean against a wall

with the old men and talk  
until the last light and then  
dissolve into stonework

faces flattening, disappearing  
as though they never existed.

**So the dialogue is about me reading your poetry, me getting a message about my life and my experience — that kind of connection.**

Yes! I may be writing about the Kansas River, and you know that river and have had particular experiences there that are meaningful to you.

**And even if it isn't the same river as the one the speaker connects with, perhaps it is another river in the reader's own region.**

Absolutely.

**In your article, "Colonization in American Poetry,"<sup>2</sup> you encourage writers with these words: "Perhaps they can find connection with the cultural and physical geographies under their feet. Perhaps an audience might follow." There's an invitation in there to think about a deeper goal than fame.**

I suppose as a kid I was as vain as anybody, but I had mentors. I had a professor at Emporia [State University], Keith Denniston, who told me, "Don't count on fame." There are a lot of bitter people ... This is a business. He named names, which I won't do here, but just look at the number of folks who killed themselves, people as famous as you can get. You think, wow, if you get a Pulitzer Prize, you must be happy and fulfilled, and life is good and no problems the rest of your life. You can just look and see that's not true. But at the same time you have to be practical. If it is your profession as an academic writer, as it is mine, you try to get the work out and to get it out to places that are appropriate. I very seldom send to national magazines. I mostly publish in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> *Words of a Prairie Alchemist*, 19-26.

**Would you talk about the reasons for that?**

For one thing, I've had requests for material from area publications, to the point that I do not have much extra material to send out!

Also, a corollary, I haven't had time to do the submissions it takes to get work accepted. I used to devote an entire weekend to that about four times a year. I've also had the experience of sending something off and not hearing for *years* what the decision would be — and that's okay if it's a negative. But I have had a set of poems published in one place; then two years later the original place published it. So it is time-consuming. If someone asks me for a poem personally, it is easier to just send to that place. So supply and demand are a major part of my situation right now.

Also, I look at a publication before I send material, and I can see that my work just does not fit certain publications. It would be silly to send work to a language-poetry journal. Wish I could say I have a set plan, but I don't.

I will say I had a set of discouraging rejections one summer, so I started the *Thailand Journal* manuscript just to see what would happen with the same poetry with exotica rather than Midwestern images. I did get more national acceptances. So I began to think of all poetry as a kind of travel writing. So be it. We do want to travel out of our ordinary states of mind.

**Here's what I read into the fact that you publish regionally: that you are interested in what can be accomplished with poetry and other writing here — to show through this medium the value of life right here.**

Yes. And I want to be able to sit down when I have an impulse for a poem to work with that and not have to contort it to fit a particular school of writing or to fit a certain publication. The very medium we use is such a personal self-disclosure that you get tricked into thinking this is about oneself, and it's not. It's about an art form.

**You've produced a lot of writing in spite of having a very full schedule. You have a full-time faculty position at Haskell. You have taught at KU. You've published books, you keep the blog. There are events to lead or attend, the boards you serve on, reviews and academic writing. You operate a small press. You always seem to have some new community project going. You have a family. When do you have solitude for writing?**

Whenever I can grab it. My husband, Tom Weso, and I have separate offices at home, and sometimes he says he would like more of a wife, and I'm not saying my personal life has been easy, but I don't see anybody around me having an easy personal life, either, for that matter. I need more hobbies, obviously. I used to be very physically active when I was young, before my knees went out, and I do miss playing tennis. But I just really like writing.

**How would you say your writing has changed or developed over the years?**

I've gotten a better eye, and I've gotten a better ear. And I'm trying to layer more into my works, because with nature writing, in particular, there can be a real starkness, and I've just noticed that people respond more if there's a human hook to it, so I've been layering human experience and stories — and family stories — more.

**Those who know your work know you've always lived within 100 miles of Emporia.**

**That's really true?**

Yes. Well, I had a couple summers here and there.

**Have you imagined what kind of a writer and teacher you might have been if you had left Kansas?**

I actually got accepted into the creative-writing program the University of California-Irvine right out of college. This would have been 1971. I went out there, and I didn't have any money, my parents opposed it. I was very naïve. I was living with my sister, who was expecting me to babysit for her eight or ten hours a day and then commute to do this, and I just realized that was impossible. I had also applied to graduate school at KU, so I came back. And there was a man involved, also.

**Always a big factor.**

Oh, yes. So I just disappeared from Irvine, and they called me up and were friendly, and I didn't know what to say. I wasn't very socially skilled. I was by myself trying to figure this out, and my parents just wanted me to go home and live in Emporia with them. That was their ideal. And I knew that was not a good choice for me! At another point I got provisional acceptance to the University of Iowa, and that would have meant leaving my children when they were babies, and that's not an option.

So this was my karma — though as an undergraduate, I'd say, oh, I've got to get out of Lawrence, I can't imagine spending my whole life here. Eeks!

**You've stayed and become a kind of champion for the Midwestern voice, a subject you've been thinking about for a long time. Are there distinguishing characteristics of the Midwestern voice and Midwestern poetry?**

Yes, and I've tried to address that in a couple of pieces of writing. Number one, we're speaking a particular dialect of American English. This is our mother tongue. You know, you and I speaking together, it's like breathing air. What does the water taste like? What does the air smell like? But I know that as we talk to people from other parts of the country, different things happen.

So, well, then, how do you define the Midwestern voice, you know, what do you say it is? You can look at immigration patterns of English-speaking peoples or servants. I remember my mother would speak English with some kind of fossilized accent, for example, she would say "warsh" for "wash."

You know, I really credit [Salina, Kansas, poet] 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. And I think his work's pretty Midwestern.

**Some of what you're saying — about what the water tastes like, what the air smells like — seems to suggest that the physical environment itself is affecting our dialect.**

I think that's true. I think the physicality of the weather, the spaces ... there are lots of implicit things that we experience that we don't even think about. Proximity studies — Edmund T. Hall did so much with that. When I'm in the East or, actually, recently I was in downtown San Francisco, Macy's, with all these people everywhere, and I just kind of

went into this shell and managed to be happy enough, but it took me twelve hours to come out of it and kind of replay things. If you sit down in a restaurant, you expect to have a good space and not be jammed up against people, whereas I was jammed up against people eating meals. There are biological, protective feeding behaviors that I expect to have a little room for — and for conversation, if it's to be more intimate, I expect a band of privacy.

**I wonder about the pace of speech being affected by that need for space.**

Oh, yeah. I think it's Loren Eiseley who wrote that the people who are out all day long, cattle drovers or farmers — they really learn not to say much. There is an overlap with Native people, who will be slow to speak; they don't chatter, as a rule. They can gossip, there's a lot of conversation, but there's also the weight and the placement of silence that's very different, and it's more like rural people in Kansas. I believe a lot of rural Kansas people have Native origins.

The other thing I notice is that we use our voices more tonally for emotional emphasis. You know the different ways you can say, You wanna come *with*? ... You *wanna* come with? You *want* ... *You* want to come with? I think there's a lot of vertical expression going on with what would appear to be simple language.

**[Writer] Kim Stafford said almost exactly the same thing about his aunt, who lives north of Hutchinson — her many ways of saying “Yes.”<sup>3</sup>**

Really? Now, that — that's interesting.

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Stafford, “The Poet Father, the Poet Son,” interview with Kirsten Bosnak, *Flint Hills Review*, Fall 2009.

**I want to read a few sentences from your essay “At Home on The Range: The Kansas Vernacular in Literature.”<sup>4</sup> You write: “ ... The authenticity of our work comes not from what we learned in school, but from what we learned at our mothers’ knees. There is a distinctive local speech pattern, and I recognize it most when I contrast it to out-of-staters. I recognize the other-ness of various American English dialects.”**

**I think about how a lot of people here in Lawrence, a university town, did not grow up in Kansas or the Midwest. What you’ve written reminds me to pay more attention in my communication — to be more aware of what’s happening in a conversation with someone who might not be from here.**

I have learned to try to find out where people are from before I plow into things. I don’t make assumptions about what I can and can’t expect in the way of a response. And I will be much more forgiving of people for certain things that would irritate me more if a fellow Kansan did them: interruptions, you know, things that are annoying, people trying to dominate the conversation, things that could sound condescending. I finally found that for somebody from Chicago or the eastern seaboard, this is just their way of ... being friendly! [Laughter]

### **Relating to you!**

Yeah, let me tell you about myself! I am really good at this, this and this! Okay ... I think those threads, those underpinnings of assumptions underlie the literary expression.

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<sup>4</sup> “At Home on The Range: The Kansas Vernacular in Literature.” *Touching the Sky* (Lawrence, Kansas: Penthe Publishing, 2004) 77-90.

**How do the speech patterns influence the writing?**

There's a spareness. I look at someone whose work I admire very much, Andrew Hudgins, who is telling stories, with long lines, and it's chatty, and it's well crafted language with nice sounds, but it's much more British. And then look at Ted Kooser [former U.S. poet laureate, from Nebraska] — I would even say look at [Lawrence poet] Ken Irby, who's kind of hewn his own way of expression. It can be long lined, and more often is long lined, but there's still a spareness of getting right down to the pith of words.

**Have you seen interest in poetry change in this region over the past twenty-five years?**

When I was a young woman, I was very interested in learning about it, and there were just three, maybe four, women on the English department faculty. It was very male dominated; a lot of the poetry was machismo, it was about fucking and using language, drinking and drugging — not that I have that much against those things, particularly — but it would be a kind of a profound statement, to end with some kind of masculine mode of domination.

I remember thinking, am I lost in a bad French movie, where the women are all winsome and don't have any kind of identity outside of just being icons representing nature or something? I really liked some of [philosopher Jean] Baudrillard's thought, and then I tried to read his book, *America*, and I thought, wait a minute, this is horrible! It wasn't always horrible, but there wasn't room for the feminine voice, and machismo isn't quite the right word, but it was a very male-colored world.

**As I've read old issues of *Cottonwood Review*, where I found some of your work, or the book *30 Kansas Poets*,<sup>5</sup> which you edited, and pieces in your books where you've written about your experiences from that time, I've wondered about the kind of energy it took to hang in there and help poetry here evolve.**

Well, that obsessive-compulsive piece helps. [Laughing] It really does. When I did get to graduate school and take creative writing classes with [KU Professor] Victor Contoski, who was a very nurturing person and who really didn't care what gender or color you were — he really was very good — there were women who were fabulously talented who just dropped off. I don't even know what happened to some of them. I heard stories of how they married so-and-so and this-and-that happened, and none of it was good. Or they were working, they got the work side of the feminist movement, the economic pieces, but then they're raising families and working the job and shoving the writing to the side. That is really kind of tragic.

And I'm thinking, in my generation, how many other women poets are there in this area? There's Patricia Traxler, who grew up in California and had some chutzpah from another way of life, and Gloria Vando, who had some chutzpah, who's Puerto Rican. But the editors were virtually all men. Hilda Raz up in Nebraska was an exception.

I had a nice big brother, six years older, so I put all these guys in this slot, big brother. There were very kind men who mentored me a great deal and really were good, but there was this whole sea of other stuff going on. Fortunately, on the coasts and in other parts of the country, things changed. But Ted Kooser recently wrote about life in his memoir, about how, in his part of Nebraska, a couple stopped by, and the wife sat in

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<sup>5</sup> *30 Kansas Poets*. (Lawrence, Kansas: Cottonwood Review Press, University of Kansas, 1979).

the truck, and I thought, oh my God, in 2000-whatever, somewhere the women still sit in the truck. And that's not just a metaphor.

**So through all that, you just hung onto the helpful mentors and kept going.**

That's right.

**And now Kansas has a poet laureate, and you're it. Would you talk about the importance of having a state poet laureate?**

One gets into a position like this, and it's not what one expects. There are lots of odd surprises. I end up writing a lot of letters of recommendation. It's fun to have people write me and ask advice about going to graduate school or which way to end a poem or where to find a publisher. People, I guess, are looking for someone to mentor them, as I certainly did. And there aren't that many people willing to mentor.

When I was a younger student, teachers would invest themselves in some of their students. Now you're worried about sexual harassment, and there are all these other issues. There's all this awareness of addictions; you don't want to bring down students by having one glass of wine in front of them. I'm the last of a generation that would go out for a drink after class with half your class and your professor. You'd get a little silly, and people would laugh and talk and tell stories, and that was part of the education. The professor would say, oh, that reminds me of the time when James Dickey came through town or Dylan Thomas made his tour, or whatever. So that informal thing is lost, in a way.

So I think having a poet laureate gives you a person to go to. People can say, hey, we've got her email. I'll just run this by her. And it's fun. One of the things I just got involved in was a short book about May Williams Ward, a Kansas poet who was very active, very involved — died in the late sixties. She was kind of an informal poet laureate. She went around and did talks and workshops with people. She had published in some of the best places, *Poetry* magazine, East Coast magazines, and made a little bit of a living doing that. She was married. She corresponded, and all these people who wrote her asked every kind of advice, from, "where should I put this comma?" to, "do you think this is good enough to collect in a book?" Lana Meyers from Newton [Kansas] asked me to read her new book about Ward and see if I'd write an introduction to it, and I said, sure. And that's next in the pipeline for Mammoth Publications, my own small press.<sup>6</sup>

**So having the poet laureate builds cohesion among people who are interested in poetry. Does it also bring new people in?**

I think it does. Getting a poem out every couple of weeks through the Internet broadsides helps. I get really nice comments about that; people say thank you, or, I didn't expect to enjoy poetry. And to me that's been a very comfortable way to get folks out and address the need to expand the audience for poetry. And literacy — I find myself being an advocate for libraries and literacy, not just that you know the alphabet and are able to read, but really read deeply. I think that's what poetry is about: getting us to read deeply and to think more deeply.

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<sup>6</sup> *Prairie Rhythms: The Life and Poetry of May Williams Ward*. (Lawrence, Kansas: Mammoth Press, 2010.)

**Is there communication among state poets laureate?**

No, there isn't. That's one of things I'd like to address. I'm not sure if I'm going to get this off the ground, but I would like to do an anthology of state poets laureate. I'm working my way down to that, and I've got someone helping me.

Originally, I thought, oh we'll have a big conference. I talked to my boss at work, and she said we could have it at Haskell for free. But there's no money, there's no organizing principle, there's no federal agency saying, let's all do this. So it would have been me doing a lot of work on top of my full-time job and being poet laureate.

**What happens when a Midwestern poet, such as Ted Kooser, becomes popular on a national level? Does that, in itself, contribute to the regional community of writers, to interest in poets here?**

I think, more than that, it has made people here perk up a little bit and take more pride in their regional poets. The great thing about Kooser is he's really a Buddhist; you get these images that sink underwater, and, just barely within consciousness, transformations take place. He reorders the universe by the end of a poem, but it's a very Midwestern set of tropes he uses: the landscape, small towns, small-town relationships, nature, the whole population of his family.

**How did he become known on a national level? In reading both his poetry and prose, I get the impression that he might say there are other Midwestern poets just as good as he is.**

I think he might say that, indeed. He started publishing with the University of Pittsburgh Press, and that's what lifted him out of the Midwestern ... moment. He's wonderful, but you can't do what he's done within the Midwest. The prize committees are not convened in the Midwest, the prize-granting agencies are not in the Midwest, the major presses are not in the Midwest.

**To a writer here, those committees and presses can seem very far away.**

Well, this is what I've found from doing these talks around the state: You walk into any library or arts center in Kansas, and all of that group of people are very up on *The New York Times* bestsellers list. When I was a kid, my parents subscribed to *The New Yorker* magazine, and on Tuesdays, the local newsstand got the Sunday *New York Times*, so my dad would go down and get it, late, and the whole family would read different sections. It was just like reading science fiction, as far as I was concerned. I'd look at the ads. Steuben-glass bowls ... amazing.

**You talked about the influence of Gary Snyder and Harley Elliott. You've also written about your grandmother's reading of Chinese poets, her poetry, and her influence on you. Are there other writers whose voice or ideas have been deeply influential?**

There are dozens of writers; everybody I read, I'm influenced by. I really like Rilke's sense of digging into a colorful subconscious energy, to try pull that above ground into a poem. The person who advocated for that, and I have to give him credit, is Robert Bly, and I liked what he had to say about prose poems and reading widely. I like Louise

Glück; some of her line breaks are very attractive to me. I love to read Mary Oliver just for the gymnastics wedded to content so well.

**You've written that you miss "having sisters," female poets of your own generation.**

**Do you still feel you have too few sisters?**

I want to mention that, back then, I shared a lot of the same interests with [Beat-generation poet] Diane di Prima. But now, no, I don't feel that. I think the young women poets are amazing. They all played sports in high school; they're just in a different range altogether. I read numbers of very good young women writers.

**Any you want to mention?**

I like what Mary Jo Bang [Washington University, St. Louis] does with language, and I like Hadara Bar-Nadav at UMKC [University of Missouri-Kansas City].

**I wondered how teaching has affected your writing, and I mean this to be a wide-open question. I'm thinking back to "Learning the Language of Rivers,"<sup>7</sup> the very first poem in *Starwater*, and how it begins with a setting in which a teacher talks to a Navajo student about English grammar.**

Teaching has kept a roof over my head and food in the refrigerator, and I'm very grateful for that! [Laughing] I'm grateful to the federal government and to Haskell Indian Nations University, in particular, and to other places where I've taught. What is interesting is how relatively little of that comes into the writing. It's the inverse, to me. In many ways, the writing is an escape after grading — how many freshmen themes this one semester? At

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<sup>7</sup> *Starwater* (Lawrence, Kansas: Cottonwood Review Press, University of Kansas, 1988) 11-12.

one time, I was teaching five classes and had little kids at home, and I don't know how on earth I did it, how anybody does. But teaching provides a structure, a living, interesting minds to interact with; it's invigorating. The other thing — you told me I could free-associate — being a very shy person, you know, you're standing in front of a bunch of people trying to entertain them, basically. You can tell the people who teach freshmen because they get in front of people, they have segues and a nice edge of humor and try to be a little playful but still focused. It's taught me how to speak and perform, frankly.

### **Learning the Language of Rivers**

*For a Navajo student*

Friend, this English grammar does have order  
and even harmony, a symmetry of clauses and phrases.  
Together we will untangle its yarns  
and find a stable design,  
unchanging lines of subject-verb-object,  
to stand as solid as Arizona mountains.

...

Some afternoons after class I go sit by the river  
but have no word for the green bits of water  
moving through my fingers,  
glimmering in strands of sunlight.  
I have no word for the river living inside me.  
My nouns and verbs make "water" and "life"  
into ordered but remote geographies.  
I admire your verbs;  
the three hundred-fifty thousand forms of "to go,"  
the prefix *naanaa*, to restore cycles over and over.  
I admire the motion in your nouns.

...

**In your years of teaching, have you seen interest in poetry grow, or change, among young people?**

The poetry slams kind of made it okay to like poetry in a different way. And now, I think rap and the hip-hop movement are making it fine to like poetry. There have always been a few people who are committed to it.

There is one school of thought among poets that this is an elite activity, this isn't something for everybody. But I would probably disagree with that because I think everybody turns on the radio, they try to compose words to people they care about or articulate emotional experiences in some form, and I think that is the seed of poetry.

**What would you like to say about your new DVD collaboration with [Lawrence painter] Paul Hotvedt, *3 Voices*?**

Well, I'm curious to see if the video format works. The paintings are beautiful, so for me it was just like going to the candy store.

**When do you find time for something like this, or the anthology of state poets laureate, or the collection of works from local writers and artists about the Wakarusa Wetlands a few years ago?<sup>8</sup> You've always got some project going.**

My house isn't always clean! And I used to entertain more. I guess I was always doing a lot, with two little kids and my elderly parents, and now that they're gone, that frees up a lot of time.

**You've got time-management skills.**

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<sup>8</sup> *The Wakarusa Wetlands in Word & Image* (Lawrence, Kansas: Committee on Imagination & Place and Lawrence Arts Center, 2005).

I think I have learned to wait for my subconscious to process something before I try to spit it out on paper. Maybe I've become efficient in that way, to go with the subliminal or subconscious tides within me. Then when I do have a moment to sit down, I can access or tap into it because it's something I've been mulling over while I'm doing other stuff.

**[Kansas poet] Steven Hind and I talked about needing to take enough time, get enough distance from the event that was the kernel of a piece of writing, in order to get it right. That time for processing seems very important. I also asked him about what he'd said in another interview, about how he was glad not to have to publish as part of his job, not to have the publish-or-perish pressure.**

That's very true for me also. You can get these kind of standardized, academic writing styles that are almost paint-by-numbers formulas. You want to work for authenticity of voice rather than craft. You can find a lot of clever writing, but what I'm looking for is writing that will sustain me.

### **What projects do you have coming up?**

I've got a collection of literary critical essays about Midwest writing coming from Backwaters Press in Lincoln, Nebraska. I'd like to call it *Natural Theologies*.<sup>9</sup> But one of the things is that I couldn't get it published by a university press. The University of Kansas doesn't publish books on this subject, it doesn't really fit Oklahoma's mission, and I sent it to Nebraska and then heard they don't really publish works about authors who aren't dead.

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<sup>9</sup> *Natural Theologies: Essays about Plains Literature* (Lincoln, Nebraska: The Backwaters Press, 2010).

They didn't tell me this, but I mentioned to a friend that they sent it back to me, and he said, oh, haven't you heard that story about when the University of Nebraska Press sent one of their new young editors to a writers' conference, and she got up and did her presentation on Willa Cather and how much they'd done for Midwestern literature? Then the Midwest authors got up and said, what about us; are you going to do something on us? And she said, oh, we don't publish work about Midwest writers who are living. And she was a young thing, and, of course, they just pilloried her.

**How do we keep continuity of regional literature with that kind of criterion?**

Right! So there's nobody publishing Midwestern literature. Nebraska does Great Plains, mostly dead, but at least they'll do fiction and poetry. Oklahoma University Press will do cowboys and Indians. But lit crit over this region, which is a large region, is pretty much ignored.

**I think back to what you wrote about how we should learn to know the place where we are and use that as a ground for writing, and how an audience might follow.**

I think this whole buy-local grocery movement is taking root in the arts. I had a lovely conversation with a guy who talked about having cultural events where there were potlucks with local food, using pots and plates made by the local ceramicists, so they were eating the food from the earth of their local area and listening to music from there. This is what will save us, this connection to land in a 360-degree way, not just going to the farmers' market today to buy local hamburger, but a way of living, so our molecules eventually change to become, literally, of the same matter as the soil and the water.

**B.H. Fairchild:**

**The Braid of Memory and Experience**

*B.H. "Pete" Fairchild was born in Houston, Texas, and grew up there and in small towns in west Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. He graduated from high school in Liberal, Kansas, and studied at the University of Kansas and the University of Tulsa. Fairchild was professor of English at the University of California-San Bernardino and held the Lorraine Sherley Endowed Professorship at Texas Christian University. His new collection, Usher, was published in 2009. His four previous books of poetry have won numerous national awards, and he also is the author of Such Holy Song, a study of William Blake. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. His book Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest won the National Book Critics Circle Award. He lives in Claremont, California.*

*Pete and I corresponded via email for this interview in spring 2009. During that time, I travelled from Santa Fe back to Lawrence, Kansas, with Kathleen Johnson, editor of New Mexico Poetry Review, where the interview was later published. Kathleen and I stopped in Liberal and visited the high-school library, which is named for Fairchild and for poet William Stafford, who graduated from there in 1932. I finally met Pete in person after his reading at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Missouri, in late April. "What did you think of Liberal?" he asked. "It's probably bigger than you thought."*

**In your 2007 interview for the Lannan Foundation in Santa Fe,<sup>10</sup> you said you had “the habit of wanting to bring high culture into low culture situations.”**

**You have spoken of your father’s admiration for good craftsmanship among the machinists he supervised, and also the influence of intelligent men who worked in the machine shop in Liberal. You have said your father read Hemingway, and in *The Art of the Lathe*,<sup>11</sup> we find the poem “The Machinist, Teaching His Daughter to Play the Piano.”**

**All this points to an appreciation for art, for fine work, among people living everyday lives in small towns. Have you seen this change in your lifetime — and what about a loss of appreciation for poetry among people who don’t make a formal study of it?**

I don’t think an appreciation for art is very far away from an appreciation for fine work, as in lathe work or welding or very precise automotive work or carpentry. Craft is not that far removed from art, and I have objected on several occasions to the stereotype of blue-collar folks as beer-guzzling semi-literates whose only cultural outlets are NASCAR and Thursday night wrestling.

I do think (though it’s only speculation) that over the last sixty years pop culture has increasingly pushed high culture aside in the lives of most people, whether in small towns or cities and regardless of social class. It was not at all unusual in the fifties to find that your doctor or dentist or postman knew a couple of poems by heart or listened to the Texaco opera on Saturdays, and learning to play the piano of course meant learning to play classical music. My father-in-law was a radio operator for the highway patrol and

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<sup>10</sup> As of the date this interview was published in *New Mexico Poetry Review*, a recording of Fairchild’s reading and his interview with poet R.S. (Sam) Gwynn could be heard at <http://www.lannan.org/lf/rc/event/b-h-fairchild/>.

<sup>11</sup> Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 1998.

had a house full of books and an impressive classical record collection that he listened to whenever he got home. Stripped down to his undershirt, cracked open a cold beer, put his feet up, and listened to Mozart.

As for poetry, I think it's written more and read less among the general population.

**I have read of your affection for small towns and your concern about the fact that they are dwindling. You make a point of visiting them, don't you?**

Yes, I do make a habit of visiting small towns, especially the ones that are dying. In fact, that's what I did the day after my reading in Kansas City. I had visited mostly dying towns in western Kansas, and so my friend H.C. Palmer<sup>12</sup> arranged for me to be driven through a few in the northeastern Flint Hills region of Kansas. There's an entire section of *Usher*<sup>13</sup> devoted to these towns and the underlying causes of their decline. It's not just the small rural towns throughout the Plains states that are disappearing, but rather an entire stratum of American culture. The question that keeps haunting me is: What happens to a nation when it loses its agrarian populace?

**And what is the response that haunts you?**

Obviously the implication is that nothing good can happen to a country when that is the case. It certainly undercuts Thomas Jefferson's ideal of a democratic republic heavily populated by independent, land-owning, small farmers burdened with a caretaker's sense of responsibility toward the land.

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<sup>12</sup> A medical doctor, poet, and fiction writer in Lenexa, Kansas.

<sup>13</sup> New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009.

**On our trip back from Santa Fe, Kathleen and I drove past the unincorporated town of Bloom, Kansas, on Highway 54. The sight of the abandoned Bloom School was riveting — intact Art Deco arches, lovely sign out front, roof completely caved in. I saw the school, then I read your poem, “Bloom School,” in *Usher*.**

On my small town tour I saw many scenes similar to the one in “Bloom School.” That whole trip was the most beautiful and yet melancholy I’ve ever experienced. That kind of experience is the basis of the whole section, “The Beauty of Abandoned Towns” in *Usher*. All those little towns, once prosperous, now almost wholly gone. Very typical was Dresden, Kansas, founded by German Catholics in the later nineteenth century. A very prosperous town of five hundred, sixty years ago, with three newspapers, an opera house, a busy downtown where merchants sold to all the farmers living within a radius of probably ten miles, especially on Saturday when they came in to do their “trading.” Now, about 40 mostly elderly folks. An astoundingly beautiful, quite large Catholic church sits two miles away with a couple of million dollars worth of stained glass windows and gorgeous, tall Venetian brick towers with real copper domes. You can see them gleaming in the sun from ten miles away. It served that entire part of the county with probably as many as five or six hundred at High Mass. Now, a small group of folks from Dresden and Leoville maintain it, and they’ve lost their priest. This sort of thing is happening all over the Midwest and probably all over the country to those little rural towns unable to compete with Wal-Mart and located too far from the interstate highways to attract tourist and trucking business. It’s usually acknowledged that when they lose their high schools, like Bloom School, due to school consolidation, it’s all over and ghost town status is not far away.

### **Bloom School**

In 1936 dust storms would clot  
 the mortar of its bricks, but now the wind  
 sweeps clean its crumbling, fluted columns  
 and pollinates a field of bluestem  
 and sunflowers tall as high school kids.  
 Nothing is everywhere: doorless doorways,  
 dirt-filled foundations, and weed-pocked  
 sidewalks leading to a sky that blueed  
 the eyes of bored students stupefied  
 by geometry and Caesar's Latin.

*Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres.*  
 Who cared how Gaul's dead past was divvied up?  
 Every radio in every car in Bloom  
 cried *Now*, and now was an eternity  
 except at graduation when the future  
 was invented by the Baptist minister.  
 The stars that evening fell on main street  
 and sank into our laminated hoods  
 streaked with downtown lights, and heaven  
 once more rolled across our rolling lives.

...<sup>14</sup>

**We also stopped in Liberal to visit the Stafford-Fairchild Library there at the high school. What are your feelings about having your name associated with William Stafford's<sup>15</sup> — and having your high school library named after you?**

I am of course deeply honored to have my name associated with that of William Stafford in any way whatsoever, and so I am extremely proud to have our names together on our high school library. William Stafford was the first real poet I ever met, and that was when he visited my English class at KU many years ago. When they had the dedication of the library, his son, Kim Stafford<sup>16</sup> — a prince of a guy — came out for it, and I loved hearing his stories about his father. I will always be greatly indebted to both the high

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<sup>14</sup> *Usher*, 79-80.

<sup>15</sup> Stafford, in 1970, was named the twentieth Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, the position now known as U.S. Poet Laureate.

<sup>16</sup> Poet, essayist, and author of *Early Morning: Remembering My Father, William Stafford* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2002).

school and town libraries. I just don't know what I would have done during those years without them, especially since we had no bookstore in town.

**I know I'm not the only one who wonders how a place like Liberal, so far removed from the centers of literature, has produced two nationally known poets, both you and Stafford. Coincidence? You've said in a previous interview, apologetically, that what you remember from your high school years was the incredible boredom. Yet, your experiences from that time have provided the material for what some people consider to be among the best modern American poems.**

**Did you have access to helpful people, teachers, and family members who gave you time and space to think? I wonder if very vastness of the area itself had something to do with it. Poetry can come from anywhere, can't it?**

I think Liberal has probably produced more poets than just the two of us. Ashland, Kansas — much smaller than Liberal and not very far away — produced the brilliant and very influential experimental poet, Ronald Johnson. But as for why and how poets come out of southwest Kansas, I just don't know. How does one become a poet anywhere? I have written that I believe there's such a thing as *logophilia*, falling in love with language, which I think happens to all poets, probably during childhood. But that could happen anywhere. Certainly the local culture was against it. Boys in towns like Liberal or Ashland were simply not supposed to grow up to be poets.

I do think that having lots of time to read had something to do with it. Having a teacher such as Evelyn Varah had something to do with it. She taught us Whitman and

E.A. Robinson and Frost, and I will never forget my response to Gogol’s story “The Overcoat,” which she assigned us.

Having two years of Latin translation had something to do with it. Just coming into literature, into a life-within-life drenched with significance, had something to do with the poetry that came later. And I had a lot of time and a lot of space to fill in with my imagination.

As for subject matter, when I got to KU, it seemed clear to me that poetry needed to be about Grecian urns and nightingales and unrequited love, but when I began to read poets such as Stafford and Richard Hugo and James Wright, I realized that the stuff of my life — small towns, oil fields, machine shops — and the stuff of anybody’s life was exactly the right subject for poems.

### **Brazil**

This is for Elton Wayne Showalter, redneck surrealist  
 who, drunk, one Friday night tried to hold up the local 7-Eleven  
 with a caulking gun, and who, when Melinda Bozell boasted  
 that she would never let a boy touch her, “down there,” said,  
 “Down there? You mean, like, Brazil?”

Oh, Elton Wayne,  
 with your silver-toed turquoise-on-black boots and Ford Fairlane  
 dragging, in a ribbon of sparks, its tailpipe down Main Street  
 Saturday nights, you dreamed of Brazil and other verdant lands,  
 but the southern hemisphere remained for all those desert years  
 a vast mirage shimmering on the horizon of what one might call  
 your mind, following that one ugly night at the Snack Shack  
 when, drunk again, you peed on your steaming radiator  
 to cool it down and awoke at the hospital, groin empurpled  
 from electric shock and your pathetic maleness swollen  
 like a bruised tomato. You dumb bastard, betting a week’s wages  
 on the trifecta at Raton, then in ecstasy tossing the winning ticket  
 into the air and watching it float on an ascending breeze  
 with the lightness and supple dip and rise of a Bach passacaglia  
 out over the New Mexico landscape forever and beyond: gone.

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<sup>17</sup> *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 49-50.

**Your poems tell stories. Would you talk about your ideas on storytelling?**

Well, narrative poetry — poetry that tells a story — is the oldest form of poetry, though some people seem to regard that form as strange, and I don't know why. Perhaps they think that all poetry is supposed to be confessional. I think that pure lyric poetry is possible, but I don't think that pure narrative poetry is. Narrative poetry has to be a kind of hybrid form, has to have some sort of lyric depth, it seems to me, and to achieve that in addition to narrative momentum is not easy.

**The Gray Man**

We are cutting weeds and sunflowers on the shoulder,  
 the gray man and I, red dust coiling up around us,  
 muddying our sweat-smearred mugs, clogging our hair,  
 the iron heel of an August Kansas sun pushing down  
 on the scythes we raise against it and swing down  
 in an almost homicidal rage and drunken weariness.  
 And I keep my distance. He's a new hire just off  
 the highway, a hitchhiker sick to death of hunger,  
 the cruelties of the road, and our boss hates  
 poverty just enough to hire it, even this old man,  
 a dead, leaden pall upon his skin so vile it makes you  
 pull away, the gray trousers and state-issue black  
 prison boots, the bloodless, grim, unmoving lips,  
 and the eyes set in concrete, dark hallways that lead  
 to darker rooms down somewhere in the basement  
 of the soul's despair. Two weeks. He hasn't said  
 a word. *He's a goddamned ghost*, I tell my father.

...<sup>18</sup>

**What influenced your style of storytelling — what immersed you in it? Was it watching so many movies as an usher in high school — and reading prose, which you've said influenced your poetry?**

Yes, I'm sure that prose narrative — especially some of Hemingway's stories such as "Big Two-Hearted River," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," "A Way You'll Never Be,"

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<sup>18</sup> *Usher*, 19-20.

and others — influenced me, but probably the first influence was simply the storytelling in my family, in particular among my father and his brothers. Staying up late, sleepy and sort of hypnotized by the sound of their voices, watching the tips of their cigarettes like stars moving through the dark of the porch, I would hang on every word even if I had heard the story ten times before. Anybody who writes a narrative poem is influenced by prose narrative, even though there's a big difference between the two. Oddly enough, just today I was thinking that maybe it's fear of death that makes us tell stories: We don't want the Big Story to end, so we keep telling small stories.

**Many of your poems have a melancholy tone, but some can walk the line between wistfulness and humor; I think of “Delivering Eggs to the Girls’ Dorm.”<sup>19</sup> And some, like “Brazil,” can be hysterically funny. Yet, what I think I can say about your body of work in general that it is the product of a deeply reflective personality. What do you think of the idea of poetry as a kind of mental autobiography?**

Well, poetry — and indeed all imaginative literature — is a little bit biographical, no matter how veiled it may be. A poem in which the person speaking is someone else altogether — the circus performer, Frieda Pushnik, for instance — still has a bit of myself in it.

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<sup>19</sup> *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, 25-26.

**Frieda Pushnik**

These are the faces I love. Adrift with wonder,  
big-eyed as infants and famished for that strangeness  
in the world they haven't known since early childhood,  
they are monsters of innocence who gladly shoulder  
the burden of the blessed, the unbroken, the beautiful,  
the lost. They should be walking on their lovely knees  
like pilgrims to that shrine in Guadalupe, where  
I failed to draw a crowd. I might even be their weird  
little saint, though God knows *I've wanted everything*  
*they've wanted*, and more, of course. ...<sup>20</sup>

**It's interesting how you turn the tables in this poem. Rather than allowing Pushnik to be the object of pity her audiences imagine her to be, you imbue her with a power of awareness that those who come to see her don't have. She has compassion on them.**

Frieda Pushnik was an intelligent, courageous, very admirable person who had to overcome many more (and bigger) obstacles than the rest of us. I think any person who is burdened with that has to acquire a sort of wisdom and insight into human nature that most of us never achieve.

**In his introduction to *The Art of the Lathe*, Anthony Hecht wrote about how your poetry blends very different experiences. He quoted T.S. Eliot: "... in the mind the of poet, these experiences are always forming new wholes."**

**The book's first poem, "Beauty," begins with a day in Florence and seeing Donatello's David, then goes into the experiences with Uncle Ross and the "lovely" table centerpiece, the crude character of Bobby Sudduth, and finally the two men**

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<sup>20</sup> *Usher*, 23-26. The poem's epigraph is an excerpt from Pushnik's *Los Angeles Times* obituary: "'Little Frieda Pushnik, the Armless, Legless Girl Wonder,' who spent years as a touring attraction for Ripley's Believe It or Not and Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey ..."

**who drive through in the black Corvette, ask for work at the machine shop, and turn out to be exhibitionists. There is their nakedness — their beauty? — juxtaposed with the nakedness of the statue. There is the father’s deft handling of a potentially dangerous situation in the machine shop. The poem is all about psychological movement between present and past, between places, between experiences.**

**I think we all braid together our experiences in memory, but it’s another thing to be able to bring this to consciousness and make art with it.**

“Beauty” is about a lot of things other than beauty; in other words, to use your phrase, there are several things “braided together” in that poem. This seems to be something that one progressively learns to do over years of writing poems. The poet is always hungry; he wants to bring more and more into the poem without overloading it, and this is especially true with narrative poems. He wants a single note to resonate with other notes. And also, I think, as he lives his life, he increasingly sees how one thing — the look of trees after a rain, a face seen fleetingly at dusk, the dominoes his grandfather gave him — is connected with many other things in mysterious ways.

### **Beauty**

“... *what are you thinking?* she asks again, and so I begin to tell her about a strange afternoon in Kansas, about something I have never spoken of, and we walk to a window where the shifting light spreads a sheen along the casement, and looking out, we see the city blazing like miles of uncut wheat, the farthest buildings taken in their turn, and the great dome, the way the metal roof of the machine shop, I tell her, would break into flame late on an autumn day, with such beauty.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *The Art of the Lathe*, 11-18.

**Has Blake's poetry influenced your thought and writing?**

I don't think Blake influenced me in any technical way, that is, in any way that has to do with craft. It was rather the way his life was completely given to the life of the imagination, one of the purest examples of that in the history of literature, that so struck me.

**You've talked before about important male influences on your poetry and your attention to craft. I'm wondering about female influences. You mentioned one of your high-school teachers.**

Yes, certainly my high-school English teacher, Evelyn Varah, influenced me. I didn't see my father until he returned from World War II, and during that time my mother taught me to read. My mother in many ways gave me the gift of imaginative literature, and also the spiritual gift of love without reservations. I think all the women in my family — certainly my two grandmothers — had an effect on me, but now we're talking about effect rather than influence, which is different.

**I wonder if you'd say a little more about Evelyn Varah. Again and again, poets tell me about a certain English teacher they had.**

Evelyn Varah was an excellent English teacher who had that sort of genuine bond with literature, a sense of its almost magical powers, that a very good lit teacher ought to have. She also had a deep understanding of the beauty of the English sentence, something that I don't believe is taught much anymore.

**You have spoken of the significance of the composite figure of Roy Eldridge Garcia, how he was developed from three influential or memorable men. What would you say about the character of Maria? Her relationship with the teenage boy in “The Blue Buick”<sup>22</sup> is no small thing.**

One of my first glimpses of the mysterious thing called beauty was the great ballerina Maria Tallchief dancing at a little movie theater in Fairfax, Oklahoma, and she has found her way into three of my poems. I think Maria in “The Blue Buick” is Maria Tallchief when she dances in front of the Buick’s headlights but the rest of the time is pretty much modeled after my wife.

**Your first full-length book of poems was published when you were in your forties. Were there advantages to waiting, rather than publishing a book in your twenties or thirties?**

I thought back then and still believe that well-crafted poetry requires a long apprenticeship. At the end of that apprenticeship, and only then, does one submit poems for publication. For better or worse, that was my attitude when I was in my twenties. But I don’t think there’s any advantage to waiting until you’re forty-two to get a book of poems published. I would have been happy to get a book published in my thirties, but such was not to be.

***Usher* has just been published. What projects are you working on now?**

I’m working on a *Selected and New Poems* and some essays on poetics.

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<sup>22</sup> “The Blue Buick: A Narrative,” *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, 59-86.

**Is there a certain time you set aside for regular writing?**

I would like to be a morning writer, and I've tried to be, but sooner or later I always fall back into writing late at night. It's such a seductive time that it actually seems to have been invented for purposes of writing or reading.

**The Memory Palace**

It is dark but will soon be light. We will place them here, in each room, on each machine, each part your hands touched repeatedly, all those surfaces glossed now with moonlight raining through the slats in the roof.

There is a certain urgency about this, like the undertow at Galveston when you almost drowned. A certain pull.

It is the machine shop, of course, because you saw your father build it and your mother worry over it and both of them quarrel and grieve over it, and you worked there, and it became the air your family breathed, the food they ate. It is all around you and inside you, and for reasons you cannot know, it contains everything you did or felt or thought.

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<sup>23</sup> *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, 115-122.

**Steven Hind:**

**Alone, the Mind Makes Medicine**

*Hind grew up on a farm in the Flint Hills near Madison, Kansas. He taught English at Topeka High School for four years and at Hutchinson Community College for thirty-two years, retiring in 2006. He has published four books of poetry and self-published a collection of essays for his children. Much of his poetry, which is deeply rooted in place, relies on memory and solitary experiences of encounter in rural settings and with the nonhuman world. The following interview came out of a correspondence that took place in fall 2008.*

**I was immediately drawn in by your accounts, both the poetry and the prose, of having found your neighbor, Sam, dead in his house when you were a teenager. In your poem “The Third of September in Sixty-Three,”<sup>24</sup> you write, “I would never get back from that sight.” Clearly this was a profound experience. I wonder if you’d mind sharing how your relationship with Sam and the experience of finding his body influenced your writing.**

Sam had grown up on the Verdigris River farm where he lived and died. He and one of his younger brothers, Fred, were bachelors on the home place through most of my boyhood. They were the only adult men I knew, especially Sam, who were interested in nature for its own sake. He knew a lot about wildlife and was a keen observer.

I knew Sam through the cooperative work of the farms and through quail hunting. I learned from his casual example that knowledge and skill in the woods and fields were

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<sup>24</sup> *The Loose Change of Wonder* (Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 2006) 62-64.

valuable for their own sakes. But I was a dreamy kid, and as “Defended Ground”<sup>25</sup> explains, the discovery of his corpse was another kind of gift, an awakening. I think I appreciated Hemingway’s initiation stories more deeply because I came to them after my own initiation.

As Sam’s example had demonstrated a veering from conformity, his death demonstrated the crippling disguise our rituals around death tend to comprise, or so I believe. I’ve tried to get at the battering at the door of consciousness that confrontation with mortality was for me: the breakthrough without which no life can be fully experienced. At least it provokes a new kind of vigilance about one’s experience, which can motivate self-expression in some cases.

The first in a series of short stories I wrote in an undergraduate fiction class was about that shocking discovery. It was an obvious and less than compelling narrative, I’m sure, but forty years later I got it right, I think. “In Sixty-Three” has been worked and reworked until it’s a lamination that I can scarcely separate. It’s as forcefully expressed as any “truth” within my experience. The fly, the corpse, the atmosphere — those are indelibly seared into memory; the duality of perspective and tone, invented to serve the truth.

### **How did you choose this form for the poem — an internal dialogue?**

The first book I read about poetry was John Ciardi’s *How Does A Poem Mean?* A poem included there by one Henry Reed titled “Naming of Parts” stayed with me. It counterpoints two voices that slide into each other through puns and turns of phrase. That intrigued me. And I was always intrigued by the device of the “innocent” narrator who

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<sup>25</sup> An essay in *Lonely by Nature*. Self-published, 2007. Pages unnumbered.

told you more than he (or she) realized he was telling — Huck Finn, some of the Browning monologues, and so on.

What was always missing from my attempts to treat the subject of “In Sixty-Three” was that subconscious apprehension of the dark knowledge that slammed into the mind even as consciousness repressed the shock of it. Of course, I can say this in hindsight, but in the writing this was intuitive, just the groping along for years trying to find some expression that felt right. So the writing builds comprehension of one’s own life experience. I think of that notion of D.H. Lawrence’s, something like “the tragedy of the common man who doesn’t know what he feels is that he doesn’t feel anything.” Of course he does feel, but without the tongs of expression to grasp and explore feelings, what *does* he have?

Juxtaposing the voice of benign resignation to the voice moving reluctantly toward knowledge, or that voice performing its reluctance in recollection more properly — that seemed the way to express the process of my own troubling apprehension. With luck, the poem verifies something that others have felt too.

**The motif of the fly caught between the door and screen is powerfully effective, not only because the sound of the buzzing fly is so strongly associated with Midwestern farm houses — and with, as you put it in the poem, “creature death” — but because the trapped fly embodies the helplessness of the teenage boy to resist this experience of seeing death and the body’s decay once he comes to the house. The experience has come upon him, and he wants to break free but cannot, even when released from the immediate situation, as the fly is released from the trap when the boy opens the**

**door.**

**This use of the fly seems very carefully and finely crafted and also reminds me of the line in Dickinson's poem: "I heard a fly buzz when I died ... ."**

Of course, you are right on the money, as they say, about the fly as an emblem of the boy's psychological predicament and anxiety. That's useful to the imagination, apprehending the experience in its symbolic dimension. But it was pure, shattering experience for me, at the door and in the initial expression. And I can see that fly in my mind's eye as clearly today as on the morning when I walked up those stone steps to that screen door. In hindsight, of course, I knew what I was going to find, suppressed anxiety raising all my vital signs. And, yes, when I first read Dickinson's fly poem, the hairs stood up on the back of my neck: "And then I could not see to see." Wow!

It was what we called a "blow fly," large with an iridescent turquoise sheen to its body. It was a supremely shocking sight — he was very dead. Of course, if we had let him be — no one would ever live in that house again — he would have been a clean skeleton in a month. Something in me has detested the preservation of corpses ever since. You may have noted my interest in celebrating bones.

I agree with [painter Georgia] O'Keeffe that bones are beautiful objects, although I wouldn't go quite as far as she goes, at least pretended to go, when she said, "It never occurs to me that they have anything to do with death." I was so shocked by the grotesque sight on that ruined mattress that as I rushed out of the house, I thought, "Wait a minute, you don't even know what you saw." The black, bloated corpse on that bed looked in the flash of my glance more like King Kong than a human being. So all I had to do was be true to the event and to the shock to my sensibilities. Then to find a

performance in words that would serve it. “In Sixty-Three” is the result after years of thinking about it.

**The Third of September in Sixty-Three**

...

And

did you open the door?

I remember the insect, the iridescent green fly,  
knocking screen and glass, caught between  
doors, such a small panic.

So you opened the door of his house?

...

I felt the rush of myself through the black hole that  
corpse could not block even as it filled my way. I  
stumbled on my heels and reached back for  
the knob, stumbled from the door and fled  
across the porch boards and down  
the dished stone steps.

You went for help?

I thought of help, drove his green truck down  
the dusty road for home. I would never get back  
from that sight, the fly gone free where  
I was caught in the turning of the fall  
on the third of September that year.

**You mentioned two pieces you had to get right in writing this poem: “being true to the event” and “finding a performance in words that serve it.” And many of your poems, such as “In Sixty-Three,” are based in memory. To be true to an event, or a character, how important is it to simply give oneself time to turn the experience over again and again in one’s mind?**

I think it’s Joy Harjo who says we are “memory made flesh,” something like that. Yes, memory is a central engine of my writing. I suspect that living a kind of exile from the

place of my upbringing provokes an obsessive return to memories, that and the dissolution of a certain kind of community as well.

In *Familiar Ground* is a poem called “Getting Into the Act.”<sup>26</sup> It was one from a whole collection of poems I wrote during the four years teaching at Topeka High before I returned to grad school at the University of Kansas in ’69. I think most were sort of third-rate Robert Frost; well, I had that imprint in my head, never mind that Kansas isn’t New Hampshire. Anyway, I was driving back to the farm after my M.A. orals at KU, and the memory came of snooping in Lily Braucher’s abandoned house a mile from our house. I had gone in through a missing window and found a box of books in an upstairs closet. It was a ghostly experience, alone in that creak and whisper of the house in the wind with that child’s hand traced inside the book cover. In the poem, it became my grandmother’s hand.

So I’m driving, and that poem begins to come as an event, a return. Up the walk, past the doghouse, into the abandoned house. The interior movie memory, so to speak, played in my head, and all I had to do was write. What did [poet William] Stafford say, “I dream my way back to that place”? when I asked him about a poem of his set in Gillette, Wyoming. Mind you, “Getting Into the Act” was B.S. — Before Stafford. I had never heard of him until I came out to Hutchinson, which seems strange now.

The point is that poem pretty much spooled out from the imagined return to that abandoned house, but I substituted my grandmother for Lily. And once, years before, in my grandmother’s house, I had that eerie encounter with the wallpaper that ends the poem, so you see how experiences reassemble themselves in that seizure of recollection. That’s how I suspect a poem is going to pay off: when I come out of — “wake up from,”

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<sup>26</sup> *Familiar Ground* (Lawrence, Kansas: Cottonwood Review Press, University of Kansas, 1980) 25.

in a sense — the initial writing experience to realize I have been out of time, have no idea how much clock time has elapsed.

Well, when I would read that poem aloud, I would find myself explaining that last image, of the missing windows and the weathering of the wallpaper until it tore from the ceiling in long ribbons affixed to the baseboards so that one afternoon I walked into a dance of these long decorative ribbons. But whenever I have to explain a poem, I know something in it isn't working right. Some thirty-six years later that dissatisfaction circles around again and I find "Excursion"<sup>27</sup> showing up in my mind to redress that earlier inadequacy.

So the memory seizes me, but its performance may be compromised, thus the endless fascination with how the language might work more successfully, or at least differently and, one hopes, more effectively. For me it's first of all about plunging into the great dark lake of accumulated experience, but once that seizure is completed, then there is the matter of those technical problems. I wonder if that isn't one reason why most people stop writing: They don't have any interest in the technique, no fascination with the tinkering.

### **Excursion**

Climb through a missing window  
 in a country house and you enter  
 the ghost of another life. Tempered  
 by years of weather, a flowered wallpaper  
 rots in ribbons to the whisper of wind  
 through empty windows. That  
 stove-less chimney, the creak at the top  
 of the stairs, the open trunk with its  
 rummaged junk, a torn tintype of  
 someone's stiff-backed ancestor —  
 the upper room becalmed with emptiness

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<sup>27</sup> *The Loose Change of Wonder*, 58.

as your breath whispers, Yes, yes, I  
know: Loss is forever. I know now.

**You've confirmed my impression that you share William Stafford's sense of exile from the life he knew growing up in Kansas.**

“Exile” is not the word I would choose, on second thought. If I had been monomaniacal about it, I could have found a way to get back there [Madison, Kansas]. I think Stafford’s “Farm on the Great Plains” addresses that, the internalizing of place. I think of Dickinson’s line — something about, to make a prairie takes “one clover and a bee,” even less “if bees are few.”

**You shared a Midwestern sensibility and a love for rural Kansas with Stafford, and there was also your friendship with him. Several of your poems are about him. Clearly he has been an inspiration for your work.**

I guess I’ll follow Bill’s advice and just launch off rather than thinking too long about the question of his influence and my affinity for that steady voice on the page. I’ll take my cue from his poem “A Course in Creative Writing” that begins, “They want a wilderness with a map — / but how about errors that give a new start? — ”<sup>28</sup> I like that dash, signaling the next thing that occurs to him.

I’m drawn to the way he faces truths, some of them not so laudable, without rancor, resentment, or self-righteousness. And that apposition in “Vocation,” about the antithesis of father and mother, she calling “us back to the car: / she was afraid; she always blamed

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<sup>28</sup> William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems* (Graywolf Press: St. Paul, Minnesota, 1998) 195.

the place, / the time, anything my father planned.”<sup>29</sup> I think we recognize that dynamic, although for many it could be gender-reversed, but who else would state it with such neutrality, just recalling “the way it is”?

The synthesis of humility, humor, and clear-eyed perception that seems solidly Midwestern/Kansan, to me — it’s everywhere in the poetry. There are poems that ride the line between wit and sobering assessments, as in “Purifying the Language of the Tribe”<sup>30</sup> or the stunning “Thinking for Berky,” with its “survivors in your beds / ... so far and good.”<sup>31</sup> His sister-in-law told me she remembered that girl, in El Dorado. “He didn’t even change her name,” she said. On and on.

By the way, the “river under First and Main” he refers to in “Prairie Town”<sup>32</sup> is now open with a park around it and a mural on the north-facing wall, with Bill Stafford sitting in the lower right-hand corner: Chalk one up for our side.<sup>33</sup>

I didn’t mean to catalog his work, but I suppose pulling the poems up like ducks in a shooting gallery at least illustrates how deeply I am influenced by him. I think that’s true for a great many people. He answered letters from everyone. He made one feel taken into the embrace of his respect.

The instant recognition of so many of his standards and judgments pulled me into his orbit, of course. His personality seemed closer to his work than that of any other poet I’ve ever met, and a few of them seemed despicable as people.

### **When did you first come into contact with Stafford?**

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 102.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 221.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 80-81.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 83.

<sup>33</sup> The Arkansas River flows through Hutchinson. The mural was designed by Dave Loewenstein of Lawrence, Kansas.

I read your note last night and went back to my journals to try to track down an answer. I didn't find any mention of Stafford up through the early nineties, which surprises me. Especially no mention of him in the summer of 1977, because I was at the Colorado writing conference in Boulder at which he read. I mention Robert Peters, Sidney Goldfarb, Ed Dorn, Bill Matthews, and Clarence Majors — all participants. In part, that may be because I wasn't likely to forget Stafford, nor Ginsberg nor Alan Dugan. I know Bill was out here once earlier, in Dodge City, and I remember driving out to hear him.

I had gotten a little scholarship to Boulder, but it turned out that the award came with strings: I was a sort of houseboy at the sorority house where the gathering was held — a beautiful old house, which the retinue did no favors. One of my duties was to take tickets at the door for the evening readings, so I was keenly aware of the sorts of crowds each poet drew.

Dorn's audience was fairly exotic. The young people didn't seem to know who Alan Dugan was. I chauffeured him about. Well, the point is that everyone came to hear Stafford — the usual poetry crowd, two nuns, sunburned working men in boots, even Alan Ginsberg, who didn't come for anyone else and who read at Naropa, so his crowd went to the mountain rather than his coming to the conference. But he and Peter Orlovsky came to hear Bill Stafford.

I was naïve about drugs and such back then, and it took me some time to figure out the scene, which was pretty wild to a Kansas farm boy. One Canadian approached me on the porch after a reading to say, "I spit on your innocence." I had no idea what he was talking about and had never before been around someone stoned; the next night he sought me out and chatted in what seemed a tone of apology. It was strange.

The more I understood about that scene, the more alienated I felt. But Bill Stafford made me feel better, at home in his words and his voice. And I will presume to say that he made most people feel that. His was by far the largest crowd for a reading. I couldn't tell you specific titles that he read, but I remember his demeanor. That story Kim [Stafford, his son] tells about the flat tire on the road when the motorcycle gang comes roaring by, Bill's posture: All will be well. What's the old hymn? "It Is Well with My Soul." I think he made people feel that, feel the possibility of grace.

I think William Stafford was the father figure we all secretly want: calm, wise, gentle but no pushover, brave in the way of self-knowledge that causes optimism about one's own human possibilities. That's "reckless talk,"<sup>34</sup> I know. I'm groping along here.

### **But you knew his work before you met him?**

As to specific work, I can only speculate that "Traveling through the Dark"<sup>35</sup> must have been the first poem of his that I really drank in. It was widely anthologized, as you know, and for a good many years at Hutchinson Community College we used a text containing it. The interview<sup>36</sup> addresses that, and I was both surprised and instructed by his discussion of the concept of the "specious present."

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**Hind:** I have some students who want to rewrite "Traveling through the Dark" and have

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<sup>34</sup> Hind is quoting a phrase Stafford frequently used to refer to and invite open conversation. Kim Stafford elaborates in his online essay, "Talking Recklessly," <http://www.williamstaffordarchives.org/>.

<sup>35</sup> *The Way It Is*, 77. Arguably Stafford's most famous poem.

<sup>36</sup> An edited version of Hind's February 6, 1984, interview with Stafford in Hutchinson was published later than year: "An Interview with William Stafford," *Cottonwood Review* 34, Fall 1984, 25-29. It does not include the excerpt on the subject of the specious present, which appears in the manuscript Hind provided for my interview with him.

the man take some action to save the unborn fawn. What would you say to them?

**Stafford:** One thing is that the assumption that something can be done in extreme circumstances like that is the assumption that neglects the difference between real time and effective time. That is, ... well, you know the idea of the “specious present”? This is the idea that something is going on to the point at which nothing is going to change it, and you feel, it hasn’t happened yet, therefore, there’s something that can be done, but in effect it’s already happened. And the example I heard someone say is, you’re standing on board the Queen Mary. It’s going full speed. About fifty yards from the dock the captain turns to you and says, “You take over.” [Laughter.]

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I guess I fluttered past his quiet utterances until I began teaching them. I suspect I always taught myself more than I taught anyone else. So, truth be told, I probably didn’t connect right away. I think I had to grow into Stafford’s poetry and his point of view.

I hated the Vietnam war, thought it a fool’s errand from the get-go, but I had no tradition from which to resist the draft and was called up for induction even though I was married and teaching in Topeka. I rode up to Kansas City on the army bus with former students! The only reason I wasn’t drafted was because I had a bone spur in my knee, which disqualified me.

Out here [Hutchinson], the first of my brilliant Mennonite students gave a speech — I had a double major in college and taught speech for a few years out here — on

conscientious objectors. I soon found *Down in My Heart*,<sup>37</sup> which pulled me into Bill's orbit at once. And I read some of Gerald Heard at Stafford's mention of him, of going to Heard's California ranch to talk about war resistance, etc. I suspect that Bill's courage of conviction was as attractive as his poetry, although they are of a single cloth.

Well, I looked back at the few letters I received from him. I didn't write often because I had the half-conscious sense of intruding, of burdening an important man — how Kansan is that! His letter of January 1978 mentions the Boulder encounter in his thank-you for our hosting him here that winter. A letter in 1983 offers me his editor's name since I had mentioned writing a novel but having no sense of what to do with it.

I see that on Kansas Day, 1988, I included "Religion Back Home" in a presentation to a women's group out here. From then on, I don't think I ever gave any sort of talk or presentation where I didn't include work by William Stafford. And *Writing the Australian Crawl* is among the most liberating books on writing I've ever read. In person, in his advice and counsel on writing, and in the spare, modest, and often witty brilliance of his work — Stafford raised the Plains voice, let us say, to a level of authentic expression that places him among the best of American voices. Or so I believe.

### **And when he died?**

When I received word from one of his nieces of his death that night, I was devastated. I couldn't even pass the news along. I jumped in the car and drove north into the night on the impulse to talk to [poet] Harley Elliott in Salina. After ten miles or so, I thought better of the impulse and turned back for home. I couldn't even participate in the memorial program I arranged here because I had never felt such grief at the death of another human

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<sup>37</sup> Stafford's master's thesis at the University of Kansas, later published.

being except my grandmother. Eventually, I could reach some sort of detachment, and then I was surprised at myself. I had not known the depth of emotional attachment I felt for the man. I don't know if others as remote from the actual man as I felt that way. He conjured an intimacy and a presence on the page the likes of which I have never felt for another poet. And his person seemed the perfect fit for that voice. Certainly part of that results from a commonality of experience — an oddity given the difference in our ages.

**Going back to “Excursion” as an example, your poems might or might not be called Midwestern, but they are distinctly rural in their subject matter. I remember reading Dana Gioia’s essay “The Anonymity of the Regional Poet,”<sup>38</sup> about Ted Kooser’s poetry, most of which is also about rural subjects. That essay seemed to me a kind of backhanded compliment. It most definitely categorized Kooser and used the term “Midwesterner” in the very first paragraph. I wonder what you make of the idea of the regional poet. Is that label fair? Is it a liability? A gift?**

In general, I don't think the attitude about the Midwest can be shaken. I don't know how Kooser feels about the idea that he is a regional poet, but it doesn't bother me. I loved New York City for its art, architecture and theater, but I couldn't live in that sort of human congestion. It's what you are used to, I suppose, or what you determine to become used to. And I don't have that instantaneous recognition of a Kooser or Stafford poem as being like most of the cosmopolitan, let us say, poetry — much of what is run in *The New Yorker*, a magazine I anticipate like a kid on Christmas morning. But I've talked here before about the eccentricity of the anachronisms of my rural life experience, so none of

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<sup>38</sup> *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2002) 83-99.

this will be surprising.

But aren't most of us caught in the chains of a provincialism? I think of [poet] Patricia Traxler telling me about the warning she received from her California friends when she was contemplating the move to Salina, Kansas. Among the horrors that would be visited upon her would be the schools; her kids would be so far ahead of the Kansas curricula that they would be bored and stifled. To the contrary, she found that they were behind in Salina!

I suppose our natural Midwestern self-effacement is to blame, in part. Stafford's "Our Kind" comes to mind. I knew at once what he was talking about as my grandmother, a wonderful cook, could never accept a compliment — oh, the rolls didn't rise properly, etc. I hear myself doing the same thing sometimes. It's kind of funny and silly, but it's us.

**I get a strong sense of privacy from the subject matter of your poems: solitary experiences in nature, watching coyotes, the man at the campfire. You said in an interview a couple of years ago that teaching at a university, with the pressure to publish, did not suit you. Instead, there seems to be a personal imperative that certain life experiences be explored in your writing. It's as if, for you, the practice of poetry is driven by something that is almost the opposite of ambition.**

I like that: "the opposite of ambition." I suppose I have, or had, as much ambition as anyone, but it was never of much help in writing poetry. That arises from a different plane of need. When I haven't written anything that works for a while, I feel a vague anxiety. I suspect this need is akin to meditation or prayer — that projection out of

self which installs refreshment upon return.

There is that notion of writing where you are, how you are. It's not a matter of ego but of possession. I heard Truman Capote say once that when he considered a subject, he asked himself if he could think of anyone else to whom that subject more properly belonged. If he couldn't, then it was his. For better and for worse, I'm no Capote, but I do have that sense of territorial imperative, that I've experienced things that no one else could capture. Misguided or not, I do have that conviction about the better poems I've found myself writing. Of course, I've started many poems that went nowhere but into the discovery that here was another expression of the predictable, subjects I had seen others dealing with, some much more skillfully than I ever could. That's somewhere near the range of that state of mind, at least.

As to the privacy issue, I have said before that I spent a lot of time alone as a kid. My brother is four years older than I, so when he went off to school I was really alone. As soon as I was old enough to be trusted off the farmstead, I walked to the river, a long shallow riffle where it would have been impossible to drown; that was a permissible license. The silence of solitude meant that I made these happy accidents of discovery; soon I could court such glimpses into the worlds of other creatures. And so on. I still crave that, and even out here, walking through a shelterbelt that a developer had the presence of mind to spare and put a sidewalk through behind his rows of houses — even that is a sip of the kind of adventure I knew and still crave. Even there I will see birds, squirrels, and rabbits in unexpected contexts and behaviors. The same can be said for the power company right-of-way with its access road and rarely mowed grass along a deep drainage ditch. Who else knows a sizable snapping turtle lives in a pool at a culvert's

mouth? Day before yesterday I wondered how many others noticed the vultures convening high above Hutchinson — about fifty of them wheeling in the sky, calisthenics for the fall migration to come, I speculate.

That is a temporary fix, however, and occasionally I have to get back to the home ground and disappear into the woods and hills for a few hours. It's a renewal that regenerates a kind of equilibrium I don't quite know is threatened until its recovery.

So that addiction to the old places and my old habit is inescapable, and I like leaving no evidence of my passing even as I come home to scrawl out, "Kilroy was here," as Faulkner said all writing was. Maybe poems are the only way to come at these things truly. A couple I've been working on come to mind.<sup>39</sup> As to that uneasy line between parallel worlds, maybe you've seen the kind of thing I describe at the rest stops in "Interstate."

### **Interstate**

Ten trucks chatter their diesel-ease as they  
quilt the road's vibrations into their monotony  
for the sleepers deep in the last rest of sunrise.  
A banner of sunflowers borders the roadway,  
and a hawk dips close to the sizzle of tires,  
stalking the air with no sense of his peril, while  
a mouse cowers in a tangle of shadows, one  
of them winged, one of them traced as a hush  
through the air. — A driver unlatches his sleeper  
door and climbs down to pavement, testing his legs.  
He turns to the toilets, walking between rivers  
of tire whine as the hawk stalks the sunflowers  
and the diesels idle in the dawn's early light.

And this sense of entrapment in a lost world ...

### **Recollections**

Near the end, the mind is  
like a dusty album in a dark

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<sup>39</sup> Neither "Interstate" nor "Recollections," which Hind sent me, has been published.

chamber: Pictures re-imagine  
 their subjects, flashed past  
 the aperture of recollection —  
 surfaces, their colors, the mute  
 secret signs of what had its  
 passing. And behind those lost  
 places, the ghost that clicks  
 the shutter that caught the light.

**Did you have regular writing habits through all those years of teaching college?**

**Perhaps they've changed over time.**

I'm not sure I've ever had "writing habits." I was so harried by teaching habits — four and five composition classes semester after semester; marathon reading I used to call it — that writing often lurked around the edges. In fact, I would begin thinking that I hadn't written much for months, then I would take a look back and be surprised to discover quite a number of poems in various states of development. The poems just sort of happened, I guess. Anyone who can be surprised by his own output is probably not trustworthy on his writing habits. Now, of course, I can come down here most mornings and have a go at whatever comes to hand and mind, but it's late in the game for me.

**How do the poems come?**

I've spoken at length in another interview about opening phrases taking me by surprise when out walking or working in the country. I would jot them down and follow the trail when I got back home to the desk. I suppose that's one characteristic that makes a minor poet, fitful production that comes from unreliable inspirations. I never know what will spark a poem — a phrase in a letter, reading about the Hutchinson fathers going to Medicine Lodge on a buffalo shoot in 1872, which resulted in a counterpoint poem in

*Familiar Ground.*<sup>40</sup>

I think of a Gulf Coast painter named Walter Anderson. He would row out to Horn Island in a skiff and stay there for days and days, drawing and painting. Once he wrote in his notebook: “The first poetry is written by farmers and sailors who sing with the wind in their teeth. The second poetry is written by students and scholars and wine drinkers who’ve come to know a good thing. The third poetry is sometimes never written, but when it is, it is written by those who have brought art and nature into one thing.”

The pursuit of that third poetry is what interests me. I can’t contrive subjects for those efforts; the world has to show me a certain slant of light. Seclusion is useful in that regard, as this phrase of Dickinson’s causes me to remember. Seclusion, privacy, then the voices come. I guess that last poem in *Loose Change*<sup>41</sup> tries to come at this. By the way, that “red blanket” alludes to Black Elk’s use of color words: “the black road of worldly difficulties” and “the good red road of spiritual understanding.” What beautiful phrases!

**A Private Tribe**

Alone, the mind makes medicine as birds  
begin to sing and the breeze brightens  
with sunlight, clouds passing away. Alone,  
my heart softens its grip on the moment  
by moment ordeal of pressing the blood  
from chamber to chamber, a dark passage  
thumping along the tributaries.

Drums welcome me back to the feast  
and the songs as the distance shields my tribe  
from those tidy battalions of the buckles and flags,  
their disciplines of line and command. Wrapped  
in a red blanket by the fire, I listen in solitude  
where the old mentors hold council, as they did  
when I first heard their voices.

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<sup>40</sup> “Medicine Lodge,” 6.

<sup>41</sup> “A Private Tribe,” 107.

### **How about revision?**

Nothing about my processes of revision would be unusual — just writing and re-writing as one alteration after another flowers into something that seems its own expression in its own voice.

I do have a capacity to be walking along, as I was yesterday, and suddenly have something I've written strike with startling clarity. Later, when I was working on a longer piece that I could never have predicted coming along, I thought of something I read about Eskimo hunters. Setting off on a hunt they were likely to say, "Probably won't get anything today," or words to that effect. You know, that mindset that it brings the worst kind of luck to presume success — the next seal or the next poem. I guess I embrace that stance. Don't tempt fate to show you how fickle the bestowing of life's gifts can be.

**You've written in one of your notes to me that your book *In a Place With No Map*<sup>42</sup> gives "a fuller picture of my preoccupations." This is actually one of the things I enjoy most in reading a collection from a single poet — getting a sense of the experiences that stay with that person. One of my professors, Michael Johnson, advises us to pay attention to experiences that haunt us. What do you think of the idea that a poet's body of work is a kind of mental autobiography?**

I agree emphatically that the experiences that haunt are the ones to write about. And nothing else in my life haunted me the way that confrontation with death did out there on a lonely Verdigris farm. By the way, I took a class in contemporary literature with

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<sup>42</sup> Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Memorial Press, Washburn University, 1997.

Michael Johnson one summer way back in the late seventies. What a helpful intelligence.

As to the autobiography of poetry, yes and no. Art transforms whatever it touches, takes up. Why? Well, there is the fascination with the medium, of course, just to discover what you can get the language to do. But for me, at least, there was always a certain sense of disconnection, that the surface apprehensions of experience aren't quite accommodating the feelings those encounters engendered. This is hard to come at. Wandering about in those abandoned houses — just saying that doesn't access the profound feeling of loss, and, yes, a detached nostalgia for the life I could never know that had passed there, yet hovered so close, through the familiar and the familial, as to laminate my own experience with a kind of power and perspective. "Plywood consciousness," maybe, ludicrous as that conceit looks. For me, the poetry is a way to sequester loss so that it complements and enriches the present, and it adds ballast to keep the boat upright and moving on the breath of continuance.

**Nedra Rogers:**  
**Writing the World Within**

*Rogers, who lives in Lawrence, was raised in Bison, Kansas, in Rush County, northwest of Great Bend. She is a fourth-generation Kansan. As a young woman in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she lived in New York City and traveled in the eastern United States and Northern California. She returned to Kansas in the mid-1970s and has worked as an educator in Kansas public schools for many years. In spring 2008, she received the Governor's Arts Award for Emerging Artists and completed a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing at the University of Kansas. Her first collection of poetry, Soul's Night Out, was published in fall 2009 by Woodley Press, Topeka, Kansas. Our interview took place one night in late fall 2008 while Rogers was babysitting her grandsons at her daughter Maria's house in North Lawrence.*

**How did the practice of writing poetry start for you?**

I got interested in poetry in high school when I first read Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay. I felt I understood what they were expressing, and their work moved me deeply. I was inspired and began writing a little then. I didn't write during my early twenties. I was busy traveling the country with a backpack and taking care of my sons born during that time. I went back to school in the seventies at Emporia State University and began writing again. My writing was interrupted by remarriage, the birth of two daughters, and work as an educator. I was very busy. About twelve years ago, I started writing again, and I've kept at it pretty steadily since then.

**The poems in *Soul's Night Out* take the reader around Kansas, to California, down the Mexican coast, and into Central America. There also are references to Washington, D.C., Colorado, and parts of Africa. The traveler's spirit is strong in this collection, but so is the Kansas part.**

When I was young, I just wanted to travel, and I still love to go to Mexico. Back then, there were no such words as “hippie” or “flower child.” I first went to Hays [Fort Hays State University] for a year; I think I was the first hippie there. A girlfriend and I — she was a go-go dancer, and I played guitar — we were going to go to Harvard Square in Boston, but we got as far as New York, and we were living in the village. I met Mike, my first husband, a racehorse trainer, and we traveled all around the East Coast on the racehorse circuit. I convinced him to go to California. We camped, we hitchhiked, we picked up hitchhikers; that's what the life was like then. What kind of broke me of traveling was having babies. I got tired of that scene. And maybe becoming a Christian later made me more conservative, more responsible in some ways, wanting to provide for my family.

I have had a long enough life that it gets so complicated. From California, I took the kids back to Kansas and worked as a nurse's aid, and I felt led to go back to college and become a teacher. First I was at Cloud County Community College in Concordia. I became editor of their school paper, and I was writing essays that were along the Irma Bombeck style that was popular back then — about daily life, sort of humorous, down-to-earth. From there, I went to Emporia State; that's when I took some poetry classes and became interested in writing again.

### Dos Pesos

At the edge of an ocean, I am riding a white horse.  
 I would not believe this, but to be so warm,  
 a horse must be real, which leads me to believe  
 that anything might be possible  
 in Playa lo de Marco. That dark-eyed Diego  
 leaning there against the palm is whispering,  
*How beautiful is the gringa on the white horse,*  
 and Pablo in the fishing boat drops his net  
 and turns his brown shoulders away from the sea.

When my hour is up, when my horse gallops off  
 with another, I don't care. The bare feet of Alejandro  
 are approaching in the sand. I drift above the ocean  
 on the white clouds of his song — above the palapas  
 and the little wet dogs, above the bright umbrellas.  
 How sweet are words half understood.  
 Something about a small bird. Something about  
 a mountain. Something about his heart.

I think I'll let Fernando weave my hair forever,  
 let Simon squeeze lima on my marlin-on-a-stick.  
 Berto can serve me piña scooped out and filled  
 again with papaya and mango, and why not  
 try *all* the cervezas: Corona, Dos Equis, Pacifico?  
 Why not become more beautiful  
 with every swallow, so when I stand

in line outside the public restroom, I realize  
 that of the dozen gringas in their dozen  
 pairs of flip flops, my feet are the most beautiful.  
 Even Eduardo, vendedor of toilet paper,  
 who sets up shop outside the restroom door,  
 notices and beckons. *Un peso,*  
 he whispers, *un peso for the regular.*  
*Dos pesos for the soft and scented.*

(*Soul's Night Out*, 16)

### Anyone in particular who encouraged you?

[Professor] Keith Denniston. Everybody from Emporia will remember him. There was a group of poets who met, and we turned out a literary magazine, *Quivira*. Keith really pushed me to become a part of the writing community. He was very accepting and friendly and could make anyone feel welcome in his presence. He invited students to his home on a weekly basis. His wife, Concie, an artist, was an exceptional hostess and

didn't seem to mind the constant coming and going. There was always food, wine, and laughter. The Dennistons had a secluded, beautifully landscaped area in their backyard — great for wandering around.

Keith organized a touring group of poets and musicians. They traveled to neighboring towns like Topeka and Kansas City. He managed to talk me into going on one of the tours to The Writer's Place in Kansas City, which was difficult because I was very shy and a little frightened to be around people I didn't know well. Also, my three sons were then six, eight, and ten, and I didn't have a baby sitter. I just always stayed home with the boys in the evenings. You could almost say Keith bullied me into making the trip, because I was dead-set against it. At The Writer's Place, I read a poem I had written and played guitar to accompany my reading. Then I played and sang a few folk songs. I did get a positive, encouraging response from the audience, and I was glad I had gone. Keith tried to get me to go on more tours, but I just didn't want to leave the boys, as road trips were usually overnights.

When I did attend the Quivira Literary Club, I brought the boys with me, and Keith always welcomed them. If it hadn't been for the literary club, my daughter Maria would never have been conceived. Her father was a writer in the group. So I guess Maria has Keith to thank for her very existence.

Keith organized a production company of sorts, drawing students from both the ESU theatre and writing groups. We produced a series called "Joseph Hartman, Joseph Hartman," a quirky spoof on "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," a controversial TV series from the seventies. I wrote one of the screenplays and played a bartender in the show. I remember we actors danced disco to "Staying Alive" at the end of the show. It was

tremendous fun for me. Again, Keith really had to push me to write the script and participate in the show. And again, I was glad he talked me into it.

**Do you feel a sense of being part of the community of Kansas writers today, or is writing more of a private pursuit for you now?**

It has been private, but what's made me feel more like a Kansas poet is getting local and state awards.<sup>43</sup> When I got the Langston Hughes Award, people in the community were congratulating me all the time, people I didn't even know. Having been recognized like that gives me a feeling of responsibility and desire to be more a part of a community.

I really admire folks who are an important part of the community of Kansas writers and are dedicated to the promotion of poetry and the encouragement of poets. I have been the student of fine Kansas poets — besides Keith Denniston, there's been Jonathan Holden, Denise Low, Michael Johnson, Kenneth Irby, Brian Daldorph, Gary Lechliter. And there are talented Lawrence poets, friends and fellow students at KU who inspire me — Sandy Mitchell, Kevin Rabas, Kathleen Johnson, and Sam Bell. The MFA program enabled me to get a lot of feedback on my work. It also gave me deadlines, which I seem to need.

I'm somewhat of an introvert, and I don't attend readings as often as I mean to. I had begun to go more regularly and was beginning to feel a part of the community of poets when I began helping to care for my mother, who had cancer the winter of 2006 and 2007. The following summer, I suddenly lost both her and my partner of five years. Since then, I've found it difficult to attend readings. I have attempted a few, and I

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<sup>43</sup> Rogers has won two Kansas Arts Commission awards, the Langston Hughes Award from the Lawrence Arts Center and The Raven Bookstore in Lawrence, and Salina's New Voice Award.

have sometimes had to slip out the back door in tears. I am still isolated in grief, but I am beginning to come out of that now.

Winning the Governor's Arts Award was extremely encouraging at a time I really needed encouragement. After my losses, I had written very little, and it was becoming hard to believe in myself. I am thankful for the Kansas Arts Commission. They really do encourage Kansas artists. Getting a little monetary reward now and again is nice, too. The recognition is humbling, and I appreciate the support I'm given by Kansas poets. I hope to be among them again soon.

**The section "Grief" forms a full third of *Soul's Night Out*. Those losses brought forth a lot of literary work in a short period of time.**

A few I wrote before Mom and Joe died. Obviously, a lot of those poems are about losing Joe and about grief in general. One was "Last Holiday," and that was written at a time Joe was very ill a few years ago, but I had no idea he would die so soon. I guess I did think at that time that he might not live, he was so sick, but he had an operation and got well.

I was in the MFA program for three years, and half that time was spent taking care of my mom with cancer. Then I lost them both, and the last year, it was about just getting through. But poetry actually brought Joe and me together. I had been emailing the poet Steven Dunn. I told him I liked his work, and he said he was coming to Salina to read and invited me. I met Joe that night. He worked for Public Access TV and was filming the event, and we shared a table. We were both smitten immediately.

### **Last Holiday**

No sun today. No funny  
paper, no slow Sunday conversation  
over coffee, just you turning  
in your sleep, thin shoulders,  
damp sheet, and me beside you  
memorizing Easter Sunday.

In the thorn trees, robins  
join the choir of Southern Baptists  
down the street. Halleluiah,  
the liquor stores are closed.  
Southern Comfort is locked away  
on Easter Sunday.

The Resurrection Pageant  
has been canceled due to threat  
of rain. No Roman guards,  
no Mary's vigil in the park today.  
No tomb, no earthquake,  
no stone rolled away.

Just you thrashing, me bringing ice,  
you cursing life and asking why  
I bother. Who can explain how grace  
embraces witnesses of suffering —  
why breath as foul as this  
is all the more priceless? (57)

### **Eucharist**

She understood that plenty becomes  
famine, that coming is only the beginning  
of going, so she made her heart a granary,  
gathering moments and storing them  
as though they were barley or rye.

She harvested everything: the vigor  
of his step, the tilt of his head, the way  
his eyes began to smile before his lips.  
At dusk she gleaned the rest: every hollow  
of his back, the bold hand, the firm thigh.

And when he was away at sea —  
not really at sea, for he'd never even  
reached the coast — she had her granary,  
and though the season's yield was stolen,  
she had grain for the bread she would bless  
and break, and eat in remembrance. (72)

**The poems in the first section of *Soul's Night Out*, "Not Me," have a strong element of mercy and compassion. The individual poems vary quite a lot in tone, but as a set, they acknowledge the suffering and the struggling: female soldiers, refugees of Sudan, African slaves of the American colonial era, vendors of Tijuana, the poor who work at whatever they can to make a living on the Mexican coast. In this section, are you asking readers not to turn a blind eye to the others' suffering? This message comes most directly in "Waking to Sirens" (18), from which the section's name comes.**

I have not consciously tried to send any messages in my poetry. I am just expressing how I feel about the world I see. I have learned that many people feel the same way I do when they witness poverty or suffering. People have made comments like, "Oh, that's just the way I feel when I see those men holding signs by the road in 100 degree heat."

I think we humans don't normally turn a blind eye to the suffering of others. We do see it for what it is. We acknowledge it generally, in our minds and hearts too, but perhaps we don't do as much about it as we believe we should — at least that's true in my case. I guess you could say I carry some guilt.

As you said, the message in "Waking to Sirens," carries the section's name, which is "Not Me." I have often wondered, why not me? Why not us as Americans? Many of the very poor of the world live in garbage dumps. I wonder how we — myself included — can keep living our normal lives and not do anything about the poverty of others. I believe as a nation and as individuals, with some exceptions, of course, we do have the means but not the will.

### Day Before Yesterday

Dwayne is on suicide watch, not interested in algebra just now, so I'm working hard at making things make sense. We've struggled through his daily question, *What's the point?* And now we're calculating area. He understands the formula — length times width — but when we reach Volume of Rectangular Solids, we hit a wall. He doesn't understand cubic dimension or how numbers can have power. When I try to explain, Dwayne throws up his hands and asks, *What you talkin' 'bout, power?* Truth is, I don't know what I'm talking about. I just have the Teacher's Edition.

... (6)

**In “Fundraiser at Redemption Baptist” (9), a poem in which people are acting to help others, there are strong contrasts between what the women and men do. Could you talk about the ideas behind this poem?**

It came out of an actual experience I had as a member of Chautauqua Baptist Church in Chautauqua, Kansas. I did change the name of the church, but the facts are pretty accurate. I was in a women's group that cooked a supper to raise money for our sisters — we called them our sisters — serving in the first Gulf War. We women were pretty amazed that females were serving in combat. Before that time, women had not been allowed in combat. I think we felt a certain sense of wonder and perhaps empowerment. We discussed what we would purchase, and we were making suggestions like shampoo, etc., and our spokeswoman said, “What they really want are tampons.” That kind of blew me away. I never forgot it.

I think we were all more or less putting ourselves in their places and wondering what it would be like to be in a foxhole and start our periods. There was really a sense of gender, and it was heightened by the entrance of men, who came in off the Chautauqua County farms with their muddy boots to eat our soup. I felt like we had a big secret —

that we knew something they didn't. Yet, they were the ones who did all the discussing of the end times and such, and they were the ones who went upstairs for prayer while we stayed in the basement to clean. And clean we did that evening. We cleaned our hearts out. It was a time of female bonding.

**Do your roots in rural Kansas influence your way your way of presenting experiences through writing?**

Well, I feel strongly that being a fourth-generation Kansan has helped make me who I am. My father grew up working very hard in the fields. His family still plowed with horses when he was young. The four boys really did work from sunup to sundown. They were allowed thirty minutes a day for lunch, and my father said they used that time to grab their fishing poles and run to the creek. My father pushed a hand plow to prepare the earth for our gardens. Those gardens were planted in perfect rows and were perfectly weeded. I never knew Dad to use a rototiller.

We kids learned to fish early, and that was a favorite pastime of ours. In the summer or on weekends, we'd often head for Walnut Creek or Sand Creek with cane poles and a can of worms. We had the run of the entire earth as we knew it and went anywhere we wanted. We took off across the field behind our house sometimes pretending to be cowboy and cowgirls exploring the prairie. We crossed barbed-wire fences and played hide-and-seek in wheat fields or cornfields. I suppose it didn't do the crops much good, but none of farmers said anything that I know of. We never got in trouble. There was so much time and so much freedom of movement.

I am perhaps more Midwestern than some because of the time and particular place I

grew up — on the plains. There were no hills; there were very few trees. Creek beds dried up every summer. Occasionally, there were dust storms. My brother and sisters and I tramped through dust on the mile roads on our way to our adventure land.

How does this affect my writing? Well, the plains are a part of me. Bison was not like Lawrence. Lawrence has hills and many trees and more rain. Our sky was bigger where I grew up than it is here. And it was brighter blue. When I go back to that area I do feel a strong attraction for the vastness of it and for the sky. The physicality of the land is different.

I feel slower, in a way, than I suspect the rest of the nation feels. People — other than the hot-rodding teens — drove through our town very slowly. My father always drove slowly. He liked to look over the fields for pheasants, or to see how high Walnut Creek was, or if the wheat was getting ripe. There was no rushing around. Families had one car, and we walked a lot. We often walked to our 4-H meetings, which were held in an old one-room schoolhouse a couple of miles from town.

When it comes to writing, I am very, very slow. I take forever to write a poem. Like my father who wanted his garden rows just right, I like to have my lines just right, and I keep up with the word weeding way beyond what is reasonable.

**Do you have regular writing habits? I know you frequent coffee shops.**

Yes, I write best in the morning at a coffee shop, especially if it is sunny — at a sunny window, sipping cup after cup of coffee. Depression shows up thematically in my poetry because I do experience melancholy from time to time — especially in winter.

I have to be in a slightly altered state of mind to write the kind of poetry I want to

write. I can usually access that place by reading poetry that inspires me. I like to discover writers I'm unfamiliar with, so I often grab a new anthology — I'm reading *Poetry 180* now — or a literary journal like *Poetry*. Any day that I'm writing, I'm also reading poetry. I read until I tap into the source, and then I put my book down and write. Sun helps a lot! Often, if it's not sunny, creativity eludes me, and it's just no use trying.

### **What subjects are inspiring you these days?**

Lately I've discovered the poet Christopher Howell, whose work I like very much. He lost his 20-year-old daughter in 2001, and his book, *Light's Ladder*, contains many moving poems of loss that have a directness and simplicity. I find poems of loss quite comforting these days. Grief is difficult to express in ordinary ways.

I also like the poems of Jane Hirshfield and Mary Oliver, who lost her partner a few years ago. I am enjoying Billy Collins' new book, *Ballistics*. I admire his insightfulness and his ability to get readers to laugh with him at the human condition.

Of course I'm inspired by the subject of grandchildren. My eighth grandchild was born two weeks ago, and I just learned number nine is on the way. The oldest of these babies is four. My grandchildren bring me immense joy.

### **Why write poetry?**

Well, it doesn't cost money to collect leaves or to write. I wonder sometimes if I write partly because I am rather an introvert, and I really do want to communicate. I also like to really think about what it is I believe and want to say. When I am in a conversation, I can't think quickly enough to say what I mean. I'm always behind.

I take great joy in the poetic expression of others, and I want to be a part of that conversation. I want to take time to look beyond the obvious, to explore my inner self and the world within the world.

### **Far From an Ocean**

I'd like to go back to Jewell County one of these days  
to see if it's still there — that limestone post  
on Highway 36 marking the point midway between  
New York and San Francisco.

We were as far from an ocean  
as anyone might be, but I could hear the sea  
in my mother's songs of ships and harbors  
with exotic names — Shanghai, Barcelona.

...

I might drive back, just to look around. I always thought  
that highway marker was a tease — enough to make  
a person want to hop a train, living *midway between* —  
so far from any golden gate, from cities songs were written for. (40)

**Amy Fleury:**

**The Landscape of Possibility**

*Fleury grew up in rural northeast Kansas. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature from Kansas State University, then a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. She was an English professor at Washburn University in Topeka for ten years before moving to back to Louisiana in 2008 to become the poet in the MFA program at McNeese. Her first collection of poetry, Beautiful Trouble, was published in 2004 and won the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award. In fall 2009, she was the Amy Clampitt Poet in Residence in Lenox, Massachusetts.*

*For this interview, we met at a coffee shop in downtown Lawrence one morning in early January, while Fleury was back in Kansas during the university's winter break.*

**You have talked with me before about a friend's place in the Flint Hills where you go and write. Would you talk about the influence of that place, what it's done for your work?**

That's the home of my friend Margy Stewart, a colleague in the English department at Washburn. She and her husband, Ron, purchased this property and have designated it as a preserve. It's called "Bird Runner" — they're big birders — and their plan is to give the land to The Nature Conservancy when they pass on. It's a part of that large area of unplowed ground.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> There are two major areas of protected land in the Flint Hills: the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, nearly 11,000 acres, much of it privately owned, held in partnership with the Nature Conservancy, the National Park Service, and the Kansas Park Trust; and the

One of the things I love about the Flint Hills and the Konza is that you can really get a sense of scale and scope because it is unbroken by farm ground and minimally by other human structures like roads. So you can be in a place where you can look for miles and see the prairie the way people saw it a hundred, two hundred years ago. There is something about the prairie landscape, for me, that is so inspiring and evocative. It's a landscape I've internalized.

**It feels holy to me.**

Absolutely, to me too. For me, it's ... I don't want to say prototypical ... it's the essential landscape — that's it — and everything else seems like a variation of it. I've used this as a metaphor in my writing a couple of times. I feel like the possibility of the landscape, the space, is similar to the way I feel about the possibility of the page. The land and language, for me, in that way, are very interconnected.

In the prairie, you just feel like a creature in existence. All the concerns of contemporary daily life fall away, and you're a creature in the world, not a taxpayer or a worker, whatever. You're an animal, breathing and taking in the natural world. I love those sorts of spaces.

**That reminds me of something you said in a 2006 interview.<sup>45</sup> Several of the poets I've spoken with have talked about how important William Stafford's work is to them. You said in that earlier interview, "His poems were about my world."**

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8,600-acre Konza Prairie Preserve, owned by The Nature Conservancy and Kansas State University and operated as a field research station. Both have areas open to the public.

<sup>45</sup> Miranda Ericsson interviewed Fleury in December 2006 for the Map of Kansas Literature. This website covers Kansas authors, past and present. It provides biographical information, lists of published work, writing samples, short interviews, and links. See <http://www.washburn.edu/reference/cks/mapping/fleury/index.html>.

Miranda Ericsson, who was an excellent student at Washburn and has put such effort into the Map of Kansas Literature website, asked me in that interview if I had favorite authors. That's always a complicated question, but if I did have to go to one person, it would be Stafford. I find with many undergraduates that they haven't read much poetry, or that the poetry they've read is nineteenth century, more archaic poetry, and when I first discovered William Stafford when I was a freshman, it was such a revelation to me because his poems were about farmers and small towns and the natural world, prairie lands. Of course, he wrote about Oregon and the west a lot, too, because he spent most of his adult life there, but, like me, he was born and raised Kansan.

Up until then I didn't think my life and where I was from were worthy of poems, and here I had this chance to read these phenomenal, relevant, moving poems that had wheat fields and place names that I was familiar with. The poems are populated with my own experience. I don't think I believed poetry was open to me until I read that work. Then I realized that poetry was open to anyone and everyone, and you don't have to live in New York or Paris and have some glamorous background to appreciate poems, to begin with, and, second, to write them. It was one of the greatest gifts. If I hadn't read Stafford, it's hard to say whether I would have wound up on this path I'm on. He gave me permission to write about those things and to celebrate, quite frankly, a very uncelebrated place and existence.

**Is there a particular poem of his that comes to mind?**

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Probably a poem that is very central to my worldview is “Earth Dweller.” It’s not one of his most famous, but it is frequently anthologized. I think that poem espouses what I think about the world. It’s a very spiritual poem, and an embracing poem. In many ways, in writing and in living, that’s what I aspire to, what “Earth Dweller” is about.

The poem ends, “The world speaks everything to us./It is our only friend.” There is the idea of listening to the world, to the earth and the rafters in the barn, the ax handle that has a story to tell, just as the character Arlie does in the poem. It all comes together, the sunlight striking through the barn. In many ways, it’s such a humble scene he builds, but it’s so elevated at the same time. It’s a touchstone, a poem that guides me and stays with me.

### **Earth Dweller**

It was all the clods at once become  
 precious; it was the barn, and the shed,  
 and the windmill, my hands, the crack  
 Arlie made in the ax handle: oh, let me stay  
 here humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all;  
 let the sun casually rise and set.  
 If I have not found the right place,  
 teach me; for somewhere inside, the clods are  
 vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing  
 for the saints forever, the shed and windmill  
 rear so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.

Now I know why people worship, carry around  
 magic emblems, wake up talking dreams  
 they teach to their children: the world speaks.  
 The world speaks everything to us.  
 It is our only friend.<sup>46</sup>

**Is this what poems should do for us — guide us? What is their purpose and value?**

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<sup>46</sup> William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1998), 129. Originally published in *Allegiances: New Poems by William Stafford* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

The idea of attending to the world through language is very valuable, I think. One of the things about poetry is that, because of its compression, its brevity, we don't read it in the same way we read a newspaper, a novel, instruction manuals. I think poetry is in many ways more meditative than other art forms and other language-based expression because of the attention to language, sound, detail. It is a sort of meditation to really look at something closely and to listen to it deeply.

The barrage of images we encounter daily through television, the Internet, radio — we have this constant onslaught of data, images, sounds. Poetry really asks us to look at individual elements of language: image, sound. Often, poetry is equated with prayer, and I don't necessarily mean that in a religious sense. I mean that poetry calls us into a state of deep attention.

**What you are saying implies that there really is an audience for poetry out there. Is it your sense that interest in poetry is growing?**

I do actually think it's grown slightly compared to twenty years ago, and some of the things I was just talking about are responsible for the growth.

**The desire to go to a quieter, more attentive place?**

Yes, and I also think we have more access to it through books, and through the Internet, though it can be a distraction. I think there are a whole lot more poetry readings than there were twenty or thirty years ago, and that's really wonderful. Think about the idea of incantation and the meditative quality of it. So often when we read, we're by ourselves

with our page, and the great thing about a poetry reading is that we can have a communal meditative experience rather than a solitary experience, though both are valuable.

**Is that a job hazard for writers, so much time alone?**

It's not job hazard, but it may be a life hazard! [Laughing] It is so essential to have lots of time alone when you're writing, but some people thrive and can write in the midst of a lot of activity. I'm not one of those people, and that solitude can also be very pleasant and fortifying, but you have to live in the world, too, to write. So if you isolate yourself too much, you're not part of the stream of life, but that generally doesn't end up being a problem; life has a way of giving you troubles and joys.

**I want to ask you about your teachers. You've told me in past conversations that you had a mentor at McNeese who was extremely important to you.**

John Wood, an English professor at McNeese, is my mentor I met in Louisiana. He is an extraordinary poet and an even more extraordinary human being, somebody who really embraces life and art — art is so important to him. He's a photographic historian and critic as well as a poet. He's a very serious collector of daguerreotypes; he has one of the best personal collections in the country. He has such a thirst for the world, to explore things and learn. His enthusiasm was so contagious, and he was such a good model of a way to live as well as a way to write, just being very interested in big things and as well as small. If you knew about something he didn't, he wanted to know about it. I was from Kansas, so that was very exotic, and he was interested in what grew here and the

foodways of the place. Seeing somebody live in such a big way and be so engaged was a good model for seeing that all sorts of things were worthy of our attention.

This is important for students; it was especially for me because I tended to be more reserved and tentative about my writing and the possibilities of it, and he was one of the first people who encouraged me consistently and vocally, and he really believed in what I could do and admired it and challenged me. It was the most intense growth period in my life, and I hand a lot of that to John Wood because of the type of person he is, and he was that way with most of his students — a wonderful, warm human being with vast intelligence, but also very down to earth.

He's since retired; in fact, the job I have now is not directly inherited from him, but it's in that lineage. The workshop that I was part of when I was a student is the workshop I conduct now, so that's a great honor to me. John not only inspired me as a writer and as a person, but also as a teacher. I wouldn't say I'm the same kind of teacher, but I learned from him about possibilities and the different ways one can be a teacher — often in more unconventional ways in individual relationships with students, and the sustained relationship between teachers and students over time. Conducting that workshop now is like returning to the cradle of my own making as a poet.

**I wondered how you chose McNeese, far from Kansas, as a place for graduate study.**

**Also, was it was difficult to leave Kansas when you decided to return to your alma mater as a faculty member?**

Oh, yes. Yes. There were a couple of reasons I ended up choosing to go to Louisiana to work on my MFA. First of all, I went to learn from John and from Robert Olen Butler,

who was the fiction professor there. He had just won the Pulitzer Prize<sup>47</sup> the year before I went down, and I was in both the poetry and the fiction workshops, so those two faculty members were a big draw.

I also wanted to go someplace very different so I would have a contrasting experience, so I applied to places like Louisiana, which is almost like living in another country, and to Alaska and other places that were very different from Kansas. I look back at those decisions about where to apply, and I think it was a pretty wise choice. This will sound so hackneyed, but I really do appreciate the central metaphor of *The Wizard of Oz*, that in order to appreciate one's home you have to go someplace else, someplace that gives you a contrast to the place you know. It was a good experience for me because the language, the food, the climate, the whole culture, is very distinct, and that was such a great gift, too. And a wonderful thing to return to.

But it was very difficult to leave Kansas because I love Kansas so much and it's such an essential part of who I am, being from here, and the way I look at the world. As I said, that essential landscape is very internalized, but you take it with you wherever you go.

I also realized it was a good time for me to do something different to challenge myself. I still do hope someday to come back to Kansas. I fully expect to end my days here. You never know what path life leads you on, but in my conception of the future, I imagine myself back here.

**Are there other teachers you want to mention, even pre-college?**

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<sup>47</sup> Butler's book of short stories, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993.

I really have been blessed with good teachers. As an undergraduate, I had Jonathan Holden and Elizabeth Dodd at Kansas State. I think it must have been Elizabeth's second year there when I arrived. She's only eight years older than I am, and we're very good friends now. The teacher-student relationship becomes more equal over time, as I've found with my own students. It's a great evolution.

But I always go back to librarians, too. In some ways, librarians were maybe more instrumental to my writing life when I was young person than teachers I had as a grade-school or high-school student. Then, of course, my folks were very encouraging of reading. My mother was always reading, and seeing that all the time as a child made me very interested. I was a very serious reader, and I think a lot of that had to do with Mom taking me to the library. The librarians would always take an interest in what I was reading and what I was interested in, and they'd ask me what I thought about books when I brought them back. When they got a new one they thought I'd like, they'd suggest it. So it was a very interactive relationship.

The Seneca Free Public Library was a converted church.<sup>48</sup> There's a new addition now, but when I was growing up, the library was *in the church*, so it had stained glass windows, and the librarian sat up at the altar, and that's where you had your books checked out. Now I think of it as very novel experience, but at the time it seemed absolutely normal that that's where you'd have your library — in a church!

### **There's something symbolic in there for you.**

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<sup>48</sup> In a later email, Fleury shared this information about the library: "The church that eventually became the library was built in 1868, and it was actually the first Universalist church in Kansas. Various denominations held their services in it, and it was referred to as the Old Stone Church. After sixty years of use, the various Protestant churches had built their own structures, and owing to the fact that Seneca was and is predominantly German Catholic (perhaps about ninety percent of the population), the building was converted to the public library in 1928."

Absolutely!

**In some of your poems, there's a sense of having experienced the nineteenth century, something that seems even to go beyond the level of being a persona poem. One poem I have in mind is "Threshing."**

I always loved stories and loved listening to my elders tell stories, and I had the great fortune of having two great grandmothers who lived well into their nineties. I was a teenager when one of them died, and she told stories about when they came to Kansas. My interest in reading about that time period was important, too; it's a very evocative period for me because it's homesteading, it's possibility, it's open land, the unexplored.

I think the same thing that appeals to me about the nineteenth century is what appeals to me about the prairie, which is the possibility and the expanse. I think if I could live in another time period, I would want to homestead in Kansas. I think that would be great! I think it'd be a lot of fun; I'm sure it'd be a lot of work and frustration as well.

### **Threshing**

Under the polished spokes of the sun,  
 they sickle and sheave their wheat.  
 He sings her that song  
 she's been wanting to hear  
 of riffling water and sweet fall breeze.  
 But these are her hands calloused with rhythm,  
 this is her hair full of sweat and chaff.  
 She braids her body through the rows,  
 reaping his voice and the autumn seed.

...<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Beautiful Trouble* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) 27.

### **Homestead**

He had the wanderfoot,  
and that's how we landed  
in this harvest of rocks and wind.  
We had dirt and water  
and some sticks of wood.  
We had two earth rooms  
and babies in a trundle bed.

...<sup>50</sup>

### **I've had the same kind of fantasies since I was a little kid reading Laura Ingalls Wilder.**

Yes. As a child, I loved to read Laura Ingalls Wilder and anything that had to do with that time period. Even as an adult, I count the novels of Willa Cather among my favorites, particularly the prairie novels — *My Antonia*, *Song of the Lark*, *O Pioneers!* Those really capture my imagination. I like that era. I think of the possibility of it, the opportunity to test yourself in certain ways.

### **When do you find time to read — and make time to write?**

I stick my writing and my reading in wherever I can get it in, though for me it does help if I have more extended periods of time to write. I'm not one who can get very much writing done in a few minutes. It takes a while to sort of submerge myself into that space, and if I can give myself some time, it's more productive. Obviously, it's more difficult during the semesters when things get hectic. Usually, academic breaks — summer and between semesters — are very good too for my writing.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22.

But I've never been an early-morning writer. I know that's a great time for many people, but it's not for me. Over the years, I've noticed that people who have a sustained writing life tend to be either early-morning writers or late-night writers. I tend to be more of a night writer. I can write at any time of day, but I'm not a five-o'clock-in-the-morning sort of person. I don't think you'd want to read anything I wrote at five o'clock in the morning! But I think the reason why those ends of days are often productive for people is that it's out of the fray of daily existence, in a way; you're not thinking about what you need to get at the grocery store and the bills you need to pay. All those things aren't as intrusive in your thoughts in the early morning, and later you've cleared out the distractions in some sense.

**I want to ask about some of your poems. "Fifth Grade" is one I could identify with strongly. I remember thinking at different times in my life that when I'm such-and-such age, I'll be better at whatever I'm struggling with at the moment. Is that the idea behind the poem?**

I think it is about that to a large degree. Writing is a series of choices. My choice to write in the third person, first of all, and, second, the tense of the poem suggest the idea of time — the perception of time — being an ameliorating force, that it's going to be better. One of the things I hope the poem does, when it ends, is leave a sense of ambiguity about whether it's hopeful or not, because I think on any given day it could go either way. Some days, things really aren't very much different from what they were in fifth grade, but some days, you think, yes, I can handle that much better now. So it's a hard line to

walk; I hope it has both of those elements in it. Often the way people interpret it tells a lot about their perspective!

### **Fifth Grade**

She rode a short bus, little loaf of bread on wheels,  
 which let her out at the front steps of her red brick school.  
 The classroom smelled like pencil lead and minty paste,  
 and lacy, paper snowflakes were taped to frosted  
 windowpanes. The radiators clanked and steamed.  
 She went to the cloakroom to hang her hooded coat,  
 and that's where he was, her red-headed tormentor,  
 waiting to kick the backs of her knees and call her  
 stupid. He was an ear wiggler, a knuckle cracker,  
 a kid who picked his crusty nostrils, one the principal  
 called a wiseacre. Once when she'd sewn her Girl Scout  
 housekeeping badge on upside down, he'd said  
 she was dumb, clumsy, ugly. She suffered that day,  
 but sat at her desk imagining how she could stab him  
 with her safety scissors and how he would cry  
 all through recess with the others standing around.  
 He would be a mess of snot and tears and after a while  
 she'd forgive him because, after all, she was a good girl  
 and wanted peace, a word which she could correctly spell.  
 But then he would probably spit in her face or crush  
 a milk carton on her head at lunch and tell everyone  
 how she was worthless, worthless. She'd pretend  
 not to care because, big deal, she already knew that.  
 Let me tell you how she stood in the girls' room stall,  
 her socks puddled around her ankles, her eyes brimming  
 with tears, telling herself how different things would be  
 when she was a grown-up woman, maybe thirty, yes,  
 how very different she knew everything would be.<sup>51</sup>

### **Is this one of the poems that people ask you about more frequently?**

It is, and I think it's because it's something everybody can relate to. I don't want it to be a poor-me scenario, but I think everybody's felt this way at some point or another, and whether the circumstances are the same or not is beside the point. We feel misunderstood or persecuted, whatever. So they tend to be drawn to it. It's a continual struggle living in

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 7.

the world, thinking about how we are perceived by others and how we perceive ourselves.

**But the story came first, not the message.**

They always do. I never start a poem in an idea, or when I do, it doesn't work. It always works better for me if I let the poem reveal itself to me and let it teach me what it wants to be about. And sometimes, even when I've finished, I don't know what it's about.

When I try to impose an idea on a poem, it seems very artificial. Poems have a way of organically surfacing the issue that they're about.

**It takes a long time to write a poem.**

That's one of the ironic things. They are short, or compressed. The contemplation-per-word ratio is inordinate compared to most uses of language that we have. You can work on something for months and months or even years, and you've got a couple hundred words, maybe. But the substance is in the compression, not the length. I always contend that the writing process is also the process of thinking and meditating, and oftentimes I'll have a phrase I knock around for months, and I don't know what it's about, and then the rest of the poem one day will arrive to accompany that phrase or image or line. There's a lot of subconscious work that goes on with writing that doesn't involve the pen scratching across the page or the keys on the computer clacking.

**“Covenant” is another poem that stays with me. You’ve talked with me a few times about your brother, and I might be projecting this upon this poem, but it feels like a brother-sister poem, and even if it’s not, it seems to me ...**

It is! It is, though — and I think you were about to say this — it has the flexibility of being applied to other relationships. To me, it is very much a brother-sister poem, but one of the things I deeply believe is that there are a lot of kinds of love poems. Often we think of love as simply romantic love or erotic love, and that’s such a limiting way of thinking about a love poem. There are love poems that are poems of friendships, love poems that are filial, like the brother-sister relationship, or parental. There are many kinds of love poems that should be called love poems.

#### **Covenant**

You draw the bow of barbed wire,  
let me pass through to the pasture,  
to you and the other side.  
It is a good day to walk  
the rusty tallgrass sugared  
with snow, to measure your stride  
through the timber and swale.  
Giving me the lee, you track the wind.

... <sup>52</sup>

**Other poems of yours are clearly about lovers. But “Covenant” is different. The imagery of it — anybody who has traipsed through a field on a family farm with siblings or cousins and crossed a barbed-wire fence or tried different ways to cross a barbed-wire fence can relate to it.**

And how much easier it is if there’s someone else there to help you through the barbed-wire fence!

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 11.

**This is also one of your poems set in the rural Midwest, and I wondered if to some degree you consider *Beautiful Trouble* a book of place.**

It's tough because place is really important to me, but it's a lens through which I see the world, so I don't think it's consciously a book about place. It just naturally arises from how I write, I suppose. I think one concern about having place be an element of poems or stories or anything is the fear of being labeled with the moniker of being a regionalist, which is sort of a false dilemma, in many ways, because when you think of the greatest literature ever written, you could call it regionalist also. William Faulkner, sure, he's a regionalist, but he also won a Nobel Prize for literature, and his work is read widely.

**Aren't we all regionalists, to some degree, if we're honest with ourselves?**

Yeah, absolutely. I think we all tend to internalize a landscape and a culture that is a part of that particular place. I would say, though, for some writers, place is not as important, and when you think about that, especially in contemporary society, that makes a lot of sense. Go to any strip mall, and you can see it replicated anyplace in the country, and there's nothing special or unique about it, it's strip-mall land, and a lot of people live in that. That's their place, that's their setting, suburban housing developments that are sort of virally replicated. And that's one of the things I think is interesting about living in a place like Kansas or Louisiana: They're real places; they still are distinct, which is not to say that they don't have their strip malls, but there's something that's still held about the culture and about the landscape that is identifiable.

But I like a sense of place. It's something I like when I read, too, and it doesn't have to be a particular place; it doesn't have to be the Midwest. I like being situated.

Another favorite novel of mine is *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*,<sup>53</sup> which is set in the Channel Islands, and it is a deeply regional book, but it is so universal, and so beautiful and funny and delightful, and I think that that's how we access the universal: through particularity, through specific, local details. It gives a sense of lived experience. So to me, it is important, but there's a lot of placeless literature or art out there that's still good; it's just not as important an element for some people's writing.

**I want to ask about voice, also, People talk about the feminine voice, but *Beautiful Trouble* seems to take it, quietly, to a new level. It's not a self-consciously feminine voice; it's just there expressing, but you treat subjects I'm not sure I've found in poetry elsewhere. There are poems that go ahead and acknowledge a woman's sadness at not having children. And in "Pink," you show how little girls think they want to be pretty for boys, for men; you raise the question of whether or not, looking back, we realized that we, on some level, were taking part in this. Where did this idea come from; was it imposed on us?**

Right! And are we perpetuating it?

#### **Pink**

It's the suffering of little girls,  
all the fuss of ruffle and frill.  
Once we wished to be pink-lipped and lovely,  
to be perfectly tipped teacups,  
honey-rimmed on the mouths of men.

...<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> A novel by Gerald Basil Edwards (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2007), first published in 1981.

<sup>54</sup> *Beautiful Trouble*, 8.

**I'm sort of gasping as I read some of your poems, thinking, yeah, I've thought about that, too. There's a lack of inhibition; something has allowed you to go ahead and write lines like, "My children sing out to me/from their hammock between my hips ... ."**<sup>55</sup> **How are you able to get that down poetically?**

I think one responsibility writers need to assume is a willingness to go places that are difficult emotionally, socially, and culturally — to say the things that people think but aren't saying. My experience is like the landscape; it's internalized. It's not a conscious choice, not really a conscious decision to write certain things; it's just the way I've lived in the world. But I think it's a challenge because the gender roles for women seem to be more codified than for men, even now, and if you find yourself in a situation where you're not participating in the generally accepted gender roles of wife and mother, it forces you to ask all sorts of questions and evaluate your place in the world. It's something to wrestle with.

One of the things I hope comes through is that this isn't a rejection of traditional women's roles at all; it's just an acknowledgment of the experience of people that don't fall within those. Again, there is a sense of ambiguity, and I want there to be a sense of this tension between wanting to fill these roles but also feeling like it's not mandatory, and obviously not in the ways that we traditionally perceive them. It is a complicated, thorny thing, and it's important to acknowledge that. Often when I catch myself censoring something I'm feeling or wanting to write — if an image or phrase comes to me and I think, whoa, I can't say that, that's too much — then I think, well, that's exactly what I need to say!

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<sup>55</sup> "Commutations of the Flesh," *ibid.*, 36-37.

**Letting that consciousness come out is a vital skill for poets.**

And I think you have to be willing to make yourself vulnerable regardless of what the subject is, whether it's this, in particular, or something else. And I think there's a distinction between raw confessionalism and this sort of considered acknowledgment of disappointments, sadness, confusion, all sorts of things, because that's what we go to poetry for. We want to feel that our experiences are valid and shared.

One of the things I really hope for with these poems you're referring to — just as one worries about being a regionalist poet — is that I don't want to be perceived as a “woman's poet” or a “woman poet.” But, again, I think we have to access universal experience through particular details and individual experience, and I hope men wouldn't feel excluded from those poems.

**What you are planning for your residency in Massachusetts this fall? Is there is a project you're working on?**

Yes. My poetry manuscript that I'm hoping to complete then is called *Sympathetic Magic*. That borrows a term from *The Golden Bough*<sup>56</sup> about like attracting like. So that's an element of the poems, but it's also a meditation on sympathy in general, the notion of sympathy in lots of different ways. Not just the common way we think of sympathy, as in having sympathy for someone's difficulties or sadness or grief, but thinking about the broader sense of sympathy — a meditation on understanding, fellow feeling, and connection through experience. We can sympathize with others through all kinds of

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<sup>56</sup> Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, a comparative study of mythology and religion first published in 1890, is considered a classic. It was most recently reprinted in paperback in 2006 (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: NuVision Publications). The full text of the second edition, published in 1900 (in New York by Macmillan and Co., Limited, nearly 500 pages), is available online at <http://books.google.com>.

emotions: anger, joy, regret, hope. I plan on opening the book with two epigraphs — one from George Eliot and one from Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass,” which is “And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral, dressed in his shroud.”<sup>57</sup>

I’m really looking forward to that expanse of time in Lenox, to really be able to lean into writing. I think that’s one of the bigger challenges of sustaining a writing life when you’re teaching or doing whatever job you’re doing: having to start and stop a lot. Just to have that be front and center for a long time will be nice.

**Are there times when the well just feels dry?**

Absolutely.

**What do you do then — read?**

Reading is always a good thing, but I think the longer I have had a writing life, the more I realize that there are natural ebbs and flows in my writing. That doesn’t make it any better when you’re in one of those lulls, and often, for me, it’s not that I am not writing anything, it’s that I’m not writing anything good! You know, I’m not writing anything that’s worth keeping, and that is almost more frustrating than if nothing is coming at all, and it’s as if, okay, now I’ve lost my whole sense of what is a good and decent line, or something like that.

And one of the elements of being a teacher is that you’re constantly nursing people through these periods, and so you see this happen again and again, which is not to say it’s not a real concern and a danger, because obviously some people do walk away

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<sup>57</sup> From “Song of Myself.”

from it, and they don't return to it, but I think that's almost more of a gradual falling away rather than that the words don't arrive anymore. In some ways it's a test of commitment. I think that's true with any kind of art or activity. You, as a runner, if you decide you don't want to get up and run anymore, eventually whatever compelled you about running doesn't draw you any longer.

The good thing for me, I feel, at this stage of my life, is that I've sustained my interest and my activity in writing for long enough that I can't imagine my life without it; I can't imagine waking up and it having been five years since I've written something. I just don't think that's a possibility anymore for me, which is a comfort. That is not to say I won't have sustained periods of little or poor writing. But I understand the angst of it when you're in the midst of it. I have a really good friend who is a very brilliant and very highly published poet, and he called me this fall just beside himself with this fear that it wasn't going to come back. It's one of the most anxious parts of being a writer, when you have that stoppage, but also I think it's good sometimes to have these lulls because you are, again, subconsciously filling your well. You're working on things on a different level than is readily apparent.

**As I talk to Kansas poets, I'm aware of both their use and my use of those old phrases from rural life. Not that I want to box us in, but I do notice when we say "comes out in the wash" or "fill the well."**

Those metaphors remind me of the cycles of writing; it's like planting. Sometimes you have to let things grow, and sometimes you're planting, and sometimes you're cutting, and sometimes you're just letting the field go fallow.

**Your poem “Nemaha County Nocturne” reminds me of those quiet periods we need, letting the field go fallow, resting, rejuvenating.**

It’s a diminishing syllabic poem, so as the lines progress they get shorter and quieter. I hope the poem ends in a prayer-like hush. This isn’t the *capital-H* “Holy” of church and religion, but *little-h* “holy” that infuses nature, which is more essential and important to me.

### **Nemaha County Nocturne**

The difficult stars parse the night into silence,  
benediction, dream. Between soil and silo thrums  
the grammar of grain and all of Kansas rests.

The slender roots of weeds suck at the dirt,  
and the listing windmills and ruined barns  
lean toward their beginnings. Flowing north,

our river glides through glacial cuts  
and those ghosts of primitive sea.  
A turtle, overturned dish

of flesh and patience, swims  
against history’s blur.  
Locusts resurrect

the wind and with  
reluctant tongues  
we name it

holy  
holy.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Beautiful Trouble*, 21.

**Donald Levering:****The Thread of the Past, the Life of the Present**

*Levering was born in Kansas City, Kansas. He studied at Baker University in Baldwin, Kansas; the University of Kansas; Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon; and Bowling Green State University in Ohio. He works as a human-services administrator in Santa Fe. He has published five chapbooks of poetry and three full-length volumes. He was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Grant and a first-place winner in the Quest for Peace Writing Contest. His latest collection, The Number of Names, is forthcoming from Sunstone Press. For this interview, we met at his home on a windy April morning. The apple tree in his garden was covered with buds.*

**You've had a varied working life, like Jack London and Mark Twain and many other writers we could think of. Would you talk about the choices you've made for earning a living — not remaining on an academic path — and the connection between those choices and your writing?**

After I finished undergraduate school, I worked as a groundskeeper for four years. Those experiences of working outdoors and with plants definitely influenced a couple of books I wrote. Also, that kind of job allowed me to be meditative while I was working; for example, I could read W.S. Merwin on my break or lunchtime, then I could ruminate on what I'd been reading, or think about what I'd been working on in my own writing, while I was working. It was not the kind of job that was challenging me intellectually, so that

just freed my mind to be thinking about poetry. Plus, just being connected with nature — when you're outside, even if it's a semi-urban environment, it's still the outdoors.

I did some teaching, and that didn't agree with me very well. There was something about it. ... I felt responsible for motivating people to love literature, and it was incomprehensible to me that I would have to motivate someone, so I eventually left the teaching field. I became a state bureaucrat after I moved to New Mexico and have been, lo, these many years. There, too, you could call it a schizophrenia, but I have my work that I do for the forty hours in the week, sometimes a little more, not usually. My lunch hours are my own, and I usually read. I don't generally carry my work home with me, which is another thing about being a teacher — you're always carrying your work home. So it gives me freedom to do what I love to do, which is the writing and the reading, and at the same time affords a way to make ends meet.

**Would you describe your work as a human-services administrator?**

I work for the child-support enforcement division. Bureau Chief is my title, and I'm responsible for twenty-three staff members. It's getting people to pay money that the court has obligated them to pay. The role I'm in is supporting the caseworkers who do the work in the field. Generally I don't deal with individual cases or individual customers. We have a call center, and I manage the contract for the call center. There's a lot of contract work, procurement work, policy analysis, legislative analysis. For example, during the course of the legislature, I'm responsible for the analysis of any bills that might have an impact on our organization.

So unlike the groundskeeping job, it does occupy me intellectually. I really have to be with it, and of course there are people issues with being manager. So it's not always easy to walk away from it at five o'clock, but, still, I think there's more a line of demarcation than there is with an academic position.

**Did you need a professional degree for this position?**

No, at the time I got into it, I already had my MFA, and the requirement was just a master's degree; it didn't specify that it had to be in government service. And most of it is learning how the bureaucracy works from the inside — or doesn't work, as the case may be! I love the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol because he's so great at lampooning the bureaucracy, and it's obvious he's been on the inside. Dostoevsky does that, too. I've been reading him lately, and he has a lot to say about how bureaucracy can crush people's souls.

**I wonder if some of the poems in your latest collection, *Whose Body*,<sup>59</sup> were influenced by the work you do now, or if they had to do with the subject of your work in a broad sense.**

I don't think so, at least not in any conscious way. I think that was more influenced by other life experiences, relationships with people: lovers, ex-wife. And then, of course, Chuang Tzu, the ancient Taoist, and the whole tradition of making the surprising statement and seeing where it leads you.

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<sup>59</sup> Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2007.

**As I read *Whose Body*, I kept thinking about the word “body” in reference to a body of work. In your body of work, there is a Zen-like quality, something that points to a sense of living in the present moment and recognizing the beingness of what is right in front of you. In *Whose Body* there is a recognition of life as suffering but also rejoicing in the experience of living, whatever the physical difficulty. Is Zen philosophy or practice a conscious influence in your life and work?**

I’m not a practitioner of Zen. I don’t have that kind of discipline, to sit and watch my thoughts; I have other disciplines. I’ve read quite a bit about it, and I have close friends who are practitioners. There’s something very attractive to me about the philosophy of Zen, as I understand it, of being in the present moment, suspending judgment, and I think those are great perspectives from which to be a writer. At the same time, to be a writer, one has to engage and be in touch with one’s own emotions and all the emotional connotations of the words that are selected for poems.

I guess that’s part of why I’m not a practitioner, besides the lack of that kind of discipline. I want to maintain the full connection with the emotion behind writing and not leave it behind. Maybe that’s just a misunderstanding of the philosophy on my part. Going back to Chuang Tzu, I think there’s a lineage that comes from the early Taoists that the Zen Buddhists are following. I mentioned the notion of just saying something that is totally unedited, thinking something that is not in your normal frame of mind and having that as a starting point, and taking that and saying, where does this go? With language, there are all kinds of different places an unpremeditated beginning can lead.

**Are there poems from *Whose Body* that you think of first as I ask about this book?**

“Why Not.” “Why not turn my arm into a rooster ... ?” I think of that poem as a sort of springboard for the whole book. The spirit of Chuang Tzu impelled *Whose Body*. We don’t know if Chuang Tzu was one person or an amalgam, but his irreverence, his surprises, his bliss, his fearless look at the body’s infirmities and impermanence, his humor — all these attributes I found desirable and different from what I’d been writing before. “Why Not” riffs on some lines from Chuang Tzu.

I think “Spider” is also a central poem because the thing I’m constantly mulling over is an idea of predetermination. When there seems to be a lot of evidence that things are sort of rigged on a cosmic scale, how does one live — in-joy and enjoy — and maintain a personal spontaneity in the light of all this information we have about how our heredity and environment have programmed the way we are and the way things are around us? The poem works with that. Even though it’s not a long poem, it’s central to the book, which has all this sort of bad luck happening to people, something about their bodies going wrong on them, in “Missing Thumb” or “Kidney Stones.” All these things happening to people — it’ll happen to everybody eventually. We all get sick, we all die. In spite of all of that, how do we go on?

After writing “Why Not” and “Spider,” which also borrows an image from the master, other poems came in the spirit of Chuang Tzu with and without specific references. They tumbled out rather quickly and began to coalesce into a book.

### **Why Not?**

Why not turn my arm into a rooster  
 so it can watch for the false dawn?  
 This sore finger could flute  
 the falling leaves of cottonwoods.  
 The carapace I’ve grown to keep away pain,  
 why not drill it full of holes for divination?  
 My sloughed skin could be formed

into the Great Clod of Agriculture,  
 spittle into the web  
 of the Master of Eight Legs.  
 ...<sup>60</sup>

### Spider

To make a joyful sound,  
 just let the divine spider  
 climb out of your mouth  
 and go about its business  
 tying knots around your life.  
 So you're a marionette,  
 you can still feel yourself dancing  
 no matter who's pulling the strings.  
 Even as your divorce decree  
 is signed, the spider  
 goes on marrying you  
 to corners of household dust.  
 Eight legs, a ravenous mouth,  
 and the yen to spin silk in shadows.  
 Who wouldn't sing?<sup>61</sup>

### Missing Thumb

Thumb in the hospital dumpster.  
 Its owner fumbles with its ghost.  
 It has its story, the screws

turned, fishing flies tied,  
 compass points guided.  
 Or maybe in its muscle memory

stitching quilts, braiding hair,  
 cinnamon pinches sprinkled on dough.  
 Whatever it has picked up

to bring to the nose  
 or turn before the eye  
 is missing only when memory goes.

The five aces spread in a fan,  
 the songs picked on a banjo  
 today can only be played

inside the brain.  
 Recall the cursive trail  
 of new words being learned,

of love letters. But now —

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<sup>60</sup> *Whose Body*, 42.

<sup>61</sup> *Whose Body*, 46.

the new way of writing  
without a thumb.<sup>62</sup>

**At the beginning of this conversation, the subject of your work with plants came up. Beginning with your earliest published work, your poems show a deep personal knowledge of plants, a sense of connection with the green world.**

**Even in *Whose Body*, which is full of human stories, we find tulips, blackberries, oak trees, spruce, holly, and pomegranates in the first few poems. In *Outcroppings from Navajoland*,<sup>63</sup> the flora of the southwest region has a strong presence. The wind has been fierce the last couple of days here in Santa Fe, tumbleweeds flying everywhere. I kept thinking of your poem, “Tumbleweed.” You and the green world really have a thing going. You’ve talked about your work as a gardener, but this connection was probably there before that. It’s in all your books — deep in your consciousness. Would you talk about your connection with plants and how that started?**

I’m really glad you’re still seeing that because I’m not able to do as much gardening as I used to do, and yet I still do feel this connection. When you say it’s in my consciousness, it makes me think it maybe has something to do with my background. My grandparents were farmers and then became grain elevator operators, and in the summers, when I was growing up, I worked in the grain elevator in Kansas.

**What town?**

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<sup>62</sup> *Whose Body*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> Tsaille, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1984.

Gardner. Spring Hill is where the grain elevator was. So I had a connection with farmers. I also tend to be not the most socially oriented person, and I find solace sometimes in just being outdoors with living things. I get solace from that rather than going to a party, usually. I think of Dylan Thomas's line "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower."<sup>64</sup> I like to contemplate both the power and the interconnectedness of the natural world. It's totally boggling to me. I was just reading the other day that aspens grow from a single sort of rootstock. An entire aspen stand would really be, genetically, one individual, and some of them are very old.

There's a poem in *The Kingdom of Ignorance*<sup>65</sup> — the title poem — about a mushroom. The subterranean cytoplasm is enormous and extremely old. All of these things help me to put into perspective our human existence, which we tend to amplify, and certainly human existence is grand and amazing, yet it is but a part of a natural world that is even more grand.

### **Tumbleweed**

autumn they are done w/ the  
 staid life of shrubs, their  
 anchors left to plumb the  
 desert depths while they roll  
 away rootless on billows,  
 tumbling toward boulders,  
 dropping into arroyos,  
 bouncing across highways,  
 stacking against fences,  
 always sowing seeds<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The first line of Thomas's poem of the same title, which is posted online at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15379>.

<sup>65</sup> Georgetown, Kentucky: Finishing Line Press, 2006.

<sup>66</sup> *Outcroppings from Navajoland*, 15.

**There's a question I wanted to ask earlier, when you were talking about working as a groundskeeper at Lewis and Clark in Portland. I know William Stafford was there at that time. What drew you out there?**

I went there to enroll in a master-of-arts-in-teaching program, and I did go through one year of that program before I decided to be a groundskeeper. I knew Stafford there. I also knew a poet named Vern Rutsala, who was probably more influential for me at that time than Stafford because his style is more what I was interested in. I didn't fully appreciate Stafford when I knew him at Lewis and Clark. It was later before I could grasp the subtlety and great understatement of his poems — I guess I had to be a little older.

There's a seminal experience at Lewis and Clark that I have to mention. I was up in an apple tree, pruning, and the head of the theater department came by, a man named Dick Willis. He knew I was a poet, and he had just gotten a review copy of Theodore Roethke's collected poems. He just was walking by, and he said, I really don't have any use for this book, would you like it? He put it down by my lunchbox there at the base of this apple tree. I had read a couple of the anthologized poems of Roethke, but that book just completely opened up a whole new door. Talk about connection with nature. Roethke opened up my mind to these connections. The attention to rhythm in his poems is something that has stayed with me ever since I first read that book. It was one of these happenstances. There really was a big shift after I read that book. This guy happened to be passing through, he knew I was a poet, and he had more books to read than he knew what to do with, so he just laid it on me.

**Your chapbook *The Jack of Spring*<sup>67</sup> opens with a quote from Roethke. Do those poems follow pretty closely after that occurrence?**

Yeah, many of those poems were written in that time period.

**What is the Jack of Spring, precisely; is it the same thing as the Green Man concept?**

It is the same as the Green Man, which was in England, just sort of a personification of spring. It probably goes back to the figure Pan in Greek mythology.

**“Pulling Weeds,” which first appears in *A Folio of Garden Poems*,<sup>68</sup> is one of my favorite poems of yours. This is the one that got me thinking, what is the mind frame of this poet? My impression is that you have this respect for life that doesn’t put people above everything else.**

Absolutely not. We’re just part of the web. Unfortunately, at this stage, we’re the part that is impinging on the existence of the entire web.

**Those first few lines, “Whose hands are these/Thinking they can divorce/The plants from the soil,” remind me of Thoreau and his ambivalence at hoeing up the native flora to plant beans at Walden.<sup>69</sup> It asks, who am I to do this?**

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<sup>67</sup> Oneonta, New York: Swamp Press, 1980.

<sup>68</sup> A chapbook printed by Levering on letterpress in Bowling Green, Ohio, 1977. In the following interview question, the first three lines from “Pulling Weeds” are quoted from the version in *Folio*. The full poem included here is a later version, published in *Horsetail* (Topeka, Kansas: Woodley Press, Washburn University, 2000), 25.

<sup>69</sup> In the chapter “The Bean-Field” in *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “But what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden?” (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., reissued as an Oxford’s World’s Classics paperback, 1999; edited with an introduction and notes by Stephen Fender), 140.

I haven't read Thoreau in a long time, but I'm certainly sympathetic. The blurb Contoski<sup>70</sup> wrote for *Horsetail* connected me with Thoreau. That's an honor.

### **Pulling Weeds**

Whose hands are these  
that think they'll divorce  
these plants from the soil

The weeds have white  
fingers too  
and a firm grip on the earth

These hands say  
they have tools  
to insure the uprooting

and reason  
an ordered garden  
in the mind

The weeds have chiggers  
to patrol  
their empire

They summon rain  
or brain-baking sun  
on their enemies

They will break  
and begin again  
before they'll surrender

### **Do you remember feeling ambivalence when you worked as a groundskeeper, weeding and pruning?**

It's interesting you bring up pruning, too. Pruning can be looked at in one way as imposing human will on nature. Especially things like topiary, shaped hedges, or bonsai, to be the most extreme. But then there's also an aspect of pruning that helps for fruit. It helps the tree put its energy into the fruits instead of water shoots and all these other

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<sup>70</sup> The poet Victor Contoski, professor emeritus of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.

things. Rather than becoming a bigger tree, it becomes a more fruitful tree. Of course the parallels with writing are manifest and all over the place. You can write big, sprawling things, but where's the juice in them? So you use your tools, your writing tools, to bring into focus what you want to hand the reader, so to speak.

**Your first couple of chapbooks are beautifully printed on letterpress, *A Folio of Garden Poems* by you yourself. From the letterpress work and your work as a gardener, I get a feeling of your sense of pride in working with one's hands and a desire to create order.**

The poem I'm working on now has a lot of references to hands. Again, I think it's from my background, where my grandparents literally worked with their hands to make ends meet — and the experience as a groundskeeper imbued in me a respect for the proletariat of the world. So there's that aspect of it, and then there's the aspect that hands and paying attention to what we do with our hands can create beautiful things.

In *The Fast of Thoth*,<sup>71</sup> each poem takes its cue from a calendar image, and it goes through the months. One has to do with quiltmakers. It's a poem that's just made up of quilting terminology.

**You mentioned Vic Contoski earlier, and you've talked about your grandparents. I want to ask about your early influences and teachers, and what led you, growing up in Kansas City, Kansas, and as a university student, to poetry?**

Well, I wrote my first poem when I was fifteen, and I don't remember what the poem was, but I do remember writing. That's when I started writing, and it just came to me. But

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<sup>71</sup> Columbus, Ohio: Pudding House Publications, 2002.

I think the two very earliest direct influences were Shakespeare and Keats. It was just from high-school courses where I was reading *Hamlet* and reading the sonnets.

**It got into your system.**

It got into my system. John Donne was another poet who was very different from those other two that I really liked very early on. Those three are among the earliest influences.

Of course, I had teachers — even in high school, there was an English teacher who was not my English teacher, but she was the sponsor of the literary magazine. Steve Bunch, who's my friend from way back, and I were in the same high school, Shawnee Mission North, and pretty much ran the literary magazine together with this teacher, Thressa Newell. She would invite us over to her house, just socially, and she was encouraging us as writers in a very subtle kind of way. She liked it that we had this spark.

And, of course, during two summers working at the grain elevator, my grandmother and I read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to each other. We would alternate reading chapters. I was fourteen, fifteen years old. I loved it! It just brings tears to my eyes to think about that closeness with her. And also just the magic of Homer. What a storyteller! Talk about early influences — that was very strong.

And then, of course, Vic Contoski was the first actual poetry-writing teacher I had. He instilled some principles and craft that I still very much try to stay in touch with, about honing the language down and knowing what your subject is. And he also exposed the people in his class to W.S. Merwin — I first became aware of him through Contoski. Marge Piercy, Denise Levertov. I also remember a Baker University professor who taught a literature course my freshman year. He had recordings of Dylan Thomas reading

his works — LP 33-rpm records — and he invited the class over to his house to listen to them. And that was a huge eye-opener, ear-opener for me: Oh, that's how it can sound!

Poetry is really that close to song.

With so much, I think it's just exposure. I think craft can be taught, but so much is exposure to the masters. And encouragement. One of the things about Contoski is that he was able to keep such a positive, reinforcing atmosphere in his poetry workshops. People were there to encourage each other to write better, not to be critical of each others' writing. I'm still in touch with him.

**Poetry books often have a loose theme, but several of yours have unusually tight themes. Would you describe the process of coming to identify a theme for new work — without it being forced? Do you find yourself thinking about certain subjects, writing poems, then becoming aware that a theme is showing itself?**

I think the way that works is that I don't write poems to make a book, so I have the makings of three books going at once, but I don't necessarily even think of them. I think of the individual poem that comes; I just try to make that poem, internally, as consistent as it needs to be and follow whatever theme it has. I guess I feel a lot of freedom compared to these poor novelists. They're shackled to a particular book until they get through it. I'm just writing poems, and I find out after the fact — I say, Oh, look, this poem bounces off this one. So the collection falls together after the poems have been crafted. I feel lucky that I don't have to, as you said, try to force poems into a theme. I never do that. I find poems that go into a manuscript.

When you're at the stage where you're publishing books of poems, part of the craft is selecting the poems and selecting the order of the poems. That takes considerable thought to do successfully.

**Am I off base with this idea that the themes of your books are especially tight?**

I guess that's some internal consistency in me, that there are certain threads in my thinking that hang together for a certain period of time, and the poems that come out of them can all go into a book.

**How many years' worth of writing gets captured in *Whose Body*, for example?**

The span for that is shorter. It's probably five years, so it is more concentrated than others. *Horsetail* spans decades, actually. The *Outcroppings* — I'm going to contradict myself — I lived on the Navajo res for two years, so all the poems came out of that experience.

**Did you work on the *Outcroppings* poems for a number of years after that, though?**

My son was born on the reservation in 1982, and we left shortly after he was born. It was 1981 to 1982, and the book was published in 1984, so unlike some of the other books, it was very concentrated in terms of the chronology of the writing.

**So you were out walking on the reservation. You were learning about the mythology of the place, and you were writing about the mythological figures and the features of the area.**

I was working as a househusband with my daughter and then my son, briefly, before we moved. But I also was teaching extension English courses to adult Navajos. That was very eye-opening. I'm sure I learned more from them than they learned from me about English. It was expository writing. The thing about Navajos that was extremely interesting to me was that it was very difficult for them to write narratives in English, but if you asked them to describe a mesa or an arroyo, suddenly they had these English skills you didn't know they had. Whoa! These are people who really pay attention to what is right there, what the landscape is.

**It seems to me they might have been among your teachers in that respect, because you do that in your poetry. You look at what's right there.**

Oh, yeah! I think part of the reason English narrative was hard for them is that their whole sense of time is not linear, it's circular. Something I might have picked up from them is my tendency to write in present tense and try to render things as much as possible into what's seen right now. That's kind of a way of approximating circular because what's now is something that has been before and will be again.

### **Silica**

from a distance it seems  
 an Indian has dashed  
 a bottle against  
 the mesa wall  
 smashing the monster  
 of delirium tremens  
 before it reappears —  
 but look closer Anglo  
 this translucent rock  
 is laid in sheets  
 of luminescence  
 an icy fragment  
 lifted in the hand

is lens to the land  
 below, framed by Yei  
 whose bodies comprised  
 rainbows  
 before the Flood  
 when the Navajo  
 ascended through a reed  
 to this Fifth Level  
 of horses, white men  
 and whiskey<sup>72</sup>

**The book is a collaborative work.<sup>73</sup> How did it come about?**

After we left the reservation, we moved to Safford, Arizona, and I was teaching there at the community college. Leonard Gorman was a Navajo student there, a photographer.

Gregg Baker was a photographer living in Crownpoint at the time I was in Safford.

Crownpoint is northeast of Gallup, about sixty miles. Way out there! It has a rug auction — I think now it's every month — and it's run by the Crownpoint Rug Weavers

Association. It's a cooperative mostly of women, and they congregate at the elementary school. They put all the rugs out on the tables before the auction begins, and you can go through them and feel the texture and see them up close. They're selling Navajo tacos on the side, and jewelry. It's a huge family affair. But at the same time, you've got these dealers from Santa Fe. They're there in their expensive clothing, and they're going to take what they buy at the rug auction and mark it up three times to sell it here.

**Dust Devil**

not like in Kansas  
 where tornadoes can  
 twist your house to splinters  
 more like the pattern  
 in a Navajo rug  
 that captures your eye  
 & would trap your soul

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<sup>72</sup> *Outcroppings from Navajoland*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> *Outcroppings* includes photographs from the Navajo Nation by Gregg D. Baker and Leonard Gorman.

if the weaver hadn't first  
 found her own way out  
 ...<sup>74</sup>

**This book feels like the result of an immersion experience. You're nowhere else; you're in the present moment.**

In some ways, I feel that whatever I said in that book about Navajo culture and mythology is superficial. It's what I could garner at a very high level. It seemed like every time I would find out something, there would always be two or three things underneath going on that I was totally oblivious to until somebody tipped me off. I was very fortunate to have close Navajo friends there, and they would tell me — a little bit!

I went to a Yei-bi-chei [a winter ceremony], and I was the only Anglo there. It was an all-night ceremony. It was actually the ninth day of a five-day ceremony because there was a mistake made in the recitation on the fourth or fifth day, and so they had to restart it. There's a certain point at which you can go back and restart that part of the ritual. So we were way out, longer than was originally intended for this because the medicine man had made a mistake and caught himself. And I think what they're doing is sort of the equivalent of Homer in terms of doing it all from memory, because it's really complex, the cycle of that.

**What brought you to Santa Fe, and what keeps you here?**

It came time to leave Safford, and Santa Fe had so many things going for it. I didn't want to live in a larger city like Albuquerque. The climate here, in general, like the climate in Lawrence, Kansas, is mild. I like the three major heritages represented here, the Native

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<sup>74</sup> *Outcroppings*, 40.

American, Hispanic, and Anglo, which are more or less living harmoniously, respecting each other without making it some sort of homogenous blend that is nothing.

Of course, I have a good job. Because of the Lannan Foundation reading series, all these world-class writers pass through, and a lot of really good writers are here. Arthur Sze is here, Miriam Sagan. Nathaniel Tarn is in the vicinity. He's my favorite translator of Neruda.

**When you came to visit us last year, to give a reading at the University of Kansas, I asked about the group of poets you meet with. Would you talk about how your meetings are organized?**

Sure. There are six poets, three women, three men. We try to meet every two weeks, usually on a Sunday afternoon. We have a protocol. We start by emailing each other a copy of a poem. Each writer is asked to bring one poem every time. When we start, the writer of the poem reads it, then seals his or her lips and doesn't say anything by way of explanation. We will have had time to review the poems, and we have standards whereby if we don't know a word we will have looked it up or Googled it.

Then we go through and talk about the intention of the poem, what it is trying to do. Then we talk about the emotion or the tone of the poem, and that gets a little confusing to me because some people interpret that as, how does the poem make me feel? But what is the tone of the *poem*? For example, if you write a rant that's really angry, well, the tone or emotion is anger, but that anger might not make the reader feel angry; the reader might feel sad.

Then we talk about what we like in the poem — what lines we like, what images, what concepts. Even if we don't feel the poem is an overall success, we like to find things we can praise in it, and there is always something. Then we talk about what is not clear to us, what word choices were not as precise as they might have been. Where does the rhythm seem to lag, and all the nitpicky things: Where has the tone become inconsistent, why is there a shift from this point of view to that one?

It's a pretty rigorous review. We can talk about one short poem for half an hour, so this is a full Sunday afternoon. The host has snacks, and we rotate.

**How long has this group been going?**

Since about 2000. There are three of us who have been together since then, and others have come and gone. It really helps! Part of it is the discipline of coming up with a poem every two weeks that you think is worth somebody else's consideration. It's amazing how things you think are perfectly clear are very muddy to other people, and it's not until they tell you why they're not understanding something that you can say, Oh, okay, well, I can remedy that. Or not.

**But you don't necessarily suggest fixes?**

We do! It can be — there's really a range — did you mean this word instead of that word? Or it could be more philosophical. Or, what if you wrote this, instead of third-person point of view, in first-person point of view? We might say, you might play with the point of view. We try to be tactful. And in the last part of the process, after we've exhausted our discussion, the poet will respond primarily by saying, this is what I was

trying to do, and can you talk more about your comment? Or, what would you think if I changed this? Sometimes while people are talking you'll get an idea — you'll say, do you think this would fix that problem? It's a good group.

**You told me you'd be writing this morning before I came over. Do you have a regular writing time?**

Yes, mornings. I get up at five or thereabouts, and I write as long as I can. If it's a workday, I write till about seven. And if it's a weekend, I can end up writing until past noon.

**That's a lot of writing.**

It is, and I end up throwing out a lot!

**But it sounds as if it's meditative for you.**

It is a kind of meditation, and I know I'm really in the zone when I've lost track of time. All of a sudden, I'll look up and say, whoa, it's 11:15!

**Do you have a new project in the works?**

Yeah, I have another book that's coming out from Sunstone, and it's called *The Number of Names*. I've actually submitted the final manuscript to them, although I'm sure they won't get to the production part of it until the end of this year. I've already got a couple of changes and one poem to add to it.

**What is the new book about?**

Well, of course, naming is what poets do. But some of the thematic underpinnings have to do with the kabbalah, in which it is said that God created the world by naming it, by naming individual things. They came into being. That idea is pretty fascinating to me.

It seems to me that numbering is an aspect of naming. The title poem is a list poem that has different things that are numbered. It could go on infinitely. As it is, it's three pages long. Also in that book there are a lot of poems about death. On a personal level, there are poems about my father's passing away and about other people who were close to me. There's a poem that is based on this photograph. [He takes a framed antique photograph down from the wall; it shows a large group of people holding stringed instruments, and he points to a man.] This is my grandfather, my father's father. He was gone before I was born. So there are references to music throughout the book and references to that grandfather. I'm not a musician, but I love music, and I think I got that in large measure from him.

**These threads really matter to us, and photographs help. I see your work as always following some thread.**

We're all following threads that our ancestors have laid down for us. It's all over us, genetically, personality-wise. One of the early poems in *The Number of Names* is called "Blaze," and it's about a trail blaze, an axe mark in a tree that says, this is the way to keep going. To me, that's a metaphor for what our ancestors have done for us. We keep coming across these blazes — oh, they did this before us. They knew the way. Or they took a wrong turn, too!

**Blaze**

Whose axe I followed here  
as an orphan trails the father  
he'll never know

Faith in this braille of the bark  
is all I know  
leading from tree to tree

through the seasons over the summit  
to this wilderness of mesquite  
thorns and boulders

Hesitation  
Lost among trunks  
Steps retraced

I squint into the dusk  
searching for the knotted hurt  
feeling the bark of older trees

for the scar  
that is the axe's candle  
for me

and for those who follow<sup>75</sup>

*for Don Lancaster*

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<sup>75</sup> Published in the late 1980s in *Amelia Magazine*, Bakersfield, Calif. The magazine has ceased publication and should not be confused with *Amelia's Magazine*, <http://www.ameliasmagazine.com/>.

**Kathleen Johnson:**

**Searching for a Spark**

*Johnson has roots in the Gypsum Hills, also known as the Red Hills or Cimarron Breaks, just north of the Oklahoma border in central Kansas. She lived in various parts of Oklahoma until she was twelve, when her family moved to Kansas. She studied art history at the University of Kansas in the 1970s and has worked as a free-lance book critic for many years. *Burn*, her first poetry collection, was published in fall 2008 by Woodley Press, Topeka, Kansas, as she was completing the Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing at KU. The following year, she moved from an acreage near Baldwin City, Kansas, to Santa Fe, where she also has family roots, and founded New Mexico Poetry Review. She published the first issue that fall. This interview came out of a correspondence that took place in fall 2008.*

**I know that *Burn* is a work that has been smoldering for many years. The theme of fire comes through naturally and with remarkable clarity — fire in its many incarnations: the cleansing prairie fire, the fire of life, the heat of desire, destruction of the body by “firewater,” the heat of summer, the longing for warmth in cold times, the creative spirit that comes upon someone like a tongue of fire at Pentecost (I’m thinking of your poem “Duende” here), and so on. I wondered how or when you became conscious that fire, with all its physical and symbolic meaning, had become a recurring theme in your poetry.**

I began noticing recurring motifs in my work several years ago. This bothered me

at first; I saw it as a weakness. Then I started realizing that my favorite writers did the same thing — they returned to certain subjects, sometimes obsessively. In Richard Hugo’s book *The Triggering Town*, he talks about this at some length. One point he makes: “If you must choose between being eclectic and various or being repetitious and boring, be repetitious and boring. Most good poets are, if read very long at one sitting.”

When I began assembling poems for *Burn*, I was influenced by the way many of my favorite poetry collections were put together. Almost all of Linda Bierds’ books, for example, are knitted together intricately with repeating themes, motifs, and images. I tried to put together the kind of book I most enjoy reading. Fire in its various incarnations is the most obvious theme I return to in the book, but there are several others that turn up repeatedly.

**I noticed the use of color, for instance, right away. Are there particular themes you want to mention?**

The color red is a dominant thematic symbol. I use quite a lot of color symbolism, but red absolutely bleeds through this book. “Bloomsday” begins with the Joycean epigraph, “shall I wear a red yes”; here red represents romantic passion and desire. But red colors many of the other poems, too, from “garnets glowing warm around my neck” to “northern lights shimmering red” to “Heat mirage of red,/eyelids closed against relentless sun.” The collection culminates with the image of O’Keeffe’s flaming-red canna, symbolizing both romantic and creative passion.

The moon — that favored image of poets — is another linking and fortifying symbol in the collection. For me, it stands for feminine intuition and power, the light of

imagination, and magic. Snakes are another repeating motif. They suggest threat and conflict.

The most important reason I chose fire as the overarching theme of the book, however, has to do with my plan to write a sequence of four collections themed on the elements — fire, earth, water, and air. I'm working on the earth book now. It will be called *Subterranean Red*.

**Georgia O'Keeffe Muses While Painting a  
Red Canna: A Rhapsody**

In the deep center, red and glowing, a slow burn  
spreading, an undercurrent running strong,  
the loud ring of a hammer striking  
something hard. So alive I could crack  
at any moment. So much like reaching to all  
creation. What lies beyond the flame, beyond  
my grasp? ... (*Burn*, 56)

**So, the four elements, not only fire, emerged as a natural theme in your writing?**

Yes, they've always been at play in my poems. Everything is always already there waiting, it seems. Maybe the most important thing we do as poets is pay attention to those preexisting patterns and follow through on thematic designs.

***Subterranean Red* sounds like fire, too.**

Those embers never do die down completely. Yes, the earth collection will also have some fire in it — and air and water. The dominant focus, however, will be on the earth theme. The title, *Subterranean Red*, was partly inspired by the red dirt of the Gyp Hills, also known as the Red Hills, the region of Kansas and Oklahoma where my family has owned farm and ranch land for several generations. My great-great grandfather, a poet

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.

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<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.

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<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.**

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<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

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<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.

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<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

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<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.

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<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

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<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.

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<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.

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<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**

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<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

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<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

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<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>

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<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.

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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*

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<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

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<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.

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**Amy Fleury**

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## **Nedra Rogers**

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## **Kim Stafford**

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