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**Interview with Stephen Meats**

**Pittsburg, Kansas**

**March 24, 1998**

Meats: What’s the ultimate purpose of this series of interviews you’re doing? What’s your goal?

Sheldon: What I’d like to do is pull together a collection of representative works of Kansas poets with interviews. I’ve seen collections of Kansas writers’ work, but not much discussion of their work, so I thought it might fill a need and be of interest to me, too.

M: There’s an attitude I run into quite a lot as poetry editor of *The Midwest Quarterly*. People in Kansas write poetry? My, what a surprise! I did this special issue, summer of ‘95, Great Plains poets. I turned away as many people as I accepted. Now I’m planning another Great Plains poetry issue in summer of ‘99 which will exclude everyone who was in the first GP issue [Laughs], another seventy-five poets from the ten Great Plains states. Then I’d like to put those two issues together in an anthology, just to lay to rest the notion that poets have congregated on the east and west coasts and left the middle pretty much empty.

S: I was amazed in starting this project. Someone would say you really need to talk to so-and-so, a poet I hadn’t even thought of, so it turned out I really had to limit the scope.—Anyway, I have a series of questions I’d like to ask, though it seems invariably that I’m two minutes into it and I jump to the end and back, but I thought maybe we’ll start with—and already I’m jumping over my first one—but I wondered: What effect does serving as poetry editor of *The Midwest Quarterly* have on your own writing? Is it beneficial or detrimental to read all that poetry?

M: I should explain that I haven’t actively been writing poetry since about 1991, but I’ve been poetry editor of *The Midwest Quarterly* since 1985, so in answering, I’ll be talking mainly about prior to 1991. But, the short answer to your question is that I didn’t find it to have much of an effect on my writing. [INTERVIEWER’S NOTE: Meats was able to resume writing poetry in about 2000-2001, so the hiatus he speaks of here turned out to be temporary.]

S: Really.

M: Probably the main effect was it took up time, but I didn’t feel myself influenced much by what I was reading. I always enjoyed reading submissions, but I never felt like there was much interplay. And now that I haven’t been writing poetry for a while, even though I read huge piles of *Midwest Quarterly* poetry submissions and admire a great deal of what I find there, and feel compelled many times to offer suggestions to writers about how to tighten up their work or brighten up the imagery or how to bring out what’s really at the heart of the poem when they’ve obscured it with unnecessary language or something like that, I don’t find myself feeling, gee, I ought to get back to writing, or, gosh, I could be doing that.

S: What caused you to stop writing?

M: Well, [Laughs] you don’t mind if I talk about some personal things?

S: No.

M: I don’t really think of myself as a poet. I never have. I’m an academic, a scholar and an administrator, who has had the good fortune to write a few poems. I look at the people I consider to be true poets, and what I see them doing is writing their lives. They have in their heart a kind of hunger, I think, that I had a little bit of for a time, maybe a kind of melancholy, a dissatisfaction of some sort, and the only thing that can bring things into a sense of order or rightness is writing, and if one’s whole life is consumed by that hunger, then you write your life. I had that feeling for a time, and then it stopped. From about 1978 until about, say, 1990, 12 or 13 years, I walked around and everywhere I looked, I saw a poem. I understood then what some of my artist friends had meant when I would ask how they decided to paint that drawer or that raincoat, and they would say, well, you look at it and you see your work of art, your painting, in the thing you’re looking at. That same thing started happening to me suddenly one day, and it kept going for a period of time, and then it stopped. And, I spent probably three or four years grieving over that stoppage, and then I quit that, too. I’ve tried writing poetry since then, and the thing that was in the poem that gave it the energy just isn’t there. I wrote some things that I thought were terribly clever, but it was just cleverness, and the essential thing that came from that hunger was no longer there. Now, something did happen to me, in May 1988, which may have been the beginning of the end. I had a small stroke that put me in the hospital. My right arm was paralyzed for a few hours. I came out of it, but after that, I don’t know, it just seemed like my values changed. I still enjoy the things that I wrote about, birds, trees, the natural world. Those things move me still, and I see great beauty there, but I don’t see poems when I look at them now. Of course, I feel incredibly fortunate, humbled even by the fact that for a very short time I was touched by the same mysterious hunger, even if only in a small way, that touched, say, Keats, or Blake, or Bly, all the great writers worthy the title of poet.

S: Has the editing, then, become the main thing for you, or is that—?

M: The editing satisfies some need in me to be a teacher, a facilitator, a helper. If someone shows me a construct of language, I can usually see ways to cut or to change or to sharpen it. I’ll sit there and look at a poem for a while, and it will kind of swirl around, this is someone else’s poem, then I’ll suddenly see how if you would just move this or delete that it would all fall into focus. I find almost as much satisfaction in doing that as I did in writing a poem. But, I can’t generate it myself now. You know, I can’t put the first word down on the blank page. Just doesn’t come. So, in addition to satisfying my urge to be a facilitator of others’ work, editing has become a substitute for that kind of creativity that I found through writing poetry. I could never have been an editor of poetry in that way, offering suggestions to other poets, if I hadn’t written poetry myself. But in some ways I actually think I’m a better editor of poetry, as a shaper and facilitator, than I am a poet. My own work doesn’t seem as good to me as many of the pieces I help other people revise, so I feel now that, as an editor, I’ve moved beyond anything I ever was as a poet.

S: If we can sidestep for just a minute to *The Midwest Quarterly*. Is it, as it appears, pretty robust? Lots of literary mags in Kansas are not, and some have even gone out of business.

M: Yeah, I know. Well, *MQ* lives on the edge. It has a modest subsidy from the university. The editor in chief, Jim Schick, is given one course of release time from teaching to do the editing and handle the business end of the enterprise, not nearly enough to compensate for the enormous amount of time it takes to run a major journal, of course, but it’s at least something. The other people on the editorial board volunteer their time. I don’t get any release time for the poetry editing. We have six hundred to seven hundred paid subscribers. Quite a few of them, I think, are poets whose work has appeared there, but I suppose most of the subscriptions, a vast majority, probably more than five hundred, are library subscriptions, most of those university libraries, I’m sure. So, though it’s not earning huge profits [Laughter], I think *The Midwest Quarterly* is in no danger of going under. Here a few years ago, when state schools were undergoing a round of budget cuts, there was some talk in the administration about maybe dropping it. Jim Schick talked to me about it and to other people on the editorial board, and we decided, as a gesture to indicate our willingness to share in the reductions, that we’d cut the number of pages in each issue by about 25%. Since that time, though, it’s been relatively stable. I don’t know if I’d call it robust, but it’s certainly not in any danger of collapsing. There hasn’t been any talk in recent years of seeing it as somehow superfluous to our mission. And certainly there’s no shortage of submissions. I don’t know how many essays Jim gets, but he already has issues filled through the end of 1999. I receive somewhere around 4,000 poems a year from roughly 800 or so poets and publish sixty. Fifteen poems per issue, and all my issues for the next year are already full. There’s been no sign that poets are going to submit any less, so it seems healthy. But, I don’t expect it to suddenly have a glossy cover [Laughter] with four-color photography or anything like that. I think it’s going to remain just as it is.

S: If we can move to your book—

M: Sure, sure.

S: Denise Low, in her introduction, makes a comparison between the metaphors in your poems and John Donne’s metaphysical conceits. I read the book the first time before I read the introduction—

M: That’s wise, usually, yeah. [Laughter]

S: But, I remember thinking, yeah, there is that sort of extremity in the images, but, I found myself in some places shaken out of the complacency that sometimes you fall into, really having to work to keep what was going on in a poem all in my head at the same time. “False Spring,” for example, is one that works that way, where the poem makes some surprising moves. I guess, first, is that a calculated strategy, or do you find yourself in the midst of the process of writing the poem deciding to make those jumps?

M: I rarely knew where a poem was going when I caught the first part of it. Probably, in the particular poem you’re talking about, it’s more like somewhere in my awareness, without my even necessarily knowing it, were certain things lying around, and a particular thing, a catalyst, would suddenly come to mind and attract these other things to it like a magnetic. In this case, there were probably two or three catalytic elements. One was the opening image of the cardinal at the bird feeder, and the connection between that and the pumping of the blood through the heart. What follows in the poem is basically what was in my mind on that particular day. Things I saw on TV. The story about the mother and the father fighting over the child who had almost drowned. The line of caribou—this was a nature show—going across the hills. The polar bear hunting seals along the coast. The Weather Channel [Laughs] with its big maps. But mostly it was the cardinal and this whole notion of circulation and blood, and carnage, really, violence at the heart of everything. Even the cardinal and his mate. One is eating while the other is standing sentinel. Watching for the cat, or whatever it might be that would put them in danger. Maybe that polar bear [Laughter] looking for a snack would come out from behind the sycamore tree [Laughter]. Beauty and danger, whether it’s human or animal. Seasonal, even. I say in the poem that it’s been spring warm. The crocuses have come up, and all of a sudden we have an ice storm. So, those things just came together when I was standing there looking out the window in the morning at the bird feeder on the sycamore, with the spirea bushes there, and the two birds going back and forth. Now, the writing of the poem itself took months after that, but once I saw that those things were connected somehow, it was just a matter of figuring out how to connect them in the poem. That was a puzzle and a struggle. But as far as calculation goes, no. Though something that’s developed in my view of what makes a good poem is that it has to make the reader move beyond comfort. That is, take leaps across big dark spaces that they wouldn’t ordinarily contemplate. But, did I have that theoretical notion in mind in the writing of that particular poem? I would say, no. That’s something that developed out of my practice and out of studying poetry that I admired, like Bly’s notion of leaping poetry. Or even looking back at, say, Coleridge or Blake, both of whom had the ability with certain images to just rivet you and pull you completely out of yourself. I think of Blake’s “angel with the bright key” in “The Chimney Sweeper.” He just suddenly sweeps you from a familiar scene into a totally alien, even if imaginary, landscape. I admired that kind of poetry. That’s what I found energy in, so that’s what I found myself doing.

S: In her introduction, Denise mentions something about your poetry taking the reader as far as they can go and then returning to familiar places, though on the return “something is oddly altered, like furniture rearranged.” It struck me that in that going out and coming back, in that journey, imagination seems to be an important element. You’ve mentioned a couple of time the influence of Bly, but I was also struck by a similarity to Wallace Stevens, his use of imagination. Is that accurate do you think?

M: I admire Wallace Stevens tremendously. One of my keystone images is “light is the lion that comes down to drink” in Stevens’s poem “The Glass of Water.” The connection he makes between light and the lion imbues these almost impossibly dissimilar things with light and life. Even the similarity of the words themselves, light and lion and life, to me indicates that this is where the heart of things is, and is what I am trying to bring out, too, in my poems. And the imaginative journey out and back. Since I was a child I have been very sensitive to seasonal cycles, the great circle of life. Watching trees bud, then leaf out into full foliage, and then the color change and fall, and the bareness in the winter, and then watching it all over again. The cardinal and the mate, too, in “False Spring,” the circular sense of that image occurs in many of the poems in my book. It’s not something that I deliberately calculate, but the circular nature of things moves me and engages my imagination. You could probably trace it back to Blake with his cycle of innocence through experience and then back to innocence, but changed with the return. Probably some affinity there with Yeats’s gyre, also, a circular motion that progresses through time. It’s just something I felt. Something I could make poetry out of.

S: I said that there were two things. Imagination was one. And also, and I may be pushing it a bit, but I was thinking in reading a poem like “Coastline,” for instance, or “(In Dark Places).” There’s this movement in the book between the plains and the coast, and I was thinking of Stevens going from Hartford down to Florida. Living in Kansas would have given you that awareness of seasons. I spent a year in California in the desert, and was at a loss because there weren’t those seasons, but the Florida coast is a place that’s removed in so many ways from the plains. How has that, because you lived there for a while—

S: I said that there were two things. Imagination was one. And also, and I may be pushing it a bit, but I was thinking in reading a poem like “Coastline,” for instance, or “(In Dark Places).” There’s this movement in the book between the plains and the coast, and I was thinking of Stevens going from Hartford down to Florida. The Florida coast is removed in so many ways from the plains. How has that, because you lived there for a while—

M: Seven years.

S: —how has that affected your poetry, do you think?

M: The west coast of Florida, the gulf, is the coast I sat on for seven years watching the sun go down, rather than the sun rise, so there’s lots of sunset imagery. Also, the gulf reminded me of the plains I grew up on, where you could see a thunderstorm coming a long way off. Also, the surface of the gulf was pretty calm, so I think I felt an affinity there, like looking out over a field of bluestem or of wheat and seeing the wind play in the grass or the grain, seeing the wind play with the surface of the water, watching the birds, the gulls. When I was working on farms as a teenager, plowing, I often saw gulls circling behind the plow or the disc or the harrow or whatever it was, you know, so the gulls on the beach brought that back to me. I felt a connection between those two landscapes. It wasn’t something I consciously connected, but it came out intuitively in my poetry. Of course there aren’t four seasons in Florida. It’s more like one and a half seasons [Laughter], or maybe two. But, I felt the similarity of the two landscapes, the flatness, the vista. And the sunsets. The going down into dark is the time of day that moves me, just as autumn is the time of year. I think Keats’s “To Autumn” was the first poem I ever really truly understood, and so I feel that affinity in myself, but so far as the water and the prairie goes, it’s just that they’re similar landscapes. I just happened to stumble onto that. It was coincidental.

S: Would you mind reading that poem?

M: No, not at all. The title, “(In Dark Places),” by the way, comes out of a Bly poem. I can’t remember which one now, but the title is a tacit acknowledgment of my debt to Robert Bly. Can I talk about it a little bit before I read it?

S: Sure, sure.

M: This is, I think, the fourth successful poem I wrote. If you’re interested in what the others are. The first three were “Mother” and “Fossils,” and an unsuccessful poem about a mockingbird that I later salvaged a part of that became the end of “Bright River.” I wrote all three the same day, the same evening actually. And then I struggled with writing poems for quite some time after that without success, until I came up with a draft of this poem, which seemed more successful, but it was more than fifty lines long. I showed it to Duane Locke, whose name I mention here in the back. He’s still a poet in Florida, and I worked with him as an assistant editor on the *UT Review* for several years before I wrote any poetry. Anyway, I had showed him those other three poems, and he said, you’ve got something here. These are rough, but they are actual poems. So, of course, after struggling so long, I was eager to show him the fifty-line version of this poem. He read it carefully, and then all he said to me was, I think you have the mistaken notion that writing poetry is easy. So I took the draft and cut, cut, cut, cut, and what I had left was the four line poem you see here. And that’s why the extra spaces are in there among the words and phrases, because I felt the absence of all that material that I had left out.

[Reads]

**(In Dark Places)**

Twilight lightning slaps the gulf

In a gull’s throat I hear rusty hinges

Or is it unoiled limping windmill blades

In the bushes rain claps its hands

S: There’s that juxtaposition of the—

M: Right, of the gulf and the prairie. The rusty hinges. That’s the sound of the screen door hinges on the backdoor of the little farm house I grew up in. The windmill was the old rusty windmill in the pasture toward the creek, and, of course, the first and last lines refer to the gulf. This is a description, as most of my poems are, of an actual happening. I wrote down what happened, though at first I thought a lot more had happened [Laughter} than just this. I was looking out over the gulf just before sunset and watching at a distance the lightning of several small thunderstorms striking the water, and then at a particular moment, I heard the cry of a gull that I misperceived as the sound of those rusty screen door hinges that I had not heard since I was ten years old, and then in an almost instantaneous second misperception, it became the sound of the uneven creaking of the windmill, and then an instant later, big fat drops of rain started flap, flapping into the oleander bushes and that brought me back. In those few seconds, I had traveled in my imagination not just back home to the prairie, but also back into my childhood, and then the sound of the rain recalled me to the gulf coast and the present. That’s what this poem evokes for me. Sometimes people read this poem and ask, what does it mean? It just seems to be images, and I say, well, that’s basically what it is, because that to me is what a poem means, not some moral or platitude you can reduce it to, but what its images evoke. But this poem makes you leap a long way.

S: Thank you, by the way, for the story about cutting the lines. It’s similar to Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” where he has that larger piece that he cuts down to almost nothing—

M: I hadn’t thought of that. Right.

S: The image of the limping windmill appears in another of your poems.

M: Right, earlier in the book. “A Child Falls Asleep.”

S: Would you mind reading that one?

M: No, no. This is a poem about childhood.

[Reads]

**A Child Falls Asleep**

to the child

in bed

in the cold

lean-to

off the kitchen

the rusty turning

of the windmill

in the dark

is his father

limping

across the pasture

toward home

S: The windmill takes on almost a mythic identity, it seems like, and with the limping—

M: Well, my father—actually a lot of the men in my family had a congenital twisted right leg. You could always tell when my father was tired, especially as he got older, because he would limp on that right leg. There’s a picture of him when he was about a year and a half old standing on a high chair with a dress on. This was about 1915, and back then infants, even the boys, wore these little white embroidered christening dresses, and his legs below the hem of that dress were bowed like this [shows with fingers] [Laughter]. But that limp was something that always reminds me of him. But the windmill— When I was a child, my father worked in town, and I was very connected to my father emotionally, but I didn’t see much of him because of his job. He drove a truck delivering gas and oil to farmers when I was the age of the child in the poem. He would leave early in the morning before I was awake, and particularly in the summer, during harvest, he didn’t get home until all hours, and I missed him, and frequently I would go to bed and cry because I hadn’t seen my dad all day. So, this poem is about the sorrow of the child I was then, lying in bed, missing his father, and listening to the windmill in the perpetual Kansas wind. It was an old windmill, and it turned unevenly—[makes sound of turning windmill]—like that, you know, and with that rusty sound coming across the pasture toward the house, I suppose, just going into the first stages of sleep, dream, that sound became for me my father, tired after a long day working in the fields, limping across the pasture. Of course, he never would have walked home in the dark across the fields, but that memory embroidered by my child’s imagination is what became that poem.

S: I’ve heard Kansas artists say that they will go out of their way to avoid including windmills and quilts in their work. But it struck me that these things appear in your poems in a context that’s radically different from the clichés we’re used to.

M: Well, obviously I tell my own poetry writing students to avoid sentimentality like the plague [Laughter], but the truth is that sentiment and emotion—sentimentality and true emotion—are separated by the thinnest of lines. It’s very easy to slip from one into the other. In fact, in reading the very same poem, what one reader might see as sentimentality or cliché, another one might find very moving. Denise Low helped me edit my book, and we had a big fight over the word “tears” in the poem “Bright River.” She felt it was sentimental. Yet, I felt, in that case, that the sentimentality suggested by the word was subverted. So, yeah, I can see how those things have become clichés. Out on the plains, the old windmill against the sunset. But, for me, those images are very powerful and evocative. I couldn’t avoid them so I had to look for ways to revitalize them, because they moved me, not with nostalgia, but as somehow emblematic of life and death.

S: You’ve mentioned Locke and Bly and Blake. First of all, what other significant influences brought you to poetry? And what pushed you over the edge into writing?

M: A mockingbird. [Laughs]

S: A mockingbird.

M: Well, two actually. When I was in graduate school, I studied a lot of poetry. Since getting my doctorate, I’ve taught a lot of poetry. All the way from Shakespeare through to contemporary poets. Felt like I understood it. I also, though, have had a desire to write that goes back deep into my childhood, as well. But no matter how hard I tried to write poetry, I had never been able to write a poem that actually seemed like it had the right stuff. Then one night, after going to a poetry reading that Duane Locke gave at the University of Tampa, I went home and started reading a draft of someone’s master’s thesis. As I sat there at the dining room table reading and marking, a mockingbird began singing outside in the dark. Fortunately, it was fall, so I didn’t have the air conditioner on and the windows were open. So I was reading and listening, and all of a sudden found myself remembering a couple of summers previously when I’d helped a friend catch a mockingbird that had gotten into her house and was scaring her kids. This was in Columbia, South Carolina. I managed to trap the bird and carried it in my hands to the front door and let it go. Under the spell of that mockingbird’s song outside my window, I set the master’s thesis aside and started writing a poem, trying to anyway, about the feeling of that bird flying out of my hands. And lots of other things about mockingbirds came into it, and there were some things in there about my mother, and my father had died not long before, so that got into it, and some other things about fossils, and cosmic time, and geological time, and I suddenly realized that there were several poems there all mixed up. So I started trying to separate them and got the mockingbird poem going, and then the fossils poem. The other stuff about my mother I thought was just distraction, waste, and I had no idea what to do with the stuff about my father, so I laid that aside, too. I actually finished two, the fossil poem and the mockingbird poem. And then went to bed in an extreme state of excitement, because I was aware as it was happening that this was something entirely different, that something bigger had taken hold of me. I lay there awake for two or three hours, and finally got up about four in the morning and sat down at the typewriter and wrote the poem “Mother” in one rush. It just burned as it came out, like hot vomit, and I cried violently as I typed it out. So, that was what moved me to start writing, that mockingbird [Laughs].

S: “Mother” seems like another poem made out of a childhood memory. Would you read that poem?

M: Sure. Sure. Most of the poems in the first section of my book are about childhood, or my children or family. That’s one of the themes that holds them together. And, again, this is something that I remember as actually happening, though my mother tells me it didn’t [Laughter]. So it’s a memory of something that that child that I was imagined.

[Reads]

**Mother**

Once when I was a child

in the middle of a Kansas blizzard

I looked into my parents’ oil stove

through mica panes in its door

and saw three gray and black birds

with orange eyes

walking in the midst of the fire.

I called my mother to see.

She took a mop handle

and smashed those birds

into piles of ash.

M: Well, that poem. I know what it’s about now. When I first wrote it, I didn’t. I just knew that it upset me tremendously. But now I realize, on the one hand, that it’s about the struggle I felt to hang onto my imagination, against the influences around me—that my mother here takes the bad rap for [Laughter]—the influences that seemed in league somehow to control it, or even crush it like happens to the birds in the fire. The other thing there is the mother. In one sense it’s not my mother at all. It’s just the parent or the wicked stepmother or conventionalism or conformity, or whatever it is that takes imaginative, wild, free spirited children and turns them into suits. But I think the pain I felt writing the poem indicated that it also expressed some intuitive realization I had about a coldness, maybe even a deeply submerged antipathy at the heart of my relationship with my mother.

S: My family lived on the edge of town in Emporia, when I was really young, on what had been an old ranch. And I noticed a lot of things, birds and such, but it wasn’t until I was an adult that I started trying to put names to them. In your poems, you are always very specific about naming things. Was that something you came to early on, as a child, or was that later?

M: Knowing the names of things, when I was growing up, particularly the animals and the birds that were around where we lived, was something that just came naturally. Crows and cardinals and orioles, blue jays. Badgers, possums, coyotes. Then I went away to college and later into graduate school and then into teaching, and started a family and all that, and when I moved back to Kansas in the fall of ’79, I found that I had forgotten the names of many of the birds that I had grown up with. So I set out to learn them all over again. Now, if I read a poem sent in to *The Midwest Quarterly* in which someone says that a bird sang on a branch, I find that it doesn’t satisfy me. I want to know what kind of bird it was and what kind of branch it was sitting on. [Laughter] Although I’m not an expert in any sense of the word, I am an avid backyard bird watcher. I’m not somebody who has the outfit and the scope and who rushes off to the jungles of Guatemala or somewhere else exotic to see the only annual appearance of the rare whatever. That’s not my kind of bird watching. In fact, I like nothing more than watching the birds that come to my back yard every day, seeing the same species over and over again. But, yeah, the particular name. Poetry is made out of particulars. So even plurals bother me a bit. It’s THE cardinal, that particular cardinal that was coming to the feeder on my sycamore on that particular day. That was an important bird. It had in it as sacred a bit of the life force as I do.

S: The reason that I ask, I’m thinking of the title poem. And I know there are all sorts of problems asking writers, did you mean to do this, but when you structured the book, putting “Looking for the Pale Eagle” at the front, was that in a way a set of directions for the reader as to how to read the book?

M: Absolutely. And also, how to walk through life. To keep on looking. I guess, like Whitman, I believe that the most extraordinary meanings are contained in the most common things, like his leaves of grass. Those red-winged blackbirds that I talk about in the poem. You’ve seen so many of, you’re tired of seeing them. They’re clichés like windmills and quilts. But if you quit looking, you’ll never see the detail that brings it all back to life. That restores its vitality and particularity. So you keep on looking, and that spectacular moment of new seeing will come. That is part of it. But another part is the incredible, spectacular variety of the natural world itself, which is there all the time. And that’s why the wind in the poem laughs. I think I’ve discovered something special when I see for the first time that golden underlining of the red epaulet. And it does open my vision up, and not just my vision at the moment, but my vision in memory. Seeing suddenly the way the sun is reflecting off the water in that ditch where I saw the blackbird, then remembering the light reflecting off the plowed ground when I was driving through Tennessee, and then the light shining off each particular scale of a cottonmouth—these were memories of actual things I had seen at different times. I didn’t just make them up. That cottonmouth was sunning itself on a fallen cypress tree where I was fishing on the Combahee River in South Carolina. I looked over and there it was. I was that close to it. And then comes the surrealistic image of the pale eagle rising in the moon’s face. That’s the path that I traveled from seeing this spectacular thing, the little golden underlining, into memory and then into the realm of the imagination, and that path is there for everybody, and the wind just laughs because it was there all the time.

S: I read that, and I immediately flashed to other poems. And one of them, I can’t think of the title, but it’s by William Stafford, and he talks about this antelope in the grass—

M: Right, right.

S: —and Stephen Hind’s landscape where, if you sort of get out of yourself, but you’re still paying attention, you’ll get beyond the clichés, and see the thing —

M: Right. Exactly.

S: —and I wondered if that’s a notion that is particularly suited to Kansans given the nature of our geography.

M: Our landscape is subtle. You can look across it and see nothing. It’s very austere. I’ve lived by the ocean, and I’ve seen the magnificence of an ocean storm. I’ve lived in Colorado in the mountains, on the Rampart Range, and watched the sun set behind Pike’s Peak every day in the most incredible light show you can image. And all of that is grand and wonderful, but you’ll never see anything like that on the plains. So, you have to look through this apparently featureless façade that the prairie puts up to you to see what’s really there. But, the spectacle of the sunset over Pikes Peak is just as blinding to real vision as the austerity and blankness of the prairie landscape, it seems to me. They both obscure the potential for the real connection between your spirit and the spirit of the natural world, which is kind of what my writing is all about, really.

S: I hadn’t thought about it in that way, but that sunset in the Rockies is almost a sort of touristy thing.

M: It’s a post card. It’s grand, but it’s a cliché. Here, though, for tourists we have to put antlers on jackrabbits.

S: Getting back to the title poem. It begins “The world is winking at us all the time.” Is that winking somewhat tongue in cheek?

M: Sure. Just like the wind laughing. This is a poem that has two sides to it. It inspires as it deflates. If you walk out under the prairie sky at night—even though there’s nothing but open space there—there’s no room there for pretension. The human being should feel small there. The natural world is in charge. It’s the thing that has the energy; it’s has the power. The human being has the privilege of perceiving that, and articulating it, if you’re really lucky. So, yeah, the gold underlining is a wink, or the sunlight on the ditch water—the gilding of the garbage dump, but it’s still a garbage dump—so the winking builds up at the same time it deflates. And the wink is only momentary, almost as if nature winks only as it wills. And your job is to keep looking until suddenly it gives you that moment of grace.

S: You mentioned the jump in that poem to the imagination. And I think of another poem that makes that leap maybe much quicker. “The Night Venus Climbed the Oak Tree.” [Laughter] You’re watching the stars, and you have this notion of Venus as this strapping woman, climbing a tree, but then suddenly, well, no, it’s this spider skimming across the water. Then you make another leap to the three wise men following the star. And you say, they’re not looking for a savior. They’re just curious how far their spider of desire could ride the tension. And I was thinking of Richard Hugo’s book *Triggering Town*, and that notion of taking a poem in one direction, and then pulling the trigger to the real poem. Is that— Could you just talk about the composition of that poem?

M: That poem is the only one I ever composed mostly in my head before I ever wrote down a word of it. That doesn’t mean that once I got it written down I didn’t do a lot of revising. I did. But, I actually wrote most of the first draft in my head. I had an old house in Pittsburg on Olive Street that had a hammock out on the second floor deck, and as I was lying there one evening, watching the stars come up, I began writing this poem in my mind. After about two or three hours, when I went inside to write it down, I had it done through the point of the spider. The three wise men didn’t come into it until I was writing it down. I didn’t actually anticipate that they would jump in there at the end, but I had been thinking a lot about religion at the time, about how far wrong religion had gone, and so that may be the reason they come in there at the end. Anyway, I was watching the stars rise, and I had this notion, maybe with a bit of jealousy since I’m a man of stout proportions, that they were floating, you know, like athletes with trim figures seem to defy gravity, and then here came Venus, which may really have been Jupiter, but Venus worked better in the poem. She just came right up through the limbs, right up the trunk. It was amazing, and this was the language that occurred to me as I was watching all this. When I finally went inside to write it down, all I could find were some of those advertisement inserts that fall out of magazines, you know? My wife had apparently been reading a magazine there and had just thrown them out on the couch, but I was too full of it to go look for a blank sheet of paper, so I wrote it down as fast as I could in the margins of those ]Laughter]. So, that’s basically the history of that poem.

S: So, for you, does it most often begin with an image or a series of images rather than a line or words, or is there some of both?

M: Images and words. Usually, it’s a particular thing I see, and words come with it. There’s another poem in the book that has a line in it, “pale cattle grazing in the fields of dusk.” I was driving back from Kansas City one day, and as the sun was going down, I saw these white cattle in a shadowy part of a pasture, and against the sunset they looked pale. The instant I saw them, the words where there, too, “pale cattle grazing in the fields of dusk.” That’s the way things come to me most of the time, and then I just have to find the poem to put them in.

S: In your poems, there’s this movement between light and dark. I was troubled by it originally. You’ve got these sections, “Bright River” and “(In Dark Places),” and I think I brought to the reading of the poems in those sections certain conventional expectations. But in “Bright River,” there’s certainly the antithesis there, moments of darkness in some of the poems, and in “(In Dark Places),” some wonderful light moments. “Reading Poetry Outdoors Poses Hazards” [Laughter], and “If the Inquisition Had Come to Coffee,” which is a wonderfully charming poem. I think it finally occurred to me on a conscious level in our discussion a little earlier when you were talking about the sunset in Florida, that you’re not dealing with the traditional clichéd meanings of light and dark—

M: No.

S: Light is not necessarily positive and dark isn’t necessarily negative.

M: Not at all. Sometimes light, like the sun in that poem, “If the Inquisition Had Come to Coffee,” highlights certain things so you see them in a new way. Sometimes it obscures. Sometimes darkness is a place where unpredictable and frightening things happen, and sometimes it’s a place where good things happen. It’s like the image of the moon in “Pale Eagle.” The moon is a cliché. You have to be very careful if you write a poem about the moon. But if you can actually, against all odds, come up with a fresh way of seeing it, it gains power by being wrested from the jaws of cliché. That thing that’s a cliché is only a cliché because it’s had the same conventional meaning attached to it so much that it’s become a cliché. My feeling is that experience belies cliché. If you look at something like light and dark and you immediately assign positive and negative meanings to them, then your imagination is imprisoned by cliché. If you look at the moon and see the man in the moon, then you’re not actually seeing the moon; you’re seeing what you’ve been brainwashed to see. But if you can break through those layer upon layer of clichés that conventional perception has encased us in, then you can trust your experience, your perception to be fresh, original, and the trick is, of course, finding language to convey that freshness and originality. Reading is the key there, I think.

S: In the last section of your book, and especially the last poem, “Prairie Quilting,” you seem to be deliberately pulling all this together, the light and dark, the coast and the plains, and various other things.

M: Yeah. Now that was a deliberate exploitation of a cliché, the quilt. But it also represents a conscious attempt to highlight things that might be considered feminine or domestic as expressions of my own feminine side, my domestic side, a very strong domestic side, actually. Anyway, the quilt is the central image, and all those descriptions of what the men did and what the women did, as well as the blurring of historical eras, these were things that I had read about or had seen or heard talked about in my family history. So I started with my own experience, and then tried to connect it with all the rest, the generations of my family, the farming civilization on the plains, the crops in the fields, the sky, the wild birds, the scarce water, the rivers, the tractors and the trucks and the cars, the incredible vitality of all this activity, wild and domestic and human and non-human and plant and wind and sky, that I was a part of all that, but the things that held it all together were very fragile—and depended on this tension, like in the Venus poem, the tension that somehow holds it all up or holds it all together, very fragile.

S: You mention at the end of the poem that if the stitching is too tight that the fabric can tear or the thread can break, and if it’s too loose, it won’t hold.

M: Somehow it all manages to be at exactly the right equilibrium, most of the time.

S: But I was thinking, those people who are expecting the cliché, though, are going to be surprised, as they move toward the end. There’s love, yes, but there’s also lust and force and hate and fear.

M: The child who is the result of the conception doesn’t know whether the parents loved each other or not. It’s just the fact of biology. But the life force is carried forward. Whatever the attitude of the breeding pairs, whether they’re birds or bears or people, the life force is carried forward, and that’s part of the tension that holds the whole fabric together. The life force has to go forward.

S: You’ve talked about your childhood and the influence it had. There’s another poem in the first section that may not initially strike the reader as a poem about childhood, but it sets up a lot of what follows it, and that’s “Paths”. Would you mind reading that?

M: Sure. This is also a poem I wrote early on, shortly after my father’s death, as a number of the poems in the book were, and in it, I tried to express, living in Florida, how I was feeling about my father’s death and my connection to this land back here.

[Reads]

**Paths**

Not square mile roads

that grid burned into the prairie land by law

and paved with the bones of forty million buffalo

but prairie paths

paths that fall from the feet of animals

paths where the wind wanders

where rain runs and laughs and hides under stones

paths that curl into the bends of creeks and rivers

step lightly across where wooden legs of bridges

leave no footprints

run along contours of limestone bluffs

like wrinkles on my father’s brow

S: That seems another example of that pulling of the trigger at the end. The simile of the father is a somewhat elemental figure, and a sort of grounding influence, too. Is that an accurate reading of that?

M: Yeah. I was trying to come to terms with my father’s death. I had put him into the soil, and I was trying to find some way of connecting my affection for him and my loss with my affection for the landscape that I had grown up in and my loss of that as well, since I was living in Florida at that time and didn’t know I would be moving back. But indicting at the same time the human or legal forces that had destroyed part of the landscape or defaced it, or seemed out of harmony with the creatures and the land itself. Of course, seeing my father’s face in the limestone bluff was, I guess, though I didn’t see any of this at the time, was the ultimate sort of harmony. My origin, his origin, out of the soil, back into the soil, back into the landscape, and seeing there the path that I would follow as well.

S: There is in that poem and in some of the others a political or an ethical stance. I’m thinking of “The Spiked Wolf of New Straw.” You’ve got it gnawing bones that will still be lethal ten thousand thousand years from now, referring to the Wolf Creek Plant. And “Elephants Attack Village,” [Laughter] some funny lines in it. They didn’t interview any piano keys.

M: Right.

S: I asked this question of Chris Cokinos, also, who often writes with a political agenda. There is in some camps a hesitance to write a poem that is politically charged—

M: In my camp, too.

S: Well, that’s my question. Did those poems feel different in the writing? Were you somehow aware that this was, say, different than a poem about childhood or the landscape?

M: No, in my view they fit in together. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be in the book. You’ll notice that in the poems with the political stance, I’m not necessarily standing with the Greenpeace people or the conservationists and environmentalists and demanding, oh, we must preserve this at all costs, or we must not pollute that. You don’t find that kind of strident political statement coming out of these poems. I may be against pollution and for conservation, but that’s not what I’m writing about. I’m writing about how people get so inflated with a sense of their specialness that they think they’re immune to the natural laws that govern the rest of the planet, and that we can therefore mess with nature with impunity. That we can slaughter forty million bison and not put into serious jeopardy our own place in the natural landscape and our own role in the natural evolution of things. We build a nuclear generating plant north of Burlington, and the radioactivity that it produces is going to change the earth for thousands of years, and we don’t seem to realize that it’s going to come back on us. So that’s as deep as the politics go there, that human beings somehow think they are immune to the forces of extinction and evolution that have shaped the planet for billions of years. We are part of it. We’re not going to escape. As I say there, the wolf and the bison and the Osage were here before us and now are gone—now we are here, taking our turn, and eventually the landscape itself will still be left here after we’re gone, and we will have had a hand in our own demise. That’s as deep as my politics go.

S: You seem to touch on that same arrogance quietly in the poem “Cottonwoods.” The speaker is complaining about the uselessness of cottonwoods, and then at the end there is a shift away from a human definition of usefulness to a series of images showing cottonwoods as an integral part of nature.

M: Well, in a way my view on this is all tied to what I think are the qualities of a great poet. The things that I now see that I was aspiring toward, but had no hope of ever coming close to. I mentioned a little while ago, hunger, the hunger has to be there. Passion. Maybe the passion and the hunger are the same thing. Compassion that extends to all life. Humility, and that’s the main thing I’m writing about in “Spiked Wolf” and “Cottonwoods,” that no one individual, and no race, not even the whole human race, can afford to be arrogant. Certainly the poet has to be humble in the face of language, in the face of the natural world which gives us everything, and by extension, the human race has to be humble as well. Humility. It would be nice to think that the human race would acquire humility, bit I don’t see it happening, really, the humility which does not take upon itself any kind of specialness that claims an immunity to the very things that govern all life and all processes.

S: There’s a poem that I think pulls together a lot of these issue, or maybe I’m wishing I’m right about that [Laughter], but no I think it really does touch upon several of the things we’ve talked about, and that is “Another Windy Night on Olive Street.” Would you mind reading that?

M: No, but, again, let me talk about it a bit first. My wife used to work midnight to eight. She was a police officer here in Pittsburg. Having her out on the street policing was not conducive to sleep [Laughter] for me. So this one night I was sitting there after she left for work, trying to read, folding laundry, anything to distract my hands or my mind. There was quite a wind blowing, and the old frame house we lived in was creaking a bit. And I suddenly had this image come to mind of a scrap of paper tumbling in the wind across a dark field into a fencerow. And that’s how this poem started.

[Reads]

**Another Windy Night on Olive Street**

What little sleep I was starting is now

a scrap of paper tumbling somewhere

across the dark fields. In the past hour

the wind has battered this old frame house so hard

the creaking has made me half-seriously think

that it might explode in kindling-sized pieces

as in a tornado, or be pulverized

like the test structures in those

atomic blast pictures. A broad pattern

in the grain of the oak table in front

of me is like a diagram of shock waves.

I peek through my secret window

in the top gable and see a sight that makes

me laugh: trucks are dumping scrap metal

at the trailer park. A tornado is piecing

trailers back together and setting them

carefully on their foundations. This

winds seems to be blowing everything

in reverse. Dead leaves are flying

into the trees. The ash and elm and sycamore

I see from my window have shrunk to saplings.

Creeks are running backwards. Rain is leaping

from earth to sky, and the oak across

the street throws the lightning bolt that split it

back at the clouds. Iron in my water pipes

swirls back to the mines. Skeletons

clatter out of the ground in cemeteries

all over town. On the prairie, fences

are coming down, roads are blowing away,

road cuts are filling in. Elk, wolf, grizzly,

and bison materialize out of the sod.

I try to protest as things alive shrink to nothing

and things dead return to life, but the only sound

I can make is the rough carol of grackles

in the cedars. I search for my pulse, but feel

only the dark rhythm of antelope

galloping with the wind across the plains.

S: In that, you, at the end, disappear into the rough carol of the blackbirds and the antelope. The way things were here, in essence, before people. Like, I suppose, all residents of Kansas and the great plains, you live in a place that has been often, and still is, overused. What do you see for this place in the future? Are you hopeful?

M: Well, I don’t know. Hope. What is that? [Laughter] Actually, I am optimistic. I think that in the short run probably we will somehow manage to solve our problems, and if we don’t, we’ll somehow manage to endure the failure. You’ve noticed that several of the poems in my book take a very cosmic view. The one about looking for Halley’s Comet, for example. In the long run, though, and taking the cosmic view, I think the human race is bound for extinction. But, isn’t that pessimistic, you might ask? No. I just think it’s natural. And that goes with what I was saying before. We are not special. No matter how much we might resist the notion, we are still subject to the same natural forces that govern the making and the death of stars. But that doesn’t make me pessimistic. I actually take a great deal of comfort in that. That my body will go back into the soil. That the very things I live on, that nourish me, have come out of the ingredients in the soil that have been left there by other living things that have died. When I die, I’ll make my small contribution to nourishing whatever comes after me. It may or may not be human, but it will be some life form, and that same cycle will continue until the planet dies. Then whatever raw material is left will be gobbled up by something else, a star, or who knows what. But it’s all being recycled as part of a larger whole that somehow is in balance with itself. So, in that sense, I’m a very hopeful, optimistic person. Very upbeat. But I don’t see a future in which the human race will climb the ladder of progress onward and upward into the stars. I just think the earth will evolve and the human race will eventually go extinct and something else will take our place. Ants maybe. Who knows.

S: To finish with, if I could get you to read a brace of poems—

M: Sure.

S: The one that you mentioned about looking for Halley’s Comet—

M: Sure.

S: And then “Planting Cucumbers.”

M: OK. You want them in that order?

S: Yes, please.

M: The Halley’s Comet poem is titled “Let Now the Stargazers.” That’s actually a phrase out of the Bible. And I forget where now. Probably somewhere in Isaiah I would guess?

[Reads]

**Let Now the Stargazers**

Knee deep in bluestem pasture

I’m out looking for the comet

in December twilight. All around

pale cattle are grazing in the fields

of dusk. Even at this late season,

a heron, still as some fossil

in the stones of an ancient sea,

hunts intently as last light lingers

on the water. Dark spills eastward

down the hill. A sprinkle of farmyard

and smalltown lights draws my eye

to the horizon, just as, in one

vast surge, the prairie joins the sky.

Tonight I do not see the comet

but as I stay a while to watch the winter

stars come out, I recall a saying—

more stars than grains of sand

on all the beaches of the world—

a bit of wisdom that seems off the mark

equating a nuclear furnace with a shard

of silicate. Closer seems the kinship of star

to heron, cattle, grass, and man—in each

a flicker of star heat lives—from the heavens

we came, to the heavens we will return.

For when our star expires, this earth,

and everything that ever perished on it,

through patient eons of gradual decay,

will diffuse in clouds of particles and gas

set free upon the stellar winds to kite about

the void perhaps ten billion years or more

before we’re swept again into some heating nebula

to become the genesis of who knows what

bizarre and transient reincarnation.

M: The ending of that poem pretty well sums up my vision of our future and the future of the whole planet. “Planting Cucumbers” is more personal. On the night before my father’s birthday, ten years after he died, I had a dream about him. I had thought a lot about him during those ten years, had in fact written several poems trying to come to grips with his death, but I had never dreamed about him. But that night I dreamed of him, and when I woke up, I came down stairs and was sitting at the dining room table looking out through the sliding glass door at this little garden I had there, and it occurred to me, under the influence of this dream, that planting a cucumber vine on my father’s grave would be a fitting decoration for it. This poem came out of that thought, though it took quite a long time to finish it. Actually, that dream moved me to write two poems. The other one, if you’re interested, is “Seeing My Father Again,” in the last section of my book, and in it I describe the dream itself.

S: Go ahead and read that, too, if you’d like.

M: OK, but I’ll read “Planting Cucumbers” first. People are puzzled by this poem, and some are even a little horrified by it when it dawns on them that it has a kind of indirect cannibalism at the center of it.

[Reads]

**Planting Cucumbers**

I ought to plant a cucumber vine

on my father’s grave. He always

liked a garden, and star-yellow

blossoms and large-hearted leaves

would decorate that place better than

plastic tulips. That cucumber vine

could put down hardy roots,

and father’s ashes could nourish them,

and I could pick them cukes,

and feed them to my children

and to my wife Annie who never met him,

and all our bodies would be richer

for knowing him this way,

and we could carry him home with us,

and, best of all, some part of him

could stand again in light and air

the way a body was meant to stand.

Now what could be better than that!

M: The last line bothers people. They don’t know how to read it. They want to read it, “Now WHAT could be better than THAT.” But it’s, “Now what could be BETTER than that.” That’s the emphasis. So it’s kind of a joyful poem. The other poem, the one that describes the dream I mention above, is a tough poem for me to read. It was in struggling to write this poem about the dream that I learned everything I know about love and grief. That grieving is not sadness or sorrow, but is the form love takes after death. And so, it goes on as long as you’re alive. It’s called “Seeing My Father Again.” I now realize it’s very archetypal and all that, but at the time it was just a description of a dream.

[Reads]

**Seeing My Father Again**

I’ve seen my father once

in the ten years since

he turned on his side

that bright October morning

and died without a sound.

I heard his muffled call

from somewhere in the house

and went to find him.

He was in the single bed

in my son’s room. I asked him

what he needed. He had lost

his glasses, he told me,

and needed me to find them.

And besides, it’s lonely here,

he said. It seems like years

since anyone’s been to see me.

When he turned to me, sunlight

through the window blind caught

the white scar that divides

the pupil of his left eye

neatly into halves.

I did the only thing

that I could think to do.

Even though the bed was narrow

and I had on coat and tie and shoes,

I climbed under the cover

and held him till we fell asleep.

S: Quite a poem. Thank you.