

Billy Collins Interview, April 6, 2005

Edited by Harbour Winn and Carla Walker

Interviewed by Dr. Harbour Winn, Dr. Elaine Smokewood, and John McBryde
Transcribed by Mark Pickens

HW: What about after 9/11 when you read “The Names” before Congress. I guess that was one of those times when the conventional role of the poet laureate writing for a particular moment or a particular event happens. What about that context where you were expected to write a poem? I’m sure you were appreciative of the grief and yet there could be, there has to be something political to the art. What was that like?

BC: Well, it is kind of an impossible task. The American poet laureate is not really obliged to write the kind of occasional poetry that the British poet laureate is, and that isn’t part of the job description. This was obviously an extraordinary . . . I think Rita Dove did write a poem willingly on . . . I think they restored a statue, this golden statue that was on the top of the capitol building and it was helicoptered off and then restored and helicoptered on during her tenure, and you do get a great view of the capitol from the poet laureate’s office, so I think she saw this figure flying off and then flying back again and she wrote a poem about that. That’s really the only poem by a poet laureate that I know of that would qualify as an official occasional poem. I got a telephone call . . . I was going to say, the circumstance of 9/11 was a very special circumstance as was the subsequent, unprecedented convening of both sessions of Congress away from Washington. I think in the history of the government they’ve done that maybe once when the British burned down half of Washington and another time I’m not recalling, but they decided to hold the joint session of congress in New York, and most of the congressmen decided to come up on trains from Washington accompanied by F-16’s up and down this corridor, so this was rather exciting, and I was asked to write a poem for the occasion. I was asked by four or five people in a conference call, and they were PR people from Congress. I said to them initially, “I’m not sure that I can.” It was in two weeks, and I said, “I don’t usually write under public pressure.” I don’t usually take assignments as a rule. You can’t say no though. You can’t say you’re too busy for Congress, so I said, “I will definitely be there, and I will read something.” I thought I would find, probably something by Whitman, something appropriate, but not by me. But then they put more pressure on me. They said, “It would be especially nice if you could write something just for the occasion.” And then the four of them on this conference call began giving this recipe with the very ingredients they thought should go into the poem. One said, “It would be nice if you’d emphasize the heroic actions of the police force and the fireman, and could you mention something about the sorrow of the families and perhaps the hope of the future,” and I was kind of writing down this checklist of all the ingredients. At that point it seemed more impossible to do. But, I had about two weeks, and I didn’t really try. I thought I just wouldn’t do it; it was beyond me, so I looked around and found some Whitman to read. But then, I woke up at five in the morning, before I usually get up and I thought I could do . . . I didn’t want to write a political poem because I thought I would strain my voice. I don’t write political poetry in that literal sense of the term, but it struck me I could write an elegy for the deceased. So, I had a genre, a box of a genre to work in. And then it occurred to me I could use

the alphabet and go through a name at a time and sprinkle these names alphabetically throughout the poem and that would be the spine of the poem that would hold it together. So, I'm not really a formal poet, but I am. I needed the elegy as a genre and I needed the alphabet as a sort of handhold to get through the poem. Once that occurred to me, I got up out of bed and wrote the poem in a couple of hours, nothing to it. I actually made names: A, I made Abruzzio, or B Baker, and it was odd because then I went on CNN.com and I looked up the names of the dead and I'd guessed about twelve of them. So, I wanted there to be a mix of common names like Baker, but I also picked some real one-of-a-kind names so that family would know that their deceased person was especially honored there. The only really technical problem was that there was no one whose name began with an X. So I put in a parenthesis there, and I said let X stand, if it can, for those not found. So that seemed to work out okay. Then the actual reading of the poem before Congress was very intimidating and serious. Because you're standing in front of all these congress people whose faces you've seen on TV all the time and you recognize them. It's a little unreal. It's like being in front of all these movie stars whose faces you recognize. It was interesting to see the various degrees of attention that were being paid to the poem. Pat Moynihan was listening, just up on the edge of his chair, a wonderful memory of his intelligent open face taking it in. Others were shuffling papers behind me, you know, it was interesting just to see. The other thing was, for better or for worse, regardless of the merits of the poem, there were a lot of speeches before and following, but when I began to read the poem, something in the house changed. People could tell that this was not public language. This was not the noise and timbre and cadence of public language. This was a different kind of language. That kind of got their attention, and then when some of them realized it was poetry, they just thought "oh it was poetry," but many of them stuck with it. It did show that poetic language is different. These are men and women who spend their lives in and producing political public language. It was like a different song was being played than the one they were used to hearing.

JM: Well it had to be, a cliché, but a "once in a lifetime" experience.

BC: Absolutely. I've never read it after that.

JM: In public?

BC: Well I did once, because I was at a college reading and it was the third anniversary of September 11th and so I read it there. But I've never published it, and I don't have any plans to publish it. I do think of it as a poem for that day. I have a new book coming out in the fall, and I've decided I'm going to leave it out.

JM: It could be an appropriate thing at a distant anniversary or something like that.

BC: Yeah. It's on the Internet, and I know people who have had it read at memorial services and things like that, but I was just very sensitive about not using it as part of my repertoire and exploiting it in any way, leaving it as part of that day.

HW: With your wife being an architect, and in some of your poems you do address this, do you both feel or discuss that you are really doing the same thing?

BC: I hope I'm doing something close to architecture. You could perhaps distinguish in poetry the difference between the architects and interior designers. I think weaker kinds of poetry are really interior design, where you're putting modifiers on things, and making nature more beautiful than she is on her own, embellishing, and that kind of thing. Often those poems don't have an architectural kind of structure. It's just doilies and decoration. I think the bones of a good poem, they do have skeletal and architectural elements that are keeping them and holding them together, these formal elements. My wife and I joke about this competition we have, because I'd like to write poems that are still being read after all of her buildings have collapsed, but I don't know if either of us will be around for that.

JM: Earlier today you talked about the television not being poetry because it's both happy in form and happy with content, and I guess I'd take issue with that on some of the shows that really strike me as poetry. One that comes to mind is a show on HBO right now called "Deadwood." Some of the dialog that the actors give is Shakespearean; it's just awesome. I've seen films that move me in ways that poems do, with better time I could name a list of them, so I want more comment from you on how far you think the genre of poetry goes, particularly the slams, with roots in the rap genre, poetry into other genres, "poetry in motion," a phrase used as a praise.

BC: As opposed to prose, because if you say, "that's a very poetic thing to say" or, "that was a very prosaic experience." If you turn poetry into an adjective it's a praise word. If you turn prose into an adjective it's a word of condemnation, which is revealing. Well, and in a traditional way, poems to me . . . I don't like the extension of poetry into other arts, because it seems it's just using this "poetry in motion" as sort of an honor or an honorific. It's like, "Sapphire, your desert is pure poetry!" To me, poetry is an arrangement of lines on a page, and as far as performance poetry goes, it's harmless. It's always at the same volume, which is always rather high, and it seems to have developed a rather narrow style, which is a style of shouting and confrontation, and either threats or boasts that are both hollow. I would go back to the page. I write for the page. One question I get sometimes is, "Are rock lyrics poetry? Is Dylan poetry?" For me the page is the test. There probably are some Bob Dylan songs that you can read on the page and are verbally exciting. But that's a very limited . . . there are few examples of that. So the competition is that if you get all these musicians off the stage, guitars and the three girls with short shimmering dresses, get them off the stage too, and bring out your lyric on a piece of paper and read it to the audience, and I'll read a Dylan Thomas poem or my poem, and we'll see what's going on here. Let's make the playing field even. So much rock and roll doesn't even have to make sense. One of my favorite songs is "Whiter Shade of Pale." I've never figured it out; I don't want to figure it out. I think it would be a waste of time. One of the great things about rock n' roll is that lyrics don't make a lot of sense. It's all about vowels and consonants and chords. It's not about making sense. Some of it does, and some of it makes a great deal of emotional sense. So that's my kind of traditional view. But when I say television I mean television. I don't mean "Deadwood," I mean television. Your exceptions prove the rule I think. You know Dennis Potter, who wrote for the television screen. He wrote "Pennies from Heaven" and "The Singing Detective." He was a very admirable guy because he wouldn't write movies. He was actually trying to reform British television by writing quality stuff for television. At one point in an interview, he said, "television is all about the same thing." He wouldn't say anything more than that, but I sort of knew what he meant. It's all about television.

It's all pretty much the same with a few exceptions. But I started thinking about it and I wondered, "What is television saying?" I think television is basically saying, "everything's okay." Modern fiction is saying, "things are not okay." And poetry is saying, "things are great, but you're gonna die." I liked in "Bowling for Columbine" how Marilyn Manson, for all his freakiness, made the most sense of any commentator on that movie when he said that television generates fear, makes you afraid with stories of murder and crime and people betraying each other, and also documentaries and newscasts about pepper the silent killer, and if you're wearing the wrong shirt size you might get heart disease, and there's just that tendency to make us afraid. And then Madison says, the commercials come along now that you've been afraid and say, "hey buy this. You'll look better. You'll feel better, and you won't be so afraid." So he made it a strange conspiracy, some kind of hydraulic where the audience is being intimidated, made insecure, and then the commercials come along and invite you to this world of improved living, faster cars, better looking stuff, and it's all this horrible trap, one big game.

JM: So how does that differ from poetry?

BC: (Laughing) Well, poetry doesn't have commercials! I don't know. Why would you think there would be any resemblance?

ES: You talked about the page being a test for poetry, and I was thinking about your poetry and Whitman's poetry and they seem to be such a different kind of poetry. But for both of you, the page is such an intimate kind of space, and both you and Whitman often have that intimate, seductive relationship with the reader. I was thinking about what Whitman wants from the reader, and he seems to want to transcend time and space and achieve a kind of immortality by being alive in the reader's mind. So what do you want?

BC: I think I learned that intimacy from Whitman. Some of his passages are almost frightening. You wonder how he knew you were there. Every year in New York there's this thing called the Brooklyn bridge walk, where hundreds of people walk across the Brooklyn bridge reciting poems about it. You know, Hart Crane, and Stevens, and Marianne Moore, and when we get to the other side Galway Kinnell reads "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" standing there with the east river in back of him. And these days the twin towers are visible in their absence. You can kind of see the outline of them in the air. He reads these passages in which Whitman basically says I looked at this water and now you're looking at it, and it's so moving. It's very eerie. He's actually talking to you. You think, does this poet talk to you? Does he relate? Well he's actually talking to posterity in this very intimate way, "You stood here; I stood here. What you felt, I feel." It's shocking. I certainly can't get that close, but I think of the reader as one individual to whom I'm whispering or delivering a fairly quiet message, with the exception of some satiric poems I've written that maybe would be read in a group. I give a lot of these public readings, but I would never give a thought to that when I'm composing. It's always very private, and the ideal reader is always pretty much in my situation. He or she's in a room somewhere with a page, and as they say, "we're on the same page."

HW: But you don't always write about he or she in the same room, because you particularly include mice in your poetry, and canaries. What about the mice? What about all these furry little creatures? They seem to inhabit your poems sometimes as much as "he or she."

BC: Well there's an infestation of mice in my poems.

HW: Do you have that problem in your home?

BC: Yes! Yeah, we have lots of mice. We live in a country house with two really lazy cats, and one mouser, but there are more mice than she can keep track of. So we have a lot of mice around the house. My interest might have started as early as watching cartoons. I'm not sure why they're in there. I didn't set out with a mouse theme, but I think of them as very sympathetic, little, delicate, harmless creatures that are squeaking out this existence for themselves. If there is literary precedent it's Robert Burns's poem about the mouse who in 1778 or whatever, his nest was uprooted in a field in Scotland . . . that's the original literary mouse I think. I also don't try to fake the fact of my circumstances. I live in the suburbs of New York. I don't live in the jungle of the city. I don't live in a farm. I live in the suburbs, and the fauna of suburban life are domestic cats, geese, deer, mice, sometimes a swan or a badger. I'm basically writing about the creatures that are part of my everyday animal world.

ES: In your poem "Albany" you have that wonderful line where you talk about your hound's interest in the world. I sort of think of you in your poems as in the world sniffing it, licking it, and most of the time wagging your tail. Do you think that's an apt metaphor for the poet's proper relationship with the world?

BC: That reminds me of "The Hound of Heaven." In a few poems there's an image of me walking through the woods with the dog doing the sniffing while I'm doing my own form of investigation. She's sniffing around . . . That's probably an apt metaphor. I have a number of poems where I'm kind of transformed into a dog. But as I was saying earlier in the talk, I think lyric poetry is about the "I" and not about the "he or she." I have very few poems about other people, and when I conduct workshops I try to get students to write about the "I." I think the "I" is the most powerful, because when you write about the "he" or "she" you're tempted to fall into the world of prose fiction where you want to use the powers of that world, including omniscience, and it has no place in poetry. You're speaking from the authority of one individual, one ego, one set of perceptual eyes. Novelists can say, "I love you" said Cecilia, thinking the opposite." That's a kind of authority poets don't have. I think authority is so important in poetry, because the poem, also it's not a novel of 300 pages, it's going to last 30 or 40 or 14 lines, so how do you develop trust quickly in a short form? Well, the way it use to be done was through rhyme and meter. Rhyme and meter to me was, besides giving musical pleasure, a trust system. When you begin a poem with, "[quotes the first few lines of Frost's "Stopping by Wood's on a Snowy Evening" rhythmically while snapping]," right away you kind of relax, because you know this beat is going to continue. A contract has been signed, and you know that at regular intervals these sounds like "though" and "Know." It's relaxing, like floating in salt water. The poet is going to sing you this lullaby. What the poem is about you don't know, but you at least trust the rhythm and sound system of the poem to be sustained and supportive. Now, once through Whitman, poetry realizes it can get along without end rhyme and metronomic meter, so we lose this whole trust system. One reason I don't use formal rules in most of my poems, it's one of the reasons for the weakness of contemporary poetry, because we have a kind of autobiographical poetry based on memory, and there are poems that have

personal, emotional centers to them, but why should I trust you? I don't know you. Why should I trust this intimate revelation about how much you hate your father? Why should I care? I don't trust what you're saying. Then if you add to that omniscience, I really don't trust you. So when I teach poetry workshops we talk a lot about form and a lot about trust.

ES: If you were asked about the difference between a really personal, intimate poetry such as your own, and the kind of self-indulgent confessional poetry, would that lack of trust be the difference? Is that what isn't there?

BC: Yeah. I think this poetry I'm writing is intimate but not personal. I can say that because you won't find out much about me. You'll find out that I'm fond of mice and I live in a certain house and I like dogs. You'll find out things like that, but you won't find out much else really. You won't get autobiographical information. You won't get out of me what you would get from Sharon Olds or Elizabeth Bishop or Frank O'Hara. It's not very personal in that way. It's personal in that I'm exposing the reader to the kind of whims of my thinking and my imaginative curiosities, speculations. You find out what kind of head I have and what kind of meditations take place, but you don't really find out much about the biographical part. I guess I'm not inclined to . . . That's not really a subject of interest to me. I think maybe the way I think is different from the way other people think, but I don't think my life is any different than anyone else's.

HW: In a sense, I think you can say you are more intimate than Sharon Olds, because those winds, those waves that run across you makes them more about a person than specific hard details.

BC: Possibly, yeah. We would have to talk about intimacy. I guess there are different kinds. There's an emotional intimacy, and then there's an imaginative intimacy. It would be an interesting article for someone to write.

HW : Back to the mice, you like fairy tales and folk tales. While I don't know that your poems were necessarily written for children, fairy or folk tale elements are in them. Could you talk about transforming. I could run down the list of your poems with this theme. I love the poem where you've got a wolf reading a book of fairy tales. Were those important to you growing up? That's a personal question, but how does that work? Maybe you know Bettelheim's view on folk tales.

BC: It's not so much me thinking about folk archetypes or Bettelheim's theories. I think a lot of my imagery comes from childhood or boyhood. There was a poem about Jack and the Beanstalk, Smokey the Bear, Hansel and Gretel, and I have a very early book, a set of four poems. Each one is about the loony tunes' major players in Merry Melodies' cartoons. It could be just a sign of immaturity. I don't know, but also that sense of transformation you get in cartoons is similar to the sense you get in Ovid, because things do morph into other things or metamorph into other things. A character could be flattened by a steamroller and then he just kind of shakes himself back to his bubbly, little, three-fingered reality. I think picking something like the wolf is a broader pattern that we all know, something common, a common referent. That could be something in mass culture like Smokey bear, or a fairy tale, or the children's song

“Three Blind Mice.” The poem I was going to talk about this afternoon but never got a chance to is called “Questions About Angels”; it starts out, “How many angels can dance on a head of a pin,” which probably decreasingly is a commonly known thing. It’s something students today may never have heard of, but it’s a thing we all know. I do that as a way of not appearing presumptuous, not presuming your interest in something personal about me. But assuming your knowledge about something we can all stand on . . . I guess it’s like dance class; they say, “let’s all start on the same foot.” Then the dance can get more complicated, but I know you’re there with me. We’re on kind of the same page in the beginning of the poem. The hope then is that the poem will go well beyond that starting point into more mysterious and less definable areas, a movement from something we all know to something that only I know for a moment, and that would be the end of the poem, the destination and the conclusion at the end of that poem. At the end of “Questions About Angels,” I say the answer could be just one angel, and then I perform a maneuver that lots of poets do by going inside the metaphor. You come up with this fantasy of this one angel and then you go inside that tableau. You make that the real end of the poem and leave the rest of the rhetoric behind. So there we are with this angel. She’s beautiful, and she’s dancing, and the jazz combo is playing, and this and that. But that poem was written and created to discover the angel. That angel didn’t exist before the poem was written. I didn’t have her in mind when I started, but I found her through the writing of the poem. It’s an example of the poem being really about figuring out what the poem means. The poem is trying to understand its own author. I like that angel. I like her a lot. I’m glad she was there for me. I think it’s also an example of not knowing where you’re going. I’m asking questions here, but when people say “how do you know when a poem’s finished,” well, when you find the angel. You find what that poem was written to uncover. It’s very clear to me when it’s over; everyone says, “poems aren’t finished they’re just abandoned,” but I don’t buy that. My poems are finished when they’re finished. Poets work hard on their endings.

JM: You don’t go back? We had Naomi Shihab Nye here, and I think she writes them again and again.

BC: I do write them over and over, but not that many times.

JM: Do you ever find yourself in the process of chasing a poem down . . . do you ever find yourself just scared to death of where it’s going.

BC: No. The only fear would be that I wouldn’t be able to finish it. I don’t see it leading into, if this is the spirit of the question, into dark psychic areas where angels fear to tread.

JM: No, there is a reason I’m asking, because it’s been my observation that the leading poets don’t exhibit fear. Something sets you apart. You’re willing to go into those places and lead us where we’re somewhat afraid to go to and you’re not. That’s maybe what makes some of this poetry meaningful to us and worth our interacting with it.

BC: When I think of the poem going somewhere, like it’s going in this direction that might make you afraid, I don’t think . . . the place I feel my poems going is some part of the imagination, some dimension that the poem slips into. Really I don’t see these poems as tunneling down into acts of personal excavation. Not like psychoanalysis where you’re peeling

yourself away and getting back to the time when your father criticized you. That's not the kind of exploration I tend to be doing. But it still seems like exploration to me, because the imagination has so many dimensions, and so many bits of slippage, and maneuvering, and metamorphosing that can take place in the poem's imaginative space. Those are the maneuvers and places I travel into rather than those psychoanalytic sources.

JM: A corollary question would be whether you ever find yourself completely surprised by where a poem is taking you?

BC: As often as possible, yeah. The single angel would be an example. "No surprise for the writer, no surprise to the reader." [Frost]. I actually gave a talk last summer called, "How Do You Plan for Surprise?" How as a writer can you put yourself in a mood, in a compositional frame of mind that increases the element of surprise? This is a very self-contradictory thing to do, to plan for surprise, but I think there are mental adjustments you can make. For example, when composing, I say be very alert to distractions, because what might seem like a distraction might be a signal. Be free to interrupt yourself if in the progress of the poem . . . something comes that seems to be static or interference; that's very often a signal you should not ignore. The poem wants to go there, so you have to be ready to abandon plan A quickly. Otherwise, you are filtering a lot of good stuff out and ending up with a poem that is controlled by your will.

ES: Since you've talked about poems taking us on a journey into a new place in the imagination, I'm thinking about Robert Frost's "Directive." I think that's been such an influential poem for subsequent poets, and you have a wonderful poem, and Richard Wilbur does, and Li-Young Lee does, there are just so many great "Directive" poems. What is it about that poem that makes it so magical and powerful?

BC: Well, I think it's like so many of his poems. I can't think of a better example of a poet than Frost, who does start with something very ordinary and common, and then six or ten lines later is dealing with very serious or ultimate questions. He's got a very slippery gearbox, because you don't see gears being changed, but suddenly roads divide and he thinks he'll go this way or that way in another poem. But he ends up talking about the irreparable nature of decisions and fabricating the past. There's no poet who so subtly, and I think "Directive" is a good example, expands an observation into a much wider truth, and it never seems in less capable hands where the truth would seem tacked on like a moral. The transition from the observation, from Aristotle into Plato is what he's doing there, that shift of spheres is sly and charming usually. Are you thinking about the poem called "Directions" also?

ES: Yeah.

BC: We all know how to give directions. Someone asks you for directions and you try to figure out what they know. So you say, "Do you know where the library is? Oh yeah. And do you know where the parking lot is?" And where their knowledge ends, well that's where you take off. So, that again is a form that I copied. I start out, "you know this, and you know where the garden goes . . ." then I'll take over and show you that.

ES: Were you thinking of Frost's poems when you did that?

BC: I wasn't. No, to tell you the truth. My only conscious Frost poem is "Splitting Wood." I love to split wood. We have some wood in the back of the house and I tend to do that a lot. I wanted to write a poem about splitting wood, the kind of physical pleasure of it, and I knew there was probably some metaphor I could find in there. So, I thought to myself, Frost has done that. It's so associated with Frost. It'd be like a story of going after a big whale or something, he's kind of done it. Then it just irked me, and I still wanted to write a poem about it. So I began the poem with the word "frost," not a proper name, but an ordinary name. The first line of the poem is, "Frost covered this decades ago, and frost will cover it again tonight, the leafy disarray of these woods." It was in November, so the frost would be on the ground every night. That was my way of kind of nodding to him, by using his name in the first line and saying, "hey I'm trespassing, but, I'm admitting it, so."

JM: The jealousy you talked about. Milan Kundera, in one of his books, talked about there are only so many gestures, and every one has been done. There's not an original thing left. What's your take on that?

BC: Yeah, well there's just mannerisms. There are only a few stories. Someone said there are only two stories in life. One is that a stranger rides into town, and the other is that someone goes on a long journey. You can take most literature and put it under one of those two headings. Willa Cather said that there are only four or five human stories, yet we retell them as desperately as if we've never heard them before. So, you can't come up with a new theme. You can only add new mannerisms. That never seems to be a limitation. I don't think anyone, unless you're an adolescent writer, can say, "Well it's all been said." You don't realize that stylistic modification has apparently no end to it. But you can't go into a room and invent a new human theme.

HW: I'm thinking back about that whole sense of architecture, and when you look at, say *Nine Horses*, and you look at *Sailing Around the Room*. Does *Nine Horses* end up being the poems that haven't been published in a book yet? Do you see them as interconnected? How do you divide them into sections, or order them within those sections? What do you think of architecture in *Nine Horses*?

BC: Well, I thought I was the only one that does this, but I hear there are other people too. If I was ready to have a book I would just move this table out of the way, and I would just put all the poems on the floor, face up of course, in any order with a little room. I would walk around in my stocking feet. I would look around for a while and try to find two poems that wanted to be together for some reason or other. But it's a little mystical if you will, or supra-logical, because I'm not looking for poems about mice, or death, or the death of mice. I'm looking for two poems I'm not sure about, but they seem to want to be next to each other. So, I'll put those two together and look for other poems to fall into groups. Then I'll think, you might want to be over with . . . no you'd be much more happy with these guys. It's almost like a cocktail party where people naturally fall into groups and find sympathetic . . . but you couldn't say, once you had four people in this group, "we got together because we all like Shiraz." Bonds of temporary sympathy draw you together and that's it. It usually becomes pretty conventional now that books of poems have been divided into sections, so I usually make four sections. You have a first and

last poem. Putting this *Poetry 180* book together was kind of interesting, because it starts with birth and ends with death. The first poem is a Sharon Olds' poem about the first hour she was alive, before she was delivered to her mother. It ends with Lawrence Raab's poem about what song he wants played at his funeral. In the middle there are poems about poetry and adolescence. So there is a real architectural arc to the whole thing. It is a kind of vanity though. When you put a book together it's fun to kind of play with the architecture of it. You don't have to write anymore, because you can be a designer. But no one I know, except editors and reviewers, ever reads a book from beginning to end. I don't. I flip through it and look for a sexy title or a short poem. I pop it around like a flip book. I do tell students, about organizing a book, two things. One is, when you send a book off to the press, you frontload the hell out of it. You take fifteen "A" poems, super strong poems, and put them right in the front. That's the way to do it. There just going to read them. Then if your book gets accepted, you can say, "I kind of rethought the arc of the order." No press will insist that it stay in the same order. So you can do a bait and switch there.

JM: I had a mental image of a domino game. Those start simple, and there is any number of ways they can go. But there is an order. I can see that.

BC: It can drive you a little nuts. This new book, it drove me a little nuts, because I just wasn't sure what I was doing. Plus, we started with eighty poems and got it down to forty-five, I guess. We threw out thirty-five poems I guess.

JM: The *Poetry 180* books . . . what was your process picking the poems for them? You mentioned the arc. Did you know that going into the second book?

BC: No, I didn't. I was just picking poems and had no way to organize it, and I guess you could have done it very arbitrarily, but there is an extra dimension of playfulness in organizing. I knew there were a number of poems about childhood, a poem about a sonogram, a poem about birth, so all that was an obvious start in the maternity room, and then to the grave, and see what happens in between. For *Poetry 180*, I could go up in my bedroom and say hey, I want this poem, and I'm definitely going to take a couple of poems by Tom Lux. But in the second phase, I'm going to kind of run out of poems, that I knew, and as I said, going to poet's house in New York and grabbing things off the shelf got me looking at authors and anthologies. I started ransacking the place looking for poems. It got harder and harder to do. Of the 180 poems in the new book, there are probably 163 or so poets, some poets have two. One poet has three poems. I counted 38 of those poems that I'd never heard of, and I kind of like that because it demonstrated to me that I wasn't going on name, I was going on poem. Plus it's nice to have a younger, lesser-known poet in a collection like that. The first one sold over 60,000 copies. The audience though, is much bigger than that, because it gets into classrooms. The exposure is very good for poets.

ES: How do you hope your poems are taught in classrooms. How do you hope the likes of us are teaching you?

BC: Well, I don't know how you would teach me. I really don't know what there is to say. I've never observed a class. I'd like to be a fly in the chalk tray sometime. I don't know what there

is to say. They seem very transparent to me. I think the only way I would imagine them being taught would be to follow a method I use in teaching other people's poetry, and that is to look at the poem not as something that means something, but as a set of verbal maneuvers. It starts with A and ends with Z. The question is how does one get from A to Z, and where are the points of development. Obviously, when the poet says "but" this is a major turn or shift. How does what follows differ from what's before? I try to teach it as a set of moves as the poet finds her way down through the poem to the ending. Not to use a mouse again, but like a mouse in a maze. If you point out maneuvers it gets them more interested than "what does the poem mean" or the awful question, "what's the poet trying to say," which implies that the poet has failed, but here at Ritalin High School in literature 1A, we will explain what the poet was trying to say. Dylan Thomas tried, but we will make all this clear.

HW: I really like your article about the pleasures of poetry, and hearing you talk about the ones that haunt you or your shadows, the ones that become companions to your heart. What are poems like that to you, now or in your past?

BC: I think I've internalized so much poetry. Anyone who reads a lot of poetry has a whole vocabulary of poems, or an index. There are poems that one can recite, but there are usually a larger set of poems that you can't recite, but you know them in your heart. You can see them, you could botch a recitation of them, but the effect they had on you is sort of an internalizing, indwelling, rotating effect. One of the pleasures of teaching literature is that you keep returning over and over again to this file cabinet or rolodex of poems. So there are a lot of companion poems that do what that implies, they provide some kind of company. Also, they provide a way of reading other poems, and it's very important that you read poems through the lenses of old poems you've read before. That's necessary. A less willful example, if you hid a tape, and we all heard a song for the first time, we are listening through all the songs we've ever heard, we're judging it, not consciously, but through all the songs that we've ever heard. All the poetry you know is this rather complex lens through which you are reading and judging new poetry. That's what high school students don't have yet. They can't see that as an added pleasure when your little library of poems grows to such an extent.

HW: People always describe you as kind of frustrating because you have become something like a stand up comedian. How did you develop? . . . Some of your responses this morning . . . you've got . . . Johnny Carson, David Frost . . . but they didn't write like Robert Frost. Aren't you doing both?

BC: Well I've taught for a fairly long time, and I've gotten very comfortable around audiences. To control a classroom of students, you do need to be very alert and quick, and to isolate certain students . . . you know you can be sarcastic to this one, while to be sarcastic to another might be injurious. To read the audience that way comes from having taught since the earth was cooling. As for the poems, when I write them I'm never laughing. Sometimes at the end I laugh because the poem seems so ridiculous, the place I've gotten to, and I'm not reading them for anyone to laugh out loud. When I read a new poem to an audience, it's surprising when they laugh out loud and where they laugh. It does tell me something about the poem often I didn't know.

HW: But you know what you were saying this morning; it sounds like you're more like a fiction writer, because you're looking through the windows of other people's houses to know who you can be sarcastic with. You're not just sitting there yourself looking out.

BC: Again I think that comes with being a teacher for so many years, having a sense of the audience. When I give readings I know what poem I'm going to begin with. I have maybe four poems I begin with, and I have three poems I can end with that just seem to work as bookends. The rest of it I have poems to choose from. I don't have a stack I just go through, which would be a more sensible idea and I wouldn't have so many to carry around. I'm judging the mood of the audience and I'm choosing the next poem some times in the middle of reading one poem. I'll be thinking the way you think when you're saying something you've said before. I can think a little ahead of myself and have a sense of what poem I'll follow a poem with. I'm trying to mix the mood of a reading so that it's not too funny, not too serious, or that it's disorientingly both. I go back and forth between those two poles so that no one is too comfortable thinking they're here to laugh or to get serious. I'd like to think we're here to do both.

HW: What have we not asked that you'd like us to ask?

BC: The craft. I like being asked about individual poems, actually, because that's where my attention is. Interview questions force one to really see the whole process in ways you wouldn't have thought of if not asked. It's analytic, reader's questions. There's such a difference between artistic performance and composition and talking about it. I like the example of Paul Desmond, who played saxophone with Dave Brubeck, famously. He was asked in an interview, "Why is there so much melancholy in your playing?" And he said, "It's probably because I'm not playing any better." It showed that he just wanted to play well. He wasn't trying to be melancholic or anything else. He was just trying to play the saxophone well. I think poets are trying to write well. It's easier for me not to talk about the future of American poetry, or the elements of what's in my poems. It's easier to talk about a poem, because I can return to that state of mind I was in that led to the composition of it. I feel like I have more authority then, than when talking about performance poetry . . . these are questions I never give thought to. I often think the big questions seem irrelevant to the practice. An analogy for me would be if you saw some guy trout fishing, standing in a stream with waders on, and someone with a notebook waded out there and asked him what he thought about the over-killing of Japanese tuna. He's saying, "I'm just trying to catch a trout here." The questions are often so expansive as to force the writer to leave his or her true area of authority which is the writing itself.

ES: My current favorite poem of yours is "While Eating a Pear."

BC: Ok. That's interesting. I think I know that one . . . looking out the window?

ES: Yeah. You sort of require the reader to imagine a time without language and a sort of un-mediated relationship with the world. Is that what poets really want to do?

BC: Well, that's another form of travel. It's chronological, but imaginative. This comes up in a number of my poems where I do pre-history. There's a poem called "Weather," where before

human beings, there was weather. It was rainy, sunny, there were clouds, but none of it was witnessed. It went on and on for hundreds of thousands of years, unreported, unobserved weather. It's quite thrilling for me to imagine something like that. I guess I go back to this pear and it was shadow on one side and light on the other. It's something very simple that takes us out of the picture. I like that one too.

ES: I love all of those poems of yours. "The First Dreamer," the first person to dream . . .

BC: Yeah. There are a lot about ultimate things and first things. First reader, dreamer . . . I think there's one called "First Geniuses," these original wise men. There's one called "Nostalgia" which is a trip through unknown history into the future. It's just like the grid of the alphabet with "Names," and the grid of time is just another . . . I love reading Szyborska right now, Wislawa Szyborska, she won the Nobel prize in 1996 at the age of 73, so she's 81 now I guess. I just read the introduction to her new book. She's a wildly conceptual poet. In one of her poems she takes a switch on a carpe diem theme. Instead of the concept of having a limited amount of time, a la the "Coy Mistress," therefore we should live life voraciously, her take is that she switches it from temporal to spatial. As far as we know we're the only intelligent life in the cosmos. Well if that's true, shouldn't we have a really good time at the fireman's ball this weekend? She just zooms down to this particular thing. There's nobody in the entire universe, so at the ball, let's have a really good time.

HW: I find that your poem on the writing process . . . I like to use it even in a composition class . . . even students in there that might not ever frequent the English department door, they like that poem.

BC: Which one?

HW: "Writing in the Afterlife."

BC: Ok. Well that's another example of dimensions looping. You thought writing would end, but . . . Yeah, that poem is a student's nightmare. In the afterlife, we'll still have to do these exercises. Describe. Use detail. Use adjectives. Express feelings. Yeah, it's supposed to be a nightmare. I'm glad they like it.

HW: The athlete who's just going through the motions, getting a D. They love that poem. They laugh in a way that they're laughing at themselves and me.

BC: I like the line where he says that the next assignment would be to jot down your thoughts and feelings about being dead. "Not really an assignment, but think of it more as an exercise," he groans. I've said all this stuff. You seem like you're burdening them, "it's an exercise!" But now you're rowing these boats through the underworld. So that's Greek mythology basically. A lot of it is just "What if?" What if writing continued after death? Someone said that the fact that you can imagine the weather the day after you die indicates that you have an imagination and other creatures don't. You can imagine you die in Oklahoma City and it's a little drizzly that morning. It's the Wednesday after your Tuesday heart attack. You can actually conjure that up. That's what less gifted creatures can't do, for better or worse.

JM: We just know it will be windy.

BC: The winds come sweeping down the planes . . .

Transcribed by Mark Pickens