

## ***Transcription of Interview with Poet Claudia Emerson***

*Bios:*

**Poet Claudia Emerson** was born in Chatham, Virginia, in 1957. She earned her bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia in 1979, and her M.F.A. in poetry from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1991. She is currently associate professor of English at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia. She has also taught at Washington and Lee University, Danville Community College, and Randolph-Macon Woman's College.

She is the author of three collections of poetry: *Late Wife; Pharoah, Pharoah;* and *Pinion, An Elegy*. Her verse has also appeared in numerous literary journals and publications, including *Shenandoah, Poetry, Blackbird, Southern Review, Five Points, Visions International, Ploughshares, Chattahoochee Review,* and *Crazyhorse*, among others.

**Dr. Harbour Winn** is the director of the Center for the Interpersonal Studies Through Film and Literature and professor of English at Oklahoma City University.

**Dr. Regina Bennett** is the director of the Master of Liberal Arts program and associate professor of English at Oklahoma City University.

**Emily O'Connor** graduated from Oklahoma City University with a Bachelor's in English in Spring 2012. She will begin work on an MFA in Poetry at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater in Fall 2012.

**Emily:** I guess maybe the most, first impression I had of your poetry was that so much of it includes nature and landscape imagery, or references. And I was wondering why. I'm sure that has some sort of personal connection to you. I was just wondering what you had to say about that.

**Claudia:** Yeah, I think that's a great question, and I'm glad you noticed it. Landscape is extremely important to me in my poetry and just in general. I'm somebody who notices it. I'm always setting things against sort of a greater landscape, and I'll talk as I did this morning, looking small and noticing detail light. I still will sort of do that widescreen thing pretty often. Partly I lived in the rural landscape in the south side of Virginia for so many years. That's just the backdrop of everything. And even growing up in a small town where my father ran a furniture store. He wanted to get off the farm, so he went into town and ran a business. We would still get in the car in the evenings in the summer and drive around the landscape to look at the tobacco crop, because if the tobacco crop was good, he could sell a refrigerator. I mean, it was that tightly tied, and so the landscape became, in that case, not just backdrop, but essential to everything that was going on.

**Emily:** It affected everything.

**Claudia:** Everything. The health of the cows, all of it. And my father's sister and husband ran a family small farm, a tobacco farm, and so a lot of the imagery that'll turn up in my book isn't exactly firsthand.

When I was little, we would go help out with the tobacco crop, but I was little and mostly played around the barn or handed leaves or something like that. But I was very aware of how important it was that we all pitch into it, so crops, landscape becomes very important. I'm also interested in that landscape in animal consciousness, and that's an increasing interest, like more and more I have an interest in looking at that. When we speak about the planet or what consciousness is, I'm very aware of other consciousness in terms of animal perception and experience. We'll see where I end up going with that.

**Emily:** Well, yeah and you were talking about that this morning with the waxwing bird, and why he was hanging around, I guess.

**Claudia:** Yeah, in terms of landscape in my writing, I'm also very influenced by the weather. I've noticed this too as a teacher. One time I was teaching two twin sections of an intro to literature class, and I had essays come in from them. And one day it rained, and one day it was sunny. And the rainy day grades were lower. [laughing] This is very bad, but I was aware it, just how influenced I am by that context. It's really healthy for me, though, to see other landscapes, because I can get ideas. When I return home, I can see it freshly.

**Emily:** Good, well thank you.

**Harbour:** Following up with Emily's question, I'm looking at your emphasis on nature and wildlife and all that sort of thing, and I think particularly in the early part of *Late Wife*, nature also seems to represent isolation. It represents something sinister. I mean I felt sometimes I was reading Margaret Atwood, or particularly the narrator in *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood's novel. I wondered with what you've just been saying about landscape, how you use nature to kind of represent isolation, trauma, terror, psychic disturbance.

**Claudia:** Yeah, I think that's a great question and great observation. I was aware in the memories of those houses. Well, A) they were isolated in the rural landscape. We often would live and not be able to see another house from the one we were in. My ex-husband liked it that way. He was a Daniel Boone-type, elbow room. He just really didn't want to be close to other people. And the houses were two-a-one old, and as I said this morning, they had critters in them. Things were always coming into the house. And as I looked back on them, there was almost a sense of claustrophobia about the houses. The walls are filled with honeys or bees or insects or something—a sense that the house itself is being reclaimed by something, and being overgrown. And I think that's psychically how I felt sometimes, that I was the house being eaten by the termites, that sort of thing. Again, when I was living in it, I don't know that I so much thought that, but looking back, I certainly saw it and felt it in memory, more than it probably was. I mean they were lovely old homes. I'm sure it was nothing sinister about them. Again, I love the natural world, and I love animal life, but there's something about opening that drawer and there's a snake on the silverware that's disturbing. You know, that's a little too close coming in. I was gonna say, peace, grandfather. [laughing]

**Regina:** One of my questions is I had selected that poem to ask you a question about—this notion of women and snakes. And my mother's deathly afraid. I mean, she never saw a snake that should live.

**Claudia:** That's right.

**Regina:** I mean, I'm from the country, too, so I know all about that. And then in some of my classes, like we've been reading "Sweat," Zora Neale Hurston's short story, and then there was stuff in your poem "Natural History Exhibit" that reminds me of Dickinson, too—"A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" and "My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun." So women and snakes, guns, [laughing].

**Claudia:** Very good, I love that Hurston story, and I'm a big Dickinson fan. And in some ways you would never—I'm glad you pick up on it—because I would think I never see any kinship with her in the language itself, and yet I find myself constantly—she was one of my touchstones, I go back to her a lot. Just a couple things, and then I'll get back to the snake issue because I was sort of worried about it in that poem, honestly. But I'm interested, and maybe it's men, too, but in women's lives and in women writer's lives, and especially with Dickinson, the idea that I come back to where women and some of the figures in Dickinson's poems miss a passage somewhere. And again, I was talking in the workshop last night about her command to tell all the truth but tell it slant. And of course I think she's speaking about metaphor there, or the figure of speech as a way of telling something slant. And yet, she's talking about working to the side of things. And of course, for herself, there were many sort of missed passages of the normal. Like what do we think of as the normal passage for anybody? Again, growing up in south side Virginia, born in the fifties, the normal passage is to marry, have children—you're going to do these things. And when I messed up a passage, or mixed it up in my family, to get divorced or something like that, there's a danger there that you have walked outside of the normal path. And of course Dickinson kept going to the missed passage. But every time you miss such a passage, you're able to see more to the slant, and in some ways, then more clearly what everybody else is doing that's so normal.

To the women and the snakes thing, though, I keep always going back to the archetypal Biblical myth of here's Eve and the snake, and we're going to chop it to bits. I don't care what you tell me, human, that this snake is a good thing. And men would always say, we have to have the black snake. That's good, it'll eat the rodents. No, not in that culture. You get the ho and chop it up, as if taking the head off isn't enough. And then, the idea of—I don't know where this came from—but to hang it in the tree. Kill it and hang it in the tree, and you'll get rain. You're talking about in Oklahoma, you need rain. You need to kill some more snakes.

**Regina:** Yeah, my mom's working on it. [laughing]

**Claudia:** Yeah, where's that? I don't even know where that myth comes from. I always think, some of those tales are simply excuses. We gotta kill the snake because we need rain. But I was aware of, when you hang the snake and its body becomes straightened, and it turns into the barrel of a gun, I'm very much thinking about "My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun." And I should have fired it, you know, I should have killed that snake when I had the chance. You know, I should have dealt with the problem at the time. But, whenever you have a snake in a poem, you know what you're bringing up—all these connotations and associations you cannot escape. And I just decided, to hell with it. If I make it real enough, the snake that was in the silverware drawer and the ones in the "Natural History Exhibit." You know, have you ever seen those exhibits? They're sort of creepy. I mean, when we take a wilderness,

basically, and sort of create this—I don't know what to call it—sort of a violent order out of it, of something that appeared ordered, but they're still moving around inside of it. I found that extremely disturbing. It's like the one in the drawer seems more normal to me—the civilized version of the snakes. But yeah, I was thinking, definitely of Dickinson.

**Regina:** And that imagery of the coiled snake, and then you have the tines and the blades and stuff, that contrast there.

**Claudia:** Yeah, I still have that silverware. [laughing]

**Harbour:** It just seems like those passages, like Regina's referring to, just general reference to nature, there have got to be places where there's like an unconscious text or there's gaps in there—that each of us are going to respond to in different ways.

**Claudia:** Yeah. I don't know. I was accused in grad school—I remember this vividly—of making animals more important or more noble than they are. You know, that they are somehow lesser, or whatever it is. And it's true, in my very early work, I loved to write persona in the voice of animals, and now I don't think I would do it. I don't think I would be interested in it, but I was very interested in that at the time as a way to get inside some other being and, you know, look out through them. And I've always been fascinated. Of course, I was talking about it today, but one of my missed passages really is, I would love to be a veterinarian. I often prefer the company of animals. I'm interested in them over people sometimes. I also think, I'm not a Jeffers scholar, but I'm a fan of Roberson Jeffers, too, and he has some things going on in terms of animals, and ways of seeing animals, and sort of despairing about human nature that I respond to.

**Harbour:** I think Jane Hirshfield has a whole series of poems, too.

**Claudia:** Yeah, that's right.

**Harbour:** Where she inhabits the persona...

**Claudia:** Yeah, it's really interesting, fun to do.

**Harbour:** Well, you know, you've referred to Faulkner as one of your favorites. I've been on the pilgrimage to Roanoke, and all of that.

**Claudia:** Oh, okay.

**Harbour:** And last night, you were referring to the long sentences, you know, three or five adjectives are better than two, you know, in *Pinion*. So I just wonder, you know, if Faulkner looms so large in your experience, how do you see yourself in relation to not only Faulkner, but Southern literature? You know, the grotesque, the Gothic. You're from Virginia. How do you place yourself?

**Claudia:** It's kind of tricky, because it moves around. I mean, I'll back up to say, it sounds so crazy to love Emily Dickinson since I was sixteen, and also to have begun to read Faulkner at about the same time because it seems like they're at such opposite ends of things. My Faulkner fall-in-love story is a junior-in-

high-school story where we assigned to read *As I Lay Dying*, and I hadn't read any Faulkner up until then. And the teacher assigned us a character from *As I Lay Dying*, and we had to write an additional entry, or chapter, whatever you want to call them. And I was assigned Jewel. I don't know if you've read *As I Lay Dying* in recent memory, but he's the one with the horse, who wants to get the horse so he's working the neighbor's farm and all this stuff. And it's kind of an interesting thing because I have no idea what I wrote. I don't remember that at all. To be assigned a literary character, already in existence, and told to write something else. A) I thought it was a good assignment, but it was a brilliant assignment for somebody who would turn into a writer. Not to do something exactly extra, but do something else in this voice. That sort of set me in love then with Faulkner. Going forward, let me think, I think trying to write fiction myself in the early days before I settled into poetry, I would have said my literary family—I meant to talk about this actually in the workshop—I think as we go along and become writers, we then make a different family, from the one our biological family. And my family has Faulkner in it, but it also has that powerhouse of Southern women fiction writers. Flannery O'Connor is just top of the list. At the time, I would now say Faulkner. But now, definitely in high school, I was in love with everything Flannery O'Connor wrote—everything, her letters. I mean, she was just fascinating to me. That's a pilgrimage I want to make to Milledgeville. And actually, a friend of mine, R.T. Smith, who's editor of *Shenandoah*—I'm blanking on the name of the book, though—he just did an entire book of poems in the voice of Flannery O'Connor. It's really crazy; it's just fun; it's great. It's coming out...I'll send you the name of it. But anyway, I became interested in that. I just loved her. There was something to—and I can't do it myself in my writing—you know this, because you [Harbour] know more about it than I do, but the use of violence and humor. You know, that sort of unexpected way, like the best horror film. She can trick you into laughing, and the next minute have somebody shot. And that kind of extreme situation was very appealing to me and remained. And I think isn't it O'Connor who said about that kind of grotesque or exaggeration, for her, because a part of what she's writing for, is "if you're deaf, I shout, and if you're blind, large disturbing figures in the air" or something like that. I was very drawn to that. But I don't know, since I'm born in 1957, I grew up in a barely civilized community. When I touch on the grotesque or the Gothic, I think in my work it's very toned down. And yet, I know I'm influenced by it, and a sense of the claustrophobia in the houses. Or a sense in my second book, the long poem of repression and frustration, I think is there. I felt sorry for people as a child that I saw land-bound. You know, for all that admiring the landscape, or worrying about it, there's some people who are trapped there. You know, and I think that's going away. People have more choices, but I was very aware of that as a child that some of the children who grew up on the farms didn't have the same choices and things like that. And of course, race, issues with gender in a small Southern town with one stoplight. The African-American children when I was growing up went to a different school. I lived through experience—they went through a program in Virginia called "Freedom of Choice," where black children could choose to go to the white school. Of course, they're not going to. I don't know if you—I'm borrowing this language from somebody—but in a small community in the South, often I saw there's a code of manners and then there's the law. And those two things don't always get in sync. And so some of the integration of schools, the law would say one thing, and the code of manners would send everybody off in different directions. I was very aware of that as a child. Even the funeral home, there was an African-American funeral home, a white one. African-American churches, white. African-American neighborhoods, white.

In a tiny, tiny area, where everyone should know each other pretty well, but often it was very, very separate.

I'll tell you one quick story that's off the subject, but it's an extreme example. The waiting room at the doctor's office when I was little. There was a waiting room for African-American patients and a waiting room for white patients. Civil rights happens; they do away with the African-American waiting rooms. We're not going to do that anymore. So what happened? And the waiting room for African-American patients, by the way, was the hallway with chairs in it. So they move the chairs. So then the African-American patients stood in the hall, for probably the next five years. They're not going to come into the waiting room. That was that rigid, rigid code of manners that people weren't comfortable shifting. So in terms of being Southern and having that identity growing up, those passages that you must have to be 'normal,' and then watching the divide in the town, and watching my parents struggle with it. I'm not sure it's all over the work, but it's in the background of a lot. And again, Ellen Bryant Voigt, who left the South as pretty much as soon as she could, has spent the rest of her career in Vermont had said to me at the time, "It would be good for you to leave here." And even if you're going to write out of it, you write it from a distance. And of course, I went way up north to Fredericksburg. It's kind of funny, though. People in Chatham will say to me, "Yeah, you went up north. It snows a lot up there, doesn't it?" It's Virginia. It's still the South, but it's a lot more urban and there's a different context. So, just shifting that a little bit to look back on where I grew up has been, I think, just as helpful as anything else to the writing.

But the problems in the South, and again, O'Connor talked about this, too, are in some ways so obvious that I think it makes looking at issues of race or gender or sexism, or whatever it is, or repression, or geography as destiny as I'm interested in—all those things—because the problems are so obvious, I think we have a luxury in looking at the problems and being able to explore them for all of us, and not just as Southern issues.

**Emily:** I guess what I was wondering...From what I can tell, your books previous to *Late Wife* are in some ways a lot less close to the bone, and are a lot less personal. I mean, obviously you had things happen in your life that would steer you in a direction writing about these personal events. But what really decided to make you do that and make that public in a way?

**Claudia:** That's a great question. One easy answer is that for a long time, in that marriage, in that place, I was very unhappy secretly. I didn't even write the truth in my journal of how unhappy I was—that I didn't want to be there in many ways, didn't want to be in that marriage. I didn't know how to get out of it. I never told my mother. I never told my brother. I never told my best friend. Nobody. Talk about the metaphors of repression when I look back. Or why am I speaking in the voices of animals? You know, why am I doing this? And in some ways, I can say I'm interested in them, I wish I were a vet, whatever. And there's another part of me that says I'm hiding. I was hiding in my own life, and poetry probably saved it in some ways. Not to be overly dramatic. It's not like I was going to shoot myself, but it made it worth living to find these other voices. My own first person was utterly mute. And poetry opened up those slants where I could go and be in the voice of another woman who's unhappy in marriage. I hid all over those early books. Or even in *Pinion*, when I was writing in the voice of a ninety-year-old man,

never married, never had sex, is extremely bitter. And I could say that's as far from me as possible—not so. How *other* can I make myself? Male, ninety years old. You know, I was constantly looking for some way to express emotion that I could not tell in my real life. Well, when I get divorced, and I remarry, and for the first time in my life I understand what a reciprocal emotional contact is. Really, for the first time at the age of forty-three, I have a voice. I think it's pretty much as simple, or complex, as that. Although, as you've heard me say before, I thought there was a great risk to write about the divorce, because I think it is ordinary. It's certainly been done before. I didn't want to be overly mean to my ex-husband. I'm not in the world of art to be vindictive to anyone or make it personal. You've got to elevate that, and I hope I did that. If anything, I've had some poet friends think the divorce poems are not—they don't have enough emotion. They seem cold to some people, and I think I was trying so hard to not be over-the-top. My editor even said, this is Frost who said, "There's a fine line between grief and grievance." He's talking about politics, I think, but when you have grief and you can express that and elevate that as opposed to whining or complaining. "Gee, I'm not happy." How many love poems have we read, or broken heart poems? They can be terrible. So it's a tar pit in some ways.

**Emily:** Well, I mean, I'm sure it's a hard thing to show restraint while letting your voice be heard for the first time in such a long time. You want to let this just burst out, and I think that can be seen now that you mentioned that. I think that can definitely be seen when I think about your poems

**Claudia:** You're right. I was looking for—again I tried to go: object, activity, small small small, ordinary ordinary. I knew I was doing that to get whatever drama or emotion from that. The *Late Wife* ones were, you know, again, obviously different. Looking back, as sad as those poems can be, and as sad as I felt for Kent at the time, again, I was deliriously happy in the day-to-day. Everything was great: coffee in the morning; all the food; I loved our house; just pretty much everything. And I remember once, we were at the river—one of those Sundays at the river—I said something to Kent about, "This is just great. Things are just going so well for us." And he said, "We've earned it." No, he said, "We paid for this." That was definitely how he felt. But I did find that first person, as I said at the workshop last night, ultimately exhausting to write about myself. It is a creation. As personal as I'm trying to be, it's still a creation, and I know that. But it was as close to an honest emotion as I'd ever done. And it was extremely satisfying, helpful, and at the same time exhausting. I was happy to put this one to bed. Let that one go and do something else that was more playful after it.

**Harbour:** I find those early poems filled with emotion. I think they're just terrifying. Those metaphors that—trying to go into the worlds that those can in your imagination push you to. I just find them terrifying.

**Claudia:** There was one in the first book that, talking about myself as a runner, as a jogger, for many years I ran on a neighbor's farm. There was a farm road that snaked through the property. Smooth, enough, you know. You had to watch your feet, but you could do it relatively safe. You know, I'd see all kinds of things from the natural world. There was a stable, and my father remembered when that had been a working farm. And he said, you know, in that stable—he called it the "Loco Horse." There was a horse that went crazy, and they didn't kill it. And they kept it in that stable. And you could see where the horse had stood all that time, and that horse appears in that book, the first book.

**Harbour:** *Pharaoh*.

**Claudia:** Mhm, *Pharaoh, Pharaoh*, in the voice of a woman whose husband has died after a long time, and she doesn't know how to define herself without the husband. And she shifts to a narrative of this horse that was work-crazed, and she remembers when it died and they burned it. And I've often looked, not often, but I've thought about my own jogging as a way to get out of the house and do something different. And looking at that empty stall and thinking about that crazed horse. And so this imagined voice, you know, I don't know anybody really like that. I think I was afraid for myself. I was afraid I would be married to this person for the rest of my life. And I would die, and I would be no different. I would still do the same things, and I don't know that I thought that at the time. But definitely, I know I was afraid and hidden. But that terrified me every time I went by that stable to look where that horse had stood, and it just broke my heart. And I never even saw the horse, right? It was just a story.

**Regina:** Yeah, but it is an unusual story.

**Claudia:** Well, typically, there, if an animal didn't behave, you shot it. You know, what are you doing? So that they kept it. And I remember asking my father, and I think I put this in a poem, and he said, "Well, they worked it until it went crazy."

**Regina:** One of the things I noticed in *Late Wife* is the arrangement of the poems—sequence. And I was glad you talked last night at the workshop about it. I had to leave early, but in the first part, you talked about, when you're putting a book together, you had all the poems out on the floor. And now you have a cork board that you put them on. How does that arrangement work for you? I find the placement of "Metaphor" and "Bird in the House" very interesting, because they seem to echo one another, but they're not right next to one another in this book.

**Claudia:** Right. Yeah, that's a great question, because they do get moved around. Because I have ideas for what I'm going to do but they're not written yet. And so, the poems have a life of their own sometimes, when you're working on them. So they do something different, and I'm going to have to move them or whatever. But I'm very aware—I have to watch it. Because when you're in a sequence mode, what's the risk? That you'll be redundant. I mean, you want a sequence; you want things to be in conversation, for it to be doing something that's in concert, but not repeat. It's very easy to be redundant, and I think, have a redundancy of emotion even, if you're not careful about that. And that's why, I know I'm sort of high-functioning OCD about how many I will allow myself. It's just setting a boundary for myself, so that I don't step over it. Although, in the early stages in the drafting of any of them, I'll just go crazy, because as I said last night, the thing I'm always saying to students is it's much easier to take up a dress than let one out. You know, just do too much. You can have lots of cloth, and then make it fit later. As opposed to the other thing, you may not have enough cloth. The way the cork board or the floor has worked just something to do with the way I see. I really have a hard time just looking at a page on the screen, or a page in front of me, and understanding how it's going to work with the book as a whole thing. And so when I can put them up and see them, it's extremely helpful to see how the order's going to be. You'll hear this language from other poets, too, but do you want it to have a narrative arc? Is there something linear here? You know, that you begin at one place and then there's

a completion to it. I think that's true in the divorce ones, that there's an arc, or something linear about that. And there's something linear about the final section, as well. But I think it's less narrative, and more of an emotional arc, that lessens as you go on. It's like it's going up as a rocket, and then sort of coming down far more quietly. And to put those up, those seem an inevitability to how they must go.

**Regina:** So it's not a pattern that you've preconceived?

**Claudia:** Not really.

**Regina:** And you just have to look at them and see how it...

**Claudia:** Mhm.

**Regina:** And it's not like you have in mind, oh I've got to write a poem about this...

**Claudia:** Sometimes I do.

**Regina:** ...because I have this blank in my manuscript or whatever.

**Claudia:** Sometimes I do, and I call those—I have the big stones, and then I have the poems that are chinking. Right? Or the cement that's going to fill in, and they're necessary for whatever reason. And they're weaker, but extremely necessary. They're sort of the parasitic poems, I guess. And they come typically late, and you know why they're there. Again, they're no less important to the whole book, but as standalones, they don't work so well. And again, as I spoke about last night, one of the tricks is to try—in a perfect world, I write standalones. That when they're together possibly mean something completely different. And again, my editor Dave Smith is less comfortable with that. You know, there's a slippage in the meaning because of the context of the book. That he would be less comfortable with, but I find it interesting. Not to keep going to Dickinson, but Dickinson and slippage for me is much smaller, like of what the antecedent of this pronoun. You know, like what does that belong to? I sort of love when things can move around like that, and there's an element of elasticity then to what I can make of it. However, I want to be clear in the final analysis. You know, here are what my overarching concerns were in the book—of the isolation in the marriage, and the claustrophobia, the repression.

**Regina:** So, are there “chink” poems in here that are “chinks” in between your “stones”?

**Claudia:** Here, let me see if I can spot one that's a definite “chink.” If not chinking, then I do think ones that make no sense without the sequence, or ones that don't make a sense without the sequence, would be “Metaphor.” Do you want me to read it? Would that help or not?

**Emily:** Yes.

**Claudia:**

“We didn't know what woke us—just cold moving, lighter than our breathing.

The world bound by an icy ligature,  
our house was to the bat a warmer

hollowness that now it could not  
leave. I screamed for you to do something.

So you killed it with the broom,  
cursing, sweeping the air. I wanted

you to do it—until you did.”

(“Metaphor,” *Late Wife*, 17)

Well, you don’t know what the “it” is, or anything else. You think it’s killing the bat, but if you read the sequence, I wanted you to leave me. I couldn’t stand this marriage, but then when you did, it killed me.

**Regina:** Yeah. Well and see, that’s why I partner it with “A Bird in the House.” So was “A Bird in the House” the stone and you put “Metaphor” as a chink leading up to it?

**Claudia:** Yeah, next to each other, so that they’re working together. Interesting, though, about the “Metaphor” poem. I think, at one point, it was published as “Bat.” And the ending might have been: “I wanted you to do it until you did. / I have never forgiven you.” And it was like, let me just bludgeon you with the end of this poem, and I think it was Betty who said, I think we can do without this.

Because you had been restrained before that.

And it wasn’t really true. I mean, it sounded good. “I have never forgiven you.” Let me be like Edna St. Vincent Millay for a minute, but it was over the top. And I think once you’re writing again in a sequence, even if it’s a chinking poem that’s relying on the ones around it to explain its presence in the book, you can tone down. Right? The show don’t tell thing. It makes for a better poem: “I wanted / you to do it—until you did.”

**Emily:** I thought that, because I felt like “Eight Ball” and “Metaphor” were in some ways very similar.

**Claudia:** Yeah.

**Emily:** I mean, you’re talking about a pool game there, and then you’re talking about a bat. But you’re talking about something [unintelligible].

**Claudia:** That’s right.

**Emily:** And in “Eight Ball,” you felt this tension. I mean, you are really squaring off, ready to, I don’t know what’s going to happen. As a reader, I do. But at the same time, you know, it was just so much, I think, excitement and anticipation for what was going to come in that poem, and it really feels charged. Whereas in “Metaphor,” I mean, just that last line: “I wanted / you to do it—until you did.” As a reader, you’re thinking, this isn’t about a bat, and then this isn’t about a pool table. And I think you just do that so well. I think that’s something I really—one of my favorite things about this poem.

**Claudia:** Thanks. I think when everything is really something else, it's almost frightening to think I'm writing from reality, from these events that actually happened, and they all mean something else. And that's what I've been convinced that even again when we write from the imagination, or think, this isn't me, I'm in a persona. I'm choosing it for some reason. Either I'm identifying with it, I'm empathizing with it, I'm sympathizing with it, I'm running from myself, I'm embracing something I want to be. I don't know. But again, I think the frightening part about it in some ways, understanding those things retro in that book. When he killed the bat in the house, I mean, all that stuff, the critters are coming in, again it's just the looking back of twenty years. That's now a metaphor for what happened. That's why I get really interested in—I did a lecture up in Vermont last summer in poetry and memory, some sort of anxiety I have about the passage of time anyway. That the minute we understand that because of this marriage ending, every single memory I have stored of it has changed, will never be the same. Nothing. It's all going to be colored by this. For me, that's a trauma. For Kent, it was much, much worse, because his wife died and it was a horrific death at the end. He has said that for a long time, he could remember nothing of her life. It was absolutely eclipsed by what he called the cataclysm of her death. That it shut down everything else. That's what the passage of time is for, and yet I thought that was as sad as anything else. That you lose your wife but you also lose...

**Regina:** All the good memories.

**Claudia:** Everything that you ever had was taken out. That's human nature. I mean, that's why we go to therapy and things. But, I still think it's really sad. And then for me, too, this book is done. I've written two more. And now I look back at these, and it's very interesting that the divorce poems sit still. Like, the bat is still there. I remember when he killed it. I remember the wax wing. All those things are sitting still. More still, in part, because I made them still in the poems. And yet, my life has moved on. Right, this is how many years later from that, quite a few. And yet, there's a way these are, those Wordsworth spots of time, that stay fixed and also change. And again, I can't sit here and lie that the fact that this book got so much attention changed it, too. It seemed like such a quiet endeavor at the time. I'm not naïve. I'm publishing Louisiana State University Press. I know it will go out in the world. You know, as poets, we can often that go out and about and have our readership and not get the loud kind of attention. That was wonderful, and also one of those life lessons. You put your stuff out in the world, and things happen to it. I felt really happy and I think as a writer, even to sit here today in Oklahoma, and have you ask really good questions makes me remember it, think back, and hopefully it translates to something I'm writing now. I think the exploration of the writing process of what we people see in the work is an incredibly helpful endeavor on both sides of the table.

**Harbour:** You know, when I look at the craft of your poetry, I think one of the things for me that makes them so powerful is the enjambment. The way that you know how to end a line, and carry over to the next, to break the syntax. I just think the tension you create with line breaks, and then looking spatially at those sets of two lines, sets of three lines, it's just marvelous.

**Claudia:** Thank you.

**Harbour:** Enjambment is hard.

**Claudia:** And I am obsessed with it. I have a good formal story about the *Late Wife* book, but I love enjambment. And for me, one of the great gifts of poetry, whether I'm doing the pentameter line or something shorter or longer, is that tension between what the line is doing and what the sentence is doing. I can't imagine giving it up. It's my favorite thing about poetry. And again, lots of different writers use different language about it, but one of my favorite things to look for as a close reader are the interesting plays where the line lies. Where the line is saying something different than what the sentence is saying. It's this sort of incredible tension. So, Mary Kinzie calls it "half-meaning." I grew up calling it "line integrity." Where you can pull the line out, and it will have some sort of—talk about the standalone, where the line itself will do something. Especially if it's made up of the parts of more than one sentence. I love that. Probably, you know, Faulkner said, "Kill all your darlings." What my darling is, as I said last night, is I like the long sentence. I've got a good writer friend who reads for me, and she said you know I really could use taking a breath. I have to go back in and say, "Okay, enough with the semicolons. I'll use a period now and again." But I love it, and I think what you get, and some of this is a stanza choice, but some of it is that enjambment, is a sense of ending something and that absolute propulsion to the next line. So both of those things are going on at the same time, so you're sort of idling that tension, so that there is forward motion but not too fast. I love that.

Another darling that I have, though, because I love that so much, I can see myself do it. I can look through there, and say, maybe I should have revised some of those. I'll come down to the end, and you can watch me. I'm a plane. It's like I'm dropping the wheels. It's like I'm going to come in, and I don't even want to bounce. But I want you to slow down. And so, I've got dashes all over, and it's like you can watch the flaps go up. And I'm going to try to come in, because I love it. I love landings. I love endings. And I just have lots of fun playing around with those enjambed lines. And I found because I love to play with form so much, that helps me with the revision process. Because I have no problems. If I want a cool enjambment or a better line integrity, I'll give up a lot for it, you know, to make that work. Sometimes too much. Sometimes I'll give up the thing I really want to say for the beauty of a line, and that's not good. But I absolutely love it.

But the form story I wanted to tell you, if we have time, about *Late Wife*, is, you're very right to notice, and once I get into the divorce epistles, I've got staggered, tercet, couplets, for the most part. They run anywhere from tetrameter to pentameter lines. I wanted everything to be highly enjambed and ragged, but probably only at the tenth or eleventh hour. They were highly enjambed. But up until I was well into finishing the book, all those poems were flush left. They looked far more "normal," for Claudia. Like, to the left, about the same length, blah blah blah. The tercets weren't there. And I'm looking at this book, and I thought, oh my, I have a relatively short book, with an IU construction over here. They don't look different enough. And I thought, one of the choices I have is to take a jackhammer to the form. So I went in, and just, (noise). And I've long admired William Carlos Williams, and the idea of the variable foot, and the triadic line, where those tercets he used often, you could see them as the three things function as a stanza but also as a longish line. I love that sort of slippage there of form. And I thought maybe I'll just borrow that from him, and I went back into it. And I revised almost all of them. I don't know, it might have taken some months, but just went at them again. It led to some revision of that, but I think they're much better because I had that epiphany. That's another thing again when I talk to my students about

revision. Sometimes just to change the point of view or the form or something will lead to other things that are quite helpful and actually necessary. But again, it was the sequence. It was the writing of those far more sedate sonnets that would say, these have to be crazier. Crazy for me. Not like I took the punctuation out or something.

**Regina:** You were a letter carrier at one time.

**Claudia:** I was.

**Regina:** These are letters.

**Claudia:** Very good. I was a letter carrier. My dream—I have a lot of stories about the mail route—but at one point my dream was to get on full time at the post office.

**Regina:** My partner is a letter carrier and has been there for thirty-two years.

**Claudia:** It's a great job.

**Regina:** Well, I don't know. (laughing)

**Claudia:** I used to make more money in one day of carrying the mail than I did in an entire week when I was working in the bookstore. And the letter, and I actually have a new poem about this that's going to be in the next book, but the letter is, I fear, going away. And the history of the epistle, or the letters that we don't send, is very appealing to me. So, I kind of fixed into that. I have very fond memories of that, but again, I was part-time. My route was eighty-six miles, two-thirds of what were gravel. I drove a little red and white pickup truck that had a "Frequent Stops US Mail" sign that I strapped on the back. I went up into a part of the county where—and this is in the new poem that's going to be in the next book—people who still use money orders. Well, when you're the mail carrier, you're the rolling P.O. I sold money orders, envelopes, stamps, everything. And one old lady waited behind a tree for me to pick up her light bills. I mean, her money was in the mailbox. She wore a bonnet. You know, I'm not that old. And it was just this other world you go into, and you pass by it every single day—these lives, these houses. We used to do a thing they had in Virginia where the rural carriers were given a sheet to mark wildlife that we would see in the county. If I saw a bear, a turkey, whatever, it was kind of a mail carrier survey thing. I just really loved it. It was hard, but I loved it. It was a little bit like Sisyphus, too. You know, you finish at the end of the day, and it's just going to be there the next day.

**Regina:** It's worse than washing dishes in that way.

**Claudia:** It is, it is. And the worst day was if you had what they call a box holder. You got a flyer that goes to everybody, because often my folks wouldn't get any mail. So I could just fly by, you know. But if you had a box holder, you had to stop, or a newspaper day. That was bad, too.

**Harbour:** You know, last night, you talked about the order of language, and you said that poetry was like a lens through which you could look at the world. And I'm sort of looking broader now. How might this

refer to us? You know, the five of us in the room, but all of us, at this time in history. What does poetry offer us today? If it's this lens into the world, why and how do we need it?

**Claudia:** It's a great question, because I think out in the world-at-large, I think a lot of people say we really don't need it. That it's something that's too old and it's not living in the contemporary world the way it should. All kinds of things you can imagine, and I have heard said, I hope this will make sense, but I read an article, "Does Memory Have a Future?" I think it was David Barber. I was interested in poetry and memory, and what is the function of poetry with memory when we have photography, when we have film, when we have other things, what is the good of this? Okay, to back up a little bit, I love the soldier poets of World War I. I think Wilfred Owen is just a beautiful poet, and to study him and the formal choices he makes, his despair, and the way he does that formally in the poetry, I think is lost on a lot of contemporary audience who don't know how to read format. And again, I think if Owen were in one of the wars today would he choose poetry? Would Siegfried Sassoon? No, Sassoon would not. He would choose documentary film. You know, it's like what would you choose? So why is poetry still important? And a couple things to say about it. One, maybe, it continues to be important in the realm of memory, because we don't need memory the way we used to. And I think I'm borrowing that in part from his essay, because so much is available to us in all kinds of way—our phones, computers, whatever—we don't have to store up other stuff. So we can allow ourselves to let this come in, as a different way of taking memory and doing something quite different with it. I also believe poetry allows a flexibility in between something that is extremely intense and complex and then also has great expansion at the same time. I mean, isn't that what metaphor is for? I'm going to try to nail this down and compare these two things and put them together. Right? And here they are. This big. It's tiny. And yet hope that if I've done it well, you can spend quite a long time with any one of those. Right? It's not a still thing. Remember the living eye moves through the text, as still as it is. You're going to bring whatever it is you've got going on to whatever that text is. And so, it's there. It is something that I intended, or whoever I am. And yet, not to talk there, because I don't really think that's what I'm doing. But when you come into this, you can't help but bring whatever context you have to it. At the same time, you won't do violence to my text. You know, if I've been clear enough about it, you will enter it. I was talking about last night about seeing language, and poetry, especially, as a particular kind of architecture that's so old. It's older than history. You know, it's older than the text itself. I love that, that I'm participating in something so ancient that still has certain traditions even as it's changing and doing other things. I try really hard to be broad-minded about some of the things my students want to do with multimedia and experimentations with poetry. And at the end, I always want to bring them around to: Can you do a fair close reading of a poem? And look at its lines and what's happening with the measure of the language? And can you talk about that in an intelligent way? Because I think it is a great gift to be able to do it. Not to go on too long about it, but I also really do believe this. If you can enter into a poem and be able to talk about the things that you see, fairly see, point to it in the text, talk about the places that are open to interpretation, and articulate fair interpretation to that text, you could argue any court case before the Supreme Court. I believe it is quite applicable to all sorts of things, to be sensitive to something and be respectful of it. And not just arguing a court case, but to the conversation you're going to have over the dinner table tonight. To be an active listener for somebody and bring something to it. And really to pay attention in a fair way to whatever it is you're looking at. Because it will make you

have a better life. I mean, what else is it for? Another thing for those of us who are lovers of this, lovers of language and writing, and interested, and will go on and devote the next, for Emily, for you, three years of your life to the study of it, there are a lot of us choosing to enter into something that is quite old, changing, and promises nothing, in terms of that wacky thing out there we call the marketplace. And I think that makes us all—and we should remember this when the poets get into the fights, you know, we get into fights quite often, we can be a querulous bunch—but that we're all radicals in some way, because we're not all so driven by the same sort of marketplace. It's dangerous sometimes, and risky, and yet a lot of us do quite well in it. I mean, look at those of us in this room. Aren't we having a good day today? and all pursuing something we actually want to do? We might just have one life, so you might as well give it a go, right? To follow the thing you want to love. And the minute I made up my mind at the age of twenty-eight to be serious about this, and get busy and return to school and work very hard, things began to turn around even in those repressed poems in *Pharaoh, Pharaoh*. They're still pretty good. You know, when I paid attention to where the talent was for me, and did my homework. I have a little saying on my desk that's from Rita Mae Brown. You know the comic novelist? I just loved Rita Mae Brown when I was in college. I used to think she was hysterical and funny, and there's a quote from her that says, "Never hope more than you work." We can hope for good things, but hoping doesn't do a whole lot if you're not working pretty hard. That was another life lesson.

**Harbour:** You're already talking about something else I was wondering about, and that is, you know, you teach at a small liberal arts college becoming university. Regina and I teach at a liberal arts university. Dakoda and Emily are students at one, and you know the tension, you know, of schools of English-teaching people that have jobs, and schools of music and dance wanting to be conservatories. So, what about the liberal arts and their value? How do you deal with this in your teaching, relationship between liberal arts and poetry, and how to hold up that value?

**Claudia:** Well, it's under attack, and we know this. We know it's under attack, and yet I wanted to be at a liberal arts institution for several reasons. One, the students themselves have chosen it, if they knew what they were choosing. Sometimes, my students don't. They go where they get in, or they can afford it or whatever, and that's normal. If they've chosen liberal arts, it means sometimes that they haven't specialized yet. Some of us specialize when we're four years old; others of us like me are late bloomers. We don't specialize. We're interested in lots of things. And that's sort of put down. Mostly, what are you going to major in? When you're seventeen. Well maybe you know. If you do, good for you. But I had no idea. I flirted with...Well in fifth grade, it was going to be math. And I thought about religion. I'm very interested in histories of religion. That kind of thing. All sorts of things are possible. My students can be curious about lots of things. Good at lots of things. Right, they've gotten in there. And you can watch them begin to specialize. But the fun thing is a poet teaching young poets who are in liberal arts. They write more interesting things, because they're exposed to more. They're not just exposed to poetry. As a matter of fact, we all worry that our students don't read enough. Where I am, they actually read quite a bit. And even more interestingly, they're reading lots of other things and interested in those, too. They don't hate their science class. Am I making sense about it? They're made to take these general education things that actually sort of... I tell them, too, that thing about keep your ear up. Even in the most boring class, you're going to hear something that you can use, because you're a poet. It's not lost

on you. And that's just been great. I even have this theory. Maybe this would help our argument for liberal arts, that we should have interdisciplinary classes. I had this idea for one, "Ornithology for Poets," where my poets would take the ornithology class, but all their assignments would be poetry. Take the quizzes, but they would actually write art in response. It's liberal arts. They're not going to be ornithologists. They're not going to go on to graduate school. Let them have that track. I can hear it already, though. The criticism would be, "That's not science. That's easier." They have no idea what they're talking about, when they talk about this ease of poetry. But that said, also as a writer in a liberal arts institution, I don't always just want to hang around with other poets, as much as I love them to pieces. My best friend at Mary Washington is in the sculpture department. She does installation sculpture. We had a great program that I recommend highly, a teaching exchange program where I took her 3D design sculpture class and she took....

**[Break in recording to flip over the tape]**

....The other thing that makes me furious about politics and the ways of war and images and iconic images of veterans is this way, and this is something Wilfred Owen wrote about it after the Great War, oh no, this is Sassoon who said, "You love us when we're wounded in an unmentionable place." You know, we love to see the image of the veteran with his below-the-knee amputation getting ready to run a half marathon with a new prosthetic limb. We love that, you know? His face is perfect; he has a very healthy body. You're not likely to see the burns that people who have lost their face... You know, the things that we can take, or we like to celebrate about what's going on in the world. I think that's all extremely convoluted and hard to understand.

**Harbour:** Thank you so much.

**Claudia:** Sorry, I'm a rambler.

**Harbour:** It's part of your father and your oral storytelling tradition. It enriches how you share.

**Claudia:** Oh, I love my father's stories. Someday, I'll write more about that, but he was so funny. He never really understood this world of poetry. And when I won the Pulitzer Prize, he called me "Sissy," that was my nickname, and he was already ninety-three or something when I...I can't remember now. He had heard of the Pulitzer Prize which was good, because it was a big deal and, he looked at me kind of funny and he said, "You know, Sissy, I knew you'd been workin' hard, but I didn't know you'd been workin' that hard." I just love that.