

Ted Kooser - TK
Harbour Winn - HW
Elaine Smokewood - ES
John McBride - JM

HW – Ted, I thought we might ask you since we're in Oklahoma and you're from Iowa and Nebraska, what does it mean for a Poet Laureate for the first time to be from the Great Plains? What does that mean geographically, culturally, historically? What does that mean?

TK – Well, you know, there are some qualifiers there. We – Bill Stafford – of course so much of his work was written about Kansas, when he was named poetry consultant he was living in Oregon, so I'm the first person who actually was living out here when this happened. And you know, I think it was an enormous risk on the part of the Librarian to do this – the five before me, four of them had been from the north-east corridor and then Robert Haas from Berkley area. And I'm not sure how it happened, but I think they probably felt that they ought to try to represent more than just the coasts and so on. So, you know, when I was named there was a lot of "Who?", you know, and this kind of thing coming from both ends of the country and I don't, you know, of course it means – to me it means it was a marvelous opportunity to do some things. I do think that it's good for an official body like the Library of Congress to recognize that there are writers and artists living out here in the Great Middle, you know, and that some of them are doing pretty good work. And the Library of Congress is the people's library, I think the Librarian has that in mind, you know, that this is not the property of the east coast, and so on, so those are some of the issues, I think. And one of the things that happened for me was I said "Oh, boy, if I'm going to be the first one named from this area I had better do at least as good a job if not a better job than anyone's ever done. So I really threw myself into it and it's been pretty much seven days a week since then. I've done around 200 appearances, about 100 interviews. I think I've been in front of maybe 30,000 people with things like today.

ES – Did you know that that offer was coming?

TK – No, I had no idea.

ES – What were you doing and how did you react?

TK – Well, this is a pretty good story. My wife was in Washington – she's a newspaper editor and she'd gone there for some newspaper business and it was a Friday evening, it was about 6:15 and I was trying to figure out what I was going to cook for supper and the phone rang:

"Ted Kooser?"

"Yes"

"Ted Kooser the poet?"

"Yes, this is he"

“This is Pricer Gifford, I’m the director of scholarly programs for the Library of Congress, and I am calling to ask if you’d like to be the next Poet Laureate of the United States.”

And I was just staggered, you know. And I stammered around and tried to ask some questions and he finally said, you know, “I think I better call you back tomorrow”. And I said “That’d be fine”. And I got off the phone and I’m thinking - I couldn’t get ahold of Cathy, I tried to call her and she was in a meeting or something or other, and so I’m sort of trying to figure out how I can try to come to terms with this and I noticed that we had a couple of DVDs checked out from the little town of Seward which is our county seat town about fourteen miles away. And I thought “Well, if I get those over there in time – they’re overdue by about 15 minutes but maybe they won’t fine me if I get them over there, so I’ll drive to Seward and – with the DVDs – and while I’m driving I’ll think about what it’s going to be like to be a Poet Laureate, what I’m going to say and this and that. So I got in the car, in the garage, backed out and I ripped the side mirror off the car on the center post of the garage. And it’s one of those mirrors that has a cable – a power cable – so it’s hanging on the side of the car, swinging like a skillet all the way to Seward and I’m thinking “Oh, God, this is gonna cost a chunk of money.” Cause it’s one of those mirrors that’s form-fitted to the body and everything. So I pull into Seward, approach the DVD store and I think “Well, you know, those guys at the body shop work late on Friday nights, they’re probably still there. I’ll go see what this is gonna cost. So I drove to the other end of town to Bernie’s Body Shop and they did all the stuff with the computer and they said “Well, it’s gonna be \$138 and 43 cents” or something like that and I’m thinking “Oh, Jesus, this is ridiculous.” So I get back in the car and all the way home I’m thinking about being the Poet Laureate and about having to put out the money for this mirror and I pull in the garage and the DVDs are still in the car. And it’s like that for weeks. I remember when the press got onto the – when the first press release went out I got phone calls from all the country, newspapers from all over the country. I remember lying on the bedroom floor, on the carpet, looking up at the ceiling thinking “I am never going to be able to do this. This is so foreign to me”. But, yeah it was quite a thing. And then of course the first trip to Washington, I hate to fly so I drove to Washington. They made quite a bit out of that in Washington, that I had driven all the way, you know. ‘Cause for them it’s the other end of the solar system, really. But yeah, it was amazing, really. I’m still not quite – there still is at times the feeling that I may wake up and this has never happened.

HW – when does your term end?

TK – It ends in May. At the end of May. The terms run from October to May and I give a lecture I think on the 11th or 12th of May and that’ll be my – basically I’m gonna summarize what I’ve done as Poet Laureate.

ES - Do you feel that this happened at the right time in your life and career for you?

TK - Probably did, yeah. I had the time, and still had the energy. I'm not sure in two years if I'll have that much, you know, or more. I had my health back after having been very ill in '98 and '99, so sure. It was good.

JM - I have a kind of a non-academic question.

TK – That’s appropriate for me.

JM - Where does your name come from? I've never heard another Kooser.

TK - Well, all the Koosers in the country are related. Some of them spell it with a Z, we spell it with an S, some of them spell it "K-U-S-E-R". A pair of Koosers, Michael and Sabilla, landed in Philadelphia in 1749, and they were a bunch of Germans from the palatinate, came up during - I suppose they left Germany because of all those little wars that were going on between, you know, there was no Germany at that time, it was just all these little kingdoms. And they had a big family and then many of the Koosers went over into Western Pennsylvania, Summerset County, and settled there. And I've been back there and stood at the - at the graves of my great, great, great, great, great grandfather and so on. And it's interesting, I went to Summerset, and went to a Perkins restaurant one morning, Kathy and I were back there. And I left my name at the cash register to get a table and the waiting room was full of people and I came, you know, we sat down and the hostess came out and said "Kooser, party of two" and about half the room stood up. They were all there. But it's German. I'm pretty much German on all four grandparents, although my mother's father was Swiss, but basically German-speaking on that side of Switzerland.

ES - Well, I wanted to follow up on something you were talking about this morning at the session. And you talked this morning about some of the ways that literary criticism has gone wrong and I wondered what you would like to see - people who are writing about literature and writing about poetry - what would you like to see them doing and are there people who write about literature that you admire and who you think are doing good work?

TK - Well, I have really never studied the criticism of the 20th century. And I'm not sure it's the critics have gone wrong, it's just that the critics have been - have garnered a tremendous amount of power and perhaps rightly so or justifiably so because we did need interpreters for those people. Of the people writing reviews and so on today, Judith Kitchen writes very good reviews for the Georgia Review. I like her work a lot; very personable and accessible. Fred Chaple. Those are only two that come to mind right now. But I don't like a lot of the criticism that I see that I really think - although they would deny it - is ad-hominem attacks on people. I've seen some things like that in recent years that I thought were really disgusting. A review of a book and they just basically, it's just an opportunity for a lot of insults. I really like the idea - I'm not sure there's much point in writing a disparaging review of a book - when there's so many books that could be praised. And I think it's much better to say "Here's a book you ought to read" than "Here's one you shouldn't". Now I suppose it's true that someone like me who's attained some eminence, that it would make sense for a critic to go after me because after all, I've been elevated and so on, so that's a natural thing. I don't read anything written about me, good or bad. I don't like it. You know, the praise is always gassy and I'm thinking "Oh, come

on. This is way too over the top" and then the criticisms are always very painful, you know, because of it being insulting in many ways. So it's better not to read anything. Because I'm not going to change what I do based upon what a critic says. My approach to critics would be, if I was sitting with one, "You know, this is the best I can do. When I wrote these poems - if you think I'm holdin' back something, you're crazy, you know? I put everything I had into this and if it's not good enough for you, well, it's not." It's not like I know how to write a better poem and I'm not doing it. But that's basically how I feel about it.

HW - How would your view, what you're sharing now about a critic, correlate with a teacher, like Carl Shapiro, your teacher - how does a teacher critique, write comments...couldn't a good teacher be something like a good critic?

TK - Yeah, well I think of course. Yeah. I think the best way to go at writer's workshops and so on is to look for good things to say, first, before. And I - frankly, I fail at this sometimes; I get kind of impatient with my students and I write notes all over their poems that are not praiseworthy enough and I'm sure they are hurt by that. I always try to remember to apologize if I've done something in haste, you know, but I think it's good to try to find, to point to the good things that they're doing and then point out the ones that aren't working as well. Now Carl Shapiro, you mentioned Carl, he was never a critic of student work, right on the words and punctuation and marks and stuff like I am. That's the way I look at work, I'm really all over it. Carl was more into kind of general appraisal of a poem, you know, what is this thing, what is it setting out to accomplish? And what does it mean to say and so on. And I've worked with over the years other people like that. Two of my correspondences Jim Harrison and Dan Gerber tend to be that kind of critics of my work and of their own. And Leonard Nathan, who's another very good friend of mine, is a poet of - marvelous poet - who hasn't had nearly enough recognition I don't think. He's very good with the tiniest little points in a poem, you know, he'll get all over it. So if you can get a balance of that it's great.

ES - I'm doing an interview with someone who - I can't remember who it was - I think it was the person who's taking over the writing program at the University of Iowa, perhaps. And she said something to the effect that - I think the question came up about teaching students to be poets and can you really teach students to be poets and she said something like "It so often comes to the point where if this poem is going to be fixed or the student is going to be a better poet, he or she is going to have to be a better person." Do you think that's true, is there a way that's sort of - how good a poet you are or how good you are at the craft of poetry has something to do with how developed you are as a human being and sometimes you just kind of separate those things?

TK - You know, that's a real interesting question and I've thought about it a lot. When I read, years ago, when I read The World According to Garp, you know it was a very entertaining book and it was a big best seller and all that, and I laughed at all the funny things in it and everything, and I got to the end of the book and I - I felt very uncomfortable about it. It felt to me that the person who had written this book had a very decidedly mean style, you know, in a way, or was a mean person. So that kind of stuff

kind of comes through from behind, sometimes. And you know, we know, there have been lots of writers who have been successful, who have not been “good people” as we would think of it, as far as character and so on. But I do think that there’s something in that, in there. Not necessarily do you have to be a good person to be a good writer but that character has something to do with it and it probably has to do with the perceptions of the reader looking at the work. It’s amazing what will show through from behind a poem. We have a poet who’s now, gosh, in his eighties up in Nebraska. Published a lot of poetry over the years in little magazines and everything but he is a, kind of a chronic whiner. He, you know, he’s got this sort of “well, you know, my adult children are still living at home, they’re 50 and 53 and we can’t get rid of ‘em” and he’s going on about that. This guy – and I’ve read a lot of his poems over the years – he can write a poem about a crystal vase in a window filled with daffodils and somehow or other, from behind, you hear “well, they’re really not as pretty as you think they are”. It just kind of comes through from behind. It seeps through. And I think that’s what character does. Don’t you think so?

ES – I wanted to ask you, too, you’re famous for having talked about liking poems with more eye – e-y-e – than I, capitol I. How do you deal with students who maybe are writing in a very confessional mode in your classes?

TK – Well, I’ve done things like, without overtly saying that I don’t particularly like that, I’ve said things like “You ought to do a version of this poem in third person”. Just to see how that sounds. You know. And that will kind of get them thinking about it. I don’t know. That again is a personality and you’re never going to turn some people away from that, from writing where ‘I’ is the most important part of all. I remember, I remembered a review of one of my contemporaries – it was in the New York Times book review maybe ten years ago – and this poet had, her collection was being reviewed and the reviewer said – we’re going to call her so-and-so in this anecdote – the reviewer said “there could be an earthquake in Ethiopia and one hundred thousand and fifty people would perish and so-and-so would feel she had to take her temperature”.

HW – You have a variety of poems that are your response looking at a painting. One on Windsor Homer, you’ve got one on Washington, there are other ones, but you seem to look at portraiture and painting and as I read your poems I find so many of them are portraits in words. I think we could collect together so many of your poems and make really a portrait of usually people that are not famous beyond the way that they impact the people in their everyday lives. Just wondering, and then I know this, you also – you know you’ve talked about the cover of this book, Braided Creek, you painted that and I’m wondering if your painting, your view as a person who looks at portraiture and then as a poet who creates portraits.

TK – One of the first poems I ever wrote that I really liked when I was quite young was based on a painting of George Bellows – it’s in the DeMoines art center – called Aunt Fanny. It’s a Portrait of an old woman. And I described that. And I really liked that poem, you know, it was sort of predecessor of a lot a poems I would write about paintings and then about people. And, you know, I have a very strong visual orientation. I’ve drawn

and painted all my life and sometimes I have to remind myself to get the other senses in those poems, you know, because they're so very visual. I've often wondered, you know, from time to time someone will say that they can sort of see the great plains in my writing. Well, if you look at those single poems you can't do that. But I often wonder if what it is is the absence of odors. That puts a kind of space in the poem. That there's a lot of air between the reader and whatever's in the middle distance, you know. And that may be part of that perception but...I do like the idea of being on the outside looking in; that's the point of view I prefer. We own a – in the Sheldon Memorial art collection on the campus of the University of Nebraska – we own a very famous Edwin Hopper painting that they really bought for, I think, \$80,000 when they bought it – it's worth millions, now. But it's one of those things Hopper did. Hopper, you know, was very influenced by photography and this is a – what looks like a telephoto shot through a apartment window. Bricks around the outside, and there's a – on the left as you look there's a man on a couch reading a newspaper – or an overstuffed chair. And over on the right is a woman sitting on a piano bench, touching one key of the piano. And to me that is the ideal point of view; across the street, looking through the window at something happening. That's where I'd like to be as a poet. I do appear in some of my poems; I'll probably read a poem tonight in which I'm – maybe more than one – in which I really appear. But I like the idea of being on the outside looking at things.

JM – Almost like a voyeur?

TK – Yeah, like a voyeur. Yeah, yeah.

JM – That's an interesting perspective.

HW – What about as an anthropologist? Hearing you talk, I think the ideal, originally, of anthropology was that you could be this detached observer, but I think invariably your participating and observing and changing, perhaps, what you're seeing while you observe. But it also crosses my mind as I read your work and as I think of the portraits and the places that in many ways you are – even this morning with the blizzard – I see you as a poet, as a historian and poet as an anthropologist. And I guess my orientation would be that perhaps I can learn more about history through the artist. Have you thought of yourself as an anthropologist and as a historian?

TK – Not really. But I've got good friends who are anthropologists, and yes I've thought about anthropology and how it works. I, fortunately we in English like each other better than the anthropologists like each other. I noticed the anthropology – annual anthropology convention – I've heard described as sort of like a, you know, a bunch of pit vipers, you know, who just detest each other. Partly because in Native American studies the material is so confined. There's not an endless amount of it, you know, so they're all fighting over the rights to write about the Lacoda, you know, that kind of thing. I know, that's an interesting point of view, Harbour. I suppose in a sense I am observing people in this way that anthropologists do. And as far as history – one of the best ways to read history, I think, is to read biographies. I really – all my knowledge of the

revolutionary war is from reading the biographies of the participants. So you're following the people, rather than the events and such, you know.

ES – I wondered as a painter and as a poet, what can you do as a painter that you can't do as a poet, and the other way around?

TK – Well I think the – to me, poetry has to be more exacting than painting - since painting doesn't have anything as precise as language to go along with it. It can be freer, in ways. You notice that particularly when you hear people start talking about paintings, you know, about how inadequate, how the painting goes beyond language in some way. There really be – it'd be very, I, I know I could, in that book I could describe those painting of Winslow Homer pretty literally, and make them work. But I couldn't do that with contemporary abstract painting – there's really no way that language will even apply itself to that. I can say "Okay", yeah, "Mark Rothco uses big canvases of bright colors". Well, that's pretty far away from Rothco. But, you know, I do think as I said before the visual orientation of my poetry comes out of my having been interested in drawing and painting for years.

ES – Do you think those two activities complement each other, for you? That painting makes you a better poet?

TK – I don't know about that. I find it very useful to have something that I can do when I'm not – when I don't feel like writing, something that is engaged with the arts in some way. I feel good about that, you know. I don't like wasting time; there's not enough of it. Although when I'm traveling I must say that sometimes in motel rooms I like to watch television. There's just something about it, it's just so right, you know?

JM – You said this morning that with your painting you don't show it, you don't sell it. Presumably there's enough of them around to where they're just starting to pile up. You don't give them away?

TK – I've given away a lot of them.

JM – You do?

TK – Yeah. I've given away lots of them and as a matter of fact, most of them. I keep them around for a while to kind of pat myself on the back for having painted something and then somebody will come by to visit and complement me on a painting and I'll say "Here, why don't you take that one?" It's great fun to do that.

JM – You don't really have any intentions beyond that?

TK – No, I don't think so. I mean, there are some things...there's a painting that I gave my – I've been friends with Deborah Winger for 20 years - and I gave her a big painting of a barn burning. And then Copper Canyon decided they wanted to use that painting on a cover of a book of some writings of Rethke that is coming out. So I let them do that. And

then that book of mine, Winter Morning Walks that has a painting of mine on it. But that's a different thing than really being engaged in the profession.

JM – Also this morning, and last night, we talked about your editing process, where a poem will go through several iterations, drafts, whatever you want to call them. My mom, this morning said “I want to know if he's ever had one just show up, fully formed”. Just pop out, and that's it. You know, it's done and it can't be improved.

TK – Never.

JM – Never has?

TK – Never happened. I've had some that have come out pretty close and I've had to do very small tinkering with them. They're usually small poems. There's a poem in Delights and Shadows – *Screech Owl* – that came out pretty much the way it is although I had a little, I had an extra phrase in there that I eventually took out. But I was lucky in that case, you know, to catch it right.

JM – Some of the poets that we've talked to, we try to get into some of their craft. And a lot of them talk about the difference in writing versus the difference in editing. And it's a complete different mindset. They're a different person, they are approaching it in a different way, and you're the first that we've talked to that seems to be more integrated, that editing and writing don't – there's not that big of a difference.

TK - I don't see it. I don't know, it's very hard to put myself in their minds, how they would do that. But it's the same person doing both things, you know, so my sense of what a poem is at play not only as I'm writing it but as I'm editing it. So maybe I'm the peculiar duck in that sense.

JM – Is most of your editing subtracting?

TK – Subtracting almost always. That's a good question.

JM – We've heard that before, too. I'm thinking of Michael Andaje when he was here. He was one of the very much “I'm writing” or “I'm editing”, not a mix. But his, too, was taking away more than he adds.

TK – Yeah. Well, that poem that I read this morning, that memory poem where I talk about all of these things coming in, which is very much the way I try to get my students to look at writing from memory. I want them to get all the detail they can possibly get in the first draft and then go through and select the detail that is the most effective in conveying whatever they want to do, and throwing out the rest. Initially, on the first draft, getting it all in there and then starting to compress it down. One of my colleagues in the English department up there is very much on the idea “we'll add to this” with her students. She'll say, you know, “you need to put more in this part of the poem” and blow it up a little bit and expand it and all that. And to me it's, you know, unbelievable to go at

it that way. It's very interesting to have two people working with the same students doing that because they come from her to me and I'm, you know, they've been taught for a semester to expand and then they come to me and I'm telling them to clip it and throw it out. Compress it and take the hot air out of it, you know. So maybe in between the two of us they come to some sort of sense of themselves, I guess.

HW – I told you this morning, or last night – I don't remember – that it's hard not to just dwell with Delights and Shadows. But this book, I don't know if it was just the moment in time when I was reading it, but this one struck as much as any of your books. Winter Morning Walks. I wonder...tell us about that. I mean, we don't have a poem from every day. Did you write a poem for every day?

TK – I wrote one every day, but some of them were quite – you know. I took out about thirty of them when I was done and mainly because they were redundant. They were too – maybe not an identical poem, but they were too much like the other one. So I picked the one I liked the most.

HW – But your average this morning, you were saying – or last night – you got one a month and twelve a year. This was a demanding time, wasn't it?

TK – Well, it was me really fighting for life, you know, and hanging onto these poems like they were – like I was sliding down a rocky slope and grabbing at handholds, you know. And at that time I had no idea whether I would be alive in six months or not, you know. And I was kind of reawakening to the – which you go through in a near-death situation, you know. I was reawakening to the world and I was appreciating all those little details. There's a poem in Delights and Shadows called *Surviving* and it is very much like that, too, about seeing the ladybug on the window sill. The kind of things that you're suddenly aware of and appreciating in life that might have otherwise been gone. And so that's what that book is. It's just sort of a huge catalogue of all kinds of little things that I was just trying to appreciate, you know, and celebrate in a way. And grabbin' one day after the next, you know, I mean that's really what I was doing. I really think that this writing business is a lot – as I mentioned yesterday – is a lot about trying to find order at a time when you've had cancer, you've gone through this devastating treatment, everything is chaos, you're scared to death, in two weeks it might be back, you know, the idea that I could put together a little square about the size of a playing card of order every day, you know, was very helpful to me. When people start talking about poetry as therapy I'm really suspicious of that. You know, I don't like the sound of that, you know. But in effect, that's what I was doing, I think.

HW – A number of these poems you – there's personification, there's the metaphor which you've talked about, but you assume a point of view of animals. It's like Jane Hirschfield; you assume the point of view of different animals that you see. There's a... I write "Walden Pond" often when I'm reading this book, in my margins. There's a Thoreau-like appreciation, for want of an analogy or a comparison.

TK – Yeah, I don't, you know, I've always been very interested in the natural world and I'm – you know, we live in the country so it's all around us and I wasn't running into people on those walks. I'm running into rabbits and birds. There's a hunter that appears in one of those poems, and some other things like that, but generally that's what I had available to me to write about. Those were the things. And one of the poems in there I like very much is one about my wife going off to work and twirling into her coat. There's a person who appears, you know. But, you know, it was a lonely time, too, because I was out there, you know, I couldn't be out in the sunlight, you know, I wasn't well enough to spend a lot of time in town with my friends. So I was alone with nature. Watching it very carefully.

ES – You know, I was thinking about that's one of the things I love about your poetry is that over and over again your poems seem to be as if they're coming from someone who is not afraid to be alone with himself and not afraid to be alone with nature. And that's so sustaining to just be connected to that person, through those poems.

TK – Yeah, I thought any number of times that when it comes time for me to die - if I could find a place where I would like to be when it happens - would be in October when the fruit is all overripe on the apple trees and so on and we have a lot of wild plums up that way, I assume there are wild plums down here, too, but to go up into the corner of a field in the deep grass that has not been plowed, under a thicket of plums that are overripe and falling down with that fruit smell and everything like that on a crisp October day, all by myself just crawling in under one of those bushes and lying there looking up at the sky. To me, that would be the ideal way to go, rather than with a lot of friends around me and so on.

JM – One of the questions I like to ask of people who come and sit where you're sitting is on the subject of fear. Because it's something I've noticed with poets, that they tend to be the least fearless among us, which probably is by their poems. And it's a question, do you ever come across anything in your writing that has just scared you off, you just can't go there, or do you find a way through that?

TK – I can think of instances when I was in my twenties and thirties where I wrote things that were, that made me feel kind of crazy and that was scary to me. I think maybe at the time I was getting close to being kind of crazy. I drank way too much when I was young, and that was part of it. But that hasn't happened to me in a long time. I haven't found myself drawn into an area in writing that was that, had a kind of darkness to it. I don't even remember examples of what the writing was like in those early times but I do remember once reading a piece aloud to Carl Shapiro, a little prose passage I'd written. And sort of scaring myself by reading it. Something about the whole moment was very bizarre. And I, you know, I probably write differently about death, having come close to it, then I would have when I was younger. One of the things about being terribly ill is you worry all your life about some terrible thing happening to you and then it happens and then you think "well, okay now, what am I going to do? It's already happened, you know, I've gotta live now, I've gotta go on living", you know, and that's a really important thing to have happen, in a way. It changes you. Do you know about the Duende? The

Lorca's idea of the Duende? They were, well, he wrote about the Flamenco and the idea was that if – if I understand it correctly – that height of Flamenco dance is to dance out to the edge of death, in other words out to the edge of complete physical collapse and then to draw back from that. And it gives you an aura. And the great Flamenco dancers are able to do that – go right out to the edge of collapse and then pull back. And that, by extension then, persons who have looked death in the teeth and have turned away from that have a kind of a different kind of character or something about them, not necessarily an aura but something like that. And some of my friends who have gone through terrible things have a kind of aura that I describe as “duende”. When Bob Curee was running for Senate, Gentleman's Quarterly interviewed me about his senate race and I said “You know, he really has duende” and of course Gentleman's Quarterly, you know, they had no idea what it was or anything, we just left it at that. But then afterwards when that interview was published I had several people come to me and say “Jesus, what are you talking to GQ about *duende* for?” But that is true about Bob, he's a very charismatic person and I think it's because here's a guy who was in Vietnam and really saw some terrible things in Vietnam and came close to dying and his lower leg blown off, you know, and then came back from it. And I see that a lot among alcoholics as well, people who have almost died from alcoholism and who have gotten in a program and come back. They have a kind of – I can recognize a – I'm an alcoholic with about twenty years of sobriety but I can spot an alcoholic a hundred yards off by the way they are. Ones that are in the program, who have been in the program for years, I can spot them and I think it has to do with the kind of – that kind of thing – about the demeanor.

HW – A different direction, but you mentioned the poem from Winter Morning Walks with your wife and the twirling of her coat. One thing that is just recurrent in your poems is movement. A movement starts. And empirically you describe it without a chain link missing. That is a trademark of yours, I think, and of course it's often involved in metaphor, *The Ferris Wheel in John Garden*, I love that poem, but I don't know. You have just a gift for looking at the sequence of how something moves.

TK – I like writing that way. There's a poem I may read tonight, *Skater*, which has that one little twirl in the air. The woman in the wheelchair moving the wheels with her hands, that sort of motion, I mentioned when I was talking about this poem, I wrote about a roller-blader coming toward me with that sort of sweeping motion that they have. I have a poem called *In Passing* about two people who are meeting on the sidewalk and not knowing whether they're going to speak to one another or not, not knowing whether they really recognize each other, then that moment when they pass without speaking there's a sort of a charge there. I like that kind of subject matter. It's interesting though, you know, I don't think I've ever thought about this until this moment, but in landscape painting, when I do a lot of it, it's always good to have suggested motion; wind blowing. It makes a – when the trees are bent into the wind all of a sudden the painting, there's a lot more to it than if they're just standing there. So there I'm picking up on motion in a kind of visual way.

ES – I just wanted to follow up on what Harbour was saying because I know we talked about your poetry as portraiture and that people talk about your poetry often as a kind of

imagistic poetry but that was my sense, too, of reading your books end-to-end was that I – it's like the book of changes. That it's all flux. And I feel as if I'm riding the wave of change and the wave of time. And no poem, no matter how small it is, doesn't enact some change or some transformation of some kind.

TK – Well, yeah. Thank you. I don't know that I've ever consciously sought that. I like the sound of it, you know, that we are all astride this ribbon of time and things are happening all the time and even, you know, the classic imagistic poems that have lasted the longest, the ancient Chinese poems and so on. They have that, you know. And then those marvelous paintings, those big paintings of Mt. Fuji and so on there's always that little figure in the foreground walking along with a stick, you know, or something like that. It seems to me, you know, incidentally, it seems to me that the poems that have lasted the longest generally – although the ones in the Greek anthology and so on are not like this, particularly, but – are the poems which establish place and weather almost right off the bat. And I think that what happens is that in human conversation that's what we do. You know, we say “You know, Harbour, I got up this morning, it was raining a little bit, looked out the window and I could see whatever snow was left melting” and so on and then I introduce my story after that. But I set the weather and all that stuff first. So I try to do that. Not necessarily try but sort of do it intuitively. Here's something we might talk about a little – I'm don't know where I'm drifting with this – but I was telling somebody the other night that if you think of the original human family as living outside this cave in France, right at the mouth of this cave, and you have one person who ventures out into the woods with the digging stick, and you have another person who has made that person a little leather pouch to put the grub worms in when they bring them back from under the rocks, then you have someone there to tend the fire and take care of the children and then you have a Shaman there of some kind who is telling stories and painting the pictures on the cave wall and doing that and it occurred to me that those are the – you know, every occupation we have today, right down to the English professor or the person who puts microchips together is in some way – that occupation in some way relates to the original occupations. Because human need has not changed; it's still shelter, food, sex, those things that are served by those original occupations. And that those of us who are engaged in occupations that are the closest to the original ones may be the happiest people. That the painters and the poets and I think even English teachers are not that far removed from that story telling thing and everything, or the people who dig in the dirt – the geologists and the people who run the earth-moving equipment and all that kind of stuff are pretty close to the original occupations. And that the people who are the most removed from those, like the microchip guy – who is not only, he's putting a microchip in a microchip. You know, he's so far away from the original things, that those occupations are not nearly as satisfying as the very, as the primal occupations: cooking, making fires, making garden, making pictures, telling stories. All of those people seem happier to me, I think.

JM – I think you're right. I've said most of the world's problems could be solved if people just realized that what people really want is just to get home to dinner. And it means they've got a place to go to, it means they've got a meaningful job that's

elsewhere, and they've got a safe place. And if that was honored and that was met, a lot of this other energy we waste would not be so.

TK – Well, look at you, John, you're moving from one of the primal occupations – digging under the rock for the grub worms – to baking, which is another one. You just moved from the woods into the firelight. Another thing I think is true about people along with what you said is that generally nearly everyone is doing the best they can. They are trying to live a good life. And they are screwing it up, making terrible mistakes, and so on, you know. But generally they're trying to live a good life. I talked to a guard at a wedding in Omaha. The bride's brother is a guard in the county facility in Huntsville, Texas where all of those guys going to the electric – or the gurney, I guess it is in Texas – pass through this facility. You know, and we're talking a year of guys that are on the way to their deaths. And I said "Of those people, how many of them are genuinely evil?" and he said maybe, "Ted", he said "Maybe two or three percent, the others have just made stupid choices". You know. And so that sort of bears out this idea. Incompetent as we are, we're trying to get home for dinner.

HW – It's Maury Sendak, Where the Wild Things Are. Max gets home in time for dinner.

TK – Yeah. That's right.

HW – You talked about your view of the confessional poem, the preference of the third person, the observer, and I think all those things as I read your poetry are so – and yet there's the poem about your mother, the poem about your father, and mentioned last night, *Pearl*. I don't have a favorite Ted Kooser poem, but those – *Pearl*, and the one on your mother – they're so moving. I remember one night in this room early in the morning reading it and I just was in tears. I think you're definitely there. But I think what you also do is you terrify me. You put me there, too. Those are like anomalies to your other poems and yet to me they're some of the most memorable ones, too.

TK – Well, I was willing to take the risk of really letting my feelings out in those poems, particularly the one about Mother. And a lot of my earlier works were really quite restrained that way and I don't do that. But whenever I come to my family I've done that. There's a poem in Weather Central about my cousin Ira Freedline which I've – I may even read that this evening, I'm not sure. But that I'm willing to talk about – genuinely talk about my feelings about my family. Oddly enough I had an email this morning, I checked, and it was a teacher who had written to me and one of her students had a question about those poems about my father and my mother wondering if those were real or if I'd made those up. And I thought "God. Who would make up something like that?" Don't we sort of – I mean, I really think we trust the sort of lyric poet to be telling the truth, you know. Of course, this is a kid, he's in school, he doesn't know that yet, you know, but I mean, I couldn't have made those poems up. And of course Winter Morning Walks is much more open to expressions of feeling than anything I'd ever done before. And a lot of that was coming about at the same time. I mean, Mother had died just before that was started, Dad had been dead twenty years but I was still writing about him from time to time. I really liked my family, you know. I mean they were extremely ordinary in

every way but if we can write about family then they gain a little edge of mortality. If somebody reads that poem about my mother, my mother comes into the light for a little bit, then subsides again. So that's part of what I'm trying to do, is keep them in the light a little.

HW – I can't help but, the Wallace Stevens association with you is inevitable for the academic person, but I try to think beyond that because you're so different from Wallace Stevens, thank goodness, but that's not to say I can't appreciate some of Wallace Stevens' poems. But I just wonder, do you talk to Mutual of Omaha? Do you do poetry readings for corporations? I mean, because of your *vida* you would seem to have credentials as anyone from the insurance world or business world, that even if it was just sort of to be cute, they would get a poet to come address them.

TK – Yeah, I've had some invitations that for one reason or another I haven't been able to do. And I would do it under – you know – some circumstances. All too often, though, when you gain some little level of celebrity and you get these invitations you know what's happening is that the Bessie Jones has been named the program chairman for the Cayamago (?) alumni and she's looking around for somebody who will satisfy her need to come up with a program. And when I see those things I sense that they're really not interested in me and my deal and then I can say "You know, I don't really want to do that." And one of the insurance organizations in Nebraska came to me and I could tell, right away, that that's what it was. It needed a program for something and they thought "Oh, this guy will be, he's a program we'll try him and if he can't do it we'll see if one of the assistant coaches can do it", you know, and that kind of thing.

HW – What about, like, the secretary that you had that was one of your best critics? Weren't there people that you worked with that need poetry or...

TK – You know, a lot of those people come to my readings when I do them locally. The people I worked with at the insurance company, I've seen a lot of them at my readings. One of my former assistants even set up a reading recently for the International Association of Business Communicators – their chapter. Which is people who work in marketing and sales promotion. I did do a reading for them. So yeah, there's some of that.

HW – What was your experience like, there?

TK – It was fine. It was like any other reading. I'm not writing over the heads of those people. One of the things I really liked – one of the groups I really like reading to was the medical personnel. There's an awful lot of emphasis now on healing and the arts and I'm trying to be a part of that, you know. I've done maybe three or four things and the University of Nebraska Medical Center where I've gone up and read poems to them and talked about how good it was for me to have poetry at hand when I was trying to recover and that sort of thing. And my doctor is a very creative guy, invited me up there two or three times to do that sort of thing. And that's really satisfying work, you know, because I so admire people who are in medicine, you know, and really doing something of worth like that. And you know the insurance company job, Cathy is a newspaper editor, it's

easy to see the social worth of newspapers. I mean, there's no doubt about it, that it has some social value to it. Working in a life insurance company, life insurance there are some social benefits, if you die your beneficiary gets some money. But most of my energy, when I was at the insurance company, was going into making life insurance agents rich. Figuring out ways that they could sell more insurance and get rich. And playing to that part of their ambition. And I had a hell of a time finding any social worth in that. But I had my poetry writing on the side to kind of redeem me as a human being, I thought – you know – all those years. I may be being too hard on that industry, you know, but I don't know – at the time I used to think about that. People who teach, who work in newspapers, who are doctors, clergy, you know, I think they're doing the good stuff. You know, helping people through life, you know, and providing counsel and support.

ES – Do you think by the kind of work that you did that you were able to almost save a sort of energy for your poetry?

TK – Well, you know, I do think that people who work with writing all day long like journalists, I never met a journalist who didn't want to write a book or a novel. But they work with words all day long and I don't think they can – very difficult for them to go on working in the evening hours with it. So the fact that I was doing something entirely different during the day may have been good for me, in a way. It is not a job, however, that I would recommend to someone who wants to be a poet. But I would recommend that they get a job. And try to hang on to it, you know.

HW – When you read earlier at the lunch you mentioned that the poem you read about the farmhouse was often anthologized. I think the whole phenomenon of anthologies is interesting; I think that poets are saved or they're damned because of the poems that are anthologized. What would you anthologize of yours? What are you pleased when you see it asked to be anthologized? What do you wish was?

TK – I wish that – my experience has been that most anthologies copy each other, so that abandoned farmhouse poem has been in dozens of anthologies, primarily because someone saw it in another one. It would be nice if newer work was – you know, that poem was written in 1969, you know, and you think “Well, Jesus, haven't I written anything good since then that's worth being anthologized?” I think that's part of what I think about in those things, and it is true, in a way, that anthologies tend to preserve a kind of poem for, associated with someone's name. Robert Hayden, for instance, that poem of his *Those Winter Sundays* which is the only poem of Robert Hayden that anyone knows. And he wrote a number of good poems. But that's the one that is anthologized over and over and over again. Maybe that's not all bad. Maybe if that poem can live a hundred more years, that's alright. Maybe it's the anthologies that are going to keep it going.

ES – This is going to not be connected, but you are often compared to Robert Frost, or your poetry's compared to Frost's poetry, do you think that's an apt comparison?

TK – Oh, I don't know. It's flattering, I think I really like Frost, but I suppose in a way a poem like *Pearl* in which I'm relating, I'm doing a narrative kind of account of something happening, probably at some point in my life have shown some influence of those Frost narratives. Matter of fact, it occurs to me right now, I'd never thought about this, but one of my favorite Frost poems is *The Witch of Kowos* (?) – if I'm pronouncing that correctly - where the old woman has the knuckle bone in the bottom of her sewing basket that she's looking for all through the telling of the story, well *Pearl* is very much like that in a way. May even be about the same length. I don't know. But I don't read Frost often, you know, I always like it when I read it but he's not somebody who I think I've been profoundly influenced by. I wonder if part of that just doesn't come from the fact that I write about rural life and so did he.

ES – And this won't be very connected, either, but I wanted to ask you about metaphor in one of your poems and just kind of look at one of them as an example of your use of metaphor. And I was thinking about the poem *Etude* about the heron. And one of the really cool things about that poem is that it starts out being a poem about a bird and the bird is compared to a man writing a love letter, but then it becomes a poem about a man writing a love letter that's compared to a bird and it's like the whole literal-figurative distinction is kind of completely ungrounded; I almost get dizzy when I'm reading that poem and it seems like that's kind of a mood that you're attracted to a lot in your poetry and I wondered if you wanted to talk about it a little bit.

TK – I think it's sort of like daydreaming, you know. You're in the present, here's the heron, and then you dream off into this other thing, and then eventually you have to come back. You have to get yourself back grounded, and so what you do is in that poem, his pencil is poised in the air like the beak of a bird and then back you go to the bird. Another poem in Delights and Shadows very much like that is *Bank Fishing for Blue Gills* where I talk about the boat as if the boat were a man and then the man becomes very real during the course of that, and then I've got to get it back to the boat. And I've had – I had a student recently send me an email – a student in a high school somewhere – they couldn't quite figure out which was the real thing; the man or the boat. I don't know that is a – I guess there is such a thing as a move that I do but I do a lot of that, yeah. It's great fun, you know.

ES – And it's where so much of the movement comes into your language, into the poetry.

HW – You were talking this morning about how you put together a Braided Creek and when I look at Weather, just a bit, the table of contents – you know there's seven parts – and when I look at Delights and Shadows I think there's four parts, aren't there? How do you – do you see Part 3 of Delights and Shadows or Number 5 of Weather Central as a kind of interconnected cycle of poems or as a – how do you structure these things?

TK – You know, what I do is – usually – if I have sixty poems that I think could be in a book, then I start trying to arrange them on the floor. And I've never had an idea as to what a book would be. But now I've got the material for a book. So I see if there are similarities between certain of the poems and as it turned out in Delights and Shadows

there's the section of poems that are largely about my family. There's a poem – there's a section of sort of portraits like you were talking about earlier, there's a section of poems about things, and that kind of thing, you know, they are pretty loosely categorized but I've divided them, you know, into that. And another advantage of having sections in poems – in books of poems – is that you use up four pages of signature so you don't have to have quite so many poems. I have never wanted to put a poem in that was a filler, you know, I never...that's a dangerous thing. Because that could be the one poem that somebody sees first, opening the book, and it's not going to represent the book's better stuff. And so I try to wait until I have sixty of them that are really strong, but with the section heads then I only need 56.

HW – You know, what's so interesting is that a year ago at this time the three of us sat here with Billy Collins and he described the very same process how he puts books together. He has them all on the floor, they're in a couple of rooms, he walks around them for several days and he arranges them.

TK – I rearrange them by shape and length, too. I don't want to have a whole string of poems that are long poems together, you know, I like to have it feel kind of eclectic. I didn't know that about Billy but I'm not surprised.

ES – It was interesting, you were talking this morning about putting the string of note cards from the bedroom into the dining room, and what you're describing now it's really interesting to see this whole process as a kind of a visual art for you, in a way. And with your revision notebooks and your cutting and pasting.

TK – You know, Jim, in a way, on that – laying out Braided Creek, turned over to me. I don't think he wanted to mess with it. He's somebody who has to write for a living, you know, and the idea of taking two days to move poems around on the floor was not up to his standard, you know. He's one of the few writers in the country who has been able to survive on his own work, you know, all these years. But that means working hard at it, all the time. But yeah, so he turned it over to me and I didn't even know how to go about it. And yet I began to feel a kind of – a sort of a loose thread that ran through everything that I could kind of play on and you know it came out, I think, pretty well.

JM – Well, like you describe poetry itself just making order out of something that doesn't have apparent order in it. It's kind of the same process. It's like the book itself is a poem, of sorts.

TK – Yeah, I think that's right. I think a book should add up to being more than the sum of its parts in some way. That's what usually goes wrong with chat books, it seems to me – I used to review them for the Georgia Review, it seems like many chat books just look like just 20 poems stapled together. You know, they don't really ever in sum come to more than that.

HW – This is going back just briefly but the three of us also sat with Lucille Clifton who passed by battle after battle for her life with cancer, also, and I just wonder do you have connections with someone like her?

TK – No, not really. I'd like to meet Lucille Clifton sometime, but I haven't. Most of my literary friendships are by mail, you know. I corresponded with Leonard Nathan for probably fifteen years before we ever met. And you know, got to be very good friends through the mail. That's part of living on the great plains, I think, it's like we're holding up telephone poles out here with the wires – long wires – reaching away, you know, and so I really don't know a whole lot of my contemporaries personally; I know them by their work. And so on. And I don't go to the AWP convention or anything like that where I could meet more of them. But I like them at a distance, frankly, you know.

HW – However differently your poems sound, I think Clifton and you have some real similarities.

TK – I've read some things that she's written. I can't quote anything that I liked quite a bit – I mean written about poetry and writing.

HW – The non-academic.

TK – Yeah.

HW – The very highbrow presentation, a very sharp eye. There's a kind of oral quality to her poetry.

JM – She was here the day of Rosa Park's funeral.

TK – Oh, really?

JM – We got to visit about that just kind of in between official events. It was neat to get her read on that.

TK – I was at the Library of Congress one afternoon in the Klugey (?) center where the scholars work – this is an endowed center by a couple named Klugey – and my boss at the Library, Pricer Gifford, who is the director of scholar programs said – I was down there, I went down to see him in his office – and he said “Ted, here's a couple of gentlemen I'd like to have you meet” – elegant black gentleman in there, in old age, standing there and it was John Holk Frankin and John Carter – you know who Franklin is – but Carter's the guy who with Thorgood Marshall took the Brown Vs. Board of Education to the supreme court, you know. And there they were, right in the library, you know. John Holk Franklin was just marvelously warm and friendly and you know, and here is *the guy* who wrote the history of the civil right's movement. Right there in the flesh. It was really marvelous.

JM – In your work at the library you have done some interesting things. I talked to you last night about bringing John Prine and I'd like to ask you in this format about that and how that came about and if you knew each other beforehand or why him, why that interchange. It was wonderful.

TK – Well, you know, I had never met him before. What had happened was when his first album came out in 1970 or 71, I stumbled upon it somewhere. And that's the one that has the classic John Prine songs – Sandstone, Donald and Lydia, all those really early ones. And I thought, you know, I have thought all along that all those song writers of that period – they used to talk about “These people are the poets of the age” and everything – that Prine was the best of them. That I like Prine's writing better than I like Bob Dillon's, writing and so on. You know, I like Dillon's writing, too, but Prine – I thought Prine was more inventive and more interesting in lots of ways. And so I've always kind of carried him around with me and had been invited on – I believe it was the 9th of November – of 2004, shortly after I'd been installed as Poet Laureate. I did a reading at UT at Knoxville and afterwards, after the reading, a bunch of us in the English department were sitting around talking and somebody said “What are you – what kind of things would you like to do at the Library of Congress” and I said “It'd be great fun to get John Prine there”. Well, there's a guy on the English department there by the name of R.B. Morris who's a fiction writer and he said “I know Prine, I'll just ask him.” So he connected me up with Prine. And Prine was willing to do it for the very small honorarium that the Library offers – 2500 bucks, 3000 bucks or something or other like that – he was the first folk singer who had been there at the Coolidge Auditorium in the Jefferson building since Woody Guthrie was there in 1936. And I don't know whether he knew that or not but I told the crowd there that night that that was the case. And, you know, I hit it off with him. He and I had the same kind of cancer, six months apart – he's six months ahead of me – just discovered that that night. I knew he'd had some. But, you know, he's doing well. He brought his lovely Irish wife Fionna, and these two very handsome little boys of theirs in little suits and ties, you know, and friends of the family, it was really just a wonderful evening. We had a few longstanding Prine fans show up but it had been billed as a conversation rather than as a concert so we were able to keep the crowd from getting out of hand and too big. The day before the concert one of the custodians at the library found a guy sitting in the auditorium with his knap sack who was waiting to get a seat and the guy had to say “you know, we don't do that at the Library of Congress. We don't sleep here overnight to get in”, you know. As it turned out there was plenty of room for everybody. It was a lot of fun and it was very interesting some of the things he said about song writing, I thought. At one point somebody asked him about writing out of anger in response to something that made him angry. And he said he never does that, he always waits. And I thought that was a very interesting thing. Let the emotions cool a little, then address them, you know. What I love about Prine, I think I told you this, John, he is, if any other singer in the country – this is an exaggeration but – if any other singer in the country had a line in a song “There's a big old goofy guy dancing with a big old goofy girl, oh, Lord, it's a big old goofy world” that coming out of anybody but John Prine would come out as a sneer. There'd be a little sneer to it, looking down on those people. Not Prine. Prine is right in there with those people. He is right at their level and he respects them and loves them, I think. That big old goofy guy, that big old goofy girl, you

know, he, John's waitin' for the next dance, you know? He's right there. But what a huge presence he is. You know, he just – I told my wife when I got home – she wasn't able to go – I said, this is like, as if I were sitting onstage with a huge chunk of the universe that had been drifting for a billion years and yet had that kind of gravity to him. It was marvelous, really.

JM – Is that still on the website?

TK – I think it is still on the website.

JM – It's worth people looking up.

ES – And he has the perfect voice for his songs. You wouldn't think he had the perfect voice for anything.

TK – You know, he told a good story. He said – you know when they do head and neck radiation they try to shield part of the salivary glands – they can do that sometimes. Or areas – they build these lead forms that can fit in. I couldn't have that, so – but in Prine's case they were making one to try to protect his vocal chords. And they were talking to him about this. And the doctor said “You know, we want to make this lead thing around your larynx here that will protect your vocal cords, knowing that you're a singer”. And Prine said “You ever heard me sing?”

ES – Well, he was in Oklahoma City within the last two or three years, I'm thinking. He sounded wonderful.

TK – Yeah. His voice is about an octave lower than it used to be. But I think it's got marvelous character to it. Yeah, that was a – another thing that night that I really loved was the – somebody – they sent up these questions on 3 by 5 cards and someone said “Mr. Prine, do you think that there's still a place for the protest song in America?” And he said “I think it's a full-time job”.

JM – That's some of the fun of getting to be Poet Laureate.

TK – That was the most fun, I think. That and – I enjoyed that immensely and I also had liked going to the NCTE meetings, both years, hangin' around with the English teachers for, you know, four or five days, talkin' to them about poetry. Those people who go NCTE are – they are the, they are the best of the best. Here are young women and young men who have gone to those things on their own nickel, the school board won't give them a dime for – they're paying two hundred bucks a night for a hotel room in Indianapolis just so they can be there, you know. And participate. It's really quite marvelous, I think. I've liked that, and Prine, and you know I've had, I had the opportunity to give away these Witter Binner fellowships. Year before last I picked Martin Walls who's a young Brit living in Syracuse New York working for a magazine whose work I really liked, and Claudia Emmerson, who wrote under Claudia Emmerson Andrews her first book. She's published three books at LSU. She's a Virginian, and then this year I picked Joe Stroud

from California and Connie Wannick from Deluth to get these 10,000 dollar scholarships. And you know, these are poets who are really writing very, very well but who really do not have that kind of recognition. So it's a lot of fun to bring them in and have them read and Grace Kallieri has this program – radio program – called *The Poet and the Poem* from the Library of Congress and she interviews those Witter Binner people for that so that was really a lot of fun too. And you know I've had events like this, you know, just talking to people. It's been good. I really have not had a whole lot of unpleasant experiences at all. If there had been graduate students sitting in the back of the auditorium with burning questions that they can just barely contain, you know, questions with some sort of veiled insult in them and everything, none of them have stood up yet, you know. I've seen that happen from time-to-time, you know, but I haven't had anybody be confrontational in any way.

HW – Well, we appreciate you being here, Ted.

TK – Yeah, thank you, I've enjoyed it.

HW – For giving us your time.

TK – I enjoyed it.

HW – And this interview will be published in the Oklahoma Humanities Council's publication. I'll give you some samples from the past. One question they will ask me to ask you is in the publication of the edited interview would it be okay if one or two of your poems was included?

TK – Sure, I think that'd be fine. You know, some of the ones we've mentioned would be fine. We just need to give them proper accreditation in there, is all. Or just the standard acknowledgement is fine, sure. That's not a problem.