

Mark Doty Interview: FOR CARLA WALKER

Fri, 1 Nov 2002 One for publication

**Transcript of Conversation with Mark Doty
April 10, 2002**

Abigail Keegan: Maybe for starters you could tell us what lead you to write poetry?

Mark Doty: A sense of a great internal pressure, the tremendous desire as an adolescent to gain some control over the turmoil within by speaking it, by giving it a name. And so when I was 14, maybe, I began keeping a notebook, which was not a diary, and it certainly wasn't poetry, but a catch book of phrases, impressions, dreams, day dreams, quotations of things I liked, a kind of repository for all that was turning within. I kept my notebook deliberately in terrible handwriting, just in case anyone should find it and try to read it. I wanted it to be completely private and sometimes, of course, I couldn't read it myself. That was the beginning of writing for me, and I was lucky enough to stumble across some poets who spoke to me when I was very young. Some of them are Federico Garcia Lorca, William Blake, and J.R.R. Tolkien. In reading those poems I felt a sense of excitement about being in the presence of the kind of language that did more than describe the external world, that somehow did something else besides telling a story. That language seemed to vibrate with feeling and to contain something which could not be said in any other way, something unparaphraseable, as if the only way to speak this particular perception was through the words of this very poem. That was very moving to me and I wanted to make something in response to it. The words and phrases in my notebook became the beginning points, the building materials from which I would try to shape my beginning poems.

Abigail Keegan: That intense poetic language sometimes intimidates students, and if you come to it miraculously on your own, and it's the way you think, sometimes it's hard to bridge the gap between their resistance to that language and relishing language that can not be paraphrased completely.

Mark Doty: That was how it felt for me. Suddenly I seemed to be less alone. Because there had been other people who thought something like I did, and whose sense of the world, as represented in these words, seemed to mirror mine. And not just to mirror it, but to also challenge it and raise questions and to push me further toward the real. So yes, that can be a scary thing. It's part of being human, I think, to what we long for most, which is to feel our feelings, to be ourselves in the most profound way. It's also something deeply frightening and so we tend to avoid it. That's why we have this attraction-repulsion relationship to poetry. We hunger for that sense of the inner life and for the truth and interiority, and yet we also want to get away from it because it may cause us to feel things that are troubling to us, or it may cause us to change.

Harbour Winn: I'm wondering about your perception of your audience and your audience's perception of you--how you distinguish between yourself and the persona who speaks in your poetry. How do you in language strive for that persona or "the other" to be heard by us, your audience? I'm really wondering about the connection between your interior world and the interior world of your reader. Does this happen after lots of drafting, or does it come in a moment of inspiration?

Mark Doty: No it's completely spontaneous; I've never had to work for it. I don't believe that subjectivity can actually be captured in language because it's too complicated and it's too slippery. And words, for all their elasticity and complexity, are smaller than experience is. They can't quite contain it all. So when we are writing about our experience, we are always making a version of that experience, and we are always making a version of the self for the audience to meet. We select some details, we suppress others, we heighten some things, and we put others things more in the background. There is just no such thing as being your naked self on the page. It's always an act of self-presentation.

Somebody who taught me good deal of that was Robert Lowell, whom we think of as not just a confessional poet, but the inventor of confessional poetry in his wonderful 1959 book *Life Studies*. Lowell said about that book, "I wanted the reader to feel he was meeting the real Robert Lowell." The writer may say, "I want you to feel you're meeting the real Robert Lowell, or the real Robert Pinsky, or the real Jane Hirshfield," but of course what you're doing as a writer is making a kind of persona, a mask. Some of those can be quite far away from the way we experience ourselves, and some can be much closer. I'm trying to come as close in my work to the texture of my experience as I can and to the texture of my perception. That is why poems are what they are. It's why they are discursive and extended. It's why they work in kinds of complex sentences. It's why they're interested in not just distilling an experience, but trying to give you some context around that experience. So that you as the reader can get a little closer, I hope, to the texture of my subjectivity. It's one of the reasons I read. I read in order to meet people and have a sense of the way in which somebody else has experienced the world. And to feel my own connections to that experience and my own differences from it as well.

Conceiving of audience is a difficult question to talk about because I think there's a way in which poets don't often know precisely to whom they are speaking. It remains a little bit of a mystery to us. Because if you say, I'm writing a poem to this group of readers, the result is likely to be over determined and boring. The poem is spoken to whom? To the kind of invisible best friend, to the ideal reader who's on your side, who wants to understand you but needs help in being able to do so. I conceive of the audience for my poems as being one person at a time, as opposed to speaking to a large group of people in a sort of public way. I would like for the poem to be spoken, say, around a table, two chairs, a lamp, and I'm going to invite you to come in and sit down with me and listen to this. So that makes a different kind of address than the way you would speak in a large hall of people. It's also a different kind of address than the way you would whisper something to yourself, trying to figure something out for yourself. It's conversational, and it's directed toward a listener whom I imagine, although I admit I imagine that listener in a very vague and shadowy way.

Harbour Winn: I think that many in the audience this morning heard you speaking to them. I think I did.

Mark Doty: I guess I believe that everyone can only be one's audience if you attempt to speak to one persona at a time. If the poems work, it's because there's a kind of intimacy about them; that it's an open intimacy that anyone might join. That would be my goal.

Abigail Keegan: And sometimes poetry has to be just speaking to

yourself, or just to an object. I mean, it lies outside the rhetorical contract; the poet has to take the step outside of the idea of the audience to conceive a poem.

Mark Doty: The problem with the way we often conceive of the audience is that we can wind up talking down to people or overly explaining our experience. And one of the characteristics of a good poem is that it trusts its reader to do the readerly work of coming to the page with imagination open, with the willingness to engage with the poem, to wrestle it out, to be there for the difficult parts, to supply one's own imaginative experience to the images on the page. So I think that means that you don't want to nail down who this listener is too much. Right? Because then you work too hard to present things to a particular listener, as opposed to allowing that space for the reader to come in and do their work in the poem.

Abigail Keegan: As you said this morning, poets don't know what they're writing about until their writing it. So if you conceive of audience, you're writing to persuade, or to somehow have an impact. If you're in the process of self-discovery, you are your audience.

Mark Doty: Right. And this is one of the things I've learned from Elizabeth Bishop in a poem like "The Fish"; she takes us with her through a process of perception. And that means that she is not giving us her wisdom, she doesn't already know what she's doing when she begins the poem. But she invites us to be part of an experience of coming to knowledge. That's been crucial for me, because it suggests that one might write a poem in which you're feeling your way through what experience gives you to get at a sense of truth, to get at the core of something. Of course by the time poem is finished, I know what it is I'm getting at. But I want the poem to retain a feeling of struggling towards understanding, of coming to know it. I believe that the energy of discovery is part of the engine of the poem, it's part of what makes it come alive and vital.

Harbour Winn: You're describing the rhetorical persona, the sense of whom you speak to. I think in Firebird, you kind of reflect back, or maybe in the preface to Heaven's Coast, you talk about the danger of the artist being too close. And while I understand that, I think part of the power of Heaven's Coast is that perhaps there is less of the sense of the rhetorical mask. There is, paradoxically, a kind of immediacy that engulfs you.

Mark Doty: I had no distance when I was writing that book. It was begun six weeks after Wally's death, at a time when I not only couldn't write, but I also couldn't really read very well; my concentration had been shattered by the experience of new grief. The ability to begin writing what I thought was an essay about observing the process of grief felt like a huge gift to me, that now I don't have power over anything else, there is nothing in my life I can control, but I can shape these sentences about how it feels to be in this moment. And that gives me just this much distance from the awful chaos of my feelings, because now I'm standing back trying to shape this material, I'm trying to say it well. So it felt like a great consolation to be able to do that.

It's an interesting book in this regard because it's far from "emotion recollected in tranquility"; it's written right in the heat of the moment. And if I had waited five years to write Heaven's Coast, it would

be a very different book. It would probably be a more linear one. It would probably spend more time on stories about my relationship with Wally, as opposed to being as completely focused on his death, and on that time, my experience thereafter. But in fact, I'm grateful that I didn't wait and write that book because I think that book already exists. When I wrote Heaven's Coast, part of my motivating force was that I could not find anything to read which was commensurate with my experience. There were plenty of books about grief from a psychological point of view that intended to tell you that your feelings are normal, and there are plenty of religious books, which intended to tell you that death was not the end of life, and so you need not be shattered by grief. But that wouldn't work for me. I wanted to read something by someone who had been shattered by grief

Harbour Winn: I think what you said this morning about tattoos as the world writing on you is a way to understand Heaven's Coast.

Mark Doty: I worked on the book for a year after Wally's death and I thought two things: First, I would just put everything in. It was my first prose book and unlike the experience of writing a poem, where one takes everything out and you're doing all you can to compress this thing to a few words that are absolutely necessary, I thought, I have all these pages, and I will add and add. I can tell more stories, I can stop and meditate about questions, and I can talk about what I'm reading. I'll go any place with this feeling, and I love that feeling of expansiveness. Secondly, I wanted the book, because it was potentially infinite, to have a boundary. I chose the first year of mourning as being that boundary because I imagined it would be like the ceremony in Judaism where the year after a death, people gather and the headstone is unveiled and the name of the person who has died has been written there in the world. Wally doesn't have a literal headstone, but I thought the book would be a way of writing his name in the world.

Harbour Winn: You write in Heaven's Coast, "The lower one goes in the medical system, it seems the more humanity, the more hands on help, the more genuine care one finds." When Michael Ondaatje was here last year, he had recently spent the fall in a seminar at the Columbia University Medical School and he found similarities between doctors, the humanities and medicine. Do you see the humanities as having a purpose in the education of a doctor? And would this be a way you could talk in public places about resorting to public language, having this interaction with literature?

Mark Doty: Absolutely. Recently I was in an odd situation, I went to the 25th anniversary of Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, which is part of Harvard Medical School. My role there was to teach a little workshop on creativity and healing with a friend of mine, Dr. Rafael Campo, who is a poet as well as a physician. So we were doing our workshop and then they announced that Barney Frank, the congressman who was going to be part of the closing panel that day, could not be there because congress was having a meeting about terrorism. And they asked me if I would fill in for Barney Frank on this panel, the purpose of which was to imagine the future of health care, and I said, "yeah sure- why not?" Suddenly I find myself on stage in front of literally hundreds of doctors, and I'm supposed to imagine what medicine might be. I got quite into this and began to think about a kind of community health care center of the future and what that might look like.

I had many fantasies about this, but one of them would involve a person in such a setting whose job would be a literary advisor. And the job of the literary advisor in the hospital or clinic would be to help you find what to read. And I don't mean in terms of information about your illness, but I mean in terms of common struggle, how have other people dealt with the pressures of physical decline and incurable disease, with a disease whose course is unknown? How have people thought about that? What kind of record of their struggle have they left us to consider? I think that would be of such incredible use, to join the ill to a community of other thinkers about their experience. It would seem like such a humanizing force in medicine. And to my great delight, there was a wealthy benefactor of the Hospital present who was very enthusiastic about the idea. So this actually might happen in a kind of pilot program at Beth Israel, which would be thrilling.

Rafael Campo has written a wonderful book called *The Poetry of Healing*, which is about his experience as both a physician and a poet and the intersection of those two things. I highly recommend it. He also quotes an interesting new study; it was the first clinical evidence, hard evidence, that people who write creatively about their health do better. They live longer. So, it's not just speculation on the part of humanists anymore.

Abigail Keegan: I want to ask you about elegy, and I have been particularly interested in Byron. He has some encoded elegies for a dead lover of his within the first series of his really popular poems. So I became very interested in how important elegy is for the gay community. And there is a larger question, because there are a lot of theorists that say, elegy isn't possible now because we don't have final principles to refer people to, elegy cannot offer the consolation it has previously. But at the end of *Still Life With Oysters*, you suggest some kind of flexible permanence in the idea of tenderness and style, as being that which the writer, the poet, has to offer. What do you hope for elegy when you work through it and when you offer it to an audience?

Mark Doty: Well, traditionally the elegy has to do two things. It has to memorialize, so we're attempting to conserve something of that particular person. What do we wish to hold in the world? Then it attempts to offer some consolation, to make some gesture of meaning making in the face of that loss. It's interesting that before the 20th century, the memorializing side of elegy was the least of it. I think Milton doesn't particularly care who Lycidas was. It's sort of beside the point. The point is that, "Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil," that in fact this dead young man has a continuing life in heaven and we need not fear for the brevity of life on earth. By the end of the 19th century, that sense of elegy is collapsing right and left, and the elegy becomes more a form of memorialization and the inscriptions of particular characters. Its gestures toward making meaning are necessarily tentative, provisional, compromised in some way. I've thought about this a lot because of having lived in the teeth of an epidemic and a community in which I felt desperately needed to inscribe whatever gestures of making sense we could in the face of all that chaos. And yet how could we do that without denying the actuality of death?

There was a Unitarian minister in my town who, entirely well intentioned, used to lead memorial services, and I remember going to one of these in which he was talking about a man whom many people loved, and he said, John's not dead, he's with us still. And I couldn't bear it. I wanted to stand up and say, "He is Dead! And if we don't acknowledge that

fundamental fact of this loss, any kind of consolation you offer us is going to be just pointless." For me this seems to point to something about what elegies might be in our time, that they need to acknowledge the fact of rupture, of breakage in the world. And if they stop there, they're not offering as much in the way of how the living might, at least temporarily, make some stay against chaos. Might make some kind of gesture of making sense. So I have wanted to write an elegy that was balanced, which made provisional affirmations, which acknowledged the reality of loss, but attempted to go beyond merely chronicling that reality.

It's interesting to connect this with the history of gay literature, because I think there were strong elegiac currents in the art of gay men before there was an AIDS epidemic. A good example would be Cavafy, a hero of mine, and those beautiful poems that memorialize his dates, these handsome young men he would meet in the café and know for an hour or a week, and sometimes 25-35 years later he's writing a poem that remembers that encounter. Those are not poems that are attempting to remember the dead, but they certainly are poems that are attempting to make a stay against loss. Because there is no social structure that will allow him to sustain those relationships, they are doomed from the very beginning to vanish. And in that relationship which is so temporary, so fleeting, is the place where that speaker is going to find his greatest moments of joy, and the most profound occasions of meaning in his life. So it's as if the groundwork had been laid for a kind of tradition of fusing the mournful and the joyous before we had such grave reasons to do so.

Harbour Winn: In what ways do you feel kinship with our poet laureate Stanley Kunitz?

Mark Doty: Stanley is a heroic figure to me in several ways. Primarily it is in his insistence upon reinventing himself and remaining psychically alive. He's been writing for a very long time and certainly has rested upon his laurels, has ceased to struggle towards something renewing and vital in his work. Yet, his best poems, his most emotionally direct work, his most compelling work arises in his 80's and 90's; that's just remarkable. There are very few historical examples of such artists who do their most vulnerable work at those moments. One thinks of Yeats, but I can think of very few others. That is thrilling to me, and I think the reason that it is so important is because I want to be in this for the long haul. My hope is to stay alive as a poet and I do not think that is an easy matter. As one continues to write, you have explored certain familiar territories, you create yourself as a character in your work--or at least that's something I have done--and those things can be both an accomplishment and something that box you in at the same time. And Stanley seems to me, in that regard, an exemplar of freedom and of possibility. He also has been quite dogged about going his own way; he is not someone whom we particularly associate with any school or set of colleagues. He has written his formalist poems and his free verse poems. He has written longer work with social and historical contexts. He's written tiny, highly compressed lyric poems. I think he makes exactly what he needs to make, and I find that instructive.

And we both have gardens in Provincetown, and spend part of our time in New York. Stanley makes the meanest martini I have ever had, and he holds them much better than I do, so there is that real difference between us. Stanley drinks one of his martinis in 15 minutes and he's just fine. I drink one of his martinis in 45 minutes and I have to call a cab to get home.

He is someone who has been phenomenally generous to younger writers in helping to found The Fire Arts Work Center, The Poet's House in New York, in teaching, in being a mentor for decades for so many of our finest contemporary poets. And that's an antidote to the dangers of isolation, and to the ways an artist can kind of get off by himself in his own private territory that can become increasingly obsessive and reflexive. By staying connected to the community and by being of service, I think Stanley has really shown us a way to avoid isolation, bitterness and solipsism.

Abigail Keegan: What do you want to see happen in your future work? And what would you like to see happen in American poetry?

Mark Doty: In my own work, it's sometimes not so much a matter of what I want to see happen, as the course the poem decides to take. In writing the poems that became *The Source*, I found myself interested in turning outward and I wanted to write a more social, a more public poem. Having published three volumes, which formed a kind of trilogy about my partner's death and my own coming back to life from that experience, I had enough of talking about myself in that way and I found myself increasingly feeling like a citizen of the country rather than of one particular place, because I was traveling a great deal to teach and to give readings. I wanted to talk about a broader sense of American life. And so that was the impulse behind *The Source*, and some of the poems do that, but oddly, some of the poems I would say are more spiritual, if we will accept that term, are more idiosyncratically, personal in a way. And I didn't expect that, that was just simply what the work insisted on doing.

The poems I'm writing now, slowly, seem to be engaged in a rather fierce argument with time. And while, of course, limits and mortality have been central subjects of my work, I don't think I have thought of time as a force and as a mystery in itself as much as I'm doing now. That's my prediction at this moment for what the next book of poems will do. But when it actually comes around, we'll see, for it may have done something quite different. The poems so far are shorter and they continue something that happens in *The Source*, where the speaker of the poem is a little further in the background.

What I would like to see happen in American poetry is more of the same. I think this is a good moment in that there is a great deal of poetic practice. It is an enormously rich time. The literary communities that have grown around American universities and also community reading centers in many of our cities are larger and healthier than ever. This is a wonderful thing for the culture; it means we have more and more people making poems, reading them, giving attention to the inner life, and giving attention to one another in these smaller communities than has ever been true before. I can't help but think that is a good thing for our culture. While there are huge differences, there are always arguments within the world of poetry. Ten years ago we were obsessed with an argument between free verse and formalism, and at this moment we are obsessed with an argument between representational and nonrepresentational, or between different visions of what post-modernity is. That seems to be our obsessive territory right now. The fights will go on, but the subject of the fights will change, of course, over time. What excites me is that I see fewer and fewer poets adhering to any one school or way of making poetry. My students in Houston and NYU, and Columbia, who are some of the best young writers in America, seem just as likely to produce a fragmented poem with no self on the stage one week,

to write a sonnet the following week and then maybe a Wordsworthian memory narrative the next week. So more eclecticism, a blending of schools, people writing from political concerns and aesthetic concerns, a willingness to see how we can make it new. I think it's an encouraging time, actually.

Harbour Winn: You have described yourself as "working at the juncture of memory and imagination" and have said that you place the act of remembering in the foreground. You also have mentioned Nabokov's *Speak Memory* as a book that does something of what you aim for. I'm wondering about other writers like Annie Dillard in *An American Childhood*, Ivan Doig in *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, Li-Young Lee in *The Winged Seed*. Do you read these books? Do you see yourself connected in ways with these writers and their work?

Mark Doty: I love reading memoir, and I'm enormously interested in the shapes that people describe in experience. I think in that way the art of the memoir is not so far from the art of the poet, at least as I practice it, which is to look at all the stuff of experience and attempt to identify patterns. What kind of meaning and shape might I make today? Understanding that if I wrote, just as I said, *Heaven's Coast* five years later, I would make a different kind of meaning and a different kind of shape. I think that is always true, you never get it right. This becomes clearer in memoir than in poetry since, of course, poetry tends to be shorter, and you can exercise a little more control. With memoir, I feel there is always another way to tell that story. There is another emphasis. There is something I left out. There is a whole other way to structure the tale, and that will always be the case. Memoirs that have been important to me.... Frank Conroy's *Stop Time*, which is a wonderful example of coming very close to the subjectivity of the child's self, of getting one of those things that is almost uncaptureable on the page.

Nabokov, for the incredible richness of language, the way his style becomes a character, a presence in the book, and style is something he uses to inscribe a "self." Proust of course, although he is neither a memoirist nor a poet, is a huge influence on how we think about memory. And to my mind, a huge influence on the way I write poems and I think for many other people too, in terms of his allegiance to the associative nature of memory and the unfolding of sensory experience as it is recollected and reexperienced.

Terry Tempest Williams is a memoirist who both very powerfully invokes the personal and also links her life to larger social, political forces, in an extremely effective way. *Her Refuge* is an extraordinary book.

Mary Carr, in *The Liars Club*, is a spectacularly good storyteller. Her interest as a memoirist is not so much the uncovering of truth as an archeologist of memory; instead, it is being a great entertainer, and spinning a wonderful and engaging yarn for her readers. Which is certainly one of the things memoir does as well.

Finally, my friend Bernard Cooper is a Los Angeles essayist and memoirist, who has the most pristine evoked dissections of memory, looking at moments of experience to understand how they provided instructions in gender, in sexual identity, the construction of "self." And he is someone whose work had been hugely instructive to me. He wrote a book called *Truth Serum*, which I highly recommend.

Patricia Hampl has a terrific book about memoir called *I Could Tell You Stories*, which is a great place to turn for meditation.

Memoir is an exciting form because of its hybridity. There are memoirs

that behave like novels. There are memoirs that behave like autobiographies. There are memoirs that behave like...Heaven's Coast for instance, which borrows from nature writing, literary criticism, what we might call a kind of practical or applied philosophy, a la Thoreau. And that is very intriguing to me, to have a form for which the parameters are loose, and the possibilities are far from exhausted. We are far from exhausting the possibilities for memoir.

There is a wonderful young writer named John D'Agata; he has a book called Halls of Fame, which is a book of essays that reinvents the essay as a list, as a kind of catalog, as a lyric poem. These are essays doing quite new and energetic things. And as I was enthusiastic about the state of poetry, I think nonfiction prose is also an arena that offers great opportunities of invention and investigation.

(Interview with Mark Doty conducted and edited by Abigail Keegan and Harbour Winn; audiotape transcription by Michael Pace. Poet Mark Doty was featured at the fourth annual Thatcher Hoffman Smith Distinguished Writer Series sponsored by the Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film & Literature at Oklahoma City University.)