

THE RED WHEELBARROW INTERVIEW WITH MORTON MARCUS BY KEN WEISNER (2002)

KW: *Mort, how did you come to settle in California?*

MM: I never had a home. From the time I was three-years-old, I was sent to thirteen boarding schools in four different East Coast states, and then I enlisted in the Air Force for four years. So I lived in dormitories or barracks for fifteen of my first twenty-one years. After my discharge, I went to the Iowa Writer's Workshop as an undergraduate, and from there I got a full scholarship to do graduate work at Stanford.

KW: *So you were at Stanford in the early sixties. What was it like?*

MM: It was very academic—which means it was uptight and conservative. For example, Ken Kesey had been there the year before I arrived, and while I was there *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* came out. It was greeted with derision and scoffing by Stanford's literary elite. I remember defending it in the graduate creative writing seminar. Another example was the professor—I forget his name—who taught Whitman and Emerson and had literally been exiled to the Education Department, office and all, because both those seminal American writers were taboo to Yvor Winters, the supreme arbiter of taste in the English Department. As you can imagine, my time at Stanford was not enjoyable, and many of my classmates and I left school as students forever after that year.

KW: *But you stayed in California?*

MM: I was already married and had a child by the time I finished Stanford. After my year there, I was broke, and took a job teaching primary school in Point Arena, in Mendocino County. Then I went back to New York for a year to supposedly be co-editor of a resurrected *Discovery* magazine, the mass market literary journal put out in the 1950s by Pocket Books Inc. and originally edited by the novelist Vance Bourjaily, who I'd known in Iowa. But the deal never came together, and anyway I found myself no longer an East Coast boy, with its grime and dog-eat-dog ways. I yearned for the beauty of Northern California, and would take my daughter in her stroller to the basement of the Museum of Natural History where I'd sit for hours looking at the diorama of a California Redwood forest.

So the next year—it was 1964—I was back in California, teaching at a boy's high school in San Francisco called The California School of Mechanical Arts. I stayed there for three years. I'd been publishing my poems since I was in the Air Force, but now I became part of the San Francisco scene. By 1966 I was reading in various places around the city, had become the assistant chairman of the Neighborhoods Committee of the Artists Liberation Front, and was entrepreneuring readings in Haight Ashbury, the Mission District where I lived, and even Glide Memorial Church, where Cecil Williams had just taken over as pastor. However in 1967, the Haight was discovered by the national media which christened that summer "the summer of love" and described the Haight's inhabitants as "love children." People from all over the United States inundated the neighborhood as either would-be "love children" or "weekend hippies." So when my second daughter was born on welfare because I was earning so little as a full-time teacher at the California School of Mechanical Arts, my wife and I decided it was time for a change.

KW: *And that's when you came to Santa Cruz.*

MM: Yes. Jim Houston, who's now a well-known novelist, was a friend from my Stanford days. He lived in Santa Cruz, had taught at Cabrillo College, which was then a fledgeling community college. He put in a good word for me, and I was hired. My wife and I decided that if we were coming to the country, by god we should live as far from civilization as possible. So we found a place off Empire Grade, which was surrounded on three sides by miles of forest and upland meadows. There were wolves, bob cats, and at least one mountain lion up there. It was, literally and figuratively, wild. Being a city boy, this was my first experience of rural living. My writing "study" was an abandoned chicken coop that stank of chicken shit, especially when the weather was hot, which in summer was always. Maybe that was one of the reasons I

began wandering deeper and deeper into the woods, into those old Redwood forests that were everywhere around me, with their surprisingly numerous trails and animal runs. I became immersed in the life of the mountain and took to bringing a notebook with me on my hikes. I began to write and write some more-gibberish, hermetic utterings, strange chants in the wind that swept through the branches above me. That's how *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems* came to be. Most of them were written on those rambles.

KW: *Tell me more about how you wrote them.*

MM: I would take a backpack filled with water, bread, wine, and a book or two, and head into the forest for the day. There were a number of fire roads and intersecting trails everywhere, but about a mile in was an abandoned quarry that fell a thousand feet or so in three tiers, and from there trails ran every which way. I always carried a spiral notebook tied to one of my wife's old Kotex belts. The belt was elastic, very springy: that was important. I would attach the other end to my belt and the notebook would dangle against my thigh until I felt the urge to write something. Then I'd grab the notebook and whisk it waist-high and start scribbling. Who says I'm not resourceful? Gary Cooper be damned!

Anyway, very mysterious things happened on those jaunts, especially when I'd fall asleep and have to make my way out of the woods at nightfall or after dark. There were strange voices everywhere I didn't understand, and still find a bit frightening, even to this day. The poems without titles in the book are completely "dictated" poems I transcribed from what I heard—or thought I heard. I call them "spirit of the mountain poems."

KW: *Why did you leave such a mysterious, and for your writing such a wonderfully fecund, place? And why did you continue to live in Santa Cruz?*

MM: I'd been married for thirteen years, three of them living on the mountain, when my marriage broke up. I moved down to Aptos, in the center of the county and nearer to Cabrillo, and in the next decade went through all those changes people go through in their lives—the fears, the self-recriminations, the losses, the remorse, the failures, the acceptances, the confrontations with the self and others, the deep breaths and decisions to continue on from day to day. And after a number of years, I realized that not only had I faced these different stages of my life in Santa Cruz, but I had formed a kinship with the land and the people of the county that was at once personal and universal—that, in a word, I had finally found a home, a place where I could say, "This is my place."

But it was more than that. I had always been looking for a place that would make me want to do what Father Zossima does in the *The Brothers Karamazov*. He was young and arrogant, Dostoyevsky tells the reader. But when he realizes the error of his ways, he gets down on the ground and kisses the earth in reverence and thanks for allowing him to exist. That is the feeling I have about Santa Cruz. Now I'm married again, this time into a third generation SantaCruz family, so I feel more a part of Santa Cruz than ever.

KW: *White Pine Press has just released (Spring of 2002) your remarkable new and selected prose poems, Moments Without Names. More than half of the poems in the new book, including the three prose poems we are printing along with this interview, are presumably newer, written since the remarkable 1997 Hanging Loose Press book, When People Could Fly. Are you to this day mostly working in the prose poem form? Is the writing of prose poetry still your chief daily practice?*

MM: I never wrote primarily in the prose poem form. Ever since I abandoned closed verse in 1959, I've let content determine form. It's a mysterious thing. From the beginning, the poem determines itself, as if it's alive or I'm taking dictation from one of many voices inside me. What I can say about the prose poem's place in my overall work is that it allows me a freedom of expression like no other form. I dispensed with closed verse for free verse to gain part of that freedom, and then discarded the line in favor of the prose poem to experience greater freedom.

In many ways I was searching for that freedom of expression in writing from the start. I began writing at an early age, although I didn't know it at first. Attending thirteen boarding schools from the time I was three years old, I was always the new boy, which meant I was always getting beat up by the bullies, a situation I cannily remedied by learning to beat *them* up. I was so ferocious that everyone left me alone, and I began to keep myself company by painting pictures in words, since I couldn't draw well. The word pictures soon became landscapes of magic countries populated by a variety of characters whom I—a boy without family or friends—could talk to about the mysteries of growing up. By high school, I was putting those wordscapes on paper. By then, lest you get a picture of me as a lonely, tormented artist-in-the-making, I was no longer a reclusive kid, but a sociable jock who had a lot of friends in a number of different cliques.

KW: *Your work shows you to be a cross between a poet and a story teller.*

I imagine you telling knockout bedtime stories, ongoing sagas full of meanders, dreams, ironic twists and turns, and magic. Would you mind saying a few words about the relationship between story telling and poetry, in your work and in general? I add this without meaning any negative inference: don't language and form (more foregrounded concerns of many of your early poems) take a backseat to imagination and voice in this kind of fundamentally narrative lyric art?

MM: I love stories: telling them, hearing them, reading them. There's an art to telling stories, in poetry as well as prose. It's a learned thing that has to be mastered. Very complex. Choices have to be made all the time—who's telling the story, from what perspective is the scene being shown, what scenes are to be developed and what not, into how many characters' minds should the writer go? Is the story to be realistic, symbolic, or both? Plot-driven or character-driven? Is it to be a parable, allegory, what? Each kind of story has its own restrictions and demands a different approach. One type of prose poem I write, the fantastic narratives, are often like funhouse mirror reflections of everyday reality. They heighten, distort, so the reader can see his world from a fresh, and at times not particularly edifying, perspective. The three epigraphs at the start of *Moments Without Names* encapsulate the book's intentions and my attitudes toward what I write. The final epigraph—the one by Andrei Sinyavsky—hypothesizes that absurd fantasy more accurately portrays our times than realism. I believe that.

But that doesn't answer your question about the difference between storytelling and poetry. As a prose poet, I try to strip the story down to its essentials, using all the techniques of poetry to accomplish the task. The techniques of poetry are, in essence, methods of condensing—using the least amount of words to say more than a full complement of words would. I accomplish this by employing rhythm, assonance, consonance, alliteration, metaphor, and by selecting the most telling concrete image or detail, the exact or most telling word. I use every poetic technique I know of in my prose poems—except the line. You see, the prose poem is a very exact form: one extra sentence, phrase, even word will destroy it. So, yes, imagination and voice are all important in prose poetry, but they're rigorously controlled by language and form.

At the same time, other threads are woven into the mix. For all their narrative concerns, the prose poems highlight another aspect of my work, one which has been a constant surprise to me whenever I detect its presence. As a college English instructor who taught composition and rhetoric for thirty years, and who is also a devotee of Michel de Montaigne, I find it intriguing that so many of my prose poems either start out, or resemble in their entirety, expository essays.

KW: *One very moving prose poem from the new collection is called "The Request." It combines a memory of hearing tenor Jussi Bjorling sing on a CD with a deep memory of your father, or of his absence. Would you mind telling us a little more about this poem and about the centrality of your relationship with your father—or his absence—in your life and work?*

MM: "The Request" happened exactly as it reads. The speaker in this case is me. I was listening to a CD compilation I had just bought of Bjorling's arias and songs when unexpectedly his voice introduced one of the pieces. I was overwhelmed by the presence of the man, or at least the sense of it, while at the same time knowing he was speaking in 1958, that he would die in 1960, and I was hearing his voice in 1999. I

grabbed a pen and pad and began writing. I was moved by the disparity of being and not being, the sense of different times, and the eternity of art. And overriding all those feelings was the sense of the 20th century he was speaking from the middle of and which he and I in our separate lives had shared so much of. I was particularly thinking about the brutality of the century, experiencing a numbing awareness of the mass killings that had taken place everywhere on the planet in the last hundred years. Remember, it was 1999, the year before the new millennium began. All these thoughts—actually feelings rather than thoughts—were coursing through me. I was crying hysterically as I wrote, as if I was writing a lament for the century and for all who had suffered in it or through it, when suddenly the connection between Bjorling and my father erupted out of nowhere. I was convulsed with anguish. I had inadvertently entered that no man's land where poetry becomes revelation, consolation, damnation and redemption all at once. I had only seen my father twice in my life, and then for brief moments, and I had never come to terms with my fatherless existence. I could have stopped writing at that point, but it is this dangerous area that I seek in a poem, a no man's land inside me that I try to map with words. That is the power of poetry for me. And to cut off such an experience would have been like turning back from an expedition whose goal was to find a secret medicinal plant that could save if not the world at least me. But me *is* the world, for in the end the personal concerns of the poem must become universal, must communicate to the reader's life. The four or five times I've read this poem in public, it has had stunning effects on the audience. Many listeners break into tears—for themselves, not me, and I hope that means the poem helped them achieve a sort of redemption of their own by acting as a catalyst which took them deep into the jungles of their own psyches.

KW: In the parable-like narrative "My Encounter With the Eternal Mystery," the speaker is brought to his knees in fear by, of all things, a night-glint of mirror. I love the irony in the poem, of course, but also the power of the fear and vulnerability the terror creates for the speaker as character and as narrator. Would you mind talking a little more about that poem—its origins and meaning?

MM: There are two kinds of irony. The first is sarcasm, and in the end it is a distancing device, a refusal to emotionally enter a situation, but rather to comment on it from the outside. The second is irony of situation, in which the forces of nature play their grim jokes on us. The latter is the stuff of tragedy and drama. "My Encounter With the Eternal Mystery" is a serious poem, in tone and intent, and is concerned with the second kind of irony. In many ways, it is a horror story after Poe. It is about nothing less than a supposed confrontation with God. The speaker is again me, and I wanted to portray that experience of being in a dark hallway in a strange country, alone with a presence that would not reveal itself and seemed to be mimicking all my movements. The last words the speaker mutters are the same words God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. I'll let the reader figure out the meaning I'm implying with those words, but I will say that, no, in actuality I didn't mutter them when I returned to the apartment house the next day. They're a calculated "poetic" addition.

KW: I like "Monsters" very much because, as so often occurs in your prose poems, it takes on a huge theme (the guilt of mankind, the innocence of children) in such an understated, engaging and direct parable (I feel similarly about many of the shorter pieces in the newest collection, from "Broken Symmetries" to "Heart Attack" and "The Moment For Which There Is No Name"). Would you tell us a little more about "Monsters" and also about the power of nesting an idea, a religious or philosophical theme really, so completely in a briefest narrative or lyric image? Which writers and traditions influenced you in developing this strategy and craft?

MM: "Monsters" is straightforward. There's no comment I can make on it that it doesn't clearly imply. But I don't "nest an idea" in that poem or any other. In my poems I'm interested in evoking an experience and finding out what it means to me—why I'm writing about what I'm writing about. Writing for me is discovery, not manipulation of ideas, and since I evoke the experience so sensuously, that discovery will hopefully be available to the reader as well. The traditions and writers who have influenced me in this area are, among others, the biblical prophets and their parables, Chuang Tzu, Montaigne, Franz Kafka, and Jorge Luis Borges.

KW: In the third section of your other upcoming book of verse poems from Creative Arts Books, Shouting Down the Silence, there is a whole section of wonderful poems of homage called "The Glorious Dead." I love the sense of homage you bring into every book, every project—often on different levels (homages to other artists, to ancestors, to political figures, to writers—to friends). Would you talk about this thread and primacy in your work?

MM: In the third section of *Shouting Down The Silence*, I'm telling or retelling true or apocryphal stories about great writers, composers and painters. I love the stories and the meanings I get out of them. The artists of the past are my heroes—my god parents, older brothers, uncles and aunts whose works have not only enriched but guided me. They're in many ways my spiritual family. I pay homage to them and all the people of the past who have given us the world we have now. In many ways I speak for them. I think that all of us are responsible for their world and I am obligated to make sure we never forget them. Of course, I'm not just talking about the great artists now, but all our ancestors, our immediate family and all that great retinue of evolution that extends back to the beginning of time and beyond it.

KW: *Since we are able to print them for the first time here, would you tell us a little more about "Rodin & Rilke" and the curious, ecstatic poem for Anton Bruckner, "A Letter" (1885)?*

MM: For a time, the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke worked as secretary for the equally great sculptor Auguste Rodin. I was struck by the differences between both men, and wondered at the tensions that must have existed between them. They had two different sensibilities, and I thought there was no way they could have understood each other, although they might have been fascinated by each other's work and character. At the same time, there was an earthiness in Rodin that appealed to me more than Rilke's rarified sense of things, and I wanted to know about that. But that part of the poem never "came" to me. So I don't think the poem has gone far enough, and as it stands is just a pleasant trifle. The Bruckner poem is pure fiction. It never happened. I invented an assistant to a music publisher who is writing a letter to his fiancée about a meeting he's just had with the composer Anton Bruckner. The assistant was sent with two others to announce to Bruckner either a state prize he had been awarded or a summons to an audience with Franz Joseph, ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The assistant is in awe of the composer, and his attitude surrounds the poem like a shimmering light, enhancing everything he sees. But he was a means to an end, and that end was taking a close look at Bruckner whose music and personality have intrigued me for years. Bruckner was a very simple man who wrote grand prayer-like symphonies to his Roman Catholic God. He was an innocent, a "fool of God." Many in the upper-crust world of Viennese art considered him a country bumpkin. I tried to capture his character as seen through the eyes of the fictional assistant and, as I do in so many of my poems, at the same time attempted to create a world in which the poem exists. This is very much a poem that obeys many of the rules of fiction—point of view, setting, character, dialogue, and scene.

KW: *In your film criticism, you are unapologetically sociopolitical, steadfastly critiquing shallow constructions of race, class, and gender in your evaluations of cinema (but also always on the lookout for wonder). How much does this passionately political animal in you determine how you write poetry? I am thinking of earlier poems like "Nail," but also of the politically piquant poems found in both of your new books (take "Celine, 1951," for example). And yet, you don't write about contemporary political issues, events, landscapes, as much as one might expect—do you?*

MM: I do write about social and political issues in almost every poem. Some of my poems even address political issues of the day. But my mind is always moving toward the larger picture, seeing the particular issue in a historical or mythic context. And there are a preponderance of contemporary events and landscapes in my poems. For example, poems like "Doing it to Others" from *Moments Without Names*, or the poem you are printing in this issue, "Suffering," locate political horror and outrage in an "enlarged" perspective. The poem "Suffering" enumerates almost every kind of suffering people go through in this world. It talks about the horrors being perpetrated in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and other places; it talks about what we go through as individuals, as adults and children; it comments on different philosophies that advise us how to survive mentally if not physically. By the way, the actress who spoke the lines that end the poem was Mary Tyler Moore, when she was being interviewed on *Inside the Actors Studio* TV program. Almost all my poems are acts of discovery: I never know how they're going to end. But "Suffering" began with the last lines. Her answer to the question, delivered so calmly, with such matter-of-fact certainty, struck me as a profound statement which was for her, and could be for others, words to live by. In fact, I got up from the family room couch where I was watching the interview, and walked right upstairs to my desk, and started writing.

KW: *Your 1988 Coffee House Press book, Pages From a Scrapbook of Immigrants, is really a book you had been aiming for throughout your early life as a poet, and then it began to crystallize in a poem like "It Begins Right*

Here" from Big Winds, Glass Mornings, Shadows Cast By Stars. In fact, the last two poems in Origins (your first book from Kayak, 1969)—"The Destruction of the Intellect" and "The March"—already invoke a powerful sense of homage, connection to ancestors, to forced emigrations and the shoulders upon which you stand. Can you talk about the writing of Pages From a Scrapbook of Immigrants; how long did the book take once you had embarked? Do you see it in a way as the central work of your career? Or do you see your prose poems that way?

MM: Very insightful. You're right on all counts. *Pages* was the book I was aiming to write since the day I first took up the pen, although I didn't know it, even though the archetypal family portrait gallery in *Origins* was a clear if abstract precursor that should have tipped me off. "It Begins Right Here," however, was the spark that ignited the fire that became the story of my family's trek from Russia to America—but again I didn't know it. Then, several years after I wrote "It Begins Right Here," I entered a dry period in my writing. My obligations as college English instructor had shoved my writing needs into a trunk that was gathering dust in the attic of my psyche. I wasn't happy about that, so I decided to get up at five each morning and write anything that came into my head until I had to leave for my nine o'clock class. I also decided that I would not look at what I'd written from one day to the next, but would fill as many pages as I could with new material daily. After two weeks of following this regimen, I realized I was writing almost exclusively about my family in three different time periods—imagining what my ancestors and grandparents' lives must have been like in Russia; putting down from old family stories, half-stories, and anecdotes what their lives must have been like after they arrived here; and weaving into the mix what my early life was like coming out of this milieu in New York. Many of the pieces were portraits of family members—sketches of uncles, aunts, and cousins. In six weeks, I had a rough draft of the book. But it took me seven years of shaping and revising to get the material into its final form. Along the way, it was supposed to be put into print by three different publishers. The first went out of business and the second reneged on his offer. Each time a deal fell through, however, I took the opportunity to rewrite the book. In the end, it became an experiment in writing a Tolstoyan panoramic novel in verse, each poem a sort of chapter in which I sought to explore not the narrative movement but the lyrical moment of an event or family member's life. But understand that as central as *Pages* is to my work, in truth each book is central to it, since every book is different in approach and style. It's as if each book completes a phase similar to a painter's—like Picasso's "blue period," or Goya's "Quinto del Sordo" paintings.

KW: *Does Phil Levine begin to influence your work in the seventies? For example, how influential was his The Names of the Lost on your own subsequent flowering as a writer about your own personal, cultural and ancestral past? If you would, please also comment on the influence you may have felt from Charles Simic and Russell Edson beginning around the same time (early seventies). Also, what are the poetry readings from that period (or any period) that most left an impression on you?*

MM: Phil Levine has been an influence since the day I read his small first book, *On The Edge*, in 1964. He remains a beloved poet. I've said in print that if I could have written like anyone, it would have been like Phil Levine. Unfortunately, I'm not him. My sensibility takes me more into parable and myth, more into humor and absurdity. I'm much more European in my approach, and that's where Charlie Simic comes in. Charlie and I have been friends ever since he was the great Yugoslav poet Vasko Popa's host for the State Department on the East Coast and I was Popa's host on the West Coast. Our sensibilities are very similar—Slavic to the core. Like Phil, he is a constant inspiration—in his prose as well as in his poetry. When Charlie moved out here we became—to me anyway—as close as brothers. When I started experimenting with the prose poem, Edson entered the picture. His imagination and imaginative leaps within the poems are breathtaking. But his unexpected twists and turns of syntax as well as logic and structure are equally as intriguing. I address all this in my essay on him, "The Tunnel," which appeared in the fourth issue of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. W. S. Merwin's *The Miners Pale Children* was another important influence on my prose poems.

KW: *Your prose poems in particular seem to be written in a sort of global voice—the imagination, politics, and tone of which arise from a variety of influences and forces outside of American culture.*

MM: That's because many of my influences are writers from other cultures. *The Selected Poems of Henri Michaux* was an important influence on my early prose poems. As for poetry in general, The Post World War II East European poets were very important (especially those from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and the transplanted Czeslaw Milosz), South American poets and fiction writers

(especially Neruda, Vallejo, Borges, Eduardo Galeano, Cortazar, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Machado de Assis, Bioy Casares, Garcia Marquez), as well as the tales about Nasrudin, Rumi's *Divan* and *Mathnawi*, *The Chuang Tzu*, a host of Chinese poets, the Japanese haiku masters Basho and Issa, and, of course, the Russians: Gogol, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Leskov, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Babel.

KW: Although you are a quintessential, American immigrant offspring and to some degree an American "child of the sixties," do you fundamentally see yourself as an international poet, a wanderer, a poet of the world—or rather more an American poet?

MM: I'm currently editing the collected poems of Bert Meyers. In his correspondence, he wrote a short history of twentieth century American poetry (mostly from WWII on) in which he identifies two strains. One is the American strain, led by Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. It pursues American speech rhythms and is rooted in the American experience. The other strain is European in essence and international in scope and many times embraces a surrealist approach. But why, I ask, does there have to be two separate strains? Can't we unite them? I very consciously pursue American speech rhythms and my work is rooted in American attitudes, practices, and experiences. At the same time, I'm interested not only in what's been done elsewhere but with the sensibilities that inform all aspects of Chinese thinking (which I studied in college), Sufi literature, and especially East European literature (to which I feel an almost biological bond). In the end, however, my entire impetus is international in all aspects of the word because I see the oneness in all diversity. I'm essentially a fabulist—a maker of parables—coming out of a Judaic biblical tradition, so it could be no other way.

KW: Gary Snyder and James Wright are examples of poets who created, starting in the fifties really, new kinds of American masculinity, new possibilities for the masculine. I would argue that you, also, do this: that you are an important poet of the masculine. Somewhat of a masculinist—perhaps a wrestler—even a fighter—at heart, you nevertheless turn yourself in your art toward reflection, passionate searchings, tenderness, love of the wild, a love of play, and a deep sense of homage, even reverence. Do you understand these multiple gifts and implicit tensions in your work as gendered? To what degree is gender (and its construction) a primary way in which you consider your voice and art?

MM: An interesting observation on your part, since I've always been concerned with the masculine in art, especially in poetry. When I was in my teens I was fascinated by two male ballet dancers with the New York City Ballet, Jacques d'Amboise and Edward Villela, who were able to project maleness through movement. I felt the same way about Gene Kelly, whereas Fred Astaire always impressed me as too ethereal, almost prissy. I found Gaston Lachaise's nude females in the Museum of Modern Art enormously erotic because there was a male appreciation for every curve and muscle group in them. I wanted to infuse my poetry with that sense of maleness. I'm sure there was something else going on here as well, and it wasn't only felt by me. When I attended the State University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop with a group of other Korean vets at the end of the 1950s, every male poet, whether he would admit it or not, was conscious that America's general attitude towards male poets was that they were "sissies," or worse. Those who had been writing in high school or before had been kidded or ridiculed and even beat up, and as if to offset this stigma many of them had thrown themselves into one masculine undertaking after another from an early age, especially into sports. An amazing number of us were former high school and college football, baseball, and basketball players, and one of the highlights of the year was the workshop softball season, which was a brutally competitive affair that reached almost barbaric heights of battle when members of the famed Iowa football team challenged us and almost always got beaten bloody.

But what do I mean by the masculine in poetry? It's something in the style, in the voice—a certain muscularity of expression. Nothing is precious, hothouse, or fragile. The rhythms, even the syntax have a sort of truculence—emphatic, definite, grounded. It's that certain something on the page that lets the reader know a man is speaking. I'm sure that's why I've adopted the plain style in my work—to highlight that voice.

You mention Snyder and Wright in this connection. Snyder had the masculinity in his first two books, *Rip Rap* and *Myths & Texts*, but after that he got too full of himself and his language became bloated. Wright was never a favorite of mine. There is something precious about his work and he seems to be straining to be manly. His first two books—before he tossed off the cloak of closed forms—are appalling in their sing-song imitativeness, and I don't like his prose poems at all. They're wispy, he doesn't rein in the prose rhythms or sentence structure—that is, he doesn't even try to use those elements to poetic advantage. His prose poems are just flaccidly there, like jottings or journal entries. Phil Levine has the masculine voice, as does William Carlos Williams and our original model, Whitman. The use of shifting tones of voice in those three poets was an inspiration to me, as it was when I read the poetry of John Donne, another "masculine" poet. Donne's speech rhythms, shifting moods and tones of voice opened the masculine door for me. Read his *Songs and Sonnets*. It is a collection of poems about love, but love looked at by a man in dramatic situations that are experienced "masculinely" in every shifting mood and change of attitude—rapturous, reverent, angry, cynical, disdainful, you name it.

But what do I mean by masculinity? Growing up without a father and being shunted from one boarding school to another, I had to formulate my own ideas about what it meant to be a man. Superficially, I learned a lot about masculinity from the movies: Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn, Bogart of course, and Brando. But that was "image". Warring against the tight-mouthed, emotionally self-restricting ways of the American male movie hero, with his quiet dignity and self-effacing code of honor, was my Russian Jewish background with its fierce emotionalism and obsessive intensity. I could never deny that part of myself, be "cool", and I never wanted to. For me, being a man was being whoever I was, compassionate, quick to feel and talk about my feelings, not afraid to show tenderness or any other "feminine" emotional states, while at the same time having integrity, honoring others, and standing my own ground, not letting anyone push me—or those near me—around, no matter what the consequences. I'm sure these values made me a fighter in my early years and a union leader later on. I try not be petty or vindictive, prejudiced or deceitful. Of course, more times than not, I fail to live up to my goals, but I try, and I can live with myself without feeling guilt or self-loathing. At the same time, my sense of masculinity has, since an early age, made me a protector of others—not only the protector of the bullied kids around me, but, when I grew up, protector of the best traditions that have been handed down from the pasts of all cultures.

KW: *Who are some women poets who've moved you and why?*

MM: Naomi Shihab Nye is one. Dorianne Laux, Kim Addonizio, Ellen Bass. All of them speak straight to being alive and "in the world" in all the ways that phrase has meaning. The wonderful Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska with her smiling, sad wisdom. Adrienne Rich, too, especially in *An Atlas of the Difficult World*. But she needs to guard against the polemic. I also very much like poets like Eavan Boland. I love her book of prose, *The Lesson*, where she explores the issue of the woman poet in Irish literature and life. What a book, what prose! And Kilarney Clary: I admire her prose poems. And let me not forget Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, the seventeenth century Mexican nun who I regard as the seminal figure, the mother figure if you will, of American poetry. There are lots of others that don't come to mind right now.

KW: *Margaret Randall liked your early poems because they were "useful, and that is what poetry is for." What are the ways in which poetry is useful? Your favorite poetry? Your poetry in particular?*

MM: Poetry is useful because the poet's vivid use of language pierces the readers' imagination, forcing them to simultaneously think and feel about the important aspects of their lives. In the bustle of their daily existence, people tend to put on hold, or don't have time, or don't want to deal with, those questions. They go dully from one day to the next, reacting to the world around them with habitual responses. Like all art, poetry quickens the readers' sense of life and reminds them of who they are in the scheme of things, and it does this through an intimate, immediate, almost physically apprehended use of language, not through a language that conveys abstract information.

KW: *How has 9/11 shifted your attention as a poet? Has this historical watershed in any way—I mean, either radically or subtly—changed your priorities or vision as an artist?*

MM: 9/11 has not shifted my attention or priorities in the least, as either a human being or a poet. To me, the world was always the way 9/11 showed a lot of Americans it was. When the publisher of *Moments Without Names* read through the galleys in December, she was surprised to find how "relevant" the book was to 9/11 and remarked that "it seemed to be written with 9/11 in mind." The truth of the matter is that poetry should always be of its own time and timeless simultaneously. Artists are looking for eternal truths in the everyday incidents they write about, or paint, or sculpt, or dance to, or compose music for—it's the old saw again of finding the universal in the particular, and in my case relates to my concerns with history, myth, and metaphysical speculation.

KW: *Why don't more poets do collaborations with artists like you have in The Santa Cruz Mountains Poems? Are poets collaborating with artists as much as they could and should?*

MM: I love to collaborate with artists from other mediums. I've done it with potters, musicians, dancers, dramatic artists and most notably in the stage piece I wrote, "The Eight Ecstasies of Yaeko Iwasaki: A Legend In Poetry, Dance, and Music." Collaboration allows me not only to work with those who create in different art forms, but more importantly, it allows me to see the world in different ways; that is, through how other artists conceive of the same materials I'm dealing with. It's hard for many artists to do collaborations because it demands an openness, a possibility of changing one's own work and concepts to blend with others'. Many artists prefer the private, the solitary, the reclusive, and many, alas, have invested too much of their egos in their work, and ego must be put on hold by all concerned in a collaborative effort.

KW: *You are a great connoisseur—and respected teacher—of film. How has your passion for cinema found its way into your poetry? Please offer a general answer as well as a couple of specific examples.*

MM: Of all the things I know about cinema, film has affected my poetry in only one major way. It's given me the all important sense of the camera; that is, it has made me aware of the importance of always knowing from what perspective a scene I'm describing is being viewed by the reader. All of Hemingway's stories seem to be written with the camera in mind. The same is true of Shakespeare, whose plays were presented on a bare stage and showed scenes to the audience through the characters' descriptions. The camera seems to be at work in Donne's poems too, almost all of which are dramatic monologues—that is, in each one a voice is speaking to someone else in a specific environment or situation. Almost all of Donne's poems evoke a sense of place in the same way Browning's dramatic monologues do.

KW: *What excites you most about the state of poetry today, and what makes you most grouchy about the state of poetry today? Tell us about at least one or two underrated poets we should all be reading.*

MM: I'm grouchy about the Language Poets, who are elitist and solipsistic. Poetry as I see it should move outward from the poet's psyche to the community. Poetry is not poetry but journal writing until the poet realizes that communication with readers is poetry's purpose. Then it's poetry, it's art, and, hopefully, then it has a chance of being useful. I'm also getting grouchy about all the confessional poetry that's being written. Coast to coast whining. American poetry seems to have gotten bogged down in therapy. You know: "Tell us about your abusive parents, husband, wife. You'll feel better, or at least know that you've gotten even with them." Poetry is more than that. And then there's the dominance of the literal in all genres of literature. Realism rules. What's happened to the imagination, the supposed seat of all creative acts?

As for two underrated poets people should be reading, let me mention two who are not underrated but just not well known in this country. I think anyone interested in American poetry should be aware of the work of Weldon Kees, whose collected poems have been in print through the University of Nebraska Press since 1959. He is virtually unknown but was and remains a tremendous influence on American poets, and that includes me. He wrote sonnets, sestinas and villanelles as well as free verse. He was a modernist with a very dark vision of America, but there are elements of post-modernism throughout his work, especially in his use of collage and pastiche. He was way ahead of his time. The second poet is

Rolfe Jacobsen, a Norwegian poet who died in 1994. An excellent collection of his work, translated by Roger Greenwald, has just been released by the University of Chicago Press. It's called *North in the World*.

KW: *What are the most effective writing disciplines you have practiced? What hints do you offer younger writers when it comes to process, practice, discipline? How do you practice your craft today?*

MM: Many poets keep extensive notebooks and try to write every day. I don't. I wait until I'm wracked with spontaneous eruptions of creativity, and this method has worked so well for me –and so voluminously–that I have not needed to employ any disciplines to keep working. A long time ago I formulated the idea that I write when I have to. That is, I believe that the periods between writings are ingestion periods during which my psyche, subconscious, or whatever you want to call it, is preparing itself for a new creative explosion–or at least a poem or two. However, when the dry periods stretch out too long and I begin to twitch, I employ any of a number of exercises to prime the creative pump so to speak. By that I mean I use these exercises to get me to the place from which my authentic voice (or voices) can speak. Automatic writing is the simplest exercise, where I write down anything that comes into my head and keep doing so for half an hour or more, then go back and see if there are any lines, phrases, word-combinations, or images that are worth exploring or that I feel a kinship with. This process can kick start a poem at any time during the period the writer has assigned to do it. But to tell the truth, automatic writing hasn't worked for me in years.

My favorite and most productive exercise I call "trance-lations," in which I take a poem, or part of a poem, or parts of several poems at random, from a language I do not understand, and I "translate" it. Of course, all I'm doing is using the foreign-language poem as a touchstone to trigger my imagination, writing what individual words *seem* to mean in English and following the sense they make when joined with other words, phrases, and sentences. The best foreign poems to use for the exercise are in romance languages, or any language with a recognizable alphabet. It is imperative, however, that you place time limits on yourself for each "trance-lation." Say, ten minutes for each twenty line poem. Under that kind of pressure you usually forget to be self-conscious, forget to be intimidated by your rational mind and your expectations of yourself, and can therefore enter that egoless state it is necessary to achieve in order to truly engage in the act of writing. I find "trance-lation" to be an extremely freeing exercise, not only for me, but for the participants in the many workshops I've taught in one place or another, whether in high schools or colleges. The results are never the same, even if I give the same poem to a workshop of forty or more. "Trance-lation" is always exciting for the participants as well, because it lets them go beyond their self-imposed attitudinal restrictions to a place where they can freely engage their imaginations.

KW: *What are the things you most struggle with as a writer? For example, art involves a certain cleverness. How do you defeat it?*

MM: I always struggle with language, trying to make it say or connote the unsayable, always trying to find the right words, rhythm, tone which will allow the reader to experience the poem. The cleverness of artifice–the strategies and sleight of hand the artist is continuously manipulating behind the scenes of a piece so it will work for the beholder–is also a constant struggle. But by letting content guide me, by submitting to the necessity to write what I have to, I usually get beyond the smirking mode.

KW: *Now that your selected prose poems and newest verse volume are in the hands of the world, where will you head next? Do you have a clue?*

MM: Yes, this is a time of completion. Not only is the selected prose poems out and the new volume of verse poems due to be out within a month or so, but next year my entire collected verse poems is going to be published, and within the last year I've revised all the poems from that batch that I've wanted to. So my first sixty-five years of writing is behind me and a new world of possibilities lies ahead. Will I be able to do something new? I have no idea. A lot of friends want me to write my memoirs. I'd like to continue my reminiscences of famous writers I've known, relatively short pieces similar to the ones I've done on Ray Carver and William Everson. I've got lots of anecdotal remembrances about John Logan, Czeslaw Milosz, Charlie Simic and a raft of others. We'll see. The newest poems in *Shouting Down The Silence*–"Roses," "The Poem About Light," "That Morning," and "Suffering"–seem to be pointing in a new bard-

like direction. Hmm. Let's just say that I'm curious about where my writing will go next, but I'm not anxious or "twitchy"—not yet.