

Transcript #3

March 23, 2007 & April 24, 2007

In conversation with Marthe Whitcomb

with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Douglas Kerr, & Andrew Leavitt

MW: Socially we had Friday nights at our house. They started at 187 8th Ave. And Friday nights a lot of people usually came and it was like there was no set agenda but a lot of people had things to read and there was conversation and discussion. Allen Ginsberg with Peter Orlovsky.

RH: Every Friday night?

MW: Every Friday night we had this.

RH: Was that a pleasure for you or an ordeal?

MW: To a certain point. But by that time I got very tired. So sometimes I skipped it. I just didn't care. Especially if Mary was a little bit fussy or something. But usually I went. And we had thirty wine glasses and all that.

RH: Who were the regulars?

MW: Philip [Lamantia] and Bob [Creeley] and Robert, Robert Duncan, and Tom Parkinson came with Ariel [Reynolds]. Richard Moore. And anybody in town who had called up during the week—the way Kenneth dealt with that was saying, come Friday night. So when people who had called Kenneth during the week and asked if they could meet him, he would say why don't you come Friday night. It was a little bit of a way of handling social responsibility. At the same time good friends came. Like Michael McClure, Jim Harmon came, Ida Hodes, an old friend of mine. There were lots of single women who came.

(laughter)

RH: Was it mostly literature or politics?

MW: It's interesting...a lot of the time it was politics. A lot of the time. And there would be times when people would read their own things, but it was never organized. It wasn't set up for that but it so happened. Some of the people who might have called Kenneth during the week and he said, "Well, I'd like to meet you—come over Friday." They were the ones that maybe brought something to read. That was my feeling about it. And they got a good hearing. Everybody in the room would be interested and responsive. So it was a gentle place to read.

RH: Was Muriel Rukeyser still around?

MW: Muriel...I don't think so, but she was here several times.

DK: I remember reading that William Carlos Williams came through and had dinner with you. He was with Flossy, but that must have been shortly after Mary was born.

MW: Yes, it was. We were living at 8th and California.

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DK: But that was separate from Friday nights?

MW: Oh yes. People like Williams and Ted Roethke. People like that were closer to us both and they weren't shuttered off to Friday nights.

DK: How did Kenneth get along with Williams?

MW: Very well, very well. Except for once in the East when we met, when I just saw him casually, the longest time I had with him was when they came for dinner. It was great because I read his poetry, of course, and I met Flossy, who was incredibly delicate and strong, very strong woman. Mary was just very small and was running around being very cute. He did not care at all. He was a self-concerned person with a little bit of country thrown in. It was that kind of mixture of provincial and smart and very self-aware. And Flossy was tough, you know?

BH: Did they talk about poetry at all? Did he like to talk about poetry?

MW: Oh yeah, they did. And its demise.

(laughter)

BH: How it was going downhill.

MW: Oh yeah!

DK: At that point they had both written open poems to each other.

MW: Yes, and also, they knew each other's poetry very, very well and they were a little rascally with each other but there was a quality of admiration between them and affection. There was real affection.

DK: Is it true that he was the one who wrote a letter and gave it to Allen [Ginsberg] and sent Allen out here to see Kenneth?

MW: Oh yeah. Allen went to see him when he was back at home and gave him a letter of introduction to Kenneth. That's why Allen called.

RH: Another local question—I think of the Richmond district during that period as being kind of a white Russian neighborhood. Was Clement Street your shopping street?

MW: Clement—it had everything. Kenneth did all the shopping during the week in our household. He used Lick Supermarket and Schubert's Bakery and the shoe store and all of that stuff. And a very sad thing happened one day. He was very much a part of the neighborhood and he was out all the time. And he was in Lick Supermarket and he had Mary in the stroller. In this apartment on 8th Ave we did not have a refrigerator. When I think about that now it seems horrible. But we had this cooler and we never bought meat, and we bought milk a quart at a time and I was still making formula for Mary, so it didn't bother me somehow. So he would shop every day for little bits of stuff. One day he was shopping with Mary and somebody official at Lick supermarket came up to

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Kenneth and said, "I saw you take something," it was so awful. Kenneth said, "No, you didn't," and they had a discussion about it and Kenneth left the store but when he came home he felt both angry and as if something had been ruined about going to the store because he and Mary liked to go. So he didn't go to the store anymore, he went to the smaller stores, but it was very sad.

BH: Do you think that was something that he had done?

MW: No, I don't. I don't think so. I wouldn't believe it. But you know, he looked like he always did, but he was a little bit unusual. I remember once we were on the street and this kid came up and said, "Mister, are you the violinist?" (laughs) He wore funny clothes...he wore a cape. Maybe it was his appearance.

BH: Well, it was probably unusual for men to be pushing strollers at that time, right?

MW: Yeah, it was. And you know, he wasn't a kid or anything either. It was very sad. It really was a very sad thing for Kenneth.

RH: What was your relationship like during that time? How were you and Kenneth getting along?

MW: I was very caught up in the routine of my life, because I got up very early with Mary, and then, I was involved in my job at work, and then, besides Friday nights we often had company for dinner because somebody would call. And then, Kenneth liked to cook, he was a really good cook, and so as a result I never cooked until I started exerting more independence and then I loved to cook. Kenneth often invited people to dinner. We had this friend, Ed Hagedorn. I loved Ed Hagedorn, he taught me to drive. He was an artist and he lived in the Montgomery block in North Beach and he was an old friend of Kenneth's. We were really good friends. If he called, he was always invited to dinner.

RH: Did the Friday nights continue on Scott Street?

MW: Oh, yes, they did.

DK: Did the gatherings get much bigger then?

MW: They were bigger. And Harry Redl lived around the corner from us. So they were our neighbors, Harry and Ann Redl. And in fact, Harry Redl took birthday pictures for Katharine's fourth birthday at the house.

BH: And who else was a regular there? Jack Spicer?

MW: No, he didn't come over.

RH: Why?

MW: Well, I think he and Kenneth hated each other.

RH: That's what I thought. What was that all about?

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AL: It's nice when there's an easy answer.

BH: What had happened with that? Didn't they like each other at first or...?

MW: I can hardly remember why they hated each other. I think Spicer could be intimidating. I don't know, personally. I think, though, his general style would have offended Kenneth. And then, all he needed to do was say something snappy and Kenneth would have just turned it around and left. I don't think they would have come to blows or anything.

DK: Do you remember Charles Olson coming to the Friday nights?

MW: Yes, well, Charles was one of the people who came, who would come whenever he was here. Friday night was different. They were sort of the locals, they lived around here. People who were just visiting could come Friday nights, but Charles would of course come for dinner and stay all night. I'm really very fond of Charles, very fond of Charles Olson. And it was at Scott Street that I met Bob Creeley because Kenneth was in Lagunitas with both of the children at that point. It must have been summer. They must have been three and seven, something like that. Bob was in town and he called Kenneth and Kenneth had said some people are coming Friday, why don't you come over? And so that did work out that way.

BH: So what year was that?

MW: Let's see, about '57.

RH: We want to hear that whole story.

MW: That's a whole story, yeah.

MW: Friday evenings, they were something that Kenneth loved and he did that for a long time. Any phone call he got during the week, from anybody, no matter where they were from. He prepared himself, because he didn't always especially want to see the person or make dinner. But there was always Friday evenings, because somebody was going to come Friday evening and then it could seem like a genuine invitation to the person calling. But it often was because even when William Carlos Williams was here, he came to Friday nights, and Ted Roethke, so it really served a kind of double purpose. It was a chance for visitors to come and then often they would have more time together with Kenneth if they were here for a few days. Sometimes they stayed with us. But, the Friday night people were all the local poets or starving writers or students.

And at that time I worked at San Francisco State, and I worked in the Dean of Instructions Office, and so one of our old friends was Ruth [Witt-Diamant] who started The Poetry Center, so whenever she had a poet in waiting up in her office she'd sent them down to say hello. In fact that's how I met Lawrence. He came in to the Dean of Instructions Office and said he was Larry Ferling and he'd just met Mrs. Diamond. And she'd told him to come down and say hello, and so we talked. And then, when I invited him to Friday night I didn't know what to do with him. He had just moved here with Kirby. They bought a house next to Kenneth's old house on Wisconsin Street. Kenneth's was 692 and I think theirs was just right next door. Lawrence and Kirby lived there for the first part of

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the time they were here. And during all the time they were trying to adopt and then they did adopt and then Kirby got pregnant. So they started their family there. Lawrence came in and I told him to come to Friday night. For me, sometimes, Friday night was a hassle. I was very tired by Friday even when Mary was the only child around; it was hard because I'd get home and it wasn't always a good scene between Kenneth and me and so I found it hard. But I did have good friends who came and that was great. And it was a mix of old timers. We had a friend, Ida Hodes, who actually had helped start The Poetry Center with Ruth [Witt-Diamant]. She'd come from Chicago and she was in Big Sur with some people who were there preceding Henry Miller and I can't remember what her relationship was with one of the people and I can't remember his name. He's very well known, but I can't think of it. Maybe it'll come to me. He lived in Big Sur and knew Henry Miller and...

RH: Might it be Jaime de Angulo?

MW: It was not Jaime de Angulo, but he was in that group. Older friends and visitors and then a whole group of young poets came to Friday nights, and you never knew who was coming. And in a way it could be lively and fun, or not, for me.

RH: What time did they come?

MW: I got home from work by six and by eight people were coming in.

RH: And the kids must have been all over you.

MW: It was hard. We had a whole shelf of Friday night things—wine glasses and little things. I really did enjoy a lot of it but I was tired. That was my main complaint during that period. I was really tired. And I think part of the tiredness was that the relationship was very difficult for us that time.

BH: Sure.

MW: Mary was the only child at that point. Kenneth did readings all over the country and so I often had a friend of mine who now lives in Vancouver, Ellen, would often come down and stay with me until one irrational evening when Kenneth had some irrational episodes. He scared people. We were at an anarchist meeting once at 1057 Steiner and there was a party because Dave Coven, and Mel Green, and Audrey [no last name] and that foursome. And Kenneth got into a wild argument with Mel or Dave and Audrey came up to me and said, "Could you try to get Kenneth to leave, because he's foaming at the mouth." Well, he was eating Tums, because he had a nervous stomach.

DK: Foaming at the mouth!

MW: Foaming at the mouth. Well, he scared them to death. But anyway, the New York people would come Friday night, too. They were always distinguished as the New York People. And they wanted to know what Kenneth's life was like. They were taking it apart and it felt very microscopic and invasive in a way to me too.

RH: They, meaning, everybody who came?

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MW: No, no, no. Just Dave and Mel. And I think it was because they felt that they weren't known, and they were outsiders in a way. And certainly they made their way in San Francisco, but they were already a little antagonistic with Kenneth and he took that and ran with it, towards them. It was not easy. But they often came to Friday nights.

RH: Did this have to do with whether he was living life correctly or was it more personal?

MW: I think it was more personal. I was thinking of the anarchist principles. Kenneth really had Midwestern principles more than the anarchy principles and that had a showing of colors. That had become very clear. I think he was a very good student of anarchism and he'd read anarchist literature and in fact he went, he visited anarchists in Italy whom he had read. He was very serious, but it was more home-grown middle-western morality that he lived by and reacted to.