

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

In conversation with Marthe Whitcomb
with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Douglas Kerr, & Andrew Leavitt

BH: I'm going to try to find our pictures here. Well, one of the things we were interested in finding, you found out from Linda Hamalian—when the Fridays started.

RH: Yeah, when Kenneth was still with—

BH: Marie.

MW: There was a lot of stuff, and then my recollection is it continued when we were at 8th and California. At Marie's it just sort of came—they were not originally poetry readings. It was talks.

RH: Party. Friday night.

MW: And, I put out wine, and I often left if people were staying beyond midnight—I was so tired. It was Friday, you know, it was hard. But sometimes there would be a large group. And what happened was that people would call that they were in town—outsider people from other places—Kenneth would say, "Well, come over Friday night." And it gave him a time to have them over, but not of any wildly outstanding way.

BH: Well, one question I have is when I was talking to Dick, to Richard Moore, he was saying that he had started going over in the late, as a student of the late '30s and then...

MW: Oh good.

BH: But it was a sort of...

MW: In the late '30's?

BH: In the late '30's.

MW: Up on Potrero Hill?

BH: Yeah. So he and Tom Parkinson had gone over a few times and then I asked "Did they start—did these things start after the war?" and he said, "No—we started going over when I was..."

MW: I didn't know that at all.

BH: I guess little social gatherings but I guess not formally or anything.

RH: Hamalian says that it was partly Bill Everson coming back, and it was partly the CO's returning.

MW: Oh, that makes total sense to me.

RH: So that it was, in a way, an anarchist pacifist discussion.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: And Kenneth worked with a lot of people including—who's the bishop from Grace Cathedral who disappeared on a hike [Bishop Pike]? Well, he and Kenneth worked on a lot of petitions, and then I guess Kenneth was called before the draft board at least at one point and asked. That stimulated him to take the job at SF General. He was an orderly.

BH: Right.

MW: And of course they gave him the night shift. So he told me he was a little scared going home at night. You know, the buses were hours apart, and he would run from the hospital on up Potrero Hill to his house. (laughing) But he didn't want to get drafted, that's for sure.

BH: So, when they started going over to just socialize in the evenings he wasn't working probably. He was working in the house.

MW: Oh yeah. This must have been when he lived on Potrero Hill because it was not at 8th and California.

BH: Late 30's, yeah.

RH: So, when you were first cohabiting was after you got back from Europe? That would have been when the...

MW: When we had a place together?

RH: Yeah, that was when the Friday nights started?

MW: Yes, when I got back from Europe and then I was first in Oregon and then I lived in Seattle for a few months.

AL: But you're trying to figure out when they really kind of started. In earnest, of the form that's been demonstrated in the photographs, the stuff that they created in the *Life* photos...

MW: No, that was much later.

DK: I think what Bob is thinking about when this kind of stuff started. When did this kind of thing start?

MW: This kind of thing? That was unique.

BH: Yeah.

MW: That was unique. Sometimes people would bring things to read or they'd talk about a poet or ...

DK: It looks like a good set up for Kenneth because *Life* had run its story on the poetry scene, the Renaissance in San Francisco after "Howl," and he was featured in a photograph reading to jazz in

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

The Cellar. He was described as a poet of national reputation and elder statesman of our city poets, three months shy of fifty-two. He did not take the publicity seriously enough to let it annoy him. At his apartment he arranged a poetry reading for *Life* full of photographers that would introduce them to the new sensibility of poets like Michael McClure and Philip Lamantia.

MW: That sounds normal.

BH: So he wanted it to be...

DK: What happened at the readings?

AL: Whatever happened...

DK: He decided to explain San Francisco this new literary movement, which was not like the East Coast scene, to the common reader. His invitation to *Life* was to come here and see a small in house reading. It's your house, they came, but then it was never published because it was after the fact of the original *Life* Magazine story.

RH: You can order the original *Life* magazine back copies. You can buy the original *Life* magazine. So, I hope I'll have it next time.

BH: So, probably they never ran the photos because it was after the fact.

RH: They didn't buy the story. It wasn't wild enough. (laughing)

[Group passes around photos from *Life* photo shoot. Some of which appeared in *Brick Magazine* Summer 2008]

BH: Look at this picture of Helen Adam.

MW: It's great and Madeline Gleason is pretty good too.

BH: And then my students, just in this one. I love this one.

MW: Oh yes, I can just hear her. She was great and her clothes were great.

BH: My students, this was their favorite.

RH: How did she dress? Helen Adam.

MW: She dressed like an upper-middle-class proper English woman whose father had been a gypsy. (laughing) It was outlandish and proper. And she wore wonderful clothes. It was just amazing and of course her speech was clipped and was—have you ever heard her read?

RH: No.

MW: Oh, it's such a treat. There must be a recording? At the Poetry Center?

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: Well, the new Helen Adam reader has just come out with some of her recordings on there, so it's available.

MW: Oh, good! Oh, I didn't know. She was a treasure, and Madeline Gleason was pretty good, too, not like Helen.

BH: They were amazing. So there's a Helen Adam and there's a Jack Spicer and there's...

RH: Whalen. I'm not sure which the others are.

BH: Is there a group?

BH: And then is there one of Everson. Is this here?

MW: Yes, Everson is there.

RH: I had an impression that Everson wasn't one of the...

MW: Oh, I didn't understand that.

BH: I was just trying to gather one of the two Helen Adam's pictures, there's this one and there's this one. Both of them are great.

AL: I assume you're going to fill out a lot of this stuff tomorrow, right?

BH: Right. Just on this general subject, while I'm thinking of it—I told Tommy Bliss at The Bancroft about the interviews which and these photographs and he is very interested.

AL: This is the guy originally that you had tried to get to read...

BH: He's in charge of the collection—rare book and manuscript collection—at The Bancroft and whose got Michael McClure's and Ferlinghetti's and he would love to talk to you about your collection—your collections and your manuscripts at some point.

MW: OK.

RH: If you want to do it, it would be great. It means that the kids in Berkeley could go into the library and look through the books and papers.

AL: So this idea of the chronology, and it seems to me that you need to have access to a bit of different information of where these social things on Potrero Hill in the '30s. But when you two were together, I mean, my recollection—Kathy used to talk about this, she remembers this, these events so clearly. They were happening then but that certainly is compatible with this '57 photos and she was born in '54. But this might have been a slightly different demonstration...

MW: Well, this was definitely unique.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

AL: The concept of people coming over and reading or talking politics and sitting there. I remember there was a time when I went to a City Arts lecture where Garrison Keillor was interviewing Ferlinghetti, who is in one of these. I mean the irony of this—I kind of sat there with my jaw dropping because Keillor comes out to warm up the crowd, spends the first 5 minutes going, “There’s this very underappreciated poet from San Francisco called Kenneth Rexroth,” and he just starts talking about Kenneth, and then when Ferlinghetti is talking about it, he pauses and makes mention of these Friday evening gatherings, and I guess that’s what I’m trying to make here. So clearly these things were happening ...

RH: Well known.

MW: Garrison Keillor—he really loved Kenneth. There were things on his Sunday morning show. Often he says, “as the great poet Kenneth Rexroth said.” (laughing)

AL: But I guess the point was that clearly Ferlinghetti remembers these very...

MW: Well, we always had Friday nights. It’s just that this one was unique. And they were there for purpose, you know? *Life Magazine* was taking pictures.

RH: Yeah.

MW: And it took... Usually people just sat around in the back room, but they took up the whole front two rooms, and people were out by the hall and things.

AL: It was not uncommon that he would kind of lead discussions on lots of topics as well.

MW: Well, of course the discussions were on anarchism.

RH: Yeah. Well, what Robert Duncan was saying about this—I forget to whom—was we all came out from under Daddy Rexroth’s coat.

MW: It’s true, it happened a lot.

BH: Richard [Moore] was saying it was almost like turning on a machine and that Kenneth would just start going on these subjects that were wild and he would end up connecting them in this sort of wild way.

DK: And so Kerouac—that’s how Kerouac has him in the *Dharma Bums*—just starts talking.

BH: Marthe, one question I had is do you know how this lady is cutting things on the cheese plate? It’s a cheese plate there. We couldn’t figure out who that was. You have the ones in back labeled but not her. We didn’t recognize her.

MW: I’m not sure who that is.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: Yeah, see, and these all, I think, is that Michael McClure down there? I thought that's Michael McClure or it could be Lamantia.

MW: Oh, I can see it much better. So here's Helen, that looks like Michael, yeah, there's Jim Harmon. I'm used to wearing glasses. That looks like Michael...Jim Herman...Oh, that's John—that's Hawthorne.

BH: And who is that in the back?

MW: That looks like my friend Tom. That could be Michael. That's Jack Spicer. Oh, here's Ariel, and here is Dick [Moore's] wife.

BH: Ruth?

MW: Ruth, yeah.

MW: I need to see the overall pictures. And then I, because she's older than Joanne and her hair is different, so it's not Joanne.

BH: No, no it's not Joanne. It almost looked like Josephine Miles.

MW: One of the reason you know this was a special Friday night—good cheese. (laughing)

RH: I was going to ask you about that. Where you bought cheese in San Francisco back in those days?

MW: We had good cheese stores, but we lived in the Clement area.

BH: So did you not always have great food like this?

MW: No, no, this was obviously an expense of wonderment. (laughing) But yes, oh you know where I got it? At the Lick Market—and they had a wonderful—17 Clement. I got everything there. This was a big occasion.

BH: This was a big occasion?

MW: This was not a normal occasion. I mean, we would have a cheese and crackers and wine. We always had wine. I had this set of ridiculous wine glasses, but they were useful. (laughing) But Friday nights came and went as a point of interest for me...but we always had them.

BH: So you didn't always stay for them?

MW: No.

BH: No?

MW: I went to bed.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: You went to bed and the kids were—well, you were working!

MW: Well, because, especially after Katherine was born, I was really tired.

BH: Yeah, could you sleep through the noise though?

MW: Yeah...or I usually could, yeah.

BH: Yeah.

MW: It was worth it to go to bed. (laughing) You know, this woman is familiar to me, but maybe if I see her in one of the bigger pictures I'll know.

BH: Yeah, I don't know if she's in any of the other pictures so that's why I couldn't figure out who she was, because she wasn't identified in any of your other pictures either so...

AL: She might have been an interloper from the neighborhood who just came!

MW: No, no, but definitely there's something a little familiar about her, and she's definitely older than. Yeah and her hair is different. I'm just thinking maybe from the profile, it may come to me.

BH: Okay, well that's probably as much as we can do with the photos, so shall we just maybe...

RH: Turn to the 5th

BH: To the poem?

AL: Because I think that maybe tomorrow you can dig deeper in to try to get this perspective of where it sits globally into the larger process?

DK: Where do you think they sort of ended or what they changed into? Why did they stop happening? I'll ask you that question tomorrow.

AL: So why did they die out?

MW: I don't think it did. I think after we moved on Lincoln Way and Mary was staying with Kenneth, I think they had Friday nights. So I don't really know the death of it all.

BH: Richard Moore said at one point in the early '60s when Kenneth got tired of them, "We moved them to my place."

MW: Oh, excellent, there you go.

BH: So you might want to even call him, because they started...

MW: Well, where was Dick's place?

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: I forget where he said his apartment was. And then he had to move to...

MW: Move to Marin.

BH: After that, so I guess his memory was that they moved for a while to his apartment and that Spicer and some of the people came.

MW: Kept going.

BH: Kept going at his apartment because Kenneth was tired of them and...

MW: Uh huh.

BH: So that was one thing that I thought maybe you could even either email him or call him up.

RH: Sure.

BH: And just ask him for his, cause he's got tons to say on the subject.

RH: Another question would be, who were the regulars?

BH: Yeah.

RH: What was the core group?

MW: That's a good question, too.

RH: I think the question I have is, was Muriel Rukeyser already gone by the time you and Kenneth got together?

MW: Well, Muriel was always partially hosted by The Poetry Center, and I'm just laughing at the possibility of having Ruth, Ruth Witt Diamant, and Muriel Rukeyser in the same dwelling, but that didn't happen. But Muriel was not a part of any of the things that I knew about. I mean, she came to dinner or something like that and she and Kenneth had a long time of knowing each other, but she wasn't a part of any of this, these meetings.

RH: Yeah.

MW: She read for The Poetry Center, I think.

RH: I just thought she, I'm sure she did. I just thought earlier. There are some stories about their arguments. I guess Kenneth thought she was a Stalinist.

(laughing)

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: So he went through life thinking that almost everyone at one time had been a Stalinist. A “Stah-linist” as he said but I might have heard that in some derogatory statement.

RH: Alright, so “In Defense of the Earth.”

BH: I had in mind maybe we could start with some of the “Marthe Away” poems.

RH: Why don’t we start with the first poem?

BH: The first poem. “The Reflecting Trees of Being and Not Being.”

RH: I guess this is my question. About 2/3 of the way down the first page, “I can see in it / Trees of silence and fire. / In the mirrors when its waves / I can see faces. Mostly / They are your face.” (Hamill & Morrow 525)

MW: Mhmm.

RH: Yes, so maybe we should start by asking what you remember about how he put this book together presumably. Or do we just want to talk about the writing, about the individual poems?

DK: Well, I think this seems to have been written as a set, if I remember correctly, the poems written to you at the beginning of this book—Marthe?

MW: Yeah.

DK: They were written to you, for you, when you were in New Mexico?

MW: Away.

DK: Yeah.

MW: Um, that presents a very low point of our relationship and I didn’t know about... I didn’t know too intimately about their existence and so I found out about them later. I guess before they were published. I actually felt manipulated by them, too. So it was not some joyous discovery, you know.

BH: So they were actually written when you were away?

MW: I was away.

BH: Because you were in New Mexico at that point?

MW: Right.

RH: And they’re full of intense loneliness and longing and clearly he’s in different ways repeating these—abandoned by his mother and with Marie and then with you.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

DK: So, “Mostly / They are your face. On its streams / I can see the soft moonlight / On the Canal du Midi.” (Hamill & Morrow 525) Where is the Canal du Midi?

MW: Oh yeah, that’s where we were.

RH: This is a memory of when you...

MW: A memory of me.

RH: When you were bicycling.

MW: In Provence.

RH: In the south of France.

BH: But it’s a poetic choice, the Canal du Midi sounds vaguely vaginal...

MW: What?

BH: It sounds like a part of the body.

MW: Yes.

BH: The Canal du Midi, because it’s in the middle. As a choice “On its streams / I can see the soft moonlight / On the Canal du Midi.”

DK: That’s carried out in the following lines, because then he’s looking at your eyes, with “Fluids of your eyes” and it ends with “Golden fires and lamps of years,” which can stand in for...sexual or... I’m just thinking that. Brenda, I think is correct because then there is some reason to think that the sexual allusion or undertones here are carried out in the final lines.

MW: Yeah.

DK: I was curious when I read this. I was interested by the word “mostly.” He says “Mostly / They are your face,” because these poems that are written to you are a lot about Mary and they seem to be penitent.

MW: Yes, that’s the word to pick.

DK: I also associate Kenneth with Modernist poets and the word “only”—“merely,” just the one object understood and written with imagist overtones. So where he’s talking about an object of desire in Mary and he said “mostly” and I find that really an intriguing choice of words. Because then he’s looking in your eyes and I was wondering if that is the moment where he’s actually letting you be your own person, another person impenetrable in this moment of sexual suggestion.

MW: I doubt it.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

DK: I doubt it, too. The memory is so controlling, and there's a repetition here. Because when Kenneth writes about memory, there's a lot of repetition in the language and words float to another in the sound of them. The start of this poem is one long sentence and you can see words weaving in and out of each other in this sound and repetition. At the end of the poem, he says, "I can see" four times and that, him saying it, it goes back to that modernist thing of knowing and controlling and holding the object. It's you, but it's "mostly" because it's still made to be somewhat elusive while he still wants to control.

MW: Yeah.

DK: Rereading the set last night, I was intrigued with this poem because of this sort of difficulty and control that are really shaping it. Other poems in the book don't have interweaving of language and repetition. They have his more geometric style where he puts together pieces, layering together a story, but this is maybe a dynamic memory. Notice too what they cut in edition that Bob has. The 1965 collection of short poems. It has a poem called "The Great Canzon."

MW: Oh yeah.

DK: And it is a poem about, like after Dante, a great love and a spiritual love.

MW: Right.

DK: A Beatrice kind of love. It's not here. It's not in the set of complete poems.

MW: It's somewhere else.

DK: It's been removed, so...

MW: The first time that it was published, it was "The Great Canzon *for* Marthe."

DK: So, it's here, interesting enough. But it's not in there.

MW: I think he took my name out of "Seven Poems for Marthe."

DK: And that happened for this edition, but they keep "The Great Canzon."

BH: It's interesting.

DK: Isn't that interesting?

RH: So there is a page left out all together?

DK: Just in the series here, but it should be before "A Living Pearl" if I'm correct. The series goes...No, I'm sorry, the series goes: "Loneliness," "The Old Song and Dance." Then it goes to "The Great Canzon" and then "Growing." So it's between "The Old Song and Dance" and "Growing." It was moved.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: Oh.

BH: Oh, OK, but this is just re-titled, “In my childhood when I first.” He changed the title to “The Reflecting Trees of Being and Not Being” when originally it was “Seven Poems for Marthe.”

RH: Right, look at the date they precede. Yes.

BH: And next “Marthe Lonely.” Yeah, well it was “Marthe Lonely.” It isn’t even in here. No, it is, but it’s just called, what is it called in the collected?

RH: He’s renamed them.

BH: Yeah, he renamed them. He renamed it “Loneliness.” He took Marthe out of it.

AL: He did what Kenneth did. He wasn’t for the original. He was a Modernist.

BH: Well, he was angry.

MW: You know, I think Kenneth was in charge of changing the titles the first whatever, the first time, because those poems kept being published a lot, and so he just took charge.

BH: He just took—he tried to make them general.

MW: Made them more general.

BH: And obviously it was from the hurt that he describes in the first place. But it’s interesting what Doug was saying about the seeing and the fact that he repeats “I can see,” four times. It’s almost as if he’s colonizing the seeing before he lets the beloved’s eyes actually appear. Because her eyes—it’s not even stated the gender of the person here but presumably we know it’s her—her eyes appear in the penultimate line before this headless tetrameter last line. Which I think is really interesting. The last line is headless, what we call headless tetrameter. Where there are four feet with missing the first syllable, so “Golden fires and lamps of years” and also, I mean, it’s seven syllable lines throughout the poem.

MW: That’s his thing.

BH: And I thought that was really interesting that it was the seven.

MW: I think a lot of his poems are seven syllables.

BH: Yeah, and alternating sometimes with eights.

RH: And nines. The business with eyes here in this one gets picked up in several places ... it’s in the section of “The Lights in the Sky are Stars.” In the one, two, third poem “The Heart of Herakles,”—this is interesting because of the connection between the Marthe poems and the astronomy poems.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: Right.

RH: He becomes, he says "I."

RH: Here's "The Heart of Herakles" where he says "Lying under the stars, / In the summer night, / Late, while the autumn / Constellations climb the sky, / as the Cluster of Hercules / Falls down the west / I put the telescope by..... / My body is asleep. Only / My eyes and brain are awake. / The stars stand around me / Like gold eyes..." That picks up on "your gold eyes" in the first poem. "...I can no longer / Tell where I begin and leave off."

BH: Male poets.

RH: "And the invisible grass, / The tipping earth, the swarming stars / Have an eye that sees itself."

MW: The eyes again.

RH: And he has become the eye that sees only the stars, only the stars, but the stars are gold eyes. So at that point, as in Dante, the golden feet transfused female beloved has become the entire universe that is. And Wordsworth says that in his ballad "Tintern Abbey." "We are laid asleep / In body, and become a living [soul: / While with an eye made quiet by the power]" Is it eye or mind? I forget what he says, but anyway, powerful echoes...

MW: Oh yeah.

RH: And the sparks of gold ["A Maze of Sparks of Gold"] picks up on it, so there is that connection made here. Was his interest in astronomy?

MW: It was very deep and he knew a lot about it.

RH: He really must have.

MW: He was always saying we have to go out. There's something in the sky that we have to see.

RH: There is a poem in the series about the eclipse...

MW: Oh yeah.

RH: "Protoplasm of Light."

MW: "Protoplasm of Light."

RH: And that's just the next reference.

AL: She's right on it.

RH: The one just after that.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: We don't have that one right after, we have "A Maze of Sparks of Gold."

RH: Yours is 538 [Hamill]. Let me see then where.

BH: While Bob tries to find that I'll tell you there's going to be a total eclipse of the moon on Wednesday.

MW: There is?

BH: Yes.

MW: Total?

AL: You get the automatic email system with all the stuff in the sky?

BH: We have an astronomer at St. Mary's who send it.

RH: I want to show him this poem, "Blood on a Dead World," where he says...

AL: Page 540 [Hamill] for us.

RH: "A blowing night in late fall, / The moon rises with a nick / In it. All day Mary has / Been talking about the eclipse. / Every once in a while I / Go out and report on the / Progress of the earth's shadow. / When it is passing the half, / Marthe and Mary come out / And we stand on the corner / In the first wisps of chilling / Fog and watch the light go out." And the poem turns on the child's question, 'Is it all the blood on the earth / Makes the shadow that color?' / She asks."

BH: "I do not answer." That's great.

RH: Do you remember that occasion?

MW: Yeah, I do. It was at 8th Avenue and California.

BH: But it's interesting he didn't take you out of the references like that. He didn't take you out.

MW: He left that in?

BH: He left Marthe and Mary.

MW: I know but—

BH: "Marthe and Mary come out / And we stand on the corner."

MW: Maybe he thought it was part of the history or...

BH: It wasn't a love poem.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: He didn't want to resign as a father.

BH: While we're on that sequence I was going to ask you a little bit about the section called "A Sword In a Cloud of Light" which I really enjoyed and liked reading over the holidays a lot and of course it's very tender toward the child.

MW: Yeah.

BH: And I thought it really got the character of San Francisco night, you know? And that area around Broadway.

MW: Kenneth loves this poem. After he wrote it he really was proud of it.

RH: I really liked it.

AL: I remember you read this at the book thing.

BH: Well, my question was simply first of all, did you think it was slightly strange to hear, to have the child depicted as, that he took her into such a kind of difficult configuration?

MW: No, I'm trying to remember the name of the place, but it was... Kenneth went there, sat there all the time when he was out walking or shopping. Mary had been in there many times. No, I thought it was nice that they were out together and I didn't think it was worrisome in any way because it was a familiar place.

RH: Completely safe.

MW: Yes, and also, I can't remember the guy's name— Jimbo? Or something really... I can't remember it, but he and Kenneth were good friends and they talked all the time. And Mary was often with him.

BH: I found it interesting that after the description and the very plain telling: "I am fifty / And you are five. It would do / No good to say this and it / May do no good to write it. / Believe in Orion" then it gets very sappy there for a second?

MW: Yeah.

BH: You know, "Believe / In the night, the moon, the crowded / Earth. Believe in Christmas and / Birthdays and Easter rabbits." That was just such a strange mix of his plain need and sentimentality.

RH: Well, I think it's sentimental but intended to be funny.

BH: Really? I didn't think he was in control of his tone there because it, you can't really tell whether he's going for believe in all these fugitive compounds of nature, which is wonderful writing, and believe in Christmas and birthdays and Easter.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: Well, I have to tell you something, Brenda. I always feel this when I read this whole poem. It was because this poem was read a lot and Kenneth read it. He liked this poem a lot, but there's definitely a jump.

BH: Yeah.

MW: And it goes from more straightforward description and reality to a very sentimental beseeching and it, what I always felt was, I hope that this is not the nature of the conversation when you take a walk on Fillmore with Mary.

BH: Yeah.

MW: Too much, too much.

BH: Right.

MW: So that's what I always thought.

BH: Yeah, I'm glad to hear you say that because there's some really amazing writing.

MW: I'd forgotten about that, the emotion that was attached to that, but when you come to the end with me, it's a real jump, but I guess it didn't feel that way to Kenneth. I don't know.

AL: Because I'm talking more than I ever have in the other [discussions]. I try to stay in the background, but it just reminds me of something that Katherine said once, not totally irrelevant, not just once, but she was so into all of these things. Right, I mean he would make Christmas into this huge thing. He'd get into the Santa—

MW: There was a huge element of sentimentality and history and you always, always went to midnight mass at Church of the Advent and you always had presents in the middle of the night and that kind of thing pervaded our lives.

BH: Yeah.

MW: It was more times, but Christmas was special and then Kenneth always had a birthday party three days before Christmas—not my favorite thing.

AL: But I guess I just remember there was a lot of this. I mean Easter wasn't as big, but everything was a big, so I just imagine there was some relevance to that, how it crept in.

MW: And we got the wet grass from the park at 8th and California—up at Lake and California. Lake Street Park, and it had to be like wet grass that we had pulled out that day.

(laughing)

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: Connects to his deep love for the Anglican liturgy. He just had such a scoured, blasted childhood that he created ritual order, held it whenever he could. It's in the astronomy poems. Always, the interest in procession of the equinox and the order.

MW: I think he early on became very knowledgeable about astronomy, and his mother died when, I guess he was twelve, is what comes to my mind. But I'm not sure. And then I think he had a hard life, you know? Sometimes traveling with his father, and then when he was mid to late teens he was more on his own, and the circumstances of his father's death I don't know. So, I know about it either... I don't know. Do you know?

RH: No, I just know what's in the—

DK: I don't think we really know.

BH: But it also does, despite his sort of longing for this ritual and the business of family holiday and all of this infusion of—

MW: Lots of symbols—

BH: — ritual would bring up or Christian tradition and the 50s, the 50s Christmas and everything, but it does seem just on the literary level. I'm not denying that he had this longing and everything, but compared to the other writing in the poem it often seems to me in these poems that his poetic judgment will fail him in a line or two and it will undermine the poem in some way and after he's written amazing stuff like I think "Joy, fear, hygiene, and the proud / Names of the middle classes," which—

MW: I know. That goes everywhere.

BH: He is very strong. I think his, just as kind of polemical writing, but he gets by with it and then "moon beams like a pudding" is a wonderful shift and then farther on in the poem, he writes "Seller, master and victim, / Like some immense theorem, / Which if once solved would forever / Solve the mystery and pain / Under the bells and spangles."

MW: "Under the bells and spangles," yeah.

BH: I think that's really wonderful writing.

AL: End there, Kenneth.

(laughing)

BH: And then he goes on and on... So, I guess my feeling was that somehow his need and his yearning would sometimes undermine these sections.

RH: I think so I'm not completely justifying them, but it's so absurd to say, Believe in Easter rabbits, so partly, he's slightly mocking his own sentimentality, I think. This is an argument about tone and the other thing that's interesting, two kinds of things that figure in his writing are the sentimentality

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

and always blaming the bad guy. I think that we learned from “Never / Give up this savage religion / ...for the rascals.”

MW: Doesn't this poem go all over? I mean, it's amazing and...

DK: And it's also, just to make a comment, the book is something like this.

BH: Yeah.

MW: The book is like that, too. Exactly.

DK: The stronger poems are really in the first half then we get the “Thou Shall Not Kill,” which is interesting, but it goes all over the place—diatribe. Once I got to the later parts with “A Bestiary” and then the epigrams and the translations and it talks about past lovers, fish flies and so on, and then it returns to some more meditative poems at the end to try and tie it up. It's like absurdities is the world I have. The move into absurdity is also to include all those poems in the book because it is a book of poems as well.

MW: One other poem could... except in the Dylan Thomas poem.

DK: Yeah.

MW: I mean—that's straight out of the emotion. And we got there from...

BH: Yeah.

RH: And there's another one in there, which is the “Far / Away in distant cities / Fat-hearted men are planning / To murder you while you sleep.” [from “The Great Nebula of Andromeda” – “The Lights in the Sky are Stars”]

MW: There it is. That's it.

RH: That's in the same. It's in the 2nd poem in the astronomy series.

DK: I mean it's, on the one hand, it's true that there...

(laughing)

BH: It's so...

RH: On the one hand it's true that there are bad guys out there. On the other hand. Easter rabbits on one side and murders on the other, you know? There's some, the connection between the anger and the sentimentality of—they have to do with his pure heart and these battles.

MW: These bad folks, yeah.

BH: Mmmm.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

RH: Anyway, maybe we should go back and go through the Marthe poems.

AL: In the description a couple of minutes ago you used the word ritual, and I'll tell you, that just so resonated with me because that's what Katharine always used to talk about. Because I remember I asked her, "So, well, what religion are you?" You know? And she said "Oh—if there's ritual we do it!"

(everyone laughing)

AL: And she said—we were basically pagans. Because we made the best parties—that's what we were that day. She had this big issue of wanting to have some unified filter so she converted, that's what she took away from her experiences, so the word ritual.

BH: That's the one thing I love about him... I do share his passion for belief and flailing himself from one belief to another.

AL: He saw ritual in origin and these vows.

BH: It's funny.

RH: So "She Is Away."

BH: "She Is Away."

AL: "Marthe Away"—so it's called "Marthe Away" in the original.

(laughing)

BH: "She Is Away" in the final.

AL: So here I think they want to go to "Marthe Away," which starts with: "All night I lay..."

RH: I didn't have anything to say. This is the poem that comes nearest to psychological self-examination.

MW: Oh, "Marthe Lonely?"

RH: As he ever comes.

BH: "Marthe Away."

RH: And it's in the lines middle, midway through the untellable love and then he writes, "I knew then, / As your secret spoke, my secret self, / The blind bird, hardly visible in / An endless web of lies. And I knew / The web too, its every knot and strand, / The hidden crippled bird, the terrible web."

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: Mhmm.

RH: Get a glimpse of the private self who felt like he was always faking and conning and trying to get by.

MW: Yeah.

BH: Yeah, I found that really moving, too—I just taught this in January to my students at St. Mary's and...

MW: What a good poem to teach!

BH: They loved it and I started the class with these several poems at the beginning of this book and they loved them. We spent a lot of time on "Your body lay like a warm soft star"...how memorable that you know, "Against my body, / Your body lay like a warm soft star"...that that's a potentially sentimental image, but it's not at all. He sort of veers away, that it's that oxymoron oddity of—you can't possibly have somebody snuggling up to you like a star.

MW: I think that's the point.

BH: Because first of all stars are prickly. In reality they're way out there, billions of miles away, hot gases, they're not snuggly at all. But they loved "warm, soft star" as adjectives and how in "Marthe Away," how impossible it is to have a lover that would do that and I think they were all moved by that and I think they were all moved by what Bob was noting that the lover in the middle sort of admits that he's full of bullshit. That he somehow has lived his life in this complex way, getting by and then somehow redeems himself by saying, "O love, / I who am lost and damned with words, / Whose words are a business and an art, / I have no words."

DK: If I could just add to that, a thought about how he ends the book, the last poem "Codicil." The first two lines of that poem, I can just tell you they go: "Most of the world's poetry / Is artifice, construction. / No one reads it but scholars."... It's a fear that seems to be permeating the book.

MW: Right.

DK: About himself and about the poems and writing, really strikingly so here, but then he ends it again by a poem that talks about concluding the book "Most of the world's poetry / Is artifice, construction," then he talks about the horror, the very last line, 'Reason for a horror of / The use of the pronoun, 'I',' so there's an interesting way to tie up the whole book.

BH: Yeah.

DK: I tend to read across a book, and I thought that was an interesting way to do it.

AL: So you're talking out the end of the entire book?

DK: But in a general way, putting the book out on other people. At that point, after he's gotten through the book, he seems to be talking about himself. Read the book, well...

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

RH: The other thing is it seems to me, amazingly, to be written in that time, is a defense of the subjectivity of this book. He's just at around the time that "Life Studies" and Plath and "Howl" are published and he says the poetry of "Valéry / Like that of Pope, / isn't just / Personal," saying of Alexander, this is so smart of him, saying of Pope that his poetry is personal but that these people for whom that kind of Neoclassic poetry was the height of the impersonality and that sort of kind of conservative model of poetry in the period, "it is intense, / Subjective reverie as / Intimate in revealing, / Embarrassing as you will,"...this is not such great writing indiscretions psychoanalytic couch but there is that par.t

MW: What poem is that?

RH: This is the very last poem.

BH: The last poem in the book—it's called "Codicil."

MW: Oh, we've got the "Bestiary" down there.

BH: Yes, the very last poem.

RH: It's a kind of justification for writing of this kind of...

BH: Subjectivity.

RH: Personal, subjective poetry.

BH: Yeah.

RH: Just at the moment that this you know, the term confessional poetry was going to be born and intense personal subjective poetry.

DK: And the poem for this, this is the last poem, the poem right before it is titled "They Say This Isn't a Poem." There's two arguments for what a poem is and can be at this moment, and these two poems come after all this absurd stuff, or what can seem so absurd to us now, things that are in "A Bestiary" and the epigrams that are just out there and...

AL: Katharine loved "A Bestiary."

(laughing)

BH: I'm sure.

AL: She loved it.

RH: Also, as a poet just noticed before that—the group of having done the 100 poems from the Japanese 45. This brings us to the topic of his translations, which we can take up.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: But just to say one more thing about the “Codicil” and because we’re not doing this particularly in order but he does have this fundamental tension and paradoxical place in himself that he’s so erudite and he’s autodidact and he’s full of this fantastic knowledge and he worships poetry and he is fundamentally, he’s like a self taught academic himself.

MW: And he’s a self-critic.

BH: And he’s a self-critic but he’s going to put forth this sort of populist position that poetry has to be, personal and outside of what’s accepted as poetry by the academy and then...

MW: The academy.

BH: In order to really do its work and he knows that he has to have both. He’s not going to throw out English poetry because he thinks that it’s impersonal...

DK: No, he’s not.

BH: He wants to be among the poets, as Keats would say.

DK: There seems to be an effort at reciprocity. He uses the word reciprocity in the poem called “They Say This Isn’t a Poem” and even in that first poem where he says “I can see,” he does seem to be asking or creating a situation where he wants reciprocity? Interaction? Mutuality? There are lines here that say, I don’t know where to start—“All That Is, hence he who / Is in perfect accord with All / That Is can act upon It / Without effort, with a kind / Of reciprocity, like acts / Of the mutual love of friends.” So the reciprocity is there and in the theme we talked of earlier of “the I” isn’t so alone, there is the poem, “A Dialogue of Watching” and where he...

MW: Which poem is that?

DK: I’m sorry. In “A Dialogue of Watching.”

MW: Oh yeah.

DK: But that is a poem where he is watching you. There’s no conversation with you.

MW: No.

DK: So it’s just this subjectivity, but he calls it a dialogue watching you and your body because he talks about children as well.

MW: Right.

BH: Marthe, how much did he read? Did he sit around and read all day?

MW: No, he went to the grocery and cooked and took care of Mary and talked on the phone and wrote a lot of letters, but he did read for hours and hours.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

AL: That is Katharine's memory. I may have said this before, but I remember when we must have still been in school so we were just talking about issues of our childhood. So to this day it sticks with me—her description of what she thought it meant to go to work.

BH: Yeah.

AL: And now of course she realizes that not everyone works that way but her image, I'm not changing. Well, basically you go to work by—you stack the books in the bathroom, you make a big tub of hot water and you read all the books that came yesterday. That's what going to work is. (everyone laughing) Sitting in a hot tub and reading. That was her idea of work. So, I, of course, growing up in Michigan, had a kind of different concept of work, of people with milk pails going off. It was kind of funny. That was the greatest description of our different backgrounds.

MW: He had lots of rituals about his bath because he had this oil-cloth covered board.

BH: Uh huh.

MW: And then he would make a very big tub of water, hot, and then after a couple of hours he would let out a lot and put more hot in.

BH: A couple of hours?

(laughing)

AL: Well, you have to work all day!

MW: A long time, a long time.

AL: So, I think your concept is, I believed her, that by most descriptions it would be a long time.

BH: Marthe, did you not feel... I mean I know this is going back to some of the questions we've had before, these poems just show so much yearning appreciation for some feminine companionship and caretaking in some way. Did you not feel crazed with annoyance when you came back from work and this person had been sitting in the bathtub all day?

MW: Really, I just accepted it, you know? It was the way he did that and the books would be piled beside the bathtub.

BH: For hours.

MW: I think he probably had lots of ideas while he was having his bath, but I think he wrote at his desk.

(everyone laughing)

BH: Things were moist on the way.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: But it was very fixed.

BH: Oh boy, that's a riot. Okay, so maybe we should look at you know, "Loneliness" or "Marthe Lonely." Is it called "Marthe Lonely"?

DK: It's called "Loneliness" here.

AL: It's number 3 in ours.

BH: Yeah.

AL: In our primer.

RH: They were numbered.

AL: "Marthe Lonely" is roman numeral III.

BH: "Marthe Lonely." Nice of him to tell you how you were feeling.

RH: So what about the one that's called "Mocking Birds." It's put in the 3rd position in here.

BH: In the original "Marthe Lonely" is the 3rd one.

RH: It's the one that begins "In mid-March in the heart of / The night, in the center of" – He moved that from elsewhere.

AL: Yeah, it must have come from elsewhere because it's not in this series here. Give me the name again.

RH: When he did the 1960s, sixth version the first poem is: "In my childhood I first / Saw myself unfolded in"—the first Marthe poem, then the second one is "Marthe Away."

AL: We got that.

RH: And the third one.

AL: Oh, "Mocking Birds."

BH: "In mid-March in the heart of..."

AL: So that's not here. "Marthe Lonely" is number III.

BH: He must have imported "Mocking Birds."

AL: Yeah, because "mid-March" doesn't start here.

DK: It's not just a change of title.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

RH: And then number, what's number IV?

MW: Number IV is "Quietly."

AL: "Lying here quietly beside you."

DK: "Quietly" is later in the book.

RH: That's moved to later.

DK: Much later.

RH: Quite a bit later. That's IV. Number IV in the original. It's called "Quietly."

AL: Just so you know, these are all roman numbers, if that matters to you.

RH: And number V is—

MW: "The Old Song and Dance."

DK: "On Marthe's Birthday."

RH: "The Old Song and Dance On Marthe's Birthday."

AL: And it starts with, "You, because you love me."

RH: And number VI.

BH: That's number V in the original?

AL: Yeah.

RH: And then after that?

AL: "Marthe Growing."

RH: And what is the first line?

AL: "Who are you? Who am I?"

BH: So what's number IV in the original?

MW: Number IV.

AL: "Quietly"

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: “Quietly.” Oh, Okay.

RH: And then number VII is “A Dialogue of Watching.”

DK: Is number VII? So that’s on page 557.

MW: That was the poem, you know, that I knew of.

RH: It was just called “A Dialogue of Watching.”

MW: “A Dialogue of Watching.”

AL: I remember about ten years ago, it’s just kind of timely, that “A Dialogue of Watching” was a poem in the Valentines *Chronicle* magazine.

BH: Oh wow.

AL: *The Chronicle’s* Valentines Magazine.

MW: I forgot that.

BH: My students loved this poem. I taught this in January term, because that’s all I could get in book form that they could afford.

AL: You probably doubled the number of copies sold by having them buy it.

BH: So was the dialogue number VI?

DK: Number VII.

BH: Oh, number VII.

DK: Which continues the theme of watching.

BH: Right. They loved this too because of the buttocks.

RH: That’s right.

BH: I was saying the students loved reading “A Dialogue of Watching” because of the “proud buttocks.” They spent a long time on it, so I was thinking we should look at “Loneliness” a little while. We shouldn’t stay too long and tire you. Maybe another 20 minutes.

(laughing)

AL: I have to say I am enjoying this so much. I love listening to people talk about the poetry.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

RH: So, that's one of the "them" that turns, this book turns on his 50th birthday, and Mary's five, he's fifty—"Marthe Gone."

MW: Major importance to any significant or memorable time or day.

RH: The other thing about the Marthe poems is that we've commented on that whole book of the year of travels, poems, what were about marriage.

MW: Yeah.

RH: They're about the sacramental character of marriage. Made possible all knowledge, so there is the thing of just his, the idea you know, however distant the idea was to reality that in this whole poetic song got blown up in his face when you moved out.

MW: Right.

BH: But the previous poem he was being very elegiac about the honeymoon when he was still married to two people, so it was interesting, the concept of marriage that was such an ideal that there must have been this—did you feel like there was always this gap with him?

MW: You know, during the time, the travel poems were being written or afterwards when they were also being written, Kenneth and I were not together in any real way. It was a very hard time. There were some real breaks in the relationship. I felt very betrayed, and so it wasn't at a time of our being geographically together. It was a hard time for me, and I certainly didn't think Kenneth was very happy. And at the end of that trip I was desperate to get home so there wasn't... The poetry reflects some of where Kenneth was but not every place I don't think.

AL: Was it where he wanted to be? I mean it seems not that uncommon that people have a much better ability to conceptualize where they want to be than to actually be there. And sometimes it strikes me that people who seem quite distant from that point spend much more time elaborating on where they want to be and sometimes are better at describing it, this discrepancy between describing and intellectualizing the process.

MW: Kenneth didn't want to be divorced or in the past. He held out against that constantly and forever with Marie. And his relation with Andree, his first wife, I mean it never left him, and so I think he was one of those people who didn't really approve of breaking up relationships, but he did a fair job.

DK: So he really seems, we've talked about rituals and so on, and—

MW: Right.

DK: And his desire to seek some kind of continuity and not change friendship, change in his life. Did any of that in the fifties, the middle-fifties, in the period we're talking about now, did any of that desire for continuity and connection translate into valuable connections between you and Kenneth during this period? Because it seems to be something was always troubling between you two. But did anything develop into connections?

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: You know, I think it meant a lot more to me about a kind of sacramental relationship in the early years that I knew Kenneth and that's because, well, I was going to say because I didn't know him well, but I knew him pretty well. It's just that I was very tired in the relationship. I was physically tired and emotionally worn, and then I found myself pregnant and that was, it was almost, it *was* a physical blow, but it also was an economic responsibility, and then I was very aware that Kenneth, from the standpoint of relationship, Kenneth had very elaborate and demanding ideas. He would have them about being a father as well as a husband, so I think we weren't in sync. I would have been more available to that kind of relationship earlier, but at the time that he was writing about it, I think he was also very...we were estranged from each other.

BH: Yeah.

MW: It wasn't like we were on the same line. However, I always respected his interest in tradition and his birthday, Christmas, Easter—all that stuff. It's very important to Kenneth, and I made it happen for years and years until I just didn't. But I did make sure there was always the birthday party and the acknowledgements and the special dinners that were part of what was very important to him. I did until we were totally separated.

BH: He seemed to have had this idea of the contracts. I'm looking at "The Old Song and Dance" which I guess we talked a little bit about before but which is number IV in your original and when he writes, "My bride, my well beloved, / Sweeter than honey, than ripe fruit," this sounds very like Song of Solomon or something in the bible. "Solemn, grave, a flying bird, / Hold me. Be quiet and kind. / I love you. Be good to me. / I am strong for you. I uphold / You. The dawn of ten thousand / Dawns is afire in the sky. / The water flows in the earth. / The children laugh in the air." So there's this idea of the contract that I love you in the first place.

MW: And you will uphold me.

BH: So you do these other things.

MW: Yeah, that was the...

BH: The idea of the contract. That was interesting "because I love you, I / Am strong for you," so "I uphold you" and he says that early.

MW: He says it early.

BH: As well, so the idea of this elemental love that was like earth and water.

MW: Like earth and water flowing.

BH: Water and they're flowing together and it's interesting. It's an interesting idea, not particularly—well, it's...

DK: It's interesting how it rains later in the poem where he talks about men and their Brooks Brothers suits. A different contract, a wrong contract.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: In the “Thou Shalt Not Kill”?

MW: What—a different contract?

DK: Yes, in “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” he talks about men and their Brooks Brothers suits. It’s a different contract from the one with you in “The Old Song and Dance.”

BH: Yeah.

RH: Looking at time, in “For Eli Jacobson”—

MW: Eli Jacobson?

RH: Yes, the poem “For Eli Jacobson.”

MW: Yeah, Eli Jacobson. Kenneth met him many years before we reconnected. When he reconnected with him and then when he was in Los Angeles, I think Kenneth and Frank Trieste, they did a lot of hiking and they also went often to Southern California and Eli was an old-time radical and an old-time Commie, I think, and he and Kenneth just had this remarkably easy and good relationship and they came to visit us. He was married to, I can’t remember her name, but they came to visit us and they just loved their trip and we had people over to meet them and dinners and things like that and Eli said, “We should live here,” and Kenneth said, “Well, there’s a house right across the street,” and there was, so friends.

AL: I think getting a rental was a lot easier.

(laughing)

BH: Cheaper.

MW: And Eli Jacobson, who became a friend of ours, had lived in that house and they left so the Jacobsons bought it just like on this trip! (laughing) And we had a lot of times together, and he was an old world person, very gallant, and they had a lot of—I can’t remember the poem right now—they were comrades. Yeah.

BH: Yeah, he says “we were comrades together” several times.

MW: They were comrades together, yeah, and I guess this is when...

DK: The point of the poem is the memory of being young radicals more than anything else—

BH: Yeah.

RH: Do you remember the right—should we kind of go through and see if there are poems she wants to comment on?

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: Yeah, I have one more specific question in terms of maybe something that Richard Moore said, which is that we were all just under the sway of Yeats and since I noticed this big break in Kenneth's work between the intimate mode and the vatic mode, that sort of prophetic voice that he tries to take on like in the Haley's Comet poem, which seems very Yeatsian. Were you aware of Yeats being a big thing?

MW: I was.

BH: Yeah, for Kenneth.

MW: It was a big thing.

BH: Seems like Yeats and then obviously when Dylan Thomas became just that vatic.

MW: A profound absorption, yeah, and he knew Yeats poetry backwards and forwards.

BH: Yeah, interesting. So were there poems that you want to talk about, that you particularly love?

MW: Oh. Let me look a little bit.

(laughing)

RH: I mean I have a couple of questions, for example, the poem called "The Mirror in the Woods."

MW: Oh yeah, "The Mirror in the Woods." We found that. Is that in the first part of that?

AL: OK.

RH: It begins, "A mirror hung on the broken / Walls of an old summerhouse / Deep in the dark woods."

MW: Lagunitas.

RH: That's Lagunitas?

MW: It was so real. This was a house up—Marie's house was at the top of the hill, as you turned off the highway going away from Lagunitas town, and her house was about a mile or so on and you went, you turned off the road, right and went up a hill and hers was at the very top and we spent a lot of time there and right below there was this old beaten up falling down summer house in the woods.

(everyone laughing)

MW: My son-in-law, we went there and explored it a little bit. It was empty and messy and everything, and there was this broken but large mirror on the wall, and so I guess we went to Marie's for lunch or something cause we got this when Kenneth and I were together and we brought it home. This place was just shattered, stuff lying around everywhere, so we brought the mirror home.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

It was very hard because we were in a very small car, and Kenneth got it framed and Mary used it because she had ballet lessons from the age of four on and that was her mirror and so I can't remember the poem, but I will in a minute.

RH: It's also interesting because the last poem I—

BH: Oh, I get it.

RH: The last poem in "The Dragon and the Unicorn" is called "The Double Mirror."

MW: Oh.

RH: Yes, he organized them here; this is in this. He took out sections from "The Dragon and the Unicorn" and he made this empty mirror and then doubled mirrors and the first Marthe poem begins, "In my childhood when I first / Saw myself unfolded in / The triple mirrors."

DK: Yeah.

BH: And then here is in the woods.

RH: There's "The Mirror in the Woods."

MW: "The Mirror in the Woods."

RH: And this all connects to your mirroring eyes, the mirroring eyes of the stars, the mirroring eyes of the spiders that he sees in the stars.

MW: Oh yeah.

DK: And it goes into...Bob, where it starts repeating lines, words, it's interesting where he ends one sentence on "crowds" and then the next sentence begins with "crowds"?

MW: Oh yeah.

DK: Memory still comes into play

RH: The other big poems in this book are "Time Is the Mercy of Eternity" and "Mary and the Seasons."

AL: When was the "Mercy of Eternity"? That is out of "The Dragon and the Unicorn" as well.

RH: Oh it is, I see, and then "Mary and the Seasons." Yes.

MW: What is it?

RH: "Mary and the Seasons."

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: Oh yeah, “Mary and the Seasons.”

AL: I don’t think... it’s not in this book. Wait a minute.

DK: It’s in “The Dragon and the Unicorn.”

RH: It’s in “The Dragon and the Unicorn,” but maybe it’s its own poem.

AL: I see. No, I’m wrong. I was trying to put together what I understood.

RH: Let me look at this and just see if I need I can go to the Berkeley library. It is in here.

AL: My mistake.

RH: It’s and then.

DK: Singing voice.

RH: Yeah. “Mary And the Seasons.”

DK: Oh, right.

RH: There’s a poem that’s called “For Mary,” but there isn’t a poem in this volume called “For Mary” so it must have a different title. But here’s this separate poem. “Dry Autumn,” “Spring Rain,” “Autumn Rain,” “Clear Autumn,” “Snow,” “Another Twilight.” One, two, three, four, five, six poems. I didn’t have any questions about them but this is, I think, among the best things he ever did.

MW: Yeah.

BH: Yeah. So Marthe, are there poems that you wanted to talk about from this volume?

MW: I wasn’t—I didn’t think of any. I didn’t think about it in that way.

BH: Ones that you thought you were struck by when you were rereading?

DK: Marthe, when was his birthday again?

MW: Kenneth’s birthday? December 23rd 1905 he was born.

DK: 23rd.

MW: What does he say?

DK: There’s a poem here. “Human, Avian, Vegetable, Blood,” begins here. “Today, three days before Christmas.”

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

AL: 22nd or 23rd?

MW: His birthday is the 22nd.

BH: 22nd.

DK: So he doesn't say so, but he's writing on his birthday. "...three days before Christmas, / I had planned to cut some berries." You said something earlier that made me realize it, writing and thinking on his birthday.

MW: Yeah, it was the 22nd. One of his best friends, Harold Mann, they traveled together out of Chicago and everything, and his birthday was on the 23rd and they gave themselves a good celebration when they were together.

BH: So, maybe we should just do one more poem. Does anyone have any idea? And I guess I would like to at least, just cause "Thou Shalt Not Kill" is in this volume and there, as we've acknowledged that there's a bunch of really ridiculous writing in it but it was a really important poem.

MW: Yeah, OK, let's do that.

BH: Because it gave way to "Howl" and...

AL: I've heard that on many occasions.

BH: Yeah, well, so much—the rhythms, the litany, the rhythmic quality, that incantatory, the fury of it—where he just gets the... So when did he write this one? Were you still away when he wrote this?

MW: Oh yeah, I went to the reading at the Fillmore Gallery, the first reading.

BH: Of "Thou Shalt Not Kill"?

MW: Uh huh.

RH: Fillmore Gallery?

MW: Fillmore Gallery. Yeah, it was incredible. The reading. It was quite overwhelming.

BH: What do you mean? When was it? When was that reading? In like '54?

MW: I'm trying to think... Do you know? I don't know when he wrote that poem.

BH: Well, I think he wrote it in '53 or '54.

MW: Because we lived at Scott Street then and so that would mean it would be after '54 that the reading occurred because Katharine was born before we moved to Scott Street, and so it must have been in, taking a guess '54, '55, that he read it.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: Because I'm trying to remember in Ken Knabb's book he writes some about, do you know this little volume by Ken Knabb?

MW: I don't.

BH: Who does the Situationist Press—he's a huge scholar and archivist of Kenneth's work, I wish I had brought this little volume, he talks about the initial, the writing of the poem a little bit and then the reading that, you know, he has read about, and of course, Ginsberg heard it and wrote "Howl" after he had heard it because Ginsberg's "Howl" was read for the first time in 1955 and he wrote "Howl" in the summer of '55.

MW: OK, then I've, thank you—you know a lot! You know more than I can remember. OK, here was the thing. Kenneth read, OK...

BH: We found it.

DK: Yeah.

MW: Kenneth read "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in a jazz club.

BH: In a jazz club? OK.

AL: The first time?

MW: The first time. Not at Fillmore Gallery. The Fillmore Gallery was "Howl."

BH: OK, it was called the Gallery Six?

MW: Yes, Gallery Six! I'm sorry, that's the wrong—OK, the wrong raucous occasion. (laughing)

BH: That's ok, so—

MW: But he read that at, Kenneth read "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in a poetry and jazz performance, and I can't remember where it was. It was in North Beach.

BH: In North Beach.

AL: It wasn't at the Cellar? A different place?

MW: You know who might remember?

BH: Here it says, in the Hamalian biography it says that he wrote "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in '53.

MW: That could be.

BH: Right after, because Dylan Thomas had just died.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: Yes, that's right, now we're getting closer.

BH: It says the following year Ginsberg began work on "Howl" which both he and Rexroth claimed were not influenced by earlier "Thou Shalt Not Kill" even though the two poems have a very similar political perspective, but it obviously is because he...

MW: I know. No, now we're finding more of the way it really happened. This is good, so "Howl" was at the gallery and that was a major occasion, but the Dylan Thomas, the "Thou Shalt Not Kill" poem was read in a jazz club with and there was music... Bruce... I can't remember his name, the guy who did a lot of that writing.

AL: You're thinking of Bruce...

MW: What?

AL: You're trying to think of the person who played the music. I wouldn't know, but was this the guy who was at the 100th birthday party? Remember there was that guy who lived by you. I wouldn't remember his name but he was at your birthday party and you seemed to...

MW: I can't remember how that was.

BH: Well, in any case, I just was trying to figure out the timeline because I knew that he had written "Thou Shalt Not Kill" before.

MW: Before.

BH: Before. Early enough for Ginsberg to have heard it and Ginsberg wrote "Howl" in the summer of '55, right? The summer of '55.

MW: These were not in my mind at that time and in the mind of a lot of these people, these were not connected, but it's obvious that ...

BH: They could be in some, it's obvious that he had read it or heard it because it sounds very similar but I was just trying to figure out where he, it must have been, he first read this in a jazz club in North Beach in maybe '54? It might have been in '54.

AL: Well, it sounds like it's gonna be somewhere between '53 and '55. (everyone laughing) I think it's on this one recording I have. I can certainly see when...

BH: Oh, good.

AL: I think, number one and I'll look and see if it gives any date or information on that.

BH: Yeah, because...

AL: If I can I'll email you.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

BH: That'd be great. So, anyway, I just wondered what you remember of this, of the writing of this poem.

MW: I remember Kenneth's emotional connection to Dylan Thomas, but it was a kind of poem that I didn't take to bed with me to read. (laughing)

BH: Right.

MW: And it was a definite performance piece that we were, that it was... And I don't remember any of the details around the physical space that Kenneth was using, what he was writing in, I really don't. I don't remember whether he wrote it in San Francisco or over in Lagunitas.

BH: Was Katharine born in '54?

MW: '54.

BH: So it must have been right around the time that she was born.

MW: Yeah, that might be right.

BH: You were probably distracted, right? Having a new baby.

DK: Marthe, do you remember it being a piece that he continued to read?

MW: A few times, I think. A few times, he did.

DK: Yeah.

MW: To tell you the truth...

DK: Uh huh.

MW: I didn't really love the poem.

(everyone laughing)

BH: Yeah, I don't blame you. But my students' reaction was really interesting.

MW: Oh yeah.

BH: They read the first part and I just thought, well, students are going to be able to really relate to this cause it's hammering so much of the stuff and then when we got to Part 2, my students asked: who are all these guys? Who is he going on about, these people for? And by the time they started piecing it together—OK, they're poets and he's mad at what the world has done to poets and so we finally worked backwards, but it was interesting and I just have always thought it just ends with this, "you killed him, you killed him in your goddamned Brooks Brothers suit you son of a bitch" you know? Such a sudden ending.

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

RH: And that became the most famous line in that poem.

MW: I have a better reaction to the end of “Howl,” to be honest.

BH: Yeah, the western night.

RH: Yeah.

MW: And the event of “Howl.” No wonder I was saying that that was Kenneth’s poem because it, the performance was crazy, it was just...I loved it. (laughing) All the time you wished you could have been really bad, there it was. (laughing) So great. It was great.

BH: Do you remember the jazz club performance when Kenneth read this then for the first time?

MW: Yeah, and I was trying to think of this guy’s name, because I know he died but I know his wife.

AL: Well, then it’s not the guy you introduced me to at the party.

MW: No.

MW: I can’t remember who that was. Bruce, and he was a saxophonist, he and Kenneth practiced together. I don’t remember. His wife was calling me a lot and she always remembered much more than I did. I don’t know. I’m sorry that I can’t remember some things...do you know, I had in October, two surgeries very close to each other...3 ½ weeks apart...my memory is much worse...yeah...it’s all true...I’m waiting for it to return...

AL: Well, I believe —

MW: At least I remembered.

AL: It’s a muscle

MW: That I heard “Howl” read at the gallery. It was a major event.

(laughing)

AL: So I have two little stories—these meetings are about stories—one, as I remember, someone had to type up the mimeographs because copies were hand... And she was the one...she had to do all this...

MW: And then they Xeroxed or...

AL: Mimeographed... Every kid wanted to do the mimeograph.

RH: If you had a copy that would pay a college tuition!

Transcript #8
February 15, 2008

MW: Oh my god...I wish I had...

AL: You might not remember this. This guy who had them, you autographed them a while ago!

MW: Oh I do...

AL: No, no, he just asked you to sign them and you did and so you just doubled the value for his kids. You told me just about this years ago...after the fact...he had these things he asked me to sign them...this was years ago.

MW: Oh yeah...I did...I did them at work I guess. It was purple.

RH: Uh huh...Mimeographs.

AL: So I was waiting for the guitar lesson and he took just off of Fillmore, and this was about two years ago, and so I'm just killing time waiting a few minutes and I'm walking down Union Street and it was an odd day an off day a Saturday morning a guy is walking around. He's this touristy guy who has got a camera around his neck and just...I say hi, can I give you some directions or something? And I had nothing else to do and so he goes well, I'm here. So this guy had come from Germany. He was obsessed with Kenneth and he was trying to find all these destinations and so he says, "I'm trying to locate Gallery Six." And I kind of paused and look at my watch to see how much time I had, and I said, "Well, you bumped into the right guy."

(laughing)

AL: He could not believe it. I think it's a restaurant now...that address so I took his picture in front of it. The guy was floating. He was on a trek from Europe.

MW: How wonderful! I've never heard this story before.