

Transcript #5

September 2, 2007 (Inverness, CA)

In conversation with Marthe Whitcomb

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

Marthe at Inverness [Part I]

MW: I love this part of the country so much.

BH: Were you aware at that time that—was it Buzz Heitzman who had been walking out here for the purpose of just getting to know the landscape? Or was it really sort of involved in the literary work that Kenneth was doing?

MW: Well, that certainly fed into what emerged but I was—we were just aware of the immediate surroundings really and how far you can get before you have to eat and what you can do with the kids and you know the story.

BH: Well, I was always... When Bob and I were first walking around here together I was always thinking, because at that point I had a fairly ironic view of nature or non man-made nature. And I hadn't worked out my sort of metaphysical, spiritual relationship to the natural world or something.

MW: And I think Kenneth and I were in different places because I hadn't done as he had done for so many years, which is spend a lot of time outdoors. Do a lot of camping, do a lot of sleeping bag trips and then with Laughlin [James], he used to go on horseback with packing mules and everything, so I didn't have that. It was new for me to do all that. But actually Kenneth loved that role for himself—he liked to be the teacher so he knew everything. (laughing)

BH: Yeah.

MW: He knew everything. Katherine, when she was a baby, could be on my back and so we came to [Lagunitas] all the time—all my free weekends.

BH: And you'd just take the car out here and then you'd...

MW: Well, with the children, yeah, we'd do hikes but then we stayed at Samuel Taylor or...

RH: We'd find that road, that same road that goes up.

BH: You'd go up the Devil's Gulch Bridge?

MW: The Devil's Gulch is great. Yeah, and when he came, before the kids were born, and also when he came with Mary, he'd go up there. But now I think that all that land is owned by Samuel Taylor State Park?

BH: I think, yeah. We've just never gone up that road. We're always just kind of a little bit stressed to get back, so we haven't really gone up there but Bob said he went up at one point and saw what the area was.

MW: Yeah.

Transcript #5

September 2, 2007 (Inverness, CA)

BH: But I just am really curious about what it looks like.

MW: And also it was very different from the open... I mean from this terrain it's wooded and there's a lot of—you hear water everywhere.

BH: Did you climb [Mt. Tamalpais] like up in the Cataract Trail?

MW: I did it a little bit and I went up for a place up there. But I didn't hike all the way. We always seemed to be doing more hiking when we were not at home.

Marthe at Inverness [Part 2]

[Picks up mid-conversation. (Some conversation not recorded). Starts with a return from Europe in late 1949/first pregnancy]

MW: So it was—he was probably working on it in his own way for a much longer time than it was apparent to me. And I think it was a very hard time. I know, interpersonally it was a hard time. He was a difficult person, so it was a hard time and then when we came back we actually...I thought it was... I didn't want to ever see him again (laughing) and went to Seattle to stay with my friends and I worked in the Seattle public library and got a job but then I was pregnant and then that got very involved. So I did come back. We came back. We had a freighter from Bordeaux and we're on a great freighter...good friends...the captain was so adorable and he used to bring me special things because I was feeling sick... I didn't know why I was sick but he would have oranges and crackers at the breakfast table (laughing) and then he taught me to play chess. We had a good time but...and then there was a woman...there were 14 passengers—the load that they could take and one of the women was a very elegant older woman and she kept talking about the cockroaches. Anyway, it was a good trip, but I was sick to my stomach. I was obviously...I didn't know I was pregnant and then when I got to Seattle I found out. So what we did was take this freighter and then in New York I went to—oh it was right before Christmas and I went to Oregon and spent Christmas with friends and Kenneth went to San Francisco. We were angry with each other. And then in Oregon I found out I was pregnant and then I went to be with friends in Seattle and stated working up there but in the meantime Kenneth came to San Francisco and told Marie where he'd been and some of the things he'd been up to and then there began a kind of long push to get together and I was very new, because I was pregnant, and Marie was ...Marie and I were good friends and, insofar as we could be, and she was very...I think she, well she was a very good friend to my children, Mary and Katharine, and I think she really wished that at some point in her life she'd had children so she became very much my support and my friend. So she was a great—a really great support for me, you know?

RH: So...

MW: Back to San Francisco, yeah.

RH: So you moved in with Kenneth when you got back?

MW: When I got back and Marie had moved out a couple months before and yeah. And I'm trying to remember. I stayed in Seattle until past the midpoint of the pregnancy so when I got here I don't think I worked and I signed up at children's hospital and everything and then I started working right after Mary was born. I worked at the old San Francisco State college when it was on Market and

Transcript #5

September 2, 2007 (Inverness, CA)

Herman in audio-visual. It was a good job. I liked it, I learned a lot (laughing), and then I stayed working there through my second for quite a while—moved to the new campus and worked in administration.

RH: Yeah, I knew that it was downtown but...

MW: Yeah, Market and Herman, it's a UC Extension class place now.

RH: Yeah, yeah, but I remember San Francisco State when it was brand new.

MW: Well I moved in when it was brand new.

RH: It was shockingly austere and modern.

MW: Yes! And not collegiate in a way.

RH: No, sterile. Yeah.

MW: But I got used to it—plus it got better of course—kids and trees and then some buildings got older but they kept building new ones...language arts and all that stuff, and at that time, it was interesting. I worked for the Dean of Instruction so we did course development and also I did the faculty hiring, so it was an interesting job. I liked my job. So I remember actually Robert Duncan. [Ruth Diamond] was in the English department at that time; I knew Robert and she had said come to say hello and he was grading papers for Ruth (laughing) and she a budget for noontime readings, and so Robert said, give me some money, so he did a reading for us that was good. Anyway, Robert was there and Ruth and then [Frank Fenton]. I don't know if you knew him?

RH: I didn't know but I heard.

MW: He was great. And then I stayed there through Katharine and afterwards for quite a while.

RH: Was Mark Lilienthal there in those years?

MW: Yeah, he was there.

RH: He was married to Alice Adams then, was he? Or, did you know her at that time?

MW: I didn't know that. I didn't know his wife. I always saw him at school. I used to see him at poetry readings. Was he married to someone else?

RH: Yeah, he was married later to Frances Jaffer who, with Kathleen Fraser, started a very influential poetry reading in the eighties, but his first wife before I knew him was Alice Adams —

MW: Did Mark take over the Poetry Center after?

RH: Yes, I think he did. Well I don't know if he took over the administration but he was very...

MW: Yeah, he was there. You know, when Ruth was doing the Poetry Center during the time I was there, the poets stayed with her—like Reverdy. And when Auden came we were having coffee or something and he said to me "I'm staying with Mrs. Diamond, she furnishes breakfast." (laughing) He wanted good accommodating. So it was great, staying with Mrs. Diamond. It was funny. I think when Ruth left she went to San Rafael—to someplace like that and then she moved to Japan to live.

Transcript #5

September 2, 2007 (Inverness, CA)

RH: Oh really?

MW: Yes! I'm sure she must be dead by now, but I don't know for sure. But anyway, she went—she moved to Japan. She had a teaching job in a college. She had a great house. I loved her house on Roller Street up above Lincoln Way but then she moved—totally moved out and sold her house and everything, moved to Japan for a teaching job and everything—very adventuresome, really.

RH: I started college in '58 and so I think it was around '60 or '61 that I sort of became aware of State as the place where all the literary action was and I think the first poet who, from State, who came to St. Mary's where I was, and gave a reading was Leonard Wolf.

MW: Oh, Leonard!

RH: And later some book—wrote a bestseller about fires—moved to New York.

MW: Well, he was in the English department when I was at State.

RH: I don't know anything about him except that he was the—

MW: I didn't, myself, love him. But I didn't know him well.