

Transcript #4
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In conversation with Marthe Whitcomb
with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Douglas Kerr & Andrew Leavitt

MW: I had separated from Kenneth and I was working and I had the girls and...

RH: And what was Jess supposed to do as the emissary?

MW: I think he was the emissary, yes. Well, you know Jess. He couldn't do much.

(laughing)

MW: But he drew some pictures for Katharine and talked to Mary about something and then talked to me about the integrity of the family. It was mostly...it was a sociological thing.

RH: Did you make much of "The Dragon and the Unicorn"?

MW: Did I make much of it?

RH: I mean did you read it with interest or—

MW: I did read it carefully...it seems a long time ago.

RH: I was thinking one of the things that would be fun to do if you were up for it is to spend one session letting us kind of talk with you through the short poems of the period of your marriage and "The Dragon and the Unicorn".

MW: *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*. I get mixed up on their publication dates but one of them came out and then *In What Hour* was published afterwards, even though it was earlier. Anyway, I would like to do that. [Addressing Doug] What is the topic of your dissertation?

DK: My dissertation? Oh, my. It concerns the introduction of Buddhism into Modernist literature—how modernism helped to convey Buddhism and then Buddhism helped to convey modernist writing, but in 2nd generation Modernist poets, so Kenneth, John Cage, and then leading into Philip Whalen.

MW: Right. Did you know Philip?

DK: No, unfortunately not.

AL: So, if there aren't any questions from last time, we'll go into today's session. So, per the request, Marthe has pulled out a bunch of pictures.

BH: We can just look at the pictures, I think, and you're going to tell us about them.

AL: So, she found this scrapbook from her mother.

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BH: So this first picture...

AL: Isn't that great?

BH: Yeah. "Cincinnati girl wins commission to write book for London firm." And there you are.

MW: And I never wrote the book.

BH: You were in the 4H club?

MW: I told this story before.

RH: Have you seen Michael Pollan's book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*?

MW: No.

RH: It's a book that's about corn and the story of corn.

MW: I had a sheath of corn and then I told the story of flour. I won a prize at the Ohio State Fair.

(everyone laughing)

MW: Jane is my middle name.

BH: Did they misspell your name?

MW: Well, my name is a funny thing. My grandmother's name was spelled like my name, M-A-R-T-H-E. I was named after her, but my mother kept writing it M-A-R-T-H-A. And then in school I was enrolled as M-A-R-T-H-A. So, the minute I got any sense of personal power I went back to that.

BH: Why was she going to call you with an A when she had named you with an E?

MW: My grandmother was alive at that time.

BH: Oh, and she wanted...

MW: Yeah.

BH: Smartest Student. And there you are.

MW: Isn't this funny?

BH: Here's First Place in World History. Your mother was very proud of you.

MW: Yeah, she did save all this garbage.

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BH: When did she put this scrapbook together for you?

MW: I don't know. It was after I was at Mills, I assume. This is my father at a country club thing, a job.

BH: So where are you here?

MW: There I am. What am I doing? Pouring pollen seed. This is crazy. "Dear Walter"...

BH: *The Cincinnati Inquirer*.

MW: It's just the stuff that mothers save. She wasn't really even proud of me.

BH: She must have been proud of you.

AL: So here's stuff from the family, Aix, miscellaneous, touch prints.

MW: Oh, this is better. That's my dad. He was legally blind and he was a champion bowler.

BH: Wow.

MW: And that's what he did after he retired. And they moved from Cincinnati where he had worked at the country club to Texas and then to Florida and I think he didn't work after he retired. That was my mother.

BH: Do you visit them in Florida?

MW: Never. My sister did. I was very separate from them. So that's my mother.

RH: Was that just out of high school age rebelliousness?

MW: No, I really was not close to them at all and so I was glad to leave home and I had good friends with families that I considered more mine than my own and we never resolved all of that.

RH: Was it a clash of values?

MW: It was. And I was so supported by teachers all through school. They were my mainstay and so my mother, for example, when I received phone calls she was worried that they were what she called "Negroes." It was horrible.

BH: So they were racist.

MW: That's my brother Wayne. He was the youngest of the four. That's me.

BH: Must be high school.

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MW: Oh yeah, that's my sister, Betty. She was younger than me, but she was the family pet because she was a little sickly and so she always got everything, so I had to align with the third child in the family, my brother Jim. He and I aligned and got through as best we could.

BH: What happened to Betty? Is she still alive?

MW: No, she had a very emotionally up and down life. She married when she was very young. She was very intelligent and could easily have gone to college. Then she had three children right away and then she left her husband for a local minister she fell in love with. And she was still in her children's lives, but they lived with their father and then she kind of pulled it together and worked a fairly good job in Cincinnati and was close to my brother, my older brother. She met a very nice guy—a lawyer in Cincinnati—and they were engaged. She visited my parents in Florida and came back to prepare for her wedding and took sleeping pills and died. It was very hard. It was sad.

BH: Very hard.

MW: So, two survivors out of four in the family. The youngest, my brother Wayne, disappeared and we don't know what happened.

BH: Have you looked for him?

MW: No. I've thought of that.

MW: I'm going to do that. He was a printer. I know he worked in Brooklyn as a printer. So these are old pictures. Kenneth and I lived at 250 Scott Street and this is Katharine. This is Venice. And that's Katharine on the canal. And this is Mariana in her Venetian hat.

BH: That's great.

MW: You can take any of these if you want. And this is...this is us in Venice. We were at a festival. That's me. That's Katharine. I don't see Mary. Oh, here we are walking behind all these. I don't know why my hair is white because it wasn't white. Maybe I wasn't there. That doesn't even look like me. I remember this was Aix-en-Provence. That was our house.

AL: That's Katharine, isn't it?

MW: That's Katharine for sure. She's on her way to school. They were going in the morning. This is Christmas '57. Mary, Katharine and me. And this was in San Francisco at 250 Scott Street. Kenneth always had the biggest tree in the world, the biggest one he could get. He knew a guy named Dick, I think Dick Moore, but not Richard O. Moore from Berkeley, but he was a forester and he would bring down these eight-foot trees. Kenneth loved Christmas trees. There were boxes and boxes of decorations and the children never saw it until the middle of the night. He came down from a roof. He'd get on the roof with bells and boots on and a red jacket and he'd start ringing the bells.

BH: Really? And did they think it was Santa?

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MW: Oh no, they knew it was Kenneth, but they went along with it. So that was wherever we lived. This is when we lived at 250 Scott.

MW: His birthday was the 22nd and he didn't want to play second place.

BH: So he made a big deal of his birthday?

MW: Oh, the birthday had to be bigger than Christmas and there was always a party.

BH: And then?

MW: And then, three days later, we had Christmas. This is Vicenza when we were on our trip. And I was very angry. I think it looks like it.

BH: Yeah. You were angry and you cut your hair.

MW: I had very short hair. I did that in Aix. I wanted to say I had a French haircut. I had cut my hair.

BH: It looks like the girl in Goddard.

RH: It looks like the girl in Breathless—Jean Seberg.

BH: Who took this picture? You were pretty mad.

RH: Brenda, it looks like your first marriage pictures.

BH: It does. (laughing) So these were '57?

MW: Yeah, they were in and around, partly in France, partly in the city. This was in Vicenza and I remember that.

AL: Did you all have a camera and use it often?

MW: Kenneth did all that. This is all in Aix-en-Provence.

RH: So how long were you in Aix?

MW: School started in September and it was only until May. Kenneth had a Guggenheim. And the girls were in school, so we got there for school. They went to a Catholic school because we were late for the public school and it was easier to go to the Catholic school.

MW: This is the café where we went everyday; we took the kids there after school and then I bought a car there. I told you about the car. We had a little house 7/10^{ths} of a kilometer out of town and we went in the morning, too. I would take the kids to school and then for coffee. Then I would go to a

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gym and take a walk and go to the library, then go back to the café for lunch. I just filled the days. And then I shopped and then I'd pick the kids up.

BH: Did you say that his French wasn't very good?

MW: Kenneth would not speak French. He knew it—he could read French and he knew a lot of vocabulary. So I went around asking all these dumb questions, but it was fine because I called everything a little “whatchamacallit.” There's a word for that in French—it's “petit truc.” So I'd be referring to “petit truc” in every place I went to describe what I needed, especially in the hardware store, you know, specialized vocabulary. So I'd say, “I need a petit truc to do this.” “Oui, madame!” It was great.

BH: Well, was this where you lived or? They look like castles or manor houses!

MW: These are pictures from a trip. These are all on Southern France and I don't know what they are, but these are the Dome.

BH: That looks like Kenneth right there.

MW: It does. I think it is.

BH: These are wonderful pictures.

MW: And some of these were used somewhere. I see a mark.

BH: Check marks, yeah.

MW: This is miscellaneous. This is in San Francisco when we lived on Eighth Avenue. Kenneth loved to have the kids very dressed for Easter and so it was big. And this is at the beach.

DK: Baker Beach?

MW: Baker Beach...Katharine and Mary in the Japanese Tea Garden...and this is in the park, Lake Park.

BH: What year would this have been?

MW: What? That is 1953, I think. What does it say?

BH: It says '52.

MW: Because Katharine wasn't yet born and Mary was two or three.

DK: Christmas was a holiday. Birthdays were a big holiday.

MW: Holidays were huge.

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DK: Were there other ways that you followed a liturgical calendar at all for Kenneth?

MW: Well, we went to The Church of the Advent for high days. We didn't always go together, but we always went at Christmas Eve. We went to midnight service and then we'd come home and Kenneth would go up to the roof. (laughing)

BH: Really dressed up to the hilt.

MW: Swords and everything. Yes, Kenneth had friends in Japan. He'd been to Japan and they would send all this stuff to the kids.

BH: Yes, 1957, all dressed up to the hilt with the swords—two or three swords! Gosh. She's got such a quizzical look on her face.

RH: They're adorable.

AL: I remember, when Katharine and I were dating, asking her: "So what religion are you?" She said, "If there was an argument for celebration, that's what we were that day. We'll be whatever it is to participate in all the festivities."

MW: I had a Japanese friend—I worked with her and her family—who lived in Petaluma so they invited our whole family to a parade. A Japanese parade. Well, we took this suitcase full of the kids' costumes and we went. And there was the aged grandmother sitting on the stool in charge of everything and the kids got as dressed up as you can be and we went to the parade and Kenneth loved it. He just loved it.

DK: I remember a poem, a short poem that he writes as he's walking down from the Fillmore. Do you remember the name of the poem, Bob? He talks of a holiday?

MW: New Year's?

DK: New Year's or Christmas. Right around then he says, "Believe in Easter...believe in this..."

DK: I'm trying to remember.

MW: I love that poem. "Your hand in mine." It ["A Sword in a Cloud of Light"] starts with "your hand in mine."

BH: How did he navigate. He was pretty serious about the high church Episcopalian strain.

MW: Yes, he loved the Church of the Advent. And then he and Bishop Pike of Grace Cathedral were good friends and he knew church ceremonies and liturgy.

BH: So it seems like he kept that going. He just added other stuff?

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MW: He always kept it. He never gave it up.

RH: It's also connected to the insistence on astronomy and the pattern of the stars and this hunger for order.

MW: He wanted order, especially in the first book, *In What Hour*. That was a very young man's poem book, but he was fresh out of Chicago and reading like crazy and he lacked a mentor. He had gone off and so I think he was doing a lot of independent thinking and theorizing and a lot of it became important to him.

DK: There's a small poem "Xmas Coming" — It begins "November night. Waning moon..." and has "Baby Katharine" in it.

MW: Oh, Baby Katherine. That's not it. I'm not used to seeing all his poems in bound volumes. What are those?

RH: These are the old New Directions. You know, they issued a collected longer poems, a collected shorter poems.

AL: We have the paperback versions, not the hardcover versions.

MW: I'm used to looking them up in the small books. Here are some pictures of Kenneth. Here he is in the mountains.

BH: This is early-ish, huh?

MW: Yeah. I think it was right before I met him.

BH: In the '40s?

MW: In the '40s.

BH: It's beautiful.

MW: This is 1955.

BH: Short hair there.

MW: He cut it himself.

(laughing)

AL: Explains the moth-eaten look.

MW: And then there's another. This is the same shirt. I like this picture. Kenneth loved the little Metropolitan Museum figures.

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DK: Can I ask, too, about the paintings here?

MW: They were his. He did them early on, because they're very geometric.

DK: Because there's an interesting dissertation that was done by someone in Canada about his paintings. [Rachelle Lerner]

RH: I think University of Toronto?

DK: It was never published and she was never able to get very good photographs. It's very interesting. She tracks the way he changes his ideas about his paintings and his poems. He only uses the word cubist later. He didn't use it when he was painting these things.

MW: I could witness some of these changes when he went from the geometric abstract to the pastels, for example. I had a lot of the pastels but I gave them to the kids. Oh this is the bookstore on Union Street. Oh look, he put himself in the window!

(laughing)

BH: So when was this taken?

MW: That was taken in our living room when we'd have readings Friday nights. There's a big picture I think we showed you where everyone is sitting around and people are reading.

BH: This looks younger than this.

MW: Yes, it was. Every year when he went to the mountains he cut all his hair. This is 250 Scott. I know that, yeah. And I think it was at a reading.

BH: Bob, there's a Milosz book in the window here, too.

MW: That bookstore—it was filled with remainders. I mean, really, it was not a real bookstore. It was one box of remainders after another. These boxes would arrive because he was reviewing books, but it gave him access to 500 million books.

(laughing)

RH: For how many years did he have that bookstore?

MW: A couple. He had it when we were separated and divorced.

AL: Actually, you know what, looking at the back—the back says this is an exhibit at City Lights.

MW: Oh yeah, so it's not the bookstore. Well, then we can forgive him for putting his book in the window. (laughing) Then this was at Lawrence's...but he did have a bookstore on Union street, as

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you're going down Union Street from Franklin and towards the bay, on your right there, sort of in the middle of it all, maybe Webster, there's a set of buildings and stores and it's set back, a lawn in front. It's quite pretty. And then there's an old frame house that's been turned into stores and he had the upstairs part and it said Kenneth Rexroth books. It was to get rid of the books—he didn't run it. Horace Schwartz would come over and pick up these boxes of remainder books, get them out of the house and then...

BH: That's an idea for us, Bob. Now we receive 4 or 5 books a day—very little goes out.

MW: This is "*LIFE* Comes to a Party" and this is Helen Adam...this is our living room.

BH: Oh, that's Helen Adam...that's great.

BH: Was this one of the Friday nights?

MW: Here's Philip. There's Philip Lamantia. I had it on the wall, that's why it's framed.

AL: These are all shots from the story they were running.

MW: This is different. Here's Helen looking feistier, I think.

BH: Oh, it is. They were all dressed up though.

MW: Yeah.

BH: Everyone was dressed up.

DK: But that was how it always was. It wasn't just because *LIFE* was there.

(laughing)

MW: And there's Kenneth holding his hand. There's Philip Whalen. Oh, there's Ariel [Reynolds]. And there's Jim Broughton. Pre-monk days with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Madeline Gleason. Oh, that's Bill Everson and Ariel. It was big because *LIFE* was there.

BH: Oh, Madeline Gleason. I like her poetry so much. Oh, these are great. These are fantastic.

MW: So Philip and what was her name? She was a very good poet. Eve Triem?

RH: Eve Triem.

MW: She was a very good poet. Ariel, Bill Everson...

BH: Is that Spicer?

MW: Yes, that's Jack Spicer. Bill Everson is right in there.

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BH: Are there copies of these anywhere?

MW: I don't know. There's Spicer.

BH: There's Spicer. Wow. Spicer doing his thing. This is great. You guys should have these reproduced. This is amazing.

BH: What year was this?

[* Note: transcript below includes the conversation in Transcript #3, but this is a longer version]

MW: *LIFE* Goes to a Party. '57

BH: Who's this?

MW: That's Jimmy Broughton. There's Helen Adam. This was Dick Moore's wife.

BH: Is that Richard? We know Richard Moore. He enrolled as a student when I was at a writer's conference and showed me his manuscript. He's an amazing poet. Are you in touch with him now?

MW: I haven't seen him in years.

BH: Such a wonderful man.

MW: He's a dear. I love him. And that's Michael McClure. There's Dick's wife. This is Gogo Nesbit—she was a French poet. And this is Jim Harmon, and this is Clive. Now I think of him as Clive Owen, the movie star, but he wasn't. Was his last name Hawthorne? Anyway, he and Jan were something else. There's Tom Parkinson.

BH: This is great. I love these.

MW: Tom Parkinson. This is Dick Moore's wife, Ariel Reynolds. Tom Parkinson's wife, Bill Everson. Is it Joanne McClure? Could be. That's Bill Everson. Dick Moore's wife...

BH: Were they reciting?

RH: Yeah.

MW: Philip Whalen. Jack Spicer. Everson. I think Jimmy Broughton was back there.

BH: These are great. This is the kind of thing that if you felt like just sort of somehow have a photo journal on the web or when it finally gets put together.

MW: Yeah. Oh, now here's a lot of folks: Helen, Dick's wife Gogo. Oh, that was [Ann Radle] Beverly Harmon and Jim Harmon's over here. And that's me and that's Ida Hodes. Philip. This was

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the front room and the people would stand by this window too. But this...it opened into Kenneth's study so that's where we're all sitting and there's Jan Hawthorne and this is Gogo. This is Philip, Ariel, Tom, and Dick's wife. I can't remember her name. And this is Joanne McClure. She and I were good friends.

AL: Isn't this great.

BH: Gorgeous, fantastic photos. I love that. And you know Spicer is having a big revival. He never didn't have a revival, but now he's really having a revival.

DK: It seems from the photo there are seven readers in one night.

AL: I think it was maybe more than that. Again, I wasn't there, but I've heard stories. Also a lot of conversation, not just reading.

BH: This seems more performance-like than just schmoozy.

MW: It was because of *LIFE Going to a Party*.

DK: So it did get a little more formal.

MW: It was definitely. This was not our usual Friday night. Bigger and more people and I think that was the only difference.

BH: Did they dress up more for this?

MW: No.

BH: This was typical? People came like this? In sport jackets?

MW: It could have been more dressy, but I don't know.

AL: Look at how they dressed, and they were considered outlandishly loose, but they wore ties and sports coats.

MW: Maybe some people. No, yeah, Tom Parkinson is squaresville and Dick Moore. Kenneth and Brother Everson. They didn't dress up. Maybe a shade dressier.

RH: It was our generation that threw style out the window.

BH: Right.

AL: The more frumpy, the more stylish.

MW: Yeah, I think it was. I remember people like Ida Hodes and Helen [Adams]. Helen was always very dressed up, very dressed up.

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BH: I love her dress.

MW: Isn't it great? When her eyes sparkle and she does her witch stuff. Her fashion is remarkable.

BH: Now where was this taken?

MW: Vicenza. It's a good group.

BH: It's great.

RH: It does highlight the difference in your ages. He looks like he could be your father.

BH: Yes it does.

MW: It wasn't an issue. And these are all pictures of Kenneth at home and these are in the mountains. He would take Mary to the mountains when she was two years old.

BH: Oh that's very young, very young.

MW: And then I would join them for my vacation.

AL: Your vacation was after they left and before you arrived.

MW: I know. (laughing) Oh this is Europe.

BH: We're going to go out to Devil's Gulch where he had his get-away. We're always in a hurry, but we were going to set aside some time and park and walk.

MW: Is the cabin still there? It's about a mile in.

RH: That route...what is that called? There is some little group in Lagunitas called "Friends of Kenneth Rexroth"?

AL: Really? Must be a small group.

RH: They were going to put a plaque at the cabin.

MW: That was the world's most uncomfortable bed. (laughing) Oh, these are old, old, old.

AL: This is from her pissed off state.

MW: Yeah, my pissed off state. I think there was a hill behind our house in Provence... Here is Mary in Nîmes —we drove around in this car. There was lots of Mary in Nîmes. And here we are walking down the path on the way to school. The house is behind us.

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AL: That's a pretty place.

MW: Our house was great. We rented in from Judge Levy sight unseen. We never met Judge Levy, but it was all by correspondence. He put an ad in *The Nation* and so we wrote to him and we rented a house and when we got there the only person connected to the house was Justine, the maid, so of course we kept her and she was horrified at me because we had a pet rabbit and she said "No, no, no it's for dinner!" She just didn't think we understood. (laughing)

AL: There's this picture of Katharine holding up this rabbit. It's as big as her.

MW: Great. This is Stonehenge. Mary and Kenneth went with Chris and Derek Savage. After we left Provence we went to Italy and then we went to Cornwall and stayed with Derek and Connie and their kids. And Derek and Kenneth and Chris and Mary went on this trip.

BH: Wow.

MW: I think this is all of them. They went to the cathedrals. Pretty, isn't it?

BH: Really. And where were you?

MW: I was in London by myself (laughing) and Katherine was with the Savages at home with Connie. The Savages' youngest child was Perry and he was exactly her age so they were happy. Oh, here's Bob. Here's Robert Duncan. I just put them together because I like these pictures.

RH: By which I have that. I'll have it next time—the photo of the two of them together.

BH: Is this Ginsberg?

MW: He was so young. There's Allen...always the youngest.

BH: Long hair. (laughing)

MW: This is more the way he looked when he first came to San Francisco. He was the office worker. He worked in financial stuff.

BH: Right. What was his job? He worked for advertising?

MW: Oh yeah, that's right.

BH: Fantastic.

MW: Oh, these are Katharine. Kenneth holding her...she was getting a little older. These are all Katharine. Here she is in front of the famous grocery. This is Inverness...eating ice cream in Pt. Reyes.

BH: Is that the Inverness store?

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MW: It's where they got ice cream. They were up there with Marie.

BH: You did well.

AL: I like this one.

BH: In his house in Santa Barbara, surrounded by books. He looks so happy. This one here.

MW: That's in Venice.

BH: I love this.

MW: There's Mary

AL: That's funny. That's exactly how she looks today, I swear.

BH: This, to me, looks very like Kenneth.

MW: Yeah, she does. Oh, she did look like Kenneth.

BH: So this is the picture you have over there?

MW: One of them, not exactly that, but...there's Scott Street.

BH: So that's the apartment where the *LIFE* photos were taken?

MW: Yes, but you know what? It's the wrong picture. It's not our house. It's been wrong every time. That's not the right place. Jack's Record Store was the first floor and then I can't remember what was first on the second floor, but we were on the third floor and at one point Kenneth rented the second floor and it was lived in by books and then Horace got the store on Union Street.

BH: I love that one.

MW: Imogen Cunningham took that. (laughing)

BH: Wow, those are beautiful. So, you finally were separated for good in '59?

MW: Katharine...I think she was five.

BH: Or four?

MW: So that would be '59.

AL: '59 or '60.

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MW: She was born August. And I remember she continued to go to the school in our old neighborhood because then she often went to Kenneth after school.

BH: And how far apart were you living at that point?

MW: I lived on Lincoln way at 6th. So not too far.

BH: Did the kids ever walk between the houses or...?

MW: No.

BH: You picked them up or it was always by car?

MW: Yes, Katharine was little then.

BH: Did you have sort of shared custody or decision-making? How did you work that sort of thing?

MW: I had custody. But then Mary really wanted to live with Kenneth.

BH: And when did do that?

MW: When she was in junior high. I used to go to Washington, to Herbert Hoover Junior High to pick her up, and I would always take her back to Kenneth's at the end of the afternoon. It's a hard part of my life, but she really wanted to live with Kenneth. And he promised her a lot of great things for a 14-year-old and he sort of came through on them. They went to Europe and then Japan. But she didn't really get disappointed until she had her boyfriend and of course that would be very hard all the way around. At that point she came to my house almost every day, but it was hard for her to introduce the subject of a boyfriend to Kenneth.

BH: And later he became involved with Carol.

MW: Carol Tinker. (laughing) She was organizing the house and serving tea. And Kenneth was in Montecito and she was in San Francisco, so what could he do? Not much so. She had more freedom than if he'd been on Scott Street.

BH: Seems like he had a fairly mellow life once he moved down there.

MW: I believe he did. I went there once to visit. Well, I was there a couple of times, and I wasn't aware of a lot of work pressures on him. I don't know what his work schedule was. It was a very sedate household—lots of students around, though. I think he loved that. That was important to him.

BH: When did you remarry? Marry Steve?

MW: I think that was maybe '62.

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BH: So you had been sort of officially separated for three years?

MW: Oh, from Kenneth? Well, it felt like longer.

AL: So, how long were you married to Steve?

MW: Uh, I used to know that. (laughing)

MW: Sara was born in '67.

RH: This does get the chronology here. September 16: Marthe left the California Teachers Association to join a project funded by the Department of Education and at the end of January, two months later.

MW: Oh, '61.

RH: '61, Marthe finally left Kenneth and on June 2nd sued for divorce.

MW: Oh yeah, I never went back. That was good.

RH: So you went to Washington?

MW: I went to a meeting. I had a great job. I worked for the American Council on Education at that time and we were writing a booklet about NDEA language and area centers. Because during this whole war and cold war period they established a lot of college and graduate program language centers and so we had Joe Axelrod, who was a friend of mine, at San Francisco State. Joe was the project director out here and then I was his assistant and we had a secretary and that was Ida Hodes at first. I got to hire people—that was fun. And then it was Jack Warner, another friend of mine from North Beach, and that was our office. We took some office space out on Geary Street and went to Washington for things and it was a very fun group of people. There were four people who were on leave of absences from these schools going around and evaluating these programs and it was interesting. There was a wonderful guy named Harrison Thatcher who put it all together and finished the book. I loved that job. It was fun.

BH: Were you conscious of being an unusual woman in that you were raising children and being a working career woman?

MW: I wasn't because so many people I knew were doing the same thing.

BH: Really?

MW: Joanne McClure, Beverly Harmon.

BH: So it was common...because it wasn't common in my experience.

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MW: Well, the thing is, I did know a lot of people, in my work life, for whom it wasn't common. It was unconventional, but the people who were my friends it was more understanding. I had more in common with them. I never had a time with Mary and Katharine alone where I wasn't working. I did with Sara and I loved it...it was wonderful addition to my experience, it was great—but with Kenneth I needed to work and then I wanted to work to get out from under....

BH: And then with Sara you were...

MW: With Sara, I didn't work when she was a baby, but I worked when she was older and we moved to Palo Alto. Then I worked from that time on. And generally, I like working.

BH: It sounds like that. It sounds like you really liked your jobs.

MW: I did. Not all of them but I had good and interesting jobs. And the class war didn't enter. I worked with people at San Francisco State and they became good friends. It was fine.

DK: When did you live in Palo Alto?

MW: I moved there when Sara was four, '71, and I was there for a long time. For well, twenty years.

BH: Wow.

MW: I worked in psychiatry research and even though I'm not a psychiatrist or a researcher, the relationships and friendships were good, and it was intelligent and beneficial work, and I wrote a lot of grants, got a lot of money for shrinks without having to be a victim of life, so that was good. And I liked it. It became difficult but—

BH: Steve was the psychiatrist though, right?

RH: So when you went into therapy was that your first experience?

MW: No, I had another psychiatrist in San Francisco and I liked him very much. I had maybe six months of therapy with him during some tumultuous time with Kenneth. Then when I was separating from Kenneth, one of his closest and oldest friends was Joe Wheelwright. And Joe—he was a love—he called me. I'm sure Kenneth had called him. He called and said could you come by and I did and so he talked about, he knew that he couldn't be my shrink but that he knew a young doctor who was very good and he wondered whether I would take his word and give it a try. It was in Joe's building, which is on Steiner Street. So, I had been thinking of it and it was enough to sort of get me to go. Anyway, turned out the person was Steve! (laughing)

BH: Five years? How long were you married?

MW: Well, it was a few years before '67. So '63 or '64 and then '71, '72, I guess.

BH: Was he funny?

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AL: Oh no, strange—but in a harmless way.

MW: Steve?

AL: He has that absent minded professor look, and when he speaks, he often pauses and seems to be in some secret thought process. Do you disagree?

MW: No, no.

AL: Which is my perception. Clearly this is all an editorial comment with no fact. Just the nature and cadence of his speech where a period appears in the middle of a sentence.

MW: That was really his social pattern. Not his personality. (laughing)

RH: I just wanted to check out something from this book about the Savages' perception, Linda [Hamalian]'s book, about the Savage's perception of your family, it says: "Although Kenneth remained to have a likable, amiable and courageous man they were shocked by his generally debase treatment of Marthe. They regarded Marthe as kind, generous, honest sweet—all the qualities they wanted in a friend. The Savages also noticed that Rexroth devoted all his fatherly attention to Mary leaving none for Katharine. He paid little attention to other children in the household."

MW: Well, I think he thought he would not have children and then Mary was there. There was a special intensity to that relationship. Mary didn't go to kindergarten or nursery school and she was with Kenneth until she started first grade. But Katharine had what was certainly a happier routine. As a child she went to nursery school, she had a playgroup before that and she went to kindergarten. And I was much more proactive on her behalf than I had been with Mary. So, partly, it was that I was trying to figure out how to take care of them and Kenneth didn't quite understand Katharine because she was so sweet and responsive. At the Savages' household there were lots of kids around and so it was typical of Kenneth to bastion onto Mary but it's true, he did not pay nearly as much attention to Katharine as he did to Mary. He was much more involved in her stuff and I was much more proactive for both of the kids, although I wasn't as successful in doing the right thing with Mary, but I was certainly much more involved and able to do more things with and for Katharine. Now what was that first part he said?

AL: That you were the nice guy.

DK: I have maybe one question to enter towards that. There are, because one thing I would like to talk about, just to think about is... He wrote seven poems dedicated to you but then he changed the dedication of titles for this book, the 1966 books, so in the mid '60s he changed it.

MW: The first dedication for Marthe. But the poems were called "Seven Poems for Marthe" and then suddenly there they are.

DK: But he was also—he changed other poems—another one from this period was first titled...I was trying to find it. But the sense of it is there, the poem in crystal. And so, the poems from the '50s are really these beautiful intricate objects that seem to be very much of that period. But it also makes me think that he was writing these beautiful idealized poems that were impenetrable. The

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persona is there, touched, and the person. But the poems...he's looking at the poem as a thing between people as a crystal. How do you make any sort of further contact with someone if this is a crystal?

MW: Pretty hard.

DK: It's a metaphor for thinking about these poems. But he changed that title in the '60s as he changes his idea of what the poems were doing.

MW: I think that in "Seven Poems" he changed because when he wrote those I had just...I had just gotten back from New Mexico and wanted to go back and so they were part of his...Kenneth's giving me some kind of gift, some kind of testimony in order to be with him and so he... They had a purpose, and then later, when they were published and I forget who it was, a New York poet friend, I can't remember, but he insisted on keeping the poems, but then Kenneth said, Well take away the dedication—so that was understandable, but you're talking about a larger thing.

DK: Yes, yet his dropping the dedication is why I'm so curious to talk to you about those poems from that period. Thinking about all the poems written from that period.

RH: That's one of the things I've been thinking about that I think is interesting...is that it's painful to me the way I recognize the elements in myself, but I always felt like, when I first read his poems, that the idealization of the romantic relationships is so powerful and attractive but I vaguely knew that there was something wrong with them and...

MW: And you're right...so right.

RH: And reading through them now you see that the strengths and the weaknesses of his poetry of his own very high standards of what the greatest poets. There was some part of his woundedness led to this idealization that kept him from being able to say the whole thing about relations between men and women.

MW: And I think the nature of the poetry changed as he was farther away from reconciliation or rejoining the person. Those are certainly, that's certainly true of the poems involving Marie, probably true of the ones about André and I know it was for the ones involving me. So there was that idealization but it also reflected the fear of change or a way of dealing with change. I don't know.

BH: Well, maybe the thing to do would be to bring copies of those next time and look at them together.

DK: I think moving on to looking at the poems together is good.

AL: Focus in on certain things.

RH: We can look through the poems, read through the poems written during your time together.

AL: Yeah.

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RH: Just to see if you have any comments that would be interesting. And then the other thing that would be interesting is to talk our way through this a little bit, the one, the long poem, which I want to study a little more in order to formulate what questions I want to ask you about this. I think it would be very rich.

MW: Well, It's been a long time.

DK: If we need photocopies. I can summon that. I'm always near a photocopier.

(laughing)

MW: So, in the longer poems do you think "The Dragon and the Unicorn"?

RH: Mhmm.

DK: Yeah.

MW: I thought so, too. Okay.

BH: Okay.

RH: The technique of that poem before switching back and forth between keeping a journal, a travelogue journal with these long philosophical juxtapositions, there's a sort of technical thing that's interesting here. I don't know—five minutes—and that is how he arrived at this technique of syllabics that he was using and it seemed to be connected to his study of Chinese poetry and there's another dissertation in the University of Iowa about the Chinese translations.

MW: Really? I didn't know that. Oh.

RH: And I can—I'll bring.

MW: I'm gonna learn stuff.

RH: I'll bring a copy of that just to see. This is a guy who studied, I guess, wherever the repository is, dedications in all his books of Chinese poetry and reconstructs how they work.

MW: Well, I'm looking forward to it.

RH: It will be good.