

## Interview with Paul Watsky, *Jung Journal*

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*Paul Watsky: I'd like to explore the question of how you became you, the woman of what has been termed, "A disciplined openness," who by her early twenties, despite being raised in the household of a career naval officer, was one of a very few females accepted by the San Francisco coterie of radically unconventional male poets, many of whom were unabashedly gay.*

*You, yourself, have said that during the 1950s, "Very few women set out to be independent thinkers," and that in those days you "didn't find many women I could talk to in any interesting way, who thought about being intellectually independent—or making that a goal or aim."*

*What were you like as a little kid?*

Joanne Kyger: I learned to read when we moved to Lake Bluff, Illinois, in 1941. I was five years old. And from then on everything was an "awakening." I learned to read. I learned to write, play the violin, ride a bicycle, ice skate, experience the seasons, see "nature." We stayed through my sixth grade. I found everything I needed to know. Lake Bluff was a really small town with a library. I think that's why I like Bolinas, because it has a small town's circumference, it's intimate, and has a great library.

Learning to read was wonderful. I was an insane reader. I read everything I could. I would take out thirteen books at a time, all that the basket on my bicycle would hold. I read really fast. I would read up and down the page, skip a lot of words in between if I didn't understand them. Thank God there wasn't any television then. I probably would have been glued to it.

My closest relations were my mother and two sisters. My father was in the war during the early Forties. In 1949, we moved to Santa Barbara, where I went to high school. I had some excellent teachers, one on the school newspaper where I was the features editor, and Henry Brubeck, the orchestra leader, who was Dave Brubeck's brother. I played second violin valiantly. Then I went on to UC Santa Barbara, where I had some more excellent teachers: Hugh Kenner, who taught Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and Paul Wienpahl, who taught Wittgenstein and Heidegger. He showed us how Heidegger's "nothing" was the bridge into D. T. Suzuki's Buddhist nothingness.

My early home life: a bit chaotic. My parents stayed together for twelve years of marriage, and my father was away in the war about three years of that time. Mostly, it was my mother and my two sisters that comprised the household.

*What kind of people were your parents?*

Well, my mother was a Canadian, from a family of eleven, who had moved down to Long Beach around 1914. There had been a big economic downturn in the part of Canada they were from. My grandfather

had been a grocery store owner. They were Irish and Scotch—Callin and Lamont. There was a big migration of Canadians down to Long Beach. At one point it had the largest population of Canadians outside Canada.

*What part of Canada was your mother's family from?*

Saskatchewan. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

*So they were sort of plains people, in a sense. What kind of personality did she have?*

She was the youngest daughter and had a younger brother. She was pretty, but vain, my aunts told me.

*Did she express much affection?*

Yes, but it was irregular. I do think that she wanted everybody to succeed and feel well. We all ended up in a little house in Santa Barbara in 1949. It was a female-driven household. My mother went back to work for the first time in fifteen years.

*Your parents split up permanently or temporarily?*

The legal separation was permanent. He went down to San Diego where many retired naval officers ended up.

*Do you remember what that was like for you when that happened?*

Relief, because then we didn't hear the quarreling anymore. My father was the youngest of thirteen and was twelve years older than my mother. He was already a heavy drinker by the time they met. He essentially wasn't a family man.

*Did he pay any attention to you?*

Yes, he had a kind of an old-fashioned gracefulness of language. He was from Virginia. His father, my grandfather, who I never met, fought in the Civil War when he was eighteen, and then went on to be both major and sheriff of Elkton, Virginia. My father had these great Southern manners. He loved to play golf, but I don't think he felt very comfortable at home. I remember my mother saying frequently



that he "wasn't very good around the house." The last household we had together was in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, before he resigned from the Navy. We had dinners, these endless dinners, during which we would be practically interrogated in what passed as dinner table conversation. "What did you do today at school? What did you learn?" etc. I think he was always slightly loaded, and the Officers' Club seemed to be more interesting for him. So we ended up in Santa Barbara when I was about twelve. After I went to college I finally was able to get my own place, when I was about twenty. Everything at home seemed to be emotionally fraught, very emotionally volatile.

*How did that affect you as a kid growing up?*

When you're little you take refuge, and you take refuge in books, in your room. I was the older sister so I got my own room. You make friends and visit them.

*Did you have any particularly memorable friends?*

I did. I had friends I loved in Upper Darby and friends in Lake Bluff. I had to start over again in Santa Barbara, making friends, finding my way around. It was a big cultural jump. I wrote for the school newspaper, I was in the orchestra, so I had these other social contacts.

*Were you a naturally outgoing kid?*

I think there were two responses: I could be naturally outgoing, and then there was the retreat, back into the corner in which you try to find some refuge and privacy.

*When would you do that, under what circumstances?*

At the end of a long day, what's better than getting to your room and reading a book and just kind of—

*In Jung's terminology, that makes it likely you were an introvert—*

With extroverted qualities. I always wrote for the school newspaper, writing features and humorous columns and things like that through high school and into college, so that was always a way of giving a particular voice. It was more of an extroverted kind of presentation. I was willing to put my name to it.

*Would you go out and do a lot of interviewing and gathering facts relating to your subjects?*

Yes, often. And then I just wrote my own column, so a lot of my imagination was at play in what was going on.

*Certainly your poetry suggests that you do a fair amount of both, the introverted and the extroverted side of things.*

Bolinas was an example of needing to be part of a community—and in order for this larger social body to function well you let your “ego” drop aside, which taught me a lot in the forty years I’ve been here. So it’s a little bit of both.

*When you began discovering yourself as a sexual being, what was that like?*

Well, there were grade school and high school crushes, which were very funny. I realized having a crush or a fixation on somebody was really delightful. Just reading through some yearbook inscriptions recently, I see a wide variety of recipients. My first boyfriends were very sweet. Then I had a longer relationship when I was in college, and when that ended it was like a heartbreak for me. It was my first sense of emotional devastation and how to deal with it psychologically. How did you heal yourself? I don’t know if, in some way, anyone ever does from one’s first real heartbreak.

Then, of course, there were interesting relationships in San Francisco, which were minimal, until I set out for Japan. I was twenty-six years old when I left California in February of 1960. I went to Kyoto and lived there for over four years because I was really interested in studying Buddhism. At that point, that was my direction. “Psychology” wasn’t working for me. (I was going to group therapy, where the psychologist thought sitting meditation was anal retentive.) But I found meditation to be a very calming activity, and by this point Japanese meditation seemed a very centered solution. Since I had spent the first three years of my life in China, the Orient didn’t seem like a totally big step. I was stepping off the West Coast again and to a direction that would give me some clarity.

Mixed into that I’d taken a few peyote trips, one in Marin and one over La Rocca’s Bar in San Francisco, where I was renting an apartment. It was there that I had a really colossal schizophrenic, devastating trip in which I went in and out of these states of reality. I was with two other people. I fell into “nothingness,” lightning flashes, then people had animal faces. I mean, really. Please. I’m over La Rocca’s Mafia Bar.

*Scary.*

It was scary. It was scary. And I kept having flashbacks for the next year. It was a very schizophrenic episode, and essentially I spent the next four years getting through what that was all about.



*You were twenty-five or twenty-six when that happened?*

It was February of 1959. I was twenty-five. I was never quite sure just how strong “my” consciousness was. So in Japan there was always this little teetering of, “Oh, oh, am I going to fall into the void again?” until I finally understood that some of these scary places were just like guardian figures. They were states of mind.

*How did that become clear to you?*

Well, I was looking at these Kamakura Warrior guardian figures outside temples there, and realized they were only frightening if you were afraid to go beyond them. To enter into the temple. They were protectors—not figures to get hung up on. I related this understanding to Carlos Castaneda after I returned, who was visiting with Michael Harner over at my editor Don Allen’s house.

*You just met everybody.*

Well, not everybody. I didn’t meet Mick Jagger. I realized that Castaneda was familiar with the same kind of demonic energies, the power of them. By that point, I think I had really understood that these were states of mind that were just holding you back, that they were not there forever. They were illusions. Let’s put it that way.

*That was after you came back from Japan?*

After I returned I stopped being so nervous about the “self” and where one’s mind could take you, whether you were going to go crazy, and what is “crazy” in essence. During my early San Francisco years, I was also taking Dexedrine—prescribed for me by a psychiatrist when I was in college—“mother’s little helpers,” to get through daytime working and nighttime celebrations.

*You weren’t getting enough sleep?*

No! Getting very spun out.

*If I could back you up a couple of notches. You majored in philosophy? What attracted you to that?*

I was part of an experimental program called the “tutorial program,” which meant that we had certain teachers who were willing to meet individually with students on a study course of their own choosing—

writing papers and reading their own curriculum. University of California at Santa Barbara had just moved the campus from the Riviera in Santa Barbara up to Goleta on the coast. I did that for the last two years in school. But I still had to take freshman biology, with its lab course, and I just couldn't memorize all the phylums and things like that, and so I flunked it and was short one unit for graduation. I just said, "Oh, well, phooey. I already have rented a place in San Francisco. I'm just going to move up there. I'll go back later and take that lab course," but I never did.

*So you hadn't had a fundamental desire to be a philosopher?*

Not if it involved a degree. My philosophy teacher, Paul Wienpahl, was of great interest to me. He was trying to take this Logical Positivism of dry contemporary Western philosophy to a next step—into Buddhist thinking and practice. D. T. Suzuki talks about "nothing" or "emptiness" as really being "something." As Philip Whalen says, "Emptiness is Full of Everything."

There was a whole body of wisdom out there, at the time called Western philosophy, that was doing no one any "good." I mean, they were reduced to discussing in these little philosophy journals such topics as, "You have a headache and you've taken aspirin and the headache goes away. Is the headache still really there or only being 'hidden' by the aspirin?" I thought, "I want to know about life. I need to know what my being is about. I need to know more than this." It was all ending up with language talking about language.

*Would there be one or two principles that particularly spoke to you in what Suzuki was saying that made you feel like the Eastern mind could provide you with something that you weren't getting back in the US?*

Oh, well, I hadn't quite left yet. I don't think I referred to "the Eastern mind" then. There was a kind of schizophrenic dualism, a Cartesian mind/body dualism that needed to be resolved for me. There was also the religious aspect of Christianity—sin and suffering—versus some more serene sense of Buddhism, although I didn't quite know what Buddhism really was then. I thought I knew what Zen Buddhism was about. Zen Buddhists pointed out that concepts, ideas, are just ephemeral, so what really exists is you in the moment. And all those Buddhist writings and sutras written down on pieces of paper were really nothing but toilet paper (Rinzai Gigen).

That was very appealing, of course, to a California mind, along with what D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and others were writing about. There was a real possibility of freedom of the moment. Of course, after going to Japan, I realized you had to learn how to make a place in which you could have that freedom, that freedom had walls. In other words, you had to understand what a structure was, which meant that, yes, you got up early in the morning and you sat meditation, and that you tried to focus your mind,



to empty it. You observed your mind enough to know that it was ceaselessly busy. It wasn't going to go anywhere, and it could do anything it wanted. But if you kept going back and centering yourself, then you could see that this mind, which could be a demon towards you or whip you around, was of the moment, something that you could accept and let it pass on.

*Well, accept certain things as your experience and valid as such, but not necessarily the final word on anything.*

Right. You see those "states of mind" as just another illusion. Allen Ginsberg asked the Tibetan teacher Dudjom Rinpoche about what to do with some dreadful visions he was having and got some really practical advice: "If you see anything horrible, don't cling to it; if you see anything beautiful, don't cling to it." Just let it go by. No place to hold onto.

*That Japan trip, did your expectations come to pass? Did it turn out to be what you wanted?*

I don't know what I wanted, exactly. I set out to have a relationship within Japan, and with Japan. Gary Snyder told me at one point that he really felt that he needed a Western mind, a woman's mind, to be with him, an intellectual companion. After four years, we went back to the United States, and I was so relieved to get out of that particular very strict environment that I realized that I probably wasn't going to go back. But sure enough, after he returned again to Japan for the third time, Gary did find a very attractive young Japanese lady to marry and have two children with. I could tell that he really loved Japanese culture and was at home with it in a way that I was not.

*You were in Japan but you did not become of Japan in a certain sense.*

I loved all the folk art of Japan. I fell in love with the Japanese folk craft pottery that came from the Mingei movement. A lot of foreigners over there on Fulbrights studying that tradition became friends of mine. Gary's monkish tradition dictated, "No more than two teacups," or something like that. "What if I want five?" But he was living a very disciplined kind of life, and I was thinking more in terms of a household, which I still do. We had these two rooms, a bath, and a teeny kitchen in a lovely little house. He always prepared for sanzen at four in the morning. I still didn't have a teacher in that more formal practice of Rinzai Zen. My Japanese was nowhere near adequate. Yes, I think living there was in many ways very restrictive for me. When we came back in 1964, I realized that there was all this California freedom to do what I wanted, and everyone spoke English! It was just too heady. Don Allen told me he wanted to publish my first book of poems. It was great. I just couldn't believe I was here.

*It does seem, from your journal, you struggled a fair amount in Japan with loneliness and anxiety. And my impression was that it opened up some old wounds related to your mother because you describe her in the journal as having “never breast fed me—she didn’t have enough.”*

Well, this was my attempt at doing some kind of psychological analysis. I don’t think I ever got along with my mother very well. She was the kind of person who could turn around really quick. She was Irish in that way. I recently wrote, “I don’t like her very much, but I don’t want to be left behind.” What are you going to do? Some people have really nice people as mothers. I think I was just trying to get disentangled. What was the sense of trying to blame my mother for things? Perhaps it’s my over analysis saying, “Oh, well, I didn’t get breast fed,” or analyzing some anxious sensation of being thirsty. I was whisked off to China when I was six weeks old, with a baby bottle.

*There’s your 1962 entry, “Perhaps I killed my mother. She lay dead on the bed like Nastasya Filippovna at the end of The Idiot, which I finished yesterday.” Well, Nastasya was quite a piece of work, a tormented woman—and tormenting. She apparently was based on a mistress of Dostoyevsky’s who never read his books. But the way you’re describing your mother so far doesn’t sound like she had that malignant intensity.*

She could go off on tirades, temper tantrums. The dream figure of the crazy woman in the attic could be her, but I realized I could be the crazy woman in my own attic. Anyway there was somebody up there running amok. I learned, because of her emotional makeup, never to trust her in a certain way, because you could never tell when something was going to be turned around and be thrown back at you, just twisted somehow. And she enjoyed arguments and fighting. She just wanted to stir it up. It was uncomfortable emotionally.

*It sounds like you may have figured out some ways to raise yourself and grow yourself up. It’s my impression neither of your parents was giving you too much help.*

It was pathetic. I was still always trying to calm her down, say things that would be pleasing to her, blah, blah, blah, even to just living here, where I do now. Where she never visited me. So I did, obviously, want some emotional support from her. How do you cut yourself off? You can’t really, especially if someone really wants you to be there, especially as she wrote letters at least weekly.

*This, I think, testifies to a kind of generosity of spirit. For you it would not be conceivable to cut your mother off, no matter how annoying she was, and that does you credit.*



That's nice of you. "I don't want to be left behind."

*That gives it a negative cast, but from what you say I think it's hard for you to leave other people behind. In March '63, after three years in Japan, you write, "There's nothing here that I have ever been attracted to, and Gary is no one I can depend on completely."*

I don't know if I really meant it. I think I was just writing it out to see what it sounded like.

*Any reappraisals?*

I remember after a party we had in Kyoto, there was this very cute girl there that he was flirting with. I mean, many people came to see him. But I was especially bothered by girls with long blonde hair. I think it's the first time I saw what groupies would be like.

*So this was a statement of the moment.*

A little overstated. Of course, there were many things and people I was attracted to in Japan. It was a depressed entry. I think I wanted to feel more included. But I also wanted to be independent. Intellectually independent. Emotionally probably not so successful, but I think I certainly felt intellectually independent. I had my own ideas about things, and Philip Whalen was a constant correspondent and support, so I felt that I wasn't out on a limb by myself. I never depended on Snyder for, "Is this good or bad writing?" During this time, I was developing my own "voice." Looking for my own "way," a direction I could feel comfortable with.

*It's my impression from reading the diary that he wasn't a kind of meet-you-halfway, split-the-difference kind of guy, that he had very much his view of how things had to be.*

I think, for his own direction, yes. He was very disciplined in his Zen practice. He had a teacher, and this was a demanding relationship. He was also a mature poet by that point. He had published *Myths and Texts*, and then *Rip Rap*, which were his amalgam of Buddhist/Native American work-ethic poems that were very particular to the Pacific Rim. They were unique.

He was also very private. Ginsberg wanted to be part of a larger, revolutionary Beat movement. He always knew how to talk to the media. He made a public persona of himself, whereas Snyder was private. He was studying this Buddhist path in which he was very strict with himself. But he was also a wonderfully humorous, jovial, amusing friend to be with.

*Ah, I didn't get so much of a sense of that from the diary.*

It's unfortunate, you know, how often one writes in a journal to complain.

*Do you have any recollections of him kidding around?*

There are some pictures in the journal, which I put in to show a lighter side. There's one of a kind of indoor leg stretching yoga party. And one in which Snyder is using the slide projector as an infernal ray gun.

*In Japan, you wrote, "The fact that things change has always been a source of worry and depression to me." In April 1960, you ask, "Is this my home? Have I ever had a home?" Did your migration in 1969, to Bolinas, with your second husband, Jack Boyce, to a small community in Western Marin County north of San Francisco, did that resolve the issue?*

In some way it did. I had this professor from Santa Barbara who came over, to Japan, and I remember him saying, "Things always change." And I thought, "Good Lord. No!" He was an economics teacher. Somehow I thought I was entering into stability. The Buddhist teaching of impermanence and change hadn't sunk home. Really.

*So he brought you bad news.*

I think moving around a lot when I was young was destabilizing. Back in 1969, Bolinas was very open in terms of what the counterculture was about. People were doing all sorts of wonderful things—and sometimes doing things that just didn't turn out so well.

Jack Boyce and Lew Welch, both having left San Francisco, met up in the Forks of Salmon in Siskiyou County in the early '60s and became friends. Then they moved back to San Francisco in 1964, where I met Jack after I had returned from Japan. Lew Welch died or "disappeared" up by Snyder's land in '71, and the next year, 1972, Jack died here in Bolinas.

*They were partners in doing what?*

Probably in telling each other their life history and how to cure civilization. Lew would come over, and they would drink a bottle of whisky, and Lew would read Gertrude Stein to him. They would do backwoodsman things with knives and axes and fishing rods. Jack would do his paintings, and Lew wrote poems. Then Lew would bring him on visits to San Francisco to meet his poet friends. That's how I was



introduced to Jack. I knew he had had a head injury while playing high school football, coupled with a crazy kind of erratic sense of justice. Anyway, Lew disappeared in '71 with his gun, and the next year Jack was gone, too, walked along the roof beam of his house that he was building, but didn't make it to the end. That was a scary time.

*He fell and was killed?*

Yes.

*And Lew Welch walked into the woods and nobody ever found him?*

He was trying to build a house up there at Gary's, and he just couldn't do it. He was really what we now call bipolar, a severely alcoholic person at that point. He even took Antabuse and was drinking.

*Would you and Jack have called it quits between the two of you at some point?*

It was like everybody that came to Bolinas during that time lasted about a year and then they separated. I don't know if you remember back to those times, but there was a lot of leaving or changing of partners in the communities. After a year I moved out. We had been together about six years.

*I don't remember Bolinas specifically. I was teaching at San Francisco State. I came back out to California in '69, and yes, there was a lot of community expectation that relationships weren't for the long haul, that they weren't going to last. The big destabilizer of the people I knew at State was feminism. The women were forming communities with each other frequently, women who were in relationships with men but who became very, very critical of the relationships, and the guys, and what was happening between them.*

Really. Of course, out here you had to band together in different ways, because it was just these tiny mesa houses with teeny septic tanks, and ratty dirt roads. There were a lot of welfare mothers, single mothers with children, and a lot of trying to build community and keep a free and active school. Taking care of your daily existence often was what you did every day, all you had time for. But there were other activities too.

I remember the women's peyote meetings. All these women came and took peyote, in this big open-air house. It was kind of a funny experience. I don't think anybody knew what "ceremony" to follow. Someone asked, "What should I do? There's all these women." And someone else answered, "Well, just pretend half of them are men."

*How often did those take place?*

I think there were one or two. There were also meetings out at RCA Beach.

*So this was the actual eating of the peyote buttons and the throwing up from the strychnine and stuff like that? Was there any religious component? Native religion going on?*

Everyone was very respectful, and I think various protocols and songs and rituals shaped themselves over time. Peyote has its own truth. It's hard to misuse it.

*Well, you had that catastrophic trip that you described over the mob bar. How did you decide to take a shot again after that?*

Let me see. Alan Watts brought some mescaline when he came to Kyoto. By that point I was in a healthier place. Everybody took a little bit of the mescaline. I remember him saying to his companion, "Just go with it. Just go with it." I think she was looking at an insect eating a leaf, and the whole universe seemed to be devourable. At that point I realized I wasn't going to tip over into this hell place anymore, so I thought, "Okay, I think my groundwork is a little stronger." After that I came back to the United States, where LSD was around, and mescaline, and mushrooms—all aids for trips and travels, investigations of the spirit.

I could handle what I saw and was able to experience this wonderful expanded sense of self in the world. I mean, you become aware of the interconnectedness of everything. It could be a very wonderful, magical, intuitive experience.

*So despite all the disruptions, Bolinas has really felt like a safe home for you and a community where you could be supported and sustained?*

Yes.

*You've been mentioning as we talk, and also a bit in your writings, that there was a lot of drug use?*

We called them psychotropic or psychedelic substances, not just "drugs"—to distinguish them from "harder" substances such as the methamphetamine disasters that were also happening. Ginsberg spoke of the "duty" of the poet to expand consciousness.

My father was a drinker, but it was never served in our household, and my mother didn't drink then. But I was always around people, poets, who were drinking after I went to school and then moved to



San Francisco. Lots of California red and white wine, ninety-nine cents a gallon. But there were disasters like Jack Spicer, Lew Welch, and Jack Kerouac.

Drinking can be a charming sociable practice, or it can be demonic. I'm always paying attention to where it can take you. In lieu of giving it up altogether, I still find a good wine makes situations warm and sweetly domestic, and try to avoid the situations where it turns one into a mad raver. There were several years in Bolinas when it was a long social party. I thought that's what we were supposed to do every day.

I think I was used to living in the atmosphere of North Beach, where people often drank until they reached heights of delirium by performing more and more outrageous acts, and that was delightful. It was different in Japan, where people if they drank too much sake went berserk.

*You mean they went berserk in a different way?*

They did. They fell apart. Their faces got red and they wept and had to be taken home.

*You've now been together for a long time with Donald Guravich, and I don't really know how the two of you met.*

We met in Naropa in 1977. I was there teaching. His father had died a few years earlier. He had gone down and spent time in Mexico, traveling. And then he decided to study writing at this new Tibetan Buddhist school in Boulder. Vajrayana Buddhism, with Chögyam Trungpa, carried a lot of energy and charisma. When Allen Ginsberg joined him in 1974, to make a writing program—The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics—it seemed like a very attractive direction of study. Anyway, Donald came to Naropa in '77. We hit it off, and he came out here in the spring of '78.

*So he came to Bolinas specifically to be with you?*

Right. His parents and family were from New Brunswick. Canadians. He's a very warm, intelligent, gracious person.

*And wanting to relate. That's the thing that you were looking for.*

Before, I had lived here for six years with Peter Warshall, whom I had gone to Desecheo with. He became involved with the community's water and septic issues, wrote for *The Whole Earth Catalogue* and *Whole Earth Review*.

*Was he also a warm person?*

Yes, very charismatic, very charming.

*It certainly seems like the men you've connected with have had certain powers, either as artists or as scientists. They've had a lot going on in their psyches—*

Exactly.

*Jack Boyce, who we were talking about earlier, he was a painter.*

Yes, and a carpenter too.

*These have been dynamic guys.*

I think so, yes.

*That, perhaps, says something about your animus energy, too.*

My animus?

*To be out there making something happen . . . Let's finish up, if you don't mind, just talking a bit about your poetry. In a poem that's called, "The storms of the season make me loose my reason."*

"Lose." I spelled it wrong.

*I know. The beginning is all about that. I didn't quite know how I was supposed to write the word, as spelled or intended. That's a 1997 poem, and in there you say of yourself, "I want to be relevant and interior also." Does this still apply?*

Of course.

*Yes, I didn't think that would change. Relevant and interior—that's the combination we were talking about concerning the introvert and the extrovert. They're both happening. Andrew Schelling, it may have been, who described you as a poet of the moment, and your collected poems are entitled About Now. At times you've talked as if Trungpa's pronouncement, "first thought best thought," something that Ginsberg picked up on and promulgated widely, was your mantra as well, but you also have written, "I refuse to rewrite this, but I did." How would you describe your long-term relationship with the conflicting ideals of spontaneity and craftswomanship?*



I always remember when Allen said, "If mind is shapely, art is shapely."

*That's good stuff.*

You accept what comes forth. You accept it. You're not trying to edit yourself. There are certain minimal standards of rewriting, like if I misspell something, which is frequently. I do a little tightening here and there, but I don't think you can really rewrite certain sentences or phrases. You lose the flow. You lose the spontaneity and syllables and inflections and vowels.

*Okay, but what I'm hearing you say, and it's really remarkable to me, given just how polished your poetry seems, that it's not built up out of multiple drafts. That's a great ability you've got. I couldn't write that way.*

Well, you could.

*Yes, but it wouldn't be anything I'd want to read, or anybody else, because I have to do a lot of figuring out and restructuring and pushing things around.*

You must have that down by now.

*What I've got down by now is more of a resignation to circumstance. If I put something away in a drawer for several weeks before looking at it again, I'll often react, "Oh, my God. Did I write that?" Then I'll see ways to fix it, bring it up a bit. Experience has schooled me to be, I feel, very, very shaky going with drafts where I'd only corrected the spelling or some such. That's just me. Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare that he hardly blotted a line.*

Well, he confidently "flowed" right along.

Early on, from friend poets like John Wieners, I learned if you make a mistake, what you call a "mistake," just change the poem so it incorporates it. If you start to misspell a word, find a word that fits that misspelling. It's a practice I've had for a long time, that whatever you write down is "religious" in a certain way, that the word wants to be there. So if you've got that respect for what your utterances are about, you don't try to change it very much. At least it's what John practiced, and I respect that. I think you can learn by restructuring and rewriting, but you lose some "tenderness." Like pastry handled too much becomes tougher. If you have a lot of flaky lines, airy lines so that some wind can blow through them, it's a nice experience. Do you write it by hand?

*Yes, I do the first drafts, and then I put them in a computer and move the draft around.*

Once you've got a computer, let me tell you, there's a lot of difference in being able to make changes, make corrections, without having to retype a whole page. I was too lazy to retype long poems and tried to use "white-out" judiciously. Sometimes it's just small movements of the line one wants changed very slightly, just to get it so it flows right. But with a computer, whew!—slam bam, you can move lines all over the place.

*Do you think that's a corrupting force or a luxury?*

I think you get used to putting your voice down a certain way, the phrasing, the way you want a line to move. I always try to write my line so it reflects some movement of inflection.

*It seems to me that there's tremendous grace and balance in your work, and all with a single draft—extraordinary.*

That new little book I just gave you, *2012*, is partly a composite from notebooks from last year. Certain singular lines felt authentic to me and I chose to let them follow each other on the page. But there are big jumps between subjects, which don't necessarily follow logically in terms of a coherent narrative. It reads like a series of headlines. You can tell me what you think.

*I look forward to reading it.*

More like a little bulletin board of messages.

*I wanted to ask you if there's a meaningful distinction in your mind between the poetry you write and what would be called "academic poetry"?*

Since many of my friends who were writing what was called "experimental" poetry are now teachers and "of the academy," what is the academy anymore? In the '50s and '60s, if you were living on the West Coast, you were probably writing in the style of one of the many strands that comprised the San Francisco Renaissance. This was not what was being written and published in the East Coast academic journals, in the *Hudson Review* or *Partisan Review*, or—

*But back then that seems to have been an important distinction to your poet friends. I was thinking it was just around the end of the '60s that, say, out of Boston you've got Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who were close to Robert Lowell, who himself was bipolar. In your way of thinking would they be academic poets?*



I don't think so, but it seems the "academy" at this point has claimed them. Who's not in the academy. You know?

*Yes. Well, you're not.*

Really? I did teach often at the New College of San Francisco, and have taught at Naropa since 1975, at their Summer Writing Program. But often there are critical "academic" requirements—writing papers, analyzing poetry, and taking poems apart in certain ways, to comment on them—that just seemed to me a ruthless and useless activity.

*In the middle 1950s you began to get creative writing departments as well as literature departments. And the people who write the papers about poetry and take it apart are in the literature departments, while the creative writing people, they're supposed to write their poetry and then workshop it, but they don't critique it in the same way.*

I know. I just looked at an article in *Poets & Writers*, "Can You Teach Creative Writing?" It's a hard one. "Workshopping" is another useless activity as far as I'm concerned.

*Even as we are doing this interview, a conference called AWP is taking place in Boston.*

In Boston, right.

*I just saw an e-mail from somebody I know who's there. He said there are 12,000 people.*

It's a big deal. I mean, I have friends that must go there to get jobs teaching.

*Yes. AWP stands for Associated Writing Programs.*

If you decide you want to teach in a college or university, this is the way to go. This is a generation that is looking for exchanges, and jobs, and affirmations that their studies in American poetry can be passed on to their students.

I don't think I ever called it "creative" writing. I mean, writing is writing. Mostly I was teaching/presenting examples of writing that I was already familiar with, that I thought "real." Like in a local class I did during these past six weeks. I just asked the members to write something every day: locate yourself, put the date and hour down, and then see what happens, what gets into your head. I gave them lots of examples from other writers, trying to make the act of writing easy and accessible without get-

ting into these difficult questions about what “form” is this writing in? What is a poem? Fiction? What is creative nonfiction? What is this? What is that? Just write what’s going on around you. Outside and inside.

*You’re trying to help them be poets?*

Writers.

*What was teaching at Naropa and New College like for you?*

It was great. I could teach what I wanted. The students were responsive. I was always very careful not to tell them that what they were writing was “bad” or “good.” The last class I gave at New College, before it closed, was a review of Japanese, Korean, Tibetan, and Chinese poetry. “Asian” poetry. When did it get translated into English or a “Western” language? The fact that we’ve only had translations for a couple of centuries. When did it start funneling through to the “Western mind”? And then, how did that travel to our American poets and readers?

*Could we talk just a little bit, as a way of closing the circle, about what I think may have been one of the strongest efforts of your early career, the Odyssey poems, which you date between April 8 and December 1 of 1964. There, the primary focus is on Penelope, the stay-at-home wife. Your final entry in The Japan-India Journals (aka Strange Big Moon) is dated February 3, the day you returned to San Francisco after you left Kyoto and your relationship with Gary Snyder. Do you think that was a sort of reprocessing in some ways of the experience of the relationship?*

Oh, yes. And then there were the suitors. And Spicer saying, “It has to do with your father.” That’s when I started calling my writing under the “Homer Dome.” I metaphorically put Homer on my head and said, “Okay, let me write through Homer.”

*The forward-looking pieces are all about trying to find your home, too: the odyssey to get back there. And you hadn’t found your home yet. That was still to come a few years down the road.*

I went back again in the first poem in this new little book, 2012:

WILD CURRENT IS BLOOMING PINK

You are in search of some simple way to reach your home  
but the old gods reach out with their stories and resentments



and so your journey will be troublesome  
and frankly endless  
for you will go on to meet people  
who have never heard of you

Caught inland  
by the outgoing long tide

Where you will find a place to plant some seeds  
And tell your story all over

And give a bit of sacrifice  
so those dead ones  
can speak again.

Homer says that Ulysses is not going to die by the ocean; he's going to die without salt and away from the sea.

*So that's February 18, 2012?*

Yes, a year ago.

*So it's still so much alive for you?*

Well, it's a touchstone, isn't it? You know, there's nothing like finding a beautiful story from way back in history, like the Odyssey, in which so much happens. We're so lucky that it got written down. I'm sorry that we don't have our local Coast Miwok stories.

2013

They are constructing a craft  
solely of wood  
at Waka-no-ura, fishing village,  
a jewel quite naturally  
from the blue of the farm house tile roofs.

found on the southern coast.

The women pull by hand long strings  
of seaweed across the shore  
it dries

At the other end of the town  
the hull of the boat rises  
above the smaller houses  
A little prince of a boy in a white knit suit  
stands with the others in a group on the beach

Watching us go by, we are strange.

The women bend over  
the seaweed, wakame, changing its face to the sun.



It is lonely

I must draw water from the well 75 buckets for the bath

I mix a drink — gin, fizz water, lemon juice, a spoonful  
of strawberry jam

And place it in a champagne glass — it is hard work  
to make the bath

And my winter clothes are dusty and should be put away

In storage. Have I lost all values I wonder  
the world is slippery to hold on to

When you begin to deny it.

Outside outside are the crickets and frogs in the rice fields

Large black butterflies like birds.