

Interview with Marvin Bell¹

Part One

TIR: Though one often finds small birds and trees in your poems, not many people, I suppose, have called you a nature poet. Might it be possible to say, that if you are not a nature poet exactly, you are a nature poet inexactly?

MB: You know, that sounds pretty precise. I grew up in the country. Most people think I'm from New York City because my biography always says that I was born there. I was, but only because that was the nearest hospital. I grew up in a little town called Center Moriches, which might have had as many as 2500 people. I doubt that it has more than 3000 now. It's on the southern shore of eastern Long Island. There were woods across the street, and there was water at the end of every street that went south; and the bay was there, the Great South Bay. The Sound, the ocean, the canals, the creeks—there was one creek that came right up in the middle of town. I used to go down to steal boats for the day.

TIR: What did you do out on the Sound that led to your becoming a poet?

MB: Well, my father ran a five-and-ten. And my relationship to the water was the same as that of other people. We either owned boats or borrowed them; and we went out with people who were clambers. We crabbed a lot and fished a lot. By and large, fishermen don't swim, at least not where I come from. They don't think of the water as a place to swim in; they think of it as something to farm. So I grew up without swimming at all; I swim like a stone. When I was little it never dawned on me that it might be foolish to be running around on the muddy deck of a clamming boat with the old guy we called Uncle John, if I couldn't swim. Now I know better.

I never thought of writing poetry, if that's what you're asking. In fact, I never wrote any poetry in high school and I didn't write any poetry to speak of in college. I never thought of being a poet. That wouldn't have been something one would have thought about where I

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grew up. In fact, there were very few books in the house. There were some condensed versions of *Reader's Digest* novels, as I recall; and there were some encyclopedias which were for the betterment of the children.

TIR: Were there hobbies you had with an aesthetic bent to them?

MB: I did a great many things that put me in touch with odd people. For example—this seems as if it might have nothing to do with literature, but I think it does have something to do with it in my case—I became an amateur radio operator. My sister's father-in-law was an amateur radio operator. His call sign was W2EBT. He called himself Two Eggs Bacon and Toast. Sometimes he called himself Elderly, Bald and Toothless. He was a life insurance salesman. Probably to get rid of me after dinner one Thanksgiving at his house, he showed me up to his shack in the attic and gave me earphones and showed me how to work the receiver. Well, one thing led to another and I became an amateur radio operator. I used to handle messages a lot, what they called "traffic."

TIR: In code?

MB: In code. It's a lot faster in code. I know that doesn't sound right but actually it is. It's much faster, much surer when there is the possibility of interference. I did a lot of that. Well, in those days, people who were amateur radio operators were almost always odd ducks. Just by virtue of being one, having gotten my license and built my first transmitter and power supply (which was a kind of necessity or otherwise one was looked down upon), just by virtue of those things, I could ride my bicycle to nearby towns and knock on the door of someone whose address I'd taken out of The American Radio Relay League Directory of Hams, and this odd duck would come waddling to the door and he would take me to his odd duck shack and he'd talk odd duck to me for hours.

I also started playing trumpet when I was in the fourth grade and played with all kinds of groups for years and years. I played with a dixieland group on the radio when I was in college. I played with what we used to call combos, with marching bands, and summer bands and orchestras. I was part of a travelling trumpet trio for a while and did solos and played with brass quintets and sextets. Just all kinds of things. Then, later on, I gave a lot of attention to photography, what used to be called "creative photography." I was a potter too.

TIR: When did you begin writing poetry?

MB: I started writing seriously after college. That would have been about 1959. I started writing it more seriously when I got to Chicago, which would have been about 1960.

TIR: Can you remember when you began reading poetry?

MB: Oh, I started reading in college. I can remember reading a poem in an issue of *New World Writing* which interested me because the author was identified as an ex-paratrooper, I think—or something like that. Anyway, it was something macho and it reassured me that I would not be in trouble for reading this poem. The first line of it was “Fuzz clings to the huddle”; and the last was, “We rise and leave with Please.” It wasn’t about football as far as I could tell. I had no idea what it was about. So I went to Dr. Finch, who was our creative writing teacher at Alfred University and a cellist in the orchestra in which I played, and asked him what the poem meant. He said, “I don’t know much about modern poetry; ask Miss Tupper.” So I went to Miss Tupper, who was my history of English literature teacher, and she said, “Oh, I don’t know much about modern poetry. Have you asked Dr. Finch?” So I never got an answer; but, of course, I was foolish to think there was one.

TIR: What was your experience like in the Workshop here at Iowa?

MB: It was fun. Many of the students in the Workshop now are older than other students; but then all of the students in the Workshop were older than other students. It was a somewhat disreputable thing to do. If it wasn’t the only graduate writing program or the only community of its kind in the country, it was certainly the only one that anyone knew about. And the people here had all been out of school a while. They had been in the Army or had been bumming around or had held a job here or there. And they were all odd ducks, too, or they wouldn’t have ended up in such a place.

TIR: This was in the early sixties?

MB: Yes, I came here in February of ’61. Then you still had people on the GI bill you see, from the Korean War. Don Justice was the poet. Paul Engle ran the Workshop and also helped teach. His way of teaching was to leave the room a lot. We met him in the temporary building known as UTA, University Temporary A, which was behind the Union which now of course is a parking lot. It had a hot water flushing toilet. There was a back room which was the office. The phone would ring in the back room and Paul would jump up, run to the back room and answer the phone, and then he would come back and announce something new, such as the Iowa Natural Gas Fellowship.

But Paul was amazing, not only for his ability to raise money but for his ability to join in a discussion, after having missed most of it, and say something absolutely right. Don will confirm this for you. His instincts and his spontaneous responses were very good.

TIR: So Don was the teacher, when you were here.

MB: That's right, I had one serious teacher of poetry writing before Don—that was John Logan in Chicago. At the downtown center of the University of Chicago first, and then in a group that was called "the poetry seminar" but which was not, in fact, a course. It was just a bunch of poets around Chicago—led by Logan—who got together periodically. In fact, we just had a reunion in Chicago, a bunch of us: Dennis Schmitz was part of that and Charlie Simic, Bill Knott, Naomi Lazard, Barbara Harr, Bill Hunt, Roger Aplon, a whole bunch of people.

TIR: Who else was teaching on a visiting basis that you remember?

MB: Here in the Workshop? Oh, nobody. The Workshop was much smaller; it was one section. There weren't any sections; there was just us. There were enough people in the Workshop by the end of my three year stay so that it was hoped a few would cut each class. Indeed, one could count on it. Nobody wanted everyone to come to class; that would make a few too many.

When I was invited back here to teach in the fall of 1965, Paul had apparently been accepting people out of his hotel suite in New York City. We had ninety poets in the Workshop. I'm not making this up—ninety poets and three teachers. I had a Form of Poetry class which met in a chemistry amphitheater. I remember standing before them in my Army crew-cut and saying, "Well, I have two more weeks to put in in the Army. So, I'll see you in two weeks." I really did. I had to go back to the Army for two weeks.

TIR: What kind of poetry were you writing when you were here as a student?

MB: Obscure poetry. I fancied myself an experimental poet; I was pretty sure I was an experimental poet because my poems didn't make sense. Of course, I thought they made sense; but I don't think now that they made sense in the way that poems ought to make sense. I could write poems that made sense; but those weren't the poems that interested me. I haven't the foggiest notion why they accepted me. I think again that things were so different in those days that anyone who had been writing for a while and, indeed, publishing, as I had—not in good magazines, but somewhat widely; I had been writing reviews and had even started a little magazine in Rochester called *Statements*—anybody who'd been doing things like that was odd enough and committed enough to be let in, I think. That's all I can guess.

TIR: So between the time you were an undergraduate at Alfred, profess-

ing to know nothing at all or caring hardly anything about poetry and the time you spent a year at Syracuse as a graduate student in journalism you had somehow gotten into it.

MB: Oh, I was always interested in language. I mean, I edited the school newspaper and I wrote all kinds of things. Again, you have to realize how stupid I was, coming from that little town where people, by and large, didn't go to college and not having come from a home full of books. I did get books from the town library. But you have to remember how stupid I was. I went to college thinking the people who majored in English studied grammar. I actually thought that, until my junior year. I knew that people read books but I didn't know they studied them.

TIR: While in high school, you discovered the town library?

MB: Oh, yes. There was a little house which was opened for a couple of hours a few nights a week and was manned by a volunteer from Brookhaven National Lab. I would go and take books out, mostly philosophy. And then I'd bring them back late and he would cut my fines.

I used to read things—you'll laugh—used to read things like books by John Dewey. I was more interested in things like that. I never read much fiction and I still don't. Except for graduate school, I have never read much fiction. My wife reads everything and she tells me about it. But I like books of ideas. I think it may come from being that small-town boy who had a vague sense—and I want to emphasize “vague”—that there might be another kind of world somewhere. Therefore, one had to instruct oneself, so that one would have opportunities. I liked literature which had an instructional side to it, and I still do.

TIR: Occasionally, you come to passages like that in much older poetry. A passage in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will tell you how to skin a deer.

MB: Now that's really useful. But I like instruction about thinking, how to think about things, or instructions about morals and ethics—ethics in particular. My poetry is probably full of that stuff.

TIR: A lot of your nature poetry will say such things as here's a way you can think about a tree . . . and, here's another way you can think about a tree.

MB: That's right. I like that. I find that fascinating and I can remember, even as a kid, working in the five-and-ten, someone would say something to me—I mean the most innocuous thing, something about where something could be found in the store or what I should do next or what

I should go find in the basement. There would be something odd to my mind about the way he or she had said it; and as I carried out the chore, I would think to myself, if he had used this word instead of that word, the tone would have been entirely different. And, of course, I just ascribed that to my own neurosis. I didn't realize that there were all kinds of people who did that and they were called poets.

TIR: This has to do with what you said earlier, that the poems you wrote when you were in the Workshop seem now to you to make sense but not to make the kind of sense you think a poem should make. That is an interesting statement because, for me, your poems make a *kind* of sense. I mean, that's one way of describing them. I would say your poems make a kind of sense before I'd say your poems make sense. It's always been my suspicion, that, as I read one of your poems and have to work so hard to make the jumps and connections, that those connections that I work for to make the poem open for me are connections that for you make perfect sense.

MB: Yeah. There was a wonderful poet, who died fairly recently, named Ed Mayo. Lived over in Des Moines. He used to create an annual event, a poetry day at Drake University. He would get a bunch of us to come, poets from around Iowa, and we would bring a few students with us. We'd all read to an auditorium which would be sparsely filled. Sparsely filled? Which would be fairly empty. Mostly we'd be reading to ourselves. We'd play jokes on each other and so forth. He always liked my poems; and at the end of the evening, after we'd had pizza at his house or something, as we were going out to our cars, he would always come out on the lawn with me and put his arm around me, and, as he'd walk me to the car, he would praise my poetry. Then he would suggest that if I could only put in the connections, if I could slow down and not think so fast, it would be even better. I would always promise to try. But I must confess that the connections do seem absolutely obvious to me.

TIR: I wouldn't want you to slow down and work all the connections out because, obviously, what makes the poem work for your reader is the involvement that's necessary to make those connections, to work for the connections. But my sense has always been that your motivation was *not* to make the reader work. I've always sensed a kind of surprise on your part when people say, "But there's a jump here that I just can't see." Do you think there is, on your part, an increasing attempt to make those connections somewhat clearer? I find, for example, your poems are

becoming longer and more leisurely in pace, in this latest collection particularly.

MB: I hope you're right. Again, though, it's hard for me to know because, if something seems unclear in my poems, I always try to make it clear: So the jumps that remain in the poem seem to me easy steps rather than jumps.

My idea of how things are written now—I wouldn't have put it this way ten years ago—is something like this: one writes something down, then one writes the next thing. That's my theory of composition, I think. Now, the trick there is that the next thing that one writes must be something that interests one in sequence. It's less a jump than an extension. I mean, you can't put down just anything; you must put down something you're genuinely interested in, involved in. But how can you trust it merely to be the next thing? Well, it must occur to you for some reason. Now if the poem pays attention to itself, then that means the poet is paying attention to these things and making the connections. If not now, later. It's what Bill Stafford refers to in an essay as "the coherence of the self." You write down one thing and then write the next thing. The rhetoric teachers are going to be furious.

TIR: As a rhetoric teacher, I have often said much the same thing, except I will add that the one rule of composition is that the next thing you say has to make sense in terms of the last thing you have said.

MB: Right. If not then, later.

TIR: Mostly "right then," in rhetoric. But what is the unit of a poem for you? Is it a statement, like a sentence?

MB: Oh. I don't know that I can answer exactly because I don't think in terms of units. I can talk of poetry in terms of units. I can talk about metrical units, or syntactical units, or the line or the stanza; but I don't exactly think about it that way myself. I think it's more a matter of voice. Voice in poetry depends on phrases, not on words, and phrases make up sentences. So, if one is writing in lines, the line and the sentence and the way in which they hold hands makes a difference, obviously. Everything makes a difference; the rhythms make a difference, even if one is writing in so-called free verse. Auden, you know, published a list of what he thought a person should do to become a poet: and the poet was not only to read certain books and write certain kinds of poems but was also supposed to have a garden and a pet. I can't remember whether he includes this in his list, but it always seemed to me to be an advantage to play a musical instrument.

TIR: Because of the phrasing?

MB: Yeah. I think it helps one's ear. Reading poetry helps one's ear, especially reading formal poetry at first. But it does become intuitive after a while. I mean, when Miles Davis plays a trumpet solo, he's not counting.

TIR: You mentioned poetry making the kind of sense that for you a poem *should* make. I'm wondering what that is for you. What is the way a poem should make sense?

MB: Well, this is hard to say. Poetry is probably mostly about what life feels like. But, in order to create in poems this precise emotion, something else has to be precise first. What has to be precise first is the plot of the poem. I *think* people still call it a plot. The words have to correspond in the first place to their denotations, even though they may have been picked as much for their connotations. What is suggested can't be clear unless what is actually said is clear first. That obscure poetry I was writing way-back-when offered a vague content; it was word play. I haven't gotten over word play and hope not to, but it wasn't much more than word play. It was pretty good in the way it sounded. I mean, it sounded and looked on the page rather interesting; but it didn't make much sense. This is hard to explain; maybe if I come at it obliquely. I think when young poets are obscure, they're usually obscure out of fear. Anytime you say anything directly to someone, you can be hated for it. You can at least be argued with. You can be made fun of—that especially. So it's much safer, in a way, to find a technique that sneers at clarity and appears to be superior *because* of that sneering. But really it's just fear, the fear of saying something straight. But that doesn't mean saying a flat thing that has about it no depth and which leads to nothing else.

TIR: I want to back up a bit. I'm thinking about the implied analogy between music and your writing. Your obscure poetry reminds me of learning the scales, so to speak. Then as you take yourself more seriously, trying to make poetry make sense, you began to play with those scales to develop a melodic line. All this brings me to the question of your early training in music and your performance of various types of music: were you conscious of moving from one type to the next, from dixieland jazz, to marching band music, combo jazz, et cetera?

MB: Oh, I was very aware of the differences. The reason I gave up music . . . I started giving it up in high school. I was going to go to the Oberlin Conservatory and decided not to. In effect, I gave up music then, though

I kept playing for years and years. I gave it up because I knew I wouldn't be good enough. I was pretty good, to be honest. I had been trained in so-called serious music and I also played jazz, which is what I wanted to do because who wants to be a trumpeter in an orchestra. It's like being the male in ballet of twenty years ago; you're just a leaning post, you know. So I would have wanted to play jazz, but I knew that I would never be good enough. For a number of reasons. But the most important of which was that, when I took solos, I saw notes; and that's a terrible limitation. You can't play that way; it has to be more intuitive than that. My solos weren't any good. My solos on the piano were much better than my solos on the trumpet and I couldn't play the piano. I never had a piano lesson in my life. I only played the piano late at night when the pianist wanted to dance.

As the years have gone by and my poetry has changed, I've tried to find what my content is, what my forms are. When I came to the Workshop in 1961, there was not that much free verse being written. It didn't appear on the worksheets that often. In order to justify my writing free verse, I had to be able to defend it in the terms used by formalists. So I learned everything I could about meter; and someone would arch an eyebrow and say, "This appears to be in free verse," talking about a poem of mine that appeared on the worksheet. And I'd say, "Oh, no. It's in sprung accentuals with variant lines." I can remember that I was admired for breaking the rules but getting away with it. That's the way they put it. Now, it's gone whole hog the other way; one is grateful for a metrical poem to put on the worksheet, occasionally.

TIR: Were you reading Williams at that time?

MB: I sort of read everybody. Williams was always an interest of mine, but I read widely. I read everything but not in any order.

TIR: My question about Williams has to do with things you've been saying: the sequencing of the poem or making sure that the next image follows from the other though not necessarily in logical progression. One of my favorite poems of yours—I think it was in *The Iowa Review*—"Someone's got to say Williams . . ."

MB: Oh, yeah.

TIR: You remember it? It ends something like, "While you, Jersey, you just tapped your foot and kept your head." And there's that wonderful sense of "tapping the foot" and not "using the head" but "keeping" the head. It's always struck me as a description, not only of Williams' poetry, which I think it is, but a description of your inheritance from Williams' poetry.

MB: Well, maybe so. I'm glad you remembered that poem. I didn't put it in a book and I'd forgotten about it.

TIR: Do you think that Williams gains in clarity as he gets older?

MB: Oh, yeah. Williams is a great example of one of the reasons I was glad to become a poet. It's an art that one can get better at. To go back to music, I remember Cat Anderson, the trumpet player who was the scourge of the high registers. I went to see Basie in Birdland or Basin Street one time; Cat Anderson had no lip left. He couldn't get above the staff. He would sort of put up his horn to play solos, but the second man would cover for him. There are a lot of fields in which that is true; there's a peak and after that it's downhill. Well, it's not that way with poetry or, at least, it doesn't have to be. Williams is one of the great examples; he's not even that good until he gets old. I mean, he's pretty good; but, hell, you know . . .

TIR: We've been tracing your growth toward being a poet and toward taking poetry seriously, as something one might do. Was there any time in your development when you began to get a sense of an American poetic tradition behind you, a tradition that you tapped into?

MB: I was always aware of it. I mean, you know, I'd read everybody as I say. I admire so many poets that the list doesn't mean anything in terms of influences. I admire Emily Dickinson tremendously; I think I know her poetry pretty well. But I can't say that I can show any results in my own writing from having admired her work. I guess I need to go back a bit and say that the contemporary poets who I read with great pleasure when I was first starting to write more and more seriously, in Syracuse and then in Rochester and then in Chicago, were the Beat poets. That probably would be surprising to many people; but my first wife, or the woman who would become my first wife, and a friend of mine named Al Sampson—who was also a graduate student in journalism at Syracuse and who also quit to go take an English degree at Chicago—and I would frequent a bad Italian restaurant. We'd go there early in the day, and have an antipasto for lunch and a pizza for supper. And we'd just sit there in front of this terrible mural of Venice and read *Howl* to one another or poems by Corso or Ferlinghetti.

I have to mention again that I always liked odd ducks among people—and strange people among ducks—and when I went to college, Alfred University turned out to be a lucky choice. I know I sound like I'm getting off the subject but I'll circle around. At Alfred University, which is a private university, there is also a State College of Ceramics actually

contained within the private university. The State College of Ceramics has a design department; and the design department was, and pretty much still is, the freakiest thing you ever saw. When Moholy-Nagy created a likeness to the *Bauhaus* in Chicago, he refused to have grades or degrees; one just showed one's work and at the end of the year you were told whether or not you could stay. Well, when Moholy died, his Chicago version of the *Bauhaus* was in financial jeopardy and so they linked up with the Illinois Institute of Technology and became what's now known as the Institute of Design. A number of the teachers, being idealistic about the old system, rebelled against the notion of degrees and grades and fled. Some of them, for no reason that anyone could ever explain to me, ended up in the design department at the State College of Ceramics of Alfred University. Well, these kids on the streets of New York are no fools; they realized that if they went to the State College of Ceramics they wouldn't have to pay tuition. In those days there was no tuition at a state school in New York. So these wonderful artists from New York, who were all absolutely off-the-wall, showed up in the design department of the College of Ceramics of Alfred University. I wasn't worthy of their company, but I knew enough to know that these were special people and that they had their eye on something; it wasn't the same thing that most people had their eye on. So I watched them from a distance. Gradually, I became friends with them. I learned a lot just by watching them. They were very strange people.

TIR: Did they introduce you to the Beats?

MB: They were strange people at a time when there were fewer strange people. At least it seemed so, certainly in colleges. I had been in and out of the Village—I was a Long Islander. I had a sense of the music world there. In those days, a person might be called a Bohemian. The Beats were picked up by the newspapers and made famous because they were "Bohemian." Their poetry interested me because it was defiant. You may not remember this, but when Paul Carroll founded *Big Table* magazine in Chicago, the title was provided by Jack Kerouac who got up one morning and saw a note he'd written to himself. He'd just moved into a new apartment—the note said, "Buy a big table." So he sent a telegram to Paul Carroll: "Call it Big Table." The first issue of *Big Table* was the censored issue of *The Chicago Review*, which Paul Carroll had been editing and which was to contain works by Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Whalen, Orlofsky, John Rechy, perhaps John Ashbery and so forth. In one of the darker days of the University of Chicago, they

banned the issue. Anyway, as I recall, there were benefit readings in San Francisco, Chicago and New York by Ginsberg, Corso and others to raise money for *Big Table*. And the newspapers made this front page news. Corso came out on the stage in one of these cities, walked to the microphone to begin the evening and said, "Fried shoes." The people went crazy. That was the strangest thing they'd ever heard, the wildest event of their lives. You have to remember what we looked like then, you know.

TIR: Did you ever go back from the Beat poets to Whitman?

MB: Oh, sure, yeah. I always thought of Whitman and Dickinson as being polarities somehow. But that's really inhibiting. I mean, if you start thinking of Whitman and Dickinson as being polarities, then you feel you have to join up and there's no way to join up. They're so much what they are that it's better not to think about them as antitheses.

TIR: One of the things I think I see you admiring in Dickinson is her rebellious attitude, a kind of insistence on herself that Whitman has and that the Beats have too.

MB: Oh, absolutely. I've said it elsewhere: I would love to have been born in Defiance, Ohio. Wouldn't that be great! "I'm from Defiance and I ought to know."

TIR: And yet that doesn't seem to be the stance of your poetry, which moves away from a simple defiant mood to a more steady or stable attitude.

MB: Corrective, I think. I think I'm often corrective; in fact, I think my poems often begin in the middle of something, as if I had just thought something and now I'm refuting it or as if I'm hearing someone else's statement and am refuting it.

TIR: That's often how the lines work, isn't it? You get from one line to another by refuting something that . . .

MB: Yes, that's right.

TIR: I'm thinking, too, about how often your lines occur to me as linear, as in linear improvisation in jazz. That is, I often pick a tonal quality of a word or phrase and find myself going back and forth through the poem in search of the tonal logic as I do with music, in search of resonance.

MB: That's true, that is the way music works. I wouldn't say it's deliberate; it is intuitive, I guess. But I think it's there. One needs that sort of thing, the more so if one writes so-called free verse because that's what rhyme and meter do for the poem. They create effects that harmonize with or play off of other effects.

TIR: Might it not also do something else? In formal poetry, you always know why the line ends where it does. With the free verse line, you're always invited to ask the question. Doesn't the end of any free verse line suggest that it might have ended elsewhere?

MB: Absolutely. And the answer, I think, is yes, it could have ended elsewhere. But there is a further answer: that is, because it is the way it is, it creates this effect and not the other effect.

TIR: But as you read it, do you find yourself reading the lines differently from time to time, like a jazz musician, improvising within a form?

MB: I think, yes. There is a way of using a line to create momentum; and what it does is to create momentum first for the poet and later for the reader. Some of my poems are, in that sense, jazzy; others are not. It takes a short line to create an effect which seems jazz-like. Once you write long lines, it doesn't work out that way, I don't think. But I'm guessing.

TIR: Like Williams jazzing up Whitman by breaking those lines up into short lines.

MB: Oh, see now, Williams is a genius. I mean, he realized that his so-called triadic stanza isn't a stanza at all; it's just three margins. It's brilliant and I envy it. I would like to use it. I think I understand it and know how to do it; but one doesn't dare. Some people have dared, but perhaps not wisely because Williams owns it. It's going to be another two hundred years before he won't own it. Maybe I can overcome that sense of his prepossessing it. The trick to his three-line stanza is that his syntax is continually various; the length of the phrase varies a great deal and the syntax contains great variety. So you're always being surprised by where a line ends and very often by where a line begins. It's just that he never lets up for a moment. The trick to that three-line stanza is that it can make prose into poetry. You can do it yourself: take any piece of prose and put it in three-line stanzas but make sure that the lines are not equal, that you sometimes have longer phrases and sometimes shorter phrases, that you stop one line and start another in the middle of a phrase, occasionally, so that you interrupt yourself a lot, and you'll turn it into poetry. Figure it this way: if the end of a line is special by virtue of being the end of the line, and if the beginning of a line is special by virtue of being the beginning of a line, and if the first line of a stanza is special by virtue of its being the first line of the stanza, if the last line of a stanza is special by virtue of its being the last line of the stanza, and if the only middle line of a stanza is special by virtue of its being the

only line between two others—then how many effects are taking place in what period of time in a poem written in short lines in three-line stanzas? It's astonishing!

TIR: Then to complicate things further, think of each of those lines in the triadic stanza containing a variable foot.

MB: So-called, yeah. It's fun to set a metronome going while Williams reads those poems on records. It's not possible to read all the phrases in "The Descent," say, in the same amount of time. But it almost comes out. That is, sometimes a phrase takes what you might call two measures and sometimes a phrase takes a half a measure, so you could think of it as being equivalent to changes in time in a piece of music. The music, say, is in four-four time and suddenly you have a six-eight measure. Happens all the time. The real problem, of course, is that Williams' terminology was just a hoax. He was forced to defend his practice of free verse by using the terms of metricians, and so he had to continue to speak about feet.

TIR: Where does a poem start for you? With a thought, a sound, an argument, a rhythm?

MB: Well, it's changing, I'm glad to say, but for years I would have had to say it begins with some words that make some sense but seem to want to make more sense—not just words out of syntax but some words that make a piece of syntax. It might be a phrase, it might be most of a sentence, it might be a whole sentence, it might be one line or two lines. These words have about them an emotional resonance. They also seem to be *located* somehow, but the circumstances of their location are yet to be discovered.

This is very difficult to explain, but after running this morning I was sitting in the bathtub reading the poetry of D.H. Lawrence. The bathtub is perfect, if the water's warm, for Lawrence. He's so florid, but I was liking a lot of it. The word coming out at me was *vain*—not about Lawrence, but it's a word that he uses a lot, I think maybe with more meaning than he intends it to have. There was something about his use of *vain* that I wanted to put in a location. As it happens I don't have any more ideas about that, no more words about it. It might not come to anything at all.

I would love to get more people into my poetry. You asked in the very beginning of this conversation about how much of a nature poet I am. All poets are nature poets I guess. If a poet were to write only about machines we could probably make an argument that he or she was a

nature poet. But it's hard to put people into poems, except for oneself or an imagined self. It's very difficult to put them in the poems and not just use them, to put them in the poems and make them any more than stick figures.

TIR: Your new volume seems much more aware of people, generally, and to care more for expressing our "human condition." So let me ask whether you see yourself as a political poet, inexactly.

MB: Well, to this extent: even when I stopped writing obscurely way back when, I secretly considered myself an experimental poet. I figured that I was a poet of content, in a way that I thought was experimental. I still think I'm a poet of content. That isn't the way poetry is talked about, alas. When we think about poetry in the academy, we kind of assume that it is talked about in terms of content. But except for rare occasions, poems are *not* talked about in terms of content. Think of what reviews and critical articles are like; they generalize the particulars of a poet's book into broad statements about style and theme. But the real liveliness of poetry, and the meaning in poems, is in the individual poem, in the particulars of a poem. Even the notion of talking about a book may be harmful. We should probably confine ourselves to speaking poem by poem, but we want to learn about people and so we try to look at all the poems to see what the person is like.

Well, I still secretly—and I guess it's not so secret anymore if I say it—think of myself as an experimental poet, and the experimentation resides in what I do with content. In the poem, "These Green-Going-to-Yellow," for example, what interests me is an argument that's being made about our conception of God. Not that I had that argument to begin the poem. If I were to summarize some of the argumentative aspects of that poem, I'd start by saying that it's trying to suggest a greater involvement with people. Even in the middle of New York City someone has planted a gingko, why? The poem supposes it's because when those leaves fall on the sidewalk they look like hands that are treating us more gently than any person ever would. Later on, I say "we have no experience to make us see the gingko or any other tree," which sounds to me like a very odd thing to say. On the other hand it sounds to me like an inevitable thing to say because whatever our experience of the gingko or other trees *is*, it's experience from a distance.

TIR: We have no experience to see the gingko as gingko, rather than as something that relates to ourselves. We see the gingko as ourselves *in* the gingko. It's an insight that goes all through your work. I think

back to “I wanted to see the self, so I looked at the mulberry.” Much of your “nature poetry” is a very interesting argument with the pathetic fallacy, back and forth: that we do see ourselves in nature and that we know we can’t see ourselves in nature. The poems work on that tension, often playing with it, saying yeah I see this and this, and I also see this and this, and therefore we really don’t see anything, do we, except ourselves. What we say about it is what we see.

MB: That sounds right to me.

TIR: Your poems are filled with leisurely moments in which, say, you listen to a tree, with all the ironies on the surface: “I know I’m not listening to this tree because trees don’t laugh, do they?” And the next stanza begins, “In spring, when the trees laugh . . .” There’s a wonderful give and take where you extend out into the trees and then look back and say, “of course we don’t extend out into trees.”

MB: There was a point early in my writing when I would have thought of myself as a metaphysical poet. Maybe I should still, but in any case at that time I would have thought of metaphysical poets partly in terms of a balancing of opposites. That can be just a trick; again, I don’t hold that out as an advantage necessarily.

TIR: The way I see “Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See” is in exactly the terms we’ve been using, that there is a way of personifying stars and there’s a way of seeing them as cold, isolated bodies that may even be dead. The scientific way of looking at them, and also the personifying and emotive way of looking at them.

MB: Oh sure, that is the way they work. That’s how the title works for that particular poem which is a God’s-in-his-heaven-all’s-right-with-the-world scene down by the river on a Sunday morning. But, as the poem suggests, there are undercurrents. My big son Nathan wrote a make-believe review for his school newspaper once of what was supposed to be a record album by himself, since he’s a musician, and he called the title, with unerring accuracy an archer might envy, “Stars in the Skies, Stars in My Eyes.” He always had the ability to see through me.

TIR: “These Green-Going-to-Yellow” balances similar opposites.

MB: Yeah, that’s true. Michael Anania, the poet and fiction writer from Chicago, told me about something he had seen at the Edward Hopper show in New York City. I’ve been to the Hopper show, but I guess I haven’t looked at these sketches. Michael says there are some sketches for paintings in which Hopper wrote in the colors; he thinks that

Hopper wrote in, in one area of one drawing, “green going to yellow.” I suspect he wrote something more like “green to yellow.”

TIR: When you were putting this book together, when did you decide that that would be the title poem?

MB: I’m afraid I have to admit that I thought it would be the title when I wrote the poem. I thought, “This has got to be the title of the book.”

TIR: Why is that?

MB: It sounds relevant for its content, but really I was in love with it as a phrase. It’s an odd phrase. I’ve always liked titles that are odd.

TIR: And it seems appropriate, because in this book you appear to be more content to be in the middle of things. So many of these poems begin and stay in the middle of a situation. They’re kind of green-going-to-yellow poems, in a number of ways. And it’s a middle life book.

MB: I hope you’re right. That is, I hope it turns out to have been only the middle of my life.

TIR: The poems in the middle section go back to something you used to do a lot but didn’t do at all, I think, in *Stars Which See*—titles that move directly into the first line.

MB: I like titles which offer a little surprise in the space between the title and the first line. One of the surprises can turn out to be that the poem has already begun. Another thing you asked before was how a poem begins for me and, as is the case with most poets, most poems begin from a phrase. Sometimes that phrase is the title.

TIR: “These Green-Going-to-Yellow . . .”

MB: No, no. There the phrase comes out of the middle of the poem.

TIR: One of the most surprising titles for me is “A Motor.”

MB: I also like off-handed titles, when the poem weighs a lot, somehow. This is a poem that is very serious and goes on for some ways. It begins with the sound of a plane in the air—a motor. Of course, it must have more emotional resonance than that or one wouldn’t keep it; and you can come up with as many connotations for it as I can. We all contain a kind of biological motor that can give out. I found a title for an old poem this morning which I would have put in this book if I could have finished it. I changed two or three words and redid the last sentence; and I found a title in the middle of the poem after I had changed one word. I changed “water” to “winter.” Then I had the title; it comes over parts of two lines: “Feet in Winter, Head in the Sun.” It’s a poem in which I’m standing out in the backyard thinking about something that happened when I was a kid. I used to go to Yankee Stadium for double-

headers, thanks to an old lady I knew named Jessie Quince who had been a rabid New York Yankee fan. She had once lived in an apartment building with Bill Dickey and Frank Crosetti and a lot of the great Yankees from that time. She worked for my father—she was another odd duck. She was divorced, which was almost unheard of; no one knew a divorced person where I came from. Her house had burned down and so she had put a tar roof over her basement, and she lived in the basement. She had no intention of rebuilding her house; the basement was all the room she needed. She had a coin collection at the time her house burned down. Every once in a while she'd give me some coins, some of which would have been melted from the fire—wonderful. Every year for my birthday, she'd take me to a double-header at Yankee Stadium. And, sometimes, I would stand outside by the clubhouse afterwards hoping DiMaggio or, at least, Snuffy Stirnweiss would come out and I could get an autograph. One day there was a swarming and a worried-looking policeman but it was only—and you must remember that I was a young boy—it was only Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. But, in the poem, as I stand out back, listening to the gutters rumble with thawing snow, Bogart's face comes back, with all its ugliness, rather than the heroes' faces. So, I'm standing there in the water; it's a three-day-old snow, just melting. So, I changed the word "water" to "winter." Instead of standing in water; I'm now standing in winter. It's mythic.

TIR: But in finding that word, in finding "winter," you were controlled by the dimensions of the first word, rhythmically and in sound.

MB: Oh, yeah; one of the tricks is to forget that damn first word. You're right. It's hard to substitute for a word a word that contains more syllables. Unless you've made a rhythmic mistake in the first place. Sometimes all it takes is a word or two words or three words to fix up a poem or one word here and two words there. A great portion of the process of revision, for me, is letting enough time elapse so that I arrive at the point at which the poem has already arrived, so that I can see it and accept it for what it is. Before that, my revision tends to be a strain; it tends to be a violent changing of the poem, which won't work. I have to let poems lay around. Do poems lay around or lie around? I should have been an English major.

TIR: They lay around, naturally.

MB: Most poems lay around. You guys don't know it, but I published a poem in Kim Merker's limited edition, *Things We Dreamt We Died For*

which is called "What I Did in Paris in the Twenties" and the first line is "I lay around."

TIR: That may be saying more than you meant to say.

MB: Or I may have meant everything it says. Paris in the twenties was very exciting.

TIR: The most muted aspect of your poetry for me is its music, as opposed to the modulation of a speaking voice. You seem to cultivate an odd duck's way of talking about whatever is around.

MB: I'm trying to use a voice that *is* a voice, not of the page but of the vocal chords, a voice one can hear.

TIR: I find that particularly evident in this book. I mean, this book seems to be held together by that voice. In every poem, I can hear that same voice telling me the poem, whereas, in *Stars Which See*, I heard very different voices. Even when the pace picks up here, I hear the same voice tell the poems.

MB: I hope you're right.

TIR: And it has a certain social validity to it; that is, it's not anybody else's voice.

MB: If that's true, then I'm lucky. *Stars Which See*, *Stars Which Do Not See* is a pretty book even when it's quarreling with the reader, or with the self, or with concepts. Its poems are beautiful, even elegant. And I knew that. I'm pleased with its being like that. But the poems I have written since are not pretty in that sense. They have to be authenticated by means of the voice and by means of the physical evidence of the world that each poem offers. If they are not, they'll fall on their faces.

TIR: Was there a period you went through after *Stars* when you were not writing much?

MB: It's happened after every book. Boy, how I wish it wouldn't. But it happened after this book, too; an involuntary silence.

TIR: Are you waiting for that voice to clear away?

MB: I think that must be part of it. It's hard not to write a poem that sounds like what you've been writing. I am beginning to write again.

TIR: Do you have steady habits of writing, times of day?

MB: I wish I did. I think it's good for people to have such habits. I don't. I tend to boil over on my own schedule, an erratic schedule. All I can be sure of is that I love to write when I'm writing. It just plain feels good; I enjoy it. That is, if poems worth saving are coming out. I want the mind to be doing things, somehow, things it can only do in poems. Whatever they are.

TIR: What are they?

MB: I was trying to escape. You know, Williams says in the beginning of "Asphodel"; he says, "It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." And, of course, those are ironic lines because the man who's going to die if news can't be found in poems is Williams, in this case, because he's trying to confess something. And he wants it understood and he wants it accepted. In fact, he wants to be patted on the head and told, "That's alright, dear, I love you anyway." But I should add that somewhere else Williams says something about finding truth only in poems. I believe that there's some area of truth that *can* only be found in poems. I really believe that. Again, maybe it's just in my nature to believe that. Remember, I always like things which are instructional, even corrective. I always like things which constitute a moral engagement with the world or, at least, an interest in ethics. So, it may just be in my nature.

TIR: Here we go back to content again.

MB: It's the crust of the poem, I mean, if a poem is only music, what chance does it have? Music is better music. That the poem aspires to the condition of music is, to me—forgive me—a limited notion of poetry. I think it aspires to something else.

TIR: Off and on, in casual conversation, you have made remarks like, "That's poetry." "That's not poetry." "You can tell that's a line of poetry." "That's prose." I wonder when you're making judgments like that . . .

MB: Poetry has something to do with a quality of imagination, I think. Now, it can be bad poetry. But, when I say, "That's poetry." "That's not poetry," I'm making a distinction of genre. Okay? It can be slight poetry. It can be useless poetry. For example—and I know this is heresy—but I think many of the ideas in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, who was considered a poet of ideas, to be essentially useless ideas. That's a whole category of ideas in my thinking: *useless ideas*, ideas which aren't ideas at all, unless you wear special glasses. I think that Williams is a much smarter poet than Stevens. I'll get a lot of letters about that. But I think one of the tests of the intelligence is its ability to extend its labors. And where does one extend one's labors? Into the theoretical world that depends on words or into the world of physical evidence? It seems to me far more difficult and profound to extend them into the world of physical evidence.

TIR: That's what you mean by useful, that the ideas connect with what one calls the world?

MB: Even as I say it, I realize that the word, “useful,” isn’t quite accurate; but, yes, ideas which are at least engaged, somehow, with the physical world.

TIR: Williams is always talking about things being grounded, whereas Stevens is always working up toward or into the blue.

MB: But Stevens is well organized, as a good executive would have to be. One has the feeling that, if Stevens had given some of his actuarial tables to Williams, Williams would have messed them all up, in some interesting way, and he would have charged everybody the wrong premiums.

TIR: Or he would have incorporated them into a poem.

MB: That’s right. You know the famous interview with Mike Wallace—of all people—he reads a passage from *Paterson* and says, “That sounds like a shopping list.” And Williams says, “It is.”

TIR: Then there’s the report of the well-digging: “two feet of shale and . . .”

MB: But Williams knew when to stop. In my opinion, Charles Olson didn’t know when to stop. Williams always did something with the facts but Olson’s facts took over his mind, I think.

A poet I admire very much among contemporary poets—and it seems difficult, somehow, to mention his name because he died recently—is James Wright. Everybody will be mentioning his name, with good reason. But long before he died I had become terribly involved with poems of his, in several books, particularly *Two Citizens* and *To A Blossoming Pear Tree*. His whole sense of what poetry is appeals to me a great deal.

TIR: Ethical reasons, there too, right?

MB: Well, yeah, though he isn’t beset by as much thinking about things as I am. He feels his way through things more than I usually do.

TIR: But there’s a moral edge.

MB: Oh, absolutely, that’s right, yeah; indeed, he even says things in poems which pay homage to his readings in the classics and his readings in moralistic texts.

TIR: He disavowed *Two Citizens* in an interview in *APR*.

MB: Yeah, well, two of his friends convinced him it was a bad book; but they were wrong. For one thing, that book contains one of the best poems I know, a poem called “The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” which begins, “I am almost afraid to write down/This thing.” It’s an incredible poem and it’s in *Two Citizens*. And

there are others, the *ars poetica* that begins the book is pretty interesting, I think. He says something very telling in it. He's talking at one point about his Aunt Agnes who is a sloppy woman, a woman one would not be attracted to ordinarily; and he talks about his uncle who's married to her. "He's one of the heroes of love," he says, "because I know he lay down with Agnes at least twice." He goes on like that; and, of course, he's setting you up because, as it turns out, a bunch of boys chased a goat one day, and threw stones at it. The goat goes up into an alley and here's Agnes. Agnes gathers the goat up into her arms and protects it. Well, of course, Agnes was terrific. In the same poem, he says at one point, "Reader we had a lovely language. We would not listen."

Part Two

TIR: Marvin, you talked about the influence of Dewey; and I've wondered how seriously to take that. I mean, we've talked about the ethical aspect of your poetry. My memory of Dewey and ethics is that Dewey was a pragmatist. After the First World War, most of Dewey's followers thought that ethical element reflected a permutation of New England puritanism; and yet most could agree that his ethics were those of a practical man, as he moved through various ethical considerations, in education, in aesthetics and so on. So when I come back to the business of ethics in your poetry, having your remarks about Dewey to think back on, I want to know what you took from Dewey.

I'll tell you why I ask the question: I find a kind of polarity in a lot of your poetry. That is, you'll take a position and then, very soon afterwards, you introduce the opposite of that position. Later you'll attempt to make a synthesis in which more questions are asked than are answered. The moral forces governing your work never seem to add up to an absolute position. Rather, your work offers possibilities, let loose with their opposites, in a game of wit and irresolution, leaving to the reader such conclusions as he chooses to make from a dense and tonally reflexive language. While one can take seriously an influence from Dewey, ethics seems to me to be more rigid than all that, seems to me to be a kind of order, the manipulation of which adds up to specific judgments as to belief or behavior. If, then, making judgments in the world really adds up to question marks, how can it be said of your poetry that you, as poet, have worked within ethical parameters? Or are you satisfied that any poem is in itself an ethical statement?

MB: Okay, well, that description of some of my poems seems a fair description. What carries over for me from Dewey is that sense of being practical. They used to call him “the practical philosopher.” On the one hand, he may have been in part a puritan; he certainly wanted everything to be useful and to produce a desired result. On the other hand, he would recommend that the chairs in classrooms not be bolted, which seems mildly liberating. So, what I think I carry over—not just from Dewey but from other people who interested me—was a sense of the usefulness of ideas. In fact, I came to believe—I think I came to believe—that ideas which are not useful ideas are not actually ideas. That sounds terrible because we all know that there is theoretical mathematics as well as applied mathematics; and, in fact, as a mathematics student, I was always interested in the theoretical even to the point of trying to disprove theorems—all those things that kids do. But it seems to me still that there is such a thing as a useless idea. I think I was saying something like this last time. And there has been in my poetry, whether there still is or not I’m not positive, but there has been in my poetry a strong argumentative or correctional element; and I’ve accepted that. That’s something many poets would think a liability. Perhaps I should too; but it’s just part of my nature: I like things to be useful. I like wisdom in poems; I really do. I continue to like Stafford’s poems for the wisdom in them. I continue to like Williams’ poems for the wisdom in them. And yet I don’t feel that poetry depends on wisdom. There are a few of my poems in which, I think, I make statements having directly to do with ethics; the best example may be a poem called, “After the Ducks Went In.”

If I look at poems from *These Green-Going-to-Yellow* and look for ethical edges, if you will, or the edges of ethics, perhaps—I am not sure how to articulate it—and yet . . .

TIR: There are quite a few passages in which you seem to have something you want to say; but I am not sure whether you’d think of this as ethical or not. For example, the second poem in the manuscript, “Haleakala Crater, Maui,” where you say “It wasn’t perfection I wanted,/with its need for form, hollow/unbroken shell, for all we know.” That seems to be making a judgment, more likely about poetry and art than about society and social problems, but that kind of definitive statement appears once in a while in your poems. “I know what poetry is” is another one—remember that?

MB: Oh, yes. That’s in “You Can Keep the Sun Out of Your Eyes with

Just One Hand.” “I know by now that art/is a part of life, and I know what part/it is” and then there was, in an earlier version of the poem, a colon instead of a period and it said, “The arty part.” I swear—I swear it was in there. Somebody told me to take it out, and he was right.

TIR: And then you make, in I think a related line, an attractive statement, “I would hope to hell/not to cover my tracks with elegies.”

MB: Right. Some of the statements that I would regard as having an ethical basis have to do with our acts in literature as writers, even as readers.

TIR: I was going to ask, when you mentioned useless ideas, whether you had a sense of the ends toward which your ideas intended to be useful, some selection of ends that interested you more than others.

MB: Well, my notion of that is too ideal, I think. You know, one way to change society is to cut off the heads of all the people who are in positions of power; but then, inevitably, the people who take their positions grow heads that are strikingly similar. The other way, though it often seems so theoretical, the other way is to change individual consciousness. If artists, writers, teachers of any kind have anything to do with changing the world, that’s the way they do it, it seems to me. Now, you know, we’re always talking about how little influence serious literature has; on the other hand, someone arguing with me said, “Well, now, there are some books in the libraries of all people who are in positions of power.” I hesitate to think what books those might be nowadays, but . . .

You were on a good investigative track when you asked how much involvement with ethics these statements have, which is sometimes not much, but here’s another example. At the end of a poem which begins, “He said to/crawl *toward* the machine guns,” the poem says, “I made a man/to survive the Army, which means/that I made a man to survive/being a man.” Well, that’s a position. Is that a useful idea? I suppose it might be to someone who was, say, eighteen, who was thinking of joining the army and thought he would be more manly for it.

TIR: It’s fairly common for poets to devalue the literal statement of what’s in their poems. Creeley talks in an interview about the literal statement of a poem not being what’s principally of value in the poem, although it may matter. That’s such a truism about modern poetry, that you’re surprising me, somewhat, with the interest you take in having things to say. Even unto aphorisms. Some of your statements have an aphoristic ring to them.

MB: Well, I've always been interested in statements. In fact I published and edited a literary magazine years ago which was called *Statements*. I chose that title deliberately. It lasted for five issues over five years, and each issue was a different size.

TIR: Do you like aphorisms for their own sake?

MB: I like aphorisms which are metaphysical. I used some in books you know. "If you can't get up, get down; if you can't get across, get across"—that's a Yiddish proverb, although it sounds like Zen. Or in an early book, one of the two Yiddish proverbs I used was "Dumplings in a dream are not dumplings but a dream." I mean, that seems to me a hard-nosed distinction that is useful. But I like those kinds of things. My favorite little tale, I don't know what it is—fable I guess—is supposed to be a story they tell in the Mideast. It's about the scorpion and the frog. The scorpion comes to the frog and says, "Give me a ride on your back across the river." The frog says, "Do I look stupid? If I put you on my back, you'll sting me to death." But the scorpion says, "Why would I do that? If I stung you to death, I'd drown." The frog says, "You've got a point there. Hop on," and starts across the river. Halfway across, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog is going into paralysis and says, "What'd you do that for?" And the scorpion sort of shrugs and says, "I don't know. It's the Mideast."

TIR: I heard a story recently that reminds me of the way your poems work. It must be an old joke because I think I remember hearing it before, but you know, coming in the middle of the interview, I was thinking, "Well, that works just like a Marvin Bell poem works." I heard it as a Texas Aggie joke, it could be anything. There were a Frenchman, an Italian, and a Texas Aggie who had been on a large luxury cruiser and the cruiser had sunk and everything had gone down except for one lifeboat, with these three guys in it. And they'd been rowing for days and they were dehydrated and they had no water and no food and they were tired and they were rowing and rowing in the middle of the ocean. Eventually a little bottle floats up to the boat and they look over and the Frenchman leans over and picks the bottle up, pulls the cork out of the bottle and a genie comes out. He says, "I will grant you any wish that you want. Each of you has one wish, any wish." And the Frenchman says, "*Mon Dieu*, this is marvelous, what luck, what good fortune." He says, "I wish that I were on the Left Bank at a sidewalk cafe drinking the best French wine." Poof, he's there. The Italian says, "I wish I were in St. Peter's listening to the Pope celebrating

Mass.” And he’s there. The genie looks at the Aggie and says, “And what is your wish?” The Aggie looks around and he says, “I wish to hell those two guys were back here helping me row!”

MB: That does put the dilemma all right.

TIR: “I wish to hell those two guys were back here helping me row!” There we are. He may be a little dumb, but my god he’s going to have somebody in there helping him row. That Aggie knows damn well he’s not a god.

MB: That is terrific.

TIR: You said that you like wisdom in poetry.

MB: I confess that I do.

TIR: And yet you said that you don’t think poetry depends upon that.

MB: No. Wisdom by itself is not enough.

TIR: What is most necessary?

MB: Maybe I could say two things at once. Poetry is a kind of reporting. Stafford has a poem called “Reporting Back” and that’s what poetry is. Now if a poet is like me, he has to report back ideas as well as other things because he can’t stop having them. Some poets are able to report back without ever stating ideas directly, without statements of any sort in their poetry. It’s not part of their normal way of thinking. So, why are those pieces of wisdom—if that’s what they are—in the poem? Well, because that’s part of the poet’s experience, having those ideas and trying to find a place for them or opposing them to other evidence. So . . . poetry depends on reporting something: you’re reporting your feelings, you’re reporting the place and the plot, you’re reporting your ideas.

TIR: But lots of writing can be reporting, so is there something without which poetry cannot be? Don Justice’s phrase for it, his phrase for what just had to be there, was “technical virtue.” Then he sort of apologized for using the term but came back to it and said “yeah, I really believe that; without that you don’t have poetry. At least not very good poetry.” I wondered whether there was something, maybe not calling it that. Maybe something quite different . . .

MB: Well, that seems like a good phrase. I mean there has to be some . . . poetry has to protect its language as it goes along, I think. “Technical virtue,” Don’s phrase, seems a good phrase for it. There has to be—I mean, maybe that phrase of his takes in not only questions about what is formal, which we might propose, but also questions about what is moral or ethical. “Technical virtue” seems like a wonderful phrase. If he’s not using it today I’d like to employ it. Sure, the poem seems to

pay attention to itself, if one is technically virtuous, if one's virtue can be seen in one's technique, that is, and if one's technique can be seen in the virtue that is expressed in the poem—that seems a little more difficult to pin down.

TIR: Your poems seem to listen to themselves intently as they go along. I want to ask about the closure of a poem, where you come to rest. "The Hedgeapple," for instance, ends so perfectly—"So: here."

MB: I hope you're right. I've been worried about that ending ever since I wrote it.

TIR: Oh, I really like that. I keep coming back to it. As against "So there."

MB: Right. I guess that sums up a number of the ideas swirling about in the poem. One is that "the language we spoke seemed to make light everywhere/because we stopped to look," so we were lucky—the poem actually says, "We were lucky," the three of us, look: here we had this social interchange going around about this hedgeapple. The good thing that emerges from this has to do with the three of us sharing the experience and even talking about it. The hedgeapple is perfect by itself and doesn't require us. In the end there's another idea and that is about who owns this hedgeapple. "We thought we didn't take her hedgeapple," the poem says, and then right away it says, "We should have given it back." We didn't take it but in a sense we did. We used it, and we didn't include the woman in that act of possession. So I can't give her the hedgeapple back, it's her hedgeapple, how can I give it back to her? And furthermore, I'm no longer there. But I can give her (and you) this that we made out of the hedgeapple, which is now another form of the hedgeapple. "So: here."

TIR: It's a wonderful opening to the book. Because that's what every poem does, right?

MB: Exactly. That's why I put it first.

TIR: There's a very interesting way in which in that poem the word "light" becomes radiant itself. You begin to collect all the possibilities. Radiance, I mean, it's almost as if the poem is itself a gesture making light of that situation but the light is also reflective of an inner knowledge that the poem allows for the three involved in that experience. "Light" becomes one of your most repeated words in the volume.

MB: There's a lot of light there, yeah. I don't know if that's because light is everywhere or if it's because I grew up on fairly flat land and now live again on fairly flat land.

TIR: There's also lightness, deftness. That wisdom that we keep talking about could come across as heavy, heavy-footed—but it never does because there's a kind of "making light" in the poetry. Let's return to your talk last time about writing experimentally. I'd like to get you to say more about the nature of your experimentalism and where it's led you.

MB: Well, I don't want to claim too much and it's hard to put one's finger on it for sure, I guess, but for me it has mostly to do with content and what is acceptable in a poem and how a poem can think, how it can stop and start up again, what directions—along the periphery of whatever is central to it—it can accept new things from, and so forth. Experiments are tests, right? And so the poem is, for me at least, a kind of test. It's a test of whatever began the poem, whether an image, a piece of language, a phrase, or a sentence or even a statement. By writing the poem I'm testing what I came with.

TIR: Testing it to see how it can connect with something else?

MB: To see if it really was something. To see what it connects to. What the context of it was. It's as if a new—I'm not trying to make up metaphors for it now—but it's as if you found a piece of something and were not able to identify it. So now you try to put it in different contexts and run experiments on it to see what it is, to find out what it is.

TIR: Just to tie this for a minute with the ends of the poems, it seems to me that a lot of times at the end of the poem you've taken the piece and put it in a certain puzzle. Now you've found some sort of coherence. The end will often be taking that puzzle piece and putting it in place where it works in one or two contexts at once.

MB: That makes sense to me, yeah. To find the place where something belongs; as I say, that doesn't correspond to any established meaning of "experimental" but . . .

TIR: One of the questions you must always be asking, then, is how will this poem extend itself? One of the poems I am very fond of is the one called "The Canal at Rye." It begins and makes a change that raises that question.

MB: I almost didn't put this poem in the book because it becomes so full of statements, so rhetorical and so bald, in a sense, at the end. I do like it—it's not that I didn't like it—but I began to feel scared But it feels right. The poem says, "Don't let them tell you—/the women or the men—/they knew me./You knew me./Don't let them tell you/I didn't love your mother./I loved her./Or let them tell you." Well, now,

that's not a poem, that much, so what comes next? I don't think more such statements can follow.

TIR: It's the two opening gambits, though, of a lot of the poems: Statement X, elaborate a little, Statement Y, elaborate a little, and where the poems "make light," is in a third move.

MB: That's right. Either way would not mean much: let them tell you, don't let them tell you . . . so what? What does all that matter? But I knew that when I wrote the line, "Do you remember Rye," and began to describe this wonderful canal that's so thin because the water has receded and the sailboats have to go out single-file in the morning . . . when I said "Do you remember Rye," I didn't know what was going to come next; maybe nothing. But I do implicitly . . . I do believe, in fact, that anything can be connected, and I don't even mean it *can* be connected, I mean that it *is* connected: all things are connected if one can just find the path from one thing to another without going all the way around the world, as it were, without including every possible thing. So I went on with the description for awhile; I mean things do progress out that canal.

TIR: So you take the scenic route between two points, not necessarily the shortest.

MB: Well, not the shortest, but the one that will let you arrive at the right place, or at a place worth arriving at, but not until you're ready to arrive there. Imagine someone being told to "go out and become a man" or "go out and become a woman" and you have to end up in this other town, but you can't get there until four years have passed. It's an old story, of course. But this poem begins to talk about a great novelist who lived in Rye, and of course at the end of the poem, if one doesn't know, one will find out that it was Henry James. Henry James wrote books that are not widely read anymore, at least outside of the university. One of the reasons they're thought difficult, and by some people no doubt unworthy, is that the sentences are so long; and as you know as James got older and began to dictate his books his sentences got even longer, because it was so much easier to just walk around the room dictating longer and longer sentences. After a while there was no need for the sentence ever to stop. Okay, so "Not many will be reading/his long sentences." And there's kind of an implication, I guess, whoever's being addressed in this poem is being told, "Well, don't let them tell you," or "Let them tell you"—none of that matters; here's another way to think abc it me.

"Sentence" can cut two ways here. Of course, syntax is logic—that's part of what that means. "There are reasons/not to, reasons too/to believe or not to. But/reasons do not complete an argument./The natural end and extension/of language is nonsense." It's true; if language is pushed sufficiently far it turns into nonsense, no matter how sensible it was in the beginning. We see that in certain schools of criticism, we might add. "Yet there is safety/only there," the poem goes on to say; "That is why Mr. Henry James/wrote that way—/out with the tide"—like those sailboats that went out the canal in Rye—"but further." In language one can go further in some directions than one can ever go in one's physical life. I feel as if maybe I'm squashing it by summarizing it.

TIR: So many of your poems seem to begin in impatience, or a sort of rebellion.

MB: Yeah . . .

TIR: . . . and end with a kind of ambiguity that you can accept.

MB: Absolutely.

TIR: The gesture is "No, not that" and "No, not this"—BUT—and then a long suspension. They end often in gentleness, with an acceptance of ambiguity. It's as if you work what seems to be a dichotomy into an acceptable blur, one you feel you can live with. It's as if there's been a softening of the mood; from abruptness to calmness, at the end of the poems. That's not the way they all work, but many of them do.

MB: I think that's a wise remark. I have been thinking lately that maybe I write as if there's a little crisis at the beginning of every poem, and maybe therefore within the poet, I'm not sure. That may be changing.

TIR: The setting of *These Green-Going-to-Yellow* is a much more populous world, a warmer world; the poems are all making connections with other people, and coming to understandings with others rather than the often solitary understandings of *Stars Which See*.

MB: There is almost a whole section of this book which contains stories, and for a while I had decided that I would write poems mostly by telling about things that happened. For better or worse, a lot of interesting little things have happened to me, strange little things, like going to Cuba at what proved to be the wrong time, things like that. And I decided to try to put those in poems. After all, one of the secrets of literature every writer knows is that any life will do. It's not necessary to go bathe one's feet in the Ganges and travel around the world and work on a steamer to be a poet, nor is it prohibitive. . . . Meaning is in the small things. That's true, even of architecture.

TIR: One thing I see happening in these new poems that I don't think has happened before in your work, at least not frequently, is that part of the warmth here comes from the way you are continually at play with the reader—"What's the matter?/You don't believe the rain in Paris is red?" "If it happened to you,/maybe you wouldn't know what to say." "I never told you./There was a woman . . ." or "Don't let them tell you . . . they knew me." There's that "you" that comes so often at the beginning of these poems and is always addressed in a playful way, as if to say that there's something here I'm not about to tell you, but there's something else I *am* about to tell you.

Or again that place where you say, in "Things I Took," "Look at stanza one/compared to stanza two . . ." You step back and say, okay reader, let's take a look at this poem, and let's do a little analysis here; it's kind of interesting, isn't it, the difference between stanza one and stanza two, and what I could have put in one and couldn't put in the other.

MB: Well, I like intimacy in poems, and I think poems also gain from being addressed to someone, even if the reader doesn't know who that someone is. I think the tone of the poem is helped too, to speak about a smaller thing, perhaps. I like those things; again, to think of the beginning of the James Wright poem that we've already mentioned, "The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio," he begins "I am almost afraid to write down/This thing." One can imagine any good teacher saying, "Oh, just cut that stuff out, Jim, and get to it." But enormous intimacy is provided by those lines and, then, you *have* to read on. One of the tests of a first line in a poem is probably, simply, "do you want to read on, or do you want to go out for popcorn?"

TIR: There's a kind of trick in these poems that makes you lean into them; it's like *The Secret Sharer* where they have to whisper to each other. The poem starts in a kind of low tone, and you have to lean in to have any relationship with it. One of your more intimate poems, called "The Last Thing I Say," is interesting for several reasons; one is the intimacy of the occasion and the tenderness of the tone. Another, the way it sits playfully, after "The Canal at Rye," where you've said so much about sentences, and then this one turns out to be one long sentence.

MB: One *hopelessly* long sentence.

TIR: How in the world did you get into that; did you say "I'm going to write a poem all in one sentence"?

MB: No, there just didn't seem to be any place to stop until the end of the poem. Again, it's just an intuitive sense of things, but once it got going . . . of course some of it's a decision; there are places where there could have been a period, but instead there's a comma. I wanted it all to run together; I wanted many things to happen at once during the moment in which a father closes—in which I, in fact, close my son's bedroom door and say "sweet dreams." Obviously, in any situation in which your emotions are involved you feel many things at once. The sentence is a little complicated.

TIR: You speak in the former poem, "The Canal at Rye," about long sentences, and avoiding long sentences, and then turning back to the sentence, and then you have this sentence poem.

MB: That's why it's there, sure; also it's "the last thing I say" in section two.

TIR: But not the last thing you say; it's fine having "The Last Thing I Say" not be the last thing you say in the book.

MB: It was last in the book for a while, but I moved it. That would have been too clever, wouldn't it, if it were last in the book?

TIR: After our first discussion, we were talking and you said that as you were thinking more about where the origins of your poems were, you noted that one thing you hadn't said which you think is true is that the origin of many of your poems is in letters you write to friends.

MB: Well, to this extent: when I'm writing, I feel like writing. The opposite of that is true, too, unfortunately. And if I'm writing letters to friends—I tend to write fast; I type with two fingers which allows me to type as fast as I can, and so if I'm writing a letter to someone, I tend to just invent as I go. I mean, once I've answered the three questions that were in the other person's letter, whatever is required, then there's the rest of the letter to be written, and that's an occasion for having fun. So I start having fun with whatever there is to report, or whatever jokes I can make that the other person might like, or whatever. It's the same kind of invention that one is easily seduced by in writing poetry, I think. Sometimes a phrase will come out of it that seems serious, more serious than I meant, or maybe no more serious than I meant, but worth being . . . there's a bigger location for it than that letter, and I want to find that location. That happens sometimes. I'll take phrases right out of essays, and vice-versa; I'll put into essays phrases which are lying there on paper that I hoped would hold a poem. The boundaries between genres don't seem any more fixed to me than they must seem to anyone else.

TIR: Speaking of the relationship between poems and letters, this is a good point to move to the book of poems you and William Stafford are doing together, poems written back and forth to each other. Will you talk a little about how that book is constructed?

MB: Oh, in a very loose way, although sometimes the connections that result are not loose. I had thought about doing this, and not just with anybody but in fact with Bill, for years, but I never had the nerve to suggest it. Finally we were both at the First Annual Midnight Sun Writers' Conference in Fairbanks, Alaska, in June of 1979. Maybe that yellowish light that lasts all night at that time of the year there got my nerve up, or maybe I just hadn't had enough sleep, but we were walking along one day midway through the conference and I sort of mentioned this as something I had once thought about, not quite suggesting it, and he right away took up the idea and said, "Great," so I got home and I tried to write a poem to him to start the series; and I was trying to, I felt somehow required to, use material from there in Alaska. In fact, I may have felt required without realizing it to use the pronoun "we," because I kept saying "we, we, we" but the material I wanted to put into the poem didn't have anything to do with Bill; it happened at Mt. McKinley where I went afterward. So I was having a problem with truth; why couldn't I have said "we" even though I was the one on the raft and he wasn't? I couldn't do it. And I still have that darn poem; I've tried to put it in the series over and over, and each time truth rears its ugly head and I can't do it. Well, before I could get anything better written, a poem arrived from him with a note saying, "I wasn't sure who was to begin, so here goes." Now theoretically each poem answers the other in some way, or responds to it, and indeed sometimes the connections are quite clear—there's a little quarrel about attitude or something, how to take something, or there's a parallel plot: my memory stirs his memory, or his memory stirs mine. He has an idea about something; I have a somewhat similar but different idea about something similar. Or a situation that's similar. But sometimes the connections are looser than that, and you have to read into the first poem to see a phrase that triggered the second poem.

My publisher told me that Bill Merwin once suggested something similar to James Merrill, but it never came to be, I think. One has to be able to feel that a project like this is not going to deplete the poems one would otherwise write, deplete the energies. And I feel that I can do both things. Because I feel as if I'm sometimes more than one person.

I know Bill Stafford can do both. . . . Bill could take on *ten* correspondents like this, and still manage his own work.

TIR: Like a chess master, with ten games going on at once.

MB: Absolutely. His attitude toward writing is marvelous. His sense of the forgivable is just wonderful.

TIR: The correspondence sounds very sustaining.

MB: I admire his poetry, I admire his lifestyle, I admire everything about him. I always have. It's in my nature to want to make people into fathers, I think. I have to fight against that, and I certainly don't want to do that to him. But I do admire him greatly; he's a genuinely admirable man, with a life made out of whole cloth.

TIR: He's the person who says in a poem somewhere, "you feel oppressed? Get up at five a.m."

MB: He's a very interesting man with an extraordinarily unusual mind. I think that, as famous as he is, his work is one of the secrets of American poetry. I think he's famous for a lot of easy reasons, and he's much better than that. His work is experimental—we were talking before about what is experimental—it's experimental in its notion of composition, and it's experimental in its ideas toward the world and how it applies them in the poems.

It may have been Don Justice who said this, but whoever said it, I agree: work that seems very experimental in style often masks a very conventional mind. Work that seems conventional and off-handed in style often masks an unconventional mind. It's not a rule, but . . .

TIR: How many poems are going to be in the book with Stafford?

MB: Well, as many as we have when the deadline draws near. The series will continue; the book will just put covers around a section of it.

TIR: You're not working toward a conclusion?

MB: Not exactly, but I must confess that when I asked Godine to delay the publication one season I was aware that the series could use another turn in order to be a book. We did have enough poems, but there had been a kind of change after the first eighteen poems or so and now the next change in direction was slow in making itself known. It has worked out very well so far, I think.

TIR: And what direction do you see yourself continuing on your own, aside from the poems to Stafford?

MB: I have an idea of the kind of poem I'd like to write. I have some sense of what my language is now. There's a line between being fluent and being facile. In any case, I don't have to make as many choices now

as I once had to make about style, for example. I know what my language is; I might push it in this direction or that, but I know where it's located within me. I would like to increase my range, and of course everyone would like to extend his emotional depth. And everyone has in mind poems by other people they would have liked to have written. TIR: Like "The Old WPA Swimming Pool . . ."

MB: Right. I would like to write a poem like "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." That seems to be one of the great poems—about as long a poem as I would ever want to write. I don't have any burning desire to write an epic. The only good that comes out of it is critical attention, as far as I can tell. I would rather have written "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" than *Paterson*. I recognize *Paterson* as a marvelous poem, and Book V of *Paterson* as a lyric poem all by itself. But I still would rather have written "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower."

TIR: And you don't seem to be looking for all-encompassing metaphors, like the city of *Paterson*.

MB: No. That, to me, always rings hollow. I would like very much to have written a book like Williams' *Spring and All* which actually he wrote in 1923 and which is prose and poetry, the poetry partly illustrating the radical aesthetic idea of the prose.

When I went to Spain for most of a year I took two books: I took a dictionary and I took *Spring and All*. I had a notion of keeping a journal that would result in a book similar in form to *Spring and All*, but I never did it, although I probably have the pieces, not just in a journal but in miscellaneous pages gathered over the years. I could probably put together a book that would be similar to *Spring and All*. Maybe I will.