SHIRA RICHMAN AND MAYA JEWELL ZELLER

A Conversation with
Tess Gallagher
July 16, 2007

Tess Gallagher was born in Port Angeles, Washington, to logger parents—her mother was a choker-setter and her father was a spar-tree rigger. The fact that she lives in Port Angeles now could make her life seem deceptively simple. Gallagher has lived and traveled all over the world. She has graduate degrees from the University of Iowa and the University of Washington, where she studied with Theodore Roethke in his last poetry workshop. She has taught at the University of Montana, Syracuse University, the University of Arizona at Tucson, and St. Lawrence University in New York, among other places, and has made regular trips to Ireland since 1968. It was through friends in Ireland that she met Josie Gray, her "Irish companion," with whom she has co-authored *Barnacle Soup*, a collaboration of stories Gray has crafted through years of their telling, which Gallagher has captured and preserved on the page.

Gallagher has participated in other collaborative efforts including translating the work of Romanian poet Liliana Ursu, and writing plays and screenplays with her late husband Raymond Carver. She has published eight books of poetry: *Instructions to the Double*, *Under Stars*, *Willingly*, *Amplitude*, *Moon Crossing Bridge*, *Portable Kisses*, *My Black Horse*, and *Dear Ghosts*; two books of essays, *A Concert of Tenses* and *Soul Barnacles*; two collections of short stories, *The Lover of Horses* and *At the Owl Woman Saloon*; and a book-length interview with Japanese novelist and Buddhist nun, Jakucho Setouchi, *Distant Rain*.

Gallagher's work is "substantial yet lambent, earthy and spiritual," writes Donna Seaman of *Booklist*, and "evokes the power of the unseen as well as the seen with breathtaking clarity, creating metaphors so

surprising, radiant, and apt that the world seems to expand in their wake." In a way not unlike Wordsworth, Gallagher manages to enshrine not only the mundane, but the tragic, by seeing the world as her holy place. She was generous enough to invite us to her home where she served us homemade date-bran muffins and raspberries that she had picked the day before. We ate and talked over coffee in a room with walls of windows, surrounded by trees.

MAYA ZELLER

Your connection to the land is apparent in your work. Do you think this connection is amplified because of your roots in Port Angeles?

TESS GALLAGHER

Two things were very important. One was that my mother was actually from farm people in the Missouri Ozarks. They had a thousand acres, and I had access to that land when I was a child and I could range over that acreage—walking and on horseback—and explore. I don't know how many children really get to explore vast amounts of territory like that; it builds something else in you. I went into caves where the Indians had lived and I was out in the fields planting the grain crops and taking hay to the cattle and helping my uncle deliver calves, and was there for the sheep shearing. My father came from itinerant farmers. They were poor and they rented land and farmed it and made gardens. My mother made her own garden as long as she possibly could and I used to garden with her.

My parents decided they wanted to give us something nobody else would give us and that was the experience of farming. So when I was about ten, they bought a little piece of land, out west of town at a place called Dry Creek, about fourteen acres. We learned milking cows. We had chickens, pigs, and raised calves we fed on the bucket, and we also did planting.

Those two things are important, my grandfather's land and the acreage my parents bought, and maybe a third thing would be that my mother and I ended up being widows together here in Port Angeles. She had that farming gene deep in her—that need to dig and make outdoor spaces. So she and I gardened together. When I was having trouble with my garden, she would come over and in ten minutes she could make

things right. She had a real knack for using tools and improving, and she was strong.

One time we were planting a rose over here on this side of the house before the trees got so tall and we hit a boulder. I said, "Oh Mother, let's not plant it here. This is a boulder. Let's just choose another place." "No," she said. "The boulder is coming out." For two hours we dug this boulder. When we got it all dug around, I said, "Well, how in the world are we going to get it out?" She said, "Get a plank," so I went and found an old board. We stuck this down in under the edge of the boulder. I mean, it was the size of—I don't know if there's anything in this room that I could tell you. About two of those dog beds. Huge. She says, "Push down on the plank and we'll see if you can budge it." I couldn't budge it much so the two of us got on the end of that board and we rolled that stone up out of that hole. We got another plank, so the two of us were on two different planks and we managed to pry it out.

It was really an incredible feat, but when I go back to that, I ask, What was happening there? Okay, we moved that stone, but there was something about her will that was aptly demonstrated. I hope if I got anything from her, and I know I did, that one of the things I got is, Just don't give up. Find a way. She could always find a way, and she was often proving that the way is close at hand.

SHIRA RICHMAN

How does gardening fit into your creative process?

GALLAGHER

Well you know, you have the body—the whole body. You cannot be there writing the poem hour and hour and day and day. You're not just this walking head. So you have to figure out some things to do with the rest of the body, things that make your body a whole thing instead of just a head running everything.

Gardening integrates my intelligence without my having to think about it. I love digging. I like to plant flowers. I like to water them. I like to feel the sustenance of the water going onto the plant. I like to come over to Mother's land, which I purchased after her death. I can see where the deer have been sleeping. I like to notice that this plant grew or that the deer snacked on it—all those little things of having a garden.

I like to worry about something that's not making it, and to think what I could do to help. I like lifting fifty-pound sacks of mulch, slamming them down, and figuring out how to do the hard thing of getting it spread. I like digging weeds, which I was doing over at my cottage in town yesterday, the place you stayed, and not using—as much as I can manage—any chemicals, because you don't want your baby playing in it, don't want it going into the aquifer. When my workman says, "Let's put weed killer around these apple trees—Roundup," I say no, because I'm going to eat those apples.

I fell in love with an orchard over at my mother's. People can fall in love with other people and they can fall in love with towns, and cities, and other countries, and languages, and poets—but can they fall in love with an orchard? My lawyers were very curious after my mother died, and her land and house were going to just be sold, and I said, "No, I don't think so. I'll try to buy it. I will take the money I had coming from the estate and put some more with it and try to buy it." The lawyers said, "But you already have enough property." I said, "Yes, but, I'm in love with the orchard."

I prune it every February with a young man named Josh Gloor, who comes from Sequim, and we have three glorious days where we're pruning those apple trees and chatting. I love that time. The sun will be shining, or it might be raining. We might have to take shelter at intervals. I will pick up all the limbs so he doesn't have to bend over, 'cause I'm close to the ground, a nice way of saying "short."

One of the things I like doing is to get my body real tired. I want to go to bed with a tired body and I sleep really well when I do that. I used to suffer from insomnia—when I couldn't get that physical exhaustion from working in the garden. I'm now taking care of three gardens, so I sleep fine.

At Sky House there is no garden because I arranged it that way. I didn't want a garden there. I wanted a place where I didn't have to worry about anything, and at Sky I don't garden. There are ferns and salal there. Things that grow naturally. But I'm glad I have Mother's now. I can dig there and make spaces. I'm in the process of reclaiming her garden because it got out of control when she was sick and when I had to take care of her, so I couldn't work on the garden at the same time. She was my garden.

So, now I'm picking out blackberry bramble and other invasive plants that come into the garden. At the cottage in town that I got for

Rijl and Tiernan to live in, there's a very beautiful garden because it's compact and you can see the difference you make. At Mother's, it's hard to see the difference you make because it's too big really to be a display garden. It does have the delight of encouraging you to wander, which lets you meditate.

RICHMAN

Do you have writing rituals or habits?

GALLAGHER

Really, if a poem is coming to you, you will find a way to get it. When I'm writing I don't have any appointments that day. It is hard to keep people out of that morning space. You'd think—I have no husband here, I have no children—that I could arrange that time, but there are many other things that can want to come in. Especially workmen. They always want to come in the morning. They are great despoilers of the day. So I try to make all the appointments at what I call the teatime hour, which is three or four o'clock. That allows me my day.

I like to be at Sky House when I'm writing, because people don't call me there. That telephone is a monster and unless you take it off the hook, you're going to get calls. Somebody is going to think they need you. They'll want to ask you something. The computer is a terrible villain, too. I try to save those morning hours. And if I have anything that I should take care of, any business, I get it done the day before.

RICHMAN

Then you don't necessarily expect to write every morning?

GALLAGHER

Right. I make that time. If you get into a run of poems, that is the most anguishing time because you're going to run into these impediments. I can remember being really angry at certain people during the time I was writing *Moon Crossing Bridge*. They were interrupting and bringing fractious things into my life. But that marvelous rippling of poems, you don't get into that often, so you can't depend on it. You have to really work most of the time and just hope and expect that something will come. The expectation helps. If you sit down and you

don't expect anything, you might not get much. I know that that's away from what William Stafford said—to have low expectations, but I am of an opposite view. I think something wonderful is going to come and I'm going to put pressure there. I'm going to ask for that something special to come.

ZELLER

Kind of like meditation or prayer?

GALLAGHER

Yes, I really get out of the world when I'm intending to write. I also assume that all the spirits of the writers I have loved and have read and been with are available to me, that I have access to those energies. Just like invisible apples, I can reach and pick, can bring the images down to me. I might fail, but the expectation is, to me, helpful.

ZELLER

Do you read while you're waiting for the poem to come?

GALLAGHER

I try not to watch myself very much at the beginning of this process. I'm very casual with myself at the same time I'm expecting. Now, how you can do the two things, I don't know. As I'm expecting and hoping, I'm also very sideways with myself. These things are coexisting, because if I look too directly in it—at it—I will jinx myself. Isn't this a crazy way to think? But in fact, this is how it is.

So I will have a lot of little distractions. I might light some incense. I might drink some coffee. I might take Peggy, my dog, out for a quick walk. There will be books lying around, and these will be all manner of books—nonfiction, fiction, poetry. I might pick up any of those and read, just to get some language, to kind of prime the pump.

Right now I've got an assignment from Ciaran Carson, who was my old friend from Belfast and we exchange work. I read all of his novels and his poetry and he reads mine. In fact, he's very much responsible for helping to find a press in Belfast for Josie's and my book, *Barnacle Soup*, the book of Irish stories. When I was reading recently at the Seamus Heaney Center in Belfast—that's where I used to live for a short time,

Belfast, in 1976—he suggested that I was such a wild child, why didn't I try writing in some kind of form? And I said, "Well suggest something." He said, "Why don't you write fourteen fourteen-line poems with half rhymes." So I've started to write those. And it's really hard.

I did write a lot of stuff in form when I was a student of Theodore Roethke. And Nelson Bentley, also at the University of Washington, had us writing in form. I did some things in form even for David Wagoner, but I never really liked writing in form. I didn't feel like I got from form what I needed to get in writing poems. I hadn't revisited it, so I thought, Well, okay, I'll go back there. My Belfast poet friends are very much deeper into form and using form, in the belief that you will get some things using form you might not get otherwise.

RICHMAN

Are you finding that to be true for yourself?

GALLAGHER

I find it very awkward. I think it's all a failure so far—but I'm not going back to look at it. This is another thing that is different for me this time. Usually, I will bulldog the poem right down and I will be very intense with it for however long it takes to get it right, but this time I'm just writing and not judging. I'm going to accumulate these poems and then I'll go back. I'm not too sure they're going to amount to much—but maybe I can bring them around later. I'm going to reserve my judgment about them. I have a sense that I don't know what I've got there.

RICHMAN

How soon after starting a poem do you usually begin revising?

GALLAGHER

I would continue to write that entire day. And then I would work the next day and the next day until I got it just right. The poems are coming with such surety now. It's like being a tightrope walker—you have your balance after a while. I don't have as much revision as I had at the beginning of my writing. Maybe I'm a less good writer, I don't know, but I feel that somehow I have gotten into my way and that it is very helpful to me. I can trust it a lot more.

RICHMAN

If we were to go to Sky House and look at your writing area, which books might we find lying around?

GALLAGHER

I just got Michael Burkard's last two books from Sarabande. I had not kept up as well with him since I taught him last, at Bucknell University. Of course, he was my husband for four years and we were at Iowa together. During that time we exchanged poems and we had a relationship that really lived poetry. It became kind of the pattern for what I wanted and which I finally got, in a comfortable reciprocal way, with Raymond Carver.

It was a great pity that our timing—Michael's and my timing, for our relationship—was a bit off because you really need your life well in hand for that whole thing of two writers together to work. We were both trying to find ourselves during that time. It was a very confusing time, early in our poetry lives. We had just come directly from Iowa to our first job at St. Lawrence University.

An unfortunate part of the public life of the poet is that some poets reach the public in magazines that are more national, and others will be publishing more in the poetry venues that poets read, and Michael became the latter kind of poet. A poet's poet. I so admired the courage in his work, to choose that path, but I don't know if it was really a choice or just how he was, really. Probably that's how he is. He was always going to write that way. He has become a bit more accessible, at least in these newer poems, I feel.

ZELLER

Did you choose a different path?

GALLAGHER

I don't know if the word "choice" is correct, because what one does is governed by talents, by necessities—in the language. I wanted a wide readership, so maybe that determined the way I moved in a poem. Michael would allow a lot more ambiguity and unknowns in his poems, things that would be unresolved. I loved to read that and, as I said, I find his poems now much more accessible than the early poetry he was

writing. I love to get close to them again. We're in contact, which we hadn't been for quite a while—for no reason, just that I moved off the East Coast and we didn't meet anymore. It's such a big country.

We used to meet occasionally, and I, in fact, had wanted Michael to have a job at Syracuse—which is so ironic. I argued hard for him to be able to teach with us because he was friends with Ray and me after Ray and I were together at Syracuse. Ray was instrumental in helping Michael to get sober. Michael has written about his sobriety battle so it's okay to mention that. He talked with Ray about this. I couldn't get him in to teach there at the time. Conditions weren't right with the people he would be working with, but now he's teaching there and I'm so happy about that. The students were wonderful. One of my first students was Alice Sebold. She took about three classes with me and also took fiction writing from Ray. Lucia Perillo was one of my students there and Jane Mead. Both wonderful poets.

ZELLER

Might you talk a little about your relationship with Lucia Perillo?

GALLAGHER

Lucia came out west and she worked at Mt. Rainier as a guide. She had studied biology in California, but she had also written poetry there with Robert Hass, and then she returned to Syracuse. Her parents were from New York. She became my student and got her MFA from Syracuse. I used to have all my classes in my living room, so it was very cozy. We got to be friends, and Jane Mead was in that class and Lucia and Jane got to be friends. So when Lucia came out West, Jane would come from Iowa or California and the three of us would have girls' night over at Sky House. It remained a wonderful thing that the three of us could stay close.

When Lucia got this diagnosis of the MS, it happened the year that Ray died. I was, of course, devastated by that loss and she was devastated by her news. I remember us going out to Cape Alava with my sister and her family and we hiked out to the beach across those plank boardwalks through the forest and sword ferns. We made a campfire and I remember staying up the night with her talking about going on despite really difficult and soul-wrenching circumstances.

It was, for me, a very helpful conversation that night, to see what she had to struggle with and to get her also to understand that I had really

made the choice to go on in the best form possible—that if I could go on, maybe she could go on. We actually had that conversation. I don't know if she remembers it, but I felt it was a very special conversation, both of us talking like disembodied souls under the stars.

ZELLER

Does a person have to experience pain or adversity to write purely?

GALLAGHER

I don't know about the word "purely," what that is, because everything is so mixed—your pain with your sorrow with your joys. I don't think you can even experience your happiest times without some dimensionality, and how are you going to get that if you're not open to really going down with the difficult things? You can't just be Miss Bubbly all the time. You have to let the hard things come into you and be with them and understand their dimensions and live through them, fully. For me the way to live them fully is my writing. That's a very big help to me. You can't escape sorrow. It's here for us and anyone who thinks they're going to get out of this life without pain or sorrow—you will be avoiding so many things that could be cherished and interesting and soul-building, so we say. I like to be with my friends when they are in trouble. And I want them to be with me.

I had this experience of breast cancer, which began in August of 2002 and it was instructive—how my friends came to me like I was the little bird that had fallen out of the next tree and they were all around me calling, saying, *We're* with you. We're with you. You can do it, and that really helped me. They came from as far away as Japan. My Japanese translator, Hiromi Hashimoto, flew all that way. Haruki Murakami flew from Tokyo—he and his wife, Yoko. They came to Seattle where I was going into my chemo. I was already bald as an onion. I had put a water-based hummingbird tattoo on my bald head and Yoko was photographing it. It was just one of those rub-off kinds of tattoo. We giggled together over it.

The companioning of your friends can do so many things medicine can't. Medicine is not going to be able to save you at some point and while it is not saving you, you have to have something else. The reason my kitchen is so full of photographs is that I'm keeping all these people with me. I consult their images in the morning when I'm looking around, at the beginning of the day, thinking, Where are you now? How are you

doing? I will, at intervals, be in touch consciously and unconsciously by glancing at their photos with a lot of those people. But yes, you are going to write out of those hardships. Ray used to say, "If there's nothing going wrong, there's no story."

But that doesn't mean that in your poems you won't find the joys and you won't find the light. But sometimes you're just going in darkness, and you think, Oh, I never will get there. You have to be very patient with yourself and with the poems, to hope they will bring you back round.

RICHMAN

In an interview with Daniel Bourne, you mentioned the "intuitive magician-mind" that allows us to create the "leaping of poetry." How do you keep that intuitive magician-mind alive, active, and accessible?

GALLAGHER

It's been different at different points of my life, but Tiernan, my grandnephew, has been a big part of that during this phase of my life. He is so bright and so wonderful—just the exuberance of him—it teaches you what you *could* have. I surf on him like he is a great rolling ocean. I love to see what he's going to think of next and to bask in that and try to be in some kind of lively dimension with it that's not an Old Fogey Girl thing.

When I was nursing Mother in the last year of her life here at Ridge House, where we are, I was at that far end of the life skein in tending to her. She had congestive heart failure and she had Alzheimer's dementia. I would have the day here and then I would go over to Rijl's—my niece's—and see Tiernan and the whole day would be so refreshed. I'm glad, looking back, that I could allow myself that. That I could say, Where can I get refreshed? and to realize that I could go there to be a child with Tiernan.

RICHMAN

How do you know if an idea will be a poem or a story?

GALLAGHER

In a poem, you may have some characters, but if you get too many you'll write a huge, rollicking book of one narrative strain. Then you need

to go to fiction or you'll lose concentration of energy in the poem, make it scatter and fragment. I find myself cutting out characters in poems in order to preserve that concentration. I think of poetry as having a higher emotional density than prose. I want that in my poems, anyhow.

In prose, you have to be willing to put up with details that are not poetic; they don't have that strength. These go into writing the kind of fiction I write, which is a kind of realistically based fiction, and these details help establish the grounding for the lives you are going to tell that make up the story. That's the fabric, the warp and weft of the weave.

If I want a story, I start collecting a lot of details and listening very carefully to what people are telling me and making notes. I'll usually be working from the template of somebody's story. I feel like prose comes much more from outside me than poetry does. Poetry is intimate and more generated in my own theater, shall we say. But in prose I have to be responsive to that story that's coming to me and there has to be some part of me that goes out to meet it.

In my poems I'll have little snippets of stories that all of a sudden zoom in like a mad hummingbird into the poem. For instance, in the poem, "Sah Sin," the hummingbird poem, the detail about the mother who has her dead child with her on the bus—I had no idea that detail was going to come into that poem. I had stored it away when someone told me that story, years before, and here it came like a comet falling into the poem.

It's very helpful in either process to maintain a great openness and freedom to admit whatever wants to come in. That's what I do and one of my students gave me the best compliment I've ever had. He said, "Tess, you taught me how to be free." What he meant was probably that openness to be receptive to anything. Even your old working methods—throw them out—and allow yourself to have access to all those things that may come to you.

ZELLER

Have you considered writing a memoir?

GALLAGHER

Well, I kind of feel maybe like Ray did about this. He didn't write a memoir either. Of course, he died at age fifty, but he felt, I think, that his life was very well contained within his fiction and his poetry. His poetry was more alive to his life than the stories. He said that his

work was all he had, also, of religion. I kind of feel that way, too, that to come straight on to my life I might drive out the mysteries of it. I love what Emily Dickinson said: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." The memoir—it can ask you not to tell it slant. That is worrisome for me. I like to tell it slant. I like to be cloaked and a bit hidden.

Even as open as you may feel my poems are, they also are mysterious in some elements. Some books more so than others. I think that *Moon Crossing Bridge* is quite an oblique book in some ways, although one can have deep access to it emotionally. You may not know line to line exactly what I'm saying, but you will have emotional access and that is something I love—to give a person the ability to understand with their emotions what they can't understand with their heads, their reasoning. To be able to do that in language—because music can do that and painting can do that—this is the attempt I make in poetry.

ZELLER

We talked earlier about your birth name, Theresa. I wonder, because you use Tess for your publishing name, how much of your identity is a self-construct and how much is imposed from without?

GALLAGHER

It's a combination. Within your family and your private life maybe, more of that birth identity is still available. I remember my mother in the last years calling me Tess and really disliking that, but she began to take on the terms of my life away from the family at some point because no one around her knew me as Theresa—the name she had given me. They all knew me as Tess so they were all calling me Tess—the people helping me with her care. That was kind of an annoyance, frankly. Some of my nieces call me Tess and I don't like it much, but I don't correct them. They have to do what they want.

Tess was a name that I took on at the very beginning of my writing and it was a curious event where an actor from Durbin, South Africa, said to me, "Theresa Gallagher—no, it doesn't sound like a writer." He was very aware of image, because he had acted with Sir John Gielgud. He had a folder with his own picture, looking gorgeous, that he had to show when he went to get an acting job. He said, "You should be called Tess—Tess Gallagher, now that's a name." I was beginning to send

out my poems and I sent some under that name and, magically, all the poems were taken. So I thought, He's right.

At that time, of course, I was in the military zone. My first husband was in the Vietnam War preparation. He was a pilot and the people around me didn't know me. When I went to them, they asked my name. I said, "Tess Gallagher," so that began to be what I was called. Theresa Gallagher is still very much alive though. When I write my poems, I draw on that persona, too. Over the years it's gained its own veracity, its own powers.

ZELLER

Your father called you Threasie.

GALLAGHER

That's a very dear name. I like that a lot. Josie Gray, my Irish companion, has great names for me. He calls me Scut, which means the tail on a rabbit. I call him Master and he calls me Slave sometimes. I like that Slave because we are making this book, and I have to do so much of the drudgework of it. I must have read this manuscript for *Barnacle Soup* 150,000 times to get it all right. Josie has no idea of all that is involved in getting a book ready for publication.

He'll call me Miss American Pie or just Pie. We're always renaming each other. It's a bit of fun in the day. I call him Buddha-lugs because he has these lovely big earlobes like a Buddha. Lugs is Irish for ears. He was sixty-nine when I met him, but he was very young in his spirit and he's still very young. He's eighty-two but he's still one of the youngest people I know. Because he's ready for anything. Any wild notion I have, why, he doesn't make fun of me. He tries to come on board.

I became a vegetarian in 2000, and he's a man who loves meat and potatoes, but he makes room for this. He's concerned about me getting my protein and he starts to read about how I can get it. When I want to save the sheep in Ireland out of his herd, he humors me. He let me have this sheep and the sheep's baby lamb. Now I have four sheep and lambs in Ireland. Josie saves the wool for me and I've been able to get this made into raw roving, cleaned and ready to weave with. He's an adventurer and that's why he became a painter, and his storytelling is coming into written form in our book, *Barnacle Soup*, from Blackstaff Press in Belfast, and eventually, in 2008, by Eastern Washington University Press.

RICHMAN

What else are you working on now?

GALLAGHER

I talked about these fourteen-line poems. Of course, I'm always carrying Ray and different things have come to the surface there—*Jindabyne* just came out. That was the film made by Ray Lawrence, based on Ray's story, "So Much Water So Close to Home," and it's filmed in Australia in Aboriginal country. I've followed that along as it was being proposed and as it was being made. I kind of became friends with Ray Lawrence on e-mail. He was so nice to keep me involved.

I'm reading—I forgot to say earlier, when we spoke of her—Lucia Perillo's nonfiction book, which is fantastic: *I've Heard the Vultures Singing*. It's about her MS and what that has brought to bear on her art and her apprehension of life and the ways she has steadied herself with her poetry, with her own writing. It's a powerful book.

ZELLER

You've been a mentor for her and she's become a mentor to you?

GALLAGHER

If you're lucky, a wonderful thing happens in that your student becomes your friend and they're working in ways that inspire you. She has always been that way for me. Lucia always gave as much as she got, I have to say. The same with Katie Ford, who was another of my students. Katie was just here at Ridge House before she moved back East. She brought her manuscript, *Coliseum*, about Hurricane Katrina and we looked at that together. You get to participate later with those writers that you've nurtured—that's a big gift that teaching gives you, that you just don't get, I don't think, anywhere else.

I can't believe I fell into this life where I get to be around so many intelligent, wonderful people—really just interesting and vigorous and searching and courageous people. It's amazing.

ZELLER

In your essay, "My Father's Love Letters," you write, "I began to see poems as a way of settling scores with the self." What scores do you have left to settle?

You don't know them really until the poems start to reveal them. If I ever lose my curiosity, I won't be a writer. Poetry is like a witching stick. It's telling you what's there, where the water is. That's how I use it, anyway.

I didn't know when I wrote "Apparition" how strongly those stories that my uncle had told me had affected me, or what they meant. The poem tries to give the moment its full due, give that story its full due. I couldn't work it out in life—I couldn't say to the uncle, I believe you, what you're telling me. I believe you saw or somehow encountered the spirit of your dead brother. I couldn't tell him that directly, and again it's that slant thing, that if I spoke this in the moment, then I would somehow invade the mystery and there is this curious decorum that we maintain with the mysteries. In writing the poem, though, I can come closer to it than I could in life—in my actual, walking-around life. But unless your inner and outer life is very vigorous, your poetry is not going to be very vigorous.

I love not knowing things and that is at the heart of being a poet, that I don't feel in a place of judgment a lot of my day, although I know very well how I feel about things. I was out visiting an old childhood friend of mine, who actually was with me when Ray was very ill and in fact the night that Ray died. He was my childhood badminton partner, Jack Estes. We read a kind of Zen poem that said something to the effect of how wonderful life is if you don't read the newspapers. We were laughing about this poem and then I thought, I should have corrected myself and really let him know how politically engaged I am—that I am looking to see what's going on in this country. I'm dipping in all the time to find out.

I don't think it's great to be oblivious in times like this. We all need to be doing whatever we can about the huge trespasses upon our Constitution that this Bush administration has brought down upon us. We ought to be enraged and fighting in every molecule. At the same time, we can't drink poison all day from it. You have to take in the amount you need to know to inform yourself, but don't drink the poison. The Buddhists say something like what I was saying in *Instructions to the Double* so long ago. Ages ago! They say, "Don't drink poison at the poison temple. Go to the golden temple."