Brett Ortler and Maya Zeller

A Conversation with Melissa Kwasny

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Melissa Kwasny comes from the great tradition of poets writing in dialogue with the natural world, from the direct-address influence of Sappho, to H.D.'s treatment of nature as a character. Her first book of poems, *The Archival Birds*, was published in 2000 by Bear Star Press, and her latest book, *Thistle* (2006, Lost Horse Press), won the 2005 Idaho Prize for poetry. Kwasny is also the author of two novels, *Trees Call for What They Need* (Spinsters Ink, 1993) and *Modern Daughters of the Outlaw West*, (Spinsters Ink, 1990), and editor of *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry 1800-1950* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004). Her latest book of poems, *Reading Novalis in Montana*, is due out soon from Milkweed Editions.

Kwasny was born in Indiana and earned an MFA from the University of Montana, where she studied with Patricia Goedicke , Mark Levine, and Greg Pape. She spent ten years in San Francisco teaching in the California Poets in the Schools Program, and now lives outside Jefferson City, Montana.

Kwasny's work has appeared in *The Bellingham Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cutbank*, *Columbia*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Seneca Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Three Penny Review*, and *Willow Springs* among many other journals. We met with her over lunch in Missoula, Montana.

Maya Zeller

In the introduction to *Toward The Open Field*, you talk about the "kind of patterning shaped not by inherited conventions but rather by the specific demands of the individual poem, or poet, or subject." What is your process of "creating" form?

Melissa Kwasny

I think people who are writing in open form—which most of us are now—are working with an ear to the movement of the poem itself, a processual rhythm. It's not imposed from without, from traditional forms. Most contemporary poets don't work with a declared meter, we're doing it by ear, by how it looks on the page. In theory, it's weighted, depending on different things—an individual lyricism. I talk as I'm working, sounding things out; the poem's sound really does depend on that moment. I have certain sounds that are too much mine, of course, and I try to disrupt those. Many writers try to seriously disrupt their own fabric to see what happens.

For instance, in *Thistle*, I'm working with a very tight line, tight image, tight focus—I'm intimately focused on this one plant, the mullein for instance, so the lines are shorter and the rhythm is very integrated. Once I establish a rhythm, I pretty much stick to it—or if there's a sound patterning, I stick with it for a while, because I'm in that world for as long as it takes for the poem to be finished. I love that kind of focus, that kind of aesthetic. The paradox is that the tighter the focus, the more it reveals an entire world. But after *Thistle*, I felt the need to bring more experiences into the poems, including my reading, my relationships, history, world events The poems in *Thistle* are conversations with plants; I wanted to include the conversations I was having with others, in particular with the writers I was reading. Many of them were poets, but there were also people who were thinking of—for lack of a better word, "nature"—and I wanted to have conversations with those people. You know, when people read *Thistle,* they say, "There's no people in this!" Although that's not true, I wanted to bring more people into the next manuscript, so the lines got longer, the images became more fragmented, there were more of them. And so the voice, the rhythm, changes.

Zeller

Does your use of tercets, with long lines focused around a mid-stanza pivot phrase, grow out of the poem?

Kwasny

I'm glad you mention not just the tercet but the turn. I worked with terza rima for a while; in the next manuscript, I have three pages of terza rima. But the turn *through* images is what I'm working on now. Your emphasis might be on the line break; your emphasis might be

more on the different resonances of a particular word or words, more language-based. But it's important to me to look at image as the way the world talks. The mysteries of the world reveal themselves through close attendance to image—and by image, I mean anything perceived by the senses. With image, we have, "The natural object is always the *adequate* symbol"—what Pound said—or people say, "It's going to be able to stand on its own without interpretation." So we don't want interpretation, but if the image stands alone, we also notice that it starts to flicker back and forth. Is it a concrete thing? Is it metaphor? Or is it just what I'm seeing? I *love* that. And on a deeper level, on a phenomenological level, that's what the world consists of—we see it, and it speaks to us. So, formally, I want to know: If we don't interpret it, do we leave the symbol to free-float as the symbolists did? How do we move from image to image without interpretation? If we leave it to that, how do we see it? Because we do see strings of images. Are they clusters? And if we don't explain, the tension between emotional statements that aren't interpreted and image is fascinating to me. I've started writing prose poems, because if I get rid of the line breaks, what I have is image and syntax for movement. I'm interested in how the combination of image and emotional statement that doesn't explain the image work together to get me to the next image.

Brett Ortler

How is a prose poem different from a poem with line breaks?

Kwasny

All you have is a movement forward to rely on for rhythm; it's all movement forward, because you don't have line breaks to give you that music. So you have to really concentrate on each sound space. How does this sentence move? Because the problem with rhythm, the problem with space, is that you have to rely on your ear to create it.

What we love about poems is the silence in them, and you get that from stanza breaks, line breaks. It's due to caesuras that form in a line. In a prose poem, you don't have those things, so you have to do it with sound, but you also have to do it with the spacing of the image.

Zeller

You seem to do that by accruing images, and then popping in that big question. And you were talking earlier about making statements

without analysis, about allowing image to do the work, and then that voice kind of links your images. Would you like to talk about that accruement and then the voice that comes through questions?

KWASNY

What comes to mind is the word "trust." I have something I'm working toward now—that I have faith-in-progress, not faith in *progress*. But my goal is faith-in-process, in the *progress* of the process. The trust is *in* the image, and you're trusting that image, you're just feeling. Then you have to write the statement that comes through. That's what the image led you to and so it's a kind of process. It's not narrative. The great thing about a prose poem is that it can be prose and disavow narration, which is against its grain—against the grain of its movement.

ZELLER

Your poetry is filled with plant dialogue—in the "Talk of Trees" section of *The Archival Birds*, and then in *Thistle*—whether the plant speaks or the speaker talks to the plant. How do you respond to arguments critics make about anthropomorphism?

KWASNY

I addressed that in an essay last summer called "Learning to Speak to Them." It's just been published in the magazine, *26*. It's a complicated question. Of course I'm interested in some kind of communication, a speaking and a listening, between the human and non-human. I think we really are restricted in our knowledge by being *only* human. That effort toward communication has been a personal practice of mine—and tied of course to poetry—so with the tree section in *Archival Birds*, a series of poems meditate on, mediate with trees. *Thistle* came out of that experience of writing those poems. At some point in this process, the voice becomes indeterminate. We can't tell—is that you speaking or is that the plant speaking? Is that you listening or is that the plant listening? In a communion, one doesn't know exactly where the "I" is. I not only have a spiritual interest in that, but also a poetic interest. One could ask, Is it personification? which means you are giving the plant human characteristics. Or is it anthropomorphism? where you are not giving it, but you see everything as human. Or is it metaphor? You know, we say a tree is a metaphor because we want to project human characteristics onto the tree. Or does the tree have something to teach us about being human?

I've looked at a lot of traditions. When I was young, I was in love with Native American songs. Chippewa music, Seminole music. I was reading the volumes of beautiful translations by the ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore. Many of the songs have that indeterminate voice—we don't know who the speaker is. One of my favorites is called "Owl Woman Song," and it goes:

> How shall I begin my songs
> in the blue night that is settling?
> In the great night my heart will go out;
> toward me the darkness comes rattling.
> In the great night my heart will go out.

Who's talking here? Is it the owl? Is it the Papago woman named Owl Woman? Is she talking as an owl, or is she talking to a human being as an owl? Or is she pretending she is the owl? You don't know. It's dispersed. It's indeterminate. You don't know who the conversation is with. And I think about that. While working on my M.F.A., I also was working on a Masters in literature. I studied the imagist poets. There's a little poem by H.D. called "Oread," which I love:

> Whirl up, sea—
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.

An oread is a Mountain Spirit. Is she conjuring the mountain spirit or is she speaking as the Mountain Spirit? Or is she speaking as a person whom the Mountain Spirit comes to? I don't know, and I love that flicker.

Patricia Goedicke, when I was working on *Thistle*, said, "I'm worried about this, because people are going to say, 'Is this too much like Louise Glück's *Wild Iris*?'" But I feel we did two different things, even though I love that book; it's a gorgeous book, but in some ways it's a Christian book—in some ways a plant becomes a metaphor for a higher god. And so I thought we were working under very different premises. That's actually why I wrote the "Wild Iris" poem in *Thistle*—in homage but also because I couldn't pretend that the book's not there.

Ortler

There's a spiritual impulse in your work—*Thistle* is reminiscent of the Psalms, with its prayer and lamentation, often in the same breath. Is prayer related to poetry?

Kwasny

Sure. There's a wonderful statement by Paul Celan: "Attention is the prayer of the soul." In some ways, that is what prayer is, our ability to attend the moment, to attend to being alive. That we are here is amazing. That you stop and are attendant to that fact. Isn't it amazing? Isn't it amazing that tree is here? The capacity to feel that is like prayer. That's like a psalm.

Ortler

You refer to Emily Dickinson a number of times in *Thistle.* Your poetry, like hers, shares a certain meditative impulse. How has Dickinson influenced your work?

Kwasny

She's not a major influence, or one that's been very conscious to me. I wish I were smart enough to understand her better! [Laughs.] Some of her poems are dear to my heart, and I love the letters. I used to call *Thistle* "Bright Absentee" because of her poem which begins, "I tend my flowers for thee." But something like that, one line like that, you can carry around for years. And she is concentrated; I can't read her off the top of my head. Everything is in that one line. Nothingness and everything all in one poem. I wish I could say she's influenced me more. I feel like H.D. was more of an influence for me. When I was really young, I loved Tess Gallagher. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Montana, studying with Richard Hugo, I started reading Gallagher's book *Instructions to the Double*, and I started writing like her. You don't even know you're doing it, but when I look back years later, I realize.

Zeller

Poets are often guilty of recycling their obsessive words and images, and these familiar images usually stem from a common source. What is the significance of the blue robe or some of your other obsessions?

Kwasny

Well, there it is. [Points toward the sky.] It's part of the earth, and when I discovered the sky was part of the earth, that it came all the way down here, it was amazing to me. It sounds so silly, but we live in this sky. It's a primary gift. That it's blue! And not some other awful color, like purple. . . it could be brown, or maroon.

We live on a blue planet, because of water—because of the four elements and the way that they impact each other, enter each other. There's something about a robe that reveals. It encloses, but it also reveals. There's something sexy about it. We want mystery in our lives, and so those small revelations of it are what a lot of people would define as spirit, as something that takes them to the divinity in life. We don't want big revelations, just little ones to remind us. The robe has something to do with that. And birds. I'm reading an Iranian text, *The Conference of the Birds*. It's a long poem, and all the birds have to go on this journey to see God. Each one uses a different excuse. One says: "It's going to be a long trip," and the nightingale says something like "I'm in love with the earth. I can't leave her. I don't want to go on this trip." And the squirrel says, "I'm just fine here, I don't need to go on this trip."

Ortler

In "White Clover," you write, "You can't just live here / like a swarm of faint-hearted bees, / clogged with emotion. But really, what is there to do?" This poem expresses a frustration common to many poets—those moments when our sense of direction leaves us and we flail. How can poetry help?

Kwasny

It can remind us, as poetry does constantly, that our job is to be—to really be— alive to our worlds and our relationships. And once we realize that, people can responsibly say, "I have to be something." I think all readings of our poetry help us. In that particular poem, I don't really have an answer, except here it is: it's in our minds. There is frustration in our world. There seems to be so much that has gone wrong. The poet George Oppen quit writing for thirty years and became a communist and a political activist, and said, "You can't just use poetry. . . you can't tell yourself you're changing the world by writing poems." If you're going to change the world, go into the Peace Corps. You're deceiving yourself. I think anything you can do to honor and strengthen the inner life is

going to make the world better. The big problem is that we don't believe in an inner life anymore. The idea of the individual self, the honoring of the individual life, is dissipating in our culture. I like to think poetry helps in that way.

Zeller

Regarding the attention to self and its connectivity with the "over-soul," in your writing, you seem to have an attention to that larger good outside the self—

Kwasny

One of my favorite expressions is from Denise Levertov: "The progression seems clear to me: from Reverence for Life to Attention to Life, from Attention to Life to a highly developed Seeing and Hearing, from Seeing and Hearing (faculties almost indistinguishable for the poet) to the Discovery and Revelation of Form, from Form to Song." She's talking about attending to the poem, attending to nature. You know, that attending makes you religious, makes you compassionate I wish I would have said that!

Ortler

You mentioned that things have "gone wrong." What has gone wrong?

Kwasny

An incredible shamelessness that our country is best. We don't feel shame that we torture people, we don't feel any shame or repercussions that we bomb children, that we use depleted uranium. We've had this consciousness shift—before, at least people hid these acts. They would have been ashamed of them. Now it's all done so blatantly. People think it's okay. And that feels dangerous. A lot has gone bad.

Ortler

In that same vein, do you think the culture's veering toward entertainment, and away from the arts, is emblematic of that shift?

Kwasny

It is evidence of the lack of time for interior life. René Char has a beautiful poem in which he asks, "How can we show, without betray-

ing them, those simple things sketched between the twilight and the sky?" He answers, "By the virtue of stubborn life, in the circle of artist Time, between death and beauty." Char wasn't an esthete; he wasn't blind to what was happening in the world. In fact, he risked his life as a commander in the French Resistance to the Nazis. At the same time, he was deeply pained and deeply reflective—deeply aware of what he was doing. He was thinking, feeling, being alive inside to the world outside. Attesting to that fact is his incredible *Leaves of Hypnos*. It's funny. In French, the line reads "Par la vertu de la vie obstinée, dans la boucle du Temps artiste." A friend who has translated Char pointed out to me that the poet is naming Time as an artist—in the circle of Time, who is an artist—whereas I was thinking of Artist-Time as a special kind of time we could choose, that we do choose, a time where one lives in a state of creative attention. I have to say that I'm fond of both interpretations.