



MELANIE BRAVERMAN

Interview with Melanie Braverman in Three Parts

THE BACON REVIEW

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Eric: Hello, how are you.

Good, how are you doing?

EW: Jason just went to grab us some water

What time is it there?

EW: We're running 7 45am.

Wow, early.

EW: Yeah, he came a' knocking on my door earlier and was like, 'Eric, let's go'. 'Jason, it is two hours early—we do not need to prepare that much for this interview!'

You so don't. That's like how I tell my students, 'It's only me.'

EW (laughing): You're on the East Coast, correct?

I am. I'm on Cape Cod. You know the cape? It's the little hook that goes out into the water.

EW: Never been but yup. Lived there for awhile?

I've actually lived on the Cape for thirty years. But I grew up in the Midwest in Iowa. I still feel quite Midwestern even though I've been here for so long.

EW: What are you finding to be the differences? I've been considering shifting east and in talking about it, I've heard about quite a few differences between the two places.

How are the differences described to you?

EW: Mostly in attitude— people tend to make a lot of noise when they talk about it. It's not so much very descriptive. They're like, 'You've got to be kind of.. you know.. like..'

(Eric makes a series of ambiguous noises.)

Well, spend a little time talking to me and see how edgy I appear.

(Laughter)

You know, I do think its kind of intellectual edginess here in this part of the world that's been very compelling to me, which is partly why I think I ended

up here.

EW: Compelling because? Did you visit before you went over there? Is that why you were drawn?

I actually came here in 1982 to study with a poet named Olga Broumas. She's a Greek born poet who kind of shot to fame in the 70's when her first book was taken by Stanley Unitz for the Yale Younger Poet series. It was this really out Saphic lesbian book and it was his last pick as judge for the Yale. It kind of blew everybody away that he picked this book and she got catapulted into this kind-of notoriety that she wasn't altogether prepared for. She started this small school for women writers in Provincetown, which is where I lived until July and it was an amazing experience. I'd been in college at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington and I left there after a year, thinking I was going to come here. I never left. Never even went back and got my stuff. Olga, thirty years later is still kind of my teacher but she is whom I taught with at Brandeis. Instrumental for getting me into the University even though I never graduated college. I got this long gig teaching at a University carrying on the tradition of teaching that I was taught by Olga 30 years ago. It's

that interesting idea of poetic lineage in a way.

EW: Does she still have ripples from that notoriety that you're talking about?

She does. She hasn't written much in the last several years. She's an amazing writer. I think you'd really like her work... Her collected poems is called Rave and it came out from Copper Canyon Press. She's a very interesting writer and she still has a kind of cult status. She's very well respected in the literary world at large, but she's a very very good teacher and is called upon quite a lot to do teaching things out in the world. She's an amazing performer too, so yeah that's how I ended up here. And like I said, thirty years later still thinking sometimes that I should finish college but it doesn't look like that's going to happen anytime soon.

Jason: Could you... this is Jason, good morning.

Hi, Jason

JB: Could you tell us a little bit about the mentorship? How did you end up under her wing, so to speak?

I heard her read when I was still in Olympia. She gave a reading that I went to and I was twenty. No, I was nineteen.

I knew I wanted to write and I knew I wanted to write poems and I knew I was hearing something but I had no idea what it I was writing about. You know, I was a stoner— I smoked a lot of pot and content was not my thing, but I went and I heard her read and I thought, ‘Here’s a poet who hears what I hear.’ I had this clear sense that there is this kind of music in the atmosphere, like Popplers Music of the Spheres, there’re all these frequencies. Dogs can hear at frequencies we can’t hear. Here’s a poet who hears what I hear. I had that immediate kinship, even though she was very accomplished I had no idea what the fuck I was doing.

So I found out about this school. It was the first year it was forming in Provincetown so I decided to apply and that’s when I met her and that’s when I found out I was exactly right— that there was something she could hear that I could hear too and that my job then was to kind of figure out how to locate it and apprehend it and transcribe it. I still think that’s kind of my job. I mean, I hear that thing and I have to figure out where it is and how to get it and how to let it come through. So, we still have that essential connection, she and I.

The other thing that was really compelling about her was that she was a bodywork practitioner. This is what her classes were like: you walked in the door. You did not speak. Her classes were really long. They were like four or five hours. For the first hour: stretching, breathing, yoga. That was it. For the second hour, she would sit with this enormous pile of books around her. Two hours, no speaking. Third hour, we actually wrote.

It had such a profound effect on me, partly because bodywork ended up being another thing I had a real kinship with, and for the first fifteen years that I was there and trying to write I made money by doing massage. That was a big hook for me. I really learned how to listen. It drove home the truth that listening is an essential part of writing and that it actually has to come first in some way. In my workshops, I teach without benefit of the page. I don’t let everyone in the workshop have a copy of the poem. They have to listen to it first. They have to respond through the body and through their ear first. If there’s a lot of people in the class I’ll let them look at the poems, and certainly if it’s a more advanced class, well do a lot of line editing which you really need the page for, but I’m very very interested in this notion of deeply engaged listening. That is

the long answer to the mentoring thing.

A lot of poetry is transmitted through a kind of lineage and part of what happens to people, especially when they're starting out, is we know we hear this thing. We know we have this impulse to do this. We feel completely isolated in this activity, and partly what was helpful to me was to understand that there was not just one other poet in the world. Because Olga is a Greek-born poet she was very keen on understanding who her influences were, so for me (the recording becomes garbled here as Melanie lists Olga's influences, and so, her own)... I could see that I wasn't just some crackpot –or maybe I was a crackpot but there was a line of crackpot poets before me, and there was something hugely helpful to me of finding at least an internal sense of community.

Like I say, we're still very close friends. I'm down the road from her and she knows my kids and we continue to uphold the particular trajectory of poetry that we have in common, even though you would never stand my work next to hers and think we had anything in common whatsoever.

EW: Have you gone through the next phase of that mentor process– someone coming to you and seeking

that kind of one-on-one mentorship?

I have a few students who I've kind of cultivated –cultivated... connected with– in the last few years. One in particular, a man named Joseph Sloman who is a Texas-born poet who just graduated from Brandeis, an amazing poet. There's a young woman named Alice Neely who I met through various odd channels in Provincetown, and she's someone I'm spending increasing amounts of time with and bringing along. You never know who those people are going to be, right? Maybe they're you? I don't know. I have a real affinity for teaching and I –because I feel like I'm still twenty five– I'm drawn to people of that age. We'll see. Have to keep seeing who comes along.

EW: It's interesting to me because I went through the Creative Writing program at the University of Colorado, had been largely into poetry up until my junior year and was pumping out poems all the time, but not finding a sense of gratification in it except feeling I was good at it. Then I went and took a workshop with this guy Stephen Graham Jones. He walked into the classroom in a comic book shirt and played Bruce Springsteen for the first six minutes of class– a song that I'd

listened to that morning on my own stereo. I had that immediate 'Holy Crap!' I need to...' I don't know if it was a need to know him or get as close as I could and figure out how he was doing what he was doing.

I'm intrigued because I followed him basically, and still to this day keep in contact with him. He changed dramatically how I approach literature. I'm intrigued to see if another mentor is going to come along... because I'm at a point where I'm on my own. Is another mentor what you continue to look for, or do you feel like you've stepped beyond your first mentor?

There are writers who are emblematic of something important. It doesn't mean I love all their work. It doesn't mean I feel particularly connected to them as writers, but there's something about them that feels... I don't have a deep drive to know them in the way that I might have when I was younger, but partly because my life is taken up with a lot of other things. I have two kids. I have a girlfriend. I have chickens. My life is taken up by things that that it wouldn't have been with earlier, so I don't have... I don't know what the answer to that is.

The great thing about taking up writing as something you're going to do with your life is that you're

never finished. There's no retirement age, and if you're really in it, you're always listening, right? You're always listening to that thing that resonates with you. I think it's great that you really found somebody that you feel that connection to and I love that you wanted to talk to me. I love that you made a magazine. It's one of the things that I did really early on.

My then-girlfriend was also a poet and increasingly frustrated by the lack of publishing opportunities. Also, how often, when you pick up a journal, how many poems do you really like? Some of them are just bad but some just don't interest you— don't speak to you. So the best thing that you can really do is make one of your own, and hats off for doing such a beautiful thing.

It gives you a sense of empowerment, right? You can just make the thing that you want to see in the world. You don't have to wait for it to come to you, but also it makes it possible for other people to find you and go, 'Here's somebody who's really hearing something that's interesting to them in the same way it's interesting to me.' I do think one of the fallacies of poets is that you're supposed to be this neurotic dark antisocial person and of course we all have those aspects of our personalities, but I think it's a really really important part of this endeavor. I just did this thing yester-

day that..

(The internet conspired against us as we lost touch with Melanie, calling her on the phone and then picking up about ten minutes past where we left off)

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(Melanie shifts rooms, into a sunlit parlor with deep red walls)

Excellent.

EW: And we got the sun as well...

It's actually quite beautiful here as well.

JB: Amazing light.

Let me switch over here.

JB: Like Bill [Lavender, who spent much of our interview shifting rooms in his house].

It's red now.

EW: Great colors

What was I telling you about?

I did this writing project in the public schools last year where I had pre-K kids and I ran workshops exactly as I run them in the University. I brought my University students into the class with me to help, and it was fantastic. Really great. It really helped my older students understand that what was hard when you were five is the same thing that's hard when you're twenty, which is the same thing that's hard when you're fifty. There's this incredible sense of kinship and camaraderie with four year olds because we were all trying to do this thing that's hard and it seems crazy at times.

EW: What'd they find to be difficult about it?

When someone asks you to tell the truth about yourself, to write something that feels true, especially about your emotional life, it's scary. Sometimes it's hard to find language. It's hard to be exact and accurate, and in order to be exact you actually have to know something, and in order to know something you have to ask a lot of questions. It's that basic level of inquiry that can be challenging, but I think it's what makes good work. I don't think the process is that much different for a six year old than it is for a fifty year old, except that you get

more practice.

EW: *What's a workshop look like? If that's a fair question...*

They're very process-driven. There's a fair amount of talking, but mostly people read their poems aloud and then there is a lot of discussion about the poem—about what stands out to the ear. I ask people a lot about what resonates in their bodies, right? I really emphasize paying attention to the entire experience of the poem. For instance, if I have a student read through a poem once and they stumble over a line, I have them read it again. If they stumble over the same line again, then that's information, right? It means there're too many syllables in that line.

So, we really try to figure out what's happening in a poem from that kind of visceral level. I don't really feel like it's my job to challenge anyone's enterprise. If someone wants to sit down and write something, then that's their business, you know? I don't challenge people in relation to content at all— not something I'm interested in. But I do challenge people to substantiate the way in which they're able to stand up for what they've written. In other words, if you're going to put it out there,

you're going to have to be able to stand behind it.

We talk a lot about that. Understanding that for me at least, it's less about product than it is about process and that as you engage more deeply in the process of making something, the more you understand about what it is. I'm not a person who knows anything about what I'm doing when I'm doing it. If I did, I'd get bored! For me, the process is so much about discovery so I'm not a person who's ever going to sit down and map something out. I know a lot of writers that do that. To great success sometimes. It's not what I'm interested in.

That's what workshops are like, for me. Sometimes I'll ask someone to read a poem over several times so that I can hear it. There's a lot... I ask a lot of questions. I encourage everybody in the workshop to ask a lot of questions. I enter the classroom as a writer, not as an academic. I never have been an academic. I can't even pretend that thing. I come in the room as a writer and I assume everyone else does too.

The workshops are usually about three hours long. At the university, I had maybe twelve to fifteen people in a room and fifteen is on the outside a lot of people. Yeah, there's a lot of questions.

EW: I guess that's kind of what we're doing too...

JB: Can I shift gears here a bit, Melanie? The two pieces we've published in the Bacon so far were two from a book—looks like its forthcoming— *The World With Us In It*. Is that a manuscript that's in progress now? Are you still working on that?

No, it's done. It's been out there looking for a home for... it feels like forever. Prose poems are a bit of a hard sell.

(Again, the internet)

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(Melanie indulged us in conversation over telephone while she fiddled with her internet. Here is where the interview resumed)

Anyway, that's the status of the manuscript. I just sent you an email this morning with a few more of those poems in it if you want them.

JB: Sure we do

(Here are the pieces Melanie was kind enough to

pass on to us for publication alongside this interview:)

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From *The World With Us In It*

–Does the world love us?

–The way it loves a tree or a snake.

...

Gratitude: it's the constant need for fixing, for repair, electricity failing in the last big wind causing our clocks to blink in the dark. We set the time, set towels against the chimney to staunch the leak, measure the door for repair. One sets out pills in the morning and afternoon, the other knits hats against the cold. Pipes freeze. One mother has cancer, one has an intermittent heart like the blinking clocks. One is here, one far away. When we hit the lights at night it is a fitful sleep that greets us, dreams full of instruction as to what needs doing next, and we wake grateful for help. We drink our coffee strong, we walk the happy dog. Happiness, what is it. Six in the morning, three in the afternoon, quiet sweeps in from the corners like dust. Dusk

not long after on the shortest days, evening stretched before us like a sheet, smooth after dinner and a glass of wine and television and knitting and sleep. One helps with the shower, one feeds. One makes a cashmere cap for the mother who will lose her hair to drugs. This happens here where the clocks slow down, where the tides shift imperceptibly until once again the stairs are gone and water overflows the shore. Gull-buoys mark the swells, wind shoves sand round the rocks. It's a battle out there in the wind or it's a joy ride, depending on which direction you walk. If you want to get home you have to walk both ways: oppose and acquiesce.

...

I could tell from the striations of sky that there was snow on Long Point but the wind was blowing the weather away from us for a change, allowing the sun to break through. Suddenly three flares arced across the bay, perpendicular and perfect, smoke trails crazed by the wind. But there were no boats on the water to be seen, nor any signs of distress from the town visible from the shore as I walked. The flares disappeared so fast I began to imagine they hadn't been there at all, when just as quickly three more passed across the sky, and what was the world trying to tell me as I walked,

what was I supposed to be looking out for?

...

Hardness of chests, trick of pants, of slick, well-worn favorite shirts my men friends scan each other as if mirrors to find the flaw they knew was there all along when I who love to watch them watch excuse myself from the table to wander the street and see who's lining up for the clubs, who's paying the steep covers and who is getting let in free for being local or flirtatious or both, watching my friend clear the door without seeing me, his body consumed by the strobes and the pedantic thump of the music, this man I thought might father my child, the two of us backlit and separate in the vaporous June fog.

...

Boys in red boats call to each other in the harbor, voices full of insult and warning. Nothing at all harsh about the day, a modicum of sun, whaleboats headed to sea for their search. Feeling, for the moment, hopeful.

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It's just taken me a long time to decide if I really like the work and that kind of rejection or challenge always throws it back on me. I wonder, 'Well, what is it about this work that isn't happening out there? What is it and do I like it?' Because in the end, it's really just you and and if you can't get behind it, no one else will. I've had to ask myself a lot of questions about this work and one of the things that makes me kind of chronically uncomfortable is that it is really domestic. It is something I think a lot about in terms of gender and acceptable content, because there's a realm of poetry that has long been considered 'women's poems' and I find that creepy and I don't really want to be pigeon-holed in a certain way. But there's a certain 'you got what you got and it's just what it is' and I'm not going to start writing whatever those other poems might be, because they're not what I'm interested in and they're not what I have.

Politics for instance rises up in my work. It rises up from my body, not somebody else's body. It's just going to be what it's going to be. I've stopped trying to do anything about that. I've had to kind of submit to who I actually am and what I'm actually interested in, and I find that there's always this tension between submission and aggression. In my work life and in everything, really. You know, knowing how much to really push

through and how much to actually give in to. I think in this particular body of work it really kind of is what it is and I'm not going to turn it into something else. I tried breaking the poems into lines. I tried a lot of things to fuck around with them and see what else they could be but it pretty much is what it is.

JB: I was wondering how much of it was kind of a formal matter. Your poems, at least those I've read, are really well suited to that particular form. It's got this intimacy that comes with the form, for me, reading it. You break it apart and you lose that kind of closeness and I wonder if that has something to do with it as well.

I think that's probably true— they're very conversational in tone as all my work is, whether I'm writing fiction or poems. I do always have this sense that I'm... my perceived You... I have a secret, I have something I really want to tell You because really, you're my best friend and I want to tell you this thing. That's who write for. That's who my imagination makes up. I think the tone in the poems really has that imperative to it.

I also write a lot by ear, so in the past I've been very wed to line breaks. I like the musicality that they give you and the way that musicality can actually throw

meaning. To have written an entire manuscript without them is kind of unusual for me, but I'm very much a hybrid kind of writer. I write around. I'm a slut! I write around... and I always have— I write fiction, I write non-fiction. I identify as poet.

But I do really like the form of these poems and I'm glad you like them, because I think they're interesting. I keep coming back to them and I think, 'oh they're something really interesting happening here,' and I like that. I also like how much of the feeling of the landscape they embody. That's something I'm quite interested in: how where you live shapes you.

I always hope that somebody will just find them and go, 'Okay, we want to do this.' As I say to my kids, you can't win if you don't play, and you have to keep sending it out. That part for me is challenging. Finding the places. It's part of the job, so you have to do it.

JB: When we first read your work in Poetry Magazine the first time I read your work I went, 'Wow, these pieces really resonate,' and I was wondering if you... what it was that you had done to position yourself there? In many respects, it's not the kind of thing they tend to go for formally and that's one of the things I was most interested to see. It was a breath of fresh air

in that mag— to see this kind of intimate conversational style.

I have no idea. I didn't do anything except send them. When I send work, I always send a batch to the most unlikely places, because who knows... then I send them to a few more that I think are in the ballpark. It doesn't yield any different results really.

I wrote this essay a couple of years ago —my kids are adopted and I wrote this essay about my younger kid— and I thought, 'This is one of those essays that should be one of those Lives Columns in the New York Times. I'm just going to send it there,' and I did, and they took it in one day. I mean... I had never written an essay before and I thought, 'This is crazy, but it just seems like one of those things, I'm going to send it there,' and the guy took it and it was in the New York Times a week later. It was crazy! And I didn't do anything to it. I just wrote it and sent it.

I don't think it says anything about my particular genius but I do feel game and when I make something that I think is interesting I try to make it happen. Those moments are so rare, but I had the good fortune of having a number of them in my career. I don't have connections. I didn't get an MFA.

There's this really funny thing that happened in November. You know the poet Franz Wright? You know his work? He's insane. He's a really interesting writer but he's really fucking crazy and he worked at Brandeis. He was a poet in residence. While I was there, I had a different job and I met him I didn't know him at all.

He has a Facebook presence –his father was a famous writer poet, James Wright. Anyway, he went off on this diatribe on Facebook regaling against MFA programs –not unlike what I actually think about them– and he named me in this diatribe as being a ‘subdoor-mat MFA poet’, right? Who's a nice mommy. It was so interesting to me, because I didn't finish college, I don't have an MFA. I had a job at Brandeis because I had one and using ‘mommy’ as a disparagement? No one who read it thought it was at all sexist or misogynist. Of course it set off this firestorm of debate online and all these different online forums and blah blah blah. You never know whose going to make something of you. Brandeis isn't a masters program– it's an undergraduate program so it had no relationship to reality, really. I mean, he may hate my work, I don't know if he's ever seen it, I don't really care, but it was such an interesting thing– and now I think all these people who read this

thing are actually looking for my work online. All of a sudden, I have this crazy presence in this conversation about the evils or not of MFA programs, which I have no relationship to at all.

EW: *Dragged into it.*

Curious because I think it's actually drawing attention to my work in a way that it wouldn't have before. A roundabout way of saying you never know how your work is going to find its way into the world and you can't win if you don't play.

You keep sending it out, and because I'm such a process-driven person, the product has always been very secondary to me. The artifact that I end up making doesn't interest me as much as the process of making it, but because I want to have a life in this world, I have had to turn my attention, at least for short periods of time, on this product. That's the book, right? That's the poem, the thing you make. I think you should just fucking send poems to Poetry Magazine to see what happens. I mean, Chris Wiman... who knew? Then they asked me to record a podcast for them. Totally didn't get it at all! I'm like, ‘Hmm, what does that look like?’ So I went to the local radio station and I

just thought that all these poets that they had in Poetry Magazine did a podcast. It turns out it's just not true. There was something about those poems that they really were interested in.

The first book I ended up publishing was a novel and I'd never written a novel before so I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't have an education, so I didn't really know what I was doing. I thought, 'Well, what's a novel?' A novel is life sized. 'Well, how do you make something that's life size.' You have to make it really big. I had this studio at the time with big walls and I took these big rolls of paper and lined the walls and I thought, 'Just make it really big. That's how you can think your way into it.' So I actually literally just made it really big.

A line would come into my head and I'd write it on the paper. I'd fill up the big paper. I had my computer on my cart. I'd roll my cart around and transcribe off the paper. Take one roll downm put another roll up. After doing that like three or four times, I had tricked my brain into writing a novel, so I didn't need the device anymore, but it was how I did it.

I thought then, 'Well, what do you do after you finish a novel?' You get an agent. 'How do you get an agent?' You write letters—so I wrote letters and I got an

agent and she sent the book out, and all those rejections I got, even though they didn't want to publish the book at first, they were all saying, 'We can tell this person didn't go to grad school. We can tell that this voice wasn't conditioned by these things. We really like it.'

It was so affirming to me about the choices I've made, because I still thought, 'Maybe I should finish college. Maybe I should go to grad school.' And I don't think that people shouldn't but it just wasn't what I did.

Very affirming to me that the voice came forward. That's the information that I'm still getting from people like you and people like Chris Wiman, other editors who've taken my work, and even those that've almost taken it or not— they say,

'We get this voice. There's something about this voice that's compelling,' and so I feel like I'm doing something right.

EW: Us too. About you, not us.

Whats your work? I know that's kind of a stupid question; you're writing fiction now or poems?

JB: I've been writing a lot of poetry lately and been sending some stuff out. It's been exciting. I have had a

few places pick some things up and I guess I'm like that too— that I think voice is really important. I'm much more on the auditory side of things, I like to hear how a poem sings, and I think content too is really important. That's what I'm really interested in exploring is content that really hits, something that I like most about your work— that it makes an impact, that it's short but you read that and say, 'Wow, this really resonates.' For me that's the kind of poetry that's most exciting— poetry with an urgent voice that is intimate. There's something about that that I'm attracted to with the form that I don't find so much except with a couple of exceptions in fiction. People who are really skilled at writing compactly with emotional content and impact.

I come from a philosophy background so that mode of hardcore analytics comes pretty easy to me, but I've also been deep into books, into literature, for as long as I can remember. I'm exploring a lot of the crossover between issues that matter to philosophers and grounding that in body that's important to poets, because I think there's a lot of discussion to be had there and I think these two camps have a lot to say to each other, if they could find a common language.

Absolutely, and I would make an argument that its

actually the time. That there's this kind of insane political schism that has actually opened the door for people to talk about ideas again using a grounding moral philosophy. Regardless of how we got to this conversation, it seems really interesting and important that its happening. You have to send me some poems.

JB: I'll send you a couple that are up now so you can get a sense of what I've been on to.

Great. And Eric? What about you? Are you writing fiction?

EW: Yeah. I'm trying to learn how to beat characters up, pretty much. I tend to be a coddler and play around with words more than play around with substance so I've isolated a young man named Ugo who is told by his wife that he needs to go get a job so he can support their coming child and he gets really lost along the way. It's a longer story. First really longer story I've done since my thesis.

Was your thesis fiction or poetry?

EW: It was a blend. I was trying to merge the

stories of Jack and the Beanstalk and the Lorax. For a long time it didn't work— for the first 80% of the thesis project it didn't work— and I trashed all those pages and rewrote it within the last week or two weeks. Its definitely modified but Seussian, the up and down of Seussian verse. I'm having visceral response now, to riding around on a bike at three in the morning trying to get this thing done —obviously not writing while I'm riding— but just thinking and talking out loud in that voice; it was the most immersed I've ever been in anything with so much desperation.

The same guy who I mentioned earlier, Stephen Graham Jones, was my thesis advisor and he told me at the very end of writing it —because he was also a little doubtful of me being able to pull it off when he saw the first round— when I finished he's like, 'You know you have to finish this, right?' Because I turned in the first half of it. I turned in the first part, really. Not the first half. And I've never returned to it, which is kind of an open circle in my life that at some point I will have to close.

But yeah, right now, long stories and rebuilding a habit I guess that I have lost in favor of trying to find work.

Discipline is hard, especially when you're not in school anymore and you don't have the deadlines. For me it's really hard and I can find a million other things I should be doing. Especially —forget about it— you get a job, you got kids, you got shit you gotta do. You gotta do the laundry, you know? The laundry becomes this compelling beacon when I don't want to write. Happy to do the laundry. I find that kind of figuring how to write outside of an external structure really difficult, but you know you have to finish that book, right?

EW: Yeah.

You actually have to finish it. I'm telling you.

EW: I know, I know.

See it through. It's like, me, mommy, saying, 'C'mon. Figure it out.'

I love this writer named David Rakoff. You know his work?

EW: Who's this?

His name is David Rakoff. He's been featured on

This American Life a lot, don't know if you ever listen to that show. He's written these books in verse that are fucking amazing because what happens, I mean you know... it's so easy for things like rhyme schemes to become this crutch in writing and I always say to my students, 'That's fine but you cannot hide behind it.' He has managed to write these things in this kind of iambic pentameter verse that really... somehow the form is an essential part of the stories that he's telling. The form actually helps to make the material transcend rather than bogging it down. I think that's a really hard thing to do, which is why I think you have to finish, because there you are, doing it. Something that's really hard.

EW: You were kind of chatting about that small part at the end of process that is so difficult for you –or maybe not so difficult– the job part of writing, which is either getting it to people who need to read it or maybe formatting it and turning it into something. The real nitty-gritty of writing.

There are lots of the parts of the construction of the writing that I really enjoy. I like doing puzzles, so for me the formatting, the figuring out the form, the 'do you right and left justify', all that kind of stuff, I find

that part relieving and fun. Getting people the material I can find quite difficult. That's because it's hard for me to walk through the door. Once I'm in the door, I'm fine, but getting in the door, that's challenging. So that part's hard. The fucking around with it, the making it into something I like; the sending it out part, is really hard for me. At heart I'm really a kind of recalcitrant thirteen year old and I hate asking for permission and I get cranky and I think underlying that is a fear of rejection– people aren't going to like me, I'm a weirdo, I haven't gone to school. All of that shit can kind of rise up to the surface.

But, as I said before, there is a level at which you just have to give in. If this is the life you want, you just have to give in and you have to accept the fact that the impulse to write infers a desire to be known. This is why I have no love for a particular bent in contemporary poetry, an overreliance on irony. You start out by saying some big statement –I'm sure you see this in philosophy– make these big statements and use the next ten lines taking it back and hiding behind language. I don't have any patience for it.

I do believe that the desire to do this thing infers a desire to be known and perceived and in order for that to do that you have to be in the company of other peo-

ple, right? This is part of it, the nuts and bolts, and that means audience. You have to find an audience. That's what I tell myself. That's what makes me send the work out. Because I believe that my desire to do this infers a desire to be known and you have to be visible. There are a lot of reasons why a lot of people spend an enormous amount of time in their lives in hiding, and I can, I can sniff out the desire to hide in a piece of writing so quickly. I have very sensitive antennae for it and part of it is— it's my own impulse, I'm really good at it. It has stopped being interesting to me and now it has stopped being interesting to me in others. I'm not seduced by it. I'm not tricked by it; I think it's boring. I don't like being toyed with.

I feel like there's a lot of poems —and I see it in my students, this kind of come-here-go-away thing — and I just find it irritating really fast, and it's like, you want me to come here? Just tell me, and I'll be there. You want to show me something about yourself? Just show me! But don't waste my time by doing the come-hither thing. It's like girls who fuck with you, I hate that. I always hated that. You want to go out with me? Just say so! This is not against flirtation, which I like a lot, but there is something, a mixed message thing, in a poem that I'm just not... unless you take it on as the subject—

then it's interesting to me, but as a device, not at all.

Again, that's a kind of circuitous way of saying I feel like you have to give in to sending your work out. Send it to places you feel resonant with, which means you have to read and you have to look at what's out there and if you don't find it out there, you have to do what you did, which is make your own magazine. Make your own forum and that will help inform you about your own interest. It's really all about following the thread of your own interest, whether you're writing or reading, so I'm afraid to say, you've got to keep sending it out.

There're more places to send work to now than there used to be. Electronic media has changed the landscape of poetry so profoundly. It's not the kind of elitist house-on-the-hill thing it used to be. There are a million people doing interesting work and I know a bunch of them now and I like it. I don't always like the work, but, you know, who am I? I'm just looking around for what interests me.

JB: Well it's the audience again, you know? The conversation. That's what matters.

Yeah, I think so. Coming back to what we start—

ed talking about: you, through making these gestures make community for yourself, whether it happens largely virtually or not.

People used to write letters to poets all the time and say, 'Can I send you a poem?'. W.S. Merwin whose work I really love did this a lot, and people write to him and there was a kind of lively exchange of ideas and work that I think is experiencing a little bit of a renaissance because of online communities. I'm really happy that you wanted to talk to me. For me it's great because I'm somewhat isolated in my own life because of having kids and whatever, not being in an academic setting anymore, and that kind of stuff, but I also like it because of what it says about you. You're actively in pursuit of what interests you and not passive and that's really important in this life because passivity will kill you! Nobody gives a shit about what you're doing. This is just true: very few people on earth care that you are writing anything. We don't live in a culture that values it, there's no money in it, it's stupid. Writing poems is really dumb, but it's what you do so what are you going to do? Find your friends who are doing it too. That will help keeping you doing it, especially as you move out into the world and do things like get jobs. I think community is really really important in the activity and

I look for it with six year olds as much as peers. That's why I like being in public schools, because this is what I like to talk about and I like talking about it with five year old.

That's what I know. I don't know very many things. I know a couple of things really well and right now that seems like enough for where I'm at.