

THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 7 | 1998

Interview: The Art Of The Prose Poem

Peter Johnson and Robert Bly

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INTERVIEW

This interview occurred over a two-day period (April 6-7, 1997) at the Associated Writing Program Convention, where Robert Bly was a participant in a session titled, “The State of Prose Poetry: Straddling the Imaginary Line Between Poetry and Prose.”

Peter Johnson: Why do you think there is a prose-poem renaissance now?

Robert Bly: Baudelaire wouldn’t have been surprised: the prose poem, he thought, would be the primary form of the 20th century. Perhaps Giambattista Vico’s calendar of cultural stages, which Joyce liked so much, might help explain the appearance of the prose poem. Vico in 1744 laid out three stages of culture, moving from the Gods to the Heroes to Ordinary People—from the Sacred Culture, as in Egypt, to the Aristocratic Culture, as in the Renaissance, to the Democratic. In the Sacred Phase, all words are signs, and the natural form is a sacred chant. In high Greece and Renaissance England, Kings, Queens, heroic types, the class system, metrical poetry, and complicated syntax are the rule. In the third phase, the horizontal phase, meter, syntax, classes, all go; and the natural form is prose.

So we are all secretly longing for prose. That doesn’t mean everyone has to write it, not at all; chants and metrical poems still abound, though a little diminished. Anthony Hecht, whose work I admire, still writes as if the age of aristocratic commonwealth is alive.

Prose then is the natural speech of democratic language, which Vico calls “epistolatory or vulgar, which serves the common use of life.” If one tries to live in one’s own age, it doesn’t mean abandoning poetry: the task is to keep the mystery, the high spirits, the subtlety, even the verbal brilliance of the two earlier phases, while letting the sentence itself—not the foot or the line—be the primary unit.

Language in the heroic phase moves steadily upward. When Shakespeare creates Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he has already sensed that things have changed. We are in the democratic realm now, and in that realm everything is horizontal and grammar tends to decline into simple sentences. It was William Carlos Williams who tried to face these demands, not Henry James.

PJ: When you mention the “thing-poem” in your essay, “The Prose Poem as an Evolving Form,” are you referring to just “object poems,”

or would your “thing-poems” include such ones as “A Caterpillar” and “An Octopus”?

RB: Oh, certainly. It’s inclusive. All creatures like to be looked at.

PJ: Specifically, you say that “in the object poem in prose, the conscious mind gives up, at least to a degree, the adversary position it usually adopts toward the unconscious, and a certain harmony between the two takes place.” By “adversary position,” do you mean a poet’s conscious attempt to manhandle or control the object?

RB: Yes. The mind is always tempted to take up a superior position in relation to beings—such as caterpillars or clams—who are without reason. Many philosophers and saints in the West have made efforts to dissolve the adversarial position human beings take toward animals—St. Francis would be one. It’s been slow work.

We could say that in a prose poem one can practice writing about an animal or “thing” in a way that wouldn’t be hierarchical, in which one *wouldn’t* place human beings on top and animals on the bottom. I like the way Frost implies in “Two Look at Two” a mysterious sympathy between a human couple and a deer couple. We can feel the lack of hierarchy in Thoreau’s prose as well. So what one ultimately hopes for is a lessening of the empire mentality of the human being, shall we say, a disappearance completely of the thought of inferior races and superior races, a giving up completely of the idea that nature has no consciousness. When some adversarial thinking is cleared away, it’s possible for language to become transparent. For example, when you read one of Ponge’s prose poems, the text, in some way, almost becomes transparent, and one feels one can touch the object itself. That doesn’t mean that the prose-poem writer is doomed to be simple-minded. Ponge is the opposite of simple-minded; and he has the whole flexibility of the French language at his disposal. Animals, as we know, are very subtle, as are gardens, as are forests. So we need a language with tremendous subtlety, and many shadings. This is how Ponge does his poem on the dinner plate or *assiette*.

During our consecration here let’s be careful not to make this thing that we use every day too pearly. No poetic leap, no matter how brilliant, can speak in a sufficiently flat way about the lowly interval that porcelain occupies between pure spirit and appetite.

Not without some humor, alas, (it fits its animal better), the name for its lovely matter was taken from a mollusc shell. And we, a gypsy species, are not to take a seat there. Its substance has been named porcelain, from the Latin—by analogy—*porcelana*, sow-vulva. . . . Is that good enough for your appetite?

But all beauty, which suddenly rises from the restlessness of the waves, has its true place on a seashell. . . . Is that too much for pure spirit?

And the assiette, whatever you say, rose in a similar way from the sea, and what's more was multiplied instantly by that free-spirited juggler in the wings who takes the place sometimes of the melancholic old man who tosses us with poor grace one sun per day.

That is why you see the assiette here in its numerous incarnations still vibrating as a skipped stone settles at last on the sacred surface of the tablecloth.

Here you have all that one can say about an object which contributes more for living than it offers for reflection.

(translated by Robert Bly)

PJ: Although I see how your sensibility can be linked to Ponge's, it seems, at times, especially in his later work, that much of his language is scientific, which, to me, implies reliance upon the intellect, and wouldn't you agree that too much intellect tends to distance one from the object? Doesn't the intellect want to "figure out" the object, control it, which seems to be precisely what you're against?

RB: Ponge is a Frenchman! He's not a good example of a poet writing out of the unconscious because he didn't believe in the unconscious! I was amazed when I found that out. He offers the French dictionary instead of the unconscious! We could say that when he wants to escape reason, he turns to the dictionary because it carefully preserves the ancient, biological, mysterious history of every word. By following the tracks left by a word, we can go backward in time. Freud used a dream for that, but Ponge with his intellect is just as clever.

PJ: If Ponge approaches objects through his intellect, do you think that you connect with them more through metaphor, because so many of your thing-poems are loaded with metaphors, some of which even cluster? But it's curious that just as the intellect can manhandle an object, which we might say is not healthy, one can also manipulate it through

metaphor. It's a more subtle means of control, but metaphor still implies a certain domination. And so the self has contaminated the union of object and poet, and again that seems to be something you are against, though you have changed your mind lately. I'm thinking of your preface to *What Have I Ever Lost by Dying?* when you write, "When I composed the first of these poems, which George Hitchcock published in a collection called *The Morning Glory*, I had hoped that a writer could describe an object or a creature without claiming it, without immersing it like a negative in his developing tank of disappointment and desire. I no longer think that is possible."

RB: You are afraid that the self will contaminate the union of object and poet? You are right, it will. But so what? When I first began writing poems about box turtles or the feet of wrens, I wanted to be pure: I wanted to have the description free of my Americanness or my sadness. I wanted *their* colors in the poem, not mine. But if colors don't come in from my psyche, there won't be any colors. There'll only be a negative.

I finally decided that one's task is not only to snap the picture, but to develop it in a dark room. I finally agreed it is all right to claim the creature in some way, by "immersing it like a negative in our developing tank of disappointment and desire."

I said in the introduction you mention: "Our desires and disappointments have such hunger that they pull each sturgeon or hollow tree into themselves."

How can a poem on an octopus be free of that? No, no! It is impossible! For example, I began a poem on an orange this way: "The orange's hide is soft and grainy, and it has two navels" . . . that is the clear-sighted, scientific part . . . "as if it were born once into this world and once into the next." That last clause is where the life comes in! One half of a metaphor is contributed by the left brain, it's cool and realistic; then "the loyal old right lobe, unembittered by its owner's officialized neglect, leaps forward with a suggestion in its own language—an image. The left side grabs it with relief, and out it comes as a metaphor." That is Ted Hughes talking. "The curious result is always the same: everybody laughs or at least smiles, or at least feels a sudden lift, a sudden waft of oxygen."

PJ: Your metaphors and similes are odd in that they seem easily apprehended, but as I look closely at them, they become more elusive. I sense a real playfulness in them.

RB: Well, give me an example.

PJ: In “A Box Turtle,” you write, “The claws—five on the front, four in back—are curiously long and elegant, cold, curved, pale, like a lieutenant’s sword.” And in “The Starfish” you describe its arms as being “rolled up now, lazily, like a puppy on its back. One arm is especially active and curves up over its own body as if a dinosaur were looking behind him.” [Bly laughs.] Yes, it’s comic. And even though there is a visual element to both of these similes, they really defy explication.

RB: How did you feel about the similes in “The Starfish”?

PJ: It goes back to what you said about metaphor reflecting your internal state. Obviously, there is nothing ominous about your starfish. It possesses a sense of wonder and connectedness.

RB: I noticed that the starfish’s various arms were doing different things: “many of its arms are rolled up now, lazily, like . . .,” and the moment you say “like . . .” the whole unknown world enters in, and you don’t know what you’re going to say. At that moment, as Bill Stafford says, you have to give up all plans and all hope for perfection. Be a good host; let whatever comes in come in. One arm is rolled back a little “like a puppy on its back.” I remember writing that and thinking, “Whoa, that’s wonderful.” A scientist will say, “Some of its arms are in a rolled up position.” Period. The eye has done that. But I added “lazily,” and all of a sudden, something comes in from the part of me that likes lazy people, maybe. And then I say “like . . .” and now one is really in the soup. Writing, one has to be playful enough to say, “I’ll probably make a fool of myself in this image.” Then you can call on the part of yourself that isn’t precise, but has seen hundreds of these events when you were ten or twelve or fifteen. You don’t know from what era or stage or moment of your life the image is going to come. Had I been feeling reptilian, I might have compared the starfish’s curved arm to a snake. In any case, I love that moment when one asks, “Like what?”

Then I wrote, “How slowly and evenly it moves.” I’m simply watching the starfish move. But moving like what? I could say it’s moving like a racing car stuck in first, or like a snail. But when I say, “The starfish is a glacier,” then I’m far ahead, and I have time to make a joke, saying it goes “sixty miles a year”; actually most glaciers go only a foot or two. I go on to say that the starfish is “about the size of . . .” what? A “pail.” Sometimes when I’m writing I’ll put down six nouns

at that point: it's the size of a fist, of a dinner plate that's been thrown out into the dump, of a hubcap on a Volkswagen, the lid of a can found underneath the water, or the bottom of a pail. "The bottom of a pail" interests me, because all at once we have a pail; moreover, we have the interesting volume at the bottom of a pail, and perhaps some shady light.

PJ: Well, certain images have more resonances than others.

RB: Yes, and the making of them is so much fun.

PJ: Being an editor of a prose poem journal, I read work from many poets who try to imitate the Robert Bly thing-poem, and I'm sure they're having fun, too, but somehow they just can't make the leaps you make, whether those leaps come through metaphor or juxtaposition of imagery. I think a certain astonishment is missing in many object poems I receive. For example, I published your poem "An Oyster Shell." Listen to what happens in the first paragraph:

The shell is scarred, as if it were a rushing river bottom, scratched by great trees being carried down. Sometimes its whitish calcium has been folded over itself, as when molten rock flows out; so something is still angry. [Bly laughs.]

So you see what I mean? In your best thing-poems you constantly redirect the reader and reveal strange new associations. I've come to see the object poem as being similar to the still life in painting. Every once in a while I come across an astonishing still life, say by the Irish impressionist O'Connor, but, for the most part, many of them leave me empty. Similarly, many of the object poems I receive remind me of a still life without the banana, devoid of any correspondences, any kind of creative, erotic energy.

RB: My leaps have to do with a confidence that psychology gives me that one can see the invisible. If you glance at a human being and you see the layers of calcium on his face, you are looking at some anger underneath that. That's where the sally in "An Oyster Shell" came from. The fun lies in making unjustified leaps about people and things.

PJ: Yes, and, in this sense, not all your leaps are playful. Very often you deal with what Edson calls "the dark uncomfortable metaphor."

RB: Yes.

PJ: When I think of this playfulness, this childlike innocence in your work, I'm reminded of Rimbaud and Max Jacob, although your sensibility is very different from theirs. Rimbaud is the *enfant terrible* whose innocence has been violated, and so he wants to destroy everything; Jacob wants to play—with words, with genres, with literary and social conventions. But you're more interested in connectedness than in fragmentation or parody. In a sense, you're like Blake. I think it would be humorous to take you, Rimbaud, and Jacob on a field trip and have you all write a thing-poem on a night crawler.

RB: Night crawlers are good. It depends on what you read in. Blake reads innocent energy into even the lion and the tiger. That energy was in him. My cells have a certain optimism in them, and I'm not responsible for that—it's genetic.

PJ: That's a difference I see between your work and David Ignatow's dark, comic prose poems.

RB: We make a good pair for that reason. He comes out of a world filled with Jewish devils, that constant awareness of disaster you find in the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer. In Norway, where my people come from, we feel the *justness* of nature, particularly in the summer when the sun comes. But I want to get back to our discussion on metaphor. I think we're on to something there.

PJ: Do you think that prose poetry more than verse poetry allows for the leaps we've been speaking about?

RB: I think a lot about the word "safety." One reason I couldn't write as well when I was twenty-five as I can now is that I didn't feel as safe then. At twenty-five you think you're going to do the wrong thing, and you probably are. You meet people who belong to the class system and are hierarchical, and this fear cuts down your ability to play. Instead of playing, you're looking for the right associations, the ones an educated person might have. I don't want to make a big thing about this, but for me one of the joys in the prose poem is that I don't feel as much fear there. I'm writing in a new form, so to speak; I'm not claiming that I'm keeping up to great standards. As I've said, the most wonderful thing about the prose poem is that no one has set up the standards yet. The

ability to make leaps has something to do with how safe you feel, because if you can't feel safe, then you can't go back to your childhood.

PJ: Someone once mentioned that, in a sense, Charles Simic's poetry could be considered "children's literature." Dickens, too, and Virginia Woolf and so many writers probe this area. Another curious point is that many poets have told me that they have encouraged students to write prose poems as well as verse poems in poetry workshops, and that the prose poems have been better. One could suggest that this occurs because it's "easier" to write a prose poem, but those of us who write them know that's not true. More likely, it goes back to what you just said. Not intimidated by meter or even line breaks, these young poets feel safer; they can focus on the poem without imaginary mothers or fathers, "the tradition," looking over their shoulders.

RB: Well, let's go back to that, but in a different way. What is the proper subject for a prose poem? There is no answer for that, so you have to look at your own life. I lived my childhood relaxed and on a farm, so when I'm with a tree, I feel relaxed. But a friend of mine who's lived in Manhattan his whole life went for a weekend up to Rye and when he came back, he said, "Why don't those trees ever *say* anything?" He'd be better off writing a prose poem in the city, because he feels safe there. Once at a prose-poem workshop in the Village, I asked the students to find some object to write about that was not made by human beings. One poet refused and said: "I'm not going to do that. I don't care beans about pine cones. Instead I'll find *you* a city object to write about!" He came back after lunch with a small bottle cap entirely full of that grungy dirt peculiar to vacant lots; three long white hairs rose out of it. I wrote about that for hours. His message was, "Throw away pine cones. Get a bottle cap."

PJ: It does seem that you are stuck, or blessed, with the geography of your childhood.

RB: All you have to do is relax into that. Do you remember that little poem David Ignatow wrote about the city? He was asking a wall to bless him. It didn't:

The wall is silent.
I speak for it,
blessing myself

He once dedicated a poem to me, complaining about my constant mentioning of leaves falling: “I wish I understood the beauty / in leaves falling. To whom / are we beautiful / as we go?” That’s great, great.

PJ: To change the subject a bit, I’m curious what you think of the prose poem that comes out of what we generally call the “Language school” of poetry.

RB: How would you describe that school?

PJ: I’m thinking of that essay by Ron Silliman called “The New Sentence” and of other comments that he’s made. He wouldn’t consider the New Prose Poem to be like the prose poetry of French Symbolism, yet I know from editing my journal that many poets associated with that school consider their prose pieces to be prose poems. It’s hard to do justice to the Language movement in a few words, but I suppose I’m referring to Silliman’s interest in “what a poem is actually made of—not images, not voices, not characters or plots, all of which appear on the paper, or in one’s mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself.” It seems to me that your reliance on metaphor, and your debt to such symbolists as Baudelaire, who himself was such a believer in natural correspondences, would make you someone who writes in a very different way from the Language poets.

RB: What do you make of all this theorizing?

PJ: Some very good work has come out of Language poetry, especially such books as *Lawn of Excluded Middle* and *The Reproduction of Profiles* by Rosemarie Waldrop, but in general, I find most of it too intellectual. I have this feeling that when the Language poets go on vacation, they leave Stein and Wittgenstein at home and take Sappho and Bachelard.

RB: Ha! It seems to me that a lot of them were sorry that they were born into a messy universe, and they’d like to clean it up. It is a messy universe, and metaphors are part of the mess.

PJ: What do you think of Gertrude Stein’s work? In many ways, she is the mother of the Language movement.

RB: [a very long pause] I’d like to have more intelligence in a poem.

It's as if she's cut off her own legs.

PJ: Could you elaborate on that?

RB: No. There's something amputated there, and to me that's very sad.

PJ: It surprised me in our session this afternoon when you said in the future the prose poem will become more and more concerned with sound. I have always thought that your primary focus was on the image, without much regard for meter, rhyme, and so on.

RB: Then I should make myself clear.

PJ: But just let me add one more question to the one above.

RB: Sure. Go ahead.

PJ: Someone once said to me that when the literary dust settles it will be interesting to see what women and men emerge as the most important influences in Twentieth Century American poetry. He suggested that the two most important male figures will be Ezra Pound and you. And then he added with a smile, "Too bad Bly has a tin ear." What do you think he meant by that?

RB: I don't mind people saying those things about me. I say a lot of things about me as well. But let's go back. You are right that I thought at one time that the most important task was to bring the image and the metaphor out from its mousetrap of elaborate syntax and meter. It's like rescuing something alive from a burning building. Like rescuing a baby from an orphan asylum. It's a Taoist adventure to save the one detail that has power and imagery in itself. You know when Basho was walking on that well-known road to the North in Japan, he arrived at a mountaintop which had mainly stones and a lot of tremendous winds. Many poets had written a poem there. Basho wrote: "Storm on Mount Asama! / Wind blowing out of the stones!" Whoa! I couldn't believe he wrote that! He was able to take the energy of the wind and the energy of the stones and protect them from syntax, protect them from ordinary ideas.

I spent a lot of time years ago trying to free the image from its matrix of what I would now call the hierarchical, aristocratic realm.

But then when I got the image in my own work out, I began to say to myself: “This image resonates in the body but not in the ear.” And I began to brood over those old sonnets where the sounds resonate and reverberate so marvelously. They repeat but remain entangled. To me the next step was how to bring the sound out “from the burning building.”

PJ: Do you think this heightened interest in sound explains why you’re writing mostly verse poetry now?

RB: Yes. Let’s look at this one from *Morning Poems*:

It’s good to stay in bed a while, and hear
The *ay* slyly hidden in sequacious,
Scent in summer world the two *ers*
Listen for the *in* hidden in woodbins.

Am I like the hog snuffling for truffles,
Followed by skimpy lords in oversized furs?
For this gaiety do I need forgiveness?
Does the lark need forgiveness for its blue eggs?

So it’s a bird-like thing, then this hiding
And warming of sounds. They are the little low
Heavens in the nest; now my chest feathers
Widen, now I’m an old hen, now I am satisfied.

Here my aim is to brood over *er* and *ay*, to lift both image and sound away from the matrix of iambic meter. If I can go back to verse with the playfulness I’ve learned from the prose poem, then I have two forms of playfulness: one with the image and metaphor, and another with the repetition of sound.

PJ: And you think that’s harder to do with the prose poem?

RB: No, I don’t. I’ve done a lot of sound-work—repetition of sounds—in prose poems, though few commentators notice it. We can talk about a prose poem if you wish; I can tell a little about playing with sound in a prose poem.

PJ: First I want to point you toward a verse poem in *Morning Poems* called “The Mouse”:

It's good to have poems
That begin with tea,
And end with God.

A man is drinking tea,
Let's say, and a mouse
Runs across the floor.

It makes him think
Of all hidden things.
A mouse is a furry

Cruelty with paws.
It's a secret with ears,
A shame the man

Thought he could tell
No one of, a shame
That searches quietly

For kernels of grain
Below that awful
Cat of Augustine.

This poem seems to lose nothing if cast into prose. I see the internal transitions in the poem and the juxtaposition of imagery and thoughts as being more powerful than the line breaks. For me the line breaks actually distract me from the psychological core of the poem. So why did this poem demand to be written in verse instead of prose?

RB: You have to understand that the poems in *Morning Poems* were done as a kind of honoring of Bill Stafford, and his tradition of writing a poem every day. I enjoy writing poems in regular stanza shapes, though Bill preferred a more ragged line. I found myself drawn to the four line stanza of either four or five beats, so the lines aren't iambic, but the beats are still there. Poems-in-verse and poems-in-prose provide different kinds of pleasures. But I agree that this mouse poem could have gone into prose. There's a certain playfulness, though, in seeing if you can get your thought to fit into a regular stanza form, rather than having one stanza with three lines, the next with five, and so on.

PJ: Returning to the infamous "tin ear" attack, I'd like to know which prose poems you think rely heavily upon sound.

RB: I've tried in prose poems to lift the sounds up, so to speak. I call sounds such as *er* and *in* and *or* "sound particles." A typical prose poem may use 45 or 70 different sound particles. But if you're going to get musical chimes going, you're better off using as few of these particles as possible and calling them in over and over again. Here's a short prose poem called "A Hollow Tree," probably from 1974.

I bend over an old hollow cottonwood stump, still standing,
waist high, and look inside. Early spring. Its Siamese temple
walls are all brown and ancient. The walls have been worked on
by the intricate ones. Inside the hollow walls there is privacy and
secrecy, dim light. And yet some creature has died there.

On the temple floor feathers, gray feathers, many of them
with a fluted white tip. Many feathers. In the silence many
feathers.

In "I bend over an old hollow cottonwood stump," we can hear three *ohs* in a short space. "I bend over an old hollow cottonwood stump, still standing, waist high." Can you hear how the *ay* comes in strongly? And with "high," the first *ai* sound establishes itself, returning again with "inside" and "Siamese." "Early spring. Its Siamese temple walls . . ." If you listen to the *ai* in "Siamese," you can see it's very insistent for reasons that are not clear. Now the *awl* sound comes in three times. When one says "the temple walls are all brown and ancient," the *ay* comes in once more, and the *ow* sound becomes linked with *n*'s. And soon the *n* sounds begin to flood the poem with their *n* energy. "The temple walls are all brown and ancient. The walls have been worked on by the intricate ones. Inside the hollow walls . . ." We get "been" and "on," "intricate," "ones," and "inside." So that's fun. Now the *ai* sound returns because that sound is about to take over the poem. "Inside the hollow walls there is privacy and secrecy, dim light. And yet some creature has died here." In some sense, because *ai*'s are coming along, "privacy" is self-identified as an important word. And so it's the *ai* sound that is really doing the emotional work here; and it comes again with "died." In the next paragraph the word "temple" picks up the *m* sound from "stump" and the *m* in Siamese and adds "many." And *f* becomes important. "On the temple floor feathers, gray feathers, many of them with a fluted white tip. Many feathers. In the silence many feathers."

PJ: So much for the lack of thematically linked sounds in your poems.

RB: Ha! You see it's a magical thing.

PJ: I find it hard to believe that you're thinking about all of this when you're writing. Do you think the sound is coming from the object and is not artificially imposed? Or does it come from some natural rhythm in you? I can't believe you had this all figured out before you wrote the poem.

RB: Well, certainly; but your word "before" suggests that the poem was written in one sitting. I must have written at least twenty versions of this poem. And when I began to see that the *ai*'s were becoming colorful, I rewrote the lines in order to add shading to that sound. I think you're right to say that the sounds suggest themselves first in a perfectly natural way. And if you're terribly lucky, the improvisational inspiration will last for the whole poem. Improvisational success usually lasts for only four or five lines. After that you have to say, "Okay, I'm committed to these sounds," and then you have to look at the hundreds of possibilities before you.

PJ: There are some wonderful sounds in your prose poem "Warning to the Reader." That poem seems to me to be your *ars poetica*. The poem is a warning to readers and to writers, and it works so well because of its shifts in thought, especially the huge transition signaled by "But" in the second paragraph. I also think it's one of your darker and more ironic poems. What do you have to say about this prose poem?

WARNING TO THE READER

Sometimes farm granaries become especially beautiful when all the oats or wheat are gone, and the wind has swept the rough floor clean. Standing inside, we see around us, coming in through the cracks between shrunken wall boards, bands or strips of sunlight. So in a poem about imprisonment, one sees a little light.

But how many birds have died trapped in these granaries. The bird, seeing the bands of light, flutters up the walls and falls back again and again. The way out is where the rats enter and leave; but the rat's hole is low to the floor. Writers, be careful then by, showing the sunlight on the walls not to promise the anxious and panicky blackbirds a way out.

I say to the reader, beware. Readers who love poems of light may sit hunched in the corner with nothing in their gizzards for four days, light failing, the eyes glazed. . . . They may end as a mound of feathers and a skull on the open boardwood floor. . . .

RB: Well, the thought or drive of the poem is clear. I say I feel some responsibility through the years for urging readers to look upward, follow Kabir upward. I love ascents—who doesn’t love ascents? But still, the old tradition was, no step upward without a step down. No food for the angel without some food for the rat. In *Snowy Fields* I say:

The leaves at the crown of the tree are asleep
Like the dark bits of earth at its root.

But the main feeling in *Snowy Fields* is “the joy of sailing and the open sea!” The great joy is to follow the route of Kabir upward to that warm union he so marvelously evokes. Freud is a rat person. Freud is not popular now. It’s painful to know how imprisoned our parents and grandparents were—how they couldn’t see either the cracks in the walls, nor the rats’ holes. With “a mound of feathers” I’m thinking of many unlucky friends in the ashrams.

If we turn and look at the sound now, I can remember writing and rewriting this poem, and deciding very early on the *n* sounds. “Sometimes farm granaries become especially beautiful when all the oats or wheat are gone. . . .” One can say “after the oats or wheat are gone,” or “after the oats are hauled away.” I had hundreds of possibilities, and settling on *n* helped narrow them down.

PJ: Don’t you think those word choices are not really choices, that the right words often just arrive? Is it really such a conscious process?

RB: It wasn’t so much a word, it was a sound. “. . . and the wind has swept the rough floor clean. Standing inside, we see around us, coming in through the cracks between shrunken wall boards, bands or strips of sunlight. So in a poem about imprisonment, one sees a little light.” I remember having eight or nine possibilities for the adjective for “wall-boards.” Wallboards are boards that have been in the sun too long, and they actually become warped and smaller. So we understand there are always dozens of possibilities; but because of the *n*’s, I chose shrunken. The last sentence “So in a poem about imprisonment, one sees a little light” came in during about the fifteenth rewrite.

PJ: I think that sentence is the core of the poem.

RB: Yes. I’m declaring that this poem is not really about nature or

farm granaries. “How many birds have died trapped in granaries” that are workshops or meditation retreats that seem to offer life all the time, seem to offer constant glimpses of the spirit. “The bird, seeing the bands of light, flutters up the walls and falls back again and again.”

PJ: And then we encounter another big shift.

RB: Yes. As I’ve said, there’s a problem in all this fluttering toward the light, because the “way out” is really where the “rats leave and enter.” Baudelaire was a rat. Remember his *Flowers of Evil*. “But the rat’s hole is low to the floor.” We’re citizens of such a great country, why should we bend and go through a rat’s hole? “Writers be careful then by showing the sunlight on the walls not to promise the anxious and panicky blackbirds a way out.”

Then I decided to repeat the warning: “I say to the reader, beware. Readers who love poems of light may sit hunched,” and I’m coming back to the *n*’s, “in the corner with nothing in their gizzards for four days, light failing, the eyes glazed. . . . They may end as a mound of feathers and a skull on the open boardwood floor. . . .” Some academic poets too “sit hunched in the corner with nothing in their gizzards for four days, light failing, the eyes glazed.” I’m not mocking academic poets; I’m saying it is difficult to have to teach ascensionist literature day after day. Ministers and priests suffer from it. So do I. So I had to finish the theme as best I could, but I also had to finish the poem musically with the *n*’s in the last sentence because that’s where I began.

PJ: I’ve also thought how curious that last line echoes the end of “August Rain”: “These objects lie against the ship’s side, and will nudge the hole that lets the water in at last.” Which in that poem is a good thing.

RB: I’m glad you remembered that.

PJ: I have one more question. I always thought that Norman Mailer had the chance to become the greatest American male novelist since Faulkner, but then he became a public figure and I think he lost his focus. To say you’ve become a public figure would be an understatement. You once said that in the Sixties people were looking for a “hero,” and you gladly embraced that role. Well, now you are a hero to some people, but is that good? When you sit down to write, how do you keep from becoming self-conscious? Does the public Robert Bly look over the shoulder of the private-poet Robert Bly? How do you return to that

childlike state that you say informs all your poetry? You must know that your many “audiences,” whether they come to you through *Iron John* or through *Morning Poems*, have certain expectations. In short, how do you avoid that kind of self-consciousness that will surely destroy any poetic venture?

RB: I don’t know what to say about it.

PJ: Have you ever thought you were losing touch with that honest part of you which allows you to write?

RB: No. My wife and I happened to walk past one of those storefront mediums on Sixth Avenue one day. I said, “Let’s go.” She said, “You go.” The medium laid out her Tarot cards and said: “Do you realize that you can be in a room with a hundred people who like you, and you don’t even know it?” My wife said, “That’s right, that’s what he’s like.” Maybe it’s a blessing.

But I’ll give you another answer. In your question you wonder whether a successful person may find that some image of himself or herself may interfere with the ability to reach over and touch a rock or an animal or a feeling. Is that right?

PJ: Yes.

RB: But there are hundreds and thousands of people—and I’m one of them—who have an image of themselves as unsuccessful, inadequate, unloved, wrong. And that image of oneself is probably more dangerous than the image of oneself as a famous person.

Let’s look at it this way. For most of us, the old, close-knit community has disappeared. A person tended to live inside a group of thirty or forty people who admired him or her because of her character, or intelligence, or humor. Emily Dickinson lived in such a community in Amherst. Now we seem to be adrift in what George W.S. Trow calls either “a grid of 200 million” or a grid of one. We want to have love coming from 200 million, because the love of thirty people no longer sustains us.

PJ: That’s what I meant at our session yesterday, that for many poets, their fifteen minutes of fame isn’t long enough. They want twenty or thirty, or as many as they can get. They’re insatiable.

RB: Those are the poets who pester you as an editor, and send fifty poems in one submission. This is a very strange turn of events, and no one knows what will happen next. The longing for fame has virtually destroyed the art world in New York because people don't want to be good artists, they want to be famous. Most artists want a huge exhibition when they're twenty-four. Years ago, most artists would have waited and survived for twenty years on the admiration of their friends, or family, or mentors. I suppose I'm an example—I published my first book when I was 36.

PJ: They don't want to serve an apprenticeship?

RB: A twenty-year apprenticeship may be essential. We remember the 19th century artist in the garret who wouldn't ask for a grant because he thought that one part of his task as an artist was to be in the garret. I want to suggest that this image that so many artists have of themselves being unloved is more destructive of creativity than the feeling that one is admired. Sometimes I have both feelings at the same time.

PJ: But you must know that you couldn't take a walk downstairs right now without having admirers, some genuine, some sycophants, crowding around you.

RB: But that's the point. How do you know that they're not doing that for some other reason? Maybe the person with taste walked away the minute they saw me coming. But why argue? Both sides of us are pests: the side that feels unloved, and the side that feels admired. I write poems in bed every morning, and, for some reason, when I write like this I feel safe from both of these pests. As Bill Stafford said, during that moment when you're lying there, lying in bed, the only issues are between you and your mind, between you and your soul, and between you and the images coming toward you, whether you're going to welcome them or not. At that moment, you're back to being sixteen years old again. You've never written a poem before; and besides, whatever you have written previously is not going to help you in this particular poem. And if a hippopotamus with a funny laugh and a big green ass comes along, are you going to bring him into the poem or not? From this point of view, it doesn't matter whether you're famous. When you're standing near a hollow tree, the poem lies in the resemblance

between you and that hollow tree. You have to deal with the bond between you and the hollow tree. What birds have died inside me, hmmm? It's almost a gesture of love. So when you're in that state, it doesn't matter if anyone likes you, or even knows who you are.