

Mark Cochrane / VERY PARTICULAR NOISE: AN INTERVIEW WITH AUGUST KLEINZAHLER

The Capilano Review hosted Guggenheim Award-Winning San Francisco poet August Kleinzahler as its Writer-in-Residence from March 5 to 11, 2003. Kleinzahler consulted with local writers on their manuscripts, gave a public reading, and delivered his talk "The Wood-thrush in the Burning Cineplex" as part of the Koerner Lecture Series at Capilano College.

A native of Jersey City, U.S.A., Kleinzahler received his BA in English from the University of Victoria, where he studied with the British poet Basil Bunting in 1971-72. From 1971-79 Kleinzahler lived primarily in Victoria and Montreal, and his early books, including an anthology he edited entitled *News and Weather: Seven Canadian Poets* (Brick Books, 1982), were published in Canada.

Kleinzahler's poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, and *The London Review of Books*. His first collection, *A Calendar of Airs*, appeared in 1978. Since then, he has published six others, including *Green Sees Things in Waves* (1998) and *The Strange Hours Travelers Keep* (2003), which was recently named the International winner of the 2004 Griffin Poetry Prize.

The Griffin Judges' Citation describes Kleinzahler as "a poet who inhabits the energies of urban life more fully than anyone currently writing."

This interview (unusually provocative) is the first in a series of interviews by local writers of Capilano College writers-in-residence. Subsequent issues will feature interviews with Vancouver writer and publisher Peter Quartermain and South African poet Ingrid de Kok.

THEORY OF THE EARTH AND ITS HISTORY

The theory of the earth and its history is a branch of geology which deals with the origin and development of the earth and its various parts. It is a science which seeks to explain the processes which have shaped the earth and its features, and to determine the time and sequence of these processes.

The theory of the earth and its history is based on the study of the earth's rocks and fossils, and on the principles of geology. It is a science which is constantly developing, as new discoveries are made and new theories are proposed.

The theory of the earth and its history is a science which is of great importance to the human race. It is a science which helps us to understand the earth and its history, and to determine the time and sequence of the processes which have shaped the earth and its features.

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MC: When Jenny Penberthy introduced you, she provided a brief narrative, beginning with your discovery of *Briggflatts* and admiration for Bunting then moving to the events that resulted in your presence in his classroom. I wonder if you wouldn't mind re-telling that story.

AK: In brief, in the spring of 1970 I was living in the Village with my brother, and I went to the 8th Street bookstore one day, and I found the Fulcrum edition of *Briggflatts*. I knew who Bunting was from the Pound anthology *Confucius to Cummings*, and I was reading it in the bookstore. And I grabbed it up and I read it and I read it and I read it and I read it and I read it. It was everything I . . .

MC: . . . wanted in poetry, you've said. Can you be more particular? What were the features of Bunting's work that produced that response in you, that sense of discovery?

AK: Well, certainly the rhythmical variety, its very vigorous dancelike measures, the concentration of particulars . . .

MC: Peter Quartermain talks about consonant clustering in his close readings of Bunting.

AK: Well, he's really one of the best commentators. I'm not alone in wishing he'd done more, and not just on Bunting. With Peter Makin he's the most intelligent commentator about Bunting. And Bunting was interested in different kinds of consonant patterning: the Anglo-Saxon for one, and the Welsh *cynghanedd* for another. Anyhow, I was living in the Village and I was much infatuated with Bunting, and circumstances propelled me back to university. I'd picked up an application at UVic the year before, when I'd passed through Victoria on my way to camp up on Miracle Beach near Campbell River, and I'd had a falling out with my parents and I was a kid and everything was a big mess, so I got up at five o'clock in the morning and grabbed my rucksack and hitchhiked from New Jersey to

BC, and when I got to Victoria the fellow teaching contemporary poetry told me there was a visiting English poet that I probably wouldn't know by the name of Basil Bunting, and it was just one these extraordinarily fortuitous and wonderful conjunctions.

MC: How old were you the year you actually enrolled, then?

AK: I was twenty-one. I would have turned twenty-two that December.

MC: So I don't suppose that a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate student can strike up much of collegial relationship with an older poet. Did you know him well, or was it more of a remote, classroom-based thing?

AK: It was classroom. No, I mean, he had no interest in anything I had to say — or the few others among us who didn't drop out of the class. But we adored him, those of us who didn't drop. He was living in a little bungalow down by the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and we moved the writing class down there because it was such a small class. The other class, the survey course in 20th-century poetry, met up at the school. It was called "Problems in Contemporary Poetry," which was probably the fashion in the 1970s. And then there was the creative writing class. So, no, we weren't buddies, but I thought he was the beginning and the end. And subsequently I went to visit him in England and stayed with him for a few days.

MC: These were not, I understand, in general terms, happy or satisfying years for him, the ones he spent in Vancouver and Victoria.

AK: No. Well, I think he liked Vancouver. I think he liked UBC quite a bit and made some friends. Quartermain and others. I think he did have a good time at UBC. But, no, he had a miserable time at the University of Victoria, and the faculty there helped make it miserable. Bunting was very much resented. These were provincial bigshots who had to deal with

the greatest living poet in the English language. Although Basil certainly didn't have that profile then, in retrospect, he was. He was man of great dignity and *gravitas* and stature, so you can imagine how these characters reacted to having him in their midst.

MC: He was overlooked to some extent in the UK as well.

AK: Yes, he was their greatest poet. Probably of the century. And he worked under very dire circumstances on his return from Persia after the Second World War. He had very menial, unpleasant jobs.

MC: Can you trace his impact? Can you think of particular lines, phrasings, poems, strategies that you know represent your participation in a Bunting tradition?

AK: Well, I come out of the Pound/Williams tradition and Bunting very much comes out of the Pound tradition, colored by many other traditions — earlier English traditions, Persian, French, Italian (Dante), and his vast reading. I could never sound like Basil, because that's a very particular noise he's making.

MC: Did he read for students at UVic from his own work, or did he play the teacher?

AK: He never read from his own work. His survey course consisted of him reading from the poets in the course. It began with Hopkins and Hardy and continued up to the Americans, moderns. I think the youngest poet at the end would have been Tom Pickard. But he just read. And that made everybody in the course very unhappy because they wanted to share their opinions about all these things. But he was reading almost the entirety of the *Cantos*, MacDiarmid's long poems, David Jones's two great long poems, *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathémata*; Zukofsky, Niedecker, Williams, Marianne Moore. Nothing of Stevens, who didn't interest him, or Crane, whom he detested. And he was a great reader. I was extraordinarily lucky. But this was deeply resented, this method of teaching, by both the English Department and . . . well, there wasn't a creative

writing department then, not exactly. They were trying to get one going. There was no excuse for one; there never is, really.

MC: Do you want to say more about that — your view with regard to creative writing as an institutional discipline?

AK: It's a joke. It's an international joke. It's a money-maker for universities.

MC: Your account of Bunting's method reminds me of another interview in which you describe your approach with young writers in mentorship or workshop situations. Rather than focussing on the juvenilia of students you give them reading assignments. "Let's look at this," rather than, "Let's look at your work." And I know that approach has been taken to a certain extent in the creative writing initiative at this institution and some students hate it, or at least they rebel against it.

AK: Well, they hate it when I do it. After three weeks there's always a delegation of older students chosen by their peers to approach me and express the displeasure of the group. *Why aren't we talking about . . . me?* And that's the reason Basil alienated You know, we had a class of some dozen people or more, and there were only four of us left at the end.

MC: I find your poetry very difficult to place, and I think that speaks well. You mention Don McKay and Bringham, and I can see some affinities there. But you're also in the Norton *Postmodern American Poetry* anthology. What's postmodern about your work? Why are you in this anthology? Because you are certainly not Charles Bernstein, though I recognize this is an eclectic compilation. . . . I know you're not responsible for this word "postmodern," but does it mean anything to you, and does it mean anything to you to be in this anthology?

AK: I'm very delighted to be in it, because I meet youngsters in America and sometimes this is all they know of me. They know me through Paul Hoover's anthology, so I'll be eternally

grateful to Paul, who worked very hard on it. In some ways his was a thankless task, because editors purchase no shortage of enemies by their inclusions and exclusions. And I'm much disapproved of by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E people, because I can actually generate some pleasure through language. But no, "postmodern" means nothing to me. The people in this anthology represent certain strands of late Modernism: the Pound/Williams tradition, the Surreal tradition, the Dada tradition. Much of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is just a humorless riff on Surreal and Dada automatic writing and discontinuities.

MC: Are you summarizing the trajectories that flow through your work or through this anthology?

AK: Well, a little of both. There's not much of the extreme discontinuity of the Dada people in my writing, but certainly the New York writers, Schuyler and O'Hara, and the Pound/Williams tradition. And when I was young some of the Black Mountain writers were influential. I think in retrospect they're a lot less important than they seemed at the time, because they're very much out of Pound and Williams, and also filtered through the Objectivist tradition, which was given short shrift in the Donald Allen anthology. You know, poets like Oppen, Zukofsky, Rakosi, Niedecker.

MC: The Black Mountain influence on *Tish* and poets associated with UBC in the sixties — was that palpable at UVic in 1970-71?

AK: No. Not to me, anyhow They struck me as not very interesting, a regional clique of derivative poets operating in something of a vacuum.

MC: Were you aware of Bowering or Wah or Marlatt when you were at UVic?

AK: Yeah, I knew the name Bowering, because he must have had seventy-eight books by then. I'm sure he has another seventy-eight. None of these people are at all interesting. They weren't

interesting then, to a twenty-one-year-old, and they're of no interest now, to a fifty-three-year-old. Nor should they be.

MC: George is now our poet laureate.

AK: I wouldn't feel badly about that. He's not more objectionable than, say, Billy Collins. He writes an accessible, not very threatening sort of poem, and seems to be able to churn them out at will.

MC: Where do you place yourself historically? In the ever-onward progression of Western verse, you're between whom and whom? And again, in Canadian terms, what about Don McKay? You mentioned his name on Sunday.

AK: I probably resemble Don McKay. I don't know what Don would think, or whatever the Canadians make of Don McKay's work. A kind of domestic surrealism, the extreme changeability in tone . . . I have a number of his books at home, and have turned a number of Americans onto him. And the other poet out here, when people ask me who's out there writing, I say Robert Bringhurst. And neither Don nor Bringhurst are hustlers. They don't get their stuff out there. You know, when they get up in the morning they're not scheming to amp up their careers.

MC: You know they were both shortlisted for the first Canadian Griffin Prize. But they lost to Anne Carson.

AK: I think Anne has written a lot of interesting, very original poetry. But for me, her real achievement is *Eros, the Bitter Sweet*, which I think is a classic of the genre, in any kind of writing. And I think that those three were nominated — who among them is the most deserving I'm not sure, and I'd probably keep that to myself — but you'd be very hard-pressed to get three more interesting, or more deserving, poets in Britain or the United States. And for a country of Canada's size, with its rotten incestuous literary world and its staggering cult of mediocrity, that three of these would surface I think is an indication of health at some level.

MC: Speaking of the Griffin Prize . . . at dinner we talked about Christian Bök's *Eunoia*, constraint-driven poetry, the OULIPO.

AK: I find that tradition mildly charming and extremely tedious.

MC: How would you distinguish it from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, which you compared to magnetic fridge poetry?

AK: Oh, the OULIPO poetry involves far more skill and wit. My objection is that these are brilliant people devoting their resources — what's the line? — "in a waste of shame."

MC: That's a Shakespeare sonnet about . . . either cheap sex or masturbation, isn't it?

AK: Could well be! It is rather an onanistic aesthetic.

MC: Okay, if there is something missing in chance-driven or constraint-driven work, what is the alternative value of worldly observation and attentiveness to mood, feeling, the moment? What is it about the lyric that you consider more important than those demonstrations of —

AK: Evasiveness?

MC: No, of technical expertise. Bök, McCaffery — these works are *tours de force*, right?

AK: No, McCaffery's not. There's no technical or formal interest there whatsoever. Or in Bernstein either. I mean, there are puns and spoonerisms and fractured meanings. It's occasionally clever or amusing, but there's nothing of formal interest.

MC: When we attended Steve McCaffery's reading at the Kootenay School of Writing Friday evening, and he paused in the middle of a poem and apologized — he said, "I'm sorry, I read that out of sequence" — and he backed up and started again, you chuckled at that. You found it funny. Suggesting it would make no difference in what sequence his sentence units were delivered.

- AK: Yeah, I thought that was the best bit of the evening. Except when the band kicked in from upstairs with that heavy bass line. That also provided a little bit of counterpoint. I like accidental noise. I like the aleatory, but it has to be properly mixed.
- MC: In your talk, when you mentioned listening to background noise, in that cold library space I became aware of the buzz of the fluorescent lights, and I think that was contrary to your intentions. You were seeing that as a kind of bankrupt experiment, that kind of directioning, yet when you said it, I thought, "I can hear the lights."
- AK: No, I incorporate accident, particularly accidents of sound. In fact, in *Green Sees Things in Waves*, in the one called "Time Zones," I'm sitting in the tub and listening to something on the stereo and there are also sounds of birds and power tools. I love that. Cage — there's a lot of Cage, and some of it is formally very interesting, his *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, from the late forties, I believe — but this business of sitting in a room for six hours with the occasional tweetie bird: you know, it's a one-off deal. Be that as it may, that experiment has already been made. One can evaluate it as one likes, but to repeat that experiment is boring, which art is not allowed to be.
- MC: Implicit in that observation might be a claim that there is something in your work that has not been done to death. Something that is still vital. Can you characterize that?
- AK: I try to incorporate — well, not so much formal aleatory procedures, like throwing the *I Ching* . . . but it's certainly improvisational. This is the stuff McCaffery was talking about in his reading, and everybody thought this was really the cutting edge. But this is stuff that's nearly a hundred years old, this business of the resistance to closure and tying things up and development as one might encounter it in a mid-nineteenth-century sonata.

MC: Can you trace the influence of different musical forms — jazz particularly — on your work? Can you evidence that in your own reading of your work?

AK: I think I've just . . . *assimilated*. I've been listening to that music so long. There is a beat, but it's an irregular beat. I'll state the subject matter, the theme, at the top, and then there's a bridge, and then you do improvisational material on aspects of the theme — in jazz it would be on the chord structure — and then you return to the theme at the end. And all sorts of things happen in between.

MC: Of the many blasphemies I've heard you commit over the last few days, surely you know what you said about Leonard Cohen in the question period following your talk — well, you can be kicked out of the country for that. To suggest that Cohen's not our poet. Popular sentiment would hold that Cohen is our true laureate but he wouldn't take the job because he lives in L.A. You don't see Cohen as anything but a "folk singer"?

AK: He's a modestly good folk singer. "Famous Blue Raincoat" is his prize. It's very good. He's a shit poet. No one outside of Canada above the age of sixteen who's not mentally or culturally challenged reads the poetry of Leonard Cohen. No one. Or his novels. Perhaps in France.

MC: Okay then, what about ethnicity. How do you characterize your background?

AK: Well, I'm Jewish like Leonard Cohen.

MC: I think, in all I've read about you, there are very few explicit references to that fact. Do you see it as informing your work, your place in the world?

AK: Oh, very much. Everybody knows I'm Jewish. There's never any question. Whenever I read internationally, when they introduce me, they say, "He's Jewish." In Australia, New Zealand,

where it seems to be a larger issue. And they always want me to make a mother joke, because if you're Jewish you make jokes about your mother.

MC: But you're not a poet of identity, not in the nineties sense.

AK: I find it disgusting, those who merchandise their identity. I find it disgusting if they're Jewish, I find it disgusting if they're African-American, I find it disgusting without exception. And I think there's an awful lot of that out there. It's no longer fashionable to advertise one's Jewish ethnicity. It was in the fifties. Artists like Bernard Malamud. And it's been fashionable for Woody Allen to parade himself as the anti-Semitic caricature of the Jew. You know, he's made a fortune as the pathetic neurotic weasel cracking jokes — and some of the jokes are very funny. But Cohen I don't think has ever done that, whatever his virtues and liabilities. I don't think he's ever been a professional Jew. His name is Cohen. I mean, there are some people who think I'm the son of a Luftwaffe pilot, because my name is not obviously Jewish. They usually figure it out.

MC: I can think of poems by Cohen that allude to his Jewishness. But behind all this is a question I've been trying to reach. I wonder if your separateness from academia has allowed you to maintain your outspokenness, a willingness to make sweeping claims and pass judgment without overly decorous concern. You're making statements of a kind we're trained not to make. [AK laughs.] I notice as well that two poems included in the Hoover anthology seem to characterize academic personalities — "Autumnal Sketch" and "A Case in Point."

AK: Academia's just a reflection of the society, as are the politics of the poetry world. Everybody's very timid now; it's one of the marks of the time. I don't know what it's like in Canada, but in the States everybody's walking on eggshells. There's the sexual and ethnic politics bit, and the political correctness bit, and everybody's competing for these prizes and anxious about

who's going to be on the prize committees. One of the things I liked about some of the poets in the Donald Allen anthology was that they were subversive, and they were outside academia, and even those inside academia, like Kenneth Koch, who's not that interesting but was rather fun, you know, they were *making fun*. And everybody's humorless now and gutless. I think of someone like Jonathan Williams, who no one reads today. You know, he's funny, but when he talks about the institutionalized poetry world — and he's talking about it thirty years ago — it's just scathing and accurate and fun and smart. And nobody does this anymore. Everybody's afraid.

Incidentally, speaking of laureates, Jonathan Williams would be my choice for a lifetime appointment. We'd all be better off, and continually refreshed and amused. I would like it to be writ large that as a Diogenes crank character I cite Jonathan Williams as a precursor and model for truth-telling and, you know — saying the emperor has no clothes.

MC: In your introductory remarks to *Live from the Hong Kong Nile Club* you refer to the small-press world with "its ridiculous hierarchies, operators and social networks." Is that also the kind of exposé you're talking about?

AK: Yes, I'm equally disapproved of in the small-press world as I am in academia. Nobody says that about the small presses. The thing about the small-press world is, *Our nappies are cleaner*. It's an aesthetic. *We are not corrupted*. And I know these mother-fuckers. It's just an alternative universe.

MC: The hustling, the naked self-marketing, is even more naked in the poetry world, because there's less at stake. You see people who are just shamelessly self-promoting and there's not even any money in it. It's embarrassing.

AK: I tell you what else — and this'll sound like self-advertisement — but it's very discouraging for the young to see all these middle-aged whores and be encouraged to accept them as models. When I read in New York now, it's the young who are

there, not the people my age. I have that reputation. *You don't know what he's gonna say.* I'm a curiosity to them. A throwback of some kind to the pre-institutional world of poetry.

MC: Fashion depends on reversals, right? Your frankness now . . . what may have seemed backward becomes subversive. The shock value in some of the observations you make *depends* to a certain extent on that polite PC milieu.

AK: I will be utterly up front. If it were a different atmosphere, if there were dozens of other people doing it, I wouldn't bother. There is a lot that others do say. Everybody knows the creative writing world is a scandal and has been for forty years. The cesspool, the fraud. You can read these things in *Poetry Chicago*, you can read these things by people who've been heads of programs for thirty years. It's not to get rid of teaching writing, it's to get rid of the method and the institutional tooling that's at work now.

MC: Your work seems to have acquired a larger audience in the early nineties, but prior to that your publications were more obscure.

AK: Yes, I was part of that small-press world. I was signed up by FS&G and Faber in the mid-nineties.

MC: Do you think if you'd had more of a handle, if you were a gay poet or a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, you might have been marketable, might have attracted a certain kind of attention more quickly? Do you think that's why poets are drawn toward camps and categories — you know, brand name recognition — whereas when you write occasional poems that draw on diverse materials, you're harder to pin down and therefore not as moveable a product?

AK: I notice when I teach at places like Stanford or Iowa — the more highly established or flash the school, the more highly professionalized — the Asian students are marketing themselves as Asian and so forth. And you can imagine how

repulsive this is, you know, on a relatively sweet-faced twenty-five-year-old. A professional homosexual at twenty-five, a professional Chinese homosexual at twenty-five, a professional Latino. I've watched these kids get older and say, *This is how it is, I have to do it this way*. And I say, it is a good short-term career move, and everything's become very businesslike. That world's become very competitive. And let me say this: these young people are encouraged at these institutions to play that card. And encouraged in other corporate-like behaviors — aggressive if not vicious, certainly dishonest, morally suspect behaviors. In order to get ahead they are trained and encouraged by these adults. A vile practice.

MC: You said yesterday during your lecture that being in London Drugs struck you as somehow material for a poem. Then, this morning, the street scene outside your hotel struck you as worthy. So at the risk of reiterating a most ridiculous question, where do you get your ideas from? What makes your antennae quiver? And what of this notion of the poet as flâneur?

AK: Well, you caught me with my pants off this morning . . . with the Marine Club. I've had my eye on that. You know, architecturally it's interesting, a little place surrounded by vacant lots. It's rather mysterious. What is the Marine Club? I actually found out. Speaking to a Canadian friend the other day in New York, he told me it was a bar of sorts. But I thought it was maybe an old sailors' VFW. Do you call them VFW's? Veterans' halls? Where veterans go to drink and hang out and play Scrabble or whatever. But I thought it was that kind of place. And it was rather mysterious sitting there, and then the neighborhood's rather odd, because it's got these new commercial structures, and then these small domestic structures like the hotel. I have to look at something for a while to get a feel about it. And, you know, I like to see it in different kinds of weather, at different times of day — staggering home at twelve-thirty with a couple of drinks in me, or looking at it in the morning in the rain.

MC: You've spoken elsewhere about your father's collection of antiques, and this idea that to understand an aesthetic object, to appreciate it fully, one needs to see it many times, over a prolonged period of time, in different lights . . .

AK: Yes, different frames of mind. You know, when you're walking home from your girlfriend's, when you're in the dumps, when you're distracted.

MC: Is that what you want to produce in your own poems, verbal artifacts that are durable that way, that are worth coming at, and will look different somehow, next time?

AK: Sure, I aspire to that. I would imagine most artists do. And I think it's worth aspiring to. I like to think I'm not producing disposable art. Inevitably one does, on occasion.

MC: There's a kind of poem that strikes one as light, offhand, inconsequential. You think when you read the poem, okay, I don't need to read that again. But you might read it again a year later and take the same superficial pleasure from it. Is that not a value?

AK: It's a kind of poem. James Schuyler comes to mind. Some of his things seem very offhand. But when he's on — and by nature he's a poet of touch — he's got a perfect touch. There doesn't seem to be very much there, but I would maintain people will be reading that in two hundred years. And that has to do with the design and the depth of observation. It doesn't have to be built like a fortress, or have a lot of bells and whistles. It can be very light. But it has to be done properly, like a stroke you get in Chinese and Japanese painting, a calligraphic kind of stroke denoting a tree or this or that, and it's just right for all eternity. How did that person do that? Well, it wasn't luck.

But I want to go back to the Marine Club. So I'm walking back and forth, and I have my eye on the Marine Club. I don't want to go in there for a beer — it looks a little grim for a beer — but I've had my eye on that Marine Club. You know, the rain. I saw a sign yesterday: We're gonna be filming here, please

excuse the camera, etc. Forgot all about it. But when I walked out earlier this morning to get a cup of coffee, they had their 18,000K helium lights going. They had this drab little club in the pouring-down rain flooded with light. Lots going on in the street. There was the earthmover in the empty lot next door, there was a PG&E crew right in front of the hotel —

MC: What does that mean, “PG&E”? That’s Bay talk, isn’t it?

AK: It’s your Hydro. You had the Hydro people out there. And there was a bit of mystery in it. There were a couple people milling around the Marine Club, but there it was, with these very serious guys. You know how these people from the TV places are; they’re all big shots. And the light was extraordinary.

And I like walking into London Drugs off the rainy street. It’s very bright and full of stuff. And then walking back out into the drab Vancouver downtown. The Vancouver downtown is indescribably bleak. It is really a place in my imagination.

MC: You’re not a confessional poet. There’s a subjectivity to your work, but you’re usually in a world. Often in other people’s worlds. What is it about the cityscape?

AK: I’m very much interested in what William Corbett, the poet from Boston and a dear friend, calls “city-nature.” I use that term in a poem in my next book. But, you know, it’s what I’m talking about with the light, with the Marine Club — also with London Drugs. You have the natural light. You’re moving between kinds of light, between kinds of weather. Then you get a strange, surreal cameo of the Marine Club in TV light in the middle of the rain. So, almost invariably, there’s city-nature interacting with urban detail.

MC: Are you a nature poet of the urban?

AK: I don’t think that would be unfair. That would be the other way to look at it. I like to look into a pet store, from outside. One of the quotes about the flâneurs is — they call themselves “botanists of the asphalt.”

MC: I love your poem "Poetics": "I have loved the air outside Shop-Rite Liquor . . ." I don't know if you stand by it as a statement of poetics. And this is not a recent poem.

AK: No, it's an oldie, but I stand by it. Corbett has a country place in Vermont which he writes about, and he lives in Boston's South End, and a lot of his poems are site-specific. But he talks about city-nature. You know, plant in the window: city-nature. The trees and the sky interacting with the architecture. Architecture interacting with snow or sky. For instance, taking the 239 to Capilano College in North Vancouver the other day, going up a relatively nondescript highway, with cherry trees in bloom, and signage and the other cars, and the domestic and commercial architecture. But it's snowing. It's snowing on the blossoms. Now this sort of subject matter, the snow on the blossoms, would not be uncommon in Japanese poetry. But if I were to take up the subject — and I hadn't spent enough time on that strip of highway; I hadn't been looking at it like I was looking at the Marine Club, which I may or may not write about — I would probably have the blossoms and the snow, but I'd also have the Safeway and the traffic lights. I like the traffic lights against the snow light. I enjoy layering all those kinds of things, and you can do that, in the city.

MC: Here's a quote for you: "[O]ne could almost say that parataxis is the technique most often used in innovative contemporary poetry. Poets such as August Kleinzahler and Lucie Brock-Broido have explored the use of parataxis in a manner that is often quite different from that employed by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets or Surrealists."¹ Does the postmodern have something to do with jumpcutting? Moving between places without points of connection or logical transitions. How do you work to bring disparate elements together?

AK: Oh, they find their way to each other. It's improvisational.

MC: Do you think surprise is a primary value? I don't mean being shocked, I don't mean being scandalized. I mean word by word, line by line: *really didn't see that coming*.

AK: Can be. You know, it's not always good. Whitney Balliett calls jazz, among things, the sound of surprise. But if you're at a Mass for the Dead and a sixty-year-old lady runs in with an evergreen shrub sticking out of her behind, well, I wasn't expecting that one either. A surprise has to "work."

MC: What about your other writing in relation to your poetry? Are you a different person inside your head when you write your reviews and nonfiction?

AK: Yes, I'm in a different literary personality, and I'm accessing a different part of myself. Different, and in degree. With poetry I'm making the most demands.

MC: Do you worry about mutual contamination of voices? That the musicologist's voice, music reviewer's voice, critic's voice, will somehow get in the way of the other practice? You say that your work is fundamentally informed by your relationship to music, but many people find that a critical sensibility is sometimes hard to shake off.

AK: I think that's a good question. I separate it out. I tend to take two or three weeks to write ten or so reviews so I can get away from that head.

MC: And that covers you for a couple of months in your day job, then? You've got ten of them in the can.

AK: I've gotten as far ahead as almost a year. When I went to Berlin I didn't want to do any music columns. I certainly made notes. It's a very rich place for music, perhaps the richest in the world.

1. Guppy, Stephen. "Hypotaxis & Parataxis: Image-based and narrative-based poetry." 3 Feb. 2003 <<<http://web.mala.bc.ca/guppy/crew410/parataxis.htm>>>.

But I wanted my mind free to go where it wanted to go in an interesting place. Because if I'm doing the music thing I'm contextualizing things: "I can put that in a column, I can do that in column."

But I can turn it off. I did that the other day. They needed a few more pages for my book. And I was walking around with this poem in my head ["A History of Western Music: Chapter 13"]. I couldn't have done it from scratch if I didn't have it, but it was definitely a breach birth. But I had to shut every other system down. Here I was, and I faxed it to New York five minutes before the first student came in. And I was very pleased with myself. So I can do that, but as I say, I can't do it from scratch. The critical voice, the essay voice, is something again. They all have degrees of disposability. My music columns are quite disposable, chatty, funny.

MC: In a piece of prose meant for a wide readership, you're not going to get away with shifts in register and puns and fast-footed manoeuvres. There is an obligation in journalism to make it easy, step-by-step, so readers understand what the points of connection are, whereas your poetry depends on short-circuiting some of those connections. That seems to me a fundamentally different approach to organization.

AK: As a music writer I have a pretty stable personality. I'm unpredictable and a little bit naughty and funny. Having a stable personality or journalistic voice makes it easier; it also, ultimately, makes it less interesting, because much less is risked.

MC: It's a persona you adopt.

AK: The essays are much more demanding. I'm rather intimidated by where they will appear. I'm not intimidated about my poetry appearing anywhere, but I'm more self-conscious about my prose. It's a more newly developed skill.

MC: As is your role as a teacher, as writing "mentor"?

AK: When we were writing students with Bunting, we'd pass around mimeographed copies of our work. And he would just hold his head in his hands. He couldn't deal with it. He'd say, "You know, none of you is far enough along for me to say anything useful." And we thought, What do you mean *not far enough along*? We're grown-ups, we're twenty-some-odd years old. I mean, how far along does one need to be? But, in truth, quite a bit farther! I mean, that's how it is. These students, it's too early for them to be critiquing. They should be reading and writing indiscriminately.

MC: So what do you think of workshop-based creative writing programs that throw nineteen-year-olds together and have them examine one another's work and comment on it — the whole peer-driven method?

AK: No good. Peers don't know anything. And then they get into personal, competitive stuff. If anyone's at all interesting, they get strangled. The deal at that age is that you're supposed to take chances, you're supposed to try things out, you're supposed to fall on your ass. In any sort of peer-group interaction, people don't want to get caught out. No good. It's poison. It's absolute poison.

MC: Those of us who routinely teach first-year creative writing — you know, it's a job — might feel uncomfortable with not doing the hard labour of annotating student manuscripts, even if we secretly agree with you. It might be better for students and instructors to talk about what's out there, what's been done in the last hundred years.

AK: I haven't said anything about creative writing in print or our conversations that ninety-eight percent of people working in MFA departments would not agree to. It might take them three drinks or a degree of intimacy. But everybody knows it. If they don't know it, they're liars or fools.

MC: But to earn a paycheck and feel good about it, creative writing instructors may feel an obligation to provide detailed annotation far in excess of the value of the manuscript. Probably takes the instructor longer to write the comments than it took the student to dash off the poem, but that whole phony-baloney system requires that everyone go through the motions. Students want that kind of —

AK: *attention* —

MC: . . . attention, and parenting as well.

AK: Yes, well fuck 'em. Well, don't. I mean, that's against school policy. There are a number of problems now, and they're broadly educational problems. And I'm sure this doesn't exist in Canada, but this notion of the student as customer is destructive to everyone involved. The student cannot learn, the teacher cannot teach. It's a guarantee for nothing to happen. But listen, it's a gig. I've done it at all kinds of levels. I may well do it again. I'm doing it here, in a certain capacity.

MC: Are we all just being fraudulent and exploitative because the money's on offer, or is there a different way to do it?

AK: I think, insofar as one is asked to do it — pretty much compelled to do it in the current environment — one finds oneself working in a low, dishonest profession.

MC: This reminds me Some members of your audience on Sunday really wanted you to treat your art as, you know, the highest vocation and avocation available to the human spirit. But you seemed to describe poetry as both important and profoundly trivial as an activity.

AK: If I'm doing it right, I don't see why I should value my writing a poem any more than a potter making a pot, if we're both doing it in an interesting manner. Or any more enduring. You know, the pot, by nature, after it's fired, will last until someone drops it.

MC: It has utility.

AK: You can put pistachio nuts in it, yeah. But not always; there's ornamental pottery as well, and some of it's very beautiful. I mean, do I value poetry more than playing centerfield for the New York Yankees? I'd certainly rather have done the latter, if I had been blessed with those skills. But I would maintain that in both Canada and the U.S. good work is being done, some of which rises to the top, perhaps a greater proportion of it in Canada because it's a smaller country and you don't have the tens of thousands of hyper-ambitious creative writing students coming out of these vast Ponzi schemes with the phony awards and what not. But there are people out there, never many. And they tend by psychological make-up not to function in institutional frameworks. You know, they're painting houses and sweeping floors and teaching physics and driving buses. I'm not glamorizing the working classes; I've had enough labor jobs to know that you're useless at the end of the day. What a lot of people don't understand is that work is being done outside of the strange orbit of creative writing, and because creative writing controls everything in that world from top to bottom, the work of these people is not getting out there. Or they've given up trying to get it out there, because this system is offensive to them.

MC: Whitman is sometimes invoked as a basis of comparison for your work, and I remember a reference to the "democratic" nature of your writing. What could that mean?

AK: Most poetry now being written in the States dwells in a sort of rarified world. If you incorporate the world, the way novelists in English and French have been incorporating it since before 1900, you're considered a "street poet." I often get that rap. High and low, you know. You're just talking about the world. I'm not a creature of the street. I'm a nice middle-class boy.

MC: Your work sometimes shows how city-dwellers insulate themselves from the city, try to move through it without being touched by it, without really seeing it.

AK: I was talking with one of the students the other day. She was a visual arts student from rural BC. And she was talking about the inanimate city, the architecture and so forth, as having an animate life which controls her passage through the city, as though there are force fields around the buildings and asphalt. It seemed like an interesting way to conceive. For her it was like walking through the woods; everything was alive and interacting. I don't know if I think in those terms, but visually, it's like being in a movie. But we have to be selective. I don't remember what it was like forty or fifty years ago, but the information saturation now I think has dulled the sensory palate, if that's not too much a mixed metaphor, of city dwellers. They're thinking on the screen, or they're walking down the street talking on a cell phone. They've got too much information, they've got too much going on. I do enjoy walking around town the way people enjoy walking in the woods. You were talking about Don McKay listening to the birds — he has these extraordinary metaphors and this degree of inventiveness — well, I like the visual textures and the auditory textures of walking around town. Vancouver, with all this foregrounding — grim architecture, and often rough weather — really still is a frontier town, a cow town. You're very much aware, as you are in a number of big Canadian cities, that when you get twenty miles outside of town there's nothing between you and the Arctic

MC: Can you talk about metrics, rhythm, internal rhyme, and say, This is how my work is analogous to, or plays off, or is informed by — Monk, say? Could you make it that particular?

AK: The key in all of them — as I was writing in a poem about Monk the other day — is where the accents drop and where not. If you follow the bouncing ball, that's a major part of what's going on. The movement. I like asymmetrical rhythms.

I think I rhyme as often as formal poets do, but I rhyme at irregular intervals. There's certainly a lot of cross-rhyme and half-rhyme. There's no shortage of rhyme and repetition of sounds. I mean, you can't write a highly musical free verse, which I aspire to, without a repetition of sound elements. You know, rhythm is repetition.

MC: Is that something you associate with Bunting?

AK: You cannot have a better model than that; if I got anything from Basil it was that. Varying the rhythms without the losing of the overall flow. There are sound patterns. I get a tune in my head; there are things going on with stresses, with vowels and consonants. But I think like a musician, and I'm working in an improvisational way. These are patterns that I've assimilated, and I'm recombining them, not unconsciously but half-consciously. I forget which jazzman said, "There's no such thing as purely improvised music." You've got some idea of where you're going, and you've got a number of alternatives. You can let things flatten out. You can tighten them up.

MC: Can you talk about your method in writing the poem "52 Pick-up"? [This poem consists of two columns, or lists, of words and phrases, twenty-six in each column.]

AK: This is shameful, but I had a bunch of words that interested me. I make a list of words that I forget or that interest me or get my attention. I like having this list over my desk. I like the words. This is rather odd, but it won't be odd to another poet. So my first gig away was at Brown in Providence, Rhode Island. And I wasn't writing anything, so I typed up the words one day, and I showed the list to a friend, and I said, "Maybe I'll make a poem like this." Now her tastes were toward a more indeterminate kind of poetry than mine, which I think she found rather conventional. She said, "Oh, that would be good." But choosing among them and then reordering them . . . maybe that would work. I'd never done anything like that. And they were all of interest to me. So that's how I put it together. I just

felt my way along. What would go after “Luminoso e dolce”? What would go after “A bit of rough”? And they did form something: “Dingleberry / Esculent / Wing nut / Sforzato.” I mean, that’s not an accident, that’s not arbitrary. I realize that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E people can work in a similar way and produce eight hundred pages.

MC: I like the suggestion that you’re going to do this thing *once*. In terms of marketing and becoming known as a certain kind of poet, if you write a book-length piece in a consistent form you’re far more likely to win awards and get noticed than if you publish a collection of one-off experiments.

AK: I was taken to task for “52 Pick-up.” People who like my work said, “I love this book, but I must tell you I was deeply distressed” You know, this was very irresponsible on my part. I hope the book is successful and so forth, but it’s what I tell students, and nobody quite believes me — *You’ve* gotta be enjoying it. It’s gotta be fun, you’ve gotta have an appetite for these things. And people say, You can’t do that. Well, I can do whatever the fuck I want. Except it has to be interesting at some level.

MC: You’ll often find readers expressing frustration at “inconsistency” within a volume or even within an author’s oeuvre.

AK: I’ve had that all my life. A young English poet-critic, very concerned, said to me, “You know, we don’t know. You’re doing this and you’re doing that. You’re very hard to” As if there were a lack of seriousness on my part. But, you know, I think range is a virtue. It might not be for everybody.

MC: What recent poets are you glad of? You know, glad that they walk, or recently walked, the earth?

AK: Well, we’ve talked about Bunting and Williams and Pound. Among the Objectivist poets, one not known very well is Charles Reznikoff. And Niedecker: I value her work very much; it’s not been an influence, but important to me. When I was

young Marianne Moore was certainly an influence. Let me tell you some contemporaries. I think the most interesting of the Irish poets is one not well known, Thomas McCarthy, who's a librarian in Cork, and who I discovered through a friend when I was in Dublin. A poet of *this* region much neglected — and who I think is a great American poet but a very quiet poet; she's probably also in her nineties — is Mary Barnard from Vancouver, Washington. She's better known for a translation of Sappho. There's a very good poet, a couple of years younger than me, in the Bay area named Jim Powell (*It Was Fever That Made the World*). There's a wonderful poet in Grand Rapids, Michigan, who's a house painter, named Robert VanderMolen. I think the most interesting poet in New York is a guy named Michael O'Brien. Canadians would be unfamiliar with these names, but might be able to find books out there, not without difficulty. I think the most interesting American poets, almost without exception, are the not well-known ones, because they function outside the creative writing sphere.

MC: Are they poets whose themes are not political in direct ways? You were speaking on Sunday about the relative impossibility of good political poetry. Anthology-making in the last twenty-plus years has been driven by politicized categories.

AK: Culture politics or gender politics or identity politics — yeah, there's nothing of interest in that realm.

MC: Can you say a little bit more about two terms you used on Sunday, "hybridity" and "pleasure"?

AK: These are two very different concerns. They're not connected. I think in any of the arts' development, there's always a mixture. There is nothing new. It's always a matter of hybridization of different materials. In music, after all the experiment of the earlier twentieth-century, there was neo-classicism, which was really a fascination with the neo-Baroque and those sorts of structures and methods of development. Joyce, and many of his generation, was enamored of classical models, but also treating

you weren't worried about self-flattery, as if this were somebody else's poem and you were liking it and trying to explain to a student what to admire, what would you notice?

AK: It's a bit — what would be the word — not *antic*, but a little bit surreal, making the prosaic post-industrial landscape into something stranger. And the lavender, which the smoke was It would be late afternoon, and pollution actually has a marvelous effect on light. "Tufts" — again, this isn't necessarily a word one associates with the exhaust, waste products, from a chimney.

MC: Do you apply a pastoral attitude to urban grit?

AK: I think probably, but it's a surreal pastoral. Yes, I probably do treat the city as pastoral. Here I'm self-consciously gushing about it. I'm in a good mood because I'm with a girlfriend. And the nature of the clouds, the shape of the clouds, did remind me of the bubbles in the comics that contain the words of the characters. If they did not I would not have used the image. I would say that this poet cares very much about being accurate, no matter how bizarre he gets.

MC: Do you think Williams is "accurate"? Is Williams the model?

AK: He's not accurate like this, but he is accurate. Bunting is accurate. I like writers who are accurate, whom you can trust. If you trust a poet's art, you can be willing to travel quite a ways with that. Certainly Bunting would have insisted on getting it right, but Basil would never have made this kind of picture. Imaginatively and temperamentally he just wasn't put together that way.

MC: I was thinking of Williams's broken bottle glass behind the hospital. Somehow transcribing the visible stuff of the world. When you say you write partly out of a Williams tradition, what does that mean to you as inheritance?

AK: It has to do with the use of the vernacular, the fragmentation of the iambic line, the treatment of what's historically low subject

matter, the interest in mining the immediate world for things that interest and move one.

MC: How has your method changed since you were twenty-one?

AK: I do compose more in my head now. I walk around with a poem for a few weeks. When I was younger I'd go through dozens and dozens of drafts on the page.

MC: Is something lost now that we don't have to type and retype? I noticed that your lecture came out of a typewriter, not a printer.

AK: Yeah, I write in longhand and then on a manual typewriter. I don't have a computer, I don't have an electric typewriter, I have a manual typewriter.

MC: It's a real shift when you're dealing with a computer file. There's no obligation to keypunch those same damn words again. Whereas if you retype something, you have to reinvest in every word.

AK: I don't think word-processing has improved things. It would be very self-serving if I said that manual typewriter is the way to go. But I couldn't work on a computer. At some point I may need to, but I have to start by hand. If it's gonna happen, I have to move it over to the typewriter, see how it lines up.

MC: You say you faxed a handwritten draft — or rather, a completed poem — to your publisher to be included in your next book.

AK: And they typed it up on the word-processor and called me and checked the spelling and punctuation, and it'll go in the book like that.

MC: What other teaching gigs or residencies have you got on the horizon?

AK: This exact sort of situation is unusual. I've just encountered it this year, and I've encountered it twice in a month. I was in

Chicago three weeks ago, at Northwestern, doing the same sort of thing: a reading, a lecture, and meeting with students for a week. My next gig's at the University of Maryland outside of D.C. in early April [2003]. If one's allowed to fly into D.C. in early April! And then I've got a gig at Dia in New York, which is really the best series in the country, run by Brighde Mullins. That's the last Saturday in May. And again I'm hoping that we have no war, except on our current government. But I enjoy travel. I wish people had been inviting me when I had a younger body, with more resilience. It's very exciting. It's exciting to be here again. It's one of the landscapes dearest to me.

