

BROOK HOUGLUM & JENNY PENBERTHY / “This is the place”: A Conversation with George Stanley

BROOK HOUGLUM: I’m interested in your experience of 1950s/1960s San Francisco—the poetry meetings, readings, and community that sprang up—and how this community fostered your writing practice. Can you give us some description—who was there, what was most consequential for your writing?

GEORGE STANLEY: I was at the University of California at Berkeley in 1956 and 1957. In 1957 I went over to North Beach on a Saturday evening to Vesuvio’s which was at that time the bohemian bar. The word “beatnik” hadn’t arisen yet. It was a bohemian bar, but everybody knew *that* bar. So a friend of mine said, “You want to go to a *real* bohemian bar...” and took me to a bar called The Place on upper Grant Avenue and that was where I met Jack Spicer. And we had a conversation about Emerson and Thoreau, for some reason. I told him I wrote poetry and he asked me to come to the Magic Workshop which had just started at the San Francisco Public Library. I’m trying to remember who was in that. Certainly Robert Duncan, Joe Dunn, Ebbe Borregaard, Helen Adam.

In that period before 1960 people began to arrive from different places. Some had already arrived. Joanne Kyger came from Santa Barbara; Whalen, Snyder, and Lew Welch came from Oregon. People had come from Black Mountain because Black Mountain College in North Carolina had closed. That would be Ebbe Borregaard, Basil and Martha King—there was an influx of people into the area. Harold and Dora Dull from Seattle.

We began having the Sunday afternoon poetry meetings at Joe Dunn’s apartment on Bay Street attended by Spicer, Stan Persky, Ebbe, Joanne, David Meltzer, Duncan, James Broughton, Ron Primack, Harold, Michael Rumaker. Those meetings went on at Joe Dunn’s, and at my apartment on Pine Street which I was sharing with, I think, Ebbe, and at an apartment on Montgomery Street which we shared in 1958. People read poems and their poems were subjected to criticism by the others—sometimes very harsh criticism.

Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan were the mentors of all of us but there were other older poets in the area who were very important: Kenneth Rexroth and Josephine

Miles were two of the most important and influential. I remember a short poetry workshop at Rexroth's apartment; Ron Loewinsohn and his first wife Sue Rosen were in that group, and myself, and I can't remember who else.

JENNY PENBERTHY: Can you talk about Josephine Miles?

GS: She was Professor of English at Berkeley and very influential. Jo Miles was at many of the poetry readings. I got to know her. I went and visited her several times in Berkeley and the thing about Jo Miles' poetry was that her lines were conversational, in a different way than the plain language of Williams. Each poem was someone having a conversation with you.

BH: How much interaction or tension did you find between the multiple literary groups in the Bay Area?

GS: There were two groups in San Francisco at the time. There were the Beats, and there was the Spicer/Duncan group, which didn't have a name at that time. Later on people began calling it the Spicer Circle. But there was not much contact between those two groups. Thinking of this now I think it is similar to St. Petersburg in 1917 where there were two groups: the Acmeists and the Futurists. They went to the same café but they sat at separate tables. They were not personally antagonistic; they simply had different concepts of poetry. It was the same with the Spicer/Duncan group and the Beats. We didn't see each other very much. But there was no personal antagonism.

JP: Michael McClure's opening remarks at his Vancouver 2011 reading tried to define his relation to the Beats via his friendship with Duncan and Spicer.

GS: I think Michael may have seen that more as one thing, but the fact was that we met at The Place and then later at Gino and Carlo's. That was our centre. That table. There were very rarely any Beats. I cannot recall at any point McClure, Ginsberg, Kerouac, or any of the Beats being there...

JP: It makes sense that they wouldn't be at the same table...

GS: Yes, and one major difference was that the Beats, very early, associated themselves with and took great interest in eastern philosophy—Zen Buddhism and other forms of Buddhism—whereas our group, with the intellectual authority of Spicer, Duncan, and Blaser, having come from Berkeley and having been students of Ernst Kantorowicz, in

effect what we youngsters at the table and the bar were learning was western culture and western politics. Culture and politics. So we were western-oriented whereas the Beats were eastern-oriented. That I think is a major difference.

BH: Figures like Rexroth somehow also straddled camps.

GS: Rexroth comes from an anarchist background, Spicer and Duncan were anarchists—they were all anarchists. I learned from Spicer particularly. I remember thinking that Spicer made his mind open stacks. You could ask him anything and he could tell us anything that we needed to know. Being an anarchist, Spicer could be critical and mocking of the Marxist tradition. So we go back to that big split between Marx and Bakunin. They were on the anarchist side.

JP: What was the age difference between you and Spicer?

GS: Nine years, but he seemed so much older. He looked older than his age, and had such authority about him. I was nine years younger than Spicer and fifteen years younger than Duncan. The rest of us were more or less of the same age—Harold Dull, Ebbe Borregaard, Joanne Kyger, and myself.

BH: Aside from the meetings, what do you recall about the readings scene, or other kinds of gatherings?

GS: After the Spicer workshop, the very next year Duncan did the same thing. Duncan had a class—it was the very same room, I think, of the San Francisco Public Library—but it was kind of a fizzle. It just didn't work. And by that time Joanne and I had become totally disrespectful, so we were very disruptive in the Duncan class and made Duncan very angry. Spicer, of course, was gleeful to see us acting up, and Joanne, particularly, made up these things like the Dharma Committee, or we would appoint the bodhisattva of the week, you know, making fun not only of our own mentors but also of the Beats.

From 1960 to 1961, I was in New York, and between '61 and '65—Spicer died in '65—I don't recall any other poets entering the scene. 1964 was an important year because that's when Stan Persky began publishing his magazine called *Open Space*. And that in a sense brought the two groups back together again. At least as I recall Gary Snyder and other people of the Beat group also published in *Open Space*.

What happened in the latter half of the '60s—the hippies in '65 and the "summer

of love” in ‘66—was that another poetry group came together. This was in 1967 in the Haight/Ashbury district. There was a kind of double centre of poetry: one centre was The Poetry Centre at San Francisco State College, which was run by Mark Linenthal and Stan Rice, and the other was the poetry meetings at Wilbur Wood’s house. Wood was a poet and journalist. And people involved here were Jack Gilbert, Bill Anderson—an African-American poet and journalist—Beverly Dahlen, Linda Gregg, and five or ten other people. So there was a real poetry group meeting in the Haight/Ashbury at the time that the police were firing tear gas canisters—we once had tear gas coming into the poetry meeting. This was really a quite different group. It wasn’t really associated with either the Spicer/Duncan group or the Beats. It was a group that was associated largely with the Haight and with San Francisco State College.

JP: George, what were you publishing in this period? And where were you publishing?

GS: Well the publishing scene starts very soon after The Magic Workshop and after the Sunday afternoon meetings took place. Key figures there are Joe Dunn and Graham Mackintosh, founders of White Rabbit Press. In the first few years they published maybe ten or fifteen small books of poetry. A couple of those were mine. In 1963 they published a double-back of *Tete Rouge* and *Pony Express Riders*. There were double-back paperbacks at the time, where you had two short novels—one would be upside down—so we had double-back poetry. The other was *Flowers* in 1965 and *Beyond Love* in 1968.

JP: And those were all White Rabbit...

GS: No, the first two are White Rabbit, the second one is *Open Space*. The magazine *Open Space* extended to publish books....

JP: You don’t use the term “San Francisco Renaissance.”

GS: I don’t recall the term ever being used before 1968 or ‘69. By that time, both our group and the Beats had been in existence for ten to twelve years. Lots of other poets had arrived, but no other movement had arisen. I don’t believe there ever was a “San Francisco Renaissance.” It’s a name that people made up to describe the fact that in this period—this hot period of the counter-culture in the New Left, when there were literally hundreds of poets, and lots of readings going on, most of the readings being

very political, at least in part, that someone said there's a renaissance in poetry. But it doesn't refer to anything specifically, except the fact that there were a lot of poets around.

The social climate of the '50s and '60s led to there being such things as poetry groups and poetry readings. The radicalization that goes on in America begins in the 1950s with the resistance to McCarthyism and with the civil rights movement, and with a general feeling that the '50s were boring, an era of conformity—In poetry it was an opposition to academicism. But we never did talk much about opposing academicism. It was more an emphasis on what was the new, on what would eventually be... first it came out in an *Evergreen Review* issue called San Francisco Scene in 1959 and then in *New American Poetry* edited by Donald Allen in 1960.

JP: I wondered about that at McClure's reading. Someone in the audience asked why there aren't more poems as good as McClure's out there and McClure talked about the stifling effect of academic poetry and I wondered if this was an old opposition he was referring to.

GS: Well, all the poets we have been talking about as two different groups, by the 1970s are seen as a single movement called the New American Poetry. It's Don Allen's anthology that brings the two of them together, plus the New York poets—Ashbery and O'Hara.

JP: Yes, Frank O'Hara makes an explicit attack on academic poetry.

GS: And Olson had a very strong attack on academic poetry too. Don Allen brought the non-academic poets together. And then by 1980 or so, I'm not sure when, Ron Silliman creates this distinction between on one hand post-avant, which I've never really understood but that's what we are, and on the other hand the School of Quietude. But before that almost all university-based poets were part of a kind of network, they were the people who got the grants, they were the people who had the big careers as professors of poetry and literature. That's the kind of distinction that McClure was referring to. McClure was quite right in saying to the questioner there's lots of good poetry around. It's online. It's in little magazines.

BH: I wanted to go back to New York. What took you to New York and what happened there?

GS: Well, I think it was just time to go. Because one of the things that I always think when I think back to the 1950s is “Joanne and me” because Joanne and I were the closest friends. We had this idea, which we also made fun of, that we wanted to “make it.” And to “make it” you had to go to New York. Spicer ridiculed this. When I decided to go to New York, I thought of myself as having a *career* as a poet. I thought, “I’ve published a couple of little books in San Francisco, now I should go to New York.” Since Ginsberg and Kerouac had hitch-hiked across, I hitch-hiked. I didn’t get to New York; I got to Philadelphia.

When I got to New York I immediately fell in with the New York group. In the Bay Area there was always the division between Berkeley and North Beach. It was almost a sort of town/gown division. In Vancouver, back in the ‘60s before I got here, it was between UBC and downtown. In New York it was uptown/downtown. And the uptown wasn’t the university, it was the Museum of Modern Art. So poets like Ashbery and O’Hara were uptown poets. And downtown were LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Joel Oppenheimer, very important to me. So I got into a poetry group with those people. And spent a year there...

JP: ... uptown or downtown?

GS: I was only downtown. I met O’Hara once and I never met Ashbery. I actually did meet Ashbery twice later, once in Paris and once in Dublin. So that was New York. There were no meetings, but there were magazines. There was a magazine called *Yugen* and one called *The Floating Bear*. *The Floating Bear* was mimeographed, and *Yugen* was printed. Both of them, as I recall, LeRoi Jones was the editor. So I had some poems in those. I may have been at LeRoi’s place for Sunday afternoon meetings. I can’t really recall.

New York was a very inexpensive place to live in the summer, but when the winter came I found I had to get jobs and I got a job doing typing from Dictaphone—some terrible office job and I was living in a hotel room and I realized I couldn’t make it in New York. I wanted to go back home. I’d had my one year in New York.

JP: Could we back up to 1958 and the Zukofsky seminar at San Francisco State? What role did that play?

GS: Ebbe Borregaard and I were in that. Not much happened in that. All I recall of it is that Zukofsky and I were quite friendly because Zukofsky was doing his translations

of Catullus, and because I knew some Latin Zukofsky and I talked about that. Later on I visited him once or twice in New York. But I never saw anything coming out of that. Zukofsky had no particular influence on me as a poet.

JP: I'm thinking of a poem that you dedicate to Zukofsky, "The Gifts of Death."

GS: "The Gifts of Death" is the translation from Virgil. That's because Zukofsky and I were talking about translation.

JP: Throughout your career you've been doing translations. I wonder about the place of translation in your practice, and also what languages you know or have a reading fluency in?

GS: The only language I would say I have anything near reading fluency in is French. Some of those early books contain translations from Latin and Greek, and now I translate from French, Spanish, and Russian, but I don't know any of these languages really—I mean fluently. What I know is the grammar and the syntax and, most important, the phonology. I don't have much vocabulary but I have a big dictionary, and so I can work out a poem, by, say, Anna Akhmatova, so that I can read it with comprehension and at the same time hear the way the Russian sounds. I think that phonology is the most important thing.

JP: There's your great translation called "The Wasteland."

GS: This is an obscure Russian writer translated by Lionel Meney at a University in Quebec as prose. But I turned it into poetry. I worked with his French. I did not have access to the Russian. So it's a meta-translation. There's another meta-translation in the same book called "October"—French through Spanish—I don't have access to the French. And right now I've now turned to translation because the way I have been writing poetry for the last ten years or so—what I call free writing, depending on the unconscious and writing as fast as I can—which worked very well for me in poems like "Ripple + 26" and "At Andy's" and through much of the *Vancouver* book—no longer works.

There's a phrase of T.S. Eliot's that has been in my mind for a long time. It's called "the intolerable struggle with words and meanings." And I very recently realized that Eliot is wrong on two counts there. It's not intolerable, and it's not a struggle. It's attention, or attentivity to words and meanings and when you're writing expressively,

say, or out of the unconscious, you're not involved with that. Now I'm beginning to think that when I go back to original work it's going to be more conscious and more concerned with words and meanings than in the past. In the past my biggest strength has largely been spontaneous and... at least half of it has been spontaneous, from the unconscious. But I always have been interested in the choice of the right word. Sometimes the meaning is right but the sound is wrong. Or the sound is right but the meaning is wrong. That's what Eliot called "intolerable."

In the book I'm writing right now, "After Desire" will be the first thing in the book, and the second thing will be a number of translations and shorter original poems of mine—a sort of a transitional section, and then the third part I haven't begun yet. I have some idea where it's going to come from—out of conscious concern with words and meanings.

JP: I must say I resist this idea that the freer forms aren't also engaging words and meaning.

GS: Oh, of course they are...

JP: Perhaps it's the composition process that's different.

GS: If you write spontaneously—I'm not quite sure what I'm trying to say here—I think, for example of the great poets, like Shelley, who wrote spontaneously. I don't believe he lingered over or struggled with words and meanings at all, and yet his choices of diction are always perfect. Astonishing. So I guess I am almost saying there are skills that you have to have. If you don't have these skills built into your mind, then you have to work a bit harder at finding the right word and meaning. But still, when you find it, you know.

BH: Translation is a different process, I guess, in the sense that you are constantly thinking about which word.

GS: Yes, that's right. Maybe Eliot is kind of transitional. That is, from the great poets of the older tradition, who were like great artists, and it came naturally to them, between that and the present day where poets, whether they're considered academic or whether they're considered post-avant, they're all expressive, expressionistic.

BH: What about revision? I'm curious about your process.

GS: Nobody revises more than I do. And that's interesting because Spicer's message of dictation has been widely misunderstood. When I was at the launch of Spicer's *Collected Poems* a couple of years ago in New York, I had to make that point because someone else had said that Spicer believed in automatic writing. It's not true. Spicer used the metaphors of, first of all, the automatic writing that Yeats' wife Georgie had received, which Yeats was really interested in, and secondly the dictation that comes through in Cocteau's film *Orpheus*, where Orpheus, Jean Marais, is listening to Cégeste's voice from the underworld coming through his car radio. That would indicate that Spicer himself believed in direct dictation without any revision. But in fact Spicer made it quite clear when he was talking to us about this that not only was there no contradiction between dictation and revision, but dictation might require revision because you got it wrong the first time. And so when you revise you have to be clear that what you're trying to channel is the poem. And that means you have to cut out all your own personal concerns, lines that you think are good, that kind of thing.

JP: To get back to when you were talking about two styles of writing, the spontaneous, freer forms, and then the carefully chiselled words and meanings, you say nobody revises more than you, I suspect that your more spontaneous style is also revised.

GS: Oh yes.

JP: ... to create the impression of spontaneity...

GS: Oh no. The distinction I'm trying to make is between simply writing a poem—I'm not going to qualify it more than that—writing a poem consciously, and what I started to do about fifteen years ago which was following Peter Elbow's idea of freewriting, also following the idea of stream of consciousness in Joyce, also following Olson's idea that one perception should lead directly to the next perception—well not necessarily a perception, but one perception might lead directly to another act of awareness of one's own mind or body. And so I began writing in that way, writing faster than I could think. Writing faster than I could correct, and that's what I call the freewriting method.

JP: And that would be the first draft that you would return to.

GS: Yes, that's right. Always in ink. Later drafts could be in pencil, but the first draft was always in ink. And that's the method that doesn't work for me anymore. I found

that out in 2008 when I was in Terrace and I filled a whole notebook attempting to write that way and it turned out to be crap. One of Spicer's favourite words: crap. I think that was for two reasons. One, I had been away from Terrace for over ten years and I just was out of touch with the town. But also I think—and I think Spicer would say this—I had now out-smarted myself. What I was taking as being unconscious, even though it was coming very fast, it was actually deliberate.

JP: You were able to write "At Andy's" in the same style ten years earlier and that certainly worked.

GS: I was still in touch with Terrace then. "At Andy's," I think, sort of turns back and begins to talk about the writing method.

BH: You have also been drawn to forms...

GS: I've written a few sonnets. I have no facility whatever. I construct them as someone who has no knowledge of building. But at the same time I've been drawn to that. But not very much.

BH: You mentioned your facility with Latin/Greek in the context of translation. Did this come out of your Jesuit background? What did that education involve?

GS: I went to Catholic grade school with the exception of one year. For some reason in Grade 4 my parents put me into a public school. That was a wonderful year. I learned all about Indian tribes and the rivers of California—things that would never be mentioned in Catholic school. Then I was back in the Catholic school and it was the same thing, you know, the nuns telling you about how long hell lasts and all that...

JP: No geography other than the mythological...

GS: I don't remember anything exciting about grade school except that one great year in Grade 4. But then my parents gave me the greatest gift they ever gave me. They sent me to St. Ignatius High School in San Francisco which was run by the Jesuits. And the Jesuits are very critical of that kind of Catholicism that's taught in the grade schools. The Jesuits set out to liberate us from that kind of Jansenist Catholicism that existed in primary school. One thing I remember one of the Jesuits telling us is that we do have to believe in hell, but we don't have to believe there's anyone there. That was a typical Jesuit remark. They were really wonderful. They were these young men who

were maybe in their mid-20s, on their way to becoming priests, really bright young men—no nonsense, and you didn't talk back to them, but they were brilliant young intellectuals. And the Jesuit high school curriculum contained four years of Latin and three years of Greek. We read Caesar, Cicero, and Virgil in Latin and Homer in Greek. Plus Physics, Chemistry, Trigonometry, so it was a first-rate education and when I went on from there to the University of San Francisco, also a Jesuit institution, for one year, I was there for one week and I realized the place was just a lower level of intelligence compared to that great high school.

I had become very conscious of my Irish background in the late 1960s, when I met James Liddy particularly. But I wondered why wasn't I more conscious of my Irish background before that, and it's because my view of the world was this mythological universe. Having learned all the Greek and Roman mythology through Virgil and others, and also because of my sense of the city, which has always been very strong. That also came from one of the lay teachers at St. Ignatius High School who gave us a unit in English on the history and geography of San Francisco. So that's where that begins. And that kind of sense of the world as being both a religious and a mythological understanding, plus one's sense of the city, that was really the way I saw the world. Even up to, I think—well, New York was different. The army was different. Vancouver was not that much different. That mythological sense of the world and my sense of the city come together in the poem "Pompeii."

JP: Those two subjects are everywhere—there's a lot of classical content in your work.

GS: But it really doesn't change until Terrace. Terrace was the big thing.

JP: In the Jesuit high school, how much religious education was there?

GS: Oh, very little. They figured we'd already had enough of that in grade school. I don't even think religion was a separate subject. I vaguely remember some priest teaching it, but we didn't take it seriously.

JP: There was never any worship component?

GS: No...

JP: You didn't begin the day with prayers or something?

GS: No, certainly not. We wrote AMDG at the top of our papers, though: Ad maiorem Dei gloriam, “To the greater glory of God.” Around that time, as I put it later on, I lost my faith. It took me a long time to make that more specific. I was at mass, and the priest held up the host and said “this is the body of Christ” and I thought “no it isn’t” and I thought that meant I’d lost my faith. All I really lost was my faith in that kind of pre-modern understanding of theology. But I thought I’d ceased to be a Catholic. It took me a long, long time to realize that one does not cease to be a Catholic. So now I would describe myself the way Graham Greene did, as a Catholic atheist.

Oh, one thing I didn’t say about Spicer—this is going back to influences, and what did I get from Spicer: what was very important was dictation and the serial poem, but as a poet I was not influenced by Spicer because Spicer’s concept of poetry was pure poetry. He was a purist like Edgar Allan Poe. One of Spicer’s lines is “a perfect poem would have an infinitely small vocabulary.” Spicer’s poetry never had any influence on me. But Duncan’s did. Duncan, I would say, was impure. I’ve never been drawn to purity at all as a virtue, and Duncan was as impure as you could get. I thought of Duncan as a great a-gnostic master: *a-hyphen*-gnostic master. So the poets who influenced me most in school: Eliot and Auden, and then around the 1960s Duncan, Olson, and Robert Lowell.

JP: What do you mean by “pure” poetry?

GS: It wouldn’t contain things that are not poetic. I remember one time Ron Loewinsohn was telling us about some Philip Whalen poem where he had used the word “asymptote” and Ron thought it was so wonderful that Philip had brought that word in. And somewhere in Jack’s “Letters to Lorca” he talks about how people are always bringing words in from their lives, and all this stuff doesn’t belong in the poem. Spicer ridiculed that and used to say, “Tell us again, what was that word Philip Whalen used?”

I think that there is a concept of pure poetry, whereas a poet like Duncan or Olson would allow anything into the poem. Or William Carlos Williams. Whole passages of prose could occur in the poem.

Before we get away from San Francisco we should talk about James Liddy. I met James when he was visiting poet—I don’t think he was on faculty—visiting poet at San Francisco State College in 1968 or ‘69. We became close friends, but one interesting thing that happened was that we exchanged masters. It wasn’t exactly that. James

introduced me to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, and I was in need of a poet, someone who could be a model for me in a way. I'm not quite sure why at that moment I needed that, but anyway I did, and so Patrick Kavanagh's poetry became important to me for several years and some of the poems that I wrote in Vancouver between 1971 and '75 are modeled on Kavanagh. It was originally Graham Mackintosh, I think, who turned James on to Spicer, but Spicer became the most important poet for James, whereas Kavanagh had been previously. James and I became friends. James died two years ago. We were friends for that long period—about forty years. I visited him several times in Ireland and I visited him in Milwaukee. He taught for 25 years or so at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. You, Jenny, also have a contact with Milwaukee.

JP: Lorine Niedecker

GS: Yes, Liddy became interested in Niedecker's poetry and Blaser and Bowering went down to Milwaukee and read at Woodland Pattern Books. But James was one of my closest friends. One of my books is dedicated "To my poetry buddies James Liddy and Barry McKinnon." So James Liddy was extremely important.

BH: And Kavanagh, tell us more about Kavanagh as an influence.

GS: When Seamus Heaney won the Nobel Prize, the *Vancouver Sun* asked George Bowering to say something about him and George passed that task on to me. So I said to the *Vancouver Sun* that Seamus Heaney was one of the six or seven best poets in Ireland since Yeats. I didn't want to elevate Heaney over Kavanagh—Kavanagh was the poet who saved Irish poetry from Yeats. Yeats had become, by the time of his death, far too great, too mystical—the ordinary world was somehow left behind. It was up to Kavanagh to restore the ordinary world, the fields of County Monaghan and the streets of Dublin. So that was very important.

JP: George, talking about recovering your Irish background, I imagine the discovery of Patrick Kavanagh must have had the effect of galvanizing your Irish identity.

GS: Yes, and also visiting my cousins in Ireland and going back to my great-grandfather's grave and yes, for a long time I kind of took that seriously. I don't any longer, because for one thing I've always been aware of how bumptious and vulgar an Irish-American can be.

JP: Did your parents take their Irish-ness very seriously?

GS: They didn't really either. There is a whole middle-class kind of Irish community and it's all a lot of vanity and drunkenness and shamrocks and all this. No, my parents never took any of that seriously. My parents were not that outgoing.

BH: When did you first go to Ireland?

GS: In 1971 with Scott Watson. We made a trip—we spent six weeks in Ireland then three weeks in London and a week in Paris. Here's the anthology my work appears in: *The Book of Irish-American Poetry*.

JP: Quite a surprising number of poets—Creeley? Does Creeley have Irish roots?

GS: Oh yes, Creeley has a wonderful poem about how his mother told him he was Irish and he discovered he had the power and glory of poetry. At one point, probably still true, almost all Irish poets were teaching at American universities, particularly in the mid-west. And so this book is filled with poems by Irish poets teaching in the mid-west, but they were totally unaware of New England, so none of the Irish-American poets around Boston are in there at all. John Wieners isn't in there.

JP: Maybe we could move on to Vancouver.

GS: I moved to Vancouver in 1971 and I found it a very political place, and not just Vancouver. The first half of the '70s were very political everywhere. I'm just reading this novel by Paul Theroux about politics in London in the '70s. Because of the political defeat of the New Left in 1968 there rose up Marxist-Leninist groups with the idea that the revolutionary subject of history was not going to be, as Herbert Marcuse had said, students and other marginalized groups. So it had to go back to the Old Left, and concentrate on the working class. And also the beginnings of second-wave feminism, gay liberation, and the ecology movement all begin around 1970 after the defeat of the New Left. So Vancouver was just rife with all that kind of political activity in the early 1970s.

BH: How did you pick Vancouver?

GS: After the death of Spicer the poetry group had scattered, largely. My parents both died in the late 1960s. My mother in 1968 and my father in 1970. And after twenty years I had finally gotten my Master's degree. Vancouver was the only place I knew people. I followed Robin Blaser and Stan Persky who had moved here in 1966. And I

had visited Vancouver several times between 1967 and '71. One particular time was when Warren Tallman put on a little conference on San Francisco poetry at UBC in 1970. He brought Joanne and Ebbe and myself up. This was a complete flop because the students at UBC in 1970 were not at all interested in us being great thirty-year-old San Francisco poets.

JP: Isn't that odd because in 1963 San Francisco poets were treated as celebrities in Vancouver.

GS: Right. The point was that we were in the past. But I met Scott Watson at that time and so Scott and I began living together here and then he came down in the fall of '70 and lived with me in San Francisco and then we came back up to Vancouver and then we went on our trip to Europe in '71.

As I mentioned, it was a very political period. I became involved with *The Grape* which was the community breakaway from the *Georgia Straight*, then out of the *Straight* developed Vancouver Community Press where Stan and other people were putting out paper-bound books of people's poems and stories—people like Gladys (Maria) Hindmarch and others. And out of that grew New Star Books, so there was that, and writers' meetings which took place. After Scott and I broke up our relationship, I went to live with George and Angela Bowering and at that house on York Street we began to have writers' meetings. They probably only lasted no more than six months or so and there weren't very many of them, but they were really quite good. That's where I met Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, Lionel Kearns, Sharon Thesen, so I was fully integrated into the Vancouver scene. Except, of course, that I was American. In that period there was a lot of anti-American feeling. Also, being American, I had a sort of American attitude which was that I was not taking these Canadians very seriously as poets. Warren Tallman was very angry at both me and Stan for not giving them enough respect. So that went on.

The North Vandals were meeting towards the end of the '70s. I don't recall that there were poetry readings. I recall that we put out a magazine called *The Body*. And there were parties that were wonderful—both parties and intellectual discussions that went on between David Phillips' house and Hope Anderson's house in North Vancouver. I don't remember who made up the name "North Vandals."

JP: That was George Bowering.

GS: And perhaps that was the time that Billy Little became a prominent figure in the scene and certainly one of the most important local poets, to me.

JP: In what way was Billy important to you?

GS: Because his poetry came out of the European/Latin American/Surrealist tradition that was so different from everything that was going on here. He was just an astonishing figure.

JP: How was it for you to leave Vancouver and move to Terrace in 1976? Did it feel like a compromise to be going up north? Did it feel temporary?

GS: It felt like stepping off a cliff. I'd never lived in a small town before, and I was frightened for some reason. I had not been in good shape before going up there so getting this job was a salvation, but I was terrified of it. But when I arrived there I just instantly realized, "This is the place." I loved it. Just coming down the road from the airport into town I thought, "This is right." Vancouver was not that different from Seattle and San Francisco. But when I got to Terrace, I realized that I was in Canada. Going to Terrace was perhaps the most important thing that happened in my life. And it changed my poetry immensely. I suddenly had a whole lot of world to discover—everything was different. It was a Protestant town, it was a big trade union town, there were bears, I had to fly around in small planes, everything was new, and it gave me a completely new lease on my poetry.

BH: You developed a number of writing friendships there?

GS: Yes, I met Barry MacKinnon once or twice before when he visited Vancouver. I met him at the poetry meetings on York Avenue. But we became friends in the north and I also met Ken Belford at that time. So Ken, Barry, and I became friends and exchanged poems and I know there were publications—I can't quite remember what they were at the time—and there were a number of younger poets. The focus was on Prince George which was the capital of the North. It became an important scene and I think it still is. There's still quite a bit of poetic activity going on in Prince George particularly now that there's a university there, UNBC.

JP: Despite your sojourn in the north, the city remains a steady presence in your writing.

GS: Yes. The city has always been, from my childhood, particularly the time I studied the history and geography of San Francisco in school. I participated in that idea that San Franciscans had at that time of themselves, which was that San Francisco was a world city even though it was not a very large city. We thought of ourselves as San Franciscans, more than as Americans or Californians. I think this is true of people of other large cities like New Orleans or New York or Montreal. I had that consciousness of San Francisco. And that's where the influence of Robert Lowell comes in. My poem "San Francisco's Gone" is influenced quite a bit by Robert Lowell's book *Life Studies*. I would say at least more than half of my poetry is located in cities, with the inclusion of Terrace as a city.

JP: After you won the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Award, you set about reading Shelley's poetry. How did you respond to it?

GS: The Shelley Award came right out of the blue. The Award goes back to the 1930s. It was endowed by Mary B. Sears, who I think must be associated with Sears Roebuck. The criteria for it are simply "genius and need"! That's all! It was a great honour. I had read some Shelley when I was in high school but not since then, so I began reading quite a bit of Shelley and found him to be what he is: one of the very great. Probably the top three in metrical and rhymed verse are Shelley, Chaucer, and Yeats. That's my nomination for the top three.

Bowering and I began reading Shelley together after I received the award. In one of the poetry readings we read the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," he taking one stanza and I taking the next. Blake is certainly up there too, but in a way different because it's not the same strict metrical rhymed verse. Blake writes in ballad forms, or in long, prose type forms.

When I gave my thanks at the reading in New York, I said that I was honoured to receive the same prize that two of my mentors did, Josephine Miles and Robert Duncan. But Miles got it in something like 1932 when she was about 23 years old. Duncan shared it with Denise Levertov. Among other award winners there's a list of the great modern American poets. So I was very honoured to be associated with Shelley and with that list.

JP: What is the relation of your writing to lyric poetry?

GS: Lyricism is very important to me. I interpret lyricism very loosely in a way,

because with the move to free verse, with the abandonment of strict metrical and rhymed forms in both French and American poetry you then have the opportunity for various new kinds of lyricism. I think Duncan's poetry is a great display of many different lyrical forms, some of them free verse lyrical forms, some of them forms he invented. It's a hard thing to define. I think it's somehow taken up with the idea of discourse. If a poem is not discursive in some way, if it's not telling some kind of a story or some kind of a communication then it can't be lyrical. I don't think that language poetry can be lyrical. It's very important to me. For a while, in the mid-'80s or so, I had in my mind the criteria for any poem that I wrote. It was "RST": Rhythm, Syntax, Truth. When I say "Rhythm" I mean that in free verse there has to be a kind of tension which is created by line breaks, which I learned particularly from both Duncan and Olson. The line break is very important. Not just in creating the pause, though I think that's basically what it is, for Olson and Duncan the line is the breath, and so there is a brief pause at the end of a line. There is in formal verse, too, there's always a pause unless there's an enjambment. But the aesthetic side of poetry has always been very important to me and I sum that up as lyricism.

JP: Then there's that expressive side of lyricism...

GS: There's a great natural expressiveness in Shelley. As he was expressing his thoughts and visions he was also, without even thinking about it, putting them into pentameters and complex rhyme schemes. But there's also this great expressivism in Ginsberg which derives from Whitman which derives in part from the prophetic works in the Bible, or in Duncan.

BH: It seems there's a return of interest in lyric modes recently, across many schools of poetics.

GS: I think the whole period of language poetry has pretty much come to an end and now there are things that are just absurd, like Flarf. They're basically collage. I think we have to return to a beaux arts position where we "let a hundred flowers bloom." Many different kinds of poetry. But I don't think we can possibly recover the rhyme and metrical poetry of the past. People like Dana Gioia out of a school called New Formalism, which I call "New Formaldehyde," make the assumption that you can write rhymed and metrical poetry now, but it's not possible. You can't write it unless

you were brought up with it. Unless you were reading it and writing it from the age of five. The last poet who could do that was Yeats.

BH: You were one of the founders of Aboutism—could you tell us about it? What were the tenets, the context? What are your thoughts on it now?

GS: Aboutism was an idea framed as if it were a poetic movement. The manifesto is from Ryan Knighton: “Theory guards us from error; we are for error.”

Aboutism was a reaction to language poetry, and language poetry quite clearly eliminated reference. I think what the language poets were trying to do was similar to what the post-impressionists did in painting. That is, to make a painting not out of the images of the world, portraits, and landscapes and all that, but to make a painting out of paint. So that’s a lesson that one learns from Cézanne. So I think language poetry at a theoretical level, with a classic language poet like Clark Coolidge, was attempting to create an art form simply out of words abstracted from their signification. My sense of that immediately was “You can’t do that.” It’s not possible in language. In visual arts you can take shape and line and colour away from the world and make something new out of them that has nothing to do with any referential object. Abstraction. But you cannot separate a word from its signification. If you have the word “tiger” in a poem the image of a tiger will arise in your mind inevitably. It seems to me that even in the most austere language poets—like Deanna Ferguson or Clark Coolidge—there was always this sort of semantic haze around the poem of the meanings, of the significations that had been excluded but didn’t go away.

My basic idea was that the poets I learned from—Olson, Duncan, Lowell—their poetry was about everything in the world. It was about nature, it was about love, it was about politics, it was about the economy, it was about all the complexity of reality. And to give all of that up, it seemed to me, maybe there had to be a reaction against the poetry as well as the painting and the film of the ‘60s, because they were all dominated by big male egos. You think of Olson and Duncan and you think of De Kooning and Pollock, Bergman and Fellini... Duncan once said, “I make poetry like other men make war.”

There had to be a reaction, and one can say that in visual art it was Warhol who brought all that down, dismissed all that, and in film I think it was George Lucas, oddly enough, with *Star Wars*, but that’s another field. It was time for a reaction, but I

just never saw the point of language poetry, and I see even less the point of things like Flarf.

At the same time, there are some wonderful poets who come out of the language poetry tradition like Lisa Robertson, for example. No one is more lyrical. There are lyrical poets whose reference in their poem may not be the kind of effort that you follow discursively, but it may come through implication, through repetition. Maybe Lisa Robertson is the beginning of the reaction to language poetry, because certainly, Lisa Robertson and Nancy Shaw were the ones that changed KSW. KSW was hard-core language poetry up to that time. When Lisa and Nancy took it over, they opened it up particularly to women poets, and eventually to what it is today, which is poetry, not one particular school.

JP: What are you writing now?

GS: I've been working on translations and finding a great deal of enjoyment in coming to terms with words and meanings and with choices between words and meanings and how using a word in one line means you have to make a completely unrelated choice in another line because of tone, meaning. When I'm working on a translation I don't really have a rational plan and if one thing changes then another thing must change but I hadn't realized that. One has to have a whole line or a whole group of lines in mind to get a sense of the inter-relation.

I'm coming to the end of a group of translations. I have two more to do. Then when I begin again to write my original poetry it will, to some extent, be expressive and it will to some extent come from the unconscious only I'm not going to depend upon the unconscious as if it were some kind of magic lamp to give me the poem. So in a sense I'm going to revert back to what I was doing when I first began writing poetry, which is just writing it.

BH: Writing more slowly?

GS: Yes, writing more slowly, and seeing dictation as perhaps a more abstract concept than something that is required to happen in the actual writing at every moment.

JP: Would you describe the process of writing the *Vancouver* poem as dictation?

GS: Sometimes. The *Vancouver* poem is much more loose. It's modeled on Williams'

Paterson. It's a poem of discovery. And it's what I mean by saying that I'm not interested in pure poetry. Everything, including the kitchen sink, can be in there. Fragments of conversation that that you can't really find. There's even one point in the poem where there's something I write down—"I can't read this"—

I think of dictation from the reverse side and describe dictation as not insisting on what I want to say. To be willing to move however the poem moves—like the Ouija board, where the medium puts her hand on the—what is that thing called? The little triangle—and touches it so that it will move. You don't want to hold it down hard. You don't want to push it but you want to adopt that stance toward the poem that allows it to emerge. And that I would distinguish from a kind of conviction that the unconscious will speak through my speeded-up writing. Writing a bit more slowly is part of it.

BH: What was your approach for "After Desire"?

GS: A lot of that was freewriting, but a lot of it was modified. The poems in there greatly differ. Some of them have been revised so that they are... I've been working with words and meanings. Others are free-flowing and very roughly revised. By roughly I mean "cut those three lines out" without thinking too much about it, but that looks okay the way it is. Like a painter would work sometimes.

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After desire the springs of longing
 dry up, beauty is almost ^{unrecognizable}
~~shocked to be unrecognizable~~
 astonished that you passed it by. (The background?
~~wants to~~ come into sharper focus, by default,
 but the old soul is still tangled up in memories,
 the ^{unmade} undone, ^{misaid} commitment, to whom?
 wears a raccoon-skin coat
 into the heat of the spring. And football keeps us
 going too, politics - ^{reports from} back to the slave trade.
 Always redefining ourselves for a funeral - being asked
 to (real) funerals just sweetens the pot -
 some kind of game or other, always in play
 let beauty go and let ^{life} the world go too, then -
 (a broken world ^{deep} in clear sight, the everyday.

It's Friday again, time to do laundry - it's
 Friday again. Time to do laundry. Throw it
 away, Abby Lincoln sings, discard the heart.
 The world trying to ~~come into sharper focus~~
 has nothing to offer but anonymity ^{major} rules
 even though the old ceremonial robes
 forsworn must still be put on
 for full dress occasions.

I unlocked the door ^{to my apt.} ~~to the apt.~~

18

He followed ^{me} ~~the~~

But when he ^{was face to face} ~~got~~ in the apartment, ^{he knew} ~~realized~~
I didn't know what ^{I wanted} to do with him.

I ^{don't} ~~didn't~~ want to hurt ^{you} him

(^{any more} ~~a few~~)

I ^{don't} ~~didn't~~ want him to ^{you} ~~put~~ ^{take me in} ~~his arm~~
(^{any more} ~~a few~~) ^{you}

So I let him vanish.

I let him go.

I let him go back to his body

~~this beautiful body~~ ^{he} ~~let him go back to the sushi restaurant~~

~~undetached~~ ^{unseparated} ~~from his~~ ^{was a} ~~part of~~ ^{whole}

~~not scissored out~~ ^{clingers} ~~by the violent eye~~

~~that fastens on~~ ^{a lovely} ~~lip on cheek~~

~~of a complexion~~ ^{beautiful} ~~features~~

~~of beauty~~

images

~~typical of~~

~~by sexiness or femininity~~

~~to possess, or destroy~~

~~Undetached~~

~~undetached from his life~~ ^{any} ~~by my violent eye~~