"Where Heart is Horse and Head the Rider, Poets Must be Centaurs:" An Interview with William Pitt Root

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Q. You once wrote that in poetry you consider "emotions primary, ideas secondary." Would you comment on your preference?

ROOT: For starters, it isn't a matter of my preference. That's just how the human creature is built to work. We all respond primarily with emotions, unless that ability is diverted or crippled by trauma. In which case we get catatonics and Republicans. Anna Akmatova's contemporary, Marina Tsvetaeva, put it nicely: "The sole target of all poetry is the heart." Eliot cut finer distinctions when he observed that great poetry can be felt before it is understood. And of course if it isn't felt, we're not likely to bother to understand it. So yes, emotions are
primary, ideas secondary. Heart is the horse, head the rider, and ideally poets must be centaurs. In such a poet, the elements of self are wedded. And no one is always a poet in this sense. Theodore Roethke shadow-boxing in his poetry workshop, for instance, was mighty interesting but was not the clarified spirit who wrote “The Far Field” or “Meditation at Oyster River.” In the myths, the centaur is the teacher of heroes, heroes being men who achieve wholeness by performing the tasks which force them to learn what they are made of. And that’s a function poet-centaurs tend to overlook now.

Jack Gilbert once described the poetic talent as the “gift that cannot be refused.” Do you agree with that rather hierarchic view of poetic talent? Can one who isn’t “called” write poetry?

ROOT: Gilbert is, of course, likening the roles of poet and prophet. Jeremiah tried to refuse his role of prophet once, to spare himself further persecution, and soon was crying out that the word of God “was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones.” The great Sioux prophet, Black Elk, had the same experience. It’s a universal phenomenon among those who are called and try to refuse the summons — the charge backs up if blocked.

I will argue that we are all called. By different gods, to be sure. But we are all, nearly all — I will include catatonics but I think right-wingers must be made provisional at best — called. Not to prophesy, not to write poems, but to evolve, to put ourselves into situations where we are most likely to evolve. For some, this is spiritual. For most it is less directly so. Love is such a situation. The desire to learn, to travel, to plunge into whatever mainstreams attract us — these all have the potential to be forcing houses of the spirit on the one hand, or habit on the other. Habit kills, habit drives people nuts. Thoreau’s remark on “lives of quiet desperation” is to the point. Ours, of course, is a secular society. We say “In God we trust” on our money, but we go to doctors and give that money to them. What would a doctor have to say to Jeremiah? “Delusions of grandeur, hears voices.” Or maybe, “Patient displays neurotic symptoms as a result of double-bind.” And such perspectives are neither right or wrong — they’re insufficient.

Everyone needs to express himself, herself. Maybe in poetry, probably not. Break-dancing will do for some. Not to express yourself leads to trouble. Fire in the bones. Here’s a verse by a 10 year
old:

I used to be a door
but my parents slammed me shut.
Now I am a secret room, all lit up,
waiting to be found.

God bless. Whether that young boy finds himself someday through poetry or is found by a lover who helps him open that door with trust doesn't matter. So long as he's found.

One thing we all do is dream. It's the most fundamental creative process of the spirit. Not mind, not id, ego, superego. Spirit. And most of us are abysmally ignorant — through lack of information or wrong information — of the signifying power of our own dreams. Fascinated, but leary. We're afraid it might be Pandora's Box, the can of worms. For which we may thank orthodox Christianity and pop Freudians. Freud laid waste once and for all to the Age of Reason with *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In it, he brought together two of the most profound, and profoundly opposed, phenomena we have: the human spirit and the scientific method. He showed us the horse and rider — with the trainer off-stage somewhere — but it was a horse whose hooves descend into hell.

Q. Do you see Freud as a champion of poetry then, in a certain way?

ROOT: More a champion of critics than poets. More a Frank "Bring-em-back-alive" Buck than a Jane Goodall. He was a brassbound genius riddled with human failings, ambition not least among them. Like most revolutionaries, he was a product of his time. Which was Victorian. Prophet in a bustle. Genius in Vienna. And what came from him as vision soon got processed into theory, by himself, and into doctrine, by his disciples. And into dogma by the next generation. Nowhere does information degrade more quickly than in a consumer culture. Inspirations are made into products — new cars, new ideas — and passed into the marketplace. For instance, Freud's term "scheele" has always been translated in psychoanalytic literature as "mind." Bettleheim says "soul" is closer to what he meant. Quite a difference there. And Bettleheim is performing a function of rejuvenation that is in equal parts that of the true scholar and that of the best poet — he is reclaiming from its degraded state some gold that's gone to lead. A little alchemy.
But if artists have a champion among the giants of psychoanalysis it would more likely be Carl Jung. What Freud discovered terrified and horrified him, understandably, and he quickly sought to control it, call it to order. In those dark monstrous waters of the unconscious, while Freud sought islands of rationality from which to observe the flux and maintain his authority, Jung stripped bare and swam in awe and wonder, bearing witness to the human miracle. I exaggerate the distinction, of course, to make a point. The observer is, perforce, the critic. The witness is the artist. Jung certainly had the objective capacity but also had, more than Freud, an extraordinarily subtle and powerfully intuitive bent. Where Freud's inclination is definitive and reductive, Jung's is expansive — more inclusive, less moralistic in tone. Jung sees that the head of the rider keeps company with the stars, that even those hooves sinking to hell are really roots drawing up vital sustenance.

Q. Are writers, artists, less moral than the rest of us?

ROOT: Less moralistic. Artists and writers wage a constant, delicate, crucial warfare against the danger of creating works which critics and general audiences might too easily reduce to a moral, or immoral, stance. There is often a moral complex at the core of the work, or the impulse to work, but it has to stay hidden to remain effective. Dance of the Seven Veils! Because mystery is to artistic process as water is to living tissue — it may not show but must be present.

Q. In the book of poems you've just completed, SAINT DUNG, has this emphasis on emotion versus idea changed any?

ROOT: Yes, as a matter of fact, it has shifted a bit. The title, by the way, comes from the Spanish saying, "Dung is no saint, but where it falls miracles may follow." The title is risky — people always say, "What?" — but I like it. Jim Tate said one time he had conceived his title The Oblivion Ha-Ha as an example of two opposites being yoked together. Two sides of his nature. And there's a book called Meat Air . . . . Anyhow, much of my book has to do with people and concerns and dilemmas we tend to shun or cast off—an anorexic, endangered species, the Afghani freedom-fighters, the problem of suicide among poets, and so on. And I approach the situations not only as individual matters but as issues. This affects idiom and imagery as well as subject
matter. A few of the poems try to deal with poetry as a way of knowing, a form of learning. Not so much "poems about poetry" as explorations of the expense and responsibilities entailed by certain approaches to fundamental kinds of awareness. Other poems deal with following out ramifications, of a non-literary sort, into a larger area of life.

**Q. You say "non-literary" as if that is especially important to you.**

**ROOT:** It is. Although the literary world is not only valuable and inevitably interesting to a writer — indispensable —, I believe learning is a bit like eating. We eat, every day if we can, but turn our meals into muscle and energy, into activity, which is as it should be. We don't carry our meals around with us, buttonholing people to show them what we eat. For writers, the assimilation of old and new ideas might well follow that pattern. First you get them, you consume them, then you put them to work. But to see bits of this or that current literary fashion displayed in a poem or piece of fiction is, for me, as distasteful and childish as seeing someone trudge along with a porkchop hanging from his mouth. Among the young, it's one thing. Among the mature, quite another.

**Q:** Do you think that contemporary poets — Robert Hass, Jorie Graham, Robert Pinsky, John Ashbery — emphasize a direction towards the "idea?" And do you think this is going to make poetry more inaccessible to a general public? Is this emphasis desirable?

**ROOT:** I think that contemporary poets are afraid of the heart, and in part that's a function of the aesthetic pendulum. In people like Roethke and Wright — Wright was the last one to get away with it cleanly — you had the heart being laid bare and explored. Roethke is important technically as well as in terms of the goods he brought. Wright is important because of the distance he could go without falling back on complicated or new techniques. Both were beautiful, wonderful shining examples, but for the period of their idiom, the 50's and 60's, they ransacked the warehouse.

I understand that Daniel Halpern when he was teaching at the New School, would tell his students who turned in poems with natural images to go to the window of the classroom and point out any examples of nature they could see from there. And if they couldn't
point out examples, not to write about them. That’s an extreme example, but indicative. Urban provincialism.

As for the poets you mentioned, I think Jorie Graham is marvelous, at this point in her career primarily an architect, quite a skillful one. How much power she will finally accrue as a poet I have no idea. Robert Hass is a wonderful kind of solvent medium for ideas and feelings. It’s exciting to see someone convincingly work with ideas as he does. What he’s doing is not so much original as it is seen afresh, made to feel new again. Which is important.

Ashbery gives the appearance of being on to larger philosophical issues, large-bore concerns, if you’ll pardon the expression. It seems to me that he writes for an extraordinarily specialized audience of literate esthetes inclined to be moribund, for whom this is impossible and that is impossible once any given issue has been chopped so fine that it can never come back to life. Ashbery chops them fine. Certainly he has intelligence and talent, perhaps even genius, but having sat to read him for an hour, what is one inclined to do but sigh? Because his sophistication is strictly high-tech and his concerns are embedded in complexly textured works few indeed seem fully to grasp, he is often touted as being at the forefront . . . but of what, exactly? And to what end? Introducing Ashbery to a general reader is like grabbing a mule by the ears and trying to get him to look at an orangutan who has learned to use sign language. Now I have nothing against either mules or orangutans. But before I am going to be terribly excited by an orangutan’s use of signs, he will have to have something to say to me. Something more interesting that “I want a banana” or “Life is very very complex.”

To give a more constructive response to a poet of great complexity, let me point to Eliot and say why. Eliot not only diagnosed and dramatized the malaise of the first half of the 20th Century; he also raised up an heroic effort toward a cure. The malaise was cultural, the cure personal, and many of those who felt kinship with the disease refused or were unequipped for the cure and so resented him terribly. But he did his work. It was serious, difficult, and complete. That he was a high priest and not the lay-brother William Carlos Williams would have preferred is, in truth, a description, not a flaw.

One of the problems of poetry, as Wendell Berry has pointed out, is specialization, making smaller and smaller, more particularized and specialized an audience, and then complaining that people don’t listen to us!
Q: Do you think this change of emphasis from emotions to ideas moves in cycles, in response to people like Wright and Roethke, who were able to convey direct bare emotions so well?

ROOT: Sure, there are many kinds of cycles, phases. It's obvious that when one generation has exhausted a set of options, the new generation is likely to try something else. Wright, especially, has many imitators but, as is usually the case, they imitate the style — the flat diction, the seemingly straightforward approach — without catching the three-masted spirit. And that's often true of Roethke's other student, Missoula's own Dick Hugo. In his case, imitators tend to assume not only the diction — anything but flat — but the attitude, or stance. The hard-driving, hard-drinking, tough-talking softie. When Jim Crumley described Dick as that grand old "detective of the heart," he hit pretty close to home. The hard-boiled affect is not difficult to copy, but to know what Dick knew of the human heart did not derive from his style; it produced it. There is no short-cut.

Another kind of development — an interesting one that England, for instance, has no equivalent for — is seen in the work of Whitman, the Beats, Snyder, Wendell Berry, and others. It's the combination of a powerfully emotional response to daily life and also an accommodating vision of community. Communitas, almost. But their works constitute the cores of communities of otherwise unaffiliated people, communities of like souls, ethical and esthetic neighborhoods trying to carve and maintain niches in an otherwise indifferent world. While this process was much more in evidence in the media during the 60's and early 70's it is still very much a presence in numerous parts of the country. The influence of poets like Snyder and Berry is not accurately measured by any literary standard. It is not a literary influence, but an influence achieved through literary means. And I say more power to them.

Q: You're quoted as saying, "An ideal poem would be such that its surface might attract readers while its submarine currents seize, dazzle, baptize, and otherwise astonish their souls before letting them worry back onto the shore, reborn." How does this emphasis on emotion fit in with your conception of what a poem should do to a reader?
ROOT: Ah yes, sweet youth! And I still can't improve on that statement.

Q: You've recently published a poem, "The Unbroken Diamond: A Nightmare to the Majahadeen," about the war in Afghanistan. What do you feel a poet's responsibilities are, if any, to take an active political stance?

ROOT: It's easier to see explicit content in a poet's work than in, say, a sculptor's. And yet they're both people who happen to be artists. So it's easier to make a more explicit call for political content in poetry.

My sense of it is that people ought to be aware of how the world works, locally, nationally, and internationally. What poets are aware of — what we have digested of our ideas, digested into the muscle and fiber of our being — is going to come out in poems, and should. Certainly room should be made for it. In the sixties you had an unfortunate display of very bad political poetry and I remember reviewing an anthology called Campfires of the Resistance, by Todd Gitlan. I was politically sympathetic, but I couldn't say that that was a good anthology. It was a horrible anthology! It was apologist: bad poetry is O.K. as long as the ideas are “good.” That's no more true than that expert poetry is good even if the ideas are “bad.” You have Yeats and Eliot coming out anti-semitic and so on. We should have as a part of our consciousness a political awareness, and what we are aware of must figure somewhere in what we do with our lives. Artists are freer than mechanics to include that as a part of their function. So, yes, I feel we should be as whole as we possibly can be. Let me emphasize that flexibility, not rigidity, is the hallmark of such wholeness.

Q: For the past twenty years, politically oriented poetry — Vietnam era poetry and the books coming out now about Afghanistan and El Salvador — has come under criticism because it is sensationalistic. How would you answer this charge?

ROOT: It's not their fault war is what it is. What kind of a charge is that? That's not a charge, but a description. In warfare, the moment you depart from statistics — which numb — you engage individual sufferings.
Q: Do you think it's fair to criticize poetry for its political stance?

ROOT: Sure. If you take a political stance you’re going to have to take flack for it. With my poem on Afghanistan I ran into some interesting, fine points of politics. Nobody seems to care much about Afghanistan. It’s not local: they’re a foreign group of people. When I was sending it out I got favorable responses from the New York Review of Books and The New Yorker, and The Atlantic, and all, but nobody wanted to publish it because of its length, supposedly. I had a sense it was also because of the politics. I sent it around to some people, and Denise Levertov’s response in particular was intriguing. She sent two or three letters in two or three days. Clearly she was bothered by something. Her first letter said she liked the poem but was uneasy about giving “political” endorsements. She was concerned about being accused of being anti-communist. This is what we are ashamed of now? It doesn’t seem like the most despicable position in the world to take. But that meant she would be perceived as pro-Reagan. So she was caught in a dilemma. She finally worked her way out of it by saying that the poem was against oppression in all forms and against violence caused by oppression in the oppressed. She wrote a blurb to that effect, which I appreciated very much. I was shaken, though, by the ramifications involved in taking a stance over such a simple thing as twentieth century warfare against people who are practically living in a medieval era in terms of their defenses. I see the Afghanistan conflict as being in part not only a repeat of Vietnam, but a repeat of the Western expansion against the Indians, against native peoples in their native lands, people who have lived highly cultured, nontechnological lives. In some cases they were firing at helicopter gunships with slingshots! It’s absurd. This is such a clear-cut issue that to get involved with politics in this way is like an elephant being hamstrung by a gnat.

Q: How do you feel about some of your poems being read over Radio Free Europe?

ROOT: Wonderful. It excited me very much to find that out. I didn’t find out until eight years after it happened. For copyright reasons an author is never informed when this is done. They can’t ask your permission. I found out from Howard Norman, whose grandmother had done
the translations. He told me a little about how poems are distributed in Russia, partly through the Samizdat underground network, partly through Radio Free Europe. They have transcribers in communities who presumably tape and then transcribe the poems. Then the poems will be distributed, for instance, through butcher shops. You would go into a butcher shop, order a coded cut of meat, and get your cut of meat wrapped in poems. Amazing.

Q: As a Poet-in-the-Schools in ten different states, we know you worked with children up to the age of 85. What did you learn from them?

ROOT: I learned a lot. When Kenneth Koch’s book, *Rose Where Did You Get That Red?*, was reviewed in 1971 in the *New York Times Review of Books*, I got a sense of what he was doing, and I was amazed. The poems he got from the children were sometimes very striking in a primitive sense — color-crayon genius stuff, but wonderful. I was teaching at that time at Amherst College in Massachusetts with a highly sophisticated group of students, and I remember despairing: I could never do anything like that. Nor would I try, because I knew I couldn’t. As fate would have it, within two months I was getting off a plane in Tucson where I thought I was going to be giving a series of readings at colleges, and Neil Claremon, my contact, said, “Well, tomorrow morning at this time you’ll be talking to 4th grade Navajo students.” And I said, WHY?”

For me it was a renewal. I probably wouldn’t have been teaching college much longer. The energies involved in the college classroom were so remote from the sources of poetry that it was drying me up. Going back and working with children, where you mention the word poetry and they start to scream with glee, was rejuvenating. To find that kind of genius in third and fourth graders — real genius — opened my eyes indeed, and reminded me of how deep the roots of poetry are, of how deep they must and should be. I had to rearrange my approach to poetry in the college classroom as well, to involve some of these more fundamental, elemental things.

Q: Has teaching workshops at the college level affected your writing?

ROOT: It encourages self-consciousness. There’s no way it can’t. You have to talk about techniques as if it’s something that can be
removed from the living body of poetry. You find the temptation is to deal with the poems as if you were a forensic specialist, instead of a dance partner. We are living bodies, moving beings, and you can’t talk about meter as if you could strip the nervous system from the human body, from the body of poetry, and deal with it in isolation. Still, to teach it you must do this. For students it’s rough enough. They go through two, three years of this, but for the teacher it’s not two, three years. If you teach regularly, however long it is, that repetition can get to be quite deadening. You can begin to believe it.

Q: Does the workshop system create a type of poem, a “workshop” poem, and do you think this is leading poetry down a confining path?

ROOT: Several factors. E. E. Cummings once said a bad poem isn’t awful, it’s mediocre. Workshops by their very nature tend to eliminate the awful and encourage the mediocre, the kinds of poems that can get favorable, quick responses in the classrooms, or at least won’t draw down the wrath of God and fifteen graduate students by being awful. So there’s a matter of courage involved for the student. That’s the student’s responsibility — to run the risk of writing a bad poem so that some day he could write a great poem.

The “awful” poem may take a great risk and fail to pull it off. But the necessity of risk, to avoid mediocrity and to approach something in a manner more original, is essential. In a workshop it is possible to play it safe; in poetry, that is not a possibility except among the second and third-rate.

Q: Is it a threat somewhat? Or do you think that the student will ultimately transcend any kind of education that might confine him?

ROOT: Well, some students can transcend anything — even an education. But, of course, the perils and hazards for a young writer, student or no, probably consist more in the seductions of comfort than in the threats of hardship. In writing workshops, we may make it appear too easy. For those two years or so that a young writer is in an MFA program, it’s far too easy for him or her to imagine that success in the workshop is a proof of success, period. It’s not. The hard fact is that most good student writers disappear into anonymity. And there are always good writers coming up out of nowhere, too, who attend no workshops and manage somehow to get it on their own.
One alternative to a workshop is a master-apprentice situation, which is an old one. I don't know what transpired between Marvell and Milton, when Marvell was Milton's secretary. Or between Beckett and Joyce. Or Pound and Yeats. But it was one-to-one. It wasn't public, and I suspect those criticisms were much harsher than what came down in a classroom, and were taken much more seriously because it was one-to-one.

Q: What do you think about politics in academia?

ROOT: It's the left hand shaking the left hand. Everybody who teaches deals with that frustration. What I dislike is when I find myself drawn into it more than I mean to be. But if you want the brass ring, I suppose you have to ride the plaster horse. You certainly don't have to like it.

Q: You've been a bouncer in a bar, a teamster, a shipyard worker, and a teacher — I was wondering how the jobs divorced from academia affected your work?

ROOT: Originally they were just ways of surviving. Philip Levine said he was involved in that inevitable succession of "stupid jobs." I don't feel that way. I worked my way through college and found quickly that it was like, oh . . . Jacques Costeau has a marvelous passage in *The Silent World* where he describes his first vision of the underwater world. Standing off the shore of Italy wearing a pair of goggles and standing up to eye-level in water, he is looking through the goggles' upper half at the bathers on the shore, through the bottom half at the underwater life at his feet. He is just stunned, shocked and amazed. In college doing blue collar work in the shipyards was the underwater for me, and the bathers on the shore were the teachers. I've been a kind of cultural commuter probably my whole life, trying to write poems that would be comprehensible to truckdrivers or whatever, and writing them so that the most highly literate reader would have some feeling for them as well. I won't pretend it always works. Nor is that the only kind of poetry I write.

Q: In COOT, did you start out with the intention of writing a series?

ROOT: I began in a terminal state of boredom in Galveston, Texas.
One night after I'd been there about six months I was longing for company when this figure of Coot came into my mind. I was thinking about ski developments in Colorado and the effects that they had on the old codgers around there. I'd also worked in a gold and copper mine in Arizona, 2500 feet underground, and during the whole period I worked there it had been in my mind how different the romantic version of the prospector was from the actual contemporary miner, the drone. In the gold mine the people who worked there had these enormous lunch baskets, I mean big ones, and it took me awhile to figure out that they were smuggling gold in their lunch buckets. So I got myself a big one, but I didn't know enough about what to take; so I took what looked like gold and wound up with about 18 pounds of iron pyrite. Out of this I derived a little bit of wisdom in the form of a short poem called "The Old Prospector":

All gold is fool's gold,
If you're so smart
how come you're rich?

That little three line poem is the nugget from which the Coot poems sprang a year later. And I wrote it as one long poem. It didn't work at all until I broke it up.

Q: Was writing the Coot Series liberating or constraining?

ROOT: Very liberating. It was the first time humor ever appeared in my poems. One complaint about my poems up to that point was about a lack of humor. I knew that was true. I would give readings and people would laugh at what I said between the poems, but the poems had none of that in them.

A couple of years ago I heard Sir Laurens van der Post make a point I found fascinating and instructive. He was addressing a question regarding essential differences between aboriginal peoples — the Kalahari Bushmen, in particular — and so-called Modern Man. He said that Western Culture had made the radical error of striving for perfection rather than wholeness, and that the lesson of wholeness was something we could still learn from aboriginal peoples wherever they still exist. Now others may've made that point, certainly it seems simple enough, but it struck me like lightning. It threw light on many facets of my life, but in poetry I realized I had been striving for "perfect" poems, and I had thought humor — that too too human element — had no place in perfect works of "high
seriousness.” That embarrasses me, but it was true. And Coot was my breakthrough.

Q: Do you think that rigidity is in a lot of workshop poems?

ROOT: I think humor is often absent, yes. For pretty much the same reasons. We feel that to be taken seriously we must take ourselves seriously. That’s a lesson it may take maturity to unlearn.

Q: Do you have any superstitions or habits that help you write or get back to writing after a dry spell?

ROOT: Sure. They’re nobody’s business but my own.

Q: You’ve named Lorca, Whitman, Blake, Neruda, Roethke among others as influences on your work. What did you learn from them?

ROOT: They’re people whose spirits rose off the page in a way that for me was extremely arresting, and that’s what I wanted to have happen with my work. That’s the sense in which I felt influenced by them.

Q: Was Roethke inspirational for the “Reckoning” section in your second book, STRIKING THE DARK AIR FOR MUSIC?

ROOT: I don’t think so. The Reckoning poems began about the time my first book actually was published. I sat down and read and liked the book. I didn’t want to repeat it for my second book. The poems in my first book were retrospective, looking back on childhood or on experiences that had occurred some time before I sat down to write the poems. I had to deal with why that was the case. I knew, but I needed to look more closely, and I did that through poems.

Those poems look confessional at a glance. For me, they weren’t. They were indeed “about my life,” but while that condition satisfies Rosenthal’s definition of “confessional poetry,” it doesn’t satisfy mine. You confess what you are ashamed of, and do so to your god or to your better self; in poetry, the practice is more a matter of bragging in public about how bad you are. Sexton, Berryman. No god, no better self, just the mirror and the New York Times Review Of Books.
My sequence begins in confession but progresses to healing actions and concludes in celebration. Show me a "confessional poet" of whom that is true. Only two reviewers noticed that. One appeared in a newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi, and the other was never published but the author sent it to me much later. Despite good words from Louis Simpson and Richard Howard, neither of whom really seemed to've read the book closely though they liked what they thought they saw, Striking the Dark Air for Music got ignored in the shuffle. I still think it may be one of my best books. When I read Rilke's line "You must change your life," it hit me like a mallet, like an irreversible, irretrievable judgment. And rather than stay in my misery, writing loathsome whining confessional poems — which are spiritual checks one has no intention of ever cashing—, I made my confession, did my penance, and changed my life. As best I knew how. It was far from perfect — and far from wrong for me.

Q: Thinking of Roethke's "Lost Son" sequence, in particular, do you think confessional poetry ever transcends the individual concerns and problems of the poet?

ROOT: Yes, in the sense that I'm talking about, because it led to change, real change and growth in Roethke. The poems in his "Lost Son" and my poems in "Reckoning" bear no resemblance technically, but in the deeper sense you're bringing up, there is a resemblance. He wasn't parading around. That was life and death stuff. You can tell when somebody is messing around; you can tell when somebody is reading to a mirror, or when they're reading to their own god, if they have one. Roethke had a god.

Q: And Lowell?

ROOT: Lowell didn't stay a confessional poet. Lowell had icons, but not gods. And that's why he wasn't finally a better poet than he was. He certainly had the genius, but not the faith.

Q: Were Blake or Lorca inspirational for the Song sequence in Striking the Dark Air for Music? Were you thinking of "deep song" and duende?

ROOT: Ever since I ran across Lorca's plays and later his poems,
they've been a deep part of everything I think. In that sense, yes. The poems of reckoning and the songs of that same book were often written alternately. I would write a reckoning and that would give me the freedom to write a song. The songs were songs in the sense of praise, celebration and free energy, energy released. The reckonings were all focused laser energy, dealing with outlining guilt of one kind or another, not just a sense of guilt.

Q: You've translated some of Pablo Neruda's "Odes." Where does translation fit in with your work, in terms of your development and your style? Do you place importance on translation?

ROOT: It's all translation. Gary Snyder says when he translates Japanese ideally what he does is to digest the poem entirely and then re-create it in himself. He writes the re-creation without looking at language, looking rather at the experience the original poem pointed to. I wouldn't pretend that's what I do, nor do I necessarily think that it is the best way, but it's an interesting and extreme position that is illuminating.

When you're writing a poem about your own experience you're translating a whole series of very complex sensations and ideas and cross-associations and so on. You also do that when you're writing a story. And when you take photographs you're translating images from a very complex medium into a very limited medium, black and white for myself, where the shades of gray are very important. In translating Neruda or whoever else it might be, you try to make an equivalent. It's not just a paraphrase, it's an equivalent, and an equivalent isn't an identical reproduction at all. That, I think, is ideal translation.

Q: This also brings to mind Lowell's translations, which he called "imitations."

ROOT: Right. Lowell was fond of artifice. He had no shame about artifice and the function that it had, the valuable function. He had almost a medieval view of artifice. Now we look at "artifice" and "artificial" as bad, but in a classical sense they're not bad at all. They're the tools of a trade.

Q: How have myths and the idea of myth found a place in your poetry and why are they important to you?
ROOT: Did you say mitts or myths? A myth is an insulating vessel you use to keep from being destroyed by contact with a source of great power. That's what myths are — good myths, real myths. Whether they are from Northwest Indians or Kalahari Bushmen, or Australian Aborigines, they are the most fundamental, shaped spiritual energies a human being can come in contact with, short of angels. By the time they reach written-down form, the insulation is rather thick around the volcanic substance, but the magma is still there.

Children's stories, Grimms' stories, Hans Christian Anderson and so on, are frequently adapted from what in earlier periods were teaching tales. The Sufis in particular contributed heavily to stories we get through the French and Danish and German folktales: looking for gold, looking for gems, looking for the perfect wife, stories of a kind that can be interpreted religiously — in the deep, not in the formal sense of religion — as a pursuit of enlightenment, pursuit of a sense of harmony with the universe, earthly paradise. If you are Jungian or Freudian and you're looking at Snow White searching for the perfect prince, you might see that as an attempt to join the anima with the animus in an individual. But when you’ve removed yourself from the center of the action by analyzing it in this method, it’s most helpful if you can then re-enter the muck and mire and dreck of the stuff itself, put the story back together and make the corpse live, get up and walk, dance — and you must dance with it.

Q: Have you ever tried to write your own myth?

ROOT: The source of individual myth is dream, and I've had dreams of a kind that are mythic, in the sense that they apply well beyond my personality. "Fireclock" was one poem in which I tried to deal with one of a pair of dreams, the other of which I've dealt with — in a very brief fashion — in a poem called "Song of Emergency." But not in any adequate fashion. That's something I want to get done, because it was an important dream.

Q: Your poem "Do You Know the Country Around Here" is a persona poem, in the voice of an Indian. How have your experiences with Indians shaped the poem? What persona were you thinking of when you wrote the poem?
ROOT: Myself, hitchhiking through California, being dropped off near Healdsburg and going to an all night cafe. It was two o'clock, the bars had just let out, everybody sitting in there was drunk. The only empty seat was by an Indian who offered to buy me coffee. I didn't need the money for coffee, but he needed to give it so I took it. He talked for hours. Because I was a hitchhiker he viewed me as a kindred spirit of a kind, "a nomad," up to a point. The story in the poem is one of many he told me.

Afterwards, I walked a mile or so up to a turnoff point where I needed to get a ride, sat in the dark and scribbled the basic core of that poem — which I couldn’t read until the next day because there was no light to see by. That had seemed to me the moment in our talk when he had really nailed me to the wall. We’d been friendly up to a point, then he began telling this story as a friend to a friend, but the nature of the story was such that it became accusatory, and something in me responded powerfully.

Q: You're very concerned about ecology and wilderness. Where did this interest come from?

ROOT: It comes from everywhere I’ve been and loved and seen changed. I grew up near the Everglades where my father had farms. I loved nothing more than being out there. I was like a dog you take into the woods. My ears went up, my tail curled, and I knew I was home. It’s mostly gone now, the Everglades I knew. Drained for air fields and oil exploration and land development. My former hometown, a small one then, is officially the fastest growing town in Florida I was appalled to learn last year. The farm where my father had trouble keeping gators out of the irrigation ditches and cougars out of the way of the farm-dogs is now a Junior College. With a parking shortage.

Childhood experiences are probably the strongest, in many ways the most formative, and if the child is fortunate enough to be around wilderness of any kind he will develop a sense of proportion about existence and significance which man is not at the center of. As the earth is not at the center of our galaxy. There are grander things out there, and to know that as a child is to know it always. And I’m grateful for that. If I didn’t have that sense of things, despair would be more attractive than it is.

I went to the farms every Saturday, and to church every Sunday of
my childhood, and where I got my sense of reverence was knee-deep in swamp-water looking at alligators and flamingoes, hearing the owls at night, seeing the way a doe bent her neck to drink from a pond, watching utterly awe-struck as a cottonmouth swam by or a rattlesnake buzzed in the saw-grass, seeing the brown pelicans fly in formation overhead along the Gulf, studying the horizon at the beach before I ever set foot in the water to be sure there were some porpoises out there to fend off the sharks. My sense of creatures wasn't that they were friendly but that they were just, gave fair warning, defended their own, and that there was in a wild creature a magical quality I respected beyond anything else I might imagine. That place, those beings were important to me, and without them what was stirred in me would never have been touched. And I would be a poorer being. Without the external wilderness to stir and order the interior wilderness of the heart, a human being cannot be fully human, fully awakened.

Q: And do people figure in there anywhere for you?

ROOT: Creatures had, for me, a vitality and perfected grace I seldom saw in humans. With some important exceptions. The Seminoles who came to town in their native dress, to shop, quite utterly awed me. And the Cubans and Puerto Ricans who worked on my father's farms, and who spoke little or no English but who carried on physically with such eloquence that I had little trouble understanding what they were about — these people seemed to me, as a boy, infinitely more alive and enviable than did the white adults and kids I knew. Their lives were at once more serious and more joyful. These childhood contacts probably have a lot to do with my interest in native peoples. And working people, too. People whose connection with the basic aspects of life is still strong. Rilke's fascination with caged animals, Levine's interest in the old working class of his Detroit childhood, Roethke's love first of the greenhouse and then of the wilderness, Lorca's love of Gypsies — examples of writers who hunger for such connections are endless.

That's one of the things that first attracted me to Roethke's work. When I was reading through the "Lost Son" poems I got a sense of a man for whom all the elements of Greek drama are reenacting themselves in a vegetal, amphibian universe, and it utterly astounded me that he could draw such refined perceptions from the non-human.
It made me aware of something that I had not been much aware of in myself — that that's how I felt too.

**Q:** Do you have any overall concerns with your poetry?

**ROOT:** I'm very much interested in how people live in the world, and how it feels to live this or that way. In some of my poems I'll give voice to characters I don't like much, but I'll try and give them a fair shake. I'll have no great philosophical justification for doing it but it feels right. I want to allow a chorus rather than limiting it to whatever my voice might be. That's something I've gotten from Lorca and Roethke and Frost. Lowell in "Imitations" is sending his voice out to other voices, and that's one of the things I like about translations. I wouldn't want to translate somebody I didn't like. Can't imagine doing that.

**Q:** What do you think about East Coast dominance of the poetry scene?

**ROOT:** Well, it certainly exists as a condition, and therefore the Western writer has to look to the West for his validation. There is no establishment to offer that validation. When I went back east to North Carolina for graduate school I was very fond of Stafford already and, of course, Roethke. Roethke was known, but Stafford wasn't. At that time — this is '65 — he had just won a National Book Award, and they still hadn't heard of him. Finally, I foisted *Travelling Through The Dark* on one of my professors who said, "This man seems to write poetry as though he had a battle with it," which left me, well, you know. Stafford is clearly one of the fine poets. Dick Hugo, until he went back to Iowa and began accelerating his connections with the East through various means, was too often regarded as an interesting, idiosyncratic voice. Then suddenly in the last years of his life, thank God, he began to get the national recognition that he deserved. That such bowing to the East might be necessary even for Hugo, is sad.

**Q:** Since the success of Hugo and Stafford, is it easier for Western writers to make it in the East? Is the East more open-minded towards Western poetry now?
ROOT: Not necessarily. To give you an example, Marge Piercy read at a college in Virginia just before I went back there several years ago, and complained bitterly about the room she had been given. She was told William Stafford had just read there and it suited him fine. She replied, but "I am a name poet."

Incidentally, I got a letter a couple of days ago which will bring me face to face with the Eastern establishment for the first time in many a year. It was an invitation to go read for the Academy of American poets at the Guggenheim. They are having a Northwest poets thing and John Haines, Tess Gallagher, and Carolyn Kizer, who is still counted as a Northwest poet, and Bill Stafford will be there, too. We'll all be up there spewing pine needles at them.