

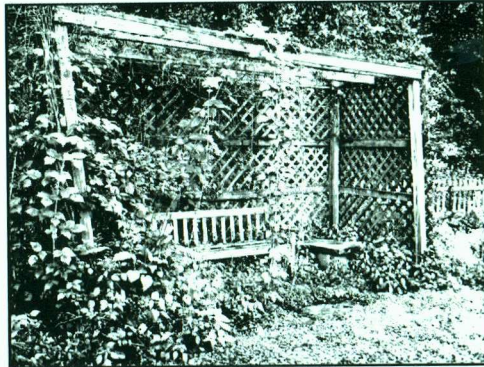
# TALISMAN

a journal of contemporary  
poetry and poetics

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BARBARA HENNING

A Telephone Interview with  
Maureen Owen on *Erosion's Pull*\*

**B:** Maureen, why did you dedicate *Erosion's Pull* to Etta Place?

**M:** Ever since I saw Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, I've been sort of mesmerized by Etta Place. She was a schoolteacher who had this romance with the Sundance Kid and then went off with him and Butch Cassidy when they went down to South America to flee the law. But she wasn't a criminal at all, she was a school teacher. She stayed with them in South America for quite a while and then they started robbing banks and trains again and she just reached the point where she knew they were going to get caught or killed and so then where did she go — she just mysteriously disappeared. She came back and sort of vanished into the crowd. Or maybe she stayed in South America. Who knows. She had a strong relationship with both of them, but she really loved the Sundance Kid. Their robbing, they couldn't stop it. It was like an addiction. They stopped for a while and then they just went back to it. They didn't have anything else to do even though they knew they were going to die. She couldn't go there. And she was so mysterious. What a wild step for a grade school teacher to take, to go off with them. She seemed like someone with a mind of her own. And finally she just thought — they are going to get killed and I don't want to watch and I don't want to get killed.

**B:** Do parts of her story appear throughout your poems?

**M:** No, not at all. She's such a mysterious character to me. . . . The first poem, the Black Beauty poem. That's like a mystery to me as well. There are kind of mysterious things in the book for me — I don't know if it would be that way for someone else. I hadn't even thought about who to dedicate it to and I was sitting there with the manuscript and I thought she's always on my mind sort of and I thought, she's the most mysterious person I can think of. . . .

**B:** You begin with a passage about erosion.

**M:** I was reading *Scientific American* and it talked about how mountains are formed and the idea that the thing that keeps mountains from growing is gravity and so as mountains erode they actually become lighter and that lightness allows the magma to come up out of the earth into the mountains and so I thought of what an interesting parallel with human beings. As we live, life kind of erodes us away with various disappointments and happiness and whatever, but we become kind of

lighter and lighter. And we become more spiritual and so the erosion process is actually shaping or allowing lightness or allowing us to become more spiritual. Also, erosion as a concept — I grew up in farming country in Minnesota. I've always been fascinated by erosion which is a little mysterious to me, too. About an inch of topsoil erodes off the land every year. An amazing process. And then I love the idea that we could be becoming more spiritual as life wears us away.

**B:** Here you have titles with several lines and bolded text and sometimes the title is half of the poem. This playfulness with titles has been going on for some time in your work.

**M:** A lot of earlier poems I didn't title. Titles seemed problematic to me. I often found that someone would title a poem and the title would sort of too much define the poem so you'd read the poem and the poem was an afterthought. You already knew too much. And then I thought you know other times, titles sometimes just ruin the poem. You can't go where you want with the poem. The title is like a lasso around that freedom. My titles are very organic in terms of the very process of the poem. They first appear just as lines or images that aren't really elemental in the poem, but that could relate to the poem or they could be the title.

**B:** I think something very existential is being highlighted in a refracted way in most of your poems and that same thing will be there in the title.

**M:** Existential ... yes, that's a good way to put it — Existential to the poem .... That's how these titles are. Yes, and I like the idea of having two or three or more titles. I kind of love the word "or." I think this evolution of title development occurred in a natural way. I had two or three lines and I thought there's a title for the poem but there are three of them and I thought well I can use them all. The bolding. Actually that's a problem I have with publishing. I wouldn't bold. That was the only solution editors and publishers and I could come up with. So I don't have a problem with it at all, but in my own writing nothing is bolded, and I like the way the titles in regular font are light above the work. It's a dilemma — And I think this was the best solution. The other thing is sometimes the title line is set in lower case and sometimes with a cap, but then in zines and books the editors have the idea of uniformity of title font and size etc. and are continuously setting the titles all the same. Well then let's not make it a title, I'd say. Well then there won't be a title, they'd say. Even the spacing can't resolve it. I've gone through torturous nightmares over this.

**B:** How did the spacing on the page evolve?

**M:** One, I wanted to approximate a speaking voice and I wanted in that speaking voice a kind of absolute silence to take place where I left a long space between the words and so there is that. And the second thing was that things are very visual for me. The spacing is a visual component of the page. A word hung out in pure space is so gorgeous to me. I want to create that pause, that silence between words, to create space in the language on the page. It is as much for the eye as for the ear. In

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some poems I want an absolute silence to fall where I have left a long space between words, and I want the reader to lose themselves for a time in that space, in the black precise shape of the letters, in the texture and form of the word. And I like when I leave a lot of space. For me, it's like when a stone hits bamboo and that resonating sound. That is kind of where the music in the line is to me and that's where the lyric starts to unfold for me. I started out painting when I was younger and later I went totally into writing poetry and so the look of the poem on the page, the placement of the words and the spacing is all of major importance to me. My poem on the page is, for me, a painting.

**B:** *Were you influenced by Charles Olson when you first started spreading words on the page like this?*

**M:** No not at all. It's weird I didn't really have a lot of modern influences when I first started writing this way. I kind of developed it myself. I haven't even read that much Olson then or now, I'm ashamed to say. But I think for me it was those two things. I wanted the poem to look on the page the way it would sound when I read it. I began as a painter and I feel that's where I'm still at — painting with words.

**B:** *Collage is important to you too.*

**M:** To me in my life — in this world today there is so much input coming at you that it seems like your whole consciousness becomes a collage of everything that is happening around you — news, mail, junk mail, your family, movie star gossip, horrible war. Tons of information coming in, so it seems like it becomes your whole consciousness, and a way to deal with it is to construct a huge collage with all that information kind of interacting with itself, kind of coming together with all the bits and snippets and fragments becoming something within themselves. It is very interesting to me the relationships that can occur even though they seem really separate from each other and really different. In my work, I've always let them flow into each other like little tributaries into one river, coming in from the sides. And the main core of the poem is the focus but all this stuff is coming in and can totally change it as well. So it is kind of fracturing in a way. It is what makes it interesting to me because it is unpredictable what kind of effect this is going to have on you or the poem. All those fragments, kind of like broken pottery. It is fascinating. If you take this little bit and put it with something else, it becomes something different. . . . We almost can't help to work that way. You can't just write a poem about one subject anymore. You can't even think that way anymore. There is just too much information. And we are all mentally multi-tasking constantly. And it has become boring to us to focus on one subject.

**B:** *It becomes like that I think because we become accustomed to so much coming in. That's why I like to periodically go out and live in the wilderness. Escape from it. The task becomes when you live like this and you're an artist, how do you take all this in and create art*

**M:** How do you stay true to your work and the truth you see in your life? If you try to write a poem in the more traditional way on one subject, you're really not being truthful. You're not reflecting the true reality of what is going on right now. And I've always loved collage. When I was younger and making art, I made a lot of collages. I like the surprise of what happens when you put different images together .

**B:** *And how it changes your thought process too.*

**M:** It can create a totally different way of proceeding.

**B:** *Earlier you mentioned that there was something mysterious about the poem:*

### *Whenever I snow*

*I think of Black*

*Beauty*

*when he was*

*pulling a cab*

*standing*

*streetside*

*under a lamppost*

*his dark harness gathering flakes*

*a jet horse becoming white powder*

*a dark horse*

*disappearing*

**M:** Maybe because I come out of such a visual perception of things — it's a funny thing to say because I'm working in words obviously, but at the same there are certain poems that I write that seem wordless to me. There is so much going on in the image, and I don't even consciously think about what it all means. I just write it down and then I can go back and can look at it and contemplate. And this poem is kind of like that. I can look at it now and it has so many different layers in terms of what it is about.

**B:** *Well it seems like a simple image, but then you have this word "disappear," "white powder" and "whenever I snow."*

**M:** It can go from being this simple image of an illustration I remember from my childhood book on Black Beauty that just stuck in my head forever — I can't even tell you what other illustrations were in the book really. So it was an important one to me. I can hardly put it into words because it's like I'm kind of overwhelmed by that image. It's like here's this beautiful animal with incredible possibilities and he's pulling a cab and it's night and the streetlights are coming on and it is snowing

and he's just standing there in the snow and the snow is covering him and he's gone in a way. It's not exactly sad, but it's more like he's flown away. He's disappeared from that path, that job of pulling the cab. . . . It is almost like magic to me. There are certain things you can do in poetry that are truly magic, and I don't mean that in terms of an illusion. It is just like you can do something magical, like a magical act. To me in this poem I've succeeded in doing this. You can't devise this method of magic it just has to happen.

**B:** *An insight, but an intuitive insight that comes to the surface. Do you think that the reason this image was so important to you had to do with your family? You were raising horses right?*

**M:** Yes I really loved horses. I'm sure that is one reason, but I don't know why that particular image. It just seemed like here was this gorgeous animal in the wrong place at the wrong time. But more than that, it was the visual thing of the snow gradually covering everything until it disappears or is transformed.

**B:** *In Goodbye to the Twentieth Century/or/Adios, Busy Signal, you take us into the sounds and material of our high tech world as they intrude into the everyday immediate. It's easy to think of technology as less spiritual. What I like about this poem is the personal address to the century and the interplay between the ordinary every day objects (plates, silverware, pots and pans) and these big ideas — "looming disaster," "lost opportunities," "traditionally." The poem is so light and airy and at the same time Marilyn Monroe is home alone, a suicide in the dark with a busy signal on the telephone.*

**M:** Andrei Codrescu edited an anthology and I wrote that poem for the anthology, *Goodbye to the Twentieth Century*. There are certain obvious things, all the household things and the technology and moving on. The busy signal is a thing of the past. And then in the third stanza talking about the change from the past way of living to the future way we live with high technology. The difference between that and the party line telephone where everyone listened in and knew what everyone else was doing.

(laughter)

**M:** There is a charm to all that, but all that is gone and we are thrust forward into this new technology. There is a certain dehumanizing thing that happens where it isn't people friendly, where as before you would get a busy signal if someone was on the phone. Now you get their voice mail. . . . I was always intrigued by Marilyn Monroe's death. A great emphasis was placed on the buzz that it was Saturday night and Marilyn Monroe wasn't out on the town. That concern was so bizarre to me. Then the whole image of a telephone there and that she was dead. With the busy signal there is a real sound, a real rhythm, a real connection to something, or to nothing, or to sound itself, or to that information that the person you're calling is on the line, home talking to someone else, but it's not that emptiness you get

after you leave a voice mail message. I just think there was something tenderly human and beautiful about that relationship with that sound.

**B:** *I loved the way you paired this tiny poem next to it. Here you are talking about Marilyn Monroe and the century and you are speaking O century, and the next one is more personal. "I fell in love / I did it myself / there are some things you shouldn't do alone."*

**M:** It kind of goes with the tragedy of Marilyn Monroe.

**B:** *Do you have anything you want to say about "her hat blew off/it happened a long time ago when you were small." Such a beautiful poem about loss and daily life, and the imprint left.*

**M:** The title is referring to an old photo of my aunt standing in Minnesota on a hilltop and her hat is blowing off and she's holding on to it. And I'm sort of addressing myself — It happened a long time ago when you were small, because I would have been about five years old at that time. Those two lines have that kind of magical thing that I feel, that I can't really explain. . . . The image is so strong. Her hat blew off. And then once upon a time. It happened a long time ago when you were small, as if it is the beginning of some strange narrative. So again, it is very collagery to me, putting those together, and it has a very magical quality for me.

**B:** *One of the poems I really like is "Now even the jungle wanted him dead or/she closed the door behind her."*

**M:** I think of it as a bitter little poem in some ways, but it resolves itself and even in the beginning "Now even the jungle wanted him dead."

**B:** *Or she closed the door behind her*

**M:** Somebody's had enough and is leaving

**B:** *When I look back at what I initially wrote in the margin after first reading the poem, I noted that it seemed like there was some anger in it but when I reread it yesterday I didn't experience that and instead I got this sense of an observer standing behind the words and watching a kind of ruination and violence that takes place but there is this distance.*

**M:** I think that's true. . . . I don't think of it as anger but a moving on . . . but I think you are absolutely right and then finally it takes off in a kind of kaleidoscopic way and even in the beginning, "Cuphea Platycentra/ Cigar Flower," a kind of quiet beginning, a little sarcastic but not terribly, a little distance, not a rage-ing at all.

**B:** *And then she just drove and drove. I know that feeling. Let's get out of here. . . . ok And then there is one of my favorite poems in the collection, "Now this vague melancholy adores me." This adoration reminds me of Julia Kristeva's description of melancholia in her book, Black Sun, as a lover, and one is in love with darkness and the darkness is in love with the writer. I have this sense that you are addressing melancholia, all of our loss, as well as some particular lost lover. It all collapses together, and the process of loss begins with one small act.*

**M:** A really interesting poem for me. Again I think in my life at least, it's a poem where I realized I was going in the wrong direction and also when I was working on it I was reading Laura Riding and I was really interested in the kind of abstraction that she played with and experiments so there is a little bit of that in the beginning. I just write . . . I don't make the poem do anything . . . I just kind of wrote it and so it was interesting to me that I felt that I was going in the wrong direction with the writing . . . thinking I should stop this and then there appears the reason you are going in the wrong direction, because of a word. . . so beautiful "Nebraska."

**B:**

*For we are two of repelling cogs  
set in their motion fast by some diligent  
terrain rising flat as the prairie  
as a word I fell in love with you then  
with a word can such a thing be done  
because of a word you said Nebraska  
& all the chairs drew back their doors  
& all the floors burst into flame  
& in the night a single fire swept  
swept through it all & I woke kneeling on  
charred ground & it was as the saint*

*proclaimed*

**B:** *That is so beautiful, Maureen.*

**M:** Thank you I get chills just hearing you read it

**B:** *It's like Nebraska and this is what I'm thinking and I may be bringing my life into this reading, but it's like you are with someone and you're going to be with him for the rest of your life and then with our age and the way we have lived, that isn't how it usually worked. But you are together there at that time and some little thing happens, some word, and boom it all falls apart. And the whole world changes.*

**M:** It just kind of explodes. To me the end of it is very spiritual. It explodes into a kind of holiness. Again it's like exploding out of the physical into the spiritual. And for me in the end I was going back to Minnesota and Nebraska, that whole flat terrain is there for me. I really believe strongly that your original geography is always with you in a very powerful way.

**B:** *Sometimes I miss sitting on the grass in Michigan at dusk with the sound of the crickets.*

**M:** Those are sacred imprints and when something sets them off you are like wow blown out of reality into an amazing space and everything's gone and you're on charred ground.

**B:** *In the poem "They can't handle the day shift" I like the beginning where she goes on: "I could just spit/I could get a falling down substance abused/I could burn myself with a cigarette" and so forth and so on.*

**M:** Total abuse there for a while. I like the lines, "but you could look all day &/not find a weasel in the desert."

(laughter)

**B:** *When you are young, you might find yourself doing things, living a life that isn't really your life.*

**M:** And hopefully you have a realization eventually. Sometimes it's hard to see.

**B:** *"she had been living in someone else's house/ on someone else's avenue/in someone else' relationship/ for someone else's dream/& now/ she was leaving"*

**M:** First it is almost like if you are in a bad relationship, you become abusive to yourself, but then you can work your way out of that until you are finally free. I think that both physically and metaphysically it can happen and does happen to people a lot when they are in a situation where they wouldn't be living like that if they weren't living with that other person. They'd be like a different person. Your individualness getting absorbed into some situation or some other relationship, living in a particular way, particular geography or house and it is not a fit for you. It's something you would not be doing. . . . Because everyone all the time gets caught up in something, this is really just a metaphor for getting caught up in anything in life that takes you away from your true purpose and what you want to be thinking about.

**B:** *Your dharma*

**M:** The whole Buddhist way of being. It's like the lure of the magical robes. You just go off on something and you could use/lose your whole life, captured in that. And then suddenly you get away from everything and go somewhere alone and realize, what have I been doing. I think it is a spiritual awakening.

**B:** *Yes it's good to have as many of those as possible, even with the mundane. On the next page, "I'm not alone /when I'm on the phone"*

**M:** Yes, the juxtaposition of those two. . . . It's almost enlightening, it's so true. . . . Another poem I love is "in the winter/we have sleeves /but in the summer/we have arms." I love the title and I like the poem because it is about real things, a real person, a kind of existential way of describing him. I sort of like the way the lines turn in on themselves. "Sometimes we wait for a train or /disembark at the same station folding/ watching the trees languid dense rolling upward then backing over themselves" I love the movement and I loved writing about Vanessa Bell.

**B:** *This is one of six in the Cornell sequence.*

**M:** I admire Cornell's work so much and I wanted to write a series of poems looking at his work, particularly his boxes. I was meditating on them and then writing. But the poem is that collage . . . "reading *Story Without a Name* — for Max Ernst." That's the Cornell part but really all the rest of the poem has nothing to do with looking at that.

**B:** *Except it is full of little things.*

**M:** Yes. It's that same kind of visual take. So each one of the Cornell pieces are different. "A group of girls from Minnesota/ or black mascara" . . .

**B:** *I think this poem is like daydreaming with the rational voice emerging within, very surreal with these little things put next to each other.*

**M:** That's the Cornell magic and I don't even have a reference to a particular Cornell work here. I think there might be in one of his boxes, not a turtle holding up the world, but something that made me think of that, like a world and someone standing on it, some image inspired that response. "Hotel Ozean" for Patricia Spears Jones has more of his work. I added some titles. A whole section "framing a gilt (yellow likegold)" is almost a description of one of his boxes down to "most people/ are afraid to say extravagant things definitively" That's my response to this work. Then "Key West" and I just went off on a tangent.

**B:** *What about "darkness sprang the swans from the shellacked pond"? What was the context for this poem?*

**M:** I was standing by a small pond in Connecticut and there were swans on the pond and it was twilight and they flew off and just the twilight on the top of the water was like shellac and they just sort of sprang out of the darkness, almost as if the darkness itself propelled them out of the pond. Anyways it was such a strong image to me and then there was a kind of mist or fog and I wanted to convey that and that's the "or/bleu/cerulean/a kind of plum blue gum/veins through skin/steel at twilight thin milk/vapor over a soggy ground" And then the poem just kind of had a change of color and I was thinking about Matisse's *Goldfish and Sculpture*, that little painting and then it just went in a different direction from there.

**B:** *"a man follows a woman with a jar on her head"*

**M:** A sand painting too, I was thinking of Morocco or Mexico or some exotic place.

**B:** *Then you have the outlaw and the broken asphalt and the flowers are a pool of blue water, "under my skin, you've gotten under my skin." This "you" appears there at the end.*

**M:** A lot of collagy changes. More metaphysical like that . . . all the images, everything has gotten under my skin. It's all there. And that "you" person too.

**B:** *Another poem I was thinking about was "A Wounded Day" My response was "How far can you go with your mother's advice?"*

(Laughter)

**M:** That's a very Minnesota poem. I was thinking about Minnesota and my mother

and relatives and my childhood and such. We left Minnesota and went to California and we were uprooted and then to start someplace where you are figuring it out and like she didn't really have a plan. Something that was very strong in my childhood was that my mother's family lived on a farm in Minnesota and it was very stable. You knew where you were and it had that certain stability, but my life with my Mom and my step dad who worked with the horses on the racetrack was very unstable. We were constantly up in the air. We never knew in the morning where we'd be sleeping that night. That kind of thing. So it seemed without a plan, without any structure and so that's where that came from. A lot of people I knew when I was nineteen and twenty were kind of rebelling against the suburban protection their parents had created for them. For me, I was trying to get some stability in my life that I'd never had. Just to know when I got up in the morning where I was going to be at night. It was a real gypsy kind of existence. Looking back on your childhood in that way and well you can't go back to it because you grow old, you grow up and you can no longer talk to her about that. . . a lost moment. There would have been no way to stop it in the first place because you didn't have the experience to know what was really going on. So this poem goes back to the childhood thing and like Dylan, that's what I used to do, "Watch the sun come rising/from that little Minnesota town." Such a Minnesota moment, the sky three quarters of the world. In Minnesota the farming country where I come from, it is so flat that you can literally see six miles in any direction. It's amazing.

**B:** *What about this poem for Hannah Weiner, "Secrets of the Cover Girl."*

**M:** Whenever I'd go to the Ear Inn, Hannah Weiner would come behind me and tap me on the shoulder. I really liked her a lot. I enjoyed talking to her and hanging out with her. So it is really about that kind of sadness that came with her death but it is also about possibilities and impossibilities. "I can swim but I can't fly," kind of a lot of color and then nature just living and dying. . . people die — and her vision of cut out letters and this.

**B:** *The gorgeous hypnotic world of images and action, and then we fall away and sometimes a realization — I'll never see Hannah Weiner at the Ear Inn again.*

**M:** An amazing sad realization, sad in a sense, but unstoppable, everything passes. And then you go forward from there.

**B:** *In the next poem, you begin with a quote from Edith Weisskopf-Joelson, "that the burden of unavoidable unhappiness is increased by unhappiness about being unhappy." I wrote in the margin "Aint that the truth."*

(Laughter)

**M:** That quote seemed to fit perfectly for poor Dora Maar. What a brutal life with Picasso. I enjoyed writing this poem because I rarely have such a purpose. Usually I'm working with collage, following where the poem takes me, but in this poem I really wanted to talk about their lives. I loved making the domestic scene — "the

lawnmower flies through the violets scattering chipped buttercups/into enameled air" Then what would happen if she just left and didn't come back. Would he finish the painting?

**B:** "Who really needs this guy?"

**M:** If only she could have just walked out.

**B:** What about "the Leaving song or where would we be if we/weren't where we are" — How hard it is to leave when you have to —

**M:** Kind of uplifting for me, this one, especially the section "If she had sent the tulips if she had not worn the shirt if she had ordered the wood/fixd the stovepipe graduated from college changed/the tires on her jeep used the ice cream maker" . . . all these things you look at and think well I could have done or not done all these things and maybe things would have gone better but then realize these are ridiculous things to be concerned about not doing.

**B:** The accumulation of possibilities sounds humorous, but at the same time I can hear all the complaints that we have about each other when we are together.

**M:** And they mean nothing.

**B:** When you get closer to your life and death and you look back, you wonder, wow what were we doing?

**M:** Exactly what was all that about?

**B:** At the end where you are talking about how Chagall realizes that he must leave and he asks Varian Fry whether there are cows in America —

**M:** When I was writing this I was in Washington and I went to the Holocaust Museum. It was so moving. The most moving part of it was one little sitting room where they had all the things about Varian Fry who did so much to help people escape. Letters and things, An amazing amount of energy and bravery and quite incredible. That ending stanza . . . It's so hard to leave a situation sometimes, or a country or a home, no matter how bad it is because you love it, it's familiar, and that's something I was reading — all kinds of testimonies — and that was something so hard for people, even though their lives were in complete danger and they would be killed and still the whole idea of uprooting and leaving their country was very hard to do. And I thought Chagall's question was so Chagall and so perfect. Are there cows in America? He would really miss the cows because his paintings have so many cows in them. And that would be a big deal.

**B:** And the whole thing can happen at a more individual level with someone who needs to leave a relationship.

**M:** A lot of the earlier part of the poem deals with that.

**B:** I love the beginning of the poem "Suddenly I realized I'd forgotten that birds have hearts/yes little tiny hearts/in their little feathered chests."

**M:** Somehow you never think about it. A bird is so small to begin with, and we don't usually think of them as having intestines and all.

**B:** Complete little beings.

**M:** You know what poem I really like a lot — it's "flaxstraw broom on a long handle." This was a tough one working with the title "a woman stands waist deep in water a woman stands/in waste deep water She is sweeping/the bottom of the lake" This was part of the title but not quite, so I didn't bold it.

**B:** In the margins, I wrote, "the phrases lift off the page like little lights."

**M:** That's such a scene from Japan, the woman standing waist deep in water.

**B:** It reminds me of Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife." She's not really waist deep in water but she could be. She could be sweeping leaves as she waits for him to come back, but we know he's not coming back.

**M:** In Japan they do things like that, sweep the bottom of the lake. It such an interesting culture in terms of incredible respect for nature in a way, sacredness of nature and at the same time controlling it, keeping it orderly. It has always been such a contradiction to me. And I like the swine in this one. The whole idea that real pearls are imitation "Casting Imitation Pearls before swine!/but to the swine they appear to be/Valueless just like real pearls."

**B:** When did you go to Japan?

**M:** I went to Japan in the mid-sixties. I lived there for three years, traveling around. I was interested in Zen. I was with Lauren Owen. We traveled around to various temples and would talk to the Roshi of the temples we stopped at and so we lived in Japan. And my two oldest sons were born during that time. I was always really intrigued by Japan because of Zen and Japanese prints and art and that visual aspect as well as the spiritual. Actually we stayed as long as we could because we had gone on a two month visa and finally the Japanese Consulate just said — you cannot renew this visa another time. So we were living in Tokushima, this port city on Shikoku Island and we had to go back to Tokyo because we had no money to return home to the U.S. So we taught in this school for Japanese business people, run by this fellow who was Korean. He was desperate to find people to teach English. At that time most of the people teaching in his school could barely speak English. There was this one German fellow who I once said to — "How can you possibly put yourself forward as an English teacher? You can barely speak English." And he said to me, "The best way to learn a language is to teach it." (Laughter) But we actually did speak English, and could teach it, so we stayed teaching in Tokyo for six months to get money to come back to America.

**B:** Pretty wonderful to be able to spend three years there.

**M:** One of the amazing things about Japan is the incredible sense of nature, but there is this control, this upkeep of nature that is going on. They are sort of rearranging nature all the time to make it more beautiful than it is. Raking the fall leaves perfectly or not raking them. At the same time there is this tremendous appreciation for the beauty of nature. But you won't find that sense say of a wild English garden.

**B:** The art of table setting, room arranging, flower arranging. Everything becomes

*spiritual, the zen way of life.*

**M:** *Exactly, it spills over into everything. All is very symbolic and very mindful.*

**B:** *Is there another poem you'd like to talk about?*

**M:** I confess to being totally in love with my poems. I read them aloud to myself a lot. I am drawn to this one on page 29, "Nox," because I love doing description, I like to put into words an image so strong that it is like a painting. In this one I worked hard for that because I was looking out in Connecticut in the winter and there was quite a bit of snow on the ground and it was night and we were out in the country on a little road. There was one street light and otherwise it was pitch dark and so there was that one street light on the snow and so many trees and the shadows of the trunks of trees on the snow. I worked and worked to catch that and finally I felt I had a little bit of it here. "Wide black absences of snow where the trees blocked the light" and the tall shadows and the trunks, but I wanted the feeling of the snow, light and fluffy, and I love Sargent's work, "two girls in white dresses" is one my favorite. I got the idea that the snow is arriving in linen and gossamer, and I felt like I'd finally gotten it down on paper how that whole image was embodied to me or appeared visually to me, strong light and trees, and shadows and yet the snow being so fluffy and bouncy.

**B:** *It seemed to me as I read it that I was entering into a painting and then suddenly I'm taken out of the painting and a light emerges.*

**M:** It ends up being about my uncle in Minnesota who had died.

**B:** *Your uncle — "he wanted to stay home . . . he wanted to be a girl in a corporate garden cafe soup kitchen waterfall.."*

**M:** The reference to my Uncle Bud is both metaphysical and allegorical. The end of his life remains open and questioning for me — perhaps closure around it is impossible. He was a very important figure to me, my mother's brother, the one who took over the family farm in Minnesota. He was a farmer and my middle brother and I used to often go back and spend summers there when we were really young. And my Aunt and my grandmother were still alive, too, and they all lived there. He was just a really Zen-like person in a way and sort of someone who was kind of quietly there if you ever need him. I didn't really have a father figure so he was probably like the closest thing to a father figure for me, but he wasn't really because there was no authoritarian thing going on that you might have with your father. But I think probably he would be in that sense someone I might be able to rely on if I got in trouble. I could go there. And the farm for both my brother and me — my family was living this very gypsy life and so we could go there in the summer and there was this amazing stable environment and my aunt and my grandmother cooked these amazing meals. It was a working farm with animals and machinery and crops being harvested so it was really like mid-America stable salt of the earth type of existence. That was really important to me to know that that

stability existed somewhere even if I was only in it for a month and a half out of the year.

**B:** *There is this poem, #6, I think, that I put on line for my fiction students — they're writing tiny little stories. So I typed your poem for the class and they loved it, a poem and a story in a few lines.*

**M:** #6. I thought I could write a hundred poems and give them all a number, but I didn't want to start with number one, something more creative. I think I wrote three, #6, #22, 26.

**B:** *There's a #5*

**M:** Oh, yes. That's how the title came about. #6 is just a true moment in time. I love Ingmar Bergman's films. It was snowing and I had some cross country skis. I went out into the soccer field alongside the woods. I had this neighbor, a strange stoic New Englander. This was just absolute verbatim, true. It was such a moment because of the color, snowing, so Ingmar Bergman black and white, and he was so coming from some Nordic world. Tall serious guy

**B:** *You say, "I'm just learning" and he says, "We all are."*

**M:** He just said it in a very flat way (laughter) just totally out of an Ingmar Bergman film. I stood there staring into the snow falling, thinking oh my god did that just happen?

**B:** *The next poem in the book, "Plaudit / or she found her self mesmerized by the hand gestures of the mourners" I love the first line after the title "I did not the ultimate concern of ever myself though" I love the way the syntax is broken up so the words become objects on the page.*

**M:** I liked that, too. I liked being able to use Ave Maria. I grew up Catholic. I think the greatest thing about Catholicism for me growing up was the rich visual and auditory things, the incense, all those physical things about the church. I was in the choir in grade school, the singing. I have all of that in my head. That's why "Our lady of Guadalupe" comes up in my poems. I much like the second title in this one: "she found herself mesmerized by the hand gestures of the mourners." It's so beautiful, I don't know how that came to me.

**B:** *When you think about this book, apart from your others, do you have last thoughts?*

**M:** I think the book really does come together for me around that whole perception of the erosion and spiritual growth as you become lighter, a sense of the pole of erosion. Where I am in my life and in my work, just my whole relationship with language is in that place right now. And I feel like I probably won't ever write a book like this again. Everyone probably feels like that when they finish a book, but I think I won't. I think I'm going in a different direction now. So it is very important to me in that these poems complete a certain period in my life, a certain way of working and thinking.