

INTERVIEW/DISCUSSION WITH BOBBIE LOUISE HAWKINS
BY BARBARA HENNING

When I was at Naropa for the Summer Program in June 2011, Bobbie came to my prose chat and we planned to get together later in the week. Meanwhile, in the poetics library, I picked up a copy of her novel, *One Small Saga*, and read it that same night. It is beautifully written prose with poetic disjunction and rhythm, the story of a young artist on a journey to Belize with her new husband. I wanted to interview Bobbie about the book; unfortunately she was ill and I wasn't able to see her that week. So we conducted our interview over the telephone. One phone call can lead to another, one book to another. While interviewing Bobbie and transcribing, it sometimes seemed as if I were orchestrating a series of new narratives. Walter Benjamin writes, "Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories." Within this interview there are many new noteworthy Bobbie Louise Hawkins stories.

Barbara Henning
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Barbara: In your book, *One Small Saga*, the narrator, Jessie, seems to be in a fix. She doesn't have enough money to continue art school and then Axel asks her to marry him.

Bobbie: I didn't have the money to go to college, and not having the money was the truth of the time, but that wasn't why I went with him. I went with him because it was an adventure. There I am, living with my parents in a two bedroom little house in Albuquerque, and here is this Danish architect from Africa and England, saying that he'd like to marry me and take me out of the country. With Olaf, I felt that I was in a place I already knew. I felt less exiled in that circumstance than I did living in a bedroom in my mother's house. When I got on the ship with Olaf and we set off to Europe, it was like now I was in my life.

Barbara: When I read the book, I wasn't thinking about it being you. I thought she was a character in a novel, perhaps autobiographical, but fiction, too.

Bobbie: Robert Duncan once said there is no such thing as fiction. And that makes more sense than almost anything. And when at one point I started looking back through my stories, I thought, I have almost never written a fictional line in my life. Your mind gets on something and you just meander along with it. I don't think that's fiction. It's all autobiography.

Barbara: Wasn't that what Duncan was talking about in his essay, "The Truth and Life of Myth," experience and imagination are one. And once you start telling any story, you jump into some fictional realm.

Bobbie: And you give yourself the allowance to elaborate. The other thing Robert Duncan was very involved in was "persona" so that he would have a poem and he would in effect have the "persona" from which the poem occurred. You look back at different

things really bright people have said, and you register how little of it has been followed through on by other writers. But I did lend some of my students this notion of persona as a place to stand and write from. The thing about teaching is that people are going to have to end up doing all of it, just like you did, but they will never get their hands on all of it, like you never did. And what you do—if you're going to stay with any kind of energy at all or any kind of validity—you go with whatever sparks in that moment. And it might be that that moment's spark is the only time that it ever occurs in your life. Just that quick little uptake and then you go past it.

Barbara: Bobbie, when did you write *One Small Saga*? Did you write it while you were experiencing it?

Bobbie: I don't even remember because an awful lot of my writing is cardboard box writing. I'll choose a bit and I'll do a bit and it's like early on you think you've got these options particularly if you have travelled much. You think, yes, I'll write my London novel. I'll write my British Honduras novel, you know. You start writing about those places and you use up the good material and then you register that if you mean to write a whole novel, this material is going to be like seasoning sprinkled through it and now you are stuck with the tedious part—

Barbara: Putting it together. You wrote it in small pieces?

Bobbie: Yes. And then the whole middle. I'd think some more about it. Little tiny lines would come across, some better than others, than some not. So at some point when Alan Kornblum was being Toothpaste Press, he asked me if I had a book because he wanted to put my name into a grant proposal he was writing. As I tell my students, anytime someone asks you if you are working on a book, the only answer is, yes. And then you go find a book. And I said yes, and then I started pulling this stuff out and putting the stuff that went together in chunks and having a look at it and then sort of lining them up to see where I could fill in. Something happened that I never—I still don't get it—something happened in the shaping of *One Small Saga*. I don't have it to look at. Did I start all the lines from the margin?

Barbara: Yes, even when you wrote a long paragraph, it was more like a line. So it is written like a poem. Let me read the beginning section to you. Each short section is like a stanza.

In late November on a warm afternoon with no breeze in it a man and a woman sat high up a gravelly slope overlooking the thin thread of water still called the Rio Grande.

We had shed our sweaters into a small pile on either side, his and hers.

There's that intimacy in even the slightest stripping. Oh do let me help you with your wraps, my dear, and why not forever while we're about it.

He had just proposed marriage again.

I was quiet but not as if I gave it serious consideration.

It would serve him right if I said yes.

What to consider as if the house were burning.
I looked sideways at this eligible suitor. Pale hair slightly curling. Pale eyes. An immediately intimate smile. An insistently cheerful disposition. Tenacity.
I wondered at it.
I seemed to myself such an unlikely candidate for so Jane Austen an advantage.
(1)

And so the book begins. It's interesting the way you segue from one point of view to another. Easier to do with lines, I think. Right off, we read differently, expecting an unusual style and form, a prose narrative in lines with gaps.

Bobbie: I don't know why that book required that, but it is like that. I kept working on it and working on it and finally that was the format that somehow felt comfortable. And I thought when I was doing it, this works really great. I'm going to do this forever and then as soon as I had finished it, I lost all interest in using that form. I think an awful lot of the blockage you experience when you are writing something has to do with you not yet getting the message from the piece itself, that it has a shape it wants. And when that message gets through, suddenly everything becomes very much simpler.

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Bobbie: I've been looking over your notes.

Barbara: Did you find anything you want to talk about?

Bobbie: The sense of myself being out of place. My dear, I didn't at all feel out of place. If I wanted to be some place I usually felt I had the right to be there.

Barbara: Remember in the novel, when Jesse meets Axel's sister, she feels utterly in a different world.

Bobbie: Axel's sister was a different kettle of fish. Axel's sisters, both of them, were ghastly women who weren't very much liked by their parents. They were both bossy and problematic. Birte felt that I didn't appreciate the upswing in my social position. Olaf's father was a personal friend of the King of Denmark who would drop in for tea. After the Nazis moved into Denmark during the war, Olaf's father was one of the first persons to be put in jail as a potential problem maker. He was a very gentle and nice man and real status in Denmark as a serious person, and those things about him were just great.

We were on this boat, the Gripsholm, going to Europe and because we bought the cheapest tickets, at mealtimes you had a table that was your table with those persons who sat there and here was this one man who was English, something like a taxi driver or something, but he was Scandinavian. All of these people were going to Scandinavia as the first Christmas boat that year. This guy was that kind of English cockney thing. He was charming and he was witty and funny and there is Birta sitting there like a great

lump. And she really felt obliged to tell me that in Denmark, of course, we would never be associated with a person of his social standing. She was an awful snob.

And the other thing was that Olaf was adopted. Olaf was the son of his mother's first marriage. His mother was an opera singer in Norway, and she had this first marriage and when that marriage ended, she met Mr. Hoeck and they married and he adopted Olaf.

When Olaf and I arrived in Sweden, the night before we were due to arrive in Copenhagen, a lot of Danish newsmen came aboard. They wanted to play up this romance between Olaf and me. So they were talking to us and taking pictures and we were on the front page of two or three newspapers the next day. They were giving Olaf all of this attention and Birte was furious. She was the real daughter and he was only . . . Every time that woman had room to be bad-hearted, she did it. And she did it all for the sense of her superiority. Well you have seen people like that.

Barbara: Yes, definitely.

Bobbie: I got on beautifully with the mother and father. They really liked me. They gave us a large dinner party at their home and everyone was decorating the tree. I grew up an only child. My mother had me when she was seventeen. She would be working as a waitress and that meant she worked these different odd hours. I'd be getting up in the morning and making my breakfast, like cereal or something, dressing myself and going off to school, being at school and coming back and being by myself. As an only child, I really put in a lot of time without anybody else around except for books, and I really believed that the world I read in books existed out there and that there were people who spoke to each other in this ongoing and rational fashion. And that was where I wanted to be.

Barbara: Before you met Olaf, you were an actor, weren't you?

Bobbie: When I was about sixteen I got into a repertory company in Albuquerque that was intending to make radio soap operas. I was on a city bus in Albuquerque going east on Central and I saw this building with "Art Center" written across the front in neon. Because I thought of myself as possibly being some sort of artist, I got off the bus and went across the street to see what was going on. I found myself in this building with sound proofing on the walls, with all kinds of microphones, and two major studios, each studio with an engineering room. It was a professional set up. I was shown around, and I asked if I could audition, they said yes. That was a break. I got a lot of training in that situation, and they liked what I did. I was the youngest member of the group, I was sixteen, and there was a lot there for me to learn. I was skipping a lot of school and anytime I could get away, I would go straight there and work on phonetics, for example, which helped me get rid of a Texas accent. I didn't want a Texas accent. I wanted to be an elegant person living in a book.

Barbara: What books were you reading?

Bobbie: Oh, honey, anything I could put my hands on. It wasn't as if I had anything like an education. We moved every three months, eight months, so I never finished a year in the same school.

Barbara: Did your mother take you to the library?

Bobbie: Oh, no. My mother read magazines. She was enamored of gothic horror so the magazines that were in the house were *Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, all of these vampire and werewolf stories. When I was six, they brought out a double billing of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. My mother who was hardly more than a child herself, longed to go to that. She was worried about taking me with her, that it might be harmful for a six year old to see these two monster movies. But she took me.

Barbara: I remember seeing those type of movies when I was about that age, too.

Bobbie: Well, they still are. Incidentally doesn't that guy Paul Ryan, the politician, look like a central casting figure for a vampire movie? He's got this very white face and very black hair and it comes down in this little pointy widow's peak.

Barbara: Yes, he does. I think they all look and smell like vampires

Bobbie: So what I read was a lot of gothic horror stuff. When I was about ten, there was a great American sci fi renaissance. Suddenly really good writers were writing science fiction, also a lot of bad writers, but these gothic magazines became "Amazing and Science Fiction Stories." They were what was there to read. At different times, I started going to libraries by myself and librarians would become interested in me. So that they would recommend books like all the Oz books. My reading was completely random. I read a lot of comic books. If you read a lot, it almost doesn't matter what you read, your taste is going to improve. The mind rejects boredom. The mind notices when it gets a higher return. When somebody tells beginning writers to just keep on writing, what is hoped for is that by writing an excessive amount they are automatically going to improve.

One year when I was living in England in London, there was a library between where I was living and the underground. Since I had that regular walk, I thought I'm going to be here a long time. I just started with the A's. It didn't matter if I heard of them or not—I'd just pull a book down and take a taste, looking for something that caught me, and I went through a lot of books, most that I don't remember all that well. And yes, almost all my writing is autobiography because it is almost all the outcome of conjecture. I start thinking about something and it gets hooked in my head. Do you want to hear a good line? Ben Jonson, I came across it a couple of days ago. "A horse that can count to ten is an exceptional horse. It is not an exceptional mathematician."

[laughter]

Bobbie: Isn't that great?

Barbara: It's wonderful.

Bobbie: I love lines like that. People come up with great lines. With *One Small Saga*, I'd be thinking about something, write a piece down, maybe a paragraph, maybe a page, maybe two pages, and maybe later, I'll think, oh do that again, do another, and they don't work, but I chuck them in the box, you know.

Barbara: *One Small Saga* reminds me of Marguerite Duras' book, *The Lover*. Both about young love, both understated but with poetic intensity.

Bobbie: I love that book.

Barbara: And your book and her book are both poetic-fictional-memoir. Here's from your book –

The engagement was effected.
We regarded one another, intent. The night sky darkened. We were in each other's life. The moon was a definite and vivid crescent. Very thin. Very thin. The ancient horns.

Bobbie: What I'm really short on, is transitions. Fielding Dawson was a brilliant transitional guy. Did you ever read him?

Barbara: Yes, I teach some of his stories in my classes.

Bobbie: He wrote an extraordinary book, called *Mandalay Dream*. He was capable of creating an incredible ambiance with the transitional shifts he wrote and I always envied him for it. My inclination is to give the gist of something and then fade to black and then come up with the next gist of something.

Barbara: What's really interesting is all that white space and the way you dip into a life, and the emotion is intensified by the emphasis on line and language.

Bobbie: A few years ago I got sick and lost a lot of patience. Now it's hard for me to pick up serious books and start reading them without feeling manipulated. For a long period of time, in literary books a happy ending would imply that the writer was not serious. Somebody had to die. I simply couldn't bear the disappointment. The older I got, the more disaster I accumulated. It finally just wore me down. I couldn't read a book that ended by killing off the people I wanted to be happy. It was finally too much.

Barbara: Yes, I guess that's one of the reasons our reading habits shift as we grow older. *One Small Saga*, however, does not have a disastrous ending. Somewhere near the end I remember Jesse (you) saying to a friend, "I *like* living my life. This is like heaven to me." Stepping back to the beginning, so with Olaf, you only felt out of place with the sisters. When you got to British Honduras, how was it living there? You had lived in the United States, in Texas and New Mexico, and then you found yourself in this completely different culture.

Bobbie: We went from Denmark to London for a year. I signed into the Slade, the painting section of London University College. I was there as a special student because we believed that within a year's time, the person who had gone to Africa in Olaf's place would be coming back to London and then we would be going to Africa. When I went to The Slade to sign in, I explained to them that I wouldn't be there as a regular student and they let me give them some money to go there daily. I got to work with models and make drawings and some paintings. I made friends with Lucien Freud. We used to go out and have Turkish coffee. Olaf and I were in West Hampstead, living at that point in a bedsit, one room, with a kind of single burner fixed about ten inches off the floor that you had to feed shillings into it if you wanted to cook something. I'd sit on the floor to cook. There was a sink in the room and the bathroom we shared with others was down the hall.

Olaf loved going to the theater so we got to go to the theater often. We saw *Streetcar Named Desire* with Vivien Leigh and *Mister Roberts*. My life became very rich and it felt more like where I belonged. So there we were and when you come to Boulder, I'll show you the photographs.

Barbara: Yes, and I want to see your collages, too. Maureen told me they are beautiful.

Bobbie: After we had been in London a year, Olaf's firm decided to close down their Lagos office. He went looking for another job and got one with the Colonial Development Corporation. They wanted to build a hotel in Belize because Belize was getting none of the tourist trade. Olaf was to be the resident architect. We got on a banana boat to Jamaica, from Jamaica we would be flying to Belize. At that point, I was eight months pregnant with my first daughter. The stewardess on the boat was horrified that a person who was that pregnant would be let on the boat. She kept her eye on me. When we got into warm weather the crew rigged up a swimming pool and a very hefty woman offered me the use of her second bathing suit. The food on the ship was fantastic. In London, we had been severely rationed, and suddenly we were being given menus that read like a fantasy. The week before we left London, Jamaica had played cricket at Lords against England and won. One of the bowlers for the Jamaican team was on our banana boat, returning to Jamaica. When we arrived in Kingston, all the piers were filled with welcomers, playing calypsos and steel drums, and welcoming their hero, Valentine. No one was allowed to leave the ship. It was charming, seeing the Lord Mayor of Kingston in his formal robes and all of this procedure. Of course, some of the passengers were aggravated that they were held up because of this ceremony, but I was delighted.

Olaf and I went from the docks to a place they had set up for us, a rental space, a kind of hotel resort. At one point Olaf wanted to go to the north of the island and have us spend a couple of nights at Tower Isle. Meanwhile the rains had started. We got in this little Morris Minor which had as one of its attributes that the windshield wipers only worked when the motor was being accelerated. The rains were serious. We were actually, though we didn't know it, in the beginning of a hurricane.

Barbara: That sounds incredibly dangerous.

Bobbie: Yes, we set off driving and part way across the island, for instance, we got out to look at the view and lightning hit about twenty feet away from us. I mean that was the biggest hurricane that they had had in Jamaica for a decade. Meanwhile we got back in this car, continued driving, got to Tower Isle and the rain was pouring down. Here we were in this very elegant resort and we couldn't go outside. But we were there and the day we meant to leave, the guy at the desk advised against us leaving because he said two busses were supposed to have come through that morning and neither of them had arrived. But Olaf's take was—"If it gets really bad, we'll come back." I mean talk about famous last words.

So we got into the car and started driving on the road that skirts the outside edge of the island. Rain was running down the hills and was running off very fast across the road and down. Every so often we'd enter into a long puddle, and then come up again. At one point we entered into a large puddle and the car started sinking. Olaf turned the ignition off and told me to take the wheel. He jumped out and started pushing the car to get it up on the other side. On the other side, there was someone waiting to get through, but when he saw what had happened to us, he realized that he couldn't. This was a man who worked at one of the plantations, and he invited us to spend the night at his house. His house was a two room house on the top of a little hill. It was like an island. We got there and the water had risen way up the hill with trees and dead chickens floating. We stayed there for a day and then the water started going down and someone came in on a bicycle and said that cars were getting around this other edge of the island route. We backed out again and drove the long way around to get to Kingston. When a tree was down on the road, we'd stop, as would others, until there were enough people to haul the tree out of the way, then we'd continue. Meanwhile, the plane we were supposed to have taken hadn't even left. No planes were leaving Kingston. So we stayed there another couple of days. Then we got on the plane for my first plane ride.

Barbara: Right after a hurricane?

Bobbie: Hurricanes keep moving on. We flew from Jamaica to Belize. In Belize we were met and then I found myself in this British colonial situation.

Barbara: Did you feel uncomfortable in that situation?

Bobbie: I was living in a book I'd read. I was in the romance. I had a handsome husband, a new baby, a cook and a nursemaid.

Barbara: I lived in India for a while, and I always felt uncomfortable with the privilege and how my privacy was invaded. Of course I was much older than you were.

Bobbie: I didn't feel guilty. I met some wonderful women. They were articulate, had been all over the world and they treated me kindly. Belize which was then British Honduras was a third ranking colony, a colony that brought in no income, so that everything that was sustained there was sustained by England and they paid for everything. They even paid the police.

One of the first things Olaf did when we got there was buy a sailboat, an eighteen foot seagull, and that was the first time I'd ever sailed. They had a yacht club, but it was only palmettos pounded into the bottom of the ocean with two platforms, like a first floor, and once a month everyone would congregate there and we'd have a race. Then there were three clubs and one of them was pretty patently a colonial club with regular dances and dinners. People were very nice to me because I was very young and my manners weren't all that bad. So it was easy. It was a lot of information. I had in my mind that out in front of me there was this woman who would be elegant and knowledgeable and it was as if I were enroute to that.

Barbara: Did you get there?

Bobbie: Oh, God nobody ever gets there. When the British were there in British Honduras, people were so much cleaner and happier and had jobs and then when the British moved out, all the local officials took over and started giving jobs to their cousins, and Belize turned into a real mucky mess. Everything went screwy.

Looking at your notes, you mention love as a problem in *One Small Saga*. Well, dear, love is always a problem. It doesn't matter if it is in a book or—love isn't at all what it pretends to be. It is essentially a form of self hypnosis, an obsession. If you watch a cat in heat, you know much more about love than if you read a romance novel. I mean they look so luxurious and lovely and they are stretching and feeling great about themselves. It is wonderful to stretch and feel great about yourself. And then when the person you have manufactured this feeling with or had this feeling with, when they go away, it's like they take it with them. And suddenly you don't even feel the size you were before you met the person. You feel less than that, you feel shrunken.

Barbara: I never thought I'd do that to myself again.

Bobbie: Did you ever read Colette?

Barbara: Long ago. I haven't in many years.

Bobbie: There is one point when she reached fifty or sixty, and she wrote a letter to men and in it she said that obviously at this point she was past the point of romance. Then she began to mention what it was that she would miss, and one of the things she missed was exactly what it is you are saying you hate. What she missed was the complication, the ability to feel disaster, the ability to have your feelings be right out there, extra to your thought process. The big drag is the implication that these things are forever. If we could just get rid of forever. I mean what if they issued marriage certificates or contracts of relationships or something that said, "I'll give this six months." "This looks like two weeks to me." You know, it would really help. As it is, here you are and this is forever. And as soon as it is not forever, you think, you made a mistake. And you didn't make a mistake. You just got on to something with a shorter shelf life than you had thought. You know, thinking about that Marguerite Duras book, she's writing about the young girl. But how old was she when she wrote that?

Barbara: She was older, I think, maybe 50's or 60's. In the very first paragraph she sees her first lover and he says something like, "Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer it as it is now. Ravaged." And she's older, looking back. It's a beautiful book, as is yours.

Bobbie: I didn't even think about using poetic breaks and lines and stuff. That wasn't the approach. I wasn't finding a shaping theory. It was more like this line isn't working. What can I do? Virginia Woolf said technique is finding the specific form and tone for the individual piece that lets you say everything.

Barbara: Interesting that you say "line" and not sentence.

Bobbie: I don't think of it as poetry.

Barbara: Well it is definitely poetic. . . . How did it feel to be the subject of love in Robert Creeley's *For Love*? He dedicated that book to you.

Bobbie: Very flattering. Plus there is a weird thing that people, if they admire a poet and that poet has a woman attached, the implication is that she is some kind of priestess of the art. And that's a pain in the neck. So a lot of people when I was with Bob treated me better than they felt I deserved because of my affiliation with him. They wouldn't have treated me nearly as nicely, but when I was with Bob, I suddenly had some status with them. When I met Bob, he was teaching Latin at a boy's school in Albuquerque for \$300 a month. I was working as a disc jockey at a radio station doing the midnight to six shift. We weren't exactly exalted there, except he had these friends he had made at Harvard, Buddy Berlin and Buddy's wife, Maryann and Race Newton. Those two guys had been his closest friends at Harvard and they thought of him as a serious writer. From the time he'd been in Harvard, he'd had correspondences going with Williams and Pound. So he was taken seriously in the outside world. I certainly didn't fall in love with him because

he was a writer. He just instantly looked like my guy. I thought I was going to be there forever. But toward the end, I had to get out of there just to save my life as I intended it.

Barbara: Sometimes saving ourselves is incredibly painful.

[Bobbie is quiet. Over the telephone, I can hear papers rattling.]

Bobbie: Well, in the course of me just knocking through my own reading, I got into reading Carl Sauer, Norbert Weiners, and an enormous number of people that one would never have occasion to read in the university situation. When I was sixteen in high school, I started reading Richard Lord Halliburton. Did you ever read any of the Halliburton books?

Barbara: No, I don't think so.

Bobbie: He wrote a book, *The Royal Road to Romance*. His shtick was he would take on historical figures and then write about them. For instance he wrote about Hannibal crossing the Alps. In order to write that, he rented elephants and he crossed the Alps on elephants at the same time of year Hannibal would have crossed the Alps, writing about Hannibal crossing the Alps. I fell in love with him. He was one of my first . . . I mean I was convinced if I could find him, I could live with him. But he was killed by his theory that there must have been Chinese sampans that came across the pacific and managed to get to land. He and a crew set off from China in one of those things and were simply never heard of again. But when I was eight months pregnant on a banana boat with Olaf en route to Jamaica, there was a point when Haiti was way ahead on the horizon, just a little dot. I was standing forward, looking at that dot on the landscape, way ahead and what I was thinking of was King Christophe of Haiti that Halliburton wrote up as this man who would march a troop of soldiers off a high cliff to demonstrate to onlookers that he had this power. He was terrible. At one point, there was a rebellion and they were chasing him and his family through the castle, he was shot and his family stuffed him into a cement mixer and turned it on so the rabble wouldn't get his body. At one point years and years later, talking to Joanne Kyger, I brought up Richard Lord Halliburton as one of my earliest loves, and she said that when she was in High School in Santa Barbara, they had a Richard Lord Halliburton fan club.

Barbara: I didn't read him in school, but I'm definitely going to check it out.

Bobbie: He is still someone you'd have to somehow accidentally come across. I don't remember whether he was a good writer though he certainly engaged my attention. I haven't looked at him for years. Well, for instance he bribed the keeper in order to stay in the gardens of the Taj Mahal over night during the full moon while he wrote the romance that building encompassed.

There was also a poet, Alfred Noyes, I was involved with reading, but I didn't feel as if I was in love with him. He wrote "The Highwayman" . . . "came riding riding riding the highwayman came riding up to the old inn door." When I was in high school, everyone knew that poem. But I was reading a poem of his at one point and it said, "There's a

barrel-organ caroling across the golden street in the city as the sun sinks low." And the poem goes on and then it suddenly shifts into the music the organ grinder is supposed to be playing. The narrative poetic line shifts into, "Come down to Kew in lilac time in lilac time. Come down to Kew in lilac time." It isn't far from London." That was the first time in my head I felt this shock of a voice shift. I was aware of how that voice changed and worked. At one point at Naropa I was talking to Allen Ginsberg and he suddenly started talking about Alfred Noyes. So it is weirdly like if you read a lot, you can really hit a lot of coincidental touch stones. I was surprised to find that Joanne Kyger had paid attention to Halliburton and Ginsberg had paid attention to Noyes. I felt like they were my own personal discoveries when I was in high school, and they didn't matter much in the larger literary scene, and yet here were these two important writers to whom they had mattered when they were young.

Barbara: Sometimes through reading we absorb voices and movements and language and it comes back in our own writing. When you came to my chat session this summer, you mentioned that you had taped conversations. Could you talk about that?

Bobbie: Taping conversations was a breakthrough for me. I went back to Texas with my mother because my grandmother was pretty much ready to die. I had written a first draft of *Back to Texas*, but it still needed a lot more on my relatives, and I was going to see all of them. We couldn't go into Texas and not visit everybody. I was really concerned to get the tone right in that book, to get that voice in my ear.

It occurred to me that if I slipped a tape recorder in and made tapes of everybody talking then when I got back home I could listen to it before I started to write and I'd be in the right tempo. I also thought that if anybody started telling stories I could "improve" them and put them in the book. That's the first time I registered how good my relatives were as storytellers. All of the stories were unimprovable. They were honed down into something incredible that I just could not improve. You know how that is, when you move away from relatives you make them less in your mind just in order to make yourself the size that lets you move around. But in "Back to Texas," in *Almost Everything*, there's that story when my cousin Preston says that Mexicans can put a dollar bill on a piece of newspaper and cut around it and every one of those pieces of paper will turn into a dollar bill. And then he turns to my aunt, and says, "Old So and so up there, he used to do that. You have to sell yourself to the devil to do it." My Aunt is saying, "So and so sold his soul to the devil?" And I'm sitting there looking at them. But I'm caught into the story, I still don't get that it's a completed item. I didn't get it until I started transcribing the tape.

Barbara: In *Back to Texas*, there's a story, "When you're stoned on grass," and Jesse/you ramble with words—as happens when stoned on grass—and you have this sudden awareness: "Nothing in my life ever happened that was as important to me as learning to read." Then you go on about the fighting between her mother and father, moving frequently and how she did well in school. Then you end: "Right from the first, reading was my darling pleasure." I like the way you often ramble and segue from narrative to idea.

Bobbie: "When you're stoned on grass and drinking wine. . ." I wrote that, and then one afternoon in Bolinas when the sun was shining and I was sitting out in the garden with Joanne Kyger and John Thorpe. I said, "Ok I've got a story I want to read to you." It was the first story I'd written that I felt was a real story.

Barbara: The frame for *Back to Texas* is this car trip to Texas with your mother, Mae, with the conversations and stories that take place in that car. Did you tape your mother also?

Bobbie: Yes.

Barbara: Was she aware of it?

Bobbie: No. When people know you're taping them, they change their diction. They want to sound more particular, and that means they use a different word choice. At the time, I was transcribing what different people said, and thinking, "Wow!" Literally, that story is verbatim. A lot of the stuff in that book, I did not write. I just copied it. And when I started copying out, I started registering a very interesting connection between my hand and my thought and my ear. And thereafter, I had an improved ability to actually hear how people were talking. It was made much more clear to me somehow. In the prose classes, I often have people bring in overheard conversations, written down. We open the class, just going around the room, and there will be this great stuff, like this guy says, "She's the kind of person you think is usual in every way and then she says, *Vahsss*."

Barbara: Vase.

Bobbie: Everyone broke up instantly and yet that could never have been described as humor. Everyone in the room got that little jostle in their body. When people are really talking they can be brilliant. In intermittent fast flash statements, suddenly there is that lovely little bit of brilliance never to be said again. As conversationalists we take those moments as a beautiful bonus, and then they're gone, but as writers you should rush to another room and put it on paper, save it out of the void. That's exactly when I find I don't have paper. I usually write on the bank deposit slips in the back of my checkbook. I'll always have more of those than I use. Eric Bogosian's career started with him sitting in bars with a tape recorder. Somebody would start talking to him, and he would come away from it having the voice down exactly. When you start doing it this way, you start using actual words instead of your favorite words. It's a natural inclination to pull away from the actual word that got said to the word you would have used if you had said it. One student told me, "You know even when I was following the tape recorder word for word, when I reread it later, I realized I had changed words."

Barbara: Did you have any trouble with your relatives as a result of taping? Did they discover later on that you had taped them?

Bobbie: I didn't tell anybody. But there was a point when my cousin Marilyn came to live briefly in Sausalito with this boyfriend who had sold her a pair of shoes in Lubbock.

My mother telephoned and said, "Marilyn is going to find out about you writing that book, and if she finds out about it, Ollie is going to want a copy, and if you send Ollie a copy, she's going to let Thelma read it and she'll read that part about when Evertt was in the vets hospital, Doris took his money and spent it. So if you send Ollie a copy, will you take that part out?" She didn't ask for a copy. If she got a copy, Marilyn would have sent it to her.

Barbara: That's hilarious.

Bobbie: I mean my relatives were incredible, and it was all because of that habit of sitting around a big kitchen table with a coal oil lamp and telling stories, just passing around the table from one person to the next. That was a major entertainment. Everyone would laugh even if it was the fiftieth time they'd heard this story because it was like a performance. So as a child I had that background.

Barbara: A student at Naropa this summer was talking to me about her family and how angry they were at her for writing about them.

Bobbie: If she's writing about her family, she shouldn't hit them over the head with it. Write about it but keep it to yourself. The likelihood, but we don't want to discourage the young, is that they will never see it because what you are writing probably won't get published.

Barbara: Her poems were already published, and with the internet now everything is available to those who know how to search.

Bobbie: At that point you decide what matters to you. Telling the truth about something is important, and when you start actually saying what you think is the case, you learn that the other person has a completely different memory of it. The real problem, you can't write about someone without cutting them short, you'll always be giving a limited description. You can never write about someone full scale. That's more writing than you are capable of. You are usually extracting the bit that makes the story work. Anyone reading about themselves realizes they've just been cut off at all the edges. It didn't cause me a lot of trouble with my relatives because by that time, I never saw any of them.

Barbara: How did "Back to Texas" get started?

Once I was talking to the editor of *Fiction Magazine*, telling him some stories, and he said, if you write some of those out, I'll stick them in the magazine. So I started writing them. Then they were printed in various places, *Big Sky*, *Fiction*, *The World*, and something called *Writing*, and something called *ZZZ*. Then *Back to Texas* was published by Bear Hug Books by Chuck Miller, an incredible artist who did the drawings.

Barbara: How did *Almost Everything* come about?

Bobbie: At one point, one of the editors of Coach House Press (Michael Ondaatje, David Young, Sarah Sheard) asked if they could reissue *Back to Texas*. It had gone out of print at that point and they wanted to include *Frenchie and Cuban Pete*. I said, "Well I have nine new stories we could stick in there, too." Michael said, "Great we'll do all of it." Then I said, "That's almost everything." And that became the title.

Barbara: Now it will be a Kindle as well as a book and maybe it will never go out of print.

Bobbie: That would be fun.

Barbara: In *One Small Saga* and elsewhere, you have a narrative voice of a woman who is analytic, someone who solves mysteries.

Bobbie: According to my relatives, I started talking almost immediately. I was a real talker right from the first. I think being a talker saved my life, or it gave me one. There is a Russian fairytale about a prince whose mother died and his father married a terrible woman and the terrible woman instantly stuffs him into the cellar, and she becomes pregnant. His only friend is a mouse and the mouse comes to him and tells him that the infant the queen is carrying is a Baba Yaga, and when the Baba Yaga is born, it is going to eat everyone. So for him to escape, he has to start running now, while the baby is in the womb. He has to go to his father's stable and get on his father's fastest horse and ride to the west as hard and fast as he can go. So the kid gets on the horse and starts riding and he passes a giant who is throwing mountains over his shoulder and he's about to run out of mountains, and he passes three witches who only have one eye between them and they pass it around them. He goes past these things. As he goes west, he grows older. By the time he gets to the west, he's a man and meanwhile as he's going, he begins to hear the Baba Yaga coming after him. The Baba Yaga is sitting in a stone bowl beating the ground at the side like a paddle with a stone pestle, going bang bang bang bang, and she's coming after him. He gets to the end of the world, and the daughter of the moon is up there, his horse takes a flying leap, and he escapes the Baba Yaga and gets to the moon. He marries the moon daughter, and after a time, he starts to feel guilty about all his people who have probably been eaten. He wants to save them if he can, so he goes back down to earth. The moon daughter doesn't want him to go, but he must, so she gives him different sorts of things like a comb or this and that.

He goes back down to earth, gets on his horse and starts riding east. As he rides east, he gets younger. When he passes the giant, he gives him his comb. The giant throws it down and instantly has all these new ranges of mountains. And he gives the witches each an eye. So now he's a child again and he's continuing to go east and he comes finally to the castle. All the outside walls of the building are still up, a huge square, like a box, or a playpen. The prince looks through the trees and sitting in the middle of this big blank space is a giant baby girl. As he watches, the girl shrinks down into normal baby size and comes crawling out.

The story continues, but the thing that caught my attention was this sense that in order to escape you can't wait for the danger. In order to escape, you have to start running right now. And I have the feeling that a lot of artists fall out with their families, not because they're that problematic, but because they register that they have to start running fast. It feels to me like my ability to talk was this, except you know in the south, girls aren't encouraged to be smart, but they are often encouraged to be outrageous, so being able to talk would be part of that. In any case, I became articulate pretty quickly. I was reading anything I could get my hands on, as I told you before. When I started reading, I turned into someone else. I had a wider vocabulary. I've been thinking lately that vocabulary is what matters. Enough words and you have somewhere to go.

Barbara: Last night I was near the end of *Back to Texas*, reading "Aunt Ada came...", when you were talking about leaving with Axel [Olaf], and I wrote in the margin, "Get the hell out of there, Bobbie."

Bobbie: I think most artists are born into families where they don't feel like this is where they belong. I mean you can love your parents a lot. The issue of love isn't the point. Do you know the Englishman, Paul Scott who wrote the *Raj Quartet*? It's a fantastic set of books. It came out as a television series called "The Jewel and the Crown." At one point in his autobiography, Paul Scott said that all the time he was a child he knew there was this difference in him and he also knew that even though it was awkward and problematic, it was something to be cherished. I think most artists have that in them as a child. So it sort of stands to reason that artists think of themselves as having unhappy childhoods because many of them, most of the ones I've known, didn't have that experience that gets described as a happy childhood where there is this lovely conflux of the child and its family.

Barbara: That disjunction may very well be what drives artists to create.

Bobbie: Then there are the times when you have to save your life. You just have to save your life. What Olaf gave me was a chance to save my life and I was extraordinarily lucky to have him come along when he did. Imagine that. That such a thing could happen.

Barbara: In one of the stories in *Back to Texas* you talk about when your grandmother gave you that advice about "ignorance and lice". . . "you don't have to be ashamed of having ignorance or lice, you just have to be ashamed of keeping them," I thought that was great advice.

Bobbie: That's a great line, isn't it?

Barbara: Yes, what was your grandmother like?

Bobbie: She was about five feet tall and raised fourteen kids. She was married three times, actually. Her first husband she married when she was about fourteen and he was

about seventeen and he died a couple of years later, and then she married Mr. Hall who was my mother's father. He was apparently a really good man and a nice man and gentle, and they were married and had two boys and three girls who lived. She had a lot of children who just died as babies, but she had two sons who grew up and three daughters who grew up. Then that husband died and she married Mr. Ussery and Mr. Ussery was this mean, awful man who would kick the kids if they came within kicking distance. They were all allowed to go to school until they were twelve, and as soon as they were twelve, they were put out in the fields, chopping cotton. It was a poor economy and that was how people on farms lived. He would be mean and her response was to say, "Yes papa." But meanwhile when one of her boys almost cut off one of her girl's fingers, she boiled a needle and thread and sewed it back on. At one time when we were in a conversation about raising children, she said, "I just had 'em and loved 'em." All of her children adored her and were jealous of each other about her. She was a loving woman.

Barbara: I had a grandmother who was like that. She had nine children, and she was also very special to me.

Bobbie: Grandmothers are really good for kids. They're often good for artists.

Barbara: A whole different shebang than mothering.

Bobbie: I was talking once to the wife of the guy who ran Slavic studies at Harvard. She was sort of heavy set and solid, very Russian, and she said, "Grandparents and grandchildren love each other because they share a common enemy."

Barbara: In another story, "About Grandmother's Hair," you mention how the KKK made your grandfather, I guess that's Mr. Ussery, buy shoes for a child *who was walking to school in the snow without shoes. He was a terrible man.

Bobbie: Yes, he was awful.

Barbara: I thought it was interesting that the KKK actually did something good.

Bobbie: The KKK people were like the tea party. They thought of themselves as moral arbiters, keeping things straight. What they thought about themselves is very unlike what we think about them. I think of them as rigid-minded fascist, racists. But the KKK thought they were straightening up the country around them, so that if a kid was going to school barefoot, they could take that into their purview as something that needed to be corrected. With all this cross burning, they thought what they were doing was keeping black people in their place, and that keeping black people in their place was a moral necessity.

Barbara: A twisted and self-serving morality.

Bobbie: When they were *feeling* something they thought they were *thinking*. It's a commonplace error. We all do it to some extent, but an education helps, widens the

vocabulary, creates a little humility.

Barbara: Bobbie, when did you start thinking of yourself as a writer?

Bobbie: When I was in high school, I thought of myself as an artist. It was the only hope I had. In the books I loved, the people who mattered to me were the artists. So that was what I wanted to be. I was right, that was where I had some possibility. What I didn't know was what that meant and I never got straight on that. The two serious art forms, I really thought of were the visual and the writing. When I was with Olaf, my first husband, I was being a painter. I was a student at the Slade when we lived in London. And when we were in British Honduras, I was teaching drawing in a couple of missionary schools as a volunteer. I showed pieces in a couple of group shows. I was always writing too because I liked words on paper. But "literature" as a thing to be involved in felt beyond me. Even after I had published books, I never put "writer" down as an occupation. I always put "self-employed." To call myself a writer sounded very impressive and scary, like bragging.

Barbara: Were you painting when you were living with Bob?

Bobbie: Yes, when we came back from Guatemala, I had a one-woman show at the Jonson Gallery in Albuquerque. Later I had two one-woman shows at the Gotham Book Mart Gallery in New York. And I showed with the Quay Gallery in San Francisco. I also had pieces in seven different books published by Black Sparrow.

Barbara: Were you writing then?

Bobbie: When Bob and I were first together, he had three things he would say. One of them was, "I'll never live in a house with a woman who writes." One of them was, "Everybody's wife wants to be a writer." And one of them was, "If you had been going to be a writer, you would have been one by now."

Barbara: That was encouraging.

Bobbie: That pretty much put the cap on it. I was too married, too old, and too late, but he was wrong. Anne Waldman asked him once, "Why are you against Bobbie writing?" He said there was only room for one writer in a house. After we were no longer together, someone in New York asked me why I insisted on continuing to write when I knew it upset Bob so much. I remember being at a reading Bob was giving and he started reading a story about the Sufis crossing the desert and being eaten by Ogres. It was a story I had read earlier and elucidated on out of a Sufi book. The woman I was sitting with turned to me and said, "That's your story." And I said, "Not now." But I tend to think of Scott Fitzgerald and how he deliberately dynamited anything that could happen for Zelda. She had a lot of different talents none of which were allowed to develop if Fitzgerald had anything to do with it. Meanwhile, he stole all her stories. He was using her as a resource. I'm sure he thought he was taking care of her because I think he was so self-serving, he wouldn't have known the difference. He not only stopped her from writing, he saw to it

that his friends wouldn't have anything to do with it either. They wanted her to go on stage, and he told them she was too insecure, so they didn't take her. If they supported her, they would lose him as a friend.

With Bob and I, we kept being together because we were really hung on each other. And then that turned into fighting. We were both so volatile that finally, over and over again, there was only one decision for me to make and that was I had to get out of there. It broke my heart. I had thought I'd be there with him forever. Everything being so chaotic wasn't the point. Edith Wharton said, "I don't know if I should care for a man who made life easy. I should want someone who made it interesting." Bob was the most interesting man I ever met.

Barbara: And then you were able to start writing?

Bobbie: I had been writing in secret. I'd wait until Bob was far enough away so he couldn't get back, like he was in his class teaching or he was in Montreal doing readings, and then I would bring this cardboard box out of the closet. What I was really fighting for wasn't the right to be some kind of brilliant writer, I was fighting for the right to write badly until it got better. And the thing that really happened as we were together longer and longer was that Bob's response to the relationship was that he was withdrawing from it, so that I was getting less and less from him of what it was that really mattered, like his intelligence and his articulation and how funny he was when he was funny, that kind of thing was happening less and less for me, and finally it just stopped.

Barbara: I'm glad you got free of it even though you lost some things that were important to you.

Bobbie: Bob and I stopped being together in 1975 and there was one chunk of people who had been "our friends" that I never saw or heard from again, as of that moment. There were a few who actually were friends of mine as well as Bob's, or friends of mine and not friends of Bob's. There was Joanne Kyger who invited me to do a reading with her, or Anne Waldman inviting me to come to the Naropa summer, and then people were asking me to come and do readings. At one point in time I was writing a lot of poetry, and I sent a poetry manuscript to John Martin at Black Sparrow. I said that if he published it, I had to publish it under a pseudonym. When he went through it and contacted me, he said that he wanted to publish it, but he couldn't publish anything of mine with a pseudonym because it would be suddenly a completely invented person that no one had heard of. So there wouldn't be any demand for the book as such. He said if he were to publish the manuscript, it would have to be as Bobbie Louise Creeley. And I just said, "Look, this isn't the time to talk about it. Just send me back the manuscript." He sent the manuscript back, saying, that I had hurt his feelings after all our long friendship, etc. And I thought, you just don't get it. Then Wesley Tanner came in on it and published that really nice little book of poems.

Barbara: *Fifteen Poems?*

Bobbie: Yes. One reason I stopped writing poems was because I came to associate them with being unhappy. Those are very unhappy poems, I think. When I was writing prose there was more of a sense of humor, rather than circling around my own distress.

Barbara: Sometimes when you are deeply grieving, everything is highlighted. There is definitely grief here, but every sound twangs with truth. It is an incredible sequence. It reminds me of H.D.

Bobbie: In July 1971, I was sitting on the beach in Bolinas with Joanne Kyger and Joanne said that they wanted her to read at Intersection and she was supposed to find someone to read with her. "Would you like to read with me?" she asked. Now get this, I said, "Bob hasn't read in San Francisco in a long time. I bet he'd love to read with you." She said, "I'm not asking Bob. I'm asking you." And I said, "Well yeah, I'd love to." So that was in a way, my first major reading in the Bay area and it came about through Joanne Kyger. And when I was reading there, I read the poems that became *Fifteen Poems*. One of the poems I read, was "The Thought that Was Called Helen." Afterward, Robert Duncan asked to have a look at the text and when he looked at it, he said, "I wanted to see whether you were taking material from H.D., but this is the Gnostic Helen," and I said, "Absolutely." You know there are times in your life when in a sense you are yourself, mythic. I mean when the things you are thinking about and doing seem to be within a larger scale.

Barbara: That's what I'm seeing in these poems. I'm seeing the present that you were living sort of shining through the mythic past.

Bobbie: Wesley Tanner was hand printing and hand binding some beautiful little books, and he asked to make a book of these poems. His press was Arif Press. Robert Duncan wrote a beautiful little preface for it. That was just about my first book, and it came out more or less at the same time as *Back to Texas*.

Barbara: Duncan calls it "first poems". Are these your first poems?

Bobbie: They are certainly early. I have never ever kept adequate files. A lot of work that I have written has simply vanished into the void. But those are certainly the earliest that managed to get published.

Barbara: Let's talk about a few of the poems. The first one seems an apt beginning for this book because it focuses on memory.

Bobbie: Yes, the wet day long ago in the poem is obviously the day that had the thunder and now it has made a full circle back through memory.

Barbara: In "*I*", you are writing about Lot's wife. She was warned not to look back at her home and the life she was leaving, but still she looked back. The other day, you mentioned something about how you thought she was treated unfairly.

Bobbie: I was talking generally about a lot of mythic females who were automatically blamed for whatever bad stuff happened, like Lot's wife, like Eve, like Medusa, like Pandora. Pandora is supposed to have had this little box, and when she opened it all the bad things flew out. The only thing left in the box was "hope." I'm inclined to think all the things that flew out were not evil. What if they were good, but no one really looked.

Barbara: She was supposed to be a counter gift to man. Fire was a beneficial gift and so he wanted to balance the positive with the negative, and so he gave man the first woman, a beautiful evil. In *III*, the world is inside one's mind and one's mind is in the world. I think about yoga and Buddhism and all this work to not be too deep in that ditch, "the restless mind," and yet that's where we often find ourselves.

Bobbie: Well I'm not a Buddhist so I don't do that work.

Barbara: Yes, but your poem is doing the work.

Bobbie: And then in *IV*—when I think of a constellation, I think of variety, a constellation is the whole mish-mash, except that it is itself a shape that holds time and space, and is itself an isolated entity.

Barbara: And this tiny five line poem, begins with the constellation and ends with "It stays so/ lonely." If the human situation is lonely, so is the cosmos.

Bobbie: All of the works in this book are really focused on remembering. The issue is remembering and within the remembering, there is the thing itself that is being remembered, and one is then responding to the memory as the thing itself, but it is a memory, that amorphous thing.

Barbara: When you are in a state of grief and you are remembering what you have lost, then the memories can carry a lot of pain, but there is also the pleasure of remembering, "the sweet human hooks" you mention in *V*.

Bobbie: In *VI*, "The Question Ordinary and Extraordinary," I'm writing about what they were doing in Salem and elsewhere to the persons they called witches. They were put to the question and there were two levels of questioning. There was the question ordinary and the question extraordinary. A witch might survive the question ordinary, but the question extraordinary was a death penalty. So that was part of the process and what I was interested in was how these people were putting neighbors they had had for decades to these questions and torturing them effectively. And what was it they were after? There was something in there. On the one hand it is cruelty and on the other hand, it's righteousness. They believed in what they were doing. But then what did they hope to achieve? I could never get it. I mean even if the person said, Yes, I am a witch, what does that get them exactly?

Barbara: It was the same logic early Americans used to eradicate the Native Americans. They were eliminating evil in the world and the women were part of that.

Bobbie: They thought they were confronting the devil itself, and the focus here is again on remembering.

Barbara: There seem to be two layers to this poem, the women standing waiting and looking back, and the loss the speaker is experiencing.

Bobbie: The poem is all about the relationship between the person being questioned and the person doing the questions.

Barbara: Even here with an interview—to try to have the questioner not leading the answer.

Bobbie: Don't ask me what number *VII* means.

Barbara: There's this emptiness and stillness in the sky and air. But it isn't pleasant, because the noisy shaking night rushes in.

Bobbie: Number *VIII* is more of a straight statement, almost a joke. It is a little scornful and has more to do with received ideas, the number of times you hear people repeating what they had heard on the radio in the morning.

Barbara: Or the sense that the language that we are given isn't quite working. You see what you see, based on what you have heard before. That's the language condition.

Bobbie: You see it in young people who decide to join an agenda, like young women who decide they are feminists and then they begin spouting these phrases that someone else said. And the notion of received ideas in a badly educated country is very obscure. I mean if you start trying to talk about received ideas to high school or even university students, they often don't know what you mean.

Barbara: Also in terms of these poems, you have Lot's wife, Helen, the witches—you also have your experience and the structure of entrapment and suffering is repeated even without trying.

Bobbie: *IX* is a poem I like. "Aren't you *tired* of romance?"

Barbara: When I read that line, in the margin I wrote, "Yes!" And there is anger in this poem, too. It is almost like relief. "God-damn glamour". And in this poem, I heard a voice here that you develop later in your stories.

Bobbie: Number *X* is another one I like.

Barbara: *X* can almost be a koan for meditation. It is circular like that.

The outermost trees are lighted

throw shadows
to join the shade

the innermost trees
live all their time in

Bobbie: In *XII*, I don't remember what my source was for this story. I think it was a shipload of people going to the North Pole who got there at the wrong time of year, and the ship was icebound, and the men on the ship had no access to food when their stores ran out. The men began dying and as they died, the others ate them, except for this guy who was skin and bones because he wouldn't eat people. One doesn't know what he ate.

Barbara: I just searched for some of the italicized words in your poem and it looks like you were talking about "The lost Franklin Expedition" in 1883. It's mentioned in a book called *Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic*.

Bobbie: In *XIII*, the wheel is always turning, day after day, and in *XIV*, there's some line of thought that I no longer remember. It was a long time ago when I wrote these poems.

Barbara: *XV* is "The Thought That Was Called Helen." That's the poem that Duncan liked.

Bobbie: At that particular point in time, I was very concerned with the women in Greek myth who were goddesses and the women in Greek myth who were mortals. Helen was a mortal. She was being slammed around. All the gods and goddesses had their perks, but she just had the miseries they were dumping on her. You know, Medusa, actually was so beautiful that if a man laid his eyes on her, he just came to a stop. And that was what started this myth of turning people to stone. There she was way out in the ocean with her two sisters. Her two sisters were both immortal, but Medusa was mortal, which allowed Perseus with his bloody shield to come swishing in and chop her head off and drop it in a bag and swish out. That seems to be a very unnecessary and unfair way to treat this woman who was just out in the middle of the ocean on a small piece of rock. I was reading a lot of Greek myths and I was reading a lot in the G nostics.

Barbara: Let's read it out loud and then talk about it.

Barbara: [After reading] You seem to not favor symbology, women becoming symbols. Instead you are searching for "women who journey for the soul's sake."

Bobbie: Lately I've been thinking about all of this Republican flurry and where the audience applauded how many hundreds of people Texas is putting in the gas chamber. There is a place where people think they are thinking and thinking they are thinking they do monstrous things. And they just continue doing them, and it doesn't even occur to them that there are options. I mean if you do the thing that is the most absolutist, what happens is some monstrosity. I keep watching these people. Did you watch last night's Republican debate? You can watch it as one more rendition of *Saturday Night Live*. I

mean, these fools are blustering around creating these environments of attitude and they're insulting each other about premises that are ludicrous before they even get there.

Barbara: How did you arrive at this thought after reading *XV*? In the poem you were talking about "state desire as that dynamic."

Bobbie: The sense of the poem is being in the heart of the world and the heart of the world doesn't give a damn about right and wrong, actually, the heart of the world doesn't give a damn about correctitude or incorrectitude. It simply is. We really are in this accidental maelstrom. And people go crazy trying to put a purpose to it. And when they start trying to put a purpose to it, they get into all these inventions. They invent Gods and they invent Helen and they invent myth and they invent all this stuff that they then take as cosmic truths. So weird. The human condition is a weird thing. Even when we know we are fucked up, we behave just as badly. The examining instrument cannot examine itself. We have this examination of our reality by us, who are within the reality and think of ourselves as superior to it. So you get all these religious attitudes, people insisting that somewhere out there, there is this larger thing that proves they are right.

Barbara: What a mess we are in. In "The Thought That Was Called Helen," you are talking about the Gnostics, and I read something about how Simon the Magician says that Helen was the first conception of his mind, Thought, the mother of all, but after he thinks her, she's trapped as a prisoner in the human body.

Bobbie: Yes, and Minerva sprung from the brow of Zeus, and there is the Gnostic Helen, but the Helen in this poem is also very involved with the Helen who went to Troy. There was Helen walking on the ramparts, the most beautiful woman. They said she was Aphrodite returned to earth. And Aphrodite of course got totally enraged and gave out a contract on her, effectively, telling Eros to see to it that Helen married a man for whom every negative thing was the case. He was to be old, ill, decrepit, stupid, uneducated, everything that is bad was to be in this man that Helen was to land up with. Having put the contract out, Aphrodite floats down to the bottom of the ocean to have a party with Neptune and all his buddies and girlfriends. Meanwhile, Eros goes and looks at Helen, and decides to keep her for himself. So he wafts her down into this valley, to this castle that he has created there and she is waited on by invisible servants. They tell her that she is to make herself ready because Eros is coming, but she must not look at him. So this goes on for a while and she gets lonesome and says she would like to see her sisters. He brings her sisters down. Well the sisters are both married to old ugly men and they are both envious of her so they instantly begin explaining to her that the situation she is in is very unacceptable and the person she is screwing who she can't look at is obviously a demon. Then they get taken home and Helen decides that she must see Eros. So she lights that classic lamp and what she sees is this beautiful man, who then flies out to a nearby tree and screams at her that she should not have done this, and now the castle and everything dissolves. And here is this girl, very pregnant, dumped in the valley. She starts going around to assorted temples to try to ask for help, but they won't help her because they are afraid of Aphrodite. That whole story is disgusting. There isn't anyone in it that you can like, including Helen.

Barbara: Helen is not supposed to look at Eros. Lot's wife is not supposed to look back at her home.

Bobbie: What a business.

Barbara: Can you say anything more about "symbology".

Bobbie: The sense in that poem is that I want to make direct statements and instead I am making mythic statements. I don't have the vocabulary to be direct.

Barbara: Yes, the thing-in-itself is layered far back. What about the repeating line in the poem: "Where are the heroes who are women who journey for the soul's sake?"

Bobbie: Well that's always been an issue hasn't it? Every so often you see women who take it up and it is always interesting to see them. I mean Diane di Prima when she was younger and doing Poet's Theatre and *Floating Bear*. She was always incredibly graceful about setting up circumstances that could carry tremendous amounts of people along with her. It was not her personal ego that was being served. It was a community of persons, men and women, and then when Anne and Ron Padgett got St. Mark's Poetry Project going. Anne's condition in there was markedly heroic, a female hero, and she's pretty much been that forever. Her singularity is interesting. And Joanne Kyger was and is an inherent heroine, personal and dedicated.

Barbara: The women in the poems are remembering, looking back on their lives. Their stories are not directed by themselves, but instead the conditions were created by others. Now they are alone. Last week, you talked about how you wrote these poems in secret when you were with Bob.

Bobbie: Yes, when I wrote *Fifteen Poems*, that would have been definitely toward the end. I was going through a miserable time in my life. My children were up against terrible problems and Bob and I were clearly breaking apart. There was a lot of grief and not much alleviation.

Barbara: So you wrote these fifteen poems in secret.

Bobbie: Yes, and when I gave that reading in San Francisco, I pretty much came out of the closet.

Barbara: He must have been there in the audience listening to you.

Bobbie: I think so. That would have been '71. Yes, he was there. I kept wanting him to write a book about the time we spent in Guatemala in about 1960, and I would say, remember so and so who was the night watchman who made these balls of mud and shot birds with them, and I wanted him to write that book. And he just kept refusing. Finally, he told me he would never write that book because I had so turned him against it by insisting to him that he should write it. Well, that's actually a classic kind of statement at the end of a relationship. It is saying, there is nothing here, anything here is going to block possibility instead of going forward.

Barbara: So later you wrote the story about Guatemala, didn't you?

Bobbie: That's *The Sanguine Breast of Margaret*, a book that has never been published in the United States and should be published somewhere. At some point I thought, he's not going to write this book, so I think I will. When he would go off to do readings and was going to be gone for three or four days or something I'd bring my cardboard box out of the closet and set it up at the table and go to work. If I had things to do and if he was at home and he was teaching, when he would leave where we lived, after half an hour he had gone too far to come back, so I'd wait half an hour and I'd bring it out, and I'd start some work. He'd be gone for the time the class took plus an hour's drive each way. I'd have everything put away by the time he came home. I wrote the first draft of that book, a not so hot hundred page draft. If he suspected that I was writing, he would sit down with a glass of whiskey and start drinking and then we'd have three days and nights of furniture smashing and all the radios in the house turned up full-volume and the kids trying to sleep. It would just be three days of hell. I think a part of what attracted Bob to me was competences I had within myself, but it was as if once I was within his purview, those competences were only to be used for his needs, in the space where we lived, and not as though they were my own.

At one point, a group at Buffalo decided to perform a play by Ezra Pound, *The Women of Trachis*. So I went along and auditioned, and got the lead, and then when we were doing the play, Leslie Fiedler came to it with Bob. Afterwards Leslie was talking to me about this play that he was planning to do in New York, and that he would really like to have me do a particular part in it. And it was made clear very quickly that Bob wouldn't tolerate it. He was tromping around the house in a fury, and I said what is bothering you? He said, "Well what are we supposed to do while you are in New York doing this play?" And I said, "I'm not going to New York to do this play." And that was the end of that.

Barbara: It reminds me of Jane Bowles and the way she always deferred to Paul, so much so that she could barely write.

Bobbie: I hate that phrase, "My wife at the time," which some men use. What a dismissal. I've never read a woman who said, "My husband at the time." People are absolutely willing to let a woman be a "muse" and that has to be the worst job description in the world. Being a muse means you sit someplace and watch this other person get on with all the fun.

The secrecy was necessary. I had to do the learning and whatever I wanted to get on with secretly because I couldn't sustain both the energy for learning to write and the energy for doing the fighting. So by doing it secretly, I cut back on the fighting.

Barbara: When I imagine that the poems in *Fifteen Poems* were written in secret, that makes me understand why the words and lines seem illuminated.

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Barbara: You were in Guatemala in 1960, but you didn't publish *The Sanguine Breast of Margaret* until 1998.

Bobbie: I was working on that book a long time, and I kept thinking about it as my first book even after I published other books because it was the first book I started with a book in mind. I didn't actually finish it until I was here in Colorado, sometime in the 80's. When I was living in England I met one of the editors from North and South. He was a close friend of Lee Harwood's. When I mentioned this book, he said he'd publish it. I never gave him American rights because he was a small press and was only publishing about 500 copies.

Barbara: What did you have in mind when you named it *The Sanguine Breast of Margaret*?

Bobbie: I love the notion of "sanguine. "Hope springs eternal in the Sanguine Breast". Margaret seemed to be eternally hopeful, with or without justification, and it is a constant.

Barbara: She's the voice of optimism as they drive an old van through Mexico with four children and only \$100. It's an incredible story of endurance—the children, the illnesses, thieves, no money, a drunken husband and then arriving at the finca, employed as lowly tutors in a serfdom. If you wrote most of this a long time afterwards, did you have any trouble remembering?

Bobbie: I wrote it in bits and pieces, but when I went to put together the final book, the big problem I had writing it was that I had gotten so far from it, and every time I would start to write about Bob, all of the worst things would come instantly into my imagination, all of the things he'd done that were shitty and petty. Then I thought that wasn't the whole of it, there was more to it than that. There was a way I felt about this person that I was absolutely blocking now and this book was not going to be a book until I could somehow show him as I thought he was then. On about draft 17, Margaret is standing in the garden and as she's pulling up weeds and cutting back a quince bush, I suddenly decide to go to a hypnotist I'd heard of in Santa Rosa. At this point, of course, I was living in Bolinas and Bob and I were not together. So I drove north on the Lucas Valley road. On the seat next to me I had a tape recorder and a list of questions. I wanted to be hypnotized and taken back to being the person I was in Guatemala and then I wanted the hypnotist to ask me the questions, to have those questions answered by the me

I was then, and to get it on the tape. One of the questions I had was, "Did you love him?" And I'm thinking, that is going to be confusing for her because she is there then, so I pull over to the side of the road and I change "Did" to, "Do you love him?" I pulled out and started driving, and I thought, "I could spend the rest of my life saving my past from its future." Then I think, "great line," and I pull over to the side and write it down and then continue. But it didn't work.

Barbara: It didn't work?

Bobbie: I couldn't get hypnotized. She said, with some people it takes two or three goes before you get there.

Barbara: It must have opened up some memories for you.

Bobbie: That night when I went to bed I slept fabulously. It was great. I went to her twice. Something must have happened. I remember lying on this sort of naugahyde couch. I've got my eyes closed, and she says, "You're feeling at peace." And I think, yeah. Then she says, "Just start with your feet and feel the peace come up your body. You're feeling very relaxed." And I think, yes, I'm feeling very relaxed. She says, "You're standing on a cliff side looking over a large garden filled with flowers." I'm imagining this garden full of flowers. She says, "You are at peace with yourself." And I think, that's good. Then she says, "You're at peace with the universe," and I just pop straight up and say, "I can't really go with *the universe*."

Barbara: You weren't a good patient for hypnosis.

Bobbie: I guess not. The arguments still pertained and it was funny. I did that a couple of times and someone suggested their hypnotist and I went to him once and coming away from him, driving over Mount Tamalpais, I found myself thinking, Ok if I can't come to grips with this, it doesn't mean I'm a horrible person for making Bob sound horrible. If he wants to sound good, he can write his own book. At that point I did away with the whole idea of working with hypnotists.

Barbara: Bobbie, how did having children affect your life as a writer?

Bobbie: The question of time, how you find the time for all of it, that was sometimes an issue. But for the most part all the problems I had with getting on with the work were my own problems. The children and my daily life as a mother were my usual day. For myself, particularly around the business of writing secretly, the question of where I would find time to do anything was very sporadic. And I was an only child and so every time I do something I invent it on my own. Motherhood and trying to be a writer were no different.

Barbara: There are several outstanding stories in the *Sanguine Breast*. In one of them you begin, "Who knows how long it would have continued without the newspaper ad." Then you go on with a description of the life of a cattle tick, making an analogy to human

beings and alluding to the relationship between Margaret and Patrick. You talk about the cattle tick leaping and then you write—

For human beings only fairy tales try to solve life with one large leap—"happily ever after". In real life we hang and leap, hang and leap, hoping with each leap that it is a forwarding. For each next effort we gather together our latest fund of enough courage, enough hope, and we leap. And being mistaken takes as much effort as being right. (13)

Bobbie: I got really involved for a while in a great book, called *The Parable of the Beast*. Did you ever hear of it? It is a fantastic collection. One of the accounts is that of the cattle tick. The male cattle tick doesn't even have a stomach. He just comes out, screws, then drops off and dies. The female has all these eggs in her then and she goes looking for a mammal to secure herself on. If she can't find one, she goes out on a bush to the end of a twig, and into a kind of stasis and in that stasis she can literally live for up to thirty years.

Barbara: That's amazing and the eggs are still alive?

Bobbie: Yes, and then at some point a mammal walks by and she smells butyric acid, and springs toward that smell. If she lands on something and it tests out at about 98 degrees, she plugs in a proboscis and pulls in some blood and that blood hits her stomach and all those eggs that were there are instantly made fertile and she lays them on this creature. It's an extraordinary story.

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Bobbie: After the relationship ended, I was sinking into the ancient miasmal mist, and I thought, if I don't get a more interesting life, I'm just going to lie down and die. I asked Rosalie Sorrels and Terry Garthwaite if they were interested in us touring together. Originally it was going to be a foursome because I also asked Diane di Prima. I saw it as two women writers and two women singers, but Diane was just completely wrapped up in what she was doing, and it took us a year just to get Rosalie and Terry and I into the same room to start knocking stuff around toward a show. We finally put on our first show at Bolinas in the community center. We rented the community center for fifty bucks, put out a hundred chairs and put some chairs to be opened in the back of the room so that when we heard chairs being opened out, it meant that we had each made 100 bucks. We did that show to about 350 people and two days later we did Bread and Roses to 3000. Then we started booking ourselves into tours and we toured for eight years. Every October we'd go to the East Coast. We'd start in New York City and go as far as Montreal, then come back down the coast for a second booking.

Barbara: That's the *Live at the Great American Music Hall*, isn't it? I listened to it last week. It's great.

Bobbie: Originally it was produced as a record by Flying Fish but when they went out of

business, Rounder Records picked it up. Isn't that great? Don't you love Rosalie and Terry.

Barbara: I love the whole thing. I get a sense of your younger life. You're tough and tender and you say these sharp and witty things, and I could hear it, too, in your younger voice.

Bobbie: Meanwhile I published the book with Wesley and then I published *Frenchie and Cuban Pete*, and then *Back to Texas*, and in every instance I published books because people asked me for them. I never had this experience of sending out manuscripts, which I think is a real failing if you are a writer with a career, but I have never been able to figure out what a career is. I mean any career I've had has been inadvertent because people invited me.

Barbara: Why did you come to Naropa?

Bobbie: There was a point when Bob and I in '75 were going to come to Naropa in the summer, and Anne Waldman had a way of inviting a particular writer, and then if they had a spouse who had something going on, she'd also invite the spouse and provide a plane ticket and find a little workshop for them or something. We were coming on that sort of basis and when we definitely split, I had a call from Anne, and she said, "Does this mean you won't be coming this summer?" I said, "Well I can't really. I mean if you give me a ticket. I can't really afford to come because there isn't any money involved." And she said, "No, if you come separately from Bob, we'll give you a ticket, we'll give you a salary and we'll put you up and I'll put you on the calendar." That was an extraordinary act of friendship on Anne's part. And it reassured me enormously. So I came and taught a workshop and did a reading and so forth.

Barbara: Can you talk a little about your book of poems, *Bijoux*?

Bobbie: A woman went through a red light and totaled my car with me in it. I got a serious concussion. The doctors told me I could take a year off from teaching and get paid my salary by my insurance. I didn't do it, and they kept wanting me to take medications like Zoloft to lower the anxiety. Nothing makes me more anxious than to be medicated. I was supposed to give some lectures that summer in the summer program so what I would do is come in early, and start laying material out. If I planned the lecture at home, by the time I got to Naropa, I'd have mislaid all the pieces. So I started coming in and laying out index cards in a kind of geography of thought. I put some students who knew me and liked me in the front row, and I said, "Ok, when you see that I'm losing the focus, stick your hand up and ask me a question that returns me to the topic."

I was going crazy because I wasn't writing. I wasn't able to maintain a line of thought. So I'd go to bed with my lap top and in the morning I'd wake up, and I'd just sort of wait for something. An idea would come floating in and then I would catch it on my computer. When it stopped, I would put a couple of blank lines and wait for another one, and then wait for another one, and then wait for another one. Then I put it all away, and later in the

afternoon when I thought I was sort of *compos mentis*, I'd look through this stuff and start taking out the dull parts. .

I was hearing a lot of poets who would look at each other mournfully and say, "I only wrote three poems last year"— [laughter] and I was turning these things out ten or twelve a day. At one point I thought, give them to Anselm [Hollo], I trust Anselm. So I gave him a couple of hundred of them, and he looked through them and gave them back to me and said, "Dear Bobbie, these are poems and here are the ones I like." Then he went back through the lot and gathered another batch and said, "Here are some more you should absolutely not throw out." It ended up being about eighty percent of them. I'm looking at it thinking, Wow, good ratio. Then I asked him if he could look at another couple of hundred. I mean it was like they were rolling out. That ended up being these three little books of a hundred poems each, with Lucia Berlin, Anselm Hollo and Anne Waldman writing blurbs for the back. And then that turned into *Bijoux*. Each of those poems was sort of like throwing a dart. When I regained the ability to think in longer lines, I lost the ability to do those.

Barbara: How long were you writing them?

Bobbie: Oh Lord, that went on for over a year. It took me about three years before I recovered. I was doing things like bringing my groceries home from the grocery store and on my way into the house, depositing my bags of groceries into the garbage cans.

Barbara: They are like meditations. Let me read a few of them—

water seeps hidden
down a hill,
the earth holds
yesterday's rain
and pain gets held
in thought as if
it needs a home
and means to stay (4)

If you don't get planted
you won't get harvested.
You want to blow around
all your life, stubble
in the wind? (6)

a woman's hair
thick or thin,
falls down her back
in a braid,
all the way to her feet
and beyond, drags

on the ground
at her back,
drags back
through all her years
a history of hair
still growing (90)

It's strange to compare pain with water and thought with a hill and water doesn't stay though it means to. It's the thought that we suffer from, the misconception about the whole thing. Wonderful little meditations.

Bobbie: A lot of them have a beautiful life-like little highlight, then you are off the hook.

Barbara: Maureen mentioned you are now writing something called "Gossip". Can you talk about this project?

Bobbie: At my age there are all of these free floating stories that happened over the past decades and some of them are my stories and a lot of them are other people's stories but those people have died and I only know those stories because I was told them by those people so it seems to me that it is important to get some of them on to paper. Did you see the piece I did, for instance on John Weiners? That's one of my best stories.

Barbara: Steve Katz is also writing pieces like this, he calls them "Memroids."

Bobbie: I think that is really to the point. All of those early beginnings just get eaten by time and disappear. One of the ones I love is about Edward Dahlberg in Majorca talking to Bob's first wife, Ann Mackinnen. They immediately got into a fierce battle and at some point Edward Dahlberg said "Young woman when your bones are moldering in the dust, mine will be carried through the streets by the cheering multitudes." That is one of the great lines of all time and I don't want that to disappear into the void.

Barbara: Bobbie, do you have anything else you want to talk about?

Bobbie: Well this business you mentioned about the avant-garde, I don't have a problem about the avant-garde because the avant-garde is one of those descriptions that comes after the fact. The thing I have a problem with is having university writing departments treating the avant-garde as if it is a genre and then teaching the students avant-garde. It is one thing to do some experimental writing to broaden your scope, but it is another to treat them to the notion of themselves writing some kind of high-degree specialized literature. It is not true. Anything taught as Literature with a capital L deceives the young and sets them apart from it in a way that dreadfully interferes with their own writing because of course they want to be as high class as they can achieve, and they are told literature is it and they get shoved toward the literary, as if it is a unique event. What it really is is an extraordinary thing within the event of what writing is. It is when the writing is really really good. And to have it treated as separated out from the body of writing – you can separate it out because it is so good. Anything that gets titled has been bagged, and

anything that's bagged generally accrues an agenda and that agenda is usually destructive to the next generation.

Barbara: Like trying to get to some end product, but what you really need to do is to be in the present with what you are doing, your writing. Thanks Bobbie. It's been very special talking with you.
