

INTERVIEW: William Kloefkorn, 15 September 1980
(retranscribed/lightly corrected and annotated, 2 September 2014)

Buried in the want ads of the *Daily Nebraskan*, a small box announces that William Kloefkorn and Ted Kooser would be giving a poetry reading at The Bookseller, 1023 Q St., at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, September 23. For those who don't already know, Kooser and Kloefkorn are two of Lincoln's finest poets. They had co-authored not that long ago a book of verse, *Cottonwood County*. Since then Kloefkorn has come out with another book of poems, *Not Such a Bad Place to Be*, and a chapbook of pieces culled from earlier work, *Stocker*. Kooser has also been busy, with *Sure Signs*, a volume of new and selected work, the first number of *Blue Hotel*, a new literary magazine, and an anthology of verse, *The Windflower Home Almanac of Poetry*. They had last read together in March, in the first poetry reading held at O. G. Kelly's.

On short notice, up against a deadline, I arranged an interview with William Kloefkorn, for Monday evening. He'd be home all evening, and up till twelve, he said; anytime I wanted to drop by was fine. As I step off the bus, it is easy to guess which house is Kloefkorn's. His familiar figure is perched in the eaves of the two-story white frame house on the corner, atop an aluminum ladder. The ladder rests astride a corner of the house between one window whose green trim looks fresh and another in need of paint. Kloefkorn is laying on a coat of primer; the ladder sways a bit with each stroke of the brush, and the man below him complains that he's being dripped on. The poet seems to welcome the chance for a break the interview offers. At any rate, he brushes aside his wife's suggestion that he do some scraping while he talks—"too much background noise for the tape," he says—and she goes back inside to change into painting clothes. Before the interview starts, he cleans the paint from his hands and fetches a couple cans of beer from the kitchen.

Q: Last year you were working on a *Honeymoon* sequence [it would eventually see print as *Honeymoon*, 1982]. How's that coming?

A: It's finished, I think. I mailed it out, and I take that to be a pretty good measure of when I think it's finished. I had about 80 poems, and I cut them back to about 70. I think it's finished; I feel pretty good about it, anyway. It's been done for about three or four months.

Q: There's a great deal of time condensation in those poems which interested me. What was your intent with that?

A: My intention was to play with time, to suggest that you can enjoy the future before it occurs, that there is a reality in the anticipation of what is to come. Especially if that goes beyond mere daydreaming of personal fantasy, so that you can, with a partner, anticipate. And a good deal of it's the anticipation, but it's made real by the dialogue—by the dialogue that you have with the partner. That's what formalizes the reality of the anticipation. You can also reflect. Howard and Doris, who are the two characters, chief characters, in the sequence, late in their lives have a quarrel, a rather serious quarrel, and they end up making up and going back to the place where they started all of it, going back to Niagara Falls.

Q: Now, that's one of the one's in Sanders's anthology [Mark Sanders, ed., *The Sandhills and Other Geographies: An Anthology of Nebraska Poetry*, 1980], isn't it?

A: Yes, I believe that one is, yeah. I'd forgotten which ones were in that anthology, but that one I think is in there.

Q: Where Doris sins and he takes the hard line...

A: Yeah, they end up jumping in the car and driving hell-bent for Niagara, and the implication is that they're going to use that setting as a means of working things out. Of course, forgiveness is a big part of that in the poem, too.

Q: OK, there's also a mythic level in that poem; myths come up a lot more than they do in most of your work. And also, not just myths, but archetypal images, primitivist images. When she goes to wash clothes in the river, it's loincloths.

A: Right, right. Well, they're always cutting back to basics, to see what they can live without. To see how much—kind of a Thoreau-istic thing—to see how much they can simplify and still get by with. And they have a tendency also to reduce that to an almost animalistic level, to see how far back they can go in their evolution, and still remain a higher animal. Howard, for example, goes out to hunt, and he conceives of himself as a great hunter, in that inner poem, one of the poems. And Doris is repulsed by this. Of course, it's highly imaginative, he's not a great hunter, he goes out and ends up killing the neighbor's cat, and bringing it back, as if he had gone into a forest, and had risked life and limb, and was bringing back food for the tribe. Well, he brings back the neighbor's cat. And when Doris sees the blood on the cat, she reverts. And she joins him. And they skin the cat, and they cook it over a fire, and they eat the meat, and they gnaw on the bones, and they sit around simply making guttural sounds. Whether they actually do that or not doesn't matter. They either do it or they play-act it, and in the process they revert to a kind of primitive existence that I think most of us think about once in a while. We wonder how far, how far we might just rather quickly revert, if it weren't for social pressures or if it weren't for peer pressure or something that's keeping us in line. Once in a while something snaps, I think, and we wonder just how far back we could go, if we didn't have all these pressures. Well, they do that. They either go back or they imagine that they go back.

Q: OK, what about the mythic levels?

A: Well, that itself is a sort of beginning. Where do you start? How does man make of himself something more than a lower animal? What's the difference? In Greek mythology, the higher animals are finally distinctly separated from the lower ones because they can do things—Prometheus brings the fire, and they are able to make decisions that lower animals can't make. They evolve, and become better than the beasts. They walk upright like gods. Howard and Doris go through the process of seeing how far back they can go so that they can start all over again. So that they sort of create their own myth.

Q: At the same time recreating old myth.

A: Yeah, or at least the suggestion of old myth. I think. And that's in some of the poems—you mentioned that she goes down to the river and she—there again, it's not quite like killing the cat and skinning it and eating it—but she goes down, and washes with rocks. And he waits for her to come back has a couple of martinis. They're still in the present all that time. Then they're going up to Venus, quick trip to Venus, all the way from one level of existence to another. And there's the notion that while they're gone the whole world might be wiped out, and so they take of couple of tadpoles or something along so they can start all over again if need be. The notion of how you start, how do you start, where did it all begin, and what separates us from the beasts. And that's something that the Romans and the Greeks and every thinking civilization has to wonder about and think about, and come up with literature for.

Q: There are also, I think in the *Honeymoon* sequence, some echoes of [T. S.] Eliot. If I remember right, in a poem you read last summer, "Those are pearls that were his eyes" shows up somewhere in there. And in "Lake Leba"—is that poem very recent?

A: Oh, I think that poem's two or three years old.

Q: There's the echo there in the last stanza of "Prufrock." Why Eliot?

A: I guess Eliot's sort of a touchstone for me. He was one of the poets when I was an undergraduate that I was extremely impressed with. And I was most impressed with those poems of his that were least hopeful, maybe because at the time I was sort of, oh, pessimistic. I still have those moments, very frequently as a matter of fact, and I'm attracted to Eliot's pessimism. But at the same time, I get sort of angry with it. It seems almost too much at times. Maybe he gets too close me; you know, really, maybe he's too good, in poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," or "The Hollow Men," or parts of *The Wasteland*. Especially lines that really hit, they're almost what [Matthew] Arnold called touchstones. If you have a line that suggests that line, you know you have a damned good line. That sort of notion that there are certain lines from poets, poems, that you can use as the best touchstones. In the "Lake Leba" poem, the voices save the people, rather than drown the people, and I think that that is as real. I think

that the saving or the healing aspect of human voices is as real as the negative, destructive aspect. In *ludi jr.* [1976] there's one, too, of "The Hollow Men," where ludi jr. is milking a cow, and he sees himself as he milks the cow as a real integral part of the whole system. So he milks the cow, and the milk he takes to the milkhouse and so on, there's a kind of a cycle. And he says, "this is the way that the world begins. Isn't this the way that the world begins? The world begins, the world begins. Isn't this the way that the world begins, with two bloods joining." So instead of throwing up your hands you sort of see the other side.

Q: Are there any other kinds of influences that play that way in your poetry, maybe not as directly?

A: Well, a recurring influence is the Bible, which I learned in a helter-skelter, nonacademic way, through a very fundamentalist background. And I'm talking about the King James translation, which is just a major influence on me. The wording of the King James translation, that's another touchstone, or at least certain parts are another touchstone. *ludi jr.* is just filled with it.

Q: Yeah, I remember Ecclesiastes coming up a couple times.

A: Well, that book is really about his spiritual awakening, and his coming to terms with it.

Q: How close is his "amen corner" to your own experience?

A: Very close, yeah, that's a good question. Very close, yeah, very close. Ludi jr. and Alvin Turner [of *Alvin Turner as Farmer*, 1972] get along real well, *real* well, they wouldn't have any problem getting along at all. As far as their theology is concerned.

Q: Well, Alvin Turner seems basically to suspect the whole thing.

A: Yeah.

Q: Now, that changed with loony, who—in *loony* [1975] you kind of both parody and take it seriously. And then, in a lot of your more recent stuff, there's rather more serious but not necessarily disciplined religiosity. Say in "Along Highway 2," or "Benediction," or "My Love for All Things Warm and Breathing,"

which is almost pantheist. Now, is that a direction you've moved, or is it just a different kind of subject you're using?

A: I think it is a direction, actually, I think it is a direction I'm moving in. Those are well-selected poems to indicate that, I think, actually. All of those poems you mentioned. Those poem's don't have the—well, yes they do—I was going to say they don't have the quarrel the others do, some of those in *ludi jr.* or some in *Alvin Turner*. Though Alvin Turner's not... he never gets all that much riled up. He has a very definite disagreement with conventional Christianity as represented by his wife, but in that book, he remains, well, in touch with his wife. So that he's willing to concede certain things in order to keep peace in the family.

Q: He'll go to sleep at church.

A: Yeah. Right. He can make his separate peace so that he can go to sleep during the sermon, or he can make a trade-off of one kind or another. He can say, well, ok, I'll have the baby baptized, that's worth it. In return I can get Martha's voice, reading, by lamplight. So he considers that a reasonable trade-off. But in those later poems, you don't have that.

Q: What about the *loony* poems, where there's that kind of simultaneous parody and seriousness?

Where loony is baptized in absolutely ludicrous fashion, but at the same time there's a fundamental truth to the baptism.

A: Well, loony was baptized the same way I was. Naked in a little stream. A little stream. That's the way I was baptized, when I was a boy. Just me and the minister, out in the little old stream. I was uneasy about it, I felt kind of embarrassed about it as a matter of fact. But loony doesn't, when he gets up he feels all clean, and he sees a cow, and everything seems to him quite ordered, and very good. Whatever happens to him there gives him some kind of companionship. I don't want to make of him a Christ or anything, but loony, he feels as if he's made some kind of an association there, so that in the morning when he wakes up he feels good because he's not alone. Now, I don't know who he's with, I don't know

what his concept of God is. But he feels as if he's made some kind of contact, with something, most specifically indicated by the cow, who is sitting over there, or standing over there, looking perfectly happy.

Q. Do you see that as just an aspect of loony's special character? Like, if ludi jr. went through the same ceremony, the same thing wouldn't happen? Loony seems more automatically open, to magic, kind of, partly because in conventional ways he doesn't understand.

A: Yeah, his understanding has to be kind of basic. So what happens there is that someone takes an interest in him. There aren't many people who do; there're only two or three people in the book who take any interest in him, any honest interest in him. Everybody else makes fun of him. Even his brother won't have anything to do with him because he's different. So when the minister takes an honest interest in him, loony responds favorably. And for him I guess that kind of companionship, even though it's very brief, is a very meaningful thing. And it brings to his mind, his rather simplistic mind, a sense of order. So if somebody cares, then things must be ok. That's essentially his thinking. But he doesn't worry too much about who that somebody is, see, he can't. He can't think about divinity or about things of that order, because that's out of his reach, but he can appreciate somebody, some personal attention, some individual's caring for him. He can appreciate that. And there's no need for him to extrapolate, to say, well, God, then, is this minister squared. He doesn't need to do that, all he needs to do is say god's a minister, or god's the attitude that proves some kind of care. That's it, that's all he does.

Q: We've been talking here about your characters as very much real people. To what extent are they real people? In *ludi jr.* your memory plays very much a part.

A: Very much, yes.

Q: Are there really models for any of these people, or are they just imagined, or is it somewhere in between?

A: There were some physical models for them. For Alvin Turner, the model was my paternal grandfather, and his farm. For loony, there were three characters, town characters, where I grew up, and I put them all together to make one character. So that loony is short, no neck, practically no neck, he's prone to epilepsy, he suffers from aphasia. Now, the three people I had in mind didn't all have those problems.

Q: One was short, one had no neck.

A: Right. So I put them all together, to make the physical loony. ludi jr. is a smart-aleck kid I had in mind, from my hometown. But those are all the physical things. They help me keep the characters in mind physically, that that sort of thing. But everything else, the attitudes, are min. So what I do is I just borrow my grandfather, and I borrow those three characters from my hometown and then the smart-aleck youngster, and I just take over. I think for them. So their attitudes are very much my own attitudes.

Q: How about the *Leaving Town* [1979] character?

A: Yeah, that has another model. A fellow senior, when I graduated from high school this guy left town. He was either going to go with us on the senior trip, or he was going to leave town. And he left town. And that's the last time I've seen him. So I sort of borrowed him. In that book, it doesn't matter so much, because you don't learn that much about him physically.

Q: He's more just narrator/watcher.

A: Yeah. But in *Alvin Turner* it was very important because the farm, well, the farm was very important. I needed that quarter section, I needed the hill, I needed the fence line, I needed all of the machinery, and the horses, everything.

Q: And he rock?

A: The rock. You bet. The rock's there. Right out of southeastern Kansas. All of the details were a tremendous help in *Alvin Turner*. But there aren't really that many physical details that are important to *ludi jr.* or to the kid in *Leaving Town*.

Q: What about Doris and Howard?

A: Well, they're a combination of I don't know how many people, the both of them, as a matter of fact. Doris was, oh, I must've had about six women in mind for her. Attitudes and all kinds of things. She's sort of an earth woman, for one thing, who gardens a lot, and Howard likes that. That's one woman. If you want a stereotype, you've got a stereotype. But she's also a very sharp-tongued person; she really gives Howard, in several of the poems, she really lets him have it, in no uncertain terms. That's another character. So I don't really recall how many there are in her, I sort of just imaginatively put her together from all kinds of people. And Howard, too, for that matter.

Q: You tend to work in sequences. What sets you going on that? Do you start with a single poem, or a character, or what?

A: Well, I—that's a damned good question—I don't know. Maybe one explanation is I used to want to write the Great American Novel. Everybody wants to write the great American Novel. And I wrote a novel for my master's [*Cold-Pease Porridge: A Novel of Kansas Life*, Emporia State, 1958], and then I wrote three others. All bad, all bad novels. I only sent two of them out, one time. I don't know, I have this kind of desperate narrative sense or something, and I see these people and these events in a string. And once I start on one of them, I want to keep that going. I don't want to write a story, but I want to write more than one poem. I'm working on two sequences right now, as a matter of fact. One of them called *After the Ballgame: Sports Poems* [apparently never published]. But they're not sports poems. Well, they have something to do with sports. And the other is called *Houses* [*Houses and Beyond*, 1982], which has something do with the houses I've lived in. I lived in this little town in south-central Kansas, there were about 700 people there, and my parents, I think, moved about twelve times, within that town that I was from. That's about once every year and a half. And all of the moves were traumatic, we were always trying to move up, but in fact we moved down. So that I have a very clear recollection of all the places, all the rooms in all the houses and everything. So I'm writing a sequence of poems about that. I can't quite answer that, to tell you the truth. I don't know.

Q: In *Not Such a Bad Place to Be* [1980], there's a "Final Scenario #6" and a "Final Reflection #14." Are those parts of real sequences?

A: I started those, a sequence of "Final" poems, and didn't finish it. It became a little tiresome, so I just stopped. But I still write those, those "Final" poems. In *Cottonwood County* [1979] there's one about Crazy Horse, final. That's the only poem I've written about Crazy Horse, but the suggestion may be in that is that you think through a lot of things before you write this one. Before you write #7 you think through #6, which means that there might be #8 or 9 to follow. But there's no real end to it. But I did envision that as a sequence, yeah, but it never did come off.

Q: Finality seems to show up a lot in your recent work. In those two, in the Crazy Horse poem; there's the one where you're under the house, in *Not Such a Bad Place to Be*, which seems real apocalyptic in tone. Is that something you feel coming out more and more? Are you working deliberately with an apocalyptic sense?

A: No. I was surprised, when I read your comments [in my review of the book for the same journal], for one thing, on *Not Such a Bad Place to Be*, to go back over a look at the number of poems that were like that. I really was unaware of that. There are a lot of poems like that in the book, and I am thinking about that a lot, but it's very undeliberate. I guess so, I guess I'm thinking about that a lot.

Q: A lot of your characters seem to be very isolated people No one more so than Alvin Turner, but—well, loony's an obvious one, he's very much outside the step of the town; some of them show up peripherally, like in *Leaving Town*, Pierce the One-Eyed Prophet, obviously this strange sort of almost desert person; Stocker [in *Stocker*, 1978], who never seems quite there, who knows what's going on, but is always just watching. That isolation, where's that come from in your characters?

A: I think the characters have a great regard—I think I do, too—for isolated individuals who somehow make sense to them. Especially with words. So the characters react very keenly to that, to something that somebody has said that made sense to them. Stocker's that kind of character. But I don't agree with

everything Stocker says. He makes an impression on the kids and some of the people there, who listen to them. And the kid in *Leaving Town*, Pierce, he remembers him, and he remembers what he said. So that there are too many people, that the ones who impress are the ones that are verbal. Yeah, those are the ones that make some kind of mark on the characters. Where loony, he can report without knowing the full meaning behind the one he's doing the reporting on. He's a little different in that way, I think. But Alvin Turner—they're all alike, they all have to come to some kind of separate peace with themselves, I think. It's like the storm in *Alvin Turner*, when the storm comes in, a really bad storm comes in: he decides that means something to him. It's that little old piece of land, and it's the people right there on it, his wife, and his kids, right there. That's where the meaning is. And they're all pushed that way, all the characters are pushed that way. Iudi jr. is pushed that way, until he makes some kind of—up in his treehouse, after he's been kicked out of church—he makes some kind of separate peace, with God, or whatever's beyond him. But they all do that. In *Leaving Town*, the character doesn't do it, finally, he's still trying to work it out. He's still leaving town.

Q: But he's in town, too.

A: Yeah, yeah, in his head. He never leaves town, in his head. Not entirely.

Q: The only thing that seems as important as particular characters in your poems is the land itself. And there seems to be some kind of balance between those two, that's most obvious in *Alvin Turner*. There seems to be some kind of, I don't know, dialectic or something, where the land shapes the people, but the people have some kind of destiny on the land, or more than the land. How do you work with those kinds of things?

A: Well, for me, it's just that the one thing that consistently moves me is the land, and people working on it and doing something with it. It seems to be kind of, it's almost mystical, and I can't get away from it, with the characters, so they have to deal with it in their own ways. I don't know, it's one of those few things that I find really exciting, I guess. Like you say, in *Alvin Turner* it'd be most obvious, and he really

has a close tie with it, and he has a running battle with it. But naturally he would, he's trying to farm that quarter section and that sort of thing. But even that kid who leaves town, the poems where he feels best, the poems where he's out there, where he turns over that skull, walking along the plowed ground and he turns over that skull of an animal and he imagines it to be, he holds it like a bowling ball. He just feels best when he's out there making some kind of a contact with the land. The land just seems to be some kind of a presence. It does things for me that nothing else can, even including most people. I'm just consistently awed by it, that's all, I can't get enough of it.

Q: Some of your poems seem to be rebelling against the confines of the page. In some of your readings, you've been known to shift to wolf howls and pig calls. In *loony*, you draw pictures now and then. In *ludi jr.* you use titles as almost a kind of separate poem. What are you moving toward with that kind of thing?

A: I'm not going to say that's a hack in me, because some of those poems—it could be, you know, the platform poem, where it works fairly well if it's read, in front of an audience with a good microphone, but on the page it's dead. I really feel that a poem should work on the page, I think that's basic. Because most of the time most of us read our poems by ourselves, or read others' poems by ourselves, sitting in a chair. If it isn't going to work there, it isn't going to work. So I'm really very skeptical of performance poems, but I find myself writing poems that would be pretty easy to put in that category. I love to perform them. One of my favorite poems in *ludi jr.* is that one in the treehouse, and that has singing in it, the "blood of the lamb" song, and yet that's a poem that I believe in as much as almost any poem I've written. I believe in what it says, and I think it's ok on a page. But once in a while a guy could go too far, I suppose. Were you at O. G. Kelly's that time? I have a poem, a real platform poem, that takes about 15 minutes to read, but I have to be kind of half-drunk to read it, because it has everything in it. The fantasies, you know, yodeling, and auctioneering—I wanted to be an auctioneer when I was a kid. And I wanted to be a Western movie singer, not movie star, but just sing Western songs. And yodel, and, oh

dear, Tarzan, I wanted to play Tarzan, too, so I worked on that Tarzan yell. All of these things I managed to work into that poem by hook or by crook, so it's kind of fun to perform, but I guess that generally I'm kind of skeptical of that kind of poem. But I'm not inhibited, hell, I don't care, I'll try anything. But I think that once in a while you can get hung up on a page, say if I don't finish this on an 8 ½-by-11 sheet, then there's something wrong. You can get into that, and you can pare the life out of a poem. It's tight, it's clean, the metaphor's perfect, and it's dull. It's like all these people wanting to cut out certain portions of *Moby Dick*, and you can justify every one of them, but after you've done it *Moby Dick* isn't as good a book. It's better than the sum of its parts. I think a lot of poems are that way, too. They can have some, some loosenesses, and still the total can come out pretty well.

Q: In general, you use a lot of different forms—your lines are different lengths, your stanzas are different. What leads you to a particular form?

A: Well, I try to make the form work with the speaker, whoever it is, as well as I can. Maybe I'm overly conscious against repeating myself too much. Especially in sequences. So I try different forms, but I think you should be able to justify the form in regard to the speaker. I had a problem with that in *loony*, and I don't know if I got it worked out or not. Because loony speaks in rather complete sentences. Maybe too complete. Maybe his thoughts are too complete at times. But I tried to balance that with thought patterns that suggest loony. So he says in one poem, he takes responsibility for his being different, and he does that in an early poem, where he says, "I must have made a wrong turn in the womb," and whatever I said, he says, must be bounding somewhere. Well, it's a complete sentence. But I thought the turn, the attitude there—"I must have made a wrong turn in the womb"—would suggest his being different. And would take the reader's mind off the fact that this is a complete sentence, that sort of thing. I was very much aware of that. While in *ludi jr.*, he is so free and open that he doesn't bother to put periods on the ends of sentences or anything like that, he just thinks right on down. He's a lot more

of a free spirit than loony is. I don't know if it works, but I think I can justify the form, in my own mind, by relating it, I hope in some convincing way, to the speaker.

Q: this summer, for the fourth summer running?

A: Let's see, this is the fifth summer, I believe.

Q: Well, off by a year. You were working with Charles Stubblefield with the Writer's Workshop. How'd that go this summer?

A: Very well, very well. We had a large class this summer, 23 or 4, something like that. Not everybody did poetry, not everybody did fiction, but we had a good-sized group. And we had some new people this summer who show some promise. So that workshop continues, I'm happy to say, thanks to the good people who are enrolling in it. A variety of people. We had some good ones in there. Three of them get their master's within one week, as it turns out, this summer. And all three of them are just really fine writers. One of them has a book coming out from Asahi Press this fall, in fact it should be out any day now.

Q: That's Susan Deal [Susan Strayer Deal, *No Moving Parts*, 1980].

A: Yeah. She's good. And the manuscript for her master's doesn't have a single poem carried over to it from her other book.

Q: She used *Daguerreotypes* for her master's?

A: Yeah.

Q: Who were the other two?

A: The other two were Liz Banset and Marge Saiser. Marge is a teacher, she teaches at Meadowland, elementary. Liz is a homemaker. And they're both very strong, very strong. They're getting better all the time, God only knows how good they're going to be.

Q: How does the workshop work affect your own writing, or does it?

A: Oh, I think it enlivens it, actually. Because it's a short period of time, it's kind of intense, and there's a lot of good people, and we do a lot of talking in class, and we do a lot of talking out of class, a lot of critiquing of their material. And I, for the last couple of summers, have made it a practice to throw my own poems into the hopper, and let them critique them, too. So it's been healthy for me, especially since I started doing that. I say, well, when I pass a packet of your poems out, there'll be a poem of mine in it, and so I just go right along with it. I've gotten some fine criticism, some very helpful criticism, from them. There's a healthy critical attitude in there, and since I've started to go right along with them, why, I think it's been very helpful.

Q: I'd like to ask about one poem in *Cottonwood County* that seemed really unusual for you, which is "Persephone in the midst of a late May morning," a mythological poem, a very straight mythological poem, and I think it's the only straight mythological poem you've done.

A: It is.

Q: What led you to that, all of a sudden?

A: Well, believe it or not, I have several. That's the only one that's been published. I was talking to a colleague about some of Edwin Arlington Robinson's poems one day, and about how he would often take a character from history, and he would present that character's problems, that character's dilemma, from a rather different perspective than we normally get. And we were wondering if that still wouldn't be a good thing to pursue, to do that, imagine what. This individual and this recognizable character, out of Greek myth or out of something else, in a dilemma, speaking for himself. How many situations like that could we envision? And so we starting talking about that. And you can come up, of course, with just any number. And "Persephone" came out of that, because, I guess I was particularly interested in Persephone rebelling. She doesn't go to the lower world voluntarily. She's stolen away, and if we take just the standard reading of the myth we say, well, she has to go back, she's eaten the pomegranate seed so she has to return, and that's the way the cycle goes. So Persephone, she's just, I

don't know, she's just a stereotype. She's a mate for Hades, and she serves the role, then, almost automatically, of going back to mother, she's mother's darling, so she goes back to mother, and makes mother happy for this period of time, during which the trees blossom. Then she goes back to Hades, and her mother, disappointed, causes the sap to fall. So she's, if you look at it that way, just a sort of puppet, who serves those functions. Well, what happens if you give her a mind of her own, and let her wonder about going back? A rebellious woman who says, "It's dark under there and it's damp under there and I don't particularly like it, what if I stayed here?" In all this beauty. Because it's May and everything's blooming. What would happen? What would happen? Well, she concludes, of course, that what would happen would be that the flowers would die anyway. She is a myth. That she is a contrivance used to explain what can't be explained. And I think that's significant. But it came of that discussion of what we might do with characters, of Greek, Roman myth, history, you name it, put in various contexts like that. And I'm very interested in that, except that I haven't pursued it very much. And the language in that poem is not like anything I've done, as I guess you mentioned.

Q: There are some other poems, in *Not Such a Bad Place to Be*, that I mentioned in my review were very different. They're abstract, they don't fix on detail the way most of your poems do. Is that something you've been working with lately?

A: I've done that since I started writing, but just in little bits and pieces. Basically, I just don't write the abstract poem, as you know, and I spend some time in classes actually talking it down. Because I think there are so many that are so bad. But then, having said that, I go out and once in a while write one. I guess I get fond of the exercise or something, and then I don't want to throw it away, so I use it. There were, I don't know how many, maybe a dozen or so like that I suppose that were in *Not Such a Bad Place to Be*. "Adjusting to Light" was one of them. That's not the way I write most of the time, but once in a while I work in one of those. I don't want to discount the abstract poem, but it just isn't my baby, I don't think. And I'd probably do well to go ahead and try it, and acknowledge that it's not worth a shit and go

ahead and throw it away or something. But you know how it is, you do something like that, you go through the exercise, and you get kind of fond of it. It's your baby, even if it has three eyes. So you keep it. And you keep saying, well, maybe it's alright after all.

Q: You'll be reading with Ted Kooser. You've read with Ted Kooser, that I can think of, probably half a dozen time. You've also co-written a book with Ted Kooser, *Cottonwood County*, where you both did half. When you read with Kooser, is it just two poets reading, or is there something more between you, some other kind of connection or something?

A: I think there's more there, I really do, because I'm very fond of Ted, and of Ted's poems. I've been very much influenced by Ted; he was the first person to read my poems. Ted's a very good friend of mine, and he's also a poet I have a great deal of respect for. And he's a critic I have a great deal of respect for. He was the first person to look at my poems, I took a bunch over one night. At the time I didn't realize what an imposition that was. But he looked them over and gave me some really sound, honest, basic criticism. Since then I've followed his poems pretty closely. So I enjoy reading with Kooser, and I know him and I know his poems really well. I don't know a lot of poetry, you know, I know a few scattered poems and that sort of thing. I guess I don't know very many poets, and poems, as much as I know Ted's. So I really enjoy reading with him, and I think I agree with a lot of what Kooser's done, I think we're on the same wavelength in a lot of ways. I don't know whether that's good or bad for a reading, but I do enjoy reading with hm. We're going to be reading at the end of October in Brookings, South Dakota, with William Stafford.

Q: Yeah, you mentioned that, what is that about?

A: It's a two-day annual writer's conference that they've had going the last five or six years up there. So that should be fun.

The house was dark as the interview ended and Kloefkorn walked with me to the door. As I walked to the corner to wait for the bus beneath the streetlamp, he climbed again the aluminum ladder, to paint by the light of the moon.