BILL LAVENDER

An Interview with Bill Lavender

The interview is initially only audio. Good mornings are exchanged. It's about eleven o'clock our time, ten down in New Orleans.

TBR: Thank you for taking the time. Bill.

We can hear Bill, and he us, but neither of us can see each other. He makes an adjustment, moves his computer so his wife can watch the game.

"How you guys doing? Where are you?"

TBR: Boulder, CO. Are you still in New Orleans?

"Yeah. I've been here since '75."

We're still unable to see Bill.

TBR: What game is your wife watching?

"Tell you the truth, I'm not sure. The Saint's game, likely, if there is one. Actually she's just sitting there grading papers and watching TV."

A teacher too?

"Yeah, she she was just lucky enough to get on at Dillard University; she was teaching at UNO but was able to quit that, thank god, for her."

TBR: Sound like things are rough and tumble at UNO right now.

"Yeah. "

TBR: See how it shakes out.

He still doesn't see us, though we can see him. Top framed-glasses, half his face broad-lit by light pouring into his kitchen. We'd just read back through Bill's Pat Robertson piece, relished in its mystic peculiar honesty.

Here:

Pat Robertson's Pact with the Devil

[The Haitians] were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III and whatever.... And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, "We will serve you if you will get us free from the French." True story. And so, the devil said, "OK, it's a deal."
—Pat Robertson, on the earthquake in Haiti, January 12, 2010

Now we gonna have us
a little history lesson.
You all know that Haiti,
way back when,
signed a pact with the devil
to expel the French,
and that's the reason God
gave 'em an earthquake
in 2010, but there's another
little bit of history almost
nobody knows, goes like this:

In 1948 there was a young man
named Marion Gordon Robertson,
son of Absalom Willis Robertson,
United States senator from
the state of Virginia
and lifelong proponent of them
"separate but equal" decisions
by the Massachusets Supreme Court of
1850, unfortunately and un-
constitutionally overthrown
by desegregation orders of 1956,
and this young man Marion
lived with his father in
that great state of Virginia and
the great city of Lexington
surrounded by the usual Southern
luxury and a bevy of Negro
servants, cooks and nurses,
many of whom had come
from Haiti once upon
a time.

And one day Marion Gordon Robertson,
who was at that time 18 years of age,
was in his house attempting to show
one of the boys from the field
how to properly stow jam in
the basement, and when that boy
bent over to replace a jar
and thrust out toward
Marion Gordon Robertson

his shapely posterior
made partially visible by the angle
of his attitude and the slackness
of his pants, why it was
just then that Marion Gordon
felt rise within him an urge such
as he had never felt before.

Now, I know what you thinking.
But no, it wasn't that.
It wasn't that at all.
He did not desire to fall
upon that servant's buttocks,
his for the asking,
nor, indeed, if he had,
would that have been anything
out of the ordinary, since
he'd already entertained himself
in that way many times
in his younger days.
No. This time what Marion
Gordon Robertson felt rising
inside him was the desire
to get down, to trade places
with that humble servant
boy bent over in front of him
and let him have a turn
at playing master.

And you know what they say,
that power tends to corrupt,
absolute power corrupts absolutely,
and an 18yearold white
boy in a basement with his man-
servant is a power
that knows no bounds.

And you know, too,
that secrets like these,
they don't last forever.
It wasn't that long until
Marion Gordon's mother
began to notice those
telltale stains on
her favorite nighty
and the funny way
Marion walked some days,
and as Josephine was
hardly ignorant of
the proclivities of rich

Southern white boys,
she quickly began
to suspect the worst.
Her fears were confirmed, finally,
when she returned home
earlier than expected one day
and found her son Marion
bent over the sofa with
his tongue hangin' out
and that big strapping black
buck working him from behind.

And upon this sight
Josephine Ragland Willis Robertson
did cry out:
"Oh Lord Jesus won't you
save my son, for a Haitian
devil has got him in the ass."

Straightaway the senator
was called home, and straightaway
the Haitian devil was
punished for his sin
and never heard from again.
And Marion Gordon Robertson
was confined to his room
with his Bible
the reading of which
might rectify his error
and also assuage his pain.

But Marion Gordon Robertson
could not be consoled.

For the first day he
cried like an animal,
like a puppy
who has lost its mother.
On the second day
he howled like
a lonesome hound
under the moon.
On the third day
he laughed like
a hyena.
On the fifth day
his mother and father,
fearing he would
harm himself
if not someone else,

sent in his old nanny
and former wet nurse,
to see if she could
comfort the boy and
bring him out of his fever.

When that old
woman went into
the accursed room,
she knew there was only
one thing for this boy.
So she unrolled her drapo
and lit the sacred candles.
She took some dust
from a leather pouch
and sprinkled it on
the flame to make smoke,
and before you know it
out of that smoke there
come a certain loa.
Now this loa he was
uncertain, looking all
around, but the old
woman she went up
and whisper in his ear:

"Tell him you is Satan."

So the loa he turned himself
all big and red, and he grew
him out a big pointy tail,
and he says to Marion Gordon:
"Son, I am Satan, at your service.
What seems to be the problem?"

And Marion Gordon said:
"Oh my darling Beelzebub,
can you bring me back that
Haitian boy who was so recently
my servant? I'll give you anything.
Do you want my soul?"

"Oh," said the loa,
"I don't really need no more
souls; I got plenty. And besides,
they don't do that much for me.
What else you got?"

And Marion Gordon Robertson,
who was soon to change his
name to Pat, thought very hard.

He put his chin in his hand
and tapped his finger on his
head to roust out the thoughts,
and this is what he come up with:

"OK, Satan, I'll tell you what.
You bring back my Haitian boy,
and I'll be such a servant as you
have never had. What I'll do is
pretend to be your constant
enemy, but I'll really be
your constant friend,
spreading your message
across the whole wide world.
I'll hold up a picture of Jesus,
but it will really be you.
I'll call myself a priest, but I'll
really be your lackey.
I'll call the saints sinners and
the sinners saints.
I'll blame victims for their
suffering, and heap fortune
on bloodthirsty beasts.
I'll take the God of love
and turn him into pure hate.
I'll steal money from the poor.
I'll live off the coffers of guilt-
ridden charity.
Anyone who says the truth
I'll call a liar, and those
who lie out of pure
meanness I'll call prophets.
What do you think, Satan?
Has anyone ever made you
an offer like that before?"

"Well, you know," said the loa,
"you talk a good game, but so
does every priest with his hand
in his cassock. But you seem
so sincere, and you know it's
what's in your heart that matters,
not what's in your head, or hand,
so I'm gonna try and help you out.
Now, there's not much to
be done, just now, about your
Haitian boy, since they already
strung him up out on the back
forty, but I reckon we can find
someone for you. Hell, you pretty

good lookin', I might just give
you a try myself.
So you go on and do
what you done said,
and more, and every night
when you go to bed,
you just sprinkle a
little of this dust
on your candle,
and stick your bum in the air,
and me, that is Satan,
will come take good care."

True story, every word.
And Pat Robertson said,
"OK, it's a deal." And ever since,
he have his loa,
and that loa have him,
and will have,
till the real Satan come
take him back
where he belong
and where he long
to be, way down
in that deep,
black
hole of hell.

TBR: Still writing?

"Naturally. What else would one do? I'm not actually working on any specific projects. I have a novel that I'm shopping and I'm not actually working on anything specific while I'm shopping. Also, I've been working hard to upgrade my private publishing operation now that I'm out of *UNO Press* and I'm trying to make it actually become a viable commercial enterprise, which is a challenge to say the least."

TBR: Well, you did a lot; it sounds like single-handedly.

"Yeah, I made a lot of friends. There were a few petitions that went out and there were about 700 signatures on them. I've got a lot of friends in the literary community. "

The petitions were in an effort to have Bill reinstated at *UNO Press* after his layoff.

TBR: Couldn't believe that. Assume most of that was budget cuts, UNO-side?

"Yeah, there were budget cuts, but there were people that'd been hired, just hired before me, just before the cuts, that'd been retained. So, it was also political. When you have a budget cut and you are a dean, who are the first people who you let go? Well, they're going to be your enemies, and you're going to keep your friends, so this was a fairly egregious case of that, actually. When you consider how long I'd been there."

TBR: Sounds like it was a pretty defunct press when you came to take it over and now it's one of the healthier poetry lists in the country. Are they planning on abandoning that program?

"Well, what they did when they fired me was they told the grad assistants to keep coming to work. And they said," he laughs and imitates the surprised grad students:

"'To do what?'"

The administration: "'Just do what you've been doing.'

"So basically those GA's have been running the press since I've been gone."

TBR: Sounds like you're outside the walls of the academy, which is where any undermining and subversive poet can do good work.

"I'm not unhappy to be gone from there, because it was a pretty miserable last couple of years. "

TBR: When are you going to be launching this new publishing company, *Lavender Ink* or *Lavender Press*?

"*Lavender Ink*'s been around a long long time. I think I started it in '95, but I've just revitalized it. Take a look at the website. I've got some new titles coming out and some of the people who were serving on the board for me at *UNO Press* are there, especially Peter Thompson, he's my main guy, especially for translations.

"Peter's a professor at Roger Williams. He's done some translations for me and I just published the first title under a new imprint called *Dialagos* specifically for translations. The first title is a new translation of a Nabile Farès novel, and translation is by Peter."

TBR: Where are you doing most of your translating

from? Mostly European now?

"No… not mostly anything. Actually, let me just find this list I just did of stuff that's upcoming," he leans forward, searching his computer screen. "For one thing I've got a Mexican poet, Gabriel Magaña Merlo, who, it's translated by Jill Levine—this is a translation that just won the PEN award—and I've got all the Chilean poetry, so actually, no Europeans." He corrects himself, "I'm sorry. Emilio Pravos, who's Spanish."

We remark on our experiences in South America, Buenos Aires specifically, how poetry is flourishing and vibrant there.

"They have respect for it down there. It's kind of interesting, dealing with works in translation, and especially of living authors, where I get to deal with the poets down there as well as the translators up there because they have very different expectations. They just kind of expect a level of respect that publishers like me don't give poets up here. They expect to get paid."

We laugh.

"Which is kind of surprising to me. I don't though, I don't give advances, but I do give generous royalties if they make any money"

TBR: Sure. Trade is very tough right now for just about any kind of book, and poetry is of course one of the hardest areas to sell just about anything. Usually cut off at about 250 – 300 copies before you pay any royalties.

"Which means no royalties," he says, smiling.

TBR: How is the scene in New Orleans?

"It's a pretty vibrant local scene, I think. There's a lot of stuff going on. Dave Brinks and Megan Burns are two people I collaborate with a lot. They have a press called *Trembling Pillow*. They also run a reading series called *Seventeen Poets*. A whole lot of stuff going on; they're publishing some interesting stuff.

"Lavender Ink was pretty much devoted to the local scene until now so most everybody I published was a New Orleany. There seemed like an upsurge in independent bookstores and certainly in reading series and book launches and things like that."

TBR: What about *Black Widow Press*, the one that did *Memory Wing*?

"Well, Joe Phillips, he's based in Boston. He has three bookstores, one in Boston, one in New Orleans, and one somewhere in Florida, I can't remember where. I'm going to look it up. He's usually in Boston. He comes down here quite often and tends to the store three or four times a year and he's gotten to be a part of the local scene. He's published me now and Dave Brinks and Niyi Osundare, another New Orleans poet; New Orleans via Nigeria, or Nigeria via New Orleans, lets say. So that's how we know him, I've known Joe for a long time."

TBR: Can you speak a little about how that book came to be?

"It's hard. Someone asked me this question the other day and I attempted to answer it and was unsuccessful. I just gave a reading in Lafayette and somebody asked, 'Where did the form come from?' and I just had to say I don't know, or, perhaps it's more accurate to say I don't *remember*, because I really don't remember the genesis of it and how I finally came up with this idea. But I knew I was going to write a verse memoir.

"I kind of started writing in something that looked like blank verse, but then I decided I wanted—I didn't want it to be that dense. I wanted stanza breaks. I decided kind of ironically on quatrains since the line itself is completely free. I decided I would use this four line stanza, a very regular stanza, as a kind of contrast with the freedom of the line and just gradually this idea occurred to me to divide it into three parts, and that just fell naturally into three parts devoted to childhood, and then, that period that I don't know how to describe except as *undergrad*, the four years of college, and then everything else.

"As ironic or bizarre that the forty years after those four years of undergrad have about the same amount of weight in my memory as those four years. Very strange."

TBR: Transitional rocky time?

"Yeah, I guess. It's just kind of the time when all these ideas formed and I pretty much stuck with them after that."

We discussed the hard-wiring that goes on in undergrad, the flashes of understanding and realization that you get and subsequently unpack for the remainder of your life, before returning to *Memory Wing*.

"The other factor that plays into to the genesis of *Memory Wing* is analysis. I've been doing Lacanian psychoanalysis for almost ten years now, and part of

the effort—you might have noticed the epigraph from Lacan—part of the effort was to come up with a mode of writing that was truly free association and that mimicked the analytic, or the monologue of the analysand in Lacanian analysis. Easy and difficult, because it truly is free association and the idea is not to try to willfully direct yourself from a memory but to just let the random moments of the memory guide it to the next one. That is what I was trying to do. This made it easy and possible to write something of that length in only about a year," he reconsiders the time, "I guess it took about 18 months—because I could sit down and write ten to twenty pages in a sitting."

He eats an orange slice.

TBR: Do you mind filling us in on Lacanian psychoanalysis?

"Jacques Lacan is a neo-freudian theorist and psychoanalyst from what, the 20's? who is very influential in post-structuralism. Derrida studied under him I think. It's difficult to sum it up."

TBR: You've been practicing though?

"I'm an analysand. I've been doing analysis. I'm not an analyst. I'm the opposite. You don't call it a patient, you don't call it a client, you call it an analysand. The gerund ending in French means 'the analyzing' because the premise is you do all the work. The analyst doesn't do anything except provide a blank slate. The whole idea is for the analyst to become that point of desire that is what's driving you so that, the less you know about the analyst the better. The more purely the product of fantasy the analyst is, the better."

We don't know if it's the orange slice he's waving around while he describes it, or the slight smile on his face, but we laugh.

He eats the orange.

TBR: Is this for *us* that it's better the less we know about the analyst, or are they, in that situation, literally behind a curtain, masking their voice?

"I talk to him over the phone so yeah, he's behind a curtain. I've been dealing with this one guy for five years. I have no idea what he looks like or really know anything about him at all. It almost seems to work better over the phone than in person though so I don't know, but, it's better if you can't see the person, if it's a dis-

embodied voice. It's all based on voice. It's very hard to describe from scratch."

TBR: Is the method socratic? Is this person behind the curtain asking a series of leading questions and you discover all this analysis in detail about yourself in light of these questions he asks, or is it sort-of a blank slate that you just show up and start talking and see where you end up.

"It's more the latter. It's not socratic. The idea is for them not to do any leading at all, but to let everything that comes out of it come from you. Basically sometimes a session gets started out of a discomfort with the silence and it's like, which one of you can bear the silence the longest.

"Finally you have to start talking. If the analyst were to say, you know: 'Tell me about this' or 'How are you doing this week?' or 'What did you do with your day?' or something like that. Even that would be enough to skew it in the analyst's direction. It's a very complicated business and very difficult to describe."

TBR: Is there any sort of revision or do you get to see like: 'They are the blank slate; they are then filled; you are presented with the slate?' Does that make sense?

"Well, the book [*Memory Wing*] is part of it, I guess. But no, it's kind of an ongoing thing. It doesn't really have an endpoint. It doesn't finalize. That's one of the distressing things about it, actually." He smiles. "You begin to wonder why you're doing it after awhile."

His orange-slice eating and the increased pace of the discussion makes us thirsty. We find water, and settle in again.

TBR: It sounds like a very fertile method for insights. Amazing what you can find by shooting the shit for a little while. That's part of the voice we find in *Memory Wing*. There's an honesty there, and a kind of vulnerability that we just don't see a whole lot in much writing and we couldn't tell if it was form or what, but that helps to piece things together. It feels like a very fresh venue to explore these things so we hope you're still planning to do writing on that. That kind of method and structure is quite different than things we publish at the Bacon. As much as we like those, they're very different in form.

"So much of poetry is. People think it should be very

tight and very revised and worked over and over again. The whole point of this exercise was to do as little revision as possible. I did a little bit of revision but very little and mostly it consisted of deleting some passages.

"The other thing, the most interesting thing about Lacanian analysis, is you learn to talk about absolutely anything; there's absolutely no restriction on it like you would have with any sort-of even vaguely social relationship. You can talk about desires and sex, whatever. I resolved when doing this, that I was going to do that, and make a concerted effort not to concern myself with cleaning anything up—offending people or anything like that. I also decided to use real names, not to falsify the names. As I say at the beginning of the book, it occurred to me that maybe the sound of the name; well, I just couldn't, it seemed too weird to change the names. It seemed like it changed the story completely, just the sound of the names. It didn't seem arbitrary. The basic experiment was to come as close to actual truth as possible."

TBR: How do you think you did?

"I think I discovered how close it is possible to come, which isn't very." He enjoys a laugh "It's like the epigraph says, you try to tell the truth and you always fail, but it is the failure itself that is the point. That's what he [Lacan] says in the epigraph: 'Words fail, I always tell the truth,' he says, 'not the whole truth—no one could do that, words fail. But it's words that allow us to hold onto the real.'

Maybe the biggest discovery I made while writing *Memory Wing* is how impossible it is to write a memoir or a record of something. I've only just scratched the surface. I could've, for example, written that much about a single day. To actually encompass all those years." He shakes his head, ruminating, "To give you some sort of inkling of what actually happened—that would be a tiny fraction of it. It would be fifty volumes of something like that. And that probably wouldn't even do it. That was strange and daunting. I did conceive of the book as being about that size when I started."

We were reminded of Bruce Chatwin, and one of the quotes he said when he was accused of falsifying his books, that he 'didn't write truths but wrote truths and a half,' embedding narratives into his life that might not have existed. He found that he was actually believing these stories he told himself.

Bill had discovered this early on.

"The very first time I wrote a memoir, which was

just a little test piece, I simplified one little story in it by conflating two neighbors from my childhood. Some years after that, I visited Fayeteville again and drove by the corner where one of these houses was and I was surprised," he laughs, "to find out the reality: that it wasn't what I had made up, because I had so assimilated my own narrative of the situation. I had lost the reality.

"I actually oddly enough didn't worry about that that much in this book. I felt that was an early revelation and so I didn't. In a way, the point of this book is the narrative and not the actual. I actually gave up, and I know that sounds ironic that I gave up on actually trying to represent it while at the same time I was saying I was trying to stay as close to the truth as possible, but I just quit thinking about the difference. So I just described the memory. That's what the description is—the memory—but it's an accurate description of that.

"I'm sure there are lots of inaccurate things in there. There are a couple of people who are in the book who've sent me factual corrections. The Frank Stanford stuff—that I've heard the most about. I said that CD Wright and Ginny Stanford were a trio living together for awhile and I was corrected and found that was not true, but I did say 'if rumor can be believed' in the book.

"We like that kind of approach, as far as memory is concerned. Maybe that's the best we can do when dealing with that subject, or, it's the most important thing that so much of our life is based on—what we remember—and that's more important than getting the details down.

"You're never going to escape from the thrall of the fantasy, so it's a kind of wallowing in it; that's what I was doing there."

TBR: As writers who don't publish much or who haven't, we find that one of the things that makes us most nervous about trying to approach things with real people's names is the reaction that the people whose real names those are are going to have. And that fear is probably … limiting. We read something once and it scared us into ever putting anything out there, that: 'Once a writer's been born into a family, the family's fucked.'

Bill laughs.

"There're all kinds of stories about this stuff and I think it's interesting, the whole debate that's going on right now, the whole fact check thing, what was that guys name, Dick Otto was it?—I just read an article by a fact checker about that issue and about that book. It's in the most recent Oxford American.

This guy had to say that the whole thing was kind-of a non-issue. That they were dealing with nothing. That it was a a blow-up publicizing of very insignificant issues. You're at the level at which I suppose one needs to check facts but it depends on what discourse you are in. You can check the facts in my book and they'll come up either true or false and either way I'm going to say 'Oh.. interesting.' I don't feel like I have any obligation to adhere to facts. What are facts after all—they're just a discursive convention. A fact is a particular kind of reality that is useful and acceptable in the social and political sphere. Facts are properly journalistic. If you wrote something about a friend and I don't know, you said, this friend got drunk one night and wanted to blow me or something, and then you published that and you have to deal with the fallout from the friend. I prefer to think about these things in terms of their overall social context. You say this in a social context and then you have to deal with the further social context of the friend. It's never neutral; you don't say something like that purely in the interest of truth. You say something like that and it is an act of aggression towards the friend and you deserve to be bitch-slapped, but by the friend, you know? It isn't really a devotion to truth. I don't know. It's a difficult and complicated question. You can say if you wanted to have a healthy relationship with your friend then you should be able to talk about anything, but in point, in fact there are no healthy relationships—all relationships are unhealthy. The idea that you can have a healthy, honest, true relationship is pretty much illusory."

TBR: Thinking back on you saying 'being aggressive towards the friend'– you're putting something in front of somebody, it's pretty face-forward. Boom. *You said it, I said it, we both know it happened, but now everybody else knows it.* Dangerous of course, but at the same time it may be for personal health. Personal exploration. Addressing an issue as it stands, because if it is enough that you're going to write it down…It's not 'my dog shat on the sidewalk'—it's 'my friend tried to blow me while sitting in the hot tub,' which is like, okay, if you need to think about it out loud on a piece of paper that means its important enough, that you needed to acknowledge it.

After you've written it, where is the end of your journal and the start of your publish?

"Exactly. I don't have any answer to it, but it's an interesting question.

"I had another thing, and this just occurred to me

the other day: we know the idea of poetry as a form of personal expression, that's an idea that has a history. I know there was a time when the writer had nothing to do with your internal quandaries and desires and things like that. If you were a writer, you wrote stuff and primarily not stuff about yourself.

"I think that's a notion, that to be a writer what you're doing is an internal exploration, I know this sounds ironic because were talking about my memoir but, I think it's kind-of weird that when you write you're doing this personal exploration. It's very complicated–what it means about the time we live in– and maybe it's a phase that will go away." He chuckles. "How would it be if we were as focused on externals as we are now on the internal?

"The Greeks, there's no such thing as a Greek memoir. That's one of the most interesting things about the Greeks is you can't find out anything about the writers.

"Certainly deliberately, with Socrates or Aristotle, all of these people, hidden behind these veils with a public appearance that's a quandary in itself.

"I don't think it's any more of a veil than our own veils of quasi-personal—we can call them fantasies as well as memoirs. It's just a historical shift that maybe comes with the genre. [Michel de] Montaigne maybe is one of the ones who began this sort-of thing. I find reading Montaigne—because, I had a kidney stone at the start of the summer (that is an experience that will truly gain your attention)—I heard somewhere that Montaigne has a great quote about kidney stones, and I went back and looked at some of his essays and indeed he was plagued with kidney stones. He had about one-a-month for most of his life, which is just a horrible fate. Indeed, he mentions them in almost every essay and it is almost always as an example of something. He's always writing about something politics or something outside himself but he'll throw in 'These trials in life are kind of like kidney stones, they turn your piss black and you may be writhing on the floor from the pain but you're stronger for it.'"

TBR: Did you writhe?

"Oh yeah. It was the worst thing. Pretty incredible"

It's easy to see Bill returning to the pain, the memory,

"The bad news was I was gonna live; that's how I felt, okay? That was the bad news, that it was just going to be 24-48 hours of this agony. I finally got to the hospital and they started shooting me up with Dilaudid,

they put me on Dilaudid every few hours for three days so I came out of it a drooling junky, but it was an interesting experience."

TBR: Time for you to write about politics and compare it to the black piss.

"Henri Michaux said, 'The fate of the Spanish armada is of no consequence to a man with a pen in his eye.'"

TBR: We're wondering if you could just explore a bit more that theme of the private vs. the public; where the gaze of the poet is. The Greek poets—those issues were universal in a classical or philosophical sense. The public would show up and listen to these performances, inspire fear and awe in the audience, and now it's taken, at least as a general trend, that poetry seems to be pretty academic and subjective and personal. We wonder if maybe you see any trend going back the other way—poetry as a public thing that can inspire group discussion, facilitate identity in a broader sense.

"I would like to see that, but I do think unfortunately that this notion of poetry as a private expression is the dominant mode right now. That this is what I see at poetry meetings. For example, I read at *100,000 Poets for Change*—a little thing here in New Orleans—a couple weeks ago, I actually wrote something just for that day and it was a political diatribe; it had nothing to do with me. But most of the people who got up basically apologized that they didn't have anything written really on topic so they read a love poem or a meditation about themselves.

"I thought it was interesting that, here's this movement, *100,000 Poets for Change* that Michael Rothenberg started and it's almost ironic—there are a hundred thousand poets who want change but I don't think there are a hundred thousand poets out there who know what kind of change they want. In other words, they're not politicized.

"It's a bad thing, really because it serves as a de-politicization of poetry. This is just the language the poets are complaining abou,t and it inferred a lot of their politics. You can look at movements like that as being exemplary of a rebellion against the neo-Romantic. I guess you could call it. Actually, not exactly Romantic, because the Romantics were truly political in their beliefs.

If you just want to contrast the personal and the political sides, I think both are going on. We just had this idea of the poet as someone who navel gazes and

thinks about himself and meditates on the fine points of feeling this or feeling that. I think it's unfortunate, okay, because you can contrast that with the notion of the poet as someone like Homer, whose job it was to historicize, to remember, to be the memory of the tribe. Or even, and this might sound ironic too, to a poet like Whitman, who felt it his job to commemorate, and to indeed historicize, to be a historical record of his time. I like the idea of the occasional poem. My students and a lot of people scoff at this idea as kind of an old and out-dated notion, but I like the idea of poetry having a place in the culture, in the wider culture, and not just a poetry culture. So I read a poem about monetary reform. Or indeed, the Pat Robertson piece as an example of my political writing."

TBR: We still get emails from people who mention that piece.

Bill shifts around his house, walking and talking.

"Well, that comes out of a tradition, it's not like it's dead. It's a tradition that comes out of the Beats. That sort of thing is going on."

We mention slam poetry, then how it's difficult to find a balance between private insight for uniqueness and politic for accessibility and identifiability.

"It's okay for poetry to be difficult and for you to have to work at it and maybe even have to do research to read it. In fact, I think we don't do that enough. There isn't enough difficult poetry out there right now. I'll send you this piece, see if you like it. It's being published in a political magazine called *Situations*. I was very happy with that; I'm very excited when my stuff gets published outside of pure poetry venues."

This is the piece he mentioned:

Wall Street Vegetables

(originally published in Situations, Vol. 5, No.1)

ezra pound says
that money should last no longer
than the value it represents
money used to buy land
should last as long as the land
money used to buy fruit
should last as long as the fruit
money used to buy meat
should last as long as the meat
when the meat or the fruit

start to rot and stink
the money that bought them
should start to rot and stink too
when that banana you forgot about
liquifies and soaks
into the ground under a cloud of flies
the money you spent on it should
putrefy in the grocer's pocket
and when that meat you didn't need
goes south with that
katrina smell
when it's eaten up with maggots
the money you paid for it
should be writhing in the butcher's wallet
and stinking to high heaven
and so you have to just wonder
under ezra pound's system of
monetary reform
what
exactly
would a wall street banker smell like
walking down fifth avenue
walking down madison avenue
cause if they smelled like what
the money they were holding had paid for
that armani cologne wouldn't make a dent
in the stench
that ann taylor suit
crisp and freshly pressed
would sag in the fumes
“what is that smell?” you'd say
as you walked by
smells like cordite
like gunpowder
smells like coal dust
like a sick-ward
like a cheap barroom stinks
of broken dreams
of puke and piss and watery beer
smells like copper tailings
washing down the river into your village
smells like sweat
like the closeness of bodies sleeping 6 to a bed
or huddled in cells awaiting
conscription or execution
smells like
death itself
eau de battlefield
that delicate essence
of a field strewn with ten thousand bodies

ezra pound's monetary reform
will never work
because the last thing wall street wants
the last thing people who make the money want
is for their money to bear
the trace of its making
the stench of where it's been

TBR: How about the book you're shopping around right now?

He laughs.

"It is the most political thing I've ever written. Its kind-of a neo-picaresque and it's modeled after Voltaire's Candide, where each chapter is a little political cartoon. It's not garnering much interest in the fiction marketplace, I'll have to say, but I've been working it pretty hard. Nowadays I have to worry about actually making a living so I have to try to make a couple bucks from it, which is kind-of ironic considering the subject matter of the novel."

We mentioned our own difficulties in not understanding money's root function. Not what it does, but more how it works.

"One of the worst things about the current political situation is that people who work in finance don't know anything about it. And there's a whole lot of people out there in finance who have actually no knowledge of economics, or, if they do, that knowledge is nothing but practical; in other words, it's how to get rich. They don't sit down and think about the whole system and the possibilities of other systems. It's perfectly feasible to get a PhD in economics and never read Marx, or even consider the possibility that there's another system besides global capitalism. The whole polemic of the world situation simply goes unquestioned.

"I met this girl the other day who was a finance major working on a PhD in finance and she was dropping out because she happened to be a radical, and she was absolutely the only person in the program who had any interest in theoretical economics at all. Everybody else was simply concerned with how to maximize their position with clever ways of making money.

TBR: We always find it interesting in discussions that others haven't even considered another possible world —as you said— to the current structure, despite there

being a pretty rich historical discussion of many different modes. It's like breaking a serious wall just to say this isn't the only way to do things.

We discussed Slavoj Zizek briefly, in reference to Lacan, then returned to econo-modes.

"Like a guy said to me once, and I can't remember the context, but he said, 'There's nothing you can do about that, that's capitalism.' And that's it, that it's this very base point of every conversation– that that is the one thing that would be inconceivable, that we live in a system that is not capitalism.

TBR: It's especially interesting to think about books and ideas, just so many changes in technology, and what is the consumer demand for poetry and for publication. What does that mean for the state of ideas? And what does that mean for places like UNO where it's political but also a fact about scholarly publishing? Unless you've got deep pockets, it's hard to get poetry subsidized.

"I have a couple of things to say about that. One is that I don't necessarily worry about that stuff. Dana Gioia wrote this book awhile back called *Can Poetry Matter* and I was looking at it and I was trying to analyze what it was about it that irritated me about it *so* so much and I realized that it was that the only criterion that he had for something mattering was performance in the marketplace.

"Maybe that's not really the only measure. I think it's hard to get poetry out there and get it read but that's not exactly the problem. If the poetry was more necessary, maybe it would be more read. If it were to step out of its own little sphere.

"Take the example of scholarly publishing. A lot of people complain about it and say it's just so specialized and only people in that field read the stuff but actually that's okay, no one complains about the discourses in nuclear physics or medicine or something like that being written only for an audience of experts. I think that poetry is kind of like that now. There is an audience of experts that we write for and that's sort-of okay.

"If you want something that's going to perform in the marketplace, then write something that'll do that. It is possible to write for a living, I know several people who do that. It's not what I want to do and so I'm not doing it."

TBR: What are the experts doing with the work that's being given to them? You've got your nuclear

physicist who, the papers are coming to them and then they're using that; if poetry comes to a poetry expert, are they: affecting zeitgeist? Are they advising leaders? Are they influencing culture?

"I think they're creating a complex discourse on the nature of truth. Maybe poetry works in the field of epistemology. Maybe that's what it is. I think when it's really most important that's what it's doing, but then poetry works in other discourses, that's why I like the fact that my poem is appearing in Situations, but it's not the only poem that's ever appeared in Situations. They do print poems now and then but they're poems with a political / sociological focus."

Bill goes wandering again, somewhere close to outside, maybe his patio.

"Discourses are never discreet. I think we worry about how small the audience is for poetry that maybe, in a way, is a distraction from the real issue."

He lies down on the couch.

"I'm just wandering around with complete abandon here. I just hope I don't wander into the bathroom and take a shit or something fun. I keep forgetting that you can see me."

TBR: We think it's rich where these domains can combine and clash and maybe even push boundaries a bit, you know? What can poets say about politics, about sociology or economy, in a way that might offer a new insight or new voice for people who aren't talking about these things? We like to see things getting out and crossing boundaries like that, if for anything but the friction.

Thinking about words being sold, or maybe more about the Homer example you gave earlier: here's a man who's depicting a history or describing something for the future, rather than for the people who are in it now. Poetry has somehow, through its lack of immediate market value some sort-of longer lasting and more 'back-end' value that may never present itself in the life of the poet today. And maybe that's not necessarily a bad thing—if, as you suggest, a focus on an audience size and a focus on a value might be a distraction, that one may not be writing everything one can or not trying to get out what one needs to get out and are instead more focused on the publish or the presentation.

That's not really a question.

Bill sits down outside after some more wandering, thinks a bit longer: “I think you lost me there. I think I lost the gist of the question.”

TBR: Twas not a question, ‘twas our eyes on the table, thinking about ourselves. Like poets.

Bill laughs.

“Samuel Johnson, quoted by Harold Bloom said, 'Anybody who writes for any reason except money is an idiot.'

“To a certain degree, I agree with that, or lets say: I see the wisdom in it. It's also interesting that Samuel Johnson was saying that back in the 18th century; it's been an issue for at least that long. I recall that there are ancient Irish writings complaining about the proliferation of poets in Ireland because it was handy to be a poet back then because poets were treated not necessarily with honor, but with a certain degree of respect, because this is how kings and royalty were remembered in the histories that the poets wrote. So they tended to put them up and save them from starvation when they could. Actually, it's kind of coming back to me – I remember reading old Arabic stuff complaining about all the jack-ass poets that were around. It's not a new problem,” he laughs, “this problem of poetry.”