

MAGGIE ANDERSON engages issues of class, labor, cultural dislocation, and political protest in her poems. Often described as an Appalachian writer, due to her West Virginia roots, Anderson's background includes a childhood in New York City with two teacher-parents, and an adulthood spent in Ohio and in northern Europe. These inheritances help form a poetry attuned to social and economic forces. Anderson taught at Kent State University from 1989 to 2009 and is professor emerita of English and editor of the Wick Poetry Series of the Kent State University Press. As a member of the faculty of the Northeast Ohio M.F.A. in creative writing, she teaches a workshop for graduate students in Bisbee, Arizona, each summer.



Maggie Anderson is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Windfall: New and Selected Poems* (2000), as well as *A Space Filled with Moving* (1992), *Cold Comfort* (1988) and *Years that Answer* (1980). She has edited *A Gathering of Poets*, assembled to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Kent State shootings. In conjunction with the 40th anniversary of the shootings, in May 2010, KSU Press will reissue this anthology. The site of the shootings was added to the National Register of Historic Places in February 2010.

In 2008, Anderson edited a selection of 55 poets from the Wick Poetry Series, entitled *The Next of Us is About to be Born*. She is the editor of the neglected Appalachian poet Louise McNeill: *Hill Daughter: New and Selected Poems* (1992), and the memoir about her, *The Milkweed Ladies* (1988).

Anderson's awards include two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Isabella Gardner Fellowship to the MacDowell Colony, the Ohioana Library Award for contributions to the literary arts in Ohio, and fellowships from the Ohio, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania Councils on the Arts. This interview was conducted over an eight-year span.

Hard Work, or the Long Story of Witness

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAGGIE ANDERSON

Conducted by Matthew Cooperman

NEW LETTERS: We started this interview in 2001 at the Association of Writers and Writing Program's (AWP) annual conference in balmy Palm Springs, and every time we started to wrap it up, reality stumped us. A lot of our initial conversation had to do with George W. Bush, the effect of his presidency, not to mention the irony of having the AWP conference on the "cruise ship" of Palm Springs. Now, post-9/11, with a new president but still deep in the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq, has the situation for writers changed? Do you think we're now less naïve?

MAGGIE ANDERSON: Perhaps. It isn't as if we were blind in 2000 to the coming threats. I was certainly not surprised to find that certain individuals or groups might want to attack the United States or the financial heart of the country in the World Trade Center. I was, however, stunned to discover commercial airliners used as missiles. I am sickened by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the on-going war against the chimera, *terror*, which is a rhetorical formulation of a war against feeling. "Terror" is not an enemy; it is a feeling,

or a psychological state. To declare “war on terror,” as all poets know, is to declare war on disturbing and perfectly understandable (given the historical circumstances) feelings in ourselves. This language short circuits both grief and rage, and it heightens fear, as I believe it is meant to do.

I find this difficult to talk about. I am troubled by the conversations I so often participate in that start with talk about what is happening in the world and then simply stop after some moments with someone saying, “I don’t want to talk about it,” or “I can’t even think about it,” or “It’s awful, terrible, unbelievable. . . .” It’s not that I don’t understand the frustration of trying to find words for what seems unfathomable, but if we stop trying to find a language for our feelings and our understandings, then we have acceded to our own censorship. This is a great help to the spirit of totalitarianism: that we will silence ourselves. Additionally, giving up on the complexities of difficult thought creates room for simple—and simply dualistic—statements by those who feel empowered by easy notions of what’s “right” and what’s “wrong.”

NL: How has that affected your writing? Do you feel afraid to write what you see?

ANDERSON: Mainly, I am afraid that I have not seen clearly—that my vision and understanding have been blurred by the representations of events. I worry that I don’t understand as much as I should, and I know that I am being misled by our government and by much of the mainstream media. Therefore, I feel even more the responsibility to write what I see, insofar as I can.

NL: We’ve been talking over the past several years about the question of witness, which is certainly caught up with what we see. We started with Carolyn Forché, and her definition of the poetry of witness, out of the anthology

Against Forgetting, as that “written out of extremity,” extremity of political or social persecution. What does that term mean to you?

ANDERSON: A writer I have turned to again and again since September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars, is Muriel Rukeyser. She was a profound poet of witness, traveling to West Virginia to report on the deaths by silicosis of the workers on the Gauley Tunnel in the 1930s (her long poem “U.S. 1” is an early, crucial text of poetry as documentary witness), and then to Spain as a participant-observer in the Spanish Civil War, and in the 1970s to Hanoi where, with another poet of witness, Denise Levertov, she protested the American bombings.

I am particularly engaged by Rukeyser’s definition of poetry as a way of *acting* in the world. Poetry, as she wrote in *The Life of Poetry*, invites us “to feel,” invites us to give a “total response,” to “meet the moment with our lives.” To me, this is the act of “witness” in its most effective sense—not as passive observer, or eye-witness informant, but as one who brings a total response to events, an opening of the heart and mind that leads to action.

“Remember what they tell you to forget,” Rukeyser wrote in several poems. By remembering, by standing with the people and scenes of terrible events, Rukeyser creates, in her poems and in her life, the conditions for positive change. That makes me think of a line from Adrienne Rich, whose poems also bear witness to the extremities of our times. Rich wrote, “The moment of change is the only poem.”

NL: How has reading Rukeyser changed your relationship to, or manifested itself in, your recent poems?

ANDERSON: The content of my poems has always included references to both public and private violence and abuses of power, as well as to the several wars of the last and the

present century. In my recent poems, I have found myself making more direct references to specific wars, for example, to the invasion of Iraq. In a recent poem called “March 2003,” I’ve also returned to an earlier interest in documentary photography, in the ways in which photographs both reveal and appropriate subjects.

NL: It’s a powerful poem. The juxtaposition of representations—of Matthew Brady’s Civil War photographs, the digitally smoothed Reuters photographs of the current Iraq war, and Mark Rothko’s luminous paintings—seems similar to your poems in *Cold Comfort* in response to the Depression-era photographs of Walker Evans, how times and mediums juxtapose.

ANDERSON: I am still interested in the tension between art and documentation, between witness and appropriation.

NL: How do you see your own poems as “documentation?”

ANDERSON: Since September 11, 2001, I have been keeping scrapbooks of photographs, news stories, editorials, and notes of world events. I have always kept fairly detailed journals of what happens in my private world and also in the larger world. I am interested these days, not only in trying to keep track of events that are happening far too quickly for me to digest, but also in tracking how we talk about these events—how they are presented to us, and how we react. I have backed off from this project a bit in the last couple of years because the newspapers and magazines and scrapbooks were starting to take up all the available space in my house. I was beginning to feel like the woman in Doris Lessing’s novel *The Golden Notebook* who pasted the walls of her apartment with articles, letters, notes, and messages about cancelled appointments and failures to repair things. She was keeping track. My scrapbooks have

that impulse behind them, too. One recent poem called "Beautiful War," mentions my scrapbook project: "This is the least I can do, to remember what happens." Or, "to remember what they tell us to forget."

In my recent poems, I have been using a looser, rangier line—moving the words all over the page. I think this is, in part, a reaction to the onslaught of data we all have to process every day just to get down to one or two nuggets of fact, or something like the truth. I am haunted by all I know I am forgetting. When did that passenger plane crash in Queens killing everyone on board and some people on the ground? When was the last time I heard anything about anthrax? Did they ever find the source of the envelopes of anthrax sent to members of Congress? What happened to the investigation of the crash of Senator Paul Wellstone's plane right before the 2002 elections? What about the space shuttle that crashed and sent debris all over eastern Texas and Louisiana? How has FEMA's work on the ground been changed by Hurricane Katrina: "Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?" I ask in a poem in progress. To respond and to remember all the things we are told about—I won't say "are informed about"—demands a particular kind of witness. This is not, of course, the direct experience of torture and terror that Carolyn Forché defines in her introduction to *Against Forgetting*, but rather the relentless daily hearing and seeing of so many wars and natural and man-made disasters and atrocities in so many places accompanied by the sense that we are utterly helpless in the face of it all. This creates a kind of slow saturation of empty rage and agitated impotence. "Pain penetrates us / drop / by / drop," Sappho wrote.

NL: You mention writing journals and notebooks. Have you been writing essays, too? That is, does this new witnessing call for prose, or for a mixed-form composition?

ANDERSON: Yes, I think it does. This is part of my impulse to spread things around on the page, to listen to different registers. This is nothing new, of course, except to me, and it also seems something more in tune with the times than my tighter more contained poems of 15 years ago. There is certainly evidence of more and more poets writing in prose recently. Rukeyser wrote in several genres, as did William Carlos Williams, another poet of witness and documentation. I am thinking of recent books that use a mix of newspaper articles, photographs, advertising copy, songs, and current political events as content and method of composition: Anne Carson's work, Carole Maso's, Campbell McGrath's, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*; and, in fact, Carolyn Forché's *The Blue Hour*, and many others.

A headline from *USA Today* in one of my scrapbooks from 2003, before the invasion of Iraq, reads: "Bush Predicts Post-War Stability." Every time I read something like that there's a slippage in my brain. It feels to me like sleepwalking. My new book of poems is called *The Sleep Writer*. I have been a literal sleep walker, and talker, all my life. Sleepwalking is a disorder of idiopathic origin. There is no cure, and no really effective treatment. This is the pathology, but I have always had the sense that sleep and waking are just two aspects of the same thing. As sentient beings, we are either breathing or we are not. Sleeping and waking states might be seen as ontologically neutral. Neither is more real than the other.

Certainly much of the information that comes to us now makes us wonder if we were awake, or did we dream that? Was there a white van with a sniper in it, or was that on a reality television show? What was it we were supposed to do with the duct tape and plastic sheeting? Surely, that cannot have been "real." As poets, I think we have some practice in translating overlapping cognitive states and spaces. As poets, too, I think we understand the power, for good or for ill, that is born from language that says one thing in terms of another.

NL: The critic Stanley Fish once said that “no university, and therefore no university official, should ever take a stand on any social, political or moral issue.” Hyperbole, one hopes, but the statement implies a question of your role as a poet in the university. How have you found your obligations in the classroom changed in the last several years?

ANDERSON: Kent State University, where I teach, has always had a highly politicized atmosphere, at least since the shooting of students there in 1970. This is not to say the student body or the faculty is necessarily more politically aware, or more liberal or leftist than any other university community, but given Kent State’s history, it is impossible to say convincingly that the university is not a place where political events are engaged. The legacy of the Kent State shootings is that dangerous events related to large political issues can and do occur even on the quiet campus of a Midwestern university. To teach or to be a student here one has to confront that legacy in some way.

I’ve always sought a larger connection to and involvement in the world outside the university (I won’t say “the real world,” because the world of the university is real enough) than a poetry classroom generally invites. I often ask my students to remember the first time the world really intruded on their private, enclosed lives. It’s a sort of before-and-after exercise: the moment when they realized that there was a world beyond the narrow circle of the family and that this larger world impinged on them. This moment might be the Iran hostage crisis, or the Challenger explosion, or the beginning of the first Gulf War. For most people, that moment is usually charged and alive and memorable.

Interestingly, I find my students these days so anxious, and so worried about their futures that they often look to poetry for comfort. In my own teaching I may, in response to this, have become not any less political, certainly, but perhaps more aware that there are multiple things poems

can do. One of them is to bear witness; one of them is to agitate; and one of them is to comfort or to offer spiritual rest.

NL: How did you first come to Kent State? In the poem "Beyond Even This" from *A Space Filled with Moving*, you say how you've been placed in the "afterlife of Ohio?"

ANDERSON: The afterlife is supposed to be a wonderful place! I came to Kent State from the University of Oregon, where I was a visiting writer for a year. Kent State was not a place I would have thought I would want to teach, but I had just turned 40 and started thinking about health benefits and retirement plans. I arrived at Kent in 1989, aware that 1990 would mark the 20th anniversary of the shooting of four students and the wounding of nine others on the Kent State campus. Shortly after I came to town, some of the Kent poets and I started talking about the possibility of a gathering of poets on the campus in May 1990 to remember the shootings 20 years before.

On the weekend of the commemorative event, over 300 poets from all over the country came to Kent to read poems. No one was paid for reading or for travel. Many, many poets came who had personal connections to the Kent State shootings or who were present on campus on that day in 1970. Among the well-known poets who came from some distance were Alicia Ostriker, Toi Derricotte, Gerald Stern, Yusef Komunyakaa, Patricia Goedicke, Jean Valentine, Vern Rutsala, Morton Marcus, Bill Tremblay, Michael Dennis Browne, and many others. Poets who could not attend sent letters and messages to be read at the event. The impulse to the gathering came out of a genuine desire to witness in this place, on this ground, the lives lost and wounded.

I have lived and worked in Kent for nearly 20 years now, so I know how much that gathering contributed to a slow healing process on the campus and in the town of Kent.

Three hundred poets reading all day and night for three days can have a powerful effect, though the scars from that event 40 years ago have not entirely disappeared, as the seemingly endless proliferation of memorials on campus to the slain and wounded students testifies. The poems read or sent to us for that occasion, along with others, were collected in an anthology, *A Gathering of Poets*, published by the Kent State University Press.

NL: I'm curious what went on at Kent State during the early stages of the war in Iraq. The "Poets Against the War" activity initiated by Sam Hamill's refusal, and that of a number of other poets, to participate in Laura Bush's White House symposium on "Poetry and the American Voice," really had an effect on campuses across the country.

ANDERSON: I'm glad you mentioned that. The "Poets Against the War" movement in March 2003 was a wonderful example of the power poets can exert through our poetry when we are communally engaged in witness to political events. Rukeyser again: "We are for poetry and the sources of poetry; we are against war and the sources of war." At Kent State in the spring of 2003, there were some anti-war marches and protests and some readings, but probably no more than at any other university—probably less than at many. One of the things that happens at Kent State, because of its history, is that whenever there is a hint of a student protest, reporters and camera crews show up and start filming and asking questions. Many students resent this invasion of media; they would prefer to bury the history of Kent State, and they don't want to get involved. So, ironically, Kent State's legacy may actually lead to less student activism than in some other places.

There was one quite frightening occurrence in 2003, however. There is always a commemorative event on the Kent campus on May 4th. Classes are dismissed for two

hours around the time of the shootings, between noon and 2 p.m. There are often anti-war speeches and readings, and these were especially heated in 2003, just after the invasion of Iraq. Some students, faculty, and townspeople had planned a peaceful anti-war demonstration that would march from the Kent State campus to the center of town, about a mile away. When the marchers began to leave the campus and walk toward town, they were met by 20 or 30 state police in riot gear with dogs, shouting at them to return to the campus. Several students who did not immediately comply were beaten by the police; a number were arrested. The entire downtown area had been cordoned off by the police, and no one was allowed to drive or walk through the 10 block area around the campus. It was an incredible show of force brought out for what was actually a small group of no more than 50 peaceful citizens carrying signs and chanting, "Not in my name." We have now seen this kind of reaction and provocation at many other events throughout the country, but this kind of "preventive" force is common here. I believe it is part of the legacy of the shootings.

It's interesting that much of the protest against the war in Iraq has been taking place on the Internet. The Internet is an important tool—without the blogs from Iraq, we would not know nearly as much about what is actually going on there—but I think there are still two critical modes of effective protest: not to show up (as in the refusal of the poets to participate in the event at the White House) and to show up (for the march, the rally, the singing). Sending money and signing petitions and writing letters are important actions and that is all many people are able to do. But, it is still important to "vote with our feet." I find it harder and harder to do this personally because I don't have the time, or can't seem to make the time. The loss of time to read and think and to be engaged in the footwork of political activism is another boon to successful totalitarianism. I cannot forget George Bush's admonition

right after September 11 to “Go shopping!” A society that is consumed in “getting and spending” does not have time for reflection, complicated thought, considered activism, and necessary rest. It is a society that is easily manipulated.

NL: Perhaps this all leads back to the question of AWP, and the political agency of the organization. In Palm Springs, nearly 10 years ago, we groused about the seeming disconnection between the world and the organization, the free trade riots going on then in Seattle and the M.F.A. recruitment panels. That issue seems all the more pressing today, and I’m wondering where the discussion about war with Iraq, or any other activist agendas, is at an AWP conference. What do you think is the role of AWP, or any writers’ organization, in engaging these questions?

ANDERSON: That’s interesting because, as a body, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs in some ways occupies the position of a university, and so this recalls Stanley Fish’s statement. What role should a writers’ organization play in the political life of its members? I’ve been involved in AWP since 1981, and I served as a board member from 1990-1994, which was a crucial period for the organization. I care very much about the organization, but it has changed in the last 10 years.

My sense at a recent conference (2006 in Austin) is that almost imperceptibly, the conference has changed over the years from a lively forum for ideas to a marketing and networking event. The main events of the conference now seem to be the book fair, the readings by selected authors from their new books, and the various arts management sessions that take place around the CLMP conference-within-a-conference. I attended five panels in Austin in 2006 and, in addition to the fact that almost none of them was graced with the presence of the advertised participants, most of the panels consisted of small papers on a given

topic, such as writing in translation, or the narrative “I,” or birds in poetry, or readings of poems from a new anthology or “nuts and bolts” talk about getting grants and organizing a reading series and raising funds.

I’d like to see AWP have more of an activist agenda, a more intellectually engaging set of panels, a more thoughtful and provocative involvement of the membership with the board and of both with the larger community of writers. One of the stated reasons for moving the headquarters from Old Dominion University in Virginia to George Mason University almost 20 years ago in the backwash of the “culture wars,” was to create a presence in a location closer to our nation’s capital so that it could serve as an advocate for literary organizations and for writers. It seems to me that has not happened. I believe the proximity to Washington, D.C., has had the opposite effect on AWP. It has become more bureaucratic, more a part of the prevailing government policies toward the arts and less willing to take any sort of controversial stand on current issues. I would like, for example, to see AWP, as an organization of over 7,000 writers at the last conference in Chicago, issue a statement about the curtailment of civil liberties under the past administration. That is not likely to happen. AWP has not developed as that kind of organization. I would still like to believe that it might change.

NL: Here’s a quote from Heather McHugh that seems germane to your work, and to this conversation. “Poems take place as time takes it, and they address their object as an attention does. The place of poetry is nothing less than the place of love for language, the place of shifting ground for human song, the place for the made for the moving.” Given the complexities of the moment, how do your poems “take place?” Do they do so in a particularly American fashion?

ANDERSON: That's a characteristically complex statement from Heather McHugh, whose poems I love. One of the things that strikes me immediately is the phrase, "poems take place as time takes it." I'm interested in the ways in which place and time intersect in language to create spaces both uniquely literary and also wedded to the quotidian. I like poems that use details, say, from the 1930s, and locate themselves in a particular geographical place. That intersection, as in some of my poems after Walker Evans' photographs, is rich for me because what's happening is not only spatial but temporal. We're not just looking at something but back at something from another time and space. The epigraph for *A Space Filled with Moving*, from Gertrude Stein, says that to be an American is to live in a space and a time "filled, always filled with moving."

I've spent some time in the last 20 years living outside this country. I lived in Denmark for awhile and I've traveled there frequently. My partner of 35 years was born in Denmark and lived there until she was 21 years old. Having lived with someone not American by birth has given me a slightly distanced, or maybe skewed, perception of my own identity as a citizen of this country. I can feel my Americanness, in Stein's expatriate characterization. She looks back to America and sees the place of her native country through both motion and time.

NL: Another poet who seems to have revealed place for you, and with whom you've had an important relationship over the years, is Louise McNeill. Did she give you a kind of permission to write about place generally, and West Virginia specifically?

ANDERSON: Absolutely. I knew I could write about New York City, where I was born. I lived in Manhattan and in northern New Jersey until I was 13 years old. So many writers are from New York that that was an obvious permission, even

a lucky accident, but West Virginia was another matter. My early education was interestingly complicated in that my father was an English and classics teacher, but he did not read contemporary works. There were books in my home, and I lived near a library; but in college, when I took my first poetry course, my instructor started mentioning names I had never heard—Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W.H. Auden, Williams, Olson, Pound—I set out to read all those poets, in alphabetical order, which is one of the reasons that Gwendolyn Brooks became such an important poet for me. As I was working my way alphabetically through the West Virginia University library poetry collection, trying to find and read books of poems by women, Brooks came up early on—another lucky accident.

I heard Louise McNeill give a poetry reading when I was a sophomore in high school, and the twang of her resonant voice, straight out of the West Virginia mountains, affirmed for me a lack I did not even know I had. She gave me permission to speak with authority of my West Virginia people and of the place itself, which had seemed so unappealing and ignored by what we call in the mountains “the outside world.”

NL: In the early '90s you edited McNeill's new and selected poems, *Hill Daughter*. How did that project get started?

ANDERSON: I came to know Louise many years after I first heard her read. I was working as a poet-in-residence in Marshall County, West Virginia, in the late 1970s, and I invited her to come and read. We started corresponding after that. The first work of Louise McNeill's that I edited was the memoir *The Milkweed Ladies*. I had published one book with the University of Pittsburgh Press, and I approached the director there about publishing the memoir. When *The Milkweed Ladies* came out, it generated a revival of interest in Louise McNeill as a poet, whose first book,

Gauley Mountain, had been published in 1939 by Harcourt Brace with an introduction by Stephen Vincent Benét. By then, she had studied with Robert Frost at Bread Loaf, attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and was publishing her poems regularly in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Although Louise continued to write and publish regionally, she seemed to have vanished from the larger literary world after that one book. I edited *Hill Daughter: New and Selected Poems* in 1992. It included the poems of more than 40 years, and, happily, received some well-deserved positive critical attention.

NL: In the introduction to the volume, you discuss McNeill as a regionalist, and you discuss American literature in the context of regionalism, say, of the 1930s. I wonder if our cultural homogenization has effaced region as a way of being a writer. Do you think American literature can still support a regional literature?

ANDERSON: I think it can and it does, though I may have a larger definition of "regional" in mind than the one I applied to Louise McNeill. Many ethnic literatures have a regional component, for instance Latino and Latina literatures. Much African-American poetry arises out of urban contexts, as does much Jewish poetry. In the last 25 years or so there has been a resurgence of interest in the literature (which has always been thriving) of the Appalachian region. I think, for example, of Jayne Anne Phillips, Robert Morgan, Lee Smith, Fred Chappell, Irene McKinney, Kathryn Byer, Ann Pancake and Maurice Manning. Bill Moyers and Robert Pinsky, as champions of a populist poetic, have also brought much warranted attention to the excellence of regional literatures.

James Wright, I would insist, is also in some ways a "regional" poet, especially in his complicated book *Two Citizens*. In this book, he really speaks out of his "two

citizenships”—Martins Ferry, Ohio, and the language and country of books. He uses the hillbilly speech of a four-year-old in and among translations from Catullus. He melds high Latin and down-river speech artfully into a cultivated regional dialect. Wright was a great model for many of us who grew up in the Appalachian region and are poets.

NL: James Wright comes up in your poem “Long Story,” from *A Space Filled with Moving*, in an epigraph: “To speak in a flat voice is all that I can do.” The poem goes on to talk about West Virginia, the intersections of family history and the history of place. As you say, “history is one long story of what happened to us / And its rhythms are local dialect and anecdote.” The flat voice that Wright claims is driving your poem, too. How has that idea affected your style, your sense of the language of poetry?

ANDERSON: Like most people who’ve grown up in a region where plain speech is valued for its presumed honesty and straightforwardness and where complexity of speech and mannerism are seen as suspicious and pretentious, I am resistant to what my family would have thought of as high-falutin’ diction. There’s the strong injunction not to “get above your raisin’”—in deportment or in speech. Still, I think I have become more and more interested in ways of combining what Fred Chappell has referred to as the “two languages” of Appalachian writers. I want both the speech of my West Virginia aunts and uncles who did not finish high school and the language I speak with my educated friends, in the classroom, and in books. More and more, I want to push the energy of a “flat voice” up against a thicker, more sophisticated diction. Wright did this with Latin, primarily, and also with meter. He would write flat, plain sentences such as the famous: “My name is James A. Wright, and I was born/ Twenty-five miles from this infected grave,/ In Martins Ferry, Ohio, where one slave/

To Hazel-Atlas Glass became my father," in that sonorous rhymed iambic pentameter. Recently, I've been trying to put more sass or jazz into my poems when the occasion seems to invite it, or to inject a speedier urban diction into my discursive mountain drawl. I am trying, as most poets are, to find a rhythm for the complexity of contemporary life as I experience it.

NL: There's also a working-class attention in your poems, really from *Cold Comfort* forward. Interestingly, it seems both an identification with and distance from class or work places. How has class been a necessary subject for you as a poet?

ANDERSON: Well, again, this is related to my two lives—my country mouse/city mouse selves. I had the privilege in my early years of going to a private school in New Jersey because my father taught there. And my mother was a political science professor at Hunter College until her death in 1959. But every summer we went back to West Virginia to visit my parents' brothers and sisters, all of whom worked in the mines or on the railroad or were homemakers. I had a life divided by the seasons and by class difference. I went to school with wealthy kids, who had extravagant birthday parties, huge houses, and chauffeurs to pick them up after school. I rode the city bus to school and went home to Appalachia in the summer. When I got back in the fall, my friends at school would ask me, "So how was Virginia? Did you do much riding?" I had no way of explaining to them the life I knew, and loved, in West Virginia. The reverse was true as well, of course. I became a chameleon, able to alter my dialect and diction as the occasion required.

My father and mother were both exceptions in their family in the degree of education they had. After my mother died, my father and I moved to West Virginia permanently in 1961, and I spent a lot more time with my working-class

family. So I had not only an urban/rural upbringing, but I also had a middle or upper-class and a working-class education. These diverse experiences are at the heart of my poetry. I have a poem called "Marginal," in *A Space Filled with Moving* where I say, "I prefer it here at the line / where the forest intersects / the field, where deer and groundhog move / back and forth to feed / and hide." The sites of overlap and contrast, of awkward intersection are where I have mostly lived and where I feel at home.

NL: Yes, yes, "edge" poetics. Yet there's an obvious paradox; you're an academic, and your life has been a combination of a certain amount of privilege and educational distance from the working class. It seems somewhat curious that your poetry would be driven by such an "industrial imagination," as it were. I mean, you've been described as a poet of labor.

ANDERSON: "Labor" is a very complicated thing. Writing a poem is a labor. My teaching is a labor. But, I know what you mean. I have been influenced by the work of many of the writers of the 1930s—Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, James Still, Haniel Long, Harriette Arnow, Louise McNeill—by their stories and by their stubborn courageous stance in the world. In a gathering of writers, such as the AWP conferences, I always wonder about origins. Did the writers who are recognized there grow up with books in their homes, or good teachers, or writing courses? How many of us are only now, being let into this literary world through a chink in the fence? Often, those who are last to come to the table are most resistant to interrogating the assumptions of membership. "Escapees" from the working class are often the most tradition-bound once they are let into the world of the academy.

In my own case, I knew at an early age what some people of my family did not have, and at that time, I had some of it. I think this has given me a boldness that possibly those

who are first generation out of the working class do not have. I've always felt it is important to tell my privilege ("Tell your luck," as Tillie Olsen wrote) and to remember how close I was to not having had it. Issues of class are always more complicated than we allow.

NL: Do you think that working-class strain is absent in contemporary American poetry, or that it's been written out of poetic discourse?

ANDERSON: I certainly wouldn't say that it's been written out. It's present in the poems of Dorianne Laux, Jim Daniels, B.H. Fairchild, Diane Gilliam, Jeanne Bryner, Maxine Scates, Robert Gibb, Patricia Dobler, Jan Beatty, and many other writers. It seems to me that there are actually many more poets who investigate, mourn, and celebrate the complexity of working-class origins or of working-class life in their poems than there were, say, 20 years ago. I know that some of this writing does not get the attention it deserves, although that's changing. The Oxford University Press anthology *American Working-Class Literature*, edited by Nick Coles and Janet Zandy, appeared in 2006. There have been recent Modern Language Association panels devoted to this literature as well, and now there is a canonical text.

An unfortunate tendency of readers in North America, or readers in the United States, is to value certain things when they come from countries other than our own. For example, there's a plain speech and a rawness and lack of affect or adornment in much of the poetry of Eastern Europe in translation. As Americans, we are very drawn to this. But if we see some of those same language characteristics in the poetry coming out of eastern Kentucky, we often do not respect it and want to call it unsophisticated, or naïve. Americans don't ever really want to talk about class.

I respect Tillie Olsen for many reasons, one of which is that she absolutely will not let us forget (see her book

Silences) that people who have achieved a great deal of success or acclaim as writers are often people who have inherited extraordinary gifts of time and money. It takes so much time and attention and devotion to craft to be an excellent writer, and few people of the working class who are so inclined have had it. Now, some of us who are privileged, who are educated and working in academic jobs for example, are writing out of our remembered history. We look back and re-imagine the industrial world we have been blessed not to inherit. We try, as Whitman wrote, "to drag the dead from their coffins," through the witness of art.

NL: Which brings us to where we began, with the poetry of witness, to remembering what happens, and where we've been.

ANDERSON: Yes. "We are against war and the forces of war. We are for poetry and the sources of poetry." After the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, I went back to the poems of Denise Levertov from the 1970s. She was, as you know, a committed opponent of the war in Vietnam and in Cambodia, and her poetry was a poetry of witness. One of her most haunting lines is from a poem called "Life at War": "Nothing we do has the deep intelligence living at peace would have." It is so important in a time of war—and when hasn't it been "a time of war?"—that we read and think and write with all the energy and intelligence and sureness we can muster. It is crucial that we try to remember what happens, because there are powerful forces invested in our amnesia, and just to stay current with the events of the world requires a diligent habit of concentrated intelligence that is hard to sustain in these days. "The disasters numb within us," Levertov also writes earlier in the same poem. Sometimes, what looks like fear may really just be "numbness." As poets, we have to seize every occasion that

will let us write past the pervasive numbness and toward witness to the truth of our own experience.

This is perhaps what you are doing with these interviews. Perhaps this is why it has been so important to me that you and I have had our annual meeting—to “work on the interview”—at the AWP conferences, and by mail, for nine years. Matthew, I think maybe this conversation has been our own small act of witness. And this may be the reason it has been so hard to bring this interview to any kind of conclusion. It is important to keep on talking.