

ROBERT STEWART INTERVIEW (APPROX. 5146 WORDS)

CONDUCTED BY JOYCE J. TOWNSEND

(Published in *South Carolina Review*, Fall 2012.)

Introduction: Robert Stewart is editor-in-chief of *New Letters*, BkMk Press, and *New Letters* on the Air. Stewart took over as editor of *New Letters* in 2002. In 2007, he was a National Magazine Award finalist for an essay in *New Letters* by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher; in 2008, The American Society of Magazine Editors awarded Stewart and *New Letters* a National Magazine Award for editorial excellence, for an essay by Thomas E. Kennedy.

The 2010 edition of *The Pushcart Prizes* includes three winning selections from *New Letters*, in fiction and the essay, a rare achievement for a single magazine; and the 2012 *Pushcart Prizes* will include two selections. Poetry from *New Letters* has appeared frequently in *Best American Poetry* and other *Best-of* anthologies. Under Stewart's editorship, *New Letters* has published essays and fiction by Wendell Berry, Robert Olen Butler, Mariko Nagai, Andrei Codrescu, Bharati Mukherjee, Edward Hoagland, Kim Addonizio, and Daniel Woodrell, to name a few. Poetry includes a translation of *The Inferno* by Mary Jo Bang, and works by Albert Goldbarth, Marilyn Hacker, Jane Hirschfield, Maxine Kumin, and the late Robert Dana, as well as others. In his near-decade as editor, circulation of *New Letters* has more than doubled.

Stewart's own book, *Outside Language: Essays* (Helicon Nine Editions) was a finalist in the PEN Center USA Literary Awards for 2004, and winner of the 2004 Thorpe Menn Award. His other books include *On Swerving: The Way of William Stafford* (monograph, Literary House 2007), *Plumbers* (poems, BkMk), and several chapbooks of poems. His essays on travel and language have appeared in *The North American Review*, *The Connecticut Review*, *Borderline*, *The Kansas City Star*, *The New Art Examiner*, *E: The Environmental Magazine* and more. Poems have appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Mangrove*, *Stand*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Literary Review*, and others.

Stewart has conducted more than 200 interviews for national radio broadcast and publication with Allen Ginsburg, Robert Creeley, John Gardner, Jane Smiley, Kay Ryan, Amiri Baraka, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Richard Wilbur. He was a Breadloaf Scholar in Poetry and won the poetry award at the Wesleyan University Writers Conference.

Anthology editorships include *New American Essays*, co-editor with Conger Beasley Jr.; *Spud Songs: An Anthology of Potato Poems* (benefit for hunger relief), co-editor with Gloria Vando; *Voices from the Interior: Missouri Poets*; and, co-editor with Trish Reeves, *Decade: Modern American Poets*.

Interview: "One More Poem, One More Essay: An Interview with Robert Stewart," conducted by Joyce J. Townsend.

**JOYCE J. TOWNSEND:** I have been wondering about your writing background and what triggered the shift (if it was a shift) to becoming an editor.

**ROBERT STEWART:** To this day, I cannot shake the idea that I was destined not so much to be a writer or an editor but a ditch digger, truck driver, general laborer – jobs for which I have great respect, and the places I started out. I have worked with craftsmen ditch diggers and with incompetent ditch diggers. We worked in rural counties in August, so rocky, it took dynamite and picks to open the ditch shoulder width. Just my head poked up level with the roadbed, and cars came by, kicking gravel down the back of my shirt. I came to literary work not until my late 20s, in the mid-1970s, and have spent the last 30 years and more trying to catch up. I crawled up out of the ditch into the academy and have worked shoulder to shoulder with men and women unarguably geniuses. Every day, they astound me.

In relating that, I am doing what I tell my writing students not to do, which is to start at the beginning. I say, throw chronology out the window; but something interesting happened in the process of my becoming an editor. I had started as a volunteer at *New Letters* and proceeded into the 1980s and 1990s; then I edited an art-criticism magazine called *Forum* for seven years, and a small literary press called Woods Colt (with my great friend Conger Beasley Jr.). I also worked as copy editor for Universal Press Syndicate, and then became full-time managing editor for *New Letters*. During much of that time, I didn't realize that I was an editor, that without realizing it, I had found a career. Then, sometime in

the mid 1990s, while reading the Zen scholar R. H. Blyth – by the way, one of the guiding forces of my life, Blyth – I came across the statement, “The work you are doing is your work.” At that moment, I began to confront editing as a value -- a meaningful career -- and I went into it with self-study and conviction.

I think of writers as the fighter pilots of literature, editors as the ground crew. Of course, many if not most literary editors serve both functions but with difficulty. The writing gets sacrificed, and I have known many editors for whom that holds true. I began to find my heroes not only among writers but editors, themselves – including the great Jack Conroy, an important literary editor of the 1930s, and the more-famous Maxwell Perkins of Scribner, and Harriet Monroe; and I began to pay attention to contemporaries like Clay Felker, Tina Brown, Lewis Lapham, George Hitchcock, Gloria Vando, David Ray and James McKinley, the latter my bosses for many years at *New Letters*. Those and many more.

**TOWNSEND:** When did your formal education as a writer begin?

**Stewart:** Here is my initiation as a writer: During the late 1970s and early 1980s I worked as a volunteer and then part-time staffer at *New Letters* for the poet David Ray, a powerful influence on me, as anyone who knows David would appreciate. David writes poems of social conscience, love, and personal experience with an intensity that remains all too rare. I often sat at a desk on the first floor of an old house used by the University of Missouri-Kansas City as the magazine’s offices. David’s office was directly overhead, and when he began to

compose a poem or story on his manual Underwood, which sat on a steel typewriter table, the hardwood floors of his office seemed to shake loose their nails and resound with a kind of thunder down upon my amateur's head. The window glass rang like church bells. The ceiling lights flickered. David pounded those typewriter keys, as if saying to me, *This is the way: Passion, Fury. Write something that matters. That's what makes a good poem.* Of course, he wasn't thinking of me at all at those moments; but I took it like that, yes, knowing, also and strongly, that I had to get out from under the thunder of his writing and find a space for my own.

When my four brothers, two sisters, and I grew up, we had virtually no books in our home, but we did have the daily *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; and one doesn't need to be a psychoanalyst to realize that watching my dad read the paper every evening – he, a plumber, welder, pipefitter – inlaid my perception of the world with respect for the printed word. There were other important early moments, including, in high school, reading the Robert W. Service poem “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” which I still have by heart; and, as a freshman in college, noticing a paperback of Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* on the dashboard of my friend Dennis Finnell's 1955 Studebaker Champion, and thinking to myself, that really looks interesting. I wish I could say that as a young man I read Proust, and Joyce, and Kierkegaard. My start was lower-brow. At some point, however, maybe from the accumulation of little things, one begins to find his passions. During my late 20s in Kansas City, I formed friendships in a

group of tremendously talented poets, including the late Mbembe Milton Smith, the now-playwright Frank Higgins, poet and artist Greg Field, and his former wife, the late Crystal MacLean Field.

**TOWNSEND:** This all looks to me like on-the-job training, as much as anything else.

**Stewart:** Yes. Students now at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where I edit *New Letters* and teach, often say they want to study to be literary editors. That didn't occur to me years back. There traditionally have been few formal programs of study for literary editors. The best way to do it is through internships at magazines and presses. Volunteer, if necessary. Write book reviews. Hang around the office. Study literature of all eras. When I first started working at *New Letters*, I could overhear David Ray on the telephone, talking to people like Hayden Carruth and Etheridge Knight and Gwendolyn Brooks. Man, I thought. This is where I want to be.

Let me add one more hero to my list of editors, above, and that's Judy Ray, married to David. She worked at *New Letters* for a while, and actually named the magazine. I frankly don't know if she had formal training as an associate editor, so to speak, but she mentored me in the detailed craft of production, layout, even editorial management. She had the one essential quality of a good production/associate editor: precision. Every address label, every line of text, every photograph, we checked and triple checked. I took more away from watching her work than she likely knows.

**TOWNSEND:** Your writing life progressed right alongside of all of this?

**Stewart:** I am slow. I often tell people that I actually thought of myself as a writer from my late teens into my mid 20s; and at about the age of 24, I realized that I had not actually written anything. I was a kind of Arthur Rimbaud in my mind, without the production. I had drafts in notebooks, nothing more. Years later, Grace Paley alluded to the exact syndrome in her own life. “I had a lot of first-class paragraphs,” Grace said to me in 1991. “The challenge was to finish the story.” I knew what she meant. I could well have proceeded that way indefinitely except for the force of will to engage the most basic writing lesson of them all (apply butt to chair). I took my one-and-only creative writing workshop, at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, in the early 1970s, from Howard Schwartz, poet and editor of Jewish folktales and myths. His gestures of approval carried me forward.

I hardly knew what I was doing, except that I kept doing work that felt to me important. One thing I learned is that writing and editing come from the same skill set, the same passion for language, with the distinction that writing is harder. Few things one does in life can be as mentally (sometimes physically) agonizing as the effort to write well.

In 1982 or so, I left *New Letters* and spent the next three or four years, surviving entirely as a free-lance writer for magazines and newspapers, everything from business magazines to art journals. I began to establish my own identity as a poet, essayist, fiction and commercial writer; I won a PEN

Syndicated Fiction prize for a story called “Who’s on Guard?” and began to move out from under the storm of other people’s greatness, to gather a sense of my own competence; but I never stopped listening for what my colleagues wanted to tell me about literary work, itself – I kept the sound of that fury in my heart, and still do.

Because I came slightly late to literary and intellectual life, I am always in a state of catching up; and I think the condition of being behind has made me a better editor. Of course, I might be rationalizing, but I suspect that my handicaps have had some positive effect on how I edit and teach. I am profoundly annoyed by unnecessary words and conventional language. They waste my time. Press onto that the fact that I am a slow reader. I hate clutter – what William Zinsser has called “the disease of American writing” -- precisely because I have so little time. I discuss all this in an essay called “Art Parts,” in *Outside Language*.

**TOWNSEND:** Manual work, as a topic, often shows up in your writing, so that paid off in terms of subject matter.

**Stewart:** Certainly, I read all of Shakespeare’s comedies and tragedies bouncing down the road in the back of a pick-up truck during the day, discussing them in class at night. This was not a hardship; when the truck arrived at the site of a busted sewer, the boss would tell me, “Dig that out and get the sewage flowing again,” and that was the hard work. The term “sewage” can’t really convey the nature and texture of what we waded into on those jobs. I have used the substance of those things in poems, especially a little one called “Boss Told

Me,” which is in *Plumbers*. I started in college as an engineering major, a mechanic, but could not shake my fascination with language. During the Vietnam war, I served on active duty in the Navy for two years, then returned to St. Louis and a dual life as a construction laborer and, by then, an English major at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

**TOWNSEND:** Is it true you once got into a fight with Chuck Berry?

Stewart: If you mean the father of rock ‘n’ roll, duck-walker, and master of the blues-shuffle rhythm, then that would be yes. I am not really a fighter, nor was I meant to be. However, I was working in construction, then, about 1969, and young. My great buddy Bob and I went with dates one afternoon to Berry’s “ranch” as we called it, just west of St. Louis, where it was known people could picnic. Berry’s dad actually treated us warmly, like his own children. You have to understand, St. Louis always has been a racially volatile town; one never knew what would happen. So the dad’s tenderness to us white kids really touched me. I never forgot how he rooted around in his garage for some picnic gear, and helped us carry a table down to the lake.

Then Chuck Berry thought Bob and I had taken his canoe out on the lake without his permission, which was, in fact, correct; he got furious and came running across the field, screaming. I didn’t like being screamed at in those days, and we had made an honest mistake; moreover, we had our girlfriends there, and I was not about to let him harangue me. I wound up facing off with him, really just a scuffle, chest bumps, some swings, before we got calmed down.

Years later, during 2007, I kept meeting up with my friend Thomas E. Kennedy, the writer, in different parts of the world – his home town, Copenhagen; New York; and somewhere else, I can't recall – it was a great year – and each time, usually in a bar, Tom would gather people around so I could tell the story about getting into a fight with Chuck Berry. Finally, after the third time (again, I am slow), I said to myself, *Be a writer. Write this down.* Imagine, almost 40 years after it happened. So, I wrote a longish poem called “Fighting Chuck Berry,” which *The Literary Review* published in 2008. The poem starts with the line, “If you want the legend, this one's true.” Writing this piece became a kind of rediscovery of the culture of the time, including the Vietnam war, music, and personal details. Thank goodness for friends like Tom Kennedy to remind me to be a writer and dig into memory.

**TOWNSEND:** Which aspects of being an editor bring you the greatest satisfaction?

**Stewart:** Thank you. Prospective editors should know the real excitement of the job. The most generous answer, and a good one, would be that I like bringing new writers to public attention, nurturing talent; and that would be true, as well. I am not without expense. The more immediate excitement, however, comes simply by being able to make things happen, almost anything, if I have the wits to imagine it. An editor can play with ideas – for example, find a guest editor to select a section of poems about the Iraq war, which we did in 2009. Suddenly, the cover art takes on new relevance (a painting called “Holy Land,” by

Ellen Pearce); the author interview, already planned, with long-time poet-activist Edward Sanders, seems like the perfect choice. The editor can shape ideas into material form through the magazine. That is really exciting.

In 2009, the writer Charles Behlen sent me a short essay to reprise the poet Winfield Townley Scott, which led me to compile a large retrospective of Scott, based on the fact that the magazine had published Scott's poems back in the 1946. I was able to contact Scott's children, who supplied photographs and other documents; and then, as if by magic, I noticed on the wall of a room in our building, framed, original manuscripts of poems by Scott, which I had forgotten existed. We reprinted those poems, with photos of the original typescripts, with commentary and a coherent, engaging retrospective of a great poet, whom few people even know these days. A major 20th-century poet. Once something like that comes out, complete, it all seems the result of some great, inspirational force, and not of my doing at all.

At the same time, shaping each issue can be excruciating, like composing a work of art itself. David Ray told me long ago that an editor doesn't just sit back and open the mail. Editors need to be aggressive, both in terms of intellectual energy, and research – they need to be investigative reporters, scholars, journalists, sculptors, graphic designers, and literary critics. Sometimes, my brain spins in my head.

Something else must be said. I have a great responsibility as an editor to fight for the integrity of the English language. I see a lot of phoniness in some

published works, and also in manuscripts sent to *New Letters*. Phoniness can be seductive. When a poem asks, “Why would we doubt what even the godless hold pure?” I am compelled to re-examine the whole poem, to ask who that big “we” is; who speaks for the godless; who says what is pure? In this case, the poem did not hold up against even those basic questions. Fiction writers, also, fall over themselves to explain the inner motivations and feelings of their characters, sometimes in the first sentence or paragraph. This is a chronic problem – perhaps, I might venture, a character flaw -- in many writers, including established writers. Instead of authentic experience or voice, the writer substitutes thematic summaries and ideas: I call it the poetry of wishful thinking. The poet or fiction writer seems to be saying, *This is what I wish my writing could communicate through drama.*

Who, you might ask, am I to say what error is? I say only this: It’s my magazine. Everything in it reflects my values and my judgments. If I err, I err on the side of what I understand to be integrity. As I said, there are plenty of other magazines. I once received an essay by the adopted daughter of a famous movie actor, but the essay was a mess in terms of syntax, grammar, and clutter. Believe me, the manuscript offered no special “voice” or quirky personality by virtue of its rawness. It was just sloppy; but below that messiness, the essay had a sweet, naïve charm about it. I spent a lot of time cleaning up the syntax and grammar; and the woman loved what I did and agreed that we would publish it. Just days after our agreement, I picked up another literary journal, and there was the essay,

already published in its original, un-edited version. I figure that this woman just was not familiar with the conventions of magazine publishing and thought redundant publication to be entirely acceptable. What I continue to find fascinating, however, is that the editor of the other magazine had done no editing whatsoever. I am not saying that my approach is better, just that it's my approach.

**TOWNSEND:** Please comment on what you look for in the kinds of submissions you accept.

**Stewart:** The example I just mentioned about the daughter of the movie star tells me – as I examine my own editorial self – that I do not look for perfection. However, before the writing gets into the magazine, I want everything right. Sometimes, that amounts to correct and proper English, and sometimes that amounts to quirky, eccentric diction. Everything, done well, is legitimate. One thing I learned to appreciate only after becoming editor-in-chief was voice. I read no small number of “publishable” stories, with all the conventions in place but without fresh diction and the spirit of personality. I now lecture on this topic, because I find that few people understand the mechanics – as far as they can be known – of creating voice. Nevertheless, an editor knows almost immediately when a piece of writing has it.

The peculiar quality of this job is that I need to recognize excellence in what has never before been done, and judge its value. The poet John Ciardi once used the analogy of Italian craftsmen who spend their careers creating a kind of

musculature design in glass objects, over and over. They do masterful work, but each day they set out to do exactly what they did the day before, over and over. I recently rejected a perfectly fine, perhaps publishable short story because it seemed to me a mere retelling of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited." That could be an excellent exercise, and the writer likely learned a lot about craft doing it, but the story offered only what had been done before.

Don't think that I look solely for what some people call "innovative fiction," in the sense of post-modern, multi-genre, or gadget-based story telling. I like those stories as well as any; but I also contend that a successful story told in traditional ways will do things with form, theme, and character that are entirely new. Every successful work of art, no matter how modest, offers some kind of aesthetic breakthrough, or innovation. I have as much fun reading Hemingway as Eluard, and I don't like to make distinctions in art based on categories. I look at the work, itself. Critic Roger Shattuck proposes that we look at art with what he calls "the innocent eye," which, in principle, requires that we respond to a work on its own terms and not from theory or ideology. That said, I do have three basic questions for evaluating manuscripts: (a) Is the voice authentic to the poem, story, or essay; (b) does the work advance literary art; and (c) does it offer hope?

**TOWNSEND:** Hope?

**Stewart:** When I read a story or poem, no matter how grim, tragic, or dark the subject, I wait for the writer to introduce some light into the matter. Call it hope but not sentimentality, because the approach is structural. Cynicism,

alone, for example, lacks complexity, as does any singular tone or emotion.

Huck's confused confrontation with the evil of slavery would not, by itself, make a great story without his willingness, at the crucial time, to proclaim, "All right, then, I'll go to hell," and follow his impulse to help Jim escape.

Cynicism seems trendy, sometimes. I want art that transforms us, if only by drawing the reader into a world of alternating truths, conflicting facts, and refusing to let us readers remain complacent. Jean Cocteau said famously, "Poetry is religion without hope." There are so many things wrong with that statement, I hardly know where to start; but it represents for me mere glibness. I subscribe to the more open injunction by film director Akira Kurosawa, "To be an artist means never to avert your eyes." In some sense, both statements start from the same position, absolute honesty; but Kurosawa leaves open the possibility that to look honestly at life can have affirming affects. Hope can be as difficult to define as any other quality of literary expression, so each story, poem, or essay needs to speak for itself. I have a new essay on the subject of hope called "A Creek in Missouri," in the spring 2011 issue of *The Connecticut Review*, as it relates to the death of my youngest sister. As writer or editor, one can at best circle the topic and search it out. Maybe this will help:

The winter 2011 issue of *New Letters* contains an essay by a self-professed "drug person," a woman who details unapologetically all of the drugs she has used and their effects on her life. The writing is absolutely engaging, authentic, skillful – like nothing this magazine has published before -- yet even good writing

would not have been reason enough for me to publish the article. It needed direction and evolving insight by the speaker; it needed to leave us readers in a place where we valued life, not addiction. The ending to that essay is not simple and does not capitulate to the speaker's position that she loves drugs (Her given name on her birth certificate was Cocaine Comfort Neal, for goodness sake). The essay ends with no moral. The speaker's view of life, however, appears more complex at the end than at the start, an effect that tells us that the speaker has changed, or tried to change, in life-affirming ways. That's enough for me.

**TOWNSEND:** What aspirations do you hold for yourself?

**Stewart:** Kindness. I have to work at it. I do my best with humor and courtesy, but kindness can be harder to grasp. An editor told me once that he couldn't sleep some nights for having to say no to so many writers. I, on the other hand, sleep fine as long as I have treated writers and students professionally. Like adults, let's say. The boss of a ditch-digging crew where I once worked told me my strong back was all he was paying for. "Take good care of it," he said. To me, that was an act of kindness. He could not have been more clear or honest. As a teacher, my biggest fear is failure to be clear. After that, students need to do the work required, and to turn it over.

I don't expect perfection, from others or myself. I have not published a book of my own poems since the 1980s, yet I write poems every day and publish them in magazines; I aspire to shape a manuscript into something worthy of the

term “book,” and to get it published. I aspire to write more and better, especially essays. ~~I am excited.~~

**TOWNSEND:** Do you enjoy traveling in your spare time?

**Stewart:** Travel forms a unifying element of my 2004 book of essays, *Outside Language*. Especially during the 1990s, I made travel a big part of my life. I arranged to take leaves from my job at the University to spend stretches of weeks in places like San Francisco, Miami, Brazil. In San Francisco, I became an expert on cheap rooms, and spent several weeks in a hotel for about \$18 a night. I decided that cost too much, and a customer at the Café Puccini on Columbus Avenue led me to an unmarked door, where I rang the bell and met an older Italian woman who led me to her kitchen; she was cooking neckbones, just like my Sicilian grandmother once did. She had a room for \$12 a night, but first she needed to interview me to make sure I was a suitable tenant. Ha. The poet George Evans, who grew up in that city, showed me a hotel in China Town run by Basque people, also, for about \$16 a night at the time.

In the early 1990s, I made what was for me a breakthrough trip, traveling to Ecuador alone, without Spanish or friends or much sense, and into the jungle, as well. In another essay -- yet to be finished but titled “Drunk, Happy, and Carefree,” which is a quote from Henry Miller – I talk about how one learns to keep going, in the face of fear and even danger. “Sometimes the stupid get lucky,” I write somewhere in that essay, “and surely that was me.”

Travel is the physical manifestation of hopefulness, in my view. It opens us to the contrary view, puts us at risk, changes our minds. When my son, Ben, was 16, he and I went to Italy and Sicily for one month, partly to visit Sicilian relatives, whom I had only just discovered through another cousin in St. Louis. Nothing, in retrospect, needed to work out well on that trip; yet everything did. Somehow, we managed the Italian train system to travel from Rome to Palermo. As we rolled into the terminal, my son asked me, “How will we know which ones are our relatives?” Just at that moment, we looked out on the platform to see four people jumping up and down, waving their arms wildly, and yelling. “I think we found them,” I said, and we, indeed, had found a long-lost and lovely part of our family. After two weeks in their home, we left on the train out of Palermo, and my son was inconsolable. He told me he felt more homesick leaving our family in Sicily than when he left his actual home. His sadness answers all questions about travel and shows me how such discoveries can lead to both pain and love, regret and overpowering joy.

I say these things to suggest the multiple and contradictory powers of travel, the humility and vulnerability required also of writers each time they sit down to work. Travel is that kind of dream.

**TOWNSEND:** What is your hope for the direction and future of New Letters?

**Stewart:** My hope for the future is that I find one more poem (perhaps today) that causes me to run home with the manuscript so I can read it to my wife

at dinner. I want to call my wife during the day and say, “Let me read you this paragraph from an essay I just found.” It comes down to that. I want one more poem at a time, one more story or essay at a time, just one. I don’t think in terms of trends, or markets, or demographics. The writing that should show up in the magazine should make me want to run home with it crumpled in my fist and say, Lisa, sit down. Listen to this.

Of course, *New Letters* has a tradition of being innovative with formats to distributed literature. Our national, weekly, public-radio series, *New Letters on the Air*, has been broadcasting for over 30 years. Now, we are rebuilding our Web site to make over 1,000 interviews accessible through podcast, streaming, and other formats. We have published a *New Letters Book Reviewer* (now retired) and broadcasted *New Letters Magazine-TV* (also retired); but we do not rest. Our Internet operation has been evolving, but slowly; and we plan a digital edition, on-line submissions, and other e-forms. One thing, in my view, must remain: printed and bound journals represent the essential aesthetic life of literature—we stand by the print edition.