

10-9-2002

## Kevin Clark: 10-09-2002

Kevin Clark  
slokev6@gmail.com

Stan Sanvel Rubin

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers\\_videos](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers_videos)

---

### Repository Citation

Clark, Kevin and Rubin, Stan Sanvel, "Kevin Clark: 10-09-2002" (2002). *Writers Forum Videos*. Video 9.  
[https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers\\_videos/9](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/writers_videos/9)

This Video is brought to you for free and open access by the Writers Forum at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writers Forum Videos by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

Clark:

Parallel paths.

Today you're lucky, in love with your wife  
for the first time in weeks, both of you  
out for a walk in the overgrown park.

No need to hold hands  
like that sadly animate couple  
you can see through a clearing  
on a parallel path.

She lets

go and turns from him. You notice  
how in their weather misery hangs  
faintly familiar in the cold shadows.  
As if having recently unlearned  
the habit of empathy, the sky  
over their forest seems to laugh  
at whatever they say, a woman  
turning from a man, their dog  
flexed on a heap of duff  
pretending to study the sparrows.  
Now the woman feigns confidence,  
stepping gracefully  
away. Two lives severed  
irrevocably.

Such a capricious drug,  
the present. Look for instance  
at this woman's immediate future.  
Like yourself once, she will forget  
the names of old haunts, her voice  
a clever imposter, someone else  
filling her mouth, not with words,  
but vocables intending her own worth.  
Or right now: how all of these thoughts  
have occurred to you in a flash.  
When you look up, your wife's vanished.  
But really she's there, of course,  
off the path, among the ancient  
waist-high grasses, holding out to you  
a single mutable wildflower  
burning in its own ochre light.  
From here to that flower exist  
no guarantees. Best to get on with it.

Rubin:

Welcome to the Brockport Writer's Forum, an ongoing series of  
conversations with leading literary contemporaries. I'm Stan Rubin your  
host. Our guest today Kevin Clark comes to us from California. He was  
born and raised in New Jersey and educated at the University of Florida  
and at the University of California at Davis where he received both an MA  
in Creative Writing and a PhD degree in literature. His work has appeared  
in many magazines nationally for years including the Antioch Review, the  
Georgia Review, College, English and numerous others, but this last year,  
2002, he has after several topics we'll be discussing his first prize-  
winning full-length collection in the Evening of No Warning, published by

New Issues Press, and underwritten by the Academy of American Poets a Greenwall Fund Grant. Clark's poems have appeared widely but this is his full-length collection and that will be the subject of our conversation here. He teaches at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo where he lives with his wife and two children. Also speaking with us today is Ralph Black, a poet and a colleague of mine, Professor in the Department of English at SUNY Brockport. Ralph, I'm glad you could be with us.

Black:  
Thanks.

Rubin:  
And, Kevin, welcome to the Writer's Forum.

Clark:  
Thanks for having me, Stan.

Rubin:  
I kind of stumbled there on your book, but in fact, the poem you just read, *Parallel Paths*, seems to me to raise a number of issues we are likely to be exploring a bit in this conversation. It's first of all very much a poem about love and love's aftermath and difficulties.

Clark:  
And the frailty of marriage, too. You know I was in, I don't know if you've been to the forest outside of Princeton. There's a virgin forest which they cut a grid through. The institute for Advanced Studies right outside there, and I used to walk occasionally there with my wife, and it just became the setting for the poem. And I thought often I write poems I don't know what's going to happen. I just throw a line down and I see what's going to happen next and I discovered that this was the setting and this was the subject. Somebody else is breaking up, the you or the protagonist in the poem is going to, is there with his wife and he's watching somebody else breaking up and, of course, there's parallel concerns.

Rubin:  
The figure of the wife at the end really takes on a lot of resonance, almost mythological. I can picture someone in a European film in a field of flowers.

Clark:  
Yeah, and of course, she's vanished at first at least for the reader, but no, it's just that the husband can't find her. There she is and she's somehow touched by this ochre light and he's in love with her for the first time in weeks, right? There's the cycle of love that you can go through in a long-term relationship although I must say I started writing this poem before I was married, I finished it after I was married. My wife always thinks that this is a little odd. She's always a little uncomfortable that opening line in the poem.

Rubin:  
We were going to ask you what you thought of that.

Clark:

Yes. She's always --

Rubin:

-- but I mean luck and love go together.

Clark:

Well, yeah, lucky in love is that phrase, that cliché, right? But I put a comma between it so it says that today you're lucky, in love with your wife for the first time in weeks. That's right. So.

Black:

The poem to me one of several wonderful love poems in this book and, you know, I think about this sprig of the mutable wildflowers at the end and it's so far away from the romantic, you know, rows that we know that's been the tradition for such a long time and many of your love poems really open up the territory of what a love poem is. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about your, maybe your reading of love poems in the past and sort of how you see your poems following in the tradition.

Clark:

Well, you know, there is a tendency I think, and I'm sure we've all seen it with our students, but I think it existed certainly before this, excuse me, before the 20th Century and well into the 20th Century to over romanticize love to over romanticize maternal love, et cetera. And I think in the poems I'm writing about marriage and love I don't want to reduce the intensity of passion that exists, but I also want to establish the difficulty of maintaining not just passion but friendships that over a long period of time you have to work on these things. These things are hard earned and that kind of reality sometimes, that kind of realism I should say, sometimes bothers traditionalists or romantics who want to think everything is beautiful all the time, you know.

Rubin:

Right.

Black:

And part of that interest in your poems is, of course, the physical world, the physical love, a wonderful sense of the erotic and a lot of these poems and

yet in a poem like the gift arguably the most erotic poem in the book there's a way in which the attention in the poem weaves in and out of, you know, of just description but also very self-conscious thinking about, you know, the mind is sort of moving in all sorts of directions and these two kind of threads interweave throughout the poem.

Clark:

Yeah, and I think they also interweave in some of the other poems the same threads, but and I think you're right. The gift is an interesting poem because while it's written in the third person it's about a man, I sometimes write poems about men who do foolish things. I rarely poems, for some reasons I rarely write poems about women that do foolish things. Occasionally, but because I'm a man and I've done so many foolish things, I find myself on themes like this and this is a case where a couple years

ago had an argument and then had this [inaudible] argument, you know, typical, had this great sex just spectacular sex, and they're married for a while. And her birthday is coming up and he thinks, oh, I'm going to recreate that sex, right? I'm going to make it and, of course, you can't do that. Everybody knows you can't do that, right? It's like enlightenment. You may be able to prepare for enlightenment but you can't pursue it. Well, it's the same thing with good sex, right? And so in that poem there's the old, there's what happened in the past and there's what's happening now and there is his consciousness and then in a way he is conscious of her consciousness and she's smarter than he is. She knows you can't do this.

Rubin:

I wonder if we could ask you to read the poem.

Clark:

Okay.

Rubin:

Ralph has prepared for it. The Gift received the Charles Angoff Award from the editors from the Literary Review.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

And here's an erotic poem as you have put everyone on notice.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

If you would be so kind as to read it.

Clark:

Yes. I guess I should say that. It's a good thing my wife is not in the studio because even though it's written in the third person and some of it's made up, et cetera, we have an agreement that I will never read this poem while she's in the audience because she refuses to have people conscious of her while this is going on. Okay, it's called The Gift.

For months he has been reinventing the room, the burnished oils, the pipe bowl of dark pot, the infinity quilt, her two birthday presents silk-wrapped and staged next to the port on the antique table. He's impassioned: Long ago, after a weekend gritted with slant jibes and too much silence in the car, when the snare of doubt caught her breath like a mute future, they pulled hard off the road for dinner and a cheap room. That night, wordless in the stale dark, without a kiss, they let memory roll its hands over their bodies. The day's pain fell behind their gathering breath. A new heat pushed her legs to the bed's reach, and he followed its path down and down to its source. He couldn't know that in a few moments his life would change forever, the room transformed, another world. And now, in preparation for her fortieth birthday, even as he

tastes the last signals of her readiness, he tries to lead her into the same lengthening secret of that night.

His thumbs work deep ovals into the raised strands of her thighs. She is about to come, and he pauses, breathes lightly out over her stomach, which begins to lower, her back settling from its arch. His own desire was to know her rising as she had years ago into the motel air and then stayed and stayed there as he kept giving the lubricous gift to her, how way off, beyond her stomach and breasts, her call began, no, not a call, but a high thin weeping, which over the longest time lowered into a sad, sung cadence of ecstatic breathing, and continued, her arms limp, her palms turned up and lax, her face leaned aside, a tear-trace streaming to the pillow, and still he tendered the same, slow tidal pace, the room atomized around them, for new life pouring on and on into him. And so, finally, here in this long-reserved, perfected room, he bends down to her again and she lifts into the altitudes of the rural afternoon light, a percussive tremor pressing out the windows-and soon another-and quick again-until laughing and able to bear no more she pulls him up into her, her fingers spread in his hair, and stares into his eyes as her breath returns. At first he swims in a slight sadness, past the failed inventions, until he closes his eyes to take the light coming up from below. He knows he should be grateful they're without the old catalyzing pain. And he recalls the fifth or eighth minute of her song in that worn room when, apart and untouched, he came in a sudden, single wave as indeliberate as her weeping. Now he hears his name breathing in her voice like a gift, and, quietly, he lets go.

Black:  
Wonderful.

Clark:  
Thanks.

Black:  
What a beautiful poem. I love the room atomized around them. I love that sort of attention to that sort of detail in this poem and others. Can you, can you talk a little bit this poem to me and many others it's very intimate. It seems to be inclined almost, I wouldn't quite say this but almost toward a confessional mode, but it's also it's interested in story and a narrative. It also has what we were talking about before the interest in the intellect and meditation. Can you talk a little bit about your reading and your influences as a poet over the years?

Clark:  
Yeah, you know what's interesting let me start with this poem. There's a poem by Robert Hass called Privilege of Being. And it's a beautiful, exquisite poem. And I'd read the poem and knew it well and in that poem there's a couple and they have sex and the angels, these slightly looking kind of angels are watching them. At any rate, I was talking to the poet, Dorianne Laux, and she's good friends with the other poet, with another poet, Kim Addonizio, both of them are terrific writers. In fact, both published by BOA in this area, and they had read that poem and they had been talking to Hass and he has that one line which is kind of a [inaudible]. It's not a very good line, it's she's about to cum, right?

And so they challenged each other to writing a poem with that line and then Dorianne said why don't you? And I was heading off to a little town that I sometimes go to write in there's a cabin there in Bolinas, California, which is right out on the water of the Pacific and I think the Hass poem was the starting place for that, but like the Hass poem I don't think it's quite confessional, you know. For me a confessional poem is written in the first person and it usually is establishing something embarrassing or humiliating about that first person character and we're supposed to understand that this is a universal that we're all normal in this, you know, uncomfortable way. Because this poem is not in the first person it's not quite that confessional as you said not quite, but it's the kind of thing that I like that Hass did, which was to uncover an intimate moment that is not often written about. In this case not just marital sex but all sex and to show us something that we're not likely to see and, of course, I guess in all of our poems that's what we want to do is show us something that we're not likely to see.

Black:  
Right.

Clark:  
To go to the larger question you asked, you know, I think you asked about my reading and who I have been, is it fair to say who I have been --

Black:  
-- influences. I mean just you know as you when you think back to your first readings of poets in your youth who were they and do you see them shaping your career.

Clark:  
There's two different stages to that. The first influences I mean I was handed a book by a good friend of the family. It was Robert Frost's Selected Poems, the Untermeyer book with the, you know, funny little drawings and things in it, and I read the whole thing and loved it. And, in fact, typed up lines from Frost and taped them up in the house especially in the dining room, which my mother barely put up with. And then I loved, you know, the same guy then gave me Dylan Thomas, he gave me Auden. Finally I went off to college and in my freshman year I heard a professor read out loud Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. And I said, that's, that, I didn't put it in so many words, I said that is congruent with my interior life. I want to be able to do that. Not that I want to be as pathetic as Prufrock, but I want to be able to do what that is. Now, of course, nobody can reproduce Prufrock, but I think in my early stages Elliott was the principle influence and then as I have gotten older there have been others Hass and I would say Norman Dubie who is a considerably different writer but who is very good with finding an odd kind of moment sometimes between people, sometimes when somebody is alone which is very, very telling and very idiosyncratic and I was always influenced by Dubie since I first started reading him.

Rubin:  
You studied with Karl Shapiro.

Clark:

I studied with Karl Shapiro at the University of California of Davis, yes.

Rubin:

Was he an influence?

Clark:

Karl wrote a beautiful poem you might know. It's not one of his most famous poems. It's a poem called Albade [phonetic] and it actually influenced this and some of the other poems in my book. Now most of Karl's poems did not influence me, but this poem did and it's about a husband going off to work, he's about to drive off to work, and his wife is at home and she's still in her robe. And the extraordinary physical and emotional love he bears for her as he is heading out the door, as he is getting into the car, is exquisite. The idea that he's leaving is the problem, he has to go away from her, and on this particular day it's very hard.

Rubin:

You are very much a poet of time and transition aren't you?

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

The poem you read, Parallel Paths, is that wonderful line that pulls the poem together such a capricious drug the present.

Clark:

The present, yeah.

Rubin:

The constant awareness that time is splitting and moving on. Is it fair to describe the book as some have as nostalgic? What is the element of nostalgia in it?

Clark:

That's a very good question. That's an interesting question. I think there is an element of nostalgia in it, but I don't know, from my point of view, of course, the poems are there for anybody to make of what they will, right? And what the poet says is often the last thing you should listen to, but I would, I think that if there's one thing that's consistently longed for in this book is a kind of absoluteness that doesn't exist for the protagonist or the narrators of the poems. You know a kind of old fashioned faith in God or something like that which the narrator longs for. And in the last section of poems in the book it's about, it's five poems all unified in a sequence about my father's death. He died when I was 14. And so in some ways I think there is not to get too Freudian about myself but there's the loss of the father and I was deeply, deeply in love with my father, and then there was in these poems a kind of simultaneous loss of faith and I think what I tend to do although I hadn't thought about this that much so I'm going to kind of here in the middle of, I'm walking on a plank here as I say this, but I



think what I'm doing at times is turning towards romantic love and martial love as at least, at least a provisional answer to that longing.

Black:

The end of the steeple, you know, enacts that exactly believing absolutely in my love for both of them only that as the family I'll listen quietly in my chair her lyric unchanted words breaking like revelations across his face.

Clark:

Yes, yeah. You know I hadn't thought about that as I was giving that answer, but that's, that I think in a way those lines could almost stand for not just an answer to Stan's question, but to everything in the book. That this is what this character is doing in this book.

Rubin:

The character has a lot of investment in family and the figure of the wife who is constantly on mythologized as some sort of center or anchor in a way.

Clark:

Well, that's not too far from the truth. My wife is --

Rubin:

-- well, the question about the confessional [inaudible], but I'm going to, there's a poem I really like in here is [inaudible].

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

And this poem far from romanticizing at all or mythologizing at all actually takes a very rather remarkably cold eye view, self-reflexive view, on the speaker's part of male love, male lust, male sexual need.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

It's a pretty cold hard eyed poem.

Clark:

Yes, yes. I wrote that poem I was, in fact, Ralph and I met each other in Italy, and I was teaching at the University of Florence and I was writing my dissertation at the time, and I was reading a lot of criticism in order to write the dissertation, which was on the contemporary long poem. And I wrote one poem was I was there and this was the poem I wrote. And shall I give it a read or is it too long?

Rubin:

It's too probably to read right now.

Clark:

Okay.

Rubin:

Because of time restriction, but I love that poem. I just want to say Ralph has something to ask you about. It ends, I think it's an exquisite little chiseled poem. I mean in that sense it's not one of your long, remeditative poems.

Clark:

No.

Rubin:

It's a more focused poem almost majestic to a certain extent.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

And it takes apart the fact that male lust seems to be triggered by any female --

Clark:

-- yes.

Rubin:

And a dangerous topic, and it ends with the poet making or going to make love to his wife.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

Which is very appropriate.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

After initially taking her to see some famous art in Florence.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

Rape by the Sabine Women --

Clark:

-- which is in the piatta sinaria --

Rubin:

-- right, and she's not as impressed by it as she was in memory and the poem ends with the image of being about to step over this line to rape the other's body with flexed fingers, to plummet, to preserve our rights of pillage. That's a tense kind of ending the lovemaking, preserving rights of pillage is something --

Clark:

-- well, earlier I alluded to the fact that sometimes these poems about love want to bear with them a kind of realism, and I think that, in fact, you know, making love is a kind of animalistic thing and at times you have to admit that both people have a kind of savage interest in the act and that it is, it is pillaging one another, you know. Adrienne Rich has a more romantic version of it. She says that we interpenetrate, right, and to a degree I can understand that and agree with that, but I think that we have to keep honest about things.

Black:

I want to go back to Florence and your dissertation for just a quick second because dissertations are usually things that we don't want to return to.

Clark:

No, no, no.

Black:

But you did write on the tradition of the American long poem.

Clark:

Right.

Black:

And that there are a number of poems in this book that are fairly long.

Clark:

Yes.

Black:

Poems that are written in sections, numbered sections. Some more narrative, others like yours middle age, not necessarily narrative. Can you talk a little bit about how you, I don't know maybe the difference between how you worked in particular forms?

Clark:

Yeah. When I was coming into my own voice and actually this book is in three sections and the last section was written first, and it was published, the last section was published as a [inaudible] book by State Street Press, which is here run by Judith Kitchen, and very grateful for Judith's interest in these poems. When I was first doing that, I think I found my voice through a collage style. And the enumerated sequence allowed me to move from section to section, from event to event, taking leaps in time and space without having to worry about transitions very much. And, you know, I was interested in that. I had read a lot of Elliott and I had read the Wasteland and had read a lot of Stevens and stuff like this and I thought I kind of like the way they're doing it. And I found that I could do that. And I sent some poems to Phil Levine, and he wrote back and he especially liked Eros in Middle Age, and he said you know you've got to do something other than these collage-styled poems. You have to learn to write in another way. Now it's not that I have never written in another way, but I said you know what he's right

and I needed to get a little more concise. And so I think what I tended to do more recently is blend a little bit of a narrative line with a lot of a lyric line, you know, and so there is a narrative taking place, there is a story or a plot or whatever you want to call it, but the interior expression can dominate and I'm interested in doing that. When I'm writing the longer poems, I still want the lyric to come through. I think a reader typically needs the structure of a plot or a story to hang on. Not every, not all the time but a lot of the time what's going to happen and if you can forestall the what's going to happen, the eventuality a bit and let the interior or the lyric moments emerge throughout the poem and kind of mix in with the narrative moments, I think you can carry a reader through a longer poem. I think it was Helen Vendler who, no, it was all Stephens I think who said that a longer poem naturalizes the reader to the voice of the writer, of the poet. And so I've always loved long poems. I just read them, I read them all the time, I like them a lot. Among my favorite books would be say the Book of Nightmares by Galway Kinnell, I love those poems. I like Norman Dubie's long poems as radically different as they are from Kinnell's, and I like what is Rich's poem, Twenty-One Love Poems. I just, I think all those things are great and I'm interested in doing that from time to time.

Black:

Well, let me ask you then a follow-up question. One of the most extraordinary poems for me in the book is One of Us. That --

Clark:

-- yes, which we definitely can't read.

Black:

Which we definitely can't read. It's a 10-page sentence.

Clark:

Yes. Single sentence.

Black:

Single sentence.

Clark:

Or the truth be known there's no period at the end.

Black:

There's no period at the end.

Clark:

Right.

Black:

And, you know, in a way I've been talking about that poem with some of my students here and some of the response has been its stream of consciousness it feels like. Did he sit down and just start writing and just not stop?

Clark:

Yeah, that's a good question.

Black:

And it is a good question and I know the answer, of course, is no.

Clark:

No.

Black:

And certainly not that it's a very, very carefully crafted poem.

Clark:

Yeah.

Black:

Can you talk a little bit about that poem?

Clark:

Yes, yes. My, I think my first child had just been born. He's 15 years old now. And it was hard for me to get time to write. So, I started getting up about 5:30 in the morning and writing from 5:30 to 7 because I knew I had that hour to hour and a half. And like I said before I often just throw something on the page and see what happens. I had taken a bus ride from Atlanta, Georgia, to Gainesville, Florida, and before I knew it that was the subject of the poem. And over the course of about five or six weeks getting up and writing seven or eight or nine new lines everyday and then going back and revising previous lines, that poem emerged and I must say I worked very hard. When you have a 10-page sentence in effect, I was working very hard on issues of time in the poem and also from a craft's point of view trying to make each line. Nonetheless, a reasonably interesting unit, a verse, right. It's not just a conversational language, right? And so here's a character I make this up there's a man who is probably in his 30s or 40s and he's finding that he's having a mental difficulties, he's having emotional difficulties, and he seems to be a distance from the world around him. And he's why is this happening? Why is this happening? And he traces it back to taking drugs. No, it's not just taking drugs. It wasn't just being, doing that. And he traces it back to this bus ride and these events take place over the course of several hours which are extremely influential in his, on his subconscious mind and it's re-emerging. In a way, it's a conservative kind of poem. It's, you know, a critique of the 60s in a way.

Rubin:

Were you a wild man in the 60s?

Clark:

I had my moments. I had my moments.

Rubin:

The poems have that quality of retouching the 60s obviously from a later time, from middle age.

Clark:

Yes.

Rubin:

And it gives it an enormously reflective element to these stories as we have been discussing here the meditative quality. And the nostalgic quality and the painful sense of time past and the adherence to time present the family --

Clark:

-- yes.

Rubin:

It's a strong mix, a mix that one could make a novel of. Have you ever made written fiction?

Clark:

Very badly, Stan. I've written some terrible fiction. I do like occasionally writing an essay in which I refer to actual events in my life, those kinds of things I do okay with. I wrote fiction in college, I tried it later after college and I just can't navigate a character and plot that well, image driven.

Rubin:

Let's talk about what you do write.

Clark:

Okay.

Rubin:

Is jazz important to you, aesthetic --

Clark:

-- that's an interesting question, you know, nobody else has asked me that question and I would say that over the last, I've been listening to jazz since I was in my teens, but I became seriously involved with jazz over the last 10 or 12 years, 15 years really. And it has, it seems to emerge more and more in my poems. And one of the reasons I like jazz is because it's always contrapuntal. There's always something that is going against the grain in an inventive way. And I think I, I don't know if I do that consciously, but there are times where I subconsciously try to do that, and I have this poem called Sixties Vespers.

Rubin:

Right.

Clark:

Where I'm talking about Chet Baker, who you know was a crazed guy but he wrote these beautiful, beautiful songs including, you know, a very famous version of My Funny Valentine, and that comes up in a poem where I guess to go back to your word I'm nostalgic for an embarrassing kind of naiveté that we had in the 60s.

Rubin:

That's a key for something that Ralph first introduced me to. I don't know that you can get this on camera but this sort of flower child with

the long hair and the intense dark eyes is none other than Kevin Clark picture from the 60s.

Clark:

1977 actually, but it was at Berkeley. That's the 60s are still going on, right.

Rubin:

This is the mandatory formal --

Clark:

-- oh, right --

Rubin:

-- grass at Berkeley.

Clark:

That's right.

Rubin:

One of us, one of your several topics. Because time is running out I want to ask you about getting this book as you have made public this book was the fruition of many years of writing. You mentioned the last section is *Granting the Wolf*, which was an early chat book, one of your three chat books. And finally after many contests being entered and many kind of bridesmaid positions where many of us end up before success, the book comes out. It's gone through eleven titles. What does it mean to you to have it out? And what is this title in the *Evening of No Warning*?

Clark:

First let me try and answer the title. You know my publisher went around and around with me on the title. That's the title I wanted, I really wanted that title. There's a poem called *Last Laugh at the Bombay Grill*, and I liked that title for the poem, but I don't like it for the book and they wanted that title because they thought it was catchy and funny, but most of the poems in the book aren't catchy and funny. And I think that title somehow reflects the loss of surety that the narrators of these poems expect this. So I think it unifies the book in that way and it also comes from the title poem which is called, *Our Children Playing Catch in the Evening of No Warning*.

Rubin:

That's almost like the opening of a song or a --

Clark:

-- yes, yes, well, I liked, in fact, the word *elegy* comes up in the very beginning of the poem. I really liked that notion at times. In fact, a lot of times what I play with in my work is on one hand these kind of sad, elegiac poems and on the other hand this kind of speedy, faster poem, edgier, kind of thing. And then I think you were asking about how does it feel to have the book.

Rubin:

Have the book, have the poems span how many years?

Clark:

Well, I guess I wrote *Widow Under a New Moon* in 1978, '78, '79, so it was 23, 24 years. And, you know, I had a little scare. I had a blood clot in my lung and this was this past summer and there I was in the emergency room getting shot up with morphine hearing the nurses asking my wife where is your durable power of attorney? And I'm having this existential moment and one of the things, one of the many things that flashed by in my consciousness was at least you have got the book out. You know it is, at one point, in one way, I feel like I have done something that I have always wanted to do and it is very satisfying.

On the other hand, and I think Ralph could probably talk to this too, once you have the book, you like it a lot. I think it's like winning the World Series. You want to win it again, right? And so I find myself pressing. I have been writing a lot. We were talking about this I have about 25 or 30 poems ready to go out soon.

Rubin:

I would like to ask you this on the behalf of many who may see this or read this conversation not at least students of writing, what does it take to sustain the endeavor over that many years?

Clark:

That's a really good question. I just love writing and I love poetry and that single transformative moment that's unlike anything else when you feel the poem as Yates said click into place, I know you both know there is nothing like that. It is a good drug and because I like that feeling and I like it the linguistic invention, you know, and creating a world with a poem and I love that feeling, I just kept doing it. Also I've got to tell you there was about a six-week period somewhere in the late 80s where I got into a funk and my wife said, Kevin, get out of this funk now. It's ridiculous, it's inappropriate, I don't want to put up with it. And she was right, you know. I live in a world that's a social world. I live with her and children, you know, I shouldn't be laying this on them, this difficulty I was having getting the book published. So I've always kind of relied on her to keep my bearings straight. And as far as kids, young people writing, 17, 18, 20, 21, love it. Love what you do.

Rubin:

I wonder, we are at the end of what was an unfortunately short conversation just before reading a poem to conclude this. Could you say something briefly about organizing poems from that many years? It's in three sections, you already said that the last section is, in fact, the earliest. It's the chat book sequence on the death of your father, *Granting the Wolf*. The second section is the only one that has an epigraph to it. It's from Lord Jim, Conrad's *Lord Jim*. I knew his appearance, it came from the right place, he was one of us. And the first section opens with the title poem. Taking them in the correct order and very briefly how did they fall into this ordering?

Clark:

Well, thanks for asking that question. The first and third sections while different the poems are much shorter in the first section than they are in the third. They are primarily in an elegiac tone. The middle section



is not. So I organized the poems by tone more or less though there are thematic commonalities in each of the three sections. The middle section is edgier. Ralph was talking about the poem that's right at the center of the book which is called *One of Us*, and it reads fast. Those poems read fast. If I had to come up with a term, I would say that those poems are about the psyche under pressure, right? People on the edge, a narrator who is either driven or living. And I wanted to balance that so that you entered the book thinking about love and family. You go through this kind of hell in the middle of the book. I hope it's an entertaining hell. And then you come out with having earned the right to feel at least temporarily positive about the world around you. So, it does end on an upbeat note I think, I hope.

Rubin:

My apologies to Ralph. I know he has a lot more to talk with you about. I think we are at the end and I wonder if you would, we have just enough time for you to read if you would the first [inaudible] collection.

Clark:

Okay. This is called *Our Children Playing Catch in the Evening of No Warning*, and you know, ironically to the first poem it's also one of the most recent poems that I have written, and it's about how being a parent for me was very interesting just becoming a parent because I didn't know two things. I didn't know it was going to be so sensuous, that children would be, you know, climbing all over you all the time. In fact, I hung out with Ralph's children lately and they just jump on me, you know, they're all over, it's great, but I didn't understand that. The second thing I didn't understand was how paranoid I would become for them, right? And then what I came to also understand is connected to that paranoia is the notion that, you know, we all end including our children. This is called *Our Children Playing Catch in the Evening of No Warning*.

A nearness in the twilight, the lovely arc.  
Cut grass not yet the scent of elegy.  
Then the elegy. Then the years...  
Now my four-year-old plying a small ball  
across the floor at his nine months sister,  
my wife listening behind her book, the dusk  
rolling over the houses, the fingers  
of my right hand unfurling to catch a ball  
my father tosses a year before his death.  
That old fact so dim today.

Such a thing to learn...

Not deliverance, nor elegy, always the white ball  
in its sure circuit, the easy backward draw  
of the glovehand. In the sky above my children,

I am playing ball, the warm crutches  
leaning like a song in the dugout  
as I limp for the batter's box.  
In the sky above my children, I limp  
for the batter's box and watch a soft line drive  
float safely above a glove.

And so the forgetting floats on the small charities  
of applause, the pinchrunner's comic awe...  
My daughter, my son elaborate in his coaching..

We can't hold all the facts for long.  
I'm still surprised how we stopped playing that one night  
when my father went inside astonished, hurt  
-the ball I'd thrown-  
the crisp delayed ache when it drilled his forearm,  
his whispering how it actually hit him,  
that this was not meant-to-be.

There are no signs. That's the problem.  
As we stop to listen to the last few seconds of dusk  
submerge beneath the evening of no warning,  
it may strike us again, the breath  
actually stricken from our lungs.

Then the nearness in the twilight.  
Then the little ones in their time.

Rubin:  
Kevin Clark, thank you for talking us today and, Ralph, thank you.

Clark:  
Thanks to both of you. Thanks very much.

Rubin:  
I hope we'll see you again.

Clark:  
You know you will.

Rubin:  
Your next book.

Clark:  
You know you will, thank you.