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Fleda Brown Jackson : 03-01-1995

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Jackson: "Night Swimming"

We are without our men, hers dead,
ten years, mine, far away, the water,
glassy warm. My old aunt already stands
half in. All I see is the white half,
Her small, old breasts like bells,
almost nice as a girl's. Then we hardly
feel the water, a drag on the nipples,
a brush on the crotch, like making love
blind, only the knives of light
from the opposite shore, the shudders
of our swimming breaking it up.
We let the water get next to us
and into the quick of losses we don't
have to talk about. We swim out
to where the dock goes blank,
and we are stranded, abandoned, good flesh
in a black of glimmering. We each fit
our skin exactly. After a while
we come out of the water, slick as eels,
still swimming, straight-backed,
breasts out, up to the porch,
illuminate, sexy as hell, inspired."

"Learning to Dance"

When we waltzed with the Senior Citizens
at the Pappy Burnett Pavilion,
I felt how you moved, slick as a cowboy,
my own rough bones clicking beside
you, trying to move the way can't
go. I loved you, turning in yourself
like a loose skin, and the woman
who danced with her broom, and the old man,
round dancing, his shirt open over
his heavy belly, an old, old grace
feeding him from the bass
of the country band. I've always
wanted to dance. Aspen leaves, tambourine
in the wind, needles flare from the tamarack
branch like ballet skirts, and that
Wednesday of the Central Lake Pavilion Dance
travels miles in place, turning
and returning to its original dark.
Afterward I pulled off my swimsuit in the lake

and held you next to me, learning
from your heart and the slap-slap of waves
on stones. What is it wants us to know
where to step? Each pause
brings us tight against the mouth
of the earth and then we raise one
foot like the flame of a candle
our bodies move in and out
of the space we've held to be true
and something else sees each
half turn as the whole dance."

[Music]

Rubin: Welcome to the Rockport Writer's Forum. Our guest today, Fleda Browne Jackson grew up in Arkansas and was educated at the University of Arkansas where she earned a Ph.D degree in American Literature. Her poems have appeared widely in journals such as the Georgia Review, Kenyon Review, Poetry Northwest, and others. She's the author of two collections of poetry, "Fishing with Blood" which won the Great Lakes College Association New Writer's Award in 1988. And "Do Not Peel The Birches" which won the Verna Emery poetry prize in 1993. Both books are from Purdue University Press. Fleda Browne Jackson is currently a Professor of English at the University of Delaware. Fleda, welcome to the Brockport Writer's Forum.

Jackson: Thank you.

Rubin: Nice to have you with us. I'd like to begin by asking you to go back to the poems you just read, both are from "Do Not Peel The Birches." And they're both fairly sensual poems, sensuous and sensual poems of being in the body. It seems to be an important theme in the book, if I can call it a theme, important presence in the book.

Jackson: I don't think anybody has ever said that before, but it certainly seems right to me. Yeah, I think being in the body is very important and it's very hard for most people to do, and one of the ways to be in the body is to write a poem.

Rubin: The one from "Night Swimming" seems to be taking you back to the setting of Central Lake in Michigan, which is an important section in your first book. Is it a memory poem?

Jackson: Yeah, it is a memory poem. The Central Lake poem, actually the Central Lake poem started in the first book, "Fishing with Blood." I hadn't been in Michigan for years and years and years, and then I went back. And when I went back, this whole string of poems started, and I did the few that are in "Fishing with Blood," and then I just kept moving. And it seems to me that the ones in "Do not Peel the Birches," get farther deeper somehow. They sort of -- I keep going over the same territory but every time I go over it, it gets deeper.

Rubin: Both poems share a kind of setting, a sensuous presence in water and in the body and they're different, one is closeness with a older woman figure and the other one is probably with a younger male figure, is that right?

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: Do they come out of the same place or are they very different poems for you?

Jackson: Oh, I think they're very different poems, yeah. Water -- sometimes I think that I just should call all my poems water poems. I tend to -- water gets in almost everything I write. The night swimming poem was -- it was a real experience, but it became just kind of a turning experience, I think it was -- the water was a kind of reaching down into finding something that

needed to be there and being transformed and it -- I guess water's been forever transforming and so, maybe I like water because it can in a poem, it can be the center of everything transforming in the poem.

Rubin: And yet something about your work, that I particularly find appealing is that these images that recur don't seem to be meant to be consciously symbols of anything, they have the feel of the experience.

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: Water in your work isn't first of all, [inaudible] --

Jackson: Oh, no.

Rubin: -- architect or something.

Jackson: No. No. No. Huh, uh.

Rubin: A place you've been.

Jackson: Yeah. I absolutely believe that the only way anything works in a poem well is for it to be only itself, first, you know. And most of the time -- yeah, I certainly don't think about water any other way but water when I'm working, but -- In fact, I was thinking earlier, because this last week I was teaching. I was reading students part of Steve Spender's "Great Essay to Make a Poem" -- "The Making of a Poem" and he says that anything looked at hard enough, well enough is -- becomes something else, but it's only in the observing it closely that anything ever happens. I can't imagine working any other way than simply observing it closely.

Rubin: In these two poems, I'd like to follow up on that, but -- just to look again at the two poems that are different but yet have similarities in action and settings. One is very kind of early sexual experience and it's "our bodies move in and out of the space we've held to be true." And the other is "coming out of the water inspired in the water there's awareness of losses we don't have to talk about." It seems that the space between these two poems is really the space of experience, that they're coming from opposite points. Does that mean anything?

Jackson: Well, yeah, they're coming from opposite points, but actually Night Swimming is coming -- they're coming from not that far difference in time. I think the speaker is the same speaker and the experience of Learning to Dance is actually an experience of -- I mean, I think that the voice at the end of that poem is a mature voice. It seems to me that it's a mature voice. So, I don't know -- they seem to be different only in the approach to the same kind of transformation somehow.

Rubin: Okay.

Jackson: That's not a very good answer.

Rubin: You said that water is important throughout your work. And in the first book we already commented along central section which is at Central Lake Michigan. It's kind of a family narrative and it seems a touchstone for all your work. Would you like to say something about the importance of that place, what it's doing in your work?

Jackson: What it's doing in my work? What it has been doing in my work, I'm not so sure it continues to do that. But, every time I think it's not going to, it pops up again. It provides a kind of focus and it's the only place I know -- you know, everybody needs to have some kind of ground to write from, and I had Arkansas. But, it -- nothing ever felt as stable to me as Michigan, because the place that we have there was in my family, for now, it's been seventy-six years. And it felt always to be the most stable place. And so, because it was stable, it was very clear in my memory and very clearly grounded and was the place that I felt that I -- you know. It's funny about summer places, you know, because you're away from it and then you come back every --

you can see the incremental changes, and because of that, I think they get really powerful. And I just wrote a poem, I've just been working on a poem about church camp, you know. What a weird thing it is -- the changes that happen just from year to year watching who you are now and then you can see who you are again. And so, it's like being a teenager, because your hormones are up, everything's vivid. And so, you go to a summer place, because it's summer, everything's vivid, so all the images get just indelible, just permanent. And so, there they are.

Rubin: Your poetry has that quality -- Judith Kitchen in her review recently in the Georgia Review has said that to read these poems is to look through a newly washed window. And she points out that this is a difficult affect to achieve and one that only succeeds when it is not an affect but something effortless. And she praises you for achieving the effortless quality. But, it is, I think your poems in, for example, the Central Lake Section of "Fishing with Blood" and many other places, such as the two you read, particularly, "Night Swimming" have that quality of looking at a scene that is there before the eye or the mind's eye. Imagination recollected in tranquility - experience recollected in tranquility. I'd like to know how you understand this process for yourself. Am I right that so many of your poems have this quality for you?

Jackson: Oh, yeah. I'm really visual. Just super visual. It's the thing that sets me off almost every time. And I have memories -- my memories are always visual memories. And, sometimes I can hear voices in my memory and sometimes I can feel things in my memory, but most of it's just intensely visual. And so, when I want to work on -- whether it's a memory poem or anything else I almost always have something visual to get it underway. And it seems to me that it's not just -- of course, the visual becomes -- just expands from there and becomes and becomes and becomes. But, just to get that one like the "Night Swimming" just that one vision of getting out of the water and walking up on the dock. It isn't that it's any longer me or anybody else, it's just that I can see those people doing that, you know. It is me, because it wouldn't -- I wouldn't have the attachment to do that poem if it weren't, well, I might, but I'd have to make it me in some way. But just simply seeing those people up on the dock, bingo. All I have to do now -- all I have to do, as if it were nothing. All I have to do is take that and get it down.

Rubin: And it's everything. A process.

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: Do you find yourself then beginning a poem because a visual image comes to you or perhaps haunts you, won't let go, or do just sit down and write every day, as I think you do, and what comes, comes? How do you engage this process?

Jackson: I write almost every day. I wish I wrote every day. And almost always when I start writing, what I write is something visual, like I'll just anything. Sometimes it'll be the crows that are making racket outside, but I'll hear the racket, but what I'll start writing is about the blackness and the crows flying and that sort of thing. And eventually it'll go someplace, but if I -- I always am sure that if I get the visual thing on paper, that the rest of it will come. And it does. Whatever else there is to come, will just -- it won't just be there automatically as if it -- you know, it's not automatic writing, but if I get the visual whatever is in the visual -- you know, I think about Basho. I think about the Haiku poets, and goodness knows I don't write anything close to that, but that kind of staring at the thing until the thing becomes -- well, Basho would say the thing becomes you and you become the thing but until it begins to sort of blossom, and then you've got

everything. And whether -- I don't always want to work that way, but it usually ends up that I do anyway. Sometimes I'd rather do something different, but that's the way I usually handle things.

Rubin: And do you tend to write a lot more than we see and pare them back, or do you --

Jackson: Yeah. Yeah. I pare too much a lot of times. I'm so worried about leaving anything that is extraneous or anything that's garbage, you know, I'm so worried about doing that. I think it's partly because I went to school back when -- there were the new critics, and we were all -- the virtue of a poem was always in its clean-ness and so, I learned early that the most important thing was to get a poem clean, so sometimes I clean it up to the point I have to go back and make it richer because I've lost some of the main poem.

Rubin: It's clear that reticence as in "Night Swimming" explicitly matters to you, are things you don't have to talk about are way of being, but you also say the opposite for the other thing, which is that to be, is to talk, to tell stories, to --

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: I think in the poem for your daughter, for example, you say something like that.

Jackson: Yeah. A Way To Disappear, Dear -- "A Way Not To Disappear, Dear, One" is to start talking.

Rubin: Is to start talking. Is that a feeling for poetry, there, or more maternal advice?

Jackson: Both.

Rubin: [Laughing].

Jackson: Yeah, I think that one way not to disappear is to do the poem.

Rubin: I wonder if I could ask you to read "Piano".

Jackson: Okay.

Rubin: Because in it you say toward the end, you say, "I try to remember my childhood as just one still scene." Which certainly seems to speak to the visual esthetic you're talking about.

Jackson: That was a smart one to pull out.

"Piano: My fingers try to remember Blessed Assurance and Jesus Loves Me.

Sending Sunday School chords out the window to an August sky's retreat.

I wish I could honestly play the old paradox, strike the mathematics of forgiveness and doom that uncoils the night into God's hands.

Not even believers believe anymore, except in their blood.

C Chords, G Chords still climb out of the heart goading the derelict fingers to finish a story any familiar story.

The sky is a dominant arch.

In the startle space beneath babble rose to a quandary, shivered, fell flat.

All that stood we nailed up on the right-angle clash of good and evil under the careful wings of angels flashing the time, the time out of the corner of an eye.

I try to remember my childhood as just one still scene,

humming with the terrible thing called love, that pitch invented again.

Rubin: That's very nice. "And winning love again and again." There's something about transience in your poems, while they're trying to fix that scene. hey always seem to be trying to fix a scene, whatever it is.

Jackson: They?

Rubin: The poems appear --

Jackson: The poems.

Rubin: -- to be attempting to fix the scene that they're attending to, that is occupying them. And they're full of sense of transience. I mean, you catch a scene almost the way a snapshot would I mean --

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: -- so instantaneously. "Night Swimming" is present tense. You know, tense seems to matter in your work.

Jackson: Right. Yeah. You know, I think that maybe trying to catch it and stop it in the present tense is because I never felt like I had it in the first place. Like I tell my students that I think the reason I write poetry is because I have such a bad memory and I have to hang onto stuff. I think that I -- to begin with, I was a very near-sighted kid and now I have contacts and it doesn't matter. In Michigan, when we went swimming, of course, I wasn't wearing my glasses. And one year I had a boyfriend and I didn't want to wear my glasses, because I didn't want to be embarrassed because I wore glasses, so I stumbled all around all that summer without my glasses on and I'm really near-sighted. So, the point is like some painters, I was trying to think who, there's a painter that people tend to say the reason he painted the way he did was because he was near-sighted. I think sometimes my childhood feels very fuzzy, because I was a fuzzy kid, even my eye-sight was fuzzy and so there I am just trying to hold it down and hold it down which just -- let's just fasten this down. If I can get the words right, I can fasten it down.

Rubin: When did you first realize you wanted to write poetry, or whatever?

Jackson: Oh, I was just a kind of introspective and shy kid. I think a lot and I wrote a lot when I was a kid. But I wrote a little bit when I was an undergraduate. I won an undergraduate writing award at Arkansas, but I didn't, you know -- I wrote and then just sort of put it aside and said, "Well, now I have to be an adult and I have to finish a Ph.D and do important things," and so I didn't do much except just a few -- I published a few poems in a little underground newspaper in Fayetteville called the Grapevine, which is still going which is a fine little paper. And after that, I was working my dissertation and that really kind of turned the corner for me. Working my dissertation is really the only time I really disciplined myself, I mean, real discipline. I became a poet because I wrote my dissertation.

Rubin: You may be the only person that I ever heard say that.

Jackson: That's probably true, but it is true. I had some native stuff to work with. I mean, I was able to do some good things now and then, but I was never going to be a poet, because I never had the discipline. But when I had to read enough to get ready to take my exams and I had to focus enough to write my dissertation, just the sheer plod did it. And my work just took a huge leap in those two years I was working my dissertation.

Rubin: It may not be germane to the poetry, but I must ask what you did the dissertation on?

Jackson: You'll just die. William Dean Howells.

Rubin: You got me.

Jackson: Yeah. Four novels of William Dean Howells.

Rubin: Was that your choice?

Jackson: Yeah, that was my choice. I was just cold bloodedly rationale about the whole thing.

I wanted to get a job and the jobs were in American Literature and the people at Arkansas in the Ph.D program who seemed like people I might like to work with, were in American Literature, so that's what happened.

Rubin: That makes sense.

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: What poets matter to you at this time? Are you at least reading poetry for your own --

Jackson: Oh, sure. Oh sure. I always get just boggled when anybody asks me that question, because Rilke always -- Rilke's been real important to me. Not that I write anything, sometimes people like to read the people they write like, but Rilke's who I'd like to be like, but --

Rubin: Why?

Jackson: Because he does that very thing that I was talking about with Basho and the -- he's able to just -- and Rodin who told Rilke to do it, you know, he said, "Concentrate on the thing. Stay focused and disciplined and concentrated and don't take your gaze off the thing and let the thing become for you the poem somehow." And I think Rilke just knocks me over doing that and I think he's probably the best poet of the 20th Century. Other than that I read everybody. And I tend to like people who are somewhat narrative the way I am. I tend to stumble more with people whose poems are very, very dis-jointed, I have more trouble with a great deal of broken syntax and so on.

Rubin: You mentioned Basho twice. Does Zen matter to you as any kind of spiritual discipline? Have you had Zen experience or training?

Jackson: I have not had any Zen training. Yeah, I do meditate and I do - seriously meditate an hour a day, but I do not -- it's not exactly Zen, it's just [inaudible] which is just a breath meditation and it's not that rigid formal Zen training. I don't even know much about formal Zen training. And I only know small bits about Buddhists - Buddhism as a religion, I don't know much.

Rubin: I want to ask you how the first collection came together then?

Jackson: How the first collection came together?

Rubin: Yeah. How were you doing these poems? When? How did these come to be in this - together here?

Jackson: The first poem I ever published really published was I think in 1981 and can't remember which one of the poems in there that was, but then I just -- I realized that people would publish my poems and that was a great revelation.

Rubin: You were kind of far along in a way for that to happen, you hadn't been trying --

Jackson: Right.

Rubin: -- to publish.

Jackson: Right. And I started sending things out with frequency and piling up publications and the way it works with everybody when I thought I had enough of them I tried to shape something there.

Rubin: I'd like to talk about what you shaped. I referred to the Central Lake Michigan series which strikes all readers of your work, I think as a really important underpinning, a grounding.

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: It's really the second of what I call the Central section, and it is in a way, it's the second of four parts, would you say something briefly about how it got organized if in fact, the organization actively reflects your own intervention and --

Jackson: The organization of the whole book?

Rubin: Yeah.

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: Yeah, just briefly about the four parts. What were --

Jackson: Well, you know -

Rubin: -- you doing?

Jackson: -- what I was doing was trying to put things together that made sense. And the poems are so different. I think they're more different than "Fishing with Blood". Well, it's a first book. And first books are like that, they're sort of all over the place because there I was trying to figure out who I was as a writer and they're just all over the place. And the voices are sometimes different in the poem -- so, the first group, what I was hoping I would do in this book is work from a very early images into the Central -- into the Central Lake poems which are -- I don't know maybe they feel like adolescent poems to me. Maybe that's what's going on there. And the others are -- the last two sections feel to me much more adult. But I didn't want this to be chronological in any obvious sense, I didn't want that to happen. What I had hoped is that the last poems would be a little bit of a coda on the earlier poems.

Rubin: In the last section you have a poem entitled, Amy Lowell's "Imagism" followed by Emily Dickinson's "Love" another poem. And how important are these two women often referred to as fore-mothers by writers or feminists, critics.

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: How important were they to your own work, you know, why are they here?

Jackson: They were here because -- well, Amy Lowell's "Imagism" was here because of images, I guess because what we were talking about earlier, I guess. I don't know Emily Dickinson's - I was just glad that Emily Dickinson was there, I don't know why, I just like reading her and she was important to me probably because when I was in school, when I was studying poetry as an undergraduate, particularly, when I was really impressionable, how many woman poets were there to read? So, thank God for Emily Dickinson, you know, there she was right in the middle of the cannon and everybody respected her and that was good news.

Rubin: Then you follow that with an O'Keeffe poem which is really a sequence of five sections about her life, really or different aspects --

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: She learns to walk to an expert, explains her work.

Jackson: Yeah. Yeah.

Rubin: Is O'Keeffe especially important as far as the --

Jackson: Yes.

Rubin: -- dual interest to you?

Jackson: Yes. I went to the Whitney Museum in New York and saw my first genuine O'Keeffe years ago and I tried to come home and write a poem and it wasn't a very good poem at all, so I stuffed it in with all the other not so good poems. And after maybe three or four years I came back to the whole thing and said, "I'm going to do her justice. I'm going to get it right this time." So, I read Biography's, I studied and studied her work. I just got books and just got -- and then I went down to -- well, actually, no, I take it back. I went to the East Wing of the National Museum in Washington and saw her paintings after I'd written these poems, anyway, I just said, "Okay, I'm going to get it right this time." And I had spent a lot of time with her work and felt I

had gotten inside her skin. And I loved getting inside her skin, because I felt we had a lot in common, that Georgia had to build herself, build her own life from the ground up and she had to figure out what she was going to do with her paintings, she had to discard her teachers and do what she wanted with it. And I just admired O'Keefe.

Rubin: You feel as if you discarded your teachers?

Jackson: Oh, no, I didn't really ever have any teachers. It wasn't exactly that, I mean, I was never in an MFA program and my teachers were the people I read. And I didn't really discard them it was just that she - what she had to discard was everybody who was telling her what to do with her life.

Rubin: yes. And then a woman writer in particular seems to confront that in a way, you need to go by expected boundaries. So, it's really sort of the artist's fate, isn't it, challenge?

Jackson: For sure.

Rubin: the last poem Edward Hoppers "Woman" seems to me not only to catch this visual interest and his interest in art, but very much she's the kind of woman in your poem who doesn't speak, who doesn't disappear, she's very much there, but yet, she's not talking.

Jackson: Right. She's held down by the paint. Which is really, in a funny sort of way, she becomes the painting and so, she's more there than - she's very real because she's held down by the paint which means that she exists in the same way in the other poem and the "Mother of the Bride" poem in that the way not to disappear is to start talking, she's in the painting.

Rubin: Reticence seems to matter to you in a very particular way in your work. There's a quality of reticence that somehow involves being and having one spiritual foot, for a terrible metaphor -

Jackson: Spiritual foot.

Rubin: In being and not being and silence has to do with that. This woman is there in a way, that when I first read the poem I thought that I might see that she was dominated by the artist, that she was the creation of the male eye, gaze, but in fact, she seems to exceed that in her paintly being, right? How did a poem like that come to you? What provoked that?

Jackson: I just stared at the painting long enough.

Rubin: Again, it's the thing -

Jackson: Again.

Rubin: -- in the object. Let me move to "Do Not Peel The Birches" which is maybe a highly organized, I don't mean to stress this opitn, if it's not relevant drop it. I'm wondering what these poems to you seem to represent whatever you learned about yourself as a poet from Fishing with Blood? What did you learn having completed this collection? Did this represent, in fact, most of the poems that you'd written to that time that you thought were -

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: -- the real poems are mostly here.

Jackson: Right.

Rubin: What did you learn about yourself at that point then?

Jackson: Huh, that's a very interesting question. One thing I learned was that I -- and this again, is sort of the motif of images, that I was burying myself in the images and sometimes to the point of losing a good strong voice in the poems, because -- I mean, this is in the way that I wanted to move past, I guess. I would lose a good strong voice in the poem because I was so lost in the image that the voice would not be there. So, if anything happened in "Birches" that's different, I think that the voice is beginning to be clearer and a little - maybe not clearer, but more focused,

maybe the voice was not so muddy but was maybe slip around. That's something that's been interesting to me in poems, how steady the voice holds. I mean, if it needs to be steady, a voice doesn't always need to be steady, but if it does, then it needs to provide a channel through the poem and I think the voice does that better in "Birches".

Rubin: What do you mean by voice?

Jackson: Well, sometimes it's not an "I" it's not a speaking voice, it's not somebody you can identify, but it's still the central consciousness the poems coming from.

Rubin: So, you do manage - it's striking in your work, but you managed to be personal in a sense, I think the two poems you read are, while not at all being confessional.

Jackson: Good. Good.

Rubin: Does your response suggest any displeasure with the confessional thoughts?

Jackson: Well, yeah.

Rubin: How you want to place yourself in terms of your material? Because it is --

Jackson: It's very personal. It's --

Rubin: -- there's a lot of honesty in --

Jackson: -- very personal. It's very personal, but I would like to feel that the material is -- there's a funny quality that happens in confessional poetry that hasn't yet cut itself loose from the image. It still has this -- it's still all grabbed around the image, the person somehow, not necessarily the poet, but the voice is somehow grabbed all around it and you never feel free to just see it as an object. And I would like to be able to step back from it and cut loose of it and see it as an object and that doesn't mean detach from it emotionally, it just means that it's obviously part of that is just in sheer artistry I'd like to be able to do that. I'd like for the poem to be an object of art, but besides that I'd like for the poem to be removed from the arena of sort of special attachment. I'd like for the image to be free and clear so that you can have it in your own way and I don't have to tell you how to have it. I don't know if that makes exactly sense.

Rubin: It sort of suggests Eliot's Objective correlative.

Jackson: Yeah. Okay.

Rubin: I do find that interesting because there are writers today, poets today that explicitly have written against the notion that the poem can be you and not you. And talk about owning -

Jackson: I know.

Rubin: -- a poem and all sorts --

Jackson: I know.

Rubin: -- ideological ways, activist ways.

Jackson: Yeah.

Rubin: That's not the function of poetry for you, it's not what your poetry --

Jackson: I know Alicia Ostriker and a lot of people who've written a lot about women's voices in poems, and I really agree a lot with some of the things that she says that the woman's voice needs to be an "I" and a really present "I" in the poem. It needs to be "This is my poem and this is my life and you don't separate it from me. We are the same thing." But, to some extent, yeah. Okay. And that's sort of almost a spate realm that sort of belongs over here and I buy that entirely. I agree with that entirely. But over here is the poem and that's another thing and in the poem the object that I've made it is an object that I've made and once I've made it -- and not just once I've made it but in the making of it my job is to cut myself off from it, somehow until it -- it feels to me more like a giving -- it feels more altruistic somehow. I don't know how to explain that. It

feels more like "Here it is and you can have it." I'm not going to hold onto it with my special interests, you know. It's become something you can have in your own way.

Rubin: Are you looking for, expecting or hoping for, or in fact, do you even need any particular kind of reaction from a reader at that point, or is it just gone from you, the poem I mean?

Jackson: There's something I want the reader to feel. Sure. As I'm working I'm never -- I never completely lose consciousness of the fact that somebody's going to read it even though that's not what I'm thinking about most of the time. But, once I've gotten to the point of saying, "Here's the poem." Then I already have built into it what I hope will happen.

Rubin: And are you curious if it does happen?

Jackson: Sure.

Rubin: In other words, you have a sense of what you'd like to have happen and you want to know that it is read the way you intended it?

Jackson: Yeah, I think it's disappointing, I think for somebody to misread, but in the reading a lot of stuff can happen.

Rubin: Richard Yugo said famously, "Look over your shoulder when you're writing and you'll find there's no reader there," but some writers feel the presence of a reader. Do you show these to someone in draft?

Jackson: Yeah. Almost everything I do. Uh, huh. Jeannie Walker and I have been working for a long time together. In fact, if it hadn't been for Jeannie, I don't know what I -- her early encouragement, I don't know if I would have been able to get past those early stages.

Rubin: When was this that she started encouraging?

Jackson: '79 - '80. We've been looking at each other's poems for an awful long time. She at that time had published a couple of books and I was just a beginner and she sat down with me with absolutely no condescension, whatsoever, and said, "All right, let's work" and it made all the difference in the world.

Rubin: Music seems to be important in your work? You read "Piano" and Country Music's in a couple of them. Would you say something about music?

Jackson: Music is becoming more and more important to me, not just in the poem, but in life. My ear for it is getting better, I think my ear was always okay. I don't think I ever had a tin ear, but my ear for sound and poems has gotten much more acute and it could just be that I'm listening to a lot more music and because I'm married to a man who likes music a lot. Maybe that's part of it. I also think that a lot can happen in the music, a lot can happen -- I guess, I've just become convinced of the terrific importance of the sound. I used to focus so much on the importance of the image that I -- maybe, okay for a while I was focused on image and maybe just now I happen to be focused on sound but I really am focused on sound a lot. It doesn't mean that I manipulate it -- I don't feel any consciousness of the sound a lot. I don't say, "Okay, I'm going to do some literature here," or anything like that. It's just that it's always at me. I'm hearing it all the time.

Rubin: do you speak aloud in the writing process?

Jackson: Yeah. Or at least if it's not aloud I'm saying it in my head.

Rubin: Do you tend to do this meditation before writing?

Jackson: I do it in the morning, because if I didn't do it in the morning, I'd never stop any other time.

Rubin: And when do you write, whenever you get a chance?

Jackson: Whenever I get a chance. I would like very much to say that I sit down every morning, religiously for an hour and write, but I try to carve out pieces of the day that I can do that, but some days the best I can get done is just a few minutes in the evening after I'm exhausted and everything I write is garbage at that point, but at least I'm doing something.

Rubin: What do you think you've achieved for yourself in finishing "Do Not Peel the Birches." Does it feel as if a certain amount of material has been done or do you find yourself pulled by the same images and the same kinds of topics that are in this? I hesitate to use the word "theme". Seems so conscious. There is some continuity in terms of the poem as far as the family material, your family populates both books. When I said you were personal without being confessional, one striking fact is there are a couple of very strong poems about and to Mark, a younger brother who was retarded and died, in both, for example. Do you find it's the same moments pulling you or are you going elsewhere? What are you doing now in your work?

Jackson: They do still pull me. And you're right when you say, or at least I'll finish saying what you did, that yes, I feel that here something was finished. It really felt very much, "This is finished." And whatever was working here is going to be reshaped from now on. It's not "This is a done thing" in a way I didn't feel that with Fishing with Blood. In Fishing in Blood I felt like I was just getting cranked up but this feels really finished. But, in the work I'm doing now, I tend to be much more in the present, much more focused on images and things in my life now. But, in every case, it pulls back into something old, you know. I'm trying a lot of -- right now, I'm trying a lot of simultaneous poems where what's going on -- a present image will trigger an old thing and they'll get all mixed up together and the old - the old thing will feed into the present thing and the present thing will feed into the old thing. And sometimes it's just falling on its face, it's not always working very well, but I have great ambitions for that.

Rubin: Final question, what do you tell your students they need to know to write? Do you teach poetry workshops? Or what would you like them to know?

Jackson: I hammer on paying attention, on concreteness. I hammer on concreteness a lot. But, I've come to realize there can be a lot of good poems that aren't necessarily concrete, but I think for my students it's best to get a hold of the concrete thing. And I hammer on discipline and practice and control and - which is the hardest thing of all for all of us I think. The control to do - It's not that we all don't know what we want to do, or a lot of us think we know what we want to do but it's learning to control it to make it happen.

Rubin: There's no trick to that.

Jackson: I wish there were. I'd like to figure it out.

Rubin: All too short. Fledda Browne Jackson thanks for talking with me today.

Jackson: Thank you.

Rubin: Hope we'll have you back.

Jackson: I hope so, too.