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The Iowa Review

Volume 24
Issue 1 *Winter*

Article 23

1994

An Interview with James Galvin

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Recommended Citation

Galvin, James; Faith Barrett; and Brian Young. "An Interview with James Galvin." *The Iowa Review* 24.1 (1994): 109-127. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4710>

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An Interview with James Galvin

TIR: So which of our preliminary questions did you like, actually?

JG: I liked the questions that I didn't understand. Also, the one about craft.

TIR: That was the one about that lecture . . .

JG: Right. I should probably have kept the notes for what I said that day, but I didn't.

TIR: Was that off the top of your head?

JG: Well, no, only partly. But I must say that it was probably a lot of stuff that I only partly believed. The reason I'm shy of things like lectures and interviews is because one ends up saying things that later on one is only going to partly believe. As soon as something gets put down—even if it's only a tentative idea—it gets accepted by others as an opinion. I much prefer ideas to opinions. So, I don't keep lecture notes and I don't write essays, and I don't, in general, do interviews. At any rate, that day, if I remember correctly, I was responding—reacting, actually—to a bias of that particular workshop: You know, the sort of Mr. Goodwrench approach to writing: “give me something you've drafted in the last twenty-four hours and I'll fix it for you.”

TIR: Oh, right, it was supposed to be “new work . . .”

JG: Right. I'd agreed to do that job without realizing they had this kind of philosophy about process. You know, I'm certain a good many mysterious things happen in revision, and even in committee, but it did seem a bit mechanical to me, and I resist that. No one's process of revision is going to do much for anyone else, not really, not for long. You have to find your own approach. I'd rather read “finished” work—whatever we each mean by that. So I was reacting to that, and my remarks were probably mean-spirited in relation to what was going on. You know, a poem is not something you can craft your way into entirely. If it were, there would be more poets. I certainly don't disparage technique or craft. Mastery is mastery. But the mystery was being left out of the discussion, and so I tried to make remarks that had more to do with the mysterious aspects of writing. I think I talked about *witch-craft*. Techniques, yes, but techniques

The interviewers were Faith Barrett and Brian Young.

that lead to magic, not just magic tricks. Poetry, unlike legerdemain, is real magic. What controls the poem is more than the poet. The poet gives up control to higher powers—form, for example—ways of listening to various energies. I think I used Gary Snyder’s definition of poetry. He talks about the skilled use of language to evoke in the reader and in the writer “rare and powerful states of mind.” In order to do that the poet tricks *himself*, not just someone else. Witches don’t know *why* they use eye of newt and hair of dog other than that it works. The crafts poets devise are often irrational, “inspirational,” associative, intuitive, or conversely, characterized by the rational madness one delights in when writing or reading traditional forms. The poetics and methods poets apply to their writings are generally presented as reasonable, but I suspect they are, like politics, more often temperamental.

TIR: I also remember you talking about Native American death songs.

JG: Well, as much as I believe in craft, which I do, as you know—I think it’s a lifelong task that you never get done—I was trying to emphasize the more primordial aspects, the thing that Borges says for example: that poetry is no less mysterious than anything else on earth. People often approach poetry as if you could, in fact, figure out some kind of unified theory about it and then do it. People who don’t understand it keep trying to do that to it. Critics, mostly—and they affect the poets. And so, as an example, I was talking about death songs, which are little, *short*—I guess they’re still technically called “lyrics”—poems that many Plains tribes have. Crow have them, the Lakota have them. The death song is what you’re supposed to be saying when you cross into your death; and it’s conceived as a *poem*. But it’s not a poem that’s designed for publication in . . . or even a poem whose primary essence is aesthetic. Rather, it’s an actual attempt to contact power, which *involves* aesthetics. It’s singing for power, and it’s supposed to help you make the transition—an important thing. If your tongue is cut out, or you’re unconscious and dying, you can have a comrade (your best friend is supposed to know your song) sing it for you to help get you across. It seems to me that some sense of “getting across” is why we do poetry, that’s why we began to do it, and it’s important to always respect that point of origin. The address of power and not just this idea of, If I polish it enough, you know, this magazine will take it, all that horseshit that in fact *does* distract us. So, I think I was just trying to say, forget about craft for the moment—or let other people talk about that. And let’s remember singing

for power. And I don't mean power over anybody, either. I really don't mean that at all.

TIR: I was thinking about *The Meadow* and the ways in which *The Meadow* seems to be about different ways of dying, among other things. I'm wondering if you would say that you are putting together some sort of death songs for those people in *The Meadow*?

JG: I accept that as a notion. I wouldn't consciously have thought of that. I would have said that I was doing elegiac work, but in fact those people do speak and I think they often speak powerfully. So sure, I'd accept that notion. That book in particular was not written for publication. Initially it was just written as a way of *saving things*—like stories, things people said, images I see disappearing. So I thought I'd better write them down quick for my daughter, so that some day she could read them. I really did write it for her, and I wasn't going to risk embarrassing myself with some foray into a craft I know nothing of—prose. I just wanted to record the stuff.

TIR: So you put it in prose because it wasn't intended to be a work per se?

JG: Right, I didn't intend for it really to be made into any kind of high artifice. I don't know, I got talked into doing that with it after the first draft was out, but initially it was just a record, a personal thing. As for the material itself, you know, anything that I could make a poem out of, I would.

TIR: So that's why there's a lot of overlap, then, between some of your poetry and *The Meadow*?

JG: Yes, in fact. But most of the material in that book went in because I felt that it lacked the kind of simplicity and symmetry I like in poems. I didn't see any way to handle it in verse, and so I decided to put it into a form that didn't demand the same kind of swiftness or symmetry or simplicity. As far as the overlap—some of it is because my life and experience are limited, and some of it is also because while I was writing it, you know, if I needed an image and I happened already to have written it in a poem—well, I could rip myself off.

TIR: So do you think that now your attitude towards writing prose has changed? Because the book became more than you initially intended it to be, for example, or because it reached a wider audience?

JG: Yes. For instance, I'm willing to try it again. (Pause) Why do you have two TV sets? If the bottom one doesn't work?

TIR: It works; the other one works better, but the one on the bottom has

color. If you want a clear picture you watch the one on the top.

JG: So together they have “content”? I like that.

TIR: You just came back from Colorado, right? What were you doing out there? I mean, what do you usually do?

JG: Usually what I do out there is try to be some place that I belong, for a change. I work. I do a lot of physical things. I read fiction.

TIR: You don't write much?

JG: Not much. I spent the better part of eight years building a two-story log house, and a big log barn, starting with cutting down the trees—all without electricity. I think work is really good for people and they shouldn't try to get out of it. I do a lot of work.

TIR: I got the impression from *The Meadow* that human effort or human labor is sometimes futile. Do you feel like there are circumstances under which work is futile?

JG: I think that without it I personally would go insane. It's restorative. Physical work especially. All the more if you're doing it for yourself and not for some cretin—you know. I've worked a lot of construction jobs, and it's very different. But physical labor is restorative and sane and necessary to human life and this culture is crazy for trying to eradicate it. Labor-saving devices—for example—saving it for what?

TIR: So you can watch two televisions at once.

JG: So you can watch two TVs at once. Or watch twice as much TV. Or have time for what? You see, that's what is useless. It's *not* working. But that seems to be our goal in this culture: to have more time in which to be useless. I mean the guy, for instance, who will go out and buy a snow blower and clear his walk with technology and then go jogging. What the hell is that?

TIR: Maybe it's called America. Many of your characters engage in work that occurs in relation to the land; sometimes their efforts seem futile against the processes of nature. Does human effort ever become futile?

JG: Well, in a sense anything human in relation to the landscape is going to smell temporary, it's going to have a taint to it. But I think that there is a way in which work—especially agricultural work—is a way of having a conversation with the landscape. Otherwise the landscape doesn't respond.

TIR: What about technology and the landscape, though? I mean what goes on in *The Meadow* is meaningful—the building of houses and the ranching and that kind of thing—but elsewhere in your work there also seems to be

a concern for technology overwhelming us.

JG: Well, yes, overwhelming us as an idea. In the sense that, you know, it becomes a monster, it becomes a goal. In other words, we tend at a certain point to start mistaking progress for technology. Or maybe mistaking progress for something that actually exists. That's the word that I would really question—"progress." As far as technology, though, there are some really good old technologies that get thrown out the window and replaced—just as with any other kind of fashion—with something newer and more sophisticated. More complex-centric. Not necessarily better. Like digital clocks. Conventional clocks are more accurate because they never stop moving. I remember when I was in college this hit me. I watched these two guys come along, groundskeepers, and one guy was driving a tractor. Behind the tractor was one of those little trailers. And on the trailer was an internal combustion engine, a utility motor, which was also running, as the tractor was. And *that* engine was hooked up to an air compressor, and the air compressor was hooked up to automatic hedge clippers. There was another guy there, holding them and he was going along—bzzzzzz—clipping these hedges. So now you've got two guys, you've got a tractor, you've got a utility motor, you've got an air compressor. You've got all the labor and machinery that went into building those things, all the natural resources that go into them—the mining and so on—imagine the infinite vortex of resources and labor and technology going into this whole deal here. Two motors, two guys, rubber, steel, fossil fuels, just so that one guy didn't have to move his goddamned arms. See, I believe in moving your arms. I think it's probably better technology to move your arms under those circumstances.

TIR: So then, the thing that would be really extraordinary about Lyle in *The Meadow* is that he was able to make all of those machines and that he could fix everything?

JG: And that he had a clear sense of which technologies were appropriate; and the sense not to throw away any good ideas just because they were older . . .

TIR: . . . or less convenient.

JG: Yeah, or just more basic. As it says in *The Meadow* at some point, if you keep your tools sharp, they're easy to use. You don't need an electric motor then. Your own muscles would be good. I suppose I can already hear the proletarian objection to all this, and all I can do is claim to identify with the

working class. I can also hear the corporate objection, which I do not identify with. People who work in agriculture often work sixteen, eighteen hours a day, especially at certain times of the year, and get paid vastly less than minimum wage because their labor is directed towards a lifestyle they *want* to live. They're not getting deluded by another monster—like wealth and financial well-being. But I remember Lyle saying one time, "I listen to these union guys talking. You know I identify with them. But gosh, eight hours isn't very long to work. Especially if you're getting paid twenty bucks an hour." From the point of view of someone who's working twice that long for a quarter that much, it's all a matter of what you're used to, I guess. It all comes down to the notion of who owns the means of production, of course. Who you're working for. Also how you conceive of the value of what you're producing.

TIR: Because union workers would then have a totally different relationship to work and its outcome than a farmer or a rancher would.

JG: Mostly it's about *who* you're working for. If you're working for yourself, sixteen hours is probably really easy compared to working for some anonymous huge corporate entity where you start watching the clock at 8:05.

TIR: So how do you think the kinds of physical work you do at the ranch then affect your writing?

JG: I don't know if it does affect my writing. Except that if all I did was try to write all the time, I think I'd end up a nut. I could say that I consider my writing to be labor intensive, and the way I build is labor intensive, too. I don't go down to the lumber store and get a bunch of studs and particle board and nail it together. I don't do that. I like to think that my teaching is also labor intensive.

TIR: There seems to be in your work a relationship between landscape and faith, or belief, or the lack of it. What does our belief, or our lack of belief, do to the land? Or to the language?

JG: I think lack of belief makes us misuse landscape *and* language. If you don't believe in anything or you only believe in personal gain you can do whatever you want—to the land, to other people, to language . . . I guess we could go back to some kind of Pantheism which had respect built in. As soon as you get this notion of "going forward and subduing," you're in deep shit because the earth doesn't want to be subdued and it's not going to come in second in relation to anyone. Mother Earth *really* owns the means

of production. My being a *Westerner* might be important in terms of my relationship with a landscape of a certain *size*. Being in the western American landscape gives you a very overwhelming sense of how small you are, how in danger of being futile your life is—which is not to say that it is useless. I think urban-scapes often lead people to the belief that nothing is more important than human activity. Being in a non-urban landscape gives you a completely different impression. It puts you in your place. It shows you just how important you are in relation to something which might involve, say, faith. It occurs to me that in Europe the same phenomenon takes place in regard to history. You know, you go to Rome and you see ordinary people living in a building that's been standing for a thousand years and had hundreds of lives just whooshed through it, and theirs is just another one. It puts them in their place. It makes them see that in relation to history their own life is relatively insignificant, not insignificant, but relatively so. It's possible that since we have virtually no history in this country (well I mean, we do, but we're not really in contact with our deeper past, the way you would be in contact with Western Civilization if you went to Italy for example) it's important to have something to give you a sense of proportion. I think that Westerners are lucky to have a landscape that humbles them. Wallace Stegner says, "you can't know *who* you are unless you know *where* you are." Or Thoreau, "Man is but the place where I stand." Again, being in an urban environment can be like a set of blinders in terms of the landscape you're in. The city-scape is also contained by landscape, but one forgets that.

TIR: I noticed in a poem in *Lethal Frequencies* you have a line where you're quoting someone else and there's this bad scene which involves the history of a piece of property. The guy says, "Hell is when you know where you are." How would this line go with that Stegner quote?

JG: Let's put it this way, knowing *who* you are is hell, too. Self-knowledge is never pleasant. What constitutes self-knowledge is not fun stuff. Think of Oedipus. Think of Dante. "Hell is when you know where you are" changes by the end of that poem into "Hell is when you know where you are and it's beautiful."

TIR: I was reading *Imaginary Timber* last week, and you talk a lot about distance. If there is a sense of pain out there, would it be that part of perception in which perspective is forced upon you by distance?

JG: I think it's probably a normal moral and spiritual response to feel one's

own diminishment by distance—by an amount of space one can't fill or even venture into. Because it's just too big. Or too hostile. That might be painful. On the other hand, I wouldn't say that landscape is pain. I was really interested by that notion though. It does seem to me that landscape is the context in which we suffer. I don't just mean suffering *pain* because I think we also suffer *joy*. Ecstasy, for instance, is unbearable. So we *suffer* our lives. If you're willing to include joy and solace among the things we suffer, then the landscape is certainly—as a museum is where you find paintings—the context in which you suffer your life. A lot of “knowing-who-you-are-by-knowing-where-you-are” has to do with realizing how small you are. That could be a kind of longing and loneliness and ultimately a kind of pain, yes.

TIR: There's a kind of extraordinary silence in some of the poems from *Elements*. I'm wondering if that might come from the landscape or that experience of solitude.

JG: Donald Justice, years ago, was irritated by the frequent appearance of the word “silence” in everybody's poems during that time. He suggested that one could replace the word “silence” with the word “distance” and get the same effect. I would like to think that there is distance—space—in those poems. Of course the evocation of silence or space has nothing to do with using the words “silence” or “space.” I would like to think that those poems are an engagement with silence and a conversation with it in which silence actually gets to have its say, its force working on you. There are poets, some of whom I admire a great deal, in whose work I do not hear any silence. I just hear them talking. That's fine, it's just not what I want to do. I do want to have . . . I want to let the silence in and hear what it has to say and try to figure out what it's been doing or doing to me or for me or with me or whatever. In other words, a conversation. So I can't tell about my own poems if it's there, but I would like to think that it is.

TIR: That's how it strikes me anyway—especially in *Elements*. Do you have any sense or feeling that language is what comes between us and the land?

JG: Well, most human utterances—like what we're doing now—are just noise, and noise probably *does* come between us, and between us and the landscape, between us and anything important. But to me what's attractive about poetry is that it offers a possibility of making utterances that aren't just noise, utterances that actually *break* the silence. There are very few, you know. Only certain sounds and images and combinations of syllables and

rhythms can do it. A lot of people have been working on this for a long time and have figured out some of what I guess we could now call traditional ways of breaking the silence. I try to wait for those kinds of sounds to occur to me rather than just talking. Again, it may involve having been raised in the West, raised in a culture where prolixity is not admired. Silence—until you have something to say—silence is what’s admired. Being brief is admired. One of the great attractions of poetry is its ability to engage the silence, of a landscape, for instance, in a way that is not just talking *about* it. We were talking about *The Meadow* before. In a way, that book was written—one of the reasons it was written, besides the reasons I already mentioned—because the silence in *Elements* was starting to scare me. I mean, it was starting to get really quiet in here. And I felt like I was in danger of giving in to it. And so the idea of writing extended prose had a lot to do with making some noise for a while so that I could make some room for myself, so that I could engage this conversation again without just saying, “You’re right, I should shut up.” In *Elements*—at least by the end of it—it was getting scarily quiet.

TIR: That makes sense to me. *Elements* was the first book of yours that I read, and later on, when I read *The Meadow*, I was surprised that you would have gone to prose. The poems in *Elements* do get quieter and quieter.

JG: Right. It was just a way of kicking open the door again, you know.

TIR: We were thinking that Dickinson also is really interested in landscape and that there’s some sort of connection in her work between landscape and belief. Do you feel that you’re responding to her?

JG: I think I must be, just because I love her poems so much. I admire her intelligence so deeply. It’s almost not a good idea for me to read her too much because she’s so intimidating to me. I feel like if you have to be that smart to do this, then I quit. I also admire her restraint . . . but I almost cannot talk about Dickinson without raising the idea of Whitman. I admire her quietness, her willingness to listen. I admire her ability to arrive at something that seems aphoristic. Something that seems simple, symmetrical, paradoxical, and true enough. And so, I don’t know about *responding* to her. Maybe *imitate*—you know—trying to find some way to even perceive the level she’s operating on.

TIR: It seems like she arrives at the aphorisms by looking very intently at things. Unlike other people who are working with aphorisms, she doesn’t just pull them out of the sky. I was thinking this is what happens also with

a lot of your poems. They have moments of aphoristic—

JG: Yeah, “aphoristic” suits me better than “aphorism.” I don’t think I’ve written very many aphorisms really. But I would like to think that I’m *leaning* in that direction. I don’t try to involve myself with wisdom particularly, and often aphorisms are involved with wisdom.

TIR: And they’re taken out of the context in which they were arrived at also, which makes them look even smarter than they are a lot of times. Well, apart from Dickinson, who else has an aphoristic quality that interests you?

JG: Well, William Blake, the “Proverbs of Hell” has probably my favorite aphorisms. And he *did* involve himself with wisdom. And I find it thrilling. He also understands the notion of symmetry and paradox, of compression. “Damn braces, bless relaxes”—if you’d written that you could just about quit. Also Antonio Porchia—another favorite of mine. He wrote nothing but aphorisms. One thin book of aphorisms in his life. As if he never said anything until something came to him in that form and he wrote it down. Many of them are quite good, I think. Who else? James Merrill, he’s got some—or, rather, he’s *aphoristic*. Merwin has some imagistic aphorisms. Some couplets of Pope’s are great aphorisms. Maybe it’s just that I appreciate it when people shut up when they’re supposed to and don’t keep talking when they’re not supposed to. It’s so rare. I’m not doing it now.

TIR: It’s sort of at odds with the idea of an interview or the way it has to work. What about prose poems? Whose prose poems do you like?

JG: James Wright’s. I mean, I can think of prose poems by a lot of different people, but I like a great many of his. He seems to really understand the difference between poetic rhythms and prose cadences and really knows how to mix it up. “May Morning”—that one that’s a Petrarchan sonnet written out as prose. It’s a kind of joke, I guess, but it’s a joke that I like. Prose, like any other form, performs differently in different hands so that we don’t really know what a prose poem is, which is its attraction. It’s whatever suffices. Mostly I’m drawn to the form because I don’t understand it. I don’t know the difference between the chapters in *The Meadow* and prose poems.

TIR: I was just going to ask you that.

JG: I can feel the difference. I don’t have any theories about it, but I do sense the difference between what I would call a prose poem and what I would call prose.

TIR: Well, that opening part in *The Meadow*, for example, seems much more like poetry than some of the other sections.

JG: It does to me rhythmically, but not in terms of its whole shape. It seems sort of like the barn door's left open on it . . .

TIR: . . . so it keeps sprawling.

JG: Yes. I know that I have this kind of tick as a poet to close the barn door once it's full of wild horses, and I know that it's highly unfashionable and I'm not supposed to do that because theoretically it's polluted. But I like it, so that's what I do. I have a physical relationship with my writing. I do what I like.

TIR: Well, do you feel at odds with certain things going on in contemporary writing?

JG: At odds? Yeah, sort of. I feel as if—you know, I used to feel pretty hip, and I don't anymore. I feel as if many younger writers are bothered by things that do not bother me.

TIR: Such as what?

JG: Oh, things like, *Who am I?* Which takes the form of *Who I am*. What's the self? Which takes the form of *I am not* a pronoun. Who is the author? Which takes the form of *hide and seek* with necessary utterance. What's meaning? Which takes the form of *meaninglessness*—the things I feel at odds with are kind of, I think, *theory-born*—expectations for words to be forensically meaningful and exact, which they never are and never were and never claimed to be. And since they're not, it breeds a sort of *taking-your-ball-and-going-home-with-it* attitude. The false expectation is followed by false frustration. If it's not going to mean exactly to you what I meant it to mean (which no real writer ever dreamt was going on) I'm going to take my ball and go home and do terrible things to my ball in the privacy of my own house. So I don't understand—I'm not moved by—that, because I never thought words made any claim to be meaningful in that sense. Their willingness to *try* is what is moving to me. It makes me think of the asymptotic curve, and how that line gets closer and closer to the axis. If you manage to make an utterance that approaches that curve, what more do you want? One of the things that comes of all this is that I end up feeling frustrated trying to address this *hide-and-seek* with necessary utterance. I guess that would be one way of putting it. You know, all this trying to write the kind of poem you could never get blamed for. Keeping the poetry so timid in terms of assertion that it couldn't ever be accused of being

politically or emotionally or intellectually dangerous. Some writers actually *like* what Don Justice calls “the dead hand of the Academy”—structuralism and its exfoliations—resting on their thighs as they compose.

TIR: Which gets back to the death songs in a way.

JG: Yes.

TIR: I mean, why are you doing this?

JG: Right. Exactly. I like the willingness to assert even though you know you’re pissing into the wind. A critic once picked out a particular line of mine—a somewhat aphoristic line, I guess—and said, but this is a half-truth. And, I thought, of course it is!—but hell, I’ll take it. You know, half, that’s pretty good. I wish I could do better. But I’m not going to throw it away just because it’s only half true. How can there be a whole truth? You know, poems are not supposed to behave like facts or newspapers. Facts don’t even behave like facts. See, it makes me feel kind of out of it because these aren’t things that bother me. Other things bother me.

TIR: So what are you really concerned with?

JG: Saving my ass.

TIR: From what?

JG: From what? From oblivion. Meaninglessness. Despair. Not “getting across.”

TIR: So that’s a spiritual thing for you or religious or—

JG: Sure, I could say, *redemption*, *salvation*, and it wouldn’t be unrelated, metaphorically, to those notions. But I think that good artists, and possibly philosophers, do what they do—this might be a strong infinitive—to save their souls, to save themselves from meaninglessness maybe, or pain. Or hell. But if it doesn’t have that necessity of utterance to it, it doesn’t interest me. That’s why I don’t like the hide-and-seek poems. I’m not sure there’s time to fuck around.

TIR: So how do you reconcile that attitude which makes a lot of sense to me, with teaching in this place, *the Iowa Writers’ Workshop*?

JG: I don’t think of it as *the Iowa Writers’ Workshop*. I just think of it as a bunch of writers together in one place, a community; and it’s not just a job. I think that one of the things that helps me is being around other writers—especially writers who have more energy and enthusiasm than I do—or at least on different days they might! Teaching takes a lot out of you, and I think a lot of people worry it takes away from one’s creative font. But I don’t feel that way at all. I feel as if everything I formulate—with

someone else or with a group of people—is going into my pocket. You know the Williams line “share with us, share with us—it will be money in your pockets.” I feel like thinking about writing with other writers is restorative and sustaining—even though it’s exhausting. If the “Workshop” were the kind of thing that in fact that word suggests—you know, a bunch of elves with little wooden hammers—I wouldn’t be here.

TIR: I was thinking about that passage in *The Meadow*—and you talked about this also in that craft lecture where Lyle is helping you, or answering your questions about building the house. Then you say to him, How do you do this by yourself, putting in the first rafters? And he says, “You know, I’ve often wondered that myself.” I was thinking about that connected with the idea of writing which is necessarily a solitary endeavor, but paradoxically is not and cannot be solitary.

JG: Right, I agree. At a certain point, something mysterious happens, and if any of us knew how to do this, would we? Would we, if it was something we could ever figure out? You can study the tables on a framing square forever, but at a certain point you’ve got to get the first two pairs of rafters and the ridge-board up by yourself. You don’t know how you do that, and once you even manage to do it, you don’t quite know how you did it.

TIR: Then what about teaching? What can you do as a teacher for other writers?

JG: I don’t think I can teach them anything that they wouldn’t eventually figure out for themselves. I might be an enabler or an accelerator. Basically all I can do is generate or demonstrate my own enthusiasm for the art until, communally, we hold our enthusiasms up and say, Look! I think there’s energy in that. As far as mechanics—formal matters—I feel I can help. But anything there is to know of value can’t really be taught, it can only be learned. It’s up to the people we refer to as students—they’re not really students, they’re young writers—it’s up to them. If they want to learn something, well, I’m here. I’ve read some stuff. I’ve thought about some stuff. I talk. And what I say—either it’s like a spark that jumps the gap or it doesn’t. But they have to *be there*. It’s up to them. Also it seemed to me, while I was studying here, that I learned more from my compatriots than I did from my teachers. It really has to do with the quality of this community. One of the hard things about this job is constantly being accused of a set of beliefs you demonstrably don’t believe in. But, given what there is to worry about, let’s not worry about that.

TIR: How did you feel when you got to this line in “Resurrection Update,” this last line here speaking of the earth as “an aspirin in a glass of water”? Did that have a sort of inevitability and surprise all wrapped up in it?

JG: Yeah, I guess it did because I left it there. Ultimately, it seemed like it was okay. But I did worry about it, I suppose, thinking it might seem, oh, flat, non-resonant, maybe escapist. Like putting in an image because I couldn’t really end the poem? An image which was kind of mute.

TIR: In *Lethal Frequencies*—and I guess you could take these one at a time if you wanted to—there are the two poems which in some way come from poems by Frost and Stevens, “Indirective” and “The Sacral Dreams of Ramon Fernandez,” which comes out of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” What drew you to want to respond to these poems?

JG: All right, well, I’ll just do one poem at a time. I love Frost—it’s an homage, I guess. But what I like about Frost is the fact that he knows where he is. He knows *who* he is because he knows *where* he is. That’s why he was dismissed during his lifetime as being a regionalist.

TIR: Even though that was an assumed identity to a certain extent? Even though he transplanted his identity?

JG: Well, he was dismissed critically because of his use of a particular idiom and because of his habitation in a particular place which was not urban, therefore not in some sense *relevant* to critical sensibilities. When he lets his Yankees talk, it’s just glorious to me. You know, “Fred, where’s north?” “North, why north is there, my dear”—or “my love” I guess he says. That to me is an achievement. Also I think it was an attempt to just go a distance that I don’t usually go, to keep talking. Because my temperamental tendency is to fall silent much more quickly than that. And it’s about place, you know, one’s place in a place. And as far as “Ramon Fernandez,” I was just tickled when I read that footnote about why Wallace Stevens put this supposed Peruvian critic—Ramon Fernandez—in his poem. Wallace Stevens says, “Ramon Fernandez was not intended to be anyone at all.” And I thought, “That’s how I feel.” Also it became an opportunity to let Ramon speak because Stevens didn’t let him. I wanted to let Ramon speak—for that side of Stevens that seems to me to struggle with death. I think many of Stevens’ best poems are written out of a fear of not being saved by his writing or by his philosophy or by his vision? “Disillusionment at Ten O’clock.” “Domination of Black.” In “Sunday Morning,” for example, he really gives in to the destructive possibility that his philosophy

might be insufficient. And so I thought if I got Ramon—obviously a man named Ramon Fernandez is probably a Catholic—and let him speak, well, not speak, but represent, be associated with that impulse, the God-shaped hole inside us all, and have his say and be Catholic. . . .

TIR: Getting back to this regionalism accusation, the one against Frost, what do you think about the fact that he moved, that he was not from there originally, and that he's so much associated with that idiom as a representative of that part of the culture in this country? I was thinking about this because we were talking so much about your work being a product of that landscape, the fact that you were born there and that is where you consider yourself to be placed. I guess I'm wondering if it seems to you in any way illegitimate that he would just up and—

JG: No, not in any way illegitimate. I mean, you can either handle the idiom, or you can't. It either becomes you, or it doesn't. It either fits in your mouth, or it doesn't. Someone like Frost—who knows, maybe if he'd moved to New Orleans and written poems in Creole, he would have been just as good at that. I don't know. Maybe it was a temperamental thing, maybe he was drawn to that region for reasons having to do with terseness and reticence and the things that seemed to be in his character. Emily Dickinson was from that area, too. And they both are anti-transcendentalists—well, I shouldn't say things like that and one doesn't really know whether they were or not. But, you know what I'm saying—they're not mystics. So he was probably drawn to the area which spawned the idiom for neurological reasons which I'm not qualified to address. But I think of, for instance, Cormac McCarthy. He began as a Southern writer, writing Faulkner's idiom pretty much and writing it well, and then moved to El Paso where he's now writing these westerns. And damned if he doesn't know the idiom. Some people just have a real ear for it. I don't think there's anything false about it at all. If it works, it can't be fake. It's not something you could fake.

TIR: So because he *can* do it, he can do it.

JG: Yes, and because he can do it, it's tempered, it has restraint. It's not like a lot of stuff—especially in some fiction—which is in-your-face with the idiom, where nobody ever says anything that isn't quaint and charming and regionally idiomatic. I hate that stuff. That's sort of a boast, you know, "You should have been there and known these people as intimately as I did, these crackers, these people who talk this funny way. Listen to how I can

imitate them.” That stuff betrays itself. You can get it published, but you can’t get away with it.

TIR: My other question about your poem “Indirective” is tangentially related. We talked about the Frost poem and you described it I think as some kind of derailing. He gives the “directive” and it all goes awry, and he never really gets to where he said he was going. So I was thinking about that dream in *The Meadow* where Lyle drives into Denver and then won’t take directions even though you both know he’s going to get lost going back. Then in this kind of dream logic, you’re explaining his attitude: “Things have too much direction, and you can’t find your way back from anywhere.” Do we order the world with language or does the world order us? I was thinking about narrative and direction and arriving somewhere.

JG: Well, again, Wallace Stegner has addressed that when he says, “Chaos is the nature of reality, and order is man’s desire.” Frost’s poem enacts that notion, among other things. And if you were to ask me which is relative and which is absolute. . . . Obviously, we’re part of nature, and obviously we all suffer from the illusion of being excluded from nature. Everything comes out of nature, including our desire to order it into something that it isn’t.

TIR: Some of the poems in *Elements* are about discovering the order that’s already there, that’s larger than the order we try to impose on what’s around us.

JG: I like that. That’s a Zen practice, too, you know—looking at something long and hard enough to see its real nature, not just its apparent nature. Who knows if anyone has actually ever done that? But it’s an interesting thing to try.

TIR: Another quote from *The Meadow* reads, “He lived so close to the real world, it almost let him in.” That’s from the beginning, about Lyle. Then you start off with that description of him watching the meadow while he’s eating as if he’s watching TV. So there’s this different kind of attention that is possible for somebody like that. Is it still possible for us to attend to the real and the real world? Or have we in some way deprived ourselves of that possibility, or to what extent have we deprived ourselves of that possibility?

JG: We have deprived ourselves of that possibility to a very large extent. But I think it’s still possible to try to attend to it. Again the figure of the asymptotic curve seems operative and useful. To feel alienated from the world (which, even if it’s an illusion, is a *real* illusion) is kind of a luxury.

I mean, it's based on idleness. As Nietzsche says, "Idleness is the beginning of all psychology." If you're engaged in survival, you're not worried about whether this rabbit that you want to eat is real. You're not thinking about that. It's a luxury that gives you the chance to say things like "Zeno's arrow never reaches the target" or "Words don't actually arrive at any meaning." The train is coming down the track and you're standing in the middle of the track. . . .

TIR: Which is the place in which work is no longer necessary.

JG: Exactly.

TIR: So that work would be the remedy for that attitude?

JG: Yes. Getting back to what we were talking about—there's a restorative element to it, in that you know you're up against an "objective" danger, if you wish. You can get hurt. You can fail. Of course, doing too much of anything, whether it's physical or intellectual work, without a balance, without addressing, again, the whole human being, will make you stupid. Reading too much will make you stupid. Of course, I'm thinking of spiritual "stupidity." I'm not sure you should quote me on that. (Laughter)

TIR: Too late. Here's another question for you. There's this passage in *The Meadow* where you're sort of rejecting different metaphors for memory—I think that's what's happening: "When we think of our lives as what we have done, memory becomes a museum with one long shelf on which we arrange the bric-a-brac of deeds, each to his own liking . . . Lyle doesn't think of his life as what he has done or what was done to him." I'm wondering—that metaphor seemed to you to be inadequate, and that we shouldn't be ordering our lives in that way. I assume you mean thinking of our great achievements or categorizing them.

JG: Right. Or reducing your life merely to its *experiences*. William Stafford's got that wonderful, somewhat aphoristic, line that goes, "Ask me if what I have done is my life." Well, only partially. My life is probably much more than what I have done. Also much less. The whole sensation of the linearity of the passage of time is something I tried, in that book, to resist. Being human, I can't resist it completely. I was also thinking about the difference between poetry and prose. If you're going to tell a story, before you've written a word, you have already addressed—or enacted—one idea regarding the passage of time. And poetry doesn't necessarily do that. At least not as automatically. I was also thinking about the degree to which we perceive events as linear just because of how we read—the physical action of how we

are reading what we are reading. . . . Now if you've never seen anything written down and you were listening to someone talk, couldn't it seem just as much like a stack of words going straight up? Why do they have to be laid out in a string like that? Well, only because that's how we read—as Westerners—and so I was thinking about, how—if you get past sense, event, cause and effect, down to syllables, iambs, feet, words, images—time does not necessarily pass. I've often been struck by how, when astronauts go out in spaceships, the first thing they do is turn back and take pictures of Earth. That impulse, and those pictures, are fascinating to me. The Earth from outer space does not look like it is under the influence of the passage of time. I was thinking that from the point of view of the meadow, this hundred years did not *pass*. Cause and effect did not operate. Events were not linear. It didn't exist in the human-desire-for-order. It was, possibly, more like a deck of cards than a hand of cards. Or more like a closed book than an open one.

TIR: Right. There are two different excerpts—or maybe even more—from diaries in *The Meadow*, which, if they were fictional excerpts—which I assume they're not—would then contribute to the sense of time as being a linear progression. But because they're not fictional they completely undermine the idea of linearity. The dates are listed, but there's no rise and fall, there's no climax. It's just an accumulation.

JG: I like that. That's pretty close to what I had intended. A lot of people tried to talk me out of putting those in there.

TIR: I think it works in this very interesting way with the short blocks of words that you have on the page for the different sections of *The Meadow*. They play off against each other.

JG: I like it, too. And to me it is proof that nothing really *happens*. Or things really happen, but not in time.

TIR: And the days when Lyle just lists the weather and how much snow and the temperature again.

JG: That's what interests me.

TIR: Yeah, there's something larger than that ordering of days on the calendar, larger than the numerical sequence.

JG: Those diary entries, by the way, are absolutely authentic. And though there are parts left out (and you can tell that from the dates) they are rendered verbatim. The copy-editor at Holt went nuts over that stuff because it's all “wrong”—the punctuation completely eccentric and incon-

sistent. . . . But I really felt an allegiance to it. After it was in there, I tried reading Clara's diaries without the dates and it seemed quite rhythmic to me, really poetic without these signifiers for the passage of time.

TIR: Which give it that flat, segmented feeling. So maybe more rhythm to just a simpler, balanced life.

JG: But also, I'm still mystified, in a way, by why they wrote those diaries since *nothing's in them*. . . . What the temperature is, is it snowing or not—does that matter later on? I mean, I think the most interesting thing that she does is shoot the clothesline with a pistol and all the laundry falls into the snow. I thought that was just fantastic. But their sense of days as being *unremarkable* seemed to me to be important, possibly a crucial element, and that I—we—needed it in there. Unremarkable, yet worth recording.

TIR: It makes that order, the order that's imposed on the journal entries by the dates, seem very artificial. . . . I was thinking about the fact that the story comes around again and again to deeds for the land and ownership of the land because it traces all the losses of land and the transfers of land to the underlying idea, I assume, that you can't really own it anyway in the end. . . .

JG: No, we're altogether too temporary for that. It's an absurd, arrogant notion that leads people to do terrible things to each other. And to themselves. And to the land. The examples are altogether too obvious to mention. Well, are you going to keep this going until the goddamn tape runs out or what?