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March 16, 2007

In conversation with Marthe Whitcomb
with Robert Hass, Doug Kerr, Brenda Hillman & Andrew Leavitt

RH: We were thinking today we would just talk about your life in the Bay Area...we can start at a number of different places.

MW: OK.

RH: But among the topics were your life, from the time you arrived at Mills, through the time of meeting and getting together with Kenneth.

MW: OK.

RH: And the culture of the Bay Area—that's one topic. Another topic is your meeting Kenneth and the early years of that relationship.

MW: Right.

RH: Another topic is we talked about reading through the writing of that period with you. That would be wonderful to do. And the later part of your relationship with Kenneth. And your life after 'cause this should also be for your grandchildren as well as for literary scholars so...

DK: If I remember correctly, the autobiography was in part recorded for your daughters?

MW: Right.

DK: So, that's part of the project...it got me thinking...the poems are so much written about the daughters and you...so what was the life at home that's reflected in the poems?

RH: I think we can take the conversation wherever it goes.

MW: Well, what about the beginning of my coming to California and meeting Kenneth.

BH: You left home. You left Cincinnati at age sixteen. Is that right?

MW: Actually, I left home at age sixteen.

BH: OK.

MW: I lived in Cincinnati and graduated from high school there at some normal age, when I just turned eighteen, you know.

BH: Yeah.

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MW: I was working summers and I had some scholarship choices and I went to Ohio Wesleyan for one year. And there I met my advisor, a man named Lawrence Sears and he was an incredibly important person to me. [He] had been at Wesleyan for several decades, had lived his early life in China and he was head of the philosophy department there. We had a very, a very deep friendship. Mid-first semester he told me that he would be leaving the next year...he'd been there for a long time. So he, his wife and their two children planned to move and he had been given a position at Mills College and so I thought about it [for] maybe six hours and made an appointment to see him again and said, "Well, I think I'll transfer to Mills!" He certainly did not say no or say, "What about Bryn Mawr?" But he did say, "Well, let's think about it." And then I went to him to have my program for the second semester approved and I had selected every course he gave because he was leaving and I wanted to be sure to get them. And then he said, "OK," and put me in two other English classes that were taught by close friends of his. So I had an unreal...unrealistic...it was not the usual second semester as a freshman.

BH: Yeah.

MW: And, I had all these great, wonderful classes—seminars and classes at his home and they were great. It was a great year and in the meantime I applied to Mills and was accepted. His wife and children were coming out to California to buy a house and so forth in Berkeley and he was going to start at Mills. So, in fact...when I first came to Mills he wasn't here in the philosophy department. But he wrote me letters and encouraged me and in the mean time I met the head of the philosophy department at Mills. A wonderful, eccentric, out of it, smart woman named Georgiana Meldin and her specialty was logical positivism. So I became drenched in logical positivism. She was Canadian. She had graduated from McGill, and we really hit it off. For example, in class there was a Beth Larson, O-N, and my name at that time was Larsen, L-A-R-S-E-N. And so she would call on us very appropriately—Ms. LarsON, Ms. LarsEN.

(group laughing)

MW: And then she would invite me for coffee at the Mills coffee shop and we would sit in the outdoor patio. You know the tin tables with holes in the middle for the umbrellas? Well, she would light her cigarette and then look nervously around for an ashtray and then she'd see the hole and that was it. It was perfect. She was great. My best friend at Mills and I were very close to her. We went on a California camping trip with her and she was quite worried about the appearance of Dr. Sears because she knew...she thought of him as...an unknown quantity in the philosophy department. And they were very different. But it was interesting because her favorite of all time students, whom she talked about a lot, was a woman named Dorothy Van Ghent—who was somebody who was very, very important to Kenneth. And so she actually, over the next couple of years, she kept close to her information about Dorothy Van Ghent and in the opinion she had about Kenneth. So she worried for my soul and my being (laughs). It was hard. But then Dr. Sears arrived...I guess my second year at Mills. During Christmas vacation I worked at the White House in the bookstore with my friend Ellen. A guy came into the store to buy books and he asked whether we could go to coffee. We'd seen him there several times. We went out for coffee with him, his name was

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Bob Stock, he was a young poet in San Francisco, living in North Beach with his wife and child. He invited us to come to 1057 Steiner Street, which was where they were from—not Sebastopol...

BH: Petaluma?

MW: Petaluma!

(group laughing)

MW: *The Chicken Farmers of Petaluma*, have you ever read that book?

BH: No, but I want to hear you talk about it.

MW: Oh, it's a great book.

RH: We heard about it. Gary Snyder is very interested.

MW: *The Chicken Farmers of Petaluma* was great. I do have that book, I know the person that wrote it—he was a friend. Well, the chicken farmers from Petaluma drove in for these Friday night meetings at 1057 Steiner. These meetings were Friday nights and so I was a student, and I would take the train.

RH: And this was still your sophomore year?

MW: No, I was then a junior because I had had my sophomore year before Dr. Sears returned. And then my third year of college was my second year at Mills and we, Ellen sometimes came with me, we'd go to 1057 Steiner and Kenneth would arrive. And it was a great arrival. He had a great cape, black, and he carried all the books in his arm and he came on the bus. On the streetcar and the bus and at 1057 Steiner they—Tony and Nina and Bessie and the people who came down from Petaluma—adored him. They would have very philosophical discussions about anarchism, Italy, all the historical movements and Italian anarchism and the international movement...and it was very lively. I learned a lot.

MW: Which was great (laughing). Anyway, at that time...that was where I met Kenneth. And that was the beginning of that relationship.

BH: So was that in '47 or '48?

MW: I think it was '47.

RH: So did your friendship with the Sears family continue?

MW: It did and, in fact, there were dramas around it. My best friend at Mills was a woman named [Patricia Almstead]. She was a very wonderful poet; she became even a better poet as the years went by. Her family was a prominent family in Philadelphia, and her father was a

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big politician, [Almstead]. And she had known Kenneth. Actually, she's the one who introduced me to Kenneth.

BH: In the Hamalian biography she said that there was a sort of that concern that you shared with Kenneth over her well-being...that was in part what helped cement your friendship.

MW: Yeah, there was. Kenneth was in touch with all sorts of friends who were friends of his.

RH: Doug mentioned you left home at sixteen.

MW: I did leave home at sixteen.

RH: Were you in touch with your parents?

MW: No. No, no, no, I gave my parents up (laughing). I had to.

DK: That's another chapter.

RH: So young to be on your own.

MW: Yeah, I was on my own. There I actually was supporting myself. I had about three jobs from the time I was sixteen on. I moved in, in my same neighborhood, but I moved in with friends—a friend of mine named Janet Hoover and her mother was a minister. She was very far out and wonderful. And they just made it more and more appropriate for me to stay there with them. It was a very loving act of inclusion. So I kind of just had sort of two families I navigated between. It's a more complicated story on the family side, but I really had very little contact with my family—much more with my brothers and, for a while, with my sister. And my brother and I are good friends. He lives in Rio Vista. After he retired he came out here.

BH: What's your family position in the siblings?

MW: I'm the oldest child of four. Two girls and two boys. Yeah. But you know, I was lucky in that I had parental substitutes and teachers. I had very wonderful, incredible teachers. I remember the ones that were most important to me—I remember them in detail from the age seven on. And so they were very important to me, and they were really very remarkable in the support they gave me.

AL: Interesting...part of your story—there seems to be a number of these wonderful teachers?

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AL: As you're telling it, it seems like they found you...but it seems to me like you found these teachers.

MW: I needed them, yes. But you know, one of the strange things in the relationship with Kenneth was...there was the element of his being in the teacher's role a lot. Even when I had a child he was telling me everything to do, you know? Even I rebelled at that point.

(group laughing)

DK: A little far from his specialty.

MW: Yeah.

DK: So your junior year you started going to the—

MW: Anarchist meetings.

DK: You said “we went;” who'd you go with?

MW: Usually my friend Ellen. She was at Mills and then she left at the end of her junior year and transferred to Cal—her parents wanted her to go to Cal. Her parents lived in Berkeley. Ellen and I are still very close friends. She lives in Vancouver and has been responsible for a lot of poetry in Vancouver. A lot. Bob, Bob Creeley, and Robin Blazer lives up in her house upstairs, and Landis Everson, all of those people have been around for Ellen. She has a good life. She became a therapist and she's very good. But anyway, yeah, the anarchist meetings were really great.

RH: And then... go back for a minute. Your junior year, Sears has arrived, how did Sears and Meldin get on in fact?

MW: Well, Ms. Meldin and I always were close, always were close. But she really did not like Dr. Sears and she did not like the idea even of Kenneth because she felt he had ruined Dorothy Van Ghent's academic career and so forth.

RH: You had not met.

MW: I have never met Dorothy Van Ghent.

RH: When I arrived at Stanford to do graduate work I wanted to study the English novel...my advisor handed me the paperback two volume set of Dorothy Van Ghent on the English novel and said, “Start here.”

MW: Oh, wow—

RH: “Read these books and read her essays on these books.” She was the figure at that point.

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MW: Yeah. Kenneth wrote quite a bit about her.

BH: Was she teaching at Mills?

MW: No, she wasn't teaching. She had been a student though, of Ms. Meldin's. I think Kenneth talked about that.

RH: So you were warned...

MW: I had a lot of warning—

RH: When you first laid eyes on him and he appeared in a cape at the anarchist meeting, is that it? Had you seen him before?

MW: No, I think I first met him at a party in Berkeley.

RH: And you're a philosophy major now, and a junior...

MW: Yes, I was a philosophy major, and then very shortly after that I was a little bit fraught, but then we began our relationship then, and I was still a student at Mills.

BH: And what was the status of his marriage? I mean he was separated at that point from Marie, or?

MW: He was. But that was off again on again. And actually, when I went to join Kenneth in Europe, he was on, I guess it was a Fulbright, after I graduated from Mills. I guess Kenneth got the Fulbright and went to Europe, and I was a teaching assistant at Cal in the philosophy department. So I stayed through the year to—on my contract, and took classes and I taught Plato. (laughing)

RH: Did you take any classes at Cal while you were in Mills?

MW: No.

RH: And in your senior year at Mills what classes did you take?

MW: I just... I took some English classes. My worst class was trying to swim the length of the pool once. (group laughing) But I did. And I did it all on graduation day, too.

DK: Didn't you have that problem in high school also?

MW: Oh yes.

DK: You were going to fail high school—

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BH: I flunked archery, so I can relate.

DK: Literally, you had to do it on graduation day—

MW: Yes, I always acted, that's my last grade. Yeah, and I took... You know, I was barely present emotionally my last year at Mills. I mean, so much I was gone. Half the week I would go into the city. It was not a very great academic year.

BH: How did you get into the city?

MW: I must have taken a bus. In fact, one night I was coming back to Mills. I was dozing and I missed my stop. I had to take a cab back.

BH: So, across the Bay Bridge or—?

MW: Across the Bay Bridge.

DK: You were in love?

MW: Oh yeah.

DK: And, everybody is warning you against this?

MW: Oh yeah. Definitely. Even Marie Rexroth, Philip Lamantia who is a friend of mine.

(group laughing)