

Interview with Ethan Gilsdorf
By Jackie Biederman
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To start, I did some research on your website this week. You live in Somerville, MA and you're originally from NH, right?

Yes

Do you mind talking a little bit about your Bachelor's and Master's degrees?

After spending all of my life in a small town in NH, I went to Hampshire College in Amherst, MA and my original plan was that I was going to be a filmmaker. Since I was 10 or 12, I was interested in writing, cartooning and making movies when I was a kid growing up and in high school. I thought I was going to go to Hollywood and make my living as a film director. Hampshire had a great film program so I went there and over the course of my time there my interests just started to shift and I became more and more interested in writing. I graduated in 1990 and then took a year off. I worked and wrote during that year off and I really tried to work on mostly poetry at that point although I had originally started out trying to write short fiction. Then I applied to graduate programs and I ended up going to Louisiana State University which is in Baton Rouge. I moved down there with my futon strapped to the roof of my car, rolled into town never having visited. The smarter thing to do, although it may have scared me away, would have been to go down there after I was accepted, check out the campus, talk to people, do a little more research and see if it was a good fit. But instead, I just looked at my offers and realized that LSU's was the best one in terms of financial aide and said "What the hell, I'm gonna do it." I was there from about 90-92 for about 2 ½ years. Then I graduated with that glorious door-opening degree (laughs).

What is your overall opinion about doing an MFA? Some people really recommend getting an MFA and some people are really against it. Do you have any thoughts on that?

People do ask me this question a lot and I think that there are a lot of different ways to answer that question. My perspective was that I wasn't gonna graduate with a clear career path in tact. It helped that I was mostly interested in writing poetry but most poets know, unless they are really

naïve or stupid, that they're not going to get a job as a poet. There are almost no jobs as poets in this world. Even if you want to be a full time poet, you know there is no way to make money at it. Even if you are a novelist, at least there is this off chance that through luck or talent, you will get a novel published and some people can make a living that way writing novels but for poets, there's no way to do it. The money is not there. I kind of went into it feeling like this is my way to try out this role. Ya know-How would I feel calling myself a writer, calling myself a poet? In regards to your original question: I was lucky enough to be accepted to a program not having studied literature or English really in my undergrad and I was very fortunate because I feel like they kind of took a chance on me and whatever they saw in my writing. I'm not sure what it was but it must have been something. I did have some holes in my reading background and I really felt like this was my chance to take myself seriously as a writer for 2 or 3 years, take all of those classes that I wish I had taken in college, really focus on trying to write as much as I can and see how that feels, see how I like that....Do I feel comfortable in that world? I think that people have to go into the program with some pretty clear ideas about what they want to get out of it and they don't have these grand illusions about what it will do for their careers. I think that they just have to have a proper attitude about it. For some people, they're looking for a community of writers. For some people, they are hoping to go to a prestigious program like Iowa or something where they might make connections and get discovered by an editor or an agent because there are some MFA programs where there is some serious recruiting done. My program: not so much...The program I went to was perfectly fine and I had a great experience there but it's not known to be particularly prestigious so it doesn't attract that kind of attention. You really can benefit from the experience of having your work critiqued, having to write something regularly, developing the thick skin that you need. These all really important skills that you have to have if you're looking to be a lifetime writer. You can't be crushed every time someone doesn't like your poem. You have to be able to soldier on. Like the class you took with me, you know that there's never one answer. There's often seven answers and you have to figure out: how do you handle all this feedback? How do you incorporate it, how do you decide ultimately what is the best thing for your piece that you're working on. There's no doubt that it's also flattering that 12 people have taken time to read your poem. You're very vulnerable at the same time but when you think about it, that's kind of great attention. The down side is that you get 12 different responses to what to do with it, if you were to revise it, what direction you should go with it...and that can

be enormously frustrating. Which is the great thing about writing because you can look at how people respond to it but in the end, you're the one that has to decide what to do with it...mostly, sometimes if you're going to get it published, then an editor has their own say and you have to listen to it.

We had to read an article for class by the poet/critic Donald Hall and he said that a lot of American people do an MFA program because they don't have the coffee shop experience that Paris is supposed to provide so people go to get an MFA to create that community of writers. I know that you lived in Paris for awhile, did you find that was true while you were living there?

Well, to bring you up to speed on what happened after my MFA, which opened all of these doors for me (laughs), I moved to Vermont and lived there for 7 years and worked for half that time as a bookstore manager and the other half I worked in Public Relations for a small college. I was also involved in starting up a student activities program for the college. It was in 1999 that I moved to Paris. I had begun to develop a community of writers. I mean there's not really a café scene in Vermont per se and there are cafes in Boston and Somerville and certainly I find that in Somerville I do find that I run into a lot of people that I know here [Diesel] or at True Grounds or some other places that I go to that are more in my neighborhood but I wouldn't say that the center of our literary lives are in the cafes. I wouldn't even say that that was the case when I was in Paris. Most of the time the cafes I went to, people were just there to eat and I was with a bunch of people I didn't know. There is a very vibrant writing community there, particularly an English-speaking writing community. I mean there is a French-speaking writing community that has always been there. I mean as you know, Paris has always been an attractive setting for ex-patriots of all types. A lot of writers come to Paris for a lot of reasons historically. I think there was a time when people did literally congregate in cafes to discuss the great issues of the day and I think that a part of that is mythology and a part of that I think is true. I'm sure it's over-Romanticized to an extent. It wasn't as if my experience was similar to Jean Paul Satre and Simone Beauvoir who every day would be at the same café and everyone that they knew who was part of their literary circle would show up and they would literally, like for example if it was Café de Flur or whatever café it was that they hung out in, they would literally be there for like 5 or 6 hours a day and they had their table there and people knew that that was where they would be and I'm sure they drove the café owner nuts because they probably drank one coffee and nursed it all day...I mean maybe they had lunch there too, I don't know, but that was their

living room. Another reason for that which is a practical one is that apartments in Paris are tiny so I think a lot of French and European people in general are better at living in smaller places and so they would go to cafes to have an extra living room, essentially. And yeah, a lot of contact with fellow writers did happen. I mean with the internet, it's different. My community of writers there was partly people I knew who lived there, who I would see at different types of events like readings, lectures and gatherings and parties at each others' houses and that was probably the center of my social life was fellow artists and writers that I knew there, but I was also in communication with all of my friends back home through the internet and telephone so yeah, it's not quite the same. It is very Romantic though, there's no doubt about it...and by Romantic I mean if you're a writer or an artist and you go to a place like Paris, it's very hard not to get swept up in that sort of Romance of "I am in Paris and I'm going to write beautiful things," ya know? I'm going to paint the most beautiful pictures, I'm going to choreograph the most beautiful ballet, whatever it is because it's such a loaded city in that way because so many people have gone there. There are sort of ghosts everywhere you go. But for a lot of reasons, it's a crappy city to move to as an artist because it's very expensive. There was a time when it was really cheap, particularly post World War II era where half the city was bombed and it was a tough place to live and rents were cheap. Now, it's as expensive as NYC or London, although London is even more expensive. If you're a struggling artist, you shouldn't move to a city like Boston or Paris where the rents are high. You should move to Des Moines or something...somewhere cheaper, ya know (laughs).

Do you have a separate poetry life where you schedule certain times to write? Or you try to write a certain amount a day? Or is it a lot less organized than that?

It's a lot less organized than that. I don't write as much poetry as I used to and I think that there a couple reasons for that. Halfway through my time in Paris, I began to write full time so I would say that began in about 2002 when I started doing freelancing for the Globe and the Washington Post and other newspapers and magazines. Once I began making my living as a writer, for practical reasons, it was harder to find time to write poetry. But more importantly, at a certain point in my life poetry was a much more I think an essential part of my identity as a writer because I wasn't doing any other kinds of writing. Poetry was my one place I would go. I mean I was working full time, ya know. I worked at a bookstore and the college and the times that I had available to me at night or on the weekends were times to write and that was when I would focus and those times I would say were

more characteristic of most of the 90s when that was my outlet. I really focused on making my identity as a poet be how I would call myself a writer. Now that I'm essentially a full-time journalist, I've been writing a lot more non-fiction, personal essays and I'm now working on this book so it's shifted a bit...which is not to say that I don't write poems anymore because I still do but it's not the kind of things where I feel like I have to do it every day in the same way that I did before. I think that there is also some frustration out of not receiving the kind of professional recognition that I had hoped for. I feel like a lot of my friends and fellow writers who followed the same path as I did, they got an MFA, they got their manuscript of poems published with small presses, got a teaching job, maybe they went off to get their PhD, maybe they didn't; but their professional identity as a writer is really as a poet and they have the book to prove it. Unfortunately, in this field it's really hard to get a full time teaching job, not just as an adjunct professor but a proper teaching job that's maybe tenure track or at least has a contract if you don't have a book published in your field. I probably spent 15 years trying to get my manuscript published...I mean different versions of the manuscript but sending out poems on a regular basis, getting published in magazines, coming up with different versions of a manuscript which means taking a bulk of your poems that have been published and assembling them into some kind of order (laughs) and then sending it around to small presses, contests and so forth to try to get it published. I really felt like I was banging my head up against a wall and I kind of gave up on that after awhile and I don't know if that means that I'll never come back to that and never try to get it published but I felt like if I could get the satisfaction of having an audience and having someone read my work if I'm publishing in the Boston Globe. It's not poetry that I'm publishing there by any means; I understand that...but I still love to do readings. I think part of the reasons why maybe my interests have shifted is that I'm ultimately interested in connecting with an audience and if I'm writing poems that I'm only keeping in my journal or are only getting published in these small journals that only 200 or 300 people are going to read as long as this magazine doesn't get thrown away or stuck on a library shelf. It was just becoming kind of depressing to me and I was thinking why am I doing this? I want to be able to connect with readers which is the whole point of doing that. Maybe I'm an egomaniac but you want people to read what you've done whether it's a poem or a short story or a novel or an essay. I really feel like when I do readings of my poems, that I'm really happiest because I'm connecting directly to the audience, getting the feedback cycle. I can hear immediately what people think. I mean people always say "Great job" or they say "Nice

work” but you can really sense their reaction so lately that’s what I’ve been focusing on is that kind of poetry and thinking about more performance than the page.

I noticed that you still perform at the Lizard Lounge. Does knowing the difference in your audience change the way you write? For instance, when you know you are writing this kind of performance poetry rather than poetry for just the page?

Absolutely. Initially, when I did my first reading there and other small readings similar to that and especially when you’re reading with a band, it changes the dynamic of the reading. I think that the first one I did, I didn’t think about that as much and I just picked out which ones would be good to perform but the next time I did it, I really thought that I should be writing stuff specific to that unique performance venue. You feel like you’re a rockstar, sort of a stand-up comic and sort of a poet all at the same time. You can’t read short 4 line long poems; they need to be these long poems, closer to what we would call spoken word and/or slam-type poems. I don’t at all consider myself a slam poet. I’ve never competed in a slam and I’m horrible at memorizing my own work which is kind of a prerequisite of being a slam poet but I would say that the work is definitely different from say something that I would be sending to the “New Yorker” or something. Sometimes they can be the same kind of thing, and although some people might say that that is pandering to the audience, I think that you have to be aware of who the audience is. If I’m going to get a reading on a public stage here in Davis Square, you’d have to capture people’s attention and maybe try to get people who would not normally listen to poetry, get to listen to it. But if I was invited as a special guest to come into a classroom at a college where I already have a captive audience and they’re already studying poetry, then it would be a different kind of poem because that audience is already in a way expecting poetry with a capital “P.”

The piece on your website that you wrote with Lisa Pasold called “Blonds have Less Fun” seemed like it could have been a performance poem. I was wondering, do you tend to write a lot of collaborative poetry?

It’s funny you found that. I haven’t thought about that in years.

I do a little bit but not a ton. Lisa was someone I knew in Paris. She is a friend of mine and she died her hair blond and I died my hair blond at the same time and so we wrote this poem together...it’s funny that you were talking earlier about café life because even though we both lived in Paris, we didn’t write it sitting over coffee. I wrote part of it, I e-mailed it

to her because she lived across town, she e-mailed it back so we wrote it over the internet which is funny because maybe it would have been different if we had done it face to face. It's hard to write in public. I mean you can sit in a café and write a poem but it's hard to do it when you have someone sitting over your shoulder.

I've done a few of those. I've played around with some collaborative stuff. I had a really wonderful experience- I'm not sure if you found this on my website-but there was this woman that I didn't know who lived in Portland, Oregon and her last name is Gilsdorf and she's not related to my family and she is a fabric artist who had seen one of my poems and was inspired to do a screen sprinted quilt in response to one of my poems and then sent me an image of something and asked me to write a poem in response to that so it was this kind of long distance, collaborative project which bridged poetry and fabric art. And also about 2 weeks ago, I was involved in another project with a woman I know not really very well (a daughter of a woman that I took a painting class with) who asked me if I wanted to participate in this project where she would send me a piece of art in the mail and my job was to respond to it within 48 hours and mail it back to her and I could choose any medium I wanted and it was a chain so that the first person, say they did a small painting, they would send it to her, she would send it to the next artist, that artist maybe made a small video, then sent it back to her, then the artist would send the video to the next person and they would do something so there was the drawing, the video, a painting, I did a poem on a piece of small wood and mailed it back. She lived in Italy at the time. She archived it all on a website so you could see the progression.

I noticed that you have a few poems dedicated to people such as the other Gilsdorf, Sara Lynn Gilsdorf

That's my mom

Ohh, ok. And I also noticed you dedicated one to Melissa Arnold Adams. A lot of people talk about writing very personal poems versus more broad topics...do you have any thoughts on that?

I would say that our natural inclination as writers and particularly poets is to write about their family. I think that that is pretty common. I think that people tend to write about experiences with strong emotional content and a lot of those experiences come from our relationships either with lovers or with parents or with siblings...so I would say that my early poems were

very much in that vein. A portion of my poems that I did for my MFA thesis were highly personal, maybe not 100% autobiographical but definitely “of me,” particularly my relationships. I do think that a lot of people who read poetry and to a certain extent, who write poetry, make the mistake of thinking that they can only write about themselves or that everything in the poem is autobiographical. Yet in a novel, a lot of people think well it might be based on the person’s life’s story, it might be partly autobiographical but they assume that it’s fiction because it’s novel but with poetry, there is nothing in a poem that says “This is based on a true story” or this isn’t so a lot of times people just assume that it is the poet’s experience and for me one of the liberating things about poetry is that you can take on the voices of other people. There is no fact-checking in poetry. You can write a story about your life but change the details where necessary if you want to. That may feel disingenuous for some poets but for me, it doesn’t. I really feel like you need to do what you need to do to make it a better poem even if that means fictionalizing things.

I think that some people have an experience and then download that and they say that you have to feel moved because this happened to me and this is exactly how it happened but that’s a journal entry, that’s not a poem. That’s not necessarily a well crafted work of poetry and it can still have poetry but it’s very easy for poetry to turn into a kind of therapy. I mean I think it’s natural. If you were to ask a person to write a poem who isn’t a poet, like the kind of people who write like two poems in their life time...one to their high school girlfriend and one when their grandmother died or something like that. There are people who don’t write poetry turn to poetry for those times when they feel the most emotional. I mean Hallmark cards are written in verse because verse has a kind of commemorative quality to it.

I noticed that you quoted or borrowed lines from certain poets in your poetry such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Derek Wallcott and W. B. Sebald. Were those people highly influential to you as you were becoming a poet? Are there any other writers that you feel sort of a kinship to?

I think that that list of authors has changed over my experience writing poetry. Edna St. Vincent Millay was a poet whose work I don’t know all that well, I know a little bit, but she was evoked because I spent a month at a writer’s retreat or artist colony where it was the former estate where she lived near the Berkshires, over the border in NY. I felt like I was in her hood so I wanted to evoke her presence and read some of her poems as a way to kind of do that. Derek Walcott...I’m not an expert in his work but

I definitely at one point felt a kind of kinship to what he was doing. Other poets...to name just a few...I feel really impressionable so for example if I'm in graduate school and I'm taking a class on epic poetry then suddenly Homer will start appearing in my poems or I'll try to write in the style of these ancient epics. If I'm studying Asian poetry traditions, this sort of very spare quality will take over in my poetry. There are definitely a handful of poets that I have gone back to over the years, they're not necessarily well-known for example this poet named Elizabeth Bishop who was actually a Boston-based poet, a poet named Richard Hugo who I used to read quite a lot when I was trying to figure out if I was a poet or not. Another poet named James Wright. The last class that I taught at Grub Street was a multi-genre writing class so we did poetry, fiction, dialogues/monologues and that got me all re-energized about poetry again because I found myself returning to poets' work I really admired.

Do you find that teaching and your work as a journalist and those other kinds of experiences feed off or your writing? Do they kind of bounce back and forth off of each other? For example, I couldn't help but think of your role as a journalist when I read your poem "Headlines from Childhood."

Yes, yes, definitely. I think that that "Headlines from Childhood" poem was written around the time I was starting to become a journalist. Teaching is a wonderful way to do a couple of things...one, to remind you what it is you love about the subject no matter if you're a physicist or a historian. It helps to stop get your shit together and think meditatively and think constructively about what is it that I can teach about this subject, what do I know, what am I passionate about. That's one of the wonderful things about teaching is that it reminds you why you're in this enterprise to begin with. And it's really inspirational, I find. When I see someone working on something that they're struggling with or when they produce a great piece of writing or a piece of writing that maybe isn't great but is on the road to being great, there's energy. You give energy but you also receive energy. I wouldn't say that I'm a particularly spiritual person. I'm kind of an atheist and a skeptic and not a church-going person and I feel highly skeptical of new-age stuff but I do feel very strongly that if I'm feeling kind of grumpy like the world is out to get me and I'm having these dark thoughts that people have and I can't imagine how teaching for the next 3 hours could be any fun at all and I'm dreading it...the minute you go into that classroom, that energy that you give completely comes back to you. It really is recharging even though you're expending a lot of energy. It's

really wonderful. I recommend teaching to everyone. If you have something to teach, then teach it.

I noticed that you won a 2007 Fellowship from the Somerville Arts Council. Would you mind talking a little bit about what that project is about?

I had been attempting to write a memoir about my mom and my relationship with my mom. My mom suffered a brain aneurysm when she was 38 and I was 12 and so the book was going to be about how that was sort of the defining moment. It's a topic that has appeared in my poems a lot. I have been grappling with this topic and how to write about it publicly in a way that other people would find interesting. I was working on this project for several years. I applied to the Somerville Arts Council which supports individual artists in the city. A lot of arts councils support organizations of artists who are going to do something like go to a school or do a project that involves other people. Simply to give an artist say \$1,000 and say "Take a few months off of your life and work on your book," there are very few city arts councils that do that so it's wonderful living in Somerville. So I proposed this request and they gave me the grant which wasn't a lot of money but it was some money...and over the course of last year, the project really changed and it was actually through Grub Street that I took a class which was with a literary agent. The class was about how to get the attention of an agent with your book manuscript by writing a really kick-ass cover letter and making sure the 10 pages of your manuscript are red-hot so you'll get the attention of an agent and in turn get an editor. The woman that taught the class later on ended up being my agent and said "I would love to hear about any projects that you're working on. I think you're a great writer." So I sent her this project and she said well this memoir sounds great but you have a lot of work to do on it. So I said that I had another idea which is sort of related to the memoir which is using my memoir as a way to explore this larger project which is a book that I just sold to a publisher called "Escape Artists." It is about America's fascination with what I call "fantasy escapism culture" so it's things like reading books like Harry Potter, movies like Lord of the Rings, games like World of War Craft, role-playing games. The connection to my memoir is that as a teenager I played dungeons and dragons all through high school and it was for me a way to escape from my situation and things happening at home with my mom and my family so the book is using my memoir as a way of getting into the topic. It begins with a chapter which is very clear memory of me as a teenager growing up in rural NH playing D & D and it explains briefly about what happened to my mom, what that experience

was like and how a 12 year old kid tries to deal with that. Then it uses that experience and says ok this is something that I was interested in as a teenager, still grappling with it a little bit as a 41 year old, still having these fantasies about running off to Middle Earth and being a hobbit. How do I integrate that into my personality and why it is that World of War Craft is so popular? The other subsequent chapters are about why people are attracted to these kinds of games. What role do they serve in their lives? What is the appeal? How do they navigate through their day to day normal mundane life if most of their psychic energy is being expended in this virtual world and experience? So that project came out of this original memoir. It's still sitting on a shelf half done. It has been really, really hard to write for a lot of reasons and so I think it's probably on the back burner. This other project is much more approachable and plays more to my strengths which is as a journalist. So the book was just sold to a small press and printer so my project for the rest of this year is to write it and it's scheduled to come out next year. I hope it will be interesting for other people to read. There's a little link on my website if you want to read more about it.

To get back a little bit more to the poetry...A lot of poets tend to have an image or something that recurs a lot in their work. I've noticed that there is an ant that comes up in your poems a lot. Is there a reason for this?

There's definitely a reason behind it. I don't know what the reason is. I'm fascinated by them on some level. I have been since I was a little kid. It's a really good question and no one has ever asked me it before so I appreciate it. There are other images that occur too, such as being underground. I am also really interested in the way societies work and I think there's something about ants that seem to embody this idea of a microcosm. There is something inane metaphoric about them because they are this kind of little society. They live in colonies and they build things and they have relationships that seem very human. They have Queens and they have workers and they do tunnels and they enslave other insects and they farm and they're kind of amazing in that way. I think sociologically I am fascinated by that. On a personal level, I spent a lot of my childhood sitting in my driveway examining the earth up close. I grew up in a house in a town that was a run down house and there would be cracks in the walls and there were all ants and bugs in the house. There was a garden outside and we were always playing in the woods and in the sandbox and getting stung by bees. We were outdoors so much. I was very connected to nature as a kid but at the same time, I watched a ton of television too. I was aware of

popular culture. I had a lot of unstructured childhood time, unsupervised sitting in the woods, in a garden and that definitely had an effect on me, even though I don't really have that experience as an adult because I live in the city. I've lived in cities for the past 10 years.

I've been painting a lot in the past 4 or 5 years and rabbits keep appearing in my paintings and I don't know what that's about either. There's a cliché that you don't choose your subject, your subjects choose you. As you write more and more, you may find yourself drawn to certain subject matters and it's very hard to say why that is. In some ways, it is very clearly a product of who you are and how you grew up and your influences as a child and who your parents were and how you were treated. There are so many factors; it's hard to pin it down.

That leads me to a question I have about the set of 11 poems that you wrote about the Queen that also have some ant colony imagery in them. I understand that these 11 poems exist as one large cohesive work...are they part of an even larger project? What are your thoughts on project collections in general?

I have written poems like the one you are referring to about the ant farm. For me, that is more narrative than some of my other work and by narrative I mean poetry where you are telling a story at the same time. I am definitely drawn to the longer poem formats although as a writer and a reader, I find that it's hard to be engaged with something that is going to be 10 or 15 or 20 pages long in verse. That's very hard to do that successfully but there are definitely themes that have reoccurred in my poems. I would say that on half a dozen occasions where I have tried to tackle what I call a sequence of poems, where you have interlocked, inter-related poems that are part of a greater collection. I wouldn't say that I have ever sat down and said ok, now I'm going to write 50 poems about my mom or all about ants. I probably have tried to do that before but became bored and frustrated after a very short time. I think there can be danger when a poet sits down and says "I will now write 50 love sonnets" and it's hard to follow through on that. You also have to follow your own interests, your own inspirations and not make it into a chore. I think that can be sort of the death of poetry when it becomes a chore. Nonetheless, when I think retrospectively when I have published these little chapbooks or attempted to send my manuscript out to contests, I will look through all of the work I have done in the last 5 or 10 years and I will notice a theme that doesn't make sense when you're trying to arrange your poetry into a project. If you read contemporary poetry, that's very much the case. You will see them arrange their books thematically, maybe with three or four

sections in each book and try to find some organizing principle so that it doesn't seem like you're just reading completely random poem after random poem but you also don't want to repeat yourself. I find that extremely difficult to find that balance. I know it's interesting to me as a writer. The interesting part for me is to write it. Once I have written it, I'm kind of not interested in it anymore. It's the process that is exciting for me. Once, it's done, sure I can go back to it and read it over it again; but half the time, I'll cringe. It's therapeutic and it serves a purpose to get something out of me and onto the page or it was a problem, I was trying to solve on some level or it's a discovery process...sometimes you don't know what you want to say until you say it. So in the process, whether it's an essay or a poem or a short story, you discover the subject matter as you go through and then in the end, I'll say 'Oh, I've written a poem about ants and then a critic will say or someone like you will say 'why did you just write about an ant? What did that mean for you?' and I'll say 'I don't really know.' It's definitely worth considering why. I might say I'll try to write a poem about an ant but I don't know what it's going to be about. I think it's quite common to say "I'm going to write a poem about...I'm trying to think of a poem you may have read...Did you read the one called "Play" with the guy wondering which wine goes with toothpaste?

Yes (laughs)

The poem began with this idea of me or a person like me sitting around late at night having drunk wine and brushing my teeth and wondering if you can have another glass of wine after you brush your teeth and that's sort of the idea, that's the thing that started the writing of the poem and I didn't realize that it was actually going to be a poem about relationships and this on again off again situation. The last stanza is where we get to the idea of the play and then I also heard a poem that had that line about being addicted to the beginning of relationships and that ended up working its way into the poem...but I didn't sit down and say "I now know for sure that the poem I want to write about the difficulty of being in a relationship." If I had done that I probably would have failed and it wouldn't have been a very interesting poem. You begin with that spark of "Ooo that's interesting." Then in the revision process you realize that part of the poem was just warm up and the heart of the poem is actually here and as a poet, it's your job to cut that out which is hard. I think that's the case in a lot of poems. The goal is to have the fewest number of words...there's a requirement for precision and accuracy and efficiency that you wouldn't expect in a novel. I don't remember exactly the details of

how that poem got written but I can imagine that I was sitting at a café or sitting at a bar and I scribbled something on a cocktail napkin and stuffed it in my pocket. That's normally how my poems begin. I'll overhear something on the street, I'll hear something on the news, I'll tear something out of the newspaper, I'll be sitting at the bar, I'll run into a friend and they'll say something interesting to me and it gets written down, it gets recorded. That's the piece of autobiography in a way. Where I go with that from there...well, I can go anywhere with that...that's where you can imagine. In a way, poetry is more liberating than fiction because you don't have to tell a story, you don't have to come up with motivations for characters' actions, you don't have to have believable dialogue, you don't have to worry about being realistic and not absurdist. There are a lot of conventions in fiction that you have to adhere to if you want to have your reader take you seriously. Things have to be described accurately and it has to be believable. In poetry, you can do whatever the fuck you want basically and you can make it look the way you want. In a way, it's much more liberating. For me the biggest issue with all of this is what your goal is in the end. If you want to just write it for yourself and have it be in your journal or write short stories but never have them published, you can write anything you want...but if you are seeking an audience and you would like to have other people read what you've written and get something back emotionally and intellectually to be struck by an interesting idea, you do need to think about how you can make that palpable to your audience and I don't mean pandering to them, I just mean you need to make sure that you're actually saying something that the reader can get otherwise, you're just being obscure. Otherwise, it's like you're playing games. Poetry has this reputation of being kind of obscuring. It has this reputation of being the art of obscuring things but it's really supposed to be the opposite. You're trying to reveal things and not hide them, ya know? I think people misunderstand that poetry is not a scavenger hunt.

We read Paul Muldoon this semester and a lot of students were getting frustrating because they felt kind of alienated by some of the references in his poems.

I remember reading Paul Muldoon but I don't remember being particularly interested in what he was doing but that doesn't mean he's not a good poet. What's wonderful about poetry is that there are so many different kinds. There's a kind of poetry out there for every possible reader and your job as a reader is to find the poets that speak to you. No one is judging you or grading you so maybe it's Paul Muldoon or Emily Dickinson or Jack Kerouac. Pick who you like, who speaks to you and as you read more, you

will find yourself able to enter the world of other poets. It takes practice. Just like writing, reading takes practice too. There's no accounting for taste. You can't really argue this poet is better than this poet. It's like saying "I can't understand why you don't like tomato soup." I mean if you don't like it, you don't like it. I might help you appreciate it. I might say "Jackie, try this tomato soup, it's homemade or this tomato soup has bleu cheese in it, you like bleu cheese but if you really don't like tomato soup, there's nothing I can do to make you like it. I think that people forget that. I think people should just be reading, it doesn't matter what it is...but I do think they shouldn't be afraid to challenge themselves a bit. I do feel like some people only read for stories and they only read stuff that's easy to read that are stories like mysteries or thrillers or that kind of thing...which is fine because they're reading and that's important but it's like the language is kind of transparent, a medium for their story...and that's fine because humans have always told stories...but I would hope that same reader would be someone who would pick up for example, Paul Muldoon or someone else and try it. It won't be the same pleasure that you're gonna get out of reading Stephen King or John Grisham. That's a different kind of pleasure you're getting. With poetry, it's quieter and it's definitely more work.

I also noticed that you have a lot of poems about the past and memory, such as the poems about your mother. Is that something that you try to work on your poems?

It's definitely a topic that I'm very interested in. I'm very interested in the idea of memory and how it functions. I'm interested in the idea of regret that comes up in my poems a lot. It's something that I struggle with on a personal level and I think that on some level poetry serves as therapy for me. Not in the same way that I was describing it earlier. I hope it's not just downloading things that I need to get off my chest. I guess more so that it helps me work out issues in my life that haunt me and memory is definitely one of them because I definitely do suffer from being really attached to the past and I have a hard time letting go of things, I have a hard time processing things that happen to me so how memory functions in my life and how memory functions in cultural life like how is this neighborhood affected by the past, what happened here last week or 10 years ago? What do people remember about this place? 50 years from now? I'm just really fascinated with time and memory...and I'm not really sure why but I am. It's probably because I've struggle with these issues in my personal life so naturally they're going to appear in my work. I think some of my poems in the past have been a venue for working out problems in my relationships

and when I'm feeling like there's no where else to put that psychic energy, I put it in a poem. But not really when I'm happy in my relationships and things are relatively calm...but now I have a therapist so that subject matter is not appearing in my poems anymore because I have another place for that. I'm embarrassed to admit it but in lieu of keeping a journal, going to church or having a therapist, writing serves a similar function. If I don't believe in God, I guess I have to believe in poetry or writing, ya know? It doesn't offer answers but it's a place for me to explore the possibility of answers like how do I feel like I know something for sure? The act of writing poetry is in a way to experience the world. By writing the poem, you are helping to record your experience and what it's like to be human on planet earth in 2008 or whatever the year was that you wrote the poem. It is kind of a public record, a kind of medication, a way to process what has happened to you, make connections and just to kind of honor creation in a way. Some people honor creation by praying or by having a baby but for me, writing is a way to do that. I do feel that is true. I do feel that is why I do that. What I do fight with is this culture...that American culture....this is a culture that is designed to distract you, to entertain yourself and not think about things whether it's television, movies, the internet, all kinds of unhealthy addictions. I think that in the same way that people who meditate or people who pray, writing is a way to have a place outside of all of that, outside of time in a way and outside of culture...outside of Bank of America and Starbucks and McDonalds, even outside of the pressures of your family and your friends and people who want stuff from you, obligations that you have, bills that you have to pay...there's a lot to occupy your time with...people feel understandably frantic, I think. I struggle with that as well. So is writing a poem a good use of time? Maybe I should be down at the soup kitchen ladling soup...(uncomfortable laugh)...but even if it's just for a half an hour or an hour to reflect on the world, to take stock of it and notice that this is the week that this tree is starting to bud or that tree has already started and this one is a week ahead of this one. This is the kind of stuff that I think about all of the time. Walking is really important to me. Walking and riding my bicycle are absolutely crucial to my writing life and why I was so reluctant to get a cell phone because I was afraid that it was just going to be another distraction in my life and I already have enough distractions in my life. And I know about my escapist tendencies from my background and things that I am thinking about for this book I am writing...I know already that if I had my choice, I would watch Lord of the Rings again, ya know? But you just can't. I'm aware enough of my own shortcomings, my own weaknesses that I know what I need to do to feel connected...and I think writing is a really

good way to connect yourself and I think it helps you feel sympathetic to other people. I think world leaders should write poems. It would force them to pause and think about what life would be like for other people...like this lady handing out flyers. Why is she doing that? Who is she? What's her background? Like the guy that's trying to sell you Spare Change every time you go on the subway...my heart breaks every time I see these people. I never buy it from anyone unfortunately but it's a moment when I connect with the world, kind of have a moment and I'm very sensitive to that. But you can't go through life so sensitive that you fall apart. And just the act of thinking about that...am I being too sensitive? And if I am thinking about being too sensitive than am I really being too sensitive? You can really see why a lot of artists have gone crazy because a lot of them are really riding a fine line...they have to be connected and in tune to what's around them or else they're not doing anything that's interesting.

This is kind of cliché, but as my final question, I was just wondering if you have any advice for young writers?

It's hard to answer this question without string of clichés like "If you want to be a writer, write. Keep writing-practice. Read a lot"...and those are obvious things. A lot of people say that you should write every day but I don't really believe that you have to write every day. I don't...I mean I try to but it doesn't always happen. I need to remind myself of pieces of advice that I should follow like try to put my writing projects that are dear to my heart first and then have all other things follow. Carve out a space in your life to read. Purchase things or do things that cost money that will force you to justify spending time on your writing so go to a writing conference, take a class, make connections with other writers, be part of a writing community. In some ways, I don't feel like writers need a lot of encouragement or advice because I feel like everyone is a writer maybe that is because of my world and maybe that's because everyone in my world is a writer but I mean I feel there is not a shortage of writers which is a good thing because everyone who is writing is engaged in the world, they're examining it, criticizing it, picking it apart. Some people say we are turning into a nation of zombies...that may true for many people but there are also more writers now then there have ever been.