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# She Asked For Light

## A Conversation with Susan Terris

by Rebecca Foust

I INTERVIEWED SUSAN TERRIS at her home in San Francisco, a handsome gray stucco house in a quiet residential area off busy California Street, not far from the Golden Gate Bridge. Terris and her husband David, who recently passed away, have lived here for more than twenty years.

The house is a dark and cool respite from an unseasonably warm spring. Built in 1907, it has high ceilings and graceful proportions. An upright piano stands in the foyer, which also holds a table set with a chessboard and pieces. She grew up in a "mathematically-minded family, all but me," but she does play. At the back of the house lies a small, sunny kitchen and service area with an old-fashioned hand-crank pencil sharpener mounted on the wall.

We sit in the living room furnished with a leather rhinoceros footstool, an antique carousel horse, an oriental rug in muted shades of burgundy, navy blue, and teal, and a bamboo-and-glass coffee table on which has been placed a plate of madeleines. The room glows with pieces from Terris's mother's Asian Art collection: two Ancestor portraits, jade figurines, a lotus-shaped cinnabar box, and with orchids in baskets. Terris's interest in textile art is seen in the framed quilt top (one from her collection of quilts) and a cross-stitch made by Terris herself. Decorations range from scattered casual shells, coral, driftwood cut to formal art, like a three-foot tall standing bronze nude. The carousel horse, originally from a traveling carousel in Kansas, was bought in pieces then painstakingly restored by Tobin Fraley.

In front of a fireplace, a small chair holds an assortment of nineteenth century china-faced and cloth Chancay dolls Terris collected "while in the grips of a doll obsession" coming out of her work on a letterpress book called *Sonya the Doll Wife* (Conflux Press, 2007). Terris found the Chancay dolls—new pieces made from bits of antique fabric up to a thousand years old—in small town markets she visited when traveling in Peru.

Terris's office, located in the basement, is lined with bookshelves and holds a metal three-drawer filing cabinet and a very large desk facing a wall filled to the ceiling with a bulletin board neatly push-pinned with rows of papers. Two windows admit light, but the only view is of a big Douglas fir in her small yard. Terris says the room is good for concentration but that she, catlike, follows the light in the house and moves from room-to-room to do her work.

Born and raised in the Richmond Heights neighborhood of St. Louis, Terris is the oldest of three children with a brother and sister four and ten years her junior. Her neighborhood was shaped like a figure eight and bordered on a large undeveloped tract of land, a "wild" area where Terris, a tomboy, played and built forts. Terris's father, who ran the family real estate business, was a champion speed skater at the University of Wisconsin, and he skated, all his life, every Saturday morning. Terris was started on skates when she was eighteen months old but "failed," as a figure skater because she "strode like a speed skater." She took classical ballet from a White Russian teacher until she was, at age fourteen, "mustered out" because she lacked the requisite Balanchine flexible back and body type. Afterwards she took modern dance and swam competitively—free style short distance and relay—through freshman year at college. Terris continued with modern dance into her fifties.

Terris had, she said the "best, smartest" mother, who ran a knitting shop and volunteered with the National Council of Jewish Women in lieu of the career that "would have been a bad reflection" on her husband in that era. When Susan was told she was too young to knit, she taught herself, using two pencils and a ball of string. From her grandmother, she learned various needle arts, "everything but

how to crochet." Terris enjoyed enormous freedom growing up in a matriarchal family that "prized girls and also prized athleticism."

In the fifth grade Terris changed schools, attending the all-girl Mary Institute, founded by T. S. Eliot's grandfather, and still in operation today. There were twenty-six students in her class. Jews were a minority at the school, but Terris did not feel like an outsider because she had "what the school valued: good study habits and athleticism." She swam at the "Y" and played three sports at school: field hockey, volleyball, and basketball. Terris grew up loving the outdoors and attended Camp Chickagami in Wisconsin for eight summers, first as a camper then later as counselor. Camp gave her the freedom "to be someone she wasn't in St. Louis," to be other than a "nerd." One of her favorite activities was "running wild rivers" in canvas canoes that campers had to learn how to tip, drain, and patch. Terris, who has written many poems about or using metaphors from canoeing, especially loved the untamed river canoe trips.

*Fifteen: Running Goose-Eye (excerpt)*  
*As a girl, you see, I never gripped horseflesh*  
*between my thighs, because I thought*  
*water was all. Salt taste on my tongue,*  
*I faced Goose-Eye, the unrunnable rapid,*  
*chose the edge of the wave,*  
*paddled, swam it, survived being thrown*  
*loose from gravity.*

She didn't know always that she wanted to be a poet, but Terris always knew she wanted to be a writer. Her parents were great readers and anti-censorship. The home library contained much fiction and poetry by many poets including Shakespeare, Lawrence, Browning, Yeats, and T.S. Eliot. Terris's mother and grandmother belonged to a Jewish literary group called "The Pioneers," to which they had to present a major paper every year. This group was a source of patronage for Tennessee Williams while he lived in St. Louis. Terris's parents were Reform Jews who attended Temple every Friday night, and Terris was confirmed there.

Our conversations took place in two three-hour sessions in April and [May 2014](#).

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## PART ONE

### Session 1: "What's On the Loom"

**Rebecca Foust: Did you always believe in your work?**

**Susan Terris:** Yes, I was the first child, brought up to believe in everything I did—including writing, mostly short stories and essays.

**RF: Can you remember when you wrote your first poem?**

**ST:** No, I didn't have much faith in my ability to write poetry. I really thought my skill was in narrative.

**RF: How did you pick Wellesley for college? That's pretty far away from St. Louis.**

**ST:** My mother had gone there. The Dean of Women (also one of the Latin teachers) at my school had gone to Smith and wanted me to go to Smith. I asked why, and she said, "I always like to send a few good girls there." So I went to Wellesley just to spite her.

**RF: How was it?**

**ST:** My first semester there I wrote thirty-three papers. I didn't like the philosophy of education, a philosophy—and it's still, to some extent that way—of proving to your teachers that you were doing your work. I thought when I got to college I was going to be doing something different than in high school. But I loved my friends there; I loved my friends on the faculty of which I had many. And I met my future husband on a blind date when I was a freshman there.

**RF: What was your major?**

**ST:** English literature. By the beginning of junior year, I knew that David and I were going to be married before my senior year and that I was going to be at Barnard then because there was an exchange program. David was out of school, working in New York. So I took every great English course left to take at Wellesley as a junior. And then went to Barnard and took every great English course I could at Columbia or Barnard. So that was actually an advantage to me. I had a terrific year there and made some good friends on the faculty too. Coming from a small school—I saw this with my own kids too—you know how to be friends with faculty members. So that transition was easy for me. Helen Corsa, one of my mentors, just died a few years ago, I'd kept in contact with her and also, with Philip Booth. I am not in contact with Richard Wilbur at this point, but occasionally am still in contact with David Ferry. His wife Ann taught me Chaucer. When I was at Wellesley, Marianne Moore and Robert Frost were two of the many poets who came to our 4:30 afternoon poetry readings. Marianne Moore, of course, was always changing her poetry—you kept her book in front of you, and she'd be changing the words as she was reading them—and she wore those hats, which was sort of a kick.

**RF: When did you meet your husband?**

**ST:** We met right before Thanksgiving of my freshman year. He was two years ahead of me at school, was a senior at Harvard. He was friendly with a cousin of mine from St. Louis. He had met my roommate Emily who was really most extraordinary and very beautiful. But it was typical of David that he would then ask out the roommate he hadn't met. That's how he was. His favorite restaurant was always the one he hadn't been to yet. His favorite place to travel was always the place he had yet to visit. We married in the end of August before I started my senior year at Barnard. We lived in New York, and I took the subway to school.

**RF: How did you end up here in San Francisco?**

**ST:** David grew up in Detroit. But his parents moved out here when he went off to college. His father set up a whole new medical practice out here. Imagine starting all over again at the age of 52! That's what was pulling us to the West Coast. When I graduated college, I was already 5 months pregnant. Dan was born in St. Louis in October, and we moved here in early December when he was 6 weeks old.

**RF: You have three children?**

**ST:** Yes, Dan, Michael, and Amy. Both Michael and Amy were born when I was in graduate school at San Francisco State. I started the Master's Program in the fall of 1960 with one child and finished in 1965. My focus was Literature of the American South, and are you ready for this, Chaucerian and pre-Chaucerian Literature.

**RF: You did all that when you had very small children?**

**ST:** I used to take Amy to class with me in a little infant seat and would stick her under the seminar tables. She'd sleep for two hours wake up and coo for the last half hour. We lived in Park Merced, right next to SF State. I also was a TA and did research work for two professors

**RF: After you graduated, is that when you started getting into children's literature?**

**ST:** Let's go back for a minute, because you asked me about David Ferry and the others. The reason they were such fabulous teachers is they were all teaching me fiction, and so their egos were not involved in what I was doing as a writer. If I had been a budding poet at that point, it might have been different. Here, I was writing short stories: they're poets; we're friends. They were not competing, and therefore their ability to judge the fiction I was writing was, I think, right on and unbiased.

**RF: Did you think about teaching?**

**ST:** I did some teaching at SF State, but I had a huge decision I had to make when I graduated: I had taken the GRE. I had access to the Carson McCullers papers. If I'd gone across The Bay and gotten into a PhD program at Berkeley, I could have done my thesis on the Carson McCullers papers, split at that point between Philadelphia and St. Louis. But, quite frankly, we didn't have the money for me to travel and hire help when I wasn't there because my husband was working 12-14 hours a day. So, I didn't do that. The first thing that came along was a job writing for a publishing company for a series of urban readers aimed at urban kids, particularly boys. One of David's' roommates came out from New York to interview the head of Chandler Publishing Company. In the meeting, he asked Howard Chandler, to give me a call. So, this is the old-line publishing kind of thing. I go in. Howard Chandler is probably in his early 50's at the time, and he said to me, "I hire a lot of women part-time; I hire

editors, I hire writers, and I hire artists. What do you do?" I said, "Well, I guess I write." And he told me, "I will give you a couple of assignments, and, if you do a good job, I guess I will pay you."

Not long after I had been writing for this company (and also substitute teaching at the same time) a friend told my husband at a party, "I'm on the board of Chandler, and they have this wonderful new writer." When I saw the friend, I said, "I understand you have some wonderful new writer." He replied, "It's you." That's what gave me the courage to send the first stories I was writing—children's books—off to New York. Positive feedback; if somebody thinks what you're doing is good, then you want to continue doing it.

**RF: What age group were you writing for?**

**ST:** Before I submitted anything to New York, I wrote six picture book stories, and of those, only one was published. Which by the way is also true of people who write and send out short stories; they're lucky to get one in six published.

**RF: How did you figure out where to send your stories?**

**ST:** My friend Marilyn Sachs, who wrote children's books, was at Doubleday. She told me about a young editor named Georgess McHargue interested in acquiring new writers. Georgess's great claim to fame was having written, at the age of 22 or 23, fresh out of Radcliffe, *What's in Mommy's Pocketbook?* One of the most intelligent, literate people I ever met. She published my first couple of children's picture books, and she published my first novels. Then she left Doubleday to write full time. After that, I published with Scholastic and MacMillan and one book with Franklin Watts. Then Farrar picked me up and became my publisher.

**RF: How many books did you do all together?**

**ST:** Twenty-one books for children and young adults.

**RF: Of that group, what book are you most proud of? Was it *Nell's Quilt*? I bought that book for my kids.**

**ST:** Years ago, Marilyn Sachs introduced me to her friend Difa Hamins, who is a weaver, and I once asked Difa, "What is your favorite weaving?" She told me, "Oh, my favorite weaving is always the one on the loom." That's my metaphor. Do I like *Nell's Quilt* best? Maybe, to a certain extent, but probably also *Tucker and The Horse Thief*, a historical novel about a girl that dresses as boy and goes to the gold country with her father; that one was actually made into an HBO movie by the same name. My friends gave me an opening party the first night it was on television. It was hilarious, they set the living room up like a movie theatre and made popcorn, and at the end when the credits rolled, they all stood up and applauded.

**RF: How long were you in the field of children's literature?**

**ST:** My first book was published 1961, and my last book was published in 1996. I had been writing and publishing some poetry along the way, but most of my books were novels for the YA market. A book took me nine months to draft, another nine months to revise the draft, and there would be some time in between. Basically, it took two years to write and revise and then took another year (publishers schedules were much longer then) before the book came out. In the 80s my daughter Amy was very sick, and it became obvious to me that if I wanted to keep writing I was going to have to concentrate on poetry because I could do a discrete piece of writing—say, 30 lines—which was a lot different than dealing with a 200-page book.

I was just over 40 when I started really writing and publishing more poetry, but it wasn't the primary focus right away. The wonderful thing about my editor, Steven Roxburgh, at Farrar was that when I told him that the next book that he thought was coming wasn't going to come, he was very supportive.

**RF: During that first turn towards poetry, who were the poets dominating then? Who were people reading and talking about?**

**ST:** You have to understand, I had a mid-Victorian school education; I'm still back reading Byron's *Don Juan*, the *Canterbury Tales*, Milton, Keats and Yeats, translations of Dante, and reading every new translation of the *Aeneid* that came because I had five years of Latin and was still, as a substitute, teaching some Latin.

**RF: Was your earliest influence when you first started seriously writing poetry your classical education?**

**ST:** Yes, and these are the cadences I still hear in my head.

**RF: In about 1982, you got to the point where you said, "I have to turn to poetry because I can't put the time in with these bigger books?"**

**ST:** Yes, I made an abrupt turn. Mountain climbers say that the piece of rock on which they are likely to kill themselves is a very interesting piece of rock, and to make this kind of mid-life career change is in essence a very interesting thing to do. Amy was severely anorexic, and it was absorbing every bit of energy that I had. The boys were both in college; she was the only one home.

**RF: Was desire to write about your daughter's illness part of what influenced your decision to turn poetry?**

**ST:** I've never written about my children. I wrote about things they were doing. There's a book where all the kids were all obsessed with string figures. I wrote one book when you could still roller skate across the Golden Gate Bridge, something I did with my kids, and that was in the book. Even in *Nell's Quilt*, which is about someone who stops eating, I was not writing about my daughter. My editor who knew all my kids said to me, "This book isn't about Amy. It's much more about you."

I would deal with things that were more personal. Not necessarily first-person but things that were more personal in a different way, looking at the world as an adult. All my children's books and novels are about that cusp where a girl or boy has to take a stand about something, and where you stand at that moment determines who you are going to be for the rest of your life. Because I'm interested in that moment. I know where it was in my own life, and I'm interested in it. I looked around at the world at 12 and knew I wasn't going to ever get any older. I just turned around one day and realized that I was fully formed and fully grown and I had to live another 10-12 years before I could go out in the world and be considered an adult.

**RF: In about 1982 you're starting—how did you develop a community in poetry?**

**ST:** I didn't think about it. You're not the oldest child . . . oldest children generally don't look to the left and don't look to the right to figure out what other people are doing.

**RF: What were your goals when you first started?**

**ST:** To be good, the same thing we all want, same thing you always wanted, not to be mediocre.

**RF: Did you start by publishing poems in literary journals? How did you even figure out which journals to read?**

**ST:** I bought *Writers Market*, a mistake, because it was too general, and then I bought *Poets Market*, and it had a rating as to whether journals were more open or less open to submissions, and I started sending to places that looked like they would take a beginning poet. I'm not necessarily proud of the things that I first published. I never tried dealing exclusively with rhyme, but I did try writing seriously with form. You called me something like a pseudo-formalist in a review.

**RF: Not pseudo-formalist, I said you were like Donald Justice; you clearly understood formalism and had mastered structure and then made a conscious, informed decision to depart from it.**

**ST:** I like things that have a form to them. It's not that I never do that, but mostly I have to have some methodical conceit behind what I do like using a repetitive stanzaic form or couplets or triplets. I'm working all in couplets now, I don't know why, I don't know how long it will last. There was a period when I was writing longer poems, doing something that Larry Levis did a lot, stanzas with 4,3,2,1 lines and variations on that.

**RF: When did you start reading contemporary poets?**

**ST:** I got very interested early on in the work of women in literature. That probably started originally with Jane Austin, Christina Rossetti, the Brontës, and the women of the American south, Willa Cather, and Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor. That led me into Muriel Rukeyser, Marianne Moore, Lorine Niedecker, and Adrienne Rich. I grew up memorizing both Dickinson and Frost.

**RF: When did you first meet 'Lyn Follett (C.B Follett, Marin County Poet Laureate 2010-13)?**

**ST:** Our kids both went to the Urban School in the city, and our kids were friends. We must have gone to some of the same events in the late 80s. 'Lyn had been taking writing classes from Margaret Kaufman and had seen my poems which became the chapbook, *The Eye of The Holocaust*, and she

asked whether she could publish it at Arctos Press. Not long after, Margaret talked me into going to Napa for the first time.

**RF: Is that where you first met David St. John?**

**ST:** Yes, I was in his workshop at Napa; a very high level of people were in that workshop, like Katrina Roberts who teaches at Whitman and is a professor of my grandson Noah, and Margaret Hasse, a poet from Minnesota, who had done maybe two books by then with Milkweed Press. So, David's workshop was a great experience for me. My Molly Bloom poem was one of the poems I submitted, read by David before he ever met me. The other one was called, "Angel Blood," written in the voice of a "cutter." When I had my conference with David he said, "You know, don't you, that anyone who reads that poem is going to be looking at your arms to see where you have cut yourself." And I said, "I don't care. This was written about someone I know, but it didn't work in the third person, so I wrote it first person."

I had taken a course at Cal Extension also with Carolyn Kizer. Two things she taught me that were wonderful were: "If you are going to be a writer, you have to be absolutely ruthless, you can't worry about what other people will think." I was already on that road, so I was happy to hear that. The other thing was the idea that "every Monday you send out your poems." Now I could never send out poems every Monday, I'm not nearly that organized, but the idea that you should regularly send out poems was useful to learn.

**RF: Let's talk about RUNES, the journal you edited with Follett: when you ran it, how many issues did you put out.**

**ST:** We did it from 2000 to 2007, seven issues, one per year. We thought of it as an anthology more than a journal, and each year was a separate anthology. 'Lyn and I worked together on everything. It was extremely harmonious; it was great. I loved working with 'Lyn. She ultimately felt that if we had been 10 years younger when we started it, we could have done it longer. But, it was impinging upon her ability to do her art; she was doing all the book keeping and financial stuff as well as editing.

**RF: Did you get submissions from all over the country?**

**ST:** We advertised in Poets and Writers. And the Writers' Chronicle. We were reading about 5,000 poems for every issue.

**RF: Did you actually write a note on every rejection you sent out?**

**ST:** Yes. Our husbands said we were 18th Century women living in a 21st Century world, feeling we had to answer everything by putting something in handwriting.

**RF: I can tell you as a poet who got one of those rejections, it meant a lot to me. I'd just started writing in time for the last issue of RUNES and had gotten nothing but rejections at that point; it was exciting to see something in handwriting from an editor and to know the poems had actually been read. I just can only imagine how many people you encouraged in that way.**

**ST:** 'Lyn had created a fabulous form. The form had a place to write the name of the poem you liked best from a submission, in some cases two or three names of poems. When it came to writing the rejections, I would have been able—let's say if I was the one who wrote to you—to say we particularly liked your poem, Fable, and please send to us again.

**RF: Tell me about your editing after Runes—was it then you started working as editor at Pedestal Magazine?**

**ST:** In Posse came before Pedestal. I was at AWP having coffee one morning with Ilya Kaminsky, and I said to him, "I like editing. I'd like another editing gig;" He came to me later that week and introduced me to Tatyana Mishel, the editor of In Posse. One conversation, and I became poetry editor there.

**RF: When did you start editing The Pedestal Magazine?**

**ST:** I had been publishing in The Pedestal, and at some point John Amen asked me whether I was interested in editing. My husband used to say to me, "You never give up jobs. You just take on more of them."

**RF: And how long did you work as poetry editor of these two journals?**

**ST:** I'm still doing it. In Posse seems to be on a hiatus now because we need a new Editor-in-Chief—one of those situations where—just—life got in the way. John Amen took a break from Pedestal for a year, then we did one issue this last year, and I don't know what is going to come of that.

**RF: How did you get involved with editing Spillway?**

**ST:** Spillway had been around since the early 90's. Publisher Mifwany Kaiser was looking for a new editor, and David St. John (on the Spillway Advisory Board) said, "Why not ask Susan ST?" Mifanwy and I knew each other, since I spent a lot of time in LA and had also become part of a poetry community there.

**RF: Let's talk a little bit about the things that make writers despair: how many submissions do you get for Spillway?**

**ST:** I probably read 5,000 poems for each issue. Now that I have two issues a year, it's a lot.

**RF: Do you read them all or do you have somebody screen them first?**

**ST:** No, I read everything—I read 48 entries yesterday of about 5 poems each.

**RF: What's been your best greatest moment editing Spillway so far?**

**ST:** Again, what's on the "loom"—

**RF: It must have been pretty exciting when Dan Belm's article got picked up by Poetry Daily.**

**ST:** Yes, but I do wish that Verse Daily and Poetry Daily would also give credit to Spillway when they give credit to a poetry book containing a poem that was originally published in Spillway.

**RF: A mysterious process, isn't it, how poems get picked for these things?**

**ST:** I'm absolutely thrilled with the Pushcarts we have been able to win for poets and that Sean Thomas Dougherty was picked for Best American Poetry. It thrills me every time I go to a reading and hear poets, doesn't matter who they are, read poems that I have published. The last time I heard Camille Dungy read, she came down to me afterwards and said, "Oh, I didn't mention that you had published the second poem also." And I said "That's okay. When I'm sitting in the audience, it makes me feel good just to hear you read those poems."

**RF: I first learned about Spillway in 2008, in my first year of grad school. Eleanor Wilner read her poem about the cave bats and the bomber planes and mentioned it had been published in there. Were you the editor then?**

**ST:** Not yet. Eleanor got a Pushcart for that poem. The year before we had nominated her for a poem from RUNES, and she didn't win it; her joke was that she got the "pity vote" the next year.

**RF: That was quite a poem, I remember being blown away by it.**

**ST:** Yes, the poem was wonderful. The MFA thing reminds me of something—one year 'Lyn and I had a gifted young poet pre-screening for us, someone who had come out of a very prestigious MFA program, and we discovered that this screener was inordinately prejudiced against people with MFAs. That was when we decided we couldn't have anyone read for us.

**RF: Interesting, how'd you figure that out?**

**ST:** Because we read all the poems anyway, and it was like poem after poem that had been written by some MFA graduate from somewhere had been put into a rejection pile. I don't care whether people have MFAs or not. I only care about the poem.

**RF: One more question about Spillway—does the journal have an aesthetic, or what kinds of things are you looking for?**

**ST:** I like to be surprised. I always like to be surprised.

**RF: Is one issue a year themed and the other un-themed?**

**ST:** No, they're all themed. "Muse & Music" is next. I've deferred that issue to November because of my husband's death. The June 2015 will be "Everyday Epiphanies." An issue in the past was devoted to first publications. Your student Javier Zamora was in that issue. One theme, "All in the Family," featured the Barnstone family, three writers and an artist. And I just loved this last issue's theme, "The Long and Short of It," — how the long poems and short ones work together. Right now, I am totally involved in "Muse & Music"; and again, I will still use long poems and short poems because I

love pithy short poems, and I'm always willing to give space to long ones. I have a 9 or 10 page Norman Dubie poem in the next issue.

**RF: You told me once that you read mostly at night, is that right?**

**ST:** I work during the day but read for pleasure at night.

**RF: So, what poets are you reading for pleasure right now? What's on your bedside table?**

**ST:** The Lost Son by Theodore Roethke. Tribute by Anne Germanacos. Mary Szybist's book Incarnadine. I read a lot of journals, as you do, too, because it gives me such a wide view of work out there. If I'm reading an interesting submission, I punch up the person's name on the computer to see what I can find published online or available through some journal online because. . .

**RF: You stalk them [laugh].**

**ST:** I want to see what else that person is writing, and I want to know if someone is sending me his/her best poems.

**RF: How do you figure that out?**

**ST:** I Google them. I try to find what they are publishing in print journals. Some poets save their "best poems" for magazines or journals they feel are particularly prestigious. One thing about running a contest as we did at RUNES is that when there's \$1000 involved people are more willing to send you their best poems.

**RF: I wonder if a poet always knows what their best poems are?**

**ST:** They don't always know. Do you? I don't. A lot of the really good poems that I get from fine poets are longer poems because they know I'll publish them. The first thing Barbara Hamby ever said to me about RUNES, was "I'm doing the alphabet, and I've never published in an 'R,' I still have R to go." Later on she said "I always know that you'll read and take my long poems seriously, which many other people don't."

**RF: Seattle Review only takes long poems now; but you're right, a lot of journals are concerned about getting more than one poem per page, and it's easier to publish shorter poems. Let's talk about the proliferation of journals in recent years—do you agree with the view it is diluting the overall quality of writing? Or with Brenda Hillman that it's a wonderful time for writers because there are so many more publishing opportunities now?**

**ST:** I think it is fabulous. One of the reasons for the proliferation is the MFA programs. I said to David St. John some time years ago, "What are you doing graduating all these poets?" And he said to me, "I am, at the very least, graduating people who are better readers." Better readers will make better poets and more of them. Some poets, MFA or not, will rise to the top. Some won't: that's the way it is. I'm very interested in young writers the same way everybody is interested, young writers who are good, and when I find one I get very excited about it and do everything I can to promote the work.

**RF: What do you think about online journals versus print journals?**

**ST:** Oh, I love online journals, love them, the real quality ones like Blackbird Online, Cortland Review, Agni Online, Diode, Blue Fifth, PoetryBay, Box Car. I mean there are many. Lynne Thompson—you've met Lynne—has this system, whereby when she's feeling like, "Why isn't anything happening with my work?" She sends off to online journals because you hear back so much faster. George Wallace publishes a lot of my poetry in Poetry Bay, and I know if I send something to George I'll hear back within 24 hours.

**RF: Will print disappear, and everything go online—why or why not?**

**ST:** Oh, I hope not. Many of us love the feel of print in our hands and the way books smell . . . I read fiction on the iPad Mini for traveling. It used to be a nightmare that I would run out of books, and then I would have to find a bookstore wherever I was. What I love is the search feature. The fact that I can go back and find the first introduction of a character, that I can go and find a scene in which there's a significant incident. But no, I don't want books to ever go away, and I do not read poetry in electronic format.

**RF: What fiction book are you reading now?**

**ST:** I'm reading Francine Prose's book, Lovers at the Chameleon Club: Paris 1932. Wonderful book. The last fiction book I loved was Americanah, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—really good. Also Jame's

McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*. I don't read many short stories because I like to be really involved; with short stories, just when I get involved, it's over. I make exceptions for people like Alice Munro or Junot Diaz.

**RF: You've mentioned two important artistic collaborations, one with 'Lyn Follett and the other with David St John. What is the secret to preserving this kind of friendship between artists?**

**ST:** Not being jealous.

**RF: How do you accomplish that, especially if you're pursuing the same goals at the same time?**

**ST:** I don't think I am a jealous person. I had great friendships also in the field of children's books and a mentor, and I mentor all kinds of people in the arts, as I've told you. It's the "respect" thing, the reason I get along with children. I treat children, also, with respect. 'Lyn and I did a reading in Livermore recently; I wrote her afterward and said, "Every time, I hear you read, I wonder why I even bother," and she wrote back, "That is just what I was thinking too listening to you." So, it is the ability to appreciate one another. There is a woman I have known a long time, but years ago I stopped telling her when anything good happened with my poetry, because she kept saying, "I wish that would happen to me." I began to feel like I couldn't say anything good to her because she was never happy for me. I am so happy for 'Lyn when something good happens for her.

Look, we all have things—my personal thing is the *Georgia Review*; I cannot get Stephen Corey to accept anything. The *Memos* book that's coming out from *Omnidawn* has the "Memo to the Editor Who Keeps Turning Down My Work." I sent it to him along with some other memos. He wrote a gracious note, but turned them down.

**RF: What is your goal for your poetry?**

**ST:** To please myself, meaning essentially, not trying to please anybody else. I'm not Emily Dickinson—I can't shut my poems up in the closet and not show them to anyone, and I like feedback. But most particularly, I write for myself to see what I can discover, to see what process or progress I can find in my own work. And if I didn't think the possibility was there, to get better, why would I keep doing it?

**RF: I've been thinking about publication, not about the "how" but about the "why." Why isn't it enough to write a poem you know is good? Why take that extra step of sharing a poem with someone else?**

**ST:** It's a validation that keeps you writing. Because, inside, we're all still the children we were, and because, when we were children and we did something good, our mothers and our fathers said, "Good work." We have that need in us. What the validation does is makes me think that maybe the next thing I do will be of value.

**RF: Do you feel that you are communicating with an audience when you write a poem?**

**ST:** Oh, I hope so. But, it's not a particular audience. I'm truthful when I say I write for myself, but I like the appreciation of the audience.

**RF: Martha Rhodes often says in her workshops, "Who is your reader?" Who is your reader, Susan?**

**ST:** My version of that is, who cares? If the answer is nobody, then that piece of writing is not worth working on. I did that with children's book writing too, asked myself, "Who cares?" It doesn't have a specificity to it. I'm not trying to impress any particular critic, editor, reader, person in the back of the audience.

**RF: How do editing and writing poetry support or not support each other?**

**ST:** In my case, they support each other very strongly because I do a lot of hands-on editing. Yesterday, I cut what somebody thinks is the major sentence out of a poem. I wrote to the poet and said, "You're either going to tell me I am crazy or you'll say yes." It's a poem in the voice of an angry gay man, and there's a sentence in the middle that takes away from all the elegance of what is being said. I said, "This sentence is doing you no favors in the middle of this, and it reads just fine without it, and my acceptance is conditional." Editing other people's material helps me to edit my own material. Also, I see hundreds and hundreds of really competent poems, but they don't have the extra spark, and I'm looking for the extra spark.

I accepted a poem by Robert Perchan last week, called "My Grandfather Was a Violin Shredder." The premise behind the poem is that older violinists take their violins to this man to be shredded because they can't bear for their violins to fall into anyone else's hands. But the violin shredder kept some piece of every violin with the idea that he was going to build his own violin someday. After he died, what his grandson found was a little piece of wood with a string; he didn't find anything resembling a violin. It's so tender and at the same time sad and funny, but the subject is just so incredibly original. I have no idea if there's such a thing as a violin shredder. Perchan lives in South Korea, I've never met him, but he has a wild sense of humor. How could I turn down the Violin Shredder?

**RF: People talk about having an inner-editor who is anathematic to creativity. Do you ever feel so critical of your own work that you can't put the first draft on the page?**

**ST:** No, you cannot let the editor voice speak to you when you are drafting work.

**RF: How do you shut that voice up?**

**ST:** You don't listen to it. You don't ask who cares when you're doing those first drafts. I mean, take Gretta Mitchell who photographed me this morning. Gretta has been photographing me since I was 24 or 25. She kept saying to me, "Now, show me that spark that's you." The photograph we finally decided on has me leaning in from one corner of the picture. Gretta said, "I can straighten that out," but I said, "Oh, please don't," because what she got is something spontaneous within a structure. And, that's what I am looking for in a poem.

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PART TWO

Session 2, May 5, 2014: "I Never Turn Down a Dare"

**Rebecca Foust: Your poetry has an "edge;" I'd like to know where that came from, and was it always there?**

**Susan Terris:** The edge comes from the essence of bitch.

**RF: What do you mean by that?**

**ST:** I see the world in its complexity, and I see the good, but I also see the bad. I am always willing to venture into the bad. I do everything that scares me; that's part of being a white water canoeist, part of jumping off the highest rock on river trips. So, I forge ahead into things that are scary or dark to see what I can find. It's a product of being afraid of everything, therefore, I'm afraid of nothing. I know that makes no sense, but it is the truth. I grew up in this neighborhood of boys. I never turned down a dare. People who know me well don't ever dare me.

**RF: Was the edge in your children's' books?**

**ST:** Yes. Because I'm interested in what happens at the moment of danger for everybody, I mean not just personally—how a person confronts danger. It's like what attracts mountain climbers. That piece of rock.

**RF: At the same time, I've also noticed in some of the poems a kind of vulnerability and fragility.**

**ST:** That's the soft inner core, where you get where it hurts, as opposed to the protective outer core that says, "I will accept any dare."

**RF: And where does the vulnerability comes from?**

**ST:** Most of all of us, who are creative in any field, whether we're artists or opera singers or writers, feel like classic outsiders, and that's where the vulnerability is. I grew up as the favorite child in a wonderful, conventional Mid-Western family. I had nothing to complain about, but the outsider thing is something people feel or they don't feel. I was a solitary child. I had friends, but I've always spent a lot of time alone. You can learn to present yourself in the world as though you are not vulnerable, but that does not take away how you ultimately feel.

**RF: Is it an asset for an artist to have that vulnerability?**

**ST:** It's an asset for an artist to know it's there, and be willing to let it show. One of my children's books was about someone who was convinced her parents weren't her real family. I knew my parents were my real family. I just was never ever going to have anything to do with the bridge playing, golf playing country club life. No one expected me to do these things and no one cared that I didn't play bridge or golf. I started working summers full time at the age of 14 so I would never have to go to any club. I worked in a dime store and in a department store when I was older, but most particularly I spent years working in the noncontagious wards at Children's Hospital in St. Louis where my uncle was a doctor.

**RF: You had a classical education--did you actually study Latin or Greek?**

**ST:** I studied Latin for 5 years and French for 13 years.

**RF: I see an architectural element in your poetry and wonder if that language study was be an early source of that.**

**ST:** At my mid-Victorian girls school, we had a course every day called "Grammar" where we just did—grammar—and I believe Latin and grammar have a great deal to do with how we think about construction of sentences.

**RF: Remember diagramming sentences?**

**ST:** Yes, we diagrammed everything.

**RF: I actually think it shapes thought.**

**ST:** I do too, and when I was reading Browning or Byron or Yeats or whoever, I could see the architecture of the way sentences were composed.

**RF: You don't seem to write in form much now, sonnets occasionally. Did you ever write in form?**

**ST:** I've tried experimentally to write in different forms. In general I'm not comfortable handling a regular rhyme. I like internal rhyme, but I tried at one point writing in strict iambic lines, and I found that one of the big problems was that I filled in a lot of extra junk words in order to get the right number of syllables in a line. And then I had to take out those junk words, and then it was not iambic anymore. I cannot write a villanelle that doesn't end up being a parody. I seldom write pantoums anymore, but I went through an enthusiasm for them because the obsessiveness and danger that you find in a lot of my poems works in such an obsessive form. Probably my best is "Pantoum for the Member of the Wedding" in Andrea Hollander's *When She Named Fire*, an Autumn House anthology of writing by contemporary women. I've discarded most of the other ones I've written along the way.

**RF: Do you have drafts of your early poems, and have you saved poems that you haven't published?**

**ST:** Yes, I've saved poems I haven't published. Do I have drafts of my early poems? I've changed computers, and I threw out the old disks when I didn't have anything that read them anymore. My files probably have printouts of those poems. I keep my yellow tablets that I write on, but a lot of them are probably indecipherable.

**RF: I know a poem is never finished, but is there one or some you're the most pleased with, that feel the most finished?**

**ST:** I guess, *Molly Has the Last Word*, *Summers Lease*, *Marriage License*, *Camera Obscura*. The poems in my new *Selected* [Ghosts of Yesterday, Marsh Hawk Press 2013] were not always the ones I like the best. I tried to choose the poems that worked most cohesively in a given section.

**RF: Ghost of Yesterday has six sections, five named after your previous books: Ghost of Yesterday, New Poems, Curved Space, 1998, Fires Favorable to the Dreamer, 2003, Natural Defenses, 2004, Contrariwise, 2008, and The Homelessness of Self, 2011. It looks like you started with the newest poems and then went back to the first book, second book, and so on. Are the poems in each section in the same order as the poems in the book they were drawn from?**

**ST:** Not necessarily. Again, poems were included or left out so I could create a cohesiveness in each section.

**RF: How did this book come to be?**

**ST:** I don't like volumes of collected poems, the "door stop" volumes, because I find that those books include weak along with all the strong poems. I thought it would be an interesting exercise at this point to try to pick out my strongest work from various books, as a kind of assessment of where I'd come from and where I was. I was interested in seeing how the work had changed, but I was also interested in seeing whether I still felt strongly about the work in each of these volumes. And I felt really badly for some of those poems I left out.

**RF: Did you care as strongly about the poems when you went back to the first book, the one written in 1995?**

**ST:** Yes, the first book had the whole section of poems about women—not all persona poems but all focused on women in books of literature—I felt very passionately about. There were also a couple of family poems I still felt very strongly about. Several poems, for example, "The Man Who Stood on A Chair" and "Minimalism" are about my mother and father. And "Winter Solstice"—those poems I feel very strongly about. "Undercut" is one of the only poems I ever wrote for my husband.

I don't write much about my family. My brother lives in fear that I will bring back the poem called Palatino, a very detached view of him getting so excited about a poem I had written about our father that he called me in from the next room. It turned out that he wanted to know what the font was in order to use it for a brochure for his company!

I discussed the New & Selected with a number of people I trusted, as well as some of the Marsh Hawk Press people. Everyone seemed to think it was a good thing to do at the point where I had five books of poetry and this group of new poems—19 diptychs—that were never going to expand beyond what I had done with them. The reason I like chapbooks so much is that I often reach a point with poems in a series where I don't have any more impetus to go forward; I begin to feel bored with this subject or like I'm going to start repeating and stepping all over what I've already done. I couldn't figure out how those diptychs were going to fit into a new book, and it seemed to me they were kind of summing up in many ways of work I had done in prior books.

**RF: When were those diptychs written?**

**ST:** In 2010 and 2011. The first one was "Major & Minor / Minor and Major," the one that begins "When I get there, the lily is already wilting." I have no idea where it came from, nor when I reversed it. "The Ghost of Yesterday" appeared, and it wasn't until I was in the penultimate of the new poems that I knew who the ghost was. It's my father, but my father had already been gone for 33 years at this point.

**RF: How many chapbooks have you written since your first one in 1995?**

**ST:** I think I have 14 that have been published.

**RF: And, you have another one coming out soon?**

**ST:** I have two more. One is by Omnidawn, Memos. Usually, when I do a series like this, it starts with a single poem, and then something, whatever I'm doing in terms of form or voice, wants more. The other chapbook is called, All Generalizations Are Generalizations, and it was published from Kattywompus Press in Boston.

Memos is a series of very short poems, 6 to 10 lines, in couplets without punctuation, a series of memos to people I know or people I've seen. One is to a girl in a body of a boy, one is a memo to the girl with a strawberry birthmark on her face. They're all titled "memo," too—"Memo to Sister-in-Law the Day Before She Died," "Memo to the Lake House," "Memo to My House Plants," "Memo to the Cat Who Keeps Bringing Me Dead birds," and then the "Memos to self" are all literary in one way or the other. They almost all have to do with 19th century fictional heroines. Some days you don't know whether I'm Jane Eyre or the mad woman in the attic.

The Generalizations chapbooks started with New York Times op-ed by Fran Lebowitz about generalizations; some of the titles were originally borrowed from her and then I went very far afield with other generalizations. One of those poems, "Rough Ties: All Mothers Are Single" was in Rattle [<http://www.rattle.com/poetry/rough-ties-all-mothers-are-single-by-susan-terris/>].

**RF: This seems like a good time to talk about process. Do you write every day?**

**ST:** No.

**RF: Do you have a routine for writing?**

**ST:** That's hard to answer. If I didn't do so much editorial work both on magazines and private editing for people, I might. It's not a question of writing more. A writer has to live in order to write; writing done every day runs the risk of being extremely solipsistic. At Barnard I took a course modeled on "The Harvard Daily Theme Course," where I had to hand in a paper every day for a semester. I still have all these papers. What I did in order to live this way was to record conversations I overheard, in the subway, in the supermarket, when someone dropped eggs on the floor. It was an interesting exercise, but it also convinced me that is not where the best writing comes from.

**RF: Where does the best writing come from?**

**ST:** For me, the best writing comes from snatches of things I have written down in my yellow tablets. When I do sit down to write, several weeks a year where I do nothing but write for an entire week, I look at these things again, and sometimes they make sense and become a poem, and sometimes they just keep sitting there. It took me over three years to figure out how to write about Sonya Tolstoy, and then I came across Tolstoy's short story in which his wife turns into a china doll that falls off the table and then the dog runs away with the china doll. I had Sonya's journals too, but until I read that story I didn't know how to use the journals. I didn't know how to write about her in any way that felt original.

I always wanted to write a children's book about where lost socks and lost mittens go, but I never figured out how to do it. As you know very often you write a poem, and you read it and it's not a poem. I have a large file of stuff I call "Incomplete," but incomplete probably means second rate—not going anywhere, not going to leave my house or my computer.

**RF: Do you carry a little notebook in your purse?**

**ST:** I carry a little leather thing that holds index cards, and I will jot things on cards that then find their way into the yellow legal pads. I will give you an example of where an idea came from for a poem I recently started. During hot weather last week or two weeks ago, I had the bathroom window opened very wide; I look up and see on the window sill an excessively ugly pigeon with pink speckled feet, and I'm afraid the bird is going to fly into my house. I stood up, and the bird flew out. When I texted my friend Julia to tell her what had happened, she replied, "Now you understand what it really means to be a single woman living alone." The truth is, the times we've had a bird or bat in the house, I have always been the person to get it out. My husband always stood there and said, "What do we do?" But, the concept of knowing you are truly alone when there is the danger of a bird being in the house is a very interesting kind of metaphor. So, that's a poem I'm going to try and write.

**RF: You get an idea, and the poem develops from the idea—is that accurate?**

**ST:** That's accurate, but I try to get beyond the fact that a poem is "about something." The idea may generate a poem but be a fragment in it rather than the poem itself.

**RF: Do you ever write towards the last line?**

**ST:** Never, I never know what the last line is going to be. The same way when I wrote children's books, I never knew the exact ending. I knew what the story was, and I would outline it chapter by chapter, but I never knew what the ending was going to be because, as you've heard many people say, your characters take over. And the same thing happens in a poem—some half-hidden voice behind the poem tells me how it's going to end. And, if it doesn't happen within me that way, then I'm usually not happy with the poem.

**RF: Is that voice your muse? Or, what some call the poem writing itself?**

**ST:** I've always used the iceberg image: 9/10ths of what we know or what we write about is under water. My other favorite image is of ice fishing. You put your line down through the hole in the ice, and you don't know what you're going to pull up. It is those strange and interior things that surface beyond what you think you're writing about that interest me.

**RF: Some poets, like Yeats, believe they're channeling other consciousnesses, but you're saying that these things are inside, and poetry is a way of accessing them?**

**ST:** Yes, but I've always written a lot of persona poems, and in the voices of men, not just women. There's no way to write a persona poem that has any value without putting something of yourself into that character. One subject that interests me is the notion of lying in poetry. In fiction, it's perfectly all right to lie, but in poetry there is sometimes an expectation that if you write in the first person, it must be you, and it must be the truth. Once at Squaw Valley at the end of a lecture Sharon Olds gave,

something spurred me to ask, "Do you think it's all right to lie in poetry"? She thought I was accusing her of lying when in fact I was asking a philosophical question. And, again—this comes from the Caroline Kizer course I took—since I don't care what people think, I can write something either in the first or the third person that appears to be about myself that in fact has nothing to do with myself. It may have my emotions, but it is not "about" me. I explained to Sharon what I meant, and she understood. I believe I can say anything I please. If you do it well enough, you should be able to get away with it. But there are things you can't do. I would not put myself, for example, into the voice of a Chinese girl or of an African American woman, and I'm very loathe as an editor to accept poems that do this.

**RF: What about, say, someone writing a first-person poem about having an autistic son if they don't have an autistic son?**

**ST:** To me that's different from appropriating an ethnic voice. In other words, Jonathan Lethem [author of *Motherless Brooklyn*] says he doesn't have Tourette's, but when you see Jonathan Lethem speak, he is a compulsive talker. He talks talks talks talks talks talks. He understands Tourette's because he is has at least a few of those tendencies.

**RF: Have you ever had issues with people feeling hurt or exploited by your poems?**

**ST:** Yes, I had a friend who was upset about a poem that I wrote that was in the voice of a daughter who was adopted. I have six adopted children in my immediate family, and I didn't feel that this poem was something that she owned. I never published it, by the way.

**RF: On your writing retreats: You go away at least once a year for a couple of weeks and do nothing, but write?**

**ST:** Usually, a week at a time, I don't think I extend it more than a week. When I was in Maine last year I did maybe 28 pieces in a week, but you have to understand that about 12 of them were only four lines long.

**RF: When you go away on retreat is your focus generating new work?**

**ST:** Yes.

**RF: Where do you go?**

**ST:** I go to Maine, on Penobscot Bay, with my oldest son in the fall, where we each have a tiny little cabin, and we work for a week. It's a family camp that has been there almost 100 years that Dan and his family go to in the season. These are off-season rates, no central kitchen. The cabins have kitchens, but mine, "The Acorn," is so tiny I can practically touch every wall at the same time.

**RF: And then you go somewhere in Minnesota?**

**ST:** We have a family home in northern Minnesota, and I spend some time there, where I work alone. And I usually go for a week in February to a house friends loan me at Stinson Beach.

**RF: So, about three weeks a year.**

**ST:** Probably closer to four because I often have close to two weeks in Minnesota. Not necessarily contiguous weeks, but we'll have guests and then won't have guests.

**RF: And, when do you do the work of pulling your books together? How do you find time to do that with all the editing you do?**

**ST:** I don't write every day, but I do work every day, revising poems, etc. Because my husband was so ill I didn't go away this year in February, but I continued to revise the poems from last fall in Maine. I've written a couple of new poems in the interim, but if I am putting a book together, I do that during other hours on a continuous basis. If you are writing a novel, you can't stop in the middle, because the voice will change. In the same way, if you're putting a book of poems together, you've got to keep doing it so the focus stays the same.

**RF: You're very widely published in journals. Can you talk a bit about how you get your work out?**

**ST:** At one point, I entered a lot of contests because it was a way to get into magazines that were not going to accept me otherwise. You're putting out a lot of money to enter these contests, but I was winning enough money back to pay for what I was entering, so it was pretty good strategy.

**RF: You mean because you didn't have the credits in your cover letter yet?**

**ST:** I don't even know whether it's the credits in your cover letter that make a difference. It can be if they already know who you are, if somebody on the staff knows you. I don't resent any of this. I really believe that most rejection isn't personal, and there are many reasons why people get rejected, but if you enter an up-and-up contest and you win, you're going to be published in *The Iowa Review* or whatever it is. If you can pick up \$1,000 here or there, it pays for a lot of contest entries. I don't do it anymore, but it was one way of getting my name out there. I don't necessarily recommend this to other people because you have to make a decision early on whether you write the kind of poems that contests like—poems with dramatic tension. Years ago, when I was having lunch or dinner with Martha Rhodes in New York, she told me, "I don't enter contests because I do not have the kind of poems that win contests." That's a kind of self-knowledge; Martha's small tight poems are very skillful but not necessarily what wins a contest.

**RF: Do you have a submission strategy now?**

**ST:** No, but I try to be loyal to places that have already published me, even if they are not in the so-called "top tier" of magazines. I generally keep sending them work, and I send them good work, as matter of respect. I also continue to try to place work in so-called top journals who published me before. And, when people write me and request work, which happens—I wouldn't say often but happens often enough—again, I try to send my best work no matter what journal they're representing. I try not to be an elitist in any way.

**RF: What do you think about the notion we hear a lot now, that nobody's reading the journals now, except the other poets, and they're only reading the contributors' bios?**

**ST:** I publish a journal in which we have now done away with contributors' bios—I guess they can't read those, can they? I don't know. This could be true. But I don't care. Again, I don't think that much about who the readers are. I mostly think about whether the readers care. One of the reasons that I love the online publishing is that you get a wider readership. The downside is, something I published 20 years ago is still there, and I don't always love these things.

**RF: One concern with online publishing is that people don't bring the same kind of attention to an online poem as they do to a poem in a journal. What do you think about this?**

**ST:** But. . . what makes a reader? In other words who are we to stay how much attention they give or don't give? I get great feedback from online poems. I love hearing from total strangers who have read my poem, and I don't care whether they're poets or nonpoets.

**RF: Are there audio recordings online of you reading your work?**

**ST:** There's the one from Rattle I mentioned. I'm not wildly interested in self-promotion. I am trying to do the best work I can. I'm trying to continuously improve what I am able to do. But I know a poet who has always felt that if she gets to know famous people, it will make her famous. It doesn't work that way. I don't spend any time trying to get myself known by famous people. I do readings, but don't do a huge number. I get tired of hearing myself. But as someone who was involved in theatre as a younger person, I love the performance aspect.

I grew up being in plays all through grade school and high school. I also did costuming and some tech work. When I got to college, the first major audition was for *Sabrina Fair*. I dressed myself like Audrey Hepburn, in my red-and-white pleated skirt and angora sweater and with my pageboy hairdo. I made the callbacks for the last three, but didn't get the part. And, years after that, the woman who'd been the director told me, "You said 'ant' instead of 'awnt'". That was the end of my on-stage theatrical career.

**RF: I have a sense of theater in your work, When writing the review for *The Homelessness of Self*, published in *Prairie Schooner* in 2011 [vol. 85:3], I considered shaping it around the idea of point of view.**

**ST:** Particularly in the longer poems there is a theatricality. I have never tried my hand at writing a play and never will as far as I can see, but I love high drama and theatricality, and those were also the kinds of poems that won prizes.

**RF: When you first started seriously writing poetry in the '80s, were you aware of any dominant schools or styles that influenced you in an way, what Harold Bloom calls "the anxiety of influence?"**

**ST:** No, I always wanted to not be part of the schools. I consciously avoided trying to be like Elizabeth Bishop, for instance. I felt I was fortunate during college to have missed the T. S. Eliot frenzy, because I thought I could appreciate him better when he wasn't in high vogue. Like when Shakespeare's Coriolanus (which I still think is second rate) became a sudden great thing. It isn't a question of what works I liked. I didn't like being part of a wave. I found for instance in the poetry of Michael Ondaatje a kind of luminous beauty, that maybe wasn't receiving as much attention as other poets whose work appealed to me less.

You asked earlier what poets writing now will be remembered in a hundred years. That's an interesting question, and I'm not sure I'm really someone who should be answering this, but the names that come to mind are people who did something that was obviously different and done well. Poets like Jorie Graham, Brenda Hillman, Seamus Heaney, Adrienne Rich, W.S. Merwin, Louise Glück, whose work has either a distinctive style or a distinctive point of view; reputation may go down and up, but readers will always go back to them.

**RF: How would you describe your own style, as you're writing now?**

**ST:** It comes back to the whole question of are you willing to take a dare. I'm willing to try almost anything, and I don't feel I have to write a single "type" of poem.

**RF: Can you talk about the differences in publishing children's books versus poetry?**

**ST:** When I made the change from publishing children's books to publishing poetry, I found that no poet or poetry editor cared that I had this long and pretty successful career in the field of children's books. I felt people were going to look down on my poems because of the children's' book work, so I cut it out of my bio. It reminded me of getting to college and graduate school and discovering that nobody cared anymore about my excellent spelling and punctuation. You have certain things drummed into you, and then they're no longer valued.

**RF: Today we have unprecedented proliferation of journals and of poetry books being published, something like 5000 new books a year, making it harder, maybe, to find the good work in the great wash. Also, there are vastly more poets vying for the coveted spots. What can you tell new poets who may be demoralized by the current state of publishing?**

**ST:** You can't be in any creative field if you can't take rejection. That's what I tell the young people I mentor. The best thing I can do is teach them two things: to be able to accept rejection and to realize that most of it isn't personal. You don't know who the people are reading on the other end; you don't know that they give each poem the attention I do as an editor. You may be sending poems that are not like the poems the journal publishes. Or you have just written a great poem about running a marathon, but the editor has just accepted a poem about marathon running. To combat rejection demoralization, send out work again, get feedback, do a strong reading. The first time I read in a Marin Poetry Center Traveling Show was at the depot in Mill Valley. Afterwards, a woman in a wheel chair with some sort of flag on it came zooming down the aisle to the front, calling out, "I've found a poet, I've found a real poet!" And that is the kind of thing that will keep someone writing.

**RF: Even for journals without a theme, an editor reading poems towards the end of the submission period has already begun to shape that issue, right?**

**ST:** Submit earlier, always submit earlier. You don't have to be the first, but, by the time you get to the end, you are at a disadvantage.

**RF: Any other advice for poets trying to get their work out there?**

**ST:** We are in an era where it is not looked down upon to self-publish, that's particularly if you're in the chapbook field, because the chapbook is like a calling card that you can take with you to readings. I have occasionally also used the chapbook to send in with submissions to a magazine. I don't do it all the time, and I'm not asking for a review, only trying to show a selection of my work. I'm more likely to do it if I am writing poems in a sequence.

**RF: Robert Frost said that the book is its own the last poem, and it's obvious that you take the art of the book very seriously. How do you sequence your books?**

**ST:** That's where my background in fiction and my background as a fanatic reader of fiction makes a difference. A poetry book has to have the same kind of arc that a novel has, which doesn't mean all the poems need to connect, but there needs to be something pulling you forward and also means you have to start the book with something easy to get in to. Something welcoming, that makes you want

to read. I do the same thing with Spillway. I don't start with a difficult poem. I start with something that will invite people in and then try not to let the sequence sag. To me, particularly if you're trying to get a book accepted somewhere, it is better if you have an arc that goes through, and part of the arc for me generally means having the last poem be a way out of the book.

Eleanor Wilner wanted me to switch poems at the end of *The Homelessness of Self* so that "Marriage License" was not the last poem, but I said to her, "Nothing can follow 'Marriage License.'" That's the only time I have ever used a long piece at the end of a book. If I use "Marriage License" at a reading, it's the last poem. If I read my Molly Bloom poem, Molly always has the last word.

**RF: So, you use an arc strategy in your readings too?**

**ST:** Absolutely.

**RF: When you sit down to sequence of a book do you first start with the first poem and the last poem and then fill in?**

**ST:** I choose a bunch of possibles for first poems and a bunch of possibles for last poems, and then I work to see how that is going play out.

**RF: What do you think about "writers block?"**

**ST:** Basically, I don't believe in writers block. If you don't know what you want to write about, you just have to sit down and start writing and keep at it until something begins to happen on the page that is of interest to you, and you may only pick up a few lines from that. And when I say "write and keep writing," I'm talking about a free write process with not letting any editors/editorial voice in your head come into it.

**RF: How do you shut those voices out?**

**ST:** You don't revise as you do it; you don't re-read what you're writing, at the time. And then you see whether anything leaps out at you as something you really want to talk about. The advice for people wanting to be serious writers is that they have to learn how to generate writing they can then work on. That has to do with getting past the writer's block and has to do with setting time aside, finding what works for you. A young woman I know, quite a good poet who teaches High School English, said to me after having her first baby, "I can't find time to write anymore." And I said, "Would you consider going and sitting in your car during the lunch hour to generate writing you can later make into poems?" I think that worked for her.

One way I learned to generate writing (aside from going away which I was not able to do when my children were young) was never accepting any commitment on a Monday. I had to answer the phone because I had children, but Monday was the day set aside for getting started. People are morning people, or they're evening people or they're Friday people or whatever. I'm a morning person, and I'm a Monday person. I wasn't working full time and could manage not to be a substitute teacher on a Monday. Instead, I would devote that time to writing, and then I had the whole rest of the week with something in hand I could think about. The most important thing taught by conferences like Napa or Squaw Valley (where you're under the gun to bring something different every day) is how to produce new work.

**RF: Any artist can experience periods of demoralization—what's your advice to poets for keeping it going over the long run?**

**ST:** Try something different; try something that you've never done before; try something hard. If you've always done things that are tight and short, try a loose baggy monster. If you've always done loose baggy monsters, try things that are tight and short. Write in voices that aren't your own; tackle subjects that are difficult for you. Make lists, because the lists themselves become ideas. Read work of poets like Brenda Hillman, poets who keep on keeping on by trying new things.

**RF: A writer's life requires a certain amount of solitude and can be lonely; I'd like to hear about how you managed that, particularly as a mother of young children.**

**ST:** I've never been lonely. My siblings were younger, and I spent a lot of time alone. I love to go out and see people, but I also love to be home by myself, and there are always more things that I want to do on any given day than I can ever possibly get done. I get up every morning and look at the clock and say to myself, "I only have four hours to work before this interrupts me," or "I only have six hours." I'm always parceling time out because there never seems to be enough for the things I want to do. That's how I'm not bored, and that's how I'm not lonely.

**RF: How do you handle interruptions by electronic media—email, Facebook, telephone?**

**ST:** I don't get many phone calls. You've been in my house. You've heard that I don't get many phone calls. I'm not a big phone conversation person. People who know me phone me before 8:30 in the morning or after 4:00 in the afternoon. In the morning I look and see whether there's any email I need to take care of that's immediate. I decided this morning one thing I didn't have to read was the long blog entry from my grandson in the Peace Corps in Senegal—I'll read that this evening. Do I look at email in the middle of the day? I might, while eating lunch. The hours between 4 and 7 in the afternoon, I usually don't work—I set that time aside to have tea with friends, talk on the telephone, read a little email or, even better, read whatever book I'm reading. If I'm working intensely on something, I will go back and work on it after dinner, but that wouldn't be generating new work. That would be revising, editing, or arranging the sequence of the book—something that doesn't need my brain with the freshness it has when I get up in the morning.

**RF: Do you get up early?**

**ST:** Yes, but I try not to get up before 6:00. My husband and my children were all very respectful of my work, and I didn't do a lot of work during the hours my children were around. That was really something I started doing intensely when they started school.

**RF: How do you feel about MFA Programs? A good thing or a bad thing in terms of the ultimate goal of becoming a writer?**

**ST:** How do you feel about it? You did it! I don't have any negative feelings about it. It's great for many people who did not, as I did, come through high school, college and graduate work with an intense focus in English Literature and writing. I didn't want to go back to school for a MFA because I no longer wanted to prove to anyone that I could write a critical paper. But many people have benefited from it. The thing that disturbs me about it is the sameness that can come from programs when overwhelming personalities teach and students try to emulate them, or the teachers shape the students into replicas of themselves. I also worry about the hundreds of graduates every year who think their books are going to be published, that they're going to become famous poets, going to get great teaching jobs.

**RF: Do you think that writing can be taught?**

**ST:** No, but you just finished saying yourself that the process of reading critically and the discipline of having to produce work was useful for you. What teachers can do is the same thing I try to do in private editorial work: get rid of bad habits. I have a granddaughter at The University of Iowa who called me in a panic about a story she had to write. From her draft I cut two adjectives, two adverbs and the last page and half. As I told her, it is a typical for writers to write past the ending. When teaching Children's Literature at Cal Extension, I frequently cut the first few pages because it was the "vamp" before the real thing, and you want to begin in medias res, the same thing you try to do with poems.

**RF: One more question about audience. Do you share the concern that the poetry audience, our readership, is shrinking? That poetry has little relevance in the lives of most people today?**

**ST:** Many people only turn to poetry when somebody dies or gets married. That's too bad.

**RF: Many people seem to feel they should like poetry but actually don't. I read poems to my kids, but I don't know if my kids will read poems to their kids. Could you talk about that?**

**ST:** The complexity of modern poetry and its rejection of narrative are some things that turned a lot of the so-called public away. I've been part of a read aloud group, probably for about nine years: of the twelve of us, five are writers, and three are poets. But we all love reading the poetry out loud because it is so satisfying. We have read Don Juan, Beowulf, and the Odyssey. We have read Gilgamesh and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the only thing we ever failed in was Dante because it wasn't fun—too many historical figures we had to keep looking up. We've done fiction too, but the important thing is that this group keeps wanting to go back and read poetry.

**RF: So one idea is to create opportunities for people to read the poems aloud in their own voices, like the Marin Poetry Center's Anthology party and the Holiday party read-arounds?**

**ST:** Our group has a holiday party, usually in December, where we bring our favorite old chestnuts: Joyce Kilmer or Shakespeare, things that we memorized or knew as kids. Some of it is politically

incorrect today, but we still did Vachel Lindsay's [tap tap tapping by Terris] "Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable." It is important not just to read your own poems aloud but also to hear them read by someone else and also to hear other poems written by other writers. If you do an event like this, ask people to bring poems not by themselves. At Spillway anthology readings, I ask poets to read their own poem and a poem by another contributor to the anthology. I picked this idea up from 'Lyn.

**RF: We're almost out of time. Are there any gaps, anything I failed to cover in this interview?**

**ST:** You've talked about Virginia Woolf needing a room of her own. When I first started writing, my "room" was the master bedroom. I didn't have a desk, so I used the top of my sewing cabinet, which wasn't very big. One of those tables where the machine folded down, with a knee thing not a foot pedal. I learned to sew on my grandmother's treadle machine.

**RF: When did you finally get your office that you showed me yesterday?**

**ST:** After we moved into the house, when the children were one, three-and-a-half and five-and-a-half.

**RF: Woolf's essay says women need a physical space of your own—your sewing machine table—and a temporal space, which you talked about before, figuring how to fit writing time into your schedule. Woolf also thinks it crucial that women learn and believe they can generate income by their own pen—do you agree?**

**ST:** In the children's book world in my novels, I was a good mid-list writer, and my work was really appreciated. I was in maybe the top five percent of earners in the children's book world, but only the top half of a percent makes any money. I could have supported myself at one point on what I earned as a children's book writer, but I couldn't have supported a family. I've always done things [other than writing] to earn money.

**RF: T. S. Eliot said that "no honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what they have written, they may have wasted their time and messed up their life for nothing." Do you ever feel this way?**

**ST:** I'm quite sure that I have no idea what the permanent value of my work is, but on the other hand I refuse to believe that I have wasted my time or messed up my life. I believe it has enriched my life. I believe it has enriched the lives of my husband, of my children, of people that come into contact with me on a regular basis. It has enabled me to be able to mentor other people in creative fields. I long ago decided I was probably never going to become a famous poet, but I'm still trying to do the absolute best work I can do and hoping that everything I write is better than what I've written before.

**RF: What does it mean to you to be "successful"?**

**ST:** To feel that what I am writing is of value to me.

**RF: Your all-time favorite poets, female and male?**

**ST:** I have to go back to again influences in my childhood—Muriel Rukeyser and Robert Browning.

**RF: Thinking about the VIDA statistics, do you think women poets are discriminated against with respect to publishing, prizes, exposure, etc.?**

**ST:** They have been discriminated against, but it's getting harder to do so. I don't know the statistics, but I bet there are a lot more woman with MFAs than there are men. A poet I knew years ago, a wonderful woman with a very sharp tongue, said if you didn't have a cock you couldn't get into Poetry, but that has changed. And, because of the matriarchal shape of my family, I grew up as a liberated girl then woman, and it's very hard for me to put myself in a position of feeling discriminated against.

**RF: What would you have done if you hadn't chosen to be a writer?**

**ST:** I didn't give up the idea of Medical School until I was over 40. I had worked in medical jobs as a teenager and in college, and I loved the biological sciences, but at the time I had to make that decision, being a doctor was a terrible life for women, and anyway the only options open to women were radiology and pediatrics. But I've never given up my interest in medicine.

**RF: Wrapping up here—do you have any good anecdotes about poets you've met?**

**ST:** The only thing I can think of is a visitation by Donald Justice, whom I've never met. I'd had surgery and had moved into the back bedroom so I wouldn't get jostled or pushed around by accident. In the middle of the night, the door opened. I sat up, and Donald Justice was standing in the doorway.

He was wearing a black turtleneck and a pair of jeans, was quite slim and had sort of a crew cut. He didn't say anything, just looked at me, but he was there, and I was quite sure he was there. When I next talked to David St. John I told him about it and asked why he thought Justice was there. David said, "He wants you to pay attention and to finish your book." *The Homelessness of Self* was the book I was working on. Donald Justice was probably steeped in the same nineteenth century poetry I was, what he and I really would have had in common if we'd ever met. That's the only story I have, a kind of wonderful, epiphanic post-surgery hallucination.

**RF: How would you like to be remembered? Not to be morbid, but what is your ideal epitaph?**

**ST:** All right, I actually have a phrase for you: "She asked for light." The best and also the worst—it doesn't say whether she got it or not. I just wrote that down this morning in the kitchen while thinking about your comment that the house was bright, and how I told you I move around the house like a cat, because I like light. *RF*

Rebecca Foust's brand new collection of poetry is *Paradise Drive*. Her previous books include *All That Gorgeous*, *Pitiless Song*, winner of the Many Mountains Moving Prize, and *God, Seed: Poetry and Art about the Natural World*. She was the 2014 Dartmouth Poet in Residence and is the recipient of fellowships from the Frost Place and the MacDowell Colony. She lives in Marin County, California.