

Transcript of Robert Hass Internet Talk Show

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Center for Instructional Innovation

Western Washington University

William Lyne, English Professor, Moderator

William Lyne: Good morning. Welcome to the Center for Instructional Innovation. My name is Bill Lyne. I'm a professor here in the English Department at Western Washington University. And we're very fortunate this morning to be joined by Robert Hass, a very distinguished poet, former Poet Laureate, winner of many awards, and a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Professor Hass spoke last night to a pack crowd at the performing arts center and has agreed at this unreasonable hour to join us and answer a few questions that people have sent in on the internet. So, Professor Hass, welcome.

Robert Hass: Pleasure to be here. Hello to you out there who are awake at this hour.

Lyne: We have a few questions that have been sent in on the internet, so if you'd like to just jump right in...

Hass: Sure.

Lyne: The first one is: what did you like most about being Poet Laureate of the United States?

Hass: There were a lot of things that were interesting about it. I suppose the thing I liked the most was actually getting to know Washington. I spent a little bit of time there, but I was actually commuting from Berkeley. I would teach on Monday and Tuesday and Tuesday night or Wednesday morning get on a plane. Getting to know the city, the galleries—the National Gallery was just sensational to live with—and the neighborhoods, the rivers. I spent a lot of time on the Anacostia River with friends who were involved with cleaning up on the Anacostia. So, that I liked a lot.

There were many things that were interesting. Traveling around the country was interesting. Getting to meet the President and his wife and getting to see what the White House was like was interesting. It was—I got very tired of it after a while. I just felt it was an adventure.

Lyne: And you did two terms right?

Hass: I did two terms. The library is organized just like any harassed institution and I think you could do it forever because, I mean, they wouldn't have to have a meeting and think of somebody else. I don't think anybody's wanted to do it for more than two.

Lyne: I know that when you were there you were involved a lot in literacy education and education in the arts in schools. Could you maybe talk a little bit about what you see the role of arts education in high schools and colleges right now?

Hass: Yeah. I mean I have no special expertise in that subject. The job of the Poet Laureate is sort of ill-defined. You go there and you introduce a lecture series. Basically you give a poetry reading and the rest of it is kind of up to you. And you do get a lot of opportunities to do things, invitations to speak and stuff like that. So I don't know that I did a lot, but when I would be invited someplace I'd go out and talk to people about literacy issues. What do I do with this job? It seemed like running around telling people that poetry was wonderful was less useful given the platform than to go places and say, "We've got to teach our kids how to read." Which then meant, for me, that I really had to start learning about how literacy issues worked in this country. I knew in my state of California that there was a real crisis in the schools which was the motivating thing for me.

You know, I've been—I teach, as you do, and I know about my little part of the world and the rest of my time I had spent writing. So, going around to schools, visiting them, spending a lot of time talking to teachers, talking to foundations was an education for me. I think that, for you students out there listening, the thing that was maybe most interesting that I learned was that the non-profits in this country that do stuff like arts in education, that do stuff like environmental work, that do stuff like working on women's issues and health issues and children's safety issues—almost all that work in this country is done by non-profits. The funding mostly comes from endowments and individuals. And it constitutes kind of a fourth estate, a fourth pillar of the structure of our civil society. Ideas don't come from government, they really don't. Some of them come from the Universities but they're generated and they get tried out in the non-profits. You know, clearly, in one way or another, we're imaginative and symbolizing animals, us humans, and if you don't educate that gift in people it won't flourish. You know, why is Dutch design so great? Because they have a proud tradition of arts education. It's not that complicated. Why is American engineering so good? We have terrific engineering schools.

If you want the arts to flourish, you have arts education. And mostly you will know, students having been through high schools recently, how much you've gotten—not enough. There's not room for it. And so to see the foundations and the organizations, usually artists, you know, who are looking for jobs found a way to create a program to do more music education in their city or more education theatre or more education visual arts or dance or whatever. And that's how a lot of the work is getting done. Does that answer your question?

Lyne: Yeah. And does that—because I know when we were talking before that you're doing some environmental education work now in the schools across the country. Could you talk a little bit about that, too?

Hass: Well, I was the first person from west of the, maybe west of the Allegheny's. And everyone who's ever been—almost everyone who's ever been appointed to the Poet Laureate position has been from the east coast. And I think the reason I was picked was because I was somebody they had heard of from the West and they thought it was time to do that though there had been, you know, wonderful poets out here and a powerful tradition of poetry in the Northwest, actually.

So I wanted to do something that reflected Western culture and the Western culture of poetry and I thought I ought to do something with natural history and environmental consciousness in American writing. They had given me a budget of \$10,000—the Library of Congress had—to do some kind of artistic or scholarly conference. And the day I arrived they said, “Well, have you thought about what you want to do?” and I said, “Yea, I want to do a conference on the environmental tradition in American writing. ‘Huh’ they said. ‘Interesting’ they said.

The next day I went in and they said, “Guess what, the money has dried up.”

Lyne: Oh, so they took your money away after you said environment?

Hass: Oh no, they didn't take my money away. They said gee they thought they had it but they didn't have it. And I said, “That's funny.” Later I learned the story and I was annoyed and there was nothing I could do so I said, “If I raise the money myself could I do this?” I had no idea how you'd go about doing that. They said, “Oh, well, sure if you want to do it yourself.”

So I called up every writer I could think of who was involved in the environmental community and said, ‘Who are the funders? I need \$10,000. In fact, I need \$50,000. I'm going to bring every environmental writer in the country here!’ I was probably angry.

It turns out—is this interesting?

Lyne: Yea, I want to know what happened—I'm intrigued about what happened to the money.

Hass: It turns out that at that moment—the way politics worked in Washington is never what you think—at that moment, it was 1995, with Newt Gingrich and the new Republican majority in Congress (for the first time in 20 years there was a Republican house).

Lyne: So this was as the contract on American was taking place?

Hass: All the Washington bureaucracies were extremely nervous because the heads and all the chairs of committees in Congress were new guys. And the committee that funded the Library of Congress now had a very conservative, right-wing, Oklahoman Congressman as the head of the committee. And things were going along very nicely. There was also a Government Reorganization committee and some guy in the Commerce

Department, seeing an opening, had said we really ought to put the copyright in the Commerce Department instead of the Library of Congress for negotiating purposes. Copyright brings about 5 million dollars a year into the Library of Congress. It was a pure bureaucratic power grab. I knew none of this and I walked in and said.

Lyne: So your \$10,000 was part of that?

Hass: No, they did not want to annoy the conservatives in the Republican Party by having some wild man from Berkeley having a bunch of environmentalists at the Library of Congress so they freaked out when they thought I was going to do it. I knew none of this.

Lyne: So if you had come and proposed a conference on the history patriotic poetry-

Hass: It would have been fine. Anything but that.

Lyne: But the environment thing.

Hass: The environment thing. Anyway, I went ahead and did it anyway. I did raise some money and I did do it anyway and they also were unwilling to publicize it very much at the time out of this nervousness. So we also raised money to have a public relations firm.

Anyway, out of this comedy I realized that everybody in Washington is constantly having conferences and events thinking that this would be a good way to get nation attention to their cause; though the only cause I was interested in was representing the fact that, from Hemingway's Big Two-Hearted River to Melville's Moby Dick to the Mississippi and, you know, everywhere you look, American literature is about our relationship to the natural world. It's one of the great themes of our literature. And that was all I wanted, you know. I didn't have any—that doesn't tell you what you should do about cleaning up mercury in the Georgia Pacific mills around here, it just says Americans are attached to the Earth and then the engineers can figure out how to clean it up.

So I thought that—I've always felt that we don't do a very good job of education in literacy about the places where we live in the classroom and that when everyone is talking about literacy we need to talk about our regional literacy. So that kids knew their own watersheds. Kids ought to come out of school knowing. If they live in New York they ought to know the history of their neighborhood; they ought to know the few trees that grow; they ought to know where the bricks come from; they ought to know when the subways and sewer systems were constructed; and who are the workers that did it. And, you know, in California people ought to know the migratory birds or the resident birds and so on. There ought to be—I didn't have it in my head what it was—but we ought to—because children are so sensually alive to their environment. If you add to that knowledge, which happened to me rather late—that is in college somebody taught me that I could go teach myself natural history and give names and narratives and history to all of this stuff I knew.

So I got interested in trying to figure out how to help promote that work in the schools where teachers are doing a lot of it but it's against the grain of...

Lyne: Sure, of the **standard ??? 14:29**

Hass: So we started a program at the Library of Congress and at the International Rivers Network—a non-profit that's involved with river education—and Berkeley to sponsor a program for children from kindergarten through 12th grade to do poetry and artwork based on their bioregion, themes from their bioregion, and we called it River of Words. To give it a kind of focus and importance we didn't fight it. We pick winners and we invite eight children to come to Washington from all over the country.

Lyne: These are elementary school kids, high school kids?

Hass: Elementary through high school.

Lyne: Ok.

Hass: In four categories, you know, kindergarten through 3rd grade, 4th through 6th, 7th through 9th, 10th through 12th. We bring eight kids plus a teacher or parent to Washington every spring and the children read their poetry to the Library of Congress and they have their art displayed there. And they meet local kid and we take them boating on the Anacostia River and they go to the White House and they meet their congressmen and go to the Smithsonian and the home town newspapers do stories. This year there's a winner from, two I think, from Seattle: one a junior high school girl and one, I think she's a kindergartener in art. So it's a way of reinforcing year after year in the schools the ways that teachers not just of science—so the kids are going out and doing water quality testing or learning the life cycle of salamanders in the local creeks—but that each year they go back and imaginatively revisit their place.

And there are now about 20,000 children all over the country participating in this program. And if any of you listening to this are involved with teaching or working with schools or intending to, I would like to help think about how to give the children that you teach or will be teaching an imagination of place. You can find us at the River of Words website and we'd be happy to talk to you more about that program.

Lyne: Great. Thank you. Let's see, what else do we have here? Some of these questions seem to be perhaps following up on some of the things you talk about last night. One person writes in saying, "I'm sorry, I missed whether or not the caretaking father with his 1940s wink was actually your own father. If so, do you look at the situation as something tragic that compels you toward an ideal yet realistic representation of life?"

Hass: Well that's interesting. Well yeah, I mean I was—I have a friend who says, as a matter of policy, she always insists that the characters in her poems are fictional because,

of course, one way it's not true to say it's my father is you can't really capture other people in poems, but it's certainly based on the relationship between my parents as I saw it as a child. And tragic...

Lyne: Yeah, do you look at this situation as something tragic that compels you toward an ideal yet realistic representation of life.

Hass: An ideal yet real representation. That's a very interesting phrase.

Lyne: A nice juxtaposition there.

Hass: Yeah, I mean I guess the ideal and real part, I guess that's what tragedy is, is an up-close sense of the terrible friction between the ideal and the real. Or the real when the real is about loss, painfulness, failure—which is something we understand in relation to some idea of what isn't failure.

Lyne: Okay. Is the only role for a poet today within the Academy? I think this is interesting, I mean, in preparation for this I was reading a couple of interviews with you for before and there was one nice spot where you talked about it being sort of the best of times, the worst of times in terms of a kind of a mini-boom in interest in poetry over the last 25 years or so versus the way poetry has been kind of pushed aside by new forms, new technologies, things like that. So, that might go with this question: Is the role for a poet today within the Academy? What other roles can poets play today or what other locations can they occupy?

Hass: Well, that's interesting. I mean, location is interesting, that term. First of all no, the answer is not just in the academy. In San Francisco, more and more of the young poets are not going into the academy for the reason that there are not as many jobs as there used to be. So, in San Francisco, a lot of them are going into the high-tech business.

Before about 1950 there were not poets in the Academy. It was very rare. Robert Frost was an exception. There were a few, you know. William Carlos Williams was a pediatrician. Stevens made his living as a lawyer. Mary Anne Moore worked as a librarian and editor. T.S. Eliot worked as a banker and then as a janitor. People found jobs, and they will again.

And at the moment a lot of the jobs that the younger poets are in are high-tech, which means that the poetry scene has shifted to urban night schools that would be amenable to evening poetry readings and reading groups and people – there's a new poets' theatre of people getting together and putting on Dada plays; experimenting with video and poetry in new forms; poets reciting to bands or with two or three jazz musicians in a club called the Elbow Room, some old neighborhood bar in the mission district in San Francisco.

I think in the cities right now there's the beginning of a whole new wave of different forms of poetry that are going to take shape outside the academy.

Lyne: And with those forms being a lot more engaged with orality and performance, I mean, do you see that changing the nature of what's happening on the page, of what's happening in poetry magazines, what's...

Hass: It might. I think a lot of that change has already occurred. The relation between poetry and orality is ongoing.

Lyne: Sure.

Hass: Sappho couldn't read and write, you know. The early, the roman poets like Horace and Catullus thought of the poem as the performance of the poem. The written text they thought of as a script. The idea of poetry as a written form really emerges rather slowly and keeps emerging. Poets still call poems songs, they still use the metaphor of singing. Since the 50s at least, with the 'beat' generation, poetry performance is the whole thing of café poetry. Poetry readings on campuses are very common; that's made the form more oral.

I think that a lot of old poetry forms are based on prayer or they're based on folk song. There've been a great couple of generations of song writers, you know, from Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell and Van Morrison and to, you know, to the present. And there's been not really too much penetration between the two. Maybe there will be more.

Hip hop of course is the great explosion of oral poetry and it's had more influence back into literary poetry than literary poetry has had on it I think. So, anyway, this is always an ongoing crossbreeding.

Lyne: Again, I think this is following up on something from last night: "You touched on the subject of desire and I was curious how you first became aware of the significance of desire and how you use that in your poetry?" *laughter*

Hass: I think there's a poem by Rocha called The Poet at Five. He thinks the first play with imaginary companions is where you first become aware of it as the engine of life.

What is that?

Lyne: I'm not sure. Something—somebody writing on a board or something next door.

Hass: Oh, on the opposite side of the wall here. There's a clicking. That's writing with chalk on a blackboard. You can think of a—

Lyne: Education happening next door.

Hass: The secret writing of the secret message that's always going on on the other side of the wall of this particular version of reality.

Lyne: And I guess the second half of this question was how you use that—I guess meaning desire—in your poetry.

Hass: Well, you know, desire and imagination are almost the same thing. It's what feeling is in some way, or the imaginative part of feeling. As soon as you have a feeling, if you can give an image to it, a picture of it, that's what imagination is. In Buddhism, it's the root of all suffering. In the Western artistic tradition it's the origin of all beauty. So it's the location of the place where beauty and suffering do the dance of being human is right there.

Lyne: I know that you read some of the haiku stuff last night and—both the Milosz and the haiku stuff—and both of those are engaged with acts of translation; the one being sort of solo enterprise and the other being collaborative and that really interests me. I mean, could you talk a little bit about the differences between doing it by yourself and actually working it with the poet and translating it.

Hass: Well, when I'm working with this grand old poet—if you weren't there last night I've spent about 20 years with a very great Polish, one of the, most people think, one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, getting his poems from Polish into English, mostly working with him. When I started I knew no Polish at all and over the years I've learned some but not very much.

Lyne: And this just grew out of you guys working together?

Hass: Out of our being neighbors with this common love and he is very anxious of course to have his poems in English since he was living here in exile and wanted to have an audience. And he also wanted the poems to be pretty literal and the translator cares more about how it sounds in English than the translated person does. A pretty good English version is ok because it's just a version, the poem is in Polish.

So if I wanted to say, "Earth falls away from the place where I am standing," "Earth falls away from the place where I stand," "From where I stand, earth falls away," "From where I stand blah blah." You could do it a half a dozen ways and good enough for him is good enough. And once there's a poem, there's a place in his poem—do we have time for this story?

Lyne: Sure, please.

Hass: One of his most famous poems is called *The World*. It was written during WWII when everybody was writing protest poems. He wrote a poem about a farm family in Lithuania going about a normal day. It's twenty sequence poems, but very simple short poems, heart-breaking because that life doesn't exist. All this terrible stuff is going on and in the poem the kids are coming home from school and noticing the way the little bell of the jewel flower of the spring has grown over the little picket fence. Or they're walking up the stairs and the old doorknob is described. Or they go into the study where the dad shows them a picture of the beautiful city of Paris open to the world on all sides.

In that sequence of poems, the mother tells the kids a goodnight story and it's called the Parable of Poppy Seed and it's now one of the most famous poems in Polish literature. And it goes something like,

'When a seed of poppy is a tiny house, inside it are people and a cat. Outside in the yard a dog barks at the poppy seed moon. The Earth is a star and nothing else and this seed is a garden. The Earth is a seed and nothing else and that seed is a garden and that seed is a house and even if there were a hundred thousand, each would contain a house and a garden. All in a poppy head, all in a poppy seed. The poppy plants grow very tall and when the children run under them they sway back and forth.'

And the whole thing is done almost in nursery rhyme sound. And it's heart-breaking. So I think the version I did was something like,

'The Earth is a seed'—no wait, let me start again.

'On a seed of poppy is a tiny house.
Inside it are people, a cat and a mouse.
Outside in the yard a dog barks at the moon,
Then in his one world he sleeps until noon.

The Earth is a seed and nothing more
And that seeds a garden and that seeds a star
And even if there were one hundred thousand
Each would contain a house and a garden.

All in a poppy head, they grow taller than hay.
The children run through and the poppy plants sway.
Then in the night when the moon is aloft
You hear the dogs barking, first loud and then soft.'

So I thought, 'I nailed it.' I showed it to him and he says, 'Mouse? There is no mouse in my poem!' And I thought ok, and I said, 'Well, I needed a rhyme. You want it to rhyme.' And so, back to the drawing board.

So if you have the poet leaning over your shoulder you're kind of stuck. Whereas Basho has been dead for 200 years.

Lyne: Nobody looking over your shoulder there. When you talk about the long poem that Milosz wrote during the war and how it's about ordinary life, I remember again reading an interview with you where you said, you talked about in the 60s being engaged in a lot of sort of grassroots, on-the-ground political stuff. And if I'm remembering this right, you talked about feeling as though you had to make a choice at that moment, sort of between the life you'd chosen and a more, I think in the interview you said something about taking up all your free time and nights doing political work. Could you just talk a little bit about that choice and how you see it now and, I mean it seems to parallel the

Milosz thing, I mean that there's the poem that he was writing and then there was the war happening over here.

Hass: That's interesting. Time management is a ___ in life and there are periods in it when it demands certain things of you. When you have a small child, a one-year-old as you do, you know, then the work to do is that. One of my heroes of the 60s, a writer who was enormously influential among us in those years, a man named Paul Goodman who wrote a book about universities called The Community of Scholars, which was the gospel of everybody in the years of the free speech movement and the time of reform at the universities. He was this sort of communitarian, anarchist thinker I guess.

And I met him during that time and I remember him saying, "The way to do politics is to do a job that you love and when stuff keeps you from doing it well, change that." That you didn't need to go to South Africa and organize the poor. You needed to, you know, go where your appetites took you and when stuff gets in the way, you know, if the aim of the thing is to, you know, make the best product and you can't make the best product or provide the best service and you can't provide the best service or if there are things about the grocery store that means you're delivering unhealthy, stupid stuff to people, change that. That's politics.

So, I took that to be my permission to, what I wanted to do was be a writer and when I finished graduate school I had a chance to take a job in Chicago doing political work for a community organizing thing and I didn't do it. I wanted to have a family. I wanted to write. So, there's this path not taken thing. Then later, partly because of the poet laureate thing, I found my way coming back into it really after my kids were grown I had the time to do it. So it's sort of this sadhu phase of life. Not yours, your job right now is to feed that one year old.

Lyne: Before you got here, I think somebody in the office here told me that you're working now or doing a gig at the Iowa workshops?

Hass: Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Lyne: Could you talk a little bit about how you see creative writing education and MFA programs, sort of graduate creative writing education? What's the state of that for you these days?

Hass: I think this grew up—it wasn't around when I was, there were one or two maybe, but it was not an option when I graduated from college in 1963. There were two or three in the country. Now, almost every place including western Washington, which has not an MFA program but an MA program, has a graduate program in creative writing. And about 80% of them pay stipends to young writers graduated from college to mostly they do TA-ing, they teach freshman English or some other beginning creative writing themselves and they take creative writing courses. It gives you a chance for two years after college before you figure out what kind of job you're going to have to give a shot to writing.

So, the MFA programs have become the artist garrets of the 21st century, I think, or at least as long as the Universities are still willing to support them. It's a great thing that if you want to write after you're out of school, you want to give it a shot, you can go do that. There are disadvantages to doing that but compared to what?

Lyne: Right.

Hass: You know, compared to working in a video store and going home tired and not feeling like writing. This is a way you can be around other writers, get some more instruction, get some more education. So I'm all for it.

Lyne: And do you see any... you know Iowa's famous for the writing workshops. Is that what you mostly teach at Berkeley, is the creative writing courses?

Hass: No I do a mix. I teach literature courses and some creative writing and I also do a class with a friend of mine who is a plant pathologist and a forest ecologist who teaches an introductory course in the environmental science program called, it's the introductory environmental science course, and he approached me and we now teach a class for freshmen called The Earth and How to Think About It.

Lyne: Wow.

Hass: Which is about environmental science and about literature.

Lyne: I remember, again, reading maybe in a bio or something of yours, and so if this is inflated or wrong let me know. It emphasized the formative influence, especially in California there, of beat poetry on your decision to—I think he quoted you as saying, “I thought I was going to be a novelist, an essayist and then discovered beat poets.”

Hass: No I don't think that's quite accurate. I always wanted to be a writer and the beats being around, I mean the main thing about it was that it showed that there were people there who were doing it, that I didn't know how you'd get there. But it was different say then growing up in a factory town in Massachusetts.

Lyne: And this was where, in San Francisco?

Hass: Yeah, San Francisco. A suburb outside of San Francisco, but I mean, there are parts of the country where the idea that it's hard even to find a way to a bookstore, let alone to a place where you'd see people live the life that, you know, might have to do with art or the arts. Any university town offers most of that now. But that wasn't true in the 1950s. So in that way, the beats were an excitement.

The main thing that it was Al Ginsberg, who was from New Jersey, writing a kind of wild poetry: ‘I've seen the best minds of my generation starving, hysterical, naked; Mohammed and the angels staggering on; tenement rules illuminated...’ you know,

‘Negro hipsters dragging themselves through the angry dawn looking for a fix.’ It was about drug taking and wildness and craziness and ashcans and dollars and it meant nothing to me. It came out of another world. I just knew that there was energy there and that meant a lot. But it was really later, partly through Gary Schneider who is a poet of the Northwest, that I began to hear of the beats something that connected to my own life.

But poetry in general in those years was an enormous excitement to me not only—Theodore Roethke was then teaching at the University of Washington I guess—I came across his writing. Robert Lowell’s poetry was vicious. Poetry of the beast but also New York’s group of poets around the abstract expressions painters in New York called the, later can be called, the New York Poets School. There was a ton of interesting work being done in American poetry in the late 50s and early 60s and I started reading it and suddenly found that I was just more interested in reading poetry than in anything else and was writing it with some excitement.

Lyne: This is maybe a selfish question because I’m about to teach Frank O’Hara. What do you think of Frank O’Hara’s work? I mean, you mentioned him...

Hass: Oh, I love his work.

Lyne: Ok, maybe could you talk about who you see as some of the most interesting, exciting, younger poets working today?

Hass: Yeah, well it depends on anybody younger than me? Poets in their 40s are so... Two who interest me a lot are a southern poet named Forrest Gander who has written a book called Science and Steepleflower, which is post-modern sort of post-MTV generation work that uses a lot of collage and mixes—among the young poets that tends to be one thing that’s going on is mixing stuff in new ways. And it’s in the poetry of my generation, after all the masks in TS Eliot and Yates and so on, a personal and autobiographical poetry seemed like a breakthrough to some kind of freshness. I think the younger poets are a little tired of that.

Lyne: And do you see that maybe as reaching back to a kind of more modernist thing, some kind of, you know, collage, something more like Ezra Pound or Patterson or...

Hass: I think that they’re, yes and no. I mean I think they are most interested maybe in reaching back to Gertrude Stein. But yes, to some extent. I mean I don’t modernist techniques ever went away, but they’re interested in intensifying them.

Lyne: Anybody else? I mean, that students should go read? Because so much of my teaching of 20th century American poetry probably ends with your generation. So it’s the kind of poems that we’re not going to be assigning to them in classes.

Hass: Yeah, a poet named Michael Palmer, who is of my generation. Younger poets, one of the name Carol Snow, a book called For; Donald Revell who’s writing; all of this. A lot of the interesting new poetry is difficult poetry or at least it’s not emotionally,

immediately accessible. My wife, Brenda Hillman, her newest book which is about—partly take us as metaphors—the geology of the pacific coast, plus stuff from rock and roll, plus stuff from X-Files, Star Wars, plus Gnosticism and Feminism and kind of rattles it all into a book called Cascadia.

I don't know if you teach Dorie Graham. Her work seems to be quite remarkable. There's a young, black poet named Thomas Sayers Ellis who I think is really exciting.

Lyne: I know you read from the haiku translations last night. How long have you been engaged with that project?

Hass: Well I've been actually well over it, but I started—I did a lot of that work in the 70s and then I just let it sit. But I would quote them all the time to people and then my publisher said—I'd done kind of a study—and my publisher said, 'We should do this as a book.' And I said, 'I don't really want to do that. I don't know Japanese well enough, it's an amateur thing. I would, you know, have to go back and study.' And he sort of kept pressuring me, so I thought okay.

Then I went back and I read all the criticism that I could, in English, and then I found out all sort of interesting stuff so I did quite long notes on the poems in the early 80s and I guess I finished that book in '86 or so. I haven't really done any more work with haikus since then.

Lyne: So when you were doing that did, especially when you say you went and read all that, did you see yourself as in a tradition of an American engagement with haiku. I'm thinking specifically of like Ezra Pound, experiments with haikus.

Hass: Yeah, I did. I mean I was thinking more actually of West Coast poets. A lot of the poets who were at the University of Washington working with Roethke had an interest in classical Chinese poetry. Caroline Kaiser did wonderful poems, who ended up teaching at Portland. Someone named Kenneth Hanson did Chinese translations. Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac were interested in translation from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry. Kenneth Rexroth, who was a San Francisco poet; Sam Hamill in Port Townsend; there's a strong West Coast tradition of interest in classical Chinese and Japanese poetry. And I think it's because it was a poetry that was close to the natural world, relied a lot on image. There was a West Coast interest in Buddhism. It was that interest in the air, culturally, that led me to Zazen and to the study of Buddhism. And so yeah, I thought of it as that I was dutifully inside a tradition.

Lyne: What are you doing now? What are you working on recently?

Hass: Well, at the moment I'm just trying to write poems. I've written some essays on American landscape photographers and contemporary and some of the 19th century photographers. Although there are a group of younger photographers in this sort of post Ansel Adams generation who did a show called New West that try to do not the sort of pictorial, picturesque, sublime thing, but of what our towns actually look like. You

know, it would be interesting to not do postcard Bellingham, but to do what Bellingham really looks like or the edges of LA. And they got very interested in the work of a lot of the photographers who were hired by the geographical survey in the 19th century. Timothy O'Flanagan was one of their others. So I've gotten, through the younger photographers, I've gotten interested in thinking about this whole tradition, how we see our worlds. So I've been working on that a little, probably going to put together a little book of essays, of poetry and photography and politics.

Lyne: What kind of civic or political questions have you been writing about?

Hass: I've been trying not to. I've been trying to just get back to...

Lyne: Get over the hangover of being Poet Laureate?

Hass: Yeah, exactly.

Lyne: Well, okay, I think we're—oh, I'm sorry. There are more questions that have come in: I listened to you at last night's performance and started to wonder how many languages do you know?

Hass: *laughter* One. I know English pretty well. I had some Latin—I had four years of Latin in high school and I had two years of German and one semester of Russian and one semester of Greek. Terrible ways to start a language and I didn't do any more in college, but for various reasons that was the case. So I didn't really learn any of those languages. Then I had to, in graduate school, I had to pass an exam showing that I had acceptable reading knowledge of French and the guy who taught the summer course I took said to a group of us, 'If you want to really learn French, I must tell you, get out. Leave here right now. You won't learn it—in fact it will make it difficult for you to ever learn it.' And we stayed because we had to pass this test. I don't know if you had to—

Lyne: Yeah, sure, we had to.

Hass: So I never really mastered another language, but when I would get interested in a poet I studied the language a bit so that I could study the poet.

Lyne: We have another one here: I'm particularly interested in the silences and in your composing process. Could you say something about how you decide what to leave out of your poetry?

Hass: Such an interesting question. The how is instinct. Someone told me once about a writer, a novelist, in California named Oakley Hall. I was talking about an essay I was writing at the time about rivers and dams and he said he had one principle in doing research: always to not use at least one thing that you know. And I asked how you pick and he said it doesn't matter, but always leave something out. And I think in general with a piece of writing, it's great advice to always look back and make yourself take

something out so that there's a feeling of something in reserve. For some reason it gives a work that quality of silence.

A dramatic example of that would be the story I heard Monet, that when a neighbor's son came and spent the evening with them and describe what it was like in the trenches in WWI—the bodies and the blood and the mud and the shit—he listened that evening and when down the next morning and started the water lily paintings. The reason those things are so beautiful and not wallpaper, I think not merely decorative, is that their inception was tragedy and horror but he never refers to it.

Lyne: Wow. Well, I guess we just have a few minutes left here. Is there anything you'd like to read for us or leave our students with before we go?

Hass: I could read a poem. It's spring and so maybe this, which is about early spring in Iowa City, might be a place to end. I grew up on the west coast, I'd never been to the mid west to see spring come on out of winter, so I tried to do something about just the teeming life of that place and the amazement of it. So, here's what it's like about now in Iowa City.

This morning a cat—bright orange—pawing at the one patch of new grass in the sand-and tanbark-colored leaves.

And last night the sapphire of the raccoon's eyes in the beam of the flashlight.
He was climbing a tree beside the house, trying to get onto the porch, I think, for a wad of oatmeal
Simmered in cider from the bottom of the pan we'd left out for the birds.

And earlier a burnished, somewhat dazed woodchuck, his coat gleaming with spring,
Loping toward his burrow in the roots of a tree among the drying winter's litter
Of old leaves on the floor of the woods, when I went out to get the *New York Times*.

And male cardinals whistling back and forth—sireeep, sreeep, sreeep—
Sets of three sweet full notes, weaving into and out of each other like the triplet rhymes in medieval poetry,
And the higher, purer notes of the tufted titmice among them,
High in the trees where they were catching what they could of the early sun.

And a doe and two yearlings, picking their way along the worrying path they'd made
through the gully, their coats the color of the forest floor,
Stopped just at the roots of the great chestnut where the woodchuck's burrow was,
Froze, and the doe looked back over her shoulder at me for a long moment, and leapt forward,
Her young following, and bounded with that almost mincing precision in the landing of each hoof
Up the gully, over it, and out of sight. So that I remembered

Dreaming last night that a deer walked into the house while I was writing at the kitchen table,
Came in the glass door from the garden, looked at me with a stilled defiant terror, like a thing with no choices,
And, neck bobbing in that fragile-seeming, almost mechanical mix of arrest and liquid motion, came to the table
And snatched a slice of apple, and stood, and then quietened, and to my surprise did not leave again.

And those little captains, the chickadees, swift to the feeder and swift away.

And the squirrels with their smoke-plume tails trailing digging in the leaves to bury or find buried—
I'm told they don't remember where they put things, that it's an activity of incessant discovery—
Nuts, tree-fall proteins, whatever they forage from around the house of our leavings,

And the flameheaded woodpecker at the suet with his black-and-white ladderback elegant fierceness—
They take sunflower seeds and stash them in the rough ridges of the tree's bark
Where the beaks of the smoke-and-steel blue nuthatches can't quite get at them—
Though the nuthatches sometimes seem to get them as they con the trees methodically for spiders' eggs or some other overwintering insect's intricately packages lump of futurity
Got from its body before the cold came on.

And the little bat in the kitchen lightwell—
When I climbed on a chair to remove the sheet of wimpled plastic and let it loose,
It flew straight into my face and I toppled to the floor, chair under me,
And it flared down the hall and did what seemed a frantic reconnoiter of the windowed, high-walled living room.
And lit on a brass firelog where it looked like a brown and ash grey teenaged suede glove with Mephistophelean dreams,
And then, spurt of black sperm, up, out the window, and into the twilight woods.

All this life going on about my life, or living a life about all this life going on,
Being a creature, whatever my drama of the moment, at the edge of the raccoon's world—
He froze in my flashlight beam and looked down, no affect, just looked,
The ringtail curled and flared to make him look bigger and not to be messed with—
I was thinking he couldn't know how charming his comic-book robber's mask was to me,
That his experience of his being and mine of his and his of mine were things entirely apart,
Though there were between us, probably, energies of shrewd and respectful tact, based on curiosity and fear—
I knew about his talons whatever he knew about me—
And as for my experience of myself, it comes and goes, I'm not sure it's any one thing, as my experience of these creatures is not,

And I know I am often too far from it or too near, glad to be rid of it which is why it was
such a happiness,
The bright orange of the cat, and the first pool of green grass-leaves in early April, and the
birdsong—that orange and that green not colors you'd set next to one another in the
human scheme.

And the crows' calls, even before you open your eyes, at sunup.