

Going to the Mailbox An Interview With Robert Bly

By Ray González

Someday, the record will show that the four giants of 20th-century poetry in the U.S. were Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Bly. Without Bly, modern American poetry would be unrecognizable in its current form. Without his poems, his translations, and his devotion to poetry, American literature would have taken a different turn in its rich and influential history. These conclusions are based on the impact his poetry has had for more than 40 years and the influence this writer has left on poets, the publishing community, and general readers. It comes from observing one of the most committed lives of poetry any American artist has experienced in our culture. Writing legendary early books such as *Silence in the Snowy Fields* and *The Light Around the Body*, and being one of the first to introduce the work of Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo to English readers, Bly has always been at the forefront of major changes in our literary character. His criticism of the status quo in the poetry community, his work with *American Writers Against the Vietnam War*, and the way he challenged men and women to debate gender issues in large public gatherings have made him vulnerable to criticism, but given him the energy to make poetry the central driving force for generations of people all over the world. Poets who love his work and poets who dislike what he has done have no choice but to admit that his so-called style of “the deep image” poem may become the most enduring form of poetic expression in the English language. Too many poets swear by it, and too many of them spend their lives making sure their work stays away from it. This is great power in the most linguistic and spiritual sense—a mastery and dominance few writers could ever imagine. Bly has worked in the light and darkness of that power to create a poetry that is identifiable by the character of its creator. It is both a lethal and a healing poetry that turns human experience into an emotional knot of understanding while it opens the mysteries of our animal journeys. In other words, a Bly poem is the sound and text of our past, our present, and the uncharted vision of tomorrow. To have this kind of artist among us is a gift. It is also a signal that the long road of the American story, with its triumphs and often self-imposed tragedies, could not be told without the rebellious and independent soul of a man like Robert Bly.

In early December 2001, there was a public celebration of Bly’s 75th birthday. Poets and friends participated in a seven-hour marathon reading at The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis to pay tribute to his work and his life. A few weeks after the party, this interview was conducted at Bly’s home. A month later, *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars*, his most

recent book, received the 2002 Minnesota Book Award for Poetry.

The Bloomsbury Review: *You celebrated your 75th birthday with a huge literary gathering. Donald Hall, Li-Young Lee, and other poets read poems and honored you. At this point in your life, what does it mean to have so many people acknowledge how significant your work has been to them?*

Robert Bly: It’s wonderful. I’ve been working all my life to get to that place. We all like to be praised, but I was touched by the sense of community that day. In Minneapolis, the liter-

ary community has gotten larger and more warm-hearted. It was my birthday, but also a birthday for the writing community. Talking Volumes, a regional book club in the Twin Cities that encourages people to all read the same book, selected *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars* this year. It is the first book of poetry in their program. I felt heartened by that. Decades ago, when James Wright and I started here, there was no community and no support. We were alone as poets. I remember Jim coming out to the farm—this must have been the late 1950s—and telling me he was depressed because he went to a University of Minnesota English department party the night before. I asked him what hap-

pened and he answered, “I said something good about Whitman to a professor and he was too shocked to answer, so his wife did. She got in my face and said, ‘Show me one good line by Whitman, just one!’” This kind of stuff drove poets to stick together. All we had was each other.

TBR: *Donald Hall’s presence at the tribute reminded me that your generation of poets dominated American poetry for at least 50 years. Philip Levine, Louis Simpson, John Ashbery, Galway Kinnell, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, the late Denise Levertov, everybody is in their 70s. Do you think American poetry will ever see such an influential group of poets again?*

RB: I’ve been brooding about that. I started a poem, which isn’t finished, about 1958, when we thought our poetry would bless everyone. And we were right. When I mention this to some of these poets, they remember there was something we knew in our hearts back then. We were young, but we knew there was something important happening with poetry. There was a point when we found Chinese poetry, which was such a blessing; then Whitman came back. Our generation of poets, wanting to reach out to so many, had something to do with World War II and its after-effects on our society. Many of us turned to poetry. Another friend recently recalled the smaller sense of community where poets kept in touch and had friends, but were pretty much alone. He said, “What a thrill it was for us to go to the mailbox and there would be another issue of *Kayak*.” It was a blessing, but how could the death of millions of people in a war lead us to turn to poetry for that special blessing?

Galway Kinnell’s 75th birthday party was held last week in

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New York. I gave a talk and reflected on how Galway, Donald, Jim, and I would write long letters to each other about our poems. We were always typing and typing. The more we typed, the better we felt. The letters were our way of reaching out. There was a wonderful generosity in Galway's heart and in the others'. At the talk to honor him, I said it had something to do with World War II, as if the dead wanted poets to do a good job. I don't know if younger poets are doing that anymore—finding how poetry among friends and groups is, above all else, a blessing. I asked if younger poets are writing letters to one another, if human contact and sharing of poems bring them closer. Someone at Galway's celebration jumped up and yelled, "No! When people I know get an e-mail from someone, they erase it!"

TBR: *Poets have forgotten the art of letter writing.*

RB: That's right, and the young poets at Galway's gathering felt very sad over this. You can't write poetry by yourself. If you do, you will make the same human mistakes you are writing about in the poems. You need someone to tell you, "Wait a minute. The world is out there and you have to go to it." Donald and I still exchange letters once or twice a week. We talk in them the same way we always have. I will send him a poem, and he will answer, "Oh, God! You can't say 'grief at dawn.'" My line was "Our parents' faces had so much grief at dawn." Donald writes, "Grief at dawn? What does that mean? Make it clear! Did people cry right before sunrise or what? What the hell is that?" He also says not to capitalize some noun you haven't figured out like "The Great Ones," instead of St. Francis and St. Cecilia. He says if you try to keep the word alive by capitalizing it, you've already let it commit suicide. We can share in letters something special and close between old poet friends, a part of the generation we are talking about. Robert Creeley said when we started writing in the late forties, the level of American literature was very high. We could see Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor,

Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. My God! How could we keep up the standards? You can see a great difference between our generation coming back from World War II and those who came back or emerged after Vietnam. They were coming out of a history of lies.

TBR: *Despite being a key individual in that generation, you have done a great deal of your work alone. Though you have many old friends in the literary community, I have always sensed that you have needed a great deal of solitude. Is this true?*

RB: Yes. Even though I've done hundreds of readings and appearances, I have always needed to be alone and, lately, I'm getting more time to myself. I've been spending a great deal of time up in Moose Lake, sometimes four days a week, then down to Minneapolis to see friends or work on things. It's more solitude than I've had since I was probably 22 years old. I've cut back on doing so many events, and it is marvelous to have this time.

TBR: *As I prepared to read something at your birthday celebration and reread many of your books, I felt your newer work in Morning Poems and The Night Abraham Called to the Stars seemed less angry than your work in the past. The poems don't seem to express as much fury as those in Sleepers Joining Hands or, of course, The Light Around the Body. What has happened to the anger in your poems?*

RB: The anger has lessened, and I am grateful for that. Many from our generation were leftists, and we took part in demonstrations against the Vietnam War. I still feel we did the right thing in responding, but sometimes the

anger you express in your poems has to do more with disappointment about your own life. This topic is difficult. I don't know how to really talk about it. In the poems of *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars*, I'm still trying to write about historical events and disasters that have happened to the human race. It is our duty to write about disasters, but I have tried to

SELECTED BOOKS BY ROBERT BLY

Anthologies & Edited Books

- The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford** (*HarperPerennial*, 1994)
Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations (*Beacon Press*, 1975)
The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: Poems for Men With James Hillman & Michael Meade (*HarperPerennial*, 1993)
The Soul Is Here for Its Own Joy: Sacred Poems From Many Cultures (*Ecco Press*, 1995)

Poetry

- Eating the Honey of Words: New and Selected Poems** (*HarperCollins*, 1999)
Jumping Out of Bed: Poems (*Barre Publications*, 1973)
The Light Around the Body: Poems (*Harper & Row*, 1967)
Loving a Woman in Two Worlds (*Dial Press*, 1985)
The Man in the Black Coat Turns: Poems (*Dial Press*, 1981)
Morning Poems (*HarperCollins*, 1997)
Old Man Rubbing His Eyes: Poems (*Unicorn Press*, 1975)
Selected Poems (*Harper & Row*, 1986)
Sleepers Joining Hands (*Harper & Row*, 1973)
What Have I Ever Lost by Dying?: Collected Prose Poems (*HarperCollins*, 1992)

Prose & Interviews

- A Little Book on the Human Shadow** With William Booth (*Harper & Row*, 1988)
Iron John: A Book About Men (*Addison-Wesley*, 1990)
The Maiden King: The Reunion of Masculine and Feminine With Marion Woodman (*Henry Holt*, 1998)
Remembering James Wright (*Ally Press*, 1991)
The Sibling Society (*Addison-Wesley*, 1996)
Talking All Morning (*University of Michigan*, 1980)

Translations

- The Half-Finished Heaven: The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer** (*Graywolf Press*, 2001)
Hunger by Knut Hamsun (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*, 1967)
The Kabir Book: Forty-four of the Ecstatic Poems of Kabir (*Beacon Press*, 1977)
The Lightning Should Have Fallen on Ghalib: Selected Poems of Ghalib With Sunil Dutta (*Ecco Press*, 1999)
Lorca and Jimenez: Selected Poems (*Beacon Press*, 1973)
Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems With John Knoepfle & James Wright (*Beacon Press*, 1971)

For a complete list of Mr. Bly's books, please see:
<http://www.robertbly.com>; or
<http://www.cla.sc.edu/ENGL/LitCheck/Bly.htm>

talk about it as if I participated in those disasters, too, not just blaming other people. If I do a poem like that well, instead of only blaming the world with its wars, then you can see I am also responsible. The older I get, the more I realize how much greed I have. Perhaps, this is the difference between the poems in *The Light Around the Body* and the ones in *Abraham*. I now see my part in it. And that is hard, very hard. In fact, the whole *Abraham* book is about the greedy soul. “The Five Inns” says, “I live very close to my greedy soul./When I see a book written two thousand years/Ago, I check to see if my name is mentioned.”

TBR: *You are one of the few writers who have spoken harshly against the Bush administration and its response to September 11, calling the New York attack “the first sacking of Rome.” This has brought silence from some of your recent audiences, but it reminds me of your long poem, “The Teeth Mother Naked at Last.” I have found four versions of the poem: in the original City Lights edition, in Sleepers Joining Hands, in your first Selected Poems, and recently in Eating the Honey of Words. Though it might fit the times, you rarely read it in public anymore, but you keep tinkering with it on the page. It’s like you can’t leave it alone. What does this poem mean to you more than three decades after its publication?*

RB: I still like the poem, and I read it once in a while. If there are a lot of young people in the audience, most of them will not understand what was going on at the time of the Vietnam War. Despite September 11, they do not know the tremendous amount of grief we were suffering. Sometimes I will speak at a university and a faculty member, trying to shame me, may ask me how I feel now about my Vietnam poems. I answer, “I’m sorry I didn’t write more of them.” With shocked expression, he may ask, “Why didn’t you?” Well, we didn’t believe it would go on for so long. We never planned for more poems because we couldn’t accept that something so vile would go on for years, but it did. A great deal of “The Teeth Mother Naked at Last” was written spontaneously on stage during those times. I would take newspaper articles and read a bit on stage, composing lines to fit the horrible news. I would check the tape of the reading and in that way find out what I had said. That’s the old way of doing a poem—right smack in the middle of things—and you are living it and doing poetry at the same instant. Sharing it with an audience, the give and take between the poet and the audience would bring things that would never arrive if you were just sitting down composing it alone. “The Teeth Mother Naked at Last” is the only poem I have ever created with that ancient relationship between poet and audience. The dark times of the Vietnam War gave us that bond, the union only poetry could give us. The poet and the people were feeling the same thing at once, at that moment, and the long poem came to us. Maybe that is why I keep working on it. There is something not quite settled in it, and it may never get settled! Toward the end of the poem there are the lines,

*Now the whole nation starts to whirl,
The end of the Republic breaks off,
Europe comes to take revenge,*

*The mad beast covered with European hair rushes
through the mesa bushes in Mendocino County.
Pigs rush toward the cliff.
The waters underneath part: in one ocean luminous
globes float up (in them hairy and ecstatic men);
In the other ocean—the Teeth Mother, naked at last!*

Lawrence Ferlinghetti and I were giving a reading in California, and I had finished those lines the night before. We were driving to San Francisco, and I remembered most of the lines and spoke them to him in the car. Lawrence looked at me and said, “You know, you really are insane!”

Back in the sixties, it was a matter of pride to steal books from bookstores. City Lights would get ransacked by shoplifters because Lawrence carried great books no one else did. For years, he refused to put detectors in or hire policemen to watch people. Once, I asked him why not, and he said he would rather go out and earn the money back by doing readings than put policemen in a bookstore. I think one year he had to earn \$10,000 to replace the stolen books. He is a very generous man.

TBR: *In your first Selected Poems, there is a brief essay about the form of “The Teeth Mother Naked at Last.” You describe it as having lines that embody power in a direct way. You say you based its form on the Smart-Blake-Whitman line, wanting, like those poets, a line that would throw or catapult itself into the outer world. Your newer poems in The Night Abraham Called to the Stars are in the ghazal form. What has happened to the Smart-Blake-Whitman line in your work?*

RB: It’s still in the poems, and I let it be there. I had forgotten that phrase about the line throwing itself out into the world. Did I say that? I like it. That’s not bad! The Whitman line always shot out into the world. Whoa! Amazing! Now, I’m more interested in the line that goes out, but curves back into itself as part of its historical consciousness. In the ghazal form, there are no long lines. A stanza is 36 syllables. The aim of the whole ghazal form is to come inward. Be aware of the world, but come inside. Don’t go in so far that you don’t notice the world. In the original Arabic form, there were two lines of 18 syllables each. In the Arabic ghazal, you had to go into the world and come back in those 36 syllables. In English, I chose to do three lines of 12 syllables, because our lines get problematic after 12 or 14 syllables.

But I still love Whitman and the long line where every line calls for the next line, and he just lets them come, more and more, toward some of our greatest, most influential poetry. The ghazal says, “after 36 syllables, it is over!” In the last stanza of a Hafiz ghazal, the poet always comes back to himself. “Hafiz” means someone who has memorized the Koran, and apparently he made a living doing that. He can talk about the world in the ghazal, and, at the end, he says, “Hafiz! What are you talking about?” “The Sufis have settled for a fantasy, and Hafiz/is no different. How far out of reach/our souls are, and how weak our wills are.” In poetry of the West, it is seldom that the poet asks himself or herself if anything has been accomplished in the poems.

TBR: *In another essay in the first Selected Poems, you said*

that after the Vietnam War, you wanted to return “to privacy rather than to go on judging, useful as judgment is.” Do books like *Meditations on the Insatiable Soul*, *Morning Poems*, and *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars* represent a period of privacy in your poetry?

RB: Yes, they do. During the writing of the poems in *Meditations on the Insatiable Soul*, I was meeting with various men’s groups. This led to a number of poems about my relationship with my father and a direction to a more private kind of writing. The workshops with men brought out more personal issues and less political things. Since then, I’ve stopped doing so many of those conferences with either women or men, and I’m glad about that.

TBR: An earlier book, *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, is one of your darkest, most sobering books. In *Selected Poems*, you describe how you “fished in male waters” for the work in *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*. You also said you wanted to “please the old sober and spontaneous ancestor males” with that book. Were those poems a precursor for what you accomplished later with *Iron John* and your intense work with men’s groups?

RB: All that work represents years of writing those kinds of poems, working on *Iron John* and the men’s groups. During that time, many of my friends would ask me, “What are you doing working with men?” I would ask them, “What am I supposed to be doing?” They would tell me I should be working on literature. I didn’t always know what to say to that. My decision to be so involved with the men had to do with my relationship with my father, and it required talking about it to many people. Then it would come out in poems. It was the same kind of poetic blessing as the earlier political poems about war. I had to go into sorrows in my life I did not want to look at. One time I was talking to a group of men about fathers who never spoke or said anything to their sons. I told them, “When you see your father, do not hesitate to tell him that you love him. No matter what, you must tell him that, but don’t expect you are going to get anything in return. He may never say anything back to you.” One man in the group went to visit his father when he was dying and told him that he loved him. Then, he said, “Do you love me?” The father said, “Of course I love you, but men are not supposed to talk that way,” and he died. I visited another group in California, and we discussed this. They asked me what I had done in my case. I told them I went to see my father at the hospital the other day. There must have been about 30 of them in the group. They stood up, formed a circle, and put their arms around me, and said, “Robert, you are never going to get it.” I wept for 15 minutes. This is what is wonderful about teaching beyond the poem. I teach these men something and they teach me the same thing in return.

TBR: The amazing success of *Iron John* and the men’s movement has quieted down in recent years. Many people who responded to *Iron John* and the movement did not know your long career as a poet and how you worked for decades to create a larger audience for poetry. Was your poetic side ever resentful of that side of you that got so much attention by focusing on male issues?

RB: No, I don’t think so. I read a lot of poetry to the men.

A great deal of the work with men was centered around poetry. James Hillman was amazed when we would go into a group of 100 men who had not read a line of poetry since high school, read them some Yeats, and they would understand every line. The years of working with men gave me more confidence in how poetry can be received by people. Men and women I presented poetry to did not know how to take it off the page and give it a human voice. By reading so much of it aloud in these groups, poetry came to life and these people who were not educated in poetry or never wrote it found a way to put a human voice to it by hearing it in public. It no longer belonged to the silent page. The transformation was astounding, as I saw hundreds of men and women understand and accept poetry as part of what we were doing in these groups. Last night I gave a reading here in Moose Lake to townspeople. I have been giving them a Valentine’s Day reading for years. These are ordinary men and women. I read them many things, including Gerard Manley Hopkins, and they understood everything. So, my poetic side and the part of me that needed to work with these groups is one and the same.

TBR: *Eating the Honey of Words: New and Selected Poems* came out in 1999. It doesn’t contain the short essays many people found captivating in the first *Selected Poems*. Why did you choose to leave them out?

RB: Some people found them captivating. Other readers wrote me long letters scolding me for explaining every period of my writing life. They said they don’t want to be told about a poem in a book of poetry. They said, “Shut up!” In the new version, I shut up.

TBR: Your earlier books are represented by different poems in *Eating the Honey of Words* and the first *Selected Poems*. These volumes are quite different from one another. How did you choose the poems for *Eating the Honey of Words*, and what happens to a poet when deciding what to include from decades of writing?

RB: I would go hide in Moose Lake, spread out all the poems, and see which ones I still loved. This process is not very reliable. One day you love a poem, and the next day you don’t. I’m not satisfied with the selections in *Eating the Honey of Words*. I’m going to do a third version of selected poems! Some of my best poems got left out of *Eating the Honey of Words*, and some of my bad ones may have wound up in there. This process of judging is very strange and not much fun.

TBR: Many poems in *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars* give a sense of someone proclaiming his defiance, as if you have reached a fierce wisdom and you are challenging the world to come after it. You know you have an enormous audience for your work. When you write, does the weight of so many loyal readers ever affect what you wind up doing in a new poem?

RB: No! And I don’t know how loyal they are. How come they don’t buy more of my books? Surprising as it may sound, even I don’t sell many copies of a book of poems. I understand what you mean about the public weight on your shoulders because many, many people really watch what I do. It is an honor to have American readers love your work because it says something to their hearts, unlike many European countries

where poets are respected more for being members of “high culture.” As for the fierce wisdom in *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars*, many of the poems challenge people to pay attention and do something. I deliberately put in references to historical figures like Newton, Flaubert, and Abraham because, from one point of view, many of these people are like walnuts hidden in the cake. “Hannibal and Robespierre” says, “I hope you’ve stopped saying that people/Are bad and animals good .../ Every old frog is a son of Robespierre.” The danger with deconstruction today is that young people will grow up with no sense of history. At one time, everyone knew something about the Romans and the Greeks. There are people who don’t know anything about the 16th and 17th centuries. I used historical figures to madden people, get them thinking and moving. I was also trying to say, “There is something good here totally separate from my poems. Go find it.”

TBR: You recently published *The Half-Finished Heaven: The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer, a Swedish poet you have translated for many years. In the introduction, you say he addresses issues in his poems that are older than life experiences. You call them “before-birth intensities.” I find this phrase, “before-birth intensities,” a good way to describe Morning Poems, The Night Abraham Called to the Stars, and the translations.*

RB: Yes, before-birth intensities. Tranströmer’s work is intense beyond the normal use of language. One of his oldest poems, “Out in the Open,” is about the Vietnam War, where an airplane is sweeping low over a field and there is a man picking at something on the ground. He mentions that the plane is shaped like a cross and its shadow passes over the man. Tranströmer says, “For a fraction of a second, [the man in the field] is right in the center of the cross.” Tranströmer writes later in the same poem: “I have seen the cross hanging in the cool church vaults/At times it resembles a split-second snapshot of something moving at tremendous speed.”

In *The Sibling Society*, I talk about examples like this and describe what Tranströmer is doing as something vertical in a poem versus horizontal, because the vertical has disappeared in American poetry. There are too many poems where the speaker goes to the laundry or sees a boy and a dog down the street and goes home. There are too many horizontal details in American poems, and that is the curse of American poetry. It doesn’t go deeper, as Tranströmer does. It doesn’t trust the vertical line where you really get down to the truth of what you are seeing and saying in a poem. Whether it is a badger drinking at a pond or the stars disappearing over the edge of the world, it comes down to that vertical line that penetrates everything. It is a vertical intensity, and you can call it pre-birth because it has been with us for hundreds of thousands of years. I tried to approach some of that in *Morning Poems* and *Abraham*. Even the title of *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars* is vertical from the top to the bottom—through the movement and vision of the poem where you uncover things, hurtle them forward, and the reader better watch out! The people in the caves understood this, but we don’t seem to understand it—the thrust of language in our

lives and what it can do. It is what I love in Tranströmer—how the vertical goes right down your throat and wham! So I finally put a whole book of his translations together, though I had published a number of them in the past. I am happy to have translated Tranströmer because when you translate, you come closer to a poem than by any other means. Memorizing a poem is not as good as translating one. You have to find every word in both languages and their connections. Over the years, people have complained that I spend too much time on translation. It is not enough, because I have learned a great deal about poetry by translating. I don’t want poems anymore without pre-birth intensities. This is why I gave The Domestic Globalization Award [the updated Blue Toad Award from Bly’s magazine *The Fifties*] to the 250 creative writing programs in American universities. No intensity! The award just appeared in the first issue of my magazine, *The Thousands* [the new version of *The Fifties*].

TBR: I read that and wondered, “Should I resign my job now?”

RB: Aha! Galway Kinnell did remark that some programs are good, so there are some exceptions. But I think that instead of giving a degree to MFAs upon completing their thesis manuscript, teachers should say, “So! There are no vertical lines or moments in these poems. I am flunking you!” They can stay in college another two years and see if they can find a different teacher. If, among them, the 250 programs only graduated the six poets who wrote with vertical intensity, it would be a relief to everybody. There are too many books of bad poetry being published today.

TBR: Along with Robert Hedin and Roger Greenwald, you have also published *The Roads Have Come to an End Now: Selected and Last Poems of Rolf Jacobsen, a Norwegian. How do you choose your projects among so many translations, essays, selected poems, plus restarting The Thousands?*

RB: When I go to Moose Lake, I see all the projects I haven’t done or haven’t worked on in a while. It gets me going again. Right now, I am putting together my selected translations from the 24 poets I have translated over the years. The oldest one is Horace, and I have been pondering how to arrange the volume. Maybe I should print the poets in chronological order. But my daughter Bridget said, “Why not put them in the order in which you first loved them?” A great idea! Only a woman would think of that. So, I’m running around thinking, “When did I first love Juan Ramón Jiménez? When did I first love Rilke?” You can’t translate a poet you don’t love. It is required. There will be about a dozen poems from each of the 24 poets. HarperCollins will publish it, but I don’t know when I will get it done because one project gets me going on another, plus how do I choose 12 poems from Rilke? Impossible.

I stay in bed in the morning from about 6 to 11, my best hours, and I write poems. *Morning Poems* and *Abraham* came out that way. Most of the poems in each book were done in one day, but it means staying in bed and writing, getting it done. Of course, I then have to go back and work on each one for about six months because some came out right, some didn’t. It is like fine-tuning an instrument. After 11:00, I don’t care what hap-

pens, though I have to look at my list to see what I haven't done. I am also working on more poems of Mirabai with Jane Hirshfield. Annie Wright and I are editing *The Selected Poems of James Wright*, a long project. I am writing the introduction for the book. I am also writing an introduction to a book of poetry by Paul Carroll. Everyone has forgotten Paul Carroll since he died, but we are doing a book of his. I have to do a blurb for Kim Stafford's book on William Stafford, his father. It is an amazing book. You really get a sense of Bill's life from the point of view of his son. Bill was a pacifist, but a very aggressive father! I want to do more translations of Issa and Basho. It is exciting to know there is more to do as you get older.

TBR: *Is there anything in poetry you have wanted to do, but haven't accomplished yet?*

RB: Yes, write a good poem.

TBR: *In A Little Book on the Human Shadow, you talked about the cost of giving away our own power, often surrendering personal responsibility to others, whether it comes to family, sexuality, or artistic matters. As one of the most recognized poets in America, with a long career of accomplishment, have you ever felt you have given too much of your power away? In other words, has there been a high price to pay for being so successful?*

RB: It is very generous for you to say these things. Your question is a tough one. Yes, there has been a high price for being successful, but you have to understand that I wanted to be a success. Part of it has to do with what I said was happening in 1958 when, as poets, we knew we had something to give to the world. Gaining success was also greediness on my part. I wanted to be loved and heard and read, all of it. Some of the teaching I did was a missing-out on things. Plus it was a way of making a living. I missed out on my own valuable energy. I decided long ago not to teach on a regular basis because when I am in a classroom with students, I give away too much of myself. Other poets who teach don't do that. They have more sense. I remember that when Richard Wilbur, who was older, was about to start teaching, he said, "I have to decide what to do because you can either be a good poet and a bad teacher, or a bad poet and a good teacher." He decided to be the good poet and had to hold himself back from the students. He is still writing well. My nature is to tell a class anything. I was wise to stay out of that profession. I did many conferences and visiting writer things for decades to get money to raise my children. The price for those irregular jobs is that your intensity is disturbed, though you might have more freedom. Even hundreds of readings over the years have done that. I have written too many poems that carried only half their intensity because the other half had been given away through my teaching. All of the poems in *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, except for maybe two or three, were defective because of that loss of energy. A great deal of it was given away before I wrote the poems. There are mysterious leaks in our whole body. There have to be ways one gathers the greatest psychic energy, intellectual energy, joy energy, image energy, and holds it close to the heart, until it can enter the writing. The poems in *The Night Abraham Called to the Stars* have more of that sustaining

power than any of my books because success and time have made me understand all of that now. We know that Homer was blind and that there is a tradition of blindness among the great ancient poets. They didn't have to give away so much with their eyes; it stayed in the poems. The tradition of poetry readings in the U.S. is partly wise and partly foolish. It encourages too many poets to go out and expend themselves. On the other hand, it is one of the most rewarding experiences because there is very little social interaction in our culture. What you gain by sharing poems in public and having a social life might be something you were never able to do in your own family. Everything has two sides to it, and when you are out there for a lifetime of poetry, tell me it doesn't tear at you in many directions. I've done enough of those things and will not apologize, but will not say it was the right thing either. Now I want more time with my wife and my half-finished poems, because I have many waiting in Moose Lake. It is like a candy shop! I'm glad I've lived this long. ■

INTERVIEWER: **Ray González'** seventh book of poetry, *The Hawk Temple at Tierra Grande* (BOA Editions), appeared this summer. Poems from the book received a 2002 McKnight Artist Fellowship for Writers, The Loft Award in Poetry. His second book of essays, *The Underground Heart: Return to a Hidden Landscape* (University of Arizona) and *Circling the Tortilla Dragon: Short-Short Fictions* (Creative Arts Book Company) will be published this fall. He is associate professor of English at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.