

WORDCRAFT OF OREGON INTERVIEW WITH STEVE DIEFFENBACHER

Q: You spent 10 years in La Grande, working for *The Observer*. How did you end up working at the paper?

A: I came to *The Observer* after leaving the Navy in 1974. Like many men of my generation who came of age during the Vietnam era, I was faced with hard choices about military service. There was a draft then, and in my last year of college a “lottery” system was instituted, which meant that once your college deferment ended with graduation, you could be drafted based on your lottery number. The “lottery” was a drawing of birthdates, and once your birthdate was drawn, you were stuck with that number until age 26 when your eligibility for the draft ended. Anyone with a lottery number up to 150 was fairly likely to be drafted. Those with higher numbers would often not be called.

My number was 12, so I knew I was almost certain to be drafted; and sure enough, almost as soon as I got my bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Utah, I was called in for a physical by the military, which meant a draft notice would be coming soon afterwards.

I was ambivalent about the Vietnam War, but my father and grandfather had both served in the Navy and that weighed on my thinking as I considered whether I could be a conscientious objector. Eventually, I felt duty-bound to serve despite being opposed to the war. I decided to join the Navy because of the family tradition and so I could have some say in how I would fulfill my military obligation. Once I was in uniform, because of my journalism degree, I was able to move into a job as a reporter/editor at the base newspaper at a naval communication station in Stockton, Calif., where I was stationed for all of my enlistment after boot camp. That experience helped me get the job in La Grande when I got out of the military.

Q: Was there anything in particular about La Grande that drew you here?

A: I had done a lot of thinking about what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go during my four years in the military. I had grown up in cities of more than 100,000 people, and had lived in Latin America until my father died when I was 13. When that happened, my mother, brother and I moved to San Diego to be near family members there. San Diego was the biggest city I had ever lived in and for me very strange because people seemed so remote from each other compared to the close-knit community of American families I’d known in Latin America. I was very lonely in California, painfully shy, and felt like an outsider all through high school.

I began to wonder what it would be like to live in a small town, if perhaps it would give me some of the feeling of community I’d felt in Latin America and that now seemed lost to me. I had married before going into the Navy, and considered what kind of town would be best for raising children, too.

So when I was about to get out of the Navy in 1974, I applied almost exclusively to newspapers in small towns in the Northwest where I had traveled often on leave while in the Navy. I fell in love with the Northwest landscape on those trips with my family and *The Observer* in La Grande was the first newspaper to offer me a job.

Q: What kind of work did you do at the paper?

A: In my 10 years there I was a reporter, wire editor, photographer, and finally assistant editor. As is the case with many small-town journalists, I also wrote stories no matter what my job title was. As time went on I became particularly interested in the arts and was able to increase the paper’s arts coverage. I wrote a column, did art

reviews, interviewed artists and writers. Those stories are what I'm most proud of from my years in La Grande.

Q: I see that your forthcoming book, *The Sky Is a Bird of Sorrow*, is published by David Memmott of Wordcraft of Oregon, a writer and artist himself, and that the cover art is a painting by Don Gray, also from eastern Oregon. Did you know them then?

A: I got to know Dave through my arts coverage and we hit it off right away. My first meeting with him, if I recall correctly, was when he won a poetry award for a poem called "Dancing with the Ghost of Myself." I don't remember the award, but the title was so evocative and haunting, it stuck in my mind. He was a great person to check with on arts events and we had good talks about writing in those days.

Q: Did he turn you on to poetry?

A: Well, I think being around him definitely got me thinking that way again. It planted a seed. I hadn't actually started as a journalism major in college. I had written some poetry before. For almost three years I was an English major, but then it suddenly dawned on me that I couldn't pay the bills writing poetry, and I was too shy then to stand in front of a bunch of students and teach. But I could talk with people one-on-one, so journalism seemed a possibility. It would allow me to write and make a living at it. So I changed my major to journalism.

My return to poetry was nurtured by other people in La Grande, too, particularly George Venn, with whom I had occasional contact in my work. As a poet and faculty member at what was then Eastern Oregon State College, now Eastern Oregon University, he one day asked me to interview William Stafford, who was in La Grande for a reading. I was hesitant at first, because my editor was lukewarm to the idea and because Stafford's reputation, as gentle as he was in person, seemed larger than life to me. I was afraid my questions would seem trite. But I decided to do it anyway, and luckily, having studied his poetry in college, I could ask specific questions about his work, and it went well. That interview, held at George's home as we all sat around a wood stove, made a deep impression on me. It planted more seeds.

Those seeds finally germinated in 1992 through Garrett Miller, a co-worker at the *Mail Tribune* in Medford where I work now. He was a painter who was trying his hand seriously at poetry for the first time. He invited me into a poetry group, and I was taken again with the form's possibilities to express all those mysterious things at the margins of everyday life. I've been at it ever since. Sadly, Garrett died in a motorcycle accident in 1993, just as his poetic voice was coming into its own.

Q: Any regrets about coming to poetry belatedly, not having gone through a creative writing program in college?

A: Not at all. I had taken some creative writing classes in college, but it wasn't my emphasis. And because I came back to poetry in my 40s, I had some life experience behind me. Also, although newspaper writing is not poetry, I had honed my writing skills a lot by having to write daily in my job. The job at *The Observer* also got me out into the field interviewing people I might never have gotten to know otherwise — farmers, cattlemen, horsewomen, firefighters, helicopter pilots, you name it.

The down side of it, of course, is that I've never been connected to an academic community, where many opportunities for grants, fellowships and those kinds of things are generated and where there's a heady froth of new ideas bubbling up all the time. I was around writers at the newspapers I worked for, yes, but as journalists our daily focus is almost entirely on the news, not what might lie under that surface reality or the possibilities

of language for their own sake. I've made up for that by meeting frequently with other poets in the Medford/Ashland area, where I live now. Many of them work outside academia, too.

Q: Do you think having lived and worked in Eastern Oregon has had any influence on your poetry?

A: Absolutely. I believe what was happening to me during those 10 years in La Grande was a growing sense of landscape and its correlation with states of mind. During my Navy years, I had gone almost every summer weekend into the Sierra Nevada to camp with my family. Stockton is not that far from the mountains. And coming to La Grande just magnified my connection with nature and its forces. It was a solace to me and intimidating as well because I had never lived in a place with such harsh winters before. I lived daily with the paradox of being in a location of stunning natural beauty side by side with nature's survival-of-the-fittest reality and over a decade it became a part of me.

Although I haven't written many poems specifically about the La Grande area, nature's combination of indifferent destructive power and majestic beauty became real to me there. Since leaving the area, I've traveled in the Southwest, and the distances there and the dryness of the desert landscape, heightened my sense of that paradox, of how nature both enlarges and diminishes a person, and I find that feeling energizing. There is a spiritual resonance to the West's huge landscapes that can't be defined, but once felt, stays with you.

Q: There are strong feelings of longing and loss in your poems. Do those come out of that relationship with nature?

A: Well, nature can sometimes be brutal, too. One of the poems in my book, called "Glacier Park, Night of the Grizzly, 1966," is about an attack by a grizzly on a young woman working in Glacier National Park. She was camping with some co-workers one night and the bear attacked while the group was sleeping. The others managed to escape, but she was trapped in her sleeping bag, allowing the bear to drag her away and kill her, it's not clear why. She was a classmate of mine during my high school years in San Diego. A top student, she had finished school early and gone up to Montana for the summer. I remember the day my social studies teacher came in and told us she'd been killed. Her boyfriend was in the class and he sat stone-faced with shock.

I already was living with feelings of vulnerability because my father died when I was in seventh grade and although I didn't know her well, the cutting off of her future so suddenly affected me deeply. Everyone I've met who's lost a parent or other close family member at a young age carries a heightened awareness of the world's tentativeness. So every new loss just magnifies it. The death of parents, the psychological pain of divorce, seeing my children cope with depression or other emotional problems and experiencing some of those feelings myself all end up reawakening those feelings.

The unanswered whys of them never go away. My second wife, Terry, lost both her mother and her stepfather at age 8, and she has the same dynamic I have. It is one of the things that drew us together. There's a powerful resonance that you can sense in another person who's gone through it almost without having to be told about it.

Q: Do you feel loss in nature? The book is called *The Sky Is a Bird of Sorrow*. Is that how you see nature, as a place of sadness?

A: Sorrow is a complicated word. It is different from grief, larger and more encompassing than any individual human loss. It is about the existential dread and loneliness that comes with our consciousness. It's a particularly human thing. I believe that as soon as we are born, we have the yearning for something else, for the answer to why we are, our reason for being. But that question can never be answered in our lifetimes. We guess

at the answer, try to find it through religion or science or whatever discipline our particular bent leads us to, but it always eludes us.

In the ancient epic of *Gilgamesh*, the main character goes through the agonizing loss of his best friend, Enkidu, and travels even to the land of the dead to find the why of things, and in the end discovers there is none, that just putting one foot in front of the other, just living and having the will to try is all there is ultimately. Life becomes its own justification.

I realize not everyone would agree with this, but that has been my experience. Nature — land, sky, air and water — affirm the continuity of life, but there is still that wish for something more, that's sorrow, and that's what inspired the title, which is the title also of the first poem in the last section of the book where I address this central preoccupation.

That doesn't mean there isn't joy in the book or a positive aspect to that glimmering of something more. In fact I have a poem called "Joy" that is all about the love I feel for my wife. But our earthly joys are momentary, the good things that come in life always end, as do the tragic things, starting the cycle anew. Everything comes and goes in time. Yet there are moments, and these come and go too, when a person can feel part of something larger, an undercurrent in the flow that comes as a sense of other things that aren't ever clearly visible to us. The last section of the book is about that — the realms we create in the imagination. The bird in the title hints at that, the possibility of transformation through creativity.

Q: You use Spanish phrases in some of your poems? What function do they serve for you as a poet?

A: Because I grew up in Latin America, I once was bilingual. The music of Spanish is part of who I am. There are times when English seems inadequate for some of the resonances I feel, so I lapse into Spanish, which I learned early and is inherently lyrical, conveying emotion more flowingly for me than English. I also love how the same thing said in two different languages can have such different effects on us through their sound. Sound is critical to my writing. In some ways I think its immediate, non-verbal power — one that goes beyond language right into the mind much the way we react to a painting or sculpture — reaches the deepest roots of our being. It precedes any search for meaning.

Q: How does Don Gray's art figure into your feelings about your poetry?

A: I had interviewed Don when I was working at *The Observer*, and also reviewed the first major show he did at Eastern Oregon State College when he began to veer away from his more realistic painting style. I loved the new direction he was taking and said so in my review. Not long after that I left the area, and Don also left eastern Oregon for some time, living in the Southwest and California, and I lost track of him.

When Dave and I began to look at artwork for the cover of the book, and couldn't find something that quite fit my work, I thought of Don. I had seen Wordcraft's 2010 book by Bette Lynch Husted called *At This Distance*, which had a painting by Don on its cover that I really liked. I remembered that his work had always spoken to me of things at the edge of my perception. So Dave and I started looking through Don's work online and I came upon his semi-abstract "Loom of the Land." I knew immediately it was perfect for the cover and captured the feeling of my work, with its echoes of the Oregon high desert and the Southwest, its feeling of hidden layers in the Earth and the evanescence of things. I told Dave so, and he loved it, too.

Q: What has been your experience in working with a small press like Wordcraft of Oregon?

A: Small presses are the ideal publishers for poetry. Their editors are more open to feedback and they are more willing to respond to an author's concerns. That's why so many writers prefer them nowadays. Making a book is a process of mutual discovery, with demands of deadlines and compromises. Once I sent Dave the manuscript, I tried not to introduce major changes in the poems. And he sought my opinion on cover art and other matters of style. The dialogue with him, his designer and Don Gray has made it a real collaboration and I believe, a better book, because it was done in concert, although of course, he did the lion's share of the work setting everything up. His press is a labor of love and every poet I've mentioned it to, considers it among the best in the state. The name of the book was actually his suggestion because he thought it was more evocative and meaningful than what I had first chosen. And after thinking about it, I realized he was right.

Q: How do you see your poetry evolving after this book?

A: The very last section of the book, the one called "The Sky Is a Bird of Sorrow" like the book title, marked a departure for me. Most of those poems, notably the ones with epigrams from Rainer Maria Rilke's work, are more dense than others in the book. Two years ago blood clots were found in my lungs, and most of those poems were written during my recovery while I was off work on temporary disability. In those poems, I explore the intimate questions I feel our human lives bring us to — how honorably we have lived, how we come to terms with being gone from this Earth and what sustains us every day as we go about our routines, what endures, if anything. How do we — coming back again to my central theme — cope with loss, because in the end we lose everything. Or do we? What things survive us, if any, and offer consolation to our descendants? Beyond that, those final poems pose questions about the nature of reality, how imagination, our daily lives and dream play off each other and begin to meld over time until nothing seems strange in our world. There is an undercurrent of feeling that it all fits together somehow. I'll never know how exactly, but as time goes on there is less compartmentalizing of reality into one thing or another for me, but instead a free-flowing consciousness where images and feelings come in from all quarters and they all seem right as part of the fabric of life. It's an exciting prospect for me to explore those boundaries even though I'll never come to any ultimate answers about what could lie beyond them.

