The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Kevin Stewart, David Gavin, and Tom Franklin

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 11, 2011

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/ redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
  - annotations for clarification and identification; and
  - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed Kevin Stewart, David Gavin, and Tom Franklin on June 11, 2011, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This series of interviews took place during a birthday celebration for William Harrison.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Okay, guys. [*Tom Franklin drops beverage can on floor*] My name is [*Kevin Stewart laughs*] Scott Lunsford. Thank you. Uh—we're with the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. And today's date is June the eleventh. The year is—uh—2011. And we are at Laurie Harrison's residence in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And for the past couple of days we've been doing a series of interviews of former M.F.A. students, teachers—uh—friends, hanger-ons, groupies around the program. And—um—uh—it is part of our Bill Harrison project, who we've already interviewed. Uh—these recordings will be archived forever at [*camera clicks*] the Pryor Center. Uh—DVD copies of these interviews will be available at the Special Collections Department in Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas campus. You will each receive a transcript [*camera clicks*] of this interview. You will each receive a DVD of the raw footage of this interview. You'll be asked to look at this, and you'll be given a couple of weeks to respond to us. You'll need

to look at the transcript. You'll need to look at the video. If there is anything in the transcript that you're not comfortable with—uh—we will edit it out, and we'll do the same videowise. If—and we may ask you for clarifications on the transcript—spellings, places, names, events—anything that helps make the—the—the story—uh—clearer for the researchers. Once that editing is done—and that's really the only editing we do—we don't make a program out of this. This—this is just interviews. And what we will do with your approval of these—uh—of the transcript and the raw footage is we will post this stuff on the Pryor Center website. [00:01:53] Everybody in the world will be able to see at least selected highlights of video of this interview. They will have at their disposal the entire transcript of this interview and all of the audio of this interview, which they can download—put it in their car on their CDs or MP3 players. We will encourage the use of this material for educational purposes by documentarians, researchers, Arkansas historians, students of Arkansas history—anybody that has an interest in this material—and if they're using it for constructive purposes, we're going to encourage them to do that. Having said all of that, if you guys are comfortable with this idea and—and what where doing here, you need to tell me now and just say, "Yeah."

And if you're not, it's okay. No hard feelings, and we can move on and do somethin' else. [*Cell phone dings*] That's yes, yes . . .

Tom Franklin: Yes for me.

SL: . . . yes.

David Gavin: Yes.

Kevin Stewart: Yes.

TF: Let me turn off my phone.

SL: Good answers. We're already halfway through.

KS: Can you edit these two out, though?

SL: Uh—probably not. [*Laughter*] And we probably can't help you guys in the way you look either. So . . .

KS: Superimpose faces and . . .

[00:02:57] SL: Yeah, we probably could. We won't do that. [*KS laughs*] You might—you guys could do that. But we won't do that. Um—so—um—I guess usually—I guess what I'm gonna have to do is I'm gonna have to ask—uh—each one of your names and where each of you were born and when you were born. So I'll start over here on my left—will be audience right—and your name is . . .

KS: Kevin Stewart.

SL: Kevin. And where and when were you born?

KS: I was actually born in Kittery, Maine, but grew up in Princeton, West Virginia.

SL: Excellent.

DG: Uh—my name is David Gavin, and I was born in Galway, Ireland—uh—1946.

SL: Okay.

TF: My name's Tom Franklin. I was born in Dickinson, Alabama, in 1963.

SL: Excellent. Okay. Now, all of y'all have been a part of this program. Is that correct? [DG nods head]

KS: Correct.

TF: Yes.

SL: And you are—so you are survivors [*laughter*] of the program.

KS: My marriage wasn't, but . . .

[00:04:01] SL: [*Laughs*] Um—so—uh—I usually—uh—want to know about your parents—uh—and this is more—uh—as much a genealogy thing, but it's also—uh—kind of to get you guys thinkin' about how your life put you here tonight. So—uh—your parents' names were . . .

KS: Hobart and Nancy Stewart.

SL: And your . . .

KS: Actually, Ellis is my mother's maiden name.

SL: Excellent. Okay.

DG: Father's name was Joe. Mother's name was Maureen.

SL: And her maiden name?

DG: Oh, her—her maiden name was Neilan.

SL: Neilan. All right.

TF: Father is Gerald Franklin. Mother was Betty Bradford and now Betty Franklin.

[00:04:42] SL: Okay. That's great. So did you all all attend public schools growing up?

KS: Yes. [DG nods head]

TF: Yes.

SL: And yours was in Ireland? Is that . . .

DG: It was, yeah.

SL: In Ireland.

DG: Yeah.

SL: And—uh . . .

DG: I came to America in—uh—[19]76.

SL: Let's see, and so how old were you then?

DG: Thirty.

SL: Thirteen. And—uh—where did you live when you came to the United States?

DG: Oh, various places. I came to the writing program in [19]92.

SL: Uh—and—uh—where did you come from to get to the writing program? What . . .

DG: Oregon.

SL: Oregon.

DG: Yeah.

SL: And—uh—was that Oregon public schools, or had you already been to college?

DG: Uh—I'd been to college. Uh—I had a degree in English. I was—got accepted by the school, and I came down in [19]92.

[00:05:29] SL: Okay. And what about you? You . . .

KS: I—I came here in [19]93 and . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

KS: . . . uh—I started in engineering—uh—got a degree in engineering at Bluefield State College in West Virginia. Uh—and then that didn't take, so I ended up in English and writing. And I got here—I finished a B.A. in English at Concord College, which is now a university, [19]91, and then did a M.A. at Radford University in Virginia before coming here.

SL: And where was Concord College?

KS: West Virginia.

SL: West Virginia. Okay. And . . .

TF: I—um—I forgot the question.

SL: Kay.

TF: What's the question? [*Laughter*] I'm sorry.

KS: Where'd you go to school?

SL: Oh, you forgot the question.

TF: Oh, where—oh, where—oh, where I went to school. Uh—went to—uh . . .

KS: He didn't really go.

TF: No—no, I went to Clarke County High School in [*KS laughs*] Clarke County, Alabama. And then went to the University of South Alabama in Mobile in 1981 for a bachelor of arts degree in somethin', [*KS laughs*] but I did so poorly that my father said, "I'm not gonna pay for this," and—and pulled the money away, so then—uh—gradually went ba—back myself and—and paid for it myself. It took me about nine years to get a bachelor's degree. And I had a number of jobs that I worked at the same time as—as gettin' the degree. But I came here—uh—in 1994 at age thirty or thirty-one. So I think . . .

SL: And . . .

[00:06:51] TF: . . . I think comin' here at—at a later age was good for me. I—I wouldn't've been ready at age twenty-two or twenty-three.

SL: Mh-hmm. I was kind of a returning student . . .

TF: Yeah.

SL: . . . myself or—yeah, I did much better later on.

TF: Nontraditional. [*KS laughs*]

[00:07:01] SL: Yeah, nontraditional. So—um—um—all three of you—were—were there—uh—I—I guess y'all—um—decided that you wanted to write at—at some point? Was that after you had gotten your degrees—your respective undergraduate degrees? And was there something that happened in each of your lives that said, "Okay, I want to learn to write," or how—how did you come—how did you get to this program? What was it that made you apply to the University of Arkansas?

KS: Who wants to go first?

SL: Go ahead.

KS: Music.

SL: Music.

KS: Yeah, Bruce Springsteen songs. That's a—yeah, and—and—yeah, the—the songs kind of spoke to me in ways that most music I'd been listenin' to up to the time didn't. And—uh—and then interviews with Springsteen where he'd talk about, like, Flannery O'Connor and Steinbeck and things like that. So I . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

KS: . . . started investigating that. I didn't grow up among books in

my family. And—uh—so—uh—and then I started kind of writing some music articles, and people would say, "Hey, you're pretty good at that." And—and—uh—and one thing led to another, to—ultimately, I wrote a letter to the editor once to our local paper in West Virginia, which—uh—engi—my engineering professor called me on the phone and said, "That's really good. You should consider writing." And—which I didn't know how to take because I was, you know, [*TF laughs*] currently one of his engineering students at the time.

SL: Yes. [*KS laughs*] Uh-huh.

KS: So it was "Well, what are you tryin' to say?" [*Laughs*] But yeah, that's more or less how I got into it. And . . .

[00:08:37] SL: So you—you finished up your engineering degree or . . .

KS: Yeah, I'd had jobs in that and . . .

SL: Okay. [*DG clears throat*]

KS: . . . I've done—I have buildings standing in West Virginia and south West Virginia—I think maybe even in North Carolina there's one.

SL: Uh-huh.

KS: But—uh . . .

SL: But . . .

KS: . . . but yeah, so . . .

SL: . . . it wasn't happenin' for you.

KS: Yeah.

SL: You didn't really like it. Okay. And—and how about you?

[00:08:54] DG: Well, I suppose you could say I—growing up in Ireland, and the Ireland I grew up in was poor and—uh—no television. There—it didn't exist until, I think, 1963, and I was about eighteen. So I read books pretty voraciously throughout my early—you know, formative years because there was nothing else to do. Everybody was poor, and you know, people didn't own cars. So I read books, and—uh—there was a rich oral tradition of storytelling, I think, that—you know, I wasn't aware of it, but my mother was a tremendous storyteller—my father, my grandfather, everybody, you know. As they say back there, they talk the leg off a stool. [*Laughter*] So you know, there was a lot of stories, and—uh—I was familiar with the storytelling—uh—uh—form. I mean, I always felt comfortable telling stories, and people always fu—usually listened to my stories to—to their conclusion, and I felt that I could tell a story, but I'd never considered writing anything, although I did love to read, and I had a—I suppose, a taste for writers, and I was aware of writers. But—uh—people would occa—sometimes occasionally, like Kevin

said here—people would say to me, "Jesus, you should write that down, you know. Did you ever think of writing those things down?" I never really did because I didn't have the confidence, and it seemed to me to be so far above me and removed from, you know, mere me. And eventually I did start to write, and I got accepted here by the program, and it was, you know, it was a big milestone in my life. I don't think I slept for a few days afterwards, I was [*laughter*]—I was—uh—elated but also frightened—actually terrified. Oh my God! [*Laughter*] But that was me.

[00:10:43] SL: But you were—you were in Oregon at that time. Is that . . .

DG: I was in Oregon, yeah.

SL: Uh-huh.

DG: I lived in Oregon.

SL: Okay.

TF: I grew up poor too. We didn't—we couldn't even afford books. That was a joke. [*Laughter*] We had a few books.

DG: We've got 'em in the library, Tom. [*Laughter*]

TF: We couldn't afford libraries.

KS: They didn't have those. [*Laughter*]

TF: We didn't have those. Um—I grew up—um—in Alabama and—

uh—uh—was—I was fortunate to grow up with my uncles who told stories and—uh—preachers who told stories. And those were perhaps the most fantastic of all. And I grew up—uh—loving *Star Trek* and then *Star Wars*, and I wanted to write science fiction, and [*DG clears throat*] I remembered that at one point I'd written a hundred stories, and they were all science fiction stories, and they were all terrible. There was one called "Borborygmi," which was a hundred pages long. And I wrote 'em all on this tiny portable typewriter, and—uh—"Borborygmi" was a hundred single-spaced pages, and it was about a guy's stomach growling, and it would tell him the future. [*Laughter*] And I would—and I would type these—these—uh—sound of these . . .

SL: Interesting arena. [*Laughter*]

[00:11:47] TF: I would type these sound effect lines, like, the stomach—stomach—um—growling sound effect lines, like, "Boy-oing-oing-oing-oing-oing—*O-I-N-G*, *O-I-N-G*," which was really fun to type. [*Laughter*] And—uh—I wrote one called, "Alfred Hitchcock, You Son of a Bitch," which was about time travel. I wrote—I had just—I had a—a hundred terrible stories, and finally at some point—um [*someone coughs*]—I read—actually, I read Barry Hannah, who was . . .

SL: Okay.

TF: . . . this program's first graduate. And—uh—someone had said to me, "You know, you gotta read this guy. He's—he's really strange [*SL laughs*] and very funny."

SL: Uh-huh.

TF: "And the language is electric, and—and I didn't know that you could do that with a sentence before. You know, he put words against other words in strange ways that I'd never experienced before." And—uh—when I first read Barry Hannah, I couldn't even—couldn't even—I didn't—I couldn't keep reading. I had to go away from it. It was too strong. I had—I finally came back to it and—uh—all right, so he was instrumental for me in—in taking me away from science fiction and—and turning me more toward realism.

[00:12:49] KS: That's a—I had the same thing with Breece Pancake.

TF: Hmm.

KS: And somebody said, "You gotta read Breece Pancake," and I read Breece Pancake, and I was like, "You can wrote—these—these people are—can be in literature? I know these people." And that was—that was sort of eye-opening. It was like, "Wow!"

TF: Yeah, those are [*unclear words*].

KS: "These are—these are my—these are my family members."

TF: Those are good stories too.

KS: Yeah, and . . .

TF: "Trilobites."

KS: . . . these are my family members 'cause, you know, and the—we're all from working-class families, and—uh—and—uh—the working class in literature isn't really heavily represented, you know, at least up until more recently. And—uh—I mean, in Shakespeare, they're like the—the comic relief, you know.

SL: That's correct.

[00:13:25] KS: And—uh—and then, you know, in, you know, Dickens and things like that, the working class are just kind of—they're there, but you know, whatever. But—uh—it was the first time I'd ever read people that I knew and realized that [*DG clears throat*] these peoples' stories are of value, and—and they're worth writing about. Then I was kind of like, "Okay, I know these people. I—I can't write like Breece Pancake, but I [*laughs*] at least know those kinds of people, to try to write about 'em," you know. [*Laughs*]

TF: And Raymond Carver was that way for you, wasn't he? Wasn't he [*Trey Marley coughs*] big for you?

DG: Yeah, I suppose he was. Yeah, yeah, Carver. Yeah.

SL: So—um—[*TM coughs*] one would—it—it sounds like to me—uh—

sounds like to me that you—uh—were—um—very—uh—active and had a lot of energy to—to spend on writing, and—uh—sounds like you had done the work of an engineer, and you know, and when I think of engineers, I think of problem solvers—uh—and so you had been through that discipline. And you had just been living [*KS laughs*] storytelling. And hadn't really thought about [*laughter*] about writing it down, but you had—you knew . . .

DG: Still haven't. [*Laughter*]

SL: You had—you were able to ta—hold an audience with your verbal skills and storytelling.

DG: I'm not as good as Tommy.

TF: He was way [*laughter*]—yes, yes, you are. You're better than I am.

SL: Okay. Well . . .

KS: The best verbal oral—oral traditions ever, right?

TF: I agree. Right here. Absolutely. [*KS laughs*] Absolutely.

[00:14:55] SL: Well, I'm a great believer in oral history and—and storytelling. I—believe me, it's what we do—gather stories. But—um—so—uh—what did you send in, and how did you—how did you hear about the University of Arkansas M.F.A. program, and what did you send in to get accepted?

KS: I can't remember the exact story I sent in, but—uh—something I was—I was doin'—I was gettin' my M.A. Actually, I can't even remember what it was. But—uh—but the—but the reason I sent it here was because they didn't have the—the entrance—the—the—the fee.

TF: I know, I loved that.

KS: The application fee.

TF: I loved that.

KS: And—uh—and so what they did was like, "Send in your shit, and if we like it, then we'll tell you whether to spend your money or not." I said, "Well, that's pretty cool." So I sent it in, and they liked it and—'cause I had a list of programs [*DG clears throat*] I was gonna apply to. Uh—and then—uh—so I narrowed that down. I applied to, like, here, Alabama, and Iowa, just to see if I could get into Iowa. I didn't. [*Laughs*] I got into Alabama, but I came here instead. Yeah—and—uh—but I—I just loved it, and so I came out here to visit. And bein' from West Virginia, this part of Arkansas is very similar, with the . . .

SL: Yeah.

[00:16:03] KS: . . . with the Ozarks and all that. In fact, Skip Hays told me one night—we were drunk, and he said—looked at me, laughed—said, "Kevin, you're one of the few people we didn't

have to justify Fayetteville to." [*Laughter*] And—uh—but I felt—you know, when I came here and visited fay—it felt very natural. It felt very right. But I didn't really know anything about the writers. I knew Lucinda Williams before I knew Miller Williams. And Miller—or Skip told me never to tell Miller that.

SL: Okay. [*Laughs*]

KS: And—uh . . .

TF: And now you've [*laughter*] said it to the world.

[00:16:32] SL: Okay. So now what—what did you send in? And how did you—how in the world did you hear about the University of Arkansas?

DG: Well, I didn't know there were such things as writing programs. You know, I went back to school when I was thirty-nine. I—I was wild when I was young. I'd gone to university in Ireland, but I was more inter—interested in traveling and adventure, and you know, I was kinda deluded. I thought, "Something'll fall outta the sky, and I'll be fine." You know, I used to sit in bars waiting for somebody to discover me, but it [*laughs*] never happened. [*Laughter*] So eventually I went back to school. But when I got my—uh—uh—when I got a degree in English, I took a few creative writing classes, and I wrote one story—um—that was fairly autobiographical. It was about working in a pub in

London ser—yeah, serving a fellow a bad pint to get rid of him—you know, to dissuade him from coming in.

SL: Uh-huh.

[00:17:24] DG: And—uh—I wrote that story, and I sent it to the program, and—uh—uh—it got me here, you know. It was a little different. But I didn't know—I mean, I didn't know if it was different. I suppose it was. It was set in London in a pub. But—um—the characters—I didn't really know much about Fayetteville, but I was ready for a change. You know, I'd lived on the East Coast, and I'd lived on the West Coast, but—uh—I'd never really been in the South, and I loved the idea—I loved the sound of the Ozarks—meaning, just the—the word—and I wanted to see them badly. But another reason that I was really drawn here—and this is one reason I was really drawn here—I've always loved horseracing, and when I lived in, you know, in California, I'd go to the racetracks, but I used to read about Hot Springs's Oaklawn Park in the *Daily Racing Form*. And I—it—it would describe, you know, [*KS laughs*] the Ouachitas, and it'd describe the national parks and the—the town of Hot Springs. And to me, that was just heavenly. And I said, "Oh my God, I wanna go there so badly." And these winners that had come out of the—uh—the first one was Sunny's Halo, and he'd won the

Arkansas Derby on the—on the—on the lead. And I said, "Oh, I have to go." You know, [*SL laughs*] when I got accepted by the program, I was delirious with excitement. I said, "Now I can go to Hot Springs." [*Unclear words*]. [*Laughter*] And I've probably been there a hundred times [*laughs*] since then.

[00:18:42] SL: So how did you do with your stake at—at Belmont today?

DG: Oh, terribly. Terribly. [*KS laughs*]

SL: Oh, I was counting on you to win.

DG: Yeah? Oh God, no.

SL: I was hoping for a loan.

DG: I had six horses in it, and I said to everybody—well, I did a pick three, but I said to everybody—you know, they were askin' me for a tip, and I said, "I have no idea," I said. [*SL laughs*]

KS: ?Track muddy.?

DG: Take twelve horses runnin' a mile and a half in the mud. None of them have run a—ever run a mile and a half and—uh—two of them have run on a sloppy track. I mean, it's just [*laughter*] no way. You need a crystal ball.

KS: Oh, and he knows this kind of stuff too.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughter*] So you didn't—you didn't get anything out of it?

DG: Oh God, no.

SL: Well . . .

DG: No, no, no.

SL: Okay.

DG: It was . . .

[00:19:21] SL: Okay. And so, now, what did you send in, *Star Trek*?

TF: I don't remember. No, I [*laughter*]—I sent in one of my—probably one of my Barry Hannah-esque—uh—esque stories.

KS: Was it the one about the pumpkins, where he shoots the pump—or watermelons?

TF: Yeah, he—I think it was that one.

KS: Huh.

TF: Yes, I think it might of been my story "Shubuta."

KS: Yeah, "Shubuta."

TF: Which he—which—now knowing how much Bill hates southern fiction [*laughter*]—Bill Harrison—it's a—it's a miracle that—uh—I somehow got in. And I had also got—I'd gotten into Iowa too, and I'd driven to—to visit both schools, Iowa and here. Those—I narrowed it down to those two places. And I hated Iowa. I hated everything about it. On the—on the—on the out—I went into their building, and they had, you know, "Iowa Writers' Workshop." But for "Workshop" they had transposed the *W* and

the *P*, so it was "Porkshow." I thought, "That's just too fuckin' precious. I don't want anything—anything to do with this place." [*KS laughs*] And so I came down here and got here late at night, and I had a steak at that great—um—place on the square.

DG: [*Unclear word*] grill?

KS: Oh, down—uh . . .

TF: No, no, it was up—up on the square. Um . . .

KS: Hugo's?

TF: No, no, it was a steakhouse.

SL: The Old Post Office?

TF: No, it—anyway, it—and it may be gone now. But—uh—and the next day, I met Skip and . . .

DG: The Hoffbrau.

KS: Hoffbrau.

SL: Hoffbrau.

TF: The Hoffbrau. Is it still there?

SL: Oh yeah.

KS: No, I think it's gone.

SL: No, it's gone. It . . .

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:30] TF: But the next day I met Skip at his office, and I said, "You know, I got an assistantship for the first year. Is it

guaranteed for the next year and the next year?" He said, "Well, it is unless you fuck up." [*Laughter*] And I thought, you know, I liked that kind of honesty, so [*KS laughs*] . . .

SL: Yeah.

TF: . . . I'm very happy to [*unclear words*] . . .

KS: I remember—I remember Whitehead callin' me—he goes, "Your GRE score's a little low."

TF: Yeah.

KS: "But we're gonna work on this for you. We want you here." [*Laughs*]

[00:20:54] SL: So the three of you had to teach composition as well?

TF: Yeah. [DG and KS nod]

SL: How was that?

TF: Hard. [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, it was Faulkner composition still?

KS: No, I was the first year that they stopped doin' the Faulkner.

SL: Oh.

KS: We were still takin' the Faulkner class.

SL: Yeah.

KS: These guys didn't. [Points at DG and KS] Well, you [points at DG] had to take it, but you [points at TF] didn't have to take the

Faulkner . . .

TF: Twice. [*Laughs*]

KS: Our [*laughter*] . . .

TF: He had to take it twice. [Points at KS]

[00:21:20] KS: A lot of people had to take it twice. [*Laughter*] Well, I scratched mine. You know, you make a ninety-one in that class, it's a C. You know, it's a—it was insane. But anyway, it was like [*laughter*]—and—but you know, we were takin' the class, but we didn't—you know, before we got there, they were teaching the—you know, but we didn't have to teach the Faulkner English, we just had to take it, which was odd. But you know, this—they had brought in Pat Slattery, you know, with the pedagogy and, you know, the comp rhet stuff and all that. And you know, so we had to take this class that really had nothing to do with what we were teaching [*DG clears throat*], which was odd. But we were the—our class, when we came in [19]93, we were the last class that did the Faulkner English—which I will say, at the time, I hated it. I only had to take it once, so I was proud of that—but it's probably one of the best classes I ever took 'cause now I know so much about grammar and the language, and it was—you know, at the time it was painful, but now it's, like, yeah.

SL: You can still get the books. They're . . .

KS: Yeah.

SL: . . . expensive, but you can still get . . .

KS: I think they're on eBay for, like, hundreds of dollars now.

SL: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

[00:22:18] KS: I still like Skip Hays's sentences—he told us—the *Writing Good Prose*. You had to write—you had to, like, have a introductory clause followed by a noun clause followed by—and Skip's was always "the fucking this, the fucking that." And that was his final and [*laughter*]—and he just wrote as many curse words as he could in the—you know, for his sentences just 'cause he hated the class so much. [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, okay. So you've—did each of you—your first encounter was with Skip, or was it with Bill or . . .

KS: Whitehead was my first encounter.

SL: And your first impression with Jim?

KS: I was intimidated, so I—I wasn't gonna go anywhere else after—you know, 'cause I was afraid he might come after me or somethin' because he would call you. And the other thing was the dean of—I was at Radford University at the time in Virginia. Our dean of arts and sciences was named Paul Bryant, and so he would call up and immediately launch into a Bear Bryant joke,

you know, 'cause [*laughter*]—and so he was kind of charming. I—no, I just—you know, when I came here—it was like Tommy—when I came here, I just—yeah, I wanted to be here, yeah, and I didn't really have any misgivings about coming here. And then after I got in, I researched the program. I didn't really know much about it, and then I saw who all came from here—you know, like Barry Hannah and Ellen Gilchrist—you know, Buddy Nordan—people like this.

TF: John Dufresne. Yeah.

KS: Yeah, John Dufresne, Steve Yarbrough—all those guys were here. And I said, "That's a pretty good lineup. I don't mind bein' a part of that." [*Laughs*]

[00:23:52] SL: What about you? Who was the [*KS laughs*] first guy you met here?

DG: The first person I met was Jim Whitehead. And the way that happened, I had come from Oregon. Now, I had never spoken to anybody on the phone here. I'd never called up—asked any questions. [*SL laughs*] I just thought that would be improper. [*Laughter*] I didn't think it would be the way to do it, you know.

SL: Yeah.

DG: I mean, they had accepted me, and I t—I sent them a letter—told 'em I'd be here. Well, I arrived here on an airplane. I got

down to Drake Field about nine o'clock at night, and eventually I managed to get up to—I was staying in Hotz Hall, and oh, there was all sorts of stuff on the roof, and the bed had been urinated and torn up and—so I didn't get a great night's sleep. But I went down to . . .

KS: [*Unclear words*].

[00:24:40] DG: . . . Kimpel Hall the very next morning. We had the Dr. Van Scyoc—Leo Van Scyoc—wonderful man. We had the sort of informal get-together, meeting, talk. And I was standing in the hallway in Kimpel Hall on the second floor. And the English Department was in the distance with the letter boxes, and I was standing up the hall, opposite one of the classrooms where we were all going to go. And there was an alcove there with Coke machines and coffee machines, and I'm standing there with a large group of people. I mean, students—M.A.s and M.F.A.s and people, and I didn't know anybody. And I was standing there, and I looked down the hall, and I saw a man approaching, and he was tall, wearing a shirt—a suit and tie. He'd—formally dressed, and I recognized his face. I said, "Oh! That's Jim Whitehead." So as he approached, I didn't want to stare, so I looked at something else. And suddenly, as he was opposite me, wheeled around suddenly, and he looked directly at

me, and it was slightly unnerving. And he thrust out his hand, and he looked at me, and he had a twinkle in his eye. And he said, "You must be Mr. Gavin." And I was so startled and dumbfounded [*SL laughs*] that I had no response. My mouth [*laughter*] opened, but not—I couldn't—not a sound came out. And I looked at him, and I was astonished bec—that he knew my name. I was really taken by surprise. And he said, "I've met everybody else." [*Laughter*] So you can't imagine the impression that made on me, you know. I mean, he—I thought, "My God, what an extraordinary human being, that he would care that much and that he would know everybody's name and face and that he would've"—you know, I was really moved.

[00:26:34] SL: That's good. And first guy you saw?

TF: Well, Skip—you know, when I came to visit—well, he was the first. But once I came here, I talked to John DuVal briefly. And I think I met—oh, they had us all into a room in my year—I had—we were a large class. I think there were nine poets and nine fiction writers in the two thou—in the 1994 class.

KS: Yeah, we had six in ours. We were the year before. There were three poets, three fiction writers. Two poets quit, so we were four of us by the time that—the year ended.

TF: And then we were a stampede of . . .

KS: Yeah, and then they came in—just—it was a huge . . .

SL: Like a cattle call, almost.

KS: Yeah.

TF: Yeah. And they got us into a room, and Skip said, "I know you have all been"—he was direct, and he said, "I know you have all been told that teaching your classes is the most important thing, but that is not true. Your writing is the most important thing here. You better write well, first of all. Teach your classes. Fine. Sure. Do well in the other classes you take, but write well while you're here." And that really made a big impact on me. And then Jim said somethin', and then Bill said, "And by the way, if I'm not teachin' the workshop, don't give me your stories. Give them to me when I'm [*laughter*] teachin' the workshop. That's when I want to see 'em."

[00:27:41] SL: Well, I mean, that's a pretty big—that's a huge influx.

TF: It is, and he had a kind of twinkle in his eye when he said it. And I didn't mind hearin' it. It was actually good to know.

SL: Uh-huh. [*KS laughs*] Okay, so we've got you guys here now. We know a little bit about—you know, what I have to say, just looking at you and hearing what I've heard so far, this diverse—the diversity aspect of who Jim and Bill and Skip have brought

into the program is just—you guys are like the poster boys of diversity, you know. And it's—I think that may have been one of the elements in you guys getting in—that you were coming from such different places and from different—from different places in your writing and in your skills. You know, obviously, they saw someone—something about what you had sent in that revealed some kind of potential and talent. So how—what was the—I guess I'm not sure where you guys wanna go with this, but I really wanna know how these guys entered your lives, because I think, from what I've heard so far, that one of the things about this program is that there was a real blur between what was classroom and what was life. And [*TM coughs*] it was like they—it really—the learning didn't stop or . . .

KS: Right, right.

[00:29:18] SL: . . . start in the classroom. These guys were living with you in every sense of the word. Is that what was . . .

KS: Well, it was the thing—it was the whole thing about what Skip said to y'all about writing. It's like writing is this—and it's—you know, writing is foremost, and that was it. You know, we were talkin' about writing all the time and was always writing, whether we were in a classroom or at parties or in bars or hangin'—talkin' on the phone or whatever. And we've—I think, you know, we've

continued that, that the writing—there is—it all blurs. Writing—you know, when you write, everything you do is writing. You wake up. Your relationships are writing. Your—I don't have kids. Tommy has kids, but then—and I don't know if Tommy looks at his kids and thinks of—"There's a story here" or not. But everything you do, you're thinking, "There's stories here." And everybody you meet, "There's stories here." And I—that's what I got from it all because it was constant—just writing, writing, writing. "What are you writing? What are you writing?" Writing—and then teaching and all that was sort of—you know, it was important, but it was still secondary to that. But it was just omnipresent—just the writing, the storytelling, and the—you know, just the constant—and in some cases, even like a—even competition 'cause [*laughs*] somebody gets somethin' published, you're happy for 'em. [00:30:36] You know, the thing that I learned about this program after I got out of it and started teaching at the colleges here and there in Virginia and Louisiana and this and that—this is like a family, this program. And people who see us together from other programs are kind of amazed at that. And I know guys at Florida State—and when we—John and I did a reading in Oxford, those guys came up from Florida State. [*Unclear words*]. And they were, like, just amazed that

Skip had come down, and you know, you were there, and we were all there. And they were just amazed at the camaraderie among us, and you know, it's just like friends forever. But it's—you know, it's writing, writing, writing, and just—you know, talking about writing and living the writing, and it's—I don't know, it's—just bein' back this weekend's been pretty inspiring already. And you know, I love these guys, you know, so [*laughs*]—and I love this program and this town for this reason, you know. But I don't know if this answers your question or not, but . . .

[00:31:36] DG: Well, I'd say Bill and Jim and Skip—they were the antithesis of formality or stuffy academics. You—they wanted to be called by their first names always and by everybody, and they had great humanity. There was no distance that I had found with previous professors—you know, a certain austerity and aloofness. Those guys—they did—that did not exist for them. They were warm and outgoing, and Bill would—I mean, we had so much fun with Bill, and you felt like he was a part of the group, and he was, and he still is. And Jim was the same way. And if you went to their house, they were always happy to see you, and they'd make you feel at home. And their wives were like that too—their entire family. And Skip was like that. And I

really think that's why they're so widely loved and respected and truly loved because they treated us better than I think you—we could ever have imagined. And I mean, it was just extraordinary. They really put their arms around you, and they would've done anything for us. They were just really tremendous men. I never experienced—I never—I'd never known men like that. [*Laughter*] Not wishing to be . . .

[00:33:06] TF: Not even in San Francisco? [*Laughter*]

DG: . . . not wishing to be . . .

KS: [*Unclear words*].

DG: . . . sentimental, but it was—you know, they were just really—you know, just tremendous.

SL: I think they felt a genuine . . .

DG: Tremendous human beings.

TF: But they're all hard-asses.

KS: Yeah, yeah.

DG: Oh, absolutely.

TF: They are such hard-asses.

KS: It wasn't like they just told you everything you did was great. No. Particularly Bill. [*Laughs*]

TF: I . . .

DG: Oh, they wouldn't praise your work. No way. They wouldn't

[*laughs*] praise your work.

TF: They would. I mean, they would on occasion.

KS: On occasion.

DG: If it was really, really good.

[00:33:30] TF: And when they did—I'll tell you a Bill story. When they did, it really meant a lot. I came into the program—I'd been—I had had twelve workshops with one guy down in south Alabama, and he was good for me in some ways. But what our workshops were, were you bring in a story, you read it out loud, and then we would line-edit it. We'd point out which words were repeated, [*laughter*] and it was—I knew there was a better way to look at stories. And he also said to us, "All that matters is lyricism," that ten pages of gorgeous prose is a short story. And I—you know, and so I learned to by lyrical to please that guy in that workshop.

KS: And then Bill . . .

TF: And I came here with all my pretensions, and I went into the workshops with the attitude of, "My ten pages are a story." And Bill would say, "Oh, no they're not." [*KS laughs*] Skip would say, "No, they're not. They're not a story. You need somethin' to happen to—you know, and then use your language and find a way to use it." And they were just what I needed to hear. And

they beat me up time and again, and I needed it. And you know, I always came back—never let 'em—you know, they would push you away, I mean, and it was your job to come back and get better, you know. They wanted you to learn the rules before you tried to break 'em. And it was amazing for me. It was exactly what I needed. And I was thirty, so I was old enough to appreciate it. And at the end, when my book got taken—*Poachers* got taken—Bill called me on the phone and said, "You know, I want you to know that I'm very proud of you." He said, "We were hard on you," he said, "and you—but you came back," he said. "And we respect that." That felt great. That was more—that was, in a way, more important than anything my father said [*KS laughs*] about my own writing 'cause he didn't have many compliments.

[00:35:10] KS: Yeah, I got the same response from him for my book. And he just kind of—when we did our reading in Fayetteville, he just took me aside and said, "That's a damn good book." And it's, like, probably—you know, I could win whatever awards from here on out, but that was—'cause he was hard on me. And I think I made a C in our workshop. Remember when you came up to me, you were scared. Tommy was scared 'cause he had heard I'd made a C. He goes, "I hear

he's really hard on Southern writers. I don't know what I'm gonna do. And he gave you a C?" I said, "I don't know what to tell you." [*Laughter*]

TF: Yeah. There was one person who didn't even . . .

KS: And speakin' of the devil.

TF: Speak of the devil. [*Laughter*]

SL: Really. The devil is with—among us now.

TF: That C-wielding motherfucker walks in [*SL laughs*] . . .

KS: But I remember when you and I did our readings, and I read that story where, you know, he takes apart the car. And Bill kind of grabbed me by the arm afterward, and he goes, "That scene where he takes apart the car—mmm!" That "mmm" [*TF laughs*] was like the best review I ever got. [*Laughter*]

[00:36:04] DG: No, he said to me—here—when I came, he looked me straight in the eye, and he said, "I read your story." He said, "That's why you're here." And you know, that meant the world to me. Bill said that. [*Bill Harrison pretends to cough*] [*Laughter*]

SL: So is that Bill around the corner there?

TF: Yeah, that's Bill around the corner.

SL: And are we going to be intimidated by his presence or . . .

TF: Not anymore.

SL: Not anymore.

TF: Okay, okay, a little bit. A little bit.

KS: No, it . . .

DG: Bill loves sentimentality. He just loves sentimentality.

KS: And stories about children. [*Laughter*]

TF: Crippled children.

BH: With dogs.

KS: Crippled children. [*SL laughs*] Yeah. With dogs and leukemia.

TF: With crippled dogs.

DG: Oh, maybe we should . . .

[00:36:48] SL: Well, okay. So . . .

TF: [*Unclear words*].

SL: . . . you know, the effort here was to have the three of you in the same room at the same time so we could hear good stories about Bill and Jim and the program.

TF: What have these been? [*DG laughs*]

SL: Hmm?

TF: What have these been? [*Laughter*]

BH: Poop is deep in here.

KS: [*Laughs*] He's leavin'. Now we can talk again.

TF: Yeah.

SL: Is he leaving?

TF: Yeah, he's gone.

BH: Okay. One second.

TF: They're all gone now.

SL: Gone now.

[00:37:20] KS: Oh, I gotta tell the story about Skip and Whitehead and my thesis.

SL: Okay.

TF: Yeah.KS: This is one of the best stories of—one of the—at least revolved around me, which is the most important thing. [*Laughs*] No,

I . . .

SL: Okay, tell . . .

KS: . . . no, I was—when I was workin' on my thesis, and I did the story when I applied for my last job to prove that—you know, in a writing program you're gonna get diverse opinions about your work—often contradictory opinions about your work. You just have to kind of pick and choose what you can from each of your teachers because they're gonna tell you crazily different things about the same thing. You know. But I was workin' on this novella in which this guy—it's set in West Virginia after the Buffalo Creek flood, which was real event that—you know, a makeshift mining dam broke and flooded a whole valley. Killed

like a hundred and thirty-some people or something like that. So I had a guy working for—I had fictionalized the head guy working for the mining company. They killed his wife, and he quit workin' when—he was a mining surveyor, and he quit workin' for the company, and he squatted on their land in a Airstream trailer and was growing mushrooms and whatnot, you know, in an abandoned coal mine, and decided to start exploring the mine. And turns out the mine had actually had a [*DG clears throat*] roof fall in which—and this was a historical event in which a bunch of Black miners had been, like, caved in, and they just, like, left 'em in there. Walled up the mine and kept goin'. That was actually true. But anyway—so he—you know, he discovers this. So he's back there mappin' this mine out, you know, and I had all this really groovy mine-surveying stuff, you know.

SL: Yeah.

[00:38:54] KS: [*Laughs*] Pages and pages. And it was, like, in the fifties—fifty-six, fifty-eight pages or somethin' and—but—and that's—and then I go to Skip—and his girlfriend—he had a new girlfriend, and she was a drummer for a snake-handler band, so I had, like, every cliché in the world goin' on there for West Virginia. And the—she was this drummer for a snake-handler band only because they were the best rock-and-roll band in

town. And they are good bands. If you ever watch the videos, the snake-handler bands—it's good rockabilly. But—so he was with her, and then so Skip was tellin' me, "This needs to be fifteen- or twenty-page story focused on this guy and this girl—this drummer." I'd go to Whitehead. Whitehead would say, "This needs to be a hundred and seventeen pages long, and he needs to turn that coal mine into an amusement park." [*Laughter*] So I'd go back to Skip, and it's fifteen, twenty pages, focus on these two. Go back to Jim. [*DG laughs*] Hundred and seventeen pages, amusement park. [00:39:56] And it's like—and then, finally, Skip goes over to Jim. He said, "Jim, we're drivin' Kevin crazy. I'm tellin' him, 'Fifteen, twenty pages, focus on these two characters.' You're tellin' him, 'Hundred and [*laughter*] seventeen pages with the amusement park,' and he doesn't know who he's writin' this story for, me or you." And then he said—and Skip said—and Jim just slams his fists on his desk. Says, "Goddamn it, Skip, they're not writing for me and you. They're writing for God." And then Skip says, "Well, that may be true, Jim, but I'm pretty sure God doesn't want a amusement park in a goddamn coal mine." [*Laughter*] But they were both tellin' me the same thing: I didn't have enough goin' on in that coal mine. You know, so Skip in his way was tellin'

me, and Jim in his bizarre way was tellin' me, and just—so it was—after I thought about it, it was the same lesson, you know. So [*laughs*] . . .

[00:40:49] SL: All right. So do we have any favorite stories about Bill or Jim that you want to relate?

DG: Well, not really associated with writing, but we [*KS laughs*] . . .

SL: That's fine.

DG: . . . we used to—we—Skip and Bill and Tommy and Kevin and a bunch of us used to go to Hot Springs once a year. And we'd all stay at a place called the Tower on the way into Hot Springs on Park Street. And we did that for years and years, but we always had a lot of laughs—good times—but I always felt a little pressure because—not that I really know anything about horses, but I knew a little bit. I mean, I'd spent a lot of time at racetracks or—you know, my father, like, grew up or—well, in a way, my father used to run a racetrack back in Ireland. So I remember I was—we were at Hot Springs one day, and Bill said to me—"Gavin," he says, "you gotta give us a horse here." He said, "You know, we need—I need to—you know, we haven't been doin' too well." He said, "We need one of those cast-iron plungers." And [*laughter*] so I said, "I'm workin' on it, Bill. I'm workin' on it." So there's a $10,000 claiming race, and I like a

horse in the claiming race. He's droppin' down from about twenty-five grand down to ten, and he looks pretty good, and he's hot on the board. The odds—he's about 9–5. And I said to Bill—I said, "Bill, I think we can get our money back on this horse here." And he said, "Which one?" I said, "The two horse, Bubba Menkus." And he said, "Goddamn it, Gavin," he said, "there's no fuckin' way in hell I'm puttin' money on a horse called Bubba." [*Laughter*] I said, "Bill, I think he's gonna win." And he did. But Bill wouldn't bet a horse called Bubba. [*Laughter*]

SL: Bubba.

[00:42:56] KS: Remember when we all bet on that Heffernan horse and lost our ass? That's a [*laughs*] . . .

SL: All right, your turn.

KS: Tom?

TF: I'm—I need more direction, almost, I mean—but . . .

KS: Bill story.

TF: Bill stories, but . . .

DG: Or Jim.

TF: Or Jim stories.

DG: Either one.

TF: I remember being deeply conflicted because I—when I gave my

final reading here, I had a line I was really proud of. I said that—you know, I'm thanking everybody—all my teachers. "I wanna thank Bill Harrison for takin' all the kudzu out of my stories, and Jim Whitehead for puttin' it all back in." [*Laughter*] I forever felt this pressure from him to make me—he says, "Put the women in sack cloths." And Bill would say, "No, no, no, no, no, no, don't do that." [*Laughter*] When I first finished—or, you know, when I had my thesis meeting with Whitehead—I'd already had one with Harrison and one with Skip. And I went over to Jim's office, and you know, he had the stories, and he had a couple of complaints. He said, "Cottonmouths aren't black." And I said, "Well, Jim, they can be." He said, "Goddamn it, I'm from Mississippi. They can't be." [*Laughter*] So I had my snake book in my car, and I go out to the trunk of the car, and I get the snake book. And I say, "Open it up." He says, "Okay, you're right." [*Laughter*] And then he poured bourbon, and it was ten o'clock in the mornin', and gave me a glass and said, "You're done. Welcome to the club." That was a great moment for me.

SL: That is a great moment.

TF: It was a great moment, because I—you know . . .

[00:44:23] SL: You know, I was gonna—that's—one of my questions

I like to ask is did any of y'all have the courage to enter an argument with Jim?

TF: He loved you to. [*KS laughs*] Yeah, I don't think that I ever actually did.

KS: Not about our writing.

TF: Yeah. It was about everything else and—you know, I entered into a argument with him once about masturbation. [*KS laughs*] And I thought he was a total prude about it because I was startin'—writin' a story that had lots of masturbation in it at the time. [*SL laughs*]

[00:44:53] KS: Did he read it? Did he read it?

TF: He did read it. I mean, I actually met with Skip about the same story, and Skip said, "You know, Tom, there's a lot of masturbation in this story." [*SL laughs*] And I said, "Well, that's what it's about." He said, "I know, but a little bit goes a long way. This is a lot of masturbation." [*Laughter*] And he said, "And consider the guy in" . . .

DG: *Portnoy's Complaint*?

TF: No, speaking of masturbation. No, the guy in Martin Amis's *Money*—that narrator, you know, who says . . .

DG: Oh yeah, John Self.

TF: . . . who says, "Unless I tell you otherwise" . . .

KS: Or *Confederacy of Dunces*. [*Laughs*]

TF: . . . "unless I tell it to you otherwise, I'm always smokin' a cigarette." So my line should've been, "Unless I tell you otherwise, you know, I whacked off last night." That should've been in the story, but I couldn't find any good way to do it and—so then I met with Whitehead about it. [*KS coughs*] And he said, "Masturbation. Now, I think that we should abide by what the Cub Scout journal—the Cub Scout guide implies. Just—your hands off. That's a good rule." And I looked at him, and I thought, "Oh my God, you're serious. You're serious." And I just thought, "I can't talk to him, really. I mean, he's—you know, he's just this big, thick-headed guy who's [*KS laughs*] too serious about everything." And it was about a year later—Beth Ann and I went to Paris. We actually got engaged—I met my wife in this program, Beth Ann Fennelly. Amazing poet.

KS: Great poet. [TF points to DG to provoke a response]

DG: Yeah, absolutely. [*Laughter*]

TF: And . . .

KS: A little late on that. You were a little late on that. [*Laughter*]

[00:46:10] TF: And—but she and I met in Paris—we got engaged in Paris, and we met . . .

KS: And she got us drunk on Brazilian liqueur one night and . . .

TF: Oh God, that was a good night. She [*KS laughs*]—but we met Bill and Skip and had drinks in Paris, and we told them we were engaged, and they started buyin' us all these drinks. And we wound up gettin' absolutely just trashed with 'em. We never ate. We had the best—one of the best nights of—it was one of the best nights of our lives because I'd never seen those guys like that before. They were away, and they were looser. And Jim said to me, "You don't like me." And I said, "I think you're a prude." [*Laughter*] That's how drunk I was. He said, "I'm not a prude." [*KS coughs*] He said, "About masturbation"—he said, "I"—and he just corrected me gently. He said, "You know, you were wrong about that. I was—I thought it was funny, and you took me seriously." He knew just what I was talkin' about. [*KS laughs*] And after—and later in the night, he took me aside and hugged me. One of those side hugs, you know. "It's all okay," he was sayin', and it was. And we were different from then on. It's just—but we had that great night in Paris. And the next day, we went to a museum with 'em. We went to that—what's that museum over there? The really big one.

KS: The Louvre?

DG: D'Orsay?

KS: The Louvre?

TF: Yeah, the d'Orsay.

DG: Musée d'Orsay.

TF: Yeah, we were there, and it was so great because I went with Skip, and Beth Ann went with Jim, and they each had somebody to teach every—about the paintings to. You know, if they were together, you know, they would compete on . . .

KS: Yeah, they'd argue.

TF: . . . who could teach the other and who gets to be the teacher and who has to listen. They don't—nobody's gonna listen, but I was there listenin' to Skip, and she was listenin' to Jim, and it was just great.

[00:47:37] SL: You know, [*TF clears throat*] I think this personal interaction that—outside the classroom and, really, outside the academic side of things is what probably helped give you the will to survive the intense criticism. I mean, these guys were actually looking at your work.

KS: After going through the shit we went through in workshop . . .

SL: Yeah.

KS: . . . asking a girl out for a date is a lot easier.

TF: It's much easier. [*Laughter*] I remember—hey, I remember—and I think you all were both in this in this workshop when they were destroying my story "Poachers." They were just takin' it—

and see, it was Skip's workshop, and I remember—and . . .

KS: The only thing I didn't like was the banjo.

TF: I think I took the banjo out.

KS: It was—yeah.

TF: That was too deliberate.

KS: [*Laughter*] Yeah.

[00:48:24] TF: But I mean—but someone said a couple tentative things, and then Michael Downs said, "Well, I think this is a story about wilderness." And Skip said, "That's why I don't like it." Bam. Slammed his hand down. "It's too goddamn met—allegorical," he said. And he . . .

KS: Oh!

TF: . . . he was off on it for a long time.

KS: 'Cause he hated allegory.

TF: Hated allegory. And I remember I was writin' notes—and you were supposed to write notes then. I was writing, "Fuck them! Who are they? Don't look up. [*Laughter*] Don't blush. Don't blush. Just keep pretending you're writing notes. Fuck them! Who" . . .

KS: Nod and go on.

TF: And I still got that manuscript somewhere. [*SL laughs*] But he was right; it was too allegorical. And I was reading another

Arkansas writer, Buddy Nordan's book, *The Sharpshooter Blues*, not long after that. And he had that mail truck pull away from the story, and it had an STP bumper sticker on the back. And I thought, "That's cool. I remember those bumper stickers." Had a little epiphany of my own and thought, "You know, I don't have any of those bumper stickers on the back of any Jeeps in my stories. I need to make the real world more vivid."

SL: Detailed.

KS: Yeah, yeah.

SL: Yeah.

TF: Yeah, have to put more detail in there.

KS: The specifics.

SL: Yeah.

KS: But . . .

[00:49:22] SL: Yeah. Okay, any [*KS laughs*] other stories you want to tell? We're about to change shifts. I—you know, I kind of wish I'd gotten each of you alone 'cause I feel like, you know, I would've given you more . . .

KS: I like this. I like the . . .

TF: [*Unclear words*].

SL: . . . more of a chance to really address . . .

KS: Yeah.

SL: . . . all the things and—'cause you have to kind of let each of you talk, but . . .

TF: Well, this is like playing doubles in tennis. You know, once in a while . . .

KS: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

TF: . . . your partner gets the ball, and you can go over there and rest for a minute.

KS: Because you know, the other guy can hit the volleys and . . .

TF: Yeah, just . . .

KS: . . . the overheads.

TF: . . . rest for a minute.

KS: The overheads and . . .

[00:49:57] SL: Speak of tennis, did you ever play tennis against Bill?

KS: We used to play tennis all the time.

TF: Yeah, we played a ton.

KS: We played doubles.

TF: Yeah, we played doubles. A lot of doubles.

KS: Remember David Koen? I'd have to be his partner, and he sucked, and I'd have—I'd . . .

TF: Yeah.

KS: . . . get pissed off and hit the ball over the fence 'cause . . .

TF: He would yell, "Fuck!" [*KS laughs*] He didn't like to lose.

SL: Did y'all ever play flag football?

TF: No.

KS: No.

SL: No?

KS: But I remember one time we were playing tennis, Skip did three aces in a row. [*TM coughs*] I was on his—Skip and I were doubles—we might've been against you and somebody. Maybe Beth Ann.

TF: He had a hell of a serve, Skip did.

KS: Yeah, Skip made three—you know, boom, ace, boom, ace, boom, ace. Forty-love. And I turned around and looked at him. I said, "Skip, now don't double-fault this away." And he goes, "Kevin, I wish you hadn't said that." And he double-faulted it away.

[00:50:34] SL: Double-faulted. Yeah. [*KS laughs*] Well, let's do a round—one more round—let's do a round of just kind of summarizing what you took away with you from the program and how it's affected the rest of your life.

KS: I got great readers from here, people I trust to read my stuff, and they're honest with you. And one of them has died recently, so I have one fewer. But you know—but just—you know, just—

you know, people that—you know, they're good readers, they're your friends, but they're also honest with you. They don't just tell you everything is great. But like I said earlier, it's kind of a—this whole Arkansas M.F.A. thing was—at least while we were there—was kind of a family atmosphere. And you know, it's like if I ever needed to call somebody to get me out of trouble, Skip Hays would probably be the first person [*laughs*] I'd call, you know. And he would come—well, like, we were jokin' with him today. He was comin' to get us. We had told John—you remember when we called you?

TF: Yeah, yeah.

[00:51:35] KS: About Yates and gettin' out of jail and all that. We did that to Skip today, and Skip—you—John said, "Here are the keys." He was comin'. He was comin' to help us out. We were, like, jokin' with him that we'd wrecked the car and were drunk or somethin', you know. It's like [*laughs*]—but it was just, you know, just the whole family atmosphere, and there's so many talented people and good writers. And I mean, there's an element of competitiveness to it, but you're always—I mean, Tommy just made the *LA Times* thing, and I'm so proud of when these guys I know do this kind of stuff. It's just wonderful, you know. It's like—you know, and it's great to be a part of that,

and I have seen these people grow as writers and artists and people, you know, and I just love these people. And . . .

SL: Okay.

KS: . . . I'll be here forever for that. [*Laughs*]

SL: Okay.

[00:52:21] DG: When I—you know, when I attended the workshops, and I heard the other people talking about the work—the work that we would all have to read—we'd have a week to read it—I didn't know an awful lot about the structure of stories and voice and characterization and plot and language. I sort of maybe knew a little bit through reading and maybe kind of an innate, fuzzy idea about lang—well, about what would make up a story. But I learned it from those guys, and it was something that I had a natural, I suppose, inclination to learn, that I was tremendously interested in learning that. It wasn't anything that I resisted. It was very easy for me. I don't mean that I was better than anybody else at learning it, but it was—I—it—you know, it wasn't difficult for me. I was eager to learn that, and it, you know, it—that was invaluable—knowing—learning—picking up those skills, and I can—you know, I can read work today, and I can read writers. And I can really—I can—I think I can understand things that I would never have understood, hadn't—

had I not learned it here from Bill and Skip and Jim. And that was really—that was extraordinary, being able to—but also as a teacher. You know, I teach at a community college, and I teach English and writing and that sort of stuff. And I very rarely get stumped because I can always fall back on what I learned here. And it carries me through, and I have found out that there are other—others in our profession that are not that lucky. They didn't have the foundation, and they didn't have the great teachers that we had, so I'll always be grateful for that.

SL: That's good.

[00:54:31] TF: We've talked about Hot Springs a couple of times. And I remember one year at Hot Springs—y'all both were there. We'd always go to this German restaurant on maybe a Saturday night, and they had these—you know, you'd get a—kind of like a room like a cave.

DG: Rathskeller.

TF: Rathskeller . . .

SL: Yeah.

TF: . . . in [*DG laughs*] the back corner. And one night we were all just there, and I had all these friends, and I felt somethin' I had never felt before. I felt it more powerfully than family, even. I've got a—I have a great family, you know, a brother and

cousins, and I'm very close to 'em, but this was somethin' else. This was somethin' I have chosen, and it was really incredible to be there with these people that I admired and loved. And I'll never forget that feeling that, you know, and I've not had it again even, you know. That this group of—the people I felt closest to in the world at that moment. And I love them. I'm still friends with them. And that—as Kevin said, it's for, you know, readers, but also friends. Come away with friends. It's amazing and—when I met John Dufresne for the first time in a bookstore in New Orleans, he said, "You went to Arkansas, right?" And there's that connection. Because of that, he's gonna give me [*DG clears throat*]—I have a chance where someone else might not. Not that he's stingy with his chances. That's not what I mean. [*KS laughs*] But there was a connection there we had already. And I had that with Lex Williford and with Steve Yarbrough—the first time I met all these people. And you know—and they really—I know I'm a better writer because of those guys. I know that I am.

[00:55:54] SL: Yeah, I get a sense that the things that you guys got here, you are providing it everywhere you go. It's like it has its own life.

KS: Yeah.

SL: That you guys are perpetuating it. And . . .

TF: And I'm now doin' the same thing, you know, that they were doin'. I'm now teaching in a program, and I hear them all the time in my head. I mean . . .

KS: Yeah, yeah.

TF: . . . they're always there. I'm always quoting Jim or Skip or . . .

KS: With . . .

TF: . . . or Bill. And it seems like I quote Bill more than anybody else. I almost never quote Jim, but . . .

KS: [*Laughs*] 'Cause you only have so much time. [*Laughter*]

TF: But Jim's stuff was so specific to what I was workin' on. You know, Bill had, you know, the things—you know, "You only use first person if their voice demands to be heard."

KS: Yeah.

[00:56:38] TF: And "Every story begins with a contract between the reader and the writer—writer and the reader." I mean, it's, you know, things that I believed in that he made it his sound bites. He was really good at that. So I mean, I hear those [*KS laughs*] guys and use their—pass their wisdom on all the time.

SL: That's good.

KS: And he's, like, in Mississippi [points at TF] . . .

TF: Yeah.

KS: . . . Iowa [points at DG]. And I'm in Montana now. And so we're spreading the Arkansas, although they're kinda used to it in Mississippi, I think, at this point.

TF: Yeah, they're [*unclear words*].

SL: Mh-hmm. They have to . . .

KS: Barry had been there for a while.

TF: Barry—yeah, [*KS laughs*] Barry taught the same way those guys taught. And you know, he did just the way they did, so—and I do too.

SL: All right. This is good stuff, guys.

[00:57:17 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]