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"Poet at Large: A Conversation with Robert Bly"

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ROBERT BLY

I live my life in growing orbits
Which move out over the things in the world....

I have wandered in a face, for hours,
Passing through dark fires....

And I am gone to the desert, to the parched places,
To the landscape of zeroes!

I can't tell if this joy
is from the body, or the soul, or a third place.

BILL MOYERS: Tonight, Robert Bly reads his poems and talks about his life. I'm Bill Moyers.

When I told Robert Bly that I would like to talk with him on his home ground, he replied, "Then meet me in the north country." Here, on the shore of Kabekona Lake in Minnesota, and at a farm four hours further south, Robert Bly has grounded himself. He was born fifty-two years ago on the Minnesota prairie, three generations after his family arrived in America -- Norwegian Lutheran pioneer stock.

He left the family farm a maverick, bound for Harvard, where he studied poetry with Archibald MacLeish. He first found solitude in New York City, where he spent three years living alone in a small room, working occasionally as a clerk or a house painter, eating one meal a day at the automat, reading hours at a time in the public library.

In time, he came back to his father's farm. He could live frugally here, could think and write. His first book of poetry, Silence in the Snowy Fields, captured solitude in the Minnesota landscapes. By the time he won the National Book Award in 1968 for The Light Around the Body, Robert Bly was writing about the Vietnam War, contemporary values, and the unconscious.

There's a rhythm to his life now. Two weeks a month he spends with his four children near the family farm in southern Minnesota. Four or five days a month he supports himself, barely, by giving poetry readings at colleges and in community forums like Cooper Union in New York. The rest of his time is spent here among

the lakes and pines of the north country, where he translates poets from abroad and writes most of his poetry. Robert Bly thinks the best poets finally come home.

MOYERS: Were you as creative in New York as you are here?

BLY: Well, my own opinion is that no one is creative in their twenties, because you're too neurotic, you're too confused. I tried to write in my twenties, ~~but~~ I didn't do much. But how about you when you were in Texas? The **problem** is that no one wants to go back to the place where they were born. You want to go to New York, right? You want to do something like that. So here, you're not in Texas.

MOYERS: I'm not writing poetry, either.

(Both laugh.)

MOYERS: Have you spent a lot of time running from that northern Protestant Lutheranism in which men are not supposed to be expressive, in which tears are not allowed?

BLY: I don't know if the word "running" would be right. Fighting would be something like that. I tried for ten years to write poetry using only that male Protestant patriarchal Western European side, and it was a hopeless failure. And all through my twenties the poems were nothing. And eventually I came to realize that you have to have, you know, a feminine side to yourself also, the feeling side develop. And so I'm still involved in that. The last five or six years I've learned how to weep for the first time.

MOYERS: You've learned how to weep.

BLY: I've learned how to weep.

MOYERS: Over what?

BLY: Sometimes out of thinking of the suffering of my own life; instead of having a stiff upper lip, which was what you recommended, you weep. I remember weeping went on during the Vietnam War, over other people's suffering. And evidently weeping is something that's done a lot in the world. You wouldn't know it, to be in Minnesota, but evidently when people find something beautiful they weep. One day I was listening to a symphony, a Schönberg thing, and the snow was falling and I started to weep, I started to weep for an hour, I couldn't stop.

MOYERS: One of the best lines that appealed to me is that line where you talk about the parts of us which grow when we're far from the centers of ambition.

BLY: Far from the centers of ambition, right. So, that's the kind of gift given you if you move back to your crummy little place. At least you're far from New York or Los Angeles. And I understood that best when I'd been moved out to the farm after being in New York a while, we moved out to the farm, we had a horse; we didn't have any money, so I didn't have any water in the house, so we had an old windmill. So I went out to water my horse one day, and I'd been read-

ing the Buddhists. And I was told in college that I was supposed to be ambitious as a poet. Send my poems out, get them published, get them into New Yorker, whatever -- right? Buddhists say no, that's all wrong, you don't understand, that's completely wrong. If you want to be a poet, you have to merge with the trees and the animals and so on. Now, those things don't have any ambition. So therefore you can merge with them. So therefore they try to teach not-ambition. So I wrote a little poem,

How **marvelous** to think of giving up all ambition!
Suddenly I see with such clear eyes
The white flake of snow
That has just fallen in the horse's mane!

(At Cooper Union.)

BLY: "Six Winter Privacy Poems." Part one.

About four, a few flakes.
I empty the teapot out in the snow,
feeling shoots of joy in the new cold.
By nightfall, wind,
the curtains on the south sway softly.

Part two.

My shack has two rooms; I use one.
The lamplight falls on my chair and table
and I fly into one of my own poems --
I can't tell you where --
as if I appeared where I am now,
in a wet field, snow falling.

Third poem.

More of the fathers are dying each day.
It's time for the sons and the daughters.
Bits of darkness are gathering around them.
And the bits of darkness appear as flakes of light.

A little meditation poem.

There is a solitude like black mud!
Sitting in this darkness singing,
I can't tell if this joy
is from the body, or the soul, or a third place.

(Scattered laughter, applause from audience.)

BLY: (Laughs.) A little poem, "Listening to Bach."

Inside this music there is someone
who is not well described by the names
of Jesus or Jehovah, or the Lord of Hosts!

Here's a last little one, the sixth one.

When I awoke, new snow had fallen.
I am alone, yet someone else is with me,

drinking coffee, looking out at the snow.

(Applause from audience.)

(In Minnesota.)

MOYERS: When did you know for sure that you wanted to write poetry for a living?

BLY: It was in college, and I was studying Yeats.

MOYERS: At Harvard.

BLY: Yeah; and we started to work on Yeats, and I was astounded how much could be contained inside a single poem. Of the man's life, and of his opinions, and of the past, and of his occult work and of his own private thought. I had always thought of poetry as sort of like a bird singing something eccentric that happened at the edge of something. And suddenly, reading Yeats, you realize, as I've realized since, that the entire work in psychology -- if you go into poetry and write it, you're drawn to the most amazing things that have happened in the last hundred years, which is psychology, the advances in psychology. You're also drawn into politics and you're drawn into the whole question of nature, and you're drawn into what is the collective -- you follow me?

MOYERS: Yeah.

BLY: It was when I realized that inside a poem you could find the entire world and work in it.

MOYERS: So when someone asks you, From where does a poem come, your answer is, Everywhere.

BLY: Yes, everywhere. But I suppose especially from, let's say, the dark side, or something. Since human beings became civilized, they have a tremendous liking for the light side of themselves, the side on which the light falls -- the civilized side, the polite side, the economic side. But actually underneath all of that there's a dark side, which is sometimes referred to as a shadow. So therefore in the shadow is contained everything in yourself that you don't like, as well as your whole primitive self. So if someone says, Where does the poem come from, in most cases it comes up from the unnoticed side of every human being, it comes up from the primitive part of him.

MOYERS: I read someone who said, "Robert Bly's poems are a journey into the interior. He's down there somewhere, waiting for us."

BLY: (Laughing.) Maybe, if I haven't left. But I like that idea very much. In myself, what I have been trying to do, I suppose, in the last -- well, I'll read you a poem which I wrote in New York; I'd been living in New York and then I left and went down to -- I was heading for Charleston, I went across the Chesapeake Bay. And I hadn't seen water for two or three years. And moreover, I felt while I was living in New York that I would probably never do anything, that my poems would probably be a failure, that I would never publish a book of poems. And yet I received enough nourishment from simply writing and reading poems that that was all right with me. So this is mentioned in the poem; I'll read it to you. "On the Ferry Across

Chesapeake Bay."

On the orchard of the sea, far out are whitecaps,
Water that answers questions no one has asked,
Silent speakers of the grave's rejoinders;
Having accomplished nothing, I am traveling somewhere
else;
O deep green sea, it's not for you
That this smoking body ploughs toward death;
And it's not for the strange blossoms of the sea
That I drag my thin legs over the Chesapeake Bay;
Though perhaps by your motions the body heals;
For though on its road the body cannot march
With golden trumpets -- it must march --
And the sea gives up its answer as it falls into itself.

MOYERS: You're fortunate to catch moments like that and hold them forever. What you call peak experiences.

BLY: Yeah. And I was glad to do that and feel it, to see it actually in the water. And usually that experience doesn't come until you're twenty-nine, maybe, or thirty -- maybe in your thirties -- when finally you forget what the collective wants. Forget it. And forget what your parents want. And you slowly fall into yourself.

MOYERS: You're off on your own.

BLY: And that's a wonderful moment.

MOYERS: You said at the reading, or in one of your poems, that you aren't sure whether a man's feeling of joy comes from his body, or his soul, or a third place. What is that third place?

BLY: Well, I was doing some meditation during that poem. It was a little poem that goes,

There is a solitude like black mud!
Sitting in this darkness singing,
I can't tell if this joy
is from the body, or the soul, or a third place.

And I suppose there's a little joke in there, because we're told we're told we're either body or soul; there must be more possibilities than that. But what happens, I think -- I'll just go back a little. We're at about the seventieth or eightieth anniversary now of Freud's first work in bringing the unconscious forward. And Freud said, you know, you have a conscious and light mind, and underneath that you have a dark, unknown mind. And Christianity did a great deal of harm in that it called the unconscious the devil; therefore it blocked access to that mind for centuries. So it's a very important thing that has happened when Freud and Jung, eighty years ago, and Adler and others began to give attention to the unconscious mind. That's exactly opposite than calling it Satan. Actually, what Freud did is say you have two minds and the dark one may be the more intelligent of the two. The dark one is the mind that makes up your dreams. And Jung later showed how incredibly intricate and complicated and spiritual, actually, the dreams are. So this is my idea: about twenty years ago an important change occurred in the psyche -- or

at least of Western man -- and that is that after human beings in the West, through Freud and Jung, started to pay attention to the unconscious in a positive way, to regard it as something positive, it began to get more confidence, just as if you pay attention to a child it'll start to blossom. So the unconscious has now responded by creating something which was not here before. It's as if the unconscious is now objectified and is out there somewhere. Now, I don't know, I don't understand it very well, but it's something like this: for a thousand years now there has only been in the West man against nature. Man is intelligent, as Descartes says, and wonderful, and nature is stupid and doesn't think and is full of snakes and alligators and so on; a naked confrontation between man and nature. What I think has happened is that the attention to the unconscious has created a third being, which now stands between man and nature, and that's a wonderfully joyous occurrence.

MOYERS: But which joins them, doesn't it?

BLY: It joins them. It can act as something between man and nature, as if the old unconscious of human beings now, which has been for thousands of years, millions of years, has agreed to come out and take a stand between man and nature. So there isn't that naked split anymore.

MOYERS: And this is that third place.

BLY: I think so. I don't know what to call this. I called it like the third being which is now present, and one of the reasons that there's so much excitement in poetry now is because in the old days, let's say, let's say in the eighteenth century, either Pope wrote a poem about man -- the proper study of mankind is man; and he stayed completely with the man -- or Keats would write a nature poem. And it was as if those were the only two choices. But now there's this third presence inside; and what is exciting about poetry since the 1920s is that sometimes the poem goes into this third being and comes directly out of it. And it's neither man nor nature; I can't explain it any more.

MOYERS: How do you draw it out? It's not like putting a bucket down into a well.

BLY: I think that, of course, everyone who wants to get near it, in a way, would follow the road that Freud and Jung took. In other words, you pay attention to your dreams. If you have something by your bed, you write down your dreams. Because the dreamer is entirely a part of this third place, or it's entirely a part of the unconscious. And so you pay attention to nature also a lot. All Chinese poetry, which has a lot of the third presence in it in ancient times, paid terrific attention to nature, because this being is close to nature, as well as to yourself.

MOYERS: Is this how you write your poems?

BLY: When I started to write, I was writing completely with my conscious mind. That's the way I was taught to write. And I wrote for ten years without any success. And by being alone, I began to sink down a little bit into the unconscious, by being alone a long time. And now I think of it differently, a little bit differently now. I'd

say that there's that one moment in which you fall into yourself, hmm? And that's a moment in which you feel the unconscious going to hold you up; it's going to hold you up. It isn't necessary to be successful, you're already successful, you understand me?

MOYERS: It's like swimming in the Dead Sea.

BLY: Yes! You feel a support underneath you, made of your own feelings, and **so** on. And that's a wonderful moment.

MOYERS: **But** most of us don't trust our feelings that much.

BLY: No, and that's a great problem of being a male in the West. We're just not taught to do that. So you could also say that you're being held up by the ocean. After all, the name of the ocean is mare, which is the same word as Mary. So in a way, the ocean also stands for all the feelings and all the feminine parts inside a man, which one learns to trust and to help hold him up.

(At Cooper Union.)

BLY: So I'll give you a poem about a couple of my children. I have two daughters, one's sixteen, one's fifteen, called Mary and Bid-dy, and this is a poem which touches on them. We don't have a television set, never had, so when we get snowed in or something, then the girls -- and I have a couple of little boys, too -- what happens is that they usually make up a play or something, and my daughter Mary usually casts herself as the princess, and the boys get the crummy parts, because they're littler...

(Laughter from audience.)

BLY: And then they cast it and put on the costumes and put it on, and Sunday night the grownups are invited up to watch it for a small fee.

(Laughter.)

BLY: And so this describes one of those nights.

Ah, it's lovely to follow paths in the snow made by human feet. The paths wind gaily around the ends of snowdrifts, they rise and fall. How amazed I am, after working hard in the afternoon, that when I sit down at the table, with my elbows touching the elbows of my children, so much love flows out and around in circles....

Each child flares up as a small fire in the woods....
Biddy chortles over her new hair, curled for the first time last night, over her new joke song.

Yankee Doodle went to town,
a-riding on a turtle,
turned the corner just in time
to see a lady's girdle.... (that's a Taurus)

Mary knows the inscription she wants on her coffin if she dies young...

(Laughter from audience.)

BLY:

...and she says it:

Where the bee sucks there suck I
In a cowslip's bell I lie.... (couple of lines
from Shakespeare)

She is obstinate and light at the same time,
a heron who flies pulling long legs behind, or bal-
ances unsteadily on a stump, aware of all the small
birds at the edge of the forest, where it's shadowy
...longing to capture the horse with only one hair
from its mane....

And Biddy can pick herself up and run over the
muddy river bottom without sinking in; she already
knows all about holding, and she kisses each grownup
carefully before going to bed; at the table she faces
you laughing, bent over slightly towards you, like a
tree bent in wind, protective of this old shed she
is leaning over....

And all the books around on the walls are light
as feathers in a great feather bed, they weigh hardly
anything! Only the encyclopedias, left lying on the
floor by the chair, contain the heaviness of the three-
million-year-old life of the oyster-shell breakers; oh,
they were so long, those dusks -- ten thousand years
long -- where they fell over the valley from the cave
mouth (where we sit).... And the last man killed by
flu who knew how to weave a pot of river clay in the
way that the wasps do.... Now he's dead and only the
wasps know. And the marmoset curls its toes around
the slippery branch, aware of the furry chest of its
mother, long since sunk into a hole that appeared in
the afternoon....

Well, dinner's finished, and the children pass
out invitations composed with felt pens.

You are invited to
"The Thwarting of Captain Alphonse"

PRINCESS GARDINER:	MARY BLY
CAPTAIN ALPHONSE:	WESLEY RAY
AUNT AUGUST:	BIDDY BLY
RAILWAY TRACK:	NOAH BLY
TRAIN:	SAM RAY

Costumes and Sets by Mary Bly and Wesley Ray
Free Will Offering Accepted

(Laughter, applause from audience.)

BLY: I'm going to give you a poem now, I'll give you a poem of
my own which is connected a little bit with grief. And it's a poem
sort of out of the '70s. And it's called "Snowbanks North of the
House," and it's about those things that happen in Minnesota when
snow comes down from the north and comes from Canada or somewhere,
and it's everywhere except right around the house. North side of
the house there'll be a gap of five to six feet, and I'd noticed
that since I was a boy. And finally I wrote this little poem about it.

Those great sweeps of snow that stop suddenly
 six feet from the house,
Thoughts that go so far.
The boy gets out of high school
 and reads no more books.
The son stops calling home.
The mother puts down her rolling pin
 and makes no more bread.
And the wife looks at her husband one night
 at a party,
And loves him no more.

And the energy leaves the wine,
And the minister falls leaving the church.
It will not come closer.
The one inside moves back,
And the hands touch nothing, and are safe.

And the father grieves for his son, and
 will not leave the room -- (this is Lincoln)
And the father grieves for his son, and
 will not leave the room where the coffin
 stands;
He turns away from his wife, and she sleeps alone.

And the sea lifts and falls all night,
And the moon goes on through the unattached heavens
 alone.
And the toe of the shoe pivots in the dust,
And the man in the black coat turns and goes back
 down the hill.
No one knows why he came,
Or why he turned away and did not climb the hill.

(Applause.)

BLY: Well, that has a little soul in it, you feel a little soul in it? Because finally I myself am willing to accept a little grief.

(In Minnesota.)

MOYERS: I want to be sure I understand what you mean when you're talking about Hades, grief and pain. Are you saying that in order to become human, to discover that third place, we have to admit, acknowledge the presence in our lives of evil?

BLY: I don't think it's evil; it's connected with the pain and the grief we have in our own background, and as you know, in America especially, the men and the women are taught to be cheerful all the time. And pain is considered something bad that you're ashamed of. And if you go to a Kiwanis meeting you hear them insanely optimistic about everything. So therefore there's a movement in the other direction, in which you move downward towards grief and acceptance of the side of yourself that you don't approve of, that your parents didn't approve of. And in alchemy this is described as lead. You know, they say, Don't begin with the spirit, that's the wrong place to begin. The problem with much charismatic Christianity is that of going too fast into the spirit; they're going into the light. Alchemy says no! the spiritual process begins with lead. It begins with the

element lead, which is a part in you that's so heavy and so deep-lasting you don't think it'll ever change. And so lead is connected with the grief in your family, it's connected with your alcoholic grandfathers and your insane grandmothers and the suicides in your family, the part in your family that always seems to get blocked, generation after generation. That's called lead. And you go down there and begin with lead and live in lead, and you just remain down there for a while; that was the idea of alchemy. And then, also, the lead involves the grief of your own country. So therefore an alchemist would say, Well, if you really want to be a poet, you know, you're going to have to read a lot about American history, because a lot of your lead is contained in all the suffering and grief that America has caused. Well, do you understand me?

MOYERS: But you're not saying that we ought to grovel in it.

BLY: No, no. There's the opposite point of view, is many people are becoming addicts now, addicts of anger; it's like being an addict of heroin. That's not the same process. The anger is taking them over. But the image of going into Hades, you go into grief, down through Hades, because you're going somewhere else. That whole process of slowly the making of the soul. You don't stop and become an addict of grief or an addict of anger.

MOYERS: You move on.

BLY: Yeah, the point is to -- in ancient things, you know, in Eleusinian mysteries they give you like a twenty-five-year process, and they slowly feed you through. And again, unconsciousness is not the same thing as grief. Unconsciousness, being unconscious, is connected with rage. Okay, you're a father. One of the things I noticed is something like this: if you're unconscious a lot, as I have been for many years, if you're unconscious everything seems to go all right except you feel a lot of anger and rage. And that's all right until you become a father. When you become a father you may notice that your rage will suddenly fly out at a child. And that child has done nothing to deserve that rage. Brohhmm! it goes, and you feel it leave you. And so therefore if you're a father you realize that one should do something about that; and of course if the rage is connected with being unconscious, then the only thing to do is to try to become more conscious. So I made a little progress there, working on that, especially in relation to a son of mine named Noah, who's about twelve now. And I'll give you a poem I wrote for him. It's a new one.

Night and day arrive -- day after day goes --
Night and day arrive, and day after day goes by,
And what is young remains young and grows old,
And the timber pile does not grow younger,
nor the two-by-fours lose their darkness.
But the old tree stands so long,
The barn stands so long without help.
The advocate of darkness and night is not lost.
And the horse steps up, turns on one leg, swings,
And the chicken, flapping, claws up onto the roost,
Its wings whelping and wholloping.
But what is primitive is not to be shot out
into the night and the dark.
And slowly the kind man comes closer,
loses his rage, sits down at table.

So I am proud only of those days that we pass
in undivided tenderness,
When you sit coloring a book stapled with
messages to the world,
Or coloring a drawing of a man with fire
coming out of his hair,
Or we sit at a table, with small tea
carefully poured.
So we pass our time together, calm
and delighted.

MOYERS: And you're saying to your son...?

BLY: Yeah, somehow the more conscious we become, which I feel is connected with eating our own shadow and eating our own grief, then the more we are able to be calm and quiet with our children, and be close to our children.

MOYERS: What about male-female relationships? You've been thinking a lot about those. At the reading the other night I heard you say that the pain men and women give each other is exactly what they need.

BLY: (Laughing.) Well, it's sort of a joke, but I mean, America has so much comfort in it now, and you know, everything is centrally heated and cars have such wonderful heaters in them; and so where are you going to find pain except in the relation between men and women? (Laughs.) So it's the only suffering left to us.

MOYERS: But you talk about developing the female side of our natures. When did you decide that's what you had to do? Was it with marriage?

BLY: Before I was married I was aware, living alone in New York, I was aware of how barren the personality is when only one half is developed. And I wrote a poem called "A Man Writes to a Part of Himself," which gives that feeling in the twenties when you go back to your room and you're twenty-six years old and the room is so barren and so lonely you want to leave right away. And I realized that the feminine side of myself was living off somewhere. Actually, in a poem I put her in a valley, and actually she had regressed and was like living in the cave times. Probably that's true. My male side was twenty-six and living in a city, my female side was living 2,000 years ago; and the problem is to bring those two together, somehow.

MOYERS: How do you do that?

BLY: Well, again, the process of paying attention to dreams is helpful -- I don't know, I find, as a male, a lot of my optimism in my male side and a lot of my grief and feeling in my female side. So therefore one could say it has to do with feeling. It's what Robert McNamara did not do. When you said to him, You know, they're burning children in Vietnam, do you know that? They're burning them with napalm. And McNamara, he'd answer with his male side completely. He'd say, Okay, I'm pulling down the charts now. I want you to see these charts. Now, we're putting in 20,000 tons every week and they're only putting in 18,000 tons, we're bound to win.

And that's not an answer to the question, because he's not answering with his feeling side at all.

(At Cooper Union.)

BLY: I was saying, you know, one thing the American can do is just to become the collective; that's a great solution. And especially you want to become the male collective. So I'll give you a mask of a man who has done no development on the female side at all. It's a poem I wrote a long time ago called "The Busy Man Speaks," and I'll give it with a mask. (Puts on mask.)

(Laughter, applause from audience.)

BLY:

Not to the mother of solitude will I give
myself away!
Not to the mother of art, nor the mother
of conversation!
Not to the mother of tears, nor the mother
of the suffering of death!
Not to the mother of the night full of crickets,
nor the mother of the open fields!
Nor the mother of Christ!

But I will give myself to the father of righteousness,
who is also the father of cheerfulness,
Who is also the father of perfect gestures!
From the Chase National Bank an arm,
a flame has come,
And I am gone to the desert, to the
parched places,
To the landscape of zeroes!
And I shall give myself to the father of righteousness,
the stones of cheerfulness, the steel of money,
The father of rocks.

(Walks around audience.)

I'm going to get you. You think 'cause you go to Cooper Union I won't get you? I'll have you within five years. You know what I'm called? The Industrial Revolution! Every year since the Industrial Revolution I'm stronger! You think you can fool with machines and you won't look like me? Every time you drive your car you look more like me when you get out of it.

(Laughter, applause.)

BLY: Want some labor-saving devices? Half the women in the United States look like me now! I've got your parents already. Go ahead, laugh, you'll laugh at your funeral, won't you? I'm not so easy to be gotten around. Television is my specialty.

(Applause.)

BLY: Including Channel 13.

(Laughter, applause.)

BLY: You know what I like about television? 'Cause you can be passive watching it. You don't have to do anything. The programs are all educational. I love passive students. I can eat 'em. Eat em! Go ahead. More rock records, more me! Get yourself an instrument, I'm not so sure about that. But as long as you've got your records, hrrnnhh!

(Applause.)

(In Minnesota.)

MOYERS: Darkness comes early to your Minnesota winter.

BLY: Hm...yes. The pines call it down. You want a poem about that? (Plays dulcimer.)

MOYERS: Sure.

BLY:

There is unknown dust that is near us,
Waves breaking on shores just over the hill,
Trees full of birds that we have never seen,
Nets drawn down with dark fish.

The evening arrives; we look up and it is there,
It has come through the nets of the stars,
Through the tissues of the grass,
Walking quietly over the asylums of the waters.

The day shall never end, we think;
We have hair that seems born for the daylight;
But, at last, the quiet waters of the night will rise,
And our skin shall see far off, as it does under water.

I don't know if the dulcimer's any good with that or not.

MOYERS: But you like the darkness, don't you? Not exclusively, but naturally.

BLY: It's the other half. I found almost all of the poems I had written in Silence in the Snowy Fields were written at dusk, at the passage from day to night, and that's possibly a time when the unconscious opens.

MOYERS: Do you think in the end the light persuades the darkness?

BLY: I don't know; I don't know. I read St. John, but I'm not sure I believe it.

(Both laugh.)

MOYERS: I know you've been doing a lot of work in fairy tales for modern men. Why?

BLY: You know, in the last ten years there's been talk about women's growth and stages of women's growth, which has been very helpful to everybody. But less talk about the stages of men's growth. And it's possible that the fairy tales were composed, some of them, ten to twenty thousand years ago by men and women of the nature of Jung and Freud and Karen Horney who found themselves not only having amazing insights on growth processes in human beings but they found the necessity to put it -- because libraries were being burned they couldn't simply print it -- so they had to put it into a story, extremely vivid, that would be remembered for a long time. And one example -- well, I thought I might begin the book with "Jack and the Beanstalk."

"Jack and the Beanstalk" says that in the beginning the mother tells the boy to sell the cow for money, and he starts out in this task. But he disobeys his mother. So the first movement of the boy, when the growth begins, the first act is to disobey the mother. And strangely, in this poem the mother in a way represents the system; she asks him to buy into the system by selling the cow. And that was all going well, except that he met an old man -- a wise old man. Which brings in the whole area of magic and respect for intelligence in old men and things like that, and the old man offers him instead three magic beans. So the word "magic" suddenly appears. And so the second stage in the growth of a male is when he approaches the world of magic; and certain boys are open to magic still.

MOYERS: His first stage is disobeying his mother.

BLY: Yeah -- apparently; according to this story.

MOYERS: His second stage is accepting magic.

BLY: Yes. Now, the growth can stop at any point. So therefore in this case the boy is open to magic; don't know why. Maybe his parents read him fairy stories. Don't know why. But he's open to magic, and he accepts the three magic beans, okay. Then he comes home with the three magic beans, right? His mother says, "What are you doing? Lookit, you moron! You've bought these three beans -- what is this?" And she's furious and throws them out the window. But that helped the beans to touch earth. And the next day the beans have grown up, and there's this large green thing outside the window, which, a Freudian might say it's his penis, but we hope not because later it's cut down. Anyway, it's his manhood, perhaps. His manhood is now growing up, with the help of the old man, and with the help of the anger of his mother. If the mother had not thrown the beans out, if she'd said, "Well, how wonderful. We have a couple of beans now. You and I'll just talk about it, we'll put them in the cupboard, we'll have something to talk about." It's important the woman go through the anger, too. So she throws them out. So then he has three choices: one is to ignore it, close the curtain, live with his mother; second choice is to cut it down, which was recommended in the '60s -- many males were recommended to get rid of their aggression and their anger, cut it down; the third choice he has is to climb it.

Jack decides to climb it. So he decides to climb his own manhood, hm? So it turns out that if you start to climb your own manhood, when you get up on top, you know what you find? You find a really big male. And this is related to finding your own father, who looks down and says, "What is this? My son is growing up? He's going to be a male? Arrghhh!" In that area he meets his father; in another area what he just did was to meet a collective like IBM. Like

American Tel & Tel, who are enormous giants, who specialize in eating young males. And a third possibility is that he's meeting some large male on some other plane; you know, on some spiritual plane he's meeting a very large male. In any case, it's a dangerous business. And what this story says that's so wonderful is that the male will not survive his contest with IBM unless he has a feminine presence to help him. Inside the castle there's a young girl at a spinning wheel. Nobody knows what that is, very mysterious. But when the male comes she hides him in the oven. **Always** hides him. There are many versions of "Jack and the Beanstalk," but **always** she hides him in a sewing basket, in an oven, in some feminine area. So he's protected by the feminine twice, first by the woman who protects him and second by being in the kitchen area. And then the giant can't get him. Then an interesting thing happens. Because he's gone through the confrontation with the father but he lived -- with the great father, with the collective father -- only with the help of a woman...or maybe his own feminine side. Then, if the male does that, he receives energy. In the fairy story that's described -- oftentimes in fairy stories when they're talking about energy, increase of energy, they'll use gold coins. He steals gold coins from the old father, and then runs down the tree, and he has the gold coins; but it shows how difficult it is for the male to get away from the mother because as you know, what happens, he and his mother spend the coins. And then he has to go back up the tree and make the confrontation a second time.

This time he gets a goose who lays golden eggs. So the energy's becoming a little more organic now, hm? More tied in to his body. It's a mammal that's laying the eggs now. So he again succeeds with the help of the woman, goes down the tree, but again he can't get away from his mother. He and his mother actually get impatient and they kill the goose in order to get the golden egg. Ah, it's touching how hard it is to get away from the mother. And so then he goes up the third time, and you remember the third time he brings down a golden lyre, and now it's much more integrated in the whole world of music and sound and all of those things. Now it's a self-containing energy that continues. The goose is sort of the level of Balzac, who had a lot of energy, but the lyre is in the area of Kabir and the great religious singers who have endless supplies of energy. And then he comes down the ladder, and this time the lyre calls out and the great collective or the great father follows him down the ladder and he cuts it off and the father is killed. Then he's free of his mother, too.

MOYERS: If you get us men to reading fairy tales, you may destroy the economic system.

BLY: Well, I'm afraid it'll never happen. What did Isaac Bashevis Singer say? You can't affect the system, you can't even make it worse.

(Both laugh.)

MOYERS: Why do you want us to read fairy tales? You think it does help us gain insight into the meaning of myth?

BLY: I think that in ancient life, for example, they knew much more about the stages of growth than we do. The whole idea of being saved instantly has been a great destructive power in understanding that our growth proceeds by stages. Yeats said it proceeds by spirals. And we mustn't expect to grow up in our twenties; that's a disaster. We ask great creativity and great spirituality out of our

people in our twenties; no, that's not what they are. Their job is to make a connection with the world and try to do something in the world, and then, as they get older, it'll be time for spirituality or for growth. It's important to do them in the right stages, and fairy tales are unbelievably succinct and daring in the way they lay out certain stages. And most fairy stories end with the prince and the princess being married. That has nothing to do with marriage. The fairy stories proceed to the point at which the male inside the body and the female are married. That is the marriage that takes place in the ~~castle~~. And at that point, then, you're prepared to do something in ~~life~~. When the male and the female have been married, when the king and the queen have been married.

MOYERS: When you are whole.

BLY: When you're whole, hopefully -- even for a minute or two. (Laughs.) You'll probably fall back later. (Laughing.) (Playing dulcimer.) So that's why it's exciting. There are these most wonderful Eskimo stories, and ancient stories about man's growth.

MOYERS: Where are you, in what stage?

BLY: Don't ask me, don't ask me. (Laughs.) Probably at the bottom. Probably haven't even climbed the beanstalk yet.

MOYERS: Move over, that makes two of us.

(Both laugh.)

MOYERS: You were very popular with college students in the '60s. I know because I heard from them, I saw them, I met them, and part of it had to do with your very early opposition to the war in Vietnam. Was it just the war that offended you, or did you see something else more deeply in the American psyche?

BLY: Well, I had already -- I had published Silence in the Snowy Fields, and I was thought of as a poet who was interested in trees and snow and stuff. But I'd also written another book, which no one would publish; it was called Poems for the Ascension of J.P. Morgan. And no one wanted political poems at that time, and no one would print it. And what I did was to take a poem about our whole capitalist general situation and then put next to it an advertisement. So it would alternate between a poem and an advertisement; you know, insane things out of Time magazine, and stuff like this. So I was interested in the whole issue of what's it like when a nation tries to suppress and pretend that it hasn't done the murder of the Indians. And it was our manifest destiny, you know: God asked us to go the West Coast and wipe out all the Indians, you know, really, he did. And when you read that stuff in history books, you realize that we're engaged in a vast forgetting mechanism. And from the point of view of psychology, we're refusing to eat our grief, refusing to eat our dark side, we won't absorb it. And therefore what Jung says is really terrifying -- if you do not absorb, you know, the things that you have done in your life, like the murder of the Indians and bringing the blacks in -- if you don't do that, then you will have to repeat it, you continue to repeat it. There's a repetition compulsion which neurotics have. And America is neurotic. It has the compulsion to repeat the Indian wars. So as soon as we started to go into Vietnam it was per-

fectly clear to me that what was about to happen was that the generals were going to fight the Indian war over again, and the Indians -- I mean the Vietnamese -- are poor in relation to us, they're Asian, somehow they have this strange religion called Buddhism, which is not Christian; the best thing to do is just to kill them. The best thing to do is to get a good excuse and wipe them out. And so I felt it couldn't help the United States at all because all it would mean is we'd go deeper in -- deeper into neurosis. And you give Eisenhower credit; Eisenhower ~~saw that~~ something like that was going to happen. He refused to send ~~troops~~ to Vietnam. That was the greatest thing he did as a President. And he said, No, what can we do over there? It's hopeless. And he said no to the French. And then Kennedy, who was an idiot in many ways, just a wonderful, intelligent idiot, didn't see that at all. He was so crazy about the light side of life, he was so crazy about elegance and good humor and all of that, and he didn't see what he led American in for. I blame Kennedy most, and after that, Johnson.

MOYERS: That was a very bitter time in your life, it seemed to some people. You talked about the time when the ministers lie, the professors lie, the priests lie, television lies.

BLY: All of this is a longing for death.

MOYERS: A longing for death? You think our society has a kind of death wish?

BLY: Yes, that if you don't eat grief and you don't face out what happens, it's so strange; what happens is that the death longing, which is just as strong as the life longing in us -- it's right there. As Freud at the end of his life said, I've overlooked something; I said that eros ruled everything. I was wrong about that. There's eros and also the death instinct -- so the death instinct then can become powerful in a human being. If it becomes more powerful than the life instinct, the death instinct will come forward and he'll commit suicide. If the death instinct becomes strong in a nation, as it was in us around 1960 and '63 and '64, if the death instinct really becomes more powerful than the life instinct, then it will do something absolutely destructive to itself as a nation.

MOYERS: And how do you get it open? How do you get it out? How do you deal with it?

BLY: I don't know. I don't know. I think America will do it again; you know? I think the next war will probably be the Brazilian one. Because we've learned something from the Vietnam War; but as I say, I miss the grief. I don't see any real grief in the United States over that. The people that are suffering the most are the veterans who went and did what we asked them to do. Then they come back with their leg blown off and no one'll even talk to them. You know, people come up to veterans and say, "You deserved it! You got what you deserved!" Well, that just shows we aren't facing it, we still aren't seeing what we did.

MOYERS: What legacy do you think the '60s and Vietnam left us?

BLY: It left a wonderful legacy of the knowledge that we're quite insane.

MOYERS: Insane?

BLY: Quite insane, America's quite insane. And that was the gist of the whole thing; I mean, we had our best people, McNamara, Johnson, everybody in there, and they couldn't figure out the most elementary thing, namely that they were going to lose. You can't fight against a people who are actually fighting for independence and their own honor. So the fact is that we had our best brains working at it and it didn't work, so insanity's the only other possibility. I mean, America has a profound insanity, and it's all right. France is insane; I mean, why shouldn't we be insane?

MOYERS: ~~What~~ What is insanity? Denial?

BLY: I don't know. I don't know what insanity is, but I would say that if you ignore your dark side long enough -- a man can ignore his dark side for ten to fifteen years, and then it begins to get strong out there itself. Everything you ignore in your personality is pushed out to the edge, where it begins to gather strength and begins to be hostile to you. And eventually it'll come back in and bust up your whole -- you know, serene...life. And so I think that insanity is when the dark side has been ignored for years in a puritanical society, and then suddenly it returns and smashes everything. And what does it cause us? A depression. It causes us a depression, which is a wonderful thing. The unconscious knows that our invasion by the insane side produced B-52s taking off from Guam. What did they cost? \$50,000 every one took off? Something like thirty of them took off every day for five years; the result is an economic depression. But the word depression is wonderful, because it's chosen by the unconscious to make you understand that the economic world and the psychic one are identical.

MOYERS: So what does poetry have to say to this kind of society?

BLY: I don't know -- it says, it says -- I don't know what it says. But I notice the wisdom of people like the Hopis, for example, who will have two to three days a year, or even a season, of mask work, when everyone goes out and is insane, you know? They're totally insane. (Laughs.) All that's wonderful; everybody's a little insane, and then in the end they're all sane from agreeing to be insane. Whereas you go to a Lutheran church, you notice anybody insane in a Lutheran church? Baptist church?

MOYERS: Not in a Baptist church. Lutherans maybe, but not...

(Both laugh.)

MOYERS: Is that why you use masks?

BLY: Yes, I use them for that purpose.

MOYERS: Should we have a kind of national mask day?

BLY: Yeah, that'd be helpful, um-hm. That'd be helpful. Everyone agree that they're partially insane; it would take a lot of load off the people in the insane asylums, who have to carry the whole weight of insanity. (Laughs.)

MOYERS: There's a poem -- one of the first poems you published, in Light Around the Body, dealt with some of these themes. I remem-

ber it was one of the first poems of yours I read in the '60s. "Come With Me." Remember that?

BLY: Yes, I remember that, and I thought of it a minute ago when we were talking about how around 1960 or '63 or '64 it began to be apparent that we were going into extremely dark areas without willing it. And I use images here of an old tire rolling down a hill, and then drowning in ~~some~~ **darkness** slew at the bottom. And to me what happened then was that this ~~darkness~~ **darkness** began to grow, and then Kennedy was standing in the way; **because** Kennedy had too much to do with light to a certain extent. And I remember the day that Kennedy was killed; it was perfectly apparent to me -- I got this horrible feeling, Here we go; here we go; now we're going right down into the dark now, going right down. And you know, it's as if the unconscious got Kennedy out of the way because -- I mean, he was foolish, but he had wonderful connections with light and things, and if the country's going to suffer, you're going to have to get rid of a man like that. So it can suffer. (Plays dulcimer.) So the poem is called --

Come with me into those things that have felt this
despair for so long --
Those removed Chevrolet wheels that howl with a
terrible loneliness,
Lying on their backs in the cindery dirt, like men
drunk, and naked,
Staggering off down a hill to drown at last in a
pond.
Or those shredded inner tubes abandoned on the
shoulders of thruways,
Black and collapsed bodies, who tried and burst,
And were left behind;
Or those curly steel shavings, scattered around
on garage benches,
Sometimes still warm, gritty when we hold them,
Who have given up, and blame everything on the
government,
And those roads in South Dakota that feel
around in the darkness...

MOYERS: You're a man of many paradoxes, Robert Bly. Light and darkness, love and death. Do you ever feel them -- tearing at you?

BLY: Well, so what's wrong with a little insanity? (Laughs, playing dulcimer.) I suppose if you feel it, yeah. Eventually -- I don't know; I don't know anything about it. But if I ever became wise, they'd all make a harmony, a terrific harmony. And the wider the grasp out to the edges, the bigger the harmony would be. I'll give you a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, on the idea of trying to go out as far as you can to the edges, hm?

I live my life in growing orbits
Which move out over the things in the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
But that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God,
Around the ancient tower,
And I have been circling for a thousand years.

And I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a
storm, or a great song.

(Laughs.) That's Rilke when he was about seventeen years old. (Plays
dulcimer.)

The body is like a November birch facing
the full moon
And reaching into the cold heavens.
In ~~the~~ trees there is no ambition, no
sodden body, no leaves,
Nothing but bare trunks climbing like cold
fire!

My last walk in the trees has come. At dawn
I must return to the trapped fields,
To the obedient earth.
The trees shall be reaching all the winter.

It's a joy to walk in the bare woods.
The moonlight is not broken by the heavy leaves.
The leaves are down, and touching the soaked earth,
Giving off the odor that partridges love.

MOYERS: From Kabekona Lake in Minnesota and Cooper
Union in New York, we've been listening to Robert Bly.
I'm Bill Moyers.

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