

The Theatre of the Body

Extreme States in Elisabeth Harvor's Poetry

The interview took place in May 2001 on the south shore of the Kennebecasis River, three miles, as the crow flies, from Harvor's childhood home.

Anne Compton (AC): Your books of poetry, *Fortress of Chairs* (1992), *The Long Cold Green Evenings of Spring* (1997), use free verse in variable length paragraphs. What does this form enable you to do?

Elisabeth Harvor (EH): It wouldn't occur to me to write in any other way. I don't care to be confined. Although in my experience as a teacher, I've found that if I give students restrictions, they will often respond with free writing that will surprise even them with its vitality or hilarity. Or terror. I remember writing "Afterbirth" (9–21), the first poem in *Fortress*. I had been reading a poem by Sharon Thesen in which she talks about tall blue glasses and music. It reminded me of the tall blue glasses from Mexico that my parents had. I started with that. And then it just became a series of free-wheeling memories from childhood. I was writing with a deliberate deadline in mind because at the last minute I had decided that I was going to send the poem to the *Malahat Review* long poem contest. I stayed up all one night working on it and sent off what I knew was a flawed version by express post the following morning, but I kept on working on it. The next afternoon I rushed down to Britnell's bookshop and got Sharon Olds' *The Gold Cell*. Her poetry triggers something powerful in me because she is so unambiguous. She is so much of a force. I thought, "I have to read Sharon Olds. I have to move close to that clinical fire to make sure that I pull everything that I can out of me for this poem." I wrote all that next night in a very strange fugue state.

- AC You are describing the way in which other people's writing, in this case Olds', can be a stimulus for your own.
- EH As a writer, I am drawn to her kind of staccato authority. I had a feeling that I could get something from this. I could inhale something, and it wouldn't be *like* hers, but it would be triggered by her. Having said that, though, I should also say that she is a writer I'm not entirely drawn to. She doesn't have enough ambiguity for me. Her work doesn't have enough of an afterlife. She's all there on the first take. You don't need to go back. She's too grandstanding, boastful, harsh, and has too microscopic an eye. At the same time, I'm very grateful to her, and find her powerful and stunningly refreshing. She affects me very differently from Plath, say, a poet I can go back to time and again. Plath is an absolutely primal force too, of course, but there's more invention in her work. There's greater metaphorical dazzle. There are greater leaps, but, at the same time, there's somehow more room in the poem for the reader to do some of the work with her.
- AC Your flexible free verse form allows for unpredictable developments, for surprise, and for lyrical associations between discrete moments. Do you think of yourself as a lyric poet or a narrative poet?
- EH Somewhere in between, I would say. Sometimes people say, "your work is prosy," but I can think of any number of poets who are much more prosy than I am, whose language is not lyrical.
- AC There is a strong formalist tradition in the Maritimes. You are unique in that your poetry is such a pure form of free verse. I've never seen a sestina or sonnet by you. Or a villanelle.
- EH I've never tried to write one although I know it could be intriguing to see how I would fight my way around that limitation. But for me, form—being hemmed in that way—is not a liberation. Poets whose work I admire greatly have all done these things. I've never done any of that. I've never counted syllables. I just want the poem to be however it is, and I'll just take a look at it and sound it out. The same goes for haiku. I like reading it, but I haven't been drawn to writing it.
- AC It seems to me sound matters in your poetry as much as sense does, even if you are somebody who doesn't count syllables. Do you read a poem aloud to yourself when you are writing it?
- EH Actually, I don't sound it out, but I do hear it somehow in my head. If it felt wrong, I would hear that.
- AC This is a poetry that takes its time, and in one poem the speaker says,

“You need time for that, that kind of linkage / memory begetting memory / as water begets water” (28). Do these lines describe the writing process for you?

EH Those lines would certainly describe the leisurely but eerie “Afterbirth,” but there are many shorter poems that feel much more condensed, at least to me: poems in *Long Cold Green Evenings* like “Leaving Home,” “Snow and the End of Childhood,” “Her Children or God,” and “Snazzy Night.” Or even “Letter to a Younger Man in Another Country” in *Fortress*.

AC “We” is the pronoun of frequency in *Fortress*. Sometimes the “we” is specified as “my sister and I” (“Afterbirth” 9); at other times, the “we” is a group, as in the nurse poems of Part 2 of *Fortress*. Sometimes, however, the impersonal pronoun “you” is used. Are you trying to put a distance between these speakers and yourself?

EH In the poem “Four O’Clock, New Year’s Morning, New River Beach” (45–46), a speaker is addressing a young mother who is referred to as “you.” That “you” is clearly the narrator herself. The “you” is the “I” in the past. In “Night Terror” (51–53), it is the same.

AC You haven’t lived in New Brunswick since you were twenty-one, yet the Kingston Peninsula and the city of Saint John generate some of your most powerful poems. What hold does this landscape exert over you?

EH The landscape of the Kingston Peninsula has a great hold over me because we were so very isolated there in the winters. We were isolated both physically and psychically from our neighbours. In summer, when there was a lot of foliage, we couldn’t even see any of our neighbours. We were the only immigrant family in a settlement of Scots and Irish descendants. There was all that immigrant pressure: our mother was forever giving us the impression that we must do better than everyone, that we must out-Canadian the Canadians, be more amazing at school, more amazing at everything. And although I can’t remember any of these things being specifically said, we felt them. The feminine quality of the landscape, though, its rolling hills, must have had some maternal reassurance for me. I was really in love with that landscape. I haven’t been able to go back. I lived in Fredericton in 1994–95 and had many chances to go down to the Peninsula, but I’d heard that it had changed a great deal, and I couldn’t go back. I think I want not to go back. I think, too, my feeling for the landscape is tied up with a certain feeling of abandonment. I can remember standing on the beach, as a very small

child, and watching my parents go out in the canoe, going around Black Rock so that they disappeared. I must have believed that they would be gone forever. In the winters, they would sometimes walk to Saint John by crossing the frozen river. Once, when I was still small, my brother followed our parents across the ice and got lost. The farm girl who looked after us organized a search party to go out on the ice to look for him. His tracks went as far as the crack in the ice that widened where the Bay of Fundy sent its salty tides up the river. It was assumed at first that he had drowned. But he was found alive. I remember my mother telling me all of this years later, and I cried so violently that she had to keep saying “But you see, it’s all right. We found him,” but I couldn’t be consoled by this. Any indication that we hadn’t been properly looked after got me very upset.

- AC If you felt that you weren’t being properly taken care of and were worried for your safety, was the landscape the safe place?
- EH I think the safety of the landscape was maternal, but it also had to do with my father, who was a very kind person, a stable person. The landscape and my father were the couple. My mother was the cyclone or the volatile lizard.
- AC In the poems, memory seems to blow a wintry chill on the present.
- EH When I was living in Fredericton and was driving around looking at the miles and miles of dark spruce trees, I just wanted to cry. Something about New Brunswick makes me want to cry.
- AC Is it the look of the place?
- EH It’s the history of the place. There’s a lot of open country on the Kingston Peninsula, and we owned a huge tract of land, but most of it was wooded. The feelings also relate to the time of my being writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick, and so they have some emotional connection to the area around Fredericton, the sad tracts of trees, fir and spruce, the endless miles of dark trees. There was also a great bluff behind our house on the Peninsula, with a small cedar forest leading into it, and I associate those cedar trees with a definite melancholy. But I think it was the more public history of the place too, and this is especially true of Fredericton: the massacres on both the Indian and settler sides, the terrible winters and the famines.
- AC Is it fair to say that this area—the Kingston Peninsula and the Kennebecasis River—is the psychological underground of your writing?
- EH Because I am no longer a child or an adolescent, no landscape, in the

present or future, will ever affect me in the same way. A lot of the adolescent feelings about sexuality, or safety, might have been landscape-connected. Romantic ideas about the future occurred while I was walking in the country. I remember coming home, so tired, as a student nurse, dragging a mattress out into the orchard, falling asleep there with apple blossoms falling all around me. I often dream now of living in the country, yet I don't think I would like it day-to-day. I don't even think of the country as a safe place any more. It's become a sinister place since Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Movies like *Easy Rider*, and its descendants, have certainly also helped to demystify the romance and safety of the country.

AC The Maritime landscape obtains to a greater degree in your poetry than in your fiction. Why is that?

EH Partly because poetry—even my poetry—doesn't require characters. Although there are many poems about women and landscape, or women in the landscape, come to think of it. And then the ability of landscape to offer up images is so much more useful to a poem, and can even be the life of the poem whereas imagery and scenery can sometimes get in the way of the narrative in a story.

AC Does memory stand to experience as the afterbirth does to birth? Is memory the afterbirth?

EH That's wonderfully put. And, yes, I would say so.

AC "Memories. . . might point the way to this childhood, that childhood." Does that mean that there are any number of versions of the past?

EH Not really. I think I know about the past. I'm arrogant about what I remember, just as I suppose most people are, thinking that they remember everything exactly as it was. That line might be an instance where I am acknowledging the current thinking that there are many moods, many memories—that we might look at something one way one day and then differently another day, or look at it through a politically conscious lens and see it in another way. And yet I haven't revised my memories. You know how they say that when a parent dies, you revise your thinking about that parent. I haven't found that to be true. I didn't think differently about my father after he died. And if I survive my mother, I don't suppose I will think differently about her either.

AC Your writing comes out of a body of memories that you have about your personal past?

EH Often. Although more often out of the marriage between the invented

and the real. If I need to invent, I invent. Although, as most writers know, invention has a habit of becoming prescient in quite spooky ways. There's always a danger it can make you feel too much like God. But then life also has its habits, above all its notorious habit of upstaging art.

- AC Poems in *Fortress* include subjects such as menstrual periods, the placenta and giving birth. Are you insisting upon the connection between women's bodies and women's sensibility?
- EH Certainly not consciously, but I suppose I must always have been fascinated by the body, by illness, by life experiences that involve the body, like the woman giving birth out on the Kennebecasis River. Living out in what would now be called back country, one was just more exposed to the theatre of the body.
- AC Not just the marvellous women of "Afterbirth," but many of the women—the women going down to the river to bathe in the poem "The Damp Hips of the Women"—seem to have mythic stature. For you, is there in ordinary women a mythic quality?
- EH My mother was a great one for women friends. She made much of them, and they made much of her. While my father would be home working, or putting us to bed, or cooking supper, my mother would be down on the beach with her friends, or going off on little jaunts, or playing a trick with her friends on some other group of women. She was quite girlish with her friends. So, in a way, I saw them as girls together, but, at the same time, as goddesses. They were the ones who called the shots, and my father was just there as background. That was not my view of him, of course. But it was their view.
- AC The word "decay" recurs in *Long Cold Green Evenings* ("the air smelling of decay") and in your novel, *Excessive Joy* ("decayed sexual heat"). In a *New Brunswick Reader* article, you speak of the "East Coast's fog and decay." Did that attunement to decay begin back here?
- EH In a sense, that is my past and my childhood although I hadn't realized that I was so fond of the word. I wonder if it has to do with the house that we lived in on the Kingston Peninsula before we moved down to the pottery. It was a very old farm house, very mouldy, very dark. There was a curious smell in that basement. And as children we were always afraid to go down there. There was sand on the floor and a little stream bubbled up through it. It was like a landscape down there because of that stream. And there was an icehouse where a truck would come,

every two weeks, with a huge block of ice wrapped in canvas. The ice-block on the sawdust floor smelled of decay. In the orchard, the apples would fall and decay; so there was a lovely smell of apple decay.

- AC You make poetry out of the intimate details of a life—the loves and hates between parents and children, the delight and terror of motherhood, the coming apart of marriage, and the terror of old age. Does the human heart in its entanglements accurately describe your material?
- EH I would say so.
- AC Few people write poems about children. The emotion so easily goes sentimental. The third section of *Fortress* contains poems on early motherhood and babies. Were these difficult to write?
- EH Slipping into sentimentality was a worry. When I sold “At the Horse Pavilion” to the *Malahat Review*, the editors wanted to cut the last line, “Until this moment I never knew what love is” (66). They wanted the poem to end earlier. I agreed but then whenever I read the poem at readings, I would find myself putting the line back in. Their argument against the line was that it was already implied in the poem. But when I was putting the book together, I put the line back in.
- AC For me your short stories are not as thematic—tyranny of mothers, internecine family warfare—as reviewers have suggested. Rather, they are glimpses into how the mind works: registering the present, remembering the past, sifting information. Would you say that the mind and how it works is your real subject?
- EH Yes. And the heart, too, and how it’s connected to the mind. Or disconnected from the mind, as the case may be. A writer named Heidi Greco got this right when she reviewed *Let Me Be the One for Paragraph* and described the style of the book as “akin to synapses firing in the brain” and talked about the way the stories were “jolts of energy linking cliff to cliff, idea to idea.” As a writer who’s a constant reader, I would have to say that the mind is what I look for when I’m a reader, the mind and the heart, much more than I look for the architecture of plot. I read to meet the mind and the soul of the writer. But as a fiction writer, I have to try to remember that plot is the bait, the device that I have to use to get the reader, or at least some readers, to even *want* to encounter the heart and mind of the writer.
- AC There is a lifetime in *Fortress* from the childhood of “Afterbirth” to the questions of “Bloom, Rain”—“How do we do it? / Learn how to be old?” Did you set out to chronicle a lifetime in this first collection?

- EH No. I didn't. I wasn't thinking of that trajectory. When Michael Harris and I finally put the poems together, we did think, however, of that order. That particular poem, "Bloom, Rain," has a very intriguing history in relation to two other poems. I'd read Don Coles' poem "Self-Portrait of the Artist at 3 a.m." in his book about Edvard Munch. Munch is looking in a mirror and thinking about how old he is. The lines "How do we do it? / Learn to be old?" then came to me. That's what I began with. My poem then becomes very involved with rain. Barb Carey, another poet friend, then read my poem and wrote a poem called "Wire Kiss" about a teenage girl. There's something incredibly rain-saturated in her poem, which was affected by "Bloom, Rain." So through that cross-pollination of poems, we went from a very old man looking in the mirror, to a middle-aged woman thinking about getting old and being afraid of it, to a very young girl thinking about a boy from her school while she looks out at the rain.
- AC There are four kinds of light in *Fortress*: the natural light of childhood, the overly bright light of the hospital poems (part 2), the watery light of the motherhood poems (part 3), and the rainy darkness of age and the single life in the final section. Is light for you the register of emotional or mental states?
- EH Often. And some of the women-living-alone poems are filled with a kind of surreal or even cruel light. I'm thinking of poems like "In the Cold Sunlight" and "Love After a Long Absence (of Love)" in *Long Cold Green Evenings*.
- AC In *Long Cold Green Evenings*, in one poem alone, there is a "light-pricked twilight" and "light-flocked dimness."
- EH Light can symbolize so many emotions. Not only for poets and painters, but also for story-writers: loss, hope, melancholy, regret, the understanding that we are going to die. But the tiny bits of light, the light-on-the-move in "light-pricked twilight" and "light-flocked dimness" seem more philosophically energetic and buoyant, at least to me, and perhaps take a happier view of mortality.
- AC Your fiction favours the sensation of smell; light is favoured in the poetry. Is that so?
- EH I think smells do belong much more in prose. They don't seem as connected with clarity as light does. They seem more ordinary, more connected with the body.
- AC In your novel, *Excessive Joy*, Claire thinks, "there was some boundary of

risk or tenderness you crossed if you were a lover . . .” As a writer, are you interested in extreme emotional states?

- EH Yes, I am. But also in the subtleties and complexities of ambivalent states. Ambivalence in all its forms, really.
- AC You said in an interview, “An obsessive is an aristocrat of feelings” (Ross D20). I would have said “the drudge.”
- EH It’s only in her, or his, own delirious world view that the obsessive is an aristocrat of feelings. She sees the love object as unique, absolutely irreplaceable. She sees him not only as the only one, but also as the only one for all time. And so she inevitably sees herself as bathed in his shine. Whereas the much more objective outsider sees her as being *embalmed* in his shine, sees her as being dulled by it, sees her being made less than she is. Sees her as having such extreme tunnel vision that she’s turned into, as you put it, a drudge.
- AC Although *Long Cold Green Evenings* continues the variable free verse paragraph of *Fortress*, it favours a shorter, terser line. Would you say that the second collection is more cryptic?
- EH When the second book came out, one of my students asked, “Where are your long lines? I think of you as a long-lined poet.” But I didn’t want them. It was actually a technical decision. Some of those poems in *Long Cold Green Evenings* pre-date the *Fortress* poems.
- AC I could see that. In fact, I wanted to ask you if *Long Cold Green Evenings* was the underlay of *Fortress*?
- EH About half of this book co-existed with *Fortress*. *Long Cold Green Evenings* was about to be published by Coach House Press when Coach House collapsed. It was about a month away from being published. Then I took it to Signal Editions. This accounts for the very strange acknowledgement at the beginning of the book in which I thank Michael Harris “who (along with Simon Dardick) generously made room on the Signal Editions list for this book.” Originally that sentence continued, “after the fall of Coach House Press,” showing why it was generous of them to take the book at the last minute. Simon Dardick wanted me to take that phrase out, because by that time Coach House had re-invented itself. Now it sounds very strange. It sounds as if I went pleadingly to them to make room. I regret that I allowed the wording to stay that way because it sounds like the poor little writer had no self-esteem and they generously made room. I’d love to get that misconception corrected.

- AC “Snow and the End of Childhood” is a poem that moves away from the usual narrative technique for enigmatic suggestiveness? Would you say that is a shift that characterizes this second collection as a whole?
- EH That’s an apt description for some of the poems in the second book. That particular poem ends with a metaphor. On the whole, I would say the poems in the second book are more suggestive and metaphorical. The second book might be a little higher and cleaner and colder than the first. Perhaps there are more ideas in it.
- AC “Snow and Moon River” opens with an image of snow falling on a glassed-in swimming pool; the pool and its swimmers are seen from nine storeys above. Is there increased attention in this second collection to bizarre perceptual experiences?
- EH Yes. I have a fondness for bizarre perceptual experiences, for the dream-like or nightmare-like way that seeing something from a shocking or disrupting angle jolts you into thinking in new ways.
- AC In *Long Cold Green Evenings*, the river landscape seems ominous in a way that it wasn’t in *Fortress*: “smaller [islands] / frightened groves / of trees // riding / the darkening water.” Is there more threat in *Long Cold Green Evenings*?
- EH The landscape is standing in for time and life. I definitely think that *Fortress* is a younger book. It’s probably a more hopeful, buoyant book. *Long Cold Green Evenings* is a more darkly realistic book.
- AC Snow, which was benign or indifferent in *Fortress*, is quite sinister in *Long Cold Green Evenings*.
- EH I wouldn’t say sinister: “Snow falls on snow / snow falls on the swimmers . . . / like a thoughtless promise from God / that can never be broken.” I think I see snow as very beautiful even though I don’t like it. But I think you are partly right. In “Snow and the End of Childhood,” its appeal weakens: “We sink up to our knees / in its cold fluff // and deeper // until we’re stopped short by it // and there’s nothing to do / but fall face-down on it with a // sapped joy that feels sexual.” Snow has the power to slow you down, to stop you, to still you. It makes you feel tired. There’s that brilliant line in Sylvia Plath’s “Tulips”: “Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.” That part of the Plath poem makes me feel very tired. This is what I remember about growing up and being so isolated at the pottery in the winter. Just the five of us, these five unhappy people, with our mother reproaching our father about so many things. Not having any real friends in the community.

Not having any grandparents or cousins. Not having anyone on this continent who would intercede for us. That feeling of being snowed-in is so claustrophobic for me.

AC Snow creates an asylum, which can be either refuge or prison.

EH Yes. And for us it was a prison.

AC Would you say that the potential for violence is also present in the second book?

EH I think the second book is less tender. I think there is no question: violence could happen or has already happened to the narrator in this book.

AC “The Damp Hips of the Women” seems to me to be a love poem to the women of the 1940s. For all the gains that women have made, have certain womanly qualities been lost?

EH To me, it doesn’t really seem that way. It’s *plus ça change*. That scene could happen again another time in the future. After all, women in the 1930s—with their fedoras and their trousers, and their jobs, their smoking and their very free sex lives and so on—were quite mannish in a lot of ways. The war was very sexual, I think, in the way women felt about themselves with all those men around. And then after that, we came into a period of such prim abstinence. The 1960s was a blossoming out again in a rather pagan way. Certainly people now can talk about everything more freely, but in losing the innocence of sex, we’ve also lost some of the private excitement of sex. We’ve lost so much of the mystery of it.

AC “We Have Four Husbands” is the poem in this collection most like a short story. When material presents itself, do you always know whether it will be a short story or a poem?

EH I do, but I don’t know how I know. I have a poem that I’ve written recently that begins “Pure liquid and twist of birdsong at one a.m.” I can’t imagine these lines being the lines of a story. A poem begins for me with a line or a few lines, and they are not lines that I would use in a story.

AC Is the key language?

EH Language, not ideas. When I’m thinking about a story, I’m thinking of all sorts of character-based things, which you really couldn’t do in a poem. Occasionally—for example, in the story “Through the Field of Tall Grasses” (*Let Me Be the One*)—the ending is made from a plundered poem. The poem called “I Don’t Ask For Real Happiness” was about a teen-aged girl trying on the evening dresses of an older girl while she lives in a doctor’s house. When my editor at HarperCollins

wanted me to extend the ending of the story, I went back to the poem, which had been published in *Pottersfield Portfolio*, but had not been collected in a book.

- AC It is language, then, that determines the genre because the material could be either story or poem?
- EH Yes, almost always. And in fact the reason I could get away with an intensely poetic ending in that story is because the epiphany of that particular story allows for a more lyrical, staccato, forceful, dramatic use of language.
- AC Are you suggesting that a short story comes round to poetry in its ending.
- EH I think so. The final few lines or final few scenes can have that metaphorical intensity.
- AC Occasionally there is a honky-tonk feeling to this language as in, for example, “You could fill a stadium / with the hearts you’ve broken . . .”
- EH I can see that it has a real twang to it now that you’ve pointed it out. And I am a country and western fan of the best country songs, partly because the best country songs—and also the worst country songs—are willing to go all the way into emotion. But I also like the more ironical and witty songs, the ones that are on the point of crossing over from country to folk. There’s also a honky-tonk feel to “How Long Will It Last,” a poem where the narrator is in love with a younger man. The narrator, after trying not to hear the “honky-tonk of the car horns” at his imagined wedding, also tries not to hear him stamping the snow off his boots “outside the door / of someone younger.”
- AC In “Cold Day in August,” the speaker, while taking a drive with her sister, recalls how her mother used to sunbathe on the roof of the house. She says, “there were no / scraps of leftover light / for her two daughters” (37). This is redolent of folk or fairy tale with light substituted for food. Were you consciously working with fairytale in this poem?
- EH On some level, I think that I was because there is something in that poem about the dark knitting: “all around us the bay’s / broken bracelet of islands // their steep walls / of trees // knitted into / a sketched darkness / by someone who must have / kept whispering, You will / learn nothing here, there isn’t / even the relief of a meadow . . .” (37).
- AC There’s something else that’s fairytale or folk story in that poem. The woman is on the roof sunning while the men, with their horses and sleighs, are coming down over the snow-coated hills. The sleigh-bells are jingling.

- EH And yet it is absolutely based on reality. It is also intriguing in terms of the seasons: the fact that it could be so hot on the roof while at the same time the men are travelling on snow. My father made my mother a little pen for sunning up on the roof. She was an exhibitionist about her body, but I still don't know if she was aware that those men coming down over the bluff could see her down there, totally naked in that little pen.
- AC In "Cold Day in August," the "broken bracelet of islands" seems to say to the speaker who is crossing the Kennebecasis River, "You will / learn nothing here. . . ." Has the landscape become inarticulate to the returning Maritimer of this poem?
- EH I don't think there was anything as conscious as that. I think the poem refers more to questions about the mother and her superficial sexuality, which was not experienced as a deep womanly sexuality, but as a teasing—a jingling, high jostling, flirty, kind of teasing. The two daughters, in the present, seem to be in a state of paralysed resentment. There is something dead in them, some anguish relating back to the mother.
- AC They seem to find talking about the past erotic.
- EH It's an opening out. It's a release.
- AC Is there less effort in *Long Cold Green Evenings* to distance the speaker from the author?
- EH No. I don't think so. I mean, I don't think there was ever much of an effort to distance the speaker from the author.
- AC Do you expect your readers to identify the speaker with the author.
- EH I think that they probably will most of the time anyway.
- AC Was "Snazzy Night" originally a part of the longer poem "Afterbirth"? Or, is it just that the child's perception of adults in social interaction is a perspective of persistent interest to you?
- EH Yes, it is of persistent interest. That poem's from the time of *Fortress* although I don't think it was ever actually a part of "Afterbirth."
- AC Why is the mother here so closely associated with light? Around her there are "no / scraps of leftover light" and her laughter "scatters light."
- EH When you're a child and even if you have a very bad relationship with a parent, you can't stand to see that parent humiliated. These children want to run to her and tell her the bad news—she's being mocked by the women at the party—to protect her, and they are stopped because they see her turn to laugh and the light scatters. It's a scattering of energy and they can't move toward her.
- AC Is there power in that scattering of the light?

- EH Yes, it backs them up into a corner.
- AC The mother is a taker of light?
- EH Yes, and the scattering of light means that she doesn't have to be warned. Adulthood isn't as dangerous as the children thought even though her friends are being catty about her.
- AC In "The Dark Clouds Between the Ribs," the child-speaker says, "there isn't a word // in the world it isn't too late for." Is the child's dilemma, thus expressed, also the poet's?
- EH God, I hope not.
- AC For the child-speaker returning home, after a stay in the doctor's house ("The Dark Clouds Between the Ribs"), home is "beloved, terrible." Would that accurately describe your own adult return to your Maritime home?
- EH It accurately describes my adolescent returns to my home. We [my brother and I] were away for two years living with a doctor and his wife, though not all the time. In the fall and the spring, we were home because then we biked to the ferry and sailed across the river, but in the winters we were in Saint John. And it applies to other times when I was away—at summer camp or when I was away living with the doctor's family when I was much smaller. Home always seemed both beloved and terrible to me. The "beloved" is my father. The "terrible" is my mother. The house itself, and the charming way it was arranged, and the landscape around it, all of these things were also beloved. At the same time, so many terrible things happened in the house—so many accusations, door-slamming, temper tantrums—though these were set in a matrix of so many sing-songs and picnics and skinny-dips on starry nights.
- AC *Long Cold Green Evenings* follows the childhood physical illness poems with poems about being "lovesick." Is anything being suggested by this proximity?
- EH I don't think so. "One of the Lovesick Women of History" is a fairly playful poem, followed by a more resentful poem, "In the Cold Sunlight." "A Breast, Our Hearts" is about mass infatuation. I wouldn't say that any of those poems are really anguished. "In the Dark," which is in another section of the book, seems to me a much more anguished poem than those playful ones.
- AC Lovers and male doctors seem interchangeable in "A Breast, Our Hearts." Your novel, *Excessive Joy*, is about a woman's obsession with her therapist. Why is the medical erotic?
- EH It's the power and mystery of it all. These men know something that

could help you or save you and therefore they must be protective lovers. We meet them in a place that is supposed to be perfectly safe. So that if something is transgressed, there is the excitement of that. There are all those possibilities for transgression.

AC Art gives “instruction through seduction,” you say in the introduction to *A Room at the Heart of Things*. What instruction does your poetry give?

EH It might give instruction on how to cope with disappointment in love. If there is instruction, it is very deeply embedded in the poems. I would hate to think that I was writing poetry prescriptively. My poetry is not meant to be instruction to anyone, but if someone reads it and feels it emotionally and takes direction from it, I have no quarrel with that.

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D20–D21.