TAFFY MARTIN

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANE WAKOSKI

Diane Wakoski (1937-) was born in Whittier, California, and earned a bachelor's degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1960. After graduating, she moved to New York and taught at the New School. She also published several poetry collections, including *Coins and Coffins* (1962), *Discrepancies and Apparitions* (1966), *The George Washington Poems* (1967), *Inside the Blood Factory* (1968), *The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems* (1971), *Dancing on the Grave of a Son of a Bitch* (1973), *Virtuoso Literature for Two and Four Hands* (1975), *Waiting for the King of Spain* (1976), *The Man Who Shook Hands* (1978), and *Cap of Darkness* (1980), as well as several collections of essays, including *Form Is an Extension of Content* (1972), *Creating a Personal Mythology* (1975), *Variations on a Theme* (1976), and *Toward a New Poetry* (1979). She was also writer-in-residence at California Institute of Technology, Hollins College, University of Virginia, Willamette University, University of California at Irvine, University of Wisconsin, and Michigan State University, where she became a professor of creative writing in 1976—a position she held for the rest of her career. The following excerpt is from an interview conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, in May 1981, which was published in the autumn 1981 issue. In her introduction, Martin explained that her goal was to discuss Wakoski's recent work and "the direction in which her poetry has been evolving."

Taffy Martin: *Cap of Darkness*, which appeared just a few weeks after your first collection of essays, *Toward a New Poetry*, differs from your previous volumes of poetry in being more meditative. It seems to use as metaphor many of the characters you've previously created. I noticed that in some poems, especially toward the end of the collection, such as "Lantana" and . . .

Diane Wakoski: "My Mother's Milkman." Yes, I've gotten more and more

Diane Wakoski photographed by Elsa Dorfman
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interested in how memory functions as a kind of narrative for people. And that memory is not documentary, as most people seem to think it is, even at its best. Its best function is over a long period of time, in the sense that you don't need to remember what happened a minute ago, because you're in touch with that. What you need to remember is what happened a long time ago. So memory is really most valuable in the sense of its function—its primary function. We're not talking now about senility and other things—not remembering that you poured this cup of tea and pouring it again. But the use of memory as part of your life, a sense of your life, and knowing your life, and building on and creating a whole out of that. Every year that you remember something, you either lose part of it, and therefore it becomes a different kind of memory because it's more fragmentary, or as you're losing it you replace it with something else so it may remain the same size, but it actually changes. And every time you *tell* your memory, just as every time you *tell* a dream, if you're the kind of narrator that doesn't like gaps, you invent something that you think is logical, that fits in an empty space, and therefore distort or change it—not really distort—

Martin: Create?

Wakoski: Create it. And if you're the kind of person that doesn't feel required to do that, you just let the fragments hang there. So whatever you're doing, you're recreating not history, but your sense of yourself. Because your memory is part of your whole self. That's what began to fascinate me about these fragmentary memories that I had that really had no narrative meaning in *my* life whatsoever, such as the image of my mother's milkman. There are many memories that I have that have huge narrative significance. And most of them I have by now mined and made poetry out of. My mother opened her trunk on the porch that day when my father, who wasn't expected, who was in the Navy, came walking home through those palm trees in the sunset. This is a memory that is a key to all my feelings about myself as a woman, about myself as a person, about my father, about men in the world. So that's a loaded memory, and it's full of narrative content. I very early, so to speak, in my poetic life, wrote a poem using that. To be truthful, I've mined all of those memories from my childhood that have that kind of narrative significance, because I was writing poetry for over twenty years. I've spent my capital in the sense of using those memories, and I began to realize that I

had these other subsidiary memories that were more fragmentary and not part of the narrative of my life.

Martin: How did they affect your poetry?

Wakoski: I realized that fragment is simply a way of narrative. My mother's milkman really didn't mean anything to me. He was simply a figure who came. And because I wasn't that interested in my mother's life, it didn't really even interest me that there was this kind of romantic figure in her life and, you know, that sense of proportion, reality. Nothing ever happened that was significant other than this one scene that was sort of charged. But I never even really realized why it was charged, because I didn't—I know what homosexuality was in those days and so I didn't understand—I mean, I understood that there was something weird about this man leaving his wife and daughters to live with this teenage boy, but I didn't really understand why, even though I had read Freud and had discovered Havelock Ellis and things. I didn't know what half this stuff was really about in emotional terms. I really just didn't know. The things you get from reading are different from what you get from the life input that goes into that reading. And so when I kept thinking of this phrase, "my mother's milkman," it kept coming back so much that I actually even wrote it down in my notebook that I write my poems in, which I don't keep as a journal or anything like that, but I just wrote down the words thinking that I was going to write a poem. But then nothing came, and a month later the phrase came back to me again—"my mother's milkman." So I realized, and probably it was the phrase "mother's milk"—I wasn't a breast-fed baby—and actually the idea of breast-feeding is very repellent to me, although I grew up drinking a quart of milk a day. I don't know what kind of craziness that is. But whatever it is, it must have been that phrase. And then there was this figure. And, of course, what the poem did—sometimes it reveals the archetypal thinking that is going on that you don't know about. I realized that I was thinking of my mother's milkman in terms of my own narrative history. That's what allowed me to write the poem. But it was new narrative history, because I suddenly recognized him as a figure, like the King of Spain, functioning for my mother the way the King of Spain functioned for me. But I hadn't invented the King of Spain until a few years before, so it was impossible to fit it into that niche.

Martin: Into the mythology.

Wakoski: Into the mythology. And I also, perhaps because of my bad feelings about my mother and the subsequent feelings about myself, I was looking for the differences between my mother and myself, and not the similarities. And I did not start this poem thinking, “My mother’s milkman is her King of Spain.” I don’t know that that was even in the first version of the poem. It was in the revision, that “My mother’s milkman, her King of Spain.” That phrase suddenly occurred, and I saw what I was doing. So you see, what really became the primary image to me is this very fragmentary image from childhood of this man, the sound image of that truck and the milk bottles, and the image of his gold tooth, which I realized then that he had had but I somehow hadn’t even thought of that. And fitting in with the King of Spain and then fitting in with my own obsession of the last few years of men leaving women for other men. And, you know, a final recognition that in some way, even though my father, who hated homosexuals like poison in the best redneck fashion, really chose the homosexual way of life rather than live with my mother and his two daughters. He chose to live on that ship with all those men, just as Cloyce Hamilton. But these discoveries are all of what I consider a more meditative nature. And they’re with the subsidiary, the fringes of things, rather than that primary, that primal, charismatic image.

Martin: I was also surprised to find in *Cap of Darkness* a change in the image you present of yourself. In a lot of earlier poems you play with being pale, moonfaced, unattractive, and yet also alluringly beautiful. “Lantana” presents a different type, an ambivalent memory of yourself as a child possessing murderous stillness. It is a description of your inner self rather than one of outward appearances.

Wakoski: Well, that’s another one of those poems that comes out of an interest in how memory works. There’s a constant visual image I have of this little girl standing in front of the hedge. There’s no narrative connected with it. I can feed it into my myth, but it doesn’t have any important narrative place in the myth. And there’s nothing really connected with it except what I, as someone years later, come back and superimpose upon it. And it really is one of those favourite photographic memories. And in fact I’ve used

the image in various ways in poems, but, you know, just as a subsidiary image itself. But I suddenly realized that in constantly recalling—this is why I dedicated that poem to Lore Metzger when I read it—because it was talking to Lore that made me realize that I was having, that I brought that image into a conversation and realized that I really wanted to talk about it, it was coming back to me. The effect of that poem I think is very similar—a lot of people don't like that poem, and other people think it's very strong—and it's very similar to a poem in *The Man Who Shook Hands* that is, I think, the last poem in the book. And it's part of that little group of poems called "The Ring" along with "The Hitchhikers." "The Photos" is the title of it. I'm driving in California and the incident of my sister showing the photograph of my father to my mother . . .

Martin: And looking in the mirror.

Wakoski: Right. And then ending with the image of myself as Medea and an image of myself, again, as a murderer.

Martin: That's true. It is there.

Wakoski: The image of the murderer. And the last line, which lots of people—it just really bothers them. This is an American disease—you have to be happy. But the line is some—I wish I could remember it—we can look it up—but it's "How I hate myself" or "How I hate my life."

Martin: It's "my destiny."

Wakoski: "My destiny." But it's the same thing. And people think you need to go rushing off to a psychiatrist the minute you can say that. To me that's an enormously strong thing to be able to say. It took me forty years to be able to say that. How I hate my mother; how I hate myself. I kept trying to say, "How I hate my mother; I will be different; I am more beautiful." And, you know, it's never going to be a major—I mean I'm not going to write a whole book of poems about it.

Martin: Yes, you've talked about this before. I think that one of the strengths of your poetry is your attempt to acknowledge and build something out of

the pain that the poems recreate. Responding to rejection is the basis of a whole lot of your poetry. It uses the pain to create something new.

Wakoski: It's a source of strength in me. Being able to say "How I hate my life" is for me a very strong statement, not a statement of weakness or a statement of giving up.

Martin: Or failure?

Wakoski: Or failure. It's an absolute acceptance of an imperfect world that I keep trying to make whole and perfect in my poems.

Martin: Yes, I've often thought that your attempt to create a private mythology succeeds because it starts, as Yeats knew it must, at the bottom of the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, having given up all the pretensions and creations, having come face to face with the starting place.

Wakoski: Well, that's what *Greed*: Part Twelve is all about. But I think it's so overtly about it, that it will bother some people. It doesn't bother me. I've loved it. I've had a wonderful time learning it.

Martin: There is a section missing from your long poem, *Greed*. What has happened to that poem?

Wakoski: I finished *Greed*: Part Twelve a couple of weeks ago. Eleven was published. The missing one is *Greed*: Part Ten, and that was supposed to be the greed of love, sex, and romance, and it was supposed to be the BIG greed. And it was going to be part prose and part poetry and the prose was going to be letters and it was based on—I conceived of it at a time when I really was writing poems often in conjunction with writing letters to people, especially to men that I was involved with when I was living alone. And somehow the act of writing a letter would often inspire me to write a poem. I even got so I would just write a poem as part of the text of the letter and without feeling any need to revise it or anything, just send it that way. And partly because I was doing that, I started xeroxing those letters, not really with the idea of saving them, or I started making carbon copies, and then I realized that I was interested in the letters as poems and I thought the whole

subject of love, sex, and romance was something I talked so much about that that would just make organically the right kind of work. So over a period of a couple of years I must have collected about two or three hundred pages of this stuff, and I had it all xeroxed when I was at Hollins College and then I continued to write some more letters and poems of various relationships, interrupted this or added to it, and then I decided I was going to start right for sure and I realized that I had all kinds of problems that I didn't know how to solve. They were fiction-writing problems, among other things: were the characters in this book going to be the names of the men, or was I going to make up names? If I made up names—I had already decided that I'd probably edit the letters so that they weren't full of things like "I'll be arriving in Los Angeles on so-and-so" and all those informational details, but then I decided that if I took out those parts, in a way the narrative would be missing because part of what was interesting about those letters was they're real letters. And, so I kept going back and forth—what am I going to do? I had already started calling all these people by names, by designations: the motorcycle-betrayer, the cowboy, the this, the that, and I liked that, but on the other hand, I felt that even if they had those identities in the poems, they still had to have real names: so it would still be "Dear Gary" or "Dear John" or "Dear Bob" or whatever. These problems just became overwhelming to me. I realized that I couldn't decide what I wanted to do. Then at a certain point I decided that I wanted to . . . I mean, I would go through and in a few weeks I decided I wanted to make the whole thing fictional, a real epistolary novel instead of a poem.

Martin: But it never became that novel?

Wakoski: To be truthful, I didn't totally want to solve that problem, because I still wanted to be writing my poems and being me. I didn't really want to write a novel. By that time I'd started siphoning the poems off because whenever I'd put together a collection of poems, and this was during the period of time when I was publishing about a book a year, I obviously would use all the poems I was writing, or some of the poems I was writing. And then I got to thinking, well, if all these poems have been published, then the only thing I'm publishing that's new is the letters, and there's something really bizarre about publishing your own letters as a poem. It's not unreasonable, but it's—I just decided that it all began to have too many problems,

so it became . . . By that time I decided to write *Greed*: Part Eleven.

Martin: And that established *Greed*: Part Ten?

Wakoski: So we published Eight, Nine, and Eleven together, and ever since poor librarians have been saying, "Where's number Ten?" And, probably, in order just to neaten things up, I should have written this next part of *Greed* as Part Ten and just forgotten about it, but as far as I'm concerned Part Ten is love, sex, and romance, and it's the lost part. It's not lost—all this stuff is in my archive at the University of Arizona library, so if it never even gets published, it has some kind of existence, some kind of public existence for people who are interested in getting access to it.

Martin: And Part Twelve?

Wakoski: When I started about two and a half or three years ago I decided I was going to write *Greed*: Part Twelve and it was going to be about gluttony, maybe. Because that's the obvious aspect of greed, but it was the one I had never written about. And it was obviously becoming a major factor in my life, as I became more and more interested in eating and food became a primary subject in my life. Overeating was the natural result of this. But when I started writing *Greed*: Part Twelve, I found that I wasn't interested in gluttony at all. That's why I had never written about it. It just didn't interest me. And I didn't feel moralistic or anything else about it; I just wasn't interested in it. I didn't think that any appropriate poem about gluttony should really be a poem about food, because that isn't what my subject was. And I think that's part of what slowed me down for a long, long time. I realized this after I wrote the first two or three pages of it. Then, I think, I let about a year go by, and I picked it up again, and as I was writing, I realized that what I wanted to write about was my idea of bourgeois greed, and that is of always wanting to have enough of everything, which is not gluttony—it's the opposite of what many people think of as greed. But I think of it as what real bourgeois decadence is—that you should never be wanting for anything. Not that you should have lavish and large surpluses, but that you should always have enough to eat, you should always have enough sex, you should always have a nice house, you should always have transportation. And I realize that that's the kind of greed that my students most suffer from, and it

most debilitates their lives because it makes them incapable of taking risks and of living their lives, you know, without being kind of plugged into this "enough" system.

Martin: What about recognition or fame? Enough of that?

Wakoski: Oh yes. Although for me that's probably more of a greed. I want lots of that. I don't want just enough; I mean I spend every year in the spring anguishing over not being nominated for all the major prizes or not getting them, and there's no reason in the world why anyone should want a Pulitzer Prize if what you care about is good writing, because that's not what gets Pulitzer Prizes. And actually that's one of the things that this *Greed* is about—the folly of worldly recognition, and the folly of that sense of always having enough because there can never be enough.

Martin: Now that's come up in *Greed* before.

Wakoski: I think that's the basic concept of *Greed*, really. I just keep mulling it around different subject areas. What really—last summer I really took off and realized what I was going to do, and it's really the other half—I didn't realize this until I was finished—but it's the other half of *Greed*: Part Ten—love, sex, and romance, the quest for the perfect partner in order to create a whole self. And I conceived of the poem as being a journey to the desert where I meet all of my muses—George Washington, the King of Spain, the Woodsman, the Motorcycle-Betrayer, they're all there—Beethoven. I started writing that part of *Greed* last summer, and I got it written to the point where I took the journey and I got there, and then I didn't know what to do. It lay around for six months or so until we got moved into our new house and I decided I was ready for a new project. It had been germinating and things were sprouting, and so I started working on it either in January or February for several hours each day, three or four days a week. Then I would go for a couple of weeks and not do anything—it just kept sprouting. I decided I wanted to write a masque, because I like allegory, and I've always been fascinated by drama, but for the same reason that I don't write novels—I can't create realistic characters, I like extravagant things too much—I decided a masque would be perfect, because it's an allegory, and it's done in the most extravagant of all possible ways. I had already invented the context for this.

I arrived in the desert with the sense that I was on a journey of destiny—a journey of some sort. I arrived at this place in the middle of the desert that was a kind of oasis—with incredible gardens and these glass structures. And I immediately saw a sign as I walked into one of these gardens that said: "G. Washington, President, Society for Western Flowers." So that became the setting for what was going on, and I meet George Washington.

Martin: Was that the first meeting with George? I don't remember.

Wakoski: The first *real* meeting. So George asks me what I've been doing and what my quest has been, and he says that I'm here to learn about my new quest. So what it is is the end of the search for the perfect man or mate or wholeness through sex or man's love other than self.

Martin: And you become Yeats, altering Plato's parable.

Wakoski: Right. I'm a mythmaker in the sense that I don't tell the story of my life but of something bigger than life. I see myself as "woman," and I definitely see myself as "poet," almost in epic terms, rather than . . . I *use* autobiography, but I really don't write autobiographically. I'm just not enough involved in the real world. I always want things to be bigger than life.

Martin: It seems to me that the closest I've come to that is Olson, or maybe Williams, as being at the centre.

Wakoski: I identify with that same big ego, the Maximus ego, that's in those poems, and that same sense of wanting to define the world in your own solipsistic mythology in a way, with yourself somewhere at the centre of things. I'm not realistically egotistical in the sense that I don't really think Diane Wakoski is a very important person. In fact, I'm terribly aware of how insignificant Diane Wakoski is. But I think Diane the poet is the centre of the universe, and I have no qualms in putting her there, running things. And this poem really does it.