Alex Quinlan

"I Don't Want to Be a Priest. I'd Rather Be a God": An Interview with David Kirby

QUINLAN:

I'd like to begin with your latest collection, *More Than This*. The title poem braids together three stories—two heartbreakers and a witty barbershop riff about a dead cowboy. Could you tell how that poem came into being?

KIRBY:

Sure will, Alex, since what I say about this one poem will say a lot about how I write in general. I'm in this for the long haul, so I keep what I call a "bits journal," one into which I throw everything. And I mean everything: overheard conversations, graffiti, childhood memories, images that come out of nowhere, stories people tell me. (When people know you're a writer, they'll seek you out and give you material. I like that: it's a lot easier when other people do your work for you.) When my bits journal gets a tad overgrown, I'll go into it and do one of two things: I'll find three or six or eight bits that look as though they have something to do with each other, or I'll identify a single juicy bit and then start looking for others that might make it even juicier.

"More Than This" (the poem, not the book) grew up out of the first method. Here were three very different stories that all centered on heartbreak, as you say, on tears and deep, deep feeling. How could I (a) make these stories come together and (b) leave the reader not just reconciled to death and loss but elated? I hope you can hear me rubbing my hands together with glee at this point as I think, "Okay, how am I going to sell

this difficult material?" Because why write otherwise? As you can see, I used one of my favorite tricks, which is to tell half of one story, then tell the others, and then finish with the other half of the original story. Works every time.

I make my students keep bits journals because you can't write poetry every day, but you can add to your bits journal every day. The bits journal is the key to longevity. Some students resist because they're used to just "popping 'em out," as one said about her poems recently. But the most frequent comment I get from students I've had five, ten, twenty years ago is "Thanks for making me keep a bits journal." I was just Skyping with a former student who's close to forty, lives in another country, and is a married mother who works in procurement—which is one of the many jobs other than mine that I don't understand. I just assumed she wasn't writing poems anymore, but then she said about something, "Yeah, I made a note of that in my bits journal." Swoon . . .

QUINLAN:

I'm interested in the structure of that poem, as well. The braided narratives are bound together at the end by a unifying insight: "the world / is so beautiful, that it will give you no peace." It seems to reflect a commitment to Horace's idea that a poem should delight (in this case, through story) and instruct. There should be some payoff, some insight. Otherwise, why bother? As you once said, "A poem either writes you a bill, or it sends you a check."

KIRBY:

I didn't think about this as I set up the beginning and middle, because why would you write the poem in the first place if you knew how it would end? Another way to say that is, I really like the way you're reading "More Than This." You're right: here's this poet sticking the knife in, and then he sticks it in again, and then he not only sticks it in a third time but gives it a twist, and you're thinking, "Come on—I can't take this

anymore! Why am I doing this to myself?" I guess the poem has to be written in such a way that the poet is telling you implicitly that it's going to be okay, that a rescue is on the way.

In this case, the rescue isn't going to be someone saying, "Isn't death awesome?" or "Pain is fun, right?" Instead, it's a matter of the poet reminding you of and reconciling you to something you know already, which is this: we want pleasure more than anything else, but we like to be hurt as well because nothing makes us feel more deeply than pain. Pleasure plays most of the piano keys, but pain plays all eighty-eight of them. Maybe that's why George Jones said, "I'd rather sing a sad song than eat."

QUINLAN:

Your collections, especially from *The House of Blue Light* onward, seem very deliberately structured. This is something you discuss directly in the preface to *The House on Boulevard St.*, a collection of new and selected poems which reimagines the typical volume-by-volume order of such collections in favor of a three-part structure you've said is modeled on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. How did you arrive at the four-part structure of *More Than This*?

KIRBY:

Structuring a collection is like structuring a poem. It's probably like structuring a note in class that you pass to the girl you want to make out with, or a grocery list, for that matter, in that (a) there's no one right way to do it, but (b) it has to work. A lot of my books have that three-part, *House on Boulevard St.* structure with a beginning, middle, and end. People like threes. Threes are comforting. I've also used the coast-to-coast method and begun with the first poem and just gone straight through to the end, and that works, too.

But *More Than This* struck me as a little heavier, if you know what I mean. *The Biscuit Joint* is lightweight and rugged, like a bicycle, but I needed a more substantial structure for

More Than This, so I drank a lot of coffee and took a lot of walks and chewed out my imaginary enemies and finally hit on the symphonic model, meaning four parts that begin in an upbeat way, augur down into torpor and misery, and then *pow!* Using musical language, you blast past all the baffling and painful parts of life and end on a peak that's even higher than the one where you began.

By the way, in the fall of 2021, LSU Press will be issuing *Help Me, Information*, my ninth book with them, and the structure of that collection will be random. Totally random, with three poems in one section and one in another and seven in a third. The poems in *Help Me, Information* just called for that.

QUINLAN:

I'm fascinated by the epigraphs to *More Than This*.

"If I can't dance to it, it's not my revolution."
—Emma Goldman

"I like beautiful melodies telling me terrible things."
—Tom Waits

"Play it fuckin' loud!"
—Bob Dylan

Could you say more about them?

KIRBY:

I remember stumbling over these all at once and thinking how they combined to say everything I believe to be true about poetry. None says it all by itself, but together they deliver the whole package. The first two remind you that pleasure comes first but that a poem must have substance as well, and the last just says your poems should be loud. They should land on your ear in a way you won't forget. That doesn't mean that a poem has to have a marching band and fireworks and

people stepping on rakes and hitting each other in the face with cream pies. Even a quiet poem can be loud. Even a little poem can be big.

QUINLAN:

You've said that "Every new work of art is a tiny point at the top of a pyramid whose base is immeasurable." Without attempting to measure the immeasurable, which is especially tempting in the case of your poetry because of its trademark braiding of vignettes and anecdotes drawn from life with references to other works of art and literature, could you discuss what we might call the shape of the pyramid? I am particularly interested in the bricolage technique and the way it serves to unify so much of your work. Yet you didn't always write poems that way. What was the inspiration for this approach to writing a poem? In what ways has it evolved since its inception?

KIRBY:

Miles Davis said, "Sometimes it takes a long time to learn to play like yourself." That was the case with me: I began by writing conventional free-verse poems of the kind you see in magazines today. At the same time, I had a lot of stories that came mainly from the time in which I grew up and the place, as well, which was a farm in South Louisiana. My mother was a great storyteller. She was born in 1902 and saw a lot of things—she was riding her horse to school one day and came across a lynching, for example—and since I was twelve, before we got our first TV set, people would sit around on the porch and tell stories.

Barbara used to say to me, you ought to turn all those stories you have into essays. But an essay to me at the time was still an academic production with footnotes and so on. But one day, I thought, hmm—instead of writing the stories as essays, why not write the stories as poems? That's what you call narrative poetry: if it's good enough for Homer and Dante

and Milton, shouldn't it be good enough for me?

So I did, and the first one I wrote was called "The Summer of the Cuban Missile Crisis," which Marilyn Hacker picked for *Ploughshares*, which was a better journal than any I'd been in previously. So I wrote more and more of what I called "memory poems." That's a term Byron used, I found out later, but that's okay: Virginia Woolf described Byron's poem *Don Juan* as "an elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put in it," and I thought, aw, yeah.

And a lot of editors loved those poems, so I repeated my initial success again and again. And some editors hated them and took the trouble to write me and tell me so, which is unusual; usually you just get a little form rejection. I'm serious! I got a turndown in the mail one day from a magazine called *Grand Street*, and the next day a separate letter arrived from its editor, Bill Corbett, who said he just wanted to let me know that he personally found those poems flat and unmusical and he really, really hated them. Okay, but I figured if I was annoying people that much, then I was doing something important.

So without thinking very much about it, I guess I was building a big old pyramid, one on which some people could stand and see far, yet a pyramid that crushed others. A gentleman named Anis Shivani wrote an essay called "White American Male Playing It Safe: The Growing Phenomenon of the 'Kirby Poet,'" which says that "Kirby's speech is utterly genial, pleasant, avuncular, demotic, approachable, wholesome, friendly." The horror! And "[Kirby's] perpetual affability" is a "threat to the art of poetry."

I'm just happy to know there's such a thing as *the* Kirby poet. By the way, when somebody has a beef with you, it's usually them, not you. For years I wondered why Bill Corbett hated me so much, and then he came out with a memoir about his monster of a father, someone who shamed and angered him his whole life. I don't know what Anis Shivani's problem is.

I don't mind if somebody throws a rock at me from time to time. In fact, I kind of like it. A lot of poets take themselves

too seriously. Look at their poems. Look at those scowling headshots. They self-present as the priests of the temple when they're really just gatekeepers clucking their tongues at the rest of us and doing their best to shoo us away. I don't want to be a priest. I'd rather be a god, but by that I mean one of those Greek gods, somebody with power and flaws, as well. That's a god who is going to get speeding tickets and be shot at by jealous husbands, and then every once in a while he's going to pull off a little miracle.

QUINLAN:

You have frequently written of the importance of John Keats on your poetry, and references to his poetry are scattered throughout your poems, notably in "This Living Hand" from *More Than This*. How would you describe Keats's influence on your poetry?

KIRBY:

Oh, Johnny Keats. I could cry my eyes out when I think of him dying at twenty-five. Same thing, almost, with Otis Redding, who was just a year older when he died. Both those artists and many others like them represent everything I want to do and be. Their work is lush yet restrained. Neither arrives at the place he's trying to get to, yet neither leaves any gas in the tank; they're coasting on empty toward a horizon that's *almost* reachable. Otis was a torch singer, meaning he carried a torch for someone he could never have. Same with Keats. Yeah, part of me wishes he'd have gotten better and married Fanny Brawne and had thirteen children and become a boring old man. But he didn't. He lived his whole life in just a few years. Same with Otis. I've lived three times longer than either of them, and I still try to live like them every day.

QUINLAN:

You published your first collection in 1977. At what point did

you start writing poetry?

KIRBY:

I started writing poetry when I started writing. Like a lot of people who try to recoup their first memories, I see a collage, frames from a bad short movie by someone who doesn't know very much about filmmaking: me drinking lemonade on a hot day, walking toward a woman in a long dress with her arms outstretched, watching my hand holding a pencil like a screwdriver and making marks on a rough tablet. That's me writing poems, I think. That's me trying to draw attention to myself. My parents were older—they were in their forties when they had me—and I had just the one older brother, and we lived way out in the country. So I was always looking for ways to draw attention to myself. I was always writing material, you might say.

QUINLAN:

Growing up, you lived on a working farm, if I'm not mistaken, and your parents were both educators—your mother a schoolteacher, your father a professor of English at LSU. How did that childhood prepare you for life as a poet? "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," Auden said of Yeats. I get the sense that bucolic Louisiana, along with the value placed on education and language in your parents' professions, nurtured you into poetry.

KIRBY:

I always say I had three parents: my mother, my father, and the ten acres I lived on with them and my brother for the first twenty-one years of my life. There were trees, water, animals, and playmates of every kind, from bankers' sons who lived in the big houses not far away to kids who used outhouses because their shacks had no plumbing. But most of the time I was alone. I lay on my back a lot and watched the hawks

circle. I fell out of trees. I poked stuff with sticks. I usually took a snack and my cap pistol and, when I was older, a real gun so I could shoot tin cans and the occasional cottonmouth moccasin. Everything was in those woods, especially my dreams. I go there in my mind every day of my life.

QUINLAN:

I'm interested in the way people from your life become characters in your poems. Of course, your wife Barbara is a staple, the Beatrice to your Dante, but your friends and students often pop up, as well. I've even heard you say that you warn unfriendly acquaintances—including the occasional hapless college dean—that if they're not careful, they just might wind up in a poem. Can you discuss how you came to draw on your daily experience as a source for your poetry? Were there particular poets or artists who influenced you in this approach?

KIRBY:

Influence is so tricky that I always check the lock on the chicken coop when someone says so-and-so was influenced by blah-blah. In logic, that's called the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* ("after that therefore because of that") fallacy. You see it in trials: a defense attorney will say his client is innocent because he ate too many Twinkies before he killed his mom, and therefore it's the Twinkies' fault, not his; a good prosecutor will say the accused probably ate a lot of French fries in his life and that you might as well blame them for his blood lust.

Anyway, no, I can't say I took the daily experience idea from anyone else in a deliberate way, but plenty of poets before me—Whitman, David Antin, Kenneth Koch—did the same thing. I do feel as though billions of dollars' worth of ideas are flowing past me at any moment and that each is as valuable as the next. Here's a quote for you; it's from Kim Stafford: "I call myself an eavesdropper on the world. Constantly taking note of the things that are coming in. Things that come from

my mind. Things that come from the street. People around me. Reading. There's a constant river into the spirit and the mind. Poetry is just saying, OK, I'll take some of that and put it back out."

But I was already using my daily experiences before I read that. They were just too good. You're right to suggest that my father shaped my love of scholarship, but it was my farm-girl mom who taught me to see everything as a story. Armistead Maupin said that stories happen to people who like stories. That's me, all right.

QUINLAN:

I'd like to discuss the converse of the dynamic relationship between art and experience. You once told me that, more than opening your poetry up to your experience, you are always trying to get your experience to rise to the level of poetry. What are some of the ways you have found to do that?

KIRBY:

I was driving a visiting poet to dinner once when he said that his life was really rich, and he wished that his poetry could be richer. I had the opposite thought, that my poems are or should be my life's role models, its heroes. Or at least I wanted to write poems that worked like that. Look at it this way: since, as you say, my poems are made from daily experience, I better do something to make that experience pretty darned thrilling, since most of daily experience is not.

Stanley Cavell said a person would go mad if they had to watch a video of their last twenty-four hours, so I'm going to compress, enhance, and move those hours around to make a better movie. And there you are: if the poems are thoughtful and colorful and exciting, then shouldn't my life be, as well? Come on, life! Step up to the plate! The poems are showing you the way—be like them!

I once came across another metaphor that works this way: me popping bubble wrap is paradise; me watching you pop

bubble wrap is hell, and me watching a video of you popping bubble wrap is an incentive for a three-state killing spree. When you're reading one of my poems, I want you to feel as though you're the one popping the bubble wrap.

QUINLAN:

How does knowing any given moment of your life might be material for a poem shape the way you live your life?

KIRBY:

To some extent, I do go out looking for trouble—I mean, looking for new things to write about. Once Barbara and I were in Athens, and I got wind of a rally by a right-wing group called Golden Dawn, so I told Barbara I was going to take a stroll, but I didn't say where I was going. The rally turned out to be a lot scarier than I thought. It was lit up like Hitler's rallies in Nuremberg. The participants wore shirts with a symbol that was as close to a swastika as possible without actually being one, and they were nasty to me when I tried to talk to them. (I'm pretty sure they could tell I wasn't a Golden Dawn member.) I got a poem out of it and a lecture from Barbara, but actually the poem turned out not to be as memorable as others I've dreamed up just lying on my couch at home.

I've already talked about the bits journal I keep and make my students keep, and once one of them wrote the best thing on one of those anonymous evaluation forms we get back when the term is over. He said, "It's funny how the act of viewing everything as potential material has the effect of creating more material." There you have it: this twenty-year-old knew more than his venerable instructor. It isn't a matter of living your life a certain way, but of just doing what you always do and upping your awareness. That's a lot easier than going out and being menaced by thugs at a neo-Nazi rally.

QUINLAN:

Earlier in your career, you did scholarship on Henry James and Melville. How, if at all, has that experience informed your poetry?

KIRBY:

As a poet teaching in a university, which is what 93% of the poets out there do, I'm a little different in that I don't have an MFA or a PhD in creative writing. Since poetry pays the bills at my house, I'm not going to bite the hand that feeds me and say that degree programs can be inhibiting or can lead to sameness because students try to please their peers instead of following their own whims, but I do wonder what would have happened if I had gone through a program where I'd submit those long, loopy braid poems and have others say, "Nope, that's not poetry, you should write like us." I never took a poetry workshop, even as an undergrad. But I always wrote poetry.

As far as studying literature in a structured way, I never thought much about that, either. I just loved to read. In part because of the world I grew up in, which teemed with blacksmiths and people who couldn't read and traveling snake-oil salesmen, I was drawn strongly to the nineteenth century, to the world of Whitman and Twain. In graduate school, I discovered Henry James and thought, okay, this is for me: he never married or had children, and because he had a small inheritance and didn't have to work at a day job, he became a kind of high priest of art. He did what he wanted, in other words. And I wanted to do what I wanted. So he was my guy for a good fifteen years or so.

But by then I was married and had children and a day job, and high priestdom didn't seem all that workable. About that time, I (re)discovered Melville, a blue-collar writer with all the bills and backaches most writers have. After a half-dozen books, he even let writing go for a long time and became a

customs inspector. He was good at it! You'd think he'd slouch through his days on the docks, but his supervisors gave him high marks. Yet Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, right? He wrote the kind of book you'd expect from a high priest of art. So, yeah, it's not as though one lifestyle produces one kind of art and another produces something completely different. Choosing the form of your life is like choosing the form your poem takes; what matters is not the choice but the outcome. It's a means to an end. The choice isn't the thing itself but a way to get there.

QUINLAN:

This interview is taking place just after the passing of the musical legend Little Richard, about whom you wrote a 2009 biography. You've said that what made Little Richard so special is that he "took from the sacred and the profane," from childhood experience performing in medicine shows and in churches, and that he was a "hand-made and a home-made entertainer." I'm curious about the intersection of the sacred and profane in your own work, as well as the "hand-made and home-made" work of creating the persona who leaps from the pages of your poems or, at your readings, the entertainer who leaps across the stage performing his poems.

KIRBY:

Well, it's all sacred, isn't it? And it's all profane. I know you're just dying to ask me whether or not I believe in God, so let's clear that up right now. I do believe in God, but not in a tall guy in a robe up in heaven who looks like Charlton Heston. A lot of what I write goes back to Shakespeare, my mentor in generosity and abundance. And a lot of what I think goes back to Emerson, who was so smart but also just so darned commonsensical. Emerson said, "Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your

gratitude." So God isn't a person to me or anything like a sentient being or an intelligence. God is everything. Therefore we owe God only one thing: awareness.

Here's another quote, this time from Mark Strand. (I love quotes, obviously. Why go to the trouble of thinking things up if someone has already said it better than you can?) Strand says, "We're made of the same stuff that stars are made of, or that floats around in space. But we're combined in such a way that we can describe what it's like to be alive, to be witnesses. Most of our experience is that of being a witness. We see and hear and smell other things. I think being alive is responding."

Let's see, where was I? Oh, yeah. You really asked two questions, Alex, the first being about the sacred and the profane (they're the same) and the second about performance. Let me try to be a little less long-winded with my second answer. Performing is just witnessing. Performing is being as alive as you can, especially when you're with other people, because when they see you do that, they know they can be more alive, as well. A performance is like a poem: it's still you, but it's the most engaging version of you.

Mark Strand also said, "We might have come along so that the universe could look at itself."

QUINLAN:

As we've discussed, you have evolved as a writer throughout your career, moving freely from literary scholarship to poetry to music criticism and biography. In what ways has working in these other areas shaped your poetry?

KIRBY:

I just love to write. I'm not a graphomaniac, but I have graphomaniacal tendencies, meaning I love to write but not so much that it's a sickness (that would be graphomania). I like to make up grocery lists. I used to even like to write checks, but who writes a check anymore? So I'm happy to write anything. It's just one more version of staying open and trying to live

as seamless a life as possible, which is the best thing any poet can do for their poems. The only thing I don't write is fiction; maybe that's because I'm a sprinter, and even a short piece of fiction is a mile run.

Fiction's covered in our house by Barbara, though. Once I said to her, "Look, we both write poetry, and you write fiction, and I write non-fiction. One of us should write a play. Why don't you write a play?" Barbara looked at me for a minute and said, "Why don't you?" What I did was take a short story of hers called "Mrs. Kaneshiro Sees God" and put it in play format. I submitted it to the 1999 Nantucket Short Play Festival competition. It won. We flew up to Nantucket that September for the world premier (and, as far as I know, the only production) of "Mrs. Kaneshiro Sees God."

Later the festival director asked me what our next play would be about, and I said there wouldn't be a next play. We'd won—why go back and spend months writing a play that almost certainly wouldn't do as well? That attitude also sums up my approach to gambling. I went to a casino exactly once, put five bucks on red at the roulette table, won ten bucks, left undefeated, and went back to being a poet instead of a hustler or a card shark. I like everything, but poetry's where the money is for me. I don't mean money-money, of course. I mean something like spiritual money.

QUINLAN:

You have frequently mentioned the role that your wife, the poet and fiction writer Barbara Hamby, plays in your poetry. Can you discuss the literary partnership you have shared with her? When did it begin? How has it evolved over the years? What does a typical working day look like for the two of you?

KIRBY:

Yeah, let me tell you a story about Barbara. She won a Guggenheim Fellowship a few years back, and one of the university's media reps was doing a piece on her. She called

me up and asked if I married Barbara because I knew she was a genius, and I said no, I married Barbara because I couldn't keep my hands off of her! "Great," said the media rep. "So many quotes I get are just bland." But then an hour later the media rep calls back and says her boss nixed the quote about the hands. Apparently, that was not highbrow enough. I guess I was supposed to paint a picture of me and Barbara floating above the clouds as we strummed our harps, or lying on an Indian-print bedspread in a meadow like Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithful, feeding each other cherries and giggling over our memories of art school.

No, we were just powerfully attracted to each other. Still are. But then a miracle happened. We found out we both were mad about poetry. We liked to go to the movies. We liked to travel. And so on: the more time we spent together, the more we found out what we had in common. Whew! What relief, huh? It wouldn't have been much of a marriage if it turned out that I only liked to fly those little radio-powered model airplanes and she liked to spend her spare time roping and branding calves.

We start our days with coffee and the kind of old-school newspapers that go thwack when they land in the driveway, the local paper and *The New York Times*. We talk and talk and talk, and then one person says, "I better do my exercises," and the other says, "Oh, okay, then I'll do mine." We have separate breakfasts and lunches because by then we're a couple of independent contractors with classes to teach and poems or stories or book reviews or letters of recommendations to write and contests to judge and meetings to go to or any of the other hundred things that writers and professors engage in. But we always have dinner together, we always take a walk around the neighborhood, and we usually find time to watch either some highbrow indie movie or one of those bloody stories about a dentist who murdered his entire family on *Forensic Files*.

By the way, after her boss told her I couldn't say I couldn't keep my hands off Barbara, the media rep proposed that I go on record as saying I "couldn't live without her." I went along, but that's the kind of thing you say when you're wearing an

ascot and have a cigarette holder and a fake European accent. What's wrong with being married to someone you can't keep your hands off of?

QUINLAN:

Mary Oliver says that she writes poems "for a stranger who will be born in some distant country hundreds of years from now." Who do you envision as the audience for your poetry?

KIRBY:

Good for Mary. Let me quote Sarah Palin, though. Remember when John McCain was campaigning for president and Sarah Palin was his running mate? Katie Couric asked her on CBS what newspapers and magazines she read, and Palin said, "All of 'em. Any of 'em." I write for all readers, any reader. It's too much for me to think that in the year 2525, a bald guy with silver skin in a green tunic is going to turn to his look-alike wife and say, "This Kirby really got it right in that poem he wrote before World War VI and humanity's subsequent relocation from Earth to Pluthor."

I think everything should be clear to everybody. If I'm giving a talk on Milton, and the hall is packed because it's a rainy day and there's free coffee and doughnuts inside, that means there will be people who dropped out of school in the eighth grade as well as world-class Milton scholars. I want to pitch my talk so the dropouts get a good story about a man, a woman, and a snake, and the scholars pick up some insight into *Paradise Lost* they haven't thought about before. Same thing with poetry. If I post a poem on Facebook, I expect my poetry pals to praise it, whether they're praising it sincerely or not. But our housekeeper is one of my Facebook friends, as are some of the women who work in food service on campus, and when they say, "I liked that poem, Dr. Dave," I'm as happy as a fourth-grader who got 100 on his math quiz. Whitman was right. Poetry is for all of us.

QUINLAN:

What does it mean to write for posterity, to endeavor to create art that lasts?

KIRBY:

Wait, let me slip into my t-shirt that says "I Think You've Mistaken Me for Someone Who Cares." Actually, that shirt uses language that's a good deal saltier, but I like to save profanity for those moments when it's really needed, like when you hit your thumb with a hammer or run to the bus stop only to see your bus disappearing into the distance. Or when you take your phone off your bedside table first thing so you can start your day with a poem and see instead some weird denatured language cluster put there by somebody who writes with all the forethought you or I might use when we pour a bowl of cereal and slice a banana over it.

Whatever I do, I'm damned sure not going to try to baffle or frustrate readers by clogging the media with a bunch of weird denatured language clusters. When I look back on a poem I've just written, I hope I feel like a guy from the 1950s with a combover and a jump suit that says "Dave" over the left pocket. He's washing up now because he just put the last touches on a Kenmore washing machine or a Ford Crestliner, an affordable purchase that's going to make somebody happy and last a long time. Doesn't have to last forever. All you want is for people to point at something you made and say, "Yeah, I want that one there."

QUINLAN:

You've said, "My students teach me without meaning to." You also dedicated *Get Up, Please* to your students, with the words "As Borges says paradise is like a library, so I say it's a classroom— / we'll sit around this big table, and you'll teach me." What are some of the things your students have taught you, whether they meant to or not?

KIRBY:

You know, I got to looking at my last Social Security statement and one thing or another recently, and I figured that if I quit tomorrow, I'd make slightly more money than I would if I kept working. But my students are my Oxy, my China white, my snortable everything. If I could tie off and inject them directly into my bloodstream, I would. My entire teaching career has been one long game of Hot Potato: I juggle that spud for as long as I can, but then I throw it out to the young folks. They toss it back and forth, and sooner or later, the potato comes back to me. Teaching isn't a one-way street from the podium to the back row. It's an exchange with lots of deviations and off-ramps. I tell them things. They tell me. I show them a poem of mine, then they show me one I wish I'd written. We swap moods: if they're down, I'll pick them up, and if I'm frazzled, they'll organize me. I'm lucky in that I teach mainly small classes with advanced students in them, but that just makes them junior colleagues, not empty vessels for me to fill with my excellent wisdom. And as you suggest, the best lessons are probably the ones you're unaware you're learning.

QUINLAN:

What are you reading these days?

KIRBY:

All of 'em. Any of 'em. My second life as a reader began one May morning in 2011. Our thirtieth wedding anniversary was coming up. Barbara had said, "Don't you want to do something special for our anniversary?" and I said sure, thinking she might mean we'd drive up to the Tomato Festival in Attapulgus, GA. But when Barbara Hamby is your travel agent, you're more likely to go on a 30-day, 4,000-mile train ride from St. Petersburg to Beijing, which is what we ended up doing.

I knew we'd spend a lot of time bouncing along in Soviet-

era rail cars, so I went over to Borders to buy some books. At the top of my list was *Empire of the Summer Moon*, a 400-pager about Quanah Parker and the Comanche Nation he ruled, which stretched from Mexico to Canada and covered most of the Great Plains. Now a book that size weighs well over two pounds (I put my copy on our kitchen scale just now to come up with that number). I figured there wouldn't be a lot of English-language bookstores in Ekaterinburg and Irkutsk, meaning I'd have to bring a Santa Claus sack of books weighing twenty-five pounds or so. So I bought a Kobo, which was the e-reader Borders was selling at the time.

I've since upgraded to a Kindle. The best thing about a Kindle is that you can get a free sample of pretty much any book in the world, and if you decide to buy the whole thing, it shows up instantly and at a lower price than you'd get anywhere else. Having a Kindle hasn't stopped me from buying regular books, and I do patronize Midtown Reader, Tallahassee's brick-and-mortar bookstore. Anyway, right now I'm reading a biography of Elvis Costello, a book about cephalopods, a couple of memoirs and novels, and a history of philosophy. I can read anything on my Kindle except poetry; that I have to get from the store. Can't read poems in e-book form. A poetry collection has to be an object, something that lies open on your chest when you're daydreaming on a couch and wondering what you're going to write next. Worked for Homer and Sappho. Works for me.