

Raymond Carver, *The Art of Fiction* No. 76

Interviewed by Mona Simpson, Lewis Buzbee

Raymond Carver lives in a large, two-story, wood-shingled house on a quiet street in Syracuse, New York. The front lawn slopes down to the sidewalk. A new Mercedes sits in the driveway. An older VW, the other household car, gets parked on the street.

The entrance to the house is through a large, screened-in porch. Inside, the furnishings are almost without character. Everything matches—cream-colored couches, a glass coffee table. Tess Gallagher, the writer with whom Raymond Carver lives, collects peacock feathers and sets them in vases throughout the house—the most noticeable decorative attempt. Our suspicions were confirmed; Carver told us that all the furniture was purchased and delivered in one day.

Gallagher has painted a detachable wood *No Visitors* sign, the lettering surrounded by yellow and orange eyelashes, which hangs on the screen door. Sometimes the phone is unplugged and the sign stays up for days at a time.

Carver works in a large room on the top floor. The surface of the long oak desk is clear; his typewriter is set to the side, on an L-shaped wing. There are no knickknacks, charms, or toys of any kind on Carver's desk. He is not a collector or a man prone to mementos and nostalgia. Occasionally, one manila folder lies on the oak desk, containing the story currently in the process of revision. His files are well in order. He can extract a story and all its previous versions at a moment's notice. The walls of the study are painted white like the rest of the house, and, like the rest of the house, they are mostly bare. Through a high rectangular window above Carver's desk, light filters into the room in slanted beams, like light from high church windows.

Carver is a large man who wears simple clothes—flannel shirts, khakis or jeans. He seems to live and dress as the characters in his stories live and dress. For someone of his size, he has a remarkably low and indistinct voice; we found ourselves bending closer every few minutes to catch his words and asking the irritating “What, what?”

Portions of the interview were conducted through the mail, during 1981–1982. When we met Carver, the *No Visitors* sign was not up and several Syracuse students dropped by to visit during the course of the interview, including Carver's son, a senior. For lunch, Carver made us sandwiches with salmon he had caught off the coast of Washington. Both he and Gallagher are from Washington state and at the time of the interview, they were having a house built in Port Angeles, where they plan to live part of each year. We asked Carver if that house would feel more like a home to him. He replied, “No, wherever I am is fine. This is fine.”

INTERVIEWER

What was your early life like, and what made you want to write?

RAYMOND CARVER

I grew up in a small town in eastern Washington, a place called Yakima. My dad worked at the sawmill there. He was a saw filer and helped take care of the saws that were used to cut and plane the logs. My mother worked as a retail clerk or a waitress or else stayed at home, but she didn't keep any job for very long. I remember talk concerning her "nerves." In the cabinet under the kitchen sink, she kept a bottle of patent "nerve medicine," and she'd take a couple of tablespoons of this every morning. My dad's nerve medicine was whiskey. Most often he kept a bottle of it under that same sink, or else outside in the woodshed. I remember sneaking a taste of it once and hating it, and wondering how anybody could drink the stuff. Home was a little two-bedroom house. We moved a lot when I was a kid, but it was always into another little two-bedroom house. The first house I can remember living in, near the fairgrounds in Yakima, had an outdoor toilet. This was in the late 1940s. I was eight or ten years old then. I used to wait at the bus stop for my dad to come home from work. Usually he was as regular as clockwork. But every two weeks or so, he wouldn't be on the bus. I'd stick around then and wait for the next bus, but I already knew he wasn't going to be on that one, either. When this happened, it meant he'd gone drinking with friends of his from the sawmill. I still remember the sense of doom and hopelessness that hung over the supper table when my mother and I and my kid brother sat down to eat.

INTERVIEWER

But what made you want to write?

CARVER

The only explanation I can give you is that my dad told me lots of stories about himself when he was a kid, and about his dad and his grandfather. His grandfather had fought in the Civil War. He fought for both sides! He was a turncoat. When the South began losing the war, he crossed over to the North and began fighting for the Union forces. My dad laughed when he told this story. He didn't see anything wrong with it, and I guess I didn't either. Anyway, my dad would tell me stories, anecdotes really, no moral to them, about tramping around in the woods, or else riding the rails and having to look out for railroad bulls. I loved his company and loved to listen to him tell me these stories. Once in a while he'd read something to me from what he was reading. Zane Grey westerns. These were the first real hardback books, outside of grade-school texts, and the Bible, that I'd ever seen. It wouldn't happen very often, but now and again I'd see him lying on the bed of an evening and reading from Zane Grey. It seemed a very private act in a house and family that were not given to privacy. I realized that he had this private side to him, something I didn't understand or know anything about, but something that found expression through this occasional reading. I was interested in that side of him and interested in the act itself. I'd ask him to read me what he was reading, and he'd oblige by just reading from wherever he happened to be in the book. After a while he'd say, "Junior, go do something else now." Well, there were plenty of things to do. In those days, I went fishing in this creek that was not too far from our house. A little later, I started hunting ducks and geese and upland game. That's what excited me in those days, hunting and fishing. That's what made a dent in my emotional life, and that's what I wanted to write about. My reading fare in those days, aside from an occasional historical novel

or Mickey Spillane mystery, consisted of *Sports Afield* and *Outdoor Life*, and *Field & Stream*. I wrote a longish thing about the fish that got away, or the fish I caught, one or the other, and asked my mother if she would type it up for me. She couldn't type, but she did go rent a typewriter, bless her heart, and between the two of us, we typed it up in some terrible fashion and sent it out. I remember there were two addresses on the masthead of the outdoors magazine; so we sent it to the office closest to us, to Boulder, Colorado, the circulation department. The piece came back, finally, but that was fine. It had gone out in the world, that manuscript—it had been places. Somebody had read it besides my mother, or so I hoped anyway. Then I saw an ad in *Writer's Digest*. It was a photograph of a man, a successful author, obviously, testifying to something called the Palmer Institute of Authorship. That seemed like just the thing for me. There was a monthly payment plan involved. Twenty dollars down, ten or fifteen dollars a month for three years or thirty years, one of those things. There were weekly assignments with personal responses to the assignments. I stayed with it for a few months. Then, maybe I got bored; I stopped doing the work. My folks stopped making the payments. Pretty soon a letter arrived from the Palmer Institute telling me that if I paid them up in full, I could still get the certificate of completion. This seemed more than fair. Somehow I talked my folks into paying the rest of the money, and in due time I got the certificate and hung it up on my bedroom wall. But all through high school it was assumed that I'd graduate and go to work at the sawmill. For a long time I wanted to do the kind of work my dad did. He was going to ask his foreman at the mill to put me on after I graduated. So I worked at the mill for about six months. But I hated the work and knew from the first day I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. I worked long enough to save the money for a car, buy some clothes, and so I could move out and get married.

INTERVIEWER

Somehow, for whatever reasons, you went to college. Was it your wife who wanted you to go on to college? Did she encourage you in this respect? Did she want to go to college and that made you want to go? How old were you at this point? She must have been pretty young, too.

CARVER

I was eighteen. She was sixteen and pregnant and had just graduated from an Episcopalian private school for girls in Walla Walla, Washington. At school she'd learned the right way to hold a teacup; she'd had religious instruction and gym and such, but she also learned about physics and literature and foreign languages. I was terrifically impressed that she knew Latin. Latin! She tried off and on to go to college during those first years, but it was too hard to do that; it was impossible to do that and raise a family and be broke all the time, too. I mean broke. Her family didn't have any money. She was going to that school on a scholarship. Her mother hated me and still does. My wife was supposed to graduate and go on to the University of Washington to study law on a fellowship. Instead, I made her pregnant, and we got married and began our life together. She was seventeen when the first child was born, eighteen when the second was born. What shall I say at this point? We didn't have any youth. We found ourselves in roles we didn't know how to play. But we did the best we could. Better than that, I want to think. She did finish college finally. She got her B.A. degree at San Jose State twelve or fourteen years after we married.

INTERVIEWER

Were you writing during these early, difficult years?

CARVER

I worked nights and went to school days. We were always working. She was working and trying to raise the kids and manage a household. She worked for the telephone company. The kids were with a babysitter during the day. Finally, I graduated with the B.A. degree from Humboldt State College and we put everything into the car and in one of those carryalls that fits on top of your car, and we went to Iowa City. A teacher named Dick Day at Humboldt State had told me about the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Day had sent along a story of mine and three or four poems to Don Justice, who was responsible for getting me a five-hundred-dollar grant at Iowa.

INTERVIEWER

Five hundred dollars?

CARVER

That's all they had, they said. It seemed like a lot at the time. But I didn't finish at Iowa. They offered me more money to stay on the second year, but we just couldn't do it. I was working in the library for a dollar or two an hour, and my wife was working as a waitress. It was going to take me another year to get a degree, and we just couldn't stick it out. So we moved back to California. This time it was Sacramento. I found work as a night janitor at Mercy Hospital. I kept the job for three years. It was a pretty good job. I only had to work two or three hours a night, but I was paid for eight hours. There was a certain amount of work that had to get done, but once it was done, that was it—I could go home or do anything I wanted. The first year or two I went home every night and would be in bed at a reasonable hour and be able to get up in the morning and write. The kids would be off at the babysitter's and my wife would have gone to her job—a door-to-door sales job. I'd have all day in front of me. This was fine for a while. Then I began getting off work at night and going drinking instead of going home. By this time it was 1967 or 1968.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first get published?

CARVER

When I was an undergraduate at Humboldt State in Arcata, California. One day, I had a short story taken at one magazine and a poem taken at another. It was a terrific day! Maybe one of the best days ever. My wife and I drove around town and showed the letters of acceptance to all of our friends. It gave some much-needed validation to our lives.

INTERVIEWER

What was the first story you ever published? And the first poem?

CARVER

It was a story called “Pastoral” and it was published in the *Western Humanities Review*. It's a good literary magazine and it's still being published by the University of Utah. They didn't pay me anything for the story, but that didn't matter. The poem was called “The Brass Ring,” and it was published by a magazine in Arizona, now defunct, called *Targets*. Charles Bukowski had a poem in the same issue, and I was pleased to be in the same magazine with him. He was a kind of hero to me then.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true—a friend of yours told me this—that you celebrated your first publication by taking the magazine to bed with you?

CARVER

That's partly true. Actually, it was a book, the *Best American Short Stories* annual. My story “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” had just appeared in the collection. That was back in the late sixties, when it was edited every year by Martha Foley and people used to call it that—simply, “The Foley Collection.” The story had been published in an obscure little magazine out of Chicago called *December*. The day the anthology came in the mail I took it to bed to read and just to look at, you know, and hold it, but I did more looking and holding than actual reading. I fell asleep and woke up the next morning with the book there in bed beside me, along with my wife.

INTERVIEWER

In an article you did for *The New York Times Book Review* you mentioned a story “too tedious to talk about here”—about why you choose to write short stories over novels. Do you want to go into that story now?

CARVER

The story that was “too tedious to talk about” has to do with a number of things that aren't very pleasant to talk about. I did finally talk about some of these things in the essay “Fires,” which was published in *Antaeus*. In it I said that finally, a writer is judged by what he writes, and that's the way it should be. The circumstances surrounding the writing are something else, something extraliterary. Nobody ever asked me to be a writer. But it *was* tough to stay alive and pay bills and put food on the table and at the same time to think of myself as a writer and to *learn* to write. After years of working crap jobs and raising kids and trying to write, I realized I needed to write things I could finish and be done with in a hurry. There was no way I could undertake a novel, a two- or three-year stretch of work on a single project. I needed to write something I could get some kind of a payoff from immediately, not next year, or three years from now. Hence, poems and stories. I was beginning to see that my life was not—let's say it was not what I wanted it to

be. There was always a wagonload of frustration to deal with—wanting to write and not being able to find the time or the place for it. I used to go out and sit in the car and try to write something on a pad on my knee. This was when the kids were in their adolescence. I was in my late twenties or early thirties. We were still in a state of penury, we had one bankruptcy behind us, and years of hard work with nothing to show for it except an old car, a rented house, and new creditors on our backs. It was depressing, and I felt spiritually obliterated. Alcohol became a problem. I more or less gave up, threw in the towel, and took to full-time drinking as a serious pursuit. That's part of what I was talking about when I was talking about things “too tedious to talk about.”

INTERVIEWER

Could you talk a little more about the drinking? So many writers, even if they're not alcoholics, drink so much.

CARVER

Probably not a whole lot more than any other group of professionals. You'd be surprised. Of course there's a mythology that goes along with the drinking, but I was never into that. I was into the drinking itself. I suppose I began to drink heavily after I'd realized that the things I'd wanted most in life for myself and my writing, and my wife and children, were simply not going to happen. It's strange. You never start out in life with the intention of becoming a bankrupt or an alcoholic or a cheat and a thief. Or a liar.

INTERVIEWER

And you were all those things?

CARVER

I was. I'm not any longer. Oh, I lie a little from time to time, like everyone else.

INTERVIEWER

How long since you quit drinking?

CARVER

June second, 1977. If you want the truth, I'm prouder of that, that I've quit drinking, than I am of anything in my life. I'm a recovered alcoholic. I'll always be an alcoholic, but I'm no longer a practicing alcoholic.

INTERVIEWER

How bad did the drinking get?

CARVER

It's very painful to think about some of the things that happened back then. I made a wasteland out of everything I touched. But I might add that towards the end of the drinking there wasn't much left anyway. But specific things? Let's just say, on occasion, the police were involved and emergency rooms and courtrooms.

INTERVIEWER

How did you stop? What made you able to stop?

CARVER

The last year of my drinking, 1977, I was in a recovery center twice, as well as one hospital; and I spent a few days in a place called DeWitt near San Jose, California. DeWitt used to be, appropriately enough, a hospital for the criminally insane. Toward the end of my drinking career I was completely out of control and in a very grave place. Blackouts, the whole business—points where you can't remember anything you say or do during a certain period of time. You might drive a car, give a reading, teach a class, set a broken leg, go to bed with someone, and not have any memory of it later. You're on some kind of automatic pilot. I have an image of myself sitting in my living room with a glass of whiskey in my hand and my head bandaged from a fall caused by an alcoholic seizure. Crazy! Two weeks later I was back in a recovery center, this time at a place called Duffy's, in Calistoga, California, up in the wine country. I was at Duffy's on two different occasions; in the place called DeWitt, in San Jose; and in a hospital in San Francisco—all in the space of twelve months. I guess that's pretty bad. I was dying from it, plain and simple, and I'm not exaggerating.

INTERVIEWER

What brought you to the point where you could stop drinking for good?

CARVER

It was late May 1977. I was living by myself in a house in a little town in northern California, and I'd been sober for about three weeks. I drove to San Francisco, where they were having this publishers' convention. Fred Hills, at that time editor in chief at McGraw-Hill, wanted to take me to lunch and offer me money to write a novel. But a couple of nights before the lunch, one of my friends had a party. Midway through, I picked up a glass of wine and drank it, and that's the last thing I remember. Blackout time. The next morning when the stores opened, I was waiting to buy a bottle. The dinner that night was a disaster; it was terrible, people quarreling and disappearing from the table. And the next morning I had to get up and go have this lunch with Fred Hills. I was so hungover when I woke up I could hardly hold my head up. But I drank a half pint of vodka before I picked up Hills and that helped, for the short run. And then he wanted to drive over to Sausalito for lunch! That took us at least an hour in heavy traffic, and I was drunk and hungover both, you understand. But for some reason he went ahead and offered me this money to write a novel.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever write the novel?

CARVER

Not yet! Anyway, I managed to get out of San Francisco back up to where I lived. I stayed drunk for a couple more days. And then I woke up, feeling terrible, but I didn't drink anything that morning. Nothing alcoholic, I mean. I felt terrible physically—mentally, too, of course—but I didn't drink anything. I didn't drink for three days, and when the third day had passed, I began to feel some better. Then I just kept not drinking. Gradually I began to put a little distance between myself and the booze. A week. Two weeks. Suddenly it was a month. I'd been sober for a month, and I was slowly starting to get well.

INTERVIEWER

Did AA help?

CARVER

It helped a lot. I went to at least one and sometimes two meetings a day for the first month.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever feel that alcohol was in any way an inspiration? I'm thinking of your poem "Vodka," published in *Esquire*.

CARVER

My God, no! I hope I've made that clear. Cheever remarked that he could always recognize "an alcoholic line" in a writer's work. I'm not exactly sure what he meant by this but I think I know. When we were teaching in the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the fall semester of 1973, he and I did nothing *but* drink. I mean we met our classes, in a manner of speaking. But the entire time we were there—we were living in this hotel they have on campus, the Iowa House—I don't think either of us ever took the covers off our typewriters. We made trips to a liquor store twice a week in my car.

INTERVIEWER

To stock up?

CARVER

Yes, stock up. But the store didn't open until 10:00 a.m. Once we planned an early morning run, a ten o'clock run, and we were going to meet in the lobby of the hotel. I came down early to get some cigarettes and John was pacing up and down in the lobby. He was wearing loafers, but he

didn't have any socks on. Anyway, we headed out a little early. By the time we got to the liquor store the clerk was just unlocking the front door. On this particular morning, John got out of the car before I could get it properly parked. By the time I got inside the store he was already at the checkout stand with a half gallon of Scotch. He lived on the fourth floor of the hotel and I lived on the second. Our rooms were identical, right down to the same reproduction of the same painting hanging on the wall. But when we drank together, we always drank in his room. He said he was afraid to come down to drink on the second floor. He said there was always a chance of him getting mugged in the hallway! But you know, of course, that fortunately, not too long after Cheever left Iowa City, he went to a treatment center and got sober and stayed sober until he died.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel the spoken confessions at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings have influenced your writing?

CARVER

There are different kinds of meetings—speaker meetings where just one speaker will get up and talk for fifty minutes or so about what it was like then, and maybe what it's like now. And there are meetings where everyone in the room has a chance to say something. But I can't honestly say I've ever consciously or otherwise patterned any of my stories on things I've heard at the meetings.

INTERVIEWER

Where do your stories come from, then? I'm especially asking about the stories that have something to do with drinking.

CARVER

The fiction I'm most interested in has lines of reference to the real world. None of my stories really *happened*, of course. But there's always something, some element, something said to me or that I witnessed, that may be the starting place. Here's an example: "That's the last Christmas you'll ever ruin for us!" I was drunk when I heard that, but I remembered it. And later, much later, when I was sober, using only that one line and other things I imagined, imagined so accurately that they *could* have happened, I made a story—"A Serious Talk." But the fiction I'm most interested in, whether it's Tolstoy's fiction, Chekhov, Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, Hemingway, Isaac Babel, Ann Beattie, or Anne Tyler, strikes me as autobiographical to some extent. At the very least it's referential. Stories long or short don't just come out of thin air. I'm reminded of a conversation involving John Cheever. We were sitting around a table in Iowa City with some people and he happened to remark that after a family fracas at his home one night, he got up the next morning and went into the bathroom to find something his daughter had written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror: "D-e-r-e daddy, don't leave us." Someone at the table spoke up and said, "I recognize that from one of your stories." Cheever said, "Probably so. Everything I write is autobiographical." Now of course that's not literally true. But everything we write is, in

some way, autobiographical. I'm not in the least bothered by "autobiographical" fiction. To the contrary. *On the Road*. Céline. Roth. Lawrence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet*. So much of Hemingway in the Nick Adams stories. Updike, too, you bet. Jim McConkey. Clark Blaise is a contemporary writer whose fiction is out-and-out autobiography. Of course, you have to know what you're doing when you turn your life's stories into fiction. You have to be immensely daring, very skilled and imaginative and willing to tell everything on yourself. You're told time and again when you're young to write about what you know, and what do you know better than your own secrets? But unless you're a special kind of writer, and a very talented one, it's dangerous to try and write volume after volume on *The Story of My Life*. A great danger, or at least a great temptation, for many writers is to become too autobiographical in their approach to their fiction. A little autobiography and a lot of imagination are best.

INTERVIEWER

Are your characters trying to do what matters?

CARVER

I think they are trying. But trying and succeeding are two different matters. In some lives, people always succeed; and I think it's grand when that happens. In other lives, people don't succeed at what they try to do, at the things they want most to do, the large or small things that support the life. These lives are, of course, valid to write about, the lives of the people who don't succeed. Most of my own experience, direct or indirect, has to do with the latter situation. I think most of my characters would like their actions to count for something. But at the same time they've reached the point—as so many people do—that they know it isn't so. It doesn't add up any longer. The things you once thought important or even worth dying for aren't worth a nickel now. It's their lives they've become uncomfortable with, lives they see breaking down. They'd like to set things right, but they can't. And usually they do know it, I think, and after that they just do the best they can.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something about one of my favorite stories in your most recent collection? Where did the idea for "Why Don't You Dance?" originate?

CARVER

I was visiting some writer friends in Missoula back in the mid-1970s. We were all sitting around drinking and someone told a story about a barmaid named Linda who got drunk with her boyfriend one night and decided to move all of her bedroom furnishings into the backyard. They did it, too, right down to the carpet and the bedroom lamp, the bed, the nightstand, everything. There were about four or five writers in the room, and after the guy finished telling the story, someone said, "Well, who's going to write it?" I don't know who else might have written it, but I wrote it. Not then, but later. About four or five years later, I think. I changed and added things to it, of course. Actually, it was the first story I wrote after I finally stopped drinking.

INTERVIEWER

What are your writing habits like? Are you always working on a story?

CARVER

When I'm writing, I write every day. It's lovely when that's happening. One day dovetailing into the next. Sometimes I don't even know what day of the week it is. The "paddle-wheel of days," John Ashbery has called it. When I'm not writing, like now, when I'm tied up with teaching duties as I have been the last while, it's as if I've never written a word or had any desire to write. I fall into bad habits. I stay up too late and sleep in too long. But it's okay. I've learned to be patient and to bide my time. I had to learn that a long time ago. Patience. If I believed in signs, I suppose my sign would be the sign of the turtle. I write in fits and starts. But when I'm writing, I put in a lot of hours at the desk, ten or twelve or fifteen hours at a stretch, day after day. I love that, when that's happening. Much of this work time, understand, is given over to revising and rewriting. There's not much that I like better than to take a story that I've had around the house for a while and work it over again. It's the same with the poems I write. I'm in no hurry to send something off just after I write it, and I sometimes keep it around the house for months doing this or that to it, taking this out and putting that in. It doesn't take that long to do the first draft of the story, that usually happens in one sitting, but it does take a while to do the various versions of the story. I've done as many as twenty or thirty drafts of a story. Never less than ten or twelve drafts. It's instructive, and heartening both, to look at the early drafts of great writers. I'm thinking of the photographs of galleys belonging to Tolstoy, to name one writer who loved to revise. I mean, I don't know if he loved it or not, but he did a great deal of it. He was always revising, right down to the time of page proofs. He went through and rewrote *War and Peace* eight times and was still making corrections in the galleys. Things like this should hearten every writer whose first drafts are dreadful, like mine are.

INTERVIEWER

Describe what happens when you write a story.

CARVER

I write the first draft quickly, as I said. This is most often done in longhand. I simply fill up the pages as rapidly as I can. In some cases, there's a kind of personal shorthand, notes to myself for what I will do later when I come back to it. Some scenes I have to leave unfinished, unwritten in some cases; the scenes that will require meticulous care later. I mean all of it requires meticulous care—but some scenes I save until the second or third draft, because to do them and do them right would take too much time on the first draft. With the first draft it's a question of getting down the outline, the scaffolding of the story. Then on subsequent revisions I'll see to the rest of it. When I've finished the longhand draft I'll type a version of the story and go from there. It always looks different to me, better, of course, after it's typed up. When I'm typing the first draft, I'll begin to rewrite and add and delete a little then. The real work comes later, after I've done three or four drafts of the story. It's the same with the poems, only the poems may go through

forty or fifty drafts. Donald Hall told me he sometimes writes a hundred or so drafts of his poems. Can you imagine?

INTERVIEWER

Has your way of working changed?

CARVER

The stories in *What We Talk About* are different to an extent. For one thing, it's a much more self-conscious book in the sense of how intentional every move was, how calculated. I pushed and pulled and worked with those stories before they went into the book to an extent I'd never done with any other stories. When the book was put together and in the hands of my publisher, I didn't write anything at all for six months. And then the first story I wrote was "Cathedral," which I feel is totally different in conception and execution from any stories that have come before. I suppose it reflects a change in my life as much as it does in my way of writing. When I wrote "Cathedral" I experienced this rush and I felt, "This is what it's all about, this is the reason we do this." It was different than the stories that had come before. There was an opening up when I wrote the story. I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end—writing stuff and publishing stuff I wouldn't want to read myself, and that's the truth. In a review of the last book, somebody called me a "minimalist" writer. The reviewer meant it as a compliment. But I didn't like it. There's something about "minimalist" that smacks of smallness of vision and execution that I don't like. But all of the stories in the new book, the one called *Cathedral*, were written within an eighteen-month period; and in every one of them I feel this difference.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any sense of an audience? Updike described his ideal reader as a young boy in a small Midwestern town finding one of his books on a library shelf.

CARVER

It's nice to think of Updike's idealized reader. But except for the early stories, I don't think it's a young boy in a small Midwestern town who's reading Updike. What would this young boy make of *The Centaur* or *Couples* or *Rabbit Redux* or *The Coup*? I think Updike is writing for the audience that John Cheever said he was writing for, "intelligent, adult men and women," wherever they live. Any writer worth his salt writes as well and as truly as he can and hopes for as large and perceptive a readership as possible. So you write as well as you can and hope for good readers. But I think you're also writing for other writers to an extent—the dead writers whose work you admire, as well as the living writers you like to read. If they like it, the other writers, there's a good chance other "intelligent, adult men and women" may like it, too. But I don't have that boy you mentioned in mind, or anyone else for that matter, when I'm doing the writing itself.

INTERVIEWER

How much of what you write do you finally throw away?

CARVER

Lots. If the first draft of the story is forty pages long, it'll usually be half that by the time I'm finished with it. And it's not just a question of taking out or bringing it down. I take out a lot, but I also add things and then add some more and take out some more. It's something I love to do, putting words in and taking words out.

INTERVIEWER

Has the process of revision changed now that the stories seem to be longer and more generous?

CARVER

Generous, yes, that's a good word for them. Yes, and I'll tell you why. Up at school there's a typist who has one of those space-age typewriters, a word processor, and I can give her a story to type and once she has it typed and I get back the fair copy, I can mark it up to my heart's content and give it back to her; and the next day I can have my story back, all fair copy once more. Then I can mark it up again as much as I want, and the next day I'll have back a fair copy once more. I love it. It may seem like a small thing, really, but it's changed my life, that woman and her word processor.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever have any time off from not having to earn a living?

CARVER

I had a year once. It was a very important year for me, too. I wrote most of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* in that year. It was back in 1970 or 1971. I was working for this textbook publishing firm in Palo Alto. It was my first white-collar job, right after the period when I'd been a janitor at the hospital in Sacramento. I'd been working away there quietly as an editor when the company, it was called SRA, decided to do a major reorganization. I planned to quit, I was writing my letter of resignation, but then suddenly—I was fired. It was just wonderful the way it turned out. We invited all of our friends that weekend and had a firing party! For a year I didn't have to work. I drew unemployment and had my severance pay to live on. And that's the period when my wife finished her college degree. That was a turning point, that time. It was a good period.

INTERVIEWER

Are you religious?

CARVER

No, but I have to believe in miracles and the possibility of resurrection. No question about that. Every day that I wake up, I'm glad to wake up. That's why I like to wake up early. In my drinking days I would sleep until noon or whatever and I would usually wake up with the shakes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regret a lot of things that happened back then when things were so bad?

CARVER

I can't change anything now. I can't afford to regret. That life is simply gone now, and I can't regret its passing. I have to live in the present. The life back then is gone just as surely—it's as remote to me as if it had happened to somebody I read about in a nineteenth-century novel. I don't spend more than five minutes a month in the past. The past really *is* a foreign country, and they do do things differently there. Things happen. I really do feel I've had two different lives.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk a little about literary influences, or at least name some writers whose work you greatly admire?

CARVER

Ernest Hemingway is one. The early stories. "Big Two-Hearted River," "Cat in the Rain," "The Three-Day Blow," "Soldier's Home," lots more. Chekhov. I suppose he's the writer whose work I most admire. But who doesn't like Chekhov? I'm talking about his stories now, not the plays. His plays move too slowly for me. Tolstoy. Any of his short stories, novellas, and *Anna Karenina*. Not *War and Peace*. Too slow. But *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *Master and Man*, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" Tolstoy is the best there is. Isaac Babel, Flannery O'Connor, Frank O'Connor. James Joyce's *Dubliners*. John Cheever. *Madame Bovary*. Last year I reread that book, along with a new translation of Flaubert's letters written while he was composing—no other word for it—*Madame Bovary*. Conrad. Updike's *Too Far to Go*. And there are wonderful writers I've come across in the last year or two like Tobias Wolff. His book of stories *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* is just wonderful. Max Schott. Bobbie Ann Mason. Did I mention her? Well, she's good and worth mentioning twice. Harold Pinter. V. S. Pritchett. Years ago I read something in a letter by Chekhov that impressed me. It was a piece of advice to one of his many correspondents, and it went something like this: Friend, you don't have to write about extraordinary people who accomplish extraordinary and memorable deeds. (Understand I was in college at the time and reading plays about princes and dukes and the overthrow of kingdoms. Quests and the like, large undertakings to establish heroes in their rightful places. Novels with larger-than-life heroes.) But reading what Chekhov had to say in that letter, and in other letters of his as well, and reading his stories, made me see things differently than I had before. Not long afterwards I read a play and a number of stories by Maxim Gorky, and he simply reinforced in his work what Chekhov had to say. Richard Ford is another fine writer. He's primarily a novelist,

but he's also written stories and essays. He's a friend. I have a lot of friends who are good friends, and some of them are good writers. Some not so good.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do in that case? I mean, how do you handle that—if one of your friends publishes something you don't like?

CARVER

I don't say anything unless the friend asks me, and I hope he doesn't. But if you're asked you have to say it in a way that it doesn't wreck the friendship. You want your friends to do well and write the best they can. But sometimes their work is a disappointment. You want everything to go well for them, but you have this dread that maybe it won't and there's not much you can do.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of moral fiction? I guess this has to lead into talk about John Gardner and his influence on you. I know you were his student many years ago at Humboldt State College.

CARVER

That's true. I've written about our relationship in the *Antaeus* piece and elaborated on it more in my introduction to a posthumous book of his called *On Becoming a Novelist*. I think *On Moral Fiction* is a wonderfully smart book. I don't agree with all of it, by any means, but generally he's right. Not so much in his assessments of living writers as in the aims, the aspirations of the book. It's a book that wants to affirm life rather than trash it. Gardner's definition of morality is life affirming. And in that regard he believes good fiction is moral fiction. It's a book to argue with, if you like to argue. It's brilliant, in any case. I think he may argue his case even better in *On Becoming a Novelist*. And he doesn't go after other writers as he did in *On Moral Fiction*. We had been out of touch with each other for years when he published *On Moral Fiction*, but his influence, the things he stood for in my life when I was his student, were still so strong that for a long while I didn't want to read the book. I was afraid to find out that what I'd been writing all these years was immoral! You understand that we'd not seen each other for nearly twenty years and had only renewed our friendship after I'd moved to Syracuse and he was down there at Binghamton, seventy miles away. There was a lot of anger directed toward Gardner and the book when it was published. He touched nerves. I happen to think it's a remarkable piece of work.

INTERVIEWER

But after you read the book, what did you think then about your own work? Were you writing “moral” or “immoral” stories?

CARVER

I'm still not sure! But I heard from other people, and then he told me himself, that he liked my work. Especially the new work. That pleases me a great deal. Read *On Becoming a Novelist*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still write poetry?

CARVER

Some, but not enough. I want to write more. If too long a period of time goes by, six months or so, I get nervous if I haven't written any poems. I find myself wondering if I've stopped being a poet or stopped being able to write poetry. It's usually then that I sit down and try to write some poems. This book of mine that's coming in the spring, *Fires*—that's got all of the poems of mine I want to keep.

INTERVIEWER

How do they influence each other? The writing of fiction and the writing of poetry?

CARVER

They don't any longer. For a long time I was equally interested in the writing of poetry and the writing of fiction. In magazines I always turned to the poems first before I read the stories. Finally, I had to make a choice, and I came down on the side of the fiction. It was the right choice for me. I'm not a “born” poet. I don't know if I'm a “born” anything except a white American male. Maybe I'll become an occasional poet. But I'll settle for that. That's better than not being any kind of poet at all.

INTERVIEWER

How has fame changed you?

CARVER

I feel uncomfortable with that word. You see, I started out with such low expectations in the first place—I mean, how far are you going to get in this life writing short stories? And I didn't have much self-esteem as a result of this drinking thing. So it's a continual amazement to me, this attention that's come along. But I can tell you that after the reception for *What We Talk About*, I felt a confidence that I've never felt before. Every good thing that's happened since has conjoined to make me want to do even more and better work. It's been a good spur. And all this is coming at a time in my life when I have more strength than I've ever had before. Do you know what I'm saying? I feel stronger and more certain of my direction now than ever before. So “fame”—or let's say this newfound attention and interest—has been a good thing. It bolstered my confidence, when my confidence needed bolstering.

INTERVIEWER

Who reads your writing first?

CARVER

Tess Gallagher. As you know, she's a poet and short-story writer herself. I show her everything I write except for letters, and I've even shown her a few of those. But she has a wonderful eye and a way of feeling herself into what I write. I don't show her anything until I've marked it up and taken it as far as I can. That's usually the fourth or fifth draft, and then she reads every subsequent draft thereafter. So far I've dedicated three books to her and those dedications are not just a token of love and affection; they also indicate the high esteem in which I hold her and an acknowledgment of the help and inspiration she's given me.

INTERVIEWER

Where does Gordon Lish enter into this? I know he's your editor at Knopf.

CARVER

Just as he was the editor who began publishing my stories at *Esquire* back in the early 1970s. But we had a friendship that went back before that time, back to 1967 or 1968, in Palo Alto. He was working for a textbook publishing firm right across the street from the firm where I worked. The one that fired me. He didn't keep any regular office hours. He did most of his work for the company at home. At least once a week he'd ask me over to his place for lunch. He wouldn't eat anything himself, he'd just cook something for me and then hover around the table watching me eat. It made me nervous, as you might imagine. I'd always wind up leaving something on my plate, and he'd always wind up eating it. Said it had to do with the way he was brought up. This is not an isolated example. He still does things like that. He'll take me to lunch now and won't order anything for himself except a drink and then he'll eat up whatever I leave in my plate! I saw him do it once in the Russian Tea Room. There were four of us for dinner, and after the food came he watched us eat. When he saw we were going to leave food on our plates, he cleaned it right up. Aside from this craziness, which is more funny than anything, he's remarkably smart and sensitive to the needs of a manuscript. He's a good editor. Maybe he's a great editor. All I know for sure is that he's my editor and my friend, and I'm glad on both counts.

INTERVIEWER

Would you consider doing more movie script work?

CARVER

If the subject could be as interesting as this one I just finished with Michael Cimino on the life of Dostoyevsky, yes, of course. Otherwise, no. But Dostoyevsky! You bet I would.

INTERVIEWER

And there was real money involved.

CARVER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

That accounts for the Mercedes.

CARVER

That's it.

INTERVIEWER

What about *The New Yorker*? Did you ever send your stories to *The New Yorker* when you were first starting out?

CARVER

No, I didn't. I didn't read *The New Yorker*. I sent my stories and poems to the little magazines and once in a while something was accepted, and I was made happy by the acceptance. I had some kind of audience, you see, even though I never met any of my audience.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get letters from people who've read your work?

CARVER

Letters, tapes, sometimes photographs. Somebody just sent me a cassette—songs that had been made out of some of the stories.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write better on the West Coast—out in Washington—or here in the East? I guess I'm asking how important a sense of place is to your work.

CARVER

Once, it was important to see myself as a writer from a particular place. It was important for me to be a writer from the West. But that's not true any longer, for better or worse. I think I've moved around too much, lived in too many places, felt dislocated and displaced, to now have any firmly rooted sense of "place." If I've ever gone about consciously locating a story in a particular place and period, and I guess I have, especially in the first book, I suppose that place would be the Pacific Northwest. I admire the sense of place in such writers as Jim Welch, Wallace Stegner, John Keeble, William Eastlake, and William Kittredge. There are plenty of good writers with

this sense of place you're talking about. But the majority of my stories are not set in any specific locale. I mean, they could take place in just about any city or urban area; here in Syracuse, but also Tucson, Sacramento, San Jose, San Francisco, Seattle, or Port Angeles, Washington. In any case, most of my stories are set indoors!

INTERVIEWER

Do you work in a particular place in your house?

CARVER

Yes, upstairs in my study. It's important to me to have my own place. Lots of days go by when we just unplug the telephone and put out our "No Visitors." sign. For many years I worked at the kitchen table, or in a library carrel, or else out in my car. This room of my own is a luxury *and* a necessity now.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still hunt and fish?

CARVER

Not so much anymore. I still fish a little, fish for salmon in the summer, if I'm out in Washington. But I don't hunt, I'm sorry to say. I don't know where to go! I guess I could find someone who'd take me, but I just haven't gotten around to it. But my friend Richard Ford is a hunter. When he was up here in the spring of 1981 to give a reading from his work, he took the proceeds from his reading and bought me a shotgun. Imagine that! And he had it inscribed, *For Raymond from Richard, April 1981*. Richard is a hunter, you see, and I think he was trying to encourage me.

INTERVIEWER

How do you hope your stories will affect people? Do you think your writing will change anybody?

CARVER

I really don't know. I doubt it. Not change in any profound sense. Maybe not any change at all. After all, art is a form of entertainment, yes? For both the maker and the consumer. I mean in a way it's like shooting billiards or playing cards, or bowling—it's just a different, and I would say higher, form of amusement. I'm not saying there isn't spiritual nourishment involved, too. There is, of course. Listening to a Beethoven concerto or spending time in front of a van Gogh painting or reading a poem by Blake can be a profound experience on a scale that playing bridge or bowling a 220 game can never be. Art is all the things art is supposed to be. But art is also a superior amusement. Am I wrong in thinking this? I don't know. But I remember in my twenties reading plays by Strindberg, a novel by Max Frisch, Rilke's poetry, listening all night to music

by Bartók, watching a tv special on the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo and feeling in each case that my life *had* to change after these experiences, it couldn't help but be affected by these experiences and *changed*. There was simply no way I would not become a different person. But then I found out soon enough my life was not going to change after all. Not in any way that I could see, perceptible or otherwise. I understood then that art was something I could pursue when I had the time for it, when I could afford to do so, and that's all. Art was a luxury and it wasn't going to change me or my life. I guess I came to the hard realization that art doesn't make anything happen. No. I don't believe for a minute in that absurd Shelleyan nonsense having to do with poets as the “unacknowledged legislators” of this world. What an idea! Isak Dinesen said that she wrote a little every day, without hope and without despair. I like that. The days are gone, if they were ever with us, when a novel or a play or a book of poems could change people's ideas about the world they live in or even about themselves. Maybe writing fiction about particular kinds of people living particular kinds of lives will allow certain areas of life to be understood a little better than they were understood before. But I'm afraid that's it, at least as far as I'm concerned. Perhaps it's different in poetry. Tess has had letters from people who have read her poems and say the poems saved them from jumping off a cliff or drowning themselves, et cetera. But that's something else. Good fiction is partly a bringing of the news from one world to another. That end is good in and of itself, I think. But changing things through fiction, changing somebody's political affiliation or the political system itself, or saving the whales or the redwood trees, no. Not if these are the kinds of changes you mean. And I don't think it should have to do any of these things, either. It doesn't *have* to do anything. It just has to be there for the fierce pleasure we take in doing it, and the different kind of pleasure that's taken in reading something that's durable and made to last, as well as beautiful in and of itself. Something that throws off these sparks—a persistent and steady glow, however dim.