

54.38.56 Interviewer: Thank you Jeff for talking with me today. I'd like just for you to start with some basic biographical information. Where were you born, where you grew up, where you went to school, that kind of thing.

54.39.56 Jeff: O.K. I was born in 1957 in Cincinnati. I was born at Bethesda Hospital. I grew up in Lockland, Ohio. Went to Lockland High School. In 1975 I went to Cumberland College, in Williamsburg, Kentucky, and I transferred from there to Eastern Kentucky and then the University of Cincinnati. The reason being that none of those programs at that time in the mid-'70s offered writing curricula per se as schools do now. And I knew I was going to be writer. I knew...I wrote all the time. And professors continued to encourage me to go to a place that had a program as well as literature, and UC had that. And uh, so I went to UC and graduated in 1980. I graduated with a...I didn't know what to do with a English degree, so I immediately at that time decided, well, teaching's in my blood too. I come from a family of teachers as well, so I will be a teacher. And so I got a Secondary Ed degree from UC. Taught for 1 year high school then left in 1982 to go to University of Colorado, Boulder, where I entered a graduate writing program there and studied poetry. I lived in Colorado from 1982 to 1986, returned to Cincinnati in '86, proceeded to work here at the College of Mount St. Joseph in 1987, and I've been here since 1987. And in that time, I also acquired an MFA degree from Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. I have a wife and a daughter and we live in Western Hills. And, should I keep going?

Interviewer: That's good. That's a good start. When you say you have writing as a interest and ability, can you remember in elementary school or junior high, activities or things or maybe even outside the school where...you said you were always writing. What were some things about writing that have always attracted you?

Jeff: Yeah, there are three sort of... We think of a seminal moment as just being one but I think there are three in my early years. When I was in fourth grade, my fourth grade teacher called my mother and said: "Mrs. Hillard, you know Jeff is some kind a reader. He's always the first to finish in class, but he never remembers what he read." And she said, "Really?" "Yeah. He just whips through those books but doesn't remember anything because when he puts his book down he gets out a piece of paper and starts writing something." I didn't remember that until my mother reminded me. So we had to practice on my reading comprehension because I was too busy getting to the writing part. Then in seventh grade, I had a Spanish class and I was always writing things, I don't know, little things, poems mostly, little stories. And toward the end of the year our Spanish teacher said, "Well, you guys want to do something different?" And we all said, "Let's write a play." And she said, "Cool. Who would like to write the play." And everybody scrunched down in their chairs and their desks, nobody wanted, that was work. And I said, "I'll do it!" And then I was kind of a clown and I said: "I'll do it if I get a better grade and if I get to sit in the back of the class for the rest of the year, just write this play for the next three weeks." And she said, "Well, it has to be in Spanish." And I said, "Alright, okay." So I went back and I got that, you know, she let me write this play. It turned out to be about...it was one of those...that was during the time when buddies of mine and I would go downtown Cincinnati to see what's now called those blaxploitation films, "Superfly", "Shaft"...and so my play, had to do, in Spanish, had to do with a kind of hero who was a sort of Superfly detective, and it was

performed. And then my junior year, the most important thing that's happened to me that I can think of that early, perhaps ever, is we had a really rough English teacher. A brilliant, rough, yet compassionate, human man who really cared about literature and writing. And I loved him and most students did. He was an African American and was a known scholar in the city of Cincinnati as a high school teacher. And he was never one to compliment much. And to him, to even smile was a huge thing. But you could tell he cared. One day I was walking down the hall and he tapped me on my shoulder, and he said: "Mr. Hillard." And I thought, "My God, what did I do." That's what you thought, and he said, "You need to keep writing." And my heart climbed in my throat. That was the hugest validation I think I have ever received out of a lot of stuff. For him to say that gave me complete empowerment to realize I had something. Now I probably would have anyway, or I would have tried. But having that man say something at that age. We have been in touch ever since then. My first book in 1989 was dedicated to him. So, those are three moments in my early school years where, immediately, I knew I was going to write. I didn't know how I'd feed a family. I didn't know what writing would bring. I knew I was more creative. I knew it was poetry or fiction rather than say advertising copy or PR, although, of course, in the last 25 years I've done some of that stuff, too. But at that time it was completely creative. And I just thought I let the chips fall where they might, later on down the road if I needed to be a teacher, I would be a teacher. If I needed to be something else, I'd be something else. But I would always continue to write. I see that happening to my daughter right now as well. I see her doing little things that I used to do, but one thing she does more than I ever did was draw. I cannot draw, and that's what she is doing.

54.45.13 Interviewer: I have a eight-year old son who likes to draw and tell little stories and my older son is very much math and science oriented . He is a very good writer to summarize sort of non-fiction essay, summarizing facts. But he has trouble getting outside himself or outside....

54.45.30 Jeff: It's fascinating to watch regardless...

54.45.33 Interviewer: When you say that the fictive or creative side was something that you were more drawn to, what is it about that form, whether it be poetry or fiction or play or what have you, that allows you to go beyond the literal, what about that attracts you or is the place you find your niche?

54.45.57 Jeff: In most cases, what I am trying to do is reach out in my fiction or poetry and particularly poetry, try to reach outside of what I might just simply be thinking at that time. I do consider a lot of my own personal experiences valuable in the writing process. But, as an artist, as I've been maturing as an artist, I've been taking on necessarily subjects, persons, peoples, countries, places, materials that are outside of my own experience. And, I've been trying to use that as a way to see, not only how I would come at that from an artist's stand point but how does that matter in my life? So the things I've been writing about over the years have allowed me to get outside of my own little insular world and try to imagine the lives of somebody else. That's what these, well that's what creating is all about to me. I'll be the first to admit and the first to say that my own life, in things that happened to my own life, carry over in our importance symbiotically in the work of a creative piece of fiction or poetry. You can't divorce yourself

from that. But, I think...we have an imagination, to imagine other things too, other places, other leaps, other areas. And that's what I try to do.

54.47.40 Interviewer: What were some of the, either classes, or experiences or writing projects that you undertook while you were in Colorado that were...other than just getting a degree, was there anything while you were there that was important

54.47.56 Jeff: As a grad student in my late 20's at the University of Colorado, mid-to-late 20s, one thing, two things I did that I think are really important now that I look back are that I helped bring in some major writers to read at the University of Colorado for two years. And then the second thing, I would say the most important thing is I moved to Denver. Because it was a little cheaper to live there and...

54.48.35 Interviewer: How far is that to Boulder? 60 miles?

Jeff: No, no...more like about thirty-two. Piece of cake. And I was only going there...I needed to just go to classes once a week or maybe twice, so. But Denver was a real contrast to Boulder because we lived in downtown Denver, inner city Denver. But one thing I did there is I hooked up with a friend of mine, whom I met while I was in Boulder. He lived in Denver. His name was Ray Gonzalez. Ray Gonzalez is one of the great poets in this country. He's a Chicano poet. Ray at that time did not have any books, and right now as an anthologist and as a writer, fiction, poetry, playwright, he has at least 12 books. That's an amazing...he was always prolific. And once that first book of his came, the others just rolled. It is amazing to see. Ray and I were very close. He teaches now at the University of Minnesota. He is a very close friend of our mutual friend John Bradley, whose book *Atomic Ghost* in which some of the Fernald poems appear is a extraordinary anthology. Ray and I in Denver created...what's called the poetry scene. He was a huge cog in the wheel, and he brought me in to help run readings, several readings series, workshops. And Denver at that time in 1984, '85, '86 was a happening town, poetry-wise. A great deal of that has to do with Ray Gonzalez. And also, I worked really tirelessly, too, knowing that poetry was my love, my first love. And I had produced a manuscript that won an award at the University of Colorado as a manuscript and I knew that that would turn into a book. I was hoping it will turn into a book and it did. So, our eyes were set. Our visions were set. And that was really important. Those were two important things.

54.50.55 Interviewer: In that time in Denver, were there poets...or maybe this happened before for you, poets who really try to engage communities or issues or critical aspects of society in their work, so that their poetry both stands alone as an art form or piece of work, but also is inviting readers to think about, you know, various issues, homelessness, or whatever?

54.51.23 Jeff: Yeah. Absolutely...in fact, that was probably the primary thing, uh, kind of steering us. We worked out of a bookstore, we worked out of a coffee house, we also worked out of community center. So the writers and the poets who were coming in to read were not necessarily from the ivory tower. They were poets from the street. Ray had received a degree in Texas but he had not a Master's at that time, and yet he was one of the most scholarly persons I ever met at that time. Without a doctorate that man could have easily taught some of the classes

I took at the University of Colorado. He was about four years older than I, so I kind of looked up to him. And we believed, I know...he believed in amassing any and all who could write poetry into one setting. And there were some poems and pieces that were responses to things happening in the community. There was a little chat book that was put together about May Day. There was, uh, were two poets writing specifically about a little community in...in inner Denver called Five Points. A very mixed, ethnically mixed community called Five Points. And, they were addressing issues that were arising just in Five Points. A fairly impoverished, lower class community, but still there were writings emanating from there, that we were helping critique and get in front of a microphone and stuff like that. A lot of open readings, but it was really very, very active.

54.53.13 Interviewer: When you lived in Denver, did you hear anything about Rocky Flats?

54.53.18 Jeff: Yeah, right, you heard a little bit, but not a lot. At that time I still really wasn't totally sure what Rocky Flats was. I, at that time knew not to compare it to Fernald because I really wasn't too much aware of Fernald. The thing about Rocky Flats was I had a professor at Colorado, a very well known poet, and he lived on the edge of Boulder. And he would say to us, well if a harsh, I mean if a real, real, real strong wind comes, a Chinook wind, from that point where Rocky Flats is, I mean God knows what that's going to bring into this neighborhood, you know, what a strong wind would blow in. So, all of Boulder was living within proximity of Rocky Flats, for sure.

54.54.23 Interviewer: Before we get to the Fernald connection, just more generally could you comment on coming out at that time in Colorado, kind of your feelings about the role of poetry to sort of influence social consciousness or awareness or even as a possible change agent. And I think that the term today may be called cultural activism, maybe wasn't called that back then but what kind of role and potential of poetry to transform someone's thinking about a subject?

54.54.58 Jeff: Right, I began to think more about that more once when I was back in Cincinnati in '86 maybe through '90, '92. When I could look back at how Denver had influenced what I've done. While I was there we were just going pretty much 90 miles an hour not thinking too much the impact that we made. What I did know at that time and what I think I've tried to bring out in some of the stuff I've done is people living in these communities like Fernald have things that they need to write. And they are not sure how to go about it. So, one thing I've done since then, I did a little bit of in Denver, but a lot of what I have done since then, is try to meet with people sporadically in many different communities. Since I know...as a writer I know quite a few people now here, and empower them to write, to feel that they can write about something. I do know that there are not many political issues or cultural issues, current events, what no, that can't be addressed esthetically, given whatever media that person does. I am finding more since I've arrived. Now I did see this happen in Denver but not as much as I have in last ten years, and that is a emerging or confluence of many media to address an issue. A point there is 1997. Here in the College of Mount St. Joseph, we, in '97, spring of '97, we came back from spring break. That was the time in March of the 1997 flood, the Ohio River flood that devastated this place, devastated Cincinnati and regions there. I immediately knew I had people affected by that, and what I did when I came to my poetry workshop was I said: "We are going out into the world." I

said, "This is a traumatic thing. We are artists in here. We have to deal with this. Let's address this as writers and artists." And I sent them out as volunteers, to volunteer in the field doing whatever they needed to do--sort clothes, handle food, take phone calls, paint--for ten days, to accumulate their experiences in a journal and to create a poem about anything regarding a flood, their experience, whatever. They did that, we workshopped the poems, and we put that in a form of a book, a little book, and we sold 400 copies of those books and gave all the money to the Red Cross in care of flood relief. That to me is, was student-driven, they loved it, they interacted. So, what I learned from there is that an artist is not isolated. The poem is not necessarily isolated. It stems from many sensory objects and in the very least, it is meant for someone else to read, or for someone else to share in. And, by its very nature, if someone is writing a poem, that should be shared with you. So this connectivity, this interaction, this confluence, whatever you want to call it, of media is very crucial to the whole creation process. That's what I found out at least in the last ten years.

54.59.07 Interviewer: Let's go back to the mid '80s now you come to Cincinnati, take a job at the Mount. When did you become aware of Fernald as a potential source of materials for your work and its sort of impact on the Greater Cincinnati community and you wanting to address that through some poetry.

54.59.30 Jeff: Yeah. Became aware of Fernald in '89 when I saw front-page articles about Lisa Crawford and FRESH. And what that particular organization I felt meant to not just the community but the world. I cut it out. I clipped it out, as I do a lot of stuff, and I put it aside. I said, "This is incredible." So at that time Fernald was closing and I continued to keep those articles. I continued to look at that place as possible subject matter. Uh...I was working on a book on the Ohio River at that time, poems, and it was a historical sort of book. And so being in the middle of that, I didn't pay as much attention to the next project. But as I was finishing River Dwellers, my second book, I knew, I was pulled, I gravitated toward the Fernald material immediately, and I realized that was a book. And that's when I met, I mean, I've known Jon Hughes for almost 25 years. But that's when I got together with Jon and I said: "What do you think about a project?" A collaboration, since I've always believed in collaboration and he too. He said: "Let's do it." So we figured out a schemata of how we would do it. And it was almost fly by the seat of your pants. And from that point we realized that it would be...uh...the poems that I would write about Fernald, things I found or discovered through interviews, and images that he shot would manifest themselves in the form of a book.

55. 00.15 Interviewer: What's sort of research... (here the tape is cut)...

So you did some clipping of some articles about Fernald. You touched base with Jon Hughes and said, let's work on the project involving photos and poetry perhaps about Fernald and see what happens. What... you needed to undergo some kind of process of education and immersion in the people and issues surrounding Fernald. How did you go about doing that?

55.00.41 Jeff: Right, uh...we...first thing we did was we didn't set an absolute deadline. We said, "Maybe a couple of years." We were also doing individual projects on the side. And since this is a collaborative effort, we didn't want to hold each other to it, although we knew the sooner the better. Although as creative book, it's hard to push something. At any rate, I...not only did I

read a lot of material, of course, in the papers, but I scoured what came to be documents in the FRESH library that was instituted. I also got a lot of information at that time from the DOE. Or DEO, what is it? DOE, yeah, and researched as much as I could...the catastrophic nature of what it meant to create nuclear energy. And then I read a couple of texts that my friend John Bradley, the poet John Bradley loaned me that he had come across. I did a little background reading. I didn't want the background reading to be too overwhelming but I wanted to get a sense. And it was 1992 when I conducted my first interview. My river book was published in '92. And just about as soon as it came off the press and started being distributed I started interviewing people of Fernald, and coming up with possible contexts and that sort of thing. I never got inside Fernald. Jon did, Jon went into Fernald. I never went into Fernald. I don't have a reason for that. I got enough visual material in my mind from talking to people about what it was like in there. And then Jon shared a plethora of images, of images that he shot, hundreds, that of course didn't make into the book that I can also look at, you know. So that's how the ball started to roll, right around 1992.

55.03:02 Interviewer: What were some of the contexts or issues or points of reference that started to come though in your own absorption of the material on talking to people that you thought would be good starting points for some poems?

55.03.18 Jeff: Yeah, I didn't know how I would begin. Uh...so I went word of mouth. I had students from Crosby Township. We have a lot of students at the Mount who have gone to Ross or who lived in Crosby Township. They put me in touch with people. Those people put me in touch with people. I had a couple of central people that I depended upon. One was a woman named Edwa Yocum. Extremely important woman. She had had some ties to Fernald. But she of course has lived there for a long time. Edwa was very, very kind in escorting Jon and I to different people who might want to talk about Fernald, could share experiences. So over about a year and a half, two years, I had notebook full of stories and anecdotes. Many of those I felt at that time would surface as poetic material. And actually I called, would call back and ask for people that knew these people so that maybe some of the stuff might be corroborated. Strangely enough, that's my journalism background, since I am a journalist too. I don't know if I needed to do that but there was something in my heart of hearts that I wanted to make sure about. So in some cases I would call and talk to other people who knew these people, upon whom some of the poems might be based. "Did such and such really? Do you remember such and such having a boyfriend at that time?" "Oh, yeah, yeah, absolutely." "Did such and such, was he...was he a crate carrier?" That's what they called one job. "Was he a crate carrier, as far as you can remember? I was just curious to know... I'm pretty sure..." "Oh, yeah, yeah, he carried crates." So everything just kind of...that made me feel good because if I am just talking to one person, I mean I am not sure what to expect, although I do trust. So that stuff became very...that gave me a great lift because some of the stories I was hearing, some of the stories I heard, were surreal. And I began to believe and suspect that some of the poems maybe surreal also.

55.05.40 Interviewer: What do you mean by surreal?

55.05.41 Jeff: What I mean is...uh...by surreal, the esthetic notion of it in my case being a merging of images that have no real logic or perhaps meaning in them. Uh...what are you to

make if you see a three-legged duck in a farmyard in Crosby Township? And I saw one. It was probably mutated. And, we might be able to link..., Who knows? You know, how can you know, I'm no scientist. But in my mind I linked that right with the toxins, man. I mean that is...that three-legged duck was derivative of the stuff happening. Why were people walking around in Crosby Township with moles, you know, size of eggs, you know more than once. That stuff becomes, the accumulation of that becomes a kind of surreality. It's above and beyond reality. Uh...reality would see, would be seeing a bunch of two-legged ducks. I heard stories of animals...a girl had a dog, and she was walking the dog in the backyard and the dog just fell over and died. I don't know, could have been a heart attack whatever, okay. I just felt that there were so many problems as we know now stemming from Fernald. The leakage, sky, water, ground water, the aquifer...so much of that bombarding that area. Then, you know why couldn't that stuff occur as a result of it. I definitely think there is a cause and effect there, absolutely. So that stuff becomes above reality, beyond reality in life, the surreal stories. Now, in the poems, some of the poems that arise in the volume have a little surreal quality because of the oddness of the language or the juxtaposition or the merging of strange images against a fairly, maybe, calm setting. So there becomes a spin, and the spin maybe a little illogical, which is okay in a poem. Whoever said a poem should be figured out?

55.08.12 Interviewer: Did you hear anything what I would probably call sort of a Cold War frame of reference that basically says that there was health and environmental damage but it was kind of necessary because we were...had to build the weapons to kind of beat Russia?

55.08.36 Jeff: From people I talked to?

55.08.36 Interviewer: Or from any other literature or the official accounts.

55.08.40 Jeff: Oh yeah. Some of that stuff from DOE was completely defensive of it. And there were some factory workers that I talked to who spoke off the record and on the record, you know, and they got to know me and they could trust me and Jon. And they were extremely proud of what they were doing. And then there were others who castigated the place, reprimanded, "a terrible place to work." So I got both ends. The ones who were defending Fernald were basically saying "Well America was in that position at that time and it didn't know what it needed to do but we sure as hell weren't going to get beat by the Russians," you know, so that mentality did exist. I don't know how it is now, would be interesting. I didn't...I don't know if I have a poem in there in the book. I don't think I do, that outright alludes to the Cold War or even alludes to that possible politic that determined the longevity of Fernald. I don't think I even wanted to go there. I wanted to deal with people, community and what they were up against. They were up against Big Brother.

55.10.12 Interviewer: Uh, the other side of that issue sort of a Cold War arms race was the government's sort of claim of needing to preserve secrecy or not letting information... Even to the work force, the work force was sort of operating on what they call need-to-know basis or the surrounding community. To what extent does that secrecy veil that was there for years, how does that sort of contribute to this sort of surrealistic quality? Even when folks even they are trying to recall what they remembered, what was going on?

55.10.47 Jeff: Yeah, shadowy, darkness, ah, blurriness, a lot of smoke, smoke and mirrors. The poems that bring up or invoke Fernald, the place, the factory, the facility, it's not glowing...pardon the pun, it's not gleaming, it's dark. And yet, and I will address that in a second, why the book exists the way it does. But there were more disfavorable things said about the secrecy and what was kept from the people than a defense of it or what we needed to do it anyway. We now know that there were so many things being illegally done in the way there were handling, certainly unethical, in the way they were handling equipment for so many years. When the place Fernald, the facility arises in any of the poems there is a blurry kind of connotation with it. What I mean is that it's sort of a...it's kind of an anathema. It's kind of a shadowy figure. A goal, it's something that's not...it's monstrous sort of thing. It's something that...is operating under the auspices of a kind of government-sanctioned graveyard. I didn't take it lightly and the poems don't invoke Fernald, the place, too lightly. I give great humanity to the people, because that's what they gave me. That's what I got as a writer. That's what I took with me. I can see it in most of their faces. And the book also...a lot of poems also try to...I want to say, relate it as they were, relate the stories as I heard them, without being transcription, there's nothing transcription. I took stories, I took messages, I took information and I construed it as honestly as possible into what I felt as an artist was going on with that person or with those people or with that place.

54.13.32 Interviewer: I noticed that different poems adopt different either voice or persona or position of who the reader might imagine to be writing this or whatever. What were some of those persona that you were trying to illustrate with some of the different poems?

54.13.51 Jeff: That was a continuation of this imaginative leap. It was a continuation of my thinking that this would be a book, not from just an omniscient point of view, a.k.a. a Jeff Hillard point of view, or could be construed that way. But I wanted to actually try to incorporate and evoke the voices of people in the community from what I heard. So in one poem where I am listening to...well in one poem that creates, that uses a woman that I talked to talking about her husband and about a kitchen and about water. These things happened, and I felt that as a poet, the poem was best served from the first-person point of view, the first-person point of view being the woman in the kitchen, the woman talking to me, the woman relating that story. I felt that this is the leap, this is the necessary esthetic leap that the book needed to take and using that point of view, that first-person, was more reliable and honest and more touching I think maybe, hopefully.

55.15.19 Interviewer: To what extent did that decision that you made to try to come out from different angles allow for you to take the same kind of general subject shadowy and complex as it is, and create several poems? What about different angles and aspects that still have different pieces of work that don't get repetitive or get to the point of, well you know there's so much you could write about this. How did you try to find multiple vantage points in multiple stories?

55.15.52 Jeff: I looked to see what some of the best stories were, and maybe with ... and maybe some stories that weren't the best. And I didn't want to rely on just the best. As maybe the most newsworthy for poems or maybe something like that. I think it's a very intuitive process. It just

hit me that I would use this voice and this material in this poem. And I didn't give second thought. I didn't try to rationalize why I would do it. And that would lead me to say this: that the book could have been...with all that's happened in Fernald, the book could have been 300 pages. You know people say why didn't write a novel. Well, I could have. I didn't want to. Why didn't you write a book of journalism...that's been done. I said I wanted to go out as poet and do what I felt I could do as a poet who's always trying to advance...you know...a little bit further each time. And we decided to keep it to just this set of poems, short set of 20 poems, uh, and not expand it any more because we felt that for such a huge place as Fernald, incredibly huge place, in history and in place, let's let a small version of what happened, this, speak in large quantities, for larger things, as opposed to doing a big book about a small... a big book about a big subject. We wanted a contrast, small book with large stuff in it we think about a large subject. So the...so that accentuates, I think, the significance of how one looks at Fernald. It emphasizes, you know, here's just a little tiny book, here's a little tiny project, but it takes on US history, and how US history affected people in community right here.

55.18.08 Interviewer: How did you come to organize the book, organize the sequence of poems, the images and come up with the title? Just kind of the final, some final decisions about, other than just the size, about how to position these poems in relationship to the photos and that kind of thing.

55.1823 Jeff: We met a few times at Jon's son's house, Sean Hughes, and uh...he is a graphic designer and a computer whiz, and he put the book together. We had another editor friend with us to give us some assistance. I laid out, I laid out the poems that I felt should be in the volume. Jon laid out maybe 50, 60 images that we could choose from out of hundreds that he shot I guess, 50 that he really, really aimed for. And several things happened. First thing is we realized that the book could only be so large, uh under 60 pages, because we received a grant from the city of Cincinnati to publish this book, that paid for the publishing cost of the book through a publisher in Cincinnati. So we only had so much money to work with and so much room. My poems were going to go...and that's what I came up with those, now how do we fit Jon's in? The other thing that happened was Jon realized that all of his images rarely had people in them, they were peopleless. We never knew that, he didn't know that, until he sorted them all out. And we thought that's odd because most all of my poems in the book have people in them, they are populated. I didn't realize that. I know I get some landscape poems where there is a kind of omniscience about it. But I've also got a lot of people in them. So, what Jon decided was to arrange his images, most all the images that had no people in them and use those. And we did not look to correspond a particular poem with a particular image. We felt that that would be pushing the boat too much. We didn't want to do that as artists. We didn't necessarily throw these images in just randomly. We placed them in integral points, but we didn't say, "Oh, this poem is about a bird on the fence. Let me see if I've got an image that's got a fence." We didn't do that. That's cheesy, man. That's not where it was happening with us. So, I think what's you see is you see a gradual working of the book from a little lighter notion or notions on Fernald, if you will, I don't know about that were lighter, but into something steeped a little more in drama or conditions that are adverse. The rusted, toxic-eaten barrels that Jon took inside Fernald don't show up at the beginning, show up more toward the middle and the end, that kind of thing. So, that's kind of like a guiding principle we had.

55.21.52 Interviewer: And the title?

55.21.56 Jeff: Pieces of Fernald, I came up with that. That was mine. I knew that, I knew that after about the second poem I wrote. Pieces...I ...what is Fernald, I mean, but a place literally fragmented. And the fragmentation that has occurred is astronomical. I just thought well, here's a piece of that life, here's a piece of that life, here's a piece of that life.

55.22.27 Interviewer: I will ask you to read in a minute or two. Let me ask you to talk a little bit about the, uh, John Bradley, and he wrote the Foreword and he was doing a work that's this *Atomic Ghost*, kind of project, somewhat in tandem with this. To what extent did your work here sort of coupled with that or does the surrealistic thoughts you had while you were talking and researching Fernald, to what extent did that correspond with sort of a surrealism or absurdity that...

55.23.05 Jeff: Yeah, absurdity would probably be the operable word.

55.23.10: Interviewer: People were out there sort of ... If you look at their weapon complex as a whole, just American's experience with the atomic, atomic bomb as a whole.

55.23.15 Jeff: That's, that's what John's been very interested in. John is also not only a poet, and a fiction writer, a professor, but I think a scholar on Japanese history. And for many years, he has been concerned about the effects of World War II, the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

55.23.37 Interviewer: Is he at Northern Illinois?

55.23.28 Jeff: Yeah, and he's certainly activist-oriented. And in fact John, John was out in Denver for like one year in the 80's when Ray and I were out there. Uh, but he...for many years he has had a notion that certainly was started by Allen Ginsberg, I mean when Allen Ginsberg wrote...I think it was ... "Ode to Nuclear Energy," or "Ode to Atomic Energy" or "Ode..." but John was very concerned that this country is not,... writers, poets in this country have much more to say collectively about issues dealing with nuclear war than the country is aware of. So, he decided to create this anthology called *Atomic Ghost*, that would collect poems addressing nuclear issues, nuclear war issues, the Cold War. And compiled those poets of great national stature like Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Diane Wakoski and poets who are not known or first time poets. Uh...he knew, he knew the Fernald book was happening and he is very happy about that. I asked him to write an Intro and he was just completely happy to do that, and uh, it's a joy to have his Introduction in there. And what he gave me as a colleague, and a friend, and a fellow poet is...uh, he gave me the understanding that this is a value to this country, even though it's done by a small press, an independent press, and may not get very wide distribution, it's still going to leave an imprint because of the nature of the stuff that's being tackled. And that was a great lift.

55.25.37 Interviewer: I want to talk about that issue of impact in a second. But let's...I asked you before we started the kind of think about if that's a poem you would want to share. That's not certainly totally representative of all of it, but just one that sounds good, when it's read aloud, strike your fancy.

55.26.05 Jeff: I will read one I was referring to before about the woman who lived about three miles from Fernald, whose husband worked at Fernald for 32 years, almost the entire time.

55. 26.18 Interviewer: Is that Corilla Kelly?

55.26.20 Jeff: No, no no. I captured her story. What I did is I captured part of her story. There was an image, there were a couple of images that made a great impression on me, and I worked them as a poet works material with a love of language, hopefully a flow or some, some...in this case, with this issue some absurdity that rises. It's called *Looking Glass*. And there's an epigraph by Sylvia Plath that I use. And the epigraph is: "Darling, all night I have been flickering off, on, off, on." That's by Sylvia Plath, from a poem of hers. *Looking Glass*:

I lift a drinking glass and look through it
out the window. Afternoon alone with radio, t.v..
Alone with frozen vegetables, a chicken to fry.
Turn off t.v.. Turn on radio. Hold glass eye level.
My fingers smudge the glass so it offers only
a vague view of corn and the Fernald factory.
I play this game to relieve the passing hours,
to see how many of the crops I can name.

What I always see is my lipstick on the rim.
Thirst taunts me. I'm aware of water and glass,
of my lips and throat when I'm in the next room.
I fill the glass with water and see only water.
Lipstick darkens the glass I handle constantly.

My day moves simply, before thirst and water.
I kiss my husband who leaves at dawn for Fernald
Plant 5, where he drills holes in sheet metal.
I grow nervous. I listen for the door in fear
he will come home sick, his tears red and glowing
from standing near chemicals all day.
Plans to shop or sew tire me when I know
he tires of looking at hot metal ingots
born of pure uranium.

I won't tend the garden anymore: the company
of toxins thrives underground, their meandering
bloom locking out all that seems fertile.

The small relief I find in daylight, I hear at night:
 one goldfinch ignoring grass seed and straw.
 Its spurts of song crack the dry air
 when my husband and I lie in bed
 and I kiss his brick-red cheek.
 He sleeps beyond his itching arms,
 as I find the moon slumped over oak trees,
 above sky of smoke-plumes we forget in sleep.
 This sky will never retreat like we must,
 night air holding open our two small mouths.

55.2948 Interviewer: What do you think a poem like that can communicate that's either different or beyond, uh, either a journalistic or kind of non-fiction accounting of environmental conditions or hazards? What does a more imagistic or creative take on environmental condition? What can that bring to an understanding of issue that's little bit different from the non-fiction?

55.30.20 Jeff: You know, what I hoped to do in this poem was to merge very, very small image and metaphor, water, glass, lipstick, kitchen window, with the more grandiose notion of husband going to Fernald. I thought, I wanted the water, I wanted the water to be emblematic of life continuing to flow on, even though it's tainted. Um...that's something I think if people, if they look at it, think about it, can get. A woman who is disturbed by what she sees and knows is happening. But...and at that time, knew her husband was sick, a lot of the times, but you know they couldn't pinpoint it exactly then. But she...they didn't...you know it was a job. And so there's a routineness about the day that I think comes out. Turning off the radio, the TV, setting the kitchen table, cooking dinner, washing the vegetables, wondering, you know, is her husband going to come home with a fever again. She told me how much trouble he had sleeping, you know. She told me that she loved birds, that there was a nest outside in her yard. And I just kind of transposed that to one gold finch within proximity to the kitchen window, or maybe the door, so I kind of exploited that a little bit. So, some of this was very true to story, but I didn't want to do it chronologically. I didn't, okay, she, you know, she kisses her husband in the morning when he leaves for work, that doesn't show up until mid-poem. I wanted to set the stage for really who this woman is, who this voice is, very lonely and concerned. So even this concern, I think arises...and would generate some thought in just the reader.

55.32.35 Interviewer: I lot of folks have commented about when the site was in operation, there were efforts made to sort of shield or mask what was going on even simple things like painting the water tower in black and white checker board or referring to the title of "feed materials," and if someone came along and said oh, you must be making dog food that notion wasn't contradicted. They sort of allowed for domestication of what was going on, try to make it seem as normal as possible, even at the point of having a dairy farm sort of on the corner there fairly close to the site. How can a poem through more creative sense of narrative or structure or different than a non-fiction account that tends to be more chronological and straightforward? How can a poem help a reader sort of get a different perspective or to break out of the conventional wisdom about something?

55.33.38 Jeff: I think the most important thing it can do is not necessarily bring forth a lot of information, like a piece of journalism can do, facts, realism, objectivity. That's one thing I don't necessarily think, strangely enough, it can do. What I think it can do most prominently, on the other hand, is use, again, language, and movement of language and wordplay and structure to invite the reader into a kind of poem-as-music. Poems are derived from music, from song. And the definition of poem is "poesis," a made thing, and that made thing does not necessarily have to be extremely oriented to the truth. Uh...and I'm not as a writer, as a creative writer. I did not, though, disabuse the stories that were told to me. I did not take them, and probably as an artist I could have, and that would be another form of art, wouldn't it have been? But I used their stories humanly and as right to what they told me as possible in order to facilitate the music and the language that I wanted to use. And another reason, another prominent thing being that this book contains lots of different forms in order to provide the reader some anchor of knowing that you're in a kind of creative act here. A poem is a creative act, recognizing this social issue, this cultural issue. I have a villanelle, a French form. I have a guzzle, which is in Urdu, a Turkish form. I have uh sonnets, and of course free verse. So, a strategy going into the book was for me to mix up the forms to make it even more inviting, even maybe a little more unpredictable. I think that unpredictability has a lot to do with it, too. You know you're inside some of Fernald, maybe not all of it, with the book, but you know you're in a portion of an artist's mind who's trying to use that subject matter as a vehicle for presentation.

55.36.14 Interviewer: Talk a little bit about sort of the critical reaction to the book both in terms of the more artistic community or the...your colleagues if you will, and then what you've heard, or how you have gone back into the community and kind of said you know that Edwa Yocums of the world or the other folks, that lived or still live or work around Fernald. What their feelings of the book have been, that you've been able to discern?

55.36.38 Jeff: It's been very good, very positive. It's received in the last three years. (cough) Excuse me. It's received five reviews that I know of that have been published. And they've been in literary journals and they've all been very positive. I'm appreciative. They've all cited the book as being a kind of ...a risk-taking book, meaning that a poet's writing about a part of the country, a part of this region that they don't read about, that they wouldn't otherwise have known existed. I have gotten some feedback from Fernald, not a lot. I know the book's in some residents' hands, I know that's if it's not in residents' hands I wish it was. They tend to be very positive about it. Uh...students that I have mentioned before who have lived there who have helped distribute and sell some of the books tell me that people tell them, "He taught you? He was your teacher? Oh, that's interesting. I didn't know he taught poetry at Mount St. Joe," you know and that kind of stuff. So, it's been all pretty good, pretty positive.

55.38.03 Interviewer: What would you, I don't know if you have gotten this take all from other critics, probably not critics but folks at Fernald, that essentially it's too dark, and there are some folks that want to kind of move beyond toward a future. That's you know, the property is usable and this sort of brings up either the dark memories of the past or just a ...

55.38.28 Jeff: Yeah...I haven't gotten that. I really haven't gotten that much, I don't know if Jon has. I was talking to someone in Fernald who got the book and he, immediately, he said you

know, real interesting book, and I really like that poem about the young couple making love in the back seat of a car after he just got off from work, as a sonnet. That's a sonnet, you know, and that's a kind of humorous thing. That's the first thing he picked out. He thought that more interested him more than the thing about the stuff about the silos. And so even though it's fairly dark of course, there are these moments of dark humor I think that arise here and there, but...

55.39.13 Interviewer: There's a fine line between the absurdity and the comic, Dr. Strangelove take on things, which I don't see too much in the book.

55.39.15 Jeff: Right...no...

55.39.26 Interviewer: There are some lighter moments that's for sure. Uh... I wanted to ask you about...my role in doing this interview is to sort of help prepare lesson plans for junior, senior high school teachers. I am targeting history and science teachers, but certainly we can...this could be used...books like this could be used in the English classroom to kind of promote creative writing projects. One of the goals on proficiency requirements now for State of Ohio is to get students more connected, in whatever subjects they are dealing with, more connected with the local...either...history or issues or whatever. Have you had much of a chance to think about the use of something like this in a high-school setting? Or if not, what would you see as a potential use of either this book or more generally thinking of creative writing as a way to help students understand Fernald?

55.40.20 Jeff: Let everybody know about it. Tell everyone you see, every teacher. We'll take orders. That would be great. Sure I've thought about that. My marketing has been very limited. Uh...because it kind of all falls on mine and Jon's shoulders, and just the few others that work with this company. So, it's not exactly nationally distributed unless people get wind of it in other places. I would love for it to be promoted even more than it has been already. Uh, when I was finished with this book and it came out I immediately started work on the Cuba book. So I've been ensconced in Cuba in a couple of other projects. So, it like I wish I could devote more time to marketing and promoting. So, that would be ideal to have teachers know about it.

One thing I think that could be learned from anybody coming into a classroom and talking about writing poems or stories is to allow students to know that all subject material is open to be written about, I mean it's available. You can write, you know, not only about your vacation to Myrtle Beach, but you can write about the house on the corner that has broken windows, that's chipped paint and there's nobody living there. But at strange times during the day you see people going in and out of it. That can be written about, too. There's no material... So what Fernald, what Pieces of Fernald could show, is that, here's a writer who is primarily not even writing about himself but using the voices and the presence of others as a way into his own artistic vision. So, if they wanted to write about some super hero or they wanted to write about somebody that they didn't know, they could very well do that. They can make it up.

55.42.36 Interviewer: Do you think either because students don't think that way or teachers sometimes don't think that way, they are either harried by the needs of the day to day classroom, it doesn't come out that they have that degree of freedom?

55.42.46 Jeff: Yeah, I wonder about that. I really don't know. But one thing that I instill in my students is that creativity is just not necessarily the pen on the paper or the keys on the keyboard. You may need to take photographs, or pieces of music. You may want to take pieces of music and photographs or a piece of sculpture. And study...look at it, take it in, think about it. And let that be an impetus to a poem or a song or a story. By the same token, I have them do wild experiments far outside anything predictable, you know as for say, okay, sit down and write about what you did last night. That's predictable. I'll have them list three things they did last night and take the middle thing and write something about that. You know, so I don't know how creative a lot of teachers are. I am sure many of them are extremely creative in how they get students to write. I think it's a huge issue. It's very large.

55.44.10 Interviewer: (To another interviewer) Do you have any questions? I am about exhausted about my pieces of Fernald.

55.44.16 Jeff: I am exhausted.

55.44.22 Interviewer: I want to ask if you could go back again when you first started to hear about Fernald. As a poet, why, on an emotional level, because you described a lot of the process how you do this, the construction, why is Fernald important?

55.44.43 Jeff: Because when I first read the clip, I think the real impetus was the clip of FRESH and their organization. I realized people suffered. And I could not for the life of me fathom why they had to suffer at the hands of this government-sponsored production plant. And course as the information came out, we saw how large, how magnanimous that suffering was. I could not believe it, and I knew that poets and writers have always addressed subjects of suffering. And I didn't feel compelled because they, they did it... I...this is my backyard. I am thirteen miles away from where I live from Fernald. I could not believe that the government planted this place here and did this. They knew exactly what they were doing. The same with Rocky Flats, the middle of nowhere. We will plop it right here...ppfu..., that fascinated me. I had to take that on. I didn't know how. And I knew I couldn't spend years and years and years doing it. Because I try to work quickly. Three, four years is quick I mean. But I knew I would get into it if I made a decision to get into it. And after I talked to Jon, Jon and I talked about the absolute subterfuge, you know, that was carried on by the government, and I have great concerns about what this government does anyway to its people. Uh...I am not terribly happy with our government. Believe me. And that was an impetus also. That was an inspiration. I wanted to put something in their face. I did. Now, given that, given that, one thing I tried to do as an artist, I did not want this...this may had to do with length also, why we kept it to this size, which is these poems and images, didn't want this to be a complete overt polemic. You know...let's...you know what I am saying?

55.47.20 Interviewer: Yeah, let me ask you a related question now, which is. You talked about the emotional process of making this book. Again, I am trying to get at what was it like, how did you change, your thinking change from the first time you heard about Fernald to the completion to now in terms of, you know, your thoughts about Fernald?

55.47.47 Jeff: From the emotional stand of point...uh...in terms of the writing of the poems? In terms of my gathering the information and being with those people?

55.47.58 Interviewer: How did this process impact you?

55.47.04 Jeff: Uh...I knew it would have a...I felt it would have an impact because of the people I would be hanging with, talking to. Uh...I think I have some problems from time to time, you know. I think, you know, oh my car won't start, or I've got a little backache. I am humbled. Every time I went up there and came back I was humbled more. Uh, and, ...that I think, now this is theory, I think that gave me greater, a greater way in esthetically to write the poem. Not that I felt I could even be like them. I am not saying that. Not that I felt that I could even live there, Fernald. I don't mean that. I mean I was brought down to such a level, in a right way, in a positive way. Because they didn't have voices anywhere. I didn't have a voice. I mean they didn't have a writer necessarily...I don't want, I don't want to, you know, pat myself on the back. But, you know, they didn't have a writer to look at it that way. And I felt, as I got into talking to them more, about half way though, I'd say, through maybe my 13th, 14th interview, o.k., uh...I felt obligated after that point. Uh...I felt...I felt that this...I felt that I was drained. I felt that this was a huge book for me. I felt obligated because I did not want to back out of not...I didn't want to back out of writing their stories some way. I didn't feel obligated to them. I felt obligated to myself. Fifty-six pages. I feel, Jon feels, it's fifty-six hundred, of, of emotion, you know. That's what I still feel. I am very proud of this book. I am very happy with the way it came out. And we, we probably could have submitted it to other presses. But we wanted our own hands on, we wanted...First of all, we never wanted it to go out of print. And it never will. It's so...

55.50.53 Interviewer: Final question. In terms of what I call the American psychic landscape as opposed to the actual landscape, what do you think Fernald means, as a American, as a person who lives here for you?

55.51.09 Jeff: Uh...oh my God, you know you may think the same thing. The vanity. Okay, uh...we can all...we can go, we could delve into Cold War mentality. We could delve into Cold War strategy and in the needs therein. But come on, when it's all said and done, this just became a way for the government to continue to stockpile and stockpile for really no logical reason. Now we know...and I think they knew then, I really do...and I think a lot of it was vain. Uh, it's just...look what it's done. It's destroyed lives. Uh, no humanity whatsoever behind the thinking or the governing that place from the top down to whoever is capping the uranium or shipping out the radon or whatever. That's what it leaves me with. Uh...it's frightening too. But what it leaves me with is a really frightening take on what could happen, at any...possibly any moment with some kind of government-sponsored whatever, war on drugs, border war, problems, terrible... I don't buy it. Jon Hughes and I said that this is con job. I mean, over some drinks. You know Jon, we talk that way. But I mean you know that's crude. But I don't disbelieve that at all. Uh...I spent time up there. Uh...I only talk to folks of there now via phone. I mean I could go up there but I call a few here and there. I still have students up there. Uh...I think

really the United States, our United States suffered as a result of the creation of Fernald, Rocky Flats, etc. You know that kind of, that's what it does. Can I say something else?

55.53.37 Interviewer: Sure

55.53.38 Jeff: Uh...I say that, but we all know that...I mean you talk to people in Fernald, the Fernald project. But I don't want the book to be a downer in the sense that it just encapsulates horror because it doesn't. You know, there's juxtapositions of uh, ...beauty in terms of the poem about the bird on the fence and the beauty of the landscape actually that just happens to be kind of overshadowed by some strange looking smoke coming out of that plant, you know. So it's not my idea to profit from or to expose too much darkness where there already is. But to deal with that creatively, to see if there's some other combinations. Yes, I did see a bird on the fence in a strange visual image that was absolutely one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. And I wrote about that. So...

55.54.54 Interviewer: Sort of like the question that Steve asked, but for children, for your daughter, who might, you know, in 20 years look back on this period of time on what happened at Fernald. What advice, what would you like to tell them when they read this book, to think about as well to know about this period?

55.55.13 Jeff: Yeah, they would be reading concurrently with this, they would probably be reading a little history about it, some write-ups about it, some information. That would be the straightforward news kind of information or encyclopedic information. Here is how an artist or artists dealt with Fernald. Now, in this book by artists, a couple of artists, you will learn what people went through at that time or what people were thinking about Fernald in 1990, '89, '90, '91, '92. What, who were some of those people? Some of those people are in here. Some of those thoughts by the poet is in here as well.

55.56.12 Interviewer: Thank you, we appreciate your time.