

## A Conversation with Jeff Walt

[Wednesday April 4, 2001  
5:10 PM]

**Larissa Thompson:** First of all, it would be great if you could tell me a bit about your history with the state of Vermont, as a resident of the community and as a writer. What types of memories do you link with the piece of your life in VT?

[Thursday, April 5, 2001 7:09  
AM]

**Jeff Walt:** I will always think of Vermont as home (even though I grew up in rural Pennsylvania). I drove to Vermont in my beat up Festiva during a horrible winter storm (without snow tires!) in January 1993, heading for Plainfield, where I was moving in with a woman I had never met and into a house I had not seen.

I needed to complete a teaching semester at Goddard College to satisfy the requirements for my MFA in Writing and Literature, and they (Goddard) hired me on as an adjunct that semester to facilitate an on-campus Creative Writing course. I spent most of that winter in my room writing, and when I wasn't writing, I was reviewing my students' work.

I grew to love the solitude of winter, and the communities of Plainfield and Goddard though I stood somewhere on the periphery of both. Ironically, the woman that I rented my room from, Bev, had a gay son who I became friends with over time. Three of the poems from *The Danger in Everything* are great examples of my time there—"This World, This Fracture," "Solace, Late in the Day" and "House of Joy and Rage"—poems that are very reflective of the space I was in at the time.

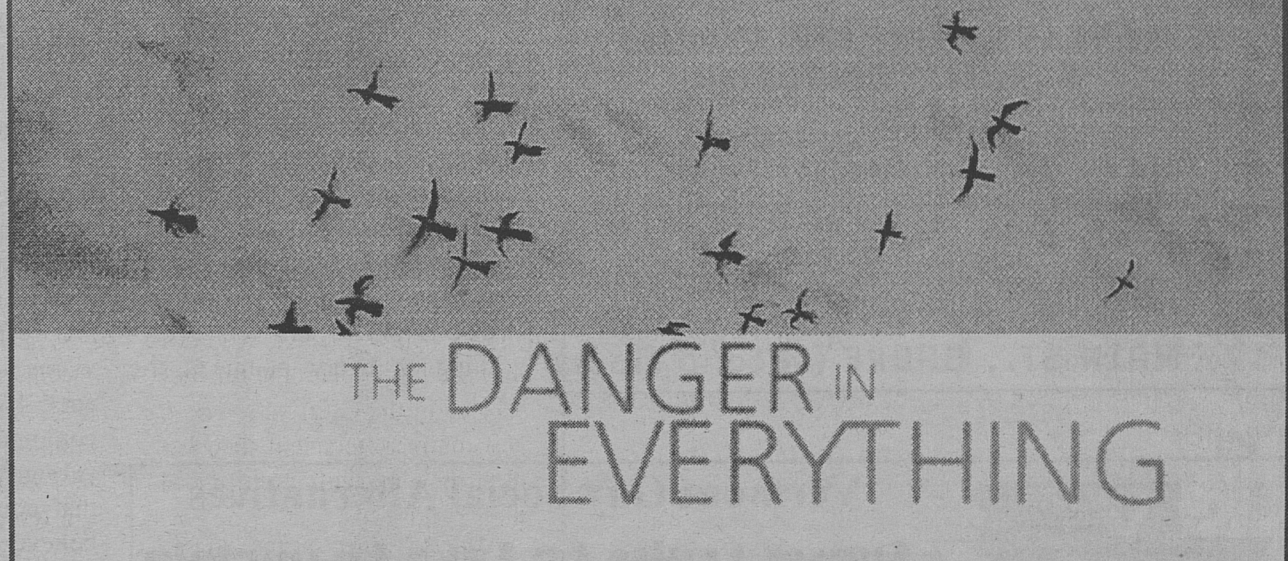
I was falling in love with all sorts of things back then: trees, birds, grass, the sky. Vermont opened me up to so many natural possibilities.

I was also falling into an overwhelming sense of loss connected to the loss of my childhood. My mother was a severe alcoholic who attempted to raise three children alone, so in many ways, I was suffering the loss of her as well (even though she was still alive at the time). I often say that I had the luxury of watching someone kill herself since my mother—quite literally—drank herself to death. I use the word *luxury* because I learned so much about living as a result of the way she lived and died.

Almost all of the poems in *Danger* were written while I lived in Vermont from 1993 to 2000 (with the exception of two summers spent in Provincetown and one in Pennsylvania), born out of the space and the love relationship that I was in at that time. My major spiritual growth spurt happened during those years, so when I swim back over my life, I am very connected with everything—the good *and* the bad—that occurred in my life when I lived in Vermont. I return to Vermont at least once a month as my partner and I own property there.

I was always self-absorbed—and still am to a large degree—in the "poetry" of my life that I didn't connect much to a writing "scene" or community, though I wish now—just a little—that I could have been open to it. I definitely don't regret my choices over those years. I have always been a loner in every aspect of my life. Even after my chapbook, *What I Didn't Know*, came out in the chapbook anthology, *Passionate Lives*, I still didn't attempt a reading in Vermont. I always felt I was doing a bit of a disservice to myself as a poet by not trying to put my name out there more, but again, that's where I was then. I accept it.

I don't think I read my work publicly in Vermont until my poem, "Postcards My Brother Used to Send" won first place in the OITM poetry competition in 2000.



"I believe we all have a story to tell."

[Friday, April 6, 2001 11:20  
AM]

**LT:** Where do you think your feelings of solitude come from? Your work is often nature-oriented, and I notice that when you do involve people, you are often the observer. Do you ever wish to give more of yourself, or do you feel that this would be pulling too much of the childhood angst you referred to into your work? Do you think that now, as a more accomplished writer, you might be able to project those inner-feelings in a less "angst-ridden" way? How do you want to challenge yourself in the future? Where do you want to go with your writing now that you are more accessible to the public with your book, *The Danger in Everything*?

[Sunday, April 15, 2001 7:03  
PM]

**JW:** I feel a writing life demands solitude. When I think of my relationship to solitude I think of it as a need—a requirement to do what I do, which is look closely at life, at the details of the world. I believe that poets examine the minute and how it all relates to the larger picture.

I was an introverted, shy child and spent hours hiding, watching, listening.

My brother had the stage. My mother would put him on the kitchen table with a big guitar and he would pretend to be Elvis for our neighbors and relatives. I was in the attic wandering from box to box, digging for treasure. I was the Bionic Woman, Police Woman and all three of Charlie's Angels. I kicked ass. I sang songs. I wrote poetry. Solitude has always been a big part of my life (consciously and unconsciously.)

I believe that solitude is different from detachment. My feelings of detachment come from growing up with an alcoholic parent. I detached from needing my mother's love because so often she was not there to provide the love that I needed as a child. Frequently, when I would let my guard down and expect her love to shine bright, there was always a big disappointment, which reinforced the detachment.

For example, I was hoping for a big birthday party

when I turned thirteen, but I came home from school to an empty house. My mother arrived an hour later with her lover—both of them terribly drunk. They drove the van through the yard and onto the sidewalk in front of our house, and when they got out of the vehicle my mother tripped and smashed a Seagram's bottle between her head and the cement. Her lover, Henry, fell on the lawn and died of a heart attack. Soon, our yard was lined with neighbors, the coroner, police and an ambulance.

This is just one example, but as a result of a series of incidences similar to this one, I moved inward where it was safe.

There are ways in which we guard our hearts—afraid to feel pain, so we detach from people and events where there is the slightest possibility to be hurt so, as adults, instead of investing in a long-term relationship where one is completely vulnerable, we may choose years of one-night stands in which we never know the other person at all; our buttons don't get pushed in the same way. We grow toward a different light.

I have chosen to utilize my adult love relationships as springboards for development—the space that opens my eyes and allows me to do my life work. I believe that my life is my career, so my spiritual growth is of paramount importance to me. Only in relationships do I feel the full impact of my triggers.

Yes, I do want to give more of myself in many ways. I want to share what I've learned about poetry and being connected to this world and how they relate. I've learned a lot about giving in the past couple years and have had a couple great role models—my ex-partner and my current partner are great examples of pure giving, and I use them for inspiration.

When my mother was near death, I stayed away, unable to be physically close to her at that time. There was a lot of pressure from other family members for me to be near her while her dementia progressed. My sister and brother had detached from the situation and had little communication with her. She was bed-ridden without anyone to take care of her except the derelicts she chose to associate with. She was selling her morphine to punks on the streets—if they had not