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This interview was conducted with Joyce Sidman on February 27, 2015, in the Special Collections Conference Room, Western Libraries in Bellingham, Washington. The interviewers are Nancy Johnson and Sylvia Tag.

ST: Let's start with your early writing.

JS: Well, I'm thrilled to be here, being recorded. I think I was born a writer in many ways and always enjoyed words and always enjoyed putting them together, and probably put a few too many of them together for my mother's liking. And also remember getting sent out in the hall for talking during class. So I think words were always vital to me.

But I also think that a poet's way of looking at things in metaphor is also a part of who I am, and that's something that I think all children have. I remember walking on the beach with my nephew when he was only four or so, and he would be picking up shells and saying, Look, Aunt Joyce, it's a hat. Look, Aunt Joyce, it's a horn. Look, it's a wing. And just that automatic integration of his imagination and the tactile reality of the world was so natural to him. And I think of that as kind of the basis of poetry, connecting, connecting things, finding ways to connect things and make patterns. And I do think you can be born with that. I think it can be cultivated also. But it always felt right to me to connect things like that, to compare things to other things and make meaning with words.

And I loved finding that in books, and I loved making it myself. But I don't think I really thought of myself as a writer until probably middle school or high school. And then there was a very, very patient teacher who would read my poetry, anguished poetry, and always find something nice to say about it. And I think she was some of the reason that I kept writing poetry anyway.

ST: Were you writing in private as well, was this assignments, or was it something that you found -- I think you mentioned finding someone you trust to share, was that the beginning of that, or a person or...?

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JS: Yes, I think...I think I had friends who were also interested in writing, and we would share with each other, but I think teachers were really important because friends weren't honest, and teachers were a little bit more honest. And teachers could tell you, you know they could look you in the eye and say, You have a gift for this. You love to do this. You should keep doing this. And I think that's something that teachers can do that no one else can do. Parents can do it, but kids don't always believe parents. They know that parents are positive no matter what sometimes, and so I think teachers are just so critical in that way of really saying to a child, You are good at this, or, You love this and you should keep doing it.

NJ: You didn't go to college, though, to be a poet.

JS: Well, I did...I wrote through college. In fact, I had two independent tutorials. I went to Wesleyan where you could basically do whatever you wanted to. And two different professors had writing tutorials with me, one poetry and one short story. But I was not an English major because basically I didn't like the other English majors. They were too snooty. So I decided I wanted to learn German because I had German background, and so I majored in German instead and studied German literature, and went to Germany. But I was a secret English major. I really loved English courses and took a lot of them, so I was really into literature then, but I just couldn't stand to hang out with the English majors. It's terrible to admit.

ST: But you were in school, maybe, to be educated, because being a German major isn't practical in that sense -- so you had the opportunity to go to college and learn.

JS: Yes. I did, yes.

ST: But without thinking necessarily where --

JS: Well, I was just going to say, I think my parents really believed in a liberal arts education. I grew up in New England, and it was a kind of accepted course, and maybe not even that I needed to be thinking about a career, because I was a woman. And I did feel like when I graduated from college, I needed to work and support myself, but I was not shunted into one career or another. And in the back of my mind I always assumed that I would be writing, and that's what I would do.

NJ: What is the distance between when you graduated from college and your first public, whether it was published, but your first public writing?

JS: Besides high school?

NJ: Mm-hmm.

JS: Well, let me think about that. I did send poems to adult journals when I was just out of college, and I think I had a couple of them accepted then and then later when my kids were young. I had children by the time I was, let's see, 28 -- 28 and 30 I had my two kids. And I was sending out adult poems whenever I could. And then I think I just got immersed in motherhood and reintroduced to children's literature and just remembered all these books that I loved and how the authors put their words together and how evocative they were and how much my children loved them. And I think that's when I

started thinking, You know, this might be your world. I think you have to find your people. You have to find where you belong, and, you know, it's kind of an extrapolation of the not liking English majors, I was not enthralled with the world of adult literary people, and I feel like I needed that wakeup call with my children. And I just -- the children's literature world just felt so much more comfortable to me. It felt like people that had imagination but they were friendly and they support each other and they love to play, and it's just all the things that I loved about writing in one place.

ST: And lack of critique, maybe, from your adult community, or?

JS: Yes, I think it's the competitiveness that really, I mean, I have a writers' group and we critique each other's work, but we do it with love, and we do it to support each other. And I felt like that was lacking a little bit in the adult literature world, so, but I don't in the children's literature world.

NJ: Have you always been a part of that group, or is that after you published some work?

JS: I joined a group in Connecticut before I was ever -- my children grew up in Connecticut, or at least they were little in Connecticut. They were born in Connecticut. And I joined a group, and this is a lovely coincidence. That teacher who encouraged me in high school, she lived in Connecticut. That's where I went to high school. And after I'd followed my family around, as my husband was training to be a doctor all over the country, we ended up back in Connecticut, and she invited me to her writers' group, so I was in her writers' group. And she was still writing poetry, and I was writing poetry, and it was just like, Oh, this is so wonderful to be with Marsha again. I had to learn to call her Marsha instead of Mrs. Sanderson. And we would walk dogs together, and she knew my kids, and so it was just this wonderful coincidence. And there were other children's writers.

And then we moved from Connecticut, but wherever I've gone, I have found compatriots. And it really helps me to have that core group of people that support each other, and also can be honest with each other.

NJ: Is she still alive?

JS: No.

NJ: Did she know any of your work before--

JS: I dedicated my first published book to her. It was a chapbook of adult poetry. I almost brought it for you, and I thought, Well, this is children's literature. But she knew of that. I gave her a copy, and she was at that time just on the tip of Alzheimer's, but she really appreciated it. And that was--it was just great to be able to do that, give it to her.

ST: And your own parents and your family, do they love your work and--

JS: They do.

ST: Do you feel known by them?

JS: Oh yes. I think, yes. In the beginning it was a little bit like, So, have you thought about writing a real book, Joyce? Which all children's literature people. But what they meant was a book that they would read and that they -- you know. And so I can totally understand that now. At the time it irritated the heck out of me, but I understand it now, and they were very supportive, and they love that I'm doing this, and they brag about me, and it's kind of a fun thing that I can share with them.

NJ: And your children, when you were publishing, how old were they when you were first starting to publish the children, your poetry for children, not the chapbook?

JS: Right. I think I still have the note that my son wrote me. He took a message from the editor that accepted my first book, and I have it over on my desk. It says, "Call back. Millbrook wants to buy book." And I think he must have been in the 5th grade or something like that. And so I have that in his little handwriting, you know, up above my desk. So they were -- they were -- I think they were totally floored because they'd been listening to Mom whine for ten years about not getting a book published. I think in a way, I mean who knows what effect you have on your children, but I think in a way it taught them that you can love to do something and you can be passionate about it and you can be -- You can fail over and over and over, and then you can finally triumph. And, if I didn't teach them anything else, I hope that that's what I've done

ST: Well, you lived that.

NJ: Yes.

JS: Yes.

ST: I mean, that's a powerful example of words over...

JS: And I had support from my husband, without whom I would not have been able to fail over and over again, so it was this wonderful sort of family effort of them inspiring me, both with their characters and with the literature that they were reading and my husband supporting me and me cranking it out.

ST: Cranking it out. So there were some bumps? I mean, when you say cranking it, that makes me think that maybe there were some desert stretches, or not?

JS: There were many, many desert stretches. When I say ten years, that was the time from the idea coming into my head that I wanted to write for children and the birth of my publish. And, in that period I was finding my voice and realizing I couldn't succeed with novels. I didn't understand how to. Plot is important. And also selling things to *Cricket Magazine* and places like that.

ST: Okay.

JS: You know, kind of getting a readership. And I wrote different kinds of things. I wrote essays for the newspaper, for the op-ed section, and that kind of thing, and just keeping going. I think a lot of the people that are published are the people that love it enough to keep going in the face a lot of rejection. Not everybody, but.

ST: Well, *Ubiquitous* has a bit of a plot.

JS: It does.

NJ: So, does *Winter Bees*. A lot of yours do, in some way, and how you envision the plot.

JS: Yes. Right, right.

NJ: In my class this past week, the question came up, and I'm curious to your take on it:

What is the difference then between poetry for children and poetry for adults?

JS: Hmm. It's an interesting question. I think some of it has to do with subject matter and writing about things that are interesting, both to children and adults. I feel like -- I often feel like the poetry that I'm writing is more for me at that age, and I guess a lot of writers feel that way, that you're writing for the child within you who's still just floored by the world and excited by the world and believes in magic and gets excited about things, and that's who I feel like I'm writing for, not necessarily children, but anybody who has that sense of wonder. But I've, you know, written adult poems that are about things that children don't understand yet, or they -- it would hurt them, so I think -- I think subject matter is alive, but sometimes treatment is some of it.

NJ: Can you elaborate on what you mean by treatment?

JS: Well, I feel like adult poetry has an obscurity to it sometimes that -- or layers to it that children can't decipher, can't get under, and it takes an adult mind to work at it and get to that point. Children are -- they're often very literal, and there are even times when I feel I've been explicit in a poem, and I talk about it with a class, and they're like, Oh, I didn't know that. I didn't realize that was going on. Some of them will get it, some of them won't get it, and then you're wondering, how many children are understanding this? And who -- which children are you writing for? And you can kind of shoot yourself in the foot by wondering that too long. You just have to write for that inner child.

ST: Which, I'd be freed up once that first published book comes along so that you're not rethinking, or second guessing, or not? Was there a shift or something?

JS: I wish it were that way.

NJ: Do you ever stop second guessing?

JS: No.

NJ: Okay, okay.

JS: I think having the first book published is a huge threshold. I will not lie. And actually having the second one published, so you know the first one was not a fluke.

ST: There you go.

NJ: Yes.

JS: Then you start thinking, Okay, I can tell people I'm a writer, and I can really feel like a writer, and yeah. And that is really huge. And I have many friends who had not had that success, and they've been writing as long as I have, and so, you can't just say, Oh, it's just as hard with the tenth one as it is the first one, but -- because it's not, because people know that once you have a published book -- I mean, they've never heard of it. They meet you. You say you're an author. They say, Oh, what did you write? No one has ever heard of anything I've written, which is fine. But still, I know that. I know that I have published work, and that's -- that is really huge. But, I think that your standards start going up and you start thinking to yourself, This is a really stupid subject. I can't believe I'm thinking about writing this. Or, and I'm going to talk to this in my talk too, you start looking at your writing with loathing. You know, the next day you look at this and you think, Ah, I can't believe -- I'm just going to rip this up. So you have to fight that. You have to fight your inner editor and just be willing to take risks, the same way you were when you were hungry for publication and you were willing to try anything because nothing else was working.

And also people expect certain things of you. This format that I've been using, people love that format. And when I do different things, they're not always open to that. Thankfully my editor is very open to it. But you do still have to fight. You still have to fight that voice in your head.

NJ: Could you talk a little bit about your editor, Ann Rider, has edited how many of your books, and what's that relationship that you have?

JS: She has edited every -- all of them except the first two, so that's eleven, maybe, something like that. And I think we have an unusual relationship in this day in age in that I don't really send anything to anybody else. She rejects -- she still will turn me down, but I have this trust in her that says to me, If she's turned it down, then it needs work, then it's not ready. And I have people in my life who tell me I'm crazy to do that and I should just send manuscripts to somebody else, but there's just been something about that woman and me that has worked, and she has been the reason that I've published all of these books, and they've been so beautiful, and they've worked. But I kind of like, I don't want to mess it up, and it's working well for us. We see things in the same way in a lot of ways, and she's just so great at choosing the good illustrators. It's just a really good working relationship. But she doesn't -- she doesn't agree with everything.

NJ: How about that Newberry call?

JS: Oh man.

NJ: Poetry -- come on!

JS: Oh, gosh, that was just so amazing.

ST: So walk us through it. Did you have some inklings? So kind of take us from --

JS: There had been a lot of buzz, and so I'm not one of those authors who's gonna tell you, Oh, I didn't even know what day it was, I was off in Costa Rica... Which Pamela Zagarenski was off in Costa Rica when this won the honor. But yeah, there had been a lot talk, I have to admit I was hoping. And I knew when the broadcast was, and it was one of those years when it was, I think, somewhere where it was -- for me in Minnesota it was going to be a little bit on the late side. I can't remember where it was that year, but. So I figured out when the broadcast was and when the committee would be going into -- for the announcements. And I knew from getting a call for the Honor book for *Red Sings* that they call you before they go out and -- So I thought, Okay, if they don't call by blah-blah, it's not meant to be. So I kind of hung around the house, and I had to meet a friend for lunch. She was going to take me out whether it won or not. And so I kind of hung around and -- Well, I didn't take the dog out, just kind of hung around, you know, cleaned my desk... So then it reached the point, Okay, that's it. You better get in the shower, you're going to lunch. So, I got in the shower, came back out, the light was blinking. I thought, Okay, probably my husband. So I press the button, and it's Cynthia Ritchie and she says, Hello, this is Cynthia Ritchie. I'm calling from the Newberry Award Committee. And it was like the floor had dissolved, and I was like falling through space. It was the most amazing moment. So I listened to her whole tape, the tape of her voice, and then I immediately tried to call her back because I just wanted -- I knew the whole committee would be there, and I just wanted to talk to them. And so I called back and I said, Hello, this is Joyce Sidman, blah, blah, blah... And then they called me back, and it was this whole -- it was this whole rigamarole, and that they were finally on the line, and they were all cheering, and it was just -- I will never forget the moment of hearing her voice. It was -- it was an amazing moment. And it was almost better because I had given up.

NJ: Yes.

JS: And then she called. Because I think every author dreams of it, and I didn't ever think poetry would win, and yet of course you dream of it anyway.

NJ: Yes.

JS: So, it was amazing.

NJ: How did it change you as a writer? Did it?

JS: I think actually getting that Caldecott Honor for *Song of the Water Boatman* changed me in a sense of making me more nervous about writing. But winning the Newberry and being validated for my writing as opposed to the illustration --

NJ: Yes, right.

JS: -- I think it was only positive. I just feel like it was a wonderful moment. It was a magical moment. I couldn't believe it happened, and it was just magic. I mean, I'm still really critical of myself, but I feel like that was that magic moment. No one can ever take that away from me, and I re-live it in my mind when I'm feeling low.

I was so thrilled this year when Kwame Alexander won because that's my publisher. They had sent his book to me to write a blurb for the back of the book. And I wrote back and said, I love this book! This is an awesome book! I want to write a book -- That was a book I read and I thought, I want to write a book like this.

NJ: It had a plot.

JS: It had a plot! And it had different -- different voices, and it was just a perfect book. So I was really thrilled.

I'm always thrilled when poetry wins. It's just thrilling. Sweet -- *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* I was totally thrilled when that won too.

ST: So then, did you call your husband or call your --

JS: I called my husband. I said, in this just deadpan voice because I was still in shock, I got a Newberry Honor. He goes, They didn't give you the award? You only got an Honor? This is not the right reaction.

ST: Wow.

NJ: Wow. And your boys, were they at home at the time? Were they still living at home? They were --

JS: No, they were off in college and, but they were thrilled and -- You know the way college kids can be about their parents lives, which is, sort of --

NJ: Oh very -- that's really nice, Mom.

JS: Called my parents, called my writers' group.

NJ: And Ann.

JS: And Ann.

NJ: Did she know before -- did she know before you did? Before they called?

JS: I don't know.

NJ: It depends where they get the phone number --

JS: I couldn't reach her actually. She was there. I reached Lisa DiSarro, who's the marketing director, first, who is just a doll. Yes, it was -- it was such a high. It was great!

ST: And then you went to the banquet, eventually. You had some months of reveling. Did you go to bookstores? Did you do some of that?

SJ: I did the bookstore thing in my own hometown, but Houghton isn't -- well I -- I shouldn't even bring in the publisher, it's -- Poetry is a tough sell in a bookstore, and I learned that kind of early on, and I don't really advocate for that anymore. I love to talk to groups of either students or adults, but the bookstore's not a great arena for, for what I do, and so, you know, Kwame's going to totally crush it because he's such a presence anyway. But, yeah, I'm more -- I'm more comfortable in schools, really, and at universities and places like that.

ST: So you've had kind of a spring after your -- the Honor. You were -- you made a few bookstore appearances.

JS: Yes, I did.

ST: And then you had the --

JS: Locally.

ST: Okay. And then you had the banquet, which was where?

JS: Yes.

ST: That was --

JS: Pretty cool.

ST: Yes, mm-hmm.

JS: Yes. Well I'm not that comfortable in huge crowds of people, and I don't like to dress up, so --

NJ: Uh oh.

NJ: It was a mixed gift.

JS: Yes, exactly. But at least I didn't have to talk. That was -- that was lovely. But it was -- it was very magical. And, you know, then they break out -- The whole ALA is just so overwhelming but full of these passionate book people who just, I love them, they're just awesome.

NJ: It kind of goes back to what you were talking about with your -- you found your people.

JS: Mm-hmm.

NJ: You know, as a writer, and ALA is another type of your people, who are floored by the world, who are -- they're floored by the world of children's literature. And they're all grown-ups.

JS: Yeah, it's true. And I hear from a lot of those people, people who will write me out of the blue and say, I love your poetry. I read it with my students, or I read it with my children, or my grandchildren, and I'm just writing to tell you how much I enjoy that.

ST: Do you take a lot of photographs?

JS: I've just -- it's a hobby that I've started.

ST: Is that kind of recent, or is it --

JS: It is fairly recent, yes.

ST: Okay.

JS: I'm going to show a lot of them on Saturday.

ST: Is there interplay between the writing and the photography?

JS: Yes. I think there is. It certainly appears to be from someone who's looking at it, but I don't know if that's -- I think so. I think it's noticing things. I love macro photography and noticing little things.

ST: Yes, yes. There's a lot of connections between how something's structured and poetry.

NJ: Yes, just even the lens you use.

ST: I'm so interested in all the different forms that you like to play around with, and introducing them. I think Nancy's earlier question about the difference between children and adult poetry, which I think is really true, a lot of the things that you surface, but, you know, the triolet, right? And the pantoum -- Do you sneak those in there? Do you boldly put them?

JS: Well, I don't write out and I don't start out to write in any particular form, but I think sometimes the subject matter lends itself, and I think I'm particularly drawn to forms where you're using the same line more than once but you have to present it in a new way. That's always appealed to me. Even in college, I remember writing pantoum-like poetry because I feel like when you have that golden line, it's wonderful to be able to recycle it and show it in a new way. And so that -- pantoums are some of my favorites. And triolet I really -- I love that poetry format and I feel like Alice Schertle wrote one, the perfect one about the cows wanting the grass on the other side of the fence. And Marilyn Singer wrote a gorgeous one about dinosaurs. And I was almost -- I had some trepidation about using that because it's been done so well.

ST: Oh, skunk cabbage -- is a lovely example of, you know. It's hilarious, right? Yes, it is. It's a funny plant and --

NJ: It's the perfect poem.

JS: Do you have that here in Washington state?

NJ: Skunk cabbage, yes, when I used to teach we had it. We'd take our students and they'd go. I wish I would have had the poem then.

JS: Yes, right.

NJ: We talked earlier about one of the unique, I mean one of the Joyce Sidman trademarks is the nature poetry and the nonfiction, alongside each other, leaning against each other, supporting each other, illuminate each other. Could you talk about that decision, how you make the decision to do that? Which do you write first? How do you revise? How do you use a poet's eye to write nonfiction?

JS: Hmm. Well, I'm not sure I can totally answer that because a lot of it is kind of organic in the way that it grows. But I start by reading a lot about the subject matter, and then I find specific creatures or plants or phenomena that interest me. And then often the next step is to do research, and I find out as much as I can about that particular subject. And then I wait for the voice of it, and sometimes that'll come right away, sometimes it takes a really long time. But there's only so much -- I have to discover what I call the coolness factor, which is what it is about that creature that really is the coolest thing to me.

For instance, in *Ubiquitous*, when I was reading about geckos and reading about how they spread around the world, they've spread because their eggs are sticky and stick to flotsam and jetsam and float everywhere. But the cool thing, the coolest thing about them, is that they have these toe pads that interact at a molecular level with the material that they're stepping on so that they can walk up walls, and I thought, That is so cool! But you can't put that in a poem. You can have them going up the wall, but you can't say that their toe pads are interacting at a molecular level. But kids deserve to know that. That's just so awesome.

So it's that kind of thing, those kinds of things, that I want to include for them because I don't know whether the child approaching this book will be most interested in the science of it or in the poetry of it or both equally, and I just feel like they're both interesting to me so I deserve to put both of them on the page. And I think that's really all that goes into that decision for me. It's everything I want that I think is cool, but some of it belongs more in poetic form, and some of it belongs more in nonfiction. And I love writing the nonfiction. It's really as fun to me in a lot of ways as the poetry. It's tough to keep it short, and it's tough to keep it aimed at 10-11 year old.

And as I'm going to talk Saturday about it, the most difficult piece of writing I've ever written is the nonfiction note for the "Snowflake" to try to describe how a perfectly symmetrical snowflake forms randomly and exclusively in the chaos of the cold skies. It's really difficult. It's like physics, and it has to do with molecules, and so paring that down to this nonfiction note was really, really tough. It was a wonderful challenge, but it was very, very difficult. But I enjoy it. I enjoy the nonfiction too.

NJ: How long does it take you to -- when I think of a book like *Winter Bees*, can you kind of give us the arc of how long it takes from maybe first idea and --

JS: Some books take longer than others. This one -- *Ubiquitous* took a really long time because it was -- there was so much science involved, and I wanted to pace it in an evolutionary way. But something like

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Winter Bees, which is a little bit more straight forward, I would say probably it takes about a year, a year and a half, to write, because I have to do a lot reading, I have to choose, I have to make sure they're all perfect. I have to find the voice for every poem. I have to send them off to scientists and see if I've done things right. And then I turn it over to Ann, and then my part essentially is done, except for cleanup work and looking at the book dummy and everything. And then it takes another two years for that illustrator to -- well, a year for the illustrator to create the art and then another year for it to come out in production.

ST: And you mentioned that you have a curriculum or you when you -- So are you thinking of that? Do you make a little side note while you're writing, or is that something -- the book's out and then you say, Oh, I'm going -- would like to have this as a book to work with students in schools if I'm asked?

JS: I think it happens in the year that it's in production. I think, Okay, how can teachers use this in the classroom? Because since I go into the classroom and use certain poems as model poems, I look through the poems and think, Which one of these would be a model poem, and how could a teacher bring this into the classroom and use it? And I try to include some art projects too, but I'm not an artist, so I kind of just think about it from, What would a 4th grade teacher want to do with their kids?

ST: So, you author the curriculum, the guides?

JS: I do. Sylvia Vardell did the one for *Winter Bees*, and I didn't even know Houghton Mifflin was contracting for her to do that. But it was lovely, and I didn't have to do it. But yes, I don't mind doing it all because -- because I teach that way anyway, so it's not that hard for me to do.

ST: It would be wonderful to hear you read some poems.

JS: Alright. Any in particular that you would like --

NJ: You used "floored by the world." Is there a poem or two that comes up, you think, Yeah, this one really -- this topic floored me?

JS: Well, let's see. In terms of science, I think *Ubiquitous* was the one that really -- well, the squirrel poem was pretty fun --

JS: I have to take a sip of water before I do it. I was just in New Zealand, and New Zealand does not have squirrels. And I don't want to tell you how many New Zealanders said, Oh Squirrels! Oh, I would love to see a squirrel! And I think, you don't know what you're talking about.

I also love the squirrel poem because Beckie Prange took a photograph -- This is my dog. She took a photograph of my dog. I put a rawhide treat up in a tree, and she took a picture of him trying to get the rawhide treat, and so there's Watson in the book. Okay, so this is a poem I tried to write in a squirrel's voice, so it's called:

“Tail Tale.”

(Transcriber’s note: In the book, this is a concrete poem within the silhouette body of a squirrel.)

OK, your brains are big while ours are just the size of walnuts which we love to eat by the way with teeth that can chew through any sort of bird feeder you care to erect and believe me we will find them no matter where you put ‘em being insatiably curious and natural-born problem-solvers just as we find the nuts we cleverly hid last fall all over your yard even though you let your dog out at every opportunity

Sure dogs run fast but what can they do in a tree nothing besides paw the trunk and stare at us hungrily as we dash limb from limb sailing out over the leaves with our parachute tails which by the way also act as umbrella, float, flag, rudder, and the warmest, softest, coziest quilt you could ever imagine oh yes indeed your brains are bigger...hmmm bigger brains versus tree-top living with a free fur coat and the ability to crack any safe known to man now really which would you choose if you actually had a choice which you don’t?

NJ: Yes, awesome! Clearly as you’re reading this and looking at your facial expression, you’re tickled by this. I don’t think a lot of people think of writing poetry as being tickled. They say poetry is about emotions. Well, that’s an emotion. And I’m curious, did you always know that? When did you know that poetry can really tickle you?

JS: Well, that’s an interesting question. I think from reading other poets and finding their humor in it, in adult poetry as well as children’s poetry, and feeling like it was okay to -- to feel a connection between a creature and myself and feel like I’m putting part of myself into the poem, even if it means using my imagination to become that creature. I think that’s something I love to do, and I think kids still love to do that too. But I think there has to be that part of yourself that you understand. It’s almost like that squirrel or like that gecko or it’s a part of you that’s bonding with that creature, and that’s the part that always tickles me because I love pretending I’m a water bug or a dog or whatever. I think a lot of kids do too.

NJ: What’s next for you? What will we see next?

JS: Well, what we will see next is a book called *Before Morning*, which actually was originally a poem in *What the Heart Knows*. It’s a poem called “Invocation for Snow in Large Quantities,” -- and it was one of the first poems to --

NJ: Boston will not like you

JS: Actually, my editor just said, You know, they all love that book, Joyce, but they love it a little less. And while I was working on this book, Ann Rider called me up one day and said, You know, Joyce -- she sends poems to her kids by email -- she said, You know, I was looking at that snow poem, and I put it with some art by Beth Krommes -- because she has a lot of snow art, she lives in New Hampshire -- and I

just thought, maybe we should do that as a picture book. I thought to myself, It's the easiest book I've ever sold in my life.

NJ: So it's like *Swirl by Swirl* in that regard, so it's a single poem picture book.

JS: Yes. And it's just a very simple poem about wishing for snow. And Beth took it and created this whole story that's set in like a Quebec City kind of a place. I'm not going to tell you what it's about, but she created this whole story around it, so that's hopefully going to come out in November, if she can get the art finished.

And then there's another book I have under contract that's going to be similar to *Swirl by Swirl*, only it's about round things, about spheres and round things.

ST: So I have a practical question for you.

JS: Okay.

ST: So, you're out a lot, getting inspiration and walking your dog Watson, and do you keep a little recorder with you? Do you have a little piece of paper? Do you have a brain that retains that amazing line that came to you a mile out on the lake? How does that happen for you?

JS: That's a great question. I'm going to talk a little bit about that on Saturday too. I have this terrible suspicious mind, and it's borne out in reality, that if I actually bring the pen and the paper with me, nothing will come into my head, because part of what a walk is for me is just to release and letting my mind just drift. So what happens is that I will get the line, like I'll get the voice of a poem. For instance, the "Oak After Dark" poem, I hadn't -- I knew I wanted to write about a tree because I found out that trees do different things at night than they do during the day, seemed so fascinating to me. I wrote a lot of really terrible tree poems. And then finally I was walking through the woods and the line "to anchor earth, to touch the sky" came into my head. That's it, that's the voice of the oak. So I went thumping home saying to myself, "to anchor earth, to touch the sky, to anchor earth..." And I just went all the way home with that in my head, and then I wrote it down as soon as I got home. But that's what seems to work for me. I'll get something in my head and I'll just repeat it until I get home. But I can't take the pen and the paper. It just doesn't work. I don't know why.

ST: Jinx it.

JS: I know. It's crazy. And I always tell kids to carry a notebook with them wherever they go.

ST: Right, right.

JS: And you know, they're never really far. They're at most 45 minutes away, those pens and paper.

NJ: So, do you still use old fashion pen or pencil? If we walked into your studio and were -- just kind of peered over your writing, what would we see you use?

JS: I write notes longhand, but I compose a lot on the computer. I like to see the way the words will look on the page, and I like almost to see the sculptural quality of them. And I love to be able to move them around. And I'll print out different drafts of things. But I really do prefer to see -- My handwriting's getting worse, and I just prefer to see how those words are going to look as a sculpture on the page, a printed sculpture.

NJ: Would we hear you read --

JS: Oh, yes. You'd hear me reading, talking to the dog, talking to myself. Yes, I think they do need to be read aloud. And often they need to be read to an audience, and that's why the writers' group is so important. Because things change when you have people there and you're reading to them. You can tell by the tenor of the silence whether you have them or not. So I think that's really important. I tell kids that in the classroom that they have to read aloud to somebody.

ST: Can we hear one more -- maybe the oak?

JS: Sure.

ST: Do you want to read the oak tree or, choose?

JS: Sure. That's one of my favorites.

"Oak After Dark"

As nighttime rustles at my knee,
I stand in silent gravity

and quietly continue chores
of feeding leaves and sealing pores.

While beetles whisper in my bark,
while warblers roost in branches dark,

I stretch my roots into the hill
and slowly, slowly, drink my fill.

A thousand crickets scream my name,
yet I remain the same, the same.

I do not rest, I do not sleep,
and all my promises I keep:

to stand while all the seasons fly,
to anchor earth,
to touch the sky.

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JS: The best of me is in those books. I believe that. Sometimes I feel like authors shouldn't be let out of there. All of this is because their best words are in their books.

ST: Thank you, very much.