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ST: We are now recording, and this is an oral history with Melissa Sweet, who is here as a presenter for the 2016 WWU Children's Literature Conference. We're going to talk about illustrating poetry, and what that process is, and the different aspects of your work. So, there's many different kinds of directions to start out.

I was curious, again, about the process of collage in your work. I was looking at *You Nest Here With Me*, and I was noticing the 1907 snippet of paper, and I thought that was, I thought, is there a story behind that, 1907, or how does that fit?

MS: That is interesting because someone I know in my town had a collection of entomological--what is the word I want?

ST: Mm-hmm.

MS: And it was bugs. What is that word?

NJ: Yes, that's it, entomology.

MS: Entomology. So these were Canadian newsletters. There are maybe 25 of them. And they had -- the covers were this gorgeous green paper. And I used them in the collage.

ST: It was on the owl page.

MS: Yes, all these. So,, the date has really nothing to do with anything, but there was something about them being about bugs that I thought was somehow fine to be with the birds, and it was the color of the paper that really interested me. And if you were going to read them for content, you might find a bug word in there, which would be fine, too. So that was it. It was about color. And this particular paper takes paint really well, so that was another reason.

ST: And you knew that ahead of time, or you discovered that or?

MS: I guess I knew it on some level. I started playing with it and it worked, so I just went with it. But in a book like this, I'm looking at limiting the materials so it's not the sky's the limit. It's okay, what is the palette and what is the type of paper that I want to use in this book? And this has some dark papers in the tree trunk, and there's not -- Oh, so here's more of that bug paper. We'll call it bug paper.

ST: This is the robin page.

MS: This is the catbird, yes. And so here it is to make the buildings, it worked. When I find a collage material like that, like those periodicals, then I try to pepper it throughout the book. And I'm just looking to see if I did anywhere else. Oh, that's probably the same paper. So, that's the feeling I want, that it's not for one page, but it's a feature of the book, and I just go with it.

NJ: So talk about when you got this manuscript, do you get it typed up? How do you receive it? And then how do you transmediate, whatever the term, this piece into something that's visual?

MS: Well, this -- I'm not remembering if this came to me as a typed up manuscript or they said, page one, this; page two, three, this... Sometimes they break it up, but this had a very obvious break. And I think we fussed around with the front matter a little bit to make it a lead into the story. And there had to be -- so in this case -- That's a great question actually. In this case, we had Jane and Heidi's text, but we had to give them, these birds, a life. What does it mean that pigeons nest on concrete ledges, catbirds nest in green hedges? Did they need to relate at all? Not really, but they're going to be opposite each other, so I'm already thinking about that. And concrete ledges, I think of a city, so it's a little bit of an urban landscape, leading into another urban landscape. And so those are the sorts of things I'm figuring out pretty early on - the text is informing me. I have to think about how I'm going to render these birds. I'm not Audubon, but I also don't want it to look so loose you wouldn't know what the bird is. It's for a medium-old kid -- I mean, it's not for a four year old -- oh, I guess it is for a four year old. So I guess it's fairly young. But still, I wanted them to be recognizable.

The front matter, "My little nestling, time for bed. Climb inside, you sleepyhead," who is this? Is this the father and his son? Where do they live? Are there going to be more than just a parent and a child? Are there going to be other kids in the scene? So all those questions come up right away. Part of it is about design, and it worked out better that the mother was talking, or a parent was talking, to one child rather than more than one, because she asks some questions, and you wouldn't know if you just read it aloud who was asking what. The bedroom scene needs to be decided on, and everything that had to do with birds, I brought in as much as I could. Oftentimes I give a child a little mascot, so she had the baby owl. And that is nice because it can be carried through the book, and it works great to have another visual element like that.

And then when the book was over, we put that.

NJ: I wondered when you did that.

MS: Yes. Well, yes, it just made sense. That was fun.

ST: So the bed is a nest here?

MS: Exactly. She's drawing birds, she has birds on her wall.

NJ: So when you said you read through it and you came up with ideas, do you sketch first? Do you sketch in your head first? Do you make thumbnails for a book like this, where it's literally a story poem?

MS: Yes. Well, I start by making -- we decide on the trim size. Some publishers say this is the trim size. Some say -- and I'm sure it's negotiable, but sometimes it feels like it works. So if I have the trim size, I usually make a smaller version of it. And I do it really old fashioned. I take the text and I just tape it down with double stick tape, and I start to make this funky little dummy that is very crude, but you already want to feel the page turns. Then I might do the whole thing that I can look at it once, so it's more like a big storyboard. It's not technically a storyboard, but it's all one piece of paper, and I have every page up there, and I'm able to start to see, are we going to close in on a bird, or are we pulling back? It's like a little movie, and -- I probably do five or six or seven different versions of that as one is very crude, and then they start to get tighter and tighter until I give something to the publisher. But my dummies are notoriously loose, and they have to have a lot of trust that they're going to get something decent. And of course they know my final art, so, they do trust me.

NJ: Right. Had you worked with this team before?

MS: I had not worked with Jane and Heidi, but I had done the *Baby Bear* series with Jane: *Baby Bear's Books*, *Baby Bear's Chairs*, *Baby Bear's Big Dreams*. The story behind this book was that it was about ten years between the time they sold it once to the time it came out, because it changed hands and ended up with Liz Van Doren. So I came on it new. I had no idea that it had been around. And one of the fun parts too, was researching their nests. The architecture of the nests is so interesting, and that was a big part of it.

NJ: That would have been a question I would have asked earlier today is, for a book like this, you're illustrating a poem -- You just said research. What kind of research do you do in illustrating a poem? And then let's also bring that question eventually over to the kind of research to a book like this.

MS: Okay. So that was another thing I did almost immediately when I got the manuscript -- I basically go online or go to the library and get, make a list of every bird I need, and then go research it. And the good thing about that, is that when I did the tiny wrens and shoreline hedges, what does a shoreline hedge -- sedge, sorry, look like. This bird has a particularly fascinating nest where she gathers up the grasses, and then the grasses are intertwined to make this nest that must just flow in the breeze. It's so beautiful. So immediately, I'm going to riff off that idea of these wonderful big pieces of natural materials poking up near a body of water. The body of water isn't so important, but the previous page shows a city, and we're pulling back and making sure we're leaving. And what do we find next? I'm not sure. Let's see, I've got to find it myself. Okay. So, this child is going to bed, and we talked earlier on about the book would close in darkness. So here, I'm just intimating a little bit of night sky coming on. The research -- every bird has such a different way of making a nest or raising their young, or their eggs, etc. But it doesn't have to be so technical. It doesn't have to be, this one uses willow branches, and this one uses cedars. It just, close enough, to make it feel like that bird's nest. And that bird -- I mean, grackles are just shimmering with color and light, and that's hard to capture, so you just make it kind of grackly.

NJ: Roget would like that line.

MS: Yes.

ST: And the reds and the pinks and the greens --

MS: That's what, like what I showed you today.

ST: -- there they are! Absolutely. Really, they're everywhere. I was just looking back at this page as well. I was just looking at some of the, where, you know, it's there.

MS: Yes, yes, yes.

ST: It's there -- this is more orange, but there's that little rose and green again.

MS: -- that is true. It's true.

And yet, without knowing that, it feels sort of, to my eye, it feels sort of right. And I think it lightens the water. It keeps the watercolor fresh and translucent, transparent.

So the research is not so in-depth like another book, the way *The Right Word* is so in-depth, but it has to be in-depth enough so that you have something to work with. And a book like this it's not -- well, it is nonfiction. It's not hardcore nonfiction, but it's the truth. This is what -- it's not a photographic rendering, but it's the truth.

NJ: So when you do that research, I imagine in some ways it's like an education you never had in school. Do you ever do those, Oh wow, I didn't know that?

MS: Oh, that is a very great observation because I have always been acutely aware that I had two years of college and then another little bit, and after that I just wanted to take off and do what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it. I guess that's maybe why I felt E. B. White was such a good fit, because -- And what's mesmerizing to me is that, what was I thinking about when I was in school? I have so little memory of it, but this work -- it's like you get a Ph.D. with every book, that it's quite remarkable. It's -- I think it's promising that even if we're not great students or we can't sustain that kind of learning, we learn in a different way.

ST: Well, mention the art show again that you watched Saturday mornings.

MS: Oh my gosh, yes.

ST: You were talking about that. You were riveted to --

NJ: It was Saturday morning.

MS: Yes, I know.

NJ: Other kids are watching cartoons.

MS: Right, right. Well, also remember, this was around 19--, the earlier 1960s. There were only so many tv shows existing. And so there were a lot of filler shows. This could have, for all I know, could have been a filler show. I mean, he didn't have the kind of Howdy Doody rep -- you know, this is Bob (*Jon*)

Gnagy It's not like the Mickey Mouse Club, which we also watched religiously. But he just showed us what he did, and showed us in a way that we could mimic it. And I wouldn't say my brothers were as interested as I was, but.

NJ: That's the other piece. So it spoke to you.

MS: Yes.

NJ: But your bird -- excuse me. Okay, it's right here. So we go back to the Bob Gnagy show, there it is.

MS: Oh yes!

NJ: What you did earlier today, and there's this bird.

MS: Yes, there's the bird made from simple --

ST: Oval and the shapes and the triangles.

NJ: Yes, you've got them, right there.

MS: Exactly.

NJ: So you researched nests, you researched birds. Anything else for this kind of a book?

MS: I want to know a little bit about a landscape if I need to. I researched telephone poles, so I knew where that nest would go. And of course the babies had to be pretty accurate. And there were different ages. Some are older than others. I mean, baby birds all look very, very similar when they're little, and then -- so, would you have a baby robin look like a tiny robin? Probably a little more Dr. Seussy than this, but it's the idea. And here you can see this is where the piece was photographed and the shadow in it. So yes -- and here's sticks, and those little papers again, so we brought -- everything's kind of carried through. It's fun to end the book with a night sky. It always is. And then just enough nonfiction.

NJ: Who did this?

MS: This, well I didn't write this. This was a plan, the plan from the beginning, so I drew the bird, the feather, the nest, and it was put together at the publisher. I don't know if you knew that Jane Yolen's late husband was an ornithologist.

ST: She mentions that.

MS: Oh, she does mention it in the author note? Oh yeah, that makes sense.

NJ: So difference then. This is a different kind of book.

MS: Totally different kind of book.

NJ: Research for something --

ST: *Firefly July*.

MS: Oh, this was such an interesting story because this came right after -- well, it came right in the middle of *Roget*. I told you this story, did I already?

NJ: Not to the tape player.

MS: Okay.

MS: So I was working on *Roget*, or *The Right Word*. It was going okay but it felt very heavy, and I knew that something had to give in order for kids to really fall in love with him, and I needed to fall in love with him in a different way. It was probably March 1, and this book, *Firefly July*, was due in April, and we all try the best we can to get things in on time, and that doesn't always happen. Books are shifted all the time. But I remember saying to my husband at dinner, Well, I'm in a pickle. I either ask them to move it when *Roget* is done, and when that will be I don't really know, or I stop everything I'm doing, pack up, and begin *Firefly July*. And I had a very cursory dummy. It was hardly anything. So my husband said, Well, I think you've got to do it. What are you going to do? You can't put them off forever. So I called the art director for *The Right Word*, and I said, I'm just going to, full disclosure here, I'll call it straight, I need to set this aside for at least a month, maybe a few weeks after, but let's say a month and I'll get right back to *Roget*. And something really shifted. I spent about two hours cleaning my studio that morning, got everything, all the surfaces were clean, and I looked at the book and I said, Okay, there's however many spreads. I'll do one spread a day. That's a month, and I need a couple more days after that, and I think I can do it. And so I felt like it was -- I sometimes in this situation, I say to myself, What would Picasso do? What would Alexander Calder do? Calder would not worry about this. He would get to it. He'd start snipping paper, gluing things down. He wouldn't make a big deal about it. And I thought this book needed that kind of freshness.

And one of the things I noticed early on, and I asked permission to do this, was that Paul had arranged these poems through the season, so what if we start out indicating spring, summer, fall, and winter, and it'd be nice to end with spring at the beginning, fall originally the ending. That's nice, already a nice format. But we say the word of the season within the art, so that if you catch that, great, and if you don't it, great. It's not part of any poem. And I started with those four pieces, and that punctuated the book, because I had a lot of freedom around those four pieces, and it was like anything goes. This is my book to have fun with. And once I did that, I started going in between. So I went in between spring and summer, and as I told you, I had decided that some of the materials -- one of the materials would be paper bags. Another was tissue paper. You can see some tissue paper in there. And then I think I just cut this guy out of, this seagull out of white paper and put it on a background. So I wanted it to feel very modern and a little bit abstract and just fresh like the poems. The poems were so short but rich. I wanted the poems and the art to reflect that.

ST: Did the poems come paired on the spread --

MS: Yes, they did.

ST: So you had those?

MS: Exactly, I had that.

ST: And which ones were single poems, window here is on its own -- versus other poems that have two poems on the spread?

MS: I might have had a little bit of permission to change that, but I don't think I did.

ST: Can you talk a little bit more about modern? You said you wanted to make it modern. That's kind of interesting, in terms of how you define that.

MS: Yes, that's a good question. Well, I do look at a tremendous amount of contemporary art, and I'm very fond of the modernist movement. And much of my work is divided in a very grid-like way, like some of the paintings that we see that were done, collage artists did, I'll think of names as we're going along. So, how I divide the page and the boldness of certain shapes.

ST: Well this is spread here -- this "Subway Rush Hour" and "A Happy Meeting," there's so many different things on, close up, far away, inside. You can just hear this shoe going --

MS: The mud squishing.

ST: You know, that big sucking sound -- when she's lifting up -- and just the different pieces.

MS: What connects these pieces is the palette. So, that was a deliberate choice, all these colors here -- we're seeing in her boot, in the wheels and the boot really. I wanted this to show the diversity of a subway in New York City or whatever city you are, that's where subways are. And this mattered less, but there's a lot of people walking on the sidewalk as if it would be a city. It might have to do with how I use paint and the shapes and the way I cut the collage, that it's very immediate, and the painting informs me as much as anything. So I begin and I say, What does this need, and where do I need a little bit of texture? Where do I need a little bit of depth? And I go back in. I decide very little before I start, because there's no real way, to my mind, to plan a collage. That's kind of the beauty of a collage is you just sort of begin, and sometimes just gluing something down, just glue down some brown paper and see what happens, and start to draw.

ST: What's this little bit here, on the bottom of her boots? Do you remember what -- it's so interesting looking. It looks like a little rickrack kind of thing, but it isn't.

MS: Well, that's cut -- It's paper. It's a green paper that's cut with a scallop scissor -- and it didn't take the paint very well, which was great because it had that sort of sucking sound --

ST: Serendipity again, right?

MS: Yes, exactly.

NJ: Trust, trust what can happen, right?

MS: Mm-hmm, really, that is what collage is about, really trusting what can happen.

NJ: So, go back to -- okay, you can talk about research, but I'm curious now. There you have one story poem, almost.

MS: Yes.

NJ: Here you have individual poems. So do you read them out loud? How do you -- what do you do with the poem before you play with --

MS: Wow, that's a great question. Do I read it out loud? I probably do read it out loud because I'm by myself and I do tend to do that. But, when I read these poems, a lot of times, especially in something like *Firefly July*, it brought me back to childhood in a big way. We collected fireflies on a summer night. What did that feel like? We were at the Jersey Shore, with sandpipers running, and we had just been to Sanibel with the sandpipers, and I remember watching them flit. So one of the things I used was this little dotted line, and it's used throughout the book, but that was a feeling of flit, the feeling, right?

So it could be rain, it could be --

ST: It's the rain in "A Happy Meeting," it's those dotted lines. It's here on the little orange cat. It's everywhere.

MS: So that's -- first of all, it has a lot of feeling of movement, immediately, just the nature of a dotted line. So that's partly why it works. It showed up in some of the papers I used. So, in a book like this, it's not only my interpretation of what it felt like to be at the shore, the colorful blankets and just monotone of the colors of the beach, but also the materials in the book get carried through. So if I get stuck, I can turn to something like that. What have I not used lately in the book? Even this is brown paper, the roof of the building, it just went green. I just made it blue.

ST: In *Firefly July*.

MS: You see a little bit underneath.

NJ: Any poem you had to do different kind of work for, either as research or that stumped you, or that you just couldn't get right?

MS: The painting of the window of the train --

ST: Back in the subway?

MS: Yes, so -- no, a window. I love trains, and I had not long before doing this book, I had been on a train from Boston to New York, and I love that feeling of it's almost like a movie screen, like that kind of ch-ch-ch-ch, that feeling of scenes going by. And you know, there's towns and the ocean, cityscapes. Here's the ocean. So this really reflected that trip, in my memory. I didn't take pictures of it. And I must have done this piece four times. The trick was that I thought it would be very loose and free, but you didn't get the sense of -- you didn't get what it felt like to be on a train and the shimmering of the windows. So I started out all different ways. I started out with a black piece of paper, and I tried putting pieces of paper on top of it that were the scenes. And eventually, I just felt, I don't know, some scenes like this one, I just had such a reverence for it, that I needed to slow down and take it scene by scene. And of course they're very linked, but I did a very slow watercolor, and it was so pleasurable. It's my favorite piece in the book. Sometimes the ones that you struggle with the most are the ones that end up -- you work on, and the trick is to have it be the most fresh piece in the book, even though you've

done it four times. You just keep approaching it with that in mind, that you're going to be so careful and present to how you're painting it. You have to be aware of what you're doing.

NJ: I'm so reminded, especially when you talk about window, and some of the words you're saying, reverence, slow down, every piece matters, that's like writing a poem.

MS: Yes. Every word matters.

NJ: Right. So I wonder if you've ever thought about the kind of work you do as poetry.

MS: Wow. I don't think I ever thought about that. I think of it, because I do it every day, and when you've done something as long as I've been doing this, you have to come to it every morning like it's the first time you ever did it. Because if you don't, it's not going to feel -- that respect for the materials, it just isn't there. I don't know if, I don't know quite how to describe it.

ST: So you have 18 pictures and 18 words here in this poem.

MS: No!

ST: I'm just counting it. I didn't prepare that. I just did it right now.

MS: I didn't know! That is very amazing.

ST: That's at another realm we're entering.

MS: Well maybe it is. I suppose if you put this away -- they're in a -- somebody, one child --

NJ: It's a visual poetry.

MS: -- a child who was here for the program said, Well, how do you start? Do you know? Because I do pictures and I do words. And I said, Some people do pictures and write a story to go with it, and some people write their story, and then they create the pictures, and sometimes it's back and forth. But you could, I suppose, easily, especially in a book like this, cover up the words and write another poem for it.

NJ: Or you paint the poem for it.

MS: Or you paint the poem for it. But that idea that, being an author or illustrator or any of the arts. Twyla Tharp talks about this. Have you ever read anything by her, Twyla Tharp? So she goes into a room and she starts to move. And that is it. I feel that that's about right. You have to come and approach it. Sometimes I think about, what if this was the last painting I ever got to do on the planet, for my lifetime? What would I bring to that? And that's important because that needs to come through somehow, that this is the most important thing you ever did, I think. Otherwise there's no point. I mean it's easy to say that, not every day is ideal, but you do --

ST: That's the intent.

MS: That's the intent, exactly.

NJ: Do you have any other poetry commissioned to illustrate right now?

MS: I'm working on a book about bugs right now, called *Cricket in the Thicket*, and Carol Murray, this is her first book. It's sweet little poems in rhyme about lots of different kinds of bugs, so it's a little bit like, *You Nest Here With Me*, in the playful nonfiction, I'd call it.

NJ: Who's publishing that?

MS: Christy Ottaviano Books.

NJ: So you're working on that one right now?

MS: I'm trying to think of the one, the book after that is not a poem, no. Poetry books are wonderful because, well, *You Nest Here With Me* is different in that it's -- you're creating a story behind it. With something like *Firefly July* or *Cricket in the Thicket*, each page is just its own fun invention.

Oh, my poet, my poet, the poet of all poets, right? William Carlos Williams. Yes, this was an amazing experience for me. It was at a great time in my career because it was really important for me to swing out. I just said, I have to do this book. First of all, that decision began to unfold in doing the research, and it's weighty business to illustrate a book by someone of his magnitude. And Jen did a beautiful job. But as I began, and it was just illustrated. It was just kind of reflecting on Jen's text. Something had to give, otherwise it was just going to be very rote, and so what I thought about early on, when I first began sketching this out, what I really loved was his poems. Of course I loved Jen's text, but it was the idea -- these poems were part of the text, at first. I asked her and the editor and art director, What if that is what I'm illustrating is the poem, and I hand letter or reinterpret it as a piece of art? And so we figured if we put the poems on the end papers, and we were careful not to put it under the flap --

ST: Thank you --

MS: You're welcome.

ST: -- from a librarian's perspective, where those books get -- they lose that end under the flap.

MS: So as long as they were here, my interpretation, so long as it was readable, and not everybody loved this format. People said, Where are your eyes supposed to go? Well, that's -- I'm okay with that. I'm okay with people finding their way and letting it be that whatever experience it is for them.

Once again, it was about structure, because with *Firefly July* I had those four pieces. When I realized I could take the poems out of the text and place them on, each on their own page, then suddenly the book fell into place, because the looseness of this poem had to be part, had to be reflected here, and I had the book. I'm not saying it was super easy from there, but it gave me something to hang my hat on. And again, in my research, and maybe I already told you this, in my research, I kept coming across this incident, or this not incident but this time in William Carlos Williams' life where he was very interested in modern art, and he had been to the 1913 Armory Show in New York City. He saw Duchamp and Matisse and Picasso, and this was when -- so this was like the introduction to abstract art for a lot of people. And he said, I want to write poems the way this art looks. We know that he didn't write sonnets and he didn't write in rhyme. He looked at objects, so that's why he said that wonderful line, "no ideas but in things." So it's these manmade things, these creations of humans, that he was inspired

by, the bold *plums, the wheelbarrow*. What is that saying about us, or what is that saying? And that's what he wrote about.

NJ: It's full circle.

MS: It's full circle.

NJ: He was inspired by art -- the art of the everyday, in some cases, and then you've become inspired as the artist by his poems to create anew.

MS: Exactly.

NJ: Interesting.

MS: So when his mother wants him to become a doctor, like the uncle, and he's not -- so here he is of this spread, didn't exist when Jen wrote the book, and I asked -- I mentioned this to everyone, I said, there is this moment in his life that feels so crucial to me. Can we have a spread about it? And so Jen added this, and so, Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, all those people were part of his social life.

And my relationship to this poem in particular, "The Figure 5 in Gold," was because when I was a kid, and you'll see this in my slideshow, I was mesmerized by Demuth's painting of this poem when I was a kid. And so this book really was a departure for me, and also a full circle as a kid, coming back to this work was really amazing.

So that was where the book jacket started to come in because I was working with my library on an altered book project, and I had all these books, and I thought, These are canvases. These are fabulous little -- they're space holders. They're beautiful.

ST: Using books to make other books to make other books --

MS: Perfectly valid.

ST: So there's this example here -- is this a photograph or did you get to keep one of those, or how do you get to have a William Carlos Williams', like, script, -- paper?

MS: That's a great question, because it was exciting. I wasn't a good researcher -- I shouldn't say I wasn't a good researcher -- I was learning how to research at this time. And when this book came around, I really didn't know what to look for, but I knew he lived in Rutherford, New Jersey, and I called the public library. I wanted to see his house, which is almost across the street. And I said, Would you have any artifacts or anything I could see about William Carlos Williams? And they did. They had a little room set aside, and there was his typewriter and his bowler hat and examples of his handwriting and his doctor -- these were his doctor pads, and they Xeroxed one for me. And I'm not a fancy -- oh, how do I want to say this? If I'm going to reproduce something like this, I don't do it in Photoshop. I just make copies on my Xerox machine. So I did it on old paper, and I think I might have added those lines, I can't remember. But I think I added those red lines. They weren't on his original. So, I had both. I had examples of his handwriting and I had his prescription, like his prescription pads, because we know that he wrote poems on his prescription pads. He'd pull over and when he felt a poem coming on, he wrote it down. Those were the kinds of things that I wanted to have in the book because it makes us feel who

he is more. If that wasn't there, we might not even remember that we read it. But that visual I think makes it more real.

And here he's going -- he's making house calls. That was going to be, that was such a -- I took that so seriously. Like I had to have people at the door and sick children, and none of that had to happen. All it meant was that he drove everywhere. And I think it's an opportunity to say, What did a house call mean?

Who makes house calls anymore? It's just an opportunity to talk about what doctoring was like then. That looseness comes later, and when you have permission to do it. I own an old doctor's ledger book, and it must have been more than one doctor was at this office, because it had these -- Look at those gorg-- those are all hand lettered throughout this ledger book. That is someone's copperplate script. And so I filled in William Carlos Williams. But that kind of thing you cannot believe how many times that's happened to me, that I have the perfect papers. And if I don't have it, I don't have it. So look at "Dr. Cash." That was a beautiful old ledger book.

NJ: Wow.

MS: Yes, pretty lucky.

NJ: So you do a lot of your font, your script, you create a lot of that yourself.

MS: Mm-hmm, I do.

NJ: Part of your signature, one of your signature pieces as an artist, I'd look at that and I could say, There's Melissa's fonts. But they're not all the same, so how do -- where does that come from? How do you know what kind of font to create, like for this?

MS: Oh gosh, that's a great question. Sometimes it's because I haven't done it before or I haven't done it in a while. We grow up learning how to write our name right away. We learn how to -- lettering is drawing. So we learn -- that is a form of drawing that we do. We don't even think about it when we're kids and we're learning how to draw the alphabet. When I begin this, it doesn't feel like it should be any certain way necessarily. Maybe I was thinking about the color or that it should be legible, but I give myself permission just to kind of have fun with it. And if there's something, like maybe I wrote the word "sparrow" and it seemed to need a little orange, so I put that piece of paper down and wrote on top of it. I don't remember how that happened, but I bet I wanted orange because opposite, there's this orangey desk. And without it, it seemed a little flat. So I'm just looking at that right now.

And it's fun to look back at this and look at the decisions I made. It really is. I hadn't looked at this in a long time. I like the little folded bit of paper and the little fake notebook papers. With the book I just did, the E. B. White book, there's a lot of hand lettering in that too. But because he used a typewriter, a typewriter became more what I used, but there's a lot of dropped caps, capital letters in it. I really like the way hand lettering looks with a piece, and it goes with collage, and these -- so this was kind of out of the blue. I found the word "is" and I said, Okay, why not have the word "is" the biggest word on the page. And if you squint and you look at it as a painting, it all works fine. So, the materials can also dictate where you begin.

ST: But you are here for this one, the “This Is Just To Say Poem,” you are interpreting the poem in a way. The way you’re placing the sections -- it actually is encouraging a certain kind of reading with it.

MS: Yes.

ST: So I don’t know if that’s something that matters to you, or you’re thinking about that or not.

MS: I do think about that. Maybe it’s just -- it’s a little bit intuitive to be honest with you, because I don’t stop and think, I’m going to break this, but I have to break it, somehow. So I think it’s a little bit more intuitive as if you were reading it aloud, maybe, a little bit. And also, I must have wanted, I must have had some -- maybe I just glued those papers down. Glued those papers down, yes, and decided to split up the poem in thirds. I don’t know. I don’t remember the decision behind it. But I know I wanted that ampersand, because I needed the black, I needed that bad. And it probably was “and,” not an ampersand, but I wanted it visually.

“The Red Wheelbarrow” just made sense. I took an old -- I took a font and blew it up to make this. So this was all about the crafting of a poem. Because I must have read that he edited a lot.

ST: Well you can see that’s what’s so lovely about this. “So much depends upon the wheelbarrow” -- because there are so many iterations of that poem.

MS: Yes. It’s just so curious to me when you see someone’s manuscripts, or you look, you go back to a historical society and you see someone -- what their papers and their manuscripts, and all the decisions they made and all the struggle and all the editing. It didn’t fly off anyone’s tongue. I don’t think. I’m sure Kwame talked about that -- that the crafting of it is what it all is. Which I think is overwhelming and exciting and encouraging, because everybody can, everybody can do it.

ST: Well and a reader who loves a poem could get lost on this page, I think -- and read the same lines again and again. We think about that we’re reading.

NJ: Yes, and you talked about slowing down. I mean, something like this, you can’t gulp.

MS: Right, right. That’s a good way to look at it.

NJ: It’s really intended to say, Take some time with this simple poem.

MS: Yes. Even though we don’t know the background behind it. That doesn’t matter at all. Even though it’s fun to know the background sometimes.

ST: Well when you’re piecing this, to get your collages piecing, and the poem is pieced, it’s just a lot of creative parts working together here.

NJ: That’s pretty remarkable. It’s beautiful. What do you do with your work when you’re done?

MS: Well, a lot of it is in my studio in big flat files. Some of it has gone to the Kerlan. There’s such a vast amount, it’s a little problematic. It’s -- something has to happen to it, eventually.

NJ: So you dedicate it all to the Kerlan?

MS: No, I haven't. I wouldn't mind sometime selling some, I mean, if that happened.

NJ: Do you still have this?

MS: I have some of that. For some reason, I felt so exuberant after *Firefly July*, I gave a lot of people I worked with away. I just said, Paul, what piece do you want?

ST: What a wonderful impulse.

MS: No, the editor and the art director, everybody just -- it was just so fun, that we had so much fun, and the cover was so fun, and it just -- you have a great feeling behind it, and it was just -- That was a lot of art, too.

NJ: And did you really do that in a month?

MS: I really did it. I did what I said. I did a piece a day. But that was, again, not overdo it, just let it be what it was.

NJ: And it feels. I mean, you get that.

MS: Yes.

NJ: Which is childlike in so many ways.

MS: Yes. It's a good thing to remember, that we can do art that way.

Can I show you something -- in *The Right Word*?

NJ: Yes.

ST: Yes.

MS: So here's two doctors, right?

And two doctors at two very different times in history. And *Roget* -- I really resisted this piece because I didn't know how to do it, but that's how *Roget*, what his stethoscope looked like. And in *A River of Words*, his stethoscope is much more in keeping with what we know as one to look like. Isn't that interesting? But I didn't know that.

NJ: Part of your research then.

MS: Yup. What did that look like? Just to make sure. And I thought, I'll be darned, there you have it.

ST: Well I think these books are very complimentary. And I do think that *Roget* --

MS: Oh, that's nice of you.

ST: -- is part of poetry. It's all about word choice, and I think, personally my experience when I read *Roget*, I thought, Oh my gosh, it's elevated the thesaurus to a whole other level. Because the thesaurus

becomes something like -- it's sort of the go-to when you can't think of a word that you need. How do you say "many"? Plethora.

NJ: You know what it means, but it's another word.

ST: It's another word. But this book really, as I said, it just elevated this whole story of his life and his passion with list making, thinking in classification. I mean, as a librarian, ah, classification.

MS: Of course.

ST: The word selection and choices is crucial in all writing, but especially in poetry.

MS: Yes.

ST: You talk about that limited number of words that he really --

NJ: And which is the right one here, right?

ST: Which is the right word, yeah.

NJ: Yes, the right word.

MS: And how does it affect every other word in it? And truly, his first thesaurus, the classified one, not the one we know today, had all these phrases -- "black as thunder," "white is the driven snow."

NJ: Maybe that's simile and metaphor. It's all right there.

MS: It's so beautiful.

NJ: Because I look at these, and there's a poem right on this page.

MS: Exactly! That was when, I tell you, when that came in the mail, and I thought, oh, I just, I need to have this. I don't know where I'm going to use it. And Jen said, It was classified like Linnaeus, and I opened up that book, I had to sit down. I was hyperventilating. I could not believe -- that was essential to do this book, and I didn't know it. I mean, you work for so long kind of in the dark. You're just shooting at -- you're shooting in the dark.

ST: Well this is reminiscent. You've been talking about modernist art, modern Twyla Tharp -- this, to look at this as a poem -- and that movement and the selection. It's random and it's select at the same time. This is darkness -- night -- dark -- pitch - glimmer ---

NJ: I can hear Kwame read that.

ST: It's echoing what you were talking about earlier -- in terms of some of the artists were doing by acting against -- What is classical?

MS: Right, right. He was really creating something that hadn't been -- something from nothing, for sure.

NJ: Wow.

MS: This riffs off the page where Jen writes, what “If (only) all the ideas in the world could be found in one place,” and “then everyone would have” the “(one) book where they could find the best word, the one that really fit.” So here we have light and dark. This question for me was, What does that book look like? It’s big and small, the universe down to tiny microcosms. When he went back as a 60-some-odd-year-old man and began to sort out what the thesaurus would look like, that was when I began to really classify light and dark. I don’t even know if kids will see that, but it doesn’t matter because I had to do it.

NJ: Guarantee at least one kid will.

ST: Or they’ll feel it.

MS: Well, it doesn’t matter. Yes, it will make sense somehow.

NJ: And they’ll feel it, and they’ll feel it.

MS: Yes.

NJ: I mean, this is a poem.

MS: It is.

NJ: “Worry, fret, grieve, despair, intrude, badger, annoy, plague, provoke, harass. Enough to drive one mad.”

MS: That is good! You just said it.

NJ: Yes, it’s a poem.

MS: That’s a poem.

NJ: And this is as much part of the poetry collection.

MS: You could just pick five or six numbers and see what a few words do together and see what you could make with that.

NJ: That would be a fun game.

MS: I thought so too, but I have word nerdiness in my blood, I’m afraid.

ST: Well you mentioned this earlier, just putting art in these end papers to lighten it, to make it something that is to be playful -- to have those kinds of things to engage a reader.

MS: Yes. And the other thing was about that --

ST: to engage a reader.

MS: Mm-hmm. And here we have, like, education, so he's reading, and this is sort of a list as well with these --

ST: On the front end paper.

MS: On the front end paper. So what does all this knowledge give you, and that's what it was. It's natural history, it's invention and describing the world, and these are the things he's describing.

ST: Well, thank you.

NJ: Thank you. Yeah, we only kept you over three minutes, I think. Wow. Thank you.

MS: Thank you. What a pleasure.

ST: It's fascinating.

MS: Well, it's always fun -- it's fun to talk to you because I see it in a different way as well. I really do.

NJ: Yes.

MS: And I appreciate that.

NJ: And that's the joy of interpretation -- in so many ways, right? There's never one way to read a book.

MS: No, no.

ST: A poem, see an art --

MS: That's a title of a book, there's never one way to read a book.

(End of recording)