

COMES A HORSEMAN-POET:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH HENRY TAYLOR

by *Hank Nuwer*

**P**OET Henry Taylor once was a good enough horseman to bid for the United States Equestrian Team, albeit unsuccessfully, and his book titles reflect his passion for horses. His first book, *The Horse Show at Midnight*, came out in 1966, while he was a creative writing graduate student at Hollins College. His collection of poems called *The Flying Change*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1986, derived its name from the way a cantering horse, while suspended midair, can change leads from one leg to another.

In October of 1992, Louisiana State University Press published his astute collection of essays on seventeen contemporary poets. Its title, *Compulsory Figures*, was inspired by recollections of "many hours spent practicing in a secluded meadow, riding horses until the circles I was asking for were as round, or the halts as square, as they were going to get," Taylor says.

Although Taylor writes about horses, be not misled by the subject matter. Taylor's verse is not a placid pleasure horse plodding through clover. Often it's a stallion charging you with nipper teeth bared. "Barbed Wire" depicts a frightened horse that butchers itself on a fence line. "One Morning, Shoeing Horses" portrays a blacksmith who accidentally pounds a nail through his wedding finger into a hoof, losing the appendage when he screams and the horse takes back its leg.

In addition to his deliberate use of unfashionable poetic forms, Taylor's work "is accessible to all readers," says Ron Rash, a poet from South Carolina. Taylor's powerful poems touch all readers deeply. You don't need a Ph.D. in Obscure Studies for his work to move you.

That accessibility to other people extends to a membership on CompuServe, an online informational service. Taylor regularly participates in literary and foreign language forums. He even uploads his poems into the literary forum and welcomes responses from readers. This interview was conducted online by Hank Nuwer, also a member of CompuServe, in October, 1992.

The poet lives but a short walk from the family homestead near Lincoln, Virginia, in his beloved Loudoun County. He left a teaching position at the University of Utah in 1971 to accept a similar post at American University. In addition to his poetry, he is a critically acclaimed translator and writer of parodies, including wonderful takeoffs on the work of James Dickey and his longtime mentor George Garrett. Critic May Sarton regards him "as the best poet of his generation."

NUWER: If called upon to criticize your own work, what is it you believe a poem should try to be and do?

TAYLOR: I set out with the hope that a poem will have a distinctive and arresting voice, a real human voice that has something like urgency, so that people will stop to hear it. Urgency isn't quite the right word, because it suggests qualities in what is being said, in the topic. The quality I'm after can turn up in very leisurely poems about something not at all dreadful. By the end of the poem, I want there to be a feeling of wholeness, completeness. These are modest aims and hopes, but they are my primary ones. In individual cases, I develop specific ambitions for poems, such as this one will make 'em laugh, and this one will make 'em cry, and this one will scare the hell out of 'em.

NUWER: What have been some of the right reasons that a poem has directed you to write it in free verse instead of in meter?

TAYLOR: I think there are certain effects which, even if they can be gotten in metrical verse, are hardly worth striving for if you can get them in free verse. A certain enlargement of the overall rhythmical unit is one thing; if you are primarily interested in getting a poem to fall into two or three "movements" that will be apparent and helpful, it is sometimes much easier to do this if you are not also sending out very audible metrical patterns. Macro versus micro, so to speak. The poem "Buildings and Grounds," in *An Afternoon of Pocket Billiards*, would have been a disaster, I think, if it had been metrical; it is now a funny poem, I think, and not light verse. I have written light verse and don't disparage it, but I was after something else there. "Speech," for another example, could have been an Augustan satire if it had had rhyme and meter, but I was after something creepier and closer to everyday life. I reiterate, though, the statement that probably led you to this question: I let each poem nudge me in the direction it seems to want to take. Metrical verse isn't qualitatively more difficult for me to write, but it does take a little longer; so I have to ask myself about every free verse poem whether the extra work would help it or not. Doubtless I have on a few occasions deceived myself.

NUWER: Compared to John Ashbery, your poetry is so accessible—even to non-academics. Why is it hard for poets such as yourself to reach the wide audience that a Frost or Sandburg enjoyed?

TAYLOR: I tend to agree with Dana Gioia, the author of the *Atlantic* essay called "Can Poetry Matter?" The problem is not particularly with the poets or the potential readers, but with the drastic shift in the distribution systems. I dislike creative writing programs far less than he does, but I would think that a newspaper chain would be better able to get poetry in front of readers—as used to happen. I don't see what can be done about it except to keep on writing and reading out loud. The accessibility issue is largely a matter of luck and temperament: I admire Ashbery's work, and have great affection for some of it. *Flow Chart*, for example, strikes me as a wonderful book. But I am aware that the general prejudice is in favor of language that places paraphrasable content

rather close to the surface. There is no particular reason to require that of poetry, but since most other language operates that way, readers come to poetry, which is also made out of words, with expectations of a kind of sense that isn't often found there.

Consider opera: I don't doubt that fluency in the language of the libretto will add to one's enjoyment, but I don't think it's required.

But I have spent years writing poems in which some accessible thread is there, holding the effects that interest me more. I was influenced by Robinson, Dickey, Garrett, Stafford, Gwendolyn Brooks, Wilbur, rather than by John Cage, Reverdy, action painting, etc.

NUWER: I understand that you've written poems that required thirty revisions. Have you written poetry in such a flurry of inspiration that only one or two drafts were required? If so, which poem(s)?

TAYLOR: A small number of poems have required minimal revisions; most have been rather short. "Among the Departures from this House" (in *Billiards*) came out quickly, and I changed one word at the suggestion of William Jay Smith. "Airing Linen," obviously, came into my head in one place. More surprisingly, I have gone back in the past couple of years and discovered that "At the Swings" required only seven drafts.

NUWER: Which word did Smith change?

TAYLOR: "Among the Departures from This House" was written quickly in the snack bar at Hollins College while I was a graduate student there (1965-66), and Bill Smith was one of my teachers. I honestly can't remember what originally stood where the word "perch" now stands: "in empty cups which perch about the room." Something vague, like "sit" or "lie."

In those early days, I would listen to advice from any number of poetic elders and betters, but Bill, like George Garrett during my undergraduate years, was particularly helpful at a crucial time.

I don't often get the opportunity, any more, to hear another poet's advice about a poem. Folks rarely make suggestions after a poem has been published. Most recently—some time in the past year—David Slavitt looked over some unpublished work of mine and made a few suggestions. I probably followed a third to half of them, which is pretty many, since David can get on a roll once in a while. The person who sees just about all of my poems in something like next-to-final draft is my wife Frannie, whose advice has at least two excellent qualities: first, she's a sensitive and knowledgeable reader with a sharp eye for things I might be prone to do without thinking; and second, she does not invest a lot of emotion in the extent to which I follow her suggestions. This grownup attitude wouldn't matter, I guess, if we weren't married; but as we are, it matters a great deal.

NUWER: Do you have to rewrite as extensively when you write essays and translations (of Euripides) as when you rewrite poetry?

TAYLOR: I don't think I generally rewrite anything as extensively as I rewrite poetry—either my own or translations. The essays are certainly worked over and rewritten as ideas and insights come along and need to find a reasonable place in the essay; but I can write them on the computer, and make the kind of changes that cause the earlier versions to be erased. With poetry, and poetic translation, it's important to me not to erase any of my alternatives until I've settled on the final ones; so I do all that work in longhand. Euripides' *Children of Herakles* was a very special case; in fact, I hope I will go to my grave considering it unique. Willam Arrowsmith was a demanding and interesting General Editor, but he had a hard time deciding that something might have actually been finished—or gotten as close to that state as the translator could get it. I worked on that project off and on for thirteen years, seventeen complete drafts. Insane.

NUWER: I particularly liked your essay on Brewster Ghiselin. Couldn't it be said about your own work [as you said about Ghiselin's] that it has a prophetic quality?

TAYLOR: I'm gratified that you find a prophetic quality in my poems, but what I was talking about in the Ghiselin essay is much more directly prophetic, as in "Vantage," which ends, "If creatures astir on the cliffs / Have then the gift of light, let it / Be larger than ours, that lost / The world and took the moon." If that sort of voice turns up much in my work, I think it's fainter than that.

NUWER: Does the act of writing a critical essay benefit your own work? Or does it serve as a pleasant but distracting diversion that keeps you from writing your own poetry?

TAYLOR: I think writing critical essays is most often a way of doing some writing while the poetry well fills up again; but sometimes criticism can open avenues that had previously been hidden. I don't think of it as poetry-avoidance, because I honestly don't think I can write good poems if that's all I have to work on. I know people like William Stafford who can work on poetry every day, but there's something about the intensity with which I concentrate that causes burnout pretty soon. The in-between activities—criticism, cutting grass or firewood, etc.—are essential, I think.

NUWER: Who was Dayton Kohler? [Taylor dedicated *Compulsory Figures* to his memory.]

TAYLOR: Dayton Kohler was a professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute for many years. I came under his guidance and influence when I began to write regularly for *Magill's Literary Annual*, of which he was the Associate Editor. When he decided to stop doing that, several years later, he recommended that I take over as Associate Editor, and I did that for three years. I think it was in the early 1970s. He taught me a great deal about a purely professional approach to writing—that a respect for deadlines, a hard nose about fees, doing the job that's expected of you, and so on—can contribute heavily to the artistic approach. They are not mutually exclusive unless you need to be the sort of person who suffers over all writing. He helped save me from that; I wasn't in much danger of it, but I'm glad he came along when he did.

NUWER: You teach at the American University. Do you find yourself mounting a charger now and then to shake a lance at campus politics?

TAYLOR: I have on occasion taken stands on personnel issues at the university, and I have even gone so far as to explain to some administrators why I have found it hard to get along with them. I may be a little more prone to that sort of thing than some professors, but I don't believe I am often thought of as a trouble-making gadfly.

NUWER: I'm aware of your indebtedness to William Jay Smith and George Garrett. What young poets have acknowledged a debt to your work?

TAYLOR: I don't have many former students who have become very well known yet. But Will Wells, who won the Anhinga Prize a few years ago, has said kind things about the effect of my work on his. He was not my student; just ran across my work somewhere.

NUWER: How do you advise your students to use the raw materials in their own lives to transform them into poetic truth?

TAYLOR: I advise students to find some way, through mechanics (changed setting) or emotional exercise, to distance themselves from matters that drive them into poems where they can't sort out their own feelings and the poet's own feelings. Milton may or may not have been sorry about Edward King's death, but at some point he had to pull himself together and write, not an outpouring, but a suitable memorial.

NUWER: Your new book of essays notes American poetry's obsession with the personal over the last fifty years. Some of your poems which read as if they could be personal are not. They spring from your imagination or you alter details altogether. For example, something that happened to your grandfather is attributed in verse to your grandmother. How did you come to the realization that truth in poetry need not be literal truth?

TAYLOR: My early (first and second years in college) reading of James Dickey, my classes with George Garrett starting my third year, and a useful observation by Stephen Minot in his *Three Genres* textbook all contributed to my understanding that you needn't stick to the literal facts. The Minot observation is that story material which is proving difficult because of its personal origin might benefit from a totally changed setting in time and place. I have to add, though, that I am less and less inclined to use a first-person narrator who sounds like me for poems about things that didn't really happen to me.

NUWER: I love the way you juxtapose the ordinary and extraordinary in poems such as "One Morning, Shooing Horses." How did you first come to write poems which use this technique?

**TAYLOR:** I don't recall ever thinking to myself that I wanted to get better at juxtaposing the ordinary and extraordinary, but I have thought since very near the beginning of my adult work that there are rewarding tensions to be created in the juxtaposition of conflicting moods, images, kinds of diction, whatever. That's one of the reasons for my use of humor in essentially serious poems; it's technically interesting because it can be difficult to call a poem back to seriousness after some humorous interlude/ interjection. A mild example occurs in "At the Swings," where the speaker has "plans to wear them down/toward a nap at five." Audiences often laugh lightly at that point, and then perhaps wonder whether I meant for them to. I did.

**NUWER:** Did you witness the incident [a farrier losing a finger] described in "One Morning, Shoeing Horses," or was it told to you? Or did it spring from your imagination?

**TAYLOR:** The event described in "One Morning, Shoeing Horses," is something I extrapolated from a farrier's telling me that he never wore rings on his fingers because he had once caught a nail in a ring and cut his finger pretty badly. I think of the poem, by the way, as a kind of lecture-demonstration of the octave-sestet structure; things are bucolic and peaceful for eight lines, and then all hell breaks loose.

That farrier, Mutt Hawley, was important to me when I was a teenager; he was our regular horseshoer, so we got to be friendly. When I started working toward taking the tests for my Pony Club "A" rating, he insisted that I put one shoe on one horse while he watched closely. "It says in the manual you have to know how," he said, "even though nobody's crazy enough to put that on a test. It's too dangerous. But you ought to know you can do it."

**NUWER:** The single poem of yours that drove hardest into me was "Barbed Wire" [in which a horse accidentally destroys itself on a fence line]. What went into the process of conceiving, writing, rewriting that poem?

**TAYLOR:** That's a story I've known most of my life; my father saw it happen, and I don't remember how old I was when he told me about it. One day in the mid-1970s I was discussing poetry with a group of graduate students, talking about the dangers of intrinsically powerful subject matter. I was complaining mostly, I think, about Anne Sexton; she wrote a few of my favorite poems, but she also wrote a bunch of stuff in which language seems of no importance except as a vehicle for the horror; the story could be retold in other words without discomfort at imperfect recall. "I could put on my poetry-reading voice," I said, "and tell you about something that once happened to a horse, and the hair would stand up on the back of your neck, and you would say to yourself that you were in the presence of real poetry. But I would doubt it." On the way home an hour or so later, I wondered whether the power of the subject made it too hard to write the poem honestly. I still am not entirely sure that I succeeded, but I persuaded myself at the time that getting it decasyllabic, and into one acceptable sentence, would be techniques that might force the close attention from which suitable language sometimes arises.

NUWER: Did you learn how to write a sestina by studying models (for example, Ezra Pound)?

TAYLOR: I studied models, but not carefully enough at first; my first attempt, which is an okay poem but not a strict sestina, is "Remembering Kevan MacKenzie," [originally titled "Remembering Kevin Gillespie"] in *The Horse Show at Midnight*. I didn't follow the word order, and the meter is, as J.V. Cunningham said, "somewhat dishevelled." I think my best one is "Goodbye to the Old Friends," and that "Return to the Old Friends" is not very good, because I wasn't able convincingly to use Pound's end-words every time.

NUWER: What is your most ambitious poem? Why that one?

TAYLOR: I'm doubtful that I could single out one poem as my most ambitious, because ambition has something to do with comparing proven abilities and the aspirations of the moment. "Things Not Solved Though Tomorrow Came," in *The Horse Show at Midnight*, remains my longest poem, and I think it was pretty ambitious for a twenty-one-year-old to try so long a narrative spoken by a man in his late forties. "An Afternoon of Pocket Billiards" is technically rather complicated: eleven ten-line stanzas, strictly rhymed and metered, the last stanza being made of the first lines of the others. That took a while. "Taking to the Woods" and "At the Swings" are, I think, two of the better poems in *The Flying Change*, and they cast a curious light on the question of ambition. "Taking to the Woods" was much harder to get done—nine months of pretty steady work, about one hundred pages of worksheets. "At the Swings" took maybe six weeks, and twenty pages of worksheets.

Still, I think it may be the best thing I've ever done. To describe what it does and how it moves makes it sound hard, but the evidence is that I was more ready for the difficulties than I usually am.

NUWER: It's as hard to imagine a book of your poetry without allusions to horses as it is to imagine Robinson Jeffers's poetry without hawks. Given your talent for parody, could you turn the tables on yourself to write a title that parodies your work? (All I could come up with was a godawful pun—"One Morning, Shooing Horses.")

TAYLOR: I once did a takeoff of *The Horse Show at Midnight* called "Piling It High at Dawn," but the funniest take on *The Flying Change* is Richard Dillard's amazing mini-history of American poetry, told as if all the poets were members of a Chinese acrobatic troupe called "The Flying Changs."

NUWER: Speaking of Jeffers, did you feel his presence while you were writing your beautiful "Hawk" poem?

TAYLOR: I think maybe I did think of Jeffers after I got the last line of "Hawk." It has his kind of remoteness from ordinary human urges. I haven't really given him the kind of reading I ought to, though I have Bob Hass's selection, "Rock and Hawk," around here somewhere.

**NUWER:** How did you personally respond to the scandal in the American University's presidency [after Richard Berendzen admitted making obscene phone calls to a woman] and its aftermath?

**TAYLOR:** My personal response to what you call "the scandal in American's presidency" was sadness and concern for Richard Berendzen, whose work as president I admired in most respects, and with whom I have long had a cordial relationship. When someone becomes disastrously ill—and that, I think, is a fair description of what happened—it is cause for concern, prayer, hope of recovery. I have admired the honest way in which he confronted his problems, and I'm glad that he appears comfortable teaching astronomy.

**NUWER:** How have you resisted the press of academia to make its inhabitants embrace what is politically correct?

**TAYLOR:** Being a Quaker, concerned to have ordinary sensitivity to the situations of other people, has helped keep me from some of the attitudes and statements that offend the PC Police. I encourage my students to find increasingly graceful ways of using nonexclusive language, merely because it makes sense to me that many female readers feel excluded by the masculine generic pronoun. But the rampant absurdities of the PC mentality (if such it may be called) have not flourished much on my campus; there may be people around there who think that nobody is better at anything than anybody else, or that no worthwhile idea has ever been expressed by a white male, but if so, the opinion hasn't been shared with me. A problem with the whole issue is that foolishness can crop up pitifully or laughably in any group persuasion. (An example would be the notion that foolishness is never laughable except to the oppressor.) Deeply committed enemies of the persuasion can fix on the foolishness, and reinforce themselves in their own foolishness: resentment of humorless argumentativeness can turn into sad declarations of the right to enjoy race jokes or bimbo jokes.

**NUWER:** Have you ever lost your temper while teaching?

**TAYLOR:** I don't recall losing my temper in the classroom, but I have come close sometimes to losing control of my emotions while reading a particularly powerful poem, or something like Abraham Lincoln's letter to Lydia Bixby. I used to do some acting in college and grad school, and I guess I think of teaching as not wholly different from that.

**NUWER:** How do you make creative use of your time driving from [your home in] Lincoln to American University? Do you keep pen and paper at your side in case a phrase throws itself at you?

**TAYLOR:** I only rarely make a conscious effort to "use" the driving time between here and the American University. If I have a deadline pushing me, for some prose project, I might carry my pocket tape recorder and talk to it a bit. Once I had to introduce my



friend Marilyn Hacker; the day of her reading, it occurred to me to try to do a ballade that would introduce her, since she handles that form so well. I did a lot of the work on the way in to the office. Mostly, though, it's the time and place where I get certain kinds of mental loafing out of my system—imaginary conversations with people I'm angry with, and so on. I don't keep paper and pen out on the seat where it's any easier to get than usual, when it's in my pocket.

NUWER: To what extent do you use notebooks?

TAYLOR: I use notebooks somewhat, but not to the extent that anyone else would ever find them interesting. My handwritten notes for poems tend toward the cryptic and opaque, to anyone but me; some of my notes for essays and reviews are clearer, but they are still very spare and skeletal. But I feel lost without writing materials nearby, however infrequently I can be caught scribbling to myself.

NUWER: Ever had the experience of personally saving a horse with colic? (That experience was one of the most troubling of my life—I helped a neighbor try to save two mistreated horses that had developed colic. One lived, one died. Its hooves were curved, its growth stunted. I lacked the courage to beat the owner to death with a shovel; this happened in a remote mountain-top community in Northern California.)

TAYLOR: I have never had to do all the work preventing a death from colic, because I've never worked with horses in an area so remote that a vet couldn't be gotten. From the curved hoofs and stunted growth you mention, though, it sounds as if you were dealing with a case of founder, which is a lot like colic but a little different. I've worked with foundered horses and ponies sometimes; ponies, for some reason, can get over it completely much more often than horses can. One reason that I stayed with equestrian competition in the 1950s was that I had access to a winning show pony; she had foundered, and recovered, but this took a few years, during which time her owner's daughters outgrew her, so he let me and my sister work with her for a couple or three years. She was about worthless for any activity outside the show ring, but in the ring she knew what to do and how to do it, and helped us to many championship ribbons.

NUWER: A question about your work-in-progress: what changes in style and content, if any, distinguish your current work from past published poems?

TAYLOR: I'm not sure I can characterize many differences between my current work and that in the *The Flying Change*. When I finished that book I didn't feel the way James Wright felt when he finished *Saint Judas*—that he was done with that sort of thing. So most of the more recent poems are fairly similar. Doing the Jackson MacLow [poet and composer of performance pieces for voice and music] essay in *Compulsory Figures*, however, has led me to make some non-intentional poems of my own; one, "Nor Peaceably Infringed," based on computer treatments of the Bill of Rights, will be out this fall in a new journal in Washington, D.C., called *The Plum Review*. Some readers, I guess, will be distressed that I have turned my hand occasionally to something so

foreign to my usual mode, but it has been rejuvenating and interesting, and that's all I can ask of a writing project.

**NUWER:** Do you ever write about dark, gloomy subjects, including death, and yet find yourself personally remote—in a light, airy mood even? Or do your moods tend to take on the atmosphere of what you're working on?

**TAYLOR:** The mood of a poem and my mood while writing it are usually not the same; if you try to write a sad poem while you're really sad, it can be hard, or seem deceptively easy, because everything strikes you as sad. "The Muse Once More" has been called a very sad poem about the hopelessness of certain kinds of ambition, but my feeling toward the poem is one of cheerful affection, because I had a wonderful time writing it.

**NUWER:** Other people give awards like the Pulitzer Prize when they recognize your genius. Have you given yourself an internal pat on the spine for achieving mastery?

**TAYLOR:** I don't think of myself as having achieved mastery in a general way. If I've ever patted myself on the back, it's often been for some small thing, some private joke or formal difficulty smuggled gracefully and invisibly into a poem. Self-congratulation can be a prelude to self-repetition.

**NUWER:** You turned fifty this year. What bodily changes have come stalking you since you turned forty?

**TAYLOR:** The most noticeable (to me) bodily changes I have undergone in the years between forty and fifty have taken place in my eyes; I have gotten the usual farsightedness, and have to use various pairs of glasses for reading, using the computer, removing splinters from fingers, etc. I first began to be aware of this when I started complaining about the declining quality of road maps. In the past year, I have put on a dozen pounds or so that I'd like to get rid of, but that's mainly a result of having quit smoking. I have gone back to regular exercise lately for that reason, and find to my happy surprise that it's not much more difficult than it was fifteen years ago, when I was doing a little age-group track and field. I feel pretty good, in short, and such medical problems as I have seem routine and unrelated to getting older. I went through a mild depression this past summer, which I am told may also be related to the smoking cessation, which I did in January. I seem pretty well out of that now.

**NUWER:** I understand that you wrote a book on using computers for writers. Was it ever published?

**TAYLOR:** "Writing on Computers: A Real Book for Real Writers" never got published. I stopped trying to update it around 1988, I think, because it suddenly came to me that I had here a whole book which couldn't find a publisher. I hadn't written one of those before, and somehow it made me feel like a real writer to realize that, well, now I had.

It was a gas to write it in the CP/M era and a little less of one to bring it into the age of MS-DOS. Taught me a fair amount.

NUWER: What use have you made of CompuServe?

TAYLOR: The uses I make of CompuServe are various, and they come and go. The Literary Forum, for example, is something I get into more or less deeply depending on what else is going on in my life. This summer when I was in that depression, I stayed away from it, not out of anything more pernicious than inertia, I believe. Now I have several projects nipping at my heels and reminding me of their rapidly-approaching deadlines, so I'm reluctant to give too much to the consideration of messages and replies. I use the Mail Service very regularly; we communicate that way rather often with our older son, Thomas, who's in Chicago being Assistant Director and Chief Vegetarian Cook for Quaker House, and I have an electronic correspondence with some people whom I've come to think of as friends, though we've never met. I check in regularly with the Foreign Language forum, because I do a fair amount of translating and thinking about literary translation, and that forum often has discussions going on about how to render this or that odd idiom, or who knows this or that about something arcane. I teach the art of literary translation every so often, and I have on occasion shared with my students some of the exchanges I've logged. The [forum's] libraries contain numerous programs and files that I've found useful, like the ones that enable me to print out something in Russian, or drill me in Latin.

NUWER: Did you and Judson Jerome [poet and *Writer's Digest* columnist who died of cancer in 1991] have an online correspondence going in CompuServe's Literary Forum? Was it one that helped your work?

TAYLOR: I came into the Litforum during Jud's last year; I enjoyed and immensely admired his generous approach to everyone. From time to time we would exchange a word or two about this line or that one, and he offered me some useful responses to a couple of the essays in *Compulsory Figures*. He wanted, I believe, a much more informal tone in all of them, but I think he was really thinking about his own approach to similar tasks when he made the suggestion, which I couldn't quite go along with. But he asked some searching questions about the MacLow and [Fred] Chappell [novelist and poet] essays, and those resulted in clarifications and additions; so he's among those thanked in the acknowledgments. Jud was an underrated writer, and there were times when his awareness of that made him irritable to the point of making quirky or over-conservative judgments. But whatever one finally thinks of him, one fact is inescapable: most of us who have readers have him to thank for some of them.

NUWER: Was there a disadvantage to being discovered as a talent so young? [Louisiana State University Press published *The Horse Show at Midnight* when Taylor was twenty-three.]

**TAYLOR:** The disadvantages of having gotten an early start were all immediate; by now, it's almost irrelevant whether I published my first book at twenty-three or thirty-three. But a twenty-three-year-old can be susceptible to what the athletes call "believing his clippings." I must have been pretty insufferable on some occasions.

**NUWER:** As a Quaker, how have you viewed political events such as the Vietnam War and United States aggression in Grenada and elsewhere?

**TAYLOR:** I spent the Vietnam War years either in college or in the teaching profession, participating in whatever protests were in progress, and doing what I could to keep other people, particularly those for whom student deferments were not available, from going. If I have regrets about this, they arise from my not having done enough along those lines. Desert Storm, I think, was an astonishingly cynical performance on [George] Bush's part.

I am sorry to have to add that I am not an unconditional pacifist. There have been times when I have tried to be, or to think I was; but that is an ideal toward which one strives with the greatest of difficulty in the world as it is. I sympathize with the people who enter into military service because they believe in what they are doing. I'd like to talk to them some more, but our disagreement about what they are doing does not lead me to judge them or to consider myself their moral superior.

**NUWER:** Did you show your poem "Frank Amos and the Way Things Work," to Amos [cancer-stricken builder of Taylor's house]? What was his response, if so?

**TAYLOR:** I am grateful that Frank Amos was able to see the poem. As you might surmise from it, he was not the sort of man who spent much time reading poetry, or anything else; but he read it with apparent interest and good cheer, and said it was fine with him if it got published. He was a fine man, and I miss him.

**NUWER:** Could you give me an imaginary tour of your Frank Amos house?

**TAYLOR:** The house has undergone a considerable change since Frank Amos's death; three years ago we added a wing almost as large as the original house. They match pretty well. It's an Acorn house, with vertical siding, trapezoidal glass in the gables, cathedral ceilings—rather modern, I guess. Upstairs in the original part there are the master bedroom, the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen; downstairs, before we added the wings we had two bedrooms, a TV or "family" room, and my study. A full bath on each floor. Adding the wing involved putting a wall through the study, for a hallway and a tiny guest room; the wing now contains the study, which features a twenty-four-foot walnut built-in desk with two work-stations—one for me and one for Frannie, my wife, who is a partner in a CPA firm in Reston. We finally have a dozen legal-sized file drawers and places to keep both her work and mine. For solitary work of the sort that writers often have to do, I go to the third floor of the wing, which is where I put the armchair and lapboard I have been using for longhand writing since 1962.

**NUWER:** Did you need to “invent a home” [a Taylor expression] while you lived [and taught] in Utah? Did any verses of yours come about that only could have been written in the American West?

**TAYLOR:** The invention of my home may have had to be more energetic when I came back to where I was raised. Utah was strange and fascinating and on the whole quite friendly and beneficial, but I never once considered spending more than a few years there, so I didn’t have to throw myself too thoroughly into “home invention.” But here [Loudoun County], things look as they used to but aren’t quite the same. I’m far from the same, for one thing: I’m fifty, not seventeen. So my approach to living in this landscape, which I saw for the first time so long ago that I don’t remember it, has had to be pretty thoughtful. It hasn’t been hard, just interesting.

**NUWER:** Ever tempted to write a single long narrative poem (an entire book)? If so, Loudoun County would make a great setting for such a poem, wouldn’t it?

**TAYLOR:** I have sometimes thought it would be appropriately ambitious to come up with a way of doing a book-length poem, but I’ve never hit on anything that I thought would hold my interest long enough. Loudoun is a great setting for almost anything, but when I ponder that, I lean toward prose. I’m hoping in a couple of years to pick up again a historical project I started in 1980 on Loudoun County; I was going along on it pretty well until the Pulitzer came along, but that has created a number of 1) sound reasons to concentrate on poetry and 2) pleasant distractions—invitations to read, write, etc.

**NUWER:** Ever venture into the Shenandoah country [of Virginia] to hike or fish for brook trout?

**TAYLOR:** I’m not a fisherman, though I once cast a fly onto the surface of the Green River in Wyoming, and I sling a surf-casting rig into the waves once in a while when I go to the Outer Banks, where we vacation quite often. So when I get over into the Shenandoah Valley—a matter of twenty minutes by car to the closest part—it’s for visiting or hiking. I do a bit more walking now than I used to, though I have no ambition to make the trek from Maine to Georgia.

**NUWER:** In your poem “Desperado” you compare and contrast city life with cabin life. What times in your life are you most content/discontent with the moment?

**TAYLOR:** The writing I do, and the stages it may have reached at any moment, have a lot to do with whether I feel content or disoriented. For the next few weeks, I expect not to have too many moments of contentment, even though the easiest way to arouse that feeling in me is to set before me the landscape around where I live—which has been, admittedly, more lush and spectacular this summer [1992] than I’ve seen it for a long time. However, I don’t find myself particularly distressed in cities. I get around in them pretty well, have even taken some pleasure in driving through the Place de la

Concorde. But part of the pleasure I take in them, I guess, is the knowledge that I don't live in one.

NUWER: Is your quiet nook of the country developing at a rate alarming to you?

TAYLOR: The rate of development in Loudoun County is somewhat alarming to me, mostly because it is deepening the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. As land prices (admittedly not increasing right now) go up, and the covenants get tighter, it gets to where the only people in a semi-rural area are those rich enough to live there, and those too poor to leave. On the other hand, I live here at relative psychic ease, not in constant pain because of the differences between how it was and how it is. The changes in the landscapes that I see most constantly have been extremely subtle so far; from where I live, I can look in all directions and see only two houses closer together than a quarter-mile. But the population increase in parts of the county I don't often see has had effects on the schools our children have attended, on our taxes, our ability to shop conveniently, and so on.

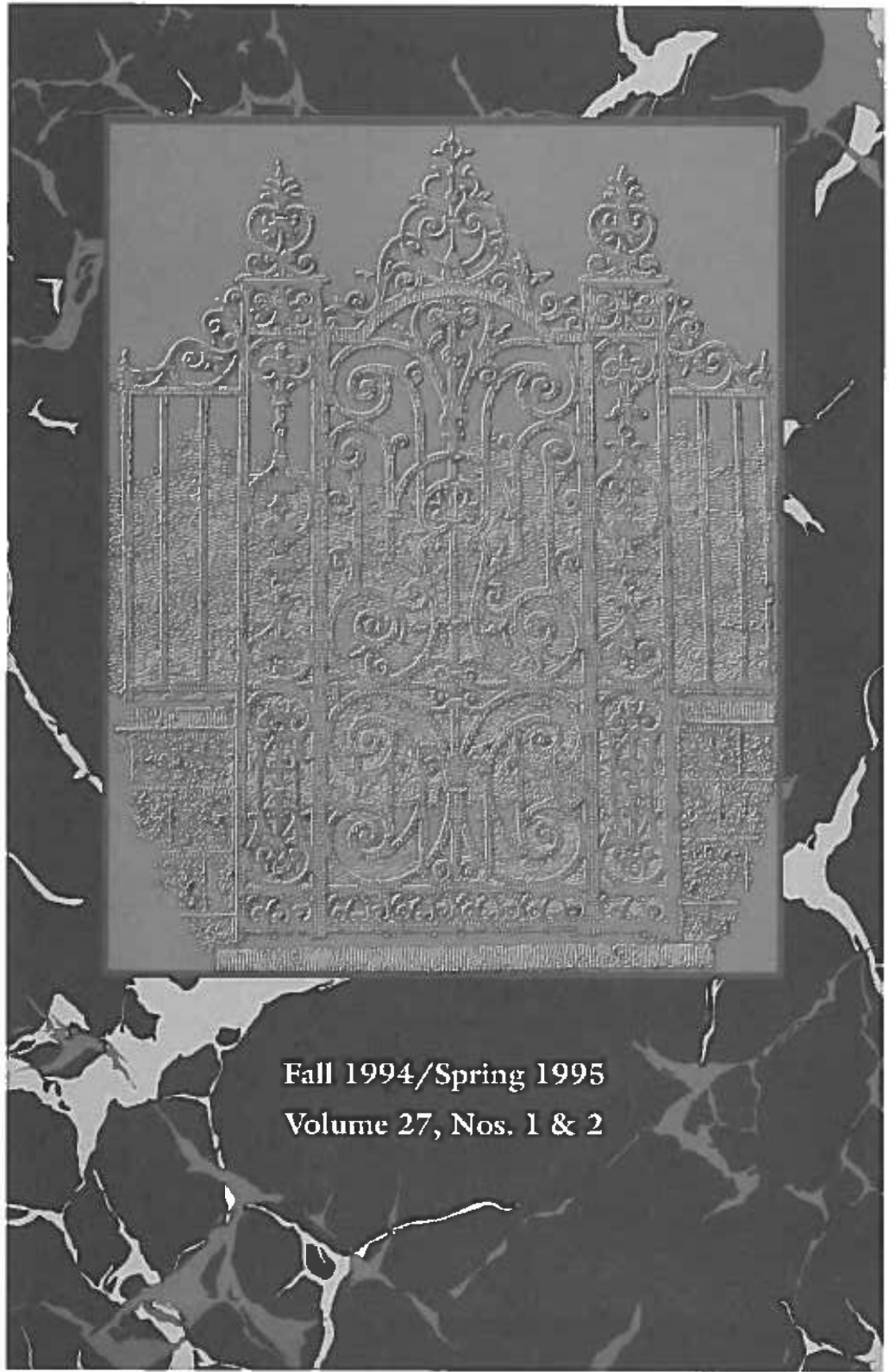
NUWER: Ask yourself a tough question that we reporter types are too blind to ask. Then answer it truthfully and ruthlessly.

TAYLOR: It has been seven years since you published a book of poems. Could you be suffering from "post-Pulitzer paralysis?"

I sometimes wonder, because the pace at which I write poems has in fact slowed down a bit. Partly because of the number of things I get asked to do that they used to ask other people to do. But the fact remains that my first three books of poems came out, respectively, in 1966, 1975, and 1985; so I don't have to feel panicky about this until early 1994, which is about when I ought to have finished anything that would have a chance of getting through production in 1995. Next year I'll be on leave for at least a semester, maybe two, and figure on bearing down on poems, as I have been doing since I finished *Compulsory Figures*.

The question might arise in some people's minds because winning the Pulitzer hasn't changed my mind about some of my earlier anti-establishment stances. I continue to be grateful not to have appeared in certain magazines (except in advertising space purchased by people beyond my control) or at certain writers' conferences.

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