Hella Hammid

Deena Metzger: An Interview

Virginia Webster

DEENA METZGER is a writer who also leads writing and journal workshops. She developed HEALING STORIES as a therapeutic means to address issues of creativity, personal transition, physical illness and life-threatening diseases. She works primarily with autobiography, life history, storytelling, myth and fairy tale. In 1980 she co-led a workshop in Greece recreating the Eleusinian Mysteries. She was on the faculty of the Feminist Studio Workshop and founded the Writing Program at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles.

She is the author of several books: SKIN: SHADOWS/SILENCE (West Coast Poetry Review, 1976), THE BOOK OF HAGS (published on cassette by Black Box, Washington, D.C., 1977), DARK MILK (Momentum Press, Los Angeles, 1978), and THE AXIS MUNDI POEMS (Jazz Press, Los Angeles, 1981). In November, 1981, Peace Press in Los Angeles published two works in one volume: THE WOMAN WHO SLEPT WITH MEN TO TAKE THE WAR OUT OF THEM (a novel in play form) & TREE (a diary novel). TREE documents Deena's struggle with breast cancer and the relationship between creativity, community, and healing.

Her poetry, prose, and articles are included in journals and anthologies including *Chrysalis, Semiotica, American Journal of Psychiatry, A Casebook on Anais Nin, Rising Tides, The Streets Inside: 10 Los Angeles Poets, Love Stories by New Women,* and *Pleasures.*

As a dramatist and activist, Deena co-wrote and co-produced the hour-long documentary film CHILE: WITH POEMS & GUNS in 1974. Her two plays, NOT AS SLEEPWALKERS and DREAMS AGAINST THE STATE have been performed in 1977 and 1981 respectively.

In 1975 Deena was awarded the First Academic Freedom Award by the California Federation of Teachers. Her work has been supported by a residency at Yaddo Artists Colony and a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1982 she was awarded the first annual Vesta Award in Writing from the Woman's Building, in Los Angeles. Deena lives in Topanga Canyon, with her wolf, Timber.

Breakfast Letter

For Dick & My Poet Friend, Eloise Klein Healy

Deena Metzger

It's not a proper name for something which flies the wind: A turkey vulture, looking for prey, swoops overhead. My friend speaks of China where the dragon and phoenix entwine as here the serpent and the eagle have been known to mate in the cylindrical air. There is heat pulsing up from the earth. The dark geyser leaps to the sun. Everywhere I look, the twining snakes rise up into the cone of light. It is not only in the heart, but in my back that I feel love, this knotty spine of caring one step at a time, an impossible ladder pulled this way and that in the wind of muscles, on the shifting ground of uncertain feet and instincts. Still we climb it, and I who am afraid of heights watch the vulture and talk to my friend of foreign countries where there are no rooms for everyone to make love and people marry late, while about my house the squirrels mate when their bodies are ready. There is no law or moral code instructing their tails to fold between their legs in tiny broken feet. The turkey vulture finds the stairs, the ramps, the trembling foundations of wind and rises on the air. But first we see its beak as it dives almost to our eyes. There is a fire in its head feathers. It's in my territory before it glides brazen up what I can not see. Do you say there are no gods here? Everywhere, I am surrounded by the invisible, hearing more of what I can not hear than what we say. I am unable to speak. What joins us is under language, is the air under our tail feathers. I sit the afternoon with a poet friend. We speak of China, the dragon and phoenix intertwining while by my feet the rattler and the turkey vulture seek to mate. It's the same fire. I don't speak of this to her. I'm not a girl, still the fire rises through me toward an old fire bird in dark plumage who makes his nest in the air above my bed. We're only human; we can only come at dawn, we learn the movements, the spiral up the spine, the joining of snake and bird, the double helix of heat. It's taken me so many years to master this. The phoenix and dragon are so old, old as China or the beginning of the world. And they still burn? Now there's a fire! Lift me to you with your red beak.

Northridge Review: In the Foreword to your book, *The Woman Who Slept With Men to Take the War Out of Them,* Barbara Myerhoff says that as a writer you attack the most obdurate structures of society: Idealogy, Culture, and Authorities. Do you consider yourself a controversial writer?

Deena Metzger: Yes. The controversy is everywhere, and it is the kind of controversy or rebellion or revolutionary attitude that comes from great attachment and affiliation. There are things that I really, really care about, and I am compelled and impelled to speak about them. I do feel that the controversy occurs because there is an innate conflict in the society between values and behavior. So when you live in an essentially corrupt society, and you care about human feelings or dignity or love, you're bound to be seen as controversial because you're challenging the privileges that come from corruption.

NR: You're speaking about the conventional patriarchal society?

DM: I'm speaking about a war society, a greed society, a self-interest society, an unaffiliated society that is disconnected from nature.

NR: Do you feel that being controversial has helped you or hurt you as a writer?

DM: That's not an interesting question to me because it implies that one adopts a stance for certain strategic purposes. Maybe, when I was younger, I had a rebellious personality because that's what you do when you're younger. But at this point I don't think of myself as having a rebellious persona. I just say what I have to say, and then people respond how they respond.

NR: How do they respond?

DM: Lately, I think they are responding with great attention. There are groups of people around me that care a lot about my work. But I have also noticed that in the public world people are beginning to deal with my ideas. Whereas, in the past, I think they would have preferred to dismiss them.

NR: How do you feel about censorship?

DM: It's terrible.

NR: What about pornography, violence toward women? How do we make distinctions between what is acceptable and what isn't?

DM: Who is to say what ideas should not be in the public world for consideration. The place where I think we can have impact is in the responsibility of those of us who care about things not to support certain philosophies that we consider heinous, and to make sure that we live in a society where a wide spectrum of ideas can be expressed. For example, theoretically we have a "free press," but of course, that is completely absurd. Most of the challenging ideas do not get expressed in the general press, and it costs so much money to put out ideas that we no longer live in a free society at all. As long as you have to gather nickles and dimes in order to express a point of view, then you are really living in an essentially censored society.

NR: You recently contributed to an anthology entitled *Pleasures,* a collection of women's erotica edited by Lonnie Barbach. Dr. Barbach's goal, as she stated, was to create a book based on women's real erotic experiences to provide material that could increase women's levels of desire and also to document new areas of female sexuality. She then says that embarrassment and vulnerability affected so many of the contributors that one-third of the writers chose to omit their names and forego credit for their work. Do you see this making some kind of statement about the relationship of women to the erotic?

DM: I don't think it's a statement about women's relationships to the erotic. I think it is a statement about society's relationship to the erotic, society's fear of the erotic. Society denigrates women who carry the erotic. It makes me feel sad.

NR: Audre Lorde makes a statement that seems similar to the ideas you express in *The Woman Who Slept With Men:* "The dichotomy between the spiritual and political is false, resulting from the incomplete attention to an erotic knowledge. The bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic . . . the passions of love in its deepest meaning." How does this statement relate to your own philosophy of the erotic?

DM: It's exactly my philosophy. In fact, the idea that I have been working with in the last year that is becoming more and more obsessive for me is the idea of the Holy Prostitute. I see my work for the next five years or so as trying to revive or create an archetype of the Holy Prostitute, and I see it as particularly necessary in the nuclear age. It has to do with the manifestation of the powerful feminine using love and everything that comes with love, including sexuality and Eros in its larger sense, as a force in the world. When I think about the Holy Prostitute, I think about Ada in *The Woman Who Slept With Men,* whom I didn't know was a holy prostitute when I wrote the book. But after writing the book, I read about the

Holy Prostitute and realized that before Christianity, and at the time of the beginning of Judaism, women devoted themselves to goddesses, Hathar or Ishtar or Aphrodite, giving at least a year of their lives as priestesses. One of their most essential tasks was to cleanse the men of the blood from their hands, cleansing them from war. When a man went out to war, in order to come back into the society, he had to visit the Holy Prostitute because she was the link to the Divine. She was the link to the Divine because she carried both the spiritual and the sexual. That was not disconnected. We've got to connect it again or we're going to continue being in this mess that we're in. If you cut off the sexual from the spiritual, you're also cutting off nature from the spiritual. That creates a mind/body split, and nuclear war follows from that automatically.

NR: Did you coin the phrase "Holy Prostitute."

DM: No. I read about the Holy Prostitute first in Merlin Stone's *When God was a Woman*. She was called the Qadishtu, which meant the undefiled one.

NR: *Tree* is the journal you kept while fighting cancer. Did you write *Tree* with the intention that at some point it would be a complete work which you would publish, or did your decision to publish it come after the journal completed itself?

DM: I intended it to be a public book. So when I went to the hospital I kept two journals, one private and one public, which, it turned out, were almost identical.

NR: Were the decisions you made in dealing with cancer related to the process of writing? Did you have some idea of how you wanted the book to end? At any point did you think it might be a book about dying rather than surviving?

DM: Though it occurred to me that I might die, it never occurred to me that *Tree* could be a book about a woman coming to grips with dying, though it is a journal about a woman having to deal with death. That may be another way the book kept me alive. That's a fascinating question because this is the first time that has occurred to me. How wonderful!

NR: So what you write motivates your actions?

DM: Well, apparently!

NR: *Tree* presents cancer as a metaphor for the internal oppressor in contrast to *The Woman Who Slept With Men* which deals with the external oppressor. The external oppressor is overcome

through integration into the woman's own body which relates to the idea that one must love one's enemy before true harmony and completeness occur. Yet with the internal oppressor, cancer, victory is gained not by integrating it but by destroying it, having it surgically removed. Having dealt with cancer in both literal and metaphorical ways, do you think it could ever be possible to love cancer as the internal enemy in the same way that we must love the external enemy?

DM: It's very clear that cancer is attacking the body. On the other hand, it is also clear to me that cancer is both the enactment in the body and/or the psyche of a political situation as well as a personal response to intolerable conditions. In this sense, I think cancer is a metaphor, disagreeing totally with Susan Sontag. I think that the idea that cancer *is* a metaphor is the most healing idea that exists around the idea of cancer. I not only know this from my own experience but I have worked with dozens of people who have cancer. There is no question in my mind that cancer comes when the body and the psyche can no longer live in the way that they have been living. Cancer says, "Change your life, or I'm going to kill you." So one has to integrate it because it is a friend on many levels. It's a terrible, terrible friend. It's like that Buddhist Master who slaps you to wake you up. I do have to say that in all the ways I've dealt with cancer, either with myself, or with individuals, or with groups that I work with for cancer patients, I have never yet met someone who with very little prodding didn't get the idea. They may not have been able to change their lives, but the moment you get the idea that cancer is telling you something, then you know that it is exactly true. People may not be able to get to what cancer is saying specifically because it is too terrible to face what they have to change. But you can see it in their eyes, the recognition. There is no other disease like it and I think that's part of its terror because we know that change is the message that comes with that disease.

NR: Who do you perceive as your reading audience? Can you make a generalization about the kind of people who are influenced by your work?

DM: I think my audience consists of those people, men and women, who are thoughtful, and who want to live their lives in very authentic ways and who are ready to wrestle with meaning in one way or another. In a more specific sense, my audience is women who are interested in what it means to be a woman, political people who are interested in the depth of what politics can be, people who are connected with Eros, and an assorted group of rebels and revolutionaries.

NR: Do you have a sense of a disproportion in your audience? Are there people who you wish would read your work, but don't?

DM: Everybody. I would like a larger audience. I do think that I don't have it because people are told by the commercial publishers and the media that they don't want to confront their lives, it's not that they really don't want to. Everything is set up so that nobody confronts their life. So most people pick up books for the sake of entertainment. And my books are not entertaining. They may be interesting, but they're not entertaining.

NR: You have a short prose piece entitled "The Woman Who Swallows an Earthquake Gains its Power." How is the woman-who-sleeps-with-men similar to the woman-who-swallows-earthquakes?

DM: They both have to do with women taking in power and what it feels like. When you're a woman you sometimes think you're just a body and you're small and really you may be trying to do something very large which may be something as simple as writing a poem. When you're writing a poem and you're at the edge of what poetry *is,* you're performing a very large act.

NR: You seem to be saying in your work that women's power comes from their erotic capacity. Is that women's primary source of power? Are there other sources?

DM: Anything can be their source of power. But I do think women have a special facility for the erotic, in part because I think, historically, the matriarchal societies were erotic, and I don't mean sexual. The energy that has to do with really caring about the world, with being engaged in the world, it is the energy of magnetism, and it is not the energy of ego. It's not the energy of being cut off and separate and distinct. It's the energy of being part of.

NR: You also do work as a therapist. How does your writing relate to the work you do in therapy?

DM: So much of what happens in therapy is coming to understand something about the world which I might use in the therapeutic process and then use in the creative process. When I'm working as a therapist, I'm working with Eros. I'm working with reaffiliating people with the life force, reconnecting people to the meaning of their lives, reconnecting them to values.

NR: Do you use your writing in therapy?

DM: On the outside my therapy might look very traditional. There is a client and there is me, and we are talking. But I think it is what we talk about, and the context in which we talk about things in relation to my value system and attitudes that makes it different. I do workshops which I call "Healing Stories" which are based on the idea that every life is a story. Disease is an interrupted story. If you find your story then you find meaning. If you find meaning, then you find health. Rather than seeing oneself as a victim of external circumstances, one can really see that one is living out a story and the story is some interaction between the cosmic story that has been given to one, and the personal story that one creates. If you can see that story, a*nd* you are a writer, you can see where it is going, where the necessity is, and you can also see where you are manipulating the story, you can see where it is inauthentic. Because you can also see where it is going if the conclusion is not good for you, you may want to change the ending, you may have to change the narrative.

NR: So you consider yourself more than just a poet dealing only with aesthetics?

DM: Poetry as aesthetics is totally uninteresting to me. Poetry has to have that, but to me the poet is a seer, a witness, a holder of consciousness and values. Just to do literary pyrotechnics, which seems to be so much of what poetry is, reduces poetry to ego and masturbation.

NR: When you look at a poem, do you look at it for form or for content? Is the spiritual content the most important?

DM: No, because then you can get into junk, into sentimentality, into babbling at that point. There is a place where content and form are one, the rhythm, the tone, the language, the beauty, the energy of it. If you're just looking at content you are just looking at ideas. I look to see if the experience of the poem moves me. A lot of my response to literature has not only to do with content and form but has to do with the person in whom the content and form sit. For me there has to be an integrity between the words that are put out and the life that is led. When I come across an absolutely gorgeous poem and the behavior or action of the poet is in conflict with what's being said, the poem doesn't mean anything to me. The author is very important to me.

NR: Many of the modern literary theorists want to completely detach the writer from the work so that the work stands as itself without the author behind it.

DM: That kind of thinking is awful. Not only that, if one has any spiritual sense, one knows that is not true. One knows that there is an energy that informs a work. That energy is from the body and the life of the person who has created it. That energy goes with the poem. It can enhance the poem but it can also destroy it if there is a conflict. Poetry is about seeing the world. If you are just pretending, saying that you are seeing this when in fact you are seeing something else, you're just lying. I can't imagine anything worse than lying in poetry.

NR: Do you see things in your poems which aren't developed and then you go on to develop them later?

DM: Definitely. Mostly what I find is that I've been writing about the same thing for twenty years over and over again — trying to get deeper, trying to understand it better, forgetting that I was thinking about it, looking at it in another way.

NR: Is rewriting myth important to you?

DM: It's alive for me. Myths are very real things for me. I live in the dimension of the dream.

NR: Myths seem to appeal to the subconscious mind. Do you know where you're going when you start a story?

DM: Never. I don't have a clue. With *The Woman Who Slept With Men* I really didn't have a clue. All I had was the title, literally. I went away to write it. I had a ream of paper, 10 weeks, and the title.

NR: Eloise Klein Healy has a poem which she thanks you for inspiring. She heard a message you had on your answering machine. You always have a poem or special message on your machine. Do your phone messages ever reach the printed page?

DM: No, they don't. But I did once do a short piece for *Dreamworks* which they did not publish. Maybe they thought I was writing them a letter instead of sending them a piece. I often put my dreams on the answering machine. And one day I took down some dream messages and sent them off. I thought that would amuse them. That was the closest I came to putting them on paper, though they do get in my journal.

NR: It seems a shame to lose those messages.

DM: Well, in the last few months I've been trying to write them down because people have been saying, "thank you for the poem," and I didn't know it was a poem. So I thought maybe I should start paying attention to what I'm putting on the machine.

NR: Would you talk about your experience on the Isle of Lesbos.

DM: I taught as part of the Aegean Women's Studies Institute which was on Lesbos one summer. It was wonderful. It is a beautiful island. I taught a writing course and a course in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

NR: Did you get in touch with Sappho?

DM: I didn't. But other people did. Despite my attitude toward patriarchal society, I also miss and need the masculine. Sappho doesn't give me a buzz.

NR: In *The Woman Who Slept With Men* the chorus tells Ada that if she joins with the women there would be only love, only good, and she wouldn't have to confront the negative other. But Ada says no.

DM: I'm always interested in the other, in opposites. I'm fascinated by it and I'm also aware that something happens in me when I'm in contact with the other that does not happen in me when I'm not in contact with it. So I like men and foreigners and animals and women who are different from me.

NR: You were also recently involved in a cultural exchange program in Nicaragua. What did you experience there?

DM: You also have to know that I was in Chile in 1972 right before Allende was murdered. I was in Cuba in 1973 at the time of the coup in Chile. When I came back from Cuba, I was devastated and heartbroken by the coup for political as well as personal reasons; I had many dear friends that I had met in a short time in Chile, and they were the finest human beings and they were being tortured and murdered by my government. I became part of a collective and we made a film about Chile. It was the first documentary that came out of that coup. So I went to Nicaragua in 1984, 11 years later. As a friend said to me, "You haven't been in love since then." Going to Nicaragua was going to see whether there was anything there of what I had seen in Chile, because Chile had given me so much hope, then so much despair from its destruction. So Nicaragua was very moving for me. I saw some of the things that I had seen in Chile, the sweetness of the people, their generosity, their extraordinary commitment and energy. There are people there literally

working 20 hours a day, and they are so young. Because of conditions in Central America, because so many people were killed by Somoza, this revolution is being made by kids; they are children.

NR: What did you see there in the way of artistic expression?

DM: What I saw in theater was very interesting. I was with a theater delegation and we went to a theater festival there. Their theater is naive. It is often simplistic. It's not necessarily well developed or intellectual. But it is so alive, and it has so much meaning for the people who do it and for the people who see it. The idea of doing theater that matters instead of theater that doesn't matter is incredible.

NR: How do political environments influence artists? How is art in Nicaragua affected by the political situation?

DM: Totally. The purpose of their art at this point is to explore and present their reality. They have never seen reflections of themselves before. No one had ever considered the issues that were important to them. It's like when Baldwin wrote that he had never seen an image of his face anywhere in society. That was the underbelly of what Ralph Ellison was writing about in *The Invisible Man,* those early books that came out of the Black Movement. The same is true in Central America. Now they are not only talking about issues that really concern them, they do their own theater about those issues. What happens for the most part is that theater workers go into a community, get together with the people in the community, ask 'what's going on, what do you want to explore, what do you want to think about?' Then all together they do a play about what's going on. Then the theater workers leave but they leave a theatrical community intact. One of the most exciting things that I heard about was a play which was done about alcoholism. The town alcoholic was the one that they got to play the alcoholic. Who else? Certainly his consciousness changed by doing that play.

NR: *The Woman Who Slept With Men* is written in play form. Has it ever been performed? Is it meant to be performed?

DM: Yes. It has just been performed in Canada and it was meant to be performed as a stage dream because I was interested in whether I could write a piece that had a public voice and a private voice at the same time.

NR: You write in virtually every literary form, plays, novels, poetry. Do you find that ideas generate their own form or do you start with the concept of a form and shape ideas into that form. How do the forms differ in the way they express ideas?

DM: They are very different. Something comes to me and I know it is a novel or a play or a poem. I'm working on a novel now. I have a thought about making it into a screenplay. As a screenplay it will be totally different and the experience of it will be totally different. In the novel I can go back and forth across time, back and forth through consciousness. I can have living people and dead people very easily without it being surrealistic. In a screenplay, I have to write a story that makes sense in action. The screenplay will be the exterior form of the interior novel. I have to finish the novel first because I don't want to be influenced in any way. Screenplays are always influenced because they are collective productions.

NR: What is the novel about?

DM: The novel is called, *What Dinah Thought* (pronounced "Deena"). It is about a contemporary woman named Deena who feels that she is invaded by her name, that her name is a live entity and has been alive since the name was born 3,330 years ago. The events that occurred around her name, which became a part of her name, are continuing events in history. She has a sense of wanting to go back to Israel, to the town called Shechem, which is now Nabulus, which is the center of Palestinian life on the West Bank, to that place where Dinah was born. She goes to live out her story again so that it will end differently.

NR: That relates to the story as healing process again.

DM: Exactly. So it is a novel about healing history. This is a book in which there are dead people and living people and they all co-exist very easily in the novel. I don't think there is any problem in the novel with the layers of experiences that are being talked about—political, spiritual, personal. I'm talking about the feminine, I'm talking about patriarchal religion. It goes all over the place very easily and I can't do that in a movie. If I do it in a movie I'm going to tell a story about Israeli/Palestinian relationships and how they are embedded in a story that happened 3,000 years ago and how that story is still alive in us and how we have to transform the original end to that story.

NR: What have been your experiences getting published? Have you had a problem being published due to the nature of your work?

DM: Impossible. I've been curious to see what is going to happen with this novel because I do feel in some ways that it is a major novel.

NR: It's still difficult for you to get published?

DM: Yes. But I don't pay a lot of attention to it. I don't send my work out a lot. I send it out when people ask me for work.

NR: What kind of advice could you give to new writers who are having a difficult time getting published because their content is not commercial or entertaining?

DM: You've just got to write. Then you'll find ways to get it out. I was very lucky because when I was a young writer I had a friendship with Anais Nin. I met her just before her diaries came out, when she was still an underground writer. It was quite clear that her work has an enormous influence on people even before the diaries came out. I had a model of an underground writer and a writer of enormous integrity. So the advice that I can give to other writers is that first you have to write the work that you have to write. Because if you get published and it's not important to you, there's no point to it. And if you write what you have to write, it is going to reach whomever it has to reach. It does not have to be hundreds of thousands. We are being destroyed by the inevitable escalation of media. I have a very deep sense of an audience. I think it would be marvelous if *all* women could read *Tree,* but I don't think that a week goes by that I don't hear from someone who has been really moved by something I've done, not a week. So when I'm sane, like I am in this conversation, I'm not greedy. But sometimes I'm hysterical.

NR: How have you made money?

DM: Teaching, therapy, doing workshops. Before that I was a switchboard operator, a terrible typist — anyway I could. It depends on what your ambition is. If you want to be poet — and in that sense I also mean a novelist or a playwright — then you can't think about the marketplace. It's nice if you get paid, but they are not related. I sometimes look with great sadness at those people who won't give themselves to writing because they can't get paid for it. Originally, going to college had nothing to do with earning a living. A person went to college to be educated. To try to make a living as a poet, and then only write what you can get paid for is a violation. Which is not to say the poet should not be supported, quite the opposite. The poet should be supported. So should the shamans and witches. All the important people should have life stipends.

NR: Whose criticism of your work do you rely on? Friends? Reviewers? Literary critics? How do you balance what other people say about your work with what you feel about it?

DM: I have extraordinarily gifted, intelligent, and honest friends in a variety of fields. I go to them for critique. I get the best and toughest critique that I can and I use it as well as I can. After that, I don't care what anyone says. A review is strategic. If you get a good review, someone is going to buy the book. It doesn't mean anything else. It's rare that a reviewer will write something that tells me something about my work. At this point, I know what I'm doing.

NR: How do you develop that kind of confidence as a writer?

DM: At some point a writer has to become a fabulous critic, but a generous one. You can't be the critic that destroys the work. So many of us live with that critic on our shoulder, the one who says, "that's terrible, you'll never do anything, you're really stupid, you have no talent, etc. etc." That's not the kind of critic you should be. You should be the critic who is very ambitious about excellence, about your doing the best you can do.

NR: How do you manage to maintain the healing connections in your life and still maintain the privacy and isolation that you need to be a writer?

DM: With struggle, and I'm not always successful. But I need both of them desperately. I go back and forth. You're talking to me at the most balanced time of my life because I'm just about to give up teaching and being a therapist for an indefinite amount of time just to write. For the last year in my workshops we have been dealing with a series of exercises. 'Imagine that you left your life for a year. Imagine that you were living in a city alone and you spoke to no one for a year.' Suddenly I've found myself saying that I'm really going to do that. There is also an increasing need, as I've gotten older, for solitude. I used to live a very embedded life with lover and children and friends and family. Now I live alone. The first time I went off with myself and a typewriter for a weekend was when my kids were three and four. I spent three days alone speaking to no one. I have a great hunger to be in solitude.

NR: What is the importance of the tree symbol to you, especially as they appear in the *Axis Mundi Poems* which are predominantly about trees?

DM: Trees represent everything to me — the tree of life, the world tree, etc. Also I love them as trees. I bought my house because I was sitting on the couch and looking at the eucalyptus trees outside. I

don't need to go out to talk to them, but sometimes I do talk to them. I do need to look at them.

NR: Are you interested in painting? Do you work in other forms of artistic expression?

DM: No. I wish I could paint. I wish I had the skills in the other arts. The aesthetic environment is very important to me and visual artists are doing something very different from what I'm doing. I'm very interested in that difference. What we're working on now in one of my workshops is creating the biography of a "consummate artist" who works in a field or genre that the person doing the biography knows least about. Most people choose either musicians or sculptors. I'm trying to have them find out what the creative process is by watching that kind of artist very carefully — watching them as they work, watching them in their studios, watching them take walks. Then I ask what is the first moment in which they discovered that form or saw a shape for the first time. I'm very interested in what the musician thinks or how the visual artist sees. One of the most exciting times in my life was when I was at a writing retreat and I took a walk while I was stoned. I suddenly saw the landscape as Franz Klein would see it. Then I saw the landscape as Cezanne would see it. Then I saw it as Picasso would see it. It kept shifting in front of my eyes. It was marvelous.

NR: Will you ever have a sense that your work as a writer is complete?

DM: I can't imagine that time. I'm certainly not ready now. But I feel that had I died earlier and just left *The Woman Who Slept With Men* and the poster I did, that I would have felt good about my work. Those two works are ones that I feel particularly good about. Now, I certainly will not feel good until I finish this novel. I have about five years of stuff to do now. I never know what idea is going to come next. I think there is a part of me, like Henry Miller, who hopes that somewhere around 75 or so I will be blessed with the ability to paint. I suspect that I will never have my life dream which is to be Martha Graham since it is unlikely that not having had the facility to be a great dancer that that will ever come. That has to wait until the next life.