# Elizabeth Cleaver: The early years

*John R. Sorfleet*

*The material included here is from a much lengthier interview which took place over a two-day period — Thursday, March 21, and Friday, March 22, 1985 — at Elizabeth Cleaver's home on Melville St. in Westmount, Quebec. At the end of the week she left for a month in Europe, which included visits to the Bologna Book Fair and Hungary. It was an enjoyable trip for her, but when she returned she seemed out of energy for a few weeks and went to see her doctor. The diagnosis, confirmed by a biopsy in early June, was liver cancer. Treatment was unsuccessful and, much earlier that we expected, on Saturday, July 27, she died.*

*The interview itself was based on a working relationship and friendship that began ten years previously, when* CCL *arranged to publish the papers of the Loughborough International Seminar on Children's Literature (issue #4, 1976). I helped Elizabeth edit her article on "The Visual Artist and the Creative Process in Picture Books" and then, within the year, moved to Montreal to take up a teaching position at Concordia (then Sir George Williams) University. In subsequent years she gave talks to some of my classes, and I helped by giving feedback on her own works in progress — including, eventually, her M.F.A. thesis for Concordia on her own work. We talked together, laughed together, worked together, prayed together — and were good friends, right to the end. In tribute to that friend, I have been careful, in this transcript, to reproduce many of the idiosyncracies of our conversation — false starts, joking, laughter (usually joint), teasing — in an effort to give some indication of the delightful kind of person Elizabeth was, "a good and constant friend." All those who enjoy her work will miss her creative talent; those of us who knew her will miss her unique self as well, will miss that woman who, in a large corner of her heart, kept a place for the child within.*

*SORFLEET*: This is Thursday the 21st of March, 1985, and you're going off to Bologna in a few days.

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I'm very excited about it!

*SORFLEET*: I'm not surprised! What I'm going to start with are questions about your background. Where were you born and when were you

born?

*CLEAVER*: I was born in Montreal in 1939, November 19th. I grew up in Montreal, and I lived here till I was twelve, going on thirteen. My parents went to Hungary — this was in 1952 — and I accompanied them, and I lived there till 1956.

*SORFLEET*: What did you do in Hungary?

*CLEAVER*: I went to school. First of all, I had to learn to read and write Hungarian. I could speak Hungarian, because at home we always spoke Hungarian. It was a very difficult language to learn; I had great difficulties. I was very fortunate to study at the College of Sarospatak (Comenius taught at the College of Sarospatak). When I was there the school was celebrating the 425th anniversary of its establishment. I was at the boarding school, and I lived in. There was great discipline at this school; I think it was very good for me.

*SORFLEET*: Was it an all-girls school?

*CLEAVER*: No, it wasn't, it was co-educational, but there were different boarding schools for the boys and the girls. I studied mathematics and science — I had no art training at all.

*SORFLEET*: If you go back to the years before you went to Hungary, in Montreal, did you have any art training in school?

*CLEAVER*: In elementary school, I had art, yes. It was my favourite subject.

*SORFLEET*: What did you like to do in art the most?

*CLEAVER*: In art — anything, all the projects we had. I remember, when I was in grade four, because I was one of the best in class, I was allowed to use oil paints [laughter] and I tried to stretch that experiment out for quite a long time. It was something I should have completed in one or two sessions, but I just carried it on and on and on, just so I could continue working in oil paints. I remember I had a very good teacher.

*SORFLEET*: Was it mainly pen and ink, or pencil?

*CLEAVER*: Oh, we worked in crayons, and wash, and paint.

*SORFLEET*: Did you do collage?

*CLEAVER*: No. Well, actually, in grade seven we did do collage. I remember one project was taking images out of magazines and collaging them together. The image I did was of buildings. Just recently I was going through a book on collage, and I saw something very similar to what I had done in seventh grade. Of course, this one was done in the twenties or thirties. But it just struck me as so similar to what I remember doing in grade seven. That was just one session with collage. When I did start working with collage would be at Sir George Williams University many years later, in Richard Belmire's class. We had one class where we just painted papers with different colours, and then after they dried we started cutting and tearing and making designs or landscapes or whatever with

them.

*SORFLEET*: Did you ever do much finger-painting?

*CLEAVER*: No, we didn't do any finger-painting at all.

*SORFLEET*: How about sculpture?

*CLEAVER*: I haven't done sculpture.

*SORFLEET*: I seem to remember when I was in grade school we had clay and we were supposed to make something or other.

*CLEAVER*: Oh, I've worked with clay, and I've worked with papier-maché, that's probably the closest I would come to sculpture, but they were mainly making masks on toilet paper rolls, building it up, did you do that?

*SORFLEET*: Yes, we made animals, using toilet paper rolls as the core and building up paper around it.

*CLEAVER*: I have a mask I'll show you when we're done — it's from a project from my stage design class, I think it could have been Beauty and the Beast or something — I even have photographs somewhere of the set design that I did. It's really beautiful.

*SORFLEET*: How old were you then?

*CLEAVER*: I think I was about twenty-nine. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Oh, I see. [laughter] That's older. [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: Very young. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I have two brothers and a sister that are older than I am. I'm the youngest. They're almost nine, ten years older than I am.

*SORFLEET*: Did they go back to Hungary with you?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, they did. Actually, they moved back before we did. They went to university there. They're engineers. Because of their science background, I thought I had to become an engineer too [laughter]. So it was very difficult. I had this pressure on me, where I knew I had to do something or become something, but I didn't know what it was, and I had to search and find my own way.

*SORFLEET*: How did it happen that you ended up going into art, since you had not studied art in Hungary? How old were you when you came back from Hungary?

*CLEAVER*: I think I was sixteen or seventeen.

*SORFLEET*: And there had been no real art work in your life during those years, not even things you had done on your own?

*CLEAVER*: No, I had no time. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Oh, I see: they really worked you. [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: They certainly did; I had mathematics, algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry, biology, Hungarian literature, Russian, and I'm supposed to say Latin. I had English. I enjoyed languages; I was able to continue that.

*SORFLEET*: Why did your family go back to Hungary?

*CLEAVER*: My grandmother was very ill. She died of cancer shortly after. And my mother was the only daughter. She wanted to see her mother. And I think my parents always had this idea that they'd love to go back to Hungary.

*SORFLEET*: Weren't they worried about the communists?

*CLEAVER*: I guess they were, but they thought things would be all right; of course, they were extremely disappointed. We came back.

*SORFLEET*: You left in 1956. Was that during the Hungarian Revolution?

*CLEAVER*: We did, but we left legally. My parents were Canadian citizens; we were supposed to leave, whether there was a revolution or not. [laughter] It just happens that there was a revolution, and we paid our way to come back.

*SORFLEET*: When did you come back in '56?

*CLEAVER*: Actually, it was in '57, in January.

*SORFLEET*: So it was after things had settled down, once the Russians had sent in the tanks and everything.

*CLEAVER*: Yeah.

*SORFLEET*: What did your parents do career-wise?

*CLEAVER*: My father was retired. He was older. When he came to Canada in 1935 he came as an apiarist.

*SORFLEET*: As a bee-keeper?

*CLEAVER*: Yes. He had two brothers here, and it was very difficult for him to come to Canada. He had to have a profession that they would accept at that time. He liked bees very much, and all his life that was his great love. It was too bad that he did not have a farm, and he did not have bees and that he was not able to work on that.

*SORFLEET*: How do you feel about bees? Or bugs in general?

*CLEAVER*: Well, I probably don't have that passionate love or whatever it is that my father had, and of course, my mother got stung once or twice, and then she wouldn't go near them, so my father on weekends would go out and look after his bees. We'd go sometimes.

*SORFLEET*: So all the years you were in Hungary he was essentially retired, then.

*CLEAVER*: He was, yes. My mother's family had land, grape vineyards; it was a lot of work just to look after.

*SORFLEET* Were they able to keep their land?

*CLEAVER*: Where they were, it was all right, yes.

*SORFLEET*: Now, was the reason that you went back to Hungary, besides your grandmother's situation, was it because your parents really wanted you to have a Hungarian education?

*CLEAVER*: I really don't think that they wanted us to have a Hungarian education, I think it just worked out that way. Of course, they were pleased

that we could learn to read and write Hungarian, and have that background as well.

*SORFLEET*: Do you think in English, in Hungarian, in both, or do you think in pictures?

*CLEAVER*: I think in both languages. Sometimes I can express something better in Hungarian; there are words in Hungarian that you can't express in English.

*SORFLEET*: Since '57 you've lived in Canada all the time except for short trips elsewhere. Do you find yourself experiencing any kind of cultural conflict between the Hungarian and Canadian sides of your life or, since you live in Montreal, between the Hungarian, French and English sides of your life?

*CLEAVER*: No. Not really. I'm not really that involved with the Hungarian community, if that's what you're getting at. I have recently gone back to the Hungarian Church because I miss hearing Hungarian, and I miss interesting lectures in Hungarian.

*SORFLEET*: Did you speak Hungarian at home?

*CLEAVER*: All the time.

*SORFLEET*: And when you left home and you visited your mother, you also spoke Hungarian, primarily?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, even my fairy-tales were told to me in Hungarian!

*SORFLEET*: Did you ever think of writing a book — say, *The miraculous hind* — in Hungarian first?

*CLEAVER*: No.

*SORFLEET*: Have you ever thought of translating it yourself? Or has it been translated?

*CLEAVER*: No, it hasn't. It's very difficult to translate *The miraculous hind* to Hungarian. Arany, the poet who wrote about the miraculous hind, is such a great Hungarian poet that who'd want to translate *The miraculous hind*? They would use Arany's text, naturally.

*SORFLEET*: Have you ever thought of drawing illustrations for his text?

*CLEAVER*: No, I haven't, but that's quite a good idea. Maybe I should.

*SORFLEET*: You have the illustrations already — some of them, anyway.

*CLEAVER*: Yes, that's right. That's an idea I could probably suggest to the Hungarian publishing house when I'm at Bologna. That's very good; thank you! [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: You mentioned that you had siblings who were much older than you. Did you spend time with them when you were younger, before you were old enough to move out on your own?

*CLEAVER*: Well, till I was about eight years old, and they left for school, yes, we were a very close family, it was like being brought up by five adults. I had a lot of attention. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Did everyone treat you as the baby?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I was allowed to do everything. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: That sounds great! [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: Yes, that's why it's so difficult now. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: What do you remember most about your Hungarian years? What made the most lasting impact on you?

*CLEAVER*: I think, going to the College of Sarospatak — the teachers I had there, the qualities — it's very hard to put into words — they tried to give us more than just the subjects they were teaching.

*SORFLEET*: How did they compare to the teachers you had before and after? Do you think they were better?

*CLEAVER*: I think so, yes.

*SORFLEET*: Because they demanded more or because they gave more of themselves?

*CLEAVER*: I think both. They demanded more, and they gave more of themselves, and a number of them also completed theology because the school was connected with the theological college. So there was just a very, very special atmosphere, growing up in these surroundings. My Hungarian teacher also had a degree in theology, so he had a very large background that he could draw on when he taught literature. Or, my history teacher taught Greek myths: there was always five or ten minutes before the class was over, and she'd say she'd tell us some stories.

*SORFLEET*: It sounds as if you were the recipient of a lot of story-telling, either from your family or from school. I gather then that stories were communicated to you orally more than in writing.

*CLEAVER*: Right, although I did meet quite a number of Hungarian authors, and I did read too, but we did have a lot of story-telling.

*SORFLEET*: Who are your favourite Hungarian authors?

*CLEAVER*: I would talk about poets, and there were a few. There's Lajos, Attila Jozsef, there's actually quite a few that I might go through. Some of these poets wrote poems that are adapted to children's books which I have bought.

*SORFLEET*: Mainly poets, eh?

*CLEAVER*: They're mainly poets. I really like poetry more than fiction. Partly because it doesn't take so long to read, and I love the imagery. [laughter] I think, too, it's because of the language.

*SORFLEET*: What about English? Are there any favourite children's authors you remember from your years in Canada?

*CLEAVER*: A poet again: Robert Louis Stevenson. I had to memorize his poems when I was a child —

*SORFLEET*: You had to?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I just had to — my sister made me. [laughter] My mother would tell me stories in Hungarian, and with my sister and my father I would read in English — and sometimes with my brothers.

*SORFLEET*: Besides the poems in *A child's garden of verses*, were there any other books you remember as being particularly enjoyable when you were a child?

*CLEAVER*: *Puss in boots*. And I remember my very first alphabet book, which had illustrations. I don't remember who did that book — it was actually a Hungarian alphabet book: the letters are the same.

*SORFLEET*: Did you read any other books by Stevenson?

*CLEAVER*: No, just the poems. I can still see the pictures.

*SORFLEET*: Do you remember who the illustrator was?

*CLEAVER*: No, I don't. I wish I did. I imagine if I went to the New York Public Library, they would probably have it.

*SORFLEET*: Or the Osborne collection.

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I would have to look at books from the forties. It could be the thirties — I would have to check.

*SORFLEET*: Or it could be something that had been done earlier and was just reprinted.

*CLEAVER*: Yes. Another one I remember had animals on the farm-that must have been a Golden Book. I enjoyed looking at the animals.

*SORFLEET*: Did you ever write any of your own stories or make your own books up when you were a child?

*CLEAVER*: No, I didn't, but I played with a lot of cutouts, and that's where I would tell stories. It was to the cutouts.

*SORFLEET*: Are those the sort where you have a basic figure and you put clothes on them with these little tabs?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, with the little tabs. You had to cut them out. Do you remember them?

*SORFLEET*: Yes. There weren't as many of them that were appropriate for boys, but there were occasional ones. Actually, more than cutting them out you punched them out. They were attached by one or two little pieces of paper, and you had to break the paper to punch out the stuff. Sometimes you cut them out. It was mainly cowboy stuff.

*CLEAVER*: Then later on I read Grimm's fairy tales and Hans Christian Anderson.

*SORFLEET*: "Later on" — meaning?

*CLEAVER*: Well, I must have been in grade six or seven. Still a child. I remember just taking them to my world, and not letting any of those images go, and just worked on them, you know.

*SORFLEET*: Were there any Canadian books you remember, or any Canadian stories?

*CLEAVER*: No, I don't remember any. The text books that we had in school might have had Canadian stories, but I don't remember.

*SORFLEET*: You came back from Hungary when you were sixteen or seventeen years old. What did you do when you came back? Had you

finished your high school at that point?

*CLEAVER*: No, I hadn't, and I had to finish high school when I came back. But I didn't finish it right away. I went to business college, and I had secretarial training, and I was working. I worked as a secretary and continued my studies in the evening.

*SORFLEET*: Where did you work?

*CLEAVER*: I worked with the Mental Hygiene Institute. It's connected with McGill University. It's near Pine and University. That was my first job. I worked there for a little over a year, for a psychoanalyst, and I used to love to go onto his office when he wasn't there and I'd brush the dust off his books so I'd have a good excuse to look at books on the interpretation of dreams. I remember that was my first encounter with books on dreams and Freud.

*SORFLEET*: Is this when you started to develop an interest in Jung?

*CLEAVER*: Jung came later on. I think this psychoanalyst was a Freudian — maybe not [laughter].

*SORFLEET*: Did you read any of the books?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I'd borrow them. On the bus in the morning, and in the evening, I would read them. Of course, I bought some. I still have some of the books and I have the dates, 1957, '58, something like that.

*SORFLEET*: Are there any particular things you remember from those books about the interpretation of dreams that might have influenced you later on?

*CLEAVER*: I don't remember anything particular, but I've always been interested in dreams. It was almost a habit in our home: my mother would tell us what she dreamt last night, whether you wanted to listen to it or not! [laughter]. She'd say, "Guess what I dreamt." Of course, she always dreamt about people in Europe, family, so it was something quite natural to have dreams and to talk about them — they seemed so very real. To this day I'm fascinated by dreams, and I've great interest in Indian pyschology, partly because they're interested in fairy tales.

*SORFLEET*: Do you think that might have been one of the reasons why you got involved in an imaginative occupation, that is, being an artist and author?

*CLEAVER* I really don't know. I think it just happened that way. I was working as a secretary for five years. After the Mental Hygiene Institute I worked for Chemcell. I worked in the market research department. I worked for about five engineers. It was a lot of work.

*SORFLEET*: Is there anything that you remember of particular interest from your work at Chemcell?

*CLEAVER*: Just that I tried to, not reform everyone, but I got them to get interested in pictures for their office, instead of just a calendar. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Nothing to take home to read from there, though, eh?

*CLEAVER*: No, I tried to direct their interest towards art, because I was taking evening courses at Ecole des Beaux Arts, and I was also going to Concordia — Sir George — at the time.

*SORFLEET*: Did you have one year or so, or two years, of high school to complete when you came back from Hungary then?

*CLEAVER*: I had two years to complete because I took five courses one year, and then five courses during the next, and then I was working during the day, but most of the courses I took I had already done in Hungarian, like all the science courses, like mathematics, algebra. It was much more advanced there, so it wasn't difficult when I took biology and chemistry here. Actually, I graduated from mathematics and science here as well. That's what I graduated in, since I had those subjects. I was at Sir George High School, so I really go back in history with Sir George! [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Why was it and when was it that you moved from your science emphasis, then, into an emphasis on fine arts?

*CLEAVER*: I enrolled in some science courses — I started in chemistry — and I didn't do too well. I realized that I should perhaps go back to something that I really enjoyed doing when I was a child, and that was art. And then I suppose it dawned on me that I had forgotten all about art, and that I should try it. That was a very good thing to do.

*SORFLEET*: Exactly what happened — you enrolled in a course?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I took basic design with David Viest who studied at the Bauhaus in Germany, and it was his first year lecturing at Concordia, and he was just so enthusiastic and he had so much to give that I'm sure a number of people in the class became artists or just got very interested in art. I think an awful lot depends on the teacher. Had I had a very exciting teacher in English, or maybe even in chemistry, I'd probably be in that area. Don't you find that, to some extent? Of course, you have to be receptive towards those ideas too.

*SORFLEET*: If you had a fascinating chemistry teacher you might just have waited that much longer before realizing you wanted to become an artist!

*CLEAVER*: [laughter] Could be, could be — I don't know! [laughter]. Sure. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: So you took your basic design course. Then what did you take?

*CLEAVER*: Then I took different courses in painting and drawing, with Richard Belmire. He was a painter.

*SORFLEET*: When did you first realize that you were interested in making this a life's work? Because, after all, you were still working as a secretary.

*CLEAVER*: Well, that didn't happen. I was a secretary and I saw no way that I would change professions, because you just don't change overnight

from one profession to the other just because you like something. Something drastic has to happen in your life, for that to happen. In '65 I got married, then moved to Toronto, and while I was there I worked for MacLaren's Advertising. I was on the creative floor and I saw how things were put together, like art and writing, and I learned a lot during that year. I thought it would be a wonderful idea if I could put a book together. I don't know where I got the idea from — it just happened — that I should do a picture book. I had to do something with art, and it seemed the most logical thing that I could possibly do was try to do a picture-book, with words and pictures.

*SORFLEET*: When you were working at MacLaren's, were you working as a fine artist or as a secretary?

*CLEAVER*: I was working as a receptionist. I had contact with everybody on the floor and knew everybody.

*SORFLEET*: Had you received your fine arts degree yet?

*CLEAVER*: No. I continued taking courses in Toronto, as well. They were courses given by someone visiting Toronto.

*SORFLEET*: So while you were working at MacLaren's you got the idea of doing a picture-book. So what happened with that idea?

*CLEAVER*: There was a writer — his name was Ted Wood. I told him I would like to do a book, and he said he had a number of stories around that he'd written for his children, that he'd bring one in and I could take a go at it. It was a whimsical dragon story, and I took it extremely seriously. I worked on it a year, and I put it together and I had twenty pictures, and it was these pictures I took around to publishers. They liked my work, except they said it would be very expensive to publish in colour. This was in 1966-67, and in 1967 during Young Canada's Book Week there was a celebration at Boys and Girls House, and Miss St. John invited me to come to a party they were having. There I met William Toye, and I showed him some slides, and he said he had a manuscript of Canadian verses that he was planning to publish, and he would like me to work on them, and this book became *The wind has wings*.

*SORFLEET*: Going back to the book you illustrated for Ted Wood, did you use collage techniques?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I did, I used collage.

*SORFLEET*: Why did you choose, of all the things you could do, collage? Why did you choose that rather than pen and ink?

*CLEAVER*: Because that's what I could do best.

*SORFLEET*: When did you first study collage?

*CLEAVER*: A number of years before that, in Richard Belmire's class. I did many different techniques. We did painting; we did linocuts and woodcuts, and I did etchings; I did tabular prints; I did lithography; I did many different ways of working. I chose collage because I found that the easiest

way to work and to get into the story. It's also very contemporary. I love the effect that you can get from collage, the feelings I could evoke from the cut or torn paper. I like line-drawings as well.

*SORFLEET*: Do you do any line-drawings?

*CLEAVER*: No, I don't. I only do line-drawings when I'm making a linocut, and that's just to transfer the image to the linoleum block, and I cut that out. Then I get excited about the line I can achieve in my linoblocks, but I'm not excited about the line I can achieve in pen and ink or pencil, although I've done drawing, but that's not the final form for me.

*SORFLEET*: When you're doing your preliminary work for any book, don't you sketch things out at that point?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I do.

*SORFLEET*: In fact, if I recall correctly from some of the sketches I've seen of the early work, some of them are quite good. I was just wondering why you never pursued it.

*CLEAVER*: I don't know. It was just something that I didn't pursue, I guess. I found cutting and tearing paper more exciting.

*SORFLEET*: You don't ever think of the road not taken, so to speak?

*CLEAVER*: [laughter] No, never!

*SORFLEET*: How did you meet Miss St. John? Why did she come to invite you to Boys and Girls House? Were you reading a lot of children's lit then?

*CLEAVER*: I was going to the library while I was working on the whimsical dragon story, and when I completed the pictures I took all of them to Boys and Girls House and I showed the librarians, and we tried the pictures out on children who were at the library at the time. The librarians were Miss St. John and Miss Cook and Miss Bagshaw, and they were all very excited about the pictures, and they were really interested in finding a publisher that would publish the work, and since they knew I'd gone around to all the publishers and I'd had no luck, they thought they would introduce me to William Toye, who would be at the party.

*SORFLEET*: Were any of those pictures ever published as part of a book?

*CLEAVER*: No, the story hasn't been published. Should I take it to Bologna? [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: [laughter] I was wondering — Ted Wood has published other books, has he not?

*CLEAVER*: Just recently. He's published a book that was sitting around for fifteen, twenty years, and he published with Scribner's. I read about it in the newspaper. Wouldn't it be something if this book was published after seventeen, eighteen years! [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: And people would think of your drawings as being the culmination of your career, rather than the beginning of it! [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: [laughter] That's right. I remember showing it to him. He was excited about it. He wasn't at MacLaren's by the time I finished it. I think he was at Foster Advertising. I remember going to see him and showing the pictures to him, and I really tried to do something with it and nothing happened. But I have his manuscript.

*SORFLEET*: Was your husband an artist or involved in artistic pursuits at all?

*CLEAVER*: No, he wasn't. He worked for Imperial Oil at the time; he's in public relations.

*SORFLEET*: And you encountered him because he worked at Imperial Oil and you worked at Chemcell?

*CLEAVER*: No, I met him through Young People's at church.

*SORFLEET*: What church did you go to then?

*CLEAVER*: I went to a number of churches. He went to Knox Crescent at Kensington, and I had a girlfriend that was at business school with me — Dorothy lives in Calgary now, she went to another church in Ville St. Laurent, a Presbyterian church as well — and there was a gathering of all the different churches and there was a tour to Ottawa, and Ted was handing out the tickets to everyone, and that's how I met him.

*SORFLEET*: When was that?

*CLEAVER*: 1958. . . . I knew him for a long time before we got married. Actually, he was in grade twelve and then he went to McGill, and I was going through Sir George and working. He was sort of my first boyfriend, well not my first, but more or less, you know, the first serious one.

*SORFLEET*: One thing I did forget to ask: what grade-school did you go to on Montreal?

*CLEAVER*: Aberdeen School on St. Denis St. It's not there any more, but it was facing St. Louis Square, it's just above Sherbrooke.

*SORFLEET*: Where did you live back then?

*CLEAVER*: It was on Colonial St., between Prince Arthur and Pine Avenue.

*SORFLEET*: That was part of the McGill ghetto at that point too, wasn't it?

*CLEAVER*: This is my childhood you're talking about? No, I think it was an ethnic area; there were a lot of Hungarians living in the area at the time.

*SORFLEET*: That's not far from St. Urbain St. Sequential waves of immigrants go through there! [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: [laughter] Yes.

*SORFLEET*: Now, we have you in Toronto. You've been working on this children's book with Ted Wood and you've met Bill Toye, and he approaches you about illustrating a book of poems. That was called *The wind has wings: poems from Canada*, I assume, and you then had your first real

illustrating job. Did you stop working at the advertising firm at that point?

*CLEAVER*: Oh yes, I stopped working. After MacLaren's I went to an art studio, and then I got ill and I stopped working.

*SORFLEET*: What was your husband working on at that point?

*CLEAVER*: He was at Imperial Oil still.

*SORFLEET*: You were transferred?

*CLEAVER*: From Toronto to Montreal. It was his first job, in Toronto... and in '69 he was transferred to Montreal.

*CLEAVER*: Were you ill at the time you were working on your first manuscript?

*SORFLEET*: No, I recuperating when I started working on *The wind has wings*.

*SORFLEET*: So, in sequence: you met Bill Toye in 1966?

*CLEAVER*: No, let's do it this way: I'm at MacLaren's and I do the whimsical dragon story, so I have the twenty illustrations that I show, then I get sick, so I think I'll never be able to do a book now, then I recuperate, and then I start working on the illustrations for *The wind has wings*.

*SORFLEET*: So, you met Bill Toye before you got ill?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, before I went into the hospital I met Bill Toye.

*SORFLEET*: And he suggested this as a project before you went into the hospital?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, he told me to call him in December, after he came back from his South American holiday, and I did call him when I was recuperating, and I told him that I wouldn't be able to accept the manuscript because I didn't know when I'd be able to work on it, and he said he would wait till I got better, and my recovery was speeded up because of the work.

*SORFLEET*: It gave you a bit of an incentive —

*CLEAVER*: It certainly did, it certainly did!

*SORFLEET*: Now, this was the first book that you illustrated that was actually published. And you'd just come out of this serious illness. Did you find that your having been through this encounter with death, so to speak, or potential encounter with death, changed your pictures at all from the pictures you had done for Ted Wood's book?

*CLEAVER*: I don't know if it changed my pictures, but I think it changed me as a person. I could no longer continue living the way I was. I knew then what I had to do if I was going to be here for a short period of time. I just wanted to get down and do my work, and do books, so I really zoomed in and concentrated on my work. I suggested to Bill Toye that he do Indian legends in picture book format, since they weren't done in Canada, and he found two stories that he would retell: the Micmac legend *How summer came to Canada* and — Sheila Egoff suggested — *The mountain goats of Temlahan*. We worked on these two books simultaneously.

*SORFLEET*: You had finished *The wind has wings* at this point?

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I finished that; the book came out in the fall of 1968, and then the two Indian legends came out in 1969.

*SORFLEET*: Just pausing for a moment to look at *The wind has wings*: going through the book, I noticed some things which seemed to me to be recurrent in your work. The very first of the pictures is an illustration of the poem "Orders" by A.M. Klein. I don't know if this was the first picture you did for the book, but it's the first picture in the book. It emphasize the relationship between a young boy and the landscape around him; in fact, he's almost merged into the landscape.

*CLEAVER*: Yes.

*SORFLEET*: This relationship between nature and humanity is one that you frequently come back to in your work. In many of the Indian legends that you illustrate, it sometimes seems that the landscape is even more alive than the characters.

*CLEAVER*: It's very important for me, the landscape, the forest, and trees, I love trees, I just unconsciously produce trees, even when it's not required!

*SORFLEET*: Well, I suppose that can be said of this particular illustration, because it has flowers that have grown into trees!

*CLEAVER*: Yes. Yes, a very strange thing about *The wind has wings*: you would never guess what I was going through through the pictures. I think there's so much life in the colours, in the completed work, and I remember while I was working on that, I really didn't have the chance to think, will I get better or not? I was thinking of poems and work. Isn't it wonderful that it's not gloomy or dull or dark colours, or something like that — not at all! It was just wonderful that I had the opportunity to work with poetry. It had a healing effect, I'm sure. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: The second of the pictures in the book — it strikes me as precursory to another element in your later work — presents us with "King Rufus," a medieval king on a horse that has decorated cloth on it, and so on; it seems almost like some of the things that you pick up in your Hungarian work, *The miraculous hind*. You don't use this kind of picture of a man on a horse in your Canadian Indian books, but you do use it in the European one. Any comments?

*CLEAVER*: It was an opportunity to do a linocut, I think, and I just wanted to variate and not have just cut paper, but have a different feeling.

*SORFLEET*: But you were the one who chose which poems you were going to illustrate. You chose to illustrate "King Rufus" and "Orders," but you chose not to illustrate some others. Why?

*CLEAVER*: I made an illustration for "Rhymes," but Bill Toye wasn't too pleased with it, so he didn't use it.

*SORFLEET*: Oh. [laughter] So much for that theory! [laughter] I also noticed, in "King Rufus," that there is an apple tree. There is a mention of

"crimson apples/the monarch sought/For cooking in/His scarlet pot", but there's more emphasis on roses and so on. Why —

*CLEAVER*: I like apples. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: And trees. [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: And trees. [laughter] It was an opportunity to have another tree, and to put apples on it; I think the image is visually beautiful. That same tree I use again in the very last poem in the book, in the black and white linocut, and there I just include an owl. It's the same tree.

*SORFLEET*: Owls happen at other points in your work too, don't they?

*CLEAVER*: In the hard-back edition of *The wind has wings* there's an owl on the cloth cover.

*SORFLEET*: You have other poems such as "Eating fish" and "Rest hour" and "The boar and the dromedar," which you didn't illustrate.

*CLEAVER*: No, I did make pictures for "The boar and the dromedar," and I loved the poem very much. It was just that there were so many figures in the poem, I couldn't fit it into the space I had, so I decided against it, because there was no way that I could fit together the pictures for those three poems to make it work. There are some pages where I was able to bring two poems together on opposite pages. That's a difficulty when you're illustrating poetry: you have a limited space, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

*SORFLEET*: Did you ever do anything else with that picture?

*CLEAVER*: No, I still have it in a pencil drawing. I have a sketch of the idea I was going to do.

*SORFLEET*: Looking at another poem, "The flight of the roller coaster," what's interesting here are two things: first of all, the way you indicate the kids' excitement, their hair standing up on end, so to speak, and second is the way — following the poem, admittedly — the physical landscape merges with the ethereal landscape, with the clouds in the sky. That is different from what we saw in the very first of the poems, where the kind of merger you have is very natural between the human and the natural world. Any comments?

*CLEAVER*: In that particular picture I think it's the way the colours are brought together, contrasting colours, they sort of shock you . . .

*SORFLEET*: You have lots of purples, and reds —

*CLEAVER*: Magentas —

*SORFLEET*: And magentas and blues —

*CLEAVER*: And green —

*SORFLEET*: There's green here, yes, but I was thinking of the way the clothing of the children merges with the colour of the clouds.

*CLEAVER*: I know, but for me the dominating colours are the green and the magenta, that is what makes it so vibrant and moving; those colours move when you put them next to each other, and that just adds to the

excitement.

*SORFLEET*: There are some pictures that are just black and white linocuts. Why is that?

*CLEAVER*: That's a good question. Originally, when the book was planned, it was going to be a black and white book, and then Bill Toye thought perhaps we could have a few colour pictures and as we went along, it evolved into coloured pictures and black and white pages, so you have colour and black and white throughout.

*SORFLEET*: So the colour started to take over. Also, I suppose, it showed his confidence in your work, because colour printing is a much more expensive process than black and white printing. He obviously thought, hey, we've got something here, let's go for it! One of the poems that you illustrate is one I remember reading when I was a child in school, "The ships of yule" by Bliss Carman. Just for my own satisfaction, why did you choose this particular illustration of a monkey and an elephant on a ship with a boy dressed in sailor clothing, waving to it?

*CLEAVER*: I don't quite remember the poem, but I think there's reference to those objects. I just tried to create the feeling I got from the poem.

*SORFLEET*: Alright, thanks. Next, we see more black and white illustrations with "Jack was every inch a sailor," and "Donkey riding". I notice two humourous things about this. First, with "Jack was every inch a sailor," you have Jack trying to get out of the whale. Now, this of course follows what the content of the poem is, but this merging of two illustrations occurs even in your recent *ABC* book, where you have a zebra coming out of a zipper. This ability to put together two things is one of the things I think is funny about your work; it adds humour.

*CLEAVER*: I didn't think of that. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: The other thing I noticed was that the poem "Donkey riding" has a fleur-de-lys on the flag. There's a mention of Quebec in the poem, but were you aware of the independence movement at that point?

*CLEAVER*: [laughter] No, I wasn't. It was only logical that I put a fleur-de-lys for Quebec.

*SORFLEET*: So there's no political content? [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: No, I don't think so. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: In terms of the technical challenges of the book, what do you think was most significant? Is there anything that you recall as being particularly difficult, or particularly enjoyable, or particularly satisfying?

*CLEAVER*: It was very hard to come up with the first few pictures that I would create for *The wind has wings*. Once I got over that, once I produced four or five pictures, then I sort of felt, I know what I have to do, and if I work at it slowly, pictures will come. The very interesting thing about this book, I only worked on a few pictures at a time. At this particular time, I was not able to make sketches for the whole book and show Bill

Toye what my ideas were. I could only do a few pictures at a time, and when I completed those then I could go on to the next few pictures, whereas now I am capable of thinking of all the pictures for a book, preparing a sequential image. But this takes time to develop.

*SORFLEET*: In one of the poems, "Isabel," you have Isabel at the very extreme right edge of the picture, emerging with the ring in her hand. Now, Isabel is not differentiated from the sea plants in terms of colour particularly, there are a number that are the very same shade as she is, although there are a few that are darker and she's a little darker than the water. But one who is not looking closely would not perhaps realize that there is a girl there until one looks at the ring and looks at what's holding up the ring and so on. Were you trying to suggest something special here?

*CLEAVER*: No, I think I didn't want to introduce too many colours — I think it was purely design, what colour would look best on the two pages, and because I just used those two colours, the purple and the blue, the ring would really show up, but had I had many other colours in my composition, it would be a bit busy looking.

*SORFLEET*: I was wondering if you were trying to suggest some of the gracefulness of Isabel, the way she merged so naturally with the natural landscape.

*CLEAVER*: That too, yes.

*SORFLEET*: Okay, she says! [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: [laughter] Sure, You have to tell me these things. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Looking at another of the pictures, "The juniper tree," you have, of course, a tree illustrated, which we've come to expect, but —

*CLEAVER*: It's not a juniper tree —

*SORFLEET*: No, that's true. But you also have a man who is the very same colour as the tree's leaves, who seems to be attached to the tree in the same way as the leaves are. What significance has this?

*CLEAVER*: These things I did very intuitively, sort of unconsciously. I don't think the detail was important. Through poetry you're trying to create feelings and moods, and that's what I do through colour, and the details you get from the words. So it wasn't important for me to have more detailed drawing; just the colour, the shape there, suggests what I want to say.

*SORFLEET*: What I was trying to get at, though, is that the colour of the man and the colour of the leaves in relation to the tree all blend in —

*CLEAVER*: They all blend in, they do —

*SORFLEET*: Yes, and also in some sense make him an extension of the natural landscape.

*CLEAVER*: Yes. [flipping pages] That one works, very well.

*SORFLEET*: These are the facing pages with "The diver" and "Noah" on them.

*CLEAVER*: Yes, it's nice the way I was able to combine the two pages with the water and Noah.

*SORFLEET*: And you have the bird on both sides, so in fact it's two in one.

*CLEAVER*: Yes, it's very successful.

*SORFLEET*: That's sometimes very difficult, I guess.

*CLEAVER*: It is, but it sometimes works. It just happens that I could do those poems on that double page.

*SORFLEET*: Who decided on the order of the poems?

*CLEAVER*: Bill Toye. I'm not quite sure, but I think it was his decision, or perhaps Mary Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson.

*SORFLEET*: But you didn't have anything to do in the ordering of the poems?

*CLEAVER*: No, not at all.

*SORFLEET*: Did you find yourself making any statement, though, in terms of the order of the illustrations, the things that you chose to illustrate?

*CLEAVER*: No, I didn't.

*SORFLEET*: You don't see any process, then, in terms of the paintings in the book?

*CLEAVER*: No.

*SORFLEET*: What about the sequence in which they were done?

*CLEAVER*: Oh, they were done all over.

*SORFLEET*: Do you remember the very first one?

*CLEAVER*: It might have been "King Rufus." There's a linocut that I could get into and print. [flips through book] The first few pictures were "For the sisters of Hotel Dieu," that came together easily, and then "Song for Naomi" and "Poem in June," "The rapids," and oh, of course, the very first one I could do was "The Great Lakes suite" because they were just monoprints, and immediately we had four pages, by just using the two monoprints. [end of tape one]

*SORFLEET*: We were talking about "The Great Lakes suite" before we ran out of tape, and I'd gone on to ask about the monoprint that is included in that poem on page 51. It shows us a rocky island with seven pine trees sticking up from it. There are no pine trees in the poems, and I was wondering if this was the influence of trees in your work coming to the fore again, evergreens this time — maybe there's some significance to that-and whether there is any significance to the number seven, because it's very much like the Group of Seven kind of painting.

*CLEAVER*: Well, I don't know, I think I just worked intuitively there. It had to be a black and white page, and I just — I think those are linocuts — I just cut out and arranged my composition in that way.

*SORFLEET*: One of the trees seems to be split in half. Is there any

reason for that?

*CLEAVER*: No, you see trees like that in nature, don't you? [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: Just wondering if it had been put together, and then cut apart in the printing process. [laughter]

*CLEAVER*: No, no. [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: There is also an Eskimo-type print on page 55 of *The wind has wings*, and there was another picture — for "The forsaken" — that reminded me of your later Indian illustrations, but these had no linkage to what you were going to do in *How summer came to Canada* or your subsequent Indian books, eh, it was just a coincidence that you were illustrating the Indian or Eskimo tales at that point?

*CLEAVER*: Well, it's because of the poem, I had to do something Eskimo.

*SORFLEET*: But there's no artistic link; you didn't have any idea of the fact that you were going to do more of this kind of work?

*CLEAVER*: No, I didn't.

*SORFLEET*: Looking at this next poem, "There's a fire in the forest," one notices the very vivid depiction of the flames consuming everything — consuming trees, animals — and the animals, particularly the birds, fleeing. A critic might say — to my mind, unjustifiably — that there's insufficient contrast in this particular illustration, considering also that the hawk and the birds are almost in the same shape as the background of the fire.

*CLEAVER*: Well, the figures are merging with the monoprint because there's a fire. I arranged them in such a way where the colours would—

*SORFLEET*: Show a melting effect? Yes, and I think you get a much more vivid impression of the effects of the fire through that colour combination, and I'm not aware of any child I've seen read the book comment on the difficulty of perceiving the hawk.

*CLEAVER*: And the type was directly dropped onto the monoprint as well, and that's quite effective.

*SORFLEET*: In a way, I suppose a child would be intrigued to find the picture of the hawk there if he didn't see it at first; it would be like discovering a bunch of rabbits in one of those "find the rabbits" pictures. And the child would have fun doing that.

*CLEAVER*: Yes, yes, you get into the picture.

*SORFLEET*: This does seem a bit repetitious, doesn't it? [laughter] It doesn't seem half as spontaneous! [laughter] But let's look at "Eskimo chant" too, because this is a very striking picture. How did you do it?

*CLEAVER*: A monoprint that I created. Going through my monoprints, I realized that this one would be just suited for "Eskimo chant". With the red colour and blue, it would give you the feeling of the northern lights. All I had to do was add the igloo and the figure by the igloo.

*SORFLEET*: The contrast of that northern lights colour with the blue and the bits of white creates quite an impression of cold.

*CLEAVER*: It does.

*SORFLEET*: It's a very impressive picture. "The Ice King," a few pages later, is one of the poems which has a picture of a figure, a person, merging with the landscape. This is in some ways similar to the way in which the same subject, the King of the North, the Winter King, in *How summer came to Canada*, is portrayed. Did you find the illustration you had done of "The Ice King" in any way influenced how you interpreted the world of winter subsequently?

*CLEAVER*: I don't think so. Not consciously, at least.

*SORFLEET*: What about this picture that goes with the poem, "The rapids"?

*CLEAVER*: I had the monoprint and it was very textured; the blues and white give you the feeling of mist from the rapids. All I had to do was add the canoe and the rocks and a few trees and my composition came together very easily.

*SORFLEET*: With the texture of that particular picture, one gets a great sense of spray, of water from the rapids; you get a sense of action, movement, excitement. Again, very effectively done.

*CLEAVER*: Thank you! [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: I notice that in some of your pictures you have people flying. This occurs in "Poem in June"; it occurs in the cover illustration; it occurs in at least one other illustration, "Song for Naomi." What does a flying person suggest to you?

*CLEAVER*: I think it's just freedom. I don't know, I just do it unconsciously.

*SORFLEET*: Well, generally, I suppose, it means freedom, the wings of imagination —

*CLEAVER*: Freedom, imagination, happiness, that I guess the poems suggested.

*SORFLEET*: I do notice some similarities in technique between the "Song for Naomi" illustration and the illustration for "Orders". Do you want to talk about that?

*CLEAVER*: Oh, there are a lot of pictures that have a similar technique. But I think you're probably thinking of the colours, the greens and yellows.

*SORFLEET*: The merger of the kids with the landscape.

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I think that's what you're thinking of. But I never associate the two. Perhaps it's because of the poems, they're so very different. I think that "Orders" has greater space. In "Song" and "Song for Naomi," the pictures are squeezed in between two columns of type, whereas "Orders" is completely free and open, and in the corner you have four or five lines.

*SORFLEET*: What about the illustration for "For the sisters of Hôtel Dieu"? I think you might have mentioned at some point that you remember

the sisters from your past?

*CLEAVER*: Well, it's one of my favourite pictures in *The wind has wings*. I remember as a child walking by the Hôtel Dieu hospital, by its fieldstone wall, and I tried to think back to that time, just as A.M. Klein does in this poem, where he remembers the nuns as if they were birds.

*SORFLEET*: In the poem "The clock tower," does the clock tower exist?

*CLEAVER*: I think it does, in Toronto.

*SORFLEET*: There's a kind of fantasy world quality to the landscape illustrating the joint poems "Indian summer" and "Steeds." You have the red, red earth and the blue, blue sky —

*CLEAVER*: Yes, I know what you mean, the contrast of the colours, the blue and the red and the brown.

*SORFLEET*: Very gripping, in any case. You end the book with an owl and an apple tree. The apple tree, of course, has occurred previously in the book, and trees are very prominent in your work. What about the owl? Does he represent a symbol of wisdom to you at the end, especially when associated with the apple tree? Does he represent Elizabeth Cleaver sitting in the tree of the book she's made, and looking out at the reader, saying: hey, reader, look at what I've done?

*CLEAVER*: No, I don't think so.

*SORFLEET*: What does he represent?

*CLEAVER*: I think there's an owl in that poem, that I was trying to make a representation of an owl in a tree, and if there isn't — [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: There is! [laughter] You've just shot my theories down, that's all! [laughter]

[*Some hours later in the conversation, discussion returned to* The wind has wings.]

*SORFLEET*: In 1984, *The wind has wings* was republished as *The new wind has wings*. In *The new wind has wings*, what changes did you make in the book from the original version?

*CLEAVER*: Not very many changes. There's a new cover design, and there are a few poems that I have redone, and there are the new poems that were black and white linocuts.

*SORFLEET*: Why did you change the cover?

*CLEAVER*: I thought we could have kept the old cover but my editor, Bill Toye, thought it should have a new cover design because there are many new poems in the book and it was a new edition.

*SORFLEET*: The new cover design, I notice, you've made quite consonant with the idea of the old. In the old one you have the child flying in the air; in the new one you have two children flying kites in the air, to which they're attached, representing both the ability of the imagination —

*CLEAVER*: to take off and to fly, yes. There aren't that many images that you could use for a title like *The wind has wings.* and I had to deal with that. I retained the colours that I had in the previous book; the magenta which I love very much, I thought it was very attractive and worked before, so I wanted that to remain. That's why I had that on the new cover. One poem that was changed was "The roller coaster": in the first edition, the image of the children coming down the roller coaster is on the left-hand side, and in the new edition we moved the clouds and just put the image coming out of the right hand side, and it really works much better this way.

*SORFLEET*: You get much more of a sense of movement.

*CLEAVER*: Much more of a sense, because it's going to run out of the page.

*SORFLEET*: Whose idea was it to change this?

*CLEAVER*: Bill Toye's. Another new picture was a combination of two poems, "Psalm of the Fruitful Field," and "At St. Jerome," where I made a Quebec landscape with cows and daisies in the picture along the bottom of the page. A difficult poem to work on was "One step from an old dance," David Helwig, where I incorporated words into my picture "In the Calm and Peaceable Kingdom." I found it very difficult to produce this calm and peaceful setting, and I did many, many different sketches before I finally worked on the final picture that I have here.

*SORFLEET*: Of course that particular picture is indebted to, in some ways, another picture.

*CLEAVER*: Edward Hicks' paintings. Yes, I looked at a lot of Edward Hicks' paintings of "The Peaceable Kingdom," and thought of producing something similar, but I really couldn't. This is what my "Calm and Peaceable Kingdom" turned out to be, an evergreen tree and these animals.

*SORFLEET*: What strikes me about the picture is that it has become a Canadian Calm and Peaceable Kingdom. You have the loon-

*CLEAVER*: It's the Canada goose.

*SORFLEET*: Oh, sorry — squirrel, hawk, bear, wolf or coyote, and you have a girl who is not what one would generally call a WASP, or anything like that: instead she has partly native features-she has epicanthic eyelids, for example — she's either partly oriental or partly Eskimo or partly Indian. I thought you were making some kind of statement about Canada there.

*CLEAVER*: No, that's the way my girl turned out. [laughter] I'm sorry! [laughter]

*SORFLEET*: [laughter] Okay. [laughter] I like the picture anyway: that's one of my favourites.

*CLEAVER*: I enjoyed working on it.

*SORFLEET*: What does the figure in this picture represent, the picture

accompanying O'Huigan's poem "Bye Bye"?

*CLEAVER*: Well, he's the monster.

*SORFLEET*: You have him as a kind of fire figure.

*CLEAVER*: Well, he's a sort of fire figure monster that comes in the night if you close your eyes. I don't know if you've ever closed your eyes and put your fingers on your eyes: you get this very bright red colour if you do that. They're like the colours that play in your mind's eye. Actually they're the colours that I had and they worked very well together.

*SORFLEET*: Any technical changes?

*CLEAVER*: No, I tried to keep things consistent with what I had done before and not be very different. Another poem I should mention is P.K. Page's "A backward journey" — about the Dutch Cleanser Lady. I enjoyed working on this picture because I made xeroxes of the Dutch Cleanser Lady and I reduced the xeroxes and got the smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller figure, and just arranged a composition indicating that she, as P.K. Page says: "The woman led me/backwards through the eye of the mind/until she was the smallest point." One of the poems in this book led me into my next book, which would be the *ABC*. This poem, Phyllis Gotleib's "A bestiary of the garden for children who should know better," inspired the alphabet book. After my working on the letters, Bill Toye realized that I could possibly work on an alphabet book, and suggested that I consider doing that, because it would never have occurred to me to work on an alphabet book.

[*The conversation, covering other works and ideas, continued for some time.*]

**John R. Sorfleet**, *associate professor of English and Canadian Studies at Concordia University, was the first editor of* CCL.