

An Interview with Willy Conley, Author of *Listening through the Bone: Collected Poems*

GU PRESS: *The title of this collection is Listening through the Bone. Can you elaborate on what that means?*

CONLEY: It comes from the title of the very last poem in the collection. It is based on a memory I had once when I walked up to a lone flagpole in the middle of a field somewhere...though, I can't remember where. It could be anywhere really. (In the poem the memory is different because I created a collage of recollections and images.) Anyhow, I stood with my back and head up against the flagstaff. It was a windy day. I distinctly remembered feeling the pole sway a bit and the vibrations of the flag flapping furiously in the wind, the rope pinging against the pole. In essence, I was a lightning rod, if you will, taking in everything I was feeling and listening in the moment with my whole body. I believe that is what deaf people tend to do in their respective worlds—they become attuned to their environment primarily through tactile means. Yes, they sense odors, take in things visually (although some are unable to), and some hear to a certain degree (and some don't). Yet I feel it all boils down to what one really feels down in the bone. That was how I determined that this title represented the source from which all of my poems were created.

GU PRESS: *Your poems capture a range of human experience, from the mundane to the deeply poignant. What inspires your approach to writing?*

CONLEY: Just staying alert and open to what is happening around and within me. If something appeals, arouses, or appalls me, and it sticks in my head, heart, or gut, then I know it's something to get down on paper. Reading the writings of writers that I admire will often inspire me to "try on" their style.

GU PRESS: *You are a photographer, actor, playwright, and novelist as well as a poet. On top of that, you compose poetry in both English and American Sign Language. Do you have a favorite mode of expression? Do you find that it's easier to convey certain ideas or concepts in one mode over another?*

CONLEY: I would say photography. I often see poetry in images; the lines, forms, texture, composition, and color are all there at once when you snap a photo.

GU PRESS: *These poems were written over a span of 30 years. How would you describe your evolution as a poet?*

CONLEY: I've gone from sentimentality and overstatement to being more economical with words by saying less and leaving it to the reader to collaborate a little with me on the imagery.

GU PRESS: *What do you hope people take away from this collection?*

CONLEY: I hope people will relate to my poems and photographs by experiencing a range of sensations and emotions on some level. My work includes experiences that are deaf (or hearing) related, existential, puzzling, irrevocable, and natural.