

## Mark Katzman: Excerpts from "At Home in the Unknown," a 1996 Bronk Interview

**Is this house like a second skin to you?** BRONK: Not only skin, it has internal organs. It's the only place that's ever been home. I've lived outside of it from time to time when I was in college, briefly in New York City and the service, but it's the only place that I have ever really felt at home in. I wasn't really comfortable anywhere else.

**It's been such a core part of your writing.** BRONK: Oh yeah. The house is a frequent metaphor with me. I think very likely that when I die it will be torn down. It has a two-wire electrical system. It's inadequately insulated. The plumbing is old. No modern person would put up with it. **You've lived here alone for many years now, haven't you?** BRONK: I think most people's lives are pretty solitary. Even people who go to offices or factories where there are lots of other people. I remember a woman I would have said had lived a great deal of her life in a quite satisfactory marriage, had several children. Her husband died, and I was commiserating with her. She said, "I've always been alone." And I was surprised but the more I thought about it, the more I thought, yeah, she's one of the few honest people in the world. And she certainly was a woman that not only had that family. She had lots of friends and was not a recluse at all. She was out every day, meeting people, enjoying them. The woman from next door, whose children were grown, lost her husband, but not too long after that she told me that she was going to marry a man in Florida, whom she had grown up with and gone to school with here. I said, "Nothin' like first love, is there." And she said, "Who the hell's ever said anything about love. She said, I can't live alone." "Oh," I said, "I live alone." She says, "The hell you do. I don't know anybody that has more people in his house than you do!" It was pretty much true at that time. There were a lot of young people that were here most of the time, coming and going, you know. But I was still living alone. I've always had close friends. I may not have had as many casual friends as lots of people do but I think I've more close friends than most people do.

**When did you begin writing?** BRONK: I began writing things in High School because of a teacher that I had who had a great influence on me. She's still alive, God bless her. But what I was writing at that time were imitations of one person or another. When I went to Dartmouth my teacher was Sidney Cox. I'm sure that I began writing things for him that were poems and were mine. **At that point did you know that you would follow that course and continue to write seriously?** BRONK: No, I didn't know it, though it wouldn't have surprised me. There wasn't conscious planning or a definite goal. It was simply something was happening that I hoped might continue to happen. Writing is something that *happens* to the writer. And if it doesn't happen again to the reader, you might as well not have read it. In either case it's a happening. Literature is about the reader's experience of the work. It's the reader that makes the work. Some people expect that the reading experience of the work is going to be made for them. But, unless the reader really makes the work, it might as well not be read. If it isn't doing something to the reader, it's not authenticated.

**Are you a pencil and paper man when you work? Do you sit at the typewriter?** BRONK: [holds up sheet of white paper bearing a few lines in his spidery script] This was yesterday. I

don't know whether it's finished or not. I'm not making it any longer but I might need to rephrase something. I hate to type. I've never really learned to use the typewriter. I don't hunt and peck anymore because I know pretty much where the keys are but nevertheless I'm *watching*. It's always by hand. Sometimes I hear the whole thing before I even have a pencil or a pen in my hand. Back in the days when I mowed the lawn a poem might happen while I was mowing. It would have nothing to do with *mowing*. It would start working in my head. That was the way also when I was walking. I tried to remember to carry a stub of pencil with me. I could always pick up an old cigarette package or something and jot some things down so I wouldn't forget them before the time I got home. Very often now I wake up at night in the middle of a poem or wake up in the morning with something going on in my head and I say, no, no, that's not a poem. But it keeps insisting, you know, look at me. I might get up, start shaving, whatever, and go, ah, ah go back and get my workbook and write down a few lines. There's no advanced planning. It comes as a surprise. Oh, oh, is that so? [laughs] When I was writing *The Brother in Elysium* I pretty much *had* to plan, but I didn't always know where I was going. As a matter of fact I can remember I would come to a point at which I'd say to myself, Where the hell do I go from here? And usually that would straighten itself out when I'd be walking. I'd go for a walk in the afternoon and be somewhere out in the countryside and realize, Oh, yeah, I know now. When I write tomorrow I will do such and such. A sentence or a paragraph or a direction would occur to me. It was a way to get away from the desk. I think we have to get away from the desk and do something physical, otherwise we're in a trap that we don't see our way out of. If you stay inside it you can get lost. You have to re-approach it. It's a matter of replenishing your energy. Getting a fresh view of things.

**How much do you revise?** BRONK: I revise very little. And the revisions are not really re-writings at all. In most workshops and creative writing classes you're advised to re-write and re-write. If the poem isn't there there's no point in trying to write it. And if the poem *is* there, leave it alone. Very frequently I think that I'm improving something. I make the improvements and then the next day realize that it was right the first time. Leave it alone.

**How do you feel about giving poetry readings?** BRONK: I like to read to a person or two or three here in the house. It's like having a conversation. Public readings are something else again. I was never invited very often. In recent years I have been invited and have refused because I don't want to do it anymore. Success is awfully hard to take. It's corrupting. And we're all, including me, corruptible.

**What's the origin of the Bronk family?** BRONK: A man named Jonas Bronck came into New Amsterdam in the early 17th century and bought the land which is now the Bronx. An Indian treaty was made in his house. After he died, Pieter Bronck, who was thought to be his son, and Jonas's widow moved up to Fort Orange, Albany. Her second husband was Arend Van Curler, the founder of Schenectady. But the historian who is now the head of the Bronx County Historical Society says that Jonas Bronck died "without issue." Pieter Bronck went to Coxsackie and built a house there which is still standing. He was very likely to have been a younger brother of Jonas. [pointing to document] This is the Arms of Jonas. All of these elements later became part of the seal of New York City and New York State. The motto is from the Aeneid: *Do not yield to evil*. And when the treaty was made to the Indians in New York City they felt they had to have a seal to seal it with and so they used Jonas's seal on the flag he had flying on his ship, The Fire of Troy. Apparently he was a merchant trader in the North Sea, with a Dutch wife. According to the historian he was a Swede.

**There's a picture among your archives on the University of New Hampshire web site of your mother. Was she a Congresswoman?** BRONK: She was on the New York State

Republican Committee. She was raised in Greenwich, Connecticut and had uncles in Schuylerville, New York. She'd come up and spend summers with them. That's how they met. My father had a contracting business and had a job to build a lock or a dam or something or other in Schuylerville.

**What do you remember most about him?** BRONK: That he was an enterprising and successful businessman. My father was William. I'm William M. Jr. The M is an initial only. It came about because when my father was born they were expecting a girl that they were going to name Minnie. And to their great disappointment my father appeared so they named him William with an initial only M. Minnie came along several children later. I dropped the M and when my father died I dropped the Jr. I like things to be as simple as possible and two names are enough for me.

**When did he start the coal company?** BRONK: In 1923 he bought a coal franchise from a widow who didn't want to continue with it. In those days you couldn't just set up in the coal business because no one would sell you coal. He was always interested in new enterprises. Four years later he went into the building material business, lumber and such. He built the lumber company across the road. Then he took on fuel oil. And before he died he started the first concrete business in this area. In the meantime he's been a bank president, but the bank got lost in the Depression. When Roosevelt came into power in the early '30s part of the New Deal was to set up state public welfare departments which had not existed before. My father was the first Commissioner of Public Welfare in this county. He had quite a varied and successful business life but was only 52 when he died. I really had very little interest in the business but I did take it over after the war. I thought, I'll go in it *temporarily*. His brother had been running it since 1941 when my father died until after the war was over. I thought I'd find somebody to manage it. We didn't feel confident of his brother. So I was there temporarily which lasted thirty-some years. My sister Jane had been in the business after she got out of college until she got married, which was, oh, 6 or 7 years later. She was like my father. She loved business. She would've made a better manager than I did. I didn't get rich but I made a living and it gave me a great deal of freedom as far as my writing life was concerned. And there were times when I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the people. The customers and the staff. I liked the social part of business. My father was not one to belong to service organizations and neither was I so when the business day was over the business day was over.

**If, as you write, "All worlds are temporary," is anything permanent?** BRONK: Yeah. I think there is permanence. It's not worldly but that nevertheless we are living in. We're living in a very precise location. Hudson Falls, New York or Binghamton, New York or wherever in the last years of the twentieth century. Those things seem important to us. But somebody from Sumner or Thebes or Babylon felt the same way; that they were in a very distinct time and place. But those worlds are all gone. And presumably ours will go also. **Everything's relative?** BRONK: What isn't?

**What is the real world?** BRONK: [laughs] How could you ask me what something inexpressible is? I don't know. I have a feeling that there is, somehow, somewhere, a reality, and that, possibly, we are even in contact with it. All this business about aliens and other civilizations—our own civilization is as relative and temporal and foreign really as alien civilizations are. There may be alien civilizations but we have no idea what they might be. I wouldn't be able to begin to make any description of a real world any more than I could make visualization or a physicality of a god. Those are concepts which are beyond our temporality and our relativism.

**Do you believe, in any way, shape or form, in reincarnation?** BRONK: No, I don't. I don't think that the terms life and death, as we commonly use them, have much relation to what may be going on, really. I'm not sure that we truly have an incarnation let alone a reincarnation. Incarnation is as mystical and immaterial as anything could be. If you believe in reincarnation you pretty much have to believe that you're leading a real life, that you're really alive. Which I find hard to believe. That we live in those kind of hard terms. In the sense that we speak of the computer world, there is a text of some kind that can be printed as a hard copy but what comes out as hard copy is not a reality. A belief in reincarnation says that there are material realities that get repeated, that get restated in other terms. I don't feel confident of that at all.

[. . . .]

I'll read you a poem. "We go looking through the universe for someone other than us/We are other than us/Turn Hubbell here, look at us/We are other than us." That is, we are other than the way we speak and think of ourselves. We take ourselves for granted as an undeniable reality. I have no quarrel with material evolution. Of course it happened. We are created in a mortal form. The terms don't interest me. Some people are very satisfied with one story or another, of who we are and why. I don't find any such explanation satisfactory. And there's no point in arguing against it. If anybody wants to believe that, OK, but it does not represent my experience. I can't specify what I think as an argument against what most people are thinking. But I feel quite certain that there explanation is not correct. [imitating W.C. Fields] All right, give us another one. I don't have one to give. But I don't accept someone else's. And that's what I mean, "We are other than us." We are other than we are commonly spoken of. Let the Hubbell telescope turn around and look at us and see if they can find something that they haven't seen before. The most recent statement is called For All We Know. "Don't we know it all!/Everything/Language is what we lack/Neither the words we have nor our syntax say certain things." But I have the feeling that, yeah, we may very well know it all. Everything. We just simply can't articulate it. Have no way to say it in comprehensible language but I think possibly we actually know it. . . .

Copyright © 2000 Artzar.com All Rights Reserved

**Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

**Author:**

Mark Katzman [2]

**Review Process:**

Single Review

**Criticism Target:**

William Bronk

---

**Source URL:** <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/mark-katzman-excerpts-home-unknown-1996-bronk-interview>

**Links**

[1] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/mark-katzman>