



WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN IN CONVERSATION WITH KARL TARO GREENFELD:

WHY ARE YOU POOR?

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**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good evening, my name is Paul Holdengraber and I'm the director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, now thankfully known as LIVE from the New York Public Library, it used to be called PEP, Public Education Programs, but sounded a little bit too much like medication you would take if you had a stomach ache. My role here at LIVE from the New York Public Library is, as I often say, to make the lions roar, or as I've come to say now, to create something in the form of cognitive theater. Tonight, to illustrate the point, we are going to ask a very insistent question, which is, "Why are you poor?" To help answer that question, asked with searching insistence and passion, in William T. Vollmann's recently published *Poor People*, who better ask than Karl Taro Greenfeld, the now editor-at-large of *Sports Illustrated*. **(laughter)** No, but in all seriousness, and in an early incarnation, this editor was the editor of *Time Asia*, and Greenfeld edited some of Vollmann's work, including some of it that is included in this book.

I encourage all of you to join our email list, all of you who do join the email list, they will be getting a free ticket to upcoming events, which include people like Clive James, Jan Morris, Gunter Grass, Rebecca Mead, Leslie Bennetts, and many more. There will be a Q

& A period after this conversation, I insist on the Q, that really, we prefer if you could possible ask questions rather than make very long comments. Questions, in my experience, usually take about fifty-two seconds, and then there will be a book signing right after.

Karl Taro Greenfeld is the author of *Speed Tribes: Days and Night With Japan's Next Generation*, *China Syndrome: The True Story of 21<sup>st</sup> Century's First Great Epidemic*, and *Standard Deviations; Growing Up and Coming Down in the New Asia*. William T. Vollmann is the author of several—if not many more—novels, three collections of stories, and in 2005 he received the National Book Award for his novel *Europe Central*.

It is my pleasure to be co-presenting this evening with the National Book Foundation, and I would like to particularly thank Harold Augenbraum, its president. And now, to answer the question, "Why are you poor?" it is my pleasure to introduce the talent.

**(applause)**

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Hi. Um, this is a pleasure for me, it's great to see Bill again. We've worked a little bit together in the past, he's a—and he's a pleasure to work with, but much more so, or as much so, a pleasure to talk to. I first, I'll quickly say, I first came across the name William T. Vollmann when I read a story in *Esquire* magazine which began, and I found the story in *Butterfly Stories*, but anyway, "Once upon a time, a journalist and photographer set out to whore their way across Asia. They got a New York magazine to pay for it." Now, at that age, and I was in my twenties, this to me was aspirational. **(laughter)** And I thought, and I was living in Japan and constantly traveling back and forth to the regions Bill was writing about and—but wasn't writing the way Bill was writing about it. And what Bill was doing, which was so tremendous, was he was writing about—he was writing about getting the story, and writing about reporting the story, and writing about the people he was meeting while he was trying to do the story, and sometimes not worrying about the story as much as the experience of getting it and doing it. And that, to me, was almost revelatory. And I subsequently investigated more of

his work and found him to be a nuanced and deeply intricate and intelligent novelist, willing to take philosophical risks and really challenge the reader, and jump around in voices in a way that was refreshing, sometimes hard, but always sort of in the end made me feel like I'd gotten something out of it.

And in his nonfiction, which is what we're here to talk about today, he—I think he takes that even a step further, in that—I can't say a step further, because his novels are so wonderful—but what he does is he brings us to places where we may have even been before, but he looks at it in a different way, and in so doing, he teaches us or we learn a little bit, we learn a lot about the people, but we also learn a lot about ourselves and what we sometimes miss and what we sometimes look for when we embark on these journeys. And in this book, which is a—first of all, I have to say, this four-year run, by William Vollmann, which was *Rising Up and Rising Down, Europe Central, and Poor People*, I can't think of an American writer who has had a four-year run like that in, maybe ever. I mean, it's just remarkable, in terms of nonfiction and fiction, what you've done, so congratulations for that.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Thanks, Karl. **(applause)** Well, you were very flattering, and I just want to say to you, in front of everybody, that I'm really grateful to you, it's actually thanks to Karl that this picture is on the cover. He was my editor at *Time Asia* and I got to work for him a little bit, one of my greatest assignments was taking a train trip across China and one of the stories in this book is from that. I never would have seen it, you know, without you, so thanks Karl.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** This is—what he tries to do in this book, and what he succeeds in doing, is remarkable. Which is, attempting to—well, I mean, talk about what you wanted to do, and talk about the sort of the mission you undertook in this.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, when I was writing *Rising Up and Rising Down*, you know, I got a chance to go to many, many different places. And I was wondering whether poverty and violence were linked. You can hear the same, mostly threadbare,

excuses for violence in any number of places. You know, I was defending my nation, I was defending my authority, I was defending my creed, whatever. So I thought, well, why don't I ask people in Afghanistan, or Colombia, or wherever, why are you poor? This seemed like a simple, direct way to get people to talk about the subject of which everyone is an expert, as they say. And what really surprised me was that these answers seemed to vary by region. I'll never forget how shocked I was when I started interviewing some cleaning ladies in Thailand and asking them why they were poor, and I thought the answers would all be different, and mundane. But the answers were all the same, and they all said, "I am poor because it's my karma, because I was a bad person in a previous life." And my first thought was, how horrendous that these poor people have been brainwashed into thinking this. And then I thought well, maybe I'm in the wrong if I start deciding what people should or shouldn't think. You know, why should they think that, could it be in their interest to think that? And maybe it is. Maybe it's better to be accepting of your poverty than to be angry about it, which is for instance the case in Colombia, where the standard answer is, "I am poor because the rich people have stolen from me and they stole from my family and they stole from my family's ancestors, and I hate them." I can't say it's better or worse, it's just different. But this book evolved out of my bafflement, really, that the answers could vary in this cultural, regional way. I wanted to make sense out of it.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** One of the things that's fascinating to me is that we all read so much about poverty, which seems to be offering like almost a prescription to how to end it and how to solve it, and it seems like so many people who undertake this subject, there's almost a tendentiousness to how they're approaching it, whereas you are exploring this deeply, yet, and with great sympathy, yet, and in those other books I often feel there's a little bit of condescension, almost, that, look at these people, they're poor, and here's how we can solve their problem. Whereas you are very sympathetic but at no time did I feel that—you were never condescending, which is admirable. But I also didn't feel that you were, I felt that you were holding back almost from saying, we can help all these people.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, I don't think that we can. I think that poverty has always been with us, and always will be with us. When I was younger—

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Yet, it's not—it's surprisingly not depressing. I mean, that said, it sounds like it would, it's not, it's not at all.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, I hope not too depressing. I was very interested in Marxist theory when I was younger, and one of the notions that the Marxists talk about it is false consciousness. That somebody can think that he's really, really happy as a wage slave, when really, he's being exploited by the system all his life, and he gets a gold medal and he feels very proud, and really he should be out there killing the people who used him. Eventually, I decided that I didn't agree with this. And, I guess I didn't agree with it because I met so many people all over the world who have their own version of what false consciousness is. The missionary of this or that religion who tells me that I'm going to hell, the missionary of the next religion who tells me that the first missionary is going to hell, and so I don't want to believe in false consciousness, except in the case of children. I want to believe that someone who is an adult, who is living a life and making good or bad decisions, has the right to think whatever about that life and those decisions. And that's the very simple basis of this book.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And at one point you actually belittle the UN—I don't remember, was it "more aid, better directed"?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** That's what they would like. And of course, that's what we would all like. But we live in a world in which we might not get more aid, better directed. And I can say that the problems of poor people would be solved if only we took fifteen billion and put it into this or that program, but I don't have the power to make that happen, and if it did happen it might not work. So what can I say about it? Is there anything that I have to offer, given that I'm not a policy maker, and I don't have deep pockets?

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** One of the things that lifts it above being sort of voyeuristic, because obviously it's not intended to—he's not trying to solve the world's problems—is this sort of, is the sympathy which comes across, and is this idea that he's really trying to understand, or that you're really trying to understand not just poverty but also the emotions around it, and the sort of, the intellectual price that it exacts on some of its—on the poor.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** That's, yeah, that's one of the most painful things to me. To see the way that people suffer. The second most painful thing is to see the way that people become numb. That an impoverished mind can become dull, so it can't even express its own suffering, necessarily. And if it's okay with you, Karl, and if it's okay with the rest of you, I'd like to read you a little bit of the book that focuses on that. This is from the very first chapter, and it's the chapter about the Thai cleaning ladies. This is the end of that chapter:

"The last time I visited—maybe I should have kept coming, but Sunee always looked so tired when she wasn't drunk, which was most of the time, that I felt guilty about interrupting, and I could not think of anything else to ask her—what else could there be to know? She brought filtered water from the office for me. 'Dlink, dlink.' Sitting in the hot darkness, her daughter Vemunrat had already stuck a candle into the floor to do her homework by, her face an inch away from the flame. She was still in her uniform and the sweat on her skin was glistening in the lamplight, on the emerald Buddha, the emerald Buddha clothed in gold.

""How was your day, Sunee?' 'Every day the same. And the boss doesn't come so often. Come or not, we always work.' There was whiskey in her bag, evidently from the money I'd given Vemunrat the day before. And lest you think that I share my interpreter's judgment of this woman's drinking, let me say this: The tale of Sunee is by no means as ghastly as the stories collected by Marx in *Das Kapital*. The eighteen-hour working days, the lace makers dying of overwork, the use of women to haul barges. Because the labor required to produce horses and machines is an accurately known quantity, while required

to maintain the women of the surplus population is beneath all calculation. And yet, when I think about Sunee's life, I can't help but feel that it too has been, and is being spent on nothing beyond its own animal maintenance and reproduction. No doubt I would still be, in some sense, the person I am if I had to live in that hot, dark, filthy room with the substance of my days outside that room devoted to monotonous labor which harmed my body, and if I couldn't read or write, but I doubt that I would have been able to develop and express that person who I am. Sunee's drunkenness thus seems to me to be an entirely natural rebellion. Therefore, a beneficial one to her, if not to her daughter.

"What's your plan for tonight?" I asked, just to ask something. Really, I couldn't think of much reason to disturb her further, she looked so very tired. Sunee smiled. 'Just have dinner, my daughter already ate at her grandmother's. Sometimes she likes to drink milk.' And her hands made that little gesture of suffocation."

And so, you know, what do you do with this kind of thing? Someone who's living an awful, terrible life, and she hates her life, and the only thing that she has in her life, aside from her love for her daughter, who she is doing her best for, but maybe failing—

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Who she steals from, also.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yes, she does. And she is failing her. You know, is a little bit of oblivion in a bottle, and I don't think that's wrong.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And a great point you make, which is that, communication and I think this reading shows that, or reveals that, communication is a luxury of those who have means.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, that is very true. After meeting Sunee and her daughter and her mother a few times, I went to the central railroad station in Bangkok, and I met someone who was worse off than Sunee. She was a beggar name Won, there's a picture of her in this book too, and she had some sort of white growth on the side of her

face, and she was so hungry and weak that she couldn't even think. So, you know, I bought her lunch, I was talking to her, and I asked her if she was poor, and why she might be poor, and all she could say was, "I think I am rich." And she was so out of it I felt that she could die at any minute. She might have had AIDS, she was probably demented, but she was so shut down. And what do you do with that? I mean, that's a whole different level from Sunee trying to make sense out of the fact that she's going to be poor forever and ever, by saying, "I was bad in a previous life and therefore I have to accept that this is my destiny." You can argue with that, but then if someone is so poor, and she says she is rich, do you want to introduce the notion of false consciousness then, and say, you know, I should help this person, maybe against her will, what should I do for her? I can't even communicate with her.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** The—one of the things that I always wonder about, and this book brought this to mind, and *Rising Up and Rising Down* brought this to mind, was the methodology by which you work when you're doing this kind of nonfiction book, because they unfold—these books unfold over years and years and some of the reporting is in I think the early nineties, even, and so, is recent—and what I was wondering is, how much of this is stuff that you go back and look at what you have and say, wow, there's a theme here which is emerging, which I'm interested in, and how much of it is, you go in looking for it.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** You know, with a book like this, of course no matter what I do, it's going to be to some extent about myself and my prejudices and limitations, and the places that I went and the places I didn't go. But when I'm starting to collect information, I try not to think too much or read too much while I'm doing it, I don't want to have a theory. I want to gather data. So when I started working on this project—

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Did you actually start on this in '90-'94, knowing that this was going to be a book about poverty?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Not then. I think the first time it really hit me was when I was in Colombia and I started asking people, you know, what the biggest problem was and there, it was just this horrendous intractable violence that had gone on for fifty years or more. And there, it seemed like people were violent because they were poor. So many cases of rural refugees, fleeing violence because right-wing guerillas and left-wing guerillas came into their hometown and they ended up in Bogotá as panhandlers. And they became vicious, angry, dangerous robbers who drivers were afraid of. And I started asking them, why are you poor? And when they talked with such passion, even an old man who had been robbed by people poorer than he was, and his belly had been cut open by these robbers, he still sympathized with them more than with rich people. He was so enflamed by class hatred, I started thinking, you know, I keep hearing this all over the place, in Colombia, why is it that I don't hear that in Japan? So I just said, well, I'll just have to keep, any time I have a chance to go somewhere, let me ask people why they're poor, and just keep recording it in my notebooks and then eventually maybe I can figure out something to do with it.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Why were you in Colombia to begin with?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I was writing a story for *Spin* magazine, the first time. And then the second time I was on assignment for the *New York Times* but they killed it.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** So you were you—so then, reading Bill's copyright pages is like an education in how a writer makes a living. I mean, it's just a wonderful description of the research he did for this story which wasn't run, or magazines not paying you, I mean, it's a great introduction to sort of how your—your process of working.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, yeah, they don't all pay for their prostitutes, Karl, **(laughter)** but at least they might pay to have me ask people why they're poor in my own spare time.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And some ways I see, *Rising Up and Rising Down* and this are sort of dovetailing—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** They are.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** —projects, and although, and in this book, at times you feel like you're working toward coming up with—the equivalent is a moral calculus for justifying violence, but you stop short a little bit.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Right. Well, the difference between poverty and violence is that violence is an act that one human being is inflicted on another human being, and so we have the right and the necessity to judge those people and say, well, it might be okay under these extreme circumstances, but it's not okay to commit to violence against your fellow human being here and here and here and here. But you know, because of my discomfort with the notion of false consciousness, or the fact that I, as a rich person, a person who was able to have the leisure to write this book, is writing about poor people, I think it would be far too easy to tell people what to do. But at the same time, I don't want to say nothing. And I think that one way to look at poverty is that people have their own normality.

Some Russian beggars told me that under the Soviet regime, everybody was poor, but nobody knew it, and therefore nobody was poor. And, you know, in Pakistan, that the Afghan refugees got better meals than the local people did, so they were jealous of them. You know, there is absolute poverty and there is relative poverty. And to the extent that poverty is absolute, it's not necessarily in the individual's control. You can't control how much money you're going to make banking, or how much money you can get from your horrible job cleaning offices in Thailand. But, you can control how you feel about your life, which is a very simplistic and maybe stupid-sounding thing to say, but I think that when I see people who are poor and relatively happy, it's because they have taken a little bit of control over the meaning of their lives. They have some explanation for who they are, and what they can expect.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** So, was your—the lack of a sort of political agenda, for want of a better word, in this book, has to do with the fact that you came to believe that it was situational, in terms of what you could do.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Right. And it is about me, in that sense, it's what can I do. And yeah, I do give people money, but the other thing that I can do, and that any of us can do, is if we see people who are poor, we can listen to them. Because poverty has certain phenomenon. You know, to the extent that poverty is perceived by the poor person and not just a matter of how much money you make, it's associated with feeling invisible, or feeling deformed, if you like. A poor person might smell bad, he might yell, he might look terrible. It's associated with estrangement from rich people like us, or from other poor people. And to the extent that you can address those perceptions by communicating with the person, I think you might be able to benefit your fellow human beings. That's my hope.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And you give a—the United Nations lists these dimensions of poverty: short, illiteracy, exclusion, lack of material means.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Right. And that people can't necessarily do anything about.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And then you add a great list: invisibility, deformity (physical deformity), unwantedness, dependence, accident-proneness—which is a great observation, by the way, that was an insight that I hadn't thought of, about how often when you're in these regions reporting stuff, you come upon that, that trait.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** That's one of the saddest things. Somebody who has no safety net, and any little thing goes wrong, and the person suffers terribly or dies.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And then pain, numbness, and estrangement, which, I found that to be a very eye-opening list because it went so much further than just sort of economic characteristics and went into the actual consequences of economic characteristics. And the book—what I wonder about, in this book you refer to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, what a great book.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And it's—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** And the photographs are wonderful in this book, by the way.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And that's I think where the parallel for me came, is the pictures and the text. Yet, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, you, at one point, you point out that the presence of James Agee may have in some ways contaminated the observation.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, as it has to. You know, I called it an elitist book, you know, with egalitarian longings. And of course, this is an elitist book too because almost all of the poor people that I wrote about, would never, ever be able to read it. And I wanted to keep myself and my interpreters out of it as much as I could and let that poor people speak for themselves, but that turned out to be a tremendous challenge because a lot of what poor people have to say is not by itself very interesting because they are poor and their minds are numb, they don't have the education. They might have enough food, they might not have enough food to even think clearly and articulate. Most of the stories I have heard from victims of violence are horrendously riveting stories. Most of the stories that I have heard from extremely poor, malnourished people take a bit of work on my part to tease out before I can even understand what's going on.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And do you feel, I mean one of the things—I remember reading an interview with Primo Levi where he said the, someone asked him, or told him that he was telling the truth about the concentration camps, and Levi said no, the truth about the concentration camps went up the chimneys. And so I don't know the truth, I survived. What I wondered is how—this goes back to the James Agee thing—how did your presence contaminate the whole thing so that what you're getting is in some ways your own projection and distortion coming back at you, and how—do you feel you were able to get at the truth of it, or do you still feel like there's an experience there that you can't really ascertain or understand? I think you do say that at some point.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, my method was to pay for interviews. I felt that that way I was giving something as well as taking something, and it was a fair exchange. And as long as the person had no particular expectation of seeing me again and no sense that I particularly disapproved or wanted the story to go in any particular way, then there was no incentive to cast the story differently. But of course, if the person could get me to come back, and give more money, then you know, I might run into some poor Scheherazade **(laughter)** and some of the Russian beggars had stories that just kind of went on and on, they were fascinating. The details kept changing, they didn't really add up, but I kept paying more money to try and figure it out. **(laughter)**

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And you went to great pains to try to build a linear narrative out of stories that simply wouldn't coalesce that way.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, that's right.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** The—do you have any reservations about paying for interviews? Because you've done that for other stories as well, and in other—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** That's right. No, I always think it's the right thing to do. I think that it's reprehensible to make a living from other people's misery and not somehow benefit them temporarily.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** How...how much does your fiction inform your nonfiction, in a sense, how much—I mean, what are your own ground rules for nonfiction versus fiction?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, when I'm writing a work of fiction the sentence is most important. What I want is to create the most beautiful prose that I can. And when I'm writing a work of nonfiction, I want to learn as much as I can about a particular reality. Of course, a camera eye is not objective, but it's the most objective thing that we have, and to the very limited extent that I can be a camera eye, when I'm trying to learn about reality, that's what I want to do.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And you actually—I mean, one of the reasons for the photographs is you actually work from those.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I do. And sometimes I don't even have the chance to feel emotion. When I'm taking one of these photographs—I remember, there's one in there of a Russian beggar lady in Kazakhstan, and I was just trying to take as many pictures as I could on that cold day, and offered her some money and took her picture, and went on my way. And then, when I see this picture now, it just horrifies me. This poor woman, her mouth is wide open like a black cave, and she has some kind of scab on her face, she's wearing a wool hat, the snow's falling down on her face, she's shivering in the doorway. And it just breaks my heart. And I wish, you know, that I had been able to go back and find her and hear her story or do something else for her, but at least I have this picture and if I hadn't taken the picture, I probably never would have remembered her.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** The—it's interesting that the idea—I mean, it sounds to me like one of the reasons you pay your interviewees is not so much for the service but out of a sense of, that's what you're doing for them.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I might as well do something, yeah.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** The—I found, there's a great part of the book where you're talking about your own living situation in Sacramento. And it's like a converted restaurant. Are you still living there?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yes, my studio.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** It's a converted restaurant and next to it is like a parking lot, where a lot of homeless congregate. And the—well, you can describe it.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, the parking lot's about ten thousand square feet. It's very near the homeless shelter, so a lot of people sleep there, mainly men. But there are some couples, and then there's some prostitution in the parking lot. And I always encourage them to come and stay as long as they want and bring all their friends. So in the summertime especially, it's kind of festive, you know, the glow of all the crack pipes, **(laughter)** and I'm just hoping that they don't burn my building down. They like me, and I like them, and of course they're always—

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** But though, they threaten you sometimes too, there are instances—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** They do. Yes. They're always trying to get into the building and take everything that I have. **(laughter)**

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Besides that, they're great.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, that's right. So, we go through, you know, various iterations of the same basic class standoff. **(laughter)** So every couple of weeks I have my exercise in humility, I go and scrub the excrement off my walls, and my little girl, I always make her go and shake the hands of daddy's friends and give them some water, and they might give her a rotten orange or something if they're being nice. And I'll get to

know a few of them, and then after awhile they disappear and all it all starts over. And in the nighttime, sometimes some of these people can be a bit threatening. Recently, I had to put some razor wire around one side of my building because they kept turning on the water and leaving it on. I wanted to actually put in a water fountain for them but I was told I'd get cited for being an attractive nuisance, which of course, I am in lots of ways.

**(laughter)**

But it's a fascinating problem and makes me realize, you know, what a class divide is. No matter what I do for them, it's never going to be enough, because I have more than they do, and I don't want to give it up. And they want to get what I have, and I can't blame them, but I'm also going keep them out of my building.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Do you—at some point—you've written a lot about firearms, and your ownership of firearms. Do you carry a firearm when you're going to and from your studio?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I have firearms in the studio. And I have never had to pull a gun on anybody in my parking lot, but I have had to bodily push people out of the door when they sometimes see me open the door, and they come and make a run for it.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And, do, I mean, is this a decision on your part to have your studio here because you want to live in this—you want to live in this kind of class laboratory, that you set up?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** It was a place that I could afford. **(laughter)** And then I thought, how do I want to deal with my new friends in the parking lot? And I decided, why not try it? And, you know, I'm going to keep trying it as long as I can, and I think I can try it for the rest of my life. And it's very, very interesting. It's a constant challenge, and I feel like it's very good for me and it's hopefully good for them, you know, when I give an alcoholic a bottle of booze on Christmas, because if it's okay for Sunee it's gotta be okay for them.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Did you want to read more, or—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Maybe we should—

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** We could do questions.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Should we just open it up to questions if there are any?  
You're in charge, Karl.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** If we can—I thought you could read a part of the, your own homesteading situation, or anything else you want to do, and then we could take some questions, I don't know where we are on time, that's the only thing...oh, we're fine? Okay.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** "I have come to know the way that some of them are with each other. The couple sitting on the sidewalk laughing, hugging, then staggering off somewhere, returning an hour later, holding hands, their arms fly around each other. These two love each other, living in that faintly feculent smell like a barnyard, one of poverty's many aromas. Do they still dream the desperate dream of richness, whose fulfillment might require many a nightmare twist? Or are they rich enough? I could have made friends with them, if not with the dogs in their street cages.

"I have, on occasion, blended into the backpacks, tarps, bungee cords and blanket-topped shopping carts that lean against the walls. Once upon a time, I was even close the longhaired, scabby woman who sits on a bench twitching her ankles. She placed me in the hands of God. Now she has forgotten me. 'You're in my prayers,' she murmurs to someone else, giving off a faint smell of sour milk.

"As for me, being a rich man, I came, went, and got excreted from these people's consciousness. Now they gaze at me with bitter wariness, mimicked by their barking dogs. I shut my door on them, just as when we who are in first-class train compartments

pull our doors shut to drown out the poorer sort in the corridors who will be standing or leaning all the way across Romania. Of course, my shut door gives them something to lean against. I'm doing them a favor."

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** I think the, one of the things that's so important about that—and that's the last section of the book, right—where you talk about your—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yeah, that's right.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** The thing that was so important about that to me was that it took the book from the level—at some points, I felt that there was a little bit of a tourism aspect to it, meaning, let's go look at poor people and now I'm going to tell you about how they live—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I understand, yeah.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And I think that what that did was it established a certain credibility in that what you were doing was merely going to sort of record other versions of what you were living with.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, yeah, I mean the biggest limitation of this book is that I haven't lived it and I can't, because if I lived it and I became poor, I probably would not be able, as I said before, to express myself or do much of anything. So, this is, I guess, the closest I can come.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And the next book, I assume, will be a multi-volume study of wealth. **(laughter)**

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** That's right, only if someone pays me, yeah. **(laughter)** Well, any questions? Should I go stand at the lectern, or...okay.

**Q:** When you talk about your belief in accepting sort of the validity of other people's beliefs about their decisions, whether they support their own decisions or whether they hate their own decisions, your willingness to accept whatever it is that they believe about their decisions—how do you avoid sort of like, the slippery slope of relativism in that case, in just sort of like embracing, you know, whatever other people believe about their lives and about their attitudes towards life?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, I guess what I would say is that we are talking about what's right for them. And not what's right for others. And in fact, poor people can be as bigoted and judgmental about other poor people as anybody else. So just because somebody says, "The only good thing in my life is getting drunk," doesn't mean that I necessarily think its fine that everybody gets drunk.

**Q:** What is your preferred method of recording your conversations so as to be as unobtrusive as possible? Do you take notes as you question them, or do you go elsewhere and write down the notes, or use a tape recorder? What do you do?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I am a very busy, bumbling note-taker. I sit there scribbling like mad, writing down everything people say, and by and large, it makes them happy that I am paying attention and writing it all down. And it also makes them reassured if they're talking about illegal acts, that nothing is being permanently recorded and nothing can be proved. I think that writing in a notebook is really the way to go. Anytime, you know, a rich man and his interpreter are talking with a poor person there's going to be a feeling of intimidation on the poor person's part, at least initially. And if there's also a mechanical device making a record it could be a big problem.

For instance, in China, the chapter that Karl was able to help me with, there were seven hundred families who had legitimate title deeds, under Mao, to their houses. And the new China decided to create a freeway, and was busy demolishing these houses bit by bit, so, you know, this poor guy is picking through the ruins of his house, looking for anything that he can find that might be usable. You know, a house that he had title too. And they

said a couple of ambiguously discontented things about the situation. They didn't dare to say too much, and my interpreter was not sympathetic. They would have said even less if they were recorded. Maybe that's a long-winded answer to your question.

**Q:** You—the topic of being a tourist has come up, that in a sense you were a tourist, someone who's just temporarily passing through the lives of poor people. I've noticed that among tourists, tourists enjoy seeking out poor people and saying, oh, look at the wonderful simplicity of poverty, coming home, and then not really implementing poverty in their own lives. How might you think the idea of poverty serves rich people as an idea?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Hm, that's a hard one, but I would say that if Sunee believes that she is poor because it is her destiny to be poor, that idea may or may not serve her and help her somehow. If I believe that it is her destiny to be poor because of who she is, that idea will certainly serve me as a rich person who doesn't want to give her anything, and that would be horrendous.

**Q:** You talked about regional differences—did you notice any significant differences between rural and urban poverty?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I would say that it—the differences didn't break down too much like that. They were more sort of larger regional or cultural differences. However, people in rural areas often talked about not having a chance to go to school, which made it much more likely that they were going to be as poor as their parents. But, you know, that's not a real answer to the question, why are you poor? That's more an answer to, you know, how are you poor?

**Q:** You talked about when paying different people for interviews, that you also mentioned the people outside your home in California, there was a man you bought alcohol for Christmas—I'm curious about, how did you tell yourself how much was enough? Did you base it on—because poverty in one region, I assume, is quite different than poverty in another region. Maybe a dollar a day means something somewhere—did

you have some sort of amount in your head, maybe a meal, whatever one meal costs, and then—and same thing with the people outside your home, how do you deal with if you have guilt at all, but sort of the guilt of being wealthy with, okay, I've got this guy staying all Christmas but why shouldn't I be helping these people the next day or the next month? How do you deal if you had guilt at all, with when to say when, with how much to give?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, you're really asking two questions. And the first is the question that I started with, how much is enough? How poor is this person? And that's when I eventually decided that we couldn't just talk about monetary poverty. We have to talk about the poverty that the person is feeling, because yes, somebody could make, you know, ten dollars a day in one country, and be much more poor than someone who's making one dollar a day in another country. Or someone in the rainforest who maybe has never seen a dollar in his life and is not poor at all. So in answer to your second question, all I can say is that the person that I choose to give to is no more and no less important than I am, and he doesn't owe me anything more or less than I owe him. And if I happen to be feeling nice and want to give him some booze on Christmas that's okay, and then if a week later I think maybe he's the person who peed on my wall and I don't feel like giving him a beer that day **(laughter)** that's okay too.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And I think also you make the point that one of—I mean, you give because it makes you feel good.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Right.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And that's the motivating factor.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** It can't really solve the problem of their poverty as they see it. It can make me feel better about myself, and to the extent that we can communicate with other human beings and make people feel appreciated, make them feel that they have friends, then we have done for them as much as we can do for someone when we say, I love you. If you marry someone and you say I love you, you still have to

keep saying it. You know, once doesn't really cut it. And I think it's the same thing, however much you're going to give to someone, it's always appropriate at any particular moment, and it's never going to be enough.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** I think one of the things I'm wondering about now is, since you stop short of offering sort of a, you know, here's my fix-it plan, and you—yet you, you're presenting all of this ultimately for some reason, who is this ultimately serving?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** You know—

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** I mean, obviously the reader on one level, but...

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Right. Maybe—

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Is it supposed to be a catalyzing—

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Maybe if an NGO read this and said, one of the things that we ought to do is to ask people in our particular zone why they are poor, and what they most need, instead of thinking that one size fits all, then that would be helpful.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** But I mean, don't you think that the sort of the, you know, the good NGOs are already doing that?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I don't think so, no.

**Q:** Hi. I'm coming from a Southern Baptist, South, a conservative point of view here, so I wanted to preface that because I feel really fortunate that my faith in God has always said I can always have enough to eat, I can always have a house to live in, I'll always have clothes, I'll always have what I need, even if I don't always get what I want. Because I'm an artist here in New York, and hey, I have 325 square feet, so I don't get all that I want.

But I wanted to ask you how you saw the people who had faith? Did you still see great poverty even in those who had faith? Do you understand my question?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Yes, I do. And I think that any way in which a person can make meaning out of a life is helpful, and that I think that some of those Thai cleaning ladies had faith—that they believed that for whatever reason, this was something that they were meant to go through, and that some of them, I think, derived strength from that.

**Q:** I was just wondering, you know, in lieu of all this studying and traveling you've done, how you feel about like, the American rap culture. You know, where someone knows they're poor, they're angry that they're poor, they're pimping out women, they're selling drugs, but that they know that someday they might be able to buy a stadium for the New Jersey Nets, you know. How—what do you think of that kind of poverty?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I don't know very much about rap (**laughter**) but, so my answer can't be too close but I will say that generally, American poor people feel about their poverty somewhere in between the way that Japanese feel, which is, I am ashamed, please don't ask me whether I'm poor because I don't want to admit to being poor, or Latin Americans, who are angry about being poor. And I think it's because the basic Protestant culture that settled much of this country always believed that richness was a blessing, and also that this was a land of opportunity, and everyone has an opportunity if he is industrious and spiritual, and therefore if you are poor, you have failed. So I know we're getting away from rap, but I do think that Americans tend to be angry and ashamed about being poor.

**Q:** Why are you rich? (**laughter**)

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I am rich because my parents were rich, my parents were not poor, which gave me the leisure to get a very, very good education and find out what I was good at, and make money doing that. I have been very, very lucky, and there are a

lot of people I met, including my interpreter in the Congo, who was as smart or smarter than I was, and who was never, ever going to be able to make ends meet.

**Q:** Thanks for being here. I'm wondering if interviewing so many people about their own suffering put you into closer contact with your own suffering, whatever that might be, or made it feel further away?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** When I was in Bosnia and a couple of my good friends and colleagues were killed, I felt very, very grateful to be alive, and I felt that I had an obligation to be cheerful and I was much more cheerful and grateful for every moment for some time afterward. When I have sort of searing experiences with poverty, it makes me very, very sad. And, you know, it was kind of a tormenting project.

**Q:** You make a distinction between poverty and violence, and how we're supposed be allowed to morally judge people who are violent against others, but I guess my question is, can't poverty affect someone else—for instance, Sunee, the mother you mentioned who steals from her daughter, who drinks, isn't she affecting other people in her life the way, I mean, perhaps not to the extent that a violent person might be taking someone else's life, but how can we not judge that in any way?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I think that's a good question and I guess what I would say is that, to the extent that poverty becomes violent or bad behavior toward others, of course, you know, it's our obligation judge it. And you know, we're free to judge Sunee's behavior toward her daughter, and we can think about what we could do it about it, what we should do about it, what she should do about it, but I would say that it's not necessarily our place to judge her getting drunk in and of itself. Of course, if she gets drunk and her daughter doesn't have a meal, that's a different matter.

**Q:** Would you agree with the pastor of the Riverside Church here in New York that poverty is the ultimate weapon of mass destruction?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Poverty is a very powerful weapon of mass destruction for certain. And some of the people that I have met in the Muslim world who happen to hate us nowadays, hate us a lot more because they are poor and they feel that we are impoverishing them. I think that—I remember a lot of the Taliban people that I interviewed who were mostly, you know, very, very nice people, never had a chance to get schooling in any place except a madrasa. The teachers were doing their best, they also knew nothing but the Koran, and they, in my opinion, taught some of the Koran and not other parts of the Koran that they didn't know about, and so these people grew up knowing only how to fight the Russians and justify with a partial knowledge of the Koran. And so that made them very dangerous to the Russians and very successful, and now dangerous to us.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** What I think is interesting about that is that you, you actually go a long way toward justifying the burqa, but ultimately condemn it because it's a causative agent of poverty.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, yeah, what I say is that women should be free to wear the hijab or the chador or the burqa if they want to, and the Islamic segregation of the sexes I think took some getting used to for me, but it works for them, I have nothing against it. What was painful for me to see in Taliban Afghanistan was women who were supposed to be secluded, who were wearing the burqa, but their male relatives had all died. So they were out on the street begging, but a woman was not supposed to be out on the street. So basically, these women were supposed to just curl up out of sight somewhere and starve to death. And I thought that was awful.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you have any views on the presidential candidates that are running now, and do you think any of them have a better way of dealing with poverty, and then, another little point—you used the word "elitism" in talking about people who wouldn't be able to buy your book. Is that a correct use of that word?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, to answer your second question first, I think it's always safer to try and be hard on myself instead of hard on others. To answer your first question, I would say anybody who is as unlike the current president as possible.

**(laughter/applause)**

Would all of you like it if I keep answering questions, or should I just have a signing and let you go? What's good? Okay.

**Q:** In choosing a title, did you mean to invoke anything about the book by Dostoevsky?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** That is a beautiful book, but I just wanted the title of my book to be as simple and direct as possible, like my question.

**Q:** Excuse me, when you were traveling, did you encounter any communities during your travels that were using microeconomic techniques to help the very poor help themselves? I believe the man who came up with that notion has won a Nobel Prize recently.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** I can't say that I did, I do think that to the extent that microeconomics is based on community, it might work. And one of the things that we Americans are often poor in is community. One of the places I remember being was a slum in Nairobi where many, many people used one toilet, and they kept the toilet very, very clean. And not too long after that I had a chance to be in a hotel in Times Square **(laughter)** and it was very, very interesting, I mean, it was just absolutely filthy, all the light bulbs were stolen, you know, women were getting raped in this bathroom and some woman had given birth and flushed the baby down the toilet there, it was just this hideous place, and the people kept saying to me, why do they make us live like this? And I thought, you know, they have more than these people in Nairobi, they have more toilets and the toilets are all dirty, and what is wrong? And it has to be something about the lack of community here. Something that prevents people from working together the way they should. Because this slum in Nairobi was in a very, very dangerous area too. It wasn't that

those people were any better off in many other ways, so I would think that any sort of microeconomic solution has a chance of working if it is implemented by neighbors.

**Q:** Mr. Vollmann, I would like to make a comment and have you further address your argument about why people are so poor. It seems to me that based on what you're saying, that you're putting the full responsibility of poverty on the individual, and while I believe that an individual has partial responsibility for their economic success and the direction of their livelihood, I do think that I'm not—I haven't gotten from your argument other issues or other factors that address poverty, such as prevailing Western imperialism, and the fact that Western countries are currently and still have been the metro pole for economic opportunity, and so I think the reason why poverty still exists is that there's a lack of economic health in the countries themselves, there's a lack of proper education, there is consistent patriarchy and lack of opportunities for women. And so these are the factors that I think contribute to poverty, and would you say that you've looked at the systemic diseases that are in the countries, and that being the reason why people are poor?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** My short answer to your question is, yes, I have looked at them to some extent, no I have not addressed them, and the reason that I have not addressed them is because it is not in my power to address them and it's not in your power to address them. You may be able to make a local difference, and help some people, but you are not going to be able to eradicate, for instance, imperialism. So of course, we should face the fact that imperialism exists and to the extent that we can influence our readers and take responsibility, we ought to do that. In the meantime, what else can we do? What happens if we don't succeed? What happens, you know, if we get another president like Bush? Does that mean that we're completely helpless? I hope that we're not, and I don't really have an argument. I don't know how to fix poverty in general. I wish that I did. In the meantime, I'm going to do the little that I do know how to do, and I think that anyone who does that is doing more than doing nothing.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** And also, I think you very diligently and thoroughly tried to map out the circumstances by which people find themselves in their present condition, in Kazakhstan and so forth. I mean, and I think in so doing, without being tendentious or without being sort of proselytizing, you make very clear that these are issues, but you don't—it's not a, you don't hit us over the head with it. At no point do we feel like we're being lectured, to put it that way.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, one of the interesting things to me was that I almost never heard someone say, I was poor because of patriarchy or because of imperialism. They would say, I am poor because I am this, or I am poor because this or that very specific thing happened to me.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Does anyone have a great last question? No questions?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** They're all great.

**KARL TARO GREENFELD:** Is there an anecdote or a story in the continuity of all your great gathering over the course of a decade or more that has a glimmer of hope, or that's not so intractable, that's not so like your toilet comparison?

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Well, to me, that does have a glimmer of hope, right there. And I think that people do have a certain amount of power over their lives, and that one of the things I remember being struck by in Kazakhstan was a part of Atyrau, the old town, it was the poor part of town, that they were busy tearing down in the name of oil progress, and these houses were actually quite beautiful in a way, of course, the area was very squalid, it was filthy with mud in between these old houses, but the houses were hand carved with patterns of flowers and hearts and so on and so forth. And these people who were developing everything of course couldn't care less, they were just bulldozing the houses, but these people did not want to be developed. They liked their houses. And I think that people can like their lives, and other people might think, oh, those poor people,

what awful lives they have. But the hope is that people don't have to think about their lives what we think about their lives.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Karl Taro Greenfeld, William T. Vollmann, thank you very, very much.

**WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN:** Thank you all very much, too.

**(applause)**