

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Jim Blackburn

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:02] Okay. Well, good morning.

David Todd [00:00:04] I'm David Todd, and I have the privilege of being here with Jim Blackburn.

David Todd [00:00:09] And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and education work on behalf of a non-profit group, the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a web site for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas here in Austin.

David Todd [00:00:32] And I want to emphasize that he would have all rights to use this recording as he sees fit. It is his.

David Todd [00:00:38] And I wanted to make sure that that's okay with you.

Jim Blackburn [00:00:41] Absolutely.

David Todd [00:00:42] Okay, great. Well, let's get started.

David Todd [00:00:46] Today is Tuesday, October 10th, 2023, and it is about 10:10 in the morning, Central Time.

David Todd [00:00:54] My name, as I said, is David Todd. I'm representing the non-profit Conservation History Association in Texas. I am in Austin.

David Todd [00:01:02] We are conducting a remote interview with Jim Blackburn, who is based in the Houston, Texas area.

David Todd [00:01:08] Mr. Blackburn is a well-known environmental lawyer and planner who studies and teaches at Rice University. He has written a number of books, including the books "Texas Bays" and "A Texas Plan for the Texas Coast", and also, with the painter Isabel Scurry Chapman, Mr. Blackburn has co-authored three other books - "Birds: A Collection of Verse and Vision", "Hill Country Birds and Waters: Art and Poems", and "Earth Church".

David Todd [00:01:38] And today I was hoping we might talked about his most recent work, "Earth Church". Earth Church chronicles the Virus Vigil, which was a correspondence that Jim had, along with Isabel, with some 700 people during the depths of the COVID outbreak between 2020, 2021, that period of time. And it features Mrs. Chapman's paintings and Jim's narratives and poems. I guess it's a little presumptuous of me, but I think that basically covers

sort of the spiritual connections among all life. He can certainly add a lot of details to that, but I hope I got the general gist correct.

Jim Blackburn [00:02:23] You got the gist.

David Todd [00:02:24] Okay, good. All right.

David Todd [00:02:25] Well, with that preamble out of the way, I thought we might just start with a few questions for Jim. And my first would be just to please explain the origins and goals of "Earth Church" and the Virus Vigil.

Jim Blackburn [00:02:42] Well, of course, the Virus Vigil comes out of the COVID virus. When I first heard about COVID, I was actually in Egypt and I was just starting on a trip down the Nile. Our boat had just left the dock. We were in the river coming downstream. And I got a call from, or I checked in with Rice to my senior professor, the chairman of the department, Phil Bedient.

Jim Blackburn [00:03:13] He said, "Blackburn, Where are you?" And I said, "Well, I'm in Egypt". He said, "Get out of there. Get out of there!" And I said, "Well, I can't get out of here. I'm on a boat". And he goes, we just had one of our I think it was a staff member that had come back from India, from Egypt, and was the first COVID case in Houston.

Jim Blackburn [00:03:34] And so, all of a sudden, I learned about COVID in a situation where I couldn't do much about it.

Jim Blackburn [00:03:41] Well, we managed to get back. We got back to the United States about a week before they shut the borders and really closed off international flights. And like everyone else, we were just absolutely kind of stupefied by what was happening and the newness of it.

Jim Blackburn [00:03:58] And I had collaborated with Isabel Scurry Chapman over the years. She's a wonderful artist. And I had walked into her art studio one day and said, "I can write some poems to go with those paintings you've got on your wall." And she said, "Well do it".

Jim Blackburn [00:04:13] So, we'd written a couple of books, and she had an inventory of paintings. And so she and I got to talking and we thought we would reach out. I mean, the thing about COVID was we were disconnected all of a sudden from friends, from family. No one knew what to do. There was no visitation. And so we just started reaching out by email. And we sent out every day one poem, well, a painting and a poem that went with the painting.

Jim Blackburn [00:04:41] And over time, she would send me, oh, a dozen, half a dozen paintings at a time, and I would write poems for them. And we did this for 365 days straight. So it was one year of every day, a poem and a painting. I will say that probably it wasn't world-class poetry every day by any stretch, but most of it involved nature in some way or another. That's the connection that Isabella and I had. She likes to paint birds, trees, things like that. And over the years I've had a spiritual connection with the natural system.

Jim Blackburn [00:05:21] And so as we kind of evolved this 365-day journey, I began to really kind of end every poem with "Welcome to Earth Church. Pull yourself up a pew, you know, hope that nature reveals itself to you", or something like that at the ending. And every

one of the endings - not every one, but most of the poems - ended with that type of Earth Church lyric.

Jim Blackburn [00:05:49] But I think it was to give continuity to the idea that this was about spirituality. It was about connection and spirituality. And my spirituality, my spiritual center, is the Earth. It's nature. So Earth Church is simply a representation of a spiritual place that I think many, certainly many of the people that were on the mailing list, agreed that nature was a spiritual center for them and enjoyed kind of reading about it, thinking about it, talking about it.

Jim Blackburn [00:06:22] And I think for too long we have left spirituality to the realm of religion and not necessarily something that each of us own and talk about freely and openly.

Jim Blackburn [00:06:35] And for me, I needed to quit drinking back in the eighties, and Galveston Bay became my higher power. And that's really where a lot of this comes from. The Texas coast is a higher power. Nature is a higher power, Earth is a higher power. And that's all spiritual.

David Todd [00:07:01] And so, that I guess sort of gives us an idea of the origins of the project. And what do you think you were trying to achieve? What were some of the goals that you thought might be achieved by going through this, this marathon of poetry writing and outreach to to your community?

Jim Blackburn [00:07:23] Well, I'm not sure that it was ever kind of formally conceived in any kind of serious way. I think it was really more of almost a spur of the moment attempt to connect. So I would say connection. In fact, I think according to word, "connectivity". You know, I wrote a poem about connectivity. So it was really about a time when connections had been denied to us, reaching out and making them happen.

Jim Blackburn [00:07:52] And so, in this way, Isabelle and I became connected with this group of 700 or so on the email list.

Jim Blackburn [00:08:02] And on occasions they would write back if a poem struck somebody particularly, or if a painting struck somebody.

Jim Blackburn [00:08:10] And then, of course, we ran through most of the birds we were familiar with fairly quickly, you know - 100 days or so. And you began to run a little short of birds. And it's hard to come up with 23 different poems for the various species of sparrow or warbler.

Jim Blackburn [00:08:28] So, we began to, and then Isabelle, you know, infused trees into it. Then we began to infuse animals into it - reptiles, toads, and as well as some kind of pictures of the universe and kind of depictions of the earthrise over the moon. And began to get perhaps more into the universe and into kind of the Earth's role in the universe.

Jim Blackburn [00:08:59] But it was really all about, really, the earth as the center of life as we know it. It is the only planet that we know, I think still, that we know there's life on, at least life like we know it.

Jim Blackburn [00:09:14] And I just don't think we get it. We don't appreciate life and living and the fact that the Earth is what gives us all of this. And we would not be, but for the

earth. And you know, I am, therefore I am. The Earth is, therefore I am me. You know, it's almost that fundamental.

Jim Blackburn [00:09:35] Yet, in our philosophy and our thinking, we seem to have lost that.

Jim Blackburn [00:09:41] And so, on the one hand, I think COVID was a time of fear, time of like I say, disconnection. We've been disconnected from the Earth for a long time. And so, I think it was almost like a plea for connections back not only to each other, but to the Earth.

David Todd [00:10:02] That helps. Thank you.

David Todd [00:10:06] So I was always struck by your messages, your poems and essays and the pictures of Mrs. Chapman's work of how, I'd like to say, generous you were towards Mrs. Chapman as sort of your muse and partner. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about her, her work and the connection you feel towards her.

Jim Blackburn [00:10:36] Well, we have a very, I think, interesting relationship. As a general proposition, she would send me paintings and then I would structure poems to go with the paintings. So in a way, she was leading us on this journey for 365 days, because I was responding to what she sent. Now, every so often, I would suggest I would like such and such or such and such. But by and large, I was letting her the art kind of take me.

Jim Blackburn [00:11:07] And so, if it came up with a picture, for example, of maybe a little chapel underneath a tree, a little shrine or something like that she had painted ...

Jim Blackburn [00:11:21] She and I went to India together along with her husband, John Chapman, who is one of my best friends. And she and John Chapman are best friends with my wife, Garland and myself. We've traveled to India numerous times and were really affected by the kind of just display of spirituality in rural India particularly. And I think her art begins to reflect that - very impacted with the relationship of the Indian people with nature.

Jim Blackburn [00:11:54] You know, you go to Africa and you're the only, you know, tourists are the only ones watching the animals in Africa. You go to a little wildlife park in India and you have to get there early because the Indians are going to be all over that park. So if you want to see it, you'd have to get basically get there before the locals do, which I loved, in the sense that, you know, these are places that the locals enjoy as much as the tourist enjoy. You know, it's that kind of infusion of a kind of almost living spirituality that we got from India that her art conveys.

Jim Blackburn [00:12:40] And then I get the chance to interpret it through words. And I just heard the most wonderful thing about Larry McMurtry talking about herding words, kind of comparing a writer to a cattle rancher. But writers herd words and I've kind of herded words and organized words to kind of express what I was seeing in her art.

Jim Blackburn [00:13:01] And it was just a fun kind of exercise. Yeah, it was a adventure in a way, in collaboration.

Jim Blackburn [00:13:12] But yeah, and she is, her art can be both extremely realistic and somewhat primitive. And sometimes when she got more primitive, it was, it evoked kind of more interesting things and, you know, you begin to think about life and what it is. And you begin to, you know, to delve into things that, you know, we probably don't sit around talking

about nearly as much as we perhaps ought to. But these are subjects that are oftentimes considered to be taboo, certainly spiritual in a religious sense, a lot of us just avoid those conversations because you can get into conflict very quickly, but spiritual in a sense of a kind of understanding our place in the universe, trying to make sense, bring some order to a kind of a chaotic view of spirituality.

Jim Blackburn [00:14:08] To me, that's where the Earth comes in and that's where the Earth is so central. And I just think that we've been missing some a central element in our philosophy and in our kind of way of life by failing to incorporate the Earth more fully into our concept of life and living.

Jim Blackburn [00:14:31] So, we got a chance to celebrate that.

David Todd [00:14:38] You know, it sounds like it was a conversation in a sense between you and Mrs. Chapman, but also this give and take and negotiation between yourself, Mrs. Chapman, and then this group of some 700 participants, you know, who are receiving these messages from the two of you. Can you say anything about that audience that you had that was also sort of participants as well?

Jim Blackburn [00:15:08] Yeah. Well, it really was participatory in the sense it was an email. So, certainly, you know, whoever received the email could always write back to Isabelle and myself. And I would say most days, you know, three or four people would respond, telling, you know, perhaps telling me that something that they either saw in the art or read in the poetry kind of struck them particularly.

Jim Blackburn [00:15:32] But I can remember probably one of the most fun experiences with the group as a whole was talking about kind of reincarnation. You know, we got into that part of spirituality and, you know, what is life energy? You know, upon death, does it disappear? Does it take another form, kind of, you know, those types of thoughts that people, like I said, don't normally talk about.

Jim Blackburn [00:16:01] So, I just sent out to the group, "if you're reincarnated, what animal would you like to come back as? You know, what part of Earth would you like to come back as?"

Jim Blackburn [00:16:09] And it was a, I mean, just a, the response was, I would say 50 to 100 of the audience of about six or 700 responded with what they wanted to be.

Jim Blackburn [00:16:22] And, it was the most wonderful kind of amalgam of different animals.

Jim Blackburn [00:16:31] One wanted to be a big old baobab tree with kids all over it.

Jim Blackburn [00:16:38] There was a woman that wrote about her memory in Germany during World War Two, and the plaintive cry of the nightingale. But how she loved that nightingale in the park and how meaningful it was to her.

Jim Blackburn [00:16:56] One wanted to come back as a rose bush at the Rothko Chapel.

Jim Blackburn [00:17:01] Just, you know, all types of different images. And it was fun. A lot of fun.

David Todd [00:17:10] Well, it is striking that that I think there was a sense of joy, although you're talking about very existential, deep things. I was struck by that myself.

David Todd [00:17:22] So, let's talk a little bit about the book itself.

Jim Blackburn [00:17:29] Okay.

David Todd [00:17:29] Chapter ten of your book, "Earth Church", discusses disappearing species. And I think it'd be great if you could read some of the poems from that section and maybe give a little description, some kind of narrative about the inspiration, the context for the poem. Because a lot of times it's rooted in prose maybe, and then you, you know, make things much more artistic and poetic when you add your poetry and Mrs. Chapman's artwork.

David Todd [00:18:01] So, the one I was hoping to start with might be the ivory-billed woodpecker chapter, which I think is on 226.

Jim Blackburn [00:18:15] 226.

David Todd [00:18:16] Yes.

Jim Blackburn [00:18:16] Yeah. The ivory-billed woodpecker. I mean, I got interested in the ivory-billed woodpecker because my law partner for probably 20 years, 25 years was Mary Carter. And she and a couple of her friends went to Arkansas to try to find the ivory-billed woodpecker when they had heard it had been found in some backwoods swamp in Arkansas. And of course, they went and did not find it.

Jim Blackburn [00:18:50] But all of the talk about the ivory-billed ... I was in Cuba, they were saying maybe there were still ivory bills in Cuba. But I grew up in central Louisiana. My parents were from central Louisiana. I actually grew up on the Rio Grande border, in Harlingen. My dad was a seed salesman down there.

Jim Blackburn [00:19:09] But my parents were from central Louisiana and we went back there. We spent many summers back in central Louisiana and spent most of the big holidays there.

Jim Blackburn [00:19:19] And I learned to hunt and to fish from my uncles and from my dad. And, but my uncles would take me out with them during the summer. My dad was working down in the Valley, but I was in Louisiana. And so Uncle Bun and Uncle L.E., Uncle Charles, they would all take me to all of these crazy swamp places because my grandfather Blackburn had been a foreman with the timber company that cut the cypress trees from the swamps back when that was first being harvested. And my daddy and his brothers spent a lot of time down in those bottom lands, and they knew it like the back of their hand.

Jim Blackburn [00:20:00] So, I really had a first-class nature education in these bottom lands.

Jim Blackburn [00:20:05] And I can remember, particularly my Uncle Charles. And, you know, he stuttered a bit. And, you know, he said, "You know, you know, Jim, there's a good, good, good God bird". And I said, "What?" And he said, "You know, 'like good God, look at that woodpecker'".

Jim Blackburn [00:20:24] And I think they he was describing the ivory-billed. It would have still been around in the thirties when they were down in those woods. And it really struck me.

Jim Blackburn [00:20:34] And of course, they were in East Texas.

Jim Blackburn [00:20:37] But this is a species that, at least as far as we know, has disappeared from the Earth. And the loss of a species is, it's a big deal. You know, it is the end of a strain of DNA. It is the end of an adaptation. It is the end of something that nature created and that, I guess, was formed by evolution.

Jim Blackburn [00:21:06] And it just strikes me ... I have litigated to protect endangered species. And it's a bit like having a death penalty case in criminal law because you're really fighting to preserve a species, the habitat that species relies upon. And I mean, it's a very serious undertaking.

Jim Blackburn [00:21:28] The Endangered Species Act is a very powerful act, but for good reason, because the threat is a very powerful threat.

Jim Blackburn [00:21:40] I've always been very careful about litigating under the Endangered Species Act because it is so, so strong. And, you know, there's always a fear in the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals out of New Orleans, which is where all of our Texas cases would be appealed to. They're the worst environmental circuit in the United States. So, there's a good chance that they could really strip the Endangered Species Act of its strength, if we aren't careful. So, there's always a bit of nervousness about one of those cases.

Jim Blackburn [00:22:14] But now in the case of the ivory-billed woodpecker, we never got a chance to litigate to protect it. And I think that is kind of what this poem is really about. Is really lamenting the fact that this is a species that's gone. It's been lost. And you know, that's, that's, that's a bad thing for us. It's a bad thing for me as a person who loves birds. That beautiful ivory bill on a huge woodpecker: something I'll never see.

David Todd [00:22:50] Yeah, very sobering.

David Todd [00:22:57] Well, you want to recite your poem for us?

Jim Blackburn [00:22:59] Sure. Let me. Let me give a shot at it, here.

David Todd [00:23:02] Thank you.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:03] The Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:05] I've heard the story about my uncles.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:08] When they were boys.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:10] A story about a bird they saw.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:11] Down in the Cocodrie swamp -

Jim Blackburn [00:23:13] A bird that my Uncle Charles called.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:15] The "Good God Woodpecker" as in.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:18] "Good God. Look at that woodpecker."

Jim Blackburn [00:23:20] It happened during the thirties,

Jim Blackburn [00:23:22] And I always wondered if they were talking.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:24] About the ivory billed.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:25] A magnificent bird that has been.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:27] Denied to me,

Jim Blackburn [00:23:29] A bird that I may never see,

Jim Blackburn [00:23:31] A bird that has apparently.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:32] Ceased to be.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:34] It's just not here anymore.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:36] It isn't simply that one specimen died,

Jim Blackburn [00:23:39] But instead, it's that an entire species.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:41] Has left the Earth.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:43] Left us with less,

Jim Blackburn [00:23:45] Left me wishing for the Good God.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:46] For whom it was named,

Jim Blackburn [00:23:48] The same good God with whom.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:50] I am angry.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:51] For letting us humans be so blind,

Jim Blackburn [00:23:54] For letting us destroy other living things.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:56] Without thought and without care.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:58] AAGHHHHHHHHH.

Jim Blackburn [00:23:59] Good God. I miss that woodpecker.

Jim Blackburn [00:24:04] Now, that's the ivory-billed woodpecker.

David Todd [00:24:09] A nice tribute.

Jim Blackburn [00:24:13] Well, while we're talking about big birds, maybe we could talk a little bit about a bird that you have managed to intervene on its behalf, the whooping crane, which I think is a happier story. I see it on page 228.

Jim Blackburn [00:24:36] Correct.

Jim Blackburn [00:24:41] Yeah. The whooping crane is a bird that's very, very dear to me. My friend Ann Hamilton was on the board of the International Crane Foundation, and we got involved in litigation involving the whooping cranes. And she introduced me to George Archibald, who was the founder of the International Crane Foundation and the one that taught Tex how to dance and basically seduce a mate. And they began to mate these, or to produce the whooping crane chicks in captivity.

Jim Blackburn [00:25:21] George Archibald and Ann Hamilton are a fascinating pair of human beings in their own right. But through their eyes, I got to really see and understand the whooping cranes.

Jim Blackburn [00:25:33] And it probably is one of the most meaningful kind of legal encounters and spiritual encounters I've ever had. So there is a huge part of my life that is just kind of, the whooping crane is a part of.

Jim Blackburn [00:25:51] And I would say that when my wife and I got married, on our first anniversary, which was back in '72, we went and saw the whooping cranes and took the good boat Whooping Crane out of the port that it had there at the Lamar Peninsula in Rockport. And I think it's Captain Brownie Brown, and his cat Hard Head was always sitting on the dashboard of the big old boat.

Jim Blackburn [00:26:20] And you know, so whooping cranes you know, are part of my, I guess, history. We were down to about 18, 19 cranes in the late thirties. We almost wiped them out. It almost went the way of the ivory-billed.

Jim Blackburn [00:26:39] But over the years, we managed to protect them and the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge being set aside was for the whooping crane. I think Franklin Roosevelt was the key to getting that land set aside.

Jim Blackburn [00:26:53] And then, more recently, I had a chance to litigate to protect the whooping cranes. We sued the State of Texas for their water policies that, we alleged in federal court, killed 23 whooping cranes in 2008, 2009 time period.

Jim Blackburn [00:27:16] And a wonderful federal judge, Janis Jack out of Corpus, was the most attentive federal judge I have ever been in front of. I probably did the best legal work of my career in defense of the cranes, and we won a huge case on behalf of the whooping cranes, you know, in her court, in her federal court in Corpus Christi.

Jim Blackburn [00:27:41] That case ended up being overturned by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, but very narrowly and frankly, I think impermissibly so. I think they violated a tenet of really appellate law because the Fifth Circuit judge Edith Jones reinterpreted the fact situation and basically disagreed with Judge Jack's factual assessment, which is really not the province of the appeal court.

Jim Blackburn [00:28:10] But we took it to the U.S. Supreme Court and they did not agree with us, or at least didn't feel like making a federal U.S. Supreme Court case out of it.

Jim Blackburn [00:28:19] And then it turned out we worked with the Guadalupe Blanco River Authority, one of the principal water users, and reached an agreement that, ultimately, will, I think, yield the same result we were trying to get through the litigation.

Jim Blackburn [00:28:36] Which is a very interesting kind of story.

Jim Blackburn [00:28:43] To some extent, it is almost more important to fight than to absolutely win, because by fighting, you indicate both the will and the capability to succeed. And I think we scared the water world of Texas absolutely to death with the fact that we won so big in federal district court.

Jim Blackburn [00:29:06] And it also says that there's ways to work together to get to a place. I think we had to litigate to get their attention. But I think once we got their attention, we were able to put together a compromise that I think in the long term will work very nicely for the future of whooping cranes.

Jim Blackburn [00:29:28] So, I think that success, both on a personal level and I think in a professional sense and certainly a success for the birds, which was the real, that was the real goal of this, was to protect the birds.

Jim Blackburn [00:29:42] And now the birds are, their numbers are up and they're expanding to other parts of the Texas coast. They're moving north into Matagorda Bay. And the poem in the Earth Church book is about seeing whooping cranes at Oyster Lake, which is really across Matagorda Bay from where they have historically been seen down in Espiritu Santo Bay and San Antonio Bay. This is a pretty far northward extension. And, you know, the cranes are using the marshes around Oyster Lake. We anticipate they'll be using the marshes all around Matagorda Bay. And there are those that think they may even expand up into Galveston Bay in the next 20 to 30 years, assuming that the trend continues. Right now, the trend looks good.

David Todd [00:30:38] [I have a new pen. The other one ran out of ink.]

Jim Blackburn [00:30:42] [I understand.]

David Todd [00:30:43] [You've got so much to say. I got so much to write down. All right.]

David Todd [00:30:46] So well, great. Let's hear your poem: The Whooping Cranes near Oyster Lake.

Jim Blackburn [00:30:54] The Whooping Cranes Near Oyster Lake.

Jim Blackburn [00:30:57] The fishing was finished, the day was done.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:00] The boat was flying back toward home,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:03] Waterbirds were moving here and there,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:04] All was peaceful, there was no care.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:07] Suddenly, friend Jack yells, "Look, whooping cranes, '.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:10] I thought he was kidding, playing games.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:12] But indeed, the whoopers were just flying along.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:16] This wasn't the right place, it just seemed wrong.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:19] But my how delightful it was to see them,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:21] These magical birds that rule any realm,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:24] Imagine them expanding to cover the coast.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:27] It would be stunning, it would be the most.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:30] I have been to court to protect this bird,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:33] I came to the judge and asked to be heard,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:35] And she listened and ruled with keen acumen.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:38] And the whole bird world gave a heartfelt "amen".

Jim Blackburn [00:31:42] My linkage - my connection - with these big birds is real,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:45] It is hard to describe how wonderful it feels.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:48] To meet a former client whose range is expanding.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:51] In spite of politicians and all the glad-handing.

Jim Blackburn [00:31:55] This is what Earth Church is all about,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:57] It's enough to make me stand up and shout,

Jim Blackburn [00:31:59] Of my love for cranes and nature and fish,

Jim Blackburn [00:32:02] Earth Church is my granted wish.

Jim Blackburn [00:32:05] So when I wish upon a star,

Jim Blackburn [00:32:07] It's for the whooping crane to come from afar,

Jim Blackburn [00:32:10] He'll meet my eyes and wave his arms,

Jim Blackburn [00:32:11] And help me forget about fears and harms.

Jim Blackburn [00:32:14] The Earth is my church, I shall not want.

Jim Blackburn [00:32:16] It is my food, it is my font.

Jim Blackburn [00:32:19] It saved me when it was needed most,

Jim Blackburn [00:32:21] And to some it's the same as the Holy Ghost.

Jim Blackburn [00:32:25] So welcome to Earth Church,

Jim Blackburn [00:32:27] Pull yourself up a pew.

Jim Blackburn [00:32:28] Go ahead and scoot over,

Jim Blackburn [00:32:30] A whooper's joining you.

David Todd [00:32:35] Nice to join you in Earth Church.

Jim Blackburn [00:32:38] Well, I would love to have a whooping crane next to me in church. I mean, that's my idea of a perfect church.

David Todd [00:32:46] Yeah, I could see the pews would be full of all sorts of creatures.

David Todd [00:32:52] Well, you go on in your book. There's more in store. I'd love to hear you talk about another creature that has had a lot of serious challenges. And that's the ocelot. You have a wonderful poem here on page 231 that I was hoping you could give us a little background for, and then maybe recite the poem.

Jim Blackburn [00:33:18] Sure. The ocelot, I mean, I've never seen an ocelot. I've known about them for a long time. There was a population that was known to be in existence at Laguna Atascosa refuge. And that's a refuge I knew from my days in the Rio Grande Valley as a kid. Growing up, I used to go there and birdwatch a lot back when I was in high school, and I love that refuge.

Jim Blackburn [00:33:45] And the ocelot is a small cat, maybe 20 or 30 pounds, long tailed. Mainly hunts at night. Moves and lives in the deep brush, and so South Texas brush, thorn brush, kind of low brush. I mean, this is the stuff that covers, you know, that make almost a impenetrable thicket is where these ocelots like to be.

Jim Blackburn [00:34:17] And, over the years, I kept hearing about these ocelots appearing in other places. And the way that they most frequently have been identified as been as roadkill, frankly, where, you know, they were found on a road. They'd been run over and they weren't supposed to be in this part of Texas, yet they were.

Jim Blackburn [00:34:42] And there is the Yturria ranch just kind of north of Raymondville and Mr. Yturria has been a kind of a wonderful steward for ocelots. He recognized. A lot of landowners for many years were scared of the Endangered Species Act and of identifying that they had endangered species on their property, not to the point where they would eradicate the species or anything like that, but they just didn't want anybody to know about it. They did not want U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coming in and doing surveys on their land because everyone feared this strong Endangered Species Act that I've been talking about.

Jim Blackburn [00:35:25] But what we have seen in the last, I'd say, decade, is an evolution occurring where now I think the ranchers are beginning to see that actually managing for endangered species may well be perhaps something that could be financially beneficial and that there may be, you know, certainly great rewards from a stewardship standpoint.

Jim Blackburn [00:35:50] But where it really became noticeable is once the kind of Eagle Ford shale, once the Midland oil play, the Permian Basin, began to really expand, we began to see pipelines being developed to, one, collect this oil and gas from these locations, and two, deliver it to the Texas coast.

Jim Blackburn [00:36:15] And I can remember being called and got involved with a lawyer named Jeff Mundy from Austin and who's an excellent litigator. And I always reached out to good litigators to help me when we were going into federal court. But a landowner called us and said that a pipeline company was going to come right through the middle of their property and they wanted us to fight. Hired me as an environmental lawyer. I brought Jeff Mundy in with me.

Jim Blackburn [00:36:44] And, you know, you kind of go, well, what have we got to fight with? And he said, "Well, you know, I think I've got this spotted cat on my property. And I said, "Well, perhaps that could be a useful piece of information".

Jim Blackburn [00:36:55] And ultimately we put some game cameras out. We got a picture or two of the ocelot. And with that, we could go into federal court and eventually force the pipeline not to come across the middle of the property, but to come down the edges of the property lines. So it didn't stop the pipeline per se, but it protected the integrity of the ranch.

Jim Blackburn [00:37:17] And the idea that something that had been considered a negative could be turned around into a real positive for private landowners in Texas, I think was a turning point.

Jim Blackburn [00:37:30] You know, like I say, there had been a lot of fear about endangered species showing up on your property. That was not something, I would say in the 1980s or 1990s that any rancher looked forward to.

Jim Blackburn [00:37:45] I think today we are developing a market for carbon dioxide being pulled out of the atmosphere and stored in brush, stored in the soil from prairie plants with the deep roots.

Jim Blackburn [00:38:01] And I think there will also be something called a biodiversity credit. And I think those ranches that are able to prove that they have ocelots may be able to offer a carbon credit to the market that has a biodiversity positive to it that might actually be as valuable as the carbon dioxide payment that they should be able to get in the future.

Jim Blackburn [00:38:28] So, I think we're in the process of seeing perhaps the economy begin to turn around and recognize values that we have never traditionally valued in our economic system.

Jim Blackburn [00:38:40] And I think this evolution with the ocelot is just one of a number of such kind of turns that are occurring. And to me, I would argue we should have been there from a spiritual standpoint, but we haven't been. And I don't necessarily criticize that. I would love it to be spiritual, but I can understand it not being.

Jim Blackburn [00:39:05] But if we can make it financial, if we can make it financially beneficial for ranchers and landowners to protect endangered species, to celebrate them, to identify them and say, "Hey, look, this ranch is friendly to endangered species, We're ocelot-friendly. We're jaguarundi-friendly. We're Houston toad-friendly."

Jim Blackburn [00:39:24] You know, any of those, you know, that would just be such a different conversation. And I think that is beginning to occur. So I would say that's one of the most optimistic things that I've seen is sort of this evolution. And again, I think money is at the center of it. You know, if we can get our economic system to reflect some of these natural values. Oh, gosh. I mean, I think that would be a game changer. And I think that is beginning to appear. And I'm optimistic that it can happen. Doesn't mean it will. But I certainly think that we are in a position to see some amazing things happen from an economic standpoint in the future. And I think the ocelot will benefit from it.

David Todd [00:40:10] Yeah, it sounds like there's the possibility of good things happening if the, you know, as you say, the economics and the spirit and the natural values all coincide in a better way.

Jim Blackburn [00:40:24] Yeah. Yeah. That is, I think, the ultimate desirable goal, is that coalescence of the spiritual and the financial, the ecological, the social, if you will, you know, where we begin to truly elevate these endangered species and make their protection part of our identity.

Jim Blackburn [00:40:47] You know, the world is less. I mean, I've done a lot of work with equity. And in a way, this is equity for all living things. And I guess, you know, on the one hand, you can probably take a concept like that too far, but on the other hand, it's just a way of thinking that we've never thought before.

Jim Blackburn [00:41:09] And, I mean, we're at the point where we can destroy species. We're at the point where humans have the ability to totally transform the earth. I mean, we've changed the atmosphere with carbon dioxide. We changed it with the chlorofluorocarbons that destroyed the ozone layer. I mean, we have that capability. Of course, nuclear weapons - we have the ability to wipe out most forms of life as we know it.

Jim Blackburn [00:41:37] Choosing not to do these things, choosing a different course, intentionally going a different direction. But, you know, those are the issues that humans have today that we've really never had at this scale. And I think these are issues about evolution of our species. And I think that there is the potential to evolve. I think there are tools that are in motion to help this evolution. But on the other hand, we could also fail in this.

David Todd [00:42:12] High stakes.

Jim Blackburn [00:42:13] I think, you know, but there are things that a lot of people may not think are high stakes. But I, I think the high stakes come from the subtleties of our relationship with Earth, and whether we can recognize and incorporate those quickly enough or not.

David Todd [00:42:35] Yeah. Well, and I guess the ocelot is a good example of all these different forces coming into play in a little 20-pound spotted cat in South Texas.

David Todd [00:42:46] So, read your, read your poem to us. That would be nice to hear.

Jim Blackburn [00:42:52] The ocelot.

Jim Blackburn [00:42:54] The elusive form moves in the dark,

Jim Blackburn [00:42:57] Ethereal, fluid, the spots are its trademark,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:01] Living in thickets, moving after twilight,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:03] With few humans ever getting a good sight.

Jim Blackburn [00:43:06] In Texas, this cat was almost eliminated,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:09] Mostly due to habitat being extirpated,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:12] One key for today is brushland corridors,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:15] If it's to avoid the fate of the dinosaurs.

Jim Blackburn [00:43:18] These cats moved from Mexico up the coast,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:20] And perhaps along rivers and creeks like a ghost,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:23] Always moving snake like below the branches,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:26] Hiding away in remote and quiet ranches.

Jim Blackburn [00:43:29] It's part of the fabric that it inhabits,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:32] Living off small mammals including rabbits,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:34] Evolved for the brush and so elusive,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:37] Wary of humans who can be abusive.

Jim Blackburn [00:43:40] Ocelots been known to need legal support,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:42] They are simply unable to protect their own fort,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:45] Today friend Jeff Mundy knows the tools to be used.

Jim Blackburn [00:43:48] To keep these cats from being abused.

Jim Blackburn [00:43:51] There are times where it is necessary to litigate,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:54] When a pipeline insists that the path must be straight,

Jim Blackburn [00:43:57] Proposing to take ocelot habitat pristine.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:01] Such power's misuse requires response clean and lean.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:05] There's a special place for species like this,

Jim Blackburn [00:44:07] In Earth Church liturgy, there's a special list.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:10] Of those species we will strive to maintain.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:13] To allow that being to stay in the game.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:16] There's no higher call that we can answer.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:18] Than to speak up against the spread of cancer.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:20] That we cause when we callously disregard.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:23] Those species that need us to be their guard.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:26] So welcome to Earth Church

Jim Blackburn [00:44:28] Pull yourself up a pew

Jim Blackburn [00:44:29] Where the sly ocelot

David Todd [00:44:31] Wants to friend you.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:34] That's the ocelot.

David Todd [00:44:36] Very nice.

David Todd [00:44:41] Well, so there are more elusive creatures out there that you have written about, thought about. One that's quite close to where you live, in at least its original habitat. And that's the Houston toad. *Bufo Houstonensis*.

Jim Blackburn [00:44:56] Bufo!

David Todd [00:45:00] Bufo! Tell us about Bufo.

Jim Blackburn [00:45:02] Oh, Bufo's wonderful.

Jim Blackburn [00:45:06] I mean, it's a toad. And it's an endangered species that's a toad.

Jim Blackburn [00:45:11] And the Houston Zoo has actually taken a major role in both the Houston toad and the Atwater's prairie chicken in trying to help these species recover by breeding and raising their young in captivity and then releasing them back into nature. And I think it's one of the kind of redesigns of zoos where they become essentially part of restoring ecological systems as well as being showcases for them. I think it's part of the evolution of zoos and their role in society, and I applaud it tremendously.

Jim Blackburn [00:45:56] Funny story: back in, I think probably the 1970s, the Endangered Species Act had just been passed. And one of the things you do under that act is to designate critical habitat. And so, critical habitat must be designated officially in the Federal Register. And as I remember it, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service posted some designated critical

habitat for the Houston toad that had already been developed in what I think was Sharpstown Center out on the Southwest Freeway in Houston.

Jim Blackburn [00:46:33] So Houston toad had definitely been there. They love wetlands. They love kind of wet, cool spots. And we had a lot of wetlands heading out west and southwest of Houston, and we had filled thousands of acres of these wetlands. But Fish and Wildlife wasn't quick enough on this designation. They have to move to more rural areas to find the Houston toad. And I think we got some in Bastrop County, we've got some in Grimes County. We've got some kind of in the upper watershed of Buffalo Bayou out by Cat Springs toward Columbus.

Jim Blackburn [00:47:12] And I think the way you find them basically is going out in the spring and listening and kind of hearing them call their mating calls and things like that.

Jim Blackburn [00:47:24] And I think, you know, again, from a value standpoint, if we're valuing biological diversity, those ranches, those farms that have Houston toads, that can prove they have Houston toads, I think there are those that will pay to protect those areas.

Jim Blackburn [00:47:45] And pay or not, I just love the idea that we do have a code name for Houston. You know, the best-kept secret about Houston is that we have fabulous ecological habitat around Houston. Houston doesn't talk much about ecology. I think if we were on the West Coast or the East Coast, it would be known to everybody in the world how wonderful our ecology is.

Jim Blackburn [00:48:11] But we have wetland systems all around, particularly, really all around Houston. And the Houston toad habitat is some of that really wonderful kind of wet, moist springs where springs come out of the ground on the side of a very small hill, kind of at the base of a small ditch. And the Houston toad that inhabits it just makes me smile. *Bufo Houstonensis*.

David Todd [00:48:51] Hmm. Well, it's nice that the Houston toad has an ally in the Houston Zoo and that there's some recognition from people like you, as well, of its value and its future.

David Todd [00:49:05] So, why don't you tell us a little bit about it through your poetry?

Jim Blackburn [00:49:10] The Houston Toad.

Jim Blackburn [00:49:12] Hi there, y'all. I'm *Bufo Houstonensis*,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:15] Another one of them endangered species,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:17] I no longer can be found in Houston town,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:20] I now have found much safer ground.

Jim Blackburn [00:49:22] I live in springs and seeps and bogs,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:25] It's there you'll find me and my polywogs,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:28] In counties named Austin, Bastrop and Fayette,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:31] We haven't been eradicated from there yet.

Jim Blackburn [00:49:34] When the federal government put me on the list,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:36] The Fish and Wildlife Service was a bit embarrassed,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:39] They designated my habitat on Houston's west side,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:42] Where urban sprawl had committed bufocide.

Jim Blackburn [00:49:45] We once could be found throughout Texas forests,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:48] We don't need much, our lives are modest,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:50] But I need private puddles that are wet year-round,

Jim Blackburn [00:49:55] My feet like to be on spongy soaked ground.

Jim Blackburn [00:49:58] You humans seem to like draining wetland areas.

Jim Blackburn [00:50:01] And requiring a wet home is a bit precarious,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:04] I'm hopeful you'll accommodate my special needs,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:07] And that I'll not be wiped out by human greed.

Jim Blackburn [00:50:10] Thankfully, the Houston Zoo folks took an interest,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:13] In captive breeding and they were persistent,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:16] Now they release thousands of eggs strands,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:17] It's nice being consistent with human plans.

Jim Blackburn [00:50:21] In the spring these days down in Austin County,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:24] The chorus can be heard singing loudly,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:26] Today, many males join in the competition,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:29] To see which female prefers which rendition.

Jim Blackburn [00:50:32] And here at Earth Church, we smile with affection,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:35] That Bufo Houstonensis had a population correction,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:38] And we thank the zoo for helping nature along,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:41] I hope to one day hear the Bufo song.

Jim Blackburn [00:50:45] So welcome to Earth Church.

Jim Blackburn [00:50:46] Pull yourself up a pew,

Jim Blackburn [00:50:49] Here we work for all species

Jim Blackburn [00:50:50] Including you too.

Jim Blackburn [00:50:53] That's Bufo.

David Todd [00:50:56] Well, Bufo is a great preamble to this next animals I was hoping you could talk about, the Attwater prairie chicken, also once found in Houston, as I understand it, and another beneficiary of work at the Houston Zoo and elsewhere to try to reintroduce them. Can you tell us a little bit more about the prairie chicken and maybe recite some poetry as well?

Jim Blackburn [00:51:21] Sure.

Jim Blackburn [00:51:22] Attwater prairie chicken, again, is an endangered species. It's a wonderful bird. I have a friend, B.C. Robison, who used to write for the, I think, for the Post before it became the Chronicle, the Houston Post. But he was an outdoor writer. And he and his wife and Garland and I and some other friends went to Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge out kind of, southwest of Sealy, out toward Eagle Lake. And we went to see the booming.

Jim Blackburn [00:52:01] And in the spring, the males gather, well, the males gather and compete, and the females kind of gather and watch. The birds go through this booming celebration where they've got big orange sacks under their bills, kind of coming out of their necks. And they inflate those sacks and then they drum their feet on the ground and move their feet tremendously fast. And there's this weird sound that kind of pervades the prairie right at dawn.

Jim Blackburn [00:52:38] And it is one of the most interesting spiritual events that I've ever experienced - to be out there on the prairie with the booming of the prairie chickens.

Jim Blackburn [00:52:52] There was a group of them that managed to live down in the Clear Lake area down where NASA was. I think Nature Conservancy had a refuge down there that for many years held a population, but they got wiped out by one of the hurricanes that came through. Very precarious living right on the edge of the coast.

Jim Blackburn [00:53:12] And really the Attwater Prairie Chicken Reserve is I think, the main place where we have prairie chickens these days - Attwater prairie chickens. There are other prairie chickens up in the Great Plains and in the Amarillo area up in that part of the world.

Jim Blackburn [00:53:32] But these are, this is a different species. This one is definitely endangered.

Jim Blackburn [00:53:38] And one of the problems is that they are very much preyed upon by almost every predator out there. And I think fire ants have taken their toll as well. So there's just all sorts of kind of forces against this animal, or this bird - not the least of which is habitat conversion.

Jim Blackburn [00:54:01] But, I mean, they were shot for many years. I mean, they are chicken-like. Having never eaten one, I would presume they probably taste a bit like a chicken.

Jim Blackburn [00:54:13] But, you know, the coyotes love them. The hawks and the eagles would prey upon them. You know, most any type of predator will find something and the eggs are open to being taken by snakes. And they nest on the ground. So, I mean, they are highly vulnerable.

Jim Blackburn [00:54:35] And the Houston Zoo, again, much like what they're doing with the Houston toad, they are raising chicks in captivity and releasing them. And, you know, some of those will make it. It's, again, hard enough if you're born in the wild to make it and if you're born in the zoo and then transported out there, it's not an easy transition. But they work with them. They and I think they're getting better at kind of the how to do it. But again, it is not an easy process.

Jim Blackburn [00:55:12] But my great memory of the Attwater prairie chicken is that booming, that morning of booming where we watched them. And it was fabulous.

Jim Blackburn [00:55:24] Also another funny story about prairie chickens: we had a friend from Mobil Oil Company and I was telling you about that piece of land Nature Conservancy had - well, they got it from Mobil Oil. And back when it was still in Mobil's hands, Roger Tory Peterson, who is one of the great bird watchers. He wrote the Peterson's Book of Texas Birds. Roger Tory Peterson called up Mobil and asked if he could come and see their prairie chickens.

Jim Blackburn [00:55:50] And so, this friend of ours that worked for Mobil said he was in charge of having Roger Tory Peterson out there. And got there before daylight. Hear them booming out there. And Roger Tory Peterson jumps out of the car and immediately falls into a ditch. And this guy said, "You know, my whole vision was I was the guy from Mobil Oil that killed Roger Tory Peterson".

Jim Blackburn [00:56:13] And so, you know, birdwatching is, you know, a contact sport. But, of course, Roger Tory Peterson jumped right up. He was perfectly okay. But I can just, I mean, I just chuckle, you think about these oil companies trying hard to do the right thing and then, you know, some accident like that occurs and you go, "Oh, my God, what have we done?" You know, a little Texas humor.

Jim Blackburn [00:56:42] Okay. How about a poem?

David Todd [00:56:45] Please.

Jim Blackburn [00:56:47] The Attwater Prairie Chicken.

Jim Blackburn [00:56:49] We got up early one morning long ago.

Jim Blackburn [00:56:53] To meet B.S. Robison and go see the show,

Jim Blackburn [00:56:56] We were heading to the prairie near Eagle Lake,

Jim Blackburn [00:56:58] Downing the coffee to keep us awake.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:01] We met a few others at refuge headquarters,

Jim Blackburn [00:57:04] Assembling like a platoon awaiting their orders,

Jim Blackburn [00:57:07] Then in a caravan to the booming ground to await the sun and that intriguing sound.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:12] I'm not sure exactly what I'd expected.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:14] As the first rays of the sun we detected,

Jim Blackburn [00:57:17] I remember the cold penetrating my jacket,

Jim Blackburn [00:57:20] And then we received the strangest racket.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:23] The woohooohoo came low and discreet.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:26] And then the boomboomboom from the pounding feet.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:29] We could all clearly see the inflated orange neck.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:32] Hornfeathers up and feet pounding like heck.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:36] To this day, I remember the magical ambiance.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:39] A prairie enshrouded in the sound of the dalliance,

Jim Blackburn [00:57:42] The male of the species working hard for a mate.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:46] The ladies evaluating who to pick for a date.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:49] And later that morning at the Blue Goose Cafe,

Jim Blackburn [00:57:51] Eating the best pancakes from a prairie gourmet.

Jim Blackburn [00:57:55] And talking with friends and enjoying good company,

Jim Blackburn [00:57:58] The morning's adventure ending just wondrously.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:01] And now, looking back on that wonderful experience.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:03] I can still hear the sound so eerie and mysterious.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:07] The whole native prairie was part of an opera,

Jim Blackburn [00:58:09] A meditation to be invaded by Deepak Chopra.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:14] Tympanuchus cupido is the scientific name.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:17] For the drumming Cupid a prairie thing,

Jim Blackburn [00:58:19] A bird that is seriously now in decline.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:22] For good prairie habitat is hard to find.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:25] So welcome to Earth Church.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:27] Pull yourself up a pew,

Jim Blackburn [00:58:28] Say a prayer that the prairie chicken.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:30] Will boom for you.

Jim Blackburn [00:58:33] That's Attwater's prairie chicken.

David Todd [00:58:36] You know, one thing I always like, and I hope you don't mind if I do a little personal aside, is that these poems are very personal to experiences that you've had with friends in, you know, places sometimes long ago with your wife. And it really makes these resonate as something that's very meaningful, not just to the rest of us that, you know, enjoy reading them, but to you. So thanks for sharing them.

Jim Blackburn [00:59:06] For sure. I mean, that's kind of, I mean, I really write for myself. It's kind of a form of therapy. You know, my spirituality is something that has helped me enjoy living life. And I celebrate it first and foremost for myself. I'm very grateful that I have found this outlet and this direction. And it's pretty cool.

David Todd [00:59:35] Well, thanks for wrangling those words for us and for yourself.

David Todd [00:59:39] So, your next rodeo is, I guess, about the black-capped vireo. And perhaps you can tell us, give us a little introduction to what the vireo has meant to you. And then also maybe how you've lent it some poetry.

Jim Blackburn [00:59:56] Sure. My wife and I went in with her sister and brother-in-law and bought a little place in the Hill Country back in 1975. And we've since bought out the sister and brother-in-law. And Garland and I have this place in the Hill Country that we just dearly love. It's a small, little, little place. It's just a little hideaway. I do a lot of writing up there and I've gotten to know a lot of the different species up there, and they're quite different from coastal species. You know, we've got the turkey family that lives down by the dam and we've got the chickadees and the vireos, the white-eyed vireos, that we've got, the titmouse and, of course, the cardinals and all of them that come by the feeders.

Jim Blackburn [01:00:51] And they're kind of, I like to consult with them about, you know, kind of how life is going on. And they're kind of my kitchen cabinet up in the Hill Country. And, you know, it's just fun to sit back and enjoy them and listen to them.

Jim Blackburn [01:01:07] And there are two species. The black-capped vireo has actually been taken off the endangered species list. At the time that we wrote this, they were still an endangered species. And but the black capped vireo is one of the species. The other is the golden-cheeked warbler. And the golden cheeks are around our place. Black caps are a little more elusive, a little bit further to the west, and I don't see them nearly as much.

Jim Blackburn [01:01:38] But just the idea of these endangered species once again trying to make it, trying to find their way in a world that has sort of left them behind. It's again, a reminder of the fragility of life, that things can change on you. And you thought you were doing quite well and then maybe, maybe you weren't.

Jim Blackburn [01:02:06] And we, as humans, having an obligation in that equation and trying to figure that out: how should we handle these types of conflicts, these intercepts. So I think it's a highly difficult issue.

Jim Blackburn [01:02:24] So, the black-capped vireo is one. I had a former client, an artist named Pat Johnson from Fayetteville. And I've got a picture that she made of three black-capped vireos, kind of playing marbles with acorns. And it's a picture that makes me smile every time I look at it. And, you know, but this idea that species can have fun, that species have needs, just kind of putting your head into the head of an animal, of a bird, of a reptile, and just trying to kind of trade places a little bit and in a way, playing reincarnation, if you will. Can you put yourself in that other living thing's place?

Jim Blackburn [01:03:17] I mean, I think this word, "being", is a very interesting word. To me, all of these creatures are beings, whereas a lot of people think the only beings are really humans. I think once our value set incorporates all of living things, even trees, as beings, it could be a very different world, or it certainly could be. These are things that intrigue me.

Jim Blackburn [01:03:52] I don't see this, I don't see this becoming law anytime soon. Nor do I think it should. But I think it's a part of philosophy. I think it's a part of ethics. And I think it's a part of kind of learning to, again, be an Earth citizen. I don't think we talk enough about that.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:15] So, how about the black-capped vireo?

David Todd [01:04:18] Yes, please.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:21] The Black-capped Vireo.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:23] Walking near Lone Man Creek.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:25] In the Texas Hill Country in late spring.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:29] The rains came to the Hill Country last week -

Jim Blackburn [01:04:31] Soaking, penetrating rains, bringing water.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:34] That found seams within the limestone shelves -

Jim Blackburn [01:04:38] Seams that slowly leak life-giving water.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:41] That is open and available to the small vireo.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:44] With the black cap that flits down.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:46] To the natural cup and drinks.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:47] The life-giving elixir.

Jim Blackburn [01:04:49] A vireo that has a special status,
Jim Blackburn [01:04:52] A vireo that is labeled by our actions,
Jim Blackburn [01:04:54] A very old that ENDANGERED.
Jim Blackburn [01:04:57] I visualize this lovely living thing sipping.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:00] And see the essence of life,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:02] The essence of existence.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:03] On this beautiful place we call Earth,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:05] A place inhabited by a magical spirit,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:08] A force called life -
Jim Blackburn [01:05:10] Something that exists nowhere else but here.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:12] On Earth that is my church -
Jim Blackburn [01:05:14] Life that is fragile,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:15] Life that is a flame needing tending.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:18] And I get it - loud and clear.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:21] Today I am calling all, calling you.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:23] To be a keeper of the flame of life,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:25] Protector of things endangered,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:27] Protector of those that are under attack,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:31] Protector of those unable to protect themselves,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:34] Protector of the DNA that holds the key to life.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:38] And to protect this endangered vireo,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:40] We must provide food, water and shelter -
Jim Blackburn [01:05:43] Save the springs of seeps,
Jim Blackburn [01:05:44] Protect the oak cedar scrub.
Jim Blackburn [01:05:46] And give life a chance.

Jim Blackburn [01:05:48] So simple and yet so hard.

Jim Blackburn [01:05:51] And at night the black capped one lands.

Jim Blackburn [01:05:54] Within my dreams and wraps me in his wings.

Jim Blackburn [01:05:57] And says thank you.

David Todd [01:06:01] It's nice to think that there's some gratitude out there. I know you do this for your own reasons, but I hope that you feel like the natural world appreciates it. I guess you, I hope you sense that.

David Todd [01:06:16] I'm curious about sort of the format of this coin, which seems a little bit different. The stanzas are not your usual four line couplet.

Jim Blackburn [01:06:28] Right.

David Todd [01:06:28] And I'm curious if that is something that was intentional or just sort of coincidental.

Jim Blackburn [01:06:33] Well, I'm not I mean, I don't know that I necessarily intended to do this poem that way. I think that some poems - I don't spend a lot of time on these poems. They come quickly. And sometimes it's just a chain of consciousness. So when I do these kind of blank verse, the unlined verse and there's a fair number of those, particularly in the Virus Vigil itself, there were some. And in the two poem books I had done with Isabel before, those were mainly blank verse. So I kind of came from that.

Jim Blackburn [01:07:11] But I found that during the Virus Vigil, the readers enjoyed the rhyme more than the blank verse. I think the rhyme is, I think, more accessible. I think people smile more with the rhyme. There's sort of a bit of a game to the rhyming. It also makes for kind of disjointed poetry on occasion. You know, you end up forcing rhyme and, or you let the rhyme sometimes take you as to how you express something. Whereas the poem I just read was just following a visual sequence without worrying about the alchemy of the combination of the words from a rhyming standpoint, but more from my intentionality standpoint.

Jim Blackburn [01:08:07] A lot of times a blank verse conveys a concept better than the rhyme does. So sometimes if I want to say something, it's just easier to say it by just doing a chain of consciousness. You know, JUJUJU, you write it down and move on.

Jim Blackburn [01:08:24] Because, I mean, keep in mind, we were doing a poem a day, a painting a day. I mean, Isabelle's art was amazing, for as many paintings as she produced. The poetry, I'm not so sure I kept up that high standard that Isabel had. Not every one of these were fabulous, and there were some that were probably downright bad. But, but, you know, you know, when you're doing that many, that fast, sometimes a blank verse was a nice break.

David Todd [01:08:59] Well, I've certainly enjoyed them. You're very modest about them.

David Todd [01:09:06] So, we've toured the countryside. And I think that this next narrative and poem that I was hoping you could tell us about maybe goes out in the Gulf and out in the deep ocean - the Kemp's ridley sea turtle. Could you give us a little context to that creature and then maybe read the poem that you wrote?

Jim Blackburn [01:09:32] Sure. Well, I love to fish. I grew up hunting and fishing, and many years ago I decided hunting was not something I was interested in continuing. But I still enjoyed fishing. Fishing was kind of in my DNA, I guess you'd say, from the beginning. And I just saw a picture the other day, I think, of me. I was three or four years old, running around with a little perch on the end of a hook and line. You know, I get great, great enjoyment from fishing.

Jim Blackburn [01:10:09] And, you know, I birdwatch when I fish.

Jim Blackburn [01:10:15] Never, never got a motorboat. We fish out of kayaks. We carry our kayaks to somewhere along the bay. And if we can't drive to it, then we're not going to fish there. And so there's a lot of times there's not a lot of choice of where to go. And it's not always beautiful water, but you fish where you fish, you know, or where you can get to. And in a kayak, I mean, you know, you can paddle a few miles, but you know, you're not going to paddle 20 miles and go fish somewhere and then decide to pick up and go 20 miles in another direction. That just doesn't happen.

Jim Blackburn [01:10:51] So, you really get to where you learn the habitat. I love the marsh on the Texas coast. I just absolutely think it's wonderful.

Jim Blackburn [01:11:00] And the birds that are in it - the willet, the great blue heron, the egrets, the rail that you see every now and then. Gosh, just, you know, to me, there's nothing better than putting a kayak into a bay at daylight and just taking a deep breath, and boy, that feels good having.

Jim Blackburn [01:11:24] And then, you know, every now and then you see some really unique things.

Jim Blackburn [01:11:27] One of the funniest things I ever saw, and one of my favorite places to fish is Christmas Bay, which is on the far south end of Galveston Bay System. And I'll never forget. Certain times of the year, there's perhaps several wadefishermen that kind of wade out from the shoreline. And wadefishing is a kind of longstanding tradition on the Texas coast. And of course, with a kayak, you can paddle somewhere, and then you can tie your kayak to your fishing belt and then wade and fish. And so the kayak offers the best of both worlds.

Jim Blackburn [01:12:03] But there was a group of white fishermen out in the bay, kind of a line of them. And I was kind of watching them come near. And all of a sudden I saw them part. And, you know, that was an unusual thing. You know, clearly something was going on. I kind of wandered over there. And a rattlesnake was swimming through. And I promise you, fishermen will part for a rattlesnake.

Jim Blackburn [01:12:29] And we don't see many. We know rattlesnakes are around. I mean, they're, you know, if you've got high ground, certainly after a hurricane, if there's a brush pile anywhere, I mean, it's going to be full of rattlesnakes. You just don't go poking around brush piles along the coast in the marsh.

Jim Blackburn [01:12:48] The marsh itself doesn't have snakes because it's saltwater.

Jim Blackburn [01:12:53] But those rattlesnakes are going to be at the edges and then at the high ground.

Jim Blackburn [01:12:58] But you know, I always kind of keep an eye out, ever since I saw that, I always got to keep my eyes open.

Jim Blackburn [01:13:04] And one day I was out fishing and I saw a head pop up nearby. And I've started to go, "Oh!" And then I realized, "No, no, that's different". And it was a Kemp's ridley sea turtle. And I was fishing with a sea turtle. And that sea turtle swam around me for about 20 or 30 minutes. And its head would bob up every so often.

Jim Blackburn [01:13:26] And I'd seen Kemp's ridleys on occasion. I've never really seen them nesting on the beach. And they do nest. We're at the far end of their nesting range. South Padre is a better place for nesting, but the best place is down in Mexico.

Jim Blackburn [01:13:41] But they are endangered species and I saw a lot of them at Port Aransas at the jetty, not at Port Aransas, but down the coast where the Corpus Christi, there's a channel that comes across North Padre Island, just across from Corpus Christi. And one day I was there and saw about 20 or 30 Kemp's ridleys feeding on the algae on all of the rocks. And they're neat.

Jim Blackburn [01:14:12] But to actually be wade fishing with a sea turtle, and an endangered sea turtle, that was pretty cool. And it really struck me as one of those unique moments that, you know, it doesn't happen often. I mean, it has never happened before or since. So it was really one of those really unique things.

Jim Blackburn [01:14:33] Now, my friend Bill Balboa at the Matagorda Bay Foundation, whenever we have a big freeze, he'll go out in a boat and try to rescue turtles that are stunned by the freeze. And I mean, we have turtles in our bays, but you just don't see them very often. And so this was a very special sighting.

Jim Blackburn [01:14:53] And so here's the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle.

David Todd [01:14:59] Thank you.

Jim Blackburn [01:15:00] Wade fishing in Christmas Bay's a delight,

Jim Blackburn [01:15:02] You come in the dark and walk in at first light,

Jim Blackburn [01:15:05] The bay surface is mellow, flat and smooth,

Jim Blackburn [01:15:08] The wind's not up yet, just a breeze to soothe.

Jim Blackburn [01:15:12] I'm wading along, gently shuffling my feet,

Jim Blackburn [01:15:15] Alerting the stingray that I'd rather not meet.

Jim Blackburn [01:15:18] When I suddenly notice movement beside me,

Jim Blackburn [01:15:20] But when I look over, there's nothing to see.

Jim Blackburn [01:15:23] I keep wading and fishing and glimpse it again,

Jim Blackburn [01:15:26] And I focus attention to the right and reel in,
Jim Blackburn [01:15:27] And stay very still for a minute or two,
Jim Blackburn [01:15:31] And a Kemp's ready sea turtle's revealed on cue.
Jim Blackburn [01:15:36] I take several minutes and experience it moving,
Jim Blackburn [01:15:38] It comes ever closer as if it's approving.
Jim Blackburn [01:15:41] Of my coming to live life with it today,
Jim Blackburn [01:15:44] It's a great welcome sign here on Christmas Bay.
Jim Blackburn [01:15:47] I look at the sky and the pelicans are coming,
Jim Blackburn [01:15:49] The water explodes, the baitfish are running.
Jim Blackburn [01:15:52] From the school of trout that has come to feed,
Jim Blackburn [01:15:53] Mullet flying from the water in a burst of speed.
Jim Blackburn [01:15:57] Now, this is why I come to the bay,
Jim Blackburn [01:15:59] To encounter memories I can take away,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:01] And hours later when I've returned to town,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:05] I'm in a great place, feet not yet on the ground.
Jim Blackburn [01:16:08] And at night in bed when sleep is hard to find,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:10] The Kemp's ridley comes, joining my mind,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:13] Telling me we had such a nice bay encounter.
Jim Blackburn [01:16:16] Two beings intersecting, trading live power.
Jim Blackburn [01:16:20] Christmas Bay's a temple where I come to pray,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:22] Gratitude overwhelms when I went in my bed I lay.
Jim Blackburn [01:16:26] The turtle and Earth Church put on quite a show,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:29] It gold for me - the best place I know.
Jim Blackburn [01:16:32] So welcome to Earth Church,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:34] Pull yourself up a pew,
Jim Blackburn [01:16:36] Here a Kemp's ridley sea turtle.

Jim Blackburn [01:16:37] May befriend you too.

Jim Blackburn [01:16:40] That's the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle.

David Todd [01:16:43] Wow. Such a magical thing, you know, having this sort of sharing, trading life power between a bipedal mammal and then this ancient, you know, seagoing reptile. That's amazing how you bridge that. I appreciate you reading it.

Jim Blackburn [01:17:04] Well, I mean it is, it's, it's literally something I feel, and I've come to feel. It's, it's almost like having a sense that you just kind of hone over time and, you know, I've felt these connections. I mean, I just went to the hawk migration last weekend at Smith Point and felt that with these migrating hawks that are moving through and they're like marathoners coming out. And Smith Point is kind of like a turning point where they have to go back up and around the bay and kind of just greeting them and cheering them on. Saying, yeah, okay. Good to see you today. And, you know, I kind of make it a point to go out there once a year and kind of wave at them and, you know, don't always see a lot, but sometimes it's just dragonflies, which I'm also happy to see.

Jim Blackburn [01:17:59] But, you know, it's like there's not a bad day when you've got the right attitude about things.

Jim Blackburn [01:18:05] You know, birdwatching to me has never been about a life list. It's been about an encounter. It's been about an interaction. It's been about a spiritual mingling with a bird, with a flock of birds, with a group of birds, with many several species, or one species.

Jim Blackburn [01:18:26] I'll never forget running across Victor Emanuel leading a group. And I've known Victor for a long time and think very highly of him as a person, both as a person and as a professional birdwatcher. And he was raving on about a grackle. And I just thought how wonderful that is. This is a man who's gone all over the world looking at the most exotic birds, and he can find pleasure and something wonderful about a plain grackle. Now, I just think that is just wonderful.

Jim Blackburn [01:19:00] And I think a lot of bird watchers, unfortunately, kind of miss that aspect of bird watching. They get a little obsessive about a life list and not so much about enjoying it, and kind of having a relationship with the birds and with the habitat and kind of, you know, I think they miss the spiritual side. And I'd like to see more of that kind of conveyed in what we do and how we think.

David Todd [01:19:27] You know, I was, I've been sort of struck by how all these poems and the narratives sort of celebrating this connection of life and recognizing all the deep good that is there in that connection. And yet I thought it was curious that this outpouring of thought and feeling and spirituality comes from this, I mean, I think one of the triggers at least, was this, this pretty nasty virus, you know, that we're connected to...

Jim Blackburn [01:19:58] No question about it.

David Todd [01:19:58] But it's dangerous. And I was hoping that you might talk a little bit about, you know, our friend, COVID.

Jim Blackburn [01:20:06] Well, we actually did a poem about COVID, and there's an image of COVID that Isabel wrote. I don't know where it is in this book, but it's somewhere in here, I think.

David Todd [01:20:18] Page 12 maybe? Is there one there?

Jim Blackburn [01:20:22] Let's see. The Virus. Yeah. Let's see if it's there.

Jim Blackburn [01:20:27] But I think, you know, COVID was fascinating in so many ways. It caught us by surprise. But, you know, on the one hand, I feel like society was unprepared for this. And I kind of remembered, reminded a bit of the War of the Worlds where I think bacteria killed the invading aliens. You know, these little microbes can, these viruses can take down a whole civilization. I mean, you know, it shut us down. I mean, it basically altered the world. I think none of us that lived through it will fail to remember the COVID time.

Jim Blackburn [01:21:15] But it also gave us, I mean, you know, we didn't go to work. We were at home. We were working. I worked from a desk in my porch outside at home. I did things I would have never done. And I think I had time I would not have had otherwise.

Jim Blackburn [01:21:35] So, in many respects, it was a very interesting kind of pause, and one from which we came out probably heading in a little different direction than we were before it happened. Probably, you know, in some ways, I think business has forever been transformed. A lot of people don't think they need to go to work anymore. They can work from home. I think that's a direct relationship from COVID.

Jim Blackburn [01:22:01] But Isabelle painted the virus as a, it's a beautiful image of a multi-colored virus. And I think there were those that felt that she was a little too celebratory in her appreciation of the beauty of the virus. But she said she didn't want to paint it just one color because that would make that color bad. And so she painted it all colors. So we've got a green one, an orange one, a pink one, a blue one, a purple one, etc., just because she didn't want to isolate one color being the virus color.

Jim Blackburn [01:22:37] But, kind of with a nod to Mick Jagger, I'll read this poem if you'd like.

David Todd [01:22:49] I'd love that. Thank you.

Jim Blackburn [01:22:51] The Virus.

Jim Blackburn [01:22:52] Please allow me to introduce myself,

Jim Blackburn [01:22:54] I'm a charlatan who can morph itself,

Jim Blackburn [01:22:57] I'm what you're all concerned about,

Jim Blackburn [01:22:58] That you should fear me - have no doubt.

Jim Blackburn [01:23:01] I'm the nasty little virus that's crippled the nation,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:04] And also set off a global conflagration,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:07] I'm the economy's worst nightmare and yours as well,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:10] If I were alive, you'd be. I'd be going to hell.

Jim Blackburn [01:23:14] But I'm told that I'm not technically alive,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:17] I'm not sure that I care - I seem to survive,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:18] I've an RNA genome, but have no cells,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:23] I use yours to reproduce and ring all the bells.

Jim Blackburn [01:23:26] I'm susceptible to my body being dissolved,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:28] So your attempts to stop me must be evolved,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:30] Vodka won't work for there's not enough alcohol,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:34] But a 60% solution will answer the call.

Jim Blackburn [01:23:38] Now soap's the real killer so to speak,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:39] It causes my body to spring a leak,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:42] The soap takes the fat and peels it away,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:44] The longer the contact the more I pay.

Jim Blackburn [01:23:47] I love those folks who despise the mask,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:49] That makes my transmission an easier task,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:52] Your desire to mingle is my ticket to ride,

Jim Blackburn [01:23:55] On your statements of choice, I will glide.

Jim Blackburn [01:24:00] I love the leaders who don't take me seriously,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:02] And adopt a style of acting imperiously,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:05] I relish the disdain of knowledge and science,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:07] My success depends upon the people's defiance.

Jim Blackburn [01:24:11] I'm a self-centered virus yet feeling disrespected,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:13] This poem's not at all what I expected,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:16] Rather than celebrating me and my skills,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:18] This poem's about your people and their ills.

Jim Blackburn [01:24:21] So welcome to Earth Church,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:22] Pull yourself up a pew,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:24] We're all about science here,

Jim Blackburn [01:24:26] And you should be too.

Jim Blackburn [01:24:29] So, I am a scientist. I believe in science. I love the things that are not scientific. I get tickled with my friends that are in artificial intelligence and that are really super sophisticated from a technical standpoint, and they're into the next generation of supercomputers and how this kind of new physics will emerge. And this one guy, says, "You know, everything is ones and zeros except for love and spirituality". And that's where I like to play - in the area that's not ones and zeros. I love science. I love technology. I love, I mean, science, I think is where I'm kind of I found a real direction in life with science.

Jim Blackburn [01:25:28] And I think as a lawyer, as an environmental lawyer, I was a better scientist than I was a lawyer, which served me extremely well. You know, you got the environmental science degree as well. And you know that good generalist knowledge of science is something that as a lawyer was just absolutely irreplaceable for me. I didn't need to have experts with me all the time. I could converse with scientists. It's powerful.

Jim Blackburn [01:25:57] But so is the stuff that's not scientific, the stuff that you can't prove. That's the realm of poetry. That's the realm of the spiritual.

David Todd [01:26:12] I love that there's this element in life that you, you, you can't foresee, you can't predict, you can't really know and get your arms around. And, you know, sometimes it knocks us upside the head like COVID did. So it's a humbling thing.

Jim Blackburn [01:26:32] Well, and I mean, that's kind of in a way, gratitude and humility, I think, are two wonderful words that are, I think, poorly understood and seldom used. You know, I hear so many people complaining. Of course, I'm getting older now. You know, and older people complain a lot. You know, God, you know, your body's not working as well as it used to. You know, your aches and pains, your whatever.

Jim Blackburn [01:27:01] But, you know, to be grateful for being alive, to be grateful to be able to go out and meet the hawks on migration, to be grateful about seeing a dragonfly, you know, having a flower that blooms beautifully and that you can reach down and smell.

Jim Blackburn [01:27:20] I just, the other day I was having a bad day, and kind of walking along with my head down, kind of, BLAH, you know. And then I saw a pecan and I picked it up and started looking at it and then realized it had rained. The pecan had come out of the tree. Grass is growing. And then I found a bur oak acorn. Then I found a live oak acorn. And all of a sudden I had three things in my hand and I was rich.

Jim Blackburn [01:27:49] And my mood changed, just that fast. Just because I actually just paid attention to life and living things. And it takes me from negative places to positive places. And I think that's something I would hope that others could find and some may through what I've written. And if so, I'm really happy.

David Todd [01:28:13] Yeah. You know, it's funny you talk about age, but you remind me a lot of we have a two and a half year old who lives across the street from us here in Austin, and she loves little shells. Picks up these little shells, tiny little freshwater shells. And she seems to have that wonder that you have somehow retained over the years. And I really marvel at it.

David Todd [01:28:36] So, well, is there anything that that you might like to share just in closing, about your views on poetry and art, or spirituality and nature, or just more generally about wildlife in Texas?

Jim Blackburn [01:28:50] Well, I just think, one, being able to collaborate with Isabel and having an artist to share kind of this exploration of Earth and spirituality. You know, she sees things very differently than I do, yet also through a spiritual lens. And so being able to have that kind of shared experience, our, you know, Garland and John Chapman, my wife, her husband, you know, they're our producers of the book. They helped us. So we make it kind of a joint effort. It's like, you know, it's bound in friendship. And that also makes it special.

Jim Blackburn [01:29:40] You know, the idea that we can combine art and words, painting and words. And, you know, again, it's much more spontaneous than planned. And I love that spontaneity element. I mean, I may not be thinking about the universe and she'll send me a picture of the moon and stars. And, you know, I can always say, "Well, yeah, why not focus on that for a minute?" And so and, you know, it's just a nice way.

Jim Blackburn [01:30:09] And I will interpret her paintings in ways that she never thought, because that wasn't where her head was when she painted it. But that's where mine was when I wrote the words.

Jim Blackburn [01:30:20] And so, there's sort of a back and forth like that where we really don't necessarily talk about it so much as it would just kind of do it. And it's a fun adventure.

Jim Blackburn [01:30:32] But I think the most important concept is that I found kind of, in a way, my key to life through nature, through the Earth, and through a spiritual connection with it. I have no doubt that I would long be dead if I had not found another path. And that path has, I think, served me very well, and I'm very grateful that I found it.

Jim Blackburn [01:31:04] So, I try not to lose gratitude. I try to be grateful for every day, for every event, for every opportunity, just sort of kind of what I've begun, kind of where my head is these days.

Jim Blackburn [01:31:19] And, you know, I'm very grateful that you called me and asked me to do this. So thank you.

David Todd [01:31:26] Yeah, well, thank you. I will think of you as I always do, but especially when I see a bur oak or pecan or a live oak acorn. It'll just maybe wake me up and help me smell the roses. Is that a mixed metaphor? I think that's a mixed metaphor!

Jim Blackburn [01:31:43] No, I think it's a perfect, I think it's a perfect conclusion because it's all of those things. I've got those three little seeds on my desk right now and every morning now I look at those and smile. Because it reminds me to be grateful.

Jim Blackburn [01:31:57] Yeah. Just a trigger. Things like that.

David Todd [01:32:00] Little trigger.

David Todd [01:32:01] Well, this has been fun. Thank you so much, as always. Always great to visit with you.

Jim Blackburn [01:32:07] You know, it was fun to do this. And I just want to say, I think by focusing on the endangered species chapter, I think that was a nice Texas side to things as well. So I appreciate that.

David Todd [01:32:21] Well. Thank you for doing this. It was wonderful. And as always, I hope our paths cross real soon.

Jim Blackburn [01:32:29] Well, I've got to go see about somebody who's interested in carbon credits.

David Todd [01:32:34] Excellent. You never stop.

Jim Blackburn [01:32:38] Got to get that economy to start rewarding ecology. Got a lot of work to do.

David Todd [01:32:43] All right. Keep at it.

Jim Blackburn [01:32:45] Take care.

David Todd [01:32:46] All right. Take care. Bye.

Jim Blackburn [01:32:46] Bye.