

### HARLEY ELLIOTT (1940 - )



Harley Elliott is the Kansas poet's poet. He is the writer I studied to learn the best ways to write about grasslands and inner landscapes of the imagination. His words flow as smoothly as conversations among friends. He uses an unassuming mid-Plains dialect—peppered with vivid images. I consider him the first English-language poet to use this region's idioms. Elliott also writes longer works about history of the West, as well as whimsical and surreal poems. *Loading the Stone* (Woodley 2006) is a unique prose work that straddles fiction and nonfiction.

Elliott has lived in Salina since he was a two-year-old, and his writing reflects his attachment to prairie spaces. Yet he eschews labels. He told an interviewer: "I was really conscious that if I wasn't careful I would get put into this box called 'prairie poet.'"

This poem is directly about avoiding the stereotypes of labels. He suggests all words can limit direct experience of reality. In this case, the monarch butterfly walks on his face, and "blinded by words," he fails to match its "shining light." He addresses his readers and asks us to join in his quandary about how to express relationship with nature. Elliott's "hinged mosaic" description for butterfly wings here is one of my favorites.

#### **BUTTERFLY MASTER**

*This butterfly stopping on my cheek  
would choose yours too  
if you had fallen down among  
grass and pasture flowers  
and your face closed  
hard as mine.*

*This small hinged mosaic  
of orange black and palomino  
has been given a name  
and the danger of names hovers  
close to both of us today.  
Walking up it stops at  
the doorway of my eye:  
there I am  
blinded by words  
in the shining light of its face.*

*We rush together  
earth and sky.*

**Education:** Elliott graduated from Salina High School. He received a BA from Kansas Wesleyan University and an MA in art from New Mexico Highlands University.

**Career:** This poet and artist spent four years in Syracuse, New York, after college, where he established relationships with New York publishers, including Dick Lourie (Hanging Loose Press). He returned to Salina and taught art at Marymount College until it closed. Then he worked in arts education at the Salina Art Center. His ten books of poetry are from Crossing Press, Hanging Loose, Juniper, Woodley Press (Washburn University), and others.