

# PHILIP BELL'S INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES FISHMAN

Part 1 Tuesday 8th April 2008

Philip Bell (PB): Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed on *Glorious Times*, I think everyone here would allow me to speak on their behalf in saying that we all admire and respect your achievements in the world of the literary arts.

As, perhaps all interviewers would, I tried to do a little research beforehand and the first thing that becomes clear, is that little is written about the man behind the literary career. Before moving on to the more specific questions, could you share with us your early life inspirations, perhaps describing those moments that you feel may have laid the path that you have followed.

Charles Fishman (CF): Thank you for your interest in my life as a poet. I've decided to accompany my replies to your questions with a short poem or two that may illustrate, in a way that prose can't quite do, what I'm trying to express.

I believe that my early life experiences did, somehow, set me on the path to becoming a poet. I was born in Oceanside, Long Island, on July 10, 1942 (you can find Long Island, which Native Americans--& Walt Whitman--called "Paumanok." i.e., "Fish-Shaped," on a globe or internet map). I have always felt that my being born at that time, in the middle of WWII & during the mass annihilation of European Jews by German Nazis & their collaborators, marked me as one who would need to speak out against antisemitism, racism, & all other forms of bigotry, ethnic & religious hatred, & the oppression of women & children. Of course, when I was a young child, these dark matters were a distant cloud that I barely apprehended; instead, I was moved by my surroundings & shaped by family, friends, & strangers who I encountered as I grew.

Most important, I think, was my family's move from Freeport, Long Island, to the South Bronx (near New York City) when I was two . . . & then the move back to Long Island when I was 8--this time, to a suburban development called "Forest City," a section of Wantagh (which is where I mainly lived until 7½ years ago). This experience of a "country" place & a "city" place for significant periods of my childhood helped make me conscious of differences--in people, accents, languages, foods, landscapes, feelings--& this heightening of sensory impressions took place while I was becoming conscious of myself as a being who could respond to these intriguing nuances of color, sound, aroma, mood, place, & tone.

Earlier, while I lived in a second-floor apartment on Wheeler Avenue in the Soundview section of the Bronx, my parents rented a small cottage in Flemington, New Jersey. For quite some time, Flemington has been known for its clothing outlets, but back then, in the mid- to late Forties, Flemington was country. In fact, there was a working farm a short walk from where the cottage was, & in that time when doors didn't have to be locked & children could wander more freely, I was permitted to walk away from the cottage, so I could discover what existed beyond its walls & doors. The poem I'm including here was inspired by memories of those early experiences.

JULY 1946

That summer trees talked: a whisper

I still hear. The farmer's collie

sprawls on the front steps, the cottage

is white and calm, a wooden ship snugly  
anchored. This is the day I sail  
out of reach, light as a dandelion puff,  
a forked seed floating.

What will I find in the shade of the dark  
trees, hidden among the branches? a name  
like a nest to sleep in? a name black  
as the chanting leaves? I know this  
stillness. Once before I was warmed  
like this, nourished directly.

This is the day I am here, the breath  
of centuries rushing through me,  
the mouths of my blood speaking . . .  
Ahead, where the road bends, no one  
comes for me, not even that good golden  
dog, that cottage door into early morning,  
my mother in her housedress of scarlet flowers,  
murmuring the day's first meal.

from *Water under Water* (2009)

Part 2 Monday 7th April 2008

[PB: Question Lost]

CF: Thank you for this question. I feel that my first teachers of language--that is, the first who imparted to me an idea of the power of words--were my parents, especially my mother, & Nature. "July 1946" touches on this, but there is much else to say.

I was a quiet boy, who nonetheless enjoyed competition. I always tried to outdo my friends & others who I encountered: I wanted to run the fastest, hold my breath the longest, learn the most

words--& the longest & strangest words. Something that happened when I was 9 will make this clear:

I was in Mr. Lewis' fourth-grade class at Gardener's Avenue Elementary School in Levittown, the first post-WWII suburban development in America. One day, Mr. Lewis stated that "antidisestablishmentarianism" was "the longest word in the English language." Of course, I looked up the word as soon as I got home & memorized it instantly.

However, the next morning, my father left a jar of a clear liquid on the kitchen table--I think he had been using the liquid to spray a few apple trees we had on our tiny property. Being hyper-curious about everything, I read the label on the jar & learned that the liquid was DDT; more exciting, though, was the revelation of the full chemical name of this previously unknown substance: dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane. Clearly, this word--perhaps not exactly English, but certainly a word that someone who spoke English could pronounce & add to his vocabulary--was a good deal longer than Mr. Lewis' word.

The next day, I marched into class, picked up a stick of chalk, &, in large block letters, wrote that word on the blackboard. Perhaps that was my first poem! In the next few years, I committed to memory every long word I could stumble on: in a "Ripley's Believe It Or Not," I found a made-up word, comprised of Latin roots & suffixes, that was 310 letters long. In a National Geographic (I believe), I found a Polynesian word that was 86 letters long. There were many words that dazzled & pleased me, including one I eventually used in a poem: the name of a railroad station in Wales that was more than 50 letters long.

I also learned nonsense words, tongue-twisters, etc. One of my favorites was this:

Amid the mists and midnight frosts,  
With stoutest wrists and loudest boasts,  
He thrusts his fists against the posts  
And still insists he sees the ghosts.

So, yes, I think that children can be introduced to poetry via the magic of sounds & the music of language. I know I was inspired by my mother's humming, her laughs, & her impromptu singing . . . & I was also inspired when my father took me fishing--what movement on the sea, what sounds, what smells, what a wonderful sense of the magnificence we name "life." What is important is to waken the senses of the child.

Here is a poem that touches on another door that opened for me when I discovered I could use my hoard of words to reach others--even my close-mouthed father.

## WORDS

In your closed mouth, father,  
I found words: long words  
that described small islands

short words that embraced  
the deepest desires esoteric  
words that transported me  
to microambient worlds words  
that worshipped and despaired  
that were toxins ointments salves  
words stripped from rare  
ecclesiastical bindings or ripped  
from the air.  
I loved words as much as you  
loved silence: words that wakened  
intoxicated explored words  
with the rank smell of viscera  
that excoriated and restored  
I collected words, forged from gold  
or zirconium words ethereal as breath  
and dark plutonium words more fatal  
than death Words my daggers  
my lariats my fire-scorched tongs  
my antlers my cockscomb my  
rhinoceros horn words my plunging beak  
my wild and thorny cry.

from *Country of Memory* (2004)

### Part 3 Tuesday 8th April 2008

PB: It's always interesting to hear how people define poetry. I find it's like defining art; it can be different for different people. When people visit the Tate Modern Art Gallery in London, perhaps one of the most oft heard whispered comment is "That's not art! I could do that!"

I find an instinctive feel for something that calls to me as poetry, yet when I try to define it I am lost. I am sure that we all would love to hear your own thoughts perhaps illustrated with examples of what is and what is not.

CF: Many contemporary poets have lost patience with traditional punctuation & have experimented with using no punctuation (e.g., W.S. Merwin) or using some punctuation but breaking standard patterns (I fall into this category).

What first moved me to insert additional spacing in some (but definitely not all) of my poems was my discovery that I had to "score" certain poems before reading them to audiences. Pauses & stresses are often difficult to indicate in a line or series of lines, & I began to use the additional spaces when I felt the need for a more clearly marked caesura. My intention has been to help myself perform the poems more effectively & also to guide readers of my work so they can navigate the poems more easily & with a clearer sense of their underlying pulse or rhythm.

PB: I really shouldn't let you off that easily, but I truly admire your honesty and admit to the same problem. As a supplement (3a) however could you comment on your use of space formatting in your poems. (The why's and wherefore's)

#### Part 4 Wednesday 9th April 2008

PB: We've had some interesting insights into the things that inspired you to pursue a literary career and now it would be interesting to explore your particular likes. We have in the UK a radio program called Desert Island disks, where guests have to imagine being on a desert island where by design they can choose to have ten favourite pieces of music that they can play. My adaptation of this is with the printed word.

Imagine yourself abandoned on the desert island with plenty to eat and drink, but you can choose just 5 books and 5 poems to accompany you – What would you choose and why?

CF: You drew your fourth (actually fifth) question from the UK radio program, & I will extract my answer from your adaptation of "Desert Island Disks."

I can't provide a definitive list of books or poems, but here is a list of must-haves I would desire:

~ *The Collected Poems of William Blake*

~ *The Collected Poems of Federico García Lorca*

~ *The Collected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*

~ *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman

~ *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*

~ Instead of individual poems, I would want a supply of blank journals & functioning pens that would last as long as I needed them; shelter from storms; & plenty of sunblock.

I did my Master's Thesis on Yeats's method of ordering his poetry & read everything he wrote while doing that, but it's been at least ten years since I last read a poem by him, so I would need a refresher course in the mastery of rhymed & metered verse.

Blake's work is inexhaustible, alive to mystery & the power of the cosmos, & engaged with social justice--just what I would need if abandoned on a desert island.

Lorca would keep me mindful of colors, music, & the dark force called *duende*, which is the source of great art.

Rilke would push me to reach for levels of higher consciousness but would keep me wedded to the contemporary world. If Rilke's book was not in the island's library, perhaps a collection of Rumi's poems would be.

Whitman, of course, would teach me again how to use my native language magnificently while reminding me that the microcosmic island I found myself on was truly tethered to the stars.

## Part 5 Thursday 10th April 2008

PB: As you are going to have a very busy day today, with your own interviewing session, I will ask you a short but perhaps thoughtful question.

If you had to choose just one of your own poems as a bequest to the world, that would represent what you would most like to be remembered for, which one would you choose and why?

CF: My first response to this question is that you are asking me to choose between my children, but it's a fair question, nonetheless. The poem that comes to mind immediately is "A Child of the Millennium," which [name deleted] posted to this list last month, but I want to think about this choice & will write again by tonight--that is, by tonight on Long Island.

PB: LOL No one said it would be easy! It's a question I would hate to have to answer. I will wait in anticipation to see if you change your mind.

CF: After my interview with Peter Thabit Jones & Aeronwy Thomas this afternoon, I realized on the drive home that there is another poem that more fully responds to your question. This poem has no real title, but it does have a section title because it's the final section of my poem, "The Silence," a poem I wrote in 1995-96 that deals with the Holocaust. "The Silence" was written as a challenge to myself: to somehow condense into a cohesive poem the great 9½-hour documentary, *Shoah*, by Claude Lanzmann. I was able to complete the first 3 sections of the poem in December 1995, but it took me another six months to write the missing fourth section, which needed to be in my own voice & had to have a distinct tonality & vocabulary that did not mimic the other three parts. This poem matters to me because it was drawn up from my blood & my soul, the way the most achingly cold & sweet water might be drawn from a deep well. My hope is that this poem will speak to people who read it now--& in the future.

## Part 6 Friday 11th April 2008

PB: My final question in this interview series was inspired directly by your conversation relating to your interview with Aeronwy Thomas and Peter Thabit Jones this Thursday. Could you share with us a little of that experience and perhaps relate how you feel that their work has been either influenced by or moved on since Dylan Thomas' view of the world?

CF: The face-to-face interview yesterday was a delight & soon transmogrified into a conversation between three poets. I had prepared a dozen questions but, as the triologue unfolded, I dropped

some questions & inserted a few others that were suggested by the issues raised in the discussion.

I did explore Dylan Thomas's influence on Peter & Aeronwy. That influence was strong on both poets but manifested in different ways. For Aeronwy, her father was a mammoth presence that became more overwhelming when he died. Aeronwy was born in 1943 & Dylan died in 1953 at 39, so she was only 10 when he was gone forever. Aeronwy recalled peeking through the keyhole of Dylan's writing shed & seeing him hunched over the poem he was working on. She didn't write a poem until she was 18, in part, because she needed to work through her feelings about her father & herself. Also, she lived in Italy with her mother during the years when she might have begun writing. It was only when she was 30 that she decided to live as a poet & to find her own voice.

Peter Thabit Jones was born in Swansea in 1951, where Dylan was a mythic presence by the time Peter found his way to poetry. He is a professor & scholar & discovered poetry as a way to embrace the beauty of Swansea &, also, to make a place for himself in a family of 17! Unlike Aeronwy, Peter has remained a devotee of traditional poetic forms, including the forms used by Dylan, but he has also managed to forge a style that separates himself from the national poet of Wales.

My favorite lines from the work of Peter Thabit Jones are these:

You were born glowing

And when the green bird

Landed on you

It left all its songs.

-- from "The Green Bird" in *The Lizard Catchers* (Cross-Cultural Communications, 2006)

My favorite poem in Aeronwy's book, *Burning Bridges* (Cross-Cultural Communications, 2008) is "Daughter," which includes these lines:

I watch her breathe,

awash in sleep.

The moon lights

her watery face.

PB: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed in what has been such a very busy week for you. I am sure that your replies will raise more questions from the members so maybe your ordeal is not quite over yet.

On a personal note, the interviews also gave me reason to read your own poetry and I am so pleased that I did. It's been a wonderful and humbling experience and I am sure that your work will have a very special place in literary history.

CF: Thank you for the time you spent on the interview questions & for your patience--greatly appreciated. I would like Glotimers to be able to read "Gone" as it exists on the page (the email version has lost spacing & acquired some new line breaks). Please see the attached version.

I'm grateful for your warmth & your generous assessment of my poetry. Can you tell me which poems you have read? That would be helpful to me.

PB: All from your web site and here. I have been very moved by your works on the Holocaust especially.

CF: You are a gentleman & scholar &, I would hope, a friend. I, too, wish we could take a long walk together over the English countryside, as the great Romantics did. The Lake District would be just the place.

I will keep you & your brother-in-law in mind today & will pray for his recovery.