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## Carl Phillips: Poet

Carl Phillips

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Phillips:  
"The Trees"

All night. From behind  
curtain, turned suddenly all lifting  
veil. From behind the screen behind that.

Their motion- their leaves' motion-  
that of a torn wing,  
that same unlovely

snagged flight, to the same half-tune  
(your breathing)  
to which the hours on blue

ankles parade as  
down some questionable boulevard.  
All night,

as if that other one (before  
you, my body beside someone's but  
not yet yours), when

'even the moon, even clouds'  
were saying the trees that- as now,  
then too- I was certain

could not know.  
They think everything ends...  
If so, then

why not this wake of losses (inevitable?  
earned?)  
that I have often enough come

so close to forgetting, I turn around  
- and yes,  
they are still with,

I think they will always be with-  
no one is waving good-bye.  
The trees

wave but, except to say 'wind-  
up again,' this  
means nothing. Sometimes,

we hold on to a life tightly.  
Foolish; sad.  
Not to know that it has already left us.

Rubin:

Welcome to the Brockport Writers' Forum, an ongoing series of conversations with contemporary writers. I'm your host, Stan Rubin. Our guest today, Carl Phillips, is the author of five collections of poetry, including "In the Blood" 1992, "Cortège" 1995, "From the Devotions" 1998, "Pastoral" 2000, the last three published by Graywolf, and "The Tether" [Inaudible] Strauss into 2000, and his sixth collection, "Rock Harbor", will appear next year. He has also completed a translation of Sophocles [inaudible] working from Oxford. His work has been highly honored. He's been a finalist for the National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle award as well. He's received an award in literature at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; the Morris Poetry Prize, first collection; the Academy of American Poets Prize as well as fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Library of Congress among other honors. Carl Phillips was educated at Harvard and at Boston University and at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and he has taught at Boston University, Harvard, the Iowa Writers' Workshop among other places, and currently is a professor of English at Washington University in St. Louis where he's also concluding a service as director of their MFA program in creative writing. Carl, it's a great pleasure to have you with us -

Phillips:

Thank you for having me.

Rubin:

Thank you. The first, the poem you just read, and I'd like to start [inaudible] grounding, which was the first poem in "Devotions". And is a collection which has, well, in many ways exemplary work. As an epigram, John Dunn, "Therefore, he may raise the Lord falls down". And in this poem, as in throughout your work, sense of [inaudible] at once. In "The Trees" particularly, we have night, we have the trees outside, we have the body of a sleeping lover present. Would you talk a bit about this multi-leveled existence that's in your poetry, and particularly this poem as a starting point?

Phillips:

Well, I think in this particular poem, it has to do with, it seems to me that existence is multi-layered in terms of past, present, and future, and I was interested in this poem in the notion of how many times in a life it seems as if here we are. This is the life we're going to live, and how surprising it is looking back to think that we have that kind of complacency. And after that's happened enough times, it seems as if it gives a different charge to the present because there's always this, you know, how many lovers has one found oneself next to, for example, and thought this was how it will be. And so I guess the idea of mutability is somewhere behind it -

Rubin:

Mutability is a persistent theme in your work and in the classical work you -

Phillips:

Yes.

Rubin:

You hark back to. Let's, I would like to ask you also about the voice in the poem now before we move on to other things. In this one poem, "The Trees", is this the voice for you of your poetry, is this a recognizably, the voice that speaks so much of your poetry or what, how would you characterize the voice that speaks in this poem?

Phillips:

Divided, I suppose maybe multi-layered. It seems to me as if there are at least two voices within a divided self for the poem, and it happens I think quite a bit in the poems and that book from the "Devotions". So the idea of the insistent person in the present who says, well, this is what life is and will be, then this other voice that says remember you once thought that before. At the same time, there are the voices to be imagined from something like the trees with, if one believes in the idea that messages can be found within the natural world, that maybe looking hard enough or listening hard enough would reveal, would uncover those voices as well. So I think of the poems as being very choral, I suppose, in that way, but unlike most choruses where everyone sings and produces some harmonious chord, I think of it as sort of dissonant chorus of maybe consciousness or the different selves.

Rubin:

This concern with consciousness and the inner voice, the voice has a being, certainly, is associated with your work. It's what your work does, embodies. I'm wondering how you came to this lane of language, to the kind of poetry that even in our time, perhaps surprisingly, continues to center itself on in the factor of being. The strangeness of being. How did this happen? Your first book came out in the early 90's, one "In the Blood", won the Morris Prize. What does that book result from? In other words, saying how did you come to be a poet [inaudible]?

Phillips:

Right. I think, well, I think that book maybe, most first books are about thrashing out identity of some sort, but I think the first book came out of, to some extent, mixed racial background. One parent white, one part black. Instability throughout childhood, living on different Air Force bases each year until I was in high school, and then, though it was a surprise bit to me, a sort of wrestling with sexual identity that is in that book. And I think that's probably what triggered the idea of other voices. The poems seemed to mirror the conflict of saying I am this, I'm not this. Maybe, maybe not. It was a very strange book by which I felt outed, as I always put -

Rubin:

By the book -

Phillips:

Yes. Because I didn't, certainly, wasn't my intention to write openly about that because I wasn't fully aware of it. I was living quite a different life from I think the one that people think of when they read the other books.

Rubin:

And your last books have all been dedicated to your partner, Doug -

Phillips:

Yes.

Rubin:

And, clearly, he's played an important role in your poetry, but he's not a poet himself [inaudible] -

Phillips:

No, thankfully. Thankfully.

Rubin:

He's your reader -

Phillips:

Yes, he is. He's a trustworthy reader because he can respond. He has a different eye, a photographer's eye, and can respond from the gut, I think, as opposed to being burdened perhaps by schools of poetry and [inaudible] thought.

Rubin:

I'd like to go back to the -

Phillips:

Yes.

Rubin:

Kind of Air Force brat, in a sense -

Phillips:

Yeah.

Rubin:

How does he get in touch with, or how did the classics come to intersect his life, which the classics which play such an important role in your own.

Phillips:

For Doug -

Rubin:

I mean, for you -

Phillips:

Oh, for me?

Rubin:

I want to go back to you -

Phillips:

Oh, that person. That brat -

Rubin:  
That brat that using that [inaudible] -

Phillips:  
Yes -

Rubin:  
Growing up in a variety of schools, variety of Air Force bases. When and where did the classics enter in, which so energize your own -

Phillips:  
Well -

Rubin:  
Project -

Phillips:  
The last couple of years that my father was in the Air Force, we lived in Germany, and German was mandatory. And then he retired. We moved to Massachusetts, and they had no German. And there was one space left in the beginning Latin class. So I took it out of interest in languages, and then ended up taking it for four years, and promised my Latin teachers I would take one year of ancient Greek in college, though I, my plan was to be a veterinarian, and I was pre-med. And I ended up hating problem sets and loving ancient Greek and ended up just turning everything. I decided to study classics, and then ended up teaching Latin in high school -

Rubin:  
When did you write your first poetry?

Phillips:  
Probably in, well, if it counts, probably in junior high, high school, that sort of thing. Sometimes I think it came out of a need to fashion a, maybe a portable world or something like that. It's something that was constant, that one could take with one. And my mother always had us read poetry and wrote some herself. So, but I don't think of any real poems being written until about '88 or something like that when I started writing the poems that were going to end up being in the first book, and that was after a long silence of not writing at all and not wanting to.

Rubin:  
What explains the resistance?

Phillips:  
I think what explains resistance, though, I don't like as an explanation is that it was all a way of the mind suppressing what I guess I wasn't yet able to deal with in terms of being gay. I was married, and it would, I think that, it was strange because I had written in college and then just stopped immediately upon getting married and didn't write for ten years, and it's too coincidental it seems to me for it not to be the case. And then the poems slowly were speaking, I think they have these veils of classics and myth partly because I think there was probably the poem was sort of trying to announce something without entirely. It all sounds very mystical, doesn't it, but -

Rubin:  
A veil is such a recurring -

Phillips:  
Yeah -

Rubin:  
Motif in your work -

Phillips:  
Yeah -

Rubin:  
Symbol image, what have you, but.

Phillips:  
Well, I think that that's, my, I think that comes from, there's a scene in. As a classist I should know. I want to say the "Iliad", but something tells me it's in the "Aeneid". There's a scene when one of the heroes is briefly allowed to see what is behind the veil of the battlefield, and one of the gods lifts the veil, and can, and then the hero is able to see, oh, there are all these gods playing, fighting on the field, but when the veil goes back down, it looks as if it's all the mortals. And it's always interested me the idea that, well, if there were this veil that could be lifted, we would see what really is giving, what are the motivating forces to what seem to be our own interactions, sort of like the ancient Greek idea of the [inaudible]. You know, that kind of force -

Rubin:  
These are alive.

Phillips:  
Yes -

Rubin:  
To you, these Greek [inaudible] -

Phillips:  
Well.

Rubin:  
[Inaudible] They're a way of explaining [multiple speakers] -

Phillips:  
They're alive. I don't suppose they seem alive when I'm doing something ordinary like going to the supermarket, but in the poetry world, they seem alive -

Rubin:  
It doesn't sound as if you expected very early on to sustain a productive career as a poet. That it was something that you knew you were called to-

Phillips:

No. I was just writing on the side while I was teaching, and it just seemed to be for private pleasure. It didn't occur to me to do much with it. And there was a poet who came to be a poet in the schools, Martina Spata, who suggested that I should apply for a state grant. I didn't know they existed, but I applied and got one, and that was the first thing that made me think maybe this is something I should consider, and I started sending to magazines and, but in a sort of very naive way. I didn't send to the "Paris Review" because I thought it was in Paris, and I didn't know how, one would figure out postage to Europe. It makes no sense, but I stumbled into something I guess.

Rubin:

What sustains you as a poet? What keeps you writing?

Phillips:

Finding routinely that I'm wrong about what I thought I understood, and it's, it seems to me that in each of my books I have thought that I understood something about how to conduct the body or about love or what devotion might be, and then it turns out to be, it was correct for that moment, but the context changes, or one gets older, or one has been with somebody for ten years as opposed to one, and then it's the need to go back and try to figure out, well, what is the answer.

Rubin:

In an interview with you that came out earlier this year, and I don't normally refer to other interviews, but I think an excellent interesting interview by Christopher Hennessey that was published in the "AWP Writer's Chronicle" just in the fall, the two of you explore what you call the erotics of syntax, and I wonder if here you would say something about this. Whether you think of it in, as a style or not. This sort of linguistic angle or this way into language, of inhabiting language that you have been developing from book to book, this particular concern with the, with not, what is not always paid attention to it seems today in writing, let alone in language, the markers of what, of hesitation between the words. The way, punctuation and syntax and space function. I mean, how you understand this and how you came to this as your medium.

Phillips:

Well, I think it does come from, well, I want to say it's just how I think, but probably that's affected by having read a lot of Greek and Latin prose authors, and I'm very interested in writers, like, [Inaudible] and how those languages, Greek and Latin, being inflected the ways in which. Well, first, it's just the idea of the verbs being sustained, suspended until the end, but those particular three prose writers are fond of omitting a verb entirely from a sentence, and of there's a way in which it became apparent to me that to read those writers in the original is to start understanding a particular sensibility. It was, it wasn't just Latin, but I suddenly understood that, well, the Latin of one writer is, of course, different from the Latin of another, and I. I don't know a very sophisticated way to put it except that it's exciting, grammar is exciting to me, and. So when writing a sentence, there's a reluctance to leave it I find, and, or I like the idea of the manipulation that can happen between a very long set



of sentences and then suddenly very short staccato ones, and it wasn't a stylistic choice. It's just something that seems to have happened, and I do feel as if there's something erotic about it in the sense of wanting to prolong something rather than have it sort of come to climax, I guess. And I think there's a way in which, well, I can exasperate readers, but I also think it can be an alluring thing, or maybe I just find it alluring. I find it fascinating just to go into a John Dunn poem and try to unravel -

Rubin:

You mentioned John and Herbert in some of these 17th century -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

Devotional poets, metaphysical poets, and you, you yourself, of course, from the devotions. Maybe get you to maybe to read the title poem in a moment -

Phillips:

Sure.

Rubin:

What, now these poets you came to presumably in the course of your education -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

What is their interest to you? Why do they have a hold on your imagination still -

Phillips:

Because they show that to be spiritual is not what I was raised to think it is. They show that to be spiritual is also to be flawed and to know hunger and desire and to be dissatisfied and to not accept pat answers. So someone, to read Herbert, so the temple is to see someone who's constantly going back and forth between these poems of saying here is the correct way to behave, and then the next poem saying and I can't do it. I won't do it, or someone like Dickinson or Hopkins where they, to me, their devotion is believable because they admit that they fail in their devotions routinely. And they also show that the sexual is not something that doesn't have a place in religious feeling. So. And their language tends to, their lines tend to reflect that wrestling, it seems, in an earnest way. So I was always bothered, not, I wasn't particularly raised in a religious setting, but I was always bothered by the idea of simply reading hymns and things that, they didn't seem to open up the possibility that this is a hard won kind of devotion. It's not as if you can say, well, I believe or I don't. It was a long answer -

Rubin:

Your poetry is so much, as people have noted, obviously, so much of the body, and, yet, it is also so much of what the body can't reach. What it's, what can't be reached except through the body and then what's beyond that that perhaps we can never achieve, and there is loss and loneliness in your poetry. Would you speak about the kind of spiritual aspiration in the poetry and the loneliness?

Phillips:

Well -

Rubin:

Or I, however you think of it -

Phillips:

Well, I just. The loneliness, I suppose, is in, it's become more and more of interest to me to think about how there's a point beyond which one can't get with another person in the relationship. You can never know them entirely. You can never, there's the having of the body, but then there's, you can't know a person's mind or whatever equivalent there might be for a soul or something, and it reminds me of that poem by Louise [Inaudible] Orange where it seems as if the more, the closer, once the body is brought as close as it can be to another, it's to how there never be, as I understand that poem, there will never be the kind of closeness that's wanted because it's, because it would be to possess entirely the other person, including spiritually and mentally. So I think that's a, perhaps it's, that might be the loneliness is to understand that one is finally alone, no matter how many years you may have been with somebody and love them. That's my perhaps strange take on it.

Rubin:

And probably the source of what some have noted as the suffering in your poetry -

Phillips:

Right, which isn't, to me, it's not as if one courts it, but I think to see it squarely is to begin, to be able to make progress, and also I think suffering is, oh. Suffering is a way of charting that one has actually attempted to be devoted, and, you know, it seems how can you, your devotion has been tested, and you've had to pay in some way.

Rubin:

Could I ask you to read the title poem "From the Devotions" -

Phillips:

Sure.

Rubin:

Oh, you have it in front of you -

Phillips:

I do, but - so nice of you to hand it to me. Oh, right. Alright.

Rubin:

Maybe you'd say something about what, why this is the title.

Phillips:

Why it's the title of the poem -

Rubin:

Yeah.

Phillips:

Partly because I was thinking of Dunn's devotions upon emergent occasions, but also because I had gone to Provincetown in Massachusetts, and I noticed some men who were on a, lying on a beach, and next to them, they would just be lying next to the small pile of stones [inaudible], and it turned out when I inquired that these represented for them a dead lover whom they had once come to the beach with. And I, and that I found that interesting as a form of devotion, but what was more interesting to me was that even as they were explaining that, they were clearly interested in the other men walking by on the beach, and I thought what happens with that. We're to be devoted to the dead. Does that rule out that you don't still have a kind of eagerness for the flesh as a living person, and as we know in the Aeneid, Dido's big mistake is not to just be devoted to the memory of her dead husband, and she gets caught up with [Inaudible], and it's all over. So I was thinking about what devotion is, and once this poem was written, I sort of understood that's what the whole book would probably end up being called because it seems that the book was very much about devotion to the living, devotion to the dead, and then devotion to something like God or some belief in that. Shall I read it?

Rubin:

Yeah.

Phillips:

OK. "From the Devotions":

"As if somewhere away a door had slammed shut.  
But not metal, not wood, or is when something is later remembered only as something dark  
in the dream, torn, bruised, dreams slow descending.  
It could be anything.  
Tiling, clouds, you again, beautifully consistent in no usual or masterable way.  
Leaves, a woman's shaken loose throat, shattered eyes at the sear, palms, ashes, the flesh, instructing.  
You silent.  
A sky, a sea requires crossing, and like that, there is a boat, or like that, a plane.  
For whom is it this way now when as if still did I lie down beside, still turn to touch.  
I can't. I could not save you.  
Not, despite what you believed that all travel necessarily ends here at the sea.  
I am back, but only because.

As the sun only happens to meet the water in such a way that the water  
becomes a kind  
of [inaudible], how each piece takes and for nothing gives back whatever  
light, suns, moons.  
A bird that is not a gull passes over.  
I mark what you would.  
Underneath at the tip of either wing, a fluorescent light moon, a round  
star.  
Does the bird itself ever see this?  
According to you, many have had the ashes of lover's strewn here on this  
beach,  
on this water that now beats at, now seems to want just to rest  
alongside.  
The dead can't know we miss them.  
Presumably, we were walking.  
That we are walking upon them.  
All night, again, a wind that failed to bring storm.  
Instead the paradise dream, the abandoned one nest at a bad angle  
in danger and what it is to not know it.  
The equally abandoned one tree that for the time being holds it alone  
and what it is to not know it.  
All morning, it has been the fog, thinning at last as if that were the  
prayer.  
The streets filling with me as if they were divine answer and not just  
what happens.  
Do I love less if less is all I remember?  
Your mouth like a hole to fly through.  
What you understood of the flesh.  
How always first are we struck down?  
Then we rise, are astounded."

Rubin:

Thank you. What's an exquisite poem, if I may so. What our viewers can't  
tell -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

Is that some lines, some phrases are italicized -

Phillips:

Yeah.

Rubin:

For example, the last and we rise, are astounded. How does one write a  
poem like this, and I want to say this, too. Our viewers also can't tell  
that this poem is written in two line, three sections of two-line units,  
we'll call them couplets, nine units for each of three sections. So what  
is your feeling for form, first of all? What -

Phillips:

Well -

Rubin:

Do you think of it? What does it mean to you -

Phillips:

It means a lot. I think form's very important, especially in free verse, and.

Rubin:

What is its role in free verse?

Phillips:

It seems to me it's one of the key ways in which we can reinforce the content, and I believe in what I describe as athleticism in a poem, and I think that that means that everything can be made to do work, including the form. I think just, it should be possible if we don't look at any of the words of this poem to already be able to say something about it just based on the form in terms of its psychological trajectory. And so, and I think it would say something like it's something to do with a desire for pattern, for shape, for form, and, yet, there's an inconsistency in terms of line length, and there's, the italicized, non-italicized should suggest that there's at least two voices and that that figures into the sort of want-to-be couple, couplets. And although there are two voices, it's not as if the people are entirely speaking to one another or answering questions. They simply are speaking off and on, and maybe there has answers to a question or not. That, that way anyway the idea behind it for me. As I wrote it, I didn't think in terms of it will be in all of that. I just had the first section, and had the idea that there would be the dead speaking to the living and vice versa, but there would be no ability to say which was which. So maybe it's the dead at the end who say, well, then we rise and are astounded, or maybe not, and. I don't know if that answer help how a poem like this gets written -

Rubin:

That's good. How do you work generally? Is there a way you work, a time you work? I don't want -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

I'm not trying to take you into the trivia of the familiar -

Phillips:

No, I know -

Rubin:

Just, does it, what matters to you in making a poem be there?

Phillips:

Well, I have not very good work habits, I suppose. What I do is I write maybe once every couple of weeks, usually just on Sunday morning. It's always only in the morning -

Rubin:  
Devotions, indeed -

Phillips:  
I know, and I don't know. I think that has more to do with that it's the one time I'm free, but I did think that was going [inaudible] and fitting somehow. And then I generally only write for about four or five hours, and whatever it happens, either that's the poem or it isn't. And which is to say I'm not very good with revision. I almost unable to go back a few days later and revise, but I want to think a lot of revision is going on in my head before I sit down. In a poem like this, actually the third part is part of an abandoned poem that I wrote many years earlier than this. And when, once I have the first two sections, and I wanted it to be three sections because I, because it seems the right number, three, just as three cubed would be nine, and so there would be the nine of each one. Just as the book is nine poems in each of the three sections, it's very sort of anal retentive, or something, but it's, it has a kind of magic to me. And, anyway, once I found that other part, it allowed me to figure out a way to go into what I thought would be the third part, but usually it's just sitting and hoping for a burst of something based on a couple pieces of paper that I've just sort of scratched on [inaudible] couple weeks -

Rubin:  
Do you throw a lot away? Do you revise much?

Phillips:  
I don't revise much. I mean, if you had looked at my drafts, there would, I collect them and number them, and often they'll be, the final one is draft 12, but those 12 drafts have all been done within the four or five hours. And then there are usually three or four handwritten ones, and then the ones that are, I'm throwing it onto the screen and sorting it out. And I think things will change because I'm going back to, I just acquired an old Hermes -

Rubin:  
Oh -

Phillips:  
Typewriter. Or maybe it's Hermes. Anyway, Hermes is what I think of it as manual typewriter, which is how I typed everything in my first book. I had no computer or anything.

Rubin:  
Wow.

Phillips:  
Let's see what happens.

Rubin:  
Will this change your style? How do you -

Phillips:  
It might get shorter, those poems. So -

Rubin:

I would like to know this. How do you hear yourself when you write? I mean, what is it you're attending to? It's such inward poetry.

Phillips:

Well, one answer I have, but I think it sounds as if I should be locked up then is to me, these voices are all hearable, and there's some poem, I don't know which one it is, but I have one where I've written a certain amount, and then I actually ask out loud while I was writing the poem who said that, and decided to write down who said that as the next line. And it led to this strange poem of, you know, it seems to me there are numerous voices or selves in each person, and so it's often listening to that, but I fear that sounds like a sort of vague schizophrenia or [multiple speakers] -

Rubin:

Or maybe many poets should be locked up on that score -

Phillips:

Maybe.

Rubin:

You're a resistor of labels, and not least, I think that we're living in a context of, oh, you know, freshmen composition and a kind of efficiency communications culture that argues simple and direct, clear and direct, and then your work would frustrate that -

Phillips:

Sure -

Rubin:

Desire.

And, of course, you resist the labels that have been put on you, gay poet, black poet. What is your sense of what poetry is given that it's not to be subdivided and segregated into these [inaudible]? What is the enterprise of poetry?

Phillips:

Well, for me, I guess it's all I can say for me. The enterprise of poetry is maybe twofold. One is to sort of find a container, I suppose, to try to understand, it becomes a space in which briefly I can understand something that eludes my understanding. Only briefly, only long enough for that poem to seem as if, yes, I've nailed it, and then there's the next way in which one feels one hasn't. And then it also seemed to me sometimes that poetry is sort of a wedge between the poet and those things that aren't yet understandable and maybe we're not yet ready to understand them. Maybe I think that because of the things I was saying about my first book, but it's often, it seems to me as if. I believe it will sound a little hokey, but I feel as if I write in order to live, and I'm not sure if many poets do it that way, but I wouldn't be able to live if I didn't grapple with things, and this is a medium for me to grapple with those things, and, you know, as opposed to writing to be published. Something like that.

Rubin:

How do you negotiate the, whatever the shifting definitional line is between the private and the public? I mean, your poetry is published. It's [inaudible] public, and I just refer to a whole host of claims that are made on you, and other poets by all sorts of public rhetorics. What is your sense of the public place of poetry, and here I'm thinking of its affinity with the Greek poets? What does this mean to you, public, private?

Phillips:

Well, I think that poetry for me comes out of a very private space, but I realize that it's a private space in which I think I'm working with issues that most people, to varying degrees, are also working with. How does one live a life? How does one love another person? What are the possibilities? What are the responsibilities for anything from being a human being to being a gay human being or a black one, and. So I think that, ideally, the private space of the poem becomes something that maybe some reader out there, I guess the phrase would be can relate to, but it can help them to not necessarily think, ah, that's the answer, but to see that, oh, here's another person wrestling with this, and this is how he sorted it out, and I also think, another enterprise of poetry should be to help people understand things that. And I think poets, if poets have anything as a gift, it's the sense of vision that goes beyond the usual vision, and it's extremely comforting, by all accounts, for people to read a poem that deals with something that they themselves don't know how to understand, especially people who are not poets. It seems, there's a lot that can be learned about loss or that can be learned about joy from [inaudible]. I was working with some students in the Bronx two years ago just for a week, and brought in a variety of poems, and they had never read poetry and didn't know that kids like themselves appeared in poems, and I think that in itself is just important for them to know and that there's a world that includes them.

Rubin:

Because the world of language makes it possible to anyone who can -

Phillips:

Yeah.

Rubin:

And that world is, you can enter it, or allow it to enter you, and if that world seems somehow so [inaudible] by the barrage of images and concerns, and your poetry so clearly is going for something else. It's not talking to an audience or for a time. I want to ask you in what's left us. I do want to touch on a couple of things. In the Hennessey interview I referred to out earlier this year, a word that struck me that keeps recurring is honesty. What do you mean by honesty? It seems, I was struck by how rarely one hears that word in relationship to any literature today, and how often you used it.

Phillips:

You know, I can't recall, I know I got in trouble for, recently for using that word. Someone thought it was wrong. I don't know, but -



Rubin:

Sound too judgmental for someone -

Phillips:

I suppose. I, I just mean that it seems important to, well, at least in terms of being a writer, it seems important to write what one really believes and feels and thinks, and I find teaching in a graduate program that there's a lot of distraction that comes from what students think are the important trends or how to be in particular magazine or be popular in certain ways. And it's, just this week I was meeting with two graduate students on their theses, and I said do you really think these poems are reflective of you, and they did not. They said they did not. They had just, they thought, well, it seemed I should write this. I should push myself to do this because I read so and so's book, and it, and I think, but what do you want to do, and it does mean that you risk maybe being out of fashion, but you, if you've been doing this for yourself anyway, then, presumably, it wasn't for fashion. It was for trying to understand something for yourself. And then the rest just seems, like, the proverbial gravy, I guess, if that happens. But also honesty just in terms of daily life. I think it's worth asking, well, just yesterday I was teaching [inaudible], and the French one, [inaudible], and towards the end, [Inaudible] says we are, we come from a tribe of truth tellers, and we'll tell it to the bitterest end. And I thought, well, that seems to be what poetry should be, and there was a big debate because the students, I think, felt as if, well, doesn't that mean it's, it'll court disaster. Yes, but I would say it's worth the disaster if you got to the truth in the end. So I don't know if that's honesty, but -

Rubin:

I, it also indicates the -

Phillips:

It's not a pain-free life -

Rubin:

No, it's not a pain-free life, and it's odd that you might have to explain that to students, but I guess we learn that willy nilly. We learn it in our -

Phillips:

Right -

Rubin:

Our lives. In your most recent book, before we close, I want to ask you about "The Tether" -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

Do you feel, first of all, that it is built on your earlier work? Have you achieved something different here?

Phillips:

Oh -

Rubin:

I mean, how would you fit it to your prior work -

Phillips:

I think it's very, I think it's consistent with the themes of the work except that. It's strange because I think at the end of, from the "Devotions", there might have been an idea that "Devotion" had been understood, and then "Pastoral" seems to me very much about having to make a choice between something like art and love, that old choice. And seems to all but say that betrayal is inevitable if, betrayal of the beloved if one is an artist. And in this book, "The Tether", I think I have come to this understanding, or at least did then, that if betrayal should, hypothetically, be required, betrayal doesn't have to equal the end of a relationship. That there might be something that ties people together that goes beyond the simplicities of who's been with whom, and in that sense, it would go back to that last poem that I read that the idea of, well, then it's not a betrayal of the dead to still be of the living and care about the body. It's just, there's a connection that still exists even as you might go onto another relationship -

Rubin:

The book is divided into two sort of narrative-seeming units -

Phillips:

Yeah -

Rubin:

August, December, and January and May -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

And overall it is a course of a relationship and part of one -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

But the poem's also clearly, "The Tether", seems to function in that sort of deliberate way as a, there's the image on the cover, and it's some of the poetry of a falcon tethered. There's the image of being tethered to the body, being tethered to God.

Phillips:

Yes. That's, and the thing is, it seems to me that those connections are completely invisible, and that's what I want to explore, and I think, I'm not sure how this happened what is noticeably different about the tether is the line itself. It's very short and general, very short lines, and the poems are almost not there in some ways, and I don't know if that's

because it's, like, a tether, or what, but it's how it, it's how it presented itself -

Rubin:

A lot of thin poems, three line -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

Stanzas. So not exclusively by any means. One of my favorite poems in there that there's no time to discuss, "Roman Glass", is almost, you know, reads to me like a kind of [inaudible] poetica involving time and pressure, and you do say something in there I want to ask you about in one of the stanzas of "Roman Glass" from "The Tether". You say, you refer to the pressure with the restraint exerted upon prose, and you also refer to whatever pressure it is that, in effect, can render a poetry from prose in the way, say, sharded glass becomes other and newly value given enough time and pressure. Is this, what is your feeling for how poetry is not prose? What is poetry as writing?

Phillips:

Well, I think, maybe this is the easy answer, but I think that poetry is, good poetry shows that life without the line break is meaningless. And it seems that that's not always clear, and that's why I think a lot of poetry reads like prose, and it's a very random line break, but I don't think it has to be that way, and. But maybe that's as much as I, I can't, I don't know.

Rubin:

What's really happening in "Rock Harbor" in your new collection, we have time, but saying there's a new, is it, in a sense, of a piece or a further development, or are you going in what you think are new direction?

Phillips:

Well -

Rubin:

If such exists -

Phillips:

One always wants to hope for that, but I guess, the poems are, they're denser, long lines. And, thematically. Well, let's put it this way. I thought the title "Rock Harbor" would work well because it's a place in Massachusetts near where I lived sometimes, and I, I'm interested in this idea that a harbor is a place one would go for safety, but this is a harbor that has a lot of rocks in it and a lot of boats have been destroyed because of that. So this idea that the same space of safety is the one where one might be destroyed, and not that that is what a relationship is. But it seems, it seemed an interesting notion that some of the poems seemed to speak to, the idea that eventually one has to accept that the two will co-exist and there's none of that running off into the sunset that happens at the end of [Inaudible], but that maybe

it's a little denser and more fraught with difficulty and joy at the same time.

Rubin:

It does seem that the ending of one book propels us to the other -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

Opening over a little hiatus -

Phillips:

That's true.

Rubin:

Yes.

Phillips:

An ongoing story -

Rubin:

Right. Well, you have a place that you live in in Massachusetts on the Cape, and you've been living for years now in St. Louis with some visits elsewhere -

Phillips:

Yeah -

Rubin:

And the ocean recurs in your work -

Phillips:

Yeah -

Rubin:

And, of course, you're without it when you're in St. Louis. Do you find yourself writing more about it when you're there or when you're not there?

Phillips:

I think -

Rubin:

That is when you're absent from it or -

Phillips:

I write less about it when I'm in Missouri and write more, I realize it took me a while to see that I write a lot about light when I'm out there. Doug and I drive out a lot. He does landscape photography, and I sort of stay there until the sunset just sitting in a field, and it gives me a lot of time to think about light -

Rubin:  
Do you have a notebook with you?

Phillips:  
Oh, yes.  
Yes -

Rubin:  
Poems come from, you do draw from, as "Pastoral" might indicate, you draw from place.

Phillips:  
Yes, and, yeah, I write things down, and it's more often somewhere in a moving car that I'll get this sudden idea. Very dangerous life -

Rubin:  
Or you're not driving while you're writing -

Phillips:  
Yes, of course. So -

Rubin:  
We won't go into that aspect of the poetic life. I'm, unfortunately, we're at the end of this discussion. I find myself -

Phillips:  
Alright -

Rubin:  
Such. So enamored of your work -

Phillips:  
It's been fun -

Rubin:  
And see where it's coming from when it does that I like to extend this, but I wonder if we could have you take this to its end by reading -

Phillips:  
Sure -

Rubin:  
The final poem from "Pastoral", which is a book from year 2000. Also one of your Grey Wolf books.

Phillips:  
Yeah.

Rubin:  
And there is a poem of a falcon kill in "The Tether", in fact.

Phillips:  
That's right. Yes. On purpose, but that's another story -

Rubin:

Do you have anything to say about this first or do you -

Phillips:

Oh, this poem -

Rubin:

Yeah -

Phillips:

"The Kill".

Rubin:

Why is it the last poem?

Phillips:

It's the last poem because the book opens with the idea of and this elusive stag, constantly chasing the stag and thinking that to find it would equal something like satisfaction in a life, but it turns out, but then the idea turns out to be that, oh, but the choice will be you have, you either have the stag or you have the lover, and which will it be. And as we'll see, it's kind of hard to say if there's a choice made at the end. I don't know if that was an explanation, but -

Rubin:

I think what I would ask you is this real briefly -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

Some of your poems seem to be answering or addressing perhaps -

Phillips:

Yes.

Rubin:

Art objects or classical -

Phillips:

Yes -

Rubin:

Renderings, but you don't typically refer to any specific work or art, statuary, painting.

Phillips:

Right.

Rubin:

Is it, it's really a motif in your imagination.

Phillips:

Yes. Do you mean something like the stag -

Rubin:  
Yeah -

Phillips:

Yes. I mean, for me, it equals everything from the one that St.  
[Inaudible] saw with the cross between its antlers to the idea of  
whatever is elusive - love, understanding of art - and it also I think.  
It came to represent to me something about sexual abandon because of  
living opposite a park in St. Louis, which turns out to be a place where  
many people have anonymous sex. I didn't think of this until while  
driving down the road. A man leapt from the bushes, presumably after  
having had his encounter, and for a moment I thought a deer had leapt out  
of the bushes, and this idea of the deer, the man, the sexual, you know,  
something very, it all came together for me around that. But maybe it's  
just a private symbology.

"The Kill".

"The last time I gave my body up,

to you, I was minded  
briefly what it is made of,  
what yours is, that

I'd forgotten, the flesh  
which always  
I hold in plenty no

little sorrow for because - oh, do  
but think on its predicament,  
and weep.

We cleave most entirely  
to what most we fear  
losing. We fear loss

because we understand  
the fact of it, its largeness, its  
utter indifference to whether

we do, or don't,  
ignore it. By then, you  
were upon me, and then

in me, soon the tokens  
I almost never can let go of, I'd  
again begin to, and would not

miss them: the swan  
unfolding  
upward less on trust than

because, simply, that's

what it does; and the leaves,  
leaving; a single arrow held

back in the merciless  
patience which, in taking  
aim, is everything; and last,

as from a grove in  
flame toward any air  
more clear, the stag, but

this time its bent  
head a chandelier, rushing  
for me, like some

undisavowable  
distraction. I looked back,  
and instead of you, saw

the soul-at-labor-to-break-its-bonds  
that you'd become. I tensed  
my bow:

one animal at attack,  
the other - the other one  
suffering, and love would

out all suffering -"

Which if you think that suffering is important for producing art would  
mean that love has to be eradicated. So it's tricky-

Rubin:

The language of paradox seems to be the only way you can speak these  
things that. A distraction but one you can't turn away from, an  
inevitable one.

Phillips:

Yes. It's a little strange, I'll admit, as a poem, only stags. Maybe it was  
from living up in Iowa for a while and seeing a lot of deer.

Rubin:

Well, unfortunately, we're at the end of this conversation. It seems that  
we're at the beginning of the next one -

Phillips:

But thanks for having me -

Rubin:

Carl Phillips, it's been a pleasure to speak with you and explore a  
little of your really, I think, rich and important work -

Phillips:

Thank you -



Rubin:  
See you again here -

Phillips:  
Thanks.