

explorations



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INTERVIEW

INSTINCTLINGS

Paul Farley interviewed by Jacek Gutorow

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Jacek Gutorow: *What strikes me when I read your poems is that they are quite firmly rooted in the place – and I mean here, of course, Liverpool. You have written about various places but Liverpool seems to creep into so much of your poetry – sometimes indirectly, maybe even unconsciously, but it's there as a constant reference, a bit like Frank O'Hara's New York.*

Paul Farley: Yes, it'd be hard to disagree. There hasn't been much of a sense of project, poem by poem, but there it is. It's tempting to fall back on the proverbial 'You can take the [insert person] out of [insert place], but...', which sounds rhetorically convincing, though things might be a little more tangled. You mention the wonderful Frank O'Hara, who had an East Coast upbringing, served in the Navy, returned home to study on the GI Bill and only made it to New York by the early 1950s, from which point it provides the backdrop and texture and immediacy we'd associate with his work. I left Liverpool when I was 20, which must have led to a different kind of imaginative perspective over time. I do have a goofy origin theory about all this. When I was very young, five or six years old, my family were moved out of condemned property near the town centre into new social housing on the edge of Liverpool. This was happening to people all over the country during this period, part of a wave of postwar redevelopment. For whatever reason, this gave rise in me to a fascination with the older city, the seaport, the river. Later, when I moved away for good, all these mysteries and excitements came back. 'Exile' would be way too melodramatic—I go back there often—but that attraction some writers have to places seen again from a distance could have kicked in, and Liverpool is a strange, paradoxical, mythical place, more so it seems the further in time I get from it. It feels to me like it's there and it isn't there—Colson Whitehead says somewhere that you're a New Yorker when what used to be there is more real and solid than what's there now. Also, I suppose having a particular regional accent means Liverpool's on my tongue. It's available, or present if you like, when I open my mouth to speak. I could paraphrase Roy Fischer and say 'Liverpool's what I think with', though I think that might be stretching things.

JG: *Many of your poems are reminiscent of your childhood and teenage years – that would be the 1970s and the early 1980s, I suppose. Do you think of that period a lot? One could describe your poetry as nostalgic and I'm wondering if you feel OK with this adjective.*

PF: It's where and when I grew up. There's that thing Ted Hughes says about Elmet, how he grew up in a place where it gradually dawned on him that he was living in the remains of something. In his case it was the long shadow of the First World War, the loss of the textile industry, the decline of faith, Methodism. Coming into consciousness in Liverpool during that period you're referring to, the city felt like it was being cut adrift from something.

A lot of the people I grew up with were part of the diaspora, successive influxes who'd made their home in the city, especially from Ireland, Wales and Scotland—the 'great matrix of Anglo-Celtic alchemy' as Mark Lewisohn describes Liverpool in his recent Beatles opus—but from further afield too. It's worth mentioning that it wasn't one environment, but several, at least once we'd moved into new housing. We were right on the edge of rural Lancashire. Lapwings and skylarks were as much a part of daily experience as TV and pop music. I picked up on the hybridity of that early on—a bus ride in one direction took us to the city and the river, a walk in the other direction and the air smelled of shit and barnyards. It was great.

But it wasn't a utopia—except maybe in the minds of the town planners who built the mass housing estates and schemes—and you have to bear in mind that politically and economically, those were increasingly volatile and uncertain years, generally in this country, acutely so in a place like Liverpool, which had known tough times and been dependant on casual labour and seafaring, but now lost much of its status as a port and what manufacturing base it had very rapidly. Unemployment went off the scale, there was poverty and there was terrible racial disadvantage. The summer I turned 16 there were riots throughout the city. It's well-known now that the first Thatcher government was considering a policy of 'managed decline' over investment and renewal. The City Council rebelled against Westminster. All this precariousness must have ramified in a thousand ways in that ecosystem, in the texture of daily life, and you also felt it at the level of shared memory, and a break with the past.

If by 'nostalgic' you mean a tendency to Photoshop the past, to turn it into an idyll, I'm not sure if anyone—myself included—would really want to live in one of my poems. At least, I tend not to think of them as straightforwardly enjoyable reflections on the past, or as simply autobiographical. I'm not even sure the past can be easily consigned to 'the past'. And we kid ourselves about it anyway, constantly. We're always fictionalising to a degree. But—at the risk of sounding nostalgic and self-deluding—there was often a genuine sense of community and togetherness and hope back then, too.

JG: *When did you feel for the first time that you wanted to write poems and become a poet? And what were your first poetic fascinations?*

PF: I had a kind of breakdown after moving to London, and the worst of it was I lost my voice. Poetry eventually led me out of that, in a way I can't quite put my finger on, but it



On a rooftop, 1985 (author: Carole Romaya)

felt like a recovery of something. I grew up surrounded by talkers and storytellers. I'm told my party piece as a small child was being lifted onto the kitchen table and running through a repertoire of nursery rhymes and songs. I don't remember any of this. The only poem I've a clear memory of writing early on was in school, when I was about 13 or 14, and I remember because I was reprimanded for it! I must have been very taken with the doctrine of 'mutual assured destruction' (this still being the height of the Cold War) and the last line of this poem, I shudder to report, went: 'They're all fucking M.A.D'. I was sent to see the Head of English. I remember him saying something like 'It's a beautiful day, look at everything that's going on outside, why not write a poem about that?' The only poem I remember reading in school was Browning's 'Home Thoughts from Abroad'! And A Child's Garden of Verses was one of those books that seemed to turn up in different places. Poetry crept up on me, or I crept up on it. I started to seek it out. Firstly, things that felt slightly contraband, or had an edgy aura, like the Beats, Burroughs, the Liverpool Poets, who were a big deal to me at the time not least by bursting that bubble of obscurity; proof of poets in this place, writing about a world I had a foothold in. I discovered the Central Library on William Brown Street. By the time I'd moved away to art school in London, I was still reading American poetry and I can be fairly sure of this because at Chelsea—time for another shudder—I was giving my paintings titles like 'Myopia: a Night'. Poetry gradually became a thing, though it was always happening in the shade of art. I was trying to write poems, off and on, but never had any ambitions for them. Before I was into my 20s I never entertained the idea of becoming a writer, not for a second. I wanted to make pictures, paintings and photographs.

JG: In your poems you often resort to cinematic metaphors and allusions. In The Boy from the Chemist you mention "celluloid," "film-set streets," "credits" or "footage," to bring up just a few terms connected with films; and the poem entitled "Termini" (also from your first book) seems to unravel as a kind of short film with the "front-seat

panorama", the brothers Lumière and end-credits. Such references are surely not casual. Could you say something about your interest in cinema? How (and when) did it start?

PF: Now you ask me, and now I think about it, I'm surprised I didn't write more 'cinematic' poems. I'd been introduced to American avant garde filmmaking at Chelsea: Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Andy Warhol, Bruce Baillie, Michael Snow. I made a few short films there too. One time I took a 16mm clockwork Bolex up to the Lake District and shot footage around Wastwater and near Windermere. I also shot films from the train between Lime Street in Liverpool and London Euston. Looking back, I suppose these feel a bit like precursors. I already had a hands-on feel for film, the editing suite, the cameras, the language of cutting and shooting, long before I published a poem. I even worked in a cinema to support myself while I was at Chelsea, as an usher.

But before that, cinema was always there. We were all steeped in it. I had friends who I could talk to in movie quotes. It was fairly indiscriminate, and I guess a lot of it came from what was broadcast and screened on the wall of the cave in the years we were growing up. It was a shared mythos or iconography, I don't think it's too far-fetched to say that. I'd also have to acknowledge actual cinema-going. I interviewed the late great Terence Davies once, around the time he would have been making *Of Time and the City*, and was struck by the galaxy of cinemas and picturehouses he could remember visiting when growing up in Liverpool. He was 20 years older than me, and I just caught the tail end of this world: the ABC, the Futurist, the Odeon, the Abbey. Some of these places were on their uppers by the time I was going, run down, about to close forever, or turn into nightclubs and supermarkets. Watching *Star Wars* in an Edwardian fleapit was a kind of displaced, nostalgic experience. Again, there was the fascination I've mentioned earlier with this city I'd grown up in—which had once been a site of modernity, the Lumière brothers filming from its Overhead Railway, a place that had the first passenger railway on the planet (we lived right next to the Edge Hill terminus at the end of the 1960s), although it was all old or dismantled by the time I came along.

JG: You have mentioned Terence Davies. Not everybody knows that you have written a critical study of his 1988 film Distant Voices, Still Lives. Could you say something about it? What attracted you to Davies in the first place? I'm afraid he is criminally unknown in Poland.

PF: I saw *Distant Voices, Still Lives* the week it came out at a cinema in the West End, and it was overwhelming, seeing this Liverpool from my parents' time reimagined on the big screen. I guess on one level the film was exciting that fascination I had with the world I was born into, the older city. The way the film recreates the rhythms and textures of that time and place, its rituals and routines, and finds momentousness in the very ordinary, which is where it often lives. He just gets so many things so right, I'd never seen anything get so close as a portrayal and evocation of working class life after the war in this country. And it's a film about memory. Not a memory of a time and place but a lyrical framing of time and memory.

Clearly, it's right up my street, but I think his films have a much wider resonance and appeal, not least in his commitment to cinema. And you could say Terence was a very literary director. Beyond the Liverpool movies, he made adaptations or biopics of Emily

Dickinson, Edith Wharton, Siegfried Sassoon, Terence Rattigan, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, John Kennedy Toole. He told me one of the key shaping influences on *Distant Voices, Still Lives* was Eliot's *Four Quartets*. I can't remember how the book all came about but I was happy to get the chance to write it. The British Film Institute used to publish a series called *BFI Film Classics*, I don't know whether they still do, but they were great: Salman Rushdie wrote one on *The Wizard of Oz*, A. L. Kennedy on *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. I seem to recall angling to do another film and the editor taking me for lunch and suggesting something closer to home, something that was staring me in the face. I'm glad they did.



2001, with Michael Donaghy (author: Michael Donaghy)

JG: *Your first book of poems (The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You) appeared in 1998. It was the time when several critics announced the emergence of the so-called New Generation poets: Carol Ann Duffy, Simon Armitage, Glyn Maxwell, Mick Imlah, many others. Did you feel any affinity with them?*

PF: I'd say one of them—Michael Donaghy—changed my life. I'd enrolled in his night classes at City University, before all the New Gen stuff happened, and he had an enormous influence on my approach to the art. I can't overstate the impact meeting Michael had on me, as I'm sure it did on many other writers. The New Gen poets—there were superb writers on that roster, but the whole PR 'new rock and roll' line was a bit iffy. Lists and promotional campaigns like that are often bound to be flawed, one way or another, and this one couldn't have given a true picture of British poetry during that period. But yes, poets like Carol Ann Duffy, Simon Armitage, Don Paterson, Jamie McKendrick, Lavinia Greenlaw, Ian Duhig were all on my radar because I admired their work. Whether we were all on the same wavelength—certainly somewhere in the same bandwidth, I reckon, though when you listened closely they were all very distinctly themselves as poets.

JG: *I remember that when I talked to Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, they pointed up how important contemporary American poetry was for them. The New York Poets. The Beat Poets. I'm sure you also read them at the time but I'm wondering how you read them. Did they have any kind of impact on you?*

PF: I'm sure they must have done, early on. When I was young the borders between the two cultures were fairly porous, and we'd grown up irradiated by American culture, so there was that recognition factor, though at the same time I'd have to say that poetry often seemed a world away. I felt its distance from a lot of the English poetry I was encountering in fits and starts. But anyone reading their way into it soon realises that 'American poetry' covers a multitude. Then later on when I met Michael Donaghy my sense of it all shifted further. Michael was New York Irish, born in the Bronx, who came, via Chicago, to settle in the UK in the mid-1980s, and he brought with him (among many other things) a fresh look at those US poets from mid-century like Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, Howard Nemerov. So those poets who were trading with an English tradition, if you like, some of whom had found themselves labelled as formalist throwbacks and framed in opposition to writers as different as John Ashbery, O'Hara or Allen Ginsberg, writers who'd nonetheless been anthologized together as the 'new American poetry', even though you could find all kinds of interesting traffic between some of those writers and English literature, indeed, world literature. Michael liked to cut across or challenge a lot of this critical canon-forming stuff—his thing was that linear cultural progress was a kind of illusion anyway. Which might have come as a relief to me at that point; my reading was enthusiastic but all over the place. Anyway, sorry Jacek, this is such a windy answer: yes, contemporary American poetry more generally has been important, though I have to say, it feels like I've taken plenty of bearings from poets on this side of the ocean, particularly in Ireland, over the same period. Just like, later on still, living in Grasmere for a couple of years and thinking about the Lake Poets and long Romanticism probably left its marks.

JG: *In general, what do you think of poetic influence?*

PF: I encourage my students to read as much as they can, to be open and alert to what's happening now but also willing to look beyond movements, fashion, currents, and be under the wider influence of influence. The things you admire and the things you reject are you figuring out where you are and who you are as a writer. You're finding a way into a big conversation. Find those poems you want to carry around or learn by heart. They provide our bearings, and I think we all end up with a kind of private playlist. Poems can feel a long way from what we do but have something about them that keeps us coming back. For me, say 'Innocence' by Patrick Kavanagh, or 'Power' by Adrienne Rich, or 'The Heaven of Animals' by James Dickey, actually a good few poems by Dickey. None of these, so far as I can tell—though it's not for me to say—have left any clear traces, though they feel indispensable. And the stuff you don't like must be influential, right? Sometimes the bearings you take seem more obvious or immediate. It might be the way a poet approaches form—not that they're 'formalists', but their ways of shaping the material or setting a thing in motion. Then there's the material itself, the ground other poets have opened up or made available. Maybe the closest it ever feels to

that anxious Oedipal struggle model of influence would be an encounter with a poem that leaves you with a sense of wanting to weigh in and have your own say on the matter in hand. I'm aware of the idea of the misreading, the covering of tracks, the unconscious jostle. It's an untidy business, and there must be an observer effect—you can't see things straight. But we know writers and artists enable and inspire or dare each other—and other poems inform our approach as much as anything else in our lives. So much is made possible. And so much is waiting to be discovered. That's ongoing business. Do you know that Peter Bogdanovich line: There's no such thing as an 'old' movie... Only ones you've already seen and ones you haven't.

JG: *The Boy from the Chemist* was released when you were 32 but I suppose you started publishing poems much earlier? Bringing out a debut book at the age when (I'm sure) you were already a few steps ahead of your first poetic texts – was it a conscious decision?

PF: I'm not sure there were many conscious decisions being taken back then. Or at least there wasn't much calculation involved. My memory of it now is of one thing leading to another, and I got lucky. I walked into Michael's night class partly on spec, it being the closest to where I was living in Kings Cross at the time; through that class I also met a group of very talented younger poets; I started receiving encouragement from established writers; and I finally figured out what to do with the poems I'd been writing, and started to publish things, although that didn't happen until around 1994-95. Up till then I'd been clueless. There's a thing called the Eric Gregory Awards in Britain, which is this lovely, longstanding source of support and affirmation for poets under 30 from the Society of Authors. I'd never heard of it until I'd just turned 30! I won an international prize for a poem in 1996—and that ratcheted everything up. By then Picador had started publishing poetry, and decided to build a list with an editor, a long-term commitment, and Don Paterson took on that role, and he took a chance on me (I think mine was his first collection). So a lot happened quickly and in a relatively short stretch of time—but it happened on the back of flailing around for years in London.

JG: *How do you read those early poems after thirty years?*

PF: Reluctantly, bar a few exceptions. I might be wrong, but I think most poets who've built up a 'body of work' over time probably only check in occasionally with their early stuff, or don't often have cause to be going back and looking closely at it. Not as a disavowal or rejection, not at all. A first book is a big deal, a significant moment for any writer. But maybe more out of being preoccupied by the next thing. And I'll admit on my part to a little wariness with that kind of stocktaking. Your perspective changes. It has to. I came across a copy of *The Time Machine*, with a preface written by H. G. Wells thirty-odd years after the book was first published, and recall him being critical from the standpoint of the mature writer he felt he'd become, but remember thinking, well, he still wrote *The Time Machine*!

The exceptions are a few poems from the first couple of books that I still enjoy performing. It gives a reading a depth-of-field for an audience, I hope, when you revisit

older poems alongside new or recent work, and for you there's the chance of interesting acquaintances being struck. I like hearing other poets do it. The hits and the new stuff. I like reading from memory, and by now those older poems must be deeply embedded. They feel very familiar, and at the same time like they were written by somebody else, which you could argue they were. To go back to Armitage once more, I'm sure somewhere Simon talks about the typical reaction to coming across an old poem you haven't looked at in years, and it's the same sentence only with a difference in emphasis: 'Fuck, did I write that?' or 'Fuck, did I write that?' God, thirty years. When you say it like that...

JG: In some of your poems you make suggestive references to paintings and painters. There is Vermeer and there is Van Eyck, great masters of interiors and surfaces. And then there is Joseph Beuys, an austere iconoclast. There are others. As a poet, do you envy painters? After all, you wanted to be a painter, didn't you?

PF: We could circle back to O'Hara: why I am not a painter! There have been times at home when I've had to go into the shed and find a tin of gloss or emulsion to match the colour of a door or wall or whatever, and I've opened the tin, broken the skin with a stick, given it a stir, and when I've started applying the paint with a brush, I've gone into a very gooey zone. That feeling of a loaded brush, and the brushstrokes, travelling up my arm. Muscle memory. The smell of turps and white spirit. That's the closest I get to envying painters. Other than that, no. I still love looking at paintings. It's felt natural to turn to the visual arts, like it has done to draw on pop music or cinema, it's just what I've absorbed. I've started taking photographs again since the lockdowns, after a very long break, and remember saying to someone recently that it felt good to be making something without words every now and then, like a holiday from language or something. Maybe it's a manifestation of some baked-in frustration, unfinished business, or whatever, but I don't think of it like that. Somebody asked me once about poets who'd gone the other way, who'd 'lapsed' into painting or art. I couldn't think of any off the top of my head, except Marcel Broodthaers, because there's that story about his first poetry book not selling, so he cast it in plaster and declared himself to be an artist.



2012 (author: Mark Haddon)

JG: *How do you write a poem? For example, do you start with an image? A phrase? A feeling? Do you revise a lot? And when do you know the poem is ready?*

PF: Difficult to answer this, because you're never stepping into the same river twice, and it never seems to happen in the same predictable way. I wish it did. I wish poems would come to me while I'm shaving in the mirror of a morning. Some poets say they 'hear' the poem, that it arrives like music—I think I know what they mean but for me it's more of an inkling. Sometimes you see it whole, or think you do, the cliched flash. But things tend to build up over time, a series of exciting hints and nudges. You feel your way into it, instinctively. Instinctlings. By the time I've sat down to write I'll usually have a phrase or a line, maybe more, and it just goes from there. Once it's up and running, I've noticed that if the poem has legs, it's like you're making something that has magnetism or updraft—it has an attraction. It pulls stuff in from different sources, or from parts of you that are normally scattered or discrete. It's difficult to talk about because it's playful and self forgetful. You just go off on one, as we'd say. With a bit of luck I'll end up with a first draft. Usually I'd go back and revise a fair bit—typically big changes followed by progressively smaller tinkering until I either quit or I'm made redundant. Sometimes it all comes together very smartly and almost in one go, though for me that'd be the exception.

Speculating on how old poems got written needs to be taken with a shovelful of salt, as it's rationalising a long time after the fact, but it does become easier to convince yourself of what might have lit the fuse. And it's usually less embarrassing than trying to discuss the finished article. Around the time I was writing the poems that ended up in my first book, I was working for a library in West London, and one of my jobs was to go out on the mobile library and deliver books in the community, which I did with a guy called John, who was able to drive this gigantic van. I can still remember the route: World's End Estate, Latimer Road (the area around Grenfell Tower), Dalgarno Gardens, a lot of it newbuild or high rise. The library where we were based, in the shadow of Trellick Tower, intersected with a place called Southam Street, which I discovered was originally a much longer thoroughfare because a photographer called Roger Mayne had documented it in the 1950s—black and white images, maybe what would go on to be called 'street photography', showing the life of its children playing out, gangs and teenagers hanging around. A lot of this West London had been swept away, bulldozed and rebuilt. One day when we were driving around, John, who was one of these guys who'd knocked about a bit, told me a story about how he'd once worked on a building site and seen a man freeze on a very high ladder, and had to climb up and rescue him. And around this same time, I was reading Herman Melville, a novel called Redburn (it just occurs to me now that I bought this at the flea market on Golborne Road, even though I was working in a library). The title character is a boy who sails from New York to Liverpool and tries to navigate the city he arrives in using his father's guidebook—and ends up getting lost. Anyway, I think these are the headwaters of one poem I wrote, about a windowcleaner on his rounds in Liverpool, and hardly any of this stuff is in the poem, above the waterline, but all of it—anecdote, art, literature, going out on that van full of books surrounded by those tall flats—feels connected by the poem it made possible.

JG: *To what degree is poetry and poetic speech instinctive to you? I'm asking because what I like about your poems is their randomness which is never (or almost never) arbitrary. But of course you cannot plan being elusive or casual, can you?*

PF: I'm still surprised by what can happen when our speech—its accent and rhythms and elisions, everything—meets a metrical pattern. I like it when a poem sounds like something is being said that's likely to stay said. When the voice of a poem on the page has a sense of utterance, or a line that feels like something you might overhear. If a poem strays out of earshot of this sense of it speaking in some way, I'd have to reckon on there being a very good reason for it doing so. I also like the way a poem can outrun you, go beyond what you might be capable of saying, and in that way is never straightforwardly 'you, speaking'. If it ever manages to 'seem a moment's thought' then for me it's only a demonstration of the high pain threshold I've developed for all the fiddling and frustration involved backstage. I find writing poetry is dead hard, and real achievement is rare, but I'm in my element when I've got a poem on the go.

JG: *Your last book of poems is *The Mizzy* (2019). To me, it is the most varied of your books – in tone, in poetic forms, in themes and images. Is there anything specific about this volume that you would like to stress? And a more general question: do you attach much importance to how poems are arranged in a collection?*

PF: You can't fail to notice how collections have changed over the last few years. The themed book, the concept album, the sequence, the book where every poem takes the same formal approach—these have been in the ascendancy for a while. In a way, you could view this as a kind of courtesy to the reader, especially those who might be wary of poetry. The book is providing a frame, or a bridge. Look, everything here is about water, or set on a wind farm in the North Sea, or makes the same shape again and again. It lends a kind of coherence and focus. The collection with a bunch of poems written over a number of years and gathered together—a beginning, a muddle, and an end, as somebody said—might have taken a back seat for now. Though even a miscellany can have recurring themes, obsessions, connections, modulations of voice and persona. There can be structure, or chronology of some sort, even narrative. I like something Thom Gunn once said, about knowing when he had a book; he felt that something had been 'covered'. I recognise that. But I'm probably guilty of placing too much emphasis on the individual poem—I'm one of those poets who thinks a handful of poems that have a life of their own would represent a fair return for anyone.

JG: *In his "Bread and Wine" Friedrich Hölderlin asked: "who wants poets at all in lean years?" (I quote Michael Hamburger's translation). Hölderlin wrote this line two centuries ago but I think his words are even more relevant today. It seems that nobody reads poets today and that poetry has become something exotic and having little to do with our reality which is not only apocalyptic (as many have noticed) but maybe even post-literary. How would you defend your poetic craft?*

PF: I don't want to get all defensive, but citing Hölderlin like this reminds me of something Ted Hughes wrote about context. He quotes from Republic, where Plato in turn is quoting Damon explaining how the modes of music aren't altered without important changes to the laws of state—and he asks, does this mean a poet is to listen to their gift or study legislation? Wordsworth and Coleridge and Blake, all writing two centuries ago, like Hölderlin, during the aftermath of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars etc, produced work that mightn't obviously or directly address the wider social and political issues of their day but seems instead to refract or distil them into symbols or moral tales. It's that thing Shelley wrote at the time (in defensive mode) about the spirit of the age and unacknowledged legislation. I guess what I'm driving at is faith in a kind of imaginative integrity, which has to come before any seeking after relevance or well-intentioned engagement with the big issues of the day. Though I couldn't deny the power of the public poem or the poetry of witness, of writing to the moment, done well—you've only to think of Tony Harrison, a poem like 'v', say, or Carolyn Forché—and this interview has reminded me that the first poem I remember writing in my school exercise book was a protest poem.

People have been telling me nobody reads poetry since I started paying attention decades ago. It's perennially in decline, in danger of dying out, an irrelevance. I've got used to it. Maybe it's tougher today, to 'tell all the truth but tell it slant' in an attention economy. Maybe a lot of poetry has drifted too far beyond what the fabled 'general reader' expects from, or looks for, in a poem. Maybe it likes living off grid, working undercover. I don't know. I could quote another German poet back in response to your question, that Brecht line that goes 'Will there be singing during the dark times? Yes, there'll be songs about the dark times...' That's the short answer I should have given.



2017, at the BBC London (author: Michael Symmons Roberts)

JG: *Where do you find yourself now – I mean, as a poet?*

PF: I'm keeping going. It's hard to tell how much my approach has changed since I began writing—I'm decades older, though, and you'd like to think there's some accumulation of knowledge and nous, despite what Socrates said. I can't help being

drawn back to those things that seem to have always fascinated or attracted me, and try—often in vain, I'm sure—to avoid hitting the same note. I don't take poetry for granted. You know, most of the time I'm not a poet, I'm doing other stuff, but whenever I am in the mood to write, these days I can usually find the time. I have to be grateful for that, and for all the breaks I've had, which might bring us back to where we came in. Liverpool City Council, rebellious, on the brink of bankruptcy, soon to implode, nevertheless somehow managed to pay my tuition fees and gave me a small maintenance grant, so I could go to study at art school in London. I remember the cheque, with the city's coat of arms, the Liver birds, Neptune with his trident, a Triton blowing his shell. There's an attachment to place.

INTERVIEWEE'S BIO: Paul Farley was born in 1965 in Liverpool and studied at the Chelsea School of Art. He has published five poetry books and a *Selected Poems* with Picador: *The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You* (awarded the Somerset Maugham Award and a Forward Prize in 1998); *The Ice Age* (winner of the 2002 Whitbread Poetry Prize, and a Poetry Book Society Choice); *Tramp in Flames* (short-listed for the International Griffin Poetry Prize in 2007 and the T. S. Eliot Prize); *The Dark Film*; and *The Mizzy* (shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Costa Book Awards in 2019). He has written a book on Terence Davies's *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (British Film Institute, 2006) and in 2007 edited a selection of John Clare for Faber's *Poet-to-Poet* series. Farley's work includes many radio dramas, documentaries, literary adaptations and features, both as writer and presenter. He has written and presented many programmes for the BBC's *Classic Serial*, *Book of the Week*, *From Fact to Fiction*, *Between the Ears*, *Sunday Feature* and *The Afternoon Drama*, as well as numerous standalone arts features and series. He is a frequent guest on magazine arts programmes such as *Saturday Review*, *The Verb* and *Front Row*, has been invited to appear on flagship series such as *Start the Week*, *The Today Programme*, *A Good Read* and *With Great Pleasure*, and he currently presents *The Echo Chamber* on BBC Radio 4, a series on contemporary poetry.

e-mail: p.j.farley@lancaster.ac.uk

INTERVIEWER'S BIO: Jacek Gutorow is a Professor of American Literature at the University of Opole. His academic interests concern American and British modernism; he also writes extensively on contemporary Polish literature. He is the author of seven critical collections and seven volumes of poetry. He has translated American and British poets (Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, David Jones, Charles Tomlinson, Simon Armitage and others). His recent critical works deal with the ambivalences and dilemmas of the modernist sensibility.

e-mail: gutorow@uni.opole.pl

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