

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Brief: Phillip B. Williams

**Jenn Habel:** This week's guest is Phillip B. Williams. I spoke with Phillip shortly before his fantastic second book of poems, *Mutiny*, was released by Penguin Random House. In addition to discussing the origins and organization of *Mutiny*, we talked about grandmothers, *The Masked Singer*, and the omnidirectionality of time. This is The Brief. I'm Jenn Habel.

**Phillip B. Williams:** Hello?

**JH:** Hi, Phillip, it's Jenn.

**PBW:** Hello. How are you?

**JH:** I'm well. How are you?

**PBW:** I am well. My service is pretty wonky, so let me know if I go out.

**JH:** Okay. Where are you right now?

**PBW:** I'm in Philadelphia.

**JH:** Okay. What's out your window if you're by a window?

**PBW:** Row houses and cars. [laughter]

**JH:** Row houses... and hopefully a cellphone tower somewhere nearby.

**PBW:** No, who knows? Oh, now, my neighbor is looking out at his window, he never has his curtains closed. [laughter]

**JH:** Little does he know you're going to be fielding questions about poetry for about 20 minutes or so. [laughter] Well, in an interview that you gave a few years ago, you mentioned that you took a sustained break from reading and writing poetry for a while. I think this was in 2018, and I was curious what led you back to poetry after that break?

**PBW:** It wasn't something that I... [inaudible] didn't expect control over, but I think this is part of the answer. I was working on and still completing a longer project. Around 2019, January, I was visiting a friend in LA, and I often would do that in January just to get out of the East Coast and try to get some sun. I'd planned on only writing on this long project, but then the only things that would come were poems, and they weren't necessarily poems that I had been writing. They had different energy, they were more leaning towards frustrations and angers with all kinds of things. I think it was just a moment of purging. I had held on to those feelings

for so long, because the longer project does not have space for anger, at least the way I'm reading it. That doesn't mean that there isn't anger in a work of fiction, in the book, but I just, in that moment, had to just get all of those frustrations and angers and even madesses out. It ended up being something that lasted for the entirety of 2020. And so that's how it started with just having been overwhelmed with these feelings that I couldn't get on the page those other three years that I hadn't been writing poems.

**JH:** So all the poems in *Mutiny* are from 2019, 2020 then?

**PBW:** No, some are from 2016. So the period before I stopped writing poetry, it appeared immediately after. Most of them were written in 2020, which I think might shock or even appall some people, but you have to imagine not writing poems for two or three years--you're actually still writing, right? So these poems and these words are always in imagination, they're always in process. So it's not like some holy muse came down and said, oh, now for a year, you're going to write these poems. They're still much editing very quickly. But a lot of those ideas, they had been sitting and being nurtured subconsciously throughout that entire time.

**JH:** When did you get the idea to title so many of the poems, or to designate them, final poems?

**PBW:** That happened in January. One of the ideas behind *Mutiny*--it hasn't become the prevailing way of describing the book--is if I were to write a goodbye book to poetry, what would it look like? What would my final poems be toward and what would they sound like? That's the angle for a lot of those. "Final Poem for the Deer" is not saying, oh, no, don't write about the deer anymore. It's the critique of how I've been writing about the deer. Also, recognition that as I'm observing poems written about the deer, it has been written in this way, but by no means do people need to stop doing what they're doing. But it's a way of making aware like, hey, we have this trope, we have this image, these metaphors that we go to often. How can we refresh them or at the very least acknowledge that this is a pattern and where does that come from? So why do we use the deer as a way to navigate through death? Why are we always killing the poor animal? [laughs] It's always dead or dying or about to be dead. There are some beautiful poems, like George Oppen has a poem where the deer are startled and they stare out. In that way, it's fantastic. But so many of the poems about deer are, it's being preyed upon or has been hit by a car, something like that. So these final poems, "Final Poem for a Crow" was another one, are explorations of how as keepers of language, nurturers of language, however people think of poets, there are so many different ways to navigate the language, have there been patterns to it that have become second nature maybe to a fault. And the main person who I'm asking that question of is myself.

**JH:** Do you feel like in those titles the tone is different in different places? Like, sometimes it's exasperated or sometimes it's prayerful? Or did you think about it in those terms at all?

**PBW:** That's a good question. I think it depends on the poem, meaning the context of the poem works retroactively in understanding how the title works upon the poem, if that makes

sense. So like “Final Poem for the Moon” is really an ode to the moon, as well as a goodbye. “Final Poem for the Deer” is an exploration of a father who has passed away and having the deer be more of a living deer as opposed to, oh, it's a dead deer. It's acknowledged in the poem that this deer is a symbol as it is always made to be the symbol. And it takes a strange, surrealistic, maybe even mythological embodiment in that poem. So that final is more of a transformation. It can even easily be called “Revision of the Deer.” Then some of them are exasperated or just like annoyed or even angry, like “Final Poem for the Black Body.”

**JH:** Yeah. I don't know if this is related at all. In a tweet, when you were listing three themes in your recent work one was “anachronism as the only form of time.” I wonder if you could explain to me what you mean by that. I've been thinking about a lot and I kind of can't puzzle it out.

**PBW:** So the idea that time is linear is one way of thinking of time. I'd rather think of it as circular, and not even circular in one direction, but circular omnidirectional. So time moves into the future, and as it moves into the future, it's constantly feeding into the past. And so, for something to pop up in a work that we're doing that is referential, that's just usually how we work, we bring something from far ago into the work that we're working on presently. Then there's more the futuristic mode, I guess you can call it science fiction or even just the act of imagination, right? It's creating something, making something new, and then bringing that into the world. But I'm also wondering about what happens when there's something that it says in the present for which we have no evidence, and then many years deeper into time, like ten years later, twenty years later, there's confirmation from the past that the thing that we have been thinking about during that time had always been true. Or if, oh, they didn't really—thinking of a people, let's say an ancient people—they didn't really have electricity or light. Then you find out that there are some tribes that figured out how to have electricity way before—or light, I should say light—that are not candle-based, it was more so hydro-powered, right? That's what I mean about time being anachronistic. There are ways that we describe time or usually think about time that are incompatible with the ways that time actually occurs. It's usually with a way that we do not give our full imaginative powers to everyone and everything.

**JH:** Okay. Interesting. In some ways it's making me think, like, there is no finality. I found myself thinking about issues of endings and beginnings a lot when I was reading *Mutiny*, and just about the fact that mutinies are both endings and beginnings. I was wondering if that came into play when you organized the book. Because I noticed, like, the first and the last poems begin “in the beginning,” and then have the idea of finality in the title of the first poem, and then toward the end of the last poem there's the word “end” or “endings” repeats. Were you conscious about that in choosing those as the first and last poems, or just what were your thoughts on how you organized the book in general?

**PBW:** Yes. All I knew is that I didn't want sections. Oh, I just didn't want them. [laughter] I can't stand it. [laughter] The idea that this is section one and this is section two, and other people do it well. I think in *Thief* I did it well. It did feel a bit compartmentalized as far as categories. I

couldn't handle that. Also, for me to be mutinous, it's not for a book to be mutinous, but for me to be mutinous, was to go against sections. That is the way that a lot of the books that I read that I like vary in sections, and one can say that we're trained by what we read. I wanted to go against that training, and so it was very important for me not to have sections. *Thief in the Interior* originally was written without sections and it didn't work because some of the poems, they could not interact with the others in a kind of transitional way. That was not the case with *Mutiny*. So that was the first organizing principle. And then the second was to figure out how to get that long poem, "Mutiny," not to be in the middle of the book, where the long poems are sometimes placed as a marker of, hey, you're making progress. I wanted it to be either at the beginning or at the end and it found its way at the end. It also could not be the last poem because it makes such a grand statement. And as you were saying about beginnings having endings or endings being new beginnings—"Mastery," it doesn't obviously, in my opinion, lead a reader into thinking that more can come from it, which is why something else had to come after it. So, ending with "in the beginning" was a way to hit a reset button and let the reader know that there's always space and possibility for something else to happen. "Final First Poem" was always going to be the first poem just by nature of the title and how it introduces a lot of the themes and arguments.

**JH:** So in the last poem a grandmother is mentioned and something that I really liked about *Mutiny* was the attention that it paid to grandmothers. I'm wondering if you would be willing to tell me a little bit about your grandmothers if that's not too personal of a question.

**PBW:** No. I'll share what I can. My grandmother in, I don't have the manuscript in front of me, in "The Shame" and in "Final Poem for Grandmother's Cancer" is my maternal grandmother. I grew up with her. We lived on the first floor of our two-flat, and I have the closer relationship with her and very fond memories of her. I love her still, loved her then. I will say that there are a lot of things that I learned from her that I did not know I learned from her until I became an adult, like a love for board games I think actually is a family thing. But she used to tear me up in Checkers, just ruin me. [laughs] And we had a good time doing it, she wasn't going to take it easy on me. Then after that, she would want to watch, was it *Matlock* or *Murder She Wrote*? She liked a lot of the black and white TV shows, *Little House on the Prairie*, I think, she would watch, things that I couldn't sit still and watch. But there was peace in just being there with her. The grandmother who appears in "In the Beginning" is my paternal grandmother. I met her maybe when I was four or five. We also had a close relationship, but because I didn't live with her and I didn't see her every day like I saw my maternal grandmother. And the book, *Mutiny*, speaks about my father, which also feeds into why I didn't have a close relationship to my father's side of the family. But she was also incredibly loving. The way we spent time together was more so conversation, but she also just left me alone to play alone because I liked to do that, and she liked that I could do that and not be under her a lot. So I think there's some more poems in there about her. There was always a very strong, loving, warm relationship with the women in my family, and even the men, I just don't really write about them yet. I haven't done so other than my father.

**JH:** One of the things you just said about how your paternal grandmother would let you play alone kind of ties into another thing I wanted to ask you, which was what ideas do you have about why you became a writer? I wonder if maybe one of the reasons is that you did like to be alone.

**PBW:** Maybe, maybe. I wasn't always fond of reading. I liked reading as a child, didn't like it for a lot of my teenage years, kind of liked it [laughs] in the later teenage years going into my 20s. I was an English major in undergrad. But I would always, always write stuff, songs, poems, short stories. I wanted to design video games. So I would structure, like oh, so this is what happened in this game. That happened all my life, the creating. Probably it was because I was given so much space to just sit with myself and think through things and imagine, and no one would want to interrupt that unless they absolutely needed me. But I was given a lot of time to play and giving that time to make worlds and then getting older and learning that there are other ways to make those worlds, sort of put those ideas down. That's where I believe writing came in. There's always the love for language. The poetry always started as what I thought were songs, couldn't play music for anything. But it's like, oh, what's this song, let me read this song to you. [laughter]

**JH:** So you're not a musician in any way?

**PBW:** No, I have a guitar that I haven't touched. It's still in Chicago. I haven't brought it with me because I travel and move a lot. It just would have been a precarious thing to constantly have to figure out how to get that wherever I was going. So I just left it in Chicago. But one day I'm definitely going to go back and get it.

**JH:** So you're not one of those people that, during the pandemic, plays your guitar all the time. It's too bad you didn't have one. [laughter]

**PBW:** There's one person I know who went back to their guitar and played, and then they also have a beautiful voice. I did not do that. I went to weightlifting because I wasn't moving and that was very dangerous. So I had to find a way to get off of the void of the couch and that ended up being exercise. I still have a need to move even more than what I've been doing but that's where I went. I couldn't be stagnant anymore.

**JH:** I was in motion a lot, too. I walked kind of constantly this year, and I would just keep walking around my block. I think my neighbors if they saw me were probably thinking something was wrong. [laughs] But I think a lot of us kind of had to create motion and exercise in some way during this time. Were there any other things that comforted you during the year, during the loneliness of the year?

**PBW:** Competition shows, and particularly of *The Voice*, which I watch on Hulu. There was one season that several episodes I was just crying because the voices were so beautiful. They have really beautiful voices on there. Oh, I also started watching *The Masked Singer* and LeAnn Rimes was one of the voices who was wearing a mask. She sang a rendition of a Billie Eilish

song. I could probably watch it now and still just start sobbing because I watched it twice already and cried both times. [laughs]

**JH:** I don't know that show. How does [crosstalk]

**PBW:** How does it work?

**JH:** Yeah. How does *The Masked Singer* work?

**PBW:** So, folks who are wearing full-blown costumes, they look like the sun or a character who's composed of popcorn or two owls sitting in a teacup or something. They're really elaborate. You can't tell who's behind them. They've changed their speaking voices, but their singing voices are left pure. So as they're singing into the microphone, the judges have to think about who they sound like, if it's familiar voice, oh, that tone, I know that tone. So for instance, Gladys Knight was on there and she has a really distinct tone. She tried to hide it. For a bit, you're like, oh, no, no, no, because Gladys wouldn't do that, right, with her voice. But it was Gladys Knight. So there are certain ways you can tell who's who. But then there are some voices that are just really beautiful, like a LeAnn Rimes, but I don't want to say she doesn't have a distinctive voice but we haven't heard LeAnn Rimes popularly for a while.

**JH:** Right. Yes.

**PBW:** So it was hard to pinpoint that it was her, and throughout the episodes, they'll leave clues and things like, oil is really important in my life, and they're from Texas, something silly like that. So it's just a guessing game for the judges to try to figure out who's behind the mask and then whoever couldn't be guessed by the end of the show, they are the winner of the show.

**JH:** Okay. Does the audience know who the people are who are masked? Or they don't know?

**PBW:** No, we have no idea.

**JH:** Nobody knows. Oh, that sounds good.

**PBW:** No one knows.

**JH:** That's really good. All right, I'm going to check that out. Well, I don't want to take up too much of your time, Phillip, but do you have a poem nearby that you would be willing to read before we hang up?

**PBW:** So there's a book that I reviewed earlier in the year called *Master Suffering* by CM Burroughs on Tupelo Press. She has some really beautiful poems. This one is called "Most Beautiful Thing"  
*for Doug*

When I say I am patient, I mean that for some length of time, I did not know myself, nor was I confident that I would be known.

(This was constantly my preoccupation.

Likely the preoccupation of any body  
in a natural state of peril.)

My reasons being

I came early to the world and might have died.  
I came early to the world and might have killed myself.  
I came early to the world but missed my own passing.

It took years to find

I am blessed or impossibly fortunate.

I feel the life of my dead sister filling me.

I have seen myself through.

**JH:** Thank you.

**PBW:** You're welcome.

**JH:** Is there anything you would want to say about that poem, or that you particularly admire about it?

**PBW:** No, just get the book. [laughter] If I could just implore readers to get *Master Suffering* by Burroughs. And the thing is that it's such a powerful book and it's so short. But by the time I finished reading it, I felt very, very full. There are questions of faith and what are the body's possibilities and what is the speaker's body forced to go through and forced to endure and come out on the other side of. But there's still the experience of the power dynamics of being alive and having to just navigate and just to be when there's so much built against whatever could facilitate a healthy life, be it misogyny or be it one's health, or be it a kind of burden of faith itself. So, yes, fantastic book.

**JH:** Thank you, Phillip. Thanks for your time and your thoughts.

**PBW:** You're welcome. Thanks for talking to me.

**JH:** Yeah, and congratulations on *Mutiny*, it's fantastic. So [crosstalk] enter the world soon.

**PBW:** Thank you. I'm glad somebody is. [laughter] No, no, there's been a lot of love for it I'm very appreciative of. I'm relatively anxious around it, but for good reasons.

**JH:** Are you? It's stressful, huh?

**PBW:** I mean, you get a first second book only, you only get one second book, and they usually say the second book is the more challenging one to have a life, give a life. So, I want to see what happens.

**JH:** I hope it has a prominent one. The cellphone gods smiled on us, so I'm glad that we made it through this with good reception. [laughter] All right. Well, it's been a real pleasure. I hope you have a good rest of the day.

**PBW:** Thank you. You too. Take care.

**JH:** Okay, bye-bye.

**PBW:** Bye-bye.

**JH:** The Brief is affiliated with the Elliston Poetry Room and the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati. It's produced by Michael C. Peterson. You can find the whole season at [soundcloud.com/ellistonpoetryroom](https://soundcloud.com/ellistonpoetryroom). Thanks for listening.