

A Conversation with Marvin Bell

October 15, 2006

Marvin Bell is the author of nineteen books of poetry and essays, the most recent of which, *Mars Being Red*, was released by Copper Canyon Press in 2007. “What sets the new poems apart from those of the 1990s,” according to *Publisher’s Weekly*, “also brings them close to some poets of the 1960s: they speak out directly, angrily and almost despairingly against the current administration and the war in Iraq. There are ‘too many body bags to bury in the mind.’ Unlike many poets of protest, though, Bell ties his antiwar sentiment to an awareness that, even in peacetime, we all must die: ‘We need to think of what might grow in the field / from our ashes, from the rot of our remains.’”

Born in New York City in 1937, Marvin Bell grew up on rural Long Island. He holds a bachelor’s degree from Alfred University, a master’s degree from the University of Chicago, and a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa. He taught for many years at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and served two terms as the state of Iowa’s first Poet Laureate. He has also taught at Goddard College, the University of Hawaii, the University of Washington, Wichita State University, and Portland State University.

“Poetry doesn’t easily reveal itself,” Bell said during his opening remarks at the International Camouflage Conference at the University of Northern Iowa in 2006. “At first glance, it looks and sounds like the utilitarian language we use every day, but it isn’t. It can be the lie that tells the truth. It can follow an indirect path that reveals more than a straight line would... In other words, to see it, one sometimes has to take a second look. And, indeed, one can be looking directly at it and not see it until it moves.”

Bell's many honors include the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature, Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and Senior Fulbright appointments to Yugoslavia and Australia. His books of poetry include *Rampant* (2004); *Nightworks: Poems, 1962–2000*; *Ardor: The Book of the Dead Man, Volume 2* (1997); *A Marvin Bell Reader: Selected Poetry and Prose* (1994); *The Book of the Dead Man* (1994); *New and Selected Poems* (1987); *Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See* (1977), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; *A Probable Volume of Dreams* (1969), which was a Lamont Poetry Selection of The Academy of American Poets; and *Things We Dreamt We Died For* (1966).

"Art is a way of life, not a career," Marvin Bell wrote in "32 Statements About Writing Poetry." We met with him at his home in Port Townsend, Washington, where he talked about teaching, poetry, the personal sublime, and political engagement.

BRETT ORTLER

Do you think there's too much emphasis on writing perfect poems?

MARVIN BELL

Depends who you are. I don't think Charles Bukowski worried about it. What is "perfection"? And how does one attain it? Some think it requires writing slowly, laboring through revision after revision. Yet some excellent poets have written fast in an improvisational manner. There's no one way to write. I believe that, I don't just say it. Don Justice is an example of someone who wrote very slowly, even though he believed poets should write a lot. I once took over an office of his in Iowa City and in a drawer were a few sheets of paper on which he was working out three lines in a poem called "For the Suicides of Two Years Ago"—three lines about the black keys on a piano, and he'd typed them over and over, making tiny changes. I think people make art in many different ways, and genius in the arts consists of getting in touch with one's own wiring. It's not a question of good and bad.

Bill Stafford's attitude toward writing was something else. He used to say that writing is a natural human activity, and he would allow an audience to think whatever they wanted to about him. He was tough inside. I saw him, in a sense, diminish readings where the event seemed too important, where people seemed to be making a fuss. He would read

fewer poems than usual and mainly small poems—it'd still be a wonderful reading—but it'd be short, as if he were taking a position against making it too important. When he went to a party after a reading, if there were important people in the room, and people in the corner who seemed to feel as if they weren't sure they belonged, he would head right for those people. I never saw a man who could pay better attention. When he was talking to you, he was *right there talking to you*.

We were up at the Midnight Sun Writer's Conference in Alaska—both teaching—and I said to him, “Let's write some poems back and forth sometime.” And he agreed. So I got home and I was thinking, Whoa, I've got to write a poem and I've got to send it to Bill Stafford. It's got to be a good poem. And while I'm thinking that, here comes Bill's first poem. We didn't have e-mail in those days, so we'd write back and forth, and we published a couple of books of that work, but we hadn't intended to publish—it was just something we started to do. Sometimes Bill would send three or four poems, one of which would be the official poem. It didn't matter whether the poetry was good—whatever that means—it mattered that anybody could do this, that there was a community about it and that it was fun. Someone told me that Merwin may have suggested the same thing to James Merrill years ago. I used to do it in classes. We'd draw names out of a hat and people would pair up and write six pairs of poems, going back and forth.

ZACHARY VINEYARD

There's a small press trying to recreate that in Idaho—Blue Scarab Press. They print chapbooks with five poems each from two authors.

BELL

Blessings on small presses. There was a fellow in Idaho who printed pamphlets of Stafford poems, Donnell Hunter—he'd do a pamphlet of Stafford's work every year. And he also did a pamphlet of poems Bill and I wrote during the Port Townsend Writers' Conference, where we decided to write poems back and forth each night about the conference. On the nights when it was my turn I couldn't sleep because I had to write my poem, while Bill was up at five in the morning writing, who knows, *six* poems. Bill knew that judgments were beside the point, and he wrote a lot, published thousands of poems. I asked him, decades ago, whether he'd written hundreds of poems or thousands. He said, “Thousands.”

And I said, “If you say thousands, that means you’ve written at least two thousand poems.” I hardly knew him yet. And he said, “Well, last summer, someone lent us a cabin in Oregon, and I had a little desk and whenever I finished a poem, I’d put it over here on the right side with a stone on it. And at the end of the month I had about...” and he held up his hands to indicate a ream’s worth of paper. I understand that for years he only wrote for about an hour and a half in the morning. He’d start with a little something and just go with it. I’ve written in his style, but I don’t generally write that way. The line that I cherish by William Carlos Williams, that shows up in *Paterson*, applies to Bill: “Only one solution: to write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive.” That’s a very different attitude than trying to write perfect poems.

VINEYARD

How did you end up focusing on sentences in poems?

BELL

Some years ago I wrote a poem that sounded like—I don’t want to be too fancy about this—but it had the feeling of having been taken from a book lost to antiquity. So I called it, “From the Book of the Dead Man.” And there were some other unusual things about it. Every poetic line was a sentence. That is, the sentence was also the poetic line. And the sentence was elastic. You know, it’s syntax that provides opportunities for an enjambment, or an end-stop, changes in pitch, pace, timbre... It’s syntax that’s the real secret to free verse. So I got away from the obsession with free verse lines in that poem. In effect, I did away with the ongoing arguments about the poetic line. And the poem had two parts with titles. It’s one thing to have stanzas or sections, but two separate parts with titles—what is that? But of course the implication is, Oh yeah, you thought the poem was over. But it doesn’t have to be over. And the truth is, I don’t believe any poem has to end where it ends.

People talk about terminal pleasure—which sounds like something in a Greyhound station—but a great ending doesn’t have to be the only ending. You can keep going and make another great ending. That’s how the brain works anyway—things coming from different directions all at one time. And everything connects, but it doesn’t necessarily connect right now. So things in the second part of a dead man poem might connect to the first part or they might not. You know how in

workshops, if you repeat something, you're told to get rid of it? But the goal of poems isn't to be as efficient as possible. If it bears saying again, say it again. So I did that.

Jane Yolen, who's published and edited over a hundred children's books and writes poetry now and then, was doing an anthology—"about adult fantasy," she said. I wasn't sure what she meant. She said, "That dead man poem of yours would fit, but they have to be unpublished poems, so send me some new work." I forgot about it and didn't do it. Next year I saw her again and she said, "You never sent me a poem, but I'm doing a second volume." I sent her some unpublished poems that might be adult fantasy, and she sent them all back and said, "Well, these are nice, but, you know, that dead man poem, that would've worked." So I said to myself, Okay, she wants a dead man poem. I wrote a new one, imitating the first one, and after I wrote that one, I got even more interested in the form. I wrote another one and another and pretty soon I was off and running. I loved the form of the dead man poem because I found that I could put anything in it. Also, it fits my philosophical leanings and the way my brain operates.

When I'm teaching, I like to say it doesn't matter what you start with, it's the quality of attention you pay to it afterward. You can put anything in a poem so long as you make use of it later. You may not even have to make direct use of it. You might just make use of things that fit with it. You want to be alert to where it leads.

I kept writing dead man poems and published two books of them, but the truth is there are a lot more dead man poems than that. I'm considering writing another book of them. There are five in the new book. Some reviewers are likely to say, "What the hell? You have these poems and then *these* poems? They don't look or read anything like each other." If so, they should look again.

A few years ago, I was writing a friend and I said, "I've written the last dead man poem and goodbye to the man of my dreams." It turned out to be the next-to-last. I had to write one more to finish that book. But I got an e-mail the next day and my friend said, "I know other peoples' dreams are boring, but listen to this: You were seated at a table in Brussels. You had a red pen in your pocket. A red drink on the table. And a big pile of paper on the table. You looked like you didn't want to be bothered but I felt I had to greet you. When I did, you looked sad and perplexed and you handed me the pile of papers and you said to me, 'I've written all these poems called *Following the Sounds of*

the Resurrected Dead Man's Footsteps and I can't put them in my book because I wrote the last poem for it last week." So I started writing poems called *Sounds of the Resurrected Dead Man's Footsteps*, which look like dead man poems but have a different point of view. And that was that. When workshop members want assignments at conferences, the last assignment I give is to write a dead man or a dead woman poem. Sometimes they're funny, sometimes not. It's a form anybody can use, as far as I'm concerned. Poets and critics develop these ideas about what a poem should be, but it's limiting to do that if you're a poet.

VINEYARD

The dead man poems remind me of the surrealist poets, the spontaneous association. Do you identify with that aesthetic?

BELL

I don't think we have had real surrealism in American poetry, but that's what our quasi-surrealism was called because poets weren't known to be doing anything like it before that. Real surrealism—pure surrealism—wouldn't make any sense. We have certain episodes of surrealism in poetry. Bill Knott wrote a couple of books that were real *tours de force*. Jim Tate has what people call a surreal element—I don't really think it's surreal, I think it's dark comedy or something else. Russell Edson, people will apply it to him, but again, it's not really surrealism. He's a fabulist.

I suppose the so-called Deep Image School thought of themselves, in a way, as surrealists but it seemed as if the images they were supposed to have brought up from the subconscious were too convenient. They weren't exactly Breton—he brought up images from the subconscious that convinced you that you didn't want to know him. [Laughs]

There are surrealist moments in the dead man poems, but the dead man poems are not surrealist. That's the thing about the dead man form, it accommodates everything—the fantastic, sentimentality, abstract thinking, water, dirt and air. I think Ashbery's poems, which can themselves contain all sorts of things, are sentimental, actually, but he also has this, you know, raise-your-mind concept. It accommodates surrealism, socio-political poetry, the Absurd (with a big A), and I like that. The other thing is, most people think of the dead man as a persona, but I don't—I think of it as an overarching sensibility. There

are certain truths that you could say underlie such a project. One of them is mortality. But the dead man is alive and dead at the same time, which allows him to say and do things that another speaker wouldn't be able to.

ORTLER

Do you think it's harmful to have a distinct view of what poetry should be?

BELL

It's natural for young poets to have an idea of what poetry should be, to be creating aesthetics, because how do you start writing? It's hard at the start to just feel that anything goes. You naturally have feelings about what's good—and there are many ways to try to say what's good and what's better. But many of our institutions define poetry by dumbing it down. They're supposed to be spreading it, and they are, but it's often a watered-down version. Well, it's not up to me to say every chocolate manufacturer should make great chocolate, but I can choose which one I eat.

At the other extreme, the poetry that gets the most attention from critics is poetry that needs unpacking, that has some difficulty about it that the professor has to explain to the class. I think that's one of the reasons Stevens is taught a different way than Williams is, and probably more often, because he invites explanation, commentary on the work, and Williams often writes in a way that excludes commentary or makes it unnecessary. The work that gets promoted in literary circles is work that has stylistic eccentricities, imaginative eccentricities, needs to be unpacked, is difficult or obscure. I don't have any position against that at all, but I think it's only part of the scene. A great deal can be seen in good poems that do not require classroom unpacking, but it takes a special kind of reader. There can be layers in what appears to be direct expression. To me, that is more interesting than beautiful words in the ether.

Robert Lowell, many years ago, said in an interview something like, "American poets do a very difficult thing very well." And it's true—I think American poets attempt to create individual styles by making the language difficult, by putting a pressure on the language that makes it, as Williams said about poetry, "a less well-made or better-made machine." When Bly was publishing *The Fifties* and then *The Sixties*, he published an

essay called, “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry.” He said American poetry is like a pinball machine, full of levers and buttons and lights and razzle-dazzle, while poetry in other countries is a different thing, based more on the quality of imagination and the quality of emotion, and often with a socio-political stance to boot. That’s neither good nor bad, it just is, even still. And I think Ashbery will be taught more than Neruda. I mean, Neruda will be taught as a socio-political, cultural figure more than his poetry will be closely read because most of Neruda’s poetry doesn’t require unpacking. He’s a little surreal in his second book, *Residencia en la tierra*, but the poems don’t require a critical unpacking, not really. To me, analysis is worth more than judgment—by analysis, I mean description—you know, what is the poem doing?

ORTLER

How has the current political situation affected your work?

BELL

The new book, *Mars Being Red*, is largely wartime. *The New Yorker* just took four wartime poems. One of them is set in Bagram and concerns the torture of a taxicab driver who was arrested even though they knew he was innocent. For *The New Yorker* to run something like that seems to me indicative. It’s hard for me not to be engaged by the news, not to be concerned about socio-political matters, but I can’t say that everybody should be.

I’m going to teach some classes at Grinnell when I’m back in Iowa City, and I’m thinking of telling the students that all the poems have to be about the news. I don’t care where they go with it. They can write about the shoes on a dictator, but I want the poems to come out of real events. The poems might be crap, but I feel as if it might be interesting to try it instead of everybody writing another love poem or another nature poem or another father poem or another there-wasn’t-enough-beer-at-the-party poem. Maybe it’s a stupid idea and won’t work, but I just think my own generation has been a little deficient in dealing with things that are not about the personal sublime—and that topic is to be honored. There was a time when I thought that was the highest achievement in poetry, but I haven’t for a long, long time. And I could be completely off-track and maybe that’s what poetry is and that’s what it always has to be and always will and should be—the personal sublime—but I think

you can write about the personal sublime, which is a term I just made up, and still be in the socio-political world. I would prefer to be able to do that myself. I'd like American poets to be more involved.

When the Iron Curtain came down, the poets in Eastern Europe were beside themselves because their work had mattered so much. You could be put in jail for your poem, and people were, all the time. The poems were important. But America loves everything, co-opts everything—even if there's a club against baseball and apple pie, there'll be a website up in a week, you know? And I used to joke that the general drift of governments in the last twenty years was to the right, so one day we might find our poems meaning more and we'll be put in jail. [Laughs]

In America, we don't have a recognizable force of political poets. I think my generation are stylists of the imagination, most of them, and they're good at it. But one could do something else if one wanted to. It's a truism—but I don't know if it's true—that most political poetry is bad. I'm partial to philosophy, certain kinds of abstract thinking, but I think you can write that and still set it on the battlefield or in governmental chambers or in alleyways with the homeless.

I don't make a rule for anyone. It's hard enough to write anything worth rereading. Why should you have to do this or that? But I've been a poet for a long time and, in a lot of ways, it's easier to be a poet at twenty than a poet at sixty, because, at sixty, you've done a lot and you don't want to do it again, and you know some things too well. For it to be surprising or worthwhile to yourself, you have to take a new path through the woods, and get lost deliberately, to find a new approach. A new style leads to new content.

ORTLER

Do you think our country is going in a direction where poetry might matter more?

BELL

Bly said, I think in a poem, that the country is breaking up into tribes of the saved. That was a long time ago, twenty years probably. I think that's what's happening. Critics try to come up with the top five or ten American poets but it's been nonsense for a long, long time. You can't have Milton without Anglican England. You can't

have Shakespeare without Anglican England. You can't have Dante without Catholic Italy. You have to have a kind of agreed-upon myth and belief structure to have "The Great Writer." You can't have that in this country, because it's too diverse, too big, and there are too many tribes—and it's becoming more so, not less.

VINEYARD

Do you think that's why we haven't seen the American epic poem?

BELL

I think that's probably one of the biggest reasons you don't get many poets trying to write *the* great American poem. The other thing about long poems is that nobody will sit still for them. How many crawls and promos can CNN run at once? How many ads can pop up while you're trying to read the weather? It's insane. But we're very sophisticated. When I was a kid, when we'd go to the movies, we weren't looking at what time it was. We'd wait for the next show if there were only ten minutes left, but if there was an hour left, we'd walk in. And you'd turn to the guy behind you and say, "What's going on?" In about three sentences he'd fill you in. Because the films were so slow and there were no jump cuts. If the cowboys were out on the range, and all of a sudden there was a jump cut and they were in the kitchen, half the audience would turn to the person next to them and say, "What happened?" You don't realize how incredibly sophisticated you are. People won't sit still for a long poem. Poets do write longer poems at times. It would've been the normal taste once, but now it's an acquired taste.

A few years ago, there was a group of younger poets who were making a big noise about being the new formalists. And they wrote long poems and poems that seemed long even when they were short. I thought they were rather dull, myself. One day, I asked Don Justice, who was a very good formalist, if they were any good, and he said, "Oh, no." [Laughs] There's a wonderful story of a young poet going to see Williams. He hands him a sonnet and Williams hands it back and says, "In this mode, perfection is basic." In other words, you have to be able to write a perfect sonnet before you can write a good one. You know who the young poet is? Ginsberg. Of course he goes out and writes *Howl* and Williams writes the introduction to it. Williams also cracked later that, "All sonnets say

the same thing.” You know he’s speaking metaphorically. But in this mode, perfection *is* basic.

VINEYARD

What is “Line Disease”? You’ve mentioned it before—writers focusing so much on line that they lose focus of the poem as a whole.

BELL

Hmm. I don’t know what I meant. Sounds good. [Laughs] People did talk for so long about free verse—actually people have stopped talking about free verse—but what’s happened is, line should make a difference. On the other hand, free verse is free, so you are free to have the lines *not* make a difference, because something else is going on in the poem. That’s what happens with prose poetry, you no longer have the lines, so maybe you have something else. Nobody knows. We think Keats is a great poet. A hundred years from now people might say, “Can you believe they thought Keats was good?” We’re so tied up in our own subjectivity, we have no way of knowing what people will like a hundred, two hundred years from now. One thing I know for sure is that I don’t know anything for sure and I tend to distrust critics and poets who think they do. Some work demands more of itself, it may not be obscure, it may not be allusive, but it demands imagination of itself, it demands socio-political engagement of itself, it demands pressure of language on itself, it pushes the envelope in some way—imaginatively, intellectually, verbally. Is this progress? I don’t know, but it’s change.

Most poetry books end up under dormitory beds, and nobody reads them. The person who gets the most out of a poem is the poet. Same with a painter and his or her painting. The great thing about art is that it’s the big yes, the one place in the world where you have permission to do anything and be anyone and go anywhere and transcend time and space, which you absolutely do not have in your daily life. One in the morning, you’re writing a poem, next thing you know it’s five in the morning and you have no idea where the four hours went. It just takes you over.

On one hand it’s Poetry with a big P, on the other hand it’s just poetry and it’s a symptom of other things. I know a lot of poets who have had great success, but have not been made happy by it. They wanted something from writing that writing wasn’t going to give them. The

writing was symptomatic. It was a manifestation of deeper things. And if you make it something else, if you make it the goal itself, then that's no different than deciding that your life should be devoted to bowling. I think that philosophy and art as a survival skill are more important today because there's bad news in your face every day. I think for young people, philosophy and the arts are important survival skills.

ORTLER

In an interview, you said that much harsh criticism of young writers and MFA programs is self-hatred or hatred-beyond-disguise—

BELL

Arguments about MFA writing programs are truly academic. People who criticize MFA programs have a point, but the point isn't worth making. Do we really think MFA programs were designed to produce the greatest writers of the century? Did we ever believe that the teaching of creative writing is the same as the teaching of geometry? Writers tend to protect their turf. They want to say everything is lousy ever since them, and MFA programs make an easy target. If you want to put down a general group of people in the poetry world, that's how to do it. It's a version of the old argument that you can't learn anything in school—you know, get out and see the real world. But people in MFA programs don't live in the classroom, and they're only in the program for two or three years. And some of the people who've been putting down MFA programs were themselves part of writing classes at, say, Harvard or Yale. You should only criticize what you've been part of, I think, because that's what you know, but even then you may not know much.

Most people who go through writing programs aren't going to be writers ten years later, but they'll carry something from that time, some sense of creativity, of what writing is, what poetry is. The only reason to go to an MFA program is to hang around with other writers for two or three years and write like crazy. The truth is, you learn to write by reading. There is no other way. You model your writing after what you've read. If you read good poets, then your poetry will contain similar characteristics and maybe you'll write a good poem. If you read boring poets, your poetry will probably be boring. You don't learn how to hit a baseball by watching somebody strike out. You learn from watching someone hit a home run—a single is better, actually—and even then you

can't learn just by watching, you have to have a lot of pitches thrown to you, and then maybe somebody can give some advice.

There's very little to say about writing poetry that isn't obvious. I thought about writing a book about writing poetry, but then I decided it'd be pretty thin. You'd think that after teaching workshops for over forty years, I'd have a lot of ideas about it. And I do have a lot of ideas, but mostly about rules to break. When I started teaching in the '60s, I used to tell students that the publication of poetry by big houses in New York was going to turn out to be a blip on the literary map. The future was like the past: small editions, small presses. I didn't know I was going to be right, but that's what I thought. Because originally what you had was a bunch of editors in New York who were willing to publish a cookbook so they could publish literature. Now you have editors who only want to publish cookbooks or romance novels, and they publish a book of poetry or a good book of fiction every once in a while so people won't yell at them. It's just a business for them.

The last few years before I stopped teaching, a certain kind of student in the Workshop had a different notion of all this. They didn't want to be known by a lot of people. They believed that if a lot of people liked your work and you were getting published a lot, you were no good, that it was a specialized thing for a specialized audience and that's all the audience you wanted. They tended to be language-poetry-influenced or theory-influenced, and people like them founded magazines or presses and they just wanted to be part of their specialized group. Their work was often happily obscure.

Language poetry started out like surrealism in that the poets said to themselves, What has the use of conventional language got us? War, poverty, hatred—you know. Surrealists wanted to shake up expectations. So the new avant-garde got rid of lines and wrote in paragraphs, they broke the syntax of sentences, they wrote poetry that eschewed linear sense. They wanted to defy expectations so people could experience language and consciousness freshly. Much of the criticism supporting language poetry is elegant b.s.

A lot of the structuralist and post-structuralist theory in the academic scene seems to be based on two things: language is relative and language is subjective. So there's cultural slippage. That's basically what a baby knows—from the first time Mom says *No* in a different way. Language is impure. Nonetheless, what we say overlaps what other people understand it to mean. This is how language works: if you look

up a word in the dictionary, the second definition doesn't mean exactly what the first one meant. Promote this to the phrase and it gets worse, promote it to the sentence, the line, the stanza, the poem, and it gets worse. Nothing is synonymous with anything else, but what one person says or writes and what another hears or reads overlaps. Writers are people who work in the overlaps. They accept the impurity of language. They just get on with it. Language is impure, so what.