

Classic Poetry Series

Nick Flynn

- poems -

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Alan Dugan Telling Me I Have A Problem With Time

He reads my latest attempt at a poem
and is silent for a long time, until it feels
like that night we waited for Apollo,
my mother wandering in and out of her bedroom, asking,
Haven't they landed yet? At last
Dugan throws it on the table and says,
This reads like a cheap detective novel
and I've got nothing to say about it. It sits,
naked and white, with everyone's eyes
running over it. The week before
he'd said I had a problem with time,
that in my poems everything
kept happening at once. In 1969,
the voice of Mission Control
told a man named Buzz
that there was a bunch of guys turning blue
down here on Earth, and now I can understand
it was with anticipation, not sickness. Next,
Dugan says, Let's move on. The attempted poem
was about butterflies and my recurring desire
to return to a place I've never been.
It was inspired by reading this
in a National Geographic: monarchs
stream northward from winter roosts in Mexico,
laying their eggs atop milkweed
to foster new generations along the way.
With the old monarchs gone (I took this line as the title)
and all ties to the past ostensibly cut
the unimaginable happens--butterflies
that have never been to that plateau in Mexico
roost there the next winter. . . .I saw this
as a metaphor for a childhood I never had,
until Dugan pointed out
that metaphor has been dead for a hundred years.
A woman, new to the workshop, leans
behind his back and whispers, I like it,
but the silence is seamless, as deep
as outer space. That night in 1969
I could turn my head from the television and see
the moon
filling the one pane over the bed completely
as we waited for Neil Armstrong
to leave his footprints all over it.

Nick Flynn

Amber

Hover
the imagined center, our tongues
grew long to please it, licking
the walls, a chamber built of scent,
a moment followed by a lesser moment
& a hunger to return. It couldn't last. Resin
flowed glacially from wounds in the bark
pinned us in our entering
as the orchids opened wider. First,
liquid, so we swam until we couldn't.
Then it felt like sleep, the taste of nectar
still inside us. Sometimes a flower
became submerged with us. A million years
went by. A hundred. Swarm of hoverflies,
cockroach, assassin bug, all
trapped, suspended
in that moment of fullness,
a Pompeii, the mother
covering her child's head forever.

Nick Flynn

Bag Of Mice

I dreamt your suicide note
was scrawled in pencil on a brown paperbag,
& in the bag were six baby mice. The bag
opened into darkness,
smoldering
from the top down. The mice,
huddled at the bottom, scurried the bag
across a shorn field. I stood over it
& as the burning reached each carbon letter
of what you'd written
your voice released into the night
like a song, & the mice
grew wilder.

Nick Flynn

Cartoon Physics, Part 1

Children under, say, ten, shouldn't know
that the universe is ever-expanding,
inexorably pushing into the vacuum, galaxies

swallowed by galaxies, whole

solar systems collapsing, all of it
acted out in silence. At ten we are still learning

the rules of cartoon animation,

that if a man draws a door on a rock
only he can pass through it.
Anyone else who tries

will crash into the rock. Ten-year-olds
should stick with burning houses, car wrecks,
ships going down -- earthbound, tangible

disasters, arenas

where they can be heroes. You can run
back into a burning house, sinking ships

have lifeboats, the trucks will come
with their ladders, if you jump

you will be saved. A child

places her hand on the roof of a schoolbus,
& drives across a city of sand. She knows

the exact spot it will skid, at which point
the bridge will give, who will swim to safety
& who will be pulled under by sharks. She will learn

that if a man runs off the edge of a cliff
he will not fall

until he notices his mistake.

Anonymous submission.

Nick Flynn

Embrace Noir

I go back to the scene where the two men embrace
& grapple a handgun at stomach level between them.

They jerk around the apartment like that
holding on to each other, their cheeks

almost touching. One is shirtless, the other
wears a suit, the one in the suit came in through a window

to steal documents or diamonds, it doesn't matter anymore
which, what's important is he was found

& someone pulled a gun, and now they are holding on,
awkwardly dancing through the room, upending

a table of small framed photographs. A chair
topples, Sinatra's band punches the air with horns, I

lean forward, into the screen, they are eye-to-eye,
as stiff as my brother & me when we attempt

to hug. Soon, the gun fires and the music
quiets, the camera stops tracking and they

relax, shoulders drop, their jaws go slack
& we are all suspended in that perfect moment

when no one knows who took the bullet--
the earth spins below our feet, a blanket of swallows

changes direction suddenly above us, folding
into the rafters of a barn, and the two men

no longer struggle, they simply stand in their wreckage
propped in each other's arms.

Nick Flynn

Emptying Town

I want to erase your footprints
from my walls. Each pillow
is thick with your reasons. Omens

fill the sidewalk below my window: a woman
in a party hat, clinging
to a tin-foil balloon. Shadows

creep slowly across the tar, someone yells, "Stop!"
and I close my eyes. I can't watch

as this town slowly empties, leaving me
strung between bon-voyages, like so many clothes
on a line, the white handkerchief

stuck in my throat. You know the way Jesus

rips open his shirt
to show us his heart, all flaming and thorny,
the way he points to it. I'm afraid

the way I'll miss you will be this obvious.

I have a friend who everyone warns me
is dangerous, he hides
bloody images of Jesus
around my house, for me to find

when I come home; Jesus
behind the cupboard door, Jesus tucked

into the mirror. He wants to save me
but we disagree from what. My version of hell
is someone ripping open his shirt

and saying, Look what I did for you. . .

Nick Flynn

Statuary

Bees may be trusted, always,
to discover the best, nay, the only
human, solution. Let me cite
an instance; an event, that,
though occurring in nature, is still
in itself wholly abnormal. I refer
to the manner in which the bees
will dispose of a mouse
or a slug
that may happen to have found its way
into the hive.

The intruder killed,
they have to deal with
the body,
which will very soon poison
their dwelling. If it be impossible
for them to expel or dismember it,
they will proceed methodically
& hermetically
to enclose it in a veritable sepulcher
of propolis & wax,
which will tower fantastically
above the ordinary monuments
of the city.

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When we die
our bodies powder, our bodies
the vessel & the vessel
empties.

Our dying does not fill
the hive with the stench
of dying. But outside

the world hungers.

A cockroach, stung,
can be dragged back out.

A careless child

forced a snail inside with a stick once.
We waxed over the orifice of its shell

sealing the creature in. And here,
the bottom of the comb,
a mouse,
driven in by winter & lack.

Its pawing woke us. We stung it
dead.

Even before it died it reeked - worse
the moment it ceased
twitching.

Now everyday
we crawl over it
to pass outside,
the wax form of what was
staring out, its airless sleep,
the mouse we built
to warn the rest from us.

Nick Flynn

Twenty-Pound Stone

It nests in the hollow of my pelvis, I carry it with both hands, as if
offering my stomach, as if it were pulling me forward.

At night the sun leaks from it, it turns cold, I sleep with it
beside my head, I breath for it.

Sometimes I dream of hammers.

I am hammering it back into sand, the sand we melt into glass,
the glass we blow into bottles.

This stone is fifteen green bottles with nothing inside.

It never bleeds, it never heals, it is a soup can left on the back shelf,
the label worn off.

It is the corner of a house, the beginning of a wall.

At night it changes shape, it lies on one side, casting jagged shadows.

It brightens where my tongue touches it.

Richard's eyes were this color, a pale fruit, honeydew.

When I swing it over my head I swear it could lift me.

If I jump from a bridge it would drag me down, the current couldn't
carry us, it has no lungs, no pockets of air.

If I could walk it to the center of a frozen pond & leave it,
in the spring it would be gone.

Nick Flynn

You Asked How (formerly Even Now She Is Turning, Saying Everything I Always Wanted Her to Say)

At the end there were straws
in her glove compartment, I'd split them open
to taste the familiar bitter residue, near the end
I ate all her Percodans, hungry to know
how far they could take me.
A bottle of red wine each night moved her along
as she wrote, I feel too much, again and again.

You asked how and I said, Suicide, and you asked
how and I said, An overdose, and then
she shot herself, and your eyes filled
with wonder, so I added, In the chest, so you
wouldn't think
her face was gone, and it mattered, somehow,
that you knew this. . .

Every year I'm eight years old and the world
is no longer safe. Our phone becomes unlisted, our mail
is kept in a box at the post office,
and my mother tells me always
leave a light on so it seems
someone is home. She finds a cop
for her next boyfriend, his hair
greasy, pushed back with his fingers. He lets me play
with his service revolver while they kiss
on the couch. Cars slowly fill the windows, and I aim,
making the noise with my mouth, in case it's them,
and when his back is hunched over her I aim
between his shoulder blades, silently,
in case it's him.

Nick Flynn