

Classic Poetry Series

Nick Flynn
- poems -

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Nick Flynn(1960 -)

Nick Flynn (born 1960) is an American writer, playwright, and poet. His most recent publication is a play, *Alice Invents a Little Game and Alice Always Wins* (Faber & Faber, 2008). His most recent book is a memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, (W.W. Norton, 2004). He has published two collections of poetry: *Blind Huber*, and *Some Ether*, which won the inaugural PEN/Joyce Osterweil Award and was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Further honors include a 2001 Guggenheim Fellowship, a 2001 Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, and the 1999 Discovery/The Nation Award for his poem, *Bag of Mice*, about his mother's suicide.

Flynn's works have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Fence*, *The New York Times*, and *The Paris Review*. He was born and grew up in Scituate, Massachusetts, south of Boston. His parents divorced when he was young and his mother committed suicide when he was 22. He drifted through several jobs before starting work at a homeless shelter in Boston, where at age twenty-seven, he met his estranged, homeless father for the first time. Flynn earned an Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from New York University, and teaches part-time at The University of Houston Creative Writing Program. His long-time partner is actress Lili Taylor, with whom he shares a home in New York.

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

Belly of the Beast

Here again
at the edge of what was,

the river held back
by the stones it has carried,

the knife in your hand
brimming

rain. Inside this day
without beginning or end, it cannot

stand still inside you.

One day I'll leave—not you
but all this—this hunger

that pushes each wave.

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

Cathedral of Salt

Beneath all this I'm carving a cathedral
of salt. I keep

the entrance hidden, no one seems to notice
the hours I'm missing??...????I'll

bring you one night, it's where
I go when I

hang up the phone??...????

Neither you
nor your soul is waiting for me at

the end of this, I know that, the salt
nearly clear after I

chisel out the pews, the see-through
altar, the opaque

panes of glass that depict the stations of
our cross?—?Here is the day

we met, here is the day we remember we
met??...????The air down here

will kill us, some say, some wear paper
masks, some still imagine the air above the green

trees, thick with bees

building solitary nests out of petals. What's
the name for this? Ineffable? The endless

white will blind you, some say,
but what is there to see we haven't already

seen? Some say it's
like poking a stick into a river?—?you might as well

simply write about the stick.

Or the river.

Nick Flynn

Elsewhere, Mon Amour

Leaning from the platform, waiting for a glimmer
to braid the rails

the eyes of the action hero cut from the poster

all that concrete pressing down

A fine edge gleams around your body
as if it could be contained

The way each finger is licked, dipped in &
rubbed across the gums

until the teeth go away
Even my hands kiss you

A night broken down into grains

If you find yourself lost, dig

a cave in the snow, quickly
you need shelter against the night

A candle could keep you alive
the engine of your lungs

will heat the air around you, someone will
miss you, they will send out dogs

You must be somewhere, right?

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

If This is Your Final Destination

They say you are made of clouds, they say you are made of feathers, they say you are everywhere or nowhere—we know you are both. Our flight is delayed, this airport another nowhere. If this is your final destination, the air murmurs, if a stranger or anyone you do not know well offers you anything ... but how well & what's he offering & is this our final destination? At the hotel a man hands us the key to room three one three—home for a week or so. On the lobby tv a woman once apparently enormous holds her old jeans up to her body & smiles. Neil Diamond sings & when I go into the bathroom he follows. Everybody has one. Paradise is cloudless, they say, impossible to know. Yesterday a man was sucked into the earth as he slept—a sinkhole opened below his bed—not even his brother could save him. In the hotel restaurant my daughter orders corn flakes, they come with a pitcher of milk, she pours nearly all of it into her bowl, until I stop her she will keep on pouring. Three more tvs are screwed into the wall above us—a car goes round & round, a pitcher throws a baseball, a woman slams her racket to the clay. My daughter pushes her bowl away, picks two packets of jelly from the basket, pulls the plastic off one, then the other, lifts each to her tongue—red, then purple. The wallpaper is the texture of trees, a landscape seen from above, a contour map of an unnamed mountain, people wandering the face of it. If we were closer we could tell river from leaf, mountain from shadow, a fire making, unmaking itself. What is this strand of DNA between us, unconnected to & of the shadows parading past, our outlines already chalked into the earth? I live on air & light, I drag my daughter everywhere, this morning she muttered Federer Federer Federer like a spell & it was as if he stood before us again, his perfect red jersey. How many mornings, the sun not yet up, did I swivel on the red stool at the supermarket lunch counter, my mother in back extruding donuts,

the aisles dark & empty behind us—she'd bundled me
into the car still sleeping to get there. I'd twirl or
wander or make toast, contemplating the basket
of butter & jelly, each in its little wasteful tub,
impervious to air or time or decay. Angel of Grape,
your purple body not only filled those coffins
but took the shape of those coffins—emptiness made
whole, color now a shape. Angel, my daughter now
wants only you, she asks for the whole basket, she
pulls back each sheet, puts her tongue in—
strawberry is her favorite, because it tastes
like strawberry.

Nick Flynn

Marathon

Petals

on a river, a tree in blossom, one
pink bud—unopened—falls

& is carried downstream & out
to sea. From

above the other petals seem to
carry it. Closer—

this is our map, these our
footprints, we

grew up drinking this water. At the
start there

was doubt, we lit a torch, no one
believed we would

make it. Closer—

the legs, the heart, the lungs. It's
too soon to say

we were lucky, it's too soon to say
anything

until the cloud is pulled back
from the sky, until the ringing is

pulled back from the bells. Look—
everyone we've ever known

runs without thinking
not away but into the cloud, where we are

waiting

My Mother Contemplating Her Gun

One boyfriend said to keep the bullets

locked in a different room.

Another urged
clean it
or it could explode. Larry

thought I should keep it loaded
under my bed,
you never know.

I bought it
when I didn't feel safe. The barrel
is oily,

reflective, the steel

pure, pulled from a hole
in West Virginia. It

could have been cast into anything, nails
along the carpenter's lip, the ladder

to balance the train. Look at this, one
bullet,

how almost nothing it is—

saltpeter sulphur lead Hell

burns sulphur, a smell like this.
safety & hammer, barrel & grip

I don't know what I believe.

I remember the woods behind my father's house
horses beside the quarry

stolen cars lost in the deepest wells,

the water below
an ink waiting to fill me.

Outside a towel hangs from a cold line
a sheet of iron in the sky

roses painted on it, blue roses.

Tomorrow it will still be there.

Nick Flynn

Self-exam (my body is a cage)

Do this: take two fingers, place them on
the spot behind your ear, either

ear, the spot where your skull drops off

into that valley of muscle
& nerve—that is the muscle that holds up

the skull, that turns the dumb bone
this way & that, that nods your face up &

down when you think you
get it—press deeper, touch the little bundle of

nerves buried there, buried in
the gristle—the nerves that make you blink

when the light bewilders you, that make your tongue
slide in & out when you think you're in

love, when you think you need a drink, touch
that spot as if you have an itch, close your eyes &

listen, please, close
your eyes—can you hear it? We think our souls live

in boxes, we think someone sits behind our eyes,
lording in his little throne, steering the fork to

the mouth, the mouth to the tit, we think
hungry children live in our bellies & run out with their

empty bowls as the food rains
down, we sometimes think we are those

hungry children, we think
we can think anything & it won't

matter, we think we can think cut out her tongue,

& then ask her to sing.

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.

*

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