Nick Flynn/"The When & the How"

by

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Eng 202

The Art of Poetry

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The Art of Bewilderment. Emotional Rescue. Narrative Medicine. These are the lecture topics offered by Nick Flynn on his agent's site. These topics are fitting considering the multiple award winning writer has a voice that is "so singular, harrowing and loving as to be indelible." (Mark Doty, http://blueflowerarts.com/artist/nick-flynn/) While Doty used this turn of phrase to describe Flynn's memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, this description could be used to describe his poetry as well. And the themes of confusion, emotional devastation, and healing resonate in his life, as well.

Nick was born in Massachusetts, on Boston's south side, to parents who promptly divorced. After his birth, his father disappeared from his life, eventually landing in prison, which left Nick with his troubled mother. When he was about seven, he bought his first book, Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde.

I went downtown and saw this book. I loved horror stuff, so I bought it. I brought it home and I remember so clearly bringing it home and only being able to understand half of it, at most. But knowing that next year I would be able to read this. And next year I did. It was a huge thrill to have this knowledge: I’m just not quite ready for this yet.

I feel like that’s been the model for most of my artistic life: putting myself in the presence of something I’m not quite ready to understand, then having the sense that this is something to work toward, to go toward. (washington Square)

In his early 20s, "a memoirist's worst nightmare came true for him. His mother read a fictionalized "story" he'd written in one of his college notebooks, about a woman struggling in ways that she was, too. Shortly after she found the notebook, Flynn's mother mentioned her son's story in the suicide note she left behind after fatally shooting herself." (rumpus) Flynn spent the next several years bouncing from job to job and encountering his homeless father for the first time at the shelter where he worked at age 27.

In addition to earning multiple fellowships, degrees, awards, and honors, Flynn has published four books of poems, three memoirs, a play, and collaborated on many, many more projects. He's also executive producer of the feature film, *Being Flynn,* which is based off of his memoir, Another Bullshit Night in Suck City. He currently teaches at the University of Houston and has publshed his latest book of poems, My Feelings.

Despite the variety of endeavors, one thing remains the same. "While the subject matter may differ dramatically, in all of Nick Flynn's work there is the struggle for connectivity in a disjointed and harsh reality." (Poets.org) This is especially true in the poem, "The When & The How" from My Feelings*.*

This poem is striking in its contrast. Contrast in both form, non-standard stanzas and use of italic, and in content, a retelling of a conversation between two new friends (lovers?) interspersed with the internal dialog of the speaker. This contrast makes sense once the subject of the conversation is revealed. "by uttering the word MOTHER *fucked-up/painful wounded invisible unspeakable meaningless/*I knew yours (like mine) had killed herself *delicate* & that" What starts as mild inquiry made during the first few days ("A few days into it...") of a budding relationship, suddenly becomes a dark "fucked-up" tale.

But, as Elisa Gonzalez states, "Flynn has always had more to say about suffering and love than "They exist." And he has always avoided portraying himself as saint and victim." (Washington) In this poem, the speaker is not rehashing the gory details of what is obviously a "painful wounded invisible unspeakable meaningless" tragedy. The whole intent of the poem is to build a *connection* between two people *within* that tragedy: "it would let me know something of your struggle...& you...something of mine."

The words used to the describe the mother are particularly interesting. She is "conjured" and "*shadowy mystical elemental"* which has allusions to an otherworldly or magical characterization. As if the speaker's mother had now become legend in his mind. No longer of this earth.

Structurally, "The When & The How" has more in common with e.e. cummings than Shakespeare. Regular upright prose text is split by italicized emotions. The italicized text feels as if it's meant to be read simultaneously as thoughts going through the speaker's mind while thinking about the conversation again. "A few days into it *extravagant subterranean mystifying..."* The italics pulse through the poem turning the mundane and simple, "...as we walked from the L back to my apartment..." into the "*inappropriate*" and "*complicated"* and "*forbidden."*

It is the emotional, complicated italicized words though that make this poem so very Nick Flynn. "Bewilderment," "emotional rescue," and "narrative medicine" all make sense in this poem. Both the narrator and the female companion of the story have experienced this "*confusing tongue-tied"* event in their lives, but the speaking of it openly, even though it is "*flimsy shameful crushing...forbidden closeted"* results in something "*all-encompassing epic god-given"* and**healing**for them both.

Nick Flynn is an open and powerful writer who manages to turn some of his deep, personal tragedies into healing places that acknowledge and explore the darkness but always facing the light. "The When & The How" was incredibly powerful in doing just this. Like his reading of Dr, Jeckyl & Mr. Hyde, Nick Flynn understands has written a poem in which the reader may not understand the exact brand of suffering but they can recognize something worth working towards. As he explains it, "...by the end hopefully some balance between mystery and clarity remains."

THE WHEN & THE HOW

A few days into it *extravagant subterranean*

*mystifying* as we walked from the L back to

my apartment *inappropriate dormant*

*complicated* I asked about your family--you

(like me) had yet to mention any *desperate distant*

*tethered*

& as the question left my mouth I knew

*confusing tongue-tied* the instant before you

spoke it *incomprehensible wayworn insubstantial*

the moment I conjured her *shadowy mystical*

*elemental*

by uttering the work MOTHER *fucked-up*

*painful wounded invisible unspeakable meaningless*

I knew yours (like mine) had killed herself *delicate* & that

*desperate unknown* our conversations

from that moment on would be simply *broken*

*limited backwoods*

a matter of the how *flimsy shameful crushing*

& the when

*forbidden closeted*

which would matter only in so far as

*all-encompassing epic god-given*

it would let me know something of your struggle

*phantom oceanic flickering* & you

*uncontainable feral misguided*

something of mineBibiography

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Nick Flynn, Professor

Curriculum Vitae

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Poet

Nick Flynn

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Nick Flynn

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Washington Square Review

Elisa Gonzalez

Issue 36

September 2015

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Michelle Aldredge

03.04.12

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Conversations with Writers Braver than Me #7: Nick Flynn

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January 24, 2011