

Nate Pritts // <http://www.natepritts.com>

INTERVIEW :: I Thought I Was New Here, August 2009

Conducted by Gregory Lawless

My Very Me: An Interview with Nate Pritts

... this tremendousness,
this unutterable and inexplicable tremendousness

that fairly quivers both inside & outside my very me.

(“This Tremendousness I Can’t Talk About”)

Nate Pritts is the author of two books of poetry – *Sensational Spectacular* (BlazeVOX, 2007) and *Honorary Astronaut* (Ghost Road Press, 2008) – with a third, *The Wonderful Year*, due out in early 2010. The editor and founder of H_NGM_N, Nate teaches poetry at the Downtown Writers Center/YMCA in Syracuse, NY. Find him online at www.natepritts.com.

GL: The poems in your second book, *Honorary Astronaut*, are passionately cosmological. Plus, they’re clever, companionable, and funny at the same time. You (and by ‘you,’ I mean the speaker(s) of your poems) often present yourself as a kind of butterfingering metaphysician: “Again & again I fumble / with the cosmic thread,” who, despite his best efforts, continually falls short of his philosophical quest. Yet...this failure seems to keep the poems energized and thrusting forward. For example, you write, “I am / the thing lost and the thing looking for it.” Could you tell me a little bit about what it is like to be the “the thing lost and the thing looking for it”? And why does this state of inevitable loss, of self-missing-ness, give rise to poems that attempt to “rocket toward discovery” of self and cosmos alike?

NP: Well, I think you’re left with two choices – you can sit around lamenting things, sort of griping & complaining – or you can put this big goofy grin on your face because the whole wide world is pretty damn amazing. And if you’re a normal human being, you probably never hit one or the other pole & instead spend your days kind of sliding between them. I’ve resolved, in my poems at least to give reign more to the latter, even when I don’t totally feel it or when the ostensible subject of the poem would seem to be counter to that emotional range – fake it ‘til you make it. Which is itself a rhetorical stance in a lot of my poems – the speaker sort of hoping for the best, amping himself up & everyone within earshot because then maybe the whole group of them will be ecstatic enough to be worthy of the spectacular things this world is offering us.

A lot of my poems have, at their center, an implicit sense of constructing the self out of words & out of sensations, thoughts, riffs, feelings built out of an essential distrust of experience, or events, as an indicator of anything. So the poem itself is the rocket & the

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ride begins when the poem starts.

GL: Your poems are full of sudden and unequivocal disclosures, “I live my whole life inside, walking / as carefully as possible to lessen my chances of a fall,” which make your speakers seem lonely and eager for company, as though they have just moments to tell someone, some stranger, their life story. I could imagine these poems—so conversational and urgent—being spoken to someone on a bus ride, on a first date, or in an elevator. They seem, in short, to take advantage of the fact that someone is, momentarily, within earshot and ready to listen. Could you tell me why so many of your poems take the shape of such candid emergencies?

NP: I really like that characterization. My poems often develop out of an intense desire to blurt something out, something that is valuable & necessary. To me, the moment of the poem implies a couple of things – things I take for granted & so don’t even really think about: 1) that there is something really important that needs to be said & 2) that someone is listening but could potentially stop listening if the substance of what is being said is not delivered in a compelling enough manner. This ties into my feeling about subject matter, which is that basically the poem itself is the subject. My role as speaker isn’t to get you to care about the ostensible subject of my poem (holidays at grandmother’s house, or the sound of a certain kind of music); that stuff is & should just be fodder for the poem itself, hurtling forward, trying to get the reader to open up their eyes to the moments of the poem’s happening. To me, I think there’s no bigger emergency than the fact that birds are flying overhead & we’re all still walking around grumbling, or that the big yellow sun is shining down on us & we persist in dopey moodiness. One of my poems says something about how we’re all having epiphanies every day – the big crisis is that not every one is truly experiencing themselves, or allowing themselves to be changed. Or sharing.

GL: There seems to be a lot of New York School in your poems, in that you use what seems to be the speakers’ immediate surroundings and experiences as a source of poetic kinesis and inspiration: “My first name is Nate. / My last name is Pritts. I’m having a wonderful time.” Thus, the reader often feels as though she is witnessing the creative genesis of the poem—feels, that is, as though the poem is being written right before her eyes. At the same time, there is an emotional force in these poems that’s more personal than Personim: “I am not afraid to die. I am afraid to die / before I tell you what I’m thinking & what I’m thinking/ is that everything decays and crumbles...” But the fear of death often *shuts us up*. How and why, then, do you use these deep fears and anxieties to build a poetry of such velocity, volubility and animated engagement with the present moment?

NP: I call this “processual poetics” – a poetics of process. You’re right that I’m heavily influenced by New York School poetics, which I would define as inherently social & public & demonstrative. Berrigan talking out loud to himself & whoever would listen,

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Schuyler talking just to you in an intimate way, Koch clowning in front of the room. But the other part of the surface mix, for me, are the styles often lumped together as Black Mountain poetics – though for me it's much more centered on Olson, Duncan & Eigner – poetry that I think of as inherently remonstrative in nature. And I guess my deeper sense of “where I'm coming from” is channeled through Coleridge.

But, to me, the end of your question answers itself: when faced with deep fears & anxieties, how else can you face it but with something so wound up & charged with life?

GL: As an editor for a successful on-line literary journal, you must be achingly aware of the trends and/or shifting currents in contemporary American poetry. Of those trends/currents/etc, which do you find the most fascinating and appealing? The most aggravating? And how do such editorial observations affect your work as a poet?

NP: I receive as submissions & read in other journals lots of poems that mimic other poems – taking all the surface & none of the substance. But what I love about poetry is its ability to package up the sensibility of another person & deliver it to me – as an intellectual or emotional or linguistic or poetical knock out blow. I found that I was reading a lot of poems that were competent – the kind of poems you couldn't find much wrong with but where certainly nothing was really crucially right either. This is when I talk about lamenting the professionalization of poetry. But the thing is reading so much poetry keeps me honest – I guess I'm able to see the bluff & bluster of others very clearly so when I go to write my own poems (& let's say I get to a moment where I want to reach for a zany image) I make sure that what's in there is earned & necessary.

GL: If I told you that ten years from now you could either become the Poet Laureate of the U.S., or that H_NGM_N would become the most widely read literary journal in America, which outcome would you choose? And, for five points extra credit, why?

NP: To me, this question comes down to a consideration of influence. And I would much rather imagine a poetic landscape that is open to the kinds of diversity I hope H_NGM_N fosters, than a poetic landscape dominated by me. Actually, I think I'm going to write a fake Nate Pritts poem – the way an MFA student in the future might.

GL: How is Nate Pritts becoming something or someone different than the man who wrote *Honorary Astronaut*? Will the Nate Pritts of the future ever be a real astronaut, for example? Or in other words, what new and exciting things are you reading, writing and/or thinking about these days?

NP: I've been working outside of academia for most of the past three years – in advertising as a writer & web developer, & as a tech editor. I think my view of things –

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which you characterized as that of a “butterfingered metaphysician” falling short – is being tempered by one of extreme order, mechanization & awe. I think the earlier Nate Pritts didn’t trust emotions because they were inexplicable. I think now Nate Pritts feels like even the inexplicable is explicable but is still worth gasping about. My new favorite quote is “Everything is a file” – something that old assembly language programmers thrown back & forth.

My new book, *The Wonderfull Yeare*, grew out of an experiment, really. I had written all these overwrought emotionally symbolic poems under the influence of Bly, Wright & Stafford in the mid 90s. I found that, when I returned to them, I could see the emotion but not totally feel it – I didn’t even know what I was writing about in some cases. So the poems in *The Wonderfull Yeare* are collage cut & paste versions of these earlier poems – my present day reconstructions – hoping to invest them with new happinesses & sadnesses.

I’m also diving back into Coleridge & Clare, lots of contemporary poetry, & spending lots of time reading about, & looking at pictures of, what people in the 1950s, 1960s & 1970s thought the future was going to look like.

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