

JENNIFER H. FORTIN & NATE PRITTS *in conversation*

Nate Pritts: The poems in your first book, *Mined Muzzle Velocity*, have an interesting & consistent form; in short, they're all in postcard form. But within that, it's an endlessly diverse group, struggling deeper than the simple "wish you were here" to run the gamut of human feeling—from whimsical to tortured, from playful joy to broken resignation. Through it all, there's a sense of intimacy that's remarkable as a function of the language itself, as well as what it is the speaker actually says. How did you settle on the postcard form for these poems?

Jennifer H. Fortin: I wrote these poems while living in Brooklyn, after having returned from serving in the Peace Corps for 27 months in Bulgaria. Before Bulgaria and during, I'd been lucky enough to travel abroad pretty widely. I tended to keep journals during these times, mainly recording my impressions and factual information about the days I was spending away from the comfort (predictability) of my childhood hometown, Gaithersburg, Maryland. After settling into NYC (as much as any non-native ever does), I reexamined my notes from abroad. It seemed weird to try to force my impressions into a non-fictional representation of whatever place they talked about, but no way was I surrendering that material, which was, as you can imagine, very important to me.

It felt natural and necessary to cannibalize my written memories, to feed them air again—but to refrain from saying things like "Okay, this is how an elementary school worked in Bulgaria," "They eat this here," etc., which are so narrow. Ever since I can remember, I've shied away from trying to imagine real places if I can't see them myself—I don't like constructing fuzzy versions of things. So, without imposing that burden on others, I tried to yield to the desire to show and think and feel in a jarred and jarring way—even if it meant only extrapolating a single, poignant detail from a situation and omitting the rest—and to do so leaning particularly hard on the consistency of the addressed "Dear." (And when one is anywhere but home—hey, but also when one IS at home—isn't there inevitably a missing *Dear* you want to share some things with?)

At this point, I was sure I wanted to use the journal material without getting overly specific, and I was sure of the constant "Dear." A postcard form, which had the potential to recreate the spontaneity, surprise, urgency of being foreign (and of being a human being!), seemed to be the way to go. As a bonus, postcards allow for and even invite breaking of speech conventions—I mean their writers are permitted to use jargon, colloquialism, fragments, exclamation, to leave off transitions, etc., while chock-a-block including pithy, high-impact phrases. This correlates nicely to the making of a poem.

And finally—although there were many reasons this form compelled me so—I was attracted to the exclusion you can expect if you read correspondence meant for another. It feels like lots of poems propel readers into another orbit, like they're little private things careless of the reader. People are afraid to read poems because they feel like they're not going to get the elusive "it." But when you're reading poems in the form of correspondence that is not directly addressed to YOU, then it's a given that you'll be kind of left out of some of the ideas, which may revolve around the existing relationship between the writer and recipient.

This brings me to your poems in *Sweet Nothing*. Readers of your poems often approach you saying they felt like you were writing just for them, like they could really relate to your work. I suspect similar reactions this time around. How do you think you accomplish this feat, especially when the poems specify who they are to or about, for example, the “(letters to her)” series, and even those poems with specific addresses as titles (“518 Thompson St.,” “118 Holland St.,” “2056 N. Oakley Ave.”)? Somehow you manage to include and exclude simultaneously. How would you describe the very salient intimacy in your book and in your work in general?

NP: I think, on one level, people are responding to the fact that my poems are very openly sentimental, almost unabashedly full of feeling. That’s easy to relate to, & maybe even refreshing, since most people (& even most poets!) are trained to distrust their feelings, or to at least make sure to obscure them behind a posture or a pose or some brains. Sometimes the feelings & situations in my poems are authentically autobiographical (they really happened to me & involve real actual people) & sometimes they are just sort of plausibly autobiographical (playing within a range of emotional responses that I could have had). I hope to generate an overall tone of intimacy in the poems, one that allows the reader to see themselves as either the “I” or the “you.”

How can Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp”—which starts in direct address to “My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined / Thus on my arm” & proceeds to catalogue the specific qualities that draw him to her—still affect my heart & make me feel full & fragile all at once?

How can Frank O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings”—where the famous effusion “Grace / to be born and live as variously as possible” is actually addressed to the person the poem is dedicated to (Grace Hartigan) & is plopped in the middle of a list of different places & people the reader wouldn’t possibly know—still help me to feel the joys of friendship & an exuberant elation at plain living?

There’s something about that intimate address that sort of weaves a spell & really effectively puts the reader in either one of those two locations of identification (sender/receiver). So even if I mention a very specific place (as in the address poems), the sense of closeness & intimacy is still there. I want my poems to behave more like something being spoken by one person into the ear of one other person, what one beating heart says to another.

But for me, a successful poem is one that functions on two fields simultaneously—emotional & intellectual. That might seem pretty obvious, but a lot of poetry seems to work exclusively in one of those fields, or at least to privilege one over the other. I hope the emotional tenor of my work is made more complex through the ways in which my use of language challenges a simple sweet nothing to be more substantial. Mark Bibbins, in his blurb for your book, calls you “a relentless thinking-machine.” But yet the poems seem to spring from a desire to connect on an emotional level. How do you reconcile these things?

JHF: To think is to thank, etymologically, and, I’d say, *actually*, too. Thinking is a form of gratitude, of acknowledgment of things and objects, people, places and ideas, beyond the self.

Even in the midst of misery, there's some relief to be had in the ability to observe. To thank is to point to the responsible individual or thing, as in: owing to him or her or the circumstances of this day, (x). I'd say, then, that the responsible person is the thinking person. She's the one who remembers, who notices, who is conscious and considerate. She evaluates, she has the form of something in her mind.

Maybe it's from this gratitude, at least in part, that other feelings sprout—the guilt of not thanking enough; the fear that your thanks, no matter how you try, can't be sufficiently communicated; the joy when they are; the sorrow when no one cares about your exciting observation; etc. These are more spontaneous experiences than thought is, and certainly they move (*e-motion*) thoughts in one direction, then comes another thought, then a feeling, then the language pushed in another direction, and so on (though maybe not as linearly as this—it could be groups of thoughts, groups of feelings, groups of thoughts/feelings). Since thought and emotion agitate and motivate each other, it seems to make sense to represent these motions, which is what I try to do in my work.

Groups of poems are threaded throughout *Sweet Nothing* (the sky poems, the street address poems, the “(letters to her poems),” the “A Sentence” poems). I'm particularly interested in the speaker of the sky poems, as he seems more subdued (quieter, kind of still in formation, like we're witnessing him in the process of learning?) than other speakers in the book. What can you tell me about this?

NP: I think that's a really lovely distinction you made about thinking in your own work—tracing the birth of emotional response to a kind of intellectual understanding. As in, if you think hard enough about something, you can't help but be led to feel. It's like the chronology in the first sonnet in Philip Sidney's *Astrophil & Stella* sequence:

*Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain [...]*

This is relevant to the “speakers” in *Sweet Nothing* too—which is to say I'm always operating from the perspective of a single speaker, but one who is capable of a wide range of utterances. Sometimes the speaker is much more certain of what he's saying, or the trajectory of what he's saying. Sometimes he's looking at the past, & what he says has the benefit of reflection. In the sky poems, I was aware of exploring the difference between a gestural utterance & an intentional one, the difference between saying something because the shape or sound or feel of it is true as opposed to saying something with a purposeful or layered objective. Each of those poems is an attempt to sketch the sky as I saw it on a particular day—as humbly as possible, without adding a lot of psychology or baggage. With that strategy, I think I struck upon a lighter & kind of more simple & maybe honest way of representing something—my surroundings, my self at that moment & only at that moment without having to deal with myriad clarifications & qualifications. Rather than only representing the “process of learning” it actually became the process.

Rather than having multiple speakers in the book, then, I'm trying to use those different clusters of poems to more fully enact a single complicated speaker—one who follows from pleasure to knowledge to pity, arriving at grace & acceptance.

But the poems in *Mined Muzzle Velocity* achieve this same kind of multivalence, this same sense of discovery & actual living. It's clearly a unified speaker, who runs through a sometimes frenetic series of emotional responses. It's sort of like walking into a machine designed to stress & test every single possible condition, running something through the wringer to see if it's well-built & designed to last. Do you think the speaker ends up somewhere, somehow, having learned? Or are there more postcards to come?

JHF: That capability (negative!) and complication you talk about really shines through—in different ways for different poems—in your work. I like how you describe the sky poems, as kind of stripped down, “without adding a lot of psychology or baggage.” It's a gift to have the intuition of how and when to leave a poem leaner.

So, in addition to being a “relentless thinking-machine,” you've introduced the idea of my poems as a stressing-and-testing machine! Bizarre! So mechanical. But actually, yes, the model of various parts working together to create a powerful device is just what I hope to have made. I only wonder exactly what effort toward exactly what work I'm trying to reduce in making them! Maybe it's the work of being.

Indeed, I think the speaker, “Yrs.,” of *MMV* does end up somewhere “having learned”—that is, having thought and felt. That's why I stopped the series where I did—it just felt like she'd revealed as much as she need to, and had absorbed enough of her surroundings to satisfy herself.

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