

Nate Pritts // <http://www.natepritts.com>
INTERVIEW :: Bookslut, February 2010

Conducted by Elizabeth Hildreth

[Nate Pritts](#) is the author of *The Wonderful Year* (Cooper Dillon Books) and two previous books of poems, *Sensational Spectacular* and *Honorary Astronaut*. A collaboration with painter Keith Gamache, *Flutter By*, is forthcoming from Cinematheque Press. He teaches poetry at the Downtown Writers Center/YMCA in Syracuse, New York.

In December 2009 and January 2010, he was interviewed by Bookslut over e-mail about *The Wonderful Year*, and his press, [H NGM N](#). They discuss, among other things, his insane use of exclamation points, how he wants you (befuddled & awestruck) while holding his hand, that flimsy curtain between Memory & Imagination, and his upcoming aesthetic compound. Look out New World!

Let me just start off by saying I think *Honorary Astronaut* is destined to make poetry history -- if only for its sheer amount of exclamation points. I'm not great with detail, and thus a terrible counter, but my grand total: 48. Which probably means, oh: 72.

I now remember this about you, Nate. When I re-envisioned your poem for my English to English translation project, THAT poem had an exclamation point, and I recall my fingers physically stuttering at the idea of replicating it. I made myself do it -- to be like you, Nate, like you -- and it felt so wrong. Not so wrong it was right. Just so wrong it was wrong. Like I was wearing a boa, or doing my own taxes, or cooking a 15-pound turkey. But I have to say the EPs so naturally spurt out of you, underscoring whatever emotion happens to be on hand (or in heart) -- disbelief, bedazzlement, despair, wonder, heartbreak. I'm not detecting artifice -- like any -- and yet, I can't help thinking: Is this guy for real?

Liz, I'm more real than real! I've read this mind-blowing question about 15 times in the last few weeks (which we all know means I've read it something closer to 35 times) & I'm ripped in pieces over how to respond simply because I think there are so many different ways to respond -- & none of them might be right!

I will say this: I had never thought about this before you asked me.

As a kid, I read comic books. My foundational experiences with language either came directly from or were constantly colored by comic books. Many characters in many comic books use exclamation points to punctuate everything they say, I suppose to communicate the emphatic/heroic nature of their utterance.

So I think, on one level, exclamation points do seem natural to me. They are an accepted part of my repertoire.

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I never used semi-colons until I read Stafford & I didn't use the ampersand until after reading Berryman (& Olson is still trying to teach me how to use parenthetical statements).

It's also pretty well known that I'm a fool for the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge, & so the idea of the ecstatic utterance is one I hold very dear.

Again, "ecstatic" doesn't necessarily mean "happy," just as "exuberant" doesn't truly imply something positive. I am unrestrained & enthusiastic about any human emotion.

Other things to think about:

! - as a writer, I use words & punctuation to communicate things. Why rule out any of those words or marks of punctuation? Even if they don't feel natural, you should force yourself to use them once in awhile. What if someone told a painter that they couldn't use the color blue?

! - don't for a second think that the exclamation point is in any way simply an excitement machine. To me, the mark puts the reader on high alert. The sentence that precedes that mark is, yes, one of intense feeling or thinking (big happy or big sad), but it is not always thrilled about it. I am as emphatic about my ambivalence as anything else!

! - people misunderstand me. You mention "disbelief, bedazzlement, despair, wonder, heartbreak." You say you don't detect any artifice. Thank you. I am completely for real. I'm realer than real. I'm right now more than ever & I want you to know that & feel that. I want you dizzy & confused right alongside me; I want you befuddled & awestruck while holding my hand.

I've been labeled amped up, torqued, overblown, melodramatic. Yes, yes, yes. Yes. Gosh - - my first book was called *Sensational Spectacular!* But: Is this guy for real?

Yes!

I kind of figured that.

Okay, I just got *The Wonderful Yeare*, which is so new it's in my hands in PDF form. Get it while it's hot!

Let me set this up by describing the framework of the book as I understand it. The book, I'm deducing from the epigram and its title, was conceived with Thomas Dekker's *The Wonderful Yeare* in mind. From what I've read, Dekker's book is a multigenre book that functions as a Best and Worst of 1603, the "Wonderfull" meaning, in his case (and

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yours) beyond belief, surprising, shocking -- as opposed to great, awesome, terrific. Then it's divided up into seasons:

- Spring Psalter
- Endless Summer (in which all the poems are printed vertically)
- (sonnets for fall) (which, other than having 14 lines, don't seem that sonnet-y to me)
- Winter Constellations.

Remember when I emailed you earlier and said even with those billion exclamation points, I found *Honorary Astronaut* to be... sad? In an exuberant, fun, uplifting way. But, still, sad?

Dang, this book takes the cake. It bursts open with "Tulips – An Invocation"

*Each year it's the same damn thing,
a constant red ache.*

And that's the cheery part. Then comes "Spring Psalter" in which the narrator announces:

Heart, I submit to the program.

Whoa. Takes a lot to make a Heart submit to the program. I've tried.

So Nate, can you talk about how closely Dekker's work relates to yours, and how the seasonal framework is functioning in this collection? Also, maybe talk about the narrative arc, which seems to start with the disintegration of a relationship (with an awareness that "a flimsy curtain separates Memory from Imagination") and then spirals into total fallout, and then ends on a note of looking into the "& then afterward."

Dekker's pamphlet is incredibly satirical, while my writing is not, but at the center of the dual core turbine that powers both works is the idea -- from the epigram you pick out -- that there is no medicine when one is sick at heart, save "comforting speech." That seemed crucial to what I was doing in these poems.

What was I doing? Well, you're right that the poem chronicles / foretells / remembers / distorts the scattering of self that accompanies the dissolution of a relationship -- but, biographically, behind the beaded curtain -- the poem sort of talks through several relationships. Perhaps the most integral relationship interrogated & scrutinized is the relationship we have to our own Memory.

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Also, I was more conscious of making a boisterous statement about my Poetics in this piece than in anything else I've written. It's labeled as a shepherd's calendar & it is obviously preoccupied & obsessed with pastoral imagery, both for its own sake & for a tendency to use Nature as a figure for the human condition. My two earlier books were collections of poems; this is one poem doing what I think poems should do: annotate & enact the experience of being human using words because I have boundless faith in both of those things!

While "Spring Psalter" is first, I've always thought of "Endless Summer" as the beginning of the ending -- while "Winter Constellations" was actually the first section written.

Talking about the narrative arc misdirects from what I think is at stake here. To me, the poem shifts & accumulates. The collage, fragmentary nature of the utterances is meant to mimic the way we stumble into & out of our own fracture, our own broken perceptions, our many un/certainties.

Time passes &, today, we feel so much less happy or sad about what happened yesterday. That's heartbreaking. I wish it weren't so. But it is. Thank goodness.

"Spring Psalter" positions the speaker in the after, remembering & taking stock & sorting through. The speaker (geez, ok: the "me") conceives & reconstructs & constructs a past that helps him interpret a present -- all while worrying over the effectiveness of this project -- that flimsy curtain between Memory & Imagination, which is a larger worry over Subjective & Objective perceptions. "Spring Psalter" was constructed as a collage -- I think an early draft was one long poem broken in couplets. As I revised, I dipped in & wrote more -- adding lines or changing lines or moving lines -- essentially abandoning the "pure collage" aspect of it. The form published in the book is a further revision, meant to emphasize the call & response nature of the poem. It is meant to be read responsively. Of course, I can't imagine that actually happening -- but as I read it in my head, the left justified lines are in a solitary voice; the indented lines resound in a collective voice (which just might be all our internal selves together).

"Endless Summer" is printed vertically, as you note, so as not to mess with the line breaks. A friend of mine told me this poem made her feel as if she just got beat up! You talked before about how tough it was to use EPs; well, I recognized that it was hard for me to use the f-bomb & to express anger. But, as Larkin knew, it's not just our mums & dads that fuck us up. To me this is the center of *The Wonderfull Yeare*, the crash site, the explosion -- though, I'm sticking to my story that the entire poem is a recollection.

"(sonnets for the fall)" are sonnet-y to me for several reasons, though the most crucial is that they are written from a Poet (me, the "I") to a distant or unattainable Muse-like figure (an other, the "you," which is not an other so much as it is an other version of the I). After the assault of "Endless Summer," these poems completely fall apart --

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disintegrating & fragmenting on the page. The repetitions & echoes are the only solid thing the speaker can cling to.

“Winter Constellations” is the section that is most comfortable with its fragmentary nature -- in that, to me, the fragments of the lines & numbered sections feel whole. There’s a rage for order that has been satisfied here. Overall the images are ones of cooling, of time having done its thing. This section represents a kind of rebirth -- clean & brand new.

I suppose every year ends with that feeling of starting over.

But Nate, didn’t you just explain the narrative arc? Or at least one way of thinking about the “chronology” of events, misremembered and fragmented as they are?

Spring: Reflection
Summer: Explosion
Fall: Dust still flying
Winter: Dust settling

Can I just tell you I thought the text of Endless Summer represented trees (and, in turn, growth, life, etc.)! What I thought was so interesting is how the poems start out in a style that clearly draws from Romanticism -- Coleridge and maybe even Blake (?) -- as well as some of the early Modernism bros-- Whitman and Hopkins. Like in your “Spring Psalter” when you write:

*The arc of light, the leaf-glow, the pattern of ragged
sunlight through the branch bone, the cool of night & pink [...]
&, O, it was the winter of disconnect, discord, the cordate
tally of causes & reasons dispersed, refuted, rank & file unfilled,
scattered [...]*

Okay, wait. Indulge me as I type in some Hopkins (“The Golden Echo”):

*Undone, done with, soon done with, and yet dearly and
dangerously sweet
Of us the winpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matched
face*

But as your book goes along, the poems (to me) become much more “contemporary” and “experimental.” (Hate both those words.) Let’s just say the latter ones sound like poems one might read in, say, H_NGM_N. For instance, “III”, in the (sonnets for the fall) section:

*This is my self
some things that are supposed to be
& then the whole world bursting new
all those complications & what matters
is the chill in the air & how it's making
one less leaf in me
one cloud this one bird*

I'm not sure where to go with this, Nate. Let me put in my therapist voicebox. Ahem... How do you feel about what I just said?

Towards the end of Ford Maddox Ford's [*The Good Soldier*](#) (1915) the narrator, John Dowell, says "I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find his path through what may be a sort of maze."

I'm worried about this drive to uncover narrative. Or maybe I'm worried about the word "narrative" as it implies a starting point, a stopping point & that, in between, something happens. Obviously this book has a beginning & a middle & an end but I also think those are arbitrary distinctions. "(sonnets for the fall)" could have been first in the book; "Endless Summer" could have been last. FMF reminds me every day that "life does not narrate." My poems do not narrate; they annotate; they exist alongside of.

Permit me to suggest that *The Wonderful Year* offers an impressionistic narrative, one that is not based on, or illustrative of, a cause & effect chronology of happening events.

As far as the style, each section of the book was written in a purposefully different surface style though the underpinnings to the project, the philosophical & epistemological building blocks, are unified.

"Spring Psalter" employs a kind of heroic utterance, an annunciation. I wear my Whitman, my Coleridge, on my sleeve. But Hopkins! O Hopkins is a favorite of mine & I'm thrilled you picked up an echo there. His manner is equal parts ebullient praise & hesitant, cantankerous care in speaking about it.

"Endless Summer" is meant to be less certain of itself -- less adorned, not presented, if that makes sense. Or, to look at it another way: "Spring Psalter" is addressed to everyone. "Endless Summer" is addressed to me.

"(sonnets for the fall)" is addressed to you. Coleridge says that human beings are "a revelation of Nature!" I'd take that further & say that in Nature is a revelation about what it means to be human. While the book is grounded in this transcendental use of Nature, this section is the one where those intrinsic correspondences are tested, refuted & supported all at the same time. Coleridge again: "all the organs of sense are framed for a

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corresponding world of sense.” Liz, if this section seems most “experimental” and “contemporary” it comes from embracing what Coleridge doesn’t say -- that we do not always live in a corresponding world of sense. Whether that’s our fault, or the world’s, is something I haven’t figured out yet.

“Winter Constellations” is addressed to everyone again.

But let me borrow some more from FMF to say, simply, *The Wonderfull Yeare* is the saddest story I know. It’s the story in which the “Mind reflects itself & has, as it were, its confused echo, in Life.”

(Coleridge again.)

Impressionistic narrative. Got it. Like it. Admittedly, I am somewhat obsessed with chronology and sequence. I chalk it up to my day job in instructional design. I spend all day anticipating, according to adult learning theory, how people will come to and then move through information --and then based on my conclusions, I create usable paths for them by chunking stuff together appropriately. It bleeds over onto everything. Such a monkey, chunk, chunk... plunk, plunk. Your thoughts about narrative remind me of an [interview](#) in which Jean Valentine was talking to Kate Greenstreet about her most recent book [The Last 4 Things](#):

JV: You’re not providing an ordinary narrative in “56 Day,” but you are giving us a life and a time. Do you think this book tells a story?

KG: I feel it as a story, but I couldn’t paraphrase it. You know what I mean?

JV: Yes, I wouldn’t be able to paraphrase it either, but I definitely get a human life in it. The shape of a human life.

I mentioned H_NGM_N above -- of which, as I hope you know, you’re the editor. Let me just say, the work is consistently, consistently amazeballs in there. I was just reading Leigh Stein’s chapbook *Least Inhabited Island II* the other day, which is a part of your Combatives series. God, she’s the best -- so, so talented.

But now, H_NGM_N is doing full-length books, right? For the first time? How’s that going to work? And was this always the plan, to move into doing entire collections?

Your day job in instructional design has a lot of bearing on my answer to this question. Well, first -- NO -- it has not always been my plan to publish full-length books. That would be giving me much too much credit for being a big picture kind of person. However, finding new & exciting ways to lead people to poetry has always been my goal. I hope I do it in my own creative work & it’s what I think of as the primary responsibility

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of any editor. H_NGM_N started as a ditto magazine because I knew I could produce it cheaply, whenever I wanted, & could send it to lots of people. We moved online, mostly, because it was a better way to reach more people & to expand what we offer. The print chapbooks, the current roster of portable document format chapbooks, the COMBATIVES series you mention -- & now the full-length titles -- are all different ways I try to solve the problem of leading people to poetry.

How's it going to work? I don't know. Ask me again in about a year. Right now, the roll out is going to be handled this way: we've broken ourselves into two different book series for the foreseeable future. We'll be republishing, with critical apparatus, an out of print book that we judge to be important to our contemporary conversations about poetry in our REISSUES. First up is William Heyen's book *Lord Dragonfly*. This will be packaged with an essay-memoir I'm writing (Bill was my first creative writing teacher, at SUNY Brockport in the early '90s) along with an essay by Matt Henriksen (which was originally published as a "Recovery Project" essay at [Octopus](#)).

We'll also have a POETS series. The first book we're doing is Matt Hart's *Wolf Face*. (Incidentally, both of those should be out by the end of 2010). We've just commenced an open reading period for full-length manuscripts & all of us (the editorial staff at H_NGM_N) will pick at least one to publish. But I'm already realizing that I won't be happy with that -- so we will probably go ahead & offer chapbook publication to some people who come close, or maybe ask about pulling single poems out of manuscripts for publication in the online journal.

Wow. That's a lot of work. I *will* check back in a year.

It's interesting that William Heyen's going to be your first author. I was listening to a [conversation](#) with Heyen with journalist Don Swaim (conducted in 1984 for the radio station WCBS in New York). Heyen mentions his publisher Vanguard and calls it "one of the last of the small independent publishers." Then the interviewer Swaim asks, it hasn't been bought by a conglomerate yet? And Heyen says no. (Coincidentally, Random House bought Vanguard four years later in 1988.) Then Swain asks how big its list is, and Heyen says, "about 20 books a year" (which includes some heavy hitters, e.g., Dr. Seuss, Joyce Carol Oates [20 books by her!]). And there's this brief silence, and then Swaim says, quietly and sort of incredulously/ominously, "That *is* a small house." Such a time capsule. If this were the show *MTV Cribs*, Vanguard's 1984 house would be, like... [50 Cent's house](#). Well... maybe Bow Wow's. Or Lil Wayne's.

That's cool about the new POETS series too. I'm excited for Matt Hart's new book *Wolf Face*. It'll be great to see another collection after [Who's Who Vivid](#). That debut was super -- and supercharged in terms of the pace. I'll be interested to compare its velocity to *Wolf Face*.

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So what's being served up next, as far as little old Nate Pritts, not the giant conglomerate H_NGM_N? Any projects on the burner?

I'm always working on lots of projects. I have another full-length manuscript completed, to follow *The Wonderful Year*. Maybe more immediately on the horizon is a book called *Flutter By* to be released by Cinematheque Press. It's more of an art book -- a collaboration I did with the painter Keith Gamache -- a series of paintings paired with poems.

In general, though, I write a lot & I write best when I'm working on something -- not just tossing single poems off extempore into the ether, but working a particular vein of material or some aesthetic compound.

I love the idea of "compound" and its many meanings. I'm just picturing you making a towering piece of art out of chemicals and hippies and trash. Can you do that and then can I interview you about it? And can I be a part of that art? I don't care what I am: chemical, hippie or trash. I'll let you classify me. Okay, Nate, with that aesthetic compound assignment in your hands, I'll sign off, with one last poetic thought:

N_T_ PR_TTS _S TH_SH_T!

Please note: Use of exclamation point. Also: use of end rhyme, something I normally don't do. The sky is opening up, Nate.

link:

http://www.bookslut.com/features/2010_02_015660.php