

PRISM REVIEW CONTEMPORARY INTERVIEW

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NATHAN HOKS

Who is Nathan Hoks? Maybe ‘what’ is the better question: Nathan Hoks, according to the leading expert on the matter, Nathan Hoks, is “a millipede . . . / He should be squashed. / He should be flayed.” These lines appear in “People of the Interior,” a poem in Nathan’s second book, *The Narrow Circle*, a National Poetry Series winner in 2012. The poems from his first book, *Reveilles*, were praised by John Ashbery as being “minute even as they affect us powerfully . . . like great gulps of air.” So: Nathan Hoks is a poet. A talented and thoughtful one. He is a husband, a father, a friend. He hails from Chicago. But none of this wholly defines him. How can it? Nathan is “a fork in the egg yolk. // His face is a mail bomb.” He can tell you more, read on, read on, read on.

1

From: Nathan Hoks <nshoks@gmail.com>
To: Sean Bernard <marlette85@yahoo.com>
Sent: Tuesday, July 2, 2013 2:49 PM
Subject: Re: contest judge/interview? (this will get more detailed but it’s a good start; respond to what you want at your leisure, feel free to invent questions, and I hope all’s well)

Hi Sean! I’m in northwest Michigan for the week and I don’t have internet so I’m going to get back to you next week. I just didn’t want you to think I was blowing you off. This looks fun!

2

Hey Nate. If I were going to start interviewing you, would it be okay if it started like this?

It would be okay.

Cool. Maybe we can agree to ground-rules, too, since this is over email. I suggest using the honor system: you don't take more than thirty seconds to answer any single question and I won't edit anything, won't reorganize anything, certainly won't change your answers. I swear. I'm probably lying but the point is how great it'd be to end up with this experience people can share, something utterly fresh and organic, not someawful-lit-journal-interviewish-frankensteinian-chemical-laboratory-ried-chimera-thing. Do you accept our terms and/or have you read a sincerely good interview lately that you can point us to as a role model for this? What was so good about that one, anyway, that makes you think this won't be better?

I accept your terms but must admit I have a soft spot for Frankenstein's chemical labor. I read an interview with Gerald Stern in *The Writer's Chronicle*. It was pretty wonderful even though Frankenstein didn't come up. Do you like *Frankenstein*? I used to teach it. I always found the prose kind of belabored, but the story fascinates me. I love the idea that what you make may become either a monster or a genius or simultaneously both. That took more than thirty seconds.

3

Let's talk about shame, a feature in much contemporary poetry. Would you agree that shame is a feeling that leads to inaction . . . or at least to negating/obfuscating action? Avoiding detour-thoughts of dramatic irony and the like, would you agree that writing for an audience - lyrically or not, which we'll get into more later - isn't blushingly covering one's private parts with a towel so much as running down dark alleys and flashing strangers? Isn't writing, maybe, almost anti-shame? Or, for what I'll say are better, more conscientious (troubled) writers, an overcoming of shame greatly informed by the struggle of shame?

Well, you know Auden's famous line, "Poetry makes nothing happen"? It kind of makes sense, in that regard, to locate shame as part of the lyric mode. But I think of it like this, too: shame is only possible through exposure. Even in a private moment of shame where it's the conscience that is seeing the object or act of shame, the split consciousness necessary for that kind of personal shame constitutes, to me, a kind of exposure – the exposure of the self to the self. Since the self is always at least doubled, it's always spying on itself.

I think you're right to put it in the rubric of "the struggle of shame," though I don't know if one overcomes shame. Sometimes I think that the audience of poetry is really looking for a striptease, so there's bound to be a bit of blushing going on. But seriously, writing for an audience is, to me, in itself shameful. It's foolish to want approval, especially for something like poetry, which, from an idealist's point of view, should be thoroughly above such concerns. And that's the thing, the audience itself is a contaminant. The "pure" artist doesn't bother with it, but those of us who give a minute's thought, become defiled by it. Totally shameful.

And that's the thing, the audience itself is
a contaminant.

You're kidding . . . we think? There's no such thing as a pure artist, is there? All writers are sluts to something. To create any art is to create art within some sort of system. Or across systems. No one just, like, makes art without knowing it's art. Do they?

No, I'm totally serious – it's not my position but I'm trying to describe a poetics that stems from symbolism and *l'art pour l'art* but that you can feel in critical thinking running all the way from the New Critics through the Frankfurt School and into Post-Structuralism. Adorno, for all his prattle about the social content of the lyric, still looks toward art

that negates the social -- at least that's my understanding of the basic thrust of *Aesthetic Theory*. Derrida's image of the poet is a hedgehog, this creature that wraps itself up into self-contained, fortified and isolated ball. I'm simplifying the ideas of complex thinkers, but my point is that these notions of the isolated artist persist. I agree with you, and I like this notion of crossing systems, as if art were itself some kind of passageway between zones. And I should be clearer: I think that these types of prostitutions, these impurities, these shameful exposures, are precisely what make for interesting admixtures in art. But still we struggle with puritanical notion that a hermetic text can operate in a closed system. It's the reason we've invented this quasi-objective language like "the speaker" to describe lyric poems: we're afraid of contaminating art with life, and vice-a-versa.

4

What's it like to be a Cubs fan? Is it something that sort of helps shape the eternal sadness of your human soul? (Can you do me a favor and read that last question in the voice of Werner Herzog?)

I would love to see a Herzog documentary about the Cubs. Poetic rumination on ivy, its futile climb up the bricks each spring only to end up a disappointing mass of brown leaves eventually bagged and tossed by the grounds crew. Being a Cubs fan lately hasn't felt like being a fan at all. At least I have summer to myself.

Do you dwell enough on Werner Herzog in your day-to-day life?

Do you really hear Herzog in my poems?

5

What was attractive about reading when you were younger?

I think I was attracted to the way reading could provoke the kind of imaginative flow that we have such easy access to as young children. As I got into my teens, this imaginative space became both a refuge and a kind of defiance. Adolescents are unhappy. I don't think my adolescence differed in that way--whether it's confronting your parents, your social circles, social and economic difficulties, or simply the rising awareness of how fucked up the world is, there's plenty to be pissed off about as a teen. For me, reading was both a way to reject the world around me and a security from that world. As readers we can be like Derrida's hedgehogs. We can roll ourselves up into protective balls. Of course, what I eventually figured out was that the protective ball is actually a Möbius strip. You think you're following a path into an interior space, but keep going and eventually you end up back outside. For me, literature is a continuous surface that fuses the inside and outside.

How do you read a poem? Maybe you could show us by picking a favorite.

Blake's "Tyger": to me, it moves both through its music and its associative patterns. Rhythmically you have these great pounding trochees driving the poem, complimented by those couplets that are like chimes dinging on cue. But I picked the poem because I've never been able to imagine it in a mimetic way, that is, as an event or pure image. I simply can't wrap my head around Blake's incongruous imagery. I want to see this giant tiger in the night sky, which is also a kind of forest, but then I'm forced to consider, via synecdoche, the moment of its creation and some godlike workman pounding away at the beast, a bizarre moment where organic and industrial elements are informing each other (the beating heart, the sinews, the eyes, and the skies meet the anvil, the chains, the furnace). And then you have angels, again signaled by metaphor (or is it?), and the question of a totally different kind of creator. I know there are all kinds of interpretations of this poem as a Biblical allegory or a representation of Blake's labor as an engraver and

printer, etc. etc., but none of those account for my constant baffling at the poem. It is a poem of “fearful symmetry” precisely because the symmetry between art and life (which I take to be mimesis) is thoroughly violated, fragmented, burned up – and yet art remains, something symmetrical is left standing: Blake’s inspired movement via associative imagery and the music of language.

(That was sort of awesome.)

6

I basically see all writing as manifestations of illness.

Earlier you asked if we like Frankenstein. Not at all. It’s too hysterical a book, isn’t it? As in filled with hysteria. But then you seem to dig that, right? Rimbaud for one – and Bronte, too, so we read recently? Why the attraction?

I basically see all writing as manifestations of illness, so hysteria is just one of many modes it could take. Two things come to mind when I hear the word “hysteria”: 1) Def Leppard; 2) the problematic etymology of the word and history of its diagnosis. This was a “woman’s disease” supposedly caused by a floating uterus. I mean, it’s no longer a diagnosis, for a good reason, but in terms of literature, I think the pieces we’re talking about basically exhibit an excess of emotion, and that excess is probably what we mean by hysteria here. I guess that’s always been a reason I’m drawn to writing and reading: they provide an outlet for emotional excess. Hysterical works are those that are saturated in affect, passion, sentiment, and I find them exciting because this very excess puts language and form on the brink so we can watch and feel

their functions start to break down. In the case study *Dora*, which concerns hysteria, Freud develops a theory regarding the psychosomatic manifestation of hysterical symptoms. Dora has a cough, difficulty breathing, and a loss of voice which, if I remember correctly, Freud reads as a somatic response to her anxiety over an older neighbor's sexual advancements. Freud's diagnosis is problematic, but I'm especially interested in the intersection of mind and body, emotion and sensation. In fiction the hysterical symptoms signal some of the larger social anxieties that swirl around these narratives. Frankenstein becomes an imprint of mass hysteria, registering the social panic around the advances of science and the displacement of the human.

And as you've noted, I could ramble on and on about *Wuthering Heights*. Its modes of hysteria (delirium, the physical convulsions of TB, the erratic and extreme violence) seem connected to suspicion about foreigners and the reevaluation of marriage customs and patrilineal property transfer. Now the funny thing about Def Leppard's *Hysteria* is that it's not very hysterical. I suppose "Pour Some Sugar on Me" is probably a kind of hysterical displacement of homoeroticism, and for that matter, "Rocket", too, but the music is far too clean to cross the line into hysteria.

"Armageddon It"????? Is not??? Hysterical????

In the comment stream of the video for "Pour Some Sugar on Me" on YouTube, someone has written: "This song is sex in my ears." I think that's the point, right?

(Nodding.) Now we're wondering: are you drawn to the 'saturated' in other walks of life? Athletes . . . foods . . . music . . . films . . . whatever. Any examples?

I feel like

Oh – sorry to interrupt.

I feel like

Whoops. Our bad. Did you want to keep talking?

I feel like

This is hilarious to us right now. Really. Go ahead. We won't get in the way.

I feel like

Psych! Ha ha. No, really, go for it.

I feel like I have fairly tame, boring tastes; I don't even think my taste in literature is eccentric—we're talking about canonical titles. I mean, okay, I do like some mildly odd writers, but that's not what we've been talking about. All psychology (crazed or not) is basically excessive, at least from an evolutionary point of view. Speaking of Freud, psychoanalysis is essentially a saturation of interpretation, right? The thing about saturation is that it cuts both ways. It enacts the classic paradox of satiety. Forms of excess generally provide pleasure and pain entwined, and I think that's what I like about them. Keats, at the beginning of "Ode to a Nightingale," is in this state of drowsy numbness and dull pain because he's sated himself on the bird's song: "'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness." Reading Freud's case studies is intoxicating because there's this constant unveiling of desire; but it's painful, too, because Freud pushes every detail to its limit and before long you experience this overdose of interpretation, a poison of interpretation. Let's think of David Lynch, whose films are weird, but also thoroughly mainstream. No, never mind, let's think of something totally mainstream and something that I love: football. Anyone who's ever sat through an entire NFL game has experienced saturation, especially if it's televised. Football is this absurd sport soaked in gratuitous violence and pointless

ritual. I find watching football to be simultaneously cathartic and nauseating. And that's the thing: revulsion is a key element of meaningful experience.

What do you mean?

Even tiny doses of revulsion go a long way. I feel that I need to be bothered, sometimes really bothered, in order to appreciate something in a long-lasting way. I like to disagree with myself, to find myself disagreeable. Art should be kind of ugly. Poems should make you pull back. Characters should be both demon and god. It doesn't mean they have to be offensive per se, but that something doesn't sit right, that there's an impurity in the admixture.

I never really feel comfortable about the self.

Do you think young writers should get comfortable with their strange/uncomfortable interiors? That it makes for better writing?

Actually I'd advise against feeling any degree of comfort with the self, whether it's strange or not. One of my biggest motivations to write is a great discomfort with the self, with this locus of individuating impulses in this body and this social identity and this complex of thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. Ugh, it's too much! And then when this monstrous convergence of energies moves into language, the whole thing's a total mess. That's why the language becomes so strange. That's why the whole form of communication begins to feel like a deathtrap. Subjectivity and language, two systems which have no business working together, forge a horrifying relationship. Pure monstrosity. So I never really feel comfortable about the self. I'm not comfortable setting down these things in a poem; I'm compelled to do so; it's compulsive and fairly unintentional. Another "thing" writes my poems.

Yeah, that sounds normal. Not to be rude, but we do wonder a little about you and Freud.

What do you wonder about me and Freud? What about us? Well, I don't have a special relationship, if that's what you mean. Okay, I'm starting to sound hysterical. I do like the case studies every once in awhile because they're like good detective fiction. They remind me of watching *Scooby Doo* as a kid, where the ghost is always some malcontent dressed in a sheet, except with Freud the ghost is always erotic desire dressed in the sheet of death, or love of the mother dressed in paranoiac aggression toward the father.

7

From: Nathan Hoks <nshoks@gmail.com>

To: Sean Bernard <marlette85@yahoo.com>

Sent: Thursday, August 1, 2013 10:55 AM

Subject: Re: contest judge/interview? (hoped to get to The Narrow Circle in this round, but too much other fun stuff; next time, hopefully)

Hey Sean -- so sorry I've been so long here - getting over a cold -- I kept wanting to go back to the bar where I answered the first batch of questions, but couldn't get myself out to do it. So here's what I've got. I may want to tweak a few spots (especially the last one), but I thought I'd try to get something back to you. Happy to answer more, trim/edit these, or whatever you're thinking. Sorry I didn't get a chance to say Hi when I talked to Vieve. Is your number 775-722-9160? Let's talk soon. Peace - NH

8

Going back to the discussion of saturation, hysteria, impact through revulsion: generally, when we read from the Interior and Exterior

sequences of your second collection The Narrow Circle, the poems seem more domestic/comfortable than saturated: pouring a glass of water, filing nails, frying eggs, riding a bicycle, listening to the radio, going to bed. It's frequently a more comfortable domesticity than a frustrated one. The poems – while self-critical and effectively uneasy – present a mind in repose, in an almost calm voice.

That makes us wonder: why don't you, at least in these poems, try to create/dive into saturation?

Let me say this: as I see it, the self is formed though a saturation of linguistic feedback, and in so far as my work is concerned with the formation and deformation of the self, whatever that is, it is involved in saturation. But you're right, stylistically my work tends to be fairly flat. A review recently referred to it as enacting a deadness of form, which the reviewer, Toby Altman, took to be a response to the avant-garde's imperative of innovation. The other part of the puzzle is the role of shame, both in the formation of the self and in the lyric. We have things like modesty, order, decorum, partly because of shame. Writing, especially lyrical writing, is an act of humiliation. Speaking from a subject position is an act of humiliation. The self is a blossom on the bush of humiliation. I guess I'm especially sensitive to this aspect of writing and overcompensate (saturate?) with flatness. Stylistic flatness is comfort food.

Eg, "I really need to say this stuff poetically and I want to say it well so others think I'm smart but really the whole thing is absurd, so I better be pretty detached-seeming about it lest the mockery of others," etc. Is that why 'especially lyrical'?

Yes, detachment is a good word, though I hope I don't seem indifferent. It's a defense mechanism, indeed. After all, lyric tends to move toward the unsayable, and in making that movement public it prostitutes a private utterance.

Can we talk about the collection's penultimate poem – "Letter of the Exterior"? Can you tell us why you included it?

It's funny that you ask about "Letter of the Exterior" because it was the last poem I wrote for the book. I "like" it because its tone and texture differ from other poems in the book. As a letter, it seems to me more straightforward and human. And the basic gesture of writing a letter to one's self seems to fit with the interplay of self-generated and self-generating voices that occurs throughout the book. I also think of it as a kind of parody of certain moments of the Interior, namely of "Spiral of the Interior" and "Farewell, Interior."

Here's what we like about that poem, both particularly and as a general representative of your poetry: the wonderfully stubborn juxtaposition. Weird details clashing with domestic details. The speaker's calm resignation to the strange in the face of the strange . . . and how that resignation – a shrug, really – serves to disarm the strange. And very simply the poet's – that's you – push and pull against the surreal (not the whole school or whatever, just . . . maybe your writing impulses? or something): yes . . . well, not really . . . but, well, yes. Only not.

And on that note we'd like to add, Nate, that your brain seems strange.

I doubt that my brain is any stranger than another's. Compared to most poets I'm really a conventional guy, but I do tend to allow my writing to follow "strange" curvatures. The push-pull you mention is important. There's nothing stranger than the normal. I love Georges Braissai's reminder: "The surreal is a normal calf." Strangeness comes from perspective and from the particular curvatures we follow: a small man reminds the speaker of a glass of water; speech is "projected" as a whale and speech turns the speaker into a hologram; language is an invasive force, polluting the exterior and mercilessly remodeling the world. None of this is *Twilight Zone* material. What I'm interested in is the routes of association that the poem can take to get to these places.

J'accuse! You're an associative poet! We wonder – if you're using associative routes to get "to these places," how do you know what places to get to? Do you know the end before the rest of the poem? Or if you're moving associatively ahead, how do you know where to end? "Letter" ends in quiet, dissatisfied domesticity. Was the poem headed there early in the drafting process? Did you associate backwards? How would you explain the associations/movements that you put into a poem - Serendipity? Tone? Brita? Pur? What's your filtration system?

The great thing about using association as a method of composition is that it's an endlessly flexible system. It can proceed by rhythm, by homonymic relationships, by pun, by motif, by image, by shape, by metaphor, etc, and in this way it's something of an anti-system, which is not necessarily anarchy or total chaos but maybe the negation of procedure. Anyways, I don't think you ever really know when you get there, that is, to wherever you're going, because if the conditions are right, poetic association can just keep going and going. Sometimes I just get bored and try to find a quick exit. Other times a poem ends as a fade out, the way ripples just kind of loosen and lose form as they get further and further from the initial disruption of a still surface. And that might be a helpful way of thinking about poetic association: a disruption of a placid language psyche. The poem is this device for either effecting or registering that disruption. The poem can be the very thing causing the disruption, say the tectonic plate rubbing against another plate, or the device registering the disruption, the seismogram. And in my own approaches, I like to confuse the registration device for the event itself, and vice-versa.

I just looked at an old draft of "Letter of the Exterior" – it had four more paragraphs at the beginning! I rarely remember composition decisions very clearly, but I do remember that the last paragraph's image of the man raising his hand above his head was actually the image that I had started the poem with. I don't remember why I moved it to the end, but I suppose it was a little like moving backwards. I find it funny that you

read dissatisfaction in the domesticity at the end – you’re not wrong because I can see these elements in themselves as dissatisfying, but I guess I find them in sum very satisfying. The broken glass and the wet salad, the dog eating walnuts and the mute television all feel quietly magical to me, which is why he can sit there without quenching his thirst, that is, without immediately tending to the body or even bothering to clean up the broken glass. There is great peace in that domestic moment, which is why it’s the penultimate poem of the book.

9

We just read that Gerald Stern/Dean Young interview you mentioned. It’s like twice as long as this one. Ramble, ramble, ramble. We think we got it beat. Totally, right?

Um, Nate?

10

Oh, and earlier – by soul, we meant poetic voice. That might clear things up a bit.

I like the conflation of soul and voice. Maybe because the existence of both is debatable.