COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE # 2

Guest(s): Nick Flynn

Host(s): Rachel Zucker

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Transcripts formatted after those from Disability Visibility Project

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[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Welcome to Commonplace, Conversations with Poets (and Other People). I'm Rachel Zucker. I recorded this strange, meandering conversation between poet and memoirist Nick Flynn and myself, in early June 2016, at NYU. It was a hot day, and Nick arrived sweaty and enthusiastic, having just ridden his bike over the Brooklyn Bridge. It was great fun, but also a bit harrowing to talk to Nick. There were moments when I knew I should have gone further, asked something more personal, or maybe just been more up front about my surprise about some of the things he said. But there's always something about Nick, that, despite his openness, causes me to sit there, listening, wide-eyed, to what he's just said. Before I've recovered, he's on to the next story, next thought. We talked for a long time, almost two hours. At first, I wished that I'd imposed more of a shape to our conversation, that I'd followed up on each thing he'd said and tried to get us to stay with each topic for longer and go deeper. But there's no

controlling or containing Nick Flynn. And in the end, the meandering nature of this interview feels appropriate.

My time with Nick, as a longtime reader of his poems and prose, often resembles a joyride through Hades. I have to remember to blink, and it's probably best not to get out of the car. For those of you who haven't yet read Nick's work, you're in for a real treat. Nick Flynn's creativity knows no bounds. He's written four books of poetry, including *My Feelings*, his most recent collection, out from Graywolf Press. He's also the author of a play, *A Textbook*, and three memoirs, one of which was adapted into the film *Being Flynn*. He's won many awards, including the PEN/Martha Albrand award for the art of the memoir, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the PEN/Joyce Osterweil Award for Poetry. He's worked as a ship's captain, an electrician, and a case worker for homeless adults, and now holds a teaching position at the University of Houston. He is married to the actor Lili Taylor, and--forgive me--I did once thoughtlessly use the word actress during this episode. Together, they have a young daughter who Nick talks about during our conversation.

Nick and I spent an embarrassingly long time trying to reconstruct the timeline of getting to know each other, and the details of a long train ride we took together. I'm not going to include that part of the recording, but because the backstory is relevant, let me tell you the story of getting to know Nick Flynn, or one version of the story, because as I know from talking to and reading Nick, narrative is only one way of knowing what happened. I met Nick years ago in Rebecca Wolff's class at The New School, where she'd asked us both to be guests. I'd read and loved Nick's books of poetry including *Some Ether* and *Blind Huber*. I was there to discuss my first book, *Eating in the Underworld*, and Nick and I hit it off but didn't keep in touch. I read Nick's memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, when it came out around 2004. I adore memoirs, especially formally interesting memoirs, which are the kind often written by poets.

For a few years, I'd seen Nick every once in a while at readings or at the yearly Association of Writing Programs conference, and there was always a feeling of

camaraderie and respect between us. On my end, I think there was also some jealousy. I was interested in writing prose but hadn't done it yet, and Nick's memoir had been successful. I knew Nick liked my work because he invited me to contribute poems to an issue of *Ploughshares* he guest-edited and later invited me to participate in a collaboration in which writers wrote a poetic response to a work of contemporary art by Mel Chin. That project was called "The Funk and Wag from A-Z."

Much of the history between us I have reconstructed from our email correspondence, without which I would have no idea how all this happened. In response to Nick's invitation to participate in the "Funk and Wag" project, I emailed on July 7, 2012: "Dear Nick, I'm sitting in a half-dark living room in Paris, where I have come to teach for twenty-five days, without my family, which is terrifying and wonderful, and I'm finishing Craig Teicher's new book of poems, which is excellent, and having the epiphany that the way to finish my seemingly unfinishable poetry collection is to write several really good, new poems, which feels impossible. Mostly what I'm doing is obsessively checking for an email from mother, to whom I recently sent my strange, lyric essay-memoir, which is mostly about her. I'm sure her email will read, "If you publish this, it will kill me," but I don't know if that's terror talking or common sense. And so I can't move, let alone write several great, new poems, or even one bad one. And then my computer binged, and that was you, and that seemed very wonderful, and this invitation, to which I say yes, definitely."

[5:31]

Nick wrote back right away: "So excellent, all of it, Paris, no family, terror, Mom's ghost-note. Almost all my writing these days is collaboration of one sort of another. I think the fiction of being alone is finally starting to dissolve." Five months later in December of 2012, I emailed Nick to ask for advice about how to proceed with my memoir. "Dear Nick, *Mothers* is going to be published. I wrote the book in 2009 and have overhauled several times since. It's about the relationship with my mother as well as my relationship with several women that

were mother figures for me. The book has as much to do with trying to reconcile the fact of my self as an artist-mother with a pledge I made as a girl to be nothing like my own artist-mother. It's also about memory and the difference between prose and poetry. Are there things you wish you'd taken out of your book, things you wish you'd left in? Were there people in the book you showed before publishing, and if so, how did that experience go? Did you change anyone's name? Basically, do you have any warnings or advice for me? I've been writing memoir in poems for as long as I've been writing. I don't quite understand why this feels different, but it does."

Nick wrote, "Hey Rachel, very cool about your book. I had the same experience with my father, then in the writing of the book, in order to write the book, I ended up developing and deepening my relationship with him, which wasn't my intention nor conscious desire, and yet in the end is perhaps more significant than the book. I took out a lot in the drafts, basically with an eye toward compassion toward him. I took out anything that felt like it was grinding an ax, as a book is a sad place to settle something that should probably be settled in an alley or in therapy."

"Dear Nick", I wrote back, "This is a great line: "a book is a sad place to settle something that should probably be settled in an alley or in therapy" and I'm writing it on an index card and putting it on my bulletin board. It's strange work, this writing stuff. I feel like a wretch for using my mom, kids, husband, etc. in my book, and also, what the fuck else would I write about? And I think the writing, I hope, makes me a better daughter, mother, wife, etc." I'm pretty sure that when I wrote to Nick for advice in 2012, I didn't remember the story of his mother's suicide. I remember that she had taken her own life when Nick was in her early twenties, but not the part about Nick's mother reading a half-finished short story he'd written in a notebook adn left at home and how she'd begun writing a suicide note partly in response to thes tory, which she finished two weeks later right before shooting herlself. That story was in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, but I don't think the details were on my mind. How could I not have been thinking about it? How could I not see that Nick had already given me a warning?

On January 16, I got an email announcing the publication of Nick's third memoir, *The Reenactments*, which is a book about watching his memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City,* be made into a movie. And the news was that Nick would be reading from *The Reenactments* the next night at the Strand bookstore in New York City. "Dear Nick," I wrote, "I'm hoping to come to the Strand. I'm so eager to do so but also afraid. I'm in a really strange mental place right now. After having many meetings with my mother about this memoir, she suddenly became very clear that I should not publish it. She basically said that terrible things would happen to both of us if I did. The whole experience has been painful and thrown me around and around and made me question the nature of writing and publishing anything as well as the moral responsibility of memoir. It's been a tough period. I feel that to publish the book would mean that I was a person who knowingly caused my mother pain, and that I would be punished cosmically and karmically and personally. To not publish the book felt like the end of my writing life. This is the central story of my life and a story I really needed to tell. And I felt also that I would not be able to write into the censored space, which is what everything felt like if I chose not to publish the book. And then notice of your new book just came. I can't wait to read it. It gives me a feeling of possibility, when I'd felt very boxed in and trapped. So I'm going to go ahead with publishing this memoir, knowing that it is complicated and not knowing what will happen with my mother. Hope to see you tomorrow."

[10:28]

Nick wrote back, "At least you understand the enormous weight of writing that involves other people, which puts you ahead of 95% of what's out there and is one of the central questions to this thing we're attempting." I did go see Nick at the Strand, and asked him from the audience a complex and probably inappropriate question about the ethics of writing about real people, especially family. Two weeks later, my mother died of an aortic dissection. I had sent my mother an email saying I was going to publish the memoir. She forwarded that email to several friends saying I was breaking her heart, and a few hours later, her heart actually broke. I don't remember any specific advice Nick gave me, either at the reading or

afterwards. I don't remember emailing Nick to tell him my mother had died. The next few months are a blur. What I do know is that about four months later, I was going from New York City to D.C., to the AWP conference, and there was Nick. He came up to me and we talked for four hours. I was deep in grief and guilt, almost out of my mind. I don't know what he said to me, but I know it was significant to be sitting with Nick, to see that after three books of poetry and three memoirs, Nick appeared to have survived. Of course, I couldn't know how he was really doing, how he felt inside. As my friend Erin reminds me, "Don't compare your insides to other peoples' outsides," and there's that great line from Carolyn Forché: "one can live without having survived."

But certainly, Nick was still breathing, and at that point, I found it really reassuring. We ended our train ride down memory lane with my asking Nick why he'd agreed to do the podcast. He responded somewhat obliquely. "I've been working on this idea of bewilderment. This just made sense to do this with you." And here's the conversation that followed. [music playing]

NICK FLYNN: I keep thinking that part of my project in this life is to [laughs]--to get my feet on the ground in some way. To, like, land. I'm very spacey, in some ways. In some ways I'm really grounded, but those ways seem really superficial to me. And it seems important to get my feet in the earth [laughs]. [inaudible 13:08]

But the bewilderment is sort of like--but it seems like it sort of has to go through that. It has to go through this unknowing to get there because I can't just fake it. I could fake it. I could very easily fake being--sitting here right in front of you. And I am sitting here right in front of you. You know what I mean? Just in other aspects, that sense of somehow being false, or that this isn't really real, or some other thing. There's all these other psychic pulls. The bewilderment seems like the only way to get there, because it seems like otherwise it's false. It feels like if I just, with certainty, it's always--whenever I sort of arrive at a place of certainty, if I really think about it, meditate on it, write about it, the opposite is equally true. Bewilderment just sort of allows that sort of openness to that, and to try to do both at once--to be grounded at to accept this vast sea of unknowing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And would you say that that kind of trying to go through bewilderment or be in bewilderment is a spiritual practice? Is it like an intention?

NICK FLYNN: Um, yes--spiritual practice. I've done a Buddhist practice for a while, but I'm not a Buddhist. I sort of load around [? 14:34] various spiritual disciplines, but I think I'm primarily a poet. But I can learn something from these practices. Like the Buddhism thing--the whole thing about just being present in this moment and stuff. I mean, I've been doing this for years. And I always somehow open another door and will be like, "Holy fuck, I'm not even present at all. I'm not even vaguely here." Like, I can have this performance of presence. I guess that's spiritual.

I was thinking on the way over here--I rode my bike over the Brooklyn Bridge, which I do. The Brooklyn Bridge is not the good bridge to ride over because it's filled with tourists. There's a bike lane and there's a pedestrian lane, and they're equal size. And it's marked, but everyone on that bridge--everyone!--99% of the people have never been on that bridge before and will never go on it again and don't care about a bike lane. They don't care! And I used to get really angry at them. I used to be one of those angry bikers. I mean, I wasn't as angry as the angriest, but I was like sort of pissed off. And now I've just been doing this thing. I have to do it every time I go over. I have to consciously do it--where I just stop. And I'm like, "Excuse me! Thank you!" I just do this thing, and I feel so much better on the other side of it. I feel like that was something. I don't know what that is. It's just sort of a moment, that the anger or something, seemed really not to be. I was just swirling in some whirlwind, some old whirlwind of despair or something.

[16:04]

But to actually just sit there with this person and recognize that these people have never been on the bridge--they're really excited to be on the bridge! Everyone's doing the same picture, too. It's so crazy. And I go by--and I don't have to go by!--I'm chosing to do this. The Manhattan Bridge is just a block away with no one

on it. I'm choosing to be with this humanity that piss me off. And they take the same exact picture. There's a woman coming up, there's one woman squatting down in your lane. And her friend is standing there, and she's about to leap and throw her arms in the air to catch her jump in the air with the bridge behind her. There's like ten million of those pictures in the world. And everytime they do it, they swing their arm into my head when I'm going by them. It's sort of like, "Oh, here it comes." Like a Groundhog Day thing--here it comes again. Here comes the hand coming at me. How do I react to it?

RACHEL ZUCKER: This is so fascinating. When I was getting ready to talk to you, I was telling my son, "This guy, Nick Flynn, he's coming in. He's a poet, but he also writes these memoirs." I was explaining everything. I said, "So, he wrote this memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, and they made a movie of the book, of this memoir, and he wrote another memoir, *The Reenactments*, about the experience of watching his life being made into a movie." And Moses said, "Well, are they gonna make a movie of *The Reenactments*?" He was kind of kidding. And I said, "You know, I know you're joking, but in some ways, *My Feelings* is a reconsideration of some of that same material in another form, with different feelings coming to it. And it does remind me in a sense of, like how you're choosing to go over the same bridge again. Maybe you're choosing, maybe you have no choice. I don't know. You do have a different response, I think, with these poems, than in *The Reenactments* and *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* and the poems that came before both of those. I'm really interested in that.

NICK FLYNN: I have this chapter or paragraph or moment in *The Reenactments*, where I ask--my editor really wanted me to know in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* what I felt the moment my father came into the shelter. Then, in making the film of it, they recreate that moment, and I was there for the recreation of it, which is like twenty takes on each actor before they do a coverage [? 18:50] where they turn around, or whatever they call it. So there's twenty takes of Paul Dano, playing me, seeing Robert De Niro come in and ask for a bed, and he does it twenty times, twenty times and each time is different. Then De Niro--the camera turns around to De Niro asking for the bed, and it's twenty times and every time is different. Then

they choose one--one moment, or one take somehow, one and weave it together in a certain back-and-forth. But I say in *The Reenactments*, I say if it was me and you wanted to know how I felt, I'd just make a movie of all those forty takes. Because that's how I felt. It's just a kaleidoscope of feeling. But just when you said that--it's so interesting you said that. I wasn't really aware of that, but I like that take on it, that *My Feelings* is trying to move closer toward something or giving it a different form. I'm choosing to hear it as closer toward something. I think that is sort of a project--to get closer towards something in one's work.

You start out in one place and then you realize all the falseness of it or the things you couldn't say or weren't able to say, that you avoid or you forgot or you misremember. Then you try to get a little bit closer but also, what you're feeling of it. I'm doing this thing now where--I've sort of had this crisis in the past year of writing, after *My Feelings* came out. Almost when it came out, it's so funny. It came out in May, and right after that I did this roadtrip with my daughter back to my hometown. My wife was out of town. I had to do something; I had a gig. I sort of had to bring my daughter with me. And I also said, "Let's go, I'll show you my hometown. I've been telling you stories about my childhood, when I was seven." She was seven last year; now she's eight.

[20:53]

So we took this road trip. We went back through all these spots; I got to show her the houses I lived in. It was really beautiful, really weird. It was really fun. But some things I did when I was seven were really fucked up, like really kinda nutty. So my wife's out of town, and it's sort of like I'm in charge. I don't know how it is when your husband's in charge, but it's different. It's different! I feel a little feral. Like me and this seven year old--we feel a little bit like, "Alright, let's see what trouble we can get into in some way." The stories I tell her--there's this story when I was seven where I broke into a house and stole some things. And I was seven--I sorta didn't believe it. The story was that I was seven, and we went back to the house. The house is a museum. It's a whole long story about why it's a museum and stuff, but it's a museum now. And I've only been it once when I was seven,

when I was her age. And now, almost fifty years later, we go into it again. And now it's a museum. And it's like memories. It's this strange thing--your memory of going to this house that's now a museum. It's all a really nutty, convoluted story. But I told her this story about breaking into the house, and I couldn't believe that when we went to the house, and I saw her next to it, I thought, "I couldn't have been seven!" She still has a stuffed monkey that she talks to. You don't break into houses and steal things when you're a kid. And I also set a field on fire. It was just like a seven-year-old crime spree in the town and other things. And I realized that when we were in the house that was a museum that he died that winter when I was eight, the guy whose house it was. And I knew he was in the house. So I knew that I was seven when I did it. It was just a sort of shocking thing, like "Oh, I must have been twelve. Twelve year olds would do that, but a seven year old wouldn't."

So it sort of began this whole process of somehow questioning all the stories. There's something about with my writing--I don't know about your writing. We're very different writers, I think, which is wonderful. I love love your writing. I hope you know that. But your stuff feels to me like very much in the moment. Like there's a moment that you're capturing and really capturing that moment. With mine, I really piece together these things. It's very collage-y. I've brought like collage-y things to show you involving my process, whereas yours feel like from that school of Notley and Eileen Miles and this whole sort of New York thing. I don't know if you feel that way too. I really admire that, because it does feel closer to--you know, I'd have to study Buddhism for thirty years and I wouldn't get close to that, to that being in the moment to write something that I can feel okay about or that is actually capturing that moment without the thousand demons in my head contradicting me and leading me down other tunnels, photographs of the 80s and all that.

There's this thing that happened, like right then. I realized that I forgot that *My Feelings* came out in May; we took this trip in May, and then, like, all the stories I've told in my books. There's this one story that's also when I was seven, and this is like the main thing. My mother set our house on fire when I was seven. Maybe you picked that up in the books? Because I refer to it in different ways, but I refer

to it in a way that's so controlled. I control that narrative, and I think it's kind of funny. I kind of admire her in this way. She was twenty-seven; she was broke. She got insurance money; no one got hurt. But then, like, going back to this house I could stand outside the house with my daughter, looking at her when she's seven. I was like, "What the fuck!" Like, that's crazy! This was a crazy thing. Like, who would do that?

So I had to go back into therapy, and my therapist was like, what happened is that I have these narratives, which are these books that contain these stories. It's sort of this control. I apparently am a control freak, or something, so I try to take this past, put them into stories that I can control the narrative. Then, suddenly, the narrative started breaking down and the affect that I was keeping out just seeped in and became pure affect. The stories became pure affect. And now I don't know what to do, really, because all the books feel false. All the books you've read feel utterly false in a way, like they're only ways to avoid affect, to avoid actually feeling, to avoid doing what you just do naturally. I'm projecting wildly into you, but what you seem to be able to do: just be present in the moment, complicated, messy, filled with the emotion that comes in you. You deal with it, you process it, in a way that feels real to me. Where mine are like, I look at them like, "Holy fuck! This all has been, in a way, like a scrim, a way to avoid feeling."

[25:57]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I am very envious of the way in which you write--you're calling it sort of collaged--but in pieces--rather than a sprawling mess, which is what I always seem to end up with--poems that are longer and longer and longer, a sort of fragmented, no-chapters memoir. I love the pieces of your work. It enables me to be in them but also have space in between them. It doesn't feel controlled to me. Also, you are writing about the past almost all the time, and I think I'm generally writing about the present--

NICK FLYNN: The present moment! You are!

RACHEL ZUCKER: I always think I'm doing that becacuse I have a very poor memory, and in fact I'm slightly worried I'm becoming demented. I worry that I have very little access to the past.

NICK FLYNN: I don't either!

RACHEL ZUCKER: But you remember, you know. Even if you doubt the memories, you do have these memories of--kind of extraordinary memories, actually, and many of them traumatic. Let me ask you a question about my feelings because I think this is absolutely related. I'm obsessed with the cover image that you chose. This is Lori Nix, right?--is the artist.

NICK FLYNN: Lori Nix is the artist. I bought the photograph--I actually bought that photograph--in Houston. A friend of mine runs a gallery in Houston, and he kept all semester--I teach every spring in Houston--and all semester we did a lunch like once a week and he'd always bring me by the gallery. The show was up, and he sort of insisted I buy one. I really loved them, but it was like more money than I've ever spent in my life.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, this is an important image, so I'm just describing it for a minute. This is an audio-only, but I'll put a picture of the book up on the website. It's a photograph of a laundromat that's all fallen apart and out of use, and the ceiling is coming down and the fluorescent lights are still working, but it's all sort of coming apart. But it's not real.

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, it's a little apocalypse. All her photographs are little apocalypses; she makes them all. They're all dioramas--small boxes. Everything in them is made. So if you look at the photograph there's like a little shirt hanging on a hanger and she made the shirt. She made the hanger. She made the little cactus that sort of needs water and is tipping over. She made everything. It's amazing to me--her attention. It felt very much like what I do with my writing. This is what I think is the difference between me and you. Mine are a little, like, handmade apocalypses, much more like these little dioramas.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But extremely realistic looking and phtogoraphed.

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, looking, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah! I would guess that most people looking at the cover of this book do not know that it's a photograph of a diorama. Right?

NICK FLYNN: No, almost no one does. No, you wouldn't! It's real. It looks real.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. So talk about--

NICK FLYNN: That's what I see my poems as. They're also like handmade apocalypses. They're sort of like disasters, but I control them. And they're disasters that are based on things that have happened, but I am skewering. I think that mode is ending for me, and I'm not sure how to take my hand off the wheel and keep writing. But I feel like that mode is ending, like I've come to the end of that mode. This image, too, though--I just went back to my hometown again. It's very strange. It's like the bridge, say, the bridge and a hand coming toward me every day. A year later, after the book came out, a year ago when the book came out and I went back to my hometown and went back to the house and the field I set on fire and all that stuff. The same thing happened again. My wife got called back to Europe, to re-shoot the film, which was really strange. The Fine Arts Work Center called me and asked me to do another gig at the same time. The same friend of mine, Mike, a buddy Mike, a running buddy, came with Mave [? 30:09] and I in the car. We were doing the same thing, driving the same thing, going up there again. We went back to my hometown, but this time after having processed this for a whole year, the whole what-this-was. Right next to the downtown was a laundromat that to me, in my memory, looked exactly like this.

This is like memory. Things start to fall apart in your memory. We didn't have a--you know, my mother was single, a working mother; she worked like three jobs. We didn't have a washing machine. We never had a washing machine, so we

always went to the laundromat. We lived in the laundromat. She would leave us there. She would go and do stuff, and we'd just be in the laundromat. Or we'd leave. So after so much time, it's like this mythic space for me--this laundromat. Much more than anything else. Lori Nix also has photos of subways that are, like, sand has come into them. Apocalyptic. It's almost like that book *The World Without Us.* It's sort of saying, like, how quickly nature would just crush us once we were gone. Like how quickly everything would just be overgrown and filled with something else.

[31:27]

RACHEL ZUCKER: So, if this--

NICK FLYNN: Just thought about this Jung quote, too. My therapist is a Jungian, and he just said this thing yesterday which is supposedly carved in a subway wall. He thinks it's the only Jung quote carved in a subway wall. On 6th and 42nd street--which, I don't even know. That's what he says; I don't know. That "nature must never be allowed to win. But she must never lose."

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow…

NICK FLYNN: That's Jung on a subway wall in New York: "Nature must never be allowed to win. But she must never lose."

RACHEL ZUCKER: Will you talk a little bit about therapy and in particular--someone asked me some question in an interview or something; I can't remember when it was--but I said that I felt like *The Pedestrians* was at the end of my Freudian period and the beginning of my Jungian period. I don't know if that's true or not; it's just something that came out of my mouth. But I"m interested that your therapist is a Jungian therapist, and I'm interested in knowing--

NICK FLYNN: My current therapist--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Your current therapist.

NICK FLYNN: Yes. That's working for me now. So I've entered my Jung phase for the last several months. A lot of these things, it feels like--I've been interested in this stuff for a while. I've been interested in Jung for a while. I've been interested in his---I mean, he has like, you just feel, like, on the line from Blake. In *The Red Book* he has his own Blake-like paintings and his own cosmology and his ideas, which are completely unprovable, but for poets, seem wonderful. At least for me. It's like Wittgenstein. Who are the philosophers for poets; who are the psychoanalysts for poets? I say Jung more than Freud, at least for me. I don't know about everyone. But Yung, and with that, his delving into archetypes and into the unconscious realm as connecting us all, like having this connection that we're all connected through--this unconscious realm. Through archetypes, through the collected unconscious--is fascinating to me. It feels much more like what I try to do with the writing. That thing of trying to--and I don't consciously ever try to connect with anybody with my writing. It's a very solitary activity. I don't think like, "Who is going to read this?" I'm also aware that poems don't exist until someone reads them. They don't exist. They really don't exist. They only exist when they're activated.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Just poems or all kinds of writing, all kids of art?

NICK FLYNN: Any art. It doesn't exist until it's activated by someone else at that moment, at that moment, and their experience with it, which connects to other things [inaudible 34:31] the archetypes allow us to connect to these other things. And how to do that and just have it be--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Has therapy, either with this therapist or other therapists in the past, always been an important part of your writing life and your process?

NICK FLYNN: Well, it's so funny. You brought up Rebecca Wolff when we first met. Rebecca said to me at one point, "Well, I don't want to go to therapy. I'll lose the well of energy that I write from," or something, that it would someone run dry.

And I've never thought--to me it seems that there's no end to crazy. You just pull back another layer and it's like, "Oh my god, what is this room that I haven't even ever looked at?" You know, I haven't been in this type of therapy for a while. I was in a different type of therapy for the last several years--this Wilhlem Reich thing with body memory and stuff like that. So this going back to talking therapy has been interesting. To me it's really important. I talk a lot. I have a small circle of friends that I talk really intimately with. If we don't, if we're just chatting with someone and we don't get to that level, I don't really know how to sustain it. I have about an hour of attention, then I'm like, "Okay, this is pleasant" but if you don't cross that threshold into something which seems real, which to me is like, "What are you struggling with?" I'd like to say it's also, "What brings you joy?" That would be nice. I'm hoping to get there [laughs], to have that be the activating impulse.

[36:22]

Mary Jo Bang said--she gave a talk down in Houston a couple years ago--she said that her reason for writing was, she said, "Well, the reason for writing is it brings me joy. Like, I get this great joy out of writing." It sort of was like a lightening bolt. Like I never would have articulated it that way. To me it was always about, like, crossing the threshold into this dark territory, into these places that are really hard to get to and then coming back, barely making it back with some sort of something in your teeth, or something. But it is joy, though, too! Like I wouldn't do it if it didn't bring joy. So just sort of keep that as a motivator. And to realize hat there's always been joy in it, also.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Are the poems part of a conversation that you're having? You sort of just said you don't think about who is reading them or the audience when you're writing them, but in real life--so much of what we're talking about is what's real, what's not real, what's certainty, what's bewilderment, what's a diorama of a laundromat that you may have psychically spent a lot of time in--how does writing the poems compare to this experience that you have where you are having these important, meaningful, personal, and intense conversations with other breathing,

living organisms who are responding to you? Are the poems a completely separate--

NICK FLYNN: Well sometimes it would come out of those conversations. I would take notes, just like notes I took in therapy yesterday. And some things I just wrote right before therapy, just things I was thinking. I have to bring in dreams to therapy, every week. I had a dream with Matt Johnson in it last night. Do you know Matt Johnson?

RACHEL ZUCKER: No…

NICK FLYNN: A teacher down in Houston. It's just so funny. I can't quite remember it. He just built like a new porch or something. It was very strange. A lot of the poems are, like, if someone read them, if the person I was having that conversation with or having this intense connection with read them, they would know that this is a conversation with them, but also ideally they would be able to talk to other people to.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Well, I do come to your work to find out how you're doing.

NICK FLYNN: [laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: It may not be accurate, you know. I also come to your work to find out how I'm doing, or what I should be doing.

NICK FLYNN: It's so sweet that you worry about me!

RACHEL ZUCKER: I do! I do. It's interesting because your story is very different from mine. Your writing is different from mine, but I feel involved in it, at this point. I feel like I've had these experiences with your books over the years, and I like going back over and over again to the house that you grew up in, to the stories that you are retelling or revisiting or re-experiencing. But I also feel

concerned--concerned about that process for you. Not that I don't want you to do it.

NICK FLYNN: Well, I think it's a risky process. I do say that. I have to remind myself of Mary Jo Bang's edict of joy. And it is it. When she says it, I'm like, "I know it's true." But if you're asking me, I say that poetry is a dangerous activity. To me it's like really a dangerous activity. It's physically dangerous. You go into places that are really hard to go to. At least, those are the poems that I really respond to, in a way. Those are the ones I feel like the poets--but that's me too! I was in therapy yesterday, like, what is it about having to get so close to the edge of the abyss? Like, always. To just keep doing that in different ways. I guess if it was healthy, I wouldn't be in therapy. But I don't know another reason to do it or another mode. That's why I say I admire your work so much because it does seem like you are able to take it from this moment, and it feels like it's on the edge of something, but it's an edge that's manageable in some way that's not gonna--because you're saying it right in the moment, and you're present with it. Mine feels like I go get into a dissociated state to get to it. I try to [inaudible 40:58] some of this dissociation that sort of comes howling in also.

[41:02]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I feel like there's something smart here to think about having to do with the underworld and the trip to the underworld and why people go to the underworld, and how you cut back, but I can't quite…

NICK FLYNN: Well, you know, with my therapy yesterday, it was sort of enlightening. There's this stuff–-and we can talk about marriage too, you know. You're a great expert on marriage, so you talk about that too, because who are the partners we choose to be with? Why do we choose them? I assume you've looked into that a little bit, and I have, and it's always sort of terrifying, when you read about it and you find some identification with it, that you try to figure out the stuff that was set up in your childhood, you're trying to find a way to resolve it. You're trying to find a way, and the partner, seemingly, is completely opposite of anything

you've grew up with, and suddenly you're like, "Oh no, these five characteristics line up perfectly, and they're the things I need to work on, in order to become a whole human being, in some way," which does seem to be part of a reason to be here.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, it's interesting that your marriage does not come up super directly in your books. It's there—

NICK FLYNN: At the end of *The Reenactments*…

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes, there's a beautiful moment at the end of *The Reenactments* where you talk about the two moments in the film where your real wife playing a different character–-not your wife in the film–-touches the actor who's playing you, and that's funny because I really noticed that—

NICK FLYNN: Which would be very different than how you would write about your relationship.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes.

NICK FLYNN: Which would be much more direct. The actual person would be there.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Maybe, yeah. But it's a gorgeous, gorgeous moment, and a gorgeous realization, and very hopeful, that somehow she's saying, "If you make it through there, if you make it through this, I'm there for you." There's something–-literally her–-but more life, happiness, joy, a different kind of family–-that's waiting for you.

NICK FLYNN: And I can only hear that when it's, like, on a screen, by actors, and it's not me who's saying–-who's being told that to. Also to levels of it–-there's a real glass house, mirror chamber aspect to it. What I can take in is a big part of the projects.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, and I've wondered that, throughout the years, when I imagine what your life is like, which I do.

NICK FLYNN: Now's your chance! Now's your chance!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, what's it like to be married to an actress? In part because–-this question has several parts. First of all, I'm so interested that you said, "If I were gonna describe what my reaction was to first seeing my father come into the shelter, the most accurate description would be all the twenty takes of watching"--his name's Paul Dano?

NICK FLYNN: Paul Dano, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So, it's not your response to watching an actor do twenty different highly artificial responses, was that it was a very authentic experience, all twenty of them together. Again, you're talking about your writing, in part, as a process of going to the same place over and over again, but noticing your different response, or playing it differently, or responding differently, or noticing what's different, in that same moment, which seems very much like the process of acting. But what's it like?

[45:01]

NICK FLYNN: What happens to you in a really charged moment? Do you know exactly what you're feeling at that moment? I don't. I don't–-sometimes there's like seven things going on at once. One of them is observing, are you feeling the right thing at this moment? Or, don't laugh! It's a tragedy. You shouldn't be laughing. Or, why are you trying to distract yourself by putting a song on now? Or, why are you–-there's whole levels of self-consciousness within that moment, for me, I've found. But you might have a different–-you see, one great difference between us that we haven't even touched on is you're Jewish, and I come from an Irish, but not even Catholic Irish. There's Catholic Irish in my background, which

would be more emotive, but the WASPs were the ones who stuck around. My father was gone, and my grandmother was pretty drunk, so it was sort of a more WASPy, so we don't feel anything. We don't know what we're feeling, so I think there's a part of that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think that's a huge deal.

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, whereas when I just told that to you, you'd be looking at me like, "What are you talking about?"

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, no, I do know what you're talking about…

NICK FLYNN: About the feelings. About having the multiple feelings.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think what's really fascinating to me–-and then I'll tell you something about my marriage and you can decide what to do with this–-authenticity is probably one of the most highly valued things in my marriage, which is great, on the one hand, and there's a lot of permission to say how you feel. I can say how I feel to Josh. I almost always know how I feel. He has a much harder time accessing how he feels, but to the extent that he knows how he feels, saying how you feel—

NICK FLYNN: Does he have a hard time accessing it, or does he have a hard time saying it? Because to me, I know how I feel, but I totally cannot say it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh no. He has no trouble saying it. He only has trouble not saying something, and I think that comes from being Jewish.

NICK FLYNN: He's Jewish also.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes. And I think it comes from a real sense that it's totally fine to say anything–-to say how you feel. It's also totally fine to feel anything,

because only actions are sinful, not thoughts and feelings, and I think that culturally that's a very big difference, and probably to you...

NICK FLYNN: That would be Catholicism, and I wasn't raised Catholic, so...

RACHEL ZUCKER: So, expressivity, good. Feelings, good.

NICK FLYNN: It's just my thoughts are so dark.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay! So here's the thing…

NICK FLYNN: And I've tried, in my marriage–-and we're working on it now. They're just burn the house down. That's the thing. Like I really have to be–-I feel like I have to be circumscribed, in some way, but I'm working on that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So, one of the things that's very—

NICK FLYNN: Are you going to tell me the secret about your marriage now?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I'm trying to.

NICK FLYNN: Okay, okay, sorry.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, it's not really a secret, but I think the thing that is very hard, for both Josh and me, is when we feel like the other person is not being honest, or is not being their authentic self, and I think we're both more worried about that than we are about the incendiary nature of certain feelings or thoughts, and so I think Josh would have a very hard time being married to an actor, and I think I would too–-or, the idea that one of us would be thinking or feeling something but not saying it, which could be an act of tremendous love and kindness, is not perceived as love or kindness in my marriage. It's really perceived as—

NICK FLYNN: Withholding, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: As withholding, and I think, in a way, it's very frightening, because I think the priority is placed on knowing that you can be who you really are with the other person, all the time.

NICK FLYNN: That sounds amazing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, it's a little problematic because what if you have negative things to say, because you're a human being, and then you're just saying them and saying them, either in a poem, or right to the person's face, and what if you actually would like the other person just to shut up for a little while, but you've spent twenty years saying you have to say everything? It's problematic. Or what if you decide you'd like to change, or you'd like to try something different, you'd like to be a little different? There's not a lot of room for that, because the idea is you get to be who you really are, which presupposes that you are one particular thing.

NICK FLYNN: Or that you know who that is.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Or that you know. Or that you want to stay that thing.

NICK FLYNN: Yeah. That's my problem. Knowing that. So, yeah. It's like—

[50:03]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Like, I don't know how to make stuff up, in poems or in writing. I have no ability to make things up or to pretend--

NICK FLYNN: I don't do a lot of making up. Yeah. I don't do a lot of making up either. There's moments that are--but my thing is also, like, so kaleidoscopic, of time. Tiem keeps collapsing. Something that's happening in the moment could've happened twenty years ago. My moment is different than your moment, I think.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm. When you go back into the past in your mind in the poems or in the writing or maybe even in therapy, do you feel that you are playing the part of a younger self, or do you feel like it's you going back either into the underworld or into the past or into the alternate space?

NICK FLYNN: I don't know if I have a--the whole age thing is a little fluid for me, also. When last year, my wife was away--Lili was away a lot last year, like most of the year. From May until December she was working. There were periods where she'd be back, but they were very brief periods. So it really was my daughter and me, like I said. We went feral. And part of that going feral was like, I did that thing Lili had talked about before. Maybe when she was three, suddenly having flashbacks when she was three. For me I didn't have any. I really didn't know what she was talking about when she suddenly was in that moment, and it was traumatic in some way.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Lili had that experience--

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, Lili. But when I was seven it happened to me. So there were times when I was driving with Maeve [sp?] and we were both seven. We were just two seven year olds driving. And I couldn't even see over the steering wheel. We were just driving down the road sort of like crazy people, like seven year olds. I have pictures of her from that time. Her school picture from first grade to second grade--the transformation is remarkable. She looks like a completely different person after a year with dad. She gave herself her own haircut. She scarred her nose. She looks like an animal, and before she looked really proper. We had a fun year but a wild year.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And also you re-lived your seven year old--

NICK FLYNN: Yeah. Yeah. And that's some of what I'm writing about now, if I am writing, which I don't even know if I am writing. But I'm writing something. I don't know what it's going to be. Maybe I need to be more in your mode, in this

really present moment mode. I don't know. I'm trying to figure out what it is. Because the other way, like I said, I'm having trouble with that other way.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I have this idea--it's not really a theory, but--I have this idea that basically all artists have some kind of brain damage.

NICK FLYNN: [laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: And we write either out of or toward the place of non-function. So I really do think that if I write in the present moment, it's not because I'm doing something right, it's that--

NICK FLYNN: That's all you got?

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's all I got! So--

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, this is all I got. But I mean, I like to think the books are different, too. I try, at least structurally, to have difference. They feel different. But then sometimes they come around again. Like, *My Feelings* feels more like my first book of poems, in some ways.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm obsessed with this poem "Cathedral of Salt". Will you read that one?

NICK FLYNN: Sure.

[Nick reads "Cathedral of Salt"]

[54:57]

What do you get out of that?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I love this poem. But tell me: do you feel like you're not writing this poem right now? You're doing something different?

NICK FLYNN: Writing this type of poem?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

NICK FLYNN: I might be. I brought a couple new things with me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, what do you got?

NICK FLYNN: These are like--I'll look at that later. Those are actual collages.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm.

NICK FLYNN: But this is like--I think this is the most recent poem. It says May 2016. This is most recent, and this is how I made it, too. I wanted to bring--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, I love seeing your handwriting.

NICK FLYNN: I wanted to show you how I made it. You can see it's made out of like--there should be another document where I cut these from--what we're seeing is the poem here that's typed up and then there's four sheets of paper, and each one has little scraps of paper taped to it that are phrases, resonant language. I took it out of a page of a document about twenty pages long that was written over the course of the whole semester. Because I see things that I wrote all over.

RACHEL ZUCKER: In the same notebook?

NICK FLYNN: I do this meditation writing. I do it with my grad students in Houston. I do it with anyone I teach right now because I think it's effective. I don't know why I wouldn't do it. We gather for our workshop, and we write just briefly in each workshop. But I have them meditate first before they write. And often it's

around the same--the writing is around a theme or trying to deepen something. So the whole course of the semester we're going back to one moment or one image or one bit of language and deepening it in some way, but meditating first. Then going into it in a different way.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So you'll give them a prompt--

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, I'll give them prompts like, "Find the language there; find the image within this. Then move that image to the top and try to tease it out." Or, find the, whatever, declarative statement.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Can you give me an example of something you might say to them before they begin meditating that they're supposed to begin meditating on?

NICK FLYNN: Well, sometimes beginning it's often like--I have this collection of--I stole this from Carolyn Forché, who was one of my first teachers--a black and white postcards. They look like memories to me. The figures in them are--there's usually people in them having some sort of interaction. They're not recognizable figures. It's just in a scene that just sort of has a story built into it, in some way. Or at least tangible things of the world built into it. I give that out first. That's the first exercise. They sort of look at it and just meditate for seven--well, what we do first with it--they only look at the card for thirty seconds. Then they put it down, meditate for seven minutes, then write a pure description of the card from their memory. They write it from their memory. Then we go back to that, like, "What did you remember? Why did you remember? Why do you think you remembered the woman rather than the man? Why did you think the woman was screaming when she was laughing?" You start interrogating your memory of it. Then you start bringing in your own what it reminds you of, what it brings you to. We do this the whole semester, like once a week. A seven minute meditation then a seven minute writing. That' show we did this year, with my grad students. I had a really wonderful grad class in Houston. Then at the end we take it, and we did a couple things. We did a cento--which I don't think I brought in--where we took in everybody's work that they brought in the whole semester--and everyone gets a

xerox of everyone's work, then cut out the lines. We each made poems out of everyone's work. So there were these collaborative centos that were, you know. It's just really interesting to hear the echoes--almost everyone chose the same lines out of certain peoples' poems.

This is a different mode, yeah. These are all mine. These are my daily writings from that time. I Xerox all those and then sit down and find the resonant language. You do it very quickly, over a three-hour period, for a half an hour you mark this resonant language, whatever that means. It's different for each moment you do it. If you did it the next day, it'd be a whole different thing. But this is the one from this day. That's the only way I can tie into your process of--this is my "being in the moment." This is as close to the moment as I can get. It's completely from fragments from the universe--my moment. That's what my moment looks like. I get that and then put it together and then line it up. I have a title of it, stolen from Ilya Kaminsky, from his poem "Author's Prayer," "If I speak for the dead I must leave," I think maybe how he ends that poem. So I started this one with that.

This is to answer your question about not writing in it's mode. I probably still am writing in the mode of--the way I'm thinking of the writing is almost the longer prose pieces that I'm having trouble with. The poetry's got its own energy. I can't control that as much in some way, I think.

[1:00:35]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, let me ask you--you've got this resonant image on the cover of the book, which is a photograph of a diorama, that somehow also feels like a memory to you because it's of a place that you didn't--no one could--literally go to, but that you have been in this other way. You also have this poem called "Cathedral of Salt," and you have the line that begins with "Beneath all this I'm carving a cathedral of salt." I guess what I'm asking is: is the poem the photograph of a diorama? The diorama being your memory of experience?

NICK FLYNN: This one here--the "Cathedral of Salt"?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. But also I guess in general, too. Where is the poem for you on the level or hierarchy of realness or recordedness or a reenactment or--

NICK FLYNN: To me this poem is completely real. This is an accurate depiction of my reality. I don't feel its invented at all. I don't feel I invented anything in this. I feel it's observed and it's pushing into places that aren't comfortable for me, that are transgressive in some way. Trying to figure out--I wonder why I'm not a fiction writer, you know? I think part of it is--I've done a play, I've written a play, and when you work with--which is close to fiction as I come because of creating characters. The characters are really based on people I knew in some way. But there was a lot of invention in that. The actors were were--I did a lot of staged readings/workshop productions on working things out, which is sort of a wonderful collaborative process. But the actors really want to know--need to know, maybe--there's a character in the play, it's called *Alice Invents a Little Game and Alice Always Wins*, and there's a character in the play named Ivan, based on a friend of mine named Ivan. We lived together in Boston. Ivan the character in the play, he's really dressed well, like in a suit. But you can't really tell if he's homeless or not or if he's bullshitting. You don't really know. So the actor's like, "Am I homeless?" And I'm like, "I don't know." I'm like, "I don't know. Like, I have no idea." I knew Ivan for ten years; I had no idea. I don't know anything about him.

I feel like people are completely inscrutable to me. I can say what they did very precisely. I know exactly what they do. But their motivations, their inner life? I mean that's why I read poems. That's why I read poems. So I can get some glimpse of someone's inner life. So I don't feel like I'm completely walking among ghosts. So I get some sort of connection to someone. I get it more probably from--not more, but--that's why I have this circle of friends that I talk to. Fiction, too--you have to know what motivates the character. You have to know what they want, what their obsessions are. All those things to me seem inscrutable. I can just barely say what people do, what I can see them doing, and then try to get into my motivation. I don't really know why I do things! So this poem is like that. This

poem is trying to get at why I act certain ways in the world that I've set up that somehow to me makes sense. That this is how I'm gonna get to the next moment. And yet if you actually break it down and look at it it's like that's crazy. Like this makes no sense at all, which is why you go to therapy, to break those moments down and interrogate them and say, like, "Is this really the best mode for you to be living in right now? Why are you choosing? Why did you think this was the safest route to get what you want, and what do you want?" All these questions--this poem feels to me like that. I'm not sure to you. I have a part in it that's the most poignant to me. I have no idea if it's the same for you. I have no idea if you think of that--do you want to guess?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, alright--

NICK FLYNN: We'll play a game. Like what would be the most poignant part to you? There's a part to me that's heartbreaking, that's come up in therapy, that's caught my breath in therapy like, "I can't believe I wrote that."

[1:05:28]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, you know, there's a theme that I see in your work that's pretty resonant, which is about loss and missingness. In my copy of the book, I underlined, "Neither you nor your soul is waiting for me at the end of this," the idea which no one seems to notice the hours I'm missing. The idea that the painfulness of really recognizing how alone is. If someone's not waiting for you, if someone doesn't notice when you're not waiting for them or when they're absent, despite the connections that you are making really actively with people that you love, even with people who have died that you love, that something about those connections is not actually visible or not sustainable. To me that's the big fear that I see in your work, which is very resonant to me.

NICK FLYNN: Yeah. Yeah. You got it; you're smart.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What's the name for that? Ineffable. The idea that the word ineffable, which has like a pretty positive connotation in certain ways, if you are the kind of person who is really worried that no one notices when you're not there or that people disappear and you can never get them back, something ineffable is not that great. You want something that is not ineffable, even if you don't really believe that there's something that's not ineffable.

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, that's good. That's the whole thing, too. It really was a genuine question because you would hope with any art that each person has their own experience with it and has their own--what moves them is not gonna be what moves you. It's so surprising to me when people--but we're lined up though. You and I seem lined up on this.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think something that seems pretty common ground between us is a preponderance of doubt and a kind of anxiety.

NICK FLYNN: But in your culture the doubt is positive. That's a good thing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, but doesn't feel good. Doesn't feel good to live in that all the time. Even if you're not doing something bad, it still sucks.

NICK FLYNN: It's hard in a marriage, too.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's very hard. I think if you're not willing to believe somewhat blindly in a common story and follow the path and assume your role and do what you're supposed to do, you're constantly reinventing the wheel. You're constantly saying, "What does it mean to be married? What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a father? What does it mean to be a daughter or a mother?" All of those things. You're floating around in the wind and you're not--

NICK FLYNN: Some people seem to have it easier, though, if they don't question that. It's probably easier to live, but it's part of our job, I guess. No one forced us to be poets, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I have this fantasy--it might be a misunderstanding of my own work and my own process--that my poems are very much like photographs. This idea of the photograph of a diorama that's made to look so realistic is so compelling to me and frightening to me and not, I think, what I do, on some level. I think I'm very obsessed and compelled and frightened by realness--

NICK FLYNN: Yours is more of a photograph of reality and your comment on it. But it's really within that space--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes. Yes--and knowing that a photograph is sort of pretending to be the most real thing, but we know that it's not. The idea that it would intentionally be a photograph of something that's not real but that's very constructed but made to look real is something that is deeply terrifying to me.

NICK FLYNN: But that's part of my terror. I think I have done that my whole life. I'm not sure why I chose that photograph exactly. It just seemed like the right cover. And it seems more and more so like the right cover because of all the things you're saying. And also about this constructed reality--it goes back to the beginning, the narratives I've created are breaking down and they're becoming pure affect. Just the flimsiness of the narrative is like--I've always questioned narrative anyway as being an artifact. It feels almost like that Plato thing--banishing the poets--because it keeps them from being in the present moment, the aestheticizing reality. It seems like he's a crank. I was brought up to think Plato was a crank.

[1:10:21]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well acting has to do with this, too, right? Because you are pretending to get at an emotional truth. You're constructing or doing something

artificial in order to get to a place of pure affect or--right? And there is truthfulness there.

NICK FLYNN: But actors are also doing it to allow the audience to have catharsis, right? And not for catharsis themselves. It's their job, and they're doing it well. They can completely embody a character, btu they're probably not going to get catharsis from that, at least I haven't seen that with Lil, like her coming to "Wow, that really worked out some stuff." It's just like a marathon. I think it's the same with us, in a way. Like writing a poem isn't catharsis. It isn't cathartic for me. Not at all. It's grueling. There's joy in it--I have to keep going back to the joy--but it does feel dangerous. It feels like dangerous work. There's reasons that the mind sets up these little constraints that you can't cross into until you're ready to cross into them. When I'm writing, the subconscious, the unconscious mind rises up and pushes into that space, which I might not be ready to go into.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you feel that your writing makes you a better or worse husband, a better or worse father? I'm just gonna go right there. What if I miss my chance to ask you that? It seems really important.

NICK FLYNN: [Laughs]. Wow. Does the writing make me a better or worse husband, better or worse father? The word better has sort of been my main--is that an adjective or an adverb? "I want to be better"--has sort of been my main thing, like the attempt to be better, in whatever that means. It probably is bleeding into the poems. I don't know if the poems have done that up until now. I feel like what you're noticing--they exist on different boats. They exist from the level of really actively trying to portray what I'm feeling at that moment. They also are complete ways to deny what I can't feel, I think. I'm starting to see that. I'm starting to see there are ways I feel like, "This is really a thing, and I can see other people have a reaction to it." Like writing the thing about my mother setting the house on fire. Other people have had reactions saying like, "That's terrible." They felt it much more than I have, until recently. It does make me wonder about that. In a general sense, I don't think writing makes you a better person, at all. Even pushing deeply into things, I think, can make you into a monster. It depends. It depends what else

you do in your life. There's power to it. There's a power dynamic. You're writing about other people--you were asking about that--like what's your responsibility to other people? I feel a great responsibility to other people, almost too much. In order to be better, I think you have to really want to be better.

Like I'm sober, right? I don't drink. There's a thing recovery that says if you're a good horsethief when you're drunk, you'll be a better horsethief sober. It's not going to change you. You're still going to be a horsethief. For a long time I thought that was one of the promises of getting sober: you get to be a good horsethief. I misunderstood, wilfully misunderstood. Until you get to a point that you get tired of being a horsethief. Suddenly that doesn't work anymore. That's when change happens. That's when you're like, "Why am I doing this?" There are reasons you do things--sort of fascinating and horrible--reasons you can justify doing things. When you get to that point when being a horsethief no longer works, no one can get there for you. You have to get there yourself. There's no one that can say, "Stop being a horsethief." I don't think. You can get put in jail. You just learn how to be a better horsethief in jail, metaphorically. Writing does not make you better.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Now you say you keep choosing to go over the Brooklyn Bridge, where you know there are all these people who are gonna aggravate you, but now you have a different response to them and feel better when you've gotten across the bridge. So the writing doesn't make you better, but you keep doing it, you keep going back. I would say writing poems and writing in an autobiographical mode, in poetry and prose, as you do, is in some ways an act of going over the same bridge over and over again that you know is the bridge where there are all the people who are gonna annoy you, all the people who are taking the same photographs over and over again. But you have done it so many times. But there is a change, right?

[1:16:09]

NICK FLYNN: This also goes back to union--the collective unconscious. I just see when I'm riding over the bridge, when I'm in the negative space, I can ideally see.

I can actually see myeslf believing deeply that the Brooklyn Bridge is mine, that I own this bridge and who the fuck are these people on the bridge? And then I can see myself thinking, like, “That’s insane. That’s a crazy thought. Like what is that? Yeah, I have a bike, and a little piece of paint painted down the middle says, “This is the bike lane. This is not the bike lane.”” And you see bikers all the time like, “Get out of my fucking lane!” Like all the time, I see it. Now I’m trying to be nicer to people and saying like, “The guy behind me is not as nice as me. Like, that guy is gonna yell at you! That’s one of the reasons I’m trying to tell you this. Like I don’t care, I can just go around you.” But then also you wonder, is that controlling too? Like what is the levels of it.

It’s also a process of age, too. My first book, *Some Ether*, was written when I was here, at NYU. We’re sitting at NYU right now. This is where I went to school. That was like twenty-five years ago, almost, that I came here for the first time. Almost twenty-five years ago. Those poems were So I was like twenty-five years younger. That was like half a lifetime ago. You would hope that things would change over that time, I think. It’d be horrifying to me to think I was still in the same place. I might be going over the same ground, going back to my hometown, going back and trying to see stuff but trying to see it with this different perspective. Going back with my daughter is different than going back as a single guy cruising the street at night and feeling like a ghost or something. It’s very different to be there in the daylight and doing the thing I did when I was her age. We did this thing, which we didn’t get to do last year because we went to the house that I broke into, whose name is Mr. Mann [sp?], by the way. I was told by my grandmother--he was in the woods behind my grandmother’s house--I was told that if you get too close to Mr. Mann’s house. She told me not to go there. She said, “Don't go near that house because if you go near he’ll come out with a shotgun and shoot you.”

RACHEL ZUCKER: And you broke into this house after your grandmother told you that?

NICK FLYNN: Well, she said “He’ll shoot you with rock salt.” And I said, “What’s rock salt?” And she said, “Well, it’s not gonna kill you. It’s gonna sting.” And I was like, “Then I’m in.”

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow!

NICK FLYNN: So I’m like, “That sounds good.” I spent the entire summer trying to get as close as I could to his house. But the question in therapy is why would I think that’s a good idea? What was happening? This was after my mother set the house on fire, so why did I think? That was a mode to--which I never put together until recently--a mode to have control over a situation. This guy was far less scary to me--he was just some crazy guy with a gun--than Mom setting the house on fire. That’s where I could master it. That’s where I take the whole mastery thing and apply it to my writing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So here you are, twenty-five years later. Now I’ve got all your books on the desk--

NICK FLYNN: Yeah, you should just burn them all--

RACHEL ZUCKER: No!

NICK FLYNN: [laughs] I feel like I have to do something else. I feel like there’s been this falseness of narrative--of creating a narrative from this thing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Is that part of what’s inspiring these different kinds of processes which seem to be more aimed at accessing the unconscious?

NICK FLYNN: Yeah. I’ve always accessed the unconscious but it’s even more of the main mode. It’s always been part of the mode, but now, just finding ways to do it. But that’s tricky, too. If you’re someone who wants to be grounded on this earth but you’re spending your whole time accessing the unconscious realm, that can be problematic too, probably.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you want to read this poem, the new poem that comes from the little pieces?

[1:20:15]

NICK FLYNN: I don't even know what it is. I don't think I've ever read it, so this would be the first time. Again, the title comes from Ilya Kaminsky's "Author's Prayer," the last line.

[Nick reads "If I Speak for the Dead I Must Leave"]

Yeah, not bad, first time I read it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Gorgeous. Thank you, Nick, for--

NICK FLYNN: Thank you, Rachel! It's so nice. I'm so happy. I was really excited about coming in.

[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: This has been Commonplace: Conversations with Poets and Other People. I'm Rachel Zucker. Many thanks to Nick Flynn, for speaking with me and for his wonderful writing. Website consulting, technical support from Christine Larusso and Daniel Shiffman. Theme music written and performed by Moses Zucker Goren. Design work by Eton Darwish [sp?]. Thank you also to Soren Stockman and Nicholas Fuenzalida. Future episodes of Commonplace will feature John Murillo, Cathy Park Hong, Matthew Rohrer, and Claudia Rankine.

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