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This interview was conducted with Neil Hilborn on April 12, 2018, in Miller Hall, Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. The interviewer was Sylvia Tag.

ST: We are this evening with Neil Hilborn, and Neil has graciously agreed to do an oral history for our PoetryCHaT collection. And Neil, this is just basically a conversation. I'm going to try and ask you some

questions and just be a good listener. So I'm curious. I was reading a little bit about just your background of course, and you mentioned in one interview that you started maybe writing every day when you were around 15 or 16?

NH: Yes.

ST: Did you write in a notebook, or were you writing online, or you had little scraps of paper? Do you remember?

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NH: I was writing in notebooks. It was half kind of intentional poetry and half journaling, really. But I would just -- it kind of started when I would take the notebooks that I was taking class notes in, but I'd get bored and just start writing poetry in the margins. And then eventually, each of those notebooks would kind of transition from class notes to creative writing. And so yeah, that's kind of how I started writing every day, just because I would have a notebook in front of me, so I was writing in it. And this was -- when I was writing this stuff, this was 2003, 2004. Right around that, live journal was a really big deal, so I had three live journals.

(Laughter) One for every day journaling occurrences. One was for my poetry, that was awful. And one was this secret one, that I wrote poems -- basically I was just writing poems to girls, but I pretended that nobody knew the link except this one person that I was giving it to. Like, oh my God, you're... Anyway, it was horrible. But yes, that's how I started doing it as an everyday practice. So it was kind of unintentional, but I continued it now, which is great because now it's my job and I have to write every day (laughter).

ST: Do you remember a particular inspiration, a poet or something? Were you just playing with words? I mean, part of it is just something that emerges from within, but maybe there was something else that intercepted.

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NH: I went to community college instead of going to high school, basically, because I was homeschooled in Texas and there are no rules, and so I basically just decided when I was about 14, I was like, hey, I'm going to go have a classroom experience, but I don't really want to be in high school. So we found a local community college that would take me, and they had some excellent creative writing classes, so I just sat in. And I always liked poetry, but I didn't know where to find it. Most of what I had access to was Shakespeare and George Herbert and Alexander Pope, which was good, and I learned a lot from it. But I -- it wasn't really inspiring me to write anything in particular.

I remember the first poem that really grabbed me and made me want to write, made me realize maybe I could have my own voice. It was this poem by Stevie Smith called "Not Waving but Drowning," that was in a poetry anthology for this creative writing class. And poems were -- Stevie Smith was a very depressed person, but she wrote this. I mean, it's a really, really incredible poem. She's, I think, she gets lumped in with the confessional poets and things like that. But anyway, the poem totally messed me up, and I was like, oh, I got to write sad poems about how I'm sad now. (Laughter) So yeah, and then that kind of clicked and I looked up a bunch of her contemporaries. I was reading a lot of Randall Jarrell and Phillip Larkin and things like that. And then, yeah, so that was -- I forget where I started this, but I feel like that was what was inspiring me back then.

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ST: Well, part of what you started with was that a poem spoke to your sadness.

NH: Yes. And I think up to that point I'd never read a poem that was so explicitly about depression and death. When John Donne writes about death it's this huge, gigantic thing. But when Stevie Smith writes about death, it's kind of a tiny moment that almost, she makes almost feel insignificant. And I was really intrigued by the fact that you could turn death, this huge thing, into something so tiny in a 12-line poem.

ST: So in the process of that, you were starting to speak out loud some of the time?

NH: This was all very private.

ST: Okay.

NH: I didn't know spoken work and slam poetry. I didn't really know that existed until I got to college. My -- go ahead.

ST: No, I was just wondering, because you moved from Texas, Houston?

NH: Houston, Texas. Yes, ma'am.

ST: Yes, Houston.

NH: (Laughter)

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ST: Yee haw. Up to Minneapolis or Saint Paul or Minnesota?

NH: Saint Paul. I went to Macalester College.

ST: And so when you moved, it was to go to school at Macalester, which you found out about somehow.

NH: My mom just told me to apply. Everywhere else that I applied to college was either on the east coast or in Texas. And my mom was like, "Hey, just apply to Macalester College." And I was like, "Where's that?" And she goes, "It's in Saint Paul." And I was like, "Where's that?" Ummm.... (Laughter) So, I applied just because she told me, and I got in, and then I went to visit. I sat in on a creative writing class, and the professor, who eventually became my honors advisor, Wang Ping, she was teaching the class. And I was just some dumb 17-year-old in a punk band t-shirt, and she just pulled me aside, she was like, "Hey, you thinking about coming to Macalester? What do you write?" And I was like, "I write poetry." She was like, "I'm the head of the poetry department. What kind of stuff do you want to do? What sort of poems do you like to write?" It just blew me away that --

ST: She took you seriously.

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NH: Yes, that she should took me seriously, even though I didn't take myself seriously. And I mean, the campus was beautiful. Also, I kind of, Minnesota kind of tricked me, because it was the end of April and it was like maybe the third day it was 70-something degrees --

ST: It's mean.

NH: Right! And everybody was outside, barefoot and playing Frisbee and really enjoying themselves. I heard it was cold here. This is so nice.

(Laughter)

NH: So yeah, and then I found out what winter was. (Laughter)

ST: All the indoor poetry gatherings, though.

NH: Yes, no, I mean I really like winter, I really, really credit winter with a lot of the work that I produced, because I think that's part of the reason why I stayed in Minnesota because the writing community's so good, and normally, none of my friends who were writers were touring in winter. So certainly for December and January, we'd all just get together every day and just work on poems, and edit each other's work, and really get each other prepped for that next cycle of touring. Because it's cold, you can't go outside, you can't do anything else other than sit inside and be sad and work on poems.

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ST: Did you bring your younger work with you? Do you have kind of a library? Do you have it at home with your folks?

NH: (Laughter)

ST: Because you're in a real interesting transition. What I would consider that transition time of being on your own but yet there's still maybe the archive at your folks, or?

NH: My mom just sent me all of my old notebooks.

ST: Okay.

NH: And I was about to not get them, which was, Hey stupid, you should have (laughter), you should have your old notebooks. Sure, sure, sure, you're right, you're right.

ST: Bravo, Mom.

NH: My mom's excellent, and really encourages my career. So, I have all that stuff. And I opened up one notebook, and I was like, No, I can't do this. (Laughter) But, so many of the poems are so bad. But I think in five years, I'll be ready to actually look at that stuff and see, actually start to take stock of where I came from as a writer, and pick apart what elements are still present in what I'm doing, and blah, blah, blah, you know. But I can't go back through that stuff yet.

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ST: So what would you say to a teen, a youth, a kiddo who is struggling with mental illness, with OCD, with sadness, maybe depression -- is there something that you have some reflection on?

NH: The first thing I'd say is, get some therapy, man. And I'd say, I'm not a mental health professional, I don't know anything. Take every piece of advice I have with a grain of a salt. But, the thing, yes, writing is very important and very therapeutic for me. But the most therapeutic thing for me has been therapy. So if you have access to it, and access is always an issue, but if you have access, please take advantage of it. Get some therapy. It will help not only your life but also your writing.

ST: Do you have people write to you? I mean, you're so honest and genuine -- So I'm wondering how you're managing that. Is it overwhelming?

NH: Yes.

ST: Is it still, in terms of how people reach out to you?

NH: I'm not managing it well right now. For a long time, I looked at the emails and looked at all the Facebook messages and tried to reply to as many people as possible. But it got to a point where I had to step away from that stuff because it was -- actually it was really, really

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consuming my time and attention. I found myself waking up in the middle of the night to answer more Facebook messages. It was like, this isn't -- I can't keep doing this. So I haven't looked at that kind of thing in a while. I just haven't been able to. But I'm trying to figure out a way that I can maybe engage with people more, but I haven't come up with a way that I can do it healthily because it gets pretty intense, man.

ST: Well, because there's an impression of availability.

NH: Exactly.

ST: Partly with social media, with being there, all of a sudden there's that kind of dynamic, and I would imagine having to be really clear about boundaries and modeling healthy boundaries. That's a challenge for many of us.

NH: And I think it's the kind of thing where I think people get this -- I'm trying to figure out a way to say this that's not horrible. I've noticed that a lot of people, when they talk to me after shows or something, they have the sense where they feel we're best friends because they know all of my stuff. And granted, they don't know all of my stuff. There's a lot of things that I don't write about, I don't perform, because I want to keep some internal life internal. But it's this weird moment with, Oh my God, I know everything about you, we're best friends. I'm like, Bro, we just met. I don't know what you're doing.

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ST: Yes.

NH: So it's that weird para-social relationship where I want to say, Hey, it's really great to identify with somebody else, but we're not -- you've got to be friends with the people in your life. I like you, I'm glad you're here, but I'm not your friend.

ST: That's very insightful. The transferring of that relational dynamic. This is a beautiful book. This is going to be a very predictable question, but is published slam poetry sort of an oxymoron?

NH: Oh, you're fine.

ST: I don't feel like that's original, it's common. But what do you think about that?

NH: You know, it's funny. I've been personally trying to distance myself from the term slam poetry for a while.

ST: Oh.

NH: Just because, I think that all of "slam poetry," whatever the hell that is, is contained under the umbrella of the spoken word, and I think that -- I haven't competed in a poetry slam in six years. And so what I do, I would say it's not slam poetry, but it certainly is spoken word, right?

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ST: Actually, I'm a little relieved because I've been referring to you as spoken word, and then when I was really digging in, I thought, Oh, am I using the wrong classification?

NH: No. Genre is stupid, ultimately. But I think to your point, there are poems in this book that I wrote that I intended to be performed, and it was definitely a struggle to figure out how to make them actually work on the page, because it's -- mostly just with line breaks, because I have -- I have a certain way that I know the rhythm, I know how the rhythm, the poem, works in my head, but that rhythm looks terrible on the page. So I had to work really hard to figure out - And honestly, I just got help with it. I asked my editor, Hanif Abdurraqib, who's a really, really incredible poet. Hey dude, these are my slam poems. I don't know how to -- see actually, I called them slam poems -- I don't know how to make these line breaks work.

ST: Tell me about the cover. It's sort of Texan more than Minnesotan, isn't it?

NH: Yes, so this picture -- that picture's from west Texas, near Big Bend National Park. And I just like snakes, man. Well because, I think so much of -- partly it was I wrote most of this book when I was on the road and travelling all the time and touring. And so, I tried to convey this image of the road, and what sort of being out in the world is like. But also, I subscribe to the belief that not everything has to symbolize something.

ST: Sure.

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NH: I just thought it was -- out of the 20 designs that Nikki, our designer, turned to us, this was the one I like the most, so I just said, Let's go with it.

ST: So that's interesting, Neil, because I'm struck by the home-ness of this book. And when you told me this was a Texas photograph, I went, Of course. Because as I'm looking at some of these really incredible poems, "Lake," and "So Long," and some of these that are really resonant of, well you can tell me. To me when I read them, they were very grounding, so I don't know what to do with that other than observe it.

NH: I really appreciate that observation because that's what I was trying to do. (Laughter)

ST: Okay.

NH: Because -- a lot of the book for me is really -- the book really highlights the struggle I was having, certainly over the last few years, with these two diametrically opposed forces that I thought I was feeling. Where my career was taking me away from home all the time and putting me in cars and on planes. But the life I actually wanted to be leading was at home in Minnesota with my fiancée Annie -- and the life that we're trying to build together. I felt my one dream coming true was ruining another dream coming true. A lot of poems are me attempting to establish this grounded place of home when I was feeling desperately like I didn't have one. (Laughter)

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ST: Well, it's as I said, there's so much to explore in this work, and I'm extremely grateful that you've given me a little bit of time --

NH: Oh of course.

ST: -- just to hear a little bit about what, where you are right now and what you're thinking and how the process is going. I'm very grateful. And I know we have a roomful, a sold out room, here in Miller Hall to hear you this evening, and we're just really honored to have you on our campus.

NH: Thank you for having me.

ST: Thank you so much.

(End of audio)

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