

Zoe Dzunko & Jon-Michael Frank in Conversation

written by Guest Contributor | July 28, 2016



Jon-Michael Frank: Both of our books have this sense of the world not being enough. Art, I always thought, was an implication of this. You mention Kim K and I mention a few celebrities in my book. I think a lot of people ingest from celebrity culture, or celebrity itself, what others derive from art, or being an aesthete. I know a lot of writers/artists who buy into the whole artifice of celebrity, which is something I'm really skeptical about—I mean, I'll be the first to admit that I'm a 32 year old fanboy of many things—but I guess I distrust fetishizing or intellectualizing a culture that couldn't exist without the world as fucked up as it is. Because of this it saddens me how close celebrity and art seem to each other? Did I make this up? Or is this something that you can see, too?

Zoe Dzunko: Well, I think the modern world, however you choose to interpret that epithet—i.e. western consumer society or capitalism or whatever—is desperately, vividly not enough. I think that is its whole racket. It is shaped around the notion of gap, rather than an apprehension of bounty. It's about hunger and a hunger that specifically longs for resources not reasonably within grasp. It is nearly impossible for us to consider using only what is locally available to us, when we could, when it would be totally possible. So, I think that kind of engineering equates access to power and elite positions and I suppose the ultimate version of access finds as its acme the holy trinity of beauty/wealth/notoriety. I'm interested in the connection between art and transcendence and whether that impulse plays into celebrity culture or not. I suppose the difference is that art can be appreciated even if it isn't contemporary, but celebrity can't: it thrives on relevance. Obviously that currency isn't sustainable, so I think it's probably the same human hunger for sublimation but a very painful one too because it gives nothing back except a more profound sense of your own human irrelevance, both universally and within terrestrial systems of economics.

For me, the interest in celebrity culture is bleaker: I find it both perplexing and tragic the way human value might be quantified, how some individual's hours are worth considerably more than others' based upon essentially arbitrary factors. So, yeah, the same sentiments as your own—how

do you ethically fetishize a culture that reifies the worst of all possible worldly systems? I think I'm curious about celebrity because it has interesting implications for ideas of self-determination and how we might create ourselves in certain images we find appealing, but I'm more interested in the gulf it contains. The gulf between celebrity/reality but also the self-void. It's much easier to dream about a vision of your life but there is something terrible about living that dream, lest you realize that dream was a dream you fooled yourself with all along.

Ultimately we can't escape being bodies in the world, no matter where our bodies are placed in socio/economic hierarchies. Sometimes I feel like a spectator, watching myself live myself, it's a confusing realisation when I connect my mind to my life and it dawns on me that this is really it. I see a lot of this gap in *Nostalgia Flower*. There's a really clear divide between "life" as it is imagined and life as it is experienced ('you miss your own life' or 'why must we go back to our lives'). Is this you grappling with the tension between art/life or does this sense of depersonalisation bleed into your real-world experiences?

JMF: I cling to the tension between art and life. I don't want life to complement or palliate art. I feel a little pretentious or intransigent saying that, but it feels honest to me. I prefer life with a problem—probably better to have abstract problems lol, but problems nonetheless. I don't see a purpose for art without escape, which is to say without problems. Whatever the spectrum, from the dregs of ennui to the gut of Nina Simone singing, "I've got it bad, and that ain't good" if I can get some art out of it, it's probably worth it. I don't want to play the whole we need suffering card. But as a human, sometimes it feels like that *IS* card.

If the spirit doesn't feel fucked to me, it doesn't feel as essential, and I loll in the feeling of something being essential to life. Why's that feel so elusive, and nuanced? Like why can't I be one of those people who look out their window and feel this looming relevance to the weeds, skies, vines, or even things as tedious as the garbage trucks and stray dorito bags. I feel like a lot of times in writing, especially writing *Nostalgia Flower*, I'm trying to make things relevant and/or sacred that otherwise aren't i.e. garbage trucks and chip wrappers. Like, if I had to be honest, I don't give a shit about garbage trucks and trash but in poetry I do, I do. And that feels so empowering to be able to rehearse that feeling, that things matter—even if they don't. That being said, I don't mean to wax the gemini here but I also admire people who get tattoos without a backstory, without significance, so I don't know. There's something about seeing a lump of faded dolphin on the small of a stranger's back that invigorates and says to me: LIFE, too. I think I'm kidding, but I think I'd prefer an existence where I wasn't.

But back to your question, yes the gulf between art and life. I suppose that's what feels the most real to me. I think part of what feels accurate about art, especially visual art, is the hyperbolized part, the imagined part, that is there you know, but not. I think that's what art gets right about life that life doesn't. Fairfield Porter is masterful at igniting that. You see how he paints a sock and think: *that's a sock, that's the first, and thus, only sock I've ever seen*. I don't love socks, but I love the epoch of

things. That suggestion that there's potential for this world to be refreshed, not simply linger and oppress as precedence. I can love anything for its newness, not even having to love the thing itself. I get that from bingeing movies and reading books in a/c and I crave and relish in it forever. Isn't that what summer's for? I want to feel born, you know, not just be born.

ZD: I love what you say about summer. Summer is the idea of summer, right. I think this is why so many human routines metaphorize the arrival of spring, the seasonal shift where life is most turned up, new leaves etcetera. I think we all want second chances. What I get from your feelings on suffering is essentially: no rupture = no art. There is no functional need to aestheticize utopia, you just push open the doors and go live in it. I mean, clearly I'm no anthropologist, but say everything was ~universally~ perfect for all humans, would we start to distinguish new and shining flaws? Like, this weather is too good it bores me or this food is abundant and I'm tired of feeling full. Imperfections that were former unrealized ideas of perfection? Are we biologically predisposed, I mean, to mine our landscapes for threat i.e. is our survivalist lens perma-hued for dark edges because they are the only ones that really count.

I think there is definitely a suffering artist archetype, though I don't think all artists necessarily suffer or need to. I'm also ambivalent about aestheticising trouble or trauma for the sake of project, which feels exploitative, especially from my privileged position of relatively minor suffering. Still, what is a poem without its risk, its rebuttal—it's a still life. So that gap between habituated reality and a rediscovery of that reality, that can be paved with pain or not, but it definitely calls to mind comparisons between what we see and what we want/need to see. I think art is definitely an out of this world, with its bleached surfaces, but one that also precipitates a jumping back in. Okay it's like a hot tub turning cold when the temperature stays the same, you need to be touched by the wind to feel it again.

JMF: Yes! I definitely agree "artists" don't need to "suffer for art". I really kinda hate that stereotype because I don't know about you but when I'm "suffering" I shut down and don't do shit. Like, who, in the thick of suffering, or in the k-hole of it, thinks "I would really like to paint a can of root beer in a lake right now." There has to be a post-period, for me, because what's worse than suffering without meaning. So I'm definitely not saying, or exhorting that there needs to be a trauma, but just that for me I have to be aware of things that are unsettling or seemingly incorrigible in order to feel necessitated to make something, or as you put it in *Selfless* "every day, a little ripple in the flat sheet of morning." And I cherish that feeling because it makes me want to improve shit. Improving shit is what it's all about, isn't it, or should be, at least.

Since we both talk in our books about this idea of deliverance, and locating ways of enabling it, whether it's from an extrinsic discomfort or the very cavity of our own lives, I wonder if sometimes it's our outs that are unfortunately enforcing our ins. *Selfless* seems to be all about this, and *Nostalgia Flower* is too. I mean nostalgia itself is an out that is also an

in. From your rural waterview in Australia to mine in the PNW what are our thoughts on this? Are we fucked?

ZD: I mean, of course we are fucked but we are by no means unique. Ins and outs are the major theme of our conversations, aren't they? Anyway, this is something I've been thinking a lot about, especially because the movements in *Selfless* feel dismembered from me now the book is complete and I can't tamper with it anymore—I find myself out (which is good) but also removed in the sense that I'm drawn to questioning its veracity. I know the book to be very true, but it is an artefact in its own right now and I'm less able to connect myself to its logic. What I find interesting about this is the fact my poems are often a very deliberate practice of removal—from the world, from myself/of myself—and now I too feel the force of that ousting.

Remember when we were talking about feeling like interlopers? I think this all comes together because art/community is geared towards the universal, but the sense of universality is ultimately imagined; some imagine it more strongly than others. I think art is an out of a sense of missing in. For me, anyhow. There is no access to coherent feeling or true belonging, there is only the impression it exists. I don't think that's fucked, it's just a hunger. What's interesting to me about nostalgia, both as it appears in *Nostalgia Flower* and as a distinct concept, is that it ultimately expresses longing for something unvisitable. Like, the term derives from homesickness but really it isn't a longing for home, at all, it's a longing for a different period. That is, almost without exception, a simpler time. Like art, it's of this world and categorically removed from this world. How does nostalgia occur for you, and when did you realize you were writing a book in its shadow?

JMF: Yes, interlopers! When you told me about your experience in the United States and used that word I felt the world small in a good way. I felt like we were teenagers meeting at the mall and gushing over our favorite Spice Girl. Mine's still Baby Spice, yours?

ZD: Mel C.

JMF: When I was deciding on a name for *Nostalgia Flower* I was living in LA in a pool house with my partner and our two dachshunds. It was my first time in LA and I loved looking at all the palm trees and feeling terrible that I wasn't one of them. As I was relinquishing all my money, I kept reading online about the unveiling of the Corpse Flower bloom in Denver. There's something so reassuring about people visiting a flower, that exhausted symbol of beauty, where they had to give out barf bags due to the effluvium of the bloom. I love how some emotions can't hack out their archetypical space in say a laugh or a cry, and they must be dislodged into something more visceral and encompassing as a bodily function. That's big time beauty, I think, beauty that topples and usurps, beauty that reduces the whole spectrum and prelude of self to a meager clump of feeling. Anyway, I flirted with calling it something related to the Corpse Flower, because death and beauty blah blah blah but I remember watching the dogs longingly eye a dog toy at the bottom of the pool one day and the word Nostalgia flitted into my brain and I realized everything I was writing was enameled with nostalgia. I wanted to

revisit feelings I had had, maybe not necessarily to be in that period again, but to somehow sheath my life in them. There's this intimation that somehow feelings can protect your life or preserve it somehow, which is a very silly thing if you really think about it, but I think for me, nostalgia, is a kind of haven my life is building for itself, out of a kind of interest in conservation or preservation or something. I'm sure it's misguided, but it's something. It somehow relates to the Alice Notley quote, "inside me a person is playing the piano perfectly / while I play notes" for me, in that, with nostalgia, there's this version of me elsewhere who has rendered my life as I'd like it or even just fundamentally, more accurately, while I fuck things up or express them ineptly now in the present.

Another way of looking nostalgia, and how vital it is for me, is Basho's anthem of a haiku: "even in Kyoto / hearing the cuckoo's cry / I long for Kyoto" (translated by Robert Hass). I was taught this haiku by someone very dear to me in high school and have yet to rival it either by experience or aesthetic. It is 100% perfect, in that there's nothing to be added and nothing to be taken away. To me, it makes longing for what once was, or an essence of something as it currently is, glamorous because you can't have it, and thus can want it forever. This world, and our experience of it, is very un-forever, so wanting is this precious way of transcending the world and what's fucked about it. It's gone, but the feeling is not.

I love how you write about forever in *Selfless* saying "Even then I knew forever was a portrait of yellow eggs steaming on a white plate" I can't shake that image from my head, and I don't want to. I don't think we realize when we long for forever that that's the sort of thing we're longing for. I write in one of my poems, "I live endlessly as actual nostalgia." Do you feel that way about yours, or am I severely delusioned?

ZD: I've heard those lines from Basho before but they just now punched my heart. I think nostalgia is rarely connected to the current moment but that feels closest to how I experience it. Maybe this is why we like watching movies, because for those characters within them the current moment is so present, so lived, so vital. Nobody is sitting in the backseat, on the road trip, saying 'yeah, I just can't connect with this experience and yet I find myself longing already after this moment of my history.' Without seeming dramatic, this really tunnels towards the depths of my human pain. I have always self-diagnosed it as an inability to be "present" but I'm not sure that's true. It's definitely a discarding of current moment, but I think the roots are a little deeper. This is where our books are most entwined I think, in that they are much more comfortable living in a world of protracted possibilities and are deflated by the idea of culmination. Sometimes I don't even want to begin things because I don't want them to be over. This is another way of expressing the gap between reality and fantasy, and also of having to confront head-on our inability to procure the exact result we long after.

In *Selfless* this emerges foremost in a distrust of logocentrism, in a refusal of anything that can be designated, and also in a knowing that the titular necessitates a simplification of complexities that are ultimately robbed by their concretisation. This might really be my own fear of aging, of the

definitive, the conclusive. Surely this is a big theme in *Selfless* and *Nostalgia Flower* both. One of the phrases that hits me most in your book is 'hunger is a possessive comfort / the sky transcending the sky.' *Selfless* contains a mirror phrase in: 'Since birth I have been / charmed by hunger, it is the most / anomalous of love affairs, it is something / you can keep.' The hunger is the possibility and it is the last thing you can hold onto before satiation 1. terminates its promise or 2. resolves the hunger in a way that is seen as unsatisfactory. If you can't control the outcome or the outcome robs you of meaning, then surely the appetite is a more reliable or graspable experience. You can keep that and you can own it.

JMF: Ugh yes the inability to be present! Even thinking about the inability to be present I'm thinking about all the times I haven't been present and thus sadly am currently also not present. And yea, the appetite, too! I love hunger for itself. It's so easy to own, to account for and to feel purposed by. Is that egregiously capitalist of me to say? I'm afraid to think that desire/hunger is principally a capitalist dilemma. Deleuze talks about this, which doesn't make for the best summer reading, but it contended a lot of what I thought about being a person. I hate how philosophy can thoroughly ruin things though, like opening an umbrella or eating a peach or what have you. But it startled me when I first encountered it and I had to tell someone immediately, like somehow I could rid the agency of it and somehow invalidate it, or like rely on some externally familiar source to prove me wrong. Like how fucked do you feel when you first start reading sociopolitical theory, and you encounter these designs that aim all your modes and desires to some rigged preconceived predatory system. It's like what's the point. How do you deconstruct that? Isn't it determinism that says how can you have any unadulterated thought about the world since the schema of the world nurtured and harvested that thought in you? Do you think there's reprieve from this in poetry? I mean that's the allure for me I guess. Getting to look at what I think and not necessarily having to think it but being able to see it on a page as something that I want my life to confront in pulchritude or veracity rather than in an assembly of the mind. But back to hunger because logic is a killjoy. It informs everything I do, and while I'm not 100 % proud or supportive of everything I do, it at least makes it feel important to me. I like when things feel important.

I also don't mourn when a book or project is over, because while it sucks to be in the wilderness again, I prefer that finality over say dying, or the termination of a relationship with a being who lives and breathes and can potentially eat ice cream with me. I like when projects are over because I get to be somebody else again, and have rawer thoughts. This is what I fear about writing a novel, or fiction: I can't commit. I like being different people, *Nostalgia Flower* is its own world, and I love that world but I don't need to go back. I love cosplay for this. When you are living the fantasy of being something or someone else you get to escape your life by living, instead of it, something it's capable of. For me, this is what all art is. To think that your life is capable of more than you are seems so wondrous to me. I'm happiest if I luck into this feeling making things.

ZD: That's a nicer way to think of it—who wants to perform the same character

forever? I think you're right about inherited ideas and meaning, it's hard not to consider speaking as part of the system when language is ostensible, emblematic of the system. When you say 'assembly of the mind' I think about Wittgenstein's five red apples and then I think that maybe, just maybe, poetry does offer a reprieve because it's disruptive of normalized associations. It imposes itself upon words and demands other meanings, or it makes unconventional/unintelligible phrases build feeling rather than logic. I think this is maybe why we groan at overused associations in poems, because their presence breaks the fourth wall or exposes their mechanics, their worldliness. In human interactions these phrases are fine, but in poems they detract meaning with their logical connections, and their encoding is laid out to witness. I feel the limits of language and meaning most when I write poems and I think this is the best and worst aspect of them. The desire to build words out of inexplicable sensations, acknowledging that the lexicon from which we derive and categorize those feelings is manmade, reveals the constructedness of our thoughts/feelings etc. Maybe that's the unique deal of poetry, not metaphor but catachresis, being able to see words again and be momentarily rid of their limitations.

JMF: OMG! Yes! I love the way you put that and want to go to the beach with it. Every time I read the first two lines of *Sand Under Nails*, "Nothing more or less than / impossible, telling you how I feel" I die, in a good way. I think you emote a lot of the notions you just expressed with the perfect economy of those two lines. Sometimes I also think we forget that things are wordless. That when writing or reading that all this conjured shit is indispensably wordless. Like what I love and what sustains me is absolutely wordless.

Have you read CA Conrad's intro to *Ecodeviance*, where there's discussion about implementing rituals to emphasize the nowness, or being in the present, when writing to combat the factory-esque quality that emerges when doing something routinely? It's one of the most beautiful things I've read this year, I had to read it three times before getting out of my car and going into the 7-11 for a slurpee. Like Conrad writes, I too have watched people I love lose their creative "essential selves" to Pennsylvania factories and felt that same forfeiture when falling into the machination of writing the same poem over and over again. That being said, I think sometimes, that non-present quality has been really encouraging for my work—perhaps, or at least I hope, it's a presence in a different way. I do agree with what you said though, and think sometimes that's why I don't lament a project being finished because I wasn't really there anyway so what's the real loss? Like *Nostalgia Flower* is my life yet it's derived from feeling not there for it anyway.

ZD: Right. In *Nostalgia Flower* there are so many holes and I guess they couldn't exist there without that feeling. We talked already about nostalgia but I wonder if romanticism is any different or just a nostalgia reflex? Some of my favourite lines in *Nostalgia Flower* are 'some things are so far away / ruddy wound power'; it's the gap and the wound and is masterful, I think, because it gets at this almost violent redolence of the untapped. It's a slow healing sore. What kinds of things do you romanticize?

JMF: I don't really know what isn't romanticism. I mean even to what we were talking about earlier about how we translate sensations into a lexicon, that itself is a romanticism. I love that one Cary Grant quote that goes, "everyone wants to be Cary Grant, even I want to be Cary Grant." This is what Instagram feels like for me. It's terrible, but it's also kind of pretty to see what people wish their lives were, that feels better to me than what they actually are in a lot of ways. I think this is detrimental and pernicious when you have a greater power or influence on the sociopolitical climate, where it can affect others, but I think for the "I," the personal, fantasy is the healthiest way to be a person in this world. People who love reality, have this ravenous thirst for it, frighten me. From what I know of the world, and maybe this is a sheer deficit in me, someone else has to suffer for that love, you know.

ZD: Yeah, that's probably true. I think there are some people living simply and not focused on money or ascension, who are just happy being in the world and doing things that feel valuable to them. But, for the most part, people with realities shiny enough that they need no polishing have likely directly or indirectly carved their place within a system that stands on others. I guess this depends so much what that shininess means, it's just my feeling that a 17 year old shouldn't be living in a mansion when people working three jobs aren't really living. This is coming full circle, I suppose. The thing is, I have never really felt myself drawn to those soft edges or white living rooms or swimming pools. My romanticism feels temporally fixed on my teenage impulses. I romanticize the shitty nearby town I used to catch the bus to, roaming around, asking strangers to buy me cigarettes, whatever. I feel very sentimental about this place but when I take people there they're like *yeah, no this is kind of awful*. Anyway, what resonates so much in *Nostalgia Flower* is that similar imagery, not like motifs of aspirational living but the symbology of being young enough to believe in aspiration. Did you realize *aspire* derives from the morphemes 'to' 'breathe'? This seems very capitalist. Anyway, in *Nostalgia Flower*, I get this strong cement-covered, mall fountain vibe from you. Is it youth and that weird package of pain/beauty you long after? You know, the past: the one thing you can't have back?

JMF: I think in a lot of ways I long for those crisp glimpses of the world I had as a child to come cascading back into my adult life. I think life feels best for me in those hushed, private moments when I feel the same about the world, even knowing how fucked and corrupt humans have made it, that I did in the maternities of youth. Like that that wonder isn't slayed, that it is able to be exhumed and beaten back into my heart again, like a cell or something just as essential.

I think this is explored in myth a lot and even in Disney princess movies, from well, generationally, a lot of our youths. Princess movies can be so great. While their portrayal of physical, sexual and cultural stereotypes and mores is garbage, I love the archetypical aspiration of the true self being able to be revealed which seems to be some kind of solution or balm to a bevy of ubiquitous human problems. That in this piece of shit body, and life, there's something that can be measured and transcendent without the world, without the body etc. If I'm for anything about ontology, I'm for that. Maybe

this is where we need to start talking about love lol.

You write in *On Being Wanted*, the poem for SJG (segue: flowers to Sarah, <3 4ever) that “women don’t want love.” That line feels so dangerous and effervescent to me. It’s something that I’m afraid of—that admission. I’m afraid if I admit I don’t want love then I’ll be forever fucked and lost but a lot of times that feels very real to me—what if it’s not love I’m looking for □ (i mean tbh it prob is). I think it’s easy to think that we work, and create art/weed gardens or do whatever in order to get love, or that it somehow relates to love, but the older I get the more I think it’s deeper or more covert than that. It feels like whatever we need, or whatever hole we feel, we sort of slap a lack of love on it in order to quiet or still it so we can get back to writing or painting or pulling weeds etc. but honestly, what if it isn’t love we need, but something else that we can’t seem to fathom or articulate.

ZD: I think we do exactly that, right. I think we do that because we don’t know what else to do/ask for? I read this article the other day that was pretty unremarkable except for its straight up rebutting of the notion that we’re actually supposed to feel happy. Not that we shouldn’t, but that the idea that happy is our baseline and any deviation should be attributed to some outside/psychological event is fraught and totally unfounded. Who decided we should feel good all the time? If I was to make that choice for the planet I would, of course, want everyone to be as happy as they can be, but it is a bizarre concept that dispiritedness = abnormal. I don’t know why we’re on the earth, we’re basically microbes. I think we’re here to continue our survival, not necessarily feel “whole”. I think we might have all felt whole before such a notion existed to us. I felt so whole when I was a child, before anybody revealed the violence of expectation to me. Also, being female, I think there is a notion of love braided into our psyche from a very young age: being loved/giving love. I don’t know that *love* is the be all and end all for me, honestly. I would rather be respected, to give meaning to someone’s life in a quantifiable way. I know the two aren’t mutually exclusive, by any means, it just bores me that the most expansive of all human experience/meaning can be simplified in such a way. You’re loved and then what?

JMF: Ugh yes I agree! Love’s been such a problem for me and I don’t mean it in some external fashion, which it is too, but I mean the internal part of it—the gestation—knowing what to do with it. I don’t really know what to do with it and that’s probably why I write and draw bummer pictures. You tattoo this best in *Selfless* with, “But truthfully / all of the poems were written before me / each one an admission of guilt / for never knowing how to love enough / at the right time.” I don’t know how anyone could read that and not feel it knife in them and nest inside. So, I know this is kind of puerile, or maudlin, but tell me about your love? Because really that’s all I give shit about when knowing and talking with other people.

ZD: I think my previous sentiments could suggest that I don’t buy into love or that it isn’t a major force in my life, but that is laughable. I think I resist romanticism, the commodification of love, but not the raw biological experience of it. I think almost everyone loves *something* and I, myself, am

obscenely flooded with love, totally seasick with it. Some mornings I step outside with the intention of minding my own business and it will swoop on me as a crazed force, like: god the grass is so *green* today, or that bird is feeding another bird and I adore them both, or my neighbour is wheeling out his garbage and I want to personally thank him for existing. My love for the people closest to me is difficult and painful. I think it always has been because I have to trust they know and that I have shown enough to give them reason to know and I am not at all an easy come, easy go person. I want to shape the love into something concrete enough to dent them with, something they can really feel, an indelible, unassailable love, and I don't know how to do that. I often think about those Matthew Zapruder lines: 'try to make me repeat / the most terrible thing I said / to someone and I will / if the mind of that someone / could ever be eased'. Regret for harm caused or regret for love unexpressed, both of these pains stem from our failure to entirely impact feeling with words, to ever trust that such a thing is possible. In the end, it's enough to have the opportunity to love, I suppose. To continue banging our heads against the impenetrable perimeters of others, to keep saying: no, but I *really* love you, you need to know that. That is a poem that goes on forever.

JMF: <3 <3 <3



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