

Punchline: An Interview with Featured Poet Nick Courtright

Interview by Ryan Sharp

Nick Courtright is the author of *Punchline*, a National Poetry Series finalist published by Gold Wake Press in 2012. His work has appeared in journals such as *The Southern Review*, *Boston Review*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *The Iowa Review*, among numerous others, and a chapbook, *Elegy for the Builder's Wife*, is available from Blue Hour Press. In Austin he teaches English, humanities, and philosophy, and lives with his wife, Michelle, and son, William. We are pleased to revive Borderlands' Featured Poet section with Courtright in this issue's spotlight. His poems and a review of his debut collection *Punchline* follow the interview.

We met up with Courtright shortly after his return to Austin following the conclusion of the "Devil's *Punchline*" reading tour—which took him and fellow Texas poet Kyle McCord up the I-35 corridor through Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa—at the East Village Café to talk about poetry, philosophy, *Punchline*, and Courtright's second full-length collection, *Let There Be Light*, which is due out from Gold Wake Press in early 2014.

You recently wrapped up your "Devil's Punchline" reading tour that you co-headlined with Kyle McCord. I was fortunate enough to be at the first leg of the tour here in Austin where Karyna McGlynn also read. How was the tour and what was it like to go on tour like a rock star?

Nick:

It was very much like a rock star—every day with the groupies. [laughs] But, no it was good. It was a very educational experience, because we did eight cities, eight readings, in eight nights. So it wasn't too terribly long, and it wasn't the world's most glamorous locales, you know, if you were going to make a list of such places. But it was good. I was just talking to Kyle [McCord] about it the other day, where it's like every day you have one explicit purpose in

your life, and that is to get up, get into a car, and drive to a place where you entertain a room full of people. So, it really clarifies and streamlines your life because you have this one purpose.

And it makes you also realize what it means to be on, and to have to turn yourself on every night and know you're going to have to entertain people. You try to figure out different sets for different environments. One night you might be in the basement of a bar in Lawrence, Kansas and most of the audience is college-aged, and then you're in Omaha in a fancy art gallery and most of the people there are 40 and dressed nicely because it's a cultural event.

You live in Austin, Texas now, but you are originally from Ohio. How has being an Austinite affected your poems or your writing?

Nick:

I think it's impossible to escape the role of place in writing, because whenever you're writing it is inevitable that the location comes through. There are concerns of a particular area, like someone who lives in Texas might write more about politics than someone who doesn't. Someone who lives in Texas might write more about it being freaking hot outside [laughs]. Whereas when I was in Ohio, my writing was populated by the winter. So there is definitely that on a very direct level.

Also, as opposed to living in places that are [bigger] poetry hot beds, like New York, or San Francisco, or Chicago, or even Denver, or someplace like that, poetry is more under the radar here, despite the Michener Center at UT, so I think it has freed me to be able to write the way that I want to write and to pursue things in my own way rather than feeling like I have a community to compete in.

Or, fit in to.

Nick:

Yeah, because I know when you live in New York there is a "scene." And you can't not take that into account, or the academic pressures that come with it. While here, even though I teach, I am not necessarily an academic. My poetic education is more through

reading science non-fiction and ancient texts than it is dealing with the tit-for-tat of the contemporary poetry scene or whatever. So I feel like that absence from those sorts of cultures has allowed me to have a little more freedom to experiment and to develop my own way of doing things, as opposed to following whatever trend might be taking place elsewhere.

When I hear the word “punchline,” which is also the title of your debut book, I first think of the last line of a joke that comes right before the rim shot. While several of the poems in the collection take on a very smart, witty, and, at times, wry sense of humor, the ideas that the poems are dealing with are not really that funny. They are very serious, even grave. At what point did you decide that using humor was the good way to approach the big questions in the book, and furthermore, to choose a title that references that humor?

Nick:

I have always been drawn to huge topics like philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, morality, you know, just the fundamental nature of being. I used to be really into physics. So those things have always been there, and I think the fact that our heads can spin about it, and we can't necessarily figure it out, that's a fundamental draw. So, the humor comes through in the nature that whenever you are talking about the fabric of reality or whether we can know things, if you don't have humor and humility about it then you're just sort of an idiot, because that means you're probably being dogmatic. I saw one place where actually, I can't remember who said it, but they said that the most striking thing about the Bible is its complete lack of humor, and I thought that was a very interesting thing. I mean you can go back to the Bible, and you can find humor in it, if you look hard for it, but at the same time you can also see it as not very funny at all. Unless you take the flip side and see all of it as funny, where it is God is just dicking around with everybody.

But, as for the title “*Punchline*,” I did have some trepidation about giving a title that implies that this is going to be a bowl of laughs when in fact the nature of what happens to us after we die

is not necessarily going to have people rolling in the aisles. So, I did have some hesitation about that, because in many ways it deals with deeply unfunny material, but I thought that I needed that to lighten the situation. I did not want the book to be serious. I wanted it to sort of poke fun at the desperation of our inquiries.

Because, if we're not laughing, we're crying.

Nick:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Punchline grapples with the mystery of existence: why we are here and what is it all about. These ideas we have been pondering, even fighting over for obviously a very long time. Do you think it would be better if we knew the answers to these questions, or is it better that we are left to our faith and our imaginations?

Nick:

Great question. Um, I don't know? I think that we run into a lot of problems when we think we know the answers to these questions and that has led to mass slaughter and genocide and all of these other things. Of course, "slaughter" has "laughter" inside of it, right? So the idea of being under the impression that we know, that is folly. I think that that's folly. But to actually know, whether actually knowing would be better than not knowing, I think that actually knowing could be a boon to us, because it would eliminate from the world the type of false knowing that we so often espouse, but it would also steal from us some of the magic of our cyclic contemplations. Where if it was just like "okay, here's the truth," and it was just revelation, it was just shown to us, then that would be almost unfair.

And, at the same time, if someone did show that to us, I can't remember who said it, it was one of those ancient philosophers, either Protagoras or Gorgias, who said that even if someone did know the truth, he or she wouldn't be able to tell anyone. Even if someone comes down to you and says "here it is," as soon as you try to say that to someone else you are taking that absolute thing

and you're putting it into the dualistic world of language, which immediately ruins it. It's just like what Haruki Murakami says in *After the Quake*, where a woman wants to talk about her emotional experience, and another character says the moment you put words to your emotions you turn them into lies. You know, because you can't express these things.

There are no words.

Nick:

Yeah, so that's not really answering your question.

But, it's great!

Nick:

It's dancing around it. [laughs]

Well, one of my favorite poems, both to read and to see you perform, from Punchline is "The Apocalypse." The image of the headless octopi is a big reason why I love that poem. In "All of Us Are Getting Older, and By 'Us' I Mean Atoms," the octopus image reemerges. This time it is "billowing." What a beautiful image and sound you create in that section—"the billowing octopus/ scattering." Other than the octopus, are there images that you find yourself revisiting often in your work?

Nick:

Yeah, I would say that there probably are things that I come back to that are impossible for me to avoid. Like the musician Jason Molina, it was always the railroad and the blue light and the factory. And basically you have these same things, these tropes that you revisit. I am sure there are ones in there. There is actually a thing online where you can plug a document in there and it will tell you the word frequencies. I've done that before, but I almost sort of want to stay away from it.

It kind of steals away some of that mystery again.

Nick:

Yeah, because there are those archetypes that you play off of. I think that the octopus is interesting, and, actually, in teaching I've taught about the octopus regularly, because it is something that is so entirely alien to us, but then it has all of the magnificent abilities. Like, apparently it is colorblind, yet it has visual receptors in its skin, and it can camouflage itself in accordance to other things. If it's colorblind, it can't necessarily see the color. How does it know what color to turn? You can cut one of its limbs off, and not only will it grow back, but the one that you cut off has neurons in it that will continue to act as if it is alive and try to grab food and put it into the mouth that is no longer there. There are all these things about them that are really, really nuts. They are fascinating creatures.

And, also, *The Apocalypse* poem, it actually says "octopi" many times, which is technically the incorrect term, because that is a conflation of the Greek and Latin, which is wrong. It should actually be either "octopuses," if you are going to put an English end on it, or, if you are going to keep it Greek, it should be "octopodes." But, of course, people say "octopi." So, I always laugh when I read that poem, because it has this purposeful grammatical incorrectness in it just because it sounds better. But, yeah, that's an insane poem. That's the craziest one in there.

Your second collection, Let There Be Light, is being published by Gold Wake Press in 2014. What was it like writing a second collection, particularly after Punchline received quite a bit of critical acclaim?

Nick:

It's awesome! It's fun. I'm definitely going into this one with my eyes wide open. The first time it was a crazy thing. With this one I just stuck with the same publisher, so I didn't send it out anywhere. I didn't try to land it anywhere else.

It's definitely a vastly different book. Actually, the work in it predates *Punchline*—much of it anyway, not all of it. The structure

of it does not. That I came upon late—the whole idea of building it the way I built it, giving it that type of conceit, that was definitely something that was added on after the fact. It was like one of those epiphany moments.

But, yeah, I'm excited for the next one to come out. I'm excited to be able to talk about a new book and to go and read stuff from a different book, and just have another artifact. *Punchline* has been out for more than a year now, so I am anxious to get the other one out there.

You say that they are vastly different books. How does Let There Be Light compare to Punchline?

Nick:

The organizational principle of it is much more of a structure. It's much more of a conceit. Like, *Punchline* is broken down into parts, more or less, and it has the quotes leading it off, and it's definitely a cohesive book, but it's not rigorous, its layout. *Let There Be Light* takes the first seven days of existence as according to Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 2:3 and puts them down in reverse order, so the book ends with the creation of the universe, so it has a much stricter way of doing things. Like, day seven is the day of rest, so on that day, of course, the first two words I wrote in the book are "the internet." [laughs] Of course, ironically. Then day six is the day of human beings, so that part discusses a lot of human bullshit. Day five is fish and fowl, so that section has a lot of birds and a lot of fish in it. Day four is the day of the seasons and stuff like that, so it talks about that. And, day three is about trees and the like. So, its structure is more rigorous in regards to the theme of various sections. So, it is different in that regard.

Another way that it is different is that *Punchline* was written as 30,000 words in one sitting and then whittled down, so it's very much one cohesive book. It's almost like one giant poem. *Let There Be Light*, the works in there were written over the course of years, they are not in the same order that they were written, so it's a much more constructed piece, and it also means that individual poems are much more individual poems. It's not like one giant poem. It's

like every poem is its own machine in and of itself and needs to be considered for its beginning, middle, and end. Whereas, in *Punchline*, the end of the poem just sort of moves into the next. So, it's a lot different in that regard. It's much more a book of lyric poems with a heavy structural conceit as opposed to one giant poem broken into parts.

You said something interesting there that reminded me, even though they are different, of Punchline, because you said that you inverted the seven days of creation [in Let There Be Light], and in [Punchline] that book opens with a drawing of the moon and ends with a drawing of the sun, so that seems like sort of an inversion as well, the way you structured it. That is very interesting.

Nick:

Yeah, because *Punchline* ends with the sun, which would be counterintuitive. I debated that quite a bit, but I wanted the book to end with brightness. You know, like there is hope. There is, despite the unknowing, there is brightness to be had. It's a new day. *Let There Be Light*...not quite as sunny. It's definitely a darker book.

Even though that one ends with the light as well?

Nick:

In a way. In a way.

Looking at the titles of the four poems that Borderlands is excited to publish in this issue ("Metaphysical Referendum Resulting in Immortality," "All of Us Are Getting Older, and By 'Us' I Mean Atoms," "Near-Death Experience," and "The Shore at Dusk"), along with the title of Let There Be Light, it seems clear that some of the big themes from Punchline also appear in your more recent work. Do you feel that addressing these big questions in your writing has brought you any closer to a philosophical and/or spiritual truth? Or do you feel more like Sisyphus endlessly rolling and re-rolling his boulder uphill?

Nick:

I don't feel like Sisyphus, because I try to avoid the despair of the boulder rolling back down the hill. But, I do feel...I'm trying to think of a good metaphor. It's like if I were rolling a boulder, then I would just keep rolling the boulder, but I wouldn't be rolling it uphill, because that would be too hard, and it wouldn't be rolling back on me, because that's too bad. It would be more like a kindly but everlasting boulder rolling. [laughs] There is at times the feeling that I am getting closer to something. I am learning, and writing is a huge part of my learning. It's definitely like the act of writing it down, of refining it, does help me to resolve the nature of these dualities, to try to come up with [a] sort of idea of what is going on. Like, I don't approach the page with an idea of what I am going to write about. I write and via the act of writing I discover what is to be revealed. So, I definitely do not feel like Sisyphus, and dealing with these questions, it is definitely like a salve on the wound that does not heal.

Maybe Prometheus is a better example.

Nick:

Yeah, and it is an ongoing thing, but I do feel it is constructive, even if it does not necessarily result in my immediate ascension into the heavens of truth and knowledge or whatever. But, I do enjoy pushing the boulder.

I think that that is a good note to end on, but I do want to say thank you very much for this interview. We at Borderlands are big fans of your work, and we're looking forward to Let There Be Light in 2014.