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Reader's Guide

from Sean Bishop
 author of *The Night We're
 Not Sleeping In*

Author Asks:

1. *The Night We're Not Sleeping In* revolves around my father's death, but I had a hard time knowing how much or how little to include about him. Are there poems where you wish you were told more? Are there particular details you wish you knew? Which poems? Which details? Why those? How would knowing change the way you engage with the book? Why do you think I left those details out?

2. Assembling this collection, I wrestled to make many projects live together in a small space. In the end, four projects survived. If this were your book, and you had to choose to ditch the "Adam" poems, the "Secret Fellow Sufferers" poems, the "Little Bones" section, or the poems about the father, which would you choose? Why? In what ways would losing each change the tone, the feel, or the message of the book as a whole?

3. When submitting this book to publishers, I changed the title a lot. Sometimes it was *Minor Losses*. Sometimes *Black Hole Owners Association*. Once or twice it was *Terms of Service*. I switched to *The Night We're Not Sleeping In* at the last minute, almost on a whim. Do you think I made the right choice? Why or why not? Would those other titles have changed your understanding of the book? How or how not?

4. Once, when a critic called Flannery O'Connor's stories "Christ-centered," O'Connor protested that her stories were more "Christ-haunted." I feel similarly about religious references in *The Night We're Not Sleeping In*. (There are a lot: go count them). When a colleague suggested that the book might be "religious" I balked at first, but then I totally saw what she meant. So what do you think? Is the book religious, in a way? If so, what way? If not, then what's with all the Biblical imagery? What's the book's attitude toward religion? Toward God? What makes you think that?

5. There are many "epistolary" poems in this book—poems that act as (or pretend to act as) letters or messages to a particular audience. First, make a list of those poems. Then, which do you feel are most successful? Why? How would you perceive these poems differently (if at all) if they did not have an addressee, or if they were addressed to a general "you"?

6. While revising *The Night We're Not Sleeping In*, I got self-conscious about how many times I used the word "little": "little deaths," "little ducks," "little nerve," "little bones," "a little darker," "little black dress." How does littleness work in this book? What is it doing to the subject matter? Why do you think I might have been driven to it?

7. In "A Bit of Forgiveness," I changed names and details to protect the privacy of people from my hometown. Yet in other poems I didn't hesitate to call my uncle "an ass" (he's not) or to imply that my aunt burned Christmas dinner or canceled the family holiday entirely (she did neither). When is it important and when is it inappropriate to tell the literal truth in a poem? Is it more or less okay to fudge the truth about family and friends? Or about strangers? Why? If "Phil" had stabbed me instead of the other way around, would it be more or less okay to use his real name? What would be less appropriate, to name "the walleyed girl" (who wasn't really walleyed, btw), or to

name “Phil”? Why, do you think? What if I told you I never actually stabbed “Phil”? (Except, yes: I did.)

8. Many of these poems begin with humor, sarcasm, or sardonicism, then move toward seriousness, sadness, or hope. What is the overall effect of these combined registers? Are there poems where you think the balance is off—too jokey, too angry, too sad, too sentimental? Which poems? Why? How do you understand the speaker’s use of sarcasm and humor? What’s it doing for the speaker? What’s it illuminating? What’s it hiding?

9. Four or five poems in the book use images of outer space, or metaphors related to astrophysics. How do you see these poems speaking to one another, if at all? Why space? Why physics?

10. I was lucky that, because I have a background in graphic design, my editors let me do the layout and design of *The Night We’re Not Sleeping In* myself, cover to cover. Do you think it’s true or untrue that a book shouldn’t be judged by its cover? Do you feel like the design of this book (its small size, the trademark Sarabande embossed flyleaf in the front and back, the solid black pages, etc.) affected your reading in any way? Why or why not? And how or how not? Do you think design and layout are more or less important in poetry, compared to prose? Why?

Writing Exercises:

Spare Bones

I wrote “To Throw the Little Bones that Speak” by going through my notebooks and scribbling good lines and images from otherwise failed poems onto scraps of paper. I put those scraps in a cup and pulled six lines/images at random, then forced myself to write a twelve-line poem using all six of those lines/images. I returned the scraps to the cup and repeated the process for a few hours. So do that: write a poem (or poetic sequence) that is exactly half-comprised of random lines and images from your failed poems and exercises.

Poetic Contract

The first poem in *The Night We’re Not Sleeping In*, “Terms of Service,” works by contrasting form and subject: it uses the sterile, legal terminology and structure of a contract to address personal subjects. Do something similar: find a non-poetic form and make it poetic by considering an unconventional subject for that form. Maybe it’s a job-application letter that addresses your romantic proclivities. Or maybe it’s a list of tax deductions that reveals the emotional losses for which you wish you could be compensated or reimbursed. Be sure to make the impersonal personal.



Further Reading:

Some influence on Tnwnsi, in rough order. Poems unless noted.

1. *Genesis and Jubilees* (+ associated Biblical apocrypha)
2. *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton
3. *Complete Poems* of Elizabeth Bishop
4. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, by T. S. Eliot
5. Everything Larry Levis ever published or intended to publish
6. *What the Living Do*, by Marie Howe
7. *After*, by Jane Hirshfield
8. *Complete Poems* of Philip Larkin
9. *A Brief History of Time* (nonfiction / science writing), by Stephen Hawking
10. *Some Ether* (poems) and *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* (memoir), by Nick Flynn
11. *Otherwise: New & Selected Poems*, by Jane Kenyon
12. *The Dream Songs*, by John Berryman
13. *MACNOLLA*, by A. Van Jordan
14. *Song*, by Brigit Pegeen Kelly
15. *not merely because of the unknown that was stalking toward them*, by Jenny Boully
16. *The Lion Bridge*, selected poems of Michael Palmer
17. *Collected Poems* of Zbigniew Herbert
18. *U.S. 1*, by Muriel Rukeyser (but you might as well read her whole *Collected*)
19. *Landscape for a Good Woman* (socio-political, critical memoir), by Carolyn Kay Steedman
20. *Dance Dance Revolution*, by Cathy Park Hong

