



An Interview with Matthew Nienow

by *Lauren Davis*

Matthew Nienow is a poet and business owner living on the Olympic Peninsula. He is the author of three chapbooks and has received multiple awards including the Ruth Lilly Fellowship, a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a scholarship to Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. His poetry can be found in publications such as Poetry, Best New Poets, and New England Review.

I met up with Matthew Nienow in his woodworking shop in Port Townsend, Washington, where he stood hunched over his latest creation, surrounded by tools, scraps of wood and sawdust, and beautiful half-finished paddle boards. When he looked up to greet me, his smile was unguarded, like that of an old friend. The conversation that followed was just as open.

Lauren Davis: How have you tied your poetry into your woodworking?

Matthew Nienow: Well, for a long time I thought about the similarity between approaches to writing and woodworking. Essentially, you take an interest in something, take something that is in a more raw format, a form whether it's language itself or a stack of wood and you have to have a vision for it and what it might do. You have to have an understanding of the materials and how they are going to react to the tools that you to apply to them. There is a need for revision. There is a need for just practice and waste. And all those things side by side lends itself to a lot of meditation while I'm working with wood. A lot of times the work can be slow, sometimes tedious, sometimes exciting. But you get to see something come together. You get to see a shape created. And it's very similar, the way that I approach writing poems or essays. Sometimes it's a delight in the material. A delight in the capacities of language and the capacities of the wood to make something that seems worth spending time with.

And beyond that, this particular company that I am working on, this came from a long time dream. This company is called Good Story Paddleboards. And not only have I tried to live a story worth telling about, partly because I think it's an interesting way to approach life, but I wanted these boards and woodworking itself to reflect my love of writing and belief that language can really make impacts in people's lives. So each board carries with it a sort of emblematic quote, a little snippet of language, often from a poem or essay, but something that's pocket-able, that kind of aphoristic piece of language that that you can look down and see artfully put onto the board.

LD: You have a wife and two kids, a full time business, and you're a writer. How do you balance all of that?

MN: I don't. I try. I've been more successful at certain points. Up until we had our second son I was able to maintain a lot of what potentially looked like balance. Writing, earning some money, writing, spending time with family, submitting work a lot of the time. We had our second son about three years ago and I just got even busier. Life got crazier. And my priority was being a good father and so I worked on that, and that's meant a lot less time for writing. Trying to make enough money. That's hard to do. It's also meant a lot less time for writing. So basically family and work have been taking the priority for the past couple of years. Poetry doesn't have that kind of timeline. It's not worth doing for September publication. It should be there and be able to last whether happens in five years or ten years, later in my life even. I'm not trying to do something to be popular. Even though it's hard to wait. I just try to remind myself that what matters more is the accumulation of events and successes that make a good life, not just being successful this year or next year. Balance is not here now. Maybe in a couple of years.

LD: The Olympic Peninsula, where you live, has a reputation for being

wet and dreary. Does that influence your work?

MN: Occasionally. The landscape definitely has found its way into some poems over the last several years. Less so the dreariness. But there are elements of that dreariness that come in, that feeling. I am definitely a gray person. My favorite color is gray. But I do love summer. I love the sun, the blue sky. Even though I grew up in this region, in Port Townsend you are so much more immediately faced with those elements. The sea is right there. The mountains. Though I love Seattle, it's different. It takes a long time to get anywhere. Even if you can see it in the distance, it's going to take you an hour to get there. In Port Townsend, all you have to do is turn around and you're right there. You're faced with the mountains. It's kind of hard for me not to focus on those things. Not that I would necessarily try to escape that.

LD: You were part of a very unique program, Writers in the Schools, that places professional writers in grade school classrooms. What was that like for you?

MN: That was really interesting. So, during my time while I was getting my MFA at the University of Washington I had already been publishing for a little while and pushing that side of things hard. So I thought I might as well give it a try and apply to that program, which in Seattle runs through Seattle Arts and Lectures. I ended up getting one residency at an urban middle school which was really challenging. I had taught in some other places and not necessarily had formal training. So the piece that I found most compelling about that was that I could step in as a practicing professional and not consider all the other areas that teaching required. I could just focus on content. So every class I would go in and bring to them an opening to a poem, an invitation, an angle to try and I'd get them writing. It was really hands on so that they could make something right there. By the time I left the room they had a product. But it was really challenging and

stressful and I knew this was not something I wanted to do everyday forever. And then I had another even more challenging residency at Seattle Children's Hospital working with kids in the palliative care unit. And that was even harder because I had to show up to a room without introductions. I'd have to go introduce myself. Sometimes suiting up in scrubs, depending on what these children were facing and go and meet someone wherever they were—often in very poor health—and try to get them to write. Sometimes they wouldn't feel up to it. Sometimes they weren't sure what I was talking about. Other times they were somewhat interested. But I never knew if they were going to be there the next week—and a lot of times they weren't—and if they were in a different facility, if they were no longer living. So it was very powerful but draining experience. I had some magic moments. And I only did that for one residency. But a couple of wonderful Seattle writers have continued to do that.

LD: Do you think that for those children that were able to write that it helped them with their illness?

MN: I think that's the hope. It's hard for me to say with certainty whether or not it helped. I know maybe in one case I was pretty certain. In other cases, I think I tried to make a genuine connection with the kids and bring some of my passion to them and hopefully give them an outlet for situations that are difficult, but I really don't know. That the program has continued and gotten stronger is probably a good indication that it is helping people. I admire people like Sierra Nelson who continue to go back and back and back. At least at that point in my life I was really tapped by that experience. Perhaps not totally ready for it. And yet I am still glad I did it.

LD: In your woodworking shop you have a Walt Whitman quote, "All truths wait in all things." What does that mean to you?

MN: I love that one. I have grandpa Walt in my head. Walt on my arm. I have him a bunch of different places. But that, "All truths wait in all things," I like in particular because in this space I work with things. A poem ultimately becomes a physical object. Even to read it requires some sort of physicality. Then it becomes more thing-like. As I'm in here, grabbing from a stack of lumbar or working with



any given tool, using my hands, my body itself, that, the things that I seek, the things of value that we call our meaning for our lives, those pieces are already there. It's kind of being ready to receive them. So it's a good

reminder. I think it should be bigger. It's kind of small. It should take up half the wall to say that.

LD: Can you finish this statement for me? I am a poet because...

MN: I don't know. I'm a poet because I can't help it. I don't think I set out to be a poet. I think I found myself in poetry, as I found myself in music, as I found myself in woodworking, in cooking, certain types of adventure, travel, relationships. But something that is a weird thing to say is that you are a poet when you aren't always making poems. I'm not reading as much as I'd like. Or writing as much as I'd like to. But I find myself still in it. And find myself making poems with sincere hope that they will live outside of me.