

Nathan Vass – Saxifrage

*Nathan Vass is an artist, filmmaker, photographer, and author by day, and a Metro bus driver by night, where his community-building work has been showcased on TED, NPR, The Seattle Times, KING5, and landed him a spot on Seattle Magazine's 2018 list of the 35 Most Influential People in Seattle. He has shown in over forty photography shows and is also the director of nine films, six of which have shown at festivals, and one of which premiered at Henry Art Gallery. His book, **The Lines That Make Us**, is a Seattle bestseller and 2019 WA State Book Awards finalist.*

Editor: To start, I was wondering about the part of your book where you are talking about being a child and riding buses. You talk about the mechanical parts of buses, taking photographs and using film. Do you find yourself missing the material and mechanical part of the process when you're writing?

Nathan: Something that's interesting to me is that, sometimes I'll write blog posts originally on paper, other times I will type them in their first draft. It seems that the posts that get commented on the most seem to be the ones that I hand wrote first.

E: Really?

N: Yeah, there's something about the tactile involvement of doing stuff in the real world that seems to have real value, and it's hard to quantify that value but it's real, there's something there. We, as humans, have been in existence for millenia interacting with the real world, talking to each other in real life, and that offers a level of satisfaction that we're not going to be able to eradicate in the space of a generational lifetime. It's like places getting rid of their self checkout machines in favor of bringing back the community vibe. I think that's really kind of beautiful, because we are humans and we like touching each other's lives. Technology as an intermediary for communication has positives, but it also statistically increases loneliness and makes us less able to talk in person. When you're talking in person you're improvising. It's like a muscle that you hone, and when you don't do it a lot that muscle starts to fade. It's only going to help to be good at talking to people. Going back to your question, I find it very convenient to type it up electronically, it does have value, but I try to remember that it's worth it to carry around a journal and write by hand because it's a way of engaging in the written form that's expressive.

E: You talked about automated buses telling you what stop you're going to get off at and how that's very impersonal. Do you think that's universal with technology? Do you think all technology is making us more impersonal?

N: It's really weird, let's say we were to back track twenty five years and we're talking about the communications technology that were going to be, we somehow knew what they were going to be. We would assume that it would be so much easier to communicate. Weirdly, that just totally hasn't happened and we tend to talk only

to people we already know. It's a similar sort of thing to recommendation software, they're only going to suggest something to you that's similar to what you already like. It's totally different than getting lost in a bookstore and stumbling upon something completely amazing, or your Swedish boyfriend recommending like German silent films. That's totally different than something you'll find on Amazon. There's these exciting things that can happen in the real world that you're not going to get with technology. Do I think all technology is making us impersonal? I'm going to say no. I think this world tends to resist absolute statements, but there's always exceptions. There's certain things like, texting is sort of like telegrams except you don't have to go down to the post office, so there's precedence for this. Emoji's recall hieroglyphs, communicating via symbols. Hopefully the pendulum will swing in society so we're not so obsessed with using technology as a primary mode of communication and shift towards something that recognizes it as a useful tool while also remembering that we're wired for human communication and it totally feels good to do so. I walked into Kaiser a little bit ago and I hadn't been there for a while and they had just renovated and there were no staff in the waiting area. There was an automated check in and then you go over and sit somewhere. You hope you're in the right place, but there's no one to tell you! You wait for like door 1A to open, and it just feels like it's totally worth paying someone to sit out there. If I'm just alone in this robot world, is that going to increase or decrease my feeling of belonging in society? I don't think it's going to increase it.

E: How do you make sure the people on your bus feel that they belong and have that human contact when they might not necessarily get it other places?

N: That makes me think about what you're saying about the automated announcements. What they offer, that's useful, it's very quantifiable, it's obvious. It's helpful to know what the next stop is because it might be rainy outside or you can't see anything. The benefits are very concrete. The drawbacks to listening to a human voice call it out to you is less quantifiable but no less meaningful. You feel less lonely, you feel like "Oh, there's someone up there who's friendly." I remember riding the bus once and it was very loud inside, the heater was on, there was traffic noise, and I couldn't tell what the driver was saying on the microphone. But her tone was friendly, and I thought to myself that's actually the most important part of what she's doing, that means I could go ask her questions if I needed to, I feel safe. And those are items of value that are less concrete, you can't take them to a stockholders meeting and say, "This is how we're going to make more money." But just because you can't assign a monetary value to them doesn't mean they're less important. And your question specifically was about how I make the bus more of a safe space?

E: Yes, like less of an automated world.

N: In the bus driver's manual for King County it says make eye contact with your riders and greet them. The reason they mention that is not just because it's nice, but also a safety thing. If you say, "Hey how's it going?", people start to mirror your body language and that automatically brings them down if they're feeling negative or angry. You're defusing situations even before anything has happened, and that's one method of making people feel safer. Also, there's a sense of acknowledgement with saying "Hey how's it going." We think of small talk as pointless. No one

actually cares how you're doing, but you're communicating a statement: "I acknowledge you", "I respect you exist." And people love being acknowledged, it's such a huge currency on the street. If you acknowledge them, that just does so much in helping the environment feel healthier and safer. Whatever attitude I put out is what I'm going to get back in my face times ten as a bus driver. Does that work all the time? No, but nothing works all of the time. But if it works most of the time, it's something worth doing. I just try to let them know that: I care about you guys, we're equals here, we have something in common, and I don't know what it is but we both don't like bed bugs. There's always common ground. People can sort of smell that, and that just contributes to people feeling safer. I had a passenger tell me once that she goes out into the world and thinks of everyone as if they're a friend, and most of the time it makes interactions go better. I try to do that too.

E: As a bus driver, you come across too many people to write about them all. How do you decide what experiences to write about and which to just keep in your memory?

N: There's such a huge backlog of blog posts I have not written, it's endless! There's so many wonderful, small things that happen. What ends up getting ruled out is stories that are similar to what's already been put out, regardless of whether it's just as meaningful to me. A guy got on the bus and said he had read the *Seattle Times* article about me when he was in jail and it brought tears to his eyes, and it inspired him to be a better person. Six months go by and another guy gets on and he goes, "Hey I was in prison when that news article came out about you and I read it and just started crying." It's such a similar thing but to write about them both would make it lose the emotional power even though they both took place. In that case I just choose one of them. Also when I started writing the blog, I wrote about moments of people being nice to me and complimenting me, because I hadn't experienced that! But as the blog grew I sort of had those moments happening a lot. Like giving someone a free ride and having them be happy about it for example. Now I've just recently gone through this phase of writing a lot about death. People confide in me that someone they love has just passed away and we end up having a deep conversation about it. When I have a conversation with someone, I find myself writing about it from a different angle, from what's new and fresh for me to write, not here's the tenth story about someone telling me their mom passed away. Let's talk about a different way of seeing that same event, or something else that's more exciting that's happening on the bus. A lot of things happen that I don't get all the notes down for. Basically what happens is someone gets off the bus and right away I scribble down notes about what just happened, and because that's an imperfect method I don't get everything down or the conversation was too long or there was more than me and one other person. That's why the book and blog are conversations of a similar length that happen between me and one other person. Sometimes there are conversations between three or more other people that I think, "Okay this is too long, I'm never going to remember all this, I just have to enjoy the moment." So some of those get ruled out. Or something that's kinda nice but something happens that's more interesting. It's overwhelming sometimes. There's so many stories.

E: I'm curious, you said you write things down on scraps. Have you ever had the experience of rediscovering something? Finding a scrap of paper that you lost and

then remembering the story?

N: Sometimes I'll wait a long time before writing about something, especially if it's negative. I haven't really processed it yet, I need time to think it over and understand what really happened. Or sometimes I'll lose something and find my notes again and it's like, "Oh hang on, I don't remember this enough to write about it." Or I'll find something and think the notes are good, all the dialogue is there, and then I can take some time to write and think about it.

E: I had another question then about writing specifically. I was reading on your blog that you don't do any digital editing on your photos and it's all analog and material. Are there any parallels between that approach and your approach to editing your writing?

N: Wow! I love these questions that I've never thought of! If there is a parallel, it might have to do with a desire to preserve the purity of what I'm trying to express. Maybe the purity of a moment if the writing is like the search to understand the moment. If it's meaningful, then photography is also a desire to show what I was feeling in the moment. That's the purpose of most of my pictures: let's capture what it felt like. Because photography is often underused as a medium, as a documentary format, of capturing what things look like, but it can be just as painterly. You're expressing in a very subjective way what it feels like to be standing at the Eiffel Tower. And maybe you don't even take a picture of the Eiffel Tower; it's of the trees that are over here that no one looks at except you. Or the maintenance people who are at the bottom of the tower, that was what got you. You're getting a chance to express what you felt in the moment. Or, more importantly, what it looked like. And so, in writing, it's also this search of, what was I feeling? But I guess the more accurate technical corollary would be if I wrote all my blog posts with a typewriter. I'm not cool enough.

E: I'm not so sure how you'd get them online.

N: Yeah, I'd have to go handing them out or something.

E: Handing them out to everybody on your bus?

N: Yeah. Even if I'm shooting on film, and I'm too lazy to get the film developed or something, I'll still shoot on film then have the film scanned, or scan the film myself onto a computer. It's still worth it to do that, even though it ends up in a digital environment, because it looks totally different. I feel like that's what I'm doing with the bus stories: taking something that's very real and then just transposing it into an easy-to-access digital environment. People seem to really respond to the book, though. The book only has thirty stories in it, but it has a larger awareness than the blog. The blog has, I think, thousands of stories on it. It has eight years of stories. It's way bigger than the book is. But people really dig the book as a tactile, real thing, and I do too. It feels like more of an accomplishment. Like, "Look, mom. It's real." The most surreal moment I had was when I was driving the bus and someone was in the back reading my book.

E: Did they know?

N: Yeah, they did. It would have been more amazing if they didn't.

E: If they didn't notice when they got on?

N: Yeah. It was wild, though.

E: Do you ever experience creative blocks? If so, how do you get over them, and what would you recommend to others suffering those blocks?

N: This is so hard! I was looking at that question, and I was like... Well, the blog forces me to write. So, a week will have gone by, and someone asks why I haven't posted. Or I'll just be wondering that, and there's this pressure to put new work out. That gets me around the writer's block issue, because I've got to do something. Maybe the most recent thing I have notes for doesn't interest me, so I scroll down, find something else, and then start writing about that. Maybe that means that a solution could be working on something else that's creative, possibly another piece of writing. I don't think I have good advice for that one. I think what I do is just go create in another medium. I pick up the camera or something. It might be that what you're trying to express in one medium actually isn't the best medium for it, and I'm going to go express this via another art form, maybe something like cooking or exercising or whatever. That's what you need at that moment. People aren't really following intuition. Your subconscious is an amalgamation of all life experiences you've ever had. It's always going to be smarter than anything you can come up with consciously in the moment. Trusting your gut and following through with it seems to yield pretty good things. Someone I know said that all of the best decisions she's made in her life have been whims, and I think what she means by that is not that they were casual and unconsidered, but that she felt a gut, instinctual pull and decided to listen to it. There's something there that's ineffable but real, and awesome. As an example, in making this book, I tried to do this whole New York publishing thing. The process is, you try very hard to get an agent, and you do that by sending query letters, and you have a nonfiction book, so there's a whole process. It's super standardized, so you do this whole thing and query a bunch of agents, and eventually the stars align and you get one and then they start pitching the book. I was bending over backwards trying to make this happen, and it felt like I was trying to force something into existence. I did get an agent, but it led nowhere. The book actually ended up happening because a friend of mine, who's a graphic designer, said, "Hey, want to do something with your stories? Let's make a zine. It'll be fun. Let's do a zine." Only our friends were going to read it, no one cared, so we could do a zine because it's fun to collaborate. And I said, "Oh, this sounds cool, this New York thing didn't work." And *then* it became a book, because we got excited, so we started making it bigger, and then it just blew up. I think you have to enjoy every step of the creative process, because if all of it's miserable, and your goal is just to become famous, and all you want to do is get to that point, and all this stuff is just, "Ugh, gosh, I can't handle it," that doesn't seem to work very well. But if you're enjoying every moment of writing, getting frustrated, writing again, sharing with your friends, that seems to snowball. Maybe it has to do with you bringing a positive energy to it. I don't know how this stuff works. But it seems to work.

E: Another question that I had was about blogging, because blogging is really going out of style, honestly, and social media is really taking over. Like with Instagram,

that's more photo-based blogging. Have you thought about switching over to social media? What are your feelings about blogging going out of fashion?

N: Such a good question. Maybe that's why the book is more popular. I love that books have continued to be a thing, isn't it great? Where my book is being sold, at local bookstores and stuff, they tell me that actually, small bookstores are doing really well right now, because they offer an experience you can't get on Amazon. You walk in there and the person at the desk knows all about books; you can ask them questions. Books are doing really well and maybe that's why the book of mine is doing well, more so than the blog. The blog used to have way more readership, and now it's like, do people read blogs anymore? It makes me think perhaps I should just do a second book. I don't feel an attraction toward doing what I'm trying to do here on social media, because the topics, the people, who I'm trying to express require too much nuance and time. You can't do it in these bite-sized situations. Images are a fun art medium, but photography is hampered by the fact that it's devoid of context. It can be dangerous in that way and misleading. It's a great art form for other reasons, but it's not the one for communicating these moments of human interaction that are delicate and specific. It has to still be in blog form, or actually, better yet, book form; some sort of written format. That's why I'm not on Instagram, I'm not on Twitter, and I think that'll continue to be the case. This is something that I've been thinking about a lot, actually. The mediums are changing, and I'm excited to see if I can get another book out there, because I've got some ideas. I feel like I've gotten a lot out of the discipline that blogging forces you to have, as a writer. It's super constructive. I was not a good writer when I started. It's amazing, once you put in the ten thousand hours. I love it. It makes me feel really good, especially now. If we're alive for a limited amount of time, and you've got a choice between documenting life versus living life, living life sounds more valuable, and I think it is. Of course, I think the thing to do is to do both, obviously, but to find a proportional balance that makes sense, and if I'm spending the majority of my time sitting behind a computer, writing blog posts, that doesn't seem as constructive. I say that even as someone who doesn't attach a lot of importance to whether or not other people look at your art. I don't think that validates the art. I recently went and saw Philip Glass at Town Hall. He wasn't there to play music, his memoirs had just come out so he was doing a Q&A. People were asking him all these Q&A questions. They were fairly boilerplate, but somebody finally asked, a music grad student, got up and said, "Philip Glass, I'm a music grad student, and, do you have any tips for how I can succeed in the world of music?" Philip Glass sat there for a long time, and then he said, "Get a job, preferably not in the arts, not in music eve, so that you can do whatever you want in your art and be unbound creatively." What I like about his answer was that it implied he doesn't attach a lot of importance to whether or not people are buying the music or even listening to it. It's about what the art does for you. I think that's really important for artists to remember. We see portraits of artists in films or elsewhere, as these famously talented people who don't have to do anything besides sit around and make art, but the reality is, most artists have day jobs. If you can find a day job that you enjoy, that pays, I wonder if that's the best scenario, where you can then go and do your art. The nice thing about that dynamic is, it's relatively achievable in society. For about ten years I did wedding photography, and it was so miserable. It was like being asked to use your favorite passion in ways you don't care about, it runs the

risk of sucking out the joy and passion in your art. I was talking to someone who has two passions, working on special effects for films and playing guitar. He does high budget, Hollywood films and I was talking to him and he was like ‘I am never going to let a job destroy my other passion, playing guitar, I’ve lost this one because I’ve turned it into a career.’ That tends to happen, there’s something about having to do something. It’s like reading in school, they assign these great books, like *Great Gatsby*? Amazing book. But there’s something about having to read them.

E: I guess that brings us to another question, do you want to share the ideas of the book you’re working on at all?

N: So the first book was not intended to be consumed on a mass scale. The assumption was that we were doing a small print run for this art gallery I’m doing and maybe my friends will buy it and there will be a bunch left over. So because of that, I chose not the best stories, in terms of writing quality, but the most personal stories. For whatever reason the book ended up taking off and people really like it. But because of the way it was conceived, I didn’t put the best written stories in there. Those are still waiting to be used. I can’t wait to put what I believe is the best ‘writerly-writing’ that I have been capable of creating into a book, and hopefully that will be published. Hopefully a publisher will take interest. Publishing, yes it’s easier now that you can self-publish, but in terms of having someone else publish your books, that’s harder now than it used to be. Money is such a major concern of whether or not to publish something. Now they’re usually conservative, books need to be very similar to what’s already been published. This is too tied to populist concerns. Often when we come across a very creative piece of art, let’s say a movie, it breaks through, it’s a hit and it’s critically, commercially, and artistically appreciated. Then you go and read about how it was made. The story is the same every time, the director is like, “We got turned down by every studio, no one wanted to make this, but then someone did and it’s a monster hit.” There’s a hunger for creative, new stuff, but there’s a resistance to making it because what if it’s a risk? What if it’s a flop? And as an artist that’s how you survive spiritually, by taking those risks. Once you’re super successful, then there’s a bunch of people relying on you to continue being super successful and you can no longer take those risks. There’s a catch-22 there. But I want to go back to like Jean Auel who did that *Planet of the Cave Bear* stuff. She took her manuscript to everybody and no one would publish it. There’s no such thing as a “neanderthal romance”, which is what that was, but it was a hit *because* there was no such thing as a neanderthal romance. And now there’s a whole series of neanderthal romances out there. My book was turned down by all the publishers my agent in New York recommended because A) it was too regionally specific. And B) they said, “We think this is really good, the writing is good, but we don’t know if it will sell. I like it, it’s sweet, but I don’t know if it will sell.” He’s contradicting himself. He likes it, that means somebody else does too. But there’s a risk of like, “I don’t want to take that chance”, because he doesn’t want to be financially responsible. And as far as it being regionally specific, there’s a lot to be said about how the more specific a story is, the more universal it is. Someone was talking about Brokeback Mountain, and how the narrative works well because it’s so specific. And because it’s about these very particular lives and it’s told with such detail, it becomes intensely relatable to anyone who is not a cowboy in Montana. For example, would we not still read something if it took place in New York? There’s going to be street names that don’t mean anything to us, but we take

that in stride as texture and detail. The fact that my book has since proven to be successful here in Seattle speaks to that, because most of the people reading it are not on Rainier Avenue. They don't know what I'm talking about in terms of where the bus is and so on. But the fact that I am naming those things grounds it in reality. I'm not in this to make money; I get about two dollars per book, there's no money in it. But I like sharing my book. Even if it's only shared among my friends, that's enough. It still feels like an accomplishment, like I made it.

E: You mentioned in a recent post about films and life that you “have a fondness for pictures that go beyond” the conflict. Do you find it difficult to capture those moments? And what have you learned about people and the lives they lead from paying special attention to those “after the curtain falls” moments?

N: I feel like conflict doesn't need to be an essential narrative driving force, it's just the easiest narrative driving force. Over relying on it creates dynamics that are not entirely healthy, where we frame our lives in terms of conflict instead of other stuff. For example, movies about relationships quickly establish the existence of the relationship, and then, because the movie has to go on for two hours, a conflict is introduced. That means that we process most relationship films as portraits of conflict. That doesn't always need to be the case. But the belief that you need conflict to keep the story moving, which is really entrenched in our society, reinforces that. I'm not sure that needs to be there. I believe human existence is fascinating enough that you can just plop the camera down and observe life happening. There's certain movies that do that, they are more character-based rather than plot-based, and they hold up a lot better over time. A movie that's super plot based you feel less of a need to rewatch, because you already know what happens next. But when you're watching *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* or the *Irishmen*... Those are about humans interacting. That's interesting, let's learn something about human nature. As to the question do I find it difficult to capture those moments? I love trying to capture them. I'm lucky because I'm working in a bite-sized format where there's less need to come up with a reason to hold the audience; it can just be a portrait. There's a chapter in the book called “Ode to Aurora” where nothing story-based happens but it's just what existence looks like from one corner of the world. I find it fascinating. Watching those little moments, I've come to appreciate things with a sense of wonder. The way we choose to see things so determines how we experience life, what we think of life. One of my colleagues chooses to look for cars that drive really well, and because he's tuned in to look for that, he sees it everywhere and thinks everyone is a really great driver. I choose to look for the positive. Life is short, and modern life is very much the act of editing, choosing what to look for. With that in mind, it's like, “Maybe I should decide what to pick out and I should choose the positive stuff.”

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