Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Max Heinegg and Clint Margrave

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, August 12th, 2020

Poets on Craft is a cyberspace for contemporary poets to share their thoughts and ideas on the process of poetry and for students to discover new ways of approaching the writing of poetry. In the face of a pandemic that is both viral and political, it is a resource for strength and creativity, friendship and beauty, love and rejuvenation. It is thus a celebration of the beautiful and eclectic minds of contemporary poets. This series is intended for educational purposes only.

The format is as follows. I emailed poets these questions: “Generally speaking, how do you build a poem? How do you start a poem? How do you move from one line to the next? How do you know when to end a poem?”

With the exception of length requirement, poets are free to respond in whatever manner they find appropriate to their styles and concerns.

Access to *Poets on Craft* is democratic. Generally speaking, anyone can have free access to these posts. With that said, please consider supporting our poets by clicking on the links in their bios and purchasing their work.

For this third post of the series, we have Max Heinegg and Clint Margrave.

Max Heinegg is a high school English teacher, recording artist, and co-owner of a local brewery. His poems have appeared in Cultural Weekly, The Cortland Review, Thrush, Nimrod, and Glass (Poets Resist), among others. His records can be heard at www.maxheinegg.com

I have a bunch of ways to get a poem going. If it’s early in the day, my thoughts are usually roaming, so I’ll type or dictate freely into my phone, and then revisit these seeds later, to see if they’re worth watering. If I just want to chill out and write, I’ll put on tabla music on YouTube, or Cocteau Twins, Michael Hedges, Brian Eno, or Satie, and I’ll just play around. I’ll come back to it later in the day and see if anything I did is interesting enough to pursue. Another way is what I call, “the poem writes itself.” This is when something happens in my life, or I see some juxtaposition of events or objects that would make a good poem. Then I go about trying to capture the idea and let the lines surprise me along the way.

I try to make sure the poem’s moves are fluid. This is the focus of revision, so in the act of composition, I just follow my intuition as far as it will go, with no interference from my critical

mind. That comes later. In the act of writing, there's a cool interplay between the part of the mind that is sending the lines out and the part of the mind that breaks the lines, or even types the words. So, I'd say drafting is instinctive and revision is more analytical. When revising, I pay attention to clarity, enjambment, (breaking lines with purpose) and whether or not something is happening musically in the diction. I think the content or the tone of the poem dictates whether or not the line to line movement is propulsive and linear, or clever and sinuous.

I know a poem is done when the main idea of the poem is complete, and when my ear is happy with every line. Often, I'll find several potential end-points in my poems, so I'll test each to check if I'm dragging the poem out. Overall, I try to think of the lines as being in service to the poem, the same way a guitarist should play to the song, as opposed to trying to put flourishes everywhere. As a musician, I do prefer a lovely ending, something musical that will linger, and I do think most poets try to put their best two lines at the start and the end, so there's something there too. If you read enough good poems, you'll see many options for how to end a poem: I'm learning to let the poem finish where it wants to, as opposed to imposing controls. Lately, I listen to Stanley Kunitz, who said, "end with an image and don't explain."

Clint Margrave *is the author of the novel Lying Bastard (Run Amok Books, 2020) and two poetry collections, Salute the Wreckage (NYQ Books, 2016) and The Early Death of Men (NYQ Books, 2012). His poetry and fiction have appeared in The Threepenny Review, Rattle, Ambit (UK), Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac, among others. He lives in Los Angeles, CA.*

I start my poems usually as freewrites. I will take a small nugget of an idea (from notes I take) and try to move out of the way, allow my mind to freely associate in a 1-2 page freewrite. Later, I will come back and reread and see what's salvageable. I think of it like sculpture. I begin with a big block of something and then carve it out. There is usually not a lot of the original freewrite left when I'm through.

Since each poem happens differently, it's hard to give a general answer to this question about line movement. If it's a narrative, I try to move the story forward with what's essential and not boring. In other cases though, I may be playing with metaphor that might move the lines in a certain way. Other times, I may want more spontaneity and will try to juxtapose two separate ideas and see what happens. To be honest, I'm hardly conscious of moving from one line to the next. Even my line breaks are generally instinctual.

Sometimes, the ending of a poem is instinctual. An image to land that punches you in the gut or makes the work feel complete and yet still leaves a sense of mystery that doesn't over-explain but remains clear (it took a long time to learn this). On a more practical level, it's usually a line or two up from where I think it ends.

Featured image is by Alexis Rhone Fancher.

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