Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Angelo Colavita and Joanna C. Valente

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, September 16th, 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 eighth post in the series, we have Angelo Colavita and Joanna C. Valente.

Angelo Colavita lives and writes in Philadelphia, where he serves as Founding Editor of *Empty Set Press* and Associate Editor at *Occulum Journal*. He is the author of two chapbooks of poetry as well as a full-length epic, *Nazareth*, forthcoming from Apep Publications in 2021. His work has appeared in *The Shoutflower, Wildness Journal, Madcap Review, Prolit Magazine, Dream Pop, Yes Poetry*, and elsewhere online and in print. For more info, visit angelocolavita.com or follow him on Twitter @angeloremipsum and Instagram @angelocolavita .

The way I go about composing a poem varies, depending on what the piece calls for. Part of the fun of writing, for me, is experimenting with style and process. I've found the process itself changes what the poem can become. It's all there, complete, before I even start writing, so the way I see my job as a writer is to listen to the poem as I'm writing, to pay attention to what it is telling me it needs. Sometimes that means I have to abandon my preconceptions of what I think I'm writing about, following paths created by accident or error or rhythms that rise to the surface by

chance. When I'm paying attention to those sorts of things, the poem becomes like water, taking the shape of whatever container it has been poured into.

I'll start a poem with an appealing phrase. Maybe it's something I've overheard in passing, a striking image, a certain sound quality, etc. I write almost indiscriminately and try not to evaluate what I'm writing too much during the composition; there is plenty of time for that during revisions. The writing itself can be a burst of emotion in one sitting, or maybe just insistent or persistent thoughts I'll have over the course of long periods of time. I don't write to explain or to be coherent in a conversational sense. That's for journalists. Poetry gives the writer freedom to be strange and to tap into language on a subconscious level. I know when I feel like I've learned something about myself that the poem is successful. I don't really care if the reader learns anything. I trust they will. They don't need me for that.

After I've pieced together what I've written in some sort of aesthetic narrative arc, I'll sit with it a bit, taking time away from the piece so my sentimental attachment to the poem can be somewhat severed. I've found that if I'm too much in the moment, I cannot make reasonable choices that benefit the poem. It becomes too much about me and not enough about the art I'm trying to make. So I step away only to come back to it with a level head and make distinct edits. I'll remove the superfluous and make additions wherever I find gaps in the poem's logic. I ask myself questions — which is really just asking the poem questions and listening — and read the poem out loud to myself. Does the piece intensify where it should? Does it soften where it should? Is it grounded enough for points of contact? Is this fun to read? Unlike the initial composition, the revisions are all about control. I'll know when the poem is finished when I find myself making arbitrary edits that don't necessarily refine what I've got. Basically, a poem doesn't ever have to be finished. You can revise and edit forever. But at some point, even the revisions can get away from you until you tangle the poem into a knot that will never come untied. I've killed a lot of poems that way. It happens. You scrap it and start over or just move on to the next poem.

Joanna C. Valente is a human who lives in Brooklyn, New York. They are the author of several collections, including *Marys of the Sea, #Survivor,* (forthcoming, The Operating System), *Killer Bob: A Love Story* (forthcoming, Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), and is the editor of *A Shadow Map: Writing by Survivors of Sexual Assault.* Joanna is the founder of Yes Poetry and the senior managing editor for Luna Luna Magazine. Some of their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus, Them, Brooklyn Magazine, BUST, F(r)iction, Ravishly*, and elsewhere. joannavalente.com / Twitter: @joannasaid / IG: joannacvalente / FB: joannacvalente

Writers are architects. Instead of creating buildings and landscapes, we architect with words. How do we want the structure built, what's the groundwork, what's the aesthetic, the tone? How can we make and allow the reader to inhabit a poem, like a room, brightly lit, a few soft curtains obscuring the outside, some fruit in a glass bowl on a wooden table. This is how a poem is made, just like how we make anything, whether a home, a relationship, a meal. It consists of a vision, and then choices to make that happen. For me, I start with that vision, literally: an overwhelming image or scene that comes into my head. Poems are language dreams, paintings carved from language.

I'm naturally a visual person, and think visually, in what I call scenes or photographs or short films. I also happen to have this fascinating desire to always want to translate these in some way.

I'm a visual artist first, even if I don't always make that obvious, or at times have deprioritized it. However, it's a huge basis for anything I do. This isn't to say words or other forms of art, like music, aren't important, but the image or narrative will present itself to me, even if it's just my mind working out my own feelings, kind of like wandering ghosts in space. Embracing the way I think and process emotions, and the world around me, rather than trying to change it, has helped me figure out how to write my poems from my voice, rather than trying to be something I'm not. This is, of course, every artist's lifelong journey. We learn from others, and are influenced by others, but how can we translate that? Language is difficult, and getting to know ourselves and our writing, is equally so. And what we do, and how we do it, changes over time, as we change. Lately, I take notes before I write a poem. Normally while I'm walking or working , I'll have images and thoughts come into my head, or be inspired by my very bizarre dreams, so I write them down before I forget. I've been trying to slow down my writing process in general, and letting poems sit longer and take longer time editing. So I suppose what I'm trying to say is my poems start as nebulous blob painting in my brain and I try to carve them out into a kind of sculpture. And trying to be better and more intentional as I get older.

When it comes to sculpting my lineation, the bearings and groundwork of the poem, I tend to break lines up within the middle of thoughts and phrases, so I let those images and ideas propel me, which mimics a kind of stream of consciousness. One can't come without the other. It's all connected! I also am deeply aware of how I want the experience to be visually for the reader, and tend to focus on where I want them to pause and focus. Because I write this way, I tend to write the end first, possibly because I have this narrative in my head. It doesn't always happen this way, but I generally have an idea of it in its entirety, so the end isn't as hard for me as knowing when it is too ambiguous or too much detail. So editing the entire piece is usually the hard part, knowing when to stop tinkering. I tinker on poems I've written years and years ago, regardless of whether they've been published or not. It never stops. Which is like a conversation that never ends, with myself. And I suppose I just try to find better ways to find the right cadence and language, especially as my own self becomes clearer. I'm sure part of this is how I'm also changing as I get older, versus how I wrote as a younger poet – and some of the traps I'd let myself fall into (whether laziness, complacency, or rushing).

(featured photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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