Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Asa Drake and Marilyn McCabe

Bunkong Tuon · Friday, December 3rd, 2021

For this fifty-fourth post in the Poets on Craft series, we have Asa Drake and Marilyn McCabe.

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.

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.

This series is intended for educational purposes only.



Asa Drake is a Filipina American writer and public services librarian in Central Florida. She has received fellowships from Tin House and Idyllwild Arts and is a 2020 92Y Discovery Poetry Contest winner. Her most recent poems are published in *Adroit, Copper Nickel* and

***The Paris Review Daily*. For more information, visit asaldrake.com.**

Frequently, a poem is a question I cannot pose to anyone else. At times, a poem offers me room to rehabilitate language or accept that I cannot love what's been said to me. Often, it requires a discussion about place and belonging. I care a great deal about the authority of my speaker as she works through an uncertain landscape. The poem becomes a jury of myself and is inherently unfair to the language I drag into it. I think that small corruption is what draws me back to poems. I want to question the inherent pleasure of things by presenting them with my own discomfort.

I have two construction methods for poems. My favorite, and the rarest method, is a poem that I write in one sitting. These are acts of god. More often, I will start a poem and then put it away and start another one. I'll do this several times before I realize, inevitably, that I have been working on the same poem. The news is always a surprise, and I frequently go back to my journal to see the order that individual lines were written before they were thrown into these separate poems. The journal is a key part of my process and how I move from one line to another. I love to jot down observations, especially from work or from watching small animals. And I think keeping a journal protects a certain kind of syntax that I love.

When does a poem end? I don't think closure necessarily makes a good poem, so I try to end poems with the right sound more often than the right language. Earlier, I said that I like to pose questions through poems, but I don't think that a poem needs to find resolution. Sometimes, I want a poem to simply maintain a space for my own obsessions.



Marilyn McCabe's work has won awards and contests through AROHO, The Word Works, Grayson Books, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Her books of poems include *Perpetual Motion* and *Glass Factory*, and chapbook *Rugged Means of Grace* and, most recently, *Being Many Seeds*. Poems and videopoetry have been published in print and online. She blogs about writing and reading at marilynonaroll.wordpress.com.

I never start out thinking "I'm going to write a poem." I just start thinking on the page. Anything might trigger the impulse to do that: an image, a phrase, an idea, a question. One thing jostles another: an image a word, an idea an image. I just try to let thought meander, looping through idea/image/word/metaphor/simile/story, until it peters to a stop.

After some time — a couple of days, a couple of weeks — I'll go back and see if anything I've written seems to begin to transcend the original impulse. Does it seem to travel somewhere, does it seem to consider something from different angles, interestingly? Does it already have some rhythm, some music?

If yes, then I'll start playing with line breaks to increase tension, or release it, to control the speed of how it plays itself out. Then I consider grouping the lines, or moving them around the page,

letting white space have some say. I'll look at syntax to see if playing with it adds wonder or surprise or significance.

At some point I have to again step away. Then I come back to see whether I've said everything that seems to need to be said, or if I've said too much. Having said too much is easier to handle: I start to trim away distractions. Sometimes I know I have not yet gotten to the heart of the matter. Then I need to try to find a way back into the work, to try to find a way back into the headspace I was in when I first started writing it.

Sometimes I just have to set a timer for ten minutes and start with the phrase: What I'm really trying to say is…." By setting the timer, I've created a tension that works against my conscious, critical mind, in favor of the blurt. Too much thought or earnest intention kills this thing that might be a poem, makes it all lumbering and self-conscious. If I can find something in the blurt that seems organic to the original piece and seems to help it along, I incorporate it.

Only after I've done all this can I begin to think that what I have is "a poem." Then it earns its own file in my "Current Poems" folder. An exciting moment.

I have a teetering pile of filled notebooks and a wordprocessing file 165 pages long of stuff that has not yet earned the designation, and probably never will. But somehow hanging onto it is also part of my process.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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