
Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Austin Veldman and George Franklin

Bunkong Tuon · Friday, November 19th, 2021

For this fifty-second post in the Poets on Craft series, we have Austin Veldman and George Franklin.

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.



Austin Veldman is a poet, editor, and collage artist from South Bend, Indiana. He is the Editor-in-chief of [Twyckenham Notes](#) and the Managing Editor of [42 Miles Press](#). Recent work can be found or is forthcoming in *Epiphany*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Ocean State Review*, *Ligeia Magazine*, *Matter Monthly*, *The Sunset Review*, and more. Find out more at austinveldman.com.

Being a poet is a mindset, a way of seeing the world. There is beauty to be noticed in all things, a level of intricacy which lays beyond the surface of every moment. A writer may find inspiration in new and varied experiences—travel to a new city, a first time canoeing down a nearby river, an early morning walk through the forest. Family—our children and our friends—can be invigorating. And perhaps most importantly, a poet can find inspiration by consuming other art, be it poetry, literary fiction, visual art, or musical performance. For me it is all these things. If I find that I do not feel a poem in me, it is because some sense of richness is missing in my life.

In this way, most of the work of writing a poem begins before any of its lines are written. The life of the poet is the well from which all the possibilities of the poem exist. If the poet has adequately filled their life with a richness, then the well will be full, and the poem will flow from this fullness. The writing of the poem is always occurring. In this sense, a poet is always writing.

Poems for me begin with one line. And from this line the poem immediately has an inherent momentum, its own idea about what it will become. At Indiana University South Bend, working with poet David Dodd Lee, I was taught the writing method of “free association” and the grounding of the act of writing in nowness. That is, that the unconscious mind should guide the writing of the poem and the poet should avoid overt intention and the predictability and cliché it can bring. Through this mode of writing, surprising and interesting things happen in the poem. A freshness is unavoidable. Over time, this sense of writing becomes more refined and attuned.

Yet sitting around and waiting for these phrases to come to mind is not sufficient. To be a serious poet, you must work at it. Sometimes you must make time to write even when you do not feel particularly inspired. Again, the method of free association is particularly useful for smashing through any perceived moments of writer’s block. The point is not to overthink anything but to just begin writing. To start a writing session, sometimes I will borrow a nearby book for a phrase or line. I will use this line, modified or not, as either the poem’s title, the first line, or the last line. A starting point has thus been placed before me and there are no excuses. I must write.

Long periods of making are important. You can worry about sending the stuff out later. Write for a few weeks and then assess what you have amassed. Revision is essential to the process. If you believe that everything you write is perfect the first time it is written, then you are naive. Lines *do* come out well made and sometimes whole poems. But through revision you refine the poem. You must be your own editor and you must be honest. This takes practice, a sort of removed point of view in which you can cut through the rosy vision most have of our own work.

Through revision, you have an opportunity to enhance the poem’s intention and dismantle cliché. Be purposeful with how you build emotion or momentum. Does the poem’s ending feel true? Does it *arrive* somewhere? Over time, you will hone this sense of arrival and what it means for your poems. It is, in my opinion, the most important moment in any poem.



George Franklin is the author of four books of poetry, *Noise of the World* (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions), *Traveling for No Good Reason* (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions), *Among the Ruins / Entre las ruinas* (Katakana Editores), and *Travels of the Angel of Sorrow* (Blue Cedar Press) and is also the co-translator, along with the author, of Ximena Gómez's *Último día/Last Day* (Katakana Editores). He teaches poetry in Florida state prisons and works as an attorney in Miami.

A poem for me usually starts with a line or a phrase. I may be rinsing off dishes in the sink or walking the dog, but I catch some words that go by very quickly. Maybe those words will be the first line of a draft, maybe the title, or maybe they'll become unimportant upon sitting down to write. But, that's how it starts. The next step is as I write the first couple of lines. What does the poem want to be? Is that first line iambic pentameter, one of my standby syllabic lines, or something more Whitmanesque running right across the page. Early in the poem's making, it shows me what it wants. This is not to say that I know where the poem is going, or if it will go anywhere. That gets worked out in the writing.

I know by now that if I've been reading about some topic or person, that subject may well enter the poem. It's an investigative process. I don't usually have a topic in mind, unless something has been

looming quite large for me. This business of poetry is mostly a question of listening to what I'm feeling and thinking, being aware of the things that are important. Somewhere Frost talks about proceeding by indirection. (I hope I'm recalling this correctly.) That's the way I think it works for a lot of us when we write.

During the pandemic lockdown, I had an unusual experience. I was writing a persona poem, a man watching his wife die of plague in some earlier time (not exactly an unexpected topic), and all of a sudden, this character comes into the poem, "the angel of sorrow," who hangs out at the tavern and will buy the speaker a drink. No idea where he came from. But, that was the beginning of a narrative sequence that became my chapbook, *Travels of the Angel of Sorrow*. For a while, I was writing one of those poems every day, once even twice in one day. It was almost as though I were taking dictation. I made virtually no conscious judgments about form and very few edits. Occasionally, the angel will still show up. His poems are as inexplicable to me as ever.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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