

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Barbara Ungar and Stuart Bartow

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, September 9th, 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 seventh post in the series, we have Barbara Ungar and Stuart Bartow.



Barbara Ungar’s *Save Our Ship* won the Snyder Prize from Ashland Poetry Press and was named to *Kirkus Reviews*’ Best Books of 2019; it also won an IBPA Ben Franklin award and was a Distinguished Favorite of the IPA. A chapbook, *EDGE* (named for the EDGE lists of Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered species), is just out from Ethel Press; prior books include *Immortal Medusa*; *Charlotte Brontë*, *You Ruined My Life*; *The Origin of the Milky Way*, and *Thrift*. A professor at the College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY, she lives in Saratoga Springs.

With luck, I start a poem with inspiration: an idea, a line, an image occurs, sometimes from a dream, and the rest of the poem follows naturally. Those occurrences are a gift, however, that come after years of practice. I learned from Flannery O’Connor to be at the desk every day to receive those moments; from Natalie Goldberg I learned to warm up in my journal with free writing every

day, the way a ballet dancer does a barre or an athlete runs. This keeps you in shape. Also, some days, when you are just writing to complete your five minutes or three pages or whatever daily limit you set yourself, you may be surprised by a tug on the line: a sudden excitement when an idea or feeling, or both at once, grab you, and you go from there.

Because of this free writing practice, I rarely have trouble moving from line to line: once I feel that tug, I just go. “Write everything you have to say on the subject, then stop,” is how my poetry teacher, the late, great Bill Matthews, answered the question of when to end a poem. Now comes the fun part: I go back and edit, quickly crossing out most of what I’ve written, keeping just the good bits. I recopy those, and start to arrange them in lines, editing the wording, and so on. Other ideas may occur to me as I do this, so I freely add and subtract, moving pieces around, until I feel like I have something resembling a poem. Only now do I type it up. I save every draft, because you can sometimes over-edit, and want to go back to an earlier, fresher draft. I try not to settle on a form too soon, but let the material dictate its own form. Does it want to be in long or short lines, free verse or some kind of regular stanzas, all over the page or a block of prose? I think of Michelangelo saying he saw the sculpture within the block of stone, and all he had to do was chip away the excess. A lot of my process is that chipping away. Sometimes you have to delete lines, stanzas, whole sections that you are very attached to, maybe that even inspired the poem.

When you think you’re done, show the poem to someone you trust to be honest and critical. Someone with a strong BS detector, who will help you avoid SCPS (self-conscious poetic striving). For example, once in a workshop, Frank Bidart looked at a two-stanza poem and said, “The poem is in the first stanza. By the second stanza, now you’re just showing off.” Beginning writers often think they have to tie everything up with a bow at the end: tell the reader what they’ve just shown. These “moral of the story” endings must go; trust your reader. Often the beginning has to go, too: I call it “taxiing down the runway,” when you are writing your way into a poem: at a certain point, you can feel the poem lift off into the air. I generally cut everything before lift-off. The more you practice, the more ruthless you become. A great Bidart trick is to put the poem away overnight, and first thing in the morning, before coffee or breakfast, pick it up and try to read it as if you just found it in a journal, as if someone else had written it. Writing haiku is a good practice for learning to hone your language: how do you say as much as possible using as few words as possible? I am lucky because my first reader is fellow poet Stuart Bartow, who also happens to be a haiku poet, with a strong BS detector.



Stuart Bartow teaches writing and literature at SUNY (State University of New York) Adirondack. He is also chair of the Battenkill Conservancy, an environmental group focused on the watershed bordering Vermont and New York. His most recent collection of poems, *Green Midnight*, is published by Dos Madres Press. His latest collection of haiku is published by Red Moon Press.

The most important creation the poet makes is the human being who makes the poems. How to create that person: Read poems by other poets every day. Spend as much time outdoors as possible. Imagine what it’s like to be someone else, something else. What it’s like to be an ancient tree in a storm, or the collective consciousness of a beehive. What it is to be a person with a family working two jobs, day shift, night shift. Recognize poetry in everyday speech. Learn the names of stars and

moths.

Your two most important attributes are imagination and empathy. Poetic genius lies in the depth of these two. John Keats expressed the concept in his depiction of Negative Capability. Don't be afraid to be strange. Don't worry about literary recognition. It's a phantasm. Be ready and willing to acknowledge consciousness in any and all life forms, even in inanimate objects. Always remember this quote by R. H. Blyth: "Moments of vision come when least expected, unbidden, and in most [people], pass into oblivion, unnoticed and unremembered..." Don't force anything. Be present, open. Be there when the poem happens. Poems, then, will come to you.

Afterwards, don't eschew editing. Embrace it. Editing is where craft comes in, and can be as immersive and satisfying as making a first draft. Beyond everything I have just written, you are on your own, a temporary wanderer and visitor here on this earthly plane. Embrace that fact. Be brave.

(Featured photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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