Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Caroline Hagood and Wendy Chin-Tanner

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, September 30th, 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 tenth post in the series, we have Caroline Hagood and Wendy Chin-Tanner.

Caroline Hagood is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of First-Year Writing at St. Francis College. She has published two books of poetry, *Lunatic Speaks* (FutureCycle, 2012) and *Making Maxine's Baby* (Hanging Loose Press, 2015), one book-length essay, *Ways of Looking at a Woman* (Hanging Loose Press, 2019), and one novel, *Ghosts of America* (forthcoming from Hanging Loose Press 2021). Her writing has appeared in T*he Kenyon Review*, the *Huffington Post*, the *Guardian*, *Salon*, and the *Economist*.

I tend to practice what I think of as the Frankenstein method of constructing my poetry. I take shards of imagery from all sorts of strange and dark places and then sew them together into a monster. So what does this look like? I tend to write down every bizarre thought that comes to mind in the notes section of my phone, on napkins and shopping lists. Then when I go to write a poem, I type every one that catches my eye into a Word document and see how I can put them together into anything resembling a poem.

In terms of moving from one line to the next, I like to picture myself jumping around in the poem,

and I decide where I need to jump next. I sometimes imagine that if you look really closely, you can find the poet still in there moving things around. I tend to close the poem when I'm too tired at the end of the night. But seriously, I tinker until I can't possibly tinker anymore. There comes a time where if you change anything anymore you will most certainly make it worse. This is often a good place to end. Then I like to ask the Marie Kondo question: "Does this poem spark joy?" If the answer is yes at all, I will leave it there.

Wendy Chin-Tanner is the author of the poetry collections *Turn* (SRP, 2014), which was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award, and *Anyone Will Tell You,* (SRP, 2019), and co-author of the graphic novel *American Terrorist.* She is a poetry editor at The Nervous Breakdown and co-publisher at A Wave Blue World, an independent publishing company for graphic novels.

My poems often come to me through my inner ear from a frequency that plays "the music of the words." I might hear a word, a phrase, a sentence, or sentences that convey images or ideas that then evoke a chain of associative thoughts, sounds, and images. A central question or set of questions then form, which are explored in the remainder of the poem. I routinely write down lines, sounds, words, thoughts, images, and quotes that might make their way into poems later. When I'm ready to draft a poem, I flip through those notes and allow something to spark my imagination. At this stage, I start laying down lines. I force myself to let my subconscious do what it wants without judgment. After that first pass, I polish, polish, polish until it feels right. Then I let the poem sit for a good while before revising it again. I'm a chronic reviser.

I like to practice a Darwinian model of revision: survival of the fittest (lines). An image can't be there for the sake of window dressing alone. It has to serve a function in the poem. What work is it doing? What connection is it drawing? Is the language fresh and surprising? Is there a twist? Does it take the poem and the reader in a different direction? I try to be honest with myself. While poetry inherently makes use of density and distillation of language, it has at the same time the capacity to be expansive, to spark meanings and associations that move us far beyond the immediate sphere of the words on the page. If I find images in my work that aren't doing that, I get rid of them. When in doubt, I cut it out.

When the central question of the poem is answered (that is, if it has an answer, and if not, then when we understand how and why it is unanswerable), then it's the end. The length of these explorations and answers can vary wildly. Some poems are pages long. Others are a single line. I intend for every poem I write to invite a conversation. A poem is a dialogue with an imagined reader. Every I is also a you. And every you is an I. I want my poems to be letters to the universe.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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