Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Chris Haven and Dean Rader

Bunkong Tuon · Friday, May 20th, 2022

For this seventy-fifth post in our Poets on Craft series, we have Chris Haven and Dean Rader.

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.

Chris Haven is the author of a book of stories, *Nesting Habits of Flightless Birds* (Tailwinds Press) and a collection of poetry, *Bone Seeker* (NYQ Books). He teaches writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Find him on Twitter @ChrisLHaven and on the web at www.chrishavenwriter.com.

Dean and I are both in a generative poetry group where we take turns writing prompts for each other every month. The poems we're referring to in our entries here were both in response to a prompt asking us to write a poem inspired or influenced by a non-U.S. poet.

This prompt arrived as my family was taking care of my mother in the last weeks of her life. It was not a time where I felt able to fit the making of poetry into my schedule psychologically, practically, even physically.

Few poems I've written have occurred during such an extreme time. I don't believe that every

poem has to hurt to write, but this one hurt. And I don't think I would have written it without the prompt.

Prompts help me look at what's already happening in my life through a particular constraint. In this case, the thing I focused on was the food we would bring up to my mother. One of the joys of our time together centered around meals.

We were able to prepare her favorite foods—fresh strawberries and cream, fried okra, buttered grits. The combinations didn't make sense and they didn't have to. It was what she wanted, and the image of those plates and the satisfaction we felt in her enjoying those meals was a kind of poetry in the moment.

Because of the prompt, I revisited the work of Tomas Tranströmer. Something about the starkness of the line "We are at a feast that does not love us" resonated with what I was living through. I took that line for the title of my poem and described the ritual of making food and bringing back the empty plate.

The poem ends on the realization that one day, the plate will not come back empty. It inhabits the moment of joy, and simultaneously looks ahead to the time when that joy will be past. That line—and the prompt—offered the opportunity to capture a truth that I otherwise would have been too busy to notice.

I've been avoiding the word "obligation." Was it an obligation to take care of my mother? Possibly, but there was never a question that I would do it. Is it an obligation to write poetry? Maybe, for some people. Is it an obligation to bear witness? That question is much easier for me to answer: Yes, without a doubt. We have to fight against the silence. A poem can be a stay against the silence.

For me, a prompt is a way to engage that obligation. It allows me to tap into lived experience through the filter of imagination and language. I never think of the prompt as the guide or even the reason for the poem. Instead, it provides access and permission to what's already there. A good prompt can open a door, if we can steel ourselves enough to step inside.

Dean Rader has authored or co-authored eleven books, including *Works & Days,* winner of the 2010 T. S. Eliot Prize, *Landscape Portrait Figure Form,* named a Best Book of the Year by the *Barnes & Noble Review,* and *Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry,* a finalist for the Oklahoma Book Award and the Northern California Book Award. Recent work appears in *New England Review, Harvard Review, BOMB, Southern Review, Narrative, Zyzzyva,* and many others. His writing has been supported by fellowships from Princeton University, Harvard University, and the MacDowell Foundation. Rader is a professor at the University of San Francisco and a 2019 Guggenheim Fellow in Poetry.

Almost all of my poems begin as problems— fears I can't face, questions I want answered, wrongs I want righted, phrases that jam the cogs of my brain, images that blind me. The poem sometimes attempts to resolve these issues, but more often than not, it seeks a way, through language, to make the emotional tenor of the poem—the music and depth of its questioning—the resolution.

All of these concerns came into play with this particular project.

As Chris correctly notes, we were given a prompt to write a poem that responded to an international poet. The year was 2015. I had been translating *Alturas de Machu Picchu* by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda; so, I had Neruda, ambition, and nationhood on the brain. I also had parenthood on the brain. My sons were 3 and 6 years old, and I was feeling pessimistic about raising kids in America at that particular moment in history.

I recalled Robert Bly's interesting choice to translate the title of Neruda's "America no invoco tu nombre en vano" not as "America I Do Not Invoke Your Name in Vain" but rather, "America I Do Not Call Your Name without Hope"—not a huge change but a notably different message. And I wondered if I thought about America—and raising kids in America—with hope.

The first draft of the poem imported Neruda's lapidary rhythms, its broad strokes, its mix of

admiration and criticism. His line, “I live in the darkness that makes me what I am,” stuck with me but entered my poem as “This is for daybreak / and backbreak, for dreams and for darkness.”

I liked that line, and I was more or less pleased with the poem sonically, but I felt that overall, everything was a bit . . . tame.

I spent the next few months revising the poem—adding, deleting, moving things around, changing words and sounds. July of that year was the one-year anniversary of the murder of Eric Garner, who was killed on my birthday in 2014. A couple of weeks later was the one-year mark of Michael Brown’s murder. The timing of these milestones (and their ugliness) worked their way into the poem and pushed it in a new direction.

Suddenly, I became interested in connecting the violence of America’s colonial past with the violence of our post-colonial present. But, I did not want the poem to read like a piece of propaganda or a history textbook or an op-ed. I wanted it to work as a poem; I wanted its density, its cadence, its images, its sounds, its fire to pulse—to radiate—with anger and emotion.

However, if the poem was too explicit, if it was too over-the-top, if it was all rage with no restraint, I knew it would actually undermine its ambitions, and in my mind, do more harm than good. So, I tried to channel all of that . . . energy . . . into the sonic and rhythmic DNA of the poem.

Ultimately, it went through dozens and dozens of iterations. The version Chris first saw was quite different than the version first published, which itself differed from the version in my book. In looking back, the poem is part Neruda, part me, part American mythological discourse. And I hope part music.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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