

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: David Kaczynski and Jim McCord

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, December 16th, 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 twentieth post in the series, we have David Kaczynski and Jim McCord.

✘ David Kaczynski is the author of a poetry collection, *A Dream Named You* (TBM Books); and a memoir, *Every Last Tie – the Story of the Unabomber and His Family* (Duke University Press). He previously served as Assistant Director of Equinox Youth Shelter in Albany, NY; Executive Director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, an advocacy group; and Executive Director of Karma Tryana Dharmachakra, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery located in Woodstock, NY. He currently resides in West Texas with his wife Linda Patrik, a retired philosophy professor.

I usually begin a poem while hiking alone to a remote canyon about four miles from our desert cabin. Maybe a line or two; perhaps the glimmer of a theme. Rarely can I pin down the source of any poem. Poems come to me much like dreams, although I do need to invite them and remove any obstacles that might block their arising. I find that walking off into the wilderness represents a nice corollary to exploring one’s mind through poetry. Since poetry is the essence of language, it’s also the purest form of thinking, free from any fixation on control or objectification. It teaches us that ambiguity is not a fault but a virtue: the ability to say many things at once; the presence of the unsaid with the said; both a gathering and a letting go. Through poetry, we are able to explore the mind’s expanse to its very aporias—death, the boundary of self and other, time, the coincidence of

spirit-substance, and various other givens. Eventually I arrive at the canyon rim (an apt metaphor for the abyss of understanding) where I unburden myself, nestle down in a familiar, comfortable spot, take out my pencil and notebook and begin with a few lines that “spoke” to me earlier. From time to time I gaze up at the surrounding, time-shaped landscape, then down again at the page. Sometimes a welcoming hawk or vulture will cast its shadow across the page I’m writing on.

Often I take time to meditate before, after, or in the midst of writing a poem. It could be that writing is part of the meditation practice, too. Once I’ve got a cluster of lines on the page, I feel as if I’ve entered a new stage. The visual pattern has become important somehow. I might even think of myself as a sculptor aiming for symmetry, elegance of form, chipping away at my natural clumsiness while leaving some oddity just for the heck of it.

I typically end up transcribing a cleaner version onto a fresh page. But that’s not the end of it. I’ll go back, re-read and revise every day for a week or so before I consider the poem finished. Then sometimes—it might be years later, say while packing up my belongings for a move—I’ll discover some old papers, including poems that I haven’t looked at in years. I feel a bit like an archaeologist then, far removed from that younger poet. Or maybe a terton. Most old poems I end up discarding, but sometimes I’ll stumble across one that reads fresh and still speaks to me.



Jim McCord is a former teacher whose poems have appeared in a variety of journals and six books. The three most recent books pair poems with photographs by Carol McCord: *Two Lenses-Four Europes* (2019), *Red and Green in the Alentejo* (2020), and *Beneath the Midi Sun* (2020). Jim and Carol’s website: www.two-lenses.com

Poems start for me when something grabs my curiosity and won’t let go, something I want to learn about, the poems themselves learning experiences that unfold pretty much on their own with my guidance. The world is absolutely full of starters every minute, everywhere—wonders to eye, to think on, to have feelings about. Starters that especially attract me are often found in history, natural history, art, literature, national and cultural identities.

I think one should fool around and experiment with lines—their lengths, how they sound, how they pause or move from one to another, how they best fit their subject. But I also think many writers come to find there are particular line lengths and breaks that are compatible with their breath and sense of movement. Allen Ginsberg imitated William Carlos Williams’s short lines and runovers until he felt cramped and realized his breath was as full and long as Walt Whitman’s. Quite a range of possibilities between the two!

Sometimes, of course, the poem has an ending before you start the beginning, the ending being the reason for writing it. If that’s not the case, I think poems shaped from the outset are best not to go in deliberate search for an ending. For me, making poems is an act of discovery and clarification that moves through thoughts and feelings expressed through images and sounds in many different ways. Depending, then, on what’s gone before, they also end in many different ways. Possibilities off the top: soft landing, logical conclusion, summing up, turnabout, added surprise, punchline, bang (but never whimper!).

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher).

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