

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: ?? Nguyen Mai and Sokunthary Svay

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, February 24th, 2021

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 twenty-eighth post in the series, we have ?? Nguyen Mai and Sokunthary Svay.



?? Nguyễn Mai is a Vietnamese poet from Santa Clarita, California. They are the author of *Ghosts Still Walking* (Platypus Press, 2016) and *Battlefield Blooming* (Sahtu Press, 2019), and they have work forthcoming in *They Rise Live a Wave: An Anthology of Asian American Women Poets* (Blue Oak Press) and *Read Ritual: An Anthology* (Locked Horn Press). Currently, they are pursuing a Ph.D. in political science at the University of California, Riverside.

As with many other things in Viet life, my poems often start at a point of rupture or contrast. Since I’m also a researcher, I’ll typically come across these points within archival work or through conversation with colleagues. A detonation, like a new year’s flower. The way Buddhist activists and protestors in Hue cut a sliver of silence into a warzone using memories of the dead. Of course, my daily observations as a product of two refugees who settled in the suburbs also make their way into my poems. When fire season comes, the contrast between flame and charred hill is enough to

inspire lines. There's also the threat of displacement which looms over my already-resettled family. During one of the most recent fires, I imagined a gaggle of young Los Angeles partygoers filling their glasses with wine while a wildfire creeps their way. There's often interesting friction or emptiness that sits within these points that draw me to them. Poetry's capacity for holding and emphasizing such moments is what makes it such a useful tool. Carving out and pinning down these fissures with some level of precision is, I think, one of poetry's most utility functions. I like to put it to good use whenever possible.

Once I identify which of these moments I want to capture, I begin to write around that point of rupture or contrast. I feel for the direction that the poem wants to take me – into, past, away from these points – and begin to write in that direction. Geography, proximity, and placement matter. Where am I in relation to the point in question? Where is the poem? Where is each stanza and line in relation to that point? Regardless of what direction the poem walks or sprints, I try to stay oriented to the inspiring point of rupture or contrast that has brought me to the poem. In writing any poem, I pay close attention to its footing. Even the most liminal or difficult of subjects requires clarity.

Because I often write poems to engage with concepts and subjects in ways that I cannot through my social science work, I often find that I feel poems are finished when the same relief comes to me as it did after my family finished burying my grandmother's body. When I start or end a poem, I think of my mother, who once recalled for me the days she searched for her father's corpse: *We just wanted to find him, to bury him so it was done*. It is in this way that a poem is a ritual. In many poems, I am burying a body. Like the diverse variety of rituals I and many others participate in, each poem ends at a different pace. A poem is done when the sandalwood burns out – when the heat, the cold, the friction is finally written out of me.



A Khmer writer from the Bronx, Sokunthary Svay is a founding member of the Cambodian American Literary Arts Association (CALAA), she has received fellowships from the American Opera Project, Poets House, Willow Books, and CUNY. Her first collection of poetry, *Apsara in New York*, is available from Willow Books. Her opera collaboration with composer Liliya Ugay, “Woman of Letters,” received its premiere in January 2020 at the Kennedy Center. She teaches English at Queens College, CUNY.

How is my poem built? It helps if I don't think of it as a poem. The “p” word has given me a bitter taste. Rather, I think about phrases, images, maybe go peek into a vulnerable moment in my heart and spend some time remembering. I've learned after many years that I can't “hunker down” and write something from scratch nor in one sitting. I have scraps everywhere, multiple open Word documents, sentences on my whiteboard, notes on paper around the house. To write it down at all and see the words themselves is life enough, and whether they make it into a “poem” doesn't matter to me. The poem functions as a concentrated area of inquiry and emotion, so when I'm ready to go there and be introspective, then I take those memories of words and phrases with me, with a good cup of tea or coffee. Poetry is not my endgame, it is my vehicle to get to personal truths.

How do I move from one line to the next? If I'm lucky, they're already there and it's a matter of tweaking, re-reading for sound, and looking at how the line is structured. Sometimes, it's just

moving lines around and maybe fitting in a new word or two. Sometimes it's not about lines but stanzas, and thinking about where the ideas or images are going.

How do I know when to end a poem? When the image feels final, when it goes back to the title and closes it out. When the quietness of the final line leaves something to linger on in the reader's mind.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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