Cultural Daily

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# Poets on Craft: Jerry Wemple and Grant Clauser

Bunkong Tuon · Saturday, January 8th, 2022

**For this fifty-sixth post in the Poets on Craft series, we have Jerry Wemple and Grant Clauser.**

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.

**Jerry Wemple is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *Artemas & Ark: the Ridge and Valley poems*, as well as two poetry chapbooks. His poetry and creative nonfiction appear in numerous journals and anthologies, including internationally in Ireland and Chile. His website is www.jwemple.com.**

The two hallmarks of my work are place and image. My poems often start in a process like what Richard Hugo describes as “the triggering town.” The trigger could be a memory or something I recently read or a place recently visited or revisited. A poem I’m working on now stems from a memory of going to summer camp when I was nine. I remember clearly that I hated that camp. I am not sure what I expected, but it wasn’t at all what I wanted. It was too regimented.

In summers, I was a free-range kid, wandering around town, dropping in at my grandmother’s to watch TV or going over to visit a cousin. I loved exploring my little town, going uptown talking to the clerks at the department stores, scouring alleys to find soda bottles to trade in at the corner store for a few dimes and nickels. At that camp, which was run by an order of Catholic Brothers, we had to go to Mass every morning, then breakfast, then do X, then do Y. And everything had to be done in a group.

Remembering that camp got me thinking about that year, because after that year things changed. At Christmas my mother got married to my stepfather and by the next Christmas we moved to Florida, far away from all our relatives and all my friends. My mother never discussed the move

with me until about a week before. Once we moved, we left everything behind. Though I could not have articulated it then, I came to realize that one’s world can change overnight.

This is a long way of saying during drafts of this poem I began to figure out the controlling image and controlling idea of the poem. To do this I had to figure out what were the important parts of that year. I also had to do some research. We moved to Florida because my mother and stepfather got caught up in the Florida land scams that started in the 1950s and lasted until 1970s.

In a way, my poems are like mosaics. I put a piece here, another there, and hope it all comes together. In the making  the poem I am paying attention to creating strong images and using language in an inventive way. I read drafts aloud many times, searching for rhythm and pace. To end a poem I’m looking for something that both reverberates through the poem and provides a twist, a new angle or way of seeing what came before. I’m not always successful, but it’s a goal.

**Grant Clauser is the author of five books including *Muddy Dragon on the Road to Heaven* (winner of the Codhill Press Poetry Award) and *Reckless Constellations* (winner of the Cider Press Poetry Award). Poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Rattle*, *Tar River Poetry* and others. He works as an editor and teaches at Rosemont College. You can follow him on Twitter at @uniambic (Photo by Alex Cope)**

For me, discovery and surprise are what mostly motivate me through each new poem. I'm hoping to find something I haven't found before, even if it's familiar territory. I think of writing like taking a hike in woods I've been through before–I want to find something new each time, something to delight or interest me in a slightly different way than the last time I hiked that trail. Practically speaking, it means reaching into language for new images, new metaphors, new ways to experience familiar things.

I rarely plan my writing, and almost never know where my poems are going to end up. I hope to surprise myself. Usually I start with an image or a line that interests me, and let cues from that line tell me what to do with the next line. I frequently say to classes that poetry is a series of decisions, and those decisions work best for me when there's a balance between the spontaneous and the structured. I might, for example, base a poem's syllabic structure on the first line that came to me, but let each subsequent line add a bit of its own personality, so that by the end I've arrived somewhere unexpected. Again, like going on a hike, I'll start down a path I've walked before, but this time the moss on the rocks might demand more of my attention than the woodpecker did last time.

I've had people refer to me as a narrative poet, and indeed most of my poems have some element of story to them, but I hope the lyric element, the transcendent element, is what carries the poem. I think everything is metaphor in one way or another–and that way of seeing tends to lead to more discoveries. The view outside your window or the memories of your childhood can all be used as passages into something else. It's always seemed to me that the most lasting poems are those in which the lyric or metaphoric voice takes control, where the flexibility of language and discovery transcend any events or particulars of the story. I believe that's what allows one person's experience to have a universal appeal–a sort of invitation into another's world.

*(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)*

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