Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: John Dorsey and Chase Dimock

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, September 23rd, 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 ninth post in the series, we have John Dorsey and Chase Dimock.

John Dorsey is the former Poet Laureate of Belle, Missouri, 2017-2019. He is the author of several books, including *Your Daughter’s Country* (Blue Horse Press, 2019). He may be reached at archerevans@yahoo.com.

Generally I start with a title for a piece, that usually sparks a narrative in my mind or sometimes a memory. I keep a notebook that I refer to as my memory book, this is just full of single lines about things I’ve experienced or people I’ve met, this helps paint a portrait or tell the story I want to tell.

The poem for me has to have a beginning, middle and an end, like the chapter of a novel or a good short story. I don’t make any edits until I’m done with it, and when I switch the computer off I never touch the piece again. When I think about how I’m going to close a piece, I re-read it a few times and just try my best not to overwrite it or get away from my original thought too much.

Chase Dimock works as an Assistant Professor of English at College of the Canyons in California and serves as the Managing Editor of *As It Ought To Be Magazine*. He holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Illinois. His poetry has been published in *Roanoke Review, Waccamaw, Flyway, Funicular Magazine, New Mexico Review*, and other journals. For more of his work, check out chasedimock.com.

It probably doesn't come as a surprise that as an English Professor, I like to have a prompt for my poetry. I'm not great at spontaneously inventing from a blank page; I need to be in conversation with an idea for a while in my daily life, and then start transcribing that conversation into poetry. For example, my latest project is a collection of poetry about human relationships with animals and what the behavior of animals reveals to us. This could be on the micro level of my own personal relationships with pets and the natural world and what this might say about me, or on the macro level of how our culture treats animals and what this says about being human. Having a prompt in my head creates a lens through which I look at the world, and I become attentive to how my experience with animals could be better understood through poetry. Whether it's an animal fact I pick up online or a moment with my pets, having a poetry lens on the world mediates my experience of the natural world through poetics.

The structure of the poem depends on how I am engaging with the topic. A narrative poem is easier to start because I begin where the story starts, or a stanza of prefacing ideas essential to understanding the story as it unfolds. The stanzas progress as needed by the facts of the narrative. An outside editor's perspective is valuable for helping me to craft a more efficient narrative and not go too long or heavy on details. Any of the cast off lines are like a starfish arm; it could grow its own starfish later. A poem that muses philosophically and introspectively has a less definitive beginning. I start with some images and phrases as a free association, knowing they won't necessarily end up as the beginning of the final poem. In the genesis of a poem, the lines are more like a rhizome with infinite possible connections. It's better to explore the possible relations of images and phrases before imposing a linear order. The most important part of this exercise is to get past the inhibitions and inner criticisms that keep you from starting. It's easy to get impatient and doubt your abilities early on in the process, especially if you have a deadline, or an internal compulsion to always be productive with your time like I always feel. I accept the fact that most of the work of poetry is in this playful engagement, and just because it didn't all fall into formation by the end of the night, that doesn't mean I didn't make vital progress.

I like to end a poem on either a final twist or a call back to an earlier premise in the poem to bring things full circle. You need to make the journey of reading a poem rewarding, that each shift and turn was necessary to get to a promised final destination. There should be a revelation there at the end, something uncanny, a connection that was always unconsciously there, but now made visible. As a professor, I have an urge to create a perfectly clear and plainstated argument, and I try to resist that desire because poetry shouldn't be didactic; it is more about what eludes clarity and how our blind grapplings in the fog momentarily resemble a dance. The reveal at the end isn't about a "moral" or a fact so much as it is about what we learn through the engagement of poetry. The best poems address a deeply personal and unique experience, but communicate it in broad terms that invite the experience of others. It's a moment specific to an individual spoken in a way that connects to the universal.

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(Featured photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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