Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: John Hicks and Ximena Gómez

Bunkong Tuon · Thursday, January 27th, 2022

For this fifty-ninth post in the Poets on Craft series, we have John Hicks and Ximena Gómez.

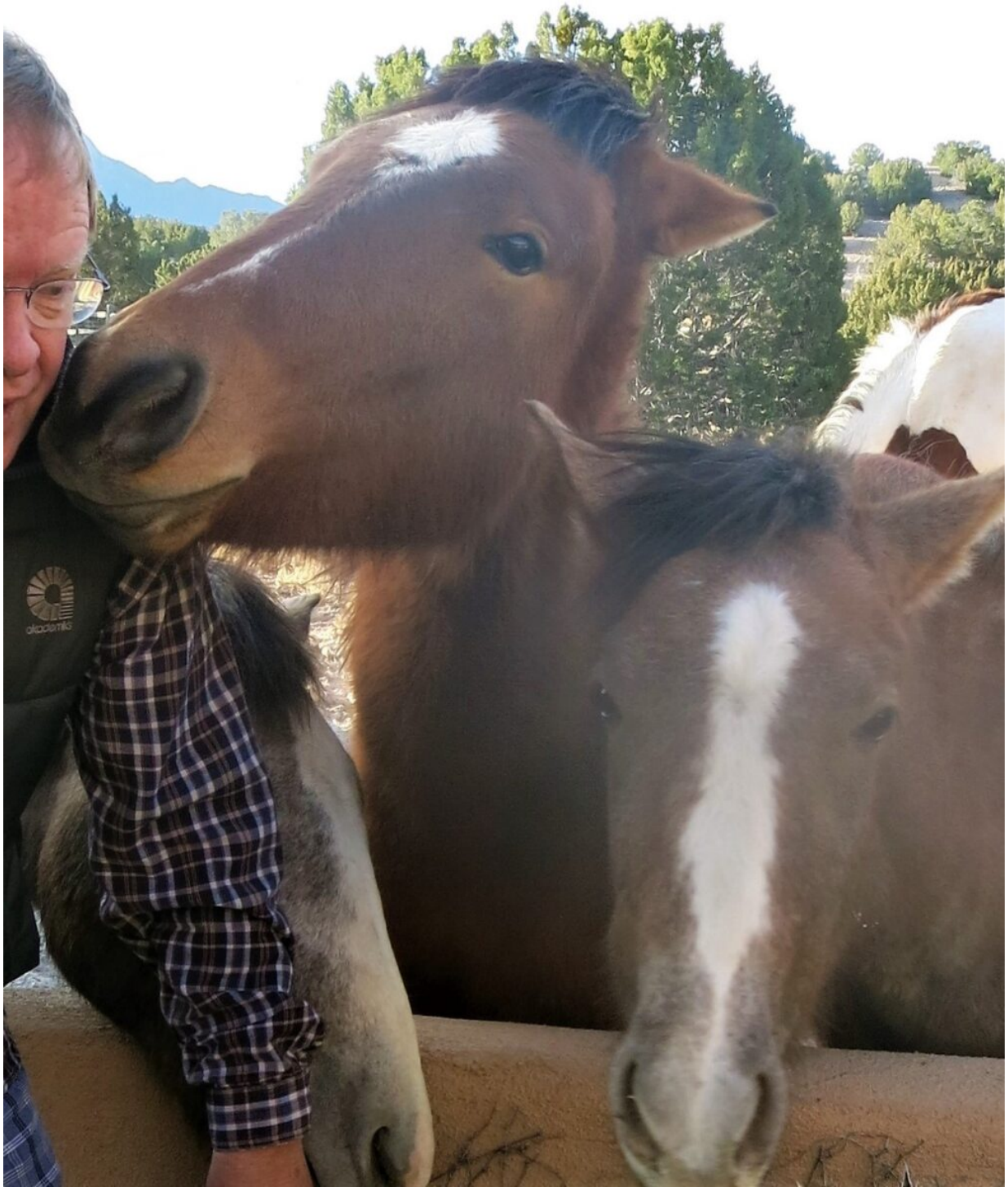
Poets on Craft is a cyberspace for contemporary poets to share their thoughts and ideas on the process of poetry and for students to discover new ways of approaching the writing of poetry. In the face of a pandemic that is both viral and political, it is a resource for strength and creativity, friendship 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.



John Hicks is a New Mexico poet: has been published by: *I-70 Review, South Florida Poetry Journal, Valparaiso Poetry Review, Bangor Literary Journal, Verse-Virtual, Blue Nib, Poetica Review, The Bayan Review,* and others. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from University of Nebraska – Omaha, and writes in the thin mountain air of the southern Rockies.

"Poetry helps us to be more in the world." I can't remember where I heard that, but if it helps readers be in the world, then writing it helps me, too. So, I put a lot of effort into journal publication. If a poem succeeds with editors, it likely will with readers, too.

I write in four overlapping steps: gather ideas, explore, draft, and revise.

A triggering idea can occur anywhere: a lizard turning over gravel for insects, the memory of an

open boat crossing Cartagena Harbor in the dark, the smell of teak oil on a wood table. If Bill Holm can write a book of boxelder bug poems, how can we not find ideas?

Sometimes ideas come from absence. We're accustomed to a certain noise level where we live, but occasionally everything goes silent. And there, within the triangle of noise, silence, and perception, the ceiling creaks. It's as if the ceiling has never creaked before. If poets do their jobs, readers will never see ceilings the same again.

I jot ideas for poems on note cards I carry in my shirt pocket. When there's enough to work with, the next step is a yellow pad to explore what I have. I seldom start at the keyboard.

I don't start out knowing what I want to say. That never succeeds for me. I discover it in the material I'm exploring. The yellow pad is where I apply the five basic interrogatives: Who, What, Where, When, Why. Sometimes a mind map helps. The idea is to mine the unconscious mind. I'm still pursuing the poem, and seeking candidate narratives or themes. If I get traction, the next step is drafting with a Word document.

Here I begin considering imagery, form, point of view, tension, verb tense. Later I include metaphor, tone, transitions, etc. A good way to find metaphors and similes is to ask, "What's this like?" "What does it remind me of?" Similes are often the front door of metaphors.

At this point, it's important to ask, "so what?" Why is this poem worth writing? If writing the poem has moved me, it will move readers. Readers who are involved in a poem, who have found its emotional truth, the "Aha" moment, are invested in it. This is the power of poetry.

I go on to revision when I know I have a poem. If not, I abandoned it for the time being. Compression is a major effort at this point. Which words are unnecessary for meaning, impact, and clarity? Early drafts have a lot of telling—opportunities for creating poetic interest.

Poetry is like painting: viewers fill in what shape and color imply. Readers like puzzles, and they don't need to be told everything. They like to fill in the gaps. I edit so that, by suggestion, they can participate in understanding the work.

An important part of revision is line breaks. In addition to supporting tone and tempo, they can also encourage reader involvement. I like to end lines with words or phrases that encourage going to the next line.

Also important is reading the piece aloud—not within my head. It's surprising what we discover when speaking lines aloud.

I end a poem when I think it sufficiently expresses what it's about. At that point I work on an ending to make the work memorable, one that encourages readers to go back into it again. Then I set it aside. After two weeks, poems always seem different. I have to decide: revise or send to an editor.

Ximena Gómez is a Colombian writer, poet and translator. She is the author of the poetry collection *Habitación con moscas* (Ediciones Torremozas, Madrid, 2016), a dual-language poetry collection *Último día / Last Day* (Katakana Editores, Miami 2019), and *Cuando llegue la sequía* (Ediciones Torremozas, Madrid, 2021). She is also the translator of Jacqueline Woodson's National Book Award winner, *Brown Girl Dreaming/ Niña morena sueña* (Penguin Random House, August 2021), George Franklin's *Among the Ruins / Entre las ruinas* (Katakana Editores, Miami 2018), and contributing translator to *32 Poems/32 Poemas* by Hyam Plutzik (Suburbano Ediciones 2021). In 2018, she was a finalist for Best of the Net.

What triggers my poems are images, very often images of intimacy: the inside of a room, a corridor, the kitchen, leaves, or flowers falling from a pot, objects like a bottle of olive oil. The image could also be a light in the street or a light coming through a window or the contrasts between lights and shadows, or more often a vivid memory. Reminiscences come to my mind during conversations, while I'm resting or walking, and sometimes they have a story from the past attached to them.

These are the kinds of images that prompt poems. I jot them down and later start the process of writing, and that's when I make decisions about the form of the poem, if it's going to be a free verse poem, a prose poem or if it's going to be formed by blank hendecasyllabic lines or even by blank heptasyllabic lines. (Hendecasyllabic lines are frequently used in Spanish poetry, with or without rhyme. They're the equivalent of the English pentameter.) At the same time, I decide if the poem will have stanzas or will be in couplets or some other arrangement. I have noticed that when I'm writing about something very personal, I tend to write mostly in free verse or in prose. The process of writing a poem could last for days, and sometimes I try different forms for the same poem.

I am bilingual—Spanish and English. I use them both every day, because I work as a translator on issues related to immigration and human rights. I write basically in Spanish, but some of my poems have been translated into English.

I can't imagine what my writing would be like if I hadn't come to the United States. Learning English and being bilingual is something that has shaped my poetry. English and Spanish interact when I am writing in Spanish. Very often, when I am writing, I forget a word in Spanish and instead an equivalent word comes to me in English. Sometimes an English word helps me to find the right choice in Spanish. Sometimes I jot down ideas in English but write the final poem in Spanish. Other times, I think a few lines in English, or start mentally translating stretches of the poem, thinking how it would sound in English.

English is a more concise and a more restrained language. Spanish on the other hand is sweeter and more rhetorical. When I was co-translating one of my poems with my partner, I realized something that to me was a revelation: an English translation of a Spanish poem is not only shorter (which is known among translators), but it's also more emotionally restrained. In general, these features of English are constantly shaping the poetry I write in Spanish. I think my poems have grown more concise and more emotionally restrained as a result of my reading and translation of English poetry. At the same time, Spanish is more expressive and colorful, and I don't want to lose that.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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