

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: José Angel Araguz and John Sibley Williams

Bunkong Tuon · Monday, December 13th, 2021

For this fifty-fifth post in the Poets on Craft series, we have José Angel Araguz and John Sibley Williams.

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.



José Angel Araguz's most recent collection is *An Empty Pot's Darkness* (Airlie Press). His writing has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry International*, *The Acentos Review*, and *Oxidant / Engine* among other places. He blogs at [The Friday Influence](#).

My poetic practice is one that centers on flexibility and perseverance. Realizing early on that what matters is getting words on a page first, that I don't know what I have to say until I start saying it, helped get me more comfortable with revision, which is really where poems begin. I don't think I'm a good writer (not in a first thought, best thought kind of way, haha), but I do feel that I'm a

good editor, a good reviser.

I like writing daily, even just a sentence or a diary entry, something to keep me close to words. This daily practice can sometimes sound impressive or daunting (wow, a poem a day!), but really it's just moving words around. A word-shuffler, I be. Sticking to a daily practice has also led me to work in shorter forms (hard to squeeze in an epic poem between shifts, meetings, paying bills, etc.). But whatever form a day's writing takes, that shape never really holds, not at first.

That's where revision comes into play. I will fill up notebooks and leave them alone for at least a year before returning to them. Time is a friend of revision in this way. Sometimes I come back to something that in memory shines like gold, but when I come back to the actual words on the page I find that I was mistaken. On other hand, writing that I don't remember writing, drafts that I didn't give a second thought to after writing, sometimes these spark up an interest a year later.

Being open to that spark, to the poem starting again beyond the first draft, that's really what I practice in revision. Sometimes I'll move a poem from stanzas and lines into paragraph form, shifting and revising as I go; sometimes I'll do the opposite, take a scrap of daily life writing and work it into lines.

I'm always playing games as well. Whether I'm working on a first draft or a revision, I'm always counting syllables, beats, or words per line. Keeping part of my focus on a formal aspect allows me to be open to what the content wants to do. Conversely, following the content at times leads me down rabbit holes, researching into etymology or the facts behind a specific tree that's come into a poem.

Coming back to a poem with the humble awareness that I'm a different person each day, weathered as words are weathered, allows me to put aside intention and luck up on things. I feel poets are always working a glimpse at a time. I realize that how I'm describing my process the way I have so far makes it so that one might think a poem never gets done (and sometimes it feels that way, haha).

Which is where endings come in. A similar flexibility as described above comes into play for me with endings. Sometimes a poem's ending surprises me by not being the ending I wrote but actually ending a stanza before. Sometimes a poem's ending will come to me while working on a book project. In one instance, I switched the placement of the last two stanzas of a poem because the difference in tone from that move suited the work that followed.

In a way, another word that should be a part of this meditation—along with flexibility and perseverance—is necessity. Necessity not in terms of my own needs, but the needs of the poem. My own needs are met in taking the time to be close to words, to play my games and spend time moving words around. The needs of the poem, what the words are saying beyond what I can hear, that's where I try to get at in revision.

Sometimes the need is one of clarity, sometimes it's ambiguity. An ending comes when that need feels met. When the image or phrase worked out knocks me out with its presence, its newness and pulse.



John Sibley Williams is the author of seven poetry collections, including *Scale Model of a Country at Dawn* (Cider Press Review Poetry Award), *The Drowning House* (Elixir Press Poetry Award), *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press), and *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize). He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and founder of the **Caesura Poetry Workshop** series.

Most of my poems begin with an image I simply cannot get out of my head. Often as simple as an

empty silo at dusk, a tattered scarecrow wrapped in my grandfather's work clothes, a handed-down tea set, or the plastic stars glued to my children's ceiling, there's just something mysterious and tantalizing about forging in black ink on a white page an emotionally resonant and visually clear image that seems simple at first but, when you really digest it, grows more metaphorical as the poem progresses.

Although it's not intentional, I think I always have Pablo Neruda's line "My soul is an empty carousel at sunset" humming in the background of my mind while crafting images. So few words; so much to unpack. I think I'm always striving for that delicate balance of depth and accessibility.

Where do these images come from? I honestly have no idea. Both landscapes I've never experienced firsthand and those I act as witness to every day share the same pages. In a new poem, the horrifying story of Emmett Till shares the same line as my fears of how society will treat my transgender daughter. Just a few lines later, the dementia my mother experienced before her death and my wife's grandmother's experiences in a Japanese internment camp all show up. They may sound like wildly divergent ideas, but their connection, to me, is intuitive. If my mind is making such connections, a reader's can to.

My job, I feel, is to craft language in a way that all these ideas can share the same world, can build atop each other, can leap and spark, and hopefully can resonate across cultural and experiential boundaries.

Starting from that core introductory image, my process is almost always the same. First and most important, I never have any clue where a poem is heading. I don't map anything out. I don't set out to write a certain kind of poem. I just follow the poem's lead. As I believe sound and rhythm and flow are all as essential as meaning, I read that first line aloud over and over again until the next line comes. I let my ear be the guide, to a certain extent.

Another key component, to me, is approaching each poem like a short film. How does the camera pan? What will it zoom in on? What will remain subtly in the background? I feel every detail in a poem should be working double duty as both a literal and figurative placeholder for a deeply felt emotion. It's all about implication. It's perhaps akin to a Raymond Carver story. What might that overflowing ashtray smoldering between an argumentative couple imply about their relationship? What about that housekey that doesn't seem to work, that half-drunk beer bottle on the lawn, that fading photo of a child when there's no other sign of a child in the house?

In the end, I feel poets need to trust readers to make those connections. Things need not be spelled out. If you place the right breadcrumbs in the right places, an entire story can unfold in only a few lines.

So, throughout my writing process, I'm simply following my own breadcrumbs without even a hint of where they may lead. It's absolutely essential for me to be surprised by the next line. If I'm not, why would a reader be? I leap and leap and listen to the connections the poem seems to be making. Then I experiment with and sharpen the language so the conceptual white space between the breadcrumbs will hopefully make sense to someone without my lived experiences.

Although it doesn't always happen this way, frequently the ending a poem announces itself in a rather loud voice. I just hit a point in the poem where a certain line or image screams at me, "The poem stops here. Do not write another word." Then I read the poem again and again to ensure the poem has built up to that closing in an emotionally resonant and fairly clear way. When I am a bit

stuck on an ending, my usual approach is to revisit the first few lines or stanzas. Often there is an image or idea I can repurpose, recontextualize, and make wholly new based on what's occurred from its first usage.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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