Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Jose Padua and Sean Thomas Dougherty

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, October 21st, 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 twelfth post in the series, we have Jose Padua and Sean Thomas Dougherty.

Jose Padua was born in Washington, DC and is a veteran of New York's spoken word literary scene. His first book, *A Short History of Monsters*, was chosen by Billy Collins as the winner of the 2019 Miller Williams Poetry Prize and is out from the University of Arkansas Press. His poetry and essays appear regularly at Vox Populi.

I used to mourn lost thoughts—ideas which came to me, for instance, while I was riding the subway or taking a walk but which I never wrote down. Later, I'd remember having some cool idea, which somewhere during the course of the day went missing. Somewhere along the line, though, I quit worrying about these things. I let my mind wander as was its habit. Sometimes I'd hang onto to an idea or image, other times I'd lose them. I didn't realize until much later in life that I had attention deficit "disorder" and what's more, that I was mostly likely what they call "on the spectrum."

I'd been writing poems since I was in college, but the poetry really didn't start taking off until I gave in to the way my mind worked. Until I gave up trying to fit in, or say what I thought other

people might want to hear. The way to do it, I figured out, was to let people into my head. What goes on in my head, of course, isn't for everyone. But those who do like it are welcome to hang out for a while.

My poems, then, tend to come very quickly. I finish the first draft of most of my poems in an hour or less. I start with a line that randomly comes into my head. It could have something to do with where I was that morning or something that happened thirty years ago. Whatever it is, I let my mind wander and make odd connections the way it always does, writing it all down along the way. Whether my thoughts are funny or scary or sick, I let them happen—I try not to filter them. I know that the poem is done when it feels like the end of some old Jean-Luc Godard film. Afterwards, when I've got it all down, I look at it as a whole and take out anything that bores me, anything that doesn't move me. That's pretty much the only filter I apply to my thoughts. When I'm done, I step away from wherever I was and look for somewhere else to go.

Sean Thomas Dougherty is the author or editor of 18 books including *Not All Saints*, winner of the 2019 Bitter Oleander Library of Poetry Prize; and *Alongside We Travel: Contemporary Poets on Autism* (NYQ Books 2019)). His book *The Second O of Sorrow* (BOA Editions 2018) received both the Paterson Poetry Prize, and the Housatonic Book Award from Western Connecticut State University. He works as a care giver and Med Tech, and lives with the poet Lisa M. Dougherty and their two daughters in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Every poem is different and organic. I mean sometimes people will compare a poem to building a house, a chair, a room. They will use metaphors of carpentry and craft. But for me, every poem is even more different. A sonnet say may be like building a house, but another poem may be like trying to birth a dragonfly, or another like trying to navigate the path of a falling leaf. I honestly am not trying to be oblique here. I think this question is sort of unanswerable, as most questions of how to make art are. Technically though, since it is a poem, it always comes down, for me to sound. A poem is all about the pressure, in language of sounds, for our purposes in English. Everything else—meaning, image, anything—I find secondary. In the end a poem is about a certain set of sounds that we choose or stumble upon that when put together give a shape, and out of that shape, give us meaning or a certain understanding of the silence that surrounds that shape of sound. Often a poem, particularly in trying to end one, I suspect, is as much about what is said or withheld as what is written.

I usually start a poem with a line I've found throughout the day, something said by someone that I overhear. But a poem can often start with one word. The idea or etymology of sound and meanings in that word. Others begin visually, something I've witnessed or read. Most of my poems then grow out of my lived experience. If I am starting from scratch, rather than the poem "finding me," say I am working from a prompt or a vague feeling, I will write down a series of words and then put them together to hear the first shape of sound those words might mean or make. Sometimes I just sit down and start telling the story. I often think of the weather. I just sit down and ask these three questions: what does the rain say? What does the wind bring? What does the snow erase? Someone will answer one of them. Some day from our childhood or somewhere. Some dead voice we carry. And I go from there.

I move with sound, but the shape of that sound is the sentence. I write a lot of prose poems. I often privilege the sentence over the line. For most of my work I usually use the sentence as the unit of

measure. For lines, I often turn to my first editor my wife Lisa M. Dougherty who has a great sense of line and suspension and sees opportunities for more meaning making. I am not a “natural poet” in that what I write is often somewhere between poetry and prose. I think and breathe more in sentences than in lines or meters. I think of the poem more as a relationship between sentences, between narrative and metaphorical movement, driven by the voice that is listening in my head that isn’t me, but is the voice of that certain poem. Often in my poems, like a relationship, the secret to the end is embedded in the beginning but I never know that until I arrive.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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