Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Joseph Fasano and John Guzlowski

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, October 7th, 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 eleventh post in the series, we have Joseph Fasano and John Guzlowski.

Joseph Fasano is the author of the novel *The Dark Heart of Every Wild Thing* (Platypus Press, 2020). He is the author of four books of poetry–*The Crossing* (2018), *Vincent* (2015), *Inheritance* (2014), and *Fugue for Other Hands* (2013). His honors include the Cider Press Review Book Award, the Rattle Poetry Prize, and a nomination for the Poets' Prize, "awarded annually for the best book of verse published by a living American poet two years prior to the award year." He serves on the Editorial Board of Alice James Books, and he teaches at Columbia University and Manhattanville College.

I believe a poem finds its form when the craft and the magic are the same, indistinguishable and inseparable from one another. For me, a poem most often begins with an image that expresses itself in a particular linguistic music. That is, the image does not exist separate from its expression, at least as far as the poem is concerned.

In my experience, the poem then grows organically from that original energy, and the poet follows

the unfolding of the poem. Just as the work of our lives is to continually clarify to ourselves what mysteries we are living, so the poem slowly reveals the great question of its existence.

As for the question of when a poem is finished, it's perhaps true, as Valéry says, that poems are only abandoned, never finished, but there does come a time when a poem banishes its maker. No more can be done, because the poet's contact with that world has ended. And now all it can do is live or die on its own.

John Guzlowski's writing appears in *Rattle,North American Review, Crab Orchard Review,* and other journals. *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, his poetry memoir about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany, won the Benjamin Franklin Poetry Award and the Eric Hoffer/Montaigne Award. His most recent book of autobiographical poems is *True Confessions* (Darkhouse Books). He is also the author of the Hank and Marvin mystery novels (reviewed in the *New York Times*) and a weekly columnist for the *Dziennik Zwiazkowy*, the oldest Polish daily newspaper in the US. John is also a retired professor who spent a long long time teaching writing.

I absolutely believe in inspiration, the muse that speaks to me. When I first started writing, I thought the idea of a muse was just a gag, some bullshit left over from the Greeks. But then I finally came to believe in the muse after that. What I noticed was that thoughts and words are always popping into my head, and I don't know where they're coming from, but there they are, and I have to write them down immediately because the muse isn't going to whisper twice what she whispered once. Sometimes, I hear a phrase in my head, a combination of a few words or phrases, and I like the sound or the image or the thought, and I write it down. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, as soon as I start writing the word or phrase I heard in my head, it will lead me to another phrase and another. I don't try to force it. I just try to let the words lead me to where they want me to go.

What follows after this is generally a slower process of revision and playing with the poem. When I was teaching creative writing, I used to tell students that editing wasn't editing, it was really experimenting. When you make a change to a poem, you're experimenting with it, playing with it, trying to see what else you can do. Sometimes this process takes a couple days, sometimes longer. How do I know I'm finished? When I can read the poem out loud and it feels fluid and like it came from me immediately without hesitation or any kind of editing. That's when I know it's finished.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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