
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Joshua Nguyen and Susan Nguyen

Bunkong Tuon · Tuesday, April 5th, 2022

For this sixty-eighth post in our Poets on Craft series, we have Joshua Nguyen and Susan Nguyen.

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.



Joshua Nguyen is the author of *Come Clean* (University of Wisconsin Press), winner of the 2021 Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry, and the chapbook, “American L?c Bát for My Mother” (Bull City Press, 2021). He is a Vietnamese-American writer, a collegiate national poetry

slam champion (CUPSI), and a native Houstonian. He is a PhD student at The University of Mississippi, where he also received his MFA.

I approach form in poetry as a game. If you ask any of my friends, I am a pretty competitive person. It was instilled in me at a pretty young age. I have vivid memories of driving two-and-a-half hours outside Houston, TX to Lake Charles, where I thrived in the sounds and sights of the casino [I learned poker at a pretty early age]. I give a lot of effort in playing sports or board games [currently, my favorite board game is Wingspan]. And from 13 – 21, I grew up participating in various youth and collegiate poetry slam teams [imagine performing a heartfelt poem about your grandma and five random audience judges give your poem a 2.4 out of 10]. I’ve had to learn to adapt to rules in order to succeed. I’ve learned to study the rules so I can break them.

This craving of rules and structure is part of my personality. I’m a pretty type-A person [I’m definitely a high-maintenance roommate, dirty dishes laying around in the sink piss me off!]. But because of this gamesmanship, I look at poetic forms as a type of written game where I have to adapt the rules in order to win [win, in this context, means writing what I need to write within the confines of the form]. I see poetic forms as a productive challenge.

When I approach writing a brand new poem, there are two ways in which form seeps its way into my work.

1. The content/feeling/idea/theme of the form perfectly matches a form that I already know. For example, I wrote a poem called “[In Praise of My Threaded Eyebrows](#),” and the form came so easily. *Threading? What kind of poetic form threads? A PANTOUM!* The weaving of repeated lines in a pantoum matched perfectly the weaving motion of getting your eyebrows threaded.

Or when I use the American l’c bát form to talk about Vietnamese diaspora, since the form itself was a form I appropriated from Vietnamese literature for the English language. And the form was a personal attempt to bridge myself with Vietnamese history while acknowledging the hyphenness of Asian-American.

2. When I get stuck, a good poetic form can save my poem from the abyss. Oftentimes, when I set out to write a poem, it comes from the initial idea, or line that I thought about that I am looking to expand. And then, I write a rough first draft, let it sit on its own for a month, let it marinate, and when I return to it, there’s a good chance that I’ll think it’s really really really bad. Sometimes, though, the poem is attempting to reach its arc but it’s missing something, and sometimes, it’s missing constraint. Personally, the vastness of the blank page scares me, and sometimes that fear can be read in the lines of a rough draft. But by putting the lines I have within the confines of a form [sonnet, ghazal, etc.], there is a self-editing that happens by nature of the rules I have to adapt to.

This happened in my poem, “Google Calendar for My Imposter Syndrome,” from my book, [Come Clean](#) (University of Wisconsin Press, 2021), where I wanted to write about imposter syndrome, but it was missing something. And then I thought of confirming it within the borders of the “google calendar” form, and it created an urgency that I needed. Another good example of this is Fatimah Aghar’s poem, “Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan,” where the stanzas of that poem are within the confines of a doorless blueprint of a house.

I love writing in form— it provides the structure I need within my own lines. It’s a game that I am willing to study, learn the strategy, and win [well, let the poem win].



Susan Nguyen's debut poetry collection, *Dear Diaspora*, won the 2020 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry and was published by the University of Nebraska Press in Sept 2021. She is an alum of Tin House Winter & Summer Workshops and Idyllwild Writers Week, and her poems have been nominated for Best of the Net and a Pushcart Prize; her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *Tin House*, *Diagram*, and elsewhere. Her hobbies, beyond reading and writing, include photography, zinemaking, hiking, and otherwise being outdoors.

I keep everything. Random memories that come to me as I am reading or watching. Things overheard. Dreams remembered. Images or lines conjured. Intriguing or eccentric oddities I find on the internet. I have always been a collector, scared of losing anything.

I keep all of these in a throwaway document that I affectionately call "word vomit."

My word vomit has taken many forms. Early on, it was a Google Doc that I kept open in an innocuous tab that I quickly toggled out of during my internship when someone walked by.

This Google Doc was dozens of pages long. In it, I drafted new work. I added to it every day. Copied and pasted lines from the rabbit holes I fell into. I remember spending a full week doing a Wikipedia deep-dive into serial killers.

Each morning when I took the metro, I grabbed a copy of the *Washington Post Express*, which was full of bizarre gems I wanted to save forever. Sometimes I even tore out sections, gluing them into a sketchbook. During my MFA, I started handwriting my word vomit in small notebooks for a while.

My word vomit provides a starting point, a way into writing. More importantly, it gives my ideas time to percolate – to shift the ecosystem of my long-ass Google Doc or notebook or, more

recently, my notes app. I might come up with a stellar line or image but often I can't use it right away – it's too forced. I'm shaking the polaroid too hard, willing the image to develop before it's ready. I have never been patient.

I've found that my word vomit takes the pressure off trying to write an amazing first draft. After all, I'm just trying to get the ideas down. I don't have to worry about cohesion, making sense. Feeding my word vomit images, overheard quotes, poorly-thought-out metaphors allows me to release them (no longer worried about losing them, forgetting) while still turning them over in the back of my mind.

When I sit down to write, the things I've explored in my word vomit weeks or months before always find their way back even when I am writing about something else. Often, they become the missing connection from one poetic leap to another. I must remind myself to trust this process.

For my debut poetry collection, *Dear Diaspora* (University of Nebraska Press 2021), my research was wide-ranging. Decades-old Yahoo! Answers questions. Newspaper articles from the '70s, '80s, and '90s. I collected things to mull over. Lines and ideas from my word vomit appear throughout my book. For example:

- In the long poem “The Boat People,” the section “Some Boat People Will be Returned” is comprised entirely of lines pulled from dozens of different articles, all a disjointed cacophony about the refugee experience.
- In the “You Google Vietnam” poems, I draw from my own experiences of constantly and literally Googling Vietnam – the many stories I saved.

These days, my writing is more sporadic. The ideas, images, sounds that I collect live in my phone. I am learning, again, how to be observant. To approach each day with curiosity, to save every wonder.

Here's the latest from my word vomit – maybe you'll stumble upon them again one day, living in a poem:

- I don't visit the cemetery where I climbed pine trees to their highest point. I don't visit the little field by the playground by the church
- Tom came to my craft talk and said kind words
- Maybe it's best to leave some memories undisturbed, leave the ghosts where they belong
- I think maybe one of the bartenders could have been him if he'd gotten shorter, face fuller
- The desire to be seen, to be doing better: an adult with a book and cool fucking pants

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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