Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Julia Lisella and Maria Lisella

Bunkong Tuon · Monday, August 15th, 2022

For this eighty-second post in our Poets on Craft series, we have Julia Lisella and Maria Lisella.

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.



Julia Lisella's most recent collection, *Our Lively Kingdom* (Bordighera Press, 2022), was named a finalist in the Lauria/Frasca poetry prize. Other titles include: *Always* (WordTech Editions, 2014), *Terrain* (WordTech Editions, 2007), and a chapbook, *Love Song Hiroshima* (Finishing Line Press, 2004). Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Ploughshares, Nimrod, Paterson Literary Review, VIA*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*. She also writes literary criticism, mainly about women writers, is a professor of English at Regis College in Massachusetts, and co-curates the Italian American Writers Association Literary Readings in Boston.

I don’t wait for inspiration to strike in order to start writing; if I did I would not produce much work! Instead, I set aside time during the week for writing and revising poems. It is not always the same time every day or every week, but it is the time I can carve out to sit down and say, *poems now*.

So, I often begin with something very ordinary, like something that happened that day or the day before. I don’t worry about whether it will make a good poem or not. I let the ordinary help me reach in deeper and deeper, free associating my way in until I get to something that feels worth telling, exploring, making sounds and rhythms around.

When I am very stuck I use different forms to just get myself to begin. Lately I’ve been working with the psalm form. I find it such a strange and interesting form of writing—the way the intentions of many psalms to express urgent concerns, complaints, or exuberant faith or joy, seem in direct contradiction with the shape and pacing of the psalm, its long lines, its flatness and declarative nature. Because I tend toward the lyrical, I find the psalm form can steady me, make me stay in one moment just a bit longer and work toward clarity.

Psalms also let me have a bit of fun, using a traditionally religious form to express very secular events, feelings, and memories, like the psalm I wrote recently responding to the overturning of the Roe v. Wade decision by the Supreme Court.

There are times though, when scheduled writing time and a little bit of inspiration (or maybe memory mining) work out: I am talking to a friend on the phone and a phrase she’s used or a product we both remember as kids or some other detail suddenly recalls a memory for me: an awkward afternoon some 40 years ago. I lock it away and keep talking to the friend. Later, I sit down and work it through—trying my best to feel it rather than tell it—the sounds, the way the air felt, the smells or colors.

Moving from one line to the next is another story! Many of my poems are rooted in memory, and so most of the time I feel I make poems through a kind of unearthing: dig, write it down, let it lead to whatever, and then go back in. Did the connection to this other moment get me deeper, or did it draw me away/distract me from something more difficult to write about, or more necessary to express? Once I feel the poem is exploring the area it needs to, then I scrape away the excess, trying to find the poem’s true shape—and I mean that quite literally—should it have more air, more space, or less?

As for endings, they come if you are patient. It’s easy to write a bad ending, one that ties everything up into a clever or neat little story, or an ending that obfuscates or confuses so much no one can remember the poem, and I’m sure I’ve been guilty of both of these kinds of endings! Ultimately, though, I want the poem to be like a good conversation—the themes, images, rhythms, emotions, can be taken up again, by another poem, or by a reader’s engagement with the poem I’ve left them. And it’s the ending’s job to offer us that echo, that vibration, that can promise this.



Maria Lisella's collections include: *Thieves in the Family* (NYQ Books), *Amore on Hope Street* (Finishing Line Press) and *Two Naked Feet* (Poets Wear Prada). Recent work appears in the anthologies: *Stronger Than Fear: Poems of Empowerment, Compassion, and Social Justice; Without a Doubt* (NYQ Books) and *NYC through the Eyes of the Poets Who Live Here*. She is the Queens Poet Laureate and an American Academy of Poets Fellow; is poetry editor for VIA – Voices in Italian Americana; contributes *to La Voce di NY* and *Never Stop Traveling* and co-curates the Italian American Writers Association readings.

I've worked full time as a travel writer for decades – an enviable job for sure so I met people from all over the world. It was primarily business writing, so I'd interview general managers, CEOs, marketing execs.

I'd tell myself reporting would warm me up for poetry, but it was only half true; I was actually hiding from poetry, escaping from its call whenever I could.

My training provided me with a safety net: reporters are witnesses to other people's stories. Soon poems arrived that were outtakes of articles.

After hours, I'd talk to guides, hotel clerks or waiters about what it felt like when the Berlin Wall fell or when Dubrovnik was bombed in the late 90s.

Then destinations became the subjects: Venice at Carnevale or the Bernini statues at the Galleria in the Borghese Gardens.

Just as I needed deadlines for my journalism, I realized I needed deadlines for poetry and the first arrived in the form of brevitas, an online poetry circle that began 19 years ago.

About 50 poets submit a poem of 14 lines or less, twice monthly and we comment or soft workshop each other's work privately on email.

The Madison Poets met weekly; and Thursday Morning Poets emerged from a series of workshops I led.

My husband's death changed everything, as did the pandemic. I peppered my weeks with poetry deadlines and lost my fear of writing with others.

Someone advised me then to "say yes to everything." So I applied for a fellowship from the Academy of American Poets in 2020.

That award made me realize poetry would save my life and deserved to be treated with joy, respect and dedication.

I began to lead and participate in workshops more frequently. These past two years, I have written more regularly and vigorously than ever before.

As remote as zoom may be, it offers participants privacy to write alone and together at the same time. Those sessions sparked playfulness in my writing and I write alongside participants, so I am just beginning a piece with them.

Strangers have given me courage. Workshops offer me a starting point, and a portfolio of surprises.

Grief, however, has become my most recent partner in poetry.

I have shepherded two posthumous books for my husband; a third is in the wings, but I hear my work calling me: it is time to focus on my chapbook waiting to be published, a collection I began with him; and an anthology on step parenting. Always looking at the next thing.

Do I write about other things? The past is what informs and propels me. When I write about

politics, aging, caretaking or mental illness, it is through a personal filter – yet I rarely use the first person – to that end, my reportorial skills cast me as a witness, a position of comfort.

Poetry has improved my reportorial writing.

I am sure I have still not written the poem I fear most to write.

Do I force poems into forms? I look at how I wrote the first draft, if it showed up in couplets, or quatrains, I often honor its original arrival.

When is it finished? That is a great question because I keep all the versions I write, and am never sure if that makes sense or it just muddles me.

On occasion, I cannibalize a long poem, sweep it into 14 lines or less and that is often when I find its real heart.

Poetry pumps my heart; it makes me feel alive.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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