Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: K.D. Harryman and Terri Linn Davis

Bunkong Tuon · Friday, April 15th, 2022

For this seventieth post in our Poets on Craft series, we have K.D. Harryman and Terri Linn Davis.

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.

[K.D. Harryman](#)'s most recent collection of poetry, *A Girls Book of Knots* is forthcoming with BlazeVox[books]. She is the poetry editor for Five South and the author of *Auto Mechanic's Daughter* (Akashic, 2007). You can find her on Twitter @poetrybite.

Poems begin with obsessions for me. Usually that means what I'm reading whether it's an early 20th century encyclopedia of maritime knots or a graphic YA novel about summer camp. Sometimes, I'm obsessed with what I'm watching. My latest poem came out of my most recent habit of watching a full episode, sometimes two, of Columbo before bed with my partner. We're on season 5 and well under the spell of the imperfect magic that was 70s TV.

The poets I admire must do this too, I think, follow their obsessions. I'm thinking of Paisley Redkal's series of Mae West poems from her book *Imaginary Vessels* (Copper Canyon, 2016*)*. For poets, there are advantages to plumbing the depths of these obsessions.

Sometimes our obsessions allow us to come at difficult subject matter from an approachable angle of comparison. Think animal imagery in Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* (Graywolf, 2016). Or mythological allusion in Natalie Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (Copper Canyon, 2012).

Sometimes, our obsessions allow us to keep writing when we want to turn away. In the recent *White Bull* by Elizabeth Hughey (Sarabande, 2022) the poet turns the language of a racist politician upside down. She uses her "obsession" to attempt to right a wrong.

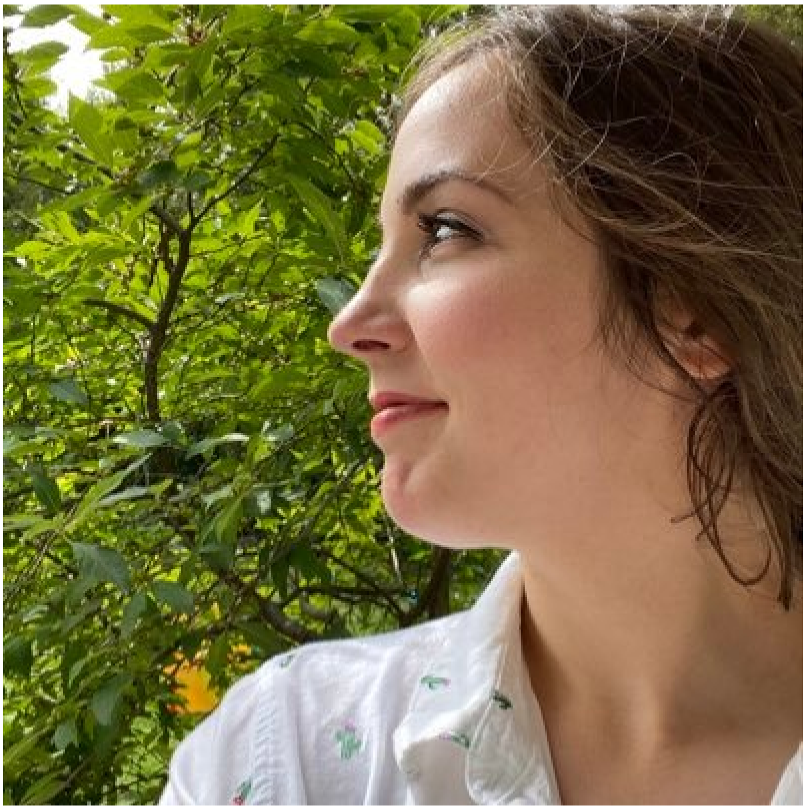
I've been working on a manuscript of poems for the last few years. It started with the Ashley Book of Knots (Doubleday, 1944). I had become fascinated by the diagrams and instructions. I borrowed from and at times manipulated and subverted the source material. I used terminology of knot-making to write about being female in a patriarchal society, about poverty, about pulling your way out of muck, out of the past, about making yourself into something new.

You start writing about knots or Leonard Nimoy who happens to be guest starring on the most recent episode of Columbo but you're thinking about family, place, adolescence or the father you never knew, climate change, civil rights, or whatever themes always seems to course through that heavy, thumping poet's heart of yours. The poems that have nothing to do with knots still belong in the same manuscript because of the underlying themes. Hopefully, the poems speak to one another academically and emotionally.

Much like obsessions provide cohesion and conversation and tension among poems in a manuscript, they provide scaffolding to get you from one line to the next in individual poems. Additionally, when your focus is diverted toward the obsession there's room for comparison and association to sneak in, which often makes for my favorite poetic element, surprise. I love a gut punch ending. I love to be blindsided, T-boned even, by a good *volta*.

I used to think I was done with a poem when it made me cry because poems were emotional manifestations for me. The more I write and study though, the more I see poems as concrete, sturdy, made things. With the latest manuscript I knew it was done because when I held it up and shook it, nothing fell away.

I think ending a poem is like that, too. You sit with it. Maybe you baby it. Don't let anyone read it for a time. Maybe you interrogate it. You hand it off to trusted readers and editors. Regardless of how the poem came about, eventually you hold it up to the window. Are there holes, thin spots, parts where your workmanship shows? Where does it shine? What does it reflect?



Terri Linn Davis is a poet and writer who lives in Connecticut with her co-habby and their three children. She has been invited to attend the 2022 Kenyon Review Writers Workshop for poetry, and she was the recipient of the Jack and Annie Smith Poets and Painters Award (2018). You can find her on Twitter @TerriLinnDavis and on her website www.terrilinndavis.com

When I was in my MFA program, I needed a deadline to be able to write. Now that I'm coming up on a year out of grad school, I take my time. I have *never* been a fast writer. I write one poem over weeks and weeks.

And I absolutely cannot write with pen and paper. I like using the computer because there's a permanence to setting ink down that makes me anxious. Within Google Docs, I can move lines around, play with line breaks, and experiment with structure.

My writing *always* begins with thinking. I keep "seed" ideas in my notes app on my phone. I'm a magpie for language and impressions. It's so important to write down these seed ideas in as much detail as you can muster as soon as you think of them. You'll forget!

Here's some examples of what I've kept:

- "It's me, your skin."
- "Dwelling—a dwelling (house) and dwelling on a feeling memory"
- "Synecdoche or metonymy dog poop"

Here is me not taking my own advice. The only one I might be able to use is the seed on "dwelling." The other ones I keep around for my own entertainment.

Poems are strange because every time I think about starting to write a new one, I'm overcome by the irrational fear that I can't. I can't, and I'll never be able to write another poem EVER again!

It’s like I’ve forgotten everything.

Recently, after reading Mary Carr’s *The Art of Memoir*, I was struck by this statement: “I often find that any bafflement I face on the page…is instantly answered once I find the right voice.”

Yes! For every poem I write, I need a new speaker. The lines won’t look the same as my previous poem, the stanzas, the imagery, the tone. I need to find the right voice.

Once I’ve decided on a seed idea to use, my next step is to browse poems for inspiration on how to form this new poem’s voice. I subscribe to Poetry Daily and other poetry “poem-a day” style subscriptions. Verse Daily is great for this part, too. I’ll search through poems until a form, structure, or often a specific syntax catches my eye.

Usually this act of combing through poems is what I need to get me started with my first line. My first lines become my steering wheel for the rest of the poem.

Another way I get into a poem is to take interesting language from related or unrelated articles. I love Scientific American for this. Poets often research obscure topics for their poetry and this research is the perfect time to gather yourself some good words. I’ve used texts like food recipes and Mortuary Science textbooks. There’s just something about corralling together words and phrases I wouldn’t have come up with on my own that leads to a breakthrough.

But poems are so much bigger than diction or word choice. A poem works rhetorically through length of lines, forms (like sonnets and villanelles), stanzas, sounds (alliteration), white space. I imagine the process of writing a poem as an elaborate chain-reaction type machine that you might have seen in movies like *Home Alone* or *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids.*

One of my favorite parts of writing a poem is playing around with line breaks. I use two tactics towards line breaks within every poem I write.

In some cases, I’ll end a line (enjambed or end-stopped) on a word that I feel is significant. That end word is one that I want the reader to notice. It works as a spotlight. Another way to work with line breaks is with surprise. If I want to surprise a reader, then I might enjamb my line with a shocking image or a surprising word on that next line so it’ll hit the reader right in the face.

After years of reading and writing poems your conscious self and your unconscious self work in tandem to create your poet brain. It becomes second-nature; for me—remembering that is the hard part.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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