
Cultural Daily

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Poets On Craft: Louisa Schnaithmann and Mark Danowsky

Bunkong Tuon · Thursday, October 28th, 2021

For this forty-ninth post in the Poets on Craft series, we have Louisa Schnaithmann and Mark Danowsky.

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.



Louisa Schnaithmann is the author of *Plague Love* (Moonstone Press, 2021). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *The Mantle*, *Rogue Agent*, *Gargoyle*, and *The Broadkill Review*, among others. She is the consulting editor for *ONE ART: a journal of poetry*, and lives in Philadelphia. She can be found on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#).

When I begin a poem, or rather when I am inspired to write a poem, usually a line comes to me, a line that contains a singular image. I go back to this idea a lot—the singular image—because I feel like it describes a lot about how I write or come up with a poem. Sometimes the line and image is

very clear to me, and sometimes it's fuzzy and needs more work. Oftentimes, I have to jot it down on paper or on my phone so I don't forget it!

From there, I try to follow the image to where it wants to take me, all the while trying to figure out what it's trying to say. What does the moon want from me in a poem, for example? Is it accusatory? Forgiving? A divine goddess beckoning me to write more? All of these questions are swirling around in my head as I write the poem. Of course, even in a first draft, I'm paying careful attention to line breaks, word choices, and the musicality of the writing.

Lately, I've been drawing on a lot of inspiration from my childhood, mainly in the form of memories, both good and bad. I was once told by J.C. Todd, a poet that I admire, that I write "lyric poetry with an incomplete narrative". To this day, I'm not 100% certain what that means, but I think that it's a decent description of my poetic style.

As far as poets whose work I've been inspired by or drawn to, I feel that I owe a huge debt to Sylvia Plath. I first read *Ariel* when I was 14 or 15, and even though I didn't know much about her life at that time, reading her felt like someone struck a gong deep inside of me. That sound is still reverberating in me today. I also really admire Jack Gilbert, Louise Glück, Mary Ann Samyn, and Rita Dove.

How do I know when one of my poems is ending or "over"? It's strange, but I sort of feel it out in a very intuitive, vaguely "negative capability" kind of way. It's done when it's done, I suppose. Of course, revision happens, but I also am always a bit fond of my first drafts, which feel very raw and authentic to me. Revising can be a necessary part of writing poetry, definitely, but it can also be the death of a good poem, in some instances.



Mark Danowsky is a Philadelphia poet, author of the poetry collection *As Falls Trees* (NightBallet Press) and *JAWN* forthcoming from Moonstone Press. He is Editor-in-Chief of *ONE ART: A Journal of Poetry*, Senior Editor at *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, Poetry Craft Essays Editor at *Cleaver Magazine*, and a Regular Contributor at *Versification*. Find him on social media [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). His personal blog is [here](#).

I love the idea of always being at “Square One.” The importance of trying to maintain a beginner’s mindset, being curious, acting as the sort of amateur scholar who is a jack-of-all-trades.

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Each poem is new. No choice. The way you cannot step in the same river twice. The way you cannot repeat a word or a phrase or a line in a poem without saying it another way. In this framework, repetition is never repetition, never sameness. And the result? You are always meaning making, always *making it new*.

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Abigail Adams says, “Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.” Stay curious. Stay receptive.

*

Ask yourself, what sort of masks am I wearing today? What roles am I playing? Who is this version of “me” moving through the world and being in the world with others? Well, that is the speaker of the poem you bring to the page that day. That is you, then, in that moment. Of course, as Ralph Waldo Emerson says, “Tomorrow is another day...”

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I believe in Richard Hugo’s “personal universe.” The words you use are the words you hold close to your heart, the words that speak to your place in the world.

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My poems are, at times, adjacent to my state of well-being; my headspace and bandwidth on such and such spectrum at the time of writing. They depend, in part, on what happened to me that day and what was happening around me.

*

My mind is busy. Too busy, maybe. But I would not have it any other way.

*

I am not a spiritual person in the conventional sense. That being said, I feel there is an interconnectedness we all have with each other, with our surroundings, with the natural world.

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We live in a grim society full of glitzy distractions. Seek out the humanity beyond all that is ephemeral and fleeting. Locate what matters.

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Much good poetry tends to have high stakes. Good poems also find serenity, love, kindness—the sort of wisdom that requires high emotional intelligence.

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From the outside looking in, some approaches appear as if the poet is going through a “dry spell.” Many of the best poets I know write in what I like to call the “pot boiling over” method. They gather material, mull it over, consciously or subconsciously, they go about their daily goings on, and then, eventually, what was always going to arrive spills out onto the page.

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In a 2021 virtual reading, Richard Blanco used a metaphor about the slow formation of a pearl in your mind. Charles Baxter says, “We must grow to love whatever happens slowly.”

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You can take it fast, you can take it slow, the key is discovering what works best for you.

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At the end of the day, your chosen road was the only road worth traveling.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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