Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Lucyna Prostko and Sarah Giragosian

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, November 18th, 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 sixteenth post in the series, we have Lucyna Prostko and Sarah Giragosian.

Lucyna Prostko, a Polish-American poet, graduated from the M.F.A. program at New York University, where she was awarded the New York Times Fellowship. Her first book of poems *Infinite Beginnings* was published by Bright Hill Press. She is currently pursuing Ph.D. in English at SUNY Albany.

When I am lucky, the first line of a poem is an invitation, a whisper from the unconscious self: *You have something to say.* This is probably the most exciting way in which inspiration tiptoes into my life. Sometimes it happens at 4:00 a.m. in the morning or in the middle of preparing dinner, and if I accept the invitation immediately and write by hand in my journal, I might be able to write the entire poem in one sitting with only minor revisions later. But this is not always possible. Often the voice goes unheeded, as I find myself in the midst of a busy life. The invitation lingers only for a little while, and then it is withdrawn. More often, when I attempt to write a poem, I start working with a fleeting image, a few words spoken to me by a friend or a stranger, or just a vague idea. The idea might come from my notebook – a hidden storehouse of curious fragments, memories, and dreams, but it might also occur to me as I am sitting in front of an empty page. Many ideas come from mundane experiences that contain the promise of inner mystery – the persistence of an osprey fishing over a lake or the memory of coming home after long travel and finding myself spooked by the sense of the unfamiliar in a familiar setting. Some poems come from reading newspaper articles, and some arise from my curiosity about ordinary human lives, or the history of my immigrant family.

Ideally, I start my writing day by reading poetry that I can use as a way of entering the music within. I do not exactly try to imitate, but it helps me to join my voice with the chorus of other poets' voices. I am content to be part of a larger community of writers – those who form my traditions, both Polish and American, and those who are my peers and contemporaries. Occasionally, a line of someone's poem becomes an inspiration for my own. Sometimes the music of the poem invites me toward my own music. It helps me find the right note. If I succeed in this, writing can be less laborious because it is the sonic quality of the poem that most often guides my lines and the progression of images. If I do not find the right music at first, I trust a meticulous process of revision to make the poem come alive. Often I explore different forms before I find the voice that sounds just right. I tend to write the first draft quickly to capture the fleeting imaginative impulse, trusting that the unconscious self might have a better vision of the whole than the conscious self does. When I sit to write a poem, I want the experience to be rendered truthfully, but also to be somewhat transformed by my imagination. The mundane or harrowing personal experience can be endowed with the greater power of mythopoetic or philosophical truth.

When do I know the poem is over? I seldom worry about it. I write as long as the impulse to go on is still there. Sometimes, heeding the advice of Donna Masini, my first, and brilliant, workshop teacher, I write past what seems to be the ending to see if there are more unconscious forces at work that want to bring the poem forward. Then, I cut down to what I feel is essential and engaging. While pruning the various branches of the lyrical and narrative truth, I engage with the sonic, metaphorical, and image-driven content of the poem. I read each line out loud to carefully consider line and stanza breaks and the truthfulness and "shimmer" of language. When the poem opens itself to a deeper mystery of inner and outer life, I am content.

Sarah Giragosian is the author of the poetry collection *Queer Fish*, a winner of the American Poetry Journal Book Prize (Dream Horse Press, 2017) and *The Death Spiral* (Black Lawrence Press, 2020). The craft anthology, *Marbles on the Floor: How to Assemble a Book of Poems*, which is co-edited by Sarah and Virginia Konchan, is forthcoming from The University of Akron Press. Sarah's writing has appeared in such journals as *Orion*, *Ecotone*, *Tin House*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. She teaches at the University at Albany-SUNY.

The process of generating a poem often begins with something that moves, startles or surprises me. That jolt to the system can be an image, a misprision of some kind, a dream, a miscarriage of justice that I can no longer tolerate, outrage at our current administration, a snippet of an overheard conversation (I'm still looking for a chance to quarry and inject a phrase that I heard while eating in a diner: "The fallacies of her garden are immense!"), a question, a new word ("porcupette," for example, is one that I am hoping to use in my next poem), a certain turn of phrase, or a visceral reaction to art, an animal or person, or an experience. When there's something rattling in the back of my consciousness that I can no longer ignore, that's when I know it's time to write. It's not groundbreaking for a poet to say that there is some sort of initiating impulse that galvanizes a poem, but for me there is always a sense of finding an opportunity for deeper inquiry, a chance to stage discovery, but that doesn't mean that a poem is claiming epistemological mastery or resolution. Elizabeth Bishop once said that poetry is a form of "thinking with one's feelings," and I agree; poetry is a process of theorizing tied to affect and the body. It's also a form of listening to the body, to the other, and to oneself.

Research is a significant part of my poetic process. As an ecopoet, I am interested in how a lyric poetics rooted in the sensory and the concrete world can help me become a better reader and interpreter of the natural world and prepare me to take action. Researching animals and environments, both through my own field research and my reading, has made me more convinced that animals' ways–of-being in the world can help to animate and physicalize language and innovate poetic forms. My research in biosemiotics and interspecies communication has led me to believe that an animal language exists and that it bears significant ecological implications: we are not the only bearers of language, and a viable ecological language exists in the natural world should we choose to read it. I'm interested in zoopoetics, poems that think through and even are structured by animal poiesis, such as bird songs and dialects and animal mimicry, repertoires, and behaviors. Moreover, while ideas themselves can be riveting, poetry is embodied and a poem's musicality provides propulsion, movement from one line to the next. At the same time, crafting a poem also involves recursion, a turning back to the previous line to tinker and tweak the language and syntax until the poem can move forward. It's like holding in mind a chord before advancing on to the next progression. In order to revise a poem, I have to get outside of the poem, imagine myself into another's consciousness and situate myself as a listener to my poem. Meaning-making is always a conversation, even if it is with oneself. I think of a successful poem as one that opens up new pathways of thought. If I'm stuck, I'll try to write what I fear to write, listen to music, play with an animal (my cat or my tortoises), or turn to another art form to activate new channels of thinking and feeling.

In terms of finishing a poem, I have to admit that it's rare that a poem ever feels quite completed for me; there's always a nagging feeling that there's more tinkering that needs to be done. I'm always waiting for the moment when the poem feels "just right." That intuitive feeling that a poem has landed, for me, is connected to closure. At one point in my early training as a poet, I believed that I was striving for a lyric end that involved climax, epiphany, or emotional release, but after reading John Emil Vincent's brilliant *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* and studying queer poems as a graduate student, I realized that closure is not necessarily synonymous with a certain kind of emotional or intellectual payoff. Now I'm much more interested in upsetting a traditional beginning-middle-end lyric structure. A poem can offer up opportunities for multivalence, discursion, disturbance, and slippages, and yet still cohere. For me, resolution is not the endpoint nor is exhaustion. I don't like a poem that brakes, but one whirs with energy, even when it has reached its limit.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)