Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Maxine Scates and Kasey Jueds

Bunkong Tuon · Tuesday, April 19th, 2022

For this seventy-first post in our Poets on Craft series, we have Maxine Scates and Kasey Jueds.

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.

Maxine Scates is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *My Wilderness*, (University of Pittsburgh 2021). Her poems have been widely published in such journals as *AGNI, The American Poetry Review, Iowa Review, The New England Review, The New Yorker, Ploughshares, Poetry* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and have received, among other awards, the Starrett Prize, the Oregon Book Award for Poetry, and two Pushcart Prizes.

Writing poetry has changed my life in so many ways. It's how I find out what I don't know because it allows me to reach beyond the self I do know to dwell with mystery and uncertainty and

transformation. I think of it as a practice. When I sit down to write, I know that the three or four hours I have will be uninterrupted. It's crucial to me that I have a space which will allow me to be receptive and listening to whatever may arrive.

When I'm beginning a new poem, I never want to know what I want to write ahead of time. Yet, often that's easier said than done because all of us are capable of trying to force the poem to do what we want it to do or, for that matter, what we think someone else may want it to do rather than what the poem wants to do. I try not to censor myself, and I try to let the poem have its own life.

I try to be aware of what I still think I'm not supposed to write about—what I'm still afraid to write about—and if that comes up I try to follow it. I've found it's useful to both give myself permission to say what enters and to remember that ultimately it's my choice to reveal it to others. By following in this way, I believe something in us is changed.

Moreover, I think every poem we write is a bridge to the next poem. And, while I'm thinking about what one does not write, the flip side of not writing about a particular subject is worrying about writing too much about a particular subject.

For instance, my most recent book, *My Wilderness,* is, in part, about the deaths of both my mother and my friend. After their deaths, I wrote poem after poem—not all of them made it into the book, but each poem did lead me to the next. I believe that by going deeper and deeper, we tap into archetypal material which out of a seemingly singular experience speaks to the experience of many others.

I think of the whole process of writing the poem as an arc. I write many, many drafts. My early drafts are messy. I want everything to enter that wants to enter until I feel I've exhausted what I have to say. After five or ten or fifteen drafts or more, I've reached the top of the arc.

On the downside of the arc, I begin to craft the poem, to try to locate what wants to be there and what may be edited out but will probably reappear in another poem. Then, though some of it may already be in place, I attend to how I want the line, tone and sharpening of imagery to embody the feeling of the poem.

For me, exhausting what we have to say is the most important part of the process because all too often we begin the crafting stage too soon and that leaves too much unsaid. I've done this for a long time so, returning to the notion of practice, I think knowing when a poem is finished becomes intuitive. Still, I do set my "finished" poems aside and come back to them after a few weeks and sometimes I find they aren't finished at all. I'd like to think that sense of being unfinished speaks to the unending experience of what we tap into when we give ourselves up to the poem.

Kasey Jueds is the author of two collections of poetry, both from the University of Pittsburgh Press: *Keeper*, which won the 2012 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, and *The Thicket*. Her work can be found in journals including *American Poetry Review, Crazyhorse, Narrative, Beloit Poetry Journal, Ninth Letter, Cincinnati Review, Bennington Review,* and *Pleiades*. She lives in a small town in the mountains of New York State.

My poems often begin with an image or phrase that feels alive to me, that has an energy that wants to keep on going. It might be two or three words that seem to belong together, but not in any

logical way. Or it could be a phrase that has a particular rhythm, a music that wants to spin itself out.

Lots of these images or phrases come from my notebook, which I try to write in most days, even if it's just for a few minutes. I took a class a few years ago with the beautiful poet and teacher Sarah Ann Winn, and she introduced us to Lynda Barry's four minute diary exercise (which you can find on YouTube and also in Barry's book *Syllabus*). I love this way of approaching daily (or almost daily) writing, because it feels so doable.

I'm in love with the poetic line. I adore so many prose poems, and hybrid texts, and poems that use the space on the page in innovative and surprising ways. And I keep coming back to the line. I think I'm interested in the way lineation can both work with or against the meaning or feeling of a sentence or phrase. Or sometimes work with *and* against it.

I tend to move from one line to the next by asking which word, in the line I'm writing or revising, seems to want to be next to the white space that surrounds the poem. Which word wants to be amplified by that quiet, given a little extra room to breathe and shine?

Sometimes one line in a poem will seem to have a particular flavor that the following line turns upside down, because of the way white space steps in between those two lines and gently messes with them.

My all-time favorite example of this is from Sharon Olds's poem "The Winter After Your Death." In it, the speaker watches a pond where a fish moves "under the thick trap / door of ice." Because of the line break, the ice is both a trap door and a trap that isn't a door. Both a means of escape, and a place from which no escape is possible.

My teacher Tom Lux (another beautiful poet and human) encouraged us to read our poems line by line, backwards, when revising. In other words, we'd read the last line of the poem first, then the next-to-last, and so on. He saw it as a way of checking that each of the poem's lines had energy, was engaging and compelling on its own. I still revise using this technique and find it incredibly helpful.

Lineation feels like just one way that poems can magnify and hold the many-ness of meaning and being that is our life on this earth. The poems I love best, even the smallest ones, perfectly contain the contradictory multiplicity of the world. The world is always *many*—and so are we, as humans (though so many forms of public speech would have us believe differently).

I think we need the ways of knowing and being that poetry gives us especially urgently right now. We need so much more than the received, rehearsed, already-known stories that fill up the space around us. We all have a wild knowingness that reading and writing poems can touch and help lift into the light of day.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

This entry was posted on Tuesday, April 19th, 2022 at 8:53 pm and is filed under Education, Poetry, Criticism

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