

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Mike James and Shawn Pavey

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, February 17th, 2021

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 twenty-seventh post in the series, we have Mike James and Shawn Pavey.



Mike James makes his home outside Nashville, Tennessee and has published widely. His many poetry collections include: *Journeyman’s Suitcase* (Luchador), *Jumping Drawbridges in Technicolor* (Blue Horse), and *Crows in the Jukebox* (Bottom Dog.) He currently serves as an associate editor of *Unbroken*.

Very early in my writing life I fell in love with Paul Valery’s notion of “the given line.” This is the one line which often comes out of nowhere to get a poem going. Often the line does not end up in the final version. I am always jotting down odd words or phrases on scratch paper or dictating them into the notebook function on my cell phone. I often do that on walks and drives. Those snippets are starting points when I sit down to write.

I almost never have an idea of what I’m going to do. The absence of a roadmap is completely exhilarating because it encourages me to go in different directions. Sometimes those directions might be in regards to form (erasures, syllabics, prose poems, etc.) Sometimes the direction might be in subject matter. The more uncomfortable I am with something, the more faith I have in it. John Weiners said, “Write the most embarrassing thing you can think of.” That’s pretty good advice.

I write every day and I am generally working on a few poems at once. Many of my poems go through numerous revisions. A very few I get lucky with. Every poem is different and there’s a sound each poem is after. I know when I am done when I hear the poem click at the end. This is a very internal sound, but I always trust it and step away from the poem. To do anything else would just poison the silence.



Shawn Pavey is the author of *Talking to Shadows* (Main Street Rag Press, 2008), *Nobody Steals the Towels From a Motel 6* (Spartan Press, 2015), and *Survival Tips for the Pending Apocalypse* (2019, Spartan Press) which was 1st runner up for the 2020 Thorpe Menn Literary Excellence Award. He co-founded *The Main Street Rag Literary Journal* and served as an Associate Editor. He recently completed two months as a Poet in Residence at The Osage Arts Community. A graduate of the University of North Carolina's Creative Writing Program, he likes his Tom Waits loud, his bourbon single-barrel, and his basketball Carolina Blue.

So, for me, sitting down and scribbling a poem is only the first step in writing a poem. That just gives me something to shape. There are poets who sleep with the muses and emerge each day brimming with inspiration and perfectly formed first drafts. I am not one of those. Poetry is dismally compensated work that I cannot imagine not doing.

I think most poets are always writing, though, by taking time to notice things in the world around them – the way sunlight hits a leaf at a specific time of day, how birdsong contains patterns and rhythms that we can duplicate with language. Poetry gives voice to the things we notice. The last few years have seen me writing more regularly, and I'm rarely more than three feet away from a notebook and a pen. However, there are times I just can't shut down the noise in my head long enough to find that space where I can listen to the poem that might emerge. So, maybe I'll play guitar or go for a walk or read some poems – these are things that help quiet my mind. Then, I'll sit back at the blank page and jot down what's whispering to me. Sometimes, it's just garbage and I walk away and start over. There are times I sit down with a half-formed poem or stanza or line in my head and explore where that takes me. There are times when I sit down and intend to write a ghazal, an experimental sonnet, a syllabic construction that intrigues me, and that structure helps drive the next word, the next line, the next stanza and, often, the next poem.

My first drafts rarely see daylight. I have a few trusted friends with good editorial eyes who will look at a draft and offer suggestions or insights, but I find the poem usually emerges on the editing lathe. Usually, I'm shaving away the useless bits, the boring language or the lines that don't "do" anything. I like to circle back and make sure my verbs are doing as much of the heavy lifting as I've paid them to do, that my deictic articles are sparse and the ones that remain are necessary. I look at word choices and wonder if there is a more musical way to write a thing without making the poetics too obvious. Sometimes I read them aloud and pay attention to where I might fumble a word or line and then look at that place to see why I got tripped up there. It's usually something in the poem that still doesn't work. Sometimes I discover that the poem didn't really begin until the 12th line, or that it should have ended 10 lines sooner. I consider a poem finished when I can see it walking on its own out the door. It doesn't mean I won't edit it again 20 years later, though. It's my poem. I'll do what I want to it.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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