
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Mitchell Nobis and Jared Beloff

Bunkong Tuon · Monday, May 2nd, 2022

For this seventy-third post in our Poets on Craft series, we have Mitchell Nobis and Jared Beloff.

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.



Mitchell Nobis is a writer and K-12 teacher in Metro Detroit whose unpublished manuscript has been a finalist, etc. He facilitates Teachers as Poets for the National Writing Project and hosts the Wednesday Night Sessions reading series. Find him at @MitchNobis or mitchnobis.com.

For about 20 years, I was a teacher-writer who never sought publication for creative work. I did some professional writing (co-authored a book on teaching and wrote some essays), but my poetry and fiction stayed in notebooks and hard drives—I didn't think of myself as "a writer." A little

over five years ago, I finally followed through on years of encouragement (mostly from my teaching mentor Janet Swenson and other Red Cedar Writing Project friends) and submitted to lit mags.

As a parent and K-12 teacher, I have no alone time. I'd love to grab a pen and notebook and convene with the muses, but the reality of work and parenthood means most of my first drafts are just scraps of ideas. I grab notes all over the place: in voice notes recorded on my phone while commuting or walking the dog, in emails to self, on backs of receipts left in my car, and sometimes still in actual notebooks.

During my lunch break or after the kids are finally asleep for the night, I'll return to the notes and start to give them form. I've also gotten used to being the weirdo writing poems behind the first-base dugout at my kids' Little League practices or in a parking lot. Embrace weirdness, you know?

Driving and walking the dog are times for the brain to reflect, to notice what it noticed. It's no surprise then that my poetry tends to reflect on parenting, climate crisis, and other things already on my mind. I love reading poems that help me reframe my thinking about the world, and that's largely what my own writing does for me. I suppose I hope it does that for my readers, too.

Writing is usually a solitary act for me. I rarely share with anyone until I feel it's done, though I appreciate the occasional chance to collaborate and love feedback from my wife and other writers, like Jared.

Deeper in the revision stage, I like to notice what a poem is already doing, and then refine the structure around that. Sometimes the line length determines itself. First stanza all four words per line? Let's keep that going. Lots of blank verse already happening? Let's make the whole thing blank verse. I rarely set out to follow a form, but if I see it happening, I'll chase it further.

If an ending doesn't present itself naturally, I shelve that poem and return to it later. I have an overflowing folder of "B" poems, the ones I hope to return to someday. A draft usually falls into that folder because it lacks an ending or it's only an observation with no "so what?" to it. If the poem says or does what it needs to, it's done, though admittedly some of my favorites are a total mystery to me too in that regard.

Generally, when it comes to craft, I go with what feels right. That's a terrible explanation because it offers no specific techniques, but ultimately it's a testament to reading a lot—and rereading the writers whose work resonates the most—to know what "feels right." Taking in others' work and letting it feed your own is what creative work boils down to. Questlove essentially defined creativity in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview when he said "you take old records, and you try to make them into new records." And I think it was Austin Kleon who said problems with output are problems with input. If I want to write, I have to read constantly.



Jared Beloff is a teacher and poet who lives in Queens, NY with his wife and two daughters. You can find his work in *Contrary Magazine*, *Rise Up Review*, *Barren Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *The Shore* and elsewhere. He is the editor of the Marvel-inspired poetry anthology, *Marvelous Verses*. His work was nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize for 2021.

Starting poems varies for me. Many times, especially with thematic poems I'm trying to put together for tighter collection, the start might come from out of research, some anecdote within a book that gets me going. Other times, I have a core image from memory like something I saw when looking with a poet's eye on my way to work or on a hike or listening to my daughters ramble about their current interests (five year olds help break you out of the norms of your thought patterns with questions that have a wide range of assumptions about you or the world. I highly recommend working with one from time to time). When I am stuck I go back to art history and try to study what the artist did both on the page and within their movement, then I start writing what I see and go from there, this works for writing "after poems" emulating great writers, too.

Moving from line to line is harder to describe. So much of my writing is intuitive, letting the first idea build an association and then playing off of that. I try not to be too conscious in my choices in

the first draft or take over too much control or it starts getting forced. I kill the poem at that point and wait for a better frame of mind. As I've grown, the process has become a good mixture of flow and control, listening for musicality in the phrasing and trying to develop new images. I also have some rules that I follow loosely while drafting and doing revisions: cut or vary articles, rearrange syntax to see how things flow, develop turns throughout a piece. UNLESS, my writing mind says nope this is the way and then I trust that and ignore whatever rules I've set up for myself.

I wish I had a substantive answer about ending poems other than that I like to end with an image or a combination of words that will resonate or haunt the reader for a while. Many times that line will occur to me in the middle of the writing and I will put it at the end and work my way to it.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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