Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Nahshon Cook and Joseph Ross

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, February 3rd, 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-fifth post in the series, we have Nahshon Cook and Joseph Ross.

Nahshon Cook is a poet and horseman. He is the author of *The Killing Fields* and *Communion* (both published by Shabda Press). He lives and works on his family's farm in Parker, Colorado.

For me, poeming is a meditation on metaphor as a bridge from the known to the unknown and a safe way back. Life is a canyon full of answers to questions we are never taught to ask. To blindly accept those answers is to be a casket for someone else's secrets. That's slavery. For me, freedom is that dark, low laying river flowing between the cliffs of knowledge and wisdom. I want to keep learning how to be there and stay relaxed. The in-between, flowing space is where I've learned that clear questions go in search of hosts: I am human. What does that mean? This exploration is the purpose of a poem.

To say what I want to say in as beautiful a way as possible is my personal touchstone for skillfully sculpted lines. When my intention is clearly expressed in as elegant, and simple a way as possible, I know a line is finished and I move on to the next until the poem is complete. Each word is a world. Each line, a planet.

When emotion fills the fissure that feeling creates within the space of a poem on a page, and all that needs to be said, has been said, and beautifully. That's it.

Joseph Ross is the author of four books of poetry: *Raising King* (2020), *Ache* (2017), *Gospel of Dust* (2013), and *Meeting Bone Man* (2012). He teaches English and Creative Writing at

Gonzaga College High School in Washington, D.C. and writes regularly at JosephRoss.net.

My poems usually begin with a feeling. I read, see, learn of something, and it evokes a feeling: anger, sadness, delight. I want to share that feeling and so a poem begins. Sometimes, a poem begins in my head with a phrase or line, but that only happens when there is already a feeling. For example: I had written a few poems about the 1963 bombing of the 16th Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four little girls. I wrote those poems because of the feelings of sadness and anger that act provoked in me. As I was reading various accounts of the bombing, I learned that two Black boys were also killed that day in Birmingham, one by a white boy on a motorcycle and another by a police officer. It struck me that while most people know of the four girls killed in the church, no one knows about these two boys. It felt to me like they were being lost to history. That concern deepened my feelings and I wrote elegies for each of the boys: "Requiem for Virgil Ware" and "Requiem for Johnny Robinson."

In most of my poems, I try to tell a story, whether of an actual event or a moment or a feeling. I move from one line to another through a kind of unfolding. My hope is that the poem unfolds the moment, the feeling, so that the reader can see it, experience it in some way, feel it. I try to find a mix of literal language and, what I call, surprising language. Surprising language, to me, is the magic of a poem. Surprising language lives beyond the literal. For example, "The handlebars of a boy's bicycle / can be a crucifixion // if the year is America…" Literally, a bike's handlebars cannot be a crucifixion and a year can't be America. So, because those constructions surprise the reader, taking her beyond the literal, I hope they might work in a poem. You wouldn't write an essay this way. But a poem can be built this way.

A poem ends when I think it has earned a sense of completion. It can end when it has told the story, shown the reader a moment, or evoked the feeling. I often find in early drafts that I over-write. Then, in revision, I need to ask myself "Has the poem told story?" If I'm being honest and I think it has, then I can remove anything that is superfluous. This requires discipline on my part because I often like the extra language. But liking the language doesn't make for a great poem. I need to stop when it is complete. If I like that language more than my earlier relating of the story, or feeling, then I may need to dig backward and take that language I like and put it earlier in the poem. I believe in the power of a poem's closing. Those lines are the poem's final engagement with the reader so they need to be strong, crisp, surprising, and loaded.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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