Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Nathan Spoon and Cynthia Atkins

Bunkong Tuon · Friday, January 14th, 2022

For this fifty-seventh post in the Poets on Craft series, we have Nathan Spoon and Cynthia Atkins.

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.

Nathan Spoon is an autistic poet with learning disabilities whose poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review, Crazyhorse, Gulf Coast, Poetry, Poetry Daily,* and the anthologies *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope* and *Sonnets from the American: An Anthology of Poems and Essays*. He is the author of a debut collection, *Doomsday Bunker,* and the chapbook *Fail Better! Feel Great!!* and editor of *Queerly*. (Photo by Allison Steinquest)

I am ADHD, autistic, and dyslexic, and these forms of neurological queerness are important to the way I write. All of these are disabilities, but, for me, there are some strengths present alongside my weaknesses. Perhaps most notably among the strengths, is that I have an ability, at least when writing poems, to consider the elements of a given poem simultaneously, so that I can write the poem in a single draft. This is a bit of good fortune, as I typically struggle with any other type of writing.

As peculiar as it may sound, I usually start a poem with what I call the poem feeling. Once I have this feeling, I begin visualizing multiple shapes moving through various kinds of spaces that appear all at once within my mind's eye. Then, as my mind settles, the spaces move into proximity with each other, and the shapes become the words of the first line or so of the poem. At this point I have a phrase or possibly a sentence to work with. It becomes extremely important to proceed carefully. If I am unable to keep care, things become confused, and the poem will seem forced, and the entire venture will fail.

To maintain the integrity of my process, I pause as often as I need to before writing the next phrase or sentence. This aspect of pausing is crucial to my writing process, especially since I often feel that I am in the middle of an avalanche of possibility, and I need to make choices that allow the poem to emerge.

Additionally, I tend to write in a voice that changes as it goes along, much like a chameleon or a

cuttlefish changes its colors. I give the feeling that everything belongs together by considering the sounds of words in relation to each other and by laying the poem out on the page in an orderly way. In fact, I often begin to have a sense of how the lines will be arranged and what type of poem I will be writing while writing the first words.

I can also add that meaning is not a primary concern when I am writing a poem, and, as I will not be redrafting the poem later, it never becomes a concern. Still, this is not to say I don't care about meaning. It's just that words and phrases are already so rich with meaning, and I am arranging—making a sort of dancing bouquet—out of what is already there. It is the act of arrangement, of composition, all in relation to the avalanche of possibility, that I am concerned with. Once I have the poem as a sharable artifact, I let the surplus go.

I typically end a poem in relation to its loose form. For example, I have recently been writing a lot of sonnets, and I say loose form because I write a sonnet in my own way: often in two seven-line stanzas.

Because I have a sense of the form early on, I can see the end coming, although I have no idea what it will be, it becomes clearer the closer it gets. I approach the end of a poem with an ease I don't know how to describe, as well as a feeling of anticipation, as I tend to get myself into a hole just before arriving, and the end is my—and the reader's—opportunity to climb out.

Cynthia Atkins is the author of *Psyche's Weathers*, *In The Event of Full Disclosure* (CW Books), *Still-Life With God* (Saint Julian Press 2020). Her work has appeared in many journals—*Alaska Quarterly Review*, *BOMB*, *Cimmaron Review*, *Diode*, *Florida Review*, *Indianapolis Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *New York Quarterly*, *North American Review*, *Permafrost*, and *Verse Daily*. She earned her MFA from Columbia University and has earned fellowships and prizes from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, The Writer's Voice, and Writers@Work. Atkins lives on the Maury River of Rockbridge County, Virginia, with artist, Phillip Welch and their family. (Photo by Anne Valerie Portrait)

I like to write things down, long-hand. Fragments, doodles, an abbreviation of a thought. For me, beginnings always start with the hand—the hand, pen and paper contacting my uncensored mind. Free hand gives me a sense of unadulterated openness, nakedness—and the knowledge also, that I will be the only one to see these mutterings. A certain room of privacy is where my composing happens. After many drafts, it's ready to be typed. The type and the screen feel more distant and objective—This is where I hone and prune and shape. My interior censors shift gears shift—and it begins to feel more *public*. The tailoring and fitting abide with typing, but these two parts—from hand to type—are an essential part of my process.

For me, the origin of a poem begins for me with an image. Images make the boat float. As Williams' said, "No ideas but in things."—I'll catch a glimpse, a person at the grocery store, a Vermeer painting, a yellow cup with light on it, a kid sledding—

I am impacted by visuals, ala a very *visual thinker*. I feel my job as a poet is to unpack those images and find the places where they reveal their secrets. Images, symbols, and metaphor hold so much complexity. And where I thread the needle is the fun part—crafting the line breaks, enjambments, and marrying the repeated sounds of consonants and vowels.

There are defining moments in our lives that shape us, indelibly. Sometimes joyful, but also trauma, the memorable footprints of the hard facts of life. We write to escape ghosts, to purge the good, bad and ugly. Memory is such a tool—but it lies too—and that's where poetry comes in. These moments encapsulate the alleyways of our interiors, in the direction of our fragile lives. For me, at 8 it was my parents divorcing, at 12, watching my teenage sister dragged out of the house to a *mental institution,* or the hard joy of giving birth to my son. I think that is the moment I realized empathy and fear are intertwined. I call Art, my *meds,* my medicine—Art is what helps disentangle, deconstruct and give some narrative arc to assuage pain.

As I work on this, I hear the great bell hooks has left the earth, and I remember these words: "I don't trust anyone that isn't a little neurotic." I get this, because we are all human living with loss and heartache in a madcap world, and who can maintain that perfect balance of harmony in chaos?—In my latest book, *Still-Life With God* (Saint Julian Press, 2020). I am trying to ask the larger spiritual questions in this new paradigm of social media and wonder where spirituality, faith exist in a uber-neurotic world. I feel the culture has a serious addiction to the ethers of social media, and not always good for mental our health.

When I read an ending of a poem that moves me, it's because the poet has succeeded in *'taking me off the page'*—I look for an ending to be a crescendo of the whole experience of the poem. In ending my poems, it's usually a force that builds and leads me there. But when that doesn't happen, I reread the different parts and ask what associations are gathered?—The dénouement is never planned, but a discovery, not closure, but an opening. For me, poetry– is more like a painting—in that, time and space are temporal. Writing and reading is a dance. If a piece is working, we trust that readers will bring their associations and connect to our narrative in some moment of understanding and common humanity.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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