
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Pichchenda Bao and Greg Santos

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, October 28th, 2020

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 lucky thirteenth post in the series, we have Pichchenda Bao and Greg Santos.



Pichchenda Bao is a Cambodian American writer and poet, infant survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime, daughter of refugees, and feminist stay-at-home mother in New York City. Her work has been published or forthcoming in the *Adirondack Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Newtown Literary*, *great weather for MEDIA*, and elsewhere. She has won fellowships and grants from Aspen Words, Queens Council on the Arts, and Kundiman. Listen to her poem at the 21stSt-Queensbridge stop on [Queensbound](#) or read more at [Stilt House](#). (Photo by Bunnarith “Bo” Bao)

There is no one way to start, build and write a poem. Write a lot. Read a lot. Revise. And all of us are utilizing different strategies, practices and knowledge. I’m so grateful to be a part of this craft series because I myself am in the beginning stages of my writing life and these questions perplex me as well. For me, as an emerging writer, at the heart of these questions on craft is a search for kinship. I want to know: Are poets my people? Does poetry reside in me? Am I a real writer? How would I know?

Here’s another confession: I don’t write every day or even with regularity. I have sketches of poems stashed all over the place: in multiple notebooks, on the backs of flyers, on my phone, in files named, renamed and saved on clouds, spanning decades. I lose lines all the time, and I know this kind of fertile chaos will not work for most people (it barely works for me). Still, I’ve come to understand that writing is a relationship that demands radical acceptance. I cannot yearn for a pristine artistic practice. My children, my family, my responsibilities to others, my unproductive pleasures, my cluttered living space, my different deficits are not obstacles to

artmaking, not lesser matters that must be managed and held in check so that I can get down to the real work of art. The real work is my persistent, deep attention to all of it, to see the meaning in the making of every day and to cultivate unshakeable faith in my intrinsic creative power.

Like it's been said many times before, every writer, in every moment of writing, must contend with the blank page, with the possibilities of each line and sentence yet to come. What makes you a writer is the writing. Writing before the household wakes up or after they've all gone to bed. Writing on the train, on the bus, on long walks. Writing during your commute, your lunch hour, your shift breaks. Writing after class. Writing after not writing. Writing to the rhythms of your singular life, on a schedule or in manic bursts of stolen time. Writing in the mountains, at the beach, in a cloister, in the bathroom. Writing bad lines, safe lines, overdone lines, strange lines, vulnerable lines, uncertain lines, not-quite-there lines. Writing lines that'll get excised in revision, and lines whose power you won't even realize until after they've touched someone else. Extravagant writing. Experimental writing. Playful writing. Writing in tribute and in various ruled forms. Writing with and without the external affirmation of publication and prizes. Writing what only you can write. Believe me. This will get you and your poems to your own place among artists. Just keep writing.



An adoptee of Cambodian, Spanish, and Portuguese descent, Greg Santos is the author of *Blackbirds* (2018), *Rabbit Punch!* (2014), *The Emperor's Sofa* (2010), and *Ghost Face* (DC Books, 2020). He is the Editor in Chief of the Quebec Writers' Federation's online literary journal, *carte blanche*. He lives in Montreal with his family.

I will often kick off a poem with an image or a line that I find surprising. I then get excited about holding its hand and seeing where the poem will lead me. Sometimes I will ultimately remove the first couple of lines. This is what I would call my false start. Perhaps because this is my way of introducing a thought to the reader or providing some kind of context that I think the reader might need. But it tends to result in being

a moment more “tell” than “show,” so it gets scratched out or deleted when I’m working from my laptop.

Ending my poem comes from more of a gut feeling. The poem seems to know when it is done and has exhausted itself. After setting a poem aside for a while and returning to it, I will usually tweak it and play with how it looks on my screen. I like to read the poem out loud to myself. If I trip up over a word, then it is a clue that something needs to go or to be changed. I know when a poem is finished when I get tired of it and don’t want to keep fine-tuning it anymore.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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