Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Susan Deer Cloud and Teresa Mei Chuc

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, November 11th, 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 fifteenth post in the series, we have Susan Deer Cloud and Teresa Mei Chuc.

(Deer Cloud in the High Andes near Ollantaytambo, Peru, Jan 2019)

Susan Deer Cloud, a mixed lineage Catskill Mountain Indian, dwells in her birth place of wild birds, wild animals, wild land, and wild storytellers of free spirit. The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship and two New York State Foundation for the Arts Poetry Fellowships, her most recent book is *The Way to Rainbow Mountain*. Before the Covid-19 pandemic she went roving each year in the Americas and Europe, whereas now she is holed up in a hinterland haze and writing her next book.

Not that I would completely toss out the craft of poetry, but I caution any writer against being locked into poetic devices to the point they lose sight of the creative fire. Since I took my first college writing course with a Chinese scholar in spring 1977, I have grown dismayed by the pandemic of poems infected by the workshop virus of too much self-conscious technique and not enough of unshackled vision and the human heart soaring like an eagle into the pure air of freedom. Whenever I start a poem, it is that border-less realm of what I call the Great Mystery

flaming through me and moving my fingers to write words, music, and any silences that evoke what mere human language can never quite articulate. In terms of what craft I may use, metaphor is especially effective for making the leap into the dreamlike intensity of existence and shaking off mind-numbing clichés, stereotypes, assumptions and generalizations.

When I was still teaching, I told students that writing a poem can be like making love. A poem requires expert foreplay at its very beginning in order to enter into the body of the poem and ride tidal waves of language laid bare, original, and truthful. I surf from line to line based on my own particular breathing and interior music, while well aware of different poetic forms. I am glad I know those forms, but sonnets, villanelles, etc., were forged by people of different backgrounds and realities than my own. They were not Catskill Mountain-indigenous, poor, isolated, and female. They did not grow up being hurt into voicelessness by authoritarian liars. Writing a poem is the dancing and singing of a great love deserving of attentive care until the crescendo of "coming" at its end. As I summarized to my students, a poem balances on its beginning and ending and one must be careful about dragging out first lines and last lines which can dampen the fires of passion and vision. Of course, students being students, one of them asked if they should smoke afterwards. "Not in the way you mean," I laughed.

Laughing is another aspect of writing poetry. Humor, smiles, and laughter are integral to being a poet and can sustain a dreamer through that hard and hungry life in which writers are often scorned and rendered invisible. Even when writing about tragedy, crafting a defiant smile is a crafty way of making a stand against those who would murder joy and poetry forever.

Former Poet Laureate of Altadena, California (2018 to 2020), Teresa Mei Chuc is the author of three full-length collections of poetry, *Red Thread* (Fithian Press, 2012), *Keeper of the Winds* (FootHills Publishing, 2014), and *Invisible Light* (Many Voices Press, 2018). She was born in Saigon, Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S. under political asylum with her mother and brother shortly after the Vietnam War while her father remained in a Vietcong "reeducation" prison camp for nine years. Teresa is a graduate of the Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing program (Poetry) at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, founder and editor-in-chief of Shabda Press and teaches literature and writing at a public high school in Los Angeles.

For me, starting a poem involves a deep listening and silence in order to hear what I want to write about and all the things I need to hear in order to write each line of the poem. It's almost a state of meditation. When I have an idea of what I want to write about, I try to think of the clearest way I could express the idea so that it could be understood by as many people as possible. I try to find a metaphor that helps me convey what I want to express. Specificity is important as I move from line to line, appealing to the five senses. Rhythm and sound are very important as I choose the words in each line. Since my poetry is usually lyrical, it is condensed energy so I try to use as few words as possible to express my thoughts and emotions.

I try to stick to what Rainer Maria Rilke taught me, to trust myself. Rilke wrote, "Everything is gestation and then birthing. To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion, entirely in itself, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own understanding, and with deep humility and patience to wait for the hour when a new

clarity is born: this alone is what it means to live as an artist: in understanding as in creating.…”

A poem could take minutes or hours or days or months or years to write. Patience is everything. It really can’t be rushed as life can not be forced; you can’t force an acorn to grow into a great oak tree in a day or year. Even when the poem takes minutes to write, the gestation period could have been years, many years or a whole lifetime. Usually, I don’t know how my poems will end and sometimes the end will surprise me, too. I like to end in a way that makes the reader or listener think in a way that they have never thought before.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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