Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Sydney Lea and T.R. Hummer

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, November 25th, 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 seventeenth post in the series, we have Sydney Lea and T.R. Hummer.

Sydney Lea, former Pulitzer finalist and Vermont poet laureate, founded and for thirteen years edited *New England Review*. His latest publication is a mock-epic graphic poem, *The Exquisite Triumph of Wormy*, produced in collaboration with former Vermont Cartoonist Laureate James Kochalka, available from Able Muse. His thirteenth collection of poems, *Here*, appearedfrom Four Way Books in late 2019.

For me, a poem starts with some incidental—often a snippet of conversation, recent or long past–that comes to me out of the blue, though almost as often, I respond to some phenomenon in the natural world. I start to write "about" whatever it is, with no sense of where I will end up. (Indeed, if I do have such a sense, the poem is bound to be weak, as there will be no jab of discovery for me or the reader.) I try to abandon myself to the language, as a painter might to her oils, trustful that my materials will lead me to whatever conclusion I may reach. Since, even in early drafts, I tend to be rather formalist, as a rule using regular, if often unorthodox, stanzaic and metrical arrangements, the issue of where a line should end is not an urgent one: what *is* urgent is that the line break make some sort of sense, syntactically and, well, dramatically. How do I know when I am finished? That

remains a bit of a mystery.

T. R. HUMMER is the author of fifteen books of poetry and essays, most recently *After the Afterlife: Poems* (Acre Books, 2018) and *Eon: Poems* (LSU Press, 2018). Former editor-in-chief of *The Kenyon Review*, of *New England Review*, and of *The Georgia Review*, he has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry, a National Endowment for the Arts poetry fellowship, the Donald Justice Poetry Prize, the Richard Wright Award for Artistic Excellence, three Pushcart Prizes, and the Hanes Poetry Prize, among other honors. He lives with his lovely wife and stepdaughter and a host of unruly animals in the Hudson Valley of New York.

What follows is a purely personal statement about my own way of approaching the writing of poems and is in no way intended to have universal application or rise to the level of Truth.

A few months ago I turned 70; therefore I can safely say that I have been writing poems seriously and regularly for over 50 years. During that time, I have gone through any number of phases in which I struggled to correlate what my conscious, "reasonable" mind wanted my poems to be and what the rest of me insisted on. That struggle, for me, constitutes the definition and exercise of "craft." Therein lies the reason why the practice of poetry (and no doubt of any art) is less about talent and more about persistence: the more you struggle, the more natural and normal that process becomes for you. Learning to count accents and to rhyme, like learning the more existential formal traditions of free verse (yes, they exist) was and is useful but is not the essence of the art, which cannot be defined or captured by any theory.

Musicians describe the same process: in the beginning, for most people, one struggles with or against one's instrument and the body's relation to it; beyond a certain point, the struggle changes and is with or against the instrument, the body, the player's mind, and music itself; eventually, musicians say, the instrument disappears (so to speak: it has become part of the player's body and mind); and finally the player too disappears and there is only music. An illustrative story concerns the great tenor saxophonist Stan Getz, whose daughter found him lying on the living room sofa, motionless. "Are you sleeping, Dad?" she whispered. "No, sweetheart," he replied. "I'm practicing."

For me, at this point in life, I have instant access to a broad range of stylistic approaches; taken all together, this range might constitute my "craft." I have thought hard about as many degrees of the arc of that range as I have been able to manage in 50 years. Now I rarely need to. The instrument of my art disappeared some time ago; after more time passed, I did also. Now there is nothing left but poetry.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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