Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Tim Suermondt and Pui Ying Wong

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, January 6th, 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-first post in the series, we have Tim Suermondt and Pui Ying Wong.

Tim Suermondt's sixth full-length book of poems, *A Doughnut And The Great Beauty Of The World* will be forthcoming from MadHat Press in 2021. His latest book of poems is *Josephine Baker Swimming Pool*, also from MadHat. He has published in *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Georgia Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Stand Magazine*, *december magazine*, *On the Seawall*, *Poet Lore*, *Plume*, *Sublunary Review*, *Poor Yorick*, among many others. He lives in Cambridge (MA) with his wife, the poet Pui Ying Wong.

On the question of how a poem starts, I have to first decide what poem or poems should be started. The trigger for poems come from innumerable places and I'll often work on a poem in my head, marinate it if you will, sometimes for days, even as I'm doing daily routines. If things go well, I'll have the title of the poem and much of the poem itself if not all of it before I sit down and work on it. But the transferring of the poem in my head to the poem on the paper or computer screen usually involves changes, often massively and surprisingly so.

As I begin the process of writing the poem, I "cut into the camera" to use a moviemaking

term—working on the lines as they come, adding or subtracting, shaping and reshaping and so on. Then after I have the poem to where I think I want it, I'll go over it all together. If I'm satisfied (to the extent that any poet is satisfied with any poem he or she has written) then the poem has a good chance of being sent out into the world with my Bon Voyage behind it.

As for the ending, I like poems that shut tight with a click and those that keep the confines open into a broad future. It is a contradiction: but there it is. And it all depends on the poem and the intent of the poet—how tight, how freewheeling. In any event, a good ending gives any poem a nice lift, and we poets will take all the lifting we can get.

Pui Ying Wong is the author of two full-length collections of poems: *An Emigrant's Winter* (Glass Lyre Press, 2016) and *Yellow Plum Season* (New York Quarterly Books, 2010)—along with two chapbooks. She received a Pushcart Prize. Her poems have appeared in *Ploughshares, Prairie Schooner, Plume, New Letters, Zone 3, The New York Times, Penn Review, Leon Literary Review, Foliate Oak,* among others. Born in Hong Kong, she now lives in Cambridge (MA) with her husband, the poet Tim Suermondt.

I think it is kind of odd that even if you have written many poems you always start in the unknown. I heard poets become irritated and anxious in between writing poems, feelings I can relate to. It helps that I am married to another poet, a wonderful one at that. My husband Tim and I talk often about poetry, from poets we love to writing itself. Poetry is very much alive in our household, a rarity I know not to take for granted.

Reading is important as it feeds my imagination and inspires me to write. My type of reading ranges from poetry to news articles, with stories and essays in between. In starting a poem, sometimes a sound, an image or an idea stood out. But it is not yet a poem, not unless it travels and comes into its own. One thing Tim and I do is take long walks. There are things along the way that may trigger a poem. Can be anything, a windy day, construction workers eating lunch in the park, a trip to Walmart. You find poetry everywhere; the challenge is putting it into language.

I think if the poem has something to say it will forge its own path. The poet is there to help it along, give it shape, find it a suitable form, choose better diction. If the poem does not go anywhere it is likely a false start. No matter how much you try to apply "craft" it still looks and feels empty. Just as I believe that the poem finds its own path, I believe the poem finds its own ending. It is not unlike while driving on a long, windy road one comes to a clearing or a lookout point. You get out of the car and take in the vista, agreeing at last the poem is pleased to be here. The drive ends.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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