

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Tina Schumann and Jenna Le

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, August 5th, 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 the second post of this series, we have Tina Schumann and Jenna Le.



Tina Schumann is the award-winning author of: “Praising the Paradox” (Red Hen Press, 2019), “Requiem. A Patrimony of Fugues,” (Diode), “As If” and editor of “Two-Countries: U.S. Daughters and Sons of Immigrant Parents” (Red Hen). Her poems have appeared widely since 1999, including Ascent, Cimarron Review, Nimrod, Poetry Daily, Verse Daily and read on NPR’s The Writer’s Almanac. More information can be found on her [website](#).

The impulse to start a poem for me usually arises out of a moment of colliding elements (images, emotions, questions etc.) One or more of these elements may have been simmering away on the back burner of my mind for a while. For example, it might be that I had been thinking of my father and his dementia at the same time I am driving down a tree lined street on a fall day, a leaf glides to the ground while I pass a house under construction and bam! a trifecta of images, thoughts and emotions have collided and I know something is coming to a boiling point that will eventually make it on the page. I cannot fully articulate it at that moment, but I know (call it inspiration) that

that moment of impact has stirred in me the urge to work towards getting to the root of a particular illumination and its connective tissue. At this point fragments and notes will be jotted down, usually in plain nonpoetic language. I regularly pull over while driving to take notes. There is something about being in motion which often triggers a creative stimulus in me. Whether it be driving, walking, or sitting on a bus. So, an un-expected impact of elements equals note taking equals the beginning bones of a poem. In the initial thrall of creation I simply get it all down on the page without judgment or editing. Along the way I allow myself plenty of flexibility to let go of the original moment of impact and allow the poem to tell me where it wants to go.

Line by line I am having a conversation with myself and the poem under construction. This includes experimentation with form, word play, images, similes and metaphors. As the poem speaks to me, I will more clearly see if it wants to be an expression of an elliptical psychological state, a literal narrative, or something in between. How is the form supporting the content? Would a stricter form such as a Sestina serve the poem or a more open lyrical form? If my instincts are working well, I will see the lines that are moving the poem forward and those that feel like ornamentation or over-explaining. Other questions that arise are: Is the next line informing the line before it or taking a turn too soon? Am I extending a metaphor beyond its usefulness? I must always be cautious of extending a metaphor too far and losing the reader along the way. If I get a gnawing feeling that I am simply paraphrasing the previous line, I check myself. Am I adding to the lyrical scaffolding to best affect? Or am I simply in love with the new set of words? If so, which one stays, and which one goes? I often cut a line and archive it in my on-going list of “fragments,” or “orphaned images” as one mentor called them. They might find a home in another poem or serve as a prompt to get me rolling with a new one. In any case it is almost always a kind of building and dismantling cycle.

There have been very few times when I have known with absolute certainty that a poem is done. I usually let myself sit with it for a while in a state that feels close to complete. Something is indicating that I have said what I want to say the best way I can for now. My gatekeeper is telling me to step away from the page. In rereads more questions will follow: Is the poem balanced? Are there lines that feel unresolved? Is being unresolved OK for this poem? If I came across this poem in a journal (and I was not the writer) would I be intrigued enough to keep reading? Is the narrator reliable? Taking myself out of the equation is the hardest bit, but it can be done. In most instances, ending a poem comes down to my own sense of wanting to move on. Call it boredom or possibly fear. Fear that I am going to over-dress the baby and therefore smother it. At some point, one must trust that the poem can make its way in the world without you. More than once I have come across my own poem in a journal and thought “Oh, I should have ended that sooner.” But that’s the risk you take, and in the end, it is only my opinion. Another reader might feel differently. With all that being said I know that having my work read by other writers helps enormously. Their feedback will indicate areas that need clarification and if the ending is satisfying to more than one reader.



Jenna Le is the author of Six Rivers (NYQ Books, 2011) and A History of the Cetacean American Diaspora (Indolent Books, 2018), an Elgin Awards 2nd Place winner, voted on by the international membership of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. She was selected by Marilyn Nelson as winner of Poetry By The Sea’s inaugural sonnet competition. She lives and works as a physician and educator in New York City.

For me, a poem starts with an observation that strikes me as novel and therefore possibly worth sharing with others. Often it's an observation that has humor to it, but most crucially it has to feel fresh to me. Sometimes it's an observation about the texture of language itself, e.g., "The medication name 'remdesivir' sounds just like the name of an old-timey knight!" Other times, it's an observation about an out-of-the-ordinary sensory experience I've had, say, an interaction with nature in which I felt awe or revulsion, terror or an anesthetic-like calm. Although beauty and pleasure are all well and good, I take a naughty delight in honing in on feelings of revulsion or terror wherever they arise. In every interaction with nature, there seems to me to be something creepy-crawly, something gnarly and creaturely that distinguishes nature's reality from one's platonic ideal of nature, and this generally strikes me as the most interesting part. It might be a flower whose long petals look weirdly fingerlike, or a cluster of turtles whose sheer numerousness gives me a frisson. Often a poem begins with an observation about how some one thing resembles a totally different thing, a metaphor begging to be birthed: a petal resembles a finger, or a turtle resembles a human soul cast out of Eden, or an obscure historical figure from 19th-century Vietnam unexpectedly reminds me of myself. It's like that itchy feeling you get when you see someone and think, "This guy looks a lot like a famous actor, but I can't place my finger on exactly who — let me scratch this scab of a thought until I can figure it out."

The first few lines of the poem, then, will contain a statement of that germinal observation, in language as plainspoken and clear as possible. For the rest of the poem, I'll follow that train of thought, like a maiden trustfully following a white thread through a dark labyrinth. My mission is to get to the root of what made that observation feel interesting to me. Often the thread will be elusive, and I'll need to put on blinders to stay on track. For example, I'll make a rule that every line in the rest of the poem must adhere to the same meter as the first couple of lines, or must participate in a rhyme scheme with them, or must end with the same end words. Such constraints will help propel me from line to line, keeping me focused on the essential. No poem will ever be able to say everything about everything, but if I keep my vision focused, I may succeed in writing a poem that says something about something.

Still, I never want my poems to feel like rote exercises, so I must take care to keep my eyes directed at the loamy labyrinth floor, rather than side-eyeing the leather squares of the blinders themselves. I want each line of the poem to maintain a connection to what is real, to contain concrete image words, as well as a sense of tension and vitality equal to the poem's starting lines. If a line feels flabby or gassy or colorless or static, I'll ruthlessly delete it and backtrack, like a video-gamer reverting to their last save point. On the other hand, if the poem wants to race off in a direction wildly different from anything foreseen, I'll let the poem take the lead. Wherever the wind feels fresh and vigorous and life-giving, that's the direction I'll go. That's how you make it out of the labyrinth. And when you feel that sudden blaze of hot bright air that tells you you've reached the labyrinth exit, you'll put down your pen. You'll know it when you get there. It'll hit you like an explosive revelation: "*Now I know which actor I was thinking of. It's Ryan Stiles from *Whose Line Is It Anyway!**" At that moment, and not a second later, you'll bring the poem to an end.

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