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Poets on Craft: Tom C. Hunley and Joe Weil

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, May 5th, 2021

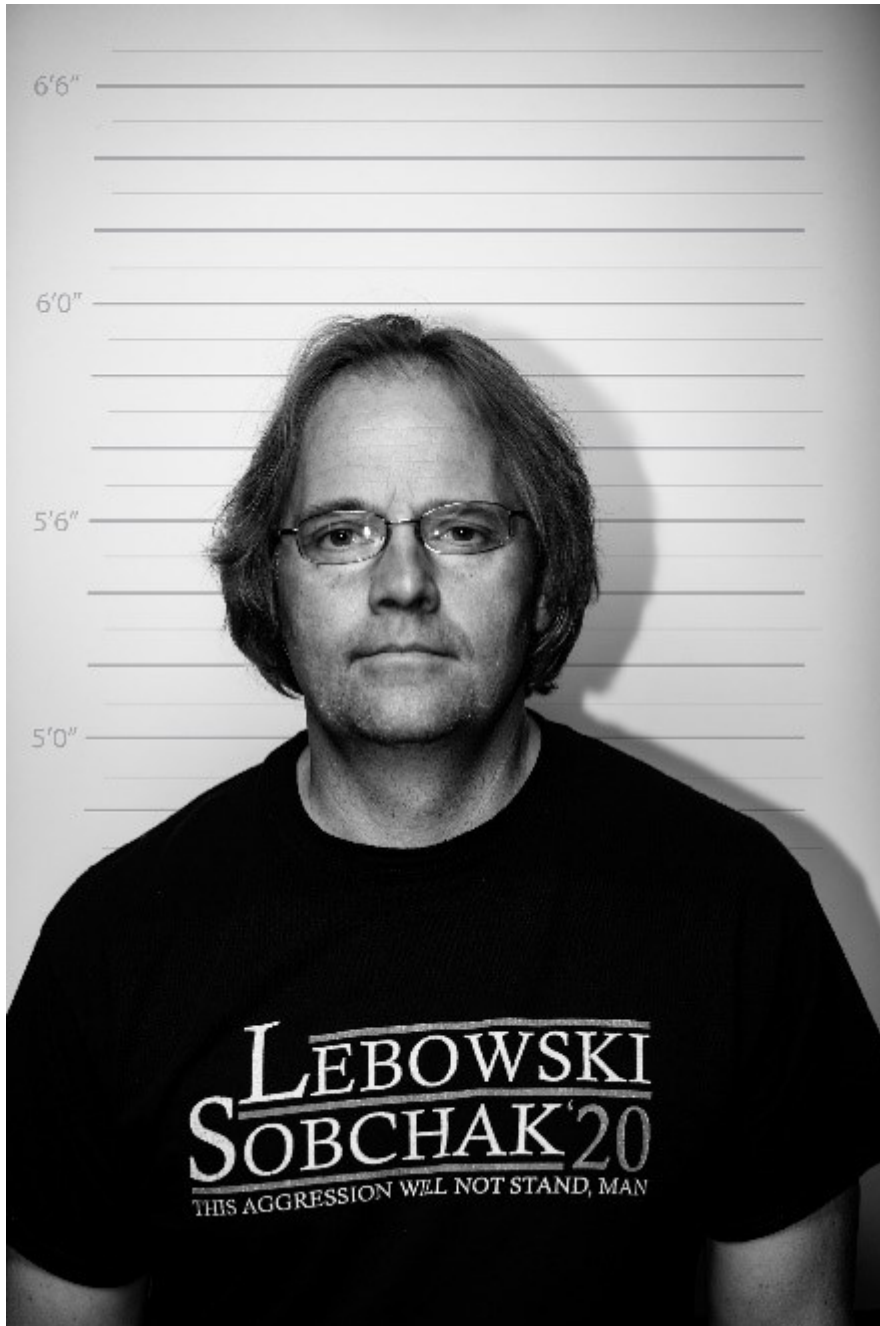
For this thirty-seventh post in the *Poets on Craft* series, we have Tom Hunley and Joe Weil

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.



Tom C. Hunley won the 2020 Rattle Chapbook Prize for *Adjusting to the Lights* and the 2020 SmokeLong Quarterly AWP Microfiction Prize. *Crazyhorse* nominated one of his poems for a Pushcart last year, and other poems are forthcoming in Chaffin Journal, Gargoyle, Penn Review, and Tar River Poetry. *What Feels Like Love: New and Selected Poems* is published recently by C&R Press.

As a young poet, I wrote late at night. In college, during breaks from college, freshly post-college, I worked in a warehouse: loading trucks, unloading trucks, sorting packages. There was a lot of white noise, which fueled my creativity, as did the repetitiveness and dullness of the tasks at hand. I'm not the first to be wounded into art by hard work. There's a long tradition of work songs. Forms such as the villanelle are thought to have originated by poets working in hot fields, for example. I wrote a lot of poems in my head at that warehouse. I'd keep working on a poem all evening, memorizing it, revising it, holding it in my head until I could get home to write it down. I'd get to my little studio apartment (or room in a house or apartment) at 2am or so and work on

poems until dawn.

But now my life is much different, and I write in the morning. The rest of the day's work can wait. My family's busy with work and school. I have my first cup of coffee, read someone else's poetry, and wait for that feeling to flood me. You know that feeling? That trance-like state coming on. I have a number of ways of courting inspiration from other people's poetry. Some of those are in my book *The Poetry Gymnasium: 110 Proven Exercises for Shaping Your Best Verse* (McFarland, 2nd edition 2019). I call one of my favorite exercises "Writing Under the Influence (Of Another Poet)".

First I read a collection closely, underlining at least one phrase from every poem in the book. I also underline favorite phrases from the book's title page. I'll create a title by collaging phrases from several poems in the collection that I just read. For example, the book on top of my stack here is *Wise Poison* by David Rivard. By collaging phrases from Rivard's table of contents, I arrive at the working title "Welcome Shy Gravity" as I'm intrigued by that combination of words. What could they mean? I don't know. The body of the poem will be a search for an answer. I've underlined phrases in every poem in the collection, and I'll let them guide me as I try to welcome shy gravity. In the book's first poem, I've underlined, "We are only being human on a Monday afternoon." Engaging with that, I write my poem's first line: "I was human all weekend." I follow where that leads, and when I'm stuck, I turn the page and see the underlined lines "we're not like those grins they have / plastered to the sides of every bus." Still thinking of my title, I write "Gravity couldn't touch my grin." Then I follow that where it leads, until I'm stuck. Then I turn the page and let a line or phrase from Rivard's next poem guide me. At some point, my obsessive subject matter (currently the experience of raising two kids with special needs), asserts itself, and in revision, the poem takes on a life of its own, separate from me and Rivard and shyness and gravity.



Joe Weil is an associate professor at Binghamton university and the author of 11 full length books, the latest two of which came out this Year: *Helping the Village Idiot Feed The Chickens* (Iniquity press/vendetta books) and *The Backwards Year* (NYQ books). When not teaching or writing, Weil plays the piano. He has two children, Clare and Gabriel, with the poet Emily Vogel.

The great painter George Braque said the painting must win over the idea of the painting or both die. I think this is also true of poetry. If I have too strong an idea going into a poem of what “I WANT,” then the idea overwhelms all the possibilities and it is very much like having a title

before you have a poem. It can freeze you.

Usually I build my poems out of a line that comes to me, or a series of lines. I have a poem “Fists” where I began: “It was the sense that your fists were worlds/and mine were not. that caused me to worship you.” Those first lines just sort of came to me, and then I realized: “Oh, I’m talking about my father’s hands.” He’d been a boxer, a Diamond Glove champ, and his hands were really amazing, but I didn’t know they were his hands or that he was the subject of the poem until I had those lines written down. Those lines said: I have to describe his hands in mythic terms. I have to contrast my child’s hands with his. I have to speak about how I related to his hands and then I need to go out of the past and into the present because my father is dead and this is an elegy. It all evolved from having no idea but a few lines and then I searched for the silent questions each line was asking: what does it mean that someone’s hands are worlds? What does it mean that mine were not? and what is worship? What awed me? Once I realized I would be the child Joe in this poem, I realized that bigness and power, but also gentleness would need to be. The poem grew from there. If I had sat down and said: “I’m going to write an elegy concentrating on my dad’s hands,” it would not have turned out very well. That’s more of an essay. In this case I kept the first lines, but often they are more like prophets of the poem to be than part of the poem.

You write into a poem and then you realize what you thought was the poem is only the tool for shaping it. In this case, everything grew out of the first couple lines.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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