

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: William Hathaway and David Rigsbee

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, December 2nd, 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 eighteenth post in the series, we have William Hathaway and David Rigsbee.



William Hathaway has never won a prize. You can find a list of his books and a number of newer poems on his website, williamhathawaypoet.com. His last book is *Dawn Chorus, New and Selected Poems 1972-2017*, Somondoco Press.

No matter what kills us, it can always be said that we died because the heart stopped, and by the same generic token we all start with a first line that can come from anywhere. We proceed with what seems to follow, and then we begin to see what we knew but didn't know we knew it, and then we revise. That's why we speak in parables. I learned quickly fifty years ago that poetry reading audiences were not interested in how I wrote the poems. They wanted to hear the poems sprinkled with a few words of wisdom and a few jokes and then get to the party. Writing poems is one thing and selling them is another thing and, since I don't need to sell my poems and find the business of promoting myself unpleasant, unnecessary and useless, I feel no compunction to produce. Consequently, I feel free to spend a lot of time and focus on poems that don't "work." Like most poets I spent my seedtime experimenting with a range so as not to be seen as a one-trick pony, but now I'm content to be largely a one-note Johnny. A basic kind of poem that I often write

is a sort ode of my own devising that tumbles down the page as a stream of thoughts lurking in images contained in narrative settings. A ten syllable line seems to work best for the cadence, and since I have no interest in being inaccessible or to try to duplicate some sort imagined surreal language of the brain, my run-on riffs are essentially grammatical. My form or style relies heavily on manipulating syntax, not unlike old grammar exercises in diagramming sentences. I don't confuse subjects as themes. I use a lot of assonance and consonance, internal near rhymes and repetitions. The two or three people in the world who still know my poems see me as a dark, edgy poet with a sense of humor.

I hardly ever write a poem in a blazing streak from beginning to end. I can't read for very long without getting restless or dozing off, and I interrupt writing poems consistently and then rewrite what I just wrote when I return. Everything goes slowly. I'm uncomfortable when poems aren't coming to me and I'm uncomfortable while I'm writing them. I can't remember the last time I was surprised by joy. I got a degree in creative writing and taught creative writing classes at various times, but I learned how to write poems by reading. Aside from some practice in copy editing for style, creative writing instruction primarily teaches poets to unconsciously write self-consciously. I can usually tell how poets wrote their poems by reading them several times, which is how poems are supposed to be read. I am a person with some significant limitations, and one of them is an inability to memorize. That is, I remember lines of poetry but I can't summon them at will. I learned how to use my disabilities as parameters to work around, to make forms that are unorganized but not disorganized. I can play a vigorously ordered game of tennis without a net. Like the Sermon on the Mount, Rilke's famous advice could still work if anyone wanted to work it.



David Rigsbee is the author of 11 collections of poems, most recently, *This Much I Can Tell You*, from Black Lawrence Press. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Agni*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Southern Review*, and many others. His translation of Dante's *Paradiso* is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry.

T. S. Eliot, Osip Mandelstam, and Seamus Heaney (among others) talk about the importance of the sound of a poem, especially as this precedes the actual setting down of words. This notion stands in contrast to the more pedestrian sense of poetry, the classroom takeaway. Poets are often loathe to explicate their own poems because it's an invitation to apply standards and measures that don't go into finding the opening lines or to find where the creases fold. There are exceptions, of course: formal poems, for instance. Most of the time I am aware of a sound, often a phrase or a line I picked up from another poem or something that's been rattling around inside my head. I do like the Joe Brainard idea ("I Remember") of starting a poem off with an assertion whose completion could go off in any direction, could suggest sorting out infinity itself, with innumerable sidebars and associational off-ramps. Gerald Stern is the master of this. It could also tempt poets to meander off into a flood of barely linked images. But the key is to identify the pathways whose connections make up the armature of the poem, and that armature is tied to how the poem sounds, how it appeals to the ear, not just the eye.

At the same time, and perhaps in contradiction to this, I like the reductive idea that you might condense the ramble to its essentials, something during which understatement will take up the flag of articulation through suggestion, an idea that includes this benefit: you invite the reader to participate in closing the circuit of the poem. What's more, a kind of courtesy arises as a result.

Broadly speaking, poems may be conceived as belonging to either of two camps. The first is a poem that wishes to explore the reach of articulation (think Shakespeare all the way to Derek Walcott). This is the idea that believes that if you can think it, you can say it (and, conversely, if you didn't say it, you didn't think it either). The second kind assumes that language, like the world, can be condensed, while still being rich in intimation. Our memories, which we often think to be expansive, are in reality just such reductions, but what they condense to is our commonality as human creatures living in history. Yehuda Amichai was one such master of this kind of pared down lyricism, as was Constantine Cavafy. In both cases it was the poem of experience itself and hence a record. When I started out writing poems, I was drawn to the former, but now, as I gather in more experiences in time, I'm drawn to the latter. The poem, so to speak, resolves itself in song, whose premise is a sound.

David Kirby has spoken of the three ways we end poems. One is to hear the lock click in place, as if, though unexpected, we come away realizing that surely the poem's ending was inevitable as it squirmed out of the puzzle of its occasion, and the fact that we could not have anticipated it is made moot by the justice of the conclusion. I have always liked these kind of endings. They turn the poem around and put the hand on a doorknob just now presented to view. A second way is to exit through that door, take a step into a new ground, and call it quits. The new ground is, in a sense, the unwritten future poem. It's like imagining what Hamlet thinks before he goes to sleep. The third is simply to leave off, as if the imagination has caught the gleam of a different thought light, or as if the poem had exhausted the power of its rhetorical engine and simply wanted to let be. That too is legitimate. I have found that many of my poems, as well as many of the poems of my peers, could have ended at a different line than they did. It would be a different poem, but a poem all the same.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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