

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Dustin Pearson and Shawnte Orion

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, November 4th, 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 fourteenth post in the series, we have Dustin Pearson and Shawnte Orion.



Dustin Pearson is the author of *A Season in Hell with Rimbaud* (BOA Editions, 2022), *Millennial Roost* (C&R Press, 2018), and *A Family Is a House* (C&R Press, 2019). You can follow him on Twitter and Instagram: @dustinkpearson, and visit his website: dustinkpearson.com.

I’m a poet who tends to write poems about a certain subject for a season, which I think can be less spontaneous than some poets, but that’s not to say I know what I’ll write. Because I can’t help but be a cerebral person, I’ll usually focus my thoughts on a subject until they render a definitive utterance: a sentence (or fragment), question, or some other thing. If that utterance is attached to a story, I’ll simply imagine it to completion. If the utterance is attached to an emotion or is otherwise abstract, I’ll concretize it by creating imagery I feel is the equivalent of that emotion. It’s all about tuning in to that voice inside my head, which I’ve learned recently not everyone has. It’s an anxious but productive approach for me. In short, as long as I’m listening, the poems start themselves.

I think my main consideration when moving from one line to the next in a poem is to maximize a sense of nuance. If I'm thinking about utterances or statements meant to be understood at the level of language, sometimes this will mean breaking a line so that a statement I initially understood to be simple becomes more complex. If I don't exactly understand an utterance that my thoughts have rendered, I assume it's my subconscious trying to tell me something. Sometimes I can find legible meaning if I break the line in a way that varies from how it first renders in my mind. If the poem is more an assemblage of images meant to create a scene or kind of animation, I'll break the lines so that the image or animation unfolds exactly as I picture it.

I'm not sure I have an efficient way of ending a poem, but a tactic I think works well is to always take a finished draft of a poem and look for all of its possible endings. Often enough, this ends up meaning that I end a line or three earlier than what I've written. My ultimate consideration is this: which ending is the truest (not most realistic because the reality is that we so often go beyond or stop short of what's true in our daily lives)? Which ending is the most faithful to how I feel now?



Shawnte Orion attended Paradise Valley Community College for one day, but he is the author *Gravity & Spectacle* (a collaboration with photographer Jia Oak Baker from Tolsun Books) and *The Existentialist Cookbook* (NYQBooks). His poems have appeared in *Threepenny Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *New York Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He is an editor for *Rinky Dink Press* and he has performed in bookstores, bars, universities, hair salons, museums, and laundromats.

My attention is always scattered, so I tend to all poems simultaneously. I add to this garden of various seedling ideas whenever new lines, fragments, or images come to me until one of those ideas begins to sprout. Then I try to lavish more water, focus, and sunlight on that particular poem until it's mature enough to bloom.

An early fascination with cinema helped shape my poetics, so my linebreaks are "cuts" and I move from line to line in the spirit of a montage sequence. I also keep in mind that 1920s soviet film editing experiment known as the Kuleshov effect that used a plain shot of an actor's face spliced with a shot of a bowl of soup, a child in a coffin, and a woman on a couch. Although each juxtaposition used the same expressionless close-up, the audience perception was that the actor conveyed hunger when looking at the soup, grief when paired with the shot of the coffin, and lust upon seeing the woman. I try to layer images with that in mind. I want each line of the poem to slightly shift the experience of the line before it or leave enough room for an implied connection.

Antonioni's films relied on images more than dialogue or plot, like how *L'Avventura* ends with two characters facing away from the camera. One is aligned with a blank concrete wall, while the other stares toward an active stratovolcano in the distance. It makes me think of the Stanley Kunitz quote about poetry: "end with an image and don't explain." I want poems to close with images that suggest where things are headed, while also adding new context to what already happened, if you read it again.

(featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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