

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Jordan Smith and Alexis Rhone Fancher

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, July 29th, 2020

When I was a community college student in Long Beach, California, I browsed the library catalogue looking for books containing interviews with famous writers and poets. I was particularly interested in craft—i.e. how writers and poets approach their work, how they start, maintain momentum, and conclude their stories or poems. Now some thirty years later, I teach an introduction to poetry class and I'm still very interested in craft.

With education in mind, I created the series *Poets on Craft*. Its intentions are threefold: (1) to provide a forum for contemporary poets to discuss their writing process; (2) to help students discover different approaches to craft; (3) to showcase the brilliant and eclectic minds of contemporary poets.

The process began with me emailing poets the following 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.

I choose to publish their responses on the digital magazine Cultural Weekly because online publication is efficient, quick, and somewhat democratic. Generally speaking, anyone can have free access to it. With that said, please consider supporting our poets by clicking on the links in their bios and purchasing their work. Thank you.

For this inaugural post, we have Jordan Smith and Alexis Rhone Fancher.

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JORDAN SMITH'S most recent of eight books are *Clare's Empire* from The Hydroelectric Press and *Little Black Train*, winner of the Three Mile Harbor Press award). He teaches at Union College. (Photo by Malie Smith.)

Just after I got the email from my friend, BK, asking me to contribute this piece about how I work on poems, I found myself revising a poem I'd tucked into a previous note to him. There was

something about the ending I'd never liked; rereading it in the message, I saw that trying to get the rhyme right, I'd fallen into sententiousness. The tone undercut the thought, just when it needed to click into place. Maybe that's why I never sent the poem out except to friends? I messed around with it for a while. I think it's better; at least it's less pretentious. I'll know more when I reread it tomorrow.

A friend wrote me about my new book of poems, *Little Black Train*, saying he liked how improvisatory the poems seemed. He's a fine musician and poet, so his comment pleased me. That's how I remember writing most of the poems, although "woodshedding" might be even closer—the practicing an improviser does, more than the accomplishments of a performance. I start somewhere (you've got to start somewhere), double back, toss out a possibility than trash it, go back to something basic, go to the kitchen for another cup of coffee, pick up on a theme, put it away to see what happens later, change the playlist, then follow an associative tangent, quote a few notes of a standard, stop and check the tuning. That's how a draft gets done, and revision isn't much different. Sometimes the subject is a given (I wrote eight poems after Walter Hatke's paintings of hats, consciously variations on a theme and part of a collaboration he and I planned, but I never guessed where each poem was going until it was done); sometimes it starts with a few words I can't shake or an anecdote I'd like to tell more than once. Sometimes I commit myself to finishing a draft at the first sitting no matter how bad it seems; sometimes I compose and revise in my head while walking (that seems to work best for formal verse, where the rhyme gives me half a chance of remembering where I've been). It's done when I can't see anything left to do. It's good if it's a surprise. "You'll know when you get there," as Herbie Hancock said. The length and the pace of lines seems to sort itself out as I go. Often I've got something in mind, a poem I recently read and admired or a song, a pattern suggested by the first few lines. It's causal, not casual; lineation is intertwined with tone, which is a way of being present within an experience, a sensibility. Revision is a way of increasing that presence until it is almost all that's left on the page.

But I have to pay attention. The title poem, "Little Black Train," was set off by an annoying interview on NPR that I heard when driving through an upstate canal town, a place I associate with trains and grade crossings, and then by the song on the cd I switched to when I'd had enough. I wrote that one in my head, too, as I drove. The epigraph from "Fuck" came in the middle of a lecture by Adrian Frazier; I wrote it down, I knew I'd use it, but it was a while before I knew how. Another friend just told me a good story about throwing the *I Ching*. That needs a home in a poem too. I think I've almost figured out how the first lines should sound.



ALEXIS RHONE FANCHER is published in Best American Poetry, Rattle, Verse Daily, Plume, and elsewhere. She's the author of five poetry collections, most recently The Dead Kid Poems, (KYSO Flash Press, 2019). A multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, Alexis is poetry editor of Cultural Weekly.

Something happens. And I make it mean something. Nature. A prompt. A memory. A theme. A response. A dream that wakes me in the night. I constantly make notes on my iPhone that regularly turn into poems. A headline in the *New York Times*. A line of dialogue from a noir film. A bad feeling. A good one. Everything and anything can turn into a poem. Sometimes a poem arrives fully formed. Sometimes it knocks around in my head for years. I remain open, receptive.

Welcoming.

As for when to move on to a new line, understanding line breaks is helpful.

The poem changes in successive drafts. Lines that worked, work no longer. My process differs, although I often begin a poem writing in third person, past tense, that usually becomes first person present tense by the second draft. I write prose poems. “Regular” poems. Ghazals. Sonnets. Rhyming. Free verse. Sometimes a poem needs to find its own form. Or the form changes over successive drafts. No rules or predictable behavior. And I usually cut the beginning and the ending by the final draft. I cut everything that I deem unnecessary. Then I cut some more. I think of editing a poem like a gem cutter thinks of faceting a diamond. How to best make it shine. Then I send the poem to a series of peer editors, who edit/critique/and often make further cuts.

(Featured photo is by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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