Notes from the Slush // On Writing Contemporary Poetry

FP / Poetry Lab 2021

Contents

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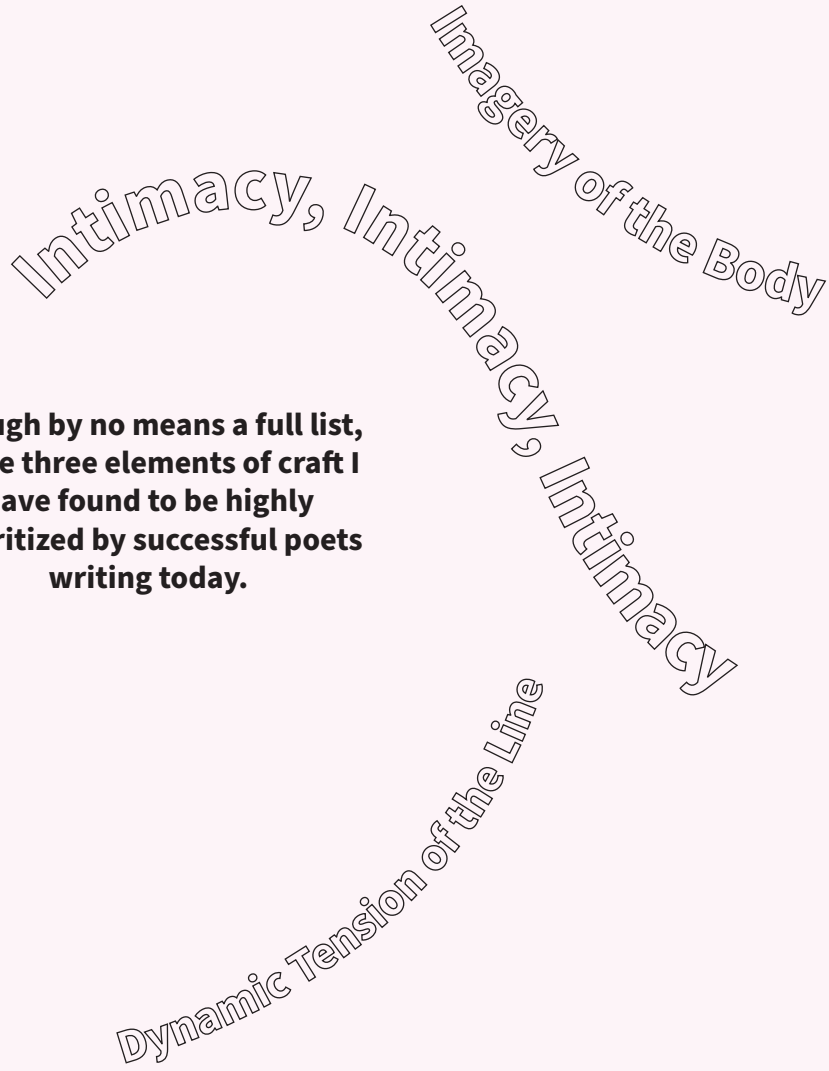


Though by no means a full list, these three elements of craft I have found to be highly prioritized by successful poets writing today.

We'll discuss briefly what each of these mean and share an exemplar poem to illuminate their practical expression.

the priorities of your peers

What elements of craft are your peers choosing to focus on and elevate today?

1. Imagery of the Body

The reasons for this priority are perhaps unknowable or innumerable—perhaps it's a reaction to the ways technology is currently carrying us away from our own bodies and into screens and digital spaces. Perhaps it is a reaction to post-modern cerebreality, a reconnection to the divine fact of our physical existence. No matter the reason, poets are writing for the body of their reader.

In your own writing, you should always be considerate of the physical body of the reader—you shoud talk to their body in ways it can't help but understand. Once their body is activated, engaged in the stakes of the poem, their mind and emotional being will come along for the ride.

Looking at "Tim" on the next page, we can see that Tiana didn't wait in this respect. In the second line, the reader is invited into the experience of "barefoot sprinting across a field of damp grass." This is the first invitation made to the reader's body both through direct address ("barefoot") and sense language ("damp grass").

She continues:

"kissing a man"
"entered my body w/o asking"
"my cold nipples"
"breasts"
etc.

Placing imagery of the body into poems, no matter their theme or subject, will do much to pull the reader into the experience of the work.

Even lines such as, "Look deep inside the eye of a baby goat," touch the reader's own eye! The body doesn't much care for logic—you don't have to seduce it with logic. All the body wants is to be touched and seen, to touch and to see, to feel and smell and taste and hold something squishy between its teeth. Don't underestimate what you can accomplish through body imagery.

Tim

I don't know what happened that night.
I was barefoot sprinting across a field of damp grass
and then I wasn't. I was kissing a man—then I wasn't.
I was on a twin bed and then and then... and then I was
blank—prone on the dumb floor of a dorm room—
then I… I don't know what happened to my panties.

Do you know what happened
to my panties?

Who took them off—
Who entered my body w/o asking—
Who saw my cold nipples and said nothing—
Who saw taupe watercoloring the rim
of my eighteen-year-old breasts—
Who broke my beaded black dress—
Who keeps the hours I can't remember?

If faceless men came into that room then they have no names
and if I could scream into that room I'd shout: *Talitha kum!*
meaning *Little girl,* *I say to you, get up!*

~

Look deep inside the eye of a baby goat,
said Jessica, her command hung
at the back of the barn, lush imperative.

2. Intimacy, Intimacy, Intimacy

"Much of contemporary poetry—though by no means all of it—is written in a diction that almost belies that it was formally composed: its general tone is one of natural and friendly intimacy; the language is not noticeably different from ordinary language... not unlike letters you might have recieved from a good friend." —Mary Oliver, A POETRY HANDBOOK

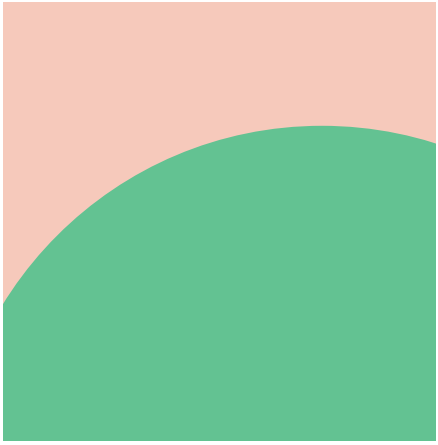
Oliver goes on to theorize that perhaps this new tone and form—the "invitational" poet instead of the "aloof" artist—deliberately coincided with the rise of new writers eager to express and reveal themselves: "women writers, and Afro-American writers, and Native American writers," she says, and we can also add many more to that list today based on our ever growing definitions of "diversity."

Much of the passion in poetry today is driven by women and young people and people traditionally underrepresented and the community should be grateful for it.

With that influx—just as in Oliver's generation more and more women were being invited in—seems to come this focus and priority on the intimate relationship between reader and speaker.

Looking at JP Grasser's "A Brief History of Mercy," we can see this intimacy at play. Within the first sentence, we're pushed into grounded, plain-spoken concerns of family, as if the reader were family themselves:

"you climbed the chain-link, planning to throw yourself in front of the train?"



Readers today are eager for the connection to other human creatures, beyond the artificiality of technological distance. Profundity, for many of us, is found simply in the face and voice and touch of a dear friend.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MERCY

There must have been poppies at the foot
of the fence, below the bent awning

of barbwire, or if not poppies, the downy
heads of dandelions, heavy with humid air,

or if not air, was it the heft of mercy
that made them bow, slightly, the night

you climbed the chain-link, planning to throw
yourself in front of the train? Wasn't it

halogen that tunneled through the darkness,
hovering just over the tracks, or was it

softer, something incandescent and seeping?
An Attempt, I told your sister, eliding

the unspeakable for her sake, not mine—
and why? Was it clemency, intimacy,

knowingness, my own familiarity
with the runaway speed of worry?

I can't say. I know the green bruise lingered
on your neck for weeks, the trace

of your mother's engagement ring,
its three-pronged setting, after she choked

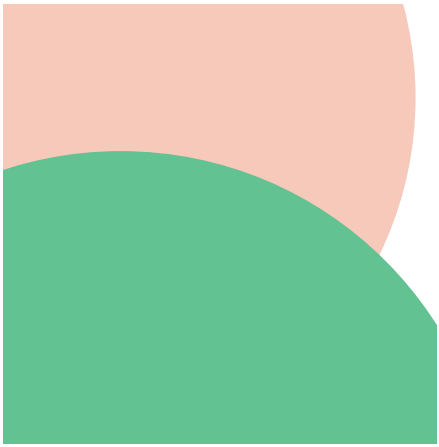
3. Dynamic Line Energy

Lines are and always have been fundamental to the writing of poetry—it's undeniable! I can't remember a craft book I've read that didn't devote a whole chapter to their function and articulation.

What I've seen do well in magazines and in the public today though are poets who express a reinvigorated curiousity and attention upon their line breaks.

The very best theory of line methodology I've found comes from James Longenbach's THE ART OF THE POETIC LINE—wherein he argues that lines break in three fundamental ways that all interact "dynamically" with one another to produce an affective rhythm upon the reader. Those three:

1. End-stopped lines.
2. Lines that break on grammatical phrases.
3. Lines that break within grammatical phrases.



"A line ending is a force in a poem, much like a punctuation mark. That white space out there is an opportunity."
—Ted Kooser

In "Dress code," by Kristin Chang, we see primarily an interaction between 2 & 3, with a heavy use of (3):

hearing / (2)
flag / (3)
detention / (3)
one / (3)
etc.

She's also included many moments of internal caesura to further texture the rhythm, as well as the interesting visuality that plays on the sensation of the American flag.

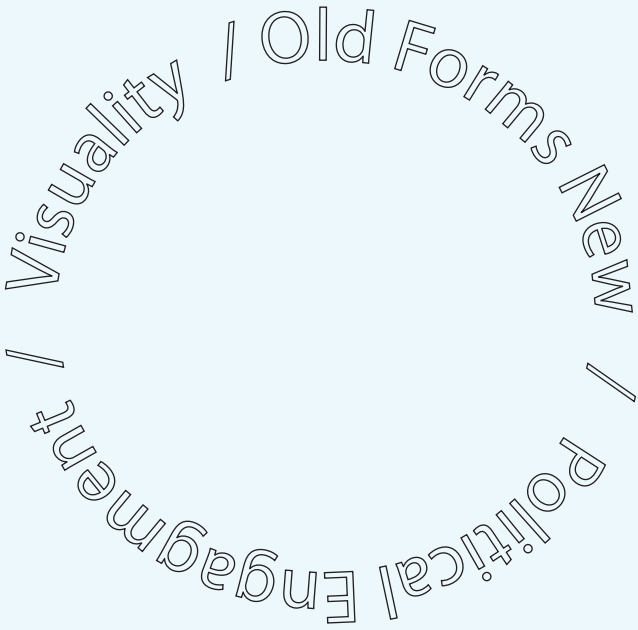
Like Chang, I recommend you to pay careful attention to how you utilize that "dynamic energy" of your lines.

Dress code for an immigration interview

At his deportation hearing
my uncle wears a suit & a flag
patterned tie. In detention
centers, clothing is the number one
cause of suicide: sleeves knotted
into nooses, shirts wadded down
windpipes. In a month, they'll uncork
a shoe from my uncle's throat.
In a month, we'll frame a copy
of the Constitution in our living room,
pray to it like a portrait & pretend
our fathers founded a way to drink
directly from the sea. My mother folds
our laundry into letters, sends my uncle
his favorite pair of socks. We are sent back
his ashes in an envelope. We list our address
as the sea's. In detention, three colors
are banned from the body: red, yellow, and blue.
My uncle's favorite color is the sky. On
birdwatching trips, he took me seaside to watch gulls
abduct the air. My mother says it's best
to wear a dress you can get out of
one-handed or with a saw. Go skinless:
at birth, we are issued a body each
to be buried in, a country to clothe
like a corpse. In a mirror-walled room
my mother is questioned for marriage
fraud. She memorizes my father's ring size,

Excerpt of the winner of the 2018 Frontier Industry Prize
"Dress code for an immigration interview" by Kristin Chang

Ripe for Innovation



The following poems reveal the ways your peers are bringing their attention to elements of craft that are in the process of finding their contemporary modes of expression.

1. Old Forms New

Formal innovation has seemed to only accelerate for the current generation of contemporary poets. From Jericho Brown's duplex innovations, to Terrance Hayes' book of American sonnets, to Tyhehimba Jess's incredibly intricate contrapuntal works—the landscape of innovating old forms and inventing new ones seems to be in its spring time, full of new life and color and opportunity.
No longer are forms only in the domain

"The most radical poem a poet can write today is a sonnet."
— Barton Sutter

of the academic writer—in our digital world, resources on forms, their structures and their traditions and their methodology, are widely available and easy to find. Poets are taking great advantage.

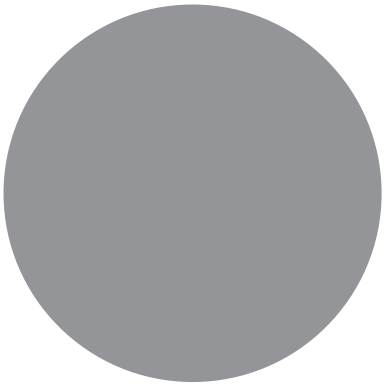
From Ghazals to Pantoums, from Double Sonnets to Sestinas, Villanelles and Rondeaus—forms and the opportunities to make old things new, abound.

Taylor Byas' "South Side" sonnet sequence was the winner of last year's Award for New Poets. A quick glance at the right hand margin will reveal her desire for tight formality: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG // GAGA...

The truth is that formal poetry used to exclusively express the voice of a certain kind of human: often privileged, often white, often male.

As a black woman, writing of the south side of Chicago, it is a radical act to appropriate those forms for her own needs and mode of expression.

What is your radical act?



South Side

I.

This is what teaches me love. Your streets, their wailing
for their dead. The way a siren becomes a mother
too. How my parents hold me like some frail thing
to their chests at night, how quick they are to cover

my ears when the block gets hot. The handshake half-hug
sacred enough to make a man feel whole
again. The shapeshifting, how what looks like a thug
in darkness softens into a boy in the gold-

glow of a bedside lamp. How we are all
somebody's grandbaby. Harold's Chicken steeped
in so much hot sauce, the nose runs, and the small
piece of bread too wet to hold, drowning beneath

the fries. Each of our brownstones, side by side—
so there's nowhere to run, nowhere for us to hide.

II.

So there's nowhere to run, nowhere for us to hide
when the neighbors know your business—the women cooking
on their balconies and patios to side-
eye all the young folks slinking past *Just looking*

Excerpt of the Winner of the 2020 Frontier Award for New Poets
"South Side" by Taylor Byas

2. Political Engagement

In their discussion on this potential and ripe topic for poetry, Addonizio and Laux write in THE POET'S COMPANION, "The important thing here is to look at your personal truths—not to try and present a comprehensive portrait of the injustice in the world. Describe your own experience, or imagine that of others, at the level of the human. Let readers in, instead of shutting them out with the thunder of your convictions and commitments."

Have you noticed the trend? Much of contemporary poetry's innovations on tradition is the radical inclusion and focus on bringing deep and authentic intimacy to our poetic modes of expression.

It's undeniable that we are set in a world raging politically—and likely will be for decades yet as the multitude of global threats are only increasing and gaining momentum.

Thus, it's undeniable that we are all being made witness to political events, recipients of political experiences, creatures of urgent political concern.

As THE POET'S COMPANION suggests, the "trick" is to avoid broad and self-righteous "thunder." Focus on the intimate, the personal, the truth of how politics and injustice is affecting your own life.

"A talk about trees is almost a crime / Because it implies silence about so many horrors?"
—Bertolt Brecht

With "The Long Afterlife," you can see how Michelle Phương Ting has found the poem in witness to her own family's history. The concern is deeply personal and authentic. Notice how quickly the poem seeks to include the intimate details of its speaker: "I wake early to make coffee / and butter my tongue."

Notice how urgent the political becomes in the face of a lived human friend.

The Long Afterlife

From 1961 to 1971, the U.S. military poured approximately 20 million gallons of Agent Orange over Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. 5 million acres were destroyed. An estimated 4.8 million people were exposed, and 150,000 were born—with deformities, mental illness, blindness, and cancer.

Even the land learned to loathe
herself. Her soil seethes

with a persistent poison.
She remembers everything

she's been given. Twenty million
gallons leached or sunken

into the sediment of rivers
and bodies. Dioxin has a half-life

of a hundred years, and Eternity
arrives like any other day—the sun

rises orange. I wake early to make coffee
and butter my tongue. Leaves on the mangrove

shrivel black as cotton off a child,
as her limb. Days slow

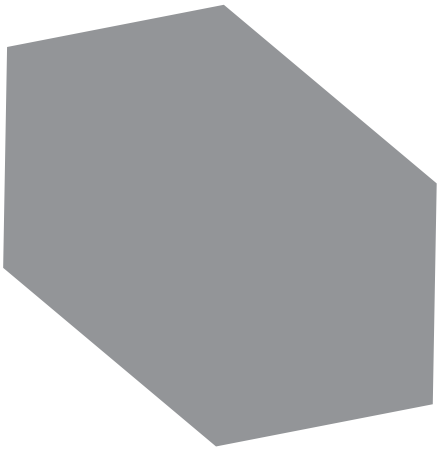
toward nothing. With a finger,
I push around breadcrumbs. The near end

of anything wants itself finished.
Even liver cells inside my father

divide relentlessly. They call this
the long afterlife—

Excerpt of the Winner of the 2020 Frontier Industry Prize
"The Long Afterlife" by Michelle Phương Ting

3. Visuality



"Exceptions can only be measured by reference to the norms they seem to ignore."
—Mary Kinzie

Unique visuality is incredibly difficult to do well. Most often the case, the visual element pushes the reader away from the emotional experience the poem is seeking to elicit and discover in the reader.

For the most part, you're not going to find much in the popular craft books or MFA curriculum on how to create visually innovative poems.

You're not going to find much yet in books or magazines either—yet there is a need for it, a desire for it.

The struggle, as I've seen hundreds of them come through the slush, is for the poem to keep the appropriate amount of tension on the emotional body of the reader while delighting them with the new visual experience.

Mary Kinzie speaks of this tension in her book, A POET'S GUIDE TO POETRY, explaining that there is only so much room on the foreground for the different techniques we employ in the poem. Visuality, in that sense, will always dominate the foreground, if it so desires, and thus the difficulty lies in restraint and the building of a strong background experience for the reader.

Golden's "[X][Y]/[X][Y]" takes its visual inspiration from sciene, but notice how the poet has chosen to keep their diction and language decidedly unscientific. Instead the diction is plain spoken, conversational, even crass at moments. It's a marvelous exercise of that tension and restraint needed to keep the poem from becoming "too cute."

[X][Y] / [X][X]

[X] [Y]

Everyone wants a chunk of ----------[flower]
flesh on their front lawn ----------[seasoned]
I walk, & ----------[niggas]
hear ----------[rioting]
I just want to ----------[party]
when I switch. I am a ----------[man]
same suede black as their ----------[durags]
People ask me, ----------[*boy?*]
& I answer with ----------[fists]
My ----------[friends]
Cry, ----------[*Kill-mo,*]
Prying the dirt from ----------[childrens']
buckled teeth ----------[again]

I'm used to ----------[metaphor &]
shame. It never ----------[lingers]
Some sisters call me ----------[kin]
because I am ----------[trash]
& I know it. We dissect Adam's ----------[rib]
because holding my ----------[girl]
with my dick in my ----------[palm]
means ----------[safety]
means school children get ----------[silent]
means church girls ----------[playing]
on pavements with my ----------[joy]

[X] [Y]

Excerpt of the Winner of the 2019 Frontier Industry Prize "[X][Y] /[X][X]" by Golden

Revision Considerations

"Revision is the poet's most difficult, demanding, and dangerous work. Difficult because it's hard to let go of our original inspirations of the poem. Demanding because it calls for us to reach deeper or further than we may want to, or feel we know how to. Dangerous because we feel we might, in the act of trying to make a good poem better, lose touch with the raw energy that drove the poem into its fullness to begin with and destroy what we have so joyously created."

—from THE POET'S COMPANION
by Kim Addonizio & Dorianne Laux

How is my poem engaging the reader through their imaginative body?

How is my poem approaching the reader's emotional body through deliberate intimacy?

How are my line breaks dynamically engaging with my poem's themes and energetically pushing the reader down the page?

In what ways is my poem innovating on the page into new, authentic expressions of language?

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