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"Timed Exposure VI" by Ken Steinkamp; <http://kensteinkamp.com/>

*Tim Tomlinson, President and co-founder of The New York Writers Workshop, takes us on a journey through Shanghai, London, Florence and*

*New York that ends with a perceptive glimpse into the land of the future from the vantage point of our constantly changing times. Sharp, poetic, witty and fearless of convention, Tomlinson possesses the cosmopolitan edge of a writer not content to live only upon the page but one who lives loudly out in the world. He is the co-author of The Portable MFA in Creative Writing and fiction editor of the webzine Ducts. His work has appeared in many publications including *The Missouri Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Libido*, *Hampton Shorts*, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, *The North American Review*, *Modern Haiku*, *Parnassus Literary Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, *Musician* and *Downtown Express*.*

*Having held the views expressed in The Portable MFA as sacrosanct for many years, we have long looked forward to this interview and invite you to sit down with us as though we were seated in comfortable black leather chairs in a New York City cafe. Cheers.*

~ Regarding beginnings and the “rules”- in your experiences of writing and teaching across the globe, do you find that for a writer approaching a new medium that they should first learn the rules and then choose when and where to break them or should they first write inspired and uninhibited, reflecting upon that work by learning the rules afterward, as you describe with your short story “Poor Boot’s Fruit” in the early pages of the fiction section in *The Portable MFA*?

***No one starts writing out of an interest in rules, they write out of a need to express something, or the joy of expressing something, or even the joy of breaking rules. In my workshops, I don’t teach rules, I try to facilitate expression, I try to help generate pages. Then we talk about what’s come up, and what one might do with it. And some of what one might do with it involves the “rules.” I always come back to the great Flannery O’Connor statement, that in writing fiction you can do whatever you can get away with, but you’ll probably find out that you can’t get away with very much. Alice Elliott Dark used to say that you have to allow yourself to make a mess on the page. You don’t want “rules” to prevent you from making that mess. But of course you have to learn how to clean that mess up. So inspired mess-making and disciplined rule-learning become simultaneous endeavors.***

~On character and accessing the sea of unconscious beyond the inner shores of 'censor'- you've referenced Virginia Woolf's view that "...a writer can't write about the flaws of others until she is ready to acknowledge the worst things about herself." Your response to this is the profound exercise of the interview where you imagine sitting down with a principle character and accessing their truest, innermost voice by a series of increasingly intimate questions. Talk to us about the development of this exercise, how it came about, how you've used it in your own writing and an anecdote about a student who used this exercise to add another dimension to their work.

***I make myself do things that are antithetical to what I think my nature is, and it has been my nature to recoil from writers who talk about their drafts, especially, as if the characters, these fictive, nebulous, invented things, are actually alive. "She does this, he believes that." It's the working class scruff in me, innately suspicious of anything that sounds highfalutin or self-convinced or self-aggrandizing. And part of me thinks it's more dignified not to talk about the products of the imagination, or the emotional life, at all—kind of like Wilson's admonition to Francis Macomber: "Doesn't do to talk too much about all of this. Talk the whole thing away." So there was that, the need to challenge my preconceived notions, and then a collection of interviews called Writers Dreaming (edited by Naomi Epel). Alan Garganus was one of the subjects and he talked about a hurdle he faced when writing Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All. His protagonist, a white southern woman from genteel pre-war society, used the word "ain't" in her speech, and, Garganus explains, he went along with it until it bothered him enough to stop the writing and figure it out. To do that, he wrote "Why I Say Ain't" across the top of a yellow legal pad and he wrote ("she" answered) the 120 pages that became a chapter in the novel.***

***I thought, yes, of course, why not interview characters—I've always been a fan of the Paris Review Writers at Work series, so I borrowed that structure and started going after some of the characters that troubled me. I still don't talk about them much, but once they start talking to me I hear them and feel them in a***

*way that's much more convincing than how I imagined them before the interviews.*

*One example of the interview exercise's utility might be the story "Look Closer" in the much-missed Salt River Review. Rosie was a character I didn't get—what would motivate a sixth-grade kid to expose himself to a bunch of his classmates? And Kathy Christmas—why would she resent the experience of her friends? I set up interviews with each, in the Paris Review mode. I asked questions about some of the objects around them, and then about their backgrounds, their families, and then about some of the events or undercurrents of the story draft.*

*Some of what happens in that story remains mysterious to me, but Rosie's and Kathy's motivations became clearer from what they said, and some of what they "revealed" in the interviews found its way into the story, re-phrased in the narrator's language. (Going back to rules for a second, and trying to make myself do what I think is against my nature: I always caution students against opening stories with dialogue. I never liked that kind of opening, it always seemed forced and artificial to me, and in an interview...maybe with Poets & Writers, Harry Crews articulated why. The reader is in a vacuum at the beginning of a story, Crews said. To lead the story with dialogue, from an unestablished character in an unestablished setting in an unestablished context, puts the reader in a vacuum within a vacuum. Not a very good idea—too many risks, no payoff. But after hearing myself say it so many times, I thought, you know what, I want to break that "rule." In the case of "Look Closer," I think I get away with it because the dialogue describes an action the speaker is taking and the action is so ... unusual, and the context emerges in the attribution, even before the opening statement concludes.)*

*I can't think of a specific instance when a student shared a eureka moment off the interview exercise, but the responses in general have been overwhelmingly positive, even among the most hardened skeptics (a group to which I still belong). If nothing else, the interview exercise enables the writer to hear*

***the voice of the character—the monster blinks, to use the Tobias Wolff analogy, and that changes everything.***

~ In various mediums, including poetry, fiction, film, and performance art, there seem to be fast-emerging trends that entail a divergence from form and a leaning toward random, artistic compilations of material. Experimental and flash fiction have seen a spike in popularity and literary publications are heading into uncharted waters (with some intriguing new publications having issues produced on cards and post-its in the range of one hundred words) and as discussed with fellow journals at the Fourth Annual Mass. Poetry Festival, seeing the novel usage of methods such as erasure and Google search terms in poetry. Found poetry has also made its way into the contemporary scene. Do you feel that these trends are a reflection of the way we're living in the modern world- a seemingly disjointed trajectory of crossing paths, constantly stimulated by the fast-paced atmosphere of sensory intake? Do these developments seem, in your opinion, more like a fad or a lasting form of expression? If the latter, will more traditional forms continue to co-exist or will writers need to adapt to stay attractive to publishers? In your opinion, do you find that these trends, long-term, could in any way potentially limit storytelling or the use of pure imagination for both the creators and the audiences looking to find a level of meaning not always found in randomized strains/forms? Or do you find that in the long run they add another dimension of creativity by piecing together the fragments in a way that allows for a broader range of intellectual and emotive interpretation?

***I think the story embraces and absorbs contemporary trends. Take a collection like Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried. In it, O'Brien deploys some of the metafictionist's tricks of the trade – the blurring between memoir and fiction, the letter, the journal, commentary, fragments, flash fictions, and full-blown three-act structure stories. In the end, the book functions like one big story, and after the end, you tend to remember the pieces that work most like conventional stories (the title story, "On the Rainy River," "Speaking of Courage," several others), more than you remember the less conventional pieces ("Notes," "Spin," and "Style," for instance).***

***Interestingly, in workshops, the unconventional pieces tend to help writers uncover story material, or discover story strategies, often more readily than fully-crafted stories, so I'm***

***not denying their value from either the aesthetic or the pedagogical viewpoint. (By the way, I hate the word “pedagogical” and I apologize for using it. Other words I hate: theory, trope, and problematic as a noun. But because I have an aversion to them, I’ll probably use them to begin a story or a poem.) But you raise interesting questions about some of the fun, hip gimmicks around today. I’ve heard poets in particular preface a piece with statements like, “I didn’t write a single word in this poem.” And I think, OK, cool, but how long does cool last? Pretty much by the time I find out about it, it’s not cool anymore. A while back Leonard Cohen spoke to the longevity of his career with this astute observation: he who marries the spirit of his generation will find himself widowed in the next. I see a lot of these trends as first marriages.***

~On location- tell us about the influence of setting on your writing and teaching. You’ve lived and worked in the thriving cultural centers of New York City, London and Shanghai. The beauty and mystery of the differing locations often presents itself in your work. Share some of your most memorable experiences, including the recent workshop on fiction and memoir in Shanghai.

***New York is where I’ve lived the longest, in the beginning by choice. I moved there in 1977 when the place was jumping culturally, and economically just starting a slow crawl out of the sewer. To me, the street vibe in many places was viral—not unlike what you see in Taxi Driver. In 1986, when I left NYC for New Orleans, I found that I missed that virus. Of course, I’d just exchanged one virus for another. In both places I lived recklessly. In many respects, I wasn’t smart enough to recognize that the books I’d loved—On the Road, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas—were cautionary tales, not celebrations, or not simply celebrations, of the lives they depicted. I was a gullible reader. It wasn’t until the end of my time in New Orleans, 1988 – the year Raymond Carver and my father died, that I started thinking, dude, this is getting a little repetitive, to say the least. That year I read Carver’s story “Careful,” about the drunk with the wax stuck in his ear who thinks that he’s going to kick alcohol by drinking only champagne. And it’s four o’clock in the***

*afternoon and the curtains are drawn and he's still in his pajamas pouring champagne into a Dixie cup. Then a piece about Kerouac's final weeks appeared in the New York Times Magazine. That one literally made me burst into tears. It was starting to look like by the time you realize you've rounded a corner, it's already too late.*

*I got back to New York, which I think is less accommodating to dissolution, and not long after that I started teaching, more out of desperation than choice. And I discovered I liked it, and I was good at it. So half my experience of New York, and 99% of my experience in New Orleans, is rum-sodden and that sense appears in "Belated Apology," "Before and After Science," "This Is Not Happening to You," and in all the "Stool Samples: Vieux Carré" poems. But once I put down the bottle and picked up the chalk, as it were, life seemed a little different. I remember reading something about a great little Hoboken-based indie band called the dB's, whose songs, the writer said, concerned girlfriends and rent. And I think my next sustained stint in New York picked up on those themes, they were the two constants, the two worries. There are lots of beautiful, exciting, complicated girls in New York ("Arts & Leisure," "Blasphemy"), and there's no such thing as a cheap apartment. This is when I sunk into many of the writers that I continue to love: Mary Gaitskill, James Salter, Edmund White, Lydia Davis. And I had one long haul with a poet who turned me onto a lot of the poets I continue to love: Jack Gilbert, Joy Harjo, Dorianne Laux. That's what New York provides—there's an anxious, competitive edge and everyone's trying to keep on top or keep afloat and while it may not be the best way to live, it can be exciting and you can learn a lot.*

*Living in Florence was different for me, and living in London. In those places, I walked out onto the streets and felt mesmerized, enchanted. I'm a scuba diver and these places felt to me like the kinds of lazy coral reefs you get off Bonaire in the Dutch West Indies—the subtle, densely textured low-voltage reefs that don't get the big animals but are crammed with the widest and most dazzling varieties of everything else. So in those cities I felt like I was walking around enchanted places. I*



*loved the music of the voices, both the Italian and the English—I probably understood more of the Italian, and I don’t speak Italian. Having that sense, though, of being a welcomed visitor into an alien realm really opened up my heart, really helped me recognize the great good fortune I’ve had, made me realize my blessings. That’s what poems like “Morning in Islington” and “Moonlit Walk” come out of. I should say, too, that early on I was so seduced by Italy—it’s where half my family comes from (the other half is English). I needed to read what other writers in English had done with their experience of Italy, and that’s what led me to Charles Wright, who remains one of my top tier poets. I devoured The World of the Ten Thousand Things and Negative Blue while living in Florence, and at first look that wasn’t easy, because one of the other things I thought I hated was poetry that didn’t justify left, poetry that deployed any kind of unorthodox spatial prosody. As soon as I’d see extra white space, drop lines, indented margins, or no margins, or patterns, I’d turn to the next poem, or book. But because Wright was writing about Italy, I stuck with him and fell in love with the work. “Morgan’s Bluff Revisited” is something of an homage.*

*Shanghai is altogether different. It’s a full frontal assault, and full dorsal, and full intestinal. You feel like you’re dodging bullets while stepping on hot coals. It’s a place of great, locally-inflected contradictions. For instance, we live in a modest but spacious flat—modest and spacious don’t go together in New York City real estate, but here they do. Everything breaks down, but we have great views of ugly buildings. It’s so much to take in. After ten months, we feel as if we’re finally getting the lay of it. We’re learning the language (as much as one can with two 90-minute tutorials a week, plus all the listening), so we expect next year to be more exciting, more illuminating. But still not Florentine. The workshops I’ve run have been wonderfully global affairs. For participants at a recent session I had a Russian, a Venezuelan, a Mexican, two Americans, two Brits, a South African, a Zimbabwean, and a local from Shanghai. They’ve all been like that. The aspiring writers here have a hard time finding workshops of substance (I hope I’m providing some). Many of them are trying to make sense of*

***their experiences in China, and that's one of the reasons I'm focusing as much as I am on memoir.***

~Having your perspectives on what an MFA program can and should be, what would your suggestions be for undergraduate programs at the colleges to better provide for and prepare the students who seriously want to pursue that dicey discipline that is creative writing? Where is the line of balance drawn between craft/revision/structure and the freedom to actively create? What happens for the students who are passionate to learn but don't want their creativity to be squelched by say having to write by committee, or as you discuss in the intro to *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*, according to accepted 'Moses complex' style or being analyzed to death without learning enough craft?

***Undergraduates believe in their own expression. That doesn't mean their own expression isn't an important step, but it's just one very small step on the (generally) very long path toward publication of any sort. Teachers of undergraduate creative writing have to meet the students somewhere close to where they are. By way of analogy, I'll mention one of my yoga teachers who led a small group of us into our first bound half-moon poses – this is a one-legged balance pose with the hands clasped in a bind between the standing leg and the floating leg. For the early practitioner, it's scary enough to be in (unbound) half-moon. You wobble, you think for sure you'll fall, and you think the floor is fifteen stories below. Bound is a whole new level of fear. But the instructor coaxed us forward by saying: what if? What if you add some weight to the standing leg? And what if you lean a little further forward? And what if the back heel comes up off the mat, then the toes? And what if you bring even more weight forward? This slow walk into the full pose was revelatory for all of us, because in a matter of thirty, forty seconds, we were executing versions of bound half-moon without crashing. Undergraduates are afraid of losing their voices, they're afraid of revealing too much, they're afraid of being laughed at, they're afraid they won't get laughs. They need to be walked onto one leg very slowly, very gently, and once that back leg starts to get light, they need to hear the questions: what if there are techniques for keeping the reader***

***on the page? What if there is craft behind effective scene construction? What if there are methods for using dialogue?***

***Over-analysis of unfinished, unrealized work can be deadly. It can lead to a certain cynicism in the workshop. That's why it's critical to include craft components for all workshops not labeled advanced. This way, some of the vocabulary and some of the neutrality of craft discussion finds its way into the workshopping of manuscripts. And each week, participants will sense the growth in their work, the increasing authority with various components of craft.***

***To some extent, the "writing by committee" syndrome is endemic to the workshop process (if the workshop meets for any length of time—six-to-ten-weeks, a full semester). The instructor can minimize the syndrome by establishing clear goals (this session will focus on the mechanics of dialogue, this session will focus on structure...), by providing a constructive vocabulary for critique (effective vs ineffective, dynamic vs inert, fully realized vs on the way), and by stressing process over product (it looks as if this manuscript is struggling to achieve x, y, or z, vs I hate this kind of story).***

***In The Triggering Town, Richard Hugo says that the best thing a writing instructor can do is save you five years of mistakes. If the goals of the course reflect those two things – the limits of the instructor's impact, and the sense that mistakes do actually exist – the work will get off to a better, more productive start.***

***Another thing Hugo says is that when an instructor tells you she doesn't like the way something in your manuscript is working, what she's really saying is write it the way she would. And that's something else that should be foregrounded in a workshop (again, especially if it's semester-long). Going back to the Flannery O'Connor statement, it's the instructor's job to help the writer get away with his approach—that will encourage the writer to write more pages, not fewer, and the more the writer writes, the more the writer learns. The instructor's job is not to discourage. The instructor's job is to do no harm.***

*The instructor's job is also to introduce young writers to many voices, many approaches (even if they're not his approaches, and especially if they are). In a recent poetry workshop I conducted here in Shanghai, some of the participants shrugged at a Jack Gilbert poem, others got off their best work. The poems of Into the Deep Street, an anthology of 20th Century French poets largely overlooked by the academy, turned the students on to the possibilities of mood connected to detail and place. It's the instructor's job to turn the young writers on, to show them why they want to read more, try more, write more, to show them the pleasure of the process without being unrealistic about the struggles.*

*Another way to work with undergraduates, and/or adult workshops with beginning and intermediate writers, is to provide exercise assignments with limited goals. Then, at least part of the following session/s can be devoted to discussion of how well or not the clearly-stated, simple, limited goals were achieved.*

*Something else that's useful: getting writers in to talk to the students. Over here at NYU Shanghai, we had Edward P. Jones visit with the undergraduates who are interested in, but not committed to, majors in some kind of creative writing. Mr. Jones didn't discuss craft much, except to give the impression that he rarely sees anything of much merit come across the table of his workshops. What he was best at, most impressive at, was just being Edward P. Jones. The students had never encountered anyone who so embodied the world vision he professed. The world vision was not rosy, not in the least. And this perplexed the students. They knew Mr. Jones was a Pulitzer Prize-winning, major league author in full career, and they were stumped by his failure to celebrate his success. "So what if you win a prize," he told them. "That doesn't stop the people you love from dying." Some of the undergraduates were a bit put off by this presentation, but they all left with something to wonder about, and those who will go on to write will always remember the day they met the writer whose phenomenal success brought so little happiness. And they might want to create a character based on that guy. And they'll*

***probably need to conduct an interview to help figure out the apparent contradiction. That's a lot to give an undergraduate writer in a semester, no less an afternoon.***

~Talk to us about Greenpoint Press and the *Ducts.org* webzine division which, together with the New York Writers Workshop, are a part of New York Writers Resources. Greenpoint Press discusses its particular interest in personal non-fiction; what are some of the contributing factors that distinguish this medium in the eyes of the organization? For *Ducts*, is the webzine exclusive to regional New York writers and how has the online format enriched the publishing experience over the years since its inception in 1997? With both Greenpoint Press and *Ducts.org*, there is the mention of looking to publish under –recognized writers and quality fiction that “might be overlooked by larger commercial publishers.” What are some of the fiction projects that you’ve recently worked with that meet these criteria?

***We're truly a millennial organization with our feet in two centuries—sometimes those feel like the 18th and the 19th, but we launched right on the cusp in 2000 as, simply, New York Writers Workshop. A few years later we created Resources in order to merge with Ducts, a webzine already of some stature and endurance. And we brought Greenpoint Press under the umbrella. Jon Kravetz, the editor-in-chief and founder of Ducts, could tell you a lot more about its origins and mission, and Charles Salzberg, co-founder of New York Writers Workshop and publisher of Greenpoint Press, could tell you a lot more about Greenpoint.***

***I've been fiction editor at Ducts for maybe five years now, and I can speak to the desire to publish under-recognized writers there, and to look outside, way outside, the New York area. The Summer 2012 issue, for example, our first full female fiction issue, due in June, features a piece from Katrina Hamlin, Hong Kong-born of English parents, living (when she submitted the piece) in Shanghai, but now back to Hong Kong. Another ex-Shanghai writer, Dena Rash Guzman, appears with a short-short set in the rural Pacific rural northwest, where she's living now. We have the self-contained opening of a novel by Mary Paige Snell, nominally set in New York but haunted by New England and the Midwest. And we're particularly proud to***

***showcase the debut fiction of Keerthana Jagadeesh, a young writer from Bangalore, India, now studying at NYU. Most of her work, poetry and fiction, is Bangalore-based. These are all writers we'll be hearing a lot more from, and I love the way, in issue after issue, Ducts brings the wide-reaching global community of writers onto its screens.***

***As I say, Charles Salzberg is the muscle and brains behind Greenpoint. He's been involved in the writing world on so many levels, in so many capacities. If he has a motto, it would be: how can I help other writers? And his work at Greenpoint demonstrates that motto. He knows how difficult it is for writers to get a good read, a fair read, from the large and many of the small commercial houses. So Charles gets a hold of titles like Long Gone, by Richard Willis, a memoir of life in rural Iowa in the 1930s and 40s, that reads like a Grant Wood painting, and he gives it a chance. It's been a huge success critically, and it's done well for Greenpoint financially – although the financial is not really what any of New York Writers Resources is about. We're a not-for-profit, run, for better or worse (I hear a joke here, but I'm not going to say it) by writers. In fact, this gives me an opportunity to mention our first big fundraiser, which is featured on our website, and is slated for June 14, and is located at Lincoln Center. Lincoln Center! After beginning in the back room of a Houlihan's (that no longer exists) on 63rd and Broadway—across the street and a world away from Lincoln Center. On a certain level, it feels as if we're not slouching toward Bethlehem any longer.***

\*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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