AWP 2024 EVENT OUTLINE:

Revising Revealed: The Art of Revising Poetry
(Saturday, 12:10 – 1:25pm, Convention Center street level, Room 2210)
https://www.awpwriter.org/awp_conference/event_detail/25879

EVENT DESCRIPTION:
Most books and panel discussions of poetry focus on before and after—how to be inspired, and how to seek publication. Critique sessions in workshops and MFA programs worry over drafts, then send writers into solo struggle to re-write. Revision—each writer’s intense concentration on myriad adjustments—remains largely hidden. Using specific examples, attendees at this panel learn from Nez Perce, Nigerian-American, and Anglo poets exactly what happens between inspiration and the final text. Two co-editors from The Art of Revising Poetry (Bloomsbury, 2023) will lead the discussion on revision techniques with three of their contributors. Topics will range from false starts to how a poet tinkers, cuts, rearranges, and shape a poem throughout the revision process. Panelists detail what they changed and why, as well as reveal personal revision tricks, idiosyncrasies, and lessons learned through long practice.

EVENT CATEGORY:
Poetry & Craft

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATORS:
Kim Stafford & Charles Finn

EVENT PARTICIPANTS:
Abayomi Animashaun, Tami Haaland & Beth Piatote

OPENING REMARKS, HOUSEKEEPING, AND INTRODUCTIONS:
Kim: Good afternoon and thank you all for being here. My name is Kim Stafford. I am the author of a dozen books of poetry and prose, including *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do: How My Brother Disappeared; The Muses Among Us; Having Everything Right*; and *Singer Come From Afar*. I am the founding director of the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College and co-editor of the poetry textbook we’ll be talking about today, *The Art of Revising Poetry*.

And this is my co-moderator and co-editor of *The Art of Revising Poetry*, Charles Finn. Charles is the former editor of the literary and fine arts magazine *High Desert Journal*, and author of *Wild Delicate Seconds: 29 Wildlife Encounter* and *On a Benediction of Wind: Poems and Photographs from the American West*, winner of the 2022 Montana Book Award.

Together we welcome you to *Revising Revealed: The Art of Revising Poetry*.

Before we begin, just a few housekeeping notes we’ve been asked to share:

First, for those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, we have copies available. Please let Charles know by raising your hand and a printed copy will be delivered to you. In addition, the organizers ask that you please make sure spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers and that you treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them. Also please be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and (going forward) refrain from wearing scented products. Finally, please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. We ask that you do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Kim: So, again, welcome and thank you for attending. Charles and I are very excited to be here and excited to be able to share with you these
three panelists insights and practice into the revision of poetry. Before we introduce our panelist, Charles will give you a little background on the book we’ll be referencing, *The Art of Revising Poetry*.

**Charles:**
Greetings and welcome. As you probably know *The Art of Revising Poetry* is billed as a textbook for graduate and undergraduate writing programs, but Kim and I have always felt it has a far wider appeal and can be immensely interesting and helpful to anyone who writes or reads poetry.

The idea for *The Art of Revising Poetry* arose some years ago when I was flipping through old notebooks and journals looking for inspiration. Seeing early versions of my poems, I was struck with how vastly different the first drafts were compared to their finished, final, published forms. They were also visually interesting, palimpsests of first reads and re-reads as I scribbled in the margins or directly over top of my lines. My initial drafts were full of cross-out and arrows, insertions, blank spaces, notes to self, and all manner of marginalia. In the most severe case, I realized only a single word from my first draft had survived the revision process. And this got me wondering if other poets worked in a similar way, exactly how much time they spent on revising, and how many “drafts” a poem went through.

*The Art of Revising Poetry* is therefore a visually unique and fascinating look into the creative mind of 21 working poets. Together, Kim and I solicited poems from a wide variety of our poet friends from across the United States: Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, Anglos, men, women, gay, straight, and asked them to send us photocopies of a first draft of a poem—straight from their notebooks—along with the finished, final version as it appeared in print. We then asked them to write a 1,000-word essay describing exactly *why* they made the changes they did. The result is an anthology of poetic knowledge and a teaching guide unlike any other. And what we hope to
do today is share with you some of the revelations about revising poetry we learned along the way.

Kim:
To do this, we invited three of our illustrious contributors Abayomi Animashaun, Tami Haaland, and Beth Piatote to share their insights and expand upon the chapters they wrote.

Abayomi Animashaun is the author of three poetry collections and editor of three anthologies. He is a recipient of the Hudson Prize and a grant from the International Center for Writing and Translation. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.

Tami Haaland is the author of three books of poetry, What Does Not Return, When We Wake in the Night and Breath in Every Room, winner of the Nicholas Roerich Prize. She teaches at Montana State University Billings and has served as poet laureate of Montana.

Beth Piatote is a scholar, teacher, and creative writer in both poetry and prose. Her books include Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature (Yale 2013); The Beadworkers: Stories (Counterpoint 2019) and a forthcoming poetry collection. She is an associate professor of English at UC Berkeley.

Kim: Thank you, Charles. Now, to get us started, could you each give a brief overview of your personal revision process and how you approach revision in your work.

Abayomi Animashaun

Poetry for me is an act of faith. Faith that by showing up to write (between the morning hours of three and six), I’ll discover words and phrases beyond my limited imagination that sometimes become seeds for new poems or solutions for old unfinished poems…In the process of revising a poem, my draft felt clunky. False. But I knew I was close. So I
kept showing up. I refused to lose faith in my process. The poem had taken on life. It was almost formed. I couldn’t force it into my prior notions of what it could have been by referencing Moses’ adoptive mother, who drew him out of the river, gave him his name, and raised him in Pharaoh’s house. I had to follow the poem down another river, one that slowly emerged from the act of writing, to a conclusion I read now and marvel at still.

Tami Haaland
I grew up on the Montana prairie and started writing poetry at twelve. My household was full of art and music, but I was convinced that poetry would be my path in life. Still in my teens, I was lucky enough to take classes from Richard Hugo and Madeline DeFrees at the University of Montana. And then I persisted.

Drafting happens fairly quickly for me, and revision is long. I usually write longhand and do some cleanup work as I type, then experiment with lines and indentations, thinking about space on the page. The piece often sits for a good while after that, and if it feels ready enough, I'll try it out with some trusted readers whose honesty I value. They usually give me plenty to think about and I take notes. Then it sits longer and in time I will begin to tinker, taking their comments into consideration but also finding the poem to be new to me because I've been giving it time to itself. This process continues. Rarely do I send something out quickly. The poems rest and gradually begin to associate with other poems I've been writing. If they form stanzas I'll often scrunch the stanzas together, re-edit, try to sharpen the language, then consider again the shape the poem will take. At some point, the poem seems finished enough to make its way into the world, and as it comes back to me, I continue to reconsider.

Beth Piatote
I am working with a particular constraint—or rather, a particular font of possibility—in my poetry: to illuminate the grammar, beauty, and
ontological brilliance of my Indigenous language, Niimiipuutímt/Nez Perce. My goal is to use poetry for Indigenous language revitalization, and this means crafting bilingual poems that will assist language learners in grasping Nez Perce grammar and usage, while also offering lovely, accessible gems of observation for general readers….In revision, I need I to distill what the poem was really about, so I asked my dreams to help me. This strategy was another version of going for a walk; I had to shake things up. I needed to access a deeper level of my creativity that was not yet flowing through my pen, to go somewhere with the poem where I wasn’t in control of it but simply able to observe and learn from it. In most cases this work can be done in waking life. But when we write, we are free to use every resource we have available, and in this case I asked my dreams to help me understand the soul of the poem.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

Charles: Thank you panelists and Kim, those are all quite fascinating approaches and my first question also goes to all three of you.

1. **To Revise or Not to Revise, that is the Question:** The Beat poets used to say, “First thought, best thought,” an approach that privileges the power of the unconscious to shake off literary artifice and trust what comes. But a corollary to this is a notion from the writer Reginald McKnight, who once told an audience that revision of any work should strive not to polish the text, but to make it more raw, primitive, even feral, working backward from the civilized to the elemental. How do each of you make a poem stronger through revision, without making it fall into some kind of literary artifice, some perfected form that leaves its original genius or potential essence in the dust?

2. **Kim: The Poem Taking Over:** Throughout the revision process, many poets talk about seeking what the poem wants to be, as if the poem itself must become the teacher and the guide. Beth, in your essay you say, “a writer is both responsible for craft (making
intentional decisions) and for attunement to the organic form of the poem (allowing the poem to be what it wants).” Writing the poem you included in the anthology, you observe, “I had to … go somewhere with the poem where I wasn’t in control of it but simply able to observe and learn from it….to discover what the poem wanted to be.” “Give your whole self to the process,” you say. Can all three panelist speak to this idea that sometimes you must follow the poem where it wants to go, and not where you first intended or thought it would be. Is that a difficult sacrifice?

3. **Charles: Getting Help:** Tami, you search out help from a community of fellow writers, letting others read your work, saying, “The more comprehensive revision comes more slowly, less consciously, and often because readers—fellow writers and trusted collaborators—point out what I may have overlooked.” Beth you also search out help, but in your case say of the poem you wrote: “I needed to distill what the poem was really about, so I asked my dreams to help me … understand the soul of the poem.” Abayo, you too sometimes show your work to trusted friends. Can each of you expand on the benefits, and possible pitfalls of seeking out advise and opinions? And Beth, I am particularly interested in hearing about how dreams help inform and shape your poems.

4. **Kim: How do you know when to stop revising?** The task of revision can be looked at as the work of a farmer—cultivating young ideas and budding images, then nurturing the seed-bed of first thought into ripe growth. If so, part of the trick is knowing when it’s time to stop, to harvest, to call it good. For generations, writers have quoted the idea attributed to various poets: ‘a poem is never finished, only abandoned.’ Perhaps it’s more accurate to say a poem needs not so much to be chilled to finality, but to be released to readers, to go forth like a child from home, to clear the writer’s desk so new epiphanies will have a place to land. Ted Kooser says he revises until the poem feels like it was written by someone else—a stranger—and then he can tinker with abandon for finality. My father, William Stafford,
once said he stops revising a poem when it no longer feels like an act of imagination: “I come to poetry for the experience of creation. If revision becomes just fixing something, I don’t do it.” Can each of you tell us how and when you know a poem is finished, if ever.

Charles: Final Tip of Thoughts…to the three panelists: Each of you is a highly talented and successful poet. What is one piece of advice, or one last thing you’d like say about revision before we open the floor up to questions from the audience. Tell us, if you can, how through revision you make your poems sing?

Q&A for audience input…