
Cultural Daily

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Poets on Craft: Melinda Palacio and Richard Vargas

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, May 26th, 2021

For this fortieth post in the *Poets on Craft* series, we have Melinda Palacio and Richard Vargas.

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.



Poet, author, and speaker, Melinda Palacio lives in Santa Barbara and New Orleans. Her poetry chapbook, *Folsom Lockdown*, won Kulupi Press' Sense of Place 2009 award. She is the author of the novel, *Ocotillo Dreams* (ASU Bilingual Press 2011), for which she received the Mariposa Award for Best First Book at the 2012 International Latino Book Awards and a 2012 PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature. Her first full-length poetry collection, *How Fire Is a Story, Waiting*, (Tia Chucha Press 2012) was a finalist for the Milt Kessler Award, the Paterson Prize, and received First Prize in Poetry at the 2013 International Latino Book Awards. In 2015, her work was featured on the [Academy of American Poets](#), Poem-a-Day Program. Melinda's latest poetry collection is *Bird Forgiveness*.

It's easier to start a poem than to end one. I start by reading from my notebook. On a separate piece of paper, I write down everything that has been on my mind lately, even if it has nothing to do with poetry. I often steal from myself because I write random notes all the time. No matter what I'm writing, I often start with a phrase or a sentence from my notebook that stands out. I do not have a set notebook for jotting down all the ideas that pop into my head (that would be nice). If I could train myself to put all of my ideas in one place, I might be better organized. My sense of disarray has a loveliness I cling to. You never know when you might need to fish an idea out of the waste basket. There is a baby photo of me surrounded by bags and boxes. Maybe, my mother used my crib as storage? My office may be filled with clutter, but I know where everything is at, even the ballad papers I lob into the trash. The most important thing is to write down the idea, especially if I know the idea will become a poem, story, or song (yes, two years ago, I started writing songs). I'm currently working on new poems, songs, and a new novel.

Ideas, whenever they arrive, must be honored immediately by writing them down or else they will

move on. Someone else will be ready to listen and jot down the stroke of genius. Some people call this brainstorming, letting ideas rain on the page. I've found that it's important to respect those ideas and breathe life into them through the act of writing. Before you know it, a poem takes shape; it's your own magic.

Lately, the theme of birds has been a haunting poetic obsession. Birds are present even when I can't see them, I hear them. Three years ago, I wrote a whole book where birds found their way into each poem, *Bird Forgiveness*. I figured I was done with the subject. However, the pandemic and being on lockdown with little company other than birds meant they crept back into my thoughts and poetry. The middle of the poem is the easiest to write because there's a rhythm that's established and certain phrases demand inclusion or are easy to cut out because they take away from the poem's message. For me, the middle is about the poem's music and message, and the audition of each word's merit in terms of sound or emotion, thrill or clarity. Sometimes the change feels obvious and other times, you couldn't imagine going in the new direction when you first sat down with your newly formed poem. I write until I'm tired and I can't squeeze anything more out of the poem. If I'm not exhausted by the last stanza, I'm not finished. Exhaustion is the key to revision, but I make sure to sit down with my new poem after some time has passed and then the experience of finishing the poem feels like sitting down with an old friend and rehashing a familiar or favorite subject that keeps you talking until you can no longer keep your eyes open.



Richard Vargas received his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of New Mexico, 2010. He edited/published five issues of *The Tequila Review*, 1978-1980, and twelve issues of *The Mas Tequila Review* from 2010-2015. Published collections: *McLife*, 2005; *American Jesus*, 2009; *Guernica, revisited*, 2014. He currently resides in Wisconsin, near the lake where Otis Redding's plane crashed.

The poem is a living thing. The writing is an intimate interaction of art and the physical body, and it is reflected in my line breaks. I was influenced early by the poetry of William Carlos Williams and Robert Creeley. Williams' made me realize the break should reflect the breath; read the poem aloud, your body will tell you where to break the line as you pause and inhale. It reflects the pattern of my speech. Creeley's use of the short line creates a tumbling effect, the poem becomes a waterfall of words trickling gently on the page, one line leads naturally unto the next. The written and spoken aspects of poetry rely equally on each other.

My subject matter? I'm surrounded by it. My senses are bombarded when I am awake and asleep. What I see, touch, hear, feel, and smell all have the potential to trigger those sacred moments of clarity that are expressed as poems. Sometimes it will burst out, my fingers unable to stop hitting the keys of my laptop until the poem is birthed onto the screen. Then there are the ones who grab my attention, but leave it for me to work it out, exercising my heart and mind as I struggle with the

essence of the encounter. What is this mark it left on me? What about it needs to be expressed and passed on? The process can take days or weeks. Then at the time of its choosing, the poem shows up, says “now you’re ready, let’s do the work.” To be a poet is to pay attention.

I view the writing of poetry as the best of three worlds: indulging in my fascination with words and the sensual pleasure they give sliding off my tongue in various combinations, the joy of being able to make a verbal music (although I regretfully cannot carry a tune or play an instrument,) and painting mental images that project color and texture in the mind of the reader. The best poems touch on all three, and it is the bar that I try to reach, no matter the subject matter. Ditching the ego is the first step, realizing that I heed the call of a higher cosmic energy provides all the reward I’ll ever need or want. It’s all about the poem... nothing else matters.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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