
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Nicole Yackley and Aline Mello

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, March 10th, 2021

For this thirtieth post in the series, we have Nicole Yackley and Aline Mello.

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.



Nicole Yackley is a poet and artist from GA. Her poetry has been published in *Belletrist Magazine* and *Phoenix Literary Magazine*, among others. She has a BA in English from UGA and an MFA in Poetry from UTK where she studied under Joy Harjo.

I build my poems usually around sound. I enjoy rhyme and alliteration and consonant clusters and homophones, etc, and will use those to move forward if the idea gets stuck. I'll see, hear, or think something that sparks a phrase and then I'll move sonically from there. I want my poetry to have meaning and be relevant, of course, but I mostly just relish the way language feels.

The way I use line breaks is about creating emphasis. There is naturally more (visual and sometimes vocal) weight to the first and last word of every line. Because of breath, phrases, and rhyme, sentences are split before line breaks are involved, so I like to use the line breaks (in non-form poems) to add emphasis in places that are not already weighted. I will often embed the rhymes instead of having them perform at the end of the lines. To me, this allows any rhyme to propel the line forward musically without it being the focus. I also ask myself where a line break will most affect the meaning of the sentence, and place it there. Hidden interpretations caused by that kind of line break create a subtext to write towards as well.

As for knowing when to end a poem, it is often for me about when a certain tone is reached.

Sometimes a shorter poem will feel falsely self-assured, or conversely too uncertain without any motion towards an answer. Both of those extremes are stationary, and I prefer a reaching toward—whether writing out of the mire or into it, always ending in that liminal space. Another way of knowing that the poem is done is when it is memorized. If I try to type the poem without looking at the previous draft and it comes out exactly the same way, then that's the final poem.



Aline Mello is a Brazilian writer and editor living in Atlanta. She's a proud immigrant and UndocuPoet fellow and her debut poetry collection *More Salt Than Diamond* is forthcoming from Andrews McMeel in 2022. Her poetry can be found in the *Georgia Review*, *The New Republic*, *Grist*, *The Rumpus*, and other journals. Find her online at thealinemello.com and

@thealinemello. (Photo by Eley Photo)

Poems for me happen in different ways. When I first switched from writing only fiction to writing poetry, I would write down streams of consciousness, maybe about a page's worth, and then I would cut down the words and reformat everything until it was a poem. But as the years went on, I started depending more and more on whatever was the prevailing feeling in my body. Sometimes, that would come from reading something powerful or impactful—probably from other poems. Whatever feeling stayed with me after reading several poems, I would try to make into a poem, following the words that came to my mind without judgment and, in this way, allowing the process to be one of discovery. The thought that whatever I was writing down could be only mine and others might never ever see it is important in this process. If I am aware of an audience outside myself, I edit too early—as the words are just coming out. It can be paralyzing. Rarely, but sometimes, the poem comes to me in words. Sometimes I will be in a specific moment—like teaching my mom US History so she can pass her citizenship test while I am still undocumented—where the words will start immediately. (In this specific case, it was the title and first line “Studying for the Citizenship Test with My Mother” and I went on describing the scene as it happened, looking for meaning and connections.)

Most of the work of making whatever I write into an actual poem comes in the editing. After I've written everything and it feels like a finished thing, I can go back and look for units of meaning. Each word, each phrase, each line, each stanza—each has to have meaning. If it doesn't, it's cut. I try to use line breaks to cause surprise, like a line can mean one thing completely different when read alone, and another thing when read together with the stanza. The most brilliant use of this is in Lucille Clifton's “won't you celebrate with me” where she goes “my one hand holding tight / my other hand.” The first line sets up the expectation that she is holding onto something or someone secure, or even something not so secure. But the next line shows she is simply holding her hands together. She has nothing else to hold on to. And that line break provides that surprise to the reader, and makes her meaning that much more potent.

When it comes to ending the poem, I am looking for a finished feeling or thought. Sometimes, I honestly don't know when a poem is finished, only that I'm finished with the poem for the present. Maybe I'll return to it with a new mind years from now, but today, I am done, and want to set it free from me and my editing. Sometimes, though, the ending comes with a piercing last line. Then I know that I can't write anything else to follow that line so I stop.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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