
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Valarie Hastings and Nancy Murphy

Bunkong Tuon · Saturday, October 2nd, 2021

For this forty-sixth post in the Poets on Craft series, we have Valarie Hastings and Nancy Murphy.

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.



Valarie Hastings is the 2020 winner of the Steve Kowit Poetry Prize, recipient of an Honorable Mention for the 2020 Allen Ginsberg Award and a 2019 Pushcart nominee. Her first collection of poetry, *Searching for Dandelion Greens*, was released in June 2021, with Garden Oak Press.

I first began writing in response to my dad asking me to write him stories when I was little, living on an Army base in Maryland in the Sixties. These were of course very *short* stories, if you could even call them that, some images thrown down with lots of phonetically spelled words and big lettering. But it was always a way for us to communicate, even when he was far away, serving in Viet Nam and, later, Thailand. Writing for me has always come from that same deeply personal place. Writing for me is like a calling this way.

In building a poem I begin with journaling. It is the foundation for everything I write. I journal as often as I can, anywhere I can—on airplanes, the bus on the way in to work, when I can't sleep at night. I always keep a light-weight journal and pen with me everywhere I go. I re-read my journal entries, take a highlighter and post it notes to them, picking out ideas, bits of stories, things I've overhead on the street, language that resonates. Next, I go to my laptop and flesh out those same ideas on the keyboard. I try to get it all out without any censorship, inviting the poem to take me where it wants to go. Once I've got the gist of the story onto paper, I begin turning it into a poem—revising, paring down, thinking very consciously about tone and mood, who the speaker is,

whether he/she is speaking in first, second or third person, experimenting with the voice and enjambment. I try to be curious and playful, never judgmental—this is the most fun, the most mindful endeavor you’ll ever engage in! I try always to avoid/ignore/shut down (flip off) what Philip Schulz calls the “shit bird”—that voice in your ear, sitting on your shoulder calling you out as an imposter. Sometimes I don’t succeed. But I want to enter the poem with that same childlike joy that started me writing, and give the poem the patience and love it asks for.

I read all the time, asking myself why do I like this poem? What’s working here? How has the poet created mood and tone, who is the speaker? Why is this voice fresh? What is the syntax and how is the music in the language working? Ending the poem is a letting go. It doesn’t need to be tidy. I love the way Tim Seibles approaches this. He says the end of a poem is like finishing a letter, where you feel you’ve said what you want to say, and you don’t need to say anything more.



Nancy Murphy is a Los Angeles based writer and performer and a recent winner of the *Aurora Poetry* contest. She has been published in various journals including *Gyroscope Review*, *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *glassworks*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Baltimore Review* and others. Nancy grew up on the East Coast and earned a B.A. in American Studies at Union College, Schenectady, NY. (Photo by Lindsay Schlick)

Poetry writing for me starts with a search. A search for understanding, for the truth under the surface, for the precise word to capture an image or feeling. Yet poetry is the language of the unconscious—we are trying to find words for the inexpressible. We will always fail. We reach anyway because when we get close, it’s exciting. When I read a great poem, my pulse quickens and I feel illuminated about some aspect of the human condition. As a writer of poetry, I enjoy the gift of self-discovery when my words shine a light onto something I didn’t know I knew.

When I sit down to write a poem, I usually free write to warm up, writing lots of mediocre lines, riffing and letting it be nonsensical and strange. Sometimes an idea has been marinating for a while

and I want to get it on paper. Other times I have just had a dream that I want to savor. If I am going through a particularly emotional time, I try to jot down notes when it's fresh to assemble later when I have some distance. And often I don't have an idea but trust that something will emerge. A good writing prompt can distract me from my inner editor enough to have my writing surprise me. Reading a favorite poet will always inspire me to write too.

The editing process is where I can get a little distance from what I am working on. If a piece is about something painful for example, editing allows me to transcend that by getting lost in the creative process of forming it into a poem. I play with language, the sound of the words together, line lengths and breaks, stanza breaks and lengths—like a giant puzzle. I look for ways to ground the poem if it is too abstract, using tangible things in my environment and sensory details. I also see where there are opportunities to broaden or deepen the poem, the turn that elevates it from writing about your favorite cracked coffee mug to how you miss your daughter.

Where is the ending? Usually about three lines before I first think the ending is. I try to land on an image or in a place where the reader will engage and carry it away with them to ponder. The ending should just sing! When is it all done, or as I say, done for now? When you have fallen in love with your poem and want to read it aloud over and over, and then share it with the world.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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