Finding a Window

Nikky Finney on the South, Condoleezza Rice, and why curiosity trumps rage.

by Kimberly Reyes

Nikky Finney has been writing poetry since she was a teenager, but those early attempts were often "terrible, horrible rants," as she describes them. Through the years Finney harnessed that indignation into something beautiful and often healing. She is the author of four poetry collections, including the 2011 National Book Award–winning *Head Off & Split*.

After 20 years of teaching at the University of Kentucky, Finney has recently returned to her home state to teach at the University of South Carolina. In addition to her teaching duties, she's currently writing an introduction to the forthcoming reissue of James Baldwin's only volume of poetry, helping to judge the next National Book Award for Poetry, and working with the National Civil War Project to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the war.

In the middle of unpacking, Finney found time to speak with the Poetry Foundation about her passion for politics, pauses, and the Dickinson-like windows she looks through to write poetry. A condensed, edited version of that telephone conversation follows. She will also be reading at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago on October 30.

You grew up in South Carolina as the daughter of a civil rights attorney and a teacher. What was it like growing up in a house like that during the civil rights movement?

I remember as a child wanting to do more. I saw the adults that were raising me and taking care of our community being incredibly committed to changing it. Changing the little world and the big world. And as children we were allowed to see and hear and be involved in some of that, and some of that we were protected from because it was a very dangerous time all around. I was just telling somebody yesterday that I have been keeping notes on my life since I was about 13, not thinking that I would use it to be a poet or to write the things that I do but just because it generally helped me as a 13-,14-, 15-year-old understand how human beings could, one: be so violent, and two: hate somebody so much because of the color of their skin or some other personal characteristic without knowing them. These are the questions children ask themselves and the world, and sometimes they get answers and sometimes they don't.

You're a member of the Affrilachian Poets, a collective of writers of African American descent from Appalachia that you helped found in the mid-'90s. Could you tell me about the collective?

Frank [X Walker] looked up the word "Appalachian" in the Webster dictionary, the 1984 edition or something like that, and it said white residents of mountainous regions of the country. Frank is from Danville, Kentucky—you know, Appalachia. So he thought: if I'm not going to be included in the definition in Webster's, then I'm going to have to make a word. So he took Africa and Appalachia and he made Affrilachia, which now is in the English dictionary.

We started doing readings in Kentucky and in the region and Frank was teaching in the elementary schools, and people started to really take notice. We would go into communities. There was one in particular that I remember, Lynch; what a name—Lynch, Kentucky—and there was a black woman, a retired schoolteacher

who had been writing poems since she was a schoolgirl. She had them in several shoeboxes, and when she heard that we were coming into town to do this reading, she brought her shoeboxes with her. They were sitting in her lap, and afterwards she opened them up and showed us her poems, and we thought she would never have done this had we not come together to make a collective. It just gave us great energy to keep going into small communities and large cities and get young black folk to see that you didn't just have to be two or three things that this community allowed you to be; you could be a writer and an artist and find great pride in that. And we were also meeting elders, older people who had been hiding the fact that they were writers all of their lives because nobody came to care about it.

You talk a lot about writing in the "in between," being impartial without standing on a soapbox. How do you do that, especially when writing about such horrific events?

Because rage doesn't make poetry. And I think that if you're a poet and you're an artist, you know this—that rage makes rage. Nobody wants to hear your rant. If you want to rant and if you want to be full of rage, you can put that in your journal book. Art is about the provocative, but it is also about the beautiful. I never forget that. They go hand in hand for me.

I know what it takes, having done this for as long as I have, that sometimes you have to wait it out. You have to go for a walk, you have to go for a bike ride; you have to wait 48 hours for something to pass. I call it sometimes finding a window instead of a door. You know a door is right in front of you and it's got the wall, and all you do is open it and walk through, but a window is over there, and it has a certain plan of life, and sometimes you have to climb up on something to get through it. There's a little more task involved. So I'm always looking for a window in terms of writing things and figuring out what I want to say about them.

Was it always a 48-hour waiting period for you, or did you have an angry phase as part of your development? Did you ever write rageful poetry?

Oh yeah; [when I was] young, young, 15, 16, 17 years old, terrible horrible rants. I still have them, I look at them and go, "Wow, this was me in the beginning." The young Nikky Finney poet was angry about the world she lived in and how she was treated sometimes in that world, how her family was treated.

What was the click for you that got you to the next level?

[Knowing] this isn't good writing. [laughter] Nobody wants to hear this. And I hadn't even started reading aloud or sharing it, but I knew this was terrible. I know better than what I'm writing about. I've always been a human being who had a great conversation with her interior self. I don't know why. I was always contemplative and thinking of things in the round … and that kind of thinking about things is exactly how I see my work, always looking for a way to show myself and also the listener or the reader something that they didn't know. I could rant about how hateful somebody is, [but] there's no new way in, there's no window to that that gives you anything new. The artists that I love, the writers that I respect, that's what they taught me. There's something deep inside that touches the reader or the listener. That's where you want to spend your time, and that was a great lesson.

Do you think the craft of poetry can be taught?

It can be taught, yes! It can be learned. What you were born with: sensibilities, maybe, you're born with spirits, maybe, but one of the things that drives me crazy are students of poetry thinking they can walk from their dorms into the classroom and write poems. There is a discipline of poetry, a study of things to pay attention to. There are also things that you have to come with that have nothing to do with the technical side of it. Recognizing who you are in the world and your empathy, your ability to not just look at your own life but at other people's lives. Things can be taught and things can be practiced. You need to know that your poetry muscles can get bigger.

You've written about polarizing figures such as Condoleezza Rice and Strom Thurmond with great humanity. What draws you to them?

I think my curiosity. I think that is the thing that has made me a poet, really—my curiosity about people, my empathy with people. Yes, I look at them in not easy ways, but I also hope I don't forget that they are people too, with foibles and fragilities and missteps; I'm trying to show that. In America we tend to think that sound bites teach us about people and who we are. I think that is ridiculous. I tend more to read biographies and look at things that most media doesn't have time to spend a lot of time on. That's what I did for Condoleezza Rice: I read a biography about her; I have a huge folder of articles on her. Putting together the poems is like playing Sudoku or a puzzle. I'm not trying to say I'm the last word on Condoleezza Rice, but I did want to explore who she was: a Southern girl like me, from a middle-class family like me, who was taught many things about the South and about being three times as good. We both were taught a lot of the same things, and we were also taught a lot of different things, which is great because I don't believe that there is a monolithic black person.

In your National Book Award acceptance speech, you said: "Some have just climbed out of the cold wet Atlantic just to be here. We shiver together." It's an exquisite line. What did you mean by it exactly? Do you feel a spiritual connection to those who came before you?

Absolutely. I feel spiritual, physical, historical, psychological, psychic. I am always talking to the ancestors whose names I know and whose names I do not know. I was born in Conway, South Carolina, right on the cusp on the Atlantic Ocean. I didn't know this as a girl growing up; [I] didn't connect [it] with the slave trade or the fact that it was one of the ports where slavery entered America. As I grew up and I had to educate myself, I realized this land that I came from and was born to had such historical and spiritual significance to me. I started realizing that part of who I was was part of them, so I never forget.

[When I found out] I was one of the five finalists [for the National Book Award], a friend of mine called me and said, "So you've got this speech written, huh?" I laughed. I said, "C'mon, man, I'm a girl from South Carolina; I was taught to be more modest than that." He said, "Oh, so you don't take yourself seriously." I gasped and got off the phone and thought, "Wow, maybe I should write something, just in case. And so I did. I knew where I would begin. I always begin with silence and meditational prayer and thanksgiving to those that I do not know. [But] this was really different. I mean, here we are at a $1,000 per plate dinner, dressed to the nines, and I'm going to ask you to move over in your seat and let an enslaved African who has escaped or jumped off the boat in order to not be a slave anymore sit beside you? I mean, how is that going to go over? What might that sound like? And after I worried about that for a little bit I thought, I don't really care. I know that this is the right thing to say, and I want to speak not to the $1,000-plate dinner or to the dressed-to-the-nines people but to all of our hearts about this history that is so infrequently talked about.

And you use the term "head off & split" in part to describe how a society decides which parts of stories and history it wants to preserve—and what gets ignored.

If we don't watch, if we don't pay attention, many, many, many stories, many many, many names, many, many, many truths will not make it to air. That's always been the case, and it always will be the case. Toni Cade Bambara wrote this on the back of a postcard: "Do not leave the arena to the fools." I think about that—it's the second thing I think about when I wake up in the morning. If you don't pay attention, so much valuable information will be wiped away.

I first learned of the Orangeburg Massacre through your poem "Dancing with Strom." Is that teaching an intention while writing or just a happy by-product?

I think by-product. I'm not trying to lead the reader and say, "Do you know about the Orangeburg Massacre?," but I am trying to say nobody talks about the Orangeburg Massacre—not in South Carolina, not in the country. The Orangeburg Massacre had a huge impact on me as a young person. So I'm just

telling you, really, who I am. I can't tell you how many emails I get from strangers, from people who just want to say, "I didn't know about this." I always feel like it's my job … if you give me a public [space], if you give me a podium, a stage, or a moment before an audience, part of my responsibility is to bring forward something that perhaps that we need to be talking more about.

After the Supreme Court decision came down about voting rights this summer, Congressman John Lewis talked about how post-slavery Reconstruction was reversed and how the modern progress that people take for granted can very easily be taken away. What's your take?

I love John Lewis; I really think he's a soldier and a hero in a lot of ways, and I think he's right. This false sense of security is all around us, even in the body of the first black president of America. We do not live in a post-racial America. We will never be post-racial until we can look at each other and talk about race. We have never ever, ever done that. I'm always an optimist, but I'm also a realist. It's going to change by people talking about it, by art, by keeping it in front of our faces. You can talk about tough things without indicting, without pointing your finger and jumping up on the table and making people feel terrible about who they are. That's the humanity part. I want to have that conversation with people.

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