

“So I Became a Witness”: An interview with Nikky Finney

by [Joshua Barnes](#) / August 14, 2012 / [No comments](#)



Poet Nikky Finney being interviewed at House Permutation, one of City of Asylum/Pittsburgh's House Publications. Photo: Camila Centeno

[Nikky Finney](#)'s *Head Off & Split* won the [National Book Award](#) for Poetry this year. Since then the writer's career has skyrocketed. Finney appreciates the accolades, but she hopes she'll have time to write again after her agenda, booked until 2013, opens up. The author of another three collections—*On Wings Made of Gauze* (1985), *Rice* (1995), and *The World Is Round* (2003)—Finney could be called a nonfiction poet of our time. She is a witness to people on the margins of history, guided by the principle of telling the lion's story in a world where the lion hunter tells the tale.

Finney came to Pittsburgh in June with the African American poetry organization [Cave Canem](#), for their third annual workshop and [reading](#), presented in partnership with City of Asylum/Pittsburgh. That afternoon, after leading a workshop with a group of Cave Canem's student poets, Finney sat down for a conversation with *Sampsonia Way*.

In this interview she discusses her journey into poetry, her editing process, why she is frustrated with history's lion hunters, and the story behind her gripping poem "The Afterbirth, 1931."

Do you remember the first thing you ever wrote? How did it make you feel?

I have been writing for my entire life. As soon as I could hold a pencil I started scribbling, and I've kept journals ever since I was about ten. I've written about a hundred journals, which I still have and where I can find out what I was doing when I was twelve or fourteen. My love for poetry started in the fifth or sixth grade when I started trying to compose stanzas and things like that. They were awful. But there is one that I consider my first poem—I remember I was on a bus. I'm from a small town in South Carolina and I was just composing my bus poem. It is awful stuff.

Still I love the process of writing a poem. I love the feeling of the hand on the page trying to hold one's imagination, compressed into some sort of shape. Because of this I remember where I was and when I wrote that one poem. It made me feel like I could do this for the rest of my life, and I have been.

What is poetry to you?

I started writing in the south in the 1960s. There was a lot of upheaval and my parents were involved in civil rights marches and fights at the time. But I was really young and I didn't go to a lot of them. Because my family was very close and my community meant a lot to me, I remember thinking to myself, "How can I join in? How can I do my part?" It seemed like everybody was doing their part. So I started to be a witness. I started writing down and documenting what I saw: Mr. Brown, the electrician, making signs; Reverend Scott, the preacher in our church, driving someone to a march. That was one level. The other level was that I couldn't understand how human beings could be so mean to each other.

"I couldn't understand how human beings could be so mean to each other."

My mother used to say that I was her tender child because all of the world's things seemed impact me much harder than they did my brothers and I took them to heart. I was maudlin about them. I had to figure them out with the pen in a kind of self examination, world examination. It was an enlightenment that I was trying to figure out because the world didn't seem to be giving it to me.

It seems that Struggle has been a leitmotif through your life, even in your [acceptance speech for the National Book Award](#).

Struggle has been a part of my life and my community since the beginning. I am never far from struggle, never far from applauding it, from talking about it, and making sure we never forget that struggle has been a part of humanity.

How are the concepts of struggle and freedom interrelated?

They are mixed in the process. All over the world there are communities and cultures who want to figure out what they're going to eat tonight and where their children will go to school. So Freedom is a part of humanity's day-to-day because so many different communities are struggling against the One Percenters. It's the people who have it all against the people who never know what tomorrow is going to bring. The language of that struggle may change, the signage may change, but it's in all of us to realize that is a part of the human condition.

Maybe it's because I feel like it is the outsider who can see best, not the person in the middle. I find myself to be a person on the margin—not marginalized. I'm an outlier.

You also deal with personal issues and personal history in your work. How do you walk the line between those topics and maintaining an outlier’s perspective?

I don’t think that good poetry is spilling your heart on the page, but I do think that what I’ve been through and what I feel are a part of the human arena. If I can use those things I will, but I’m not trying to convince you to come to my side of the poem. There is a balance you have to strike by having gray hair and realizing that there is a wisdom that comes from making mistakes when you write often. You know, the “Why did I put that in there? I should never have written that!”

But that’s life. You don’t have a perfect slate; you learn from your mistakes and hopefully you keep going. I teach my students that you have to respect vulnerability. Vulnerability is honesty. It’s truth. So I’m not going to avoid being vulnerable. It’s disingenuous. Why would I write about other people and other things and not include myself? That seems unfair. It’s like I’m gazing over the fence and into somebody else’s yard—and heart—and not doing the self-observation that I need to do.



Nikky Finney reads on Monterey Street. Photo: Renee Rosensteel

How do you visualize history?

There is an old saying: “As long as the lion hunter tells the story, the lion’s story will never be told.” The hunter will only tell the story of hunting and shooting and killing the lion. The lion is looking at the hunter going, “What’re you doing in my neighborhood? I have to protect my family. I’m a lion—I’m supposed to be here.”

When I was growing up, history was always told from the perspective of one voice at the top of the spectrum looking down on all of the different parts. I don't like that view. It's neither very healthy nor a very whole point of view. Plus there are all of the "-isms" that pop up: Racism and sexism, for example, which many times don't allow the one "person" at the top of the spectrum to give a true narrative about what that history is.

"I love history but I'm always mad at it because it's never doing what I think it should do."

I like to tell history by looking at people, at what someone's personal history means to a community, a place, or a town. That living history means more to me than one person's perspective on three-hundred years.

So in walks the artist who paints a mural on a wall to say, "These are the people who live in this community." In walks the poet to talk about stories that the newspaper isn't going to pick up because they're not interested. That art, along with those newspapers, makes a much tighter, truer picture of the community, in that world, in that time, than just one source. I love history but I'm always mad at it because it's never doing what I think it should do.

Is this what you meant about doing your part when you started writing poetry?

Definitely. I grew up in a town where the Carnegie Library's beautiful building was segregated. Early on I asked, "Mom, why can't we go in there?" She said, "The laws are going to change sweetheart," and the laws did. So I went in there, but there were no books about black people or by black people. I'd come up in a house where we were big readers and I knew that black people read and wrote books. When I said that to my mother, she said, "Well I guess you're going to have to write some." The permission for that was huge for me as a little girl growing up in a place where there were no poets that I knew of.

You mentioned the National Book Award acceptance [speech](#); while I was writing that I realized that nobody taught me about the [black codes](#) in South Carolina when I was growing up. I thought, "Why wouldn't you teach me this part of South Carolina's and America's history?" Well because it's shameful, it's embarrassing, nobody wants to bring it up. But it's history. "So you're only going to teach me the parts that don't embarrass you? You're only going to teach me the parts that aren't shameful?" That's a lie. "You're carving out a piece of history and you're leaving out people and things that have shaped the state and the entire nation." So when I was blessed with The National Book Award I thought, I have to bring something forward that we need to think about during this auspicious occasion.

None of us ever choose our histories or where we come from. I think now of your poem "[The Afterbirth, 1931](#)." That poem inevitably sticks with the reader, though its content is extremely personal. Where does that story come from?

It was at a family reunion in Smithfield, Virginia, walking around with my father. He always had a limp and we knew something happened when he was young but we didn't know the story. And we walked over to my great aunts—there were four of them alive at the time. They were talking about my father's birth and one said, "Well, [the doctor] was drunk." And the other one said, "No, he wasn't." And the other one said, "Yes he was, we opened the door for him." My father and I leaned into this conversation and I realized that they were telling the story that became this poem.

I asked my father if he knew what they were talking about and he had never heard about the doctor who was drunk. I went back in the house and wrote down what I heard said. At first I started it out by saying, "They, they..." But the final version begins with, "We were..." because I did not want to indict my family from that time. I think [that allowing the drunk doctor to assist his patient] they made the best decision they could in 1931. I thought if I changed the "they" to "we" it became less about pointing the finger and more about what the family had to do in 1931 for my father to be alive.

Like your father, sometimes there's much pain that comes before our lives, or there's pain that we carry as a result of living. How can we deal with the weight of pain and use it for something? How do you bring beauty or joy out of that circumstance?

I know if I am getting ready to write about something hard, like my father's birth where my grandmother died, I want it to be beautiful. I've got to bring some music into that. I've got to bring in some sensory things that are not about the horror. But I've got to leave the horror in. I've also got to make you walk away with it, with some of it in you. That is what I am aiming for as a poet.

"The process of art is taking history and tough things through our hope and imagination to make them bearable and beautiful."

Yes, these things are albatrosses around our necks, but that's until we turn them into something like body armor. In this case, my family now has the story of my father's birth. That's a jewel, no matter what happened, if I've done my work right. The process of art is the process of taking history and tough things and bringing them through our imaginations and our hopefulness. In doing so it makes those things bearable and beautiful. That piece is a history piece for my family. It's also a history piece for Virginia and America.

Give us a glimpse into your editing process.



Photo: Camila Centeno

I have a lot of [blackboards](#). I have blackboards I write on, blackboards I keep things on, and blackboards I draw charts on. I grew up learning that I was supposed to remember the things put on the blackboard; I was supposed to take them to heart. Then the whiteboard came. But I was like, "No!" because when I write on the blackboard I get covered in chalk and it has a symbolism for me. It reminds me of my early teachers,

who cared a lot about what I was learning. I also love pencils. I love to hear my pencil on a piece of paper, discovering something.

I do a first draft of a poem in pencil and then it goes into the computer and I work off that. I work on a typewriter for smaller things—I love the sound of the typewriter when I'm working and I have about four of them on my desk. They are now collector's items.

I don't think you should move along with modernity because everyone else is moving along. You have to say, "Well, I can move along here, but I am going to bring these other things with me that represent something that matters to me." The typewriters matter. The pencils matter because they help me get at the work in my own spirit. It's more work because I then have to take those drafts to the computer to edit and then to the publisher to see what I'm talking about. But it's worth it to me; it's worth it to see the different stages. All of my drafts are dated and have the time when I was working on them. If there are one hundred drafts of a piece, I have the map of how it came to be. I can see when I got tired and habits I've overused.

"I hate when young writers or artists think, 'I have to be tragic.' You don't have to be tragic. You have to be healthy."

I once had a student, Patrick, who was Irish. Every poem he turned in had potatoes in it, or this tree from Ireland. I said, "Patrick, in every poem—I don't care if it's about a town or city—you have potatoes." He didn't realize it. So he looked at the map of his drafts and was like, "Wow from the very beginning I have these symbols, this symbolic food from Ireland." It's the same thing with my drafts. I look at how I've grown as a poet and what I am still doing that I shouldn't be.

Of course, the drafting process is also very important. I write early in the morning, from four to seven. No editing. And then I go about my day, teaching or whatever it is I'm doing. Before I go to bed I reread it and edit with a pencil. From four to seven in the morning is the dream state, when you're just composing. Late at night you can bring the editor into the room and mark out some stuff. But not in the morning.

How old do you feel right now?

Twenty-six. My mind is bright and I've got a ton of ideas that I want to work on. I'm happy. I think I'm healthy, as far as I know. My lungs are full of air. I walk every morning at six o'clock. I've got too many things to keep up with. I believe in the future. I believe in tonight, tomorrow. But I don't mean that like everybody wants to be twenty. I don't want to be twenty, necessarily. I don't want to go through the things that I went through at twenty; those were learning things. But I feel good, I don't feel like the end is near.

I am going to see what I feel like tomorrow.

What advice would you give to your nineteen year-old self, sitting on a wall outside, contemplating being a poet?

The same exact advice my best teacher in the world gave to me: Engage yourself in books, engage yourself in human beings who can tell you stories, and engage yourself in looking in the mirror and seeing who you are, your genuine self. Do not follow the line of dozens of people who are doing whatever they are doing with their life. Don't listen to people who say, "You can't do this, you can't be that. You have to do it this way." It's ridiculous. Forty years ago people told me that I couldn't be a poet and I just held onto it with both hands. Call it foolishness or madness or whatever, I became a poet. You have to have a dogged, passionate belief in yourself. That comes with understanding that there are people who have already done this for many years in many cultures in many ways and you have to figure out how to do it your way. You also have to stay healthy, eat well. I hate when young writers or artists think, "I have to be tragic." You don't have to be tragic. You have to be healthy. You have to tell the truth and that's it.

