

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poets on Craft: Pacyinz Lyfoung and Hedy Tripp

Bunkong Tuon · Friday, March 18th, 2022

For this sixty-fifth post in our Poets on Craft series, we have Pacyinz Lyfoung and Hedy Tripp.

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.

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.

This series is intended for educational purposes only.



Pacyinz Lyfoung is a French-born, Minnesota-grown, Hmong/Asian American poet. Currently residing in Washington-DC, she belongs to a worker cooperative and is in the process of establishing her solo practice as an inclusive economies attorney. She has taught poetry at the [Loft Literary Center](#) and just completed serving as a Co-Host of the online [BIPOC Writing Party](#), organizing weekly community writing sessions with guest hosts or sharing her own prompts. Her work can be read in the [Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement](#), [Bourgeon](#) and [Lyricality](#).

Poetry came late to me. It found me when my paternal grandmother passed and all that was left to me were her words, in a language I only half understood, in stories that came as blinding showers of meteorite light in the darkness of my ignorance of my family and cultural heritage.

It found me when the language of compassion and justice fell on deaf ears when a daughter of our Hmong family committed the most horrible crime, and people were too scared to be related to her or to be scapegoated for her.

In both instances, I had to find an intermediary language that could break through barriers of loss of mother tongue language or blockage of human empathy. So, yes, in general, my poems start with having to put on my poet's hat and using my poetic tongue, to record my family and community (Hmong and beyond) history.

Especially as a Hmong American poet, coming from a community that did not have a written language until the 20th century, I feel that one of my roles is to be the one who remembers and records important and mundane events. I also do this beyond the Hmong community. This year, for example, I just felt that emotional trigger to bear witness and build empathy after the Georgia killing tragedy and the spate of Asian hate hitting people who looked like my elderly father.

How does a poem evolve? A poem starts as an intent or a kernel of fact. To grow it needs attention to the direction it wants to go and the people it wants to reach. In general, I am fascinated by the vernacular of specific issues. To open the doors to the language used in specific arenas is to learn a new language. And of course, to learn a new language is to get at the heart of that community's life and values.

I have written several elegies for family members. Poems seem the perfect container to catch the essence of people. Those poems really center on the personalities and language that come from their worlds.

As a French-born Hmong American poet, I still have family in France, so, I often translate family poems for them. In that process, I find that either because I am a Native French speaker or the French language just has more precision, my French translations are richer and may actually clarify the original English poem as well. For family, I go back to more plain language that is not so metaphorical or explorative, to stick to the language that would not be obscure to average people, non-literati/non-poet people.

How does a poem end? That is the trickiest part of the poem. The end of the poem should have some type of bang, like an epiphany or a revelation. A long winding road that goes through rough patches and fires, but in the end, it dives into a cool pool at the bottom of a waterfall. A wave cresting to lap gently on the sand or crash into rocks. The bow wrapping the gift of poetry. Whether it is a magnificent red silk ribbon or a simple rope of grass, it completes the package and makes a lasting impression on the person who unpacked the box and is left holding that string. The best ending takes the poem from good to great. The best ending makes the poet and the reader feel complete, as in poetic mission and/or adventure accomplished.



Hedy Tripp is a poet excitedly exploring lyrical memoir. A published writer and recipient of many arts awards, Hedy draws on her rich life experiences as an Asian American, Singaporean Eurasian immigrant, breast cancer survivor, and wife, mother and grandmother to a fiercely social justice activist Black and multicultural family. She has performed spoken word presentations around the world and some of her latest publications, including poems “[Cocoon](#)” and “[My Breast](#),” can be found in [Lyricality.org](#).

A quiet space, chocolate laced, coffee in a favorite mug, a gel pen and blank paper in a journal is enough to send me into my memories and guide my long-hand writing across the page. I will not be limited by poetic structural formats but free flow my thoughts into words.

I find the art of poetry a powerful, almost magical, tool for expressing the many emotions that course through my lived experiences. I start and build my poems through these experiences, not fearing spelling mistakes or grammar but focusing on the theme of the moment. Even allowing tangents and sub tangents to carry me to known and unknown paths.

I write as a woman and poet of color, so my themes often bring me to analyzing my experiences – both in prose and poetry. I am a breast cancer survivor and many of my poems reflect that trauma but also speak to empowerment. I have explored, through poetry, the superficial standards of beauty and that I am not defined by my breasts. My poems also carry the message of the need for women of color to have mammograms as we are dying from the complications of late diagnosis more than White women. Poetry, especially when it is transformed into spoken word, becomes a formidable educational tool and can even save lives.

As an immigrant Asian American woman, I have often been asked how come I speak and write such good English. Yes, that is racist. And I reply that that is my only language derived from the colonial history of Singapore. My fluency and poetic rhythm come from my love of reading – unfortunately only English books!

Reading will help your writing. Read anything from Greek classics to bawdy love triangles – it is the lilt of the sounds that emanate from the books that will transport you to other worlds and times.

I do encourage poetry writing from any language you are comfortable with. You do not even have to translate – it is your poetry.

As a BIPOC writer, identity will always be central to many of my poems. As a Singaporean Eurasian of at least 8 generations, it is a unique identity. Through poetry, I found the ease to explore the privileges of that position as well as the colorism and racism embedded in this identity. This is completely different from the mixed-race experiences of America, where miscegenation was illegal and a crime. I hope my poems and yours will bring hope and new perspectives.

I have often rewritten and edited a poem till it is in tatters and then find out that the original was the best version! But it was pleasurable rewording and twisting the theme inside out. Poetry is fun!

How do I end a poem? I don't. It can be continued ad infinitum. And the end will just come. Trust yourself. But the end may be the beginning of another thought, another poem. Enjoy these adventures.

(Featured image by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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