



Photo: Jennifer Alasbrook-Turner/
BANG Images

Ashley Jones | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

A WOMAN OF TRUTH

By Jacqueline Allen Trimble

Ashley Jones follows the mantra of many an ancestor — if you do not see yourself reflected in the world, create the world that reflects you. That’s why, in 2018, she founded the Magic City Poetry Festival, a multi-generational, multi-venue series of literary/poetry-focused events held around Birmingham and designed to celebrate a breadth of poetic voices during the month of April. Year after year, the festival brings together

people from a wide swath of demographics to discuss, celebrate, and highlight the enduring power of words. While Jones was creating and nurturing this legacy institution, she never stopped working, reading, editing, teaching and writing, producing four books of poetry, one anthology, scores of essays and interviews, and a critical volume on black women poets.

The word genius gets bandied about indiscriminately these days, but there is no other way to describe the Renaissance woman who is Ashley Jones. She is a visionary poet, writing about the good, the bad, and the ugly of Alabama and Southern environs with grace, clarity, and a nuanced understanding rarely seen. Her work is a masterclass in poetic craft, meticulous in its use of language and image, and she is an old soul with the vision of a wise woman who sees the extraordinary in everyday objects.

Always, her poetry is a tangle of complications rooted in a Southern sensibility as lush as kudzu winding its way along road embankments. Unlike kudzu, however, Jones is native to this soil, laying claim to her various identities which are sometimes at war with expectations of what it means to be a Southerner. Though her love for Alabama is apparent, she never allows us to forget that we must always question the thing that we love. Unapologetically black, female, and intellectual, she magnifies the South both because of its history and despite it, calling out the region's problematizing past at the same time she celebrates its beauty, its people, and its possibilities. In "All Y'all Really from Alabama," she writes,

this here the cradle of this here
nation—everywhere you look, roots run right
back south. every vein filled with red dirt, blood,
cotton.

Born and raised in Birmingham, and the product of the Alabama School of Fine Arts, she became the youngest and first person of color to be named poet laureate of the state of Alabama. No one was surprised. Her poetry unabashedly explores her vulnerabilities and self-doubts as she lays bare, as only a daughter of the South could, the preoccupations of our time, deploying history and her arsenal of poetic gifts as weapons and shields against the onslaught of despair. Even her most recent collection, *Lullaby for the Grieving*, inspired in large measure by the death of her father, moves beyond a personal meditation on grief to consider the world writ large with insight and hope. In the title poem, she writes,

the slip of a rain-glazed rock
against my searching feet.
small steps, like prayers—
each one a hope exhaled
into the trees. please,
let me enter. please, let me
leave whole.

**“This is what Jones
does repeatedly:
navigates the terrain
of humanity with
trepidation, but
also prayer.”**

Written near the Sipsey River, the poem aligns wilderness with uncertainty, and the speaker takes small steps down slick rocks, tentative in this unknown territory of despair. This is what Jones does repeatedly: navigates the terrain of humanity with trepidation, but also prayer. Though the path is slippery and the possibility of disaster ever present, there is always the hope of wholeness. We readers are pulled along as well, feeling our way through each poem, each word negotiating life's perplexing moments with our poet guide helping us reach the angels, which in this case may be “the crown of light / atop the leaves.”

Ashley Jones' work is never simple, but always accessible. Perhaps this reflects her work as a teacher. After earning her MFA from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, she returned to the Alabama School of Fine Arts to teach creative writing and later returned to UAB to teach in the same honors program in which she was once a student. Even as she continues her own education as a Ph.D. candidate at Old Dominion, she persists in teaching us something — about history, the nature of loss, the nature of love, about how to love ourselves. That love for oneself is a form of resistance, too, as is all of Jones' poetry. Resistance to erasure, to annihilation, to someone else telling her history. Jones is a truth teller. And the best part — with all she has done, all the awards she has won, all her accomplishments — she is just getting started. Alabama has been made more beautiful by her presence.

Jacqueline Allen Trimble, Ph.D., is poet laureate of Alabama (2026-2029). Among many other honors, she has won the Balcones Poetry Prize and a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. She lives in Montgomery, where she is professor of English at Alabama State University.