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March 2023

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Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Poet Laureate of Limbo" (2023). *Poet Laureate Papers*. 28.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_poet_laureate/28

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Poet Laureate of Limbo

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Poet Laureate of Kansas

I am the poet laureate both of Kansas and limbo. How Kansas led to limbo entailed the political equivalent of something we're known for on the ground and in *The Wizard of Oz*: sudden changes in the weather. When Governor Sam Brownback took office in January, 2011, one of his first orders was to abolish the state arts agency, the Kansas Arts Commission (KAC) that houses the poet laureate program. Although that order was overturned by the state legislature, the will of the governor prevailed in ways that threw arts funding and programs in continual free fall ever since.

While the political story is still unfolding until the end of this legislative session, having been appointed in 2009 by then-governor Kathleen Sebelius, I'm continuing on, carrying the program in my hip pocket now that KAC has been defunded, destaffed and dismantled. What does it mean to represent the literary arts in the only place in America without a state arts agency? To paraphrase Rainer Maria Rilke, I'm living my way into the question, hoping to land an answer, particularly because without clarity, I can't do anything to secure the program's future.

The only thing clear is that everyone -- most of the people of Kansas, arts programs and staff, the Republican-controlled legislature, even the governor himself -- realizes that wiping out our state arts agency didn't work. The governor's plan for a non-profit foundation to make up public funding with private funds has fallen flat. The governor's line-item veto last May of \$669,000 in state funding for KAC resulted in the state losing about \$1.2 million in federal and regional arts dollars. While a few communities in Kansas have local arts funding, most don't, particularly smaller towns in isolated areas. Already, we've seen arts centers shut down, galleries shuttered, programs canceled, and many people thrown out of work. The economic impact sucker-punches communities already reeling from the recession.

Left as one of the floating particles from this mess, I've spent ample time confused and

disheartened. My first two years in this position, I had staff support and funding. Following the good work of the two poets laureate before me -- Jonathan Holden and Denise Low -- I gave readings and talks, and organized poetry contests, a poetry pen-pal program, and a Kansas Poem In Your Pocket project. I coordinated a Midwest Convergence of State Poets Laureate in 2010, and a National Convergence in 2011 that brought 20 state poets laureate to Kansas from Alabama to Alaska.

The happy-go-lucky work as what one of my friends calls "boss poet of Kansas" could have halted when the bottom dropped out. I could have resigned in protest, but knowing how long it took Kansas to start a poet laureate program, I believe resigning would have destroyed the program's best chance for a future. Also, with so many writers and artists are suffering from the massive loss of arts support, it wouldn't make sense to give up the poetic pulpit.

In surprising ways, history intervened with the state's 150th anniversary of statehood. Having started a website in 2011 that featured 150 Kansas poems, I found myself carried by momentum to edit an anthology of the poetry, *Begin Again: 150 Kansas Poems*, published by Woodley Press in November, and help coordinate a 20-city poetry caravan, bringing poets to small and big towns around Kansas. Energized by the power of our poetry together, dozens of writers traveled on their own dime across the 400 miles of Kansas to often just read one or two poems each. For 2012, working with the national organization America: Now + Here, I'm engaging 150 writers to each write 10 lines of a renga, a conversational poem written in community on our state motto, more timely than ever: "To the stars through difficulty."

There's obviously difficulty, but also stars. Last fall, I raised my program's entire \$5,000 budget through an internet campaign over three weeks. "Isn't this just what the governor wanted?" people ask about private fundraising for public arts. But the generosity I've witnessed speaks to a simultaneous logic: we have to keep alive what we value until it can be funded appropriately again. On the first day of the fundraiser, I sat in my aged mini-van in my driveway, staring at my computer screen to see if anyone contributed. I noticed someone I barely knew gave \$100, but I miscounted the zeros. He

actually donated \$1,000, an act of faith so stunning, I started crying.

My husband has told me I should say I'm the poet laureate in exile, but what the Dalai Lama and the people of Tibet face is worlds more severe than our situation in Kansas. Yet I am taking refuge in the people of Kansas, who remind me daily that hanging in there, wherever "there" is, matters. A woman living with late stage cancer tells me how the workshop I facilitate for people with serious illness is the highlight of her month. A man writes in gratitude for a poem I read at a rally. I receive emails and facebook messages, knowing nods in the supermarket and hugs from acquaintances in parking lots.

While I don't know how long I'll be in limbo (such is limbo), I do know that while I'm here, I need to honor the faith people have shown me by keeping this program alive and shepherding it to a safe haven.

Most of us who create art dwell in the gap between what we know and don't know. All I need to know, I've learned by being a poet: keep my broken heart open, don't harden over what's too hard to feel, create what's ready, and persevere. It's my practice. It's my limbo. It's my deep love for Kansas and the power of our words that keep me in this untenable place.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, PhD is the author of a forthcoming novel, *The Divorce Girl*; four collections of poetry; *The Sky Begins At Your Feet: A Memoir on Cancer, Community and Coming Home to the Body*, and several anthologies, including co-editing (with state poets laureate Marilyn L. Taylor, Denise Low and Walter Barga) *An Endless Skyway: Poetry from the State Poets Laureate* (Ice Cube Press, 2011). She coordinates Transformative Language Arts, a master's program in social and personal transformation through the written and spoken word, at Goddard College, where she teaches. She also leads writing workshops widely, and with singer Kelley Hunt, co-writes songs, performs collaboratively, and offers Brave Voice writing and singing workshops.

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