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### Poet Laureating Across a Big State in a Challenging Time

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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## Poet Laureating Across a Big State in a Challenging Time

- ⤴ Inauguration ceremony at LAC
- ⤴ Radio station interview with someone who knows nothing about poetry
- ⤴ Photo shoots at Wheatfields or in driveway
- ⤴ Strange emails

All at once, the emails started pouring in, mostly the kind of emails that made me a little nervous about what to say. People wrote from isolated houses in small towns in the middle of hundreds or acres or from the heart of Kansas City to ask me to do things well beyond my scope. "Would you drive to my town -- it's only about seven hours from where you are -- to go over all the poetry I've written since high school? I have over 10,000 poems, and I don't know how to organize them into a book." Or, "Poetry is healing, and I'm having a very hard time in my life. Can we meet every week for you to help me get over all the abuse I've suffered?" There were also the requests to drive over a thousand miles round-trip to speak to a junior high class, with a note saying, "Sorry, but we can't pay your mileage, but we will take you to lunch" or offers to speak, in one day, at a conference starting early in the morning.

Part of the problem beyond these requests was that people didn't understand what being a poet laureate entailed. Some thought I was working full-time for the state and basically, this was what I did: visited with anyone anywhere to help them with their poetry, and by extension, their lives. Most of the problem was that people are suffering, and they needed help.

Yet as someone working full-time on top of this position, living with a gang of teenagers and young adults, and busy with all I was doing for this position, I had to turn down a lot of people. I got good at writing long emails detailing resources, long-distance or, if they were near Kansas City or Wichita, close by as well as books to read for writing prompts, poets to consider, and most of all, ideas for forging writing circles, writing support groups, writing dates regularly with friends wherever people lived.

- ⤴ "Strange Love" talk in Newton at beginning
- ⤴ Basement of art center in Iola, small group in-depth conversation reading
- ⤴ PSU have your cake and eat it too
- ⤴ Silent audience in Hutchinson that bought record number of books (do they hate me?)
- ⤴ Running with Lebanese Orthodox in Wichita
- ⤴ KC Jewish night or faith night
- ⤴ Reading in country near Des Moines
- ⤴ 150 project and rejections

And the poems flooded in, many very good and moving poems but also many from people just getting started in the business of poetry, that is, the business of trying to publish poetry they just wrote, wrote in high school or had been writing all along. I tried mightily hard to publish people who had never been published before, to find something they wrote that would work, but I had plenty of poems - and by extension, the poets who wrote them -- to reject. While my guidelines explained that I was looking for fresh and original language, poetry that was alive and vibrant, I still received a heap of rhyming or unrhyming cliches, one piled on another as well as bland doggerl (good doggerl is great and entertaining, so really, I have nothing against the form). Also, given the amount of poems coming in, I could only use about 10% of all that was submitted.

What surprised me wasn't the submissions by new poets -- I applauded their efforts -- it was the extremely bad behavior I faced in several situations. One person who sent in his first poem ever wrote me half a dozen attack emails, all very long and comparing my rejection to the larger tragedies of life. Another kept sending me packets of poems even after I asked her to stop. Of course the worst offenders struck just when things were going to hell in a hand basket in Kansas arts funding, but more on that soon.

- ✧ Salina guerilla reading on top of chair in restaurant at lunch hour

Here I made the mistake of telling Ronda that I had never read in Salina. It's one of the larger cities in Kansas, and the largest city where I never read, a situation that appalled Ronda so much that after we sat down to eat, she had me stand up on my chair and recite a poem. Having none in my head at the moment, I made one up, combining the words that came out of me with words I remembered from one of my poems. The lunch crowd looked up politely, mostly men and women from downtown offices and shops, and at the end, applauded. Within minutes, the video was on facebook.

- ✧ Garden City State Theater reading and then workshop with 50+ people of all ages
- ✧ Dodge City no-show guerilla reading in coffeehouse Dodge City workshop and reading -- people drove hours
- ✧ Poem for Chancellor
- ✧ Poems for friends who die -- Maura, Lou
- ✧ Poet Laureate in Lawrence
- ✧ Poetry in Politics conference -- caught with head of Free Staters in fierce storm in mountains
- ✧ KAC awards day we won important vote
- ✧ Trying to reach new KAC people without success and finding out how they testified to legislative committee
- ✧ Fundraising campaign success -- sitting in driveway and realizing someone gave \$1,000, not \$100, and crying
- ✧ Amy Nixon's story about her father coming to his first poetry reading ever, being amazed at the poetry, and then using "Begin Again" with pals on a OSU listserv angry about sports management changes
- ✧ Driving a new road home from Johnson County (see blog)

Places the Poet Laureate Position took me:

*Beyond Kansas:*

- ✧ Concord, New Hampshire
- ✧ Plainfield, Vermont
- ✧ Kakokia, IA (check)
- ✧ Iowa City, IA
- ✧ Ames, IA
- ✧ Des Moines, IA
- ✧ Kansas City, MO
- ✧ Princeton, NJ
- ✧ Naugatuck, CT
- ✧ New Haven, CT
- ✧ Lebanon, NH
- ✧ Oneida, IA

- ♣ Summertown, TN
- ♣ Tuscon, AZ
- ♣ Oklahoma City, OK
- ♣ Tulsa, OK

### *Kansas*

- ♣ Lawrence
- ♣ Topeka
- ♣ Lenexa
- ♣ Mission
- ♣ Shawnee Mission
- ♣ Kansas City, KS
- ♣ Leavenworth
- ♣ Lecompton
- ♣ Iola
- ♣ Wichita
- ♣ Hutchinson
- ♣ Garden City
- ♣ St. Francis
- ♣ Dodge City
- ♣ Salina
- ♣ Manhattan
- ♣ Olathe
- ♣ Newton
- ♣ Ulysses
- ♣ Emporia
- ♣ Cottonwood Falls
- ♣ Council Groves
- ♣ Matfield Green
- ♣ Marysville
- ♣ Waterville

## **ews of My Demise Is Greatly Exaggerated: Everyday Magic,** **Day 389**

Posted on [August 17, 2011](#) | [4 Comments](#)

Well, I'm still poet laureate, and as I've written before, I still plan to finish my term, which ends next July, and to pass on this post to another poet. Yet today in [the paper](#), I read these words: "The NEA said a draft version of a Kansas plan for the commission's future operation made reference to elimination of the state's poet laureate program, arts management training and public receptions." I figured this was the case from the cues I scoped out, like all the poet laureate pages disappearing from the KAC website and the new chair of the KAC, after one very polite phone call (I initiated) to find out about the status of my position, not returning any of my calls or emails. But still, sheesh! It is kind of a kick in the head.

Ken says I should tell people I'm the poet laureate in exile, taking refuge in the people of Kansas, which sounds lovely, but I wouldn't want to compare my little plight to keep this position alive to what the Dalai Lama has on his shoulders. On the other hand, I have felt for months like I've been in limbo,

operating on the cheer and goodwill of people around me and, at the same time, making plans to ferry the position toward a safe harbor (more on that later).

What bothers me is hearing the new powers-that-be “eliminated” the program as if that act should silence people like me, but poets aren’t known for easily being quieted down. The poet laureate program is not over, finished, buried or dead. To the contrary, my work as poet laureate is very much alive: In coming months, the anthology I’m editing — *Begin Again: 150 Kansas Poems* – will be published by Woodley Press, and I’m working with others to encourage dozens of readings around the state. The website the book is based on, [www.150KansasPoems.wordpress.com](http://www.150KansasPoems.wordpress.com), is popping out a new poem every few days (thanks to me pre-loading these poems from the thousands submitted). I’m giving readings, workshops, talks; writing occasional poems to present at whatever occasion I’m invited to; and doing all I can to represent the power of our words on the page and aloud.

So to paraphrase that famous Mark Twain quote, yes, news of my demise is highly inaccurate. I don’t feel eliminated at all (although I certainly mourn the loss of arts support for all of us in the arts in Kansas). Instead, I’m hopeful that all of our actions to lift up the arts in Kansas will one day restore state funding for the arts, and give back to our state more of who we are in image, sound, motion and other mediums. This is all another way of saying the goodness of the arts will outlive the evil of the day.

Posted on [June 4, 2011](#) | [7 Comments](#)

Each June, I put together an annual report on what I’ve done all year as poet laureate for the Kansas Arts Commission. Now that KAC doesn’t have a staff or funding, I’m reporting to all of you instead to help get out the word on poets laureate like me do throughout the country, and how we need to keep our Kansas poet laureate position, even after I finish my term in a little over a year. I’m also very interested in visiting more Kansas communities this coming year and doing whatever I can — since the KAC website no longer features a poet laureate page, you can contact me at [CarynMirriamGoldberg@gmail.com](mailto:CarynMirriamGoldberg@gmail.com) if you’re interested in a reading, workshop, talk or collaborative program.

So here’s what I’ve worked on as poet laureate from July 1, 2010 through the present:

- ⤴ **Organized Poet Laureati!: A National Convergence of Poets Laureate**, held in Lawrence Mar. 12-13, featuring 20 poets laureate  
(from Alaska to Alabama), 130 participants from eight states, and a whole lot of ecstatic readings, discussions, panels, workshops and more on how poetry relates to place, society, health, creativity, work, and in short, life.
- ⤴ [150 Kansas Poems](#): Launched website featuring 150 Kansas poems over Kansas’ 150 birthday year, and edited **Begin Again: 150 Kansas Poems**, forthcoming from Woodley Press later this year.
- ⤴ [An Endless Skyway: Poetry from the State Poets Laureate](#): edited with Marilyn L. Taylor, Denise Low and Walter Bargaen this beautiful anthology includes poetry from close to 40 writers.
- ⤴ **Occasional Poems for Special Events**: The Kansas Susquicentennial, Governor’s Arts Awards, the Kansas City Peace at the Crossroads event, Lawrence Arts Center/940 Dance Company’s Dance Dialogues, the inauguration of Goddard College’s new president, and several funerals.
- ⤴ **Writing**: In addition to lots of poetry, I wrote prose as poet laureate: a preface to UN World Peace Congress proceedings, chapter on publishing poetry for *Women and Poetry: Tips on Writing, Teaching and Publishing by Successful Women Poets* (forthcoming from McFarland), “Mothers Lost and Found,” preface to [Wisdom Has a Voice anthology](#), and [“The Imaginary](#)

### Friend of the Page,”

#### ^ **Presented readings, workshops and talks:**

- ^ **Colleges & Schools:** Hutchinson Community College, University of Iowa, Johnson County Community College, Marysville High School, Valley Heights High School.
- ^ **Turning Point: A Center for Hope and Healing** in Kansas City — writing workshops for people living with serious illness and/or their caregivers, plus workshops for the metastatic cancer group.
- ^ **Centers, Churches & Bookstores:** Carnegie Arts Center in Dodge City, Koester House Museum (Marysville), Country Place Senior Living (Marysville), Waterville Opera House (with Kelley Hunt and Laura Ramberg), Marysville Public Library, Ecumenical Christian Ministries, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Manhattan, The Raven Bookstore, The Writers Place, Kalona Country Store (Iowa).
- ^ **Judging:** Poetry Out Loud!, Kansas Authors Club, National Federation of Music Clubs
- ^ **Conferences:** Presented workshops and readings at the Power of Words Conference in VT., and the Examined Life: Writing and the Art of Medicine conference in Iowa.
- ^ **Brave Voice:** Co-led with Kelley Hunt the 6-day Brave Voice: Writing & Singing for Your Life retreat in Council Grove.
- ^ **News:** Featured in several programs of KPR Presents, Poets & Writers Magazine, The Daily Palette, Kansas City Star, and “Celebrate This Kansas,” Susquicentennial poem, was published in many state newspapers.

What territory I’ve covered this year comes from having wonderful guides in the form of splendid partner organizations in all the named places that invited me to come visit. What I do as poet laureate is similar to what so many of my fellow laureates do — read about them at <http://unitedpoetslaureate.wordpress.com> — and wherever you live, support the poet laureate program, which seeds the power of our words throughout and beyond the U.S.

I return to the world I knew before this event to find it slightly different. For one thing, the house is cleaner due to the mad rush of cleaning all last week so that we wouldn’t cringe at the spider webs on the ceiling while showing some poets laureate where they would be sleeping. For another, the sun is out, snow and rain are gone, and so are the poets laureate: the last having just left as the 19 of them sprinkle near and far in all directions. Some are home already, and some — like Peggy Shumaker and her wonderful husband, Joe, who will travel for two days to Alaska or like Lisa Starr, who may be on the long ferry from Rhode Island to her inn on Block Island — are still in process.

As for me, I alternate between horizontal and semi-horizontal (sitting in bed, typing or checking email, or simply dozing into surreal and buzzing snippets of dream). Graham Nash sings “I Am A Simple Man” on itunes, and I fee like a very simple woman listening to it. The squirrel waits on the branch to leap onto the bird feeder. The cat sleeps on a pile of blankets one of the poets used. The Christmas lights around the bedroom window droop across thumbtacks.

Karla Morton (TX) & Mary Crow (CO)

I’m not exactly sure what happened during these days, but I do know I hugged many people, swam with others in tandem through conversations about vocation and passion, healing and imagery, the hunger to find the right words, the necessity of listening to other, and where to find Thai food on Mass. Street. I watched audiences leaning forward, intent and awake. I heard all weather variations of poetry: sonnets about liberal arts, free verse on the damage fathers can do, elaborations on the danger of the hot dog man, and wry deconstructions of our need to be adored.

I also found friends for life: poets and poets laureate I just met, and yet they were instantly big brothers or long-lost cousins sharing a bag of ginger snaps with me late at night in the kitchen or duck spring rolls at a candlelit dinner yesterday. There will be radio broadcasts of portions of the event on Kansas and Kansas City Public Radio stations, and a video or two soon, but for now, this is what I know.

I also know whatever happened was, for me at least, extraordinary: made of

Walter Barga (MO), Norbert & Katherine Krapf (IN)

running back and forth on my back deck near midnight, throwing snowballs and shovels of snow at each other; taking pictures of one another taking picture of one another; immersing myself in conversation with four women in the corner of Free State Brewery as we all ate big steak together; and squeezing into a car with poets laureate of five states to maneuver the weather of this state.

Thank you to everyone who came, listened, read, stayed, drove, fed, housed, asked questions of and provided answers for this gathering flock of blackbirds this weekend and the big sky we poured ourselves through on the way to each other.