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INTRODUCTION

Khadijah Queen

Colorado's landscape is uniquely suited to poetry. During my eight years on the Front Range, I began to write nature poems more than I ever had before. Places like Estes Park, Barr Lake, Chatfield State Park, and Cherry Creek State Park reactivated a childhood love for the natural world that I know won't ever leave me again no matter where I might travel. The majesty of Colorado, and the undeniable connection of its people to that natural beauty—whether they live in larger cities or more rural environments—offer a unique and rich canvas from which to, as Toni Morrison has said, “do language.”

That “doing” of language means marrying words with action, creativity with connection. Serving as the poet laureate of any city or state requires a deep

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commitment to that engagement. To step away from one's solitary work and invent new ways of reaching people takes a sense of play as well as seriousness. Luckily, poems can contain both sensibilities, and as poets use language to invite connection to the full spectrum of human awareness, for subject matter it makes sense to turn to the land and people—from Fruita to Fort Collins, from Leadville to Littleton, from Boulder to Basalt, from Durango to Denver, from Manitou Springs to Colorado Springs—surrounding us. As poets, we wish to tap into as many senses and emotions as we can. We aim to express the inexpressible through what we observe in order to make real-life connections off the page. Colorado offers no shortage of such chances.

Still, the challenge for the poet laureate remains communicating the value of poetry, becoming an ambassador, of sorts, for what the twentieth-century poet, essayist, and journalist Muriel Rukeyser considered to be a resource—poetry as a holding space for contradiction and a vehicle for understanding self and others. Part of the reason poetry can seem mysterious is our reluctance to take time in that holding space. Another reason: a sometimes forced disconnection from how we feel in order to get through our days and lives, especially when it comes to more difficult emotions. Andrea Gibson writes: “We live in a culture that pushes down emotions. Poetry awakens them.”

Gibson's poems tell feeling-rich, wide-awake stories with straightforward language that carries the kind of emotional heft that enforcers of silence can only fail to suppress. The intimate and devastating impact of drug addiction appears alongside the grace of sports heroes nearing physical flight, the “I” as strong in its most vulnerable moments because love insists on its own endurance. Experiencing recurring grief and the everyday violence of bias, facing illness and mortality, the speaker in Gibson's poems cries, prays, suffers, fevers, pains—yes—but delights too, proclaims: “I know how to build a survival shelter / from fallen tree

branches, packed mud, / and pulled moss,” recognizing the earth’s materials as vital to healing.

Bobby LeFebre’s poems acknowledge lineage through both place and people, documenting the difficult “struggle of land and language and people and politics” and the “beautiful paradox” of faith. Stories of grandparents and Lyft drivers give both warnings and wisdom. Simplicity holds tactile beauty, and ordinary encounters echo multiple histories, “many things existing . . . at the same time.” Corn and sun and chiles recur, find bright resonance in hands and on skin, offer sustenance, and help to narrate “a future that vows to never forget its past.”

Similarly retaining a deep connection to the wider world, Mary Crow writes of “horizon’s eclipse / sliding toward / mountains,” keeping readers aware of “the tremendous still / in us” in our state. Her poems stand out as traveling in memory, observing “how small human life looked” next to rarefied monuments, unafraid of admitting fear or loneliness, desire or desperation. Traveling has a way of sharpening observations of the self, and Crow’s poems don’t shy from the cuts. Even at the most unexpected moments, her poems still seek “a glimpse of the sublime.”

Joseph Hutchison is a rooted watcher. His poems document the movement of people, animals, and time. He also notices the smallest of actions in the landscape, such as how “the dreaming grass / flutters in its sleep” without neglecting the ordinary grandeur of “windy canyon shadows / high over kivas and cliff-houses.” Too, he notes transformations both without and within, the rewards and costs of those changes: “It’s your natural openness / I want to enfold me. But then / you’d become city; or you’d hide / away your wildness to save it.”

David Mason’s work haunts and breaks taboos, carries us in the language of memory through “mesa country,” imagining—craving—a potential connection with “the remnants of a people who moved through, / migrating hunters five millennia past.” As laureate, he found connection to audiences large and small,

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diligently committing to the work of sharing poetry statewide. While realizing that “poets have to confront the fact that much of the world finds their efforts unquantifiable,” in his travels all over the state Mason found personal joy as well as “people hungry for the life of poetry.” Indeed, the places he visited served as inspiration, and his songlike poems conjure a world where “every mountain rose up to its limit.”

“The sky precipitates its hue,” writes Milford E. Shields in the poem “San Juan Basin,” an ode to an ancient place in the Four Corners. The poem praises how “deepening shades blend swiftly down, / Fuse outer mountains into crown, / Then racing in more vivid sheen / They grow into a sea of green”—using colors as a kind of visual transformation. Serving for over two decades, Shields infused his poems with exuberance and a sense of awe of the natural world, and the divine forces that link living things to one another.

The first Colorado poet laureate, Alice Polk Hill, used her influence and energy to lobby for and create the position over a century ago. Her poems adhere to traditional forms, with exuberant rhymes that praise faith and family without shying away from discussing topics like death and grief, longing and worry. One poem addresses the poet’s young daughter, her namesake, lovingly highlighting the child’s innocence with a protective layer of parental hope. Hill expresses fervently that young Alice will, under angels’ protection, “conquer all foes within, without” in her life.

Hill’s successor, Nellie Burget Miller, wrote as one of the “country-folks” in praise of ordinary joys. Enchanted by kittens, bees, hollyhocks, the “scent of fresh-dried linen, and the warm earth / After rain,” she “loved homely things” while still observing the larger world. The poems meditate on history, faith, and dreams yet remain grounded in the honest experiences of the everyday present: “Wildest fancies have a grain of truth stuck in the sieve.”

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Poems by Leadville's own Margaret Clyde Robertson, who served as laureate in the early 1950s, offer us portraits of a population dealing with the unpredictable realities and real dangers of mining life and enliven that moment in the area's history, when "Leadville was mad as Babylon." The poems' dialect and simple rhyme schemes bring to mind camp songs and stories, with balanced doses of humor and warning.

World War I veteran and journalist Thomas Hornsby Ferril, Colorado's poet laureate during the 1980s, also reflects on history and adds a deep sense of the passage of time. Reversals of expectation abound, showing a sharp intellect and an unflinching understanding of reality. His tight lyrics are straightforward and stark, telling us that "War is ever twice as near / As the nearest town." They refuse to hide from difficulty or ugliness, in one poem recalling a child's accidental death. He uses an image of a machine turned deadly in order to show us—not tell us—the larger implications beyond individual tragedy: "Lip of the bulldozer against the skull, / Churning the dead to furrows of new exile." In the current moment, his words resonate, and his curiosity about other humans and their stories reminds us that "beyond the sundown is tomorrow's wisdom." We deserve a present and a future in which, Ferril proclaims, "Love can hold you ever."

I think the earliest laureates would be thrilled with the poets who have served in their stead, in both creative and community endeavors. To perform and to teach are acts of enormous generosity and courage. To share one's personal experiences in poems, spinning those experiences into stories that readers can connect and relate to, is also such an act. The generosity of these poets laureate shines in their deeds as much as their words. And they do so with humility, enthusiasm, and joy.

Bobby LeFebvre writes: "The poet manifests, evokes, and makes tangible the visions and love that live within us all." Such manifestation and evolution, I agree, are the work of the poet; to agree to expand that practice publicly, in service

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to as vast and diverse a state as Colorado, takes a great deal of imagination and fortitude. This anthology represents the tangible openness of the people of our state to receive that work with the same love with which it is offered. It has been my honor to have also called Colorado home, and to have this chance to praise in prose the lush and affirming poetry of these laureates in what I hope will be the first volume of many.