

US Poets Laureate

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1993-1995: Rita Dove

American Smooth

We were dancing—it must have
been a foxtrot or a waltz,
something romantic but
requiring restraint,
rise and fall, precise
execution as we moved
into the next song without
stopping, two chests heaving
above a seven-league
stride—such perfect agony,
one learns to smile through,
ecstatic mimicry
being the *sine qua non*
of American Smooth.
And because I was distracted
by the effort of
keeping my frame
(the leftward lean, head turned
just enough to gaze out
past your ear and always
smiling, smiling),
I didn't notice
how still you'd become until
we had done it
(for two measures?
four?)—achieved flight,
that swift and serene
magnificence,
before the earth
remembered who we were
and brought us down.

I Have Been a Stranger in a Strange Land

Life's spell is so exquisite, everything conspires to break it.
Emily Dickinson

It wasn't bliss. What was bliss
but the ordinary life? She'd spend hours
in patter, moving through whole days
touching, sniffing, tasting . . . exquisite
housekeeping in a charmed world.
And yet there was always

more of the same, all that happiness,
the aimless Being There.
So she wandered for a while, bush to arbor,
lingered to look through a pond's restive mirror.
He was off cataloging the universe, probably,
pretending he could organize
what was clearly someone else's chaos.

That's when she found the tree,
the dark, crabbed branches
bearing up such speechless bounty,
she knew without being told
this was forbidden. It wasn't
a question of ownership—
who could lay claim to
such maddening perfection?

And there was no voice in her head,
no whispered intelligence lurking
in the leaves—just an ache that grew
until she knew she'd already lost everything
except desire, the red heft of it
warming her outstretched palm.

Canary

for Michael S. Harper

Billie Holiday's burned voice
had as many shadows as lights,
a mournful candelabra against a sleek piano,
the gardenia her signature under that ruined face.

(Now you're cooking, drummer to bass,
magic spoon, magic needle.
Take all day if you have to
with your mirror and your bracelet of song.)

Fact is, the invention of women under siege
has been to sharpen love in the service of myth.

If you can't be free, be a mystery.

2000-2001: Stanley Kunitz

Passing Through

—on my seventy-ninth birthday

Nobody in the widow's household
ever celebrated anniversaries.
In the secrecy of my room
I would not admit I cared
that my friends were given parties.
Before I left town for school
my birthday went up in smoke
in a fire at City Hall that gutted
the Department of Vital Statistics.
If it weren't for a census report
of a five-year-old White Male
sharing my mother's address
at the Green Street tenement in Worcester
I'd have no documentary proof
that I exist. You are the first,
my dear, to bully me
into these festive occasions.

Sometimes, you say, I wear
an abstracted look that drives you
up the wall, as though it signified
distress or disaffection.
Don't take it so to heart.
Maybe I enjoy not-being as much
as being who I am. Maybe
it's time for me to practice
growing old. The way I look
at it, I'm passing through a phase:
gradually I'm changing to a word.
Whatever you choose to claim
of me is always yours;
nothing is truly mine
except my name. I only
borrowed this dust.

The Layers

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:

“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

Benediction

God banish from your house
The fly, the roach, the mouse

That riots in the walls
Until the plaster falls;

Admonish from your door
The hypocrite and liar;

No shy, soft, tigrish fear
Permit upon your stair,

Nor agents of your doubt.
God drive them whistling out.

Let nothing touched with evil,
Let nothing that can shrivel

Heart's tenderest frond, intrude
Upon your still, deep blood.

Against the drip of night
God keep all windows tight,

Protect your mirrors from
Surprise, delirium,

Admit no trailing wind
Into your shuttered mind

To plume the lake of sleep
With dreams. If you must weep

God give you tears, but leave
You secrecy to grieve,

And islands for your pride,
And love to nest in your side.

2004-2006: Ted Kooser

Abandoned Farmhouse

He was a big man, says the size of his shoes
on a pile of broken dishes by the house;
a tall man too, says the length of the bed
in an upstairs room; and a good, God-fearing man,
says the Bible with a broken back
on the floor below the window, dusty with sun;
but not a man for farming, say the fields
cluttered with boulders and the leaky barn.

A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall
papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves
covered with oilcloth, and they had a child,
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.
Money was scarce, say the jars of plum preserves
and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole.
And the winters cold, say the rags in the window frames.
It was lonely here, says the narrow country road.

Something went wrong, says the empty house
in the weed-choked yard. Stones in the fields
say he was not a farmer; the still-sealed jars
in the cellar say she left in a nervous haste.
And the child? Its toys are strewn in the yard
like branches after a storm—a rubber cow,
a rusty tractor with a broken plow,
a doll in overalls. Something went wrong, they say.

Look for Me

Look for me under the hood
of that old Chevrolet settled in weeds
at the end of the pasture.

I'm the radiator that spent its years
bolted in front of an engine
shoving me forward into the wind.

Whatever was in me in those days
has mostly leaked away,
but my cap's still screwed on tight

and I know the names of all these
tattered moths and broken grasshoppers
the rest of you've forgotten.

Depression Glass

It seemed those rose-pink dishes
she kept for special company
were always cold, brought down
from the shelf in jingling stacks,
the plates like the panes of ice
she broke from the water bucket
winter mornings, the flaring cups
like tulips that opened too early
and got bitten by frost. They chilled
the coffee no matter how quickly
you drank, while a heavy
everyday mug would have kept
a splash hot for the better
part of a conversation. It was hard
to hold up your end of the gossip
with your coffee cold, but it was
a special occasion, just the same,
to sit at her kitchen table
and sip the bitter percolation
of the past week's rumors from cups
it had taken a year to collect
at the grocery, with one piece free
for each five pounds of flour.

2008-2010: Kay Ryan

All Your Horses

Say when rain
cannot make
you more wet
or a certain
thought can't
deepen and yet
you think it again:
you have lost
count. A larger
amount is
no longer a
larger amount.
There has been
a collapse; perhaps
in the night.
Like a rupture
in water (which
can't rupture
of course). All
your horses
broken out with
all your horses.

Nothing Ventured

Nothing exists as a block
and cannot be parceled up.
So if nothing's ventured
it's not just talk;
it's the big wager.
Don't you wonder
how people think
the banks of space
and time don't matter?
How they'll drain
the big tanks down to
slime and salamanders
and want thanks?

Cloud

A blue stain
creeps across
the deep pile
of the evergreens.
From inside the
forest it seems
like an interior
matter, something
wholly to do
with trees, a color
passed from one
to another, a
requirement
to which they
submit unflinchingly
like soldiers or
brave people
getting older.
Then the sun
comes back and
it's totally over.

2010-2011: W.S. Merwin

I Live Up Here

I live up here
And a little bit to the left
And I go down only

For the accidents and then
Never a moment too soon

Just the same it's a life it's plenty

The stairs the petals she loves me
Every time
Nothing has changed

Oh down there down there
Every time
The glass knights lie by their gloves of blood

In the pans of the scales the helmets
Brim over with water
It's perfectly fair

The pavements are dealt out the dice
Every moment arrive somewhere

You can hear the hearses getting lost in lungs
Their bells stalling
And then silence comes with the plate and I
Give what I can

Feeling *It's worth it*

For I see
What my votes the mice are accomplishing
And I know I'm free

This is how I live
Up here and simply

Others do otherwise
Maybe

Native Trees

Neither my father nor my mother knew
the names of the trees
where I was born
what is that
I asked and my
father and mother did not
hear they did not look where I pointed
surfaces of furniture held
the attention of their fingers
and across the room they could watch
walls they had forgotten
where there were no questions
no voices and no shade

Were there trees
where they were children
where I had not been
I asked
were there trees in those places
where my father and my mother were born
and in that time did
my father and my mother see them
and when they said yes it meant
they did not remember
What were they I asked what were they
but both my father and my mother
said they never knew

The Falcons

There were years when I knew
the flower in the red stone walls

now in the courtyard where I have returned with
you
we drink the wine of visitors
the temperature of the cellars

dusk is welling
out of the dried blood of the masonry
no hour remains on the sundial
by now the owls of the tower corners
are waking on their keepers' fists
but it is still day
out in the air
and three falcons appear there
over the courtyard

no feathers on heads or breasts
and they fly down to us
to our wrists and between them
then hover and perch just above us
keeping us in sight
waiting
they are waiting for us

this time they will come with us
when we leave the island
tonight for the rest of our lives

2011-2012: Philip Levine

Belle Isle, 1949

We stripped in the first warm spring night
and ran down into the Detroit River
to baptize ourselves in the brine
of car parts, dead fish, stolen bicycles,
melted snow. I remember going under
hand in hand with a Polish highschool girl
I'd never seen before, and the cries
our breath made caught at the same time
on the cold, and rising through the layers
of darkness into the final moonless atmosphere
that was this world, the girl breaking
the surface after me and swimming out
on the starless waters towards the lights
of Jefferson Ave. and the stacks
of the old stove factory unwinking.
Turning at last to see no island at all
but a perfect calm dark as far
as there was sight, and then a light
and another riding low out ahead
to bring us home, ore boats maybe, or smokers
walking alone. Back panting
to the gray coarse beach we didn't dare
fall on, the damp piles of clothes,
and dressing side by side in silence
to go back where we came from.

On the Meeting of Garcia Lorca and Hart Crane

Brooklyn, 1929. Of course Crane's been drinking and has no idea who this curious Andalusian is, unable even to speak the language of poetry. The young man who brought them together knows both Spanish and English, but he has a headache from jumping back and forth from one language to another. For a moment's relief he goes to the window to look down on the East River, darkening below as the early night comes on. Something flashes across his sight, a double vision of such horror he has to slap both his hands across his mouth to keep from screaming. Let's not be frivolous, let's not pretend the two poets gave each other wisdom or love or even a good time, let's not invent a dialogue of such eloquence that even the ants in your own house won't forget it. The two greatest poetic geniuses alive meet, and what happens? A vision comes to an ordinary man staring at a filthy river. Have you ever had a vision? Have you ever shaken your head to pieces and jerked back

at the image of your young son falling through open space, not from the stern of a ship bound from Vera Cruz to New York but from the roof of the building he works on? Have you risen from bed to pace until dawn to beg a merciless God to take these pictures away? Oh, yes, let's bless the imagination. It gives us the myths we live by. Let's bless the visionary power of the human—the only animal that's got it—, bless the exact image of your father dead and mine dead, bless the images that stalk the corners of our sights and will not let go. The young man was my cousin, Arthur Lieberman, then a language student at Columbia, who told me all this before he died quietly in his sleep in 1983 in a hotel in Perugia. A good man, Arthur, he survived graduate school, later came home to Detroit and sold pianos right through the Depression. He loaned my brother a used one to compose hideous songs on, which Arthur thought were genius. What an imagination Arthur had!

Inheritance

A rectangular Bulova, my Zadie called a dress watch, I wore it for years, and though it gave the wrong time I treasured the sense of community it offered, the beauty of certain numerals — the seven especially, the way it leaned into its subtle work and never changed, and signified exactly what it was and no more. In dreams I learned that only the watch and the circle of ash trees surrounding me, and the grass prodding my bare feet, and of course my nakedness were necessary, though common. Just surrendering my youth, I still believed everything in dreams meant something I could parse to discover who we were.

As I write these words

in sepia across a lined page I have no idea why they've taken the shape I've given them, some cursive, some not, some elegantly articulated, others plain, many of no use at all. They go on working as best they can, like the Parker 51 that spent its coming of age stumbling backwards into Yiddish or the Bulova

that finally threw up its twin baroque arms in surrender to the infinite and quit without a word. The Parker still works and is never to blame. On good days it works better than I, and when it leaks it leaks only ink, never a word best left unsaid.

As a boy I would steal

into Zadie's bedroom, find the watch in a velvet box, wind it, hold it to each ear — back then both worked — to hear its music, the jeweled wheels and axles that kept time alive. There is still such joy in these tokens from back of beyond: the watch, the Parker pen, the tiny pocket knife he used to separate truth from lies, the ivory cigarette holder — a gift, he claimed, from FDR who mistook him for a famous Russian violinist. I could call them "Infinite riches in a little room" or go cosmic and regard them as fragments of a great mystery instead of what they are, amulets against nothing.

2017-2019: Tracy K. Smith

Sci-Fi

There will be no edges, but curves.
Clean lines pointing only forward.

History, with its hard spine & dog-eared
Corners, will be replaced with nuance,

Just like the dinosaurs gave way
To mounds and mounds of ice.

Women will still be women, but
The distinction will be empty. Sex,

Having outlived every threat, will gratify
Only the mind, which is where it will exist.

For kicks, we'll dance for ourselves

Before mirrors studded with golden bulbs.

The oldest among us will recognize that glow—
But the word *sun* will have been re-assigned

To the Standard Uranium-Neutralizing device
Found in households and nursing homes.

And yes, we'll live to be much older, thanks
To popular consensus. Weightless, unhinged,

Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift
In the haze of space, which will be, once

And for all, scrutable and safe.

Wade in the Water

for the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters

One of the women greeted me.
I love you, she said. She didn't
Know me, but I believed her,
And a terrible new ache
Rolled over in my chest,
Like in a room where the drapes
Have been swept back. I love you,
I love you, as she continued
Down the hall past other strangers,
Each feeling pierced suddenly
By pillars of heavy light.
I love you, throughout
The performance, in every
Handclap, every stomp.
I love you in the rusted iron
Chains someone was made
To drag until love let them be
Unclasped and left empty

In the center of the ring.
I love you in the water
Where they pretended to wade,
Singing that old blood-deep song
That dragged us to those banks
And cast us in. I love you,
The angles of it scraping at
Each throat, shouldering past
The swirling dust motes
In those beams of light
That whatever we now knew
We could let ourselves feel, knew
To climb. O Woods—O Dogs—
O Tree—O Gun—O *Girl, run*—
O Miraculous Many Gone—
O Lord—O Lord—O Lord—
Is this love the trouble you promised?

The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack

The first track still almost swings. High hat and snare, even
A few bars of sax the stratosphere will singe-out soon enough.

Synthesized strings. Then something like cellophane
Breaking in as if snagged to a shoe. Crinkle and drag. White noise,

Black noise. What must be voices bob up, then drop, like metal shavings
In molasses. So much for us. So much for the flags we bored

Into planets dry as chalk, for the tin cans we filled with fire
And rode like cowboys into all we tried to tame. Listen:

The dark we've only ever imagined now audible, thrumming,
Marbled with static like gristly meat. A chorus of engines churns.

Silence taunts: a dare. Everything that disappears
Disappears as if returning somewhere.

Appendix I: Origin

The Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry is appointed annually by the Librarian of the United States Congress and serves from October to May. In making the appointment, the Librarian consults with current and former laureates and other distinguished personalities in the field.

Currently, the laureate receives a \$35,000 annual stipend, endowed by a gift from Archer M. Huntington. On October 3, 1985, the U.S. Congress passed legislation authored by Senator Spark M. Matsunaga of Hawaii changing the title of the position to Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. The Library minimizes assigned duties, to allow incumbents to pursue their own projects while at the Library. The laureate presents an annual lecture and reading of his or her poetry and usually introduces poets at the Library's poetry series, the oldest in the Washington area and among the oldest in the United States. This annual series of public poetry and fiction readings, lectures, symposia, and occasional dramatic performances began in the 1940s. Collectively the laureates have brought more than 2,000 poets and authors to the Library to read for the Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature.

Each consultant has brought a different emphasis to the position. Maxine Kumin started a popular series of poetry workshops for women at the Library of Congress. Gwendolyn Brooks met with elementary school students to encourage them to write poetry. Joseph Brodsky initiated the idea of providing poetry in airports, supermarkets, and hotel rooms. Rita Dove, considered the first activist poet laureate, brought together writers to explore the African diaspora through the eyes of its artists, championed children's poetry and jazz with poetry events and read at the White House during Bill Clinton's first state dinner. Robert Hass organized a watershed conference that brought together popular novelists, poets, and storytellers to talk about writing, nature, and community, and co-founded the River of Words K-12 international children's poetry and art contest. Robert Pinsky initiated the Favorite Poem Project. Billy Collins's "Poetry 180" project distributed a poem to all high schools for every day of the school year. These poems were also collected and published in two anthologies.

Appendix II: List of US Poets Laureate

- 1986–1987: Robert Penn Warren
- 1987–1988: Richard Wilbur
- 1988–1990: Howard Nemerov
- 1990–1991: Mark Strand
- 1991–1992: Joseph Brodsky
- 1992–1993: Mona Van Duyn
- 1993–1995: Rita Dove
- 1995–1997: Robert Hass
- 1997–2000: Robert Pinsky
- 2000–2001: Stanley Kunitz
- 2001–2003: Billy Collins
- 2003–2004: Louise Glück
- 2004–2006: Ted Kooser
- 2006–2007: Donald Hall
- 2007–2008: Charles Simic
- 2008–2010: Kay Ryan
- 2010–2011: W. S. Merwin
- 2011–2012: Philip Levine
- 2012–2014: Natasha Trethewey
- 2014–2015: Charles Wright
- 2015–2017: Juan Felipe Herrera
- 2017–2019: Tracy K. Smith
- 2019–2022: Joy Harjo
- 2022 – present Ada Limón

Appendix II: Brief Biographies

Rita Dove

Rita Frances Dove (born August 28, 1952) is an American poet and essayist. From 1993 to 1995, she served as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. She is the first African American to have been appointed since the position was created by an act of Congress in 1986 from the previous "consultant in poetry" position (1937–86). Dove also received an appointment as "special consultant in poetry" for the Library of Congress's bicentennial year from 1999 to 2000.^[1] Dove is the second African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, in 1987, and she served as the Poet Laureate of Virginia^[2] from 2004 to 2006.

Ted Kooser

Theodore J. Kooser (born 25 April 1939) is an American poet. He served as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004 to 2006. Kooser was one of the first poets laureate selected from the Great Plains and is known for his conversational style of poetry.

Stanley Kunitz

Stanley Jasspon Kunitz (/ˈkjuːnɪts/; July 29, 1905 – May 14, 2006) was an American poet. He was appointed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress twice, first in 1974 and then again in 2000.

Kay Ryan

Kay Ryan (born September 21, 1945) is an American poet and educator. She has published seven volumes of poetry and an anthology of selected and new poems. From 2008 to 2010 she was the sixteenth United States Poet Laureate. In 2011 she was named a MacArthur Fellow and she won the Pulitzer Prize.

W.S. Merwin

William Stanley Merwin (September 30, 1927 – March 15, 2019) was an American poet who wrote more than fifty books of poetry and prose, and produced many works in translation. During the 1960s anti-war movement, Merwin's unique craft was thematically characterized by indirect, unpunctuated narration. In the 1980s and 1990s, his writing influence derived from an interest in Buddhist philosophy and deep ecology. Residing in a rural part of Maui, Hawaii, he wrote prolifically and was dedicated to the restoration of the island's rainforests.

Merwin received many honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1971 and 2009; the National Book Award for Poetry in 2005, and the Tanning Prize—one of the highest honors bestowed by the Academy of American Poets—as well as the Golden Wreath of the Struga Poetry Evenings. In 2010, the Library of Congress named him the 17th United States Poet Laureate.

Philip Levine

Philip Levine (January 10, 1928 – February 14, 2015) was an American poet best known for his poems about working-class Detroit. He taught for more than thirty years in the English department of California

State University, Fresno and held teaching positions at other universities as well. He served on the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets from 2000 to 2006, and was appointed Poet Laureate of the United States for 2011–2012.

Tracy K. Smith

Tracy K. Smith (born April 16, 1972) is an American poet and educator. She served as the 22nd Poet Laureate of the United States from 2017 to 2019. She has published four collections of poetry, winning the Pulitzer Prize for her 2011 volume *Life on Mars*. Her memoir, *Ordinary Light*, was published in 2015.

In April 2018, she was nominated for a second term as United States Poet Laureate by Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden.

Appendix III: Poetry Terms

alliteration	the repetition of sounds in a sequence of words. (See also consonance and assonance .)
assonance	the repetition of vowel-sounds.
beat	a stressed (or accented) syllable.
blank verse	unrhymed iambic pentameter.
caesura	an audible pause internal to a line, usually in the middle. (An audible pause at the end of a line is called an end-stop.) The French alexandrine, Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter, and Latin dactylic hexameter are all verse forms that call for a caesura.
consonance	the repetition of consonant-sounds.
end-stopped line	a line that ends with a punctuation mark and whose meaning is complete.
enjambéd line	a "run-on" line that carries over into the next to complete its meaning.
free verse	poetry in which the rhythm does not repeat regularly.
meter	a regularly repeating rhythm, divided for convenience into feet.
ode	a genre of lyric, an ode tends to be a long, serious meditation on an elevated subject.
simile	a figure of speech that compares two distinct things by using a connective word such as "like" or "as."
stanza	a "paragraph" of a poem: a group of lines separated by extra white space from other groups of lines.