

News 'N' Notes

February 2026

Poets' Roundtable of Arkansas

Founded February 5, 1931

Member of the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, Inc.

<http://poetsroundtableofarkansas.org>

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Greetings to all of you. I do hope your holidays were good, and you got the New Year off to a good start. We think of January as the month for reflection and giving yourself a restart. It's the beginning of a new year...but it's only the calendar telling us that. What if we had calendars that went from our birthday to the next? Would that be the time for restarting your life? That makes more sense.



Speaking of beginnings – we want to welcome a new group to PRA. The Apple Blossom Poets in Little Rock had their first meeting in January. Karen will tell you more, but I just want to say Welcome!!!

Maybe it's my annual SADD kicking in, but it seems like the past few months have given me more challenges than usual, both professionally and personally. I know many of you are also feeling the pressure of work, holidays, family, and/or health issues. These things seem to be more pressing during the holiday season and a few months after. Plus we look at the headlines and ask *What now?*

But we have something at our disposal to help us.

Write it! As poets and writers, we are well-equipped for this solution. After all, we do it all the time, don't we? Sometimes we feel our muse has abandoned us, but is she just showing us different subjects to opine? Maybe the thing we want to write about isn't the thing we should be writing about. Use free writing to curse enemies. Congratulate friends. Gossip about neighbors. All thoughts should be given a voice. Don't be afraid to hurt someone's feelings. It's between us and that piece of paper or computer screen. We don't have to share it if we don't want to (I'll never tell).

When we name whatever bothers us, it can feel like a weight is lifted and life seems a little easier to manage. Even if your spirits don't need a lift, use this exercise in other ways. Use it to plan out your year or set goals. Release ideas to the light to see how they look. Or just write to yourself. Try it – you'll like it.

“There are no negatives in life, only challenges to overcome that will make you stronger” - Eric Bates

Thanks for listening to me,
Christine Henderson
President, PRA

Welcome New Members

William (Bill) Green of Little Rock
Scott D. Lewis of Conway
Janet Holmes Uchendu of Little Rock
Joey Williams of Hot Springs
A. J. Wentz of Little Rock
Charles Templeton of Eureka Springs
Stephen Schwei of Houston, Texas
Liv Ryan of Little Rock
Anne Moses of El Dorado
Debra Sue Middleton of Bald Knob
Carolyn Boyles of Maumelle
Melissa Hite of Little Rock

Congratulations and Newsworthy

November Monthly Contest Winners

Judge: **Christine Henderson**
First Place: **Marie Allison** “Home”
Second Place: **Sheri Hayes** “My Creaky House”
Third Place: **Cathy Moran** “Coming back home to the nest”
First Honorable Mention: **John McPherson** “A Shrine Someday, No Doubt”
Second Honorable Mention: **Jerri Hardesty** “The Boomerang Effect”
Third Honorable Mention: **Marilyn Joyner** “My Haven”

December Monthly Contest Winners

Judge: **Ann Carolyn Cates**
First Place: **Marilyn Joyner** “Boxes of Life”
Second Place: **Janice Canerdy** “No More Empty Boxes”
Third Place: **Marie Allison** “Empty Boxes”
First Honorable Mention: **Sheri Hayes** “Kitty Cats and Empty Boxes”
Second Honorable Mention: **Rachel Kulp** “My Empty Box”
Third Honorable Mention: **John McPherson** “Emptiness”

January Monthly Contest Winners

Judge: **Marilyn Joyner**
First Place: **Dennis Patton** “Changing Prayer”

Second Place: **Karen Moulton** “Keeping Legs Crossed”

Third Place: **Marie Allison** “Trapped Inside”

First Honorable Mention: **Jerri Hardesty** “Unexpected Vacation”

Second Honorable Mention: **John McPherson** “In the Cellar”

William G. Hill was selected as The Mississippi Poetry Society Poet of the Year. **Gail Denham** won third prize in Lomp (Minnesota) contest with “Afternoon in the Cotswolds;” four of her poems won prizes in Arizona monthly contests last year; she won two prizes in Massachusetts annual contest; she won a third place in Dancing Poetry; she has three poems in the PPS Anthology; Highland Park published “Broken in Half” on Facebook; “Home Place,” “Crushed,” and “The Urge to Rearrange Produce” were in Highland Park; two poems were in Poetic Voice (Pennsylvania).

Laura Bridges has had poems published in the Hot Springs’ *Sentinel Record*.

Kai Coggin shares the following: February 4th is the 37th anniversary of Wednesday Night Poetry, which she has been hosting since 2019. On that anniversary, it will be 1,932 weeks in a row, never missing a week since February 1, 1989. February 12, she will be featured at the Zeitgeist Reading Series in Little Rock; February 24-27, she will be visiting Ithaca College, as part of their Distinguished Writer Series, doing a reading for staff, and craft talk with their creative writing students; March 4-8, she will attend AWP in Baltimore; April 15, she will be visiting Monroe Community College as a Visiting Speaker, in Rochester, NY; May 19-22, she is the Jon Tribble Fellow at the Poetry By The Sea Conference in Connecticut.

Emory Jones’ poem “Bones Die Hard” won first place in the Mideast Regional Contest of the Poetry Society of Tennessee 2024-

2025 Festival Contest; “Raft of Years” won third place in the President’s Award of the Poetry Society of Tennessee 2024-2025 Festival Contest; “Upon Putting an Anthology of Poetry in the Community College Bookstore” won fourth honorable mention in the Anything Goes Award of the Alabama State Poetry Society’s Spring 2025 Contest; “Her Fury,” “A Walk in the Park,” “Tin Roof,” and “Queen Lilies” were published in the May/June 2025 edition of *Pennsylvania’s Poetic Voices*; “The Survivor” won second place in the A LIFE SAVED Category of the 2025 Mississippi Poetry Society Contest; “Remembering Mississippi” won third honorable mention in the MISSISSIPPI POETRY SOCIETY AWARD of the 2025 Mississippi Poetry Society Contest; “The Big Bad Wolf” won first honorable mention in the PRIMROSE AWARD of the 2025 Mississippi Poetry Society Contest; “Eagle Snow” won second place in the Confluence Category of the Poetry Society of Indiana 2025 Summer Contest; “Painted Desert” was published in *The Avocet: A Journal of Nature Poetry Summer—2025*; “Upon Putting an Anthology of Poetry in the Community College Bookstore” won fourth place in the Anything Goes Category of the 2025 Spring Award of the Alabama State Poetry Society; “Rain Regiment” and “Dogwood” were published in the July 2025 edition of *Pennsylvania’s Poetic Voices*; “Summer Humm,” “Dust devils whirling...” Haiku, “Summer sun beats down...” Haiku, and “Summer Sunshine: A Cinquain” were published in the July edition of *The Avocet*; “Campfire” was published in the Fall 2025 edition of *The Avocet*; “The Sanctuary” won first place in Category 18 (Nature’s Wonders) of the 2025 Poets ‘Poets’ Roundtable of Arkansas 2025 Contest; “Poetic Feast” won second place in Category 23 (Betty Heidelberger Memorial Award) of the Poets’ Roundtable of

Arkansas 2025 Contest; “Swirling leaves flutter...” won third place in Category 32 (Haiku Classical and Modern) of the Poets’ Roundtable of Arkansas 2025 Contest; “Mississippi Memories” and “A View from Mississippi” were published in the October 21, 2025 issue of *Deep South Magazine*; “Crow HAIKU” won second place in the Traditional Haiku Category of the 2025 Illinois State Poetry Society Contest; “Winter Sunshine” was published in the winter 2025-2026 edition of *The Avocet*; “Dancing Autumn—An Etheree,” “Playful Spring—A Kyrielle,” and “Verse Virus” were published in *Sagebrush and Silver, Nevada Poetry Society Anthology 2026*.

A New Branch of PRA-The Apple Blossom Poets

Enthusiastic efforts are underway to create a Little Rock Metro Area branch of the Poets’ Roundtable of Arkansas. An organizational meeting of interested poets from central Arkansas was held in Little Rock on Saturday, January 17, with 18 people in attendance. Four more had expressed a desire to attend but were not able to be there. Spearheading the effort is **Amanda (AJ) Wentz**, with help from PRA members **Cathy Moran** and **Larry Witherspoon** of Little Rock, and **Michael Blanchard** from Conway. AJ was previously a member of the Gin Creek Poets branch in Searcy and later the Little Rock branch that disbanded following the COVID outbreak. A lawyer by profession, she works in the office of the state’s Attorney General. AJ has volunteered to serve as president. **Melissa Hite**, also of Little Rock, has agreed to serve as vice president. The group has selected as its name The Apple Blossom Poets in honor of the state flower and official floral emblem of Arkansas and the third Saturday of each month as its meeting date. Stay tuned to

future issues of the newsletter for progress reports on our newest branch.

Two Ways You Can Support PRA

*The PRA is still in need of someone to serve as treasurer. Currently, the president is taking on those duties along with the responsibility that comes with being president. If you would like to step up and offer your skills for this position, contact president **Christine Henderson**. Her contact information is in the PRA yearbook.

*If you are considering sponsorship for a contest for Poetry Day, please see the form on the PRA website in the Contests section. <https://poetsroundtableofarkansas.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/2026-pd-sponsorship-form.pdf>

Spring Celebration Contests

Three contests are available to enter: Dr. Lily Peter Memorial Award sponsored by Roxie Wilson; Verna Lee Hinewardner Memorial Award sponsored by **John Crawford**; Freeda Baker Nichols Memorial Award sponsored by **Pat Laster**.

Check page 10 in the PRA yearbook or <https://poetsroundtableofarkansas.org/spring-celebration-contests/> for specific addresses to send in submissions.

The submission period is from January 1 to February 28.

If you plan to attend Spring Celebration this year (see details further down in Board Meeting Business), you may also enter the serious or light verse contest. Poems must be no more than 16 lines. Members leave their poems at the registration table. **Remember to place the category in the upper right corner but do not put your name on the poem anywhere.** Winners are decided by the group in attendance. For more information, see page 11 in the PRA yearbook or visit

<https://poetsroundtableofarkansas.org/spring-celebration-contests/>

Live Poetry in Conway

The 2025-2026 season of Poetry@thePublic will resume on Sunday, February 15, at the Faulkner County Library in Conway.

Poetry@thePublic is a series of readings by poets from Arkansas and the Ozark region hosted by the Library (located at 1900 Tyler Street in Conway) and coordinated by *SLANT*, the UCA journal of contemporary poetry. Library doors for these Sunday events open at 2 p.m., and the readings begin at 2:30. The event is free of charge and open to the public.

Featured poets this time will be Nate Duke from Little Rock and Zack Medlin from Fort Smith.

Nate is a native of Little Rock. He earned a BA in English from the University of Arkansas, followed by an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Montana and a PhD in English/Creative Writing with a concentration in poetry from Florida State University. Nate's debut full-length volume of poetry, *A Suit of Paper Feathers*, was published by Parlor Press/Free Verse editions in 2023. His poems have also appeared in the *Paris Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Green Linden Press*, among others. He has taught at the University of Montana, Florida State, and Montana State University. In the fall semester of 2025, he joined the faculty of the UCA School of Language & Literature and also the editorial board of *SLANT*.

Zack is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith. He holds an M.A./M.F.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and a Ph.D. from the University of Utah, where he was awarded the Clarence Snow Memorial Fellowship. His poetry has appeared in journals such as *The Cincinnati Review*, *Colorado Review*, and *Iron Horse Literary Review*, among others, and was featured on Poetry Daily. His poems have

been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and awarded numerous awards including an AWP Intro Journals Award. His debut poetry collection *Beneath All Water* was the winner of the Marystina Santiestevan First Book Prize.

SLANT Submission Period Open

Michael Blanchard announces that the submission period for the Spring 2026 issue of *SLANT* (which has an expected publication date of May 15) opened February 1 and continues through March 31. We welcome your contributions.

Send your poems with "SLANT submission Spring 2026" in the subject field to slantpoetry@uca.edu.

Now in its 40th year, our journal appears in digital format twice annually: Spring (May) and Fall (November) and over the years has published work by poets not only from all parts of the U.S. but also from many other countries. For more information about *SLANT*, including submission guidelines and a view of our current and recent issues, I invite you to pay us a virtual visit at [SLANT Poetry](http://SLANTPoetry). Please remember that we also welcome the submission of news items from you at any time during the year for publication on the [Forum: News & Reviews](#) page of our website. You can send those to us at slantpoetry@uca.edu. Be sure to add "SLANT Forum" in the subject field of your email message.

Lucidity Poetry Retreat #33

April 7, 8 and 9, 2026 in Branson, MO
TUESDAY April 7: Registration 6 pm
First Session: 6:30 pm
Director: **Nancy LaChance**
Poetry Leader: Byron von Rosenberg
Poetry Contests \$\$ Awards
Banquet Critique Workshops Poetry
Lectures Open Mics Book Sales Table
Freebie table

Time for visiting with interesting poets from all over

Deadline for contest poems and critique workshop poems: March 7, 2026

Accomplished Poets, New Poets ~ All Welcome

Share your knowledge and learn from others
Hotel: Stone Castle, 3050 Green Mountain Rd., Branson, MO

Rooms Reservation: call 417-243-2872 to register. McKensie Dunson will take reservations Mon- Fri from (9 am-5 pm) through Branson.com Groups Department Mention Lucidity Poetry Retreat~ for special rate: Single - \$406.63 includes taxes, gratuity and banquet Double - \$240.85
Hotel Reservation Deadline February 20, 2026

Registration Fee: \$20.00 (if you are early bird: postmark by Feb 14). After Feb 14 \$30.00

NOTE: send me 3 separate emails by March 7!!!

1. E-mail 1 unpublished contest poem with your name on it.
2. E-mail 4 critique poems (your name on each poem, top left).
(please send short poems – no more than 30 lines)
3. Email (1) Critic's Choice poem with name on it

Please label each type of poem you are sending

to lachancenancy@outlook.com

That is 6 poems in all. Poetry Deadline: March 7, 2026

Send registration form and money to my Lebanon address. (Early bird Feb 14 postmark)

Nancy LaChance

14940 Hwy 64
Lebanon, MO 65536
417-531-0719

PS: Bring a raincoat, umbrella, sweater, sock cap, scarf and gloves, flip flops, etc.

Never know what weather in the Ozarks will bring.

For registration form, contact **Nancy LaChance** at lachancenancy@outlook.com

January Board Meeting Business

The board met on January 17, 2026 at First Community Bank in Searcy.

Dennis Patton reported that the Governor is reviewing the committee's recommendations for poet laureate. In the interim, **Suzanne Rhodes** will continue in that role.

Christine Henderson will continue as acting treasurer.

Membership fees will not change.

Spring Celebration will be held on April 18, 2026 at Parkview Methodist Church in Benton. Registration begins at 9:00 a.m. and the program begins at 9:30 a.m. **Michael Blanchard** volunteered to find a speaker. Lunch will be a potluck. Critiques will be coordinated by **Michael Blanchard** and **Christine Henderson**. If a new poet laureate has been named, the board will invite him/her to share plans for their term. Poetry Day chair will be **Michael Blanchard** with **John McPherson** serving as Poetry Day contest chair. A tentative date is being confirmed. As UCA is not providing lunch this time, food will be discussed at the July board meeting. Critiques will be limited to the first 12 received. Look for an announcement closer to the due date.

The subject for the Sybil Nash Abrams Award will be Arkansas Native Wildlife. Contest Committee Chair is **Marilyn Joyner** who along with her committee will select the judge.

The subject and form for the O'Neal Memorial Award sponsored by Ben O'Neal is any with a line limit of 32. The O'Neal

Humor Award subject is vacations with the form being any and a line limit of 32.

The general fund and Poetry Day bank accounts will be moved to Arvest Bank.

Rick Houston updated the board on his recent outreach efforts to youth in Atkins.

PRA's Facebook Page

Do you or your chapter have news you'd like to share? I am happy to post it on the Facebook page as well as include it in this newsletter. Maybe you are giving a reading? Have a new book coming out? Give me a shout at jkmoultons@yahoo.com and I will spread the word.

Looking for Poetry to Read?

Gail Denham suggests poets William Stafford and Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel.

Laura Bridges is reading Naomi Shihab Nye's book *Cast Away* and **Pat Durmon**'s new book. Check here for other books by current and former PRA members:

<https://poetsroundtableofarkansas.org/resources/pramemberspoetrybooksforsale/>

Poet Laureate

Series

Jo Garot

McDougall

After the death of Peggy Vining, then governor Asa

Hutchinson appointed **Jo Garot McDougall** to the position of poet laureate in 2018. In the proclamation, the governor noted that "inspired by her heritage, McDougall captures a sense of place and a Southern way of life through language that is direct and unexpected. Her poems are honest reflections on loss and authentic accounts of everyday life." She served in the position until 2022. Previous to this, the position was



a lifetime appointment. Act 292 of 2017 amended how poets laureate are chosen and their length of service. Instead of the legislature, the governor selects the poet laureate from a list of potential candidates compiled by two English department heads and two members of the Poets' Roundtable of Arkansas as designated by the Director of the Department of Higher Education and the PRA's president respectively. The poet laureate's term is limited to four years. Jo Garot was born near DeWitt in Arkansas County in 1935. Her father was a rice farmer and her mother was a secondary education teacher. Jo has one sister named Nancy. Jo earned a Bachelor of Science degree in home economics from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. She married a rice farmer named Charles McDougall. They lived near Stuttgart for twenty years. Jo and Charles had two children: a son and a daughter. Over the years, Jo had poetry published in magazines, but in 1980, she pursued an MFA in creative writing at the University of Arkansas studying with Jim Whitehead and Miller Williams. She graduated in 1985 and in 1986 started a year of teaching at Northeast Louisiana University. From 1987-1998, she taught at Pittsburg State University in Kansas, Hendrix College in Conway, and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock before taking an emergency leave of absence due to family illness and retiring in 1998. Her daughter died in 1999. She and Charles lived in Leawood, Kansas for many years before moving to Little Rock. Charles died in 2021. Jo has published six poetry collections: *The Woman in the Next Booth* (1987), *Towns Facing Railroads* (1991), *From Darkening Porches* (1996), *Dirt* (2001), *Satisfied with Havoc* (2004), and *The Undiscovered Room* (2016). *In the Home of the Famous Dead: Collected Poems* was published in 2015 by the University of Arkansas Press. She published her memoir, *Daddy's Money: A*

Memoir of Farm and Family in 2011. A short film based on McDougall's poetry, *Emerson County Shaping Dream*, directed by Don Maxwell, was released in 2001. *Towns Facing Railroads*, a stage presentation adapted from McDougall's work, premiered at the Arkansas Repertory Theatre in 2006. *A Very Fine House*, an exhibit featuring prints by Anne deVere and text by McDougall, opened at the Abrons Art Center in New York in 2005. An arrangement was created by composer Steven Ebel using poems from *Towns Facing Railroads* in 2005. A song cycle from *Dirt* was adapted for a wind ensemble by composer Ty Emerson and premiered at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore in 2007. Jo won awards from the DeWitt Wallace/Readers Digest Foundation, the Academy of American Poets, and the Arkansas Arts Council; and numerous fellowships to the MacDowell Colony. She was inducted into the Arkansas Writers' Hall of Fame in 2006. In 2019, she was presented with the Porter Fund's Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2020, she was awarded a Pushcart Prize, after approximately thirty years of being nominated for it, for her poem "Rivers." In this article, <https://shorturl.at/3toZs>, find out about Jo's work in conjunction with the PRA to bring about Arkansas Youth Poetry Day. *Over an Arkansas Sky*, Jo's 2010 anthology inspired artwork in the form of a terrazzo floor at the Clinton National Airport. Learn more about the project here: <https://clintonairport.com/art-program-over-an-arkansas-sky-terrazzo-floor/> As I was researching Jo, I found this 2002 Arkansas TV program called *On the Same Page with Jo McDougall*. Jo reads some of her work at the beginning and the end of the video. Some of the dramatizations of her work are shown as well. In the middle, a panel made up of Miller Williams, Dr. Rosemary Henenberg, (recently retired from

Hendrix College), and Phil Martin discuss Jo's work. You can watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSxbYyDvjwI>

To read one of Jo's poems, visit this link: <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2016/feb/27/american-life-in-poetry-this-morning-by-jo-mcdouga/>

Jo lives in Little Rock. Her contact information can be found in the PRA yearbook.

Collegiate and Student Contests

The information for these contests can be found on the PRA website. Please share with colleagues, grandkids, and anyone else you think might be interested. We'd love to have robust participation. Questions? **Lisa Lindsey** is the Youth Chair and **Karen Moulton** is the Collegiate Chair. Please take note that the submissions for the youth contest are to be sent to **John McPherson**. Collegiate submissions should be emailed to **Karen Moulton** at jkmoultons@yahoo.com or mailed to her. The mailing addresses are listed on the PRA website under Contests. Thank you for your help in disseminating this information.



Featured Poet: Michael Blanchard

If you have attended Poetry Day and/or Spring Celebration the last few years, then you've seen this face and

know it belongs to **Michael Blanchard**, Adjunct Professor of English in the School of Language and Literature and Editor of *SLANT: A Journal of Poetry* at the

University of Central Arkansas in Conway. Michael was Poetry Day speaker in 2023, served as Poetry Day Chair in 2025, and is currently a Member-at-Large on the PRA board. Michael is chiefly responsible for Poetry Day's venue change to the Fireplace Room on the UCA campus in Conway. Michael is a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He is a graduate of the University of Virginia, where he was an Echols Scholar and inducted into Phi Beta Kappa and where he twice won the University Union Fine Arts Award for Poetry. He also earned an M.A. degree from Indiana University and completed additional graduate study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has taught literature and creative writing at Troy University where he served as editor of *Epos*, the University's literary magazine, and where he was presented the Ingalls Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; North Carolina State University; and the University of Louisiana. His poems can be found in the *Alabama Literary Review*, *Quarry*, *Voyeur*, *Cave Region Review* (He was a featured poet in the 2019-2020 issue.), *Bayou Magazine*, and *Broad River Review*, among others. In addition, he is a frequent contributor to *Southern Literary Review*.

His previous publications include four books of poetry: *Naming the Silence: New & Collected Poems* (2017), which was nominated for the Patricia Goedicke Award for Poetry; *And the Mountain Replied: 39 Poems* (2019); *Stones in the Path: New Poems* (2020), and *The Pearl Diver's Daughter & Other Poems* (2023). A fifth book, *The Things of This World*, is scheduled for publication in early 2026. You can read a poem from his forthcoming book here:

<https://stonepoetryjournal.com/michael-blanchard/>

Michael somehow found the time to answer my questions.

If my research is correct your first poetry book came out in 2017, yet you've been writing poetry since high school according to an interview I read, and you've been teaching creative writing and editing university poetry journals as well. What "clicked" to make you decide—I need to put my poems together in a book?

Your research is correct. Something many people in Arkansas do not know about me is that some years back I took a wide detour from full-time teaching to answer the call to work in the non-profit world. As a result of two deaths in my family, my father's and my older brother's, I started volunteering for a hospice organization in Lafayette, Louisiana, where I was living and teaching at the University of Louisiana. I did some public speaking for them and helped out on a few fundraisers. Nothing too heroic. Gradually, I felt the need to be of greater service to the community outside of the academic world. After a time, I was offered the job as executive director of the hospice's newly formed foundation and accepted it. The deal, though, was that I would have to be allowed to continue teaching on a part-time basis. After 12 years in that role, a hospice in Raleigh, North Carolina came calling with a similar job. I had attended graduate school at the University of North Carolina and loved the state. The deal was the same, though, and I was allowed to teach as an adjunct faculty member at North Carolina State University. I did that and worked as director of the hospice foundation for 8 more years. In all that time, I never stopped writing but I wasn't publishing much, only a few poems in journals here and there. In 2015, I felt it was time for another change and retired from hospice to devote more time to writing. Roughly two years, that first book was published. Its title, *Naming the Silence*, refers to many things. Among them is the end to my radio silence as a publishing poet.

Even though I am retired, it is challenging to find time to write, so when I think about the

responsibilities you have as adjunct instructor of English at UCA and the activities you are part of outside your position, how do you find the time for your own poetry?

For me, the most creative part of the day is early morning. Fortunately, I am an early riser, usually somewhere between 5 and 5:30 a.m. and without the aid of an alarm clock. That is where I find the time for the space that separates my creative day from my work day. Even when I have an 8:00 class to teach, there is time.

This is a rather standard question, but I like learning the answer from the various poets I interview.

Describe your writing process. Handwritten? Typed? Dictated? Daily? When inspiration hits?

The answer to this question is closely related to the previous one. It is part of the discipline of writing that includes setting aside a dedicated time and space every day and having a set list of activities for that time. But the word "discipline" also refers to a field of study. So, my process involves continuous learning about the history and craft of poetry. For me, it is reading the work of other poets and keeping a notebook of favorite lines and ideas generated from that reading. A third part of the discipline is mining the ore in those notebooks for what might become new poems. For that part of the process, I keep old-fashioned index cards and return to them every day to see what sparks my interest. Of course, it is always good to be prepared for ideas that come randomly and perhaps miraculously into our lives. So, I always keep a pen and small notepad on me to record those.

Often, people ask me if I write every day. The answer to that question depends on what we mean by "writing." I work on a poem in progress every day. That's the fourth part of the process. But that's not the same as saying I write a poem every day. It's akin to a painter in their studio working on a single painting for days or weeks or even longer until it is finished. It might be more accurate to say that I work at poetry every day.

When starting a poem, I prefer to write by hand on an artist sketch pad. There is something about the large size of the page and its blankness that invites the mind to wander. I usually do not commit a poem to the typed page until I am satisfied with the content and structure. But that does not mean I am done with it. The typed page simply allows me to see more clearly the broad brushstrokes of the poem. At that point, it's time to work on the finer detail of the poem, like specific choices of words and phrases or punctuation.

Share a revision strategy you use that always delivers.

Two parts here. In transferring the makings of a poem from the sketch pad to the typed page, I often see or feel changes that could be or need to be made to the poem and make those changes right then. The act of typing the poem also gives me a better sense of how the poem looks on the printed page and how it flows (or doesn't flow). The second part of the strategy is never to be in a hurry. Return to the poem every day and try to see it fresh every time and be open to new possibilities every time until you have worked it through.

I read that you were influenced by T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams partly because they had other careers besides poetry.

Yes, you are probably referring to an interview that accompanied a review of my first book back in 2017. The interviewer asked me a question I had never been asked before. That question was whether I consider myself a poet or a person who writes poetry. Without hesitation, the answer was the latter. No matter how devoted we are to the art and craft of poetry, it is not the totality of who we are as humans. In the case of T.S. Eliot, he was working in Lloyd's Bank in London when he wrote "The Waste Land." Wallace Stevens was vice president of the Hartford Life Insurance Company. And William Carlos Williams was a physician and reportedly wrote poems on

prescription pads between patient visits. I was once the director of a hospice foundation. And now I am a teacher, editor, father, brother, friend, and more.

Another way of answering that question would be to say that I am a person who sees the world through the lens of a poet and who brings that perspective to bear in all facets of my life.

How much did the modernist approach of Eliot, Stevens, and Williams inform your poetry?

Those three were part of the first wave of modernist poets—along with Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Hilda Doolittle, and several others—who came into their own in the years following World War I. Their work was a reaction to a world devastated by a global conflict and a world in which young artists and writers had lost faith in traditional institutions and modes of belief that they felt should have provided safeguards against such an event ever happening. They were the "lost generation," to use Gertrude Stein's term for them. In their poetry they were trying both to describe a world without meaning and to seek new sources of meaning, what Marianne Moore called "a place for the genuine." For Wallace Stevens, modern poetry was "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice." In that effort, they felt that traditional poetic forms no longer fit and seized upon the freedom to create new forms better suited to the age and to their themes. That freedom to seek new forms that support and reinforce the meaning of a poem is perhaps their greatest gift to me as a poet.

Who are some contemporary poets that you enjoy reading?

If by "contemporary" you mean poets living and writing today, I would have to mention first the poets that publish in *SLANT*, the international journal of contemporary poetry that I have the privilege of editing for the School of Language & Literature at UCA. The *SLANT* community of poets now numbers 452 worldwide. There are a

handful that have been contributing to us for 30 years or more. But in each issue, we receive terrific poems from first-time contributors. More specifically, Michael Hettich from Black Mountain, North Carolina, is among the finest American poets writing today. He was the inaugural recipient of the Hudson-Fowler Prize in Poetry awarded by *SLANT* and the School of Language & Literature in 2023. Mary Makofske from Warwick, New York is another outstanding poet. She was the second recipient of the Hudson-Fowler Prize. And I always love keeping up with the work of Eric Paul Shaffer from Hawaii, our Poetry Day keynote speaker this past October. James Owens, who is originally from Virginia but who now lives with his wife in northern Ontario, Canada, also continues to impress me.

Ranging more broadly to poets from outside the *SLANT* community, I would include Naomi Shihab Nye, Carolyn Forché, Terrance Hayes, Jericho Brown, and Jane Hirshfield, and from outside the U.S. French poets Jean-Michel Maulpoix, Valérie Rouzeau, and Murièle Camac, the Spanish poet Luis García Montero, and Moroccan poets Fatima Zahra Bennis and El Habib Louai.

What trends in poetry have you seen since you first began reading it?

Trends in both the form and theme of the poems. As I mentioned above, the first wave of modernist poets and successive waves like the Beat Generation poets of the 1950's and 60's made the world safe for poetic experimentation. I see many poets today returning to established but perhaps less familiar verse forms, like the pantoum, ghazal, or villanelle, many of which originated outside the history of English and American poetry. I also see a lot of ekphrastic poetry (poems written in response to or as commentary on works of visual art). That is not a new thing. The last book William Carlos Williams published before

he died was titled *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems*, which begins with a cycle of ten poems, each one based on a painting by the Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder. But a number of submissions to *SLANT* I receive fall into this category.

In terms of theme, much of the poetry I read today seems to be an extension of or return to the confessional poetry written by mid-century poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, and W.D. Snodgrass. It is boldly personal and brutally frank. This trend seems to be coupled with a need or desire on the part of younger poets today to be closely identified with a cause or condition. That shows up even in many poet bios. At one time, the typical poet bio attached to a submission to *SLANT* listed education, hobbies, and publications. Now, they are more likely to lead by identifying the submitter as physically disabled, LGBTQ+, or neurodiverse, or a combination of those or other labels. This is not a criticism of the trend, just an observation on it.

How much of your writing time is devoted to submitting to journals?

The answer here depends on how much new poetry I have to send out into the world at any given time, but it is an important part of the practice of poetry. The answer also includes three parts of the submission process: researching new journals and their submission guidelines, actually sending poems to them, and tracking the results of submissions. As I was nearing the completion of my next book, I had 43 previously unpublished poems and spent a considerable amount of time, almost daily, sending those out to various publications. That is mainly because I was so caught up in the rush of creating poems I did not want to lose the momentum by stopping to send a batch or two out every time I had 4 or 5 new poems.

As you probably have discovered yourself, there are lots and lots of literary journals out

there, so the research part probably is the most time-consuming. It's not just a matter of creating a list of journals that publish poetry. It's also a matter of finding the right fit for me and the poems I have to offer at the time and of which ones are accepting submissions at that particular time. So, even when I do not have a new poem to send out, I try to update my list on a fairly regular basis.

How important is it to have your work out in the world?

Very important. It is another of the marks of a working poet and one of the ways we can join in on and contribute, if even in small part, to a conversation about the nature and possibilities of poetry, a conversation that started roughly 4,500 years ago with the oldest work of literature known to humanity, which happens to be a poem. On a practical level, it is important also because many publishers require you to have published a certain number of poems in literary journals before taking a serious look at your manuscript for publication.

In an interview with the Southern Literary Review in 2017, you said you were "less fussy about abiding by the standard rules of punctuation" than you used to be. You went on to say you give yourself more freedom in that way. Can you say more about your choice not to use punctuation?

Sure. As an English major and English teacher, I once felt bound to follow the standard rules of grammar and punctuation in my poetry. To confess, I never wanted anyone to suspect that I did not know the rules. Then, I realized that poetry was a different world with different rules. Poetry is not just a prose paragraph divided into stanzas. I am not sure what the catalyst event for that epiphany was, but it was liberating. Now, some of my poems have no punctuation at all, and I sometimes feel that punctuation is actually an intrusion on the poem. What that does is force me to structure poems so that their rhythms and flow make divisions or thought or changes in direction apparent to the reader.

When discussing the poems in Naming the Silence: New & Selected Poems, you were quoted as saying you allow "the resulting prosody to emerge organically from the theme and mood of each poem, as if I were listening to the poem and allowing it to come to life, take shape, and mature on its own terms." I hear this a lot in the poetry webinars and classes I take, this idea that you have to let the poem be what it wants to be. I find that elusive. Can you share how it is you discover a poem's will?

It begins by admitting that we are as much agents of the creative gods and that we are often channeling poems rather than creating them all on our own. Sometimes people ask who my audience is when I write. The answer is that I try not to write for an audience but to be the audience for the poem and let it speak to me. It might all sound rather mystical. But listening is an essential gift for the poet. Writing poetry is a lot like riding a horse. We can hold the reins tightly and take the horse in the direction we want to go, or we can hold loosely and let the horse follow its own lead. It is generally the latter approach that leads to genuine discovery and insights we would never come to if we simply tried to impose our will on the process.

In reading your past work, God, gods, biblical characters, and myths feature heavily. In the poem, "The Theory of Everything" from your upcoming book, The Things of This World, we get more of a science take. What can we expect from the rest of the poems in that book?

The poems in that book are all rooted in the belief that it is through the things of the physical or natural world that we experience beauty, joy, love, and wonder but also that the things of this world are subject to the laws of time and mortality; they change and do not last forever. Through some mystery of the human heart, that mutability does not diminish our love for the world or the people in our lives. In fact, it intensifies it. The poems are also a meditation on the fact that while the physical world is beautiful it can also be a source of destruction and suffering through natural disasters. And sometimes, it

is we humans who inflict suffering on the physical world and on each other.

When putting together poems for a collection, do you start with the title or theme or do you see what theme emerges from your work?

So far, it has been the first. I start with a theme or title concept and let the poems rise out of that creative wellspring. In fact, I already have the concept in mind for the next book and a list of poem ideas on index cards.

On a side note, more and more publishers these days like to see tightly focused collections on a central theme or concept. Please talk about the process of getting a book published.

It begins as the result of the process we have talked about already: having a disciplined daily practice of poetry and a sufficient number of poems for either a chapbook or full-length book. Enlist the feedback of two or three honest but supportive fellow poets on the manuscript as a whole, not just on individual poems. Be open to their suggestions and rework the manuscript as needed. That includes the poems themselves as well as the order of the poems. The arrangement of poems counts. Next, look for a publisher that is a good fit for you and your manuscript. A good fit is determined by the types of poetry books the publisher releases, by the amount of control over or input you will be allowed into the layout and design of the book, by the amount of marketing expected of you, and by the number of copies of the book the publisher expects you to purchase. Unless you have a prior working relationship with a publisher, this stage of the process might take some time. But do not rush it. Visit the publishers' websites and take a look at their catalog. Look at the book covers, read the descriptions and the blurbs or back cover endorsements. Once you have found a few prospects, study their submission guidelines carefully, then submit your manuscript accordingly.

If you are lucky enough to find an interested publisher, they will send you a contract and a timeline for design, editing, and final publication. Once you have submitted the manuscript and they have done the initial layout, you will receive a digital proof with a deadline for submitting changes or corrections. This step might take several back-and-forth communications until you are fully satisfied with the book, both the cover design and the internal contents.

At any time of the process, you can try to place as many of the poems as possible in a journal. But keep in mind the publisher's deadline for submitting an acknowledgements page with a list of the journals where the poems previously appeared. And keep in mind also that those journals who did you the favor of accepting the poems first love to be thanked in public print.

What is something you'd like to share with members that they may not know?

I think I shared that above in my answer to your very first question. For 20 years, I was an advocate for compassionate care of the dying through my work with hospice organizations in Louisiana and North Carolina. For both, I was director of their foundation and had responsibility for fundraising, public education, and the volunteer program. And as I said above, I was fortunate on both occasions to have a board of directors that allowed me the freedom to teach on an adjunct or part-time basis. In some respects, you can say that for a long time I had parallel careers. Now, I am back to a more singular focus, teaching at UCA and editing the poetry journal.

What is a question you wish interviewers would ask you but never do?

Two questions really. The first is about the origins of poetry as a form of performance art. The other is about the role of the poet in society throughout history. I enjoy talking about those subjects very much.

From the Editor

The research I did about **Jo McDougall** for the Arkansas Poet Laureate series led me to a 2002 interview program featuring her. I just loved listening to her read, seeing the dramatizations of her work, and listening to Miller Williams with whom Jo studied, discussing the magic and the mystery of her poetry. In particular, I love what Miller Williams said about poetry: “But the mystery in poetry should not be in what it means on the surface. It’s awfully easy to be obscure. A three-year-old or a drunk can be obscure. We don’t know what either one means when they try to express themselves.” I couldn’t agree more yet it seems like certain “important” journals are seeking out obscurity. I don’t mind doing a bit of the work myself to get the most from a poem as I read it, but it shouldn’t be so cryptic I have no idea what the poet was trying to convey. I recently listened to a talk by Marie Howe who stated that poetry shouldn’t be trying to make a point. So somewhere between being obscure and obvious is the sweet spot I guess, and you can find that sweet spot in Jo’s poetry. *Dirt* is my favorite book of hers. It seems like magic the way she can use a few simple words to convey emotion and image. I also read her memoir, *Daddy’s Money*, which I found fascinating. I have always been a fan of Jo’s and it is a thrill to have met her and read her work. She was the subject of my submission for Famous Arkansans in the Poetry Day Contests. My poem was not selected, but I want to share it with you here. I actually wrote two poems about Jo: one contained many facts about her life and the other, the one I’m sharing with you, uses her book titles to describe her life. If you have not read any of Jo’s poetry, I encourage you to do so. (I’m sorry the poem’s formatting didn’t hold. I used slashes to mark the end of the line.)

“Jo Garot McDougall, Arkansas Delta Poet: A Tribute in Book Titles”

Jo Garot was raised in the *Dirt* of the Arkansas Delta/

near DeWitt and Stuttgart, *Towns Facing Railroads*./

Given every advantage growing up, she used *Daddy’s/ Money* to graduate from the University of Arkansas/

in Fayetteville. Not wanting to be one of those *Women/ Who Marry Houses*, Jo married Charles, the son of a rice/ farmer who became a rice farmer just like her daddy was./ They had two children and were for a time, *Satisfied with/*

Havoc. She was a teacher and a mother before finding her/ poet self in *The Undiscovered Room* of her mind. She/ and her family lived in Louisiana and Kansas before moving/ back to Little Rock where they lived *Under an Arkansas Sky*/

until Charles’ death in 2021. His was not the only tragic news/ coming *From Darkening Porches* of her life. Their son suffered/ a stroke in his thirties, leaving him to live with left side impairment,/ while their daughter died of cancer at forty-one. Jo never wanted/

to live *In the Home of the Famous Dead*, but it seemed her fate/ for when her daddy died, her sister, Nancy, became *The Woman/ in the Next Booth* fighting Jo over the estate. Jo continued to write./

She served as Arkansas Poet Laureate. Her poetry describing/

small-town, farm life, has inspired a short film, a stage presentation,/ musical compositions, and even a terrazzo floor in the Little Rock/ Airport. Jo has received numerous fellowships and awards, honoring/ her body of work and Delta heritage *Under an Arkansas Sky*./

Sincerely,
Karen Moulton