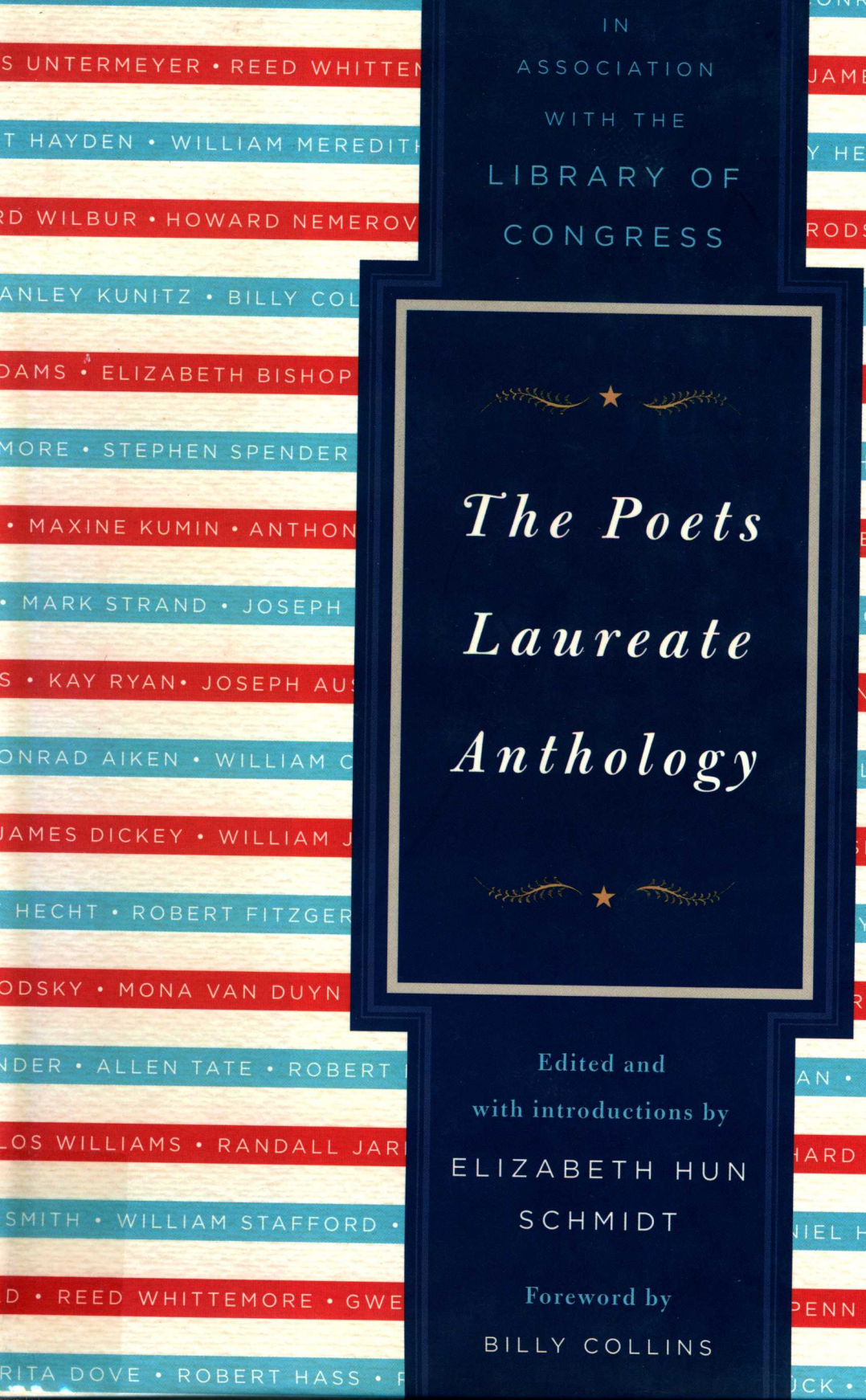
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IN
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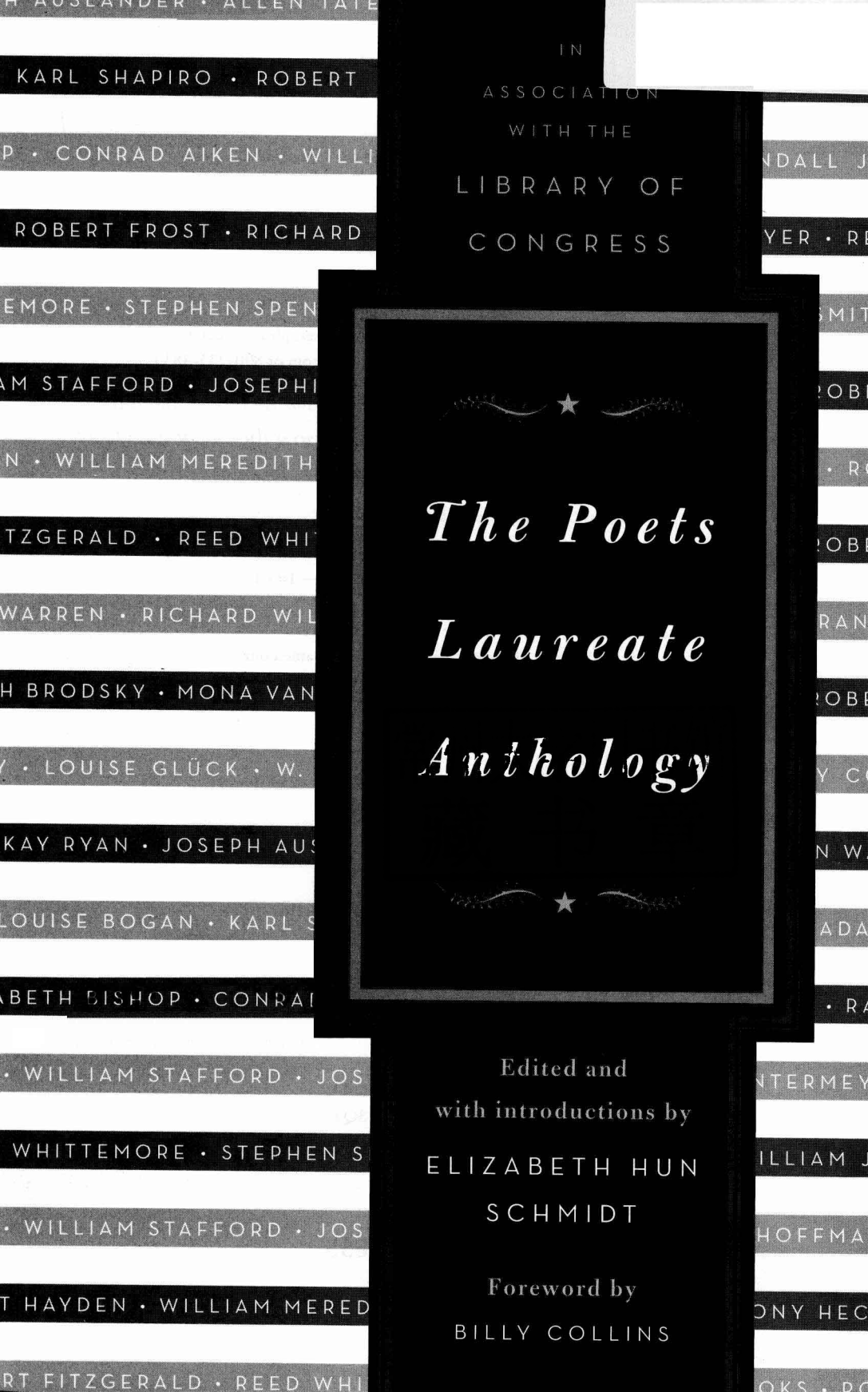
CONGRESS
The Poets Laureate Anthology
Edited and
with introductions by
ELIZABETH HUN
SCHMIDT
Foreword by
BILLY COLLINS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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

FOREWORD

Billy Collins

Becoming the United States poet laureate is a surprisingly straightforward process, especially considering the trumpeting resonance of the title. Unlike the British model, the American version is conferred without ceremony or ritual of investiture. No wreath is bestowed, nor is a cask of dry wine bestowed as is the custom in England. The news, however stunning, is delivered via a phone call from the Librarian of Congress, who congratulates you and talks you through a short list of duties, and after a pleasant luncheon in the Library's pavilion weeks later—poof, you're the new poet laureate. You do get a very nice office, a suite of rooms in the "attic" of the Jefferson Building, where you are apparently free to spend as much or as little time as you please. Located down the hall from the Senate Page School, the office is impressive not only for its elegant period furniture and the spectacular view of the Capitol, but also for the ghosts of all the previous laureates who haunt these rooms and whose photographs stare down at you (well, at me anyway) with expressions ranging from dim recognition to disbelief. *There must be some mistake*, Robert Penn Warren seemed to be saying. *Surely, not him*, Robert Frost seethed.

In place of a royal key, or cape, or coat of arms, the new laureate is presented with a heavy book containing a history of the Ameri-

can laureateship—or "Consultantship in Poetry," as the office was called until 1986—written by one William McGuire and titled *Poetry's Catbird Seat* after a remark by Reed Whittemore, who once described the position as "a job of opportunity, a catbird seat." I had hoped that this heavy book might explain the meaning of the laureateship and make it clear what I now was supposed to do, but this was not the case. The most helpful comment I came across was Howard Nemerov's observation that the poet laureate was expected to devote his tenure to explaining to others what it is exactly that the poet laureate does. Conrad Aiken concurred with Saint-John Perse's description of the job as "not exactly fictitious, but shall we say slightly imaginary." Indeed, apart from giving an annual reading and lecture, it appeared that the poet laureate was free to sit behind his desk and practice the art of Sudoku. "The Consultants," McGuire flatly adds, "were far from idle, but their role remained largely undefined." The most amusing misconception of the laureateship I ever heard issued from a high school student who asked me after a reading, "How many people would have to die for you to become President?"

With no obligation to write "occasional poems," say, on the death of an earl, it seemed that the American laureate was free to write occasionally. Yet many recent laureates had found inventive ways to keep busy. Perhaps inspired by Maxine Kumin's poetry activism in the Washington community and Joseph Brodsky's idea (though Brodsky never acted upon it) of placing poetry books in motels and supermarkets, Rita Dove, Robert Pinsky, and Robert Hass had taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the Library to promote poetry on a national level—to be "a lightning rod for poetry," to quote one description of the office, however painful that might sound. My own contribution was a program called "Poetry 180," the aim of which was to expose high school students to contemporary poems without the attendant pains of explication—a poem a day, one for each of the 180 days of the school year. It was as simple as that. Such boosterism, it should be added, would not have sat well with certain previous laureates, including Louis Untermeyer, who (not warmly) remarked that he "was meant to act as a poetic radiator, radiating a love of poetry over as many miles as possible."

Although *Poetry's Catbird Seat* didn't tell me what a laureate should

do, the book contained enough tidbits to appeal to my taste for literary oddity. I discovered, for instance, that Ogden Nash, a reader for Doubleday at the time, was the one who first spotted the manuscript, tossed over the transom, that became Stanley Kunitz's first book of poems. When Ezra Pound was committed to Saint Elizabeths Hospital, Untermeyer proposed an alternative sentence: "life imprisonment in a cell lined with the poetry of Edgar A. Guest." Maxine Kumin would ride her horse, Boomer, for an hour before heading to the poetry office. Senator Edward Kennedy, of all people, introduced Andrei Voznesenskii when he read at the Library, and Daniel Hoffman gave a lecture on Carl Sandburg that bore the intriguing title "Moonlight Dries No Mittens." And speaking of titles, Kumin called one of her lectures "The Poet and the Mule" and was dismayed to see it listed in the evening's program as "The Poet and the Muse" due to a typesetter's understandable confusion. I was surprised to discover that Archibald MacLeish, not the laureate at the time, had accepted Nixon's invitation to write a poem on the occasion of an anticipated moon landing. I already knew that the change in title from "Consultant in Poetry" to "Poet Laureate" was due to the efforts of one Spark Matsunaga, a Democratic senator from Hawaii and war hero, who for twenty-two years tirelessly kept introducing legislation to enact the change until Congress finally relented in 1985; but it was more revealing to learn how various laureates spent their tenure in Washington: Karl Shapiro exploring the library's holdings of esoteric and mystical books, Robert Frost visiting the library rarely but using the title to widen the stage of his own popularity, and Robert Penn Warren hunkering down to write *All the King's Men.*

McGuire's book—which, by the way, deserves updating—provides the best and perhaps the only history of the laureateship, but here in *The Poets Laureate Anthology* this history is told for the first time by some of the very poems that distinguish these forty-three title holders. The anthology offers a generous sample of their work and provides a sweeping aerial view of the shifting ground of American poetry from 1937 to the present. Like any poetry collection, it can be read in any order according to each reader's whims—front to back, back to front, or dipped into anywhere—but editor Elizabeth Hun Schmidt's decision to put the poets in

reverse chronological order encourages readers to begin with W. S. Merwin, holder of the office as of fall 2010, and move back in time, stepping plot by plot over the landscape of poetry, arriving finally at the verses of Joseph Auslander, the first to hold the post. This reversal of chronological order may remind readers that literature not only progresses, but it *recedes*; it moves forward toward an unknown future, but it also backpedals toward its origins. Once the Influence and the Influenced trade places on the time line, unusual effects may result. Like the lordly Hudson, poetry flows in both directions.

At first, I planned to describe the arc of this progression from the somewhat dusty poems of Auslander to the spare rhythms of W. S. Merwin or to follow the book's reverse sequencing and travel from Merwin back to Auslander, but I found that the poets in between seemed unwilling to act as stepping stones for my tour, mostly because each is so distinctive. So instead of charting waves of literary change, I am simply going to point to some of the highlights of my perusal of the anthology. Of course, no two readers' tours of these poems will be the same—each will find his or her own delights; each will experience spikes, maybe even valleys; and each may be swallowed whole by individual poems. Here are what might be considered marginal notes pulled from the sidelines onto the page proper.

Straightaway, I admired W. S. Merwin's wonderfully modest, early three-liner titled "Separation": "Your absence has gone through me / Like thread through a needle. / Everything I do is stitched with its color." I have long envied Merwin's ability to transcend punctuation, fully on display here. And I loved Kay Ryan's "Home to Roost" for its perfect balance of silliness and horror accomplished through the image of chickens (not vultures) blotting out the sun—a barnyard apocalypse with a late repetition of its title—now a cliché with teeth. Every one of her poems is a little tower of sonic activity. And how can Charles Simic possibly go wrong when he starts out a poem with "I was stolen by the gypsies. My parents stole me right back. Then the gypsies stole me again. This went on for some time." As in so many of his strange, tactile poems, he leads us into a little world both surreal and real, crazy and scary. In "To a Waterfowl," which echoes the William Cullen Bryant original, Donald Hall is erotic and defiant, barely tolerating hus-

bands, wooing their wives, and challenging the young, while glorifying his own poems and deprecating himself. I liked Ted Kooser's idea of an ideal reader, a beautiful woman who would rather have her dirty raincoat dry-cleaned than waste the money on a book of poems, and indelible is Louise Glück's anti-Romantic assertion that she hates sex as much as she hates the mock orange flowers that light her yard. Also stuck to the slope of my memory is Robert Hass's "Then Time," in which some touching pillow talk between a man and woman wanders into the deepest human considerations. And Robert Pinsky's "Shirt" deserves its wide audience for the way it mixes the precise details of piecework shirtmaking with the criminal horrors of immolation. To read Stanley Kunitz's "Halley's Comet" was to experience again the deft way it shuffles together the domestic and the cosmic and to be reminded of its final image of "the boy in the white flannel gown / sprawled on this coarse gravel bed" of a rooftop. And Rita Dove's "Day Star" deserves its place in many anthologies for its empathetic portrait of a wife and mother who commits the terrible sin of doing absolutely nothing right "in the middle of the day."

Dipping into the anthology in a few random places is a sure way to experience the wide variety of voices and styles gathered here. Mona Van Duyn contributes a lovely sonnet titled "Earth Tremors Felt in Missouri," which cleverly compares love to a sensuous seismic catastrophe. In "Love Song," Joseph Brodsky's characteristic rhyming is on parade in a series of seriocomic romantic promises. Richard Wilbur's "A Simile for Her Smile" has long stood out as a perfectly balanced hinge poem in which a beloved's smile has the metaphoric power to stop traffic and let quieter sounds prevail. And Howard Nemerov's wit is fully deployed in "Money," a mock lecture on American economics, history, and culture in which he studies a buffalo nickel as Keats had studied his urn.

Some laureates made use of the office to write poems with a social or political thrust. Robert Penn Warren's mockingbird sings to the president, the Senate, and more personally to J. Edgar Hoover. Gwendolyn Brooks's pool players leave school and die soon; William Meredith writes a letter to the White House; William Stafford raises his voice against the murderous policies of the government, vowing in one poem "never to kill and call it fate." James Dickey drinks from a helmet in a foxhole.

Brooks's ballad of racial injustice, "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," finds its deserved place. William Jay Smith's "The Pumpkin Field" is part of *The Cherokee Lottery*, a sequence bemoaning the forceful relocation of tens of thousands of Native Americans. Classics such as Richard Eberhardt's "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" and Frost's "The Gift Outright" need only be given a nod of the head, a bend of the knee.

Poets also kept a steady eye on the natural world. Among the notable poems about animal life is Dickey's fanciful and chilling "The Heaven of Animals," which imagines a place where predation is an eternal state, where the killers kill perfectly and the killed are killed again and again: "They fall, they are torn, / They rise, they walk again." In an earthly version of that meditation, Randall Jarrell describes the snow leopard as "the heart of heartlessness." In another of his poems, a woman at a zoo implores a vulture to change her by investing her with animal power. And Reed Whittemore's "Clamming" is a beautiful example of how to access a large subject (a son) through a small one (clams); it ends with a piece of irreducibly Buddhist advice: "Son, when you clam, / Clam."

The Poets Laureate Anthology contains plenty of surprises, discoveries that may change our notions of how a particular poet's work should be read. But it is clear that editor Schmidt also wants to show our laureates at their best; indeed, some of their included poems have been anthologized so frequently as to become echoes of themselves. William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow, Robert Hayden's "austere and lonely offices," Elizabeth Bishop's "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" and many other familiar lines and images have achieved a kind of frozen, iconic status. Such may be the price of writing an absolute killer poem. "Household poems" of this order may also take on a much more public tone than the poet intended, and thus the intimacy of what was originally composed may be lost. Plus, placing poets in the context of their public recognition holds the danger of viewing them through a rather polished lens. Enshrined as some of these poets may be, it is important to remember that each of these poems began as a smaller thing—an initiating line, an intriguing image, "a lump in the throat," as Frost put it—not as a contribution to an anthology such as this one with its sober historic title. It is safe to say that these poems were not written to be declaimed to the American public from the balcony of the laure-

ate's office overlooking the Capitol; more likely, they were meant to be uttered quietly to a single reader, or said to no one at all since poems can be what poets say to themselves as they wander from room to room through the houses of their experience. Yet the laureates surely deserve their own anthology, a common place for both the living and the dead to gather. And for us readers, these many poems, so carefully collected here, allow us to tune in to the many voices of our laureates as they talk us through more than seven decades in the life of American poetry.

INTRODUCTION

ELIZABETH HUN SCHMIDT

The journey to the office of the United States poet laureate in the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress is full of grand passages and unexpected turns, befitting the rich and somewhat vexed history of the state-sanctioned poet here and abroad. On the one hand, few buildings are as glorious a celebration of the marriage of the cultivated mind and the republic as the Jefferson Building, built one hundred years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence in the Italian Renaissance style that Thomas Jefferson believed to be the paragon of stately architecture. No writer has a more august place in which to work. On the other hand—well, good luck finding the tucked-away nook called the Poetry Office on the high floor of its remote wing in the Library, at the end of a narrow unmarked hall lined mostly with rooms set aside for the House of Representatives' teenage pages. You might think our country wants both to flaunt and to hide the fact that the only official job in the arts in the United States is for a poet.

Ambivalence about poetry's place in politics extends back to the earliest writing we have on art and civilization. Over two and half millennia ago, Plato kicked poets out of his ideal republic because their poems distracted philosopher-kings and their charges from ordered, rational thought: "Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them

up. She lets them rule although they ought to be controlled." Plato did make an exception for poets who increased "happiness and virtue" by composing "hymns to gods and praises of famous men." These days many classical scholars argue that we shouldn't take Plato too literally on this one. While it is true, they point out, that Plato dismissed the emotional content of popular sagas like Homer's *Odyssey,* he nevertheless peppers his discourse with poetic flourishes like dramatic personae who speak in pleasing meters and use allusions, complex allegories, and vivid metaphors. Plato well knew, as have most revered politicians, that no one listens to prose that is too literal and didactic. Humans respond to figurative language. We remember sections of speeches because of their striking cadence and imagery. Poets are masters, most of them painstakingly trained, at cultivating such language, and politicians need some poetry in their rhetoric in order to charm, instruct, and lead the masses.

In ancient Greece the laurel was sacred to the god Apollo, patron of music and fine arts, and was used to form a wreath for poets and heroes. In the Middle Ages the Romans publicly conferred the title of laureate upon Francesco Petrarch for his classical scholarship and a long Latin epic he wrote celebrating Italy's connection to the ancient world. But Petrarch is best known for the cycle of intimate love poems he wrote in Italian to the fair-haired, blue-eyed Laura—just the kind of poetry Plato warned us about. The tradition of crowning one exemplary poet settled in England in the mid-sixteenth century, when appointed poets served for life and received a modest annuity from the royal household, sometimes in the form of wine, in exchange for verse delivered on special occasions. In a vitriolic footnote to *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* Edward Gibbon called for abolishing the practice of tethering "stipendiary poets" to the crown because it made poetry "false and venal." Thomas Gray was the first poet to turn the job down, saying he would rather serve as "rat-catcher to his Majesty." When he was seventy-three William Wordsworth tried to refuse Queen Victoria's appointment but relented after her prime minister struck out the occasional verse clause, promising "you shall have nothing required of you." Wordsworth's brief spell as laureate, however, lives on in Lord Byron's dedication to *Don Juan,* a metered screed rebuking any poet who would

sell out and sing before the king. Real poets of the Byronic order don't wear laurels.

When the job traveled to the United States, it had the good fortune to be designed by a poet, Archibald MacLeish, who was appointed by President Roosevelt and served as Librarian of Congress from 1939 to 1944. MacLeish named the post "consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress," partly to distance the job from its imperial associations. While the Librarian still selects our representative poet, the post's $35,000 stipend and the costs of running the Library's literary programs are covered by a private endowment started in 1936 and augmented from time to time with gifts from eccentric donors, like the anonymous one who delivered her $100,000 in a hatbox. In 1986 Congress voted to change the name to "poet laureate consultant in poetry" to increase the post's visibility. Robert Penn Warren, our first official poet laureate, said he had no intention of performing as a "hired applauder" or of writing "odes on the death of the President's Cat."

This brings us back to the Jefferson Building. Several poets have remarked that the post's real perk is the view from the desk in the Poetry Office. Conrad Aiken declared it "the best in Washington," overlooking "the Capitol on one side and the Supreme Court" on the other and "out to river and country too—all Washington." Aiken took full advantage of the lack of a specific job description during his tenure, drifting out for long lunches, strolling among the cherry blossoms, and holding informal, sherry-enhanced discussions with his writer friends in the poetry wing.

Most poets have taken the word "consultant" in their lengthy title to heart. They travel the county, and sometimes the world, giving readings and speaking about poetry; they answer the flood of mail addressed to "United States Poet Laureate" each year; and they devise ways to bring poetry to marginalized communities. And not even a poet can eke out a living on the laureate's stipend. Many continue to work at their day jobs, which usually means teaching, though some have also worked as doctors, executives, farmers, and editors. In the last fifteen years, laureates have harnessed new media and developed dozens of websites, connecting poetry to jazz and environmental causes, piping verse into schools and prisons. A few poets have made it clear to the Librarian that

if selected they would continue to live quietly as poets and read only at the start and finish of the Library's annual reading series. "Some of us have chosen to spend a lot of time running around the country lighting poetry bonfires," says Billy Collins, poet laureate from 2001 to 2003, but he notes that "the job can be tailored to each individual's personality."

Perhaps the best indication of a healthy distance between the seat of government and the United States poet laureate consultant in poetry is that no laureate has been asked to read at a president's inauguration since Robert Frost charmed listeners at John F. Kennedy's ceremony in 1961. Kennedy said he asked Frost to read not in order to sing a hymn of praise to his leadership but because Frost's poetry inspired respect for independent thought and the full range of human experience:

> I asked Robert Frost to come and speak at the Inauguration . . . because I felt he had something important to say to those of us who are occupied with the business of Government, that he would remind us that we are dealing with life, the hopes and fears of millions of people. . . . He has said it well in a poem called "Choose Something Like a Star," in which he speaks of the fairest star in sight and says:
>
> *It asks a little of us here.*
> *It asks of us a certain height,*
> *So when at times the mob is swayed*
> *To carry praise or blame too far,*
> *We may choose something like a star*
> *To stay our minds on and be staid.*

In other words, Kennedy tapped into the very lyrical power Plato urged his audience to resist. Every poet in this anthology writes poems that in countless ways celebrate the freedom we have to write and think and question what it means to live, work, love, mourn, and pursue happiness in America in a particular time—and all flow from Walt Whitman's great 1855 paean to democracy and individualism, "Song of Myself."

No poet who has served as poet laureate changed his or her style in order to sing to the White House. Some have been inspired by their side

view of the Capitol to write poems with a discernible political content, to protest war or to commemorate lives lost in conflict, for example. Some have used their perch as a bully pulpit from which to criticize U.S. foreign policy or cuts in funding to the arts or environmental causes. Some write purely from the imagination, set off from anything resembling external reality. All, in a chorus of distinct and memorable voices, fulfill Emerson's quiet maxim on self-reliance, "The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray." Pragmatically speaking, a poet's very vocation, whether she or he winds up laureled or not, can be seen as a declaration of independence. Stanley Kunitz (poet laureate in 2001, at the age of ninety-five) called poetry the only uncorrupted form of expression because it has no market value—the opposite of Frank Zappa's definition of art, "making something out of nothing and selling it." Perhaps this is why, given all the vexing questions of poetry's place in politics, poets are the only writers leaders want—or fear to have—by their sides. Who has ever heard of a philosopher, historian, novelist, or creative-nonfiction laureate?

The poetry collected in this volume illustrates the idiosyncratic and subjective range of modern American experience: each poem is, as Charles Simic (poet laureate from 2005 to 2006) wrote of lyric poetry, a "snapshot" in which a reader might see herself. Rather than upholding any kind of status quo, the poets in this volume testify in countless voices and styles; as such, this book is a celebration of freedom of speech in motion. But the list of laureates could reflect a fuller span of North American identity. To date there have been few poets of Native American descent and no Latino-American or Asian-American laureates. There have only been three African-American poets selected by the Librarians of Congress—not enough in a country whose traditions of personal narrative and innovative music stem from the sufferings and triumphs of the millions of people displaced and transplanted by the African slave trade.

Above all, the poets that touch down every year or two in the Library of Congress are the gatekeepers of the American idiom. Plato's student Aristotle pushed aside all questions of the just state in his treatise on poetry, which he defined as a "vehicle of expression" employing "current terms," "rare words," and "metaphors." Poets, regardless of

temperament or style, work with words. What they choose to do with those words—celebrate or excoriate the state; contemplate a great dinner or a field of flowers; address a lost love, a pinup girl, a scoundrel, a deceased parent, or a beloved child—is between them and their muses. Some poets believe that original use of language can shape the public imagination and thereby influence public values and policy; to some, the greatest expression of liberty is the ability to stand to the side and observe, dream, remember, and testify.

Whatever the case may be, the United States was conceived from the pen of the thirty-three-year-old Thomas Jefferson, entrusted with drafting the first version of the Declaration of Independence (most of which remained unaltered by older statesmen called in to polish and edit) because of his way with words. Our very sense of state emerged from the deft and memorable use of language and the compelling sound of one man's voice on the page. It *is* symbolically fitting, then, that our laureates work when they can find a quiet moment in a building named for Jefferson, set off from but surveying the nation's Capitol.

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Books like this contain multitudes. The project began with a call from Martha Kaplan, who came up with the idea for an anthology of work by the U.S. poets laureate with her client and excellent writer W. Ralph Eubanks, director of publishing at the Library of Congress.

Ralph Eubanks and his industrious, cheerful, and patient staff at the Library of Congress were a pleasure to work with. Blaine Marshall helped select the poet photographs and cleared all photo permissions. Evelyn Sinclair, to whom this book is dedicated, was a boundless source of encouragement and information; her prompt e-mails in response to each poet selection and introduction were just what I needed to keep them coming. Patricia Gray in the poetry office answered questions promptly and helped us get many of the photographs for this book. I thank her also for keeping the office of the poet laureate in order. It's impossible to overstate all the help Elizabeth Eshelman provided with her orderly systems for keeping track of our permissions process. This book would not have met our final deadline without her focus and dedication. I look forward to reading *her* writing in books someday soon.

Back in New York this project moved forward, mostly in the summers, with tremendous help from several groups of splendid interns. Lauren Lila Feinberg worked on this book from the very beginning