

**Eric McHenry, Kansas Poet Laureate:
An Interview with
Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg
and “16 Suite,” a Poem**

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg (CMG): How did you find poetry and/or did poetry find you?

Eric McHenry (EM): I've always loved talking and I've always loved music, and I think my love of poetry is sort of a marriage of those two enthusiasms. I remember being transfixed, as a kid, by a recording of an Irish musician reciting a Yeats poem, and by my Mom reciting "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and by the first rap songs that I heard, and on a hundred other occasions when someone used language musically and memorably. Poetry and I were on a collision course.

CMG: You memorize and recite a lot of poems. Could you share what aimed you this direction, and what you find this process brings you and brings to the poems?

EM: When I'm really taken by a poem, I reread it again and again, and eventually I've got it. And then I don't have to reread it; I can experience it whenever I want. The best poems are different every time I revisit them; I keep discovering new tones and colors. In graduate school I studied with Robert Pinsky, who's a big proponent of the idea that a poem isn't words on a page but words on the air, that the written poem is like sheet music waiting to be performed, and not necessarily by the poet or for an audience. A poem is a realized work of art when it's being said by someone who loves it. I like that idea a lot. I do think there's something to be said for

Philip Larkin's view: that it's nice to have the poem on the page, to hear it only in your head, to know how far you are from the end, and to see those submerged rhymes and other nuances you might miss when simply hearing the poem. But I don't think Larkin's and Pinsky's views are incompatible. Larkin was contrasting reading a poem with attending a poetry reading. But a person who memorizes and recites a poem isn't missing any of those nuances or pleasures -- he or she knows them better than anyone.

CMG: What is being poet laureate showing you so far about poetry, Kansans, our communities, and Kansas in general?

EM: In every Kansas town that I visit, I meet people who are eager to hear poetry, to hear about poetry, and to talk about poetry. Life is baffling and chaotic and at times overwhelming, no matter where you live. And so the desire for that "momentary stay against confusion" that poetry can offer is, I think, universal. Being poet laureate has also reminded me of what a beautiful state Kansas is, and how little of it can be seen from I-70 or I-35. I've been so grateful for the opportunity to get onto the smaller byways and side streets -- to find myself in Glasco and Clay Center and Iola.

CMG: Where do you feel yourself being led these days in your poetry (both what you're reading and writing)?

EM: I've been reading Robert Francis closely for the first time, and it's making me want to write a simpler, quieter line. I don't know if this will prove to be an infatuation or something more lasting, and I don't know if I'm capable of writing a simpler line in any case, but I'm eager to find out.

16 Suite

1.

Because I only kissed her
because she looked like you,
I didn't blame your sister
for spitting in my drink
at Pizza Hut. (She tried
to stir it in, but it
was clear, coherent spit
and wasn't going to sink.)
All spring and summer I'd
avoided her because
I was so sure she knew.
Then one day there I was,
expecting her to bring
me breadsticks on a tray,
and Pepsi, and to say
How was everything?

2.

No, the worst was watching Darren trip
comically on his own hightop, pitch
facelong into a concrete wheelstop, chip
his tooth and split his chin. "It's just a bitch,"

Troy said. For fifteen minutes Darren lay
there in a parking space, spat blood, and slid
his tongue through the black gap we didn't say
made him look stupider although it did.

How grateful for that one astringent truth,
how stunned by its sufficiency, we were.

Darren, you are going to wear that tooth
to school and that's a bitch and that's for sure.

3.

Interest in your face began to flag
when you got contacts. Pretty soon the kid
who thought it was hilarious to tag
buildings with your name no longer did.

Walking out of People's with a pail,
a steel brush and a five-pound bag of lye,
you were the kind of person words would fail,
in just a few more hours, to signify.

4.

You didn't find the sugar maples' turning
all that dramatic, and you didn't find
the purple 37 in the square
of pastel dots because it wasn't there.
You may have chosen not to finish learning
you were profoundly red-green colorblind
until you were 16 and didn't care,
because by then believing wasn't seeing
and every non-experience was true
to your experience of experience being
available to everyone but you.

But you experienced those leaves, those days,
as atmosphere. You raked them into piles
and to the cul de sac to supervise,
and watched the cinders climb into the haze
that overhung the city's four square miles,
and that was how they finally met your eyes,
and now, and years from now, the tang and sting
of maple leafsmoke on November air,
or in your clothes, or in the clothes or hair

of someone passing will retrieve a pang
so imprecise it's briefly everything.

Eric McHenry's most recent book of poetry is *Odd Evening*. Others include *Potscrubber Lullabies*, which received the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, and *Mommy Daddy Evan Sage*, a collection of children's poems illustrated by Nicholas Garland. He lives in Lawrence, Kansas, with his wife and two children and teaches creative writing at Washburn University. He is the poet laureate of Kansas for 2015–2017.