
An Interview with Kansas Poet Laureate Wyatt Townley

When Governor Sam Brownback dissolved the Kansas Arts Commission, it seemed that Kansas would no longer have a Poet Laureate. But last spring, the Kansas Humanities Council took over direction of the state's poet laureate program, and named Wyatt Townley the 2013-2015 Kansas Poet Laureate. The theme of Ms. Townley's laureateship is "coming home to poetry." She visits communities around Kansas giving public readings, talks, and discussions, free of charge, to nonprofit organizations. Townley is a widely published, nationally known poet and a fourth-generation Kansan. More information about her can be found at www.wyatttownley.com.

The following is an e-mail interview in which Townley explores some of this issue's themes, including the importance of art and humanities education in our state.

This issue's theme is education and the arts. The theme is timely because the State, through the budget, is separating the two. At the same time that Kansas educators are required to teach students 21st-century skills, the State is cutting art funding and art-education programs. The rationale for these cuts is that art is not relevant to the skill set students must develop to succeed in today's economy.

Is this true? Do you believe that art is a necessary part of our school curriculum? How do students benefit from studying and making art?

Is art a necessary part of the curriculum? This is like asking if breathing is a necessary part of being human. The arts and the humanities are essential, not extracurricular, to the activity of education. They're not a spice to sprinkle on food to make it taste better. They are the food itself, and they nourish every part of the student.

The act of creation—whether mixing a color of paint or finding a note on the violin—teaches us how to see, how to listen, how to take risks, how to persevere through difficulty. In the little is the big. Over time, this discipline permeates every aspect of life, expanding our humanity and our natural curiosity.

The curious mind is a pioneer in all things. If education is reduced to a process of acquiring information, curiosity will eventually be replaced with a quest to be "right." The artistic process is one of inquiry, of moving from the known into

the unknown, spurring creativity in any pursuit, be it science, engineering, or the next image in a poem.

A good advocate for the cause is the relatively new Kansas Alliance for the Arts in Education, where I serve on the board [www.ksallianceforarts.org].

If you were speaking to a group of students, how would you spark their interest in the arts? in writing? in poetry?

I might start with a question. How many have read something, or seen a movie, or heard a piece of music that changed their life? What was it, and how did it change them?

What suggestions do you have for teachers to incorporate the arts into their classrooms?

First, I admire teachers' commitment to their work, navigating the front edge of the educational wave. Teachers have so much to do these days. Art isn't something to do. It doesn't live in a drawer, separate from the rest of the curriculum, to be pulled out for special occasions. Art is something to recognize, and it's everywhere around us at all times, in the geometry of everything we see and the mathematical symmetry of music, dance, and nature—as Shakespeare put it, “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones...” It's a matter of expanding point-of-view.

If you were speaking to political and community representatives, how would you encourage them to invest in arts education?

I'd say to them that if education were a loaf of bread, art is the leaven, making it rise. It expands the mind and rouses the curiosity, without which no real education can occur. As an example, a singer finds a high note by rooting it *downward*. What a discovery! A dancer gets higher in the air by going *down* before pushing up. What a paradox! It's the same in basketball—the harder you push the ball down, the higher it bounces. Turns out—duh—it's physics! Such connections abound, and they ripple out into more inquiries and insights, making for a smarter, more creative and productive workforce.

Data supports this—students who participate in the arts demonstrate improved academic performance, lower dropout rates, higher SAT scores, and are three times more likely to graduate from college. US employers rank creativity as a top concern when hiring, yet 85% of those employers can't find the creative applicants they seek.

And for any adults who missed out on the arts, I would say, we're never too

old (and it's never too late) to start exploring an area that interests or intrigues us. Art isn't for the young; it is the fountain of youth!

What has technology done to or for poetry? Describe your Internet presence. How does it fit into your writing life?

Technology has evolved over centuries, from the invention of moveable type to books in the ether. The Web may help to spread the word, but like the wind it spreads both trash and treasure. There are some wonderful applications (like www.motionpoems.com that sets contemporary poetry graphically into motion), but there are at least as many downsides, since screen time usurps reading time for many. Considering the decline in literacy, we may inadvertently be replacing word with image.

My internet presence has recently expanded with the laureateship. After years of resistance, I have joined Facebook because I am told it will help me communicate with fellow poets and “word people” more easily ([facebook.com/WyattTownley.PoetLaureate](https://www.facebook.com/WyattTownley.PoetLaureate)). And I have a windy website (www.WyattTownley.com) that's worth a visit.

What should poetry do with or about technology that it has not yet done?

Poetry, a deeper kind of literacy, does not yet translate elegantly onto the small screen. For starters, the translation needs to protect both the enjambment and legibility, not sacrificing one to the other. Type needs to be big enough to read while simultaneously preserving linebreaks. The look of a poem on the page is as important as its sound. It's not just text.

You ask about technology, but I feel obligated to mention that the act of writing is a world apart from the technology that spreads the word on the surface. The work of poetry is done below the visible tip of the iceberg, way below the water line, where it's cold and dark. Nobody's been down there before, including the poet, who's hoping just to come back with something before the air supply runs out.

The theme of your laureateship is “coming home to poetry.” Explain what this means. How will it be reflected in the text of your poems? How will it be reflected in your daily activities as laureate? How will it involve the communities of Kansas?

I can't talk about the Laureateship without first thanking the Kansas Humanities Council, whose support has re-established this position. It's a win-win for our state.

As Poet Laureate, I see my mission as two-fold: bringing people home to poetry and bringing poetry home to people. As for the first part, I'll be traveling around the state with a program called "Coming Home to Poetry." What is "home," what is poetry, and how do they intersect? I wonder when and why some of us left poetry behind, and will invite people to join the discussion, wander their bookshelves, crack a book, and find their way back to it. Poetry really can save lives. But only if we avail ourselves of its power to comfort and to heal.

As for the second part, I'll be initiating a project called "HomeWords" that explores the notion of "home" from micro to macro: body, house, land, and sky. Still in development, "HomeWords" will evolve into a syndicated poetry column to appear in newspapers and other venues statewide. We'll be exploring big ideas using a very small poem: the American Cinquain. I hope that people across the state will put pen to paper, and that teachers will encourage their students to participate. Learn more at www.kansashumanities.org/programs/poet-laureate-of-kansas.

You have published collections of poetry and books on yoga and dance. How have these four forms of expression (books of verse, books of prose, yoga, and dance) influenced each other?

Probably the connective tissue is motion. Motion is of course key to yoga and dance (poetry in motion), and certainly it is fundamental to the work of the writer: getting words, whether poetry or prose, off the page and into the reader. Great writing is kinetic.

What would you say to a student who wants to be a poet?

Don't tell your parents! Just kidding. If you must be a poet, you will be a poet. Live big, read everything, discern what is great, and follow what speaks to you. Trust the path. It will lead you where you need to go.

Striptease

Wyatt Townley

It takes a lifetime
to shed our skin.
Take a lesson:

The snake slides out
the maple shakes off its propellers
and hair by hair we follow

like Hansel and Gretel
dropping what we can.
The cicada sings

only after leaving
its shell on the tree
just as the poem

unwinds down the page
losing its earrings,
its shoes on the stairs.

The Poem

Wyatt Townley

waits on your pillow
and in your shoes each morning.
Behind the drapes you draw,
it's on the empty swingset
that flanks the frozen creek.
It's the towel that dries your face.

It follows you around the house
like a pull-toy, from stove to chair
and out to the mailbox where
nothing has arrived. It bumps
up every blessed stair. It's on
the phone, which is for you.

It's in the coffee you drink
and the ink you arrange
on the page, in the wood before
the paper, the earth that clutched
the tree that grew to fill a sky
where snow falls onto shapes of things

you once made, but can't get
your arms around anymore,
where it also is. There is nowhere
it hasn't got to, in the unsold
seats and the space between tables
where words mix like smoke,

between this breath and the next,
in the blood that runs around the one
block of the body again and again
and keeps coming back to knock
at the door where someone hands you
an envelope that is also it, saying yes, yes.

The Fountain

Wyatt Townley

for RT

The fountain rises from a deeper place
and thrusts its liquid spear into the air
then turns to fall with death-defying grace.

But when we fall, we struggle to save face
and make our way with ever greater care.
The fountain rises from a deeper place.

Like the gymnast hurtling into space
who wraps around the trapeze in mid-air
then turns to fall with death-defying grace,

the falling and the rising interlace.
It's fear that holds us back from going there.
The fountain rises from a deeper place.

It's only life. Summer will replace
what Spring has cost. The tree will drop its pear
then turn in Fall with death-defying grace.

And so we fall into a hard embrace
and push our hips together in a prayer.
The fountain rises from a deeper place
then turns to fall with death-defying Grace.

Tracks

Wyatt Townley

Follow the children who follow the creek.
Their bright clothes fold into trees

and they're gone. How you've grown —
too slow to keep up, too dogged

to turn back. Forget the list in your pocket.
See what you've missed. Deep in the woods

the wind erases the way you came. All paths
lead here. Beside you the tracks of a wild turkey,

and earlier, a raccoon retracing its steps.
There a deer paused, perfect disguise,

and here we all are, leaving ourselves
behind. We fold into trees and are gone.

—Poems from *The Afterlives of Trees* (Woodley Press, 2011).