

## HomeWords by Wyatt Townley

I am honored and humbled (and delighted!) to be asked to serve as the new Poet Laureate of Kansas. It's fitting that the laureateship has found its way home to the Kansas Humanities Council, a natural habitat.

The notion of "home" is a longheld Kansas value. Consider our state song, "Home on the Range," or Dorothy's mantra at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, "There's no place like home." As Poet Laureate, I'd like to start a conversation around the state about coming home to poetry.

Poetry is a place we can return to in all kinds of weather, with its innate power to heal and comfort, transform and inspire. Its porchlight is always on.

***The poem waits on your pillow  
and in your shoes each morning.***

—from "The Poem" in *The Afterlives of Trees*  
by Wyatt Townley

But we're late, we're busy, we're watching TV. Some of us are afraid of poetry, or uncomfortable with it. Maybe we think we don't know what it means. But a poem isn't a puzzle to solve or a code to break. Its value is not what it *means*, but what it *does*.

What *does* a poem *do*? It moves us. It quickens us. It stirs us up. It calms us down. It makes us nod our head, or shake it. William Carlos Williams said, "It's difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there."

Poetry addresses important things, sublime things, difficult things, and enables us to explore them. In Libya, an enemy of Gadhafi was kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured, but he

**Wyatt Townley**

found comfort in reciting poems to fellow prisoners—declaring that with poetry, he carried "his house in his chest." Poetry became his mobile home. That's part of its essential beauty—its portability.

It can also be fun. The home of poetry is big enough to encompass not only the deepest and the highest ground, but also, the playground. Think "Jabberwocky," Mother Goose, "The Emperor of Ice Cream." When I go into schools, I take pencils engraved with: *The page is a playground*. Kids (not to mention professional writers!) can feel intimidated by the blank page or screen. So let's have recess...let's run, fall, galumph—in other words, *play*.

***Behind the last fear  
is an empty swing.***

—from "The Swing" in *The Breathing Field*  
by Wyatt Townley

Some of us left poetry back in childhood, like a pair of shoes we've outgrown. If you haven't cracked a book of poems recently, turn around. Coming home may just be a matter of walking back through Eliot's "unknown, remembered gate":

***...And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.***

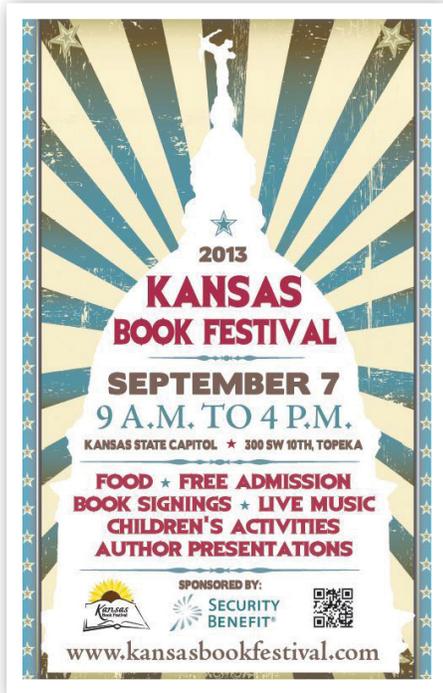
—from *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot



Photo by Terry Weckbaugh

**W**yatt Townley of Shawnee Mission is the 2013-2015 Poet Laureate of Kansas. Wyatt is a widely published, nationally known poet and a fourth-generation Kansan. Her work has been featured on National Public Radio's *The Writer's Almanac* with Garrison Keillor, in US Poet Laureate Emeritus Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry* column, and published in journals ranging from *The Paris Review* to *Newsweek*. She has published three collections of poetry: *The Breathing Field* (Little Brown), *Perfectly Normal* (The Smith), and *The Afterlives of Trees* (Woodley Press), a Kansas Notable Book and winner of the Nelson Poetry Book Award.

# Come Home to Poet Laureate Events in Kansas



Now through 2015, Poet Laureate of Kansas Wyatt Townley is presenting readings and discussions about poetry in communities across the state. On September 7, 2013, Wyatt will be a part of the Kansas Book Festival on the grounds of the State Capitol in Topeka. For an up-to-date listing of Poet Laureate of Kansas events, visit [www.kansashumanities.org/events-calendar](http://www.kansashumanities.org/events-calendar).

Poet Laureate of Kansas Wyatt Townley is available free-of-charge for public readings, presentations, and discussions about poetry at Kansas nonprofit organizations (as funding allows). For more information, visit [www.kansashumanities.org/programs](http://www.kansashumanities.org/programs) or contact Leslie Von Holten, program officer, at [leslie@kansashumanities.org](mailto:leslie@kansashumanities.org) or (785) 357-0359.

## Thank You

Thank you to the over 100 Friends of the Humanities whose contributions have helped KHC match the \$10,000 gift from Colby businessman Lon Frahm in support of KHC's new Poet Laureate of Kansas program. A complete list of donors is available at [www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org).

KHC is still \$600 short of our fundraising goal. Will you help? Donations in any amount are appreciated. Your donation to the Kansas Humanities Council in support of the Poet Laureate of Kansas program will make Poet Laureate of Kansas events available to communities statewide.

Visit [www.kansashumanities.org](http://www.kansashumanities.org) for details or call Julie Mulvihill at (785) 357-0359.

## In Memoriam

This issue of *Humanities* is dedicated to the memory of V. James (Jim) Sherer, KHC Board Member from Dodge City, who passed away May 21, 2013. "Jim's strong commitment to his community, his enthusiasm for Kansas history, and his infectious personality made him an outstanding member of the KHC board," shared Gene Merry, chair of KHC's Board of Directors. "He will be deeply missed."



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The Kansas Humanities Council promotes the understanding of the history, traditions, and ideas that shape our lives and strengthen our communities.

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