



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA POETRY CENTER: *Celebrating 50 Years*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
**POETRY CENTER**

### THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA POETRY CENTER: *Celebrating 50 Years*

Edited by Gail Browne and Rodney Phillips

Designed by Ellen McMahon and Kelly Leslie

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Over the past fifty years, the following individuals have served as directors and acting directors of the Poetry Center: A. Laurence Muir, LaVerne Harrell Clark, Richard Shelton, Mary Louise Robins, John Weston, Robert Longoni, Lois Shelton, Alison Hawthorne Deming, Mark Wunderlich, Jim Paul, Frances Sjoberg, and Gail Browne.



A MEMOIR OF THE POETRY CENTER LOOKING BACK FROM 1984

*LaVerne Harrell Clark*

THE FIRST NEWS I HAD OF THE POETRY CENTER reached me in Mexico in November, 1960, while L. D. and I were traveling there on a William Bayard Cutting Fellowship from Columbia University. He was gathering material for his dissertation on D. H. Lawrence, to which I was adding photographs of Lawrence places as we went. In a letter waiting for me in Monterrey, Laurence Muir, incoming head of the English Department at Arizona, wrote that Ruth Walgreen Stephan had endowed a Poetry Center at the University, that it had already been dedicated by Robert Frost, accompanied on his visit by William Meredith, with Ray Manley present and taking photographs. It all sounded most exciting, and the best part of it was that Larry was now offering me the position of directing this great new enterprise. I wrote back eager to accept, providing only that when we came home I be given time to finish my M.A. thesis on Navajo and Apache horse mythology, which had already been delayed by our Mexico expedition. Let me add here that it was a heady time all around for L. D. and me. The thesis so much on my mind just then became when finished my first book (*They Sang for Horses*, University of Arizona Press, 1966). L. D. at that moment in Mexico was waiting for copies of his first novel to arrive from New York (*The Dove Tree*, Doubleday, 1961), and his Mexican research became not only the dissertation for his Columbia Ph.D. in 1963, but also his second book (*Dark Night of the Body*, University of Texas Press, 1964).

Ruth Stephan's inspiration in founding the Center was to create an institution where poetry, as well as other creative writing, might be, in her words, "maintained and cherished." She donated for this purpose a small cottage on Highland Avenue that became known as the Poets Cottage, with "The fieries and the snuffies" from the old cowboy ballad inscribed over the doorway. Under the endowment the University also acquired a larger house next door, which was promptly remodeled to serve as our headquarters, as it still does. In addition to I do not know how much in financial endowment, Ruth also donated to establish the library some five hundred volumes of poetry and a trunkful of priceless literary journals. Though her name was later dropped from the Center, at her request, I am often touched by the memory of her friendship and her kindness to L. D. and me in those early years, and by her love then of Tucson and the original Poetry Center cottage, where in years just previous she had written her novels *My Crown*, *My Love* and *The Flight*, and some memorable poetry of her own.

In accepting Ruth's gift, the University had agreed to establish a board to choose and set the fees for poets who would visit the campus to hold seminars and classes, and give public readings, so that not only the University but the whole surrounding community might benefit. The early make-up of that governing body included Larry Muir, Robert Nugent, Larry Powell, Dorothy Fuller and Barney Childs, a poet and instructor in the English

During the 1950s, poet and novelist **Ruth Stephan** rented a cottage on Highland Avenue. It was here she wrote many of her books, including two novels based on the life of Queen Christina of Sweden. In 1960, she gave that cottage to the University of Arizona to found the Poetry Center, along with a core library collection of several hundred books of poetry.



The Poetry Center's first home was located at 1074 N. Highland Ave. **Ruth Stephan** also donated the house next door, 1086 N. Highland. The first house became the cottage for visiting writers and the second house became the library.

Photos: 1,7, LaVerne Harell Clark; 2 Tom Jensen; 3,4,5 Peter Balážstro; 6, Unknoün

*Stanley Kunitz*



The eminent poet **Robert Frost** joined **Ruth Stephan** in dedicating the new Poetry Center on November 17, 1960. Both Frost and Stephan were given University of Arizona 75th Anniversary Medallions.



The inaugural writer in the Poetry Center's Visiting Poets and Writers Reading Series was **Stanley Kunitz**, who read on February 14, 1962. On March 4 he wrote a gracious thank-you letter to LaVerne.

Department, and student members besides. They all worked hard and with notable perception to fulfill the purpose of their founding, as I know the Board still does.

Larry Muir readily consented to my delay in taking over the Center, and all went as planned. At length, on the second day of January, 1962, I opened the doors of the empty house on the corner of Highland and Speedway demanding to be filled. The only furniture about was a new telephone and an old and splintery desk on which I snagged my hose time and again as I reached over to make a phone call. I had cold feet about what to do to initiate the Center and had gone to Larry Muir for advice. About all I got from him was what became his standard answer: "Just play it by ear." This was counsel that cut both ways, I can say, the best being the freedom to make my own decisions, but coupled with the responsibility, too, of instilling in a rodeo-oriented town a fondness for poetry and the willingness to support an institution dedicated to promoting it.

Play it by ear we did, and what a pleasure it is now to look back after so long a time, when we anticipate celebrating next year the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Center's founding, and to unearth fond memories of how we—L. D. and I and a host of others—laid the groundwork for so wonderful a cultural center.

One of my prime worries from the beginning was what sort of person Ruth Stephan would turn out to be. I went on being nervous about meeting her, while Larry Muir kept assuring me that we'd be compatible. At last, on the fateful morning, I rushed over to my hairstylist and made my appeal, "Louis, do me up special today. I'm about to meet the grand personage who endowed the Poetry Center." Louis was curious, naturally, and as he worked he plied me with questions about my new job. I spouted answer after answer, too many: about ideas running through my head on getting started, about how they might fare with the Board, bringing in my fear, of all things, that our benefactress might be precise and demanding, like types I had worked with at New York publishers. Or else Louis may even have pictured from my diatribe a portly dowager wearing a pince-nez and balancing a Browning tea-cup.

I did not know it at the moment but Larry Muir was waiting to take me over to the Poetry Cottage immediately to meet Ruth. When we arrived, I was highly impressed and pleased to find myself facing a slim and youthful woman with natural grayish-blond hair: graceful, pretty and warm. She put me at my ease at once, and we found plenty to talk about, not so much the Center, that day, as our mutual interest in Native American culture. I had my preoccupation with Navajo and Apache horse lore and she her project of rendering into English, with the aid of a native speaker, the songs and tales of the Quechua Indians of Peru, a book already published, not long before,

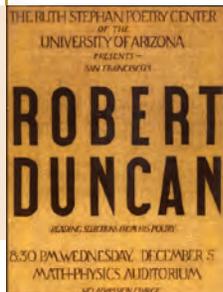
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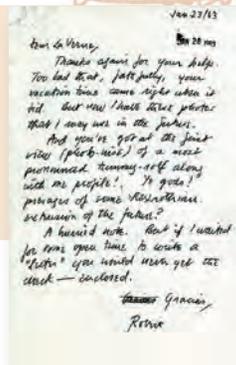
**1**  
Kenneth Rexroth read on March 16, 1962, continuing the Poetry Center's new tradition of inviting well-known authors to read their work and meet with students from the English Department.

In December 1962, Robert Duncan developed a nice rapport with LaVerne Harrell Clark, who took portraits of most of the visiting poets in the 1960s. He wrote to thank LaVerne for sending copies of the photos.

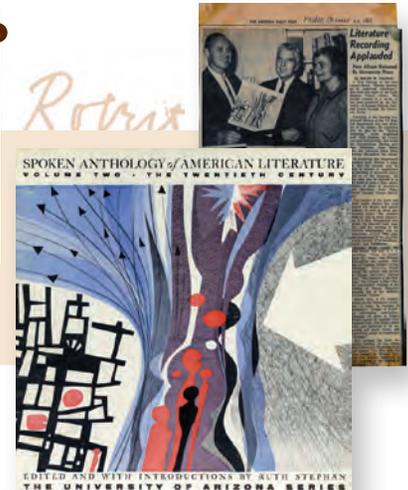


*Thanks again for your help.*

**2**  
LaVerne Harrell Clark and Ruth Stephan at the Poetry Center in May of 1963.



**3**  
From 1963 to 1965, Ruth Stephan edited and Richard Shelton directed a two-volume set of audio recordings titled *The Spoken Anthology of American Literature*. The collection included works by important writers (including prose writers) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



Photos: 1, Jack Sheaffer; 2, LaVerne Harell Clark; 3, Unknown

as *The Singing Mountaineers* (University of Texas Press, 1957). We laughed a lot that morning and generally enjoyed ourselves. It was abundantly evident, when we parted, that she approved of me and that we would get on well together.

But only imagine. As Ruth complimented my hair-do and inquired offhand about my stylist, I said, "Oh yes, Louis Bertocci. He's very good, and he's close by, just over on the Square."

"I know," she said. "And he has a good assistant, too. I was there for a shampoo earlier this morning."

I blushed, I know, and I fled as soon as possible, for it was plain from her tone of voice, and her knowing yet understanding amusement, that she must have been in a booth next to mine at Louis' while I was there, and had heard every word of my chatter to him.

That was enough to smooth over the awkwardness. We both understood and we never brought up the incident again. We went on to become the best of friends, and remained so until Ruth's untimely death in 1974.

During my early days of shouldering the burdens of the Poetry Center, I had little help, none of it paid except for Lucy Finley, an elderly black woman retained as our housekeeper, mainly because she had worked for Ruth for

years. A little later the budget was stretched to bring in a part-time assistant for the library, and volunteers showed up and stayed, among them Heloise Wilson, wife of Keith Wilson, and Richard Shelton, who was at that time still a graduate student in literature.

To begin with, there was furniture to buy to help bring that empty space alive, down to the file cabinets soon to be needed to house our expected-to-be-growing records, and chairs for our anticipated-to-be-swelling audience, bookcases to buy or build, which meant university requisitioning with its paperwork and headaches. We had a few difficulties peculiar to ourselves, too, by which we were sometimes taken aback. Our like had never existed on the campus before, which sometimes led to confusion. For example, one day as I was waiting for office supplies to arrive, I learned by phone that they had been sent to Poultry Sciences. "Poultry Center" made sense to some puzzled shipping clerk, whereas no one had ever heard of a center for poetry. We got calls now and then from people mistakenly connected with us as a Portrait Center, besides, and Lucy told me she had a hard time getting across to her friends just where it was she worked: they could hardly understand how an oddity like a "Poetry Center" was ever meant to fall into the nature of things. It did take a while to solve these dilemmas that kept popping up from time to time. We had one over some donated books, too. Ada McCormick, who loved doing good wherever she found an opening, sponsored back then a Little



On December 4, 1963, Robert Creeley read his poetry to an overflow crowd at the Physics-Math Auditorium.

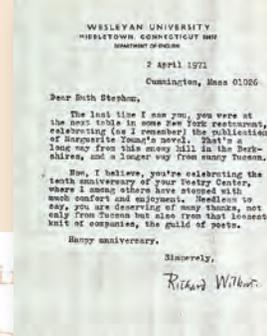


Noted poet Richard Wilbur read for the Poetry Center in March 1964. The wrought-iron legend "The Fieries and the Snuffies" has adorned every incarnation of the Poet's Cottage. The letter, written in 1971, congratulates Ruth Stephan on the 10th Anniversary of the Poetry Center.



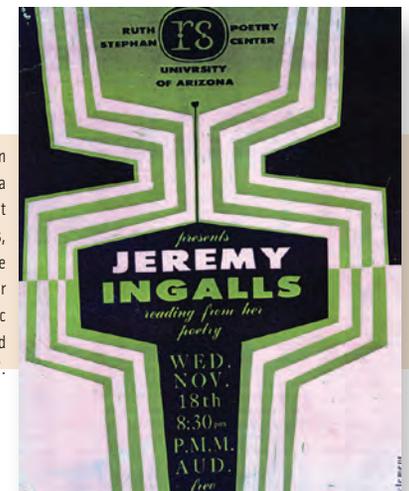
Photos: 1, 2, LaVerne Harrell Clark

Dear Ruth Stephan,



Sincerely,  
Richard Wilbur.

Local poet Jeremy Ingalls read on November 18, 1964. After a distinguished teaching career at Rockford College in Illinois, Ingalls retired to Tucson, where she spent the last 40 years of her life. Her life's work was the epic poem *Tahl*. Kore Press published her *Selected Poems* in 2007.



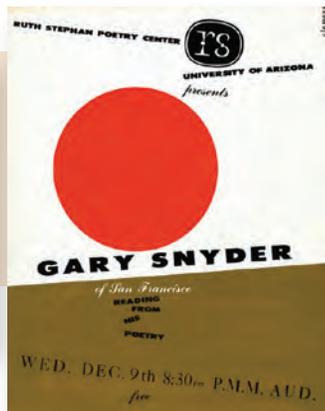
Chapel of All Nations in a house just south of the Poets Cottage. She sent us some boxes of books one day, a gift to the Center, she said. On glancing through them and discovering they were all books on religion, I put them aside until I could consult Ruth, for Ada was a good friend of hers. It turned out that the books weren't meant for us at all, but for the Jewish Center.

So how then, given our strangeness in the eyes of the world, were we to attract an audience? Our first visiting poet was Stanley Kunitz, and though he was well known and highly acclaimed, the local newspapers seemed never to have heard of him, and Lucy was puzzled about at least one seeming discrepancy: "Why isn't this man a doctor?" she wanted to know. "Everybody else around here is."

All in all, though, I was not wholly at a loss as to what to do about spreading our name. I had been well-grounded in writing press releases and aggressively promoting them since my days on the college newspaper. I did now have to go through the U of A news bureau, since officially all University publicity had to go forth into the world through them. I knew how to write up releases well-tuned for their sort, which in the end they did me the honor of tampering with very little. And since I saw to it that these releases were distributed far and wide, they did stir up a good bit of favorable attention.

But something more was necessary, and short of preaching on street corners, the only immediate recourse that came to mind was posters. L. D. and I went at this with verve and determination. With help from artists on campus and off, we got up an attractive, I would say striking, poster for Stanley Kunitz, and we set out unblushingly on what was to become standard practice: we put up that poster all over town, driving around sometimes from opening to closing business hours, sometimes into the evening. We hung our pride and joy on the wall or in the window of any office or store or public building where anyone would listen to us, not just in such obvious places as libraries and bookstores, but supermarkets, hardware stores, clothing stores, restaurants, even a real estate office or two. Most of the people who staffed these concerns welcomed or at least tolerated us, just for the novelty of the thing sometimes, and I suppose also taking the view that if we could do them little good, at least we brought no harm. There were polite refusals now and then, and an occasional bit of ridicule, but these were rare and on the whole a modicum of curiosity was aroused in several quarters about this new animal in town. Comments spread and some of them got back to us, and they were in the main favorable. I do remember two embarrassments, both taking place, as I recall, during the visits of poets later on. One faculty member, unidentified, thought it inappropriate when he saw one of our posters hanging above the vegetable counter in a supermarket. I was mightily pleased to have it there myself. Why should lettuce-lovers not love verse as well? The other setback

Poet, essayist, and environmental activist **Gary Snyder** read for the Poetry Center in **1964** and **1969**, and then decades later, in **2010**.



Photos: 1,2, *LaVerne Harrell Clark*



**May Swenson's** witty poems and winning personality made her a crowd favorite. She first read for the Poetry Center on February 24, 1964.



I never dared mention to Ruth. Once we were turned down on hanging the likeness of one of our poets in a Walgreen drugstore.

Stanley's visit came off well, better than we had dared expect, partly because of a simple curiosity among the general public over this novelty. The English Department gave full support, and so did a fair portion of the rest of the University faculty. One unexpected drawback hurt perhaps as much as it helped. It made some people uncomfortable—it made me uncomfortable—that we had in spite of all so many empty seats, that is, about half the house, but that was because of the location. The reading came off in the Liberal Arts Auditorium, which seats around 600. But half a house was good fortune enough for a debut. Ruth was not in Tucson at the time, but important members of the University administration came to the program and I heard they went away impressed.

Now Lucy was highly protective of Ruth. I'm sure because in their years together, she had dealt with gold-digging suitors more than once. Let me just say here that Ruth hated to be reminded that she was a rich woman, though the evidence was always before one's eyes in her maiden name. She preferred to be thought of above all as a poet and a novelist.

Our next visiting poet was Kenneth Rexroth, whom the papers played up as controversial, helping to fill three-fourths of the auditorium this time. And

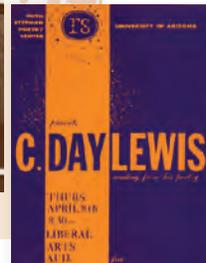
some of the audience must have felt they had their money's worth when Rexroth recited "Making Love on Malibu Beach." To be sure we had much more explicit poems than that delivered from the stage as time went on, and let me mention that although this was one of my original fears, we were never hampered in those early days when it was still to be dreaded that we might be subject to censorship. The closest we came to that, I suppose, was something that happened after I left the Center. A reporter from *The Arizona Republic* seemed to be out to impose his own brand of censorship when he had words with Allen Ginsberg on the steps of the Poetry Center during a press conference. National publicity came of that, but luckily it was the reporter who got trounced for insulting Ginsberg, and whatever fell our lot from the episode could only have been a little to the good.

Now Lucy mistrusted Rexroth from the first. Getting off on the wrong foot, at the hotel where he stayed because Ruth was in town and occupying the cottage, he checked in with a battered suitcase held together by an old belt. This did not live up to Lucy's expectations of a visiting poet. But then she and I were both soon in for a greater worry. We knew that Rexroth and Ruth were long-time friends; he had insisted on coming to visit when she was in Tucson. She had been divorced from her second husband, John Stephan, for over a year now, and it became clear to us, through Lucy's diplomatic indirection, that Rexroth meant to ask Ruth to marry him and she intended to turn him

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Irish poet **Cecil Day Lewis**, who read for the Poetry Center on April 8, 1965, was Great Britain's Poet Laureate from 1968 until his death in 1972.

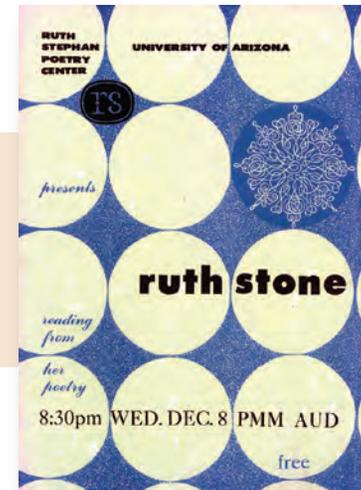


Photos: 1, 2, 3, *LaVerne Harrell Clark*

**Archibald MacLeish** was a poet, playwright, and essayist who also served as Librarian of Congress. His extremely well-attended reading for the Poetry Center took place November 2, 1965.

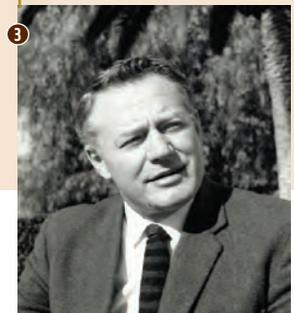


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**Ruth Stone** read for the Poetry Center on December 8, 1965.

**Robert Bly** read at the Poetry Center early in his career as a poet, on November 30, 1966.



down. Since we did not know how he would take her rejection, we urged her not to deliver the definite “No” until after the reading. She complied, and although we heard nothing of Rexroth’s reaction, all the same he checked out of the hotel early the next morning and I had to mail his check to San Francisco. As the years passed, however, I came to see how sincere Rexroth was in his love and loyalty for Ruth. He contributed a fine appraisal of her work in her *Various Poems* volume and wrote some moving poems in her memory after her death.

While I am not aware of any other suitor of Ruth’s who appeared on our series, and only heard about her social life sparsely now and then, I remember that she dated Adlai Stevenson for a while during the days when he was still much in the public eye, though he had already lost in the race for President. Many of us still hoped that he would make a comeback and win, and with that we entertained fond dreams of one day seeing Ruth in Washington as First Lady.

So we went on diligently with our poster campaigns to light the way for our visiting poets. When Phyllis Gibbs later came to work as my assistant, I had her and her father out distributing hither and yon. We even joked about extending our range as far as Eloy, but we never actually did that.

But now obviously we needed a mailing list. We maneuvered and scrounged for that. Most of the Liberal Arts faculty ended up on it, as well as any set

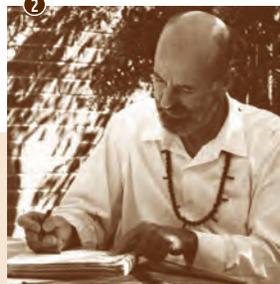
of people in Tucson of intellectual or artistic bent. I tried hard also, with fair success, to gather the names and addresses of people in the audience at every reading by asking them to sign a sheet. And once I had hold of a name I made it a rule never to delete it or to give up on any likely candidate. Phyllis and I made it a standing joke: “Never give up on a name unless you know that person is permanently dead.” She came to me one day with “Sorry to bother you, LaVerne, but we have a note here from a man who says his wife passed away two years ago. Do you think that makes her permanently dead?”

We divided the list, also, according to information we happened to pick up about anyone who had ever come to a reading and signed our attendance sheet. We soon, in addition to a good many regulars, kept supplementary lists for CF#1, CF#2 and CF#3: for Chair-Filler Occasional, Chair-Filler Rare, and Chair-Filler Almost-Never. But then, as I said before about the deceased, we were a long time in giving up on anybody.

One idea I felt strongly about and presented to the Board soon after the Center opened was to use my talents as a photographer, an avocation which I had gone on with since college days, to take informal portraits of all the visiting poets and hang them on the walls of the Center, eventually to build a collection of the most important poets of our day. The Board was happy to support this scheme. And so it began, and others continued it after me: you can see the ongoing results on display anytime you visit the Center. The

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**Louise Bogan** came to the Poetry Center in February 1967, at the height of her career as a poet. Bogan was the poetry reviewer for *The New Yorker* for over 30 years.



**Lawrence Ferlinghetti**, founder of City Lights Bookstore, read at the Poetry Center on October 11, 1967.



**Denise Levertov**  
**Woman Poet Will Read Works Here**

Denise Levertov, one of the finest poets of our time and one of America's leading women poets, will read at the Poetry Center on October 11, 1967. She is the author of several books of poetry, including *When the Mind Begins to Read* and *The World of the Poet*. She has been a frequent visitor to the Poetry Center and has read her work at many of our readings. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Academy of Arts. She is also a member of the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a member of the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a member of the National Endowment for the Arts.

**Denise Levertov** was one of the Poetry Center's favorite poets, reading four times (1967, 1973, 1984, and 1992).

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rewards of this photographing project extended for me beyond the satisfaction of the practice itself. The portraits I took over several years, both when I was the director and afterwards, went to make up the bulk of my anthology *The Face of Poetry*, in which I attempted to capture in their verse and in my portraits the spirit of the best poets of the 1960s and 1970s.

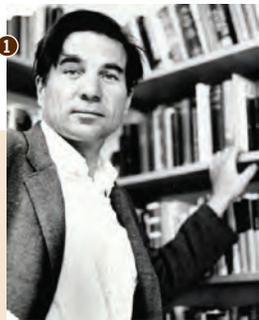
I can truly say, looking back now over nearly a quarter-century, that managing the Poetry Center for those years I was there made up one of the best periods of my life, both professionally and personally, with happy recollections in addition of the time after I left there to devote my efforts to my own work, for I have always maintained a close connection with the Center.

I must not forget, either, the marvelous social life that went along with all else back then. I remember glowingly the happy parties we arranged for the visiting poets, sometimes at our house—L. D. and I always loved entertaining—and sometimes at Larry and Elizabeth Muir's or another faculty member's residence. I remember with pride and pleasure the buoyancy that lifted our spirits when we learned that John Ciardi or Robert Creeley or Gary Snyder or Louise Bogan or C. Day Lewis or Richard Eberhart or David Ignatow was coming to town. But as for the specific programs, if I had to choose one as prominent over all the rest, it would be Archibald MacLeish's appearance. By the time he came, in 1965, everything could be expected to run smoothly, and it did. We booked the main auditorium, on a gamble, which seated over

two thousand people. We had a full house, and I believe even a few standees. MacLeish was a superb reader, and the breathless attention of the audience during the whole performance was witness to what I will say was the best poetry reading I have ever attended, and I know that other people felt the same way.

I know that when I gave up direction of the Center, I left it in capable and dedicated hands. It remains in superlative condition today, as I often have occasion to observe close at hand, and I fully trust that it will continue in that state of near perfection for a long time to come.

*A longer version of this 1984 essay was written by LaVerne Harrell Clark for the Poetry Center's 25th Anniversary. L. D. Clark, LaVerne's husband, provided this edited version for our book. LaVerne passed way in her home town of Smithville, Texas, in February 2008.*

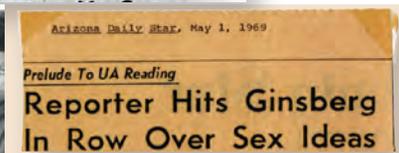


**Galway Kinnell** first read for the Poetry Center on March 20, 1968 (followed by appearances in 1970, 1977, and 1992). He was highly involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

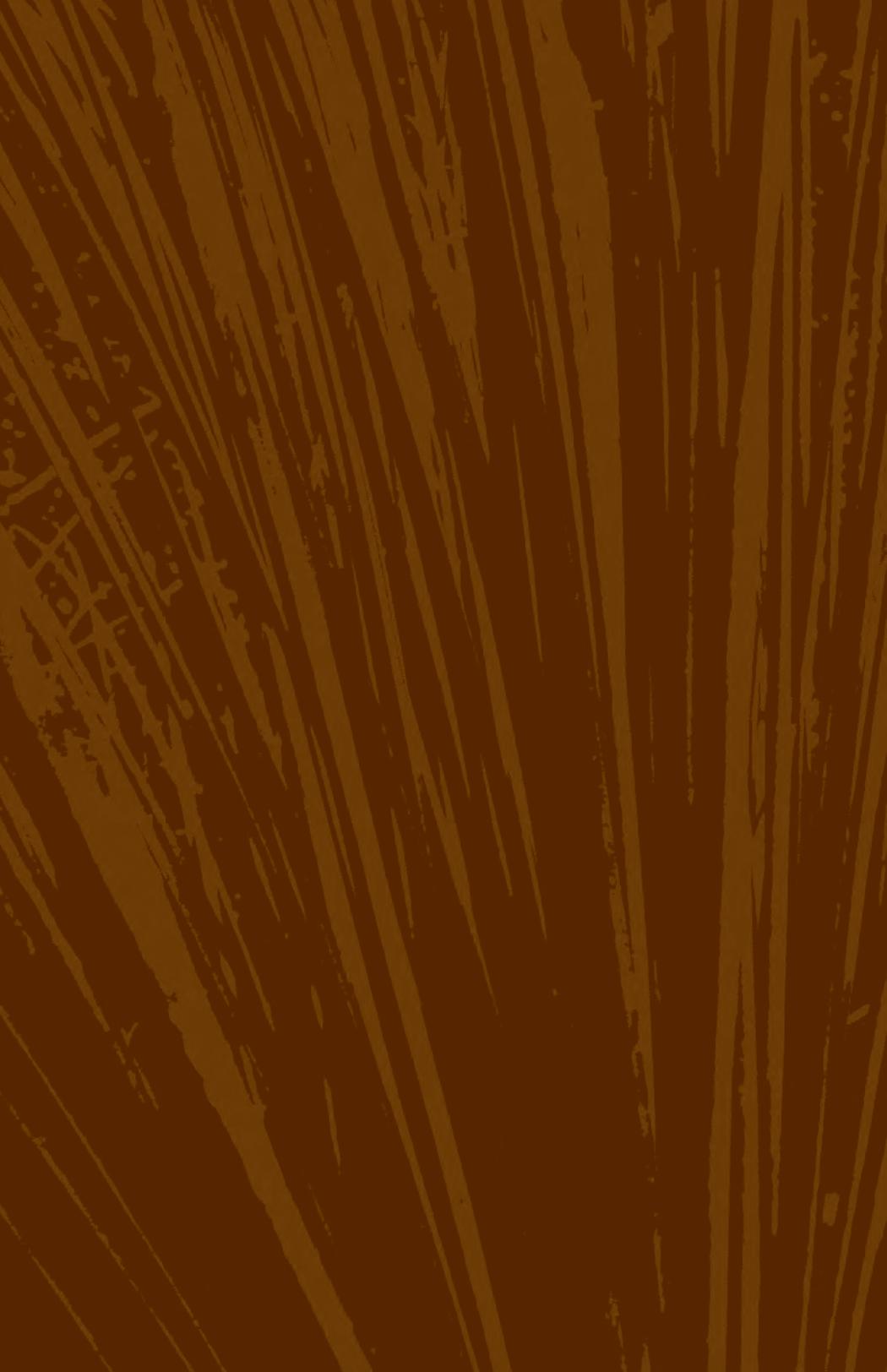
Photos: 1, *LaVerne Harrell Clark*; 2, *Nancy Carrick Holbert*; 3 *Unknown*



Current U.S. Poet Laureate **W. S. Merwin** first read for the Poetry Center on January 14, 1969.



While Beat poet **Allen Ginsberg** read for the Poetry Center on April 30, 1969, he was involved in an incident with a journalist from *The Arizona Republic*, who punched the poet in the mouth.



LOIS SHELTON AND THE ROUND TUIT

*Richard Shelton*

LOIS SHELTON BECAME DIRECTOR of the University of Arizona's Poetry Center in 1970. She had no administrative experience, no training as a librarian, and her knowledge of poetry was limited to the fact that she once sat in on a modern poetry course when she was teaching at Abilene Christian College (now University) and that her husband wrote poetry, although he didn't show it to anybody, including her. Her field was music, her expertise was performance, and she was destined to become the best-known mezzo soprano in Arizona. Looking back, it seems an odd choice for the job as director of a University Poetry Center. But at the time it seemed inevitable, and Lois remained in that position for 20 years until her retirement in 1990. When the directorship became vacant in 1970, I was placed on the search committee to find a new director. Lois was teaching music in the public schools. One night at dinner she announced to me that she was going to apply for the job. I was skeptical. I knew she could do it, but her qualifications wouldn't look too good on paper. As it turned out, there was no paper until after the fact. I met with the search committee the next morning, told them Lois was applying for the job, and resigned from the committee. Then I went to my office down the hall and began the chore of grading freshman themes, something that occupied much of my time. In about 15 minutes Dr. Larry Muir, head of the English Department and chair of the search committee, was at my door. "Lois has just been chosen as the new director of the Poetry

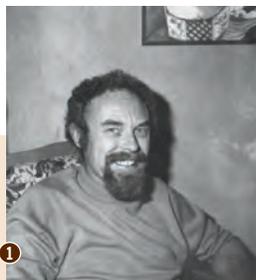
Center," he told me. "The decision was unanimous. We are trying to reach her by phone now."

I was shocked at the speed with which this important decision had been made. Academic appointments in those days did not have the cumbersome formality they do today, but they were usually somewhat formal, involving interviews and a scrutiny of an applicant's vita, letters of recommendation and past performance evaluations.

"But you haven't even seen her application yet," I said.

"That's all right," he replied. "We've seen her, and we've seen her in action." The action he was referring to was Lois' ability to entertain and charm visiting writers. Since the Poetry Center's beginning in 1960 she had had plenty of opportunity to do both. I had been on the Board of the Poetry Center since its beginning and had filled in as acting director one year while LaVerne Clark took a leave of absence to do research for a book.

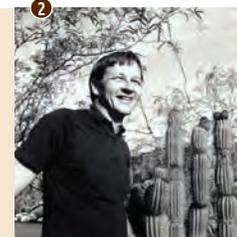
That ability to charm visiting writers, many of them internationally famous, is captured in Al Young's book of essays on music and musicians, *Kinds of Blue*. Lois had taken Al to the Desert Museum and then they returned to our house. While Lois made coffee, Al sat down at the grand piano and began somewhat absentmindedly to play the music he found there. It was Jerome



Poet and essayist **Richard Shelton** first read for the Poetry Center on January 7, 1970. This undated photo by his wife, Lois, is from the early 1970s. The flyer is for a 1978 reading.



Photos: 1, Lois Shelton; 2, 3, LaVerne Harrell Clark



A masterful teacher, yet extremely shy, **Donald Justice** was also very photogenic when he visited the Poetry Center in 1970 to read on April 9.

**Diane Wakoski** read for the Poetry Center three times during the 1970s (seen here on November 20, 1970). Her archives are held by the University of Arizona Main Library's Special Collections Department.



**Ruth Stephan** returned for the Poetry Center's 10th Anniversary celebration in spring 1971.

Kern's "All the Things You Are." Al is a well-established professional musician as well as a writer.

I'll let Al tell the rest of it:

When Lois meandered into the room with a gleam in her eyes and her arms outstretched singing Oscar Hammerstein the 2nd's actual lyrics in bell-like operatic tones, I almost fell off the bench ...When we reached the end of it, I sighed, looked up at Lois and said, "Where did you ever learn to sing like that? What a shock! Why didn't you tell me?"

Once she got through quivering with laughter, she flashed me her earthy "Hey, Sailor!" smile and said, "My training was in opera."

I promptly apologized for my lumpish accompaniment but Lois, gracious soul that she is, said, "You were fine, just fine. I couldn't resist coming in on you like that. I love that song."

"I love it too," I told her.

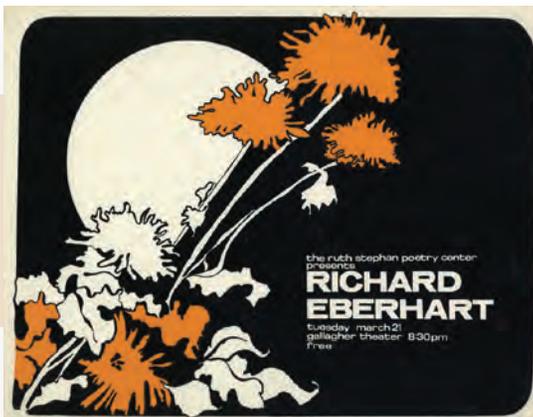
During the first decade of its existence, the Poetry Center struggled to survive as an odd, non-academic entity in an academic environment. It had the loyal support of Dr. Larry Muir, English department head, and the Poetry Center Advisory Board, made up mostly of English department faculty and students

whose primary interest was poetry. There was no creative writing program during the Center's early years, although the English department offered one undergraduate class in poetry writing.

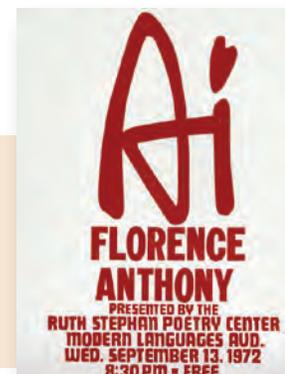
I was a member of the Board from its beginning, and we faced many problems. Of the two small buildings Ruth Stephan gave to the Center, both were termite ridden and had serious plumbing problems.

As LaVerne and the other directors of the 1960s did before us, we had to continue to the difficult task of building audiences for Poetry Center readings. We did this through a three-pronged approach including postering and newspaper announcements. The other thrust was entertainment. Our feeling was that if we could get the faculty members sufficiently involved to encourage their students to come to the readings, we would have an audience. This was particularly true of the English department, not only because poetry was an important part of its curriculum, but because, including freshman English, it dealt with more students than any other department on campus. We instituted a series of dinners before the readings and large parties after the readings, and not surprisingly, the majority of those we entertained were members of the English department faculty.

Members of the Board had no budget for entertaining, but we passed those duties around, and since Lois and I had a good house for entertaining, a fair



**Richard Eberhart** read for the Poetry Center on March 21, 1972. A dear friend of the Sheltons, he often visited them in Tucson with his wife, Betty.



Photos: 1, 2, LaVerne Harrell Clark

**Ai**, who earned a Bachelor of Arts in Japanese from the University of Arizona, read for the Poetry Center in 1972, shortly after receiving her MFA from the University of California at Irvine.



share of those dinners and parties fell to us. One of the best parties at our house found Lois singing Allen Ginsberg's setting of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* while Allen accompanied her on a little portable harmonium. When the grand opera voice met the music of a Beat poet and the poems of an 18th-century mystic, the result was magnificent. It was in this capacity, as hostess, that the members of the search committee had seen Lois "in action." Fortunately, she proved to be equally skillful in other areas as well.

When Lois became director of the Poetry Center, I think there was some concern by members of the Board that she and I might be in collusion to ram through a program and a series of visiting writers that they didn't want. Far from that, Lois expanded the program so that it represented many schools and styles of poetry and even nonfiction. At one of our Board meetings, in fact, after a long discussion of which writers to invite for the following year, one of the other Board members turned to me and, referring to Lois and me, said, "Don't you two agree about anything?"

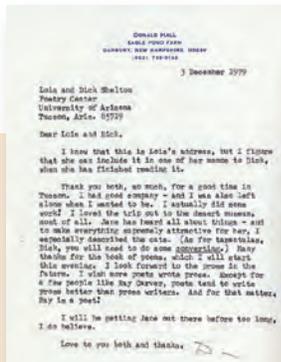
As the program expanded, bringing in more and more writers each year and sending more writers into the public schools and university classrooms, problems with the physical plant continued to plague Lois. At about 2 a.m. one night in March of 1972, we were awakened by a phone call from Richard Eberhart, who, with his wife Betty, was staying in the Poetry Center's guest cottage.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," Richard said, "but the bathroom is washing away."

That got us wide awake. The bathroom of the guest cottage was a tiny lean-to affair that had obviously been added after the building was built. It didn't really have much of a foundation, and when the ancient pipes under it burst, the whole thing was in danger of floating off into the parking lot.

It was Betty Eberhart, during the Eberhart's extended visit, who established what was to become a long-standing tradition at the Center's original quarters. Ruth Stephan had purchased the small ramshackle house on the lot next door to the guest cottage and had it removed, leaving us with an expansive yard shaded by huge cottonwoods, with ornamental orange trees, some bamboo and many flowers. We sometimes held open-air classes or readings there when weather permitted, and the weather usually did except during the late summer monsoons. Betty took one look at this great expanse of lawn and said, "What you need is a croquet set." Then she went out and bought one, and the official Poetry Center Croquet Tournament was created that afternoon. It lasted for years until the Poetry Center was moved to its second home, another set of houses on Cherry Avenue, when Speedway was widened and the Highland underpass put in.

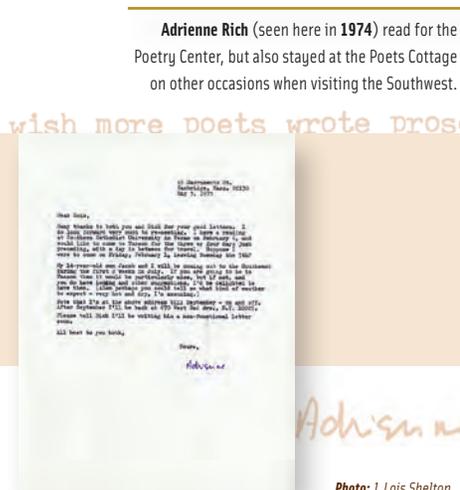
During Lois' twenty years as director, I was privileged to carry the luggage and act as tour guide for many of the most famous writers in America



Donald Hall first read for the Poetry Center in 1972. After his 1979 visit he wrote to Richard and Lois Shelton that he liked his visit to the Desert Museum most.



Pulitzer Prize-winning poet James Wright read to a crowd of nearly 1,000 people in the Modern Languages Auditorium on February 21, 1973.



Adrienne Rich (seen here in 1974) read for the Poetry Center, but also stayed at the Poets Cottage on other occasions when visiting the Southwest.

I wish more poets wrote prose

Adrienne Rich

Photo: 1, Lois Shelton



and abroad, while Lois was their hostess, booking agent, travel agent and publicity manager. She referred to her job as “the care and feeding of poets,” but it was much more than that. That was merely the part she enjoyed most. I introduced the writers to the Sonoran desert, and she introduced them to our ever-growing public audience for poetry. We usually had between ten and twelve readings each year, all open to the public and free. The readers included Stephen Spender, Nicanor Parra, Grace Paley, Robert Penn Warren, Lucille Clifton, Denise Levertov, Diane Ackerman, Frank Waters, Tillie Olson, Carolyn Kizer, Mona Van Duyn, Joseph Brodsky, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, William Stafford, W. S. Merwin, Tomas Tranströmer and on and on.

My duties as tour guide were totally voluntary and enjoyable. Sometimes we took the writers to Nogales, Sonora, to give them a view of a Mexican border town, but usually I took them into the Sonoran desert for a short walkabout during which I identified a few plants, birds and desert creatures. (The encounter between Mark Strand and the tiger rattlesnake was quite remarkable.) For many of them the desert was totally exotic and fascinating. I took Lucille Clifton, who had always lived in cities and never been west of the Mississippi, on a midnight stroll through the desert under a bright moon. She was game but terrified and had a grip on my hand so tight it was painful. At every step she said, “I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid,” as if to

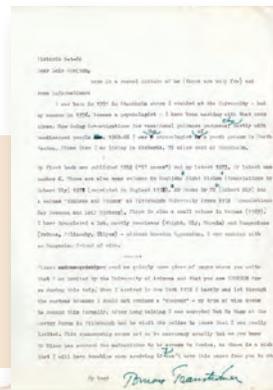
convince herself. After a later trip she wrote a memorable poem about the Sonoran desert and some of its inhabitants.

One such walkabout that I remember best was when I took C. Day Lewis, then the Poet Laureate of Great Britain, into the Tucson Mountains west of Tucson. He was intrigued by the plants. At one point he reached out and touched a cholla, called a Teddy Bear Cactus because it looks so cuddly. The barbed spines which make the cactus look so attractive attached one of the segments to his hand. He winced in pain.

Instinctively I reached out to get the monster off him only to become impaled myself on the same cactus segment. So there we were, both the victims of the same cactus. I finally got us loose from the spiny monster, but always afterward I was able to say that the British Poet Laureate and I were very much attached to one another.

During the twenty years Lois was director, many parties stand out in my mind. One was a party honoring Richard Howard at the home of Harry and Mary Louise Robins. (Mary Louise was a former director of the Poetry Center.) Richard Howard had just done a remarkable reading for a large crowd in the Modern Languages Auditorium, but he decided to do another one, something more intimate, at the party afterward. He read his extensive dramatic monologue, complete with a long, elegant cigarette holder as a prop,

Swedish poet **Tomas Tranströmer** was one of the first international writers to visit the Poetry Center and was a frequent visitor in the **1970s and 1980s**.



*Tomas Tranströmer*

Photos: 1, 2, Lois Shelton



Leslie Marmon Silko read for the Poetry Center on November 19, 1974, three years before the publication of her critically acclaimed novel, *Ceremony*.

ely some piece of paper where you



Her assistant, Ila Abernathy, photographed every inch of it so that the writing would not be entirely lost.

...

Lois' struggle with Buildings and Grounds, the entity which controlled all repair work for University buildings on campus and off, was protracted and monumental. The Poetry Center was housed, at different times, in two sets of little houses on the periphery of the campus. Lois engineered the move from one set of houses to the other, which was no small task since the book collection had grown enormously thanks to endowments established by Ruth Stephan and her mother, Mabel Walgreen. At the time of the move, a sizeable portion of the collection had to be put into storage because of a lack of space.

Many other programs were housed in such buildings at the edge of the campus, and the attitude of Buildings and Grounds towards them was obvious: These old houses are hard to maintain and are going to be torn down eventually to make way for large, modern brick structures. Why should we waste our time, energy, and resources repairing them? The fact that one of those old wooden houses contained a priceless collection of poetry, including first editions of famous works, broadsides, unpublished manuscripts and correspondence by poets didn't seem to make much difference to them, as exemplified by the first near-disaster and their response to our plea for help.

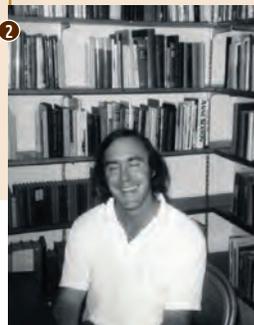
28



1  
Renowned Russian poet **Yevgeny Yevtushenko** began the tradition of writing on the walls of the Poet's Cottage during his stay in **1979**.

Photos: 1,2,3,4, Lois Shelton

**Robert Hass**, former U.S. Poet Laureate, has read for the Poetry Center four times, in **1979, 1984, 2000**, and most recently at the Poetry Center's **2007** Housewarming Festival.



Later, Lois would handle this ongoing situation in various ways depending on the nature of the particular problem, and there were constant particular problems. She seemed to be able to get along with anybody, and she charmed the workmen who came to fix things. One of them, in fact, stopped by nearly every morning for coffee and stayed as long as he dared. This did not alleviate the source of the problems. That source lay in decisions made in the upper echelons of Buildings and Grounds, decisions over which Lois had no control.

To deal with this, Lois sometimes turned on her helpless southern belle voice, at which she was quite adept. (She was raised in Texas.) In telephone conversations with the head of Buildings and Grounds she would use it, appealing always to his sense of chivalry in regard to the helpless and unprotected female in distress. "Ah declare the commode is overflowin' Suh, and Ahm frightened out o' my little ol' wits. Ah don't know the furst thin' about plumbin', Suh. Could you sen' one of them nice workmen ovah here right away before we have ourselves a major flu-ud." Her southern background and her extensive stage training and experience made these telephone conversations as Scarlett O'Hara priceless theater to anyone who happened to be in the same room, but we were not allowed to laugh or applaud until she hung up.

Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. The original guest cottage had a room in front that had been a tiny sitting room but was converted into a

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University of Arizona Creative Writing professor **Peter Wild** read for the Poetry Center in **1970, 1976, 1982, 1985, and 1993**. This photo was snapped in **1979** by Lois Shelton. Wild, who died in 2009, published more than 82 books and more than 2,000 individual poems in his lifetime.



4  
**Robert Pinsky** first read for the Poetry Center in **1980**. Later, as U.S. Poet Laureate, he founded the "Favorite Poem" project, which invited Americans to share and read their favorite poems.

tiny additional bedroom when the larger sitting room was added in the rear. That added room in the rear was one of the most charming features of a charming cottage, with a bank of windows on two walls and black and white checkerboard vinyl flooring. Its furniture and decoration had been overseen by Ruth Stephan, whose taste was exquisite. Because that room became the social center of the house, the tiny sitting room in the front, now converted to an extra bedroom, was seldom used. One morning Lois opened the door to that room and was horrified to see the long tunnels termites make hanging from the ceiling. She called Buildings and Grounds, and eventually they sent a man over to inspect.

The man, who arrived in a golf cart, was a stranger to Lois. He said that the ceiling had to come out and that the attic had to be treated for termites.

“When can you do that?” Lois asked. “We have a visiting writer coming in next week.”

The workman reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic disc slightly larger than a poker chip. On one side it was embossed with the word “TUIT.”

“See this, Lady,” he said. “This here is a Tuit. And notice that it’s round. I’m going to give this to you to remind you that I’ll come fix your ceiling when I *git around to it.*” Then, laughing, he got in his golf cart and drove away.

Lois was not amused. In fact, she who seldom showed any sign of anger was livid. She went next door to her tiny office in the library building and thought about it. Then she got the push broom from the closet and went back to the guest cottage. Placing the business end of the broom against the ceiling in the little front bedroom, she pushed upward as hard as she could. The entire ceiling came down in a great tide of lathes, plaster, dust and termites. Then she went back to her office, replaced the broom in the closet, dialed a number on the phone and turned into Scarlett O’Hara. “Suh, mah ceilin’ just collapsed. It scared me almos’ to de-ath. Somebody could have been kil-led!” She got a new ceiling and the house was treated for termites the next day.

I thought about this incident many years later, in the 1990s, when I was filling in for Alison Deming as acting director. (Alison was doing research in Hawaii.) At some point during the years since Lois had had her adventure with the ceiling and the TUIT, I had made an accidental discovery. It came about when Alison and I were planning to take a group of creative writing graduate students to visit several ghost towns and historic sights on the San Pedro River and spend the night in Bisbee.

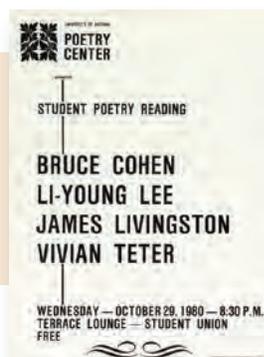
We requested two fourteen-passenger vans from the motor pool and were told that we would have to have a special driver’s license to transport students. That license could be obtained only by attending a half-day training session at something called Risk Management, which I had never heard of



1

New York-based poet **John Ashbery** read for the Poetry Center twice, 10 years apart, on November 4, 1980, and September 12, 1990.

Student readings are an ongoing tradition for the Poetry Center.



Warm regards,  
*Michael*

Photos: 1, 2, Lois Shelton



2

**Michael Ryan** read for the Poetry Center on September 9, 1981. It is customary to send visiting writers a recording of their reading. In Ryan’s case, the tape he received was of a reading by William Matthews, which had been mislabeled.



before. In fact, Risk Management was so low-key that it was difficult to find, tucked away in a small, nondescript building on the north edge of the campus. What I discovered during the training session, however, was that appearances could be deceptive. This little unit on the edge of campus was actually one of the most powerful organizations of the university since its job was to minimize risks to anybody on or visiting campus, and thus cut down on costly lawsuits. It controlled everything from slippery floors to students in university vehicles. Suddenly I saw what this could mean for the Poetry Center. Risk Management trumped Buildings and Grounds.

After Alison left for Hawaii I took a little tour of the two old buildings on Cherry Avenue that housed the Center. I discovered that one leg of the bed in the guest cottage had fallen through the floor where there was considerable termite damage. There was also a bad weak spot in the dining room floor where traffic was heaviest. The roof in that building had been leaking badly, partly due to a malfunctioning swamp cooler. Next door, in the library building, there was a weak spot in the floor of the main room, and the wheelchair ramp was in such bad shape as to be unusable. Alison had been trying to get these things repaired for months to no avail.

The next morning I began stomping large holes in the wheelchair ramp in several places. The two staff members who were working inside came out to see what all the noise was about.

“Alison isn’t going to like this,” one of them said.

“Alison will love it when it’s all fixed,” I replied. Then I went into the library building and stomped a large hole in the middle of the floor while shouting, “This is for Lois and the TUIT.” I was on a roll.

One of the staff members was distraught and expected the campus police to arrive any minute and cart me off to the loony bin. The other staff member seemed to be enjoying the show.

Next stop was the guest cottage. Shouting, “This is for Lois and the twenty years,” I stomped a large hole in the floor between the living room and dining room, then enlarged the hole in the bedroom. When I got out the ladder and started to climb up to the roof of the guest cottage, I thought one of the staff members would faint, but she didn’t. By leaping into the air and coming down on both feet, I was able to knock several large holes in the roof. “This is for Lois and the ceiling and the broom,” I shouted. Then I came down from the roof, put the ladder away, and went into my office to make a phone call. I had to wait a few minutes until my heavy breathing calmed down. It was probably the best day’s work I had ever done during my two stints as acting director.

But I didn’t call Buildings and Grounds; I called Risk Management and told them we had some very dangerous situations that they might want to check



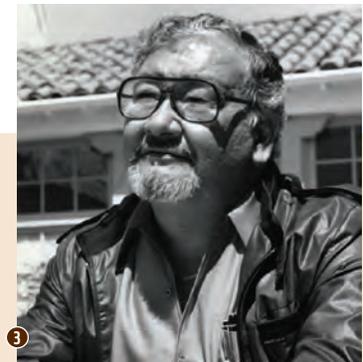
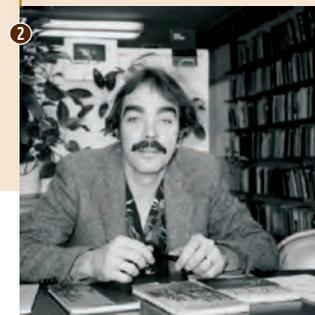
*1*  
 The Poets' cottage be free? If it is, may I be allowed to see you?  
 I would like to see you  
 in an desert again

Photos: 1, 2, Lois Shelton; 3, LaVerne Harell Clark  
 Mark Strand's second reading for the Poetry Center was on November 17, 1981. In between he wrote to Lois Shelton about staying in the Poets Cottage. The Cottage was available, but Strand's plans changed, and he didn't stay after all.

Dear Lois and Lois:  
 It has been about three years since I visited Tucson and I'd like to visit again. I like to sit down on my way to California and read to you. Will the Poets' cottage be free? I'd like to see you there. I would like to see you again before I come out to see the desert again. I'd like to stay for a few days. Please say hello to the staff. I'd like to see you at the cottage and I'd like to see you at any time. Let me hear from you at any time.  
 Warm regards,  
 Mark Strand.

*Warm regards,  
 Mark Strand.*

The late Larry Levin read for the Poetry Center only once, on January 27, 1982.



University of Arizona professor N. Scott Momaday read for the Poetry Center on many occasions, beginning in 1974. This photo was taken “in between” readings in 1985. Momaday’s groundbreaking novel, *House Made of Dawn*, was published in 1968.

out before somebody was seriously injured. They sent an inspector that afternoon. He looked at everything, shook his head and rolled his eyes. He probably knew exactly what I had done, but he said nothing about it. He made notes on a clipboard and went away.

Next morning a crew from Buildings and Grounds arrived early. They worked for several days. While two of them went to work replacing the wheelchair ramp, another two began preparations for putting a new roof on the guest cottage. The floor repair took longer because large sections of the floor had to be removed. The man replacing the flooring in both buildings did an excellent job. The kitchen and dining room floors in the guest cottage had been covered with vinyl tile, and once he had the floors repaired, he asked me what color tile I wanted to put on them. He had a book with samples. It hadn't occurred to me that I would have any choice, but I knew immediately what I wanted. Black and white checkerboard like we had in the first guest cottage.

While he was laying the tile, I said, "This is for Ruth, whose dream we have tried to keep alive."

...

There was an ironic epilogue to this scene. Later, the head of Buildings and Grounds called me to ask if I was pleased with the work his crew had done. I

told him I was very pleased, and they did an excellent job all the way around. He then asked me if I would write him a letter recommendation stating that his crew had done good work.

"Yes, I'll write you a letter," I said, "but I'm terribly busy right now. It will have to wait until I get a round tuit."

He didn't mind that. Evidently the workman with the tuit, years earlier, had not let him in on the joke. He never sent me a round tuit, so I never wrote the letter.

Looking back over what I have written, I see that nearly every event and situation is "behind the scenes," so to speak, something the public would not have been aware of. It does not take into account that during her twenty years as director, Lois Shelton put the University of Arizona's Poetry Center squarely on the literary map of America, where it has been ever since.

It does not take into account the hundreds of public readings of poetry and prose she managed with dexterity, nor the affection with which she was viewed by hundreds of writers in this country and abroad.

It does not take into account the students in many classrooms, both at the university and in the public schools, who developed a real interest in reading and literature when a live writer was in their midst. Lois sent those writers to



**Jorie Graham** read for the Poetry Center three times, in **1982, 1990, and 1999**. Winner of numerous literary prizes, she has been called one of the most celebrated writers of our time.

**Al Young** first read for the Poetry Center on September 14, **1983**. He returned in **1997** as a reader and weeklong guest in the Poet's Cottage, which he used as home base for a statewide residency sponsored by the Academy of American Poets.



*Photos: 1, 2, 3, Lois Shelton*

**Lucille Clifton** was one of the most popular poets to read for the Poetry Center over the course of four decades. Her indomitable spirit and great sense of humor endeared her to audiences. Clifton passed away on February 13, 2010, the same year she was selected to receive the Poetry Society of America's Robert Frost Medal for distinguished lifetime achievement in American poetry. This photo from her **1983** visit shows her enjoying the Sonoran desert landscape.

the classrooms, often chauffeuring them herself. She also founded the Friends of the Poetry Center, a support group that has been instrumental in helping to provide funds for the Poetry Center's many programs.

Today, the Poetry Center, in its new building, the first building ever built specifically to house it, and under the inspired leadership of its current director, Gail Browne, is undoubtedly the most important and effective entity of its kind in America.

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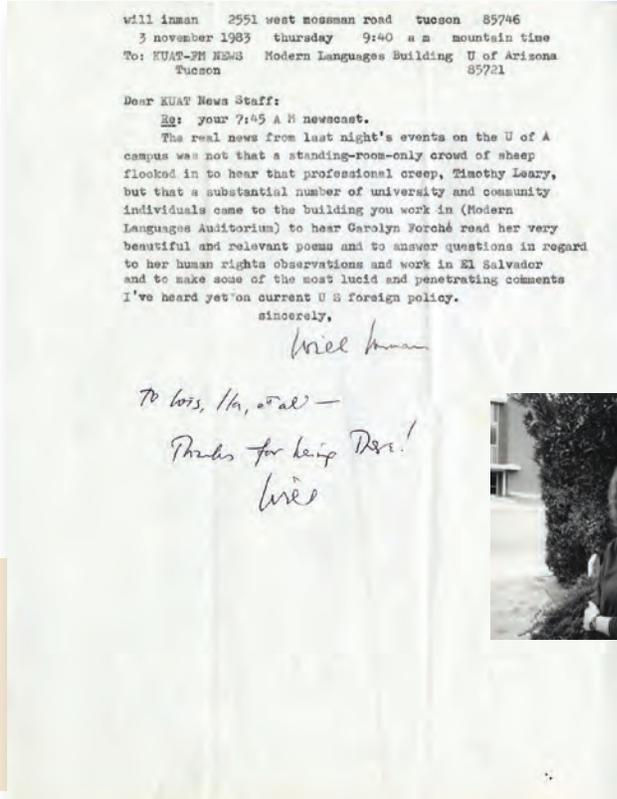


Photo: 1, Lois Shelton

*Will Inman*

Carolyn Forché first read for the Poetry Center in 1983. Her poems of that time period drew from her observations as a human rights worker in El Salvador. Will Inman, one of the founders of the Tucson Poetry Festival, wrote KUAT News a note following Forché's reading.

37



**PEOPLE, HABITAT, POETRY**

*Alison Hawthorne Deming*

“We owe what we are to the communities that have formed us.”

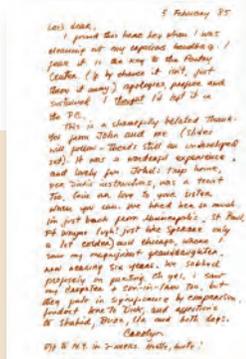
*Habits of the Heart*

— Robert M. Bellah et al.

THIRTY YEARS AGO I MADE A CROSS-COUNTRY ROAD TRIP from northern Vermont, where I had lived for a decade of self-exile in the clarifying North, drove to New York City to pick up my then-lover who was studying art at the Cooper Union, and rolled out into the American West. This was my first trip west of the Mississippi. My daughter was in boarding school, a scholarship-induced reprieve for me from the burdens of single parenting. My companion and I were broke, in love, and happy for the road. We pitched our tent in a cow pasture in Pennsylvania, waking to a circle of curious Holsteins watching our sleep. We kept rolling on out into the open possibility of the Great Plains. I'd been writing poems for years and reading hungrily to try to figure what this art was that drew me, first as a modernist acolyte in love with Eliot and Yeats; then falling for the emotional extremism of Lowell, Path, and Sexton; then landing in the backyard of poets associated with the San Francisco Renaissance and Black Mountain College. I had become snobbish about my poetic affections, which strikes me now as an offensive narrowness, an aesthetic parochialism that made me identify myself with one group by opposing others. I was looking for something larger in myself, some vista more expansive than the worn-out New England hills and a poetics true to my own character and experience. I did not want to be a caricature of poets who had come before me.

We camped on a dirt road in Texas after a freak ice storm, pitching the tent in sleet that coated the ground, weeds, fence wires, tent struts and nylon with sheening ice. We were exhausted to the bone from the ice-road terror. In the gray morning, we woke to a melting world and found that we'd pitched our tent beside the corpse of a dog, a traveler less fortunate on that perilous road. By the time we got to Tucson, we were ready to be housed once again and took up the invitation to stay with my lover's brother, a graduate student in arid lands. When he heard I was a poet, he told me that the University of Arizona had a Poetry Center. He had that look on his face that said he knew I'd be surprised to find such a thing out in the desert. He boasted that the Center had an archive of poetry recordings. I was snobbishly skeptical, certain the place would have none of the poets who mattered to me.

I was at the time excited by Kathleen Fraser, whose book *New Shoes* had just come out. I loved the Magritte poems and how others ranged across the page, allowing air and uncertainty into the poem. She wrote of "feeling pulled along by forces not quite even in one's control..." and I understood myself to be an apprentice to that feeling, the desire to be self-possessed and recklessly open all at once. I made my way to the weedy bungalow on the edge of campus, browsed the rickety shelves lined with poetry books, and found the small plastic file box holding twenty years worth of cassette tapes, including a recording of Kathleen Fraser reading here on September 29, 1977. As I



Photos: 1, 2, Lois Shelton

Carolyn Kizer developed a warm relationship with both the Poetry Center and the Sheltons, evident in the candor expressed in this 1984 photo and 1985 note to Lois.

*I found this here key when I was cleaning out my capacious haulbag. I fear it is the key to the Poetry Center. (If by chance it isn't, just*



Poet and University of Arizona Creative Writing professor **Steven Orlen** has the distinction of reading for the Poetry Center 13 times, beginning in 1967 and most recently in 2008. Lois Shelton snapped this photo of Orlen in February 1985. The poster is from 1973.

write this, I pull the book off my personal library shelves and find that *New Shoes* sports Jon Anderson's endorsement—"These are stunning poems... form a kind of latticework or exterior nervous system... a great gulp of pure oxygen"—and cover art by Tucson's Gail Marcus Orlen. The Poetry Center, from my very first visit, changed my sense of the national literary map and made me realize that what I was seeking was not just a self-actualizing voice but literary community.

If a place isn't careful it can become a caricature of itself, falling for a canned version of its history that leaves it bereft of whole categories of collective experience. Tucson as Cowtown and Santa Fe as Pink Coyote Land. A place can lose track of its story and so its future. This can happen to literary organizations, which can sprout up like field mushrooms in the rain and shrivel as quickly. In the twenty years I've lived in Tucson, I've seen dozens of journals, reading series, community workshops, and writers groups form and dissolve. A few have sustained. This is not a surprise: artistic affiliation follows the patterns of growth, connection, and decay that cycle through nature and culture. Life spans vary; dynamism is all. Looking over the past fifty years of the Poetry Center's history, I can't help but marvel at the Center's constancy through periods of institutional distraction, fiscal insecurity, aesthetic contentiousness, the tired jabs at "academic poets" (as if such a category could be defined and have remained so from 1960 to 2010), the

privatization of public education, and the call for arts audience development in the age of entertainment.

What has carried us through all this weather, so that we begin our second fifty years standing in the breezeway of an artful new building that is the fulfillment of a long collective dream in this community, spawning a wealth of programs serving diverse audiences, and building a living archive of poetry, photographs, and recordings of over 1,000 readings hosted by the Center since 1962? And why here, we ask, even those of us closest to the life of the Poetry Center, why here in the arid and malled landscape of desert and sunbelt sprawl? What are the key values that have shaped the Center and that might serve others who wish to create something in their own communities that says poetry matters?

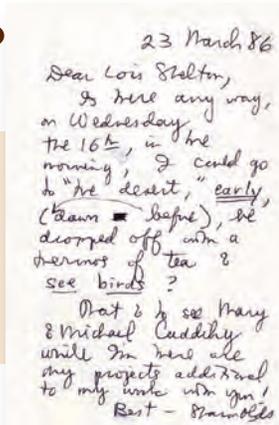
The Poetry Center was established on an aesthetic idea passionately held by founder, poet, novelist, and editor Ruth Walgreen Stephan—"to maintain and cherish the spirit of poetry." When she spoke of the spirit of poetry, she meant not the art's ethereal aspect that "makes nothing happen" but rather the animating force that lends strength and purpose to individuals and movements. She had spent winters in the 1950s writing in a rented cottage near the university campus. In 1960 she bought this cottage and an adjoining lot, donating them on the same day to the university to launch the Poetry Center. In her Connecticut home, she had a small poetry room and

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Ellen Bryant Voigt first read for the Poetry Center on February 20, 1985.



Photos: 1,2, Lois Shelton

Sharon Olds read for the Poetry Center on April 16, 1986. Her special requests were to be dropped off in the desert, to "see birds," and to visit Ironwood publisher Michael Cuddihy.



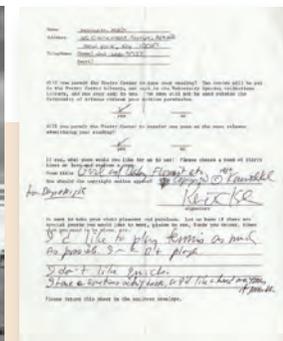
she had noticed how it encouraged her young son to read poetry “without intermediaries.” She had also seen that the university was devoting more and more of its resources to science and technology, and she wanted to protect a cultural space for poetry.

Stephan was not the kind of donor who writes a check and disappears. In addition to her original donation of property, between 1960 and 1972 she made gifts of poetry books, booklists for purchase, a secretary, a housekeeper, curtains, furniture, Southwest art and artifacts, money and stocks. She secured a bequest of Walgreen stocks from her mother Myrtle Walgreen; this bequest seeded the library acquisitions endowment. She purchased five additional lots and donated them to the Center, envisioning construction of a permanent home for the Center. She wrote an illuminating essay on collection development in which she emphasized the beauty and physicality of the book, and the importance of poetry’s roots in indigenous song and its flowering in world literatures. “The nucleus of the collection,” she wrote, “should be the acknowledged great poets of all countries in the world together with the foremost living poets in our country. This is essential in America whose population is multi-ancestral.”

Stephan lived by the tenets of her vision and remained a fierce steward of its values. She and her husband, painter John Stephan, had co-edited the avant-garde journal of art and writing, *The Tiger’s Eye*, from 1947–49. The journal

was celebrated in a 2002 exhibit at the Yale University Gallery. Reviewer David Anfam called it “a seismograph to the complex cultural moment of the late 1940s in America.” Stephan traveled to Peru to collect Quechua songs and tales, published as *The Singing Mountaineers* in 1957 by the University of Texas Press. She published two historical novels. She traveled to Japan in search of a quiet place to write and found herself a student of Zen Buddhism, publishing the essay “The Zen Priests and Their Six Persimmons” in *Harper’s* in 1962 and making the documentary film “Zen in Ryoko-in.” Decades before the buzzwords of multiculturalism and diversity became ubiquitous, Stephan articulated a vision and practice that embodied them.

The process of building community has opened up and changed over time, as it will do. Stephan was not in favor of hosting readings, fearing that they’d turn into faddish celebrations of favoritism. But it was the reading series, launched in 1962 with visits by Stanley Kunitz and Kenneth Rexroth, which brought community together—following on the auspicious dedication ceremony at which Robert Frost and then-U.S. Representative Stewart Udall presided. John Kennedy had just been elected President and at the Tucson gathering, Frost and Udall cooked up the idea of having a poet read at the upcoming presidential inauguration. From its first public ceremony, then, the Poetry Center was linked to the national theater of politics. It did not hurt the broader cause that the first director of the Center sent a letter to over



1  
New York School poet **Kenneth Koch** read for the Poetry Center on October 9, 1986. While he was here, he met with students, played tennis, and visited the Desert Museum as well as Mission San Xavier del Bac.

Photos: 1,2, Lois Shelton



2  
Although poet **James Merrill** corresponded with the Poetry Center many times in the 1980s, he was only able to read for the Center once, on April 1, 1987. Merrill died in Tucson on February 6, 1995.



100 poets worldwide inviting them to spend time in the Center's guest cottage. On the local scene, audience development through the 1960s and 1970s was a homemade affair of making phone calls to professors and writers, running posters around town, and hanging them in commercial venues. Audiences for literature were strong from the start: a couple hundred for Kunitz and Rexroth; 400 for Robert Duncan in 1963; a stunning 2600 for Archibald McLeish in 1965. Tucsonans like to joke that there was nothing else to do in town in those days. But that's not the whole story.

The dominant story of the American West carries the flag of Manifest Destiny—that sense of “divine” purpose that led the eastern Anglo culture to expand its political and economic influence “from sea to shining sea.” It was an ethos bearing blades and bullets, iron rails and steel wills. It usurped land inhabited by Mexicans and American Indians, taking and using whatever it wanted, mining and grazing to the nub, then moving on. A familiar story by now, the ethos of which has long been demoted by the anguish and diminishment that came with its sense of progress. But this was never the only story of the West. Small stories have emerged within this large one, stories in which distinctive cultures and landscapes drew artists, writers, anthropologists, and scientists, including the Taos of Mabel Dodge, D. H. Lawrence, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe. People bringing learning and culture from their

home places but also hungry to learn from the land and the people who knew the place intimately through generations of living by its terms.

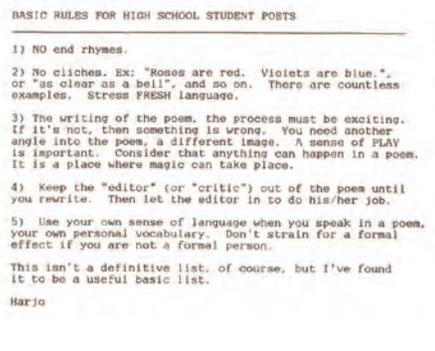
In Tucson, one such influence, as ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan reminds me, was the Carnegie Foundation’s launch of the Desert Laboratory on Tumamoc Hill in 1903, the first research site devoted to the study of arid lands. At the time Tucson’s population was 7,500, and the influx of scientists focusing on this place helped to enrich the town as it began to grow. I think it is fair to say that Ruth Stephan’s contributions to Tucson are part of this cultural flow, newcomers expecting a level of culture they had known in larger cities of New York and Chicago, but who also made an effort to celebrate the older cultures that were in place. She valued the communal identity experienced in art that crosses generations and continents. She did not foresee how significant the community’s role would be in the life of the Poetry Center.

I’ve emphasized Stephan’s role because I believe her passion has been translated and carried on by many people who have shared in the Center’s stewardship over the past fifty years. Lois Shelton merits special mention, as she served as the Poetry Center’s Director from 1970 until 1990. While being a vigilant overseer of the Center’s endowment, she offered warm hospitality to writers, she and her husband, poet Richard Shelton, taking poets on outings into the desert, to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum or the San Xavier



1

Joy Harjo visited a local high school when she came to read for the Poetry Center in 1987.



BASIC RULES



2

Novelist and poet Sandra Cisneros read for the Poetry Center on January 20, 1988.



Charles Bernstein, one of the founders of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, read for the Poetry Center in February 1988 and was a presenter in the Center's Conceptual Poetry Symposium in May 2008.



3

Charles

Mission. They never lost sight of how remarkable the desert is to newcomers. The collection of poems written by visiting writers (May Swenson, Lucille Clifton, Carolyn Kizer, Al Young, etc.) in the Sheltons' honor—and in that of the Sonoran Desert—testify to the quality of experience their hospitality offered. In 2002 Gail Browne became executive director, offering precisely the set of leadership skills in organization and development, and the brilliantly steady temperament, that made the elegant and inviting new facility a reality.

When I moved to Tucson in 1990 to become director of the Center, a tenth-generation New Englander who had lived for forty-four of her forty-five years in New England, I knew I had a lot to learn. I had been working as coordinator of the writing fellowship program at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown where I had been a poetry fellow, the last stint of a decade-long transition from a hard chapter of life that began when I was a pregnant college drop-out and ended after two decades of work in family planning and public health programs in northern New England. I had fallen into this work during Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, first as a paraprofessional outreach worker for Planned Parenthood of Vermont and last as a researcher and writer for the Governor's Task Force on Teen Pregnancy in Maine. What I had experienced as a teen mother—poverty, struggle, judgment, and deep personal reward—was not represented in the professional face I wore in those positions, which were all about helping others, all about being of service

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Olga Broumas read for the Poetry Center on October 26, 1988.

Photos: 1, 2, Lois Shelton; 3, Unknown

to those who lacked health care information and services. I had struggled through a doomed teen marriage, raising my daughter mostly on my own in a life that now seems to have been bewilderingly difficult. At the time it seemed right to make physical challenge the starting point of self-invention.

Get up before dawn, build wood fires to heat the permeable old farmhouse, wake daughter in cold, hike to barn to milk goat, gather eggs, water and grain the horse, scare away the fox scouting the hen house, breakfast the daughter, pack up her lunch, take her to school, drive an hour in the snow to get to work. Repeat chores in the evening. Read stories and more stories to daughter who hated bedtime. Find still and quiet hours in the night to write. Bank the fire. Stack wood for morning. Sleep in the cold. For a dozen years I understood the desire to be a writer as the hunger for what Virginia Woolf taught a woman she needed: a room of her own.

Through these years I wrote and read poetry: Wendell Berry's "Mad Farmer" poems, Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*, Plath and Sexton and Lowell, Kinnell and Merwin and Levertov, Duncan and Creeley and Dorn, Stein and Apollinaire and Neruda. I understood that language was the tether that held poets to life and to the human family in all its anguish and contradiction. I read anything my friends—fellow urban refugees—handed me, and I wrote by hand on a desk made of old weathered barn boards, woodstove bracing me against the night. I wrote list poems about the junk

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Lois Shelton directed the Poetry Center from 1970 to 1990. Along with her husband Richard Shelton, she was known for her hospitality and generosity.

In his nearly 30 years as a professor in the University of Arizona Creative Writing Program, Jon Anderson read for the Poetry Center seven times. This photo dates from his reading in October 1989. Anderson was born on the Fourth of July in 1940 and passed away in late 2007.

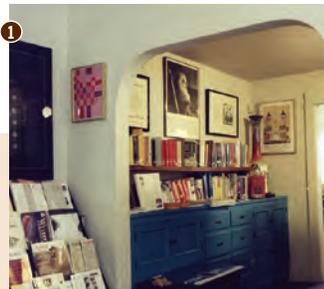


I cleaned out of my woodshed in that ramshackle home—horse harnesses and canning jars, the front page of a newspaper from the day the Hindenberg crashed in flames, and jars full of square-cut homemade nails. I wrote poems about the cold, farming, stars, muskrats, and loneliness. I imitated everything I read. I fell in love with the silence at the end of my pen, the sense that could spill from that silence, and the music that could drive language out of its dark habitat in the neural forest of my mind and onto the open field of the page.

I wrote that way for years, showing work to no one but a few other closeted poets who shared my enthusiasms for the beauty of words and their tendency to fall into form. I did not understand that language was a communal possession, that to write was to join in a collective enterprise that reached all the way back to clay tablets and papyrus, to the deeply old human desire for sharing story and song.

I know this is a long digression into terrain apparently alien to the matter at hand, which is to explore the values that have shaped the life of the University of Arizona Poetry Center. But it is a necessary digression, because while the details vary, stories of artistic apprenticeship often leave out the importance of finding community. One can sit in a room of one's own until the wallpaper peels from the walls, never knowing if one's words have the capacity to bridge the distance between oneself and others. Without the communal sense of art's force, one can weaken into faithlessness when facing the blank page. It took

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The Poetry Center's second home was three bungalows on Cherry Avenue just north of Speedway. The Center remained at this location from 1989 to 2003.



me a long time to realize that nearly every advance I made as a writer came in concert with someone passing along the work of a beloved author, of my attending a poetry reading or lucking into a writing community—first and foremost the wonderful vortex of anarchistic energy that was Poet's Mimeo Cooperative in Burlington, Vermont, during the 1970s and later on other groups (Vermont College MFA, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and Stanford's Stegner Fellowship programs)—that led me to feel the power of a collective experience of art.

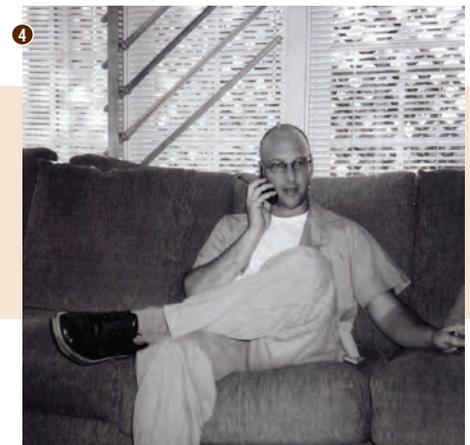
I brought these values—experiences that had begun to solidify into values—with me to Tucson. I had come from the Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC) in Provincetown, where I been a poetry fellow and then writing program coordinator in the 1980s. FAWC is a notable arts institution founded by writers and artists, among them Stanley Kunitz, whose spirit hovers over several of the projects described in this collection. The idea to offer long-term (seven-month) residencies to twenty writers and artists early in their careers was spurred by the founders' belief that what artistic vocation required most of all was the freedom to work among like-minded others. But the FAWC founders were also committed to investing in Provincetown as the nation's most enduring arts colony. As commercialism was diluting that legacy, they felt that the influx of the fellows and visiting artists would help seed a future in which that legacy would not be lost to shops and condos. So I gained from

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Photos: 1, 2, 4, Christine Krikliuy; 3, Unknown



Poet Richard Siken in the Poetry Center's "living room."



that experience a greater conviction that artists, in a manner that might well be impossible to quantify, can help to shape what a community means to itself and to others.

The Poetry Center had a distinguished thirty-year history by the time I arrived in Tucson. Its collection had continued to grow thanks to the Stephan endowment, the reading series had flourished, funding had been diversified among public and private supporters, the guest house walls bore the beloved graffiti of visiting writers who had slept there:

Yevtushenko in 1979 wrote:

*I bless everybody unblessed by God  
Those in shoes and those unshod.*

Edward Albee in 1980 wrote:

*The least dishonorable defeat  
is the only honorable goal.*

William Matthews in 1981 wrote:

*Isn't it great,  
Not being dead yet!*

And Denise Levertov in 1984 wrote;

*The poet-ponies sniff the breeze;  
They scent a friendly stable...  
No bit or bridle there to tease  
And oats upon the table*

Richard Shelton was running his prison writing workshops, the MFA program had been established in 1974, writers in the reading series routinely made visits to local high schools to read and give workshops, the Walgreen endowment had grown to over one million dollars dedicated to library acquisitions, student awards and readings helped to build audience for new writers, community and student writers hung out and loafed at their ease on the Center's couches, and visiting writers quite literally left marks of gratitude on the guest house walls. The constellation of programs and resources the Center offered was unlike any other poetry facility in the country. I felt immediately both the dignity of its history and the potential for its future.

But the fates of urban development and university expansion set up a few detours.

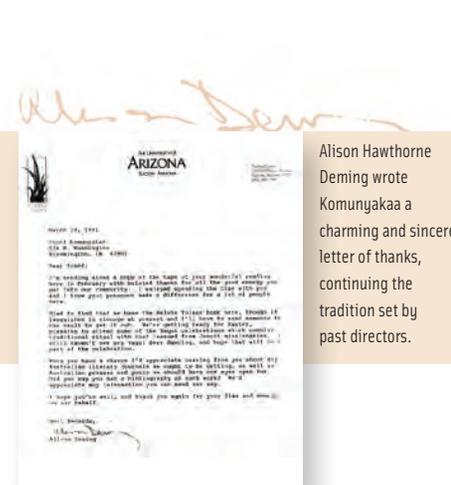
And this led to one of the Center's most challenging decades. In 1989 the Poetry Center's original two buildings were demolished for a city project to widen Speedway Boulevard, long infamous for its 1970s *Life* magazine

Alison Hawthorne Deming became the Poetry Center's director in 1990, just in time for the Poetry Center's 30th Anniversary celebrations.



Yusef Komunyakaa read for the Poetry Center on February 6, 1991.

Photos: 1, Unknown; 2,3, Alison Deming



Alison Hawthorne Deming wrote Komunyakaa a charming and sincere letter of thanks, continuing the tradition set by past directors.



Lorna Dee Cervantes captivated the audience at her reading on March 27, 1991.

designation as “the ugliest road in America.” *Hic transit gloria mundi*. The collection and guest house were moved to temporary quarters—then moved again when those temporary quarters were demolished to build a parking lot for the university’s medical center expansion. It is an easy claim to make that the needs of a small and quiet center can be glossed over and forgotten in the growth spurts of a large and rapidly expanding institution.

The Center’s plans to build a permanent home were at this time linked with other campus projects slated for construction with state money. Our project met delay after delay as state resources became more pinched. For the purposes of this essay, I won’t give even the barest outline of the arcane tiered procedures involved in getting a building project approved, funded, and built with the support of state government in a state boasting a legislature that places little value on higher education. A few informal proposals were floated our way suggesting models in which the Poetry Center would be subsumed into other university identities—the Main Library or College of Humanities—proposals that did not offer much promise that the unique characteristics and values and history of the Center would be given a priority.

The Arizona Board of Regents gave conceptual approval to the construction of a new Poetry Center in 1990. By 1996, with one-third of the collection in storage due to space constraints, we still had no new building and faced the prospect of being folded into a state-funded humanities office building

at an unknown future date. That year, with the support of our community-based development board, I made the recommendation that the Poetry Center separate from this larger project, which meant we would also separate ourselves from the prospect of having a state-funded building and need to commit ourselves to raising four or five million dollars. This was truly a test of our capacity to reach the community and of the community to respond to our need.

The dual challenge—to hold onto aesthetic integrity while drawing major donors to the cause—can be a perilous passage for an arts organization. Will the organization’s core values be compromised? If we changed from a being a “poetry” center to being a “literary” center would we attract more money? Would that dilute the strength of what we’d accomplished over the years, making us less distinctive and worthy of support? The prospect of raising several million dollars for poetry was chilling—and the estimated cost kept climbing the more years our project was delayed. While the Center had a firm financial footing in its library endowment, its programs had been supported over the years by a mix of public and private funding—small grants and contributions from Friends of the Poetry Center. By the time construction commenced in 2006, we were looking at a \$6.8-million-dollar building, with university support covering only \$1.9 million. The success of the campaign, which stretched over a decade, had everything to do with community



Post-confessional poet **Frank Bidart**, well-known for his personae poems, read for the Poetry Center on September 13, **1991**.



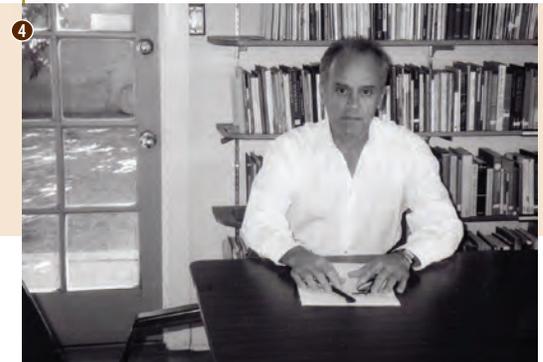
University of Arizona Creative Writing Professor **Jane Miller** first read at the Poetry Center in **1986**. This portrait by LaVerne Harrell Clark was taken at her September **1992** reading.



**Sandra Alcosser** has read twice for the Poetry Center, first in **1992** and then as part of the Center’s “*Oh Earth, Wait for Me:*” *Conversations about Art and Ecology* series in 2009.

Photos: 1, Alison Deming; 2, LaVerne Harrell Clark; 3, 4, Unknown

In addition to nine volumes of poetry, **W. S. Di Piero** has published translations of Italian works and books of art and literary criticism. He read for the Poetry Center in **1993** and **2001**.



board members who contributed time, money, and influence, as needed. In addition, the Center partnered with the Humanities Seminars Program, which offers non-credit courses “for community members in serious pursuit of intellectual stimulation and enrichment,” and lacked a permanent home on campus. Their constituency joined ours in common purpose and raised funds for an elegant presentation space at the new Center.

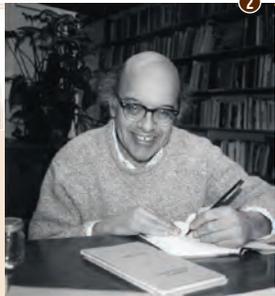
My confidence in community support had grown over the years I served as Director (1990–2002). It seems worth backtracking now to consider a moment in the Poetry Center’s history when I began to appreciate the robust interest in poetry and the unique strengths of our community. In 1992, Larry Evers and Ofelia Zepeda launched a semester-long course and reading series out of the American Indian Studies Program, cosponsored by the Poetry Center and Department of English. “Poetics and Politics” brought thirteen of the most accomplished American Indian writers (including Simon Ortiz, Joy Harjo, N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko) to campus for readings. The series began with standing room only in the customary lecture hall seating a few hundred audience members. Each week the reading was moved to a larger hall, as the audience swelled. We wondered if we’d end up in the basketball stadium. It did not quite come to that, but the point was made out loud that there was a much more committed audience for poetry in Tucson than even we partisans had suspected. Beyond that, I became more convinced

that special interests in the audience for poetry are a good thing and need not be a source for contention. There are indeed multiple audiences for poetry.

If we hosted a reading for an avant-garde poet, that brought a different audience than did a populist poet or a Latino poet or a new formalist poet or a bio-acoustical composer or a celebration by high school students of the traditional corrido, a border ballad form. Some audiences were large, some small, some constituencies overlapped and intersected with one another, but they were always varied, and in love with the art of poetry. One tends to celebrate only the big numbers, but in the life of poetry it is essential to also celebrate the many small traditions that exist within this large and encompassing and unfolding form of expression. This ethos reminds us to continue asking: Who’s included? Who needs to be included? Perhaps our longest-standing program addresses some of the most neglected citizens, the prison writers’ workshop. All of these experiences with the poetry audience in Tucson spoke, as we considered our expansion, about a community—both the city and the university—that wants to be a great place for the arts and understands how deep and broad its legacy in the arts goes. While state support for both education and the arts in Arizona is dismal and diminishing, we continue to have enough citizens who care about these values for us to know that their support will be there.



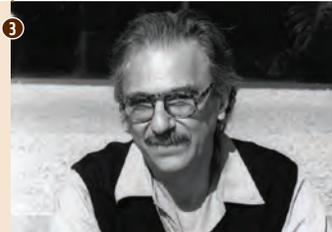
**Benjamin Alire Sáenz** read at the Poetry Center in 1993, shortly after his first book of poems, *Calendar of Dust*, won the American Book Award.



Acclaimed poet **Gerald Stern** has won the Ruth Lilly Prize, the National Book Award, and the Wallace Stevens Award. He read for the Poetry Center in 1983, 1994, and 2002.



**Gustaf Sobin** was a U.S.-born writer who, for more than 40 years, wove the history, sensations, and language of his adopted Provence into his poetry and prose. He read on February 7, 1997, and the Poetry Center held a tribute to him on March 6, 2010.



Photos: 1, LaVerne Harell Clark; 2, 3, Christine Krikitiwy

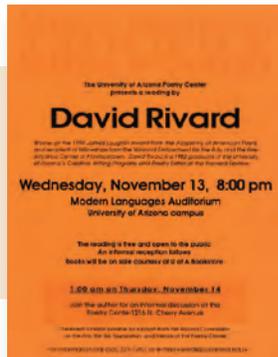
The design challenges for the new building were great: how to make a space large enough to house the collection and its anticipated growth while retaining a feeling of intimacy; how to provide access to an irreplaceable collection of books, recordings, and photographs while protecting and preserving these resources for the future; how to provide a welcoming space for public events hosting several hundred people while offering silence and refuge; how to foster interaction between community and university members while leaving space for solitary reading and reflection. It will come as no surprise then that the overarching theme of the building's design, as conceived by our gifted architect Les Wallach and his firm, Line and Space LLC, was "contradiction = inspiration."

The building has become a landmark, its opening celebrated by over 2,000 people who attended the day of festivities and performances in fall 2007. Landmarks serve as navigational guides and the new Poetry Center serves that function well, drawing in a growing range of audiences. New stories of artistic apprenticeship are finding a habitat in which to grow. Local writers offer classes and workshops that support the work of other local writers. In addition to library patrons and reading series audiences, new constituencies that frequent the Center include young children and their families who come for Saturday programs called Poetry Joeys; K-12 students visiting on library field trips; high school poets on a Corrido Field Day or Poetry Out Loud

competition; and retirees attending the burgeoning Humanities Seminars Program who have joined in discussion groups on poetry and prose.

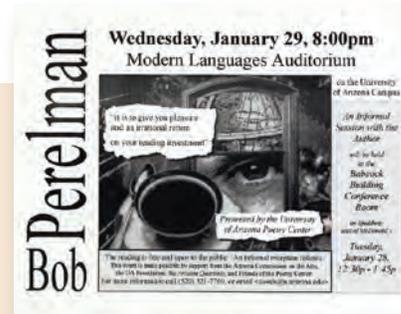
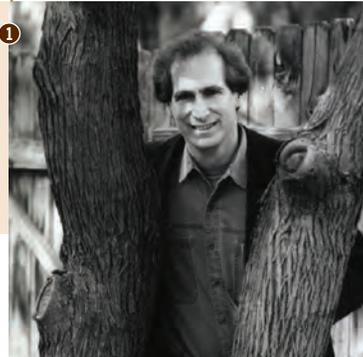
Early in the design process, the Center held a salon with Poetry Center staff, community volunteers, and architects to brainstorm about the relationship between poetry and architecture. Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* came into the conversation. Poetry is a form of "protected intimacy," he wrote. "The house allows one to dream in peace." The private life of the mind is the province of the poet, and the core principle governing this province is the faith that by attending to inner imperatives, framing them within the constraints of artistic/linguistic form, the poet reaches out to reveal our shared humanity out of which the spirit of community rises.

Bachelard tells the story of the French poet Saint-Pol-Roux, who bought a fisherman's cottage perched on a dune of the Breton coast. The poet designed and built around this humble hut a many-towered manor where he and his family lived. "And soon, bound up in my egotism," Saint-Pol-Roux wrote, "I forget, upstart peasant that I am, that the original reason for the manor house was, through antithesis, to enable me to really see the cottage." I think often of that relationship between hut and manor, when marveling at our spectacular new building and all the responsibilities it places on us who are for the moment custodians of its future. Our origins as an institution rose quite literally out of a couple of rundown cottages. And poetry is a humble



David Rivard is a graduate of The University of Arizona's Creative Writing program.

Bob Perelman read for the Poetry Center on January 29, 1997.



Photos: 1, Alison Deming; 2, Karen Falkenstrom

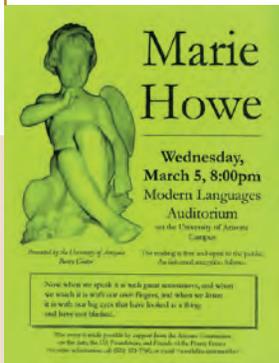


Included among the L=A=N=G=U=A=A=E poets, Leslie Scalapino read for the Poetry Center on February 22, 1989, and returned on September 24, 1997. This photo dates from the latter visit.

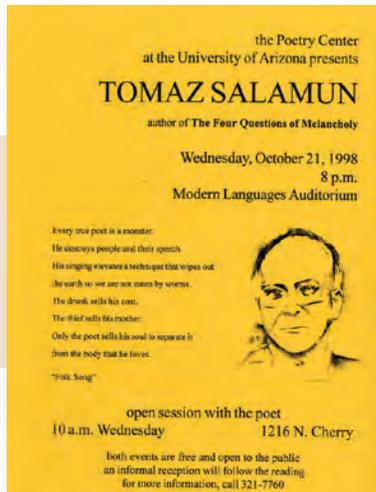
citizen of the art world, not given to commodification or stardom. How the small art/language/culture is to survive with integrity within the large is a question for our time that has many resonances. I take the metaphor to heart and celebrate one particular resonance: poetry is the hut; community is the manor.

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Marie Howe read from her then-forthcoming book, *What the Living Do*, on March 5, 1997. Audiences today still recount the awed silence in the auditorium after she read from these stunning elegies for her brother who died of AIDS.



Slovenian poet **Tomaz Salamun** was Consul of Slovenia when he read at the Poetry Center on October 21, 1998. A considerable body of his work has been translated into English.



Internationally renowned Chinese poet **Bei Dao** read for the Poetry Center in Chinese on March 3, 1999. College of Humanities Associate Dean, Dennis Evans, read the translations.



Photos: 1, Dennis Evans; 2, Alison Deming



Eleni Sikelianos read with Jane Miller as part of the *Now and Next Series* on December 1, 1999.

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**TO GATHER AND APPEAL: A Community Orientation to Poetry**

*Gail Browne and Frances Sjöberg*

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA POETRY CENTER'S fifth decade is marked by an explosion of growth fueled by the tenacity, resolve, and vision of numerous individuals. Foremost among these visionaries is our founder Ruth Stephan, who left us, as stewards of the Center, with a charge to “maintain and cherish the spirit of poetry.” This seems easy enough upon first impression, but the more one lives with this founding mission, the more complicated it becomes. What exactly is the spirit of poetry? Is it distinct from poetry itself? Stephan defines her term elsewhere, in *Notes Toward Developing a Poetry Collection*, where she writes, “spirit is the instigator and flow of all revolutions, whether political or personal, whether national, world-wide or within the life of a single quiet human being.” This charge, then, is kaleidoscopic. We are to foster the instigation and flow of a poem. And of poetry. And of the revolution of poetry.

By the Center's fifth decade, this explosion of growth was necessary to resolve dueling expectations for the Center. Patrons wanted, in equal parts, a dynamic gathering place and a site for solitude and reflection. The Helen S. Schaefer Building resolves the meeting–retreating contradiction through an architectural progression toward solitude. The building itself allows for a classroom of eighty adults to explore *Political Shakespeare* in the Dorothy Rubel Humanities Seminars Room while just outside, and visible through a glass wall, students from an elementary school recite poetry in the

Hillman Odeum. Concurrently, in the Michael and Helen Dobrich Library, a graduate student peruses literary journals, researching where she might submit her own poems. And in the Randall Rodman Holdridge Reading Area, tucked among the stacks, relaxed into a leather armchair, someone sits quietly out of sight with a slender volume of poems.

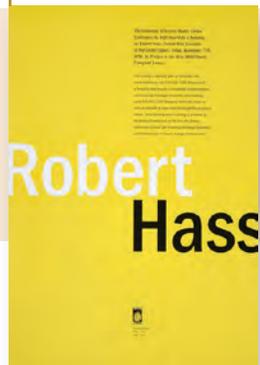
In 2000–2001, under Director Jim Paul, the Poetry Center's Reading Series was presented under the title *Wide Open: Poetry in the Larger World*. Poet Barbara Cully read for the Series that year. In an interview published the day of her reading, Cully said,

Before I had the opportunity to read my poems publicly, I wrote poems quietly to myself that others might read quietly to themselves. After reading publicly, a shift happened and I became aware of my lyrical voice as a gift that I wanted to bring across to an audience. So reading, I think, is one way to make one's set of intentions larger.<sup>1</sup>

A similar shift happened at the Poetry Center when we became aware of the myriad possibilities in the new space, gifts we wanted to bring across to an audience—to all of our audiences at once in fact. Our aim was to create something spectacular for the “larger world,” for those we had served in the past and those we hoped to serve in the future. And we wanted to emphasize that the Poetry Center, despite the spectacle, is an intimate space where all are

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Robert Hass celebrated the Poetry Center's 40th Anniversary with a reading at St. Phillips in the Hills Episcopal Church on November 17, 2000.



Poet and spoken-word artists **Tracie Morris** and **D.J. Renegade** headlined the Poetry Center's Mondo Hip Hop event at the Rialto Theatre in downtown Tucson on October 27, 2000.



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Photo: 1, Christine Krikliwiy



Poet and classicist **Anne Carson** read for the Poetry Center on February 21, 2001.

welcome. The design and construction of the Helen S. Schaefer Building, its ability to house the world-wide alongside a quiet human moment, was a feat to celebrate. Thus, to inaugurate the new building, we planned (and planned and planned) a Housewarming Festival.

The experience of the Housewarming Festival in October 2007 was breathtaking. More than 2,000 people filled the new building, participating in carefully orchestrated and spontaneous events throughout. There were readings by nationally renowned poets in the Hillman Odeum and readings by high-school students and contest winners from the stairwell overlooking the library. There were scavenger hunts as readers of all ages sought treasures of facts and lines on the walls, in the books, and on the spines. Bookmakers and public artists oversaw Post and Bind, an event in which writers composed poems from prompts as their works-in-progress were projected on computers and walls so people could observe the act of a poem being written. Meanwhile, individuals queued up with sheets of paper to have their pages folded, stacked, punched, and stitched by an assembly line of artists so people could observe the act of a book being bound. Performing poets of Typing Explosion, outfitted in 1960s secretarial garb, set to work on a series of collaborative poems, taking requests from patrons and then hammering away on their keys, communicating by way of bells and whistles, pulling sheets from one typewriter to hand off and scroll quickly into the next so that

somehow, miraculously, at the end of the line a finished poem was presented to its commissioner. Meanwhile, kids in the Children's Corner worked with prompts of their own dispensed by a magic box, drafting elements of a fantastic tale. When the kids were through, Stories that Soar actors took to the stage, weaving the kids' own lines into their performance. All this time, on the ground, a corps of visual artists created chalk portraits of poets on the sidewalks in the breezeway and in the Mary Dearing Lewis Garden. Stilt-walkers and acrobats of Flam Chen wove their way among the crowds, calling attention, at the proper moment, to a poet-spirit reeled down from the sky to chant, inspire, and drop lines of poetry to the people below before gracefully floating skyward by way of giant helium balloons.

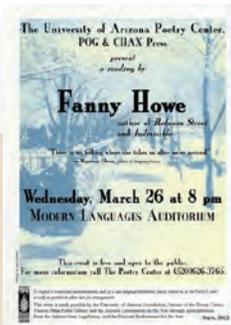
This was the first time in the history of the Poetry Center that almost all of the communities it serves—as well as people who had never before set foot in the Center—came together at the same moment to marvel at the proliferative gift of the written and spoken word. Our new architecture did not create the Poetry Center, but it created a home capacious enough to embrace all of its potential. The Housewarming Festival inaugurated the new cultural center we had become. The message sent that day was that the Poetry Center is a place where literary aspirations are realized, and it is also a space of creative exploration for the community at large.



**1** Gail Browne became Executive Director of the Poetry Center in 2002. Under her leadership, the Poetry Center moved into the Helen S. Schaefer Building.



**2** Fanny Howe has written over 30 books of poetry and prose. She read for the Poetry Center, for the first time, on March 26, 2003.



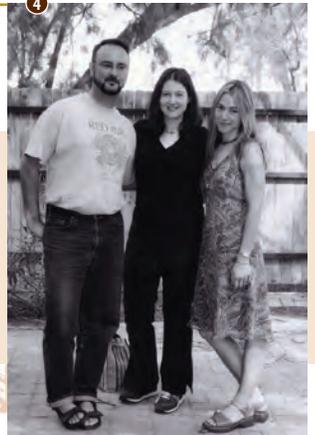
The Howe Reading was co-sponsored by Tucson literary groups POG and Chax Press.



**3** A former student in the University of Arizona MFA Creative Writing Program, Li-Young Lee read from his work on September 10, 2003.



The Poetry Center's Next Word Series highlights new poetic voices. The series was inaugurated in October 2003 with poets James Thomas Stevens, Matthea Harvey, and Olena Kalaytiak Davis.



**4** Photos: 1, 2, 3, 4, Christine Krikiuy

Most importantly, the Housewarming Festival would not have occurred without a fanatical staff and an army of volunteers, who thought through, set up, and oversaw every tiny detail. In 2000, the Poetry Center was run by four employees and a couple of part-time student workers. They were a dedicated lot, each person stretching his or her job description like a newly winged creature pushing against the fibers of a cocoon. Building on tradition and on the goodwill of its tiny staff, the Poetry Center started to grow, envisioning and embarking on new programs, taking inspiration from everywhere and hawking its wares to new audiences wherever they might be found.

## Two Roads Converged

On an April afternoon in 2001 Gail Browne stepped into the Poetry Center on Cherry Avenue for the first time. This was her first visit to Tucson a fact-finding excursion to determine whether she would relocate from California. She was about to relinquish her share of a San Francisco-based arts marketing business in order to pursue a lifelong interest in poetry.

*I remember my initial excitement that a poetry library of this magnitude should exist in such a relatively small city. There wasn't anything like it in Bay Area or Los Angeles. But because it looked like a private residence I wasn't sure*

*how welcome I would be. I was coming from out of state, was a stranger, and felt insecure about my place here. Nonetheless, I was captivated by the Poetry Center's charm—it felt like a space that had been well loved and tended to over the years. I wanted to come back and dig deeper, to mine the collection for what it had to offer. Still, I had a hard time believing it was available to me, as a member of the general public, to access and appreciate.*

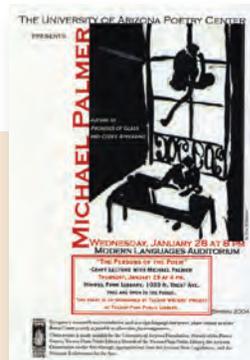
Frances Sjöberg had attended Poetry Center readings in the Modern Languages Auditorium for years, but in the late 1990s she began to spend time in the library itself, embarking on a rigorous self-guided study of modern and contemporary poetry. When a staff member left unexpectedly, she offered to help out until a replacement could be found. Shortly thereafter Director Alison Deming recruited her to apply for the job.

*As a guest in the library, I would move from room to garden to room, reading or listening to poetry. I was keenly aware of how rare this space was, and I entered rarified time whenever I pulled an out-of-print book off the shelf and found a quiet, sunlit spot to delve into it. When I wasn't reading, Program Coordinator Christine Krikliwy would regale me with stories and gossip of the Center. The history moved me, and when I began to work at the Center, I truly felt I was honoring a history as well as serving the present time. For the next nine years, I continued to study, filling in a map of poetry, with the Center as my compass.*

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**Michael Palmer** read for the Poetry Center on January 28, 2004, and returned in 2010 as a participant in *Words Through: A Tribute to Gustaf Sobin*.

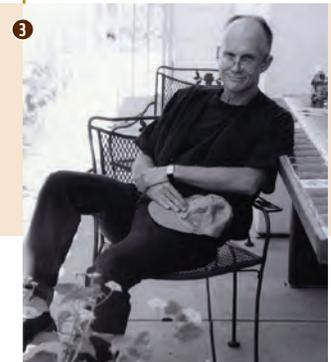


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Photos: 1,3, Christine Krikliwy; 2, Unknown



After the demolition of the Cherry Avenue bungalows in late 2003, the Poetry Center moved to a University building on the corner of First Street and Cherry.



UA Creative Writing alumnus **Tony Hoagland** read for the Poetry Center and delivered a lecture in September 2004.

Nine months after Gail visited the Poetry Center for the first time, she was hired as its executive director. She brought entrepreneurial and marketing skills to a community of supporters who were determined to move the Center out of that quaint bungalow into a home worthy of its history and its holdings. She teamed up with Frances to envision that future and to chart a course to get there. Gail managed the capital campaign and worked with the architects at Line and Space LLC on the new building design and construction. Frances took the reins to direct and develop programs in order to fill that new environment. Together, they worked on organizational development to bring it all together.

*Our sustained gaze throughout was fixed on this moment, the point in time when the Poetry Center would be built and occupied by a steady flow of engaged visitors and a dedicated team that gives whatever it takes to create a place greater than any one of us. Our aim was to celebrate the poets and community members for whom the Center exists. And to find like-minded, strong-willed colleagues on whom we could rely to tenaciously advance the work of the Center. It was our good luck to embark on this project, with such people, at this time.<sup>2</sup>*

### A Public–Private Partnership

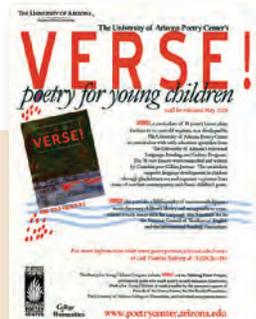
From the start, the Center has been sustained by the University of Arizona. Upon receiving the gift of the Poetry Center from Ruth Stephan in 1960, President Harvill emphasized the great need for the study of literature alongside the University’s developments in research science and technology, citing the fundamental value of humanistic studies in dealing with practical problems. The Center was moved from its original home to accommodate the widening of Speedway Boulevard in 1989. A decade later, when the Poetry Center was at the outer edge of its capacity, on the cusp of being moved from one set of temporary quarters to another in order to make way for the world renowned Bio5 Institute, a group of community advocates came together to insist the vision of Ruth Stephan and President Harvill be upheld.

In the late 1990s, College of Humanities Dean Charles Tatum and Associate Dean Dennis Evans assembled a group of arts and humanities supporters to pool resources, share contacts, and advocate for a permanent home for the Center. Among the leaders of this group was arts patron Helen S. Schaefer, who agreed to chair a development committee. A chemist by training, Helen was versed in poetry from a very young age. Helen and the others who banded around the goal of creating a permanent home for the Poetry Center had unique reasons to dedicate themselves to the project. The common thread



1

The official groundbreaking for the new Helen S. Schaefer Building took place on May 5, 2005. Pictured: Gail Browne, John Schaefer, Helen Schaefer, President Peter Likins, and College of Humanities Dean Charles Tatum.



The Poetry Center developed a number of programs aimed at cultivating a love of language in children. The cornerstone of these programs is a curriculum of 38 poetry lessons for 4 to 10 year olds.



2

The Poetry Center continues to administer prizes for excellence in poetry for University of Arizona students, including the Hattie Lockett Award, the Academy of American Poets, Margaret Sterling, and Poetry Center Prizes. The LaVerne Harrell Clark Fiction Award was instituted in 2009. Shown above are poetry contest winners in the spring of 2006.

Carolyn Forché read for the Poetry Center twice during the 2000s, in March 2002 and again in February 2007. She taught a two-day course in our Classes and Workshops program during the 2007 visit.



3

Photos: 1, 2,3; Christine Krikliuuy

among them was the belief that the literary arts play a crucial role in ensuring a thoughtful, progressive culture.

It is well and good that an active Tucson arts patron like Helen had an interest in the Center, but the question was raised: would individual supporters answer the call to invest nearly \$5 million to preserve a space for poetry? The first gift, given in 1998 by Colleen and Jim Burns, was a leap of faith in College of Humanities and Poetry Center leadership, and also in the generosity of our community.

Shortly thereafter, UA alumnus Randall Holdridge and former managing editor of the *Tucson Citizen*, George Rosenberg, took the initiative to write a case statement for the new building. The Poetry Center joined forces with the Humanities Seminars Program, a rapidly growing lifelong learning program for adults. Like the Center, the Humanities Seminars Program promotes literary and humanistic studies to deepen engagement with and strengthen understanding of our individual and collective experiences. George had been influential in other arts revitalization projects such as the restoration of the Temple of Music and Art. As one of the founding members of the Humanities Seminars Program, he headed up the effort of that group to raise \$500,000 to build a room in the new building where the seminars would be held. Randall, a retired educator and school administrator, is an avid reader whose interests span a wide range of subjects. Combing through Poetry Center scrapbooks

and archives reinforced for Randall that the library collection was extremely valuable, and that there was a genuine need in Tucson to house these books in a dignified setting. In his words, “Tucson deserved to have something that represents high literary culture. The Poetry Center was that something.”

As the vision grew, so grew the number of visionaries who came forward to lend a hand. Jimmye Hillman, a UA emeritus professor of economics, once stated that agricultural trade policy “has to be concerned with the question of how to build a community.”<sup>3</sup> This statement could as easily apply to Jimmye’s support of the Poetry Center. Jimmye worked with Marshall Fealk, a local attorney, to secure a leadership gift from the estates of writer Jeremy Ingalls and Mary Dearing Lewis. This gift confirmed the community’s commitment to see the project through. The momentum was met by the University of Arizona, which upheld its promise to exchange Ruth Stephan’s gifts of property for the parcel of land on which the Helen S. Schaefer Building currently sits and also provided \$1.9 million toward construction costs.

The Center’s ability to define our community was enhanced by writers and students of poetry who came from outside the usual English department and publishing house channels. Tony Luebberrmann and Colleen Burns turned their full attention to literature after retirement. They are not only Poetry Center advocates and advisors, they are active participants and library users. Win Bundy, proprietor of Singing Wind Bookshop at her ranch in Benson,



1

Construction of the Helen S. Schaefer Building began in the late spring of 2006 and was completed by the summer of 2007. On a “hard hat” tour of the site are former president **Peter Likins**, president **Robert Shelton**, **Helen Schaefer**, **Gail Browne**, architect **Les Wallach** and builder **Harold Ashton**.



In June 2007, the Poetry Center held a three-day symposium, *Native Voices: Indigenous Language and Poetry*. The symposium brought together acclaimed Native writers from Mexico to Alaska.

Leslie Marmon Silko gave the keynote address.



2



3

On *Native Voices*, the Poetry Center collaborated with UA Professor **Ofelia Zepeda**, director of the American Indian Language Development Institute.



4

Poet **Sherwin Bitsui** delivered an *Image Speak* workshop at the symposium.

Photos: 1 Unknown; 2,3,4, Christine Krikliuw

Arizona, brought her passion for books and her unstoppable can-do attitude to the Poetry Center's development committee. Win insisted that everyone recognize—as she did—the long reach and absolute relevance of the Poetry Center to *everyone* in our community.

These early gifts and affirmations signaled the moment the Poetry Center became attuned to the fact that “the question of how to build a community” is intricately bound with the question of how “to maintain and cherish the spirit of poetry.” The public–private partnership we were engaged in to construct the new building compelled us to strengthen existing services and identify new programs to meet community interests and needs.<sup>4</sup>

### Engaging Readers and Writers

Building audience for the Reading Series has been a longstanding mission of the Poetry Center and was something at which our predecessors excelled. Of all the programs offered by the Poetry Center, the Reading Series is still, after 48 years, the mainstay. The challenge of the 2000s was to deepen community engagement beyond the Series, to offer a variety of approaches to encounter poetry, and to make these encounters meaningful to readers and writers with varying degrees of experience.

Lectures and panel discussions were woven into the Reading Series program to give audiences an opportunity to better understand the poetic and aesthetic concerns of a visiting writer. In the Helen S. Schaefer Building we reinvented the 1960s Coffee Hour program, in which faculty previewed the work of visiting writers before a reading. Shop Talks on poetry and A Closer Look Book Club on prose explore the works of visiting writers and encourage dynamic reading of great literature by providing facilitated and stimulating discussions among peers.

We developed The Next Word in Poetry, a series within the series that features two or three emerging writers for a reading and conversation. The series evolved from a program that poet Jane Miller suggested in 2000 called Now and Next: Poetry for the New Millennium, in which an accomplished poet introduced a rising star. It also extended the spirit captured in some of our most valuable early recordings, such as the 1972 reading by a very young Ai, recently graduated from University of California at Irvine, discussing her strong aesthetic, her new name, and her sources of inspiration. This recording became increasingly valuable as Ai continued to develop her aesthetic and became, herself, a source of inspiration for other young artists. Since 2003, through The Next Word in Poetry, we have brought almost 30 emerging writers to Tucson, each of whom we expect to captivate us for many years to come.



A formal dedication ceremony was held for the Helen S. Schaefer Building on the evening of October 13, 2007. Speakers included Robert Shelton, Ofelia Zepeda, Congresswoman **Gabrielle Giffords**, **Stewart Udall**, **Helen Schaefer** and poets Billy Collins, Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Alberto Rios, and Alison Deming.

**Brenda Hillman** wrote a poem, “To a Desert Poet,” for the Dedication. Iowa City Emyprean Press printed a broadside for the occasion.



The October 14, 2007 Housewarming Festival featured performances by **Fiam Chen** and a standing room only reading by **Billy Collins**.

Photos: 1, 2, 3, 4, Christine Krikliuwy; 5, 6, Tom Willett

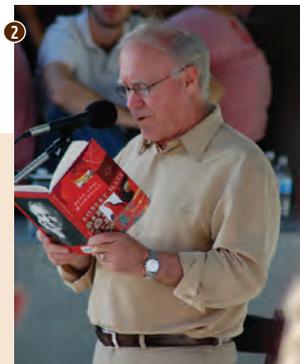
Library displays and art exhibitions by local artists add another dimension to readings and lectures. The Helen S. Schaefer Building is a gathering place not just for people who love literature but for arts patrons of all persuasions. In the Jeremy Ingalls Gallery we mount exhibitions of treasures from our collection and present the work of professional and student artists, whose projects make direct links to our programs or use the library collection as a point of departure. Because the Poetry Center now presents most of its readings in the Dorothy Rubel Humanities Seminars Room, which has a sliding glass wall to accommodate up to 500 people in an indoor–outdoor presentation space, reading audiences are now able to view these exhibitions when they come for an event. More and more the Poetry Center is thought of as not just a library and reading series, but as a cultural center that celebrates the interrelation of literature, music, dance, theatre, and visual art.

The Helen S. Schaefer Building also prompted us to cultivate the Center as an international destination for the exploration of poetry and poetics through symposia. Although a delay in construction prevented us from presenting our first symposium, *Native Voices: Indigenous Language and Poetry*, at the Center itself, it defined the impact we are able to have and the significant effect of bringing together leading artists with shared artistic concerns. In partnership with the renowned American Indian Language Development Institute, we brought more than a dozen distinguished native writers and storytellers

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Gail Browne and Frances Sjoberg enjoy the festivities.



Robert Hass reads in the Hillman Odeum.

from the U.S. and Mexico to advance a discussion of the role of literature in preserving and enlivening endangered indigenous languages. *Conceptual Poetry and Its Others*, our second symposium, curated by critic Marjorie Perloff, was presented in May 2008. Once again, poets and scholars from around the world attended the events. The symposium spawned subsequent books, articles, and collaborations among participants, demonstrating that our symposia have the power to launch multinational literary conversations.

For writers of poetry and prose, our Classes and Workshops Program offers instruction and support. But this program has value for students and teachers alike. Students learn to hone their craft while teachers are given the opportunity to extend their thinking about literature through the lens of their own creative and instructive works.

Building on the writers-in-the-schools programs developed by Lois Shelton and Alison Deming, we attempt to reach as many students and teachers as possible by investing in curriculum-based K–12 programs. The development of *VERSE! Poetry for Young Children*, a collection of 38 standards-based lessons for four to six year olds, was a turning point for the Poetry Center's educational outreach. It provided a means for us to think about the next generation of our own audience. It enabled us to see how poetry is not something that people come to at a certain stage of life but something that can and should be a lifelong experience. Children's programs, like the Saturday morning

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Photos: 1, 2, Lisa Wise; 3, Christine Krikliuy

Performance group, **Typing Explosion**, hammers out poems on demand at The Housewarming Festival.



Poetry Joeys activities, bring into focus that poetry is a way of being in the world, more than just a subject to be studied. The Children's Corner and Anika Burns Children's Collection make this a family-centered experience.

The Bilingual Corrido Contest for Arizona High School Students gained significance beyond what we could have imagined. The curriculum we developed for this program in 2000 was meant to teach high school students about a musical ballad form popular throughout to the Mexico–U.S. border region. Developing the program was a challenge because it aimed to reach an audience we hadn't actively served before, and it asserted a musical form as literature, which challenged some of our fundamental literary assumptions. The Corrido Program has enabled us not only to serve the educators, musicians, and students who participate in the contest, but also to serve and educate ourselves about the way poetry flows through the general population independent of the academy. In recognizing the unique literary movements in the Southwest, we found one of our greatest strengths.

### Ruth Stephan and Myrtle Walgreen Collection: The Heart of the Center

Every staff person at the Poetry Center enjoys a view of the library. The administrators who work upstairs look down on it through floor-to-ceiling glass walls; the librarians downstairs are surrounded by it. Architect Les Wallach at

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The Poetry Center offers a vibrant program called **Poetry Joeys** for children ages 4 to 10. The monthly activities draw large groups of children and families who participate in fun activities that expand and develop children's language flexibility.



1



2

On April 17, 2008, **W. S. Merwin** read for the Poetry Center for the seventh time. He also spoke on "Poetry and the Natural World."

Line and Space LLC made this design decision because he understood that the library has always been the heart of the Poetry Center. Our collection documents the history of poetry publishing in America for the past 50 years. Today, as books on paper risk obsolescence, we are more aware than ever that our collection is rare. Many of our holdings are unavailable anywhere else in the world, and we're often the first library in the U.S. to acquire new books from small presses.

Right after the Housewarming Festival in 2007, our librarians began the arduous process of retrieving boxes of books from off-site storage. It took more than a year to re-integrate them into the collection, designating them for the main stacks, the archives, or rare book room. We uncovered treasure after treasure. In addition to the numerous rare and out-of-print monographs, we returned to the collection full runs of influential journals, such as *Yugen*, edited by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Tucson-based *Ironwood*, edited by Michael Cuddihy.

We still adhere to the acquisitions policy established by Ruth Stephan, although poetry publishing has proliferated in the past decade. Thus, we collect as comprehensively as we can within our financial constraints. After years of converting our card catalog to an electronic system, our records are now available through the international library database, OCLC/WorldCat.

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On September 25, 2008, **Jean Valentine** read with her friend, fellow poet **Catherine Barnett**. Valentine also visited Richard Shelton's prison writing workshop.



3

In May 2008, the Poetry Center held a three-day symposium, *Conceptual Poetry and its Others*. Curated by Marjorie Perloff, the symposium presented avant-garde artists Christian Bök, Charles Bernstein, Tracie Morris, Craig Dworkin, Caroline Bergvall, Cole Swensen, and Kenneth Goldsmith. Pictured: **Tracie Morris**.



4

Photos: 1, Frances Sjöberg; 2, 3, 4, Christine Krikliwy

Thanks to LaVerne Harrell Clark we also possess an extraordinary photography archive of contemporary American poets. After LaVerne's passing in 2008, her husband L. D. Clark donated 3000 of her negatives and prints to the Poetry Center, along with her Roloflex camera. The tradition she began of taking our visiting writers' portraits continues to this day.

For the past decade audio technicians have digitized reel-to-reel and audiocassette recordings from the 1960s through the 1990s in order to assemble them in a searchable database developed in concert with College of Humanities. Most of the original recordings were in surprisingly good condition thanks to our dry desert climate. Our new audio-video electronic database not only allows recordings to be safely listened to now, but also preserves them for future generations of readers, writers, and scholars.

Hundreds of these recordings are now available online through the Poetry Center's web site. How could we have imagined thirty or forty years ago that people from around the world would be able to hear changes in the timbre of W. S. Merwin's voice over the five decades he read for the Poetry Center? Or that Lucille Clifton's description of adventures in the desert with Lois and Richard Shelton would be shared so far and wide?

## The Poetry Center Today

We've come a far distance from the days when four employees ran the library, the reading series, and a handful of outreach programs. In 2010 the Poetry Center staff is an entirely different group of talented and equally dedicated individuals. Most have earned Master of Fine Arts degrees in creative writing and some hold advanced degrees in English literature or library science. The majority are graduates of the University of Arizona. Nearly all of them maintain active writing and publishing lives in spite of their demanding jobs. It's not an easy balance to achieve, as many artists who do something else for a living can attest, but it helps to work in a house of poetry among colleagues who share the drive to create art.

While we all still see ourselves as generalists, the day-to-day work has become more specialized. Librarians must be trained in the technologies required of our digital age. Education outreach coordinators must also be teachers in order to develop poetry curricula for students at different developmental stages. Marketing experts and web designers are necessary to communicate the full dimension of our offerings to new and diverse audiences. Event programmers negotiate a highly competitive literary industry. And fundraising is a major component of everyone's job description, not just the executive director's.



**Luci Tapahonso** and Ofelia Zepeda read from their new University of Arizona Press books of poetry on October 23, 2008.

Fiction writer  
(and poet)  
**Denis Johnson**  
read on  
April 9, 2009.



Photos: 1, Christine Krikliwy; 2, Cybele Knowles; 3,4, Rodney Phillips



"Oh Earth, Wait for Me:" *Conversations about Art and Ecology* featured readings and lectures by poets, musicians, and visual artists working with ecological issues, including UA Creative Writing Professor **Alison Hawthorne Deming** (pictured left) and **Lila Zemborain** and **Rosa Alcalá** (pictured right).



The success of the Poetry Center also depends on our extended family of hardworking volunteers who play vital roles in establishing and maintaining the atmosphere in our library. Students have volunteered at the Center since the beginning: they shelved books, cleaned up after poets in *The Fieries and the Snuffies* cottage, and kept the library open during evenings and weekends. Recently, we have made deliberate efforts to also recruit members of the Tucson community. These volunteers are retirees with a long history with the Poetry Center, newcomers looking for a connection to Tucson's literary scene, and recent MFA graduates wanting to sustain a close connection to a place they love. They sit at the front desk and greet every visitor who enters to the Poetry Center. If, as poet Steve Orlen says, "the Poetry Center is the best living room in American to read poetry," then it's important to have someone friendly at the front door to say, "Come on in."

In addition to receiving guests, volunteers and interns help with nearly every aspect of Poetry Center business, from setting up chairs and administering surveys to adding dust jackets and security tags to books. Volunteers with specialized skills and experience create databases and storage systems for sensitive documents and ephemera. Docents are trained to lead tours, offer special insight into the collection, and entertain visitors with stories from the Center's past. Interns training in library science provide systems maintenance, processing support, and research for the Audio Video Library. Interns

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The Poetry Center gathered with friends and writers on March 6, 2010 to celebrate the work of late poet **Gustaf Sobin** in a tribute, *Words Through*, titled for a line in one of Sobin's poems. Participants came from as far away as Mexico City, Georgia, San Francisco, and New Jersey. Pictured: poet and Sobin literary co-executor, **Andrew Zawacki**.



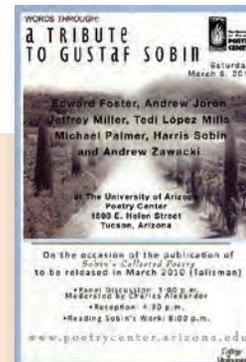
In 2004 Mexico City poet **Tedi López Mills** read from *While Light is Built*, published by Kore Press and translated by Wendy Burk. She returned to the Poetry Center in 2010 for the Sobin tribute.

training in arts administration work in marketing, events coordination, and curriculum development. Interns also lead poetry activities and field trips for classes of students from preschool to grad school.

### The Future of the Poetry Center

The Helen S. Schaefer Building demands sustained engagement with multiple audiences in order to fully capture the potential of the building and its grounds. New technologies enable the Poetry Center to extend this engagement beyond our physical landmark into electronic frontiers. As we continue to serve audiences, both near and far, we will keep focused on the Center's most distinguishing features. Our librarians will acquire more rare and unique works of contemporary poetry, increasing the value of an already priceless archive. Our programs will continue to challenge experienced writers and readers, and we will continue to create thresholds for new audiences to enter. As we engage individuals across generations, we will explore new performance techniques and interdisciplinary approaches to convey *the proliferate gift of the written and spoken word*. We will provide more online resources and our digital interface will become increasingly elegant and accessible. Whether mining the Audio Video Library or experiencing virtual symposia, audiences outside of Arizona will have access to our diverse

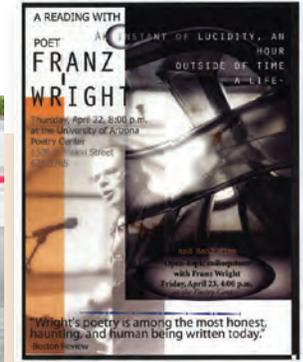
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Photos: 1, 2, 3, Rodney Phillips



Pulitzer Prize-winning poet **Franz Wright** read for the Poetry Center on April 22, 2010. Son of the late poet James Wright, Franz was enthusiastic to come to Tucson because his father had spoken so highly of his visits to Arizona.



resources. The Poetry Center will be known as a place where literary discourse begins and flourishes, where creative explorations abound—a place of long reach and relevance to everyone in our community, both here and beyond.

1 Graig Uhlin, “UA Lecturer to Give Public Reading of Poetry,” *Arizona Daily Wildcat*, Sept. 27, 2000.

2 During the 2000–2010 era, we had the good fortune, between us, to work with the following Poetry Center staff members: Renee Angle, Timothy Bell, Wendy Burk, Michael DeHart, Alison Deming, Ann Fine, Annie Guthrie, Cybele Knowles, Christine Krikliwy, Mauryne Maxwell, Bonnie Jean Michalski, Jim Paul, Rodney Phillips, and Michael Rerick. We also worked with numerous excellent student workers, interns, volunteers, consultants and contractors. Without the hard work and care of these individuals the Poetry Center would not be where it is today.

3 George B. Frisvold, “Jimmy S. Hillman: An Interview,” *Arizona Review: Economic Perspectives on Arizona’s Agricultural and Natural Resources*, Volume 2.2, Fall 2004.

4 It’s impossible to name everyone who contributed to the success of the Poetry Center’s capital campaign, but we would be remiss not to mention Tom Sanders and the other development committee members—in addition to those named in this essay—who served from the early to mid-2000s, including Alison Deming, Norma Feldman, Richard Johnson, James Lipsey, Richard and Lois Shelton, Harris Sobin, and James P. Walsh. Recent members of the development committee help us to re-envision the committee’s work in order to understand and meet the needs of the Poetry Center’s next generation: James Hensley, Matthew Myers, Susan Wallach, and Lisa Wise.

The Poetry Center’s Statewide Bilingual Corrido Contest for High School Students, celebrating the popular Mexican ballad form, marked its tenth anniversary in **2010**. First place winner **Araceli Valenzuela** performs with **Mariachi Rayos del Sol** from Tucson High School.



Photos: 1, Unknown; 2, Robert Reck



The award-winning Helen S. Schaefer Building, new home of the Poetry Center.

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This book was printed on recycled Cougar smooth opaque text with vegetable based inks using 100% new wind energy at Arizona Lithographers in Tucson Arizona.