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## The pull of poetry

New Madison poet laureate Steven Espada Dawson stays open to various routes

BY **SAMUEL ANNIS** SEPTEMBER 8, 2024 8:00 AM



JAMES KREUL

## Steven Espada Dawson looks to bring ‘poetry and possibility to disenfranchised communities.’

While he was still in high school, Madison poet laureate Steven Espada Dawson saw an announcement for a poetry contest. The prize? A new iPod, which Dawson’s mom, a Mexican immigrant raising two children on income from her graveyard shift job at a call center, would not have been able to afford.

In a characteristically bold move, Dawson wrote his first poem, submitted it to the contest, and won. The punchline to the story is typical of Dawson’s humor: His was the only submission to the contest.

Dawson, who took the reins of poet laureate from Angela Trudell Vasquez this spring, is also the development and communications coordinator at Madison’s Arts + Literature Laboratory. Our conversation over Zoom took place just days after Dawson put the finishing touches on his first book manuscript, *Late to the Search Party*, which will be published by Scribner in 2025. His face, lit by the glow from his computer, becomes animated with humor as he tells this story. Despite his head fog from a recent bout with COVID, Dawson is talkative and quick to laugh.

His poems, infused with biography, are also rich with comedy, like the moment in his poem “Elegy for the Four Chambers of My Heart” when he writes: “My dentist is the closest/thing I ever had/to a father.”

**Poetry was not initially in Dawson’s plans** when he started college. While studying pre-med, Dawson was conducting interviews with medical researchers for a class assignment. The final question was what their career would

be, if not their current job. Each response, he says, included a look of regret before the respondents gave answers like “a painter” or “a writer.” Following this project, Dawson shifted his own major to creative writing. Just one more example of his “embracing change,” he says.

As the first high school graduate in his immediate family, he adds, “no matter what decision I made, I was going further than expected.”

These alternate routes were, for him, other imaginable worlds, as he writes in the poem “Self-Portrait as Moon Corpse,” places where he might “search for my life/in stranger’s wheel wells, under fingernails, halfway up/chimney trunks, every suburban breakfast nook.”

Dawson’s poetry often deals with his efforts to understand himself, his history, and his family. Frequently, one dissolves into the other, as he writes in “Elegy for the Four Chambers of My Heart”:

*I’m always looking*

*for a mirror with a family inside it.*

*If a mirror breaks, which shard is the family?*

*There are so many ways to hold yourself*

*Hostage. I'm still learning to love my captor.*

With work this personal, who is Dawson writing for?

“A younger version of myself,” he says, even as he wryly acknowledges that if he could go back in time, the “old me would kick my ass.”

But he is also writing for others. Like the stranger who wrote him to say he would be reading one of Dawson’s poems at the funeral of his sister. This is what sustains Dawson, the “camaraderie from strangers” who are touched enough by Dawson’s work to contact him and relate how much a given poem meant.

Dawson sees the post of poet laureate of Madison as an opportunity “to bring more poetry and possibility to disenfranchised communities,” in particular, those whose lives are intertwined with the criminal justice system.

Dawson’s own experience proves that “art is a way we can imagine the world differently,” he says. With his new platform, Dawson hopes to introduce poetry to those who otherwise might never get a chance to experience the transformative power of artistic expression, whatever the medium might be.

His current project pipeline includes a potential collaboration with Odyssey Beyond Bars, a UW-affiliated project aimed at supporting currently incarcerated individuals in achieving a college education.

How would Dawson today answer the question he posed to the researchers back during his pre-med days: “What would you be, if not this?”

Dawson laughs and says “I would hope to be a novelist or an essayist, because that’s where the big bucks are, my friend!” He pauses. “But despite calling myself a writer more and more, my initial bodily pull is as a poet.”

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