

June 4, 2012

Dear Madison Arts Commissioners:

Thank you for inviting us to provide you with some materials regarding discussion around the evolution of the Poet Laureate position here in Madison. We have been meeting with various individuals around Madison as we seek to define and understand this position, and we are happy to welcome your comments, ideas and feedback as well, either as individuals or as a Commission.

As you probably know, originally the awarding of a Laureateship was a true crowning (with laurel leaves, hence the name) of the *best* poet, on the basis of their poem(s). However, the position here in the US has evolved with time. On a national level, this is clear when we think of how each Laureate chooses a project to focus on during their tenure. We see this more service-oriented approach as the most sensible way to understand the Madison position as well. Certainly neither of us believes we are the *best* poets in this town of so many strong and interesting and diverse writers. Therefore, we follow in Fabu's footsteps, choosing to focus on the service we can offer to this art and this community that we feel so deeply toward.

Assessing our own strengths, we determined that two immediate areas of service we can try to offer are 1 ) to place poetry within the city in new and surprising ways. This includes incorporating poetry into the fabric of daily life, getting poems in front of people who would not ordinarily read or listen to poetry; and 2 ) helping to define and focus the position of Madison Poet Laureate, with an eye to encouraging applicants, and raising the profile of the position so that it will draw more applicants in the future.

When we picked up the Laureate mantel, we learned that there are two projects which are current, are expected to continue, and yet need funding: the Bus Lines program, and the John Tuschon Laureate fund. It is our understanding that there is some expectation that the Poets Laureate should help to find the funding for these currently unfunded (or

underfunded) projects. While we are happy to appear at fundraising events, or contribute our talents in some way suitable, we think that it's important for these programs to have permanent and reliable funding. We plan to ask the City to budget \$5000 for the Bus Lines project annually, in ensure it continues. This money will cover the cost of printing. We hope you will support us in this request.

Here are some specific projects we have undertaken in these first few months:

- developing a mission statement for the position, where none existed (see below) in order to help define the position;
- arranging to take on responsibility for organizing an annual poetry marathon reading at Olbrich Gardens, previously organized by the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets;
- rewriting the guidelines for the Bus Lines program, and continuing to think about how to help that program evolve to appeal to students and to serve their interests;
- approaching the Common Council about incorporating a poem into the start of their meetings quarterly (begun on May 1 of this year);
- partnering with another local poetry publisher, Shoshauna Shy of Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, to bring out a chapbook of poems (through our press, Cowfeather) which centers around Madison locations, proceeds from which will go to the Tuschen Laureate fund;
- working with the Wisconsin Book Festival to develop poetry programming for the November festival in Madison;
- meeting with numerous leaders in poetry, the arts, and the community in order to think about how we might best serve them and partner productively during the next four years;
- working to arrange a 1-2 week retreat or residency for the Laureate position, as a small perk for an unfunded position, but also, ideally as a means to link the Madison Poet Laureate to other organizations and networks in the region. We hope by the end of our tenure to have something permanent in place for this.

This may be the right place to reiterate that we do not expect, and have never expected, any money for ourselves. Everything that we do for poetry, we do as a *completely volunteer service* to our art and our communities. We welcome further opportunities to serve poetry and the arts, as far as the commission and the city deems practical and desirable. And we especially welcome your voices into the conversation, as we move forward.

Sincerely,

Sarah Busse and Wendy Vardaman

Mission Statement:

The mission of the City of Madison's poets laureate is to integrate poetry into the fabric of civic life, ritual, and the everyday, and toward that end:

- place poetry before the public in surprising places/spaces;
- create conversation about poetry;
- connect poets and groups of poets to each other and to other artists;
- build bridges between people using poetry.