

the FULLER AWARD  
\* for Lifetime  
Achievement \*

# ED ROBERSON

CHICAGO LITERARY  
HALL of Fame

POETRY FOUNDATION

COLUMBIA  
COLLEGE  
CHICAGO

CHICAGO  
POETRY  
CENTER

AMERICAN WRITERS MUSEUM

GUILD LITERARY COMPLEX

6pm  
Thursday  
June 18, 2026  
at POETRY  
FOUNDATION  
\* 61 W. Superior \*  
CHICAGO  
Illinois

NORTHWESTERN  
UNIVERSITY

FAISAL MOHYUDDIN

UNIVERSITY of CHICAGO

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Program Co-Editor: Donald G. Evans

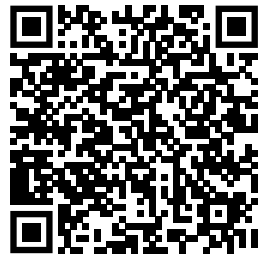
Program Co-Editor: Andrew Peart

Cover Art: Faisal Mohyuddin

Program Design: Jeff Waggoner

## Audience Participation Survey

We would be grateful for your thoughts about tonight's ceremony, so that we can anticipate the future needs of our audience and continue to make all of our programs stronger. It takes only about two minutes to complete. Please scan the QR code and you can do it right on your phone or computer.

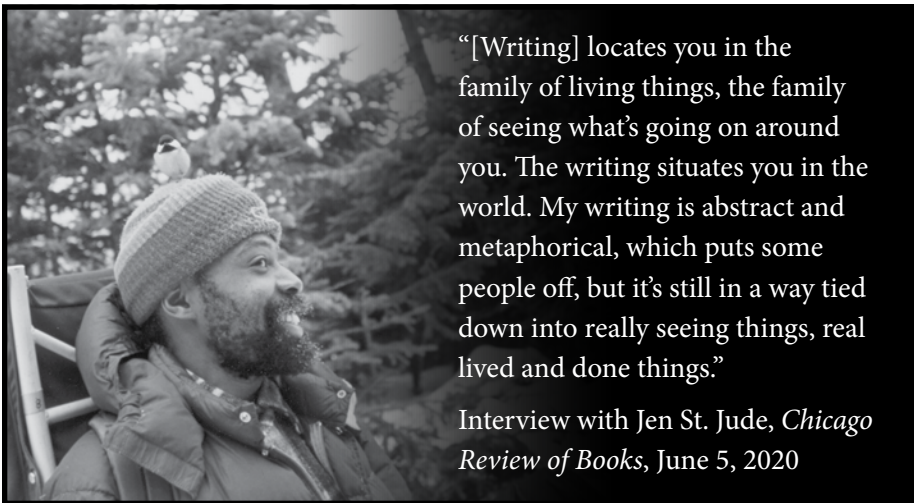


# Tonight's Program

Kenyatta Rogers	About the CLHOF and Fuller Award
Itzel Blancas	Welcome to the Poetry Foundation
avery r. young	Emcee
Saretta Morgan	"A Poet for Our Collective, Future, and Imagined Ecologies"
Peter O'Leary	"Ed Roberson's Chicago Communicator"
J. Ezelle-Patton	"Spiritual Power Lines, Meta(physical/phor) Limen Aids, and Other Confluences"
Lena Roberson	Presentation of Fuller Award
Ed Roberson	Acceptance speech
CM Burroughs and Ed Roberson	In conversation
	Closing

ASL Interpreters are Julikka LaChe and Kevin Smith.

Please join us for a courtyard reception at the conclusion of the program.



"[Writing] locates you in the family of living things, the family of seeing what's going on around you. The writing situates you in the world. My writing is abstract and metaphorical, which puts some people off, but it's still in a way tied down into really seeing things, real lived and done things."

Interview with Jen St. Jude, *Chicago Review of Books*, June 5, 2020

# The Fuller Award

By Valya Dudycz Lupescu

“The Fuller” is awarded by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame to a Chicago author who has made an outstanding lifetime contribution to literature. The tradition began in 2012, when the CLHOF honored Gene Wolfe at Sanfilippo Estate in Barrington. Ed Roberson will be our 19th honoree. These ceremonies have been held in various institutions, including the American Writers Museum, Harold Washington Library Center, National Hellenic Museum, National Museum of Mexican Art, Newberry Library, Black Ensemble Theater, Chopin Theatre, and tonight’s host, The Poetry Foundation. With the passing of Wolfe in 2019 and Harry Mark Petrakis in 2021, the CLHOF established a policy of elevating all deceased Fuller Award winners to induction status, pending board approval. Harriette Gillem Robinet joined our historical canon at an induction ceremony last year.

## **The Fuller Legacy: A Quick Look at a Literary Pioneer**

The award was inspired by the literary contribution of 2017 CLHOF inductee Henry Blake Fuller, one of Chicago’s earliest novelists and author of *The Cliff-Dwellers* and *With the Procession*. Both novels use the rapidly developing city of Chicago as their setting and are considered by many to be the earliest examples of American realism. Theodore Dreiser called *With the Procession* the first piece of American realism that he had encountered and considered it the best of the school, even during the days of his own prominence. There are additional layers of meaning to the word “fuller.” A fuller is also a tool used to form metal when it’s hot, an important part of building and a nice metaphor for Chicago, home to the “First Chicago School” of architecture that rose up from the ashes of the Chicago Fire of 1871. Between 1872 and 1879, more than ten thousand construction permits were issued. Chicago emerged as a resilient city that took risks and made bold decisions—using iron and steel to frame its buildings, giving rise to the world’s first skyscraper. The fuller was one such tool that made it happen, a symbol of possibility and perseverance. Inspired by the sleek lines and Art Deco style of Chicago sculptor John Bradley Storrs, whose sculpture Ceres is on top of the Board of Trade building, the award statue for the Fuller was based on Hephaestus, the Greek god of the blacksmith’s fire and patron of all craftsmen. According to legend, Hephaestus was the only god who worked,

and he was honored for having taught mankind that work is noble and one should excel at his or her craft. The patron of artists and craftsmen, he seemed a fitting symbol to capture the spirit of excellence embodied by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's Fuller Award.

Ron Swanson, Jr., who created the Fuller Award statue, is the founder and owner of R.E. Sculpture, Inc. Over the course of his career, Ron has worked on large sculptures, including public figures as part of an artist group at Friends of Community Public Art in Joliet. He has also worked on many original toy prototypes and various licensed character sculpts.

[www.resculpture.net](http://www.resculpture.net)

### **2026 Fuller Award Selection Committee**

Julia Borcherts

Kelci Dean

Sara Paretsky

Christine Maul Rice

Kenyatta Rogers

### **Past Fuller Award Recipients**

Gene Wolfe (2012)

Harry Mark Petrakis (2014)

Haki Madhubuti (2015)

Rosellen Brown (2016)

Angela Jackson (2018)

Stuart Dybek (2018)

Sara Paretsky (2019)

Sterling Plumpp (2019)

Sandra Cisneros (2021)

Reginald Gibbons (2021)

Luis Alberto Urrea (2021)

Ana Castillo (2022)

Rick Kogan (2022)

Harriette Gillem Robinet (2023)

Scott Turow (2023)

Patricia Smith (2024)

Alex Kotlowitz (2024)

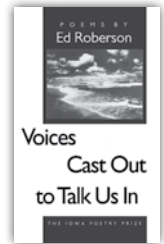
Jackie Taylor (2025)



# Bibliography

## Poetry Collections and Chapbooks

- *When Thy King Is a Boy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970)
- *Etai-eken* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975)
- *Lucid Interval as Integral Music* (Harmattan Press, 1984)
- *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In* (University of Iowa Press, 1995)
- *Just In: Word of Navigational Challenges: New and Selected Work* (Talisman House, 1998)
- *Atmosphere Conditions* (Sun & Moon Press, 2000)
- *City Eclogue* (Atelos, 2006)
- *The New Wing of the Labyrinth* (Singing Horse Press, 2009)
- *To See the Earth before the End of the World* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010)
- *Closest Pronunciation* (Northwestern University Press, 2013)
- *Asked What Has Changed* (Wesleyan University Press, 2021)
- *MPH and Other Road Poems* (Verge Books, 2021)
- *Aquarium Works* (Nion Editions, 2022)
- *found poem(s)*, with Ken Taylor (Corbett vs. Dempsey, 2024)
- *Five Poems for a Quartet* (Foolscap Poetry, 2025)



## Magazine Special Issues

- *Ed Roberson: American Poet*, in *Callaloo* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2010)
- *Ed Roberson: Retrievals*, in *Chicago Review* 59, no. 4/60, no. 1 (2016)

## Selected Prose

- "The Sculpture of Thaddeus Mosley: Four Pieces," in *Hambone* 15 (Fall 2000)
- "Thad Mosley Sculpture," in *Thaddeus Mosley* (Karma Books, 2020)
- "Project A Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Pan-Africa," in *New Art Examiner* 39, no. 3 (April 2025)

# Awards and Honors

- Chancellorship, Academy of American Poets, elected 2023.
- Edward Stanley Award for Poetry, *Prairie Schooner*, 2022.
- Griffin Poetry Prize (finalist), 2022
- Jackson Poetry Prize, 2020.
- Academy of American Poets Fellowship, 2017.
- Pearl Andelson Sherry Memorial Prize, University of Chicago, 2017.
- John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, 2016–2018.
- Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, Poetry Foundation, 2016.
- PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry, PEN America, 2016.
- Ron Offen Poetry Prize, University of Chicago, 2016.
- Stephen Henderson Critics Award for Achievement in Literature, African American Literature and Culture Association, 2011
- *Los Angeles Times* Book Award (finalist), 2011.
- Shelley Memorial Award, Poetry Society of America, 2008.
- International Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent, Gwendolyn Brooks Center, Chicago State University, 2007.
- Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Writer's Award, three-year grant, 1998–2001.
- National Poetry Series prize, for *Atmosphere Conditions*, 1998.
- Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize (finalist), 1998.
- Pushcart Prize, Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Poetry, 1997.
- Iowa Poetry Prize, for *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*, 1995.

"I knew I had to write in such a way that readers knew the poem carried its own definitions within it, its own grammar, its own dictionary since the white dictionary has blacked out certain levels of words. Trying to speak fully, clearly is what gets me labeled experimental. I'm trying to get a fully honest and open emotional and psychological reading of the language that's already here, but dishonestly read; unlike a lot of folks in the room, I'm not creating a new language. I'm just trying to un-White-Out the one we've got. No sleeping through the words to put the White-Out back in."

—Ed Roberson, interviewed by *Chicago Postmodern Poetry*, 2006

# Participant Bios



**Itzel Blancas** is a multidisciplinary maker, producer, and arts administrator. They are the Community Programs Manager at the Poetry Foundation, where they work with the team to produce engaging, culturally responsive, embodied, and fun, poetry-centered programs. They have produced or co-produced: ECOS: A Chicago Latine Poetry Festival, the Pegasus Awards, the 2019 Chicago Poetry Block Party, and the Webby-honoree VS Podcast; have served on planning committees for several literary events in Chicago; and have worked in partnership with other arts and cultural institutions on multidisciplinary programs. Itzel is originally from the Tex-Mex frontera, but has called Chicago home for over a decade.



**CM Burroughs** is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago and author of *The Vital System* and *Master Suffering*, which was longlisted for the National Book Award, Lambda Book Award, and the LA Times Book Award. Burroughs' poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies including *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, Cave Canem's *Gathering Ground*, and *Best American Experimental Writing*.



Photo credit: Diana Solis

Born in Appalachia and raised on military installations, **Saretta Morgan** is a writer from the U.S. South. She is the author of the poetry collection *Alt-Nature*, and the chapbooks *Feeling Upon Arrival* and *room for a counter interior*. Her work is informed by lived practices at the intersections of grassroots social and environmental justice movements, and by personal and intergenerational experiences of incarceration and land stewardship. She engages poetry and landscaping as technologies to map and practice collective health and belonging.



**Julikka LaChe** (they/them) is an ASL interpreter who has worked in the field since 2008. They have interpreted for the Poetry Foundation for the past five years, serve as a staff interpreter for the City Colleges of Chicago, and freelance with the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Court Theatre, the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.



**Peter O'Leary** is the author of several collections of poetry, most recently, *Onlikenesses*, as well as three collections of prose, including *The Four Horsemen: Poetry and Apocalypse*. *The Wren the Mind Allows to Sing*, a collection of exchanges about his trilogy of book-length poems about consciousness, edited by Billie Chernicoff, was recently published. He lives in Oak Park, Illinois and teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. With John Tipton, he edits Verge Books.



**J. Ezelle-Patton** is the author of *The Flower Poem* (Tender Buttons Press, 2024), and *J Walking thru the Alphabet*, forthcoming from Nightboat Books. Ezelle-Patton's work is currently on view in Denniston Hill's "Exquisite Chimera," Koyo Kouoh's "In Minor Keys," 61<sup>st</sup> Biennale di Venezia, and *Chicago Review* : Vol. 67, 2024. They play the "Tapwriter" with fellow composer-instrumentalists Nasheet Waits, Janice Lowe, Drew Gardener, and others. Among her accolades are a Foundation for Contemporary Arts (Poetry) Award, and a Doan Brook Watershed Hero award.



**Lena Roberson** is the proud daughter of tonight's award recipient and is honored to celebrate his well-deserved recognition. She has witnessed firsthand her father's dedication, strength, and integrity, which continue to inspire her. Beyond her work in Aviation Hospitality, Lena has a true passion for fashion design and acting, embracing creativity as both an art form and a lifestyle. Originally from New Brunswick, New Jersey, and now based in Atlanta, she brings East Coast confidence and Southern charm to everything she does. Lena is grateful for her father's example and proud to share this moment.



**Kenyatta Rogers** is a Cave Canem fellow and has been awarded scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. His work has been previously published in or forthcoming from *American Poets*, *Poetry*, *Jubilat*, *Bat City Review*, *The Volta*, *PANK*, and *MAKE Magazine*, among others. Rogers is a lead teacher for the Poetry Foundation's Teacher Institute. He serves on the board of directors for

AWP and the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. A Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, he is a cohost of the Sunday Reading Series with Simone Muench and lives in Chicago. His debut poetry *Before I Let Go* is forthcoming in 2027 from Trio House Press.



**Kevin Smith** is a 1982 graduate of the Illinois School for the Deaf and attended Gallaudet University. He worked for nearly 37 years with the United States Postal Service as a Sales and Service Associate.

A distinguished athlete, Kevin represented the United States in basketball at three Deaflympics: in 1993 in Sofia, Bulgaria; in 1997 in Copenhagen, Denmark; and in 2001 in Rome, Italy. During his Deaflympic career, he earned three gold medals.

Kevin has also been a dedicated leader and advocate within the Deaf community. He served for four years as a commissioner for the State of Illinois and has been actively involved with several organizations, including the American Sign Language Teachers Association, the United States of America Deaf Sports Federation, and the Museum of Deaf History, Arts, and Culture (MDHAC). He currently serves as President of the Deaf International Basketball Federation (Americas).

Recently, Kevin became a Certified Deaf Interpreter, further expanding his commitment to serving the Deaf community. He is married to Caroline Depcik, and together they have two adult daughters, Jasmine and Jada. The family resides in Burbank, Illinois.



Chicago's inaugural Poet Laureate and multi-award winning arts educator and interdisciplinary artist **avery r. young** [him, him, his] is also a co-director of The Floating Museum. His written works, performance, composition and curatorial work has been featured in several journals, exhibitions, festivals and biennials. He is the composer

and librettist of a new American opera commissioned by The Lyric Opera of Chicago titled *safronia*. His full length recording *tubman*. is the soundtrack to his collection of poetry, *neckbone: visual verses*.

“The really important thing for environmental poets [is] to connect people to other living things. They’re not just something that goes in the water. [People] have to realize, they get up the same as we do, get something to eat as we do. Because for many [people], that natural separation between nature and humans doesn’t exist. You have to get them to see that [wildlife] are alive and not our wards. They don’t belong to you.”

– Ed Roberson, in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, upon the release of his book *Aquarium Works*, 2023

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“Climbing wasn’t attainment, a grand goal, an achievement, nor was it self-improvement or proof of betterment. It was having fun, getting up high enough to see everything. Maybe I did think that I was getting to a place where I could have a freer, less segregated expression of being Black out in the wild, of being myself.”

– Ed Roberson, interviewed by Sarah Audsley for *Alpinist* magazine, 2020



# ***Ed Roberson: Lake Poet***

By Andrew Peart

Chicago was destined to be Ed Roberson's "second chance."

That's what a parking attendant told him at the Congress Plaza Hotel in 2004. Roberson had received an invitation from poet David Trinidad to serve that spring as a visiting artist at Columbia College Chicago, and he was here to check out the city. Roberson, having recently retired from an administrative career at Rutgers University, having recently come through surgery for prostate cancer, felt in between one life and the next—in the "bardo," as he puts it. Chicago offered the possibility of a new beginning.

Roberson was serious enough about that offer to be already apartment hunting. He got a little help in his search from that parking attendant at the Congress. But the man's insight was not merely practical. "When I was packing up the car to leave, he said that a couple of times in his life he had been gifted with being a seer. And he said that he could see that I was being given a second chance at life and that I had come to Chicago to take it up. Shocked the shit out of me," says Roberson. "I hadn't told him anything about the prostate cancer or coming here because of David. I hadn't said any of that to him. But he said that I was here to make a second run at life and he saw that I was going to be all right. I was surprised because that was so accurate."

Roberson's decision? "OK, I'm going to try this." It was time to journey forth into a new life, and not a time to delay. "Couple of months later, I stepped out of the bardo. 'Oh, shit. Fasten your seatbelt.'"

And what a journey it's been. Chicago is the place of Roberson's rebirth. What started as a one-semester gig turned into a full-blown second career, first with a couple years' renewal at Columbia College and then with teaching posts at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. Roberson's "second run at life" in Chicago is now more than two decades long and going strong. He might be retired from teaching, but his presence in the literary life of the city is vibrant and abiding. Just ask anyone who attends the city's myriad poetry reading series, or follows what the small presses and literary journals are doing. Publisher and author Peter O'Leary calls Roberson "*the essential Chicago poet*" of the past 20-plus years.

For Roberson, it's still somewhat surprising that he came here at all. "This is a place I had so denied," maintaining that he would never live here. Roberson has memories of visiting Chicago as far back as the early 1960s, and they're not pretty. In fact, he came to associate the city with downright ugly racial attitudes. "It just built up that kind of a history. Every time I'd come here for something, some award, some shit would come up. And you'd heard the story of how bad Chicago was, and then every time I'd come here, there it was." He tells me the story of a dinner at the Drake Hotel, decades ago, when he and his group witnessed a manager verbally abuse a young Black staff member for talking to a white girl in front of the clientele. "And I'm one of the clientele!" says Roberson, still perturbed all these years later. "As Black as I am, he had to see me."

Eventually Roberson gained a different perspective on Chicago. A few years before he moved to the city, Roberson was in town again, this time to join several other poets in readings and talks. Afterward, he met up with fashion designer Tereneh Idia, the daughter of late sculptor and dear Roberson friend Thaddeus Mosley. Roberson told Tereneh of his Chicago apprehensions. Tereneh made him see that plenty of welcome was to be found in Chicago—but with a caveat. "She said, 'You have to know *which* Chicago. You know, you had to be careful which Chicago you were in.'"

Roberson remembered this sage advice when he got the invitation to come teach in Chicago, and when he needed to find a spot to live. Staying at the Congress that time, he heard a lot of chatter that he should look only north. But he thought of Tereneh and wanted to explore. And he had wheels to get himself down to the South Side. "I saw that Bronzeville was right down the street. I hopped in the car and drove down Michigan Avenue. Got down as far as 31st Street, recognized these buildings, came over here, rode around, and, when I asked about the rental, everybody was so nice that I said, 'Well, I like this place. I'm going to take this place.' At that time there were all these Black folks here, and there were families and kids. It was like, 'Hi, how you doing? Where you from?' It was so homey that there was just no need to look anywhere else. I signed up right on the spot. It was so perfect."

Roberson tells me this story as we sit in the living room of his eighth-floor apartment in Lake Meadows, right on the edge of the Bronzeville neighborhood. Perfect the fit must have been; he's lived in building number nine of this midcentury modern high-rise complex ever since

he's been in Chicago. When he says he recognized these buildings on that momentous day in 2004, he means from his passionate study of architecture as an undergraduate. Once a college kid writing about the modernism of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Roberson must have been awestruck when he unexpectedly pulled up on the SOM-designed Lake Meadows for the first time. He was shown apartments throughout this whole building, and he originally took one up on the 15th floor. "It was so pretty. It had that beautiful view." About a decade ago he moved downstairs for a corner unit and more space. He also got arguably an even better view. On this warm spring day Lake Michigan spreads its turquoise waters as far as we can see across the horizon.

Roberson's Chicago is the Great Lakes metropolis. His poetry since the mid-2000s is deeply intertwined with his apartment's perch above Lake Michigan, its view of the Chicago skyline, and its permeability to street sounds exiting off Lake Shore Drive. There's a breadth of vision that many admirers note in Roberson's poetry, and it comes not just from the lake itself but also from the way he views it with the eyes of a newcomer, no matter how long he's lived here. He's not a native of the city by the lake; he hails from the city of three rivers, with many travels in between.

Born in Pittsburgh in 1939, Roberson spent the first three decades of his life there. The oldest of five brothers, he graduated from storied Westinghouse High School, whose other notable alumni include jazz greats Mary Lou Williams, Billy Strayhorn, and Erroll Garner. Roberson went on to the University of Pittsburgh, studying chemistry before switching to English literature. His undergraduate work in the sciences and humanities shaped his outlook. As a research assistant in limnology with Pitt's Richard C. Dugdale, Roberson undertook extensive travels, including to fieldwork sites in Alaska and Bermuda. Reading the *Metaphysicals* and the modernists with English professor



Charles R. Crow, Roberson expanded his own horizons in a different way. Professor Crow too had traveled widely, and he taught Roberson to look for the deep cultural matrix beneath whatever he was reading. “What was so impressive about Crow is that the stories he could tell and the places he had been were *learning*,” Roberson says. “So, when he talked about what could be learned from study, you could tell that he had been there. Those notes I take on the road,” Roberson stresses, “I treat those with the same kind of seriousness Crow taught with his historical references.”

Roberson’s not speaking figuratively when he talks about being on the road. His Pitt days also involved an important extracurricular education. A member of the Explorers Club of Pittsburgh, he joined expeditions to Ecuador and Peru, scaling peaks in the Andes when mountain climbing was the no-frills business of the Army Navy Surplus racks. Travel and adventure informed Roberson’s poetry from the beginning, and still do today. His 1970 cross-country motorcycle trip from Pittsburgh to San Francisco, undertaken the same year he



graduated from Pitt, became a lifelong saga. It produced a manuscript, long thought lost but recovered a decade ago, reworked, and published in *MPH and Other Road Poems* (Verge Books, 2021). Roberson, a student of the well traveled, learned the value of circling back. He’d return to South America as a young professor himself later in the 1970s, the continent forever animating his poetic imagination, even now. “The South American memories are like mythology,” Roberson tells me. Each image in the memory bank is bedrock. “It doesn’t have a time.”

After stints teaching literature at Pitt and the Community College of Allegheny County, Roberson headed to Rutgers University in 1973 to continue his teaching. He’d spend the next three decades in New Brunswick,

NJ, switching in the early 1980s from teaching to administration. He retired from Rutgers as assistant director of special programs on the school's Cook College campus in 2003.

Arriving in Chicago, Roberson brought with him a naturalist's eye for the local environment and an anthropologist's sense for the locals' behavior, honed over years of exploring far-off places and distant cultures. The city gave him plenty of raw material to work with, and now it's hard to imagine him apart from the wide vantage Chicago provides. Former colleague and fellow poet Srikanth "Chicu" Reddy underlines that affinity. "This is the city that got Ed to stay still."

"It was completely gifted to me," Roberson says of the string of teaching invitations that launched his personal literary renaissance in Chicago. "I would just join up with folks. That's what was so nice. It was like home."

Trinidad, who offered the first of those invitations to Roberson, does think "it was his destiny" to find a new home in Chicago. Fresh off retirement from an admin career, Roberson came to Chicago and restarted teaching at age 65; he retired again after turning 80. Such a "second run," especially with such longevity, is certainly rare, something Roberson understandably regards as a gift. I asked Trinidad about the thinking behind his decision to offer Roberson one.

Trinidad thinks Roberson, no matter his age, was perfectly suited to the role of inspiring young writers. "I knew he was a good person and a good poet," says Trinidad, who was a creative writing adjunct at Rutgers when he first met Roberson. The elder poet reached out to the younger Trinidad and invited him to coffee, which left a deep impression. "He's a quiet guy. He's very modest, and I've always liked that about him." At Columbia College, the understated and reserved intelligence that Trinidad witnessed back east showed up again in the classroom. "I do remember how the students really liked him. He made his important points in a soft-spoken way that you would just respect and listen to. He generated a kind of respect in me and his students too."

Roberson landed in the right place at the right time. Trinidad, along with colleague Tony Trigilio, was steering Columbia College's undergraduate poetry program and standing up a new MFA program. Teaching needs turned a one-semester post for Roberson into a longer engagement. But was it really

just a job that got Roberson to stay in Chicago? Why has he so fully adopted the city as his home?

One reason is precisely that view from Lake Meadows he takes in every day. When I ask Roberson what the essential ingredients are that make Chicago *his* city, he points at the nearest living-room window. As a poet of the natural world, and of urban nature in particular, Roberson gathers images from the daily dramas that unfold on the lake, in the sky, and against the backdrop of the city skyline. He lists a few of them for me. For one, Roberson delights in watching as rainbows arch from skyscraper to sky. For another, he loves the optical trick that happens, eight stories up, when birds and jets suddenly occupy the same visual plane. And, in an eerie twist, he's awestruck by the city's disappearing act whenever fog makes the ground invisible.

Another reason is Chicago folks. Their speech and their patterns of living have given new music to Roberson's poetry. Vernacular language and snatches of recorded speech take prominence in Roberson's voluminous Chicago-era poetry. For instance, "Aunt Haint," published in *Poetry* magazine in 2015, is an ornate verbal artifact that spins on the pedestal of a monologue delivered in Black vernacular and overheard by a speaker unseen and unknown but occupying the same public space. In a 2019 interview with the poet Joseph Donahue, Roberson tells a story about witnessing a lover's quarrel on the Chicago Transit Authority's #3 bus, his regular line. And he tells it to illustrate something that endears Chicago to him. "I remember being on the bus soon after moving here," Roberson tells Donahue, "and being at a bus stop. There was an argument going on between an elegant couple on the corner. And, you know, she is pretty pissed about whatever it was. And then she hauled off and punched him." The scene would be different back east, in New Jersey or New York. "Somehow or another, the way New York is set up," Roberson suggests, "you'd sort of make sure that you didn't see it. Here it was like, 'Oh, man! She punched him!' And everybody on the bus saw it. So there's enough room for that, for people to have a reaction, and say, 'Wonder what he did?'"

Roberson's bottom line about Chicago folks? "I feel people here more than I do other places."

Yet another reason for Roberson's Chicago affinity is the spectacular architecture. "Architecture and music, those are the modernist modes for which the city is most well known. And they're everywhere in Ed's work," says Liesl Olson, author of *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest*

*Metropolis* (Yale University Press, 2017). Chicago folks and their vernacular speech give Roberson a musical grounding, and the city's urban design gives him an architectural one. Roberson's longstanding interest in architecture, in the design of built environments, is actually an interest in what he calls "civilizations," or the overall planned construction of the physical world humans live in. Buildings don't just have stories; they *are* stories, with their passageways and portals. For Roberson, if you can understand the way a city organizes its spaces, then you can understand the stories its citizens organize their lives by.

Roberson's imagination ignites when viewing human life at this scale. "I like looking down Lake Street, which goes from one side of Chicago to the other," Roberson remarks in his interview with Donahue. "I can just stand there and gawk across the whole town." Architecturally speaking, Chicago's stories are an open book to Roberson. No wonder he's written poems about many of the city's signature architectural achievements, including the Rookery Building, Robie House, and the now-demolished Mecca Flats. Roberson's meditations on Chicago architecture take him back to mythology, to archetypes, to the structures that organize time but have no time themselves. Like his South American memories, they give him access to a kind of eternal poetic source.

Finally, there's the literary community, academic and otherwise. The kind of work Chicago offered Roberson was so much more than routine classroom work. Teaching poetry in Chicago opened up for Roberson a new world of peers, admirers, champions, and disciples. I wanted to get a sense of what Roberson was like as a teacher early on in Chicago. I asked Trigilio, given his role alongside Trinidad in developing the Columbia College MFA program. Trigilio talked first about the program's aims. "The ethos we were building at Columbia is the ethos of community," says Trigilio, and Roberson "is that kind of collaborative person." Trigilio, Trinidad, and their colleagues wanted a school that reached out into the city, and Ed fit right into that collegial esprit de corps. "He carried himself like his poems: a real spaciousness and authority," Trigilio remembers. "I felt as welcome in his presence as a person as I did in his poems." That feeling extended to students. Roberson was "never the older person lecturing the younger person" but instead taught "always with a sense of wonder," reflects Trigilio, who found a lasting lesson in Roberson's approach. "This is how to age into your art form."

Roberson has fully embraced Chicago. You could say he did so the moment

he signed on the dotted line at Lake Meadows back in 2004. He's made good on the "second chance" he got in the city, publishing more than half of his life's work to date in just a quarter of his life's time, if you count by number of books and chapbooks. That prolific streak started in 2006 with *City Eclogue* (Atelos), a book that cemented Roberson's reputation as a premier ecopoet with a singular vision of cities as ecological spaces. "That's really a Chicago book," Roberson says of *City Eclogue*. "A lot of East Coast memories, but it's a Chicago book."

In turn, Chicago has fully embraced Roberson. There's no shortage of proof, but the Chicago-based Poetry Foundation's Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, bestowed on him in 2016, brought hometown cred *and* hometown laurels. I have seen Roberson break into tears talking about the deep sense of belonging he thrives on from Chicago's literary community, as he did one night at the Hungry Brain Sunday Reading Series in January 2023. The mutual affection is strong; the feelings are real. Why has Chicago so fully adopted Roberson as its poet?

The answer, just like Roberson's new life in Chicago, starts in the classroom. But it doesn't end there. Roberson brings real magic to the seminar and the workshop, as his students in Chicago attest. But they'll also tell you that he transforms their lives by showing up for them in other venues: their readings, their small-group sessions, their hangouts. "When you come here and participate in community here, you belong to us," says Marguerite L. Harrold, who worked with Roberson extensively both during and after her MFA program at Columbia College. The city knows one of its own.

Roberson has a reputation for treating students like colleagues and colleagues like family, and for eliminating the usual pretenses that keep a teacher at an elevated remove from everyone else in the room. Poet Jacob Saenz, then a Columbia College undergrad, petitioned Roberson for an extra spot in the visiting artist's fully enrolled class. Roberson was willing "to open the door for me," Saenz says, and "because of that moment," he adds, "we were able to develop a relationship that lasted two decades. I'm very grateful to have Ed Roberson in my life as a teacher, as a mentor, just as a person."

Roberson did more than open the door. He opened up himself to his students. Saenz recalls that Roberson taught the writing of serial poems and used as a model his own 1995 collection *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In* (University of Iowa Press), part of which addresses his father's death. "I remember one

particular class where he was reading some of those poems and talking about the process of those poems, and he broke down in class. It was just this moment that none of us had experienced before with any professors and we were all, of course, touched and crying ourselves, some of us. And he ended up calling the class early,” says Saenz. “It was just such a heartfelt moment for him to become so vulnerable to us, sharing that poem, sharing the history of that poem, and how those feelings were still there, just below the surface.”

It’s Roberson’s candor and vulnerability that won over his students. Perhaps it’s the same qualities that won the whole city over to him. “Keep up the struggle. Be honest. Best of luck.” Those are the words Roberson inscribed in Saenz’s copy of *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*. Chicago likes a truth teller. Saenz describes Roberson as someone who “has never put on a facade,” who, inside and outside the classroom, “was always just who he was, which is an awesome poet and a great human being, somebody who is down to earth and able to speak to you at your own level, never someone who is speaking down upon you.” I wanted Saenz’s opinion on why Chicago so fully adopted Roberson. His response was quick and decisive. “Chicago has a love for realness, and Ed is a real one.”

Saenz mentioned another facet of Roberson’s teaching that struck me as emblematic of his open-door policy. “We had a workshop outside of the workshop,” Saenz says of himself and his fellow students. Roberson heard about it and decided that he was going to host the group at his place—quite a generous act for a poet of his age and stature. I talked to another Columbia College student who was part of that extracurricular poetry workshop. Poet Daniel Suárez agrees that Roberson the teacher was “someone who would crack open the door” and let other voices fill the room. In Suárez’s experience, that tendency took Roberson’s relationships with emerging writers beyond that of teacher-student. For Suárez, there was a deep “connectedness” between the two based on “mutual curiosity.”

The so-called “workshop outside of the workshop” was a venue for Roberson to show Chicago’s young poets what kind of role model and pillar of community he could be. What impressed Suárez about Roberson’s presence in those extracurricular sessions? “He’s bringing his own work to the table” and shedding any remnant of the instructor persona for a different role. Roberson’s attitude was never “Here I am, the elder,” according to Suárez, but rather “I’m an equal. We’re writers.” Roberson made the effort to meet the

younger poet where he was and elevate him, Suárez says.

As for Chicago's embrace of Roberson, Suárez thinks the early dedication to students was paramount. "Interacting with the students," says Suárez, "made him feel comfortable and welcome here." The warm feelings spread to the writing community and the arts community more broadly. "The people just off the bat seemed to welcome him. It wasn't a forced welcoming. You would be around people he had known a bit, and they were excited to see him," says Suárez. "He would meet new people, and they would take a liking to him." And that rapport might have warmed Roberson up to seeing Chicago's fraught social history, part of his own past, in a different light. "The history of Chicago, whether it was good or bad," Suárez thinks, turned into a source of inspiration. "All of that brought something new to him." Like the drama and beauty of Lake Michigan, it became something to write about.

For the young writers in Chicago who embraced him, Roberson the teaching poet consistently gave them something to talk about. Trigilio tells me that he always knew when a group of students filing into his class had just been in Roberson's. Those students would be absolutely abuzz, carrying on a conversation that could not be limited to the time and space of just one classroom session.

Roberson had shown them that the knowledge contained in poetry could be large. You just needed a large enough table and a wide-open invitation for what each writer was welcome to bring.

It was a favor Chicago had paid him. In his early Chicago years, Roberson received an invitation to a kind of reception party, hosted in his honor, by Northwestern University's Reginald Gibbons. Now a close friend and longtime colleague, Gibbons had assembled a large group of Chicago writers to meet the new poet in town. These were the people whom Roberson needed to know, and who needed to know Roberson; they included the likes of Angela Jackson, Sterling Plump, Christina Pugh, Mike Puican, and Anne Winters. Roberson remembers the event as a turning point, and an invitation to community much more welcoming than any he'd ever received back east. "That was a big introduction," Roberson says. "I knew where to go. And I got invitations from there." I mention the trendy word networking, but Roberson is quick to emphasize that his connections came to him as a kind of grace. "I just fell in with folks. Kept doing the work." Recognition, reception, and appreciation followed. "That was always what was going on."

Chicago may be the second city in many respects, but not in putting ambitious work above ambition as such. And that has made Roberson and the city a great fit for one another. “In Chicago,” Roberson says, “everybody’s in here doing it together. The bigness is what we have. It’s not an imagined thing. The bigness is what you do. It’s real.”

Excellent writing and mutual support are the cardinal points in Chicago. With everybody working toward the same goal, and everyone invited to bring their best to the table, the city has made Roberson feel like family. But it’s a different feeling than when he sensed his only community was his actual family. Back east, it often seemed to Roberson that his “tribe,” he tells me, was simply his mother and his brothers and a tight-knit circle of friends. It’s in Chicago that Roberson realizes “there are other tribes I do business with.” And that, for Roberson, is precisely what the bigness of Chicago is about. “The world has gotten much larger.”

Roberson’s personal storyline routed him to Chicago. His legacy as an author will be mapped onto the city too.

I asked Roberson how he felt about being a writer identified with a particular city, the city of Chicago. “I’m proud of that,” he said. I also wanted to know *how* he identified with Chicago, and how Chicago would identify with him. Roberson says that he appreciates, even loves, the stories of Chicago natives like Angela Jackson, Carolyn Rodgers, and Stuart Dybek. But his story is different because his attachment to Chicago is different. Roberson the Chicagoan, as he sees it, “is someone who came here as an immigrant,” and that image, he thinks, casts him in the light of the regular folks he so admires and their down-to-earth wisdom: “that anybody would have enough sense to come here.” That’s Roberson’s Chicago way. “It’s not the same as being born here,” he acknowledges, but to be “someone who’s associated as an immigrant here just says, if the natives accept me, then I’m a native. I’m an immigrant-native. And I’m fine with that.”

I point out that the immigrant story is a central storyline of Chicago. Roberson’s “quite proud” of that too, he tells me.

How Roberson would fit into the big storyline of Chicago literature is a question I put to the University of Chicago’s Reddy. He agrees that Roberson’s story of *coming* to the city is essential Chicago stuff “because Chicago is a place that people arrive at.” Reddy, who’s known Roberson since 2005,

remembers that even then Roberson described coming to Chicago as a homecoming. “For somebody who’s lived so many different places and lived so many different lives in one,” says Reddy, “he *is* a Chicago poet.” Reddy goes even further. “It’s hard to imagine Chicago poetry without thinking of Ed Roberson.”

But Reddy also thinks Roberson is more than just another new arrival making his home in Chicago. Roberson enriches the city’s literary scene by bringing to it a range of cross-cultural influences, won through his labors and adventures in Alaska, Bermuda, South America, and Africa. Those influences are never too distant from his poetic imagination, as firmly situated as it is in Chicago. “That’s the thing about Ed. He thinks on multiple scales simultaneously, always. He’s thinking about the city. He’s thinking about the architecture of the city. He’s thinking about the urban topography and urban politics of the city. But he’s also at the same time thinking about glaciers and shamanism and indigeneity.”

Roberson’s place in the Chicago literature storyline? “He makes Chicago poetry more cosmopolitan,” says Reddy. “I think of Ed in some ways as a world poet.”

I put the same question to Olson, who also sees Roberson as a global writer glad to have found a home big enough for himself in Chicago. “He came to Chicago after so many travels,” notes Olson. “Wherever he is, he’s clearly really there.” Roberson’s commitment to Chicago has meant showing up for poets, for poetry lovers, and for even just the poetry curious. “Not everybody’s here for poetry,” says Olson, but Roberson’s poems “really are here for everyone.” And that might be the most Chicago thing about Roberson. If we try to place Roberson in a Chicago literary tradition, Olson tells me, we’re going to struggle to find one dominant mode, style, or aesthetic that stands for the city or for the poet. But we might find a signature ethos: a pluralistic commitment to different audiences, regardless of class.

In viewing Roberson alongside great Chicago poets of the past, Olson says, “What I find more of a through-line is not necessarily the aesthetics of the work but a kind of attention to communities of readers: that dynamic between a work of art and who’s absorbing it, consuming it, reading it, responding to it.” And on that score Roberson stands tall among the greats, whether it’s Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Danner, or Carolyn Rodgers. “He’s as heterogeneous as the city itself.”

Olson recalls the motto that once appeared in every issue of *Poetry* magazine: “To have great poets, there must be great audiences too.” And if Roberson has a motto, it could be Olson’s gloss on his willingness to cultivate the art form’s various audiences. “If it’s for poetry,” she imagines Roberson saying, “I’m in.”

Roberson came to Chicago as the consummate experimentalist. He was someone who could offer students and other young writers, as Trinidad puts it, “a different kind of perspective on how to make poems and what a poem can be.” Ongoing and evolving relationships with major institutions of higher learning here—Columbia College, Northwestern University, and the University of Chicago—gave him plentiful opportunities to burnish that reputation. Now, in something of a plot twist in his Chicago storyline, the experimentalist has become the classroom poet par excellence, even as he plays to audiences all across the city.

Nowadays, even when he’s not in the classroom himself, Roberson is continuing to guide young writers and readers with his poetry. Curious about how Roberson’s work comes across in the classroom two decades after he came to Chicago, I asked poet Richie Hofmann, a lecturer at the University of Chicago. What students find so engaging about Roberson’s poems, Hofmann told me by email, are “their elastic forms, their hinged lines and multiple meanings, and their undaunted leaps from observations of the world around them to the imagination.” The poetry has amplitude. “You sense a lifetime of study and practice and experience, whole traditions coursing through it, even as the poems keep surprising you.” For students under the spell of Roberson’s poetry, as he himself might say, the world has gotten much larger.

Chicago literature has also become much larger, thanks to the presence of Roberson the “world poet.” For his part, Roberson feels that Chicago chose him. Perhaps the city, for its part, feels so warmly to him because, in reality, he chose us. He could have gone anywhere for his “second run at life.” He came here. It’s been a second run, a second act, dedicated to poetry—to teaching it, to writing it, to championing it. He’s living it fully. The city, and the world, have noticed.

*Andrew Peart is a writer and editor based in Chicago. Since 2016 he has served as Ed Roberson’s literary assistant. He works with authors and artists to organize and place their archives, including the Ed Roberson papers.*

# “I use this sighting all the time”: Preparing to Read Ed Roberson

By Barbara Egel

There has been so much written about this poet: the forms, the subjects, the place in cultural history and the response to the culture that came before him, the politics, the song, the sweet, and the sly—and with good reason, because there is no reaching the edge of his world, no being finished and moving on. His friend, the scholar Andrew Welch, says of Roberson’s work that “it may be some time before its tapestry is completely unfolded, but that is happy work to anticipate.” Ed Roberson’s poems require a lifetime of meeting the poem naked on the page, then reading the book to find where the tissues between poems have adhered to one another. Then reading all the books in order and out of order to find where he has buried the wormholes that bind them to each other, to begin the necessary exegesis, to find the intertexts. Then to learn the language of his signs and symbols and all the polysemous conversation that happens among them, within them, like seeing lightning confined in a cloud. As the poet himself says,

Timed-out,  
it’s neither  
possible nor done

The problem with an essay like this, a general one for new and familiar readers, is that Roberson’s vast worldview resists categories. He brings everything he knows and everything he is into every poem all at once, and to comb out the strands into neat flowcharts of literary analysis is to distort the work. The options are either a close reading of one poem that will continue to resonate and grow more associations and connections or the creation of a sort of field guide to start you off on your travels. Let’s start the field guide with seeing and trekking.

## Seeing

To set off on a trek through Roberson’s world, first you must become accustomed to disorientation and reorientation. You must strive to see as Roberson sees, telescopically, kaleidoscopically, and above all, fearlessly. Seeing is the First Principle in this poetic universe from which all other fundamental aspects spring. In a 2011 interview with Lynn Keller and Steel

Wagstaff, Roberson talks about the fearlessness he tries to instill in his students to "... really look at things; if something scares you, then look at it. If something hits you as pretty, don't just take the pretty, figure out how it does that to you, then what's way behind all that, too." Reading the poems, it becomes clear that seeing, sensing, is as essential as breathing. In "Violent Suicide," a short poem in *The New Wing of the Labyrinth*, the act of noticing saves a life:

I was so surprised, I froze. I stopped  
to watch it. so, it didn't happen, so, I lived.  
Observation was my practice so I lived. (49)

The automatic human impulse is usually to see and to judge, or at least to evaluate, arrive at a conclusion, and then over time, not see the thing anymore because the judgement has taken the place of what is to be seen. In "Eye Ear Nose and Throat" from *Asked What Has Changed*, people started speaking and "they stopped hearing at a distance with their eyes" and later, "They are beyond what is animal says / to them" (44). Roberson does not allow such diminishment of the senses, in part because with every re-vision, new associations and resonances appear alongside or connected with the thing we see.

Not just the what-is needs to be seen but also the what-isn't, the spaces between things that define those things as much as their heft and outlines do, the switching from foreground to background and back again. The needs-to-be-seen in Roberson's poetry is sometimes a literal invisibility, as in "About the trees bending as a seeing / of the wind:" from *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, and often, it is about seeing the history in the geography, how a moment of seeing Nature (I'll capitalize it, as Roberson does) parallels a moment of violence in the history of Black America. A short poem from Roberson's second book, *Etai-eken*, accomplishes both.

how many ever  
heads at one  
time you see their two  
colors

the jaguars and the sun  
and trees are brothers  
passing through each other  
in their coats

walls and the spots  
bleeding down the plaster and the night  
they were shot are panthers  
passing through their brothers  
in the skin (32)

First, we are seeing the trickster magic of Nature's camouflage, then the mythmaking of the brotherhood of jaguar and sun, and finally the murder of Fred Hampton as he passes through his Panther brothers, completing the myth with bloody reality. This connection mirrors biblical prefiguration and fulfilment, the model in the Old Testament finding its mirror in the new, like Ahitophel and Judas. Throughout Roberson's work, the prefiguration of a state of being in nature finds its human anti-fulfillment in the treatment of enslaved Africans from the time of the Middle Passage to the present. Nature is inescapable. As Roberson says in his introduction to the ecopoetry anthology, *Black Nature* (Camille Dungy, ed.), "There is, however, no humanly containable limit to living Nature; there is no outside of Nature." With that vastness—"the epochal / heartbeat of larger elements, the seas, / the air" (*Asked What Has Changed*, 1)—with that inevitability, the treatment of Africans and African Americans still shows on Nature's face, like seeing a wildfire on Earth from high in space. In Roberson's work, to deny that burn scar is to deny Nature as surely as clearcutting a forest.

It is a strange direction for poetry: rather than working up from the human to the cosmic, Roberson begins in the sky and works his way to the dust, to the ship hold, to the lunch counter in Alabama. The effect of this is to change your way of thinking, of seeing. After taking this journey with him many times, often in poems where you least expect to end where you do, you begin to anticipate the connection, and even, as he intends, create it for yourself. "(*Architectural Drawing*)," also from *To See the Earth* begins in some capital city with weathervaned domes that curve in all directions. The next, human scale is the arch of the foot with the same geometries as the domes. But "geometries have narrative," and the dome of heaven is invoked next, but turned upside-down to contain the oceans, which in turn contain the feet "cupped into a ship's / hold carrying each step's ground / gained by trampling another's."

## Geography

Once you start seeing, you must venture out. There are maps mentioned in Roberson's work, particularly in *MPH*, but neither the natural nor the human

world is best learned from a piece of paper. To travel in these poems and experience the world through them is, paradoxically, to give up on direction until you can learn it right. Having learned to see—or at least have learned by example what it must feel like to see with such microscopic/macroscopic apertures for eyes—you must trust and treasure *where* you see, even if it defies the compass. First, surrender any vertigo, because you will be swooping in and out of scale. As he says in the Keller/Wagstaff interview, “the second section [of *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*] turns the microscope into a telescope directed upwards to the other end of that core, looking up this big bore into the ends and beginnings and talking about those galaxies up there.” This is the way of seeing that takes in one glance jaguars and Fred Hampton, or sees in the reverse-image light and dark of the sun on the water in “Taking the Print” how the water also hid people fleeing slavery, “our crossing guided by the internal sight / on our darkness.” Prepare to be jolted, and don’t look away.

Roberson’s work shows the toolmarks of deliberate systems. Science fiction and videogames call this “worldbuilding,” where a coherent, consistent fictional universe is created in all its details. But Roberson is writing about *our* world, one that already exists, for now, and we have rationalized away most of its inconsistencies by either not seeing them (the homeless man freezing in the alley) or stopping at awe without an effort to understand. (As I might have done had I not read *Aquarium Works*, in which the fish he cared for in one of his many and wildly varied jobs become colleagues and treasured family, although like family, they can be sneaky and dangerous.) Roberson’s systems are fully realized from the beginning. What this means for the geography of the work is that, as noted, up is where you start, and you work your way down to the self or to history or to the vacant lot razed for something that doesn’t come—start huge and get human. In a pair of poems on facing pages in *To See The Earth*, “The World, Then” and “Facing up to,” we get a glimpse into the worldbuilding and the thought behind it.

The world then  
was made up of the same  
pieces that turned  
into what we have now.  
pieces the same nowhere took  
any of what then  
I thought was the world and world to come  
that came (26)



I remember the shock  
of remembering  
that I am  
still that who  
rememberings  
re-remember (67)

I wonder whether Roberson, through this constant reflection and dilation, is holding open the portal of memory for generations who know Medgar Evers or the four little girls killed in a Birmingham church only from a paragraph in a textbook. Whatever his intent, they can't stay unseen.

Even when the poet is moved by age and illness into a smaller geography, the view from his high rise in Bronzeville provides opportunity for yet another geography of scale in *Asked What Has Changed*. The view is pinned on the horizon between Lake Michigan and the sky, and the odd corners seen from that window activate the geography of small places. We have seen him focus on interiors before, notably in a pair of facing poems in *Lucid Interval as Integral Music*, where he moves from speculating on why white poets' homes become talismanic museums, to thinking about those objects that *should* be venerated by and for the Black poet, handed through generations, "But we are sold / goods apart from each other." In *Asked What Has Changed*, he sees from an interior vantage point, and the poet's own human interiority is much more clearly on display than in previous collections:

But back to horizons. Just as *Etai-eken* shows us how to see the Magic Eye photo in the untangle-able knot of nature/culture/history that we cannot tease apart but only learn to focus our eyes on, the horizon is a defining ley line. In the Keller/Wagstaff interview, Roberson tags what is important about his Chicago apartment, "For one thing, the lake gives me a horizon. I don't feel comfortable unless I have a horizon. Even if it's the next mountain, I have to have a horizon." The horizon is the measuring stick for the shadows of "the skyscrapers lying out / into the lake" and his high aerie in a geographically flat city is "a paradise / we look down on from."

### The Rest

I could have written a messy, missionizing, half-coherent book based on the manic scribbles brought on by total immersion in Roberson's work. I haven't even shared poems from all of the books. I will briefly summarize the other things you should know: The geography of the poems is as built and

meaningful as the geography *in* the poems—his spacing and lineation and the matrices he makes on the page; the “lena” form, named for his daughter, begs for close analysis; enjambment rearranges your certainty about meaning; and there are enough sonnets sitting in his books to make their own collection. The importance of *lines*—broken and reconnected, fading and fast—hums under everything as parts of poems, as geographical markers, and as historical and familial connections. The music and the oratory that elevate and teach. There is so much myth as intertext, both Roberson-made myth and myth from cultures as far apart in time and space as Egyptian mythology and Native American rituals. The list of echoes from other poets runs a gamut that includes Donne, Blake, Eliot, Hughes, Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice (the drunkenness in *Asked What Has Changed!*), Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka. Whether I am right or not about all these poets being overt influences, the fact that I heard them in his work shows how connected he is with us as a species (oh the word “specie”—note it when you see it.)

Most of all, the thing you should know is that Roberson’s poems connect across the books, drawing the work together like a string bag, like a gris-gris herb bag. This connecting is why Roberson is never done, why, as Welch says, the tapestry has not fully unfolded. The connections I still haven’t made await me in future readings, and I am eager to draw the threads together and pull them apart again to see what new geographies await me. Read and reread these poems, take the journey, be changed.

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“I look a lot, I mean I stare a lot. . . . I just see stuff raw, and sort of play with it, the perceptions. I miss a lot of stuff that other people are looking at, but then the other thing is, I’ll also see a lot of associations. Like we were sitting in traffic, and I said, ‘Oh, there’s a downy woodpecker,’ but nobody could see it until it flew. I’m looking all the time, but I don’t think I’m looking at the same things other people are looking at. I saw the colors before I saw the bird.”

– Ed Roberson, interviewed by Lynn Keller and Steel Wagstaff for *Contemporary Literature*, 2011



# Tributes

## At the Peak

Awards generously and kindly elevate a career or an oeuvre. Ed is a writer that elevates an award. A voice immediately identifiable, like no other.

## Stuart Dybek

\* \* \*

## Trusted Friend and Master Craftsman



*On any journey, especially a difficult one, go with a trusted friend*

The strength and truth of this adage often come to mind when I think of Ed Roberson. It has been my good fortune to have known Ed as a friend ever since our days as university students together, more than half

a century ago, and to have traveled with him on many journeys, real and figurative. There was the actual journey of young men across the country by motorcycle, and another to Mexico in an old green van with sleeping bags in the back and a booming eight-track tape player. Later there were other kinds of journeys, with other kinds of difficulties, on which we embarked side by side: getting married, becoming university teachers, becoming parents. And now, even though we live in different parts of the country, Ed's steady stream of emails, to me and to other friends of his, lets us feel that he is still there at our side.

The emails bring greetings, news, and, most of all, poems: drafts of poems, "final" versions of poems, final "final" versions of them, then often expanded versions of them. This is no surprise. Wherever we were, whatever journey we were on, poems were (and still are) always there—Ed writing them

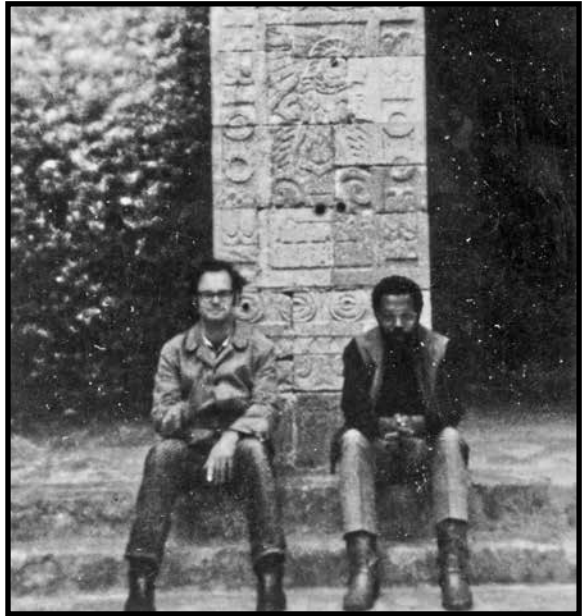
and I trying to learn to read them. With Ed, the poems are the ground one stands on, the best way to see, feel, and begin to understand where we are and what is happening.

The Fuller Award statue of Hephaistos, the Greek god of fire and the forge, of metalworking and craft, seems to me an especially apt emblem for the work of this son of the Steel City and honored poet of the Windy City. Homer tells us that when Hephaistos began to fabricate the armor of Achilles, his first action was to set his bellows and fires working:

*And the bellows, all twenty of them, blew on the crucibles,  
from all directions blasting forth wind to blow the flames high  
now as he hurried to be at this place and now at another,  
wherever Hephaistos might wish them to blow, and the work went  
forward.*

There is a level of meaning, Homer could be saying, where the process of forging metal and that of poetry-making, the melding of imagination and breath, are not so different.

Ed has published more than a dozen books and has received more awards, prizes, and fellowships than he ever dreamed existed, all of them hard-earned and well-deserved. Like many



major poets, he has brought to us a new, and sometimes startling, conception of the poetic line. The poems are rooms full of contending voices, and landscapes of multiple perspectives. Each one is a ticket to ride, with no expiration date.

Congratulations to Ed Roberson, master craftsman, and to the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, as it celebrates his work.

**Andrew Welsh**

## Miles per Hour and Revolutions per Minute

Ed Roberson has been a dear friend for more than 60 years. Even back in the 1960s it was clear he was a person of capacious mind, one who would, in his quiet voice, go on to reconstruct the English language. That is the public Ed. Those of us who knew him privately have endless stories. I had a recording of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* that Ed hated because the section "The Death of Tybalt" was conducted so slowly. One day while it was playing he went over to the record player and changed it from 33 1/3 rpm to 45. That's the way I always listened to it thereafter. Or there was the time a Chilean poet friend showed up at our back door and asked Ed for ten dollars so he could buy a steak dinner at a local restaurant. Ed, who had no money and probably hadn't eaten a steak in years, immediately gave it to him. The person that we knew privately was a man of elegance, gentility, and kindness, one who always reminded me of that other great writer, Ralph Ellison.

## Bob Supansic

\* \* \*

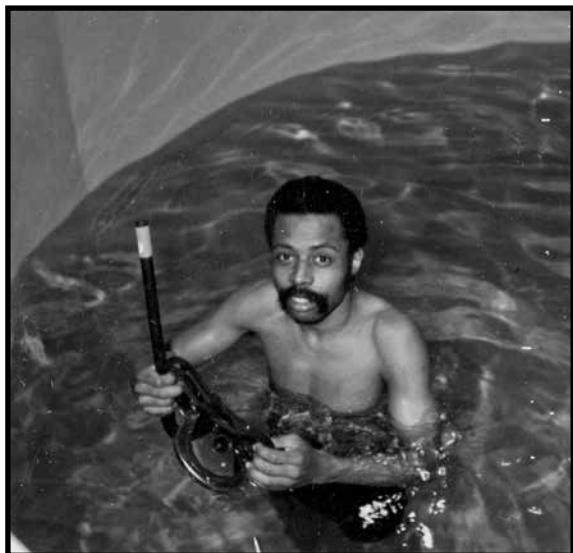
## Explorer Poet

As is often the case with me, I cannot remember exactly when and how Ed Roberson and his brilliant poetry came into my life. I wasn't lucky enough to study his work in high school or college; I don't think I was taught his work even in grad school. My best guess is that it was right after I completed my dissertation on Victorian and African American gothic novels, and was taking a moment to read and write about Black "experimental" poets, when Aldon Lynn Nielson, C. S. Giscombe, or another poet who likes to hang out at the intersection of blackness and poetic innovation first turned me on to the author of books with captivating titles like *When Thy King Is a Boy*, *Etai-Eken*, and *Lucid Interval as Integral Music*. Suffice it to say that reading Ed's work and struggling to get my head around his inimitable syntax led me to write about his poetry for a short talk, which led in turn to an essay, "On the Nature of Ed Roberson's Poetics," that really solidified my desire and determination to leave the gothic behind and make a career of scholarship on poetics, especially the genre bending, language-exploding, radical Black poetics that Ed's work exemplifies.

So you could say Ed Roberson's poetry is at the root of my work as a scholar of poetics; at the same time, he has been a star in the constellation

of poets whose writing I look to for what's possible, what's challenging. There is so much I could say about his work (some of which I have said elsewhere), but what I'd like to celebrate in this space is the exploratory spirit that characterizes him in his life as well as his poems.

It's one thing to understand, intellectually, that Black people can be found everywhere, doing virtually anything; it was another thing for me to meet a Black man who had personally gone out there and done many things that I—then, nearly 30 years ago—had never known or, sometimes, even *heard* of Black men doing. I knew Black science nerds, but had I ever met a Black



limnologist (someone who studies lakes and other freshwater bodies)? No, I had not—let alone a Black limnologist whose work took him to Alaska or who earned a living for a period as a diver feeding marine animals at the aquarium in Pittsburgh, where he grew up and did his undergraduate studies. I had read about Matthew Henson and York, Black men who went on expeditions, respectively, to the North Pole and across the North American continent with Lewis and Clark (sans proper credit for their roles in the success and survival of their traveling companies), but had never known one in the contemporary period to join an Explorers Club and hike through the Amazon or mountain-climb in the Andes. My father owned a motorcycle and rode it around town and for short trips—but I had never known a Black man who'd road-tripped via motorcycle “from Pittsburgh to the Pacific” (to borrow from the subheading of Mark Scroggins's essay on Roberson's *MPH and Other Road Poems*). He draws on these experiences in book after book, including *Atmosphere Conditions* and *Aquarium Works*, in addition to those I've mentioned already.

He's an explorer, then, in that most obvious sense—and always aware of the colonialist baggage that term carries, as well as the potential irony of



a Black man's embrace of that label, yet he was *here* (or *there*) for it: for the adventure of it, the challenge of it, the education of it, until age took him out of that arena. What's remarkable about Ed, though, is that his physical journeys were always preceded or accompanied by a great deal of research—they were intellectual journeys too—and in his later years he has continued the explorations that he has always done through reading, listening, and just observing the world around him. The poems in *Etai-Eken* were deeply informed by the research he did on indigenous cultures of the North and South American places he was visiting in those years, for instance, and he continues to be curious about the spiritual practices and the architecture of his own and others' cultures. He has done this kind of reading—the kind that leads to thinking and working through concepts in his poems—about places he hasn't and *cannot* visit, like the Pencil Nebula, which shows up in a description of how fulfilling his infant daughter's needs interrupted his writing, or the "shooting stars" that he uses as a metaphor for the life of poverty racism confines too many Black people to, in *Atmosphere Conditions*. And, for another example, there's clearly historical research on subjects like urban planning (from overt zoning regulations to the illegal redlining practices) that went into the post-pastoral poems of *City Eclogue*. Ed's poetry is often engaged for its formal practices and/or his sustained ecopoetics (that's where my own writing about his work focuses, in fact), but he can and should be read as a deeply philosophical and conceptual poet because of how his poetry theorizes. At the same time, he

is proving to be a kind of inheritor of Gwendolyn Brooks's role as a careful observer of Black life and the urban environment in Chicago, his home for more than two decades. His later work (much of it still unpublished, but which I have the great good fortune to be reading virtually as it comes out of his pen) also reveals him to be a thoughtful and compelling poetic recorder of the body aging—at 86, Ed is consciously exploring the frontier of his own experience of living.

Finally, of course, Ed has always been an explorer of what language in the context of poetry can do. I've already mentioned his ability to wrangle syntax into the kinds of knots that twist the conditions of our lives. I will never forget his response to a student in my Black Poetry class, when he visited Rutgers some years back, who asked him (deferentially, but sincerely) why he makes his poetry so difficult. As I recall it, his reply was: "I'm trying to be as clear as possible about very difficult experiences and situations." Ed is always precise, even as he is always multilayered. He creates lines full of internal caesuras that require readers to read backwards and forwards to grasp all that he is wringing out of the language. His spacing, within a line and amongst lines, can easily cloak the fact that what you're reading is a sonnet or terza rima or a Pindaric ode. But even as he plays with, stretches, and explodes given forms, he is also comfortable treating the page as an open field for looking, thinking, and moving around in. Tracing the steps of his explorations, of all sorts, is one of the longstanding, ongoing joys of my intellectual life. Being friends with one of my poetry heroes is a blessing I am continually grateful for.

Here's to you, cheers to you, Ed Roberson! Congratulations on receiving this well-deserved recognition of your lifetime of achievement.

**Evie Shockley**

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### **Drawn to Investigate**

It is 2005: I am a guest teacher at Columbia College Chicago, teaching a graduate poetry workshop called 2500 Years of Experimental Poetry: From Simonides to the Web.

It was a wonderful year, or possibly semester. Wonderful students, and, very luckily for me, Ed Roberson was my assigned office mate. We were interested in the same things: science, technology, ingrained injustice, Frank Lloyd Wright. We made a number of expeditions together to investigate

and to learn more of what our individual lives had been like. I remember Ed was somewhat disbelieving that I, having lived in New York City for decades, was uneasy traveling in France when all I saw were white faces. Uneasy until I got to Toulouse and kept going south.

What we did not share was Ed's courage, his physical exploration of many parts of the nearby Earth. I benefitted from his recounting these expeditions, in his poems or in his wonderful speaking voice, no shouting, letting become clear at a slower, deeper level what has been going on, what is going on.

Ed Roberson is a treasure, a resource, a gifted observer, a gifted conveyor of truths needed now.

**Stephanie Strickland**

\* \* \*

### **An Appointment to Write**

I met Ed when he first moved to Chicago to work as a visiting professor at Columbia College. When I heard he was coming, I bought all of his books and walked past his office, hoping to have a chance to speak with him. He was there, and kind enough to invite me in. I immediately took out my notepad and pen and started to ask questions. When I stopped to take notes, finally giving him a chance to take a breath, I noticed him slowly, one by one, placing each yellow number-two pencil into the slots of his desk drawer. I thought to myself, "Dang. I didn't even give the poor man time to put his pencils in his desk." I apologized, thanked him for his time, and told him that I should leave and let him get set up. "Oh, no, please stay," he said. "I like the conversation." It was at this point that I decided to admit that I didn't understand what he was talking about in his poetry. I was reading *Atmosphere Conditions*. Right then and there, we turned to a poem, and he walked me through it.

Ed is the kind of teacher who seems to know everything about everything. Someone brings in a poem about a rocking chair rocking itself, and he tells us about Duende. Another person seems to be writing poems in the style of a different classmate each week, and he explains that that person is a translator. Someone writes about an abstract theory related to physics, and Ed explains how it is linked to deep metaphor.

Ed is the poet who brings his rough drafts into class and walks us through his process for revision. "Revision is writing," he told us.

Every Wednesday (because Wednesday was poetry workshop night), to this day, an alarm goes off on my phone that reads, “Always be working on a poem.” Ed told me that, and I am always writing.

I am grateful to continue to be under the tutelage of Ed Roberson. Congratulations, Ed.

**Marguerite L. Harrold**

\* \* \*

## **A Magnetic Presence**

When Ed Roberson and I used to teach graduate poetry workshops at Northwestern School of Professional Studies, my students would come to class each week glowing with anecdotes about Ed—what he said, or simply how he made them feel. He has that type of inspirational effect on people, for Ed is one of the more generous and genuinely kind people that I know. In fact, whenever I attend a public event and Ed is present, I find myself gravitating towards him, as he is always a balm against the social commotion. He also never does anything half-assed. Years ago, when I asked him to write a blurb for a collaborative book by Phillip Jenks and me, he wrote me the equivalent of three blurbs! More recently, I reached out and asked him for a few sentences for *The Under Hum*, cowritten with Jackie K. White, and he wrote us an entire introduction, taking the time to respond to me from Alaska. He had just driven by the Crow’s Nest restaurant in Denali National Park, where I worked in my 20s. He was traveling from “Anchorage to Fairbanks down to Valdez,” and though on the road, he still responded with his typical enthusiasm and “Roberson verve.”

When Ed was a guest, alongside Adrian Matejka, at the Hungry Brain Sunday Reading Series, which I run with Kenyatta Rogers, it was, in eight years of hosting the series, the most attended event we’ve hosted. It was such a marvelous, magical event due to the camaraderie and chemistry between the two readers as well as to Ed himself, who is a magnetic presence. He choked up on stage that evening, and many in the audience wept, including me. My students still speak of that night with awe and reverence. Michael Palmer calls Roberson “one of the most deeply innovative and critically acute voices of our time,” and A. Van Jordan states that Roberson is “a master poet,” and while Ed himself might shy away from such a designation, his body of work more than justifies it. His achievements and influence are extensive. Ed Roberson is not only an essential poet, but he

is also an extraordinary human being whose presence enlarges the world around him, inspiring and influencing all of those who are lucky enough to enter his orbit. To use one of my favorite jazz-age sayings, Ed is truly “the cat’s pajamas”!

**Simone Muench**

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### **A Poet on a Quest**

There’s no other writer like Ed Roberson—but if Ed had never come along, some wild-eyed bard would have had to invent him as the hero of a modern-day epic. It’s hard to imagine someone of Ed’s poise and inner dignity diving into a tank with porpoises, climbing the side of a volcano, or motorcycling across America. And yet these are just a few snapshots from a life that sounds more like an action-adventure movie, or a mythic quest, than one might imagine on first meeting Ed. His travels throughout the world—from South America to Africa and beyond—aren’t mere tourism or ethnography, though. It’s all part of a searching inquiry into the environments we’ve been entrusted with, and the forms of humanity that both preserve and endanger those sacred places.

Adventure is one way to read Ed’s work, but another way to think about his work is as just that—*work*. The aquarium, the steel mill, the garbage truck, the ad agency, and the academy are a few of the places Ed’s worked in his life. His poetry makes us aware of literary making as a kind of work (in ways that go far beyond the rhetoric of ‘craft’ that reigns in creative writing classrooms today). He honors all forms of labor in his poetry—but even when they explore intricate aesthetic or philosophical problems, his poems never feel labored. I think this has something to do with class. Ed’s poems are always in conversation with their readers—sometimes profane, sometimes tender, but always intimate and generous. And those readers may be academic, working-class, children, or the unborn. His poetry is a kind of social work that enables us to imagine new forms of community.

So it’s no surprise that Ed’s found his home in Chicago—a working city, but one that feels like an adventure, too. His poems on the architecture of Chicago are some of the most dynamic writings about structure, space, and form in recent memory. He helps us to see how urban life is, oddly enough, deeply pastoral. I imagine Gwendolyn Brooks would be happy to know he’s inherited her role as the great poet of Bronzeville today.

It's impossible to boil down my admiration for Ed's life and work into a few words for this occasion—but maybe the title of one of his own books can capture what his art does to me. Every time I read a poem by Ed, I feel like I'm entering a new wing of the labyrinth.

**Srikanth "Chicu" Reddy**

\* \* \*

**Incomparable on and off the Page**

It's difficult to describe what Ed means to me because he is the only one of his kind who has been what he has in my life. He is not merely a mentor, but also a friend. He is my elder; but his actions command respect, not his age. In a world where established artists seek control over you, Ed has only ever treated me as his equal, allowing me to grow into who I am as a writer, teacher, colleague, and mentor.

The first time I knew I could trust him was after my first year at Cave Canem, where he was a faculty member, when several people told me, "Ed's looking for you." For me? What did I do? This was 2008. We have been friends since then.

No one has supported my growth as a human and writer as much as Ed. He is not a careerist, nor is he so devastatingly insecure that he inflicts violence on others. I have experienced nothing but beautiful phone calls, consistent encouragement, endless laughs, and tremendous vulnerability from Ed. He deserves every accolade, vacation, monetary award, and expression of gratitude available to any mortal man. When poets decades his junior attempted to bully me into silence, his presence pulled me through. When I doubted my intelligence, he showed me just how powerful a thinker I could be. He trusts me, to this day, with drafts of his poems, and I still don't know why he would do that (haha).

It has been a long and fruitful 18 years knowing him, and I look forward to many more years celebrating his life, generosity, kindness, and unmistakable genius. No writer compares to him. No poet understands the line as well as he does. He is a master of compression; his tight poems also master compassion. What a privilege it has been to be alive at the same time as Ed Roberson. What a miracle to be able to call him my friend.

**Phillip B. Williams**

## **An Art of Vulnerability**

Some years ago when I was struggling to find a way forward with my poems, Ed said to me quietly, “Let the others in.” Since then I’ve come to understand Ed’s own work as an extended exercise in letting the others in. The many gaps in his porous poems allow entry to creatures, kids, celestial bodies, wind, water, history, song, and endlessly multiple meanings. It’s a carefully crafted openness, a controlled artistry that’s never about controlling the world. I think of the poem that opens *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*, in which Ed’s young daughter Lena interrupts his writing only to be “picked up” and named as the form of the poem itself. I think of the homeless woman who appears in *Atmosphere Conditions’s* “The Wanderers” and whose words—“sometimes / it be’s that way”—become a guiding refrain. I think, too, of the meteors that wander into that poem as unforeseen signals from the cosmos—or, much later in his career, the *Arapaima gigas*—Ed’s “totem fish” that bites his toe and to which the poem “Shedd Aquarium” offers “huge thanks.”

Once when Ed was reading that poem to a group of my students, the memory of that fish moved him to tears right there in the classroom. In remembering that moment, I want to recognize a quality not only of the work but also of the man himself, my beloved friend and gentle mentor. Ed is one of the most generously open people I’ve ever known. Like the work, the man is humble and humbly unafraid of strong feelings; he makes an art of vulnerability. And like the work, the man is endlessly receptive to what’s going on. His curiosity knows no bounds, and he’s no stranger to enthusiasm. Here I remember driving with Ed home from Milwaukee last year: when we passed Six Flags, he nearly jumped out the window with boyish excitement before launching into an hour-long memoir of beloved roller coasters. I’m waiting for him to write that poem. And finally, like the work, the man makes others welcome. He’s a little shy, but you know he’s really not. When I showed up at his door for the first time years ago, Ed gestured me in and started talking like he was picking up a long conversation we’d just left off the day before. When I took my young kids to visit him a few months back, he gestured them in, opened up a box of cookies, spread the table with art supplies, and started talking with them as though they were fellow artists. Anyone has a seat at his table; everyone’s invited to the potluck. Count me in, Ed—and huge thanks.

**Patrick Morrissey**

## Lightning Slinger

In 1861, the Western Union company completed the first transcontinental telegraph line in the US. At the time, a ten-word telegram sent cross country cost seven dollars and more. Naturally, given the expense, senders chose their words carefully, eliminating anything unnecessary, and packed as much information as possible into those few words. Reading Ed Roberson's *MPH and Other Road Poems* is to receive a sequence of telegraphic missives, urgent and exact. The poems are dispatches from across the continent from decades ago.

In all my interactions with Ed I've known his speech and his thinking to be as freighted and precise as his verse. Spare with words, generous with meaning, his message is always dense and layered.

I put on my helmet got on the bike...

It tastes good it tastes.

Ed is a treasure. His writing teaches us to look closely and listen carefully.

## John Tipton

\* \* \*

## He Started out in the Sciences

If science is devotion, then poetry is the science of devotion. Ed Roberson is a scientist. Of tone. Of more and less than one. The circle breaks right here just like a line in Ed's cyclonic service. Seeing is inseparable from separation except in Ed's eyes, which see with what they see so clearly, and with such slant precision, that all is felt inseparably. The miracle for which he commits himself to danger is focus, form, the gift and plummet of Lena's airshaft, the diverse oceanography, the cetologic eschatology. And, so, the see it all and sound it out, the layered, laser'd on and on, and now, the latent, urgent rage—aw, man, Ed, it's all love. Thank you so much!

## Fred Moten

\* \* \*

## To Step from the Curb of your Purgation

take the city into your mouth. served neat or on the rocks. where rye flows and street names recede—front, water, pearl—all claiming to still touch shore. in poetry you trust. trade fourteens more or less. without lifting fingers or feet. fellow traveler packing five books in your head. your go-to call in every bar is voiced with friction against some part of the oral

passage. testing the limits of lust. bitters with a cherry on top. or probing the emperor from your porch. sipping spirits breathing you. a chip off big shoulders. where the hawk is your rival and friend. where four circles meet to form three crosses on the cusp of delight. you carry numbness. pass by faceless numbers. trace beauty without a guide—ghost tour keeping the bardo close. the future wants to know: *did you take your body with you or hold it back?* you don't answer for the supersensual world. for what's outside thresholds. where proof is lacking and words don't track. until you find consent in a rush of leaves to step from the curb of your purgation. to land in straight time. how the chosen do. i see you flying past devil's tower in close encounters of the motorcycle kind. tooling with choral ode precision. breaking lines with higher math. you decline to order fishbowl pals on bills of fare. honoring the acumen of regulated depths. brightness stirring water-breathers and relegated brutes. what's next is anybody's guess. you at large. some polis. some peak. on a strand at the ends of speech. abiding the nuisance of smaller fry—*let's go motherfucker! drink up!* you keep writing the winding deep. rooted in many blues. move through song with a capacity to swerve. wheelwright returned from the spheres.

### **Ken Taylor**

*from 57 wyomings (Black Square Editions, 2026)*

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### **A Teacher Who Contains Multitudes**

Ed Roberson is still, all these many years later, the most interesting person I have ever met. He was teaching at Columbia College Chicago, and we were in his graduate courses, which he led with empathy, insight, clarity, and kindness. To be able not only to hold those spaces within himself, but to share them with us, was such a gift. Thank you, Ed. You've made a difference!

### **Brandi Homan**

"I started out liking form and structure and balancing. And over the years, even though I experimented with ways to disrupt that and ways to rethink that, I'm amazed at how much I like the architecture of poems and how much the architecture of poems actually talks. The shapes of poems actually say things and carry weight and carry meaning. I sort of knew that at the beginning, but I'm learning more and more about it as time goes on."

– Ed Roberson, interviewed by Paul Muldoon for the Griffin Poetry Prize, 2022

## Signals from Deep Space

To read Ed Roberson's work, to study with him, is to explore the possibility of poetry as Voyager 1 explores interstellar space.

When he would read our drafts in workshop, they became "blocks of bulldozed air opened to light"—spaces where he traced associations and correspondences to us often unseen and unintended. It was as revelatory to receive such close, deep reading of our work as it was validating to be taken seriously enough to warrant such engagement. It was a profound discovery of potential, not only for each of us in our work, but more for how we could approach and attend to poetry and our lives.

He taught me how to read, again and anew, in a more generous and capacious way, while exemplifying how poetry is more a way of participating in the world than it is a writing discipline. There is no other poet whose work means as much to me, in as many various ways, and no teacher I've had who's thrown on more lights in previously switchless rooms. Ed has opened many mansions in the house of poetry, for myself and countless others; his poems are both the stars and their study. I'm eternally grateful for his example and light.

### Ryan Collins

\* \* \*

## A Place I Didn't Know Poetry Could Go

It is hard to imagine my poetic and intellectual life here in Chicago over the last twenty-five years without the poetry and presence of Ed Roberson. I was first introduced to his work during a reading he did at Northwestern in 2003 or so, when I was transfixed (and quite probably changed) by "I Don't See." After that, I had the pleasure of being with Ed at various poetry events and readings in Chicago over the years, including both of us being paired with the musician Ari Brown for a "Poetry and Piano" program sponsored by the Poetry Foundation in 2011. And there was the delight and relief of sitting with Ed before the Poetry Society of America awards ceremony in New York in 2008, when he received the Shelley Award and we were both feeling a little nervous. When I was guest poetry editor of the now-defunct *Fifth Wednesday* journal, I invited Ed to be the featured poet for the issue and reading that followed; and I wrote about his work for *Verse* and, more recently, *The Gettysburg Review* (also now sadly defunct!).

I remember fondly Ed's visits to UIC over the years, particularly a "One on One" poetry reading that he did with one of my graduate students. Over dinner, Ed talked about the moment of expectation before a known ritual, in the context of Gwendolyn Brooks's "Young Afrikans" and his own upbringing in a Black Southern church. He was really articulating a phenomenology of pre-rhythm. I would have been too embarrassed to take notes in the moment, but on the train home, I wrote down everything I could remember -- to be able to keep as much as I could of Ed's words that night.

It is difficult to convey the heights of my admiration for Ed's poetry. *Reading To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2010), I realized Ed's work had taken me to a place that I didn't know poetry could go, and it had to do with a completely unforeseen dimension of figurative language. I have taught Ed's books often over the years in my graduate classes, most recently *Asked What Has Changed* (2022). Just this spring I taught "Rosetta Stone Serious Study of Love Song" to my undergraduate poetry workshop, and I told them, "This poem is framed in my living room." So it is: the beautiful broadside of it in commemoration of Ed's Ruth Lilly Prize from the Poetry Foundation in 2016 has been a visual, integral part of my everyday life in my home over the last decade.

Ed's personal strength, generosity, and genuineness have been inspirational to me over the years – no posturing, just a life built within this brilliant work. Witnessing all that has meant the world to me. Congratulations, Ed, on the Fuller Award for Lifetime Achievement!

### **Christina Pugh**

"Remember, I started out learning and appreciating literature at the time of the Black Arts Movement, when people were saying, 'Look at what's around you. Look at the people around you. Look at all that music around you.' I was learning poetry at that time. So I was learning poetry when people were saying, 'We don't need no poems about trees. We need poems about the people.' That was one of the things that you would hear from the people who wanted a certain kind of community poetry. But see, you've got a guy like me who's listening to that, and I've been twelve miles out on the Bermuda reef and working in Alaska. My job was with nature. So when I pick up the Black Arts Movement, I pick it up with, 'Yeah, yeah. But—'"

– Ed Roberson, in *Chicago Review*, 2016

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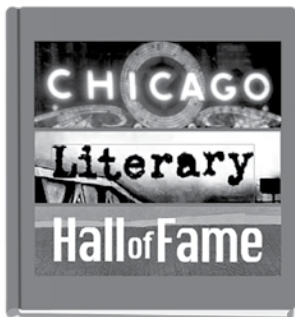
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# Our Host: The Poetry Foundation



The Poetry Foundation works to create and encourage a vigorous presence for poetry through *Poetry* magazine, free public programming offered in its building in Chicago, programs created with partners throughout the United States and abroad, and a website that hosts more than three million visits each month. The Foundation increasingly supports programs that intertwine poetry and other art forms: music, dance, theater, and visual arts. Founded in Chicago by Harriet Monroe in 1912, *Poetry* is the oldest monthly devoted to verse in the English-speaking world. The work of Chicago poets such as Margaret Burroughs, Carl Sandburg, Ed Roberson, Nate Marshall, Eve L. Ewing, Kevin Coval, and Fatimah Asghar has been published in *Poetry*. Harriet Monroe's "Open Door" policy, set forth in volume 1 of the magazine, lives on in the Foundation's mission and programming. From readings and lectures (both in person and online), to book launches and exhibits, to the publication of important poets, the Foundation is committed to the poetry of Chicago and communities that make that poetry possible. Learn more about its programming at [PoetryFoundation.org](http://PoetryFoundation.org)



# Special Thanks

Andrew Peart and Barbara Egel, phenomenal writers and thinkers, took tremendous care and time to create their extraordinary explorations of Ed's life and work. In addition, Andrew led efforts to solicit, sort, and edit much of the material contained within this booklet. Faisal Mohyuddin went way beyond expectations in his creation of the beautiful cover art. Summer interns Analise Budziak, Gus Boyer, Eddy Finch, and Annie Hazen committed precious time and talents to support this ceremony. Rich Kono made the nice slideshow and with Hannah Jennings updated the CLHOF website to reflect the inclusion of Ed into the Fuller Award pantheon. Breaker Press did the gorgeous printing and Jeff Waggoner performed his usual magic on the program design. Frank Daugherty (page 2), LaMont Hamilton (pages 10, 45), Darlene Malone (page 13), and Larry Wolfe (page 14), generously provided and permitted photographs we used in this program and the slideshow. Of course, all the people already included in this program—the speakers, the ASL interpreters, our partners, the authors and scholars who penned tributes, the statue designer, the CLHOF Board and Associate Board, the selection committee, The Poetry Foundation staff (including Noa Fields and Ydalmi Noriega), and so forth, all played integral roles in making tonight a success. It's a testament to our enlightened and passionate and caring literary community, as well as our honoree, that so many busy, accomplished people enthusiastically agreed to do their part.

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"I didn't know what I wanted except that I wanted no restraints to finding out. I worked in a limnology lab, a graphic design office, an aquazoo, the steel mill, nightwatch security, teaching rock climbing, teaching English. It still isn't clear that I actually earn a living."

– Ed Roberson, interviewed by Randall Horton for Callaloo, 2010

# Chicago Literary Hall of Fame

## Induction Ceremony

# 2026



Eleanor Taylor  
Bland

Ronald L. Fair



Saturday,  
August 1, 2026  
2 p.m.

Woodson Regional Library  
9525 S. Halsted Street  
Chicago, IL 60628

Stanley Elkin



Scan the QR code to register or visit [chicagoliteraryhof.org/events](http://chicagoliteraryhof.org/events)

# FAR SOUTH SIDE LITERARY BUS TOUR

CITY  
SOUTH



**Saturday, July 11, 2026**

10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Scan the QR code to register or visit  
[chicagoliteraryhof.org/events](http://chicagoliteraryhof.org/events)



# Partner Tributes

Chicago holds great fortune in being the home to one of the greatest American poets of the 20th and 21st Century. Ed Roberson's lyrical and musical work creates images of immense art with the most carefully chosen of words. The **American Writers Museum** congratulates Ed on this award and for all the awards and amazing work he has shared with the world to date.



## **Columbia College Chicago's School of Communication and Culture**

**Columbia** | 135 YEARS  
COLLEGE CHICAGO

congratulates Ed Roberson on receiving the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame Fuller Award. We're ecstatic that the city recognizes his brilliance and experimental reach. Even more, we are grateful for the enduring impact he's had on the many students he's mentored over the years. We thank Ed, for always being his generous, generative self!

To Ed Roberson

"one of the most deeply innovative and critically acute voices of our time."

**Poet and critic Michael Palmer**

Thank you, Ed Roberson, for your poetry, that is gentle but with teeth and for reminding us that humanity is a door that swings both ways. The **Guild Literary Complex** congratulates you on receiving the 2026 Fuller Award from the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.



The **Chicago Poetry Center** celebrates Ed Roberson, whose work has always been a serious study of love song, a wing, a many-tongued thing. Thank you for all you do for poetry and Chicago, all the flowers to you, Ed!



Ed Roberson has been a major voice in American poetry for decades, and he continues to inspire us not only with his brilliant words but also by being an equally beautiful human being. Natasha Trethewey, on behalf of **Northwestern University**

**Northwestern** | Department of English

## **The Program in Creative Writing at the University of Chicago**



thanks you, Ed, for the gusto, guts, and generosity of your life in poetry! You exemplify everything we want to impart to our students about what it means to be a writer, as well as a leader of the literary community! We love your poems, and we love you!